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0521007577 - The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830 - Edited by Thomas

Keymer and Jon Mee

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### **The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740–1830**

This volume offers an introduction to British literature that challenges the traditional divide between eighteenth-century and Romantic studies. Contributors explore the development of literary genres and modes through a period of rapid change. They show how literature was shaped by historical factors including the development of the book trade, the rise of literary criticism, and the expansion of commercial society and empire. The first part of the volume focuses on broad themes including taste and aesthetics, national identity and empire, and key cultural trends such as sensibility and the gothic. The second part pays close attention to the work of individual writers including Sterne, Blake, Barbauld, and Austen, and to the role of literary schools such as the 'Lake' and 'Cockney' schools. The wide scope of the collection, juxtaposing canonical authors with those now gaining new attention from scholars, makes it essential reading for all students of eighteenth-century literature and Romanticism.

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THE CAMBRIDGE  
COMPANION TO  
ENGLISH LITERATURE  
1740-1830

EDITED BY  
THOMAS KEYMER  
*University of Oxford*  
and  
JON MEE  
*University of Oxford*



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## PREFACE

*The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* introduces a period of rapid change and great achievement – a period in which literature was self-consciously offered as a token of Britain’s ascendancy as an enlightened nation, yet looked to as a place in which human values under threat from modernity or ‘progress’ could still be discovered and nourished. This phase of literary production is still often defined as the ‘Romantic’ period, though later inaugural dates have conventionally been used (with reference to political events such as the outbreak of revolution in America or France, or to early publications by Wordsworth and others). Among the advantages of the less restricted time-frame explored in this Companion is that it enables an understanding of longer processes now increasingly seen as central to the formation of Romantic culture; acknowledges the survival into the early nineteenth century of characteristically eighteenth-century modes and discourses; and avoids marginalization of the many ‘Romantic period’ writers who for one reason or another resist explanation in terms of the idioms or ideology of ‘high’ Romanticism. This broader chronological focus, with corresponding attention to the continuities and developments of eighteenth-century literary culture into the nineteenth, distinguishes our volume from Stuart Curran’s *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, the intention being to complement and augment the emphases of this earlier Companion. While Curran’s volume was far from being defined by a rigid adherence to the canonical texts of Romanticism, its concerns were necessarily focused on a narrower range of writing, and the bulk of its attention was given to aspects of British culture more easily assimilated to the (still much contested) *-ism* than to the more obvious diversity of the century from which this *-ism* emerged.

The extended period needs little justification in the case of the novel. The *Pamela* controversy of the early 1740s continues to be seen as the defining moment of innovation and elevation in the novel genre, and the achievements of later writers such as Burney and Austen involve a conscious

## PREFACE

development and fusion of techniques inherited from Richardson, Fielding and (as is increasingly being recognized) mid-century women novelists such as Sarah Fielding. Even the psychosexual recesses probed by Gothic novelists in the 1790s have origins in Richardson's explorations, while the socio-political sweep of Scott's fiction extends territory previously broken by Fielding and Smollett. Scholars of poetry have been more used to thinking in terms of a distinctive Romantic period beginning around 1790, but revisionist studies have rightly challenged this periodization with reference to the poetic innovations that followed the deaths of Pope and Swift in the 1740s, as well as to influential aesthetic treatises of the 1750s by Edmund Burke and Edward Young. A mid-century tradition of poetic enthusiasm emerged strongly in the verse of Collins, Gray, Smart and others, for which the term 'early Romantic' is now commonly used (alongside the older 'pre-Romantic', a category reanimated and refined in Marshall Brown's study of 1991, *Pre-romanticism*). By taking the extended period as its range, this Companion helps to plot the relationship between these mid-eighteenth-century forbears and the major canonical Romantics, while also registering the interaction between both categories of poet and broader cultural movements such as the pervasive sensibility vogue.

In drama, the period is often considered a desert, especially where the antitheatrical prejudices of influential Romantic writers continue to hold sway. Yet the theatre remained a key cultural institution throughout these years, and old assumptions that the Stage Licensing Act simply froze creativity for decades have given way to serious investigation of the new directions forced on managers and dramatists by the legislation of 1737. As a whole, the period witnessed the talents of playwrights such as Goldsmith and Sheridan, theatre critics of the calibre of Lamb and Hazlitt, and the emergence of star actors such as Garrick and Siddons. Just as the 1740s saw radical change in poetry and fiction, so drama was enduringly conditioned (not least in its strategies for accommodating and circumventing censorship) by a new generation of actor-dramatists who cut their teeth in the early post-licensing years. In all three genres, of course, important lines of continuity also cross the chronological bounds of this Companion, in ways registered by several contributors. All are valuably illuminated by the longer view, however, and by consideration of their development across an extended period in which rapid change and innovation coincide with attempts to find stability and permanence amid revolutionary times.

The period also gains definition and coherence from a series of cultural, social, and political developments which, it could be argued, mark the birth of the modern British cultural landscape. It begins with Pope railing in *The Dunciad* against the impoverishment of a literary marketplace in which hack

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writers feed middle-class readers with cheap, fugitive print; it ends in the prospect of mass readerships and democratic culture with which Victorians such as Arnold were to wrestle. As a whole, the period is central to the emergence of what scholars have come to call the ‘public sphere’ (a term originating in Jürgen Habermas’s influential study of 1962, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*). Literature gained a key role in the process whereby public opinion came to be identified not with the state authority of court or ministry but with the rational debates of private individuals, as expressed in the more diffuse field of print and other mechanisms and spaces of urban culture. With the lowering of political temperatures that followed the fall of Walpole in 1742 and the conclusive defeat of the Jacobite challenge in 1745–6, the Hanoverian regime became firmly established, inaugurating a period of relatively settled institutions and structures that is traditionally seen as closing with Reform in 1832. The creation of a coherent though flexible British national identity, in which Welsh, Scottish, and Irish writers played a key role, moved to the centre of cultural production. The phenomenon of James Macpherson’s Ossian poems, for instance, represents a rewriting of Gaelic tradition for a metropolitan audience, even though the poems and surrounding commentaries also mourned the loss of a primitive heroic culture and seemed to deplore the emergence of the modern nation for which they were written. After the Seven Years War of 1756–63, from which vast territorial gains accrued, Britain’s status and identity as an imperial power were also being cemented. What was less certain – as Linda Colley has suggested in *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1992) – was how writers and readers understood their own identities in relation to this emerging power. Empire becomes a given in writing of this period, either by directly providing the material for forays into the exotic or the primitive, or, in more displaced ways, by procuring the transformations of fortune on which domestic narratives depended (as in the recently controversial case of *Mansfield Park*). For all the growing familiarity of the exotic, however, imperial expansion and its consequences still involved widespread anxiety, and even – as in the case of the broad-based abolitionist movement of the period – extensive outright opposition.

Internally, political opposition ceased to be driven by the predominantly Tory satire of the Walpole era, though Johnson and Austen are among the later writers in whom Pope’s critique of Whig political and socio-economic corruption continues to echo. Opposition developed around issues of parliamentary reform, from the Wilkesite agitations of the 1760s to the popular radical movement of the 1790s and beyond, in ways that begin to look familiar to readers in a democratic society. In this context, the identity of ‘the public’ for literature, as for society more generally, became a contested

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matter. The wealth being generated from industry, trade and empire was fuelling, among much else, a rapid expansion of the publishing industry, and a middle-class reading audience was coming into its own. This growing audience sustained the development of the novel, fed elite fears about taste and its relationship to the marketplace, and encouraged (with the mid-century establishment of the *Monthly* and *Critical* reviews) an associated proliferation of periodicals that served to mediate and police literary culture to an expanded readership. After the French Revolution, the situation was complicated further by the spectre of a plebeian reading public, much to the alarm of figures such as Coleridge, and by fears that literature would become the servant of ignorance. Yet this explosion of print culture, and the powerful cultural paradigm of the republic of letters, also encouraged writers from below such as Blake and Clare to lay claim to a public voice on the basis of talent or inspiration alone. The culture of sensibility that gained sway from the mid eighteenth century likewise encouraged writers and readers, especially women, to believe that it was sufficient to feel to experience literature, even as it worked to protect cultural value by insisting that authentic feeling was far from ubiquitous. Those who contributed to the period's remarkable efflorescence of literary production were often divided within themselves as to whether they were participating in a cultural renaissance or witnessing, on the other hand, a fatal erosion of fundamental values.

Many writers reacted with alarm, in particular, at the emergence of modern urban and industrial culture. The development of a historical imagination from the Gothic novel through to Scott went hand in hand with primitivist nostalgia for a pre-commercial past, most closely associated with the name of Rousseau, and with an anti-urban poetry of retirement into nature that culminates with Wordsworth and Coleridge but finds significant expression from the start of the period. This reflex could serve as a radical critique of modern commercial society, but also sustained conservative longings for more feudal and organic social hierarchies of the kind famously articulated in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In poets as dissimilar as Keats and Clare towards the close of the period, nostalgic evocations of harmonious rural community accompany more or less explicit protest at the dislocations and losses entailed by agricultural and industrial 'improvement'.

The aim of this Companion is to provide a clear and accessible introduction to these complex cultural trends, and to the literature that sprang from, responded to, and in turn conditioned their emergence. The first part is concerned with matters of literary genre and cultural context as they unfolded across the period; the second is more directly focused on individual writers, but in ways that reflect the often collaborative or interactive nature of literary production at the time, whether in terms of circles of mutual

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PREFACE

influence or lines of putative tradition. The writers covered here include both the major canonical figures and others, especially women, who have recently gained fresh attention from scholars and critics. For the editors, the sense of richness and diversity in the period that has been such an important part of recent scholarship has been reaffirmed by collecting these essays, which in themselves display a rich diversity of approaches and stances. We hope that readers will also experience the volume as an opening out of one of the great periods of literary culture in Britain.

THOMAS KEYMER AND JON MEE