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Convivial Scenes on the Strand, 1823

Esther Leslie

Adopting an associational and wandering approach, this article reconstructs some of the scenes and figures which might have been encountered by a visitor to the Strand in 1823. These include William Blake, in Fountain Court, or William Godwin near the church of St Clement's, visited that year by his daughter Mary Shelley, with whom he attended an adaptation of her novel *Frankenstein* on a nearby stage. The scene depicted here around the Strand in 1823 also includes buskers and their crowding audiences, which are in turn presented as members of delightful scenes available in a burgeoning reproduced literature. Less visible perhaps are the agitating radicals meeting in pubs and back rooms and those drawn inside the cultural institutions in the area. The core inquiry here is into education, that is to say, what constitutes an education, how and to who does it circulate, and what is to come of it? Is it to be found in the old academic institutions, in the newly founded ones, such as the Juvenile Library or the London Mechanics' Institution? Or, more radically, does it rise up on the streets, in the pubs and the popular theatres, or is it perhaps, something that will be stored up in back rooms waiting for a future into which it can finally be released? Who are its recipients? What is the past and future of a radical vernacular education?



Imagine London, in 1823, in the environs of the site of the first establishment of a place of education that would become Birkbeck. This article wanders up and down one street, the Strand, glimpsing into its establishments, alleyways, and courts, lending an ear to this or that figure, following themes or glimmers of ideas as they are bandied around and mutate in a dense urban environment at a time of intensive development. It is as if one could home in on a scene, as displayed in a panorama, such as the one on the Strand, on the corner of Surrey Street, opened in 1803 and closed by 1831. A large circular painting wraps around a viewer who might then find within it a figure or two to follow for a while, before shifting the attention elsewhere, or might gravitate around a building, approaching it repeatedly from various angles, drawn in and along by the unspooling thread of a proposition, notion, or leitmotif, be it pub life, education, dissent, night-time entertainment, friendship, or existence in the margins.¹

The Strand, a thoroughfare, was then, as now, the site of numerous whirling vortices of action. Here, in 1823, can be found many convivial scenes, and less convivial ones too, no doubt. The Strand is a long road and it stretches along a main route connecting or setting apart the political centre of London at Westminster and the old heart of the city located in the east, which had, by the sixteenth century, become its financial district. City life, here on this ground, on this foreshore that is the Strand, running parallel to the river, is clamped quite directly between religion and the state, between, to the east, the church of St Clement Danes (with a wisp of a tail turning into Fleet Street) and, in the west, the royal stables of the King's mews. Within this grip, the Strand, and the lives lived along it, might appear like things cooking under pressure or a place for beings who are squeezed from each end, such that they buckle along the way. It makes for a certain intensity. Life on the Strand is turbulent and fractious. Abandoned by the westward-moving aristocracy in the eighteenth century, the Strand was reinforced in its sometimes less than respectable status, at the start of the nineteenth, as a place of entertainment, with many theatres and music halls, coffee shops and taverns. Certainly, plenty of illustrators aimed to capture something of the vibrant life that could be lived there. Strand life was reproduced in prints: crowds thronging at Somerset House, at Hungerford Market, at Temple Bar; figures debauching inside coffee houses, the antics of street musicians and entertainers, the shop fronts, with their plethora of signs. The Strand was pocketed by frame makers, fabricators of surgical instruments and mechanical calculators, disputing philosophers, agitating plotters, or Freemasons seeking arcane treatises at bookshops. It was a whirl of lively venues, excitable people, diverse things, and infectious ideas. And William Blake was there too, from 1821

¹ My gratitude to Luisa Calè for assiduous editing and direction to scholarship, incorporation of which attempts to give depth to my more impressionistic claims.

until he died in 1827. He occupied two rooms on the first floor of 3 Fountain Court, a development of houses and businesses accessed through a passage between 103 and 104 The Strand, near the Savoy. A ‘hole’, Blake called it, and a temporary resting place until God was wont to provide the ‘beautiful mansion’ elsewhere.² But Fountain Court was, hole or not, no dead end. It was a route through from Strand to Thames and, furthermore, it was connected to several artistic and commercial institutions relevant to Blake’s practice. Rudolph Ackermann’s Repository for the Arts — a print shop and a showroom on the Strand — opened into Fountain Court by a private door.³ Also several artists, artisans, and skilled tradesmen, some well known to Blake, lived and worked there. Walled up in this hole, Blake was busy at Fountain Court, where he had an engraving studio that allowed him to reprint his illuminated books and to store his many unsellable prints of *Jerusalem*. A letter to George Cumberland sent from Fountain Court on 12 April 1827, written from near the ‘Gates of Death’ and supplying a price list for printed works, complained of the confined space: ‘for at the time I printed those things I had a whole House to range in now I am shut up in a Corner therefore am forced to ask a Price for them.’⁴ He produced much new work, such as illustrations of the Book of Job, woodcuts for Thornton’s *Virgil*, 102 drawings for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, made while he was bed-bound as he approached death. Here in the shadows of powerful and exclusive art institutions — the Royal Academy at Somerset House was on one side and, on the other, at the Adelphi, was the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce — he embellished his Laocoön with slogans carved into copper raging against the curse of money, which leads away from art and into war: ‘Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only.’⁵ Blake’s view at Fountain Court looked out from a ‘hole’, he said, and there was indeed a hole in Fountain Court, a pub called the Coal Hole Tavern. This was a lively and noisy place of debauch for performers and audiences after the theatres and other establishments were closed. It supplied Blake twice daily with his porter.⁶ At least, if Blake felt the

² Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake: Pictor Ignotus*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1863), I, p. 309.

³ See Angus Whitehead, “‘humble but respectable’”: Recovering the Neighbourhood Surrounding William and Catherine Blake’s Last Residence, No. 3 Fountain Court, Strand, c. 1820–27’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 80.4 (2011), pp. 858–79 (p. 877), doi:10.1353/utq.2011.0156. Whitehead cites Morton D. Paley, *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 227: ‘In 1821, when the Blakes moved to Fountain Court, Strand, they were within a few steps of Ackermann’s print shop and showroom at 101 The Strand; the two premises were in fact so close that the large display room in which Ackermann also had weekly receptions during March and April had a private door leading to Fountain Court.’

⁴ William Blake, ‘To George Cumberland, 12 April 1827’, *The William Blake Archive* <<https://blakearchive.org/copy/letters?descId=lt12april1827.1.ltr.02>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

⁵ See William Blake, ‘Laocoön Copy A’ (1826–27), *The William Blake Archive* <<https://blakearchive.org/copy/laocoon.a?descId=laocoon.a.illbk.0>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

⁶ Many details of the immediate locality are noted in Whitehead.

surroundings less than salubrious, there was a glistening view from its windows, for, beyond the Savoy Steps and the warehouses of Beaufort Wharfs leading to the river's shore, the Thames appeared to him as 'a bar of gold'.⁷

There were many drinking establishments in the vicinity and some were radical meeting places for agitators, even if the glory days of the London Corresponding Society were now past. The LCS had come together around this spot, when it was founded by a shoemaker, Thomas Hardy, in 1792, at the Bell Tavern just off the Strand at Exeter Street. The LCS's aim was to demand parliamentary reform.⁸ Radical thinkers and agitators of various types had met also at the Globe Tavern, at the Charing Cross end of the Strand on Craven Street, and at Furnival's Inn Cellar. There was also Doctor Watson's surgeon-apothecary, meeting place of the forerunners to the Cato Street conspirators, who, in 1820, cooked up murderous plans to eliminate the prime minister and all the British cabinet members. Such were the schemes that were devised, tussled over, knocked down, set up inside the Strand's venues. There was drama inside and outside the buildings on the Strand. Perhaps the street itself was a stage, with characters, buskers, street performers, and those who came to look and were, in turn, looked at, as they spilled from the theatres and crowded into the pubs. Mingled in the scene were the passers-by, on the lookout for action, perhaps audiences or customers out to play in the city or performers now freed from the duties of work, jostling and rubbing shoulders as they strode along the Strand, flitting from pub to theatre to coffee shop and restaurant. They might have passed by a one-man band busking, perhaps the one depicted in watercolour by George Scharf in this period.⁹ This shows a character with a bass drum, tambourine, Pandean pipes, and jingling bells hanging from his hat. His whole body is used to shake out the beats of the latest urban rhythms. This one-man band was just one eddy in the stream, and his performance may momentarily have held up the flow as people gathered and watched, here, on the Strand, the strip that was once a river's edge or beach.

Ian Newman's study of Francis Place's relationship to popular urban experience in his locality of the Strand tracks a shift in manners in the metropolis as the nineteenth century progresses. Balladry is the focus as it articulates the scurrilous and socially subversive 'scaffold culture' specific to the locality between the fashionable West End

⁷ Leo Damrosch, *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (Yale University Press, 2015), p. 261.

⁸ Notes of Thomas Hardy, London, British Library, Add MSS 27814, published in *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, ed. by Mary Thale (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 8. On the LCS, see Ian Newman, 'From Magazine to Meeting: Francis Place, the Crown and Anchor Tavern, and the Founding of the London Mechanics' Institution' and Judith Thompson, '"Operations and cooperations": John Thelwall, George Birkbeck, and the Movement for Public Education in Britain', both in this issue of 19.

⁹ Held at the British Museum in its drawing collection: Museum number 1900,0725.45.

and the City. It also migrates into the bourgeois circles of the concert-going crowd of the 1780s, in such environments as the large upper room of the Crown and Anchor pub.¹⁰ The name of this tavern reflects the pressures in its environs — the crown of the monarchic state, proximate to its west, and the anchor, something that holds a thing in place, rather than overturns it; ships, specifically, such as those in the Thames. The anchor is a metaphor used often by the Church as a symbol of steadfastness, and part of a reality used across the globe by the powerful forces of the maritime military. Pushing back against these forces that would crush it, the Crown and Anchor pub provided a meeting ground for radicals and dissident thinkers, as well as revellers. It was a multifunctional place, alehouse, place of entertainment, and location for meetings. There were radicals organizing against reaction, reactionaries organizing against radicals — for example, in November 1792, the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers was founded there by John Reeves to counter Jacobins and their ilk.¹¹ Ian Newman's *The Romantic Tavern* points out how this one establishment hosted political dinners in one dining room, elegant dinners in another, a fashionable ball in an upper room, a drunken party downstairs, revolutionary enthusiasts in debate, or perhaps reactionaries strategizing. It was, he concludes, a 'relatively neutral space', and this neutrality made it able to accommodate 'different narratives about public and private space, masculine conviviality and feminine sociality, or Conservative and radical politics'.¹²

Several of the Crown and Anchor's clientele signed the call, published in the *Mechanics' Magazine*, for an institution to teach working people. The signatories alongside George Birkbeck, who would later donate the institution its name, were Joseph Clinton Robertson, Thomas Hodgskin, Henry Brougham, and Francis Place.¹³ The last named drafted the first plan and constitution for the proposed institution and did much to gather funds and support from workingmen's organizations and progressive politicians. Many note how hard-working this son of a Strand tavern-keeper was. In his career, he made breeches, gaining him the soubriquet 'the radical tailor of Charing Cross'.¹⁴ He knew the area intimately from childhood and experienced this part of the city as a zone of social inquiry — Ian Newman's work on Place and

¹⁰ See Ian Newman, 'Civilizing Taste: "Sandman Joe", the Bawdy Ballad, and Metropolitan Improvement', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 48.4 (2015), pp. 437–56, doi:[10.1353/ecs.2015.0037](https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2015.0037).

¹¹ See Austin Mitchell, 'The Association Movement of 1792–3', *Historical Journal*, 4.1 (1961), pp. 56–77, doi:[10.1017/S0018246X00022202](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00022202).

¹² Ian Newman, *The Romantic Tavern: Literature and Conviviality in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 79.

¹³ See Newman, 'From Magazine to Meeting'.

¹⁴ Alexander Bain, *James Mill: A Biography* (Longmans, Green, 1882), p. 77.

balladry outlines Place's sensitivity to the subtle social distinctions between very proximate hostelrys along the Strand. He was aware of the mingling of cultural forms in that environment, perceiving zones of transfer between varying class factions and groupings, as all make and remake themselves in the Petri dish of urban development.¹⁵ Place strove to transform himself too, educating himself late into the night. His reading of choice included Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), until he abandoned him and his ideas, in order to turn increasingly to William Godwin's thought and his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). This book affected Francis Place's political thinking — on gradualism and utilitarianism — profoundly.¹⁶ Godwin's *Enquiry*, with its commitment to reason, education, and discussion circles, was, it is said, read more widely by mechanics and labourers in reading clubs. It was those types to whom the London Mechanics' Institution was designed to appeal. Godwin's work helped propel an institution into being. Desirous of knowledge was a panoply of people: carpenters, weavers, printers, engineers, instrument makers, jewellers, all those heterogeneous workers who practised the various local trades.

And if Francis Place was indebted to William Godwin for political ideas and stimulation towards modes of spreading further those ideas, he would repay his mentor in a more tangible form through the gift of money management.¹⁷ This occurred from 1811, when Place took on the difficult task of overseeing and improving Godwin's financial affairs — ultimately unsuccessfully and at some cost to himself. Godwin had lived until this point an awkward life. Some years before this, he had tried marriage and suffered tragedy. A book had drawn him towards his lover and companion, Mary Wollstonecraft. Her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, from 1796, ruminated on how difficult it was to find and sustain friendship; that is to say, to come upon a life companion. Wollstonecraft's philosophical politics rested on the notion of friendship, 'the most sublime of all affections'.¹⁸ Her works were devoted to various forms of education. Through this, she came close to William Blake, friend of her friend Henry Fuseli. Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) responded to her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The connection through education between the two was developed in 1791, when Blake produced six plates for the second edition of Wollstonecraft's novel *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations, Calculated to*

¹⁵ Newman, 'Civilizing Taste', pp. 449–50.

¹⁶ J. C. D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, & France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 403.

¹⁷ Richard Gough Thomas, *William Godwin: A Political Life* (Pluto, 2019), p. 98.

¹⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Marilyn Butler and Janet Todd, 7 vols (Pickering and Chatto, 1989), V, p. 152.

Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness. This book dealt with the question of educating girls.

It was just after this, that Wollstonecraft came to visit William Godwin in Chalton Street, in Somers Town, and found a circle of associates who were accepting of her radical ideas about emancipation and education for women. They were tolerant too of her daughter Fanny, born out of wedlock. Somers Town, where Godwin resided, was eulogized in Blake's *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–20):

Among the little meadows green.
 Pancras & Kentish-town repose
 Among her golden pillars high:
 Among her golden arches which
 Shine upon the starry sky.¹⁹

Among this golden architecture and under those sparkling stars, Wollstonecraft had approached Godwin. In moments of lost confidence in his fidelity, she called herself — in an effort to compel companionship — a 'Solitary Walker'.²⁰ To be alone, without conviviality, may encourage the reveries of Rousseau, but it was not for those who would learn from each other.²¹ They walked together, became friends, criticized each other's writings, and then more.

Wollstonecraft fell pregnant in 1797 and she and Godwin married, four months into the gestation. They lived together at the Polygon, in the heart of newly built Somers Town. It was a semicircular block of three-storey houses. Bedrooms were on the second floor, a dining room on the first, and a parlour on the ground. Around the Polygon was open country — for little development had taken place in the locality at this time. The anarchist Godwin, rule breaker, rule bender, had preached against marriage and both he and his wife had written of independence. To keep some distance between them, perhaps to save their love or to sustain their friendship, Godwin rented another space for himself, a space to write, at 17 Evesham Buildings — twenty doors away from the marital home.²² He turned his thoughts to education. As both existed in their separate locations, Mary, their maid, acted as a courier, transporting notes up and down the street through the

¹⁹ William Blake, 'To the Jews', *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–20), plate 27, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman (University of California Press, 1982), pp. 171–72, ll. 8–12.

²⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft to William Godwin, 17 August 1796, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, ed. by Pamela Clemit (Oxford University Press, 2011–), l: 1778–1797, p. 174.

²¹ The description draws on Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, written between 1776 and 1778 and published, unfinished, in 1782, with an anonymous translation into English made in 1796.

²² Peter Marshall, *William Godwin: Philosopher, Novelist, Revolutionary* (Yale University Press, 1984), p. 187.

day: reminders to bring a certain book home, notices about visits and appointments. Wollstonecraft, in her moments of solitude in the Polygon, wrote about art and beauty and worked on a novel titled *Wrongs of Woman*. It was a rumination on friendship — a three-way relation between a woman who has been imprisoned in an asylum by a cruel husband, a warder who befriends her, and a lover, who, in the end, will abandon her. Friendship is brittle in a world that is brutal. Young Romantics turned up at the Polygon. Friends and admirers, such as William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Henry Fuseli. And so Godwin and Wollstonecraft enjoyed an enlightened and romantic union, one between two who held onto their independence, shared circles of friends and cultivated their own — though not without jealousy arising at times. But a rotten placenta left behind by baby Mary as she left the womb was within days to lead to Wollstonecraft's death. Godwin later married his next-door neighbour, Mary Jane Clairmont.

And there were other addresses and other children for Godwin after Mary. One child died and one, William Godwin the Younger, born in 1803, lived. Together, the family opened a bookshop and a publishing house in Hanway Street in 1805, with money given by Thomas Wedgwood — they moved soon to Skinner Street in Holborn.²³ Here radicals and agitators and writers and exiles gathered. Recorded is the presence of the children in the activities and discussions that took place. In 1812, according to visitor Aaron Burr, young William, aged about 9, gave his 'weekly lecture', this time on 'The influence of governments on the character of a people'.²⁴ He modelled his approach on that which he had observed of Coleridge, perhaps having witnessed his Shakespeare series of lectures which began in 1811. Later, the elder Godwin would see some of Coleridge's final public lecture series, which took place at the Crown and Anchor pub in the winter of 1818–19.²⁵ This was made up of fourteen lectures, with some titled 'On Shakespeare' and others 'On the History of Philosophy'. Godwin's diaries attest that he was present at several of the lectures that presented an overview of philosophy from the classical thinkers to Dun Scotus and Locke, Leibniz, Kant, and Schelling.

The Crown and Anchor was a site of non-authorized education.²⁶ What began in coffee houses moved into ale houses, and it was democratic self-education, learning for change, a training ground in argumentation for enfranchisement, radicalism, and progress. William Godwin was a radical as regards education, but his own interest stretched from those who might have imbibed their politics and education in inns,

²³ Ford K. Brown, 'Notes on 41 Skinner Street', *Modern Language Notes*, 54.5 (1939), pp. 326–32, doi:[10.2307/2912348](https://doi.org/10.2307/2912348).

²⁴ Cited in Mrs Julian Marshall, *Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 2 vols (Bentley, 1889), I, p. 22.

²⁵ Details of the lectures may be found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures, 1808–1819, On Literature*, ed. by R. A. Folkes, 2 vols (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

²⁶ For an extensive account, see Newman, *The Romantic Tavern*, pp. 68–107.

while drinking alcohol, down to those who were very young and were receiving their first instruction within the nursery and with their milk. Education may be a dangerous matter, according to some — and certainly it is if it is true education and not just a form of training. Godwin was accused of circulating seditious materials for children. In 1813 a government spy reported to the Privy Council on his Juvenile Library:

The proprietor is *Godwin*, the author of *Political Justice*. There appears to be a regular system through all his publications to supersede all other elementary books, and to make his library the resort of preparatory schools, that in time the principles of democracy and Theo-philanthropy may take place universally.²⁷

Godwin embraced a Republican morality, a dangerous new sectarianism, on a par with French Jacobin atheism, and he taught it to children. The books were cheap — the temptation of an allowance of three pence in every shilling, noted the spy's report, acted to 'allure schools of a moderate and a lower class'. Godwin's acquaintance George Birkbeck and colleagues promulgated dangerous ideas of rationality and self-management to older people. Might the result be similar? Might that project be just as alluring? Certainly, its dispensary of knowledge could be entered at an encouragingly modest price.²⁸

Godwin's Juvenile Library bookshop business opened at 195 The Strand in July 1822. Financial troubles led to the move to the Strand following its periods at Hanway Street and Skinner Street. Godwin's son described the tortuous processes that led to the displacement of the shop and family home in a letter to his half-sister Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, dated 25 February 1823.²⁹ A man had claimed their rented home as his own and he evicted the family and charged them backdated rent. The best bound books of the Juvenile Library were given to an auctioneer and a temporary home and a warehouse were found, before the move to the Strand. The new location for the Godwins was situated where the Strand swelled to accommodate the island of Christopher Wren's rebuilt church of St Clement's, named for the mariners' saint. A letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Godwin underlined the proximity of radical library and church in its address: 'William Godwin, Esqre/195 Strand'.³⁰ Immediately behind the

²⁷ *Shelley and his Circle, 1773-1822*, ed. by Kenneth Neill Cameron and Donald H. Reiman, 10 vols (Harvard University Press, 1961), II, ed. by Kenneth Neill Cameron, p. 601.

²⁸ Further details of cost in Helen Hudson Flexner, 'The London Mechanics' Institution: Social and Cultural Foundations 1823-1830' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2014).

²⁹ Letter reprinted in *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*, ed. by C. Kegan Paul, 2 vols (King, 1876), II, pp. 276-77.

³⁰ Letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Highgate, to William Godwin, 18 February 1823, New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, MA 2204.41 <<https://www.themorgan.org/literary-historical/417073>> [accessed 28 August 2024].

Godwins' building the Crown and Anchor was situated, a less godly location, serving a different milieu. The view from the front and the one from behind are indicative of the many possible mixings and associations — though no doubt equally the location hosted many swerves and avoidances. On the day Coleridge's letter arrived at the Godwins', the London Greek Committee first met in the Crown and Anchor to push for independence from the Ottomans. Indeed, a week later, on 8 March 1823, another letter would be drafted here by the Greek Committee and sent to Coleridge's associate Byron. And Byron, in turn, would later that year commit fifty pounds to Birkbeck's project of a mechanics' institution announced at the Crown and Anchor.³¹

Here in the Strand the Godwins stayed for a few years, with Godwin and others working on the books of the Juvenile Library, which were produced for schools and private tutors. Sometimes Godwin visited the theatres nearby — he enjoyed free admission to many.³² His diary records more than weekly theatre attendance in 1823, seeing Shakespeare plays, opera, and more popular entertainments at nearby venues along the Strand and in Covent Garden — the Haymarket, the English Opera House, the Lyceum, Drury Lane, and also the Surrey Theatre, a little further away at St George's Circus on Blackfriars Road.

Shortly after arriving at the Strand site, word had reached the Godwin family of Percy Bysshe Shelley's drowning in the Bay of Lerici off the north-west coast of Italy. A year later, on 25 August 1823, as Godwin was working on the second edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley arrived back in London.³³ She witnessed the dismal living circumstances at 195 The Strand, though noted it was an improvement on the previous home at Skinner Street.³⁴ The move was made possible by her — the publication of her book *Valperga* helped to pay off the debts accrued from the backdated rent at Skinner Street. Just as she arrived back in London, a stage adaptation of her novel *Frankenstein* was playing at the Theatre Royal, English Opera House, on the Strand, opposite the Savoy Chapel. It had opened on 28 July — Godwin's diary mentions *Frankenstein* on that day, presumably observing the fact of its opening night. Mary Shelley received no money for the adaptation by Richard Brinsley Peake, which was titled *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*. The play, with music, was popular, and performed on and off until 1850. Tickets were sold cheaply and the audience, it is reported, stayed to watch,

³¹ See Hilary Fraser, 'Utilitarians, Educators, Poets: The Beginnings of the Westminster Review and the London Mechanics' Institution' in this issue of 19. Fraser's article also explores the various relationships, literary, political, and personal that Mary Shelley — and Godwin and others — had with George and Anna Birkbeck.

³² For details, see David O'Shaughnessy, *William Godwin and the Theatre* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 42–43.

³³ Diary entry for 11 August 1823, *William Godwin's Diary* <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/folio/e.220_0004v> [accessed 28 August 2024].

³⁴ Gough Thomas, pp. 30–31.

rather than walking out.³⁵ It led to William Godwin republishing his daughter's book, in the hope of capitalizing on its new infamy.³⁶ The play also established some lasting aspects that would be present in subsequent performances. The creature, known as a hobgoblin, had been rendered mute. It was also blue-skinned — later the figure would turn green in popular versions.

On 29 August, a few days after Mary Shelley's return to London, she, her father, her brother William Godwin, and Jane Williams, a close friend and fellow widow, attended a performance.³⁷ In a letter to Leigh Hunt, Mary Shelley conveyed her amusement at watching the drama. She spoke of finding herself famous and how the play was a 'prodigious success', about to be repeated for its twenty-third night. She praised the dash that took the place of the name on the programme: 'this nameless mode of naming the unnameable'.³⁸ Describing the setting to Hunt, Shelley observes how Victor Frankenstein's workshop has a small window through which a servant peeps. When the inventor cries out that his creature lives, the servant runs away in terror. Unnamed monster, terrified servant: the dramatic narrative, unlike its original written source, does not display any particular sympathy for the creature or any others who had been rendered impotent. It is not a socially reformist text. But here was an early outing on stage and in performance for an unnamed and unnameable figure who would in time become constantly misnamed — and endlessly reanimated.

Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein brought an 'unearthly & monstrous person' to the stage.³⁹ While Shelley judged, in her letter to Hunt, that the 'story is not managed well', the monster was conveyed in a part 'played [...] well' by Thomas P. Cooke, according to Mary Shelley's assessment.⁴⁰ In Shelley's eyes, Cooke showed the vulnerable interdependency of the monster, as it seemed to seek support and to make every effort to understand sounds. Perhaps it strove to become more educated or at least a participant in the world of human intercourse, as too did many other maligned and marginalized characters around the Strand, whether in pubs or institutes

³⁵ See Mary Shelley to Leigh Hunt, 9 September [11 September 1823], reprinted in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), I: 'A part of the Elect', pp. 377–83 (p. 378).

³⁶ The editorial changes in the 1823 edition are listed in E. B. Murray, 'Changes in the 1823 Edition of *Frankenstein*', *Library*, 6th ser., 3.4 (1981), pp. 320–27, doi:10.1093/library/s6-III.4.320.

³⁷ Diary entry for 29 August 1823, *William Godwin's Diary* <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1823-08-29.html>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

³⁸ Mary Shelley to Leigh Hunt, 9 September [11 September 1823], reprinted in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, I, p. 378.

³⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, ed. by James Rieger (University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xxxiii.

⁴⁰ See Mary Shelley to Leigh Hunt, 9 September [11 September 1823], reprinted in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, I, p. 378.

of learning. What learning was this and what subject enfranchised to learn? What might the Shelleys, Percy and Mary, contribute to this discussion? In 'Shelley and Socialism', by Edward and Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Karl Marx's daughter recalled her father's distress upon hearing of Percy Bysshe Shelley's death at the age of 29, because 'he was essentially a revolutionist, and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of Socialism'. Percy Bysshe Shelley, she states, 'was a teacher as well as a poet'.⁴¹ In a series of letters in *Schweizerischer Republikaner* in 1843, Friedrich Engels noted, in a language of blessings for the poor and the spirit of self-education:

Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes; no 'respectable' person could have the works of the latter on his desk without his coming into the most terrible disrepute. It remains true: blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and, however long it may take, the kingdom of this earth as well.⁴²

Blessed are the poor and meek for they shall inherit not just Heaven, but also gain an earth and to receive that earth they need to educate themselves on all that it has to offer and much that is made obscure to them to the benefit of the ruling class. George Birkbeck's language would never have been so oriented to revolution, but he did use the religiously inclined language too of the blessed and annexed it to a vision of universalism, which implies the exclusion of none and the inclusion of all in the quest for knowledge and the development of the self and society: 'This is the time for the universal diffusion of the blessings of knowledge.' This age, he notes, has unleashed forces that are animated, active, inquiring, with a growing appetite for knowledge and such demand has been answered 'without reference to age, occupation, or condition'.⁴³

In the final act of *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, Dr Frankenstein kills his creation with a pistol, which sets off an avalanche that consumes them both. The scene seemed to confirm that something had been unleashed in the world and it was dangerous and would need to be contained. The ending of the play had to stamp it out, all of it. Among those who sat through the play, some demurring could be heard. The apocryphal John Brown was heard to say: 'I would not take my wife to see this blue-devil.'⁴⁴ Perhaps such negative reports stemmed from enemies of the circle around the

⁴¹ Edward and Eleanor Marx-Aveling, 'Shelley and Socialism', *To-Day: A Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism*, April 1888, pp. 103-16 (pp. 105, 104).

⁴² Friedrich Engels, 'Letters from London', in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, 50 vols (Progress Publishers, 1975-2004), III (1975), p. 379.

⁴³ John George Godard, *George Birkbeck, the Pioneer of Popular Education: A Memoir and a Review* (Bemrose, 1884), p. 56.

⁴⁴ Contemporary responses conveyed in Steven Earl Forry, 'An Early Conflict Involving the Production of R. B. Peake's *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*', *Theatre Notebook*, 39.3 (1985), pp. 99-103.

Shelleys, who despised what they perceived to be the Shelleys' attacks on the Christian faith. The Shelleys and their circle were monstrous, lived (or died) monstrously, cultivated monstrous ideas. The drama itself became monstrous. Its source novel was immoral. It went against nature. It promulgated dangerous doctrines. In that regard, it was, in the eyes of some, no doubt, as much an abomination as an institution set up by a bunch of radicals to educate working people.⁴⁵

Had the play opened a year earlier, visitors might well have passed a busker performing nearby, sometimes outside the Adelphi Theatre on the Strand near Bedford Street. His name was Billy Waters. Originally from New York, he had been a sailor in the Royal Navy, serving in 1811 on the supply ship *HMS Namur*, under Jane Austen's brother, and then suffering an accident on board the *HMS Ganymede* sloop-of-war, as the twenty-six-gun frigate returned from Spain, in 1812. This calamity led to the loss of his lower leg. The captain noted, on 3 March 1812, of his quarter-gunner petty officer: 'Wm Waters fell from the main yard and broke both his legs and otherwise severely wounded him.'⁴⁶ Evicted from his role as a fighting British loyalist, he took to busking, as his naval pension was so small. Billy Waters sang and played the violin. His wooden leg was used, apparently, as a theatrical prop — in various images he is shown to twirl on it or fling it out.⁴⁷ He caused a scene on the pavement when he performed and all sorts of spectators gathered round, interrupting the flow along the street. He was a street celebrity. And, at least sometimes, if some of the illustrations are accurate, he wore a striking outfit, which seemed to mock aspects of the British state, its lawmakers and protective forces. The outfit comprised an oversized black military hat, adorned with big feathers, a judge's wig, a ragged naval jacket, and torn canvas trousers. These fragments of a costume reflected elements in the area around the Strand. The law courts, at Temple Bar; the Navy Board ensconced in Somerset House with a view out to the river, where, from 1822, steam-powered ships passed; the army, all about in that palace-ridden part of the city, but, notably, on the Strand itself, where its prisoners had suffered and mutinied many times in the Savoy Barracks, which was demolished by 1820 to build a new bridge: these powerful state forces on or proximate to the Strand

⁴⁵ See Hilary Fraser's article in this issue of 19 on the ways in which *Frankenstein* was perceived as communicating a reformist political vision with a radical take on scientific, political, educational, and social issues, to such an extent that it could be parodied and caricatured.

⁴⁶ Cited in Mary L. Shannon, *Billy Waters is Dancing: Or, How a Black Sailor Found Fame in Regency Britain* (Yale University Press, 2024), p. 91.

⁴⁷ Extensive work on the visual culture of Billy Waters, and the extent to which he has agency over his life, can be found in Mary L. Shannon, 'The Multiple Lives of Billy Waters: Dangerous Theatricality and Networked Illustrations in Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 46.2 (2019), pp. 161–89, doi:[10.1177/1748372719852739](https://doi.org/10.1177/1748372719852739). This work is greatly extended in Shannon, *Billy Waters is Dancing*.

were subjected to ridicule by a colourful costume and the effervescence of a man who had, at some cost to himself, left the clutches of the military, and joined the ranks of the performers, the enliveners of streets and pubs.

There are several representations of Waters. A portrait painting from around 1815, probably by David Wilkie, shows him more conventionally dressed, but still brightly, in a red waistcoat, white shirt, and grey trousers. An aquatint of 1822 by Thomas Kelly depicts him dancing surrounded by men and women and a vendor of plaster casts, all engaged in what is called a London street party, at the foot of the statue of Charles I at Charing Cross at the end of the Strand. E. Wright drew him with a broom and a top hat held out for begging, with a wooden shack and slender trees behind him, under the title 'The Old Commodore of Tottenham Court Road'. Illustrations with the feather hat and jauntily angled leg found form in figures made of china, earthenware, and pearlware. A Staffordshire statue presented him in royal blue, a dog between his leg and prosthesis, holding a begging hat between its jaws. Another included the costume but changed the colours of his attire. Some figurines were made by Robert Shout, statue manufacturer and relief moulder, located at 18 Holborn. Shout was mentioned in a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley ('adorned with many a cast from Shout'), published posthumously by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley in 1824.⁴⁸ One figure of Billy Waters, made in 1821, his name emblazoned in gold along the base, showed his trousers stripy blue, his jacket and waistcoat touched with gold. It was likely based on a caricature of Waters by Thomas Lord Busby which appeared in a series titled *Costume of the Lower Orders of London: Painted and Engraved from Nature* [1820]. Here he was described as providing, in his own way and not in the same way as the Mechanics' Institution, education: his singing, dancing, and fiddling 'affording a lesson to the thoughtful, and no little amusement to the thoughtless'.⁴⁹

An image of Billy Waters in feathered hat and torn military jacket was included, in July 1821, in Pierce Egan and Robert and George Cruikshank's serial publication, *Life in London*, a popular monthly novel by instalments, whose full title was *Life in London; or, The Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq., and his Elegant Friend, Corinthian Tom, Accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*. Egan wrote the words and the Cruikshank brothers supplied the colourful illustrations, which were published by Ackermann on the Strand.⁵⁰ The depicted scenes concentrated on scurrilous aspects of London life. For the most part, anyone drawn into the net of

⁴⁸ *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Hunt, 1824), p. 66.

⁴⁹ Cited in Shannon, *Billy Waters is Dancing*, p. 160.

⁵⁰ See Ann Bermingham, 'Urbanity and the Spectacle of Art', in *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture 1780-1840*, ed. by James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 151-76 (pp. 161-62).

Life in London came off badly. Tom and Jerry came to be a name for disreputable types who hang around ale houses or gambling establishments. Some scenes were set around the Strand.⁵¹ One scene, ‘Tom Getting the Best of a Charley’, taking place just inside the Temple Bar Gate, looks west to St Clement’s. Another, ‘A Shilling Well Laid Out’, depicts Tom and Jerry at a rather more exclusive venue, an ‘exhibition of pictures at the Royal Academy’, in Somerset House. Waters was depicted in one vignette playing his fiddle inside a pub at St Giles. With this scene, *Life in London* takes Billy Waters away from the public gaze that met his busking performances on the Strand and places him at his favoured local hostelry, the Rose and Crown Tavern, which was inside the impoverished St Giles Rookery. The title is ‘Tom and Jerry “Masquerading it” among the Cadgers in the “Back Slums” in the Holy Land’. The rookery of St Giles had the ironic name the ‘Holy Land’, on account of St Giles being the patron saint of beggars and the impression that slums were zones where the law did not dare intrude and so were sanctuaries.⁵² Billy Waters’s character is just off-centre in the image, behind the beggar girl, Peg, who has captured the attention of Corinthian Tom. The scene is a raucous one — a mix of social types, giddily merrymaking, with Billy Waters fiddling in the tumult, his hair long and white, his feather pink at its end, his jacket blue.

Life in London became a play, retitled *Tom and Jerry*, adapted by William Moncrieff and performed at the Adelphi, the theatre on the Strand, across the road from Fountain Court. Billy Waters busked at this location.⁵³ Now a version of him was to be on the stage. The play, which opened late in 1821, was a huge success, running for sixteen months and totalling one hundred performances. A scene titled ‘Back Slums in the Holy Land’, based on the image ‘Tom and Jerry “Masquerading it” among the Cadgers in the “Back Slums” in the Holy Land’, saw various actors playing the role of ‘Billy Waters’, including the clown Signor Paulo. The portrayal was negative. Waters was shown as a bulky rogue and quite ridiculous. He leads a group of beggars. The stage characterization of the busker spilled out from the Adelphi onto the streets that Waters busked on — and the degradation of his character jeopardized Waters’s mode of existence: his reputation besmirched; his income diminished. Moncrieff related later that Waters attended a performance and denounced the man playing a role that bore his name. The audience, Moncrieff maintained, turned on him and threw him out of the theatre. He was later harassed by the authorities and arrested for begging. He appeared at the Hatton Garden

⁵¹ The location of the scenes of *Life in London* have been mapped onto William Faden’s 1819 fourth edition of Horwood’s Plan of London. See Matthew Sangster’s ‘Mapping Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1821)’ <<https://www.romanticlondon.org/life-in-london-map/#15/51.5153/-0.1178>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

⁵² See *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* <<https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/7wek5bi>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

⁵³ Shannon, *Billy Waters is Dancing*, pp. 2, 153–55.

Sheriff's Court of Enquiry in 1822. It is said he sold his violin for money to feed his wife and child. Destitute, he ended up in the workhouse at St Giles, Short's Gardens, just south of the rookery, and was dead by 21 March 1823.⁵⁴ The rumour is that with his dying breath he cursed Tom and Jerry.

Images of him that appeared in Orlando Hodgson's *Cries of London* and various other illustrated volumes continued to be reproduced multiply after his death.⁵⁵ Now he was legendary. His mortal remains ended up in the trenches of the paupers' and Catholics' burial ground set at a distance from Old St Pancras church by Somers Town. From these dugouts, 'resurrection men' took the corpses for dissection, acts that would become literary in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), where Old St Pancras Church and Burial Ground is the site of Jerry Cruncher's grave robbing. Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was already buried in the main churchyard there. Godwin would end up in the churchyard in April 1836, coming back to Somers Town and his first Mary. Mary Jane followed in 1841, the same year as George Birkbeck died. The Godwins stayed buried there until 1851, when the grandson, Sir Percy Florence Shelley, 3rd Baronet, disinterred the contents of his family tomb and reburied them — without Mary Jane Clairmont — in St Peter's Church, Bournemouth. This removal occurred six years before the railway came, a development that necessitated Thomas Hardy's rearrangement of the graveyard. This reorganization occasioned also his poem 'The Levelled Churchyard' (c. 1882), in which we might have cause to reflect on those many, including our characters in this article, who ended their days there:

We late-lamented, resting here,
Are mixed to human jam,
And each to each exclaims in fear
'I know not which I am!'.⁵⁶

It — this article, the history — ends in death. And a messy muddle of lives and bodies that contributed to the liveliness of the Strand and the culture that spawned a radical educational proposition and a seizure of life's blessings from below and in opposition to the status quo and in and against the flow of history, progress, change, traffic on the

⁵⁴ Detailed in Shannon, *Billy Waters is Dancing*, pp. 251–56.

⁵⁵ Orlando Hodgson, *Hodgson's The Cries of London* (Hodgson, 1822), Princeton University Library, Cotsen's Children Library, 681 Pams / Eng 19 / Box 027, inscribed 'Jonatn. Gawtress Book 1824 Be a good boy.', reproduced in Shannon, *Billy Waters is Dancing*, p. 36; on the 'Cries' format, see also pp. 158–59.

⁵⁶ 'The Levelled Churchyard' (c. 1882), in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Samuel Hynes, 5 vols (Oxford University Press, 1982–95), I: *Wessex Poems, Poems of the Past and Present, Times Laughingstocks* (1982), p. 196, ll. 5–8.

street. This sketch has attempted to evoke convivial scenes at and around the moment of Birkbeck's inauguration. Pleasurable, raucous, challenging, disorderly, but also educative, these scenes take part in a vernacular culture. Birkbeck College originates within the proximity of a street-level culture. A moment and a movement around the Strand brought something into being. 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? Pedlars, hawkers, milkmaids, grocers, buskers, soldiers, sailors, rag-and-bone men: their images a version of an as yet unwritten college yearbook from a future far away in time and dislocated — northwards — in space — in which they, the 'lower orders', were not displayed for the amusement of those who deemed themselves superior? What possibilities among the disenfranchised now? The costs are so much higher, the hopes so much diminished. May Birkbeck reanimate for a third century its radical, vernacular pedagogical conception!

