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Aims and Scope: Formerly *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* (1997–2005), *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840* is a twice-yearly journal that is committed to foregrounding innovative Romantic-studies research into bibliography, book history, intertextuality, and textual studies. To this end, we publish material in a number of formats: among them, peer-reviewed articles, reports on individual/group research projects, bibliographical checklists, and biographical profiles of overlooked Romantic writers. As of Issue 15 (Winter 2005), *Romantic Textualities* also carries reviews of books that reflect the growing academic interest in the fields of book history, print culture, intertextuality, and cultural materialism, as they relate to Romantic studies.

REVIEWS



Patricia Comitini, *Vocational Philanthropy and British Women's Writing, 1790–1810: Wollstonecraft, More, Edgeworth, Wordsworth* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), viii + 168pp. ISBN 0-754-65042-1; £42.50/\$79.95 (hb).


DIDACTIC WRITING SELDOM SETS THE MODERN PULSE RACING, and it is a brave critic who sets out to concentrate on literature which explicitly aims to improve the morals of its readers. From a historical distance, even the best examples of improving literature have a taint of worthiness and condescension, but throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the idea that the written word could help relieve suffering, challenge ignorance and make the world a better place was firmly embedded in the social mind, and many of the most successful authors of the time operated under such philanthropic auspices.

Comitini's study argues that the turn of the century saw a shift in the British attitude towards the less fortunate members of society, and that these changes were connected to wider debates about the role of women in the public sphere. For Comitini, this discourse is firmly located within textual acts of reading and writing, and she proposes that its practitioners created a new ideology of 'vocational philanthropy' by combining principles of aesthetic discernment with a 'calling' to address social ills. This term 'vocational philanthropy' describes a mode of writing that placed middle-class women at the centre of the philanthropic movement, and which sought to shift the idea of charitable action away from economic relief and towards a discourse of moral improvement. Many women writers, so Comitini argues, presented themselves as benevolent social reformers for whom increases in literacy during the period made it possible to reach out to the working classes and inculcate good values and a better understanding of their position and duties within the hierarchy of the nation. The paradigm of 'vocational philanthropy' allows for a better understanding the 'constructedness' of that benevolence and reform, and it is through this notion that the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Dorothy Wordsworth are filtered.

This central thesis is compelling and well-argued, and it is set up in a fresh and lucid Introduction, complemented by an intelligent and nuanced reading of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in the second chapter. Wollstonecraft's position as the often unacknowledged ideological touchstone

for moral women's writing in the early nineteenth century is convincingly established, and Comitini sets out the competing discourses of public and private spheres, gender, aesthetics, morality and instruction with precision and verve. The third chapter deals with the 'popular' tracts and tales of Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth, and the efforts of didactic writers to bring their message to bear on the lower orders—creating morally responsible individuals capable of upholding society's religious, social, and economic structure. Chapter Four reads Edgeworth's *Belinda* as a parodic refashioning of the morally dubious genre of the novel into a vehicle for middle class reform. The final chapter of the book seeks to recoup Dorothy Wordsworth's journals from the convention of the 'subverted' Romantic woman writer, labouring under her brother's shadow, and to construct instead a more complex, self-defined 'benevolent, domestic model of a womanhood who is the ideal collaborator for William' (p. 134).

The difficulty with a study of this kind is that the texts under examination are not easily subjected to the conventions of literary criticism, and as such the intention and ideology of the authors take centre stage. Comitini is understandably wary when presenting readings of literature often dismissed as '“coercive” dogma, preaching obedience and submission' (p. 69), but too much justification means that her 'vocational philanthropy' premise is often restated, and it is not until the midpoint of the book that the first literary criticism proper appears. There is often a tension between the presentation of texts as social history and reading texts as works of art, and although the critiques of Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* and Maria Edgeworth's *Popular Tales* and *Belinda* are competent and insightful, they build only slightly on previous criticism of these writers, and of Romantic-era fiction in general. Comitini is more assured when locating non-literary texts such as *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal* within a broadly cultural materialist analysis of the historical context. Here, she argues that the primary function of these didactic works was to inculcate 'the popular acceptance of the capitalist system' (p. 79) by presenting narratives in which the stability of society is shown to be reliant on its various strata performing their roles willingly and honestly.

Vocational Philanthropy is useful and well-argued, and sets out clearly the historical context and ideological agenda of Romantic-era didactic fiction, as well as elucidating the complex relationship between the private and public spheres that women writers often had to negotiate. Though slightly less convincing when it comes to textual analysis, Comitini's book is an admirable attempt to give us a clearer understanding of a popular and powerful mode of fiction: one which had far greater cachet in its own time than ours and which deserves such unapologetic reassessment. 

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS



Janette Currie received her PhD from the University of Stirling, where she is now Research Fellow of the AHRC-funded ‘Songs of James Hogg Project’ for the Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of *The Collected Works of James Hogg*. Forthcoming in 2006 is James Hogg, *Contributions to Literary Annuals and Gift Books* (S/SC Research Edition). A major interest, and the subject of a previous AHRB-funded research project, is Hogg’s trans-Atlanticism — see ‘“A Man’s a Man for a’ That”: Burns, Hogg, and The Liberator’ and ‘From Altrive to Albany: James Hogg’s Transatlantic Publication’ on *STAR* (*Scotland’s Transatlantic Relations*) project at <<http://www.star.ac.uk/Archive/Publications.htm>>.

Bianca Falbo is Assistant Professor of English and Assistant Director of the College Writing Program at Lafayette College. Her scholarship focuses on the institutionalising of literacy practices since the turn of the nineteenth century in a range of cultural sites including school books, periodicals, editions of ‘literary’ texts, and student writing. Her articles have appeared in *Reader and Composition Studies*.

Derek Furr is Assistant Professor of English in the Bard College Master of Arts in Teaching Program, where he teaches courses in Romantic period and post-colonial literatures, and works with pre-service and in-service public schoolteachers.

David Higgins is Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Chester, and is the author of *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity, Politics* (2005—reviewed in this issue of *Romantic Textualities*); he has also published articles on Wordsworth and celebrity, Hazlitt and prize-fighting, and nineteenth-century constructions of ‘race’.

Tim Killick is Postdoctoral Research Associate on the AHRC-funded *Database of Mid-Victorian Wood-Engraved Illustrations* at Cardiff University’s Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research. He has published articles on the fiction of Allan Cunningham, James Hogg, and Mary Russell Mitford. Current projects

include a monograph on short fiction of the 1820s and an edition of Allan Cunningham's *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*.

Tom Mole is Assistant Professor of English Literature at McGill University. He has edited one volume for the Pickering & Chatto edition of *Blackwood's Magazine, 1817–1825* (forthcoming), and has published a number of articles on Byron and celebrity. He is currently preparing a monograph entitled *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*, to be published by Palgrave.

