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The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

by Sarah Zimmerman

SARAH ZIMMERMAN'S *THE ROMANTIC LITERARY LECTURE IN BRITAIN* is an illuminating study of the romantic literary lecture during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, when it emerged as a highly popular medium. Between 1806 and 1820, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Thelwall, Thomas Campbell, and William Hazlitt educated, delighted, and sometimes baffled audiences who flocked to hear them in a range of London's institutional and private venues, some of which had for years been the site of popular scientific lectures and demonstrations but were now expanding their offerings to include literary and philosophical subjects. Coleridge and Thelwall had gotten their start in the radical lecture circuit of the 1790s; it was then that the young Coleridge first made an impression on the still younger Hazlitt. The theaters in which they resurfaced more than a decade later—the Royal, Surrey, and Russell Institutions, as well as private halls—excluded working-class bodies and revolutionary thought, instead catering to a middle- and upper-class clientele who came to see and be seen, but also, and especially in the case of female auditors, to participate in the period's intellectual culture and debates. Focusing primarily on the lectures of Coleridge and Hazlitt as they survive as texts, critics have written about the role the romantic literary lecture played in both codifying romantic aesthetic values and anticipating how literary studies became professionalized.

Zimmerman's book contributes to this work and complicates these claims. The literary lecture, she argues, must be read as a social and situated performance, its meaning inextricable from the dynamics between lecturer and audience, lecturer and site, lecturer and rival lecturers, and, in the case of Coleridge and Thelwall, of the lecturer to the revolutionary period. While subsequently printed volumes sometimes claim to capture the substance of these lectures, their survival and their effects are better measured by tracing how they rippled through salon-style conversations, auditors' notes, epistolary exchanges, and newspaper notices and reviews. Attending to the literary lecture as ephemeral social performance, Zimmerman persuasively shows, serves to expand our sense of the lecture's impact on the period's literary culture, on our contemporary understanding of romanticism as an aesthetic movement, and on the future of literary criticism more broadly.

Zimmerman's first chapter provides a brief history of lecture culture leading up to the period covered by the book and describes the methodological

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challenges of focusing on performances the records of which are often themselves partial and ephemeral—lecturers' and auditors' notes, recorded conversations, letters, and so on. The remainder of the book focuses on six case studies, with a chapter each devoted to Coleridge, Thelwall, Campbell, and Hazlitt, followed by two chapters that attend to the period's best-known auditors: John Keats, famously influenced by Hazlitt, and three women—Mary Russell Mitford, Lady Charlotte Bury, and Catherine Maria Fanshawe, all authors in their own right—who attended and recorded the scene and their reactions.

Although Coleridge's first 1808 lecture series at the Royal Institution followed Thelwall's first literary lectures by two years, Zimmerman begins with the former, in part because the tenets Coleridge espoused became so central to what we understand as romantic aesthetic values, in part because he dramatizes so well a tension between those literary tenets and the actual circumstances of his lecturing. Coleridge, Zimmerman proposes, from the first performed a "disappearing act," which sought to occlude both his earlier role as radical preacher and his current role of paid celebrity lecturer, dependent on the whims of "fashion" and the women who were a significant portion of his audience. Extolling the value of solitary reading and of a literature that rises above the vagaries of the marketplace, Coleridge, in his Shakespearean lectures, cast himself as a Hamlet-like figure, the poet-philosopher given over to "thought" rather than "action," inviting the audience's engagement in a "suspension of disbelief," a "forgetting [of] the theater in which they sat listening" (56).

Thus, Zimmerman argues, the Coleridgean claims that came to define a romantic poetics—especially, that the value of literature derives from its resistance to "fashion"—are fully imbricated in the marketplace they criticize. They are also challenged by other lecturers of the period. Thoroughly identified with his earlier career as radical orator, John Thelwall could not have pulled off such a disappearing act, nor did he try. His later career as a lecturer on literature came out of an innovative pedagogy that used the recitation of poetry to address speech disorders and teach elocution, and that was in keeping with his long commitment to an expanded social access to public discourse. Thelwall agreed with Coleridge on the value of education and its role in inculcating independent thought, but in the course of his career as a lecturer, rather than emphasizing the pleasures of literature as solitary enjoyment and dismissing popular taste, he founded schools, welcomed women into his institutions as audience and teachers (and referred respectfully to women writers), followed and celebrated public theater, and emphasized the social value of poetry as an oral practice.

Campbell, who took his place on the lecture stage after having been mockingly critiqued as a poet by his rivals Coleridge and Hazlitt, likewise welcomed women into his lectures (and benefitted greatly from their patronage): criticized as a poet for an adherence to convention and classical subjects, as a lecturer he embraced the project of making classical literature

available and accessible to his audience, and, as an early champion of the University of London, envisioned an institution the expansive curriculum of which was modelled on public lecture culture. In many ways, Hazlitt as literary lecturer is more of a fellow-traveler with Coleridge than Thelwall and Campbell, and his lectures, together with Coleridge's, have done much to shape our views of a romantic aesthetic that celebrates posterity, laments the power of the literary marketplace, and prefers the lasting written word over the ephemeral performance. Hazlitt differed from Coleridge, however, in that his eye was always on publication. His lectures are our first examples of modern professional criticism, Zimmerman argues, and they are so because of the way Hazlitt's experience of public speaking so thoroughly shaped his essayistic form and style.

Auditors were central to the dynamic of the lecture and to its after-effects. To make this point, at the end of her book Zimmerman turns first to John Keats, who attended Hazlitt's lectures and whose responses to them in letters and poems are well known. Zimmerman instead focuses on the less direct ways Keats's experiences as an auditor, first at Guy's Hospital, then as temporary theater critic, and then at Hazlitt's lectures, may have informed his verse—for example, his interest in and frequent dramatization of a posture of listening—and sparked his thinking about the poetic cultivation of "wise passiveness"—a receptivity that pushes back against Hazlitt's "gusto" but, Zimmerman argues, at the same time is indebted to Keats's experiences of Hazlitt as lecturer. The final chapter appropriately turns to the cases of three women who attended these literary lectures that tended at once to court female attention and, especially in the cases of Coleridge and Hazlitt, to dismiss women as poets, novelists, and arbiters of taste. Mitford, Bury, and Fanshawe at once eagerly availed themselves of the educational opportunities offered by the literary lecture and wittily and acerbically described them as cultural events, both in published work and, especially in the case of Fanshawe, in manuscripts that circulated freely, attesting both to the independence and vigor of women as arbiters of taste and to the survival of manuscript culture well into the ascendency of a print literary marketplace.

The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain acknowledges and appreciates the work of other romanticists who have written on this subject, including Jon Klancher, Peter Manning, and David Hadley. With its focus on case studies and its attention to the performance and the social environment of the lecture, Zimmerman's contribution seeks less to produce a single through line of argument than to enrich and complicate our understanding of both romanticism and the history of the institutionalization of literary studies. Coleridge's and Hazlitt's claims about literature have long dominated accounts of what romanticism was and what great literature should be—experimental and ahead of its time, for the ages rather than for the popular taste, speaking to the solitary mind, and so on. Zimmerman's illuminating study persuasively shows the myriad ways in which these claims for literary value were in tension with, or even reactive to, the settings in which they arose. They were,

moreover, contested in their own moment by the equally popular Thelwall and Campbell, more catholic when it came to modern literature and modern tastes to the point of championing women's value as writers and their rights to educational opportunity. Coleridge's and Hazlitt's claims have deeply informed the espoused values of literary studies, but Thelwall and Campbell have perhaps had the more lasting legacy, since literary education, together with the lecture format itself, both owe their very presence in the modern British university curriculum to them.

In her account of her methodology Zimmerman addresses the difficulty of studying something as situated and ephemeral as "the lecture." At times I wish she had done still more to mine the responses of auditors throughout, especially in the Coleridge chapter, which tends to foreground Coleridge's accounts, in letters to friends and elsewhere, of what he thought he was doing and pays less attention to the famously uneven effects—veering from exasperation to wonder—he produced. But then, Coleridge keeps reappearing throughout the book, and, particularly in the Hazlitt chapter, the often-reported frustration and magic of listening to him comes across more forcefully. And this reminds me that the pleasures of this well-researched, compellingly-written book are local but also cumulative: each case study provides a new window into the lively and complex social and intellectual world of the literary lecture in Britain, thickening our sense of this vibrant culture as it goes. Zimmerman begins her preface with an account of her own experiences as an academic lecturer; for those of us who have faced an audience of students from the lecture podium, the book is especially valuable in the way it connects us to this long, rich history.