

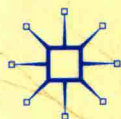
NINETEENTH-CENTURY MAJOR LIVES AND LETTERS



ROMANTIC POETRY AND LITERARY COTERIES

The Dialect of the Tribe

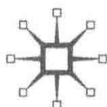
TIM FULFORD



ROMANTIC POETRY AND
LITERARY COTERIES
THE DIALECT OF THE TRIBE

Tim Fulford

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ROMANTIC POETRY AND LITERARY COTERIES

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First published in 2015 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978–1–137–53396–8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fulford, Tim, 1962–

Romantic poetry and literary coteries : the dialect of the tribe / Tim Fulford.

pages cm.—(Nineteenth-century major lives and letters)

Summary: "How does Romantic poetry read if seen as the product of social authorship—the group language of coteries of writers, editors, publishers and critics—rather than as a series of verbal icons—original lyrics and romances composed by individual geniuses? *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries* explores Romanticism as a discourse characterized by tropes and forms that were jointly produced by literary circles – writing communities – in self-conscious opposition to prevailing social and political values and in deliberate differentiation from the normal practices of contemporary print culture. Among the tropes examined are allusion and borrowing; among the forms discussed are blank-verse effusions, political squibs, magazine essays, millenarian prophecies, long-form notebook verse, illustrated tour poems and prose journals. Coteries considered comprise the Southey/Coleridge circle, including Bowles, Cottle, Cowper, Lamb, Lloyd, Robinson and Wordsworth; the Bloomfield circle, including Capel Lofft and Thomas Hood; the Clare circle, including Byron, Cowper, William Knight and John Taylor; the Cockneys, including Richard Brothers; William Bryan, De Quincey, Hood, Leigh Hunt, Robert Mudie, Patmore"—Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978–1–137–53396–8 (hardback)

1. English poetry—19th century—History and criticism.

2. Romanticism—England. 3. Literature and society—England—History—19th century. 4. Poets, English—19th century. I. Title.

PR590.F86 2015

821'.709145—dc23

2015006813

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: August 2015

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries, by Tim Fulford

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to all those who have helped shape this book, notably Kerri Andrews, Stuart Andrews, Sally Bushell, Carol Bolton, Julia S. Carlson, Paul Cheshire, Jeff Cox, Ashley Cross, David Fairer, Marilyn Gaull, John Goodridge, Lynne Hapgood, Ian Haywood, David Higgins, Simon Kovesi, Greg Kucich, Peter Larkin, Lucy Newlyn, Morton D. Paley, Dahlia Porter, Lynda Pratt, Matthew Sangster, David Vallins, Alan Vardy, and Joshua Wilner. Some chapters were derived in part from the following articles: "The Electrifying Mrs. Robinson," *Women's Writing*, 9 (2002), 23–36 (part of chapter 1); "Coleridge's Sequel to *Thalaba* and Robert Southey's Prequel to *Christabel*," *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient: Cultural Negotiations*, ed. David Vallins, Kaz Oishi, and Seamus Perry (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 55–70 (part of chapter 2); "Coleridge's Visions of 1816: the Political Unconscious and the Poetic Fragment," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 61 (April 2012) (part of chapter 3); "British Romantics and Native Americans: The Araucanians of Chile," *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), 225–52 (part of chapter 4); "To 'crown with glory the romantick scene': Robert Bloomfield's 'To Immagination' and the Discourse of Romanticism," *Romanticism*, 15 (2009), 181–200 (part of chapter 5); "Bloomfield in His Letters: The Social World of a London Shoemaker Turned Suffolk Poet," in *Robert Bloomfield: The Inestimable Blessing of Letters*, ed. John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, *Romantic Circles Praxis* (January 2012) (part of chapters 5 and 7); "Personating Poets on the Page: John Clare in His Asylum Notebooks," *John Clare Society Journal*, 32 (2013), 27–48 (part of chapter 6); "Talking, Walking, and Working: The Cockney Clerk, the Suburban Ramble, and the Invention of Leisure," *Essays in Romanticism*, 18 (2011), 75–95 (part of chapter 7); "Babylon and Jerusalem on the Old Kent Road," in *Romanticism and the City*, ed. Larry Peer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 241–59 (part of chapter 8).

ABBREVIATIONS

- Banks of Wye *The Banks of Wye*, ed. Tim Fulford, (Romantic Circles Online Edition). <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/wye>
- BL *The Letters of Robert Bloomfield and His Circle*, ed. Tim Fulford and Lynda Pratt, (Romantic Circles Online Edition). http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/bloomfield_letters/
- ByPW *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)
- CBL S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)
- Christabel* S. T. Coleridge, *Christabel, Kubla Khan, the Pains of Sleep* (London, 1816).
- CL *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956–1971)
- CN *Collected Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957–2002)
- Cowper *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)
- CPW S. T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 6 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)
- DeQ *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen. ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999–2002)
- EOT S. T. Coleridge, *Essays on His Times*, ed. David V. Erdman, 3 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978)

- Excursion* *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007)
- Friend* S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969)
- Jerusalem* William Blake, *Jerusalem*. blakearchive.org
- Lects 1808–19* S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures on Literature 1808–19*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987)
- LS S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972)
- MRW *The Works of Mary Robinson*, gen. ed. William D. Brewer, 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009)
- Prelude* William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1995)
- SiR *Studies in Romanticism*
- SL *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey*, gen. eds. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford, and Ian Packer (Romantic Circles Online Edition, 2009–) http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/
- Songs* William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. blakearchive.org
- SPW *Robert Southey. Poetical Works 1793–1810*, gen. ed. Lynda Pratt, 5 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004)
- Task* William Cowper, *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (London and New York: Longman, 1994)
- WL *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. I. The Early Years: 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967) (EY); *The Middle Years, 1806–17*, 2nd ed., ed. E. de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969) (MY); *The Later Years*, 2nd ed., ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) (LY)
- WLB Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992)

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INTRODUCTION

*A sect of poets, that has established itself in this country within these
ten or twelve years*

—Francis Jeffrey, review of Southey,
Thalaba the Destroyer in
The Edinburgh Review,
1 (1803), 63

*Few, amid the rural-tribe, have time
To number syllables or play with rhyme*

—George Crabbe, *The Village* (1783),
lines 25–26

That perverse singularity of judgement which haunts the tribe of poets

—*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*,
10 (August–December 1821), 184,
on Southey

The real objects of his admiration are the Coterie of Hampstead

—J. G. Lockhart, “On the Cockney School of Poetry,”
Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 2 (October 1817),
38–40, on Leigh Hunt

I have two related aims in *The Dialect of the Tribe*: first, to explore the formative role played in the production of Romanticism by coterie groups that comprised not only writers but also editors, patrons, booksellers, and critics; second, to understand the significance of the trope that was the hallmark of coterie style—allusion. The coterie groups I examine overlapped temporally and spatially; they even shared some of their members. Together they forged and reformed a literary language built on new, as well as traditional, uses of allusion.

Romantic coterie groups were intense friendship groups in which a new poetic language was forged in common, often collaboratively, and usually, at least initially, in private. They involved men and women and they acted as circles of production and consumption as well as composition. Poetry was criticized, edited, transcribed, circulated,

performed, heard, and read within the group. It was also made public by the group—in joint recitations, collaborative collections, group anthologies, and house magazines and newspapers. Once made public, the poetry led the group to be defined by its critics—sometimes more tightly than by the poets themselves. “Sect,” “gang,” and “tribe” were names given by reviewers who recognized that the new poets challenged established taste because their language originated in lower-class speech communities. “Tribe” implied that the poets shared the values and beliefs of the American Indians: they were uncouth, uncivilized, savage. It is this class and racial condescension that T. S. Eliot picked up in his declaration that the poet’s task is to “purify the dialect of the tribe.” His remark has, for all its implicit distaste, something in common with Wordsworth’s argument, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that the poet makes “a selection of the real language of men” “purified indeed from . . . its real defects” (WLB, pp. 741, 744). The Preface was viewed as the manifesto of a radical coterie, a “sect of poets”: its derivation of poetic language from common speech led conservative critics to brand Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Lamb, and Lloyd as being perversely and politically déclassé. They had mired themselves in lower-class slang and patois but they did not purify it; rather, it tainted them—they were collectively identifiable because they took on the linguistic patterns of uneducated cultural groups—and, in that sense, were tribal.

While Crabbe and *Blackwood’s* called laboring-class and Lake writers “tribes,” Francis Jeffrey popularized “sect” as the collective noun. The new poetry, it was implied, smacked of the cult phraseology of religious enthusiasts as well as the uncouth terms of savages. It was a collective dialect, a self-reinforcing discourse that dragged traditional literary language into lower-class venues: the chapel and the sweat lodge. To conservative arbiters of taste such as Jeffrey, it was both new and dangerous, and it needed purification from its class affiliations, its social leveling, and its political radicalism. Jeffrey blamed its appearance on Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and their friends. It is this coterie on which I focus first. By the 1960s and 1970s, it was renamed “the Wordsworth circle” and praised rather than blamed—praised in part because it was often reduced to the Wordsworth/Coleridge axis; other members whose writings did not fit the models of imaginative and symbolic language that critics idealized were relegated to the background.¹ Although those models were challenged in the 1990s, it has taken longer to restore to view the work of the neglected members. Here, developing the work of several recent

scholars,² I continue the process of restoration—framing it as a West Country coterie comprising a series of overlapping and shifting partnerships³ in which—as well as Coleridge and Wordsworth—Southey, De Quincey, Bowles, Mary Robinson, and Charles Lloyd all played parts. Later, in the Lakes, part of this coterie was reconstituted, featuring Southey as strongly as Coleridge and Wordsworth.

The second and third coterie I discuss are those assembled by so-called peasant poets, Crabbe's "rural tribe": Robert Bloomfield and John Clare. These coterie intersected with each other (Clare being an admirer of Bloomfield, who acted as his mentor), and with the kind of poetry the West Country and Lakes coterie had fashioned.

The fourth is the "Cockney school," billed at the time as an urban successor to the "tribe of poets" in the Lakes. The Cockneys were branded as a lower-middle-class coterie who brought onto the page the cant lingo of London tradesmen: they smacked of the shop. Here again I aim to change our understanding of the group—so well discussed by Jeffrey Cox, Greg Kucich, and Gregory Dart⁴—by focusing on some of its less central members—Bloomfield and "cockney Clare"⁵ among them—and by emphasizing its ambivalent relationships to the rural poetry of the Lake poets on the one hand, and, on the other, to the Cockney culture common among artisans and tradesmen. Discussing Lamb as well as Thomas Hood and P. G. Patmore, I suggest that in the Cockney coterie the Romantic sublimity fashioned in West Country and Lakes poetry in opposition to London was replayed in the petit bourgeois form of the confessional essay, with a self-reflexive awareness of indebtedness that was overwritten by conscious display of difference. Romanticism, it follows, emerges from my discussions as a dialogue between, on the one hand, provincial and rural groupings and, on the other, their metropolitan followers. Its hallmarks—imagination, sublimity, and confession—were jointly forged by a group of university poets in reaction against London culture and later reformed by circles of laboring and middle-class writers who wrote from that London culture. Yet the country and the city were not simply in opposition, for the discourse of each was inflected by the other: writers such as Bloomfield, Clare, and Leigh Hunt had a foot in both camps. Romanticism was a conflicted response, of both fascination and repulsion, to the commercial and consumerist culture that centered on London. Its trajectory was shaped by spatial, temporal, and class differences, but above all by group identity—by the shared writing and reading practices of literary coterie.

WRITING COMMUNITIES

What is revealed by examining Romanticism as a discourse made and remade in coteries? In what follows I replace emphasis on the solitary author—the sublime egotist Wordsworth and damaged archangel Coleridge—or even on an expanded roster of individual writers—with a social history of literary production in groups. Thus, I analyze poetry in relation to the conditions in which composition, publishing, and reading took place—conditions affected by a culture undergoing a series of rapid transformations that altered the status and role of authors. It was, as Coleridge and Southey put it, an “age of personality” (*Friend*, II, 286–87): one in which a capitalized publishing market served an expanded reading public and scores of new newspapers, journals and magazines traded in the personal—whether by hostile reviews that attacked an author’s private character, or by gossip about literary celebrities.⁶ The formerly private became public, and writers experienced unprecedented pressures: their self-belief and self-possession, their ability to make a living and to earn reputation, was placed in doubt. As Jon Klancher,⁷ Lee Erickson,⁸ and Andrew Franta⁹ have shown, literary value was put into competition with commercial value as never before. Some were able to bridge the two: among writers who excelled in traditional “high” cultural forms of poetry there were new opportunities of profit and renown for those who learned to trade on their authorial personae. Byron, for instance, earned money and fame from his creation of a poetic persona that seemed to offer access to intimate details of his life.¹⁰ Coleridge, on the other hand, regarded contemporary print culture with suspicion because its commercialization of publication replaced traditional relationships between author, patron, bookseller, and reader with a monetarized relationship between a writer and a distant public whose purchases were guided by reviewers and magazine journalists.

If publication became commercialized, it also became politicized to a new extent. The dramatic acceleration of capitalism altered both living conditions and cultural values. The interrelated rise of imperialism and the manufacturing system, and of consumerism and commodity fetishism, left many people in Britain and the colonies exploited, alienated and disorientated. The resultant political campaigns for reform, fuelled by the example of the French Revolution, triggered a fractious contest for cultural and political authority. Reformers were countered by repressive laws that made direct criticism of the established political and religious order highly dangerous. Campaigners were also resisted by an anti-Jacobin press that attacked

radicals' characters, leaving the public sphere personalized as well as politically polarized.¹¹

It was under pressure from this politicization, which they traced to London, that young intellectuals banded together in the provinces to support each other's writing and to find ways of gaining access to print. The problems and opportunities presented by a commercialized and politicized public sphere created a group identity, labeled as such by critics and adopted by the writers themselves. Nor was the group confined to writers: editors and publishers were also important in creating the new literary coterie—and indeed some members of the group performed all three roles.¹² At least in the early years of the "Jacobin crew"¹³ based in Bristol and Somerset, to be an author was, it appeared, to be part of a group that jointly generated and published text—sometimes even printing that text too. It follows, then, that a figure such as Southey—poet, anthologist, editor, publicist, collaborator—was more significant in shaping the group language than the relatively marginal Wordsworth. The "Bristol sound" was sometimes so much a collaborative production that to speak of a text having one author became meaningless: produced and reproduced for different occasions, it existed in different versions as the work of different combinations of creators (as Jack Stillinger¹⁴ has shown of a number of poems attributed variously to Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth singly and in combination¹⁵).

Investigating Romantic poetry as the product of what Margaret Ezell has called "social authorship"¹⁶ alters our understanding of its creation, production, and consumption—and also changes the picture of the producers involved. If it brings Southey to the fore, it also reminds us that the Bristol circle and Lake sects included women, at times at least—though their participation was not necessarily on an equal basis. In *The Dialect of the Tribe*, I explore the uneasy but nevertheless highly productive inclusion of Mary Robinson in a circle of Bristol writers; I develop recent work by Lucy Newlyn¹⁷ and Susan Wolfson¹⁸ in which the "separate spheres" produced by the critical separation of men's and women's writing are replaced by new tracings of literary relationships that, at their closest, involved a process of shared composition that was mutually formative for both the male and female writer involved. Wolfson has found in the Wordsworths' relationship a new model in which Romantic writing emerges from a constitutive interaction that brings an author into being not as a subject but as an intersubject.¹⁹ And even where the relationship was less close than the Wordsworths', several scholars have found evidence of mutual redefinition. Ashley Cross, for example, has revealed how

Southey and Mary Robinson, though they never met, each came into their own as poets as their work converged in a poetic dialogue conducted in the columns of a newspaper.²⁰

Wordsworth's poems provide one example of partnership in action at the center of a literary circle. As Sally Bushell²¹ has shown, Wordsworth's household was a poetry workshop, linked to a wider circle that included Southey, Scott, and Coleridge.²² A poem typically began orally with William and Dorothy walking and talking and then William turning conversation into verse, muttering the measures as he paced back and forth. These measures were moved onto paper by the scriptorial labor of William's female relatives, who might then read aloud what they had written down, whereupon it would be revised, sometimes orally, sometimes directly on the manuscript, and then written out again. Sent to be printed in Bristol and London, the text would be prepared for publication by a friend employed to negotiate with the booksellers and make alterations as it went through the press (for *Lyrical Ballads* this role was played by the coterie member Humphry Davy—chemist, poet, and philosopher). A result of Bushell's work is that we understand even so apparently autonomous and individual an "author" as the "William Wordsworth" credited on the title page of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/1802) and *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807) as a singular identity for a writing community without which the man William Wordsworth could not move his verse from his mind and his tongue onto the page. Here, I examine similar, though shorter lived, writing workshops formed by Southey and Coleridge, by Bloomfield, his friends and bookseller, and by Clare and his asylum keeper William Knight.

COTERIE LANGUAGE

A social history of the production of Romanticism shows it being generated in partnerships, collaborations, and workshops, being revised and edited by coterie members, and being issued in homemade collections (Coleridge's 1796 sonnets and *The Friend*; Bloomfield's tour poem and sketchbook *The Banks of Wye*, for example). But what does it reveal about Romantic form and style? Here, I offer a series of analyses that aim to reveal, by teasing out the intricate threads that relate one text to another, the ways in which historical pressures were refracted in particular uses of literary tropes that marked and, in part, constituted a common style. These tropes are allusion²³—modulating, when less self-advertising and declarative,²⁴ into borrowing,²⁵

and echo²⁶—phrasings that are shared by many members without clearly belonging to one originator, collectively forming a dialect.²⁷

In an era in which poetry competed as never before in a professionalized and commercialized literary market, poets displayed their credentials by playfully alluding to and borrowing from the work of popular respected forebears—bolstering their cultural authority by placing themselves “among the English poets”;²⁸ they also referenced each other’s words, or published words mutually generated, badging their togetherness and marking their difference from other print genres with which they competed for notice: there was strength in (poetic) numbers. Drawing upon others’ words was, then, the flexible resource of writers facing a market that placed the role and identity of the author in doubt; it played a strategic socio-poetic part in fashioning new poetic languages and in redefining the cultural figure of the poet. If it generated an intimate dialogue with fellow poets of past and present, if it obliquely invoked allies, it did so in proportion to the hostility of poets’ receptions. Allusion and borrowing characterized a language of intimacy—sometimes, of love—forged in adversity and in response to the babble of publicity. They also, on occasion, featured in a language of critique used to indicate a new-found difference from a collaborator²⁹ and a language of hate used to attack enemies whom it was too dangerous to criticize directly.³⁰ Appearing throughout their work, allusions, borrowings, and echoes were fundamental to the Romantic poets’ *modus operandi*³¹—more prevalent and longer lived, if less immediately striking, than the rustic language and confessional effusions for which they were also renowned—essential in welding literary coterie together.

CHAPTERS AND THEMES

In examining coterie language in relation to various kinds of public discourse, *The Dialect of the Tribe* takes its cue from the New Historicist work begun in the 1980s. I am, however, more interested than many critics of that time in the ways in which this discourse intersected with events in writers’ private lives. Indeed, the mediation of public events and narratives into poetic style and form via the poet’s pressing personal concerns is the process I attempt to unravel in each of the chapters. Formalism, that is, benefits from historicism when the micro-historical, including the biographical, is combined with the study of the large scale. In the 1790s, for example, one of the formative aspects of the Southey/Coleridge coterie was a diagnosis, derived from Cowper, of commercial capitalism as a disease, one effect