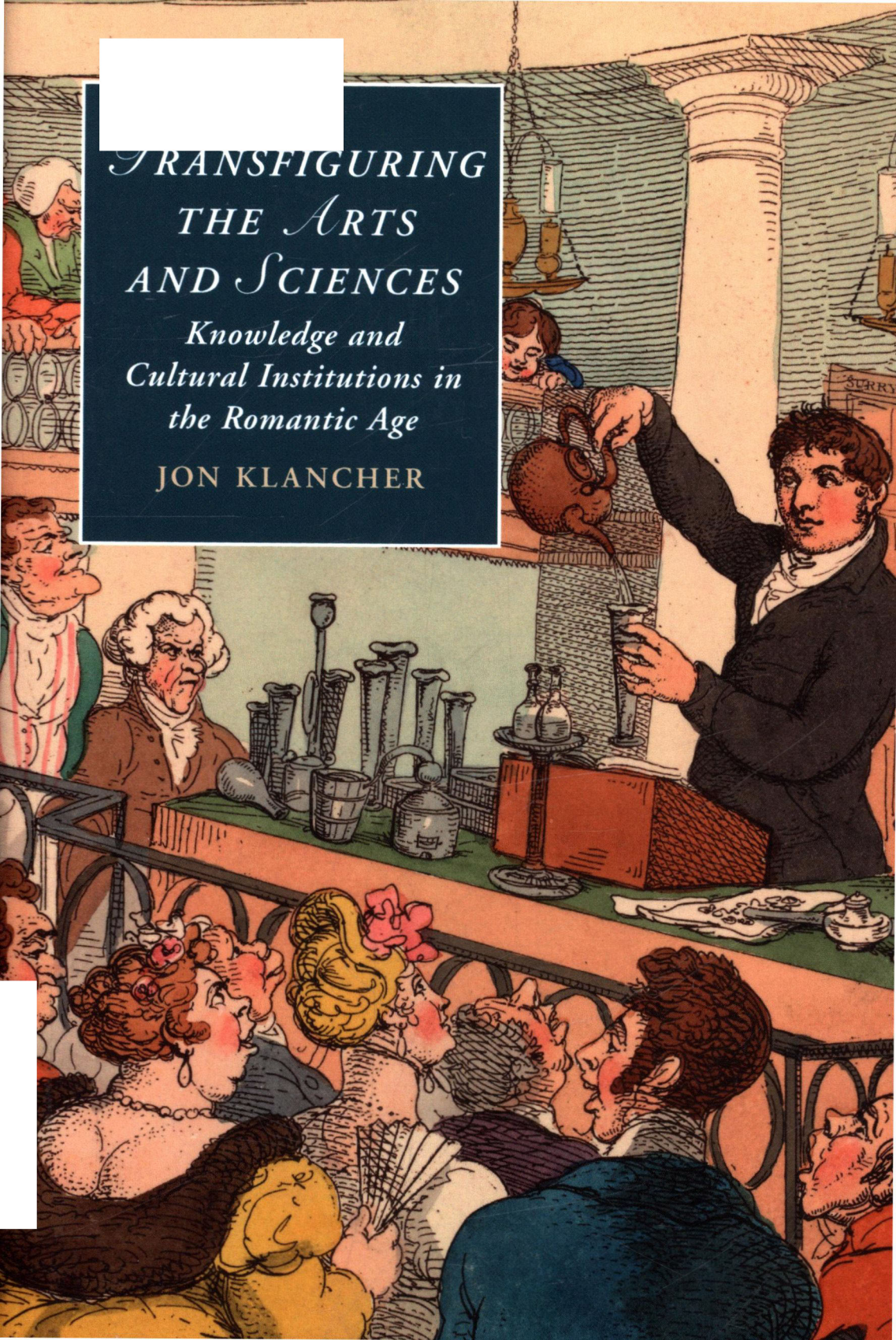

Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences

Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age

JON KLANCHER

In this important and innovative study Jon Klancher shows how the Romantic age produced a new discourse of the "Arts and Sciences" by reconfiguring the Enlightenment's idea of knowledge and by creating new kinds of cultural institutions with unprecedented public impact. He investigates the work of poets, lecturers, moral philosophers, scientists, and literary critics – including Coleridge, Godwin, Bentham, Davy, Wordsworth, Robinson, Shelley, and Hunt – and traces their response to book collectors and bibliographers, arts-and-sciences administrators, painters, engravers, natural philosophers, radical journalists, editors, and reviewers. Taking a historical and cross-disciplinary approach, he opens up Romantic literary and critical writing to transformations in the history of science, history of the book, art history, and the littleknown history of arts-and-sciences administration that linked early modern projects to nineteenthand twentieth-century modes of organizing "knowledges." His conclusions transform the ways we think about knowledge, both in the Romantic period and in our own.

"This is a substantial book and a deeply learned one, and because it is beautifully written, a very readable book as well. Its engagement with critical questions in the history of knowledge place it in the company of seminal works like Chandler's *England in 1819* and Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, both of which speak with authority about larger social and theoretical questions in the histories of knowledge by grounding their critiques in rigorous historical work."

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"Klancher reads the history of the arts and sciences recursively, alive to the complex historical processes of selection and organization and the thick layers of mediation that helped to define it…one of the most ambitious and illuminating of recent studies."

Paul Keen, *Huntington Library Quarterly*

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JON KLANCHER is Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University. His areas of research include Romantic and Victorian studies, history of books and reading, and the sociology of cultural fields. He is editor of *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age* (2009).

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For Joan,
and my daughters Emily, Sophia, and Maya

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Contents

Tables

Introduction

This book investigates an enabling framework of modern literary and cultural studies, the "Arts and Sciences," by returning to a little-understood sphere of British Romantic culture – the emergence of new arts-and-sciences institutions in London that would generate both excitement and controversy in the metropolis, spread far and wide to the provinces, then migrate to the American lyceums and lecturing platforms of the nineteenth century. They would even have an impact, more indirectly, on the history of university disciplines or knowledge fields, some of them (like book history) still being constructed today. To grasp this Romantic turn in the history of the modern category "arts and sciences," I shall try to overcome the disciplinary divide between various kinds of knowledge-history (those of the sciences, visual arts, print, and the literary) to see how this matrix of arts-and-sciences institutions formed a response to the crisis, as well as a remediation, of the early modern Republic of Letters. One result was to help produce much of the literary writing we now call Romantic criticism. A related aim of this book is to grasp the discourse about institutions as a cornerstone discourse of modernity largely invented by the Enlightenment, but given perhaps its richest and most contradictory articulations in the Romantic age. This book does not try to resolve the status of "literature" at the end of the Romantic age, but it will offer reasons to believe that literature could only become a specialized world in its own right, from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, by simultaneously resisting and incorporating the increasingly disciplined domain called the "arts and sciences."

I shall first be concerned, in Part I of this book, with a historic invention at the turn of the nineteenth century, what contemporaries called, with a capital *I*, "Institutions" of the sciences, the arts, and many knowledges or practices in between: the Royal Institution (opened in 1800), the British Institution (1805), the London Institution (1806), as well as the Surrey (1808), Russell (1808), and Metropolitan (1823) Institutions among others.[1]

Founded in the midst of political struggle and commercial competition, they often began as risky, speculative projects – in the sense Defoe or Swift might have recognized in the early modern "age of projects" – yet they worked to turn these projects into powerful, often durable patterns of knowledge production, circulation, and cultural organizing that we would more customarily associate with "institutions" *sui generis*. These Institutions invented new methods of cultural transmission and defined new roles for the "artist," the "scientist," the "literary" writer and, not least, the "director," or what we would now call the "administrator." When we enter the world of these Institutions, we also find the more familiar kinds of cultural producer – poets, critics, novelists, editors, playwrights, natural philosophers, painters, architects, and lecturers – working hand-in-hand with those rather different kinds of knowledge producer I shall be emphasizing in this book: projectors, collectors, directors, and institutors.

Despite the relatively short lifespan these Institutions enjoyed in Britain (most were gone by 1900), their wider impact was arguably immense, both for the future of the "arts and sciences" as a modern category and for the way they helped to reconfigure the cultural past. Much of our own reflection on modernity's changing conditions for knowledge production and transmission has focused on the institution of the University, its current transformations and its longer historical role. Yet beyond a university genealogy, where the new learning Institutions of the early nineteenth century will require us to go, we find an altered scenario to think about. Unlike the German university's provenance for this spacious framework called Arts and Sciences, which moved into American university structures as the name of an emerging disciplinary research system in the later nineteenth century, the British discourse and practices of the arts and sciences around 1800 were notably more chaotic. These new Institutions of arts and sciences did not reach out from a secure institutional framework toward a public sphere, nor did they find pathways for scholars and students to become, through a strenuous outreach, "public intellectuals." Instead, such Institutions *began* there, in the realm of public controversy in the metropolis, diverse markets, political debate, and colonial rule. They made their impact on public knowledge and on forms of communication in ways that would, in the long term, have a striking if sometimes an oblique effect upon university knowledges and institutional continuity. These Institutions were subject to the powers of commercial society and particular markets of cultural production, and in a period of hotly contested political reaction, the writers, lecturers, and administrators who will appear in this book – among them, Samuel Coleridge, William Hazlitt,

Humphry Davy, Leigh Hunt, Jeremy Bentham, Charles Lyell, Percy Shelley, Thomas Bernard, Count Benjamin Rumford, Mary Robinson, Thomas Dibdin, Richard Carlile, and others – could very well grasp the feel and the moment-to-moment volatility of what a "conservative revolution" means and how it acts.[2]

These arts-and-sciences Institutions had a complex and lasting effect upon discipline formation, British print media, and what we may call learning-publics, the English audiences variously fascinated, taught, or repelled by the lectures and exhibitions coming their way. "The arts and sciences are now taught in lectures to fashionable audiences of both sexes," reported Robert Southey with some surprise and skepticism in 1807.[3] Women and Dissenters in particular could find what they would never be admitted to Oxford or Cambridge University to learn. Constructing a cross-class and mixed-gender constituency in London and then the provinces, the Institutions became distinctive for the social makeup of their spectators – the Royal claimed its "fashionables," the Surrey and London had their Dissenters of all kinds, the Russell drew in its more professional audience. No less visible were the intellectuals: Byron, Godwin, Lamb, Coleridge, Keats, Hazlitt, Crabb Robinson, Thomas Talfourd, Samuel Rogers, Thomas Campbell, Joseph Banks, or Jeremy Bentham, to name only a dozen among many.

While the Royal Institution and others became famous for scientific lectures and sometimes spectacularly staged experiments, they simultaneously pursued a more ambitious (to use our word) multidisciplinary agenda: instruction on moral philosophy, literary and book history, poetry and drama, the histories of commerce and technologies, the arts of printing and engraving, as well as the "fine arts" of poetry, music, painting, architecture, and aesthetics. Our knowledge of this lecturing, research, and publishing world has thus far been fragmentary, in part because of the highly unreliable paper trail scholars have had to follow (only the Royal Institution has left a substantial archive of its productivity), but also because of the very separation of disciplinary perspectives which those institutions ultimately, though not always intentionally, helped produce. Some of these Institutions began to be studied as "scientific lecturing institutions" by social historians of science in the 1970s, an early case study in what would become the wider cultural studies and history of the sciences. Others have been studied as "art institutions" by art historians since the 1980s and 1990s, while literary historians know them mainly for their sponsorship of literary lecturing by Coleridge or Hazlitt. These separate disciplinary histories of "art," "science," and "literature" respectively have

tended to obscure the most novel innovation of early nineteenth-century cultural organizing in Britain – the emergence of a new complex of arts *and* sciences institutions going by the name of *Institutions* rather than the earlier nomenclature of learned "societies" or "academies." Societies and academies had played a fundamental part in building European knowledge since the mid seventeenth century across the Continent and in Britain. The new arts-and-sciences Institutions did not replace them – many new scientific societies appeared in Britain after 1800, in fact – but they created a very different kind of knowledge production and circulation with a far greater public impact than the earlier organizational forms had ever attempted or achieved.

These ventures in public scholarship afforded their audiences a combination of both disciplinary and, perhaps more revealingly, extra- and predisciplinary kinds of knowledge. Emerging work on the history of modern disciplines has increasingly opened the way to think more skeptically about assuming their long-term stability in light of what Luisa Calé and Adriana Craciun have suggestively called, with an ironic nod to Foucault, "the disorder of things."[4] At issue are not only formal disciplines but also "indisciplines" and "predisciplinary" knowledge formations that were often resistant to becoming incorporated into the later system of disciplined university subjects. Some became formal, important disciplines of modern knowledge (chemistry and geology, for example); others began to build "fields of study," such as historical bibliography or the history of books, only to be undone by contradictory forces at work in the very realm that was helping create them. Still others, like natural history, would prove so diverse and complex they would resist the disciplining of their knowledge entirely.[5] In what follows I shall treat these domains as "knowledge fields," a term I adapt freehandedly from the sociology of culture's theory of modern "fields of cultural production."[6] By using this expression I shall not mean that all fields can count what they produce as "knowledge" in the same way. If anything it is the opposite: fields like the literary, the artistic, the scientific, or the economic emerged from the early nineteenth century with dramatically uneven criteria of what counts as "knowledge" and which of these fields could most strongly lay claim to it. Questions of "arts" and "practices" complicated this matter of assessing knowledge enough that it will be useful to look into both the more highly organized fields of knowledge production and those more disorderly fields of inquiry that never became formal disciplines.

Such fields will also pertain to what many now call the "second scientific revolution" of the Romantic age, a recent periodizing of modern knowledge