

## How Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy' and other polemics live on in political thought and action

Percy Shelley's polemics have travelled down winding paths, inhabiting various lives, and becoming culturally and politically pervasive. From their use in the Chartist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, to modern appearances in graffiti, these expressions display an incredible ability to voice other people's thoughts and feelings, and thus live on. This essay explores why and how these polemics live on in 2022, a feat that can be attributed to their functions as calls to actions, political analyses, and emotional reflections on oppression.

Graffiti takes an idea and puts it on stage to the world. Just as William Blake's lyrics could be found around London in the 1960s and 70s (Holmes, 2016), Shelley's words, and adaptations of them, can be seen in Britain and North America today. Shelleyan graffiti (Figs. 1, 2, and 3) as a form of public communication demonstrates clearly the lasting poignancy of Shelley's voice, to the extent that people feel them to be the best medium of sharing their opinion and calling the passer-by to action. The last stanza of 'The Mask of Anarchy', in particular, meets this purpose perfectly, and its use is thus seen repeatedly. The stanza begins with a strikingly empowering tone, with "slumber" suggesting the power has always been with the masses but needs simply to be mobilised to reach the strength of "lions". The people exist in "unvanquishable number," unambiguously stating that they cannot and will not be subdued; just as the poem endures through time, so do the people. The "chains" are implied to have never been a natural part of humanity, having "fallen on you," revealing there was a time they had not been there and can thus be "shake[n]" off, refuting the idea of any divine or natural privilege belonging to the bourgeoisie. The stanza ends with the ultimate polemic statement of "Ye are many – they are few," taking the 'us and them' attitude of the upper classes and reclaiming it against them.



Figure 1: Painted fence from York's Barbican Community Centre Squat. Taken by author. (2021)



Figure 2: Sticker in New York City. (Radical Graffiti, 2021) Reproduced with permission.

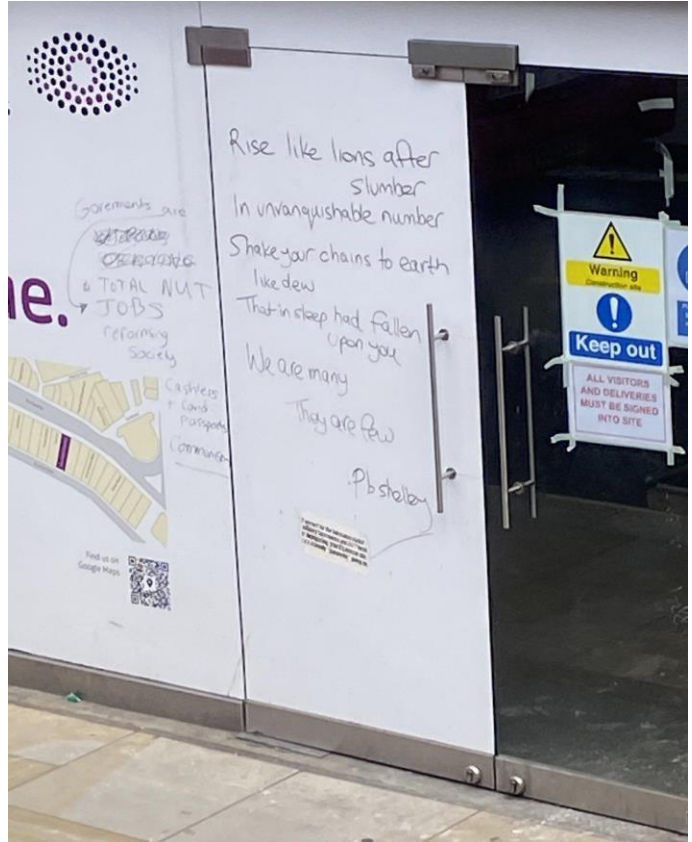


Figure 3: Graffiti in Richmond. (Somervell, 2021) Reproduced with permission.

However, Shelley’s polemics are more layered than simply a call to action. Behrendt (1989, cited in Paley, 1991, p. 91) criticises ‘Mask’ as a poem that “implicitly condemns a variety of the violence it explicitly condemns,” and Scrivener describes it as “contradictory, at war with itself.” (1982, cited in Paley, 1991, p. 91) These statements actually point to the nuances of the poem that perpetuate its timelessness in another way: ‘Mask’ grapples with the same questions around violence that activists deal with today around how to react to an intrinsically violent state when even peaceful protest—the deadly violence at Peterloo for Shelley, and the police reaction to Black Lives Matter protests as one of many examples today—is met with state violence. ‘Mask’ therefore lives on, engaging with modern political discourse despite its composition over two-hundred years ago.

Shelley similarly engages with modern political discourse through his attacks on the very foundations of government power. In their 1888 lecture to the Shelley Society, Edward and Eleanor Marx-Aveling observe of ‘Mask’: “not only the mere man but the infamous principle he represents is the object of attack.” Shelley personifies the principles represented by his contemporary politicians—“I met Murder on the way— He had a mask like Castlereagh” in ‘Mask’ and “Now o’er the palsied earth stalks giant Fear,/ With War, and Woe, and Terror, in his train” in *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*—and, through attacking the values held by politicians in addition to the politicians themselves, creates an argument that lives on through time. Although the politicians

mentioned are dead, the principles they represent are not. State-sanctioned “Murder” takes the forms of cuts to welfare, police brutality, and war. “Fraud” and “Hypocrisy” remain in the forms of widespread corruption and a disparity between the rules for the ruling class and the working class, illustrated in the British government’s treatment of Covid-19 restrictions.

Furthermore, Shelley’s polemics express the emotions that come from oppression, again adding to their timelessness. While the details of the situation may change, the continuation of oppression induces the continuation of these emotions. Shelley highlights the injustice of these emotions in ‘Mask’ by depicting Sidmouth “On a crocodile”, creating a contrast between the implied crocodile tears of the aristocracy and the intense unheard suffering of the working class. This sentiment, along with a yearning for a better time, is echoed in *Posthumous Fragments* as the narrator aches for “the time” when “No more death and desolation reign”. Additionally, Shelley explores an anger at injustice describing the aristocracy as “leechlike to their fainting country” in ‘England in 1819’ and as “ungrateful drones” in ‘Song to the Men of England’. These comparisons to species seen as parasitic expounds a clear view about their real place in society. The lack of sting of the aristocracy alludes to their unfounded pomposity but relative weakness, whilst the working class are far greater in number and have metaphorical stings. Drones are unable to feed without help from worker bees, making the workers essential for the bourgeoisie’s survival and therefore giving them immense power. A drone’s role is solely to mate with the queen; the function of the aristocracy is suggested to be only to maintain status through lineage. Shelley therefore manages to explore the complex emotions of injustice, anger, and fear elicited by oppression, and develops his call for action around them, providing hope that prevails through centuries.

In these ways, Shelley’s polemics take on a new life with every reader. Their use in political graffiti speaks to their ability to both capture the emotions felt in response to oppression and injustice, and to act as an empowering call to action. As Shelley himself observes in his *Defence of Poetry*, “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.” (1840, p. 12) Poetry uniquely understands and expresses the state of the world and ‘life’ itself, and therefore lives on.

Word count: 975

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