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Introduction to Romantic Theatricality

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Introduction

It is impossible to write about women authors of the early romantic period without taking into account the political events and cultural changes that made it "bliss to be alive" in the decade of the 1790s. For the poet and novelist Mary Robinson, life in that decade was, in many respects, less than blissful, encompassing as it did financial hardship and physical disability, but the excitement William Wordsworth projected backward onto the decade was a lived reality for a writer whose published works grew in number from two to more than twenty titles over the course of ten years. Any attempt to name her the representative poet of the 1790s, however, runs afoul of a favored tenet of romantic ideology, a concern for the originality and authenticity of the poet's creations. The Robinson of the 1790s was a cultural chameleon, adopting every literary fashion, penning Della Cruscan verse, Jacobin novel, feminist tract, and lyrical tale, this last in a direct imitation of Wordsworth's dearest project. One can add to this sketch of Robinson's career her unabashed self-promotion (as poetry editor of the Morning Post she almost certainly wrote her own puffs). The result is a romantic monster—a blatant publicity hound, a poetic panderer, a staged self.

There are, however, other, less pejorative, ways of describing these same career strategies. One might credit Robinson with a concern for audience, a sensitivity to popular taste, an awareness of the fictive nature of self-representation. One might read into Wordsworth's disturbed reaction to Robinson's Lyrical Tales (Dorothy Wordsworth reports that her brother considered changing the name of the second volume of his similarly titled project) an uncomfortable awareness of the similarities, rather than the essential differences, between his guarded and Robinson's aggressive ventures into the literary marketplace. One might, as I intend to do here, examine the performative aspects of early romantic literary culture as a whole. Rather than considering the Wordsworthian persona as a reaction against the obvious staginess of Robinson and her female peers, I instead situate it as the
most durable performance of the era. And rather than consider women writers' overtly theatrical self-representations as a deviation from the norm, or as a falling-off from a standard of sincerity—a Wordsworthian gold standard—I advocate a more detailed attention to and respect for the artificiality of authenticity.

A few preliminary words are necessary to define the central term of my title and to make clear that while I use the world of the theater here as a contextual and theoretical framework, I do not, in fact, deal with the most obviously staged texts, that is, plays. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “theatrical” in three ways, all of which come into focus in the pages that follow: (1) pertaining to or connected with the theater or stage, or with scenic representation; (2) representing or exhibiting in the manner of an actor; artificial, affected, assumed; (3) calculated for display, showy, spectacular. The uneasy sallies into the theatrical realm of the six male poets whose work has come to define the period—think of Wordsworth’s vexed portrayal of London spectacle in book 7 of *The Prelude*, or that romantic era oxymoron, the closet drama—have been fruitfully examined by Mary Jacobus, Timothy Webb, Alan Richardson, Marilyn Gaull, and Julie Carlson, among others. But when one looks beyond the forcibly conjoined coterie of male poets, one finds that connections proliferate between the literati and the stage. Among the more prominent female writers of the period, Mary Robinson and Elizabeth Inchbald were successful actresses before moving on to literary careers; Germaine de Staël and Letitia Landon invented literary *improvisatrici* fashioned after the most famous actress of the era, Sarah Siddons; Anna Seward carried “Siddonian idolatry” to new heights; Helen Maria Williams took on the role of Liberty in a Parisian staging of the Revolution; and Joanna Baillie set out to incorporate the full range of human emotion in her *Plays on the Passions*. Material links to the stage, particularly among the female writers of the early romantic period, run wide and deep.

Although these historical associations between poets and the thea-

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ter are suggestive, I am more interested in the OED's two latter definitions of "theatrical." The second, to play a part or assume an identity, has an obvious relevance to Mary Robinson, who, in her proliferation of pseudonymous identities, evoked a heterodox and fluid notion of self. But when one considers Della Cruscan verse as the most obvious and immediate precursor to the poetry we know as romantic, the cultural significance of a performed self moves well beyond one shape-shifting writer. Inspired by Robert Merry, writing in the persona of the histrionic "Della Crusca," British women writers poured forth a torrent of poetry predicated on a fabrication: an affectional alliance between sympathetic poet friends. The falsity of this fiction was brought home most forcibly when the two most impassioned of the poetic communicants, "Della Crusca" and "Anna Matilda," met for the first time in the disappointing flesh of Robert Merry and Hannah Cowley. But on a larger scale, the subterfuge inherent in Della Cruscanism as a phenomenon becomes obvious when one notes how poems that present themselves as emissaries to a desired other turn inward, focusing ultimately on their authors' emotive states rather than on the encounter or exchange. This strategy should sound familiar, providing one more reason for looking with suspicion on romantic conventions of authenticity and sincerity.

Given the frequency with which the word "tinsel" appears in contemporary reviews of poets ranging from Merry to Keats, it seems worthwhile as well to attend to that aspect of theatricality most at odds with the received ethos of the period, that is, the showy and spectacular quality of dramatic performance. I trace a propensity in romantic era verse that is directly at odds with Wordsworth's advocacy of a plain style. Fascination with dramatic modes of self-representation in the period is frequently coupled with stylistic excess, with a penchant for ornamentation which in Keats led to charges of vulgarity and in women poets led, ultimately, to erasure from the romantic canon. That theatrical modes of representation are also associated with feminization in critical literature of the period such as Hazlitt's, powerfully supports my contention that women writers played a constitutive if not a permanent role in romantic ideation.

My aim is to take a neglected facet of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British culture, an attraction to and appropriation of performative modes of self-representation, and use it to construct narratives that link "high" and "low" literary texts, that explore continuities rather than disjunctions between, for example, the Della Cruscan effusion and the "greater romantic lyric." In doing so, I nec-
essarily work to complicate distinctions between public and private, masculine and feminine spheres, building on the work of historians such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, who, writing on the English middle class in the period 1780–1850, confidently aver: “Public was not really public and private was not really private despite the potent imagery of ‘separate spheres.’” Nancy Armstrong, in her influential work *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, similarly notes the impossibility of detaching women’s history from politics and issues of gender from issues of class. My emphasis on poetry rather than the novel, on the comparatively tight focus of the early romantic period rather than the broad sweep of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, allows me to attend to some fascinating deviations in the general march toward that Victorian domestic ideal, the Angel in the House. For example, Armstrong convincingly argues that the construction of female subjectivity is bound up with the criticism of public display associated with aristocratic women. A possible line of resistance to this association is evinced in British women poets’ fascination with the corporeal presence of Marie Antoinette, the focus of Chapter 4. Mary Poovey, who three years before Armstrong similarly underscored how female subjectivity is constructed through a variety of public discourses in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, claims that literary authorship, predicated as it was on the illusion of art as a discrete, apolitical domain, reinforced bourgeois ideology. For the poets I discuss in Chapter 6, who published their work in daily newspapers, this illusion of a private literary sphere would have been impossible to sustain.

Despite the several efforts to complicate the dialectic between public sphere and private sphere, especially in feminist articulations of the rise of the novel, it still underpins recent critical work on romantic women writers which posits a feminine romanticism in opposition to, and fundamentally different from, the more familiar masculine romanticism. For example, Marlon Ross, in his groundbreaking study of men and women poets of the romantic period, focuses on Felicia Hemans as representative of a “heartfelt coterie” of women writers.

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Ross claims, “The contours of feminine desire are necessarily different from masculine desire in early nineteenth-century poetry,” and he coins the phrase “affectional poets” to contrast women writers’ emphasis on affiliation and community with male writers’ preoccupation with the self and its conquests. Anne Mellor creates a similar opposition in her bluntly titled essay “Why Women Didn’t Like Romanticism: The View of Jane Austen and Mary Shelley,” arguing: “In direct opposition to the romantic poets’ celebration of love, the leading woman writers of the day urged their female readers to forswear passion . . . and to embrace instead reason, virtue, and caution.” In Romanticism and Gender Mellor identifies a “feminine” romanticism predicated on an “ethic of care,” which she contrasts with the more familiar “masculine” romanticism typified by the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime. As a result of both this volume and her earlier edition of essays, Romanticism and Feminism, which included “The I Altered,” Stuart Curran’s essay recovering a multitude of now not quite so little-known romantic women poets, Mellor can be credited with moving gender concerns to the center of romantic studies. But her choice in “Why Women Didn’t Like Romanticism” of two novelists as representative women writers of the romantic period reinforces the notion of poetry, the genre on which definitions of the romantic are founded, as an all-male bastion. Although in Romanticism and Gender Mellor quotes a statistic that counters such a view—Curran’s identification of 339 women poets publishing in England between 1760 and 1830—she in large measure ignores the poets on her own list of “twenty or so women writers acknowledged at the time or later to be the most influential, gifted, or widely read” (2). The list includes Anna Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, and Helen Maria Williams, but Mellor grounds her arguments primarily in discussions of Dorothy Wordsworth and Emily Brontë. I maintain that the most productive arena in which to interrogate the relationship between men and women writers of the romantic period is through the poets who were writing when “the romantic” was still in its formative stages.

That this relationship might best be understood in symbiotic rather

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than antagonistic terms is suggested by Julie Ellison’s observation that “the key terms of romantic poetics—the sublime, the haunted, the grotesque, the sentimental, the ironic, memory, desire, imagination—are accompanied by the demand to be understood intuitively.” She continues: “Intuition is marked as a feminine quality, just as most objects of romantic longing are, including childhood, nature, and the demonic. The invention of the romantic subject as the hero of desire is therefore wholly bound up with the feminine.” Ellison’s positing of an integral link between the romantic subject and the feminine provides a useful context in which to consider the work of Robinson and Smith, two poets whose serial enactments of private longing have more in common with the poetry of their male peers than with the novels of Mary Shelley and Jane Austen, or the work of a second-generation romantic female poet such as Hemans. The vexed relationship to human passion and the physical body that Mellor rightly notes in the works of Shelley and Austen, and that Cora Kaplan and Mary Poovey discern in the *Vindication* of Mary Wollstonecraft, does not figure as prominently in the poetry of Smith and Robinson, if it is indeed a component of their work at all. This is not to say that these poets are unconcerned with human passion and the physical body; I note merely that their representations of female sexuality do not uniformly echo Wollstonecraft’s ambivalence. Attention to the appeal for women writers of the actress Sarah Siddons, whose public persona was predicated on a striking physique and a strong ego, necessarily complicates any attempt to align women writers of the romantic period with either the disembodied mind or an altruistic emphasis on communal regard.

Two other recent critical studies provide convincing reinforcement for my insistence on uniting public and private as well as masculine and feminine realms. Mary A. Favret’s strategic reading of romantic correspondence to emphasize the connections between public and private experience underscores how even the most seemingly private and feminine of texts, the personal letter, must be situated within the political paranoia of the 1790s. Favret writes, “The undisputable truth of letters resides not in individual expression, but in public, institutional control.” And William Galperin focuses on the vast encircling view

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of a landscape or cityscape provided by the Panorama in order to argue that this popular spectacle's destabilizing effect on a privatized subject position calls into question the commanding gaze we have come to associate with the male spectator. Galperin argues that the tendency of the Panoramas to reflect their audiences—for example, in vast cityscapes filled with milling people not unlike the mass of people surrounding the Panoramas' spectators—resulted in a “theatricalization of the audience” that denied the individual beholder a secure subject position. Throughout this book I argue that subject and object positions, those of spectator and spectacle, were not always determined by gender.

Although two basic arguments underlie all the chapters that follow—the contention that romanticism is founded on theatrical modes of self-representation and the corollary that women played active and influential roles in public life—they manifest themselves in a wide variety of venues. In the first two chapters I set out to complicate the conventional bifurcation between public and private realms, particularly as they relate to women, by, in the first instance, focusing on the most public woman of the day, the actress Sarah Siddons, and in the second, examining the role women played in the seemingly masculinist domain of the 1794 treason trials. In Chapters 3 through 7, which proceed in roughly chronological fashion, I explore how reliance on theatrical personas facilitated public performance not just for women writers but also for that most putatively private male writer, William Wordsworth.

In Chapter 1, “Sarah Siddons and the Performative Female,” I use the sonnet sequences of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson to demonstrate how women authors managed to merge theatricality and sincerity. Situating these literary works in a culture awash in “Siddonian idolatry,” I argue that Smith and Robinson are influenced by Siddons’s strategic deployment of her “private” life in the construction of her public persona. These poets, similarly, use the public’s awareness of their personal circumstances to temper or heighten their poetry’s passionate claims. My discussion in Chapter 2, “The Courtroom Theater of the 1794 Treason Trials,” is grounded in court transcripts, newspaper accounts of the trials, political caricature, and personal narratives of trial participants and witnesses. This contextualization allows me to demonstrate the subtle ways in which the trial partici-

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pants’ “performances” were pitched to the female spectators who made up a substantial part of the courtroom audience. I argue that these female spectators brought to the courtroom a sense of empowerment they had acquired as members of increasingly demanding and demonstrative theater audiences. The treason trials reveal that women writers’ reliance on performative modes of self-representation mirrored the proclivities of the culture at large. The trials also suggest how theatrical conventions leaped the boundaries of the patent house stages and permeated public life.

In Chapter 3, “‘That fluttering, tinselled crew’: Women Poets and Della Cruscanism,” I examine the role Della Cruscan poetry played in launching women’s literary careers and creating a readership for the self-referential and spontaneous poetic effusions we know as romantic poetry. I read Della Cruscan verse against the accounts of King George III’s madness, with which it shared space in the daily newspapers, arguing that the theatricality and ornamentality of this mode of poetry provided a mask for women poets and a distraction for the newspapers’ readers. And I show how William Gifford’s attack on Della Cruscanism allies the theatricality of the poetry with the bodies of its female practitioners in a rhetorical maneuver that writes women out of romanticism. Chapter 4, “Embodying Marie Antoinette,” establishes the French queen’s central place in British literary culture. Whereas Edmund Burke famously reduces her to a star on the horizon, his female contemporaries emphasize her dramatic presence, though differing widely in their reactions to and uses of her theatricality. I read the representations of Marie Antoinette penned by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and Charlotte Smith to discuss women writers’ fetishization of the French queen.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the city of London and the periodical press as venues for literary performance. In Chapter 5, “The Spectacular Flâneuse,” I contrast Mary Robinson’s city poems with Wordsworth’s representations of London in book 7 of The Prelude, noting the extent to which Wordsworth mutes and Robinson highlights women’s place in the urban street. Associated in print caricatures with the kind of decorative carriage that was rendered notorious by Marie Antoinette, Robinson uses the vantage point of the carriage rider to become both object and purveyor of an urban gaze, and complicates the conventional gendering of public space as masculine. In Chapter 6, “Theatricality and the Literary Marketplace,” I examine the phenomenon of newspaper poetry, arguing that the poetry column of the Morning Post was ideally suited to performative modes of self-repre-
sentation and, for this reason, inspired very different responses from the poets who published there—most notably Southey, Robinson, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. I read these responses as part of a larger anxiety about the commodification of poetry which is expressed in the familiar rhetoric of antitheatricality.

In Chapter 7, “Performing Wordsworth,” I take my ongoing argument concerning the staginess of early romantic literary culture to its extreme, arguing that even Wordsworth, the standard-bearer of sincerity and authenticity, indulged in theatrical strategies. By exploring three discrete instances of Wordsworthian performance—his perambulatory mode of composition, his collaborations with portrait painters, and his self-reflexive commentary in the Preface to the *Lyric Ballads* and in the Fenwick notes—I document his participation in the theatrical imperative of the culture at large. In reciting his poems to the captive audience provided by his sister, wife, and daughter, and in posing for Benjamin Haydon’s life-size painting *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem*, Wordsworth was, in the one instance, performing his poetry and, in the other, publicizing his persona, two activities that run counter to the normative conception of the romantic poet which he helped to construct.

My Coda chronicles how the fluid theatricality of Mary Robinson and her peers evolves into something less creatively enabling. Letitia Landon’s poetic propensity for deathbed scenes stands as a continuation and intensification of the theatrical strategies that served to constitute a romantic subject. Her poetic death scenes simultaneously lure an audience and guard against this audience’s encroachment. In Landon’s work the fluid theatricality of the 1790s is transformed into a static gesture of grief, a funereal monument.

As these chapter descriptions make clear, Mary Robinson figures repeatedly in many of the cultural moments on which I focus here. Although I make no claim that she is typical of women poets of the period, I do think that her tendency to situate herself at the center of popular developments—Della Cruscanism, city spectacle, newspaper reportage—warrants sustained attention to her literary maneuvers. Rather than scatter the names of lesser-known women poets throughout my book at the risk of seeing none of them emerge as distinctive voices, I have opted to focus primarily on Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Hannah Cowley, and Letitia Landon, with Wollstonecraft, Anna Maria Jones, and Jane Taylor serving at various points to complicate or broaden my arguments.

Though this project situates itself within a discrete historical milieu
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(primarily London of the 1790s) and seeks to address a specific critical issue (the place of women in romanticism), it participates as well in the ongoing theoretical debate over the performative status of gender. Women writers’ fascination with and literary deployment of the bodies of Siddons and Marie Antoinette provide a context in which to test Judith Butler’s understanding of the body as “a materiality that bears meaning” in a “fundamentally dramatic” manner and her assertion that “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Butler’s attention to both the possibilities inherent in and the constraints acting on gender performance is particularly apposite, given the delicate balance that was constantly being negotiated by women poets. She emphasizes that distinctions are not easily drawn between theatrical and social roles, before going on to assert that while “theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions.”

Talking about self-representation in the 1790s, and in particular about men and women poets’ different uses of and relations to performance, allows me to stake a claim for the signal importance of women poets during the romantic period, not as outsiders, nattering about on the fringes of the more ambitious productions of their male peers, but as serious and influential artists who made a virtue out of the necessity of gender constraints and used performative strategies to bridge the gap between private woman and publishing author. In doing so, I do not wish to write over blithely the material reality of those


13 Catherine B. Burroughs’s illuminating analysis of the gendering of closet space, Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theatre Theory of British Romantic Women Writers (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), further serves to complicate the split between private and public realms. With her focus on women’s theater theory and on the writings of Joanna Baillie in particular, she provides a much-needed treatment of women writers’ negotiations of the romantic stage. I am grateful for having been allowed to read this work in advance of publication. Ellen Donkin, Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776–1829 (New York: Routledge, 1995), which became available too late to inform my study, also promises to establish women writers’ prominence in romantic era theater.
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constraints. Rather, I concur with the conclusion Wayne Koestenbaum draws concerning performative potential in a different cultural context, the appropriation of the opera diva by gay culture. Koestenbaum writes: "No single gesture, gown, or haughty glissando of self-promotion will change one's actual social position: one is fixed in a class, a race, a gender. But against such absolutes there arises a fervent belief in retaliatory self-invention."\(^{14}\) For reasons rooted in British law, etiquette, economy, and literary culture, women writers of the romantic period had a particularly pressing need to turn to the kind of retaliatory self-invention Koestenbaum describes. But this need was felt as well by their less commercially successful contemporary William Wordsworth. The difference of temperament that has worked to divide the ostensibly antitheatrical Wordsworth from the overtly theatrical Byron may no longer seem so insuperable if we place their opposite constructions of self within the context of romantic performance provided by their female peers.

Romanticism as a movement has been, with slight exception, staged without women. I propose another, more inclusive performance, one that takes into account not just Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley but also a number of women writers who were, for better or worse, not tethered to the major male players of the time. In my staging of romanticism the female actors assume their rightful place at center stage, and there are no bit parts.