

# The Order of Authors: Degrees of 'Popularity' and 'Fame' in John Clare's Writing

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**Abstract:** This essay analyses Clare's essay 'Popularity in Authorship', arguing that the work can be seen as a central statement in Clare's recurrent concern with poetic fame and authorial reputation. By connecting 'Popularity in Authorship' with Clare's sonnets on his Romantic contemporaries (Robert Bloomfield and Lord Byron), the essay contends that Clare's complex understanding of 'popular' and 'common' notions of fame helps to bring into focus a distinctive contribution to debates about how authors were received by different audiences in the period.

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In a letter of 29 August 1828 to Thomas Pringle,<sup>1</sup> John Clare states that 'I would sooner be the Author of Tam o shanter than of the Iliad & Odyssey of Homer' (Storey 437).<sup>2</sup> It is intriguing that Clare should voice a bold preference for being the author of 'Tam o' Shanter' given that earlier in his career he had in fact been called 'a second [Robert] Burns' (Storey 105) after the instant success of his first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820). The use of this label by contemporary reviewers signified a not inconsiderable degree of critical praise but it could also become, as Clare recognised at an early stage of his career, a potential straitjacket for a young poet trying to develop his own identity. In what follows I analyse Clare's considerable preoccupation with the identity of a range of other authors, specifically in the context of his ideas about 'popularity', 'common fame', 'living fame', and 'true fame'. Recent essays by Jason Goldsmith, Simon Kövesi, and Margaret Russett have treated some of these issues in Clare, but his designations and valuations of popularity and fame still deserve more detailed attention. My central contentions will be that Clare voices hostility to the 'popular' reception of authors but also on other occasions that he reads this 'popular' reception as the predictor of 'true', lasting, or eternal poetic fame. The issue of the 'popular' in the context of contemporary and posthumous authorial reputation, then, gives Clare's writing on these subjects a distinctive emphasis and direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Pringle was the editor of *Friendship's Offering*: some of Clare's poems were published in this literary annual.

<sup>2</sup> As the rest of this letter makes clear, Clare knew Homer from Pope's translations.

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A number of the issues outlined above coalesce in Clare's essay on 'Popularity in Authorship', which was published anonymously (I will return to the question of anonymity later in this article) in *The European Magazine* in November 1825:

POPULARITY is a hasty and a busy talker; she catches hold of topics and offers them to fame, without giving herself time to reflect whether they are true or false—and Fashion is her favourite disciple who sanctions and believes them as eagerly and with the same faith as a young lady in the last century read a new novel, or a tavern-haunter in this reads the news. (301)<sup>3</sup>

There is more than a hint here of the declamations in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* against the readers of 'frantic novels' ([1802] 436), though Clare's statement does not confine itself to contemporary culture and is less condemnatory in tone. Still, in Clare's opening metaphor, popularity is a gossip whose discourse is offered to fame and given an outlet in the pernicious 'Fashion'. Moreover, this passage from Clare's essay begins – through the ideas of popularity and fame – to establish the hierarchy of authorial reputation which he draws out in the rest of the essay: in ascending order of merit he has 'popularity', then what he calls 'common fame', then 'fame', followed by what he calls 'true fame' itself. Yet, as we will see, these terms shift in Clare's evaluations, so that 'popularity' is, in certain cases, a sort of cultural blight on the name of an author, while, elsewhere, it becomes an accurate predictor of worthy, merited, or 'true' literary reputations.

The 'popularity/fame' grouping which preoccupies Clare was, according to David Higgins, by this time already something of a cliché (49), but, as Higgins also points out, Clare's deployment of it is 'unusual': he does, I argue over the course of this essay, invest it with new meaning. In the early portions of 'Popularity in Authorship', for instance, we see him elaborating on popularity and fame with specific reference to the figure of the author and through an array of metaphors:

Now it becomes natural for Reason to inquire, whether such sandy foundations as popularity builds on may be taken as indications of true fame; for it often happens that very slender names work a way into it, from many causes, with which merit or genius has no sort of connection or kindred—from some oddity in the manner, or incident in the life of the author, that is whispered over before he makes his appearance. This often proves the road to popularity, for gossip is a mighty spell in the literary world, and a concealment of the author's name often creates it and kindles an anxiety in the public notice (301).

Clare claims that whisperings about the life of the author lead to him gaining a reputation which creates a stir in the 'literary world': the reputation of an author often precedes any true reflection on the quality of writing in question, so that 'very slender names' work their way into the public consciousness without really deserving to do so. Essaka Joshua claims that 'Clare stresses the modernity of the bourgeois public sphere in characterizing

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<sup>3</sup> All references to Clare's essay are taken from John Birtwhistle's online edition.

the situation of an imaginary author who has become popular because of matters connected with his personal life' (119).

There was, however, no full 'concealment of the author's name' but rather the addition of another kind of name when Clare was introduced to the literary world in 1820 as 'The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet' on the title page of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*. Clare was himself the subject of a number of curious but unwelcome visitors to his home after the success of this edition and his initial celebrity status as a natural genius (Bate 178-9). In fact, Clare's editor John Taylor deployed a familiar strategy for presenting the labouring-class poet to a polite readership in his 'Introduction' to *Poems Descriptive* (vii-xxviii) by explaining the poverty and hardship of Clare's upbringing; in other words, with sustained reference to what Clare in 'Popularity in Authorship' calls 'the life of the author'.

In this essay, however, Clare is railing against the manifestation of details in the public sphere from the life of the reputed author *before* that author appears in print, and Clare evidently distrusts and dislikes the cloak and dagger involved in the 'concealment of the author's name'. Clare was, according to Philip Martin, at this time 'developing a sophisticated understanding of how authors and persons are not one and the same thing, the former being demarcated through writing and its consumption' (14). This is true, although Clare's overriding focus in 'Popularity in Authorship' seems to be on the idea of the author in the context of popular acclaim. His phrase 'the life of an author' expresses a concern with literary reputations that are established early but which are little or no guarantee of 'merit or genius'. In the extract from 'Popularity in Authorship' quoted above, Clare's use of the word 'kindred' is picked up negatively in the phrase 'kindles an anxiety', and he in fact brings together a number of metaphors here which are employed with a negative import, from the idea of the 'appearance' of the author in print as a kind of shabby theoretical entrance, to the 'spell' worked up by these 'slender' and undeserving names, to the image of the short-cut route or 'road to popularity'.

While Clare argues in 'Popularity in Authorship' that some authors have an undeserving name and popular appeal created for them, other authors (even authors that he admires) are apparently worked up into 'common fame', which is, according to Clare, still close to popularity:

The nearest akin to popularity is 'common fame,' I mean those sorts of things and names that are familiar among the common people. It is not a very envious species, for they seldom know how to appreciate what they are acquainted with. The name of Chatterton is familiar to their ears as an unfortunate poet, because they meet with his melancholy history in penny ballads and on pocket handkerchiefs, and the name of Shakespeare as a great play writer, because they have seen him nominated as such in the bills of strolling-players, who make shift with barns for theatres (301).

The nature of audience and the technologies through which writers came to prominence is at stake here: Chatterton may well have been heralded as the new Shakespeare by eighteenth-century Shakespearians (Cook 3-4), but there is a difference between Chatterton's fame – acquired by his commoditization as a Romantic genius – and Shakespeare's, acquired by the marketing of a performance of his plays. What Clare seems

to be getting at here is a critique of audience, and a very specific kind of audience at that. The author's name, for example, gains a life through being connected to a narrative outside or independent of his work: penny ballads, pocket handkerchiefs, and barns are for Clare, in these particular instances, inferior forms and sites of culture which take an authorial name out of context. In contrast, it is not insignificant that the many references to Shakespeare in Clare's poems and prose usually rework or quote what Clare considers to be beautiful lines from one of the plays, as evident in the examples quoted in John Goodridge's monograph on the poet (143, 178).<sup>4</sup> The 'common people', however, 'make shift with barns for theatres' (where the greatness of Shakespeare's name is proclaimed), and this practice is suggestive of a reputation completely detached from the beauties of the author's work, though Clare's objections here show are only one side of his complex reflections on the operation of 'common' forms of culture.

Nevertheless, Clare is making a particular insistent objection in 'Popularity in Authorship' to the commercialisation of literature by way of reputation: Chatterton's name sells handkerchiefs, while the strolling players are hoping to make some money by performing Shakespeare in small villages. Chatterton, meanwhile, was the archetypal Romantic genius, but he is also especially unfortunate in being the subject of what for Clare is this rather undesirable type of 'common fame'. Indeed, in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (a work co-published by Clare's publisher Taylor), William Hazlitt can be seen to agree with Clare when he says that Chatterton has 'the same sort of posthumous fame that an actor of the last age has—an abstracted reputation which is independent of any thing we know of his works' ([1819] 251).<sup>5</sup>

In this light, Clare's late reading of his own poetic fame ('my poetry has been the worlds Horn book for many years,' Bate 435), takes on special resonance, seeming to indicate a kind of fame (a horn book was an educational primer for children) which is anonymous (lacking an authorial name) but perpetual. Clare's is in this sense a Romantic rendering of authorial identity – if, that is, we follow Andrew Bennett's theories on authorship in the period, where the 'autoscriptive afterlife [of Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats] is, finally, anonymous, impersonal' (19).<sup>6</sup> Yet Clare's contribution to the debate on authorship often focuses on the impact of popular modes of reception and the influence of audience, and so opens up areas not to be found in the work of his most famous contemporaries, even as there are some very broad affinities with Wordsworth's concern with oral forms of culture in Clare's writing.

The 'sites of culture' (penny ballads, pocket handkerchiefs, and barns) which Clare cites in his 'Popularity in Authorship', furthermore, are difficult to analyse in that they can belong to folk culture, oral culture, and customary culture. The significances of these terms also vary greatly for Clare, though 'Popularity in Authorship' gives us some of his most significant thinking on the types and forms of culture. In the extract above on 'common fame', the phrase 'to their ears', for instance, suggests an oral culture, though the mention of 'penny ballads' and 'pocket handkerchiefs' seems to indicate that Clare is talking about the mesh of customary and popular culture as outlined by Bob Bushaway: '[c]ustomary patterns can be found in the areas of the organisation of work; the network of popular

<sup>4</sup> My treatment of Clare's responses to the 'beauties' of Shakespeare is an ongoing project.

<sup>5</sup> This is from Lecture VII 'On Burns, and the Old English Ballads'. It is clear from his prose writings that Clare had read Hazlitt's work.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett explains that 'autoscription' differs from autobiography in that the 'life of the poet is inscribed in poetry, the life in the writing' (19).

beliefs; leisure; social relationships and value systems' (18). Customary culture is strongly rooted in calendar customs, but as both Clare and Bushaway indicate, the idea of the 'customary' also remains closely connected to the 'popular', and in his 'Popularity in Authorship', Clare is critiquing popular leisure and 'value systems' as regards two famous authors. In his study of working-class readers of Shakespeare, Andrew Murphy cites part of Clare's declaration about popular performances of Shakespeare and 'the bills of strolling-players', pointing out that in

some cases, these performances were burlesques or other forms of adapted or reduced productions, such as the 1833 bill at Leicester theatre which included, consecutively, the second act of *Romeo and Juliet*, the third acts of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* and the fifth act of '*King Richard*' (a fascinating combination when imagined as a complete performance). Also included on the bill was 'Signor Martini, the celebrated Man Monkey from the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane' (17-8).

These claims give us another context for understanding Clare's insistence (in 'Popularity in Authorship') that 'common fame' is not a very 'envious species': the 'reduced productions' of Shakespeare noted by Murphy could at least provide some sort of explanation for why Clare says that the 'common' people 'seldom know how to appreciate what they are acquainted with'. While these 'reduced productions' might also indicate greater familiarity with the rest of those plays and with Shakespeare's oeuvre than we might have expected from this 'common' audience, according to Clare Shakespeare's name gains common currency because 'the common people' see it appear 'in the bills of strolling-players'. In the case of Chatterton, 'the common people' are acquainted or 'hear' about his unfortunate circumstances and life: a narrative of 'melancholy' stands for all that Chatterton signifies to these people. The articles of popular culture which Clare identifies (penny ballads, handkerchiefs, and performances in barnyards and rural theatres) should not be an authoritative means of establishing an authorial reputation. Clare objects to a process of cultural production and reception where an author's name is associated with a kind of vulgar commerciality. It is more than strongly implied by Clare that the true merit of a 'great writer' should reside in the text produced by him or her, not in the fanfare of public performance or the narrative of the author's life. As we will see later in this essay, however, this picture is complicated by the fact that contemporary authors (Byron and Wordsworth) who drew on their own life in their work are celebrated rather than dismissed by Clare.

Still, both Chatterton and Shakespeare, according to Clare, are names of authors which, in Michel Foucault's terms, give 'rise to new groups of discourse' (123), through the kind of culture in which 'penny ballads' and pocket 'handkerchiefs' circulate. In fact, Clare's thoughts on popularity and 'common fame' might offer a negative illustration of Foucault's injunction that

the author's name characterises a particular manner of existence of discourse. Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status

and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates (123).

In 'Popularity in Authorship', Clare clearly sees this 'popular' culture as being responsible for appropriating the idea of the authorial reputation of Chatterton and Shakespeare, and it is interesting, given Clare's own social origins, that his identification with this culture is – if not hostile – very ambiguous. Where Foucault refers to a time when 'stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author' (125), Clare says that Chatterton's and Shakespeare's names are given too much attention by the common people who do not know anything about their works, who do not know 'how to appreciate what they are acquainted with'. Clare's notion of Shakespeare being subject to common fame in this way, for instance, could be contrasted with the idea of Shakespeare as one of what Hazlitt (in his 1820 essay 'On the Conversation of Authors') would call our 'standard authors' – those writers who have produced memorable works which have been judged over a long period of time to stand above all others (23).

Yet Clare further problematises the issue of 'popularity' by making a distinction between the 'trifling' and the 'ridiculous' in his essay:

The trifling are full as extensive [as the ridiculous]. Where is the poet that shares half such popularity as the names of 'Warren, Turner, Day and Martin,' whose ebony fames are spread through every little dirty village in England? These instances of the trifling and ridiculous made as much noise and stir in their day as the best; and noise, and stir, and bustle are the essence and the soul of popularity. (301)

As stated earlier, there are some continuing difficulties in regard to the different forms of culture at stake in Clare's 'Popularity in Authorship', but he seems to be striking specifically at oral culture in this case ('spread through every little dirty village in England'). Clare is arguing that the boot-blackening made by 'Warren, Turner, Day, and Martin' gives these manufacturers a name greater than any poet, and also, by implication, that some poets have their reputation (unjustifiably) puffed up like blackening. There is a long tradition behind such analogies, but 'ridiculous' examples of popularity seem worse than 'trifling ones' for Clare, and in the last sentence of 'Popularity in Authorship' 'trifle' in fact becomes a valued notion: it is 'the simplest [poetic] trifle' which Clare says endures, unlike 'fashionable popularity' which changes all the time (303).

In 'Popularity in Authorship', Clare also takes the example of the 'trifle' to make some qualifications about the nature of 'common fame':<sup>7</sup>

There are also many desires to gain this common fame, and it is mostly met with in a manner where it is the least expected. While some affectations are striving for a life-time to hit all tastes, by only writing as they fancy all feel, and by not trusting to their own feelings, miss the mark by a wide throw, an unconscious poet of little name writes a trifle

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<sup>7</sup> For more on 'trifles' in Clare's vocabulary, see Mina Gorji's recent essay in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1780-1900*.

as he feels, without thinking of others, or fancying that he feels it, and becomes a common name. (301)

Again, if we remember the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* ([1802] 282), there is something Wordsworthian about the centrality of 'feeling' to poetry in Clare's essay, which in fact at times reads like a shorter Wordsworthian cultural diagnosis but one which departs from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in its greater and more specific emphasis on the workings of popular and 'common' culture. Clare, furthermore, claims that authors too much preoccupied with their own reputation try to satisfy 'all tastes' and in doing so neglect true 'feelings'. He explicitly makes this a matter of 'unconscious' and conscious or – in Friedrich Schiller's terms (1795) – naive and sentimental poetics, so that what stimulates a better type of common fame is a poetry which deals in simple or trifling subject matter but which also imparts intense 'feelings', and which does not strive after (pernicious and degraded) modern 'tastes' based on a kind of superficial sentimentality regarding popular opinion ('writing as they fancy all feel').

As we will see in more detail later, for Clare, the ideal type of this unassuming poet who could 'write a trifle' is the labouring-class Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823). For Clare, Bloomfield's work demonstrates a special kind of allegiance to nature, which is also another quality that distinguishes the better kind of common fame which Clare argues for in 'Popularity in Authorship':

Unaffected simplicity is the every-day picture of nature—thus children's favourites, 'Cock Robin,' 'Little Red Riding Hood,' 'Babes in the Wood,' &c. &c. leave impressions at the core that grow up with manhood and are beloved on. Poets anxious after common fame, as some of the 'naturals' seem to be, imitate these things by affecting simplicity, and become unnatural (301).

Fairy tales 'leave impressions at the core that grow up with manhood'. They also do not bear an author's name, and so in this sense are authorless. Like Clare, Joseph Addison praised the tale of 'Babes in the Wood' in the *Spectator* ([1711] 260) because it was apparently 'a plain simple Copy of Nature', and were their space here, we might use the example of Addison to analyse Clare's place in a contemporary magazine culture. Nevertheless, at this point Clare again seems to be making the claim that the impact and effect of the text produced by the (anonymous) author is the vital factor at work in all these debates.

'The naturals' who affect 'simplicity' in the extract above could well help to locate the modes of storytelling and tales in, for instance, the *Lyrical Ballads*, but Clare modifies the unhealthy import of 'common' here by aesthetic approval of a poem which is an example of this type of fame:

Wordsworth's beautiful ballad of 'We are Seven,' I have seen hawked about in penny ballads, and Tannahill's song of 'Jessy,' has met with

more popularity among the common people here, than all the songs English and Scottish put together (301).<sup>8</sup>

This is the kind of insight about the ‘common’ reputation of contemporary poets (‘We are Seven’ is one of the *Lyrical Ballads*) which makes Clare an important commentator on the dissemination of texts through his knowledge of the intersections between the culture of ‘the common people’ and the literary culture of the age. ‘Popularity in Authorship’ at least reminds us that Clare is an author who calls into play complex questions about the boundaries of popular, customary, oral, and polite culture. In the context of a discussion of Clare and Wordsworth, Essaka Joshua claims that for the latter poet, ‘customary culture signified the close link between nature and humankind, and between place and people’ (136). It seems that Clare’s understanding of Wordsworth is connected quite closely to Wordsworth’s own view of customary culture (as outlined by Joshua) but also that for Clare the work of authors (Wordsworth and Tannahill) can have a place in this culture, so that ‘We are Seven’ and the song of ‘Jessy’ are more popular for Clare than ‘all the songs English and Scottish put together’.

Here the question of anonymity is also raised once more, and, in a recent exploration of this issue, Anne Ferry cites the year of publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* as a crucial date:

[...] before that time [the nineteenth century] a poem was conceived of mainly as a skillfully made object fashioned according to formal conventions, rather than as a personal expression of its author. Sometime after let us say 1798, readers grew more in the habit of finding biographical connections between poem and the poet, a practice naturally encouraged by their opportunities to trace among a number of works the shaping experience and expressive tendencies of a poet known to be the author of all of them (196).

The ‘songs English and Scottish’ which Clare refers to in his essay would surely include some anonymous material. Wordsworth’s ‘We are Seven’ and Tannahill’s song of ‘Jessy’ might also have possibly been published in an anonymous format (with the ‘penny ballads’ that Clare refers to), but he cites the work of the two poets by name. It is a specific type of popularity and common fame which appeals to Clare, one where the author’s name remains key in the context of what Ferry calls his or her ‘expressive tendencies’. In Clare’s claims, this expressiveness is the poetic ‘beauty’ of Wordsworth’s poem. Clare’s use of the term ‘beautiful’ to describe ‘We are Seven’ is an aesthetic valuation of authorial and literary reputation combined with his knowledge of the transmission of poems by a means (penny ballads) which we would normally associate with customary culture.

These points also bring us back to the complaint in ‘Popularity in Authorship’ that Chatterton and Shakespeare get their name associated with popular forms of culture which effectively ignore or miss out the role of the text produced by the author. The fundamental difference for Clare in the cases of Wordsworth and Tannahill is that, unlike Shakespeare and Chatterton, the actual works which they produced (‘We are Seven’ and

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<sup>8</sup> Clare is almost certainly referring to the Scottish poet Robert Tannahill’s ‘Jessy, The Flow’r o’ Dunblane’ (1815).

the song of 'Jessy') are apparently valued (in their 'hawked' form in penny ballads) by the 'common' people, and this, for Clare, is a better kind of fame and popularity.

Clare thinks that 'We are Seven' is 'beautiful': an aesthetic standard (based on valuation of what is beautiful in a writer's output) should be the basis of our estimation of an author. The transmission and dissemination of the works of an author through various cultural forms (from barnyards to penny ballads) always carries for Clare a danger of misappropriation; but, as the examples of Wordsworth and Tannahill demonstrate, there is a kind of popularity which, in these instances, makes the 'common people' an accurate and sensitive audience in response to the work of certain authors. Clare – for the reasons outlined above – clearly has a high estimation of the kind of 'common fame' which Wordsworth's 'We are Seven' and Tannahill's song of 'Jessy' garner. Perhaps with a view to his own career as a published poet, Clare here values the nexus of customary culture with the literary or polite, though, as we saw earlier, Clare's strong preference was to be the author of 'Tam o' Shanter' over the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>9</sup>

It is also clear from 'Popularity in Authorship' that another species of authorial reputation or status which Clare does approve of is located at the juncture between popularity, fame, and true fame, and this is indexed in his praise of his most famous poetic contemporary:

Lord Byron's hasty fame may be deemed a contradiction to the above opinion, that popularity is not true fame, though at its greatest extent it is scarcely an exception, for his great and hurried popularity, that almost trampled on its own heels in its haste, must drop into a less bustling degree and become more cool and quiet as it approaches the silent and impartial stream of time, where the periodicals of fashion will have done with stilted praise, and the reader will find no entertainment in the popular voice of days gone by, and when merit shall be its own reward (301-2).

Clare goes out of his way to explain how Byron fits into his subtle conceptions of popularity and fame. Byron and Clare have been discussed at length by a number of critics, with my essay being a reading of the lyric practices of the two poets (2012).<sup>10</sup>

In the current cases in question, Clare's thoughts on the names of Byron and Wordsworth show how often he was prepared to have a distinctive say about the cultural moment in which he was writing. 'Hasty fame', for instance, refers to Byron's immediate popularity following the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (when, of course, Byron 'awoke to find himself famous'). Clare acknowledges that what he says about Byron might seem like a 'contradiction' in light of his earlier argument that 'popularity is not true fame'. However, at this point Clare's metaphor of the road to fame ('trampled on its own heels') is replaced by the one of the 'stream of time', which represents the quiet and settled period after the hubbub of popular praise and fashion. But what Clare says here actually seems entirely consistent with his theory about popularity:

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, 'Popularity in Authorship' has lines from 'Cary's Dante' for its epigraph: Cary was a correspondent of Clare's, and his translation became a standard edition. The epigraph for Clare's essay seems to associate the 'popular' with 'rumour' and false reputation.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Byron and Clare, see essays by Anne Barton, William D. Brewer, Mark Minor, and Edward Strickland.

Clare's rhetoric reflects his sense that Byron possesses both popularity and fame. In Byron these two modes are operating simultaneously: popularity is based on the scandalous life of the individual and fame is based on literary merit. Despite, then, his undeniably popular status, Byron is in fact clearly worthy of true fame. In the extract quoted above, Clare also seems to rework the proverbial 'virtue is its own reward' in his notion that the true worth of an author 'shall be its own reward'. Clare also once again associates or equates the 'popular voice' with the fickleness of fashion: true literary 'merit' is set against these notions of the popular.

Indeed, one of Clare's characteristic gestures is to pitch a hierarchy of authorial reputation up against what he deems to be little or 'lesser' authors, as with the sonnet on 'Lord Byron'.<sup>11</sup> In this poem, Clare's metaphor of the birth of an unrivalled (authorial) power is indicative of Byron's transition from popularity to fame:

A splendid sun hath set!—when shall our eyes  
Behold a morn so beautiful arise  
As that which gave his mighty genius birth,  
And all eclipsed the lesser lights on earth!  
[...]  
The labour of small minds an age may dream,  
And be but shadows on Time's running stream;  
While Genius, in an hour, makes what shall be,  
The next, a portion of eternity.  
(*Rural Muse* 120; 1-4, 11-4)

'Eternity' is repeatedly equated with true fame in 'Popularity in Authorship' (303), and there it is Byron and Shakespeare and Milton (302) who are said to belong to it or to be of it. The couplets of Clare's sonnet on Byron are, moreover, clearly a celebration of, and an allegiance to, 'the mighty genius' of an individual author, who shines above his peers. Clare would seem to agree with, for instance, William Duff, who declared in his *Essay on Original Genius* that 'the empire of genius is unbounded and [that] poetry, of all the liberal arts, affords the most extensive scope for the display of Genius truly Original' ([1767] 91).

On the face of it, the aristocratic 'Lord Byron' seems to represent an author who could not be more different than Clare, yet Clare persistently turns to Byron's authorial identity in his late (re)writings of the other poet, including 'Child Harold' and 'Don Juan A Poem' (Williams and Williams 167-76). Clare also calls the great standard of authorship 'the Byron of Byrons' in an early letter (Storey 140), while, according to Clare's sonnet on Byron, the scope of Byron's genius is such that it will put most other authors in the shade. The idea of 'shadows' (12) that we find in the sonnet is in fact a recurrent one in Clare's poetry (Williams and Williams 87, 91, 137), and he returns to it in the last paragraph of 'Popularity in Authorship', which comes after another discussion of Byron and which employs some of the same metaphors as Clare's sonnet on the poet:

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Vincent notes that the 'decade of the 1830s marks the heyday of elegies written to commemorate dead colleagues' (214). Despite the differences in social origins, Clare often seems to have thought of Byron as a poetic 'colleague'.

The brighter the sunbeam the deeper the shadow. The trumpeting clamour of public praise is not to be relied on as the creditor for the future to draw acceptances from; present fame is not the perpetual almanack to time's fame; they often disclaim all kindred to each other. The quiet progress of a name gaining ground by gentle degrees in the world's esteem is the best living shadow of fame: fashionable popularity changes like the summer clouds, while the simplest trifle, and the meanest thing in nature, is the same now as it shall continue to be till the world's end (303).

'The simplest trifle' and 'the meanest things in nature' suggest that Clare does not have Byron in mind at this point, but 'a name gaining ground by gentle degrees' is what Clare himself would probably have wished to be as an author, and there are few poets who invest as much in authorial names as he does.<sup>12</sup> The name to which he so frequently turned was the aristocratic Lord Byron, as also evident in Clare's response to the funeral procession of the famous poet in Oxford Street in July 1824. This account is contemporary with 'Popularity in Authorship' and is also an important reflection on the popular reception of Byron:

[A] young girl that stood beside me gave a deep sigh & utterd Poor Lord Byron there was a mellancholy feeling of vanity for great names never are at a loss for flatterers that as every flower has its insect they dance in the sunbeams to a share a liliputian portion of its splendour upon most countenances I looked up in the young girls face it was dark & beautiful & I could almost feel in love with her for the sigh she had utterd for the poet it was worth all the Newspaper puffs & Magazine Mournings that ever was paraded after the death of a poet since flattery & hypocrisy was babtizd in the name of truth & sincerity (Williams & Williams 166).

The passage recalls Clare's description of Byron as a 'splendid sun' in his 1835 sonnet on the poet. Clare's record of the procession also tells us that an image is worth a thousand words; the deep sigh of the young girl evidences a moment of acute sensibility amongst 'the common people' observing the progress of Byron's coffin (166), which has the feel of a 'mellancholy' and posthumous celebrity encounter. The girl's sigh makes fame ('great names') a matter of private, even intimate moment, in stark contrast to the vulgarity and insincerity of the public praise and flattery to be found in newspapers, magazines, and the reviews, media which are satirised in Canto I (stanzas 203 and 211) of Byron's *Don Juan*. Whereas previously Clare had, in 'Popularity in Authorship', associated 'the little mildews of literary coquetry and fashionable quackery' (302) with the popular mind, he now uses a similar botanical metaphor in his observations on Byron's funeral procession to scorn the self-righteousness of (presumably) the more privileged social orders:

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<sup>12</sup> Clare wrote what seems like – by any standards – an especially large number of poems addressed to (or in celebration of) other authors.

[T]he Reverend the Moral & fastidious may say what they please about Lord Byrons fame & damn it as they [please] – he has gained the path of its eternity without them & lives above the blight of their mildewing censure to do him damage (166)

What we also see is that Clare shifts his view of ‘the common people’ so that (at least in this context) they are the body which inspires the reputation of what he now calls ‘living fame’:

The common people felt his [Byron’s] merits & his power & the common people of a country are the best feelings of a prophecy of futurity they are the veins & arteries that feed & quicken the heart of living fame the breathings of eternity (166)

Byron is thus a ‘common great name’ (167) for Clare, who also claims that ‘I believe that his liberal principals in religion & politics did a great deal towards gaining the notice & affections of the lower orders’ (167). Clare is a recorder of the historical moment of the dead author. His position in ‘Popularity in Authorship’ has, what is more, now shifted to account for a valuable type of common fame in the contemporaneous extract on Byron’s funeral: the common people, in this instance, predict an author’s future ‘fame’ and also his ‘living fame’, and these types of fame are desirable, in contrast to the types of fame which Clare argued that Shakespeare and Chatterton met with by means of a ‘popular’ reception.

On these points Clare can, in the extracts quoted above, now be seen to depart from William Hazlitt, who, as Jason Goldsmith points out, claimed that neither ‘popular consent’ nor ‘common sense’ decided or defined the true merit of a great author. In contrast to Hazlitt and also to his own earlier view (in ‘Popularity in Authorship’) of the popular as productive of a not very desirable ‘common fame’, Clare now ‘mediates his contemporary neglect by reallocating aesthetic judgment to the “common people”, who affectively embody the future’ (Goldsmith 824). In Clare’s writing, then, popularity, the popular, and fame are part of a complex matrix, and as Goldsmith suggests in his reading of Clare’s ‘Don Juan’, he ‘exhibits an extraordinary awareness of the new and unstable relationship between writers and their audiences’ (811). The phrase ‘mildewing censure’ in the extract on Byron’s funeral (116) is, for instance, striking, and it appears to be the case that for Clare, true fame is forged against the kind of literary opinion (‘the Moral & fastidious’) which was printed in contemporary reviews. For instance, as John Birtwhistle tells us in the notes (12) to his edition of ‘Popularity in Authorship’, Clare wrote to his publisher John Taylor in 1831 to object to the praise lavished on some authors in ‘the periodicals’. In regard to the prose extracts on Byron quoted above, Clare, in a movement from his earlier stances, sees the common people as the best indication or the heartbeat of true authorial ‘merit’ and fame: these people play an important role in sustaining the afterlife of Romantic genius (they ‘feed & quicken the heart of living fame the breathings of eternity’).

Clare stages another consideration of fame and the afterlife of Romantic genius in his treatment of Robert Bloomfield, an author from very different social circumstances than Byron. Byron was the labouring-class poet of the incredibly popular *The Farmer’s Boy* (1800). In his sonnet ‘To the Memory of Bloomfield’, Clare outlines some shared poetic commitments in the context of authorial reputation and fame:

Sweet unassuming Minstrel! not to thee  
 The dazzling fashions of the day belong;  
 Nature's wild pictures, field, and cloud, and tree,  
 And quiet brooks, far distant from the throng,  
 In murmurs tender as the toiling bee,  
 Make the sweet music of thy gentle song.  
 Well! Nature owns thee: let the crowd pass by;  
 The tide of fashion is a stream too strong  
 For pastoral brooks, that gently flow and sing:  
 But Nature is their source, and earth and sky  
 Their annual offering to her current bring.  
 Thy gentle muse and memory need no sigh;  
 For thine shall murmur on to many a spring,  
 When prouder streams are summer-burnt and dry.  
 (127; 1-14)

This sonnet, like the one on Byron, is from *The Rural Muse* (the last volume of Clare's poems to be published in his lifetime (1835)), and can be read alongside poems such as 'Vanities of Fame' (124) and 'Fame' (126-7) in that collection: these works are effectively extensions of similar concerns in 'Popularity in Authorship'.

In Clare's sonnet, Bloomfield is most of all the 'pastoral' poet (9). In a letter of 1824 Clare in fact says that Bloomfield is 'our best Pastoral Poet' and calls him the 'English Theocritus' (Storey 302). The sense here is of Clare's feeling for a communal or a shared poetic, and John Goodridge has recently made extended comparisons of Clare and Bloomfield through the idea of (poetic) community (83-105). In the sonnet quoted above, the sibillancy of Clare's 'Sweet unassuming minstrel' outlines an alternative poetic tradition based firmly on 'nature' (3, 7, 10). Bloomfield is surely the kind of poet whom Clare praised in his 'Popularity in Authorship' for simplicity and truth to nature, and the emphasis on song (9) in Clare's sonnet puts Bloomfield alongside Wordsworth and Tannahill in this respect. While there is possibly a pun on 'annual' (yearly 'offering[s]' and offerings for the literary annuals) in line 10 of 'To the Memory of Bloomfield', and while the repeated 'brooks' (4, 9) might make us think of the literary context of books, this author certainly stands against Clare's abhorred clatter and 'murmur' of 'fashion'.

Again, as with 'Popularity in Authorship', Clare's metaphors in 'To the Memory of Bloomfield' are the road and the river, with the 'tide of fashion', for instance, a flow of popular opinion against and by which Bloomfield's 'pastoral brook' is potentially overawed. Yet the presence of nature in Bloomfield's poetry is, according to Clare, a guarantee that the memory of his verse shall be preserved when 'prouder streams' are still and sterile (14). Bloomfield's authorial designation is a happy embodiment of the natural over the affected: his poetry seems very like the 'the every-day picture of nature' that Clare championed in his 'Popularity in Authorship'.

Bloomfield clearly has a high place in Clare's order of authors, and rating and valuing authors seems like an almost obsessive practice for him. In a letter of 1821 to Taylor, Clare refers to 'the top list of living poets', while he also claims that 'I myself would sooner be the author of this one poem [John Hamilton Reynolds's *Fancy: A Selection from the Poetical Remains of the Late Peter Corcoran*] than half of what southey wordsworth &c

&c has written' (Storey 181).<sup>13</sup> The preference for Reynolds over Wordsworth is curious in light of the fact that, as we saw earlier, Clare cherished 'We are Seven'. But Clare's repeated desire to 'sooner be' the author of Reynolds's *Fancy* recalls his desire to 'sooner be' the author of 'Tam o' Shanter' than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. A revealing comparison can again be made here with Clare's hero Bloomfield, who stated that 'I am not Burns, neither have I his fire to fan nor to quench, nor his passions to control' (Roper 65). Poets from labouring-class social origins were evidently (and with good reason) especially sensitive about their relation to the literary tradition and other authors, and Clare's most famous poem is titled 'I Am', a statement of individual (and authorial) identity. This late and oft-quoted lyric can be read as a comment on both the personal and public neglect of Clare after his initial literary success, while in an 1832 letter to the Scottish poet Allan Cunningham (1784-1842) Clare employs another striking metaphor on the possibility of being forgotten:

when the cow grows too old in profits in milk she is fatted & sold to the butchers & when the horse is grown too [old to] work he is turned to the dogs—but an author [is] neither composed of the materials necessary for the profit of butchers meat or dogs meat—he is turned up & forgotten—  
(Storey 601)

A concern with the commercial success of an author is suggested by 'profits' and 'composed' could be a pun, but the entire analogy is appropriate, not only because of Clare's irregular 'work' as an agricultural labourer, but because of the obsessive fear of being forgotten which is evident in his work more widely. In September 1821, for instance, he told Taylor that he would be 'John Clare the thresher in the onset & neglected ryhmer in the end' (Storey 215). Clare's confinement in two asylums (from 1837 to 1864) meant that he was neglected, but the considerable increase of scholarly work on his poetry over the last twenty years proves that he was, ultimately, wrong about being a forgotten author.

Another of Clare's many startling declarations (made during the years of his confinement) on authorial identity brings together two authors who have been at the heart of this essay: 'I'm John Clare now. I was Byron and Shakespeare formerly. At different times you know I'm different people – that is the same person with different names' (Williams and Williams 19). Clare does not separate the poet from the author here, but as I hope to have demonstrated in this essay, his arguments about the forms of popularity and fame certainly show a distinctive preoccupation with ways of being remembered and recalled as an author. Clare's acute awareness of audience and of the reception of different authors dissects a range of cultural moments across the boundaries of the popular and the literary and polite: he identifies 'common' fashions, trends, patterns of reception, and claims to fame in ways that, ultimately, belie the reductive 'peasant poet' label which launched his own writing career.

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<sup>13</sup> Clare praises Reynolds's 'Stanzas, On Revisiting Shrewsbury' in this letter.

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