Marilyn Butler, *Mapping Mythologies: Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 237 pp., ISBN: 9781107116382, £24.99

Marilyn Butler, who died in 2014, was a literary scholar specialising in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a pioneering figure in new historicism. Her 1982 book, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*, was a landmark in the field, and gave great encouragement to the interdisciplinary spirit which now presides over eighteenth-century scholarship. But the next manuscript she wrote, in 1984, was never published in her lifetime, and indeed was only discovered by her executors. It has been published posthumously as *Mapping Mythologies*.

Given these circumstances, the book feels surprisingly complete. It is coherent, consistent, and based around a distinct argument. Scholars have been woefully misguided, Butler asserts, in viewing the use of mythologies by eighteenth-century poets as being in any way spiritual or religious. 'Mythologising' involved the creation of worlds which, rather than being spiritually motivated, were intended as secular rebukes to the established centres of power. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, non-Christian religious positions were felt to have more in common with materialism, irreligion, and atheism than with the spirituality they are nowadays ascribed. To write a poetic mythology was to present an alternative to the establishment. The Druidic world, the chivalric, the bardic, the Egyptian, the Scandinavian, the African, and even the Greco-Roman; as poetic material, all of this was inherently subversive.

Throughout the book, Butler dogmatically reiterates her main points. 'The most consistent feature of eighteenth-century literature,' she writes:

> 'is its alienation from power, its oppositional bias, its search for alternatives to the status quo. Its leading motifs are that power is too centralised in London, and in the hands of too few; it serves the interests of 'Them', the titled, landed, moneyed elite, rather than the

> interests of 'Us', ordinary humanity; it rewards their birth and wealth, not our merit' (p. 10).

Butler then seeks to align this apparently prevalent 'oppositional bias' more particularly with the 'mythologising' strand which, she says, became dominant from the 1730s onwards. 'From the 1730s, the past was increasingly seen as past, preferably as unimaginably early, innocent, primal: only thus could it function as a challenge and alternative to urbane City culture' (p. 10). She sets up the Anglican Church, the 'King-in-Parliament', and the 'London literary establishment' as the targets of this great oppositional spirit. The argument is illustrated over the course of the book by the examples of a small group of poets and antiquarians. Chapter two is on James Thomson and Mark Akenside; three is on William Collins and Thomas Gray; four, James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton; five, 'Popular Antiquities'; six, William Blake. Each of the named writers, along with the entire discipline of popular antiquarianism, supposedly challenged the establishment by its use of mythological alternatives.

Even appearing thirty years out of context, the book is, in many respects, impressive. It is well-written and engaging; the discussion of its chosen writers is interesting and sometimes illuminating; there are occasional satisfying aperçus; it examines some still-understudied works; and the chapter on 'Popular Antiquities' is both sturdy and elegant. If published in 1984, it would have deservedly attracted praise and attention.

But there is also much that may seem surprising to modern readers, or even downright misguided. For example, 'the King-in-Parliament', supposedly one of her oppositional writers' prime targets, is a problematic term in the context of the eighteenth century. The king's physical presence was illegal in the House of Commons and limited in the House of Lords, and royal interference in

parliamentary business was resented by most parliamentarians, exemplified by John Dunning's famous motion of 1780.[1]

Butler's other conception of a 'London literary establishment' – supposedly intertwined with the metropolitan, 'King-in-Parliament' monolith, and which most of the country's writers opposed – also flattens out the many dissimilarities between writers like Johnson, Percy, the Wartons, and Gray, ignores their sometimes profound disagreements, and even (for some of them) geographically misplaces them. Simultaneously, Butler ignores the connections her 'opposition provincials' had to the 'London establishment'. The primary forum of her popular antiquarians, for example, was *The Gentleman's Magazine*: a London-based journal whose regular contributors included Samuel Johnson. This would suggest a certain degree of accommodation between provincial antiquarians and the metropole, rather than the conflict she insists upon.[2]

For all Butler's keenness to contextualise 'literature' with 'history', her book shows very little engagement with the work of her contemporary historians.[3] She ignores the matter and concerns of political, social and cultural histories, preferring a vague, supra-historical paradigm of 'outsiders vs. elite'. Her effort to cloak this paradigm in historical garb, describing it as part of the 'country' tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is not very deep or sustained, or, arguably, pertinent.

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[1] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 548-9.

[2] For a more convincing account of the eighteenth-century literary world's groups and connections, see Moyra Haslett, *Pope to Burney, 1714-1779: Scriblerians to Bluestockings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[3] Butler's endnotes are overwhelmingly biased towards primary (literary) sources and literary scholars. Historical works on parliamentary, extra-parliamentary, loyalist and oppositional thought in the era Butler studies are entirely absent, including crucial historians like Linda Colley, B.W. Hill, Frank O'Gorman, I.R. Christie, E.C. Black, H.T. Dickinson, J.A.W. Gunn and J.C.D. Clark.

Although the book makes for a lively and thought-provoking read, it is based around a dubious thesis. Even if 'mythologising' was the central strand of eighteenth-century literature, Butler fails to prove that it was inherently oppositional. The small group of writers whom Butler focuses upon do not convincingly carry her argument; and her notion of 'the historical context', in which these writers are placed, is simplistic and outdated. In fact, reading this book, the difference between old 'new historicism' and modern 'interdisciplinarity' become clear. Butler – in 1984, at least – saw history as something discrete, to be written by historians and then drawn upon by literary scholars so as to illuminate the works of their chosen writers. Even in doing this, though, she was still predominantly guided by the concerns which she felt characterized the small group of writers she was interested in. Her work was important in encouraging interdisciplinary scholarship, but was written according to a methodology and principles which were essentially divergent from what that scholarship has become.[4]

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[4] For that more recent interdisciplinary scholarship, see, for example, the 'Cambridge Studies in Romanticism' series; the work of Dustin Griffin; Abigail Williams, *Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Womersley (ed.) *Cultures of Whiggism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).