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978-0-521-86887-7 - Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public

Andrew Franta

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## *Introduction: The regime of publicity*

This book examines the ways in which the advent of the mass public made the issue of reception central to Romantic poetry and poetics. It argues that the transformation of the relationship between poet and reader in early nineteenth-century England precipitated a fundamental shift in conceptions of the poetic text, literary reception, and authorship. Commentators have long recognized that with the decline of patronage, the rise of the novel and the periodical press, and the emergence of the mass reading public, poets could no longer simply assume the existence of an audience for poetry.<sup>1</sup> But the reconfiguration of the reading public and the literary market did not just alter poets' perceptions of the audience for poetry (as many recent critics have suggested). It also, and more crucially, changed their ways of thinking about poetry and the very forms their poems came to take. In contrast to some of the period's most famous characterizations of poetry – from Wordsworth's definition of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” to Shelley's image of the poet as “a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” – texts as different as Keats's early sonnets, Byron's *Don Juan*, and Shelley's poetry from *Queen Mab* to *Prometheus Unbound* demonstrate that in early nineteenth-century England the conditions under which poems were received had come to be an element internal to the production of poetry.

“The regime of publicity” is a phrase drawn from Jeremy Bentham's *An Essay on Political Tactics*. Composed for the newly established Estates-General in France and printed in 1791 (but not published until 1816), Bentham's *Essay* undertakes a theoretical analysis of parliamentary procedure and articulates an ideal of perfect transparency in the operations and deliberations of political assemblies. As “the fittest law for securing the public confidence, and causing it constantly to advance towards the end of its institution,” he offers “*publicity*” (a term Bentham

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himself introduces into the English language).<sup>2</sup> Rather than an established principle, publicity is a law in embryo: as Bentham puts it, “the régime of publicity – very imperfect as yet, and newly tolerated, – without being established by law, has not had time to produce all the good effects to which it will give birth” (311). This linking of publicity to “good effects” in the political realm is an issue to which I will return.<sup>3</sup> What is most striking in this context, however, is Bentham’s attempt to describe the emergence of a new way of thinking about the public. His crucial insight is to conceive of the public as a mode of opinion-making, and mass society less as an arena for the passive consumption of ideas than a kind of feedback loop which has a potentially transformative effect on the ideas it receives. Rather than naming a realm of action or reflection, “publicity” transforms “public” into a set of practices or mode of action; the term itself underscores the sense in which it is understood as a process rather than a space.<sup>4</sup> In these various senses, “the regime of publicity” captures a key aspect of the particular way of thinking about the public that this study argues is characteristic of Romantic poetics.

The regime of publicity thus not only indicates a way of thinking about the public and the condition of publicness, but it also announces the advent of an era. Addressing a political assembly on the verge of meeting for the first time in 175 years, Bentham at once argues that publicity must be the ruling principle of their deliberations and suggests that it is already well on its way to becoming the defining feature of modern society. His theoretical account not only defends its rationale for advocating publicity (under such headings as “Reasons for Publicity” and “Examination of Objections to Publicity”) and recommends practical measures for its establishment (the “Means of Publicity” include the publication of the assembly’s transactions and “[t]he employment of short-hand writers for the speeches”); it also alludes to “the state of things in England relative to publicity.” His discussion of English publicity, moreover, not only takes account of parliamentary rules but also of “actual practice” (315), which includes particular customs, such as public audiences at the House of Commons and the unauthorized publication of “the contents of debates and the names of voters,” that are in fact violations of those rules. Bentham makes it clear that this “contrary practice” is more than a set of exceptional instances. In fact, he claims, “whatever improvement has taken place in England has been accomplished through a continual violation of its laws.” This astonishing situation is the result of the “greater

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ascendancy” of “public opinion” (316) – the result, in other words, of the political pressure which was beginning to be exerted by the mass public. The tendency of Bentham’s assessment of the state of things in England is to acknowledge that, rather than a theoretical proposition, the regime of publicity is, for better or worse, a historical reality and a work in progress.

Bentham might seem an unlikely starting point for a study that focuses on poetry. He claimed, after all, that “[p]rejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry.”<sup>5</sup> But Bentham serves as an instructive place to begin precisely because he describes a crucial shift in the conceptualization of the public – the real effects of which he cannot yet comprehend. He argues for the political significance of this “very imperfect . . . and newly tolerated” regime of publicity and imagines its contribution to the reformist project in which he had been engaged since his attack on Blackstone in the *Fragment on Government*.<sup>6</sup> In conceiving of publicity as practice and process, and the regime of publicity as a feedback loop, however, Bentham’s analysis suggests that publicity’s effects are less predictable and more expansive than his political argument admits. Understood in this way, the regime of publicity encompasses a range of social and historical transformations which attended the emergence of the mass public, including such large-scale changes as the development of the concept of public opinion, the new prominence of the periodical reviews, the cementing of political opposition, and the theorization of the law of libel. I will argue that the shift Bentham describes has important implications in the literary realm as well, chief among them the reconceptualization of the very nature of textuality. Indeed, it is the project of this book to examine in detail the profound literary effects of the conception of publicity Bentham first articulated. For Bentham, publicity’s significance was purely political, but, describing this transformed idea of the public as it was coming into being, he was not in a position to recognize the full range of its repercussions for political discourse and for modern culture more broadly.

In the chapters that follow, the regime of publicity will also come to signify the range of ways in which these diverse cultural developments mediate between poets and their readers in the Romantic period. The license I take with Bentham’s phrase thus reflects my contention that poets from Wordsworth to Tennyson take up the issue of publicity in terms that reflect the new demands the mass public makes not only of politics but of poetry. Thinking about the reading public brings into

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focus the issue of poetry's relation to the means by which it is produced and distributed, as well as the media in which it is published and reviewed. If the absence of an immediate, predetermined readership forces poets to pay close attention to how poems reach their readers, it also prompts them to explore other attempts – in literature, politics, and the law – to conceptualize the mass public and thus affords them distinctive ways of thinking about the new cultural significance of mediation itself. Reception is central to poetic practice in the Romantic period because it is through reflection on the idea of the reading public that poets seek to come to grips with the implications of an emergent mass society – both in general and for poetry in particular.

The claim that reception plays a central role in Romantic poetics contradicts some of our most enduring critical beliefs about Romantic poetry.<sup>7</sup> The expressivist view of poetry reflected in the passages from Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* cited at the outset, for example, has long been understood by critics as an explicit statement about Romantic poetry's indifference to its audience. Over fifty years ago, M. H. Abrams took this view to be axiomatic when he observed in *The Mirror and the Lamp* that "[t]here is, in fact, something singularly fatal to the audience in the romantic point of view."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Abrams understood this Romantic hostility toward the audience as the product of the social transformation to which I have alluded. It was with "the disappearance of a homogeneous and discriminating reading public," Abrams argued, that we began to see the rise of "a criticism which on principle diminished the importance of the audience as a determinant of poetic value" (25–6). The reorientation in literary theory that for Abrams marked the beginning of modern aesthetic theory and artistic practice – the "radical shift to the artist in the alignment of aesthetic thinking" (3) – thus coincides with the growing sense in the early nineteenth century that the expansion of the reading public was eroding the traditional social and educational prerequisites for the production and consumption of literature.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one need not look far for evidence of the hostility toward the new mass public that Abrams described. From Wordsworth's attack on the lurid attractions of the literature of sensation in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and invidious distinction between the "People" and the "Public" in the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815 to Coleridge's condemnation of "the devotees of the circulating libraries" in the *Biographia Literaria* and comments on "that luxuriant misgrowth of our activity: a Reading Public!" in *The Statesman's Manual*, a distrust of the

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new classes of readers (especially novel-readers) would appear to underwrite the Romantic conception of the audience from the outset.<sup>10</sup>

Despite dramatic changes in Romantic scholarship since *The Mirror and the Lamp*, in important ways Abrams's account of Romantic aesthetics has continued to determine our understanding of the Romantic relationship with the audience. The line of Romantic new historicism that begins with Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, for example, rejects in the strongest possible terms Abrams's account of Romanticism.<sup>11</sup> But this rejection does not so much do away with the theory of Romantic expressivism as invert Abrams's judgments of value. When McGann asserts that "Abrams offers a program of Romanticism rather than a critical representation of its character," his argument is not that Abrams has misrepresented the writers he studies but uncritically accepted their own self-representations.<sup>12</sup> The reevaluation McGann urges entails a form of critique which would reveal these self-representations as false consciousness: what Abrams calls transcendence McGann labels ideology. But McGann's understanding of the aesthetic aims of such poems as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "Immortality Ode" does not differ substantially from Abrams's; what differs is his evaluation of the cultural and historical significance of Wordsworth's aims. McGann asserts "that the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (1). We need not discount the power of this assessment in order to recognize that the critique of Romanticism's "erasures and displacements" (85), which maintains that silences, oversights, and aversions are as crucial to understanding a poem as what it says, is a critical method which still takes *self-expression* as its object of analysis.<sup>13</sup>

The same is true of much important recent scholarship on Romanticism's relation to the reading public. Influential work on the formation of historical publics in the early nineteenth century has emphasized the consolidation of audiences along lines established by class affiliation, political interest, and gender.<sup>14</sup> This attention to the reading audience has paved the way for studies that have examined the formative influence on Romantic poetry of the anxiety produced by the rise of the mass reading public.<sup>15</sup> But in regarding poets' pre-occupations with the public in the early nineteenth century as a reflection of the effort to compete for readers or identify audiences for poetry, these approaches have left the equation of Romanticism and expressivist aesthetics virtually untouched. Whether the uncertainty

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produced by the mass reading public is thought to prompt a turn away from the audience or an anxious attempt to reconstitute an ideal audience, the writer is imagined to be engaged in a struggle to control the terms of reception. The notion of reception at work in such studies casts the reader's relation to the writer in terms of an ability and a disposition to identify with the views or opinions reflected in the text. This tendency is especially clear in accounts of Romanticism's politics, but it extends to aesthetics and poetics as well. From this standpoint, the desire to reach an audience becomes a desire to establish, maintain, and expand the domain of the author's intention, for the connection between author and reader is understood as necessarily a sympathetic bond – even, indeed perhaps especially, in those instances when the writer finds no sympathetic audience.

Of course, this way of conceiving of the writer's relation to the reader has a central place in Romantic poetry and poetics as well as Romantic criticism. One need only call to mind, for example, Wordsworth's turn to his "dearest Friend" and sister at the end of "Tintern Abbey." Dorothy serves as a kind of surrogate for the reader, and together they become the poet's second self, in whom he can "catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures" (117–19). Thus, when Wordsworth urges Dorothy, in "solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief," to "remember me, / And these my exhortations!" (144, 146–47), he imagines that his poem not only records his own "healing thoughts" but will bring solace to its readers (145). That this sympathetic imperative remains in force even when the poet laments the absence of an audience is evident, for example, in the prefatory stanza to Shelley's *Epipsychidion*:

My Song, I fear that thou wilt find but few  
Who fitly shall conceive thy reasoning,  
Of such hard matter dost thou entertain;  
Whence, if by misadventure, chance should bring  
Thee to base company (as chance may do),  
Quite unaware of what thou dost contain,  
I prithee, comfort thy sweet self again,  
My last delight! tell them that they are dull,  
And bid them own that thou art beautiful.<sup>16</sup>

These lines, translated from Dante, offer an arch version of the theory of sympathetic identification Shelley articulates in "On Love" and *A Defence of Poetry*. In addressing his poem, Shelley also offers an indirect address, and a challenge, to his reader. His "fear" that his "Song" will

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find “but few” who will comprehend it thus expresses all the more powerfully his desire for a sympathetic audience.

My argument, then, is not that we must simply dispose of Abrams’s identification of Romanticism with an expressive theory of poetry. Rather, it is that this understanding of poetry as self-expression, as well as the host of influential critical narratives recounting Romanticism’s turn inward and away from the audience that have continued to shape our understanding of the period’s literature, has obscured the emergence of an equally important conception of poetry as a process which includes the poem’s reception, dissemination, and transmission.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, what is most striking about the prefatory stanza to *Epipsychidion* is not that Shelley despairs of finding a sympathetic readership but that he reimagines the poet’s relation to the audience by redescribing the nature of the *text’s* relation to the reader. When he addresses the poem as his child, Shelley does not only draw on Dante; he evokes the humanist topos of book as child and, in particular, recalls Spenser’s “To His Booke” from *The Shepheardes Calendar* and Chaucer’s “Go, litel bok, go, lityl myn tragedye” from *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>18</sup> In echoing this traditional appeal to the audience, however, Shelley transforms it into an indirect and somewhat sarcastic challenge to the reader – and an allegory about how poems make their way in the world. His address to his personified “Song” predicts its failure to find fit readers; its rebuke to those who will react to the poem with incomprehension and hostility reiterates and amplifies the pathos of the Advertisement to *Epipsychidion*, which, like *Alastor* and *Adonais*, establishes the solitary and idealistic character of the poet by announcing his death. But the stanza also imagines the poem’s self-sufficiency, its ability to withstand or outlast “misadventure” and “base company.” If the process of finding a sympathetic audience is made difficult by its “hard matter” and is subject to “chance,” the role the poem plays in its own transmission has as much to do with its obduracy (“tell them that they are dull, / And bid them own . . .”) as the persuasive power of its beauty (“ . . . that thou art beautiful”).<sup>19</sup> Chapter 4 suggests that Shelley’s *The Mask of Anarchy* arrives at a similar conception of the poetic text’s ability to endure – or, as I put it there, to lie in wait until the proper audience comes into being – and argues that this form of textual self-sufficiency serves political ends. In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley’s aims are more strictly aesthetic, but in each instance what might look like a retreat from the audience in fact

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constitutes a radical attempt to revise the poet's relation to his readers by reflecting on how poems reach readers.

Even as he imagines that his poems must outlast indifferent, uncomprehending, or even hostile readers, Shelley focuses his attention on what happens after a poem leaves its author's hands. It is the premise of the prefatory stanza to *Epipsychidion*, after all, that the poem will leave Shelley behind – and that it will then have to find its own readers, for better or for worse. The mass reading audience highlights the unpredictability of the poet's readership, figured here in the Miltonic aspiration to “fit audience find, though few,” rather than a mere loss of control; in this sense, it emphasizes the difficulty of reaching an audience by holding out the promise of the poem's capacity to find readers the poet cannot imagine or predict.<sup>20</sup> For Shelley, the unpredictability of response engendered by the mass audience is refigured as the poem's potential to exceed its author's expectations. In such works as the “Ode to the West Wind,” *Prometheus Unbound*, and the *Defence*, Shelley pushes this idea even further by elaborating a poetics of reception that emphasizes the importance of the effects that poems have on their readers, even at the expense of their authors' intentions.

In emphasizing the crucial contribution of such thinking about the audience to Romantic conceptions of literature, I do not mean to suggest that writers before the Romantics were unconcerned with the effects of their works on their readers. Such effects have, of course, been part of the writer's concern as long as rhetoric in general has. My contention is that the emerging mass public gives this age-old issue a new shape and a new force. That said, however, this study departs very sharply from empirical studies of the history of reading and of authorship. William St. Clair's recent *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, for instance, examines “the explosion of reading” through exhaustive and detailed quantitative and economic analysis of publishing history, the publishing industry, and institutions, such as the circulating library, which shaped reading practices in the Romantic period.<sup>21</sup> St. Clair's work provides valuable context for the subjects I take up – and, perhaps more importantly, suggests a growing interest in the material conditions under which Romantic literature was produced. But such empirically oriented studies ask fundamentally different questions from those posed here. Whereas St. Clair argues that writers' impressions of the market for literature as well as received critical understandings of literary production in the period often fail to

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reflect the real state of the literary market, I am interested in the effects of precisely these mistaken impressions. St. Clair suggests, for example, that the assumption “that verse was the preferred reading of the age, and that at the end of the romantic period, there was a shift in public taste in which the reading of ‘poetry’ gave way to the less demanding reading of novels” is largely mistaken and, in the case of Byron’s assertion that Southey’s hostile review in the *Quarterly* boosted the sales of Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*, argues that “[q]uantification destroys a good story” because “the record shows that Shelley’s sales remained miniscule.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, I argue that paying close attention to the ideas about the public that shaped these stories can help us to a better understanding of Romantic poets’ conceptions of their own writing, the reading public, the literary marketplace, and literature in general. That poetry’s preeminence in the Romantic period, and the novel’s rise to prominence after it, simplifies a more complicated transition in the hierarchy of genres, for example, does not change the fact that many Romantic writers, and especially poets, felt this way. If statistics often show up our sense of lived reality, we nonetheless persist in making important decisions and assessments which defy statistical explanations. It is a central claim of this book that the impact of the mass public on Romantic poetry has to do with just this kind of gap between accurate, quantitative assessment and the perceptions that influence the writing of poetry (among many other endeavors, to be sure). In other words, that the sales of *The Revolt of Islam* were in fact unaffected by Southey’s review does not nullify Byron’s understanding of the relationship between poetry and the reviews – an understanding that helped to shape his own poetry. I argue that such views and convictions, whether they can be substantiated by publishing history, had a profound influence on Romantic writing, and this book strives to analyze their effects.

I have already indicated that one of the central consequences of the transformation of the relationship of writer to reader in the period is a changed conception of the poetic text. A crucial distinction between what we have come to regard as first- and second-generation Romantic writing lies in a shift from defining the text as the expression of its author’s views to understanding the text in terms of its effects on its readers. In different ways, Byron, Keats, and Shelley are each deeply concerned with effects – of their poems on their readers and of the reading public on their poems – and I argue that their anxiety has its source in the changing conditions of publicity that Bentham identifies and examines. This poetic examination of effects first emerges, however,

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not in the poetry of the second-generation writers themselves, but in Wordsworth's prose. Wordsworth's famous claim in the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" of 1815 that "every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" has been understood by critics as an explicit defense of the poet's authority over his readers.<sup>23</sup> Implicit in this claim is a grudging acknowledgment of the poet's dependence on readers (which is the source of Wordsworth's worry about creating taste and being enjoyed). For Wordsworth, the mass public is a problem which must be solved or circumvented. For the second-generation Romantics – and, I suggest in chapter 6, key early Victorians – this anxiety about the mass public is at once more explicit and more productive. From Byron to Tennyson, intense attention to the idea of public response leads to an interrogation of how distribution, circulation, and transmission inform poetic practice. The attention these poets pay to the different facets of poetry's reception derives from their sense that modern systems of publicity amplify both the scope and the nature of the ramifications that public expression in general, and poetry in particular, can be imagined to have in a mass society. The chapters to follow trace poets' responses to the regime of publicity as they emerge in the early nineteenth century and develop in relation to such disparate technologies of publicity as public opinion, the periodical reviews, political partisanship, and the law of libel.

Chapter 1 sets the parameters for the study as a whole by examining the development of public opinion – a crucial moment in Jürgen Habermas's account of the public sphere, which has received surprisingly little critical attention. I argue that even as a positive conception of public opinion was taking shape over the second half of the eighteenth century, so too was a profound anxiety that public opinion was necessarily subject to manipulation. Edmund Burke's critique of the London corresponding societies' public support of the newly formed French National Assembly in the *Reflections* and Byron's attacks on the new schools of poetry nearly thirty years later in *Don Juan* address this threat in radically different contexts. At issue in each case, however, is the authority by which a self-elected coterie – whether of radicals or poets – can claim to represent the English public at large. The threat to which both Burke and Byron respond is that any opinion, simply by virtue of appearing and circulating in print, might come to look representative.

In arguing that Burke's and Byron's assessments of public opinion take the same form, the first chapter traces the trajectory of the book's