

Breaking into the Boys-Only Treehouse: Feminist Revisions to the Romantic Literary Canon

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What has traditionally been understood as English Romanticism presents us with a classic case of normative circularity, in which a literary period is defined by a canon whose authority is, in turn, reinforced by the fact that it defines the period. Until recently, the canon of English Romantic writing was dominated by the Big Six poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats), with Austen and other prose writers relegated to a separate canonical space. The dominance of the Big Six was such that anyone hoping to nominate new candidates for the Romantic canon faced a difficult task, since revising the canon could not be done without also revising the standard idea of the period as epitomized by the work of the Big Six. This is the difficulty that concerns Liz Stanton in her thoughtful overview of the recent campaign to open up the canon of English Romantic writing to more poetry by women. As Stanton makes clear, the campaign has faced numerous obstacles, though none greater than the force of the normative circularity that sustains both the canon and the period of English Romanticism. For the critics Stanton considers, revising a canon that also serves to define a literary period requires them to question conventional ideas of the Romantic period in a way that nonetheless respects the authority of the Big Six. But doing so is not easy, since rejecting the terms by which a period is defined may ultimately entail redefining the grounds on which both men and women authors are to be included in the period's canon.

- Trevor Ross

Romantic poets are among the most famous literary figures of all time: even those outside academia recognize poems like Shelly's "Ozymandias" and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." The Romantic era, which began roughly around the 1780s and ended somewhere near the 1830s, is commonly regarded as a reaction against the Enlightenment's privileging of reason, celebrating instead nature, the sublime, and the individual. The Romantic literary canon consists primarily of six major poets – William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. This version of the Romantic canon, however, has not always dominated. As Jerome McGann points out in "Rethinking Romanticism," William Blake is a relatively recent addition to the canon, and Lord Byron's lack of "cultural seriousness" (737-8) makes him an odd fit when considered alongside Wordsworth. The inclusion of these two poets, then, seems to allow that the canon has room to expand; it has done so in the past, and it will continue to do so in the future.

Male poets, however, were hardly the only writers producing work during the Romantic era: female authors published poems, plays, and novels that were well-received by the contemporary literary public. With works like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, published in 1979, feminist scholars began to argue for the inclusion of female writers in the Romantic literary canon. When the wide variety of literary works published during this time is taken under consideration, it becomes clear that the canon, as it currently stands, represents only a narrow, and very male, slice of the

“Romantic era.” In fact, as Lillian S. Robinson argues in “Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” the canon can be thought of as “an entirely gentlemanly artifact, considering how few works by non-members of that class and sex make it into the ... canon as it is generally understood” (154). If the canon reinforces certain male literary standards, then it is hardly surprising that women have found it difficult to gain entry into this elite club: their gender makes them ineligible from the start. I argue that canonical inclusion is a direct result of the perceived power and social standing of the author: women have been systematically excluded from the Romantic canon because of their gender, not the literary value of their work. In this paper, I discuss a variety of solutions to the problem of canonical exclusion and I argue that the conventional definition of the Romantic canon must be expanded in order to include women.

There are a few proposed solutions to this problem of women’s exclusion from the Romantic canon, but none are without attendant difficulties. Some scholars are in favour of dissolving the existing canon altogether, questioning its ability to represent the full scope of the period’s writers. In “Were Women Writers Romantics?,” Anne Mellor argues that “literary periodizations for this era – neoclassical, Romantic, Victorian – are conceptually useless for, perhaps even counterproductive in, illuminating women’s literary history” (393). Mellor sees these classifications as imposing a false sense of structure on something far too fluid to be neatly categorized, and she seems to argue that the idea of a “Romantic canon” is itself no longer applicable, especially when women are considered. This argument is understandable, especially since it becomes difficult to trace thematic connections between an ever-widening group of authors. But it seems more idealistic than practical: the Romantic canon is too firmly fixed in popular and scholarly imagination to be dissolved entirely.

Other scholars are in favour of fragmenting the canon. They support keeping the “big six” in their own category, but adding a separate canon for notable female writers of the Romantic age. Harriet Kramer Linkin’s 1991 survey, “The Current Canon in British Romantics Studies,” found a number of respondents who indicated that they would find it easier to include more female writers in their courses if they were able to add a corresponding Romantic novel course (551). This desire for selection and expansion is reasonable since, as Julie Shaffer points out in “Non-Canonical Women’s Novels of the Romantic Era: Romantic Ideologies and the Problematics of Gender and Genre,” at least half of the novels published in the Romantic era were produced by women (469). The argument is especially compelling if instructors are already having difficulty finding time to cover the “major poets” of the era. This fragmentation, though, leads to the problem of “ghettoization” that Joel Haefner discusses in “(De)Forming the Romantic Canon: The Case of Women Writers” (53). In fact, even calling the major Romantic poets “major” implies that they deserve elevated status. There is no “separate but equal” in literary canons. Creating a separate Romantic canon for women writers marginalizes their work by implying that female authors are only worthy of study when male authors are removed from consideration. Fragmentation, then, is just as problematic as excluding women entirely.

Finally, some scholars are in favour of expanding the Romantic canon to include the work of female authors. Haefner argues that this is more a “critical reevaluation” (45) of the canon than a simple expansion, as it involves taking a fresh look at the work of the big six, as well as newly uncovered works by female authors. Expansion seems the most controversial, since it requires scholars to re-examine long-venerated poems and authors with fresh eyes – no one, it seems, wants to take responsibility for removing Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” from syllabi in favour of Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven.” But expansion does not denigrate female authors by consigning them to a literary ghetto, nor does it dissolve the value of canonicity. While it is hardly a moderate approach, since it requires reformation of the canon as well as addition to it, expansion seems the most likely to result in a more complete picture of the Romantic era in literature.

Acknowledging that the old standards for judging Romantic works are biased in favour of male authors is one of the first steps toward accepting female authors into the canon. Mellor notes,

By the end of the eighteenth century, the new institutions of print culture – newspapers and journals, circulating libraries, women’s coffeehouses, and debating societies – enabled women to shape public opinion as effectively as men. The female-authored literature proliferating in all genres – poetry, drama, history, political tracts and essays, critical reviews, and especially the novel – contributed substantially to the political and cultural debates of the day. (“Were Women” 398)

Female contributions to the literary culture of the Romantic era were significant, so why have women’s works been seemingly forgotten until quite recently? Perhaps it is because topics and themes tackled in women’s writing have not fit the working definition of Romantic poetry. As Haefner indicates, “What we were ‘looking for’ in much of the poetry written by men – psychological insight, transcendental truths, imagery and symbol, the theme of the imagination, mythopoetic structures – may not be the right things to ‘look for’ in women’s verse” (48). It is hardly surprising that it is difficult to find the same themes in women’s writing – in fact, the very imagery found in male Romantic poetry often reinforces female exclusion. In her introduction to *Romanticism and Feminism*, Mellor writes that the themes endorsed by the big six “legitimized the continued repression of women,” offering nature as an example of something that is repeatedly gendered as female, for man to control and interpret (8). The canon does not merely represent the very best writing of the era; inclusion also depends upon the author’s social power, and women simply did not – and could not – contend.

Contemporary scholars have attempted to account for the difference in the perceived value of male and female Romantic works in a variety of ways. In “Romanticism, Difference, and the Aesthetic,” Mellor draws a line between works that possess certain female traits and those that possess male. She defines a kind of “feminine Romanticism” (129) that is almost directly opposed to the ideals espoused by the

traditional definition of Romanticism. Feminine Romanticism, by her definition, is grounded more in the identity of the group than in the solitary power of the individual. Even though Mellor includes male authors like Keats in this group (129), the names she gives her different groupings – masculine and feminine – do not help to dispel any notion of female Romantic works as somehow Other. After all, masculine Romanticism holds the dominant position in history, and even though Mellor’s definition seems to place female writers on par with male, it still runs the risk of placing those identified with feminine Romanticism in a literary ghetto.

Other scholars disagree with Mellor’s distinctions between masculine and feminine Romanticisms, finding them to reinforce unnecessary ideas about gender and sex. After all, differences need not always be defined in terms of male and female. As Shaffer argues,

Such distinctions... threaten to mask elements of Romantic-era woman-penned novels worth noting... It is certainly laudable to identify “masculine” behaviors and attitudes on the one hand and “feminine” ones on the other as subject positions adoptable by either sex rather than as traits rooted in biological difference, but continuing to gender those stances contributes to their becoming reified. (479)

Though Mellor is clearly trying to carve out a place in the canon for female – or feminine – Romantic writers, she does so perhaps without realizing that she is, in fact, lending credence to the idea that the works of women and men are somehow essentially different. While Mellor asserts that the writings of female authors were concerned primarily with the domestic sphere (“Romanticism” 130), one of the respondents cited in Linkin’s “How It Is: Teaching Women’s Poetry in British Romanticism Classes” found that, contrary to his expectations, “introducing women’s poetry has in fact helped bring out the political aspects of Romantic discourse” (96). The value of Romantic works cannot be judged based on the author’s gender, and Romantic women writers are not helped by divisions into masculine or feminine Romanticisms. Like canon fragmentation, these divisions only serve to marginalize.

It is important to remember that male and female authors were not writing in a vacuum, or in separate spheres defined by their genders; they were participating in dialogue with one another. In Ashley J. Cross’s “From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*: Mary Robinson’s Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt,” the author cites Robinson as an example of a female contemporary of Wordsworth and Coleridge, “intent on connecting her reputation to” them (583). Robinson, who was aware of both their imminent canonizations and her own certain exclusion from that canon, changed her style in order to produce *Lyrical Tales*; even the title of her work is meant to help the reader associate Robinson’s poems with those of the male Romantics (593). Robinson was attempting canon reformation from within the Romantic era, inserting herself into the literary conversation (584). If she were unimportant, perhaps Wordsworth would have dismissed or ignored her, but he even contemplated changing the name of his *Lyrical Ballads* when he published the second edition so as to avoid confusion with Robinson’s

Lyrical Tales (583), which at the very least seems a clear indication that he considered Robinson a literary rival. If male Romantic poets were able to acknowledge their female contemporaries, it seems absurd that the current Romantic canon cannot.

Even stranger is the exclusion of work by female authors that performs similar functions to work produced by canonical male authors. One such work, Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England*, which is accompanied by a list of eighteenth-century women writers she finds notable, is like an early anthology. In "Teaching Mary Darby Robinson's Reading List: Romanticism, Recovery Work, and Reconsidering Anthologies," Dawn M. Vernooy-Epp calls Robinson's *Letter* "a Romantic-period text that enacts recovery work, modeling the same kind of scholarly activity that has motivated canon reformation" (16). Vernooy-Epp cites Cross in calling Robinson's *Letter*

"an alternative to Percy Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* and William Wordsworth's Preface" ... In other words, Cross ranks Robinson's text alongside two of the most important publications that Romanticists have used as litmus tests for what counts as Romantic literature. If we consider a text like Robinson's as another such gauge, we must teach women writers as part of a Romantic canon. (16)

The women Robinson names on her list include Anne Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Hannah More (16) – all women whose names are now increasingly familiar thanks to the efforts of feminist scholars. If Robinson was a popular author in her time, why has her list fallen in prominence, while Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* has never disappeared from any syllabus? Perhaps this disappearance is due to the problem of reputation.

Female Romantic writers, unlike male, had the additional burden of adhering to a strict moral code that the "gentlemen" of the Romantic canon did not have to observe. While Wordsworth and Coleridge were just as concerned as Robinson with their literary reputations, they did not risk having their literary credentials revoked based on their private lives or their participation in public life. And while men could be "Romantic geniuses" without any aspersions cast on their moral character, women had to tread carefully when it came to their public reputations. Cross points out that "[r]eputation was always sexually coded, and verbal availability – participation in the public sphere of the literary marketplace – was linked to sexual promiscuity" (573). This attitude offers yet another possible explanation for female exclusion from the literary canon: if women expressed their belief in the primacy of the self and the transcendent power of solitary genius, as the big six poets frequently did, they risked being branded as morally suspect. The fact that women were not allowed the same freedom of language as men must be taken into consideration when evaluating their work for potential canonization.

Scholars interested in recovering female Romantic writing are often working from a perspective that encompasses ideals of both feminism and New Historicism. Those who are critical of either theoretical framework may argue that attempts to include the work of

female authors in the Romantic canon are merely efforts to elevate subpar work in order to create a more “representative canon.” While I would hesitate to argue for a work’s inclusion in the canon solely for the sake of representation, I do think that the volume of work produced by women writers during the Romantic era suggests the value of that work. A wide audience, one that included authors from the traditional Romantic canon, greatly valued the writing produced by these women – even Coleridge called Mary Robinson an “undoubted Genius” (580), and Wordsworth “read and mourn[ed]” Charlotte Smith and Felicia Hemans (“The Current Canon” 557). When scholars evaluate women’s writing using a different standard than that applied to men, there is always the risk that they will be accused of lowering the bar, allowing mediocre work into the canon. Haefner states that the common assumption was “that what women wrote during this period was just no good, that stylistically women’s writing was far inferior to men’s. [This assumption’s] aesthetic presuppositions remain problematic for teachers and scholars, since the very nature of some of our premises about ‘excellent’ verse needs to be examined” (47). Women writers of the Romantic era were held to different standards than men, and it only makes sense that their literary contributions be read and evaluated in light of these expectations.

Teachers and scholars have more hurdles to overcome when it concerns including female Romantic authors in their courses, though perhaps with time these problems will diminish. As the previously-cited responses to Linkin’s 1991 survey indicate, instructors found it difficult to find the time to include more authors in already-crowded syllabi, though not all instructors have this same trouble. In “Class, Classes, and Clashes with the New Romantic Canon,” Kevin Binfield takes a rather refreshing approach to the problem, saying,

I have little difficulty and no qualms about omitting huge portions of William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* in favour of Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*... My reasons include not only my irreverent wish that Romantic scholars will question the very notion of canonicity but also my discovery that the working-class women poets can teach students a great deal about the intellectual ... and material contexts of the Romantic period. (349)

Binfield’s stance seems unusually free of the reverence for the big six that characterizes responses to Linkin’s initial survey. One response, fairly glowering with the instructor’s annoyance, notes that “as this course is an intensive examination of the six major Romantic poets... there is simply no *time* for [other writers]” (Linkin 551). It seems that the ten years that have elapsed between Linkin’s survey and Binfield’s article have allowed a new guard of instructors to bring fresh perspectives on the Romantic canon to their classrooms. Expansion of the Romantic canon is not only possible, it is currently in practice.

Students’ reactions to this expanded canon vary, of course. Binfield notes that “[f]rom 1993 until about 1997 my students expressed surprise and something approximating joy over the inclusion of ‘new authors,’” but he goes on to say that “[i]n the last couple of years, however, the surprise, joy, and interest that my undergraduate

students displayed on encountering women poets has vanished” (350). He attributes this change of attitude to the disappearance of the traditional male-dominated canon from his students’ lives. As a current undergraduate student, however, I would argue that the traditional Romantic canon has certainly not disappeared from every classroom. In Linkin’s “How It Is,” respondent Elizabeth Fay discusses the influence that a professor’s interest in a subject has on student enthusiasm. Fay’s students enjoyed studying Dorothy Wordsworth because Fay did, but not all professors have the same experience when introducing women writers: “[s]tudents apparently detected their professors’ sense of duty versus [Fay’s] more selfish and subjective attitude” (97). If professors, ones who have long thought that the male Romantic poets are the only ones worth studying, teach today’s students, they will be hard-pressed to pass along an enthusiasm that they do not possess.

Unfortunately, Binfield cites another problem that faces even the most progressive instructors of Romantic literature: tests like the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and the Praxis exam for secondary teacher certification still require students to be well-versed in the works of the big six Romantic poets (353). How are professors to know if one of the “huge portions” of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* that they so merrily eliminate from their classes will be on one of those tests? Vernooy-Epp notes the same problem, pointing out that “[f]ailing to acknowledge the traditional canon during surveys and other historically periodized classes may jeopardize students’ successful performances on these exams” (14). Canon expansion must be extended beyond the borders of progressive Romantic literature classrooms in order to be taken seriously by students and by the greater academic community. In Linkin’s “How It Is,” Fay points out that

[s]tudents are well aware that William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats are the only poets they really need familiarity with for [the GRE]. Until the constraints of that ritual exercise change, many students won’t easily accept the expenditure of time given over to ‘unimportant’ writers, unimportant because irrelevant to the GREs. If we are slowly but surely changing how we conceive the Romantic canon by the addition of women writers, the GREs issue another, and contradictory, message. (98)

Although the curriculum is not equivalent to the canon, they often reflect one another. If tests like the GRE do not change to show the revisionary work of the past twenty years, then the canon’s evolution will be stalled.

The process of canon reformation is likely to be a slow one, but articles like Binfield’s show that progress is indeed possible. The big six Romantic poets are not going anywhere, but perhaps some of the time normally spent covering them in exhaustive detail could be better used discussing the role of the novel in Romantic literary culture, or the relationship between Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales* and Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*. Too often, the male Romantic poets are considered sole representatives of their age, but in reality, they represent only a fraction of the literary output of the day. The values expressed in their works set the standard for the Romantic canon, but

standards created by and for men leave little room for the work of female writers. The canon cannot be dissolved or fragmented – the former is too extreme to be successful and the latter not extreme enough to achieve the goals of feminist scholars – so it must be expanded in order to reflect the diversity of works published. The Romantic canon has been revised before, and somehow it has survived. Surely it can handle another round.

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