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**Peterloo at 200: The radical press, simultaneous meetings and *The Mask of Anarchy***

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**Abstract**

This paper assesses the connections between Shelley’s poetry and contemporary political events in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre in August 1819. It argues for the connection between Shelley’s vision of a ‘great’ and ‘vast’ assembly in his *Mask of Anarchy* and contemporary protest at the outrages of Peterloo and agitation for parliamentary reform. In particular, Shelley’s calls for a nation united in protest echoes reformers’ calls for a series of simultaneous meetings, at which crowds gather at the same time to form a vast virtual collective protest. Such connections between the *Mask of Anarchy* and radical activity at meetings and in the press offer an alternative to recent critical accounts of the poem as attuned only to future audiences.

**Keywords:**

Percy Bysshe Shelley; Peterloo Massacre; politics; simultaneous meetings; radial press, protest; crowds;

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On 16 August 1819, the day on which yeomanry and horseguards hewed down and trampled to death eighteen people at a meeting for parliamentary reform at St Peter’s Fields, Manchester, Percy Bysshe Shelley was entirely unaware of such turmoil; he and Mary Shelley were living near Livorno in Italy, and in mourning for the recent death of their son William. Yet distanced as they were from events in England, Shelley soon learned of what was already known as the Peterloo Massacre; correspondents sent him personal accounts and newspaper reports of the day’s events and the political fallout. Shelley’s publisher Charles Ollier broke the news in a letter that arrived on 5 September 1819, and a day later Shelley noted, the ‘torrent of my indignation has not yet done boiling in my veins’.[[1]](#footnote-1) On 9 September he wrote to Thomas Love Peacock to thank him for his ‘attention in sending the papers which contain the terrible and important news of Manchester’, adding, ‘Pray let me have the *earliest* political news which you consider of importance at this crisis’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Peacock sent further newspapers including Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner*, and Shelley notes on 21 September 1819 that ‘I have received all the papers you sent me, & the *Examiners* regularly’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though Shelley’s access to the news of Peterloo was belated, and mediated through the newspaper press, his response was immediate. He makes no mention of it in his letter to Peacock, but Shelley had already by 21 September composed a full draft of *The Mask of Anarchy, Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester*, which he sent to Hunt on 23 September, five weeks after the events of Peterloo.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This essay is concerned with *The Mask of Anarchy* and the newspaper press, with questions of belatedness and simultaneity, and with the potential for the printed word to overcome limitations of time and space. Shelley’s political intervention in the poem has been much debated by critics. While some commentators doubt its significance as a political response to Peterloo, others align it closely with popular radical publications from autumn 1819. I follow this second group, but suggest that Shelley’s *Mask of Anarchy* engages with one radical strategy in particular, which uses the printed page in order to overcome distances in time and space, and responds to the corruption of parliamentary representation by using the bodies of reformers as a physical demonstration of the right to demand parliamentary reform. This was the plan for coordinated simultaneous meetings, to take place throughout Britain at one particular time, in order to produce a nationwide chorus of protest and solidarity.

1. **Critical contexts**

In my emphasis on Shelley’s alignment with contemporary radical activity, I diverge from critical claims that in *The Mask of Anarchy* Shelley avoids direct intervention in the political response to Peterloo. Susan Wolfson argues that the poem enacts the impossibility of engaging directly with radical protest in the aftermath of Peterloo. She notes that Leigh Hunt refused to publish *The Mask of Anarchy* in the *Examiner* because of concerns over a possible conviction for seditious libel, and suggests that Shelley must have anticipated that the poem would prove unpublishable.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus Wolfson distinguishes between the aesthetic achievements of the poem and its unrealised political intervention: ‘between the production of the poem and its popular reading is a gap … This gap is not just an unlucky product of state repression, but is… courted by the poem itself as it converts politics to aesthetic spectacle’.[[6]](#footnote-6) As various representations of the events of Peterloo demonstrate, Wolfson’s demarcation between the political and aesthetic seems difficult to sustain in 1819. But nonetheless I want to dwell on Wolfson’s diagnosis of a ‘gap’ between the aesthetic work of *The Mask of Anarchy* and a more direct form of political intervention. In many ways *The* *Mask* is indeed a poem of gaps, of distances. Not only is Shelley’s response differentiated in formal terms from many other responses to Peterloo, but it also seems to reflect a distinction between his experience of Peterloo as an exile in Italy, and those of reformers at home. However, I argue that in the poem Shelley is centrally concerned with finding the means to bridge such a gap, to close such distance. And the solutions that Shelley proposes, I suggest, align his work with that of the radical reformers in England in 1819.

I have found recent critical discussions of mediation helpful for thinking about Shelley’s engagement with questions of distance and communication. In many ways, Shelley takes on a similar position to those Romantic writers of wartime who, as Mary Favret notes, have to negotiate ‘the felt distance from crucial events, the limits of knowledge in a mediated culture, the temporal gaps in the transmission of information, and, finally, the difficulty of finding sounds or forms to which feeling can attach itself.’[[7]](#footnote-7) *The Mask of Anarchy* addresses the difficulties of physical distance and temporal delay, and the related problem of finding a language to articulate shared feeling when confronted by such distance. And in doing so, the poem articulates a shared set of concerns with radical reformers in England. *The Mask of Anarchy* not only responds to such challenges but also suggests solutions, and the means of overcoming such distance. Shelley gestures to an understanding of mediation not just as an interruption or deflection, but as a means of connection across a distance. Clifford Siskin and William Warner’s account of mediation as ‘everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between’ suggests how we might think about Shelley’s response to Peterloo as a form of mediation.[[8]](#footnote-8) As John Guillory notes, mediation can be understood as ‘a term closely allied to notions of *transmission* or *dissemination* but invoking the material forms of these processes, especially print.’[[9]](#footnote-9) In *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley is centrally concerned with the dissemination of ideas and feelings of outrage, protest and solidarity in the aftermath of Peterloo, but the poem is also a discussion of the significance of print for these processes. For Shelley, print is a crucial tool for his own involvement in the aftermath of Peterloo, but it is also, *The Mask of Anarchy* argues, the means of national political amelioration.

In focusing on Shelley’s concern with the mediation of the distance between himself and contemporary activism in England, I also diverge from critics who suggest that rather than attempt a political intervention in 1819, *The Mask of Anarchy* is engaged with futurity, the ‘unwritten story’ of as yet unimagined reform, as Wolfson puts it, a focus which has been taken up and developed by Andrew Franta and Marc Redfield among others.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rather than follow such a future-oriented reading of *The Mask of Anarchy*, I suggest that it engages with contemporaneous politics; indeed it is a poem which takes communication and simultaneous feeling as its subject.[[11]](#footnote-11) Wolfson herself notes the significance of news for stimulating the poem: ‘The news (the voice from over the Sea) of the massacre enters the poet’s consciousness in a dream state’.[[12]](#footnote-12) I read the news of Peterloo less as a trigger for a ‘dream state’ than a catalyst of poetic and political activity in the speaker, and a figure for the connection between activists at home and abroad, which is mediated by print.

1. **Peterloo in the press**

Shelley’s accounts of violence and oppression in *The Mask of Anarchy* draw closely on Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner* newspaper, in particular Hunt’s article ‘Disturbances at Manchester’ of 22 August 1819.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hunt offers details of the day’s events at Peterloo, the actions of reformers led by ‘Orator’ Henry Hunt, and the yeomanry and military. He also counters the partial reporting of the ministerial newspapers, in particular *The Courier*. Hunt focuses on the emotional and physical toll of the violence, asking, in a phrase that pre-empts Shelley’s work:

With what feelings can these Men in the Brazen Masks of power dare to speak lamentingly of the wounds or even the death received by a constable or a solider or any other persons concerned against an assemblage of Englishmen irritated by every species of wrong and insult, public and private? With what feelings can they dare to speak of such things in such a tone…?[[14]](#footnote-14)

Hunt demand answers from the *Courier*, but also from readers, asking them to acknowledge that political grievance is based on physical feeling, in contrast to the shadowy power of the authorities. But this injured ‘assemblage’ is not merely a suffering body; it contains the potential for resistance:

Suppose Mr [Henry] Hunt *had* been cut to pieces: - do we think that thousands and thousands of Englishmen would any longer have contented themselves with tamely looking on; or with execrations, or with brickbats, and staves? No, most assuredly. They would have risen in the irresistible might of their numbers; and every soldier would have been dragged off his horse, and massacred on the spot.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In this fantasy of retribution, Hunt imagines violence, but also gestures to the overawing power and even moral authority of the crowd.[[16]](#footnote-16) In Hunt’s account we see a hint of the ‘vast assembly’ that Shelley convenes in *The Mask of Anarchy*; thousands gathered together might indeed threaten violence, but could also impose their will purely through the ‘irresistible might of their numbers’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Other newspapers also emphasise a collective response to Peterloo but extend Hunt’s ‘thousands and thousands’ to an even broader constituency. *The Morning Chronicle* of 19 August notes that the ‘assemblage of Englishmen’ extends vastly beyond those gathered at St Peter’s Fields:

Good Heavens! To order regiments of cavalry to charge an unarmed and peaceable multitude, to hew down and trample on all who stood before them! Can this be possible? The whole country must be filled with horror at the very idea…

We tremble for the consequences of this awful business. We hope, however, for the character and honour of our country, that it will not lead to other outrages. We hope our countrymen will stop short on the brink of the abyss towards which they have been driven.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Like Leigh Hunt, the *Morning Chronicle*’s editor John Black expresses concern that the outrage might spawn more violence. But he also emphasises a response which moves beyond such physical concerns. For Black, Peterloo is an event of national significance, which should unite the nation in a collective response. His London-based paper, like Hunt’s *Examiner*, is reliant on the communication of correspondence from Manchester, but in turn, it can transmit both information and outrage to the nation at large.

Black was not alone in stressing the power of the press to circulate information after Peterloo. Radical reformers also seized on newspaper print as the means to communicate and co-ordinate responses; at least six weekly papers were founded in direct response to the massacre.[[19]](#footnote-19) These radical weeklies often echo the *Morning Chronicle*, stressing the power of the periodical press to unify the country in protest. James Griffin in the *Cap of Liberty* attacks the heartlessness of the conservative press, which sets it apart from the nation:

To the honour of your brother Journalists, be it spoken, they have, almost to a man, reprobated, in the strongest terms, the atrocities of this disgraceful day. *Their* language bespeaks true patriotism and genuine British feeling – it vibrates in unison with chords of sensibility from one extremity of the realm to the other.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Here it seems less important to signal individual outrage, than to imagine oneself as a part of a broader collective, brought together through the diffusion of print. We might even read this virtual collective as extending beyond geographical borders to Shelley’s community of readers in Italy.

1. **Radical print culture**

Shelley himself signalled his plans to contribute to this radical culture of print; he wrote to Leigh Hunt in May 1820 asking ‘if you know of any bookseller who would like to publish a little volume of *popular songs* wholly political, & destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers.’[[21]](#footnote-21) This volume would presumably have featured *The Mask of Anarchy*, which Shelley described as ‘of the exoteric species’, namely ‘current among the outside public; popular, ordinary, prevailing’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Critics have noted the formal and rhetorical connections between *The Mask of Anarchy* and reformist publications of autumn 1819, especially William Hone’s satires *The Political House the Jack Built*, and *The Man in the Moon*.[[23]](#footnote-23) Chandler emphasises the importance of the collective readership of Hone’s works, which

sold with extraordinary rapidity… [and] must have increased the experience of national simultaneity among its many readers, the sense that they were reading the same thing about the same event at the same time (an event that involved a convergence of fifty or sixty thousand Britons on the same grounds in the first place).[[24]](#footnote-24)

Hone’s pamphlets bear a clear resemblance to Shelley’s ‘exoteric’ verse, and I follow Chandler’s suggestion that a sense of nationwide shared reading of Hone’s pamphlets presents a parallel with the audience Shelley envisioned. But in addition, Shelley’s *Mask of Anarchy* is connected not only with one-off political pamphlets, but also with the periodical press, with its regular appearance and national readership. Behrendt notes: it is ‘curious that Shelley apparently never approached [Richard] Carlile, [Daniel Isaac] Eaton, or any other notable radical publishers as a potential publisher for his own works’, especially given the huge circulation of periodicals like Thomas Wooler’s *Black Dwarf*.[[25]](#footnote-25) I agree that Shelley seems to have deliberately passed up this opportunity, but suggest that the connection between the vision for reform painted in *The Mask of Anarchy* and the radical periodical press lies less in the logistics of publication and circulation than in the poem’s visualisation of a collective readership whose sheer numbers might overawe corrupt power. As I discuss below, the poem’s ‘vast assembly’ might be composed of readers, rather than protesters gathered in one location.

Kevin Gilmartin has shown that reformers in 1819 exploited the connections between physical crowds and virtual collectives of readers in various ways:

A crucial feature of this “oppositional network” was its extension from vigorous print arguments about public opinion to concrete assemblies of that opinion, in meetings, debating societies, and organized petition campaigns, which were then linked back to print culture through such practices as reading aloud, and transcribing meetings in the weekly press.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The readership of ‘oppositional’ periodicals was not limited to one social group, geographical locality, or even to the literate. Print was the means through which to organise physical protest, but it also enabled reformers to imagine the idea of collective resistance. In turn, meetings for reform emphasised their connections with, even dependence on, the printed word.[[27]](#footnote-27) In 1819, debates about periodical readerships and reformist activities were inseparable. The physical gatherings at mass meetings were an expression of much broader energies working for parliamentary reform. *Sherwin’s Political Register* notes on 10 July 1819:

It is computed that within the last two or three weeks not less than a MILLION of ENGLISHMEN have declared their sentiments in favour of a general and complete cleansing of the Augean stable of Corruption. These men… have met together in various parts of the country, in bodies of from 10 to 20,000 at a time, to consult upon the best mode of procuring a redress of their grievances.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In *The Mask of Anarchy* Shelley draws on the sense of possibility embodied in mass meetings, and of the fine balance between moral force and physical threat. And like the writers of the radical press, Shelley suggests that the physical gatherings of reformers can be extended still further to communities of readers unified in one cause.

1. **Shelley and political representation**

Shelley’s engagement with the mobilisation of mass meetings in 1819 has not been much discussed, but his plans for political reform seem to dovetail with and even anticipate such activity. T. M. Parsinnen has demonstrated the long history of the ‘extra-parliamentary association’ and argues that the power of such associations lay not in any material reforms that they forced, but rather in the way they ‘evoked an image of strength and conflict, confronting the corrupt authority in power.’[[29]](#footnote-29) As Gilmartin notes, reformers in 1819 updated such claims for a change in political representation:

Radical theorists proposed electoral mechanisms and discursive practices that would replace the deceptive shadow-play of “virtual representation”… Distinct individual bodies were assembled at mass meetings and political clubs, and accounted for in petition drives and subscription lists.[[30]](#footnote-30)

For reformers, mass meetings offered a material alternative to the ‘phantoms’ of representation in the unreformed House of Commons. Periodical accounts emphasise the overawing power of the ordered and disciplined crowd, as such a collective offers a credible representation of the political will of the nation at large. S*herwin’s Political Register* declares:

It is this steady and peaceable disposition which *alarms* the tyrants. They do not know how to contend against it. They are struck dumb with amazement to see forty or fifty thousand men assemble together… and at the conclusion proceed to their respective homes, without a single breach of the peace.[[31]](#footnote-31)

*The* *Examiner* of 12 September 1819 echoes such sentiments, citing a letter from a correspondent at Bolton who describes Henry Hunt’s arrival on 8 September. Despite the excitement at Hunt’s presence, the correspondent declares, ‘the expression of the people here is truly awful! *It has no appearance of an ebullition, but a solid and firmly fixed determination of public feeling.*’[[32]](#footnote-32) The crowd stages a representation of ‘public feeling’ through their physical presence, extending their demands for reform from their own locality to the whole nation. Shelley too engaged closely with the physical and moral authority of mass meetings, and he draws on this interest in *The Mask of Anarchy*. Indeed, he anticipates the discussions of symbolic and literal representation in 1819 with two political pamphlets written in 1817: *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote*, and *An Address to the People on the Death of Princess Charlotte*.

On 19 September 1819 the *Examiner* reports that ‘a RECORD has been set on foot in Leeds, wherein every male inhabitant of mature years may peaceably and constitutionally record his opinion, that a necessity exists for a reform in our representative system… in a book prepared for the reception of signatures’; it is a practice which ‘we strongly recommend to every town and populous village in the kingdom’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Hunt notes that the Leeds reformers are not the innovators of this plan, as ‘our readers may recollect something of *A Proposal to put Reform to the vote; by the Hermit of Marlow*’.[[34]](#footnote-34) The Hermit of Marlow is the pseudonym under which Shelley published both of his 1817 pamphlets. In *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote* he proposes the strategy which the Leeds reformers adopt in 1819:

If the majority of the adult population should solemnly state their desire to be, that the representatives whom they might appoint should constitute the Commons House of Parliament there is an end of the dispute. Parliament would then be required, not petitioned to prepare some effectual plan for carrying the general will into effect.[[35]](#footnote-35)

For Shelley as for the activists of 1819, it is crucial for the people, excluded from political representation, to be seen, felt and counted. The reformers’ task is to formulate a means by which popular ‘desire’ for reform can be recorded. Shelley recommends:

That the population of Great Britain and Ireland be divided into three hundred distinct portions, each to contain an equal number of inhabitants, and three hundred persons be commissioned each personally to visit every individual within the district named in his commission, and to inquire whether or no that individual is willing to sign the declaration.[[36]](#footnote-36)

At the end of such a process, reformers will have compelling ‘evidence as to the will of the Nation on the subject of a reform in Parliament.’[[37]](#footnote-37) The political nation in *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote* is comprised of unrepresented millions, who as individuals might be ignored, but as a collective can support their demands with the weight of overwhelming numbers.

Shelley sustains his interest in the connection between physical collective and political nation in his *Address to the People on the Death of Princess Charlotte* (1817) and *A* *Philosophical View of Reform* (1820). The *Address to the People* protests the corrupt powers of government, which ‘the regularly constituted assembly of the nation must wrest out of their hands.’[[38]](#footnote-38) The political nation is again an ‘assembly’, the aggregate of individuals whose influence alone is negligible but together is irresistible. In *A Philosophical View of Reform* too, he declares: ‘If the majority are enlightened, united… animated by a distinct and powerful appreciation of their object, and feel confidence in their undoubted power — the struggle is merely nominal.’[[39]](#footnote-39) But writing in the aftermath of Peterloo here, Shelley acknowledges the difficulty of enacting such popular will. The people must ‘exercise their right of assembling’, so that their bodies might literally represent their political claims, but he notes the dangers of state violence, and advocates passive resistance, to ‘receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions.’[[40]](#footnote-40) Critics have rightly noted the tensions in the aristocrat ex-patriot poet’s call for the stoicism of the injured poor.[[41]](#footnote-41) But for Shelley passive resistance is only one part of the collective campaign for reform. Like the writers of the radical press, he advocates solidarity made possible by print media and mass meetings. In particular, he intuits a connection with the most extreme articulation of such collective might in autumn 1819, the plan for simultaneous meetings.

1. **Simultaneous meetings**

Simultaneous meetings were a means of literalising demands for a just political representation, and in their scale and precise organisation they offered an unprecedented vision of a national collective protest, a people united not by physical proximity but by common purpose. They had been proposed in 1816, when the *Courier* noted: ‘[reformers] threaten us with calling Meetings at the same moment in all parts of the kingdom, they tell us the time will come for them to ACT’, but they were not enacted until after Peterloo.[[42]](#footnote-42) Griffin in *The Cap of Liberty* of 27 October urged reformers to ‘convene an instantaneous assemblage of the People throughout the kingdom, at which Resolutions should be entered into indicative of their intention to resort to arms, if the House of Commons persisted in their attacks upon the People’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Griffin makes an unusually frank reference to the threat of violence inherent in simultaneous meetings, but his statement’s rhetorical effectiveness lies in its conception of ‘an instantaneous assemblage of the People’. Simultaneous meetings could exponentially expand the constituency of the public meeting. As the *London Alfred* put it, they would produce ‘that effect upon the minds of their enemies which might be expected from assembled millions’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Many calls for simultaneous meetings do make literal threats of physical violence, like that of *The Democratic Recorder* onOctober 2, 1819: ‘3 or 4 millions of persons assembled to demand their Freedom, must not be trifled with, for although they petition for their rights, let it be remembered; they have the power to take possession of them when they will.’[[45]](#footnote-45) However, the polemical power of this tactic lies less in explicit threat than in the image of a people united against their governors, and brought together by the printed word.

The actual events of simultaneous meetings in autumn 1819 proved far less successful than this rhetoric might suggest. The call for simultaneous meetings was led by one faction, who had split from the reformers’ leader, Henry Hunt. The ultra-radical Arthur Thistlewood criticised Hunt’s abandonment of the tactic, demanding:

Is there any law to prevent one thousand, or one million, or more people of these countries to meet at one place or more places in one day, with arms, or without arms, with flags or without flags, at their option?… Are not simultaneous meetings desired by all the suffering people over the three kingdoms? Will they ever obtain the reform they seek, until the great majority of the poor meet on one day for one purpose… until their prayers are answered, and their constitutional claims are granted? Could [Hunt] not, after his liberation from prison… instantly have called a simultaneous meeting of the kingdom, and brought the cause of reform to a conclusion favourable to the people? Do you think him sincere in the cause for not doing it?[[46]](#footnote-46)

Like the journalists of the radical press, Thistlewood emphasises that simultaneous meetings are an opportunity for the unrepresented poor to make a physical display of representation, with an implicit threat of physical violence. He notes how close the country has been to uniting in just this way, with the huge crowds who gathered to support Hunt only one step from a simultaneous nationwide collective. But without the support of Hunt, only a few meetings went ahead on 1 and 15 November 1819, and the opportunity for a nationwide co-ordination of protest was lost.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Despite this failure in practice, the effects of the plan for simultaneous meetings were profoundly felt in the autumn of 1819. It had offered a vision for the coming together of the nation in vast numbers, and this vision of ‘one million, or more’ people assembled haunts the press, the law and the government in the months that follow. In the *Examiner* of 12 December 1819 Leigh Hunt declares that simultaneous meetings are legal, but his vision of the enactment of this legal right conjures a disturbing picture:

If all England could assemble and hear a man make an address to his countrymen, it has a right to form one gigantic multitude. We allow that great multitudes present an aspect of alarming physical power; but... have not the Governors alarming physical power in their hands?...  *It is a part of the very essence of the British Constitution, that the people should have a... conscious ability to oppose the aspect of their own physical power to those who would overawe them with theirs*.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Hunt argues that the overawing power of the multitude would only match the power wielded by the government at all times, and urges the continued legality of such possible gatherings. However this ‘gigantic multitude’ echoes his description in the *Examiner* in July 1819 of reformist collectives as ‘the thousands and thousands whose voices are getting up like the wind in so many quarters of the country, and whose rising, though not for revolution, is “As the sound /Of thunder heard remote”.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Hunt’s quotation from book II of *Paradise Lost* casts the reformers as the hordes of hell, not to demonise such action but to indicate the overawing power of their collective numbers.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Leigh Hunt’s defence of the right to convene simultaneous meetings was made as the government prepared swingeing new legislation to prevent them. By the end of 1819 it had passed its Six Acts to curtail the reform movement, with the Seditious Meetings Act designed specifically, as Lord Castlereagh noted in a House of Commons debate, ‘to guard against simultaneous meetings.’[[51]](#footnote-51) Yet even after the passing of the Six Acts, the spectre of simultaneous meetings seems to haunt public discourse. At Henry Hunt’s trial in March 1820 for his actions at Peterloo, the prosecutor conjures a vision wherein ‘if all the individuals in this island were to assemble in some vast plain, to take into their own hand the contemplation of such measure as would… produce a total alteration of system, the people would then resume the powers with which they had invested their functionaries, and government be dissolved.’[[52]](#footnote-52) For this prosecutor, as for the reformers, the effect of a simultaneous gathering of the people was overwhelming in its ambivalent power. Such gatherings could demonstrate the physical might of the populace, but their sheer numbers could also overthrow the government with no violence, as the literal representation of the bodies of the populace would dissolve the ‘phantom’ of executive government into direct democracy.

Given the failure of simultaneous meetings in autumn 1819, such an account remains conditional, a possibility yet to be enacted. Even in retrospect, historians have found simultaneous meetings difficult to analyse. Malcolm Thomis and Peter Holt shift between declaring them ‘the means of stimulating a general rise’, to suggesting ‘they were simply an intensification of constitutional pressure’, concluding that ‘the whole notion of simultaneous meetings remained thoroughly vague regarding organisation and inspiration’.[[53]](#footnote-53) It is the ambivalent quality of the convening of a nationwide collective, which, I suggest, fascinates Shelley. The literal representation of the populace through the gathering of their signatures and bodies promises to put into practice Shelley’s theoretical pamphlets of 1817. Though he composed *The Mask of Anarchy* before the convening of simultaneous meetings in November 1819, Shelley draws in the poem on contemporary discussions of the awesome power of the collective, united in solidarity even over great distance.

1. ***The Mask of Anarchy***

This account of the radical press and simultaneous meetings enables a reading of key moments in *The Mask of Anarchy* which takes into account the poem’s connection with radical practice in autumn 1819. Shelley composed the poem so rapidly that some of his proposals pre-empt those of reformists, but *The Mask of Anarchy* draws on practices of representation which had been honed in meetings and newspapers over the course of 1819, and which continued, simultaneously with Shelley’s own work, into the autumn. In Shelley’s opening stanza, his narrator declares:

As I lay asleep in Italy

There came a voice from over the Sea,

And with great power it forth led me

To walk in the visions of Poesy.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Like Wolfson and Franta, I read this ‘voice’ as that of the news reports Shelley received in Livorno. But rather than transport the speaker into a dream vision detached from the events of 1819, this voice allows the speaker access to events occurring at a distance in England. I do not read Shelley’s mode of address as one ‘that necessarily distances him from an audience’, but rather suggest that the ‘visions of poesy’, the narrative of the poem, constitute the speaker’s connections with contemporaneous events in England, to which the press has given him access.[[55]](#footnote-55) This connection is of course mediated by print and correspondence, but in noting this mediation, Shelley’s position is not markedly different from that of London editors awaiting the Manchester correspondence in the days after Peterloo. Like Leigh Hunt and the writers of the radical press, Shelley aims to overcome gaps in transmission by finding the language to assert unified feeling and action, and to produce an urgent, timely response.

The apocalyptic register of the poem’s opening appears to set the action apart from contemporary political events. Shelley employs the conventions of the masque as the allegorical figures of Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy and Anarchy, masked in the appearances of the politicians Castlereagh, Eldon, Sidmouth, process past the astonished speaker. But these visions are not far removed from the periodical writings of 1819.[[56]](#footnote-56) His ‘mask’ images seem to draw on Leigh Hunt’s ‘brazen masks of power’ from the *Examiner*, but the whole scene in which the ministers are animalised and allegorised also echoes *Sherwin’s Political Register* of 14 August 1819:

In Castlereagh we may discover the unrelenting grasp of the *tiger*; in Sidmouth, we behold the morbid stupidity of the *ass*… As for Canning, that precious pupil of the HEAVEN-BORN MINISTER, he is a complete *political hyena*… The recital of sufferings at which humanity shudders are to him a source of delirious delight, and he repeats them over and over again with a more than maniac ferocity.’[[57]](#footnote-57)

As well as allegorising the ministers as animals, *Sherwin’s* emphasises the foundation of such ministers’ statements of authority, as a self-justified ‘HEAVEN-BORN’ power. Likewise, in the *Mask of Anarchy*, the repeated claim of Anarchy himself is ‘I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!’[[58]](#footnote-58) Shelley echoes the language of the ministerial press, such as the *Courier*’s demand that the reformers demonstrate ‘their fidelity to their GOD, their country, and the KING’.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Like the ministerial press, the reach and influence of Anarchy and his ‘Pageant’ is nation-wide; they move ‘O'er fields and towns, from sea to sea… /Tearing up, and trampling down; /Till they came to London town.’[[60]](#footnote-60) The response to such ‘trampling’ oppression, the poem suggests, must also be on a national scale. The mysterious shape and voice that arise and overwhelm Anarchy and his train are difficult to pin to a specific subject; Shelley merely asserts of the speech that entails the second two-thirds of the poem, that ‘these words of joy and fear arose’.[[61]](#footnote-61) But in using this passive construction, Shelley again nods to the claims and tactics of reformers in response to Peterloo. Redfield has called for caution in assigning identities to the various voices of the poem.[[62]](#footnote-62) But here Shelley seems to suggest that in times of such outrage, individual voices cannot counteract corrupt power; rather, reformers must unite. As the *Morning Chronicle* put it,

When *The Courier* tauntingly told us, that about thirty people only throughout all England, Scotland and Ireland would raise their voice against these outrages, we answered him that this taunt would soon be thrown back in his teeth with derision. Indeed the simultaneous burst of indignation from the press of the country… could leave little doubt as to the state of the public feeling.[[63]](#footnote-63)

And the aggregate power of such collective voices carries with it an implicit threat, like Leigh Hunt’s, ‘thunder heard afar’. Shelley builds on the ambivalent power of the collective in his call for the formation of an ‘assembly’ in the section that follows.

The voice which addresses the ‘Men of England’ details the qualities of the ‘slavery’ which they currently undergo, and the ‘freedom’ which might supplant it. The means of achieving such freedom, the voice suggests, lies in collective action, and at two moments in the poem, it demands that the people congregate in a huge ‘assembly’. Here Shelley seems echo his ‘Hermit of Marlow’ pamphlets. The will, and the might, of the people must be directly represented by a physical gathering of the populace. As Anne Janowitz puts it, the *Mask of Anarchy* aims ‘to subvert the function of a representational aesthetic of the figural, and to enter into the literalization of figures in the minds of the reformers’.[[64]](#footnote-64) Shelley again draws on the rhetoric of the radical press and mass meetings, as the bodies of the reformers stand in for their political rights. So while Wolfson reads Shelley’s ‘vast assembly’ as ‘a vast formation that would be public art’, ‘political action as static aesthetic spectacle’, I suggest that the ‘vast assembly’ forms a crucial element of Shelley’s proposals for political intervention.[[65]](#footnote-65)

*The Mask of Anarchy* uses two almost identical lines to call for the formation of this assembly. The second occurrence has attracted much critical discussion, which has debated the contradictions of the poem’s appeals for passive resistance. I want to focus on the first occurrence, which introduces an alternate function for this ‘assembly’. The voice declares:

‘Let a great Assembly be

Of the fearless and the free

On some spot of English ground

Where the plains stretch wide around.

‘Let the blue sky overhead,

The green earth on which ye tread,

All that must eternal be

Witness the solemnity.

‘From the corners uttermost

Of the bonds of English coast;

From every hut, village, and town

Where those who live and suffer moan

For others’ misery or their own,[[66]](#footnote-66)

The precise nature of this ‘great Assembly’ is difficult to define, but it seems to recall Shelley’s plans for ‘putting reform to the vote’. As in his pamphlet, the unrepresented poor are encouraged to gather from every corner of the country in nationwide protest. Shelley pictures this assembly meeting physically ‘on some spot of English ground’, yet like the vision conjured at Henry Hunt’s trial, this national assembly of ‘women, children, young and old’ cannot be contained in one physical space. As in his pamphlet, Shelley indicates the importance of the press in bringing together this Assembly, so that they meet not necessarily in person, but rather in solidarity. As Scrivener notes, Shelley’s vision ‘is more radical than even what [Thistlewood was] saying, and anticipates by several months the call for [simultaneous meetings].’[[67]](#footnote-67) But his formulation is strikingly close to the calls in the radical press for national action. As Griffin notes in the *Cap of Liberty*, ‘Ere any thing beneficial can result from their effort, their motto must be, from one end of the kingdom to the other – “Be united and be free.”’[[68]](#footnote-68) Shelley suggests that the press in 1819 has enabled what he can only gesture to in 1817. Through acts of communal reading and feeling, the nation might indeed form one ‘great Assembly’.

This account of Shelley’s ‘great Assembly’ enables a slightly different view of the poem’s second call for the gathering of a mass collective:

‘Let a vast assembly be,

And with great solemnity

Declare with measured words that ye

Are, as God has made ye, free —

‘Be your strong and simple words

Keen to wound as sharpened swords,

And wide as targes let them be,

With their shade to cover ye.[[69]](#footnote-69)

This ‘vast assembly’, unlike the previous, seems a collective of actual bodies, even if the weapons they wield are verbal. The suggested link between this assembly and that at Peterloo grows stronger as the voice instructs it to stand ‘strong and resolute’ even as it is attacked by ‘tyrants’, ‘artillery’ and ‘horsemen’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Shelley’s declaration that ‘shame’ will overpower such attackers without any need for a physical response has been read as a misstep, a mistaken faith in passive resistance that is a symptom of his own ‘anxiety’ about political collectives.[[71]](#footnote-71) But reading this second assembly in the light of the poem’s first produces a slightly different emphasis. Shelley’s first ‘great Assembly’ seems to be made up of simultaneous crowds of protest all over the nation, on a scale which can overawe even the most powerful authorities in any one location. This makes the acts of resistance described in the second assembly much more potent. Shelley’s reference to shame, too, seems more effective if considered alongside the appeals in the radical press to the moral force of the crowd.

But perhaps the most significant qualities that Shelley’s ‘great’ and ‘vast’ assemblies draw from the radical activity of 1819 is the ambivalent status of their power. The close of the poem repeats the refrain from the start of the speech to the ‘Men of England’, declaring:

‘Rise like Lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number —

Shake your chains to earth like dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you —

Ye are many — they are few.’[[72]](#footnote-72)

The ‘unvanquishable number’ of this multitude echoes the unprecedented numbers of the mass protests of 1819. For this is not just one physical crowd but a nationwide collective. Critics have noted that the voice’s command to ‘rise like lions’ seems to contradict Shelley’s stated commitment to passive resistance.[[73]](#footnote-73) But as discussions of political collectives have shown, crowds might be ‘unvanquishable’ without resort to violence. As the direct representation of the will of the people, they could threaten to hold the government to account merely through their physical presence.

In conclusion, I return to the ‘gap’ between Shelley in Italy and events in England, between his speaker and the political change that this speaker urges. Though acutely cognisant of his poem’s distance from its subject matter, Shelley remains committed to closing that gap. In the *Mask of Anarchy’s* closing lines, the voice declares:

‘And that slaughter to the Nation

Shall steam up like inspiration,

Eloquent, oracular;

A volcano heard afar.

‘And these words shall then become

Like Oppression's thundered doom

Ringing through each heart and brain,

Heard again — again — again —[[74]](#footnote-74)

The voice, heard again and again, and from afar, that Shelley describes is not merely a belated, aesthetic production for astute future readers to comprehend. Rather it is an appeal to the moment, across time and space, to the crucial importance of simultaneous shared feeling regardless of physical distance. Wolfson suggests a ‘temporal incompatibility’ between the speaker who ‘lay’ asleep in Italy, and the voice who urges that people are ‘dying as I speak’.[[75]](#footnote-75) But the ‘Men of England’ speech suggests a poem attuned to the second of these temporal schemes, producing an urgent appeal to act now. Such action is only made possible, Shelley suggests, by the transmission of the printed word, which mediates distances of space and time, and unifies readers in common feeling. Shelley’s account of simultaneous connection, of activism across a distance both derives from and reinforces the discourse of the radical press and meetings in 1819.

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12. Wolfson “Romantic Ideology”, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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24. Chandler, *England in 1819*, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, 4; see also ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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