

SEM3. “In behalf of the human race”: Reviving *The Liberal* and liberalism

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 19

Convenors

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Abstract

The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South was a short-lived but influential literary and political periodical published in London in 1822–23 and co-edited in Pisa and Genoa by prominent intellectuals including Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley led by Leigh Hunt. This publication emerged in the early 1820s as a platform for the trio’s shared vision of artistic freedom, political reform, and social justice. Reflecting the radical ideals of the time, *The Liberal* advocated for liberty, individual rights, and the critique of political and social institutions, particularly those representing authoritarianism and oppression. It featured original poetry, essays, translations, short stories, and commentary, and its contributors included not only Byron, Hunt, and Shelley but also other figures such as Mary Shelley and the radical journalist William Hazlitt. Though made up of only four issues, the periodical is a pivotal, yet often overlooked, historical document, useful for understanding early 19th-century intersections of political thought and literary innovation, as it provided a critical space for the circulation of ideas central to Romantic-period debates and the early phases of liberalism in Britain.

This seminar aims to bring together a range of scholarly perspectives on *The Liberal* in order to reconsider how it reflects both the ambitions and limitations of Romantic political radicalism, as well as its broader literary and cultural implications for European liberal culture. The seminar intends to illuminate the complex relationship between literature and politics in the early 19th century, focusing on the ways in which, through *The Liberal*, Byron, Shelley, and Hunt engaged with contemporary debates over liberty, authority, and the role of the artist in effecting social change.

Objectives:

- to examine *The Liberal* as a collaborative work that reflects the distinct political and poetic visions of its contributors
- to reposition *The Liberal* in 1820s culture in Britain and Italy
- to investigate its relationship to the political and social context of post-Napoleonic Europe, particularly in regard to radicalism and liberal culture
- to consider its legacy in the broader context of Romanticism, of Anglo-Italian relations, and its continued relevance to contemporary discussions of literature and politics.

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SEM3. Papers

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 19

- “And my poor Fool is hanged!” *Nineteenth-century Shakespeares in The Liberal* (Giacomo Ferrari, Università degli Studi di Firenze)
- “A journal to be directed against everything in religion, in morals and probably in government and literature”: *William Wordsworth and/in The Liberal* (Alessia Testori, Università di Parma)

- *Promoting “the true Italian language” in Britain: Leigh Hunt as a reviewer and translator for The Liberal* (Fabio Liberto, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *The erotic Liberal in James Joyce and Salman Rushdie* (Alessandra Crotti, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *“We little band of atheistical perverts, free-lovers, we poeticals” : Reviving The Liberal and liberalism in neo-romantic biodrama* (Maria Elena Capitani, Università di Parma)

SEM3. Abstracts

“We little band of atheistical perverts, free-lovers, we poeticals”: Reviving *The Liberal* and liberalism in neo-romantic biodrama

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The Romantic period generated a number of travelling figures and narratives that still haunt the cultural imagination, both nationally and globally. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the Romantic heritage should be the object of sustained dramatisations; instead, what is remarkable is that these re-imaginings have not yet been investigated as a cohesive phenomenon. Addressing this scholarly deficit, this paper will explore two contemporary plays on P.B. Shelley, focusing on the representation of *The Liberal* and liberalism in Neo-Romantic biodrama.

More specifically, I will examine Howard Brenton’s *Bloody Poetry* (1984), which was commissioned by Foco Novo Theatre Company and first presented at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, a biodrama reprising some iconic moments in the transnational trajectories of P.B. Shelley and his circle as well as their radical ideas and scandalous lifestyle. Here, the British dramatist aimed “to salute their Utopian aspirations for which, in different ways, they gave their lives. It is a celebration of a magnificent failure” (Brenton, 1989: xiv). The short-lived *Liberal* venture is briefly but explicitly mentioned in the tenth scene of the second act, in which Shelley, on a Ligurian beach with Byron, defines the periodical as “[a] voice in England – radical, fierce, uncompromising” (303).

If Brenton’s play covers a longer time span (1816-1822) and includes multiple locations (Switzerland, England, and Italy), Maggie Rose’s unpublished *Shelley: A Diet for Peace* (2022), first performed in La Spezia by a group of secondary-school students, entirely takes place at Casa Magni on the 1st July 2022, two hundred years after the Romantic poet sailed off from San Terenzo to Leghorn to meet Byron and Leigh Hunt in Pisa about *The Liberal*, just one week before his death. In the first version of this one-act play, Rose imagines an “impossible encounter” (2022: 1) between Shelley and a twenty-first-century Scottish journalist, Susan Morgan, who interviews him on his “natural diet”. Despite the focus on vegetarianism, Shelley constantly digresses and their stimulating conversation ranges from free love to literature and politics.

This paper thus aims to put Brenton’s and Rose’s dramatic recreations of Shelley’s life on the map as part of a multifaceted and resonant cultural manifestation, while throwing light on the academically neglected but significant presence of *The Liberal* and liberalism in contemporary British playwriting.

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The erotic *Liberal* in James Joyce and Salman Rushdie

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In *Byron: the Erotic Liberal* (2001), Jonathan D. Gross introduces the concept of “erotic liberalism” to describe the interplay between liberal politics and erotic sensibility in Byron’s works. More broadly, the four issues of *The Liberal* reveal the contours of a shared political vision among its contributors, one in which eros functions as a tool of political resistance intimately tied to cosmopolitanism, censorship, and intellectual dissidence. *The Liberal*’s engagement with erotic liberalism anticipates, I will argue, key thematic and formal concerns of twentieth-century authors such as James Joyce and Salman Rushdie, whose works similarly entwine sexual and political transgressions as acts of dissent. While neither writer engages directly with *The Liberal*, the periodical survives in their works both in form and in function as an articulation of their shared investment in the Romantic tradition. This is particularly evident in *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988), where *The Liberal*’s distinctive mode of erotic liberalism works as a conceptual and formal template for the construction of Joyce’s and Rushdie’s dislocated, yet defiant heroes and heroines, heirs to the erotic liberal of the Romantics.

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“And my poor Fool is hanged!” Nineteenth-century Shakespeares in *The Liberal*

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The paper will address the presence and meanings of Shakespeare in *The Liberal* (1822-1823). The issue will be approached from two perspectives: firstly, a general assessment will be made of the quotations of or references to the Bard and his works in the four issues of the periodical; general considerations will be made as to the intention behind such references, in light of the contemporary critical and popular views on Shakespeare. Secondly, the only contribution to *The Liberal* specifically about Shakespeare – Charles Armitage Brown’s “Shakespear’s Fools” – will be analysed. The reading of the essay will not so much underline its critical merits and faults, as consider its many references to the Shakespearean literary-philological debate and theatre scene of the time, in order to position it in these spheres. The conclusion will be an attempt to decipher the purpose and implications of the presence of “Shakespear’s Fools” in the periodical. In particular, and with reference to the other mentions of Shakespeare in the four issues, the essay will be positioned with respect to the cultural, poetical, and political ‘agenda’ of *The Liberal*.

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Promoting “the true Italian language” in Britain: Leigh Hunt as a reviewer and translator for *The Liberal*

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Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) played a pivotal role in the conception and editing of *The Liberal* (1822-23). Following his blatantly sarcastic claim that the “object of our work is not political” (*TL*, n. 1, p. vii), Hunt envisioned *The Liberal* as a platform for radical ideals that were to be conveyed through a specific selection of foreign materials and a panoply of original literary pieces. The radical subtext that runs through the four issues of the periodical appears evident in the attempt of its contributors to promote foreign cultures in Britain. Even more radical was the specific focus on southern European literatures, which the subtitle of the periodical readily entails. The centrality of Italian literature and culture in the periodical is remarkably sustained by Hunt’s own contributions, from his well-known *Letters from Abroad*, serialised in all four issues of *The Liberal*, to his short story ‘The Florentine Lover’.

This paper intends to examine Hunt’s engagement with Italian language and literature in some of the translations he provided for the periodical. One article, in particular, offers interesting insights on Hunt’s strategies and practices as a reviewer, editor, and translator. In “The Giuli Tre”, published in the second issue of *The Liberal*, Hunt presents his readers with a review of Giambattista Casti’s collection of sonnets *I tre giuli* (1762). In the article, which includes typical elements of his periodical writing style, Hunt meticulously contextualises Casti’s work within the frame of reference of its British addressees, providing short summaries of some of the sonnets. To make his readers more familiar with the original text, Hunt also includes a few transcriptions of Casti’s sonnets as well as his own literary translation. The proposed paper will shed light on a number of aspects revolving around Hunt’s review and translation, on the strategies that he uses to present the text to the British audience, and on the impact the article had on the dissemination of Casti’s work in Britain.

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“A journal to be directed against everything in religion, in morals and probably in government and literature”: William Wordsworth and/in *The Liberal*

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On 20th April 1822, in a letter to Walter Savage Lindor, William Wordsworth expressed his strong aversion to *The Liberal*: “Byron, Shelley, Moore, Leigh Hunt [...] are too lay their heads together in some Town of Italy, for the purpose of conducting a journal to be directed against everything in religion, in morals and probably in government and literature”. Despite this seemingly unwarranted hostility towards the editorial project, the poet—whom Byron mockingly referred to as “Wordswords” and “Turdsword”—emerges as a significant influence on the second generation of Romantic poets, as well as on *The Liberal* itself, both in poetic and political terms. This paper aims to investigate Wordsworth’s complex presence in *The Liberal*, through a critical analysis of the following works: Leigh Hunt’s *The Dogs* (1823), William Hazlitt’s *On the Scotch Character* (1823) and *My First Acquaintance with Poets* (1823). Each of these lyrical and reflective pieces discusses the figure of Wordsworth from a distinct perspective, while also exploring the significant influence that the first-generation Romantic poets had on the second. These early Romantics are examined not only as subjects of critique within the periodical, but also as foundational voices in shaping the liberal political ideology embraced by the editors of the Anglo-Italian periodical. Accordingly, this paper examines the roots of Wordsworth’s opposition to *The Liberal* and his seldom-explored criticism of said periodical, which briefly appears in his correspondence, as well as in *The Westmorland Gazette* (1818-ongoing). This talk also considers the motivations behind Wordsworth’s political apostasy—a shift that Byron and Hazlitt both attributed to his appointment as Distributor of Stamps, a position they

believed compromised his “mental independence” (Medwin, 1824, 237) and marked his estrangement from liberal ideals. Ultimately, this paper seeks to address the following question: Would Wordsworth have supported—and perhaps even contributed to—*The Liberal* if it had been conceived and published during his youth, at a time when he was a passionate liberal poet and a supporter of the French Revolution?

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