Public Abstract

First Name:Jonas

Middle Name:Seth

Last Name:Cope

Adviser's First Name:Noah

Adviser's Last Name:Heringman

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

Graduation Term:SP 2012

Department:English

Degree:PhD

Title:The Dissolution of Character in Late Romantic British Literature, 1816-1837

This dissertation studies how late romantic British authors, writing primarily in the 1820s and 1830s, renegotiate inherited models of "character" from their high romantic predecessors. The authors in this dissertation all fear that having an identity means moral and intellectual stagnation. To have an essence is to be constituted. But at the same time, a self that is entirely conditional and arbitrary is also a source of anxiety. As a result, their texts linger in a sort of epistemological middle ground: a safe and experimental space wherein the discomforts inherent in each philosophical alternative--the self as transhistorical organism and the self as nonessential construct--can be avoided. Percy Shelley writes a poem, "Alastor" (1816), whose speaking "I" is meant to represent what he calls the "one mind," a sort of transindividual consciousness of which all individual minds are said to be the "marks" or "modifications." William Hazlitt associates the soul with an internal bias fixed at birth and visible in the human body, but not necessarily (as in Plato, Wordsworth and Coleridge) with an immaterial substance fixed in eternity. Letitia Landon creates picturesque characters who confuse and even synonymize surface and depth; her texts capitalize on the contradictions inherent in both personal and fictional subjectivities. Mary Shelley is Blakean and Hegelian in her insistence that a person without psychological contraries makes no moral and spiritual progress. All these authors thrive on the psychological climate or "mood" wherein their texts emerge, one marked by the systematic fragmentation of identity, the incipient dissolution of the idea of character. Their "aesthetic...insist[s] on the difficulty of recognizing...nondemonstrable identities."