

AUTHOR: David S. Hogsette

TITLE: Bacchus in Romantic England

SOURCE: Studies in Romanticism v39 no4 p651-5 Wint 2000

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Anya Taylor. *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink, 1780-1830*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Pp. xi + 264. \$65.00.

Over the past two decades romantic studies scholarship has focused its efforts on de-romanticizing the romantics, on refiguring and diversifying our understanding of the categories "Romantic" and "Romanticism," and on expanding the traditional romantic literary canon. To these ends, the *Romanticism in Perspective* series edited by Marilyn Gaull and Stephen Prickett has offered a number of interesting titles. However, when I sat down to read Anya Taylor's new addition, *Bacchus in Romantic England*, I must admit that a critical red flag shot up. I wondered if in its attempt to examine romantic writing in relation to Western culture's struggle with the medical, social, and moral dimensions of alcoholism, whether this book eventually would romanticize the romantic poets as creative revelers and debauchers. As I turned the pages with increasing interest, I was thrilled to see Taylor dispel my initial, critically biased concern. Taylor is a Professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the City University of New York, who also teaches in the Alcohol and Substance Abuse Program. This teaching and scholarly background lends a unique critical perspective to the lives, poetry, prose, and correspondence of romantic era writers, resulting in what I found to be a new and important contribution to romantic cultural studies. Taylor recognizes that alcohol is not commonly thought of as a "drug," and she complicates the traditional (romantic) view of the romantic artist as drug addict by situating her analysis within 18th and 19th-century medical studies and philosophical discussions of drunkenness, as well as incorporating current studies of alcoholism and substance abuse. Moreover, she effectively reveals and examines the ways in which various romantic writers engaged the cultural discussions concerning alcohol consumption in their private and public writing. This study, along with books like Alan Richardson's forthcoming *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, enriches the field of romanticism with discourses of science, medicine, and medical history. It is indeed exciting to witness this field become increasingly interdisciplinary and cross-curricular.

Taylor begins her study by analyzing the mythical and historical contexts of the romantic period's ambiguous view toward drinking and drunkenness. She notes that themes of drinking permeate the writing during the period 1780-1830, revealing a cultural concern well before the temperance writers of the Victorian age. By reviewing key classical representations of Dionysian and Bacchanalian mythologies, revitalized by many Renaissance writers, Taylor identifies the romantic period as a skeptical inheritor of these mythical notions of drunken revelry. For the romantics, the drunkard presents a troubling ambiguity: while drinking may dissolve inhibition, open the creative mind, and free the individual to explore alternative selves, it also reduces the human subject to beastly savagery and binds the body and mind with chemical and psychological addiction. Though the issue of ambiguity and skepticism is not new to characterizations of the romantic period, Taylor adds new depths to our understanding of romantic ambiguity. Romantic skepticism and ambiguity are not just philosophical or literary, but medical and ultimately moral as well. In this chapter, the scientist and doctor emerge as another type of romantic writer: "These Romantic doctors and philanthropists share with the better known poets and essayists of their day a concern with the poor; a passion for sensation and psychology; an interest in the workings of pleasure and pain,

consciousness and unconsciousness, and rationality and dreams; and a faith in the healing power of imagination" (13). Taylor uncovers another set of romantic texts that provides an additional historical context through which to understand the romantic poets' ambiguous views on drunkenness. The true spirit of the age, according to Taylor, may very well have been one of intoxication that both celebrated and lamented drinking.

Robert Burns is the perfect example of this spirit of intoxication and thus the subject of the second chapter. Instead of defending or explaining Burns's wild drunkenness, Taylor acknowledges that Burns's love of drinking is an unavoidable topic in much of his writing, a topic that concerned many of his later romantic followers and idolaters. The early romantics' indebtedness to Burns is quite obvious, and many critics have investigated the relationship of Burns and his work to such writers as Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who all but worshipped this carousing poet. Taylor briefly covers this familiar territory and then offers a detailed, close reading of three lesser-studied elegies written by William Wordsworth. This intertextual analysis strengthens her argument that the romantic poets' writings examine their troubled views on drinking and that Bacchus presented for them a duplicity that brought intense joy and genius tempered by sadness and pain. Taylor's discussion presents the traditional view of Wordsworth as reserved, conservative, and somewhat egocentric, a perspective countered by David Collings' *Wordsworthian Errancies* (1994). However, I found Taylor's demonstration of Wordsworth's true sympathy for the Burns persona he elegized particularly compelling. She reads Wordsworth's elegies of Burns as poetic conversations with friends, family, and society concerning the joy and pain of drink, revealing Wordsworth to be far more sensitive and empathetic than his contemporaries and later critics may have realized.

At first glance, chapter 3 on Charles Lamb and the fragmented self appears to offer little that is new. Fragmentation, dissipation, and fractured identities are commonly associated with romantic discourse, and this chapter provides only a cursory overview of the philosophies of introspection from the romantic standards: David Hume, David Hartley, and Immanuel Kant. However, what surprised me was the extent to which drunkenness factored into their philosophical theorizing of personal coherence, dissipation of self, and the ramifications of fragmented identities. Once again, Taylor not only allows readers to understand the romantic era from the unique perspective of drunkenness, but she also uses this perspective to reaffirm and strengthen earlier critical understandings of the literature and culture of this era. Her analysis of Lamb's letters, tragic play *John Woodvil*, and essay "Confessions of a Drunkard" constructs Lamb as a creative figure struggling with madness and confessing the horrors of an obsessive intoxication that destroys free will and dissolves the stable self.

Taylor next turns her attention to Coleridge, one of the most obscure figures of romanticism. Like many Coleridge scholars, she finds herself immersed in contradiction that makes it so very difficult to write about Coleridge comprehensively. However, Taylor's central focus offers her a solution: Coleridge's drunkenness and struggle with addiction make him an inconsistent, problematic subject. Instead of dividing him into early poetic genius and later brooding philosopher-metaphysician, Taylor outlines the ways in which Coleridge explored issues of drunkenness and intemperance throughout his poetry, prose, and life. There is the wild and spontaneous Coleridge who delighted in the tavern and wrote numerous songs of drink and revelry ignored by most critics. There is the antic Coleridge who indulged the joy of Bacchus revelry throughout his life, ingratiating him with the Lambs yet alienating him from the Wordsworths and his family. The intoxicating highs for Coleridge, Taylor points out, also provide a critical discourse that informs his views of poetic genius and the functions of the creative

imagination. Poetry for him was indeed physical in that if done properly, it induces intoxication similar to that of alcohol. At the same time there was the tormented Coleridge who, like Lamb, struggled with the painful after-effects of heavy drinking, loathing the savagery of his drunkenness and wallowing in self-pitying hangovers.

Many scholars wrestle with Coleridge's fragmented writing and the annoying reality that he never seemed able to finish any of his major, promising projects. Taylor's research suggests there is nothing complicated about it: because Coleridge was a lush he was mentally, emotionally, and, at times, physically unable to structure his thoughts and emotions into publishable works. Yet tragically and ironically, Coleridge believed in the creative legacy of drink, wishing to be the Dionysian poet who had drunk the milk of paradise. Unfortunately, Coleridge regularly drank too much and rarely saw the poetic fruits of his revelry. And to complicate matters even more, Taylor reveals a Coleridge who, though a bit of a sot himself, wrote and spoke adamantly against drunkenness. In essays like "Virtue and Knowledge" and "Spirits" Coleridge speaks out against the evils of drink, examining how the drunkard ultimately loses his free will and is plunged into depths of despair, and he associates many of his contemporary social ills with alcohol trade and consumption.

Unfortunately, the personal and social problems of drunkenness invaded Coleridge's family life, the rather sad subject of chapter 5. Taylor shines an honest yet stark light upon romantic parenting and family relationships, revealing the bitter irony of failed and painful lives created by the idealistic theorists and visionaries of the romantic era. Detailed in its evidence, this chapter convincingly uses the sociology of alcoholism to analyze the painful relationship between Coleridge and Hartley. Taylor's work here is an excellent resource for those interested in the romantic family and the psychology of alcoholic familial relations, particularly between father and son. Taylor makes a brief connection between Coleridge's creation and neglect of Hartley and Victor Frankenstein's mistreatment of his creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Unfortunately, her discussion ends there. Most critics trace Shelley's theme of rejected offsprings to her own problematic relationship with her father, William Godwin. However, since Coleridge figures significantly in the genesis of *Frankenstein* (it is clear, for example, that *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* directly influenced *Frankenstein's* narrative structure, setting, and motifs), couldn't she also be drawing some of her domestic subject from the troubled relationship between Coleridge and Hartley?

The chapter on John Keats is a rich intertextual study that provides engaging critical layers to the existing wealth of information connecting Keats to John Milton, William Shakespeare, and Greek mythology. She also focuses our attention on Keats's pragmatic and realistic view of intoxication—that it temporarily allows the subject to escape the painful aspects of physical life, but that he/she must always return to face the avoided sorrow. Throughout his poetry, Taylor argues, Keats explores how intoxication plays a constructive role in coping with the harsh realities of life. Drunkenness interrupts the speaker's sadness, but Keats always returns his speakers to the center of life as he saw it—melancholy.

In her final chapter, Taylor takes her cue from Anne Mellor's romantic gender studies and analyzes the different gendered responses to drinking and its literary representations. Though offering no new perspectives on feminist theory in relation to romanticism studies, Taylor does attempt to balance her study by examining what various women writers had to say about drunkenness and intoxication. While the male poets seemed to struggle with the ambiguities of Bacchanalian revelry and identity dissipation, the women writers Taylor examines offer no romantic views of Bacchus' chalice. Hannah Moore, Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Maria Edgeworth all detail the horrific relationships of torment, pain, and abuse experienced by wives

dependent upon drunken husbands. These writers express their outrage in honest, unflinching terms, anticipating the temperance writers of the Victorian period and revealing painful family dynamics that, according to Taylor, are only recently being fully understood by contemporary psychology and sociology.

This book does not ask idiosyncratic philosophical questions, nor is it bogged down with overly complicated theoretical diatribes. Rather, Taylor's work is an engaging piece of cultural history and close textual analysis, appealing to students, teachers, and scholars alike. Moreover, its interdisciplinary perspective appeals to readers of literature, history, sociology, and medicine. As such, *Bacchus in Romantic England* is a valuable addition to the *Romanticism in Perspective* series.

ADDED MATERIAL

David S. Hogsette
New York Institute of Technology