MAPPING MYTHOLOGIES

In this ground-breaking work of revisionary literary history, Marilyn Butler traces the imagining of alternative versions of the nation in eighteenth-century Britain, both in the works of a series of well-known poets (Akenside, Thomson, Gray, Collins, Chatterton, Macpherson, Blake) and in the differing accounts of the national culture offered by eighteenth-century antiquarians and literary historians. She charts the beginnings in eighteenth-century Britain of what is now called cultural history, exploring how and why it developed, and the issues at stake. Her interest is not simply in a succession of great writers, but in the politics of a wider culture, in which writers, scholars, publishers, editors, booksellers and readers all play their parts. For more than thirty years, Marilyn Butler was a towering presence in eighteenth-century and Romantic studies, and this major work is published for the first time.

MARILYN BUTLER (1937–2014) was a prominent scholar in eighteenth-century and Romantic studies, a ground-breaking practitioner and theorist of the historicist criticism of literary texts, and pioneering scholarly editor of hitherto marginalised women writers. Her widely acclaimed publications include *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (1972); *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975); *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in his Context* (1979); *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830* (1981); and seminal scholarly editions of works by Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen. She was King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at the University of Cambridge from 1986 to 1993 and Rector of Exeter College, Oxford, from 1993 to 2004. *Mapping Mythologies*, finished in 1984, but never hitherto published, is the first volume of a never-completed larger project on literary mythologies between 1730 and 1830.

MAPPING MYTHOLOGIES

Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century Poetry and Cultural History

MARILYN BUTLER

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Preface

For more than thirty years, from the 1970s to the early 2000s, Marilyn Butler was a powerful presence in eighteenth-century and Romantic literary studies on both sides of the Atlantic, intellectually energising, generously enabling, imaginatively reconfiguring the fields on which she worked. When she was prevented by illness from continuing with her work, her husband and friends together sorted her papers to be deposited in the Bodleian Library. Amongst them, unexpectedly, we found the typescript of a book that had been completed in 1984. There were chapters on Macpherson and Chatterton, but also on Akenside and Thomson, and Gray and Collins (not subjects on which Butler had published); there was also a long chapter on English and Welsh popular antiquarianism. And there was an introductory chapter, in which, with characteristic boldness, Butler set out the agenda for a new kind of history of later eighteenth-century poetry. On top of the typescript, there was a letter from the late Kim Scott Walwyn, then literary editor at Oxford University Press, urging Butler to prepare it for publication as the first volume of a larger work.

Up until 1984, Butler had published mainly on authors of the Romantic period – Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Thomas Love Peacock, the writers she called *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*; she was about to produce an anthology of writings relating to the French Revolution controversy. But from 1980 onward it had been evident that she was working on an ambitious project that had its beginnings in her understanding of an earlier period. Parts of this work appeared through the 1980s and 1990s as conference papers and published articles, rather like the mountain peaks of a submerged continent: mostly on later Romantic subjects, they had titles such as 'Nymphs and Nympholepsy: the Visionary Woman and the Romantic Poet' (1985), 'The Orientalism of Byron's *Giaour*' (1988), 'Romantic Manichaeism: Shelley's "On the Devil" and Byron's Mythological Dramas' (1989), 'Shelley and the Empire in the East'

(1996).[1] There were plans for a two-part book on 'Poets and Myths' among Butler's papers, and a great deal of material for the latter part. That book as she conceived it was never to be completed: she seems to have found work on the second volume so compelling that she could not spare the time to put the final touches to the first. But, as Kim Scott Walwyn saw, that first volume could stand alone. Here, in racy outline, we have the bold, original thinking that underpinned Butler's projected *magnum opus* on literary mythologies in the writing of the long eighteenth century.

Butler finished *Mapping Mythologies* three years after her *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* had been hailed by reviewers as a 'ground-breaking' new kind of literary history.[2] This, her next book, was written at the height of her powers. Like *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, it brings together a number of diverse authors and genres, both canonical and uncanonical; like that earlier work, it does not present detailed scholarship or extensive close readings, but offers a sometimes polemical view of a larger literary field. The writers whom Butler takes as her subjects are, she says, all distinguished by their interest in 'non-Christian mythologies – stories from ancient times and often from foreign parts, which convey the social and religious practices and beliefs of an alien society' (p. 17). But this, it quickly becomes clear, is not to be a conventional literary history of the kind that traces a 'theme' in the literature of a period; nor is it to be a study of universal and transhistorical patterns of symbolism. To Butler, that interest in mythology, differently inflected in the work of each of the writers she considers, is not simply expressive of 'an impulse to religion within the collective unconscious' (p. 5); indeed, she argues, it 'cannot indeed be taken as face-value evidence of an interest in religion as such at all' (p. 3). And her own concern with mythology is not simply an interest in esoteric religious narratives.

Butler's opening remarks indicate the context within which she herself was writing, and set out the grounds of her difference from the established scholars in the field. 'Myth' was a term that dominated Romantic studies, especially in North America, for thirty years or more after the end of World War II. Northrop Frye's grand theorising of the connections between the formal principles of art and the structures of primitive myth focused centrally on the mythopoeic poetry of the Romantics.[3] Harold Bloom's study of Romantic myth-making, *The Visionary Company* (1970), was to prove hugely influential, as were M.H. Abrams' exploration of Romantic myths of apocalypse in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) and Geoffrey Hartman's view of 'the Romantic period' as 'a time when art frees itself from its subordination to religion or religiously inspired myth and continues or even replaces them'.[4] Butler's summary sketches of the

religious, psychological and idealist models offered by these, the giants of Romantic literary studies in the 1980s, evince her shrewd and lively interest in the ways in which literary history is shaped by the historical circumstances of its writing. The references in *Mapping Mythologies* and in the series of essays that followed it in the 1980s and '90s point to her own rather different intellectual formation – in her early career in journalism; in her connections with the British New Left of the 1960s; in her reading in British social and cultural history and in anthropology (Raymond Williams, Eric Hobsbawm, Gwyn Williams, Christopher Hill, Edward Thompson, Raphael Samuel, Linda Colley, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Victor Turner and Jack Goody); in the burgeoning field of cultural studies (the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies had been founded in 1964); and in the 'Cambridge school' of intellectual historians, J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. Her concern is not, however, to invoke or to argue with other scholars, but to offer her own distinctive and subtly surprising 'map'.

The first surprise is that this is a book not about Romanticism, but about the writings of the long eighteenth century. Butler had begun to consider the significance of myth, or 'paganism', in the writings of the second generation of Romantic poets in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries.* She was to explore it further in a number of published essays; it was to be the subject of her next, unfinished book. In *Mapping Mythologies*, however, she presents her account of poets and myth in the eighteenth century not as the prelude to a later, more interesting story, but as having a distinctively different interest of its own. She does not avoid the linear model, but she does not look ahead to the long-deferred miracle. Whereas her work on the later Romantics was to chart their attraction to Eastern and classical pagan mythologies, the writers she considers in *Mapping Mythologies* invoke or invent myths native to the British Isles. Her eighteenth century is innovative in ways still unnoticed by literary scholars, and, as her chapter on Blake suggests, her early nineteenth century is not necessarily progressive.

The second surprise is that Butler begins her discussion neither by considering particular mythologies nor by tracing mythic patternings in the works of her chosen poets, but very much more prosaically. In her opening chapter she offers an account of the social and economic and political forces that shaped the production and reception of literature in eighteenth-century Britain. This, it seems, is to be less a history of ideas or of consciousness than a history of men in the world (all her subjects are men in this book): where they lived, how they gained a livelihood, what

they read, the reading public they wrote for, their allegiances and their enmities, how their projects appeared to their contemporaries and how their world appeared to them. Butler notes the changes both in the writer's economic position and in his relationship with his readers brought about by the diminishing role of the aristocratic patron and the expansion of commercial society. She traces the way in which the centre of literary life shifted from the court, or the corridors of power, to the bookseller, the periodical, the review. She points to the growing importance of London as cultural and publishing centre; she points also to the expansive reach, throughout the country, of a new kind of literary journalism, addressed to and creating a growing reading public with an interest in 'literary intelligence'.[5] Most suggestively, she points to the increasing numbers of self-consciously provincial writers from the still unenfranchised middle and provincial classes with no effective access to centres of power. These are the 'secular intellectuals, increasingly aware of their social role and of their emergence as a profession' who produced the works she describes in *Mapping Mythologies* as 'some of the most innovative, characteristic and influential writings of the hundred years that began about 1730' (p. 1).

Butler's adjectives – 'innovative', 'characteristic', 'influential' – point to the thinking that shapes her 'map'. Even those of the writings on which she chooses to focus that are now seen as unquestionable classics (like the poems of Gray and of Thomson), were, she shows, controversially 'innovative' in their time. Yet they were 'characteristic', too, suggests Butler, in that they were written from a felt position of exclusion: 'The poets this book considers are in different ways socially marginal – and in this, they are typical of most eighteenth-century poets writing in English,' she crisply observes (p. 22). And they were also, she argues, 'influential': strong presences for later writers and for an expanding body of contemporary readers who likewise felt themselves to be marginalised. Butler points to the importance of Akenside for succeeding poetic generations; to the wider popularity of Thomson's *The Seasons* and 'Rule Britannia', and of Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*; to the 'enormous fame' of Chatterton and Macpherson in their own century; to the increasing demand for works of 'popular antiquarianism' into the early nineteenth century and beyond. For Butler's interest in literary 'influence' is quite different from Harold Bloom's. Her literary history speaks not simply of a succession of great writers, but of a wider culture, in which writers, scholars, publishers, editors, booksellers, readers all play their parts.

Hers is not, moreover, simply a winner's history, in which a writer's importance is measured by the immediate impact of his work. She is interested also in impasse. She finds Joseph Ritson's scholarship – and his politics – far more 'significant and inspiring' than Bishop Percy's (p. 159); but she is clear-sighted about the reasons for his lesser contemporary reputation. She suggests that the 'polished, aesthetically interesting rhythmic prose' of Macpherson's translations 'was probably of more help to a successor like Blake than Chatterton's eccentric verse pastiche'(p. 108). She offers a cogent account of how Blake, arguably today the most celebrated of all her poets, isolated himself in a way that, for his own historical moment, effectively depoliticised his later work.

This last view, first adumbrated in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, shocked some of that work's reviewers, one at least considering it an 'implicit dismissal of Blake's later work'.[6] Butler writes, however, not as a literary critic but as a literary historian who is sharply mindful of the changing fortunes of literary texts through time. She notes that since 1970 'Blakeans in America, particularly, have singled out for admiration precisely those qualities in Blake that made him sectarian and inaccessible in his own day' (p. 190). Butler herself does not make 'the patronising assumption that earlier readers simply got it wrong' (p. 190). But after a series of chapters on pairs or groups of writers, she devotes her whole final chapter to the artistic career of this singular artist, charting the reasons not merely for his contemporary obscurity but for the continuing life of his work. He is, she declares categorically, 'the most significant primitivist artist of the age in any medium, and the one who develops most fully a mythicised version of Britain's past' (p. 164). Blake, she argues, is 'a master of simple communication within his craft, and he remains above all a craftsman. He can use an arcane reference, but overall he strives to be non-learned, minimalist and direct' (p. 180). What seemed to contemporaries obscure and even 'mad' in his later prophetic books is finely, aesthetically realised in a way that works toward intelligibility:

> In *Milton*, the central figure of the dead poet moves freely through space and time, changes his shape, wrestles with the powers of evil, and remembers everything, as bards in general and Taliesin in particular were supposed to do. At a first reading, particularly of an unilluminated version of the text, the reader may feel that this is only one theme in the poem among many, but the wonderful full-page engravings make it the dominant idea of the book. (p. 176)

For Butler does not evade the question that haunts literary history: how and why do some literary works, more than others, live on beyond their time? It is central to her story that the poets she discusses were themselves concerned not merely with contemporary opinion but with the judgment of posterity. Each – from Gray, whose work acquired classic status in his own lifetime, to the 'forgers' Macpherson and Chatterton, to the isolated Blake – was, she shows, differently, sharply mindful of his place in literary history.

The question was in the air. The period of which Butler writes saw the first major history of the national poetic tradition – Thomas Warton's massive three-volume *History of English Poetry* (1774–81).[7] Compendious, crammed, its attempts at narrative history constantly subverted by its author's impulse toward inclusiveness, Warton's *History* was a monument of learning that drew on 'practically everything that had been achieved by previous scholarship'.[8] It was received with approval and admiration by Warton's fellow scholars; its wealth of 'popular' materials meant that it was also hailed by many, including, as Butler notes, the schoolboy Coleridge, as 'the spearhead of the historical, popular, "folk" movement in English literature' (p. 136). Recently reprinted, with an introduction by David Fairer, it is still commemorated in the annual Warton Lectures on English Poetry at the British Academy.[9] It was not, however, Butler suggests, exactly 'an impartial history'.[10] For in presenting English poetry as beginning after the Norman Conquest, when the Celtic peoples were in retreat, and on the eve of five centuries of wars of conquest by the English kings, Warton offered and legitimated a particular national story – Tory, Anglican, firmly identified with Court and Church. This, Butler points out, was a story rather different from that told by her marginalised 'mythologists' – Scotsmen, provincials, timid scholars, forgers, Welshmen, the artisan Blake – and she highlights the kinds of challenge these outsiders presented to Warton in two of the key vignettes of *Mapping Mythologies.* She quotes from the pamphlet in which the rattled Warton admitted that Chatterton's 'discovery' of a rich literary archive dating back to before the Conquest threatened his 'entire system . . . concerning the progression of poetical composition', his whole conception of 'the great lines of the history of [English] poetry'.[11] She considers, far more seriously than did his contemporaries, the polemical tract with which Joseph Ritson responded to 'the Three First Volumes' of Warton's *History.* This, she suggests, was rather more than a splenetic exposure of scholarly errors: it was a more fundamental attack on that *History* as an

apologia for the establishment of its day. For, ironically quoting Warton's characterisation of that establishment, Ritson began with the resounding assertion that

> though the great revolution produced by the Norman invaders effected 'that signal change in our policy, constitution and public manners', which has in its consequences 'reached modern times', yet neither the Saxon people nor the Saxon tongue was thereby eradicated.[12]

He was not, Butler points out, merely complaining that Warton had 'turned his back on Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norse cultures, so that English poetry appeared to have arisen with the present order of things' (p. 137); he was insisting on another and older tradition, in which the nation appeared rather differently. What may look now like arcane or parochial literary quarrels had, she shows, a political import. It was no accident that each of her 'mythologists' presented himself as defining, inheriting and carrying forward a 'true' tradition of English poetry.

In *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* Butler had argued against the critical view that 'poets *as poets* exist primarily in their internalised imaginative worlds, and in relation to one another' (p.185). But *Mapping Mythologies* has a suggestively different emphasis. Butler portrays all the writers she discusses as men of the world, 'social, enquiring, striving, iconoclastic' (p. 22); she does not see them as occupying a separate poetic pantheon. But in this book she is also centrally concerned with her poets' sense of themselves '*as poets*'. She points to their invocations of those they saw as poetic forebears – Thomson's 'little Druid wight'; Collins's image of Thomson 'as Druid still possessing the land in spirit' (p. 63); Macpherson's Ossian; Iolo's Taliesin; Blake's Milton. Where Harold Bloom had argued that poets are threatened by the greatness of their predecessors and become 'strong' by battling against them, Butler focuses on writers who choose or invent precursors – poet, bards, prophets, druids, enabling or inspiring fellow-poets, rather than competitors. She points to their high yet ambiguous claims for the poetic vocation: Akenside's compelling images of aspiration, 'a kind of internalised adventurism specially tailored to intellectuals' (p. 54); the tragic-heroic glamour of Gray's Bard; Macpherson's Fingal and Ossian, singing on 'after the death of the community for which their songs are meant' (p. 96); Iolo's image of the Bard as national 'priest'; Blake's figure of the eternally labouring artificer Albion/Los. The recurring figure is of the poet as myth-maker, constructing imagined alternatives to the language of established power.

The worlds that these writers set before their readers were, Butler suggests, consciously literary artefacts: Akenside 'allud[ing] throughout to his own narrative sophistication' (p. 51); Collins 'narrowing the scope of history so that it means almost nothing but literary history' (p. 64); Thomson framing the contrasting landscapes of 'The Castle of Indolence' in a deliberately archaic diction and stanza form; Chatterton devising a 'Middle English vernacular' in an elaborate verse pastiche (p. 109); Blake making his imagined British history the vehicle for 'an aesthetic discussion . . . a version of "the world" which looks increasingly like the art world' in his final epic, *Jerusalem* (p. 187). But those literary worlds, Butler shows, had political meanings. In their self-conscious primitivism, they offered ambitious poetic versions of a more inclusive national past, not centred on Church and State. Sometimes fantastically stylised, sometimes invented, sometimes presented as scholarly discovery, myth was, for these writers, a form of polemical history.

In her opening chapters Butler traces the ways in which the turn to idealised country settings and primitive subjects by mid-eighteenth-century writers served oppositional or popular causes; how for them Town or City and 'Country' had 'an ideological weighting that was plainly recognised at the time' (p. 24); how they sought to configure a 'Britain' that was not centred on London and that dated back to before the arrival of the English, to the aboriginal Scots and Welsh. She explores the implications of the huge contemporary popularity of Macpherson and Chatterton: the former, by his imaginatively compelling forging of an ancient, heroic national tradition, speaking not merely to Scots but to disaffected provincials and marginalised ethnic groups throughout Europe; the latter, by his brilliant invention of a whole provincial cultural archive – local, communal, long-standing – offering a potent challenge to the pretensions of the London literary establishment. In her chapter on Blake, the only Londoner amongst her mythologisers, she draws attention to the contradictory impulses that shaped his work: how the 'country' and 'patriot' themes and primitivist techniques of his poems and engravings of the 1770s and 1780s were at odds with his attraction to the 'noble simplicity' of a neoclassical aesthetic available largely to the privileged; how in his later prophetic works a familiar type of patriot historicism was unfamiliarly crossed with a religious fundamentalism that drew on older popular and radical traditions – biblical prophecy, antinomian sectarianisms and the Druid or ancient British religion being revived or invented by Welsh nationalists.

Butler's 'myth-makers' had no 'manifesto'; they did not conceive of themselves as a movement. But looking back, she sees them as engaged in a common project: each differently questioned the inevitability of the status quo and sought to imagine a more inclusive nation than was assumed or envisaged by the establishment of their day. And in a brilliant critical move, she sets that shared project in the context of the larger intellectual life of the period. She turns not to the kinds of texts that figure in conventional histories of ideas but to an often-disparaged and, by the late eighteenth-century, old-fashioned kind of scholarly enquiry, anticipating the recent revaluing of the antiquarian tradition in her suggestion that it was, in effect, a return to an earlier practice, of Enlightenment pre-professional interdisciplinariness. The 'popular antiquarianism' that burgeoned in the last decades of the century was, she argues, not simply a hobby for gentlemen with an interest in quaint folklore. Like the turn to cultural studies at the end of the twentieth century, it signalled a new kind of educated interest in a national culture rather different from that centred on the metropolis and represented by a limited canon of individually authored great works. In this it resonated with the work of her mythologists and 'steadily gave to these isolated poetic experiments an intellectual and ideological rationale' (p. 123).

Most discussions of British cultural nationalisms in the second half of the eighteenth century have focused on the Celtic fringes; it is one of Butler's many original perceptions to see that there is also a parallel interest in oppositional narratives of Englishness. As in her previous chapters, she here considers two contrasting groups: the 'non-genteel' popular antiquarians who originated in Newcastle and the Welsh cultural nationalists who came to prominence in the revolutionary 1790s. On the English side, she discusses such various figures as John Brand and Francis Douce, who each differently drew attention to the antiquity and complexity of the people's culture, Francis Grose, the maker of slang and provincial dictionaries and – most extensively – Joseph Ritson, 'incessant controversialist and . . . prolific editor-collector of songs and ballads' (p. 137), the gadfly of the literary establishment of the day. She connects their labours to her earlier poets' attempts to portray the nation as including the unlettered, pointing to the incipient radicalism of Brand's defence of his subject – 'the *People*, of whom society is chiefly composed', and to his invocation, in doing so, of Gray's *Elegy* (p. 133). But popular antiquarian enquiry was, she suggests, rather different from that famous earlier poetic meditation on the lives of passing generations of the poor. It brought into educated consciousness an increasingly vivid and detailed sense of the ways in

which for centuries the people had been making a culture of their own. That sense – as Butler pinpoints in a telling comparison between Brand and Burke (p. 133), as she shows at more length in her sympathetic account of Ritson's 'embattled scholarship' (p. 150) – could clash radically with the values and assumptions of the London literary establishment.

Welsh popular antiquarianism was rather different. Indeed, Butler argues, its projects were closer to those of her 'forgers': 'Iolo's genuine knowledge was richly supplemented by powers of invention rivalling Chatterton's' (p. 152). She shows how his portrayal of the Welsh as heirs of an unbroken British cultural tradition dating back to pre-Roman times became a potent myth for the Welsh nationalist movement, and how the peculiar conformations of his 'largely invented Bardism' appealed to disaffected intellectuals in the 1790s, so that the cult of the Celtic became part of radical politics. Welsh cultural nationalism had, she admits, nothing like the afterlife of Brand's and Ritson's popular antiquarianism – or, as it became in the nineteenth century, 'folklore'. 'A difficult, specialist subject in a little-known language, it quickly becomes esoteric in England,' she remarks rather sadly. 'Not that it is genuinely popular in Wales' (p. 158). But it nevertheless finds a significant place on her map, both as a case study of the relation between invention and 'tradition', and also because of the ways in which it was taken up and transformed by later English Romantic poets, especially the last of her 'mythologists', Blake.

Marilyn Butler's conception of the writing of literary history was deeply pondered, and by no means untheorised. Whilst she was writing *Mapping Mythologies* reviews of her previous book were appearing. Most reviewers hailed *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* as having 'merits of the first order'; 'it rises', wrote one, 'to the level of the best criticism by making us look anew, and with renewed interest, at literature we have been in danger of taking for granted'.[13] But it was criticised too for what some saw as its 'deterministic view' of literature: for depriving the author 'of primary responsibility or credit for his own works' and for implying that 'work of art is caused by the age, and is not in any sense the cause of it'.[14] A decade later, in the most extended of such critiques, Marshall Brown was to pronounce *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* a 'distinguished but extreme example of the privileging of historical contexts'. Quoting Butler's observation in that work that 'literature is a collective activity, powerfully conditioned by social forces', he argued that 'so radically historicist an approach leaves no principle for discriminating' between, for example, a Blake or a Thelwall, and that although it can clarify 'social issues', 'there is a

counterbalancing loss in elucidating the mission of the writer': 'Where history makes literature in this fashion, it seems safe to say, literature does not make history.'[15]

Mapping Mythologies might be seen as Butler's witty but deeply serious answer to such criticisms. For here she deliberately chooses to focus on a series of writers who saw the poet as maker of history, often in a peculiarly literal sense. She does not depart from her earlier argument that 'artistic strategies are responses to problems set in the last resort by history' (*RRR*, p. 183). She sees her mythologists as 'interested parties' with political views and allegiances; with professions to establish and 'individual professional careers to advance' (p. 5). But she empathises also with their view of themselves as cultural agents who have their own peculiar kind of power. Her concern is less with the ways in which their writings were shaped by their historical circumstances than with their understandings of those circumstances and the creative strategies that are manifest in the works they produced in response to them.

Hence her lively empathic interest in the distinctively different trajectory – and yes, in the 'mission' – of each of her individual writers: what he saw himself as doing, the problems he sought to engage with, the tradition he sought to invoke. Each was, Butler shows, differently related to mainstream centres of power, differently situated geographically, politically, professionally, personally. What she sees in the history she traces is not *zeitgeist* or consensus, but divergence, disagreement, debate. As she puts it, near the opening of her second chapter: 'the relations between living poets tend to be complex and dialogic, and quick formulae from our anachronistic perspective do not cover them' (pp. 50–1). Hence the prominence, in this book, of literary quarrels (Chatterton and Walpole, Macpherson and Samuel Johnson, Ritson and 'the network of gentlemen-scholars that made up the *de facto* literary establishment of the day', p. 137). Hence Butler's concern to trace the ways in which her writers respond to other writers, with hostility, with rivalry, with admiration – Akenside to Young; Collins to Akenside; Collins to Thomson; Blake's attraction to and eventual revulsion from the Druidic tradition as propounded by Welsh cultural nationalists. And hence her method of juxtaposition, the parallels and differences she points to in her chapters on Akenside and Thomson, Collins and Gray, Chatterton and Macpherson, the Northumbrian popular antiquarians and the Welsh. If she sees the writers she considers as responding to 'problems set in the last resort by history', she sees them as doing so in very different ways.

Butler traces significant differences even within her writers' own *oeuvres*. Thus, near the beginning of her story, she presents Thomson and Gray as each writing at least two major poems that image the role of the writer in the wider world: poems as different in genre, style, conception as two poems from the same pen could be. The earlier poem of each pair – Thomson's *Seasons* (1725–30), Gray's *Elegy* (1750) – was simple in its form and diction, and thus immediately and lastingly very popular: indeed, as Butler observes, only a handful of serious English poets have reached readers so far down the social scale. The later pair – Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* (1748) and Gray's *The Bard* (1757) – were grand, historical, learned, literary in a formal and traditional style; each was preoccupied with the question of nationhood in a more abstracted way. Yet despite the relatively specialised appeal of the later two, all four poems, especially when taken together, are, Butler shows, profoundly suggestive for fellow poets or fellow artists. Her discussion brings the latter two, less immediately accessible poems, into a new kind of prominence: Thomson's 'final masterpiece', *The Castle of Indolence*, 'tersely pointing to the existence of a schism in Western European culture between the indigenous masses and their polished, "alien" masters' (p. 37); Gray's *The Bard*, 'one of the most memorable, frequently illustrated and influential of all images of the Romantic poet', making 'an extraordinary claim by a poet on behalf of poets, a claim both to a role in the state, and to magical powers superior to those of the chief agent of the state, the king' (pp. 81, 80).

What does it mean for poets to 'make history'? Marginalised, politically ineffective as they were, the writers Butler discusses saw themselves as doing so. To them, tradition was not something given, but chosen; sometimes even made up. Whether ironically or defiantly, they conceived of themselves as creative agents: bards, prophets, mythmakers, constructing alternative versions of the social order, whether as possible futures or (most often) imagined pasts. In *Mapping Mythologies*, they become figures through whom Butler confronts the question of what kind of power the 'literary' imagination might have in an actual world. With a precision that is grounded in detailed historical knowledge she presents a quietly original view of the workings of aesthetic agency. It appears in her account neither as the fiat of an isolated poet nor as the abstracted 'spirit of the age' but as operating through what Alfred Gell was to call 'the dynamics of social interaction . . . a real process . . . unfolding in time'.[16] Thus, for example, she writes of James Macpherson's massive impact on writers throughout Europe:

> The reason, as so often in cases of so-called literary influence, is that his work fitted work already done elsewhere, particularly in what one might call the anti-metropolitan cultures defining themselves in opposition to London, Paris or Vienna. Thus Melchior Cesarotti, translator of Homer into Italian, received Ossian with enthusiasm as more evidence of the strength of non-classical ancient literature; at the end of the century, Southey borrowed back (for his Oriental epic, *Thalaba*) the unrhymed stanza Cesarotti used for his Italian version of *Fingal* (1763). (p. 93)

In passages such as this, Butler shows how individual writers' stylistic decisions, rightly understood, might be seen both as enabled by and as contributing to larger cultural processes. She also, and strikingly, anticipates more recent cultural theory in her sense of how the literary text might itself become an agent within such processes – what Rita Felski, for example, describes as 'the role of artworks in enabling their own survival'.[17] What she offers is not a narrative history of great poets responding to one another, but a more inclusive map of connections and interrelationships; not a canon of finished texts but a continuing active process of appropriation, response, reaction, re-working – what she calls in this passage 'cultures defining themselves'. It is a subtly revolutionary rethinking of what she here refers to as 'so-called literary influence'.

In a book published in the year after *Mapping Mythologies* was written Michael Baxandall was to call the idea of 'influence' 'a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient': 'If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality.'[18] It is this second, more lively reality that interests Butler. She shows how the works she discusses engage creatively with the sources on which they draw: reacting to them, assimilating or disagreeing with them, reviving, revaluing, parodying, developing, transforming them.[19] Her concern is not merely with the individual writer's negotiations with tradition, his struggles with his medium (choice of language, of literary genre, of black-letter print or of engraving technique) but with a wider history, in which readers as well as writers, antiquarians and scholars as well as poets, play a part. This is a history in which literary works are remade by their readers, and those works themselves have active 'lives and careers . . . they go from here to there to somewhere else . . . and these movements in time and space affect what they are and what they can be made into'.[20] It was, Butler suggests, through this active production, circulation and remaking of 'literary' meanings that some at least in

eighteenth-century England were able to forge new conceptions of what the nation was and could be.

To Butler, writing in Thatcher's divided Britain of the 1980s, the question of how a nation might imagine itself was by no means merely theoretical. She was shortly to become a Regius professor. Throughout her professional career she had made and would continue to make her own substantial contribution to the attempt to define a national culture, not merely through her teaching, but also (for example) through her professional interventions in the shaping of the national curriculum, and her overseeing of a series of massive editorial projects that sought to make a different literary past available. Like that of her poets, her intellectual work did not take place in a vacuum: it evolved in dialogue with and response to that of other scholars who were addressing the same kinds of question from different perspectives. These were the years of the 'cultural turn' in social history.[21] Eric Hobsbawm, Gwyn Williams, Edward Thompson, Linda Colley, all of whom Butler cites, were each differently writing on ideas of the nation in eighteenth-century Britain; and in a now-famous book published shortly before *Mapping Mythologies* was completed, Benedict Anderson had theorised this emerging interest in cultural nationalism in ways that resonate with Butler's work.

Anderson argued that the concepts of 'nationality, and nation-ness' were 'cultural artefacts' created 'towards the end of the eighteenth century', discursively elaborated through cultural forms.[22] He pointed to the importance of a growing print culture in enabling the creation of 'imagined communities' very different from the old regime of 'dynastic empires, monarchical institutions, absolutisms, subjecthoods';[23] to the affinity of nationalist with religious imaginings, especially in their need to look back to primordial origins; to the importance of such imaginings in affirming the continuing existence of a society beyond the individual life-span by forging affective connections both to the dead and to those as yet unborn. And, in a passage that Butler marked in her copy, he identified those who first took up the model of the independent nation state as 'the marginalized vernacular coalitions of the educated'.[24]

Butler evidently found Anderson's brilliant analysis enormously thought - provoking. But her literary training gave her a rather different take on these questions. In *Mapping Mythologies* she addresses them with the knowledge and skills and discipline of a literary historian. She too is interested in the coming into being of what she was to call 'antithetical, anti-statist sense[s] of community';[25] she too has as principal players the 'marginalized ... educated'. But her interest is less in anatomising

'nationalism' than in exploring how, within a single society, new understandings of the 'nation' were forged. Where Anderson points to the growth of the nation state, the interaction between capitalism and printing, the birth of vernacular languages in early modern Europe, she traces the particular inflections of a conflicted, contentious process. Where Anderson writes, always in the passive voice, of the ways in which the nation 'is imagined',[26] she comes much closer to the agents of that imagining. She charts the specific choices of a succession of particular writers and a growing reading public, the creation and reception of a series of differently ambitious poems, the elaborate invention of compelling alternatives to official versions of the English past, the importance of an expanding field of cultural studies (or 'popular antiquarianism') that acknowledged the people's culture and made it part of educated consciousness. This, she suggests, is the distinctively 'literary' work that made possible a particular form of collective imagining:

> Through reading newspapers, magazines, novels, poems and plays, a large number of people in mid- and late-eighteenth-century England encountered a sense of an entire national community, present as well as past, which challenged the moral legitimacy of the claim that 'the nation' meant the King-in-Parliament. (p. 191)

What Butler offers is not exactly sociology of literature. Nor is it quite a claim for the special status of literature as a privileged object of study: her sense of the 'literary' is porous, she sees it as always embedded and implicated in the social world. But in this book she presents it as one of the most compelling of what Hayden White has called 'those aspects of social reality that attest to human beings' capacities to make and remake that reality, not merely adjust to it'.[27] Where Benedict Anderson, seeking to characterise the affective resonances of nationalism, writes vaguely of the 'beauty' and 'splendour' of poetry in fostering national sentiment,[28] she writes of the particular generic, linguistic, metrical, stylistic choices through which a succession of poets articulated their understanding of their world. Where Anderson sees 'the cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts' as simply expressive of 'the *attachment* that peoples feel for the inventions of their imagination' or at best as indicative of the psychological reasons for that attachment,[29] Butler sees a series of carefully crafted, sharply intelligent, highly sophisticated literary artefacts. She sees them, moreover, less as 'cultural products' illustrative of a prior concept than as part of a continuous process of cultural self-reflexiveness. She explores the ways in which those artefacts,

entering into social circulation, become differently 'influential', how they enable different kinds of questionings of the workings of established power, and shape different kinds of perceptions of possibility. Her profoundly democratic vision is less of the people 'aroused' and affected by a larger imagined idea,[30] than of the people (or at least the growing, marginalised educated public) actively reflecting on their historical situation, of the imagination as an individual and collective form of thought. 'Must we,' she asks at the end of *Mapping Mythologies*, 'really go on treating this as mere superstructure, rather than as the thing itself?' (p. 192).

Mapping Mythologies was to be followed in Butler's *oeuvre* by a series of important essays interrogating the premises of what she called 'old-style literary history', published between 1985 and 1996. Appearing, suggestively, in counterpoint with the rather different series in which Butler was publishing parts of her work on the later Romantics, these are essays in which she develops the interests emerging in *Mapping Mythologies*: how theory and critical practice should take account of historical difference, and on the complexities of 'tradition' ('Against Tradition: the Case for a Particularized Historical Method'); the expansion of literary to cultural history ('Repossessing the Past: the Case for an Open Literary History'); the meanings of narrative history ('Telling it like a Story: The French Revolution as Narrative'); principles of scholarly editing ('Why Edit Socially?'); the editing of works marginalised or ignored by standard literary histories ('Editing Women'); the world of reviews and journals that is the seedbed of a given society's intellectual discussion ('Culture's Medium'), and – in a way very different from Benedict Anderson –the importance of the dead in the national cultural imaginary ('Talking to the Dead').[31] In *Mapping Mythologies* we see the seeds of that thinking. Here, however, it is presented not as a series of theoretical problems but in a theoretically alert engagement with a series of writers and texts, and not as an in-depth study but as a more provocative 'map'.

The metaphor of the map has often been seen as implying a totalising vision and commanding overview. Butler's use of it in her title is closer to the way in which it was to be used in the feminist literary history that was coming into prominence in the 1980s, and to which she herself was to contribute so vividly and so substantially.[32] Over the next twenty years, feminist scholars were to map the presence in the past of a succession of women writers who did not in their time conceive of themselves as a literary movement. In an analogous move, Butler points in this book to the ways in which her mythologists can be seen as an oppositional literary 'tradition'. Her landmarks, like those of the new feminist literary history,

are rather different from those of previous literary histories. She focuses on the Thomson not of *The Seasons* but of *The Castle of Indolence*; the Gray not of the *Elegy* but of *The Bard*. Her 'literary' field, moreover, is very much larger than the accepted canon: it includes very different kinds of work, from the poetry of Akenside to the editorial labours of Joseph Ritson, from Chatterton's invention of a whole provincial archive to the scholarly antiquarianism of John Brand. Hers is not a grand linear narrative, but a map that marks dead ends and blind alleys. If she points to how Thomson looked back to Akenside, and Collins to Thomson, to Blake's admiration of Ossian and of Chatterton, she points also to the differences of situation that meant that Gray could not identify with Chatterton (p. 111), and to how the contemporary dismissal of Ritson as a lunatic 'confirm[s] his diagnosis of a network that shares common attitudes and can combine quite ruthlessly to punish and exclude someone who does not' (p. 146). What she charts is not a straightforward progression or a single 'spirit of the age', but a number of 'counter-currents' that go in rather different directions, both backwards and forwards. Thus, she notes some of the contemporary discourses that Blake picks up and transforms in his portrayal of his imaginary beings or 'Eternals':

> These beings shift (often to the bewilderment of unpractised readers) from one state to another, or subdivide, male spirit into female emanation, or, courting annihilation, they fall endlessly through space. Their behaviour-patterns can be seen as a free and very suggestive way of rendering the complexity of the human psyche, and not an anachronistic one. Doctors like William Cullen and John Hunter were in this period exploring challenges to the individual's sense of coherence in their studies of non-rational aspects of the mind, Erasmus Darwin allegorizing such inward conflicts in poetry; Fuseli illustrating them in paintings like *The Nightmare* (1781) . . . [these] shape-shifters might also be interpreted as a free, impressionistic version of Iolo's description of the immortal, transmigrating soul. (p. 174)

Thus she distinguishes between her 'forgers'' 'influence' and that of Thomson:

> Macpherson and Chatterton at least were widely recognised and understood in their time, Macpherson indeed throughout western Europe. But Thomson, and then Cowper and Wordsworth, helped to create a rather different tradition of 'country' poetry, descriptive, naturalistic, middle class and middle brow, that came to seem (at least to English readers) a more productive innovation than the Celtic nationalism that Macpherson fathered. (p. 189)

A map is not a detailed description of the terrain. Butler's method in this book is less that of extended argument than of the brief but illuminating

summary, the vivid, sharply pertinent characterisation. She observes of Macpherson that 'in the end, unfortunately, [he] is not grounded enough. There is no real feeling of earth, grit, harshness; no one gets cold or wet or hungry or naturally sickens and dies' (p. 94). She contends, against the reigning orthodoxy, that 'the viewpoint in all Thomson's poems, even the *Seasons*, [is] generally that of the outsider – townsman, villager, very small landowner, merchant seaman, trader or colonist' (p. 26). She suggests that 'if Chatterton never attracted the personal vilification that Macpherson did, it may be because an air of comedy pervades his writings, a kind of mischievous pleasure in deceiving and being found out' (p. 108). Unexpectedly but convincingly, she finds a certain 'pithiness' in *Jerusalem* (p. 180). But no more than *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* is this a simplified 'guide' or a popularising of the already-known. Underpinned by wide and adventurous reading both in eighteenth-century texts and in twentieth-century history and anthropology and cultural theory, it is closer to a charting of a particular view of the territory, a marking of what from that viewpoint are significant landmarks, an indication of the directions in which further exploration might go.

In the thirty years since *Mapping Mythologies* was written, there have been many more detailed and some brilliant scholarly studies of the writings of the hundred years beginning in 1730. Many of these are indebted to Marilyn Butler: her sense of the questions to be asked and of how they might be answered pointed to possibilities that have been taken up and developed by many literary scholars now at the peak of their careers. The handwritten inscription in Butler's copy of *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), edited by Nigel Leask and Philip Connell, speaks for many: 'This project would have been unthinkable without your inspiration and example. It is dedicated to you with respect and gratitude.'

Mapping Mythologies is 'dated', both in the sense that the works to which it makes reference were all written before 1984 – and also more positively and provocatively, in its bold historical sweep and clarity of argument. The thickets of critical and scholarly work that have grown up around Butler's subjects in the last thirty years mean that it would be very much more difficult to write such a book today. It is easy to get lost in those thickets, to lose sight of the bigger picture and the larger questions. The exigencies of academic careers and the pressures imposed by such bureaucratic modes of assessment as the British Research Excellence Framework have come to mean that the standard academic publication is now the exhaustively argued essay or monograph on a specialised topic. It is more usual now

for literary critics to look for an untilled corner in which to stake out a position than to draw a map of a whole field. There are other pressures: the need to publish too much and too quickly, the anxiously felt requirement to establish professionalism and authority, to acquire what Butler wryly refers to in this book as 'academic prestige' (p. 139).

Into this present-day context *Mapping Mythologies* comes as an inspiration and an example. Not driven by a 'good idea', or the pursuit of opportunity, but by wide reading and deep reflection, it reminds us of the kind of bold thinking that years spent in historical scholarship can make possible. It offers a new way of seeing a series of well-known texts and brings to a new kind of prominence others far less well known, by identifying and exploring the cultural project of which they were part. Butler does not strain for 'relevance' or for political correctness. She simply seeks to trace that project in its widely differing inflections as clearly as she can. But her 'map' is animated by her conviction that it is worth seeing clearly, by her respect for what her writers saw themselves as doing and by her lively interest in the ways in which poets might be not merely creations but also creators of their age. The voice that we hear in these pages is unpretentious, with no stylistic flourishes – that of one more interested in the subjects of which she is writing than in displaying her own cleverness or sensibility. It is more inclusive than academic – that of one who liked to remember that she was 'the daughter of a man who wrote for twelve million people every day'.[33] But it has a compelling authority. In its energy, its directness, its sharp intelligence, its lightly worn learning, its steady respect for historical difference, it is one that can still inspire and energise us.