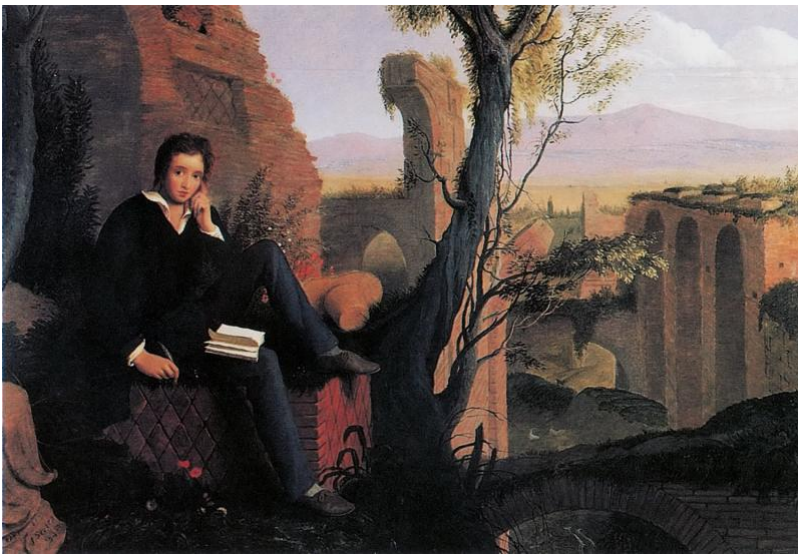


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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Percy Shelley (the sociable nightingale)

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### Keywords

Friendship

Italy

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### Abstract

Far from following the script of the lone Romantic genius, Percy Shelley (1792-1822) purposely cultivated numerous friendships with the most talented writers of his time. In his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley even endeavoured to theorize the complex workings of poetic influence, implicitly acknowledging the creative potential of sociability. Navigating through many circles, in Marlow, London (in Hunt's 'Cockney school') and in Pisa, Shelley also formed intense and durable friendships, the most famous being his creative but strained connection with Lord Byron. More recently, new scholarship has illuminated his collaborative and reciprocal literary relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, his second wife.

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'A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds.'<sup>1</sup> This statement, taken from *A Defence of Poetry*, has long shaped Percy Shelley's posterity as a solitary Romantic genius. Moreover, many have read the figure of the lonely

poet in *Alastor* as Shelley's double (although Marilyn Butler has argued that the poet rather embodies a character from Wordsworth's poem *The Excursion*).<sup>2</sup> The impression that Shelley was indeed a lone creative spirit was then further reinforced by the motif of the solitary bark which Shelley uses in 'Lines written among the Euganean Hills,' or by the poetic speaker's complaint about solitude in 'Stanzas written in Dejection – December 1818, Near Naples.' Indeed, Shelley's exile in Italy perfectly corresponds to Butler's chronology of the Romantic withdrawal of the years 1817-22, which produced many of the most compelling poetic works of the period (Butler 154).

Although these elements tend to build Shelley as an embodiment of the myth of the Romantic solitary genius, critics in the last decades have tried to situate him more accurately in the sociable world of his days, both in England and in Italy, and to link this sociability to his keen sense of the complexity of poetic influence, notably in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* ('Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and, in another, the creations, of their age,' (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 208)). Foregrounding the image of the 'uroburos' in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley was himself invested in many circles in his lifetime, notably Hunt's circle, known as the 'Cockney school,' whose medium of publication was *The Examiner*. On 8 December 1816, at the very beginning of his new friendship with Leigh Hunt – the most important one in Shelley's life according to Jeffrey Cox – Shelley writes to him: 'I have not in all my intercourse with mankind experienced sympathy & kindness with which I have been so affected, or which my whole being has so sprung forward to meet & to return.'<sup>3</sup> This new and powerful bond attracted Shelley into a circle of peers whose configuration spurred him to envisage the possibility of collective action in a new way as a 'lived example of *fraternité*,' overcoming the divisions of rank, status, and gender.<sup>4</sup> This had a notable influence on his conception of politics, but also on his poetic production.

From the viewpoint of a fairly isolated and still little-known poet like Shelley, Hunt exemplified the full promise of collective activism and a new type of 'educational project' which chimed with Shelley's political and philosophical ambition in *Queen Mab* but also enabled him to redefine it in a new way. Up until then, Shelley had mostly launched into individual endeavours, for instance in 1812 in Ireland, where he gave speeches and distributed pamphlets, with the help of his first wife Harriet and his servant Daniel Healy. Shelley felt close to Hunt's utopian desire for a fusion of literature and politics. Shelley himself had infuriated anarchist philosopher William Godwin by setting out a project to create an association in 1812 (*Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists*). Five years later, according to Cox, 'Shelley still believes that a group provides the best vehicle for cultural and political reform' (Cox 4). Hunt's project was more precisely to create a new collective identity transcending factional politics and to reconstruct the elegant sociability of the early eighteenth century, that is, the construction of 'a new progressive elite, whose refinement would guarantee reform without violence.'<sup>5</sup>

As a result, this circle of fellow poets and writers – not unlike earlier manuscript circles – also provided an immediate and sympathetic audience for Shelley's poetic production, and a source of stimulation and inspiration, making it possible to write poetry of a more intense

kind. The members of the circle exemplified the ideal readers Shelley had yearned for and would later be nostalgic of. The circle was thus also a platform of literary experimentation. *Laon and Cythna* for instance was revised through a 'literary committee' composed of Charles Ollier, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont, and Thomas Peacock. The life of the group was characterized by many communal activities such as sonnet-writing contests, which proved highly stimulating, and the circulation of poems in manuscript so as to get comments from others, forging a collective literary practice and turning poetry into a social activity outside of the commercialized sphere of print. A few years later, Shelley elaborated the dialectic of influence which is central to his theory of poetry and to the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* – it is through the influence of contemporaries that a writer becomes part of, and in turn helps to shape, the 'spirit of the age.'

Even in exile, Shelley remained invested in the circle, or tried to recreate it in various locations, as shown by his letters. Shelley sent the fair copy of 'Julian and Maddalo' to Hunt from Italy as an attempt to reproduce 'something of the sense of intellectual exchange so important to the world Hunt created around himself.'<sup>6</sup> For Donald H. Reiman, the circle was also the topic of many other poems such as 'The Retrospect,' 'Letter to Maria Gisborne,' and 'The Boat on the Serchio.'<sup>7</sup> Shelley's nostalgia for such a stimulating environment is particularly made patent in the verse epistle 'Letter to Maria Gisborne,' written during his exile in Italy where he tried to constitute a new circle. But, as implied in the famous first stanza of the poem, in 1820 in Leghorn, Shelley had become again a solitary 'spider' trapped in a 'soft cell' – a metaphor for both physical and intellectual isolation – far from the members of the Cockney school he duly enumerates later in the poem, by whom Shelley nonetheless hopes to be remembered: Hunt, Hogg, Peacock, Horace Smith, and even [Godwin](#).

'The spider spreads her webs, whether she be  
In poet's tower, cellar, or barn, or tree;  
The silkworm in the dark green mulberry leaves  
His winding sheet and cradle ever weaves;  
So I, a thing whom moralists call worm,  
Sit spinning still round this decaying form,  
From the fine threads of rare and subtle thought—  
No net of words in garish colours wrought  
To catch the idle buzzers of the day—  
But a soft cell, where when that fades away,  
Memory may clothe in wings my living name  
And feed it with the asphodels of fame,  
Which in those hearts which must remember me  
Grow, making love an immortality.' (1-14)

Beyond this circle, two other figures are also distinctly associated to Shelley – [Lord Byron](#) and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Their meeting in Switzerland in 1816 at Villa Diodati – a collaborative sociable event that also included Polidori – famously gave birth to one of the

most famous novels of the era – Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Interestingly, while critics have progressively unveiled the hidden tensions which underlay Shelley’s friendship with Byron, new scholarship has also underscored the Shelleys’ ‘collaborative and reciprocal literary relationship’ and their sociable method of composition as a literary couple.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Shelley’s friendship with Byron has long been seen as an emblem of the Romantic movement in England. Yet this friendship was also rather strained, as Shelley saw Byron as both a model and a rival who exacerbated his sense of creative inferiority and his anxiety about his lack of a wide readership. Their conversations at Venice in August 1818 were a source of inspiration for Shelley’s poem ‘Julian and Maddalo,’ where Julian embodies Shelley and Maddalo, Byron. Shaped like a philosophical dialogue in a conversational or familiar style, the poem also underlines the difficulty to communicate with the world and points the limits of sociability, which are embodied by the madman’s ‘Unmodulated, cold, expressionless’ words and ‘incommunicable woe’ (292, 343). The poem also distinctly opposes Shelley’s optimism and Byron’s pessimism, yet also underlines Julian’s ineffectuality and Maddalo’s deep insights. Byron’s poetic powers remained a source of inspiration and admiration for Shelley throughout his poetic career, as shown by his apostrophe to his friend in ‘Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills’ and the epigraph to *Ode to Liberty*, taken from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Similarly, according to many critics, *The Witch of Atlas* owes much to *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. However, while the literary and personal relationship between Shelley and Byron proved crucial for the development of both poets, Byron’s overshadowing fame also had a paralyzing effect on Shelley, especially in his last years in Italy. In May 1822 he thus writes to his friend Horace Smith: ‘I do not write – I have lived too long near Lord Byron & the sun has extinguished the glowworm’ (*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2, 423).

Another crucial literary relationship for Shelley was his shared existence of travelling, reading, and writing with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, his second wife, although this relationship was also strained and shifted across time, notably due to the growing sentimental and intellectual estrangement of the couple in the later years. Percy and Mary eloped in 1814 and married in December 1816, after the suicide of Shelley’s first wife. In 1817 they co-authored *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, in a collaborative and sociable way which makes it hard to assign the sections to one writer or the other. This mode of collaboration then resurfaced many times and morphed into a free and creative exchange of ideas, for instance when Shelley wrote the preface to *Frankenstein*, and when Mary collaborated on Percy’s tragedy *The Cenci*, which Mercer considers a ‘sister-work’ to Mary’s novel *Matilda* (Mercer 22). Mary is often an addressee in Percy’s poems and Percy wrote four lyrics for her dramas ‘Proserpine’ and ‘Midas’. However, in marrying Mary, Percy Shelley also had another aim in mind, as she was also distinctly instrumental in his desire to underline his intellectual proximity with and his allegiance to yet another intellectual, almost mythical couple, that of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, whom he celebrates in the dedication of *Laon and Cythna*. Therefore, through his wedding to Mary, Shelley also asserted his involvement in a transgenerational radical community.

Far from a lone creative spirit, Shelley was thus well aware of the complex workings of poetic influence and of the creative potential of sociability, which was probably the reason why he cultivated so many friendships with the most talented and influential writers of his time. As underlined by David Duff, ‘the impact of poets from earlier periods is also evident but the key influences on the young Shelley are living writers, theirs being the current literary idioms through and against which he defined his own voice.’<sup>9</sup> Retracing Shelley’s sociability is thus key in recovering the full extent and originality of his style, since, as ‘an allusive and sophisticated poet,’ Shelley discovered his own voice ‘by accommodating and often contending with the voices of others.’<sup>10</sup>

1. Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reimand and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 516.
  2. Marilyn Butler, *Romantic, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 141.
  3. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), vol. 1, p. 516.
  4. Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in The Cockney School. Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 52 (his emphasis).
  5. Kevin Gilmartin, *Prints Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 221.
  6. Jon Mee, *Conversable World: Literature, Contention and Community 1762-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 248.
  7. Donald H. Reiman, ‘Shelley and the Human condition’, in Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (eds.), *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 9.
  8. Anna Mercer, *The Collaborative Literary Relationship of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (New York & London: Routledge, 2020).
  9. David Duff, ‘Lyric Development: Esdaile Notebook to Hymns of 1816’, in Michael O’Neill, Anthony Howe, and with the Assistance of Madeleine Callaghan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 243.
  10. Michael O’Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 2.
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[The Retrospect \(1812\)](#)