Paul Keen. *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere.* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999. Pp. 300.

Like many scholars and critics of the past few decades, Paul Keen (of Carleton University) examines the place of literature in the world-historical revolution of the 1790s in order to reflect on what many see as a world-historical crisis today. As Keen states, the "object" of *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* "is the long history of the changing status of literature as a public sphere, but its focus crystallizes in the 1790s when the contradictions inherent in this discourse were most dramatically foregrounded" (10). Historicizing literature and the 1790s enables us to historicize the present, when historicism is understood as a major instrument of critical analysis for us now. Keen's history is an exemplary development of this use of historicism.

Its roots are in the post-war transformation in universities and academic disciplines as thousands of students, and eventually professors, from classes and social groups who historically had not participated in higher education challenged received academic and cultural institutions, attitudes, and assumptions. One result was the rapid growth in the 1960s and 1970s of historical studies building on a leftist tradition of social history, and examining the classes and groups from which such students and professors themselves came. In English studies, major beneficiaries were historical periods characterized by lower- and middle-class resistance, protest, and revolt such as the English Civil War and the era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. The past three decades have seen a steady development of research on those periods, among others.

Over these decades, such work has responded in various ways and degrees to the rise of critical sociology, the "linguistic turn," structuralist and post-structuralist theory, new Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, and feminism during the 1970s; to post-colonial theory and criticism and theories and histories of sexuality during the 1980s; and, increasing after 1989 and the proclaimed triumph of liberalism, to renewed interest in the nature of civil society and the public sphere, and in the history and destiny of the modern liberal state. For the Revolutionary and Romantic period alone, these movements in research and criticism, at times interacting, at times collaborating, at times contending, have produced a substantial library of monographs, academic journals, essays, editions, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, publishers' series, and databases and websites, not to mention conferences, associations, and discussion lists. The revolu-

tion—be it the social-intellectual revolution of the past half century or the revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—has, it seems, been accommodated in the academy. Whether this accommodation should make us feel comfortable or uneasy is another question.

The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s is one of the best recent contributions to this library of Revolution and Romantic studies. It originated as a doctoral dissertation at one centre of historicist Revolutionary-Romantic literary studies, in the University of York (England), led by John Barrell, pioneering scholar in the field. Keen's book is published in the major venue for such new work—Cambridge Studies in Romanticism edited by two other pioneers, Marilyn Butler of Oxford and James Chandler of Chicago. Like their work, *The Crisis of Literature* grows out of the work of Raymond Williams (with E. P. Thompson's work also in the background). Keen also scrupulously employs insights from most of the critical and theoretical movements described earlier, especially new left, feminist, and post-colonial criticism, examining a wide range of texts, literary and non-literary, by writers major and minor, canonical and otherwise.

In his introduction, titled "Problems now and then," Keen points out salient similarities between the 1790s in Britain, at the moment of struggle over formation of the literary institution as it would be known for two centuries, and the new questioning of that institution by a wide array of groups in the late twentieth century. Keen pursues this connection throughout the chapters that follow. In Part One, "The Enlightenment," he describes the new "republic of letters" and the new "men of letters," and in Part Two, "Marginalia," he examines contesting elements in the Revolutionary-Romantic formation of Literature, including (in the terminology of the 1790s)—"the poorer sort" (principally "writers sprung from the people" such as Francis Place, Thomas Spence, and those in the London Corresponding Society), "masculine women" (principally Mary Wollstonecraft, but also Mary Hays), and "Oriental literature" (principally Sir William Jones and his circle).

In these well researched, crisply reported, deftly connected investigations, Keen connects literature, as a refashioned instrument of social struggle, but also itself a field of struggle in a revolutionary age, to the period's transformation of old Whig political ideology into a new, comprehensive reformism, and the transformation of the reading public into the political-nation-in-waiting that would eventually achieve hegemony in a reconstituted, liberal state. Working with such broad themes, Keen yet illustrates his argument with detailed examination of texts and authors, addressing particular moments of crisis in the longer revolution, and

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adducing a wide range of recent scholarship and criticism. The result is an engaging narrative and analysis of individual agents working with large social and cultural processes not only to imagine things otherwise but to make them so, through print. Throughout these investigations, Keen returns to their use for us now in critiquing the literary institution, and academic discourse itself, in relation to contested ideas of civil society and the public sphere.

In his conclusion, "Romantic revisions," Keen positions his work in relation to the question, once again, and as raised most pointedly by Jerome McGann, of the Romantic ideology still informing, in largely unrecognized ways, our ideas of literature, identity, and nation, especially as seen in the apparently unavoidable figure of Wordsworth. The book returns, then, to the long vexed questions of the relation between Enlightenment and Romanticism, across the decade of the Revolutionary 1790s, and, more broadly, of the relation between the aesthetic and the political—a question that studies such as this help is to pursue for our own time.

Gary Kelly
University of Alberta

Peter Gibian. *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Pp. 398.

Fittingly, I had just sat down for a good boiled egg at the breakfast table when I took up Peter Gibian's *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation.* Beyond providing astute and convincing critical analyses of Holmes's "breakfast table" conversation books, Gibian demonstrates how Holmes's unique structure of *conversation* figures in the development of Holmes's other startling and progressive ideas found in his novels, medial essays, notes and correspondence. Especially as a "structure" for confident self-development, conversation played an active role in creating a culture of public socio-political participation by energizing the public sphere with the critical exchange of ideas. As the boarding house breakfast table suggests a space for the engagement of life's diverse travellers, so the conversation it generated was to be heterogeneous and non-exclusive. Differences of class, gender, and region all come to the table to talk.