

When a word takes on a fixed meaning, especially when it becomes an object of scientific inquiry or state regulation, it can seem to refer to something natural, a durable essence. This is where historicism can make a critical intervention. By showing that concepts have histories, that they take shape and change in time in contests over knowledge and power, scholars can recover the weird multiplicity of uses that a term may have enjoyed before it was pinned down. Joining the long tradition of interdisciplinary scholarship on law, religion, and literature in the United States before the Civil War, *Civic Longing* provides a deep and careful excavation of the history of speculative thinking about citizenship. At its best, this work reminds us that there is nothing permanent about our ways of naming, and thus of governing, ourselves and our affiliations. The world could be different, someday; it was before.

CALEB SMITH
Yale University

MAI-LIN CHENG, *British Romanticism and the Literature of Human Interest*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 193. \$95.

Mai-Lin Cheng's *British Romanticism and the Literature of Human Interest* explores how a selection of writers we now consider "Romantic" drew heavily upon an emerging phenomenon of human interest writing in the early nineteenth century. In our time, human interest stories appear as "clickbait" on social media, which continuously recirculates tragic personal accounts similar to those that moved the Wordsworths to share their writing in a more limited sphere. Then, as now, anecdotes of individuals lost beyond hope compelled reprinting, reframing, and layering of new prose, poetry, and paratext, sometimes over many years after the original events. Cheng's book demonstrates how human interest connected poetry inextricably with the prose of the newspaper or sensational novel, not understood as literary like poetry until the nineteenth century. In Cheng's view, drawn from studying the Wordsworths, the Shelleys, and Byron, Romanticism brings prose and poetry together in a new literature built on anecdotes or *histoemes*, not totalizing grand narratives but, rather, passing moments of human interest.

The opening chapters explore how writers "loot[ed]" and recirculated human interest stories in prose appended to poetry to raise

unsettling paradoxes and unanswerable questions (p. 18). As Cheng explains, “Romantic literature pressed everywhere into its own margins. And, everywhere in these margins, Romanticism raised the problem of the story behind the story” (p. 20). Its lyrical poetry gains force from an appended, apparently surplus and digressive yet humanly distressing prose anecdote, an anecdote that refuses a simple moral and defies analysis, supplying instead a valence of indeterminacy. Cheng invites a view of Romanticism beyond reach of ideology or history but bound to ephemeral moments that revive iterative sympathy in the retelling—effectively conjuring up sympathetic readers. Read in this way, Romantic poetry is not oppositional to prose but rather hinges to it across generic boundaries of text and paratext.

Deaths by drowning or snowstorms that separate parents from young children serve to connect the “then” of nineteenth-century print to the “now” of social media circulation of human interest stories. Cheng parallels the deaths of George and Sarah Green in 1808 in a Lake District snowstorm with the death by hypothermia of James Kim in Oregon in 2006, since both events prompted the circulation of stories regarding attempted rescue and trauma of surviving family members. The Green tragedy motivated Dorothy Wordsworth to write a prose account of them to circulate privately with a charitable motivation to raise money for their surviving children, but Cheng points out that the Wordsworths avoided publication to screen the Green children from too much charity that might raise envy or conflict with their neighbors, all of whom struggled with limited resources and understood themselves as vulnerable to the same kinds of disaster. While Dorothy’s prose account would not be published until 1936, Thomas De Quincey rewrote it from memory in 1839 in his “Recollections of Grasmere” and circulated with it a poem by William Wordsworth also memorializing the Greens. Perhaps presuming familiarity with this publication history, Cheng concentrates on questions of why and how De Quincey appropriated Dorothy’s prose, referring us only to the 1890 publication of *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey* in her footnotes and bibliography, and misses opportunities to mention dates and venues of first publication more prominently, such as the initial publication of “Recollections of Grasmere” in the September 1839 issue of *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* and its later revision in the 1854 publication of De Quincey’s own *Collected Works*.

Cheng’s emphasis is not so much on how the story of the Greens circulated as on probing Dorothy Wordsworth’s and Thomas De Quincey’s digressive paratexts. Thus, in a long footnote to the Green

story, Dorothy Wordsworth memorializes a Lake District woman murdered by her son in her home, emphasizing the lack of safety for women on the margins of rural communities. By contrast, De Quincey shifts her emphasis on fundamental insecurity to advocate in his footnotes for local safety efforts in sounding gong alert systems and strategically locating stores of food on mountain passes. The self-perpetuating force of human interest in the Greens gives opportunities to each of the three writers, while positioning William Wordsworth's poem in a marginal position between his sister's first prose account and De Quincey's editorial remixing. William's poem was less useful, in De Quincey's view, than his sister's work in gaining charitable help but added to their narrative memorial of events an abiding lyrical figure of pathos.

Poetry takes central stage in the book's following chapters. Cheng's method of advancing "human interest" succeeds most impressively in the illumination of the two Shelleys engaged in paratextual debate with each other over the importance of narrative and temporal specificity. Echoing James Chandler, Cheng makes much of Mary Shelley's titling of Percy's "England in 1819," emphasizing the sonnet's grounding in a quickly passing historical moment to amplify its human interest. (My teaching experience tends to support Cheng's view: my students seem unexpectedly motivated to draft detailed contextual annotations on names and allusions in "England in 1819" thanks to their awareness of the specific moment announced in the title.) Further emphasizing the importance of titles, Percy Shelley's resistance to changing the title of *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City* indicates his awareness of the greater human interest in the first title, with its clear signal of individuals leading a revolution readily identifiable to readers as their own place and moment, by contrast with the more distancing sound of *The Revolt of Islam*, which may have led reviewers to refuse association of the poem with England.

Perhaps most fascinating and unusual about this discussion of the Shelleys is Cheng's reading of *Laon and Cythna* together with *Frankenstein*, demonstrating the remarkable affinity of the two texts in their layering of stories within stories, and their mutual interest in figuring characters as vehicles for storytelling. We follow the intellectual dialogue of these writers as they comment on and seek to support each other's works. Percy's introduction to the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* accentuates its familial relation to John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, affiliating narrative prose to high literary form. We see Percy further testing the boundaries of poetry and prose narrative in

the *Defence of Poetry*, in which poetry is not so much timeless or eternal but rather an intricate record of passing moments, eschewing the haziness of anecdote. Cheng observes how uneasily narrative sits in the poetry of *Laon and Cythna* when framed and punctuated as a succession of lyric images. For her part, Mary Shelley amplified the importance of “story” in the 1831 preface to *Frankenstein* as well as in her reframing of her husband’s writings, grounding them in prose paratexts supplying stories to support their human interest. Cheng finds irony in Mary’s emphasis on story and “ghost story” in her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, in that it demonstrates something of Percy’s own visionary assimilation of images promoting the “poetry” of literary art. What is immortalized as “ghost story” in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* is the unspecified poignant memory of lost children bordering the novel’s experiments to counter death.

By comparison with Cheng’s elaborately juxtaposed close readings of prose and poetry by the Wordsworths and De Quincey and the Shelleys, the chapter on “Byron’s Interruption” seems more limited in scope. In concentrating on *Lara* as the last of Byron’s radically popular series of Oriental verse-romances, preceded by *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, and *The Corsair*, Cheng perhaps overemphasizes a non-necessity for context based on Byron’s letter to his publisher that *Lara*’s setting “is not Spain but the Moon” (quoted on p. 114). As Cheng demonstrates, the poem draws human interest by the stammering recoiling from speech of its characters, failing to resolve speculations that Kaled and Lara might be Gulnare and Conrad from *The Corsair* even in the surprise revelation of Kaled’s womanhood. Yet the concentration on *Lara* for this chapter occludes Byron’s extensive earlier work and seems to avoid engaging with his popular Orientalism, and the scaffolding of Byron’s poems on human interest stories of sex and death across East-West lines begs further exploration. Executions of drugged, voiceless women by drowning or burning that recur in Romantic Orientalist poetry by Robert Southey, Byron, and Thomas Moore certainly amplified horrifying stories of human interest drawn from European imperial media. As a Southey scholar, I would apply Cheng’s method of reading for human interest precisely to the elaborately anecdotal dimensions of Southey’s prose paratexts to *Thalaba* and *The Curse of Kehama*.

That we can easily see how to apply Cheng’s method to a wider range of nineteenth-century texts, however, demonstrates the real importance of *British Romanticism and the Literature of Human Interest*. Most importantly, Cheng shows us *how* to read for “human interest,” encouraging us to seek out the apparently digressive passage that

locally instantiates a human tragedy. Cheng's last chapter takes on Matthew Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in order to counter his dismissal of the Romantics as insufficient in critical reading to produce lasting literature. Arnold's contradictions surface in his "stumbling upon" a newspaper's representation of two opposing political speeches, each trumpeting the peace and prosperity of England against the lurid story on the same page of one Elizabeth Wragg accused of infanticide (p. 151). His own "stumbling upon" the human interest story that emotively unsettles illuminates for us just how much Arnold missed in his reductive dismissal of the Romantics.

As an index of how extensively nineteenth-century studies has changed, Cheng reminds us in her last chapter of the datedness of Jerome McGann's *Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), his proposal that the Romantics and their successors in Romanticists idealized literary forms as liberating us from history. More lately, we read in Romantic writings a far more complex set of internal tensions and self-questionings, a dynamic energy grounded in historical events for their appeal and pre-figuring issues of our time, as does *British Romanticism and the Literature of Human Interest*. Indeed, Cheng's emphasis on the universal appeal of rapid loss and change seems apt for a time of reductions in specialized courses on Romanticism and the shrinkage in university literature programs. Perhaps in such times we recognize more clearly that literature's survival depends on the irresistibility of human interest.

ELISA E. BESHRO-BONDAR

University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg

DANIEL WRIGHT, *Bad Logic: Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 219. \$54.95.

It is difficult to put sexual desire into language. This observation, so obvious as to seem nearly unremarkable, is provocatively defamiliarized in Daniel Wright's complex and innovative study *Bad Logic: Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel*. Wright places the struggle to give representation to the erotic at the heart of the Victorian (realist) novel, turning to ordinary language philosophy to identify the strategies authors used to do so. Philosophers have made