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Masculinity and Femininity Unbound: Revising Gender Studies (Again) in British Romanticism

Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism. Susan J. Wolfson. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006. xxii + 430 pp.

Reviewed by [Katherine D. Harris](#), San José State University

<1> “What matter who’s speaking?” asks Michel Foucault (through Beckett) in an effort to re-define the role of the “author.”⁽¹⁾ In a multiplicity of discourses, the author is merely a function of discourse instead of its creative genius. Foucault contends that the author became a cultural commodity in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century when copyright laws and legal codification recognized the imprimatur of individual writers. At this same moment, British Romanticism was developing its own discourse primarily centered around six male authors, or so early canon formation would have us believe. We have since learned that women shaped Romantic-era discourse under the guise of sentimental yet revolutionary literature. In investigating the relationship between male and female authors, Anne Mellor stressed the fluidity of gender: “Any writer, male or female, could occupy the ‘masculine’ or the ‘feminine’ ideological or subject position, even within the same work.”⁽²⁾ Yet, more than a decade later, we are still struggling with the construction of feminine subjectivities even with the shift to include women authors such as Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon and Charlotte Smith in the canon. Why the continuing resistance to these women authors when overwhelming evidence shows that women published prolifically and unapologetically during the Romantic era? In *Borderlines*, Susan J. Wolfson does not directly resolve this question. Instead, she focuses on the impact of “the language of gender essence” as it supports figures such as “the stylized ‘feminine’ poetess” and “the aberrant ‘masculine’ woman” (xviii). In other words, *Borderlines* resists confining authors to a schematic opposition between masculine tradition and feminine subjectivity, a binary established by critics such as Mellor, Margaret Homans and Marlon Ross. The study also declines to insist that female authors were inhibited by patriarchal literary culture and forces the discussion of male and female authors away from instabilities and divisions in male representations. Unlike Mellor, whose work uses the idea of masculine centrality to evaluate masculine and feminine, *Borderlines* investigates gender formations as seen through a “peculiar language” (xvii). No longer are we discussing the feminine as marginalized, to borrow Toril Moi’s map of margin and center. Instead, Wolfson sets up these borderlines as “arbitrary, fluid, susceptible of transformation” (xviii).

<2> *Borderlines* opens by describing Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) as a revolution in the politics of language. By using examples of “culture as theater” (9), Wolfson discusses the social construction of gender as it appears in pamphlets—that very public mode of writing that Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries supposed was non-literary and inherently masculine. Wollstonecraft fulfilled the role of a literary virago and was famously accused of being an unsexed female by Reverend Polwhele, a poet whom Wolfson discusses as an unsuspecting proponent of feminine subjectivity. Throughout this chapter, Wolfson traces the construction of the socially feminine through an explicitly political language. The parade of authors include Hannah More, Anna Barbauld, Maria Jane Jewsbury, Lady Blessington, Lady Montagu, Felicia Hemans and the Bluestockings. These women were all criticized as sexually deviant or transgressive, a characterization enabled by their public literary lives. Their transgressions were in refusing a sexual determinism that was part of the normative hierarchy and “put a female claim on a ‘manly spirit of independence’” (6)—a revolutionary act that shocked even the revolutionaries of the 1790s. In addition to this Romantic culture of female authors, Wolfson describes Victorian and Modernist responses, laying the ground for her final chapter. Wolfson’s goal is not to redefine gender in the manner of earlier scholars, or to debate the historical parameters of Romanticism. Instead, she investigates the artificiality of genders. For instance, Wollstonecraft’s woman in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is “an ideological and political subject that may be feminine or masculine” (xix) but is never the passive object.



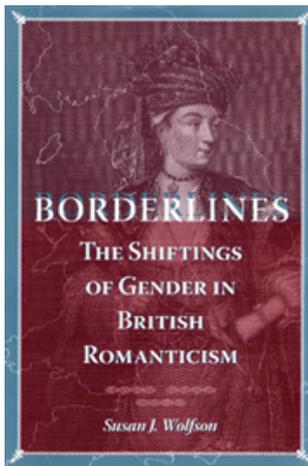
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<3> The next three chapters, the most powerful of this book, establish the fluidity of the masculine/feminine borderlines by focusing on Felicia Hemans and Maria Jane Jewsbury before moving on to Lord Byron and John Keats. Wolfson describes Hemans less as a female poet per se than as antidote to masculine Bluestockings such as Hannah More and Lady Mary Wortley Montague. Indeed, even Hemans was accused of being “blue” because she was a “lady-author” though she did not agitate for the social reformation of gender roles like the members of the Bluestockings. This chapter is rich with its abundant references to Hemans’ letters, a result of Wolfson’s earlier work in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters and Reception Materials*.⁽³⁾ She goes on to argue that Maria Jane Jewsbury is a foil to Hemans’ construction of femininity and literary reputation, but she does not condemn Jewsbury as a Bluestocking or transgressive woman. In the end, Wolfson suggests, Jewsbury felt “estranged” from Hemans’ representation of femininity as well as the accepted version of masculinity. Both women represent the shiftings in borderlines to which Wolfson’s title refers.

<4> *Borderlines* balances discussion of these two women with two men, Keats and Byron. Her four chapters devoted to these poets focus on the male author’s defamiliarizing masculinity and effeminate/feminine/feminist modes (34). Just as Wolfson discusses Jewsbury’s work in the context of Hemans’ writing, so Byron situates Keats. Through discussions of *Sardanapalus*, Wolfson posits that Byron’s effeminate characters (and even Byron himself) struggle to define “what’s ‘natural in an effeminate character’” (163). *Borderlines* continues this anti-masculinist and denaturalizing query in a chapter on the indeterminacy of *Don Juan*’s cross-dressing characterizations.

<5> Discussions of Keats’ work brings *Borderlines* back to its original questions surrounding transgressive women because the male poet re-appropriates the old gender binaries “to reinforce the manliness of the new forms. The poetry he is writing in the heat of this thinking rehearses to the point of obsession scenes of gender crisis, where female power threatens male autonomy, or a man feels pumped with power by mastering a woman” (208). However, Keats eventually is unsexed and unmanned, according to Wolfson, and plays a distinctively feminine role in contrast to Byron’s cross-gendering. With Keats’ indeterminacy, we come to a historical moment when “masculine, feminine, effeminate, patriarchal, feminist” are so conflated that the vocabulary fails. Wolfson thus sets the stage for the solution she provides in the last chapter.

<6> Wolfson’s study culminates in discussions of the “soul-talk that permeated Romantic culture” (287). In this final chapter, *Borderlines* returns to Wollstonecraft, Jewsbury, Mary Shelley and, most heavily, Hemans to conclude that these women “embrace[d] the romance of alienation, by disdaining the ‘soul’ assigned to them as the gendered bearer of cultural hope” (313). The final moments of this chapter look forward to nineteenth-century women authors Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Sand as they reject “the feminine in the soul [and] find new gods to thank for this ungendering” (314). Instead, these later female authors embrace a double-sexed soul that is not exclusively feminine nor is it the negative of masculine. Here, *Borderlines* leaves the project open to future scholarship without creating a definitive model of masculine and feminine Romanticism—something that is necessary to the continued study of this politically fraught period.

<7> The strength of *Borderlines* lies in its broad overview of Romantic-era literature. While Wolfson spends more than half the book on two canonical male authors, that discussion is justified in the face of her project: to unbind masculine and feminine subjectivity from biological sex in such a way that masculine and feminine are not in contention for control of the language. The Preface, with its critical history of gender and Romantic-era literature, makes Wolfson’s book one for both advanced and newly-curious Romantic-era scholars. As is typical with Wolfson’s books, *Borderlines*’ endnotes construct an entire critical text by themselves. Wolfson provides thirteen illustrations, most of them portraits of the authors, that each occupy a full page. “Byron in Albanian Dress” and “Felicia Hemans,” among others, provide gendered representations of the authors which were not always mirrored in their writings. The book is plump with literary and critical quotations, enough to provide a context for all of the works and authors discussed.

<8> Because Wolfson relies on the literary work of Felicia Hemans and is in constant conversation with Maria Jane Jewsbury’s texts, she must deal with a question that is continually leveled at her on the listserv, NASSR-L: is Hemans’ poetry as good as Keats’? Instead of defending Hemans’ aesthetic value, Wolfson proclaims that the question is flawed and “culturally over-determined” (35). Wolfson asks her detractors not to consider Hemans through Keats, but to

ask instead “how can our appreciation of Hemans be enhanced by reading Keats (and others) along the borders of gender?” (35). *Borderlines* accomplishes this revision of masculine/feminine subjectivity and resituates our construction of gender in Romantic-era literature along borderlines that refuse to be stationary.

Endnotes

(1) Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 1636. (△)

(2) Anne Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4. (△)

(3) Susan J. Wolfson, ed., *Felicia Hemans: Selected Letters, Poems and Reception Materials* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001). (△)

