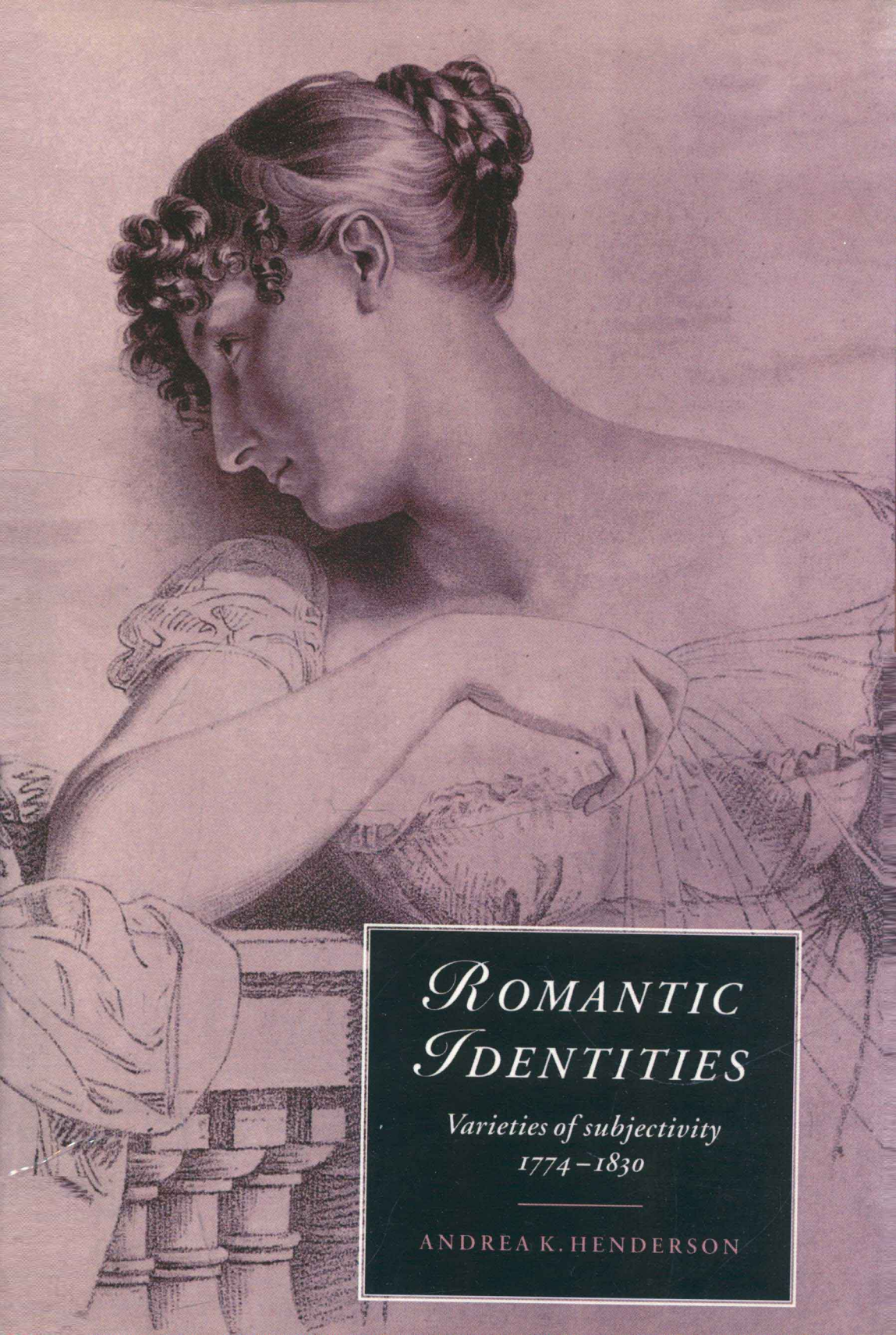

ROMANTIC IDENTITIES

Varieties of subjectivity 1774–1830

ANDREA K. HENDERSON

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Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774–1830

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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/9780521481649

First published 1996
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

Henderson, Andrea K.
Romantic identities : varieties of subjectivity, 1774–1830
/ Andrea K. Henderson.
p. cm. – (Cambridge Studies in Romanticism : 20)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 48164 3 (hardback)
1. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism.
2. Romanticism – Great Britain. 3. Identity (Psychology) in
literature. 4. Subjectivity in literature. 5. Self in literature.
6. Byron, George Gordon Byron, Baron, 1788–1824. Prisoner of
Chillon. 7. Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 1792–1822. Cenci. 8. Scott,
Walter, Sir, 1771–1832. Heart of Midlothian. I. Title.
II. Series.
PR457.H47 1996
820.9'353 – dc20 95 23333 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-48164-9 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-48164-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-02710-6 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-02710-1 paperback

Acknowledgments

Ours is an age that still privileges the canonical Romantic image of the single author, struggling with the ideas within; but it was not the writers I treat of here, speaking of the communal construction of identities and ideas, from whom I first learned that we truly do make one another. This book is the product of the influence of the many people who have inspired, helped, challenged, and supported me during its composition.

I owe thanks, first of all, to the teacher whose very way of thinking was so compelling that I decided upon first contact with her to study Romanticism – a field to which I had previously had little exposure – simply in order to work with her: Marjorie Levinson. The extremely powerful and critical nature of her engagement with literature has and continues to inspire me, while her unflagging generosity, both intellectual and personal, has seen me through many a difficulty. I owe more than I can say here, and probably more than I know, to her example and her friendship.

I owe special thanks too to Stuart Curran; his commentary, drawing on the extraordinary breadth of his knowledge, has been invaluable. Margreta de Grazia, with infinite kindness and patience, not only undertook to read this manuscript – one outside her area of interest – but read it with great care and a remarkable critical eye.

To others at the University of Pennsylvania and beyond I also owe thanks: to Houston Baker (who provided financial support through his PARSS seminar when it was most needed), Phyllis Rackin, and Peter Stallybrass. Adela Pinch and Yopie Prins both read individual chapters with great care and insight. Marlon Ross and George Bornstein provided useful commentary on the shape of the work as a whole. Jay Grossman, Teresa Goddu, Anne Cubilié, Abby Schrader, Mark Schoenfield, Margaret Russet, David Golumbia, Jeff Masten, Lisa Freeman, and Ted Steinberg all read and commented on parts of the manuscript as well as patiently listening to me talk through new ideas

and boosting my faith in those ideas at critical moments. For their editorial advice I would like to thank James Chandler, Marilyn Butler, and Josie Dixon.

I owe a special thanks to the University of Michigan Society of Fellows – and to Bob Weisbuch and James Boyd White in particular – not only for financial support and the great gift of time, but also for three wonderful years of true fellowship at its most congenial and diverse. I am grateful to Dror Wahrman for his critical commentary on the manuscript and the many things he has taught me about British history and politics. I am grateful too to Zoë Strother, for helping me see the world anew through the eyes of the art historian. Herman Stevens, with the knowledge of the classicist and the vision of the novelist, has opened my eyes to nuances, previously unseen, in literature and life.

Two of the chapters that follow originally appeared elsewhere in somewhat different form: "Doll-machines" in *Genders* 12 (Winter 1991), and "An embarrassing subject" in *At the Limits of Romanticism*, eds Mary Favret and Nicola Watson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). I am grateful to those publishers for allowing me to reprint them here.

Those in my family – especially Glenn, Dorothy, and Teri Henderson – have always provided steadfast support of every kind, and this book is dedicated to them.

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Introduction
From coins to hearts: Romantic forms of subjectivity

> When I began to inquire,
> To watch and question those I met, and held
> Familiar talk with them, the lonely roads
> Were schools to me in which I daily read
> With most delight the passions of mankind,
> There saw into the depth of human souls –
> Souls that appear to have no depth at all
> To vulgar eyes.
>
> – Wordsworth, *The Prelude*[1]

Wordsworth's claim here – that it is the poet's task to reveal that human souls are characterized by depth – is one that is generally considered quintessentially Romantic. Critics have long argued that one of the defining features and enduring legacies of Romantic writing is its characterization of the self in terms of psychological depth. M. H. Abrams, in his landmark study *Natural Supernaturalism*, took as his starting point a conviction that Wordsworth's "vision is that of the awesome depths and height of the human mind,"[2] and saw in Romantic psycho-biography a secularized reworking of theological themes and motifs. Similarly, Harold Bloom, in his important work on the internalization of the quest romance, succinctly remarked that "Wordsworth's Copernican revolution in poetry is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity, the loss of what a poem is 'about.' "[3]

More recently, Jerome McGann has argued in *The Romantic Ideology* that "poetry like Wordsworth's belongs to what Hans Enzensberger has called 'The Consciousness Industry' – a light industry, if the pun be permitted, which Wordsworth and the other Romantics helped to found, and which they sought to preserve free of cultural contamination."[4] McGann, a founder of revisionist criticism in Romantic studies, takes the recognition of this characteristic of Romanticism a step

further: he reminds us that this "consciousness industry" must not be taken for granted, assumed to be part of a natural inexorable movement towards a true understanding of the mind. Instead, McGann explores the ways the Romantic notion of "the depth of human souls," despite its self-representation as universal, reflects the peculiar exigencies of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century social life: "Amidst the tottering structures of early nineteenth-century Europe, poetry asserted the integrity of the biosphere and the inner, spiritual self, both of which were believed to transcend the age's troubling doctrinal conflicts and ideological shifts."[5]

In the past ten years or so, numerous studies have appeared that, in one way or another, historicize the Romantic investment in what Clifford Siskin describes as "a self-made mind, full of newly constructed depths."[6] From Marjorie Levinson's account of Wordsworth's conversion of ideological contradiction into psychic opportunity[7] to Siskin's exploration of the disciplinary potential of a self understood to develop and deepen with time,[8] these studies have shown us the way historical and ideological circumstances literally informed this conception of subjectivity. This book pursues the aims of such analyses in that it seeks to historicize Romantic subjectivity; it does so, however, not by linking this model of psychological depth to its historical context but by exploring and contextualizing other, competing models of the self that were produced during the period. The depth model, which criticism has, in effect, canonized as *the* Romantic view of subjectivity, was, during the Romantic period itself, only one available model among many. In recent years, studies of individual Romantic writers have often revealed the existence and importance of conceptions of the self that do not involve a notion of depth, and yet the tendency to link Romanticism with psychological depth remains, and the "egotistical sublime" of *The Prelude*, although challenged in its day, still serves as a touchstone for Romanticism as a whole. This book undertakes to examine a set of non-canonical models of the self – models that could, nevertheless, lay a claim to being peculiarly "Romantic" in that they were clearly shaped by the major social, philosophical, and aesthetic issues of the day. I will show, furthermore, that these models are to be found not only in non-canonical writing but even in the works of the period's canonized authors.

Challenges to the depth model of subjectivity have become particularly popular in recent years and typically derive from the post-structuralist attack on the very idea of self-identity: as Slavoj Žižek puts

it, "the fundamental gesture of post-structuralism is to deconstruct every substantial identity...to dissolve the substantial identity into a network of non-substantial, differential relations."[9] From Derrida's insistence on the logical impossibility of complete self-presence, to Lacan's description of the subject as barred, the sign of a lack, to Althusser's claim that subjectivity is the result of ideological interpellation, post-structuralism, loosely defined, has challenged the belief in "the depth of human souls" from several angles. Studies in the literature of specific periods have often pursued this challenge in a more historical vein – in these works subjectivity is often described as a set of politically motivated textual effects that work to define various subject-positions within a social structure. Subjectivity (and its instability) has thus become a point of reference for studies of all sorts. But the proliferation of interest in, and work on, subjectivity suggests that, like the key concepts of other debates of the previous decade, it may well be on its way to exhaustion. One is reminded of the fate of the term "essentialism": the very word implies a debate organized in terms of a binary opposition, and the categories that define that opposition, "essentialism" and "constructionism," have come to seem so anxiously overworked and even restrictive that the issues they encapsulate are now often negotiated using different categorical tools. In the case of "subjectivity," the debate the term implies centers on whether human subjects should be conceived, as in the subject/object dyad, as agents, or whether, like British "subjects of the crown," they should be understood as subject*ed*. The latter view, like the view that most of our epistemological categories are constructed rather than essentially given, is the one generally avowed; ideologies of rich inwardness and individual agency have been the primary target of recent scholarship. The reference to "subjectivity" in my title might, then, seem to suggest that I will apply a post-structuralist hermeneutics of suspicion to the notion of the "deep self" as it appears in a literary movement renowned for celebrating it. While I do hope to show that the canonical Romantic model of "deep" subjectivity is of limited usefulness in helping us understand Romantic conceptions of the subject, this is not my only aim. I think it is also necessary to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to the binary structure of the subjectivity debate itself. The Romantic era saw the production of a diversity of models for understanding subjectivity, a diversity that often goes unnoticed in our tendency to focus on the depth model, even when we challenge the depth model by revealing its ideological functions.

Romanticism and post-structuralism have together organized our thinking on the issue of subjectivity along a certain axis: subjectivity is either about self-determination or entrapment in ideology, depth or its absence. But there are popular Romantic conceptions of identity that effectively dissolve this opposition. For instance, in chapter 3 I describe an understanding of personal identity, popular among English radicals in the late 1790s, that based hope for human freedom in the belief that human beings, like paper, took their character from external impressions. Moreover, many ideologies of subjectivity produced during the Romantic age are structured according to models in which the presence or absence of depth is not the primary issue; in chapter 4, for example, I describe the way Shelley in *The Cenci* uses two literary genres – poetry and drama – to understand the relation of spiritual to corporeal subjectivity. Romantic models of subjectivity take many forms. It is the goal of this book to give the reader a sense of the multiplicity of these forms.

Each of the book's chapters focuses on a model of identity that enjoyed some prominence in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries and relates its internal structure and logic to its social context. Since the goal of this study is to reveal a range of Romantic ideologies of identity, it is not designed to work in narrative fashion toward the construction of a single alternative model for understanding Romantic identity. Rather, it is meant to foreground the variety of models available during the period and to trace their complex relations to the depth model and to other social constructs. Each chapter, therefore, focuses on the representation of identity in a limited realm and explores its significance within that realm and in terms appropriate to it. The aim of such localism is not to find *the* context that will definitively ground a text or its reading but instead to juxtapose various texts and contexts in order to produce new insights into both. While the primary texts I have selected cannot be termed representative in the strict sense, since they are intended to suggest variety rather than exemplify a single or limited set of paradigms, they have nevertheless been chosen to represent a cross-section of literary genres – the novel, poetry, drama – as well as non-literary genres, from philosophical treatises to political tracts to medical monographs. As we will see, subjectivity was an issue at stake in all these domains, and during the period the dialogue between them was more intimate than our current sense of rigid disciplinary boundaries would lead us to expect. Altogether, these texts span the full chronological range traditionally defined as Romantic,

from the first stirrings of the gothic in the late eighteenth century to the work of the second-generation Romantic poets.

The theoretical paradigms brought to bear on these works, while informed primarily by materialist and feminist thought, are various and are designed to suit the primary texts at hand. Thus, while chapter 2, for example, draws on the work of Lukács and Irigaray to link the flat and purely formal quality of gothic characterization to exchange value, chapter 5 draws on the work of Marx, Negri, Bataille, and Deleuze and Guattari to relate the flatness of Scott's ideal characters to his *resistance* to economic circulation. My method of approach, my focus on the peculiarities and contexts of particular texts or discourses, thus recapitulates, on a larger scale, one of the primary lessons of the Romantic texts I treat. The character of Romanticism, like the characters within many Romantic works, has no deep truth. It is a creature of surfaces, of context, and of varying forms; and when it appears most self-consistent, it may be least so.

Thus, I try to avoid the implementation of what would in effect be a hermeneutics of depth. Moreover, I try to avoid it not only at the global level, when discussing Romanticism generally, but also at the local level, in my discussions of particular models of identity. My aim is not simply to translate metaphors of identity into their political subtext, losing sight of what could be called the "surface text" in the process. Instead, I try to show the ways those metaphors exert a power of their own. That is, I do not want to engage in what Michael Taussig calls "a dominant critical practice which could be called the 'allegorizing' mode of reading ideology into events and artifacts, cockfights and carnivals, advertisements and film, private and public spaces, in which the surface phenomenon, as in allegory, stands as a cipher for uncovering horizon after horizon of otherwise obscure systems of meanings."[10] The vehicles for understanding identity can play as large a role as the motives for that understanding in making identity meaningful. In chapter 2, for instance, we see that once anxiety about the diminishing usefulness of genealogy in the determination of identity has encouraged the association of identity with monetary value, identity comes to seem not only mercurial but insubstantial and spectral as well. Thus, the "solution" to the problem of measuring human value – the money form – brings with it a cluster of metaphoric associations that play their own part in creating the ghostly world of gothic character.

While this book's primary goal is to complicate current notions of Romantic subjectivity, it also aims to suggest fresh perspectives on a set

of current theoretical issues. It is my belief that many of the stalemated arguments within literary studies are likely to find solutions not in the form of answers, but through the modification of the terms of debate. It is here that historically remote texts prove particularly helpful: they can provide ways not only to challenge the usefulness of a theoretical construct in a particular instance, but also to help us rethink the terms and assumptions of that construct. Thus, in chapter 1, obstetrical and embryological texts of the late eighteenth century are used to suggest challenges to, and ways of historicizing, Kristeva's notion of abjection, and in chapter 3 essentialism and contextualism are reconceived in terms of their significance in early nineteenth-century physiology. In the same way that the chapters are intended to provide specific local examples of Romantic-era notions of identity, the book's theoretical challenges are played out on a specific, local level.

The first chapter is the only one that focuses on the canonical Romantic model of identity, but it outlines its development in a non-literary realm: that of embryology and obstetrics. Opening with a discussion of conceptions of mother and child that pre-date the Romantic era proper, the chapter traces what could literally be called the birth of canonical Romantic subjectivity. I argue that the conceptualization of childbearing labor in mechanistic terms, in the context of the development of early industrial capitalism, threatened to align birth with commodity production. This threat prompted the reconception of the maternal body as a part of nature as it was soon to be defined in high Romantic art: the realm of the spontaneous and incalculable, a realm not governed by hard and fast laws. Some years later, embryological growth, which had previously been understood as the mechanical reproduction of a family line, was reimagined as arising from the embryo's supra-physical inner impulses. The result of these two related trends is a model of the genesis of the self that is peculiarly Romantic in the canonical sense, a model that both emphasizes the child's role in its own development and represents fetal development and birth as activities that transcend the world of mechanical laws and commercial relations. We thus find what we have assumed to be the achievement of a cluster of gifted poets anticipated in the realm of science and medicine.

While chapter 1 aims to defamiliarize canonical Romantic subjectivity by tracing its development in obstetrical and embryological theory, subsequent chapters focus on non-canonical models of subjectivity within the literary domain. The second chapter returns to the

problem with which the first one opened: the conceptual alignment of commodities and persons. I argue in chapter 2 that as the traditional genealogy-based model of identity was called into question by the ideals of the French Revolution and the realities of capitalist and industrial development, a commercial model of identity which had long been emerging rapidly gained ground. This model tended to polarize identity into an essential identity akin to use value, on the one hand, and a social identity akin to exchange value on the other. I trace the development of this model first in eighteenth-century moral theory and the sentimental novel, where the association of identity and value, and the division of both into grounded use value and mercurial exchange value, are clearly laid out. I then discuss the ways British monetary crises of the end of the eighteenth century exacerbated the sense of a dangerous division between use and exchange value, and show the repercussions of this division for the understanding of personal identity. I argue that while the canonical Romantic model of identity centers on grounded use value, early gothic novels represent personal identity as violently polarized and are driven by a fascination with the vagaries of exchange-value identity. That is, while on the one hand gothic characters are straightforwardly comprehensible, on the other they are peculiarly mysterious, ghostly, and flat because of their association with exchange value and the money form. I show that the flatness of gothic characterization has kept the gothic from enjoying full canonical status not just because of a critical taste for representations of psychological depth, but also because such depth signals a resistance to the commodification of identity, a resistance in which we are, for the most part, still invested.

Chapter 3 takes up the problem of identity from another angle, that of the challenge to hierarchical systems of classification posed by French Revolutionary and English radical thought. I argue that Revolutionary ideology encouraged the replacement of the hierarchical genealogical system of personal identification by a non-hierarchical, "horizontal" system wherein identity is based on context. This shift tends to make identity a literally superficial matter, as it is in the gothic novel, although for a different reason. In this case, the surface assumes a special significance because it is the site of dynamic physical interactions with the outside world which are constitutive of identity. I first describe this shift in taxonomic method and its significance for conceptions of identity in the discipline in which it was most apparent: biology. I show that Revolutionary pathology and physiology in

particular were characterized by what historians of science have termed a shift from essentialism to localism. I then turn to British Romanticism, which is generally responsive to this flattening of hierarchical distinctions and the new interest in environmental influences on identity, but which often qualifies the role of external influence on identity formation by constructing an inner, self-generated identity that is resistant to it. I argue that Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon" and the accompanying "Sonnet on Chillon" dramatize the shift from an essential to a contextual and finally to an interiorized subject and that, viewed in these terms, the poems' motives and meanings must be reassessed.

Byron associates context-based identity with subjugation to the material world, and, temporarily at least, he can only respond to this problem by adopting a Wordsworthian notion of resistant interiority. Chapter 4 considers in more detail the role of materiality and the body in Romantic poetry. The investment in what Charles Rzepka describes as the "self as mind" generally has the effect of de-emphasizing the role of the body in the establishment of identity.[11] Perhaps no Romantic poet is better known for idealizing persons than Shelley, but I demonstrate in this chapter that this idealization is not unproblematic for him. I argue that in *The Cenci*, one of the most corporeally grounded and pessimistic of Shelley's mature works, he deliberately magnifies the importance of what he terms the external or corporeal being and traces the effects of that magnification on the inner being or "inmost spirit." More specifically, the play explores the relationship of outer and inner being in terms of their resemblance to two representational modes: drama and poetry. *The Cenci*, through its conflation of corporeality and theatricality and its negative representation of the quintessentially theatrical Count Cenci, dramatizes the dangers of grounding identity in the body. At the same time, however, the play shows in its representation of Beatrice's experience that even the inmost being, which is linked to poetry, must draw upon the theatrical, material world in order to do its characteristic imaginative work. When the spirit is completely divorced from the body the self becomes disorganized and unstable. Thus, the play suggests that while external life may be little more than a theatrical mask, the circumscription of the representation of that life can have profoundly pernicious consequences. Ultimately, then, while the corporeal and theatrical aspect of being is demonized and destroyed in the figure of Count Cenci, the imaginative poetic dimension is sacrificed in the figure of Beatrice,

whose ability to imagine what she knows about her body is tragically limited. Turning then briefly to another work that conceives of the self in terms of genre – Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* – I show that Mary Shelley suggests a solution of sorts to the poetry/drama antagonism that leads to such tragedy in *The Cenci*: she subsumes both poetry and drama in the prose narrative form, and defines the latter as the genre most expressive of human subjectivity. Nevertheless, she can only imagine full selfhood as a posthumous production, its achieved form only possible when the story of one's life has been fully told. Thus for both Mary and Percy the generic forms that define Romantic subjectivity give rise to contradictions that lead ultimately to its dissolution.

The fifth chapter returns to the novel and the topic of the impact of marketplace relations on conceptions of identity. At the same time, like chapter 4, it focuses on a work that discovers problems in the canonical Romantic model of interior identity. Walter Scott's *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* opens as a novel very much concerned with discovering and exploring the heart of both persons and society as a whole, but it associates both of these "hearts" with economic circulation and the fluidity of the market. Unlike the characters of the gothic novel, whose mysterious public identities are sharply distinguished from their static and obvious private identities, the troublesome characters of Scott's novel are mysterious even with respect to their private identities; in fact, these characters' mystery is specifically represented as an inner quality. Now, interiorized Romantic identity, precisely because of its hiddenness, comes to be associated with the incomprehensibility and unpredictability of the market. It is as if the exchange value that is associated with social identity in the gothic has been driven into the depths that canonical subjectivity had offered as a safe haven from the world of commercial relations. For Scott, the notion of a psychic interiority that changes over time is linked to an increase not just in social mobility but in circulation generally and finds its fullest expression in characters who change with dangerous rapidity and are fundamentally deceptive. Ultimately, then, the novel discovers that the notion of a heart or core in either society or the individual is threatening because such a core becomes, in both cases, the center of movement or circulation, a place of dangerous fluidity. In the final third of the novel, Scott makes an effort to overcome this difficulty by trying gradually to eliminate the depth model, with which the novel opened, and define an ideal world wherein there would be no need to distinguish a core from a periphery or surface because circulation