

ROMANCE AND  
REVOLUTION

*Shelley and the Politics of a Genre*

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## *Introduction*

The purpose of this book is to explore a critical phase in the history of romance, and of Romanticism, represented by the persistent conjunction of the theme of revolution with the language and form of romance; to locate the origins of this development in the political prose and verse of the 1790s; and to examine its consequences in the poetry of Shelley, through a close reading of his two revolutionary romances *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City* (also known as *The Revolt of Islam*).

Three different kinds of enquiry are brought together here. One is concerned with genre, and the politics of genre; another is about the origins and contexts of Romanticism; the third involves Shelley, and his relation to the literary and political culture of his time. In its investigation of romance, this book proceeds from a number of assumptions and definitions: from Northrop Frye's claim<sup>1</sup> that there is a utopian or 'revolutionary' quality inherent in romance, which results from its 'dialectical' structure and uncompromising idealism, displayed both in the conception of character and 'in the polarizing between two worlds, one desirable and the other hateful'; from Fredric Jameson's important essay on romance,<sup>2</sup> with its rigorous theoretical modelling of the politics of the genre, and its suggestive historical question about 'what, under wholly altered historical conditions, can have been found to replace the constitutive raw materials of magic and otherness which medieval romance found ready to hand in its socioeconomic environment'; from Patricia Parker's analysis of the narrative structure of romance,<sup>3</sup> which shows that its dynamic (and, by extension, its politics) is ambivalent and unstable rather than straightforwardly teleological; from recent work on the sexual politics of romance;<sup>4</sup> and from other theoretical and historical studies, cited in the following pages, which provide clues as to how romance, either in its imaginative structure or in its

ideological functioning, might be deemed to have a 'politics' as well as a 'poetics'.

Yet my starting point is the claim that there is something intrinsically paradoxical about the idea of a politics of romance, and about the conjunction of the terms 'romance' and 'revolution'. If one answer (and for my purposes, the most pertinent) to Jameson's question about what replaces magic in the 'magical narratives' of the modern age is politics itself, this is by no means self-evident, for the differences between the two phenomena are more apparent than their similarities. Until recently, romance was most often defined as a genre that had very little to do with the realities of history or politics – as indeed synonymous with pure fiction or fantasy. Nevertheless, the link is now almost taken for granted as one of the central facts in the literary history of English Romanticism, and there is a virtually canonical argument that identifies its two major influences as the revival of romance and the impact of the French Revolution. According to this account, which received its classic formulation in Harold Bloom's essay on 'The Internalization of Quest Romance' (1970),<sup>5</sup> the genre reappears in the mid-eighteenth century, acquires apocalyptic scope as a result of the expectations raised by the French Revolution, and is subsequently internalised to create the paradigmatic Romantic form: the psychological quest romance. Shelley's deployment of the genre is seen to follow a similar pattern in that he begins by writing didactic, utopian romances, and ends up writing internalised, visionary works like *Prometheus Unbound*, *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life*.

Much of the evidence presented here confirms this account, but it alters the emphasis, and offers a new historical focus. By highlighting, and problematising, the relation between romance and revolution, I seek to recover the paradox concealed in the familiar claim that Romanticism is somehow a combination of the two, and thus to reveal some of the tensions, oppositions and ambivalence that surround the texts – not all of them literary – in which that fusion first takes place. I also attempt to give a more scrupulously historical account of the Romantic transformation of romance by maintaining distinctions between contemporary perceptions of the genre and our own, and by looking in detail at how images, themes, metres and other generic materials were transmitted and modified from one text to another. Above all, my aim is to reassess Shelley's relation to romance, and to Romanticism, by concentrating on two poems –

both largely ignored by modern scholarship – in which much of the work of generic reconstruction is performed, and in which the politics of romance is most fully displayed.

The paradox can be seen in its starkest form in the polemical prose and verse produced during the ‘pamphlet war’ of the 1790s, where themes and images from romance were repeatedly used, positively or negatively, to describe the extraordinary events of the French Revolution, and the possibilities, or dangers, to which it was seen in England to give rise. This is not quite the point made by Frye when he talks of the revolutionary quality inherent in romance, nor by Gillian Beer<sup>6</sup> when she refers to earlier moments in the history of the genre when the magical and the political became linked. The point here is that, with the French Revolution, history itself seemed to enter the domain of the miraculous, and romance to offer a vivid and accurate language to describe what was happening. And these were not merely isolated allusions. In the writings and speeches of the great counter-revolutionary Edmund Burke, romance imagery is so common as to constitute a kind of myth-making, the figurative narrative that results being both a polemical device to influence his readers and a subliminal encoding of the trauma of revolution. More fragmentary but no less vivid is the revolutionary romance contained in the writings of Burke’s opponents, a myth of revolution that often employs the very same metaphors to opposite effect, and that, like Burke’s, continued to shape perceptions of the Revolution for generations to come. To explore these two myths, and the confrontation between them, is the aim of the first chapter of this book, which draws on a variety of texts from the 1790s and early 1800s, including polemical tracts, parliamentary speeches, newspaper verses, political cartoons and private letters. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Wordsworth’s famous lines on the ‘French Revolution, As It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement’, a text (drafted in 1804) which brilliantly draws together opposing representations of the French Revolution, and in so doing exposes the full ambivalence of the language of revolutionary romance.

Yet it is not just at the level of imagery that we can discern a politics of romance in the literature of this period. In ways that are difficult but possible to determine, political circumstances ultimately affected the literary form itself. While some writers, such as Robert Southey and Walter Scott, wrote mythological or historical romances partly as an escape from the pressure of political affairs and everyday life,

Byron on the other hand may be said in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18) to have modernised the genre in order to explore the expanded, troubled consciousness of post-revolutionary Europe, a distinctly political project as well as a signal instance of the internalisation of quest romance. It is in the poetry of Shelley, however, that romance received its fullest political development, and underwent its most remarkable formal transformations. Chapter Two is a study of the first of Shelley's revolutionary romances, *Queen Mab* (1813). This, the most radical and outspoken of all his poems, establishes a direct and conscious link with the revolutionary culture of the 1790s, reviving its millenarian language and reasserting many of its themes, while also laying claim to a wider philosophical heritage which extends from Plato to Sir William Drummond. But the audacity of Shelley's 'philosophical poem' lies not just in its radical ideas and inflammatory tone but also in its form, which, together with its Notes, constitutes a remarkable synthesis of diverse elements: eighteenth-century allegory, Miltonic epic, metrical romance, dream vision and revolutionary polemic. Faced with such a heterogeneous work, it is impossible to treat the poem purely as an aesthetic object, and I therefore adopt a more flexible approach, exploring various aspects of its form and content, and invoking a wide range of sources and contexts. My central concern, however, is with Shelley's political exploitation of romance: of the teleological structure and utopian core of the genre; of its traditional, but now potentially subversive theme of virtue; and of archetypal motifs such as the enchantress (in this case Queen Mab herself) and the Bower of Bliss, drawn both from literary sources and from the metaphorical language of other political writings.

One of the images, or themes, that most often resurfaced in the political writing of the time was that of chivalry. Almost all of the original replies to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) make some reference to the extraordinary passage in which he identifies the misfortunes of Marie-Antoinette at Versailles with the demise of the 'age of chivalry'. Most of his political antagonists simply ridiculed the passage, more often than not by reference to *Don Quixote*; but there were some who sought to reclaim the notion of chivalry, and to show that the ideals it expressed were closer to those of the Revolution itself than to those of the *ancien régime*. The effect of this dispute was to politicise the whole question of chivalry, with the result that the so-called 'chivalric revival' which took place after the

turn of the century – mainly through the influence of Scott, though it had begun earlier – was strongly coloured by politics. Broadly speaking, the chivalric revival was a reactionary phenomenon, its function being to amuse the upper classes and to galvanise patriotic sentiment during the era of the Napoleonic Wars. There were, however, a number of writers of a different political persuasion or social class who sought to continue the polemic with Burke and his successors by adapting the fashionable theme of chivalry to their own purposes, and reinterpreting its codes in terms of a radical or liberal politics. Foremost among these were Leigh Hunt, Thomas Love Peacock, and Shelley himself, who together formed what may be described as a radical cult of chivalry in the years 1815–17. Their endeavours in this regard, in both the private and the public sphere, have passed largely unrecorded in the history of the chivalric revival, and are the subject of my third chapter. The chapter also deals with the example of Byron, whose adoption of the theme in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* anticipates, in its mock-serious tone as much as in its political application of the medieval code, many of the manoeuvres of the Hunt–Shelley circle. In the case of Shelley, whose fictitious ancestor ‘Sir Guyon de Shelley’ figures in the title of the chapter, I present a more general account of his interest in the theme, giving special attention to his engagement with the ideas of Godwin.

The fourth and final chapter considers Shelley's most ambitious reworking of the chivalric ethos, *Laon and Cythna* (1817). Written ‘in the style and for the same object’ as *Queen Mab*, this poem has a more obvious claim to the designation ‘romance’, its dominant idiom being that of romance, and its basic structure consisting of a sequence of quests. Like *Queen Mab*, it seeks to reawaken the political idealism of the early 1790s, and to advance a ‘liberal and comprehensive morality’ based on Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793); but it does so by subtler means, replacing the naked didacticism of the earlier poem with an affective poetics derived from Spenser and Wordsworth. Described in the Preface as ‘an experiment on the temper of the public mind’, *Laon and Cythna* is a unique confrontation with its own historical moment, a poetic engagement with the political imagination of early nineteenth-century England which, in Shelley's analysis, was still burdened with traumatic memories of the French Revolution. Crucially, that engagement takes place through the form of romance, so that whilst the inspired

but failed revolution that constitutes the central action of the poem is obviously at one level a fictionalised version of the French Revolution, the controlling perspective is a redemptive or transcendent one, and the poem moves according to the dynamic of quest narrative or myth rather than history. Revolutionary both in its subject-matter and in its transformation of generic conventions, *Laon and Cythna* is a fascinating case of the politics of romance, as well as a perfect (if previously unrecognised) example of the internalisation of the genre – one that is of particular interest in that it displays all the stages of the process of internalisation in the course of a single poem.

Two of the chapters, then, are contextual, two textual in emphasis. But the relationship between the former and the latter is more active than such a description might imply. A main contention of this book is that Shelley's revolutionisation of the form of romance is preceded and made possible by the revolutionisation of the language of romance that took place in the political writing of the Revolution debate, and by the existence in the English imagination of the 'revolutionary romance' of the French Revolution itself. *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*, although written a generation later, directly invoke and engage these contexts, recycling modes of thought and expression from the 1790s, and taking as their point of departure the historical and imaginative experience that Shelley called 'the master theme of the epoch – the French Revolution' (*Letters*, 1, 504). The two poems thus provide a powerful illustration of what has become increasingly apparent to historians and theoreticians of genre: namely, that the development of a genre takes place not only within the confines of literary form, but also through other ideological productions – here visual as well as verbal – with which literary texts interact.<sup>7</sup>

This book begins as an essay in intertextuality and ends as an exercise in practical criticism. One of the most striking things to emerge is the way in which particular phrases and images from romance, or particular statements *about* romance, were almost endlessly repeated and reformulated throughout the period in question (and across the historical divide which separates the first from the second generation of English Romantics), as though those utterances or topoi had become indispensable to the period's awareness of itself. That this is so should not perhaps surprise us, but it is not immediately obvious why, for example, the Spenserian motif of the Bower of Bliss should equally well have served Wordsworth's

account of the French Revolution, Shelley's portrayal of the Prince Regent, and Southey's description of a Hindu heaven; or why Burke's pronouncement of the death of chivalry should have given rise not only to countless rejoinders during the 1790s, but also, two decades later, to a diatribe against commerce in *Queen Mab*, a discussion of love in Hazlitt's essay 'On Pedantry', and a comic symposium in Peacock's novel *Melincourt*. To throw some light on these matters is not the least of my aims in the following pages.