Women Writers in the Romantic Age

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Cover image: the Brontë sisters (Anne, Emily and Charlotte) by Patrick Branwell Brontë, oil on canvas, ca. 1834. ©National Portrait Gallery, London

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Introduction

This book reviews 650 women writers in 51 national traditions, broadly covering all Europe and both Americas. Its time frame is 1776–1848, a period bracketed by two revolutions, first in the Thirteen Colonies and then later across Europe. "We the people," runs the preamble to the United States Constitution, and the 1776 and 1848 revolutions are marked by two texts with radically different ideas of what "the people" means: Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* and Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. 1848 is also, tellingly, the date of the *Declaration of Sentiments* at the First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, NY, which reprises Jefferson's famous text adding the words "and women" to his androcentric articles. We have argued at length elsewhere for a view of Romantic art, throughout this vast region, as a reflection of the age's revolutionary upheavals: in politics, where the maps of Europe and the Americas are redrawn; in industry, where steam power transforms human capacity and opens the great rivers of the world to Western gunboats; and in the culture of the book, where stereotype printing and wood paper make possible massive print runs to meet a new and expanded reading public, one with new expectations for art.[1] Somewhat ironically, the complex emergence of nationalism which these events precipitate has tended to silo scholarship into essentially national traditions, in which an overview of the whole field—Europe and the European diaspora, for lack of a better phrase—is occluded if not lost entirely. This book aims to address that blind spot, arguing that there is no other way to view the entire global phenomenon of 'Romanticism' as such.

The book is a sequel to our previous, preponderantly male-author study, *An Outline of Romanticism in the West*.[2] That study of Europe and

1 John Claiborne Isbell, *The People's Voice: A Romantic Civilization, 1776–1848* (Bloomington, IN: Lilly Library, 1996).

2 John Claiborne Isbell, *An Outline of Romanticism in the West* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0302

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the two Americas argued that the dearth of women writers in national Romantic historiographies, outside the English-speaking world, could reflect a relative lack of research in the field. In further pursuing that research, it has become clear that the field has indeed been explored unevenly. Tracing women writers across fifty-one national traditions, a remarkable disproportion emerges. Our initial English-language search yielded zero women writers in thirteen traditions, with thirty-eight nations noting anywhere from one woman writer to hundreds in the Anglo-American world. This glaring disproportion may offer a spur to future research. It seems obvious that Mexican women, for instance, did not lay aside their pens for seventy years as their country achieved independence; and indeed, our subsequent research identified a study on women writers in convents in colonial Mexico, where understandably a writing tradition was maintained. Moreover, as noted, the initial research for this volume was conducted primarily in English; the bibliography though lists a half-dozen Spanish and Portuguese works on Latin American women writers which offer avenues for further work. Universally, this volume's author lists should expand as research continues, that is our hope. The volume is in that sense nothing more, as Staël once put it, than a stone brought to the collective pyramid of knowledge.

Our goal has been to name every woman writer in a European language that our initial search revealed, from St Petersburg to Lima and between 1776 and 1848. This means reviewing the 650 women writers that we have recuperated—a refreshingly large number. For each author, dates, full name, and a brief description are given, providing an ongoing, somewhat encyclopedic resource and a ground plan for future research. Democratically, each author entry is limited to a ten-line maximum; and democratically, we set out to list every woman writer we have thus far found in this vast region who saw print, either during her lifetime or subsequently. We have no wish to sequester professional from 'unprofessional' women writers, or to prioritize the one over the other: indeed, to our mind, doing so fundamentally misrepresents the female writing experience during this period, when publication was both harder to come by and frowned upon by the patriarchal establishment. It is no coincidence that the volume contains memoirs written solely for family members years after the fact, or manuscript diaries and autobiographies

later unearthed in family archives. They form an integral part of the rich pageant of women's writing at the time, and they deserve their moment in the sun if we are to understand the fundamental ways in which men and women picked up a pen during this age in very different manners and with very different expectations. Let these voices be heard in their diversity. Finally, to make our project more welcoming to the eye, American and British women writers are here divided by century. So many women writers have been recuperated in these two traditions that offering them *en bloc* would, we believe, fatigue the reader.

Our method is twofold; or put another way, this book operates in a double continuum. First, it offers 650 brief author entries under fifty-one national headings, reviewing the several hundred known women writers Europe and the two Americas produced during the period. This provides a brief, encyclopedic overview. Second, the book offers twenty-one author extracts, with translation, in seventeen European languages. The national traditions selected are intended to provide a representative introduction to this corpus, stretching from Russia west to Ireland and from the United States to Peru. The English and Spanish languages feature more than once, given their diasporas; Swedish features twice, given that the Finnish women writers we have thus far identified in the period wrote exclusively in Swedish or German. These various extracts may perhaps prevent the study from becoming a bare aggregate of biographical author entries, breathing life and context into one overriding question: namely, can a pattern of Romantic creation be detected in the corpus of women's writing produced in European languages during the Romantic age? The question seems worth asking, and perhaps the beginning of an answer can also be elaborated. That start to an answer will be found in the contextual commentary that accompanies our extracts, discussing to what extent these writers are impacted both by the age's multiple revolutionary events and by its patriarchal structures.

A note on names. Each brief entry provides the writer's full name and dates as known. Many of these 650 women writers at some point published anonymously or pseudonymously; pseudonyms are listed in square brackets, and a brief "known as" accompanies especially long and confusing names, say of Claire de Duras. Each extract also lists each known marriage with date and the partner's full name.

How then are the twenty-one extracts selected? If the book is comprehensive, the representative extracts are necessarily selective, and representation, as the French discovered in the 1790s, is a tricky business. To begin with, these have depended on European and American library holdings, which in some measure reflect authorial success. Thus, the Dutch novelist Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint sold across Europe at the time, and the American poet Phillis Wheatley has largely remained in print since publication. Many national traditions here reviewed leave little room for choice: we have, for instance, identified just one Greek woman writer in the period, Elisavet Moutzan-Martinengou, and though her works are often absent in the libraries of America and Western Europe, she is here in extract. A certain mix of bestsellers and the unknown thus emerges, reflecting contemporary realities. We have also endeavored to feature both verse and prose in our extracts, though prose predominates, much as it appears to predominate throughout our extensive corpus, in part because of the multiplicity of prose genres, from philosophy to memoir. Our previous volume on thirty French women writers taught us that drama lends itself less well to presentation in short extracts, and we have selected accordingly.[3] In prose fiction, we have chosen to extract opening passages, since we find incipits revelatory and the comparison between them illuminating. And finally, we have sought out literary and historical interest throughout.

National traditions, which often fail to reflect either contemporary geopolitical realities or the movement of persons, are indicated by simple use of the national descriptor for our fifty-one section headings: we say Finland, for instance, though these Finnish writers mostly wrote in Swedish, or Latvia, starring Julie de Krüdener who wrote in French. Irish, British, and United States writers are thus given separate headings representing their different modern national traditions, though the many Scottish authors here identified appear within the British tradition Scotland joined in 1707. The risk of anachronism in such an enterprise is both significant and worth avoiding; that is why those modern national traditions that pay homage to these writers are grouped under thirteen more contemporary chapter headings, from "Writers from Ottoman Europe" to "Writers from Latin America and the Caribbean," with a

3 John Claiborne Isbell, *Destins de Femmes: French Women Writers, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346

brief geopolitical context provided to open each chapter, an outline of the broader historical framework in which these different women lived and wrote, and the institutional structures that their region's various nascent national movements inhabited.

Our task as we see it is to lay the groundwork for future research. To that end, a review of the current state of the field seems in order. Let us begin with studies on Romanticism. Without duplicating the review we conducted in 2022 to open *An Outline of Romanticism in the West*, it seems apparent that a wealth of national studies exists, and a smaller number of global ones, focused mostly on Europe to the exclusion of the New World, Latin America in particular. Notably, there is the five-volume series of essays on Romanticism in the *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1988–2008), which covers the Americas intermittently. Two other comparative studies cover Europe with the Americas absent: *European Romanticism: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Prickett (2010), offers sixteen short essays on a range of national Romanticisms, followed by about nine hundred pages of bilingual extracts; while *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, edited by Paul Hamilton (2016), covers a range of European literatures with some gaps, such as the Southern Slavs and the Low Countries. The present volume, like our previous *Outline*, thus offers something new to scholarship in its ecumenical reach.

Reviews of women writers in the Romantic age are a different matter. Again, a wealth of national studies exists, notably in the Anglo-American tradition, though Germany and France are well represented. These studies figure in our bibliography. Many good studies review women throughout history, and they too figure in our bibliography, for instance Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, 17 vols (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 1999–2002), Katharina M. Wilson, *An Encyclopedia of Continental Women Writers*, 2 vols (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991), and Katharina M. Wilson, Paul Schlueter, and June Schlueter, *Women Writers of Great Britain and Europe: An Encyclopedia* (London: Garland, 1997). Let us leave these aside for now, since our goal is to address the Romantic age specifically. Similarly, comparatist work on the Enlightenment is tangential to our task: Elizabeth Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of*

Letters (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), say, or Rebecca Cypess, *Women and Musical Salons in the Enlightenment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022). The same goes for Victorian studies, such as Linda H. Peterson, *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). In short, global studies of Romantic women writers are infrequent. The Gothic genre marks an exception here: Emma Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, 2 vols (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); even Montague Summers, *A Gothic Bibliography* (London: The Fortune Press, 1941). Beyond the Gothic, pickings seem thin: Katherine Sobba Green, *The Courtship Novel, 1740–1820: A Feminized Genre* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1991); Susanne Kord, *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus* (London: Camden House, 2003); Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); or Patrick H. Vincent, The R*omantic Poetess: European Culture, Politics, and Gender, 1820–1840* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004). In short, global overviews of women writers in the Romantic era seem relatively few in number, and those that exist tend to be thematic. The present volume is designed to fill that gap, addressing the question of whether a feminine Romantic age manifests across Europe and the European diaspora, one shaped and created by women writers.

What, then, does one encounter in the pages of this book? Death in childbirth, distressingly often. Tuberculosis. Bad marriages with little prospect of divorce. Debtors' prison. Time as amanuensis for a male writer, fathers in particular. Career choices: governess, teacher, director of a girls' school; dressmaker, mill worker, weaver, spy. Tailor, in the case of Maria Engelbrecht Stokkenbech, who spent years disguised as a man, smoking, drinking, and playing cards with her male coworkers, urinating through a horn, before being found out, tried, and forbidden by the government from wearing men's clothes. Writer as a last resort, to avoid penury, to feed one's children. Displeasure at being "obligated

to any man breathing," in the case of Jane Elizabeth Moore. Scientists and Quakers; lesbians, spinsters, mothers of twelve. Pseudonymous and anonymous writers, facing misattribution at the time and a sudden drop in positive reviews when one's gender identity is revealed. The unpublished, by choice or by the luck of the draw: Phillis Wheatley for instance could not, it turned out, publish again after freedom. Polyglots in large number. Autodidacts. Travelers, voluntary and otherwise, across empire and diaspora: America, China, India, South Africa, Southeast Asia, Australia, the Antilles. The bourgeois, the noble, the daughters of silk throwsters and linen drapers, those who appealed to the Royal Literary Fund. Fighters for causes, again in large number, including those who joined action to words: abolitionists, early suffragists, hymn writers, temperance crusaders. The guillotined. Speakers for the enslaved and the outcast, for every minority: Romany, Jewish, Native American, the colonized, the poor; for women, for prisoners, for those imprisoned for debt; for those Frantz Fanon calls the wretched of the Earth. This sympathy for the minority, the voiceless, and the oppressed, I have argued, is a quintessentially Romantic impulse, and in it, one may perhaps find the legacy of the Romantic period that frames this corpus of lives and works. It lies at the origins of nationalism—giving a voice, *vox populi*, to the voiceless masses—and it recurs throughout these pages, crossing barriers of language and regime and appearing with some frequency among the different women we encounter, with their different reasons for writing. As much as any pattern, it distinguishes this text.

"The Romantic Age" is a necessarily fluid concept. What then lies beyond this book's perimeter? In space, we have restricted our project to Europe and the European diaspora, the argument being that a "Romantic Age" *per se* does not exist in the period chosen, 1776–1848, outside of that ambit. Our earlier *Outline of Romanticism in the West* looks briefly in its epilogue at three different 'Romantic movements' outside the Eurosphere—in Japan, India, and the Ottoman Empire—and finds that the works concerned are all written after 1850. One may note that the borders of the Eurosphere were themselves fluid at the time, extending beyond the Americas into Australia, Africa, and Asia. Those various colonial presences, from Macau to South Africa, duly feature in this book. In time, one must delimit a chronological span somewhere,

and we have done so. Thus, like the Assing sisters, Emily Dickinson is absent—she was just leaving school in 1848 and did not begin to organize her poetry for another decade. 1776 and 1848 are seismic enough, we believe, to support the weight here accorded them. But it is quite true that Romanticism colors outside the lines. The *Declaration of Independence* is itself a somewhat arbitrary benchmark in the American revolutionary process, and that is particularly true of Boston, where the enslaved Phillis Wheatley published her poems in 1773. Opening this volume with her work—and she wrote thereafter, though she could not publish—seems a suitable means of underlining that truth.

As we trace out the boundaries of this collection, it becomes apparent that these exist in more than space and time alone; the very business of identifying someone as an author is tricky. As Virginia Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own*, "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman."[4] Many women in our period indeed wrote and published pseudonymously or anonymously; many women also surely collaborated uncredited on work by men they knew. An interesting new monograph, *Breaking Conventions*, thus reviews the extent to which the woman's part in its five couples' publications was compromised or elided.[5] It seems fair to say in these circumstances that identifying and reclaiming all women writers in the Romantic Age is a task that can be begun but not completed. And that is quite appropriate. Let other scholars then continue and correct the work here begun.

Our overriding hope in this work is exactly that: to provide tools for future research, to inspire readers to delve into the data accumulated in these pages. Perhaps an extract in one of our various languages will light a fire in a reader; perhaps a footnote will name a monograph that seems worthy of a look. The footnotes, like the bibliography, are designed, first to indicate where further information on a given author may be found, and second, to guide research. There is some duplication: the bibliography largely contains items mentioned in the

4 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, [1937]), p. 85.

5 Patricia Auspos, *Breaking Conventions: Five Couples in Search of Marriage-Career Balance at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0318. This text also has valuable information on women as amanuenses.

footnotes, assembling a small library of sources for work on women writers in the Romantic age from Russia to Peru. Author monographs, of which a good number are listed here, appear only in the footnotes; and similarly, local studies—say, on Texas or Kentucky, in the United States section—do not feature in the bibliography, which is already long. The lion's share of footnotes cites author monographs and reference works such as encyclopedias, meaning that individual page numbers seem otiose; readers are invited to consult encyclopedia entries entire or to look through author monographs at leisure. The bibliography in turn, like the index, offers a handy overview of publications in the field of Romantic women's studies, and is partitioned like the book itself into national and regional headings. As for the translations, they reproduce published versions whenever possible—for French, Polish, or Spanish, for instance. When not, they are my own responsibility, begun with Google Translate and subsequently reviewed both by me and by a qualified native speaker of that language, as the acknowledgements document.