

Women's Writing, Reading, and Education in the Romantic Period

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Antal, Éva, and Antonella Braida, eds. *Female Voices: Forms of Women's Reading, Self-Education and Writing in Britain (1770–1830)*. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2022. 269 pages. Pbk. ISBN: 978-2-84867-933-4. €15.00.

Women's voices are inextricably linked to questions of education and writing. As the title of this impressive collection of essays suggests, women have used the power of their voices at various points in history to become more involved in their cultural and political worlds. The essays in this volume cover a revolutionary period in European history—a time in which the concepts of liberty and education were debated with intensity and ambition. It was also an age of radical transformation in the numbers of people who could read. Women took part in this movement to improve literacy: as educators, authors, printers and publishers, novelists, and poets. Over the last thirty years a similarly seismic shift in our historical knowledge of the sheer range and diversity of different voices at play between 1770 and 1830 has been made by scholars interested in interrogating questions of class, race, and gender—and the intersections between such categories. In their thoughtful introduction to *Female Voices*, editors Éva Antal and Antonella Braida raise varying definitions of reading, opening with a quotation from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Female Reader* (1789), which was one among many such contemporary works addressed to young people who were learning not only to read but also to imbibe a sense of moral justice and virtuous social behavior. The title of Anna Barbauld's *The Female Speaker* (Joseph Johnson, 1811) gestured to the fact that the extracts in her book would be read aloud in a family setting following a long tradition of sociable reading (recently explored by Abigail Williams in *The Social Life of Books* [Yale UP, 2017]), but one cannot help thinking of the political resonance of the term “speaker,” as in the regulator of parliamentary speech. Barbauld grew up within the walls of Warrington Academy, an educational establishment solely for religious dissenters, who at this stage were denied political representation and barred from attending Oxford and Cambridge. Barbauld's “female speaker” is inevitably tinged with a radical irony.

The editors have assembled fourteen essays arranged according to five thematic units, starting with “Cross-cultural Connection across the Channel,” a fascinating study of European intellectual networks (not confined to Anglo-French relations, so “across the channel” is mildly

misleading). Hannah Moss investigates British responses to Madame de Stael's *Corinne* (1807). Both the European author and her fascinating creation, the conduit of passion, Corinne, straddled the private and public with fierce tenacity. David García's essay on Helen Maria Williams's translation of Bernardin St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) gives us a sense of the politics and abilities of women as translators in a revolutionary age. Williams smuggled her own poems into her translation of the novel, replacing some of the original text with her formidable sonnets. The final essay in this section, by Hélène Vidal, provides an interesting counterpart to Hannah Moss's work. Taking a slightly different approach through the use of psychoanalytic definitions of auto-fiction, she makes a strong case for the educational role of sensibility in the novels of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, including *The Sylph* (1779).

The themes of Vidal's essay are continued in the next section of the collection: "Writing the Female Self and (Self-)Education," in which radical writers including Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley are shown to express the struggle between reason and passion in novels that combine life and art with the courage to experiment. Dóra Janczer Csikós's essay introduces the intersection of contemporary periodicals (in this case the *Lady's Magazine*) with novels in forming a didactic role for readers. Anthony John Harding's discussion of Mary Hays's six-volume encyclopedia of female achievement, *Female Biography* (1803), alerts us to contemporary attempts to bring women fairly and squarely into the public sphere and to inhabit a lexicon of historical heroines, from Abassa to Zenobia. Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, mother and daughter, form the respective topics of essays by Nóra Séllei (who focuses on the body in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792]) and Kiel Shaub (who addresses the role of Arts and Sciences education for young women through a lively discussion of William Godwin's work as author and lecturer and its influence upon Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818]).

Women were resourceful in their use of genre to explore questions of knowledge, politics, and philosophy. Male intellectuals who supported female education had long chosen poetry as an instructive medium in which to impart moral or scientific instruction. Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, first published in 1789, is an excellent example of the ways in which the complex details of Carl Linnaeus's theory of the sexual reproduction of plants were fashioned into an attractive and compelling narrative. A decade later, Darwin published *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797). While he expanded contemporary ideas about the range and

ambition of female education, he thought women should still remain in their allotted place: the domestic sphere. The third section of the edited collection, “Reading and Experiments in Form,” provides strong evidence that Darwin’s female contemporaries were not content to stay confined within the domestic sphere but established themselves powerfully as the authors of public poetry and novels. Angela Escott’s fine reading of Hannah Cowley’s epic, *The Siege of Acre* (1801), a vividly realized war poem, describes the convergence of drama and poetry in this bold work. Through a combination of close reading and contextual detail, Angela Escott convinces us of Cowley’s poetic mission, using the techniques of drama in poetry, “to engage with Britain’s increasingly global perspective but also emphasizing how this particular event was a moral crisis for the community and showing how it affected its citizens personally” (153). Krisztina Kaló’s essay on Clare Reeve’s epistolary novel *The School for Widows* (1791) is a fascinating exploration of how older women remained connected to the idea of reading as self-education. While it was rare to be left an independent widow, there remained an attraction to this state in which one could exert financial and social power. The final essay in the section on form and genre is Angelika Reichmann’s discussion of Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which returns us to the topic of auto-didacticism through reading.

“Women’s Critical and Economic Thought” is the final theme of the collection. Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou explores how women could learn practical skills about housekeeping and traveling from books, and women’s appreciation for the role of novels in allowing them a measure of economic agency. Jane Marcet’s *Conversations on Political Economy, In which the Elements of that Science are Familiarly Explained*, first published in 1816, used conversation as a tool of improvement for those who wished to better themselves. Alexandra Sippel’s excellent discussion of this work provides many avenues for future research into an area that encompasses some of the most challenging moral and theoretical questions of Marcet’s day.

As Sippel points out, the seeds of Marcet’s approach can be found in the bluestocking circle, an informal “Academy” for educating women, led by Elizabeth Montagu, Queen of the Bluestockings. Montagu’s *Essay on Shakespeare* (1769) was the first extensive female defense of England’s national poet at a key moment in the history of his reception. Magdalena Pypec’s exploration of Anna Jameson’s *Characteristics of Women*, first published in the year of the Reform Act of 1832, shows how much of this classic text of feminist ideology was derived from her previous study, *Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1831). Montagu and Jameson alike found that women could derive critical

authority from Shakespeare, whose lack of formal and classical education was no hindrance to his literary power, or his ability to conjure female voices. Éva Antal and Antonella Braida are to be congratulated on bringing together a collection of essays that celebrates the ongoing connection between education and the female voice with energy and originality.

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