THE LAKE POETS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The idea that the inspired poet stands apart from the marketplace is considered central to British Romanticism. However, Romantic authors were deeply concerned with how their occupation might be considered a kind of labor comparable to that of the traditional professions. In the process of defining their work as authors, Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge – the “Lake school” – aligned themselves with emerging constructions of the “professional gentleman” that challenged the vocational practices of late eighteenth-century British culture. They modeled their idea of authorship on the learned professions of medicine, church, and law, which allowed them to imagine a productive relationship with the marketplace and to adopt the ways eighteenth-century poets had related their poetry to other kinds of intellectual work. Brian Goldberg explores the ideas of professional risk, evaluation, and competition that the writers developed as a response to a variety of eighteenth-century depictions of the literary career.

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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those “great national events” that were “almost daily taking place”: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad, and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content, and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of “literature” and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded. The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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BRIAN GOLDBERG
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