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Talking about Peterloo: Manifold Oratory Speeches during the Romantic Period

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Talking about Peterloo: Manifold Oratory Speeches during the Romantic Period

The Romantic era heralded a new age of rhetoric in which the spoken word was cultivated into a truly eloquent form: the art of oratory. Such forms of expression – those that were used both within and beyond the realm of parliamentary debates and discussions in the period – were frequently adopted by radical speakers who sought to promote freedom of speech and advocated for the working class to be granted more rights. At a time when the English government imposed strict censorship measures on the people, inhibiting personal freedoms and preventing free speech, the art of oratory became a powerful tool of resistance, especially for radicals, Dissenters, intellectuals and activists. In this article, I discuss the rhetorical strategies that were employed by three types of orators from different social classes: politicians, female activists, and radicals from the Midlands. All of these figures played crucial roles in influencing public opinion both before and during the so-called ‘great meeting’ of Manchester that took place on 16 August 1819. In fact, the rhetorical strategies and symbols that were used by orators during what has subsequently become known as the ‘Peterloo Massacre’ are still pertinent today. Many of these hallmarks of oratory can be discerned in the speeches that are delivered to modern audiences. Most notably, such rhetorical devices are still being used by protesters and campaigners on an international scale in order to effect social change and to combat social inequality.

Keywords: Romantic period; oratory; Peterloo; Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt; civil rights; freedom of speech.

With Henry Hunt we’ll go, brave lads,

With Henry Hunt we’ll go;

We’ll raise the Cap of Liberty

As Judith Thompson explains, ‘the Romantic era was a golden age of spoken eloquence in which revolutionary debate provided a forum for some of the most powerful orators England ever produced’.² In this article, I respond to Thompson’s assertion in such a way as to broaden the scope of research into how oratorical skills and rhetorical strategies were exhibited and exercised in this period by a variety of speakers – both inside and outside of the Houses of Parliament – to promote civil rights and reform. I then contextualise the rhetorical devices that were utilised by three different Romantic period individual orators or groups of speakers, all of whom belonged to different social classes. Specifically, I consider the ways in which all three of these categories of orators managed to shape public opinion by means of their rhetoric – both before and during the great meeting that took place in Manchester on 16 August 1819.

After providing some relevant background information about the period, the first orator whom I introduce in this study is, in fact, the man who was the most eminent reformist speaker of the Romantic period: Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt, a member of London’s political élite. Local representatives of the radical movement invited Hunt to Manchester as the main spokesperson for the big assembly; his oratorical skills were well-known all around the country.

Having considered Hunt, I then investigate the oratorical role of women who belonged to reform societies. Specifically, I consider their vigorous contribution to general discussions about civil rights. It is during this period that women, and other

¹ *Wheeler’s Manchester Chronicle*, 4 September 1819.

² Judith Thompson, ‘Romantic Oratory’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 529-30.

minority groups such as people of colour, gained – through their oratorical skills – public interest and attention. New performances of oratory by different kinds of speakers challenged audiences to reconsider the status quo of their social system, including new gender, class and citizenship roles.³ The women in question enthusiastically joined Hunt at the speakers’ stand in St Peter’s Field in Manchester and were acknowledged by Hunt and the local organizers as being important delegates who supported the rights of both men and women.

Finally, I refer to some of the radical working-class representatives from local districts in the North of England. These individuals spoke at small, less prestigious public meetings in order to raise awareness of the social inequalities in factories in the hopes of fostering a spirit of reform among members of parliament. However, these peaceful rhetorical endeavours to effect positive social change were tragically followed by the violence of the Peterloo Massacre.

In order to meaningfully contextualise the significance of these different groups of speakers – and that of their rhetoric – at the beginning of the nineteenth century, I consider the events of Peterloo in the wider context of the Romantic period. At this time, the ‘art of oratory’ was regarded as being the power of speech in performance which could – and did – considerably influence the popularity and circulation of ideas, especially political ones. As Carolyn Eastman explains, ‘oratory helped to fuel some of the most exciting social and political changes of the era by reconceptualising ideas about the relationship between leaders and the public, the notion of rhetorical persuasion, and the

³ Carolyn Eastman, ‘Oratory and Platform Culture in Britain and North America, 1740-1900’, in *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2016, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.33 (accessed October 8, 2020).

importance of public opinion’.⁴ It is striking that the insights that we can glean from examining oratory in the Romantic period remain pertinent to modern audiences and contexts. Indeed, the content and literary devices of such speeches continue to be replicated today, on an international scale, by those who protest against social inequality.

In terms of defining ‘oratory’ – and without delving too deeply into the classical debates about and distinctions that were drawn between the terms ‘orality’, ‘oratory’, and ‘rhetoric’ – we can base our understanding of the concept on the famous definition that was suggested by Joseph Priestley: an active Dissenter who was a minister and philosopher as well as a chemist. In his *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777), Priestley describes oratory as ‘the natural faculty of speech improved by art; whereby the use of it is perfected, facilitated, and extended; and consequently its value and influence greatly increased’.⁵

As such, this faculty of speech is closely linked to *rhetoric*, focusing upon the art of delivery. In terms of honing the delivery of one’s speech, it is important to be mindful of one’s elocution, pronunciation, gesture, tone, and other performative elements of language. Consequently, the art of oratory – in the context of political issues – was a very dangerous form of communication for those with conservative views and a very powerful one for reformists. The performance of spirited words in a public context had the potential to change the rules and, with them, society.

In her study of Romantic performative language, Angela Esterhammer asserts: ‘The notion that language is not merely descriptive of reality, but that it affects, shapes, alters, or even creates reality, underlines several interrelated currents of theory and

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Joseph Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (London: Johnson, 1777), 1.

practice from the 1790s onward'.⁶ When we consider Romantic oratory, we must also take into account the relationship between elocutionary practice and literary theory, as well as the increasingly extensive range of speakers' backgrounds at this time. The emergence of working-class orators was one of the most significant developments of the Romantic period.

To understand the significance of oratory in the context of eighteenth- and mid-nineteenth-century England, we need to remember that the extent to which speech could be 'free' – including words that were employed in the printing press and public meetings – was strictly controlled by the government, especially at the time of the French Revolution. The most restrictive laws about free speech were the so-called 'Gagging Acts': a term that has been used to describe several prohibitive laws such as the Seditious Meetings Act (1795) and the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act (1795). The government's aim in passing this legislation was to censor any public gatherings which could be regarded as being 'seditious' – those which provoked expressions of civic unrest. These laws were in force until the summer of 1818. Moreover, these limitations extended to any ostensibly dangerous meetings that could instigate plots against the monarch (or the Prince Regent) – that would constitute treason – as well as blasphemous forms of expression: any instances of speech that were critical or disparaging of – or offensive to – those who held Christian beliefs.

The government exercised its legislative control over forms of public expression in many ways. From large assemblies to small meetings, every space that had the potential to host an audience for the purposes of a possibly subversive political debate was

⁶ Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 23.

scrutinised; open public spaces, theatres, taverns, clubs, and pubs were all policed. In addition, one ought to note that the government suspended the Habeas Corpus Act three times during this period: 1794-1795, 1798-1800, and 1817-1818.⁷ The extremity of such measures signals the extent to which those in parliamentary power feared unrest and uprisings at home following the events of the French Revolution.⁸

However, the sanctions with which these rules were associated, such as imprisonment and deportation, were not wholly successful in suppressing social gatherings and political debates in public or print. It was not only the city of London that was repressed in such ways; systems of control were in place all around the country. Indeed, it was in fact at the regional level that several magistrates – who were instructed by royal proclamation to ‘take the most immediate and effectual care to suppress and

⁷ Taken from the Latin phrase ‘thou (shalt) have the body’, Habeas Corpus is a writ that is issued by a court of justice, ‘requiring the body of a person to be brought before the judge or into the court for the purpose specified in the writ’ (*OED*). A person who is being denied their liberty for any reason must be brought before the judge or into court so that the nature and validity of the individual’s detention may be investigated and determined. See ‘habeas corpus (n.)’, *OED Online*, December 2020, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com> (accessed December 4, 2020).

⁸ The limitations that were imposed on personal freedoms such as the expression of speech and opinion were well-documented in many other acts of this period. As well as those which have already been mentioned, the Alien Acts (1793) and the Newspaper Publication Act (1798) constituted two notable pieces of legislation through which the government attempted to monitor foreign visitors and the printing press respectively. Other significant acts included the Unlawful Oaths Act (1797), which was aimed at clandestine political organisations; the Corresponding Societies Act (1799), which banned the London Corresponding Society and similar groups; the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, which outlawed trade unions; another Seditious Meetings Act (in 1817), and the ‘Six Acts’ of 1819: a comprehensive set of repressive measures that were passed in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre. See David Worrall, ‘Freedom of Speech’, in *Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, 235.

prevent all Riots, Tumults, and other Disorders’ – principally exercised their power.⁹ This proclamation had also functioned as the catalyst for the prohibition of several famous works that the radical writer Thomas Paine had penned in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

In his most famous volume, *Rights of Man*, Paine offered a response to Edmund Burke’s conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In doing so, Paine utilised the stylistic devices that characterised satirical journalism at the time – as well as those that had proven to be essential to successful oratory. Paine critiqued Burke’s account of the Revolution, encouraging his readers to think differently about what had transpired in France, and why, and to support the concept of freedom of expression – including the expression of dissent – in relation to political issues in particular.

Paine’s contribution to the controversy surrounding the Revolution in France posed a challenge to the established norms of political debate; his writings were, consequently, banned from publication. This did not prevent Paine’s radical ideas from being disseminated, though. Paine’s words stimulated discussions not only about the French Revolution itself but also about civil rights and the matter of personal freedom more broadly. The controversial political notions that were shared both in print and in the context of public meetings perpetuated the idea that politics should be discussed in public and that everyone could – and should – participate rather than current affairs and policies being deliberated solely by the privileged few who sat inside the Houses of Parliament.¹⁰

⁹ ‘By the King. A Proclamation (21 May 1792)’, qtd. in Worrall, ‘Freedom of Speech’, 242.

¹⁰ In his famous sermon, delivered in 1789, Dr Richard Price did not call for the overthrow of the English system of government in favour of a republic but, rather, for a return to the key principles of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which had affirmed the protestant succession of the monarch and the protection of the rights of the subject. He opposed the influence that was exerted upon – and the manipulation of – Parliament by the Crown and aristocracy. In Price’s opinion, British

Thanks to the words of radical free thinkers and dissenters like Paine, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and many others, the culture of politics in this period was transformed. Politics became a subject to be read and discussed widely – in both public and private spaces. People became better informed about political issues as a result of the circulation of journals, reviews, and books – as well as circulating libraries themselves. Dissenters, in particular, facilitated public discussions about politics and, especially, civil rights. As a group, they boasted diverse vocations, including intellectuals, ministers, writers, scientists, and artists, who were united by one key decision. All of them had decided against joining the Church of England and, as a consequence, they were excluded from various aspects of public life as a result of the Test and Corporation Acts (1662 and 1673) that had been passed after the Restoration in 1660.

The government's ability to exercise strict control over public speeches was to a large extent – and increasingly – reliant upon the efforts of informers: individuals who held local, minor public offices and acted as spies. Such persons attended both large and small assemblies in order to inform local authorities about dangerous communications, who then reported back to the general office in London. However, as Worrall asserts, even the use of spies by the government failed to eradicate seditious gatherings altogether because 'apparently ordinary language became politically implicated in unpredictable ways'.¹¹

As a consequence, it was not easy for the authorities to manage and eliminate every alleged use of subversive language at public assemblies due to the fact that anybody

liberties were becoming increasingly corrupted and needed to be restored. His sermon was quickly printed as *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789) and was sold by sympathetic booksellers such as Joseph Johnson: a major figure in the network of dissenting intellectuals.

¹¹ Worrall, 'Freedom of Speech', 243.

talking aloud could be suspected and reported. The symbolic register of seditious language was easy to detect – but those who used it were sometimes difficult to prosecute if they did so in the context of small gatherings (such as in a tavern or a meeting house). Despite encountering legislative measures, strict supervision and severe forms of censorship – not to mention running the high risk of punishments and imprisonment – free thinkers like Dissenters continued to advocate reform in the country. Spurred on by the press and the circulation of radical ideas, reformists launched widespread campaigns by means of petitions and social gatherings in order to demand the attention and consideration of Parliament.

At this time, many speakers were stirring up revolutionary debate, and thousands were being inspired by popular pulpit and platform performers. To use Thompson's words, 'a range of recitation swept the land such that not only the poet but the reader, too, was "a man speaking to man" (or possibly even a woman to women)'.¹² Even though oratory was being overshadowed by other forms of media in the Romantic period, it undoubtedly represented the most vital and dynamic form of language. Romantic rhetoric had the potential to be extremely dangerous – especially when political in nature – and it appealed to the fervour of the people's rage and their thirst for democracy.

The spoken word afforded power and immediacy to the radicals' cause; its capacity to unite and to move, to educate and to empower the body politic, posed a considerable threat to those who were in power during the revolutionary era.¹³ It is, as such, unsurprising that the government should have chosen to take the aforementioned repressive steps; politicians feared the spectre of mob violence that could be raised by

¹² Thompson, 'Romantic Oratory', 530.

¹³ Ibidem.

radical orators.

One prominent elocutionist of the Romantic era was the radical lecturer, pedagogue and poet John Thelwall. He stood out among speakers of the period because of his rage as a radical thinker and his status as an activist who at once drew upon both polite and popular forms of oratory while expressing his commitment to freedom of speech and its improvement. He regarded oratory as being central to the formation of a democratic society, envisaging language as a medium of exchange – and literature as an instrument of not only the realisation of social aspirations but also of political empowerment.¹⁴

Thelwall became the most popular and effective orator of this day – to the extent that William Hazlitt compared his style of oration to a ‘volcano vomiting out lava’.¹⁵ However, as a radical political speaker Thelwall was charged and tried for treason in 1794, acquiring the reputation of ‘the most notorious public Jacobin in England’. After the episode, Thelwall focused upon his career as a speech therapist and elocutionary lecturer. As Sarah Zimmerman remarks, ‘in an era increasingly defined by print, Thelwall fostered an oral culture that perpetuated (if in an attenuated form) the cause that had been lost – universal suffrage – by teaching students to speak for themselves’.¹⁶ Thelwall also participated energetically in the print culture by means of his journal, *The Champion*, in which he called for parliamentary reform and denounced the government’s actions in the context of the Peterloo Massacre.

Despite the dangers of being a radical speaker outside the Houses of Parliament,

¹⁴ Ibid., 532.

¹⁵ Sarah Zimmerman, *The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 118.

¹⁶ Ibid., 60, 61.

inside them political orators were much appreciated. After important events such as those of the revolutions in America and France – as well as the colonial impeachments in India – society’s newfound awareness of the important and influential nature of speech raised fundamental questions about who had the right to speak and act for the people.¹⁷ Parliamentary debates began to be depicted more accurately by the press – despite their content technically being protected by rules of secrecy – and, consequently, a larger audience engaged with, read about, and discussed politics as an everyday matter.¹⁸

As a result, political oratory developed outside Parliament, becoming a practice that was more commonly performed – and by a broader range of people. Speeches were delivered at political dinners, during election campaigns, and at notable events for popular movements.¹⁹ The political sphere was transformed by popular oration in the halls, squares, and fields in which lectures were frequently delivered by politicians, religious

¹⁷ For a broader discussion of the audience-oriented forms of oratory in American history, see Eastman, ‘Oratory and Platform Culture’.

¹⁸ From the fifteenth century onwards, Parliament maintained a policy of strict secrecy regarding the content of parliamentary debates. Members of Parliament considered the words of peers and members to be ‘unfit for public consumption’. Those who attended the debates and then published their content afterwards were usually persecuted. However, in the seventeenth century, public interest increased in parliamentary proceedings and the circulation of newspapers and the printing press increased, too. The radical press consequently advocated for new rules to be established in relation to the reporting of parliamentary debates. By the eighteenth century, these journalists had started to circulate narratives about the discussions that were taking place in Parliament. William Cobbet (1763-1835) was a famous radical editor who, advocating reform, printed the details of parliamentary debates in his weekly magazine, *Political Register*, without censorship. See ‘Breach of Privilege’ in *Living Heritage, Communicating Parliamentary Business*, <https://www.parliament.uk> (accessed July 17, 2020).

¹⁹ The campaign to abolish slavery was one of the most famous battles to be fought by William Wilberforce: a well-known activist and persuasive orator. He did so in the Houses of Parliament as well as beyond its walls in public meetings and by collecting petitions.

ministers (Dissenters in particular) and members of other activist movements, all of whom addressed the masses. Such speakers challenged the political status quo by advocating for parliamentary reforms, planting the seeds for future change – including the expansion of the electorate – and securing more representatives in Parliament in the late nineteenth century.

The novelty of political oratory outside Parliament lay predominantly in the fact that it was neither exclusive nor hierarchical. Instead, orators addressed large crowds – in open spaces – including an audience whose constituent members shared a key experience; they were 90% of the population who had previously been excluded from political representation. However, the language of such speeches was far from unambiguous; it was deeply allegorical in order to protect the speaker from prosecution. Such rhetoric was characterised by constant shifts in voice, mode, register, meaning, and tone, as well as oscillations between passion and reason, populism and authority, provocation and restraint, extravagant metaphors and plain facts.

The Regency period saw the predominance of one orator in particular: Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt. He is most widely well-known for the speeches that he delivered in support of reform at St Peter’s Field, Manchester. Hunt’s persuasive manner of speaking and flamboyant persona have been depicted in historical reports as well as in numerous illustrations – and not without contradictions. Hunt was a wealthy gentleman farmer from Wiltshire who entered politics and became a famous figure in the fight for political reforms. In late 1816 and early 1817, he was acclaimed for his speeches during the meetings that were held at Spa Fields in London. On those occasions, he demonstrated his ability to capture the attention of vast crowds of approximately 100,000 people by means of his fiery words alone.

As Meisel asserts, Hunt ‘advanced a vision of peaceful mass pressure as a

constitutional means for securing popular constitutional rights'.²⁰ He honed his art of rhetoric to such an extent that he was able to effectively – and persuasively – convey his ideas about notions such as liberty and universal suffrage. On a personal level, he was renowned for his vanity; it is, as such, perhaps unsurprising that he was able to dramatize his political principles together with his own character in front of large crowds. Hunt was regarded by his colleagues and friends as being the perfect symbol of the 'cult of personality', as defined by Judith Thompson, and self-realisation in the context of radical orators of the late Romantic period.²¹ He was able to skilfully manipulate and play with the language of high politics while also speaking accessibly to the masses who, in turn, worshipped him.

Hunt was the master of emotive rhetoric who linked the physicality of his body with that of his auditors by pretending to struggle to speak (gasping, flushing, beating his breast). As reported by those who attended his speeches and met him in person, Hunt was a very pro-active man, always placing himself in arduous and challenging situations. Samuel Bamford, a radical who met Hunt in London, provided a colourful description of his first encounter with Hunt:

²⁰ Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 236.

²¹ Thompson, 'Romantic Oratory', 539. The phenomenon of the so-called 'cult of personality' has been widely discussed in literary studies as well as other disciplines and all over the world, particularly in the context of current Russian discourse. Many scholars have focused upon the role of male political leaders and their influence over their followers – specifically, the ways in which such individuals managed to sustain their fame as well as the effects of their influence over time. For a definition of the cult of personality in a specifically European context and during the Romantic period, see, for example, Gregory Maerts, *Literature and the Cult of Personality: Essays on Goethe and His Influence* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2017).

His eyes were blue or light grey – not very clear, nor quick, but rather heavy; except as I afterwards had opportunities for observing, when he was excited in speaking: at which times they seemed to distend and protrude; and if he worked himself furious, as he sometimes would, they became blood-streaked, and almost started from their sockets. Then it was that the expression of his lip was to be observed – the kind smile was exchanged for the curl of scorn, or the curse of indignation. His voice was bellowing: his face swollen and flushed: his grip[p]ed hand beat as if it were to pulverise; and his whole manner gave token of a painful energy, struggling for utterance.²²

Hunt attributed one's success in the art of oratory to the performativity of one's speech. He generated mystical effects in the style of plays that were staged at the theatre. He used very evocative, provocative language – but stopped short of inciting violence. Hunt knew that the line between words and actions was a very thin one, especially when addressing large mobs who had been deprived of their rights and were oppressed by civil and social restrictions. When delivering his speeches, Hunt adopted 'a new form of disciplined and defiant public display, a people's ceremonial which, having quickly invented its own ritual and tradition, enabled the radicals to challenge the establishment for control of public space'.²³

Hunt had visited Manchester before – prior to the events of Peterloo. Word of his esteemed reputation as a rhetorician had reached local radical reformers, who invited him to speak in Northern England. While local crowds in the Midlands were excited to receive

²² Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, 2 vols (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1844), 1, 16.

²³ John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1996), 41.

a visit from Hunt, his journey was regarded as being very suspicious by the police and the local authorities. A jubilant crowd immediately applauded Hunt's call for 'Liberty or Death!' on his arrival in town. He visited Manchester's Theatre Royal while in the area, but his presence was not welcomed by officers who claimed that Hunt refused to stand when 'God Save the King' was played as he ought to have done according to societal conventions.²⁴ Subsequently, the theatre was closed for a number of days; the authorities feared that a riot may be started as a result of Hunt's presence.

The success of Hunt's first expedition beyond London led to a subsequent invitation being extended to him on behalf of the Manchester Patriotic Union to chair a large meeting that was due to take place in August 1819. Hunt enthusiastically accepted the offer in the hopes that the assembly would prove to be the largest that had ever been organised. On the day in question, the radical Hunt – who wore an eye-catching white hat – was ready to address his rhetoric regarding liberty and rights to all of the unrepresented classes of society who had peacefully attended the meeting at St Peter's Field. Using the language of the people, together with a rich repertoire of symbols, ritual and iconography, Hunt was prepared to perform – with the support of the local representatives and an exuberant crowd. Banners, slogans, dresses, and melodies all played their part in the pacifistic proceedings: 'Excitement was generated through the lively interaction between orators and the crowd, a complex mutual relationship of expectation, performance and response'.²⁵

Unfortunately, Hunt's speech was never heard that day. Just after the opening

²⁴ For the full details of the episode, see Reid, *Peterloo*, 157-64, and James A. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 155.

²⁵ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, 46.

ceremony had commenced, the cavalry charged at the crowd, following the orders of the local magistrates. At least fifteen people from the crowd were killed and many hundreds were injured. Hunt was arrested together with the other leaders who had stood upon the platform with him. The infantry, meanwhile, dispersed the members of the peaceful gathering. The subsequent trial proved to be pivotal to the events of 1819 and the period more broadly. Following an examination of whether the assembly ought to be regarded as being lawful or seditious, the gathering at Peterloo was labelled an illegal meeting. The jury found all of the radical speakers guilty: Henry Hunt, Samuel Bamford, Joseph Johnson, John Knight, and Joseph Healy.²⁶

At St Peter's Field in January 1819, the significance of the meeting was conveyed 'not by what was said but by what was displayed' on stage. This was because, during such large-scale assemblies, although the speakers' words could not always be heard clearly by the audience, the performative apparatus – much like the properties or 'props' that may be used in a theatrical show – could perhaps convey even more than the speech itself. As reported in the government-financed *New Times*, Hunt's entrance onto the stage during the winter of 1819 day was echoed by his performance the following summer:

He was surrounded by an immense mob, and preceded by the Jacobin Red Cap, the miserable harbinger of so many murderers in France, and by a flag bearing the too significant inscription of '*The Rights of Man*'. We shall waste few words on the other incidents on the day; but these circumstances are so degrading to Englishmen, that we blush to find they did not excite the instant indignation of the lowest of the Mob! What! Are Englishmen, born under the nobles Constitution in the world, to seek the signs and emblems of their liberty from

²⁶ Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 66.

France in her infamous and degraded state? Is this a national, a patriotic feeling?²⁷

The symbols that were displayed during the assembly became as dangerous as the words that were spoken there. In particular, the ‘cap of liberty’ – that was associated with the French Revolution (and known as the famous *bonnet rouge*) – was regarded as the most prominent symbol of popular radicalism in the critical year of 1819. The decision to display this specific emblem at St Peter’s Field was a calculated one on the part of the attendees and organisers. In doing so, they collectively staked a claim to the public space, asserting the right of free expression and assembly in spite of the prohibitive laws of the period. Moreover, by linking such an icon to Hunt’s performative speech about liberty, the radicals openly challenged the local authorities by hinting at their potentially threatening revolutionary intent by means of a symbol.

However, although the symbols that were adopted by the audience often seemed to send threatening messages while being harmless from a physical point of view, the possibility of people becoming violent and carrying arms during such assemblies was an all too real one. As a consequence, in order to prevent dangerous events from taking place, Hunt issued a firm command that radicals were to attend the meeting in Manchester unarmed on 16 August 1819. As noted by James A. Epstein, the collective decision to display the cap of liberty was one that ‘became inextricably linked to both the politics of public space and the politics of gender’.²⁸

As well as Hunt, many women attended the meeting at St Peter’s Field. As acknowledged by many scholars today, the role of women in British politics of the

²⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁸ Ibidem.

Romantic period has proven to be pivotal to societal reform.²⁹ Women played an important role within the Manchester reform movement; thirty-seven female reform societies were established in Stockport alone between 1794 and 1823.³⁰ These women marched with banners in order to support their radical male representatives, uttering slogans which still sound very modern today: ‘Unity and Strength’; ‘Liberty and Fraternity’; ‘Parliaments Annual’; ‘Suffrage Universal’.³¹

These women also developed their own art of oratory in support of civil rights for all. Their presence at the meeting in Manchester represented a new ‘female engagement with politics’ transgressing the traditional gender code in terms of behaviour, public display and independence.³² As levels of access to education had improved, and because learning had become available to a growing group of people, elocutionary training had also reached the female community.

Women from a range of socio-economic classes, from the middle to the working classes, met in female book clubs and other such spaces in order to discuss contemporary issues. Servants and artisans gathered for workshops in which the act of reading aloud was a shared activity – both as a source of entertainment and as a tool of upwards social mobility – thanks to improved access to learning and education. Because the art of oration was a key part of literacy in this period, reading and speaking were not mutually exclusive acts but, rather, interdependent ones that could be advantageous in several contexts. During the first half of 1819, in addition to supporting the reform movement, women

²⁹ See M. Bush, ‘The Women at Peterloo: The Impact of Female Reform on the Manchester Meeting on 16 August 1819’, *History* 89, no. 294 (2004): 209-32.

³⁰ Alison Morgan, *Ballads and Songs of Peterloo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2018), 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

³² Bush, ‘The Women at Peterloo’, 211, 214.

from labouring backgrounds – as well as the middle class – even established their own reform societies and female unions.

The prevailing opinion of the time was that the notion of women being associated or involved with the public sphere in any way was dangerous as well as ridiculous. Nonetheless, the engagement of women with social and political issues increased the scale and impact of the reform movement and the mass meeting forum in particular. As Belchem remarks, ‘women were enrolled in a special female reform society, entering the public arena to pledge support for universal manhood suffrage through the rhetoric of manhood and domestic responsibility, the invocation of a “natural” order threatened by economic change and adversity’.³³

By the middle of 1819, the sheer number of public meetings that were taking place across the country, and that were being supported and attended by women, was causing great alarm among the authorities.³⁴ In fact, the Female Society actively took part in the demonstrations at St Peter’s Fields alongside Henry Hunt in a highly provocative way. Dressed in white clothes, these women carried banners that bore messages such as ‘Let us Die Like Man and Not Be Sold Like Slave’ and, on the back of them, ‘Liberty is the Birthright of Man’.³⁵

Alongside Hunt and female reformers, many others acted as advocates for the labouring classes at St Peter’s Field. Local politicians, representatives of the unions, and young radicals – despite having experienced different levels of education and occupying a variety of roles – were united by their desire for reform. The activities of John Knight,

³³ Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, 46.

³⁴ Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), 169-70.

³⁵ Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 85.

a local reformer from Lancashire, were constantly being monitored by spies. Knight had been committed to universal suffrage and the rights of the labouring classes since the 1790s. He had already attended numerous meetings in taverns and other public spaces in order to collect petitions that were to be presented to the House of Commons.

Knight was friends with John Saxton and Samuel Bamford – both of whom represented local townships. Bamford was particularly active and instrumental in the formation of the Middleton Hampden Club as he had received a ‘tolerable education’; he was nominated as their secretary. As a result of securing this position, he was chosen to be the representative who would attend the radical meetings in London. It was at one of these meetings that Knight met Henry Hunt.

As well as local representatives, a younger and much more radical faction existed in the Manchester and Lancashire districts. This group comprised working men such as John Bagguley, John Johnston, and Samuel Drummond. Throughout the latter part of 1816 and into 1817, Bagguley travelled from town to town across the districts that surrounded Manchester in order to speak directly with manufacturing workers outside the more sober atmosphere of the Hampden Clubs. His speech was very powerful and had a striking effect on his audiences; he gave hope to people who were in distress. Together with Johnston and Drummond, Bagguley could encourage groups of up to 2,000 people to gather around him.

Unlike some speakers, though, Bagguley addressed his audiences using the rhetoric of violence and revolution rather than the peaceful language of lawful change that could be heard in town. As a result, by the beginning of 1817 growing numbers of both working and unemployed men were being drawn to his meetings – as were a significant number of government spies. Reformers like Knight also joined Bagguley and his friends at these meetings. The differences between the two men’s rhetorical

approaches could, though, be clearly perceived. Bagguley, Drummond and Johnston were soon incarcerated; they did not attend the meeting in Manchester.

On 16 August 1819, men, women and children – all of whom were cheerful and well-dressed – joined peacefully together at St Peter’s Field in order to listen to Henry Hunt’s speech, accompanied by music and colourful banners. Bamford and his fellow radicals had transformed ‘the mass demonstration into a carnival of prefigurative reversal, a rich counter-statement to the rituals of loyalism’.³⁶ A crowd of 60,000 people had gathered there to demand reforms regarding social and civil rights. This scene was not one in which the art of rhetoric was showcased at its finest; this had, though, been achieved in other places and in different circumstances.

The powerful call for human and social rights that this movement represented has not been silenced since. Indeed, it is this enduring spirit of reform that has prompted the modern celebrations of the bicentenary of this important nineteenth-century event. Mike Leigh was the director and screenwriter of a film adaptation, *Peterloo*, which was released in 2019. Leigh felt that this significant historical event needed to be adapted for modern audiences because he had personally been struck by its ever-increasing contemporary relevance.

In his foreword to Jacqueline Riding’s book, Leigh says that ‘despite the spread of universal suffrage across large parts of the globe – poverty, inequality, suppression of press freedom, indiscriminate surveillance and attacks on legitimate protest by brutal regimes are all on the rise’.³⁷ Therefore, in the process of rediscovering past events that centred upon public marches and protests against the suppression of civil rights, we are

³⁶ Ibid., 83.

³⁷ Mike Leigh, ‘Foreword’, in Riding, *Peterloo*, xi.

all encouraged – indeed, compelled – to reconsider the strategies that are still being adopted by public demonstrators to this day: public speeches, banners, and slogans, for example. The music that is often played in such contexts today is very similar to that which provided the backdrop to the events at St Peter’s Field in 1819.

Moreover, the rhetoric that was used by speakers in Manchester two hundred years ago still forms part of our modern vocabulary when talking about public protests for civil rights, freedom and equality. As Nicholas Rogers asserts in his review to the movie, ‘*Peterloo* in the Age of Brexit’, Leigh embraces the challenge of filming working-class history from an at once economic and ideological point of view.³⁸ The director emphatically highlights the factory background and openly sympathises with the lowest classes and their protests.

Focusing on dialogues and debates instead of plot and action, Mike Leigh stresses the importance of public speeches and the art of oratory in the context of Peterloo. Pubs, open fields, men’s clubs and female assemblies are just some of the significant locations that we encounter before witnessing the final scene of massacre: the murder of innocent and peaceful people at St Peter’s Fields. Furthermore, public spaces are portrayed alongside those of the private sphere; the union of factory workers, mothers and young soldiers who have returned from the battlefields of Waterloo conveys the true meaning of the protest.

That which we read in history books about the Peterloo Massacre – namely, about the speeches, the forms of protest, the peaceful spirit of reform, and the violent acts of repression – still affects us deeply in terms of what we personally experience, witness,

³⁸ Nicholas Rogers, ‘Filming *Peterloo* in the Age of Brexit’, *Labour / Le Travail* 84 (2019), 333-41.

and see today in footage of the countless protests that continue to take place globally in order to demand equality and social justice. We are engaged in a long-lasting fight against discrimination – against prejudice towards members of our communities on the bases of their religious, sexual or cultural backgrounds.

The large-scale demonstrations that took place in Hong Kong in 2019 involved hundreds of citizens who, while protesting against a controversial extradition bill, were assaulted by the police. Similar struggles in response to racism took place in the United States in 2020, followed by mass protests all around the country and, indeed, at an international level. These are just some examples of how the events of Peterloo remain pertinent to us today. They remind us that we need to continue to revisit the past in order to understand – and to improve – the social relations of the present.