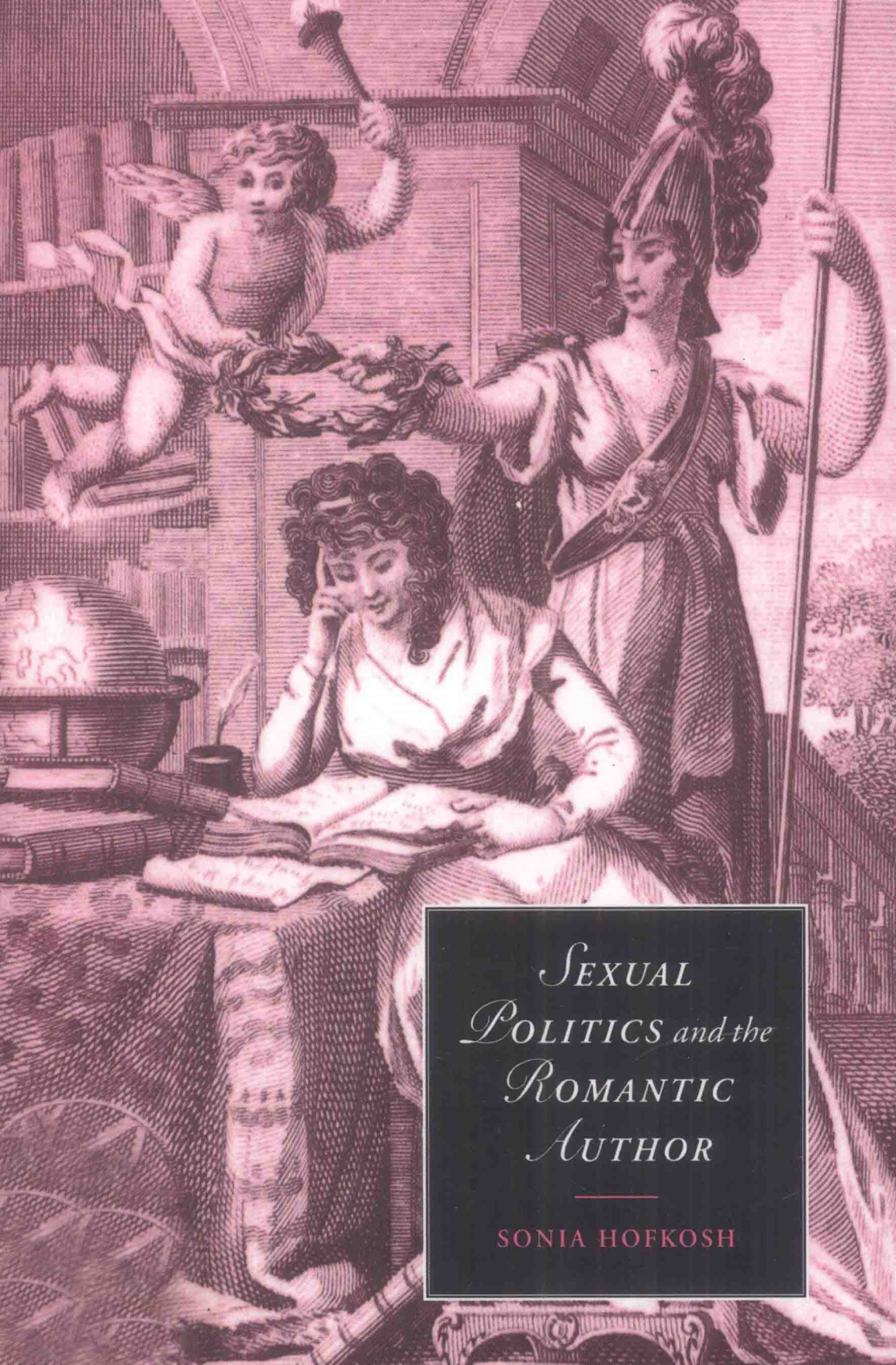

Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author

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SEXUAL POLITICS AND THE ROMANTIC AUTHOR

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521496544

First published 1998
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Hofkosh, Sonia.
Sexual politics and the romantic author / Sonia Hofkosh.
(Cambridge studies in Romanticism)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 49654 3 (hardback)
1. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism.
2. Women – Great Britain – Books and reading – History – 19th century.
3. Feminism and literature – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
4. Women and literature – Great Britain – History – 19th century.
5. Romanticism – Great Britain. 6. Sex role in literature.
I. Title. II. Series.
PR468.F46H64 1998
820.9'352042–dc21 97-18181 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-49654-4 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-49654-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02770-0 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-02770-5 paperback

Exploring a range of early nineteenth-century cultural materials from canonical poetry and critical prose to women's magazines and gift-book engravings, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* offers new perspectives on the role of gender in romanticism's defining paradigms of authorship. The romantic author's claim to individual agency is complicated by its articulation in a market system perceived to be impelled in large part by fantasies of female desire – by what women read and write, what they buy and sell, how they look, and where they look for pleasure. These studies in the contested public spaces of literary labor elaborate the fundamental if invisible function of the woman as embodiment of authorial ambivalence in writing by Austen, Byron, Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Sarah Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Keats, Mary Shelley, William Wordsworth, and others.

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SEXUAL POLITICS AND THE ROMANTIC AUTHOR

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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those "great national events" that were "almost daily taking place": the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content, and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of "literature" and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

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Acknowledgments

It is with pleasure that I acknowledge my debt to the others who have helped inspire, instruct, and support me in my claim to authorship. This book could not have been written without the various contributions of mind and of heart from colleagues, friends, and family, all of which I am certain I have felt deeply. I want to thank many colleagues in romantic studies whose active interest in my work over the years has been important in sustaining my desire to do it. Peter Manning, Anne Mellor, and Susan Wolfson provided crucial early encouragement and have been both models for the work and generous readers of it. Mary Favret, Annie Janowitz, Starry Schor, and Nicky Watson have each offered a sense of vital though far-flung sorority as well as opportunities to publish my writing. The Romantic Literature and Culture Seminar at Harvard continues to be a stimulating intellectual community and I have learned much from my colleagues there, Libby Fay, Jon Klancher, and Chuck Rzepka among them. Alan Richardson has fulfilled the dual role of mentor and collaborator with great grace. William Keach is an exemplary comrade, at once challenging and nurturing. I have valued his friendship no less than the lessons I try to learn from him about putting argument into action.

My colleagues in the English Department and the Women's Studies Program at Tufts have provided a rich environment for my thinking. I owe Josie Dixon at Cambridge University Press many thanks for her patience and tact. I am grateful to James Chandler for his support and advice, and for his patience too. In almost daily conversations over many years working out ideas and ambivalence, Lynn Wardley has been an incomparable resource. I feel my debt to her intelligence on the level of the sentence. Sheila Emerson's extraordinary capacity to see into the life of things has enabled me to turn those sentences into a book. Sasha Parness has also taught me about the intricate satisfactions of writing, among other things.

I have been fortunate in having the love and support of my parents, even when they had to wonder so where is that book already. I want at least to begin to thank Jonathan Hulbert for never failing to believe I could be an author, and for helping to create the context within which being one becomes meaningful. Eliza Hofkosh-Hulbert has shared wisdom and humor beyond her years. Her sister Nina has lately given the challenge new vigor and new rewards. The book is dedicated to Sonia Perelstein and Bessie Berman, invisible women, but also strong and a substantial part of what I am writing for.

The material presented here has been long in forming itself into a book; in the process, a number of chapters have developed out of essays that appeared elsewhere: "A Woman's Profession" in *Studies in Romanticism* 32 (Summer 1993); a shorter version of "The Writer's Ravishment" in *Romanticism and Feminism*, edited by Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); "Disfiguring Economies" in *The Other Mary Shelley*, edited by Audrey Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther Schor (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993); "The Author's Progress" emerged out of "Sexual Politics and Literary History" in *At the Limits of Romanticism*, edited by mary Favret and Nicola Watson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). I am grateful to the publishers of these earlier pieces for their permission to print the revised versions which appear in this book.

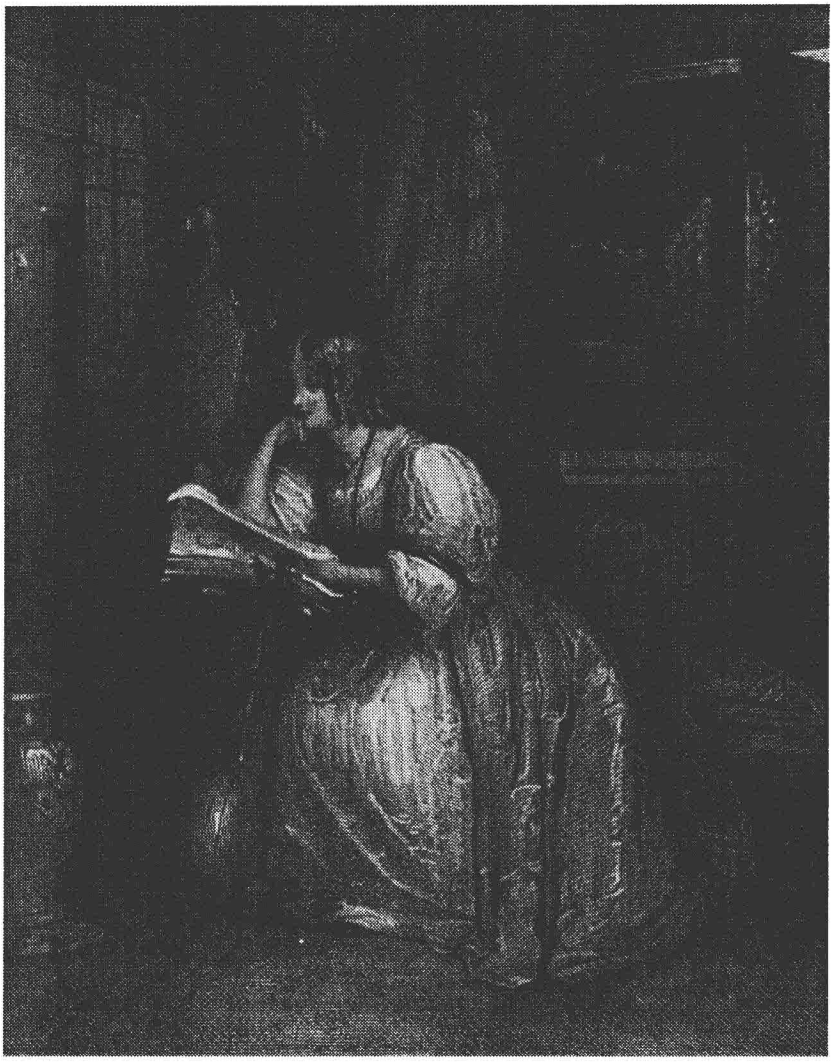

Figure 1 *Rosina.*
"Beneath this picture was inscribed in golden letters, 'The Invisible Girl.'"

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Introduction: invisible girls

An image of a young woman reading, the engraving accompanying the short story, "The Invisible Girl," published in *The Keepsake for 1833* by "the Author of Frankenstein," illustrates the conjunction of writing and the gendered body that I want to examine in a variety of situations in the following chapters. As both a visual embodiment of Rosina, the story's heroine, provided as part of *The Keepsake*'s ornamental equipage, and a functional artifact described within the narrative proper, the engraving doubly frames the issue of materiality at stake in that conjunction. Such emphatic framing is also itself fundamentally at issue in the discussions that follow, where my project involves looking at assumptions about meaning or value which motivate strategies of differentiation and definition, strategies that, like a frame, draw lines around a subject – an individual or a field of study – and thereby describe its substantive, signifying edge. I am interested in the implications of what this image thus appears simply to describe, what it can be seen to represent on the level of its content: a woman and a book. But I am at the same time interested in what seems to disappear beyond or behind those representational borders – what we might call the dis-content of the subject – the overdetermination or excess towards which the image, itself supplemental to writing, implicitly gestures, but which fades out of the view of this woman reading.

I want to consider the figure of the woman reading specifically in terms of the location of that figure and that activity in the context of the other objects which so fully furnish this interior scene. This is a scene, as Mary Shelley's narrative describes it, of "home and privacy," and as such, it is a comfortable and a familiar scene. And yet it is simultaneously a scene of culture, an evocative scene that alludes, in the parrot ("parroquet") and the mirrors and the dark chest with its open door, to some other place, an exotic or mysterious elsewhere, whether beyond or more deeply within.[1] In its shadowy suggestiveness, such allusion works visually as background

to outline the portrait of the lady at leisure all the more insistently. Only one of many portraits of ladies that decorated the pages of the lavish gift annuals through the 1820s and thirties and which contributed significantly to the appeal of those books as emulative artifacts of the bourgeoisie, this engraving explicitly conforms to conventional expectations of how culture should look; it contends that culture, domesticated, feminized, is embodied in a certain aesthetic and associated with a certain class. In thus highlighting its fulfillment of those expectations in the luminous form of the reading woman, however, the engraving also potentially disturbs the merely complacent gaze which we direct at her and which is likely to dwell, satisfied, in the luxurious drapery of her dress and on the folio pages of the book she reads until it seems *as if they were not there.*

In the very lavishness of its material detail, the engraving seems simultaneously to draw attention to the tangibility of the aesthetic object and to turn it transparent as such. It discloses even as it so elaborately enfolds and covers over the provenance of the materiality that this scene of domestic luxury indirectly depicts: in particular, the labor that is the precondition of such feminine leisure, the production that renders such consumption – of books as of other commodities – conspicuous, the economics of appropriation, exploitation, or violence that furnishes such a private space with foreign effects. We might see only a picture of a woman reading a book. But in looking at this woman we are in fact also seeing precisely what we are not supposed to be able to see, what we cannot read, or, rather, what our reading so lavishly denies: "Beneath this picture was inscribed in golden letters, 'The Invisible Girl.'" Shelley's narrative rewrites the title of the engraving, "Rosina," as it serves merely to decorate the gift book; as the narrative thus incorporates the image into its own frame of reference, it underscores the discrepancies of the market that the picture contains when it arranges its assortment of alien features into a comfortable domestic scene. On the edge of the image, as its frame, that inscription urges us to look again and to notice what we didn't think we could see; or, put another way, it urges us to notice that what we do not see, that which is invisible in this image of culture, is precisely what the engraving illustrates. The narrative written by the woman who is herself curiously situated on the outer edge of an inner circle and on occasion virtually invisible there ("a devout but nearly silent listener"),[2] in this way suggests that if to be seen is to be invisible, then to see is to be, like Sir Peter in the story, "very conveniently blind." Vision (imaging, imagining), like truth or power, must be partial, a function of expectation and desire: "Delusion bold!"[3] In the

performance of Jack the Giant-killer at Sadler's Wells – "the word / *Invisible* flames forth upon his chest" (286–87) – such delusion fascinates the observer, who looks at the audience ("the rabblement"):

> To watch crude Nature work in untaught minds;
> To note the laws and progress of belief;
> Though obstinate on this way, yet on that
> How willingly we travel, and how far! (275–78)

My interest here is similarly to trace the "laws and progress of belief" in the partial (empowering) visions that culture (looking like nature) teaches us. When we, perhaps as deluded as the spectators at Sadler's Wells, look again at the invisible girl, might we begin to see that *her* gaze may just glance over the top of the page of "one of those folio romances which have so long been the delight of the enthusiastic and young" to indicate a different subject of interest? That she looks towards a pleasure of some text other than the one that appears so centrally and so familiarly to our view? That our eyes have been willingly riveted so long to a certain form, a certain normative embodiment of significance and value, without seeing how it is a creation of its surround, both of what evidently appears and, crucially, what does not?

Through a variety of early nineteenth-century texts and contexts, the following chapters engage some of the issues, questions, and possibilities thus outlined by the image of the woman and the book in order to consider the way invisible girls are scripted into romantic tradition in particularly material configurations – as bodies, among objects, like books, in the marketplace – even as they appear to be overlooked or, what may amount to the same thing, looked over. Mary Shelley's "The Invisible Girl" appeared in 1832, and therefore just on the chronological edge of romanticism as it is conventionally construed; it provides an angle from which to look at that tradition and its defining paradigms – of presence, of vision, of the individual, imaginative subject, the author – precisely as conventional constructions specifically motivated by the appearance and disappearance of women at the scene of writing. Shelley's story thus affords us a way to see what we have been looking at *as* romanticism from another direction and through other eyes, as if through the eyes of the invisible girl. Reading with her in the picture, following her gaze at or out of the frame, allows us to see in romanticism some familiar things that we have not really looked at before.

"The Invisible Girl" opens by avowing its own diminished construction,