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## ROMANTICISM IN THE SHADOW OF WAR: LITERARY CULTURE IN THE NAPOLEONIC WAR YEARS



By Jeffrey Cox  
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"It is a year or so after the war. It cannot be said that it is war, it cannot be said that it is peace, it can be said that it is post-war; this will probably go on for ten years." This wryly phrased statement from Stevie Smith's post-war novel *Holiday* (1949) could serve as an epigraph to Jeffrey Cox's fine-grained study of British literary culture in the Napoleonic war years. Between 1793 and 1816, peace with France was formally established on three occasions: once, for a period of just over a year, by the Treaty of Amiens (25 March 1802-18 May 1803); twice, for a period just short of a year, by the Treaty of Fontainebleau following the first abdication of Napoleon (11 April 1814-25 March 1815); and a third and final time by the Treaty of Paris (20 November 1815), ratified a few months after Napoleon's second abdication in the wake of the Battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815). The outcome of all three treaties, observes Cox, was an "in-between time, neither war nor peace," when Britain continued to undermine revolutionary movements both at home and abroad, "a time we might have labeled 'cold war,' or now even a 'war on terror'" (56). Cox aims chiefly to show how dissident writers challenged the accelerated spread of reactionary politics during the Napoleonic era.

In previous studies of romanticism and war, scholars such as Simon Bainbridge (*Napoleon and English Romanticism*, 1995; *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, 2003), J.R. Watson (*Romanticism and War*, 2003), and Mary Favret (*War at a Distance*, 2010) have sometimes pessimistically argued that literature could not generate viable alternatives to the dominant ideology of perpetual conflict. Cox takes the other side. Following up on his distinguished earlier studies of political opposition in romantic-period drama and poetry (*In the Shadows of Romance*, 1987, and *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, 1998), he shows how radical and liberal writers such as Thomas Holcroft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, the Shelleys, and John Keats sought to resist militarism by mounting "border crossings" across "linguistic, generic, gender, and class barriers" (24).

Border crossing is a central metaphor in Cox's examination of these writers. Since the conflicts of the Napoleonic era entailed "limited expeditions, sallies, and border raids" rather than the "total war" that would emerge in the twentieth century (3), Cox argues that literary culture in the Regency period likewise made sporadic, tactical forays across literary, conceptual and social boundaries. The resulting "hybridized" forms (23) offered tantalizing glimpses of alternative modes of being, as exemplified by Holcroft's and Byron's experiments with melodrama (chapters 1 and 2), Barbauld's and the Shelleys' blending of satire and prophecy (chapters 3 and 4), Leigh Hunt's reworking of an episode from Dante's *Inferno* (Chapter 5), and Keats's reanimation of Italian erotic romance (chapters 6). These images of liberty, Cox claims, although sustained only briefly and known only to limited audiences, nevertheless presented an arresting alternative to the arid, death-dealing

logic of the political establishment, which, even as it sought to end the war, strove to ensure that any resulting peace would be experienced by left-leaning individuals and groups as a continuation of war by other means.

This is the kind of peace that Thomas Holcroft dramatizes in his adaptation of Pixérécourt's *Coelina* as *A Tale of Mystery*, which Cox labels "[p]erhaps the most important work of the period defined by the Peace of Amiens" (33). Known as a Jacobin novelist as well as a "man of the theatre," Holcroft created his version of Pixérécourt's melodrama at a moment when in Britain "all of the major forms of the patent theatres--tragedy, comedy of manners, and even farce--seemed exhausted, out of tune with the times" (37). Was Holcroft's adaptation of a French revolutionary drama for the London stage a radical act, as some critics have claimed? More cautiously, Cox argues that the melodrama served both liberal and conservative agendas. Thus, even as the play represents ideological tensions arising from the post-war settlement, it relentlessly welds "individual moments of threat and fear into an engine hurtling towards an anticipated moment of moral, domestic safety," resulting in a "peace that always seems challenged by new violence" (57).

In his troubled negotiation of innovative aesthetic form and conservative content, Holcroft comes closer than any other writer examined here to fulfilling the stereotype of the ineffectual anti-war radical. More successful than his *Tale* as a dramatic commentary on the war against Napoleon is Byron's *Manfred*, which draws on elements of melodrama in order to subvert what the genre typically advocates: conventional morality, domestic stability and political legitimacy. Liberated from "melodramatic notions of right and wrong," Cox contends, *Manfred* is radical in its clear-sighted acceptance of human complexity. "Where the melodrama," he concludes, "reads the Revolution and its wars as a failed apocalypse that leaves us in the in-between time of perpetual struggle, [*Manfred*] sets aside apocalyptic dreams to embrace the confusing world even if it is not heaven on earth and to resist tyranny even if he cannot create utopia" (84).

From Byron Cox turns to Barbauld, whose poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* reckons (like *Manfred*) with the troubles of her times even while entertaining the possibility of release from war. As a satiric prophecy written by a woman, the poem was attacked by conservative commentators for its violation of genre and gender norms. Blurring formal divisions and uneasily exposing the violent origins of civilized society, the poem is for Cox "as contested as the cultural moment it describes." (112-13) Unlike Holcroft, who acquiesces to the post-war settlement, and more so than Byron, for whom, I would suggest, liberty remains ultimately in thrall to tragedy, Barbauld is said to "replace the 'foundational truths' of a masculine and militaristic nationalism" with "a global embrace of the necessary violent struggle for commerce, art, and liberty" (125).

Moving from Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* to Percy Shelley's sonnet, "England in 1819," Cox argues that "Shelley's poetry as a whole explores the gap between the "grave" that is England and the "glorious Phantom" of future liberation" (127). Using this claim as a staging ground for insightful readings of poems from the Esdaile notebook, *Queen Mab*, and *Prometheus Unbound*, Cox observes that *Queen Mab* pits necessitarianism against providentialism, showing how war and its attendant miseries spring from institutional evils rather than man's fallen nature. Besides providing a framework for attacking legitimacy, the doctrine of necessity allows Shelley to herald the end of war and the establishment of perpetual peace. With its uneasy combination of didactic satire and visionary prophecy, however, *Queen Mab* strains the relation between cause and effect, prompting Cox to pose the sensible question: "if the past determines the future, and if the past is a long history of oppression ... How does one glimpse an ideal future when mankind is trapped in custom, in ideology?" (138-9). The answer, in Shelley's words from the *Defence of Poetry*, is that poetry can mirror the "gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present;" thus, anticipating a temporal reversal familiar to readers of science fiction, poetry enables the future to be a cause in the present. Following a suggestive reading of how *Prometheus Unbound* critiques tragic violence and advocates love in times of revolutionary change, Cox briefly shows how Mary Shelley becomes a social satirist in *Valperga* and *The Last Man*. To expose the iniquities of the present age, Cox notes, she first creates a satiric view grounded in a dysfunctional past and then

anticipates a dystopian future. Along with related moments in this study, this brief analysis should prompt Shelley scholars to conduct further, extended analyses of the poet's engagement with the aftermath of war.

From the Shelleys Cox turns to Leigh Hunt, whose post-Waterloo poetry, he argues, tries to imagine peacetime as "the occasion for erotic emancipation, a freeing up of love matched by liberation in verse" (167). In *The Story of Rimini*, Hunt boldly turns Dante's tragic rendition of the adulterous and incestuous love between Paolo and Francesca into a redemptive narrative of overwhelming love. Given this scenario, Cox persuasively reads Hunt's alleged infelicities of expression--an habitual target in criticism of the poet from the Regency period to the present--as evidence of a sophisticated, Schillerian ironic mode. As a radically "sentimental" poet, Hunt uses affected or contrived language to defamiliarize Dante's tale, converting a late medieval story of illicit desire and damnation into a progressive account of sexual liberation in the aftermath of war. In the midst of this fascinating reading Cox glancingly notes that Hazlitt, Haydon, and Mary Shelley viewed free love and open marriage more sceptically. But his analysis of Hunt's poem, Cox writes, is intended to serve as a springboard for "a more nuanced account of the range of sexual politics in the Cockney school" (181).

The Cockney school provides the context for Cox's reading of Keats's *Isabella*. In this appropriation of Boccaccio, Cox argues, Keats largely substantiates the central claim of the book: for all its local disagreements, the Cockney school generally believed "that the erotic might provide a new space from which to rethink a society that had for so long been organized around war and other forms of institutional violence." (182) Cox approaches *Isabella* brilliantly by way of a rare book sale. In 1812, one of the scarcest books in existence, the Valdarfer 1471 Venetian edition of the *Decameron*, was sold at auction, following a heated bidding war, to the Marquis of Blandford, for the then unprecedented sum of £2,260. While this extravagant acquisition of a single book exemplifies the aristocratic ownership and control of cultural capital, Cox explains how the Cockney School labored to disseminate free adaptations of Italian literature in English. In Cox's sustained and richly textured reading of *Isabella*, the poem resembles Hunt's *Rimini* in maintaining an ironic distance between a supposedly naïve, pure, and unified past and a sentimental, self-conscious, and multivalent present. Thus "the Cockney's turn to Italy," Cox argues, "powerfully stages a border raid across linguistic boundaries in order to shift cultural power across the divisions in British society" (191).

This finely observed, elegantly written, and beautifully structured book should be read closely by all serious scholars of British Romantic literature. It will also appeal to more general readers interested in the relations between culture and conflict. For these desperate times Cox strikes a particularly affecting note in the closing pages, where he defends the Cockney School's celebration of liberatory love over and against a death-dealing culture of war-mongering. Although I do wonder whether Shelley, Hunt and Keats manage to free their imaginings wholly from the erotic lure of violence, Cox's account of how they resisted this seemingly irresistible passion is something to applaud.

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