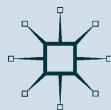


NINETEENTH-CENTURY MAJOR LIVES AND LETTERS



THE REGENCY REVISITED

EDITED BY
TIM FULFORD AND
MICHAEL E. SINATRA



Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

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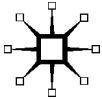
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*Tim Fulford
and
Michael E. Sinatra*

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CHAPTER 1



INTRODUCTION

Tim Fulford and Michael E. Sinatra

Since the 1990s, the field of Romantic Studies has been reconfigured. By virtue of detailed historical study of the political and cultural contexts in which “Romanticism” was produced and consumed, the historical situatedness and ideological function of its key ideals—imagination, genius, and power—have been subjected to critique. New Historicism led away from the canonization of powerful imaginative poems toward the contextualization of historically significant writings, and interrogated Romanticism in relation to such nineteenth-century contexts as politics and science, colonialism and empire, gender and sexuality, and visual and print culture. Yet while historicist inquiry became better informed and more wide-ranging, and historicist methodology more sophisticated and self-reflexive,¹ the data on which they were based—the historical periods investigated—were not transformed to the same degree. Thus many historicist studies of great methodological subtlety still focus exclusively on Wordsworth’s so-called Great Decade² and Coleridge’s “annus mirabilis” of 1797–1798,³ while others concentrate on the period of 1816–1823, when Keats, Byron, and Shelley came to the fore.⁴ In this respect many contemporary critics replicate the preferences of the very critical predecessors they attack. What is lost in this replication is not just a significant (if short) historical period in which literature and culture changed form, but also the possibility that re-periodization offers of questioning “Romanticism”—of challenging received wisdom about the literary movement assumed to have dominated the early nineteenth century. Our volume *The Regency Revisited* aims to explore this possibility, and in this it develops

perspectives from a number of critical works that have, in fact, if not in name, been exceptions to a common neglect. Donald Low's *The Regency Underworld* pioneered the study of popular culture in Regency London; Marilyn Gaull's *English Romanticism: The Human Context* revealed Romanticism's transformative interactions with the commercialization of art, fashion, and print culture in the Regency metropolis; several scholars have highlighted the significance of the Regency in precipitating changes in visual and music culture.⁵ This volume is intended to build on their work and to show that examining Romanticism in relation to the culture, politics, and history of the Regency reveals significant contours that are not evident as a result of conventional periodizations. Accommodation, credit, and disillusion are highlighted as issues, parodies, songs and magazine essays, as modes of writing, while popular art and fashionable exhibitions also burgeoned. This is not just a matter of dates: the Regency itself shaped the literature, and all the contradictions of the period.

Similarly, Thomas Lawrence's 1816 painting of the Prince Regent, which we use as our cover image, embodies some of these contradictions between the Regent's conception of himself—grandiose, larger than life, with the crown on the table next to him, and a cape that seems to take over the whole picture—and the way the authors under consideration in our volume engaged with him and his Regency. The painting betrays a sense of unease in the way it mixes praises and flattery with satire: the Regent's body seems to shrivel in his gaudy clothes, as if he were nothing but a display mannequin. The artificiality of his behavior had been the subject of many visual caricatures by James Gillray and others since the 1790s, but arguably none as biting as Leigh Hunt's famous description of Prince George, newly declared Regent, as "this *Adonis in loveliness*" in the pages of *The Examiner* on March 22, 1812:

What person, unacquainted with the true state of the case, would imagine, in reading these astounding eulogies, that this *Glory of the People* was the subject of millions of shrugs and reproaches! That this *Protector of the Arts* had named a wretched Foreigner his Historical Painter in disparagement or in ignorance of the merits of his own countrymen! That this *Mæcenas of the Age* patronized not a single deserving writer! That this *Breather of Eloquence* could not say a few decent extempore words—if we are to judge at least from what he said to his regiment on its embarkation to Portugal! That this Conqueror of Hearts was the disappointer of hopes! That this *Exciter of Desire*—this *Adonis in loveliness*, was a corpulent man of fifty!—In short, this delightful, blissful, wise, pleasurable, honourable, virtuous, true, and immortal PRINCE, was a

violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps, a man who had just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country, or the respect of posterity.⁶

The emperor's new clothes; Hunt said what many thought but few dared say. He was motivated by two emotions, both of which would be typical in the Regency years: disillusion and revulsion. Disillusion because Prince George, when his father was ailing and he was hopeful of being made Regent, had cultivated the liberal Whigs, raising hopes he would reform Parliament. When he gained the Regency, he dropped his reformist allies, dashing these hopes. Revulsion because Hunt had seen Whig newspapers, in expectation George would favor reform, lavish praise on him as patron and prince. Hunt knew this to be hypocritical sycophancy; he saw that it stemmed from the desire of politicians, pressmen, and poets for power and position ("place," in contemporary terms). His revulsion, then, was as much at the accommodation that liberal critics of oligarchy were prepared to make with the profligate Regent as with George himself. Hunt was also aiming at the reformers who showed themselves willing to praise the prince to win preferment. Their accommodation to the new order provoked his disgust; their idealization of the new ruler engendered his critique, which resulted in his being convicted of libeling George.

Accommodation and critique would be the twin poles of Romanticism in the Regency period. Byron suggested as much at its inception. After the Regent dropped the reformers, Byron published, anonymously, a personal attack, yet only a few months later was chatting to the prince about poetry, flattered by royal praise. A tempting accommodation beckoned, and Byron weighed up the prospect of becoming Laureate: "I have now great hope... of 'warbling truth at court,'...—Consider, 100 marks a year!'... besides the wine."⁷ But he held back, reminding himself of "the disgrace" and "remorse" becoming a favorite would entail.

Robert Southey did not hold back. In 1813, after discovering that Walter Scott, the prince's preferred poet, had refused the Laureateship, Southey accepted it. In so doing he made himself the embodiment of accommodation to, praise of, and eventually sycophancy toward, the monarch. He also became the chief symbol of onetime Romantic radicals' newfound alliance with the established order they had once opposed—and as such a target of satire and parody by Hunt and the writers whom Hunt nurtured. From its outset, Southey's Laureateship fascinated—even horrified—his contemporaries. He was

a figure whom “Many people laugh at . . . some may blush for” and “nobody envies.”⁸ Such observations were driven not merely by the hothouse cultural politics of the 1810s but also by awareness that Southey was attempting to do something different from his Laureate predecessors—that the radical poetic innovator of the 1790s was determined, rather than flatter the monarch and court, to use the Laureateship to speak of current events on behalf of the nation as a whole. As the *Edinburgh Review* noted, Southey was resolved “not to rest satisfied with the salary, sherry, and safe obscurity of his predecessors,” but instead to claim “a real power and prerogative in the world of letters, in virtue of his title and appointment.”⁹ He intended to stake this claim by rising above self-interest and party division to treat Britain’s victories in war as signs of its national destiny to destroy tyranny and to spread a civilization of liberty, industry, and manufacture across benighted Europe and the wider world. Southey would make the laureate a poet of patriotic imperialism, identifying his nation’s culture as a model for other countries as well as commemorating its deeds on the battlefield.

To Hunt, languishing in jail for mocking the Regent, Southey’s ambitions were undermined by the corruption of the British government and the absurdity of George, its figurehead. Without political reform, the national culture was rotten; if exported, it would spread tyranny and injustice across Europe and the world. In blinding himself to these facts, Southey discredited himself; he could no more be believed than the Regent he praised. His accommodation to the governing establishment was a warning: Hunt learned from him what not to do and be as a writer, and inculcated this lesson to the young poets in his circle and to the public via his journalism. Thus Southey (even more than Wordsworth and Coleridge) became, for Hazlitt, Keats, Shelley, and Byron, a figure to define oneself against, even if one admired (and borrowed from) their work. As Jeffrey N. Cox and Gregory Kucich show here, the Cockney circle took shape in disillusioned opposition to and grudging admiration of the poet it viewed as central to a group of apostates—the Lake Poets. Southey’s significance is a central feature of this book.

* * *

George, everyone agreed, was well meaning. A symbol of the profligacy and self-indulgence of a corrupt aristocratic oligarchy he might be, but in person he was charming, if ineffectual and vain. It was hard to resist his patronage, harder still not to accommodate oneself to his

taste, as Walter Scott discovered. Invited in 1815 to dine with the prince, who admired *Waverley*, Scott was made a baronet in 1818, after busying himself on George's behalf unearthing the lost Crown Jewels of Scotland. In 1822, Scott would organize the pageantry of George's visit to Edinburgh, dressing the new King in the tartan of a Highland chief and surrounding him with displays of Scottish loyalty: Romantic fiction staging political ideology as historical fact on the streets of the city.

Jane Austen, like Scott, found herself entreated to please. “[I]nvited” by the Regent’s librarian to include a royal dedication in her next novel, *Emma*, she complied; nevertheless, she held out against altering her subject-matter:

You are very kind in your hints as to the sort of composition which might recommend me at present, and I am fully sensible that an historical romance, founded on the House of Saxe-Cobourg, might be much more to the purpose of profit or popularity than such pictures of domestic life in country villages as I deal in. But I could no more write a romance than an epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter. No, I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way; and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.¹⁰

Resisting Regency taste led Austen to parody, just as it would Hunt and Byron: she composed a “Plan of a Novel According to Hints from Various Quarters” that guyed the historical romances George’s librarian was encouraging her to write:

Early in her career, in the progress of her first removals, Heroine must meet with the Hero—all perfection of course—and only prevented from paying his addresses to her by some excess of refinement.—Wherever she goes, somebody falls in love with her, and she receives repeated offers of Marriage—which she refers wholly to her Father, exceedingly angry that *he* should not be first applied to.—Often carried away by the anti-hero, but rescued either by her Father or by the Hero—often reduced to support herself and her Father by her Talents and work for her Bread; continually cheated and defrauded of her hire, worn down to a Skeleton, and now and then starved to death.—At last, hunted out of civilized Society, denied the poor Shelter of the humblest Cottage, they are compelled to retreat into Kamschatka where the

poor Father, quite worn down, finding his end approaching, throws himself on the Ground, and after 4 or 5 hours of tender advice and parental Admonition to his miserable Child, expires in a fine burst of Literary Enthusiasm, intermingled with Invectives against holders of Tithes.—Heroine inconsolable for some time—but afterwards crawls back towards her former Country—having at least 20 narrow escapes from falling into the hands of the Anti-hero—and at last in the very nick of time, turning a corner to avoid him, runs into the arms of the Hero himself, who having just shaken off the scruples which fetter'd him before, was at the very moment setting off in pursuit of her.¹¹

Austen debunked the current taste for the sentimental and showy that the Regent took to an absurd degree: the portrait of Sir Walter Elliott in *Persuasion* satirizes Regency manners and morals in the figure of a self-indulgent, effeminate, ageing gentleman that cannot but remind readers of Prince George. George's pet project—Brighton Pavilion—all bling and Chinoiserie, drained the public purse by hundreds of thousands of pounds. This ruinous penchant for fashionable decor was mocked not only by Austen but by George Cruikshank, who, in "The court at Brighton à la Chinese!!" lampooned George's extravagant Orientalism and decadent sexuality by showing him as a pudgy Chinese emperor alongside his buxom mistress Lady Hertford. In front of the Regent is a pile of papers, one of which is entitled "Proposal to continue the Property Tax for ever, to pay off Arrears of ye Civil List occasiond by ye Regency Whims," "Fairs, Carnivals, & other Royal Fooleries."

1816–1817 saw the economy, which had been booming in war-time, crash. Soldiers recently returned from battle found themselves destitute; millhands were out of work; laborers starved, their wages too little to buy the food their field-work produced. Protests swept the counties; revolution was expected; the government suspended habeas corpus and arrested radical leaders. In this context, George's opulent lifestyle was identified as not only decadent in itself, but also a heinous symbol of a whole system that impoverished the common people—the workers—in order to perpetuate an oligarchy. Attacking this system, William Cobbett added an economic critique to Hunt's exposure of the sycophancy that attached to the Regent. The pretense that the Regent was a great monarch was a symptom of a credit system that depended on mutual make-believe. In his *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers* (1816), Cobbett summarized an argument he had been making since 1811: The regency government depended on nothing more than the credit the people gave it, since financial

credit was the basis of the whole economic system on which it relied and which it existed to perpetuate. The debt financing in which the ministry had indulged to fund its war had required the suspension of the gold standard: paper money rapidly exceeded the gold reserve, so that the currency was supported by nothing more than trust that the government could continue to pay the interest on its loans. The results of printing money in this way were, Cobbett argued, social and political as well as economic. A class of money men was engendered whose property was not in land or goods but in money and in speculation. And the ruling class had grown addicted to the pensions, sinecures, and places that the government passed to them and their clients in return for their support. The figurehead of it all was a Regent who was paid not to rule—bribed from taxpayers' monies to keep him distracted with expensive playthings so that he did not interfere in policy. Thus the Regent's massive debts were emblems of the systematic fraud of the new economics and politics—products not abuses of it. So were taxes, raised to pay the interest on the national debt and paid disproportionately by the laborers who produced agricultural and manufacturing wealth because they were levied on everyday items such as salt, beer, and shoes.

Cobbett's diagnosis—made in forthright terms as a blunt critique appealing to the common people—helped focus the poetry of a new generation. Percy Shelley developed Cobbett's economic arguments about the credit system, just as he also learned from Hunt to target discourses that encouraged belief in the monarch's majesty. Reform demanded the discrediting, in both senses, of government, nation, and Regent. It necessitated disillusioning the people who, actually exploited by the system, were encouraged by the supposed magnificence of the Regent to believe in it. In his 1819 "Song to the Men of England," Shelley found a new poetic direction—not just more political but more focused, controlled, and graphic. Following Cobbett, he addressed the common people. Using the form of the popular ballad, he called on them to recognize their exploitation and to rebel:

Men of England, wherefore plough
 For the lords who lay ye low?
 Wherefore weave with toil and care
 The rich robes your tyrants wear?
 Wherefore feed and clothe and save,
 From the cradle to the grave,
 Those ungrateful drones who would
 Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood!¹²

Shelley's new direction extended also to the high culture genre of the sonnet, where he was still more explicit about the system and the Regent's role in it:

An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king;
 Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
 Through public scorn—mud from a muddy spring;
 Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
 But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
 Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,
 A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field,
 An army, which liberticide and prey
 Makes as a two-edg'd sword to all who wield;
 Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay,
 Religion Christless, Godless—a book seal'd;
 A Senate—Time's worst statute unrepeal'd,
 Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
 Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.¹³

Belief depended on blindness: opening readers' eyes, Shelley turned disillusion into prophecy and derived hope from disgust.

It was once assumed that—and some critics still in practice proceed as if—the radicalization of the second generation Romanticism was a reaction against the government crackdown on radicals in 1817 and the killing of peaceful protestors in 1819. It is further assumed that the first generation's—Southey's, Wordsworth's, and Coleridge's—accommodation to this government became at this point so flagitious in younger radicals' eyes that it precipitated their turn from sincerity and idealism to irony and sarcasm, and from nature and soul to politics and society. Satire and parody became Romantic genres, and in 1819 Byron tellingly began *Don Juan*, a major departure from his previous work, with dedicatory verses mocking the Lake Poets' for their servility to government. In the same year, Shelley turned away from Wordsworthian nature lyrics toward the parody of "Peter Bell the Third" and the satire of "Swellfoot the Tyrant." However, approaching Romanticism through the 1811–1820 frame lets us appreciate that this new direction was not simply a response to the politics of 1817 and 1819: it was the culmination of a diagnosis, beginning in 1811 and 1812 with Cobbett and Hunt, of the Regency as a credit system. The second generation defined its disillusion as the regaining of sight that they had lost under the spell of the first generation's enthralling verse, although the marks of their admiration continued, in fact,

to be legible in their work. There is much of Southey in *Prometheus Unbound* and of Wordsworth in "Hyperion."

What of that first generation? How do the "Lake Poets" appear when viewed neither in terms of 1798–1807 nor those of 1817 and 1819? Viewing them as Regency writers lets us account for their move away from their radical affiliations within a wider historical perspective. Rather than attributing it to innate yet unexplained reactionary tendencies, to a kneejerk alarmism about popular protest or to a slavish desire to win preferment from royals and aristocrats, we can understand it as a process with complex causes, one of which comes more sharply into focus than before. This cause concerns the war against Napoleon and liberal and radical attitudes to it. From 1811, Wellington's army, in league with the popular resistance of the Portuguese and Spanish, began to defeat French forces in the Iberian Peninsula. Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth welcomed this campaign as a heroic struggle against the tyranny of an invader who, a decade earlier, had prepared to invade Britain. They grew to despise the liberal Whigs who doubted its wisdom and who apologized for, and counseled appeasement of, Napoleonic imperialism. It was their sympathy for the Spanish and Portuguese resistance to French invasion that led them to accommodation with government, and its embodiment in the Regent. Thus Wellington's victory, Napoleon's abdication in 1814, and the final battle at Waterloo the following year, seemed to them patriotic triumphs through which Britain had freed the oppressed peoples of Europe, rather than, as they came to appear in 1816, preludes to the reinstatement of the arbitrary rule of discredited Bourbon monarchs. Southey's epic poem on the foundation of a nation, *Roderick, the Last of the Goths* (1814), emerges as a key work: rather than celebrate the origins of Britain, it told the nation-founding story of the emergence of Spain. It was an epic of displaced patriotism for a Regency that could be accommodated but that could not itself be presented in heroic terms. At the same time, both Scott and Walter Savage Landor were writing poems on the same subject: medieval Spain became an allegory of the contemporary Iberian war and a celebration of nationalism that was immune to the accusations of exploitation and extravagance that beset the Regency at home. Wordsworth's *Excursion* similarly attempted to confer epic qualities upon the national character by indirect means, preferring earnest debate about the moral character of rural Englishness to heroic tales of nation-establishing victories in war. The Regency could not be celebrated in itself, but only avoided, even by those who were allied with it.

Although it could not be celebrated, aspects of the culture it promoted could be enjoyed. Prince George loved the fashion, the gossip, the theatre, the arts, the shopping that made London the envy of the rest of Britain and Europe. So did Charles Lamb and the circle of writers attracted to Hunt: they embraced the commercial culture that circulated from the metropolitan center around the country. They wrote for the new organs that came into prominence as the publishing market expanded—newspapers, metropolitan magazines, and reviewing journals—creating an illusion of intimacy with a mass reading public by pioneering the gossipy essay, in which they gloried in the pleasures of everyday life—the rural inn, the boxing match, the latest play—and described their personal acquaintance with literary men. Literary culture in the Regency thus fostered what Coleridge called “an age of personality” capable of turning an actor or writer into an overnight star, as Edmund Kean found in May 1814 when he first played Shakespeare at Drury Lane theatre and as Byron discovered when the first canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812) made him a celebrity whose private life was detailed in the newspapers. Celebrity was both loved and loathed: Kean and Byron both plummeted from popularity to pariahdom because they were unable, in the face of gossip about their unconventional love lives, to manage their public relations. Success increasingly depended on being able to market a version of oneself that allowed a readership larger than ever before to feel that it personally knew—and liked—one. While Scott and Thomas Moore mastered this new skill and achieved celebrity and wealth, Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge did not—and Keats and Shelley did so only posthumously when they were mythologized by their friends.

Kean’s meteoric rise and fall reminds us of the popularity of theatre during the Regency, a phenomenon not confined to London but extending to the major cities, the provinces, and also to America.¹⁴ Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons had been the precursors of a star system that reconfigured the theatrical scene of the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, as Hunt recalls in his *Autobiography*, “Nobility, gentry, citizens, princes,—all were frequenters of theatres, and even more or less acquainted personally with the performers.”¹⁵ Theatre criticism was also present in all the major periodicals, with famous reviews written by Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, or Hunt himself. The Regency saw the performance of Coleridge’s *Remorse* at Drury Lane in 1813, which became the second-longest-running new tragedy at that theatre since 1797. This period also witnessed a series of major technical changes to the stage, be it in size or lighting, while the

popularity of the theatre, its actors, and managers, continued to be at the foreground of the cultural scene in London.¹⁶

Our volume of essays opens with Jonathan Sachs' discussion of Anne Grant's 1814 poem *Eighteen Hundred and Thirteen*, her response to Anna Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, which had been published two years previously. This chapter considers the fantasies of futurity in these two poems along with the ways in which these works imagine alternative futures in their place of composition. What was it to be British, now? Would, sometime in the future, the Regency be seen as an era, a historical period of importance, and if so, why? Uncertainty about the future was not new in the years 1811–1814 and might be understood in connection with longstanding changes associated with modernity more generally as a theological future became a secular, market-driven future. What is new, however, is the intensity of this uncertainty as the Napoleonic war and the new Regency put time and place in question.

In Chapter 3, Joel Faflak investigates national anxiety and national happiness, tracing them to eighteenth-century moral philosophy, political economy, aesthetics, sympathy, and sensibility, showing them to be characteristic of the anxieties associated with the First British Empire. The Regency required a rather more urgent domestic reorganization of pleasure's otherwise excessive desires as a model for broader imperial and domestic governance. Faflak argues through a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* that the Regency novel's romance of domestic stability provided a model of good governance for a nation with new imperial interests. *Queen Mab*, he shows, is a fantasia on the kinesis of cosmic forces as well as an allegory for the transformation of entropic Regency social reality.

Regency social reality is Robert Miles' theme in his discussion of *Mansfield Park*, the first of Austen's novels composed during the Chawton years (1809–1817), in Chapter 4. As such, it displays a different sensibility from her earlier novels, one that illuminates the Regency period. Renewing the estate (as opposed to "improving" it) through a lower-class agent is a new theme in Austen, one that sheds light on the Counter-Enlightenment aspects of her writing. Miles explores *Mansfield Park* to deepen our knowledge of the distinctive character of Regency culture, as exemplified through the reaction to the Berkeley Peerage affair, the biggest political scandal of 1811.

In Chapter 5, Tilar Mazzeo proposes a Regency William Blake with deep, if ambivalent, engagement in the contemporary currents of London society. She considers several concurrent events that begin with Jane Austen's letter of May 24, 1813, in which the author describes