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**Attitudes to Love and Marriage
in Poetry by Women
of the Romantic Period**

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requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the little-known poetry of the women poets writing during the Romantic Period in Britain. In particular, it focuses on attitudes to love and marriage expressed in their poetry, with a view to showing how women poets were confined by their society's ideology and how this affected the content of their poetry. The thesis focuses on poems that deviate from the ideologically "appropriate" representations of love and marriage and attempts to identify the strategies by which the women managed to express conventionally unacceptable thoughts. Particular attention is paid to the work of the two leading women poets of the period, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon.

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INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of British Romanticism the poets that typically come to mind are the "big six": William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. Pressed to name any women Romantics, one might suggest Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Ann Radcliffe, Dorothy Wordsworth, and, perhaps, Jane Austen, before exhausting one's repertoire. In fact, there were many more women than men writing, and being published, during what we have come to know as the Romantic Period (Curran, 186). A good number of these women were poets (J. R. de J. Jackson's forthcoming bibliography lists 1403 volumes by about 900 women poets¹), who, until recently, had been consigned to oblivion by literary history.

This thesis developed out of an awareness of an absence of female authors, particularly poets, in the academic texts considered representative of the Romantic Period.² Not believing that women simply stopped writing after the Augustan Period and remained mute until Victoria took the throne, I searched for evidence of Romantic women poets - and found plenty. Other scholars have also noticed that this period of women's literary history has been neglected and several anthologies of, or including, women's poetry have been published in the last few years.³ Now that the poetry is slowly becoming more available criticism should soon follow, and build on the pioneering work of Marlon B. Ross and Anne K. Mellor who have both invited a reconsideration of Romanticism in the light of women's writing of the period.

As I read as much of the work of the women poets as

was available, it became clear that, while they shared many of the concerns of the male Romantics (such as a desire for social change, a love of nature, and a nostalgia for the past), there were also areas where female experience directly informed theme and subject. Of primary importance to the women poets was the experience of romantic love as a prelude to marriage, with virtually all of them writing on the subject of love and/or marriage.

On first reading these outpourings on relationships between the sexes one is struck with an overriding sense of the sentimental, with teary-eyed melancholy and noble female suffering being the prevailing ethic. Reading and re-reading the texts, however, reveals an intimation that beneath the surface emotionalism there lies a deeper, perhaps more politically concerned, attitude to love and marriage than is initially suggested.

Given that marriage was virtually compulsory for the late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century woman, exactly what attitudes these women had to this institution became a source of interest. I decided to examine poems on love and marriage hand-in-hand, as for the women of the period the expectation was that these two states would exist together. To achieve my goal of reading the Romantic women poets' works to discover their attitude to love and marriage, I felt that a socio-historical heuristic was most appropriate. As Angela Leighton has expressed in her Introduction to Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart, the socio-historical approach, while not fashionable, has particular merit when applied to women's writing (4-5). For Leighton, and other feminist critics, it is important to recover the lost history of women's writing, and that includes

biographical and social details as well as the texts themselves.

Reading the poetry produced by women during the Romantic Period I became aware of a huge shift in ideas and their expression (concerning love and marriage) that occurred between 1780 and 1837 (approximately). I felt that to achieve insight into their work I needed to explore the culture they were writing in. The pressures on the woman writer had to be examined and acknowledged as forces that shaped the text, as did her society's attitudes towards and expectations of marriage. I have chosen to focus in this thesis on the tension I perceive between poet, poem, and society as evidenced in the texts.

While applying a socio-historical approach to the texts I have also incorporated elements of feminist criticism. I have deliberately chosen to follow what has come to be termed "Anglo-American feminist criticism", as opposed to "French feminist theory" (Mellor, Romanticism and Feminism 3). Both strains are equally important to literary criticism and feminism, but I felt that the Anglo-American methodology lent itself better to a study that takes into account the social and historical aspects of a text.

Mellor explains the reason for this:

Feminist critics working in this Anglo-American tradition have developed a method that Elaine Showalter has christened "gynocriticism," a working hypothesis that women both write and read differently from men. The role of the critic is to define these differences, locating them both in the particular biographical experiences of the writers and readers and in the more general cultural ideology that conditions both the behaviour patterns and the modes of discourse available to men and women. (Romanticism and

Feminism 4)

In the case of the poetry of the Romantic women a political rather than a philosophical approach seemed important, as ideology appeared to play such a dominant role in their lives and texts. In using some of the major texts of Anglo-American feminist criticism I have attempted to apply to the Romantic women poets what in many cases are theories that focus on women novelists or prose writers.⁴

The application of feminist theory to the texts of the women who wrote during the Romantic Period is a huge task waiting to be effected. In fact, there is an enormous amount of work to be carried out in every area of Romantic women's writing, as critics and leading Romanticists Anne Mellor and Marlon Ross have suggested in their recent works.⁵ This thesis aims to serve as an introduction to the writing of these women and hopefully will inspire others to further investigate the re-awakened voices of the female authors of the Romantic Period.

ENDNOTES

1. J. R. de J. Jackson, Romantic Poetry by Women: A Bibliography, 1770-1835 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
2. Examples of anthologies of Romantic literature that contain little or no writing by women of the period (particularly poetry) include:

Albert Reed, ed., The Romantic Period (New York: Scribner's, 1929).

Ernest Bernbaum, ed., Anthology of Romanticism (New York: Ronald Press, 1948).

G. B. Woods, ed., English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1950).

Russell Noyes, ed., English Romantic Poetry and Prose (New York: Oxford, 1956).

David Perkins, ed., English Romantic Writers (New York: Harcourt, 1967).

John Mahoney, ed., The English Romantics (Lexington: Heath, 1978).

B. Martin, ed., The Nineteenth-Century: 1798-1900 Macmillan Anthologies of English Literature, Vol. 4 of 5 Vols. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).
3. Examples of recent anthologies containing poetry by women authors of the Romantic period include:

Jennifer Breen, ed., Women Romantic Poets 1785-1832: An Anthology (London: Everyman's Library, 1992).

Roger Lonsdale, ed., Eighteenth-Century Women Poets

(Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

Jerome J. McGann, ed., The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

Forthcoming is Andrew Ashfield, ed., Women Romantic Poets, 1770-1838: An Anthology (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994).

4. Texts such as:

Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980).

Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984).

5. Mellor's Romanticism and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) and Romanticism and Gender (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Ross's The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry (New York: Oxford UP, 1989).