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Review of *Romanticism and Gender* by Anne K.  
Mellor

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ANNE K. MELLOR, *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Pp. x + 275. \$49.95 cloth; \$14.95 paper.

“Does Romanticism have a gender?” Anne Mellor poses this straightforward question at the beginning of her latest book, a valuable and most welcome addition to the burgeoning field of English Romanticism and gender studies. Her affirmative answer, supported by examining twenty of the most influential women publishing between 1780 and 1830, allows her to claim that “a paradigm shift in our conceptual understanding of British literary Romanticism occurs when we give equal weight to the thought and writing of the women of the period” (p. 1). Indeed, Mellor’s response to her initial question succeeds in complicating our understanding of the literary and cultural phenomena that we have perhaps too easily codified as English Romanticism. For throughout the book she identifies and describes two Romanticisms—what she calls “masculine” and “feminine” Romanticisms. She has performed a valuable service by making accessible to a general readership the careers and major works of women who have been largely relegated to the dustbin of scholarship, and she has succeeded in placing their concerns alongside those of the six male canonical Romanticists. Reading her book is a bit like seeing simultaneously both sides of the mirror, for the women she examines lived through the same historical and cultural events that the men did, but they refracted those events in very different modes of literary production. Describing and positioning those artistic and ideological differences constitutes the value of Mellor’s book.

The organization of *Romanticism and Gender* is as lucid and straightforward as its prose. Mellor begins with an overview of “Gender in Masculine Romanticism,” going over familiar territory (the male poet’s “cannibalization” of the female form, the fantasies of identification with the mother, the silencing or colonizing of the threatening Other). But Mellor’s more original work can be found in her discussions of the women writers, organizing those analyses around the four characteristics she sees as most representative of “feminine” Romanticism: rational love and an endorsement of marriage between equals; “family politics,” or the idea of a nation-state that evolves gradually under the guidance of both mother and father; a domesticated sublime and a feminized beautiful as an experience of nurturing love rather than fear; and a subjectivity formed in relation to others and in harmony with one’s own body, a model of affiliation rather than individual achievement. Each chapter explores one of these characteristics by juxtaposing the writings of men

to the writings of women. The result is effective—particularly the chapter on the Sublime, which contrasts Edmund Burke to Ann Radcliffe, Susan Ferrier, and Sydney Owenson (*Lady Morgan*).

This is perhaps the first critical study of Romanticism that I have read in a long time that was not brimming with arcane theory and critical jargon. Mellor is clearly writing for a general educated audience rather than for scholarly specialists, and yet paradoxically she has opened up a field that the scholarly specialists have just begun to scratch. By discussing the writings of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, Helen Maria Williams, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Brunton, and others she has opened up a critical discourse that is intended to challenge the positions put forth by Mary Poovey (in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*), Nancy Armstrong (in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*), and Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (in *Family Fortunes*). Mellor believes that their “seamless accounts of the triumph of a hegemonic domestic ideology in England between 1750 and 1850” are incorrect and fail to acknowledge the female Romantic writers who created “an alternative counter-public sphere,” characterized by rational love, an ethic of care, gender equality, a domesticated sublime, and a fluid self defined in relation to community (pp. 83–84).

But Mellor does not simply say that women wrote texts that evinced what we have come to recognize as “feminine romanticism.” She complicates the binary opposition she has constructed by her discussions of Keats and Emily Brontë, “critical cross-dressers,” for if Keats has more in common with “feminine” Romanticism, so does Emily Brontë profess allegiance to the tenets of what Mellor has defined as characteristic “masculine” Romanticism. Her discussions of both of these writers—and particularly her concern that Keats’s letters be accorded the critical attention his poems have received—are provocative and stimulating.

But notice that Mellor just slips in that phrase “ethic of care,” a concept originated by Carol Gilligan’s revisionary research and her extended attempts to modify the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, whose conclusions were drawn only from studying male subjects. In a sense, Mellor is doing the same thing, as are medical researchers for the first time. The question—what difference does gender make?—is perhaps the central query of our decade, and yet it seems to me that we undercut the value of our responses by also arguing, contradictorily, that gender ultimately is nothing more than an arbitrary social construction. Either gender signifies or it does not. Either one can make some assumptions about an individual’s gender or one cannot. You cannot have it both ways.

And yet Mellor wants to have it both ways. On the one hand she claims that there is something she calls “feminine Romanticism” and that it was primarily practiced by gendered subjects we recognize as “women.” On the other hand she wants to claim that there are “only differing modes of subjectivity which can be shared by males and females alike, and even by the same person in the course of a long and variegated life” (p. 168). And thus “feminine Romanticism” was also practiced by Keats, who was labeled an “effeminate” man by his contemporaries. She complicates her paradigm further by claiming that certain writers could be “ideological transvestites” but not “transsexuals” (p. 171). I take this curious image to suggest that a writer could subscribe outwardly to the posturings of the other sex’s dominant discourse system, but that there is a bedrock essentialism of sex: Keats can identify with the female in his own work and he can occupy the subject position of a female, but “he cannot *become* the female” (p. 183). We are back to the gender question again, only this time more confused than ever.

But this quibble is minor. Mellor has written an important study, one that will be particularly important for our graduate students as they seek to understand and reshape the field for the next generation. Mellor is ultimately arguing for an expansion of the literary canon; in fact, she goes so far as to speculate about renaming the period we have too conventionally labeled “Romanticism.” She muses about calling the period instead “‘Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Literature’ (‘LEEN Lit’ for short)” (p. 211). As a survivor of many curriculum review committees, I can only say that I have come to distrust both acronyms and simply adding texts to the curriculum. It seems to me that we will only succeed in transforming the canon when we focus not on the specific texts we teach, but on the methods of inquiry we model for our students. By posing a series of heuristics, by focusing on probing questions, Mellor has effectively modeled how we all might begin to see a field anew.

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DAVID MORSE, *High Victorian Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 1993. Pp. viii + 553. \$50.

This well-informed, thoughtful, and ably written book is mislabeled. To this reader, at least, the title *High Victorian Culture* promises a structured survey of the many interwoven strands