

# ROMANTIC POETRY

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## THE I ALTERED

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Let us suppose they all died young: not just Keats at twenty-five, Shelley at twenty-nine, and Byron at thirty-six, but Coleridge in 1802, Wordsworth in 1807, and Southey on the day in 1813 he became poet laureate. Let us suppose too of the other candidates for fame in verse that Blake was mad, that Campbell and Hunt were journalists, Moore a songster, Rogers a bon-vivant, Scott a novelist, and the rest vicars of the church. Let us then suppose a retrospect on British Romanticism just after the death of Byron in the inimitable tones of *Blackwood's*, celebrating this "Age of Genius, only second to that of Elizabeth" and attempting to identify its particular source, "the strong influence in operating the change that has taken place in our poetic literature." It might run along these lines:

We [are] delighted with the opportunity afforded us of offering our tribute of admiration to one, who, in point of genius, is inferior to no individual on the rolls of modern celebrity—whose labours have given a tone and character to the poetic literature of our nation—whose works were the manuals of our earliest years, and were carried by us, in our school-boy days, to shady nooks, and unfrequented paths, and our most favourite solitudes—whose touching portraiture of the workings of the human soul awakened in us an enthusiasm, to the full as ardent as that which is only inspired in our present youth by the effeminizing sensuality of Moore, or the gloomy and bewildering fascinations of Lord Byron—whose deep and affecting morals, illustrated by the moving examples of her scenes, touched the heart and mind, and improved the understanding by the delightful means of an excited imagination—and whose pages we have never returned to, in our days of more matured judgment, without reviving the fading tints of admiration, and justifying our early estimate of her high intellectual superiority.<sup>1</sup>

Without the pointed pronouns, a modern reader would surely anticipate from this description a contemporary estimate of the greatness of Wordsworth. But, instead, the subject is Joanna Baillie, who, two years before Wordsworth's celebrated preface, had published her own seventy-two-page

argument for naturalness of language and situation across all the literary genres. Today, if she appears in modern literary histories, Joanna Baillie is fortunate to be able to duck into a footnote, usually derogatory. And yet, aside from the authority of its preface, her three-volume *Series of Plays: in which it is attempted to delineate the stronger passions of the mind* (1798–1812) was hailed in comparison to Shakespeare and, of all contemporary influences, exerted the most direct practical and theoretical force on serious drama written in the Romantic period. That with the exception of Shelley's *Cenci* we do not read this corpus and almost none of it is revived in the theater is apt testimony to the caprices of history with fame. The caprices of historians with history are quite another matter. Manifest distortions of the record have accrued, and these are the subject of this essay.

If we revert a generation from *Blackwood's* assessment of the contemporary scene, we might focus our perspective at a point midway between Baillie's and Wordsworth's prefaces, which is to say, before Baillie's impact on her culture had taken place. This is how Mary Robinson, a major literary voice of the 1790s, characterized its landscape:

The best novels that have been written, since those of Smollet, Richardson, and Fielding, have been produced by women: and their pages have not only been embellished with the interesting events of domestic life, portrayed with all the refinement of sentiment, but with forcible and eloquent, political, theological, and philosophical reasoning. To the genius and labours of some enlightened British women posterity will also be indebted for the purest and best translations from the French and German languages. I need not mention Mrs. Dobson, Mrs. Inchbald, Miss Plumtree, &c. &c. Of the more profound researches in the dead languages, we have many female classicists of the first celebrity: Mrs. Carter, Mrs. Thomas, (late Miss Parkhurst;), Mrs. Francis, the Hon. Mrs. Damer, &c. &c.

Of the Drama, the wreath of fame has crowned the brows of Mrs. Cowley, Mrs. Inchbald, Miss Lee, Miss Hannah More, and others of less celebrity. Of Biography, Mrs. Dobson, Mrs. Thickness, Mrs. Piozzi, Mrs. Montagu, Miss Helen Williams, have given specimens highly honourable to their talents. Poetry has unquestionably risen high in British literature from the productions of female pens; for many English women have produced such original and beautiful compositions, that the first critics and scholars of the age have wondered, while they applauded.<sup>2</sup>

Robinson's landscape is then further delineated with a list of thirty-nine exemplary women scholars, artists, and writers, many of whom the modern reader could not have identified before the publication of Janet Todd's *Dictionary*. These thirty-nine articles of faith, as it were, were universally known among the literate of the 1790s and, indeed, could be multiplied several times over. Although our concern is with poetry, the breadth of the list should remind us from the start that by the 1790s in Great Britain there were many more women than men novelists and that the theater was actually dominated by women, all the more so as Joanna Baillie's fame and

influence spread.<sup>3</sup> In the arena of poetry, which in the modern world we have privileged as no other in this age, the place of women was likewise, at least for a time, predominant, and it is here that the distortions of our received history are most glaring. Its chronology has been written wholly, and arbitrarily, along a masculine gender line.

That such distortions started early can be perceived in the midst of *Blackwood's* extolling of Joanna Baillie. For the reviewer, identified as William Harness, implicitly sets Baillie within a nationalistic Scottish milieu dominated before her entrance by James Beattie, whereas clearly the major poetic voice in England in the ten years between 1785 and 1795 was that of William Cowper. But the curious centering of Beattie, who staked his exaggerated claims on one unfinished poem, should alert us to how difficult it is for the customary history to center any poet writing in Britain in the last third of the eighteenth century. After the death of the mercurial and self-destructive Charles Churchill in 1764, there occurs (according to the standard account) a remarkable trough in English poetry, which cannot be filled in by two honored poems each from Oliver Goldsmith and Samuel Johnson, nor by the inventions of the brilliant Chatterton, an adolescent suicide, nor by those two antithetical voices of the Scottish Enlightenment, alike inventors of a spurious past, Macpherson and Beattie. And yet there was a rush to fill that trough by an entire school of poets—women poets—who came to maturity in the 1770s out of the intellectual energy of the bluestocking circle of Elizabeth Carter and Elizabeth Montagu. They were well aware of one another, sometimes conceiving themselves as rivals of one another, and found an audience that followed their careers and bought their books. That they constituted a coterie, however far-flung from its London origins, is absolutely true, with all the disadvantages we might associate with it, but with the energy, determination, and staying power to enforce a transformation in the history of British letters. Aside from intellectual encouragement, it is important to note, this coterie in its broadest manifestation furnished the economic base on which women writers depended for material support. Thus, while Goldsmith was writing his two poems and Beattie his one, a succession of women poets came to prominence: Anna Barbauld with five editions of her poems between 1773 and 1777; Hannah More with six sizable volumes of verse between 1773 and 1786; Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield, whose *Monody on the Death of Major Andre* of 1781 went through successive editions and was followed in 1784 by her influential amalgamation of genres, *Louisa, a Poetical Novel*, making her a literary force to be reckoned with until her death a quarter-century later; Charlotte Smith, whose *Elegiac Sonnets* of 1784 went through ten expanding editions in fifteen years; Helen Maria Williams, who capitalized on the fame of her first two books of poetry by publishing a collected *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1786, when she was yet twenty-four; and Mary Robinson, whose first poetic volume was published in 1775, and who the year before her death in 1800 could survey a literary landscape and see it dominated by women intellectuals.

These six poets, however ignored today or misconceived in their own time, along with Cowper impel the history of poetry in the last quarter of Britain's eighteenth century. They are, as it were, the missing link, all the more missing since, deluged with reprints as the literary academy is today, only Seward's works have shared in that effort; indeed, only two of these six, Anna Barbauld and Hannah More, found their way into Victorian editions. As literary figures, these women poets are by no means isolated; there are dozens of other women of lesser ambition or simply less prominence who emulated them and thereby swelled their ranks into a literary phenomenon without parallel in earlier history. The six had their veritable differences in temperament and ideology—Anna Seward disparaged the propriety of Charlotte Smith's sonnets, for instance, and it is unlikely that Hannah More would have acknowledged the acquaintance of Mary Robinson, though a former student at the Misses More's Bristol academy, once she became celebrated as "Perdita," Mistress of the Prince of Wales—but even so, they could not help being linked in the public mind. They, and their emulators, are the unacknowledged subtext to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), their achieved and independent excellence intimating a radical reordering of existing social institutions.

The dates of the six poets are instructive, for only one of them—Mary Robinson—died relatively young; Anna Barbauld lived until 1825, Helen Maria Williams until 1827, and Hannah More until 1833. And they were followed by a second generation of women poets who likewise confound our normative assumptions about the chronology of Romanticism. These are the dates of a handful of the most prominent: Joanna Baillie (1762–1851); Mary Betham (1776–1852); Margaret Hodson (1778–1852)—truly of a second generation, she dedicated her historical epic, *Margaret of Anjou*, in 1816 to her mother Margaret Holford, whose *Gresford Vale* was published in 1798; Mary Russell Mitford (1787–1855); Amelia Opie (1769–1853); Sydney Owenson, afterward Lady Morgan (1783–1859); Caroline Bowles Southey (1786–1854); Jane West (1758–1852). These are not only long-lived women, but for the most part they published far into the Victorian period and it would appear more productively and influentially than any male Romantic contemporary, with the exception of Leigh Hunt. Here, too, were it to be pursued, is a second missing link, only less important than the first because the terms were by this point so firmly set and the energy was so self-fulfilling. Still, in the writings of the two most famous women poets of this generation, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, who died respectively in 1835 and 1838, we can discern what is otherwise almost strikingly absent in the male Romantic universe, an actual transition into the characteristic preoccupations of Victorian verse. Since, moreover, Hemans and Landon were the first women to earn a sizable income from writing only poetry, being accorded recognition in the public mind as professional poets, their success, whatever value we place on it today, testifies to a major transformation in the world of British letters. In fifty

years women had come from the margins of that world to an assured, professional place at its center.

Hemans and Landon, to be sure, paid a price for their celebrity, at once fulfilling and defining a literary niche that, however important historically, may explain, if not exactly justify, their later neglect. For the bourgeois public of the 1820s and 1830s their names were synonymous with the notion of a poetess, celebrating hearth and home, God and country in mellifluous verse that relished the sentimental and seldom teased anyone into thought. There are other and darker strains in their voluminous production—a focus on exile and failure, a celebration of female genius frustrated, a haunting omnipresence of death—that seem to subvert the role they claimed and invite a sophisticated reconsideration of their work against the complex background of the transition between Romantic and Victorian poetic modes. But such an analysis must itself depend on our understanding of their principal inheritance, which is not that of the British Romanticism that died young but rather of a half-century of women writers who determinedly invaded a male fiefdom and reconceived its polity. On the surface the interests of these poets seem little different from the dominant poetic genres and modes of thought we associate with their time. They wrote satires as well as sonnets, tragedies along with *vers de société*; a few even wrote epics.<sup>4</sup> But to look with attention and historical discrimination is to realize that some of the genres we associate most closely with British Romanticism, notably the revival of the sonnet and the creation of the metrical tale, were themselves strongly impelled by women poets; that some of the distinctive preoccupations of women poets eventually color the landscape we think of as Romantic; and that others are so decidedly different as to suggest a terra incognita beneath our very feet.

## I

We are so accustomed to referring to English Romantic poetry as a poetry of vision that we have numbed ourselves to the paradox that what the word signifies is exactly the opposite of what we mean by it. We mean that it is visionary, borne on what Keats called "the viewless wings of poesy" and obsessed, like Keats's major odes, with imaginative projection as an end in itself. The actual vision might be said to be the province—until late in the careers of Byron and Shelley, even the exclusive province—of women poets, whose fine eyes are occupied continually in discriminating minute objects or assembling a world out of its disjointed particulars. The titles of three of Anna Barbauld's poems, written over a span of forty-five years, are indicative: "Verses Written in an Alcove," "An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley's Study," "The First Fire, October 1st, 1815." If a woman's place is in the home, or in the schoolroom as in Anna Barbauld's case, or in the garden, then the particulars of those confined quarters are made the

impetus for verse. Thus a characteristic subgenre of women's poetry in this period is verse concerned with flowers, and not generally of the Wordsworthian species. Merely to distinguish texture, or scent, or a bouquet of colors may seem a sufficient end in itself, enforcing a discipline of particularity and discrimination that is a test of powers. One senses exactly such a purpose behind Mary Russell Mitford's debut with a collection of her adolescent *Poems* in 1810, which is virtually a sampler of floral embroidery, the apprentice work of a literary seamstress. Yet, this category of seemingly occasional verse, from whose practice men are all but excluded, has the capacity to encode values, not just of culture but also of perspective, as in a different medium Georgia O'Keeffe's magnifications have proved to our century. The world of Charlotte Smith's "Flora" is fantastic, even surreal; and it is small wonder that so many poems for the nursery or children in this period, verses like Mrs. Montolieu's *The Enchanted Plants* (1800) or Alice LeFanu's *The Flowers; or the Sylphid Queen* (1809), invest the garden with imaginative propensities. It is not, however, merely a "rosy sanctuary," like that of Keats in his "Ode to Psyche," built as a retreat "In some untrodden region of [his] mind," which in general parlance might be considered the quintessential garden of English Romanticism; rather, it exists for its own sake, for its capacity to refine the vision of the actual. Its significance is quotidian.

Flowers

Keats

Quotidian values, although present and celebrated in the verse of the Enlightenment and Victorian periods, have been largely submerged from our comprehension of Romanticism, with its continual urge for visionary flight, for an investment in symbols. Even the fragmentary, as in "Kubla Khan," has served to implicate planes of reality beyond the power of words to image. Yet obviously the fragmentary can have more mundane and perhaps less self-congratulatory functions: to suggest a decentered mind or a society compounded of incongruities, for instance, or, for opposing ends, to document the sheer energy of life or its resolute thingness. Such are the ends one discerns from the experiments of Mary Robinson in poetic montage, which at once recall earlier satiric catalogs like Swift's "Description of a City Shower" and assimilate new and startling cultural elements to the mix. Although we can discriminate particular elements and even recurring patterns, the poems resist reduction to thematic uses. They artfully refuse to reconcile their discords, whether of class, occupation, or mores. The opening of the eleven-stanza "January 1795" may be taken as an instance:

Observations in sum after detail

Pavement slipp'ry, people sneezing,  
 Lords in ermine, beggars freezing;  
 Titled gluttons dainties carving,  
 Genius in a garret starving.

Lofty mansions, warm and spacious;  
 Courtiers cringing and voracious;  
 Misers scarce the wretched heeding;  
 Gallant soldiers fighting, bleeding.

Wives who laugh at passive spouses;  
 Theatres and meeting-houses;  
 Balls, where simp'ring misses languish;  
 Hospitals, and groans of anguish.

We are barely conscious here that the backdrop to these clashing juxtapositions is the war with France, so carefully does Robinson go out of her way to separate her references. Not until the final two stanzas does she return to the arena of bleeding soldiers and anguished groans:

Gallant souls with empty purses;  
 Gen'ral's only fit for nurses;  
 School-boys, smit with martial spirit,  
 Taking place of vet'ran merit.

Honest men who can't get places,  
 Knaves who shew unblushing faces;  
 Ruin hasten'd, peace retarded;  
 Candour spurn'd, and art rewarded.<sup>5</sup>

Peace would be "retarded" for another two decades, with enormous cultural consequences, while these incongruities played out their attrition on a world stage to the point of exhaustion. But that is deliberately not the theater of Robinson's poem; rather, it is merely one aspect of the universal pursuit of mundane and amoral self-aggrandizement.

What had already become the longest war of modern history is also the backdrop to Robinson's even more remarkable "Winkfield Plain; or, a Description of a Camp in the Year 1800," an evocation of sheer energy continually reverting to its sexual base.<sup>6</sup>

Tents, *marquees*, and baggage-waggons;  
 Suttling-houses, beer in flagons;  
 Drums and trumpets, singing, firing;  
 Girls seducing, beaux admiring;  
 Country lasses gay and smiling,  
 City lads their hearts beguiling;  
 Dusty roads, and horses frisky,  
 Many an *Eton boy* in whisky;  
 Tax'd carts full of farmers' daughters;  
 Brutes condemn'd, and man who slaughters!  
 Public-houses, booths, and castles,  
*Belles* of fashion, serving vassals;  
 Lordly gen'ral's fiercely staring,  
 Weary soldiers, sighing, swearing!  
*Petit-maitres* always dressing,  
 In the glass themselves caressing;  
 Perfum'd, painted, patch'd, and blooming  
 Ladies—manly airs assuming!  
 Dowagers of fifty, simp'ring,  
 Misses for their lovers whimp'ring;

Husbands drill'd to household tameness;  
 Dames heart sick of wedded sameness.  
 Princes setting girls a-madding,  
 Wives for ever fond of gadding;  
 Princesses with lovely faces,  
 Beauteous children of the Graces!  
 Britain's pride and virtue's treasure,  
 Fair and gracious beyond measure!  
*Aids-de-camps* and youthful pages,  
 Prudes and vestals of all ages!  
 Old coquets and matrons surly,  
 Sounds of distant hurly-burly!  
 Mingled voices, uncouth singing,  
 Carts full laden, forage bringing;  
 Sociables and horses weary,  
 Houses warm, and dresses airy;  
 Loads of fatten'd poultry; pleasure  
 Serv'd (to nobles) without measure;  
 Doxies, who the waggons follow;  
 Beer, for thirsty hinds to swallow;  
 Washerwomen, fruit-girls cheerful,  
 Ancient ladies—*chaste* and *fearful*!!  
 Tradesmen leaving shops, and seeming  
 More of *war* than profit dreaming;  
 Martial sounds and braying asses,  
 Noise, that ev'ry noise surpasses!  
 All confusion, din, and riot,  
 Nothing clean—and nothing quiet.

"Winkfield Plain" is a tour-de-force in more ways than one, for no man could have written this poem so conscious of the place of women within the economy of war and no woman in English society but an inhabitant of the demi-monde like Robinson, would have dared to. As realistic genre-painting it is years ahead of its time: its vision of the actual is penetrating. It may be true that little of Mary Robinson's copious oeuvre falls into the genre of realistic montage; but a quick comparison with the major realist among the male poets of the 1790s, Robert Southey, would suggest what literary victories are implicit in her refusal to categorize by class or politics or morality. The quotidian is absolute.

Morality is, on the other hand, the true subject of the brilliant *Essays in Rhyme on Morals and Manners* that Jane Taylor published in 1806. But the moral vantage point is only attained through the accumulation of minute detail, each piece precisely calibrated to ground morality in quotidian life. Taylor, who is the only woman poet in England during the Romantic period to have been honored with a twentieth-century selection, immediately reminds us, with her fine irony, of Jane Austen; but there are obvious differences in perspective. A devout Methodist, she is the analyst of its bourgeois underpinnings, and, like many Dissenting women, she is

not to be dismayed by squalor. Above all, she understands what it is to work—or, in the case of the mayor and mayoress in "Prejudice" to *have* worked until the spirit is a mere extension of materiality:<sup>7</sup>

In yonder red-brick mansion, tight and square,  
 Just at the town's commencement, lives the mayor.  
 Some yards of shining gravel, fenc'd with box,  
 Lead to the painted portal—where one knocks:  
 There, in the left-hand parlour, all in state,  
 Sit he and she, on either side the grate.  
 But though their goods and chattels, sound and new,  
 Bespeak the owners *very well to do*,  
 His worship's wig and morning suit betray  
 Slight indications of an humbler day.

That long, low shop, where still the name appears,  
 Some doors below, they kept for forty years:  
 And there, with various fortunes, smooth and rough,  
 They sold tobacco, coffee, tea, and snuff.  
 There labell'd drawers display their spicy row,—  
 Clove, mace, and nutmeg: from the ceiling low  
 Dangle long *twelves* and *eights*, and slender rush,  
 Mix'd with the varied forms of *genus brush*;  
 Cask, firkin, bag, and barrel, crowd the floor,  
 And piles of country cheeses guard the door.  
 The frugal dames came in from far and near,  
 To buy their ounces and their quarterns here.  
 Hard was the toil, the profits slow to count,  
 And yet the mole-hill was at last a mount;

Those petty gains were hoarded day by day,  
 With little cost, for not a child had they;  
 Till, long proceeding on the saving plan,  
 He found himself a *warm, fore-handed man*:  
 And being now arrived at life's decline,  
 Both he and she, they formed the bold design.  
 (Although it touch'd their prudence to the quick)  
 To turn their savings into stone and brick.  
 How many an ounce of tea and ounce of snuff,  
 There must have been consumed to make enough!

At length, with paint and paper, bright and gay,  
 The box was finish'd, and they went away.  
 But when their faces were no longer seen  
 Amongst the canisters of *black* and *green*,  
 —Those well known faces, all the country round—  
 'Twas said that had they levell'd to the ground  
 The two old walnut trees before the door,  
 The customers would not have missed *them* more.  
 Now, like a pair of parrots in a cage,  
 They live, and civic honours crown their age:

Thrice, since the Whitsuntide they settled there,  
Seven years ago, has he been chosen mayor;  
And now you'd scarcely know they were the same;  
Conscious he struts, of power, and wealth, and fame,  
Proud in official dignity, the dame:  
And extra stateliness of dress and mien,  
During the mayoralty, is plainly seen;  
With nicer care bestow'd to puff and pin  
The august lappet that contains her chin.

Such is her life; and like the wise and great,  
The mind has journey'd hand in hand with fate  
Her thoughts, unused to take a longer flight  
Than from the left-hand counter to the right,  
With little change, are vacillating still,  
Between his worship's glory and the till.  
The few ideas moving, slow and dull,  
Across the sandy desert of her skull,  
Still the same course must follow, to and fro,  
As first they travers'd three-score years ago;  
From whence, not all the world could turn them back,  
Or lead them out upon another track.  
What once was right or wrong, or high or low  
In her opinion, always must be so:—  
You might, perhaps, with reasons new and pat,  
Have made *Columbus* think the world was flat;  
There might be times of energy worn out,  
When his own theory would *Sir Isaac* doubt;  
But not the powers of argument combin'd,  
Could make this dear good woman change her mind,  
Or give her intellect the slightest clue  
To that vast world of things she never knew.  
Were but her brain dissected, it would show  
Her stiff opinions fastened in a row,  
Rang'd duly, side by side, without a gap,  
Much like the plaiting on her Sunday cap.

Taylor's capacity to reveal the inner life as a thing is, it could be asserted, unrivaled in English literature before Dickens; and she possesses what for the ends of comedy he often sacrificed, a quiet compassion for its cost. That we feel for those who cannot is the impetus for the moral bond Taylor would establish with her reader. Taylor's moralizing is deeply embedded in the Dissenting aesthetic that we have wished away from the Romantic period, but that is nonetheless present as a crucial link between Enlightenment moral satire and Victorian concerns with social- and self-improvement.<sup>8</sup> To ignore it is in effect to marginalize both the burgeoning role of women as social teachers in early nineteenth-century culture and the literary interests of the increasingly educated lower classes.

If the quotidian has its view, it also has its sound. The timbre that can be discerned in these poems by Robinson and Taylor is that of the vernacular,

what we are accustomed to call, following Wordsworth, "the real language of men." It was even more so, with fine irony, the language of women—not to say also, of Dissenting culture and of the lower classes. Not only is a vernacular not confined to men, but it is at least arguable that women poets, with their relative freedom from establishment conventions and their investment in the quotidian, are those who explored most deliberately the extent to which its language could be incorporated in poetry. If it could describe, if it could moralize, it could also incite. Perhaps the bridge that spans the long distance from the pastoral drama and tragedy with which Hannah More began her career to the evangelical agitation for which she is now known is simply a woman's voice and a woman's professional experience. From the theater she had learned how to know her audience and how to command its attention, as is exemplified in this stanza from a piece called "The Bad Bargain":

But the great gift, the mighty bribe,  
Which Satan pours amid the tribe,  
Which millions seize with eager haste,  
And all desire at least to taste,  
Is—plodding reader! what d'ye think?  
Alas!—'tis money—money—chink!<sup>19</sup>

The importance of More for the future directions of British fiction has recently been admirably charted by Mitzi Myers.<sup>10</sup> But the ease of such verse, its dramatic involvement of the reader, and the introduction of everyday slang had equal consequences for poetry, the poetry of the leveling Romanticism first enunciated by Joanna Baillie.

## II

+ sentimental?

If women tended to see differently from men, it was axiomatic in the eighteenth century that they felt differently too. A singular phenomenon, suddenly appearing in mid-century and not only coinciding with the rise of women poets but also its very hallmark, was the cult of sensibility which, despite Rousseau's impact on this culture, was largely a female creation. It was unquestionably a central concern in writing by women, whether in the ubiquitous romances or in poetry. The relative fame accorded Henry Mackenzie's novella of 1771, *The Man of Feeling*, should not blind us to the crucial fact foregrounded in his title: that men, too, can feel. The obvious literary struggle on the part of women authors was to convince those men that women, too, can think; but precisely because of the powerful shibboleth against the learned woman, an ideological control of remarkable intensity, sensibility was all the more to be cultivated, even celebrated. Hannah More's tribute to the bluestockings of 1782 entitled "Sensibility: An Epistle to the Honourable Mrs. Boscawen" centers its world of learned exchange within an ambience of refined fellow-feeling, suggesting that this is the natural

atmosphere in which intellectual development is fostered and shaped. What had been widely considered the defect of a female mind is there shrewdly reclaimed as its distinguishing virtue.

In the culture of sensibility it was relatively easy for women to assert their superiority by the very act of writing. A decade before More's celebration of a collective endeavor, Anna Barbauld had illustrated the process in "The Mouse's Petition, Found in the TRAP where he had been confin'd all Night [by Dr. Priestley]," a poem whose considerable charm masks a studied self-reflexiveness.<sup>11</sup>

O HEAR a pensive prisoner's prayer,  
For liberty that sighs;  
And never let thine heart be shut  
Against the wretch's cries!

For here forlorn and sad I sit,  
Within the wiry grate;  
And tremble at the' approaching morn,  
Which brings impending fate.

If e'er thy breast with freedom glowed,  
And spurned a tyrant's chain,  
Let not thy strong oppressive force  
A free-born mouse detain!

O do not stain with guiltless blood  
Thy hospitable hearth!  
Nor triumph that thy wiles betrayed  
A prize so little worth.

The scattered gleanings of a feast  
My frugal meals supply;  
But if thine unrelenting heart  
That slender boon deny,—

The cheerful light, the vital air,  
Are blessings widely given;  
Let Nature's commoners enjoy  
The common gifts of Heaven.

The well-taught philosophic mind  
To all compassion gives;  
Casts round the world an equal eye,  
and feels for all that lives.

If mind,—as ancient sages taught,—  
A never dying flame,  
Still shifts through matter's varying forms,  
In every form the same;

Beware, lest in the worm you crush,  
A brother's soul you find;

And tremble lest thy luckless hand  
Dislodge a kindred mind.

Or, if this transient gleam of day  
Be *all* of life we share,  
Let pity plead within thy breast  
That little *all* to spare.

So may thy hospitable board  
With health and peace be crowned  
And every charm of heartfelt ease  
Beneath thy roof be found.

So when destruction lurks unseen,  
Which men, like mice, may share  
May some kind angel clear thy path  
And break the hidden snare.

Like all fables, "The Mouse's Petition" has its interior shades of meaning. Even if addressed with youthful affection to an admired family associate, the poem is a direct assertion of the claims of feminine sensibility against male rationality. Making a virtue out of the necessities of feminine existence, its winning style enacts the claim of its underlying metaphor, a release from prison. And in this "The Mouse's Petition" is of a piece with the collection in which Barbauld first published it in 1773, an act of liberation through, not from, femininity. In the clarity and delicacy of its style, it challenges the male universe exemplified by Priestley's scientific experiments. If it is not itself weighty, it embodies as it reflects the tensile strength of a cultural movement gathering momentum.

The poetry of sensibility is at base a literature of psychological exploration, and it is the foundation on which Romanticism was reared. From within the bluestocking circle itself arose a lively debate between the claims of sensibility and those of stoicism, the latter being centered in Elizabeth Carter's 1758 translation of Epictetus and Mrs. Greville's "Ode to Indifference." The debate broadened in the poetry of the later eighteenth century into an entire subgenre written by women, who represented the contrary currents either within the same poem (as in Helen Maria Williams) or in companion pieces in which "To Sensibility" would be countered with the title "To Apathy" (as in Mary Robinson) or "To Indifference" (as in Hannah Cowley and Ann Yearsley). The existence of such a feminized "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" is much more than simply a curiosity. It is the mark of the formation of an independent and shared woman's poetic, and the paradox of its analytical exposition of fine feeling should suggest as well its suitability as a locus for an encoded treatment of the female condition. Ann Yearsley, known as the Milkwoman of Clifton, near Bristol, and a protégé of Elizabeth Montagu and Hannah More, is a case in point. She is not, by and large, a poet of lasting claims, being an example of the proletarian genius that the late Enlightenment, with its humanitarian princi-

ples, promoted. But precisely because of those credentials her rendering of the complex reveals the values that underlie these conventions, what they encode. The poem she chooses to introduce her *Poems on Various Subjects* of 1787, the expanded fourth edition of the *Poems on Several Occasions* published a few years earlier, is "Addressed to Sensibility." It ends with this passage:

... ye who boast  
Of bliss I n'er must reach, ye, who can fix  
A rule for sentiment, if rules there are,  
(For much I doubt, my friends, if rule e'er held  
Capacious sentiment) ye sure can point  
My mind to joys that never touch'd the heart.  
What is this joy? Where does its essence rest?  
Ah! self-confounding sophists, will ye dare  
Pronounce *that* joy which never touch'd the heart?  
Does Education give the transport keen,  
Or swell your vaunted grief? No, Nature feels  
Most poignant, undefended; hails with me  
The Pow'rs of Sensibility untaught.<sup>12</sup>

1787  
\* Crude as this blank verse is, it embodies a defense of the right of women, with no capacity for education beyond that offered by boarding school or indulgent parents, to literary status, and, beyond that, a claim for an underlying affinity with maternal nature and through it to those elements that are essentially, fundamentally human. In other words, once again to recall Wordsworth's phrase, and here with an exact propriety, it is women who truly do speak "the real language of men."<sup>13</sup>

Yet even as such an analytical mode as verses to one's own sensibility may implicate serious social concerns, its primary impulse was introspective, and the far-reaching consequence was to create the first sustained literary exercise in women's self-reflexiveness. And in turn, that mode slowly permeated the whole of English Romanticism. Likewise, we can trace into the mainstream of Romanticism the dialectical counterpoint between emotional extremes that is the subject and substance of the poems on female sensibility. Yet also the very extremity of this self-reflexive dialectic continually verges on a feminine version of Romantic irony. In the orchestrated emotional abandon of Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence, *Sappho and Phaon*, lies a fictionalized embrace of psychological self-destruction that is virtually a *Liebestod*. Again, the comparative lack of sophistication of the Milkwoman of Clifton, Ann Yearsley, allows her complementary ode "To Indifference" to reveal the darker fears that are at work across a broad spectrum of women poets:

... INDIFFERENCE come! thy torpid juices shed  
On my keen sense: plunge deep my wounded heart,  
In thickest apathy, till it congeal,  
Or mix with thee incorp'rate. Come, thou foe

To sharp sensation, in thy cold embrace  
A death-like slumber shall a respite give  
To my long restless soul, tost on extreme,  
From bliss to pointed woe. . . .

Then leave me, Sensibility! begone,  
Thou chequer'd angel! Seek the soul refin'd:  
I hate thee! and thy long progressive brood  
Of joys and mis'ries. Soft Indiff'rence, come!  
In this low cottage thou shalt be my guest,  
Till Death shuts out the hour: here down I'll sink  
With thee upon my couch of homely rush,  
Which fading forms of Friendship, Love, or Hope  
Must ne'er approach. Ah!—quickly hide, thou pow'r,  
Those dear intruding images! Oh, seal  
The lids of mental sight, lest I adjure  
My freezing supplication.—All is still.  
IDEA, smother'd, leave my mind a waste,  
Where SENSIBILITY must lose her prey.<sup>14</sup>

Behind Yearsley's histrionic posturing is an innocence that is culturally revelatory, which by no means is merely to suggest, even as it reminds us of future avatars of sensibility, that a Shelley curling up like a child by the Mediterranean or Keats "half in love with easeful death" will make great art from the pains of too acute a sensibility. For this is pointedly a woman's voice, a prey to victimization, resonant with psychological entropy, in retreat to mindless domesticity—"leave my mind a waste"—and its timbres are echoed by every prominent woman poet of this period. Among the women poets of the 1780s and 1790s, this is the particular tonality of Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith and the reason why they are perhaps the crucial poets of these decades. → melancholy, isolation

(Charlotte Smith) made a virtual career out of self-pity. She rises from it in her novels, but it is the obsession of her poetry and, to judge by her letters, of her life. But, in sober fact, she had ample justification. In 1783 she joined her wastrel husband, to whom she had been forcibly married in mid-adolescence, in debtors' prison, surrounded with a veritable brood of their children. In effect, from that point on they were her sole responsibility, and her recourse was to write—and write. The first edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784 brought her sudden fame and opportunity, but for her the profession of letters was not an indulgence in feminine liberation nor in middle-class mobility; it was an absolute necessity. By 1787 she had separated from Benjamin Smith with responsibility for nine children but no legal freedom. Instead, her husband could comfortably pursue his ways with the insurance of a new and more secure source of income to relieve his chronically dire straits, that guaranteed by his wife's publishing contracts. There was no escaping him, nor was there any legal means, though Smith pursued them all, of independently attaching money left from his father to set up trusts for her children. So it went until her last year, when during her own decline, in a cruel irony, she received news of her husband's death.



Although Smith is virtually an archetype of the female condition of the late eighteenth century, and in her wide influence a promulgator of its values, her situation in the abstract is replicated by the history of Mary Robinson. Left fatherless in adolescence, she was married off by an Austenesque mother to a man who spent on women what he did not lose in gambling or in the assumption of loans at exorbitant rates of interest, a style of living that also lodged her, with their infant daughter, in debtors' prison. Her way out by economic necessity was through the stage, where she became a star before she was twenty. Attracting the attention of the young Prince of Wales, she resisted but at last stepped into the demi monde of his promises, which within a year dissolved in scandal. Left to herself, unable to return to the stage, Robinson contracted rheumatic fever at the age of twenty-three and was thereafter invalided for the rest of her life. A small annuity was finally procured from the prince, and she found a rather more stable, if not always steady, lover, with whom she traversed European spas in a futile search for a cure. There at least she could exist in society, from which she was almost rigidly excluded in England. But with the declaration of war in 1792 she was forced to return to London, where for the next eight years she wrote for a living. Hers was an unsatisfying, lonely existence, especially after she was again jilted in 1796, and it is reflected constantly in her poetry. If one adds her voice to Charlotte Smith's, the result is something beyond merely somber tones. It is veritably existential.

The constant theme of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* is of rootless exile. Permanence is situated in the external phenomena of nature; even the most impermanent objects—the moon, storm clouds, the ocean, a shipwrecked denizen of a desert island—have an integrity that recoils on the speaker's sense of emptiness. The grotesque forty-fourth sonnet, "Written in the Churchyard at Middleton in Sussex," is astonishing in its trope, the interior life being first compared with a seaside cemetery washed away by a tidal wave—"their bones whiten in the frequent wave . . . With shells and sea-weed mingled"—and then contrasted; for the living woman cannot attain the entropic nonmeaning of dissolution she desires: "I am doom'd—by life's long storm oppress, / To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest."<sup>15</sup> But if extreme, the sonnet is of a piece with the collection that surrounds it, the whole portraying a disembodied sensibility at the mercy of an alien universe and without discernible exit from its condition. The entire sonnet revival of the Romantic period was impelled into existence by this vision, and, even where (as with Wordsworth) the tonalities are reversed, the underlying dynamic of an isolated sensibility informs all the sonnets written in Smith's wake.

Her most finished poem, beyond the collection of *Elegiac Sonnets*, is *The Emigrants* of 1793. Its dedication to William Cowper is forthright in acknowledging his desultory meditation of *The Task* as her model. But his is ultimately a poem of ringing optimism—at least it aspires to that end—whereas the underlying metaphorical strategy of *The Emigrants* is to connect Charlotte Smith as center of perception to the exiles from France's Terror,

wandering the Kent shore cut off by but a dozen miles from their homeland, which is as present and as inexplicable to them as the suddenness of their reduction from opulence to penury. Their compounded loss of language, country, and means threatens their very sense of cultural and personal identity, and as the poem increasingly focuses on them as emblems of alienated humanity, the greater becomes their correspondence to the solitary figure observing them. In an uncanny way Charlotte Smith creates her own identity in the poem by absorbing their emptiness. In the process the details of her own vicissitudes are inflated to mythic status, and the intrusion of her legal frustrations as an embryonic version of the nightmare Dickens was to depict in Chancery seems justified by the abuses of state power from which these exiles have fled. The opening of book 2 is representative of the overall design of *The Emigrants*.<sup>16</sup>

Long wintry months are past; the Moon that now  
 Lights her pale crescent even at noon, has made  
 Four times her revolution; since with step,  
 Mournful and slow, along the wave-worn cliff,  
 Pensive I took my solitary way,  
 Lost in despondence, while contemplating  
 Not my own wayward destiny alone,  
 (Hard as it is, and difficult to bear!)  
 But in beholding the unhappy lot  
 Of the lorn Exiles; who, amid the storms  
 Of wild disastrous Anarchy, are thrown,  
 Like shipwreck'd sufferers, on England's coast,  
 To see, perhaps, no more their native land,  
 Where Desolation riots: They, like me,  
 From fairer hopes and happier prospects driven,  
 Shrink from the future, and regret the past.  
 But on this Upland scene, while April comes,  
 With fragrant airs, to fan my throbbing breast,  
 Fain would I snatch an interval from Care,  
 That weighs my wearied spirit down to earth;  
 Courting, once more, the influence of Hope  
 (For "Hope" still waits upon the flowery prime)  
 As here I mark Spring's humid hand unfold  
 The early leaves that fear capricious winds,  
 While, even on shelter'd banks, the timid flowers  
 Give, half reluctantly, their warmer hues  
 To mingle with the primroses' pale stars.  
 No shade the leafless copses yet afford,  
 Nor hide the mossy labours of the Thrush,  
 That, startled, darts across the narrow path;  
 But quickly re-assur'd, resumes his task,  
 Or adds his louder notes to those that rise  
 From yonder tufted brake; where the white buds  
 Of the first thorn are mingled with the leaves  
 Of that which blossoms on the brow of May.

journey of  
 self thru  
 melancholy +  
 isolation

Bind

interior world

Smith gambles daringly in *The Emigrants*, and perhaps she does not wholly succeed, for the stakes are too large for the table on which she plays. But by the end of the poem we have before us a wholly recast model. Cowper is willing to allow the world to flow through his centering consciousness, but he is characteristically self-effacing rather than absorbent. In "The Emigrants," most fully of Charlotte Smith's poems, one understands the deep impulse behind Wordsworth's generous praise of her in 1833 as "a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered." In his tribute he singled out her "true feeling for rural nature," which is accurate enough, but perhaps the least of what he could have learned from her.<sup>17</sup> The year *The Emigrants* was published, 1793, was also the year of the twenty-three-year-old Wordsworth's debut with *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*, poems manifestly in search of a style and subject matter. A cursory glance at the above passage will suggest how charged is Charlotte Smith's poem with features that in a few years were to become identifiably Wordsworth's: in style, the long, sinuous verse paragraphs, the weighted monosyllables, the quick evocation of natural detail; in matter, the absorbing and self-mythicizing voice and the creatures of its contemplation—the aged, the idiots, the female vagrants, the exiled and alienated.

These are figures with which we have been long familiar, in Coleridge's, as well as Wordsworth's, contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, perhaps less so in Southey's *Botany-Bay* and *English Eclogues*, which are cut from the same bolt. In Southey's hands, in particular, they are instruments of a leveling political program. But their ubiquity, and their continuation, transcend the limited environment in which we now locate them, for they are the legitimate offspring of this first generation of self-reflecting women poets. In the year of her death, 1800, Mary Robinson published her last and best volume of verse, with the firm of Longman's, bearing an advertising sheet that featured their second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and poems by Southey and Cottle. But to read the titles of her *Lyrical Tales*, as well as poems not published there, is to recognize more than her affinity with Wordsworth and Coleridge. "The Alien Boy," "All Alone," "The Deserted Cottage," "The Exile," "The Fugitive," "The Maniac," "The Savage of Aveyron"—these are the displacements of feminine consciousness, the victims of sensibility, mice in the trap. And though we can locate their genesis in the later years of the eighteenth century, they are still discernibly the characteristics of women's poetry throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century. As an instance we might take Margaret Hodgson's large historical poems in the meter and after the manner of Scott. The first, *Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk* (1809), after building up our sympathy for the Scottish patriots, records their utter annihilation, capping the grisly record by the betrayal and capture of Wallace: his death is left to the last footnote. That Hodgson's is not simply an unintentional misfocusing is clear from her even longer Epic romance of seven years later, *Margaret of Anjou*, which concludes with the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471. All our sympathy is placed on the

legitimate pretender to the English throne, Prince Edward, and even his imperious and unlikeable mother, the title figure, is elevated to heroic stature; then he and his forces are slaughtered and her great heart breaks. As late as Felicia Hemans's *The Forest Sanctuary* of 1825, the poem she is said to have thought her best (and certainly its Spenserian stanzas are of a high finish), we witness a retreat into the savage interior of South America by a father and son—a displacement as evident as it is endemic in poetry by women—escaping the manifold persecutions of European civilization. At the end they are alienated and alone, with such integrity as still carries meaning. Even as both Hemans and Landon moved away from such hard-minded realism into the realms of piety and sentimentality, their heroines still regularly perished. Contrary to what one might conventionally expect, in poetry at least, the unhappy ending is the norm of women writers of the Romantic period.

→ everyday/commemplace

III

⊗ push of article

The two features of women's poetry we have been examining, an investment in quotidian tones and details and a portrayal of alienated sensibility, are not as isolated as this analysis would make them appear. Often they are present in tandem, with an effect that presages much later poetry and casts an oblique light on our customary expectations of the literature of British Romanticism—as will be evident if we return to the oeuvre of Jane Taylor. What follows is the second part of a poem blankly titled "A Pair," in which she simply contrasts the empty life of a rich youth with the world of the urban proletariat. In both cases the moral meaning is wholly invested in quotidian detail; and the lacuna between the startling contrasts is, as with Robinson, left to the reader to fill, if any reader has the capacity, or mental temerity, to bridge such cultural polarities. The London of this poem is closer to Dickens, not born for another six years, than to Blake; and, though it is beyond proof, it is nonetheless the case that the young Dickens was far more likely to know Taylor, well-recognized in her time, than Blake. So, for that matter, was the later poet whose tones are most reminiscent of Taylor's excruciatingly compassionate calm, Thomas Hardy.<sup>18</sup>

Down a close street, whose darksome shops display  
 Old clothes and iron on both sides the way;  
 Loathsome and wretched, whence the eye in pain,  
 Averted turns, nor seeks to view again;  
 Where lowest dregs of human nature dwell,  
 More loathsome than the rags and rust they sell;—  
 A pale mechanic rents an attic floor,  
 By many a shatter'd stair you gain the door:  
 'Tis one poor room, whose blacken'd walls are hung  
 With dust that settled there when he was young.  
 The rusty grate two massy bricks displays,

To fill the sides and make a frugal blaze.  
 The door unhing'd, the window patch'd and broke,  
 The panes obscur'd by half a century's smoke:  
 There stands the bench at which his life is spent,  
 Worn, groov'd, and bor'd, and worm-devour'd, and bent,  
 Where daily, undisturb'd by foes or friends,  
 In one unvaried attitude he bends.  
 His tools, long practis'd, seem to understand  
 Scarce less their functions, than his own right hand.  
 With these he drives his craft with patient skill;  
 Year after year would find him at it still:  
 The noisy world around is changing all,  
 War follows peace, and kingdoms rise and fall;  
 France rages now, and Spain, and now the Turk;  
 Now victory sounds;—but there he sits at work!  
 A man might see him so, then bid adieu,—  
 Make a long voyage to China or Peru;  
 There traffic, settle, build; at length might come,  
 Alter'd, and old, and weather-beaten home,  
 And find him on the same square foot of floor  
 On which he left him twenty years before.  
 —The self same bench, and attitude, and stool,  
 The same quick movement of his cunning tool;  
 The very distance 'twixt his knees and chin,  
 As though he had but stepp'd just out and in.

Such is his fate—and yet you might descry  
 A latent spark of meaning in his eye.  
 —That crowded shelf, beside his bench, contains  
 One old, worn, volume that employs his brains:  
 With algebraic lore its page is spread,  
 Where *a* and *b* contend with *x* and *z*:  
 Sold by some *student* from an Oxford hall,  
 —Bought by the pound upon a broker's stall.  
 On this it is his sole delight to pore,  
 Early and late, when working time is o'er:  
 But oft he stops, bewilder'd and perplex'd,  
 At some hard problem in the learned text;  
 Pressing his hand upon his puzzled brain,  
 At what the dullest school-boy could explain.

From needful sleep the precious hour he saves,  
 To give his thirsty mind the stream it craves:  
 There, with his slender rush beside him plac'd,  
 He drinks the knowledge in with greedy haste.  
 At early morning, when the frosty air  
 Brightens Orion and the northern Bear,  
 His distant window mid the dusky row,  
 Holds a dim light to passenger below.  
 —A light more dim is flashing on his mind,  
 That shows its darkness, and its views confin'd.

Had science shone around his early days,  
 How had his soul expanded in the blaze!  
 But penury bound him, and his mind in vain  
 Struggles and writhes beneath her iron chain.

—At length the taper fades, and distant cry  
 Of early sweep bespeaks the morning nigh;  
 Slowly it breaks,—and that rejoicing ray  
 That wakes the healthful country into day,  
 Tips the green hills, slants o'er the level plain,  
 Reddens the pool, and stream, and cottage pane,  
 And field, and garden, park, and stately hall,—  
 Now darts obliquely on his wretched wall.  
 He knows the wonted signal; shuts his book,  
 Slowly consigns it to its dusty nook;  
 Looks out awhile, with fixt and absent stare,  
 On crowded roofs, seen through the foggy air;  
 Stirs up the embers, takes his sickly draught,  
 Sighs at his fortunes, and resumes his craft.

There is a further aspect to Taylor's poem, which suggests how a concern for absolute detail links dialectically with sensibility, even with the sublime of sensibility, in which all detail is swallowed in a gulf of longing. Take away the moral thrust implicit in Taylor's portrait of this unaccommodated man, or simply take away the algebra text in which he absurdly invests meaning, and you have a stark portrait of an existential condition. Look without prejudice at the uncompromising materiality of her "Prejudice" and again you encounter a void of signification. Or if a reader cannot center the disconnected fragments of Mary Robinson's montage, who can? The humanitarianism of the Dissenting tradition makes women poets sympathetic to distress and victimization, but the void at the center of sensibility should alert us to a profound awareness among these poets of being themselves dispossessed, figured through details they do not control, uniting an unstructurable longing of sensibility with the hard-earned sense of thingness.

That the threat of a collapse into this void is generally averted is, however, as significant as its presence. Even as we extract patterns from historical retrospect, it is essential to recognize that Smith's sonnets or Taylor's moral essays are the elaboration of a literary formula as much as are the *Lyrical Ballads*. A collapse in such circumstances would have been a contradiction of premises. What saves Charlotte Smith from the inanition she inscribes is quite simply its inscription. Edition after edition of the *Elegiac Sonnets* testified to a success that cannot be undervalued, success within a traditional male preserve. And her experience is paradigmatic. Even where the perspective of the poet seems radically self-denying, it is balanced by the self-confidence of its art. Where isolation seems most acute, there is the knowledge that a community is being built in its stead. The achievement of these women poets was to create literature from perspectives necessarily limited by the hegemony of male values. And that those perspectives

should enter the cultural mainstream was, in the large sense, the foremost view they had in mind, even though they could not from their contemporary recognition have anticipated the effacement they suffered from history. Poets, they might well have told us, even if confined to the domestic circle, are still the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Shelley

#### NOTES

The research and writing of this essay were made possible by a fellowship, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, from the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

1. [William Harness], *Blackwood's*, 16 (1824); 162.
2. *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman's, 1799), pp. 95–96. The first edition of this work was published under the pseudonym Anne Frances Randall: although conclusive proof of Mary Robinson's authorship has not been advanced, the attribution is venerable. For the identities of the writers cited, consult *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers: 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985).
3. On the novelists, see Katherine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), pp. 22ff. After the withdrawal of Sheridan, the backbone of the London theater was supplied by such women as Frances Brooke, Hannah Parkhurst Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Hannah More, not to ignore the signal contribution of Sarah Siddons in giving professional and social respectability to a theatrical career.
4. Although this list is probably incomplete, the following ten poets, ranging from the mid-1780s to the mid-1820s, were authors of poems of epic ambition: Elizabeth Barrett, Sophia Burrell, Hannah Cowley, Charlotte Elizabeth Dixon, Elizabeth Hands, Margaret Hodson, Mary Linwood, Eleanor Ann Porden, Elizabeth Smith (of Birmingham), and Helen Maria Williams.
5. *The Poetical Works of Mary E. Robinson* (London: Richard Phillips, 1806), 3: 274–76.
6. This poem was published in the *Morning Post* and reprinted after Robinson's death in an anthology edited by her daughter: *The Wild Wreath*, ed. Mary E. Robinson (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), pp. 160–62. It was not included in the *Poetical Works* of 1806, presumably on grounds of decorum.
7. Jane Taylor, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. F. V. Barry (London: Humphrey Milford, 1924), pp. 87–89.
8. On religious verse during the eighteenth century, consult David Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972); for a survey of women's hymnody during this period, see Margaret Maison's essay, "Thine, Only Thine! Women Hymn Writers in Britain, 1760–1835," in *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760–1930*, ed. Gail Malmgreen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 11–40.
9. *Poems* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1816), p. 286.
10. See "Hannah More's Tracts for the Times: Social Fiction and Female Ideology," in *Fettered or Free? British Women Novelists 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), pp. 264–84.
11. *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld* (London: Longman's, 1825), I: 35–38.
12. *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1787), p. 6.

13. Yearsley continually reiterates her proletarian access to human truth, for instance in "To Mr \*\*\*\*, an Unlettered Poet, on Genius Improved" ("Deep in the soul live ever tuneful springs, / Waiting the touch of Ecstasy, which strikes / Most pow'rful on defenceless, untaught Minds," p. 81). In her best, or at least her most self-assertive, poem she goes on the attack: see "Addressed to Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman's desiring the Author never to assume a Knowledge of the Ancients" (pp. 93–99), where, with considerable effect, Yearsley reduces major figures of classical myth and literature to their contemporary, vernacular British equivalents.

14. *Poems on Various Subjects*, pp. 49, 52–53.
15. *Elegiac Sonnets*, 6th ed. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1792), p. 44.
16. Charlotte Smith, *The Emigrants* (London: Thomas Cadell, 1793), pp. 39–41.
17. See William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952–59), 4: 403.
18. *Poetry and Prose*, pp. 106–08.