Ann R. Hawkins, ed., Stephanie Eckroth, assistant ed., *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed, Part 1*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011. Pp. 1280. £275. ISBN 9781851964819.

Ann R. Hawkins, ed., Stephanie Eckroth, assistant ed., *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed, Part 2*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012. Pp. 1312. £275. ISBN 9781851964826.

Ann R. Hawkins, ed., Stephanie Eckroth, assistant ed., *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed, Part 3*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013. Pp. 1104. £275. ISBN 9781851964833.

The *Critical Heritage* series, which published contemporary responses to selected authors, chose only one woman writer from the Romantic period, Jane Austen, for inclusion in the series. Twelve Romantic male authors were selected, implying that Romantic women writers have little or no critical heritage. *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed* is a voluminous response to a critical tradition which has dismissed the historical and literary importance of late eighteenth-century female authorship. In three parts and nine volumes, it edits, indexes, annotates and glosses periodical articles from 1789 into 1792, which comment on approximately 300 female writers. Demonstrating the pervasive tendency to underestimate the reception of late eighteenth-century female authors, the editors themselves were surprised at the number of women writers who were reviewed – the first six volumes were expected to encompass at least eight years, but the unexpected plenitude of reviews resulted in the entire series covering just a little over three years. The nine weighty volumes are a physical monument to the presence of women writers in literary conversations during these years. *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed* includes not only conventional reviews, but other texts that testify to the reception of women authors in the period, such as contemporary biographical notices of women writers, commentary on manuscripts and general articles commenting on female authorship. Notices of publication, and extracts without critical commentary are also recorded in the volumes, giving the reader a larger sense of the contemporary interest in particular authors, and the breadth of their readership. The copious appendices include helpful descriptions of the periodicals, and brief biographies of the woman writers reviewed. The volumes are arranged by year, then by periodical, and finally by author name, which allows each review to be contextualised in the literary conversations of the year it was written.

Romantic Women Writers Reviewed reaffirms the enormous effect gender had on the reception of a writer's work, despite the political and stylistic diversity of female authors in the period. The gender of the author is an issue in all the Romantic periodicals collected in *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed*, despite the periodicals' diverse politics and aims. Women's writing is typically treated by these reviews as a uniform category and with female authorship comes suppositions about subject matter and literary form – a lady is expected to produce texts which are imaginative, sentimental and romantic (1:9). A female name on the title page, the *Analytic Review* (1789) states, signals a 'kind of flimsy writing' and most female authors write in the same way, 'like timid sheep, the lady authors jump over the hedge one after the other, and do not dream of deviating either to the right or left' (l:25). When a woman writer is seen to deviate from this norm, she is praised for not being like the 'generality of female writers' (2:9). *The Monthly Review*'s (1789) response to Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins novel *Argus* is typical, expressing surprise that the 'fair writer is imbued,

with a spirit of *philosophy* and *rationality*, not always to be met with in her sex, even where the mind has not been destitute of culture' (1:318).

Women writers had to negotiate expectations that they conform to the laws of appropriate femininity on the page as well as off. Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* and Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* demonstrated this in the 1980s. *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed* illustrates just how persistent and wide-ranging these pressures were. The *European Magazine* (1789), for instance, reviewing Ann Hilditch's *Mount Pelham* praises this particular 'female pen' for possessing 'the artless and simple elegance characteristic of the sex' (1:181). The *Analytic Review* praises Helen Maria Williams' 'feminine sweetness in her style and observations' (2:268), while Anna Laetitia Barbauld in *The New London Magazine* is praised for both her 'intellectual' and 'personal endowments' (2:37), suggesting that a pleasurable feminine exterior is congruent with admirable literary work. Women writers who are identified as not being appropriately demure in their writings, are subject to innuendos. For example, the *Town and Country Magazine* (1790) criticises the anonymously authored *Sidney and Eugenia*; the criticism that the characters in this novel fall in love too quickly spills into speculation about the susceptibility of the female author, '[h]ow combustible therefore must have been the feelings of the female writer!' (5:115). In the same magazine, the anonymous author of *The Perfidious Guardian* (1790) is suggested to be possessed of a great deal of sexual experience, because she writes 'familiarly of bagnios, keeping and the various modes of seduction, and talks warmly of love, rapes, and raptures' (5:116).

Of course, authorship itself is frequently represented as being contrary to appropriate feminine behaviour. Female authors are characterised as compromising their 'natural' roles as dutiful wives or daughters, and negative reviews often advise the woman writer to give up her writing and focus her attention on her family, or getting a husband. For instance, writing about female authors in general, *Walker's Hiberian Magazine* (1789) states, 'we admire them more as authors, than esteem them as women. Few men would (I imagine) wish their wives and daughters to prefer Horace and Virgil to the cares of their families' (2:161). The *Analytical Review* (1789) advises the anonymous author of *The Fair Hiberian* to get married, so she will no longer write, and instead 'will employ her time better' (6:154). One of the more scathing examples of a review attempting to resituate the female author in the domestic is the *Town and Country Magazine*'s (1789) response to Esther Finglass' *The Recluse*. The review states: '[i]f miss Finglass knows as little of house-keeping as she does of novel writing, she has no title to a husband; but if she knows any thing of pastry, we recommend her to heat her oven with her works' (2:82).

While female authors are expected to obey the laws of feminine proprietary, the reviewers (regardless of their actual gender) assume a masculine persona, one that makes allowances for feminine weakness, and treats women writers with ostentatious gallantry. Too pointed a critique contravenes the laws of chivalry, and it is typical for a reviewer to announce, as the *General Magazine* (1789) does in a review of Susanna Rowson's work, '[w]e are sorry, as *men*, to criticize a *lady's* work too minutely' (1:219). The weaknesses of the posture of the gallant male critic are exemplified in the debate between Anna Seward and Joseph Weston in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1789-91), ostensibly over the comparative merits of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. As a woman writer, Seward initiates a debate with a man over the respective merits of pre-eminent male poets, and she astutely manipulates gendered social codes to her advantage, responding to Weston's hyperbolic praise of her with modest demurral. Gallantry requires Weston to reaffirm his praise of her. The typical reviewer's performance of masculinity also is compromised when the reviewers guess the wrong gender for anonymous publications. A scathing review of Mary Wollstonecraft's anonymously published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in the *Critical*

Review (1790), presumes the author is a 'he.' When Wollstonecraft's gender is discovered, an apologetic footnote pronounces that simply swapping pronouns will not correct the misgendering in this review, '[i]t would not have been sufficient to have corrected merely verbal errors: a lady should have been addressed with more respect' (2:353). 'She' cannot simply replace 'he,' the entire review, its tone and content, is contingent on gender.

Romantic Women Writers Reviewed not only provides a nuanced and varied picture of the way female writing was discussed in the late 1780s and early 1790s, it also shows that the writers who were popular in the periodicals are very different from the authors most frequently invoked today when characterising the period. With relatively unfamiliar names dominating its pages, *Romantic Women Writers* suggests exciting new directions for future eighteenth-century and Romantic scholarship. It also points to problems that come from making Jane Austen the single example of a Romantic woman writer, rather than one of many – Austen's muted reception, moderate output and belated popularity, was far from what was typical for a female author in this period. That almost all of the texts reviewed are today obscure, suggests a possible continuity between some of the reviews' representation of women's writing as disposable, forgettable literature and how women's writing is valued at this present moment. A monumental work of editorial labour, *Romantic Women Writers Reviewed* offers an invaluable insight into the complicated gender politics of print culture in the late eighteenth century, and contributes to general conversations about the relationship between gender, genre and the literary marketplace.

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