
Review on the Relationship Between Poetic Form and Political Significance

The Romantic literary period that covered the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth century saw a poetic revolution of form spurred by poets such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Whilst the content of these authors poetry is in no doubt political, this essay will question whether the forms used by these authors had any political significance. James Baldwin stated that “the point is to get your work done, and your work is to change the world” (Horvath). This observation can be applied to Shelley and Wordsworth’s work, where their aim can be seen in every aspect of the poem, including in form.

Much of the content that emerged in poetry during this time was in reaction to the French Revolution and the radical politics it inspired. Wordsworth and Shelley drew inspiration not only from the revolution but also from the British government’s reaction to it at the time and the social and economic effects that this had on the British people, particularly on the lower classes. In the eighteenth century, the idea emerged that the content of a work should determine the shape of its form (Stewart 57). Their chosen forms were also in no doubt influenced by the British government’s reaction to a revolution in France and the implementation of the Treason Act and Seditious Meetings Act in 1795. As a result of these acts, published writers had to become less explicit in their writing and were forced to find other ways of communicating their thoughts, thus encouraging them to use all aspects of the poem, including language and form, to achieve their aims.

Stewart argues that the poets from 1798 “awoke to shake off the chains of eighteenth-century prosody and expressed an individual passion through their newly invented meters and themes”, this included a shift in focus from the syllabic to accentual meter, partly under the influence of Spenser and Milton (72). The focus placed on an accentual meter allowed poets to place focus on certain words, as the reader must read for the accents and focus on the words, rather than simply listen to a lyrical syllabic melody. Some choices of forms also had a practical purpose, i.e. the sonnet form fitted perfectly into a newspaper column. Simon Jarvis also put forward the argument that the popularity of verse was due to its ability to respond to historical changes and events that were too “terrifying” or “exhilarating” to be addressed explicitly (99). In the case of Shelley and Wordsworth, this would have also been due to the legal limitations placed on the press and further criticisms of the British government.

Roberts argues that literary critics always look for ways to historicize texts in terms of its “living context”, focusing on how and why it was written (7). Roberts acknowledges the possibility that

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a text can mean something different if placed in a different context, such as applying Romantic texts to contemporary politics (9). For Roberts, “if a text is to change society, it must force a discontinuity between the society that produced it and the society that consumes it” (12). The ballad form allows for ‘The Female Vagrant’ and ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ to have the possibility of changing society in Roberts’s terms due to their universality, simple diction, and use of allegory. Shelley personifies abstract concepts of “Murder, Fraud, and Anarchy” in ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ (line 101). The non-specific terms can be applied to any revolution or political event. In this sense, the ballad form had a universalisability that was transferred from its oral tradition to its use in the Romantic period.

Chandler and McLane observe the different context for each movement of poets, comparing the Augustan poets and their successors, who responded to coffee houses and growth in newspaper distribution, to those of the Victorian era who, decades later, responded to a time of “unprecedented growth in London” and industrialization (1-2). The Romantics, on the other hand, were responding to revolution, mass literacy, and increased discourse in knowledge (Chandler and McLane 2). For Shelley, the French Revolution was “the master theme of the epoch in which [they] live”, and inspired the themes of the poetry that was written at the time. However, although direct comparison can be drawn between ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ and the events at Peterloo, the ambiguity as to the metaphors Shelley uses and universal language when referring to characters in the text such as “Anarchy” and the “Destructions”, opens the text up to other contexts and can be applied to other events such as the Industrial Revolution or even the World Wars (lines 26, 74).

Wordsworth purposefully chose “low and rustic life” to portray in his ballads as together, the content and the form, speak plainer and thus the purpose of the poem can be more “forcibly communicated”, as Wordsworth stated that each of his poems had a specific purpose (‘Preface’ 295-296). He opens ‘The Female Vagrant’ with a picturesque image of village life of “One field, a flock” and the “charms” that had once adorned the vagrant’s “garden” (Wordsworth ‘The Female Vagrant’ lines 3, 19, 20). Wordsworth had spent time in France in 1790, at the height of the ‘revolutionary debate’ and had had personal experiences with the immense poverty in the country. In using this simple language, Wordsworth would have seen himself as giving those who suffered from poverty a political voice and platform.

Thomas Love Peacock criticised first generation Romantics, such as Wordsworth, of having merely patched together “disjointed relics of tradition” (Chandler and McLane 2). This criticism, however, dismisses any purpose a poet may have had for choosing and adapting a traditional poetic form like Wordsworth does with his Lyrical Ballads. Lynch and Stillinger argue that Romantics had a defiant attitude towards limits, this to include limits of form, as they were impatient with the literary genre they’d inherited and thus turned to create hybrids, such as ‘lyrical ballads’ (20). Wordsworth was writing in a period where poetry was dominated by highly

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educated authors who were imitating the great classical poets, such as Milton who revisited the formal language and form of the epic. Horvath appears to argue that content was made to fit the meter, rather than the form attached as an instrument to better communicate the content, as Wordsworth does in 'The Female Vagrant', and therefore increases the poem's political significance by readily communicating the poet's criticisms of society. This can be seen as a result of the combining of the "intellectual upheaval" of the Enlightenment period with the thought and creativity of the Romantic period, as Horvath observes.

In his studies in the '1802 Preface', Wordsworth observes that language and the human mind act and react to each other, meaning that writing in verse would have certain expectations of the class of audience. He denied the existence of a poetic hierarchy, as short lyric poems were previously considered the being of the lowest level of the poetic scale (Lynch and Stillinger 292). Wordsworth chooses the lyric form to not only subvert this hierarchy but also to reach a wider audience by writing with the "real language of men" as he aimed to fit the metrical arrangements of a lyrical ballad ('Preface' 293).

In writing 'The Female Vagrant' in Spenserian stanza, Wordsworth wrote in the 1850 'Preface' that his aim was to explore the ways "more pathetic situations and sentiment, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose" (Stewart 59). This is seen in the poem where the audience's expectations of a lyrical ballad with a cheerful meter are subverted with grotesque imagery of the "unburied dead that lay in festering heaps" (Wordsworth 'The Female Vagrant' line 147). Wordsworth creates tension between the expected form and the form that emerges. Addison believed that the simplicity of the ballad form also helped the poet to capture the audience's imagination (Lynch and Stillinger 31).

Ballads had sound effects that would reconnect printed poetry to a living voice as the musicality gave it life, the accentual focus was closely connected to natural speech (Lynch and Stillinger 31). This was a technique that Wordsworth experimented with in Lyrical Ballads, such as in 'The Female Vagrant' where the voice is shifted from the speaker to the woman who "thus her artless story told" in the opening stanza. The female vagrant is, therefore, able to narrate her plight under growing urbanisation, industrialisation, and the American War for Independence, highlighting the effect these events had on rural life and resulting dissatisfaction created amongst the working classes as the "pains and plagues that on [their] heads came down" (Wordsworth 'The Female Vagrant' line 127). The simple language and form of the poem make this plight realistic and believable. The form and diction chosen by Wordsworth reflect the vagrant's voice and upbringing, immersing the audience in her life. The simple diction, for Wordsworth, is more emphatic, and combined with the regular ballad meter assists in accurately reflecting the universal experience of those in rural settings, in Wordsworth's mind, communicating a universal truth in the poem that can be taken out of its 'living context' and

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applied to other moments and events in time, such as industrialisation in the Victorian Era, or the current plight of refugees in Europe.

In his 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote that poetry was made to be of "the language really spoken by men" (Stewart 58). He also expressed the view that poetry was the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", upon which a meter would provide a regulating force (Stewart 58). Wordsworth also argued that such formal language and diction caused other poets to "separate themselves from the sympathies of men", a result that would have negatively affected his writing (Horvath).

Whereas Wordsworth was writing from within Britain at the time of 'The Female Vagrant', much of Shelley's later writing was done in exile in Italy and he relied on the reports that came from England, such as the news of the Peterloo Massacre. Shelley's position in exile, however, allowed him to be more explicit in his criticisms. The reach of the 'Two Acts' passed in 1795 is seen, however in that Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy' was not published until 1832, after Shelley's death. Both poets were, however, influenced by William Godwin's 'Enquiry Concerning Political Justice', which foretold an inevitable but peaceful evolution to the final stage of society with equal distribution of property and no government (Lynch and Stillinger 6).

Shelley was perceived as an atheist, revolutionist, and libertine, morals, and views which would have influenced his poetry (Lynch and Stillinger 749). After moving to Italy in 1818 with Mary Godwin Wollstonecraft, Shelley saw himself as an exile from England, an "alien" and "outcast", "rejected by the human race" (Lynch and Stillinger 750). This removed perception of events in England gave him a wider view as well as a platform to speak his mind regarding the events at Peterloo.

In August 1819, a famous public orator, Henry Hunt, and a group of peaceful protestors met in St Peter's Field in Manchester to campaign for parliamentary reform. The end of the Napoleonic war in 1815 had seen an increase in the number of working people becoming involved in the movement for reform, campaigning for universal suffrage in the belief that it would lead to better use of public money and fairer taxes. The protest was broken up by the Manchester Yeomanry, a group of volunteer soldiers, and the resulting violence left between ten and twenty protestors dead and hundreds injured. The response was an outcry of public sympathy for the protestors' situation.

The British government had responded by passing the 'Six Acts', which aided in the suppression of freedom of the public and press, and many critics deemed an act of paranoia. Whilst Shelley was in exile and could freely write poetry on the subject of Peterloo, with his intention of having it published in England by Leigh Hunt, he would have seen the need for its meaning to be more implicit and communicated through allegory, language, and form. For

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Shelley, “language, color, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instruments and materials of poetry”, and therefore would be instruments of communicating the poem’s political purpose (Roberts 288). Roberts declares that Shelley aimed to redefine what was political, this gave his poetry the opportunity to be a political voice (289). In terms of his politics, for Shelley, the struggle was to be against the existing order, rather than towards a utopia. This political thought translates into the form of the poem where Shelley adapts and transcends the boundaries and expectations of a ballad, similar to Wordsworth, rather than creating an entirely new form.

‘The Mask of Anarchy’ was Shelley’s call for revolution following the Peterloo Massacre, switching between a call for violence and a call for a passive resistance approach, reflecting the speaker’s internal battle, as he calls for men to “Rise like lions” as they are “Fiercely thirsting to exchange/Blood for blood”, however encourages them to “Do not thus when ye are strong” (lines 151, 194-195, 196). The conflicted views expressed reflect Shelley’s inspiration taken from Godwin who promoted passiveness and the inevitability of change, as well as Shelley’s own disappointment with the outcome of the French Revolution following 1815 where the poor suffered from severe economic depression and old autocratic monarchies were restored, a disappointment which may have encouraged a wish for violence, expressed in the poem. For Reno, this confliction was due to Shelley’s “skeptical idealism”, as the poem calls for violence, but then repeatedly “turns in upon itself” in the repetition of passive resistance, specifically in stanzas 73-81, where he begins each with “Let” rather than revolting against. The final lines of the poem evoke a lightly veiled incitement to revolt with violence where the slaughter experienced will “steam up like inspiration” (Shelley ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ 361). Rather than a direct simile, Shelley may be inferring that a similar inspiration to the slaughter shall be awakened in his audience.

Shelley’s choice of form reflects his aim to publish ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ as part of a volume of “popular songs” wholly political and desired to awaken and direct the imagination of the reformers” (Reno). Thus, the poem takes the form of a straightforward allegory as a ballad, written for a less educated audience, a presumption Wordsworth worked against, with couplets and triplets created to be memorable through repetition and rhyme used as tools to aid memory. This concept can be contrasted to Wordsworth’s use of the ballad form too, where he wants the imagery created in ‘The Female Vagrant’ to be memorable to warn the people he is addressing of future danger to them.

Roberts places Shelley’s declaration that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” opposite W.H. Auden’s conclusion that “poetry makes nothing happen” (1). Considering the message of ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, it is difficult to assume that Shelley did not want something to happen as a result of the audience reading it due to its powerful rhetoric. The speaker engages the poem’s audience with rhetorical questions of “What is Freedom” and

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through the repetition of the ballad's refrain calling to the "Men of England" and asking them to "Rise like Lions after slumber/In unvanquishable number/Shake your chains to Earth like dew/Which in sleep had fallen on you-/Ye are many – they are few" (Shelley, 'The Mask of Anarchy' lines 156, 146, 151-155). Shelley's use of five lines in this refrain causes the words to stand out against the regular pattern of quatrains used in the rest of the poem, placing emphasis on its words and calls to revolution.

For Shelley, "language [was] vitally metaphorical" and a tool to be used by poets, alongside form, who were the "institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society" (Shelley 'A Defence of Poetry' 858). In comparison to Shelley's other works, 'The Mask of Anarchy' was # written with uncharacteristically low diction, signaling that Shelley intended the work to be consumed by a popular audience (Stewart 62). The broadside ballad form also allowed Shelley to give a detailed narrative of the event he is describing as they typically began at the beginning, rather than in medias res, and included rationales for the actions in the narrative, such as providing rationale for why the "Men of England" should act by describing the slaughter and suffering they have experienced, using grotesque imagery and internal stories such as Hope's tale (Stewart 62, 'The Mask of Anarchy' line 147). What is evident in both Wordsworth and Shelley's poetry, in terms of the examples used, was that form was a significant tool in helping the poets speak to a wider audience. Poetic readership had always been assumed to be an elite, educated group, but in using the basis of the form of the traditional ballad, a form associated with rural life and oral tradition, combined with simple diction, Shelley and Wordsworth were able to direct their poetry to those in the working class and those who suffered in poverty. This action is without a doubt a politically motivated one as both Wordsworth and Shelley had experienced or read about the French Revolution and the fact that it was not spurred on by the elite groups in France, but that it was possible due to the dissatisfaction felt amongst the lower classes and those who suffered at the hands of autocratic rule.

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