

**Aesthetic Expansion and Romantic Revolutions**

*Revolutions in Taste, 1773-1818: Women Writers and the Aesthetics of Romanticism*. Fiona Price. Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2009. 198 pp.

Reviewed by **Anna Dodson Saikin**, Rice University

<1> In Fiona Price's *Revolutions in Taste, 1773-1818: Women Writers and the Aesthetics of Romanticism*, the debate over taste for writers of the Romantic period is linked to the period's growing political unease. Beginning her study with a comparison of Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796) and Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Price examines cultural instabilities in gendered and social discussions of taste: the different perspectives between Vivaldi and Ellena, perhaps, or the cultured nervousness present in Owenson's novel. The "revolution in taste" that takes place in these novels is the move from "an aristocratic conception of taste linked to the power to rule, disinterestedness, and universality to a more democratic model" (2). Yet Price moves beyond the class struggle implicit in this argument. The choice of texts in the Introduction highlights another important feature of Price's study: she aims to rewrite the literary history of the discussion of taste to include such varied works as the Gothic novel, the sentimental fiction, the romance, and the tale. By including works that have typically been excluded from studies of aesthetics, Price draws out an important feature of the period's aesthetic anxiety, namely, that this debate over taste particularly occurs in understudied genres that are typically gendered feminine.

<2> The first chapter, "'Real Solemn History': Rethinking Tradition," begins with a survey of classic texts on taste, including those by David Hume, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and William Wordsworth. While tradition is important for Price's argument, she points out that their arguments limit engagement with authority. To put it another way, the male writers' limited viewpoint means that they cannot critique the position within which they themselves are situated. Female writers, on the other hand, reveal the "mechanism for developing or (more often) shoring up the authority, not only of poets but of more culturally disadvantaged social groups" (15). Moving into a discussion of Clara Reeve, Price argues that Reeve participates in a debate between tradition and modernity by resituating the canon within *The Old English Baron* (1778) and *The Progress of Romance* (1785) to include "traditional feminised [sic] modes of reading" (18). Taste is linked to not only genre concerns, but also methods of female reading and education. Continuing her discussion with Anna Letitia Barbauld's 50-volume *The British Novelists* (1810), Price argues that "[f]iction, like other artistic forms, has, in this sensibility inspired narrative, something close to an aesthetic power – it impacts upon the mind with as

much force as do the senses” (27). Using Barbauld’s introductory essay “On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing,” Price contrasts the use of tradition within Reeve and Barbauld, arguing that “the devotional sublime and the sublime of institutionalized tradition, no longer separated chronologically, are competing aesthetics, representing different modes of social organization. Whereas Reeve offers us an alternative tradition, then, Barbauld gives an aesthetic, spiritual, and political alternative to tradition itself” (41). Thus, one “revolution of taste” is the move away from traditional modes of aesthetic evaluation represented by the canon.

<3> As her argument unfolds, Price explores alternative modes of reading from the page to the body. In the second chapter, “‘Fashion’s Brightest Arts Decoy’: Fashion and Originality,” Price unpacks the ways educational practices affected women, namely how gendered portrayals of women in writing influenced their real-world perceptions of themselves. The chapter begins with a continued discussion of Barbauld’s essay, claiming that “women had a particular stake in discussions of consumerism and political corruption: the question of what they wore and how they appeared was intimately linked with the health of their society” (48). Such a claim may seem far-fetched until one considers Edmund Burke’s political metaphors in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Mary Wollstonecraft critiques the gendered implications of Burke’s argument as well as engages Rousseau’s political and educational writing. Beginning with *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Price notes Wollstonecraft’s independent female gaze: “Instead of watching others watch them, women (and, eventually, other subjects) would develop a more probing gaze, avoiding passive dependence on the senses. To put it another way, an emphasis on personal beauty is replaced by an emphasis on original thought” (52). While such a distinction is useful and necessary for Price’s project, far more interesting is her analysis of Wollstonecraft’s lesser-known anthology *The Female Reader* (1789). It is in this text, Price argues, that the real work of Wollstonecraft’s project gets done. In an age that stressed the importance (and danger) of female reading, the anthology challenges ideas of female subjectivity. The specific works included as well as the order of the pieces highlight the need for women’s mental autonomy. The cumulative effect is the “conclusion that fashionable, sexualized femininity is politically and personally dangerous” (58). Thus, Wollstonecraft’s feminist project is achieved not only through active political engagement but also by challenging aesthetic representation.

<4> Just as the previous chapter explores the political implications of female taste in fashion, the third chapter considers the economic side of aesthetics. In “Disinterest, Economics, and the Tasteful Spectator,” Price uses the Gothic novels of Radcliffe, Eliza Fenwick, and Charlotte Smith to demonstrate how emotional excess often belies accurate aesthetic judgment. Price contends that “these problems with the notion of the emotionally engaged spectator led not only to the Romantic suspicion of getting and spending, but ultimately to the promotion of art as way of enhancing economic knowledge” (76). The Gothic participates in the sentimental tale’s emotional excess, but does so in a way that passes implicit judgment on the morals of its characters. Thus, a specific reaction to misfortune indicates a type of aesthetic response, which in turn produces knowledge of taste; to put it another way, “the act of viewing landscape, with its patterns of light and darkness, form a metaphor for understanding the moral shades of the human character” (87). These generic conventions make it possible for the reader to understand the consequences of the sentimental gaze, which often looks upon those less fortunate or mistreated by society, in order to open up the economic tensions implicit in aesthetic judgment.

<5> Moving outward from the individual to society, the fourth chapter, “Self-control: Romantic Psychologies of Taste,” explores the impact of taste on the community. Price begins the discussion with Maria Edgeworth’s educational writings, in which the growth of the child’s mind in relation to external sensory experience plays an important role in development. The creative experiences of the child (and later, the adult) determine the position of the individual within the community as a sympathetic spectator. As Joanna Baillie argues, “if the individual practices such surveillance and internalizes its moral implications, the ultimate social effect will be beneficial” (119). Price argues that Baillie has in mind a revolution of progress, not merely of change or difference. Similarly, Elizabeth Hamilton in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) suggests that correct judgment must be made available to everyone by means of education. This democratizing move has been developing over the course of Price’s argument, from Wollstonecraft’s gendered gaze to Radcliffe’s emotional aesthetics. By educating the masses to have correct aesthetic judgment, society can be reformed without destructive political movements.

<6> In the last chapter, “Rustic Tastes: The Romantic Tale,” Price comes full circle to explore the growing distrust of fashionable life. Using Harriet and Sophia Lee’s *Canterbury Tales* (1797-1805) and Owenson’s Irish novels, Price argues that the tale “had a flexibility that made it an important democratizing influence on the language of taste” (135). In addition, the tale records the nation’s history in ways that make it a legitimate force in the development of taste. Expanding Chaucer’s original, the Lee sisters “set the English language and native literary tradition in a much wider, international context” (144). In doing so, *The Canterbury Tales* provides a way for the English reader to situate him- or herself within national boundaries. Owenson uses this same technique in *The Wild Irish Girl* to legitimate a “narrative of cultural inheritance” (161). In both instances, the aesthetic production and reception of art becomes essential for national self-definition. Small wonder it is, then, that the stakes that Price sets on taste are quite high for this turbulent period.

<7> While the political and economic effects of aesthetic production and reception have been theorized and studied elsewhere, *Revolutions in Taste* sets itself apart by engaging texts that have been excluded from the canon and placing them alongside more traditional aesthetic theory by Hume, Addison, Burke, and Wordsworth, among others. Price argues that works by women are not so different from their much-studied counterparts; in short, “their aim, central to Romantic aesthetics, is to demonstrate that there are imaginative choices to be made by the active mind; that the aesthetic experience can and should be relocated and readjusted to provide an alternative basis for society” (169). Price’s book is a useful addition to the conversation about the revolutionary power of taste in the Romantic period.