Women Writers in the Romantic Age

John Claiborne Isbell

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-551-9
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-552-6
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-553-3
ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-554-0
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-555-7
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0458

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

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Conclusion: La Condition féminine

This book chronicles seven decades of women picking up a pen and writing, across Europe and the European diaspora, from 1776 to 1848. Its period is, for want of a better phrase, the Romantic age, an age bracketed by revolutions in Europe and in the Americas. Indeed, it is a period of multiple revolutions, in government, in the arts, in science and technology, in the culture of the book. And women necessarily played a key role in this story, from the loom to the guillotine.

Our aim has been to reclaim a comprehensive corpus of women writers in this period—without exception, across fifty-one nations—and then to determine whether any universal principles or priorities can be identified within it. The method seems appropriate. The answer may be, as Zhou Enlai once said of the French Revolution's place in history, that it is too early to tell; but the question seems worth asking.[1]

Looking back over our 650-author corpus, certain patterns or priorities do begin to emerge. Religion, for instance, from hymn writing to missionary work. Women preachers—female sermons—are naturally in short supply (though there is Lucretia Mott), and it bears repeating that nuns' texts, notably in Latin America, were routinely mediated by male hands. Social justice appears, from prison reform to charity work to abolition. Mediation of others' work: translation in particular, but also dictation, as an amanuensis to a man. Reflections on the private sphere, in letters, diaries, memoirs, cookbooks. Children's literature and the education of the young. Admonitions to other women. The broad outlines of these priorities reflect that age-old topos, women's work. That is not new to the period, though specific content—for instance,

1 Zhou Enlai famously said this to Henry Kissinger in 1972.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0458.14

the abolitionist cause—may well be. These outlines also go some way to separating the female written corpus from the male for the years 1776–1848. Other distinctions have been posited; let us begin with these. And then, moving beyond traditional women's work, we come—aptly enough, for this is an age of revolution—to transgression and revolt. One thinks of Gothic literature, for instance, that international phenomenon, with its contested epistemologies and its lurid plots. One thinks of women who were hanged, like Eleonora de Pimentel, or guillotined, like Olympe de Gouges. Of those who eloped or divorced—those assertions of female autonomy. But beyond these, one thinks of the journalists, the editors, the explorers, the inventors, the scientists, the philosophers, the military strategists—all those trespassers on the public sphere—and with them, one perhaps sees something new in the female condition, something to distinguish this age from those that preceded it.

It seems obvious that the age's men and women were conditioned equally, though perhaps differently, by the society in which they lived. This is true of the people in our book's cover painting, for instance, where Branwell Brontë has first painted himself in, then painted himself out of the group of his three sisters—a painting where success and failure, as often in Romantic art, are not so very far apart. It is true of Victor Hugo and Juliette Drouet, where Romanticism for Victor meant keeping Drouet, his mistress, shut up in her Paris apartment for fifty years, while for her it meant abandoning the stage to wait a half-century for Victor's visits. During his long exile on Guernsey, she lodged in a cottage within eyesight of the Hugo family home; he did not attend her funeral. And one might argue that certain defining aspects of Romanticism, like openness to passion or empathy for the oppressed, spoke directly to many women in the sphere the age accorded them. Elisavet Moutzan-Martinengou thus makes a remarkable witness to the Greek war of independence, from the home that she, unlike her tutor, is unable to leave. It is curious, though telling, to see how the Romantic movement later came to be gendered as male, with women cast, like Drouet, in subordinate roles. To this day, busts of Romantic men dot European cities, while busts of women, mostly nude, stand for abstract nouns like liberty or for goddesses or muses; and Drouet's work to this day is filed under H for Hugo in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. But that viewpoint is clearly a fiction, in a world where men and women equally

are actors and have free will. Much work has been done to replace this patriarchal fiction with the reality of the Romantic field; may this book bring its own small contribution to that undertaking. One might indeed argue that Romanticism was essentially female in its bones, and that it is time for that truth to be rediscovered. The case can at least be made, as we have long seen it made to the contrary.

It remains true that women in the Romantic age, as today, faced constraints that men did not. Not only was their scope of action limited—Germaine de Staël as a man might have been prime minister of the France she loved, as her father was before her—but the field of literary creation was similarly barricaded against them. Thus, while career philosophers and scientists appear in this book, they are thin on the ground. One thinks of Gulliver in Lilliput, bound by a thousand threads, as one surveys this volume's impressive body of work. What, one wonders, might women have done on a playing field that was level? We can but speculate. But the achievements listed here—for every text listed is an achievement—are not promising, or relative, or partial. They are absolute. One indeed considers the gender that shapes every word here written, as science requires of us; but every work here listed stands autonomous, complete, and worthy of consideration on its own terms, like the author behind it.

And so, we return to the question of empathy, that Romantic theme. If sympathy travels downward, *de haut en bas*, empathy sees all of us as equal: "Am I not a man and a brother?" said Wedgwood's famous abolitionist medallion. Romantic creators, in their revolutionary context, felt empathy for madmen and chimney sweeps alike, for Kit Smart's cat Jeoffry or John Clare's badger, for every category of the voiceless and the oppressed.[2] Empathy recurs throughout this extensive corpus, and empathy is proper in considering it. It is not the critic's task to investigate whether a chair might make a good table; it is instead their task to recognize the chair in its own terms, as a specific chair, and determine what unique value lies in that. Perhaps the meaning of this book's title, *Women Writers in the Romantic Age*, is to be found in that perennial insight.

2 Madmen: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Torquato Tasso* (1790); also, William Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper," published in two parts in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794); Christopher Smart, "For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry." in *Jubilate Agno* (1759–1763); John Clare, "The Badger" (1835–1837).

Finally, this is, fundamentally, a women's written corpus; indeed, it is a complete corpus of all women's writing thus far identified within a field spanning seven decades and stretching from Lima to St Petersburg. It is delimited in space and time by the frontiers of the Romantic phenomenon—roughly speaking, Europe and the European diaspora between 1776 and 1848—and it shares with that Romantic phenomenon a variety of defining traits. Beyond these boundaries, we leave the field of Romantic creation, and women's writing may come to have different characteristics. But that would be the subject of another book.