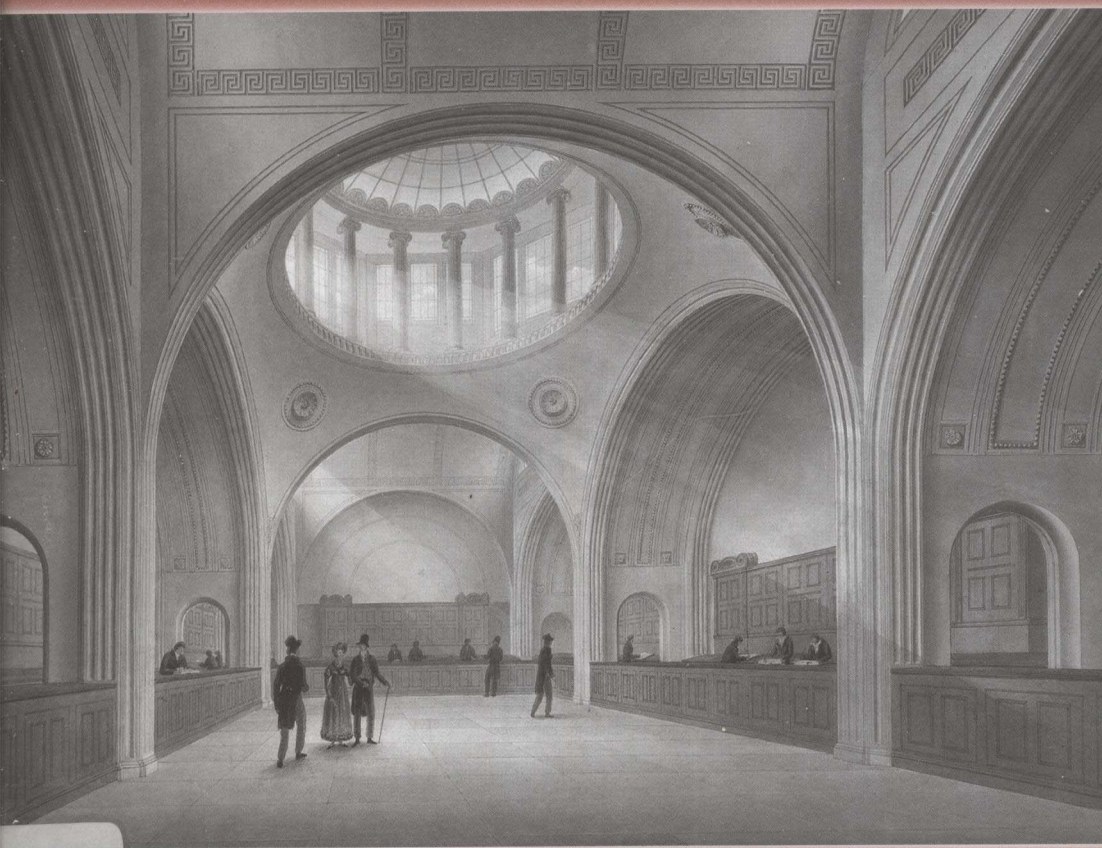


A Concise Companion to

THE ROMANTIC AGE

Edited by Jon Klancher



WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Introduction: A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age

Jon Klancher

What was Romanticism? How did the Romantic age, a pivotal moment of modernity, begin and end? What were its defining genres, languages, knowledges, conflicts over matters of politics, religion, or truth? Why has Romanticism persisted, well beyond its age of revolutions in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century, to reappear in often unlikely places or forms, or at the most unexpected of times, ever since? Both basic and complex, these questions still lie at the center of studying Romantic writing or culture. They continue to provoke new thinking about Romanticism's place in modern culture, as the chapters in the present volume will do further. This companion to the age of Romanticism guides the reader to a shape-shifting Romantic period that may have had several different points of origin, and perhaps only a provisional ending (estimates have ranged from 1798–1830, to 1789–1832, or 1776–1837 among others). As we're now aware, to periodize is to construct an interpretive as well as historical frame of analysis; it should not surprise the student approaching Romanticism for the first time to learn that there is no certain or consensual dating of this nonetheless watershed cultural moment. Yet the accumulating cluster of varying temporal frameworks built by critics and scholars tells us something important about the complexity and unevenness of this extraordinary moment. No matter what particular dates we use to frame it, the Romantic age continues to have a special and sometimes hotly debated place in the literary and cultural history of Britain or Europe (if a somewhat different one in the United States).

Chapters of this book largely concentrate on the wide range of writing, knowledge production, and visual imagining of that variably defined period (for our purposes here, about 1770–1840). Long-read Romantic writers – Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Blake, Coleridge – appear side by side with figures only now being studied as among the period’s most significant cultural producers: Charlotte Smith, Robert Southey, Sir Joseph Banks, Sir Walter Scott, Anna Seward, John Galt, Jane Austen, Hannah More, William Cobbett, Francis Jeffrey, Humphry Davy, John Gibson Lockhart, Francis Burney, and others. Still, as the first and last essays emphasize with special force, it would be a mistake to think Romanticism was only a remarkable period of literary history. In various senses, essays in this volume show why Romanticism itself has so interestingly complicated our idea of what “history” is – as well as what culture, nation, religion, politics, justice, even nature, science, aesthetics, or knowledge are.

While this Companion cannot sort out all the meanings of “Romanticism” that have radiated through modern culture since the end of the eighteenth century, it can help the student of modern literature and cultural history to try to place this hugely influential cultural phenomenon in terms that make sense in the early twenty-first century. We try to accomplish that aim by focusing, not only on key topics or important questions that emerged in the Romantic age, but on their *relationships*. Thus a chapter on the volatile nature of religious beliefs in that period will also, of necessity, speak to the framing political and imaginative context of what Percy Shelley called “the master theme of the age,” the French Revolution. The question of law or political canons of justice in this age of extremes must also engage the discourse of “poetic justice” and the period’s great narrative experiments in representing legal cases and conflicts for inquiring readers. On a very different topic, the essay on the role of the book in the early nineteenth century accentuates publishing’s intricate interdependence with the market economy and the power of publishers or editors to shape their contemporary culture.

Every essay in this volume situates a literary or cultural aspect of Romanticism – poetry, the novel, painting and theatrical performance, aesthetic theory, religion – in terms of a geopolitical, social, and volatile economic world. There is no single essay on poetry as such – a departure from traditional ways of representing Romanticism, to be sure – but poetry and poetics reappear as constant points of focus or interpretation for grasping religious controversy, empire and Orientalism, natural history, political debate, or aesthetic theory in the

Romantic era or since. The explosive growth and range of the novel or related fictional genres likewise become an ongoing focus in chapters on nationalism, historiography, law and justice, or consumer culture rather than a topic in itself. Yet each essay also takes pains to show why literary, visual, and cultural actions could transform political, social, or marketplace circumstances and ideas – and would continue to do so long after we usually say the Romantic age “ended.”

To set the stage for what follows in this volume, it is important to recall that, variously celebrated or reviled in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Romantic writing was never uncontroversial; indeed it was an explosive enough subject from the 1910s to 1940s – ideologically and aesthetically – for modern scholarly Romantic studies to begin developing systematically only in the decades after World War II. Certain critical monuments of that time are still required reading for anyone attempting to grasp the shape and protean philosophical, aesthetic, or cultural questions posed by the Romantic age – from *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Abrams 1953) or *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Erdman 1954) to *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (Williams 1958) or *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1807* (Hartman 1964). Various formalist or antiformalist (Abrams, Williams), philosophical or concretely historical (Hartman, Erdman), such works and many others initially defined the territory of debate, theory, and research that would mark the vitality of Romantic studies long afterward. By the time of Harold Bloom's collection *Romanticism and Consciousness* (1970) or Abrams's second major study, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), the field of Romanticism had become the most intriguing and perhaps consequential period of literary studies for the profession as a whole. It was also poised to be a staging ground for the powerfully debated transformations in literary and cultural studies about to commence.

The first of these – a “theory revolution” drawing on then-unfamiliar Continental philosophies rearticulated as structuralism, deconstruction, or poststructuralism – found in Romantic poetry and its interpretation a textual portal through which critics could begin to rethink long-held assumptions about language, textuality, temporality, and indeed literariness itself (de Man 1984, Rajan 1990). Later generations of more historically or culturally minded critics and scholars were often first weaned on this heady blend of rhetorical, textualist, and philosophical skepticism that performed “close reading” – no longer a property of the New Critics – with a vengeance, opening unsuspected gaps, contradictions, or abyssal spirals of uncertainty (*mise en abyme*) in the same texts or literary works long cherished for their Platonic, imaginative,

or ontological idealisms. Yet such criticism, often trained in comparative literature and absorbing English Romanticism into Germanic as well as French philosophical languages, could also reinforce long-standing assumptions about the radical break Romanticism had made with the Enlightenment, claiming that instead it was the origin of our modernity as well as an important precursor to modernism.

The philosophical turn in Romantic studies did not simply come to an end when a new historical and cultural critique of both traditional literary history and newer kinds of theory emerged forcefully in the early 1980s. Historicist, cultural, and philosophical modes of critical reading and cultural history have tended rather to coexist (as anyone who attends conferences on Romantic questions knows) and they have often blended in Romanticist scholarship and debates. Yet it would be hard to overestimate the scope and (I believe) the irreversible effects of the successively historicist, feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, and other critical modes of rethinking the texts and contexts of Romantic-age cultural production or its aftermath. Early on, debates focused on what Jerome McGann called *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), or what Marilyn Butler (1981) pointed to as the extraordinary range of Romantic-age cultural production (in *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*). Other polemical criticism raised serious doubt about centering the Romantic period as an “age of Wordsworth” or construing its great poetry and other genres as mainly in terms of mind or imagination (Levinson 1986, Liu 1989, Chandler 1998). Canon revision, the reemergence of women writers and readers to modern view, new attention to print culture and its audiences, a turn toward the long-neglected novels of the era as key to grasping both what “literature” meant to the period and how rich a cultural matrix the narrative fictions produced then and afterward – all this should be now familiar and necessary territory for anyone pursuing Romantic studies today.

The following essays will not be starting from scratch on their topics, but assume some familiarity already with what’s at stake in the history, study, and controversies attending Romanticism and the problems posed by defining a Romantic age in cultural history. They take for granted, for example, that what had long been called “English Romanticism” must now be approached as a complexly produced *British* mode of writing or visualizing that entails increasing attention to Scottish, Irish, or Welsh as well as specifically English sorts of cultural production. As the essays on nationalisms or Enlightenment and Romantic historicism will clarify, the uneven development of those national literatures and cultures – as influentially brought to the

foreground of Romantic studies by James Chandler and others – effectively redraws the geographical landscape of a Romanticism that was grasped as oriented to Western Europe or isolated in England itself (see Trumpener 1997, Chandler 1998, Duncan 2007). The same geo-cultural awareness makes the East's impact on Romantic writing a matter of sometimes startling defamiliarization of old or long-disregarded writers or genres, as Robert Southey's role in the essay on empire and imperialism will suggest (Leask 1992, Makdisi 1998). Book history and print culture, meanwhile, can no longer be regarded as incidental matters, but in one way or another figure centrally in grasping the period's sciences or natural history, political argument or novelistic imaginations, poetries or religious quarrels.

Finally, the diversity and complexity of what both students of and experts in the study of Romanticism now confront in their field can produce very different styles of argument or presentation. Essays in this Companion are written in variously contextualist, empirical, interpretive, or philosophical ways. They attend to both historical and theoretical matters, shifting from close-ups that spotlight fine textual or historical grain, to wide-angle views engaged in broader cultural mapping. They echo across one another and give, I think, a richly multifaceted perspective – if necessarily, within the reach of one 12-essay volume, hardly a totalized picture – on the “Romantic” as both a period and an ongoing cultural and intellectual force.

The first six chapters place Romanticism in a spacious geographic and cultural matrix: West and East, nationalism and empire, religion and revolution, political controversy, narratives of historical change and fictional imagining, or matters of justice or interpreting the law. The next six essays focus on kinds of cultural production and disciplines of knowledge that would affect many genres of writing or visualization in the Romantic age and afterward: natural history, geographic exploration, and the sciences; economic behavior, consumerism, and publishing history; the visual and performing arts, poetics, and the aesthetic controversies that, long after the Romantic age itself, inflected the politics of Modernism and continue to demand rigorous reflection today.

In “Transfiguring God: Religion, Revolution, Romanticism,” Robert Maniquis reminds us that *everyone* lived their lives in a deeply and inescapably religious culture at this time (even if they were atheists), one that was more sharply divided and decidedly political about their religious understandings than at any time since the religious and political struggles of the mid-seventeenth century. His essay crosses

disciplinary boundaries to grasp the ferocity of religious arguments descending from the West's long history of Christendom that were inescapably political, as overtly political debates raged in often religious language. Modern readers still have difficulty sorting out the complex arguments between older and newer viewpoints held by Anglicans, Catholics, and all manner of dissenters (Methodists, Presbyterians, Calvinists, Unitarians, and the like). Clarifying these clashes in the late eighteenth century, Maniquis accentuates the "fragility of Enlightenment" that becomes apparent when religious passions surge into the public realm at crisis moments like the 1790s. He shows why the French Revolution would be seen to introduce a new kind of violence into modern life – not mass slaughter, which had been known for centuries and had been justified by precisely religious motives or rationales – but a violence without "meaning" of the kind religion had traditionally provided (for instance, in rituals of sacrifice). Rather, the Romantic writer's appropriation of "imagination" from its earlier eighteenth-century meanings is most telling – the idea of a reintegration of mind and body after the painful tearing apart that modernity's endless violence toward the past seemed to make irreparable.

Shifting from its struggles with the past of Western Christendom and the present of modernizing revolutions, Saree Makdisi's essay dates the Romantic age by two great shifts in the discourse on Empire and the East – when the linguist William Jones introduced the "poetry of Eastern nations" to Britain in 1772 and when the historian Thomas Macaulay authoritatively pronounced such matters of no further interest to the British in 1835. Makdisi uses these moments to frame the new fascination of the Orient and especially its literature to British and Romantic writers in a period that has sometimes been called the "second Oriental renaissance." What distinguished Romantic imperialism from the wider span of modern empire-building between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries for Makdisi is thus its peculiarly strong sense of relation between the archaic and exotic remainders of an ancient past the British thought they encountered in the East, as against a rapidly modernized, rationalized course of development all around them in the West. Nearly all Romantic poets engaged in this fascination with the East, not least Byron, Blake, and Wordsworth, but Makdisi pays special attention to a then popular, but long since disregarded, poet who is only today being reread with great interest again – Robert Southey, author of *Thalaba the Destroyer*, *The Curse of Kehama*, and other narrative verse epics that in the early 1800s thrilled and impressed British readers. In Makdisi's absorbing account,

Southey's verse typifies Romantic literary imperialism in many ways, particularly as it weaves distinctly Christian beliefs or phrases into the mouths of Muslim speakers, paradoxically calling in question England's own proud discourse of becoming modern and powerful. The sociocultural critique available within Southey's Orientalist epics also suggests why Whig historians like Macaulay would find a certain kind of Romantic poetic practice altogether too powerful – what Makdisi calls an “exhilarating, threatening, sublime spectacle of Oriental alterity” (p. 55).

The next two chapters address two long-standing ways of defining the Romantic age – its association with the rise of nationalism in Western Europe and its putative opposition to a preceding Enlightenment. In his essay on Enlightenment, Romanticism, and historicism, Anthony Jarrells shows why thinking about Romanticism more historically than in the past also complicates one of the oldest ways of defining it – as standing in stark contrast to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Instead, recent scholarship has been discovering the complex continuities as well as swerves between Enlightenment and Romantic-age writing, most influentially in the work of Marilyn Butler, James Chandler, Katie Trumpeter, or Ian Duncan. Jarrells asks why it's been the case that thinking about Enlightenment and Romanticism in new ways would inevitably lead to a new cultural geography of the Romantic period as well – for instance, to the Scottish writers of both Edinburgh's high Enlightenment moment, from David Hume to Adam Smith and Dugald Stewart, or Romantic-age novelists like Walter Scott or tale-writers like John Galt. The epochal battle here lies in a more culturally activist Scotland that pitted Enlightenment arguments (in the *Edinburgh Review* and elsewhere) against those being imported from Germany by Coleridge or *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Jarrells contributes a new reading of the relation between Romanticism and historicism by showing the paradoxical way in which Galt's fictional tales would, unlike Scott's historical novels, “intermix” two contrasting ways of representing history – Scotland's developmental (or “stadial”) historicism, and Germany's relativist *historismus*.

In her essay on the rise of nationalism in this era, Miranda Burgess shows why modern concepts of nationalism do not easily fit the British case, especially its literatures as they emerge from the incommensurate national cultures of Ireland, Scotland, or England. She guides her reader through some recently influential accounts of nationalism – including those that emphasize a “reading nation” or “print capitalism” – by

pointing to the great range of Irish, English, and Scottish fictional or polemical ways of representing nations to readers and to one another. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Florence Macarthy and *The Wild Irish Boy* by the Irish writers Sidney Owenson and Thomas Maturin, and Walter Scott's Waverley novels, particularly *The Antiquary*, make up part of the complicated terrain of national figurations Burgess helps us negotiate. Like Makdisi and Jarrells, she points us back out of the thicket of British national self or communal identifications and literary figures to the wider impact they would have on what we now see, in light of these Romantic-period works, as the cultural tensions of a global modernity.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw the emergence of national literatures across Europe as well as in Britain, but just what "literature" was coming to mean in the Romantic age is the focal point of the next two chapters on political debate and legal justice. Paul Keen's chapter on politics and the literary field shows why political ideas and print media were inextricably "bound up with one another" at a time when the literary field was still being defined as a broad public sphere of discursive genres, not yet a more specialized category of imaginary works. Keen focuses on three symptomatic moments of political debate (1792, 1802, 1818) when print media themselves put contemporary writing to the political tests of legal and national legitimacy, professional authority, and democratic recognition. From the impact of Paine's *The Rights of Man* and 1790s revolution debate to the innovation of the *Edinburgh Review*, writing in public altered political and literary understandings or alignments alike. For the Regency period, Keen's brief case study of the little-studied journal *Yellow Dwarf* illuminates the period's emerging tension between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment categories of literary production, reminding us that a Romantic notion of literature as distantly removed from political life was as strongly disputed then as it has become again today.

Mark Schoenfield's chapter on law and literature turns from matters of political justice to the individual's increasingly perplexed status amidst the sweeping economic and legal changes that Karl Polanyi once called the Great Transformation. From property laws to those affecting personal behaviors, legal justice in the Romantic age became intriguingly entwined with fictional and literary means of coping with the unruly historical cases and outcomes of enacting or applying statutes to circumstances. Schoenfield takes his reader across the frontier of one of the oldest professions to the newly emerging profession of literary authorship – from Blackstone's authoritative