

The Floating Island:
female voices in
Romantic British poetry

Too long neglected

- Mid 19th – beginning of 20th century: fracture private-public sphere / women silenced and relegated to the former
- Excluded from the “Canon” of British literature for about 150 years
- Last 20 years of the 20th century: critical research and reassessment:
 - vs idea of *High Romanticism*
 - vs Romanticism of the Big Five

Voices and countervoices

- Dialogue male-female voices:
 - Mary Tighe – John Keats
 - Joanna Baillie – William Wordsworth
 - Dorothy Wordsworth – William Wordsworth
 - Mary Robinson – Samuel Taylor Coleridge

- Male poets' incorporation of the female voice
 - poet's omnivorous yearning for all-embracing vision
 - ventriloquising women
 - representation of female figures: Lamia, Christabel, Medusaalways the Other

- Independent female voices

- Theoretical

- Generally

- ✓ less obsessive than men's
- ✓ theoretical and philosophical treatises were prohibited to women
- ✓ They wrote short prefaces or introductions to their works

- Exceptions

- ✓ Joanna Baillie's *Introductory Discourse to A Series of Plays: in which it is attempted to delineate the stronger passions of the mind* (1798)
- ✓ Anna Laetitia Barbauld's reviews in *The Monthly Review*, editions of Richardson's *Letters* (1804) and many vols of *The British Novelists* (from 1810)

➤ Poetic

- Genres

- ✓ prohibited – involving self-absorption and narcissistic meditations: ode, elegy, epic in Spenserian stanzas ...

- ✓ allowed: sentimental sonnet, romance, ballad, didactic poetry

- Themes

- ✓ prohibited: politics, intellectual meditations

- ✓ allowed: domestic virtues and affections, ethical and religious sentiments, beauty of art and nature, national and popular traditions

- Yet woman is

*“una perpetua dissidente in
rapporto al consenso sociale e
politico, in esilio in rapporto al
potere, dunque sempre
singola, frazionata,
demoniaca, strega”*

(Julia Kristeva)

✓ search of interesting variants to
allowed genres and themes. E.g.

❖ sentimental poems on slavery: the
affective may become knowledge

❖ elegiac sonnets – Miltonian sonnet
/ occasional verse

❖ Hemans's mask: the sweet poetess

✓ total rebellion and experimentation on those selfsame prohibited genres and themes. e.g.

❖ Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812)

✓ Daring and strategic apologising

❖ apologetic prefaces to beg forgiveness for daring. e.g.

▪ Tighe's preface to *Psyche*: for her use of classical mythology in dealing with passionate love

▪ Smith's dedication to Cowper in *The Emigrants*: "I am perfectly sensible that it belongs not to a feeble and feminine hand to draw the Bow of Ulysses"

Poetess as *monstrum*

- broken careers. E. g.
 - Barbauld (after 1811, attacked in the *Quarterly Review*)
 - Baillie (fiercely attacked by the *Edinburgh Review* when an edition of her plays prefaced by the *Introductory Discourse* was published in 1812)

- broken careers and lives. e.g.
 - Mary Robinson
 - badly reputed
 - isolated by all
 - Letitia Elizabeth Landon
 - forced to marriage
 - untimely death in exile

Dorothy Wordsworth, *Floating Island (at
Hawkshead: An Incident
in the Schemes of Nature)* (1820)

[...]

Once did I see a slip of earth
By throbbing waves long undermined
Loosed from its hold – how, no one knew,
But all might see it float, obedient to the wind;
Might see it from the verdant shore
Dissevered float upon the lake,
Float with its crest of trees adorned
On which the warbling birds their pastime take.

[...]

And thus through many seasons' space
This little island may survive,
But nature (though we mark her not)
Will take away, may cease to give.

[...]

Buried beneath the glittering lake,
Its place no longer to be found,
Yet the lost fragments shall remain
To fertilize some other ground.