

British Women Poets and the Romantic Canon

British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community. Stephen C. Behrendt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 349 pp.

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<1> Mary Robinson concludes her famous “Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination” (1799) with an alphabetical list of over forty contemporary women writers that contributed to the active British literary community. The list includes poets, novelists, essayists, and dramatists that are well-known today – such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Ann Radcliffe – as well as lesser known writers such as “Mrs. Thickness,” author of “Biography, Letters, &c.” Robinson’s list and closing assertion that “there are men who affect, to think lightly of the literary productions of women: and yet no works of the present day are so universally read as theirs”(1) resonates with Stephen C. Behrendt’s aim in *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community*. In his book he contends – like Robinson – that women understood and knowingly wrote for the literary marketplace and, in doing so, helped shape the entire community of writers, readers, and publishers during the Romantic era. This volume attempts to increase awareness of the scope of British Romantic women poets writing for public consumption, the historical conditions in which they worked, their subject matter and style, and the ways in which they maneuvered rhetorically within male-dominated publishing and political arenas. Furthermore, the author hopes that his study will inspire a critical evaluation and reconception of Romantic canonization, poetic tradition, and aesthetics that privilege “truth, accuracy, and the history of the ways in which literary and cultural judgments come to be made, enforced, and enculturated” (301).

<2> In his first chapter, “Women Writers, Radical Rhetoric, and the Public,” Behrendt tackles the question of how women poets published radical political sentiments when faced with the double censorship of a revolution-fearing government and of men protecting national politics as their private domain. Eschewing generalities and stereotypes about Jacobin and anti-Jacobin writers, the author examines the specific rhetorical strategies employed in women’s verse to publicly express reformist republican ideologies, resist patriarchal dominance and glorification of the past, and promote an “egalitarian, companionate community” (42). One such rhetorical strategy taps into the power of sympathy to eliminate the distance between governing establishments and the effects they have on people’s lives. In such cases, the poet places the reader in the radical’s shoes and depicts the current social state that privileges the wealthy in order to reveal the

conspicuous *lack* of equality and democracy. These kinds of poems, such as Mary Robinson's "January, 1795" and Sarah Spence's "Poverty," deserve critical attention for their call for political intervention and change, according to Behrendt. Women poets also used images of warfare threatening the hearth and home to persuade readers toward peace. In these poems, women took advantage of their authority in domestic matters as mothers and nurturers and explicitly identified the government as a threat to both nuclear families and the national family. Among the examples are poems by the unidentified poet "F. A. C.," whose works are some of the most radical and militant of the reform movement. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812) to demonstrate that reformist verse was not solely the product of reactions to the French Revolution in the 1790s. Female poets faced the same resistance to their involvement in political discourse twenty years later.

<3> Throughout the book, Behrendt carefully contextualizes the poets and their work in relation to Britain's shifting social, political, and religious tides in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This enables him to draw out the interconnectedness of women writers with their male colleagues in the industry, literary consumers, war and post-war governments, and with the people affected by wartime culture and casualties. A notable example of the author's historical foregrounding occurs in chapter 2, "Women Poets during the Wartime Years." The author details the failures of British forces fighting the French – from 1793 through the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 – and the effect these had on British women and their families, many of which lost relatives in the war. Women claimed their place in public discourse by publishing poetry that frequently recounted tales of fallen fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons and thus transformed impersonal casualty statistics into actual family members and real trauma. Their writing about personal loss in the domestic sphere simultaneously expressed a political agenda and a refusal to stay out of national discussions that were considered men's territory. Behrendt explores the wide variety of rhetorically nuanced strategies that women poets used to write about their objections to or support for the war with France. For example, they used substitution to focus their poem on the war with the colonies or on the dangers of war in general, without mentioning the French conflict specifically. They also framed their poetry with statements meant to position the work as unsophisticated because written by a woman or for income, while at the same time publishing a meticulously crafted political poem in spite of the faux apology that precedes or follows it. Finally, the author's analyses in this chapter reveal a common trait among wartime women poets, and especially among those who opposed the war: together, they warn of the bloody and emotional toll that war inevitably takes on individual people, families, and on the nation.

<4>Chapter 3, "Women and the Sonnet," shifts the discussion away from bloodshed to poetic genre as Behrendt emphasizes the ambivalent yet malleable nature of the sonnet. It has, he argues, the performative ability to appear at times entirely personal and truthful and at others completely constructed and fictional. It also has the facility to convey "private" intimate thoughts or public political discourse: "For every moment that the readers are invited to regard as 'confessional' in the Romantic sonnet, there exists a counterinvitation to remember that the disclosure is taking place not in the confessional but in the public square – in the marketplace of the print medium" (122). This chapter explores women poets' involvement in the era's "rage for sonnets" and Charlotte Smith's particular contribution as "the most important figure in the Romantic sonnet revival" (118-19). Through elegant readings of sonnets by Smith, Robinson, Anna Seward, Anna Maria Smallpiece, Martha Hanson, and Mary F. Johnson, the author proves

the sonnet to be “a dynamic site of readerly activity” that creates and connects the poet’s and reader’s personae and forges complex intertextual relationships (130). Able to fuse private and public, the sonnet becomes a central site for the Romantic ethos that relates the individual to the social and builds community.

<5> The next chapter moves beyond the sonnet into a collection of longer poetic genres commonly used by Romantic women poets. Rather than performing a detailed analysis of a few poems and poets, as he did in chapter 3, Behrendt covers more ground by grouping works into three categories and surveying each: long poems about social commitment, long verse narrative tales, and shorter elegiac occasional poetry. His research on poems about social commitment shows how women poets – such as Hannah More and Lucy Aikin – wrote their way into sociopolitical debates such as the antislavery campaign and, of course, women’s rights. These long poems on overtly political topics differ markedly from those that tell stories. The proliferation and popularity of the long narrative verse tale, Behrendt argues, stems from the financial successes enjoyed by women novelists at the end of the eighteenth century. Long narrative poems – such as Mary Tighe’s *Psyche* (1805), Amelia Opie’s *The Father and Daughter* (1801), and Caroline Ann Bowles’s *Ellen Fitzarthur* (1820) – tapped into readers’ interest in “sensational” narrative in particular. Lastly, elegiac occasional poetry produced by women and often addressed to other women also bridged private and public topics by memorializing loved ones in the nuclear and national families. The 1817 death of Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales during childbirth, along with her stillborn son, was a particularly popular topic. Behrendt writes that women poets “humanized” the princess in verse and treated her as a “sister in experience,” a rhetorical move that raised the status of all British wives and mothers to the princess’ equals while at the same time commodifying her for literary profit (188). On the other hand, elegiac poems that mourn those who are not publicly known involve the reader most intimately and drastically reduce the distance between writer and consumer.

<6> Behrendt concludes his book with independent chapter-length studies of Scottish and Irish Romantic women poets. Once more, he carefully situates the works and lives of writers in these often marginalized parts of Great Britain within specific historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. The chapter on Scottish women poets surveys numerous writers and investigates how they handled the compounded ideological oppression of being both women and Scots, effectively governed by Scotsmen at home and Englishmen across the border. An extended discussion of Joanna Baillie’s poetry and influence, in particular, plays an important role in Behrendt’s claim that female Scottish poets created a unique paradigm that resisted masculine, British conceptions of art and history. Furthermore, the author is careful to articulate the similarities and differences between Irish women poets’ culture and verse and that of their Scottish “sisters.” For example, the chapter on “Irish Women Poets” emphasizes how these writers combated negative assumptions about the Irish as well as the difficulty of writing to multiple audiences at once: men and women, Catholic and Protestant, Irish and English, and more. This final chapter complements Behrendt’s important digital archive, “Irish Women Poets of the Romantic Period,” that features the work of approximately fifty Irish women writers, most of whom have rarely if ever been studied.(2)

<7> In this important book, Behrendt not only highlights the intertextual and communal relationships between women and men writing poetry in Great Britain during the Romantic era, but encourages scholars in contemporary conversations about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literary studies to work together to re-envision the canon. *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* posits a more democratic and pluralist view of the canon that ceases to privilege a few male English poets as well as Jacobin writers of both genders. Behrendt credits and employs the research of a number of critics working toward similar goals, including Paula Backscheider, Marilyn Butler, and Anne Mellor, and offers his own important volume to the cause.

Endnotes

(1) Mary Robinson, "Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination," in *A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, Adriana Craciun et al., eds., *Romantic Circles*, 31 August 2009, <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/robinson/mrletterfrst.htm>>. (^)

(2) "Irish Women Poets of the Romantic Period," Stephen C. Behrendt, ed., 31 August 2009, <<http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/iwrp/>>. (^)