The Cambridge Introduction to
British Romantic Poetry

The best way to learn about Romantic poetry is to plunge in and read a few Romantic poems. This book guides the new reader through this experience, focusing on canonical authors – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Blake, and Shelley – and including less familiar figures as well. Each chapter explains the history and development of a genre or sets out an important context for the poetry, with a wealth of practical examples. Michael Ferber emphasizes connections between poets as they responded to each other and to the great literary, social, and historical changes around them. A unique appendix resolves most difficulties new readers of works from this period might face: unfamiliar words, unusual word order, the subjunctive mood, and meter. This enjoyable and stimulating book is an ideal introduction to some of the most powerful and pleasing poems in the English language, written in one of the greatest periods in English poetry.

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The Cambridge Introduction to British Romantic Poetry

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Preface

The texts of poems which I quote in their entirety are taken from facsimiles or older editions no longer in copyright, or from Literature Online, which also uses texts in the public domain. I have usually checked them against more recent editions and found only slight variations in spelling or punctuation. I have sometimes modified the source text in ways that agree with recent editorial practice, for example, changing “oh” to “O” several times in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (“oh” seems more appropriate to an exclamation, “O” to a direct address, though they are arguably both at once). Occasionally I discuss variations in punctuation where they might bear on how we interpret a passage, for example, the final two lines of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” but by and large the variations seem of small importance in an introduction to the poems.

In the Further Reading section I recommend good (and affordable) recent editions of each poet. A few of these are the scholarly standard, but in some cases, such as Coleridge, the most exactly edited editions are too cumbersome (and expensive) for most readers. That is not to deny that the different editorial philosophies invoked by different editors make for interesting debates: Use the earliest version of a poem or the latest, or something in between? Correct the final printed version with probably intended emendations in a notebook, or let it stand? Modernize punctuation and spelling or keep it in the original form? Indent lines to reflect the rhyme scheme or not? Readers of this book needn’t worry about these issues, but if they find something ambiguous or puzzling in any of the texts, they might find something intriguing about it if they look it up in the modern scholarly editions.
Acknowledgments

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