



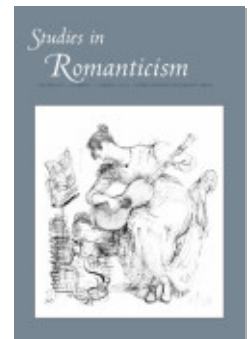
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*The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of
Disability* by Emily B. Stanback (review)

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ignominy endured by those deemed ‘equivocal characters’” but overall his novels “neglect to muster similar rancor for violations of the legal agency of the poor” (53). Wright’s epilogue closes with the suggestion that humanitarian and conservative approaches might together oppose authoritarianism, and it would be interesting to further explore to what degree any of these novels might present a strategy for doing so.

Take the case of Charlotte Smith who, Wright notes, benefited from an elite education and evoked her birth rank to claim the status of victim and appeal to her readers’ sympathy. Despite these real and rhetorical advantages, however, Smith published her first work in debtors’ prison, was unable to keep her husband from spending the money she earned from her writing, and sold her books to avoid returning to debtors’ prison after her separation from her husband. Moreover, critics have called novels like *Desmond* and *The Young Philosopher* “radical” or “Jacobin” for their support for the French Revolution and advocacy for expanded rights. For all that Wright’s original contribution is precisely to demonstrate that Smith’s call for rights first and foremost focuses on the downfallen upper classes, I nevertheless would have liked to know the relationship between Smith’s personal agenda and her more politically radical stances. When Smith implies that her loss of privilege gives her the “moral clarity” to critique injustice, does she combine humanitarian and conservative rhetorics (58)? Or does her focus on upper-class characters impede or render hypocritical her more abstract political agenda?

This query, however, in no way diminishes the compelling explanatory force of Wright’s argument. This is a book that students of Romantic-era law and the Romantic-era novel will need to engage for its histories of legal agency and for its convincing account of the ways that the language of victimhood can bolster privilege. *Defending Privilege* urges us to ask whether the Romantic novel’s vision might in the end demonstrate not the triumphant rise of the liberal individual over a repressive society, but rather the liberal individual’s failure to allow society to rise as well.

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Emily B. Stanback. *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. v + 337. \$84.99 hardcover.

Disability studies scholars have for decades challenged the stability and efficacy of normalcy as a cultural and biological category. Now, the first full monograph with specific critical focus on Romanticism and disability,

Emily B. Stanback's *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability*, makes its remarkable debut. Her study locates disability as a crucial conceptual framework for subjective experience through Romantic writers' meditations on their own disabilities and those of others. The book centers on the Wordsworth-Coleridge coterie: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Charles Lamb, but also John Thelwall, Thomas Beddoes, Humphry Davy, and Thomas Wedgwood with attention given to Robert Southey, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Lamb, Thomas Poole, William Godwin, Erasmus Darwin, and Sara Coleridge. The study embraces a valuable interdisciplinary approach by ranging across genre and form to engage short fiction, letters, journals, poetry, medical treatises, print satire, and memoir. Stanback convincingly demonstrates how aesthetic concerns related to and shaped by disability make their way into a wide range of cultural productions both public and private. Ultimately the book shows how works by writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge revealed a consciousness of disability that was culturally constructed during an era of rapid social change.

The book's introduction operates in part as a cultural history of Romantic medicine, tracing its professionalization between 1790 and 1810 alongside the simultaneous growth of Romantic writing. Throughout, Stanback's delineation of disability demonstrates how norms related to health and illness had yet to be established at the turn of the nineteenth century. Deeply interested in the conditions of literary production, Stanback shows us how encounters with non-normative embodiment demanded, generated, and shaped new forms of expression, thus revealing the essential aesthetic value of disability within Romantic discourse. "The story I wish to tell," she explains, "is one of the productively diverse field of Romantic medicine and its relation to a correspondingly broad range of cultural attitudes towards those thought to be under the purview of medical authority—those who, by virtue of their non-normative bodies and minds, we might now call 'disabled'" (2).

Stanback takes "disability" to be a sociocultural category with a foundation in medical structures, but one grounded in subjective experience. Aesthetic questions take center stage here and put Stanback's work in dialogue with important disability theorists such as Ato Quayson and Tobin Siebers. Moreover, she convincingly demonstrates how "Romantic disability aesthetics" is an essentially interdisciplinary mode, a claim borne out by an impressively detailed and rigorous textual analysis that testifies to the porousness and multimodality of Romantic discourse (3).

Moving from humoral theory to Enlightenment conceptions of deformity through the early years of Georgian medicine, Stanback shows how the practice "for naming, describing, and studying diseases . . . [participated] in the cultural project of establishing embodied norms, and specifically to help

construct ideals of ‘health’” (14–15). She ably negotiates a variety of social and political categories here, from gender construction to race theory to ethnography, from colonialism and empire to pathology and physiognomy. One of the great strengths of Stanback’s approach is her emphasis on mental and psychological difference alongside the physical and the sensual. Such attention to the mind and brain allow her to explore senses of wonder, the sublime, and even disgust as Romantic writers encounter and experience the non-normative. Yet even while foregrounding “affective response,” Stanback does so in order to “emphasize the role of corporeality in Romantic aesthetics” (45).

The second chapter begins with the poet and elocutionist John Thelwall, whose background in medicine shaped his exposition on vocal disability, the *Letter to Henry Cline* (1810). Stanback identifies Thelwall’s elocutionary practice as deeply democratic, and in her reading of his self-help ethos, she connects him to the physician Thomas Beddoes, whose novella, *The History of Isaac Jenkins* (1792), delineates principles of preventative care and frames the legacy of popular medicine, amateurism, and the rise of the medical professional. Here Stanback repositions Romantic medicine to challenge stances within Critical Disability Studies that often assume an antagonistic relationship between medicine and the disabled subject. Her reading of idiocy, both “moral and physical,” is the most in-depth of its kind, taking account of the era’s cultural and pathological representations by emphasizing the distance between subjective experience and external observation. Stanback concludes that “whenever Romantic culture at large engaged with non-normative bodies and minds, the stakes were innately political and ethical” (93).

In Chapter 3, Stanback links poetic production and scientific enterprise, showing how Beddoes’s nitrous oxide trials left their visible trace on the “textual form, grammar, syntax, and language” of Romantic literature (100). Situating experiments in mesmerism, pneumatics, animal magnetism, and galvanism, Stanback illustrates how the era’s penchant for self-experimentation cleared the space “for metaphysical and narrative expansion, allowing [writers and scientists alike] . . . to test language in finding modes of expression appropriate to new modes of embodiment” (101). She shows how such experiments paralleled the experiences of ill and disabled bodies, which in turn resisted attempts at articulation. Turning to the chemist Humphry Davy, Stanback considers how narration of the scientist’s body and self-experimentation may have impacted Coleridge’s poetry. For Stanback, Coleridge’s example reveals how the era’s language around intellectual disability shadows the tropes used to describe alternate states of mind and body as with drugs, alcohol, and gases. Such considerations return us to the realm of aesthetic experience, especially the sublime. Thus, Stanback

recalibrates our understanding of Romantic inspiration by discovering the chemical roots of non-normative experience that animate poems such as “Kubla Khan” and “Christabel.”

In an unconventional move, Stanback’s fourth chapter focuses upon the metaphysical theories of Thomas (Tom) Wedgewood and their impact upon Romantic philosophy and aesthetics. Here she goes beyond conceptions of taste as mere intellectual judgment to find “an action of viscerally embodied sensory experience” (147). Moving through Wedgewood’s unpublished papers to understand how he conceives of his disabled body in terms of temporality, emotion, and sense, Stanback makes the bold claim that Wedgewood “provides a metaphysical explanation” for renderings of heightened subjectivity in *Lyrical Ballads*, even suggesting that he anticipates Wordsworth’s linguistic slippages and perceptive failures that mark the ethical implications of the latter’s poetry. Relatedly, Stanback’s fifth chapter argues that Coleridge’s ill body frames his conception of the imagination. In “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” she avers, the poet explored the “revelatory potential of disability, delineating the terms of Coleridge’s struggle with his body that . . . characterizes much of his textual output” (188). Stanback’s reading of the poem thus refocuses attention on poetic embodiment to consider the possibilities of disability in Romantic production, whose dynamism “is fully contingent on the poet’s physical confinement” (192).

The aesthetics of Romantic encounter frame Stanback’s sixth chapter, where Wordsworth’s poetry is shown to challenge his readers by forcing them to consider both non-normative bodies *and* minds. Stanback’s shrewd triangulation of poet, disabled body, and reader affords her insightful readings of “Simon Lee,” “The Idiot Boy,” and “The Thorn,” with the latter two poems allowing her to reconsider those notions of lunacy and idiocy she explored from a medical perspective in chapter 2. As in much of Wordsworth’s poetry, disability generates narrative production, uncovering the “common compulsion to speak of—and particularly to speculate about—non-normative bodies and minds” (255). Indeed, this book is at its best when exploring how literary form contributes to the aesthetic potential of disability, as where Wordsworth’s rendering of idiocy offers “a totalizing way of being in the world, one that is beyond his full comprehension” (261).

In her final chapter, Stanback takes on Lamb’s relative “queerness” and its relation to the “madness” that plagued both him and his sister alongside his literary and social anxiety and his stutter. Here Stanback also tracks what she calls Lamb’s “theatrical metropolitanism,” examining self-presentation in his poetry and the *Elia* essays and the way he longed for an urban space populated by disabled figures (275). Stanback returns to Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower” to consider modes of confinement in an urban milieu but reads Lamb’s remarkably diverse rendering of such spaces as liberating,

even salutary, rather than as constrictive for non-normative bodies. In this way, Lamb's identification with the city puts him at odds with many of his Romantic contemporaries. Ultimately, Stanback identifies what, following Robert McRuer, she calls Lamb's "crippled aesthetics" in the *Elia* essays, an intersection of the queer and the disabled.

The erudition of this monograph is extraordinary, and the archival material analyzed alone makes it a valuable resource for those interested in Romantic-era medicine and early modern conceptions of disability. As with many groundbreaking works of scholarship, Stanback's might be guilty of trying to do too much; her brief foray into the racial contexts of disability could itself be the subject of a whole monograph. Moreover, one misses greater attention to female authors (which Stanback acknowledges). These, however, are minor concerns, and, if nothing else, they signal the promise of future study. Overall, Stanback succeeds remarkably in her stated goal: to advance "the idea that literary Disability Studies is absolutely critical to the field of British Romanticism" (49).

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