

## The Revolution Controversy and the “Spirit of the Age”

In a letter to Byron in 1816 Percy Shelley called the French Revolution “the master theme of the epoch in which we live.” The closing sentences of his “Defence of Poetry” assert, similarly, that, because of the repercussions of the Revolution, English literature “has arisen as it were from a new birth.” The “electric life that burns” within the great poets of the time, Shelley continues, expresses “less their spirit than the spirit of the age.” Such judgments were widely shared: the literature of Romanticism, early and late, cannot be understood historically without acknowledgment of how these works’ distinctive modes of imagining and feeling were shaped first by the promise, then by the tragedy, of the great events in France. In the generation preceding Shelley’s several authors had expressed an enthusiasm for those political transformations that in its intensity resembled a religious awakening. Many tried to make sense of events in terms borrowed from the Bible, interpreting the Revolution as fulfilling the promise, guaranteed by an infallible text, that a short period of violence would ultimately usher in an era of universal peace in which the world will begin anew. (See “The French Revolution: Apocalyptic Expectations” in the supplemental ebook.) And even after what they considered the failure of the revolutionary promise—signaled by the executions of the king and queen, the massacres during the Reign of Terror under Robespierre, the wars of imperial conquest under Napoleon—many authors held fast, despite a pervasive disenchantment, to their dreams of radical transformation. Twenty years on, when Shelley wrote, it must have seemed, following the defeat of Napoleon’s armies and restoration of the European monarchies, as though the clock had been turned back and the old political order had been re-established on even firmer foundations than before. Shelley and many other Romantic authors, however, continued in the belief that the hopes aroused by the Revolution remained relevant, even essential, for their moment.

That Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille and freeing of a handful of political prisoners by an angry mob of Parisians on July 14, 1789. A month later, the new National Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Six weeks after, in early October, citizens marched to the royal palace of Versailles and arrested King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, confining them to the Tuileries palace in Paris. These happenings were almost immediately reported in the London newspapers, quick to recognize a commercial opportunity. British liberals applauded the revolutionists’ proclamation of natural rights and equality. The radicals were ecstatic, believing the moment was ripe for Britain to embrace political change as well. Conservatives, who referred to themselves “loyalists,” thus casting others’ reformist principles as treason, were first wary and then horrified. Most alarming to them, perhaps, was the emergent view that politics was the legitimate business of the common people and should not be monopolized by an aristocratic elite.

It did not escape the notice of British onlookers that during the revolutionists’ festivities, printing presses were carried along in the parades—the French republic’s way of honoring the technology that made it possible to spread new political ideas and to include the masses in their discussion. This section documents how, through the early 1790s, a frenzied pamphlet war over the meanings of the French Revolution kept the printing presses of England busy in their turn. Sales in London’s print-making businesses were likewise boosted by the excitement, which provided visual artists, satirists especially, with unprecedented opportunities.