



BYRON AT DRURY LANE

The Napoleon of Rhyme

BYRON: THE YEARS OF FAME. By Peter Quennell. New York: The Viking Press. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by SAMUEL C. CHEW

ON the day before he sailed from Dover in April, 1816, Byron visited the grave of Charles Churchill, the satirist, and found melancholy satisfaction in contemplating the obscure resting-place of him who had "blazed the comet of a season." Years later, in his Italian exile, Byron looked back, in a mood of irony touched with complacency, upon the "considerable time" when he had been "the Grand Napoleon of the Realms of Rhyme." He was thinking of the four years between the spring of 1812, when "Childe Harold" was published, and the spring of 1816, when the scandal of the separation from his wife, with its accompanying rumors of iniquity, burst with a fury that resulted in his social ostracism.

It is with these four years that Mr. Quennell, who has already published a little biography of the poet, has here to deal. He calls them the "years of fame," but rather they were the years of notoriety as distinct from fame, of social success and popular applause. The implication is not a little ridiculous that when Byron left England for good, and for his poetic good, he left also his "fame" behind him. Rather the departure was the entrance into a far wider renown. It is true that his social prestige had suffered a blight which was presently to be more deeply tarnished by association with Shelley and later with Hunt; true, too, that some years later (about 1822-23) there was an abatement in the enthusiasm with which his poetry was received (and for this the tediousness of the "regular" tragedies and the slackening tempo of the middle cantos of "Don Juan" were

in part to blame); but there was no real decline in his renown as a poet till long after his death. The disappearance of "Byronism" about the middle of the century coincided in date with the triumph of Victorian ugliness, vulgarity, and pretentiousness—a fact which it is difficult to reconcile with Mr. Quennell's theory (though ingeniously argued) that the taste for shoddy and flashy and sensational verse for which Byron's early verse was responsible in a "vast middle-class public" was itself in turn responsible for the grotesque and ugly exoticisms of Victorianism. Why, then, did people drop Byron just at the time when velvet tassels and antimacassars and carved oak furniture and aspidistras (which Mr. Quennell especially dislikes) were most in vogue? The biographer does not explain. But, after all, the vagaries of Victorian taste are not his subject.

He tells a tale already told a hundred times, and tells it well, with an appropriate mingling of witty and sympathetic

comment. He does not fall into the error of taking Byron's life and character as the text for a sermon (as so many of his predecessors have done) or into the opposite error of condoning or explaining away or brushing aside the poet's transgressions. If he does not see very deeply (not so deeply as, for example, M. Charles du Bos), he sees clearly and steadily. Apologists and theorists and special pleaders have drawn a hundred red herrings across the trail; but Mr. Quennell is not to be turned aside at any false scent, however pungent. His narrative begins with Byron's return from the Levant in 1811; but it is permitted to fold back upon itself sufficiently often to make comprehensible the childhood influences, the heritage, and environment, which helped to form the extraordinary young man who, after the melancholy months of moody disillusionment that immediately followed his return, blazed suddenly as the comet of the London season of 1812. That comet continued, though with somewhat diminished splendor as gazers became accustomed to its brightness, to hang in the sky for three years. It waned perceptibly, at any rate in the eyes of young romance, after the poet's marriage; and though not quenched, it changed utterly in character after the scandal of 1816. Mr. Quennell's planetarium sets before us the stars and constellations among which this great erratic body traced its path. Each star, some now through distance so small as to be perceptible only through the telescope of research, is described and properly placed, whether in conjunction or opposition. Let us drop the metaphor before we press it too far, and say that Mr. Quennell paints for us a lively picture of Regency society, corrupt, disillusioned, unstably brilliant on the surface of widespread discontent. It was hard-drinking, hard-riding, hard-gambling, and hard-wenching. In the Mayfair crowd of beaux and fops Byron would not have been conspicuously different from other handsome young men who scored successes with many ladies had he not been a poet. A



BYRON AT HYDE PARK—Contemporary caricatures on this page reproduced from "Byron: The Years of Fame."

remark so obvious that it scarcely needs making; but the reader of Mr. Quennell's book needs to be reminded of it.

For Mr. Quennell has elected to tell the story of Byron's years of notoriety with the primary cause of that notoriety left out. It is the fashion among literary historians to say that the poetry of Byron that "counts" began to be written in the summer of 1816. What he wrote before he left England can be disregarded. Biography and criticism are not such distinct departments of literary scholarship that the life of a poet can be set in proper perspective while his poetry is ignored. A few haphazard remarks serve as comment upon "Childe Harold"; the elegiac poems addressed to Thyrza are not mentioned (nor is the problem of the identity of this person alluded to); the *Oriental Tales* are dismissed as flashy exotics; and even "Lara" is unconsidered. Yet "Lara" contains a self-portrait matchless in force and, essentially, in insight. Monsieur Charles du Bos, it will be remembered, takes the long passage characterizing the protagonist in that poem as the starting-point of his profound analysis of Byron's character. Lady Byron told how once when she mentioned the poem to Byron he remarked that "there was more in it than in any of the rest of them," and as he said this he shuddered and would not meet her eye. That this was not melodramatic posturing on Byron's part is certain; and if there is so much in "Lara" it is a document not to be ignored.

With this important reservation, that what gives lasting significance to Byron's "years of fame," namely that they were the years when he won fame as a poet, is disregarded, Mr. Quennell's biography may be heartily recommended, especially to those (if there are such) to whom the story is not familiar. Into the well-worn tale he has managed to work some little new material. He has had access to J. C. Hobhouse's copy of Thomas Moore's biography; but judging from his excerpts from its marginalia the comments of Byron's intimate friend are significant only for the support they give to the suspicion (for which there are other grounds) that there was an element of homosexuality in the poet's nature. From the Byron archives in Albemarle Street he has been permitted by Sir John Murray to cull some specimens of the sort of "fan mail" which Byron received during these years. There is something touching in these epistles, now for the first time printed from the yellowed notepaper; but they do not tell us anything that we did not already know or at any rate have reason to suspect about the years when Byron was the spoiled darling alike of the West End and of the "vast middle-class." For the rest, the essentials of the story are told and the evidence interpreted in accordance with the best modern scholarship.

Samuel Chew is professor of English at Bryn Mawr College.

Imagination All Compact

SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGERY AND WHAT IT TELLS US. By Caroline Spurgeon. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1935. \$4.

Reviewed by S. GORLEY PUTT

INTERPRETATION of Shakespeare from the word-content of his plays is manifestly illegitimate by reason of the nature of dramatic art. But images, "modified by a predominant passion," may, according to Coleridge and Dr. Spurgeon, "become proofs of original genius."

"No one could study Shakespeare closely for years without being reduced to a condition of complete humility," writes the author. Certainly her style is humble enough; she is content to report and indicate. Dr. Spurgeon card-indexed every image in Shakespeare three times over to insure accuracy, providing colored charts so that the reader may appreciate at a glance his range. There are charts, too, for Marlowe and Bacon, and one showing the detailed categories of figures of speech from "daily life" used by Shakespeare and five contemporary dramatists.

Her first section demonstrates the "revelation of the man" in the light of his imagery, aptly quoting Polonius:

And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out.

We are directed to his love of movement (other poets spoke of the silver, watery, or inconstant moon; only Shakespeare achieved "the visiting moon"), his dislike of noise and evil smells, and so on. But often in a simple simile there is no deeper indication than the word-reference itself, and such items as Shakespeare's sympathy for snails or the interesting theory that a river description in "Lucrece" originated in his boyhood observation of a curious current under Clopton Bridge in Stratford, merely support what was already obvious about his acute sensibility to the outside world, or his love of country life.

Part II incorporates Dr. Spurgeon's five-year-old exposition (in "Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare's Tragedies") of recurrent or iterative imagery, enumerating, for example, figures from light in "Romeo and Juliet," sickness in "Hamlet," food and cooking in "Troilus and Cressida," bodily strife in "Lear"; adding the chronicle plays, with imagery from plant growth and subsidiary subjects in individual plays, and comedies, notable for country similitudes, topical and musical references.

This first volume of a contemplated trilogy is disappointing in that it does not interpret Dr. Spurgeon's data beyond her earlier pamphlets.

It is top-heavy, like a Japanese battleship, with its imposing superstructure of citation, and exaggerates that constant irritation of multiple-decker sandwiches of prose and quoted verse which mars much Shakespearean criticism. But the continued study should be intriguing. Here for instance, she infers from a scrutiny of their imagery the different workings of the minds of Bacon and Shakespeare. That is flogging a dead horse with an ingenious whip; it will be more ex-



DR. CAROLINE SPURGEON

citing to follow her methods in applying the touchstone of imagery to the vexed problems of "Henry VI" and other doubtful entries in the canon, over which Sir Edmund Chambers and the late J. M. Robertson mingled so much ink.

It is almost an impertinence to draw attention to the usefulness of the present work, based as it is on impeccable accuracy. So often chit-chat critics have been able to throw dust in our eyes by theorizing blandly about Shakespeare from a breezy acquaintance with his poetry. There can be no excuse for that now. The appearance of Dr. Spurgeon's third promised volume, treating "the background of Shakespeare's mind and the origins of his imagery," will be the most searching test of her own ability to cope with the full significance of the line of research she has opened up single-handed, and with such fascinating results.

S. Gorley Putt is a Welsh scholar, resident at Yale on the Commonwealth Fund.