

Introduction
Honor as the Hidden Value of Modernity

Honour's a very common word,
By all and ev'ry where prefer'd.
But what's its meaning,—where's the Key,
That will unlock the Mystery?
It seems to change in ev'ry street,
And with each person that we meet.

William Combe, "The Duel" (1815)

Consider these two contrasting visions of honor in the Romantic era. The first one comes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose 1791 poem "Honour" is delivered from the perspective of a loutish (and hung over) young man.¹ Reminiscing on the previous night's activities, the speaker spurns the "laurels" of public recognition – and even his own private self-respect – that had been the reward for living an honorable life:

To such poor joys could ancient Honour lead
When empty fame was toiling Merit's meed;
To Modern Honour other lays belong;
Profuse of joy and Lord of right and wrong,
Honour can game, drink, riot in the stew,
Cut a friend's throat;—what cannot Honour do?²

In the modern age, honor is nothing but a virtuous cover for wanton behavior and an excuse for egotism. As an undergraduate with radical sympathies, Coleridge also presents honor as an unearned privilege of the contemporary aristocracy, whose values come from inheritance and not from the "toiling Merit" that was associated with the burgeoning middle-class.

In February 1815, however, John Keats was making a vastly different claim about honor in modern life. When invoking honor in his short poem "To Hope," Keats becomes uncharacteristically nationalistic:

In the long vista of the years to roll,
Let me not see our country's honour fade:
O let me see our land retain her soul,

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Her pride, her freedom; and not freedom's shade.
 From thy bright eyes unusual brightness shed—
 Beneath thy pinions canopy my head!⁵

Far from being a hollow signifier used to justify unscrupulous behavior, honor is England's signal virtue. It is an idea so filled with substance, that it entails – in both the clausal and philosophical registers of the poem – abstract concepts (the soul, pride, and freedom of the country) and material signifiers (the unfading heraldry of the chivalric banner, as well as the ecology of the land, made fecund by the solar energy of Hope and the horticultural canopy through which it traverses). Written in the months before Waterloo, the stanza also seems to draw upon an idiom of chivalric sentimentalism that, for a generation, had been affiliated with Edmund Burke, whose contemporary revival of chivalry was a reaction to the threat of Jacobinism and its radical outlook. However, while Keats's appeal to honor seems conservative – evoking a perfunctory wartime loyalism, as well as a courtly, Spenserian aesthetic that the poet affiliated with canonical “greatness” – the next stanza of the poem imagines the honorable nation as a haven from monarchy, especially for the common person.⁴ “Let me not see the patriot's high bequest,” Keats implores, “Great Liberty! How great in plain attire! / With the base purple of a court oppress'd.” Suggesting the heraldic imagery of the previous stanza, Keats suddenly defies the luxuriant “purple of a court” and champions the “plain attire” of “Great Liberty!” Honor, rather than accompanying the restoration of the court, becomes the companion of Liberty and its supporters, the common people allied against monarchy. In other words, honor is suspended between aristocratic and radical principles, between nobility and the common person, between the individual esteem that Keats hoped for in his quest for aesthetic recognition and the civic solidarity that he would offer, tacitly, to the middle and lower classes. In addition, as Keats's lines run in syntactical parallel with the prior stanza, the repetition of “let me see” and “let me not see” issues a generative, future-tense to both “Honor” and its companionate “Liberty.” Here, both values become prospective, not just tropes of nostalgic sentimentalism. This is also to say that for major Romantic writers such as Keats, honor was not simply relegated to the past – even a past that had purchase on the tempestuous present. It was a major, prolific value of the age and its potential futures.

For contemporary readers, the mere word “honor” can provoke strong feelings. To hear it is to imagine an extreme traditionalism at best and, at worst, an ethos wedded to chauvinism, martial aggression, and even the

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authoritarian impulse. For scholars of British Romanticism, it can seem like a particularly reactionary term. Honor underwrites Burke's defense against revolutionary radicalism, it is the code of medieval crusaders and tribal highlanders in the novels of Walter Scott, and it is a quality exclusive to nobles such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), who rely on honor to assert their privilege in the face of rising bourgeois hegemony. However, despite these conservative interpretations, this book will suggest that Romantic writers did not view honor merely as an antiquarian or illiberal ethos. Rather, like Keats, they saw honor as a fulsome value – a contemporary principle involved with, and explicatory of, the emerging predicaments of modernity, whether these dilemmas took the form of key political debates, incommensurate ideas about aesthetic judgment, or the contradictions initiated by developing commercial institutions.⁵ (Indeed, despite its being juvenilia, Keats's poem seems to engage to all of these structural features in just two stanzas: framed by the idea of honor, Keats's lines balance sentimental conservatism with direct reformism, picturesque appreciation with mythopoetic abstraction, and the elegance of purpled, sartorial luxury with the "plain attire" worn by patriots who champion equality.)⁶ By continuing to read honor as merely conservative, we overlook a value that undergirded modernity – its art, institutions, and political culture – as well as the prospects beyond it.

In addition to recovering honor's influence on Romantic culture and modernity more broadly, this book offers another pressing intervention. It reveals that the recent deluge of studies concerned with honor – from a variety of scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, David Graeber, Wai Chee Dimock, and Tammler Sommers – have a uniting feature: all of these books express a crisis of liberal political institutions, which, instead of accounting for the deep, material affirmation of the honor and dignity desired by political subjects, can only offer citizens an abstract and oftentimes impoverished ideal of freedom.⁷ I demonstrate that this current crisis is retroactively illuminated by the Romantics. For, even while they were living through the formation of liberal civic and economic institutions, and shaping them by their cultural influence, Romantic writers advanced premonitions of other political orientations – both reactionary and radical – that were more attuned to the honor of the modern subject, or the composition of a political identity based on richer, more reciprocal sociability and civic belonging. Again, we note how Keats's lines balance England's "honour" with its civic "freedom," and that if one fades from existence then the other will be a mere shadow of its former self. And yet, while both principles seem to mirror each other

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in the stanza, it is only honor – appearing before the colon’s deductive list – that contains all the elements that follow. Without honor, soul, pride, and freedom are empty.

As my epigraph implies, it would be tempting to define honor up front in solid, indisputable terms and “unlock its mystery.” Honor could be an indelible sense of self-worth, a value without a price. Or it might be more social than that, a private awareness of one’s public face. Alternatively, it could be the responsibility one feels towards that public. Perhaps honor is more of an action than an abstraction: it is the open defense of one’s reputation, either through dueling, verbal combat, or the guarding of sexual “purity.” Or, honor might be an institutional phenomenon, the civic virtue that keeps a governing body alive. Or is it the kind of trust that can be quantified by the modern financial system, where honoring one’s debts becomes paramount?

Instead of settling on a single definition, I propose that when honor is invoked by the Romantics, it might be most useful to see it as a “master value,” or a value that is so prolific – so ingrained in various idealisms, materials, and practices – that it undergirds the very idea of value itself. (Honor might also be called a “metavalue,” or a governing principle that underwrote the numerous types of evaluation that were developing in the era). Because it appears as a signifier in a stunning variety of textual productions, honor could be considered what Kenneth Burke called a “god-term,” a single word that serves as the unannounced foundation of a range of many other words in a culture’s vocabulary and that, given the vast amount of belief with which it has become invested, motivates action in the world.⁸

According to J. Hillis Miller, who invokes Kenneth Burke to discuss the legacy of metaphysical signifiers and their place in deconstruction, such expressions rise and fall with the currents of history: “honor” is the god-term for medieval and renaissance culture in Britain, while, in the Victorian novel, the word “gentleman” conveyed ineffably one’s identification with class society, and, in a contemporary culture dominated by capitalism, “money” is the god-term, an expression whose abstract and material dimensions alike drive behavior.⁹ While these signifiers seem to resonate in their respective epochs, one of the goals of this book is to show how honor – or even the very idea of a comprehensive system of value – never entirely loses its hold on artistic and sociopolitical culture. Rather than being a relic of British history, or a trope of the constructed nostalgia that defines one variety of Romanticism, honor influences new structures and debates of the early nineteenth century, from the contentious war

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of ideas in the 1790s, to the emergent mores of the literary marketplace, to the resurgence of abolitionism after Waterloo, a campaign that valued human dignity as much as it did freedom. As they grappled with these issues, the Romantics did not just release honor from its ancient connotations. They also applied it to contemporary dilemmas.

In addition to resuscitating Romantic honor and its role in the formation of the modern subject, this book picks up on three current conversations in the humanities. First, in tracing the evolution of this master value through a series of texts and representations, the book participates in a renewed discussion about the role of value in literary studies. Reacting to a generation of criticism built upon “suspicious reading” and negative critique – as well as a heightened atmosphere of crisis that has surrounded the discipline following the 2008 financial collapse – scholars such as Rita Felski, Deidre Lynch, and Michael Roth, among others, have produced monographs that urge a return to positive value, rich appreciation, and the pragmatic “uses” of literature.¹⁰ In an attempt to salvage a profession that is, supposedly, beholden to negative hermeneutic strategies and the legacies of deconstruction, such approaches look to resuscitate the “sadly depleted language of value” against a financialized “college-as-investment paradigm,” even if they risk the embarrassment or sentimentalism that might arise in defending such “personalized” connections to the literary.¹¹ By demonstrating the impact of honor on institutions that were not merely developing in early nineteenth-century Britain, but that are still extant – such as the global credit system, parliamentary democracy, or the human rights advocacy organization – each chapter gestures to this call for a greater attention to value in cultural analysis.

However, in so much as honor subtends different – even oppositional – cultural phenomena, I hope to show how values, under the pressure of social change, also stage their own critique.¹² For example, as first-generation Romantic authors became alert to the dramatic historical transition through which they were living in the Napoleonic era, their writing started to underscore a continuum between older, hierarchical ideas of honor like chivalry and newer egalitarian models, dignity and respect. In the following generation, such forms of universal worth(iness) inflect the politics of slave narratives, which start to feature secularized notions of human dignity in their attempts to move reading audiences toward the abolitionist cause. These newer forms of honor also influence the historical novel, which, in reproducing another major conflict between hierarchy and egalitarianism, places a transnational regime of credit and debt – and its crass ranking of human connection through quantification – against

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the planar, “honorable connections” made by subjects who stood outside of the commercial order.

Each chapter thus portrays a shift in the meaning and significance of this crucial feature of British life at the turn of the nineteenth century, articulating a dialectical movement from what Raymond Williams calls the residual ideas of a culture – its traditions, habits, and indisputable norms – to its emergent ideas, those “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships” that start to pervade the consciousness and habits of the period.¹³ A literary history of a value centered on the complex language and representations of honor, I demonstrate how British Romantic writers were some of the first Western cultural figures to view honor as a phenomenon simultaneously applicable to the past, the present, and the future(s) that might emerge under its influence. However, because each chapter reads honor as a transitory concept, with the ability to shift through multiple perspectives and chronologies, the arguments within them also challenge the idea that any value is a complete articulation, something that can be posited whole and, thus, used to fight against the downward spirals and alleged paranoia of negative critique. Instead, this book implies that all values are provisional things – and that to even discuss a value means evoking the reversals, transitions, and criticism that it has already undergone, or is currently undergoing.

Despite its malleability, honor seems to have a category with which it is regularly identified: civic virtue, whether it is to be found in the dueling partisan, the fallen woman who achieves public redemption, or the highland clansman who stands against the encroachments of the metropole. In its second intervention, the book focuses on the role that honor played in shaping the modern political subject, and thus responds to a revitalized interest in political theory and praxis that has permeated Romantic studies of late – a result, perhaps, of the shakiness of contemporary Western institutions, the disintegrating guardrails of democracy, and the feeling that definitive narratives of progress have lost their hold.¹⁴ The following readings show honor to be a value that was disseminated through the three dominant ideologies that, as Immanuel Wallerstein has indicated, arose out of the French Revolution: conservatism, liberalism, and Marxism.¹⁵ Because it is an ethos that signals both individual dignity and a desire for recognition, honor frames neatly a paradox that applied to each ideology: how would one cultivate private esteem while retaining a strong sense of public belonging? An anti-Jacobin might answer this question by finding honor in royalist hierarchy, while, on the other end of the spectrum,

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an escaped slave might articulate their personal dignity outside of both a sovereign nation and a global market, outlining a proto-anarchist position against the state and its official economies. By focusing on the honor of subjects represented in and responsible for Romantic aesthetic productions, each chapter reveals the contestation and crossover between modern political ideologies.

However, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of these incipient political formations seemed to have a fuller purchase on honor than others. I argue that bourgeois liberal thought and culture – not, as is regularly suspected, conservative ideology – subsumed honor into its rubric with the most zeal. Proto-liberal jurisprudence, for example, included provisions for dueling and honorable conduct across class status, while Whig discourse on the growth of commercial society – whose market-bound rules of conduct constituted a cornerstone of burgeoning liberal thought – wedded financial exchange to individual *virtu*.¹⁶ More egalitarian texts like universal declarations of rights and abolitionist pamphlets employed the rhetoric of dignity to advance Enlightenment principles that had been built on a foundation of universal equality. It is not surprising that, faced with the fragility of institutions today, a vast range of scholars from this decade have returned to honor to explore liberal subjecthood. Legal and political scholars, Jeremy Waldron and George Kateb, have recently argued that the meaning of honor changed during this time, moving from a public conception of social status and hierarchy to a more private idea of inherent dignity and inner worth, while a philosopher of ethics, Sommers, in *Why Honor Matters*, wants to restore the communitarian norms that honor can project.¹⁷ And while Dimock and Appiah have moved in a separate direction, arguing in their respective work that honor codes have been diminished rightfully in modern life, contemporary culture seems to have grabbed ahold of the concept with renewed vehemence.¹⁸ For example, the musical *Hamilton* – regularly identified as a touchstone of the liberal middlebrow – features two numbers on the codification of dueling.¹⁹

Nevertheless, against scholarship that assumes the total assimilation of honor into liberal culture – one that tends to prize autonomy over communality, abstraction over material limitation, and freedom over responsibility – I argue that honor can be thought of as something like a political countervalue that liberalism must contain and, sometimes, combat. To put this another way, in the following chapters, I show that honor is the principle that always haunts the liberal project, threatening to turn it backwards into something like reactionary monarchism, or to propel it

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forwards into the realm of communitarian anarchism. (Indeed, contemporary writers of speculative fiction have seen both sides of honor's spectrum and, in some instances, blended them together. Ursula Le Guin's opus *The Left Hand of Darkness* features the race of Gethenians, a highly stratified, monarchist people that hold above anything else the practice of *shifgrethor*, or the honor derived by maintaining total social equality through speech acts.)²⁰ One way to see its relationship with liberalism would be to view honor as a Derridean supplement, or the thing that throws into relief the contradictions of liberal discourse, or what Slavoj Žižek later calls the "obscene supplement," the set of cultural practices omitted from the self-representations of a political system that are nevertheless required for it to function.²¹

If recent mainstream political philosophy has taken up the question of honor, sociologists and anthropologists have long seen honor and dignity as the lattice – or deep code – through which various cultures operate (and break down). Orlando Patterson's monumental *Slavery and Social Death*, for example, illuminates the tension between liberal conceptions of autonomy and the broader social imperatives of honor. To put it in Patterson's terms, one's honor signaled the "social existence ... [and] public worth" whose loss was constitutive of slavery.²² And, in seeking a history of the conversion of personal honor into money, one can turn to anthropologists such as Graeber, who, among many examples of the fiscal implications of honor, discusses the "honor-price" of Celtic tribesmen in the early Middle Ages, "the price that one had to pay for an insult to the person's dignity."²³

However, throughout this study, I draw on an archive even more apposite to Romanticism as a definitive literary period: the scholarship of the Black Atlantic, whose critics and philosophers have been particularly attuned to the relation – and sometimes the fundamental opposition – between formal freedom and rich, materially sustained honor and dignity. Transatlantic by definition, the traffic of enslaved peoples across continents and hemispheres meant a corresponding movement of ideas, such as the floating ideology of American constitutional "liberty" reserved for white settlers and the slaveocracy, or a strange companionate discourse, the British abolitionist rhetoric of emancipation denuded of any material provision for the formerly enslaved, what Edlie Wong identifies in the formal ambiguity of freedom suits.²⁴ To the side of these deconstructions of liberal freedom lies prolific scholarship on mutual recognition and contestation, the dynamic inherent to honor as "master value" of social life. Regularly identified with Paul Gilroy's cornerstone chapter on Fredrick

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Douglass and G.W.F. Hegel in *The Black Atlantic*, the encounter with the other, whether through struggle or the mutual recognition of dignity, is a *sine qua non* of newer histories and critique.²⁵ Achille Mbembe's indispensable *Necropolitics*, for instance, redeploys the logic of encounter – as it entails both violence and vulnerability – to the entire hypermediated, postcolonial lifeworld, while current studies on Douglass examine the abolitionist's philosophy of dignity, that quality of public, or essentially recognized, worth.²⁶

Finally, because of its sociopolitical heft, when it appears in Romantic writing, honor is always – whether overtly or tacitly – connected to affect and the emotions, the discourse of which has become prominent in literary interpretation. In my last intervention, the following chapters engage the affective turn by revealing honor as a capsule for both sides of a major contemporary debate, one in which prominent scholars have deliberated the priority of feeling to cognition and action.²⁷ Literary representations of honor render the debate even more ambiguous, for they could reveal a sentimental, affect-laden value or one that indicated sobriety, self-possession, and even steely resolve. As a principle that was deeply felt – and long associated with the temperamental condition that could lead to a duel, the shame of blighted chastity, or a rentier class whose character was defined, like Maria Edgeworth's Lord Colambre, by their “[capability] of feeling honourable and generous conduct” – honor retained its emotional resonances well into the nineteenth century.²⁸

At the beginning of a poem composed late in his career, “The Widow on Windermere Side” (1842), William Wordsworth suggests the continuation of a direct line between honor and affect when he muses “[h]ow beautiful when up a lofty height / Honour ascends among the humblest poor, / And feeling sinks as deep!”²⁹ The transaction between the honorable bearing of another and the sympathy that they could illicit is so central to the poet's conceit that it becomes part of the topographical imaginary for which Wordsworthian lyricism is known. And yet, Romantic writers also developed an important counter-discourse. They showed how honor could be anti-sentimental and, oftentimes, allied more to temperate and broad solidarity than to the vicissitudes of sympathy, a connection that could be limited to the similarities shared by two beings. Some seventy years before Wordsworth used the language of honor to attribute an aristocratic sentimentalism to the working poor, Christopher Smart, in one of his *Hymns for the Amusement of Children* (1772), describes honor in more restrained terms. Honor “is sweet dignity and ease,” proclaims Smart, “Reserve without disdain.”³⁰ The person that has honor is self-possessed,

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perhaps stoic, and contains a “magnitude of soul” that allows them to connect with another regardless of the mutual feeling they might share.³¹ But honor is also, according to Smart, “Truth affirmed,” or, in a premonition of Kant’s third critique, the confirmatory feeling of rationality itself.³² In its entangling of reason with feeling – and its regular appearances in a long arch of Romantic literature – honor encapsulates in a single formal device the problematic of cognition and affect that has preoccupied contemporary scholars.

In sum, for the Romantics, honor was a hyper-conspicuous value that simultaneously moved with and against the sentimental currents of the day, and, despite being embraced by liberalism, the most prominent ideology to emerge in modernity, suggested alternative foundations for the political subject through its original cultural representations. More pointedly, the malleability of honor allows us to reconceptualize that subject’s openness to new political formations, especially as those formations captured a shift from definitive civic virtues to broader, affectively charged conceptions of sociability.

Yet, despite honor’s connections to value, politics, and affect, the concept remains underexplored in Romanticism. In the service of that exploration, I will address each of these three key thematics in some detail, paying special attention to the critical and philosophical legacy that honor has engendered.

Value: Individual versus Communal

When one steps out onto the heath in the early morning for a duel, it is a public affair. It goes without saying that a duel of honor occurs between two people (almost always men – although Robert Baldick notes duels among women, children, and, strangely, domestic animals).³³ It also involves “seconds,” or the companions of the duelists involved in overseeing the fairness and procedure of the event. And despite a broad understanding that the duel was to be kept away from civil society, many duels had audiences, members of the populace who were tipped off or heard about the duel through circulating rumors. (Prime Minister William Pitt’s famous duel with George Tierney in 1798 is a great example. Highly publicized beforehand, the duel attracted an audience at Putney Heath; spectators had come to witness the potential death of arguably the most powerful figure in the world.)³⁴ As an ancient practice meant to maintain one’s social reputation, dueling not only conveys the very public nature of the honor ethic but it does so in the service of one’s “titular” identity,