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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Romantic belongings

The subjects of this book, five English women writers of the 1790s, are no longer the unrepresented underside of the English Romantic canon, as they undoubtedly were even ten years ago. Critical studies of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft, in particular, have proliferated in the last decade. The poetry of Charlotte Smith, if not her prose fiction, is now relatively well known due to the services of Stuart Curran and others who have seen fit to edit and analyse the work which was barely noticed for two hundred years.[1] The prose of Helen Maria Williams and Hannah More has been less researched, although these writers too are coming into focus: the former principally for her poetry, the latter to illustrate that not all women writers of the period were feminists, or that not all women writers who have been appropriated by feminism were republicans or even democrats.

If they are no longer unrepresented, they have not by any means been deemed 'representative': neither of the literary movement we now nervously call Romanticism, nor of the 'Romantic Englishness' which until the late 1970s was largely associated, in the academy as well as popularly, with Wordsworth and Nature. Since then, contributions by cultural historians, postcolonialists and feminists have ensured that to study 'English' anywhere in the world in the 1990s is to be confronted with difference and contestation, not unity and coherence. This book emerges from that contested disciplinary context, and as such embodies its own contradictions (for only some of which I can account). It is in part a work of feminist historical recovery, building on the 'archaeology' of predecessors and peers.[2] I have willingly succumbed to two of the 'new English' axioms: that reading women's writing is an inherently valuable activity, and that literary canons have cultural meaning that is best understood by the recovery of marginal, 'excluded' texts. While I have a reflexive sympathy for both of these positions, the rationale of this study needs a more nuanced explication, so the remainder of this introduction

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and the chapters that follow will map out the connection between Romanticism, women writers and the English nation in the 1790s that underpins the subsequent readings.

The book is not simply a case for inclusivity, nor a history of exclusion, although my readings do raise questions, as others have, about the relative literary historical fates of, say, Helen Maria Williams and William Wordsworth, or Ann Radcliffe and Walter Scott, and look closely at the exclusionary effects of Romantic nationalism and the organicist metaphors on which it is founded. The exclusions are largely the symptom of nineteenth-century literary and imperial history that is beyond the scope of this book.[3] Rather, it looks at the 'proliferation' of meanings of Englishness and national belonging in the 1790s, aiming to fracture rather than complete the historical map of a literary period.

I have used the term *belongings* to signal, in three principal ways, the economic and affective underpinnings of the imagined community of the English nation, and women's relation to it in the 1790s. In the most literal sense, belongings are owned goods, the property that defines the individual in modern, contractual society. In the light of feminist critiques of the gendered bases of Lockean contract theory and the material effects of eighteenth-century contract law on women's status as property-owners, it goes without saying that women were more often belongings than proprietors.[4] Secondly, the present participle, belonging, evokes a metaphorical form of ownership: having property in common, sharing in the interests of other people. The idea of belonging to a nation holds out the promise of full and equal participation for all nationals. This is a deliberately tautological statement, as one of the things this book addresses is the historical, contested and discursive character of the nation, and how it is shaped in the interest of different groupings competing for hegemony. In the 1790s, radicals, reformers and loyalists all claimed ownership of the sign of English nationhood. Although, as I shall argue, the ascendant model was the Burkean organic nation-state, we should not be blind to the other forms of belonging that preceded it and co-existed with it, and their implications for women's national status.

There is a third term embedded in belongings that is a corollary of the idea of the nation as a discursive event: the participle 'longing' neatly captures the dynamic of desire that, I would argue, is endemic to national discourse. The nation is constituted by longing for community, and for a place of origin and stability. This pastoral fantasy of plenitude and local sustenance is symptomatic of the alienating condition we

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define as 'modernity' and of the enforced mobility of populations under the burgeoning capitalism of the eighteenth century. It is all the more potent, however, in a decade of radical upheaval such as the 1790s, when, due first to revolution and then to war, European subjects were displaced within and between national boundaries and when those boundaries were being redrawn.

As an object of desire, a longed-for place for mobile populations, the nation is gendered feminine: the *heimlich*, a familiar place. The feminised home is a concept that appears frequently in the texts I address here. It figures not only in the predictable spaces of Ann Radcliffe's and Charlotte Smith's Gothic fictions, whose wandering protagonists dream of home, but in the letters and travel narratives of Helen Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft, and in the more prosaic, but equally compelling didactic tracts by Hannah More. More's work in particular, like that of other counter-revolutionary writers, places much emphasis on the nurturing place as the source of national security.

The interpellation of the woman into the feminine, maternal subject position in national discourse, and its exclusionary effects, is apparent across the range of women's texts I have analysed for the purposes of this book. Of these five only Hannah More, resolutely single and childless, explicitly sanctions the logic of the national family romance, despite the compromise to her own subjectivity. Smith and Wollstonecraft to varying degrees critique the suffocating effects of a symbolic order that destines most women to lives of material and psychic impoverishment, whilst Ann Radcliffe and Helen Maria Williams fantasise about the power of femininity (but not necessarily maternity), and of national affection to effect a transformation in the institutions of state. It is obvious from the work of these writers that the feminised space of the nation does not provide equal rights of access to male and female travellers. The masculine subject is intelligible both inside and outside of this domain, free to define nation/home/woman as object of his desire or his possession; as a national subject he can literally come and go, long and belong at the same time. This mobile condition perhaps accounts for the 'representative' national status of male writers as peripatetic as Shelley and Byron and for the paradoxical elevation of the male traveller/adventurer in the Romantic national tradition. In the Romantic national imaginary, the woman who wanders, who defines herself beyond the home and as a subject whose desires exceed or preclude maternity, divests herself of femininity and erases herself from the familial, heterosexual structure of the nation. Her belonging depends on

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her belonging to another, desired not desiring, and her romantic attachment to person and place is sanctioned only by her literal and symbolic reproduction of the national family. However, as the work of Mary Wollstonecraft in particular testifies, whilst the archetypal feminine subject of the Romantic nation is the mother, the emerging structures of capitalism that coincide with modern nationhood institutionally misrecognise the mother's status as citizen of the state.[5] As I shall suggest, the tensions between the cultural centrality of the mother and the downgraded position that mothers occupy in the political economy of nations inflects women's relation to the symbolic reproduction of the nation, not least their relation to literary production.

To claim that the nation is a gendered space is to read against the grain of hegemonic analyses that have addressed issues of nationhood as continuous with a 'neutered' political, public sphere.[6] The 'public sphere' is the term coined by Jürgen Habermas to describe the civic space of political participation, debate, and opinion formation. For Habermas, the public sphere mediates between the economic exchanges of modern civil society and the family (which together constitute the private sphere) and the state. It specialises in socialisation and cultural formation, but its critical debates serve an economic function, protecting commercial economy from the incursions of state.[7] Feminist critics have rehearsed the tensions of the universalist rhetoric and the gender blind-spots of Habermas's model of the public sphere, drawing attention to the inadequacy of eighteenth-century public debate to treat subjects deemed as private and particular, and the material exclusion of unpropertied subjects from its domains.[8] Further, as Carole Pateman has shown us, the social contract that organises the relationships of the eighteenth-century civil society is a sexual contract; the public sphere not only mediates between civil society, the family and the state, but reproduces one in the image of the other.[9] Gender is central to the economic language of the civil domain: first, because there are contractual differences in women's and men's relation to material goods, land and capital; second, again in Pateman's terms, because social contracts are underpinned by sexual contracts, the subject of which is 'the property that individuals are held to own in their own persons' (p. 5). The property that subjects hold in their own persons – their sense of belonging – is determined as much by gender as by social rank.

Despite the frequent elision of 'national' and 'public' life in critical commentary, it is impossible to simply map on 'the nation' to 'the public sphere'. Although the interests of the English public sphere may have

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been presented as the interests of the nation, the matters of the nation are both too particular (non-universal) and too general (explicitly incorporating public and private life, in its civil and domestic forms) to be accommodated by the public sphere. Models of national belonging are premised on a more expansive and amorphous kind of contract that is not, even in its ideal sense, open to rational enquiry. As I have suggested, the affective, organic and often biological discourse that characterises nationalism – particularly Romantic nationalism – has particular repercussions for women, by restricting female subjectivity to maternal reproduction.

Familial and gendered metaphors are of course etymologically embedded in the term 'nation', which, in Romance languages, has its origin in the notion of 'naissance, extraction', whilst its Germanic equivalent – *natie* – refers to a birth and descent group. Romantic nationalism foregrounds these organicist associations, as it cross-breeds Renaissance and Enlightenment ideas of national development and merges the notion of territorial acquisition with historical progress. As Marlon Ross has argued, the Romantic nationalist grafts these ideas on to the notion of 'the folk as an organic unity with a natural relation to the nurturing place, the motherland, or the place of dissemination, the fatherland'.[10]

One of the most significant texts in the canon of Romantic nationalism, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, brings together these images of the land and the constitution in the familial unity of the nation-state.[11] In Burke's text, metaphors of birth, maternity, paternity, generation, nurturing, origin and progress in Britain jostle with images of French social engineering, unnatural graftings, geometrical carving up of community, matricide, patricide, the eating of children and monstrous women marching on Paris. That the sight of women on the streets are, for Burke, a sign of a crisis in public order and of a lost civilisation, demonstrates the extent to which the discourse of citizenship and social contract had become 'biologised', absorbed into the Romantic national idea, by the 1790s. In the middle of the eighteenth century, when for good or ill, citizenship was associated with the temporarily feminised realms of commerce and the performative domain of clubs, coffee-houses and associations (the public sphere), it was, at least rhetorically, available to women. The work of Adam Smith, David Hume and Adam Ferguson, or the Scottish 'feelsophers' as Thomas Paine called them, was instrumental in forging the ideal citizen of the eighteenth-century public sphere. In a range of texts dedicated to

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redesigning the economic and moral infrastructure of Britain, they effectively deconstructed the classic language and ideals of civic morality, which limited the citizen's expression of virtue and moral autonomy to political life in a legalistic or martial sense.[12] Their investigations led them to consider as citizens, women and men who did not have the means to participate in the political process, but who displayed their moral autonomy in economic, social and intellectual activity. The Scottish Enlightenment imagined a republic in which conversation, friendship but, most importantly, exchange became public virtues. The citizen of this republic – the commercial humanist – could take up a pen, read a newspaper, or make a purchase to fulfil his or her public duty and participate in national life.[13] These Scottish writers and their nervous philosophical enquiries made conceptually possible a balance between subjective will and the greater good, sentiment and sociability, individual desire and consensus in the mobile, historical environment of commercial society. They made a public virtue of private interest, and in the process took the patriotic sting out of antagonism to marketplace citizenship, helping to naturalise the image of the nation and state – the English nation and the British state – as a consensual community. The most visible expressions of this expanded definition of citizenship were the provincial clubs and societies which, as Kathleen Wilson has argued, '[w]hether devoted to philosophical inquiry, politics, or competitive gardening . . . endowed their memberships with the identity of decision-making subjects capable of associating for the public good'.[14] As Wilson also notes, whilst the values of these clubs were indeed homosocial, 'associational life per se was not a male preserve'.

The rationalist discourse of the public sphere, although in practice largely homosocial, is potentially more flexible in terms of gender identity than the affective discourse of nationhood. In the public sphere, gender is constituted performatively, not biologically, and its modes of address are, hypothetically, appropriate to men or women. Rudimentary historicisation problematises this Utopian image of the public sphere, which I am aware echoes Habermas's own optimistic vision of the transformative power of a rational bourgeoisie. In the course of the eighteenth century, the material spaces of the public sphere became less receptive to women's participation, as they reproduced the divided economy of capitalism and were inflected by masculinist models of citizenship. However, as is evident in the life and works of Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Hannah More and Ann Radcliffe, all of them at some time 'wandering women', it is the

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discourse of the public sphere, not of the nation, which allows them to imagine themselves as participating citizens. It is the discourse of nationality not rationality that turns them into exiles, by naturalising a patriarchal social contract and putting it beyond rational enquiry.

Not everyone, however, invested sympathetically in the construction of the nation-state as a public sphere or a consensual community of 'associates', especially a construction which was imported from across the Scottish border and which included women. Patriotism as the language of opposition to the Hanoverian state, intent on exposing corruption, persisted throughout the century, and remained masculinist and xenophobic, perhaps increasingly so in the aftermath of the Seven Years War and the subsequent battle with American 'rebels'.[15] Radical English patriots in the later part of the century rejected the image of commerce as conversation, and reinvented it as a form of military enterprise. Epitomised by the campaigns of John Wilkes in the 1770s and 1780s, radical patriotism revived the image of the ancient constitution and portrayed a variety of alien, corrupting and miscegenating forces, which threatened the liberty and masculinity of the freeborn Englishman.[16]

In debates about public life and citizenship in the 1790s, one does not find a simple opposition between feminised, commercial models of citizenship and a xenophobic, masculine patriotism. The Revolution debate threw light on the figure of the cosmopolitan patriot, exemplified by Richard Price, whose political and intellectual roots were in Enlightenment philosophy and Dissenting traditions. Price had famously called for a new attitude towards France, asking in his *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* for his congregation to lend their patriotic service to the battle for French liberty. In the 1790s, then, the discourse of patriotism itself fragmented, divided between an inward-looking loyalism and an internationalism, as radical dissenters championed universal civil liberties and embraced the intellectual strand of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism.[17] These various languages of citizenship – commercial humanism, loyalist patriotism and cosmopolitan patriotism – depend on different conceptualisations of the origins, progress and wealth of nations. They inflect the work of the women I focus on here, in ways which often compromise their own political agendas and more often their gendered, authorial identities. Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, betrayed her femininity when she issued a hasty riposte to Burke's *Reflections* (which she caricatures as an extended sentimental apostrophe on the French queen) in her 1790 polemic *A Vindication of the Rights of Men.*[18]

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Wollstonecraft's rhetoric draws on an ideal commonwealth of manly, autonomous, independent, rational citizens and old-style patriots. In this vein, she portrays Burke as a corrupt, effeminate, state-ventriloquist, trying to seduce the nation away from the fulfilment of their rights in an enlightened republican future. In later texts, most significantly, her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796),[19] Wollstonecraft explicitly turned against the image of the commercial citizen, portraying the deadening effects of trade on the imagination, which she regarded as a vital faculty for social sympathy. The imagination, she suggests, has been appropriated by capitalism. In a similar vein, she demonstrates the degrading impact of capitalism on the nation's most valued asset, the maternal body. As though to illustrate the extent of this public degradation, Wollstonecraft succumbs in her own rhetoric to the downgrading of maternity.

Helen Maria Williams, the poet and *salonnier*, who, like Wollstonecraft, found a public and political voice in the early years of the Revolution, with her *Letters From France*,[20] departed from her contemporary's view on commerce. She attempted to describe French revolutionary patriotism in terms that were commensurate with myths of English constitutional liberty and commercial humanism. Her descriptions of the sublime spectacles of the early French republic, significantly in epistolary 'exchanges' with an unknown recipient, incorporate the familial, the domestic, the beautiful and the feminine. She called herself a citizen of the world, *une patriote universelle*, and embraced the icon of French liberty as though she were a younger sister of the matronly English spirit. When Marianne became the sign of French republic under the rule of Robespierre, however, Williams held on to a sense of liberty that she saw as distinctly English, albeit formulated in the public sphere rather than by the nation. Her faith in universal citizenship turned to fear of French imperial zeal and a newly masculinised French public sphere, and, with the unsolicited help of the republican régime, she exiled herself from her adopted *patrie*. Significantly, she did not return to England, which was even less hospitable than France to her cosmopolitan ideals.

In her 1790s fiction, Charlotte Smith undertook a critique of 'things as they are' in English society, and allied herself tentatively with the radical ideals of cosmopolitan patriots. Never quite a 'Jacobin', however, she represented the internationalism of Godwinian radical philosophy with scepticism, portraying it as little more than a romantic ideal, which is pursued by her ingenuous protagonists at the expense of more quotid-

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ian, local concerns.[21] Radical idealism, these fictions suggest, produces its own exiles, principally women. Significantly, against the inherently fallen British nation-state, Smith projects the possibility of primitive New World community. This is figured principally in North America, a republic now dissociated from British rule.

Ann Radcliffe's fiction, like Smith's, provides fantasies of a Rousseauan return to nature, but, like Williams, she more confidently allies primitivism to the values of a civilising commercial world, which she champions explicitly in her 1794 *Journey* through Holland, Germany and the English Lakes.[22] More melodramatic than Smith's romances, Radcliffe presents her glimpses into the feudal lore of a vaguely historicised, Catholic Europe through the lens of that distinctly English, Whig aesthetic, the picturesque. Her fictions forge imagined communities that take pleasure in this restrained aesthetic and its associations with the private property of the 'middling classes'. Implicitly, Radcliffe's readers register the signs of the best of English culture figured by the didactic hand of this dissenting author.

Hannah More picked up on the internationalist turn of patriotism in 1793 when she used the term disparagingly in 'Village Politics', to describe a man 'who loves every country better than his own, and France best of all'.[23] In 1799, however, she unblushingly applied the term patriot to the loyal women who joined the war effort, and who came forward, 'without departing from the refinement of their character, without derogating from the dignity of their rank, without blemishing the delicacy of their sex . . . to raise the depressed tone of public morals, and to awaken the drowsy spirit of religious principle'.[24] In the war years, with the rhetoric of the local in the ascendant, the language of patriotism took a loyalist turn, and was nowhere better exemplified than by More's idea of female patriot who stays firmly in the home.

Attention to the kinds of belonging that these women and their contemporaries advocate demonstrates the multiple ways in which the emergent vision of Romantic nationalism, with its familial subject positions, was contested in the 1790s. However, it is the Romantic national idea, with its emphasis on the organic relationship between nation and state, allied to a localist attention to the folkloric connection between people and place, which becomes hegemonic. It provides the foundation for the political nation-state of the nineteenth century, and its imperialist logic. Although Romantic nationalism, with its emphasis on the local and the indigenous, constructs an image of the nation that is in tension with imperialism, it so effectively naturalises the relationship

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between nation and state that it prepares the ground for state-sanctioned imperial expansion. In the face of Napoleonic imperialism, the British state could justify its own imperialist activity by claiming to counter the spread of French totalitarianism with the more benign gospel of British civilisation.

Whilst the political and the imperial nation-state of the nineteenth century consolidated its power through aggressive territorial and industrial expansion and explicit cultural élitism, it came to power in the first place through the simultaneous possession and redefinition of 'national' property which was effected through its promises of participatory politics. Burke's Romantic and sentimental construction of the nation-state is the culmination of a cultural revolution, which, in the space of one hundred and fifty years, transformed the relationship between the English nation and British state, at least in representation. Whilst materially, state power remained in the hands of the few, its authority was newly conceptualised. The state, once represented as an aristocratic cabal, which exerted its authority through threat of violence, was reimagined as a professionalised, bureaucratic public sphere in which each individual – or, I want now to argue, each literate individual – was self-governing.

As I have suggested, although the function of the new mythology of state power was disciplinary, the promise of participation was tangible in a mid-eighteenth-century culture in which class and gender division had not yet solidified as they did in the years of intense industrialisation in the nineteenth century. Before the middle and working classes became identified once and for all as different species and before bourgeois men and women were consigned to their respective spheres in the years of imperial consolidation and expansion, English hegemonic culture had undergone numerous cycles of 'feminisation' and 'masculinisation', of shifting definitions of public and private activity, which may have produced other forms of identity.

That public life – citizenship, association, belonging – seems to have been so comfortably absorbed by the nineteenth-century nation-state is symptomatic of capitalism's power to make capitulation look like choice. The most powerful agents in the creation of the apparent consensus between nation and state or in raising national consciousness were the owners of intellectual property: the members of the eighteenth-century public sphere. As Nancy Armstrong and Lennard Tennenhouse have argued, the class emerging in the wake of the civil war were the

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