

The Advent of the Masculinized Woman in Romantic Literature

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Abstract

Both male and female writers portray anxiety in their respective works over female authors' entrance into literature throughout many texts of the Romantic period. Indeed, Romantic literature persists in viewing women of letters as imposters in the literary realm. The lady in John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" exemplifies the intrusion of the masculinized, British female writer of the 19th century. The lady's attempts to usurp the knight's power are analogous to the fear held about the burgeoning, female belletrists entering into the male-owned domain of literature. The disastrous culmination of the poem supports the idea that men and women cannot, or even should not, share either the same domain or pursuits. In other texts of the period, such as *Zofloya: Or, The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century*, Charlotte Dacre envisions the female writer as ignominious. Women's shame over their intrusion into the literary field manifests itself in the novel when the masculinized Victoria throws another of her own sex down a cliff-side. In both of these texts, disaster arises because the women have intruded upon and arrogated masculine positions. They have forsaken expected stereotypical and archetypal female qualities of docility and submissiveness. My research illuminates Romantic writers' attempts to bowdlerize the female authoress from literature. Their attempts to banish her would have succeeded had the woman of letters not become a shameless punisher of literary tradition and continued to pen her words upon the same pages as those of her male predecessors and contemporaries.

Keywords: Romantic, Literature, Women

1. Introduction

Dangerous femme fatales and fey ladies of the meads, like almost every monstrous creature, never survive the fatalistic turn of the author's vindictive pen. It is this femme fatale, or masculinized woman, whose creation as a literary trope during the Romantic period figures as a representation of the domineering emergence of female writers within this age. The downfall that these female characters cause for others or themselves reflected the anxiety of many men and women within the literary field. There are two texts of this period that demonstrate the adverse outcome that results when a woman attempts to embody and incorporate masculine qualities to her advantage. One of the most significant ways of doing so for a woman was to become a writer. For, the force of masculine hegemony was sustained predominantly by its operation within the male-exclusive world of letters which favored the ideas and writings of men, circulated within the public sphere and inaccessible to domesticized women who had been exempt from public affairs, as well as the knowledge necessary to understand these writings.

In both Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya: Or, The Moor* and John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the central female figure encapsulates the qualities of both genders, combining feminine imagination with masculine rationality, which results in a consequent toppling of masculine hegemony.¹ Rather than women that perform restrictive feminine conduct in accordance with early nineteenth-century definitions of the female sex, these women became allegorical representations of published female authors. These female author's texts served as interjections of their voices within the proceedings of the androcentric public realm, unconstrained by the former gendered political codes

of behavior.

In Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," there is an incompatibility between the knight and the lady he meets in the meads. Due to the deleterious outcome of the poem, the unification of the dichotomous realms these two inhabit and represent is futile. By the denouement, the poem serves as a portentous warning due to the knight's forlorn state after his encounter with the lady of the meads. It supports the struggle and eventual demise that occurs when feminine and masculine natures attempt to live cohesively in the same sphere, or a single body as in the female's adoption of the masculine, as that in which imagination, associated and conducive to the process of writing, resides.

Sandy Rankin-Handlang is one of many that has commented upon Keats's struggles to reconcile the feminine imagination with masculine rationality. For, instead of a tempestuous courtship bent on dominance of the lady, Rankin-Handlang interprets Keats's poems to be an indefatigable pursuit of a union with the "inspiring feminine principle of his own psyche...long[ing] for soul and the ecstatic experiences a relationship with her entails."² Such longing, that of a "marriage" of a masculine Eros with a resistant Psyche, she continues, centers as a focus in several of his odes, from "Ode to Psyche," "Ode on Melancholy," and "Ode to a Nightingale."³ So that, in Apollonian fashion, Keats pursued his Daphne, or Psyche, the spiritual embodiment of truth and beauty, through language, a main epistemological investigation that follows through many of his works than those previously mentioned.

The ringing words that close out "Ode on a Grecian Urn" reveals a resignation towards those mysteries of the soul he would unravel, yet that constantly defy logical explanation: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," --- that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."⁴ The chiasmus of these two concepts signifies their utter collapse upon one another. It is an implosion that secretes within itself, away from those who would rationally probe into the metaphysics of truth and beauty. Indeed, Rankin-Handlang includes an extraction from one of Keats's letters comparing his certainty "of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination" to that of Adam awaking to find Eve's creation truth after he had dreamt of her in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁵ Besides his and the knight's similarities to a fictional character yearning for truth and beauty through the female-principled imagination of dreams, all three men may be similar by their endeavor to become better people and writers through the search for an elusive truth. We may also consider in relation to Keats's search for truth and beauty through the feminine-principled imagination, the origins behind his conflation of words with women.

Keats's self-consciousness of his literary inheritance, accounted by Gaura Shankar Narayan, is "not one of oedipal conflict with a literary father; it is about nurturing a familial connection with a literary mother/mistress...his dependence on and engagement with a feminine representation of his literary heritage."⁶ Narayan is concerned to prove Keats's rejection of conservative gender verities that otherwise dictated the literature of his male peers who relied upon their male precedents for literary guidance. Her profound analysis claims to Keats's progressive values, which "in his celebration of the female demons [la belle dame sans merci], he seems to engage sympathetically with non-normative femininity and permit[s] its escape from the judgmental logic of linear narrative."⁷ Narayan's revisionist proposal reacts against, while building upon previous scholarship, like to her reformist "feminist" poet, Keats's poem in one of either two ways. Narayan opposes herself to critical analyses that posits a conservative masculine agenda in his poetry, specifically in his only two poems featuring demonic women - "Lamia" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

Meanwhile, Anne K. Mellor and Margaret Homans read into Keats's poetry a definitive anxiety evinced towards formidable and fearsome women.⁸ Derived from a latent sense of his own effeminate weakness, Keats may be seen to distance himself from the female principle in his poetry, to instead induct himself into the male fraternity of poets who would prefer that vocation to be kept within their exclusive coterie debarred from women.

Karen Swann is among one that lays the groundwork for these interpretations. She reveals the lady to be the victim of the knight's harassments. In an insightful, philosophical reading, Swann proposes the knight's usage, or harassment of the lady is "in order, finally, to become one of the gang, one of the pale kings and princes in whose world 'woman' exists only as a delusive fantasy, a memory of a dream."⁹ She applies this conclusion from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theoretical discourse on the function of the "Woman," whose existence within man's fantasy is only to serve as his characterless partner.¹⁰ Swann connects the knight's exploitation to the poet's, both of whose motives for "completion" is "to access a community of poetic masters," though for the knight these masters would be the "pale kings and princes."¹¹

Contrary to Narayan's contention that Keats parodies traditional, masculine narrational convention in order to radicalize and provide balladic poetry with an alternative feminine space in poetry, Swann's Keats exploits and savagely penetrates into that alternative feminine space. Simply, the knight and the poet exploit the endorsement of a feminist agenda turning his relations with the lady to his own advantage. He feigns tender caresses, extracts her guileless participation in his game of deceit, before he forces "more than love from the lady," or otherwise rape, then duping the victim of his wiles.¹² Finally, in proper form for a roué, he manipulates the story and places his vile deeds as the heartless, cruel actions of the lady's, to add injury to insult.

Certainly not the rake, however Swann's conflation of Keats with the knight may point to their united interest to denounce, through the emblematic rape of the female, to earn the approval and acceptance of a male-bonded brotherhood, for Keats composed of the high Romantic literati, intent upon maintaining the traditional, general structure, or hegemonic masculinity, of their classical predecessors. We may gather that Keats's intentions have no doubt been disproportionately misogynized in relation to the conservative political scenes amidst which his works were produced. In turn, the conservative period in which Keats authored his works, may have engendered within him a struggle "to find poetic strategies that obscured his political affiliation and muted his political voice."¹³ From this perspective, Keats becomes as submissive to hegemonic gender politics as the female demons in two of his poetic works, for whose ultimate excoriation he is charged personally responsible.

We might laud Keats's purportedly lofty intentions, even though but a timid and discreet feminist proponent. But that is tenuous at best, despite his subterfuge of poetic narration's masculine-associated energy in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" by the disruptive, figurative language that characterizes the subordinating spirit of the unbounded, dangerous female.¹⁴ However, Ronald Tetreault offers us evidence of a latent misogyny and ambiguity towards independent womanhood in his verse and a marked jealous possessiveness towards his romantic interest, Fanny Brawne. Tetreault's examination of Keats's letters to Brawne reveals an insecure manhood threatening to be defeated by his consuming passion for Brawne. Consumption, for fear of being in turn possessed by Brawne, or "an impulse to take possession of her soul, her 'self,' a drive to swallow up her very identity," depriving the woman he adores of an independent separate existence, figures into these letters.¹⁵ Eventually Tetreault notices "the tone of his letters to her...suddenly turn from affection to high-handed accusation," frighteningly similar to the power dynamics in an abusive relationship.¹⁶ Further he considers Keats's trouble relationship with poetry as though an anthropomorphic personage, and the poet's equation with poetic inspiration and imagination as a "darkly threatening mistress," whose mighty and mysterious imperiousness, women and words, had over his senses.¹⁷

So that, according to previous scholarship, we can claim in Keats's authored works, a general ambiguity towards women that either becomes fraught with a lurking misogyny associated with his female characterization of poetry, by which he alternately resists and yields to. Or, however, we may camp Keats as an early champion for gender equality who uses "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and other works to parody subvert masculine poetic tradition. Yet, neither explanation can fully satisfy, for like to his poem, the poet defies any simple reading. And though I argue for an interpretation of the poem that asserts Keats's complicity with the general opinion held of female writers during the time period, arrogating powerful social positions which publication could bring, his anxiety does not transform into the absolute repudiation prevalent, as we will later understand, in Thomas James Mathias and Richard Polwhele's acerbic lines.

2. "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

We discover Keats's knight "Alone and palely loitering" by a lake bereft of vegetation, happened upon by a curious passer-by who prognosticates death in the man's sallow features.¹⁸ Indeed, although the passer-by, whose gender remains arbitrarily up to the reader's supposition, comes across this hapless victim to the sacrificial altar of a merciless Venus when the "sedge has wither'd from the lake," the traveler relates to the knight-at-arms that "the squirrel's granary is full / And the harvest's done."¹⁹ Imagistically, a profound disjunction in time separates the "wither'd" vegetation surrounding the lake, notably advanced amidst the ravages of a lifeless winter, whereas the agricultural harvest and storage of food that the interlocutor reports of locates them before the beginning of autumn. The knight's condition can almost be likened to a disoriented time-traveler arrived from a distant land and period, whose displaced cognition of reality may have caught the interest of the idle wanderer.

Other remnants the traveler discerns upon the knight's person is the lily on his brow. The lily, formerly alluded to, is the prescience of death that plagues his features. Significantly, the lily serves as a reminder of his unfortunate abandonment by the lady and a mark of her possessive, puissant grasp over his existence even when he believes he has escaped from her domain. Alongside the lily, the "fading rose / Fast withereth" that replaces description of his facial features renders his physiognomy in the poem like unto the doted-upon mistresses who appeared as subjects in Renaissance sonnets, but depicts in contrast the likely after-effects that the muse probably suffers from after being used as a source of poetic inspiration, then haplessly discarded.²⁰ However, only temporarily does the knight remain so. At the commencement of his narrative to the interlocutor, the knight regains his former status as subject, while the lady becomes the object whose description within the story can be altered and manipulated by his authorial caprices.

In conformance to the "male gaze," the knight first regales the passer-by with physical descriptors of the lady he

met in the meads. His initial perception is of her slender, diminutive size, beautiful like a "faery's child."²¹ Once he briefly captures her appearance in a reductive manner, he moves downwards in cinematographic panning motion from her long hair to her light foot. But, his gaze is caught and drawn back up by her prepossessing and commanding "wild eyes."²² At this moment, the knight's penetrating scrutiny is arrested and caught in its roving track. What follows from the knight are several subtle machinations to engird with his own material trappings her his sense of her ascendant superiority which he believes threatens his control. In cunning fashion parallel to the lady's legerdemains, the yokes which he forms require feminine adeptness, such as jewelry-making, by the "garland," "bracelets" and belt that he makes for her.²³ His slight appropriations of effeminacy may have been to diminish the threat his outward identity posed to whom he identifies as a deceptively innocent, however dangerous lady of the meads. He "set[s] her on [his] pacing steed" in place of his authoritative position upon the horse, which would have conferred his noble seniority over that of her lack of titles and honors, due to his warrior-status.²⁴ But these ploys to divest the lady of power through subjection or deceptive effeminate romanticism, ultimately misses its mark.

However, the knight has not been the only one to unsuccessfully exact an interweaving of the two realms that separate these two characters. After he has fallen asleep at her grot, dreams of other masculine figures, such as princes, kings, and warriors, warn him that the lady only wishes to make of him another victim as they had been before him:

I saw pale kings and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;

 I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
 With horrid warning gaped wide...²⁵

The repeated presence of masculine, power-wielding figures expresses that aspect of creation that is distinct from that of the female. All three of the occupations quoted above preclude the participation of the female gender. These occupations render women's participation or integration with the lives of these overbearing figures as bellicose and equivalent to the consummation of ruin and destruction. In other words, when a woman attempts to penetrate the world of imagination or access the occupation of a writer, exclusive to men, she impedes upon their control over this domain. When she takes the knight to her grot, he dreams of other men who have been previously ruined by her:

She took me to her elfin grot,

 And there she lulled me asleep,
 And there I dream'd --- Ah! woe betide!

 I saw pale kings and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
 They cried, "La belle dame sans merci
 Hath thee in thrall!"²⁶

Within the domain of the lady's fanciful grot, she has led and directed him. Her words have wrought an effect upon him, lulling him to sleep and causing him to dream of other male figures ruined by the woman's ruthlessness. In the actions described above, the lady shows a control and mastery over the knight explicitly within the domain of her imaginary grot. The fear implicitly stated here is that the power held by male writers will be taken by women, and thus their positions sabotaged within the field of literature.

The consequence of destruction to the male participant who epitomizes the terrain of reality and mankind is specifically the failed capacity to conquer a realm out of reach, or to subdue the capacity of woman to write and harness her imagination. The knight attempts to capture and claim the lady through the jewelry he crafts for her body: "I made a garland for her head / And bracelets too, and fragrant zone."²⁷ The garland, bracelets, and fragrant zone, otherwise identified as a belt, may all be meant as restraining apparatuses meant to subdue. Hence, through the utilization of these binding habiliments upon the lady by the knight, a parallel may be drawn to the situation of the emerging dominance of the female writer in relation to the male writers during the Romantic era in British literature. The parallel is that the male writer also wishes to constrain the female and remain superior to her within the shared discipline of literature. As a result of the two interacting within the same sphere, more particularly, as is noticed, in the supramundane atmosphere, that is, the field of literature, the lady domestically inhabits, there cannot be an equal

cohabitation between the man and woman. Otherwise, there is a restrictive license over who may access the occupation of writing and authorship.

The lady may seem to be pliable and gratifying to the man's seductions and flirtations to intimacy, but she feigns affection and love for the knight. The knight, deceived by her artful chicanery, states that: "She look'd at me as she did love/And made sweet moan."²⁸ The artificiality of the lady's affection is apparent when she does not look at him with love, but with a likeness to it. Her abandonment of the knight in the penultimate stanza and the masked intentions of her words and actions reveals a misogynistic and distrustful view of women as capable only of betrayal. When noting the few words she does speak, it is in unusual verbiage that she expresses her amorous feelings towards the knight: "And sure in language strange she said / "I love thee true."²⁹ When the lady speaks, a misunderstanding arises between the two. They cannot share the same language or means of communication. Furthermore, the concern of misunderstanding between the two sexes is what may have dominated the politics of late eighteenth to early nineteenth-century literature in Britain. The only way to have understood women would have then been to conquer and restrain them. The man expected an outcome in harmony with this peroration, despite the peculiar and doubtful expression of her claim to love him. Her deceit and duplicity causes the discord formed between the man and woman, despite her angelic, virginal appearance and the natural world she inhabits. The lady actuates a gender reversal, in that the female usurps the politically dominant and underhanded manner representative of the authoritative class from which he emerges. As a "knight-at-arms," he is equipped and prepared for war. Here, the female is at odds with the male's intentions.³⁰

He is prepared to conquer but she is unable to be conquered, rendering her a worthy force above the status of a submissive woman. There is a noticeable anxiety in these events concerning the displacement of the traditional proprietors of power, being that of archetypal males in a patriarchal society, by a masterful yet seemingly naïve woman. The usurpation of power recognizes the advent of the developing masculinized female, the female writer, entering and intruding upon the awareness of the male as a full reality.

3. Zofloya: Or, The Moor

The masculinized woman was also noticed by other authors of the Romantic era, and thus influenced the intrinsic connotations of their literature. One of these authors, in her creation of a woman embodying the essence of both genders, is significant in that, from the view of a female author, a contradictory view emerges. Dacre reveals in her novel, *Zofloya*, a character hermaphroditic yet dependent upon external, demoniac influences to perpetuate her artful duplicities in the guise of ingenuousness. The book follows the daughter of a countess, Victoria di Loredani, driven to poison her husband and murder her female rival, all in the hopes of attaining the desired love of another man. Her companion and accomplice in these deeds is a Moor named Zofloya, employed as a slave under Henriquez, the man she would have as her lover. The focus here is on the sexually developing female body in Romantic literature.

Victoria and the lady from Keats's poem are significant in Romantic literature in the respect that these women surpass the traditional boundaries allotted to women not only in literature, but also the narrow limited roles prescribed to them in society as mere domestic homemakers. These transgressions involve the indiscreet pursuit of sexual desire. Yet, many critics insist upon categorizing Victoria's tertium quid sexuality, as well as Dacre's intention with the novel, which is the same problem that critics fall into when attempting to classify Keats as either a feminist or misogynist poet. Although numerous intelligent arguments have occurred that strive to find a place for *Zofloya* within the binaries of male and female Gothic, this mistake plummets us into the same constrictive polarity of thought which Dacre was trying to transcend in her time period.

Diane Long Hoeveler commented in her insightful essay that *Zofloya* was "misogynistic" since the novel ends with Victoria and the mother's punishment for neither regulating their sexualities nor adhering to moral and educational duties.³¹ However, Carol Margaret Davidson disagrees, as do I, for the misogyny that can be attributed to "Dacre's society is one thing" but does not indicate her shared opinion on the matter.³² Davidson believes that "Dacre employs the Female Gothic in *Zofloya* as a...serious attack on women's heavily and problematically circumscribed role," a role that Dacre felt compelled partially to perform only in order to find her "'double' in the form of Victoria's compelling devil-seducer."³³ Beatriz González Moreno also remarks upon Dacre's ability to adopt contradictory personas, similar to Victoria. *Zofloya* had originally been published under the nom de plume "Rosa Matilda," a name that draws attention to the "traditional dichotomy that used to categorize woman either as an angel or as a demon."³⁴ After all, "Rosa" was a name that stood for all which Lilla represents in the novel, specifically the epitome of feminine virtue, while "Matilda" had been notoriously associated with *The Monk's* lascivious female who cross-dresses as a male so she may seduce the monk Ambrosio.³⁵ The latter undoubtedly pertains to Victoria. Indeed, Dacre had sufficient reason to dissimulate her identity, for even so, because of her female pseudonym, her writing

was severely objurgated. By more than one reviewer, her writing was considered as "lacking the delicacy of the female pen," and lambasted as an "exhibition of wantonness of harlotry."³⁶ Considering Dacre's multiple personas, we may employ such understanding to reveal her developing sense of shame as a cause of introjecting the beliefs of female writers as unnatural creatures, towards her text.

The callous homicide of Lilla by Victoria may well represent the overthrowing of the prosaic and virginal representation of women formerly predominant. Hoeveler describes Lilla as, "the epitome of an emerging British domestic ideology... Lilla's mind we are told, is 'pure, innocent, free even from the smallest taint of a corrupt thought.'"³⁷ In respect to Victoria's violent and bold nature, Lilla has been typified as the standard for other women to emulate and not challenge. When in response to the Moor's comparison between these women, Victoria shamefully acknowledges her masculine inclinations:

"He would have loved you, I presume, had you chanced to have *resembled* Lilla."
"Ah! would," cried the degenerate Victoria, "would that this unwieldy form could be compressed into the fairy delicacy of hers, these bold masculine features assume the likeness of her baby face!"³⁸

Victoria evinces a conscious shame in her masculine tendencies. She believes that, because she does not fit the mold concerning the female mental attributes of domesticity and modesty, as Lilla does, she no longer is physically desirable. Zofloya also believes that, if she encapsulated the ideal of British femininity that Lilla parallels, she would no longer be castigated but instead admired. The censure of Victoria's masculine qualities returns us to the admonishment of women for attempting to be writers such as men, as in Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

In both texts, the lady and Victoria are women who have appropriated and defined with an authority their own identity as beautiful females with masculine tendencies. However, the difference resides in who gains mastery over the other. Formerly, it was the lady who superseded in dominance and craft the gullibility of the knight. Dacre precipitates Victoria towards her death by the imposing and imperious Moor, Zofloya, her companion and accessory to her malicious deeds throughout the final sections of the text. It is now the female at odds with her own gender, or more specifically, the masculine sexualized female opposed to the established British feminine ideal. Hoeveler argues:

Competing for the same man, Victoria and Lilla are archetypal female rivals, both pursuing ... the same man. Both dispossessed women shun property and wealth in favor of the sexuality of Henriquez himself ... women have become openly sexualized to a degree found dangerous and threatening to a culture that is predicated on their sexual discipline and control.³⁹

Thus it is brought to our attention that there is a transition in the body of the female not as a dormant vessel acting in compliance with the exigent mandates of a male-dominated society imposed upon her. There is now a woman who has crafted for herself a new identity, dependent not upon the possessions of the man, but on possessing the man. Though Lilla has been depicted as the pure and innocent ideal of femininity, it makes sense then to have Victoria, a female embodying masculine qualities and hence the patriarchal society, to, in destroying Lilla, destroy with the same action the incipient sexual transgression in formerly virtuous women. The anxiety is prevalent here in that a restraint and punishment is now needed to constrain the sexual perversions these women have been either discreetly or unabashedly embracing. Dacre punishes both women for their sexual perversions, however much these transgressions may be considered to be minor or gross within the context of the time the novel was written.

Keats and Dacre seek to recriminate the sexualized, masculine female not because of their malicious deeds upon otherwise innocent people, but because these women have successfully, due to their conquests, accessed and usurped regions formerly under male domain only. Their metacommentary participates in that on the national one of the mass emergence of the female writer in the field of literature and writing. It reveals the position of the female writer during the Romantic period as condemnable and unnatural, capable of yielding benefits to no one, and of only resulting in disorder. The interaction between the lady and the knight in Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," acts as a representation and parable of the mass influx of published female writers in Britain during the Romantic age. So that, whereas Keats aims to reveal the forthcoming destruction to a patriarchal society by a woman's seduction and claim of a field outside of her domestic domain, specifically the literary field, Dacre's motivation is different. Her aim may be to criticize and disapprove of the female writer, out of a conscious shame, due to calumny by male critics in literature. The anxiety associated with this event is noticeable in the work of both writers, and as we may certainly deduce, many more contemporaries. The importance of these responses indicate the transformative nature

of gender and sex as themselves permeabilities that are able to affect different shapes and forms.

Criticisms of these changed forms to which the sexes can adapt shows the actuality of transformative gender as a reality, and, even more so, the analogousness and likeness of the sexes. Mathias is one of these male critics explicitly criticizing the female writers of the age. He asserts, in *The Pursuits of Literature* that, “our *unsexed* female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves, in the labyrinth of politics, or turn us wild with Gallic frenzy.”⁴⁰ He designates a woman as being “unsexed” because she is a writer. In other words, she loses her femininity because writing was considered moreover, solely a masculine trait. In addition to this, Mathias impugns the female writer’s ability as only able to confuse, or that she is incapable of writing and communicating as clearly as her male counterparts. The above criticisms may have been what would have negatively affected the female writer’s reputation during this time period.

Moreover, many were concerned with the rise of female writers, sublimating and injecting many of their ideas into literature in order to manipulate and induce general opinion to repress this phenomenon. Polwhele wrote upon and castigated the developing masculinized nature of women in his poem, “The Unsexed Females”:

Survey with me, what ne’er our fathers saw,
A female band despising Nature’s law,
As “proud defiance” flashes from their arms,
And vengeance smothers all their softer charms.
 I shudder at the new unpictured scene,
Where unsexed woman vaunts the imperious
 mien.⁴¹

Polwhele invokes the image of a body of women that have adopted many masculine qualities. He also displays these women as perverse to nature, because of their adoption of the masculine into the female body. However, the masculine qualities of which Polwhele must be referring to might not be physical brawn, but the primary emergence of a dominant voice that defies the latency it was previously subject to. Polwhele’s and Mathias’s reaction to the phenomenon of the emerging female writer, unfortunately, may have been one common to most male writers during the Romantic era.

In short, female literary figures within the Romantic era such as Victoria in Dacre’s *Zofloya* and the lady in Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” demonstrate the tense relations between the emerging female writer over her male counterpart. These works also demonstrate the implicit anxiety felt by men and the shame felt by women for the female writer’s developing dominance within the literary field. In addition to Keats and Dacre, other writers directly attacked the female writer, such as Polwhele and Mathias, and believed these women to be impeding upon the traditional gender structure hitherto established in Britain. The above works may have contributed to the belief of a woman’s inept ability to be a writer. If not for the continuing emergence of female writers after this time period, the result of these criticisms may have been the unforgivable elision of woman’s voice upon the pages of literature.

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