

Cambridge University Press
 0521846757 - Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism
 Andrew M. Stauffer
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction: fits of rage

The men who grow angry with corruption, and impatient at injustice, and through those sentiments favour the abettor of revolution, have an obvious apology to palliate their error; theirs is the excess of a virtuous feeling. At the same time, however amiable may be the source of their error, the error itself is probably fraught with consequences pernicious to mankind.

– Godwin, “On Revolutions,”
Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, 1793

And the just man rages in the wilds
 Where lions roam.

– Blake, “The Argument,” *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1789

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, two closely related developments in Europe changed utterly the functions and forms of anger in public discourse. First, the French Revolution inspired intense debate over anger’s role in, and in creating, new forms of civil society. From its beginnings, the Revolution was centered in an assertion that the anger of the people deserved respect, and had a legitimacy of its own. Yet as they democratized anger, the Revolution and the Terror demonstrated the dangers of unbounded public rage, leaving conflict an ambiguous inheritance for English writers.¹ Second, the periodical press began a phase of rapid expansion that transformed the substance, style, and reach of the public voice. Printing technologies allowed for the dissemination of angry rhetoric across lines of class and nation, and helped establish the right of an outraged people to redress. The democratization of anger meant that learning to marshal the emotions of the populace took on new urgency, and the press was there to step into the breach. By way of anger, the newly emergent media discovered its demagogic powers; and the fight in England over the French Revolution became simultaneously a fight over the place of angry words and deeds in the modern liberal state.

This book aims to elucidate connections between these phenomena and the contours of Romantic literature in England. In that country particularly, where large-scale revolutionary violence never took place, the printing press became the field of contention upon which the political struggles of the age played themselves out; the rhetoric of anger became central. For Romantic-period writers, anger was a vexed locus of rational justice and irrational savagery, and determining its place in society and in their own work as a tool or weapon confronted them as an urgent task: how did rage fit, and what relation did fits of rage have to “fyttes” of poetry? The simultaneous importance and difficulty of writing anger make that emotion a revealing pressure point of literary history, particularly in this period when the issue of anger was so plainly and troublingly visible in Paris, Lyons, and the Vendée.

Bringing various modes of inquiry to bear on the study of anger, this book attends to the epistemology of a specific emotion in the Romantic period. We now have a growing body of interdisciplinary work on the history and theory of emotions in general (including important studies by Martha Nussbaum, Philip Fisher, William Reddy, and David Punter, among others), much of which has made the case for the value of emotions to moral and ethical judgments, particularly by examining them in relation to historical and literary contexts.² And while scholarly studies have appeared on the representation of anger and hatred in England in the Middle Ages,³ the Early Modern period,⁴ and the Victorian era,⁵ little attention has been given to Romantic anger. Indeed, critical studies of the emotions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and culture have thus far tended to emphasize grief, melancholy, and (in relation to both the gothic and the sublime) fear.⁶ Closer to my interests is John Mee’s recent work on Romantic “enthusiasm,” which shares some of the emotional and cultural dynamics of anger, particularly in relation to questions of revolution and irrationality; he writes, for example, that “enthusiasm . . . remained haunted by the fear of combustible matter within both the individual and the body politic.”⁷ In a similar fashion, I begin by assuming the value of reading the angry passions in their Romantic and revolutionary contexts.

My interpretive work on the literature of this period thus follows and extends paths laid down by historicist-minded critics who have read the imaginative products of the period as figuring particular social and cultural pressures (e.g., the work of Marilyn Butler, Marjorie Levinson, Jerome McGann, Alan Liu, and James Chandler).⁸ In addition, this book makes an alliance with two strands of scholarship: firstly, with the powerful current of English radical culture studies that itself has been

energized by its increased attention to discourse as a political act (e.g., the work of Olivia Smith, David Worrall, James Epstein, Marcus Wood, and Kevin Gilmartin);⁹ and secondly, with French Revolution studies in the wake of François Furet, who executed a Toquevillian turn away from Marxist historiography towards the political analysis of the Revolutionaries' contingent self-representations and semiotic practices (e.g., the work of Mona Ozouf, Lynn Hunt, and Keith Michael Baker).¹⁰ Recent work that pursues a similar agenda includes Simon Bainbridge's *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, Philip Shaw's *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination*, and Gillian Russell's *The Theatres of War*, all of which trace the nervous involvement of Romantic discourse and art with an historical context in which conflict was both a dominant fact and an imaginative preoccupation.¹¹ Focusing on a specific emotion within this context, I pursue a cultural history of concern over anger, and chart the literary repercussions of that concern.

I direct my attention to three intertwined categories of influence with regard to Romantic anger: political history, literary history, and an aggregate of discipline-specific conceptions and rhetorics under the heading of the history of ideas. First, the French Revolution and its English reception produced a politically supercharged conception of the angry passions. Second, as Romanticism developed in the wake of Augustan satire, the sensibility tradition, and the cult of the sublime, it mandated certain formal and imaginative transvaluations of anger in literature – and thus of literature itself. Finally, changing attitudes in legal, medical, and moral-philosophical contexts not only registered political pressures, but also contributed to the culture of wrath that was the Romantics' inheritance. Viewing these many influences, we may fairly say that the Romantic articulation of anger was an overdetermined affair, one that reveals much about the wrenching transition of these years that witnessed the birth of modernity. The literary work of the period becomes the conduit leading from the eighteenth-century imagination of anger to our own.

In political terms, the Romantic movement in England has been perpetually associated with the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath. In addition to citing such topical works as Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Blake's *The French Revolution*, readers have often felt a larger "spirit of the age" animating Romantic literature, and visible as a dialogue between forces of rebellion and reaction: Orc and Urizen, Prometheus and Jupiter, Cain and Jehovah. In recent decades, historically minded critics have elucidated the ways that this dialogue was variously inflected by its specific cultural and discursive contexts, particularly in regard to English radicalism and the periodical press. Indeed, the last two decades

of Romanticist scholarship have witnessed a remarkable outpouring of commentary and information regarding the 1790s, particularly in regard to English political culture and the public sphere.¹² In part, this book continues this line of investigation, examining certain structures of language visible in the Revolution debates and beyond. As we will see, these structures had far-reaching implications for the Romantic articulation of anger. Not only was the Revolution itself all but constituted, and certainly punctuated, by spectacular displays of rage, but the argument in England was also conducted in tones of increasing acrimony as the decade wore on. What's more, anger itself was pointedly at issue in a debate that began with Edmund Burke's outraged *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and halted only with the passage of laws forbidding further public dissent.¹³ The conceptual and political positions emergent from this cacophonous argument became the most influential legacies of the French Revolution to writers of the Romantic era.

Put another way, the 1790s in England witnessed a large-scale redefinition of anger in public consciousness, due primarily to the influence of the Revolution and the ways it was discussed. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this book illustrate various aspects of this process, by which anger was generally demonized as irrational, destructive rage – as an all-but-uncontrollable passion visited upon its victims. In the political, medical, and legal discourse of the period, we find a remarkable alignment of changing attitudes towards rage in the wake of the Revolution, as if the fear of popular anger washed over the entire culture and altered the landscape of the mind. It begins in the Revolution debates, in a rhetorical struggle over indignation: both sides want to claim this position by ascribing ferocious rage to their opponents. As a result, indignation becomes a moral stance detached from the emotion of anger as such, which is firmly identified as a dangerous loss of self-control. This outcome is mirrored, at the level of metaphor, in a change in post-Revolutionary medical theory and practice: raging inflammations (or “angry” swellings) are reconceived as destructive diseases rather than purgative symptoms. Bleeding thus comes briefly back into fashion as a treatment for fevers, given the newly perceived need to suppress displays of rage. Analogies between the physical body and the body politic mark this conceptual shift. Finally, we see a similar alteration in legal discourse during the period, whereby provocation law defines angry outbursts as transports of rage during which the rational self is abandoned. This meant defendants bore less responsibility for crimes of passion, since (it was assumed) anger no longer involved rational judgment or implied forethought. Thus in a number of discursive

Introduction: fits of rage

5

communities during this period, anger was thought of as, or as verging closely upon, uncontrollable rage.

My primary aim, while delineating the history of this redefinition of anger, is to show its impact on the work of Romantic-period authors. In the wake of Augustan satire, the Romantic poets developed their ambivalent attitudes towards angry art in concert with or in the immediate wake of the multitude of outraged voices in the periodical press.¹⁴ Romanticism in England can thus be seen as a chorus of responses to the crisis that was brought about by anger's prominence in public discourse. Godwin, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, and others provide important evidence of the various political and aesthetic pressures on anger for the post-Revolutionary author in England. However, it is Blake, Shelley, and Byron who stand closest to the heart of this book, because the imaginative and poetic programs of each are founded, however uneasily, on a particular species of anger. These three writers attempt to work beyond the limiting sense of anger they inherit from the English reception of the French Revolution. That is, they reject anger as something experienced passively as a visitation upon the self, and articulate angry emotions as positive and decisive enactments of the self upon the world. In so doing, they provide new ways of imagining the value of anger to a culture that has lost faith in that emotion. The literary work produced out of this commitment is characterized by generic experimentation as well, as these poets develop methods of presenting this essentially spectacular emotion in written form.

The question of anger's genre provokes first an attention to the history of satiric writing. Between the Augustans and the Romantics, Thomas Lockwood finds a widening split between satire and poetry: it is not that satire was not being written, but that critical canons were changing, dismissing wit, reason, and politics as components alien to "pure" poetry. Primarily under Rousseau's influence, English poetry came to be governed by an aesthetic ideology of (authorial) sincerity and (readerly) sympathy that prohibited the essential theatricality and confrontational implications of angry satire. As the voice of poetry became more disembodied and more isolated in order to avoid imputations of theatricality, anger – a violent passion that relies on tone, gesture, and facial expression for its communication to others – necessarily grew problematic for Romantic lyric poets, whose work assumes soliloquy and apostrophe as its ground. How does one perform anger without a body, a voice, or an established dramatic context? One answer is to write very strongly worded imprecations and curses; yet such an unlyrical strategy invites charges of overreaction and overacting, or madness and insincerity. The Romantic aesthetic

ideology made the composition of angry poetry a difficult and risky proposition.

Yet, like irony, anger often acts as an instrument of truth, pointing out injustices, betrayals, and false states of affairs, and seeking to even scores. So for the Romantic poets, angry satire was a highly rhetorical art and also a test of sincerity, a theatrical performance aimed at stripping away masks, an antithetical charade in the service of truth. It was by way of such contradictions that some Romantics found a place for anger in their imaginations of the literary. Scholarly activity of the past several decades has asserted the importance of satire to the Romantic period.¹⁵ Steven Jones has declared that “satire can no longer be excluded from our representations of the period,” and that “satire offers an important antithesis operating *within Romanticism* . . . it does not simply go away.”¹⁶ For one thing, amidst the political upheaval of the period, the popular press teemed with satiric poetry in the form of propaganda. In addition, we have always known that Byron and Shelley both wrote satires, and that Blake was driven by a satiric urge. Yet less clear have been the relations between anger and satire in the Romantic imagination.

One might begin to understand the Romantics’ conflicted inheritance by looking to Juvenal, who in his First Satire implies that angry verse depends upon a split between the poet and the natural order of the world:

quem patitur dormire nurus corruptor avarae,
 quem sponsae turpes et praetextatus adulter?
 si natura negat, facit indignatio versum,
 qualemcunque potest . . .

[Who can sleep when a daughter-in-law is seduced for money, / When brides-to-be are corrupt, and schoolboys practise adultery? / If nature fails, then indignation generates verse, / Doing the best it can . . .]¹⁷

The conditional “si natura negat” prefaces anger’s creation of verse, “qualemcunque potest,” as best it can. That is, anger serves as an inspiring force for the satirist despite, or rather because of, a perversion of natural creative principles exemplified by the “sponsae turpes, et praetextatus adulter” of the previous line. In other words, unnatural times call for unnatural measures, of which angry poetry is one. Because Juvenal’s declaration here is recognizable as a rhetorician’s claim to unskilled sincerity, some translators render “natura” as “talent” or “wit,” emphasizing the close ties between nature and reason in classical thought. Anger makes verse when nature, or the reasonable order of operations, fails in both the poet and society. Thus, even as it asserts its emotional sincerity, Juvenalian satire

Introduction: fits of rage

7

repudiates organicism, and becomes the cursed spite that proves the world is out of joint.

However, for the Romantic poets, the denial of nature that Juvenalian verse requires took on a new and unsettling dimension. Surveying Juvenal's reputation, Wiesen writes, "From late antiquity, when the satires first became popular reading matter, until the early nineteenth century, general opinion agreed that Juvenal's attack on the faults of contemporary society was prompted by a fiercely sincere hatred of . . . moral laxity."¹⁸ This view came under attack as the Romantic cult of sincerity grew; also writing on Juvenal's reputation, E. J. Kenney observes, "With the Romantic movement came a concomitant distrust of rhetoric" and a pervasive "assumption that rhetoric connotes insincerity."¹⁹ Thus Wiesen finds that "the reaction against Juvenal . . . was a perverse outgrowth of the nineteenth-century Romantic search for striking originality" ("Juvenal's Moral Character," 451) and William Kupersmith concurs: "Juvenal the insincere, hyperbolic rhetorician . . . is an invention of nineteenth-century criticism."²⁰ Juvenal's satiric anger came to be seen as anti-natural because conventionally rhetorical; and indeed, the satiric tradition generally fell under similar critique. Kenney maintains, "It is no doubt not accidental that the decline of Juvenal's fortunes in England was roughly synchronous with the virtual disappearance of formal verse satire" ("Juvenal: Satirist or Rhetorician?," 705). For the Romantics, the angry satirist was primarily a conventional and theatrical figure incapable of lyric sincerity.

Alvin Kernan demonstrates that the satiric tradition is one "not of Romantic self-expression but of self-conscious art, of traditions, conventions."²¹ He cites John Marston as a satiric poet who "specifically disavows the lyric tradition" in a passage from *The Scourge of Villanie* (1599) clearly indebted to Juvenal:

I invoke no *Delian* Deitie,
 Nor sacred of-spring of *Mnemosyne*:
 I pray in ayde of no *Castalian* Muse,
 No Nymph, no femall Angell to infuse
 A sprightly wit to raise my flagging wings,
 And teach me tune these harsh discordant strings;
 I crave no Syrens of our Halcion times,
 To grace the accents of my rough-hew'd rimes;
 But grim *Reproofe*, a stearne Hate of villany,
 Inspire and guide a Satyres poesie.²²

Embracing his own anger, Marston rejects the natural and the supernatural as sources of poetry, a comprehensively anti-Romantic gesture duplicated by John Cleveland (1613–58) in his "On the Pouder Plot":

I neede not call thee from thy miterd hill
 Apollo, anger will inspire my quill.
 If nature should deny, rage would infuse
 Virtue as much as could supply a muse.²³

Amplifying Juvenal, Marston and Cleveland both make an exaggerated turn to their own anger as inspiration. These Renaissance satirists engage in rhetorical posturing, energetically unconcerned with questions of sincerity. Jonas Barish claims that Renaissance culture evinces a “frank delight” in “outward splendor” and spectacle, a “pervasive pleasure in the twin roles of actor and spectator.”²⁴ Indeed, Cleveland emphasizes the link between rollicking exertion and rage, and presents himself as an angry, clownish performer. In “The Rebell Scot,” he exclaims,

Ring the bells backward; I am all on fire.
 Not all the buckets in a Countrey quire
 Shall quench my rage. A poet should be fear'd
 When angry, like a Comet's flaming beard. (*Poems*, p. 72, lines 5–8)

He further claims that, “Before a Scot can properly be curst, / I must (like Hocus) swallow daggers first” (lines 25–6). In these examples, Cleveland exaggerates his own theatricality, going so far as to relate himself to “Hocus,” a conjurer or juggler, whose chosen mode of entertainment is his own anger. To be sure, Cleveland's poems express political convictions in no uncertain terms, but they reveal nothing so much as an obvious relish of performing his invective.

The anger in Cleveland, Marston, and other Renaissance satirists demonstrates the slippage towards theater common in poetic representations of anger. Having reached over the Augustans to claim their precursors in the Renaissance, the Romantics found they still had to respond to satire's challenges. The Romantics shouldered a burden of self-expression that included abiding anxiety over the sincerity of emotional communication in poetry. For them, angry satire embodied an anti-lyrical impulse grounded in mock sincerity, and thus had to be abandoned or transformed. Blake, Shelley, and Byron discovered ways to reshape their satiric inheritance as they struggled to incarnate the disembodied voice, and to convey the alienated perspective, of anger. However uneasily, they held onto their rage because they were convinced of the dialogic relation between anger and truth. Certainly satire had long been imagined as a weapon against deception and corruption. Furthermore, in the apocalyptic dawn of the French Revolution, anger promised to undermine false structures of power and reveal the true nature of humanity. In

Introduction: fits of rage

9

the chapters that follow, I show that similar promises lie close to the heart of these poets' work.

Wordsworth, on the other hand, constitutes the absent center of this book. It may well be that the almost-complete lack of anger in his poetry, combined with his emergence as the representative Romantic poet, constitutes the strongest evidence of the anxieties surrounding that emotion in the Romantic period, as well as the cultural legacies of those concerns. In his recent study, *The Vehement Passions*, Philip Fisher sees Wordsworth as embodying the emotional tenor and allegiances of Romanticism: "In Wordsworth we can readily see the division of art between a poetry of elegiac loss, only in part recovered in memory, and a poetry of the sublime, with its center in experiences of fear. Wordsworth would, I think, stand here for romanticism as a whole. Its elegiac and sublime aspects locked in place a configuration of the passions around fear and mourning" (*The Vehement Passions*, 150). According to Fisher, a conception of the passions with fear as its representative case has held sway in Western thought ever since Wordsworthian Romanticism, displacing a former model in which anger was the template. Moreover, he asserts that "Fear and anger sponsor opposite accounts" of the passions as a whole: anger "makes clear the relation of the passions to spiritedness . . . to motion, to confidence, and to self-expression in the world"; but

when fear, rather than anger, is taken to be the template for inner life . . . Accounts of the passions . . . are preliminary to the therapeutic description of how the passions might be minimized or eliminated from experience . . . When fear is used as the template, as it was in Stoicism, the passions are taken as disturbances of the self . . . passive and opposed to action. (*The Vehement Passions* 14–15)

In Romantic-period culture, the aesthetic priorities of Wordsworthian Romanticism dovetailed with the demonization of anger in the political sphere to confirm this transition to fear as the representative passion. And, as Fisher demonstrates, we have only begun to consider the implications of this historical narrative for our understanding of the modern subject and the place of anger in post-Romantic culture.

In the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth describes France in July of 1793 in language that reveals an essentially negative, though ultimately ambivalent, attitude towards anger:

The goaded land waxed mad; the crimes of few
 Spread into madness of the many; blasts
 From hell came sanctified like airs from heaven.
 The sternness of the Just, the faith of those

Who doubted not that Providence had times
 Of anger and of vengeance, theirs who throned
 The human understanding paramount
 And made of that their god, the hopes of those
 Who were content to barter short-lived pangs
 For a paradise of angels, the blind rage
 Of insolent tempers . . .
 And all the accidents of life, were pressed
 Into one service, busy with one work.²⁵

That “work” is the work of the guillotine: here Wordsworth presents Robespierre’s Paris as a city of madness, infected by “blasts from hell.” “Sternness,” “anger,” “vengeance,” and “blind rage” are prime movers of the guillotine’s blade, like the “blast” of wind that makes the child’s pinwheel “whirl the faster” as he runs (*Prelude*, 10:344–5). The allusion to Hamlet’s words to the ghost – “Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell” (1.4.21) – evokes the spirit of vengeance abroad in France and Wordsworth’s own ambivalence regarding it, even as it associates winds with both pestilence and song (“airs” and “blasts”). These “blasts from hell” produce the feverish rage of the Terror and also recall the “loud prophetic blast of harmony / An ode in passion uttered, which foretold / Destruction to the children of the earth / By deluge yet at hand” in Wordsworth’s dream of the Arab (5.96–99). In other words, the passage presents a complex amalgam of human and divine wrathfulness, transposed rhetorically onto nature: the winds and the “goaded land.” Alan Liu has made the case that Wordsworth turned to nature as “a blind or screen” after confronting acts of Revolutionary rage, in order to return “the facts of historical violence to the status of the ghostly” (*Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, 166). This insight has wider application to Wordsworth’s processing of anger, an emotion that haunts his poetry by its absence.

In later, more directly political poetry, Wordsworth has little use for anger, particularly that of “the people.” For example, in a poem called “The Warning,” written in 1833, he laments over those agitating for the passage of the Reform Bill:

Lost people, trained to theoretic feud!
 Lost above all, ye labouring multitude!
 Bewildered whether ye, by slanderous tongues
 Deceived, mistake calamities for wrongs;
 And over fancied usurpations brood,
 Oft snapping at revenge in sullen mood;
 Or, from long stress of real injuries fly