

BORDERLINES

THE SHIFTINGS OF GENDER IN BRITISH ROMANTICISM

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Borderlines

for Ron, again

It was scarcely possible to imagine two individual natures more strikingly contrasted—the one so intensely feminine, so susceptible and imaginative, so devoted to the tender and the beautiful; the other endowed with masculine energies, with a spirit that seemed born for ascendancy, with strong powers of reasoning, fathomless profundity of thought.

—HARRIETT HUGHES, ON FELICIA HEMANS AND
MARIA JANE JEWSBURY (1839)

Lord Byron is a pampered and aristocratic writer, but he is not effeminate, or we should not have his works with only the printer's name to them! I cannot help thinking that the fault of Mr. Keats's poems was a deficiency in masculine energy of style. He had beauty, tenderness, delicacy, in an uncommon degree, but there was want of strength and substance.

—WILLIAM HAZLITT, ON EFFEMINACY OF
CHARACTER (1822)

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given me valuable opportunities to share my interests and to benefit from sharp, attentive conversation.

The frequency and assurance of such conversations are among the many reasons I'm so grateful to my colleagues and students at Princeton University.

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Susan J. Wolfson
Princeton, New Jersey, 2006

Preface

I came to borderlines by directions and indirections. I began to write about issues of gender in Romantic imagination in the 1980s, a decade during which feminist critics and new historicists were reviewing the field, especially the explanatory paradigms. Mapping the biases that had plotted critical discussions and received histories, this critique was soon to shape up a report of two romanticisms, one dominant, another suppressed. There was male/masculinist high Romanticism, formerly the whole story, with no gender marking in the spirit of the age (however contentious). And there was She-Romanticism that, while not necessarily in line with 1980s feminism, was legibly oppositional to high Romanticism in all kinds of ways (genres, values, tropes)—so oppositional that if *feminist* seemed too anachronistic a descriptive, *Romantic* now seemed an unsatisfactory cover term for the literary work in the age. (*Romantic-era* has become our taxonomic compromise, conceding the received history but relativizing its claims.)

It was in no small part because the “Romanticism” refined and institutionalized at the end of the nineteenth century was a men’s club, and stayed that way for a long time, that its politics and poetics of gender became a critical subject. A long time indeed. Even as new work and new editions of women writers broke out in the 1970s, the capacious 4th issue of the MLA’s *English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism* (1985; with no sequel) was content to limit its survey to the twentieth century’s “Big Six”: Blake, W. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, P. B. Shelley, and Keats. A canon-revolution was marked by the addition of Blake to the second edition, 1957, and no one thought, despite the popularity and influence of the other Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, that she deserved admission. The gender gap remained largely unremedied in bicentenary events and the publications soon to follow. Two critically sophisticated commemoratives of 1990 were categorically titled—*The Romantics and Us: Essays on Literature and Culture* (ed. Gene Ruoff) and *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and*

Theory (ed. Kenneth Johnston &c)—and mostly male focused. And when *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* unveiled its 6th edition in 1993, women still mattered very little in “The Romantic Period”: their writing occupied no more than 50 of 890 pages, and it wasn’t until the 7th edition (2000) that the ratio swelled, this mostly by the newly hosted *Frankenstein* (following *Longman Anthology* on this initiative).

Yet if *Frankenstein* seems an easy pass, by force of its Promethean fable and the legible connections to canonical male Romanticism, even this hospitality was quite recent. As late as 1989, Harriet Linkin’s national survey of 313 representative English departments discovered that this novel was included in only about half the Romantics courses, and it was the most frequently taught work by a woman (554). Jane Austen was there, but not as a “Romantic”: she was typically slotted (in critical literature, too) as late eighteenth-century or proto-Victorian. When women’s writing entered the story of Romanticism, it was usually to say more about male writers (Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, on William’s agons and inspirations) or to amplify themes in the male canon (Harold Bloom’s 1965 Afterword to *Frankenstein*). Most female figures, in literary representation and in critical analysis, were arrayed in the lines of men’s writing.

One of the reasons I joined the *Longman Anthology* editorial board in the mid-1990s was to offer (with my coeditor Peter Manning) a new array, one that cherished the writers and works that drew us both into Romanticism (those Big Six, and then some, including *Frankenstein*) but with new perspectives: historical and cultural contexts, and female company. It had been only a generation earlier, in the late 1970s, that feminist critics (grateful to a few mid-century pioneers) had begun to review the old ground in earnest, with attention to female authorship and lost writers, with new perspectives on better known ones (Wollstonecraft, Shelley, Austen), and with a theoretical interest in gender. This first-wave (among the most prominent: Margaret Homans, Anne Mellor, Marlon Ross) was attracted to schematic binaries: a “masculine” tradition that was a manifold of egotism, sexism, and power politics, defined and exerted against a more diffuse and permeable “feminine” subjectivity, not inclined to self-assertion or object-appropriation. With reference to such theorists as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, and to French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, women’s writing was said to be inhibited by a masculine tradition and male literary culture (call it patriarchy)—or, if not, then to be venturing a maternally animated *écriture féminine* constituting, in Kristeva’s famous Romantic-toned trope, “a revolution in poetic language.”

These initiatives got us all talking, but the first proposals, tuned to broad,

categorical descriptions and oppositions, seemed to me to elide not only the instabilities and divisions in male representations, but also the assertive critical force of women's writing. Theoretical, often value-laden principles, practices, and traditions (*masculine; feminine*) tended to be hailed in advance of, sometimes in circumvention of, the complex particulars of texts, and the agency these complexities might have in writing the historical and political text of the age. Could textual specifics contest theoretical generalization? What of the potential of literary imaginations to re-imagine, to resist the prevailing paradigms, to open a space in which history is not only disclosed, but made?

Having begun my work in Romanticism with an investigation of interrogative rhetoric—more specifically, the instabilities of male-authored poetry (drawing on formalist criticism and deconstructionist theory)—by the mid-1980s I was turning to the gendered forms of these instabilities, reviewing Byron and Keats. Recognizing that the liberal political spirit of the age—that famous break with received systems of social existence—was contradicted by an *ancien régime* of gender, I was noticing that local plays of writing were rather less systematic. My initial adventures (one on cross-dressing as gender critique in *Don Juan*, one on gender phantasmagoria in the reception of Keats) investigated events of writing that showed men on edge, uncertain of their purchase on “masculine” power, unsure of the borders between masculine and feminine—especially in one strong “spirit of the age”: the composition of the aesthetic self by feeling, subjectivity, receptivity. While these events could play into syntax and poetic form (problems I explored in two previous books), I wanted to account for the gender formations driving what Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* calls the “peculiar language” of literary imagination (*LB* 754).

As I was rereading Byron and Keats, two professional women were coming to interest me, one contemporary with Byron and Keats, and one flourishing a bit later. I was curious about this “Mrs. Hemans” whose success as a “literary lady” irritated Byron into nastiness and provoked Wordsworth into impatience; and I was intrigued by “Miss Jewsbury,” whose style and wit seemed to fascinate everyone who knew her, including Wordsworth, including even the women of his household who were irked by Mrs. Hemans. Alongside these curiosities, my affection for teaching *Frankenstein* had me reading more of Mary Wollstonecraft. Like Hemans and Jewsbury, she was totally absent from my graduate studies in the 1970s, but I experimentally included her in my first syllabi. They are all in this book.

One map of instability that did emerge in the 1980s, chiefly along deconstructive rather than historicist routes, was Toril Moi's scheme of margin and center, a kind of cartographic rethinking of Kristeva's trope of “femininity

as marginality": "If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order," Moi put it with this nod to Kristeva, then one might transvalue the margin, theorizing it less as depotentiated exile than as a factitious, over-determined frontier: "the *limit* or borderline of that order." On this map, Moi suggested, the feminine works doubly, both to shield "the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos" and, subversively, to mirror what a masculine center exiles and represses but still can't help imagining in alienated feminine form (167). Hence, within male Romantic imaginations, the phantasmic array of patently symbolic female characters, usually with designs on, pressures on, the myth of male self-sufficiency: witches, goddesses (or lovers and goddesses who are witches; *les belles dames sans merci*), dream apparitions, Psyche and epipsyche, emanations and phantoms of delight, spiritual sisters and nurturing mothers, dutiful and rebellious daughters, and forms of "Nature," from nurse to stern deity.

Yet, for all these disparate values, the "feminine" is still the reflex of masculine centrality. What if the notion of border is reconfigured from an outward limit of a concentric structure into a borderline, a differential across which both women and men face each other and continually negotiate, and across which occur more than a few strange shifts and transactions? While less mythically fraught than Moi's map of center and frontier, these borderlines of mutual negotiation are no less revealing of the way men and women lived, wrote, thought, and felt. On these medial lines, senses (and sensations) of gender shape and are shaped by sign systems that prove to be arbitrary, fluid, susceptible of transformation. Hence *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender*. Reviewing the map of Romanticism that polarizes those masculinist and feminist (or proto-feminist) orders and practices, *Borderlines* shifts the language of gender essence (culturally organized and supported as it is) into mobile, less determinate syntax, tuned to such figures as the stylized "feminine" poetess, the aberrant "masculine" woman, the male poet deemed "feminine," the campy "effeminate," hapless or strategic cross-dressers of both sexes, and the variously sexed life of the soul itself. On the borderlines, essence figures more as a point of origin, or cultural identity, from which gender, too, is a departure—or even, in extreme instances, a "mistake" (this is Wollstonecraft's bold claim).

Why be *Romantic* about this? While men and women are always reflecting about being men and women, I am certain that the Romantic era, electrified by the French Revolution, with its powerful polemics of the rights and wrongs of *Man*, charged up the discussion to a turning point, or at least a curve of acceleration. With explicit political calculation, Wollstonecraft titled her initiative *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. And because writing itself—pamphlets

and books, poems and novels—was so involved in the wrongs of woman, its methods and textures are everywhere on her critical agenda. Wollstonecraft was prescient, and is durably potent in treating gender-language as historically contingent. In her address, *Woman* is an ideological and political subject that may be *feminine* or *masculine*. Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* paved the way, but her genre is still eighteenth-century Enlightenment/rationalist. Invoking the revolution-charged word *Rights*, Wollstonecraft channels the political momentum of the 1790s. And if she strategically kept the polemic attached to domestic benefits, contending for a rationally managed home as the first site of good government, she knew she was working a trope: the home that was like a republic implied a republic that could take its cue from by such home-schooled principles.

There is no precise periodizing of the questions that focus *Borderlines*, and that's because the issues are still with us, and continue to recoil in our readings of Romanticism—as my attention to reception, then, later, and now, shall make clear. Wollstonecraft launched nothing less than a methodology, an oppositional gender criticism of literature and culture to be conducted by a close reading of textual structure, right down to words, syntax, grammar, and fleeting allusion, and never forgetting the big stakes. Sharing her commitment to proving (testing, uncovering) large points in local sites, and reading local events into wider registers, I've written *Borderlines* to argue, in effect, that gender theory is most fully realized in such actions.

Illustrations

- 2.1 *Felicia Hemans*. Edward Scriven's engraving (1839) from William E. West's portrait (1827). In *The Works of Mrs. Hemans*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1839. Collection of Susan J. Wolfson.
- 2.2 *Felicia Hemans*. Edward Smith's engraving from a miniature painted by Edward Robertson (1831). In Henry F. Chorley, *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans* (1836). Collection of Susan J. Wolfson.
- 4.1 *Mrs. Fletcher, Late M. J. Jewsbury*, by G. Freeman, engraved by J. Cochran (1832). Courtesy of Tamworth Library, Sheffield.
- 6.1 *Lady Caroline Lamb in Page's Costume*, by Thomas Phillips (1814). Copyright Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. From an image kindly provided by Paul Douglass, reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.
- 6.2 *The Finding of Don Juan by Haidée*, by Ford Madox Brown (1873). Permission of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.
- 6.3 *Byron in Albanian Dress*, by Thomas Phillips (1813). Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.
- 6.4 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in Turkish habit, from *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, edited by her great-grandson, Lord Wharncliffe. London: George Bell and Sons, 1887. Courtesy of Princeton University Library.
- 8.1 Sketch of John Keats by Charles Brown (1819). Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.
- 8.2 Sketch of John Keats attributed to Mary Newton. Reproduced from Donald Parson, *Portraits of Keats* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1954), said there (p. 172) to be in the possession of Colonel Claude N. Furneaux. Efforts to trace copyright were unsuccessful; advice welcome.

- 8.3 Miniature of John Keats by Joseph Severn (1818). Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.
- 8.4 Posthumous portrait of John Keats by William Hilton. Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.
- 8.5 Chalk sketch of John Keats by Charles Wass (1819–20), after a lost original by William Hilton. Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.
- 8.6 Life mask of John Keats taken by Benjamin Robert Haydon (1816). Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.
- 8.7 William Wordsworth, sketched by Benjamin Robert Haydon (1818). Permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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