

Labour Theories and Paper Currencies: The Economic Concerns of William Cobbett's 'Address to the Journeymen and Labourers,' and Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Men of England &c- A song'

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Abstract: Cobbett's reformist pamphlet 'Address to the Journeymen and Labourers' (1816) attempts to demystify the political and economic causes of the miseries of its intended readership, tracing with populist verve the links between labour exploitation, paper currency, and the national debt. Shelley's furious poem of 1819, produced in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre, indicated how little had changed during the interim period. The following essay aims to provide a brief introduction to each text, considering aspects of their respective treatment of value creation through the labour process. While Shelley's poem is illuminated by Cobbett's populist economic journalism, so issues of fiction and fabrication foregrounded by Shelley's poetics draw out the presence in Cobbett's article of labour theories of value developed by the classical political economists.

Shelley was just one of over two hundred thousand readers who by the winter of 1817 had enjoyed Cobbett's notorious 'Address to the Journeymen and Labourers.' The article first appeared on 2nd November 1816 as the lead piece in *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* (a sixteen-page newspaper priced at 1s.½d which Cobbett had produced regularly since 1802), and later that week as an octavo pamphlet priced at 2d. The pamphlet's cheap form remained exempt from newspaper stamp duty taxes to become affordable to the labourers to whom it was addressed. This inaugural edition of what became known as the *Two-penny Trash* encapsulated Cobbett's characteristic tone of 'plain, broad, downright English.'¹ The text's italics and robust punctuation evoked the patterns of speech, facilitating the frequent public readings of the article for the benefit of the illiterate poor. Following the radical agitation against the strictures of the Importation Act 1815, Cobbett's bold act of textual oratory energised his audience and horrified the administration of Lord Liverpool. However, the tyrannical Seditious Meetings Act 1817 halted Cobbett's own production of pamphlets, and hastened his temporary exile to America on the 27th March.²

Nevertheless, the pamphlet's argument was clear. Cobbett printed his threefold purpose on the cover: to diagnose the *Cause*, to expose false *Remedies*, and to explain the effectual *Relief* to the present miseries of the labouring class (Figure 1). The central cause of their misery is summarised as '*the enormous amount of the taxes, which the government compels us to pay for [...] its army, [...] its pensioners, &c. and for the payment of the interest of its debt.*'³ However, the government is directly accused of downplaying the structural causes of this increasing tax burden in favour of demonising the labouring class. Identifying the mode of the political right, Cobbett argues that:

¹ William Hazlitt, 'Character of Cobbett' (1822), in *The Fight and Other Writings*, ed. Tom Paulin and David Chandler (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.129-39 (p.129).

² See Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.143; Gerald Duff, 'William Cobbett and the Prose of Revelation,' in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol.11(4), 1970. pp.1349-65 (p.1356); Richard Ingrams, *The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), p.124-34; and Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p.110.

³ Cobbett, 'Address to the Journeymen and Labourers of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland' (Manchester: J. Molineux & Co, 1816), p.3. Further references to this work are followed after quotation. All italics and punctuation is Cobbett's own.

emissaries of corruption are now continually crying out against the *weight* of the *poor-rates* [...] Their project is, to deny relief to all who are *able to work*. But what is the use of your being *able* to work, if no one will, or can, give you work? (p.8)

The process is abetted by ‘the hired press [who] call you the *Scum* of society’ (p.10). Cobbett summarises the false remedies offered to his assumed reader by such commentators as comprised of suggestions ‘to narrow the limit of parish relief, to prevent you from marrying in [...] youth, or to thrust you out to seek your bread in foreign lands’ (p.3). However, the article concludes by insisting that the effectual relief to present corruption should reject violent agitation in favour of petitioning for ‘*reform* in the Commons [...] to [give] every payer of *direct taxes* a vote’ (p.11). Cobbett’s overarching claim that ‘We want *great alteration*, but we want *nothing new*’ emphasises his untarnished reverence for existing ‘constitutional laws’ such as the 1689 Bill of Rights (p.12), while simultaneously signifying the tensions of his own ‘reactionary Radicalism.’⁴

Cobbett’s argument is rooted in contemporary formulations of the labour theory of value. Leading with the thesis that ‘all the resources of a country [...] spring, from the *labour* of its people’ (p.3), he argues for reform on the grounds that ‘labourers and their families have a right [...] to relief from the purses of the rich’ because ‘no riches [exist] [...] which they, by their labour, have not assisted to create’ (p.9). This insistence on the centrality of labour in the creation of both wealth and commodity value echoes the foundational political economy of Adam Smith. Smith had argued that ‘The word VALUE’ encompasses both ‘the utility of some particular object’ and ‘the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys,’ termed respectively ‘“value in use”’ and ‘“value in exchange.”’⁵ The use value of any commodity (to its possessor) embodies all avoided ‘toil,’ and consequently (and despite the fluctuations of market bargaining) ‘Labour [...] is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities.’⁶ However, he draws a clear distinction between exchange value and monetary price:

Labour alone [...] never varying in its own value, is [...] [the] real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared. It is their real price; money is their nominal price only⁷

Smith’s theory was developed by David Ricardo, whose broader exploration of scarcity highlighted the conditions under which the ‘real’ value of labour becomes (in practice) variable, emphasising both ‘the varying price of [...] necessaries, on which the wages of labour are expended,’ but also how the labour process is itself ‘modified by the employment of machinery and other fixed and durable capital.’⁸ Terence Hoagwood observes how Ricardo’s focus on the intensification of the labour process reveals the inexorable ‘reification of capital’ over use value in early capitalism, embedded in the creation and extraction of profit. Capital value constitutes a ‘fabricated’ form of abstracted value whose ‘spurious autonomy’ Hoagwood likens in kind to the nominal money-form itself.⁹

⁴ Leonora Nattrass, *William Cobbett: The Politics of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.115.

⁵ Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations: A Selected Edition* (1776), ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.36, 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁸ Ricardo, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), 3rd ed. (London: J.M. Dent, 1911), p.8, 18.

⁹ Hoagwood, *Skepticism & Ideology: Shelley's Political Prose and its Philosophical Context from Bacon to Marx* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), p.187-9.

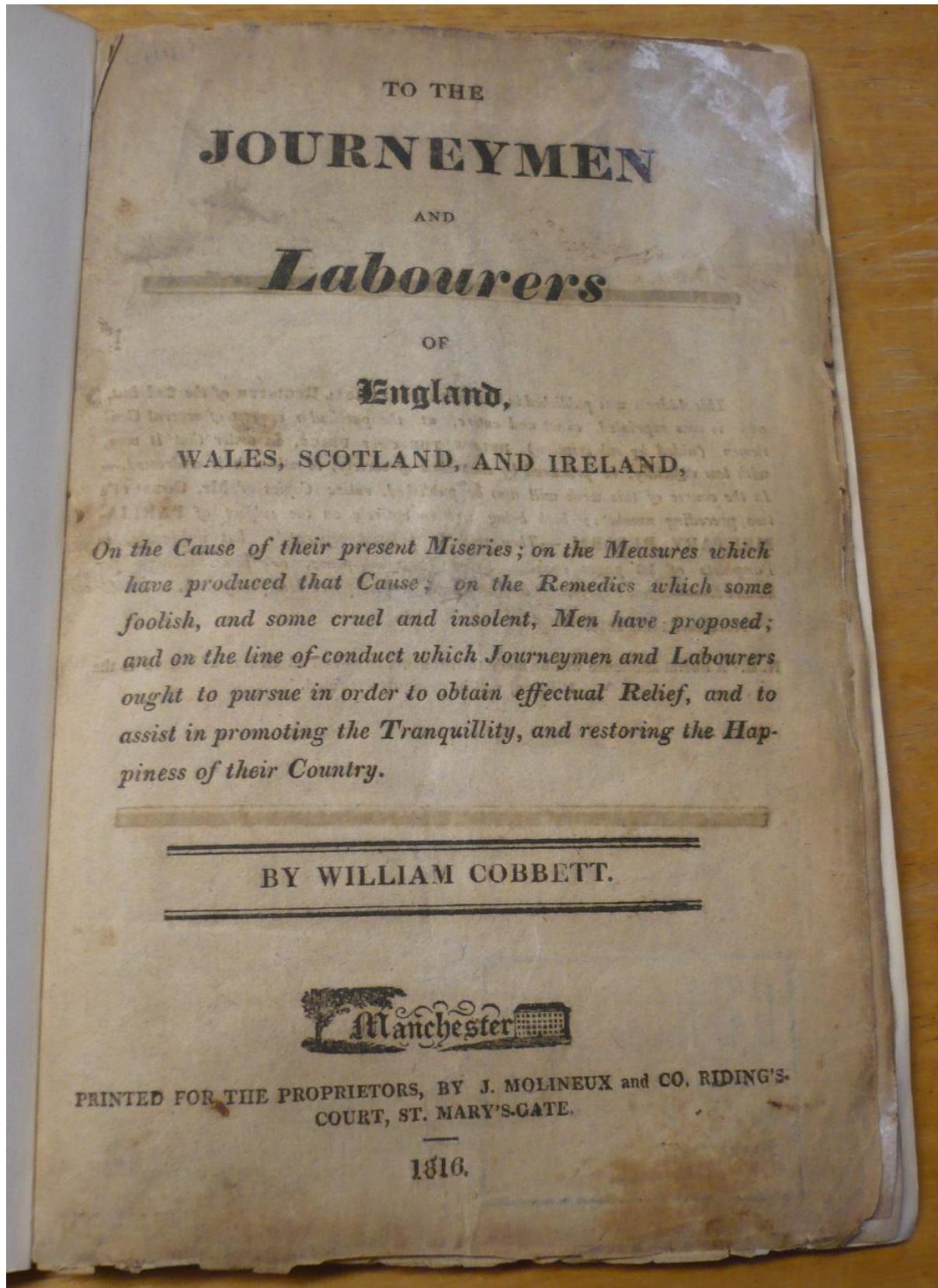


Figure 1: Title page of William Cobbett's 'Address to the Journeymen and Labourers of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland,' Manchester: J. Molineux & Co, 1816. (14cm x 21.5cm). Image reproduced by permission of the library of Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

While avoiding the perceived complexities of Ricardian vice, Cobbett's pamphlet articulates these theoretical formulations implicitly to explain the measures he sees as causing his readers' misery. Rejecting the claim that tax rates had in recent years been reduced, Cobbett explains in simple terms the reality of inflationary stealth tax upon material necessities:

[If] four years ago, I had 100 pounds to pay in taxes, then 120 bushels of wheat would pay my share. If I have *now* 75 pounds to pay in taxes, it will require 190 bushels [...] Consequently, though my taxes are *nominally* reduced, they are in reality, greatly augmented. This has been done by the legerdemain of paper-money (p.4)

Cobbett's example draws together a number of his own *explicit* economic concerns. For Cobbett, the present depreciation of currency is rooted in the 1797 Bank Restrictions Act. The Act forced the Bank of England to suspend the conversion of banknotes for gold coinage, and, in effect, to abandon their initial *de facto* gold standard. Although attempting to prevent a bank run (in response to the public's own fears of French invasion), the Act signified that the nominal value of circulating paper currency far exceeded the country's gold reserves. However, prior governments themselves had inexorably increased the volume of paper-money as a measure to service the interest on the national debt; itself originally contracted from the (then) newly established Bank of England in 1694 to finance the government's war machine. Yet until the 1816 Coinage Act established the gold standard in an attempt to curb the issue, the Liverpool government had continued to print paper-money to finance its recent Napoleonic wars, engendering an inflationary cut to the purchase power of the labour wage, while simultaneously extracting further taxes to service its debt interest.¹⁰

Cobbett was enraged. His principle critique of the relationship between fiat currency and the national debt had formed a series of *Register* articles between 1810-11, later compiled in *Paper Against Gold* (1815). However, his inaugural pamphlet formed his first serious attempt to address directly in print those labourers most heavily afflicted by the government's monetary and fiscal policies. Cobbett asserts that, between the American Revolutionary conflicts (1775-83) and Napoleon's defeat (1815), 'wars have ADDED 36 millions a year to the interest of the Debt, and 55 millions a year to [...] the taxes!' (p.5). Bringing these statistics closer to home, he follows his description of inflationary stealth tax with a list of commodities such as 'shoes, salt, beer' subject to indirect taxation of 'one half of what you pay for the article itself' (p.9-10). Yet it is the very issue of surreptitious taxation which Cobbett cites to dissuade his reader from violent revolt against small-scale producers; the 'Bakers, Brewers, Butchers' (p.13).¹¹ He reasons that, despite the '*lowering wages* [reduced purchase power] [...] your employers cannot give to you, that which they have not,' because 'the weight of the taxes [...] [press] us *all* to the earth, *except those who receive their incomes out of those taxes*' (p.13). Nonetheless, his attempt to downplay entrepreneurial profit extraction by the disingenuous claim that 'They all sell as cheap as they can' (p.13) suggests a rhetorical attempt to encourage the more affluent readership of his pricier newspaper to join the labourers in petitioning for reform. The corresponding attempt to sell his article as a cheap pamphlet put his critique of inflation into material practice.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of these events, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694-1994* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.110-6; Kenneth Neill Cameron, 'Shelley, Cobbett, and the National Debt', in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol.42(2), 1943. pp.197-209; and Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.17-8.

¹¹ Cobbett echoes Smith's famous assertion that 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest.' See Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p.22.

Shelley trumpeted his debt to Cobbett's populist economics. In *A Philosophical View of Reform (View)*- suppressed for a century until published in 1920- he reproduces Cobbett's explicit arguments concerning paper currency, national debt, and labour exploitation, and urges his intended audience to 'read Cobbett's *Paper Against Gold*.'¹² Shelley also echoes Ricardo in recognising the subspecies of aristocratic 'drones' comprised of 'government pensioners' and 'bankers' that are distinct from 'hereditary land-owners' in having replaced force with financial fraud in order to 'enjoy the profit of the labour of others.'¹³ Yet instead of echoing Cobbett's often straightforward 'demonology' of drones,¹⁴ Shelley emphasises their broader personification of class-relations in the early capitalist mode of production, arguing that the 'hereditary aristocracy [...] took the measures which created this other.'¹⁵ Nonetheless, with a subtle stab of the poet's nib he damns the drones by compounding their economic opportunism with the accusation that they 'poison the literature of the age.'¹⁶ For Shelley, almost nothing could be worse.

The subtle relationship between literature and labour exploitation suggested in *View* forms a central theme of Shelley's 'Men of England &c- A song' ('Song'). In contrast to the immediate notoriety of Cobbett's pamphlet, Shelley's 'Song' languished unread in his Larger Silsbee Notebook until published posthumously by Mary Shelley in 1839.¹⁷ Shelley's fair-copy manuscript of the poem shows the original title written in Mary's hand (Figures 2), a title she altered upon publication to 'Song: To the Men of England.'¹⁸ The added preposition suggests a didactic address to an implied (labouring) reader *à la* Cobbett's pamphlet, compounded by Mary's accompanying claim that '[Shelley] believed that a clash between the two classes of society was inevitable, and he eagerly ranged himself on the people's side.'¹⁹ However, the impact is muted by the prior omission of the poem from her first edited collection of Shelley's poetry (1824), later reasoning that 'in those days of prosecution for libel they could not be printed.'²⁰ Such caution was far from Shelley's impulse, who wrote to Leigh Hunt in 1820 to seek help publishing 'a little volume of popular songs wholly political, & destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformer.'²¹ Yet Mary's reticence reveals her conviction in Shelley's ability to translate his eagerness into verse:-

¹² Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819), in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.636-73 (p.826n). For a detailed discussion of Cobbett's influence on *View*, see Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of 'Culture'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.188-233; and Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p.364, 593. Shelley had previously sent Cobbett a pamphlet he had composed in 1817, entitled 'A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote Throughout the Kingdom, by the Hermit of Marlow.' See Gerald McNiece, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), p.85.

¹³ Shelley, *View*, p.651-2. Ricardo notes the forming 'monied class; [...] [who] live on the interest of their money ... [employed] in loans to the more industrious part of the community.' See Ricardo, *Principles*, p.49.

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), p.766.

¹⁵ Shelley, *View*, p.653. See also Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol.1* (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes, ed. Ernest Mandel (London: Penguin in Association with New Left Review, 1990), p.179.

¹⁶ Shelley, *View*, p.652.

¹⁷ The details of the manuscript's history are drawn from Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas Notebook: A Facsimile of Bodleian MS. Shelley adds., e.6* (1819-20), ed. Carlene A Adamson (New York; London: Garland, 1997), p.xxxvi; and *The Harvard Shelley Poetic Manuscripts* (1822), ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York; London: Garland, 1991), p.xxxviii, 179.

¹⁸ Shelley, 'Song: To the Men of England' (1819), in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. III, ed. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (London: Edward Moxon, 1839), pp.186-7.

¹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, 'Note on Poems of 1819,' in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. III, pp.205-10 (p.207).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Quoted in Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, p.593.

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Men of England &c -
A song

Men of England where'er ye stray
For the lords who lay thee low?
Where'er ye weave with toil & care
Ye rich when ye tyrants wear

Where'er ye feed & clothe & save
From the cradle to the grave
Thou ungrateful Demes who would
Deain your sweet-roy drink your blood

Where'er ye see of England's page
Many a weapon chain & scourge
That their stungles don't mean spirit
In your jaws the dew of your toil

Have ye ~~wisdom~~, comfort, calm
~~Health~~ Health, food, love's gentle be
~~Or what~~ so what is it yett say
With your pain & with

Figure 2: Bodleian. MS. Shelley adds. c.4, Folio 75 verso (Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Men of England &c- A song,' stanzas 1-4, holograph fair copy). Image reproduced by permission of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

Men of England, wherefore plough
 For the lords who lay ye low?
 Wherefore weave with toil and care
 The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save,
 From the cradle to the grave,
 Those ungrateful drones who would
 Drain your sweat -nay, drink your blood?²²

The poem re-produces the themes, techniques and tone of political articles such as Cobbett's pamphlet. The characteristic devices of Cobbett's prose include anaphora, parallel structuring, rhetorical questioning, and subject-verb-object sentence construction.²³ Shelley's opening quatrains feature each device, and like Cobbett keep the drones offstage to permit the poet-narrator's uninterrupted address to the labourers. Yet while Cobbett employs first-person pronouns to rhetorically position himself alongside his reader, Shelley's poet-narrator reveals a spatial detachment through second-person pronouns ('ye'/'your'). Nonetheless, his empathetic attachment to the labourer's cause is instead conveyed through poetic device; with liquid alliteration and iambic pulse conveying an ironic awareness of the supposed organic order of aristocratic rule (l.2), and steady trochaic feet and repeated conjunctions (ll.3, 5) conveying the corresponding 'repetitions of labour-history and its dehumanizing mechanizations.'²⁴ The dialectic between these two processes is embodied in 'rich robes,' where alliteration and spondee entwine the tight-weaved toil of the subordinated labourer with the tyrant rich in cultured robe and natural role, each cloaking 'the reality of the exploiter's complete dependence on the [labour] of the producers.'²⁵ This enactment of 'ideological inversion'²⁶ is emphasised through the aural pun on the tyrant's 'wear' and the poet-narrator's anaphoric 'Wherefore.' Deflecting attention from the formal couplet rhyme ('care'/'wear'), the pun enacts how any conscientious 'care' invested by the labourer into robe-weaving is a symptom of inversion, with the labourer distracted from the reality of oppressive social relations within the existing mode of production.²⁷

Having suggested a linguistic dimension to political discourse in the poem's world, the poet-narrator continues to identify issues critiqued by both Cobbett and the classical political economists:

Wherefore, Bees of England, forge
 Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,
 That these stingless drones may spoil
 The forced produce of your toil?

²² Shelley, 'Song: To the Men of England' (1819), pp.186-7 (p.186), ll.1-8. Further references to this work are given after quotation in the text by line number.

²³ Lynne Lemrow, 'William Cobbett's Journalism for the Lower Orders,' in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol.15(1), 1982, pp.11-20.

²⁴ Susan J. Wolfson, 'Popular Songs And Ballads: Writing the "Unwritten Story" in 1819,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Madeleine Callaghan, Anthony Howe, and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.341-59. (p.354).

²⁵ Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.340.

²⁶ Hoagwood, *Skepticism & Ideology*, p.192.

²⁷ Although analysing the poem's specifically proto-Marxian imagery is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that Shelley's metaphor of lethal blood-drinking to embody issues of labour exploitation mirror Marx's own crucial assertion that 'Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour.' See Marx, *Capital*, p.342.

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
 Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
 Or what is it ye buy so dear
 With your pain and with your fear? (ll.9-16)

While exchanging 'Men' for 'Bees' levels labourer and sinecure-drone to challenge the conventional, hierarchical image of the social hive, the contrasting stinglessness of individual drones stresses instead their broader systemic function.²⁸ The labourer-Bees' forging of weaponry figuratively condenses the process by which tax is extracted from the labourer's wage to service interest on the national debt (itself signifying warfare). Simultaneously, 'forge' conveys both Cobbett and Shelley's view that the government's paper-money is nothing more than forged, 'fabricated pieces of paper.'²⁹ The pun embodies the inextricable relationship between these two issues, while foreshadowing the fricative of 'forced' to emphasise the related, oppressive social relations. The dual signification of 'forge' is mirrored in 'spoil:' the latter word embodying both the drones' *plunder* of labour-produced commodities and the *destruction* of (Smithian) 'real' labour value through the reification of capital.

The opening couplet of stanza four lists human anthropological satisfactions in reverse order of necessity to evoke how tyranny chips them away (ll.13-4). The couplet-concluding 'love's gentle balm' relates to Malthusian arguments for population control, whose warnings against the procreations of youthful marriage Cobbett's pamphlet flags as one of the proffered false remedies for labour misery.³⁰ However, the implied negative answer to the rhetorical question locates both poet-narrator and subject in a world in which Malthusian population controls *are already enforced*, shocking the reader into recognising other manifestations of labour oppression. The exploitation of essential ambiguities in monetary vocabulary ('save'/'buy so dear') to evoke the broader dialectics of political economy forms one of the poem's central linguistic strategies.

While Shelley's 'Song' forges poetry to convey the abstractions of political economy, he elsewhere describes the tensions which exist between the two disciplines.³¹ While broadly opposing the poet's 'all-penetrating spirit' to the 'political economist' (mechanical 'promoters of utility'), he nonetheless perceives the foundational 'poetry in these [latter] systems of thought' due to their status as linguistic 'authors of revolutions in opinion.'³² Applying this argument to 'Song,' the transition from stanza five to six enacts the poet-narrator's attempt to reinvigorate the 'elements of verse'³³ within the theories of political economy, and in doing so, revolutionise within the poem's linguistic world the tyrannical mode of production:

²⁸ In contrast, the core moral claim of *Fable of the Bees* insists that an individualised 'Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live / Whilst we the Benefits receive.' See Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of The Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1728), ed. Phillip Harth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.76.

²⁹ Shelley, *View*, p.651.

³⁰ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.41-3. Clearly a crucial issue for Shelley, a line drafted for 'Song' laments '<O> not to miscreate,- abstain.' See Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas Notebook*, p.38-9.

³¹ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.674-701.

³² *Ibid.*, p.701, 694, 695, 679. Shelley anticipates aspects of Michel Foucault's analysis of Ricardo's development of Smith's thought, which for Foucault illustrates the transition from the classical to the modern *episteme*. See Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970) (London: Routledge, 2002), p.275-86.

³³ Shelley, *Defence*, p.679.

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
 The wealth ye find, another keeps;
 The robes ye weave, another wears;
 The arms ye forge, another bears.

Sow seed, -but let no tyrant reap;
 Find wealth, -let no imposter heap;
 Weave robes, -let not the idle wear;
 Forge arms, -in your defence to bear. (ll.17-24)

Stanza five re-emphasises the repetitive labour processes of ll.3-5, with unvaried iambic tetrameter and parallel structuring conveying the shared graft of different labours. However, the emphatic spondees of stanza six herald the repositioned operative verb at the start of each line, symbolically wrenching the means of production away from each embodiment of exploitation. These imperatives reunite the verb (the labour) with the noun (the commodity), reversing on a linguistic level the reification of capital value from the labour process.³⁴ Yet having enacted the revolution formally, the poem concludes with an ambiguous tonal turn at stanza seven:

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells;
 In halls ye deck another dwells.
 Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
 The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

With plough and spade, and hoe and loom,
 Trace your grave, and build your tomb,
 And weave your winding-sheet, till fair
 England be your sepulchre! (ll.25-32)

One reading suggests a subtle act of free-indirect discourse, through which the tyrant wrenches the poet-narrator's linguistic medium to reaffirm his authority over the labour force, whose dwellings' soft sibilants (l.25) jar with the harsh plosive consonance of the newly-demanded verb-acts ('Shrink'/'deck'/'shake'). A more probable interpretation sees the poet-narrator itself goading the labourers within the poem's world to enact the decrees of the preceding stanzas, and by extension, goad the reader to follow suit. However, while l.29 echoes 'The Digger's Song' to evoke the direct action of the True Levellers,³⁵ the closing context of these labour-verbs renders them lethal rather than liberating to the commodity producer, a recourse to social history echoing Cobbett's own evocation of neglected political struggle.

Bringing some of these observations together, the poem-world of Shelley's 'Song' envisions a dialectical relationship between poetics and political struggle, where linguistic capacity to forge radical outcomes is enacted by the struggle between the labouring 'unwitting anti-poets',³⁶ and the tyrannical mechanizations of *homo economicus*. While Shelley's 'Song' is clearly illuminated by the themes of Cobbett's pamphlet, the poem's own linguistic

³⁴ Smith recognised the labour-verb homology that entwines commodity production with the production of discourse, arguing that 'Verbs must necessarily have been coeval with [...] the formation of language.' See Smith, 'Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages' (1767), in *Adam Smith: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. James R. Otteson (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), pp.194-209 (p.202); and Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.103.

³⁵ 'With spades and hoes and ploughs, stand up now.' See Gerrard Winstanley, 'The Digger's Song,' in *The Law of Freedom; and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.393-5 (p.393).

³⁶ Wolfson, 'Popular Songs And Ballads,' p.354.

resources foreground language as constitutive in the production of these themes themselves. Yet while some critics have argued boldly that ‘The economist is [...] a poet, a maker of fictions’³⁷ Cobbett’s own journalistic critique of paper-money seems to engender a degree of scepticism within his own textual productions towards fictional representation. Nearing the end of his article, he insists that the cause of reform is thwarted by the very small-scale producers defended against violent agitation, whose ‘*supineness* and want of *public spirit*’ (p.14) engenders an insensibility to literature’s capacity to effect social change:

[Their] humanity [...] is all fiction. They weep over the tale of woe in a novel; but round their “decent fireside,” never was compassion felt for a real sufferer, or indignation at the acts of a powerful tyrant (p.15)

However, Cobbett consistently appeals to his own reader’s aesthetic and religious response to the metaphorical profundity of Exodus, quoting directly from Book 5:6-14 to align the plight of the Israelites with contemporary labour oppression (p.8). Like Shelley’s ‘Song’, Cobbett positions the labouring class itself as the principle receptive audience of the poetic, who unlike Shelley’s poisoning drones and Cobbett’s weeping small-scale producers, are empowered to appropriate the poetic to effect political and economic transformation; to force an exchange of the decent fireside for ‘the electric life which burns within [the poet’s] words.’³⁸

³⁷ Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p.50.

³⁸ Shelley, *Defence*, p.701.

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