

Harriet Guest, *Unbounded Attachment: Sentiment and Politics in the Age of the French Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 212. £50. ISBN 9780199686810.

Unbounded Attachment: Sentiment and Politics in the Age of the French Revolution, Harriet Guest's fine study of the language of sentiment in writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jane Austen, concludes with an analysis of the book's cover, a 1792 print published by Robert Sayer, *Warm Thoughts about Matrimony, on a Winter Evening*. Three women discuss their marriage prospects while reposing by a fire. Guest reads the image, first as a satire on women's restricted social options circa 1792, but then as a scene of middle-class 'independent women enjoying the private intimacy of conversational ease which was available to some women writers in the 1790s as a space from which to look outwards . . . ' (192). And then the book's moving final sentence: 'These women seem to possess a Room of their Own' (192). However, lest we get swept away by utopian dreams of female agency and community in the building of nation – as explored in Guest's previous book *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism 1750-1810* (2000) – the words 'some' and 'seem' here alert us to Romantic women's present circumstances, the more circumscribed and in many ways more powerful focus of *Unbounded Attachment*.

The book takes its title from Godwin's account of his wife's capacity for 'unbounded attachment' to humanity. The phrase pulled its punch to vindicate her vision of women's place in a greater public dialogue about the welfare of civil society in the turbulent 1790s. At the same time it marked in her an unbridled sensibility unfit for the disciplined 'men's' work of political thought and action. For women writers attempting to manage the fraught transfer between domestic and public spheres, sentiment granted them access to political sway as well as to cultural and commercial legitimacy. Yet it also gendered them in specific ways, a restriction that incited their desire to revise the social text. Put differently, to use the language of sentiment authentically and to lasting political ends, we might say that they learned how to 'perform' sentiment's capacity for 'authentic' candour. How they at once parsed, acceded to, and arbitrated this double bind, especially in Guest's compelling, detailed, and persuasive account, further compels our admiration for them and for the present author.

Chapter 1 examines Charlotte Smith's complex manoeuvre between private domestic and public political sympathies in the context of Mary Robinson's effort to glean authorial legitimacy from Smith's reputation. Careful to sidestep the gendered charge of moral impropriety for her political allegiances, however, Smith was eager to avoid association with her scandalous contemporary. Chapter 2 then takes up how Robinson's writings on the fate of the French royal couple negotiate between the cosmopolitan politics of her aristocratic affiliations and a middle-class aspiration to commercial authorship, and in turn a tension between unpatriotic enthusiasm and a frank sociability that supposedly transcended politics. Chapter 3 anchors the book's narrative in responses by both amateur and professional women writers to Mary Wollstonecraft. This struggle to sublimate from Wollstonecraft's contentious life and work the exemplary moral force of sensibility by which they were driven indicates a social alchemy required of all the writers in Guest's study. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to Amelia Opie and Jane Austen respectively, who in different ways renegotiate 'the Wollstonecraftian ideals of benevolent sensibility' (161), and thus of women's sociopolitical authority, on the eve of a Victorian period that clearly delineates the separate spheres. Opie refines from the political body of 'policy and resolution' a 'spirit and declamatory fervour' (133) appropriate to women's enthusiasm for the domestic politics of family and 'the limited sphere which underwrites the projected universality of their

maternal humanity' (161). Austen's heroines can imagine their role in community, but are otherwise isolated and adrift in the novels' social world, 'dispersed and fragmented, barely able to communicate with one another' (166). Guest's conclusion, discussed above, partly ameliorates this melancholy summation, yet it serves to remind us how easily Romantic women writers' vision of unbounded attachment, however carefully and thoughtfully negotiated in their present, could be easily compromised in future times.

Guest has an admirably keen eye for historical detail, nuance, and context, yet she is just comprehensive enough. One of this book's many assets is its conciseness. Interwoven by a governing historicist and cultural methodology, her case studies give the story ballast and coherence, but also enough slack to allow the ambivalence of 'some' and 'seem' to evoke not only our partial ability to parse history, but also how its protagonists understood their necessarily compromised access to their own histories. Guest's account of how they mapped within this fraught terrain a space, however limited, for the relaxed yet lively and benevolent conversation among future interlocutors on both sides of the gender divide, is a fine accomplishment, and reminds us how much Romanticism can still teach us about our own desire to belong.

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