

1. Record Nr.	UNINA9910462820503321
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Titolo	The Romantic crowd : sympathy, controversy and print culture // Mary Fairclough [[electronic resource]]
Pubbl/distr/stampa	Cambridge : , : Cambridge University Press, , 2013
ISBN	1-139-61114-3 1-107-23784-X 1-139-61300-6 1-139-62230-7 1-283-94326-3 1-139-62602-7 1-139-60932-7 1-139-38272-1 1-139-61672-2
Descrizione fisica	1 online resource (ix, 294 pages) : digital, PDF file(s)
Collana	Cambridge studies in Romanticism ; ; 97
Disciplina	941.07
Soggetti	Sympathy - Great Britain - History - 18th century Sympathy - Great Britain - History - 19th century Romanticism - Great Britain - History - 18th century Romanticism - Great Britain - History - 19th century Social values - Great Britain - History - 18th century Social values - Great Britain - History - 19th century Press and politics - Great Britain - History - 19th century Collective behavior - Moral and ethical aspects France History Revolution, 1789-1799 Foreign public opinion, British
Lingua di pubblicazione	Inglese
Formato	Materiale a stampa
Livello bibliografico	Monografia
Note generali	Title from publisher's bibliographic system (viewed on 05 Oct 2015).
Nota di bibliografia	Includes bibliographical references and index.
Nota di contenuto	Introduction: collective sympathy -- ; Part I. Sympathetic Communication, 1750-1800: From Moral Philosophy to Revolutionary Crowds: ; 1. Sympathy and the crowd: eighteenth-century contexts; ; 2. Sympathetic communication and the French Revolution -- ; Part II. Romantic Afterlives, 1800-1850: Sympathetic Communication, Mass

Protest and Print Culture: ; 3. Sympathy and the press: mass protest and print culture in Regency England; ; 4. 'The contagious sympathy of popular and patriotic emotions': sympathy and loyalism after Waterloo -- ; Afterword: sympathy and the Romantic crowd.

Sommario/riassunto

In the long eighteenth century, sympathy was understood not just as an emotional bond, but also as a physiological force, through which disruption in one part of the body produces instantaneous disruption in another. Building on this theory, Romantic writers explored sympathy as a disruptive social phenomenon, which functioned to spread disorder between individuals and even across nations like a 'contagion'. It thus accounted for the instinctive behaviour of people swept up in a crowd. During this era sympathy assumed a controversial political significance, as it came to be associated with both riotous political protest and the diffusion of information through the press. Mary Fairclough reads Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, John Thelwall, William Hazlitt and Thomas De Quincey alongside contemporary political, medical and philosophical discourse. Many of their central questions about crowd behaviour still remain to be answered by the modern discourse of collective psychology.
