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Romanticism & Gender

Edited by Anne Janowitz

FOR THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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Preface

Over the last fifteen years the study of Romantic period literature has been remarkably altered by the growth of feminist literary criticism. The first stage in the feminist consideration of Romanticism was a sustained critique of the ways in which women were represented in the poetry of the male Romantic poets, in tandem with a consideration of why it was that there were so few women in the canon itself. Critics and literary historians, including Marilyn Butler, Stuart Curran, Margaret Homans, Mary Jacobus, Cora Kaplan, Gary Kelly, Anne Mellor, and Marlon Ross, reshaped our sense of the central questions we wish to ask of Romantic period texts. The result of that grounding work has been a more complex sense of what the image of woman meant within the received Romantic poetic, and as well a fuller sense of who those women were who wrote poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. An intense period of archival work has been recovering to us the poetry and poetic intentions of, amongst others, Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Mary Robinson. At the same time, feminist criticism helped to demonstrate that Romantic period literature includes a striking and valuable range of texts beyond lyric poetry. Epics in poetry and prose, novels, prophecies, polemics, philosophical tracts – all these were the stuff of literary culture, and their value becomes clearer as we make sense of these texts in the context of women's history.

Feminist literary criticism has been a crucial force in the development of what we now more broadly call 'gender studies', and the essays in this volume of *Essays and Studies* build upon and extend the collaborative work of feminist and gender study. These essays, written by both established and newer critics, take up a range of issues and question assumptions about what Romantic literature is, as well as what its periodic boundaries might be. The essays address problems of the relation between class and gender, imperialism and gender identity, and gender and genre within the period understood as stretching from the 1770s to the late 1820s. And the reassessment of Romanticism as guided by feminist criticism has also made it important to think about the period constraints of Romanticism as well. Is Romanticism a mode or an historical period? Does it include American poets? This collection includes essays which think about women poets who bring Romantic poetics into the mid-century; and as well, about the meaning of gendered Romanticism to fin-de-siècle writers. Taken as a group, this collection of papers gives a good indication of roads that students of Romanticism may follow well into the next century.

Contents

Feminine Romanticism, Masculine History, and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State

GARY KELLY

IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY*, Jane Austen has her heroine, Catherine Morland, admit that ' "history, real solemn history" ', she cannot be interested in:

> 'I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.'
>
> (vol. 1, ch. 14)

Readers of *Northanger Abbey*, whether in 1805 when it was completed and sold or in 1818 when it was eventually published, would recognize that the comment applied to the majority of historiography written before that time, to the received idea of what constituted history, and to much of the history being made or recently made just across the English Channel. Readers would also know that women had begun to appear in history, to the consternation of many of Austen's compatriots, and probably of Austen herself, in the French Revolution and the Revolution debate in Britain. Such events and the British debate on the French Revolution radically recontextualized the meaning of history and the uses of historiography. Those engaged in the Revolution debate referred repeatedly to history for an analogy to the French Revolution and as a guide or a warning to Britain. Paradoxically, what was widely acknowledged as the unprecedented nature of the French Revolution was seen by many to challenge the meanings customarily derived from history, and to indicate the limits of historiography written up to that point, as a guide to the present and immediate future or, in Bolingbroke's classic formulation, history as 'philosophy teaching by examples'.

The passage of time has not changed the relevance of Catherine Morland's complaint. For example, the first volume of Elie Halévy's classic early twentieth-century account of Britain's formation as a – or *the* – modern liberal state is a survey of *England in 1815* (1913, in English 1924) that mentions Austen and a few other women (Frances Burney, Princess Caroline, Princess Charlotte, Maria Edgeworth, and 'Women,

emancipation of'). Halévy's next volume, *The Liberal Awakening (1815–1830)*, gets down to 'real solemn history', however, and women and women writers, as Catherine Morland would have expected, disappear. The same pattern may be found in literary historiography, and even recent claims for the distinctiveness, quality, and quantity of women's writing during 'the liberal awakening' in Britain tend to ignore its role in the processes of 'real solemn history'. Here I claim that post-Revolutionary women's writing, or women's writing of the Romantic period, did play a role, though as yet difficult to estimate, in the process Halévy celebrated – the founding of the modern liberal state in Britain. At the same time, Halévy's work shows that modernized, liberal Britain also marginalized women.

What later came to be called Romanticism was one of several post-Revolutionary movements. There was, for example, the plebeian religiosity of Primitive Methodism or the sect following Joanna Southcott and the bourgeois religiosity in Church of England Evangelicalism. Established philanthropic movements such as the anti-slavery campaign developed new tactics to meet post-Revolutionary fear of reform that might go 'too far'. Utilitarianism, political economy, and programmes for administrative, managerial, financial, and monetary reform reconstructed various elements of Enlightenment philosophy, science, and research. Plebeian political movements, such as the Spenceans, continued to form and re-form in a desultory and disrupted way, occasionally planning actual political violence, and forming a loose but broad national coalition with middle-class movements at certain crises, such as the 'trial' of Queen Caroline. Professionalization accelerated from the late 1790s and was implicated in many of these movements.

Common to many or all of these movements was the sublation of ideas and programmes of the eighteenth-century Enlightenments and late eighteenth-century revolutions in forms that would sustain continuing demands for change and reform, assuage post-Revolutionary fears of extremism and political violence, and envision repair of Revolutionary social, economic, and cultural disruption. This post-Revolutionary culture developed central aspects of the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary critique of a supposedly corrupt and decadent hegemonic order of court government and its supporting systems of patronage, paternalism, and patriarchy. It formulated new models for resolving interconnected conflicts of class, gender, religion, race, region, and nation. It reconstructed models of subjectivity, domesticity, gender, region, and nation from the pre-Revolutionary culture of Sensibility. It addressed post-Revolutionary anxiety about the groundedness,

integrity, and reproducibility of discursive orders of all kinds, especially personal identity, sociality, the 'nation' as a spatio-temporal condition and continuity, language, and writing and literature. These issues were central to founding the modern liberal state.

The roles of women in post-Revolutionary movements and culture were various and problematic. This was due to the implication of gender difference in social differences of other kinds, as these varied in importance from one place, group, moment, and movement to another. For example, the plebeian followers of Joanna Southcott could regard their female prophet and leader as an appropriate or even necessary sign of their difference from the male-led and dominated established church. For the same reason, Protestant Dissenters and Anglican Evangelicals could allow important roles to women in their various evangelizing and philanthropic organizations and intellectual, cultural, and literary life, while still excluding women from their clergy and providing their organizations with male officers. In politics, working-class women could parade together in support of Queen Caroline because women were licensed to sympathize, even publicly, with a distressed woman.

In Romantic writing, as in the literature of Sensibility, men took up topics hitherto considered more appropriate to women, especially certain kinds of subjective experience, the 'domestic affections', quotidian common life, local community, and plebeian knowledges later called folklore. Doing so challenged conventional and historic upper-class codes of masculinity seen by many as characteristic of oppressive and outmoded social hierarchies, economic relations, and political regimes. Yet the 'progressive' feminized masculinity of Sensibility was associated before the Revolution with genteel amateur belletrism and during the Revolution with social and cultural transgression and political violence. In the Romantic movement, men reacted with a complex remasculinization of writing that professed to reject but in fact subsumed the literature of Sensibility, appropriated 'feminine' themes, styles, and genres, combined them with conventionally 'masculine' discourses normally barred to women, such as philosophy, scholarship, satire, and the erotic, and as a result restricted women even more to acceptably 'feminine', subaltern and subliterary discourses.

Faced with this remasculinization of writing, women writers adopted several strategies in order to retain a place in Romantic literature and thereby shape Romanticism's role in a transformation of the public and political sphere through cultural revolution. Women Romantic writers develop representations of domesticity, especially in afflicted relation to a vitiated public and political sphere; they extend the domestic sphere

into the local, regional and national, thereby domesticating the public political sphere; most importantly, they critique and reconstruct history which the Revolution had radically questioned as discourse, discipline, and knowledge. These strategies were soon appropriated by male writers, however, and given the intellectual, cultural, and literary legitimacy of conventionally 'masculine' discourses. The pioneering work of all but a few women Romantic writers was forgotten or buried in order to protect the predominantly masculine character of the public literary artist and the new national institution of Literature. Nevertheless, women Romantic writers' feminization of history played a major role in the formation of post-Revolutionary culture and thus in founding the modern liberal state.

Women Romantic writers represent history as 'masculine', or characterized by competition, conflict, violence, and destruction in male-dominated societies, and especially in both aristocratic-courtly and revolutionary regimes of recent times. Such 'masculine' history is represented as damaging to discourses and practices becoming central to bourgeois civil society. These discourses and practices included individual subjectivity, domesticity and the domestic affections, localism and communitarianism, and the 'nation' considered as an agglomeration of subjectivities birthed and berthed in domesticity and civil society but marginalized and oppressed by 'masculine' history. As Catherine Morland complains, historiography is the record of 'masculine' history. The Revolution, Napoleonic imperialism, and reactionary monarchic restoration that followed showed that history could not be reformed or revolutionized by masculine means, especially by main force – historically the defining domain of masculinity. Rather, history would be reformed by 'feminine' action, including the pacific and widely acclaimed revolutionizing power of writing and literary discourse. Women writers sought to feminize history and thus change its course in two main ways – by feminizing historiography and by historicizing established literary genres of drama, fiction, and verse narrative.

Feminizing historiography was a delicate task. What Catherine Morland called 'real solemn history' was gendered 'masculine' and the preserve of male writers. Crossing that boundary was dangerous, as criticism of the pre-Revolutionary historiographer Catharine Macaulay Graham had shown. One way to do so was to keep to the acceptably feminine subject of women themselves. Interest in the course of the Revolution and the role of individual character in shaping it had produced an expanding market for biography of all kinds, including women such as Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday. Such women were

controversial, and in the Revolutionary aftermath women recovered from and for history had to include those who were both intellectually remarkable and properly domestic. Memoirs, letters, and new biographies of past women were published, such as the work of the so-called 'Bluestocking' writers and Lucy Hutchinson's biography of her husband, along with her shorter autobiography, which had previously circulated in manuscript. In 1796 the Revolutionary feminist Mary Hays pointed out that numerous women could be included in a history of human achievement, and she associated their exclusion from historiography with history as a record of despotism and tyranny (*Monthly Magazine*, vol. 2, July 1796, pp. 469–70). Hays compiled a six-volume *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries* (1803), and was later commissioned to produce *Memoirs of Queens Illustrious and Celebrated* (1821), exploiting interest in the 'Queen Caroline affair' as an instance of the victimization of women in and by masculine history. Elizabeth Benger published a biography of her near contemporary, Elizabeth Hamilton (1818), then two biographies of queens well known as historical victims of masculine history – Anne Boleyn (1821) and Mary Queen of Scots (1823). Lucy Aikin began by writing a reginal biography, of Elizabeth I (1818), but went on to James I (1822) and Charles I (1833), though she made these acceptably 'feminine' and yet counters to masculine history by treating them as sociocultural histories. She also aimed to make her historiography accessible and to avoid the often dry monumentality of historiography written by men. To be 'popular' in this way was acceptably feminine. Aikin's approach, developed from Enlightenment 'philosophical history' of the progress of civil society and applied by early nineteenth-century women writers of history for children, was made even more popular by successors such as Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland.

Most women writers avoided engagement with historiography as such, however, and sought to feminize history by historicizing forms of the *belles-lettres*, which were regarded as acceptable domains of female literary practice. Women Romantic writers experimented with drama, prose fiction, and poetry in order to influence the reading public, who would in turn, through the institutional reforms of the late 1820s and 1830s, become the political nation who formed the modern liberal state.

In the Revolutionary aftermath, drama was still produced for the licensed theatres, with their historic repertory system. Joanna Baillie revolutionized this major public cultural institution by feminizing the drama with her *Plays on the Passions* (first series 1798, second series

1802, third series 1812) and other plays. These include both comedy and tragedy, or the serious play referred to then as a 'drama', and are set in both contemporary English life and distant times and places. Thus Baillie's project is not thoroughly historicizing, but she critiques and reforms history by rigorously domesticating and localizing (masculine) passions of excessive selfhood, especially ambition and rivalry, that many saw as dominating the public and political sphere, past and present. Within this large project, individual plays employ different tactics. For example, the tragedy *De Monfort* (1798) and the comedy *The Election* (1802) show women engaged in post-Revolutionary social mediation, harmonization, and repair. Other plays represent a feminized male protagonist in contrast to brutal and corrupt excessively masculine men, weakly or corruptly feminine women, and masculinized and tortured self-sacrificing women, as in *Constantine Palæologus* (1804). Settings are not consistently historicized. For example, *De Monfort* has a very lightly historical and Continental setting, *The Election* is set in contemporary provincial England, but *Constantine Palæologus* is purposely set in the last moments of the eastern Roman empire, as the idealized historic character of Constantine Palæologus, a cultivated, benevolent, patriotic, christian, but unwarlike hero, tries to save his people and state from the excessively masculine militarism and imperialism of the Turks. These efforts are undermined by the selfishly treacherous or cowardly among Constantine's own officers, people, and even family – an allusion to Britain's divided state in face of the threat from Napoleonic France.

In a long introductory discourse to *Plays on the Passions* Baillie defends her form of purposely non-theatrical and implicitly anti-theatrical drama as morally, culturally, and socially superior to that of the public stage, which was in any case widely regarded as vitiated by upper-class decadence and plebeian disorder. By domesticating drama, Baillie relocates this powerful channel of ideological communication from a public theatrical space, historically dominated by men and upper and lower classes, to the realm of private, domestic reading dominated by women and the professional middle class to which Baillie herself and most of the reading public belonged. Baillie's discrediting of the public theatre and her feminization of drama influenced women writers to turn from the theatre-play to 'closet' drama and historical subjects, establishing closet drama as artistically and morally superior to the theatre. The public theatres eventually had to recapture this form of drama, and in the process they had to reform themselves from their historic character. By her feminization of the drama, Baillie also contributed to the embour-

geoisement of the theatre, thereby making it an instrument for constructing the modern liberal state.

In broad cultural influence, prose fiction and the novel surpassed even the drama, being the most widely read form of print apart from newspapers. The novel, unlike the drama, had long been considered a feminized form in that it was thought to be largely written by women and to appeal mainly to them. Partly because of this association, however, the novel was considered sub-literary and even dangerous, distracting young male readers from the 'solid' and 'useful' reading required in professional life, and encouraging impractical fantasy and desire in young women, resulting in their courtization. Thus the task of women novelists was somewhat different from that of women dramatists. The novel was already a private and domestic form of cultural consumption. Women novelists did, however, effect thematic and formal restructurings similar to those of Baillian drama, including a prominent role for women as reconcilers and mediators, representation of feminized male protagonists, and plots of romantic restoration. More than the drama, however, the novel needed to have its intellectual and artistic status raised; one way to do so was by appropriating elements of historiography to the novel. For several centuries dramatists and courtly prose romancers had used vaguely historicized settings to disguise, distance, and defamiliarize critique of social and political issues of their own day. These works continued to be read through the eighteenth century. Late eighteenth-century Gothic novelists used generalized historical settings for similar purpose.

In the Revolutionary aftermath, however, women novelists made more determined attempts to appropriate history and historiography in order to feminize them. Some of these writers used the novel to write historiography without risking defeminization, producing historical quasi-novels, or novels dominated by a non-novelistic discourse, in this case, historiography. As early as 1792, Ellis Cornelia Knight incorporated classical learning and ancient history, discourses otherwise gendered masculine, in the 'feminine' genre of the novel, in her *Marcus Flaminius; or, A View of the Military, Political, and Social Life of the Romans*. This was in itself a feminist move, though Knight was a counter-Revolutionary. Elizabeth Hamilton risked defeminization by publishing two satirical and political novels, *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), and though her work was accepted by reviewers, she was criticized for maintaining a 'paper war' that, by 1800, many wished to leave behind. Hamilton then produced her own historical quasi-novel, *Memoirs of the Life of Agrippina, the Wife*

of Germanicus (1804). The subject focuses on woman in history and offered many parallels to the 'masculine' history that victimized women in Hamilton's day. The novel is also a comprehensive christian and feminine critique of the classical pagan imperial Roman culture that had furnished the foundation of male humanist education for some centuries, and which could therefore be indicted as a cause of the 'masculine' character of history.

Knight's and Hamilton's quasi-novels were generally condemned by critics as hybrids and seem to have been little read. Nevertheless, the combination of historiography and romance was soon developed by several women writers and proved to be more acceptable to the reading public. Maria Edgeworth's experimental *Castle Rackrent* (1800) brings together her knowledge of Irish 'popular antiquities', or folklore, with her understanding of plebeian oral narrative, and her knowledge of the French short fictional form of the *conte*. The novel even has an elaborate and at times parodically learned apparatus of explanatory notes to validate the facticity of its fiction. The novel is precisely post-Revolutionary in representing the conditions that led to the French-assisted Irish rebellion of 1798 and indicating a way past the economic and social conflicts that converged in that event. Accordingly, the novel is purposely located in time just before the Anglo-Irish gentry's independence movement of the early 1780s and her father's introduction of a thorough programme of economic, social, and cultural modernization, according to the ideas of the Midlands Enlightenment, on his own estate. Edgeworth's professed aim was to suggest by implication the need for such a programme at the national and indeed imperial level. This programme was similar in many respects to that eventually shaping and undertaken by the modern liberal state. Unfortunately, Edgeworth seems to have felt that her novel encouraged readers in Britain to retain their stereotypic image of the Irish as quaintly pre-modern and marginal. She did not repeat the experiment in historicizing the novel.

Nevertheless, Edgeworth's experiment in a range of other fictional forms made her the most respected novelist in Britain in the first two decades of the century, and even Walter Scott, who appropriated her method and the work of her women followers for his Tory social vision and best-selling historical Waverley Novels, acknowledged her influence. Before that, Edgeworth's historicizing work and that of the women Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe in the 1790s were carried on by other women writers. In *St. Clair; or, The Heiress of Desmond* (1803), Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan) adapted her knowledge of Irish history, culture, and society to the lyrical and expressive Sentimental

novels of Bernardin de St Pierre and Charlotte Smith. Morgan's next novel, *The Novice of St. Dominick* (1805), is a 'historical romance' set in the time of the French king Henri IV (reigned 1589–1610), a revered but controversial historical figure often referred to in the Revolution debate. Here, Morgan represents the fate of private individuals affected by revolutionary events in the public political sphere. Morgan went on, in a career lasting into the 1830s, to become a major voice for colonized and subaltern peoples, including the Irish, the Greeks (*Woman; or, Ida of Athens*, 1809), and the Hindus of India (*The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, 1811).

Anna and Jane Porter experimented with historical fiction of several kinds. Anna Porter published an early historical romance entitled *Don Sebastian; or, The House of Braganza* (1809) while Jane Porter specialized in novels dealing with the topical subject of national liberation. These novels allude at once to Revolutionary and Napoleonic claims to be liberating European and colonial peoples from imperial monarchic regimes and to contemporary indigenous liberation movements in Europe and the New World. Jane Porter's *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) represents Polish aspirations for nationhood, Poland having been partitioned by neighbouring absolute monarchic states in the late eighteenth century. Porter then anticipated Walter Scott in using Scottish history as analogy for the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary age of emergent Romantic nationalism. Her novel *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810) represents the historical thirteenth-century figure William Wallace as leader of national resistance to English monarchic expansionism. Significantly, Wallace is shown to receive his patriotic motivation from treacherous, English-inspired Scottish violation of his home. The novel was widely read and reprinted through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although, like many such novels originally written for adults, publishers later marketed it as an adventure story for adolescents.

These women novelists and others constructed what would become, after appropriation by male writers such as Walter Scott, Alessandro Manzoni, and Honoré de Balzac, the most influential form of the novel in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, its empire, and ex-colonies. For women writers, however, the appropriation of the historical novel by Scott changed the conditions of writing historical fiction. For many critics and members of the reading public, Scott elevated the form, and the novel in general, to literary status, any future historical novelist was seen as his epigone, and the pioneering work of women novelists was eclipsed. Through the 1810s and 1820s, however, women Romantic writers continued to write feminized historical novels of

various kinds. Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* (1816) is apparently set at the time of the Irish rebellion of 1798 but has a European context that echoes Germaine de Staël's influential Romantic nationalist feminist novel, *Corinne; ou, l'Italie* (1807). Lamb's ambitious novel brings together elements of the novel of manners, the *roman-à-clef*, the Edgeworth regional novel, and the late Sentimental tale of Amelia Opie. *Glenarvon* was notorious as a confessional *roman-à-clef*, but its purpose is larger than that, showing again that the male-dominated public and political sphere and history as male conflict victimize women and are futile.

As the daughter of two prominent 'English Jacobin' writers, Mary Shelley had a personal and familial investment in creating a post-Revolutionary Romanticism. Four of her six novels engage with 'masculine' history, though in different modes. These historical novels resist the ideological import of Scott's and also experiment more widely with the possibilities of the form. As its sub-title suggests, in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) history ('modern') collides with myth (Prometheus) in two ways. Through the sub-title and a pattern of quotation and allusion within the novel, 'modern' history from the Enlightenment through its products, the Revolution and Napoleon (often called 'Promethean'), is implicitly contrasted with the mythic, or the ideal for which humanity, in its fallen human condition, necessarily yet unsuccessfully strives. The novel retrospectively refigures Revolutionary Napoleonic history in terms of the Enlightenment's belief in the ability of 'philosophy' as (masculine) critique and method to create a 'new man'. The novel's version of this project, the creation of a supermale, repeatedly causes the breakup of domesticity and victimizes women. Both history and myth are implicitly indicted as masculine productions, the former of male action and the latter of male imagining. Both history and myth, as the Revolution and its Napoleonic emanation, excluded and victimized the feminine, and both failed. As in the major novels of Shelley's parents William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, *Frankenstein* offers no precise solution in the text, though it implies that the restoration of the feminine to history and myth, resulting in a feminized society, is the way to break the cycle of masculine history implied in the novel's plot and its historical and literary allusions, including Plutarch's *Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Volney's *Ruins of Empire*.

Shelley's second novel, *Valperga; or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), adopts the Scott form of historical novel, with fictional characters, notably the female philosopher, pacifist, and