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From Religious Doubt to Victorian Domesticity

Airey, Jennifer L. *Religion Around Mary Shelley*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 231 pp.

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<1>*Religion Around Mary Shelley* is a study of the development of Mary Shelley's (1797-1851) religious thought from *Frankenstein* to her last published work, *Rambles in Germany and Italy*. It is a comprehensive reappraisal of Shelley's works from the perspective of the changing religious views she held throughout her life. This is the fifth volume in a series which the publisher describes as the detailed examination of "the religious forces surrounding cultural icons." The central argument of the book, as stated by Airey, is that religious faith in Shelley is linked to her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's legacy and to female prophecy, and functions simultaneously as both a refuge and a source of patriarchal oppression (5).

<2>The book is divided into two parts. The first part comprises chapters one and two, gives an overview of the religious environment in which Shelley grew up and of the religious beliefs and opinions of her parents—Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin—and her husband—Percy Shelley. The second part of the book focuses on Mary Shelley herself and on her principal literary works; Airey also gives some attention to a few short stories written for *The Keepsake*, a yearly collection of stories for a female middle-class audience. The chapters in this section—three to five—discuss Shelley's works chronologically.

<3>The first chapter, "Religion Around Romanticism," addresses the works of the chief romantic poets (Shelley, Byron, and Blake); provides a historical view of the religious currents of the early nineteenth century (Methodism, Anglican evangelicalism, rational dissent, Roman Catholicism, and atheism); and outlines the economic circumstances and social upheavals caused by early industrialization in England in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars.

<4>The second chapter is a biographical discussion of those closest to Mary Shelley and their influence on her. So, Godwin's Calvinist upbringing in relation to his philosophy, his later agnosticism, and eventual deism is discussed in terms of how Shelley was affected by them. Airey concludes that Shelley's works follow a comparable path, but that she rejects Godwin's optimistic political belief in human perfectibility. Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, came from an Anglican background and was later influenced by the circle of rational dissenters around Richard Price. Mary Shelley had an easier relationship with these views and seems to have come nearer to her mother's position later in life. Airey argues that Shelley's embrace of Christian domesticity and the value of charity, kindness and close family ties in the later works reflects her

mother's religious views. Regarding her husband, Mary Shelley initially seems to have countenanced his atheism with the concomitant possibility of the absence of God. Following in this vein, in many of her early works she pondered the possibility of a malevolent deity and what effects both absence and malevolence could have on the world. The exploration of these views is especially evident in *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826). Airey explains how even though Shelley expressed doubts about God's intent and presence in the world, she never held an atheist position. The rest of the chapter discusses Mary Shelley's views on the science of the day, particularly Galvinism and electricity, and finally the influence on her thought of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Volney's *The Ruins of Empire*. These two last works inflected her early novels as well. These two chapters provide the reader with an overview of the key sources religious, familial, scientific and cultural that helped to shape Shelley's opinions and beliefs.

<5>The third chapter, entitled "Doubt," launches the part of the book devoted to Mary Shelley's literary works. This chapter offers readings of *Frankenstein* (1818), *Mathilda* (1819-20), and "Valerius: The Reanimated Roman" (1819). In both *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda*, Airey sees a movement from hopelessness, isolation, and confrontation with an unprotective and absent God towards the fulfilment entailed by family comforts and human connection. The section on "Valerius" is relatively long and there Airey proposes that in this story Shelley confronts the Christian understanding of time and eternity and finds no end-time, just a cyclical world of victories, defeats, and replacements. In these works, Shelley explores her religious doubts and separates herself from the religious positions of the romantic poets in her circle.

<6>*Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), and "The Convent of Chailot" (1828) are the focus of chapter four, entitled "Despair." In her discussion of the first two of these works, Airey provides a detailed culturo-historical context on the place of convents and Roman Catholicism in the English mainstream and in Shelley's works. In this period of Shelley's life, she confronted more openly the possibility of an actively malevolent God, or even the possibility of a rudderless world where there is no divine plan. This struggle is reflected in the three works discussed and the analysis serves as a segue to the later works where there is a sharp turn towards domesticity and the love of humanity as a refuge and consolation from the uncertainties of the metaphysical world.

<7>The last chapter is a discussion of Mary Shelley's least popular and most understudied works: *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1833), and the revised *Frankenstein* Shelley published in 1831. In this chapter, Airey provides, as a religious context to the works, the rise of evangelical Anglicanism, the Clapham Sect generally, and the figures of William Wilberforce and Hannah More specifically. She regards these thinkers and their works as the leading ideology behind Shelley's embrace of domesticity, charity and self-denial. It is these religious tenets, especially regarding the role of women, that permeate these works. Concerning these works and their purported conservatism, Airey argues that although they deify maternity and the place of women in the domestic sphere, they also offer a real possibility of agency for women even if it is restricted in its scope. In her concluding pages, Airey touches lightly on *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844), Mary Shelley's last published work.

<8>The strength of Airey's book lies in its comprehensive approach to Shelley's oeuvre; therefore, equal attention is given to both her famous and least known works. The book offers an

accessible introduction to Shelley's life and works without reducing them to a mere reflection of her legendary and frequently studied early years. In this sense, the book's approach is refreshing. It is also a useful introduction to the many complex cultural and religious changes taking place in England in the early nineteenth century. Airey has also conducted a substantial overview of the copious critical literature on Shelley. I can see this book as valuable supplementary reading in a class devoted to Shelley and the Romantic circle she moved in. Airey's analysis is consistent and the argument she develops systematically and convincingly—the displacement of a distant God by the power of maternity and humanistic values as underlying most of Shelley's works—pulls Shelley's oeuvre together in a way that makes manifest how she struggled and finally came to terms with conflicted religious beliefs. Because this study is chronologically organized, pays close attention to the religious views surrounding Shelley, and because Airey's argument can be rephrased as a chronicle of Shelley's rejection of her father's Calvinism and a reassertion of aspects of her mother's religious and social views, it could be seen as yet another look at Shelley through a biographical lens. Airey, however, avoids the reductionism of the biographical determinism that is often found in Shelley literary criticism, and proposes persuasive readings of the short fiction. This is a careful, lucid introduction to Shelley's work that is both wide-ranging and detailed in its approach.