

ROMANTICISM
& GENDER

ANNE K. MELLOR

PR
468
F46 M45
1993

FOR LYNNE TIDABACK HANLEY
in sisterhood

Published in 1993 by

Routledge
An imprint of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mellor, Anne Kostelanetz.

Romanticism and gender / by Anne K. Mellor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-90111-1 (HB) ISBN 0-415-90664-4 (PB)

1. English literature—Women authors—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. English literature—19th century—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 3. English literature—18th century—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 4. Feminism and literature—Great Britain—History. 5. Women and literature—Great Britain—History. 6. Authorship—Sex differences. 7. Romanticism—Great Britain. 8. Sex role in literature. I. Title.

PR468.F46M45 1992

820.9'9287'09034—dc20

92-22902

CIP

ISBN 0-415-90111-1 (HB)

ISBN 0-415-90664-4 (PB)

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knowledge of the world, she *must* have received benefit of *greater* importance. (214, my emphasis)

Elizabeth's—or women's—gratitude is carefully differentiated by Jane Austen from male gratitude in affairs of the heart. Whereas female gratitude derives from financial need and women's restricted access to "knowledge of the world," male gratitude is based on little more than vanity. As Jane Austen tells us in *Northanger Abbey*, although Henry Tilney sincerely loved Catherine Morland,

I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude; or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine's dignity,

she continues parodically, "but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own" (*Northanger Abbey*, ch. 30). Where men proceed from gratitude to love and esteem, women move from love and esteem to gratitude.

Even after her marriage, Elizabeth remains grateful, and subservient, to Darcy. Discussing his friendship with Bingley,

Elizabeth longed to observe that Mr. Bingley had been a most delightful friend; so easily guided that his worth was invaluable; but she checked herself. She remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at; and it was rather too early to begin. (256)

Elizabeth must censor her comments to Darcy; she cannot now—and may never be able to—mock him. As Joseph Allen Boone has shrewdly commented, "The impulse to give Darcy time to grow, of course, is both endearingly human and humane, but it subtly reinforces Elizabeth's future role, as wife, to wait rather than initiate."²⁶

Elizabeth's dependency on Darcy is sharply defined, as always in Jane Austen's fiction, in terms of money.²⁷ Even though Elizabeth is Darcy's wife, she has only a very small personal income at her disposal. When Lydia asks her to get Wickham a place at court, she refuses. However, "such relief as it was in her power to afford, by the practice of what might be called economy in her own private expenses, she frequently sent them" (267). Elizabeth in effect receives an "allowance" from Darcy; she remains a dependent in his household.

Those who have read the romance of Darcy and Elizabeth as all "light and bright and sparkling," as a fairy tale consummation of female equality, independence and personal happiness in marriage,²⁸ have not paid enough attention to the darker nuances of Jane Austen's words. Darcy and Elizabeth may live happily ever after, but only if Darcy *permits* his wife to "take liberties" with him. For as Jane Austen tells us on the last page of the novel, Georgianna Darcy, who had always stood in awe of her much older brother,

had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm at her lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother. . . . By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself. (268)

But as Jane Austen's precisely chosen words remind us, Darcy still has the power *not* to allow either his sister or his wife to "take liberties" with him. He remains the master of Pemberly, controlling the "liberties" of all the women enclosed within—even as they, like all middle-class eighteenth-century women, must allow their suitors to "take innocent liberties" with them (recall that Wickham almost succeeded in raping Georgianna Darcy). Jane Austen advocates a marriage of genuine equality between husband and wife—and has seduced many readers into believing that such is the case with Darcy and Elizabeth—but she is honest enough to remind us that such marriages may not yet exist in England.

Except perhaps in the Navy. In *Persuasion*, Austen's last and most socially progressive novel, Admiral Croft and his sensible, strong-willed wife have a marriage that can accurately be described as a partnership of equals. Although we never learn what Mrs. Croft actually did while living on shipboard and aiding the Admiral in the command of his fleet, beyond the mending, we do see that on land, their decisions are made jointly and with full mutual respect and affection. All household purchases and domestic arrangements, all social activities, all professional decisions, are shared equally by both, whether driving the landau, conversing with other naval families in Bath, arranging the lease of Kellynch Hall, or determining the Admiral's patronage. The Croft marriage is clearly the prototype for the other successful marriages in the novel, whether the Harvilles, the elder Musgroves, the Benwicks, the Hayters, or the long awaited one of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, a marriage that judiciously balances prudence and warmth, "fortitude