

**Jonas Cope, *The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism, 1820-1839*.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. Pp. 248. £80. ISBN
9781474421300.**

Jonas Cope's monograph provides a comprehensive account of how the concept of character developed during the Reform Era, at a time when idiosyncratic genres proliferated and writers created radical literary experiments. He argues that authors threw the stability, meaning, and legibility of character into doubt by providing an alternative to texts in which readers could scan the surface to find depths in a coherent self (4–5). As Cope writes, '[c]haracter began to circulate as a concept whose ready appropriation in new print media and new scientific disciplines was strangely at odds with its unreliability as a holder of value' (11). He analyses character across an eclectic and impressive range of texts, including 'familiar essays, auto/biographies, poems, "poetical illustrations", engravings, annuals, novels of manners, fashionable novels, novels of ideas, closet dramas, "sketches" of London life and unclassifiable hybrids like Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4)' (3). In seven chapters and a substantial Afterword, Cope elaborates on the rich nuances of character, offering incisive close readings of individual texts and drawing compelling links between a dizzying array of writers.

The first two chapters establish a foundation for Cope's argument by laying out the literary, scientific, and intellectual contexts in which character evolved as a 'vexed' concept during the 1820s and 30s (49). These chapters advance a sweeping interdisciplinary portrait of this debate among well-known literary writers (Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Walter Scott), thinkers (John Stuart Mill, August Comte, and Harriet Martineau), and philosophers (David Hume, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Jeremy Bentham). The next five chapters and the Afterword build on this foundation and offer specific case studies of character in texts by Scott, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Hartley Coleridge, Landon, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Thomas Love Peacock, Charles Dickens, and Carlyle. In chapter three, Cope examines Scott's novel *Old Mortality* and Lamb's *Essays of Elia* as 'postmodern experiments' that expose the fictionality, constructedness, and arbitrary nature of character (75). Chapter four investigates Hazlitt's view that character is a fixed and unified principle governed by a congenital 'bias', which contrasts with his portrayal of character in the experimental work *Liber Amoris*. The fifth chapter covers Hartley Coleridge's poetic engagement with Lucretius's materialism in imagining the dissolution of character and corporeality as a type of freedom (what Keats calls 'the feel of not to feel it') (135).

Next, Cope goes beyond Landon's widely studied love poems to consider how her letters, novels, verse, essays, and footnotes contradict one another, suggesting that inconsistency of character is neutral in value, rather than morally dubious. Chapter seven reflects on how Beddoes and Peacock push the radical dissolution of character to its limits in *Death's Jest-Book* and *Crotchet Castle*. The Afterword focuses on Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* as bridge texts between the Reform Era's instability of character across innovative genres and the unity of character in Victorian realist novels. Dickens's *Boz* and Carlyle's unnamed editor exude 'an ironic sense of confidence and authority, drawing attention to characterisation as an arbitrary and political act even as [the writers try] to convince readers that the fictional beings in the text are possible or probable representations of living beings in the world' (193).

One point Cope touches on that would reward further investigation is the connection between the need for people to read character in order to navigate the class system and the major political reforms and working-class activism of the Reform Era. Cope draws on the Introduction to Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning's *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment* in his brief discussion of character reading. He notes their 'claim that in the eighteenth century the "legibility of character" was a "crucial issue" and an "ai[d] to

survival.” Stronger character-readers simply had better chances of social and economic prosperity’ (19). He also quotes a writer for *The Oriental Herald* who calls ‘knowledge of character [...] the only instrument of success upon which we can rely’ as a ‘science, which holds the golden keys of fortune and power’ (34). During this politically turbulent period, did character reading become less essential (and thus character lost its stability) as British society grew more democratised, especially with the passage of acts like the 1832 Reform Bill? It would be worthwhile for academics to build on Cope’s fascinating genealogy of character by exploring the class and political implications of his findings.

Through its ambitious scope and dense analysis, Cope’s monograph makes an outstanding case that scholars should take the literature of the Reform Era and its portrayal of character seriously. Along with offering an exciting addition to recent scholarship on perceptions of character during the nineteenth century, Cope persuades readers that this period of literary history and its heterogenous material are richly deserving of critical notice.

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