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Edited by Ryan Twomey with Jennifer Simkins. Juvenilia Press,
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REVIEWS

William Harrison Ainsworth. *December Tales. A Selection.* Edited by Ryan Twomey with Jennifer Simkins. Juvenilia Press, 2024.

60 pages, 9 sepia. Paperback, AUD 20.00.
ISBN: 9780733433740.

THIS HANDSOME volume does credit to the Juvenilia Press's production values. The cover reproduces a miniature of William Harrison Ainsworth at twenty-one, showing a Byronic or swashbuckling hairstyle above a baby face, like a child dressing up. Further sepia illustrations capture aspects of the period, from busy all-male sociability to twilight solitude.

Ainsworth was eighteen when these tales (with another half-dozen not included here) reached print: the second book of his young life. His precocity and teenage angst included playing at being near his life's end, witness this volume's title, and the persona adopted for "The Churchyard": "I am not young: I am, indeed, approaching to the period when I shall cease to indite these dotings of age."

Already, however, Ainsworth was skilled in handling the market, hitting the taste of the day. His quotations and borrowed phrases reflect a love for late, minor Romantics, and some phrasing passed from him to the better-known Edgar Allan Poe. He made his mark on literary history, that is, far beyond the dreams of most juvenile writers, before achieving best-sellerdom with historical melodramas like *Rookwood* (1834), featuring, indeed almost inventing, the highwayman Dick Turpin, *The Tower of London* (1840), and *The Lancashire Witches* (1848). His popularity, however, proved briefer than that of his early associate Charles Dickens.

Ainsworth has recently featured in a very different historical novel, Zadie Smith's *The Fraud*. Smith depicts him as elderly but unromantic, soured by the ebbing of his fame. Her selections from his prose in his palmy days are a luxuriant garland of clichés, flung out with immense narrative energy and panache.

Ryan Twomey's introduction dwells on the natural description in these early stories, whose outpourings of words evoke scenes of secluded bowers,

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overarching forests, or violent storms and desolate wilderness. Landscape is steeped in fantastical human imagination: rocks and forests evoke ideas of ogres and spirits, often of malign intent.

The emotion in these stories is paramount: both events and background exist to feed it, and events seldom constitute the kind of developing sequence constituting plot. The narrator of the first tale, "Mary Stukeley," passes over his entire childhood and adolescence as an "uninterrupted course of happiness" having no interest. He then falls in love with Mary "among the most beautiful scenery I ever knew," who accepts his proposal. On his wedding eve he walks out and observes another walker, a woman of striking looks, who appears to hide "a lurking trace of the darker passions" under a disguising air of softness. She falls and sprains her ankle. He helps her walk until, resting in "a spot, the most delightful I ever beheld," she plucks him a flower, he falls at her feet, and is discovered thus by Mary, whose brother then challenges him to a duel.

Rushing out in emotional anguish to fight, the narrator is accosted by the now detested mystery woman with news that the brother has been murdered by someone unknown; he is suspected and must flee to London. She supplies him with money and a horse, reaches the refuge before him, and later extracts a promise to marry her. He promises; she plunges into remorse and releases him from his promise, but out of despair he marries her anyway. We learn her name, Eliza. She earns enough money to support them both. Her husband continues to suppose she "is probably of violent and irregular passions," but without observing any: her conduct is beyond reproach.

Unable to bear subsisting on her exertions any longer, and liberated by the discovery of the real murderers, he travels to the scene of his earlier traumas hoping to recover his property. Meeting Mary by chance, he clasps her in his arms, and soon marries her without mentioning his existing wife. This marriage brings him no happiness, only guilt, shame, and misery, both before and after he reveals all to Mary. Her health declines from this moment, and she dies, leaving him to wander the world in misery and despair.

These events form a frail scaffolding for mental torment and social alienation. Similarly, the narrator of "The Sea-Spectre" endures a storm, near-shipwreck, starving in lifeboats which some do not survive (the captain heaves one corpse overboard just in time to prevent cannibalism), being washed up with other crew members on a desert island, and further starving, all before they learn the cause. Years before, a crew had mutinied in those waters. Ever since, wrecks are common there, and a spectral woman is seen pursuing and drowning a man: the widow of the murdered captain taking her revenge on the mutineers' ringleader.

Assertive women like Eliza and the murdered captain's wife bring trouble in these stories. Even their converse, those possessing "the serenity of a pure and blameless mind," seldom bring happiness. An exception is the "lovely creature" who nurses to recovery and then marries the battered protagonist of "The Falls of Ohiopyle". The man who first jilts and then marries Mary Stukeley finds both lead equally to misery. The narrator's former schoolmate R---, who first loves and then loses an ideal woman in "The Church-Yard", turns that piece at its ending to misery from mere melancholy.

The textual editing for this volume consisted simply of correcting misprints in the original, larger collection (which was nicely produced, from the samples reproduced here) and wisely deciding to retain the original spelling. Footnotes provide generous explanation of potentially unfamiliar words and phrases. Literary-context notes are from the single-volume *Oxford Companion*. The annotations are weak in Latin. “Candidi lectores” addresses not so much the bright as fair and honest judges: a version of a phrase often applied by authors to prospective readers. And “I nunc liber” does not mean “I now liberate” but “Go now, book”: another time-honoured sentiment (as so many of Robert Burton’s sentiment are) used at the launching of a text into the world.

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