

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

JAMES CHANDLER

Like the other volumes of the new *Cambridge History of English Literature*, this one offers a collaborative account for one of the recognized periods of a rich and complex literary history – one far richer and more complex, indeed, than the compromise category of ‘English Literature’ can capture. Like the other volumes, it builds on the extensive scholarship that has been undertaken in the field since the publication of the first *History of English Literature* by Cambridge early in the twentieth century. Like the others, too, it is responsive to major shifts in critical frameworks and historiographical assumptions over recent decades. Finally, like the others, and in keeping with the Press’s own directive for the new *History* as a whole, it is organized and executed in a way that ‘reflects the particular characteristics of the period covered’. In that last consideration, logically enough, lies a key to this volume’s special place and character among the other volumes.

By comparison with periods traditionally defined by century demarcations, or by the reigns of monarchs, the Romantic age has often been marked off in ways that are at once less arbitrary and more so. Some of its characteristic boundaries – 1789, 1783 and 1776, on the early side, and 1832 on the far side – are dates primarily of political significance, years associated with rebellion and revolution on the one hand, and with reform on the other. It is especially fitting that the literary history of this period should be bracketed by events of such political and social impact, since English writers at this time so often assumed their work to carry serious political weight in a contentious sphere of public sentiment and opinion. This assumption often seems to inform even the simplest of nature lyrics, even the most abstruse of poetic meditations. Indeed, part of what has made the literature of this period so intriguing for so many of its students is that many writers aspired to political and ethical influence indirectly – often, paradoxically, by way of a new assertion of the aesthetic claims of their work. In the decades that straddle the turn of the eighteenth century, the categories of ‘aesthetics’ and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES CHANDLER

'poetics' both underwent serious transformation in ways that still matter in the early twenty-first century.

This paradox can be reformulated in slightly different terms. On the one hand, the defining political developments of this age were recognized, even by many contemporaries, as unprecedented in their magnitude. 'All circumstances taken together', wrote Edmund Burke in 1790, 'the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world.'¹ On the other hand, the Romantic age is the only major period of British literary history that is named for a literary category. 'Romance', of course, designates both a literary genre and a major European language group, as well as a style or mode of artistic expression, a kind of atmosphere. This is a period, furthermore, that is often strongly identified with the emergence of what might be called a cultural idiom, a whole way of being in the world, one sometimes understood in contradistinction to the 'classical' idiom. This polarity of 'classic' and 'romantic' is not, however, a simple one. Marilyn Butler, among others, once showed that British Romanticism is hard to distinguish in certain respects from ongoing forms of neo-classicism, and further complications of these categories can be found in many of the chapters to follow.²

However we label them, the period saw the emergence of an exceptional number of poets now recognized among the finest in British history – many of them working in relations of personal and literary intimacy with one another. For most of the century since the first *Cambridge History of English Literature* was published, the works of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats have stood prominent in even the briefest anthologies of British poetry. All these poets – and they were not alone – were explicit about their engagement with what would later be called 'the condition of England' in their time. Some tried, like Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), to come to terms with 'the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved'.³ And many, too, like Wordsworth, considered that these important matters 'could not be determined, without pointing out,

1 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 92.

2 Marilyn Butler, *Rebels, Romantics and Reactionaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

3 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), vol. I, p. 120. Subsequent references cited by page number in the text.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other, and without retracing the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself' (p. 120). Most of them would therefore also have agreed with Wordsworth when he specified that 'a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force' (p. 128) on the experience of British and Irish subjects. These causes included both 'the great national events which are daily taking place' and the more gradual processes of modernity, such as 'the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies' (*ibid.*). A central task for any history of British literature in this period, therefore, is to chart the impact both of this perception and the facts that lay behind it on the practices of writing and reading.

The Romantic period has long been distinguished by the quality of its verse, but its poetic canon has recently been expanded to include (or reinclude): the work of women poets like Anna Barbauld, Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans; the work of Scottish and Irish poets such as Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Moore; and the working-class poetry of John Clare. Each of these reconfigurations of the field of Romantic poetry has had its effects on how we understand a given text's exemplary status for the age, and many of these shifts are registered, even addressed, in the chapters that follow. Most of these poets – male or female, English or Scottish or Irish, well-born or low-born – found themselves confronting a wider world than most of their poetic predecessors: a world where issues such as slavery and abolition, empire and settlement, were far more on the minds of readers than ever before. These were precisely the sorts of issues that circulated with 'the rapid communication of intelligence' of which Wordsworth wrote in the Preface.

The impact of this new literary culture on the writers of the period certainly extended beyond poetry itself. These decades witnessed the transformation of the English novel – from the impressive but miscellaneous productions of Richardson, Fielding and Sterne in the mid-eighteenth century into the more comprehensive and comprehensible Victorian novel form that took shape in the years that followed Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (1837). This segment of the novel's history once seemed to be a fairly barren time identified chiefly by two dominant figures in fiction: on the one hand, what Scott referred to as the 'exquisite touch' of Austen's novels and, on the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES CHANDLER

other, by the 'big bow-wow' of his own Waverley series.⁴ Now, however, it is recognized as the fertile period in which sentimental and Gothic fiction achieved their astoundingly durable forms, and in which both science fiction and the modern detective novel had their first emergence. It is recognized, too, as the time when experiments by Maria Edgeworth and others helped to shape an enlightened ethnographic impulse into a new kind of fiction, and with this recognition comes a new sense of the contributions of the Celtic strain of Irish and Scottish literature in the making of the great Victorian social novels. Finally, we now see this as a period when 'philosophy', often with a Continental turn, gained new authority in and through fiction writing.

Thus, whereas Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* once stood for all that was idiosyncratic (not to say monstrous) in 'the Romantic novel', we now have a new appreciation for the fiction of William Beckford, Frances Burney, Susan Ferrier, John Galt, William Godwin, Mary Hays, James Hogg, Elizabeth Inchbald, Charles Maturin, Lady Morgan, Clara Reeve, Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft. Even such a preliminary list reminds us that the novel of this period brought women into literature not only as readers but also as writers in unprecedented numbers. And while feminist scholarship continues to exhume important writing by women from decades earlier, the explosion of work by and for women in the later eighteenth century was remarked upon at the time and remains unquestionably striking in retrospect. Again, Maria Edgeworth emblemizes much about the novel in the period, a cosmopolitan woman writing from Ireland who did much to reshape British fiction, much to foster *both* the 'big bow-wow' historical novel of Scott *and* the intellectual domestic novel of Austen.

While there was no shortage of critics or reviewers in the increasingly active public sphere of eighteenth-century Britain, most observers would grant that criticism took on a new and more aggressively institutionalized function during the decades around the turn of that century. The great reviewing establishments, and the aesthetic and political camps that formed around them, generated an increasingly distinct reaction among poets, dramatists and novelists. Much of what became of the 'Lake School' of poetry can be understood in reaction to the critiques of Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, beginning with his remarks on the new 'sect' in a review of Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* in October 1802. Keats's anticipation of

4 Sir Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. David Douglas, 2 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), vol. I, p. 155.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the reviewer's critique became a defining characteristic and even an explicit theme of his poetry almost from the beginning of his more ambitious work. And the positions staked out in the great controversies of this period – positions on the value, meaning and political effects of what we still call 'imaginative literature' – continue to structure much debate in our time. The notion of poetic autonomy was born in the same historical moment as the specialized institutions of criticism on which it paradoxically depends.

The Romantic period did not invent the idea of the modern, but it did modernize it. No longer understood in terms of an opposition between the contemporary vernacular and its ancient classical antecedent, the 'modern' now assumed its place in a specifically national story. In this new story, the primitive could be revisited in a polite mode, and experimental ballads could be produced (as Wordsworth put it in his Preface) in the spirit 'of our elder writers' (p. 128) – i.e., English elder writers. Virginia Woolf recognizes the full implication of this new story for the history of the modern novel when she points to her forebear, Sir Walter Scott (whose historical fiction makes a significant appearance in *To the Lighthouse*), as a novelist whose paradoxical accomplishment can be emblemized in the fantastical neo-gothic home he built for himself at Abbotsford on the River Tweed in the 1820s. It is a home, she points out, that, though stuffed with antiquarian books and artifacts, was nonetheless the first domestic residence in Britain to be fitted with modern gas fixtures.⁵

In narrating these developments, telling the stories of Romanticism and the story of romanticisms, this volume of the new *Cambridge History* must willy-nilly come to terms with a peculiarly Janus-faced moment in the history of literary history itself. And herein lies an important source of the shaping pressure that this period itself exerts on its representation in such a history. For it is indeed in Britain's Romantic period that many of the informing concepts for projects of this sort underwent a crucial formation or transformation. I mean concepts such as 'literature', 'criticism', 'culture' and indeed 'period' itself – though certainly, as John Richetti suggests in introducing the 1660–1780 volume in this *History*, intimations of these changes were earlier afoot. Thus, while Janel Mueller and David Lowenstein, editors of the Early Modern volume, astutely cite Raymond Williams's *Keywords* to authorize their broadening of the notion of 'literature', Williams and others

⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Gas at Abbotsford', in *Collected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1925), pp. 134–9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES CHANDLER

have noted that the period when the concept of ‘the literary’ was modified toward its still dominant sense of ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’ literature was precisely that of Romanticism. And thus, too, David Wallace, editor of the medieval volume of the *History*, shrewdly resolves the antinomy between detail and comprehensiveness in literary history (‘true’ microhistory vs. ‘grand’ general narrative) by multiplying the possibilities for true but different grand narratives of the medieval period. But again, this sort of pluralism about general historical narrative emerged with singular éclat in the wake of the French Revolution, and it was revisited in the debates over Sir Walter Scott’s new form of fictionalized history as practised in the Waverley novels. It is a sense that a historian’s narrative is inevitably produced in a certain style and plot form, what the French called ‘histoire Walter Scottée’.

It is something of a cliché among historians that all researchers see their own period as decisive for the story of the really important things about our modernity. It is this sort of recognition that leads some wits to insist that we have never been modern, or else that we always already were. But it is not for nothing that a thinker of the eminence of Hannah Arendt (by no means a Romanticist and even less a romantic) identifies what we call the Romantic period as the age of the ‘pathos of novelty’ or that the period is so routinely labelled with some variation on Karl Polanyi’s phrase, ‘the Great Transformation’.⁶ To be sure, Polanyi was writing about ‘the political and economic origins of our time’, and even Arendt was concerned primarily with the theory and practice of politics and the new forms of modern statehood. At the same time, however, one of the most important historical points to recognize about this period is how literary activity became so crucial, so quickly, to national (and indeed international) affairs – how poets could come to seem legislators.

The full maturation of what Jürgen Habermas has termed the literary public sphere of the long eighteenth century would ultimately elevate writers to positions of great influence, both real and imagined. Here we discover one of the enabling conditions for the seemingly outlandish claim by Shelley in 1819 that ‘poets and philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’.⁷ To understand the extent to which Shelley’s

6 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 34; Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1944), pp. 3–19.

7 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 535.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

sentiment was shared by his contemporaries is to begin to grasp what would otherwise seem inexplicable. It would not be difficult to show, for example, how Britons talented in other ways consistently gravitated toward writing as the primary work of their lives in this period, precisely out of a sense that writing had become a medium of extraordinary potency. Among the group of six male Romantic poets who until recently tended to dominate the anthologies, all of them initially set out pursuing other careers: Blake in the visual arts, Wordsworth in law, Coleridge in the ministry, Byron in politics and Keats in medicine. Percy Shelley, Alfred North Whitehead observed, might have been a 'Newton among chemists' if he had pursued his interests in science instead of turning to poetry and letters.⁸

In this connection it is worth noting that there is also another, subtler way in which our way of naming this period signals its distinction. For other periods we employ a different grammar. We say, for example, 'Medieval English Literature', not 'English Medieval Literature'; and we say 'Early Modern English Literature', not 'English Early Modern Literature'. It sounds odd to say 'Romantic English Literature' – so much so that the pattern for titling volumes of the *Cambridge History* was broken for this volume. Why this grammatical idiosyncrasy? How is it that English Romantic Literature does not jar on the ear? The explanation may lie in the defensible claim that 'Romantic literature' forms a category so powerfully intelligible in itself that it makes more sense to speak of the English variety of that literature than of the 'Romantic age' as one among many in a series of periods. Is it not the case that the adjectival phrase 'English-Romantic' has a kind of coherence that 'English-Medieval' or (for a different reason) 'English-Victorian' does not? (The decision to name the subject for these volumes as 'English' literature in the first place had more to do with identifying a language than a nation, though 'literature in English' would have misled by being too comprehensive for the volumes' actual scope.)

The explanation may well have to do with the period's association with the concept of a *movement*, one named by the eventually nominalized form of the adjective Romantic: Romanticism. The category of Romanticism has been debated since its coinage during the period in question. In the century since the last *Cambridge History*, 'Romanticism' has had perhaps as many as three cycles of ups and downs, though they overlap in complex ways. F. H. Bradley and W. B. Yeats helped rehabilitate Romanticism after the sort of critique lodged in Thomas Hardy's brilliant anti-Romantic lyric of 1900,

8 A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 84.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES CHANDLER

'The Darkling Thrush', in which Hardy subverted the vatic landscape of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Shelley's 'To a Skylark' with a sketch of his thrush's gloomy response to a scene identified as 'the century's corpse outleant'.⁹ Irving Babbitt and T. S. Eliot discredited Romanticism sternly in the period between the Wars. But then, in the period after the Second World War, Northrop Frye and a group of scholars clustered at Yale, including Frederick Pottle and his student Harold Bloom, revived interest in the movement. Two decades later, deconstructive criticism, also largely anchored at Yale, sustained this renewed interest, perhaps even intensified it: the major Romantics were special objects of attention for the school of Paul de Man. Another cycle commenced in the 1970s and 1980s. Both new historicism (with its nominalist approach to periodization more generally) and feminist criticism (with its powerful critique of a canon centred so insistently on six male poets) spelled trouble for the hegemony of Romanticism as an organizing principle in the last quarter of the century. Just in the past few years, however, one finds that 'Romantic' and 'Romanticism' remain more durable terms than we might have imagined as recently as the 1990s. There seems to be a fascination with matters Romantic – and indeed a utility in the very category itself – that will not go away.

It may well be that 'Romanticism' survives because it captures something important about the other '-isms' of the period that it names. The '-ism' form came into frequent and often self-parodic vogue in the nineteenth century. Think of Matthew Arnold's mocking references to the various 'isms' of 'hole-in-corner' splinter groups in his *Culture and Anarchy*.¹⁰ To be sure, *Romanticism* was not the first '-ism' to appear in English, nor was the period we call Romantic the era in which the '-ism' form was coined. The '-ism' form derives from a Latin suffix (*-ismus*) and, as a way of naming a doctrinal position, it can be traced in English usage before the Early Modern period, where it mainly refers to positions in ancient philosophy: Stoicism, Epicureanism and the like. By the seventeenth century, the form has begun to be used for positions in the spectrum of modern religious positions. The *OED* cites John Milton as the first citation for 'Protestantism' in 1649. By the 1680s, one already finds an instance of the quasi-noun form, 'ism', in the characterization of a man

⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982–95), vol. 1, p. 187.

¹⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Works*, ed. George W. E. Russell, 15 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1903–4), vol. VI, p. xxi.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

who 'was the great Hieroglyphick of Jesuitism, Puritanism, Quaquerism, and of all the Isms from Schism'.¹¹

Something changes, however, with the '-ism' form as it evolves through the eighteenth century and into the Romantic period. It more and more often assumes the sense of an ideological movement, and some of these movements would come to be identified with the Romantic period itself, as has been explained by work in the 'historical semantics' of the age by scholars such as Reinhart Koselleck.¹² Hence the special appositeness of Thomas Carlyle's 1837 description of the moral vacuum left by the French Revolution and of all the 'isms that make up Man in France' that he sees 'rushing and roaring in that gulf'.¹³ Three years later, taking aim at modern women and their place in 'the system of society', and more particularly at Socialism and Owenism, *Fraser's Magazine* prophesied that 'All the untidy isms of the day shall be dissipated'.¹⁴ One of the early and powerful -isms of the period, Jacobinism, may well have been Edmund Burke's coinage of the early 1790s, but it was probably a back-formation from 'Jacobitism', a term that appeared in the title of a pamphlet as early as the 1690s.¹⁵ Still, the -ism form acquires a peculiar sense of urgency and intensity in the writings of the Romantic age, as writers come to believe that the state of society can be shown, and in being shown, altered.¹⁶

Evidence – both qualitative and quantitative – of this peculiar intensity in the writing of the Romantic period is not hard to find. The Romantic era has traditionally been the shortest of the literary periods to take its place in the sequence of epochs that structure anthologies and literary histories, and it is typically granted representation out of all proportion to its duration. The first *Cambridge History of English Literature* did not have a volume on

¹¹ Heraclito Democritus [Edward Pettit], *The Vision of Purgatory* (London: Printed by T. N. for Henry Brome, 1680), p. 46.

¹² Reinhart Koselleck, "'Neuzeit': Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement', in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), pp. 231–66.

¹³ Thomas Carlyle, *Works*, 30 vols. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1896–1901), vol. IV, p. 205.

¹⁴ 'Woman and the Social System', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 21:126 (June 1840), 689.

¹⁵ *The Spirit of Jacobitism: or, Remarks upon a Dialogue Between K[ing] W[illiam] and Benting [Bentinck, Earl of Portland] in a Dialogue between Two Friends of the Present Government* (London: J. Whitlock, 1695).

¹⁶ In his historical survey of the 'Ism' form H. M. Höpfl describes the early nineteenth-century awareness of 'a plague of -isms', and he distinguishes this moment from the other great surge of -isms, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in terms not dissimilar from those I have used here – 'Isms', *British Journal of Political Science* 13:1 (January 1983), 1–17.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79007-9 - The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature

Edited by James Chandler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES CHANDLER

Romanticism as such but it did have one on 'the Period of the French Revolution' (1789–1815). That volume, moreover, included neither the work of the later eighteenth-century 'Age of Sensibility' nor that of Scott, Byron, Hazlitt, Mary Shelley or Percy himself. Likewise, two of the twelve volumes in the mid-century *Oxford History of English Literature* (eds. Dobree, Davis and Wilson) were dedicated, respectively, to two brief and consecutive periods, one volume on 1789–1815, the other on 1815–1832. The same pattern has held true for the standard anthologies. In the widely used *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, for example, a similar disproportion has long been apparent between the duration of the Romantic period and the amplitude of representative writings included.

How does one best address these special features and dimensions of the age of Romanticism in a volume of this sort? Looking back at the original *Cambridge History of English Literature*, one notes that three kinds of headings tend to be used for chapter titles in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century volumes: single authors ('Keats'), classes of authors ('Letter Writers'), or kinds of writing ('The Literature of Dissent'). The primary or at least default approach governing all these volumes is that of literary biography, individual or collective. There are obviously great advantages to this kind of approach, especially for those periods in which sufficient biographical record survives for the authors in question. If one wished to find something about Jane Austen, or *Ivanhoe*, or Byron's Oriental tales, one had a pretty good idea of where to look and of what kind of discussion to expect. There was very little risk of overlap and, in a way, a fairly good principle for ensuring coverage. This kind of model served those volumes very well, as is clear from their extraordinary shelf life.

It must be recalled, however, that the first *Cambridge History* was undertaken after a century of practice in the art of biographical criticism. The twentieth century did not much advance this art, nor whet the taste that calls for it. To rehearse an oft-told tale: for several decades after the 1910s, the study of English literature was characterized by an uneasy yoking of unhistorical formal analysis, the New Criticism, and exhaustive 'background' scholarship into matters of literary, intellectual, social, political and cultural history relevant to reading works of the past. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the disciplines of English study have become far more splintered, more dependent on other fields of study for their research paradigms. It sometimes seems that the 'boundaries' of fields and disciplines are there only to be overleapt, straddled, traversed, transgressed or otherwise disrespected. As difficult a task as literary history has