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STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT

Poetry

For much of the two centuries following the Romantic era, its poetry was defined largely, if not exclusively, by the work of male poets: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, with William Blake added regularly after the mid 1950s. This “canon” was variously augmented by other male poets including Robert Burns, George Crabbe, Walter Scott, Leigh Hunt, Walter Savage Landor, and Samuel Rogers, and since the 1980s especially, John Clare. Conspicuously absent was Robert Bloomfield, whose *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) enjoyed great circulation but whose laboring-class origins and lifestyle relegated him to the margins of a literary-historical account dominated by more patrician tastes.

The greatest exclusions from the canon, though, involved women, whose names and poetry were largely absent from discussions of Romantic poetry for most of the twentieth century. Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), the most commercially successful Romantic-era woman poet on both sides of the Atlantic, became by the twentieth century a talisman for condescending notions of women as poets of hearth, home, heart, and shallow sentimentality: her celebrated contemporary, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (“L. E. L.”) (1802–38), fared little better in a literary history of Romantic-era Britain that was written almost exclusively by, for, and about men – and particularly academic men, scholars and students alike. When it appeared at all in twentieth-century anthologies, women's poetry was relegated to dismissive sub-categories such as minor poets or lyric poets that resolutely kept women poets *outside* of the canonical company, even while claiming to include them.

Exclusions of this sort went virtually unchallenged in a society (on both sides of the Atlantic) in which women did not in fact enjoy anything like equal status. Their exclusion was perpetuated through the trickle-down enculturation produced by male-dominated academic institutions where (typically male) scholars and teachers set the (also typically male) curriculum that was passed down as literary canon law to generations of aspiring

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teachers (many of them, ironically, female) who in turn passed it along to the students of both sexes with whose education they were charged. It might seem superfluous to retrace this history now in the twenty-first century, when women are far more prominent both in academic institutions and in the curricula devised and promulgated there, and not just in literary studies but indeed in almost all the disciplines. But history reminds us that enculturated errors, misperceptions, and misrepresentations become more resistant to revision the more often and widely they are repeated. The less narrowly gendered roster of Romantic-era poets to which students and scholars alike now revert is a relatively new configuration that is still evolving as revisionist literary and cultural scholarship operates upon the growing body of primary material – both original poetry and related biographical, cultural, and demographic information that now constitutes the field of Romantic poetry.

This sea change dates especially to the 1980s, when critical and scholarly attention turned to the extraordinarily diverse body of poetry produced during the Romantic era by women. Stuart Curran's landmark 1988 essay, "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered," eloquently made the case for the recovery and reassessment of this poetry, a view that has gained wide acceptance over the past several decades, urged along by the work of many other scholars.¹ Subsequent scholarship has furnished new insights reflecting the perspectives not just of feminist critical theory but also of revisionist literary history. Anthologies of Romantic-era women's poetry followed, the most extensive edited by Paula Feldman and Duncan Wu, and the increased availability of primary texts has stimulated still further critical reassessment.² Broadly inclusive books by Paula Backscheider and Stephen Behrendt surveyed the recovered ground from multiple angles including genre, theme, poetic form, and cultural function in their respective efforts to remap the literary landscape of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain.³ Together with new scholarly editions of the work of poets such as Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Mary Tighe, Hemans, and Landon, new bibliographical and reference resources – especially electronic ones – have provided access to works that can now be consulted online. Electronic databases that aim to be comprehensive, like *Scottish Women Poets of the Romantic Period* and *Irish Women Poets of the Romantic Period*, make available many such texts while also reminding us how many more active women poets there actually were than traditional literary history has usually thought it worthwhile to record or remark. The large body of poetry by women published before 1800 is available through *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (ECCO), while post-1800 works are appearing on an ever-expanding array of websites and electronic archives, including *Nineteenth Century Collections Online* (NCCO).

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Revisionist literary history once more credits Romantic-era women poets with the visibility, authority, and influence they enjoyed during the period. However grudging was the critical approval granted their writing, and however condescending or belittling was the gendered commentary to which it was subjected, then and afterward, the cultural *currency* of that writing is now acknowledged. In 1793, for example, Mary Robinson's *Three Poems* was widely celebrated in the press when it was released in July; even the *Morning Post*, which then barely noticed any literary publication, puffed the poems and published extracts, while on 27 November the Tory ministerial paper *The True Briton* called Robinson not just "the *first Poet* now living" but, more emphatically, the *first Poet*, period. Meanwhile, the Irish poet Lady Catherine Rebecca Manners was prominently advertised (and excerpted) by her publisher, John Bell, in the *Oracle, or Bell's New World*. While some of this publicity owed to aggressive marketing by enterprising publishers like Bell or partisan periodicals like *The True Briton*, some of it stemmed directly from the poetry's public appeal. Charlotte Smith's slim 1784 volume, *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Essays*, originally published at her own expense by the staid London publisher James Dodsley, attracted so many readers (and subscribers) that it had gone through ten editions and grown to two substantial volumes by the time of her death in 1806.

Later, sales of Felicia Hemans's poems rivaled those of Byron, who first admired her poems and then petulantly denigrated her in 1820 to his publisher (and hers), John Murray, as "Mrs. Hewoman." That the successful and powerful Murray was publishing both poets testifies to both the reputation and the market value that Hemans had acquired already by 1820. And at what we usually think of as the very end of the Romantic era, there was no doubting the public fascination with the powerful and shrewd Letitia Elizabeth Landon: poet, editor, *mysterieuse*, and celebrity. Indeed, it is safe to say no English writer of the later 1820s and 1830s was better known or more popular than L. E. L. No female *or male* poet surpassed Landon in reputation or (presumably) sales – not even Byron. (Traditional literary history has routinely dubbed Byron a perennial bestseller, more so than Walter Scott and before Charles Dickens.) Like other women poets of her generation, Landon contributed repeatedly and conspicuously to the legions of literary annuals (like *The Keepsake* and *The Amulet*) and gift books that emerged in the 1820s. Unlike them, however, she went on to edit two such annuals herself, most notably *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrap Book*, over which she exerted virtually full editorial control and for which she regularly composed poems (referred to on the title pages as "poetical illustrations") to accompany engraved pictures that she herself selected. Landon was perhaps the most powerful and influential female presence in the later Romantic

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literary scene; her success and fame attests to the visibility of women poets during the time and makes all the more remarkable their erasure from subsequent generations of literary and cultural history.

This is not to say that engaged and influential literary women like Landon were late arrivals on the scene. Quite the reverse. Mary Wollstonecraft, though not a poet, was a regular critical contributor to Joseph Johnson's periodical, the *Analytical Review*, beginning in the later 1780s. The anti-war poet Elizabeth Moody reviewed for the *Monthly Review* from 1789 through 1808. And Mary Robinson succeeded Robert Southey in October 1799 as poetry editor for the *Morning Post*. Moreover, Charlotte Smith's influence extended everywhere, her visibility increased by the self-dramatizing prefaces she added to her novels and to later editions of the *Elegiac Sonnets*. This influence was marked both explicitly and implicitly by women and men poets alike. The obscure but talented sonneteer Mariann Dark invoked Smith in two sonnets from her 1818 *Sonnets and Other Poems*, "On Reading Mrs. Smith's Sonnets" and "On Reviewing the Preceding." In the second sonnet Dark ruefully juxtaposes Smith's inspirational but intimidating fame with her own obscurity, hidden away in rural Britain without patrons or public: "I strike the lyre unknown! My very name / Will soon be blotted from this wretched earth."⁴ Others appropriated Smith less explicitly. Martha Hanson, for example, opened her two-volume *Sonnets and Other Poems* (1809), with "To the South Downs," a lyric with unmistakable echoes of Smith's well-known sonnet of that name. Other poems by Hanson rehearse familiar Smith imagery, tropes, and language to reprise the distinctive aesthetics of melancholy with which Smith had been associated, while "Stanzas, Occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Charlotte Smith," the long poem that opens Hanson's second volume, recounts the soothing but inspiring effects of Smith's poems on Hanson's own youth.⁵ Like other Romantic-era women poets, Hanson treats a female predecessor as an exemplary role model both of achievements amid adversity and of consoling presence for the later poet whose accomplishments (and reputation) fail to match Smith's. Poems like these underscore the poetic sisterhood that is commemorated repeatedly among the era's women poets.

Smith's influence is apparent in the poems of both female and male contemporaries and successors, from Helen Maria Williams, Anne Bannerman, and Amelia Opie among the women to Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, James Lacey, and John Taylor among the men. There are thematic echoes, of course, but also stylistic and generic similarities including an emphasis upon the sonnet, Smith's signature poetic form. William Wordsworth referred to her in 1833 as "a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered,"

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but twenty-five years earlier Thomas Gent had already included a memorial sonnet in the 1808 edition of his *Poetic Sketches*.⁶ There Gent assures Smith's audience (and his own) that the "thoughtless world" of 1808 that fails to acknowledge her greatness will give way in time to a more appreciative one. This sense of merit denied – or at least deferred – recurs in early anthologies like the Reverend Alexander Dyce's 1825 *Specimens of British Poetesses*, where Smith is represented by nine pages of poems and where Dyce observes that as a poet Smith "has been excelled by few of her countrywomen."⁷

Smith offers a conspicuous example of how women poets (and their works) functioned in often elaborate communities of readers, sister poets and women generally, whether authors or not. In fact, this sense of community is one of the rhetorical hallmarks of Romantic-era women poets, traceable alike in their published poems and their private letters and journals. More so than their male contemporaries, and perhaps because they were so acutely aware of their ambivalent cultural status as publishing *women* poets, women expressed their sense of a distinct (and distinctive) sisterhood even as they composed and published poems that placed them within (and therefore in implicit competition with) historically masculinist British poetic genres and their traditions and conventions. Backscheider details the attraction for eighteenth-century women poets of genres like the verse epistle, the elegy, and especially the sonnet, where the implied competition with male poets was understood to be less aggressive, and these genres remained of interest to their Romantic-era successors, as Behrendt also demonstrates. But their poetry explored new directions, new genres, including the long narrative poem and a variety of poems that are conspicuously anti-war in nature.

As already indicated, the sonnet enjoyed particular favor among women poets, but along with the inherent community (both literary and gender-focused) that the shared experience of sonnet writing fostered came a measure of territoriality. Anna Seward's notorious antipathy to Charlotte Smith, and to Smith's sonnets in particular, testifies to how much some authors felt was at stake in publishing their work. Seward considered Smith's sonnets derivative in subject and language and deficient in execution, faulting her for easy sentimentality on the one hand and failure to adhere to the ostensible structural conventions of the legitimate sonnet form on the other. Seward's objections highlight the dilemma that confronted many women poets who chose poetic forms and conventions whose exemplars were almost exclusively male.

Indeed, the issue of what was – and was not – the proper subject matter, authorial attitude, and generic choices provided fodder for both the

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champions (of both sexes) of women poets and their denigrators. Among the latter, reactionary critics like T. J. Mathias and the Rev. Richard Polwhele attempted in print to impose or reinforce boundaries upon women's literary production that were invariably tied to gendered notions of morality and propriety. Polwhele, for instance, branded socially or politically activist poets like Barbauld, Smith, and Robinson as "Unsex'd Females," as he called them in 1798 in his hostile poem *The Unsex'd Females*. Women poets' apparent debarment from both political activism and sophisticated intellectual and philosophical discourse generally was a critical commonplace. Some two decades after Polwhele's blast, Hemans published *Modern Greece: A Poem* (1817) without her name. The reviewer for the *British Review* wrote in January 1820, "we conceived it to be the production of an academical, and certainly not a female, pen."⁸ The reviewer singles out for special praise the poem's "elaborate finish" (p. 299). Such finish, the reviewer declared, was conspicuously absent from the poetry of most women because "the mind of women is not usually favourable to that deep-toned emotion which constitutes the very essence of the higher kinds of poetry" (p. 300). Indeed, the poem's "classical" texture had already misled the *Eclectic Review's* critic in December 1818 to call *Modern Greece* "the production of a man [*sic*] of genuine talent and feeling," ironically underscoring the routine association of "classical" art with maleness.⁹

Relatively undeterred by such persistent critical resistance and bias, women poets continued to expand both their own numbers and the range of forms and subjects about which they wrote. Between 1770 and 1835, according to the bibliography compiled by J. R. de J. Jackson, no fewer than 400 women were actually *publishing* their poetry in England proper.¹⁰ When the number is adjusted to include Scotland and Ireland, it rises to well over 500. These numbers include everything poetic, of course, including hymns and devotional verse, verse for children (like the collections by Ann and Jane Taylor that saw literally dozens of editions during the period), and translations (many women, including Smith, began their literary careers as translators). But the range of subjects, themes, and forms expanded exponentially as the period progressed, in part because innovations and improvements in printing and publishing (or, more properly, bookselling) made it possible to produce ever greater numbers of books at ever lower cost to publisher and purchaser alike, which in turn generated ever larger and more diverse readerships.

Given war's omnipresence in Europe for the quarter century plus that culminated in 1815 at Waterloo, it is little surprise that women poets had much to say about war, warmaking, and their effects, toward which their culture expected women to adopt a sentimental, subjective approach. While

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society expected women to participate in Britain's defense, their role was customarily defined along traditional gendered lines as wife, mother, sister, or nurse and caretaker. The discourse for which their voices were culturally sanctioned was therefore that of loyal civic support for militarism and its male protagonists. They were expected to document the pathos of war for a beleaguered nation and to celebrate triumphant British militarism with nationalistic pride. Some did just that: Maria de Fleury (*British Liberty Established*, 1790), Barbara Hoole ("Verses on the Threatened Invasion, Written in July, 1803" [1805]), and Isabella Lickbarrow ("Invocation to Peace" [1814]) proclaimed England's divinely sanctioned special status as "favour'd Queen of Isles, / Long kindly foster'd by thy Maker's hand" and confidently assured war-weary citizens of the cultural and economic rewards of Britain's inevitable victory, when "arts and manufactures would revive, / And happy Industry rejoice again; / [and] friendly Commerce would unfurl her sails."¹¹ Other poets celebrated the lives, triumphs, and deaths of military heroes like Admiral Nelson (killed at Trafalgar in 1805) and Sir John Moore (fallen in Spain at Corunna in 1809).

Not surprisingly, war touched many women poets personally. The longest poem in Felicia Hemans's *The Domestic Affections, and Other Poems* (1812), for example, is "War and Peace – A Poem, Written at the age of Fifteen." Painfully immature, it nevertheless captures the war-weary nation's distress nearly twenty years into the seemingly endless conflict with France that was draining the national treasury of both gold and the blood of the nation's young men. The poem's nationalistic militarism is characteristic of many poems of the period: "Then wave, oh, Albion! wave thy sword again, / Call thy brave champions to the battle-plain!"¹² Hemans recites the familiar roster of fallen heroes like Nelson and Moore whose losses the nation (figured in the emblematic weeping Britannia) mourns. But she focuses on the survivors of the fallen, particularly the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of the less celebrated soldiers and sailors whose loss is made doubly terrible by the resulting destitution during an era that offered little or no social safety net for such survivors beyond an often meager parish charity. Hemans had two brothers serving in the Peninsular War (*The Domestic Affections* contains poems to both), and so her poetic anxiety mirrored a personal anxiety that would have resonated with her female readers in particular.

Jane Alice Sargent, too, was from a military family; her brother, Sir Henry (Harry) Smith, had risen from yeoman cavalryman in 1804 to lieutenant colonel of the Ninety-fifth Regiment Riflemen. Her military-family background informs many of the poems in her *Sonnets and Other Poems* (1817), whose subscribers included numerous military men, including some explicitly identified with the Rifle Brigade. Not surprisingly, then, many of

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Sargent's poems involve sabre-rattling appeals to national solidarity in the face of war's rigors. Some, however, like "The Disbanded Soldier's Lament," disquietingly explore the difficult circumstances faced by returning veterans amid the economic depression and the socio-political volatility that characterized post-Waterloo Britain.

Women poets' overtly nationalistic effusions were warmly welcomed by the critical establishment no less than by the political one. Pro-war poetry by women reinforced the values and expectations of contemporary male culture by casting women in supportive roles, whether as spouses or kin, or as propagandists and publicists for British military enterprise generally. Some women poets, though, explicitly advocated redress of the widespread social distress that war produces, composing tales of war widows, bereft mothers and sisters, and mourning daughters that drew upon the later eighteenth-century vein of elegiac verse that had become a sub-specialty of women poets. Amelia Opie's 1802 *Poems* contains a particularly poignant poem, "Lines Written at Norwich on the First News of the Peace" (the short-lived peace produced in 1802–3 by the Treaty of Amiens). Among the celebrating citizens of Norwich, where Opie was born, appears one "poor mourner" whose emotional suffering is embodied in her "shrunk form" and who ruefully congratulates her townsfolk on the real or impending restoration of their soldiers and sailors before concluding with her frantic declaration that "Alas! Peace comes for me too late, ... / For my brave boy in Egypt died!"¹³ Especially for women, the poetic evidence suggests, the restoration of others' loved ones is salt to the wounds of those whose loved ones have died. Women's poetry concerning war and its effects, therefore, exhibits a troubling mixture of pain and celebration, an ambivalence that voices the broader cultural ambivalence of the nation more tellingly than the writing of these poets' male contemporaries, including even those who likewise opposed war.

Particularly when writing about war and its victims, women poets employed straightforward forms (like the ballad stanza) and quotidian language familiar to readers from religious hymns, didactic verse, and popular songs. Poems in this idiom appeared regularly in the periodical press and represented a populist poetics unlike the staid, stiff formality of the classical-leaning commemorative poems that typically marked major public events, happy or otherwise. Long accustomed to the unaffected discourse of friendship, candor, and sincerity that characterized personal correspondence (the genre historically ceded to women as their literary domain), poets infused this discursive model with sentimentality and pathos especially well suited to tales of war's victims. Shrewdly appropriating the social and linguistic conventions of the masculinist majority culture to engage and subvert

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that culture and its assumptions, they generated community not only with one another (as poets and writers) but also with British women generally, whose experiences they related in affectingly familiar ways. Inevitably, this inscribed network of shared experience empowered authors and readers alike, for in articulating the ideas and emotions of the women about whom (and to whom) they wrote their poems they reminded their readers of the community (often a community of suffering) that they shared and whose individual, private circumstances might otherwise remain largely invisible to the broader public community.

Women's more overtly oppositional voices and poems often incurred the conservative moral and political establishment's wrath, as noted earlier. A particularly notable example was the sensation surrounding the publication of Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812). Barbauld was by 1812 a respected elder poet, critic, and educator who had published widely in verse and prose for adults and younger readers alike and who had produced critical editions of British poets and essayists in addition to a fifty-volume edition of novelists. A Dissenter who had argued in print against slavery, religious intolerance, and war, she was admired by authors as diverse as Frances Burney, Hannah More, and William Wordsworth (despite his reservations about her Dissenter connections). But *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, which predicts Britain's demise as a world power and its replacement by the New World (figured both as the young American nation and the emerging republics of South America) was deemed shockingly "unfilial" in its post-imperial view of Britain. Publishing the poem when the outcome of the Napoleonic Wars remained undecided and when Britain was again at war with its former colonies struck many of Barbauld's contemporaries as treacherous, as the brutal response in the periodical press illustrates. That the poem elicited such widespread response from all quarters – including poetic rejoinders like Anne MacVicar Grant's reactionary *Eighteen Hundred and Thirteen* (1814) – indicates how widely women's poetry was being read, taken seriously, and debated publicly – in person and in print – by the Regency period.

Barbauld composed *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* in heroic couplets, the verse form still considered the appropriate vehicle for elevated discourse on momentous subjects. Other women poets employed the heroic couplet for comparable encomiastic or hortatory purposes. Lucy Aikin (Barbauld's niece), for example, chose heroic couplets for her remarkable *Epistles on Women, Exemplifying Their Character and Condition in Various Ages and Nations* (1810). Taking as its point of departure Alexander Pope's slighting portrayal of women in his "Epistle to a Lady" (the second of his *Moral Essays*), Aikin's poem undertakes an epic survey of women from Eve through

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the present, documenting women's historical oppression while affirming their cultural centrality not in traditional gendered terms but rather as full intellectual, emotional, and physical partners – even equals – to their male counterparts. Some two decades earlier the Dublin Quaker Mary Birkett had likewise employed heroic couplets for her long two-part *Poem on the African Slave Trade* (1792), which was, as its title page explicitly announces, addressed to her own sex and which followed by a year Barbauld's shorter heroic-couplet "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade" (1791).

Women's involvement in the abolitionist debate furnished them with opportunities to direct politically inflected interventionist poetry toward a public that was inclined (or simply chose) to hear in their voices the humanitarian impulses traditionally associated with women's gendered socio-political role. Even the anger that suffuses Hannah More's 1788 *Slavery, A Poem* (also cast in heroic couplets) is couched in rhetoric calculated to invoke woman's "natural" (nurturant) feelings in the oppressed slaves' cause. As these three poems (and others like them) demonstrate, though, that rhetoric could also serve the cause of women, caught up as they were in a historically oppressive social structure to which the slaves' plight furnished a clear analogy. This point was not lost on the conservative establishment (which included both men and women), and it undoubtedly contributed to the suspicion among that establishment about women's increasing involvement in the 1790s in other revisionist social, political, and intellectual causes. It is important to remember today that much of the reactionary resistance to the increasingly apparent activism informing women's public discourse – including the poems they published – stemmed from a systemic fear of the social and political power toward which their activity *as writers* seemed to many of their contemporaries inexorably to be leading them.

But women also used the heroic couplet for long narratives. In 1822, Eleanor Anne Porden, who specialized in long, learned, and weighty tales, used them for her multi-volume *Cœur de Lion, or The Third Crusade: A Poem, in Sixteen Books*. They were also the vehicle of choice for national tales in verse like the title poem in Anne MacVicar Grant's *The Highlanders, and Other Poems* (1808), which offered an intimate and sympathetic view of a populace and way of life unfamiliar to English readers, much as poems by Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan) and Thomas Moore did for Ireland. Catherine Luby, too, employed heroic couplets in *The Spirit of the Lakes, or Mucruss Abbey* (1822), an Irish Gothic romance set among the medieval ruins of County Kerry that is as much a descriptive poem as a narrative one and that reveals the unmistakable influence of Ann Radcliffe's immensely successful novels.