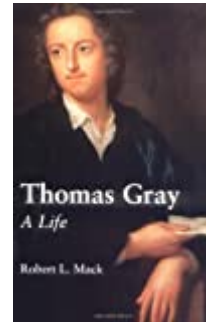


Robert L. Mack. *Thomas Gray: A Life*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xvi + 718 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08499-3.



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Thomas Gray “wrote English verses as his brother Eton schoolboys wrote Latin, filching a phrase now from one author and now from another.” So Wordsworth complained in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. In the late nineteenth century Edmund Gosse addressed Gray’s “filching” habit by attributing it to his fondness for the classical “cento”—a poem made up of lines composed by other poets, reconstituted so that they have new meaning.

In his new biography of Gray, Robert Mack addresses the point by adducing Gosse and the cento tradition (we learn that the young Gray owned a copy of the cento-specialist Ausonius’ complete works, and that the “re-combinative techniques of the cento to which Ausonius thus exposed Gray left him with a potent and highly versatile model of literary reference and allusion while still a schoolboy” (p. 127). In addition to Gosse’s cento argument, Mack adduces the more recent insights of Hagstrum, Gleckner, and Redford (see below), whose psychoanalytic arguments Mack deploys in examining an aspect of Gray’s life—his sexual identity—which was left relatively unexamined in the previously standard biography by Ketton-Cremer.[1] Evidence of fundamental differences between Ketton-Cremer’s approach and Mack’s is discernible in the indexes of the two biographies. The initial three entries under Ketton-Cremer’s indexing of

“Gray, Thomas, Characteristics” are “attitude towards Cambridge,” “character and temperament,” and “financial position.” In Mack’s index, the first three entries under “Gray, Thomas, Character, Personality and Opinions” are “sexuality,” “melancholia,” and “fear of fire.”

In Mack’s view, “the bonds of male desire ... were to form the motivating sub-text of almost all of Gray’s own poetry, and of many of his letters as well” (p. 38). Mack argues, for instance, that Gray’s “Pindaric Odes” were designed to “puzzle” his readers after he realized that his earlier more transparent poems had revealed too readily the depth of his feelings for Richard West (p. 451). Witness the frequency with which contemporary parodies of Gray’s “Eton Ode” had foregrounded the poem’s “feminine elements” (pp. 452-8).

Mack engages in a good deal of psychologizing. Why, for example, does Gray say so little about his childhood? For Mack the paucity of testimony to Gray’s childhood experiences is “itself something of an indication that all was not well within the household” (p. 76). On the basis of a sworn affidavit by Thomas’ mother that her husband physically abused her, Mack surmises that young Thomas Gray was physically abused as well. It is a suggestion that will strike most readers as plausible, as will Mack’s psychoanalytic reading of the significance of Gray’s translation of Ugolino’s story from the first book of Dante’s

Commedia, in which Gray may have sought to render his own father's cruelties. "It is possible," Mack suggests, "that in rereading, translating, and preserving this image of a father who is eternally punished for his betrayal of his own family, Gray was inflicting within his own mind a suitable vengeance on the emotional cannibalism in which he felt his father had participated" (p. 199)—a point Mack buttresses earlier in his narrative by pointing out that "Thomas was the only one of no less than twelve children born to the family of Philip Gray to survive infancy" (p. 77).

Less persuasive is Mack's suggestion that Gray suffered from "acute pyrophobia." The detailed account of the Great Fire of London (and the purple prose in which it is rendered) is presumably offered to assist Mack in making the point that fear of fire "had haunted Gray's dreams ever since he was a child growing up in Churchill" (p. 364). But neither the fact that the house of Gray's birth was destroyed by fire in 1748, nor the fact that Gray purchased a rope ladder for his Cambridge lodgings in hopes of escaping the fire that he feared would engulf Peterhouse College, nor the fact that several of Gray's Fellow Commoners reputedly pranked Gray by shouting "Fire" in his presence (pp. 481-3) constitutes compelling evidence of pyrophobia. I note that Mack quotes from a September 1744 letter in which Horace Walpole affirms, "I am in terror lest the house should be burnt tonight" (p. 555). Perhaps the reasonable conclusion to draw is that Walpole, like Gray, was fully aware of the dangers of house fires in England in the eighteenth century.

Typographical and syntactic errors occasionally mar Professor Mack's presentation. We are told, for instance,

that "references ... will [sic] documented parenthetically" (p. xiii); that William Cole "observed in much the same manner observed"; that Horace Walpole "was as generous as possible ... of his comparative material wealth as possible" (p. 165); that Agamemnon "had not even has [sic] the common decency to 'close my two eyes as my soul swam to the underworld'" (p. 402); and that "*The Progress of Poesy* asks to some extent be read as an exuberant ... manifesto" (p. 464). Mack's prose would have benefitted as well from some judicious pruning of passages such as the following—a description of the interior of the Church of St. Giles at Stoke Poges, in whose yard Gray is buried: "The atmosphere within the church seems also to savor, though less precisely, of that visible silence in which prayer and meditation seem more readily to recognize their desired effect" (p. 5).

Though Mack is occasionally prolix, Gray scholars are well served by the meticulous research which has gone into the preparation of the biography that now replaces Ketton-Cremer's life of Gray. "My central purpose," Mack tells us in a prefatory note, "has been to tell the story of Gray's life in such a manner as to draw together the separate insights of such critics [as Lord David Cecil, Robert F. Gleckner, Donald Greene, George E. Haggerty, Jean H. Hagstrum, G.S. Rousseau, and Bruce Redford] into a single and coherent narrative" (p. xiii). This purpose Mack has certainly accomplished. His debts to the work of his predecessors are scrupulously and generously acknowledged throughout.

Note

[1]. R. W. Ketton-Cremer, *Thomas Gray* (London: Duckworth, 1935).

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