

**Andrew Burkett, “Deep Time: Queen Mab.” *European Romantic Review* 33. 5 (2022): 713–725.**

Andrew Burkett’s article, “Deep Time: *Queen Mab*”, calls for an analysis of Shelley’s poem and its accompanying notes that examines the poem’s representations of ‘deep time’ and that reads those representations as indebted to Shelley’s understanding of James Hutton’s late eighteenth-century earth science and specifically Hutton’s geological ‘eternalism’.

While critics have focused on the “astronomical dimensions of [the poem’s] deep space scaling”, Burkett notes that “few scholars have sought to explore the deep time dimensions of the poem’s intense temporal rescaling” (714). Addressing this deficiency, he draws together several critical strands beginning by situating the analysis within the previous decade’s wider critical debates on literature’s engagement with deep time, specifically Mark McGurl’s response to Wai Chee Dimock’s work on literature and temporality. *Queen Mab*’s imaginative scaling up of time, Burkett suggests, makes it singularly fitted to being read within these critical debates. Bringing “into conversation” previous critical readings that foreground Hutton’s influence on Shelley’s later poetry with Alan Weinberg’s focus on depictions of time in *Queen Mab* and Marilyn Butler’s seminal work on “Shelley’s (Godwinian) gradualism”, Burkett argues that “Shelley’s indebtedness to Hutton” should be extended “backwards to an analysis of his first major poem” to facilitate an understanding of “the function of time [...] across [Shelley’s] oeuvre” (715).

The article offers a brief survey of Hutton’s geology introducing the notion of ‘eternalism’ – Hutton’s radical conclusion that in earth’s geological processes he can find “no vestige of a beginning, —no prospect of an end”, which Burkett reads as signified in *Queen Mab*’s “‘infinite’ of ‘[t]he floods of ages’” (716). Addressing the lack of evidence for Shelley’s reading of Hutton’s primary texts or those of his most able publicist, John Playfair – an issue that has limited the kind of close reading that can be performed on Shelley’s poetry – Burkett usefully reminds us, as Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat have suggested, that Shelley’s early awareness of Huttonian geology likely originated in his reading of Erasmus Darwin’s *The Temple of Nature*, which the poet undertook while working on *Queen Mab*.

Hutton’s geology offered Shelley a view of time that complemented contemporary astronomical conceptions of deep space and Burkett argues that the poem’s extra-terrestrial perspective played out in Mab’s journey into deep space is performed in part to “introduce readers to the scale requisite for comprehending the specifically Huttonian deep time that will structure much of the poem to come”. Shelley’s “repeated use of ‘eternal,’ ‘eternity,’ and related terms” supports this and are not, the article argues, “decontextualized, hyperbolic, or simply Platonic or poetic usages but are, instead, always steeped in a specifically Huttonian conception of eternalism” (718). Less convincing is the discursion into a reading of *Queen Mab*’s ‘eternalism’ via Marcia Bjornerud’s ‘timefulness’. If anything, this draws attention to the article’s conflation of ‘deep time’ with Hutton’s notion of an eternal earth, which in turn alerts readers to the anomaly of the article’s title which foregrounds ‘deep time’ while the article itself is more concerned with ‘eternalism’, as if the two terms were synonymous. The work on the final two cantos and their notes, however, offers new Huttonian interpretations and Burkett’s brief close readings beg for further analysis. Shelley’s earth, for example, which “Contains at once the evil and the cure” (6.32)

resonates with Huttonian notions of synchronous geological ruin and renewal. Burkett only touches on this towards the end, but much more might have been said (722).

The final section of the article cites Benjamin Morgan's work on literary 'scale and form' and returns to McGurl and Dimock to conclude that "Shelley's goal" in the poem's temporal scaling was to "decenter the human and radically marginalize anthropomorphisms ultimately to create a lived human praxis of existing in an entirely new relationship not only with ourselves but also with the Earth" (722-723). This, together with Burkett's earlier claim that Shelley uses Hutton to "displace the shallow time of biblical and human history so as to decenter anthropocentric accounts of ostensible human primariness" will please critics engaged in recuperating Romantic texts in the light of the Anthropocene (720). Nevertheless, such a conclusion does seem to be drawn at the expense of any account of the monolithic Romantic consciousness that pervades this poem and much of Shelley's later poetry.

These quibbles aside, the article is a welcome addition to the body of work on Romantic literature and science that increasingly recognises the seminal importance of geology and those narratives that helped to contextualise deep time. As profound as Darwin and Freud's later challenges to human self-awareness, geological deep time and its emergence in Romantic writings still awaits nuanced critical attention; this article represents a positive step along the way.

**Michelle Geric**  
**University of Westminster**