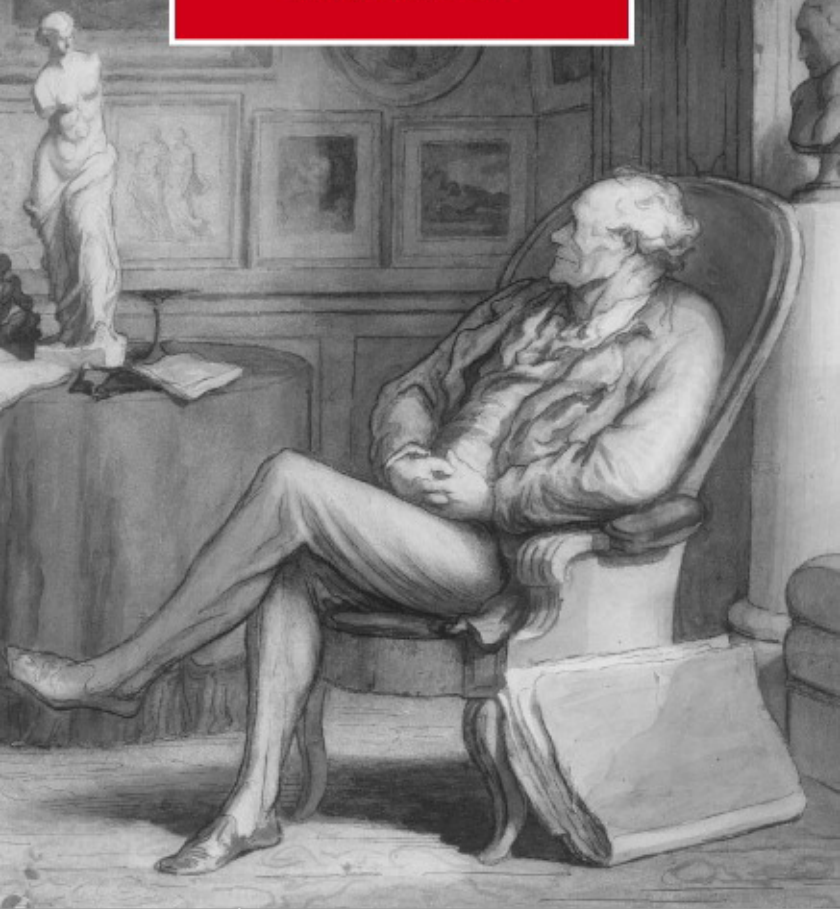


*LITERARY MAGAZINES
AND BRITISH
ROMANTICISM*

MARK PARKER



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Literary Magazines and British Romanticism

In this study, Mark Parker proposes that literary magazines should be an object of study in their own right. He argues that magazines such as the *London Magazine*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and the *New Monthly Magazine*, offered an innovative and collaborative space for writers and their work – indeed, magazines became one of the preeminent literary forms of the 1820s and 1830s. Examining the dynamic relationship between literature and culture which evolved within this context, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism* claims that writing in such a setting enters into a variety of alliances with other contributions and with ongoing institutional concerns that give subtle inflection to its meaning. The book provides the only extended treatment of Lamb's Elia essays, Hazlitt's Table-Talk essays, "Noctes Ambrosianae," and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* in their original contexts, and should be of interest to scholars of cultural and literary studies as well as Romanticists.

MARK PARKER is Professor of English at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He has published widely on Romantic literature in *Studies in Romanticism*, *Studies in English Literature*, and *Harvard Studies in English*.

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LITERARY MAGAZINES AND BRITISH ROMANTICISM

MARK PARKER



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To my parents, Hollis and Miriam

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Introduction: the study of literary magazines

This book seeks to do three things: to demonstrate that literary magazines should be an object of study in their own right, to argue that they are the preeminent literary form of the 1820s and 1830s in Britain, and to explore the ways in which literary magazines begin to frame a discussion of Romanticism. To do so, I have taken five instances from the four most prominent magazines of the time: the *London Magazine* from 1820 to 1821, the *New Monthly* from 1821 to 1825, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from 1822 to 1825, and *Fraser's Magazine* from 1833 to 1834. The first two of these instances are more traditionally author-centered, treating Charles Lamb's Elia essays and William Hazlitt's Table-Talk essays in the *London*. The third comes from the pages of *Blackwood's*, whose "Noctes Ambrosianae" constitutes one of the great experiments within the form of the magazine. The fourth takes up the *New Monthly*, perhaps the most consciously and purposefully homogeneous of the great magazines. The final instance, the run of *Fraser's* containing Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, signals the limit to this period of intense creativity in magazine production and writing. In most considerations of this literature, the essay or poem is to the magazine as figure is to ground in the plastic arts; it is my hope that by dissolving the figures of Elia and the author of Table-Talk into the ground of Scott's *London*, by examining the shifting relation of figure to ground in the *New Monthly* and the playful reversals of such notions in "Noctes," and by observing the emergence of Carlyle's *Sartor* from the ground of magazine writing generally, we can begin to appreciate the importance of the magazine in the literary history of the period we have come to call Romantic.

Such an analysis requires the development of two key terms, context and politics. Context is the more difficult term, as it can mean the immediate environment of the other contributions in a given number of a magazine, the tenor or feel of a particular magazine, magazines and periodical literature more generally, or the wider social world within which

magazines move. Context can also be produced by the relations between editor and contributor: overtly in the commissioning of a particular article or essay, in negotiations about the product, and through editorial changes; covertly in the silent adjustments contributors might make in fitting their work to a specific magazine. All of these versions of context are necessary to a study of literary magazines, but, as they are invoked at different times and with different force, their application varies considerably. The work of politics in literary magazines is less various and more subtle. Magazines such as *Blackwood's*, the *London*, the *New Monthly*, and *Fraser's* are conventionally categorized as Tory, Whig, or apolitical, but these tags tell us remarkably little. The literary magazines of this study offer surprisingly clear and self-conscious meditations on politics considered in the largest sense, as having to do with the nation as a whole. Considered together, these meditations provide a coherent and progressive argument about the way in which politics might be conceived and discussed.

The present chapter is offered as an introduction to the study of literary magazines. It specifically addresses those of the late Romantic period in England, but I believe that it raises critical issues basic to the study of literary magazines generally. The real difficulty in pursuing this project has been the lack of an existing conceptual framework for the study of literary magazines, or even a reliable description of the materials. This has forced a more inductive approach than might be taken in other kinds of studies, which can situate themselves among or against many recent good critical books. I am mindful that literary history has no self-evident and implicit meaning; it is not an empirical process, nor a recitation of facts. Nevertheless, it relies on empirical evidence, which it is the work of theory or interpretation to employ or set aside. At this point in the study of periodicals, the more we proceed inductively, the better, so long as we consider "induction" and "empiricism" as relative, not absolute states. The choice of the years between 1820 and 1834 and four middle-class magazines might seem eccentric, given the proliferation of magazine and periodical work in terms of new titles, of circulation numbers, and of audiences during that period and through the rest of the century. But I intend to show that a confluence of social, cultural, and literary factors make this early period in the history of literary magazines the most experimental, the most self-conscious, and, at least for the student of periodicals, one of the most telling.

As they have become more complex, magazines and periodicals have been less an object of study than an adjunct to literary investigation. Periodicals that are essentially single essays, such as Addison and Steele's

Tatler and *Spectator*, Johnson's *Rambler*, and Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, receive close attention. But when periodicals take on a more modern form – collaborations of many hands with an editor – they are treated largely as an archive from which scholars draw evidence to use in other arguments. Typically, scholars cite negative reviews in magazines to establish the newness or revolutionary qualities of Romantic writing (the familiar rehearsal of Francis Jeffrey's response to Wordsworth's *Excursion*, "This will never do," might stand as the type of this critical move). More often magazines are simply ignored in critical discussions. Few treatments of De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium Eater," for example, do more than mention the *London*, although that magazine, which had made a point of recounting and analyzing unusual psychological experiences, had much to do with preparing for the initial, unexpected success of this work. And while such compilations of magazine material as *The Romantics Reviewed*¹ have made reception histories easier to trace and the critical mood of the period easier to apprehend, scholars still tend to view magazines and periodicals merely as collections of discrete articles, as a system for delivering individual literary works or critical opinion that is itself disposable.

This critical tendency is unfortunate. What is lost in reading individual contributions outside the orbit of the periodical is not simply an immediate context for the work but a mode of emergence which radically affects the meaning of a particular essay, review, poem, or novel. A writer's intentions are only part of the meaning of the work in a periodical: a work in such a setting enters a variety of relations with other articles and ongoing institutional concerns that give subtle inflection to its meaning. This irreducible rhetoricity takes many forms: appeals to what often goes without saying in a particular magazine or review, innuendo familiar to its circle of readers, exaggeration discernible only by reference to the standard line of the periodical. The periodical does not simply stand in secondary relation to the literary work it contains; a dynamic relation among contributions informs and creates meaning.

Recapturing the world of the magazine involves substantial difficulties. To begin with, the sheer abundance of magazine writing, even in so small a part of the nineteenth century as this study proposes, is daunting. Michael Wolff's estimate that between twenty-five and fifty million articles appeared in Victorian periodicals is disturbing for its inexactness as well as its magnitude.² The concept of "information overload" is a commonplace to us, but Hazlitt and De Quincey wrote essays premised upon it. Of course, we might balance this rebarbative aspect of periodical research against Carlyle's matter-of-fact claim that, upon

receiving the back issues of the *Edinburgh Review* (not an unusual gift from a publisher to a new contributor), he read them straight through, or the ambitious project set out by James Mill and his son John to review the first twenty-two years of the *Edinburgh Review* for the first few numbers of the *Westminster Review*. Such feats, however, are likely to provide faint inspiration for the modern researcher.

Moreover, the complexity of periodicals makes them formidable. To read a magazine such as *Blackwood's* or the *London* is to be plunged into a world of diurnal reference and innuendo largely lost to us. Nearly all periodicals in the 1820s trade in "personality," or rancorous personal attack, and by nature such writing is elusive and topical. What goes without saying, especially in magazines, has heightened importance at a time of stringent libel laws and active state censorship. In addition, each magazine labors to develop a specialized frame of reference, in which certain names or topics can trigger the reader's recollection of earlier material. For instance, the mere mention of "Leigh Hunt" in *Blackwood's* suggests some bullyragging to follow: it allows the reader to anticipate a certain kind of carnivalesque entertainment. "Hunt" functions as a master trope, which not only characterizes other writers and situations but embodies a particular view of the literary world. Moreover, not all such uses of charged language are so easily recoverable: perhaps the more decisive term of belletristic denigration in *Blackwood's* is "Tims," an idiosyncratic nickname for Patmore that has more subtle connotations of effete and ineffectual writing.

In fact, almost no aspect of periodical study is unproblematic. Almost all Romantic magazines (and all those taken up in this study) present their contributions anonymously or under a pseudonym. Scholarly efforts, which have been directed at attribution, have been extended and codified by the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*.³ This monumental work of many years and many hands would seem, at first glance, to ease some of the difficulties for students of magazines by providing the means for a classification which affords powerful ways of discriminating among individual contributions. Of course, one might have reservations about this kind of author-centered methodology, just as one might, from a more traditional perspective, have some doubts about the relative uncertainty of some of the attributions. But more problematic is the way in which the form of the magazine itself undermines either an exclusively author-centered or an exclusively poststructural approach. It is a critical commonplace that reviewers write with the force of the magazine or review behind them, that Gifford or Lockhart, in attacking Keats, write

with the weight of the *Quarterly* or *Blackwood's* behind them. Yet it is also a critical commonplace that editors routinely changed and at times substantially rewrote contributions. Moreover, we know that contributors wrote for particular periodicals, shaping their remarks for the particular tenor of a magazine or review. Their intentions, apparently, would be to produce something like the "discourse" of poststructuralism. Therefore we have a range of modalities within periodicals, from relative authorial autonomy to collaborations between editor and contributor. In between we have elusive hybrids: collaborations before the fact, in which the contributor tunes his remarks to the key of the magazine; works of many hands, such as Hazlitt's continuation of John Scott's "Living Authors" after Scott's death; and deliberate submission of fragments to be sutured together by the editor, such as *Blackwood's* "Noctes Ambrosianae." An author-centered approach leaves us vulnerable to the deconstruction of agency inherent in contributions by multiple hands; if we consider periodicals as "discourse," we run afoul of the intentionality of this consciously anonymous production.

These two critical approaches are set out in contemporary assessments of periodicals by Hazlitt and James Mill, the former writing for the well-established *Edinburgh Review* and the latter in the first number of the radical *Westminster*. A comparison of these two accounts by two working writers has much to tell us about the advantages and drawbacks of each.

Hazlitt's 1823 "The Periodical Press" begins with a question: whether periodical criticism is good for literature. His response, once he has named Wordsworth and Scott as proof that writers can write well despite the immediate judgment of periodicals, is to turn his attention to periodical writing itself:

we will content ourselves with announcing a truism on the subject, which, like many other truisms, is pregnant with deep thought, – viz. *That periodical criticism is favourable – to periodical criticism*. It contributes to its own improvement – and its cultivation proves not only that it suits the spirit of the times, but it advances it. It certainly never flourished more than at present. It never struck its roots so deep, nor spread its branches so widely and luxuriantly. Is not the proposal of this very question a proof of its progressive refinement? and what, it may be asked, can be desired more than to have the perfection of one thing at any one time?⁴

The question posed by Hazlitt echoes through the Romantic period; it is connected with the decline of the epic and the "burden of the past" perceived by so many writers of the age.⁵ Hazlitt's answer, under his

characteristically smart magazine contributor's opening, is a surprising one: he implies that periodical writing is itself something of a literary genre, and that, at this moment in the sweep of literary history, in the rise and fall of genres and kinds of literature, the periodical has taken precedence. Hazlitt then focuses on the situation of the periodical writer:

Literary immortality is now let on short leases, and we must be contented to succeed by rotation . . . We exist in the bustle of the world, and cannot escape from the notice of our contemporaries. We must please to live, and therefore should live to please. We must look to the public for support. Instead of solemn testimonies from the learned, we require the smiles of the fair and the polite. If princes scowl upon us, the broad shining face of the people may turn to us with a favourable aspect. Is not this life (too) sweet? Would we change it for the former if we could? But the great point is, that *we cannot!* Therefore, let Reviews flourish – let Magazines increase and multiply – let the Daily and Weekly Newspapers live for ever! (“The Periodical Press,” p. 358)

This is a complicated passage, both in its sensitivity to its historical moment and in its rhetoric. On the one hand, Hazlitt gives an insider's view of the historical shift from literary production under a patronage system to production based on a market. But Hazlitt also indulges in a not uncharacteristic touch of Coriolanian spleen at this change. His distrust of the reading public and his uneasiness at being judged by the “fair and polite” instead of the “learned” are evident. He further complicates the passage with a glancing quotation of the Duke Senior in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* – an exile who has bought philosophical insight and resignation with the loss of power and position.⁶

Like the Duke, however, Hazlitt manages to find sweet uses in adversity. Anticipating De Quincey's argument in his 1848 essay “Literature of Knowledge and Literature of Power,” Hazlitt sets out the present task for intellectuals:

To dig to the bottom of a subject through so many generations of authors, is now impossible: the concrete mass is too voluminous and vast to be obtained in any single head; and therefore we must have essences and samples as substitutes for it. We have collected a superabundance of raw materials: the grand *desideratum* now is, to fashion and render them portable. Knowledge is no longer confined to the few; the object therefore is, to make it accessible and attractive to the many. The *Monarchism* of literature is at an end; the cells of learning are thrown open, and let in the light of universal day. (p. 358)

Hazlitt then turns to various periodicals, commenting unsystematically, idiosyncratically, and at times mysteriously on the tenor of and often the

personalities behind each. The strength of his article lies in its clarification of the situation of the periodical writer, considered historically: the effects of the shift from patron to market audience, of the newly professional status of writers, and of the new status of the periodical as a genre or kind of literature. Throughout, Hazlitt is alive to the nuance and innuendo particular to the periodical world, as one might expect of a writer who had been immersed in its invective, its public squabbles, and its attendant legal actions.

When Hazlitt turns to individual magazines, however, the limitations of his insider's view are apparent. His stated topic was "The Periodical Press," but what follow are brief characterizations of individual magazines, most of which turn on the perceived disposition of the editor or some prominent contributor. So strong is Hazlitt's bias toward personalities that the clarity of his remarks suffers, at least for readers unfamiliar with the contemporary periodical scene. In his discussion of magazines, for instance, *Blackwood's* is not mentioned by name, except as one "extremity of the series" (p. 369). It does not figure at all in his treatment of leading magazines. Only later, when he addresses the scurrility rife in periodical discourse, does Hazlitt turn to *Blackwood's*, and here too not by name. There are several reasons for this elusive treatment: the Whig *Edinburgh*, for which Hazlitt is writing, had been involved in a running dispute with the Tory *Blackwood's*, and its editor, Francis Jeffrey, was often ridiculed personally in the pages of the latter. (His size was a common target: in a witty reworking of Walter Scott's nickname, "The Great Unknown," he was dubbed "the small known.") Hazlitt himself had been caught up in *Blackwood's* "Cockney School" attacks (among other things, he had been called "a pimple," and he had taken legal action against the magazine for libel). Hazlitt's analysis of the periodical world derives its power and insight from his engaged position as periodical writer, but that very experience entangles him with the current scene and precludes sustained reflection upon it. "The Periodical Press," enmeshed as it is in the working world of the periodical writer, cannot step outside it for long.

James Mill's 1824 "Periodical Literature" could not be more different. Mill's article – forty pages of dense quotation and analysis – is sober where Hazlitt is playful, and it counters Hazlitt's rhetorical flights with an austere and measured prose. Mill takes the stance of an outsider, one who brings to bear "a regular and systematic course of criticism"⁷ to the largely unexamined world of periodical writing. His main point is to demonstrate that the political affiliation of the *Edinburgh Review* motivates

its characteristic contradictions. As one might expect, Mill uses a Benthamite chain of reasoning, beginning with axiomatic statements and moving inexorably toward conclusions. The article opens with a powerful attack on both Whig and Tory politics: behind their seeming antagonism lies a shared interest in retaining the *status quo*. Rather than reform, the Whigs simply want the financial benefits that the governing Tories command. Although representing an exclusively aristocratic interest, they are forced to address another audience, the middle class, in hopes of regaining political influence. This forces them into a double pleading, characterized by recourse to vague language, championing of superficial reform, and what Mill calls the “see-saw” – the opportunistic embrace of both sides of an argument. Throughout the article, Mill considers the *Edinburgh Review* solely as a monolithic discourse. He respects neither the bounds of individual articles nor the possible distinctions of authorship; the “motives which must govern the class,” not those which “actuate individuals” (“Periodical Literature,” p. 217), are Mill’s concern. Hazlitt’s analysis turns upon the lived situation of periodical literature – what the audience demands, what constrains the writer, what the present situation enforces – and the aesthetic aspects of this kind of writing. Mill’s analysis is above all a critique of ideology: critical, disinterested, dismissive of individual cases and personal agency.⁸

But just as Hazlitt’s strength, his intimate knowledge of the nuance and innuendo of periodical writing, limits his analysis, Mill’s penchant for abstraction creates systematic blindnesses within his work. In the axiomatic stage of his analysis, he posits that the *Edinburgh Review* is “addressed to the aristocratical classes” (p. 210). Such a formulation, as an insider like Hazlitt would surely know and as Mill’s own analysis later implies, is much too simple. If the review is addressed to aristocrats, what Mill describes as the characteristic voice of the *Edinburgh Review* and the Whig constituency, a “double pleading” to the aristocratic opposition and the middle classes, is surely out of place. Throughout the Regency, the *Edinburgh Review* boasted circulations of 12,000–14,000, and these remained high over the next decade as well. Such penetration of the market goes well beyond the two hundred or so aristocratic families (according to Mill’s own count) that have or aspire to political power in Britain. Even if one figures in what Mill terms the “props” and “servants” of the aristocracy – the church and the legal professions, each of whom “receives its share of the profits of misrule” (p. 214) – it is unclear what the point of the *Edinburgh Review*’s “double pleading” might be. Aristocrats and their “props” would presumably need no persuading to