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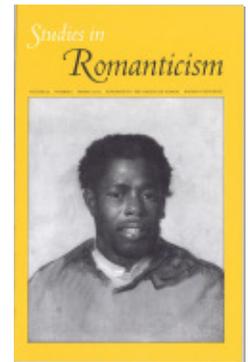
Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography by James Bieri (review)

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(Review)

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into something “like a different kind of blindness” (147). The intelligent material on Keats builds to a cogent climax with an account of Moneta’s “visionless” (quoted, 168) blindness, though one would, ideally, have liked a fuller exploration of Keats’s self-questioning art.

Byron and Shelley are discussed in relation to Byron’s identification of “Milton as the ‘blind Old Man’ in the Dedication to *Don Juan*” (177), a blindness involving many aspects, including the older poet’s “blindness to the power of his own Satan” (178), and Shelley’s concern to explore the “deep truth” (quoted, 178). The reading of Rousseau’s fate at the hands of the “shape all light” in *The Triumph of Life* hinges on Larrissy’s sense that the poem “has already established that Rousseau’s will is flawed” (185). From this sense, he adumbrates an ethically consistent and potentially hopeful reading. But it is Rousseau who diagnoses himself in this way, and it is not his will but his heart that he blames (“I was overcome / By my own heart alone”), and can his own self-diagnosis be regarded as straightforwardly confessional and trustworthy? Again, one wants a more tenaciously extended and engaged reading. Larrissy produces a sketch of an account; this reader would have enjoyed seeing it worked up into a finished, more detailed picture.

And yet the overall canvas of the book is rich and ambitious, concluding with a lively reading of the motif of blindness in Mary Shelley’s fiction. The balanced fairness of judgment, which pervades this fine book, is evident in the account of *Frankenstein* and its pursuit of “a better, if disillusioned, way of seeing” (194). Such a way of seeing, in turn, comes close to defining Edward Larrissy’s very considerable gift to his readers in *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period*.

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James Bieri. *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Pp. xviii+832. \$45.00.

The publication of James Bieri’s biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley—initially in two volumes from University of Delaware Press in 2004 and 2005, and now in one volume from The Johns Hopkins University Press (including in paperback)—is a true milestone. It has been a staggering thirty years since the last comprehensive biography of Shelley appeared, Richard Holmes’s 1974 *Shelley: The Pursuit*. While the gap has been filled by the ongoing publication of the indispensable *Shelley and His Circle* project, as well as by the complete reediting of Shelley’s poetry underway by Donald

H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (two volumes to date), Bieri's exhaustive and painstaking portrait of the poet, reportedly the culmination of decades of travel and research, may rightly be called *standard*, in the sense that all succeeding biographies of Shelley will both benefit from and be judged against it. It achieves this distinction through its patient and exceedingly thorough marshalling of documentary evidence, as well as through the new light it shines on, and context it provides for, several previously murky and in some cases unknown aspects of Shelley's life.

Bieri devotes the second chapter of the biography to the poet's mother, Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley, and presents the six extant letters written by her along with details of her early life. This is the first appearance of these letters and the richest contextualized portrait we have of Shelley's mother, who obeyed her husband Timothy's wishes not to acknowledge their son for the last third of his life and then for years after his death. Bieri finds her a lively and "feisty" intelligence, a letter-writer "more literate, outspoken, and expressive" than her Oxford-educated MP husband (23). The eldest daughter of Charles Pilfold and Bethia "Theyer" White of Horsham, Sussex, Elizabeth might have possessed a "temper," and she apparently harbored an "underlying anger toward Timothy expressed not only in outbursts but, more subtly, in feelings of disdain and disparagement that her son would have sensed" (26). Bieri's description of Elizabeth's letters and family life is presented along with his suggestion that her influence on her son was substantial, an influence obfuscated by the poet's lifelong and well-known conflict with his father. Citing Kenneth Neill Cameron as the first to make this argument, Bieri views the maternal influence on Shelley in two ways. First, Bieri posits Shelley's relationship to his mother as the origin of both future poetic imagery and future problems with women: "separation from and felt loss of the mother, the infant's prototypical anxiety experience, may be viewed as leading to subsequent 'falling in love' experiences, acts of restoring the lost maternal figure. If so, Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley remained her son's inner collaborator in his creative life as well as a crucial influence in his troubled relationships with women" (29). (Such psychologizing is a regular interpretive gesture of Bieri's, though it does not intrude or become heavy-handed.) Second, Bieri locates some of Percy's political courage—and all of his literary "genius" (19)—in Elizabeth, who not only stood up in her own way to the "tyrannical" Timothy, but was not afraid to take "socially unpopular stands" for which, her son noted later, she took "abuse" for years" (26).

One of the "socially unpopular" actions of Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley was evidently to welcome into Field Place the illegitimate son of her husband. Bieri is responsible for unearthing the existence of Percy's illegitimate elder half-brother, whose name, birth date, and mother are unknown, but

whom Percy felt to be the favorite of their father. It appears likely that the child who became “Captain Shelley”—so indentified to Percy by his friend Horace Smith in a letter of April 1821 after overhearing a conversation in a London coach—lived in, or at least was frequently welcomed into, the Shelleys’ home. Bieri speculates that the presence of the future “Captain Shelley” at Field Place had a psychological impact on the young Percy, who experienced a “blurred birthright [that] possibly helped instigate [his] lifelong refusal to be the sole carrier of his family’s title and wealth” (30). Timothy’s reported favoritism toward his illegitimate son “set the stage,” Bieri writes, “for an enduring motif in Shelley’s personality, that of the outsider, the exile” (30). Indeed, having eloped with Harriet Westbrook to Edinburgh in 1811 at the age of nineteen, Shelley, in response to his father’s cutting off his allowance and refusing to acknowledge the transgression, wrote provoking letters to Timothy that made several veiled but pointed references to the illegitimacy of the poet’s elder half-brother. The young Shelley’s outrage centered on Timothy’s glaring hypocrisy in condemning his sons’ actions, both because he called himself a Christian and because he himself had transgressed propriety and been forgiven by many, including his wife. Of course, the poet also needed money. He also wrote to his grandfather, Sir Bysshe, with no luck, thus originating, in Bieri’s estimation, some of the “persecutory feelings seemingly bordering occasionally on the delusional” (169) that haunted the poet throughout his life.

Bieri also provides the most thorough and fully contextualized picture possible of several other aspects of Shelley’s life about which we do not know everything. Bieri refers to these affairs as “puzzling mysteries that [punctuate] Shelley’s life, [and] underscore how veiled he kept much of [it]” (407). One such mystery concerns Shelley’s relationship with an unknown woman—she is known as the “mysterious lady” in the biography—who seems to have sought out the poet at various times and in various locales. The poet’s cousin Thomas Medwin, whom Bieri finds credible, is the original source of information about this liaison of Shelley’s. Bieri corrects the record to show that the shadowy story begins in 1814, not in 1816 as is usually noted, on the eve of the poet’s elopement with Mary Godwin. An apparently married woman who admired *Queen Mab* visited Shelley and professed her love to him. The “flattered” Shelley departed early the next morning with Mary and Claire Clairmont, but in 1816 Shelley may have seen the mysterious lady again and told her of his imminent trip to Geneva, where she, in turn, may have traveled to meet him. What is more, Bieri speculates that an 1818 incident at Lake Como in Italy where Shelley walked to an isolated spot with a loaded pistol followed by two police,

who confiscated the pistol fearing Shelley a suicide risk, might have had something to do with further contact with the mysterious lady.

The mysterious lady also figures significantly in Bieri's rendering of what he calls Shelley's "secretive Neapolitan experience" of late 1818 and early 1819, the geographical and psychological setting of "Stanzas written in Dejection—December 1818, Near Naples." At the center of this time in Naples is the birth of an infant girl Shelley represented as his and Mary's to the registrar for the District of Chiaia. The child was baptized on February 27, 1819, near the Shelleys' residence, as "Elena Adelaide daughter of Percy Shelley and of Mary Godwin lawfully begotten" (437). Elena Adelaide was not Mary's child, to be sure; Claire could have been pregnant by Shelley (they almost certainly had a physical relationship), but Bieri concludes, "it is unlikely that this baby was Claire's" (437). But is there a connection between Elena Adelaide and Shelley's "mysterious lady," who Medwin claims arrived in Naples the same day as Shelley? Bieri probes this possibility with characteristic assiduousness, though his task in this instance is extraordinarily difficult, for he must contend with Percy's, Mary's, and Claire's concerted effort to conceal the details of January and early February of 1819: Claire's journal is missing, Mary stopped her journal for those six weeks, and a depressed Percy would write to Peacock in England stating clearly for anyone else's eyes, "we see absolutely no one here," possibly concealing contact with someone connected to Elena Adelaide. All the while, it should be said, Shelley was figuring out how to deal with the blackmail threats of Paolo Foggi, a former servant whose damaging information could very likely have been Shelley's paternity of Elena Adelaide. Bieri writes that Shelley's being the father of Elena Adelaide, whom he called "my charge" in letters to the Gisbornes, is "consistent with his assuming legal and financial responsibility for her" (444). How much Mary knew about all this is unclear, though in 1839, Bieri notes, she seemed still to be concealing what went on in Naples that winter.

Faced with such characteristically quagmire aspects of Shelley's life, Bieri operates throughout with enriching circumspection and admirable restraint. He does not judge his occasionally maddening subject, nor does he engage in any special pleading. What he does instead is compile and array an astonishing amount of evidentiary detail, providing the richest portrait to date of Shelley's life. However, one might venture criticisms of some aspects of the biography. A retired professor of psychology, Bieri is less adept at literary criticism than he is at biographical research: the summaries and analyses (keyed, not surprisingly, to the poet's life) of Shelley's most complex poetry can come across as clunky and too straightforward. In addition, one could also say that at times the sheer volume of detail included over-

whelms any semblance of narrative or sense of momentum to the narrative, calling out for some paring or at least some further prioritization. Yet these are admittedly minor quibbles with a truly important work. Bieri's biography is an unmatched resource for scholars and readers of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

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