

British Romanticism and the Catholic Question (Review)

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British Romanticism and the Catholic Question: Religion, History and National Identity, 1778–1829, by Michael Tomko. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. vii + 224. \$62.08. ISBN: 9780230279513.

Michael Tomko's *British Romanticism and the Catholic Question: Religion, History and National Identity 1778–1829* analyzes historical events, cultural anxieties, and discourse related to Parliamentary considerations of acts addressing oppressive restrictions on Catholics (leading up to and including the 1829 passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act) to demonstrate the ways Romantic-era literature participates in the period's politically charged conversations about religious tolerance and national identity. In the years spanned by this study, tensions between Britons who viewed Catholicism as a threat to the nation and those who took pride in the nation's progressive values led to heated disputes, political upheaval, and bloodshed. Tomko's comprehensive biographical, historical, literary analysis delineates how the key authors in the study—Elizabeth Inchbald, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Sir Walter Scott—use fiction to proffer means of containing or moving forward from these tensions. Tomko highlights the following: (1) questions of British national identity (enmeshed in often paradoxical beliefs about religious tolerance, the valuing of England's medieval Catholic past, enlightenment ideologies, and conceptions of progress, morality, and modernity); (2) British Romanticism's celebrated "spirit of the age," with its characteristic endorsement of the *via media* and the transformative power of the individual imagination, as informed by the hopes and failures of the French Revolution and fear of Catholicism (by some associated with primitivism, superstition, and the tyranny of the papacy); (3) the realized and continuing potential for violent eruptions attributed to religious enthusiasm (witnessed by, for instance, the Gordon Riots); and (4) the political, aesthetic, and cultural import of Romantic texts grappling with all of the above.

The introduction and first chapter adroitly set the stage for subsequent analysis of representative literary engagements with the Catholic Question in chapters two through five, and for a discussion of the reverberations of the 1929 passage of Catholic Emancipation in the conclusion. Building on a quotation from Leigh Hunt that highlights the contrast between celebrating the progress of an enlightened age and the failure of Parliament to comprehensively repeal anti-Catholic regulations (instituted by the Test and Corporation Acts), in the introduction Tomko illustrates the widespread impact of the Catholic Question, identifies key issues and tensions that inform the study, and situates his study in the field of scholarship. Divided into four sections (1778–1800, 1800–1807, 1807–1815, 1815–1822), Chapter 1 uses historical markers to break down the "culture wars" surrounding sectarian tensions. Together, the segments create a detailed, carefully documented, complex portrait of the historical events and movements, important figures and polemicists, arguments and positions that inform literary and other engagements of the Catholic Question.

In his Chapter 2 analysis of Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, Tomko compellingly argues that the marriage of Dorriforth and Miss Milner, part of a national tale, speaks to Protestant-Catholic tensions by offering a "model of social healing and reconciliation" (60) because the prospective pair, opposites in their personalities and backgrounds, find ways each to expand the other's understanding and to address differences. As modeled here, the key to addressing conflicts is meeting often and talking through differences—keeping the lines of communication open—and learning to exercise sympathy, kindness, and forgiveness. In contrast, Part II of *A Simple Story* illustrates, in Tomko's insightful reading, the "hardening effects of sectarianism and fundamentalism" (80) in the partitioning of the home and cruelty of Lord Elmwood. Resentment builds, and sympathy cannot penetrate it when parties do not encounter each other. Part II concludes, Tomko argues, with an open-ended optimism because Matilda and her father begin to heal wounds and practice "choosing sympathy over resentment" (85). Inchbald's answer to the Catholic Question is, thus, not legislation, the burying of the past, or assimilation, but a recognition of mutual suffering, an acceptance of difference, and a choice to practice compassion.

Wordsworth and Shelley, Tomko points out in the third and fourth chapters, approach the Catholic Question from opposite sides and come to divergent conclusions, but both take a stance on the role of history and the function of poetry. Paying particular attention to *The Excursion*, *Essays and Epitaphs*, and *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, Tomko illustrates Wordsworth's "aesthetic solution," which promotes healing through the potentially unifying experience of regulated superstition in historically significant, often sacred, communal space. Though promoting superstition and dwelling on churches and abbeys runs the risk of raising fears of a return to papal ideologies, Wordsworth (staunchly opposed to Catholic Emancipation) mollifies this risk by, for example, consigning Catholic associations to memory and a fixed past as well as relying on Britons' secure moral sense of sincere spirituality and longstanding national history of rejecting enthusiasm for the *via media*. In contrast to Wordsworth's saturation in the past, Shelley promotes poetry that transcends historical specificity, avoiding the narrow perspective of the moment in favor of universals and the promise of stadial progress. Building on an engaging discussion of Shelley's disappointing trip to Ireland and Irish influences in Italy, Tomko reveals in Shelley's *The Cenci* a drama informed by the poet's theoretical stance and the ambivalence he felt toward Irish Catholics after his fight to defeat religious persecution was shadowed by fears that historic grievances would not be left in the past but, instead, lead to violence. Catholics (in Italy and largely), in this line of argument, may be so mired in convention, bigotry, and corruption that they cannot embrace reform. Beatrice offers hope of transcendence in the play, with her potentially transformative gaze and opportunity to cut bonds with the society that permits her oppression and abuse. Her ultimate failure to break from the cycle of violence and the social system that supports it Tomko convincingly reads as a comment on the Catholic Question; Shelley's support for Catholic Emancipation is evidently complicated by a conviction that emancipation is only available to those willing and able to let go of past grievances and cut ties to regressive, morally degraded social systems and religious ideologies.

Chapter 5 homes in on the tension between the Saxons, Normans, and English Jews in *Ivanhoe*, in which Tomko sees Scott's exploration of the difficulties of a nation divided by tribalism. Scott, it becomes evident, uses his medieval historical tale to expose the dangers of sectarian loyalty and parochialism, particularly as buffered by shared memory of insult and injury. Despite patterns of violence and multiple setbacks in the exchanges between the particular communities, however, in this study the novel is shown to offer the hope of a new

conciliatory ideal. Refining the national marriage plot, *Ivanhoe* and *Rowena* are ready to give up their historical identity (as Saxons) and embrace a new, progressive national identity; they embrace a rational, self-regulated *via media*. Tomko points out that this resolution is not without complications; it may reduce the impact of historic wounds and grievances, but it sacrifices to the new national ethos memories and practices that may be vital to groups' or individuals' particular ethos.

Throughout the text and into the last chapter, Tomko seamlessly draws together the many intersecting threads of his investigation, introduced in his first two chapters, essential to a richer understanding of select Romantic authors' engagement of the Catholic Question. Competing conceptions of British national identity, biographical details, historical events, and cultural anxieties, and the interplay of political, literary, and other forms of cultural discourses negotiating competing ideologies, for example, richly inform his analysis of the character, plot, setting, form, aesthetic, and other choices of poets undeniably engaging in contemporary debates about religious freedom. Tomko closes the study by demonstrating that the debates in which Romantic-era poets engaged did not end with the passage of The Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829. He points out, for example, that works by Edward William Cox and J. M. W. Turner celebrate a new, post-Catholic Emancipation sense of British superiority that might be seen as feeding imperialist ideologies, while authors like Coleridge and Southey warned that this kind of religious reform could create an inroad for the papacy. As is reliably gratifying of Tomko's writing, these polar responses are balanced by another perspective, that of John Henry Newman, arguing that Romantic ideologies and Enlightenment progress might, together, translate into an irenic valuing of secular, sectarian, partisan beliefs as parts of a complexly unified, healthy community. On the whole, *British Romanticism and the Catholic Question* is an engaging, thoroughly researched, richly informative study that rewards readers with a deeper understanding of the complexities of the era's religious tensions and the cultural products that engaged them.