

This special issue comes out of two ‘Romantic Novels’ seminar series, held in 2017 and 2018, inspired by the Romantic Bicentenary and hosted by the University of Greenwich.¹ Each of the twelve seminars focused on a novel published in either 1817 or 1818, which was introduced by an expert and then discussed by the group at large. By including well known writers such as Walter Scott and Mary Shelley as well as their prolific and popular but now forgotten contemporaries, such as Ann Hatton, the series asked questions about why some books continue to be studied 200 years after their initial publication, and others have all but disappeared. The seminars also allowed us to reposition ‘classic’ novels in the context of the varied literary marketplace in which they were originally printed, offering a window into how these novels differed from—but also resembled—their literary competitors.

The criteria for including a work in the series were that it should be a new work of fiction, first published in the year in question: either 1817 or 1818. We had good reasons for this approach. It allowed us to emphasize the year of publication as an important lens for [re]interpreting these texts, to ask how they might have worked at the moment of their first appearance. What might have struck contemporary readers about these novels? Can the experience of reading new novels in 1817 or 1818 be better reconstructed if we read a set of original fictions that are exact contemporaries, instead of focusing on the output of a single author, or publisher?

Although the novels spanned a range of genres including historical romance, domestic fiction, Gothic, didactic literature, and the national tale, and an array of authors and publishers, the selection of texts was not truly random or representative. From a field of roughly 110 novels published in Britain in these years, the sample of twelve chosen for study was influenced by considerations of accessibility, length, interest, and the expertise and availability of scholars sufficiently well versed in the texts.² Still, taken as a group, the sample of twelve books covered a range wide enough to respond to the calls of scholars to

move beyond reading what we already know how to read, to address questions of aesthetic value, and to contribute to the long overdue ‘reassess[ment of] just what Romantic novels actually are’.³

Despite the fact that the Romantic period saw a transformative rise in both the production and readership of the novel, surveys of fictional literature often ignore this period or regard it as problematic. Its so-called ‘generic promiscuity’ has been regarded as a challenge and apart from a handful of well-known names (Austen, Shelley, Scott), it has often, at least until recently, been seen as an embarrassment or a failure.⁴ According to Amanda Gilroy and Wil Nerhoeven, the Romantic novel remains ‘one of the most underresearched—or unevenly researched—areas of English literature’.⁵ Their 2001 special issue of *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* investigated the Romantic novel’s internationalism, politics, and aesthetics. More recently, scholars such as Robert Miles have suggested that the success of Walter Scott and Jane Austen in particular ‘distorts a retrospective view’ of the Romantic-era novel, leading to a misunderstanding of its modalities and ideological perspectives.⁶ Stephen Behrendt likewise argues that ‘the longstanding rejection of the many alternative forms of the Romantic novel’ relates to an ‘inability [...] to appreciate the social, political, and economic dimensions of these novels’.⁷ The disparagement of the Romantic novel may therefore result from ‘asking the wrong questions [...] so that we see what we expect to see rather than looking around on our own and seeing what is actually there before us’.⁸ In this issue of *Romantic Textualities*, we build on the work of these critics by examining a selection of five novels, both canonical and non, published in two consecutive years. The close reading of a varied group of texts which were issued within a narrow time frame opens up new possibilities for understanding their various ‘dimensions’—social, political, economic, literary, and historical—and paves the way for fresh insights into the novel in the period.

The reading that was undertaken by attendees of the 1817 and 1818 series did suggest fresh insights. In his chapter on ‘The Historical Novel’ in the *Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, Richard Maxwell alludes to the practice, once relatively widespread, of ‘working through Scott’s novels in sequence’:

Reading all the Waverley novels, often in order of composition (and even, in extreme cases, on an annual basis) was a known habit of pre-World War I enthusiasts [...]; this completist approach has its merits.⁹

Our reading group did not attempt this particular feat, nor can we claim that reading a total of twelve novels, six books each from two consecutive years, counts as ‘completist’. Yet there is something comparable here. Maxwell suggests that reading the Waverley novels in this way—all of them, from first to last— ‘suggests something of what it must have been like to have discovered them as they appeared on the scene, one by one, over some eighteen years’. It is here that the parallel lies.

There are, of course, limits and oddities created via this method. Gary Kelly points out the mismatch between modern scholarly prioritizations of new work, and what we know about what actually got read in the early nineteenth century:

Literary histories usually restrict themselves to ‘original’ works produced in a particular period, but most fiction circulating during the Romantic period had been produced earlier, working-class readers enjoyed past and contemporary fiction equally, and most of the fiction they read had been first published before the Romantic period.¹⁰

It is important to acknowledge this, and to accept that the approach of our reading group and of this edition—to focus on new fiction published in single, discrete years—whilst it may be

usefully and uniquely reconstructive in some ways (it is not, yet, usual practice to read ‘original’ Romantic fiction in batches per year of publication)—is distorting in others. If we follow Kelly’s account, in the reading habits our schedule inculcated, we were certainly not behaving much like working-class readers would have done in 1817 and 1818. Perhaps we were (to a degree) emulating some segment of the 1817-1818 reading population, however, namely users of circulating libraries. Anthony Mandal has highlighted the importance of circulating libraries in the Romantic period:

the biggest market for fiction was not the individual purchaser, but circulating libraries, which were one of the main success stories of the Romantic literary marketplace [...] Circulating-library owners could make a significant income from the demand for the latest works, as attested to by the fortunes of the Noble brothers in the 1780s, William Lane’s Minerva Library in the 1790s and Henry Colburn’s English and Foreign Circulating Library in the 1800s.¹¹

‘Demand for the latest works’ suggests that there was an appetite for newness in fiction, for what had just been published, and that the business model of circulating libraries was predicated on their provision of ‘the latest works’ in response to subscriber ‘demand’. The literary historical privileging of ‘original’ works is not anachronistic, from a reading experience point of view. There were readers reading new fiction for its newness, as well as readers who would have found it easier and cheaper to access older titles.

Mandal’s work on the relationship between Gothic and circulating libraries makes examples of *Northanger Abbey*’s Isabella Thorpe and Catherine Morland, identifying these two characters, along with the author who created them, as ‘circulating-library patrons’.¹² *Northanger Abbey* was also the novel we used to inaugurate our reading group series. This was, in some ways, an obvious choice. It made perfect sense from today’s perspective for the

first meeting of a seminar series concerning itself with Romantic novels to headline Jane Austen, the most famous representative of early nineteenth-century fiction we have. In other ways, though, Austen, and *Northanger*, were actually atypical of the series as a whole. Though it appeared in 1817, *Northanger Abbey* can more properly be regarded as a novel of the 1790s than of the 1810s, as Katie Halsey has explained:

Written in the late 1790s, finished in 1799, revised and accepted for publication in 1803, but not published until after Austen's death in December 1817 (though the title page read 1818), *Northanger Abbey* reveals many of the assumptions and prejudices about reading the Gothic romance that are also articulated in the social and cultural criticism of the period.¹³

The delay between composition and publication in the case of *Northanger Abbey* makes it oddly unlikely as a novel of 1817. The historical circumstances it is responding to are not the same as those Thomas Love Peacock is responding to in his 1817 work *Melincourt* (the second text we read for our 2017 series); its immediate contexts are different to those that informed Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* (the sixth and final novel we looked at in 2017, itself published on 30 December 1817). The gap mattered to Austen herself, who was aware of the changes in literary taste that had occurred over the course of nearly two decades, as well as the difference between her own early and late work. Halsey notes the tone of Austen's 1816 "Advertisement," in which [Austen] apologized for "those parts of the work which thirteen years have rendered obsolete". Halsey goes on to suggest that '*Northanger Abbey* must have felt to her like a rather risky endeavour in a marketplace that was just beginning to value the verisimilitude of her own later novels'.¹⁴

Northanger Abbey was not a typical novel of 1817, then, but it was published in 1817—never mind the title page—and therefore it could be included in the first year of the series. Besides, something we learnt quite swiftly is that no single novel could be said to be typical of British novels en masse, sharing a year of publication and little else. We also learnt quickly that Austen’s novelistic sensibilities were atypical for her time anyway, especially her interest in psychological realism. Despite what Deidre Shauna Lynch designates as Romantic Gothic fiction’s ‘interest in morbid psychology’ and ‘the period’s new psychological case histories’, Austen’s attention to internal thought processes and the texture of subjectivities is quite different to the more extreme ‘mental anatomies’ that we encountered frequently in the fiction of these years.¹⁵ Characters that post-Freudian, postmodern readers would recognise as ‘real’ or ‘realistic’ were arguably confined to the Scott and Austen novels. Therefore, while no single novel was quite typical of other novels, Austen was even less typical than usual, and not just because her novel of 1817 was really a novel of 1799.

In fact, the 1790s aspect of *Northanger Abbey*, far from distancing it from other works published in 1817 and 1818 that were actually prepared shortly beforehand, proved to be a point it had in common with them. The seismic changes wrought by the French Revolution had not faded from novelists’ views by the 1810s. History had not gone away. While the Napoleonic wars were certainly more recent and immediate contexts from the perspective of 1817 and 1818 than the fall of the Bastille or the Burke/Paine debate, those originary events (from which so much followed) were very evidently still in writers’ minds over two decades later. *Frankenstein*, the novel with which we chose to launch the 1818 series, provided perhaps the clearest examples of the persistence of 1790s thought into the 1810s. As James Grande points out in his essay included here, that Mary Shelley’s novel is steeped in the political and philosophical traditions of the revolutionary generation is apparent as soon as

we encounter the dedication. This famously reads: ‘To William Godwin, Author of *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams*, &c, These Volumes are respectfully inscribed by The Author’. The anonymous publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818 meant that it would not have been apparent to most of its original readers that this dedication was not just from one author to another, but from a daughter to her father. Many readers, however, would have been able to ascertain from a glance at the dedication, the likely political tendency of the book. Not only is Godwin, one of the most 1790s of writers, name checked, but he appears there along with the titles of his most 1790s of works—*Political Justice* (1793) and *Caleb Williams* (1794)—both of them preoccupied with social and political tyrannies. Grande also highlights Susan Wolfson’s recent research into the chronology of *Frankenstein*. This reads fictional events from the novel (its ‘internal calendrics’, in Wolfson’s terms) as mapping on to dates from the 1790s that had either private or public significance to Mary Shelley. For instance, Wolfson dates the beginning of Victor’s studies to 1789, a key year in revolutionary history, and Victor’s death to 1797, the year Mary Wollstonecraft died as a result of complications following Mary Shelley’s birth.¹⁶

Several of the Romantic authors discussed in our series used their novels to make explicit political protests that had their roots earlier in the Romantic period. Ann Hatton’s four-volume Minerva Press potboiler, *Gonzalo de Baldivia* (1817), for example, incorporates a searing abolitionist critique which is heralded on its title page by a dedication to William Wilberforce. *Gonzalo* has an international scope that takes the reader from the capture of slaves in West Africa, via the brutal ‘middle passage’, to the slave-worked silver mines of Peru, a site of Spanish colonial magnificence and exploitation. The novel culminates in a spectacular insurrection (inspired by the 1804 slave revolt in Haiti) in which the melodramatic and political strands of the novel come together as the slave Ozembo, who functions as a ‘noble savage’ character, rips out the heart of the eponymous anti-hero,

Baldivia. While the heroine Rosaviva argues passionately on several occasions that the slaves are in fact thinking and feeling beings, it is the male (English) hero who articulates in nationalistic terms the novel's full anti-slavery, anti-Catholic message:

‘Yonder [...] lies the island of Great Britain, the land of liberty, the mart of commerce, the nursery of science, the emporium of arts, where, instructed by the wisest laws, and inspired by the purest religion, its legislators have abolished, and for ever, the inhuman traffic for slaves’.¹⁷

In the fourth volume the main characters relocate to England and the grand-scale violence and international trajectory of the slave narrative(s) give way to a domestic Gothic/sentimental plotline lacking any overtly polemical content. For a modern audience this abrupt shift signals the difficulties Hatton had in marrying the various subplots and subgenres in her novel, but these inconsistencies were likely far less troubling for contemporary readers, who were accustomed to such generic variegations.

Thomas Love Peacock's comic novel *Melincourt* (1817) also rails against the institution of slavery but the protest here takes the form of an ‘anti-saccharine fete’. This sugar-free dinner is hosted by the heroine Antheia Melincourt's love interest, Sylvan Forester, who aims to persuade his company to abstain from this West-Indian-produced luxury: ‘What would become of slavery if there were no consumers of its produce?’¹⁸ In an impassioned after-dinner speech, Mr. Forester, who was apparently modelled after Peacock's friend Percy Bysshe Shelley, lectures his guests on the ‘morally atrocious’ and ‘politically abominable’ commodity of sugar, which he identifies as ‘the primary cause of the most complicated corporeal suffering and the most abject mental degradation that ever outraged the form and polluted the spirit of man’.¹⁹ Though the novel's polyvocality can make it difficult to pinpoint where Peacock's beliefs truly lie, the fact that Mr. Forester manages to

convince some of his guests to join his sugar boycott suggests the sincerity of the novel's critique of slavery. Our speaker for the session on *Melincourt*, Freya Johnston, argued that the urgency of the political situation was being felt with particular force when Peacock was composing *Melincourt*, and pointed out that its publication in 1817 coincided with parliament's suspension of Habeas Corpus. Habeas Corpus had previously been suspended under Pitt, from 1794-5, and from 1798-1801.²⁰

Social and political messages of a different kind also surface in the depictions of contemporary Ireland that we encountered in many of the novels. For instance, according to Simon Avery's introductory talk, Patrick Brontë's *The Maid of Killarney* (1818), can be considered an Irish national tale that endorses a conservative idea of progress. The novel opens with the English hero, Albion, admiring the picturesque Killarney landscape, and soon sees him admiring the beautiful native Flora, whose name suggests her affinity with the Irish natural world and, by extension, its traditional culture. With frequent debates between characters on topics such as religion, poverty, and the legal system, Brontë puts forward his 'radical Tory' ideas about gradual reform (as compared to violent revolution). The marriage of Albion and Flora at the novel's close signifies Brontë's endorsement of a peaceful union between England and Ireland.

The symbolic resonances of other Irish tales, such as Sydney Owenson's intricately plotted and highly allusive *Florence Macarthy* (1818), are not as easy to parse. Owenson is clearly concerned with the history and contemporary politics of Ireland, and engages with themes of inheritance and dispossession throughout the novel. As in so many Irish tales, the final volume culminates in a wedding, here between the Anglo-Irish General Walter de Montenay Fitzwalter, and the patriotic Florence Macarthy, Lady Clancare. The Dunore castle and lands are at long last rescued from 'the oppression of petty, delegated authority, and [...] the neglect and absence of its natural protectors', and the concluding maxim—'IRELAND

CAN BEST BE SERVED IN IRELAND’—is a clear enough statement of the need for Ireland to have its own, home-grown leadership.²¹ Yet the marriage of these cosmopolitan figures does not offer the stabilising symbolic union of *The Maid of Killarney* or even of Owenson’s earlier *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), and Owenson’s vision of a political future is uncertain.

Moreover, the literary and personal self-consciousness of Owenson’s posturing in *Florence Macarthy* adds layers of complexity to her portrait of Ireland. The heroine is, after all, an author of Irish fiction who enjoys an international celebrity, and she ultimately reveals that the novel we are reading is one of her literary productions (‘I shall take the liberty of putting myself in my own book [...] under the title of – *Florence Macarthy*’).²² This nod to Owenson’s own literary reputation, and perhaps to her past performance of her role as the Wild Irish Girl, raises questions of authenticity. As Jenny McAuley has argued, the copious ‘citations, parallels and intertexts highlight the extent to which Owenson regarded not only Ireland, but also women in her society, as having been constructed (and possibly distorted) by texts’.²³ Owenson’s self-reflexivity in the novel implies her interest in interrogating such constructions. *Florence Macarthy* thus fits with Claire Connolly’s argument about the inadequacy of the ‘national tale’ designation when it comes to the diversity of Irish fiction produced in the Romantic period.²⁴

Although William Godwin’s *Mandeville* is subtitled ‘a Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England’, it also, in large part, concerns itself with Ireland. The dedication gives us a clue to what these concerns are: Godwin inscribed *Mandeville* ‘To the memory of the sincerest friend I ever had, the late John Philpot Curran, (who a few days since quitted this mortal stage)’. In introducing the novel at the seminar, Jenny McAuley highlighted the sort of statement Godwin was making by dedicating *Mandeville* to Curran. The editorial notes to the Godwin Diary Website explain that Curran was ‘lead counsel for the leaders of the 1798

rebellion' in Ireland.²⁵ James Kelly's *ODNB* entry on Curran concludes that his 'sympathies were with the United Irish leadership from the mid-1790s'.²⁶ Godwin is sometimes credited with indirectly helping exculpate John Horne Tooke, Thomas Hardy, and John Thelwall from charges of high treason in 1794, via the arguments he made in his pamphlet, *Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre*. An apocryphal story has the recently exonerated Horne Tooke taking Godwin's hand and kissing it, pronouncing "I can do no less for the hand that saved my life!".²⁷ Curran's intervention on behalf of the Irish rebels was much more direct, though less successful: 'Curran's eloquent defence was insufficient to prevent a capital verdict'.²⁸ But Curran's defence worked in other cases, and both before and after the 1798 treason trials in Ireland, Curran was a crucial figure in Irish radical politics.

Mandeville, like novels by Jane Porter and Charles Robert Maturin that we read as part of the scheme, is not only interested in historical legacies, but can be vehemently contemporary too. This double vision also applies to Peacock's *Melincourt*. Gary Dyer has commented that in *Melincourt*, 'Peacock emphasises immediacy':

By depicting or evoking rotten boroughs, sinecure-holding intelligentsia, West Indian slavery, and other ills, he brings politics to center stage, and the allusions to very recent writings like *The Statesman's Manual* (published three months earlier, in December 1816), make *Melincourt* seem as up to date as the latest number of *The Edinburgh Review*.²⁹

Up-to-dateness is registered in different ways by different authors, but several texts were notable for their treatment of war. This was true of Jane Porter's *The Pastor's Fireside* (1817), as well the *The Fast of St Magdalen* (1818), which was written by her sister, Anna Maria Porter. Both Porter experts who joined us to speak to these texts, Thomas McLean and Fiona Price, noted the Porter family's interest in battle scenes. Price commented on the

precision with which Anna Maria Porter plotted battles, in *The Fast of St Magdalen* as well as her earlier and more famous work, *The Hungarian Brothers* (1807). *The Fast of St Magdalen* opens with a depiction of a town under siege:

At the close of the year 1508, a small Pisan town in the Appenines was stormed and taken by the Florentines.

The assault had been made at midnight; and the confusion of darkness was thus added to the customary horrors of war.

To the continued roar of artillery (reverberated by mountain echoes) succeeded the less deafening, but more dreadful sound of the rush of troops, the clamour of pursuit, and the cry of quarter!³⁰

The Porter sisters were influenced in this practice by their brother, Robert Kerr Porter, ‘an accomplished military painter’ who, in 1799, ‘became a great pioneer in the field of military panorama painting’.³¹ Richard Maxwell has written about the impact of Robert Kerr Porter’s work on Jane Porter’s novels in particular:

she was delighted with her brother’s virtuoso performance [...] [her] ambitious war scenes [...] show a military eye for the topographic placement of soldiers, as well as considerable flair for describing the way that a battle develops and for the way that troops move about over a particularized terrain [...] Prose fiction is hardly the ideal medium for such kinetic representations, but Jane convincingly marries strategic movement to the forces of history.³²

Maxwell goes on to explain that the combination of military precision and a propensity to be ‘fascinated by the idea of national resistance movements’, meant that the Porter sisters’

novels were often read as ‘stag[ing] tacit confrontations with [Napoleon] who, for his part, did Jane the honor of banning *The Scottish Chiefs*’. For Maxwell, Jane Porter can take credit for having ‘helped turn historical fiction in a certain sort of strategic, landscape-oriented, and panoramic direction’ and ‘thus intimidating the greatest general of her day’.³³

The Scottish Chiefs was published in 1810, in the middle of the Napoleonic wars. *The Pastor’s Fireside* and Anna Maria’s *Fast of St Magdalen* are post-Napoleonic novels. *Frankenstein*, too, has been read in this light. Gary Kelly’s seminal study *English Fiction of the Romantic Period* includes a Napoleonic reading of Mary Shelley’s novel:

Out of [the French Revolution] arose a titan, a ‘modern Prometheus’, a heroic transgressor in the name of humanity, the self-proclaimed embodiment of the Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte, whose career had only just been halted when Mary Shelley began her novel in 1816.³⁴

This post-war mood, the sense of things ‘only just’ at a halt, is marked in many of these novels, but perhaps most distinctly in Charles Robert Maturin’s *Women; or, Pour et Contre* (1818), ‘set in Dublin at the time of Napoleon’s first defeat’.³⁵

In volume two of *Women*, several pages are devoted to how the news of this is received in Dublin:

Happy those who could read, and happy even those who could only get others to read to them, the great talismanic words of—‘Entrance of the Allies into Paris—Overthrow of the Buonaparte Dynasty—Restoration of the Bourbons’—all *exclusive intelligence* that day received. Then the shops where the papers were sold. They could not have been more beset had the salvation of mankind depended upon the working of the press.³⁶

This chapter of the novel, where we learn that, as the story hit the city, ‘Nothing ever was like the tumult in Dublin that day, and many a following one’, reads more like reportage documenting recently eye-witnessed history than fiction.³⁷ It also dates this section of the plot very precisely to April 1814. As the episode concludes, Maturin gestures toward a more conclusive era-ending event:

The general sentiment was certainly that of joy. The appalling, supernatural greatness of Buonaparte had terrified even those who wished him well, and men seemed relieved, as from the spell of an enchanter. His very well wishers were glad he was checked; *checked only*, as they hoped, not overthrown. The violet blossomed again in their imaginations; they did not foresee its final blast at Waterloo.³⁸

Maturin’s *Women*, like Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, is a novel whose content and meaning is partly determined by the recentness of the cessation of hostilities in Europe from the point of view of 1818.

The public spectacle that ensues in response to news of Napoleon in Maturin’s novel is one example of the book’s broader fascination with theatre and personae. The performance of politics and the politics of performance are themes integral to *Women*. Interest in the relationship between dramatic lives and Dramatic lives, particularly those of women, recurs throughout texts chosen for the 1817 and 1818 series. From the stage acting of Zaira Dalmatiani in *Women*, to the lute playing of Rosalia in *The Fast of St Magdalen*, to the poetry of the brilliant if mentally unstable Ellen in *Maid of Killarney*, women in so many of the novels we read unsettle the dichotomy of public and private realms through their performances. Paid stage work, of course, seems a particular source of unease, as is evident in the character of Maturin’s Zaira, a literary descendant of Germaine de Staël’s Corinne. The beautiful, expressive, and experienced Zaira easily attracts the attention of the hero

Charles De Courcey with her powerful stage presence, and he eventually breaks off his engagement with the devout Eva to follow this fascinating actress to France. Though Zaira is punished ultimately by losing De Courcey and learning that the woman she stole him from (Eva) is in fact her daughter, Zaira arguably proves a more sympathetic character than either De Courcey or Eva. Female performance is everywhere a double-edged sword: powerful yet dangerous, captivating yet transgressive.

Though not a performer per se, one of the strongest female characters we encountered across the novels we read was Walter Scott's Diana Vernon, whose masculine education, independence, and political savvy make her an advantageous educator for the hero Frank Osbaldistone. With the tenacity of one 'who was accustomed to mind nobody's opinion but her own', and the quick wit necessary to get the better of Frank in conversation, Diana easily steers him throughout the novel, helping him to avert the snares of the cunning Rashleigh and to succeed on his quest to recover his father's credit.³⁹ When Diana chastises Frank for wasting time writing poetry when he could be more productively employed, he feels acutely 'the childishness of [his] own conduct, and the superior manliness of Miss Vernon's'.⁴⁰ As Judith Wilt remarks, 'It is their lack of resemblance to the conventional of their sex that attracts Diana and Frank to each other [...] Diana virtually orders Frank into male action'.⁴¹ Of course their eventual marriage sees the end of this gender role reversal. Still, the spirited dialogue between Frank and Diana and the degree of psychological realism that imbues her characterisation make for an interesting comparison with Austen's women, whose complex character development and agency have long been recognised.

Diana also has similarities with Peacock's eponymous Anthea Melincourt, who articulates feminist ideas indebted to Mary Wollstonecraft. In a conversation with Mr. Forester and Mr. Fax about female education, she rails against the practice of treating women

‘only as pretty dolls’ and subjecting them to ‘the fripperies of irrational education’, and argues for equal treatment of the sexes:

In that universal system of superficial education which so studiously depresses the mind of women, a female who aspires to mental improvement will scarcely find in her own sex a congenial associate; and the other will regard her as an intruder on its prescriptive authority, its legitimate and divine right over the dominion of thought and reason.⁴²

Mr. Forester’s progressive ideas—and suitability as a love match for Anthelia—are proven by the support he lends her in this argument and in particular by his self-referential statement that there are men ‘who can appreciate justly that most heavenly of earthly things, an enlightened female mind’.⁴³ Peacock does not develop character in the manner of Austen or Scott, of course, preferring stagey dialogue, stylised characters, and caricatured set-pieces to psychological realism. However, the examples of Diana Vernon and Anthelia Melincourt remind us that (proto)feminist characters exist beyond the pages of Austen’s domestic narratives and appear in a variety of styles and modes.

Reading the twelve novels of 1817 and 1818, in 2017 and 2018, illuminated not only the range of fiction available in the late Romantic period, but also the dialogues that emerged between these texts. Since many were composed concurrently, this is not so much a matter of direct influence as an effect of the zeitgeist. That *Melincourt* and *Gonzalo de Baldivia* share an interest in the abolition movement, for instance, does not imply that Hatton had read Peacock, or vice versa. Godwin’s diary does record his reading of Scott’s *Rob Roy*, and Owenson’s *Florence Macarthy* in 1818, but neither could have influenced 1817’s *Mandeville* (though it is possible that *Mandeville* could have influenced Scott and Owenson).⁴⁴ The articles collected here represent some of what we came to see as the most pressing and

persistent topics articulated across the fiction we read, and what was discussed at the seminars.

In the first article of the issue, Juliet Shields tackles the issue of genre, and reads *Rob Roy* in terms of Gothic romance and ‘the adventure story’. Shields argues that by weaving these together into a ‘modern version of the chivalric quest’ that nevertheless feels haunted by ancestral relics, Scott explores attitudes to commerce and landed property revealing of both his own financial circumstances and national economic anxieties at the time he was writing.

Richard Gough Thomas’s work on *Mandeville* starts from the premise that the work is Godwin’s ‘most conspicuously Gothic’ novel. For Thomas, the anti-realist feeling of *Mandeville* has less to do with the structure of the work (which is part of what Shields argues gives *Rob Roy* its romance), and more to do with its oversaturation with personal and historical trauma. Thomas considers the possible impact of biographical factors on the tone of Godwin’s 1817 publication, as well as the broader ‘contemporary resonance’ at that time of a work of fiction that tackles the aftermath of sectarian violence. The essay suggests possible links between the intensity of religious feeling explored in the book and Godwin’s readings in Dissenting history and life writing.

James Grande’s essay situates *Frankenstein* in terms of its reception by readers first encountering it in 1818. Grande looks across from Mary Shelley’s novel to the contexts and debates that were topical when it appeared, and contemplates how these might have determined the way it was read then.

The remaining two articles address the role of the female author in the Romantic literary marketplace. Departing from scholarship that emphasises Sydney Owenson’s *Florence Macarthy* as an Irish national tale, Sonja Lawrenson argues that this novel can also

be read as a challenge to masculine modes of textual production. Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Lawrenson argues, *Florence Macarthy* privileges palimpsestic rewriting over solitary creative autonomy. Instead of the macabre scientific experiments of *Frankenstein*, the technological modernity of *Florence Macarthy* is epitomised by the kaleidoscope, an 1815 invention which soon became a widely available toy, and which serves as a fitting symbol of the novel's performative, eclectic, and populist elements as well as a metaphor for the author's 'prismatic' style of creative production.

Anna M. Fitzer also discusses Alicia LeFanu's *Helen Monteagle* (1818) as a meditation on the craft of Romantic prose fiction, and more specifically the female purveyors of it. Like Owenson, LeFanu implicitly responds to critics in critiquing the tiresome standards of female character as well as the unjust assumptions about the quality and effect of novels on women readers. It is no coincidence, Fitzer suggests, that *Helen Monteagle* resonates with the satirical texts produced by LeFanu's female contemporaries, many of whom were, in the late 1810s, implicitly responding to Lord Byron's outlandish attacks on literary women.

The articles contained in this special issue offer new insights into the five texts covered—*Rob Roy*, *Mandeville*, *Frankenstein*, *Florence Macarthy*, and *Helen Monteagle*—by drawing attention to some of the commercial, environmental, historical, technological, and literary contexts that informed their production and reception. In doing so, they not only help to paint a fuller and more nuanced picture of the literary marketplace of the post-Napoleonic Romantic period, but also to showcase a historical contextual framework that allows us to reconsider classic novels, as well as providing a 'way in' to the often bewildering generic and stylistic range of non-canonical fiction of the period. In this way this special issue responds to Stephen Behrendt's anxiety that we may be 'asking the wrong questions' of these texts. The work presented here suggests the kinds of questions we can ask of non-canonical novels in order to extend our understanding both of the literary field in the Romantic period as well as

the qualities of the texts that we now take for granted as canonical. Such questions avoid the pigeon-holing tendencies that can inadvertently arise when studying both little known works and their famous counterparts from the perspective of an imagined (and misleadingly teleological) consensus about which literary productions ‘deserve’ certain reputations, and why.

¹ These two series were generously co-funded by the University of Greenwich, Canterbury Christ Church University, Romantic Bicentennials, and the British Association for Romantic Studies (BARS).

² The twelve Romantic novels we covered across the two series, in order of study, are: Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Thomas Love Peacock’s *Melincourt* (1817), William Godwin’s *Mandeville* (1817), Jane Porter’s *The Pastor’s Fire-Side* (1817), Ann Hatton’s *Gonzalo de Baldivia* (1817), Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy* (1817), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Sydney Owenson’s *Florence Macarthy* (1818), Patrick Brontë’s *The Maid of Killarney* (1818), Susan Ferrier’s *Marriage*, Anna Maria Porter’s *The Fast of St. Magdalen* (1818), and Charles Maturin’s *Women* (1818).

³ Stephen Behrendt, ‘Questioning the Romantic Novel’, *Studies in the Novel*, 26 (1994), 5-25 (p. 9).

⁴ Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven, ‘The Romantic-era Novel: A Special Issue’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 34 (2001), 147-62 (p. 147).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶ Robert Miles, *Romantic Misfits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 135.

⁷ Behrendt, pp. 14-15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹ Richard Maxwell, ‘The Historical Novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Richard Maxwell and Katie Trumpener (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 65-87 (p. 76).

¹⁰ Gary Kelly, ‘Fiction and the Working Classes’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, pp. 207-33 (p. 208).

¹¹ Anthony Mandal, ‘Gothic and the Publishing World, 1780–1920’, in *The Gothic World*, ed. by Glennis Byron and Dale Townsend (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 159-71 (p. 160).

¹² Mandal, p. 159.

¹³ Katie Halsey, ‘Gothic and the History of Reading, 1764-1830’, in *The Gothic World*, pp. 172-84 (p. 174).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176-7.

¹⁵ Deidre Shauna Lynch, ‘Gothic Fiction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, pp. 47-64 (p. 58). For the term ‘mental anatomies’, see William Dean Brewer, *The Mental Anatomies of William Godwin and Mary Shelley* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001).

¹⁶ Susan J. Wolfson, ‘Timelines’, in *The Annotated Frankenstein* (London: Belknap Press, 2012), pp. 353-60 (p. 353, p. 358, p. 359).

¹⁷ Ann Hatton, *Gonzalo de Baldivia*, 4 vols (London: Minerva Press, 1817), III, p. 298.

¹⁸ Thomas Love Peacock, *Melincourt* (London: Macmillan, 1896), p. 208.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁰ Marc Baer, *The Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) pp. 89-90.

²¹ Sydney Owenson, *Florence Macarthy*, ed. by Jenny McAuley (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 366, p. 367.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 264.

²³ Jenny McAuley, ‘Introduction’, in *Florence Macarthy*, ed. by Jenny McAuley (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. vii-xx (p. xvi).

²⁴ Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790-1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 4.

²⁵ See *The Diary of William Godwin*, ed. by Victoria Myers, David O’Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010) <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/people/CUR01.html#CUR01-notes>> [accessed 11 December 2019], editorial notes for ‘Curran, John Philpot’.

²⁶ James Kelly, ‘Curran, John Philpot (1750–1817), politician and lawyer’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

<<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-6950>> [accessed 11 December 2019].

²⁷ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (London: Colburn, 1825), p. 56.

²⁸ Kelly, 'Curran, John Philpot'.

²⁹ Gary Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 117.

³⁰ Anna Maria Porter, *The Fast of St Magdalen* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1818) I, p. 1.

³¹ Maxwell, p. 74.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁴ Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (Harlow: Longman, 1989), p. 191.

³⁵ Ina Ferris, 'The Irish novel 1800-1829', in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction of the Romantic Period*, pp. 235-49 (p. 245).

³⁶ Charles Robert Maturin, *Women*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1818), II, p. 167.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³⁹ Walter Scott, *Rob Roy*, ed. by Ian Duncan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 127.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁴¹ Judith Wilt, *Secret Leaves: The Novels of Walter Scott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 66.

⁴² Peacock, pp. 117-18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁴ For records of the reading Godwin undertook in 1818 see *The Diary of William Godwin*.