



PROJECT MUSE®

---

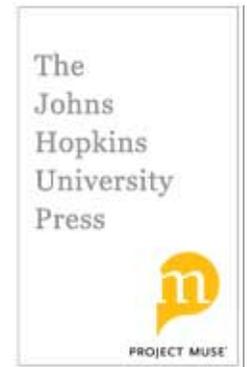
*Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period* by  
John Strachan (review)

Mike Chasar

*Studies in Romanticism*, Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2010, pp. 523-527 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2010.0023>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741913>

etcher's needle, all these tools allow true writing because they can be moved in any direction, and most mirror-written letters use at most one stroke per letter element.

The book is marred by repetition (there is a full explanation of *repoussage* on page 85, long after the subject has come up repeatedly), inattentive editing, and whole chapters that might better have been placed on line for consultation by those untroubled by too much information: the chapter on English copper plate makers in Blake's day (and long before and long after), seems particularly prodigal of paper, and though some of the information may be useful to someone someday, the only payoff in the context of this book is the observation that ". . . far from being an isolated visionary artist, [Blake] was very much a part of a changing economy of opportunity and capital comprising the central London book and print trade at this time" (119). The chapter on wood engraving is somewhat more edifying, especially in suggesting why Blake's relief blocks to illustrate Robert John Thornton's edition of Virgil inspired such disparate reactions from Blake's circle (who worshipped them) and from contemporary professionals in woodcut book illustration (who were appalled at Blake's obliviousness to the graphic conventions of the medium). And yet much of this chapter seems arbitrarily placed in this book, not because wood engravings are usually a relief (rather than an intaglio) medium, but because only a portion of it directly concerns Blake's printing blocks. There is a major discovery here, however: it has usually been assumed that Blake, like Bewick and most other wood-engravers of the period, worked in the strong end-grain of the wood, but Sung has found that several of his blocks use the longitudinal grain (and were apparently sawed to be used that way); that may be another reason why "the wood engravers" shouted "this will never do" when they saw Blake's efforts (146).

Alexander Gourlay  
Rhode Island School of Design

John Strachan. *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 368. \$99.00.

Studying the poetry of the consumer marketplace and its surprisingly frequent intersection with "literary" or "high" culture is an oftentimes lonely, thankless endeavor despite the serious questions it asks: How has poetry, the most culturally prestigious of the literary arts, been used to sell not just products but an entire consumerist ideology? How has "literary" poetry positioned itself as oppositional to the consumer marketplace yet imitated,

incorporated, or otherwise traded in the discourses of advertising poetry at the same time? And how has for-profit poetry itself been a site of literary innovation, imitating, incorporating, or otherwise trading in the literary discourses from which it is supposed to be so different? Investigations of this sort—these are questions central to *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period*—are oftentimes impeded by a number of factors (including the difficulty of recovering much of the primary material itself, which was ephemeral in nature and thus escaped widespread collection), the most significant of which may be a predisposition on the part of mainstream literary critics to disparage advertising poetry and academic efforts at assessing that poetry. In dismissing—or in simply ignoring—this enormous, diverse, and extremely public branch of poetry, these critics, John Strachan's study reveals, in fact follow a critical tradition established during the Romantic Era when writers began to accuse advertising of debasing the genre of poetry as a whole. As Robert Montgomery put it in his 1828 satire on the "Art of Puffing," advertising forced poetry into acting "I' the manner of the whore" (258).

Highlighting the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Romantic-Era advertising and its relationship to the period's satirical writing, Strachan's goal in *Advertising and Satirical Culture* is, in part, to complicate the literary landscape of England by revealing an entire sphere of literary activity created and sustained not just by copy writers but also by figures such as Byron, Coleridge, Crabbe, Dickens, Lamb, and Wordsworth. Like the most successful advertisers, this is not the only product Strachan is offering for sale. For once we buy this bill of goods—and it's hard not to, given two survey chapters on the interpenetration of advertising and satire as well as "close readings" of campaigns for shoe blacking, the national lottery, hair oils, and barbers—the literary-critical "branding" of Romanticism itself comes under question. "In its widespread focus upon the 'author' of the brand, its claims of originality, creativity and genius, its egotism and its warnings about the dangers of imitation," Strachan suggests, "the rhetoric of advertising copy often has a certain similarity to high Romantic argument" (11). As with advertising during the early twentieth century—when advertisers sought to "make it new" as often as modernist authors did—the values of literary and commercial production can sometimes so overlap that distinctions between "high" and "low" threaten to dissolve. "While I am not blind to the differences between these cultural forms [advertising copy and literature]," Strachan writes, "this book seeks to draw parallels between advertising's self-preoccupation and that of Romanticism's 'egotistical sublime'" (11).

Following Thomas Hood, who in 1843 called advertising a "department of literature," *Advertising and Satirical Culture* begins with a survey of adver-

tising copy and images that emphasizes the industry's spirit of catholicity that produced everything from short jingles to elaborate imitations of Milton, Shakespeare, and contemporary writers. In an age when advertising increasingly employed brand iconography and used advertising brokers in sustained national and international campaigns, it also became more innovative in concept and medium, oftentimes eschewing newspapers (which "seemed determined to curb advertising ingenuity") in favor of elaborate street theater, handbills, posted bills, wall chalking, and white washing (22). Trumpeting individuality and warning against imitation brands, advertisers regularly borrowed from high culture in order to elevate or dignify advertising as a cultural discourse; in shrewd acts of "metrical mercantilism," advertisers paired their products with quotations from literary works, imitated or parodied those works, and cast copywriters as legitimate "authors" responsible, at times, for full-length books that could reveal—at least in the case of Doctor Samuel Solomon who pitched the curative powers of his Cordial Balm of Gilead patent medicine—"a real, if highly eccentric, literary talent" at work (53). As with early American advertising, the patent medicine business, with its purveyors' needs to distinguish one similarly constituted, highly alcoholic product from the next, led the way, creating anxiety within the advertising industry as a whole, which assimilated the strategies of nostrum manufacturers while trying to distance itself from wholesale charges of quackery.

If Chapter 1 works to dispel the notion that all ads read and worked in similar, rudimentary ways, Chapter 2 argues that the age's advertising provided fodder for satirists and other writers who not only spoofed ads and critiqued the "supposed excesses and iniquities of advertising and of commercial society in general" (73), but who found in advertising a set of "formal models for satire aimed elsewhere" (84). That is, at the same time that Moore, Dickens, Hood, Crabbe and Cowper critiqued advertising, they weren't above mining it for their own purposes. These back-to-back chapters portray a literary England in which advertising to some extent drove the writing of literature and literature, in turn, drove the writing of advertisements—each implicated in, or responsible for, the other in a highly literary game of one-upmanship that was also a struggle over the cultural prestige of the written word during a period when, as Stuart Curran has written, the whole culture was "simply mad for poetry."

Chapters 1 and 2 thus offer panoramic surveys of advertising's literariness and literature's response to advertising that set the terms for, and make possible, what Strachan modestly calls the "case-studies of individual advertisers, products and advertising campaigns, and of the literary responses to them" that comprise Chapters 3–6. As inventive, amusing, productive, and provocative as these campaigns and responses were, in Strachan's hands

they go beyond being case studies and, in aggregate, become a convincing argument about the globalization of British products—advertising being chief among them—and the effects of that export on other nations’ literature as well. With reference to Byron (who was accused of writing puffs), Dickens (who very well may have written them), and William Frederick Deacon’s *Warreniana* (an anthology of spoof puffs purportedly written by the age’s most prominent authors), Chapter 3 focuses on the ubiquity of advertising for shoe blacking and especially the campaign conducted by Robert Warren whose *oeuvre*, driven by “his own undeniable form of creative, if capitalistic genius” (160), set the standard for all other products. Chapter 4, on the publicity of the national lottery prior to its dissolution in 1808, shows how Warren’s entrepreneurial energies were imitated by state functionaries in an attempt to equate buying lottery tickets with patriotic duty—a campaign engaged in various ways by Coleridge, Lamb, and Hood.

If Strachan uses the lottery to suggest the synergy between advertising and national citizenship, in Chapter 5 he goes one step further—internationally—via the exploding market for hair oils that occurred in the wake of William Pitt the Younger’s 1795 emergency wartime tax on hair powder. A highly politicized if quotidian product (those sympathetic with Pitt continued to use powder while his opponents dressed their hair with products derived from vegetable and bear grease), these oils and their political affiliations not only inspired scathing political verse but also, Strachan argues, touched the work of a young Balzac in France. Similarly, Chapter 6 shows how British advertising—of tonsorial services, and especially the work of J. R. D. Huggins who operated his “barberous” business out of New York City—affected the commercial and literary landscapes on the other side of the Atlantic. Filled with entertaining and revealing histories of seemingly ordinary consumer products and services—and, of course, the copy they inspired—these chapters are a boon for scholars interested in the politics of everyday life and the vast amounts of poetic energy poured into it by highly-literate individuals ranging from radical agitators and members of the working class to business entrepreneurs, satirists, and representatives of high culture.

Strachan’s conclusion focuses on the marketing of books, which, in being promoted in “the same way as more mundane products” (253), caused a fair amount of consternation among the literati, many of whom believed, as Macaulay did in 1828, that literature “should come before the public, recommended by [its] own merits alone” (266) without a multimedia surround of ads, blurbs, friendly reviews, and related puffery. Interestingly, while those concerns prefigure Modernist writers’ views of the popular press, they seem equally enlightening in our own time and suggest

why twenty-first century writers, academics, publishers, and promotion and tenure committees have yet to accept, much less exploit, the possibilities of online distribution and marketing as the music industry has done. Seeking to preserve “the book” as a privileged site of intellectual or cultural activity somewhat separate from contamination by the commercial marketplace, today’s book “manufacturers” (a term of disparagement wielded by Romantic-Era critics to describe publishers who advertised too ambitiously) are operating under a set of anxieties similar to those which motivated “serious” writers in the early nineteenth century. Strachan doesn’t say much about the consequences of such “literary idealism” (254) back then, but the \$99 price tag on his own book may suggest what some of those consequences are today.

Mike Chasar  
Willamette University