In the long eighteenth century, sympathy was understood not just as an emotional bond, but also as a physiological force through which disruption in one part of the body produces instantaneous disruption in another. Building on this theory, Romantic writers explored sympathy as a disruptive social phenomenon which functioned to spread disorder between individuals and even across nations like a 'contagion'. It thus accounted for the instinctive behaviour of people swept up in a crowd. During this era sympathy assumed a controversial political significance, as it came to be associated with both riotous political protest and the diffusion of information through the press. Mary Fairclough reads Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, John Thelwall, William Hazlitt and Thomas De Quincey alongside contemporary political, medical and philosophical discourse. Many of their central questions about crowd behaviour still remain to be answered by the modern discourse of collective psychology.

MARY FAIRCLOUGH is a lecturer in English literature at the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies and the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. She was formerly senior lecturer in English literature at the University of Huddersfield.
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, urbanisation, industrialisation, 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 comment 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.

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Mary Fairclough
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2.1 Henry Singleton, engraved by W. Nutter, *The Destruction of the Bastille* (1792). Engraving, 49.7 × 63.6 cm.  
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4.1 David Wilkie, *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822). Oil on panel, 97 × 158 cm.  
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4.3 David Wilkie, *The Village Politicians* (1806). Oil on canvas, 57.2 × 74.9 cm. Collections of the Rt Hon. The Earl of Mansfield, Scone Palace, Perth.
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