



# **30 GREAT MYTHS ABOUT THE ROMANTICS**

**Duncan Wu**

**WILEY Blackwell**

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An early nineteenth-century cut-and-paste job. In 1825, after Byron's death, Pierre Louis Bouvier hijacked Thomas Phillips's 1813 portrait of Byron and superimposed on it an image of the plumed cavalry helmet the poet had designed himself, perpetuating the image of the archetypal Romantic who died on the battlefield in the cause of freedom (see Myth 19).

Source: Paul F. Betz Collection.

This book is dedicated to Catherine Payling and her companion,  
Poppy, the smooth fox terrier (1999–2013)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I pay tribute to those whose writings I consulted during work on this book, from those who played their part in the editing of scholarly texts to the many who have written short notes correcting errors of fact in such indispensable publications as *Notes and Queries*. I pay tribute also to those whose arguments and debates played their part in shaping my thoughts. I have not agreed with everyone – that would be impossible – but have striven to summarize them accurately and with respect for their views.

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Giuseppe Albano, Curator of the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome, and his colleague Luca Caddia, gave me access to Trelawny's

earliest manuscript account of Shelley's seaside cremation, and provided the coveted photograph of his jawbone, published here for the first time (by kind permission of David Leigh Hunt on behalf of the Leigh Hunt family). As a member of the English Department at Georgetown I have been fortunate in having among my colleagues Paul F. Betz and Carolyn Forché, both of whom have advised me at various points along the way. Professor Betz provided some illustrations for these myths from his personal collection. The Master and Fellows of Campion Hall gave this book a home in Oxford in the summer of 2013, while Chester L. Gillis and Robert M. Groves, the Dean and Provost of Georgetown University, granted me time in which to finish it in the spring and summer of 2014.

This book has sent me back to basics in a way that leads me to reflect on the privilege of having enjoyed, at various times during my early career, the supervision of Jonathan Wordsworth and D. F. McKenzie – both of whom, directly and indirectly, shaped my approach to these essays. In turn I have learned, and continue to learn, from my students at Georgetown University, without whose insights this book would be the poorer. All errors, flights of fancy, and missed tricks are attributable exclusively to me.

My greatest debt is to Catherine Payling, who has assisted my work in countless respects. The dedication of this book to her and her companion Poppy the smooth fox terrier, for many years occupants of Keats House in Rome, is a small acknowledgement of all their endeavours on my behalf.

Duncan Wu  
Georgetown University  
July 2014



# INTRODUCTION

Eternal Spirit! God of truth! to whom  
All things seem as they are ...

Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time*, Book I

This book aims to reassert the humanity of Romantic writers. That is to say, its objective is to replace misconception and speculation with truth – or, where it is unknown, the admonition to be ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’.<sup>1</sup> For some reason, the lethal combination of being both dead and ‘Romantic’ has abstracted writers of the late Georgian period to the point at which they have been divorced from the reality of their own lives and translated into the mini-mart of fantasy: Blake the presumptive inmate of Bedlam in a cell adjacent to that occupied by the artist John Martin, Wordsworth the ravisher of his own sister, Byron the poet slaughtered on the battlefield, Shelley keeping his sails raised in bad weather so as to precipitate his own demise, and Keats born, Christ-like, in a stable. They were (we are told) hostile to the Enlightenment, the Augustans, and the world of science while being atheists, drug users, wife-swappers and rock stars. It is as if the truth were judged harmful to the literature and displaced by a dog’s breakfast of conjecture and surmise.

Even the label by which they are invoked inflicts upon them a species of violence: Romanticism is a flashy but brazenly opaque term.<sup>2</sup> None of the writers in this book would have used it to describe either themselves or the times in which they lived. From the vantage-point of an adult alive in 1805, when Wordsworth completed *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, there

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was little romance to be found in recent history. The uprising of the United Irishmen was brutally suppressed in 1798 and again in 1803.<sup>3</sup> Since 1793, Britain had been suffering the privations of war – and I refer not to minor skirmishes but to arduous and drawn-out battles, fought on sea and land. For more than two decades much of the world became a potential battleground, the main protagonists (Britain and France) being international trading nations: the first few years of the French Revolutionary War were marked by clashes in Pondicherry, Guadeloupe, St Lucia, the Windward and Leeward Islands, and Trinidad.<sup>4</sup> No one grew up or came to maturity without being affected by it.<sup>5</sup>

What we call Romantic might more accurately be called Regency Wartime Literature were we to backdate the Regency, as some historians do, to 1788.<sup>6</sup> Just as the optimism associated with revolution shaped the sensibilities of those who witnessed it, so the impoverishment of war chilled the national psyche. The defeat of Napoleon brought temporary jubilation but pitched the country into internal conflict, deepened by the Corn Laws of 1815 (which kept food prices artificially high), economic recession, widespread unemployment, and indirect taxation (weighing disproportionately on the poor), to the point at which the country approached something not far from insurrection. None of this would have struck anyone as Romantic, and it might be argued such a hopeful word could be attached to these years only as a misnomer.

Small wonder that a blowzy concept imposed retrospectively on the past has been a vector for misconception. But then, given the flamboyance of those involved, that might have happened anyway. The Romantics must be among the most mythologized figures in the canon, their lives recounted in print and on stage, television, and celluloid. Perhaps the explanation has less to do with the immediacy of their writings than with the eventfulness of their lives. I wonder whether that has been their undoing. To take one example, who could be blamed for assuming Keats and Shelley were among the most widely read poets of their day? But if sales are anything to go by, there were few people awaiting their next book at the time: less than half the print-run (1,000 copies) of Keats's *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820) had sold by the time he died in 1821, while Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, of which 250 copies were published in 1821, had sold roughly 90 copies by 1823.<sup>7</sup> The point is that the contemporary perspective was different from our own. Today Jane Austen is one of the most popular novelists of all time but in 1814 no one thought she would occupy that status, nor did they suspect an obscure



**Figure 1** Samuel Rogers (1763–1855) was old enough to have been a friend of Richard Brinsley Sheridan and the actress Sarah Siddons. His *The Pleasures of Memory* (1792), in heroic couplets, became one of the most popular poems of the day; by 1806 it had gone through fifteen editions.  
Source: Paul F. Betz Collection.

engraver named Blake would 150 years later be hailed as a literary and artistic genius.

Who *was* popular? Samuel Rogers was one of the period's best-known poets, author of *The Pleasures of Memory* and *Italy*, and lived long enough to be offered the laureateship upon Wordsworth's death in 1850.<sup>8</sup> His poems are now as seldom noticed as Thomas Campbell's *The*

*Pleasures of Hope* and Robert Pollok's ten-book epic, *The Course of Time*, best-sellers of their moment.<sup>9</sup> Byron, Scott, and Moore were the 'three great stars' of British poetry on the Continent.<sup>10</sup> Among serious poets, Robert Southey was highly regarded; Wordsworth once said his work would be 'cherished by posterity when the reputation of those, who now so insolently decry him, will be rotted away and dispersed upon the winds'.<sup>11</sup> But it is not easy to imagine a time when *Roderick*, *The Last of the Goths* will reclaim the readers it had during Southey's lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

In the theatre, nothing felt more enduring than the popularity of such melodramas as Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, Kotzebue's *The Stranger*,<sup>13</sup> and Reynolds's *The Caravan* (featuring Carlo the dog, dubbed by Sheridan 'the author and preserver of Drury Lane Theatre'<sup>14</sup>); verse dramas including Milman's *The Fall of Jerusalem*;<sup>15</sup> and tragedies like Maturin's *Bertram*.<sup>16</sup> Few bother with them today; instead we read as classics works hardly known to contemporaries (*The Book of Urizen*, *The Prelude*, *Epipsychidion*, and *Lamia*) and dramas considered unactable – *Prometheus Unbound*, *Manfred*, *The Borderers*, *Osorio*, and *Otho the Great*.<sup>17</sup> Scott's novels continue to be read in our time, but other fictions of the day are now the haunt principally of students, such as Burney's *Camilla*, which sold 4,000 copies on its first outing (3,000 more than *Waverley*), and Amelia Opie's *Father and Daughter*, which sold 7,000 copies.<sup>18</sup> The current popularity of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* would have been unimaginable to the scattered few who heard of them when they first appeared.<sup>19</sup>

What does that tell us? No one can know what will be read a century from now, and the impression given by anthologies and introductions – that Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, and Shelley were exemplary figures of their day, renowned and acknowledged as such – is misleading. The task of this book is to confront such notions with the contemporary perspective, assuming it can be reconstructed.

Some might ask: why bother with false trails and fake facts? Does it matter if we imagine Keats killed by a review or the Romantics' creativity drug-induced? It matters if the myth obscures the literature and those who created it. To take an example: Victorian readers wanted to believe Byron the author of manly poetry for a male readership. Writing in 1853, Charles Kingsley deplored the limp-wristed Shelley, hailing instead that 'sturdy peer, proud of his bull-neck and his boxing, who kept bears and bull-dogs, drilled Greek ruffians at Missolonghi, and "had no objection to a pot of beer,"<sup>20</sup> and who might, if he had reformed, have made a gallant English gentleman'.<sup>21</sup> This has enjoyed a protracted life in variant forms, including the beliefs Byron was a democrat (Myth 18), a liberator of the



**Figure 2** Engraving of William Edward West's portrait of Byron. West thought his subject 'fat and rather effeminate'.  
Source: Paul F. Betz Collection.

Greeks (Myth 19), and an impassioned heterosexual (Myth 17). It was as erroneous when first expounded as it is now; had Kingsley any notion of Byron's true predilections, he would probably have disdained to touch a copy of *Don Juan* with a pair of forceps.

Kingsley's blind eye was directed at the most incriminating evidence of all: what it was like to meet the man. Isaac D'Israeli encountered Byron before his grand tour of 1809, and never forgot him: 'Such a fantastic and effeminate thing I never saw. It was all rings and curls and lace. I was ashamed to speak to him; he looked more like a girl than a boy.'<sup>22</sup> D'Israeli was right. Byron was a dandy, though to say so hardly does him justice. His extensive jewellery collection ran to diamond brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.<sup>23</sup> Towards the end of his life, William Edward West described him as 'fat and rather effeminate'<sup>24</sup> – and the portrait he painted suggests a middle-aged Scottish midwife rather than a red-blooded aristocratic Lord. Kingsley did not have those testimonies

to hand, but could have consulted those of Thomas Moore, who noted that in 'his caprices, fits of weeping, sudden affections and dislikes, – may be observed striking traces of a feminine cast of character';<sup>25</sup> of Marguerite, Countess of Blessington, who met Byron in Genoa, her first impression being that 'His voice and accent are peculiarly agreeable, but effeminate';<sup>26</sup> and of James Hamilton Browne, who sailed with Byron from Leghorn to Cephalonia:

His delicately formed features were cast rather in an effeminate mould.... His eyes were rather prominent and full, of a dark blue, having that melting character which I have frequently observed in females, said to be a proof of extreme sensibility.

Byron's pout, Browne added, was that 'practised sometimes by a pretty coquette'.<sup>27</sup> On one occasion Scrope Davies surprised his friend 'with his hair *en papillote*' (the equivalent of curlers). 'Ha ha! Byron, I have at last caught you acting the part of the Sleeping Beauty', cried Davies. 'Do not, my dear Scrope, let the cat out of the bag', Byron pleaded, 'for I am as vain of my curls as a girl of sixteen'.<sup>28</sup> This was not a bull-necked boxer but a narcissist whose principal interest was boys – a taste that began at Cambridge where he fell in love with John Edleston, and which continued to the end of his life. Only such a man would describe Ali Pasha's grandsons as 'totally unlike our lads ... [they] have painted complexions like rouged dowagers, large black eyes & features perfectly regular. They are the prettiest little animals I ever saw'.<sup>29</sup> Kingsley may have been unaware of the proclivities of Byron's friends – Charles Matthews (who kept him abreast of sodomite news<sup>30</sup>), William Bankes MP (caught *in flagrante* with a guardsman<sup>31</sup>), and John Cam Hobhouse – whom Peter Cochran describes as 'a self-disgusted, cottaging heterosexual with ... a taste for spanking'.<sup>32</sup>

It is not just that Byron was never what Kingsley claimed him to have been but that, for as long as his view prevailed, it was impossible to read Byron's poetry and see its author plainly. Not until the 1950s, when G. Wilson Knight wrote explicitly about Byron's effeminacy, did critics begin fully to appreciate sexual ambiguity in his work.<sup>33</sup> In *Don Juan* Canto I, Byron has Donna Julia say, 'My brain is feminine',<sup>34</sup> a line now read as Byron's self-analysis.<sup>35</sup> But that would be in spite of Kingsley's platitudes, not because of them. The truth is always more revealing than myth, with the power to open pathways otherwise forbidden to us.

The limpet-like persistence of some myths may be related to the illusion they draw the Romantics closer to us. That tends to be the assumption of introductions to the subject, which foster the inclination to see them as poor relations whose insights and situation are 'the same' as our own. It is thus widely supposed they possessed the values and ideals of those who



**Figure 3** Samuel Whitbread, MP (1764–1815), whose ‘heart was in his broad, honest, English face’.  
Source: Paul F. Betz Collection.

aspired to a modern liberal democracy when at the time barely 1.7 per cent of the population had the vote and most people thought the constitution a cause of pride.<sup>36</sup> To say women were permitted to write political pamphlets, canvass in elections, or be patrons of a borough (like Miss Elizabeth Lawrence, patron of Ripon in the first half of the nineteenth century), is to suggest they wielded political power, yet this was a society in which they were ineligible to vote or be elected as MPs – and no one recognized the anomaly.<sup>37</sup> It is claimed the Reform Bill of 1832 initiated an era of political freedom unknown to previous generations; throughout the Romantic period, however, ‘democracy’ remained a dirty word, tainted by implications of mob rule. Those pushing through the Reform Bill agreed with Thomas Macaulay, who described universal suffrage as ‘fatal to the purposes for which government exists’,<sup>38</sup> while in 1809 Samuel Whitbread condemned democracy as ‘a form of government which I abhor;



violent, uncomfortable, ungrateful, cruel, unjust, only to be surpassed in wickedness by a savage, rooted, and confirmed despotism'.<sup>39</sup> Consider that for a moment: Whitbread was someone whose 'heart was in his broad, honest, English face';<sup>40</sup> as early as 1807 he introduced a Bill to give children at least two years of state-funded education regardless of parents' income,<sup>41</sup> and he was one of only three Whig politicians credited by E. P. Thompson for standing up 'again and again in the House to defend political liberties or social rights'.<sup>42</sup> *Even to him*, democracy was anathema. And even John Thelwall, today invoked as 'an avatar of Romantic radicalism',<sup>43</sup> was not, according to his friend Henry Crabb Robinson, 'an admirer of vulgar democracy'.<sup>44</sup> None of this was theoretical. Those who did advocate democracy could expect to be legislated against, pursued as criminals, or hounded into exile.

That should be enough to underline the importance of not assuming the Romantics were 'like us'. The glibness with which such ideas take root is one of the targets of this book, as indicated by the frequency with which I invoke that dangerous figure, anachronism. Readers have no business imposing their own socio-political assumptions on the past, then chiding it for not meeting standards of which it was innocent. The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there. And it is for us to learn its customs. We should endeavour imaginatively to reconstruct the beliefs that predisposed most people at the time to condemn democracy, the dominant political concept on which western societies are now based. To do so is to align ourselves with those who wrote the literature discussed in this volume rather than coerce them into agreement with perspectives to which they would never have consented.

The urge to define Romanticism is born of the desire to abstract, in the process of which blunt-force trauma is sometimes inflicted on the reality: 'The Romantics were misunderstood, solitary geniuses', 'English Romanticism was a reaction against the Enlightenment', 'The Romantics repudiated the Augustans'. The tendency of definitions to crack under pressure makes me wonder whether the thing itself remains incorrigibly elusive – though I have directed readers to a means of considering the concept (see page 4 below). Definers like straight lines – the kind of retrospective order critics imagine in the form of acts, intentions, designs, and psychological certainties that never were and never will be, which sometimes turn up in disquisitions on the subject. If this volume has any ambition it is to promote the claims of what one scholar calls the 'shapelessness of lives, the anarchy of thought, and the unpredictability of the future, as they are actually experienced'.<sup>45</sup> Though they make no contribution to an intellectually pleasing definition of Romanticism, they did exist: Keats cannot have known he would one day be a great poet. He



died thinking his name writ in water even if, in more optimistic moods, he believed he would one day be counted among the greats. That, as we should recognize, is the nature of living in the moment; there are no certainties where literary reputation is concerned, any more than in other aspects of life. Were we to doubt that, we might do worse than bear in mind the Romantic period was one in which hardly anyone knew of *The Prelude*, while *The Course of Time* was ‘distinguished ... by an originality of thought and style, a pure and sustained sublimity, that are deserving of the highest admiration’.<sup>46</sup>

\*

This volume follows Wiley Blackwell’s *30 Great Myths about Shakespeare* by Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith in its analysis of what might euphemistically be called factual slippage – exaggeration, speculation masquerading as fact, simplification, or outright error.<sup>47</sup> The profusion of Romantic myth is such that the learned reader may be alert to absences; I have had no option but to be selective and exercise restraint towards certain writers and themes. It would have been easy to devote more space to their sex lives, and easier still to devote more than four chapters to Byron.<sup>48</sup> (I have no regrets about not finding space to discuss the spurious portraits of famous writers discovered in recent years, worthy of inclusion though they may be.)

It would be dishonest to pretend I have played no part in the perpetuation of the myths that follow; in fact, it was important that the book target those which, like the false idols of biblical times, still command respect, even (on occasion) from myself. I have sometimes supposed the throng of ‘-isms’ by which Romanticism has for decades been beleaguered might have played their part in fostering them; I now doubt any such connection and believe that to suggest otherwise is to succumb to the temptation of overrating those ‘-isms’ in the manner prescribed by their advocates. New Historicists are neither more nor less prone to misconception than anyone else, given though some might be to pointless obscurity; by the same token, no one has a monopoly on right-mindedness, and if this book has an agenda it is to remind readers that anyone who writes on the Romantics has a duty to earn our trust by respecting the truth.

I follow Maguire and Smith in favouring the 2,000- to 2,500-word essay as the device by which each myth is explored. The obvious drawback is that of being compelled to touch on, rather than explore at leisure, aspects of the topic at hand – though that adversity is not without blessing. I use annotation as the means by which to direct readers to sources that supplement my commentary. Brevity compels me, on occasion, to summarize other writers as cogently and accurately as space will allow. I have