Most of Byron’s critics skip over ‘An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill’, understandably eager to get to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, which was published only eight days later, when Byron awoke to find himself famous. To linger on the ‘Ode’ is to hold Byron on the threshold of fame, to capture him in a freeze frame just before his career takes off. Doing so enables us to glimpse him before it becomes clear what direction his life will take, and gives us a chance to peer behind the scenes at some of the machinery that will drive Byromania, propelling its star to the pinnacle of Romantic celebrity. Byron wrote to his political mentor Lord Holland that he was ‘apprehensive that your Lordship will think me [...] half a framebreaker myself’ (*BLJ*, II, 166). In this chapter, I too am half a framebreaker. The frames that I aim to break are those chronological and conceptual frames that have led critics to ignore or dismiss the ‘Ode’. Incomplete understandings of legal definitions and parliamentary procedures have led critics mistakenly to frame the poem chronologically, representing it as a peevish comment on a completed legislative process. This characterisation is part of a conceptual frame in which Byron’s political engagement with Luddism can be dismissed as a failed effort in self-promotion, designed to launch his career in the House of Lords. These are the frames I would break.

But I am only half a framebreaker; I will also construct three new frames in which to view the poem. The first is the corrected chronology of the Frame Bill’s passage through parliament, which made it law. The second is the industrialisation of textile manufacture, on which the poem comments. The third is the industrialisation of printing, on which the poem relies for its reproduction. Byron’s poem benefits from industrial printing by being published in a large-circulation newspaper produced by rapidly advancing print technology. Since that technology
made Romantic celebrity culture possible, it is an essential context for studying that culture. I situate ‘An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill’ where my three frames – two trajectories of technological advance and one instance of oppressive legislation – intersect. On these frames I would weave an argument for understanding ‘An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill’ as one example of Byron’s activist writing. That argument will be supported by my discovery of a previously unknown reprint of Byron’s poem in a Nottingham newspaper. But the argument will also oblige me to address the issue of whether the ethical effectiveness of Byron’s poem on the industrialisation of textile manufacture is compromised by its complicity in the industrialisation of printing. To do so, I will draw a distinction between two kinds of poetic agency, which has implications for the broader frame in which critics of Romanticism work: on one hand, the agency of a poet over the production and distribution of his poems, which William Blake maintained in the highest degree; on the other, the agency of a text in the world, which Byron aspired to mobilise. The ode’s example suggests that although Byron should perhaps have been embarrassed by industrialisation, he could also embarrass industrialisation by annotating its abuses.

Having returned from his travels, Byron fixed on the Frame Bill for his maiden speech in the House of Lords. The Bill, introduced into the House of Commons by Richard Ryder, the Home Secretary, on 14 February 1812, prescribed the death penalty to people breaking weaving frames. Breaking frames was already an offence punishable with transportation for 14 years, but the Government proposed a more exemplary punishment. This was a response to the civil disturbances in the Midlands, where weavers were vandalising weaving frames in protest against wage-cuts which had reduced them to a state of near-starvation. Ryder told the Commons that ‘the ground on which he proposed the bill, was this, that if the offence were permitted to be perpetrated as it had been, it would threaten serious danger to the state’. The Tory ministry was trying to prevent the rioting from turning into a full-scale insurrection and, as D. N. Raymond dryly asserts, ‘the easiest method of procedure was, in their opinion, so to terrorise the weavers that they would submit with more amenity to unemployment and starvation’. The Commons passed the Bill on 20 February.

Lord Liverpool introduced the Bill to the House of Lords, where it received its first reading on Friday, 21 February 1812; as was customary at a first reading, no debate took place that day. The following Monday, 24 February, it was ordered that the Bill receive its second reading the following day, but in fact there was no time, and the last thing the Lords