

**Georgina Green, *The Majesty of the People: Popular Sovereignty and the Role of the Writer in the 1790s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 229. £60. ISBN 9780199689064.**

In January 1798 a crowd of almost two thousand people assembled in the Crown and Anchor Tavern to celebrate Charles James Fox's birthday. The chairman was the Duke of Norfolk, who gave a speech celebrating Fox as a 'Friend of Freedom', culminating in an impassioned toast to 'our sovereign's health – the majesty of the people'. The toast provoked a significant kerfuffle in the newspapers, which argued whether a toast to the majesty of the people was treasonous – a debate which, in effect, worked through some of the theoretical underpinnings of modern democracy. What does it mean to suggest that the people can be sovereign? How do we define the will of the people? How can the will of the people be an ethical as well as merely a physical force? How can that will best be harnessed in order to form a government? The Duke of Norfolk's toast opens Georgina Green's book, introducing the study as an investigation into what it meant 'to "toast" the majesty of the people in the 1790s' (24), through an examination of writings by John Thelwall, Thomas Paine, Helen Maria Williams, William Godwin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth.

As this might suggest, Green's book is as much a work of political theory as literary criticism. Among her most frequently cited critics are Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva, Emanuel Levinas, and Antonio Negri. The result is a theoretically sophisticated historicism that is invested in political as much as literary form. Green's attention is absorbed more by Thelwall's *Rights of Nature*, than by his poetry; more by Godwin's *Political Justice* than his novels and plays; more by Williams's *Letters Written in France*, than *Peru* or *Julia*. And yet it is one of the strengths of the study that Green addresses the interplay of political and literary representation. The concluding section of the Godwin chapter, for example, summarizes different authors' attitudes towards their audiences, suggesting how literary work can best serve political ends. Paine, Green tells us, 'cultivated a style of writing which made politics seem accessible to the masses' (137), while remaining skeptical of the possibility of accurate political representation. Thelwall assembled large crowds in order to make visible the physical force of the people's collectivity to both the people themselves and the government. Godwin, meanwhile was critical of Thelwall's strategies believing they risked rousing 'the force' of the people without rousing the 'mind'. Godwin thus 'aimed to cultivate [political] activity as a mental quality, an activity which could also be described as active reading' (137).

The suggestion that politics and literature were entwined in the 1790s is hardly new, but most often in literary studies this idea has led to investigations into the political viewpoints espoused in literary texts. What Green offers is something different: a political theory of writing in the 1790s. Political theorists and authors of what we would recognize as literary works – novels, plays, and poetry – were rarely distinguished in the period, so the book's focus on the 'role of the writer' helps us to see continuities between different modes of writing that might be blind spots in a more formally attuned scholarship. Nevertheless, the progression of Green's argument – from short discussions of Wilkes and Burke, to more in-depth analyses of the political theory of Paine, Godwin, and Thelwall, to a concluding section discussing the poets Coleridge and Wordsworth – implies that literary work emerges out of political controversy. We might quibble, however, that the reverse is equally true – the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*, was written after the first edition of the poems had been published, after all.

Regardless, *The Majesty of the People* makes a significant contribution to debates in Romantic-period studies, nuancing our accounts of the relationship between authors and their audiences in productive ways. The book provides a robust theoretical underpinning to questions raised in Philip Connell and Nigel Leask's collection *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*, and offers illuminating perspectives on debates about the nature of popular politics that have preoccupied Romanticists for several decades. Perhaps the greatest debt here, however, is to Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*. Green begins and ends her discussion of popular sovereignty by invoking Wordsworth's essay supplementary to the 'Preface' in which he proclaims reverence for the 'people, philosophically characterized' and pointedly not to the clamorous, noisy 'Public'. For Williams this philosophical 'embodied spirit of the people' was equated with culture – art freed from the laws of the market place. For Green, Wordsworth's resistance to the utilitarian principles of the market in favour of a shared culture provides a critique of the 'reductive, biopolitical administration of society', in which politics are understood as 'merely a duty to protect the 'bare' or merely 'biological' existence of members of society' (205). These are salient insights given our current climate of austerity. Among many virtues, one of the most impressive achievements of *The Majesty of The People* is its revision of Williams's classic text, bringing it up to date while making clear how half a century later the political dimensions of Williams's discussion of the Romantic artist remain as relevant as ever.

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