PERCY SHELLEY IN CONTEXT

Percy Shelley was a writer in the broadest sense – poet, pamphleteer, philosopher, translator, and correspondent – and one of the most eccentric, fascinating figures of his age. Yet he is emphatically of our age too, continuing to influence contemporary writers, to be referenced in popular culture, and to inspire social and political movements. Bringing together a wide range of contributors from different critical perspectives, this vivid and accessible volume sets Shelley's work in its many contexts – from ancient literature to contemporary poetry, from his travels around Britain and Europe to his global reception, and from his rivalries with his poetic peers to his often-strained relations with his family. Despite his short life, Shelley emerges as a vital literary presence.

ROSS WILSON is Professor of the History and Theory of Criticism in the Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, and a fellow of Emmanuel College. He is the author of four books, including *Critical Forms: Forms of Literary Criticism, 1750–2020* (2023) and *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (2013).

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009223706

DOI: 10.1017/9781009223690

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009223690

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
NAMES: Wilson, Ross, editor.
TITLE: Percy Shelley in context / edited by Ross Wilson.
DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024044373 | ISBN 9781009223706 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009223690 (ebook)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 1792–1822 – Criticism and interpretation.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC PR5438 .P434 2025 | DDC 821/.7–dc23/eng/20250117
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024044373

ISBN 978-1-009-22370-6 Hardback

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Preface

Shortly after Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in the Gulf of La Spezia (more often referred to as the Bay of Lerici by Shelley and his contemporaries) in July 1822, the British Tory newspaper *The Courier* declared that 'Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry, has drowned; *now* he knows whether there is a God or no.'[1] Six years earlier, Shelley had signed his destination in the visitors' book of an inn in the Swiss alps as 'L'Enfer' – hell; the place he gave as the starting point of this particular journey, London, was perhaps more mundane, though it is worth remembering that Shelley once declared that 'Hell is a city much like London' (*Poems* III, 103; *Peter Bell the Third*, Part Third: Hell, l. 147).

Just over two centuries after his death in that stormy sea off the coast of northern Italy, we can only guess at Shelley's ultimate destination or if he knows 'whether there is a God or no'. Nevertheless, Shelley, one of the greatest of English poets, as well as author of Gothic romances, philosophical essays, political pamphlets, tracts advocating vegetarianism, and a remarkable correspondence, remains central to the study and practice of literature, as well as continuing to be invoked by a range of political and cultural movements around the world. Shelley was a writer in the broadest sense – poet, novelist, dramatist, pamphleteer, philosopher, translator from seven languages, and correspondent – and one of the most eccentric, fascinating figures of his age. Yet he is emphatically of our age too. Two hundred years after his death, he continues to exert a significant influence over contemporary writers. What is more, his own writings are still being discovered: his early *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things* was only acquired by the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 2015 and the sheet with his incendiary entry in the inn album went to the Wren Library, Cambridge, in 2016.[2] Having been a major influence on nineteenth-century political movements in England, his message has spoken to more recent social and political movements as well, and, since the nineteenth century, the wide range of his work has informed social,

political, literary, and cultural formations of different kinds around the world. His works and person (or caricatures of the latter) continue to crop up in music, film, and television.

Shelley's short life of only twenty-nine years traversed the English home counties, his miserable school days at Eton College (where his name can still be seen etched into a wooden panel), his short career at University College, Oxford (from which he was expelled for atheism, but where there is now an evocative memorial to the College's once-despised son), Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Switzerland, Rome, Pisa, Venice, and Florence. As well as being a remarkably sonorous poet, he was also an insistently visual writer, engaging in particular with the ruins of ancient Roman civilisation, the classical and Renaissance sculpture he saw and wrote about in Italy, and painting. He also wrote evocatively about the many real landscapes of Britain, Ireland, and Europe that he visited, and the (for him) imagined landscapes of the Asian steppe, north African mountains, and Indian subcontinent. He has a claim to being perhaps the most accomplished writer for the stage of the Romantic generation.

All of this gives some sense of what might constitute a 'context' for Shelley. Although he did not use the term itself (it is only really around the middle of the nineteenth century that 'context' acquired its current sense of the web of circumstances in which some thing or occurrence might be considered (see *OED*, 'context', 4.b.)), he repeatedly considered the relation of writers to the situations in which they found themselves, and the influence of those situations on their writing. Declaring his deliberate avoidance of 'the imitation of any contemporary style' in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* (1817), for example, he nevertheless went on to acknowledge that 'there must be a resemblance which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age.' He expands this point as follows:

> They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live, though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded. Thus, the tragic Poets of the age of Pericles; the Italian revivers of ancient learning; those mighty intellects of our own country that succeeded the Reformation, the translators of the Bible, Shakespeare, Spenser, the Dramatists of the reign of Elizabeth, and Lord Bacon; the colder spirits of the interval that succeeded; – all, resemble each other, and differ from every other in their several classes. […] And this is an influence which neither the meanest scribbler, nor the sublimest genius of any era can escape; and which I have not attempted to escape. (*Poems* II, 41–42)

The language of unavoidable 'subjection' and impossible 'escape' in this passage might be taken to suggest that the pervading influence of the times in which writers live on the work that they produce is something Shelley regrets, his insistence that he has 'not attempted to escape' it notwithstanding. But we should note, first, that the writer's relation to her or his context is not merely passive: as Shelley writes above, 'each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded'; and he would go on to insist, in similar terms, in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* two years later that '[p]oets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors, and musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and, in another, the creations, of their age' (*Poems* II, 474–75). The historical circumstances in which writers finds themselves form an inescapable influence upon them and entail that there are significant similarities between different writers writing in the same age; but equally, writers themselves actively inform that very influence. Karl Marx would write thirty years after Shelley's death that '[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'[3] Shelley would have agreed with that – but he would have wanted to underline that men do make their own history.

The second thing to note from the above account in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* is that although we might reasonably take the times in which any poet lived to be, like all human lives, finite (Shelley's own times in this sense, 1792–1822, turned out to be more finite than most), the 'combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live' is, nevertheless, 'infinite'. As Henry James would famously state when he was trying to describe the difficult task, not of the poet, but of the realist novelist: 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere.'[4] Shelley's insight into the infinity of the combination of circumstances may thus be extended in order to recognise that a writer's times are substantially determined by the past (this was Marx's point at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), become the past in their turn, and are hardly homogenous in any case.

The forty-one chapters of this volume are a lot, but they do not constitute infinity. Another way of saying this is that there are inevitably elements of Shelley's context that this book does not cover. However, it does operate with a capacious understanding of what 'context' might mean, not least because the volume's editor has not attempted to foist a unified concept of 'context' on its contributors, thus there may well be as many as forty (and quite possibly more) understandings of 'context' operative within it. There is considerable material here on Shelley's biography and

historical context – which comprise an 'infinite combination of circumstances' including the Sussex gentry, the education system for the British social elite, the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, British empiricism, scientific discovery, relationships of kinship, friendship, love, and rivalry, all conducted across a wide landscape of the British Isles and Europe. But as I emphasised above, Shelley's contexts can hardly be limited to those generated within his own lifetime. The writing and thinking of the past, at once an unshakeable burden and a rich inheritance to any worthwhile writer, was perhaps especially so to Shelley, one of the most widely read writers of the Romantic age. Yet Shelley was also a poet acutely mindful of what he called 'futurity' ('A Defence of Poetry', *SPP*, 535), keen to emphasise, as he put it in his fragmentary essay 'On Life', that 'man is a being of high aspirations "looking both before and after"', recalling a line from *Hamlet* (IV. iv. 37) that he had already worked into 'To a Sky-Lark': 'We look before and after/And pine for what is not' (*Poems* III, 476, ll. 86–87). What came after Shelley – and continues to come after him – has taken many forms and, indeed, been formed by many individuals, almost from the moment of his death. One consequence of Shelley's death at the age of twenty-nine has been the desire of others, from the friends he left behind to subsequent generations of interpreters, to try to imagine what he might have become – and what he might have been capable of – had he lived. Leigh Hunt claimed he would have been the greatest dramatic writer since the Elizabethan era; Karl Marx (again) reportedly held that, unlike Byron, Shelley would have remained a radical, had he lived; Alfred North Whitehead, in a slightly different vein, famously declared that '[i]f Shelley had been born a hundred years later, the twentieth century would have seen a Newton among chemists'.[5] Such speculations should not be dismissed as mere counterfactual whimsy and they find their occasional place in this volume. The difficult history of the posthumous editing and publication of Shelley's works is also told here, as is his highly tendentious reception in the Victorian period, his recruitment to political struggles, his influence in a wide range of global cultural and literary contexts, as well as his continued presence in culture and contemporary poetic practice. What 'Shelley' is, is very significantly what his various contexts and their interactions made him. The volume is divided into four parts – 'Life and Death', 'Intellectual, Cultural, and Political Contexts', 'Writings', and 'Afterlives' – though there are of course substantial connections (another 'infinite combination', perhaps?) between these parts and the individual chapters they contain.

Notes

1. *The Courier*, 5 August 1822, quoted in James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 659.
2. See https://trinitycollegelibrarycambridge.wordpress.com/2016/07/22/shelley-and-the-birth-of-frankenstein/.
3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. from the German (London: Lawrence & Wishart; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), p. 10.
4. Preface to Roderick Hudson (1907), in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p. 1041.
5. Leigh Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy* (1844), quoted in Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 221; Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling, 'Shelley and Socialism', *The Shelley Society's Papers*, Part I (London: Reeves and Turner, 1888), p. 183; Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), p. 105.

Acknowledgements

The editor would like to thank Bethany Thomas and two anonymous readers for CUP for providing wisdom and advice at crucial junctures. Paula Clarke Bain has done an excellent job on the index, the costs of which were generously covered by the Master and Fellows of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Swati Kumari was assiduous and, above all, patient during the closing stages of the book's production. Finally, the editor extends his warmest thanks to the book's contributors, with whom it has been a pleasure to work throughout.

Abbreviations

BSM	*Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*
CH	*Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by James Barcus
CP	*The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald Reiman et al. (Johns Hopkins ed.)
JMWS	*The Journals of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert
Letters	*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones
LMWS	*The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett
Poems	*The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews et al. (Longman ed.)
Prose	*The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by E. B. Murray
SC	*Shelley and his Circle*
SPP	*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 2nd ed., ed. by Reiman and Fraistat (Norton ed.)
TP	*Shelley's Prose; or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. by David Lee Clark
ZSI	*Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*, ed. by Stephen C. Behrendt (Broadview Press)