

Winter 2015

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## Recommended Citation

Balzer, Cassandra, "Spontaneous Overflow of Emotion': The Blurred Heteronormativity of English Romanticism and Subsequent Necessity of Mary Shelley" (2015). *All-College Writing Contest*.

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‘Spontaneous Overflow of Emotion’: The Blurred Heteronormativity of English Romanticism  
and Subsequent Necessity of Mary Shelley

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English Romanticism marks a radical transgression from previous literary practice; the period signifies a shift from writing for an audience and as education, as defined by Sir Philip Sidney, to a reflective narcissism. This transition inevitably catalyzed a change in the identity and demeanor of the writer himself: from a more socially aware individual to one focused on introspection and self-evaluation. This new sense of introspection causes a rift in the historically masculine tradition of literature; with the introduction of personal emotion and reflection in the Romantic period, writers unintentionally begin to deviate from traditional masculinity. It is for this reason why Romanticism can be viewed as a blurring of lines between the masculine and the feminine. The maintenance of masculine “cosmic self-assertion” and narcissism, paired with the effeminate, reflective, and emotional literature of later Romantic writers facilitates a blurring of gender norms and stereotypes in a century obsessed with upholding these social facts. This characteristic of Romanticism provides support for the argument that Mary Shelley is the paradigmatic English Romantic writer. In experiencing the yearning for creative self-expression and assertion vicariously through her social circle, she creates quintessential Romantic characters and storylines. In conjunction, her womanhood and implicit social subversion allow the writer to include critique of masculine tendencies, as well as the freedom to write traditionally feminine traits into her work, such as emotion, irrationality, etc. It is for this reason why *Frankenstein*, M. Shelley’s seminal work, is the paradigmatic piece of Romantic literature; the feminization of Romantic aesthetics and the inclusion of a traditionally Byronic titular character combine to create a piece of literature archetypal of the period as a whole.

Critique detailing or relying on normative assumption tends toward stereotype. This paper is by no means meant to reinforce the heteronormative dichotomy that continues to

pervade western society, but to use it as a lens through which one can view the literature of a period. For this paper, traits seen as masculine will be particularly domineering, while feminine traits reflect passivity. These assumptions come directly from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Women*, and are thus indicative of the period. The stereotypes used to synthesize critique are illustrative of the time period and, though not politically correct, remain social facts.

Though English Romanticism consists of primarily male writers, the archetypal characteristics of the period blur the gender binary. Traditionally, English Romanticism is characterized by a strong affinity towards nature, the importance of imagination and emotion, a concern for individualism and freedom from oppression, and an emphasis on introspection and human psychology. Were one to split these characteristics into two groups – those known to be historically masculine and traits indicative of femininity – the lists would be fairly even. As argued against in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Women*, nineteenth century women were often viewed as incapable of rational thought (Wollstonecraft 228). This inability is nearly synonymous with the subjective occasionalism professed by Carl Schmitt, as well as the general emphasis on imagination and emotion over reason and rules. In conjunction, the idea of Romanticism as a "titanic, cosmic self-assertion," as written by Bertrand Russell, as well as a tendency toward revolutionary politics and individualism is traditionally masculine, as it retains characteristics of the domineering. This claim is further supported by the texts of the English Romantic writers; nearly all include traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. In this paper, I will focus specifically on the writing of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and John Keats. These writers are specifically chosen to represent different periods and distinctions in the timeline of English Romanticism, and are thus most beneficial to the proving of this point.

As a poet traditionally acknowledged to be socially conservative (distrust of change, yearning for past, &c), William Wordsworth's definition of the poet supports the idea of English Romanticism as a combination of heteronormative gender stereotypes. Wordsworth writes that a poet is a, "man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (Wordsworth 299). This definition of the writer places importance on the individual, rather than his contribution to the community (as professed by Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry*). Emphasis on the individual promotes a self-righteous egotism, which – as result of its domineering nature – can be characterized as masculine. That a writer should have a "greater knowledge of human nature" and a "more comprehensive soul" places the individual above and apart from others, creating the traditional Romantic outsider trope. I contend that this renegade character is inherently masculine, and that it – as result – provides basis for the balancing of and engagement in the heteronormative gender binary.

In addition to providing traditionally masculine characteristics in his definition of the poet, William Wordsworth – seemingly without notice – places great emphasis on historically feminine traits. The phrase, "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness," is inherently feminine, as it emphasizes the place of emotion and a broad spectrum of feeling that should exist in the poet. This, again, provides support for the idea that English Romanticism is a period purported on a blurred gender dichotomy, as Wordsworth deftly moves between stereotypes for heteronormative genders within a single sentence. Evidence found in this seminal Romantic figure affirms the significance and validity of this argument.

In conjunction with Wordsworth, George Gordon – Lord Byron – embodies the blurred gender dichotomy implicit in English Romanticism. Though perceived as a traditionally masculine writer, emphasizing the importance of individuality and a heightened position above society, many of Byron's poetical characters – purportedly biographical – reflect historically feminine traits. The character of Childe Harold and the Byronic Hero trope further support this interpretation of English Romantic features.

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, a four-part poem written by Lord Byron in the early nineteenth century, exhibits nearly all quintessential characteristics of English Romanticism, and thus perpetuates a smearing of the heteronormative gender binary. The poem concerns the travels and reflections of Childe Harold. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* relies heavily on Romantic tropes, as it reflects disillusionment, the inability to participate in society, and solace in nature. The twelfth stanza of the third canto illustrates the titular character's inability to fit in: "But soon he knew himself the most unfit/Of men to herd with Man; with whom he held/little in common; untaught to submit/His thoughts to others, though his soul was quell'd/In youth by his own thoughts" (Byron 625, l. 100-104). This line provides both masculine and feminine characteristics indicative of English Romanticism. In writing that he is, "the most unfit of men to herd with Man," the speaker places himself in an imperious position, yet the reason for this inability is a heightened capacity to reflect and deliberate. Like most Romantic works, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, then, can be said to reflect an encompassing of heteronormative genders.

The character in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is characterized as a Byronic Hero, a trope fully encompassing characteristics indicative of English Romanticism, and thus engages in the gender binary. In an essay, Lord Macaulay defines Byron as, "a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet

capable of deep and strong affection” (Macaulay 678). Like many Romantic tropes, the Byronic Hero entertains both ends of the gender spectrum; in refusing to live as a part of society, the Byronic hero places himself above others in a defiant, domineering position. Additionally, the tendency toward cynicism and defiance, as well as bullish tenacity shown through revenge and affection, are traditionally masculine. However, using Macaulay’s definition, the Byronic Hero’s moodiness (re: the emotional aspect) illustrates a strikingly feminine quality.

As in the case of Wordsworth and Byron, the poetry of John Keats reflects a balance of traditionally masculine and feminine traits and subjects. Keats, however, presents an interesting case in his definition of a poet and his responsibilities. Additionally, his poetry tends to lean heavily on overtly feminine tropes, further decreasing the polarization of the dichotomy implicit in English Romanticism. This is seen in Keats’ definition of the poet, his idea of Negative Capability, and his *Ode to A Nightingale*.

Similar to Wordsworth’s, Keats’ definition of a poet provides evidence to support the aforementioned blurring of the gender binary. In a letter, Keats writes that a poet is the, “most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity – he is continually informing – and filling some other body” (Keats 1286). Additionally, he writes that, “The poetical character... is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character...” (Keats 1286). Though radically different from Wordsworth’s poet, Keats’ definition continues to provide traditionally Romantic characteristics; he is subject to events occurring around him and is only a vessel through which emotion flows. In the article, “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats,” Margaret Homans writes that, “when Keats defines his own poetic ideal against the bullying egotism of ‘Wordsworth &c,’ he defines what is not his mode as clearly masculine” (Homans 343). This is supported in a letter, wherein he writes, “We hate poetry that has a

palpable design upon us – and if we do not agree, seems to put its hands in its breeches pocket” (Keats 1287). Keats’ definition of a poet is characteristically feminine, as the poet is placed in a subordinate position (Homans 350). Rather than creating and interpreting, he merely conveys. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the importance of reason rather than rational thought. However, this definition – again, like Wordsworth’s – is inherently masculine; the poet remains apart from – and thus above – society.

In addition to this definition, Keats’ idea of Negative Capability, as detailed in a letter to his father and brother, is inherently feminine. Keats provides a description of this device: “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 1276). This idea is inherently feminine, as it relies on uncertainty rather than fact or reason, and is thus flippant, unpredictable, and predicated on emotion. This idea pervades much of Keats’ poetry, as well as the writing of other English Romantic writers. Keats’ poetry is thus a balance between the masculine and feminine, as he also includes outsider characters and a heightened sense of self. As a seminal figure of English Romanticism, Keats’ inclusion of this binary – as evidenced by his definition of the poet and idea of negative capability – further supports my claim.

The blurring of this dichotomy remains apparent in Keats’ poetry, specifically in his Odes. In his famous *Ode to a Nightingale*, the speaker declares jealousy for a bird, claiming that he’d like to return to the innocence that the nightingale experiences. Towards the climax of the poem, the speaker expresses a darker longing: “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time/I have been half in love with easeful Death,/Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,/To take into the air my quiet breath” (Keats 1251, l. 51-54). Negative capability appears in the last stanza, wherein Keats writes, “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/Fled is that music: – Do I



wake or sleep” (Keats 1251, l. 79-80)? This poem, a seminal work of English Romantic literature, illustrates both ends of the gendered dichotomy. The presence of Negative Capability, previously categorized as inherently feminine, provides an air of emotional flippancy. In contrast, the aloneness of the speaker and his implicit alienation from society is inherently masculine. Additionally, the poet poses a religious query; in examining the ability to die and become part of something eternal, the poet questions the existence of a god and afterlife. Though Keats has no answer (hence: Negative Capability), the question itself is inherently masculine, as it interrogates what is believed to be the highest power known to man.

The nature of English Romanticism is inherently torn between genders as purported by the heteronormative gender dichotomy. As outlined by Mary Wollstonecraft, masculine characteristics are seen as domineering and self-assertive, whereas feminine characteristics are primarily concerned with irrationality, emotion, and a servile societal position. The works of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and John Keats – as well as other English Romantics – provide significant support for this claim, as they rely heavily on the idea of an emotional, relatively irrational outsider character. In proving the presence of masculine and feminine qualities in the most seminal writers and works of English Romanticism, it can be assumed that the period itself relies heavily on both sides of the heteronormative dichotomy. Though this may seem a relatively obvious assertion, it is necessary to prove its presence and significance to support the idea of Mary Shelley as the archetypal English Romantic.

In her essay on the feminization of Romanticism, Mary Poovey writes that Mary Shelley is well worth consideration, as, “what seems to suggest a simple discrepancy between art and life actually points to a lifetime of self-division, the result of one woman’s attempt to conform simultaneously to two conflicting prescriptive models of behavior” (Poovey 332). To

extrapolate, the combination of Mary Shelley's upbringing and social position as manifest in her writing presents a balanced yet torn sense of self and gender identity. It is for this reason why M. Shelley is the paradigmatic English Romantic writer. Shelley's identity, unlike other Romantic writers, remains in a stasis of being ripped apart (re: Wordsworth's waterfall in *The Prelude*); as a woman, she is expected to conform to larger social norms, yet – as a Shelley and member of a Romantic troupe – is simultaneously expected to create work similar to that of her contemporaries. This split identity is highly indicative of the gender division in English Romanticism, as – in addition to including masculine traits and interpreting them through a critical lens – she includes the traditionally feminine characteristics as embraced by male Romantic writers. Shelley's careful balancing act of expectation manifests in her most famous novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

A cursory read of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* reveals the overwhelming presence of traditionally masculine English Romantic characteristics. Victor Frankenstein, a male, formally educated scientist, creates life from miscellaneous parts to create a monster. Following his creator's vehement rejection and society's inability to facilitate acceptance, the Creature embarks on a personalized killing spree, eliminating important characters in Victor Frankenstein's life. In addition to the masculinity implicit in this violence, as well as the potential interpretation of the Monster as a type of Byronic hero, the novel includes masculinity in the thematic discussion of egotism and the prioritization of physical science and rational thought.

The first and most pervasive example of a masculine characteristic in *Frankenstein* is the creation of life in one's own image and subsequent acknowledgement of self-assertion/egotism. Upon enrolling in University, Frankenstein becomes obsessed with the human form, choosing to

study, “those branches of natural philosophy which relate to physiology” (Shelley 30). He becomes obsessed with anatomy, as well as the, “natural decay and corruption of the human body” (Shelley 30). Though Victor Frankenstein’s obsession is relatively abstract and unconnected to a self-obsession, filling the role of Creator (hence: capital “c”), thus undermining divine creation, is an undoubtedly self-assertive action. Conjunctively, the question Victor poses challenges the presence of a Creator: “Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed” (Shelley 30)? These indicators combine to support the idea that Victor Frankenstein is, by nature, self-assertive, thus backing the belief that he stands as an example of traditional masculinity as purported by English Romantics. Additionally, the characteristic outsider figure, a mainstay of English Romanticism, is embodied by the most significant characters in the novel: Victor Frankenstein and his Monster. This outsider figure, as previously detailed in the works of Lord Byron and the Byronic Hero, is traditionally masculine, as he is – in some regard – better than those occupying the basic level of society.

In addition to the self-assertion implicit in Frankenstein’s creation of the Monster, the novel relies heavily on the inclusion of physical science and reason. The complete disregard for the humanities is overwhelmingly present in the scenes depicting Victor as a schoolboy and college student, as well as those portraying the creation of the Monster. This inclusion/exclusion is indicative of masculinity, as it prioritizes reason over emotion; hard, physical science is generally perceived as relying solely on reason and logic, whereas the humanities rely on emotion, subjective interpretation, and perception, and are thus viewed as feminine. According to Anne Mellor, a professor of English at UCLA, when Victor Frankenstein is, “engaged upon a rape of nature” (re: creating the Monster) and “usurp[ing] the female’s ‘hiding places,’” he exclusively uses technology. Mellor goes on to write that, “both he and the patriarchal society he

represents use the technologies of science and the laws of the polis to manipulate, control, and repress women” (Mellor). Not only does Victor Frankenstein neglect traditionally feminine branches of academia, but he uses technology to disavow women of their biological ability. The ignorance and rejection of the humanities and use of technology to subvert traditionally feminine abilities provides further evidence of the masculinity implicit in *Frankenstein*.

In addition to the inherently masculine traits, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is marked as a work containing feminine characteristics from the outset; the first edition of the novel was published anonymously. This action, a result of nineteenth century gender norms, indicates a tension in Shelley’s identity and treatment of gender similar to that of other English Romantic writers. As a woman, an anonymous publication would lead to greater success, yet, as a member of a Romantic circle, the publication itself reflects an assertive masculinity. Additionally, the different editions of *Frankenstein* reflect Shelley’s ambivalence; Poovey writes that the first edition is, “as bold and original a work as the novelist ever conceived,” and that Shelley, “explodes the foundations of Romantic optimism” (Poovey 332). However, in the 1831 edition of the novel, Shelley finds this self-assertion too bold; despite a lack of changes to the novel itself, Poovey writes that the added introduction, “wants to apologize for her [Shelley’s] adolescent audacity” (Poovey 335). This apology serves as a reminder of the author’s social position, proving that this struggle and deft engagement in both sides of the gender binary are apparent even before engaging in the text itself.

In addition to this socially catalyzed anonymity, *Frankenstein* reflects traditionally feminine characteristics through the inclusion of a deranged childbirth. The scene wherein Victor Frankenstein creates his Monster is marked with vocabulary reflecting impulsive, bodily, and involuntary actions. The text reads: “My limbs now tremble, and my eyes swim with the

remembrance; but then a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (Shelley 33). Words such as “tremble,” “frantic impulse,” “urged,” and “resistless,” synthesize an image not unlike that of a woman giving birth. This, in turn, attributes feminine characteristics to Victor Frankenstein, the creator of this life. Additionally, Frankenstein’s mental health declines directly following the “birth” of the Monster: “Mingled with this horror, I felt the bitterness of disappointment; dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space were now become a hell to me; and the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete” (Shelley 36). Any reader familiar with the condition immediately categorizes this mental state as a form of postpartum depression. As consequence, the birth and subsequent psychological and emotion adjustment in Victor Frankenstein provides overwhelmingly feminine events within the novel, further balancing the traditionally Romantic inclusion of the discussion of gender binary.

In conjunction with this childbirth and subsequent mental decline, Mary Shelley interacts with traditionally feminine behaviors and characteristics in the inclusion of women as autodidacts. This example directly engages in the seminal work of her mother: Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication for the Rights of Women*. Wollstonecraft speaks to this truism by stating, “In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason” (Wollstonecraft 227). This quotation harkens to the idea that reason, a supposedly innate ability, governs belief and virtue. It can be supposed, then, that reason as taught by books catalyzes within the reader the potential for a paradigm shift, which is indicative of recognizing one’s own beliefs through self-teaching. Additionally, Wollstonecraft writes of the woman’s education as being taught through imitation in the context of providing themselves to be perfect wives: “she should rely entirely on his understanding... Led by their dependent

situation and domestic employments more into society, what they learn is rather by snatches” (Wollstonecraft 228). In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the only ‘educated’ woman, Safie, the Turkish woman, learns primarily by self-teaching and imitation. With this inclusion, Shelley engages in the conversation of gender dichotomy as purported by previous and male English Romantic writers, as it further blurs the boundary by balancing masculine and feminine behaviors. It is also interesting to note that Frankenstein’s Creature learns through imitation and books, and – like Safie – occupies a subordinate societal role.

The most obvious engagement in *Frankenstein*’s femininity is the explicit criticism of egotism, as evidenced by the negative consequences of the Monster’s creation. In creating the Monster in his own image, Victor Frankenstein demonstrates egotism, (as previously mentioned) a societally defined masculine trait. However, the subsequent “failure” of this creation – the narrative and ideas expressed in the remaining chapters of the novel – provides a venomous critique of this arrogant narcissism. The Creature’s activities – e.g. killing individuals important to Frankenstein – provide redressive action for the creator’s egotism. This serves to subvert the masculine in favor of the feminine, further balancing the dichotomy and reinforcing the idea of Romanticism as an engagement in binary gender norms.

One may argue in favor of another English Romantic writer as a paradigm for the period. For example, the deft movement between gendered characteristics in the poetry of John Keats may rival Mary Shelley’s ability to fully encompass the binary; as a poet obsessed with emotion and feeling, Keats presents an interesting case. However, rather than directly engaging in femininity, Keats seeks to control it. In the essay, “Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe,” Greg Kucich attempts to analyze the inherently feminine qualities of Keats’ poetry. In reference to Marlon Ross’s essay on women’s poetry in Romanticism, Kucich writes that Keats ultimately

seeks to, “control feminine power by adopting an aggressively masculinist stance toward visionary experience” (Kucich 30). He continues on to state the presence of a feminine poetic identity, as Keats exists as a self with, “permeable ego boundaries that exist *only* in relation with others” (Kucich 33). These interpretations of Keats’ femininity describe it as existing only through his inherent masculinity; though Keats includes feminine characters in his work and letters, he only experiences them through a lens of masculinity. As result of Keats’ inability to fully encompass and enact feminine qualities, Shelley prevails as the writer most fully embracing the dichotomous Romantic characteristics. As a woman constantly reminded of her subordinate place in society, Shelley is able to interact directly with the more feminine characteristics. Instead of simply entertaining emotion, her societal position forces a full embrace of the feminine qualities of Romanticism.

Mary Shelley stands out as a paradigmatic figure when taking into consideration the idea of English Romanticism as a period in conversation with the heteronormative gender dichotomy. As stated in the first part of this paper, English Romanticism engages in traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics in order to create the period’s defining characteristics; while the outsider figure and narcissistic self-assertion provide evidence for the inclusion of masculinity, the feminine prioritization of emotion and introspection balance the dichotomy. Upon accepting this idea, Mary Shelley emerges as the archetypal Romantic figure. By participating in the man’s world of literature and accommodating peer and familial pressure to create, while simultaneously struggling with her place as a woman in society, Shelley presents an even and earnest balance between the genders. Unlike her contemporaries, Shelley’s is a legitimate struggle rather than engagement; rather than reflecting on and adapting both sides of the binary, she is forced to fully participate. This supports the idea of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* as the iconic

work of English Romantic literature. It is necessary to acknowledge this because of society's inability to acknowledge the work of women writers. Though Mary Shelley was not a poet, her work should be viewed as the preeminent writing of English Romanticism. Despite her husband's edits and *Frankenstein's* anonymous first publication, Shelley's work stands out as the writing most highly indicative of the period, and should be the first work mentioned in a discussion of English Romanticism.



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