

ORIGINAL

## The Politics of Canonisation Among Women Poets of the Romantic Era

### La política de canonización de las mujeres poetas del Romanticismo

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#### ABSTRACT

The Romantic period (late 18th to mid-19th century) is traditionally defined by the works of male poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Lord Byron, while the contributions of women poets were marginalized or erased through the canonization process. This paper examines the socio-political and cultural factors that influenced the exclusion of women poets from the Romantic canon, focusing on the roles played by male-dominated literary societies, critics, and editors. By scrutinizing the works prominent women poets like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson, the analysis highlights the gendered assumptions about literary value that led to the devaluation of their works. Feminist literary criticism and modern re-evaluations of Romanticism have led to the recovery of these poets, expanding the understanding of the Romantic period. Despite these efforts, challenges remain in fully integrating women poets into the established canon. The research paper concludes with recommendations for further investigation into the politics of canon formation, advocating for a more inclusive approach to literary history.

**Keywords:** Romanticism; Canonization; Women Poets; Gender Studies; Feminist Literary Criticism; Literary History; Romantic Canon; Anna Laetitia Barbauld; Charlotte Smith; Mary Robinson; Literary Exclusion.

#### RESUMEN

El periodo romántico (de finales del siglo XVIII a mediados del XIX) se define tradicionalmente por las obras de poetas masculinos como William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge y Lord Byron, mientras que las contribuciones de las mujeres poetas fueron marginadas o borradas a través del proceso de canonización. Este artículo examina los factores sociopolíticos y culturales que influyeron en la exclusión de las mujeres poetas del canon romántico, centrándose en el papel desempeñado por las sociedades literarias, los críticos y los editores dominados por los hombres. Mediante el escrutinio de las obras de destacadas poetisas como Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith y Mary Robinson, el análisis pone de relieve los supuestos de género sobre el valor literario que condujeron a la devaluación de sus obras. La crítica literaria feminista y las modernas reevaluaciones del Romanticismo han llevado a la recuperación de estas poetas, ampliando la comprensión del periodo romántico. A pesar de estos esfuerzos, sigue siendo difícil integrar plenamente a las mujeres poetas en el canon establecido. El trabajo de investigación concluye con recomendaciones para seguir investigando las políticas de formación del canon, abogando por un enfoque más integrador de la historia literaria.

**Palabras clave:** Romanticismo; Canonización; Mujeres Poetas; Estudios De Género; Crítica Literaria Feminista; Historia Literaria; Canon Romántico; Anna Laetitia Barbauld; Charlotte Smith; Mary Robinson; Exclusión Literaria.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a time period in literary history known as the Romantic period and takes place from the late 18th to the early 19th century, the era claims to emphasize on emotion, individualism, and the sublime. But often the names of writers as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Byron are mentioned as the quintessential representatives of this era whose principles of celebrating nature and human spirit walked away from rationalism advocated by the Enlightenment. It was also an era of reaction against industrialisation and a longing for the return to a simple, pastoral life (Day, 2012). Although these have been celebrated in the literary canon it is important to think about who has been left out of this historical narrative.

Thus, the literary canon—the body of works considered to be representative and vital to a particular tradition of literary culture—is integral in an essential way to the ways in which culture remembers and identifies itself. As in the process of canonization is not a neutral, or objective, process, it is a process, which is determined by literary critics, historians and institutions about which works are worth to be preserved and studied (Guillory 1993).<sup>(1)</sup> However, this process has historically been influenced by many different sociological, political, and cultural specificities, generally favoring the voices of some over others. There has traditionally been a paucity of women writers in the Romantic canon with women poets usually not seriously taken seriously, often driven underground, and their work usually overlooked, sometimes dismissed. Thus, the Romantic canon was shaped both due to its own aesthetic values as well as to its artifact of gender biases long present in literary culture.

Women poets in the Romantic era, such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson, made significant contributions to the literary landscape. Nevertheless, the patriarchal norms that permeated the canon or relegated literary works to the margins, consider them great only if endowed with masculinity. Even literary historians in later settings sometimes devalued women's poetry because the poetry was seen to emphasize the domestic, or to undertone emotion, that did not fit well with the Romantic ideal of the solitary male genius (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup> This exclusion had lasting consequences, influencing those to think only of the discourse of men and men's concerns concerning the Romantic period.

This research aims to understand the politics of canonization in the Romantic period, particularly the processes involved in determining who does and does not count as a Romantic writer, and the ways in which the exclusion of women poets has clouded our understanding of this era. Key questions to be addressed include: What were the social and cultural of factors which led to the marginalization of women poets? What themes and styles did women poets employ, and how were critics of the time affected by these differences from men? Finally, what does rethinking the Romantic canon to include the marginalized voices mean? This paper (i) seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to reconstruct a more inclusive literary history by examining these questions.

## Literature review

The study of Romantic literature has long been dominated by the works of a select group of male poets, often referred to as the “Big Six”: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and William Blake. These figures have been central to the construction of the Romantic canon, which emphasizes themes such as the sublime, nature, and individual expression. Scholars such as M.H. Abrams have extensively explored the philosophical underpinnings of Romanticism, particularly its reaction against the Enlightenment and its focus on the power of the imagination (Abrams, 1971).<sup>(3)</sup> However, this traditional focus on male poets has led to the exclusion of many other voices, particularly those of women, from the dominant narrative of Romanticism.

Key texts on the politics of canon formation, such as John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* (1993),<sup>(1)</sup> argue that the process of determining which works are included in the canon is inherently political. Guillory contends that cultural capital—social and institutional power—plays a significant role in shaping the literary canon. In the case of the Romantic period, this power dynamic has historically favored male poets while marginalizing female writers. Canon formation, therefore, reflects broader social hierarchies and exclusions, including gender biases, which have impacted the representation of women poets in literary history.

Feminist critiques have been instrumental in challenging the male-dominated Romantic canon. Scholars such as Anne K. Mellor and Marlon Ross have argued that the exclusion of women poets from the Romantic canon is a result of both contemporary and retrospective gender biases. Mellor (1993)<sup>(2)</sup> emphasizes that Romantic ideals, such as the solitary male genius, were constructed in opposition to feminine values, thereby marginalizing women's contributions. Ross (1989) similarly highlights how women poets were often dismissed as writers of sentimental or domestic verse, while their male counterparts were celebrated for their intellectual and philosophical insights.<sup>(4)</sup> These feminist critiques have called for a re-examination of the canon to include the works of women writers who were active during the Romantic period.

Historical scholarship has revealed that women poets such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon were not only prolific but also highly regarded by their contemporaries. Barbauld, for instance, was a prominent figure in literary circles and engaged in political and philosophical debates through her poetry (McCarthy & Kraft, 2008).<sup>(5)</sup> Charlotte Smith is credited with pioneering the sonnet

revival in the late 18th century, and her works frequently dealt with themes of nature and personal suffering, making her a key figure in the development of Romanticism (Labbe, 2003).<sup>(6)</sup> Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon were also celebrated for their poetic achievements, yet their works were later marginalized as the Romantic canon solidified around a select group of male poets (Blain, 2001).<sup>(7)</sup> The marginalization of these women poets reflects broader cultural attitudes towards gender and literary value.

A comparative analysis of male and female poets in the Romantic canon reveals significant thematic and stylistic differences. Male poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge often focused on the sublime and the power of the natural world, while women poets like Hemans and Landon explored themes of domesticity, patriotism, and personal loss (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup> These thematic differences were used by critics to devalue women's poetry, reinforcing the notion that only certain subjects were worthy of serious literary consideration. Moreover, the personal and emotive style of many women poets was often dismissed as overly sentimental, in contrast to the intellectual rigor attributed to their male counterparts (Ross, 1989).<sup>(4)</sup>

In recent years, there has been a growing trend among scholars to re-evaluate the Romantic canon and recover the works of women poets who were previously excluded. The rise of feminist literary criticism in the 20th century has led to a renewed interest in the contributions of Romantic women writers, with scholars seeking to redress the gender imbalance in literary history. Anthologies such as *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Ross, 1997)<sup>(8)</sup> have brought many forgotten voices back into the academic conversation. Current scholarship emphasizes the need for a more inclusive approach to Romanticism, one that recognizes the diversity of voices and experiences that shaped the period. This re-evaluation has not only enriched our understanding of Romantic literature but also challenged long-held assumptions about literary value and canon formation.

## METHOD

The research approach for this paper adopts a qualitative analysis of literary history, focusing on feminist literary theory and historical case studies to understand the exclusion of women poets from the Romantic canon. This methodology enables a deep exploration of the socio-political and gendered dynamics that influenced canon formation during the Romantic period. By examining the interactions between literary critics, poets, and cultural institutions of the time, the research aims to uncover the mechanisms that led to the marginalization of women poets in both contemporary and later critical evaluations.

### Textual Analysis

- A textual analysis of selected poems by key women poets from the Romantic period, including Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, will form the core of this study. The thematic focus, stylistic elements, and rhetorical strategies of these poets will be closely analyzed to identify how their works align with or diverge from the more traditionally recognized male poets in the canon. Special attention will be paid to themes commonly associated with women's poetry, such as domesticity, sentimentality, and patriotism, to understand how these themes were treated by both the poets and their critics.
- Selected poems will be compared with works by canonical male poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Lord Byron to highlight the differences in critical reception and thematic focus, providing a comparative framework for understanding gendered biases in literary evaluation.

### Examination of Contemporary Reviews, Critiques, and Literary Anthologies

- Contemporary reviews and critiques of the works by both male and female poets will be examined to understand the critical landscape during the Romantic period. This will include analysis of literary journals and periodicals from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which often played a central role in determining the reputations of poets at the time. By studying how male and female poets were reviewed, this analysis will uncover the gendered assumptions that shaped critical evaluations.
- In addition, the research will review literary anthologies from the Romantic period and afterward to trace how the inclusion or exclusion of women poets evolved over time. This will help in understanding how the canon was constructed and reinforced by editors and literary gatekeepers, and how this affected the long-term recognition of women's contributions to Romanticism.

### Evaluation of Archival Resources

- Archival research will involve the evaluation of manuscripts, letters, and personal documents of women poets and their contemporaries to trace the historical process of canonization and exclusion. This archival work will help illuminate how these poets were perceived by their peers, literary patrons, and critics during their lifetimes. Access to such materials may provide insights into personal and professional networks that either supported or hindered women's literary careers, as well as the strategies they employed to navigate a male-dominated literary culture.

- Furthermore, the analysis of personal correspondences between poets and critics may offer valuable perspectives on how women poets viewed their own marginalization, and how their male counterparts contributed to or resisted their exclusion from the literary canon.

### Application of Feminist Literary Theory

- Feminist literary theory will provide the critical lens for analyzing the exclusion of women from the Romantic canon. By applying key concepts from feminist theory—such as the critique of patriarchal structures, the politics of representation, and the gendered nature of literary authority—this research will interrogate the cultural forces that shaped the construction of the Romantic canon. Feminist theorists like Anne K. Mellor and Marlon Ross will be used to frame the discussion on how gender shaped the perception and reception of women’s poetry during and after the Romantic period.
- Additionally, the paper will explore how intersectionality, which considers the overlapping impacts of gender, class, and social status, may have influenced the exclusion of certain women poets. This perspective will help in understanding the complex social and cultural dynamics that determined whose voices were preserved and celebrated in literary history.

### THE POLITICS OF CANONISATION IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

The formation of the literary canon during the Romantic period was deeply influenced by various socio-political and cultural factors that shaped who was included or excluded from the dominant narrative of literary history. In particular, the literary institutions, critics, and editors of the time played a crucial role in determining which works were preserved, celebrated, and anthologized, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy in which male poets were privileged over their female counterparts. As literary canon formation is closely linked with broader social power dynamics, it reflected and reinforced the patriarchal structures of the period (Guillory, 1993).

The role of critics and editors was especially significant in shaping the Romantic canon. Critics of the time often used their platforms in journals and periodicals to promote male poets who aligned with the Romantic ideals of genius and intellectual profundity. For instance, reviewers in periodicals such as *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review* frequently praised male poets like Wordsworth and Byron, while female poets, if reviewed at all, were often critiqued for their sentimental or domestic themes, considered to be of lesser literary value (Ross, 1989).<sup>(4)</sup> Editors of influential anthologies also perpetuated these biases by excluding or minimizing the works of women poets, shaping the literary landscape to reflect a male-dominated vision of Romanticism.

The male-dominated literary societies of the period further reinforced the exclusion of women from the canon. These societies, such as *The Royal Society of Literature* and literary circles that gathered around influential figures like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, functioned as gatekeepers of literary prestige. Membership in these circles often determined who received critical attention, and the exclusion of women from such spaces further marginalized their contributions (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup> The presence of women poets was largely peripheral, and their works were frequently overshadowed by their male contemporaries, contributing to their exclusion from the formal canon.

One of the key ideological forces behind this exclusion was the Romantic ideal of the solitary male genius, which became a central trope in the period’s literary culture. Poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge were often celebrated for their individualistic vision, their ability to commune with nature, and their supposedly unique insights into the human condition. This idea of the male genius, isolated and misunderstood by society, became a cultural touchstone of the era, marginalizing those whose work did not fit this paradigm, particularly women poets who were often associated with domestic themes and communal experiences (Leighton, 1992).<sup>(9)</sup> The privileging of the male experience as universal and profound created a literary environment where women’s poetry was dismissed as inferior, regardless of its intellectual or aesthetic merit.

The examination of literary anthologies from the Romantic period further reveals the gender biases embedded in canon formation. Anthologies compiled during and after the Romantic era, such as Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1861),<sup>(10)</sup> overwhelmingly favored male poets, often excluding or giving minimal space to women poets like Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Charlotte Smith (Blain, 2001).<sup>(11)</sup> These anthologies played a crucial role in cementing the status of certain poets as canonical figures, effectively erasing the contributions of many women writers. As John Guillory (1993) argues, anthologies are instrumental in constructing cultural capital, and their role in shaping literary history cannot be understated. The consistent underrepresentation of women poets in these collections reflects the broader cultural attitudes towards gender and literary value during the period.

The politics of canonization during the Romantic period were therefore shaped by a combination of cultural ideals, critical authority, and institutional power, all of which worked to marginalize women poets. This exclusion not only affected how these poets were perceived in their own time but also had long-lasting effects on their reception in subsequent generations. The focus on male poets as the central figures of Romanticism has



resulted in a skewed understanding of the period, one that feminist scholars have been working to correct in recent decades by recovering the voices of the women who contributed to the literary landscape of the time.

### EXCLUSION OF WOMEN POETS FROM THE ROMANTIC CANON

The exclusion of women poets from the Romantic canon was not merely an incidental oversight but a result of entrenched gender biases that shaped literary criticism and canon formation during the 19th century. Women poets like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson, were prominent literary figures during their time, yet their contributions to Romantic literature were systematically erased by critics who failed to recognize the literary and intellectual value of their work. These poets, who were initially respected and widely read, were later marginalized as the Romantic canon solidified around male poets who embodied the ideals of solitary genius and intellectual profundity (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup>

### STUDIES OF PROMINENT WOMEN POETS

Anna Laetitia Barbauld was a significant figure in the literary and intellectual circles of her time. Her work, often political and philosophical, contributed to debates on nationalism, education, and human rights. Despite this, Barbauld was later dismissed by critics for focusing on “domestic” themes, and her poetry was overshadowed by male contemporaries. For instance, her poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* was harshly criticized for its pessimism about Britain’s future, which led to her retreat from public literary life (McCarthy & Kraft, 2008).<sup>(5)</sup> This reception reflected a broader unwillingness to accept women’s engagement in political discourse during the Romantic period.

Charlotte Smith, credited with reviving the sonnet form and influencing poets like Wordsworth, received critical praise during her lifetime for her deeply personal and nature-infused poetry. However, her works were often characterized as excessively emotional and feminine, qualities that 19th-century critics used to dismiss her poetry as inferior to the works of male poets. Smith’s focus on personal suffering, social injustice, and the natural world aligned with many Romantic themes, yet her gendered perspective was seen as lesser in value (Labbe, 2003). As a result, her poetry was largely excluded from later anthologies that defined the Romantic canon.

Similarly, Mary Robinson was a celebrated poet and political commentator whose work addressed issues of gender, class, and personal identity. Robinson’s public persona as a “fallen woman” due to her early career as an actress and her high-profile relationships with men like the Prince of Wales influenced the reception of her work. Critics often focused more on her personal life than her literary achievements, and she was later excluded from the canon as her poems were dismissed for their supposed moral failings and emotional excess (Pascoe, 1997). Her poetry, which explored themes of personal freedom and political consciousness, was marginalized in favor of male poets who were seen as embodying a more universal, intellectual perspective.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WOMEN POETS DURING THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

The critical reception of women poets during the Romantic period was deeply shaped by gendered assumptions about literary value. While male poets like Wordsworth and Byron were praised for their intellectual rigor, women poets were often criticized for being too emotional, domestic, or sentimental. These qualities were seen as inherently feminine and therefore less valuable in the eyes of 19th-century critics. For example, reviews in periodicals such as *The Quarterly Review* often praised male poets for their philosophical depth, while women poets were relegated to the realm of sentimental verse, a genre considered to be of secondary importance (Ross, 1989). This critical bias ensured that women’s contributions to Romanticism were devalued and eventually erased from the canon.

The erasure of women’s contributions was also evident in 19th-century literary anthologies. As male editors compiled collections that would define the canon, they systematically excluded the works of women poets or included them in small, token amounts. Anthologies such as Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1861), which became a foundational text for understanding English poetry, featured only a handful of poems by women, despite the prolific output of female poets during the Romantic period (Blain, 2001). This exclusion had a lasting impact, as these anthologies shaped the literary curriculum and public perception of Romanticism for generations.

### GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS AND MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN WRITERS

The marginalization of women poets was deeply rooted in gendered assumptions about literary value. The Romantic period, with its emphasis on individual genius and the sublime, privileged qualities that were culturally associated with masculinity. The idea of the solitary, misunderstood male poet became central to the Romantic ethos, and women, whose work was often collaborative, communal, or domestic in theme, were seen as inherently unsuited to this model of genius (Leighton, 1992). This assumption led to the devaluation of women’s poetry, as critics failed to recognize that the themes of domesticity, morality, and sentimentality

explored by women poets were not only central to their lives but also offered profound insights into the human condition.

Moreover, the emphasis on domesticity, morality, and the “feminine” in women’s poetry further contributed to their exclusion from the canon. The cultural association of women with the private, domestic sphere meant that their poetry, which often reflected these themes, was seen as less universal and less intellectual than the works of male poets who wrote about nature, politics, and the self. Critics frequently dismissed women’s poetry as merely sentimental or moralizing, ignoring the ways in which these works engaged with broader social and political issues. This dismissal was part of a larger cultural effort to confine women to the domestic sphere and deny them access to the public intellectual realm (Ross, 1989).

In conclusion, the exclusion of women poets from the Romantic canon was not a reflection of the quality of their work but rather the result of gendered biases that shaped critical reception and canon formation. The emphasis on male genius, the dismissal of domestic and sentimental themes, and the moral scrutiny placed on women writers all contributed to the marginalization of women’s poetry. Only in recent decades, through feminist literary scholarship, have these poets begun to be re-evaluated and their contributions to Romanticism recognized.

### RECLAMATION OF WOMEN POETS IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

The feminist literary movement of the 20th century was pivotal in the reclamation of women poets from the Romantic period, bringing to light voices that had been marginalized or entirely excluded from the literary canon. Feminist scholars challenged the long-held assumption that the Romantic canon was representative of the era, arguing instead that it reflected the gender biases of critics and editors who prioritized male poets and their contributions. Central to this movement was the work of feminist literary historians like Anne K. Mellor and Sandra Gilbert, whose scholarship aimed to recover forgotten women writers and reframe their contributions to Romanticism in ways that acknowledged their literary value (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).<sup>(12)</sup> By interrogating the processes of exclusion and marginalization, feminist critics reshaped our understanding of Romanticism, recognizing that women poets were essential contributors to the cultural and intellectual landscape of the time.

#### Contemporary Anthologies and Re-assessments of Romantic Women Poets

The publication of contemporary anthologies that include Romantic women poets has been a significant step in reassessing their work and placing them back into the literary conversation. Anthologies such as *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Ross, 1997)<sup>(8)</sup> have made the poetry of writers like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Felicia Hemans, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon more accessible to modern readers and scholars. These collections challenge the male-centric narrative of Romanticism by highlighting the themes and forms that women poets explored, such as domesticity, personal suffering, nature, and politics. In doing so, these anthologies help to correct the historical erasure of women’s voices and offer a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of Romantic literature.

Re-assessments of women poets also emphasize the political and social engagement in their works, challenging earlier critiques that dismissed their poetry as merely sentimental or domestic. For example, recent scholarship on Charlotte Smith highlights how her exploration of personal suffering in the context of social injustice mirrors the larger concerns of Romanticism, making her a key figure in the period’s development (Labbe, 2003). Similarly, Felicia Hemans’ focus on themes of patriotism, grief, and moral responsibility is now recognized as engaging with broader Romantic concerns, thus elevating her work beyond the domestic sphere where it was previously confined (Blain, 2001).

#### The Inclusion of Women Poets

The publication of women poets in modern scholarship has changed all of our understandings of the Romantic period. Feminist scholarship has recovered the works of poets including Mary Robinson, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon to show a richer literary landscape than that presented by the male dominated canon. The inclusion of women has enabled new readings of key Romantic themes including nature, individualism and the sublime from female perspectives, adding to the complexity of these terms.

Such as for example, how women poets inserted their experience at home and within the community into the wider philosophical concerns of the historical past constitute a Romantic discourse on the nature. This view contrasts with the solitary and individualistic manner in which nature was appreciated in much of the male Romantic canon (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup> This in fact extends the reach of Romantic literature to include women poets, even while calling into question the very definitions of Romanticism that have structured its critical history.

However, the examination of women’s poets’ political and social engagement, has contributed to a greater understanding of how Romanticism and the political happenings of the time, like abolitionism, women’s rights and particularly revolutionary politics were being tangled up. These contributions were overlooked in favor

of an archetypically aesthetic Romantic canon, in which women poets were only interested in personal and domestic matters, but showed that women poets were politically active of their time (Pascoe, 1997).<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Integrated Women Poets into the Established Romantic Canon**

Despite the progress made in reclaiming women poets, **challenges remain** in fully integrating them into the established Romantic canon. The male-centric narrative of Romanticism continues to dominate academic syllabi and popular conceptions of the period, with poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron still regarded as the quintessential representatives of the era. Although women poets are increasingly being included in scholarly discussions and anthologies, they often remain peripheral, and their works are not yet fully integrated into the broader understanding of Romanticism (Labbe, 2003).

One of the major obstacles to this integration is the enduring perception of women's poetry as secondary or derivative. The themes of domesticity, morality, and sentimentality that are often associated with women poets continue to be undervalued compared to the grander, more philosophical concerns traditionally attributed to male poets. This bias is further reinforced by the historical tendency to categorize women's poetry as part of a separate, "feminine" tradition, rather than acknowledging its contributions to the broader Romantic movement (Blain, 2001).

Another challenge lies in the limited representation of women poets in literary anthologies and academic curricula. While feminist anthologies have made great strides in recovering these voices, mainstream collections and university courses often continue to marginalize women poets, limiting students' exposure to their works. The ongoing dominance of male poets in these educational and cultural institutions hinders the full recognition of women's contributions to the Romantic canon (Leighton, 1992).

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM AND CANON STUDIES**

Looking forward, there are several future directions for feminist literary criticism and canon studies that can further the integration of women poets into the Romantic canon. One promising avenue is the continued development of intersectional approaches to literary criticism, which consider how factors such as class, race, and sexuality intersect with gender to shape literary production and reception. This approach can provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and voices within Romantic literature, further challenging the homogenized narrative that has traditionally dominated the canon (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).<sup>(12)</sup>

Additionally, digital humanities projects offer new opportunities for the reclamation and dissemination of women's poetry. Online databases, digital archives, and collaborative scholarly platforms can make the works of forgotten or marginalized women poets more accessible to a global audience, helping to democratize the study of Romanticism. These projects also allow for the exploration of less well-known poets whose works may not have been preserved in traditional print anthologies, thus broadening the scope of Romantic scholarship (Blain, 2001).

Finally, the continued revision of literary curricula to include a more diverse range of voices is essential for ensuring that women poets are fully integrated into the study of Romanticism. By challenging the traditional boundaries of the canon and encouraging students to engage with a wider array of texts, educators can help foster a more inclusive understanding of literary history, one that recognizes the central role of women poets in shaping the Romantic period.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Canonization and Cultural Memory**

The canonization process plays a crucial role in shaping cultural memory, determining which literary works are preserved, studied, and revered by future generations. This process is neither neutral nor objective; it is deeply influenced by the power structures and cultural values of the time in which it occurs. In the case of the Romantic period, the exclusion of women poets from the literary canon was a reflection of the gender biases that dominated both the literary world and broader society. By prioritizing male poets, whose works were seen as embodying universal truths and intellectual profundity, the canonization process systematically marginalized women writers, whose themes of domesticity, sentimentality, and personal suffering were deemed less significant (Guillory, 1993). This selective preservation of works created a skewed cultural memory that continues to affect how Romanticism is understood today.

The shaping of cultural memory through canon formation has long-term implications for literary history. By excluding women poets, literary historians and critics effectively erased their contributions from the narrative of Romanticism, reinforcing the idea that the period was defined solely by the intellectual and aesthetic achievements of male poets. This not only impacted how future generations perceived the Romantic period but also influenced the literary hierarchies that developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, Romanticism became synonymous with the works of poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron, while the contributions of women like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson were either forgotten or relegated to

the margins (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup>

### Long-Term Impact of Excluding Women Poets

The long-term impact of excluding women poets from the Romantic canon extends beyond the neglect of individual writers; it also has broader implications for our understanding of the literary movements and themes of the period. By focusing exclusively on male poets, literary history has presented a narrow and incomplete view of Romanticism, one that overlooks the diverse range of experiences, themes, and forms that characterized the era. Women poets, for instance, frequently explored themes of domesticity, personal suffering, and moral responsibility, which were central to their lives and creative output but were dismissed as secondary concerns by 19th-century critics (Leighton, 1992). As a result, the canonization of Romantic literature has historically reflected a limited set of cultural values that prioritized the masculine experience over the feminine.

This exclusion has also had a cumulative effect on subsequent literary scholarship. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Romanticism was studied primarily through the lens of its male poets, reinforcing the idea that their works were representative of the entire period. This has led to a distorted understanding of Romanticism's thematic scope, as well as the social and political contexts in which it developed. Moreover, the exclusion of women poets from the canon has meant that their contributions to key literary innovations—such as the revival of the sonnet, the exploration of personal suffering, and the intersection of politics and literature—have been largely overlooked (Ross, 1997). The long-term impact of this exclusion is a literary history that is incomplete and unrepresentative of the diversity of voices that shaped Romanticism.

### Gender, Power, and Literary Authority in Canon Formation

The exclusion of women poets from the Romantic canon highlights the intersection of gender, power, and literary authority in the process of canon formation. Literary authority—the ability to determine which works are considered valuable and worthy of preservation—has historically been concentrated in the hands of male critics, editors, and literary institutions. These gatekeepers often made decisions about inclusion and exclusion based on gendered assumptions about literary value, reinforcing the dominance of male poets and marginalizing the contributions of women (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). In the Romantic period, male poets were celebrated for their intellectual and philosophical depth, while women poets were often dismissed as overly emotional or sentimental, a judgment that reflected broader cultural assumptions about the intellectual capacities of women.

The power dynamics that shaped the Romantic canon were further reinforced by literary institutions such as journals, periodicals, and anthologies, which played a central role in shaping public perceptions of literary value. Male-dominated editorial boards and literary societies had the power to promote the works of male poets while neglecting or critiquing those of women. This concentration of power in the hands of male critics and editors ensured that the literary achievements of women poets were either minimized or excluded altogether (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup> The intersection of gender and power in canon formation thus perpetuated a literary hierarchy that privileged male voices and excluded women from the central narrative of Romanticism.

### Comparisons Between Women Poets' Themes and Forms vs. Male Poets

A comparison of the **themes and forms** explored by women poets and their male counterparts during the Romantic period reveals significant differences in both subject matter and style. While male poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron often focused on grand, philosophical themes such as the sublime, individualism, and the relationship between humanity and nature, women poets frequently explored more personal and domestic themes. For example, Charlotte Smith's sonnets often dealt with personal suffering, loss, and the challenges of daily life, themes that were deeply rooted in her own experiences as a widow and mother (Labbe, 2003). Similarly, Felicia Hemans' poetry explored themes of patriotism, family, and moral responsibility, offering a distinctly feminine perspective on Romantic ideals (Blain, 2001).

In terms of form, women poets were often more experimental and versatile than their male counterparts. Charlotte Smith, for instance, was instrumental in reviving the sonnet form during the late 18th century, influencing poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Despite this, her contributions to the development of Romantic form have been largely overlooked, as male poets were credited with these innovations (Ross, 1997). The comparison between male and female poets highlights the ways in which gendered assumptions about literary value shaped the critical reception of their work, with women's themes and forms often dismissed as less significant or universal.

### Implications of Re-Evaluating the Romantic Canon Today

The re-evaluation of the Romantic canon to include women poets has significant implications for how we understand the period and its literary output. By recovering the voices of forgotten women writers, feminist literary criticism has expanded the scope of Romanticism, revealing a more diverse and inclusive literary



landscape. This re-evaluation challenges long-held assumptions about the nature of Romanticism, particularly the idea that it was defined solely by the works of male poets who explored themes of individualism and the sublime (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).<sup>(12)</sup> Instead, a more inclusive Romantic canon recognizes the contributions of women poets who engaged with themes of domesticity, politics, and personal suffering, offering a broader and more nuanced understanding of the period.

Moreover, the inclusion of women poets in the Romantic canon has the potential to reshape literary education and scholarship. By incorporating a more diverse range of voices into the study of Romanticism, scholars and educators can challenge the gendered hierarchies that have traditionally shaped literary history. This re-evaluation also has broader cultural implications, as it encourages readers to question the processes of canon formation and the ways in which power and gender intersect to shape cultural memory (Guillory, 1993). Ultimately, the re-inclusion of women poets in the Romantic canon represents a significant step toward a more equitable and representative literary history.

## CONCLUSION

The exclusion of women poets within the Romantic canon shows how deeply gendered biases have shaped our perception of literary history. The canonization process, by including or excluding male poets and exiling women writers such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, reinforced an erroneous, narrow, and incomplete view of the Romantic period. These women poets framed their powerful poetic voice to address important literary subjects such as personal suffering, domesticity, and social justice. Yet, they, were removed from the center of literary history because they were perceived as being of lesser intellectual rigor. In particular, the critical reception, as received by male critics and editors, reinforced the idea that Romanticism was a male preserve and so resisted the acknowledgment of women poets accounts (Mellor, 1993).<sup>(2)</sup>

In order to have a complete (and correct) understanding of Romantic period, it is of utmost importance to re-examine the Romantic canon with an inclusive approach, that is not bound to the male canon. Since feminist literary criticism helped recover these voices, it has demonstrated that women poets worked with (and sometimes in) the same ways as the men, but from different perspectives. Furthermore, this inclusive approach contributes not only to the romantic studies literature but to a changing conception of the terms romanticism, as well as literary value and authority, that has been traditionally limited along gendered lines. The expansion of the canon in recognizing the acts of women poets also pays acknowledgment to the broader cultural, as well as the societal forces which shaped the way literary tradition became shaped.

The study of canon politics has implications beyond the Romantic period. Canonization, then, bears the mark of its seesaw intersection of power, gender and authority, preserving some voices and burying others. Scholars can create more equitable and representative literary histories by knowing the ways in which historically women and other underrepresented groups were excluded. A critical engagement with other literary periods and movements requires that you understand the politics of canonization; who has and who has not been celebrated in history, and why.

Further research on literary canonization, gender studies, and the intertwining of power, identity and literary authority should be made into the future. Did this process happen differently across different literary periods or national traditions, and what would comparative studies of canon formation reveal regarding this process? In addition, new digital technologies and resources hold the potential to reclaim the marginalized voices in the study of literature, and democratize the study of literature. But furthering the expansion of feminist literary criticism to include an intersectional lens – class or race, for example – will continue to expand complexity and incision, to render literary history increasingly more multi-dimensional and inclusive.

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