

Hay, Daisy (2010). *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives*. London: Bloomsbury. 364 pages.

At regular intervals the dramatic lives of Shelley and Byron and their literary circle have attracted new biographical interest. Lately, the focus has tended to be on the female members of the circle such as in Miranda Seymour's *Mary Shelley* (2000) and Janet Todd's *Death and the Maidens: Fanny Wollstonecraft and the Shelley Circle* (2007). As a new addition to this field, Daisy Hay, has produced an inspiring composite work entitled *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives* (2010), that embraces both men and women. The book is an important and refreshing contribution to an established area of scholarship, and broadens the spectrum of study by including several names that are not usually mentioned in connection to the centre of the Shelley-Byron affiliation.

The starting-point of *Young Romantics* is unconventional as it highlights the contemporary campaigning journalist Leigh Hunt. Daisy Hay's main suggestion is that, due to his compromising behaviour and reputation for pretentiousness, his importance to the careers of the Great Romantics has not been sufficiently recognised. In her analysis of his personality and achievements, she has relied on Edmund Blunden's classical work from 1930, *Leigh Hunt: A Biography*. And, more dominantly so, on a more recent study by Nicholas Roe, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (2005). The result is a stunningly vivid description of this key-figure's invigorating and supportive influence on Shelley, Byron, Keats and, not least, Mary Shelley, which follows their developments both artistically and socially. The aim of the study is not, as has often been the case, to repeat the famous familial anecdotes of the liberated lives of the Romantics, but to point out their dependence on Leigh Hunt as the founder and editor of *The Examiner*, a journal that provided them all with opportunities for publication.

Leigh Hunt's spider-in-the-web role is re-enforced as Daisy Hay credits his article "Young Poets" with being "the first piece of writing to anticipate the canonisation of Shelley and Keats". However, reliance on Hunt was at the same time a precarious deal, due to his lack of popularity. Subsequently, Keats and others were lampooned in other more prestigious conservative journals as "Cockney poets", an epithet that was to stick with many of those who had started their careers with the help of *The Examiner*.

Daisy Hays begins her account of the poets and their works in 1813, with Lord Byron visiting Leigh Hunt, at the time of his imprisonment for libel against the Prince Regent. Then follows a description of Hunt's contact with Shelley and Keats consecutively, and the development of their poetic achievements. Also, Hay relates Hunt's acquaintance with Mary Shelley and his involvement in her work. Another important figure was her stepsister Claire Clairmont, whose ample correspondence, published as recently as 1995, constitutes a vital biographical

source on which Daisy Hay bases her exploration of the poets' private lives. The question of sexual alliances is dealt with in minute detail, yet without the streak of sensationalism recognisably present in so many accounts of the poets' adherence to the notion of 'free love'. The infidelities of the Hunt household are exposed, showing that the liberated attitude to sexuality was shared by others. In effect, Shelley considered both Hunt and Byron his "twin poles" which was why he wished them to live close by in Italy.

Unlike the case of many biographies to date, Daisy Hay's *Young Romantics* does not end with the dramatic deaths of Shelley, Keats and Byron, or with the demise of Mary Shelley. Her ambition is instead to bring to light the women who survived the famous set and, who although very much a part of their "entanglements", have been deemed more oblique figures. One of these was Claire, the most long-lived member of the coterie, who suffered the most from her emotional involvement with both Shelley and Byron. The second was Bess, Leigh Hunt's silent mistress through the years, who finally made a career as author of *Flora Domestica*, a well-selling gardening-book which was also another proclamation of the ideals and value of cockney poetry that Hunt had promoted.

What Daisy Hay calls her "story of a web of exceptional men and women, who were made by their relationships with one another" is deeply impressive and joyous to read. Her bibliography is astounding in depth and full of promise for a prestigious academic future. The exceptionally talented group of young people who lived together in Switzerland and Italy while creating unforgettable literary masterpieces have been brought to life most vividly by a youthful scholar of our own time. Importantly, *Young Romantics* has been written in a style that is bound to have great appeal to a new generation of young readers.

*Helena Bergmann*