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'Knowledge is Power': Literature, Invention, Radical Thinking at the London Mechanics' Institution

Luisa Calè

On the occasion of the bicentenary of the London Mechanics' Institution, this introduction goes back to the Baconian motto 'Knowledge is Power' adopted by the early proponents of mechanics' education to reconstruct the place and function of literature in mechanic invention, practical education, and useful knowledge, against the backdrop of its emergence as an autonomous discipline of the creative imagination. Analysis of different published versions of George Birkbeck's speech on the laying of the first stone of the lecture room in December 1824 reveals the precarious status of literature in the mechanics' 'Temple of Reason' under construction: foregrounded in one version, excluded from another. Why? This intervention explores what is at stake in its inclusion or exclusion then and now, in the current predicament of the arts and humanities locally, nationally, and internationally.



Imagine being transported to the year 1823, joining the mechanics' institution movement, and participating in discussions about the right to education. What does London look like in 1823? In this issue of 19 we revisit the early history of the London Mechanics' Institution (LMI) two hundred years ago. Our approach reverses an experiment in prophetic writing, *Revelations of the Dead-Alive* (1824). Published anonymously, but written in the first person by John Banim, *Revelations* relates a prophetic experience produced through exercises in 'Self-Control' aimed at acquiring 'habits of dying' and mastering a condition of near death for 'one hundred and ninety-eight days and a quarter':

For every day I saw a year of time; so that when I came to life again, I had observed what was and is to be in the lapse of one hundred and ninety-eight years and a quarter; a year for each day.¹

Adding up the numbers, this prophetic stride into the future takes Banim to 2023. This thought experiment in anticipatory futurity activates a well-established long eighteenth-century trope harnessed for the purpose of satire and admonishment. Nicholas Halmi argues that critical points of view from the future act as dystopian scenarios, 'negative stimuli to the realization of a future that defines itself by its discontinuity with the past'.² At the beginning of her study, *Print and Performance in the 1820s*, Angela Esterhammer uses Banim to posit 'being there, circa 1824', since the early nineteenth-century traveller to the twenty-first century

relates what he learned from conversations with twenty-first-century writers, artists, and scientists, and from his research in the twenty-first-century British Library, about how the history of his own century was recorded. Satirizing the literature, theatre, art, science, politics, and fashions of 1820s Britain from the imagined vantage point of 2023, *Revelations* speculates about a possible future.

Banim's anticipatory futurity not only satirizes, but also 'describes and performs' its own time, and thus offers a useful point of entry for understanding the 1820s.³ But how does 1823 speak to the predicament of English in the 2020s?

Taking up discontinuity as a mode of self-reflection, this issue of 19 works at the opposite end of that dynamic, maintaining the tension between the now and the then,

¹ [John Banim], *Revelations of the Dead-Alive* (printed for Simpkin and Marshall, 1824), p. 16.

² Nicholas Halmi, 'Ruins Without a Past', *Essays in Romanticism*, 18.1 (2010), pp. 7–27 (p. 11), doi:[10.3828/EIR.18.1.1](https://doi.org/10.3828/EIR.18.1.1).

³ Angela Esterhammer, *Print and Performance in the 1820s: Improvisation, Speculation, Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 1.

thinking about the historical disciplinarity of literature among the disciplines, and looking back to 1823 from our 2020s vantage point. Working against a continuum of history written by the victors, as Walter Benjamin argued, we take up the dialectical power of the ruins of the future.⁴ The juxtaposition of 1823 with 2023 offers a series of dialectical images, in which the then and the now acquire a new legibility. At stake is the claim that ‘knowledge is power’: what its social and political dynamics are, which disciplines have a place in practical education, and what it means to include or exclude literature from the syllabus. How did the LMI founders imagine the future? What future did literature have in 1823? How can we write back, revisit our present, and imagine a future for literature in and after 2023?

This issue of 19 brings together researchers trained in the field of English literature to reconstruct and reclaim the place of literature within the LMI in the 1820s and 1830s, unpacking what the evidence of literature contributes to our understanding of the early networks and ideals shaping the community of writers and reformers gathered around co-founder George Birkbeck and his wife Anna. All but the first two contributors are students, staff, and alumni of Birkbeck English. We commemorate and celebrate English at a moment of disciplinary change after the 200th anniversary of the London Mechanics’ Institution, now rebranded Birkbeck, University of London.

‘Knowledge is power’ is the opening claim of the ‘Institutions for Instruction of Mechanics. Proposals for Forming a London Mechanics Institute’, published in the seventh number of *Mechanics’ Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal, & Gazette* (1823), then adopted as a motto on the frontispiece added when the ephemeral weekly numbers of the periodical were collected in volume format.⁵ The volume’s preface cites ‘Dr Birkbeck’s Inaugural Address to the London Mechanic’s Institution’, offering ‘the most valuable gift which the hand of Science has yet offered to the artizan’.⁶ The Baconian motto returns in a speech delivered by George Birkbeck at the ceremony to mark the building of the first lecture theatre in December 1824:⁷

⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Convoluten N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’, in *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 456–88 (pp. 462–63).

⁵ Francis Place claims the notice and preface for the volume were published on 28 February 1824. See Francis Place Papers (FPP), XXXV, London, British Library (BL), Add MS 27823, fol. 284. In August 1825 Francis Place looked back to the publication of ‘a weekly paper in octavo called the Mechanics Magazine [...] a work on art and mechanical science’ (fol. 240).

⁶ ‘Preface’, *Mechanic’s Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal, & Gazette*, 1 (August 1823–March 1824), pp. iii–iv (p. iv), hereafter abbreviated *MM*. The spelling *Mechanic’s*, which appears in the first volume, changes to *Mechanics’ Magazine* from the second, here adopted throughout.

⁷ The currency of this Baconian motto in the 1820s and 1830s may be associated with lawyer, legal reformer, and writer Basil Montagu, who mentioned it in *The Private Tutor; or, Thoughts upon the Love of Excelling and the Love of Excellence* (printed for Hunter, 1820), pp. 96–100. Montagu edited Bacon’s works (1825–34) and lectured on this topic at the LMI

Now we have founded an edifice for the diffusion and advancement of human knowledge. Now have we begun to erect a Temple, wherein man shall extend his acquaintance with the universe of mind, and shall acquire the means of enlarging his dominion over the universe of matter. In this spot hereafter the charms of Literature shall be displayed, and the powers of Science shall be unfolded, to the most humble inquirers; for, to ‘the Feast of Reason’ which will be here prepared, the invitation shall be as unbounded as the region of intellect.

For an undertaking so vast in its design, and so magnificent in its object, (nothing short, indeed, of the moral and intellectual amelioration and aggrandisement of the human race), the blessing of Heaven, I humbly trust, will not be implored in vain. If in this Institution we seek to obey the mandate which has gone forth, that knowledge *shall be increased*; if we act in obedience to the injunction, that in all our gettings we should get understanding; if we succeed in proving, that for the existence of the mental wilderness, the continuance of which we all deeply deplore, we ought to blame the culture, not the soil; if by rendering man more percipient of the order, harmony, and benevolence, which pervade the universe, we more effectually ‘assert eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to man;’ and if thus we shall be the happy means of rendering it palpable, that the immortal essence within us, when freed from the deformity of ignorance and vice, has been elevated in the express image of God — then may we confidently hope that Omniscience will favourably behold our rising structure, and that in its future progress, Omnipotence, without whose assistance all human endeavours are vain, will confer upon us a portion of his powers.

Whilst I remind you that the illustrious Bacon, long ago, maintained that ‘knowledge is power,’ I may apprise you that it has, since his time, been established, that knowledge is wealth — is comfort — is security — is enjoyment — is happiness. It has been found so completely to mingle with human affairs that it renders social life more endearing; has given to morality more uprightness; and, politically, has produced more consistent obedience; it takes from adversity some of its bitterness, and enlarges the sphere, as well as augments the sweetness, of every laudable gratification; and, lastly, unquestionably one of its brightest influences — it becomes at

in 1831 and 1833. In 1831 he is recorded lecturing on ‘Lord Bacon’s Advocacy of the Diffusion of Knowledge [...] the remainder of Mr Montagu’s course on Lord Bacon’s Advocacy of the Diffusion of Knowledge, to be delivered on the 9th & 23rd of this month’s.’ See London Mechanics’ Institute, Minutes of Quarterly General Meetings, 4 vols (1824–1858), University of London, Birkbeck Library Archives, GB 1832 BBK 1/2/2, vol. 2 (1831–40), pp. 33–34; in 1833, he is thanked ‘for his lectures on Knowledge is power’ (vol. 2, p. 159).

once an avenue and a guide to that ‘temple which is not made with hands, eternal in the heavens’.⁸

After admitting ‘the charms of Literature’ and ‘the powers of Science’ to the temple of knowledge and ‘the Feast of Reason’ offered by the new lecture theatre, Birkbeck identified the new institution’s mission with the words of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, to ‘assert Eternal Providence | And justify the ways of God to man’, a promise of happiness that consists in economic, moral, political, and spiritual advancement.⁹ Birkbeck’s poetic choice in addressing ‘practical men’ demonstrates Milton’s circulation and appeal across social boundaries.

Commitment to reading among the working classes is exemplified by one of the founders of the LMI, the tailor Francis Place, who kept a library above the premises of his shop in Charing Cross, and whose papers are a primary source for the institution’s early history, in whose language was detected an attachment to Milton’s style.¹⁰ Shoemaker turned bookseller James Lackington preferred investing in a copy of Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, rather than dinner, since the text would offer sustenance for life.¹¹ By the 1800s J. Lackington & Co., ‘Cheapest Booksellers in the World’, promised ‘half a million volumes constantly for sale’ at the Temple of the Muses (1794–1841) in Finsbury Square,¹² where Birkbeck himself lived in the early and final stages of his

⁸ ‘London Mechanics Institution: Fourth Quarterly Meeting’, *MM*, 3 (11 December 1824), pp. 187–92 (pp. 188–89); a single-sheet letterpress version of this text, titled ‘Mechanics’ Magazine. London Mechanics’ Institution. Fourth Quarterly Meeting, 11 December 1824’, is inserted in FPP, XXXVI, BL, Add MS 27824, vol. 2, no. 57. This version was reproduced as an entry for 2 December in William Hone, *The Every-Day Book; or, The Guide to the Year*, 2 vols (Tegg, [1826]), I, p. 1550; the book’s dedicatory letter to Charles Lamb is dated 5 May 1826.

⁹ *Paradise Lost*, I, 25–26.

¹⁰ ‘Characters for Charity’s Sake, No. IV: Francis Place, of Westminster, Esq.’, *European Magazine*, n.s., II (1826), pp. 227–33 (p. 229); Mary Thale, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771–1854)*, ed. by Mary Thale (Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. ix–xxxvii (p. xxxv).

¹¹ *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (printed for the author, 1791), pp. 135–36. On Lackington, see Frances M. Honour, ‘James Lackington, Proprietor, Temple of the Muses’, *Journal of Library History*, 2.3 (1967), pp. 211–24 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25540054>> [accessed 29 September 2024]; Sophie Banks, ‘James Lackington (1746–1815): “Reading and Personal Development”’, in *The History of Reading*, ed. by Shafquat Towheed and others, 3 vols (Palgrave, 2011), II: *Evidence from the British Isles c. 1750–1950*, ed. by Katie Halsey and W. R. Owens, pp. 157–74; and Corrina Readloff, ‘Paratext and Self-Promotion in the *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington, Bookseller (1791)*’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 43.2 (2020), pp. 183–201, doi:10.1111/1754-0208.12669.

¹² ‘Two Hundred Thousand Volumes upon an Average are constantly on Sale’ reads a trade card for Lackington’s catalogue dated pre-1800 (London, British Museum, Y.4.238). This claim escalates to ‘An interior view of the extensive library of Lackington, Allen & Co. Finsbury Square, London, where above half a million volumes are constantly on sale’, British Museum, Heal, 17.86 and Heal, 17.87 <<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG158211>> [accessed 29 September 2024]. ‘Cheapest Booksellers in the World’ features on the Lackington metal alloy token produced in 1794 (British Museum, 1855,1004.375).

London life.¹³ Alongside tailor Place, membership of the first committee of the LMI lists a shoemaker, a printer, a carpenter, a smith, an oilman, a coachmaker, a painter and glazier, and several engineers.¹⁴ Accounts of the institutionalization of literature tend to identify a Scottish genealogy through the teaching of rhetoric and belles-lettres by Adam Smith and Hugh Blair.¹⁵ While this tradition is likely to have been a source of inspiration and comparison for the mechanics' institute movement when Birkbeck was in Glasgow, Birkbeck's appeal to literature addresses a genealogy from below.

Yet the function of literature was problematic from the start. Another version of Birkbeck's 1824 lecture theatre speech was published in the *London Mechanics' Register*.¹⁶ The differences include blurring clear points of reference: instead of the Baconian sounding 'advancement of human knowledge', the *London Mechanics' Register* prints 'the improvement of the noblest faculties of man'; in abridging what that might mean, it omits the *Mechanics' Magazine's* reference to 'Literature'. The *London Mechanics' Register* turns Birkbeck's claim to prove that 'for the mental wilderness [...] we ought to blame the culture, not the soil' into the speculative question 'whether the barren mind [...] is to be attributed to the imperfection of the culture or the sterility of the soil'. The *London Mechanics' Register* omits Birkbeck's citation from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and paraphrases the citation from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (5. 1). The mention or omission of literature and explicit literary references from Birkbeck's speech reveals tensions between disciplines, approaches, participants, and publics involved in the education of working people. The one explicit and namechecked reference that the two versions of Birkbeck's speech share is to Francis Bacon, whose foundational role is more tangibly articulated by the *London Mechanics' Register*: 'When laying the stone, let me remind you of a sentence uttered by Lord Bacon — "Knowledge is power"'.¹⁷

¹³ Birkbeck moved to 38 Finsbury Square after his first marriage in 1806 and moved out 'after his first son and wife died. Not later than 1809' when he is recorded as Cateaton Street, now part of Gresham Street, in *Medico-Chirurgical Transactions*, I (1809), p. xiii. In 1823 he was registered at 50 Broad Street, City. He moved back to Finsbury Square in 1834, where he resided until his death in 1841. For Birkbeck's addresses, see Thomas Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool University Press, 1957), pp. 41–42, 54–55, 187; 'Public Meeting for the Establishment of the London Mechanics' Institute', *MM*, 1 (15 November 1823), pp. 177–92 (p. 189).

¹⁴ 'Public Meeting for the Establishment of the London Mechanics' Institute', p. 189.

¹⁵ Franklin E. Court, *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750–1900* (Stanford University Press, 1992). For an analysis of the distinct approaches to rhetoric and poetics, see Stefan H. Uhlig, *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Literary Historiography: The Formation of a Discipline at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

¹⁶ 'Ceremony of Laying the First Stone of the Mechanics' Theatre', *London Mechanics' Register*, 1 (4 December 1824), pp. 66–67 (p. 67); Joanna Bourke, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 31, 32.

¹⁷ 'Ceremony of Laying the First Stone', p. 67. For versions of this claim in Bacon's work ('Knowledge itself is a power whereby he knoweth'), see 'Of Heresies', in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. by Basil Montagu, 16 vols (Pickering, 1825–

The connection between reading and governance was a clear feature of the mechanics' education movement. At Anderson's Institution in Glasgow, where Birkbeck's teaching career started, his successor Andrew Ure adjoined a mechanics-led library for evening reading, which provided a model of self-governance for the institution as a whole.¹⁸ Literature and reading are central to the original knowledge infrastructure shaping the arts and sciences complex of the LMI, which included 'a library of reference, a circulating library, and a reading room', as well as 'a museum of machines, models, minerals, and natural history', and 'lectures on natural and experimental philosophy, practical mechanics, astronomy, chemistry, literature, and the arts'.¹⁹ However, a manuscript letter from a funder dated 19 November 1823 preserved among Francis Place's papers argues that 'the inadequacy of institutions to produce words of genius applies solely to literary compositions', referring explicitly to the Literary Fund, a charitable institution established in 1790 to support writers and 'advocate for the value of authorship'.²⁰ Such a claim reflects ongoing discussions about the role of institutions in the development of knowledge. Almost a decade earlier William Hazlitt had differentiated the arts and sciences in discussions about disciplinary progress. In 1814 he argued that the expectation that genius can be cultivated by rules 'confounds the fine arts with the mechanic arts, — art with science'; 'science is mechanical, and art is not, and in proportion as we rely on mechanical means, we lose the essence.'²¹ Writing in the *London Magazine* in March 1823, Thomas De Quincey drew an antithesis

36), I (1825), pp. 217–20 (p. 219). 'But yet the commandment of knowledge is higher than the commandment over the will; for it is a commandment over the reason, belief, and understanding of man, which is the highest part of the mind, and giveth law to the will itself: for there is no power on earth which setteth up a throne or chair of state in the spirits and souls of men, and in their cogitations, imaginations, opinions, and beliefs, but knowledge and learning.' See *The Two Books of Francis Lord Verulam: Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human* (Pickering, 1825), p. 98.

¹⁸ H. Brougham, *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People*, 10th edn (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825), p. 18. On Anderson's Institution established in 1798 in Glasgow in fulfilment of the will of John Anderson, which acted as a model for the mechanics' education movement, and the role played by George Birkbeck as professor of chemistry and natural philosophy (1799–1803) and his successor Andrew Ure, see John Gardner, 'A Disruptive and Dangerous Education and the Wealth of the Nation: The Early Mechanics' Institutes', in *Institutions of Literature 1700–1900: The Development of Literary Culture and Production*, ed. by Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 196–214. The foundational role of Anderson's Institution is acknowledged in 'Institutions for Instruction of Mechanics: Proposals for a London Mechanics Institute', *MM*, 1 (11 October 1823), pp. 99–102 (pp. 100–02); 'Glasgow and London Mechanics' Institutions (From the Glasgow Free Press)', *MM*, 1 (29 November 1823), pp. 213–14.

¹⁹ London Mechanics' Institution, 'Abstract of the Rules and Orders of the Society', single-sheet letterpress notice, FPP, XXXV, BL, Add MS 27823, fol. 269, reprinted in *The Globe and the Traveller*, 3 December 1823, inserted as newspaper clipping in FPP, XXXVI, BL, Add MS 27824, no. 27; 'London Mechanics' Institution', *MM*, 1 (6 December 1823), pp. 227–29 (p. 227).

²⁰ Matthew Sangster, *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period* (Palgrave, 2021), p. 179.

²¹ William Hazlitt, 'Fine Arts: Whether they are Promoted by Academies and Public Institutions', *Champion*, 28 August 1814, p. 280.

between literature and science in redefining ‘literature’, ‘in the philosophical sense’, as ‘the supreme fine art’.²² By contrast, the manuscript letter in Place’s papers separates literature from the arts, turning the distinction into a contrast between specifically literary and mechanical inventions: ‘the case with institutions for the encouragement of arts and sciences is far different’, since ‘the reading of books’ proves ‘indispensable for the artist or mechanic [...] hence a library of a literary institution may do just nothing whilst a library to a mechanical institution aided by models and the helps to ingenuity may be of the utmost service’. While ‘literature requires no tools’, institutions are key to improving the mind of artist and mechanic through a collection of models, books, and training that ‘make him an inventor in his own particular line of industry’.²³

Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster point out that the emergence of literature as a distinct domain of the creative imagination and “‘poetic disposition” coincided with the proliferation of formal and material institutions of literature’.²⁴ Whether and how to distinguish literature as an autonomous discipline is not easy to work out within networks of improvement associated with the literary and philosophical societies in the Midlands and North of England.²⁵ Yet, Mee argues that association with ‘useful knowledge’ and ‘the rise of a mechanical system of education’ prompted De Quincey to differentiate ‘literature’ from its earlier meaning of ‘books of knowledge’ in general.²⁶ De Quincey posited ‘the antithesis power and knowledge as the most philosophical expression for literature (i.e. *Literae Humaniores*) and anti-literature (i.e. *Literae didacticae* — Παιδεια)’.²⁷ Against De Quincey’s distinction between ‘literature of power’ and ‘literature of knowledge’ or ‘anti-literature’, which paved the way for the disciplinary formations identified with the ‘two cultures’ debate, Jon Klancher identifies the ‘emergence of new arts-and-sciences institutions in London’ predicated on the mutually constitutive nature of emerging divisions of knowledge.²⁸

²² Thomas De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected: No. III On Languages’, *London Magazine*, March 1823, pp. 325–35 (p. 332).

²³ FPP, XXXVI, BL, Add MS 27824, no. 19.

²⁴ Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster, ‘Introduction: Literature and Institutions’, in *Institutions of Literature 1700–1900*, ed. by Mee and Sangster, pp. 1–23 (p. 12).

²⁵ Jon Mee, *Networks of Improvement: Literature, Bodies & Machines in the Industrial Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), p. 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁷ ‘Letters to a Young Man’, p. 333.

²⁸ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1960); Jon Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1, 3, 126. On the generic meaning of *science* as ‘any knowledge acquired by study, or any skill acquired by practice’, its shift to indicating ‘natural and physical science’, and the emergence of the word *scientist*, coined by William Whewell in 1834, see Sidney Ross, ‘*Scientist*: The Story of a Word’, *Annals of Science*, 18.2 (1962), pp. 65–85, doi:10.1080/00033796200202722.

What role literature should play within ‘useful’ and ‘technical knowledge’ was a fraught question. In advocating a place for literature in the workers’ ‘Temple of Reason’, the founders of the LMI challenged the social dynamics underpinning the contrast between liberal and mechanical arts. While poetry and tales featured in the prospectus to the *Mechanics’ Magazine*, James Mussell notes that by the tenth number literature was discontinued.²⁹ Resistance to the place of literature in mechanics’ education crops up again in 1826, when Place notes: ‘had it not been for us, that Magazine would have been a work of a very different nature, and of very inferior utility: for it was suggested that it should be a mere literary miscellany.’³⁰ An article published in June 1826 in the sixth volume of the *Mechanics’ Magazine* bemoans the loss of the works of Archimedes due to ‘the barbarism or neglect of the intermediate ages’, or ‘the burning of the grand library of Alexandria, a circumstance which [...] will ever be regretted by the lovers of literature and science’.³¹ The volume’s preface, dated 1 January 1827, differentiates literature from ‘the humbler arts’, later termed ‘the arts of the workshop’, in defining the role of the art of printing in terms of the interest of the ‘man of science and philanthropist’ in preserving ‘the numerous processes of the greatest value to the arts and humanities’:

However the circulation of the works of literature may serve to exalt the minds and improve the tastes of men, [...] the page which makes one useful art better understood, or more extensively known than it was before, does more to promote the substantial welfare of nations, than any hundred pages of reasoning or of fancy that were ever printed.³²

In other words, the *Mechanics’ Magazine* too identifies the distinct domain of ‘literature’ in relation to practical knowledge and their mission: ‘to establish a free interchange of thoughts and ideas — of enquiry and information — of discoveries, inventions, and improvements, in the arts and sciences’.³³

Whether literature should be part of the founding vision for mechanics’ education is part of a broader social and political dynamic. The development of ‘habits of reading’ for workers is central to Henry Brougham’s *Practical Observations upon the Education of*

²⁹ ‘To the Mechanics of the British Empire’, *MM*, 1 (30 August 1823), p. 16; James Mussell, ‘“This is Ours and for Us”: The *Mechanic’s Magazine* and Low Scientific Culture in Regency London’, in *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Scientific Thinking*, ed. by David Clifford, Elizabeth Wadge, and Alex Warwick (Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 107–18 (p. 112), doi:[10.7135/UPO9781843317517](https://doi.org/10.7135/UPO9781843317517).

³⁰ FPP, XXXV, BL, Add MS 27823, fol. 286; ‘Preface’, *MM*, 5 (1826), pp. iii–vii (pp. iii–iv).

³¹ ‘Eminent Mechanics. — No. I. Archimedes’, *MM*, 6 (3 June 1826), p. 74.

³² ‘Preface’, *MM*, 6 (1826), pp. iii–vii (p. iv), dated 1 January 1827.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. iv, v.

the People (1825), dedicated to George Birkbeck (pp. 1, 4, 5). Responding to Brougham's pamphlet, William Grinfield summed up the function of literature as

the great engine by which all civilized governments must stand or fall [...]. But the attempt to gain the chief, if not the sole direction of this engine, as it is worked by *the people*, is no other than an attempt to gain the supreme direction of public sentiment.³⁴

Birkbeck was careful to dispel concerns about sedition resulting from the power associated with mechanics' education, claiming that knowledge 'has given to morality more uprightness; and, politically, has produced more consistent obedience'.³⁵ However, social concerns about the cultural and political implications of mechanics' education were voiced as a rationale for founding a university in London in 1825:

It occurred to several persons, when the Mechanics Institution was formed, that one consequence would be, that the labouring classes would acquire such a degree of knowledge, that those who were accustomed to be called their superiors from the adventitious circumstances of birth, wealth, and power, would no longer be able to maintain their station, unless supported by real and scientific knowledge.³⁶

To respond to the pressure, the poet Thomas Campbell led the campaign to establish a university in London, 'for effectively and multifariously teaching, examining, exercising, and rewarding with honours, in the liberal arts and sciences, the youth of our middling rich people', which included 'all between mechanics and the enormously rich'.³⁷ He undermined the distinction between trade and liberal professions, and

³⁴ E. William Grinfield, *A Reply to Mr. Brougham's 'Practical Observations upon the Education of the People: Addressed to the Working Classes and their Employers'* (printed for Rivington, 1825), pp. 4–5 (emphasis in original), discussed in Court, p. 51. On the social utility of literature, see Nicholas Hudson, 'The Social Utility of "Literature": The Genesis of a Modern Idea, 1780–1800', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 53.2 (2020), pp. 191–209, doi:10.1353/ecs.2020.0005.

³⁵ Birkbeck, 'London Mechanics Institution. Fourth Quarterly Meeting', *MM*, 3 (11 December 1824), pp. 187–92 (p. 189); on the 'torch of knowledge' leading to 'peaceful pursuits' rather than making 'men discontented and turbulent', see also 'Preface', *MM*, 4 (1825), pp. iii–vii (pp. iv, v), dated 1 November 1825; and the Francis Bacon epigraph displayed on the title page to volume 6: 'Again, for that other conceit that learning should undermine the reverence of laws and government; it is, assuredly, a mere depravation and calumny without all shadow of truth. [...] learning doth make the minds of men gentle, generous, maniable, and pliant to government; whereas ignorance makes them churlish, thwarting, and mutinous. And the evidence of time doth clear this assertion, considering that the most barbarous, rude, and unlearned times, have been most subject to tumults, seditions, and changes' (*MM*, 6 (1826), title-page epigraph).

³⁶ 'London University', *Observer*, 3 July 1825, p. 3.

³⁷ Thomas Campbell to Henry Brougham, cited in 'Varieties', *New Monthly Magazine*, March 1825, pp. 110–14 (p. 113). For the plan to establish 'one college for Science, one for Literature', see Court, p. 41.

specifically identified booksellers and printers among those benefiting from a literary education.

The print sector's stake in such an education had already been recognized through the foundation of the LMI: 'as soon as the subscription-book was opened at the Crown and Anchor Tavern', the owner of the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Observer* featured among the first and most generous subscribers to the LMI:

It is to mechanics the world is indebted for that greatest of machines the Printing Press; and that the Press should now, in return, make so liberal an effort to support the cause of the mechanics, is one of the brightest instances of good returned for good.³⁸

On 6 December 1823 the *Mechanics' Magazine* reported on the meeting held to approve the LMI's rules and orders, and mentioned that

a Mechanic, [...] who stated himself to be a bookbinder, rose. We could not at first catch the import of his observations, as he quoted many passages from Shakspeare, and several of the *poetae minores*, without much regard to any connection which one quotation might have with that which preceded or came after it.

His objective was to request an amendment to one of the laws, that 'only two of any trade could be elected on the committee'.³⁹ This attempt to harness literature to the exercise of persuasive speech documents a peculiar type of 'stylistic sociability', to use Stefan Uhlig's characterization of practical rhetoric, which consists in the 'self-fashioning of social characters'.⁴⁰ Despite the article's dismissive tone and the rejection of the bookbinder's amendment, this scene provides evidence of the widening sphere of oratory that radical networks and the mechanics' movement advocated.

In 1826 reading habits within mechanics' institutions were a key evidence base for Brougham's plan to establish a professorship of English literature at the new London University.⁴¹ Brougham sent questionnaires to mechanics' institutions and identified 'a preference for general literature over scientific books' and library privileges as a

³⁸ 'Public Meeting for the Establishment of the London Mechanics' Institute', *MM*, 1 (15 November 1823), pp. 177-92 (p. 191).

³⁹ 'London Mechanics' Institution', *MM*, 1 (6 December 1823), pp. 227-29 (p. 228).

⁴⁰ Uhlig uses this terminology in a different context in relation to Adam Smith's rhetoric (pp. 18, 20).

⁴¹ Court, p. 49. For Brougham's involvement in the founding of the London University (later UCL), see also Robert Stewart, *Henry Brougham 1778-1868: His Public Career* (Bodley Head, 1985), pp. 195-99.

motivation to join mechanics' institutions.⁴² In 1834 *Cruchley's Picture of London* enters the London Mechanics' Institution under the heading 'Literature', among publications, circulating libraries, reading rooms, the Royal Society of Literature (also founded in 1823), the Royal Institution, and the London Institution; while listing the London University and King's College under the heading 'Education'.⁴³ The LMI entry includes the aim to

diffuse a knowledge of the principles of the arts and sciences among the mechanics of the Metropolis, by means of public experimental lectures; and to afford the means of obtaining useful information by reference to a well-selected library; and the acquirement of knowledge in the arts, sciences, and languages, by means of classes, conducted upon principles of mutual instruction. (p. 147)

Thomas Kelly notes that the institution's decline between the mid-1830s and Birkbeck's death in 1841 affected the library, causing a discrepancy between demand and purchases of literary works, while also citing the committee's conclusion that the 'the decayed state of the Library is the principal cause of the decrease which has taken place in the number of Members'.⁴⁴ A fundraising initiative launched in 1844 to address 'the deteriorated state of the Library consequent on the unceasing circulation of its most popular works among a numerous and fluctuating class of readers' reaffirms the conjunction of literature and science:

The foundation of this Institution was the dawn of a new era in the moral and social history of the working-man, and a multitude of new wants sprang up, to satisfy which numerous publications devoted to literature, science and art, were produced at a cheap rate [to educate the] [...] working community.⁴⁵

After two hundred years, the dream of the library takes a different shape. Digital access has decentralized the act of reading, placing publications on the cloud and on the screen, reinventing the fight to widen participation as a right to open access pioneered by Birkbeck's award-winning Open Library of Humanities against fee-paying firewalls.

⁴² The questionnaires are deposited in the University College London Archives, SDUK/18-48/22-42/22, and discussed in Chester W. New, *The Life of Henry Brougham to 1830* (Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 341–42.

⁴³ 'Literature', *Cruchley's Picture of London*, 2nd edn (Cruchley, 1834), pp. 139–50 (p. 147); 'Education', pp. 151, 152–53.

⁴⁴ Kelly, pp. 141–43. In response to the librarian's request for 'the most modern novels &c of Bulwer, Godwin, Cooper and Marriott [Marryat], and also the Poetical works of Shelley, Scott, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey', the committee instead opted for the Modern Novelists series and the Waverley Novels (Kelly, p. 142).

⁴⁵ FPP, XXXVI, BL, Add MS 27824, no. 58, dated in handwriting 22 July 1844 on the verso.

The library as a physical space is constantly reinvented and rebuilt as a networked site of sociability.

In 2023–24 contributors to this issue of 19 have been engaging in exercises of bicentenary thinking, taking the early ideals and steps of the LMI as our starting point. For the cover image for this issue, we adopt Robert Seymour’s visual satire *The March of Intellect* (c. 1828) to capture the knowledge formations of the 1820s by means of a mechanical invention, an automaton whose crown is constituted by the architectural model of ‘London University’ and whose head is made of books captioned ‘History’, ‘Philosophy’, ‘Enquiry’ [sic], and ‘Mechanics’. Unlike De Quincey’s ‘literature of power’ and ‘literature of knowledge’, the *Mechanics’ Magazine* and the LMI understood the motto ‘Knowledge is Power’ as the empowering mutual relationship between practice and theory fostered by reading. In addressing ‘practical men’ in pursuit of ‘what is useful’, for whom to engage in mechanical invention means to ‘put their hand to the tool that is to realize’, the *Mechanics’ Magazine* cited a correspondent who claimed that ‘theory without practice is [...] unknown to and of no use to the world’ and that the *Mechanics’ Magazine* ‘would make practical men of those who before were mere theorists, and give a knowledge of theory to those who were before merely mechanical’.⁴⁶ Instead of identifying mechanical in contrast to intellectual invention, the alienated labour of the hand divorced from the mind, mechanics’ education is ‘the acquisition of knowledge, and the action and reaction of intellect’.⁴⁷ Yet couched in Seymour’s personification of mechanical learning is the fear of widening participation taking the form of an empowered crowd of workers. While Birkbeck emphasized that mechanical knowledge shapes habits of morality, productivity, and obedience, the power of mechanical knowledge supported workers in developing other networks of self-governance. Inevitably, the LMI formed figures involved in socialist halls of science in the late 1820s and 1830s.⁴⁸ These distributions of the knowledge powering the will and agency of workers are embodied in Seymour’s satirical imagination, from the mechanical automaton powering *The March of the Intellect* in the 1820s to the figure that

⁴⁶ ‘Preface’, *MM*, 3 (1824–25), pp. i–v (pp. ii, iii).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. iv.

⁴⁸ For a contrast between the technical language and ethos of the LMI compared to the more popular appeal of venues that hosted lectures and discussions about politics and religion, and socialist tea parties, see Adrian Desmond, *Reign of the Beast: The Atheist World of W. D. Saull and his Museum of Evolution* (Open Book Publishers, 2024), pp. 51, 45–46, doi:10.11647/OBP.0393; on W. D. Saull and William Lovett attending the LMI, see p. 47, 178; for socialist critiques of the “individualistic and technological focus” of the mechanics institutions [...] shunning the screaming social, political, and moral questions of the day’, see pp. 341–42. Yet, in an 1839 letter to Brougham, T. Coates writes that ‘the clergy are now openly hostile to Mech. Insts., as the seed beds of infidelity, & are founding Societies for the diffusion of Religious & Useful Knowledge under the patronage of the Bishops’ (cited in Desmond, pp. 344–45). I am grateful to Isabel Davis for bringing this book to my attention.

sums up the expanded sovereignty of the people, whose composite body is captured by means of the literary figure of the ‘political Frankenstein’.⁴⁹ ‘Knowledge is Power.’

The first section of this issue, Mechanics’ Institution Networks, reconstructs the radical agents, environments, sites, and periodical press that played a role in the shaping of the LMI. The first two articles centre two figures involved in the radical tradition underpinning working-class education, tracing political routes through radical political activism converging in the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s, but diverging in contrasting a national network of mechanics’ education taking shape in Scotland and the Midlands with a London-bound artisanal experience rooted in the Strand.

In “Operations and cooperations”: John Thelwall, George Birkbeck, and the Movement for Public Education in Britain’, **Judith Thompson** reconstructs the trajectories of radical political activist, writer, lecturer, and pedagogue John Thelwall. His association with George Birkbeck in Scotland and late-life lecturing at the LMI is set in the context of a lifelong commitment to widening access to public oratory as a political and pedagogical practice. Thelwall’s lecturing and teaching is rooted in an analysis of literature as a source for a pioneering method of elocution and speech therapy through prosody and rhythm.⁵⁰ Thompson documents Thelwall’s radical oratory models, sites, and communities, from the political debating context of the London Corresponding Society to ‘the Political Lecture-Room, Beaufort-Buildings, Strand’ in the mid-1790s,⁵¹ before meeting George Birkbeck in Glasgow in the early 1800s, and returning to London, where he set up the ‘Institution for the Cure of Impediments, Instruction of Foreigners, Improvement of Oratory and Preparation of Youth for the Higher Departments of Active Life’ (1806–20). In 1831 and 1833 Thelwall lectured at

⁴⁹ Shortshanks [Robert Seymour], *The March of Intellect* (c. 1828); and Robert Seymour, *The Political Frankenstein, Figaro in London*, 1, 21, 28 April 1832, capturing the fear of the expanded sovereignty of the people produced by the Reform Bill. For a detailed description including identification of Henry Brougham’s role, see British Museum, 1873,0712.1274 <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1873-0712-1274> [accessed 16 September 2024].

⁵⁰ On the physiology of Thelwall’s poetics and oratory, see Judith Thompson, ‘Re-Sounding Romanticism: John Thelwall and the Science and Practice of Evolution’, in *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture*, ed. by Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer (University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 21–45; Julia S. Carlson, ‘Thelwall’s Therapeutics: Scanning *The Excursion*’, in *Romantic Marks and Measures: Wordsworth’s Poetry in Fields of Print* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 260–304; and Sarah Zimmerman, ‘John Thelwall’s School of Eloquence’, in *The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 60–90.

⁵¹ His concept of political public oratory is made clear, for instance, in the advertisement *Every Evening during the Discussion of Lord Grenville’s Bill, at the Political Lecture-Room, Beaufort-Buildings, Strand, John Thelwall Will Exercise That Expiring Privilege of Once Free and Valiant Britons, the Liberty of Speech, by Animadverting on the Occurrences, Projects and Conspiracies of the Present Momentous Crisis* ([n. pub.], 1795). On the Beaufort Buildings, see Judith Thompson, ‘From Forum to Repository: A Case Study in Romantic Cultural Geography’, *European Romantic Review*, 15.2 (2004), pp. 177–91, doi:10.1080/10509580420001680615.

the LMI on the Principles of Universal Prosody, the Eloquence of the Bar, Senatorial and Popular Elocution, and the Poetry of Milton and Shakespeare. Thelwall's trajectory as a political activist and lecturer tried for high treason in 1794 is an exceptional case that helps explain traditions, tensions, and reformers' interventions to address concerns about disobedience, sedition, and governance associated with working-class education in the 1820s and 1830s.

The London Corresponding Society was also a formative experience for tailor, radical reformer, and LMI co-founder Francis Place, discussed in [Ian Newman's article](#) 'From Magazine to Meeting: Francis Place, the Crown and Anchor Tavern, and the Founding of the London Mechanics' Institution'. Place's career as an artisan, political activist, and education reformer illustrates a key constituency of the mechanics' education movement. Newman documents Place's commitment to the artisanal reading culture within the London Corresponding Society from 1794 to 1797. The library that Place set up above his tailor's shop in Charing Cross doubled up as a meeting room for radicals and reformers. The Place papers at the British Library document his founding role in shaping the LMI, comparing and compiling rules and regulations, discussing its finance and governance structures, transcribing minutes and collecting documents related to the mechanics' education movement.⁵² In *The Romantic Tavern* Newman identifies the birthplace of the LMI as a complex site of Romantic sociability, which 'might accommodate a political dinner in one of its dining rooms, while simultaneously hosting a fashionable ball upstairs[;] [...] a venue for drunken revelry, or for elegant dinners; as the headquarters of revolutionary enthusiasm, or of reactionary conservatism'.⁵³ Newman notes that Place attended a London Corresponding Society meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern celebrating the first anniversary of the treason trial acquittals of Thomas Hardy, John Hooke, and John Thelwall in 1795; in November 1823, that radical anniversary took place the day after the 'meeting of above 1500 mechanics, held at the Crown and Anchor tavern for the purpose of forming a "London Mechanic's Institute"', a juxtaposition featured in periodical listings, as if to signal the potential dangers of sedition inherent in working-class education.⁵⁴ Yet by 1823 Place held more moderate views, resisting proposals advocating a funding structure that would secure artisans' and mechanics' financial independence and self-governance, and arguing instead that the institution must be underpinned by a subscription model beyond the reach of artisans and mechanics. In tracing Francis Place's role in the *Mechanics' Magazine* and

⁵² See FPP, XXXV-XXXVI, BL, Add MSS 27823 and 27824.

⁵³ Ian Newman, *The Romantic Tavern: Literature and Conviviality in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 79.

⁵⁴ 'Chronology of the Month', *Monthly Magazine*; or, *British Register*, December 1823, pp. 472-73 (p. 473).

LMI, Newman sheds light on the dynamics of 1820s urban political culture straddling the periodical press, sites of assembly, radicals, and reformers.

The *Westminster Review* was launched one month after the opening of the LMI. In ‘Utilitarians, Educators, Poets: The Beginnings of the *Westminster Review* and the London Mechanics’ Institution’, **Hilary Fraser** reconstructs overlapping networks and points of intersection between radical thinkers, writers, and reformers who published in the *Westminster Review*, lectured at the LMI, and also wrote in the album of Anna Birkbeck, wife of the founder and first president of the LMI. Fraser’s work reveals a constellation of radicals and reformers, connecting the world of the Birkbecks with the mechanics’ education movement, radiating from London to an international network of poets and reformers involved in the cause of Greek independence including Byron, Mary Shelley, and John Bowring, who was secretary of the Greek Committee that met at the Crown and Anchor in spring 1823. Bowring was also editor of the *Westminster Review*, stood unsuccessfully for the professorship of English literature at the newly formed London University in 1827, and contributed to Anna Birkbeck’s album in 1831.

While the LMI posited machines and models as essential pedagogical infrastructure from the start, the attraction of emerging visual technologies and entertainments can be felt in the focus on rational recreations, optical exercises, instruments, and inventions in the pages of the *Mechanics’ Magazine* and on the institution’s curriculum. In 1803 Birkbeck showed the Irish writer and educator Maria Edgeworth a little perspective machine and a globe lit from within, which he had constructed drawing on instructions he found in her work *Practical Education* (1798).⁵⁵ In ‘Illuminating Knowledge: The London Mechanics’ Institution and the Diorama’, **John Plunkett** invites us to consider the use of visual technologies in the teaching of optics in 1825, and Birkbeck’s use of oxyhydrogen light, magic lanterns, and illuminated transparencies in lectures and demonstrations on optical instruments and astronomy. Such pioneering methods connect practical education, useful knowledge, and institutions of knowledge with the shows of London, from the recent opening of the Diorama in Regent’s Park in autumn 1823, soon after the first Diorama had been inaugurated in Paris in 1822, and its incorporation into the programming at Drury Lane in 1824. Plunkett’s contribution situates the LMI’s mechanical and artistic inventions and practical education within a widening urban culture of arts and sciences.

⁵⁵ Maria Edgeworth to Honora Edgeworth, Glasgow, 4 April 1803, in *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, ed. by Augustus J. C. Hare, 2 vols (Arnold, 1894), I, pp. 136–38 (pp. 136–37), transcribed at <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life_And_Letters_Of_Maria_Edgeworth/Volume_1/Letter_49> [accessed 12 September 2024]. I am grateful to Caroline Ritchie for this reference.

In 'In our Time: Adult Education and Birkbeck: Extra-Mural — An Experiment 1988–2009', **Laurel Brake** moves from historical mapping to memoir as she reconstructs three overlapping nineteenth-century genealogies that underpin the 'hybrid' shapes of continuing education 'in our time', detailing her experience within Extra-Mural and departmental English while also going back to the foundation of the LMI (1823) and London University (1828, later UCL) and the University Extension Movement from the 1870s. Brake details the transformations of the LMI and how it was differentiated from the university, but also from the London Working Men's College opened in 1854, which offered a more 'rounded, liberal arts education' compared to the mechanics' institution's utilitarian approach 'geared to professional improvement'. Subsequently renamed Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution in 1866, Birkbeck College in 1907, and annexed to the University of London in 1920, the college started its process of academic accreditation and qualification. Having traced the trajectory from the Extension Movement to Extra-Mural Studies, Brake draws on her personal experience and archival sources to document that tradition's pioneering cross-disciplinary innovation, which expanded the field of English to include gender studies and creative writing. Brake's account closes with the parallel endings of English. With the restructuring of the Faculty of Continuing Education, staff were redistributed within new schools and Extra-Mural/Continuing Education English was annexed to the Department of English and Humanities (2010–19). Brake's account was written as Birkbeck English went through a further process of change, this time shaped by disciplinary convergence rather than partition, as the Department of English, Theatre and Creative Writing (2019–23) was absorbed into the new School of Creative Arts, Culture and Communication in August 2023. Brake's article is complemented by a timeline of adult education from the mechanics' movement to Birkbeck co-authored with Birkbeck PhD alumna **Robyn Jakeman**.

The second section of this issue draws on Anna Birkbeck's album to reconstruct poetical and political evidence of the early networks of the Birkbecks in the 1820s and 1830s. These contributions build on a bicentenary project of transcription and peer review of the album conducted with MA Victorian Studies students in summer 2023, which developed into an invitation to contribute to this issue. The first poem entered in the album belongs to a group of pseudonymous entries signed with a hieroglyph and a place, which Birkbeck alumna Wendy Jones attributed to the geologist Gideon Mantell, whom the Birkbecks visited in September 1825. In 'Geology, the Imagination, and Speculative Writing: Gideon Mantell's Fossil Poetry in Anna Birkbeck's Album', **David McAllister** brings his expertise on Victorian cultures of death to examine Mantell's poem 'On a Group of Organic Remains of a Former World', entered in the album after

being published in the *Sussex Advertiser* at the beginning of the year in which he made his reputation for publishing details about the discovery of the first dinosaur, which he called the ‘Iguanodon’ by analogy with the teeth of an iguana. Mantell’s profile demonstrates ‘how the narrow English education system risked wasting talent through its powerful mechanisms of religious and social exclusion’, McAllister argues, differentiating his trajectory as a published gentleman author from the profile of geologist William Buckland. McAllister’s close reading reveals the intertextual weaving of geological and literary sources including Byron, James Parkinson, and Georges Cuvier, demonstrating the speculative function of literature in the practice of science.

In ‘L.E.L. in and out of the Birkbeck Album: Poetics and Politics’, **Isobel Armstrong** answers the question about how Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s love poems fit in with the radicals associated with the LMI, who contributed later entries to Anna Birkbeck’s album, among them John Thelwall, John Bowring, William Hone, and Robert Owen. Yet alongside these entries, the album provides evidence of a corpus and a publishing network for women writers that marked and supported Landon throughout her career, since album contributors include William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, where Landon’s reputation was formed in the 1820s, and Samuel Carter Hall, editor of *The Amulet; or, a Christian Remembrancer* and the *New Monthly Magazine*, key publication venues for her later poems. Nor are the gender dynamics of the album separate from its politics: Thelwall’s respect for Landon, immortalized as ‘Sappho’ among ‘Poets and Poetry of the Age’ in his manuscript *Musalogia*, invites a reconsideration of the politics at the heart of her poetics.⁵⁶ By reading the Landon poems copied into the Birkbeck album after appearing in print in the *Literary Gazette* together with later poems published in *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap Book* (1832) and the *New Monthly Magazine* (1836), Armstrong reconstructs her appeal for ‘the public circulation of affect and the necessity of dreaming as a social need’.

In addition to intersections with publication networks, the album’s overlap with salon and celebrity culture is explored in ‘Lady Caroline Lamb and Miss Elizabeth Spence: Limits of Femininity in Early Nineteenth-Century Salon and Album Culture’ by MA Victorian Studies students **Zoe Baron and Beatrice Mossman**. In ‘M.S. Lines on Lady Caroline Lamb’, a poem entered in Anna Birkbeck’s album in November 1825, middle-class travel writer and salon hostess Elizabeth Spence addresses disgraced aristocrat Lady Caroline Lamb, infamous for her much publicized love affair with Byron in 1812, read through a series of intertextual allusions triangulating Spence’s poem

⁵⁶ For the discovery and description of Thelwall’s *Musalogia* manuscript, see Judith Thompson, ‘Citizen Juan Thelwall: In the Footsteps of a Free-Range Radical’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.1 (2009), pp. 67–100 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25602179>> [accessed 29 September 2024].

with Byron's published and Lamb's album poetry, and Lamb's novel *Glenarvon* (1816). The relationship between Lamb and Byron became topical again with the publication of Thomas Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron* in autumn 1824, which included Byron's 'Remember Thee', a response to Lamb's 'Remember Me!', captured in Spence's line 'to be remembered — yet forgot'. While through birth and marriage Lamb participated in the aristocratic salons and sociability of Holland House and Devonshire House, by the 1820s she 'condescended' to appear in Spence's middle-class salon in a second-floor flat in Quebec Street, Portman Square. Spence's salon shares a number of authors with Anna Birkbeck's album, including, in addition to Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Emma Roberts, and Jane Porter, the editors Jerdan, Hall, and Alaric Watts (the *Literary Souvenir*). By concentrating on Spence's unusual choice of address to a disgraced celebrity aristocrat turned author, Baron and Mossman demonstrate how her entry in Anna Birkbeck's album tested the limits of femininity and advocated a network of middle-class sociability, improvement, and authorship.

The album's international culture and politics is testified by entries in a range of languages, sometimes translated, sometimes not. In "'A flower of an exile": International Political Networks in Anna Birkbeck's Album', MA Victorian Studies alumna **Emi Del Bene** explores a sonnet dedicated to Anna Birkbeck by Polish author, translator, and exile Stanisław Egbert Koźmian. The feminine trope of the flower, a recurrent feature across the album, functions as a mode of political address in the context of the Birkbecks' interest and engagement in the cause of Polish independence and becomes a starting point to reveal the political associations of a group of contributors that participated in international networks of European political exiles in London in the 1820s and 1830s.

The final section of the issue, 1823–2023, zooms in and out of the 1820s. **Esther Leslie** follows radical London worlds and afterlives converging in 'Convivial Scenes on the Strand, 1823' in the run-up to the foundation of the LMI. Printmaker, poet, and prophet William Blake's last home in Fountain Court, the Strand, sheds light on his indictment of the counter-arts through his immediate proximity to Rudolph Ackermann's Repository of the Arts, and the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in one direction, and to Somerset House in the other, which hosted the Royal Academy as well as great offices of state, from the Navy Board to the Tax and Stamp Office. Radical philosopher William Godwin moved the Juvenile Library a few doors from the Crown and Anchor Tavern in 1822, attended a performance of *Frankenstein* playing at the Theatre Royal, English Opera House, on the Strand at the end of July 1823, and republished Mary Shelley's text in August. The 'King of the Beggars' Billy Waters could be seen busking on the Strand in the early 1820s.

Leslie notes that his judge's wig, torn naval jacket, and canvas trousers 'seemed to mock aspects of the British state, its lawmakers and protective forces', whose offices were established on the Strand. Waters was captured in *The Cries of London*, in Pierce Egan's *Life of London* (1821), its theatrical adaptation at the Adelphi Theatre on the Strand (1821–23), and in a range of illustrations, but he died destitute in 1823. Leslie's article ends with a question and a hope: 'Were those depicted in *The Cries of London* a community to come, who would seek education and knowledge, self-knowledge and social understanding and find it? [...] What possibilities amongst the disenfranchised now?' Whether and how Birkbeck can 'reanimate' its radical pedagogical vision is the question and the hope.

In 'The Critical Edge of Learning', **Jacqueline Rose** takes her move from the publication of Mary Shelley's *Valperga* (1823), which 'remind[s] us how far literature plays its role in public debate, and how far the struggle between tyranny and liberty belongs at the heart of writing'. Yet it also reminds us under what conditions writing can speak truth to power. Unlike Percy Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy* (1819) and 'England in 1819' (1819), both of which had to remain in manuscript until 1839,⁵⁷ Mary Shelley's choice of a medieval Italian setting offers the anachronic distance necessary to ask questions about despotism and the conditions and limits of liberty, while speaking to the condition of England after the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. The fear of the revolutionary crowd of workers can be felt in arguments around the mechanics' institution movement: would education 'pacify' or 'channel' the working classes towards 'civic participation' and politics? This is the task of the humanities, which Rose unpacks in its literary, legal, psychoanalytical, and psychosocial genealogies of self-discovery and critical thinking. This is the mission embedded in the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, exemplified by its Critical Theory Summer School, whose widening participation ethic is underpinned by funding from the Open Society University Network and Open Society Foundations supporting participation of students and scholars from the Global South, embodying 'Mary Shelley's literary plea for democracy in the face of tyranny'.

What becomes legible when we confront the mission of the LMI of 1823 in the 2020s? The commitment to practical education and useful knowledge that underpinned

⁵⁷ 'Note on Poems of 1819. By the Editor', in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Mrs Shelley, 4 vols (Moxon, 1839), III, pp. 205–10 (pp. 205–07). On the medieval Italian setting, see Tilottama Rajan, 'Introduction', in Mary Shelley, *Valperga; or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. by Tilottama Rajan (Broadview Literary Texts, 1998), pp. 7–42 (pp. 26–32). Contemporary reviews compared her study of despotism to Machiavelli; one among them berated her for its easy associations with Napoleon: in addition to allusions to Dante, 'another thing we are very sick of, is this perpetual drumming at poor Buonaparte.' 'Valperga', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1823, pp. 283–93 (p. 284); reproduced in Rajan, Appendix E, p. 486.

Birkbeck's mission to educate mechanics, artisans, and skilled workers lives on in practice-based approaches to knowledge, in the ethos of knowledge exchange collaborations between academics and practitioners, and in the rich multidisciplinary mix of adult students, who bring a unique range of expertise to the classroom, to visionary experiments at postgraduate level. Consider the London Consortium (1993–2012), a pioneering collaborative doctoral partnership, built around the adult education tradition of Birkbeck College and the British Film Institute (1993–98), the Architectural Association, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Science Museum, and the Tate Gallery, directed by the social and political theorist Paul Hirst (1993–2003) and then the literary and critical theorist Steven Connor (2003–12).⁵⁸ As that programme folded, the model of partnership between academic and non-higher-education institutions has become a national offering through the Collaborative Doctoral Partnership scheme offered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council since 2014.⁵⁹

This issue comes together in the aftermath of the restructuring that took place in 2023 in response to a local, national, and international crisis in the arts and humanities.⁶⁰ The state of English in 2023 is the result of longer-term processes. The discussion about subscription fees in 1823 resonates in the current context of student fees and debt. Francis Place and other founders of the LMI were acutely aware of the relationship between fees, agency, and governance as they discussed subscription costs in relation to working-class income and the institution's financial resilience. In the US context, Christopher Newfield argues that 'there's a relationship between budgeting and social justice and intellectual equality across races and across classes and across backgrounds and national origins'; its effects can be summed up in his title *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (2008).⁶¹ In the UK the financial impact of fees may have the (un?)intended effect of turning English into an elitist subject for the few. The UK government's decision to lift the cap on student numbers in England in 2015 to increase market competition had the effect of prioritizing quantity over quality, reinventing a two-tier system that privileged larger Russell Group institutions at the expense of smaller universities and social mobility.⁶²

⁵⁸ Colin McCabe, 'Editorial', *Critical Quarterly*, 42.2 (2000), pp. 1–3, doi:10.1111/j.0011-1562.2000.00284.x.

⁵⁹ UK Research and Innovation, 'Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTP1)' <<https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/developing-people-and-skills/ahrc/training-and-support-before-the-future-doctoral-provision-programme/doctoral-training-partnerships-dtp1/>> [accessed 14 September 2024].

⁶⁰ For the American context, see Christopher Newfield, 'Criticism after this Crisis: Toward a National Strategy for Literary and Cultural Study', *Representations*, 164.1 (2023), pp. 1–22, doi:10.1525/rep.2023.164.1.1.

⁶¹ Jeffrey J. Williams, 'Opening the Window on Higher Ed: An Interview with Christopher Newfield', *Symploke*, 29.1–2 (2021), pp. 743–60 (p. 745), doi:10.1353/sym.2021.0052.

⁶² On the student numbers cap, see Chris Havergal, 'How Will the Lifting of Student Number Controls Affect Universities?', *Times Higher Education*, 30 July 2015 <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/news-blog-how-will-lift>>

In addition to the fear of student debt and concerns about employability fuelled by ideological positions and policies that devalued the arts and humanities,⁶³ the fall of English from top A-level subject in 2012 to below tenth in England in 2022 is also associated with changes to the GCSE curriculum in 2015,⁶⁴ which can be correlated with the A-level subject's peak decline of 33 per cent between 2015 and 2021. Contrast this with the resilience and success of English in Scotland, where the school curriculum did not suffer from such changes that weaken English as a school subject; nor are home students charged university fees.⁶⁵

In the run-up to the bicentenary of the LMI, 'Birkbeck Vision 2021–26' blamed the need for restructuring on 'the twin, interlocked shocks of Brexit and Covid'.⁶⁶ After English at Birkbeck was ranked second in the 2021 UK Research Excellence Framework by the *Times Higher Education* rankings by subject, and celebrated for a world-leading research environment,⁶⁷ in the year of the bicentenary the college's organizational change plan protected creative writing, theatre, and the performing arts under the umbrella of the creative industries, but required a 50 per cent reduction of the remaining English staff. Literature remains in doubt: it was written in and written out in 1823,

[ing-student-number-controls-affect-universities](#)> [accessed 14 September 2024]; British Academy, 'English Studies Provision in UK Higher Education', June 2023, p. 28 <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4749/English-studies-provision-UK-higher-education-British-Academy-report.pdf>> [accessed 29 September 2024].

⁶³ Accusations of 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, often levelled against the arts and humanities offer at post-1992 institutions, go back a long way, crystallized in Margaret Hodge's attack on 'Mickey Mouse' degrees in a speech delivered at the Institute for Public Policy Research on 13 January 2003. See 'Talking Point', BBC News, 16 January 2003 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/2657849.stm> [accessed 17 September 2024]. A revisionist debate against post-1992 universities and the expansion of university offerings after the abolition of the polytechnics in 1992 was harnessed by Tory government policies about revising the focus from university to apprenticeships. See Higher Education Reform, Commons Chamber, *Hansard*, 17 July 2023 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-07-17/debates/10053F59-417E-491B-9230-8E43F75B4E03/HigherEducationReform>> [accessed 17 September 2024]. Rishi Sunak's government monetized the value of university education and planned a crackdown on degrees judged to be failing against expected graduate earnings. See Department of Education, 'Crackdown on Rip-Off University Degrees', 17 July 2023 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/crackdown-on-rip-off-university-degrees>> [accessed 17 September 2024].

⁶⁴ On the negative repercussions of the 2015 GCSE curriculum reform on A Level and university English, see NATE, 'The Decline in Student Choice of A Level English: A NATE Position Paper', *Teaching English*, pp. 5–6 <<https://www.nate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NATE-Post-16-position-paper.pdf>> [accessed 14 September 2024]; and British Academy, 'English Studies Provision in Higher Education', pp. 24–25.

⁶⁵ NATE, 'The Decline in Student Choice of A Level English', pp. 30–31.

⁶⁶ Birkbeck, University of London, 'Vision 2021–2026: Our Corporate Strategy', p. 8 <<https://www.bbk.ac.uk/downloads/policies/birkbeck-vision-strategy.pdf>> [accessed 14 September 2024].

⁶⁷ REF 2021: English Language and Literature, *Times Higher Education*, 22 May 2022 <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ref-2021-english-language-and-literature>> [accessed 12 September 2024]. For the unit's 100 per cent 4-Star Rating in Research Environment and Impact, see REF 2021 <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/profiles/institutions/10007760>> [accessed 12 September 2024].

as a fine or a useful art, which may or may not have a part in ‘useful knowledge’; in the 2020s its status as an academic subject is in question again. In August 2023 the Department of English, Theatre and Creative Writing was dissolved into the new School of Creative Arts, Culture and Communication, coming together with Modern Languages, Linguistics, and Media. Birkbeck president Joan Bakewell expressed her concern about the fate of English, acknowledging the threat to the humanities: ‘the case for the humanities has to be made yet again.’⁶⁸ The place of literature among the disciplines — how what Birkbeck called ‘the charms of literature’ might be harnessed to ‘the power of science’ — is as live a question now as it was then. Speaking at the Royal Institution in November 2023, theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli, for instance, argued that ‘science is imagination, besides just being calculation and numbers [...] very similar to Dante’s poetical imagination’.⁶⁹ Literature is crucial to the speculative power of invention and discovery: hence Rovelli’s use of Dante, Milton, Leopardi, Proust, and Nabokov, among other literary authors, to shape scientific questions and further the public understanding of white holes and other scientific topics.⁷⁰ Subject associations map literature’s distinctive characteristics of creative and critical thinking against the ‘skills for the future’ identified by the World Economic Forum in the face of artificial intelligence.⁷¹ The argument about the impact of English in the marketplace is tested by its outstanding impact case studies, claiming the contribution that English and cognate creative disciplines make to the British economy. The British Academy, University English, and the English Association have been at the forefront of relaunching English as a discipline through campaigns such as SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy),⁷² in response to STEM (Science, Technology,

⁶⁸ Sally Weale, ‘Dismay at Threat of “Devastating” Job Cuts at Birkbeck, University of London’, *Guardian*, 13 November 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/nov/13/dismay-at-threat-of-devastating-job-cuts-at-birkbeck-university-of-london>> [accessed 29 September 2024].

⁶⁹ Carlo Rovelli, ‘What is a White Hole’, Royal Institution, 17 and 23 November 2023, 58:00–59:57 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VSz-hiuW9U>> [accessed 17 September 2024]. I am grateful to Ana Parejo Vadillo for this reference, and much more.

⁷⁰ Carlo Rovelli, ‘Literature and Science: A Continuing Dialogue’, in *There Are Places in the World Where Rules Are Less Important than Kindness*, trans. by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (Allen Lane, 2020), pp. 28–32, originally published in Italian in *Sole 24 Ore*, 20 January 2013.

⁷¹ World Economic Forum, ‘These Are the Top 10 Job Skills of Tomorrow — and How Long It Takes to Learn Them’, 21 October 2020 <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them/>> [accessed 15 September 2024]; English Association, ‘Skills for the Future of English’ <<https://englishassociation.ac.uk/skills-for-the-future-of-english>> [accessed 15 September 2024].

⁷² Julia Black, British Academy, ‘Becoming SHAPE’, 1 June 2022 <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/becoming-shape/>> [accessed 15 September 2024]; British Academy, ‘This is SHAPE’ <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/>> [accessed 15 September 2024].

Engineering, and Mathematics), and #EnglishCreates.⁷³ In 2024 BA programmes in English, Creative Writing, and Liberal Arts at Birkbeck came first in London in the National Student Survey for teaching 'Literature in English'. English at Birkbeck is reinventing itself once more to shape new radical knowledges for new generations.

This issue, brought to life by students, staff, alumni, and the editorial team of 19, is dedicated to the community of Birkbeck English past, present, and future —1823, 2023, 2223.

⁷³ British Academy, 'English Studies Provision in UK Higher Education', June 2023; The English Association, '#English Creates: A Campaign for English' <<https://englishassociation.ac.uk/english-creates-a-campaign-for-english/>> [accessed 12 September 2024].

