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Edited by Timothy Morton
Excerpt
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Introduction

Contesting Shelley

‘Shelley, the genius, the prophet, Shelley, and Byron, with his glowing sensuality and his bitter satire upon our existing society, find most of their readers in the proletariat; the bourgeoisie owns only castrated editions, family editions, expurgated in accordance with the hypocritical morality of today.’¹ Thus Friedrich Engels intones towards the end of his relentless excoriation of the condition of the working class in England, the double incantation of the writer’s name charging the sentence with energy. Shelley continues to polarize people along class lines. I well remember, having been invited to present a BBC radio programme on Shelley’s poetry in the early 1990s, being summarily informed after having assembled my list and my introduction that most of the poems I had chosen were not actually by him. My selections were from *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and some of the radical lyrics of 1819. It was the latter that were in dispute, ensuring that I did not get to do the show at all. To the blushing eyes of some liberal humanist editors, the representations of starving mothers asking for a bit of food must have been fakes. The idea that he could not have written such things persists two centuries after Shelley himself sent off his ballads and songs for publication, moved by the massacre of a huge crowd of protesters at St Peter’s Fields in Manchester by those staunch relics of English hierarchy, the yeomanry cavalry.

Engels wrote his words four years before the adjective ‘Shelleyan’ came into circulation, though ‘Shelleyite’, perhaps denoting a stronger affiliation, appeared in the very year of Shelley’s death, 1822.² The connotation of aesthetic effete-ness inspired the name of the modern pop band, Shelleyan Orphan, but Engels had something more urgent in mind. Some circles have still not forgiven Percy Shelley for having been a class traitor. Shelley grew up in the ranks of the gentry (his grandfather had become a baronet during his childhood), but most of his life was spent in radical departures from

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upper-class norms. A glance at a Jane Austen novel will provide brilliantly convincing evidence of the painful world of the gentry from 1792 to 1822, between Shelley's birth and death. In order to retain one's status as a 'gentleman' or 'lady', one could not work for a living; one had to marry or inherit money. Like an English Marcel Proust, Austen systematically lacerates the upper class with 'remorseless gentleness', in the words of Theodor Adorno on Proust.³

Shelley rebelled in a more direct fashion. Like most rebels he became the family scapegoat, going into self-imposed exile in Italy, acting out foolhardily, and drowning at the age of thirty. Some of his surviving family members did their best either to ignore him or to turn him into a saint – to kick him upstairs to the great aristocracy in the sky, where he would be no more trouble. Almost two centuries later, I recall that doing a DPhil. on him at Oxford elicited funny comments. At University College, Weekes's Shelley Memorial draws a stone pall of Victorian cultural sainthood over his more colourful exploits. Whatever Shelley had to communicate, it is evidently still contagious.

Shelley was going to be a Member of Parliament, but the publication of his pamphlet on atheism sealed his fate as a figure on the margins of political legislation. Perhaps this is why in the *Defence of Poetry* he insists that poets are the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' (*Pr* 297). Parliament's loss was culture's gain. Shelley was interested in all aspects of literary culture. He was not simply content to write and publish works: they had to be disseminated properly too. *The Necessity of Atheism*, written with Thomas Jefferson Hogg while Shelley was at Oxford, was scattered prominently at the front of Slatter and Munday's bookshop in the High Street (*RH* 50). A passing pastor noticed it and Shelley was swiftly expelled. Such acts of bravado in disseminating his work were not uncommon. Shelley penned a sonnet 'To a Balloon, Laden with *Knowledge*' and floated actual balloons, filled with actual knowledge in the form of radical pamphlets, across the Irish Sea. In Dublin he was said to slip such pamphlets into the cloak hoods of passing ladies (*RH* 119–20). He floated radical works down the Bristol Channel in bottles, an activity for which he attracted the interest of the secret service. He wrote poems about what we might call broadcasting, such as 'Ode to the West Wind', in which he prays that his words be 'scattered' across the earth like 'Ashes and sparks', or autumn leaves (63–7). Shelley would have loved the internet. He enjoyed playing with assumed personalities, signing a guest book in a Swiss inn as 'democrat, great lover of mankind, and atheist' (in Greek; *W* 1.457). At Oxford, he had eagerly performed chemistry experiments (*W* 1.79–80), and one imagines that he would have used computers both to disseminate knowledge and to hack into and undermine government systems.

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Shelley lived in a time of terror. America and France had revolted. The British establishment had denounced the French revolutionaries as ‘Terrorists’ (the first usage of the word), and an oppressive counter-revolution was in full swing. In England, double agents infiltrated radical organizations and tried to undermine them from within. Shelley was a brave man whose bravery could teeter over the edge of recklessness. He had stood up to the despotic practices of ‘fagging’ at Eton (using younger boys as the servants of older ones, in a climate of punishment and physical abuse). Shelley did not change his habits much in adulthood. His life of escape and exile enabled him to observe at close range the different classes at work and play in England, Ireland, Wales, France, Switzerland, and Italy. Perhaps this is why he has been both so vilified and so beatified. He was a class traitor with attitude, blessed with privilege and armed with the philosophy of the radical Enlightenment, a radical cosmopolitan parody of the social butterfly.

Not surprisingly, Shelley’s family almost disowned him. Moreover, he himself struggled with his resistance to being upper class, his transformation into something of a proto-socialist. At his most progressive, Shelley could be pro-feminist, proto-ecological, anti-slavery, anti-capitalist, antihomophobic, and against cruelty to animals, eating meat, and drinking alcohol. So keen was he in one sense to do no harm to sentient beings that he became a vegetarian. His interpersonal relationships, however, especially with women, were a disaster. He encouraged many women to believe that they could transcend their patriarchal conditions, throw off their chains, and become more independent. But he did so with the charismatic compulsion of a master seducer who, from an early 21st-century vantage point, resembles those hippies in the 1960s who confused sexual liberation with women’s liberation. Shelley was capable of relapsing into the unfortunate condition of social privilege, pouring scorn on those beneath him in Wales, condemning the radical underground’s pirating of *Queen Mab*, a poem that of all poems by members of the gentry looks as if it had been written with the underground explicitly in mind.

As an individual, Shelley may seem either a seraphic extraterrestrial or a militant proto-socialist crusader, unless one understands how he engaged with a variety of cultural communities. Research into Shelley’s politics struggles through many arguments, including vegetarianism, quasi-feminism, anti-slavery, labour theories of value, psychology, philosophical anarchism, technological futurism, gradualist reformism, and triumphalism. But Shelley’s analysis and critique of early capitalism also involved the establishment of *places from which* arguments could be launched, both figuratively (recurring poetic topoi) and materially (participation in subcultures).

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Shelley's negotiations with several overlapping public 'circles' were complicated. The family and the domestic sphere were held in uneasy abeyance, though problematically reincorporated in Shelley's relationships with Harriet Westbrook, and later Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and Claire Clairmont. The family was a touchstone of his poetic vision of social harmony. Shelley's reading with his tutors at Field Place and Eton was somewhat radical, with open access to the work of materialist philosophers. Shelley sidestepped his father's ambitions for a Parliamentary career through the publication of *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), and was expelled from Oxford. Professed Deism was then a code for radical political sympathies; atheism was a serious offence. Shelley's break with his father was a crucial moment in terms of both family and literary work, and also of money, for which he struggled for much of his life. He often portrayed social tyrannies in terms of hateful father figures such as Jupiter and the incestuous Count Cenci, and used God's fatherhood as an analogue for earthly despotism in *Queen Mab*. Shelley was infamous for his views on the evils of marriage and the desirability of free love, and it is debated whether he practised the latter with Mary and Thomas Jefferson Hogg in 1815. *Laon and Cythna* depicts a love affair between a brother and sister who wage a war against a despotic government. The poem was retitled *The Revolt of Islam* when the incest of the protagonists became a scandal. Shelley was forcibly deprived of his children by Harriet after his elopement with Mary, and subsequently Harriet committed suicide, which may have been a factor in his leaving England for Italy.

Shelley's complex relationship with the first generation of poets who had responded to the French and American revolutions reconfigured the modes of radical behaviour and authorship which they established. Between 1811 and 1813 he corresponded vigorously with Godwin and Elizabeth Hitchener, trying to draw the latter into a circle with Harriet in Wales, where he also participated in what would now be called an experiment in social ecology. The intimidation tactics of the local squirearchy forced him from the land reclamation project in the new town of Tremadoc. He became involved in the growing insurgent tradition in Ireland (1812), distributing pamphlets in Dublin before a shocked Godwin dissuaded him.

Shelley participated in the radical community of Harriet Boinville at Bracknell in Windsor, which included the physicians William Lawrence (also a writer on evolution) and William Lambe, and experimented with vegetarianism. *Queen Mab* was published in 1813. Originally intended for ruling-class shelves and disguised as a philosophical fairy-story, it was a vision of past, present, and future society and an incitement to radical change. Detailed notes accessed scientific, philosophical, and political information from his extensive preparatory reading. *Queen Mab* was quickly pirated by

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the radical underground (Carlile, Clarke, Benbow, Canon, and others), in pocket-sized editions (easily hidden and transported). Shelley later objected to them, treating the self-taught publisher and *philosophe* Canon with considerable disrespect. *Queen Mab* was disseminated in Chartist discourse, and became significant for other writers from Marx to Shaw.

Shelley's ambiguous liaison with cultural groups is nowhere better exemplified. *Queen Mab* was the lasting influence on his later work, which ceaselessly unpacked and reformulated its figures, from the parallel prose/poetry project of 1814–16 (including *Alastor* and new work on diet, religion, and politics) to *The Triumph of Life* (1822). Despite his declared dislike of didacticism, the poem is remarkably and influentially didactic. On the other hand, Shelley shunned the countercultural spheres that would have enabled him to have 'somewhere to stand' from which to 'move the earth' (Archimedes' epigraph to *Queen Mab*). This distance often involved the adoption of satirical poetic and prose forms, despite the impression, again somewhat fostered by Shelley himself, that he was above such things.

Shelley ambivalently straddled crowd agitation politics and mass management strategies. *The Mask of Anarchy's* (1819) famous appeal to the sleeping lions is an example of the former. The latter appears in Shelley's interest in efficient, 'globalizing' social plans. The 'Ode to Liberty' (1820), which presents an emancipatory theory of historical process in an allegory of its birth and growth in Greece, Rome, and revolutionary France, also discusses the relationship between sustainable ecologies and economic demand. Shelley's speculations on agricultural reform with his acquaintance G. W. Tighe employed the agricultural chemistry of Humphrey Davy to model a 'top down' approach. Shelley never separated poetry and politics, and the notes that he took during his acquaintance with Tighe were written in the same book in which he drafted 'Ode to the West Wind'. Shelley negotiated similarly ambivalent positions with regard to British imperialism and nationalism, torn in his poetry between Hellenizing and orientalizing discourses.

The cultivation of individual modes of 'active virtue', like the tutelage of Frankenstein's creature, continued to be a precarious affair. The ecstatic, Dionysian collective politics of *Prometheus Unbound* (1818–19) is predicated on the individual liberation of the ruling-class reformer, though there is a lack of critical consensus on the drama's purpose, and the role of the mysterious character Demogorgon. But in the unusually grotesque satire *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820), prosopopeia (putting words into the mouths of animals) and the use of the crowd as a protagonist generate a more populist appeal, in a play that alludes to the politics of the Queen Caroline affair, the rioting and satire that arose as a result of George IV's campaign against his wife to prevent her, commonly thought of as a 'people's Queen', from being crowned.

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Shelley sought to establish a radical base in Italy, attempting to set up the journal *The Liberal* at Pisa. He became interested in the cultural history of Italy, intrigued by Renaissance Rome and reading the radical historian Sismondi for records of medieval republics, while expressing enthusiasm for the insurrection in Naples in 1820. Also in 1820 he met Prince Alexander Mavrocordato, the leader of the Greek patriots in Europe. Smitten by news of the Peterloo massacre (1819), he wrote a volume of popular songs and political prose which the essayist and publisher Leigh Hunt refused to publish, on the conservative grounds that its audience was not ready for it. Throughout his later years, Shelley collaborated significantly with Mary Godwin (the novelist), Byron the poet, and Peacock the novelist, maintaining strong relationships with figures as diverse as the poet Keats, Leigh Hunt, Godwin, Mary's philosophical anarchist father, and his friends Hogg, Medwin, and Trelawny.

The politics of time and the politics of dissemination were important for Shelley. When will the social change take place (in a sudden, violent revolution or more gradually), and to whom should revolutionary figuration be addressed? These questions run not only through the more obviously political writings, but also through works like 'Ode to the West Wind' which often receive attention as apolitical lyrics. Conversely, Shelley's political didacticism reconfigures the poetry of Milton and the eighteenth century.

It would take hundreds of pages to weigh the evidence and make a pronouncement on the more excruciating moments of Shelley's life. There are mitigating factors. Shelley was very young. He was fatally attracted towards his role as family scapegoat. His father could be extraordinarily hostile. And after all, he was in fact a member of the gentry, and any transition he could have made towards another way of being would have been painful. Such forensic rhetoric, however, would only reinforce the Romantic cult of the lone bardic genius, making it difficult to see the wider social implications and relationships within and around his writing. Moreover, the fact that Shelley was highly prepared to play to the interests of this cult only serves to redouble the problem. His biographers were by turns hagiographers and demonizers, another complicating factor that prevents us from assessing his life properly. In this volume, Theresa Kelley makes it clear that biographies are necessarily partial and that any decent attempt at one should squarely face this issue.

A brief history of Shelley scholarship

All of this brings us to the vexed and varied state of Shelley scholarship. A career so brief, so incendiary, was bound to attract both those who wished

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to fan the flames, and those who desired to dampen them. Mary Shelley was the first Shelley scholar. Her collaboration with Shelley is itself a remarkable and powerful contribution to Romantic poetry. It is, for example, hard to distinguish between the production of *Alastor* and that of *Frankenstein*: the themes and styles involved are so similar. Indeed, Percy collaborated with Mary on the latter. Mary's prefaces to the earliest editions of her late husband's work are remarkable for their tactful negotiation between politics and poetics. Mary felt that audiences required persuasion that Percy's material was not too inflammatory. On the other hand, there are many points at which she sticks vigorously to the idea that Percy expressed his political ideals through his writings. After all, Mary was often the explicit addressee. Shelley scrawled 'Mary' on the top of one of the pages of his 'Essay on the Vegetable System of Diet' in 1814, perhaps as a marker, a request to do a spot of copy-editing.

Against his will, the Victorian establishment turned Shelley back into an effete upper-class poet. Matthew Arnold damned him with faint praise: to be 'beautiful' and 'ineffectual' at once is a tough spot for an activist (*Arnold* 1.237). Not that Shelley had lacked a share of prosodic inheritors. Elizabeth Barrett, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Algernon Charles Swinburne certainly learnt a few Shelleyan licks. Wordsworth praised Shelley for having one of the finest ears of his generation, which is as true a comment and as carefully delimited as claiming that Martin Luther King had a beautiful speaking voice. On the whole, middle- and upper-class nineteenth-century poets seemed unwilling to go the whole hog and start writing about mad monarchs, starving mothers, and the new aristocracy of commerce. A notable exception here must be made for William Michael Rossetti, whose edition of Shelley casts a net wider than the one Mary Shelley had dared to cast, and whose editorial principles updated Shelley rather than turning him into a relic of Romanticism.

Meanwhile, the first slew of biographies had emerged: by Thomas Medwin, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, and later Harry Buxton Forman and Newman Ivey White. They succeeded in mythologizing Shelley, who became too Romantic to be taken seriously. It became possible to write him off as a man 'wandering around Italy in a big shirt trying to get laid', in the words of a BBC comedy that picked up on the early cult of Shelley.⁴ Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, the major anthology of the age, canonized and deodorized Shelley's poetry, offering specimens of 'verse' seemingly unlied by political interests. Thus began the entirely false division between Shelley the poet, who didn't care about politics, and Shelley the activist, who couldn't write a good line of verse if his life depended on it.

The radical working class claimed him as one of their own. Karl Marx was famous for declaring that had he lived longer, Shelley would have

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become a socialist, while Byron would have remained a mere stirrer of bourgeois sentiments.⁵ The Chartists circulated copies of Shelley's political poems. Shelley's work, specifically *The Mask of Anarchy*, influenced Gandhi directly and Martin Luther King via Gandhi, in their promotion of nonviolent resistance. (See the chapter on Shelley's receptions.)

Along with this litany of radical appropriation, it is worth remarking, for the record, that what was considered radical poetry was not necessarily 'unpoetic' – whatever that means – or preoccupied with mundane things (mundane, that is, to the bourgeoisie) like grimy workplaces and poor diet. Radical working-class literature during Shelley's time was often coruscatingly psychedelic. The imagery of republicanism and democracy tended to defy gravity. It showed the extent of oppression in the negative, making it clear that a truly democratic society would regard contemporary England somewhat as would an extraterrestrial viewing the earth from the safety of outer space. It is a shame that current scholarship has so bought into the reactionary idea that the aesthetic is intrinsically a conservative thing, squishy, palpable, and endowed with dissent-silencing authority. Shelley wanted the aesthetic to make us think, not to put a stop to thinking.

The modernists were less happy with Shelley; though again, in this period, there is a striking difference between reactionary high modernist readings and the use of him by the radical avant garde, notably Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benajmin. Distinguishing himself even from Arnold on this score, F. R. Leavis had no time for him whatsoever. In Japan on the other hand, Shelley galvanized a generation of Romanticists.⁶ In Italy Giosuè Carducci reappraised Shelley's revolutionary mix of idealism and classicism. Gabriele D'Annunzio, along with other Decadent poets, saw his work as an extending of nature beyond its normal bounds. André Maurois's *Ariel* (1923) painted Shelley as a bright young thing in an imaginative novelistic reconstruction (to say the least) of the poet's life. A major edition of Shelley had at last appeared, the ten-volume work by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck which, in the absence of a complete new edition, is still, perhaps surprisingly, a reference work.

Shelley gradually drifted across the Atlantic, like one of his balloons, where his reception has been generally happier. His emergence in 1940s and 1950s America was fresh, lacking the explicit reference points of English politics and class. The American Shelley was from the start a Rip Van Winkle who had skipped a few generations of readers. He made quite a splash in the New Criticism thanks to Harold Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959). Shelley's prose became available in 1954 in the handy edition of David Lee Clark. American scholarship, more alive to the democratic expansiveness of a Whitman, was less likely than the British variety to

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accuse him of not being an Imagist. Thus it was that after a progress through New Criticism Shelley made some headway in phenomenological readings such as Earl Wasserman's (see Further Reading).

And so to Derrida. Shelley's American moment finally arrived in deconstruction, though that literary critical and philosophical mode was quite deaf to his political resonance – and especially to the ways in which his proto-deconstructive qualities often intertwined with his political interests. Harold Bloom edited a collection of essays on deconstruction whose sole exemplum was the poetry of Shelley; the collection included an essay by Derrida himself.⁷ Paul De Man's essay 'Shelley Disfigured', which also appears in this volume, remains a classic of its genre and a major citation source for many critics still teasing out the finer nuances of his exacting reading of the way in which *The Triumph of Life* shoots itself in the epistemological foot, deconstructing itself before the reader has a chance to do it.

We must regret that poetics itself was not a firmer part of this project, despite the brilliant attention to single images, such as De Man's reading of the figure of the sun in *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley challenged Wordsworth's status as a 'poet of nature', that highly political word, in such poems as 'To Wordsworth', *Peter Bell the Third*, and *Alastor*. In particular, says Shelley, Wordsworth had failed in his presentation of intimate contact with other (sentient) beings. His work was not erotic enough. Communion with nature, as Shelley points out in 'On Love', is a function of our desire to reach out and touch something or someone, the nerve-tremblingly acute way in which our sensibility meets our conscious mind. It is thus not surprising that Shelley developed a whole range of figurative language that would somehow out-Wordsworth Wordsworth himself. Deconstructive readings have sometimes suffered from a tin ear for the ugly side of this sensibility, Shelley's intense awareness of blood and gore, his vegetarian's fantasies of raw flesh, and his meat and potatoes poetics of poverty and class struggle. Other scholars have begun to pay attention to the strangely self-referential way in which Shelley will talk of how 'the moving pomp might seem / Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream' (*Adonais*, 116–17). A pomp *is* a pageantry, so this image, an 'autophor' perhaps rather than a metaphor, is rather like a fractal, a repeating pattern that keeps ever so slightly exceeding its initial shape to produce a dazzling, jagged, zigzagging line. Other lines display Shelley describing the dream as being like an image of a dream of an idea of a dream of an image, in a dizzying spiral of hyperreal language, in which we begin not to be able to tell which level is the ground. There is Shelley the skilful poet of what classical rhetoric calls *obscurum per obscures*, an inverted metaphor that

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describes something concrete in terms of something abstract: the lightning bolt was like an idea. Consider the extraordinary lines about dew falling like ‘silver music on the mossy lawn’ in *The Triumph of Life* (355). Poetic dew is often silvery. But ‘silver music’ astonishingly displaces the colour into a hyperreal and synaesthetic realm.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the promise of the late G. M. Matthews’s edition of Shelley. Kelvin Everest eventually assumed its mantle, and his edition (*P*) is due to be completed soon. At present, E. B. Murray is updating the prose for the Clarendon Press. A very valuable edition of Shelley’s poetry and prose edited by Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers was published by Norton in 1977. And the Johns Hopkins University Press edition (*CP*) is appearing from Neil Fraistat and Donald Reiman. *P* and *CP* are highly significant editions: never before has Shelley been offered so completely. Moreover, they abide by quite different editorial principles, which makes for an illuminating clash. In the tradition of the press’s editorial policy, the Longman edition (*P*) has been assembled according to classic textual critical principles. The ‘best’ text (judged according to various standards such as whether it was the latest possible version) is used, with modernized spelling and punctuation, and heavily annotated. The Johns Hopkins University Press edition (*CP*) has been produced in the wake of the postmodern critique of textual criticism, addressing such questions as the nature of literary authority. How can we tell what an author ‘meant’ anyway? In this edition the editors have preferred to publish the earliest ‘issue’ of a text, defining ‘issue’ quite broadly to catch the writer in the act of ‘releasing’ their work to an audience, however small.

Historicism has made us freshly aware that Shelley was deeply involved in the social and political events of his day, while providing fresh readings of his work that make us aware of how history and politics interweave with literary language in deep ways. When we consider the kind of dazzling variety that New Historical readings can produce, it is very enriching to know that Shelley was a committed vegetarian (Morton), that he participated actively in collaborations with numerous other Romantic circles (Cox), that he used the discourse of orientalism to undermine some of the emerging logics of imperialism (Leask), that he was an engaged satirist (Jones).⁸ We now have a more complex picture of Shelley than ever.

Over the past four decades, scholarly studies of Shelley have emerged and taken shape. With the help of Harold Bloom, Carl Grabo, and others, Shelley took his place in New Criticism’s approach to what they construed as the ‘big six’ (male) Romantic poets. The onset of deconstruction in the 1970s further propelled Shelley studies, as the poet’s interest in epistemology and in the properties of figurative language inspired writers such as