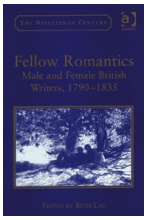
FELLOW ROMANTICS: MALE AND FEMALE BRITISH WRITERS, 1790-1835



Ed. Beth Lau
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Reviewed by Stephen C. Behrendt on 2009-11-20.

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More than two decades ago Stuart Curran's landmark essay, "The I Altered," appeared in Anne Mellor's 1988 essay collection, *Romanticism and Feminism*, which itself followed by two years *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (1986), where Curran first fully stated his case for placing the poetry of male and female authors together in formal and thematic dialogue and without privileging either. The implicit poetic and intellectual parity thus generated, particularly at the level of form, leveled a playing-field that had for two centuries been decidedly tilted. Curran, Mellor, Paula Feldman and Diana Landry had already begun making the case for re-assessing Romantic-era women poets by the mid 1980s, of course, much as Ellen Moers, Mary Poovey, Mellor and others had begun to look afresh also at women novelists beyond the ubiquitous Austen, Edgeworth and Radcliffe. Their lead convinced succeeding generations of scholars and students alike to take off the conventional institutional blinkers and recognize the Romantic writing and cultural community for what it truly was: a dynamic and interactive *community*. If men and women seemed to have written "differently," according to the received literary-historical dogma - if the nature and terms of their discourse at least appeared to be much at variance - the record that has begun to re-emerge since the 1980s shows that in reality they shared a great deal in terms of subject, theme, and rhetoric. Two-plus decades of scholarship has revealed real continuities that had been obscured for generations by apparent and often misleading discontinuities.

Some contemporary commentators argue, even now, that it is more proper (although perhaps no more accurate) to speak not of "a" literary and cultural community (singular) but rather of many such communi*ties* (plural). I have increasingly resisted this impulse toward subdivision because it yields a set of Venn diagrams of occasional and only partially overlapping communities. Starting with - or perhaps *ending* with - all those sub-divided communities risks falling squarely into the trap that William Godwin presciently predicted in his *Political Justice* (1793). The danger, Godwin observed, can threaten any single (or singular) discourse community that is characterized by broadly-based conversation and cultural exchange. Whenever such a community begins to splinter into smaller and more specialized discourse communities (plural), the constituent members of these subsets possess ever less common ground of language, sentiment and interest. When that happens, they begin to lose the language - and indeed even the willingness - that might permit them to speak productively with one another. Specialization, it turns out, breeds contempt, because specialists inevitably privilege their own patch of turf above everyone else's, and they tend to say so in no uncertain terms.

This counter-communitarian mindset undermines many collections of essays that are born (and borne) of academic conferences, special issues of journals, *festschrifts* and other made-to-order occasions. Such collections are often hit-and-miss affairs, unlike traditional monographs that offer single authors greater space for developing the intellectual "through-lines" of their arguments. Collections typically leave it to the reader to work out the stitchery that holds the parts together as a whole, and too often these collections founder on the absence of a common theme - or even a rhetorical thread - to ensure continuity. While editors usually try to compensate by tracing in advance, in an introduction, the intellectual connective tissue, this often results in a brief thesis statement followed by a series of synopses that force the individual essays into an uneasy and uneven alliance. Even when a collection is relatively successful, readers seldom have the sense that they have worked through a genuinely full, articulated argument.

Not surprisingly, *Fellow Romantics* has some of these problems. Some of the essays are very fine indeed, and some are less successful, probably because of the inevitable contrasts that separately-authored essays yield. Jacqueline Labbé's fine essay on Charlotte Smith and William Wordsworth, for example, reads the two poets' discursive monologues as deliberately crafted exercises in creating "virtual" poetic presences. These presences, Labbé suggests, are semi-fictive first-person narrative constructs that predate what we normally call "dramatic monologues" and that we typically associate with later poets like Tennyson and Browning. Labbé's revisionist reading examines two poets' shared commitment to recovering for English poetry a variety of discourse that both believed had been eroded and compromised by eighteenth century poetic practices involving sentiment and ornateness. Those practices, they objected, had significantly undermined the innate and hard "Englishness" of British poetry. So they set out, along parallel routes, to promulgate an alternative poetry (and poetic) grounded in sincerity rather than mere artifice. As Labbé puts it, both poets "recognize that poetry only pretends to be natural; both, in other words, comprehend the inherent insincerity of sincere writing" (p. 36). Through close analysis of characteristic passages, therefore, Labbé shows how both poets construct invisible auditors who essentially reflect back the speakers, thereby creating in their poems not genuinely "autobiographical" poetic voices but rather the *illusion* of such self-

revelatory voices. In the process Labbé helps us to begin rethinking how and why Smith and Wordsworth were able to create in discursive poems like *Beachy Head* and *The Prelude* voices and poetic presences that we instinctively want to say "are" Smith or Wordsworth, speaking spontaneously and "naturally," even though these poems are carefully contrived performances. In other words, the essay underscores the primary reason that Beth Lau assembled this collection. It demonstrates that two major Romantic-era poets - a historically canonical man and a woman only recently returned to the canon (if it's fair any more to use such language) - were working simultaneously and knowledgeably upon closely related agendas, assumptions, literary productions and poetics. What does *not* get into Labbè's analysis, however, is the fact that they were not the *only* poets treading this still relatively unworn path of apparently unguarded discursive sincerity, though they are the most singular. Brief collection-essays (or chapters) simply don't afford their authors the sort of space and range to which a collection like this one aspires. In many ways, what's wanted are some new studies that take a page from Robert Mayo's now half-a-century-old classic essay, "The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*" (*PMLA*, 1954) and instructively re-situate whole arrays of writers within their contemporary interactive milieus.

Susan J. Wolfson hints at one way to achieve this sort of breadth in her thoughtful socio-cultural examination of Felicia Hemans and Percy Shelley. Wolfson reads Beatrice Cenci and several of Hemans's subjects (like Asdrubal's wife, the Greek bride Eudora, and the Muslim Maimuna) as examples of rebellious women who are trapped in cultural binds that cost them their lives when they perform dramatically assertive acts within the heavily gendered climate of injustice and oppression that surrounds them. Characteristically, Wolfson ranges widely and easily over themes and contexts from Classical tragedy to Romantic-era contemporary politics, from the Burkean gothic to twenty-first-century theory, demonstrating Shelley's and Hemans's intellectual and artistic engagement with many of the same questions about gender, power and culture. In the process, like Labbé, Wolfson reveals important connections and parallels that are not merely incidental but deep and significant in what they reveal about how the interactive Romantic community of artists worked.

Indeed, Hemans was more central to Romantic-era discourse than twentieth-century criticism generally bothered to notice. She figures not just in Wolfson's essay, but also in both Alan Richardson's (where she is put into dialogue with both P. B. Shelley and Byron) and Julie Melnyk's (on Hemans and Wordsworth). But this collection hardly thrusts canonical voices to the wings. Wordsworth and Shelley are central to several of the essays, as are Byron and Jane Austen to a somewhat lesser extent. In fact, despite their emphasis on both male and female voices, the essays in *Fellow Romantics* are oddly canonical in their purview; only Letitia Elizabeth Landon (whom Michael O'Neill pairs with Percy Shelley) is on the less-often-mentioned list, and she too is getting more attention recently. The final essay not only features four canonical poets (three of them male) but takes us well beyond the Romantic period. Notwithstanding its thematic claims, Jane Stabler's essay on the conversations of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning about P. B. Shelley and Byron seems anomalous, since the conversations took place after the dates announced in the title and reflect concerns rather different from those treated in most of the other essays. But the larger problem is that *Fellow Romantics* perpetuates some assumptions it really ought to question, as for instance when Lau announces that she is "keeping with the prominence of poetry for the period" (p. 12) or when she represents Romantic-era prose fiction narrowly in terms of Austen and Mary Shelley. The scene really doesn't look quite like that any more, and hasn't for some time.

Indeed, the only essays that really seem to live up to the collection's full aspirations about parallel or joint activities are, perhaps not surprisingly, two of the three that Lau herself offers: her introductory essay and her examination of the role of imagination in Austen and several of the poets (although Barbara K. Seeber also takes up Austen and several poets, via Cowper). Lau's essay on Austen and the poets (like the third of her essays to appear here, on Coleridge and Mary Shelley, and like Seeber's) crosses not only gender lines but also the borders of genre, something that still happens all too seldom in comparative studies. In fact, *Fellow Romantics* is something of a "teaser," hinting at what more systematic investigations can teach us about the communitarian convergences of male and female writers on Romantic-era themes, assumptions and approaches. These intersections among the lives, works, and concerns of *multiple* writers deserve fuller study, as do issues like economic class and religious/ethnic/cultural status that still do not get enough attention in Romanticism scholarship. *Fellow Romantics* is a step in this direction. Despite my reservations about the inevitable limitations faced by edited collections, placing male and female writers in variously configured constellations as happens here nevertheless yields many instructive insights and perspectives. Now we should expand and extend the constellations to take in more of both the brightest stars and the lesser ones. Reminding ourselves about just how *many* "fellow Romantics" there actually were, and how interactive was the community to which they contributed their voices, will help us to evaluate in a more informed fashion the conversation in which they were engaged. Coupled with recent and new statistical and demographic studies in print culture and publication history - like William St Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) and James Raven's *The Business of Books* (2007) - and coupled too with fresh assessments of the dynamics of both the public periodical press and the private or semi-private world of personal journals and correspondence, comparative studies will inevitably continue to redraw the Romantic-era literary landscape in important, even visionary, ways.

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Beth Lau responds:

I looked forward to noted scholar Stephen Behrendt's review of my edited collection, but upon reading the piece I was rather confused. In a seven-paragraph review, the first three paragraphs never mention my book. Two more paragraphs are devoted to summarizing two of the essays, leaving only two paragraphs to summarize and evaluate the other eight essays and the introduction. Needless to say, very little is conveyed about all of this material in the short space allotted to it. (One essay not mentioned at all is Ashley Cross's comparison of poems by Coleridge and Mary Robinson.)

My main concern is that readers of the review will come away with very little sense of what the book is about. To briefly summarize, *Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835* is devoted to exploring affinities, common ground, and dialogue among literary men and women of the Romantic period. As the introduction argues, since the important recovery of Romantic-era women writers began in the 1980s, critics have frequently characterized these writers

"as participants in a female literary tradition with its own values and concerns apart from and often critical of the work of contemporary male writers" (1). I cite a number of works published from 1980 to 2007 that express this view that women writers are markedly different from male writers of the period in their interests and techniques. I also cite a number of works that challenge the gender-complementary model of literary study (some treating Romantic writers and some treating writers from other periods of British or American literature) and situate my collection within this critical tradition. Each of the essays in *Fellow Romantics* studies two or more male and female writers together, demonstrating that they "inhabited the same or overlapping . . . milieus and . . . express many shared aspirations, convictions, anxieties, and conflicts" (2).

The third paragraph of Professor Behrend's review lists a number of flaws common to collections of essays, "some" of which he goes on to say afflict *Fellow Romantics*. Two of these problems do not apply to the collection. First, it was not born from a conference, a special issue of a journal, a *festschrift*, or any other "made-to-order occasion." The book was conceived from the start as a collection devoted to exploring affinities among male and female Romantic writers, and each contributor was individually solicited. Second, the introduction does not offer "a brief thesis statement followed by a series of synopses" of individual essays. The 12-page introduction sets forth the argument of the book and situates it in the context of relevant scholarship; only 2 ½ pages (21%) are devoted to summarizing the essays, and these summaries occur in different locations, woven into major points.

Finally, Professor Behrendt faults *Fellow Romantics* for not including more writers, especially those from "the less-often-mentioned list." First, the book never claims that its intention is to "thrust canonical voices to the wings" (in Professor Behrendt's words). One of its goals is to demonstrate that the major male poets of the traditional canon, to whom women writers have most often been contrasted by critics arguing for a gender-complementary model of Romanticism, do share literary techniques and themes with various female poets and novelists. Second, as the introduction states, "No collection of essays can exhaustively cover its subject"; *Fellow Romantics* "does not pretend to treat all of the relevant figures, genres, networks, and affinities among literary men and women from 1790-1835. Many other female and male writers could and should be studied as 'Fellow Romantics.' It is hoped that this collection will . . . stimulate further work in this vein" (12). This claim, it seems to me, is very similar to Professor Behrendt's statement that the book is "a step in the direction" of exploring "convergences of male and female writers" and that we should now "expand and extend the constellations to take in more of both the brightest stars and the lesser ones," thereby "Reminding ourselves about just how *many* 'fellow Romantics' there actually were." As these parallels between my introduction and Professor Behrendt's review illustrate, I agree with his characterization of what the book accomplishes as well as the further studies toward which it hopes to contribute. If it does achieve these goals, I shall consider it as successful as one collection of essays can reasonably hope to be.

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