Protesting Peterloo: The ‘Fanciful’ and the ‘Domestic’

HELEN LEACH

This essay will explore two artefacts produced in response to the Peterloo Massacre in 1819; Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Masque of Anarchy* and John Slack’s engraving of *The Events at St Peter’s Fields*, reproduced on a handkerchief. The items will be examined to find a synthesis between them which illustrates the extent to which Reformist protest was curtailed and suppressed by the restrictive legislation of the early decades of the nineteenth century. The manner in which the artefacts collectively demonstrate the significance of class and social status, even within the Reformist movement, will then be discussed. It will reflect on the impact that illiteracy had on works of protest for the working classes, considering the manner in which literary works excluded huge numbers and the extent to which it predicated a need for visual, domestic items of protest as opposed to more fanciful, esoteric, literary works.

On 16 August 1819, a meeting of tens of thousands was held at St Peter’s Place, Manchester, to protest harsh industrial working conditions, squalid living arrangements and most significantly, the lack of political representation. At the orders of the local Magistrates, the yeomanry brutally dispersed the crowds with fatal results. At least seventeen were killed or subsequently died and many hundreds more were injured. Falling shortly after Waterloo, the events became notorious and in the ensuing public outcry, the massacre was ironically christened, ‘Peterloo’. The arts and literary community responded, producing works to reflect the widespread sense of outrage.

Within six weeks of the attack, Percy Bysshe Shelley had written *The Masque of Anarchy*, a scathing attack on the establishment and an exhortation to the people to obtain reform by peaceful means. Shelley, ‘the torrent of indignation …boiling in [his] veins’ sent the poem to his friend and publisher of *The Examiner*, radical journalist, Leigh Hunt, instructing him to publish when he ‘thought fit’.

*The Masque* is written in 91 stanzas in a lyric, ballad form. Utilising the aristocratic convention of a Masque, it satirises the Government who are portrayed in grotesque form ‘drunk with… the wine of desolation’ they had caused, critiquing the damage they inflict upon society and subverting its concern that the Reformists were the instigators of Anarchy. It envisages a day when people ‘from the corners uttermost’ of England would be liberated, assuring them that they ‘Are as God has made [them] free’ and encouraging them to

radically, stand ‘calm and resolute’ against their oppressors. It is both damning of the Government and a rallying call to the masses. It was considered highly incendiary and subversive, for this reason Hunt chose to not to publish it until 1832, the year of the Great Reform Act.

Manchester Artist, John Slack, produced an engraving of The Events at St Peter’s Place depicting the brutality of the attack by the yeomanry on the massed crowds. Peterloo predates the split into middle class and working class political movements, Britain at that time, dividing into ‘two furious irreconcilable parties, the established parties and the radicals’. The meeting at St Peter’s Fields was therefore a unifying moment for reformists, standing shoulder to shoulder, united in their desire for change. To reflect this, Slack’s engraving was subsequently adapted to suit differing tastes, social status and class and reproduced as both a cabinet picture and a handkerchief.

**Figure 1.** John Slack, Peterloo Hankerchief, 1819, Fabric Print, 50cmx60cm, People’s History Museum, Manchester. Copyright Trustees of the British Museum.

---

The handkerchief (fig. 1) is a print of Slack’s engraving on cotton and depicts the events at St Peter’s Place. It measures 50cm x 60cm. It is, like Shelley’s Masque, an overt attack on the actions of the Governing forces. The words ‘A Representation of the Manchester Reform Meeting Dispersed by the Civil and Military Power August 16th 1819’ are emblazoned across the top. Under gathering storm clouds, the speaker Henry Hunt, is shown addressing the vast crowds who are being dispersed by the Yeomanry. Alongside Hunt are several figures including a woman, symbolically dressed in white and wearing a cap of Liberty.

The crowds are depicted fleeing; it is a panicked scene. The yeomanry on horseback are foregrounded, sabres aloft and in some instances directly attacking the crowds. Vast numbers of militia are depicted at the edge of the fields adding a further ominous presence. Several foregrounded figures are shown in a prone position, notably an elderly man and at the extreme right, a young woman. Several figures are depicted being crushed. A variety of banners are held aloft in the crowd, bearing the names of Unions and slogans such as ‘Universal Suffrage’ and ‘Reform’. Framing the scene and printed around edge of the handkerchief are the reformists demands; again ‘Universal Suffrage’ and ‘Annual Parliamentary Election’. It is both a show of solidarity with Reformists and an explicit declaration of their demands.

Given the brutality depicted, allied with the demands for reform on the handkerchief, Shelley’s grotesque caricaturing of named Government Ministers and the exhortation to ‘Rise like lions…in unvanquishable number’ both works were considered inflammatory and seditious. Following the revolutions in France and the United States, the Government had a fear of uprising, resulting in the actions at Peterloo. This is evidenced in the tension and activity around the calling of the protest meeting during July and August 1819. The meeting was called by Henry Hunt in the local newspaper. Following a meeting of the Magistrates, it was declared illegal and cancelled. The meeting was rearranged for a new date, 16th August 1819.

In the months following Peterloo, the government outlawed radical political activity passing a raft of legislation to ensure compliance. Meetings were curbed, powers of search widened, public gatherings banned, publications taxed and the powers to act against sedition or libel widened. The effect of this legislation was to restrict protest and debate about Peterloo bringing about a climate of hostility and suppression, which is illustrated through these two very different artefacts. Hunt, having served a prison sentence chose not to publish The Masque, later legitimising his decision. In doing this, he stifled Shelley’s voice and ensured

---


11 There was a climate of fear of revolution in this time and 1819 saw the passage of the Seditious Libel Act with its draconian powers to seize and items considered seditious and to imprison those responsible for producing it.


that those whom Shelley was so anxious to address, would not yet become ‘Heroes of [their] unwritten story’.16

In reproducing Slack’s work as both a cabinet picture and a handkerchief, whilst not explicitly censoring it, ensured a very restricted, private, audience. Its owner was afforded a sense of solidarity with the reformers, and was enabled to commemorate the events in a safe, contained manner. The cabinet picture closeted away and the handkerchief, an intimate item, privately pocketed. A physical representation of principles, in the case of the handkerchief literally, held close to the owner’s heart.

Whilst protest has a unifying aspect, both artefacts demonstrate the divisiveness of social status and the extent of class division even amongst those seeking reform. This is particularly true when considering Shelley’s Masque. Hunt’s patronising justification for censorship, retrospectively suggested that the lower classes lacked the sophistication to deal with its content as the ‘public … had not become sufficiently discerning… to do justice to … this flaming robe of verse’.17 Hunt’s attitude sits ambiguously with the aristocratic Shelley’s, well-intentioned but ultimately naive attempt to suppress ‘his own voice in search of the anonymous authority of the broad sheet balladeer’18 and directly address the ‘Men of England’.19

Given the high levels of illiteracy, literature was increasingly ‘the propaganda of some victorious minority’20 excluding vast numbers of illiterate, usually poor.21 To address this, Shelley deliberately adopted a ‘lax and familiar measure’22 to ensure the broader appeal of his work. The poor’s lack of literacy predicated a reliance on oral tradition and as such, sung ballads were part of ‘the oral culture which still pervaded [their] life’.23 Shelley attempted to emulate this with the style he adopted for the Masque. If his intention was to engender change however, he chose a ‘form of expression with a severely limited and in many ways radically inappropriate audience’.24

Whilst illiteracy clearly excluded them from accessing the written word, social status was equally exclusionary. Despite Shelley’s attempts to unify himself stylistically with those in the lower orders, the gulf between them is insurmountable. As the poem builds to the final rousing stanzas Shelley repeatedly distances himself utilising ‘Ye’25 and ‘Your’26 not the

---

16 Shelley, Masque, line 148, stanza XXXVII, p. 15.
17 Hunt, Preface to Masque, p. 3.
19 Shelley, Masque, line 147, stanza XXXVII, p.15.
22 Hunt, Preface to Masque, p. 3.
25 Shelley, Masque, line 372, stanza XCI, p. 22.
26 Shelley, Masque, line 370, stanza XCI, p. 22.
collective ‘We’ to address them. Finally, he creates two distinct groups, from both of which he separates himself, ‘Ye are many/They are few’. The class distinction is evident throughout the poem and the final exhortation to ‘Rise’, becomes an instruction imposed by someone with privilege, not a collective call to action.

Shelley declared the *Masque* to be ‘exoteric’, believing its stylistic form made it accessible to all. In adopting the rhythm of the folk ballad, Shelley ensured a familiar style, but its content would have failed to cross the class divide. The imagery employed is profoundly esoteric, littered with allegory and literary reference, which required a level of literary sophistication to access.

Shelley’s original manuscript used ‘Mask’ as opposed to ‘Masque’, later adopted by Hunt. Both versions of the word could allude to a Masque pageant, an aristocratic convention, unfamiliar to those in the lower orders. Shelley’s spelling also allows him to play with the notion of a mask, subverting the common notion of an item of disguise. Whilst a mask is often adopted to conceal an identity or denote a specific characteristic, Shelley suggests that certain characteristics; murder, fraud and hypocrisy are timeless. These characteristics adopt a temporary ‘mask’ or are ‘clothed’ in the temporal appearance of specific people. The collective effect of this is to produce ‘Anarchy’. Anarchy, for Shelley is not personified in any specific individual, it is ‘God and King and Law’, the institutions which govern society.

Shelley also incorporates many allusions to the book of Revelation, from the dreamlike introduction to the apocalyptic nightmare which follows. ‘Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy and Anarchy’ clearly allude to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, wreaking misery, death and destruction. The appearance of Anarchy, ‘the skeleton’ on his white horse, emulating Death, the rider on a pale horse. Murder’s seven bloodhounds, fat from the ‘human hearts’ they’ve consumed reference the repeated, symbolic use of the number seven throughout Revelation. Despite Shelley’s belief in its exotericism, had it been published, it would have been utterly impenetrable to the masses he sought to address.

The visual rendering of Slack’s print on a domestic item, such as the handkerchief, would have been a more readily accessible form of protest for the majority of those seeking reform than Shelley’s allegorical offering. Mass produced by the Lancashire cotton industry, it would have resonated strongly, particularly for those in Lancashire, personally affected by the

---

32 Shelley personifies Castlereagh, Eldon and Sidmouth, respectively the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor as Murder, Fraud and Hypocrisy.
35 *The Good News Bible*, Revelation 1: 10 (Glasgow, 1994).
37 Shelley, *The Masque*, lines 8-12, stanza III, p. 11.
38 The number seven is believed to symbolise completeness and is repeatedly used in Revelation, seven stars (1: 16), seven-headed dragon (12: 3), seven plagues (15: 1), seven bowls of God’s wrath (15: 7).
events at Peterloo. Given its production by cotton workers, it was a physical rendering in the medium which provided the fabric of their daily lives, shaping every aspect of their existence and whilst they were mass producing the handkerchief, ensuring its image was seared into their minds.

For the lower classes, this was a truly exoteric artefact. Given the widespread levels of illiteracy, a ‘politics of sight’ was necessary to inform and educate. Political demonstrations such as Peterloo had a strong visual aspect, an element of theatricality incorporating ‘a rich repertoire of symbols, ritual iconography, a language of class without words’ to appeal to those who could not access written literature. Given the restrictions imposed by the heavy taxation of printed publication, for those few who could access it, the strong imagery and limited written text on the handkerchief was an accessible way of promoting reform otherwise.

Figure 2. John Slack, A View of St Peter’s Place, Cabinet Picture, Print, 23.5x28 cm, John Rylands Library, Manchester. Copyright University of Manchester.

At a cursory glance, the images in the cabinet picture (fig.2) and handkerchief (fig.1) are one and the same, the handkerchief print however, has important differences most notably, in the depiction of the crowd. Whilst a significant number of the foregrounded figures in the

---

cabinet picture are women, they are virtually eradicated in the handkerchief print. The figures in the handkerchief print are predominantly male, of a wider generational spectrum [fig.4] with one solitary woman depicted at the extreme edge of the image. The central, foregrounded figure is an elderly man. He is surrounded by figures from a broad spectrum of age and social groups. Whilst both male and female figures in the cabinet print are largely depicted from a higher social class [fig.3], the dress of the men in the handkerchief image introduces a wider spectrum generally and a significantly larger proportion of men of the lower orders; cravats are replaced by neckerchiefs and Top Hats by the ‘shapeless round’; the headgear of the working class man until the late nineteenth century.

The class distinction in the handkerchief print emphasises the ever-present awareness of social rank in the nineteenth century. This commodification of protest artefacts, recognised and capitalised upon the growing desire for social mobility within the wide range of people seeking reform. Given ‘the ascendency of the manufacturing wealth and population’, the cabinet picture would have appealed to the aspirational tendencies of the manufacturing, middle class and the cheaper, mass produced handkerchief to the lower classes and significantly, the largely illiterate work force within the cotton manufacturing industry.

---

There is currently some debate as to whether the item is a handkerchief or in fact, a headscarf.\footnote{The item is referenced in Salford’s Working Class Movement Library, which holds a huge collection of artefacts, writing and documentation from Peterloo, as a Headscarf.} Given the climate of political repression around Reformists, the wearing of this item as a headscarf would be a radical move. Headwear was an immediate, visual indicator of social status and so wearing it, would have been a bold statement. Most significantly, as a headscarf, it would have become an exclusively feminine item.

Considering the manner in which the significance of women at Peterloo is undermined in the handkerchief print, their presence being moved to the sidelines, it is doubtful that it was produced in huge numbers for women.\footnote{The procession into St Peter’s fields was led by women. Bamford, Passages, pp. 24 - 25.} The role of women in political protest at that time, was fairly insignificant. Women were ‘more likely to be used as allegorical symbols’\footnote{Vernon, Politics, p. 118.} than actively participate in protest themselves. The vulnerable, feminine form provided a trope which was repeatedly used in the art of the period and is echoed in Shelley’s portrayal of Hope, feminised and dressed in white ‘a [disempowered] maniac maid … [looking] more like despair’.\footnote{Shelley, Masque, lines 86-88, stanza XXII, p. 14.} In the context of this subjugation, it seems highly unlikely that significant numbers of women would have outwardly supported such a radical stance. Passage of time allows new audiences to re-appropriate objects, to enhance a more radical contemporary perspective and this may be the situation here.

In a similar manner, on its publication in 1832, Hunt re-appropriated the Masque for the newly emancipated generation. Free from the restrictions on publication, Hunt retrospectively claimed Shelley’s prescient vision for the events which unfolded in 1832.\footnote{Hunt, Preface, p. 5.} He claims the Masque as a beautiful and moral triumph, which successfully combines the ‘domestic with … the fanciful’\footnote{Hunt, Preface, p. 3.} to great effect. Hunt ultimately enshrines the Masque as a call to passive resistance, re-appropriating the content for a more stable time and less incendiary purpose. It was no longer a declaration of intent, it had become, a celebration of emancipation, its subversive aspect neutralised by the intervening years.

It is indisputable that the Masque of Anarchy has been of far greater significance to posterity than to its intended audience. It has been described as ‘the greatest poem of political protest ever written’,\footnote{Richard Holmes, Shelley: The Pursuit (London, 1974), p. 532.} a call for social justice which will sadly, need to be ‘heard, again- again – again’.\footnote{Shelley, Masque, line 367, stanza XC, p. 22.} Peterloo and by extension, its art, is poured over and considered a pivotal moment in the struggle for democratic reform in Great Britain. The Masque now serves as a timeless, clarion call to passive resistance and the Peterloo imagery screams to a modern audience of injustice and repression. For contemporary audiences of these works however, given the climate in which they were produced, the clarion was silenced and the screams of injustice subdued to a quiet whisper, in the struggle for reform.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY MANUSCRIPT SOURCES


John Rylands Library, Ryl. English MS 1197, Slack, John, *A View of St Peter’s Place Cabinet Picture*.

PRIMARY PRINTED SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


British Library, Romantics and Victorians: The Peterloo Massacre.  


Janowitz, Anne, “‘A voice from across the Sea’ Communitarianism at the limits of Romanticism”, in *At the Limits of Romanticism – Essays in Cultural, Feminist and Materialist*


**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

Figure 1. John Slack, *Peterloo Hankerchief*, 1819, Fabric Print, 50cmx60cm, People’s History Museum, Manchester. Copyright Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 2. John Slack, *A View of St Peter’s Place*, Cabinet Picture, Print, 23.5x28 cm, John Rylands Library, Manchester. Copyright University of Manchester.

Figure 3. John Slack, *A View of St Peter’s Place*, 1819, print, 23.5x28 cm, John Rylands Library, Manchester. Author’s own photograph.

Figure 4. John Slack, *Peterloo Hankerchief*, 1819, 50x60 cm, People’s History Museum, Manchester. Author’s own photograph.