

REVIEWS

Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt, eds.
Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception.
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In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), T. S. Eliot theorized that the western canon continually and inexplicably readjusts itself to include new works of art, thereby establishing an ideal order. In fact, however, as evidenced by the frequently hostile canonical wars that have spilled over into the twentieth-first century, works by women and other marginalized writers do not simply fall into this ideal order like tumblers in a lock. This struggle for literary legitimacy has been especially true for Romantic women poets; until recently these writers, many who were embraced by the nineteenth-century reading public and critics alike, were largely forgotten. When read at all, these poets were generally regarded to have limited talent and, consequently, to be unworthy of a serious reevaluation and reclamation. In *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, editors Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt assemble a collection of ten essays that opens up a broad discussion about the poetry these formerly-neglected Romantic women writers produced during a period in English history when poetry, and male poets, reigned supreme.

As the title suggests, Linkin and Behrendt are primarily interested in placing these women poets into a historical context that concentrates on the reception of their works and their reputations as writers. In doing so, the essays challenge many ideas produced in recent critical discourse regarding Romantic women writers, as well as reveal "how the historical reception of Romantic women poets has complicated our understanding of their achievement," such as the often contradictory conclusions reached by Romantic scholars (2).

Following a short, informative prologue by Paula R. Feldman that chronicles the history of how scholars' thinking about Romantic women poets changed in the late twentieth century, the book is divided into three main sections. In the first part, essays by Stephen C. Behrendt, Adriana Craciun, and Roxanne Eberle question established, as opposed to factual, notions of reception and point out the futility of trying to generalize and categorize these poets. For instance, by using Mary Lamb's work and life as an example, Adriana Craciun examines modern feminist gender-complementary models of Romanticism in terms of rhetorical and physical violence and urges scholars to question "current scholarship [that] too often replicates this gendered Romantic ideology unthinkingly, and often unproductively" (47).

Essays by Sarah M. Zimmerman, Catherine B. Burroughs, and Harriet Kramer Linkin constitute part two of the book which explores ways in which Romantic women poets consciously sought to

define and categorize themselves in an effort to stabilize their literary positions. Sarah M. Zimmerman, for example, argues that Charlotte Smith realized that by deliberately turning away from the reader in her self-absorbed, melancholy sonnets, Smith fascinated her readers, created a dedicated audience, and insured a desperately-needed income. Smith, argues Zimmerman, "proved herself wise enough to know that she had found in the genre's "small plot of ground" a rare and viable, yet sharply circumscribed forum for a woman to make public the sorrows of dependence" (122).

The final group of essays by William McCarthy, Kathleen Hickok, Susan Wolfson, and Tricia Lootens consider the vexed relationship between some of these poets' early nineteenth-century reputations and how ideas about these reputations have changed over time. William McCarthy addresses the subject of reconstructed reception in his essay on Anna Letitia Barbauld, a poet whose place in the Romantic canon seemed assured at her death in 1825. McCarthy posits that Barbauld's works essentially dropped out of sight due to the "vicissitudes of class and gender politics not unknown to historians: the fate of middle-class liberalism, changes in the stance of "serious" writers toward the middle-class public, contested ideas of "woman" and "her place" (167).

Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt are noted for their fine historical research in recovering and repositioning texts associated with feminist scholarship. Not surprisingly then, the collection of essays they have assembled in *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, along with the rigorous scholarship of the individual authors themselves, is important in (re)opening the doors of reception and enabling many of these gifted women poets to take their rightful places in a predominantly patriarchal Romantic canon that has remained relatively unchanged for most of two centuries. Their title's paraphrase of William Blake is certainly well-chosen in that the cleansing effects of this book on preconceived notions of Romantic women poets exposes the infinite possibilities that exist behind these formerly closed doors of reception.