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New Discussions of Gender in English Romantic Studies

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, gender studies have reinvigorated the way in which we talk about romanticism. The article discusses some of the key developments and their critical consequences. Critical interventions have not only redirected our reading of familiar texts, but also fundamentally destabilized the canon and even made us question the validity of the label 'romanticism' itself. Recent critical work is beginning to uncover a mobile syntax of gender roles. The article focuses on how criticism is beginning to discern an unstable distribution of gender characteristics across the spectrum of literary writing.

Keywords gender criticism, feminism, romanticism, the sublime, politics, the French Revolution

Over the last two decades, British and American critics have begun a complete overhaul of the way we understand gender in English literary romanticism (a period sometimes given as 1785-1830). This article will analyze how this dimension of the field has been redefined. This I propose to do by surveying some of the landmark

publications in the field. But the purpose is also to point to the fact that gender boundaries and their transgressions were already widely debated in romantic-era writing. “Masculine” and “feminine” were definitions that could be applied to writers of either sex. The article will argue thatremembering the fact that gender categories were “mobile” in this way is among the most important renewals in romantic studies.

The Revolution Debate as a Catalyst for Gender Criticism

I will begin by exemplifying some of the issues that gender-oriented criticism of romantic texts may address. One such issue is how expected links between a writer’s sex and his/her public opinion are disconnected. A survey of published writings during the period will show that female pamphleteers were on the forefront when it came to discrediting the suggestion that women could be given extended rights. On the other hand, there are male writers who examined the plight of females. An illustration of the latter (although not entirely unproblematic) is William Blake’s early poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). The critical debate on this text has dealt with the heroine Oothoon’s subjection to various forms of oppression. Oothoon’s enslavement takes place through a number of interrelated subjections: she is slave, rape victim, religious subordinate, and wife. These are roles contrasted with the perspectives of various oppressive male figures: Bromion, Theotormon, and Urizen. In this respect, Blake’s *Visions* is of socio-psychological interest because it discusses male domination as a problem that cannot be isolated from the oppressive psychology pervading other areas of human interaction during the age. This is illustrated by Bromion’s lines spoken to Oothoon (after having raped her): “Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south:/ Stamp’d with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun” (Blake 1988, 46). The urge to subject females appears to spring from the same source as colonialism (Blake alludes to British expansionist designs, which had been thrown off in the American colonies) and the trade in black slaves (against which British abolitionists were still raging in the 1790s). As a counterweight to the most congratulatory feminist and post-feminist readings, a 2013 collection of essays entitled *Sexy Blake*, edited by Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, sets out to examine Blake’s fascination with sex and his insistent attempts at

normalizing aberrant sexuality, a tendency that sits uneasily with political correctness.

Romantic-era writers were to a significant extent using gendered categories to discuss politics. The cataclysmic event that brought gender to the forefront in the romantic period was the French Revolution. This was a break with the kind of religious and monarchical tyranny, which Blake campaigned against in *Visions* and his other writings. At first, the Revolution was positively received in Britain, but the patriarchal values expressed in the conservative politician Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) set the debate in motion in Britain. Rather than embracing the overthrow of Catholic despotism, Burke saw the Revolution as devastating the code of "chivalry", which he argued had characterized European culture since the Middle Ages. The Revolution was figured as an attack on "manly sentiment and heroic enterprize" (113).

One of the numerous replies Burke's text invited was Mary Wollstonecraft's political pamphlet *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1791). Wollstonecraft takes a direct swipe at Burke's claim that what constituted the backbone of Europe was the chivalric nobility, which the revolutionaries had now toppled. In a deft discursive move, she instead indicts the nobility for having betrayed "a manly spirit of independence"; this is because a member of this class is pampered from childhood "like a superior being", never receiving "sufficient fortitude either to exercise his mind or body to acquire personal merit" (27). For this reason, the nobility have "ceased to be men". The most obvious example of this is Burke himself, who had accepted a government pension "in a skulking, unmanly way" (19).

A related strategy which Wollstonecraft applies is to feminize Burke. In a rigorous piece of discourse analysis, the critic Steven Blakemore notes that Wollstonecraft constantly accuses Burke of irrationality, and for being weak, imaginative and hysterical (1997, 15-25) – i.e. a female typecast in eighteenth-century parlance. Wollstonecraft says Burke and other "men of lively fancy" follow "the impulse of passion" and thereby fail to undertake "the arduous task" of cultivating their "reason" (1790, 67). In contrast, she presents her own argument as based on reason, judgement and unadorned truth – i.e. what were hailed as touchstones in male debate. Throughout her polemical pamphlet, Wollstonecraft shrewdly inverts the dominant stereotypes.

Wollstonecraft also wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she calibrates the liberties, previously only applicable to "man", into a focused text for British women. She now confronts the gendered rhetoric of patriarchal society, which stigmatizes "rational" woman, head on (1796, 66-7, 102). As backup for these efforts, Wollstonecraft refers to Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790) as a text which sets out to expose the mechanics of discriminatory discourse: "When we compliment the appearance of a more than ordinary energy in the female mind", she notes, "we call it masculine" (2012, 233). Wollstonecraft's similar affront to such entrenched and culturally adulterated vocabulary is an aspect of her writing that continues to invite intense study (see for example Steiner 2014).

Women who expropriated rational discourse often found themselves pilloried. A famous example of this is Thomas J. Mathias' hugely popular satire on literary contemporaries *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794), which went through no less than sixteen editions. Mathias refers unflatteringly to "our unsex'd female writers" who "now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves, in the labyrinth of politics, or turn us wild with Gallic frenzy" (1801, 244). Here, Mathias alludes to the Gothic novel, which he attacks as morally corruptive. Thus, paradoxically, women who try to rationalize will fall into the hysterical "unreason" that characterizes the Gothic novel. By drawing on a complex network of associations, he indicates that Wollstonecraft and other female writers who claim to use "reason" to defeat religious and monarchical authority are like the French revolutionaries which Burke had described as "the furies of hell … the vilest of women", dancing beneath beheaded nobility (1790, 106).

Mathias' criticism of female political writers was expanded and magnified in *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), a poem by Richard Polwhele, an Anglican clergyman and regular contributor to the conservative periodical the *Anti-Jacobin Review*. Polwhele pathologizes the "unnatural" body of female writers, such as Anna Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Ann Yearsley, and Mary Hays as constituting a "female band despising NATURE's law,/ As 'proud defiance' flashes from their arms,/ And vengeance smothers all their softer charms" (1974, 6). Not unexpectedly, Polwhele makes Wollstonecraft his main target, devoting twenty lines of the poem (and a footnote) to her.

If recent gender criticism often breaks down the boundaries between the literary text and the arena of political debate in their examinations of romantic-period writing, so the commentators of the age saw the literary field as a politicized arena. Wollstonecraft herself, as a keen purveyor of literary texts, was able influence the public indirectly. One avenue was through her reviewing for the left-liberal *Analytical Review*, which began in 1788. In her review of *Edward and Harriet, Or The Happy Recovery; A Sentimental Novel* (1788) by "a Lady", Wollstonecraft asserts that she has had to forego an analysis of the novel because "the cant of sensibility" that characterizes the prose on its pages could not "be tried by any criterion of reason". Rather, such overly sentimental works teach women to be weak: to "faint and sigh as the novelist informs them they should". By cultivating such "artificial feelings" of heightened sensibility, women readers accustom themselves to enjoy only emotional works and avoid "rational books" that "do not throw the mind into an exquisite tumult" (*Analytical Review*, June 1788, 208).

The Mobility of Gender

Wollstonecraft's remark is undergirded by wider concerns over literature. These were concerns riven with anxieties over the easy mobility of gender. During the mid to late eighteenth century, the "cult of sensibility" had established itself as a dominant social convention and a literary ideal in genteel society. In the sentimental novel, the feminine propensity for showing sensitivity and compassion was transferred to men with the effect of improving their manners. This was registered even in the physique of the literary heroes. In Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), for example, the face of the eponymous hero has "a delicacy … which might have given him an air rather too effeminate had it not been joined to the most masculine person and mien" (qtd. in Barker-Benfield 1992, 341). The romantics' great interest in feeling also caused them to write "the feminine". Contemporary reviews show that Wordsworth's heightened emotionalism was regularly attacked. Wordsworth became an effeminized victim of the *Edinburgh Review*, whose leading critics roughed him up for his unmanly inanities of sensibility (see Gravil, 2010, 73-108). The new critical attention given to the contemporary reception of romantic texts belies earlier feminist

typecasting of Wordsworth as "the epitome of appropriative and aggressive masculinity" (Wolfson 1994, 31).

Overstressed emotions needed not be "artificial" (in Wollstonecraft's vocabulary) to threaten masculinity. Also outside of the literary sphere, a maudlin sensibility could also unman its practitioners. For example, when Thomas de Quincey shed excessive tears at Kate Wordsworth's death (William's daughter), Henry Crabb Robinson, chronicler of the romantic writer, described his "sensibility" as probably "genuine" but also one which was "in danger of being mistaken for a puling and womanly weakness" (1967, 26).

The mobility of gender orientations, which has been described above, began to receive mounting critical attention in the early 1990s. Diane Hoeveler published Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within (1990), in which she looked at the six male canonical English poets and how they dealt with the idea of imaginative creativity. This, she argues, was possible for males insofar as they absorbed/cannibalized the feminine principle and thus became androgynous. She shows how male poets self-consciously engage with a feminine as Other, which came to constitute an alternative source of value, in order to complete their psyches. Hoeveler then reads a number of the "women" in romantic poetic discourse as a metaphoric expression of this idea.

Anne K. Mellor's book *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) works within the confines of the usual two traditional gender orientations, classifying a female romanticism as distinct from a male romanticism. However, she concedes that, in the final analysis, these distinctions are endpoints on a continuum that ranges not only across the board of literary romanticism but also through the corpus of each individual writer. She then focuses on Emily Brönte and John Keats, whom she calls literary "cross-dressers". The analyses of their work show that any writer "could occupy the "masculine' or the "feminine" ideological or subject position even within the same work" (Mellor 1993, 4).

The investigation of gender as not grounded in biological sex but in the social construct of the writing subject is taken much further in Susan J. Wolfson's *Borderlines*: *The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (2006), in which Lord Byron and his contemporaries Felicia Hemans, Maria Jane Jewsbury, and John Keats are shown to demonstrate how the dichotomy between "masculine" and "femi-

nine" writing was difficult to uphold in the period. This non-binaristic reading has since been extended in Gaura Shankar Narayan's *Real and Imagined Women in British Romanticism* (2009). This is a book relying heavily on the work of Judith Butler and her view of gender as a "freefloating artifice", i.e. masculinity and femininity are social constructs that may apply to either biological sex.

One example of how romantic aesthetic categories were invested with gender-specific association can be seen in relation to "the sublime". That this romantic hallmark was conceived as a gendered category has been usefully discussed by Fjelkestam, among others. According to Edmund Burke's highly *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), "the sublime" is connected with power, terror, violence, majesty, vastness, whereas the beautiful is passive and pleasing and can be domesticated. That the two categories were divided on the basis of gendered fault lines was already realised by Thomas de Quincy, who noted that "the Sublime by way of polar antithesis to the Beautiful … grew up on the basis of sexual distinctions – the Sublime corresponding to the male and the Beautiful, its anti-pole corresponding to the female" (qtd. in Proctor 1943, 75). To some extent, it may be possible to see "the sublime" as the romantic's masculinist counterbalance to otherwise effeminizing emotionalism. The way in which romanticism was defined according to writers' engagement with such issues has determined the construction of the category of the "romantic" in essential ways.

Canon Formation and Dissolution

From the late nineteenth century, when the romantic canon was first established, romanticism was to a large extent seen as a male affair. The writers read and discussed were the "Big Six": William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley, John Keats, and William Blake. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was the only novel by a female writer of interest to romantic studies, but practically nothing else she wrote was studied. In the mid-1980s, the male dominance broke up and was replaced by a new attention to female writing, without which a complete understanding of "romanticism" was deemed incomplete. In anthologies and survey works, authors now regularly include Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), Maria Edgeworth (1768-

1849), Matilda Betham (1776-1852), Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), Hannah More (1745-1833), Mary Robinson (1758-1800), Anna Seward (1742-1809), Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), and Ann Yearsley (1756-1806).

In fact, writing was one of the few ways in which romantic-era women could make a respectable living, and some of the women just mentioned were even outselling Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (St Clair, 362, 631, 716 etc.). However, they were still trailing behind Byron, who – ironically – created for himself a very masculine mythology. As a recent study has shown, female writers often developed their fiction in response to Byronism and the Byronic hero (Franklin 2013). This should alert us to the fact that gender-related issues were a key driving force for a number of female writers.

Critical works of the 1980s began to home in on the subject of "women writers and poetic identity" – to use the title of an influential book by Margaret Homans. A prominent critic was Anne K. Mellor, who edited an influential collection of essays entitled *Romanticism and Feminism* in 1988. The critical awareness of females who wrote for public consumption has fundamentally destabilized the validity of using the term "romanticism" to define a unified literary and cultural renewal during the period. It is, of course, nothing new to suggest that romantic writing took a diversity of forms. Already A. O. Lovejoy, in his important essay "On the Discriminations of Romanticisms" (1924), saw the movement as a Venn diagram with no singular common ground, but, as the push for including women in the romantic canon was stepped up, the existence of a significant chasm between male and female writers began to attract attention.

The Chasm between Male and Female Writers

A number of the women romantics tended to focus on subjects that differed from that of their male counterparts: the home, domestic duties, the local landscape, religious piety and other themes deemed appropriately "feminine". If one dimension of British romanticism was concerned with overturning traditional values, much of women's writing tried to circumvent public controversy. Furthermore, it appears that a self-regulating mechanism was in force: some genres seem to have been predominantly reserved for male writers, such as the epic, learned classical verse, the scientific poem, and the political satire. This nexus between women writers and the range of

generic conventions is the subject of the essay collection *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender* (2007), edited by L. M. Crisafulli and C. Pietropoli.

In particular, it was women writers who risked public derision if they trespassed into the territory of satire. For instance, the bluestocking writer Anna Barbauld's anti-imperialist poem "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven" met with hostility in the *Quarterly Review*, the leading Tory periodical of the day. The reviewer expressed the view that "… the empire might have been saved without the intervention of a lady-author" and laments that she had abandoned "her knitting needles" to write this political poem, when she could have stuck with the sentiments seen in her *Lessons for Children* and *Hymns in Prose* (*Quarterly Review* 1812, 309). In these previous works, Barbauld's poetic voice was identified with the culturally approved role of guardian or nurse.

In the face of such clear examples of policing literary borders in the romantic period, there has been an attempt in recent criticism to look for the links between male and female experiences. In a collection of essays from 2009, Beth Lau and other contributors (following a cue originally given in Stuart Curran's 1988 seminal essay, "The I Altered") set out to discover how male and female writers were interlocutors, drawn by centrifugal forces toward common romantic ideals rather than separated by dissimilar spheres of experience.

Since the 1990s, the sometimes single-eyed feminist focus on women writers has been abandoned to allow for the return of the "old" canon of male writers, opening up these writers to a new gender-based understanding. Barbara Gelpi's pioneering study *Shelley's Goddess* (1992) was one such prominent example of this new departure. What has since been labelled "gender criticism" aborts what was the central plank in some early feminist criticism (i.e. promoting the reading and understanding of women writers) and instead aims to situate gender within the wider circulation of social identities. Since the definition of masculinity may be of equal importance to issues of female identity, gender criticism is sometimes referred to as "post-feminist". Gender critics do not pigeonhole men's writing as monolithic, but rather tend to understand it as a series of dynamic social and cultural attitudes. Gender criticism frequently sets out to register the cracks and fissures in the definition of what it is to be a man in the romantic period and scrutinizes how

male power is torn by anxieties about its authority. For example, analysis may reveal how male writers struggle to maintain patriarchal values rather than presume that they are part of a god-ordained and static universal order.

Conclusion

Over the past decades, there has been a steady destabilization of the canon of writers seen to constitute "romanticism". Female writers are now to a larger degree included in anthologies and university syllabi, because the notions of the themes that qualify as "romantic" are under reconstruction. Recent gender criticism is also beginning to overcome the biological stereotyping and essentialist notions that characterized some earlier feminist efforts in romantic studies. Instead, criticism now focuses increasingly on the mobility of gender, which writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft were already exploring. Criticism is moving away from an older socio-political understanding of patriarchal attitudes towards new exploration of female vs. male categorizations as essentially cultural constructs. That is to say, rather than fixing on autobiography, criticism is now taking seriously textuality as a primary site for negotiating such categorization. This is the recognition that gender difference functions as a trope, which can be reversed and challenged – precisely because they are textual constructions. Gender categories are seen as mobile values, which continue to subvert the logic of essentialist or biological categories. This has created a new way of understanding romantic literature.

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