

Prophet of the Electric Age: Cultural Performativity as Nonviolent Revolution in the Lifework of Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Abstract

This article examines Percy Bysshe Shelley's interest in contemporary possibilities of text dissemination in order to reconcile the normally opposing tendencies of gradualism ("slow reform") and "violent" revolution in his life and writings. I offer a close reading of two parallel cultural events, both of which produced a national commotion that widely disseminated radical views—the "Peterloo" massacre at Manchester and Lord Eldon's copyright rulings as Lord Chancellor. In both instances, the government's attempts to control expression had the opposite effect due to the consequences of press coverage and political activism. In combination with nonviolent textual piracy, I argue that the circulation of the belief in poetry's power concomitantly with the formation of a radical canon encouraged the latter's circulation as propaganda, *de facto* establishing a common cultural heritage for the growing radical movement. Since Shelley's writings became a fundamental component of the cultural glue that encouraged cohesion of the expanding radical class as soon as one decade after his premature death, I suggest that a reading of Shelley's political strategies that moves beyond "ineffectualism" can highlight the continuing relevance of Shelley's aesthetics and political thought.

Critical accounts of Percy Shelley's revolutionary sentiments frequently struggle to synchronize the diverse traces preserved in correspondence, notebooks, and publications under a coherent ideological framework. Whence did this assumption of consistency assume its axiomatic nature, as if the critic's task structurally mirrors the astronomer's stellar deduction of a cosmic origin and its first principles? If Shelley's writings are only the phenomenal signposts of a singular Platonic Idea, literary criticism would seem to be the formal equivalent of linear

perspective in Renaissance art: tracing orthogonal lines to their vanishing point in a mimetic sleight of hand.

Such is the basis of an argument advanced in the influential essay “What is an Author?,” where Michel Foucault identifies the “author function” as an ideological construct, a functional principle that limits the free circulation of meaning within a particular orientation—much the same way that the vanishing point anchors detail within a predetermined nexus of dimensions in linear perspective. Significantly, the vanishing point is an *illusion*, a technique for creating a sense of depth within two-dimensional space. But such a technique has its place. I disagree with interpretations of Foucault that conclude that “*True* freedom... would seem to be impossible until we move beyond the author-function.... This call for unlimited freedom to attribute meanings to artworks is what I understand Foucault to be endorsing” (Nicholls 52). Such a proposal is not only misleading, but profoundly dangerous and counterproductive. Foucault writes, after all, that “It would be pure romanticism... to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure” (Foucault). Although I do not doubt the authenticity of Tracey Nicholls’s intentions, it is statements like these that have contributed to the prevailing understanding of “postmodernism” as a fetishization of the absence of perspectival view and the ironic coexistence of temporalities. The quaintness of this popular conception could remain a benign source of amusement were it not for the fact that it thoroughly castrates the radical potency of messages that now, more than ever, need to be heard.

I find Nicholls’s interpretation particularly difficult to reconcile with Foucault’s conclusion, where he asserts:

[T]here exist properties or relationships peculiar to discourse (not reducible to the rules of grammar and logic), and one must use these to distinguish the major

categories of discourse. *The relationship (or non-relationship) with an author, and the different forms this relationship takes, constitute—in a quite visible manner—one of these discursive properties....* Perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations but according to their modes of existence. *The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary within each culture and are modified within each. The manner in which they are articulated according to social relationships can be more readily understood...in the activity of the author function and in its modifications than in the themes or concepts that discourses set in motion.* (Foucault, emphasis added)

This proposal flies in the face of Nicholls's summarization of the essay, where she emphasizes Foucault's formalist tendencies at the expense of close reading:

[Foucault's] account of the critic's task...is to "analyze the work through its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships." These ways of understanding the creation and criticism of artworks are formalist in that they present the work as something that can, and should, be analyzed in isolation from its "creator" and on the basis of elements contained within the work itself.... This strongly suggests an approach to works that treats them as discrete entities, theorizable only at the level of features contained within the work, and the extent to which those features differ from or resemble features found in other works. (Nicholls 53)

The quotation Nicholls here draws from Foucault is actually meant, in context, as one example of the notions "that are intended to replace the privileged position of the author [but] actually seem to preserve that privilege" (Foucault). Foucault's point in this section of the essay is, explicitly, that any criticism supposedly confined to the formal contents of a work is already embroiled in (authorial) assumptions about the nature of a "work" to begin with: "When Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his papers? Simply rolls of paper onto which he ceaselessly uncoiled his fantasies during his imprisonment" (ibid).

That which Nicholls overlooks in her analysis is the importance of *genealogy* to Foucault's work. Rather than simply viewing the author function as a primitive mythology to overcome, Foucault is interested in critically investigating the historical role of "the author" as it has developed within and between cultures over time. The purpose is ultimately twofold: to

investigate the ideological uses and suppositions historically associated with the author function—consciously studying the ways that meaning can be “quilted” and arranged within a given frame—and, on the basis of this investigation, to explore alternative possibilities of aligning perspective within new systems of constraint.

Historically, Foucault suggests that the author function has served a number of concrete purposes:

[T]he author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design). The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing—all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence. The author serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be—at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious—a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction. (ibid)

Such is most certainly the case in the majority of Shelley scholarship. Over generations, scholars have tried to arrange the nebulous traces of Shelley’s life into a coherent pattern, dealing foremost with a number of apparent contradictions that demand narrative explanation.

Consistently, one of the prickliest subjects of Shelley’s biography is an appraisal of his politics—a crucial inroad for wielders of the author function, since his corpus is saturated with it. The standard interpretation of his views traces a rather linear development, beginning with a zealous desire for immediate change and ending with a resigned acceptance that political redemption must await some future age.¹ Although there is certainly evidence to support these claims, I would nominate this the “Ineffectual Angel School” of Shelley studies, since its

¹ In “Peterloo, Shelley and Reform”, Stanley A. Walker encapsulates this later stage by writing that “patience and long-suffering are the only efficient weapons remaining to the people, but that through them they will eventually gain their ends and maintain at the same time their self-respect” (Walker 164). Alan Weinberg mirrors this description in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, arguing that Shelley’s later political orientation is “anything but revolutionary” (Weinberg 189-90).

totalizing claim on Shelley's signifier as "author function" presents his corpus as an aesthetic failure while foreclosing a viable alternative that, I will argue, lends greater coherence to his "works" (as presently defined) and has concrete ramifications within the symbolic constellation of the literary and political fields today.

Similar problems arise with other contenders for the control of Shelley's author function; where Shelley is not read as *either* a revolutionary *or* a proponent of gradual reform projected into a distant future, he is often seen to embody a fundamental contradiction resulting from an inheritance of opposing trends in political thought: Godwinian gradualism and Paineite revolutionary theory. If Shelley's thought was predicated on a fundamental contradiction, the unspoken implication is that there is little we might gain by reexamination.

The shift in emphasis that I intend to enact in this paper is analogous to Stephen C. Behrendt's reorientation of Shelley in *Shelley and His Audiences*, which is framed within a similar tradition of polarization: "It may seem the oldest of old hats to describe Shelley as torn between his 'skepticism' and his 'Romantic idealism'; ever since C. E. Pulos's *Deep Truth* this has been the keynote of descriptions of Shelley's intellectual career" (Behrendt 2). Such ostensive "contradictions" run rampant in Shelley's writings, a fact which in itself contradicts Shelley's remarkable ideological consistency.

Apologetics and panaceas have been attempted from all sides of the spectrum. One such solution is offered by William Keach, who writes in *Shelley's Style* that "What Shelley says about language is sometimes genuinely contradictory and obscure. We need to be able to recognize this without closing ourselves to the possibility that some forms of contradiction and even obscurity may be necessary to the reflections of a volatile verbal sensibility" (Keach 3). Although Keach is

correct in many senses, it is important to stress that the acceptance of contradiction as such is not the only alternative to settling on one of its sides. Behrendt's introduction is illustrative here:

The answer to this paradoxical division in Shelley's thought does not lie in deciding that Shelley was "really" an idealist or "really" a skeptic.... Shelley develops an alternative approach to the issues of history, change, time, and process on which his double intellectual legacy divides.... When we read Shelley's poetry with this new theory of time and process in mind, much that has previously seemed baffling falls into place. Above all, a thoroughly new understanding of political process emerges, one that allows us to comprehend and accept, without excuses for "poetic license," Shelley's claim. (Behrendt 2-3)

In other words it is possible, in a concerted act of good faith, to read Shelley as *not contradictory*. Resisting, for a moment, the temptation to atomize, we must consider the possibility of a hermeneutic frame wherein the majority of Shelley's gradualist and revolutionary tendencies are reconciled.

But the significance of this argument is not, as I see it, a question of winning a game of intellectual tug-of-war. The stakes are political and transhistorical; in aligning my work with Shelley's own, my intent is to *manifest* the very thing that I am here treating as objective subject matter. If "author functions" are constructed, literary criticism is not simply a matter of revealing a truth that was waiting to be unearthed since time immemorial. Truth is *made* as it is spoken, though by no means accidental or arbitrary. Since *this*—the naming power of language—was one of the clearest and most insistent messages that Shelley consciously projected to future generations, I feel obliged to turn back and acknowledge his call. I want to explore the effects of intentional intervention into the discourse with a viable alternative that draws forth an underdeveloped aspect of his life work, and in so doing to consciously align myself with an emancipatory struggle much larger than either of us. As the filmmaker Chris Marker once wrote, "when all the celebrations are over it remains only to pick up all the ornaments—all the accessories of the celebration—and by burning them, make a celebration" (Marker).

By replicating his intention within a different domain, this project relates to a distinction made by poet and theorist George Quasha between “interpretation” and “the further life of the work” in *An Art of Limina*: “further life” is functionally defined as “an extension of the creative energy and interest that the work itself...projects through its own instance” (Quasha 9), contrasts with interpretation viewed as a definitive statement in literary discourse. A fully-realized “further life” manifestation of a work of art is performative at every level, meaning that it is as much a commentary on itself as on the subject to which it explicitly refers, which makes it impossible to say anything about the one without directly reflecting onto the other. My conscious aim is for this paper to contribute to the aesthetic and political intentions that I will read into Shelley’s work.

Even though Shelley was never popular in his own lifetime, his ideas need to be considered within their intellectual milieu and critiqued accordingly. Although “revolution” and “slow reform” might appear contradictory from an abstract perspective, the momentous events with which Shelley was concerned reveal ways of conceptualizing the two poles harmoniously. In the course of this essay, I will examine two events that rocked the tumultuous years leading up to Shelley’s death, with far-reaching consequences for both Shelley and the nation: the 1819 massacre at Manchester, and a series of legal decisions made by Lord Eldon, both of which produced a national commotion that widely disseminated radical views. I will argue that the similarities between these two events are illustrative of contemporary social and technological developments that demand a rereading of Shelley’s views on imminent political change.

Shelley never abandoned his belief in poetry’s capacity to expand knowledge and inspire action, but he *did* gradually distance himself from attempting the latter through rational and programmatic argumentation. As long philosophical poems expressing similar ideologies in very

different ways, written at two distinct moments in Shelley's career, *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam/Laon and Cythna* are often used as two distinct markers within the context of Shelley's intellectual development. *Queen Mab* differs starkly from *Laon and Cythna* in that, whereas the former articulates explicit directives in logical form, the latter seeks to transform minds by cathecting the reader's experiences with those of its central characters. Since he realized that the best-intentioned directives would misfire on minds conditioned to filter messages through inhospitable worldviews, he shifted priorities and began to focus his poetry on developing a transferable contextual frame within which genuine communication could begin to take place.

In 1819, Shelley wrote "The Mask of Anarchy" in response to news of the Manchester massacre in England, popularly known as Peterloo. "The Mask" represented a new approach to poetry for Shelley; it was just one of a new set of "exoteric" poems intended for "a little volume of popular songs wholly political & destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers" (Shelley qtd. in Bieri 156). Although Shelley had long hoped for a popular reception of his writings, "The Mask" represents a strategic attempt to align himself with the working class at the expense of his aristocratic cultural background. This is a clear instance of a late attempt—a mere three years before his death—to have a direct impact on the political atmosphere in England.

Crucially, Shelley's view of reform was linked to the principle of free expression of opinion, the violation of which lay at the heart of the Manchester Massacre on August 16, 1819—the first major political event under consideration here that unquestionably affected Shelley's opinions on the relationship between language and social change. A. Stanley Walker describes the events leading up to Peterloo with some detail, noting the pitiful economic conditions of workers taxed to extend a distant war on top of existing economic depression. Beginning in 1816,

a number of meetings were held in the city of Manchester to discuss “the present state of the country,” and eventually municipal authorities reestablished the Watch and Ward and declared their intention of prohibiting radical gatherings. Henry Hunt and a group of radicals, believing that a peaceable assembly would be closely scrutinized but unhampered, planned for a meeting on St. Peter’s Fields. On the morning of August 16, people began arriving as early as nine o’clock, and before noon the crowd was estimated to number 150,000. Hunt’s procession entered at half-past one, and four or five hundred special constables mingled with the crowd were the only visible signs that the law was on the alert. The constables were considered as a token that good behavior was all that was expected from the meeting, rather than a threat.

But just as Hunt began his address to the populace, masses of soldiery with horses and guns silently bordered in the crowd. In hoping to restrain violence with a show of good-humor, Hunt encouraged three cheers for the military—many of whom were drunk volunteers from local affluent families—but the Yeomanry unexpectedly drew their swords and plunged into the crowd, slashing indiscriminately. At least nine were killed and 418 injured, many severely.

In the eyes of the government, the violent dispersal was an unqualified success, but they found it necessary to provide justification and so alleged that the reformers were actually preparing an insurrection. In the court hearings that followed, speeches by opponents of reform frequently cited the need to “rescue” the population from the poisoning effects of radical rhetoric. But the pompous eloquence of the noble lords did little to sway the convictions of an oppressed populace. Thanks to the diligence of the press, two events in particular inflamed the passions of the people: the coroners’ verdicts on the victims of the massacre, and the proceedings at the trial of Mr. Hunt.

In the case of Peterloo, an attempt to limit expression actually condensed the seeds of opposition, which were then free to proliferate in the uncontrollable channels opened by the new collision of technology, radical piracy, and an expanding readership. After Hunt's release from prison, he took the chair of a meeting of reformers in London and remarked: "Gentlemen, the country is roused, and the cowardly and bloody deeds of Manchester have done more for the cause of Reform than all that you and I could have effected by our humble exertions for ten years" (153). Unquestionably, the juxtaposition of nonviolence with textual proliferation allowed for Peterloo's reinscription into the reformist cause.

While Walker concludes his article by writing that "patience and long-suffering are the only efficient weapons remaining to the people" (164), I would argue that this reading, which is what scholars typically read into the late Shelley, is far too complacent and benign for a poet who never ceased to issue lightning from his pen. As an extension of the emphasis Walker places on the responses of Hunt and the presses to Peterloo, it is essential to highlight the significance of technological innovation and the culture of literacy in the early 19th-century to Shelley's view of "gradual" reform. It was due to the new reaches of the press that the story of Peterloo was "Heard again—again—again—," and concrete changes did take place thanks to Peterloo's inscription into popular discourse. Rather than patiently waiting until the master releases the slave from his bonds, Shelley's is a rallying cry whose effects are intended—and indeed, have been—to exponentially increase the odds.

Shelley was keenly aware of rapid scientific and technological innovations, and, with instances like Peterloo in mind, it is important to note that his view of reform depended on a visionary sensitivity to the new possibilities unfolding at his juncture in history. Recollections by

Shelley's friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, cited in Richard Holmes' monumental biography

Shelley: The Pursuit, testifies to this fact:

The galvanic battery is a new engine; it has been used hitherto in an insignificant extent, yet has it wrought wonders already; what will not an extraordinary combination of troughs, of colossal magnitude, a well arranged system of hundreds of metallic plates, effect? The balloon has not yet received the perfection of which it is surely capable.... Why are we still so ignorant of the interior of Africa?—why do we not dispatch intrepid astronauts to cross it in every direction, and to survey the whole peninsula in a few weeks? The shadow of the first balloon, which a vertical sun would project precisely underneath it, as it glided silently over that hitherto unhappy country, would virtually emancipate every slave, and would annihilate slavery for ever. (Holmes 41)

Hogg's relation of Shelley's enthusiasm suggests that the latter foresaw fundamental changes in the means of transmitting cultural information, which in turn challenged the maintenance of the status quo in ways there previously unimaginable. Although it is unclear how the appearance of a hot air balloon in the skies of Africa would abolish slavery, the visual emphasis of Shelley's hyperbolic claim on the dramatic shadow projection suggests that he was thinking in terms of an essential ideological disruption, which ideally would reveal the baseless power claims of tyrants and demagogues the world over. Although this period of intellectual development reveals Shelley's naivety about the concrete material bases of forced subjugation, he is already certain about one point: rigid ideologies are going to have a very difficult time resisting the effects of rapid technological transformations.

With this visionary perspective, Shelley seems to presage the later views of Marshall McLuhan, who asserts:

The aspiration of our time for...empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology.... The mark of our time is its revulsion against imposed patterns. We are suddenly eager to have things and people declare their beings totally. There is a deep faith to be found in this new attitude—a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being.... [T]he personal and social consequences of any medium...result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs...by any new technology. (McLuhan 151)

There is evidence that Shelley was thinking through the implications of McLuhan's "electric age," envisioning an acceleration and increasing interconnection that would profoundly disrupt existing power structures that depended on linear mechanisms of control. He would likely agree with McLuhan's assertion that "new speed and power are never compatible with existing spatial and social arrangements" (138-39), and he dedicated his life to aiding the transition towards new patterns and possibilities.

Shelley was, after all, writing at a time when commerce was connecting all corners of the globe on an unprecedented scale; the English language had recently ascended to metropolitan status; literacy and the demand for reading material had become widespread; and the costs and efficiency of print production could actually keep up with such heavy demand. Although seemingly heterogeneous, all of these transformations relate directly to Shelley's electric sensibilities surrounding very recent changes. Despite the popular view of English dominant from the 19th-century onwards, the metropolitan status of English and its literary tradition is essentially an eighteenth-century achievement. English literature was not automatically considered a "great" tradition at the start of the eighteenth century, and contemporary writers were very aware of that fact. The recent claim to metropolitan standing led English-language writers to enshrine the cultural heroes who had brought them to their present standing within the wider world of (European) culture, which led in turn to an increasingly solidified and universalized notion of a national canon.

This "progress of English" as outlined by Yadav and others is significant because of the extent to which Shelley envisaged and wrote himself into this newly-developed narrative of literary tradition. Shelley's arrival on the literary scene at this *particular* historical moment provided the rationale for a very conscious self-orientation within a trans-historical chain of

literary cause and effect, however much projected. He recognized the centralized power of English canonicity, which guaranteed that the shared cultural fabric of present and future generations would necessarily include whatever political content accompanies that cultural tradition. As in the case of the French Revolution as figured in *Laon and Cythna*, the effects of paradigm shifts and ideological transformations could not be undone.

Significantly, this influence of modern literature was only able to take place because of the new nature of the reading public in the early 19th century. H. J. Jackson begins *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* with an optimistic quote from Mary Robinson in the *Monthly Magazine* of August 1800: “Every man, nay, almost every woman, now reads, thinks, projects, and accomplishes,” with the result that “the poorest peasant is now enabled to trace the language of truth, in pages calculated to awaken, enlighten, harmonize, regulate, and refine the human understanding” (Jackson 2). Although the statement is undoubtedly an exaggeration, it does reflect the very real historical fact that “the huge increase of readership was a given, just as it was understood that most of the increase came from social groups with little formal education” (ibid). General education, fostered by the churches, had led to widespread basic literacy and a demand for print, which in turn increased profits and competition in the publishing business, and “large numbers could be found only by admitting lower-class readers” (6). It was also beginning in this period that poverty and illiteracy ceased to be insurmountable obstacles for the spread of ideas, because “if you could not read or possess reading matter, you could still listen and talk about what you had heard” (10). And as William St Clair points out, now that a range of material was available and affordable, people of all ages could finally teach themselves to read (St Clair 137). The socialization of reading matter thus increased both the demand for print and the discourse circulating about its societal effects.

It is within this frame that I would like to examine the second major event that, along with the Peterloo massacre, directly impacted Shelley's political views: Lord Eldon's legal decisions. The first significant case involving Lord Eldon took place in March of 1817 in the case *Southey v. Sherwood*. Frank Taliaferro Hoadley explains the case in detail in "The Controversy over Southey's *Wat Tyler*," and he remarks that "the eyes of London were fixed upon this strange trial" (Hoadley 84). The case involved the piracy of Robert Southey's *Wat Tyler*, and St Clair calls the ensuing trial the "most decisive single event in shaping the reading of the romantic period" (St Clair 316). By 1817, Southey was the conservative poet laureate of England, but the case had not always been so; in the 1790s, when *Wat Tyler* was originally written, he was a radical poet along with Wordsworth and others, and the views espoused in the play ran counter to his more recent, royalist tracts berating freedom of the press. It is not clear how the publishing firm of Sherwood, Neely, and Jones got hold of the manuscript, but it is clear that the decision to publish the play in 1817, in the midst of the Habeas Corpus debate and without Southey's permission, was politically motivated.

Injunctions against copyright infringement were granted during the eighteenth century as a matter of course, and booksellers made such extensive use of them that Chancery relaxed the procedural rules requiring affidavits in support of claims (Zall 437). But despite their confidence, the series of arguments presented to Chancery by Southey's lawyers unwittingly undermined their own case; in speaking of the play's "wickedness," they opened the door for the Chancellor's dismissal: "when the Chancellor withheld the injunction, the opinion read in part: 'A person cannot recover in damages for a work which is, in its nature, calculated to do injury to the public.' 'I cannot grant this injunction,' Lord Eldon concluded" (438). As described in the *Quarterly Review*, "[Lord Eldon] knew it to be said, that in cases where the work contained

criminal matter, the Court, by refusing the injunction, allowed the greater latitude for its dissemination. But his answer to that was, that this court possessed no criminal jurisdiction” (439). The difficulty lay in the uneven relationship between civil and criminal law, and Lord Eldon was a man of the book. His decision directly led to an explosion of reading material that quickly and quite publicly disseminated radical and reformist views.

Southey v. Sherwood and the cases that followed were covered extensively in the press, which spread the reputation of the texts in question across the country. Conversations on the power of literature, accepted as a fact by all parties, were increasingly on the public tongue, and “[Lord Eldon’s] presence was deeply felt in the intellectual milieu” (441). The result was that *Wat Tyler* was “unquestionably the greatest market success—and by far the most genuinely ‘popular’ work—of any written by the first-generation Lake poets” (Lapp 119).

If *Wat Tyler* had been published along the usual routes by Southey himself, it would probably have been priced at 10s 6d (10.5 shillings), which is already considerably more than the first edition issued by Sherwood, Neely, and Jones. Although Sherwood’s firm victoriously bowed out after Lord Eldon’s decision, competing pirates flooded the market to meet the growing demand with cheap editions for the masses. The notorious pirate Carlile, who would go on to issue similar piratical publications as a strategic form of class warfare, is said to have financed his expanding publishing business from the profits. He glowingly remarked that “The world does not know... what it may yet owe to Southey” (Carlile qtd in Marsh 100). St Clair reports that

the price soon fell drastically to a tenth and then a hundredth of the normal price, and the total immediate sale was believed by Southey’s son to have been about 60,000 copies, twice as many copies as even the most popular works of Walter Scott. The piece which Southey later refused to reprint among his *Collected Works* sold twice or three times as many copies as all his other works put together. And the readership spanned the whole nation. (St Clair 317)

As in the case of Peterloo, an attempt to limit expression actually promoted the proliferation of radical views in the new channels established by technology, radical piracy, and an expanding readership.

One result was that the radical class, one of the many reading constituencies that constructed the reading nation in the early nineteenth century, received an influx of literature that strengthened and solidified their group consciousness and contributed to a common vocabulary and political perspective. This is an important function, given Cronin's point that, by 1819,

English politics had assumed a new character. The central political issues were no longer debated by individuals who differed in their views but shared a common language.... Difference in language had superseded difference in policy as the critical indicator. (Cronin 198)

There is, therefore, a distinct tactical advantage to developing a common language across a large group with similar interests. Other than the shared background provided by this growing radical canon, it was geographically well-spread and incommensurate with social class, income, gender, or age. It was at this time, too, that presses were becoming affordable enough for working-class reformers to access this widespread public. The result was that "Many men who had started in other trades took up printing in order to promote their reformist politics" (St Clair 312). Radical reviews, like their conservative counterparts, wanted literature to be effective in influencing minds, but they differed in seeking to promote social and political change rather than celebrating existing values.

Despite heavy penalties and the persistence of inspectors and spies, the rhizomatic nature of this new class of radical printers meant that they were difficult to catch in significant numbers.² Even though pirates could still be tried under criminal law in cases where an injunction

² "While expensive books were sold in ones and twos through a network of respectable retail bookshops in the main towns, unrespectable books were diffused across the country through channels which nobody in authority could understand or control." (St Clair 316)

was not granted, the network of underground and radical publishers utterly overwhelmed any particular criminal proceeding, and the texts in question were not always warranted sufficiently seditious to attract direct government intervention. St Clair points out that the pirate publishers regarded themselves not as thieves but as “the advance guard of a new political consciousness among the excluded.... Why should printed books, the main medium of all civilization, be regarded by the law as manufactured goods to be bought and sold in a rigged monopoly market?” (307). The ruling classes, naturally, disagreed with the sentiment; many authorities opposed the growth of reading irrespective of textual content, which they feared would cause a resurgence of the political philosophies and egalitarian ideals surrounding the French Revolution.

The immediate result of *Southey v. Sherwood* was to unleash a torrent of radical texts into the marketplace and provide extensive advertisement in the form of media coverage, and its significance for Shelley is unmistakable. In 1821, Shelley’s *Queen Mab* came before Lord Eldon under similar circumstances, and the results were identical. By the time of his death, most of Shelley’s other books had ceased to be available, and it is undeniable that the pirated editions of *Queen Mab* renewed interest in his work for later generations.

The surviving editions of Shelley’s pirated works provide evidence that affordability and association with other radical texts spread his name across the reading nation:

The surviving copies with their underlinings, their marginal comments, and their presentation inscriptions as they were passed from friend to friend, generation to generation, confirm that they were not only read but read intensely.... We hear of Shelley’s works being read at rallies and quoted on banners. Some were turned into songs, reprinted in editions with sales totaling hundreds of thousands of copies. Some readers may not have read any other author” (321-22).

St Clair finds evidence that Shelley’s views were spreading rapidly in the 1820s as a result of pirate publishing, which ultimately provided him with a level of fame unknown during his lifetime.

There are also direct links connecting Shelley's poetry and prose to the Marxist movement and its subsequent political repercussions. In "Shelley's 'Socialism' Revisited," Horst Höhne relates Shelley's legacy to Engels and Marx, noting that the Young Friedrich Engels was impressed with the growth of a working-class literary culture in Britain and made the point that, contrary to middle-class practice, the poetry of both Shelley and Byron were being read in unexpurgated editions. In fact,

Engels became so enthusiastic about Shelley that he started translating him and even harbored ambitious plans for publishing a collected edition in German.... His translation of the line from *The Revolt of Islam*, "Can man be free if woman be a slave?", was to become a slogan of the German working-class movement". (Höhne 203)

Marx, too, gleaned many of his historical insights and social theory from his vast knowledge of world literature, particularly of Shakespeare and the English writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and he preferred Shelley to Byron. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the impact that Marx and Engels would have on subsequent political thought is immeasurable.

And the effects continued to proliferate. St Clair writes: "What part did the reading of pirated texts play in the competition for the allegiance of minds?... Many readers claimed that their eyes had been opened" (St Clair 336). He concludes that the effects of pirated literature on subsequent mentalities were striking:

Historically in many jurisdictions, at all periods, from the arrival of print to Victorian times, we see that offshore and pirate publishing has been a vital factor in offsetting both the power of states to control the circulation of ideas within their jurisdictions and the tendencies of private intellectual property regimes to restrict access to new texts to the topmost tranches of society. Indeed it may not be too large a claim to suggest that some of the biggest shifts in mentalities that have occurred in recent centuries, including the German and later European Reformation, the collapse of the *ancien régime* in France, and the slow but relentless withdrawal of belief in Christianity, were not only assisted by pirate and offshore publication, but were only made possible because the local governing structures were successfully circumvented. (442-43)

Queen Mab itself went on to become the Bible of the Chartist movement for reform, and it was the most-quoted literary work in the reformist radical press later in the century. Whereas the old canon reinforced an older rural tradition, a new urban class now had its own literature, philosophers, poets, songs, and epics. This new urban culture was no longer deferential towards hereditary authority and it insisted on the need for economic and political reform. Thus, “those who declared that Byron and Shelley would be fatal to the nation were, in their own terms, proved right” (336). St Clair ends his massive study by proclaiming: “The development of a distinctive, reformist working-class culture could not have occurred, at any rate to the same extent, if the price of access to certain texts had not been unusually low and the resulting readerships unusually wide” (433).

Objectively, it may be a coincidence that Shelley’s legacy reveals considerable parallels to his explicit intent for the purpose of his writings, but it might also give us pause to reconsider the links between poetry and politics in light of Shelley’s evident sympathies with both revolutionary and pacifist ideals. In the media frenzy surrounding the Chancery cases, the dissemination of the belief in poetry’s power *concomitantly with* the formation of a radical canon encouraged the latter’s circulation as propaganda, and thus *de facto* established a common cultural heritage for the growing radical movement. Shelley’s writings became a fundamental component of the cultural glue that encouraged cohesion of the expanding radical class, and the effects were already becoming apparent as soon as one decade after his premature death.

Although Shelley was publicly opposed to the pirating of *Queen Mab*, it is impossible that he was not aware of the consequences of Lord Eldon’s legal decisions. *Southey v. Sherwood*, after all, was decided in the *same month* that Lord Eldon ruled to remove Shelley’s custody of his children. Shelley forever after blamed the decision on his authorship of *Queen Mab*, which had

been introduced into the case by plaintiff to demonstrate Shelley's reprehensible morality. From March 1817 onwards, Lord Eldon was the embodiment of evil, and Shelley wrote a vitriolic curse in sixteen stanzas and a few bitter lines in the *Mask of Anarchy* to commemorate the occasion. It is incredibly unlikely that Shelley could have missed the public controversy or the thousands of copies of *Wat Tyler* that were flooding the marketplace consequently, especially as he set to work on the controversial *Laon and Cythna* in the following months. There is every indication that Shelley would have relished such a wide audience, and that the radical ideas saturating his poem were intended to provoke opposition. It is also likely that conservative reviews avoided the poem so as not to create a spectacle and attract unwanted attention, as a review in the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* of January 1819 makes clear.

Two months later, however, *Queen Mab* found its way to the popular press through very mysterious circumstances. There are many different and conflicting accounts, and it is notable that both *Shelley: The Pursuit* and *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley* present incorrect versions. In the latter, editors Reiman and Fraistat explain that in 1815, long before any version of *Queen Mab* was officially published, a glowing review and substantial portions of the poem appeared in installments in the *Theological Inquirer*, and there is evidence suggesting that Shelley himself collaborated with the ultraradical George Cannon ("Erasmus Perkins") and Robert Charles Fair on the selections. This much is correct; but they proceed to claim that "The first installment of the *TI* review itself was substantially reprinted by Benbow in his *John Bull's British Journal* for 11 March 1821, in response to the Clark piracy, perhaps to prepare the ground for Benbow's own piracy" (Reiman and Fraistat 508). This version of events is impossible, because the strange truth is that the review of *Queen Mab* appeared in *John Bull's* working-class

journal *two months before* Clark's original publication, which was purportedly directed to the literary elite.

William St Clair was one of the first to think through the contradictory storylines in an appendix to *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, where he asks "Why should William Clark, as his first publishing venture, choose an extremely dangerous title and print a large and expensive edition? And how could he have found the capital?" (*Godwins* 514). St Clair's answer, and the only answer permissible by the evidence, is that Clark was not working alone. Although the traditional narrative proceeds from Clark's arrest to a second, copied "New York" edition actually put out by Benbow in London, St Clair points out that "neither piracy was taken wholly from the other. Both have features which could have come only from Shelley's original" (514-15). He also writes that "there are tantalizing references to the possible involvement of Godwin" (515). And although many of the pirate publishers were competing on the surface, St Clair and Behrendt demonstrate the fundamental cohesiveness of the radical press, linking together the saga's major players: George Cannon, Richard Carlile, Thomas Davison, William Clark, Robert Charles Fair, Edward James Blandford, and Allen Davenport (Behrendt 149). The pirating of *Queen Mab* was well-planned and carefully orchestrated.

While there is no conclusive evidence of Shelley's involvement with the spectacle, a number of further details warrant attention. St Clair suggests that "Although public denials were regularly used as camouflage, his denial shows all the signs of being genuine. However the piracy did not come entirely out of the blue as Shelley implied" (515). After Shelley's death, Carlile claimed that he had spoken with Shelley about bringing out a new edition of *Queen Mab* in 1819, but the latter had refused, casting some doubt on the sincerity of Shelley's responses. St Clair continues, "although there is no surviving record on the Shelley side of such an

approach...there is no reason to disbelieve [Carlile]" (516). Carlile and Shelley have a history of friendly relations, demonstrated most clearly in Shelley's letter to the *Examiner* in defense of Carlile's earlier imprisonment. Bieri describes the letter, which was never published in Shelley's lifetime, as "a radical defense of freedom of the press and a spirited attack on England's pernicious blasphemy laws" (Bieri 168). Continuing in an alliance with Carlile, "[Shelley] declares that he too is a blasphemer willing to go to jail—his only written pronouncement to that effect—albeit from the safety of Italy" (ibid).

Another pertinent detail is that, after establishing that Carlile's publication of Shelley's *Declaration of Rights* in 1819 is identical with the original aside from one substitution, Harry Buxton Forman remarks: "We shall perhaps never know whether Shelley furnished Carlile with the copy of the broadside from which the reprint was made; but it is not impossible,—scarcely improbable" (Forman 399). And finally, there is evidence that Carlile was in possession of 180 copies of Shelley's original edition of *Queen Mab* in 1822, which would be difficult to explain without Shelley's knowledge or involvement (36).

Regardless of the "true" histories of Shelley's pirated publications, one thing is certain: Shelley had to have knowledge about the twin pop culture events marked by Peterloo and Lord Eldon's court decisions, instances where the government's attempts to control expression had the opposite effect due to the consequences of press coverage and political activism. Shelley knew about the legal and technical mechanisms surrounding the dissemination of radical texts, which is how his own works would later reach a wide audience, and the examples provided by Peterloo and the pirate trade can be used to understand Shelley's revolutionary views in a way that reconciles action with nonviolence: it is only through nonviolence that reformist ideas were actively and virally circulated. From this perspective, Shelley's violent rhetoric can be

understood as a necessary component of his view of nonviolent reform, since the mechanisms of dissemination would never have been triggered were it not for public outrage and fierce determination. Thus:

Shelley's view of reform was not merely a resigned acceptance of prolonged suffering. For Shelley, rather, *the nature of modernity suggests that the powers of the intellect and imagination are uniquely situated to have a profound effect on human minds....* 'If [*A Philosophic View of Reform*] dampens the ardor of reformers by advancing a moderate program, it instills hope and enthusiasm by arguing that *the spirit of the times favors reform and progress.*' (Woodring 308, emphasis added)

If it is not completely coincidental that Shelley's political goals were largely realized, perhaps there is something that we can still learn from his example. The world is even more hyperconnected today thanks in part to the internet and international capitalist imperialism, which means that a radical class has even more opportunity to unite against the forces of tyranny. Projecting an idealized utopia into the distant future, in this context, is counterproductive. Just because reform has yet to be realized in the two centuries since Shelley's death does not mean that his project was a failure. As Walter Benjamin expressed in his "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," "every second of time [is] the straight gate through which the Messiah might come" (Benjamin 266). The war wages on.

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