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BRITISH ROMANTICISM AND THE LITERATURE OF HUMAN INTEREST



By **Mai-Lin Cheng**
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Reviewed by **Heidi Thomson** on 2018-12-06.

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"In our own age of clickbait, every reader knows a thing or two about the magnetism of the human interest story and its formulaism" (15). Affirming the prominence of the human interest story in today's social media and press, Cheng's book retraces its earlier, complex manifestations and considers "the Romantic engagement with the problem of human interest through formal experiments in lyric and narrative" (2). Her definition of Romantic "human interest" is contextual, "more topos than concept" (5), as she writes in the introductory first chapter, which also "outlines the Romantic idea of human interest and its resonance in modern media culture" (2). Chapters two, three, and four treat the Wordsworths (and De Quincey), the Shelleys, and Byron respectively, while the final chapter, "Romantic Ends," considers the idea and role of "anecdote" through Matthew Arnold's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (2).

After previewing all the following chapters, the first chapter explores what "human interest" and "human interest story" might mean. With the aid of scholarship on news and newspapers (Helen Hughes and Nikki Hessel) as well as genre studies (David Duff), Cheng argues that human interest "is, for the British Romantics, a problem of form" (9). "How and why," Cheng asks, "are genre and affect linked for the Romantics? Reading human interest as a multivalent, conflicted term helps us understand that it is a concept that structures Romantic literary practice" (9).

Cheng thus tackles a challenging topic, opening up many avenues for further exploration, particularly since many of the texts under scrutiny are less well known and deserving of more detailed discussion. Nevertheless, while Cheng articulates great questions, perhaps too many questions, I sometimes found a deficiency of answers: not enough sustained or critically focused analyses of what constitutes human interest. Still, this is a richly suggestive study of demanding texts. Essentially, Cheng argues that "the human interest story of the nineteenth century . . . already contain[s] its own critique of sympathy's potential to produce feeling for another. . . . [U]nder the sympathy model, interest for another is often unmasked--or demystified--as a disguised self-interest" (14). For Cheng, human interest is a "mechanism" through which "the marginal subject--whether exotic or quotidian--moved to the center in Romantic literary practice" (20). Yet since Cheng also writes that "[a]mong the Romantics, the problem of human interest was intensely argued at the margin of narrative itself" (20), she might have highlighted the idea of the "margin" more explicitly, perhaps by including it in the title.

To illustrate the idea of the human interest story, Cheng examines three versions of the same event: the overnight perishing of an English Lakeland couple between Langdale and Grasmere, orphaning their six young children, in March 1808. To raise funds for the children, Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in the following month--for circulation among friends--*A Narrative Concerning George and Sarah Green of the Parish of Grasmere addressed to a Friend*. Meanwhile, a few days after the burial of the Greens, William Wordsworth commemorated them in "Elegiac Stanzas, composed in the churchyard of Grasmere," and more than thirty years later, Thomas De Quincey incorporated Wordsworth's poem in his own account of the Greens in "Recollections of Grasmere," published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*. In comparing these versions of the Greens' story, Cheng probes the motivations of the authors and finely delineates the tensions between "self-interest and community" (3), including a fascinating analysis of Dorothy's footnote to her Green narrative about the murder of Mary Watson (48-51). At times Cheng quotes other sources which are not fully relevant to her own topic. Writing about Wordsworth's use of the word "friend" in "Tintern Abbey," for instance, she quotes Alan Liu's statement that for William, "a friend is the metonymic medium in which a family writes its intuition that it is itself structured by communications of metaphorical identity closer than mere metonymy or 'liking'" (qtd. 42). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "friend" as (3) "a close relation, a kinsman or kinswoman" and (4) "sympathizer, supporter." Both Liu's comment and the OED definitions could have been used to help link "Tintern Abbey" to Wordsworth's poem and Dorothy's narrative. Also, while Cheng's analysis of De Quincey's article makes sense, she might have done more with De Quincey's mercenary motives: his quoting of Wordsworth's poem and Dorothy's narrative may be at least partly explained by his desire to make as much money as possible from the word count of his magazine journalism.

Turning from De Quincey and the Wordsworths to Mary and Percy Shelley, Cheng examines "the kind of literary act and mechanism that brought us Percy through the mediation of Mary" (70). While closely reading Percy's *The Revolt of Islam* and using *Frankenstein* to help explain the differences between Mary and Percy, Cheng skillfully illuminates Mary's advocacy for a stronger "human interest" dimension in Percy's work through her "prefaces, notes, and editorial interventions" (70). To buttress her argument, she might have cited Michael Edson's superb collection of essays in honor of

Donald H. Reiman, *Publishing, Editing, and Reception* (2015), but perhaps this book came out too late for inclusion in her own.

A version of Cheng's chapter on Byron was first published in *Studies in Romanticism* under the compelling title of "Lara's Stutter." This chapter about a fairly neglected text, *Lara*, one of Byron's Eastern tales, is the most sustained, in-depth analysis of a single text within the book. According to Cheng, the "human interest" of the tale springs from Byron's manipulation of generic conventions and expectations of Orientalism by means of various disruptive, stop-and-go strategies. Cheng also connects the text with contemporary perspectives on Orientalism in order to highlight Byron's astute, reflexive deployment of generic and narrative techniques.

While the final chapter slightly repeats the Introduction, Cheng finely illuminates the significance of the Romantic moment through Matthew Arnold's critique of Romantic poetry in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). As indicated above, the term "margin" is not sufficiently featured within the title of this study, and neither is the term "anecdote." Yet Cheng proves that in Arnold's essay, the "human interest" story of Elizabeth Wragg and the murder of her illegitimate child is the scaffold or linchpin for larger social and esthetic points.

While investigating the human interest story, this book demonstrates the transformative significance of the margins in a variety of ways: the margins of a page, of a genre (including the marginality of the anecdote), of authors, of their subjects, and of their status in society. At times the book is more suggestive about patterns of thinking than illuminating about particular literary texts. Besides citing theorists such as Adorno, Agamben, Foucault, Benjamin, and Moretti, Cheng draws heavily on theoretically-minded Romanticists such as Jerome McGann, Alan Liu, Marjorie Levinson, and Paul De Man. As a result, this book will appeal more to theoretically inclined readers than to specialists in literature.

At times I felt the need for more contextual information about the texts discussed. Cheng's account of Wordsworth's poem, for instance, could have included some reference to Stephen Gill's critical and biographical work on the relation between Wordsworth's poetry and his family. Also, Cheng's preoccupation with theory in this book leads occasionally to questionable phrasing. When Dorothy Wordsworth refers to a "laborious walk" in her *Narrative*, Cheng turns this phrase into the "above scene of the labor of walking" (36-7).

Similarly, consider how Cheng construes Dorothy's impersonal use of the pronoun "you" in the opening of her narrative: "You remember a single Cottage at the foot of Blentern Gill--it is the only dwelling on the Western side of the upper reaches of the Vale of Easedale, and close under the mountain." Though I understand this sentence as saying, "one would remember the cottage because it's the only house around," Cheng interprets it this as a direct address to a reader: "The opening address is generous, invoking a community of supportive readers. It is a literally selfless rhetoric of appeal in which 'I' is effaced in favor of 'you.'" At the same time, there is something almost violent in the ascription of memory to an *other*, something that underscores Dorothy's formal control as she draws a map for the reader, insisting that the addressee already knows and should recall the scene" (39-40). Can all this be deduced from the opening sentence of Dorothy's *Narrative*? In particular, describing Dorothy's "you remember" as "almost violent" strikes me as an overstatement. I also wonder about Cheng's way of reading Dorothy's letter of August 1809 to her close friend Catherine Clarkson. When Dorothy says that she cannot remember a precise date or reports that workmen in the house give her a sense of chaos, does she reveal the "fragility of her sense of purpose, so easily shattered by a round of home improvement" and "insecurity of home" (51)? While I recognize that interpretations are shaped by the critical lens of the writer's argument, I prefer to see the primary text take precedence over the rhetoric of the argument, and not the other way around.

I found one other small defect in this otherwise beautifully produced book: to avoid the many separate endnotes for commonly cited primary texts, it could have cited them parenthetically.

But the defects of this book must be weighed against its strengths. On the whole, it convincingly demonstrates that "human interest" transpires from the margins and the anecdotal, and that, as readers, we should be mindful of the entire production of a text, including its paratextual materials and topics.

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