Introduction

Literature and Institutions

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Why Study Institutions of Literature?

In most common conceptions of how literature functions, the author and the reader are dominant: one seen as the originator of the literary work, the other as its recipient and (perhaps) arbiter. The shift towards the idea of an author-function oriented to sensitively receptive individual readers is often identified with a late-eighteenth-century transition to market relations. As reading publics expanded, older practices of elite composition and coterie circulation were slowly decentred through gradual processes of ‘liberal’ reform (with all the complexity and ambiguities of that adjective for this period acknowledged). However, even as the degrees of separation between individuals engaged in literary production and reception increased, mandating increasingly complex layers of mediation, the idea also developed that literature involved a privileged, almost telepathic communion between writer and reader.¹ The quintessential stereotypes of literary engagement that arose during this period – and which remain in many respects current – focus on rapt, solitary figures: the writer labouring at their desk; the poet wandering among the mountains; the leisured author in their study; the reader ensconced in a comfortable armchair, who for Friedrich Kittler epitomises the condition of literature around 1800.²

However, individuals were far from the only stakeholders in the creation and reception of literary texts in this period. Since at least the early eighteenth century, distinctively literary institutions have developed and endured, coming to play integral roles in culture and society. These

institutions provide sites for discussion and networks for circulation; serve as archival repositories; raise and disburse money; disseminate praise and criticism; author works and conduct readings; and teach people how to define and value culture. The development of such institutions was caught up in the process of sorting the disciplines of knowledge into something like their modern forms. As a result of this process, literature took its place as a distinctive domain, but one often defined as resisting specialism in the name of more purely ‘human’ sets of relations, as elaborated in works like Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ (1802) to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.³

In passages such as this one, as Maureen N. McLane points out, poetry appears as ‘an enemy both of professionalization and of specialization’: both qualities intimately bound up with the increasingly influential domains of institutions.⁴

This book considers the hitherto-neglected roles that institutions played in shaping literary culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, extending to either side of the period when Wordsworth was writing. One of the most significant characteristics of this period was the progressive transfer of kinds of authority previously invested in a small number of privileged individuals to organisations and bureaucracies. The more familiar narrative of these changes as part of an extended shift from patronage to the marketplace has often blinded observers to the fact that the latter – with its appearance of a form of liberal freedom – did not bring an end to the institutional life of literature, but rather reinstituted it on different grounds and in new forms.⁵ The profound impact of these developments has not yet been granted due attention, in no small measure because of the persistence of Romantic notions of reading as a form of direct communion, an ideal somewhat perversely disseminated by literary institutions themselves. Sites of literary tourism have often found the idea of the numinous genius very

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⁵ The shift away from patronage was also slower than traditional Whiggish accounts have implied, as Dustin Griffin shows in *Literary Patronage in England 1650–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
Introduction: Literature and Institutions

It was during our period that John Keats made his pilgrimage to Scotland to pay homage with many others to Robert Burns at his place of birth. By the time Keats visited in 1818, the cottage had become an ale-house – ‘The Burns Head Inn’ – presided over by ‘a great Bore with his Anecdotes . . . a mahogany faced old Jackass who knew Burns’. By 1838 there was a visitor’s album; 1847 saw a museum appended to the cottage; and souvenirs and Burns-related paraphernalia were on sale by 1876.

While Keats reacted negatively to ‘great Bore’ who greeted him, our discomfort with institutional authority means that both individuals and institutions are often more comfortable when powerful organising influences are masked behind human faces. This is perhaps especially true where the humanities are concerned. It is no coincidence that this book appears at a time when academics are feeling increasingly alienated by institutional forms as a management revolution in universities creates an unsettling sense that the free exchange of ideas is being marketised or, at least, subjected to increasingly intensive forms of bureaucratic mediation.

Perceiving and discussing the effects of institutions is often made difficult by their sheer scale, but also by the strange intangibility if not of their presences, then of their influence. Delineating the life of an author (or a founder) is relatively straightforward when compared with accounting for a literary institution that may have hundreds or thousands of stakeholders, might serve or educate tens of thousands, and that could have persisted for centuries, accumulating huge collections and voluminous records that will still only give a partial account of its activities. The large scales that successful institutions operate on have strongly determined how they have been approached by scholars. When institutional histories have been written, they have often comprised the history of a single particular institution, in a tradition stretching from Thomas Sprat’s early history of the Royal Society to modern works like Nigel Cross’s accounts of the Royal Literary Fund. This approach can be extremely fruitful, but does not necessarily

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8 Watson, p. 69.
provide a good platform for considering wider social drivers, or for apprehending the ways in which institutions interconnect to promote common practices and assumptions. Important accounts have sought to describe the development of particular types of literary institution, including subscription libraries, universities, and writer’s house museums. But what of the larger aggregate institutional infrastructure that has come to underpin how modern culture has been produced, circulated, and valued? Complicating that question further is the fact that the institutional scene’s involvedness is not just a matter of a mixed landscape of bricks and mortar, but also of less tangible sets of assumptions precipitating themselves into what Mary Poovey calls ‘protocols for knowing and representing institutions’, a process that she defines in relation to modern ‘domains’ of knowledge. Although it is easy to exaggerate the extent to which the order of things was consolidated in any given age, it is certainly true that the early nineteenth century saw the disciplines arranged into something like their modern forms. ‘Material’ and ‘symbolic’ institutions were formed, in Poovey’s terms – ‘territory . . . appropriated; boundaries . . . drawn; rules governing usage . . . established; unequal privileges . . . codified by law and then naturalised by repetition’.¹⁰ ‘Territory’ in this understanding is both literal and metaphorical: often a grand building, but also a ‘field’ of forces in the sense familiar from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of culture.¹¹ Chapter 3 by David A. Brewer and Chapter 6 by Anne H. Stevens treat ‘authorship’ and ‘genre’, respectively, as symbolic institutions in something like Poovey’s sense, but in practice even the most material institutions manage complex sets of symbolic relations, as many of the other contributions here acknowledge and explore.¹²

Examining the increasingly prominent roles played by institutions and institutional practices in producing, circulating, and defining literature over the course of two centuries is obviously an enormous topic that a collection of this scale can only broach, rather than cover comprehensively. The institutional landscape never achieved the completeness of the ‘panopticism’ often ascribed to Michel Foucault’s early thinking on governmentality and regulation.¹³

¹² Further examples of less tangible forms of institution are discussed in The Institution of English Literature: Formation and Mediation, ed. by Barbara Schaff, Johannes Schlegel, and Carolina Surkamp (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2017).
Introduction: Literature and Institutions

However interlocked various institutions became, however much they served established and emergent authorities and class interests – not to mention the formations of colonial and imperial power – they functioned in and helped shape a system in which domains never tessellated exactly. The field of literary production has never been closed and determinate, but is rather constituted by interactive forces rendered especially unstable when it comes to defining the literary in relation to other aspects of the cultural scene. In this ‘detotalized’ picture, as Anthony J. Cascardi puts it, ‘the modern subject is defined by its insertion into a series of separate value-spheres, each one of which tends to exclude or attempts to assert its priority over the rest’.  

However, when it comes to accounting for such complexities, a collection of this kind has the advantage of being able to incorporate different perspectives under one roof, allowing the diverse expertise of a variety of scholars to present a toolbox of different approaches for studying institutions, thereby suggesting by juxtaposition and contextualisation how ideas and circumstances changed over the period in question while never fitting together into a totality. Our focus is primarily on the distinctively decentred nature of the British institutional scene in the period 1700 to 1900, but Chapter 1 by Willy Maley, Chapter 11 by Sarah Comyn, and Chapter by 13 Porscha Fermanis track the way this distinctive governmentality translated into different arenas of the imperial situation, while Chapter 4 by Nicole Pohl allows for a comparison with the courtly institutions of the late eighteenth-century German states as they developed towards their own forms of liberal modernity.

The defining institutional form in Britain was the voluntary association. Centralised authority was treated with suspicion, even as bureaucracy and governmentality intensified over the course of the nineteenth century. Max Weber famously observed that Britain was the first state to develop industrial capitalism, but also ‘the slowest of all countries to succumb to bureaucratization’. Especially with the rolling back of the fiscal-military state after the Napoleonic Wars, there was a strong rearticulation of the long-standing idea of self-governance as intrinsic to the British character. ‘Subscriber democracy’, as R. J. Morris has described it, with its formal...

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observation of norms of free exchange – in practice contained within strict boundaries – became the distinctive form of the voluntary association. Literature was increasingly defended in the nineteenth century as the haven of an intangible national character that was resistant to institutionalisation even as its institutional locations proliferated. By drawing attention to the place of institutions in the literary landscape, this book seeks more clearly to articulate their immense significance and continuing relevance to modern society within this distinctive ‘liberal’ tradition. Despite the fact that many of the institutions it studies still exist, our study stops in 1900, partly for practical reasons of space, but also as this date suffices as an endpoint for considering the maturation of many of the key forms of institutionality. Institutions of Modernism have been studied in depth by Lawrence Rainey in terms of a retreat to deluxe editions, small magazines, and private patronage, but it is also true that in the twentieth century much of the institutional infrastructure explored in this volume was supplemented and even challenged by increasing state intervention, followed by the development of interstate agencies and organisations like UNESCO and PEN, with their developing sense of the ‘literary’ as a domain worthy of legal and other forms of sponsorship and protection on a worldwide scale.

What Is an Institution?

Before proceeding further in discussing institutions, it seems appropriate to say more about what the editors understand an institution to be, an understanding that developed from a series of workshops in which all the contributors to the volume were involved at one stage or another. The chapters included in this book are by no means governed by the attempt at definition that follows, but they have all played an important part in its evolution. The word ‘institution’ is most commonly understood in line with the seventh definition offered in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

An establishment, organization, or association, instituted for the promotion of some object, esp. one of public or general utility, religious, charitable, 

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18 Morris, ‘Voluntary Societies’, p. 152. Morris points out that this formally democratic principle made institutions vulnerable to complaints about access and diversity.


20 These workshops were facilitated by the institutional support of an Arts and Humanities Research Council research networking grant, and venues were made available by the Society of Antiquaries, York Medical Society, and the universities of Glasgow and York.
educational, etc., e.g. a church, school, college, hospital, asylum, reformatory, mission, or the like; as a literary and philosophical institution, a deaf and dumb institution, the Royal National Life-boat Institution, the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution (instituted 1798), the Railway Benevolent Institution, etc. The name is often popularly applied to the building appropriated to the work of a benevolent or educational institution.21

Tellingly for the chronology of this book, the earliest example the *OED* provides of this usage is from 1707, when the word appeared in a sermon given by Francis Atterbury on benevolent organisations: "'Tis not necessary to plead very earnestly in behalf of these Charities. . . . These, of which you have had an account, are such Wise, such Rational, such Beneficial Institutions."22 While the sermon describes the activities of organisations with long-standing remits – charities associated with the church and with the City of London – it suggests such organisations were beginning to be seen in new ways around this time, proliferating and operating in manners that were increasingly independent from the state, the church, and civic corporations.

In his *Keywords*, originally published in 1976, Raymond Williams identified a shift in the eighteenth century from an earlier sense of ‘institute’ and ‘institution’ as verbs or nouns of performative action, ‘part of a general sense of practices established in certain ways’, to ‘a general and abstract noun describing something apparently objective and systematic’.23 This last sense Williams saw as coinciding with the appearance of ‘institution’ and ‘institute’ in the titles of specific organisations or certain types of organisation, although this phenomenon really took off in the first two decades of the nineteenth century with the birth of the Royal Institution and its cognates and rivals the Surrey and British Institutions (not to mention provincial upstarts like the Royal Liverpool Institution, of which the London original seems to have heartily disapproved).24 The chronology that Williams presented is in many ways convenient for our purposes, but also somewhat misleading in the sharpness of its contrast. The idea of an act of institution as founding or decreeing into being, as Jon

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Klancher has pointed out, remained part of a ‘far more mixed picture where the nouns of *structure* intermingle with those of *action* (or agency)’. Part of this mixed picture is the strong and self-conscious sense of a whole cultural landscape being repopulated with new – and new kinds of – foundations. The *OED* definition quoted earlier provides a helpful summary of the types of organisations that came to be seen as being institutions and its point about the ways that institutional identities can inhere in buildings is one that deserves further consideration, particularly when discussing how institutions endure. However, it is less helpful for describing what an institution does. Consequently, the research network from which this book arose developed a working definition of an institution as ‘an assemblage that organises, transmits, and validates, and that self-consciously represents itself as doing so’. This is more prescriptive than the definitions the *OED* provides, but a closer examination will hopefully serve to demonstrate both what it seeks to encompass and its utility.

The mixed and open nature of the idea of ‘assemblage’ allows for the relatively easy inclusion of both things and processes within an institution’s identity. These are factors that become increasingly important as institutions age and human participants disaffiliate or pass on. Many institutions continue due to their legacy properties and holdings, with the process of instituting their authority remaining always necessarily incomplete. That is not to say, of course, that institutions do not pretend to the authority of completeness. Histories emerging from institutions themselves have often sought to promote and sustain their identities, as evidenced by memorial practices like collecting portraits and naming rooms and buildings. For this reason, the definition of institution pursued here would also give emphasis to practices that depend upon self-conscious claims to represent authority or a sphere of action, an aspect of institutions that might distinguish them from the less formal networks from which they often spring (and which they commonly play roles in sustaining). An institution’s authority, to develop this point further, depends on the social recognition of the value of its work, which is often demonstrated through affiliations advertised in forms such as the membership list or the annual report. Even when in practice the vast majority of an institution’s work is carried out by a particular individual or a small group, this work is legitimised as being institutional through the tacit consent of larger groups of stakeholders.

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The third definition the OED provides for ‘institution’ discusses an early usage that saw ‘institution’ as connoting ‘The giving of form or order to a thing’, a sense clearly related to the idea of institution as an act of bringing into being. This ordering aspect of institutional practice has remained important for modern institutions and occasions the inclusion of ‘organises’ in our definition. What an institution organises can vary widely. Many institutions organise forms of knowledge in some manner (often with a disciplinary focus), many curate physical collections – like the Hunterian museums discussed by Dahlia Porter in Chapter 8 – and many manage social processes and practices. Regardless of precise forms, the chapters gathered in this book show that all institutions aspire to be organisers (even if, in practice, they are not always successful ones). This organising propensity is demonstrated by many of the key genres of institutional interaction, including the minute, the constitution, the catalogue genre discussed by Porter, and the official report. These genres of institutionality seek to impose structures characterised by performances of authority and accountability. More loaded (Foucauldian) terms might be employed to describe institutional actions (‘regulate’; ‘control’), but ‘organise’, in the first instance at least, is both broadly applicable and helpful in terms of figuring how institutions seek (and potentially fail) to create meaning.

Part of the historical process of institutional development has been a mission to transmit through circulating (although this implies a reciprocity that is not always present in their operations) or publishing (a more heavily determined possibility). Whichever word is preferred, within our definition of institution, the concept of transmission serves as a token of the crucial role that communication plays in institutional work. The nature of what institutions transmit varies widely – from knowledge or expertise to capital to access to physical objects – and any given institution usually transmits in a range of different manners. A literary museum, like the Wordsworth Trust’s Dove Cottage, for example, could be figured as transmitting knowledge over quite small distances to its visitors or to attendees at conferences or events, but the Trust also transmits on a larger spatial scale through publications, loan arrangements, reproductions, and training. In the nineteenth century, the Literary Fund confidentially transmitted the funds it collected to impoverished authors its committee deemed worthy, but it also promoted literature through its reports and its lavish, self-consciously well-documented Anniversary Dinners, at which literary genius was lauded by the great and the good, often in execrable poetry memorialised by Byron as ‘creaking couplets’ bawled ‘in a tavern...
In addition, the Fund communicated with a wide-ranging networks beyond its membership and collaborated with other institutional actors, including the Civil List, the Royal Bounty Fund, the Society of Authors, and the Professional Classes Aid Council. These sorts of interactions were and remain crucial for effective institutional operations, serving both to advance an institution’s objectives directly and to raise awareness of its activities in ways that buttress its disciplinary and organisational authority. In the Literary Fund’s case, successful circulations and communications were recognised through the award of its royal charter in 1818 and the right to add ‘Royal’ to its name in 1842.

Our definition also acknowledges the importance of institutions’ roles as propagators of discourses of validation. Institutions commonly seek to define fields of knowledge or practice. Through doing so, they implicitly or explicitly reserve for themselves the right to police boundaries and determine value within them. The giving of prizes or charitable aid to worthy objects is one obvious mediating mechanism, but this aspect of institutionality is evident in a diverse range of practices, including the admission of members, the accessioning or deaccessioning of collection items, and the construction of syllabi and curricula. The sixth OED definition describes an institution as an ‘established law, custom, usage, practice, organization, or other element in the political or social life of a people; a regulative principle or convention subservient to the needs of an organised community or the general ends of civilization’. Successful institutions, both material and discursive, will often seek to represent their activities along these lines, claiming recognition for their judgements and assent for their regulative ideals.

Of course, success, on these terms, requires social and cultural acceptance. While institutions may sometimes organise, transmit, and validate in clandestine manners as part of their core activities, it is crucial for their long-term success that they be perceived to be acting effectively in the interests of their domain. Institutional self-advertisement can take many forms, from actual advertisements to grand buildings, published transactions, and commemorations of achievements. Such forms do not necessarily exclusively serve the function of representing an institution as conducting valuable work. However, they are often crucial for ensuring

28 These correspondences are documented in the Archive of the Royal Literary Fund, British Library Loan 96 RLF.
29 We are grateful to Katie Halsey for suggesting this refinement of the definition we initially proposed.