

## Communities of Women Writers in the Romantic Period

### The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in the Romantic Period

Edited by Devoney Looser.

Cambridge University Press, 2015.  
xxix + 238 pages.

5 B/W illustrations. Paperback. \$29.99.

Review by Elizabeth Chang.

Distinguished Austen scholar and editor of this volume, Devoney Looser puts forward in her preface the following plainly-stated declaration: “Some have questioned whether we ought to continue to study women’s writings separately from men’s. I believe there is value in doing so.” Readers of this essay collection, whether researchers, teachers, or students, will likely bring their own expectations of the necessity of such continued study. But Looser’s assertion marks the clarity of this volume’s intentions—intentions that are amply fulfilled by the volume’s contents. Certain to be of great use to a range of readers, this companion’s essays will also spur necessary future research developing the vast possibilities of women’s literary contributions in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The remarkably distinguished range of scholars contributing essays to this collection both model and encourage further inquiry. Essays considering the major genres of Romantic-era writing—“Poetry” by Stephen Behrendt, “Fiction” by Anthony Mandal, “Drama” by Catherine Burroughs, “Essays and Political Writing” by Anne K. Mellor, “Travel Writing” by Elizabeth A. Fay, and “Historical Writing” by Crystal B. Lake—of course examine the formal and stylistic characteristics of women’s writing in contrast to men’s writing. These differences were often dictated by station and opportunity—women’s travel writing concerned different scenes and subjects from men’s—but also by other factors of influence, experience, and inclination, as demonstrated

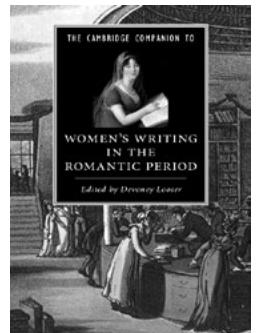
especially in the section on women’s fiction. But, perhaps more importantly, these essays also help us attend anew to the categories of literary genre in the Romantic era more generally, because they all emphasize the magnitude of contributions by women in each genre yet to be given scholarly attention. Once retrieved, these currently unknown writings will shift our understandings of what the nature of Romantic-era fiction, for example, might generally be held to be. But such retrievals will only happen, this collection suggests, if we continue to value women’s writing as its own distinct area of focus.

In addition to the essays on literary genres, the collection includes important contributions on thematic concerns—“The Gothic” is surveyed by Angela Wright—as well as issues surrounding literary production—including “Writing in Wartime” by Catherine Ingrassia, and “The Economics of Female Authorship” by Jacqueline Labbe—and also important broader social and cultural contexts: “Enlightenment Feminism and the Bluestocking Legacy” by Caroline Franklin, “The Global Context” by Deirdre Coleman, “Social, Familial and Literary Networks” by Julie Carlson, “National Identities and Regional Affiliations,” by Fiona Price, “Sexualities” by Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, and Looser’s own contribution in the field of “Age and Aging.” Details of the breadth of contributions indicated by these titles are too great to cover thoroughly here, though readers can expect, as with all Cambridge Companions, that the individually-authored essays will give a sense of both the contradictions as well as the agreements in scholarly surveys of the field. The themes indicated by these chapter titles are not presented as universally-agreed-upon keywords, but rather, and far more interestingly, as opportunities for working through the problems and possibilities embedded within all conceptual frameworks. Readers will also be interested to note that in addition to the generic and recuperative concerns already mentioned,

the volume gives thoughtful attention to the issue of periodization in the Romantic era as well. Additionally, the essays also expose the reader to a range of methodological approaches current in academic scholarship, with quantitative approaches to bibliography powered by print and electronic databases evident in the “Fiction” chapter, for example.

Of particular interest to readers of JASNA will be the wide-ranging attention to the writings of Jane Austen. Though in no danger of falling into obscurity, Jane Austen has a place within the historical bounds of the Romantic period that has been, in pre-1970s scholarship, little evident. These essays make clear that Austen can be read—and re-read—productively within the communities of women writers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This goes well beyond the implications of *Northanger Abbey*, a novel whose debts to preceding Gothic novels by women are nicely nuanced here, and extends to considerations of the expression of female sexuality, global slavery networks, and interactions between publishers and authors. Readers will benefit both from the attention to Austen as an exemplary figure in the field as well as the effort to shift the balance of the field away from Austen’s dominant exemplarity.

Overall, the collection succeeds in achieving Looser’s editorial goal: to emphasize the range of reasons—literary, historical, and social—that we append to Romantic-era women’s writings. It will surely succeed in furthering the discussion it ably surveys. A very helpful guide to further reading, included at the end of the volume, will assist scholars carrying forward the work of this collection.



Elizabeth Chang is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri.