CHAPTER 11

Action at a Distance
Communication and Material Entanglement in Queen Mab *and* The Mask of Anarchy

Mary Fairclough

Throughout his life, Percy Bysshe Shelley reflected on the theory and practice of communication across distances of space and time. This essay argues that Shelley offers a unique account of the way that poetry mediates or overcomes distance. In doing so, it contributes to a rich scholarly discussion of communications media and mediation in the Romantic period, but it argues that for Shelley the creative power of poetry overcomes spatial and temporal distance, and even negates mediation itself. Shelley's account of poetic creation and communication coalesces both with the material sciences of his own age and with much more recent investigations of quantum physics. For Shelley, communication at a distance always has powerful political implications. In the two poems under discussion here, *Queen Mab* and *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley first establishes and tests his account of unmediated communication and then attempts to put it to work in the repressive political atmosphere of 1819.

At the start of his career, Shelley focuses on the physical media of such distant communication. Two sonnets of August 1812, "To a Balloon Laden with Knowledge" and "On Launching Some Bottles Filled with Knowledge into the Bristol Channel," celebrate his actual practices for disseminating his pamphlet *Declaration of Rights*, with its claims that "A man has a right to unrestricted liberty of discussion" and "A man has not only a right to express his thoughts, but it is his duty to do so" (*Prose* 58). Such expression and discussion are made possible by what we would call communications media, Shelley suggests.[1] Each sonnet apostrophizes its vehicle, praising the balloon's "Bright ball" and the bottles' "dark green forms" (1 [*CP* II: 65]; 2 [66]). But each also switches from the medium to the "knowledge" it bears, which seems to act with more than material power. In "To a Balloon," the "spark" that the balloon bears, "gleaming on a hovel's hearth," becomes a bright "beacon in the darkness of the Earth"; in "On Launching some Bottles," their

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"freight" in turn kindles a "radiance [that] gleams from pole to pole" (10, 12 [*CP* II: 65]; 10, 12 [*CP* II: 66]). Shelley suggests a distinction between the material qualities of these vessels and the more evanescent vital qualities of "knowledge."

Later in his career, especially in exile in Italy, the practices of long-distance communication became even more practically important. In 1819 in particular, Shelley felt the spatial and temporal distance from political events at home. He continued to sustain his communication at a distance with both readers and collaborators; as Nikki Hessell has discussed, Shelley, with Leigh Hunt and Lord Byron, established the project of the journal *The Liberal* across distances of space and time, and his collaborators continued to do so after his death.[2] And many of Shelley's later poetic works, as Omar F. Miranda has recently shown, interrogate questions of communication across time and space to the extent that they might meet the description of a "global lyric": "an open and convocative poetic form of personal voice seeking 'farthest horizons' whose resulting dilated sphere traverses boundaries of race, culture, time, and/or space."[3] In this essay, I take up this rich model of Shelley's open, space-traversing poetics but focus on the problem of mediation.

Important analyses of Romantic media and mediations by Andrew Burkett, Yohei Igarashi, and Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane have tended to begin their discussions with a focus on the material media of Romantic art and literature, from print, to lithography, to telegraphy, to theater. Shelley, as we have seen, is interested in physical forms of mediation, but his developing account of matter renders mediation itself unnecessary. As Langan and McLane note, like balloons and bottles, a medium connotes "a middle layer; a means; an intermediary; a transmitting conduit; an impeding conduit; a solution or solvent; a physico-technical apparatus; a route; a conductor; an instrument; a means of communication; a physical object for the storage of data."[4] What these diverse phenomena share is the quality of in-betweenness, standing between the "knowledge" of Shelley's sonnets and their audience. Likewise, mediation for Clifford Siskin and William Warner is "the work done by tools, by what we would now call 'media' of every kind – everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between."[5] Shelley is fascinated by questions of communication, but I argue that he makes the case for specifically poetic "knowledge" as resisting or negating these forms of mediation. Poetic knowledge is not transmitted by an intermediary but rather makes its interventions through an alternate process, which we can term "action at a distance."

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I argue that, after 1812, Shelley's work orients itself to the vital, dynamic qualities of poetic knowledge itself, rather than the media that form and bear it, to the extent that his vision for poetry becomes a form of action at a distance. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, action at a distance is "the action of one object on another regardless of the presence or absence of an intervening medium [...] influence without a physical intermediary."[6] Shelley's action at a distance thus does away with the in-between qualities of mediation. In *The Connected Condition*, Yohei Igarashi posits such a model of unmediated "influence" in what he terms the Romantic "dream of communication": "The fantasy [...] of a transfer of thoughts, feelings, and information between individuals made as efficient as possible [...] the wish for mediated forms of communication made more effective so as to feel like unmediated contact."[7] However, while Igarashi makes a strong case for the Romantic period as a networked age, the gap between such fantasies of communication and their manifestations in material technologies means that poets like Shelley have to imagine new means of communicating across distance. Shelley's creative attempt to complicate, even annihilate mediation undoes distances of space and time, promising to reach and generate new audiences and even, as I suggest in what follows, to create new worlds.

Shelley displayed intent interest and investment in systems of communication and transport that mediated his work.[8] But much of his writing seems to aspire to the condition of powerful, instantaneous communication without a communicating medium.[9] Such visions of unmediated communication are vitally important for the exiled poet with aspirations to cultural and political influence at home. Shelley's account of unmediated communication at a distance is not a mere flight of unrealized fancy; it is rooted in his scientific and affective understandings of matter. Shelley abandons the opposition we see in his early sonnets between material medium and evanescent subject and instead produces an account of dynamic matter that reconstitutes models of time and space and promises to do away with mediation altogether. In doing so, his work offers an account of time that differs from Jonathan Sachs's account of both the fast time enabled by Romantic media systems and the slow time of newly understood environmental, media, and social evolution.[10] Shelley offers a vision of matter that "cuts" distances of time as well as space to offer newly formed phenomena outside of temporal and spatial systems.

Shelley's investigation of mediation and matter chimes with accounts of materiality that are still being unraveled. As Richard C. Sha has shown, Shelley is among a number of Romantic writers who engage with

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contemporary physical sciences to understand matter as dynamic, as constituted by forces rather than individualized atoms or corpuscles.[11] This dynamic model of matter, Sha suggests, informs both Shelley's understanding of mediation and of action at a distance. "Shelley's theory of dynamic matter has neither need of an ether nor of a God behind it because there is only continuous interaction of matter."[12] A dynamic material universe does away with intervening media of all kind, and, Sha notes, it thus enables action at a distance: "Because atomism requires direct contact between corpuscles – there can be no action at a distance […] [But with the] turn to force […] action no longer requires direct contact."[13] Shelley's engagement with contemporary science provides him with a crucial foundation for his conception of unmediated communication and action as well as the importance of poetry for investigating and articulating such action.

As Sha notes, Romantic engagements with dynamic matter are phenomenological; in the absence of empirical proof of the operation of matter, the Romantic physical sciences showed that "one could think about matter but not know it."[14] And such Romantic thought experiments resonate with more recent investigations of matter, which reveal a still more radical aspect of Shelley's action at a distance. These are the quantum "thought experiments" produced by physicists like Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Albert Einstein, and Erwin Schrödinger in the 1920s and experimentally proved a century later. Shelley's account of matter and mediation strikingly coalesces with Karen Barad's treatment of quantum physics. Barad presents an "agential realist understanding of matter as a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations, rather than a property of things."[15] She argues that matter's radical dynamism complicates our very categories of time and space: "Matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still – an ongoing reconfiguring that exceeds any linear conception of dynamics in which effect follows cause end-on-end, and in which the global is a straightforward emanation outward of the local."[16] Barad's account of matter, I suggest, is a crucial tool for reading Shelley's treatment of action at a distance.

Commentators have noted such connections between Shelley's poetics and twentieth- and twenty-first-century quantum physics. Mark Lussier and Arkady Plotnitsky both argue for a "quantum mechanical Shelley," noting how his work resonates with quantum physics' dislocation of "the causal dynamics by means of which the behavior of physical objects is determined and that allows one to know with certainty their positions and motion."[17] And more recently, both Chris Washington and Kate

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Singer have specifically argued for the importance of Barad's work for reading Shelley, Washington making the case for love in the *Triumph of Life* as Baradian "intra-action" and Singer showing how Barad's account of matter informs our understanding of Shelley's "materialist literary methodology that intertwines relational, moving matter with language's own dynamism."[18] I build on these studies to argue that Shelley's account of dynamic matter performs Baradian "reconfiguring" of space and time. I argue that, for Shelley, poetry in particular enables a radical interrogation of matter and mediation, not merely because, as Sha notes, it prioritizes the play of the imagination but also because it produces distinct relations to space and time. In Barad's terms, we might read Shelley's poetics as an apparatus, a tool that cuts space-time in a distinct way and produces new possibilities for not only understanding but also remaking the world.

Shelley's poetry presents a developing account of matter that enables unmediated action at a distance through its reworking of space and time. In *Queen Mab*, Mab herself declares her command of "the wonders of the human world [...] / Space, matter, time, and mind" (VIII. 49–50 [*CP* II: 224]). *Queen Mab*'s account of material forces overcoming distance has incipient political power, as Shelley makes the case for the significance of the operation of the smallest atom and its effects on the grandest cosmological and societal systems. But Shelley articulates the urgent political power of such accounts of action at a distance most explicitly in *The Mask of Anarchy*. In the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, Shelley is determined that distances of time and space must be overcome in order to produce a unified response to the outrage. In contrast to the explicitly mediated political communications of his sonnets of 1812, in *The Mask of Anarchy* the voice of protest and reform is heard "over the Sea" and across the nation, apparently producing action at a distance (2 [*SPP* 316]). I read *The Mask of Anarchy* as a political test of the radical theorizing of *Queen Mab*, a test that meets sharp challenges in the repressive political environment of 1819. Commentators tend to note the future-oriented qualities of both *Queen Mab* and *The Mask of Anarchy*, connecting such orientation to utopian arguments in both poems.[19] But a quantum reading of Shelley's work radically unsettles such gestures to futurity and to improvement. The material entanglements of *Queen Mab* and *The Mask of Anarchy* disrupt progressive models of time and space and instead suggest that unmediated action and communication might repeatedly remake the world in new forms.

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I Baradian Entanglements

Quantum physics demonstrates that, in a quantum state, particles and indeed systems become "entangled." Doug Jackson defines such entanglement as:

> a condition in which pairs of particles are created whose quantum states cannot be described independently of one another, regardless of their physical and temporal separation. Entanglement therefore describes an uncanny form of causality across time and space so that any action upon one has an instantaneous effect on the other, irrespective of distance.[20]

Though this particle behavior was experimentally demonstrated in the 1920s, there was much debate over the cause of such quantum entanglement. As Barad notes, for Niels Bohr, the apparently "uncanny" effects of entanglement were clearly a property of matter: "the so-called instantaneous communication between spatially separated systems is explained by the fact that these allegedly separated states are not really separate at all, but rather 'parts' of one phenomenon."[21] Albert Einstein did not share this view and expressed skepticism that what he termed *spukhafte Fernwirkung*, or "spooky action at a distance," might be a property of matter itself, as he refused to believe that any information could travel faster than the speed of light.[22] Einstein argued instead for "hidden variables," phenomena as yet undetected that might mediate and explain quantum entanglement. But more recent experimental work has gradually ruled out the possibility of hidden variables. As Barad notes, "nature is not correctly described by a local hidden-variables theory [...] This is no mere philosophical prejudice but an empirical fact."[23] Bohr's thought experiments have been experimentally proved to show that in a state of quantum entanglement particles mutually affect one another despite apparent separation by distance.

The understanding of matter established by quantum physics challenges received models of both space and time. Summarizing recent empirical work on entangled states, George Greenstein and Arthur Zajonc note: "we must think in terms of nonlocality, and/or we must renounce the very idea that individual objects possess discrete attributes."[24] Barad develops this account of nonlocality to unsettle any idea of "individual objects." She challenges the notion of discrete objects in space, as experimental apparatus and human observation are inseparable from the object of study. A recent quantum eraser experiment confirms:

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> [T]he atom is not a separate object but rather an inseparable part of the phenomenon […] [W]e see evidence for the ontological priority of phenomena over objects. If one focuses on abstract individual entities the result is an utter mystery, we cannot account for the seemingly impossible behavior of the atoms.[25]

For Barad, the apparent "impossible" action at a distance produced by entanglement is a result of the reconceptualization of materiality from "object" to "phenomenon." In this reworking, "[t]here is not this knowing from a distance. Instead of there being a separation of subject and object, there is an entanglement of subject and object, which is called the 'phenomenon.'"[26] Barad's use of "phenomenon" retains the uncertainty Sha identifies at the heart of Romantic engagement with dynamic matter. And yet, Barad notes, it is possible to achieve objectivity without denaturing the "intra-active" "entanglement of subject and object" in phenomena. Barad refers to this means of knowing as an agential "cut," enabled by experimental apparatus: "knowing is a direct material engagement, a cutting together-apart, where cuts do violence but also open up and rework the agential conditions of possibility."[27] Such knowing is not a result of distance: "objectivity is premised on […] an individuation-within-and-as-part-of-the-phenomenon enacted in the placement of the cut […] rather than an absolute notion of externality."[28] And Barad stresses that it is also "contingent"; as Washington notes, "each new intra-action manifests a new relation between the discursive and the material, the subject and object," revealed by a new cut.[29] Thinking of quantum behavior as "intra-actions" within a continuous phenomenal system rather than between distinct objects separated by space is the means, Barad notes, to overcome the apparent "utter mystery" of entanglement.[30] But in order to do so, we must undo received notions of space, time, and matter.

Barad thus proposes an "understanding of matter as a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations, rather than a property of things."[31] This emphasis on "relations" is fundamental to her account: "relata do not pre-exist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions."[32] Relations cannot be understood according to received spatial models because they manifest within continuous phenomena and thus disrupt and reform our account of time and space:

> Matter's dynamism is generative not merely in the sense of bringing new things into the world but in the sense of […] engaging in an ongoing reconfiguring of the world. Bodies do not simply take their places in the world […] Rather, "environments" and "bodies" are intra-actively co-constituted.[33]

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Barad's account of matter in terms of mutually constitutive phenomena rather than discrete objects decenters the primacy of human experience. It gives material processes a creative force in which time and space are repeatedly remade: "Such a dynamics is not marked by an exterior parameter called time, nor does it take place in a container called space. Rather, *iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which temporality and spatiality are produced and iteratively reconfigured*."[34] As we have seen, objective "cuts" reveal new entanglements, and this process is potentially endlessly reproduced; the cut "is an act that occurs iteratively every time we see or understand matter into being."[35] Washington accounts for the "astonishing" consequences of Barad's work as follows:

> [Q]uantum entanglement alters the very ways in which we understand ontology for humans: the world only exists in a non-fixed […] space and time repeatedly created by the production of new spacetime worlds that are, in turn, created simultaneously by newly created subjects and objects. And since entanglement instantiates space and time new worlds are made with each entanglement.[36]

For Washington, Barad's emphasis on the creative force of entanglement is crucial for our reading of Shelley. Her "reconceptualization of quantum matter as entangling the subject and object in a space and time of their own making in an act of creative simultaneity, reveals a […] [bold] and politically radical Shelley."[37] Like Washington, I suggest that Shelley's work does not merely represent but aims to reform the world creatively, and his account of matter produces a model of action at a distance that does away with cause and effect, however instantaneous, and instead suggests a form of poetic creativity in which mediation is replaced by intra-actions that continually recreate the world.

Though they seem at times to touch the metaphysical, Barad's claims are founded in experimental physics. Commenting on the quantum eraser experiment, she returns to Einstein's work, to declare:

> There is no spooky-action-at-a-distance co-ordination between individual particles separated in space or individual events separated in time. Space and time are phenomenal, that is, they are intra-actively produced in the making of phenomena; neither space nor time exist as determinate givens outside of phenomena.[38]

Barad's work helps us to move past Einstein's account of mediating "hidden variables" and the logic of cause and effect on which they rely. In phenomenal systems, time and space are iteratively remade rather than instantaneously communicated across, or mediated. Indeed Vicki Kirby

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draws attention to a key Baradian statement in the notes to *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

> Rather blasphemously, agential realism denies the suggestion that our access to the world is mediated, whether by consciousness, experience, language, or any other alleged medium […] [A]gential realism calls into question the presumption that a medium […] is even necessary.[39]

For Barad, dynamic models of matter undo mediation entirely and thus approach the fantasy of unmediated communication and action posited by accounts of action at a distance. Such action is manifested in Shelley's poetics. Shelley makes action at a distance a political goal, and he suggests that poetry is the means through which this goal might be identified and enacted. I argue that we might treat poetry, in Shelley's scheme, as a form of Baradian apparatus with the facility to offer "agential cuts," to provide moments of insight within intra-active, unmediated, material, phenomenal systems.

II *Queen Mab*'s Dynamic Matter

Shelley's engagement with matter in *Queen Mab* demonstrates his informed interest in the contemporary physical sciences and their potential to enact new understandings of the social and political world as well as the physical environment.[40] In the poem, matter is a dynamic and elastic phenomenon, intimately connected with human experiences and institutions. Mab notes in Canto V that "Matter, with all its transitory shapes" is subject to the will of mankind (V.134, *CP* II: 201). And in Canto VIII "every shape and mode of matter lends / Its force to the omnipotence of mind" (VIII. 235–236 [229]). As Sha notes, "shape" is "an important descriptor within Romantic physics," which Michael Faraday among others uses to connote "a provisional materiality."[41] Shelley's use of the term in relation to matter in *Queen Mab* fits Sha's claim that "shape" emphasizes "the phenomenality of matter."[42] Shelley's accompanying notes engage further with contemporary physics and establish the principles on which matter's various "shape and mode" are built.

From the outset, Shelley presents matter, space, and time as mutually constitutive and makes poetry the means of intuiting and even creating such entanglements.[43] Canto I narrates the journey of the spirit of Ianthe and Queen Mab from earth to the regions of space and the fairy's celestial palace. But from her first interactions with Ianthe, Mab connects this spatial flight with her control of time: "The secrets of the immeasurable past […] / The

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future, from the causes which arise / In each event, I gather" (I.169–173 [*CP* II: 170]). Canto I's journey from earth to space emphasizes the cosmological scale of Shelley's narrative and the contemporary physical sciences on which he draws. Shelley stresses the vast scale and endless activity of this cosmological theatre, as

> the chariot's way
> Lay through the midst of an immense concave
> Radiant with million constellations, tinged
> With shades of infinite colour,
> And semicircled with a belt
> Flashing incessant meteors. (I.231–236 [172])

Shelley's account of the light of such "radiant" constellations and "sun's unclouded orb" draw on up-to-the-minute accounts of the operation of light (I.233, 242 [172]). Shelley's note to these lines cites Thomas Young's 1801 "double slit" experiment on light, to ponder the question, as Lussier puts it, "is light a wave or a particle?'[44] Shelley entertains both accounts, noting: "Light consists either of vibrations propagated through a subtle medium, or of numerous minute particles repelled in all directions from the luminous body" (*CP* II: 239). For Washington, Shelley's even-handedness "demonstrates a mind determined to speculate on the hither side of known reality," and he notes the connection between Young's thought experiment cited by Shelley and the work of Bohr and then Barad.[45] I suggest, too, that Shelley's engagement with light in his notes prompts him to interrogate other forms of materiality and to develop the possibility of unmediated connection even across vast cosmological schemes.

At the close of Canto I, Shelley appeals to a "Spirit of Nature." At first, this spirit is situated in the grand cosmological phenomena of Mab and Ianthe's journey:

> Spirit of Nature! Here—
> In this interminable wilderness
> Of worlds, at whose immensity
> Even soaring fancy staggers,
> Here is thy fitting temple! (I.264–268 [*CP* II: 173])

But Shelley switches from the vast and sublime to a very different scale and type of phenomena in the succeeding lines:

> Yet not the lightest leaf
> That quivers to the passing breeze
> Is less instinct with thee;

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Yet not the meanest worm
That lurks in graves and fattens on the dead,
Less shares thy eternal breath! (I.269–274 [173])

Shelley's "Spirit of Nature" is common to both vast meteorological and cosmological systems and the "lightest" and "meanest" life forms on earth. Shelley does not quite descend to the microscopic scale of particle physics, but he nonetheless suggests that systems at macroscopic and microscopic scales are continuous phenomena rather than separate states and that they are "instinct," "imbued or charged with […] a moving or animating force or principle."[46] As Shelley develops his account of matter over the course of the poem, he builds on this vision of material life as "instinct" with dynamic forces.

In Canto II of *Queen Mab*, Shelley shifts from hints of interconnected phenomena at varied scales to an account of Mab's and Ianthe's privileged vision of such interconnections, moving to the poem's most explicit gesture to a form of Baradian entanglement. Mab and Ianthe look down upon the earth from Mab's palace, and the narrator declares:

None but a spirit's eye,
And in no other place
But that celestial dwelling, might behold
Each action of this earth's inhabitants. (II.87–90 [*CP* II: 176])

This privileged vision is granted because Mab's palace seems distinct from the regular physical laws of the universe. This, combined with the bravery required for radical inquiry, produces a new form of insight:

matter, space, and time,
In those aërial mansions cease to act;
And all-prevailing wisdom, […]
o'erbounds
Those obstacles of which an earthly soul
Fears to attempt the conquest. (II.91–96 [176])

Equipped with a new "intellectual eye," Ianthe's spirit is able to use her insights into "matter, space, and time." Her eye provides a form of Baradian cut, enabling her to perceive the connections, indeed the entanglement, of apparently separate human and natural events, creating a new vision of one phenomenal system:

How wonderful! […] the weak touch
That moves the finest nerve
And in one human brain
Causes the faintest thought, becomes a link
In the great chain of nature. (II.102–108 [176])

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Canto II articulates *Queen Mab*'s central claims that spatial and temporal events are always in relation, that human concerns are intimately entangled with those of material "nature," and that the insights of poetry, Ianthe's intellectual eye, can define and make visible such entanglement.

Shelley shifts from spatial to temporal exploration, as Mab presents a succession of visions of past empires. But as her survey concludes, Mab demonstrates that the decline and fall of human empires is precipitated by humans' lack of awareness of their material form and connection with their environment. "Virtue and wisdom, truth and liberty" are "Fled" (II.206, 207 [*CP* II: 179–180]). The return of such principles Shelley suggests, should be predicated on a reminder of humankind's material nature:

> There's not one atom of yon earth
> But once was living man;
> Nor the minutest drop of rain,
> That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
> But flowed in human veins: (II.211–215 [180])

In Shelley's account of mutable and enduring matter, questions of causality are destabilized, and human experience radically decentered. For Shelley as for Barad, here "'environments' and 'bodies' are intra-actively co-constituted." Only "human pride," Mab declares, prevents the cut that makes visible such entanglements. Shelley ends Canto II by restating how such forces demand new conceptions of "matter, space, and time":

> those viewless beings,
> Whose mansion is the smallest particle
> Of the impassive atmosphere,
> Think, feel and live like man;
> […]
> And the minutest throb
> That through their frame diffuses
> The slightest, faintest motion,
> Is fixed and indispensable
> As the majestic laws
> That rule yon rolling orbs. (II.231–243 [180–181])

As Lussier notes, Shelley maps the universe "from macrocosmic to microcosmic dimensions," making the case for the dynamic "intra-action" of material forces even at vast scales and great cosmological distances.[47] There is no distinction between human and environment in this play of dynamic material phenomena and no need for mediation within such continuous systems.

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Canto II thus establishes a model of matter that Shelley sustains in *Queen Mab*'s surveys of time, space, and human society. In the visions of an ideal state with which Shelley ends the poem, he imagines these material entanglements across spatial scales and temporal epochs cut, made explicit, understood, and celebrated. In both Canto VI and Canto VIII, Shelley makes earthly existence "Symphonious" to or with "the planetary spheres," and, as we have seen, Mab brings her vision and guardianship of "Space, matter, time and mind" together as, in another objective cut, "Futurity / Exposes […] its treasure" (VI.41 [*CP* II: 207]; VIII.18 [223]; VIII.50–51 [224]). In Canto IX, as in Canto I, Mab surveys time and space to declare:

> O happy Earth, reality of Heaven!
> To which those restless souls that ceaselessly
> Throng through the human universe, aspire!
> Thou consummation of all mortal hope!
> Thou glorious prize of blindly working will,
> Whose rays, diffused throughout all space and time,
> Verge to one point and blend forever there! (IX.1–7 [230])

Shelley's "human universe" is a material universe. The "will" is conceived as "rays" that, like light, underpin the foundations of "space and time" but which are "forever" in motion, defying containment and explanation. Connection through space and time are a function of the dynamic materialities of Shelley's universe; they are not mediated by "hidden variables" but are entanglements generated by the functions of matter itself. Shelley's account of the moments of insight, of cut, generated by Mab herself and by Ianthe's intellectual eye, present poetic knowledge not as contained within a medium but rather as the cut that reveals material intra-actions. It also reworks questions of communication across distance. Shelley moves away from a model of transmission mediated from point to spatial or temporal point and instead proposes a phenomenal system in which bodies and forms are always already entangled, and which the cut of poetry can reveal and create in potentially endless new forms. Such an understanding of the material universe, time, and space forms the source of Shelley's urgent response to political contingencies, distance, and belatedness in *The Mask of Anarchy*.

III *The Mask of Anarchy*'s Political Intra-actions

The material conditions of Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy* point to the difficulties, even impossibilities, of unmediated communication at a distance in 1819 and thus pose a sharp challenge to the theoretical visions of *Queen Mab*. In contrast to the earlier poem's historical sweep and visions of

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futurity, *The Mask of Anarchy* addresses an urgent contemporary crisis. On August 16, 1819, yeomanry and horse guards attacked an unarmed crowd at a meeting for parliamentary reform in St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, trampling and stabbing at least eighteen people to death.[48] On that day, Percy and Mary Shelley were near Livorno in Italy, in mourning for the recent death of their son, William. This distance of thousands of miles delayed Shelley's receipt of news from home. His first report of what became known as the Peterloo Massacre arrived in a letter from his publisher on September 5, nearly three weeks later. Shelley's own response was immediate; he noted in a letter of September 6 that the "torrent of my indignation has not yet done boiling in my veins," and by September 21, with the aid of newspapers sent by friends, he had completed a draft of *The Mask of Anarchy* (*Letters* II: 116–117). He sent the poem to Leigh Hunt for publication in *The Examiner* newspaper on September 23, five weeks after Peterloo; Hunt declined to publish.[49]

The Mask of Anarchy is, then, a response to Peterloo that is markedly belated and highly mediated by the postal system and newspaper press. And yet, in the poem, Shelley presents a vision of unmediated communication across time and distance, a communication that catalyzes political justice. The nature and effectiveness of Shelley's political intervention in *The Mask of Anarchy* have been much discussed, but here I am most interested in the ways in which Shelley's poem complicates notions of distance, causality, and mediation. Shelley's vision of political action at a distance in *The Mask of Anarchy* is informed by his account of the material universe in *Queen Mab*, and as in the earlier poem, Shelley's treatment of matter and mediation resonates with the insights of quantum physics. But in *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley puts his treatment of matter, space, and time to political work. The violent power of the state can be overcome, Shelley suggests, by a form of action at a distance in which the cut of poetry creates a vision of resistance, of a people united across time and space against forces of tyranny. *The Mask of Anarchy* is a poem for our times, not so much because of its much-discussed gestures to futurity but rather because it destabilizes temporal distinctions of all kinds.[50]

In *The Mask of Anarchy*, distances of time and space are repeatedly overcome, be they distances between the poet-speaker and the events he describes or distances between human and natural elements and constituents of the poem's "nation." Whereas *Queen Mab* centered on the dynamic qualities of light, in *The Mask of Anarchy* Shelley considers the medium of sound.[51] But the operation of sound across impossible distances seems to negate its mediating function, as communication in the poem shifts

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instead to something akin to the material intra-actions described by Barad. The opening stanza depicts the speaker as exiled and distant:

> As I lay asleep in Italy
> There came a voice from over the Sea,
> And with great power it forth led me
> To walk in the visions of Poesy. (1–4 [*SPP* 316])

The otherworldliness of the "visions of Poesy" and the ludic play of the "Mask," for Andrew Franta, constitute "a mode of address that necessarily distances [Shelley] from an audience."[52] I suggest that at the start of the poem an unearthly "vision" is required to undo the distance between the speaker and events at home. But as *The Mask of Anarchy* progresses, Shelley presents an account of both human activity and natural forms as parts of a phenomenal system in which distances of time and space can be overcome through unmediated material processes.

In both the nightmarish spectacle of Anarchy's triumph and its defeat through the power of hope, *The Mask of Anarchy* unsettles distances of time and space and deprioritizes human activities in its account of the operation of material forces in the human and natural environment. Anarchy and his crew make an impossibly broad and swift tour of the nation:

> With a pace stately and fast,
> Over English land he passed
> […]
>
> And with glorious triumph, they
> Rode through England proud and gay
> […]
>
> O'er fields and towns, from sea to sea,
> Passed the Pageant swift and free,
> Tearing up, and trampling down;
> Till they came to London town. (38–53 [*SPP* 317–318])

"From sea to sea" the simultaneously "stately and fast" pageant advances, "tearing up" all in its path (50 [317]; 38 [317]; 52 [318]). The vibrations of the procession affect an even wider area, as "their trampling shook the ground" and their "tempestuous cry" serves to "sicken" the heart of auditors (43 [317]; 55 [318]). But their destructive power is counteracted by the apparently fragile female figure of Hope.

Hope is a human "maid," but she is quickly associated with an evanescent "Shape," "A mist, a light, an image" (86, 110, 103 [*SPP* 319]). Like the "shape" of Faraday's physics, and "every shape and mode of matter" in

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Queen Mab, this Shape's properties are phenomenal, disrupting laws of matter and scale.[53] It is "small at first and weak," but, like "vapour," shifts

> Till as clouds grow on the blast,
> Like tower-crowned giants striding fast
> And glare with lightnings as they fly,
> And speak in thunder to the sky,
>
> It grew—a Shape arrayed in mail
> Brighter than the Viper's scale
> […]
>
> On its helm, seen far away,
> A planet, like the Morning's, lay; (104, 105, 106–115 [319])

Hope's "Shape" shifts not only its form but also its scale, through meteorological to cosmological phenomena, with potent associated material forces like lightning. This shifting shape has the power to destroy the corruptions and depredations of Anarchy, Shelley suggests, by uniting material forces against usurpation. As in *Queen Mab*, poetry seems to conduct an agential cut, providing knowledge of, indeed creating, material phenomena operating intra-actively at multiple scales and forms. The "Shape" shifts once more into an articulation, the speech that comprises the rest of the poem. This voice, too, and its "words of joy and fear," challenge conceptions of time and space (138 [320]). It has no clear location or source; as Marc Redfield notes, "[t]he more closely one attends to the poem, the more difficult it becomes to say who or what this voice is."[54] It appears to arise out of the Shape's material meteorological and cosmological phenomena:

> A rushing light of clouds and splendour,
> A sense awakening and yet tender
> Was heard and felt— (135–137 [320])

The "Men of England" speech that follows can thus be read as an example of communication at impossible distance, arising not from a locatable source mediated through time and space but rather from a continuous phenomenal system comprising the entangled forces of human and environment and cut, re-created, and made visible through poetic utterance.

The Mask of Anarchy's central speech comprises a hymn, offering detailed analysis of and protest against political things as they are in Britain. But Shelley puts its disruption of received models of time and space to polemical use at two moments in particular. The voice responds to the violence of political authorities by calling for and describing two distinct "assemblies" of the people. The second of these, "a vast assembly," has recognizable features of the Manchester crowd on August 16, as the voice calls for that

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crowd to be "calm and resolute" even as they are attacked (295, 319 [*SPP* 324–325]). But the first "great Assembly" is much more difficult to locate in time and space. The voice declares:

> Let a great Assembly be
> Of the fearless and the free
> On some spot of English ground
> Where the plains stretch wide around.
>
> Let the blue sky overhead,
> The green earth on which ye tread,
> All that must eternal be
> Witness the solemnity. (262–269 [323])

At first glance, this seems a physical gathering of reformers, on a particular "spot of English ground" at a particular time. Yet this is "some spot," not particularized, surrounded by unnamed plains. Human activity is framed and given significance by the environmental forms of sky and earth, which impart "eternal," not temporal, meaning to the gathering. And, as the voice continues, the "Assembly" shifts further from a particularized location and time:

> From the corners uttermost
> Of the bonds of English coast,
> From every hut, village and town
> Where those who live and suffer moan
> For others' misery or their own, (270–274 [323])

As the voice describes the human participants of this "Assembly," the physical impossibility of the gathering becomes clearer. The crowd is gathered from the "uttermost" corners of England and from "every" dwelling place subject to suffering, so by implication, the whole nation. I have written elsewhere about this assembly as a virtual meeting, noting the parallels with actual simultaneous meetings of 1819, events orchestrated and highly mediated by the newspaper press.[55] But informed by the models of material entanglements and unmediated communication at a distance established in *Queen Mab* and given political significance here, we can read the material and political energies forming this assembly as a kind of entanglement, for a moment located in time and space by the cut of poetic articulation but potentially endlessly recreated. Such a vision has enormous polemical power, which might mitigate the chilling powers of distance, repression, and censorship. Shelley undoes the distinction between local assembly and political nation; both might be considered as one phenomenal system, in which bonds of solidarity and fellow feeling are not transmitted across distance but rather instantaneously created anew with every poetic cut.

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The celebrated conclusion to *The Mask of Anarchy* repeats and builds upon this conception of materialized political forces enacted across space and time. The voice declares:

> And that slaughter to the Nation
> Shall steam up like inspiration,
> Eloquent, oracular;
> A volcano heard afar.
>
> And these words shall then become
> Like oppression's thundered doom
> Ringing through each heart and brain,
> Heard again—again—again—(360–367 [*SPP* 326])

News of the "slaughter" of political tyranny is sublimated to the meteorological and geological phenomena of "steam" and volcanic vapor. The sound of such phenomena is not mediated but impossibly "heard afar," across the nation, and, the poem implies, by the speaker thousands of miles away, as each repeated poetic cut reveals new entanglements. The suggestion that this is an effect of materialized intra-action grows stronger as, like the "Men of England" speech "heard and felt," these words ring "again—again—again—" through both "the heart and brain" of "each" auditor, wherever their location. As Lussier notes, "Shelley's best poetry describes a universal cohesion created through waves, a vast network of matter woven from energy."[56] This materialized "network" or phenomenal system negates the spatial distances that threaten to isolate both the protesting inhabitants of England and the exiled speaker. They are united to form a political force of unplaceable location and "unvanquishable number" in the poem's closing lines (369 [326]).

The future-oriented gestures of Shelley's poetry are often explicit and much discussed; on the one hand, then, this quality makes him an obvious poet "for our times." But the impact of Shelley's vision of a materialized phenomenal universe is, I suggest, more interesting. Shelley's vision of unmediated communication through space and time enables a different understanding of his hopes and fears for the transmission of poetry, especially its reception by a future audience. Franta notes that "[i]n emphasizing poetic transmission, even to the extent of identifying poetry's power with its reception, Shelley acknowledges a dependence on the technology of writing."[57] A Baradian account of the entangled materialities of Shelley's work negates such anxieties in two ways. First, the visions of communication that we see in *Queen Mab* and *The Mask of Anarchy* do away with the mediating form of the written word, which becomes a kind of "hidden variable," an unnecessary explanatory step for a quantum communication that comprises

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"intra-actions" within a phenomenal system rather than mediated transmission between distinct objects and spaces. And second, such entangled materialities profoundly disrupt our notion of temporal distance and dislocation. For Barad, "neither space nor time exist as determinate givens." In *The Mask of Anarchy*'s two assemblies, Shelley takes into account the suffering material bodies of those who resist state violence, but he also offers an alternate vision of their materiality, in which assembly and nation become one phenomenal system revealed through poetic cut, not temporalized in 1819 but reenacted across time and space. Shelley is for our times because he is of our time.

Notes

1 As John Guillory notes, "The term *mediation* and the problem of communication do not seem to have been brought together in any systematic way until the later nineteenth century," but Shelley connects physical media with acts of communication here. John Guillory "Enlightening Mediation," in Clifford Siskin and Michael Warner, eds. *This Is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 37–63, 53.

2 Nikki Hessell, "Elegiac Wonder and Intertextuality in the *Liberal*," *Romanticism*, 18.3 (2012), 239–249.

3 Omar F. Miranda, "The Global Romantic Lyric," *The Wordsworth Circle*, 52.2 (2021), 308–327, 322.

4 Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane, "The Medium of Romantic Poetry," in James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 239–262, 242. See also Andrew Burkett, *Romantic Mediations: Media Theory and British Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

5 Clifford Siskin and William Warner, "Introduction," in Siskin and Warner, eds. *This Is Enlightenment*, 5.

6 "action at a distance, n." *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) *Online*, March 2022, www-oed-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/1938?redirectedFrom=action+at+a+distance.

7 Yohei Igarashi, *The Connected Condition: Romanticism and the Dream of Communication* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 4, 6.

8 John Gardner, "Shelley's Steamship," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 71 (2022), 87–113; Richard C. Sha, *Imagination and Science in Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2018), 68–69.

9 At times Orrin N. C. Wang's latest account of mediation comes close to this possibility of unmediated communication. He uses "the image or figure of a cut that realizes the in, through, and off of media and mediation, the intractable inbetween, that (de-)structures the articulatory practice of media as mediation." The "cut" is important for my account of Shelley too, though it is derived from a different tradition. Orrin N. C. Wang, *Techno-Magism: Media, Mediation, and the Cut of Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 19.

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10 Jonathan Sachs "Eighteenth-Century Slow Time: Seven Propositions," *The Eighteenth Century* 60.2 (2019), 185–205.
11 Sha, *Imagination and Science*, 31.
12 Sha, *Imagination and Science*, 70.
13 Sha, *Imagination and Science*, 33.
14 Sha, *Imagination and Science*, 33.
15 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 224.
16 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 170.
17 Mark S. Lussier, *Romantic Dynamics: The Poetics of Physicality* (Macmillan, 2000), 44; Arkady Plotnitsky, "All Shapes of Light: The Quantum Mechanical Shelley," in Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, eds. *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 263–310, 264.
18 Chris Washington, "The Dark Side of the Light: The Triumph of Love in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*," in Joel Faflak, ed. *The Futures of Shelley's Triumph*, *Romantic Circles* Praxis Series (October 2019), https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/triumph/praxis.2019.triumph.washington.html; Kate Singer, *Romantic Vacancy: The Poetics of Gender, Affect, and Radical Speculation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 83.
19 Greg Ellerman reads "a utopian future, in which humans will reconcile themselves to nature" in *Queen Mab*. Greg Ellerman, "A Poetics of Ether," *European Romantic Review* 29.3 (2018), 389–398, 393. On utopianism in *Queen Mab* and *Mask of Anarchy*, see Seth T. Reno, "The Violence of Form in Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 62 (2013), 80–98; Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).
20 Doug Jackson, "Environmental Entanglement," *Journal of Architectural Education* 71.2 (2017), 137–140, 137. See also Barad on "simultaneity," *Meeting the Universe*, 272.
21 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 174.
22 Albert Einstein to Max Born, March 3, 1947, in *The Born-Einstein Letters: Correspondence between Albert Einstein and Max and Hedwig Born from 1916 to 1955* (New York: Walker, 1971), 158. See also Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 272–273 and D. J. P., "What Is Spooky Action at a Distance? Why Some Things Are Neither Here nor There," *The Economist*, March 16, 2017.
23 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 291–292. See also *The Born-Einstein Letters*, 273, 318.
24 George Greenstein and Arthur G. Zajonc, *The Quantum Challenge: Modern Research on the Foundations of Quantum Mechanics* (Burlington: Jones and Bartlett, 1997), 144, cited in Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 292.
25 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 315.
26 Karen Barad, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers," in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds. *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 48–70, 52.

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27 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 55.
28 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 321.
29 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 348; Washington, "Dark Side of the Light."
30 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 234, 338.
31 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 224.
32 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 140. See Washington, "Dark Side of the Light."
33 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 170.
34 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 179, emphasis original. See also page 223 and 234 for Barad's debt to Donna Haraway's conception of the container model of space.
35 Kate Singer, Ashley Cross, and Suzanne L. Barnett, "Introduction: Living in a New Material World," in Singer, Cross, and Barnett, eds. *Material Transgressions: Beyond Romantic Bodies, Genders, Things* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 1–28, 18.
36 Washington, "Dark Side of the Light."
37 Washington, "Dark Side of the Light."
38 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 315.
39 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, 409, cited in Vicki Kirby "Matter Out of Place: 'New Materialism' in Review," in Vicki Kirby, ed. *What If Culture Was Nature All Along?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 1–25, 17.
40 Ellerman argues that in *Queen Mab* ether is a material medium, a "vehicle of a utopian natural history" in the poem: "Poetics of Ether," 390. As I have suggested, my account of Shelleyan mediation informed by Barad complicates such visions of a utopian future.
41 Sha, *Imagination and Science*, 84, 62.
42 Sha, *Imagination and Science*, 84.
43 For Alan Weinberg, "the poem is not confined to a representation of linear or sequential temporality: it repeatedly shifts focus from one aspect of time to another." Alan Weinberg, "Freedom from the Stranglehold of Time: Shelley's Visionary Conception in *Queen Mab*," *Romanticism* 22.1 (2016), 90–106, 91. Weinberg investigates the connections between *Queen* Mab's representation of space and time and Lucretius and Spinoza, rather than quantum physics.
44 Lussier, *Romantic Dynamics*, 141.
45 Washington, "Dark Side of the Light," par. 3.
46 "instinct, adj." *OED Online.* March 2022, www-oed-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/97086?rskey=gzmqYK&result=2&isAdvanced=false.
47 Lussier, *Romantic Dynamics*, 147. Shelley connects macro- and microscopic scales again at the end of Canto III, 226–232, in *CP* II: 188–189.
48 Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.
49 Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 532.
50 Andrew Franta, "Shelley and the Poetics of Political Indirection," *Poetics Today* 22.4 (2001), 765–793; Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Susan Wolfson, '"Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form," in George

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Levine, ed. *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 188–218; Susan Wolfson, *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 114.

51 Ian Haywood analyzes the soundscape of Shelley's poem in "The Sounds of Peterloo," in Michael Demson and Regina Hewitt, eds. *Commemorating Peterloo: Violence, Resilience and Claim-Making during the Romantic Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 57–83, 58.

52 Franta, "Political Indirection," 777. See also Wolfson, "Romantic Ideology," 206, and *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 196.

53 For Washington, Shelley's "Shape" in *The Triumph of Life* is another "exemplar of discursive-material quantum entanglement." Washington, "Dark Side of the Light," par. 14.

54 Redfield, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 157.

55 Mary Fairclough, "Peterloo at 200: The Radical Press, Simultaneous Meetings and *The Mask of Anarchy*," *The Keats-Shelley Review* 33.2 (2019), 171–173.

56 Lussier, *Romantic Dynamics*, 143.

57 Franta, "Political Indirection," 791.

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