

Preface: Imprinting Anglo-Italian Relations in *The Liberal*

When the first issue of *The Liberal* was published on 10 October 1822, the periodical faced a very hostile reception and became the overnight foe of the conservative British press, which foresaw – and indeed wished for – the imminent cessation of its circulation. The publication was mainly considered by its critics as a suspicious political project, especially because the three founders of the journal, namely Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron and Leigh Hunt, were all well-known and controversial figures, members of the so-called ‘Pisan circle’, a community of liberal writers who advocated cultural and social reform. Even though *The Liberal* was addressed to a British readership, it was conceived entirely in Italy, a country that played a crucial role in the definition of the journal’s aims and themes, thus becoming a symbolic as well as a geographical space where a new vision of society and a new understanding of the role of literature within society can be born and developed.

The journal was indeed short lived: the last issue appeared in July 1823, just nine months after the first. This unfortunate outcome was largely perceived as the result of both the unwarranted hostility of its adversaries and the inherent weakness of the project. The judgement of a sympathetic reader such as John Galt, Lord Byron’s biographer, might be considered exemplary in this respect: “The Liberal [...] disappointed not merely literary men in general, but even the most special admirers of the talents of the contributors. [...] But the main cause of the failure was the antipathy formed and fostered against it before it appeared. It was cried down, and it must be acknowledged that it did not much deserve a better fate”.¹ The uproar caused by its publication was followed by a

1 John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), 270–271.

long period of semi-oblivion in which the journal was hastily dismissed by many scholars as an ambitious but experimental literary project that was doomed to fail from the outset for political and cultural reasons. In 1960, William H. Marshall published a ground-breaking monograph dedicated entirely to *The Liberal*: its history, context and contributors. In his seminal study, Marshall insisted that the journal's literary achievement, despite some undeniable shortcomings, was not to be dismissed as a literary failure but, on the contrary, he argued that more scrutiny was due in order to better understand the cultural project conceived by its authors.² Marshall's pioneering work has been followed in more recent years by other scholars, who have engaged with *The Liberal* consistently and far from dismissively, providing insightful discussions of its most significant literary and political features.³

The specially commissioned essays featured in this volume pursue the same line of enquiry and investigate *The Liberal* from several critical and contextual perspectives: from the problematic conception of such a periodical and its short and difficult life to its relationship with the Italian environment, and its reception by the British public then and now. They will also offer analyses of some of the main contributions

2 William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt, and The Liberal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 212–213.

3 Caroline Franklin, "Cosmopolitanism and Catholic Culture: Byron, Italian Poetry, and *The Liberal*", in *British Romanticism and Italian Literature: Translating, Reviewing, Rewriting*, ed. Laura Bandiera and Diego Saglia (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2005), 255–268; Jonathan Gross, "Byron and *The Liberal*: Periodical as Political Posture", *Philological Quarterly*, Fall, 72, no. 4 (1993), 471–485; Daisy Hay, "Liberals, Liberales and The Liberal: A Reassessment", *European Romantic Review*, 19, no. 4 (2008), 307–320; Nikki Hessel, "Elegiac Wonder and Intertextuality in the *Liberal*", *Romanticism*, 18, no. 3 (2012), 239–249; Maria Schoina, "Byron and *The Liberal*: A Reassessment", *Literaria Pragensia* 23, no. 46 (Dec. 2013), 23–37; Maria Schoina, *Romantic 'Anglo-Italians': Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Jane Stabler, "Religious Liberty in the 'Liberal', 1822–23", in *Branch: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* (Web: https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=jane-stabler-religious-liberty-in-the-liberal); Lisa Vargo, "Writing for The Liberal", in *Mary Shelley: Her Circle and Her Contemporaries*, ed. L. Adam Mekler and Lucy Morrison (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 131–149.

to the journal and the role of Italian culture and art in relation to the English politics of the time. The contentious nineteenth century reception of the periodical will be taken as the starting point for a broader discussion on the Romantic understanding of Liberalism and how it might be relevant to contemporary political journalism.

The volume opens with an introduction by Lilla Maria Crisafulli providing a detailed survey of the Italian context that framed the publication of *The Liberal*. Italian history, its political tensions, its literature of the present and of the past greatly influenced the vision and the content of the periodical, conceived in Italy but printed and circulated in Britain. Crisafulli carries out a comprehensive exploration of the debate surrounding the Italian political unrest and the dense cultural exchange of English and European travellers with Italian intellectuals and academics testified by the important translations of Italian classics, such as Vittorio Alfieri's poetry and Luigi Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*. The famous Pisan Circle, formed by the Shelleys, Byron and Hunt, belonged to a transnational entourage gathering Italian and European intellectuals. Within this circle, the role played by the likes of Francesco Pacchiani, Giovanni Rosini, Andrea Vaccà, and the literary salons animated by Sophie Caudeiron, M.me Beaucler and Elena Mastiani cannot be overlooked and must be considered an essential aspect of the lively cultural environment with which the English Romantics associated in Pisa during the 1820s. The fruitful exchange between English and European culture thus developed inspired and stimulated the literary and political ideals transfused in *The Liberal*.

After Crisafulli's introduction to the volume with its wide-ranging contextual reconstruction, Franca Della Rosa's essay opens a series of contributions dedicated to specific themes and features of the journal. It provides an analysis of the ways in which its adversaries weaponised the perceived 'Cockney' imprint of the journal in their reaction to the first issue in 1822. Relying on recent scholarship that has highlighted the ambitious radical political agenda underlying the Hunt-Byron-Shelley editorial enterprise, Della Rosa focuses on the changing semantics of the notions of *liberal/liberalism* in relation to an expanding international debate. She questions the inflections in the use of the term both in the periodical – particularly in Leigh Hunt's 'Preface' – and in related literature, including a group of pamphlets produced in 1822 in response

to its appearance: *A Critique on "The Liberal", The Illiberal! Verse and Prose from the North and The London Liberal*. While *The Illiberal!* published an acrid review of the journal in the form of a short dramatic piece attributed to William Gifford epitomizing the hostility *The Liberal* had to face in its short lifespan, the *Blackwood's Magazine* (12: 1822) launched a most vicious attack on Hunt's story 'The Florentine Lovers', providing an ideal case study of the virulence of the criticism levelled against Hunt and his friends. Such a scathing assault targeted Hunt's jovial celebration of love as a new, alleged abuse of the Italian literary tradition on the part of the author of *The Story of Rimini*, who on this occasion had reworked an Italian source, from Marco Lastri's *L'osservatore fiorentino*. The article's conclusion, in a crescendo of bigotry and class prejudice, questions the right of the "Cockney" author to treat the theme of love and passion that should be the preserve of noblemen and chastises him as "an unauthorized, uncredentialed, and unwarranted intruder" who had the presumption of putting his "Cockney feet" upon a "ground" – the ground of high culture and love literature – that he is not entitled to access due to its lowly social extraction.

In the following contribution, Lilla Maria Crisafulli explores the political and philosophical features of a transnational publication such as *The Liberal* and the special role played by Shelley in shaping such a challenging initiative. Discussing the reception of the journal in the hostile English press and the implications of its title, Crisafulli focuses on *The Liberal's* relationship with the Italian political and cultural background, discussing the journal's significance as an instrument of trans-cultural dialogue and the ideological (as well as symbolical) dichotomy between the 'South' and the 'North', as outlined in the periodical's subtitle: *Verse and Prose from the South*. An in-depth analysis of the inner dynamics of the activity of the "Triumvirate" formed by the three co-founders follows, where Crisafulli offers innovative insights into the individual contributions of Shelley, Byron and Hunt, and the ways in which the journal reflects the different principles, ideals and personalities of each of them. The final section of this dense essay is dedicated to Shelley's leading role in steering and shaping the project until his death, just before the publication of the first issue in 1822.

The role played by Leigh Hunt in the genesis of *The Liberal* is investigated by Serena Baiesi, who tracks Hunt's preceding and

subsequent editorial activity. In fact, well before embarking on his travels throughout Italy, the radical editor and writer had become extremely competent in navigating the publishing market, thanks to his successful editorship of *The Examiner*, *The Reflector* and *The Indicator* – amongst the most renowned periodicals of the time. After providing a comprehensive overview of Hunt’s long-lasting editorial career – with specific reference to each of the periodicals that he edited and to which he contributed – Baiesi’s chapter discusses his role in *The Liberal*, his contribution to it, and his responsibility for its brief success – as well as its cessation.

Leigh Hunt’s role is also at the centre of Timothy Webb’s essay, which draws attention to the “Letters from Abroad” included in each volume of the journal. Together, the four letters amount to 80 pages and constitute a significant contribution to our understanding of the attitude of Protestant English travellers in Northern Italy in the 1820s. Certain features of the letters, Webb argues, are worth observing in some detail especially because Hunt’s writing here seems to move across the boundaries between different genres and produce texts that are difficult to categorise under a single generic label. Although we can understand the “Letters” as belonging to travel writing, they are indeed heavily based on Hunt’s own personal correspondence, and Webb successfully argues that they can also be read as a selective guidebook for English travellers in Italy.

Fabio Liberto discusses the ways in which the representation of Italian society and culture in *The Liberal* becomes a means to indirectly promote the ideals of political reform that the editors and contributors advocated for their own country. Although the lack of planning that characterised the short life of the periodical is perhaps undeniable, the interest for the Italian reality could be legitimately considered, in Liberto’s view, the unifying feature of *The Liberal* as a coherent cultural project that critics have often failed to acknowledge. Such a project was based on the construction of Italy as a symbolical dimension of potential change and otherness, a real and metaphorical space from which the founders could pursue their strategy aimed at securing “new friends to the cause of liberty” and progress. The two articles of Italian subject that Mary Shelley contributed to the journal (‘A Tale of the Passions’ and ‘Giovanni Villani’) provide an exemplary case study in this respect.

Thematically concerned with questions of partisanship and political unity, death and immortality, predestined love and nostalgic and elegiac feelings, they appear particularly relevant to the consolidation of the Italian and cosmopolitan leitmotif within *The Liberal*.

Turning the attention to Byron's contribution to the journal, Maria Schoina dedicates her essay to the poet's translation of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*. Schoina's essay efficaciously re-assesses the dynamic of Pulci's appearance in *The Liberal* (original and translated) by investigating the complex ways in which Byron's literary sensibility and political thinking feed into one of his key contributions to the journal, namely, his translation of the first canto of *Morgante Maggiore*. Byron's re-discovery of Pulci in 1820 coincides with his own revisionist project in poetry, one which commanded experimentation, cross-cultural mediation, compositional license and a freedom of style. As Schoina argues, a careful reading of Byron's translation in the light of its original reveals several important facts about the poet's stylistic interventions and innovations, as well as his attitude towards the Italian literary tradition.

Still focusing on Byron, Gioia Angeletti investigates his political motives for publishing *The Liberal* and his links with the movement for Italian independence and the Carbonari. Angeletti's essay offers an innovative evaluation of the relationship between the editorial enterprise, the poet's involvement in Italian politics and his desire to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the British public. Byron's literary contributions – especially the epigrams on Lord Castlereagh, “Letter to the Editor of ‘My grandmother’s Review’”, “Southeogony” and a few minor pieces attributed to him – are here examined in the light of Byron's initial enthusiasm and later disenchantment with the periodical, as it emerges from the letters and journals he wrote between 1821 and 1823. Byron's gradual disaffection with the journal – Angeletti argues – cannot be dissociated from his parallel progressive estrangement from the Italian political situation.

Elena Spandri turns her attention to the treatment of the Italian arts and politics in William Hazlitt's contribution to *The Liberal*. William Hazlitt was asked to contribute by the London-based editor John Hunt after Shelley's death, and he accepted on the grounds of his deep-rooted ideal of a republic of letters, in which shared literary interests and principles were expected to transcend class divisions and political affiliations.

By consequence, Spandri analyses Hazlitt's most significant contributions to the journal – the two essays “On the Spirit of Monarchy” and “My First Acquaintance with Poets” – which seem to articulate a controversial and somewhat anti-Shelleyan discourse on the ‘Liberalism’ of the creative imagination, and on the possibility for contemporary poets to work as the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” the way they had done in the post-revolutionary radical years.

The last contribution of the volume features an interview by Carlotta Farese with the British journalist Benjamin Ramm who was the protagonist of an attempt to re-launch *The Liberal* (2004–2012) as a new magazine advocating “a renaissance in liberal politics and the liberal arts” and openly aiming to “rehabilitate Romantic Liberalism”. The interview articulates a reflection on the continuing relevance to contemporary society and politics of crucial aspects of the original *Liberal*, on the relationship between the contemporary periodical and its nineteenth-century predecessor and the reasons for the eventual failure of both enterprises.

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