Introduction

> I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both in mind and in body.
>
> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

> Women are what they were meant to be; and we wish for no alteration in their bodies or their minds.
>
> William Hazlitt, "The Education of Women" (1815)

Incarnations of fatal women – the seductress, the mermaid, the queen, the muse – recur throughout the works of women writers, demonstrating that fatal women played an important role in the development of women's poetic identities in the Romantic period. Femmes fatales can be understood as misogynist projections of the "woman within" by male writers, as some scholars have argued;[1] yet such accounts leave little room for women's surprising uses of these figures, other than as reactive critiques. To ask why they used such figments of male fantasy is to ask the wrong question, for it assumes that these figures originate in the imaginations of men. Indeed, part of our problem in mapping the new terrain of women's writing in the Romantic period is of our own making, when we rely on the circular argument that figures such as the femme fatale and the violent woman originate in and appeal to solely the male imagination, something that Romantic-period women writers did not believe.

This book does not trace a continuous tradition of women writers of the Romantic period, nor does it argue that women writers in this era experienced and articulated a distinct, gender-complementary Romanticism in reaction to the canonical Romanticisms of male writers. Feminist literary histories and the anthologies they have produced often attempt to trace such a continuity in women's literature, one that answers Virginia Woolf's need for literary foremothers, and do so by privileging nineteenth-century concepts of literary practice and publication, as well

as feminist perspectives that are not particularly useful when applied, for example, to women writing before 1700.[2] According to such feminist literary histories, "anger is an identifying characteristic of the 'female' (biological) reacting to the 'feminine' (socio-cultural)," writes Margaret Ezell (*Writing Women's Literary History*, 25). Ezell's critique is timely and illuminating for those who work on women's writing of the Romantic period, even though her own focus is on pre-1700 women writers. Unlike their later nineteenth-century counterparts, women writers of the Romantic period are just now beginning to be reanthologized and recanonized by feminist scholars, and therefore present us with an unique opportunity to reevaluate not only Romanticism and gender, but also the meaning and usefulness of a distinct female literary tradition and even of a distinct femaleness.

While the socio-cultural realm of gender has been the traditional focus of feminist literary criticism and literary history in the nineteenth century, this study focuses significant attention on the virtually unexamined realm of "natural" sex, and argues that sex (that is, the sexed body, male and female) is central to the study of Romantic-period women. While not a traditional literary history, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* does contribute to the study of women's literature, but does so while simultaneously interrogating (not dismissing) the usefulness and historicity of such a concept as "women's literature." The category of biological "women" (in addition to that of Woman, which has been closely scrutinized by feminists for centuries) must also be examined, and Denise Riley reminds us "that such a scrutiny is a thoroughly feminist undertaking":

> the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation. (*Am I That Name?*, 2)

To engage these writers and these inconstant categories from our present vantage point is not to project onto the past postmodern fantasies of performative sex and gender, but, rather, to attend to the historically specific and politically interested origins of prevailing modern models of sexual difference.

Feminist literary histories are not properly historical if they fail to examine the history of sex as well as that of gender.[3] Given the wealth of new work on the history of the body and of sexuality,[4] we cannot afford to omit this corporeal history from our reevaluations of these long-neglected

writers. Central to my study is an examination of women writers' diverse critiques and interrogations of sexual difference (the "natural" realm of biological sex) as a historically stable and stabilizing reality. I argue that Romantic-period writers not only have questioned the nature of femininity and culturally constructed gender, but that they also questioned the stability and naturalness of sex itself. Modern criticism that focuses on the former instances and ignores the latter does so because the system of natural sexual difference, which was in fact fiercely contested at the turn of the nineteenth century, seems intractable and self-evidently universal two centuries later. What appears self-evident is, of course, ideological and historical: it is recent histories of the body and of sexual difference that have helped restore these women's subtle critiques and questions, and have made them partially visible to our distant eyes. Once we more fully appreciate the diversity of opinion (and the urgency of the debates) regarding "natural" sexual difference among Romantic-period political, philosophical, and scientific thinkers, we should not be surprised that women writers also questioned such purportedly natural categories for their own diverse interests.

Over the last decade, postmodern histories of the body and of sexuality have contested the stability of the sex/gender distinction, and have instead demonstrated that current models of two distinct sexes are culturally and historically specific.[5] This two-sex system of complementary difference gained greater credibility throughout the eighteenth century, supplanting an older one-sex model, in which women's bodies were seen essentially as inferior versions of male bodies. This newer two-sex system established a "powerful alternative" according to Thomas Laqueur, which allowed for "a wide variety of contradictory claims about sexual difference."[6] The two-sex model attempted to ground the ideology of women's passionlessness and domesticity in empirical science, though, as Laqueur shows in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, the scientific community was divided over which model to uphold: "It may well be the case that almost as many people believed that women by nature were equal in passion to men as believed the opposite" (152). Despite the growing emphasis on a "biology of incommensurability" and women's passionlessness (which would support current gender-complementary models of Romanticism), the one-sex model's insistence on female sexual desire and on the necessity for female orgasm in conception was not overturned, but, rather, was conveniently downplayed by advocates of sexual difference.

The scientific community's ambivalence regarding which model of sexual difference to uphold, amounting at times to violent disagreement and contradiction, extends to the literary world. Although it is in some ways productive to generalize, as Mary Poovey does in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, that "[b]y the end of the eighteenth century . . . 'female' and 'feminine' were understood by virtually all men and women to be synonymous" (6), I find Laqueur's emphasis on the unresolved struggle over both the meaning of the sex "woman," and whether or not such a distinct sex even exists, more compelling. By emphasizing the struggle over the categories of sex and gender, rather than the struggle's outcome (the conflation of gender and sex, of femininity with the "natural" female body), we can give women's diverse perspectives greater visibility. From prominent Enlightenment feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson, to poets like Letitia Landon, women writers of the Romantic period always addressed the body when they considered issues of intellect, subjectivity, sexuality, agency, and power.

Gendered studies of the eighteenth century and of the Victorian period have for some time explored the connections between the history of the body and literary history, and have examined the historically contingent nature of embodiment that helped shape notions of cultural gender. Londa Schiebinger's *Nature's Body: Gender and the Making of Modern Science* examines in detail the complex ideological interests that shaped late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century concepts of sexual difference in nature. Schiebinger's research into botanical, sexual, and racial classification at the turn of the nineteenth century demonstrates that appreciating the contested and thus contingent status of the "natural" order of sex is essential to a full understanding of the evolution of difference, and hence the discourse of political, racial, and sexual equality, in the Romantic period.[7] Interdisciplinary studies of science and literature, specifically of literature and the body, are plentiful for the eighteenth century and earlier periods; these fields have long enjoyed explorations of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, the bawdy, and the perverse that can make nineteenth-century evocations of the body seem impoverished indeed. Drawing on Foucault's interrogations of the Victorian explosion in sexual discourses, and of the relationship of such discourses to legal, penal, medical, educational, and domestic institutions, recent studies of the body in Victorian culture and literature have examined more closely the persistence, and contestation, of sexual difference as a natural and stable category.[8] The emerging consensus among historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medicine emphasizes "that the medical construction

of male and female as dichotomous terms had no foundation in 'nature': it was based on ideological oppositions which are deeply entrenched in western thought."[9]

These developments in the history of sexuality and the body, and their impact on literary and cultural studies, are part of the larger theoretical sea change engendered by postmodernism's challenges to traditional Marxist, historicist, feminist, and psychoanalytical critiques. In feminist theory specifically, heated debates over such "constructionist" approaches to gender and especially sex and embodiment often focus on Foucault's influence in these genealogical, deconstructive, and antihumanist approaches, especially given the elision of gender in his work. Debate on Foucault's usefulness for feminist theory and practice is ongoing, and generally centers on his concepts of resistance and power, which are also central to my study. Foucault's influential theory of power as productive, not merely repressive, of bodies and subjects is seen by some to rob women of the luxury of autonomous, rational subjectivity and agency that many men have enjoyed for centuries under the reign of humanism. Feminist theorists like Elizabeth Grosz, Lois McNay, and Catherine MacKinnon have argued that Foucault's emphasis on ever-present power leaves little room for resistance or agency, and instead intensifies the passivity of (characteristically ungendered) subjects and bodies as they are inscribed, shaped, and punished by "technologies of the self" and corporeal discipline through diet, exercise, work, medicine, hygiene, etc.[10] This well-known critique of the passivity of the Foucauldian subject of power, combined with his failure to acknowledge the historically specific and firmly entrenched domination of women by men, has led some feminists to conclude that "the political experience of women daily subordinated by men, by masculinity, by the social construction of their bodies, makes resistance and change much more complex and problematic than Foucault seems to allow."[11]

But, of course, there are many Foucaults, as there are many feminisms, and a tradition of postmodern feminist theory has refined Foucauldian resistance and found valuable tools in his genealogical method and antihumanist critique of subjects and bodies. Beyond the utopian promise of "bodies and pleasures" that Foucault enigmatically suggested at the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* as an alternative, posthumanistic strategy of resisting subjection and normalization (as genital, complementary heterosexuality), feminists have also focused on his later writings in which he elaborated his notion of resistance. "There are no relations of power without resistances," writes Foucault: "the latter are

all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised."[12] This is the heart of the matter. Seeing resistance as an effect of power, and power as working discursively from the ground up, robs women of the few epistemological and ontological privileges we have enjoyed. As Biddy Martin summarizes, "[t]he tendency to place women outside culture, to define femininity in terms of an absolute exclusion and consequent innocence with respect to language and ideology reflects an overly simplistic understanding between identity and discourse."[13] But Foucault denies an opposition between "a substance of resistance versus a substance of power," and insists that "power seeps into the very grain of individuals, reaches right into their bodies, permeates their gestures, their posture, what they say, how they learn to live and work."[14] Where then is resistance, collective or individual, feminist or not, and how can such a methodology contribute to our understanding of women's literature of the Romantic period?

If resistance and power are not distinct substances, and there exist no distinct, stable groups that "possess" power (i.e., the middle classes, or men), then resistance must be contextual, localized, and historically specific. Susan Bordo offers two modern examples of how resistance can emerge from normalization, examples that have important precedents in the Romantic period:

> the woman who goes on a rigorous weight-training programme in order to achieve a currently stylish look may discover that her new muscles also enable her to assert herself more forcefully at work. Or . . . "feminine" decorativeness may function "subversively" in professional contexts which are dominated by highly masculinist norms (such as academia). Modern power relations are thus unstable; resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious.[15]

In our contemporary context, Bordo argues, celebrations of female "resistance" through the "individual empowerment" of weight loss and exercise are actually mass-produced by "advertisers in the profoundest of cynical bad faith" (*Ibid*., 198). But Bordo acknowledges the persistent potential for the subversive effects in such marketed "empowerment," despite the exploitative intention of the advertisers (*Ibid*., 198). This simultaneous, unstable, and contextual slippage between normalization and subversion, read in historical and literary context, is key to appreciating the significance of the corporeal for Romantic-period women writers. Mary Robinson and Mary Hays, for example, continued to celebrate femininity's associations with sensuality and passion at a time

when the public intellectual sphere was increasingly masculinized and rationalized. Their use of older associations of women with sensibility to further feminist projects, like Wollstonecraft's advocacy of women's exercise and physical strength, demonstrates early feminism's strategic use of available (and conflicting) gender paradigms to subversive effect. Writing at a time when the bourgeois natural order (grounded in complementary sexual difference and its accompanying gendered spheres) was firmly in place, these writers nevertheless had access to competing, even discredited, cultural models.

Femmes fatales in particular, with their inherent "doubleness" as both feminine and fatal, offer us an especially productive perspective on the development of sexual difference in the Romantic period. This strategy of duplicity, mimicry, or "doubleness of vision" is feminist theory's favorite strategy, one that can account for women's unique "internal exclusion within Western culture, a particularly well-suited point from which to expose the workings of power."[16] Women's writings thus need to be read within this larger field of power, in which resistance is not constituted by "the simple absence or inversion of normative structures," but as a "heterogeneity – the overlapping of competing versions of reality within the same moment of time."[17] Nancy Armstrong describes her Foucauldian feminist history of the novel as aiming for this heterogeneity, a defining characteristic of genealogy as opposed to traditional history, in order to avoid "the linear pattern of a developmental narrative" and instead generate a "productive hypothesis" of "how the discourse of sexuality is implicated in shaping the novel" (*Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 23). Only if we avoid such linear narratives, based on assumptions that women's bodies and texts are simply repressed by patriarchal power, can we see how they are inflected and produced by unresolved, competing discourses.

The constellation of texts, writers, and ideologies known as "Romanticism" currently lacks such gendered studies of literature and culture that also account for the history of sexuality, sexual difference, and the body. The most influential studies of early nineteenth-century women's literature share a commitment to a stable and unchanging relationship between natural sex (the female, which is constant) and cultural gender (the feminine, which is contested); similarly, they also emphasize women writers', particularly women poets', unwillingness or inability, due to cultural constraints, to assert themselves as Romantic poets, as unacknowledged legislators of the world.[18] Gender-complementary studies tend to reread the same increasingly canonical women writers

and texts,[19] and to rely on a repressive hypothesis in which (middle-class) women's "authentic" subjectivity is rarely examined as an effect of power, as implicated in regimes of power and oppression. This unresolved problem of women's repressed authenticity, and of their "natural" benevolence and ability to remain outside masculinist socio-economic systems, is thus displaced onto the stable, acultural female body and its liberating promises. Yet, when this bourgeois subject was being enshrined as the stable agent of cultural consumption and production in the middle-class economic and moral order, many alternatives, doubts, and speculations were simultaneously articulated by men and women of diverse interests. If we read for such heterogeneity then we can avoid replicating teleological narratives via "the anticipatory power of meaning" and instead attend to "the hazardous play of dominations."[20] Feminist studies that ignore Foucauldian and postmodern critiques of the subject and the body cannot account for some of the most intriguing and unusual writing by women in the Romantic period, writing that went against the grain of an increasingly hegemonic natural order.

Central to feminist literary criticism on British women writers is the usually unspoken aim to demonstrate that women as a class (that is, as a sex outside of class) eschew violence, destructiveness, and cruelty, except in self-defense or rebellion, like Gilbert and Gubar's imprisoned madwoman in the attic. This faith in women's benevolence, for it is indeed a foundational belief of many modern feminisms, originated in the rise of the bourgeois order itself, which enshrined the maternal, nurturing, and domestic middle-class woman as the protected, private moral center of this new socio-economic order. That Romantic-period middle-class women gained an important new sense of moral, cultural, and economic authority through their domestic identities is undeniable. But should feminist criticism share this same commitment to bourgeois women's special immunity or freedom from masculinist regimes of power, cruelty, or oppression? I want to insist on this connection between contemporary feminist reevaluations of the Romantic period and its normative (but not uncontested) ideology of gender and sex, because current scholarship too often replicates this (gendered) Romantic ideology unproductively.

Rescuing women writers and their female protagonists from charges of wanton cruelty, and capitulation to "masculinist" behavior such as exploitation and objectification, seems to be more the goal of modern gender-complementary criticism than of the writers in question. Aggression, murderousness, sadism, and destructiveness have no room

to surface in such accounts of women and women writers, except as responses to masculine injustice and violence. The reception of Mary Lamb's poetry and prose is a case in point: Lamb's critical reception as a writer has consistently been shaped by an implicit desire to efface the violence that remained a part of her life and writings. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics alike have struggled to reconcile the violence of Lamb's murder of her mother with her career as a writer of children's literature. Lamb's illuminating reception history and writing invite us to imagine the possibility and consequences of a female subject of violence, something feminist theory has consistently resisted. Such a female subject of violence poses a serious challenge to complementary models of women's writing, women's language, and women's Romanticism, and instead reveals the great extent to which such concepts of women's unique relationships to language, and of "women" in general, rely on an implicit faith in women's nonviolence and moral purity.

Mary Lamb, like many of the women writers represented here, has received little attention in the recent revival of interest in Romantic period women writers. In addition to resisting the temptation to establish prematurely a canon of women Romantic writers, we should also resist the illusion that we can read them from a stance of transhistorical, pure detachment, free from ideological constraints. Rather, these writers would benefit from a (feminist) reading that actively resists feminism's persistent ideology of the consolation of women's natural nonviolence and benevolence, precisely because this ideology has been unable to withstand the critique both of postmodernism, and, more importantly, of Romanticism. In order to attempt new readings of women's relationships to power and violence, and the relationship of power and violence to women's bodies, we need to abandon several a priori assumptions: that women are inherently nonviolent, that cruelty and mastery are in general unnatural (or at the very least culturally masculine, and will be eliminated once women revolutionize all social relations), and that feminist criticism should seek to show how women as a class, throughout history, do not or should not replicate systems of "masculinist" power and violence.

My focus on violent and fatal women in women's writings demonstrates not only that Romantic heroines engaged in extremely unfeminine forms of behavior, but that in women's violence and destructiveness we find the end of woman as a sex, and the end of all the consolations with which woman provides us. Violence "unsexed" women as far back as Lady Macbeth, but my goal is not to trace a rebellious, androgynous

human spirit that throughout history has chafed at the cultural constraints on feminine behavior, and occasionally erupted in acts of rebellious, androgynous violence. Rather, I examine women's violence in the contexts of larger political, ideological, and even medical debates specific to the Romantic period, to demonstrate that women's inherent nonviolence was often a necessary feature in arguments for "natural," corporeal sexual difference, and that this two-sex system was by no means universally and unquestioningly accepted as unchanging by either women or men. For example, chapter 2 focuses on the fierce debate over the nature and history of women's physical strength in the context of French women's activism in the French Revolution. Concentrating on the republican feminist tracts of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson, I focus on strength and exclude maternity and sexuality because these women themselves isolated physical strength as an area of possible corporeal mutability. In chapter 3 I expand my examination of British women's responses to French Revolutionary women, focusing on a wide range of representations of Marie Antoinette. In Mary Robinson's numerous portraits of Marie Antoinette as both public seductress and private mother, she attempts to fashion a feminism that would allow women access both to the *ancien régime* eroticized body, and to the new bourgeois concepts of rational, maternal domesticity and public citizenship.

The executions of the Queen and other highly visible women like Madame Roland and Charlotte Corday in 1793 mark an important threshold in the history of the sexed body, ostensibly eliminating both the feminine body of the aristocratic beauty and mother, and the masculinized body of the republican assassin from the range of options available to women. Because of this institutionalized exclusion of women from the public political sphere, women writers could use these politicized historical figures to make a wide range of claims to both masculine and feminine spheres of power, and masculine and feminine bodies, increasingly distinct though these categories were. The French revolutionary debates in Britain, and women's little known contributions to them,[21] thus emerge as a key crisis in the history of sexual difference, allowing women a brief window of opportunity in which to imagine daring alternatives to the increasingly rigid definitions and demands of sexual difference.

In misogynist popular accounts, Marie Antoinette was unsexed through her perverse sexuality, just as the republican Charlotte Corday, Marat's assassin, had been unsexed through her unnatural lack of feminine sensibility. "Marat's barbarous assassin," wrote Sade in his elegiac tribute to the radical journalist, "like those mixed beings to which one