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SENSING MEANING: AESTHETICS AND VULNERABILITY IN THE ROMANTIC

AGE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Sensing Meaning: Aesthetics and Vulnerability in the Romantic Age

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Sensing Meaning: Aesthetics and Vulnerability in the Romantic Age examines the politics of aestheticization by investigating how Romantic era literature aestheticized precarity and vulnerable persons. Romantic aesthetics have been characterized by twentieth century philosophers as apolitical, elitist, and even as fascist. Similarly, scholars have criticized Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and John Keats for a solipsism that favors poetry and art at the expense of the material world. Many of these criticisms share an assumption that the period was primarily—or, perhaps, exclusively—an aesthetic ideology. This project re-conceptualizes aesthetics into the process by which we scrutinize, contest, and eventually alter the value of our values.

My chapters highlight the ways literature and aesthetics participate in more overtly political debates. The opening section discusses the ability to find meaning in the environment and link this cognitive capacity to the Romantic notion of poesis, or the

faculty of fictioning. This faculty is crucial to the Romanticism's project of refiguring the human subject. In this chapter, I read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* as articulating an ethics predicated on this faculty to forge affective connections to the land, the poor, the non-living, and future generations, culminating in Wollstonecraft's own prescient thoughts on our current ecological crises. The subsequent chapter, "Working," claims that the Romantic period comes to aestheticize the ongoingness of labor and the uneven distribution of care along lines of gender and class.

In "Noticing," I use Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" to discuss sexual assault and the ability to notice or perceive injustice. The chapter calls for an epistemic justice that is built on what the philosopher Debra Bergoffen has called the "Politics of the Vulnerable Body." To quote Bergoffen, this strives to make "the 'we' of humanity... the 'we' of vulnerability." The final chapter, "Feeling," explores the complications of fragility, race, and the Romantic subject.

Partially at stake in my project is the role literature and the arts has played—and can still play—in the reformation of our values, in how a subject connects to vulnerable others, and in underscoring the importance of the natural and social environment we find ourselves embedded within. As such, my dissertation demonstrates one way the Humanities can speak to today's conflicts: in critiquing not only how our present can offer new answers to old questions, but also the value of some old answers to our new, pressing political questions.

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This project is dedicated to my parents, Aminata and Karamoko, and my siblings, Aissata and Abou. Each has shown me what power we can find in community in spite of the vulnerabilities and precarity of our lives. They are the heroes of the story I relate here.

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Preface: About the Author

The night before the written component of my doctoral qualifying examination, the air was pierced by shouting. No more than a few feet from my ground floor apartment's windows, my upstairs neighbor was making it clear that he “f--king hate[d] ni---rs” and that he planned to “kill every last goddamn ni---r in the country.” As a Black man in an overwhelmingly white social (and professional) environment, I was accustomed to feeling lonely (and alone), but never had I felt so *vulnerable* in graduate school. In being threatened with having “the klan right outside my window,” I was interpolated into a world where the desire to hurt me was commonplace and even sanctioned. I felt dejected, not least because it all felt so meaningless: the exam, the man, and my being in the world at all.

The next day, one of my essay prompts asked me to consider the relationship between “words” and “things” in Romanticism, and to examine that pairing through the lens of Percy Shelley’s conception of poetry in the *Defence*. The essay I wrote proposed that Romantic consciousness asked us to transform our being-in-the-world to find companionship with objects that bring us joy and that make our lives meaningful. I ended with Charlotte Turner Smith’s *Beachy Head*, suggesting that it shows how the sublimity of the natural world will always be beyond the reach of our linguistic net(work)s. What “mattered” was what we made meaningful: Romanticism requires *presence* in the world, *attention* to things in it, to being a thing that finds joy among “the everlasting universe of things.”

This event—writing that essay the morning after the threats and shouts of an

angry man in the the night—is the “pretext” for my study on meaning and vulnerability in the Romantic period. It gave me cause to write *Sensing Meaning*.

INTRODUCTION:

A Substantial Interest in Aesthetics

In April 2014, the municipal commission of Fort Lauderdale, Florida issued an ordinance forbidding homeless individuals from placing their private possessions on public spaces such as parks. When considered alongside an earlier prohibition against feeding homeless individuals on public property, this particular ordinance effectively outlawed *being* homeless rather than striving to eradicate homelessness. The first motivation the Fort Lauderdale Commission offered for these policies was its “substantial interest in aesthetics.”¹

Momentarily setting aside how frivolous this pretext sounds and the harm it leaves the dispossessed exposed to, the ordinance also points to the long history of how “aesthetic interest” has been marshaled against the poor. If “aesthetic transformation[s] of the landscape” in the late eighteenth century were, as Jill Heydt-Stevenson notes, “dependent upon the eradication of the commons, of signs of commerce, and of laborers’ homes,” then Fort Lauderdale committed a similar act, airbrushing away signs of indigence and precarity for the sake of (to be generous) environmental beauty.² The ordinance also presupposes the capacity to make a strong distinction between perception and precarity, along with the ethical responsibilities both may entail. This policy pitted something called “aesthetics” against an empathic concern for vulnerable others.

The roots of this aesthetics lie in the long eighteenth century. Scholars like Vivasvan Soni point to Shaftesbury as a progenitor of Enlightenment-era aesthetics,

1. (Seiler 2014).

2. (Heydt-Stevenson 1998) 263.

although Shaftesbury did not use the word “aesthetic” in his writing.³ Shaftesbury’s civic humanism in the *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) attempted to imbue philosophy with what he termed “worldliness.” This meant making philosophical inquiry contingent on “the common affairs of life” in which, for Shaftesbury, ethics and beauty were co-constituting. In other words, the ability to discern beauty comes to indicate the ability to discern merit and sound ethical judgment. As a part of the human sensorium, the “moral sense” was responsible for this entwining. The concurrence between merit and beauty shows how Shaftesburian aesthetics subsumed ethics under matters of perception (and pleasure): by theorizing a “moral sense,” Shaftesbury tied ethics to the very constitution of the human.

Such a *sensus communis* held Shaftesbury’s aesthetic philosophy together. Through it, the aristocratic Shaftesbury made room—at least in theory—for the disenfranchised. This is because his philosophical system rests on a common paradigm of the human and not a private individualism, especially as articulated by writers who “often explicitly identif[ied] themselves as spokesmen of the mercantile interest.”⁴ In Shaftesbury’s civic humanism, according to J. G. A. Pocock’s influential account, “*Virtue* could only be founded in a *republic* of equal, active, and independent citizens,” necessitating virtuous public and private actions from a disinterested point of view or the

3. See Soni, “In Search of Aesthetic Judgment: Shaftesbury’s ‘Soliloquy’” from the *Symposium on Judgment*. For more on the long-eighteenth century roots of “aesthetics,” see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*; Eckbert Faas, *The Genealogy of Aesthetics*; and Paul Guyer, *Values in Beauty*. Texts like David Summers’s *The Judgment of Sense* more properly locate this origin in the Renaissance period.

4. (Barrell 1986) 45.

pursuit of moral principles regardless of praise or condemnation.⁵ Yet by the time of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), such liberal disinterestedness was concerned above all with self-interest. For Smith, "Common Humanity" and "Benevolence" were less useful descriptions of how a society functioned than "self-love," understood as the basic impulse of human persons.

Here then we have two different kinds of "interest," the disinterestedness of Shaftesbury and the "self-love" that Smith advocated. Though Smith's is certainly the dominant position, Shaftesburian "disinterestedness" will nevertheless have a long afterlife through the eighteenth century and beyond. In this study, I extend elements of this aspect of Enlightenment aesthetic theory into the Romantic period. Positing such a continuation is not treating Romanticism as a counter-enlightenment. Rather, the Romantic tradition in which I am interested inherits this older sense of aesthetics—that it unites moral action, evaluative judgment, and physical sensation—and brings it to bear on vulnerability.

This focus on moral action insists on a connection between ethics/politics and aesthetics that has long been contested.⁶ It calls for an expanded notion of the aesthetic,

5. (Pocock 1976) 153.

6. See, for example, Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*; Gary Banham, *Kant and the Ends of Aesthetics*; Ernst Bloch, *Aesthetics and Politics*; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*; Peter Christensen, *Decadences*; Anna de Bruin, "Romantic Aesthetics and Abolitionist Activism: African Beauty in Germaine de Staël's *Mirza ou Lettre d'un voyageur*;" Thierry de Duve, "Aesthetics as the Transcendental Ground of Democracy;" David Depew, "Empathy, Psychology, and Aesthetics: Reflections on a Repair Concept;" Anne Eaton, "Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian's *Rape of Europa*;" Robert Gooding-Williams, "Du Bois, Politics, Aesthetics: An Introduction;" Paul Guyer, *Values in Beauty*; Peter Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*; Mojca Küplen, *Beauty, Ugliness and the Free Play of Imagination*; Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics*; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Marc

particularly when compared to common use today. In German, the word *Aesthetik* came to prominence with Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750). While "aesthetics" was already in use with reference to sensation, Baumgarten adopted the word for taste in particular. Many years later, Hegel's first move in the *Lectures on the Aesthetic* (1835) is to insist that "the word Aesthetics, taken literally, is not wholly satisfactory, since 'Aesthetics' means, more precisely, the science of sensation, of feeling."⁷ Here Hegel is criticizing what he takes to be the aesthetic's focus on immediate impressions. His second move is to "at once exclude the beauty of nature" from the meaning of "Aesthetics."⁸ Hegel's chief target here is Immanuel Kant, whose aesthetic theory was far more interested in nature than in conventional art objects. For Hegel, by contrast, the "beauty of art is beauty *born of the spirit and born again*, and the higher the spirit and its productions stand above nature and its phenomena, the higher too is the beauty of art above that of nature."⁹

Hegel's underplaying of "nature" and immediate "sensation" stands at odds with many other Enlightenment versions of aesthetics. Art objects represented a challenge to theories of perception for thinkers like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Kant; they were not coextensive with "aesthetics," however. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant makes it clear that "beauty" in "mechanical" nature stems from the

Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*; Michael Wayne, *Red Kant*; Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*. This is a short, but representative list.

7. (Hegel 1988) 1.

8. Properly speaking, it would be his meaning of the German word *Aesthetik*. The addition of the "s" in English language translations itself betrays the conflation of *Aesthetik* as the science of sensation/perception and "Aesthetics" as the philosophy of art.

9. (Hegel 1988) 2.

perceiving (and apperceiving) agent. In other words, to find beauty in “the reproductive organs of a plant” requires something neither subjective (our own personal taste) nor objective (like the intrinsic qualities of the object) but a combination of both. Since “universality cannot spring from concepts,” aesthetic judgments of an object’s agreeableness or terror, for example, rest on “a claim to subjective universality.”¹⁰ These are *claims*, not a call to impose one’s values onto another. The implication is that every subject with aesthetic capacities—with any of the senses—is a socially-embedded subject that carries within itself a virtual audience of all human beings.¹¹ A second, crucial element of Kant’s aesthetics is “purposiveness without purpose.” For Kant, what is commonly termed “nature” is a never-ending mechanical process and can have no definite start or end. Reasoning agents, however, impose discrete processes on the objective world they inhabit. This is termed “teleological judgment” and like subjective universality, it too is rooted in the perceiving subject. Kant saw this—creating order from nature *as if* it were designed, though knowing it is not—as one way to keep aesthetic judgments subjectively universal; though we take intentionality and teleology from our own cognitive neural activities, we act as though they were in nature. This faculty of teleological judgment contributes to a subject’s search for meaning (I will have more to say on meaning below). In this way, the perception of precarity and vulnerability can impose ethical obligations on a subject. Or so I will argue in the pages that follow.

10. (Kant 2007) 43.

11. I will pick this up again in “Feeling,” where, following Thomas Pfau’s account of Kantian feeling, I elaborate on the political dimensions of feeling.

II

Romantic Politicism

Subjectivity exists in the realm of the political, where there is inequity, autonomy, and harm. So I use the ethical elements of vulnerability—its imposition of obligation on the perceiving subject—in order to show that aesthetics can be a key factor in the politics of Romanticism rather than merely proof of its quietism. *Sensing Meaning*, then, contributes to the project of the almost fifty years since Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* of trying to find the political potential of "aesthetics." As Dorothy Hale makes clear in *Social Formalism*, "the temptation to regard the novel as *formally* producing social change is most attractive to cultural historians... strongly influenced by marxism."¹² But unlike many of the other critics of political aesthetics, my project attempts to generate a leftist politics out of aesthetics that does not rely on Marxism. While some of the prominent theorists I employ are materialist to some degree—Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Rancière especially—I am more interested here in the ethics we find in the eighteenth and nineteenth century figures I examine. Admittedly, I substitute the more "idealistic" or abstract "ethical" for the *supposedly* more important and material

12. (Hale 1998) 10. Hale also raises the question of genre. The novel has been the privileged literary form for examining the "politics of aesthetics" within a Marxist frame. If my project seeks to find a different political philosophy in the ethical dimensions of eighteenth century aesthetics, then it also seeks to explore the political aesthetics of other literary forms. I do not exercise any sustained reading of a novel or the novel genre itself in the whole of this project. In point of fact, the novel provides a great place to corroborate so many of the claims I make here that I have decided to reserve that analysis for a future study. The novel's dominance in literary criticism has diminished the archive literary scholars have access to, and the belief that the novel must play a key role in most—if not all—literary critical monographs has diminished the canon critics write on and teach to students.

“political.” That many scholars, Rancière included, deride this substitution for betraying a commitment to a very narrow, Western, and predominantly white view of what constitutes politics. I therefore move to the more idealist and transcendental ethics I find in Kant and, through him, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and other earlier eighteenth century thinkers because their philosophical systems attempt to bring together the *ought* and the *is* by way of the art object—or, as I will suggest, by way of the aesthetic (which is not the same thing as the art object). My project is neither to “uncover” the political “potential” of visual and literary art nor to bury or praise romanticism, but to aid in uncovering and contributing to a history in which the “politics of art” or the “politics of aesthetics” become redundant phrases. Moreover, my project also involves elucidating the influences—good and bad by multiple criteria—that this history still has over our contemporary moment.

My choice to work with ethics, then, is not irreconcilable with politically-motivated analysis. Indeed, working with a sense of “vulnerability” taken from feminist moral philosophy necessitates intersectional political thought. Different people—and animals, plants, and objects—are different to different things in different ways and at different times. In particular, Sarah Clark Miller’s sense of Kantian “need” as well as Judith Butler’s work on “precarity” constitute the foundation of the sense of vulnerability I use throughout the project. In *The Ethics of Needs* (2011), Miller develops a deontological system of ethics predicated on “morally salient” needs, “determin[ing] what moral agents ought to do when they encounter others with such needs.”¹³ But, as Miller notes, “who responds to which needs is often determined... by socialized roles and

13. (Miller 2011) 1.

the expected responsibilities that result from them.”¹⁴ This leaves deontology susceptible to political critique; my project resembles Miller’s in this way because I aim to subject the various systems of (usually deontological and/or idealist) Enlightenment ethics to the same kinds of critique.

Butler’s theorization of “precarity” possesses more critical mobility than Miller’s, though both lay the foundations for the present study. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler characterizes the condition of humanity as one of “vulnerability and loss.” She argues that “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.”¹⁵ She “reimagin[es] the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability,” and argues that our susceptibility to the actions of other persons is a necessary aspect of being human.

I am not suggesting that either Miller’s theory of moral needs or Butler’s claim about the inherent vulnerability of human life have their origins in the Romantic period. I argue instead that a major means by which Romantic writing participated in the political stems from its aestheticization of precarity, dependence, and fragility.

Sensing Meaning examines the politics of aestheticization by investigating how Romantic-era literature aestheticized precarity and vulnerable persons. Romantic aesthetics have been characterized by twentieth century philosophers as apolitical, elitist, and even fascist. Similarly, scholars have criticized Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and John Keats for a solipsism that favors poetry and art at the expense of the material world. Many of these criticisms share an assumption that the period was

14. (Miller 2011) 107.

15. (Butler 2006) 20.

primarily—or, perhaps, exclusively—an aesthetic ideology.¹⁶ Evidence for this position often relies on writings from major canonical figures, particularly when they theorize the nature of the poet or the imagination, or when their self-descriptions aligns with idealist fancy. Take, for example, Coleridge describing himself in a letter to an unknown correspondent: “From my very childhood I have been accustomed to *abstract* and as it were unrealize whatever of more than common interest my eyes dwelt on.” This can be construed as a kind of withdrawal from what is actually there and, as such, characteristic of a kind of detachment from the messiness of the common. I propose, however, that we see this as a means of expanding the common, of infusing it with meaning. The kind of unreality that adds to reality forms a key part of the more expansive sense of aesthetics that I refer to in this project.

III

Mean(ing)s, End(ing)s, and Ethics

...implicit in the urge to speak is the quest for meaning, not necessarily the quest for truth.

-Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

In the chapters that follow, I aim to re-conceptualize aesthetics as that process by which we scrutinize, contest, and eventually alter the value of our values. This axiological view of aesthetics rests on connecting meaningfulness to valuation. But

16. Arguably, this goes as far back as Kierkegaard. See also T. E. Hulme, “Romanticism and Classicism;” Morse Peckham, “Toward a Theory of Romanticism;” and Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*.

instead of posing the question “what is a meaningful life?,” I am more invested in the *who* of such questions: whose gets to count as a meaningful life? Who gets to determine what is meaningful? And who gets to determine *who* is meaningful?

Looking at Romantic art’s responses to these questions discloses a diversity of persons and types: children (cp. my chapters on Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, and Blackness), women (cp. every chapter), the enslaved (cp. Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, and the “Subtext” section), the poor (Wollstonecraft and Barbauld), the elderly (cp. Barbauld) and others. In short, the *vulnerable*. Romantic art posed a challenge to older, universalized figures of the human but did not necessarily dispense with such figures altogether. Rather, the Romantic art discussed here allows us to replace the assumed able-bodied, adult white male subject with a vulnerable and fallible one.¹⁷

A central component of my argument, then, is the human capacity to make meaning, and to make certain things, people, or situations *meaningful*. In my account of Mary Wollstonecraft, I use the term “fictioning” as a name for this faculty. I take the term “fictioning” from Soni, who argues that Shaftesbury’s “profoundest insight” is that the “work” of “introduc[ing] the slightest gap or differentiation into the seamlessness of being, social-being or desiring-being” is “fictive work or the work of fictioning.”¹⁸ Soni argues that this “work” makes our modern notion of subjectivity possible, for if “fictioning or *poiein* signify making, then the most fundamental making is this dividing into two (not of myself, since there is no self there yet), this making-two where there was

17. In turning the focus from what counts as a meaningful life to whose life “counts” or “matters,” I betray how contemporary race relations—and specifically the BlackLivesMatter movement—has influenced my project.

18. (Soni 2013) 9.

only one before.”¹⁹ Soni believes that Shaftesbury not only set the initial guidelines for eighteenth century aesthetics with the *Characteristics*, but that he was also the first to notice the inevitable “crisis of judgment” that philosophical aesthetics would trigger.²⁰ Locke had “created the conditions for” this crisis when he shunted judgment to “the margins of epistemology..., the ‘twilight zone’ of probabilistic knowledge” despite admitting to judgment’s crucial role in all cognition. Locke’s anxiety stems from his apparent recognition “that the anarchic fictioning power of judgment threatens to destabilize the empiricist project itself.” As a result, Soni argues, Shaftesbury formulated his own philosophical views “more or less directly as a response to” the problems Locke had discovered with judgment and its reliance on fictioning. Shaftesburian philosophy argued that fictional self-division sets the conditions for selfhood in the first place, that a person “must be divided from [her]self at the very outset... [in order] to produce a space of ‘disinterest’ or ‘critical distance.’”²¹ The “chief principle of philosophy,” Shaftesbury claims in “Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author,” is to “understand [the] doctrine of two persons in one individual self.”²² He advocates a self-division that produces both subjectivity and the means by which we counterfactually test and so affirm or impugn ethical deeds. In Soni’s formulation, fictioning and the capacity to produce and interpret

19. From the choices of “Fiction,” “Fictionalizing,” and “Fictioning,” I use the gerundives (the latter two) because they highlight the importance of its being a *process* and not a *product*. I use the term “fictioning” instead of “fictionalizing” because—aside from being consistent with Soni’s use—I am not discussing the process of making *things* (or events) counterfactual but instead the process of making counterfactual things through cognition. It refers in part to the processes of producing meanings and interpreting intentions.

20. (Soni 2013) 3.

21. (Soni 2013) 7.

22. (Shaftesbury 1999) 83.

its meanings serve as the *primum mobile* of ethical aesthetic inquiry. In other words, modes of cognition formally resembling the interpretation of literary texts catalyzed eighteenth century aesthetics (and the period's philosophy of mind in general): these include narrativizing the self, fostering reflexive feelings or emotional responses, and creating, adopting, and manipulating *teloi* or ends.

Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) is another influential example of the Aesthetic's close resemblance to literary cognition. On its surface, Hutcheson's aesthetics rest on an innate capacity, a "moral sense" that can perceive and gauge both the virtuous and the beautiful, specifically as the latter emerges in the perception of "uniformity amidst variety." However, much of Hutcheson's system depends on the peculiarly literary (and/or "critical") activity of interpreting intentions and meanings. If R. M. Sainsbury is correct in *Fiction and Factionalism*, then one determines a fiction "by how it came into existence, and in particular by the aims and *intentions* of the producer."²³ Hutcheson, like Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp in "Against Theory" (1982), presents authorial intention and textual meaning as coextensive: "to have one is already to have them both."²⁴ In Hutcheson's case, the problems of meaning and intention stem from presenting God as an author or designer whose intentions undergird the perceivable world.²⁵ And

23. Emphasis added, (Sainsbury 2009) 5.

24. (Knapp and Michaels 1985) 12.

25. Colin Jager has connected the problematics of intention and meaning found in "Against Theory" to eighteenth century moral philosophy: "When Knapp and Michaels counterpose theory and practice through the offices of a debate about authorial intentions... they are unknowingly replaying a debate that has its roots in a positing of divine intentionality (Jager, *Book of God*, 224).

indeed, the authorship metaphor is crucial to Hutcheson's project in the *Inquiry*. For example, Hutcheson illustrates how the natural existence of "Regular" forms like the square or equilateral triangle would be improbable if the world came to be through "undirected force."²⁶ An analysis of *form* necessitates, for Hutcheson and many literary critics, an intentional designer. Since "Regularity never arises from any undesign'd Force of ours" and our actions do not bear meaning if unintended (since meaning, via intention, is interpreted from and not inherent within actions, events, or objects), then the regularity found in nature must have been devised by some intending agent.²⁷

Literary cognition—a phrase I use to represent the ability to interpret intentions and produce meanings from discourse through counterfactual perceptions—also animates the *Inquiry*'s ethics. With God as the author of the universe, Hutcheson counters the potential moral vacuity engendered by any creation-through-chaos etiology: human action possesses meaning since the world that circumscribes it was intentionally designed and not formed through random accident. But, if the whole of creation exists as a designed artifact, then can any intention within it be divorced from the divine artificer's? Like Kant after him, Hutcheson answers this question by placing human intentions and actions within the purview of moral law in addition to natural law. For any action to be considered "moral" or "virtuous" in Hutcheson's system, it cannot be done in fear of retribution from any higher power, from biological mothers to God the Father. Instead, moral meaning is derived from the interpreted intentions of the rational agent. "If we do not discern a benevolent Intention in the Application" of external acts, Hutcheson

26. (Hutcheson 2004) 49ff.

27. (Hutcheson 2004) 50.

maintains, then they will not receive the praise or esteem limited to “Benevolence, or Virtue.”²⁸ Moral actions only have meaning if a benevolent intention can be ascribed to the agent. Such an ethical system requires a social literacy, “reading” the acts of other people. We perform ethical actions only for other rational creatures to whom we can attribute intention and who can attribute intentions to us. By the same token, an act loses its good moral character if we discern that its agent was seeking praise of some sort and becomes meaningless if no one is there to judge it: virtue and beauty, for Hutcheson, exist coextensively and “all Beauty is relative to the Sense of some Mind perceiving it.”²⁹ The social property of Hutcheson’s ethics depends on the ability to *read* the actions of others. The moral subject’s intentions permit the authoring of acts, with his/her associates as the necessary audience to determine their meaning. An act possesses no meaning without “some Mind perceiving it.”

The fictional self-division that produces subjectivity in the *Characteristics* complements Hutcheson’s fictionalized narrativizing of others that we perform in order to glean their intentions (e.g. *why* would someone perform a particular act?). Shaftesbury’s and Hutcheson’s aesthetic thought demands the apperception of oneself as both a singular subject capable of action as well as “a social ontology” who may be rendered unintelligible because of her/his actions or because of race, gender, or other markers of identity and difference. Reading the actions of others and interpreting (or overlooking) their intentions can meld observable behavior to essential character, downplaying the constraints a situation places on someone and, in the process, exposing a limitation to

28. (Hutcheson 2004) 229

29. (Hutcheson 2004) 40.

descriptive theories of social interactions. When applied to larger society, this tendency explains the too-common tendency to essentialize people as irremediably “other” based on what they do in a particular context (e.g. branding a homeless person a criminal for stealing a loaf of bread) or what the public imagination thinks they do in general (e.g. using unemployment, graduation, and incarceration rates to accuse urban people of color of possessing bad character and deficient social responsibility). In Bourdieusian sociology, the same error occurs when we mistake a person’s “habitus”—structures of thought, feeling, and behavior shaped by disposition, socio-economic status, and general practice—for an “innate” character. This dissertation joins a tradition stretching from Shaftesbury through Kant to Thomas Pfau (and many others) which sees in the aesthetic a means to resist such hasty attributions of intent while *nevertheless* acknowledging the crucial role that intent plays in ethical and political judgements. Because the aesthetic involves form, the shaping of an artifact or an act, it can mediate the polarity between the individual and the social. Literary cognition can emphasize both the intent and the effects of an act in determining its moral meaning.

Chapters

I begin with two authors often considered “pre-romantic,” Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Letitia Barbauld. These chapters, in part, suggest that Wollstonecraft and Barbauld are central Romantic figures, fashioning and executing what will be central tenets in British Romanticism: a co-constituting relationship between the subject and the environment, a theory of mind entwined with literary modes of cognition, and a

constancy in their aestheticizing. In the first chapter, “Fictioning,” I show how Mary Wollstonecraft’s modes of figuring humanity and personhood not only anticipate our current debates on climate change, but also articulate an ethics of affective connection to the land, the non-living, and future generations.

The second chapter, “Working,” claims that the Romantic period comes to aestheticize the ongoingness of labor and the uneven distribution of care along lines of gender and class. This is a chapter detailing the limitations of aesthetic representation in the service of the poor, especially women. It explores the bonds between aesthetics and poverty by first examining two early eighteenth century poems on indigence and labor, Stephen Duck’s “The Thresher’s Labour” (1730, 1736) and Mary Collier’s response, “The Woman’s Labor” (1739). These two texts feature proto-Romantic ways of aestheticizing time, labor, representation, and gender, though to limited degrees. The chapter then adds Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “Washing-Day” (1797) to a history of eighteenth century “plebeian poetry,” in spite of its focus on a more genteel Romantic poetics of the common. I argue that Romanticism produced an aesthetics of the everyday that treats our quotidian modes of perception as an ongoing process of improving attention to the devalued, the overlooked, and the exploited.

With the third chapter, I turn to a member of the “big six,” John Keats. I use “The Eve of St. Agnes” to discuss sexual assault and the ability to notice or perceive injustice. The chapter calls for an epistemic justice that is built on what the philosopher Debra Bergoffen has called the “Politics of the Vulnerable Body.” To quote Bergoffen, this strives to make “the ‘we’ of humanity... the ‘we’ of vulnerability.” The last chapter,

“Feeling,” addresses Blackness and aesthetics as aithesis; it involves the interplay between physical sensation and emotive response. The term *feeling* refers to both the emotive capacities of persons as well as the more material acts of sensing, perceiving, and experiencing pain. Looking at William Wordsworth’s “September 1st, 1802” and the Romantic art of failed revolutions, I use these Romantic representations of the Black body as a feeling body as another way to refigure humanity and its vulnerabilities. This chapter questions who is allowed to be a Romantic subject, and how to expand that subjectivity’s political potential.

At heart, this is a project on the politics of attention; I am interested in what and who we notice and why. The project concludes with a short coda on Black women in Romanticism. Rather than an accounting or indexing of these figures, the coda ponders their invisibility. I end by discussing Eva Beatrice Dykes, the author of *The Negro in English Romantic Thought* (1942) and the first Black woman to qualify for a doctorate in America.

Part I

TEXT: LITERATURE AND VULNERABILITY

CHAPTER ONE

FICTIONING

“She’s a poor woman, and can feel for the poor...”

-Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*

I

Introduction

I have argued in “Pretext” that the defining feature of aesthetics in the eighteenth century was the concern with the immanent connections among sense perception, judgment, and ethics. This stands in contrast to “aesthetics” as primarily or solely the domain of “art,” which the term often denotes in modern parlance. In this chapter, I begin to bridge the gap between the term’s past and present definitions through the notion of “fictioning.” Like aesthetics, what “fictioning” may mean will depend on the historical period under discussion, and I have provided a brief historical overview of eighteenth century fictioning in “Pretext.” But while “fictioning” was a key concept for the Romantics in its other valences such as “*poiesis*” and “figure” (which shares the same Latin root as “fiction”), the word itself does not appear often in the period’s literary theory. On the surface, “fictioning” was not a popular object of philosophical inquiry for eighteenth century thinkers. Yet, as Paul de Man claimed about “the Aesthetic,” a term’s scarcity may hint at the century’s deep concern with it.¹ Indeed, central texts in eighteenth

1. (de Man 1996) 92.

century philosophies of mind such as Locke's *Essay* and Hume's *Enquiry* contained long meditations on the fictionality of mental substances and the problem of qualia. In fact, Hume's *Enquiry* features numerous passages on "fictions," both as "realities" and as figments "of the imagination."²

Maureen McLane has argued that the Romantics believed that "poetry," in the guise of what John Guillory has labelled "the supergenre of 'literature,'" was constitutive of the human.³ Here, again, "poetry" means not verse per se but the human faculty of creation, with literary creation as its privileged example. While it operated under a variety of names in the period—*poiesis*, fancy, the imagination—I will refer to this hypothesized capacity as "fictioning." Because of fictioning's key role in both aesthetics and in "Romanticism" as commonly understood, then, this chapter on fictioning and aesthetics begins the project of explicating the aesthetic work of Romantic literary production. I turn to Romantic literature because it often complicates or critiques enlightenment aesthetic thought. And it performs this critique through conjoining tenets of that aesthetic with various modes of vulnerability, whether of the body, social groups, children, or "the human" in general. Romantic literary creations produce philosophical knowledge of the human as a vulnerable and socially situated figure; further, this knowledge is contingent on aesthetic appreciation: the kind of perception where interpretive thinking, moral action, and subjective, emotive capabilities overlap.

2. (Hume 1993) 31. I have counted at least 15. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Understanding*, Hume discusses "all the varieties of fiction" and belief in part II of section V, "Sceptical Solutions of these Doubts."

3. (Guillory 1995) 133. See *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Politics, and the Discourse of the Species* (2004), especially pages 4-7.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters* fictions humanity in this way, as a vulnerable and socially situated figure. It highlights the weight of the past, the effects of presence, and the need for a meaningful future. Its aestheticization of history, contemporaneity, and futurity probes the politics of the period. The text's topics range from economic poverty and social hierarchy to perception and personhood; meanwhile, the book's "actual" historical referent (Wollstonecraft traveling to Scandinavia on behalf of Gilbert Imlay, her lover) becomes less important than the socio-political relations that the text creates and depicts. That a book, as an index to the burgeoning conflation of the aesthetic with art, still highlights gendered vulnerability and the vulnerability of poor (and enslaved) populations supports my larger contention that vulnerability and precarity lie at the heart of Romanticism's aesthetic theory.

This chapter argues that Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, & Denmark* (1796) "aestheticizes" the social world through the practice of fictioning. Central to my claim is the Romantic subject's capacity to figure humanity as a moral agent in both social and natural environments. This practice of abstraction takes as a given the vulnerabilities of the individual subject, specific groups, and the species as a whole. Fictioning, a literary mode of cognition based on imaginative creation and interpretation, is key to a subject's ability to participate in the political sphere.

By arguing that *Letters* is an example of "aestheticized" politics brought about through fictioning, I am not suggesting that the work is a fictionalizing of supposedly "real" events. Instead, fiction (along with the related word "figure") refers to a faculty or

a capacity rather than material products. Nonetheless, I practice a mode of reading here that treats *Letters* like a literary text, though not as an epistolary novel in the sentimental mode. Readers may object that *Letters* is not a literary text. To be sure, it is presented, modestly enough, as a collection of twenty-five epistles from the author to a man of commerce as she travels among the titular countries. Even the book's "Advertisement" describes the author's difficulty in "avoid[ing] being continually in the first person" (51). Unsurprisingly, then, there has been a persistent critical tendency to equate the speaker of the *Letters*, named "Mary," with the historical Wollstonecraft. This tendency dates back to the work's publication, when, as Mary Favret suggests, "*Letters from Sweden* allowed the English public to fictionalize Mary Wollstonecraft" in much the same fashion that it "produced [a] public fiction of Lord Byron" based on *Childe Harold*.⁴ The still popular and critical "emphasis on biography," Anthony Pollock lamented in 2011, "has often precluded a more incisive assessment of how the *Letters* might be read in relation... to the broader issues of Enlightenment publicness, gender politics, and socio-economic critique which the text insistently raises."⁵ Yet Favret had already detailed, in 1992, the many differences between the *Letters* and the actual missives Wollstonecraft sent to Gilbert Imlay, thereby suggesting that the text is far less biographical than many critics have assumed.⁶

Even where biographical questions are secondary, though, the critical literature on *Letters* suggests that the text remains far from a "literary" object. Scholars often read it in

4. (Favret 1993) 128.

5. (Pollock 2011) 194.

6. In *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters*.

relation to the theories of gender expressed in the (politically) radical *Vindications*. Or it is read as a critique of eighteenth-century concepts like sentimental travel writing, sensibility, and the picturesque. Critics concentrate on the text's depictions and criticisms of Burke's beautiful and sublime as well. The critical field privileges the text's "sentimental" scenes, particularly those where the speaker interacts with picturesque or sublime landscapes in a traditionally sentimental (or, implicitly, "femininized") manner.⁷

I will avoid biographizing Mary Wollstonecraft in this chapter, seeking instead to learn more about the author and her views through the fictive text. One does not need Imlay or Godwin (whose *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is in part responsible for the long history of Wollstonecraft's biography-heavy reception in the first place) to argue that this text constitutes an important moment in the history of aesthetics through and because of its literary properties. Moreover, while the *Vindications* can certainly shed light on the *Letters*, it would be more logical to assume that Wollstonecraft *revises* her earlier positions from 1790 and 1792 rather than recapitulating them some years later.

Wollstonecraft has given us all we need in order to understand the social project of *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. But to do so we must read it with an eye that does not perceive only an autobiographical

7. Much of the book features instances of quintessentially impersonal enlightenment inquiry. Near its end, for example, the speaker admits that "during [her] residence in different countries, [her] principal object has been to take such a *dispassionate* view of men as will lead [her] to form a just idea of the nature of man" (emphasis added, 154). Scenes exhibiting this "dispassionate view" show the speaker adopting the descriptive techniques of usually male (and usually theorized as male) perceivers engaging in observation and description based on impersonality rather than steeped in sentimentality.

confession. This is a literary document, as its play with fact and fiction, form and content, and narrative and hi/story should sufficiently indicate.

II

Solitude and the Beautiful

“Before I came here I could scarcely have imagined that a simple object, rocks, could have admitted of so many interesting combinations, always grand and often sublime” (Letter XII)

Many critics have noted the panoply of Enlightenment philosophical discourses present within the *Letters*. The text features examples of eighteenth century conjectural history, empiricism, and what Mark Canuel calls “enlightened bourgeois liberalism.”⁸ Aesthetics saturate the book as well; in fact, eighteenth century aesthetic philosophy pervades Wollstonecraft’s corpus, though she wrote only a few texts that addressed the topic directly.⁹ In particular, Wollstonecraft takes up the popular topics of the sublime and the beautiful, criticizing Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry* in several places, most notably in the first *Vindication*. She also wrote positively in the *Analytical Review* of William Gilpin’s travel narratives, praising the “picturesque.”

The picturesque valued “roughness” in determining the beauty of a landscape,

8. (Canuel 2010)139.

9. Most notably the picturesque and the sublime. We find notable examples in the first *Vindications*, and her work for the *Analytical Review*. Added to this are the constant invocations of the picturesque in *Maria, or, the Wrongs of Woman*. Actual texts principally on aesthetic theory would be “On Poetry, and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature” (1796) and, debatably, “The Cave of Fancy.”

splitting the difference between Burke's sublime and beautiful. The popularity of Gilpin's *Observations* and other picturesque travel writers led to the rise of picturesque tourism in the latter half of the century, where leisure-class persons would travel to ruins and natural scenes often occupied by the poor, sometimes on newly enclosed land. It has become a critical commonplace to remark that the conventions of the picturesque, in Jean Moskal's words, "can legitimate contempt for the dispossessed during a time of rising poverty, suppressing in aesthetic contemplation" the just ethical response to ruined towns and impaired bodies.¹⁰ And at the same time, the popularity of the picturesque may have made the narrative of a journey like the one in *Letters* highly profitable for Wollstonecraft.

Nonetheless, as an intermediate category between the beautiful and the sublime, the picturesque might have appealed to Wollstonecraft because it loosens the highly gendered hierarchy upon which Burke's system rests. His 1757 *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* moves from a pain/pleasure dyad to one of "self-preservation and society," finally mapping this dichotomy onto the sublime and the beautiful respectively.¹¹ Throughout the *Inquiry*, Burke implicitly associates the sublime with masculinity and explicitly associates the beautiful with the feminine. Scholars have observed that Burke's "aesthetic theory... depended on distancing himself from the aesthetic object through hierarchical class and gender distinctions."¹² Indeed, Wollstonecraft saw Burke's conception of the sublime "as a significant component of the cultural problems she was trying to critique" in both

10. (Moskal 1991) 273.

11. (Burke 2015) 5.

12. (Kautz 2002) 43.

Vindications.¹³

A fuller account of how the picturesque intersects with vulnerability demands a study of its own. Here, though, I begin with an ostensibly representative moment of picturesque perception on the part of the speaker in *Letters* in order to illustrate how the aesthetic, as I have so far defined it, remains in play as we move towards the nineteenth century.

In the first letter, the speaker notices that she has “remained delighted with the rude beauties of the scene [before her]; for the sublime often gave place imperceptibly to the beautiful, dilating the emotions which were painfully concentrated” (58). This experience depicts the beautiful overcoming the sublime, noting how the former can relax the “painfully concentrated” emotions of the latter. While Wollstonecraft does not impugn Burke’s contention that the sublime “is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” per se, she does give Beauty pride of place, as overcoming the sublime *in* its ability to dilate emotions, unconcentrating them in the subject.¹⁴ But this is, we might say, a picturesque kind of beauty, since it is characterized not by smallness and meekness (as Burke had it) but by the large rocks and “commodious bay” that had triggered an initial sublimity that “imperceptibly” evolved into beauty. If Burke had associated beauty with a smallness that draws us into society and sublimity with fear and self-preservation, then the speaker in *Letters*, by contrast, revalues Burke’s hierarchy. The beautiful dilates sublime “emotions which were painfully concentrated” in the speaker, relaxing her and diffusing her emotions outwards into the environment.

13. (Pollock 2011)195.

14. (Burke 2015) 35.

Where Burkean sublimity is distinguished by an emotional intensity that does not extend beyond the subject, it gives way here to an aesthetics of affective dispersal. *Letters* characterizes the sublime in the negative, as “anti-social,” in contrast to Burke’s positive description of the same feeling as one of “self-preservation.” This scene is one of many which depicts the speaker “merging with the landscape,” an environmental union common in picturesque writing.¹⁵ Such diffusiveness more closely resembles the speaker’s (and arguably the *Letters*’s) theory of the human than the singular, “liberal” ideal Burke sets up in the spectator of sublimity. That is, beauty somehow returns us to society *and* gets us closer to nature.

In this way, the *Letters* extends the *Vindications*’ commentary on Burke’s political theory by critiquing his aesthetic system. But the *Letters* also contains passages where the speaker appears to praise the very kind of anti-social behavior attributed to Burke’s notion of the sublime. Near the end of the *Letters*, for example, the speaker ruminates on a kind of solitude “[where] the imagination bodies forth its conceptions unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation. These are moments of bliss; and the memory recalls them with delight” (105). Here “Mary” extols solitude’s fostering of “poetical fictions,” products of the imagination. But her commendation also extends to the imagination itself as the faculty of producing these fictions. These solitary “moments of bliss” in fact differ in kind from Burke’s sublime, which is occasioned by an external power. In *Solitude and the Sublime*, Frances Ferguson discriminates between Burkean and Kantian aesthetics through their respective views on the importance of objects and mental representations. In contrast to Burke, Ferguson

15. (Kautz 2002) 43.

argues, “the Kantian aesthetic made clear the need to talk less about the reality of objects and responses than about the place of the mental image” they induce.¹⁶ So where Burke’s interest would be the material existence of the trees and the pain, pleasure, or “indifference” they elicit, the speaker of the *Letters* is more concerned with what the trees enable, a being-in-the-world that finds nature “productive” in an idealistic and creative sense and cares less for its material worth or effects. For “Mary,” the “venerable shadows” of trees at night inspired the mental images and “poetical fictions” that solitude encourages the imagination to engender.

In Romantic “idealism,” often associated with a solipsism that imposes the self onto the natural world, all roads lead back to the subject. Here, however, all roads extends outwards into the environment. This makes the environment meaningful because nature “contemplates” and “muses” with or without a human subject present. Even this scene ostensibly praising solitude still forges a community, albeit with trees. The speaker finds such a “mystic reverence” in them that she “could scarcely conceive that they were without some consciousness of existence” (105). She surmises that the trees “diffused” pleasure without having a “calm enjoyment of” it. These trees are not objects unquestionably “out there” impressing sensations upon a person. Such a model would be a Burkean, empiricist view which traps the inhuman environment and the human subject in a strictly causal relationship (e.g. big rocks trigger feelings of personal smallness). Rather, the trees’ pleasure is “diffused,” something like the dilation of emotion the speaker felt in the first letter. There is pleasure present in the scene even without the presence of a human subject, though it now exudes from the trees into empty air. “Not

16. (Ferguson 1992) 2.

nymphs, but philosophers seem to inhabit them,” enjoying the pleasure of being “ever-musing.” After describing these “moments of bliss,” the speaker remembers to recount “matters of fact” about the nobles she had met. So were these blissful reveries with nature, then, matters of fiction?

This brief example of the presence of fictioning in *Letters* proffers two examples of the aesthetic work the book performs: forging an intimate and equal relationship with nature and establishing the importance of fictions (like mental images of objects “out there”) and of fictioning, often called “imagination” or “curiosity” in the *Letters*.

The remainder of this chapter turns to examples of aesthetic fictioning. The next three sections have two arcs, both corresponding to the movement from past, to present, to future. The first arc shows how that *Letters* “fictions” history, “faces” the present, and “figures” the future. The second arc works through the three kinds of intention that the text features and complicates: authorial, benevolent (i.e. Smithian), and teleological (i.e. Kantian).

III

A History of “Fictioning” and a Fictioning of “History”

I turn first to how a fictioning of history informs Wollstonecraft’s ethics and brings her closer to those whom “Mary” interacts with on her trip. *Letters* practices what James Chandler has termed “Romantic historicism.” This is no continuation of enlightenment-era conjectural history, though such historiography certainly punctuates the *Letters*, given its invocation of a past, high-mythic state of nature (e.g. “the golden

age” that the speaker observes amidst the “land of flint”). Romantic historicism, according to Chandler, saw not only the recognition of the present as “history” for a future age, but also that literary representation was historical representation. Chandler argues that the “Postscript That Should Have Been a Preface” from Scott’s *Waverley* and the “Dedicatory Epistle” in *Ivanhoe* represented “a pattern and a practice that structures the *Waverley* novels as a whole.”¹⁷ The novels “not only register how the modern historiographical operation produces its distinctive forms of meaning, they also, in their massive circulation and impact on the ‘white mythologies’ of national self-representation in the nineteenth century, play a significant role in the emergence of modern historiography itself.”¹⁸ Extending F. R. Ankersmit’s conclusion that all historical representation is “aesthetic,” Chandler proposes that Romantic historicism positions aesthetic production as the production of historicity itself.¹⁹

For many in the intellectual classes during the Romantic century, the sense of a “historical” self became an influential and common way to describe the era. The “spirit of the age,” as an experience of simultaneous contemporaneity shared among many persons, came to dominate over the sense of an individual life lived as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. “What makes Romantic historicism distinctive,” Chandler concludes, “is the quality and extent of its interest in what might be called ‘comparative contemporaneities.’”²⁰ John Stuart Mill claimed that the “idea of comparing one’s own age... had occurred to philosophers [before]... but it never before was itself the dominant

17. (Chandler 1998) 135, 136.

18. (Chandler 1998) 136.

19. For more, see Ankersmit’s *Historical Representation* (2001).

20. (Chandler 1998) 107.

idea of any age” until Romanticism.²¹

Chandler’s *England in 1819*, however, ignores the *Letters* despite its being a perfect test case for Romantic historicism. To be sure, this stems in part from Chandler’s focus on the early nineteenth century, which leads him to spend less time on the Enlightenment and on figures who overlap the two periods like Austen, Kant, and Wollstonecraft. Had he turned to Wollstonecraft, Chandler might have noticed that in her case, the Romantic interest in “comparative contemporaneities” is really a concern for imaginary social associations. Indeed, *Letters* “conceptualize[s] culture as a shared object of study for the fields of history and ethnography,” as Chandler writes of Romantic historicism in general.²² The speaker even remarks that earlier “writers who have considered the history of man, or of the human mind, on a more enlarged scale” have failed to observe the local conditions that they encounter, and have thus “fallen into similar errors, not reflecting that the passions are weak where the necessities of life are too hardly or too easily obtained” (80). An ethnographic eye, Wollstonecraft asserts, improves any attempt at universal history. But the same is true in reverse. Universal history lends ethnography a profound ethical charge, saving the traveller from confusing “the morals of the day with the few grand principles on which unchangeable morality rest” (81).

Thus, I would supplement Chandler’s argument by insisting that aesthetic production produces not just historicity (the feeling that one is in the presence of history) but history itself. It does so by positing an intersubjectively-shared social world. When

21. Qtd. in (Chandler 1998) 107. See Mill’s “Spirit of the Age.”

22. (Chandler 1998) 108.

aesthetic production circulates among contemporaries it generates what Emmanuel Levinas calls our “contemporaneousness with the other.”²³ In *Don Juan*, for example, when the narrator compares “the barbarous Middle Ages” to the barbarous “middle age / Of man,” he illustrates one kind of aesthetic contemporaneity—not simply the comparative contemporaneities of romantic historicism but the ethical task of confronting an audience with the tensions between individual life and the shared sensibility of an epoch. Wollstonecraft’s position as a transitional figure between the two periods—as well as her influence over later writers like Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Shelleys—mediates enlightenment thought through its own aestheticization of politics. We see this also in the work of Wordsworth, Keats, and Blake, and this begins to suggest a rather different “Romanticism” from the romantic historicism that has dominated criticism in recent years. Wollstonecraft, to anticipate my argument, proffers a Romanticism more attuned to a vision of humanity principally defined by vulnerability.

Letters enacts this mediation between vulnerability and Enlightenment philosophy through its status as a work of fictioning.²⁴ This is despite the admission in the

23. (Levinas 1981) 88. Romantic historicism more closely resembles the conflation of one’s “self self” and “historical self” (Rankine 14). In Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the speaker recalls a conversation about the “battle between” these two kinds of selves and how racial tensions in the present arise from the tension between them. It initiates a scenario where one’s body makes visible a history (and a historicity) that was already there; it is an example of how the past can disrupt and alter someone’s “contemporaneousness with the other.”

24. Vivasvan Soni’s account of “the emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous realm of inquiry” in the first half of the century suggests a way to connect fictioning and “literary cognition” to Wollstonecraft (Soni 1). *Poiesis and fictioning*, in Soni’s reading of Shaftesbury, set the conditions for the creation of our modern notion of subjectivity. Wollstonecraft fictions subjectivity in the *Letters* in two ways: she fictions the other through facing them and she fictions humanity writ large through her contemplations of the future.

“Advertisement” that the speaker plans to “give a just view of the present state of the countries” she passes through. The commitment to a “just” description of social conditions might make the *Letters* seem less a “fiction” than a relation of facts. Catherine Gallagher, however, has made clear that “realism was not a way of trying to hide or disguise fictionality but was, rather, the formal sign of fiction.”²⁵ She makes this claim in reference to the long eighteenth century novel’s creation of characters who were “developed as nobody *in particular*,” but the co-constitutive relationship between fictive (and, perhaps, “literary”) form and subjectivities lacking “historical” reference applies to *Letters* as well.²⁶ As Favret and others have suggested, “Mary” is not Mary Wollstonecraft; her “I,” rather, is Nobody in particular and, thus, Somebody, a person whose consciousness and situation the reader can relate to. “Nobody’s story,” Gallagher concludes, “played a very real role in the creation of the modern self” simply “by virtue of its fictionality.”²⁷

To see this, we can return to the Advertisement, where the speaker admits that the letters “were *designed* for publication,” and then reiterates that she had “been preparing these letters *for* the press” in the book’s Appendix (emphases added). “Designed” connotes not only that they were “intended” for publication, but also that they were *formed* for the press. Mary Wollstonecraft intended to publish her journey, but her letters to Gilbert Imlay were less influential in making *Letters* than the journal she kept for herself. Unique within Wollstonecraft’s corpus, the book would circulate as an example

25. (Gallagher 1992) 264.

26. (Gallagher 1992) 269.

27. (Gallagher 1992) 270.

of the sentimental journey. She had already written (and was still working on) novels, but *Letters*—as a hybrid of anthropology, sentimental travelogue, and political treatise in epistle form—stands as her most experimental work. It circulates like letters; but while we can read “Mary’s” letters, we have no access to the letters her unnamed friend may have written back to her. One of its strongest political claims, then, is purely formal: no letter from the man of commerce, but twenty-five from a middle-class woman interacting with the poor and the disadvantaged while growing increasingly tired of the leisured classes. Depicting a vulnerable woman amidst vulnerable persons, *Letters* “faces” vulnerability by giving it a uniquely literary form.

IV

Facing Vulnerability

I draw from the ethics of the face theorized by Emmanuel Levinas, for whom “the face... signifies... an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract,” precipitating an ethics of immediacy for the “neighbor.”²⁸ More importantly, the Levinasian face generates an ethics that “escapes representation”—that is, the substitution of a person with a symbol on their behalf—because the “proximity” we share with others around us enables an ethics where we can “[be]-one-for-the-other” by being one *with* the Other.²⁹ Likewise, Wollstonecraft’s text formulates an ethics of care despite not being representative of particular historical persons. The Levinasian face, according to Judith Butler, “explain[s] how it is that others make moral claims upon us,

28. (Levinas 1981) 88.

29. (Levinas 1981) 90.

address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for... [and] are not free to refuse.”³⁰

Letters implies that presence is required to create the conditions for such an ethics, but presence alone does not guarantee such an ethics.

Letters “faces” its readers by presenting them with an “I” that “we” become intimate with, an intimacy the epistolary mode itself encourages. But it also gives a “face” to the situations “Mary” finds herself in. Confronted with the manifold ethical obligations for the people she interacts with simply by being present with them, the “I” in the *Letters* stumbles into multiple scenes of the “ethics of immediacy.” Seeing the “simple gracefulness of deportment” and the “sympathy” shared among the poor, for instance, produces in her an “amuse[ment] and interest” (71-2). The speaker finds the sight of the poor interacting among themselves more interesting “than the middling [classes], with their apish good breeding and prejudices.” By “meet[ing] the *honest* affections” of the poor “as they break forth,” she finds it “delightful to love our fellow-creatures” (emphasis added).

At the same time, *Letters* faces its readers insofar as we come “face-to-face” with “Mary.” A stranger in a strange land, a woman traveling with only her infant daughter and a maid, “Mary” magnifies the inherent vulnerability of her sexed body in a patriarchal society. Given that the historical journey itself was unusual by any standard for the period— Wollstonecraft was sent to conduct business on behalf of Gilbert Imlay and his possibly illegal wartime profiteering—“Mary’s” voyage would have been seen by readers in the same unusual light. In a 1796 issue of *The Monthly Mirror*, a reviewer assumed that the *Letters* used the situation of the speaker “as an appeal to our feelings,”

30. (Butler 2004) 131.

given its presentation of/as “an unhappy mother, wandering though foreign countries with her helpless infant, enduring all the fatigue and inconvenience of incessant traveling, bad accommodations, and occasional insult.”³¹ *Letters* studies the interaction between an inherently vulnerable body and situationally vulnerable social groups.

Several moments suggest that the book re-signifies these vulnerable bodies by “aestheticizing” them, producing history and not merely reflecting it. In other words, *Letters* may be fictive, but turning these vulnerable persons into figures abets a universalization of its ethics. Take, for example, “Mary’s” observation from the fifth letter:

The sun appeared afraid to shine, the birds ceased to sing, and the flowers to bloom; but the eagle fixed his nest high amongst the rocks, and the vulture hovered over this abode of desolation. The farm houses, in which only poverty resided, were formed of logs scarcely keeping off the cold and drifting snow; out of them the inhabitants seldom peeped, and the sports or prattling of children was neither seen or heard (76).

The entirety of the landscape seems to conspire to affectively reflect the indigence of the “inhabitants.” Here, the speaker personifies “poverty” in a manner not unlike the personification of Autumn in Keats’s poem. There, the speaker asks “Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?” (l. 12). But the examples he subsequently proffers—“sitting careless on a granary floor,” “sound asleep” after reaping, and watching “the last oozing hours by hours”—refer in fact to the people performing these actions. The conceit of the poem notwithstanding, “Autumn” has no agency of its own but performs these acts

31. Qtd. in (Wollstonecraft 2013) 40.

through human actors. The same is true of Wollstonecraft's "residing" poverty. In both cases, the figure enables us to see and empathize with people more forcefully than if we were more directly confronted with the "facts." Wollstonecraft goes further than Keats: in *Letters*, the speaker underscores how a personified poverty unites, defines, and *supplants* the people who live in the farm houses. Where the second stanza of "To Autumn" augments the value of the people by emphasizing their unified actions instead of their specificity as individuals, personified "poverty" in the *Letters* depersonifies persons: only poverty resides in these homes, not people. Thus, in being so figurative, the speaker ends up being quite literal: poverty *has* displaced these people, and it now "lives" in their homes.

In this way, the passage operates as an "aestheticization" of ethics that re-politicizes the disenfranchised. Crucially, this depends upon the speaker, as a perceiving agent, coming to see that the people she meets "ha[ve] human feelings, as well as forms" (65). This case requires her immediate presence. Later in the text, Wollstonecraft tries a different, more mediated, approach:

We glided along the meadows, and through the woods, with sun-beams playing around us; and though no castles adorned the prospects, a greater number of comfortable farms met my eyes, during this ride, than I have ever seen, in the same space, even in the most cultivated part of England. And the very appearance of the cottages of the labourers, sprinkled amidst them, excluded all those gloomy ideas inspired by the contemplation of poverty.... The hay was still bringing in... (121).

Here, she sees the cottages from the window of a carriage. In effect, the homes are visually framed, a mediation different from the earlier poeticized description where “only poverty resided.” The scene’s framing seems to mimic picturesque tourism, situating the cottages and the “labourers sprinkled amidst them” within a print. The speaker observes that “the hay was still bringing in,” effacing the “labourers” while noticing their labor. This revision is a re-vision, a seeing again that foregrounds the elision of the bodies there and places attention on resulting actions instead of personified causes. The speaker’s inconsistency demonstrates how fine the line may be between aesthetically figuring the vulnerable to highlight their meaningfulness and simply aestheticizing them out of history. The first scene was predicated on presence, but that may not be enough to cross the line into the picturesque aesthetics of the second scene. In fact, the speaker does not necessarily need immediate presence in the former scene; rather, the eventual recognition of vulnerable bodies links metonymically to vulnerable people, instantiating Levinas’s notion of immediacy, that is, “the collapse of [a] representation [of a phenomenon] into a face” that depends on the other for its existence (91). By the same token, the second, picturesque scene is not determined by the speaker’s distance. The speaker only needed to connect the *figures* of the laborers to their capacities as persons. But this time she does not.

She is not alone in such oversights. Wollstonecraft is highly critical of the discourse of sentiment, lambasting those “gentlemen” and “ladies of the most exquisite sensibility,” who “forg[et] that their attendants had human feelings, as well as forms.” And she is merciless when it comes to what she calls “charity,” described here as a way

for “timid bigots... to cover their sins, do[ing] violence to justice, till, acting the demigod, they forget that they are men” (168).

Such charity refers to an emaciated notion of benevolence under the aegis of a burgeoning capitalist order. “Charity” lies at the very heart of this order, best theorized in the period by Adam Smith. Smith studied moral philosophy under Hutcheson, but his thoughts on political economy (and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well) stand against Hutcheson’s moral system. If Hutcheson’s ethics necessitates the production of moral meaning through the interpretation of intentions, then Smith’s hypothesis divorces intentions from effects. In *The Wealth of Nations*, for example, Smith hypothesizes that while “every individual... continually exert[s] himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command,” his self-interest “naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society.”³² This individual “neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it” since his choices suggest that “he intends only his own security” (572). But, according to Smith, “by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value” for himself, he is

led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and

32. (Smith 2003) 569-70.

very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it (572).

The best way to advance the public good, Smith tells men of commerce, is to tend to the “the most advantageous employment” of their own capital. The addressee of *Letters*, who has “entered deeply into commerce,” seems himself to be such a man. But such “men entirely devoted to commerce never acquire or [they] lose all taste and greatness of mind,” Wollstonecraft writes (172). Near the end of her voyage, the speaker has “an opportunity of peeping behind the scenes of what are vulgarly termed great affairs, only to discover the mean machinery which has directed many transactions of moment.” She denounces the logic behind the Smithian “invisible hand,” believing that the “sword has been merciful, compared with the depredations made on human life by contractors and by the swarm of locusts who have battened on the pestilence they spread abroad.” “These men,” she continues, “like the owners of negro ships, never smell on their money the blood by which it has been gained, but sleep quietly in their beds, terming such occupations lawful callings.” In short, the “legality” of their actions conflicts with its ethics: the state’s morals foster a worldview that relegates people to property while sneering at altruism. Smith’s system disposes of benevolent intentions, leaving the “welfare of others” to the vicissitudes of capitalism’s “mean machinery.” The “invisible hand” of the order leaves the enslaved invisible themselves.

Numerous scholars have discussed eighteenth century industrial capitalism’s complicity with human chattel slavery.³³ Many have argued that slavery and imperialism formed the basis of modern capitalism. In a text whose narrator does not interact with

33. See, for example: (Baucom 2005); (Williams 1944); (Ashworth 1995; Baptist 2014; Blackburn 2010; Johnson 1999; Johnson 2004; Schermerhorn 2015)

people of African descent, enslaved or otherwise, global capitalism leaves no place free from the specters of the Atlantic and the blood that fuels it. Within a system funded in part by treating some people as brutes, the speaker intimates that any “ostentatious display of wealth” or “greedy enjoyment of pleasure” lacking sentiment is what truly “embrutes” men and turns “all virtue of an heroic cast” into merely “romantic attempts at something above our nature” and the care for “welfare of others... [into] a search after misery” (172). The assumption that social welfare arises from self-interest is exposed as a desire to justify a system that produces and subsequently ignores inequality. Rich man, *Letters* implies, is wolf to woman, the enslaved, and the poor.

The speaker’s thoughts on commerce stage a confrontation of values whenever commerce is theorized as antipathetic to the imagination—especially in the second half of *Letters*, as the missives’ addressee becomes increasingly allied with the urban middle classes. The speaker extends the difference between herself and the male addressee when she fictions an imaginary intersubjective connection with the grand personages of the past who entered the palace of Rosemburg:

Could they be no more—to whom my imagination thus gave life? Could the thoughts, of which there remained so many vestiges, have vanished quite away? And these beings, composed of such noble materials of thinking and feeling, have they only melted into the elements to keep in motion the grand mass of life? It cannot be!—As easily could I believe that the large silver lions, at the top of the banqueting room, thought and reasoned. But avant! ye waking dreams!—yet I cannot describe the

curiosities to you (156).

The difference between the speaker and the man of commerce stems from how they relate to invisible others—here, the countless dead that the royal palace brings to mind, inspired by the history of war and the various portraits in the room. She “cannot describe” her imaginative revivification to the man of commerce who cannot understand this method of valuing the lives of other persons.

Notably, the speaker’s imagination “gave life” to the dead. Something similar arguably applies to all of the characters she meets since the *Letters* insists on adopting a literary cognition of sympathizing with “Nobody” in particular. In the passage, an invisible mass of people remain animated and valued, anchored by another’s mind. This “imagined community” does not coalesce into a nation: the speaker has a sympathetic bond with others, not a political or “material” one. In what might be a jab at the man of commerce, she points out that the objects of opulence—the silver lions—are lower than the value of the imaginary persons she refuses to accept as entirely annihilated. The lions are incapable of reasoning and thinking, whereas all people can—unless they have been “embruted” by wealth or socio-economic inequality, by fortune or misfortune. Either way, culpability for the “embruting” lies with “commerce.” In effect, the speaker has converted the man of commerce into a lion made of silver.

The dead may be gone, but the speaker refuses to accept that they have “melted into the elements” that now “keep in motion the grand mass of life.” Instead, she proposes that they still are—or at least still *can* be—aspects of the “grand mass of life” because products of the imagination are not destroyed by material decay. They continue

to live because their thoughts live on, giving something for the imagination of the living to hold, even if one has never met them. *Letters* presents the complications of personifying people (specifically dead ones); Wollstonecraft relates examples of such a power to repersonify the dead through the interconnection between perception and the imagination. This accords with Ian Baucom's notion of "melancholy realism," a decidedly "romantic type" where type is defined as a "form of existence of an amaterial, nongraspable entity, a substitute."³⁴ The "romantic type," Baucom continues, "implicitly resists the exchange of life for death by seeking to return dead things to life and insisting on the affective reality of the exemplary ghosts it calls" forth.

"Melancholy realism" aptly describes the "silver lions" passage. It fictions the dead and the uncounted into meaning. Indeed, the entirety of *Letters* enacts such "fictioning." But these scenes and others make clear that "fictioned" does not mean "fake" or counterfactual. Rather, the scenes materialize the "poetic faith" Coleridge aspired towards long before he theorized it in the *Biographia Literaria*. *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* features "th[o]se shadows of the imagination" that unravel and underscore a more transcendent truth. That truth points to how an ordinary perception of "human form" is enough to necessitate "virtue and care" (172). The "fictioning" in the examples so far takes historically vulnerable persons and traps them in the literary present. It may not preserve them in human form, but it

34. (Baucom 2005) 46.

keeps them in a humane one.³⁵

V

Meaning and Teleology

“...fueling into him the long history

of those whose suffering

was made more bearable

by the as-yet-unknown of him...”

-Mark Doty, “Two Seconds ”

“If anything, the Anthropocene is a spark that will light a fire in our imaginaries.”

-Rosemary-Claire Collard, Jessica Dempsey, and Juanita Sundberg, “Manifesto for
Abundant Futures”

So far I have argued that “history” is a fictioning—or a figuration—of the past

35. It is perhaps ironic that I label the “literary” representation of the vulnerable as more “humane” than one hewing closer to the *literal* representation of actual historical referents. But by enfleshing the social interaction between vulnerable people instead of the people themselves, a text can exercise one’s imaginative concern and care for those who have passed away, those whom one may never meet, and those who have yet to be (see below for more on the idea of “intergenerational justice” and “temporal vulnerability”). For more on this, see Frances Ferguson’s *Solitude and the Sublime*, Paul de Man’s “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric” (1984), and Barbara Johnson’s “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law” (1998) as well as Johnson’s 2008 book *Persons and Things*.

and the present; now, I specify that further by suggesting that it is characterized by a capacity to think about an “us,” whether as a community, a class, or a species. In other words, “history” in the *Letters* is built upon sharing humanity across space, race, and time; we saw this, for example, in the speaker’s criticisms of other conjectural historians who based their ethnography on difference and condescension. History is a meaning-making activity of the present, and for Wollstonecraft it is best done by cognition that unites seemingly disparate peoples rather than one that builds hierarchies among them.

The same, as we shall see, is true of her sense of futurity. Below, I invoke Kant’s thoughts on “teleological judgment” and what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “species thinking” to shed further light on the ethics of futurity at play here.³⁶

There is, to be sure, a rich critical discourse pulling in the other direction. Most notable is Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), which posits meaning and futurity as concepts united in the perpetuation of a particular world order defined by reproductive heteronormativity and vilified queerness.³⁷ Yet *Letters* suggests that there is a place for

36. I aim here to elaborate the usefulness of Wollstonecraft’s fictionings of futurity and the environment. She is to be a representative case of such fictioning by other Romantic figures, such as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *The Last Man*. There are, however, alternative responses to ecological crises that do not rely on futurity. For one such proposal, see “Manifesto for Abundant Futures” by Rosemary-Claire Collard, Jessica Dempsey, and Juanita Sundberg. The authors suggest that “the tendency to relentlessly focus on the future is not the answer” to addressing the ecological harm done by past capitalist and current neoliberal systems (327). My intention is not to refute the methods of the “Manifesto” or its aims, but to present and analyze an early attempt to connect industrial capitalism to the environment and to critique the harms of the former on the latter.

37. Edelman wants to resist “history as linear narrative... in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—as itself—through time.” In its place he offers instead a “queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition.”

future-oriented thinking and the figure of the Child in the name of a more just and more caring society. Instead of throwing the figural baby out with the political bathwater, *Letters* demonstrates ways of future-oriented thinking most necessary for the vulnerable amid the precarity of all of our lives. This is not a defense of reproductive futurity or even reproduction itself but an example of how to subordinate the future to a progressive political project in the present.

Edelman is particularly interested in the “meaning” associated with the figure of the Child and he minces no words on what he believes the figure is tasked with:

the child... [is] made to image, for the satisfaction of adults, an Imaginary fullness that’s considered to want, and therefore to want for nothing.... On every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters... terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up.³⁸

I am sympathetic to Edelman’s project, and I do not deny that the concepts of children

38. (Edelman 2004) 21. This passage raises many questions. Do “children who want” *always* figure, “therefore... [a] want for nothing?” And more specifically, do children of the poor “want for nothing?” Do children of refugees “want for nothing?” Do adults imagine these children to stand for “an Imaginary fullness” of any kind? Who falls within the ambit of this “our,” this collective whose “enjoyment of liberty” is supposedly threatened? Is it fair to compare the effects of “the Child” to terrorism? These questions leave clear Edelman’s assumption that “the figure of the Child” in his argument is (and perhaps has always been and will always be) a white, middle/upper class, able-bodied male child with no mental impairments and no time to learn to live with not being gratified. Edelman seems to suspend intersectional thinking here. Not all children, however, fit this mold.

(qua figure), meaning, and futurity are wielded against women, people of color, and queer and trans communities. And, moreover, there is a language of the vulnerability of the unborn (or a more generic call to “save the children” or “think of the children”) used to curtail women’s reproductive rights and to legislate their bodies. That noted, I am suspicious of Edelman’s absolute condemnations of these three concepts.³⁹ Below, I attempt to salvage aspects of them and their potential political usefulness as they were theorized in the Romantic period.

The discussion of futurity is not new to Romantic criticism, though Wollstonecraft has not been prominently featured in it. The “burden” of Emily Rohrbach’s *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation* (2015), for example, “comes from the Romantic propensity to imagine the present in relation to its futurity.”⁴⁰ “Romantic period writers,” she explains, “understood their world to be shadowed by a dark futurity.” In light of this, Rohrbach’s study of “literary shapings of anticipation that

39. *No Future* has had, of course, its critics; my goal is not necessarily to be one of them. There have been critiques on its lack of concern for gender (it lionizes queer figures who Edelman reads as male), disability, and race. For an introduction to latter two criticisms, see, for example, José Esteban Muñoz’s books *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics* and *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* as well as Anca Parvulescu’s “Reproduction and Queer Theory: Between Lee Edelman’s *No Future* and JM Coetzee’s *Slow Man*” (2017). In *Feminist Theory* (1990), bell hooks acknowledges that while “the white supremacist, patriarchal state relies on the family to indoctrinate its members with values supportive of hierarchical control and coercive authority,” it only does so by “pervert[ing] and distort[ing] the positive function of family,” a concept that can be the primary and/or only source of humanizing nurture for many individuals and social groups (39, 38). See Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) for instance of gender-based pushback against Edelman’s commentary on pregnancy (pp. 13ff, 75ff).

40. (Rohrbach 2016) 1. Others have also re-oriented Romantic scholarship towards the future; see Mark Canuel’s work on improvement and progress, Anahid Nersessian’s work on limited utopia, and Rohrbach herself.

envision the present in the terms of an unknown and unpredictable time... yet to come” would not easily extend to *Letters* which, as I have suggested, is deeply concerned with “facing” the present.⁴¹

Wollstonecraft’s text certainly participates in the “historical crisis that emerged in the end of the eighteenth century,” a crisis that, to quote Alan Liu (though about the long nineteenth century), developed a “sense of history as an ideology or philosophy that explains away originating absence.”⁴² But the relationship among past, present, and future in *Letters* differs from the obsession with “dark futurity” that, in Rorhbach’s analysis, encompasses much of the Romantic period. In the midst of the French Revolution, “the sense of a radically uncertain, impending futurity” failed to complicate Wollstonecraft’s belief in the certain “project of historical definition” or of projecting a future-oriented perspective of Humanity. “Mary” believed that the revolution would initiate a world where “politics... becom[es] a subject of discussion, enlarg[ing] the heart by opening the understanding” of peoples all over Europe (90). She writes that the revolution “*will* have this effect,” as good an example of “anticipation” as any in Romanticism. So while “anticipation,” as this instance points out, entails a future-orientation, one must always anticipate *in the present* and as a *historically situated subject*. The future, for the speaker, is neither “dark” nor “unknown,” even if systemic inequalities, sexism, and racism may shape the present as such. The future is certain because it is locked into social progress. For example, the appendix remarks how “the poverty of the poor in Sweden renders the

41. There is also, of course, a breadth of work on Romanticism and the present. See, for example, William Galperin on the everyday and Anna-Lise Francois’s *Open Secrets*.

42. (Rorhbach 2016) 8; (Liu 1984) 540.

civilisation very partial, and slavery has retarded the improvement of every class in Denmark, *yet both are advancing*” (emphasis added; appendix). Such “advancement” reads as almost natural; “Mary’s” anticipation is less about a dark or uncertain future than it is about the slow but gradual progress out of a dark and unjust present. In short, one works toward revolution by committing to reform. The present underwrites “Mary’s” futurity and, as she makes clear, that the future is meaningful is often the only thing that lightens the heavy weight of day to day life.

That said, Wollstonecraft is, to be sure, susceptible to the charge that her progressivism condones a certain kind of regressive reproductive futurity. Claudia Johnson takes the title of her 1995 book, *Equivocal Beings*, from “Wollstonecraft’s intensely homophobic phrase” for men she deemed “effeminate.”⁴³ Drawn from Wollstonecraft’s critiques of sentimentality and gender in the two *Vindications*, the phrase indicates how Wollstonecraft cast “feminized men” as the “problem undermining society.” Wollstonecraft, writes Johnson, “transmute[s] misogyny into a form of homophobia that could somehow leave women unscathed” since, for her, it was “crucial for the well-being of all to differentiate men from fops and ‘equivocal beings,’ but she does not consider it terribly important to differentiate men from women.”⁴⁴ Johnson finds this to be in stark contrast to the novels *Mary* and *Maria*, works detailing the power of feminine homosocial (and perhaps even homoerotic) connection. *Letters* stands in the midpoint between the early nonfiction and the later novels, so where it may fall in terms of its queer politics is up for debate.

43. (Johnson 1995) 11.

44. (Johnson 1995) 47.

“Mary” travels with her infant daughter and her maid: three vulnerable travelers. Marguerite, the maid, is unfortunately obscured for much of the book.⁴⁵ And while the child occupies very little of the “plot” in *Letters*, her presence and absence hold significant meaning. The baby’s dependence on her elders becomes pressingly overt early in the text, when circumstances separate the speaker from her infant daughter. At the ending of the sixth letter, “Mary” laments her distance from her newborn:

Fate has separated me from another, the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs sublime emotions absorb my soul. And, smile not, if I add that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion which will never more charm my senses, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child (87).

The words “even when” suggest that the “sublime emotions absorb[ing her] soul” stem from the child, not the “tremendous cliffs.” Affective responses usually believed, in the period, to derive from nature are instead caused by her daughter. The child brings about “sublime emotions;” her cheeks can “charm [the] senses;” and, birdlike, her voice “warbl[es] as [the speaker] stray[s] over the heath.” The speaker’s practice of embedding her child into the landscape charges it with both hope and fear, “ecstasy and agony.” A

45. I will discuss the gendering of domestic labor in the next chapter. Scholarship is very largely silent on Marguerite. The more popular, visible *figures* of Mother and Child obscure the woman who, in effect, works for both. Many scholars (though I am quoting Rachel Adams here) have drawn our “attention to the inequalities whereby one woman’s experience of motherhood is subsidized by the curtailed opportunities of another” (Adams, “Disability Life Writing and the Problem of Dependency in *The Autobiography of Gaby Brimmer*” [2017] pp. 47ff).

missing child (itself a figure) does not have to represent the perpetuation of any order, let alone the heteronormative nuclear family. It can also make more real the dangers of the present and figure the very real possibility of changing it for future persons. The figure of the child, that is, can stand in for the tenuousness of all life and the moral demand others impose on us.

For Edelman, the figure of the child produces further figuration: figure breeds more figure, trapping an exclusive and unspecified “us” into an endlessly reproducing ideology poised against the queer and the alien. But his particular figuration of childhood is, in fact, a version of one drawn from Romantic era writers like Rousseau, Blake, and Wordsworth.⁴⁶ In this notion of childhood, infants possess an “inherent vulnerability” that leaves them more susceptible than most to violence, pain, and death. Abolishing an ethics of futurity can abolish too an ethics of precariousness, and not only on account of children’s physical susceptibilities. The child’s vulnerability appends to figuration an ethical charge. In this sense, recognizing vulnerability—at least as instantiated in a small child—indicates how figuration makes things *more* real and more dear.

Immanuel Kant’s thoughts on “Teleological Judgment” in the third *Critique* offer

46. For a cursory overview of this topic, see, for example, Linda M. Austin, “Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy” (2003); Galia Benziman, *Narratives of Child Neglect in Romantic and Victorian Culture* (2012); Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011); Eric Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed: Working-class Children in Nineteenth-Century England* (1994); James Holt McGavran, *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuities, Postmodern Contestations* (1999); and Judith A. Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (2001). Bernstein in particular adds another dimension to this in her consideration of race. In the American nineteenth century, this Wordsworthian notion of childhood innocence is attributed to white children at the expense of Black ones. Blake’s form of “innocence” differs from Rousseau and Wordsworth, however.

a robust body of thought on future-oriented cognition. In the Kantian system, one performs future-oriented thinking, like all thinking, in the present, in the moment of “facing” an object. What makes human cognition special is the future-oriented process of conceiving “ends” in nature. For example, in the “Analytic of Teleological Judgment,” Kant lists examples of natural things that may look like ends, but are not. Since true ends fall only within the purview of moral agents with the capacity for future-oriented thinking, we can characterize these other ostensible ends as, for example, “advantageous” in regards to the organism or others, but always as a “relative” end. Moral agents bring “forward a teleological ground where [they]... regard nature as possessed of a capacity of its own for acting *technically*” or “*designedly*.”⁴⁷ Kant’s connections across teleology, morality, environments, and purposiveness from this less-famous part of the *Critique of Judgment* help shed light on Wollstonecraft’s use of these concepts.⁴⁸

For Kant, judgment—including *aesthetic* judgment—is how the self finds purposiveness and meaning in a “mechanical” nature. Human beings repurpose the intentionality within themselves and impute it to the environment. We see this in “Mary’s” lament for her absent daughter, where the infant is the cause of the sensations

47. (Kant 2007) 188.

48. The overlooking of the *Critique*’s later sections in favor of the opening part on aesthetics—reducible to beauty, the sublime, and “art”—runs counter to Kant’s own estimation of the *Critique*’s purpose. See Thierry de Duve: “Kant did not write the *Critique of Judgment* as a treatise on aesthetics. Only the first half of the book deals with beauty and the sublime and concerns aesthetic judgment. The second half, which was more important in Kant’s eyes, deals with purposiveness in nature and concerns teleological judgment” (149). Reflective judgment produces, among other principles, teleology. The mind’s capacity to do so mediates our existence as a part of nature with our rational capacities to legislate moral laws apart from it. We are human because of aesthetic judgments, but autonomous subjects because of reflective, teleological ones.

she feels when she perceives the natural landscape. For Kant, this would be an example of how we lend purposiveness to neutral matter: by taking the products of our cognitive and affective processes and embedding them into natural objects and, in this case, landscapes. Nature's newfound purposiveness, in turn, lends value to the perceiving subject's place in it. In this process, one can find the lives of others in an environment meaningful and of value. When a subject sees someone else in the environment, according to Kant, she ought to follow the "formula of humanity" and treat them with "respect," never as a means. "By the humanity in us, Kant does not mean to refer to something specific about our species," Paul Formosa argues, "but to the rational capacities in persons." The "rational capacities" of "humanity" rest on the ability to conceive of ends. To be able to find meaning in the world is to be a person and to be a person is to be meaningful.

Such future-oriented teleological thinking cannot be easily divorced from ethics contingent on inherent and situational vulnerabilities. "Autonomy" is the endgame of Kantian ethics (and of Kant's philosophy in general), and in such a world vulnerability "can engender a troubling sense of powerlessness, loss of control, or loss of agency."⁴⁹ As a result, contemporary moral philosophers "believe that the background aim of interventions triggered in response to vulnerability must be to enable or restore, wherever possible and to the greatest extent possible, the autonomy of the affected persons or groups."⁵⁰ And among the most vulnerable among us are small children.

In the end, to treat *anyone* well is to affirm that their lives have meaning. The

49. (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013) 9.

50. (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013) 9.

figure of the Child adds futurity to the equation, and through it one can affirm that life has meaning both now and in the future. This is what “fictioning” is, ultimately, all about: the ability (or even the *attempt*) to find purposiveness, meaning, and value in something or someone. In the *Letters*, facing the future *in the present*, like Kant’s account of teleological thinking, lends meaning to present actions, to the people of other nations, and to the speaker’s own life. Take, for instance, an apostrophe to futurity in the very first letter:

What are these imperious sympathies? How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind;—I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself. . . . Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness! (59)

This passage follows one where the speaker watches her child fall asleep. Not only does the precarity of a small child, as typifying the vulnerability of all human life to external contingencies, lead to an appeal to futurity, but so too does the precariousness of “those who know that there is such a thing as happiness.” Only a person in a position of privilege can vindicate meaninglessness and non-futurity. Future-oriented thinking comes off as less insidious when its ethics salve the less fortunate consigned to a precarious day-to-day life in the present. As the speaker’s own myopia to the laboring poor makes clear,

to err is human, and it carries inimical social effects. Without futurity and the ability to be better tomorrow than one was today, nothing could change for those laborers—they remain invisible indefinitely. To tie futurity to meaning results in important political interventions, while to be opposed to meaningful futurity is to impose upon the powerless a present with no hope for a better tomorrow. “Without hope,” the speaker asks, “what is to sustain life, but the fear of annihilation” (99)? With hope, we live *for* something instead of living *despite* something.

Jose Esteban Muñoz writes that “Hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory,” binding us to present-tense meaning-making with multiple potential futures in mind.⁵¹ Here, “Mary” hails the future after remembering that “some involuntary sympathetic emotion” checks her feelings of “melancholy and even misanthropy.” This automatic sympathetic reaction is most likely the reference for what she elsewhere calls “imperious sympathies,” which cause the self to feel an invisible connection to all others of the “mighty whole.”

In this way, the speaker’s dignifying care towards others practices what Janna Thompson has called “intergenerational justice.” “Our temporal position,” Thompson argues, “gives us power over past and future generations.” *Letters* provides an example. Watching a “wild coast... as [she] sailed along it,” the speaker meditates on the future:

I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man has still to do to obtain of the earth all it could yield. I even carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two of years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and

51. (Muñoz 2009) 3.

so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot—
yes, these bleak shores (115).

The speaker's thoughts extend to the point in time over which it would appear that she does *not* have power. But she checks this assumption: "Do not smile; I really became distressed for these fellow creatures yet unborn. The images fastened on me, and the world appeared a vast prison." This distress arises from allowing her "imagination... [to go] still farther, and [she] pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him." Dipesh Chakrabarty, in "The Climate of History: Four Theses," might have cited this phrase as an example of the breach of "the wall between human and natural history" accomplished by climate change. It takes place, however, long before our current self-perception of the human species as "a geological agent." After thinking of "these fellow creatures" of the future, the "world appeared a vast prison" to the speaker. In other words, those born after the tipping point of a Malthusian crisis are congenitally vulnerable to a hostile world, to "universal famine," and an earth that "could no longer support" human life." Such images "fasten" onto her, not only exercising her affective capacities (regardless of the immense temporal distance between her and the object of her thoughts) but also transforming the world into a prison *for her in the present*. The speaker does not equate the experience and the contemplation of suffering; rather, she acknowledges this—for her—inevitable state of misery for other members of the species and is emotionally affected by it since there is no escaping or preventing it. In point of fact, she then feels the same for her contemporaries in disenfranchised social situations: "we saw about two hundred houses crowded together under a very high rock.... Talk not

of Bastilles! To be born here was to be bastilled by nature—shut out from all that opens the understanding, or enlarges the heart” (116). A time of “universal famine” is certain—but so too is a time where famine is too common for so many.

The present suffering that “bastilles” the poor is the past for a suffering assured to future generations. If “Humanist histories are,” in Chakrabarty’s terms, “histories that produce *meaning* through an appeal to our capacity not only to reconstruct but... to reenact in our own minds the experience of the past,” then what do we make of the trifold “history” *Letters* broadcasts?⁵² I propose that the “history” of *Letters* best relates to the concept of “species,” a concept in both space and time but dependent on the individual mind and cultural memory. “Species,” Chakrabarty holds, “may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of danger that is climate change.”

Between Wollstonecraft and Chakrabarty, of course, is the early, “romantic” Marx, who in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* proposed that “Man is a species being” for two reasons, the second of which is “because he treats himself as *universal* and therefore a free being.”⁵³ Marx extended these Kantian conceptions of universality and human autonomy to the industrial capitalism of his age, thereby observing that in “estranging [a person] from ... nature” and their own subjectivity, “estranged labor estranges the *species* from” the person.⁵⁴ But, according to Marx, “it is only because man is a species being that he is a Conscious Being.” Individuated

52. Emphasis added, (Chakrabarty 2009) 220.

53. (Marx 2011) 53.

54. (Marx 2011) 54.

consciousness does not produce the ability to think universally; instead, these two aspects of human thinking influence and inform one another. And since the human mind “adopts the species as [its] object” of perception, thinking of others with benevolent intentions becomes a way of thinking of oneself with tenderness. Similarly, as Axel Honneth states about Kant’s philosophy of history, “we who share the moral standpoint must [present] for ourselves not only our cooperating contemporaries but also the well-intentioned members of past and future generations as subjects... convinced of the realizability of the good.”⁵⁵ Thus, a person enacts her “*essential* being” by practicing the capacity to abstract herself across time and connect to persons and objects long gone, far away, or yet to come. As I pointed out above, such a capacity has many names—*poiesis*, Imagination, fictioning, Kantian freedom—but it was a theorized and often praised element of what is now called Romanticism. Both history and futurity, I conclude, are products of figuration; each is a fictioning performed at the level of the species. In conjunction, they produce a contemporaneous “we” that exists simultaneously with a past sense of community and a future one as well.⁵⁶

The “we” that shares the contemporaneous “now,” however permeable and malleable both are, is meaningful because it represents the future to a past we accept as

55. (Honneth 2009) 6. Kant makes a similar claim in the last *Lectures on Ethics* (1775 to 1780), “The Ultimate Destiny of the Human Race” which, Kant believed, was attaining “the greatest moral perfection” (252).

56. This “we” has, of course, has historically been wielded by some populations against others. As Rosi Braidotti makes clear, this “allegedly universal ideal is brought back to his historically contingent roots” by feminist scholarship (especially by what Braidotti labels “feminist race theory”) and is “exposed as very much a male of the species: it is a *he*.” For more, see Braidotti, “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism” from *Anthropocene Feminism* (2017).

ours. Rather than trapping us within an infinitely deferred future, thinking about *us* and *now* as part of and coextensive with the future renders futurity subservient to meaning-making in the present. “A story of loss” in the past, J.B. MacKinnon reminds us, “is not always and only a lament; it can also be a measure of possibility.”⁵⁷ And since the contemporaneous—defined as everything that falls within our horizons of possibilities that may be constitutive of the “us” that “we” are now—is not tied to any particular time period, it makes any instant in time the meaningful future of a meaningful past. Nothing is lost to time if it aids in the project of meaning-making in the present; nothing is lost because everyone “matters” and has the ability to instill value and worth in themselves, each other, and the environment in which they find themselves. “Why,” says *Don Juan’s* narrator, “I’m posterity and so are you.” And so are *you*.

57. (MacKinnon 2013) 41.

CHAPTER TWO

WORKING

“We cannot step beyond the everyday. The marvellous can only continue to exist in fiction and the illusions that people share. There is no escape.”

-Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947)

“There is no history without dates.”

-Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1966)

“Did I ask you for attention / When affection is what I need?”

-Metric, “Twilight Galaxy” (2009)

I

Aesthetics and the Common

In her posthumously published essay, “On the Uses of History” (1825), a treatise on historiography and the philosophy of history composed in the form of a series of letters to “Lydia,” a woman who has expressed interest in this male-dominated field of study, Anna Barbauld revises the late eighteenth century’s conceptions of history and futurity. In her description of the meaningfulness of past acts and their continued vitality in the present, she notes how

this permanency of human characters [in history] tends to cherish in the

mind the hope and belief of an existence after death. If we had no notices from the page of history of those races of men that have lived before us, they would seem to be completely swept away; and we should no more think of inquiring what human beings filled our places upon the earth a thousand harvests ago, than we should think about the generations of cattle which at that time grazed the marshes of the Tiber, or the venerable ancestors of the goats that are browsing upon Mount Hymettus... (406).

That actions of the past are still recorded hints that things done then and now are important because they reverberate into infinity. Since the deeds of men and women have an afterlife of their own, Barbauld reasons that those women and men have one as well:

when we see illustrious characters continuing to live on in the eye of posterity, their memories still fresh, and their noble actions shining with all the vivid coloring of truth and reality ages after the very dust of their tombs is scattered, high conceptions kindle within us; and, feeling one immortality, we are led to hope for another (406-7).

The “permanency” of persons and their actions in the past reverberate to the present, supplying us with hope for the future. But, as James Chandler notes, “history” is both a where and a when for Barbauld. Environment and space (“geography”) are so important to her conception of history that the “young student should make it an invariable rule never to read history without a map before him” (410).

Such a focus on spatial histories and the environment brings Barbauld’s essay close to Mary Wollstonecraft’s anthropological, epistolary document, *Letters Written*

during a *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Critics have brought these two writers and thinkers together for a variety of reasons. A common example sees them as pivotal, if at times opposing, figures in the history of what we now call Feminism(s). Barbauld's "Rights of Woman," for example, is read as an unsubtle poetic response to Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication*. But like *Letters*, "On the Uses of History" seeks to make "chronology," "geography," and "history"—of time, place, and the synthesis of the two that bears meaning for actual collectivities of persons—all feel more present and more dear. We learn, for example, that a date "is a very artificial thing" (415). No pejorative postulation on Barbauld's part, such artificiality clues us to the importance of *poeisis* in the production of meaningful history. "Dates" are artifacts: made things, meaning- and value-bearing fictions. The "world had existed for a long course of centuries before men were aware" of the use and necessity of dates. "*When* is a relative term," she claims, and its relativity leads us to the *real* idea of time: "These [personal dates] are the epochs which mark the annals of domestic life more readily and with greater clearness, so far as the real idea of time is concerned, than the year of our Lord, as long as these are all within the circle of our personal recollection" (415-6). The historical "epochs" that matter most are the ones where we are most invested personally, those constituting "the annals of domestic life."

Most notable about Barbauld's epistolary essay on historiography, however, is its final turn to the literary. Poetry, she writes, possesses the power to make other times and places more significant for readers. It "impresses both geography and history in a most agreeable manner upon those who are fond of it" (425). Poetry "impresses" history; this

provides another case of romantic historicism, or, for Barbauld in particular, of “how the literary representation of the state of the nation became a way of making history in two senses: as the construction of a narrative of events in literary form and as the *intervention* in the course of events by the very act of publishing such a construction.”¹ What I called “fictioning” in *Wollstonecraft* I present here as *poesis*, both signifying the importance of the capacity to create not only objects but new ideas and new visions. For these two writers, these literary metaphors of human cognition illustrate the aesthetic foundation for history: it is a way to create, sense, or interpret the meaningfulness of the environments one occupies.

I have begun this chapter on work and gender with an overview of “On the Uses of History” to show the overlaps between my reading of *Wollstonecraft* and the subsequent one of *Barbauld*. For two women with philosophical differences big and small to both gesture toward similar “uses” of history and literature—of the everyday and of its aestheticization—partly evinces that Romanticism devised its own “uses” for each. That is, the kind of Romanticism that I am discussing—the one accused of “aestheticizing the world”—theorizes a union of the poetic and the ordinary.

The Enlightenment aesthetic theory most influential for this study so far has been Immanuel Kant’s. This is not limited to the third *Critique* (or the “Analytics” of the beautiful and sublime found within it), a text which keeps Kant’s work in lockstep with a contemporary sense of “aesthetics.” For example, one may cite how the imagination, according to Kant, “affords us entertainment where experience proves too

1. (Chandler 1998) 114.

commonplace.”² Such an aesthetic theory is “transcendental” only insofar as aesthetic objects, stimuli, or responses function as a means to “transcend” day to day life. This perception of Kantian aesthetics has certainly proved influential in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically when attached to a conception of “disinterestedness” that bears similarity to “aesthetic distance.” This produces what Pierre Bourdieu called “the pure aesthetic,” where terms like “autonomy” (of art objects) and “disinterestedness” are tasked with designating art as a special category of objects and aesthetic experience as a special category of affective response (Bourdieu’s point, of course, was that such an “aesthetic” does not exist because of the material conditions such an “aesthetic” strives to deny). Certainly the suggestion that, for thinkers in the eighteenth century, the aesthetic takes us out of or away from the everyday is a familiar one.

While I maintain that this is a misreading of Kant and Enlightenment aesthetics, one can cherry-pick evidence throughout the period to demonstrate how major aesthetic theorists marshaled art against the everyday (or the “ordinary”).³ In addition to Kant, take Jean-Baptiste Du Bos (1670-1742) as another example of the century’s juxtaposition of “art” against the commonplace.⁴ According to Paul Guyer, Du Bos saw “the imagination

2. (Kant, Wood, and Guyer 1998) 143.

3. This is not to imply that “Aesthetics” equals the philosophy of art. Many aesthetic philosophers used art objects as test cases, and some certainly imbued art with a far greater value than others. Rather, I take Du Bos and Kant as representatives of a certain *post-Enlightenment* understanding of “aesthetic,” namely that it refers to a discourse concerned with a special set of objects. Below, I will return to my preferred use: the aesthetic as a set of heterogeneous philosophical systems nonetheless concerned with the overlapping problems of sensation, judgment, meaning, and moral action.

4. In “Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711- 1735,” Paul Guyer notes that Du Bos’s *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting, and Music* “went through five French editions and was widely circulated in Britain long before Thomas Nugent’s 1748 translation” (*Values of Beauty* 16).

and its paradigmatic objects, artistic imitations, as distinctive means for engaging the same emotions that are relevant throughout the rest of our activities and conduct, although only too rarely aroused in quotidian life.”⁵ As Du Bos claims, “we are led by instinct, in pursuit of objects capable of exciting our passions.”⁶ We find aspects of Du Bos’s contention, that the purpose of art is to rouse passions that daily life cannot, throughout the rest of the eighteenth century, notably in the writing of Joseph Addison, J. J. Winckelmann, and G. E. Lessing.

Kant, on the other hand, saw aesthetics as the “science of sensation,” specifically the perception of what is often called “Nature,” a concept of totality acting “as a catchall term for whatever there is, whether in front of your face or at the back of your mind.”⁷ Instead of art objects, “transcendental” aesthetics occupied Kant since the first edition of the first *Critique*.⁸ In some readings of Kantian philosophy, certain categories of perception (or the creation of certain affects by certain categories of stimuli) provide both proof and access to the “suprasensible.”⁹

The poems I discuss in this chapter tackle the challenges of perceiving “whatever there is,” including other perceiving subjects, especially those in precarious social positions. First, I will work to disclose poverty’s temporality by addressing two eighteenth century examples of “plebeian poetry.” We will see the benefit of going back

5. (Guyer 2005) 16.

6. Qtd. in (Guyer 2005) 17.

7. (Nersessian 2015) 48.

8. Take, for example, the name of Part I of “Transcendental Doctrine of Elements,” the first section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Transcendental Aesthetic.”

9. This word is translated from the German *übersinnlich*, and is also translated at times as the “supersensible.”

to what arguably inaugurated the genre (and its insistence on authenticity) in the eighteenth century—Stephen Duck’s “The Thresher’s Labour” (1730, 1736)—in order to truly understand Anna Letitia Barbauld’s 1797 poem “Washing-Day,” a nuanced meditation on the entanglements of class, gender, time, poetry, the environment, and meaning. Much of the work Barbauld’s poem performs is better illuminated when we situate it in a trajectory that includes Duck’s poem and Mary Collier’s response to it, “The Woman’s Labour” (1739). These two earlier poems articulate and complicate the interrelations among art, gender, and class, the same set of terms that lie at the heart of Barbauld’s text.

I cannot do justice here to the century’s fascination with the ties between the literary and indigence. Alongside Barbauld’s “Washing-Day,” a more in-depth overview of the poetics of (and about) poverty in the long eighteenth century would spend more time on the works of, to name a few, Mary Leapor, Thomas Gray, Robert Burns, Hannah More, Robert Southey, and John Clare. I choose the genealogy from Duck and Collier to Barbauld not only for necessary concision, but also because it maps onto the evolving conception of art’s power and its use from the Enlightenment to Romanticism. I end this timeline with “Washing-Day” because, I argue, it displays Romanticism’s aestheticization of the poor and the vulnerable. The evolution from Duck to Collier to Barbauld runs parallel to an individualistic aesthetics of representation (Duck) giving way to an aesthetics of social (or group) representation to, at last, an argument for an aesthetics that takes us out of the individual-social binary altogether and posits in its place an aesthetics of *aisthesis*, of re-perception instead of re-presentation, where art

triggers both recognition and re-cognition.

There is another through-line here as well. Duck will betray the poor's desire for *play*, for shared autonomy and the ability to renegotiate values. He betrays this in spite of his veneration of work and labor at the expense of play. Building upon Duck's work, Collier calls instead for care—to care both about the poor and to care for them.

“Washing-Day” cycles from work to play, from an aesthetics defined by its representation of toil to an aestheticization of care, including care for the indigent laboring-women who occasion the poem. The Romanticism that “Washing-Day” exemplifies resignified the ordinary and the trivial, and situated care and play at the center of its own “transcendental” aesthetics.

In the next chapter, I will more fully develop the idea of “aestheticizing.” For a short working definition for this chapter's argument, aestheticization refers to the process of objects defamiliarizing ordinary perception and subjects subsequently re-cognizing perception as an ethical act. I use the term “re-cognize” because the new perception of things may not have been familiar at all and hence not really a “recognition.” But I also mean to emphasize the activity of re-conceptualizing, or of thinking something anew. “Washing-Day” makes more visible the logics of representation at play in Duck's and Collier's poems. It portrays aestheticization and this kind of re-cognition.

Where eighteenth century thinkers arguably imply that aesthetics/art transcended the commonplace, Romanticism aimed to demonstrate that the two could never be disentangled. This stance has famously led to Romanticism's characterization as an attempt to fly from the “material” in search of solipsistic pleasure. But, in truth,

Romanticism's corrective to the "art as transcendence of the ordinary" hypothesis is to remind us that the aesthetic subject is a situated one, embedded within the social as she performs perceptual or cognitive acts. This Romanticism, in short, shows how merely thinking and perceiving, as everyday occurrences, are ethical acts of immense value.

In Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, we saw the steady aestheticization of "common" life, especially the lives of poor others rather than the narrating self. And, further still, we saw how important such a capacity was for "those who know there is such a thing as happiness," or those who live for hope rather than in spite of fear.¹⁰ So while individual(istic) aesthetic transcendence in the earlier case studies below focus on precarity, the aesthetic of romantic communality alters our relationship to the rest of the world—social, natural, or otherwise—and constitutes—at its best, and perhaps only then—an aesthetics of hope.

II

Doing (and) Time: Play and the Time of Poverty

"...the concept of the everyday was formed in opposition to the concept of labor"

-Boris Aratov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" (trans. Christina Kiaer)

Relatively little is known about Stephen Duck's upbringing aside from the fact that he hails from a very poor family of agricultural laborers. Subsequently "discovered" by Alured Clark, Duck eventually found favor with numerous nobles and Queen

10. (Wollstonecraft 2013) 59.

Caroline. He is most famous for “The Thresher’s Labour,” “the heart” of which Moira Ferguson describes as “the mental struggle to cope with physical rigor.”¹¹ To Steve Van-Hagen, the poem “is interested in physical objects as they are rooted in a world of sights, sounds, and smells, yet is suspended within the amber of neoclassical versification.”¹²

Though adopting the “high” poetic diction expected in the period, “The Thresher’s Labour” performs a sustained criticism of Augustan theories of genre. The poem “uncovers the reality of living in the country in contrast to the mythological unreality of the pastoral, in which swans glide through an Elysian paradise.”¹³ It debunks Pope’s conception of leisure amidst poverty and his belief that it is “natural to imagine, that the leisure of those ancient shepherds” would lead to “some diversion... proper to that solitary and sedentary life as singing.”¹⁴ Instead, Duck emphasizes the inescapable repetitiveness of laboring class life.

Nonetheless, “The Thresher’s Labour” invokes many of the conventions associated in the period with classical poetry and the epic in particular. As Bridget Keegan noted, “Duck and his patrons shared the same canon and held common beliefs about what constitutes poetry.”¹⁵ Such conventions, which a mock-heroic poem like “Washing-Day” made light of, would alone allow Duck’s poem to be seen *as* a poem. The classical allusions, humility topos, and epic similes demonstrate to the titled and/or middle-class audience that Duck possesses a specialized kind of knowledge. The novelty

11. (Ferguson 1985) v.

12. (Van-Hagen 2005) 422.

13. (Ferguson 1985) v.

14. (Pope 1969) 4.

15. (Keegan 2001) 548.

of reading Duck resides in the fact that his “kind,” so to speak, was not *expected* to possess this knowledge. Unlike the “bluestocking” who in the period was “too easily perceived as a kind of literary crossdresser,” Duck’s success hails in part from his “authenticity” as both poet and poor person not properly educated in the *ars poetica*.¹⁶ Though “The Thresher’s Labour” raises the specter of bourgeois upward mobility—and while this may explain its popularity among the middle-classes—it fails to explain the poem’s popularity with the nobility in general and Queen Caroline in particular. If there may be a simple answer explaining this component of the poem’s popularity, it might be found in differing theories of education and “genius” in the long eighteenth century. According to Betsy Rizzo,

[Queen] Caroline was predisposed to support Duck because he served her ongoing quarrel with Pope. Duck was useful precisely because, as a poetic natural genius, he represented the antithesis of Popean art and education, and so the queen could score a clean hit by granting the thresher court preferment.¹⁷

Competing theories of education, then, underpinned the poem’s success and leads to Duck’s being called a “natural” talent.

This points to a contradictory sense of the “natural.” Addison—whose *Spectator* Duck carried with him even in the fields—discusses ancient writers like Homer “who by the mere Strength of *natural* Parts... produced Works that were the Delight of their own

16. (Ross 1989) 189.

17. Qtd. in (Christmas 2001) 74.

Times, and the Wonder of Posterity.”¹⁸ He implies later that “great natural Genius” is one that was “never disciplined and broken by the Rules of Art.” Undoubtedly, Duck’s poem, in the mind of many of its readers, should not exist and is, ergo, unnatural; the pleasure found in Duck’s *natural* genius lies in how *unnatural* it is, given the social order of eighteenth century England.

These social complexities, however, all stem from the presence of recognizable and conventional tropes and figures. The figure of Duck as an author miraculously follows the rules of art, hence his “natural” talents in knowing instinctively what should be taught. And further, this occurs within a social order where what is taught as “art” is what is given as natural. Pope best encapsulates this aspect of Augustan Britain’s aesthetic philosophy in his *Essay on Criticism*:

Those Rules of old *discover’d*, not *devise’d*
 Are *Nature* still, but *Nature Methodiz’d*
Nature, like *Liberty*, is but restrain’d
 By the same Laws which first *herself* ordain’d (88-91)

The quatrain’s repetition of “Nature” insists on this unity between nature and the rules of art. In this case, Duck would appear Popean in his rise to prominence. But the following line hints at just why Caroline would consider Duck to be Pope’s poetical antipode:

“Hear how learn’d *Greece* her useful Rules indites...” The Greeks are a good model and proof of Pope’s thesis *because* they are “learn’d;” but, tautologically, they are “learn’d” and a good model because they seem to know, by nature, “When to repress, and when indulge our Flights.” This Popean double-bind was one of the main reasons for the brief ersatz classical education Duck received from his patrons before the publication of the

18. (Addison and Steele 1970) 250. This is *Spectator* #160. Also, see Christmas: “Duck... would also ‘frequently carry [Spectators] with him to his Work’” (76).

first official edition of “The Thresher’s Labour.” In short, Duck was taught to be naturally learned.

In a mock-epic gesture, Duck—and Barbauld but, as we will see, not Collier—opens with a muse. The invocation is no iteration of generic custom, however. Following his dedication “To the Rev^d. Mr. Stanley,” Duck’s invocation of the muse is highly unusual:

THE grateful Tribute of these rural Lays,
Which to her Patron's Hand the Muse conveys,
Deign to accept: 'Tis just she Tribute bring
To him, whose Bounty gives her Life to sing;
To him, whose gen'rous Favours tune her Voice;
And bid her, 'midst her Poverty, rejoice.
Inspir'd by these, she dares herself prepare,
To sing the Toils of each revolving Year...
Ev'n these [toils], with Pleasure, can the Muse rehearse,
When you and Gratitude demand her Verse (10)¹⁹

Duck conflates himself as an author who needs patronage with the female muse who actually performs the song. If this is the case, then all of the poem’s first person pronouns would be referring back to the muse, to “*her* verse” (emphasis added). Since the opening tribute is to Stanley, who *was* one of the historical Duck’s patrons and subscribers, then the muse is Duck himself, or, at the least, a female avatar of some kind. It is “to *her* Patron’s Hand the Muse conveys” *these* “rural Lays” that we are now reading (emphases added).²⁰ Where for Homer and Milton, the *muse* performs the song with the poet acting

19. I am using the page numbers for “The Thresher’s Labour” and “The Woman’s Labour” instead of line numbers.

20. Another reading could suggest that since the patron’s “Bounty gives her Life to sing,” then Duck is calling his poem itself the muse and so the poem is feminine. This is unlikely since the muse—and Duck would know this given the brief classical education he was given and the panoply of classical allusions in “The Thresher’s Labour”—is the inspiration for a song and not the verse itself.

as a medium, there are no first person singular pronouns referring to the speaker here until 126 lines into the poem. This, following James Mulholland, “creates a significant ambiguity about the relationship between the singing Muse and the thresher.”²¹

We find more evidence that Duck has fused his poetic speaker with the female muse in the fact that it is the *muse's* voice who is tuned by the patron's “gen'rous Favours” and that she is called forth “midst *her* Poverty” instead of the thresher figure's—instead of *Duck's*—poverty (emphases added). And this transformation carries on after the dedication. In a later passage, the “gloomy, melancholy Scene” is “Fit only to provoke the *Muse's* Spleen,” further equating the muse with the indigent laborer the poem revolves around. Invoking a female muse is, without a doubt, a masculinist generic convention; making the muse into the unmediated epic speaker—that is, the author—is not.

The book's opening, then, presents a male poet (and laborer) as a female muse. In no way does this recolor “The Thresher's Labour” as a proto-feminist poem, given Duck's subsequent misogyny toward the “Throng / Of prattling Females” (19). Instead, Duck's speaker-as-muse performs its own analog to the contemporary notion of the “feminization of poverty.”²² The concept has denoted the process by which women, particularly non-white ones, constitute the bulk of the global poor. Duck's “feminization of poverty” hews more literally to the phrase, manifesting poverty and the daily

21. (Mulholland 2004) 159.

22. Women experience poverty at a higher rate than men. The term became popular in the 1970s, with Phyllis Palmer's 1983 essay “The Racial Feminization of Poverty”: Women of Color as Portents of the Future for All Women” contributing to the subsequent focus on the intersections race *and* gender.

experience of it in a feminine body and feminized construct. Despite the poem's implicit and explicit sexism, then, it still taps into gendered vulnerability to emphasize the threshers' plight. It "feminizes" poverty to lend it even more vulnerability and, in theory, to cull more care and attention from the reader. In this case, the implication would not only be that the poet's task is a feminine and, ergo, an unproductive one, in stark contrast to the masculine and pathetic thresher's task. It also admits that women are "more than ordinarily vulnerable" in contrast to *all* men, even poor ones.

Duck's subtle portrayal of himself as a female muse points to a larger phenomenon in eighteenth century letters. Critics have long discussed the social anxieties elicited by the complex of poverty, poetry, and professionalization in the eighteenth century.²³ But in addition to these anxieties, according to Nancy Armstrong, "the female ceased to represent the writers' muse and [later], with the Romantics, became instead a function of [the] imagination" over the course of this century.²⁴ This was a reaction to the development of "feminine field(s) of knowledge." Marlon Ross notes about the second half of the eighteenth century that "literary activity [became] re-institutionalized so that literature itself becomes gradually feminized; as it becomes more marginal, it [was] redefined as women's 'work,' in order to discourage males from seeing it as influentially productive (men's) work."²⁵ While Armstrong and Ross refer to a later period, Duck's

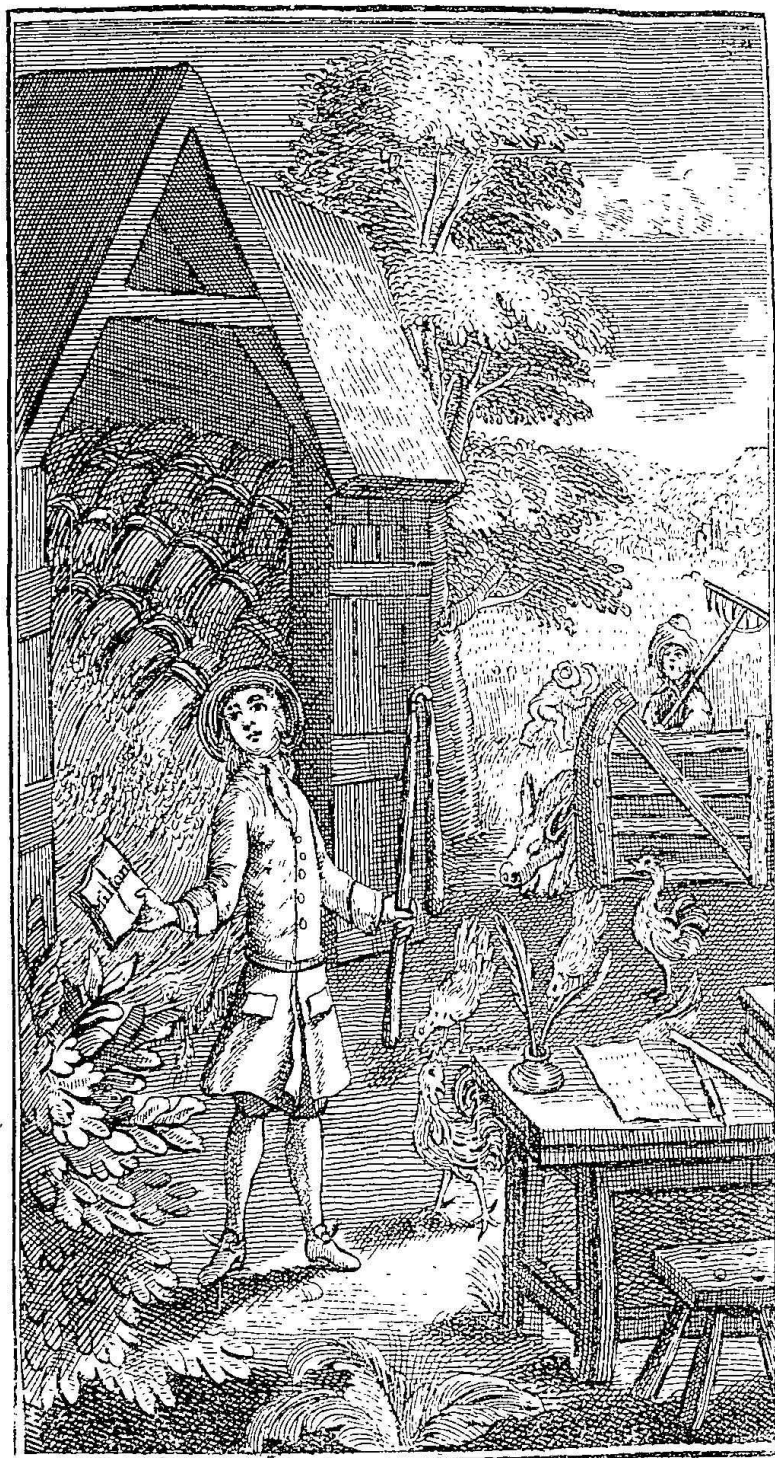
23. For more, see Mark Schoenfield's *The Professional Wordsworth: Law, Labor, and the Poet's Contract* (1996) and Brian Goldberg's *The Lake Poets and Professional Identity* (2007). See also, from *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism* (2018), Michael Gamer, "Oeuvre-Making and Canon-Formation" and Brian Goldberg, "Poetry and Social Class."

24. (Armstrong 1989) 14.

25. (Ross 1989) 230.

book gestures towards this re-institutionalization of literature in the century's first half.

Take, for instance, the pirated title page (fig.1) of "The Thresher's Labour." Though not authorized, the illustration speaks volumes about Augustan perceptions of poetry and of Duck.



Stephen Duck

Figure 1

In the image, a figure representing Duck stands in front of a desk with writing instruments set amidst farm animals. In his right hand is an open book with the word “Milton” scrawled across the pages and in his left is a thrasher’s flail. In the image, “Duck is represented... as a figure living in labor limbo between the mutually exclusive worlds of writing and threshing.”²⁶ In the background are two more thrashers, one with his back turned while working in the fields and a nearer one holding a rake who stares at Duck. What this particular copy of the frontispiece obscures, however, is the coloration of the three figures. Duck and the fieldworker in the distance are both bright white, somehow illuminated, while the figure in the middle is much darker.²⁷ The image implicitly values the contented, laboring poor and Duck, the man stuck between two worlds: the one he was born to and the other he was destined for. The benighted middle figure, however, seems confused or in awe and certainly not working. Why is he marked off so differently? Why the seeming negative valuation of this man? Could it be both his lack of productivity and his desire to be free of the fields?

26. (Christmas 2001) 89.

27. The middle thrasher is also a representative figure of Duck’s own description of the laborers: “The Sweat, the Dust, and suffocating Smoak, / Make us so much like Ethiopians look, / We scare our wives” (14). As I have suggested with Duck’s feminization of poverty and will argue with Collier’s invocations of slavery, a common tactic of materially precarious groups is to compare their realities to the sufferings of another group assumed “more” vulnerable by some criterion. The use of “Ethiopians” here does not follow this trend for two reasons: (1) “Ethiopian” need not equal “Enslaved;” and (2) Duck invokes the African stranger, who is racially, culturally, and nationally Other, with no attempt to draw a like-for-like comparison; he aims to show that Africans are frightening and, when he comes home covered in sweat and dust, that he is frightening too. For more, see David Simpson’s *Romanticism and the Case of the Stranger*. Though Simpson proves more interested there with the “life stories” of the enslaved, he still covers the means by which these figures can “estrangle British readers from themselves” (194). Simpson proves less useful on whatever feelings of estrangement the racialized subjects may feel, however.

The image's depiction of the poet and the poor indicate how Duck himself was viewed not as a bridge between the two but as a victim of fate consigned to a life that is beneath a student of Milton. He is not choosing between two "loves" or "passions." Even his outfit distinguishes him as a gentleman and not a farmhand. The frontispiece highlights the aspirations of writers for professional status as well as a period's anxieties about the professions in general. In the end, "professions" lie at the intersection of knowledge and power, and poets and writers found themselves powerless in relation to their patrons. They exerted their social power, however, within the fields of culture, establishing (and debating) canons and standards of taste.²⁸ Duck's precarious position within this professional limbo is microcosmic of the field of writing in general. That the early eighteenth century's field of cultural production was overwhelmingly male finds its own parallel here with an actual field of three men.

I will address Duck's oversight and subsequent dismissal of female laborers and Collier's response below. But even while its "feminization of poverty" is far from a feminist poetics, "The Thresher's Labour" discloses nonetheless the strained relationship between eighteenth century aesthetics and "*patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view," according to Hortense Spillers, "is the *only* female gender there is."²⁹ I turn first to the aesthetic theory Duck presents in the poem. I then discuss the sexual politics at play in "The Thresher's Labour." Suggesting that Duck's poem is politically "good" because of its aesthetics and "bad" because of its sexual politics oversimplifies

28. For this formulation of "the professions," see Penelope J. Cornfield's *Power and the Professions in Britain, 1700-1850*. Cornfield lists "actors, artists, writers, poets, journalists, and... musicians" as being "on the fringes of professional status" (28)

29. (Spillers 2003) 394.

the issues at hand here. We find, nonetheless, that Duck fails to carry out the implications of his own critiques of aesthetics when confronted with the women his thrasher must work alongside.

Aesthetics

Thinking of “aesthetics” as both the “science of sensation” and the “critique of taste” shines a light on what Duck’s aesthetics may entail. For example, the speaker describes how the work he performs changes his perception of the land near the end of the poem:

YE Reapers, cast your Eyes around the Field;
And view the various Scenes its Beauties yield:
Then look again, with a more tender Eye,
To think how soon it must in Ruin lie!...
But here or there, where-e'er our Course we bend,
Sure Desolation does our Steps attend (23-4).

What “Beauties” a scene may hold for one may bear nothing but “Sure Desolation” for another. The speaker continues on in an epic simile to describe how what, to some, may have been “pleasing Prospects” becomes “a gloomy Waste” (24). Vittoria Di Palma expounds on the long history between enlightenment aesthetics and the concept of “wasteland as ruined or defiled nature” in *Wasteland: A History*. Specifically, the former proved responsible for the latter. Europeans learned to attach value to some environments and not others and, di Palma argues, to find “aesthetically” pleasing the presence of some people in a landscape and not others. In Di Palma’s words, the “ways in which we perceive and understand our surroundings are never neutral, and... seeing and sensing are profoundly cultural acts, influenced by assumptions and beliefs that unavoidably frame

and color our experiences.”³⁰ Duck specifies this further, explicitly singling out class as a determinative factor of aesthetic perception. If genteel readers cannot see such desolation unless they know about it, then the poem enacts a masterclass in educating them about the suffering that lies behind the picturesque or the beautiful. In fact, the poem delivers something resembling a moral in a direct appeal to the reader: “LET those who feast at Ease on dainty Fare, / Pity the Reapers, who their Feasts prepare: / For Toils scarce ever ceasing press us now” (25).³¹ “Dainty,” in the 1730s, could have meant both “pleasing to the palate” and “possessing or displaying taste, perception, or sensibility.” Those who claim to possess “taste”—a faculty of discerning both sensual perceptions as well as good social acts or cultural products from bad ones—and “sensibility”—the ability, to quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to respond to complex emotional and aesthetic influence—lack pity for those whose labor is the condition of possibility for both taste and sensibility. Duck argues that one conception of the Aesthetic owes its sustenance to the never-ending plight of the poor, whose hands transform “waste” land into something pleasing for the eye.

In depicting this plight, the poem constantly foregrounds temporality, detailing when certain activities happen (e.g. “Next Day...”) and the general passage of time (e.g. “as the Year’s revolving Course goes round”). E. P. Thompson has noted that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw “time-measurement” become “a means of labour exploitation.”³² The period saw the burgeoning “need for the synchronisation of labour”

30. (Di Palma 2014) 4.

31. Even this brief passage shows more of Duck’s habit of overlooking women. The male “Reapers” most likely did not “prepare” the meals.

32. (Thompson 1993) 382.

resulting in employers exerting ever more control over their employee's time and even their bodily needs (i.e. time for sleeping and eating).³³

Such a focus on the relationship between time and rustic labour has long characterized the georgic; the mode's most famous exemplars, Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Virgil's *Georgics*, emphasize the seasons, the "time of year when" certain tasks are to be done. Those two operate, in general, at the level of the season. Duck, on the other hand, suggests that the poverty he can relate to—and perhaps, poverty in general—is best understood and most acutely felt in terms of the temporalities it imposes on people. A passage near the poem's center support this: "Time Flows: Again we rise from off the Grass; / Again each Mower takes his proper place" (18). The repetition of "again" stresses the repetition of labor in the threshers' lives. Their "everyday life" is monotonous, grinding down all of them (regardless of gender identity) who perform this physical labor with no succor. "The Thresher's Labour" muses, as it were, on how the capitalist economy transforms people into no more than "an abstract activity and a stomach."³⁴ Over its course, Duck "realizes [the] sense of hopeless inevitability" for someone in his station of life.³⁵ He sees that laboring in nature slowly obscures and possibly outright degrades people's subjectivities. In short, the temporality of poverty obscures the critical judgment of class injustice for the poor. In *Proletarian Nights*, Jacques Rancière claims that "it is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance... that it becomes possible to form a judgment about [that]

33. (Thompson 1993) 370.

34. (Marx 2011) 14.

35. (Christmas 2001) 83.

world.”³⁶ But, this is less possible “in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences,” that fill most of “The Thresher’s Labour.” As a consequence, the poem is not a testimony on the life of the poor but, rather, an “aestheticization” of the daily lives of the poor: a poem, in essence, about how the poor have no time for poems.

The poem recounts a comfortless life foisted upon the speaker (in the affective guise as “her”) as a natural fiat. Best illustrated in the appeal to “those who feast at Ease on dainty Fare,” Duck undermines the middle-class conception of “the” natural, of a notion of ordinary life that divides “work” and “leisure” as if such a division were a right. Where one may see a scene of beauty that can transcend the quotidian—like, for example, the common assumption that Kantian aesthetic experience gestures toward the supersensible—another may see only the “desolation” left in the wake of their own labor, work that enabled the leisured “aesthetic” experience in the first place. And at home, in the case for women, labor still fails to cease, implanting desolation even into spaces of rest. Such desolations may be manifested in the physical landscape, but they are born within the “torments of the soul” that filters a worker’s perception of the given scene. In highlighting such a parallax between the rural poor and everyone else, “The Thresher’s Labour” also highlights the inherently privileged nature of producing *any* kind of pseudo-objective base for what constitutes “everyday life.” The social function of the field of cultural production comes down, ultimately, to its power to delimit the natural. Despite its relative lack of material and political power or social control, it determines what counts as the ordinary from which its products can transcend as “art.” It decides what is “nature.” *This* is the power Duck endeavors to claim as his own in “The Thresher’s

36. (Rancière 2012) 19.

Labour.”

Critics and theorists can attempt to reassess and revalue “the everyday” for women, nonwhite people, lower-class persons, the disabled, and children—in other words, the vulnerable—but, if Duck is to be believed, they will always fail to notice that “the everyday” for some of the most impoverished and threatened is really “the *any* day.” For here, the pain lies in more than the perpetual repetition of stable injustices. It lies in an unjust social order that promises to change nothing. It lies in the roots of a world where daily suffering is ordinary.

Gender

“The Thresher’s Labour” usefully critiques the interrelations of aesthetic discourse and poverty. But then there is its erasure of female labour:

Our good expecting Wives, who think we stay,
Got to the Door, soon eye us in the Way.
Then from the Pot the Dumplin's catch'd in haste,
And homely by its Side the Bacon plac'd (19).

The “wife” is excluded from labor and reduced to just another element of the household. The “Dumplin’s catch’d” and the “Bacon [is] plac’d,” seemingly, by themselves. The speaker emphasizes the result of a woman’s labor while overlooking the woman herself; this is a rule rather than an exception for “The Thresher’s Labour.” In a poem so seemingly concerned with representing the subjective suffering of the poor, its objectification (and obfuscation) of poor women undoes one of its central messages. Duck’s speaker overlooks that, as a poor woman, the wife is also burdened with a full

spate of laborious tasks in addition to providing him supper.³⁷ As E.P. Thompson made clear (just before quoting Mary Collier, no less), the “most arduous and prolonged work of all was that of the labourer's wife in the rural economy.”³⁸ This aspect of capitalism, to quote Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, “has been spectacularly successful in using... gender distinction towards its own ends.”³⁹

The “good wife” passage precedes what is arguably the poem’s most infamous. Duck moves from “Our good expecting Wives” to describing “a Throng / Of prattling Females” (19). These figures, more than any other, led to Collier’s response in “The Woman’s Labour.” Situated alongside the “Master,” at whose heels they follow, these women are set up as if they were both the enemy of the laboring men and, somehow, the lucky ones. Not only do “The Hay-makers have Time allow’d to dine,” they are “Prepar’d, whilst [the Master] is here, to make his Hay” but become “prepar’d to play” once “he turns his back” (20). Calling their dialogue “prattle” reveals the speaker’s inability to even hear their speech *as* speech. Jane Tompkins tracks a similar phenomenon in *West of Everything*, where she shows how silence gets associated with masculine “control” and power. In contrast, women are associated with a perceived superfluity of language and weakness.⁴⁰ Following Aruna Krishnamurthy, Duck’s “gendering of class identity, where the male worker not only underplays his female companion’s equally harsh conditions of work” winds up “insist[ing] on constructing his model of male

37. I will have more to say on this point when I turn to Collier, who makes the same observation.

38. (Thompson 1993) 381.

39. (Clover and Spahr 2017) 152.

40. See page 62, and many other examples throughout Tompkins book.

industriousness against her alleged feminine incompetence.”⁴¹

At the root of this ostensible incompetence is the power to “play” at work. The association the thresher makes between the feminine and “play” uncovers the complex of anxieties that his dismissiveness may be founded on. “Play,” of course, is also a key term in the history of post-Kantian aesthetics. In the third *Critique*, “Art” is something “which could only prove purposive (be a success) as play,” with play defined as “an occupation which is agreeable on its own account.”⁴² In *The Radical Aesthetic*, Isobel Armstrong characterizes D. W. Winnicott’s conception of play as “an intra-subjective space in which meanings are renegotiated.”⁴³ “For play,” Armstrong continues, “is and creates a shared cultural reality.” Taking these two ideas of “play”—one from art and one from aesthetics—in tandem, these “prattling” women foster a community predicated on dialogue and the negotiation of values. More economically oppressed than Duck’s thresher, they exercise an aesthetic capacity in enacting an “agreeable” activity in the midst of their hard labour, an activity which acknowledges to each other a shared social reality. Play provides a means where one autonomous subject can “use” another without attenuating their agency. The women Duck criticizes demonstrate a positive valence for “use”—not unlike Barbauld with history—that creates a lateral intimacy among them that Duck’s thresher is excluded from but wants. If “use” is how one becomes intimate with objects, then *play* is one way subjects can become intimate with each other (or, alternatively, is a way for a subject to “use” another without rendering them as only a

41. (Krishnamurthy 2008) 69.

42. (Kant 2007) 133.

43. (Armstrong 2000) 39.

means to an end).

In short, the women practice a form of intersubjective, intimate agency the thrasher lacks and desires. Peggy Thompson has claimed that “Duck’s characterization of the throngs of women segregated by a division of labor... betrays the anxiety *men* may have felt about [women’s] unsupervised congregation.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, his “misogynist representation is perhaps a defensive response to Duck’s own silencing by the master and hints at an envy of communicative speech that is not available to him” but is, in some small measure, available to the women.⁴⁵ Alongside autonomy, play also fosters communality. Through play (and “prattle”), these women produce brief moments of aesthetic transcendence from the harsh monotony of their present and the forestalled futures of their fates.

As the poem continues, the thrasher continues to insult these working women, plaining “Ah! were their Hands so active as their Tongues, / How nimbly then would move the Rakes and Prongs?” (20). The irony, of course, is that Duck, now “so active” with his own “Tongue” through his new (or at least desired) occupation as poet, no longer has to earn his livelihood on the “move[ment] of the Rakes and Prongs.” The condescension stems, apparently, from the inefficiency of the “prattling Females” but assumes a tone of envy rather than criticism. When they do seem—to the speaker—to work, they are motivated by self-interest: “they bravely all go on; / Each scorns to be, or seem to be, outdone” (21).

Later, the speaker describes in an epic simile the women seeking shelter from the

44. Emphasis added, (Thompson 2004) 515.

45. (Krishnamurthy 2008) 75.

rain:

THUS have I seen, on a bright Summer's Day,
On some green Brake, a Flock of Sparrows play;
From Twig to Twig, from Bush to Bush they fly;
And with continu'd Chirping fill the Sky:
But, on a sudden, if a Storm appears,
Their chirping Noise no longer dins your Ears:

They fly for Shelter to the thickest Bush;
There silent sit, and All at once is hush (21-22)

From “prattling” to “chirping,” the simile records the speaker’s antagonism of women who are, for all intents and purposes, nonhuman insofar as they do not labor. Remarking how when the “Storm appears” that “Their chirping Noise no longer dins your Ears,” the speaker allies himself with the reader. That is, if the reader was there, “he” too would tire quickly of this stentorian flock. But the most notable part of this simile may very well be its beginning: “THUS have I seen, on a bright Summer's Day, / On some green Brake.” Instead of a poetic offloading of the simile—such as “thus as *one may find*, on a bright Summer’s Day...”—the speaker claims it as his own *aesthetic* experience. But the image of the speaker watching playing sparrows with (one could hope) tenderness undermines the rest of the poem’s critique of such unquestioned aesthetic experiences and his image as a Sisyphus figure with barely enough time to think. The image projects a space and time where he is neither an agent nor a perceiver of desolation. The sight of birds at play morphs into an occasion for pity, as they find shelter and “silent sit” during a sudden storm.⁴⁶

46. It is important to note that the storm comes “on a sudden.” Above, I remarked that one of the principal implications of “The Thresher’s Labour” is to re-conceive the “every day” as the “any day” for those in a state of vulnerability. This storm provides an example of the temporality of vulnerability. For Duck, poverty makes arduous labor necessary for some and not others. This produces a state of material precarity for the poor. Here, the

The speaker's movement from the "good expecting" wife to the "prattling Females" implies that a "good" wife/woman is a static one who has already made supper and does not engage in communicative action, especially with other women. And yet with play, the "prattling Females" are the true aesthetic subjects here, and not only in the sense that they are the object of aesthetic contemplation. They are agential subjects who exercise the core cognitive aspect of the aesthetic: they strive to revalue their lives of monotonous work through play, finding even a little freedom through communal imagination. They renegotiate meaning.

Duck's entrenched sexism should not discredit the poem's important work in calling to task the indifference the culture of "taste" shows to the plight and pain of the poor. It should, instead, lead us to question who may or may not benefit from Duck's critique, even though such a critique remains a useful starting point for a political project of revaluing the lives of the indigent masses and disenfranchised women. And, as I have suggested above, no one might really benefit besides Duck himself. Duck's class critique—couched within aesthetic language—attempts to raise awareness of the genuine pain of vulnerable persons. He is raising a group into visibility, seeking sympathy from his readers and their "humanity." The sexism, however, puts an already vulnerable group further out of sight, relegating their pain and suffering, leaving it "invisible and without substance," left "on the lower frequencies."⁴⁷

sudden storm instances the temporality of gendered vulnerability. Many works of feminist theory, like Susan Brownmiller's *Against our Wills: Men, Women, and Rape* (1993) has critiqued the threat of physical violence that perpetually underwrites a patriarchal social order. This violence can occur, the thinking goes, at *anytime*.

⁴⁷. (Ellison 1980) 581.

We will see that characters Duck introduces evolve—or fail to—as the tradition of “plebian poetry” is picked up in Collier’s direct response and in Barbauld’s “Washing-Day,” the capstone to the eighteenth century’s obsession with the poor as a central poetic topic and a fount of poetic inspiration—of poverty as a muse.

III

Encumbered by Care: Mary Collier’s Song of Arms and Women

“I had learned to write to assist my memory, and her Spouse transcrib’d it with a promise to keep it private, but he exposed it to so many, that it soon Became a Town Talk, which made many advise me to have it printed and at length I comply’d to have it done at my own charge, I lost nothing, neither did I gain much, others run away with the profit” (Preface to “The Woman’s Labour”)

Mary Collier wrote these words in the 1762 preface to her poem, “The Woman’s Labour.” This edition saw the first time she composed and published her own prefatory remarks. The first edition in 1739 saw this honor given to “one ‘M. B.’ [Who] had condescendingly introduced Collier to the public.”⁴⁸ Unlikely to have been written by Collier herself, this first preface undermines her from the start. M.B.’s preface implicitly dismisses the entire project of “The Woman’s Labour;” there was no way a “female Stephen Duck” could exist, for to be poor and female would mean to have no “hopes to be taken Notice of by the Great,” whether she were a poet or not (1). Noting that Collier

⁴⁸. (Ferguson 1985)

had “the View of her putting a small Sum of Money in her Pocket” paints the poem as a self-interested endeavor, one that aimed not to defend her sex and class but to—like Duck!— transcend it. Telling us that Collier “is ready to own that her Performance could by no Means stand a critical Examination,” M.B. asks us to not take it seriously. Its single merit, M.B. would have us believe, is that it is “Something considerably beyond the common Capacity of those of her own Rank and Occupation.” All in all, the preface applies a traditionalist salve to the novel event of a labor-class woman’s critical voice even before she speaks.

The biography Collier relays in the later edition highlights just how remarkable the publication of “The Woman’s Labour” is. She was born in poverty. Her parents taught her to read and when her mother died, Collier “lost” her education, but kept up her “Recreation” in reading, living with her father until he died. Collier lived as a washerwoman and might very well be “the first laboring woman to publish poetry in England.”⁴⁹ By 1762 she writes that she had “retired to a Garret (The Poor Poets Fate) in Alton where [she is] endeavouring... to pass the Relict of [her] days in Piety, Peace, and an Old Maid.” She died in poverty.

Reading—and writing—proved to be a “Recreation” in one sense only. Unlike Duck, Collier saw no noticeable profit from her poem, no means of re-creating herself into a professional poet. “Lacking Duck’s fortuitous access to the queen,” Moira Ferguson notes, “Collier had to be content with high-powered local men who treated her as a curiosity,” as “a Petersfield version of Duck but perhaps even more eye-catching, as

49. (Christmas 2001) 115.

a woman and a laundress.”⁵⁰ The two “plebeian poets” stand so diametrically opposed that even Collier’s patrons contrast with Duck’s, the rising middle-class for the former versus the traditionally landed aristocracy of the latter. Backed by the bourgeoisie, the very existence of “The Woman’s Labour” proves the possibility of social mobility, even if the case at hand is highly exceptional. This opposes the cult of Duck, who was not only supported by royalty but touted as a “natural” genius, possessing an innate ability to versify. Duck, in other words, was seemingly misplaced within society, justifying a hierarchical world order where his preferment could be seen as righting an unjust wrong. Collier, on the other hand, can be read as support for the idea that social mobility is real and beneficial to the poor and/or women. Social mobility must be good, one can presume, if it helps a vulnerable washerwoman. That only “high-powered local *men*” had the ability to patronize the text speaks volumes about how irreconcilable the content of “The Woman’s Labour” and the circumstances that saw its publication were.

Collier succeeds, nonetheless, in introducing a reading class to the daily struggles that occur around them but that may have otherwise remained invisible.⁵¹ Unlike Duck, Collier describes the actual work poor rural women perform. As Ferguson observes, “her middle-class readers are brought face to face with the work from which their profit and leisure ultimately derive.”⁵² And, as Peggy Thompson notes, in “representing a prehistorical matriarchy, in conveying the nightmarish demands placed on women laborers and contrasting them to Duck’s own male labor, and in expressing her angry

50. (Ferguson 1985) vi-vii.

51. Collier’s subscription list contained many well-known persons of rank and stature.

52. (Ferguson 1985) viii.

disappointment in Duck, Collier makes the form of classically educated men work for her.”⁵³ The poem responds to Duck’s “derisive attitude toward women who toiled alongside men in the fields.”⁵⁴ In her own words, Collier believed that Duck “had been too Severe on the Female Sex... [which] brought [her] to a Strong propensity to call an Army of Amazons to vindicate the injured Sex.” “The Woman’s Labour” was the result of Collier’s decision to “please [her] own humour” by replying to Duck.⁵⁵

We see from the title page that “The Woman’s Labour” is “An Epistle” to Duck. Epistolarity is often assumed to presume intimacy between the parties. But rather than closeness or intimacy, it would be better to say that letters create directness, an immediacy between its intended *or* actual readers and its writer. An open letter from a political dissident to a dictator, for example, produces an assertive speech act predicated on a fictional dialog. Actual readers stage a discourse that does not occur within what John Searle calls an “independently existing world.”⁵⁶ For Searle, this makes the epistolary speech act “false.” But with epistolary form as a literary form and thus a “situated” form that circulates within and also changes the social, it is “fiction” but not false. The author most likely knows the addressed party will not read it, but even if the latter does they will have to imagine a discussion with its own kind of intimacy. This discussion occurs neither on the page nor in the “independently existing reality” we call the world. It exists as a fiction, arising from within the aesthetic bonds of the social.

The title page also makes clear that Collier is “*Now* a Washer-woman, at

53. (Thompson 2004) 518.

54. (Ferguson 1985).

55. Qtd. in (Ferguson 1985).

56. (Searle 1983) 7.

Petersfield in Hampshire” (emphasis added). This emphasis on the present is no mere jargon of authenticity.⁵⁷ By 1739, Duck was well-established at court. And despite M.B.’s assertion that this is a poem “considerably beyond the common capacity of those of her own Rank and Occupation,” the “Now a Washer-woman” puts forward a world where someone can write such poems if given the chance, and not transcend laboring life into one of leisure. In opposition to Duck, Collier aims to be representative, not exceptional. In so doing, she raises an entire class of persons into the position of “poets,” to show the world that poor women too can be—and perhaps have long been—the “unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Both Duck and Collier were “formally interrogated regarding the authenticity of their work” and constantly reminded “of how anomalous their identities as poets were.”⁵⁸ Collier, socially marginalized by class and gender, was scrutinized even harder by her audiences and by her subsequent reception history.

Collier’s main point is a simple one: the supper that the thresher eats had to come from somewhere and had to be made by someone. We saw in “The Thresher’s Labour” the effects of a woman’s labour without ever seeing sincere work from women. But women, in an obvious fact that Duck somehow overlooked, did “not enjoy the patriarchal privilege of a prepared meal and instant rest, being obliged instead to sit up all night at times with fractious infants.”⁵⁹ Collier reminds us of a working-woman’s “thrice-exploited [position] as a mother, wife, and wage-laborer.”⁶⁰

57. While I have borrowed this phrase from Adorno, I have not used his sense of it here. Adorno, more concerned with the discourses of (existentialist) philosophy, does draw conclusions in *The Jargon of Authenticity* which are relevant here, nonetheless.

58. (Thompson 2004) 508.

59. (Ferguson 1985).

60. (Krishnamurthy 2008) 69.

Lines from Duck as ridiculous as “Hard Fate! Our Labours ev'n in Sleep don't cease; / Scarce HERCULES e'er felt such Toils as these!” set themselves up for easy ridicule. But Collier's aim “was not... to lampoon him.”⁶¹ William Christmas in particular observes that “Collier does not stoop to the sort of sweeping, wholesale denigration of male workers in her poem that Duck makes of their female counterparts in his.”⁶² Christmas's reading of Collier shows that she sought to *reconcile* with Duck, unifying the lower-classes across gender(ed) lines. In fact, their projects are more similar than not. “The Woman's Labour” is more akin to a stern amendment to “The Thresher's Labour” than a condemnation of it. Consider how both poets stress the temporality of poverty. Here is Duck's closing image:

THUS, as the Year's revolving Course goes round,
No Respite from our Labour can be found:
Like SISYPHUS, our Work is never done;
Continually rolls back the restless Stone.
New-growing Labours still succeed the past;
And growing always new, must always last (27)

“The Woman's Labour” is concerned with the temporality of poverty as well. Collier stresses the same sense of an inescapable monotony that is even more arduous than Duck's. She differentiates the experiences of poor women as opposed to just poor people more generally, finding her own classical figure to match Duck's Sisyphus and Hercules:

While you to *Sisyphus* yourselves compare,
With *Danaus' Daughters* we may claim a Share ;
For while *he* labours hard against the Hill,
Bottomless Tubs of Water *they* must fill (17)

The Danaïdes were forty-nine daughters (out of fifty) of King Danaus, whose punishment was trying to fill a leaking tub. In some variations of the myth, to exacerbate their

61. (Ferguson 1985) vi.

62. (Christmas 2001) 119.

punishment, they must use sieves or other porous containers to carry the liquid. Together, the poems paint a picture of how poverty slowly grinds down people's lives. The favored myths both concern not just difficult tasks, but also pointless ones; that both poets feel them explicable of their lives is a fact both harsh and sad.

Despite Collier's classical allusions, the poem lacks a conventional invocation of a muse. In its place, Collier's speaker appeals to Duck, found again occupying the typically feminized position: "Immortal Bard! thou Fav'rite of the Nine! Enrich'd by Peers, advanc'd by Caroline!" Not only does Duck stand where a conventionally feminine construct would be, he is favored by the goddesses and "advanc'd" by a female monarch. Surrounded by women who have more power than he ever will, the sole masculine presence would be the actually unsexed "Peers" who "Enrich'd" him. "Enrich'd" reads more literally than not since, without doubt, Duck was made more materially wealthy by these "Peers." Given the contemporary popular knowledge of Duck's increased wealth, the literal reading of "Enrich'd" functions more as criticism than description. Duck was not perceived as being spiritually enriched by them and it is his new *class* privilege that places him so high above Collier that she must ask him to "look down on One that's poor and low" (5).

Indeed, the female "poor and low" are the true ethical subjects here. Early in "The Woman's Labour," the speaker announces that while her "Life was always spent in Drudgery," she was "not alone" since "It is the Portion of poor Woman-kind" to lead such lives (6). "Poor Woman-kind" is, of course, a pun. At first glance, Collier excludes women from the middle and upper classes, placing a class critique above a gender one.

Such an exclusion can be seen in the vilification of the “Mistress” in the poem’s second half. Many readers have addressed the words “poor Woman-kind” and their potential suggestion that Collier’s plea only goes so far. Donna Landry, for example, argues that the poem “articulates an emergent working-class consciousness with an emergent feminist critique of the misogynist tendencies embedded in that consciousness.”⁶³ Other critics have tried to show that Collier was trying to unify all “womankind” as well as reconciling the male and female poor. Krishnamurthy reads the “we” as applying “to collective womanhood, a move that suggests an erasure of class distinctions between the washerwoman and the genteel reader who might employ her.”⁶⁴ Such contentions, however, proves difficult to support. To be sure, Collier’s poem is a proto-feminist one. But as Landry herself points out, the complicating “weighting of class allegiance and female identity is present early in the poem in... [the] ambiguous phrase ‘poor Woman-kind.’”⁶⁵ I concur for the most part with Landry that the poem addresses “a class issue rather than simply an issue of sexual difference, as a middle-class woman writer would most probably have expressed it.” But the pun on “poor” need not be mutually exclusive; nor does it have to lean more towards class or gender. In fact, it could perform a conflation: women are a vulnerable group deserving of care in a patriarchy, but the misfortune of “poor,” indigent women is particular and not reducible to gender alone. Puns suture together two distinct signifieds; this one is no different. While the plural first-person pronouns the speaker uses later distinguish her group from the “Ladies” who hire

63. (Landry 1987) 102.

64. (Krishnamurthy 2008) 81-2.

65. (Landry 1987) 104.

them and assign their tasks, taken as a whole, the poem appeals for an end to the sexist practice of discounting women and their actions, regardless of class.

What some might now call “Intersectionality” only goes so far in “The Woman’s Labour,” however. Collier relates the experiences of “poor Woman-kind” to chattel slavery multiple times. While one might argue that she is in fact using the concept of “slavery” in the abstract and not necessarily invoking the “middle passage,” that argument fails to account for why the two would be separated in the period and why a reader in 1739 would/could not associate them.⁶⁶ Right after the invocation to Duck, the speaker asks him: “what can you have / From her, who ever was, and’s still a Slave?” (5). She invokes “Slavery” to describe her condition again only eight lines later. Comparisons like these have long created problems in the study of eighteenth century feminism.⁶⁷ Mary Astell, for example, describes the situation of all “Women who were born to be [men’s] Slaves.”⁶⁸ We also find in *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) Astell’s famous

66. Posed as a question: when in the eighteenth century (and perhaps since) did an abstraction of the idea of slavery not have anything to do with actual persons and actual bodies? When did an invocation of “slavery” not entail the economic system built upon the bodies of enslaved groups? How can one invoke “slavery” figuratively and assume that such a figure would fail to certain bodies at certain times?

67. We see a more recent example of this in October 2015 when Meryl Streep and other white actresses wore shirts with the words “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave” to promote the film *Suffragette*, released later that month. The quote was from British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst and was received by American audiences as insensitive given the national historical resonances of the Civil War, which saw “rebels” fight in order to maintain their states’ “right” to human slavery. Others have also made the important observation that American and British suffragist organizations and activists of the early twentieth century fought against enfranchisement for African-Americans and Indians respectively. For more, see the following: *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* by Kathleen Blee (2008); *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* by bell hooks (1983); and *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* by Louise Michele Newman (1999) and many others.

68. (Astell 1996) 65.

aphorism: “If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves?”⁶⁹ The strongest use of the juxtaposition, however, was Judith Drake’s in *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696) where she “seriously advances a comparison between early modern married women and ‘our Negroes in our Western Plantations.’”⁷⁰ The equating of human chattel slavery and a particular (and particularly limited) conception of women’s rights serve in both of these cases—and in others throughout the period—a strategic purpose.⁷¹ A reader accepts one group as “more than ordinarily vulnerable” when it is presented as homologous to an *extremely* vulnerable and disadvantaged group by some moral rubric. As Debra Walker King has argued, “First-wave [white] feminists” (and perhaps Astell, Collier, and Drake as well) identified with slavery “not because of some physical resemblance” with subjugated Black people, “but because calling on the abstract meaning potential of black bodies was socially, politically, and economically expedient.”⁷² Here, Collier’s reader learns to pity “poor Woman-kind” by reading the poem through a lens of racialized pain

I do not pursue this ostensibly digressive line on slavery to upstage Collier or

69. (Astell 1996) 18.

70. Qtd. in (Astell 1996) 18n20.

71. Though some have suggested that because Astell refers to *Locke’s* analysis of “slavery” in the second *Treatise*, she is not referring to enslaved peoples of African descent. But, as the work of Simon Gikandi and others make clear, to think through one would mean to work through the other. It would be insulting to suggest that Astell simply did not *know* of the enslavement of Black peoples. Further, it is important to note that such comparisons are not exclusive to porto-feminist writers. Many men have made appeals on behalf of the economically destitute and have made similar appeals relating poverty to slavery. See, for example, George Dyer’s *The Complaints of the Poor People of England...* (1793), where he characterizes “the poor man’s portion in England [as] slavery” (19).

72. (King 2008) 17.

point out her contradictions. As Astell and Drake demonstrate, the comparison of white women to enslaved populations predates “The Woman’s Labour”. I point to these analogies in the poem to highlight the familiar tactic of rendering one social group as more vulnerable by aligning and/or conflating it with a “more” (in some sense) vulnerable one. We saw Duck strive for the same result in what I have termed his “feminization of poverty.” This tactic in Duck fails when the speaker begins to address or ignore actual women. Duck’s speaker makes perfectly manifest his annoyance (and jealousy of) the women he works alongside. Collier points this out, asking him: “What! would you lord it quite, and take away / The only Privilege our Sex enjoy?” (9).⁷³

But privilege turns out not to be divided by “Sex.” Just as the thresher complains about his “master,” the washerwomen in Collier’s poem must carry out the orders of their “mistress.” Appearing right after “*Sol* illuminates the Skies, / And summons drowsy Mortals to arise,” her power over these women is almost naturalized into a part of the day (13). We learn how contingent and fickle her kindness to her employees may be when we

73. A recurrent problematic, then, is the attempt to compare two social groups that are vulnerable in different ways for different reasons. The attempts to do so function with the assumption that “intersectional” thinking can be suspended, an assumption with a long history in critical race and Black feminist responses to second wave feminism. In a related vein, see Cameron Glover’s “Intersectionality Ain’t For White Women” (2017). For “The Woman’s Labour”, the comparison to slavery is further complicated by Hortense Spillers’s famous assertion that “the quintessential ‘slave’ is not a male, but a female” (215). This would make it harder to call the work an eighteenth century example of “intersectional” poetics. Recently, feminist theorists like Jasbir Puar have searched for alternatives to Intersectionality for a host of reasons. For more, see Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007) as well as “‘I’d Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory” (2012). For a response to Puar and similar scholarship, see Tiffany Lethabo King’s “Post-Indentitarian and Post-Intersectional Anxiety in the Neoliberal Corporate University” (2015) and Brittany Cooper’s entry on “Intersectionality” from the *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (2015).

see “in her Hand, *perhaps*, a Mug of Ale / To Cheer our Hearts.” But even there lies a self-interested purpose, for it is “also to inform / Herself, what Work is done that very Morn,” proceeding then to “[Lay] her Commands upon us, that we mind / Her Linen well, nor *leave the Dirt behind*.” The altruistic gesture devolves into her delegation of these women’s tasks. The speaker hints then that the mistress cares more for her clothing than the women who make a living cleaning it: she tells them “to take care / We don’t her Cambricks nor her Ruffles tear” (14). But above all else, “*these* most strictly does of us require, *To save her Soap, and sparing be of Fire*.” They must work so hard with so little soap that “Not only Sweat, but Blood runs trickling down / [Their] Wrists and Fingers.”⁷⁴ In Collier’s words: “Our tenders Hands and Fingers scratch and tear: / All this, *and more*, with Patience we must bear” (16). The “and more” hides the nigh inexhaustible list of indignities suffered by the exploited poor, seen as nothing but “The constant Action of... lab’ring Hands” (14).

We will see this synecdochic reduction of washerwomen into their “hands” once again with Barbault. First, however, their “constant action” deserves further attention. Collier and other poor women were expected to work and do little—if anything—else. They work in and outside the home, and are dispossessed of the time to think and

74. The mistress’s concern for her soap (instead of her workers) stems from the commodification of soap in the period. But her workers felt even this inequality much harder than she, for “as soap became a highly taxed commodity in the eighteenth century,” Krishnamurthy notes, “many of the poor households of rural England were forced to cut down on soap, and in some cases, resort to urine as a cleansing liquid, often for washing their bodies” (87). The bleeding hands find their analog in the domestic lives of these women, forced to deplete matter from inside their bodies to “clean” its surface.

dream.⁷⁵ They embody the poor “Artisan” at the center of Rancière’s critique of Plato’s political philosophy in *The Philosopher and his Poor*. According to Rancière, Plato’s Socrates assigns everyone a particular function within society and they are expected to only carry out that task.⁷⁶ “A shoemaker” in such a society “is simply a man who is forbidden to engage in any activity other than shoemaking.”⁷⁷ The shoemaker has no time to philosophize since he must continue making shoes for everyone else. In the end, the philosopher monopolizes thinking. For Collier, men monopolize dreaming. Not only does Duck have his brief aesthetic moment, recalling his sight of playing songbirds, but he and other male laborers get to sleep. Collier’s claim that “we have hardly ever *Time to dream*” moves far past poetic language and states an actual fact. She (and other washerwomen) would lose entire nights to work, cleaning from one midnight to the next.

For Aruna Krishnamurthy, the “constant Action” passage performs significant political work. Her essay’s juxtaposition of “action” and politics should recall the meanings of “action” associated with political movements and events. In contemporary use, “actions” refer to rallies, protests, or occupations as civil disobedience. This definition sheds light on Collier’s poem as well. For if over the course of the eighteenth century and into the revolutionary period workers evolved from possessing what E. P. Thompson calls “customary consciousness” to “something akin to ‘class consciousness,’”

75. E. P. Thompson also notes the long history of employers chastising their worker’s sleep hours, demanding they take only enough for their health and no more.

76. Rancière also describes their lives as “an indoor life, an effeminate life that leaves them no leisure to concern themselves with anything but work and family” (7). That he genders the life of the (male) artisan should further corroborate the claims made herein. I note that a gendering does not seem necessary for his argument, however.

77. (Rancière 2004) 23.

then the period also saw such “actions” transitioning from “sporadic rebellion to organizational protest.”⁷⁸ *Constant* action, then, pretends to the constant political acts of “labr’ing hands,” acts morphing from sporadic riots to daily resistance. While this attributes to “The Woman’s Labour” a radical and/or revolutionary politics that Collier herself may not share, her more immediate senses of “constant Action” prove to be revolutionary in their own ways nonetheless.

The labor she and other washerwomen must perform carries on long after washing-day. These women work in the public and the private realms; leisure is a luxury. “Only [human] action,” Hannah Arendt claims in *The Human Condition*, “is entirely dependent upon the *constant* presence of others.”⁷⁹ In fact, action partially constitutes human existence. “Constant action” is not a doing, then, but a being; or, rather, a being that exists insofar that it remains active in the presence of the other. Such constant action need not be physical, taxing work; one must not lose sight of the achievement of Collier’s poem existing at all. As said above, the poem’s existence is proof not that Collier is a poet, but that washerwomen are more than their hands.

With “word or deed,” Arendt claims, “we insert ourselves into the human world.”⁸⁰ The constant work the women must perform in the laborious world of capital hinders their “second birth” into the “human world,” a rebirth—or *re-creation*—requiring time to dream, time to think, and time to speak. It is through a distinctively Kantian mode of judgment (which Arendt believed Kant limited to the aesthetic “erroneously”) that

78. (Krishnamurty 2008) 67.

79. Emphasis added, (Arendt 2013) 23.

80. (Arendt 2013) 176.

“Arendt discovered a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm.”⁸¹ This poem seeks such an agreement. “The Woman’s Labour” reinserts an entire class of people pinned to the world of deeds back into the human world of words. The constant action of precarious being is the constant call for care: for others to care about you—and for others to care *for* you; unfortunately, it exists as the constant expectation that you are burdened with an unreciprocated care for others. “The Woman’s Labour” makes this call, but the questions remain: who has heard it? Who *can* hear it? Who *will* hear the call for care?

The word “care” appears throughout “The Woman’s Labour” and is, in my estimation, its key desideratum. We first find it describing the loss of a moment when men were more kind:

Till Time and Custom by degrees destroy'd
That happy State our Sex at first enjoy'd.
When Men had us'd their utmost Care and Toil,
Their Recompence was but a Female Smile (6).

The happiness of women was contingent on the “Care and Toil” that men once “us’d.” Collier asks Duck (and her readers) to care about the women he so decisively insults because they show “greatest Care” in putting their child to bed and preparing supper for their husbands (10). In fact, Collier associates the word with children multiple times. Not only when put to bed, but the women “home... go unto our Children dear, / Dress, feed, and bring them to the Field with care” (11). Bringing the children to the field brings domestic work into the public sphere, and also, in some cases, to put the children to work. Collier makes it clear that Duck and other men are not “like us, *encumber’d* thus with

81. (Benhabib 1996) 189.

Care” (11). Collier’s text relates the tragedy of how “care” can be twisted into a burden for poor women: they must care for children; the mistress asks them to take care with her fabrics and soap; their “frugal Care” is to glean corn right after child-rearing; they must “clean and scald [brewing vessels] with greatest Care.”

And yet, they remain uncared for. Like “play,” care connotes dually: play manifests agency, but it can diminish the value of labor; care can mean loving kindness, but it can also be a burdening task. But despite all of the “cares” these women have, Collier’s true aim is to leave her *readers* “encumber’d with Care” for a neglected class of people her readers may never consider. To show care would be not only to pay attention (i.e. to take care), but to keep someone present afterwards as well. She asks us to perform the *constant* action of a laboring heart: a state of being where care orients us to the other and their vulnerability.

IV

Toil and (Gender) Trouble: “Washing-Day”

I turn now to Anna Barbauld’s short poem “Washing-Day,” published in 1797 but written as early as 1783. “Washing-Day” is a mock-epic on the titular event before ending in a remembrance of the speaker’s childhood.⁸² If Sharon Smith is right that “Barbauld found it particularly problematic [that] within mock modes... the bonds the satirist tended to deny were often those connecting him or her to the weak, the vulnerable, and the relatively powerless,” then “Washing-Day” fortifies the bonds

82. It is also commonly characterized as a mock-heroic. For my purposes here, the distinction is not a significant one.

between the mock-heroic's omniscient speaker and the fallible—i.e. human—lyrical subject.⁸³ In fact, only the first two-thirds are mock-epic, while the final third morphs into a romantic lyric. The poem's final turn to the first person—singular, but terminating in the plural—ends in the enigmatic phrase “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles, / And verse is one of them—this most of all.”

The poem's main focus, however, is the poor washer-women, the house maids, and the effect washing-day has on the economy of the home. “Washing-Day” adeptly exemplifies what Romanticism's “aestheticization of values” means in respect to the quotidian. Furthermore, like Duck and Collier (and Wollstonecraft), it shows the significance of such an aestheticization for the most vulnerable.

The contemporary critical history of “Washing-Day” makes clear just how vexing it is to discuss the poem. Many historical facts and circumstances can alter the entire message of the text. For example, critics seem divided on how “seriously” to take the poem as a “mock” of anything. If taken completely as satire, the poem trivializes its own theme, women's labor. And if read as a more stern commentary, it seems to rest a lot of socio-political critique on a bubble. In short, “critics disagree whether Barbauld's comparison of her verse to a bubble is a positive or negative representation, whether she is being self-effacing or self-congratulatory.”⁸⁴ While Sarah Tindal Kareem has outlined and commented on the polysemy of bubbles in the eighteenth century, the rest of the poem's movements oppose a lot of these denotative and connotative valences of bubbles: is poetry a deceptive show? Is poetry fragile? Is that a good thing? If Elizabeth Kraft is

83. (Smith 2015) 553.

84. (Smith 2015) 563.

right about the eighteenth century's perception of the Montgolfier Ballon, is Barbauld praising "the toils of men and the sports of children" at the expense of poor women? How important is literature itself if, on washing-day, the children are not told any stories?⁸⁵

Numerous critical essays on the poem will claim it as a sober rebuke to patriarchy (a feminist stance Barbauld herself would likely dispute or somehow qualify) and/or as a light-hearted take on labor both physical and artistic with an eye to the gendering of work. These are issues of real concern. Nonetheless, how seriously to take the tone is a nigh-unsolvable problem I choose to sidestep here—with the admission that the poem is indeed very humorous. In any case, it is historically inaccurate to attribute too-feminist a message to Barbauld in this stage of her career; but she was too brilliant and keen a mind to *only* or *chiefly* write an eighty-six line joke in blank verse for publication. I will focus then on situating this poem within the changing nature of the aesthetic from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth. What "Washing-Day" will demonstrate is a transitional period's endeavor at aestheticizing the everyday, a crucial step in constituting Romanticism itself.⁸⁶

85. Smith's wording is helpful here as well: "it becomes impossible to determine whether this reflects her own attitude toward the activities she describes" (562). Smith attributes this to the poem's simultaneous "simulat[ion]" and "mimicry of the mock-heroic mode," though one can find a host of other valid reasons as well (562).

86. In my reading of "Washing-Day," I concur with Kraft who, in 1995, warned that "Anna Barbauld's 'Washing-Day' is... endangered by misreading." This still being the case for the present (in my opinion), I am more interested here in making connections than definitive prescriptive conclusions or contentions about the poem. That said, Kraft's article has deeply influenced my own understanding and analysis of this poem. I agree with many of her conclusions, specifically that the "poem argues that... the imagination can flourish amidst the 'endless repetition' of housework, that drudgery itself can be the scene of an inspiration that launches one toward the 'mysterious unknown summit' known as the future (25). And closer to the concerns of this chapter, I also agree that the "affirmative spirit of transcendence with which 'Washing-Day' ends... does not deny the

Like Duck and, to a lesser extent, Collier, Barbauld does not speak to the poor on their terms. The earlier poems described the experience of poverty to an audience economically removed from the experiences described. Barbauld's poem is not a description of one community to another especially since she is not part of the communities of poor women that she describes. Added to this, the poem's plethora of allusions constellate into an argot perceivable only by a certain reading class. Even so, the poem acts in a similar vein to Duck's and Collier's in that it seeks to change the leisure-class audience's knowledge of the poor. It strives to present the poor as undervalued ethical subjects.

Over the course of the poem, to use the words of Vassiliki Markidou, "exceptional, semidivine femininity is replaced by commonplace, flesh-and-blood womanhood."⁸⁷ The poem's structure actuates the same evolution. The elevated language of the mock-epic gives way to an intimate lyric in the final third of the poem (though the final lines return to the supernatural). The famous opening ("The Muses are turned gossips") sets the tone for the first fifty-seven lines, never descending from the "high-sounding phrase, / Language of the gods" (ll. 2-3). This impersonal voice relates the scene of "The red-arm'd washers" and the opening moments of "the dreaded *Washing-Day*" (ll. 14, 7). Along with perhaps invoking Collier's bleeding hands, the "red" arms signal both long working hours—implying that some of the washers may work the fields as well as wash clothes—and the corrosive soap they used. These women "come and

importance of the ordinary and the everyday" (34-5). I will point out my differences with Kraft below, but it must be stated that these disagreements are local ones and not about the poem as a whole.

87. (Markidou 2007) 21.

chase repose” even before “the first grey streak of dawn” (ll. 14, 13). As we learned with Collier and from historians of the period like M. Dorothy George, employers asked washer-women to arrive as early as the midnight *before* washing day and they would often end the midnight after or later—all for a day’s wage at best. In spite of this, the temporality of poverty descends upon the “red-arm’d washers.” Their tasks are tied to the time of day and, in the case here, the weather. As a child, the speaker failed to notice the importance of what is now termed “efficiency,” saddened that on washing-days she could not gain the attention of the maids or washers. “Encumber’d” with their work, washing-day limits their ability to show care for a child they normally “soft[ly] caress” and indulge (ll. 61).

In her influential *Muses of Resistance* (1990), Donna Landry reproaches Barbauld for keeping these women invisible and inaudible. Krishnamurthy has criticized “Washing-Day” as well, painting it as the antithesis of “The Woman’s Labour” rather than its inheritor. She turns to a line in the poem’s final third: “predictably enough, the question pondered is, ‘Why washings were,’ rather than who the washerwomen were.” I find these to be ungenerous readings of the poem. These criticisms downplay the important fact learned later on that the speaker, when a child, seems to have *preferred* these women’s company. The speaker does not need to ask who the washing women or the maids were because she spent her days with them, playing with them and being nurtured and cared for by them (she does not play with them on the titular day, marking it as an exception to her daily life). Asking *why* such a day of unjust and painful labour exists is a mode of thinking *of* the washing women as well as thinking *with* them. The

intimation is that this question has been asked by countless other washerwomen but perhaps not enough—if ever—by the mistresses or their daughters. The poem is a means of ending that latter trend.

For the speaker, we learn, was the daughter of the mistress of the house. When we do move to the first person remembrance that concludes the poem (“I well remember, when a child...”), we learn that the speaker is now, more likely than not, the mistress of her own household. Recalling “the awe / This day struck into” her, she adopts a mode of perceiving these women not available to or not seen with the mistress in “The Woman’s Labour”. Barbauld’s speaker sees more than just hands working and more than just women washing clothes. Indeed, she also “focuses on the maids of the household,” the women who not only “conduct specific domestic duties, but also narrate fairy tales that evoke supernatural creatures as well as a preternatural atmosphere.”⁸⁸ For example, her “dear grandmother, eldest of forms, / Tended the little ones” during washing-day (ll. 68-9). With the child, “grandmother,” and mother who appears later, the poem stages an intergenerational continuity of washing days. But the child and grandmother are together, bound by the care of one for the other; the mother, as I will elaborate below, supervises the maids and washer-women. She overlooks her obligations to dependent generations (those enfeebled by old age and susceptible to danger because of youth). Her separation from the two points to an often overlooked component of the poem’s class critique.

In the first-person passage, the speaker remembers hearing “At intervals” her mother’s voice, “Urging dispatch” (ll. 74-5). The vilified mistress of Collier’s poem is the mother of “Washing-Day.” Once the other women hear her voice, they work more

88. (Markidou 2007) 25.

quickly: “briskly the work went on, / All hands employed to wash, to rinse, to wring, / To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait” (74-77). These lines contain an anaphora (the repeated “and”) and a synecdoche (the women as mere “hands”), both of which prove very telling about the relationship between the women and the speaker’s mother. From the position of the latter, all she sees and expects are “hands” performing a list of assigned tasks. Separated from the domestic workers and the washing-women, the mother sees only their functions within a hierarchical class system. Ann Messenger’s claim that “Women had power on washing day” proves true, as “Washing-Day” and “The Woman’s Labour” show, but only for one woman who has power only over other women.⁸⁹ This is no longer a remembrance of things past, but an adult women’s recognition of her own role in an unjust social order: “Then I would sit me down, and *ponder much* / Why washings were” (emphasis added). Here the speaker proves the potential to break this cycle. She had looked upon the work they did on washing-day with “awe.” And as a child, she seemed to enjoy (if not favor) the company of the lower-class women. They would “soft[ly] caress” her and she would ask them for treats, stories, *play*, and, *care*. Play and care built a communion between subjects that would otherwise not interact, be it for class, gender, race, or any other politicized identity category. As the case with Duck’s “prattling Females” attests, play requires agential participation, engendering a moment of autonomy, however brief. Care, on the other hand, requires the recognition of mutual and unique vulnerabilities and dependencies. The play she once enjoyed, with the other children and the other women (with the oppressed subjects of a “patriarchal” order) bring her to a renewed appreciation for the play of children and the care of women. To begin to

89. (Messenger 1986) 188.

ponder “why washings were” is to take the first step in valuing the washing women (and maids) and their dependents.

The famous “bubbles” passages follows the speaker’s memory of her mother:

...Sometimes thro’ hollow bowl
Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft
The floating bubbles, little dreaming then
To see, Mongolfier, thy silken ball
Ride buoyant through the clouds—so near approach
The sports of children and the toils of men.
Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,
And verse is one of them—this most of all (79-86)

Instead of a materialist answer to the question the poem was implicitly asking throughout, we are given a chimerical flight of fancy, tying a silken air balloon to a soap bubble.

Critics have long puzzled over this passage. Indeed, many have wondered what such a passage means for the poem’s “politics.” The transition from burgeoning consciousness of class inequality to a child playing with bubbles appears odd. Why does the speaker cut away from the question “why washings were?” Why does she not arrive at a more detailed, politicized recognition of gender and class in this moment? Does the poem’s key message ignore the drudgery of the washers in favor of the fancy of a child? Is that so bad? Without a doubt, the women’s labor is likely not noticed or truly appreciated by men; but the world found within a soap bubble may not necessarily be noticed or appreciated by many of the washing-women stuck “wash[ing]... rins[ing]... wring[ing]... / fold[ing]... starch[ing]... clap[ping]... iron[ing]... and plait[ing].”

Another option: perhaps the “bubbles” passage *is* the answer to “why washings were?” In this case, the words “so near approach” would make the “toils of men” similar to child’s play. Many scholars have followed Haley Bordo’s and Ann Messenger’s lead

in emphasizing this subversion of the masculine sphere. Critics commonly imbue the Montgolfier balloon with the fragility, contingency, and overall insignificance of the soap bubble. The comparison should cut both ways. If, as Kraft has shown, there once was a societal admiration for the balloon—admiration that Barbauld herself shared—then the balloon could represent, for example, human ingenuity and the power of science to bring humanity nearer to the heavens. It can be seen as a transcendence. So why not ascribe *these* connotations to the soap bubbles?

The poem depicts, that is, not only a deflating (of sorts) of the balloon but also an inflation of the bubble. It imbues the fragile and vulnerable with the power of transcendence. For Paul Ricoeur, “seeing-as” “sums up the power of metaphor,” a figure that allows us to see, for example, how a bubble floating in the air is a hot-air balloon carrying persons to the sky.⁹⁰ But this “seeing-as” can, in fact, “be the revealer of a ‘being-as’ on the deepest ontological level.” Through Ricoeur’s formulation, not only is “all the world a stage,” but we see that every stage is a world; the vehicle and tenor of the metaphor exchange ontological properties. Accordingly, the balloon *is* just a bubble, but even just one bubble *is* a balloon, a discovery of magnificent import for the period that brought us one step closer to permanently altering our human condition and standing among the stars.⁹¹ The “this” in the final couplet’s “this most of all” could and most likely does refer to a number of things, the poem itself being one. But the poem as a bubble, then, can now mean that the poem is a way to ascend to something and someplace higher.

90. (Ricoeur 1990) xi.

91. I am alluding here to Hannah Arendt’s claim that “the earth is the very quintessence of the human condition,” from the “Prologue” to *The Human Condition* (page 2). Before engineered flight, the presence on the physical ground was a shared denominator.

It reduces the big and enlarges the small through metaphor's "being-as" capacities, implying that poetry can be most transcendent when it is most steeped in the seemingly insignificant and trivial.

For it is the *trivial*, the *fanciful*, and the *commons* that lies at the heart of Barbauld's poem and that sets the stage for the rest of Romanticism. Lefebvre has claimed that, in the present age, "Everyday life has lost a dimension: depth" and that "only triviality remains."⁹² Working from the mutual inflation/deflation/conflation of the bubbles and the balloon, "Washing-Day" acts as a corrective to the false dichotomy of "triviality" and "depth." In seeking to incite a re-cognition of the ordinary, the work of literary form is that the literal is never left as just literal and the figurative is never purely figurative. It is a "play" with words, a remediation that blends ontological properties. The process of this re-cognition makes visible the process by which some are left invisible. Perceiving and thinking are no longer invisible and passive, but are made manifest in literature. It lifts the curtain to reveal the "mean machinery" and with it (as we saw in Wollstonecraft's case) the blood soaking the money.

Analyses of this poem in the vein of Krishnamurthy's fall for the too easy and too-common interpretation of "Washing-Day" as a devaluation of "labor" in order to stage a defense of "fancy." Such a reading overlooks, however, the central place for fancy in labor and the central place of labor in fancy. The poem's ultimate flight of fancy is, in fact, understandable in a poem about gender and labor.

Gender, labor, and poetic craft, to be precise; and "Fancy" united all three under the banner of a gendered concept permeating Romantic period poetics. Most notable

92. (Lefebvre 1991) II.78.

would be from the *Biographia*, where Coleridge suggested that “Fancy and the Imagination were two distinct and wildly different faculties.” For his part, Coleridge believed he was “saving” poetry from “the mere arts of memory or the power of fancy.”⁹³

But “fancy” denoted too the “fancywork” of nineteenth century women, homemade crafts from needlework to patina sculptures. Fancywork was seen as unimportant work, as distraction and ornament. But it was also a means of self-expression. A flight of fancy—an expression evocative of “fancy’s wild and roving wing” in Barbauld’s “A Summer Evening’s Meditation”—does not take us away from the world of men but brings us closer to the world of women’s unappreciated work and their unacknowledged voices. We can see the flight of fancy in “Washing-Day” as a kind of fancywork, work undertaken to express the significance of the small, the overlooked, the trivial, and the mind’s capacity to find value in such things.⁹⁴ We see this clearly, for example, in *Lyrical Ballads*. Additionally, “Barbauld’s poems,” according to Colin Jager, “move consistently between the natural world and divinity.”⁹⁵ In short, poiesis (and, in the case here, poetry) is a mental practice that bears fruit in the physical world. Meaningfulness is there, and art can help one see it. And “Washing-Day,” published a year earlier than *Lyrical Ballads* in 1797 (and written as early as 1783), suggests that Romanticism’s supernatural naturalism of human *poiesis* was forged by a dissenting female poet and present in a poem about forgotten women and playing children.

93. (McLane 2006) 20.

94. As Anahid Nersessian suggests, the “Romantic everyday is shot through with supra sensible elements, or at least with the possibility of the not-natural suddenly shaking things up.” (Nersessian 2015) 60.

95. (Jager 2007) 74.

Wordsworth and Coleridge inherited a Romantic notion of the everyday that is underpinned by the aesthetics of triviality; they were not its originators.⁹⁶ Fancy and imagination, as one of Romanticism's key dyads, pitted the feminized trivial against the coded-male romantic poet who "plants the seeds for his own self-canonization, for his victory over popular women poets."⁹⁷

"Washing-Day" is not about the daily hardness of poverty or the monotonous temporality of labor like the poems of Duck and Collier were. This stems from the obvious fact that washing-day was not a daily occurrence. What the poem meditates on is what some would call the *trivial*. Theorists of everyday life—as well as many speakers of English—tend to equate the everyday with the trivial, but the two are distinct though related. Barbauld separates the two categories, no longer equating the "trivial" to "inconsequentiality" or "weak aesthetic categories" and, in this decoupling, no longer

96. I am not making an overt claim on the Romantic canon and who is included in that canon or whose works are excluded from that canon. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that every canon must come from somewhere, and, as John Guillory argues, must be understood within institutional and historical contexts. In arguing for the "Romantic" nature—inherent or otherwise—of Barbauld, however, one "co-opts[s] one text (Wordsworth's) to another ([in this case, Barbauld's]) by giving a father once again the power of naming the heirs to an estate" (Marlon Ross, "Breaking the Period: Romanticism, Historical Representation, and the Prospect of Genre," 127). This prevents a literary historian, according to Ross, from "coming to see how synchronic events and texts can have disruptive and disaffiliative relations to each other." I am suggesting, nonetheless, that principles that undergird what we now called "Romanticism" have a gendered history. In terms of the canon of this chapter, then, the move from Duck and Collier to Barbauld to "Romanticism" is not a "feminist" one per se. Rather, as I bring up with Collier, a canon that stresses the exclusion of a vulnerable group in order to include a different vulnerable population would run against my aims here. So, intersectional feminism would better describe the theoretical *aspiration* behind the (Romantic) canon I use in this chapter and the project as a whole. I will elaborate upon this link between Romanticism (including its canon-formation) and race in the final chapter, "Feeling."

97. (Ross 1989) 12.

associating the quotidian with insignificance or powerlessness.⁹⁸ In a section titled “Triviality,” Ngai characterizes the cute, the interesting, and the zany as “aesthetic categories that strangely announce their own frivolity or ineffectuality.”⁹⁹ As such, they are “unable to foster religious awe,” instead “uncoupling the experience of art from the discourse of spiritual transcendence.” “Washing-Day,” however, performs no such disentangling, imbuing “religious awe” *into* the supposedly trivial act of laundering clothing. By positing an aesthetic of the trivial that recharges the world and all events within it, Barbauld distinguishes the trivial and the “weak” from the frivolous and ineffectual. In depicting such an aestheticization, “Washing-Day” extolls the poetic capacity to transform the world into one full of meaning; the speaker needs no “transcendence” here since these poor women are of the same world as she. Instead, the poem produces an appreciative perception of their worth and their work, labor that makes the bubble (and poem) possible and so makes a means of re-valuing the world possible.¹⁰⁰ In the immediacy of reading a poem or experiencing an affectively transformative art object, we no doubt need an individuated access to the *überssinnlich*. “Washing-Day” promotes, however, the subsequent transformation of that experience into a renewed perspective of the “trivial” and the social, the domain of world-building that we all inhabit. What transcends is everything, not the aesthetic perceiver.

The tension between gender and class in this poem have divided critics. But for the speaker, these either/or cases collapse into an “and.” For if a soap bubble possesses so

98. (Ngai 2015) 20-21.

99. (Ngai 2015) 22.

¹⁰⁰. These women in fact prove to be the unacknowledged legislators of a more numinous world than what we have now, where washings are.

much transformative value, then so too does the poem and the women. The ambiguity of the “this” in the poem’s final line does not ask us to choose a referent like art, science, the earth, or the poem itself but to accept them all. “In other words,” as Sharon Smith expresses it, “the ‘truth’ about the poetic object changes depending upon the perspective from which it is viewed.”¹⁰¹ This poem reinvests with affective worth that which has been overlooked and finds meaningfulness within the demeaned; and what counts for either depends upon the reader.

Such overlooked and/or demeaned things are often labeled trivial, things partly constitutive of regular, quotidian life. As a result, while “Washing-Day” may depict an exception to the everyday (i.e. it does not occur on a daily basis for any particular household), its exception contains and entails an elemental aspect of the quotidian. The washing day formally represents the idea of a transcendental (in the case of the quotidian) aesthetic, then, because it is defined by its being outside of and removed from the everyday. And as an exception to the everyday, the washing day and its annoyances and arduousness trigger the recognition of everyday life, a concept which can only be seen in retrospect. Only when the everyday is suspended can we readjust the central values that motivate us from day to day. Only in washing-day can the speaker learn more personally the inequalities of class and gender.

But should art be viewed as an “autonomous” object, then the pure aesthetic’s potential to transcend the quotidian means little in an exception like washing-day, where daily routines are suspended. We remain here in a day of exceptionally harsh labor for some and not others. We remain confronted with the question of “why washings

101. (Smith 2015) 561.

were” (and still are) and why this bubble passage appears to be the poem’s answer. I will maintain here that to “aestheticize” such a day is not to trivialize the labor performed within it; nor does it end up depoliticizing those women and everyone else like them. Working with ideas of art and the aesthetic that Ngai seeks to move beyond for her project concerning the twentieth century, Barbauld taps into “classical aesthetic categories” that made “insistent if necessarily indirect claims for their extra-aesthetic power (moral, religious, epistemological, political), asserting not just a specifically aesthetic agency but agency in realms extending far beyond art or culture.” “Washing-Day” takes aim at aesthetic categories that *fail* to gesture towards “realms extending... beyond art,” categories assuming that the trivial and the arts are disconnected. *These* aesthetics rob Duck’s threshers, Collier’s washerwomen, and Plato’s artisans of the time to dream or think, hiding from them the means of a spiritual escape from the drudgery of their class positions. The poem stages a privileged person looking back and noting those who played with her and showed care for her; it stages how close these two activities are for children. That these women *read* to her bears significant meaning as well. Here, then, is the presence of verse, a “this” encompassing care for the more vulnerable, playing with meaning, and the critical valuing (like asking “why washings are”) of the physical labor that enables it. Fancy’s play can help one re-cognize the world, and care is how she begins to change it.

This is not simply to praise middle-class leisure and what it proffers: *time* to play, *time* to care, and *time* to think. I suggest instead that in these works is an ethical template and not a political one. If “politics” entail the question of what to do, then ethics asks

how to be. “Washing-Day” and the Romantic poetics of the everyday, when situated in the historical line of descent from plebeian poetry and proto-feminist response to it, offer a model of how to possess a disposition towards the world—and everyone in it—based on companionship. Community, in this sense, is not a top-down distinction, but rather a virtuality in which each subject participates, and where they become dependent on every other subject, not unlike Arendt’s “Action.” Such an aesthetic of intimate community is evident in the virtuality of play and the intersubjective essence of care.

I am not proposing a dominant way to read these texts or an argument that this is how they were read historically. If art about the poor that attempted to remind the cultured classes of the precarious lives of the destitute saw both an increased popularity in the pre-Romantic period through to the nineteenth century, it saw also a plethora of criticism, satire, and suspicion. The derision that poems like “Washing-Day,” Southey’s sonnets on the poor, and many of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* all weathered suggests that for their contemporaries, the transformation of the typically feminine domestic sphere into “art” was not valued creative labor, but merely a performed *task*—a word whose origins in the labor economy of peasants paints such an activity as below a true poet or artist.¹⁰² And one of the period’s most famous examples, Cowper’s aptly and tellingly titled *The Task*, quickly jettisons that feminine sphere to end up in various other places: a garden, out for a walk, or in his study, lost in Lockean (and in a perverse

102. From the OED: a “piece of work imposed, exacted, or undertaken as a duty... the work appointed or assigned to one as a definite duty.”

reading, onanistic) meditation.¹⁰³ The poet there runs from the aestheticization of the feminine to ostensibly more “poetic” pursuits.

“Washing-Day” turns to a child’s aesthetic experience of play made possible by the hard work and care of other women. But Barbauld is not, in my reading, lauding or presupposing a need for self-infantilization, especially to other female readers. Unlike, for example, Wordsworth or Blake, the turn to childhood experience achieves more than an acknowledgement of innocence’s impermanence. Because of the renewed change of perspective that the speaker will carry forward, it winds up as a maturation from childhood that changes her ethical orientation but does not entail a loss of innocence *per se*.

Crucially, the poem’s final third moves from a reminiscence of the “eldest of forms” to blowing a bubble and then ends up discussing “verse.” The poem must end with poetry itself. The speaker’s final deictic, I suggest, indexes a recognition of having received a truly aesthetic education on “why washings were.” We leave the remembrance and return to the literary present. Whatever it may refer to—and I believe it refers to *everything*—we no doubt see that the speaker has come to some renewed realization of the sublimity of something small.

103. Cowper’s own use of the word “task” within the eponymous poem merits its own study; but I note here one peculiar example from the second book, “The Time-Piece.” There, Cowper labels “As human nature’s broadest, foulest blot” the wars which arise from merely biological differences between different peoples (here denoted as “men” and “brother[s]”). This blot “Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat / With stripes” (II.23-4). That the same word used to describe the poem’s catalyst, “imposed” by a woman, should be used too in describing the causes of war is, at the very least, implicative of some underlying relation between the “battle” of the sexes and the “wars” between “men.”

As Elizabeth Kraft argued in 1995, the balloon-bubble comparison need not diminish our perception of the Montgolfiers. Rather, it reinvigorates something that would have otherwise been deemed insignificant, a bubble whose existence is so brief and contingent that it carries no worth to many. When the speaker ends the poem, we have a flurry of associations that are synthesized into something greater. An aesthetic education here teaches one to *see* meaning in the world, and to trust that the world's value and existence is not solely dependent on human perception. Where theorists like Lefebvre will imply that the everyday is the opposite of the "ideal," there need be no division between the two. The everyday and the possible can be more than the precondition for the ideal; certainly one needs to be able to blow bubbles in order to extemporaneously ruminate on their value and meaning. But beyond this, the everyday can generate a *Lebenswelt* where care (*for* vulnerable others, and *of* their plight) motivates action.

Individualistic aesthetics always occur amidst a social world. As many art historians, critics, philosophers, and sociologists have made clear, the "pure" aesthetic will always be socio-economically embedded. Aesthetic "transcendence," then, must always be communal, even if one experiences it individually.¹⁰⁴ For if the goal is to change a person's perspective of, for example, a group of people, then the indubitably important work of public policy must still be felt by that person's own subjectivity. And,

104. The (admittedly Romantic) type of communality I am discussing here locates the social beyond any particular community as such. Instead, I use this term to refer to an ethics that works through community and commonality, but not at the expense of any vulnerable group. As Audre Lorde suggests, "community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (*Sister Outsider* 112). In the next chapter, "Noticing," I will argue that these differences are ways of altering the mis/perception of social injustice, but only if we feel that the vulnerable other has a morally salient need to have their experiences validated.

as Barbauld suggests in “On the Uses of History,” poetry—including all literature and artistic products in general—achieves this better than almost anything else. We’ll see it when we believe it. We do not transcend the ordinary; instead, we revalue the ordinary, infusing the world with ethical meaning mixed with personal purpose, otherwise known as “hope.” Hope, of course, is a perpetual process and not a product.

What we also saw in “On the Uses of History” was an idea of history where time is individuated and personal. But as Duck and Collier’s experience highlights, too often the poor are not in control of their own time. Strangely, their time is not their own. Barbauld’s philosophy of history, however, is a means of breaking such cycles. The moment of recognizing one’s own social embeddedness and the inequalities it points to offer an opportunity for change. That is visible here in the speaker’s recognition of her own class position, and her attempt to honor the washer-women and the house maids as heroic and not as mockeries. That is why the *poiesis* of history and dates matter: it effects a transfiguration instead of transcendence. It can turn something more beautiful in this world and, by so doing, turns this world more beautiful, instead of moving something from this world into a more beautiful one.

According to Galperin, “the most important effort to found a politics on the everyday—de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*—comes not from political theory or economy directly but indirectly from a theory of *history writing*.”¹⁰⁵ In the Romanticism that Wollstonecraft and Barbauld represent, the fictioning capacities of the mind point to a politics built on attention to the unattended. The retrospective attention to such things reveal “a previously missing world, along with a conceptual framework for

105. (Galperin 2017) 28.

it.”¹⁰⁶ This framework, Barbauld would suggest, is poetry, a play with words, ideas, and other people across time and space. Rather than “transcendence,” play encourages re-creation of the world as it is.

Many documents of Romantic aesthetic theory, such as those by Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, credit art with the power to shift individual perspectives and, in so doing, collective perspectives. For in a greater Romantic lyric lies a subject’s interiority so deep and diffuse that to find such depths in all of us may lead to an experience of the sublime. Whether a field of daffodils, a lime-tree bower, or a skylark, an encounter with the romanticized—“aestheticized”—trivial proves the possibility of a world more numinous and meaningful than it may appear. Poetry leads to new perceptions, aesthetics to aisthesis.

106. (Galperin 2017) 6.

CHAPTER THREE

NOTICING

“Do the ethical blemishes and the aesthetic merits interact?”

-A. W. Eaton, “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian’s *Rape of Europa*”

I

Stuck in Limbo

“The sister who consumes the speaker’s wisdom will, according to the logic of his utterance, reproduce him at some later date...”

-Marjorie Levinson, “Tintern Abbey”

In *Avengers* issue #200 (1980, Figure 1), Carol Danvers, then known as the superhero Ms. Marvel, finds herself surprisingly pregnant; in three days she finds herself at full-term, undergoing labor to deliver a baby while surrounded by a clueless band of Avengers (figure 2); in one hour the boy has grown enough to seem a two year old; by the evening he is an adult male and explains his origin.¹ “Marcus” was born and raised in “Limbo,” which had become his prison. His plan involved bringing Danvers to Limbo (which is unaffected by time) and, after



Figure 1

1. (Shooter et al. 1980).



Figure 2

a prolonged and seemingly unsuccessful courtship and “a boost from [Marcus’s father’s mind] machines... [she] became [his].” By impregnating Carol Danvers with himself, that is, he found an escape route from Limbo (figure 3). The scheme, while baffling, turns even more sinister when Marcus and Ms. Marvel, through a near-incomprehensible series of events, end up leaving together as lovers (even though he has called her

“mother” three times and “my love” once).² They teleport

themselves to, of all places, “semi-Limbo.”

This is one of the most hated and derided of all superhero comic plots. Marvel Comics intended the issue to be a “celebration” and a swan song for Carol Danvers.

Instead, the comic’s plot has become known as “the rape of Ms. Marvel,” after an essay

by Carol A. Strickland later that

year (Figure 4). In Strickland’s

view, the “dirty joke that

someone at Marvel dreamed up

is all out in the open—not a bit of

it is between the lines to be

hidden from the innocents who

make up such a large proportion

of the audience. And the entire

2. (Strickland 1980) np.



Figure 3

plot is a deadly insult to every woman.” Strickland asks us to wonder how something like this could clear so many editors at Marvel and so many censors at the Comics Code. Why couldn’t they see that the “subtle boost” was a rape?

The “rape of Ms. Marvel” is an “aestheticizing” of rape; more precisely, it is an instance of how to aestheticize a rape away, of how to leave it invisible—to some—while hiding in plain sight. “Excepting a social license to physical abuse among certain class and ethnic groups,” Kate Millet observed many years ago, “force is defused and generalized in most contemporary patriarchies,” rendering it imperceptible for swaths of the public until someone who *can* perceive it can also speak a critical language understood by others.³

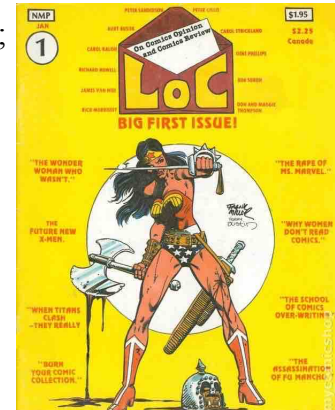


Figure 4

The superhero comic form, and its majority-male audience, only exacerbates this difficulty. Further, as an ostensibly low-brow cultural object, the comic book medium (and the superhero genre in particular) evacuates “The Rape of Ms. Marvel” of significance for many people. Scholars of British Romanticism, however, may find a parallel in the case of John Keats’s “tasteless” poetry in general and “The Eve of St. Agnes” (1819) in particular.⁴ In the poem, a man named Porphyro enlists the aid of Angela, an old woman, to sneak him into the bedchambers of his “beloved” Madeline on the titular religious evening. Custom says that “young virgins might have visions of

3. (Millet 2000) 44.

4. The issue’s subtitle bears another connection to Romanticism, albeit to Wordsworth: “(the Child is father to...?)”

delight” featuring their future husbands if “ceremonies due they did aright” (ll.47, 50). Porphyro hides in a closet, watching Madeline prepare for bed and, once she is asleep, he takes the opportunity to set up a table in her chambers, wakes her under the pretense that she remains dreaming, and subsequently—in some of the most explicit metaphorical “euphemisms” in the English canon—the two engage in coitus. Upon learning the “truth,” a crestfallen Madeline runs away with Porphyro at his behest, and they cross the “southern moors.” Keats’s friend and editor, Richard Woodhouse, viewed the poem as “unfit for ladies,” and questions of decorum sprung up almost from its initial publication. Keats, in response, said that “he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men” and, infamously, that “that he [should] despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation” alone.⁵ But most critical reviews of the poetry collection featuring “St. Agnes” actually gave it relatively little attention; Leigh Hunt, Keats’s mentor, went so far as to say that “‘The Eve of St. Agnes...’ is rather a picture than a story” and “may be analysed in [just] a few words.”⁶

Porphyro either commits or seeks to commit an act of rape, but this fact has not always been apparent in the poem’s critical history.⁷ In the twentieth century, the poem

5. (Matthews 1971) 145.

6. (Matthews 1971) 166.

7. I do wish to leave a space open that there might, indeed, be mutual consent, as Heidi Thompson argues in “Eavesdropping on ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’: Madeline’s Sensual Ear and Porphyro’s Ancient Ditty” (1998). Thompson relies in part on deleted stanzas. It should be noted that Porphyro’s plan certainly takes the form of a rape-by-deception plot nonetheless. In the deleted lines after the sixth stanza, the speaker continues describing the events of the ritual: after the night with “her future lord,” she would wake up “no weeping Magdalen.” The name Madeline derives from Magdalen, and the Madeline we see certainly “weeps” and considers herself a “deceived thing” left “in eternal woe” come

“has been judged from many segments of the critical spectrum, from ‘no more than a romantic tapestry,’ to an allegory of the quasi-mystical journey to ‘heaven’s bourne,’ to a skeptical depiction of the shattering of illusion.”⁸ Marjorie Levinson has called “the scholarly discourse on ‘St. Agnes...’ an exemplary critical pluralism,” adeptly and adroitly sketching out the critical field in *Keats’s Life of Allegory* (1988), with “‘the romantic tapestry school’” on one end and the “‘metaphysical critics’” on the other. Where the former highlights the aesthetic sensuousness of the poem, the latter “treat[s] Keats’s romance as an allegory of identity” itself, with “Porphyro, [as] Keats’s persona, playing the hero’s part.”⁹ Others have read the work “as the sweet solution to a bitter life.”¹⁰ Additionally, many read it allegorically as about the “romance” genre itself. For example, Rosemarie Maier calls Keats’s “affinity for realism” in the poem “a skepticism that is quite unromantic.”¹¹ On the issue of the sexual violence, however, the critical debate has been relatively muted or, indeed, has vindicated Porphyro as the poem’s “hero.” Take, for instance, Jack Stillinger’s admission that Keats “introduced enough overtones of evil to make Porphyro’s actions wrong within the structure of the poem” while still arguing that Madeline “hoodwinked” herself.¹² Here we see what Jean Wilson, in describing the work of Heinrich von Kleist, calls a “familiar turning of the tables, the

morning. Porphyro even calls the situation, that morning, an “elfin-storm from faery land, / Of haggard seeming, but [in his estimation] a boon indeed” (ll.343-4). To be sure, the relationship and “dream” may in fact be consensual. But the overall narrative structure, with Porphyro choosing to enact this plot on St. Agnes’s eve, is similar in form to an intent to rape.

8. (Maier 1971) 66.

9. (Levinson 1988) 97-99.

10. (Levinson 1988) 103.

11. (Maier 1971) 74.

12. See more in (Stillinger 1971a).

redirection of critical attention from the apparent misconduct of the [rapist] to that of his victim.”¹³ Wilson’s characterization of “traditional readings of [Kleist]” applies to “The Eve of St Agnes” insofar as both “conced[e] the occurrence of rape only in a ‘certain’ sense [or] only in a ‘technical’ sense,” and end up “shift[ing] the focus of attention to the question of the woman’s complicity and diminish the impact of her experience of sexual violation.”¹⁴ Why couldn’t we all see that the “dream” was a rape?

“The Eve of St. Agnes” and “the rape of Ms. Marvel” are indeed both cases of “shift[ing] the focus of attention.” They disclose familiar reading practices in finding Porphyro to be the protagonist and Marcus to be a person deserving our pity (and Carol Danvers’s love). In “Pretext,” I suggested that we change the focus of the questions “what is a meaningful life” and “what is meaningful” to “*who* gets to determine *what* is meaningful?” and “*who* gets to determine *who* matters?” Such a re-orientation was already posed in feminist philosophy’s handling of rape. In the introduction to *Rape and Representation* (1992), for example, Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver assert that regardless of “whether in the courts or in media, whether in art or criticism, who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as ‘truth’ determine the definition of what rape *is*.”¹⁵ In the re-orientation I proposed, the vulnerable—defined in myriad ways—comes into focus as the object of moral philosophy and as the underpinning of the romantic subject. In the question of rape, the attention to whose story gets told might subordinate aesthetic experience to ethics, and turn fictional “characters” into ethical “subjects.”

13. (Wilson 2001) 115.

14. (Wilson 2001) 115.

15. (Higgins and Silver 1991) 1.

All roads in this study, then, have so far led to “The Eve of St. Agnes,” a poem that concerns itself with aesthetics, meaning, gender/social vulnerability, and the very nature of Romanticism itself. But on the surface, “The Eve of St. Agnes” appears *opposed* to my claims about Romanticism, aesthetics, vulnerability, and even the Enlightenment. For example, against my defenses of “idealism” (whether of the “formal” variety or otherwise), the poem depicts the dangers of dreaming. Moreover, while I oppose Carl Schmitt’s conception of “political romanticism” (i.e. that Romanticism is apolitical because of its “aestheticizing” nature), few characters in any poem or drama by the “big six” Romantic writers better represent Schmitt’s idea of Romanticism than Porphyro. And where I might have given the impression that “aestheticizing” is indeed “good” because it makes vulnerability more perceivable and meaningfulness sensible, “The Eve of St. Agnes” casts aestheticization in a far less positive light. We see, for example, the figure of Porphyro as a solipsistic aesthete, the Romantic subject par excellence who suspends ethical judgment for his own gratification.¹⁶ We see vulnerability here not only as a state *susceptible* to violence, but as the actual aftermath of violence. Further, though vulnerability has often been associated with a loss of autonomy, I have nevertheless argued that it provides access instead to different kinds of autonomy

16. This is not to say that Schmitt’s romantic subject is a rapist or is defined by a propensity to rape. Schmitt’s subject, however, resembles Søren Kierkegaard’s own criticism of Romanticism in “The Seducer’s Journal” from *Either/Or* (1843). Kierkegaard uses that character to paint sexual gratification as an allegorical substitute for the inability to perceive value and meaning independently of one’s own pleasures and desires. In other words, Porphyro typifies Schmitt’s idea of the romantic subject not in his deception of Madeline, but in his pursuit of his own pleasures for “aesthetic” (sensual) reasons. Like Kierkegaard’s seducer, Porphyro carries out a plot to “win” a woman, and in so manipulating this woman he sheds a light on not only “romantic” solipsism, but on patriarchal privilege.

(as with Wollstonecraft and Barbauld). But this may not be the case for Madeline.

Despite all this, “The Eve of St. Agnes” still supports my central claims. Keats does not praise or champion what I will call Porphyro’s materialism, his aestheticizing, or his act(s) of violence—but nor does he forcefully denounce them. Instead, we see a working out of Romanticisms; where critics have long examined Porphyro as a skeptically “aestheticizing” materialist subject, they have less often looked at Madeline as a symbol of Romanticism in her own right. We have seen Madeline’s loss of autonomy, but we have overlooked the conditions of that loss—not only in Porphyro and Angela, but in her kin, in “aesthetics,” and in history; nor have we adequately examined how Keats himself might have viewed a state of being similar to Madeline’s vulnerable condition in “St. Agnes.” Where critics have seen the closing of eras—the age of romance ended, the bad punished, the complicit dead—they have overlooked how little changes for women (and girls) like Madeline. Where they have readily aligned Keats with Porphyro—in his sexual longing, his spiritual “growth,” and his “aestheticizing”—or with the omniscient narrator criticizing the Porphyros and Angelas of the world, the poem changes when we see Keats and Madeline as *victims* of “aesthetics,” when we see Keats not as the one who contemplates the frozen art object but whose active, narrativized contemplation *is* the art object and whose “dreams” leave him a “deceiv’d thing.” What happens when Keats’s theory of art is not limited to the masculine gaze trained upon a pair of frozen lovers, but instead becomes Madeline’s ability to see with what he may call “fancy?”

I invoke the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” because many readers take it as the prime

example of Keats's aesthetic theory, and the choice between the "Ode" and "St. Agnes" further reveals why the latter is more fit for a study of aesthetics when vulnerability is the central issue. The ode displays an aesthetics of perceiving objects "out there" and the subsequent "romantic" escape into the self that such objects can elicit. But Madeline and "The Eve of St. Agnes" offer a different kind of Keatsian poetics. As a gothic romance instead of an isolated lyrical event, the poem's narrative temporality breaks the focus on "gaze" and instead underscores the ethical relationships between characters and events (in terms of, for example, causality and accountability).

My choice to study "St. Agnes" also stems in part from a desire to resist the gendered critical preference for the Ode(s) in the long history of Keats scholarship. In her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argued that in "a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has [traditionally] been split between active/male and passive/female."¹⁷ Critics reassert this heteronormative dichotomy when they privilege the Urn over a more narrative poem like "St Agnes." And yet, we must remember that the chief conflict of the "Ode" is the *search* for narrative, the pursuit for understanding an enigmatic static image: we see this in the speaker's wondering, "What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape?" (l. 5). In criticism of the poem, readers have examined the coded-male speaker activating the text's plot by extemporizing on a silent and seemingly inert coded-female urn (referred to as a "bride" of quietness). Mulvey's article commented on this phenomenon as well, albeit in film. The "split between spectacle and narrative," she argued, "supports the man's role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen." The feminine figure, on the

17. (Mulvey 1989) 19.

other hand, “in [its] traditional exhibitionist role” is “simultaneously looked at and displayed,” and rendered in such a way “to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.” Mulvey’s insights match the dominant way of reading the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” with the titular artifact chiefly characterized by its *to-be-looked-at-ness*.

More important still for my analysis of “St. Agnes,” Mulvey’s argument addresses *narrative* cinema. It aids, then, in understanding the closeness of gendered vulnerability and narrative. The status of rape in the history of narrative, especially as articulated in Frances Ferguson’s “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” points to how, in Lynn Higgins’s words, “rape is a special kind of crime in relation” to both “fiction and... life.” Ferguson’s reading of *Clarissa* positions it—and the fate of its titular protagonist—as key in the development of the “psychological novel,” in large part due to sexual assault’s focus on mental states and the ability to narrativize them.

The differences between “St. Agnes” and the “silent form” of the urn elucidate the inextricability of gendered violence and narrative. Rape is not limited to “The Eve of St. Agnes.” Indeed, the urn is “still *unravish’d*,” the word “still” marking its entrapment within a gelid state where it will eventually *be* ravished by “quietude.” In its positive connotations, “ravishment” describes “aesthetic” experiences akin to the sublime; denotatively, however, it is another word for sexual violence. Here, the feminized urn brings attention to the temporality of gendered vulnerability, a state where violence is always close by and/or inevitable. When one reads the poem as the story of a few moments, one may only find a description of “aesthetic” contemplation, sanitizing the poem’s invocations of violence. But when we conceptualize its content as a longer

narrative, it reveals the unfortunate temporality of vulnerable subjects, a temporality we saw at play in Stephen Duck's "The Thresher's Labour." As with the women in Duck's poem, violence ("Ravishment") is not an "everyday" concern so much as it is an *anyday* concern, a way of being where the scaffold of protection may crumble at any instant. "St. Agnes" dynamizes gendered vulnerability, distending the concept to include the afterlife of a "ravish'd bride" after the moment of ravishment.¹⁸

Formally, then, "St Agnes" becomes a necessary poem for feminist literary criticism in Romantic study. Likewise, the genre that Keats chose for "The Eve of St. Agnes" was seen by his contemporaries as a "feminine" one. So while Keats may have written the poem "for men" and he may well be "perceived as a misogynist poet," this is another case in the critical practice of associating him with the feminine.¹⁹ We cannot so easily reduce the author's play with gender in "St. Agnes" to a case of "Keats's often-noted ambivalence towards the female figure."²⁰ The poem should instead, in the words of Mary Arseneau, "be seen not as an... idealized treatment of its heroine, romantic love, and the powers of the imagination, but as the harbinger of the more qualified and probing

18. Another important aspect of narrative in this chapter is its more "overt" presentation of causality. That is, if a narrative proceeds "A then B then D" (or D because of B because of A), then it is much easier to see the missing C. The *narrative* element of *Avengers* #200 reveals the "subtle boost" as a rape and not the visual element. So too here, where the causal relationship between Porphyro's designs before the dream and the "lovers'" actions afterward reveal the dream as part of a sequence that, as I hope to show, once seen as suspect cannot (and ought not) be unseen.

19. (Schulkins 2014) 7. Take, for instance, *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), where Anne K. Mellor aligns Keats with Madeline by arguing that "he... locates poetic creation in the realm of the feminine" (Mellor 175). Mellor's influential account, however, ends up "articulat[ing] the predominant argument of recent criticism about Keats and gender," namely, that "Keats's cross-dressing is a means... to silence and appropriate the feminine in order to establish a masculine self (Schulkins 5-6).

20. (Arseneau 1997) 227.

assessments of dreaming states in the later poetry.”²¹ With the poems of 1818, Keats wished to write “for men” because of anxiety that his work was already associated with a primarily female readership. And yet, he nonetheless still chose to write a poem in a generic category directed towards a female readership. In this self-defeating intention of writing a poem “for men” in a style more associated with female readers, Keats articulates a mode of Romanticism and romantic creativity in the character of Madeline built on vulnerability, where dreams of pleasure are never far enough away from a reality of violence.

Because the poem is so amenable to extreme critical polarities, it breeds interpretative absolutes which keep moral lapses hidden in plain sight. To begin with, the poem is an understudied example of Romantic orientalism.²² The vagueness of Romantic-

21. (Arseneau 1997) 241.

22. This critical discourse arguably begins in 1978, when Edward Said pointed to Romanticism’s key role in the production and perpetuation of the discursive formation known as “Orientalism.” According to Said, “modern Orientalism” was born in the “late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” when “William Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs.” There has since been a rich array of criticism on Romantic Orientalism, the “current state of... [which] resists easy summary, not only for its growing depth and diversity, but because it blends with and crosses so many other currents in Romanticism” (Andrew Warren, *The Orient and the Young Romantics*, p. 8). There is a common theoretical move in Romanticist criticism to show a more nuanced use of Orientalism by Romantic artists than Said argued in *Orientalism*. For example, see the “radical Orientalism” Mohammed Sharafuddin details in *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient* (1994), and Andrew Warren’s *The Orient and the Young Romantics* (2014) where he “argues that the Young Romantics’ treatment of the Orient becomes... a critique of the Orientalism practiced by the eighteenth century and the First Generation Romantics.” Andrew Rudd notes that “Said’s definition of Orientalism as ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ has long been seen as inadequate in accounting for the wide variety of ways in which European writers engaged with the East” (Rudd, “‘Oriental’ and ‘Orientalist’ Poetry: The Debate in Literary Criticism in the Romantic Period,” 53). See also James Watt’s “Scott, the Scottish Enlightenment, and Romantic Orientalism” from

era orientalist literature allows “The Eve of St. Agnes” to be about not an event per se but about the interpretation of events and the conditions of possibility for those interpretations. We learn more about how the poem works, I will suggest, when we remember that we are interpreting interpretive paradigms: Porphyro and Madeline; romance and Romanticism. As such, when a critic provides a “reading” of the poem, she simultaneously provides a *means of* reading the poem (and often of reading in general).

In the next two sections, I turn to Madeline and Porphyro as representatives of different models of Romanticism. Schematically, the three most common methods of critically studying Romanticism—especially its British variety—in the last half-century have been the humanist, deconstructive, and the materialist.²³ Porphyro lends himself very easily to a deconstructive and a “materialist” reading because of his proliferation of meanings and his commitment to the “worldly.” Madeline encapsulates the third dominant way of reading romantic texts: the secularized complex of idealism and humanism that M. H. Abrams has called natural supernaturalism. Like “deconstruction and more conspicuously political” approaches (i.e. “materialist” ones), Porphyro sees Madeline’s “idealism... [as] always ultimately a self-deluding empiricism,” to quote

Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism (2004).

23. Materialist in this sense includes Marxist studies but need not be limited as such (New Historicism, for example). These categories are exceptionally broad, but they bespeak the dominance of these three schools and their influence. If there is a fourth, it would be Freudian psychoanalysis, which would complement my assertions herein. For more on how psychoanalysis participates to the ubiquitous practice of “rewriting rape as another story” despite being “one of our most potent narratives for interpreting the past,” see Lynn A. Higgins’s “Screen/Memory: Rape and Its Alibis in *Last Year at Marienbad*” (306).

Frances Ferguson.²⁴ Porphyro sees Madeline as a target who “hoodwinks” herself; he aims to subject her idealization/idealism to the “material conditions” that he produces: he sets the table they eat from, he plays the music she arises to, and he dooms her to the life he has chosen for her. Porphyro’s deconstructive and materialist aesthetics measure what is “real” against an empiricist rubric of subjective pleasure and personal convenience; they turn Porphyro into the main character of a “romance,” seeking some end-reward that lends everything that comes before it meaning and worth. By contrast, Madeline’s aestheticizing brings the fictional into the real world. She builds her quest on belief and hope in search for *earthly* love and “*saintly* care.”

I end with a brief meditation on rape and “aesthetics.” Using the poem’s form and reception, I try to conceive, following Debra Bergoffen, “a Politics of the Vulnerable Body,” built around consensus and consent. In the end, “The Eve of St. Agnes” complements my thoughts on Romanticism, vulnerability, and the aesthetic, and is the work where the conclusions of the British material all converge: on the romantic subject as a vulnerable one.

II

Seeing In Fancy: Madeline and Romantic Poesis

24. (Ferguson 1992) vii. In aligning Porphyro with both the deconstructive and the materialist and Madeline with only the idealist, I am not intimating any comparison of complexity between the two characters. Instead, I aim to make a division similar to the one that Ferguson makes in *Solitude and the Sublime*, where she contrasts materialist and deconstructive criticism (represented by Jerome McGann and Paul de Man respectively) on one hand to “Formal Idealism” or, in a later chapter, “Romantic Idealism” (represented by Immanuel Kant) on the other.

“‘Like Joyce’s ‘The Dead,’ ‘St. Agnes’ has ‘a ritual solidity of description, which somehow pledges that what one dreams and yearns for and regrets is as much a part of life as what one eats, that one’s fantasies are as real as one’s food.’”

- (qtd. in Levinson, 117)

In a common reading, “The Eve of St. Agnes” relates a story of innocence corrupted by “romance.” In order to achieve such narrative conclusions, this reading goes to great lengths to paint Madeline as innocent, blessed, and vulnerable. Her fault lies not in her stars nor in her: she is a victim of “romance” itself.²⁵

By contrast, I propose that we should read Madeline as a figure of Romanticism in her own right. Juxtaposing Madeline and Porphyro as competing facets of the Romantic project—of the so-called spirit of the age—enables us to read “The Eve of St. Agnes” as Keats’s commentary on two Romantic commonplaces: the first: the aesthetic production of a lost past committed to an absolute present/presence (Porphyro); the second: the idealizing I/eye that cannot see what is present because of a semi-secularized, aesthetic commitment to “inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking” (Madeline).²⁶

Admittedly, Madeline proves far less “secularized” than this schematism might suggest. As such, I recommend that we read Madeline’s theism as a model of Keatsian

25. I will discuss Porphyro as a romantic/romanticizing subject more below; it is sufficient for now to observe the tendency of older twentieth century readings to align him with romance (e.g. Earl Wasserman’s *The Finer Tone* and Harold Bloom’s first contribution in *Romanticism and Consciousness*).

26. (Abrams 1971) 12.

poeisis. I do not mean to imply that Keats was promoting Christian thought. I only mean to suggest that the character who most resembles the prototypical Keatsian romantic subject happens to be the “saintly” but vulnerable Madeline. Accordingly, the poem is committed to making sure we see her as “blessed... among women.” I quote from the “Ave Maria” because the poem associates Madeline, whose name derives from Mary Magdalene, with virginity, purity, and beatitude—with, in short, another biblical Mary, the “sweet Virgin” (l. 9). The poem very overtly limns Madeline as a holy figure, so why not see her as a prophet from the church of verse?

Certainly, Madeline and the Beadsman belong together as figures of religious ritual. For Jack Stillinger, “Madeline presents an obvious parallel with the Beadsman” since they are both “concerned with prayer and an ascetic ritual... [and] are isolated from the crowd and from actuality.”²⁷ While I disagree that to concern oneself with prayer is to be isolated from “actuality” (a claim Stillinger needs to make in order to arrive at his contention that, in terms of her dream, Madeline “hoodwinks” herself), the poem certainly sequesters her from the rabble occupying her home. Lost in thought on the “whim” of the night’s ritual, “she saw not” the “amorous cavalier[s]” who “tiptoe” towards her and then “back retir’d, not cool’d by high disdain.” With “her maiden eyes divine... / Fix’d on the floor” (divine eyes gazing at the worldly), Madeline is in the crowd but not of it. She “danc’d along with vague, regardless eyes,” so rather than being “isolated from the crowd and from actuality,” she simply does not “regard” or value it much. Here is where Madeline “hoodwinks” herself, not in the dream; nor does this scene leave her complicit in any of the poem’s subsequent actions. In the period, “hoodwink”

27. (Stillinger 1971b) 64.

meant both to “to cover the eyes” with a hood or cap (like a falcon) or to deceive or “blindfold mentally.” Mentally blindfolded with “faerie fancy,” she turns to St. Agnes and the future reward of sexual experience. Her “vague” eyes—chiefly meaning “devoid of expression”—are, nonetheless, “regardless.” But since these “vague, regardless eyes” are the same ones described as “maiden eyes divine” in the previous stanza, divine sight disregards the material in favor of “the sweetest [dreams] of the year.” Her eyes see dreams amidst the “real,” perhaps prefiguring Porphyro’s plan to have her see his “real” deeds as a dream until it is too late.

Not simply pious, then, the poem paints her as a saint. Take, for instance, the image of her praying before bed; there, she is said to have “on her hair a glory, like a saint” (ll. 222). Porphyro, however, has already tried to *control* saints upon his introduction (when we first see him in the poem, he “implores / All saints to give him sight of Madeline” ll.77-8). And such irreverence’s corollary features his plan to control—or at least attempt to control—saintly Madeline’s perception of reality itself. Porphyro’s “success” in his design, however, muddies the poem’s ethical project, if it even has one. Does it intimate the inefficacy of prayer? Does it cast aspersions on religion in general? Does it suggest that Madeline’s sainthood necessitated her violation? That innocence needs experience?

Porphyro may answer at least some of these questions in the affirmative. Many critics have read either his character (or the poem in toto) as an attack on religious belief

in general and superstition in particular.²⁸ They have pointed to Porphyro's reaction upon learning of Madeline's plans for the evening:

But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when [Angela] told
His lady's purpose; and he scarce could brook
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,
And Madeline asleep in the lap of legends old (ll. 132-135)

Porphyro tears up at learning of Madeline's vulnerable state. He labels her evening rituals "enchantments cold," intimating his view of them as superstitious and backward-looking. But he also creates a paradox: "enchantment," in the period, could also signify an "overpowering charm; enraptured condition; [or] (delusive) appearance of beauty." An "enraptured condition" made gelid would better describe the lovers trapped within the "silent form" of the Grecian Urn's "cold pastoral" than Madeline and Porphyro. In this case the word "enchantments" means something slightly different from Madeline's point of view as opposed to Porphyro's. He sees obstructed *jouissance*; enchantment for Madeline points to a willingness to believe in the superstition and the night of *dreamt* "enjoyment" the older women described to her. If Madeline and Porphyro are forbidden to marry (because of religious difference, for example) then a dreamt night with him is all she may have expected or wanted.

Madeline, in her room, has a *Lamia*-like moment, where she is first seen
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed (ll.231-233)

She "dreams awake," explained in the subsequent line as "see[ing St. Agnes] / In fancy."

28. See, for example, in Christine Colón's "Revising Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes': The Shift from Dreams to Reality in Adelaide Procter's 'Legend of Provence,'" Marcia Gilbreath's "The Etymology of Porphyro's Name in Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes,'" and Jack Stillinger's "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'"

“Fancy,” a romantic preoccupation, was considered a “feminine” construct, whether in contrast to the “Imagination” or in reference to women’s “fancywork.”²⁹ It is also a personal preoccupation of Keats, who seems to have preferred it over the “Imagination.” We see the latter term once in all of the *Poems of 1820*, in a minor description within “Hyperion: A Fragment.” “And in her wide imagination stood / Palm-shaded temples, and high rival fanes” (ll. 58-59). Fancy and its preponderance, by contrast, appears a highly privileged concept in the collection. The opening of the ode “Fancy” can serve as an illustrative case:

Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home:
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth;
Then let winged Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage-door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar. (ll.1-8)

Because “Pleasure,” related most closely to Porphyro in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” melts “at a touch,” the ode recommends we “let winged Fancy wander” to thoughts beyond her grasp. Fancy can fly through “the mind’s cage-door,” and should we let *her*:

She will bring, in spite of frost,
Beauties that the earth hath lost;
She will bring thee, all together,
All delights of summer weather;
All the buds and bells of May,
From dewy sward or thorny spray
All the heaped Autumn's wealth, (ll.29-35)

Fancy will bring “in spite of frost,” beauty, delight, “Autumn’s wealth,” and, as the poem continues, something for almost all of the five senses. And despite fancy’s far reach, it is pleasure that “never is at home,” but rather outside the skin and external to the subject,

29. Refer to my analysis of Anna Barbauld’s “Washing-Day” in chapter two.

hence why it pops like a bubble “at a touch.” Pleasure’s contingency (or fragility) prevents it from showing us, for example, the “cheek that doth not fade.” Fancy, on the other hand, remains rooted in the subject while branching out to the limits of knowledge; it need not be bound by “experience” (and so may be allied with Innocence). Madeline sees “In fancy,” and so her belief in “enchantments cold” is not the product of a superstitious and gullible mind; it is the mind of the Keatsian Romantic subject to see in fancy, through fancy, and with fancy. In the St. Agnes ritual (and, perhaps, in other religious practice), her mind can add a coat of meaning to the material world; that is, she can affectively make the perceived world more than it appears. Porphyro, like the hunter or the predatory bird, relies on the sensible world: what he sees is a self-deluded, “hoodwinked” prey. Madeline has access to a mode of belief that Porphyro can only disparage.

She sees not only “In fancy,” but also *infancy*. Foreshadowing her controlled and circumscribed future, “seeing in/fancy” yokes together the visual (seeing) and the creative (fancy), the perception to the conception (infancy).³⁰ This is, in essence, what the Keatsian poet is supposed to do: she sees a truth via Fancy not available through cold logic. S/he can work with the “viewless wings of Poesy” and, however briefly or ambivalently, “pipe to [her] spirit ditties of no tone.” Madeline more closely resembles Keats’s idea of the figure of the poet than Porphyro, whom critics have far more often viewed as the poet’s persona in “The Eve of St. Agnes.” She melds together the cognitive and the material in a mode of aesthetic idealism predicated on a belief in the power of

30. This also recalls the “stipulated state of legal infancy” that ends Frances Ferguson’s “Rape and the Rise of the Novel.”

fancy to guide and to (pro)create.³¹

We see another example of the connection between cognitive action and pro/creative activity in the poem's fifth stanza:

At length burst in the argent revelry,
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,
Numerous as shadows haunting fairily
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay
Of old romance. These let us wish away,
And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,
As she had heard old dames full many times declare. (ll.37-45)

The poem asks us to turn away from the “argent revelry” and the “old romances” that “stuff’d, in youth” a child’s brain. After shunting romances into the realm of children’s literature (and possibly, as educational material), it asks us (“let *us* wish away...”) to turn to Madeline, who had spent the day “brooding” on love and “St Agnes’ saintly care.” Not only is Madeline situated against a particular kind of romance, her ideas of love and care came from the stories that “she had heard old dames full many times declare.” These lines provide a clearer image of the poem’s opening gambit. After the beadsman’s introduction, the speaker explicitly asks us to turn away from the predominantly male-centered romances of old and to focus on a woman’s quest for love (and care), a quest bequeathed upon her by older generations of women. The word “brooding” keeps us from reading this as an approbation of the older women’s tales of love and care and a denunciation of the old romances. Her “brooding” on love hints that “love” signifies something potentially menacing, something worth being apprehensive of. The closeness

31. That it ends in disaster for her also maps onto Keats’s career as he and members of his circle saw it, but such a traipse into “psycho-biography” yields little in better understanding the poem.

between “brooding” and “breeding” further cements this. Like “seeing infancy,” brooding/breeding may be a sign of Madeline’s future as wife and mother. Her apprehensions of love may be the outcome of her thoughts on having a “brood” of her own.

Notably, Madeline broods with her heart. Thinking with her heart refutes the philosophical (and historically sexist, racist, and imperialist) commonplace of the disjunction between reason and emotion. Her heart’s cognitive activity—in brooding—adds an affective dimension to thought. Madeline thinks with her heart, and feels with her mind.³²

In a March 19, 1819 letter to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats describes a “state of effeminacy” that some, including himself, would call “langour” or laziness. In such a state, “the fibers of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body” to a “happy degree.” He had described a similar mode of being—without explicit female-gendering—in a famous February 19, 1818 letter to J. H. Reynolds. The latter description has received much critical attention, as a mode of valuing mere thought in lieu of overt action or as an “absorption of the active in[to] the passive.”³³ Keats called it “indolence,”

32. To return to the beadsman, we can see that he is less like Madeline than many past readers have suggested. As he walks by carved statues of knights and ladies (“the sculptur’d dead”), the speaker observes how the beadsman’s “weak spirit fails / To think how [the dead] may ache in icy hoods and mails” (l. 17-18). A weak spirit, in other words, does not or cannot extend such sympathy to those which possess human form but not human feelings. Madeline’s kind of fancy imbues non-human objects with bonds of sympathy.

33. (Rancière 2011) 241.

but it would appear the same as the “state of effeminacy” he described a year later.³⁴ It is a state of activity amidst passivity, for both body and mind. Rather than an embodied cognition, Keats campaigns for a cognized corporeality, one where to relax means to perform and to linger means to be. Madeline, in this respect, figures Keats’s idealized state of being (in our last view of her before the introduction of Porphyro’s character, we see her “linger[ing] still”). Not only is it a state he advocates for, it is also a state of idealization, observable in the sonnet he wrote in the letter to Reynolds: “He who saddens / At thought of idleness cannot be idle, / And he’s awake who thinks himself asleep.” Having the mere spark of feeling (“sadden[ing]”) or thinking means to be engaged in a meaningful activity and to “see / In fancy” or to have a brooding heart means to be engaged in a meaning-*making* activity.

Madeline, then, proves not as passive as many critics presume; in fact, she may not even be as virginal as many readers presume. Noticing that Madeline is described as “Half-hidden, like a mermaid in a sea-weed,” Mary Arseneau contends that this “detail... suggests that there may be more to her than first meets the eye” (237). In sooth, possibly much more. In the ninth stanza, Porphyro’s introduction, he “implores / All saints to give him sight of Madeline” while he may “gaze and worship all unseen” (ll. 77-78, 80). The subsequent line insinuates much more about his relationship with Madeline: “Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—*in sooth such things have been*” (l. 81). When have such things been? Where? The speaker seems to stop focalizing the poem through/around Porphyro

34. In the earlier letter, he suggests that we should “open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive.” I am not going to suggest that such traits are “feminine,” merely that, as we see in the 1819 letter, Keats most likely perceived them as so.

after a dash and asserts that “such things” as speaking, kneeling, touching, and kissing “have been,” possibly between Madeline and Porphyro rather than in some ancient romance. If so (and it is a very real possibility for such an already indecorous poem), Madeline is no longer “innocent” in the sense of unexperienced.

Stillinger and Levinson claim that “Madeline is self-seduced” and “ravished by her own voluptuous, voluntary, and in short masturbatory dreaming.”³⁵ Against this view of masturbation as restricted to sexual gratification, I side with Rachel Schulkins in *Keats, Modesty, and Masturbation* (2014). Her “conceptual understanding of masturbation... is rooted within the socio-cultural conception of the term in the medical and social circles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which perceived the act as an indulgence in *dreams and imagination*.”³⁶ Not limited to “physical gratification,” Schulkins’s “figurative concept of masturbation... demonstrate[s] that Keats’s female figures turn on themselves in a nexus of isolation and desire for the unattainable due to cultural conditions that demanded the suppression of desire.” In other words, Madeline prepares for something clearly erotic and masturbatory, but not defined by negation: there is not a problem of “not having” Porphyro since, one can assume, she would not expect them to get married anytime soon. Porphyro “melts” into Madeline’s already masturbatory dream of Porphyro. Viewed one way, she instrumentalizes an idea of him, and renders it as a tool for her use. I am not absolving Porphyro of his actions nor suggesting that Madeline was “in” on it. Instead, I am trying to suggest that “The Eve of St. Agnes” does not entirely efface Madeline as a subject with agency and erotic longing;

35. (Levinson 1988) 111.

36. Emphasis added, (Schulkins 2014) 4.

it does not reduce her to unmitigated victimhood, compelling us to re-inscribe the woman-as-passive subject position we seek to contest. Porphyro ab/uses her, but she is nonetheless an enactive subject with desire as well as dream.

I have attempted to present “Fancy” as a creator of a lived-in world where we must rely on a faith in others. Fancy creates a world of vulnerability to the other.³⁷ Madeline’s form of Romantic dreaming—a form of Sight through Fancy, and a form of thought from the heart—points to a capacity to re-vision the world, not an inability to see it. With Wollstonecraft, I have called such perceptual processes “fictioning” and described it as “poeisis” with Barbauld; appropriately, with Keats it is dreaming. It is all very real, and yet, also, not.

While Madeline’s engagements with Fancy augment perception, Porphyro’s can only attenuate it. Thus, as a Romantic subject, Madeline is “solipsistic” in her pleasure, but only to create “a solipistic world of love and sex for the sake of a private pleasure that repudiates the social element[s]” restricting her desire.³⁸ In Keats’s frame, hers is the pleasure of the imagination. She does not only live in the world that she sees but also in the one that she dreams—and we are presented with a case where damaging one damages the other. She is, in short, a masturbating, but vulnerable feminine figure who sees “In

37. I am not downplaying Experience, however, even if it does end up being Fancy’s antipode; privileging the experience of the disenfranchised is, according to Joan W. Scott, the “kind of communication [that] has long been the mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past” ((Scott 1991), “The Evidence of Experience” 776). And, as I have tried to suggest in the previous section, the politics of experience impose their own social element as well (insofar as they manifest what bell hooks has termed “yearning,” a desire to critically speak out and to be heard). I will return to this in the chapter’s final section.

38. (Schulkins 2014) 93. We see a similar kind of agency in *Lamia*.

fancy;” why, then, has she not be seen as an avatar for the poet? Who can be a better mirror for Keats’s poetics than she?

III

Porphyro’s Materialist Aesthetics: Polysemy and Proliferated Meaning

“[Being] sympathetic both to feminism and to postmodernism... [can mean navigating] between the Scylla of univocal readings and the Charybdis of infinitely proliferating indeterminacy”

-Lynn Higgins, “Screen/Memory: Rape and Its Alibis in *Last Year at Marienbad*”

In the previous section, I argued that Madeline is a better candidate for Keats’s “persona” in “The Eve of St. Agnes” than Porphyro. Critics, however, often presuppose the Keats-Porphyro conjunction for a host of (arguably overdetermined) reasons. In particular, many resort to biography and others to the common perception of Keats as a defender of the eroticized flesh.³⁹ This flies in the face of the Keats who wrote “To Fancy,” however (though it does align with other poems in Keats’s varied poetic output). To use examples from “The Eve of St. Agnes,” critics seem wedded to the idea of Madeline as an ascetic, as a symbol of virginity, and a paragon of purity in part because of the actions she performs throughout the poem. She sequesters herself from the rest of

39. There are, to be fair, many important contributions to Keats criticism where this is not the case. However, the general critical disposition leans towards Porphyro as *the* poet figure instead of *a* poet figure. In the body of work that does align Keats with Madeline, the critical turn often involves showing how Keats “masculinizes” her position or subverts it in some way.

the revellers in the chapel, then she leaves them behind to go upstairs, and falls asleep alone. But critics downplay the fact that Porphyro does the same, that he sequesters himself too, that he leaves the chapel as well, and that he also ascends the stairs away from the revellers to “melt” into Madeline’s dream. Madeline makes use of the material world even when she sees in/fancy, and here I will argue that Porphyro is enthralled by only that which he can directly perceive and follow. To simplify this already too-simplistic dichotomy further: Madeline and Porphyro aren’t romantics, they’re Romanticisms.

What “Romanticism” may mean is, of course, a long and hotly contested debate. In Isaiah Berlin’s words, “the literature on Romanticism is larger than Romanticism itself, and the literature defining what it is that the literature on Romanticism is concerned with is quite large in its turn.”⁴⁰ But if one had to isolate the key feature of literary Romanticism (in the period from roughly 1760 to 1850), it might be its diverse notions of the individual.⁴¹ Romanticism has long been conceived as a period that renewed the individual subject’s relationship to nature, the arts, and to other subjectivities. To some, Romanticism signifies a mode of solipsistic idealism, a retreat from an objective realm into subjective experience. Carl Schmitt pursues such a line of critique in *Political Romanticism* (1919, 1926). There, Schmitt characterizes the romantic subject as a distinct kind of person who “aestheticizes” the world, reducing its value to his subjective experience. He would call whatever brings him pleasure, the good, true, and/or beautiful.

40. (Berlin 2013) 1.

41. Romanticism is also often seen as “an [a]esthetic, not a political question... [and] ‘Romanticism in politics’ is variously taken to mean the excessive individualism that leads to anarchy and the excessive authority that leads to tyranny” (Brazen xiv).

Another example of such a “romantic” subject would be the seducer in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, who “was the quintessence of all feelings and moods” and for whom “no thought was too sublime, none too desperate.”⁴² As I suggested above, Porphyro typifies this kind of romantic subject.

Even the “actual” event of intercourse evidences his romantic self-absorption. In the scene, Porphyro “into her dream... melt’d.” For Levinson,

The verb [melt] is... so perfect... that we overlook the designated object into which Porphyro dissolves: not Madeline, but Madeline’s dream. What is the content of that dream, we should ask, but a finer-tone version of Porphyro. ‘Into her dream he melted’ then, is tantamount to saying ‘into his own dreamed self—his dissociated, fetishized image—he melted’⁴³

I concur that Porphyro’s plan leaves him self-dissociated and self-fetishizing to some degree. The Porphyro that Madeline consents to is a *dreamed husband* from a *dreamed life*. The “actual” Porphyro would know, in that case, that the Porphyro Madeline wants to be with would not be executing the scheme that he himself executes over the course of the night. Further, his actions betray his perception of Madeline’s desires. Porphyro is a “fetishist” insofar as he cannot preserve desire without a physical object: he assumes that she “wants him;” we could say, however, that she wants *to be* with him. Unfortunately,

42. (Kierkegaard 1987) 310. For Kierkegaard, moral agents evolve from aesthetic orientations to the world into ethical ones and finally to the religious. Carrying this over to “The Eve of St. Agnes,” I would suggest that Porphyro never leaves the aesthetic, but remains driven by his own design for his own pleasures. Porphyro and the Seducer share much more in common—and they both resemble the “industrious” Lovelace from *Clarissa* as well.

43. (Levinson 1988) 107.

Porphyro's ultimate reward in marrying her also signals the loss of that crucial cupola, of her as a juridically distinct person: the disappearance of her individual legal rights and protections under *couverture*. Subsumed under Porphyro, Madeline legally exists only as a trace.

As with the "melting," such subtleties of language typify Porphyro. He exhibits a command of language's persuasive power and, like a poet himself, constantly employs literary figures and devices in his dialogue. For instance, he metaphorizes his relationship with Madeline when he first commands that she wake after setting the table: "Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite" (l. 277). In other words, she is a place or a state, and he the person questing to reach it. Porphyro's metaphor elucidates the structure of their relationship as he sees it. He is an agent of action and devotion, and she is the goal. In Porphyro's view, Madeline is an "ends" only insofar as she is the means to his own self-pleasure. The critical history of reading Madeline as "passive" springs, then, from *Porphyro's* perception of the events of the night.

Porphyro is almost a paragon of polysemy. The earlier scene where he "implore[s] / All saints" to aid him in his design is open to multiple interpretations as well. When he asks "That he might gaze and worship unseen," he not only wishes to be unseen by Madeline as he gazes, but he also wants his gaze and his worship unseen. This is partly self-interested, since their families are on no good terms. And so knowing that traditional courtship protocols are lost to him, he enacts this plan to forcibly marry Madeline by wielding decorum as a weapon against her and her family. One can only guess how long before St. Agnes's eve he had thought of this plan. This early chapel

scene, where we see Porphyro's entrance, has him issuing a command to the same saints that Madeline supplicated a mere three stanzas earlier. He looks up to control the sacred; she looks down (as noted above) to get a feel of the worldly. Their gazes help define their character. Saintry Madeline both yearns for and dreads the kinds of love St. Agnes is associated with; worldly Porphyro seeks to compel the divine to proffer him a Ring of Gyges.

A clearer example of Porphyro's polysemy comes two stanzas after the "melting":

"My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!
 "Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
 "Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?
 "Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
 "After so many hours of toil and quest,
 "A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.
 "Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
 "Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
 "To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel." (ll.334-342)

Over the course of this stanza, Porphyro calls himself a vassal, a shield, a pilgrim, a predator/hunter who stumbles upon a nest, and an infidel; Madeline transforms from a dreamer, to a bride, to being in the background as he talks about her "beauty," and finally to a bird. And the actual violation becomes, after "so many hours of toil and quest," a "miracle." Although essentially blasphemous the entire poem, Porphyro begins now to invoke religious imagery and concepts when he needs to persuade Madeline to think kindly on the deed and to run away with him. Like the aestheticizing, (de)political romantic, he measures her value in relation to himself: though he may call her his object of worship, she remains an object nonetheless. Coming upon her "nest," he "will not rob" it, "Saving of [her] sweet self." Indeed, Porphyro admits to stealing something from Madeline: her sweet *self*. He has not necessarily robbed her of autonomy since a girl/

woman in her position would have relatively little in the first place. But in robbing her of her consent and turning the deception into a labor of love, he has robbed her “nest”—recalling her apprehensive “brooding” earlier—of (to use her words) “A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing.” In short, Porphyro resignifies his actions, her dreams, and what marriage means. In a few stanzas before this one, for example, Porphyro informs her of what has just happened: “This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!” In a performative utterance of sorts, she becomes his bride (in his thinking) the instant he tells her that this was no dream. Hence she becomes *his* Madeline, for his “love” of her was a selfish and self-fetishizing one. Indeed, “his” Madeline—or rather, his idea of her—is a “sweet dreamer” and a bride and not much else.

Porphyro fashions another’s personhood into an object whose worth is subjective. In one sense, he is akin to the figure of the artist. It is not so much that Porphyro “is” an artist, but rather that, like an artist or a critic, he makes use of interpretive ambiguities to posit a kind of truth-bearing or prescriptive proposition. Porphyro endeavors to assert his truth over and above others, including ethical objections to his plot. Not unlike Richardson’s Lovelace, Porphyro completes his design only through *plots*, rhetorical prowess, and deceiving fiction, materially and affectively hurting someone by way of “arts,” the same term used to describe the drugs used to incapacitate Clarissa before the assault. In “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” Frances Ferguson aligns the figures of the rapist and the aesthete or artist through Lovelace who, Ferguson argues, “has appeared in the role of the artist... committed to a proliferation of meanings.”⁴⁴ Ferguson’s invocation of a “deconstructive account” of Lovelace is helpful in understanding Porphyro as well.

44. (Ferguson 1987) 101.

For in his insistence on interpretive ambiguity and his commitment to the performative power of rhetoric—to how language works and alters the “material” world—Porphyro functions as an avatar of sorts for a deconstructive romanticism.

The deconstructive element of his character not only contrasts with Madeline’s but sheds more light on the act of rape at the heart of the poem. Sexual assault cases wind up multiplying meanings and intentions, specifically with the issue of consent. Levinson, like Ferguson, connects such cognitive and linguistic issues to form. Given that the “poem invites us to focus [on] the breach between motivation and action,” we see that “this breach... is featured as a formal problem.”⁴⁵ But while “the breach between motivation and action” is a question of intent, consent carries its own “formal problem[s].” Consent’s formalism is, in this case, the formalism of rape, Ferguson’s chief concern. In rape trials, she argues, one assumes that “the forms of actions... carry mental states like intention and consent within them,” so that “as far as crimes go... [rape] is remarkable for focusing attention on mental states and their apprehension.” Take, for instance, the attempt to “domesticate” a rape, to make it a non-issue through marriage. In *Clarissa*, the “force of [Clarissa’s] negative,” in Ferguson’s analysis:

is not merely to oppose Lovelace but to see his effort at converting her nonconsent into consent not as making her a woman but as returning her to girlhood, to the legal infancy that means that she could not consent even if she wanted.⁴⁶

So too in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” where Porphyro’s “admission” that all was not a dream

45. (Levinson 1988) 114.

46. (Ferguson 1987) 106.

effectively renders the issue of consent a moot point for Madeline, now awake in an altered reality. Now that they have “carnal knowledge” (another link between cognition and procreation/sex) of each other, they are effectively married. Porphyro decides for Madeline their future together not when he speciously “offers” himself in the morning “if she’d have him.” Porphyro decided much of her near-term future once he began to execute his design since its “success” would trigger the same formalist account of rape that Ferguson discusses: an account that fails to distinguish between what Porphyro did and what husbands and wives—it would hideously appear—are “supposed” to do. If Porphyro was found guilty of rape, then he would be expected to marry Madeline and, in so doing, would pardon himself of the crime. If he was not found guilty of rape then there is no issue, hence “domesticating the rape,” to use Ferguson’s words. The logic states that if “his marrying her will redeem her reputation, her marrying him will redeem him from the crime that she charges him with (if only outside the legal system).”⁴⁷ The congruence of seduction and abduction, in fact, was present in rape law from the medieval period onwards. “During the medieval period,” Gregory Durston notes, “rape was often seen as being primarily a crime against (another man’s) property.”⁴⁸ The “primary objective [of older British rape law] was the punishment, not of rapists but of those convicted of abduction—an offence which included marrying a minor without her parent’s consent.”⁴⁹ In the case of Porphyro, he might have been castrated, killed, and/or had his eyes gouged out not for “rape” but for putting Madeline in a position where she must marry him

47. (Ferguson 1987) 102.

48. (Durston 2005) 169.

49. (Simpson 1988) 183.

without her parent's prior consent. The law did not protect her so much as it protected her father's interests. Rape did not become a "sexual" crime (as opposed to theft or "seduction") until the eighteenth century, where it became clear that "it was the woman's innocence that was at issue."⁵⁰ "The Eve of St. Agnes" applies an eighteenth century conception of the social dimensions of rape and the Romantic period's conception of "innocence" onto a scene set in a "romantic" past. Rape bridges "romance" and "romanticism."

This was the case too in other late eighteenth century and Romantic era texts. The "threat of rape," Caroline Jackson-Houlston notes, "is itself the key narrative trope of romance, a genre prominent in Romantic verse and prose, but this threat is usually dissipated or displaced, at least with regard to the heroine."⁵¹ Writers in the period, Jackson-Houlston continues,

excise or obfuscate the act, creating a gap where absence speaks more than presence.... If they focus on the consequences for the victim, this reinscribes the initial sexist assumptions. As a supposedly experiencing subject, she is reduced to a mere object lesson, her consciousness bounded by the recognition and acceptance of the shame of her situation, even though this is ultimately based on the loss of her commodity value as a medium of property exchange rather than on moral fault. This shame can only be expunged by the victim's death as scapegoat, or partially assuaged by her transfer to the possession of her aggressor.... What does not happen

50. (Durstun 2005) 169.

51. (Jackson-Houlston 2010) 157.

is that the woman continues as an experiencing, self-assertive subject.⁵²

Keats enacts a similar excision and obfuscation in "St. Agnes." Madeline appears, after the dream, "bounded by the recognition and acceptance of the shame of her situation," making her elopement with Porphyro almost compulsory by the generic conventions of the period (and long before, and long after). I am less convinced, however, that her despondency is the result of her recognizing "the loss of her commodity value." After Porphyro reveals that "This is no dream," Madeline does not weep over her lost "value" but chastises Porphyro: "'Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?'" (ll. 330). In the subsequent line, she checks this: "I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine, / "Though thou forsakest a deceived thing" (ll. 331-2). There is no more speech after Porphyro's suggestion of elopement, leaving inaccessible whether the "shame" Madeline feels is assuaged or not. That silence makes impossible the representation of her as "an experiencing, self-assertive subject" after the rape.

We could say that by attempting, like Lovelace, to retroactively "domesticate" the rape, Porphyro's deeds leave his fate in Madeline's hands. This proves true, however, only in theory. Even by today's standards, "there was probably massive under-reporting of the crime" in the early 1800s.⁵³ And despite being "universally acknowledged in both elite and popular debate to be the 'greatest offense next to murder,'" it was almost never prosecuted when both the perpetrator and the victim were among the upper classes.⁵⁴ In earlier periods, the issue of non/consent disappears once married. Keats alters this status

52. (Jackson-Houlston 2010) 157.

53. According to Gregory Durston, "the Surrey Assizes averaged only one prosecution a year between 1660 and 1800, and those for Sussex only one every four years" (167, 168).

54. (Durston 2005) 168.

quo when he has Madeline and Porphyro still run across the “southern moors” once effectively “married.” The question of consent remains a live one since absconding would signal that he has *not* entirely “domesticated” the rape. As they sneak out of the castle, we see that Madeline’s kin are “nightmar’d” with “shade and form / Of witch, and demon, and large coffin worm.” They are indeed “nightmar’d” by form; to be more precise, they are nightmar’d by a formalist account of rape which counts sexual violence as sexual activity and sexual activity as a sign of marriage. This account of rape circumscribes whatever options her relatives may have had to seek justice or redress.

We know that between “the 1770s and the 1820s at least... definitions [of rape] generally became tougher, and therefore more favourable to the defence, and the fact of carnal knowledge harder to prove in court.”⁵⁵ Unfortunately, rape as an event tends to recede into the background as “the circumstances surrounding the rape displace the act as the subject of the account.”⁵⁶ What the event is and what it signifies begins to multiply now that we can have competing narrative “truths” and, in theory, no universal arbiter to decide among the two accounts.⁵⁷

This state of affairs is typical in the patriarchal dismissal of women’s pain.

55. (Simpson 1988) 182.

56. (Higgins and Silver 1991).

57. In point of fact, one could argue that “theory” has long been the last line of defense or the first line of attack against any such arbiter’s existence, replacing it with the shifting stands of absolute ethical relativism: what is good can only be proven as good for me. In this way, a tradition of contemporary critical theory has become the Schmittian romantic subject of our time, arguing (whether “critically” or asseverating its benefits) that all morals are subjective and all subjectivism is moral in some context.

Examples of this prove too numerous to count.⁵⁸ Again, Porphyro embodies this in his deconstructive gestures insofar as rape cases downplay the importance of actual (f)acts in its search for mental states that can define the meaning of those (f)acts in retrospect. In Lynn Higgins's formulation, for example, "the seductively multiple narratives and interpretive strategies of postmodernism become yet another formal way of mystifying rape, by transforming it into another story."⁵⁹ Porphyro's deconstructive Romanticism, then, covets and seeks to own Madeline's more humanist one because it provides a different narrative; multiple narratives result, for Porphyro, in a discursive alibi. He seeks to dominate her by accommodating her, leading her "dream" into the material realm, the world of history and contingency. In Porphyro's mind, he is the object of her desire and, as such, that desire must be given materiality in his very basic sense. He fails to understand that the "fictions" of faith or the law can be, for Madeline and many others, just as real as his flesh, in part because violating them (by violating her) adds more hurt to her situation in the moment and long afterwards; it adds insult to injury. Like Carol Danvers, she goes off, married to her violator, to live eternally in "limbo." What was a patently malicious act became a debate about forms of action and perception.

IV

Ethics, Consent, and the Politics of the Vulnerable Body

58. We can look at the literal dismissal of such pain in contemporary western medical practice, where women are more likely to receive sedatives instead of painkillers for acute injuries. More immediately germane to my topic here, there is also the benefit of a doubt afforded men in debating the merits of abuse accusations.

59. (Higgins and Silver 1991) 7.

“The we of humanity is the we of vulnerability.”

-Debra Bergoffen

In this final section, I briefly examine the nexus of consent/consensus in order to work through the state of vulnerable subjects in the present. “The Eve of St. Agnes,” especially the character of Madeline, helps further bolster the case for a “Politics of the Vulnerable Body.” As conceived by Debra Bergoffen, such a politics “identifies the feminist hope of the rule of consent” and “recalls us to our obligations to respect and respond to each other’s vulnerability.”⁶⁰ Bergoffen articulates this politics with an analysis of the February 22, 2001 Hague trial convicting three Bosnian Serb soldiers of “crimes against humanity” for raping Muslim women and girls.⁶¹ The judgment “identified... rape... [as] a crime against humanity, whether or not there was evidence of violence or physical pain and injury. It decoupled the idea of forced entry from the idea of painful entry.”⁶² A similar decoupling of violence from physical over-powering occurs in readings of “St. Agnes” as a tale of some form of rape. In those readings, Keats’s poem becomes one where “consent” is pivotal not only in defining actions, but in the ideas of personhood that comes attendant with consent theory. Unfortunately, and as Bergoffen notes, “[g]iven our current historical location, we cannot... abandon consent theory.”⁶³ Such an admission leads to the chief question of this concluding section: if rape has proffered us a “politics of the vulnerable body” in part through a juridical concern with

60. (Bergoffen 2003) 127.

61. (Bergoffen 2003) 116.

62. (Bergoffen 2003) 117.

63. (Bergoffen 2003)127.

(individualistic) consent, then what would such a politics entail if grounded in *consensus* and community? In other words, are we to only rely on a liberal selfhood, or can we situate rights in something neither oppressively objective nor relativistically subjective? I have argued that aesthetics are often tasked with mediating such binaries. Perhaps, then, I am asking about the relationship between aestheticization and consensus (or, more simply, the aesthetics of consensus).

I have suggested above that throughout the history of critical thought on rape in the West, the issue often becomes a question of mental states and narratives in general (at the expense of bodies) and the complications of consent in particular. The limitations of consent theory are manifold. Robin West has suggested that women “who engaged in unpleasurable, undesired, but consensual sex may sustain real injuries to their sense of selfhood, in at least four distinct ways,” namely, injuries to their capacities for self-assertion, to their sense of self-possession, their sense of autonomy, “their sense of integrity.”⁶⁴ Sexual assault becomes viewed as not only a particular form of battery, but as “an *interiorized* violation of body and mind.”⁶⁵

So far, the “aesthetic” dimensions of rape in this chapter have referred to Porphyro’s “aestheticizing” gaze and his rhetorical power to proliferate meanings and alternatives to the rape at the poem’s center. But if we expand “consent” to consider “consensus,” we may have another way of linking aesthetics and vulnerability in Keats’s text. A pivotal term in both Taste (that about which there is no dispute) and politics (where it reflects the public use of critical reason by private citizens), “consensus”

64. (West 2002) 318.

65. Emphasis added, Spillers 387.

conjoins the political dimensions of aesthetics and the aesthetic dimensions of politics. In the former, canons and standards of taste inform (and enforce) an “aesthetic” consensus; in the latter, political consensus requires (among many things like relatively accessible and easily circulating media) a virtuality akin to what we see in Kant’s third *Critique*. In the case of sexual assault, the dyadic concept of consent-consensus coincides with the limitations of rape law in determining what is right and who has the rights to determine what is right.

I believe we can augment Bergoffen’s call for a politics of the vulnerable body by turning to Keats and the Romantic era. This turn does not let the period off the hook in terms of its sexual politics (or, in fact, any of its politics); but it does allow us to recover elements of the period’s political thought. Certainly “St. Agnes” benefits from such a renewed perspective, where Porphyro’s act resembles a crime against humanity instead of the culmination of a psychic journey towards identity and fulfillment.

Twentieth century critics like Earl Wasserman championed the latter reading of Porphyro in part because of the poem’s generic classifications. While the poem is as much an orientalist tale as, perhaps, *The Giaour*, it has long been seen instead as a gothic romance. This genre was more associated with female readers at the time, despite Keats’s stated intentions that he wrote it “for men.” The strange case of “St. Agnes” perhaps underscores the closeness between genre and gender (which, in the French, are the same word). The poem’s genre trouble points to or reflects Keats’s own gender trouble.

Such trouble is well-known. Keats’s biggest contemporary detractors on these grounds were John Gibson Lockhart in *Blackwood’s Magazine* and Lord Byron.

Lockhart, for example, classified Keats (and Leigh Hunt) as “a species of emasculated pruriency” and his work as “the product of some imaginative Eunuch’s muse within the melancholy inspiration of the Haram.” Byron, for his part, was even more vociferous in his insults, describing Keats’s poetry as “a sort of mental masturbation” and “the driveling idiotism of the Mankin.” The sexual language of Byron’s comments and *Blackwood’s* reviews, according to Levinson, is “a telling index to the social and existential project outlined by Keats’s style.”⁶⁶ To focus on the sexual politics in particular, the “indeterminacy of Keats’s gender... should be taken as responses to [his] mode of literary production or to the androgyny thereby implied.”⁶⁷

By the time of “The Eve of St. Agnes,” Keats was already associated with non-masculine poetry. The insistence to Woodhouse “that he writes for men” expresses, in part, his annoyance with the persistence of this association. We can contrast Keats’s actual decision to write in a genre more associated with female readers with what we see in *Avengers* #200: a rape in a genre supported primarily by male readers. With both, we have an object considered lowbrow and tasteless. Because of the lowbrow status, readers overlook it, assuming they know what it is and that they perceive it too well. But, that same lowbrow status might get us further along on the questions I have laid out here, the gender questions (of consent and vulnerability) and the aesthetic questions (of consensus and perception). Such “tasteless” objects afford a democratic opportunity, a chance to build a consensus to change what we take as a given. I do not mean to unquestioningly support the “politics” of either text, but instead to treat both as an occasion where one

66. (Levinson 1988) 4.

67. (Levinson 1988) 40n.

disputes the given, or seeks a new consensus through the act of *dissensus*.

To insist on saying what you need means little if you are unheard. Dissensus can only stem from a commitment to listen to the vulnerable other who notices something another subject may not (or cannot). Such identity-rooted noticing stages a moment when something that veils our eyes in fact reveals that we *always* perceive through veils of our own experience. And that fact opens the text—and *any* text—to a more “identitarian” politics; and in response to critics of that charge, I will make clear here that I have attempted in this chapter to defend a politics of intersubjective experience, so often derisively called “identity politics.”⁶⁸

I am, in effect, arguing (partially with the figure of Madeline in mind) that a move to an “I” is a communal move—or at least can and ought to be. “I” opens us to companionship with others.⁶⁹ An “I” seeing in fancy is a subject open to the gaze of others.⁷⁰ Even to one such as Porphyro—the man of supposed action whose power enables the poem’s central deceit and whose “privilege” it is to marry his victim and so un-victimize her in the eyes of the state—contrives to establish what is real for Madeline. Their relationship demonstrates the inherent tie between vulnerability and violence. I raise the issue of identity in “St. Agnes” in part to shed light on the “aesthetics” at play both here and in the Ms. Marvel affair. For when “aesthetics” refer only to “the arts,” its

68. Consider too the work of Miranda Fricker and others on “epistemic injustice.” This is a state of injustice due to the unevenness of knowledge. “The Eve of St. Agnes” might be a case of testimonial injustice (not paying any attention to Madeline’s understanding/perspective). For more see Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007).

69. See “Pretext” for more on Kant’s subjective universal.

70. In this case, perhaps the third person can be cast as the individualistic one, since it pretends to objectivity.

voice will be that of the authors, critics, and creators trained to divulge its secrets. But when it refers to the perception of meaningfulness and the ethics of perception, its voice becomes open to all.⁷¹ The object of aesthetics, perhaps, is to “reveal,” which requires that one asks strangers to “notice” something they do not currently see, feel, or know.

71. Jacques Rancière has long maintained a similar argument. However, he works with the “political” instead of the “ethical,” which he dismisses in favor of the “properly political” (*proprement politique*).

Part II

SUBTEXT: THE IN/VULNERABLE BLACK BODY

CHAPTER FOUR

FEELING

“I feel, therefore I am free.”

-Audre Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury”

I

Introduction

In 2016, the University of Virginia conducted a study on pain treatment procedures and assumptions held by medical school students, with a notable focus on race.¹ They learned that healthcare providers typically over-prescribed pain medication for white patients while under-prescribing for Black ones. Along with highlighting medical students’ assumptions—like Black skin being “thicker” than others—the study shows “that black patients are undertreated for pain not only relative to white patients, but relative to World Health Organization guidelines.”² Many people even “feel more empathy when they see white skin pierced than black,” and because “they are believed to be less sensitive to pain, black people are forced to endure more pain.”³ Outside of medical settings, this inequity takes shape in different ways. From the suspicion directed at a young Florida boy in a hoodie to the “Hulk Hogan” that Darren Wilson claimed to be

1. Hoffman, Kelly M. et al, “Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs About Biological Differences Between Blacks and Whites,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016).

2. (Hoffman et al. 2016) 1.

3. Qtd. in (Sharpe 2016) 10.

holding onto, the nonwhite body is frequently rendered as unfeeling in order to justify the disciplining to which it is daily subjected. The 2016 experiment and the torrent of Black death in America makes more visible the still-felt ramifications of two intertwined histories: that of whiteness and its fragility on the one hand and the perception of the Black body as resistant to pain on the other.

This chapter concerns the interplay between racialization and feeling. “Feeling” refers to both the emotive capacities of persons as well as the more material acts of sensing, perceiving, and experiencing pain. I explore the binds that tie racism to this multifaceted sense of feeling by working from the histories of these two intertwined meanings of the term. I begin by uncovering some of the potential interpretive roles of race in what Thomas Pfau has described as “romantic moods.” Pfau designates trauma, melancholy, and paranoia as the dominant affective structures of the period’s psychological climate. Race has generally been overlooked or under-explored in work on Romantic affect despite being a key factor in the re/production of these moods and of Romanticism itself. With this general sense of racialized Romantic feeling in better detail, I provide *précis* of the two interlinked concepts of white fragility and Black in/vulnerability, with a focus on how they operate within the Romantic period and the present moment. Robin DiAngelo has defined white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.”⁴ These moves often manifest as weaponized emotions, including “anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-

4. (DiAngelo 2018) 2.

inducing situation.”⁵ DiAngelo’s framing of this concept enables a contrast between these reactive behaviors (which, I will argue, characterize some of the “moods” of Romanticism) and the history of perceiving the Black body as immune or resistant to pain. The final two sections each focus on one pairing of race and feeling in the Romantic period—gender and sensibility followed by failure and enslavement—as avenues through which we might expand the traditional boundaries of Romantic subjectivity.

While not an exhaustive accounting, this chapter attempts to lay the groundwork for future thought on the atmospheric elements of race and Romanticism as they pertain to feeling, broadly construed. I aim to perform here a practice of attending to the emotive facets of race and racism in the period.⁶ I treat the racialized figures of the era as more than a so-called “black box,” an entity that only provides clues for what it meant to be oppressed and nonwhite, either then or now. That would suggest that the functions of interior, psychological experience are unimportant because of the material facts of subjugation. Instead I am inspired by Alexis Shotwell’s argument in *Knowing Otherwise*

5. (DiAngelo 2018) 2.

6. I deliberately choose not to use the word “Affect” for a host of reasons, including the desire to avoid the “slippery ground of [defining] the term itself” (Favret, “The Study of Affect and Romanticism” p. 1159). I prefer “emotion” and “emotive” only because they better describe the specific kinds of affective phenomena I discuss here, not least of all the culturally defined values attached to emotions and “being emotional.” In Brian Masumi’s formulation, emotion is affect that has been “owned and recognized.” While treated there as an attenuation of affect’s power (and potential critical and philosophical usefulness), this possession and recognition are crucial because they situate our thinking-feeling-judging selves in what Hannah Arendt would describe as the realm of appearances, where we are subject to the gaze and the cognitive acts of others. Like Ruth Leys, I believe that “many of the new affect theorists make a distinction between affect and emotion... [but] the distinction cannot be sustained” (Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”). As a consequence, the word “affect” is coterminous with “emotion” for my purposes here.

(2011) that “the implicit is significant even—perhaps especially—when it remains implicit.”⁷ The materials I discuss here are drawn from the entwined histories of African chattel slavery and the continued rise of modern empire in the long eighteenth century. Bringing these materials into conversation with recent scholarly work on race and its emotional dimensions—specifically Sharon Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2013) and Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016)—illustrates that while the “means and modes of [racialized] subjection may have changed... the fact and structure of that subjection” remains.⁸ Pfau proposes that “mood” makes certain discursive structures available to a particular milieu while precluding others. Seeing Blackness—and racialization more generally—as a mood, or what Sharpe calls “Weather,” “registers and produces the conventions of anti-blackness in the present and into the future.”⁹ I would postulate that the Black body “registers” anti-black sentiment as a matter of feeling. Such sentiment is ultimately felt by individual subjects. One must always remember, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”¹⁰ White fragility and Black in/vulnerability brings attention to the political unit that is the feeling body; or, following Simon Gikandi, they point to “the heart of a problem that will constantly haunt modernity—namely, the role of the body in the construction of identity.”¹¹

7. (Shotwell 2011) xviii.

8. (Sharpe 2016) 12.

9. (Sharpe 2016) 20.

10. (Coates 2015) 10.

11. (Gikandi 2011) 67.

II

The Mood of Romantic Racism

I have briefly touched upon white feelings of discomfort and Black feelings of pain; the former operates in an affective register and the latter is assumed to operate in a physiological one. Both are political, and bringing them together enables us to talk about “feeling” in multiple senses of the word.

Thomas Pfau’s *Romantic Moods* (2005) provides one way to think about these issues in a broader Romantic context, even though his text does not touch on race. Moods are neither social nor purely individual; rather, they are what Pfau calls “preconceptual emotive strata” that highlight the seeming necessity of literary (or, alternatively, aesthetic) expression. Looking at how history “manifests itself as a fundamental psychological climate, which in turn has been encrypted in a distinctive *structure of discourse*,” Pfau “maps a psychohistorical narrative of European romanticism” with the particular aim to historicize and “trace the evolution of romantic interiority.”¹²

My main goal here is to build on this work and on Pfau’s already substantive study by placing both in dialogue with scholarship on the relationship between “mood”

12. (Pfau 2005) 6, 1. Others have engaged in related research, both before Pfau and since. Proposed in 1954 and further theorized in 1961, Raymond Williams’s idea of “structures of feeling” operates in a similar fashion. Since “the arts of [any given] period” rely upon “characteristic approaches and tones in argument,” it is vital to look at aesthetic objects to see what they reveal about such structures” (Williams 68-69). And one can look to books and other work by Julie Ellison, Joel Faflak and Richard Sha, Mary Favret, Brian Masumi, Adela Pinch, Rei Terada and others for alternative ways of working with similar questions within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

and race, exemplified in recent years by Sharon Patricia Holland and others.¹³ In *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012), Holland suggests that racism “can also be described as the emotional lifeblood of race,” or “the ‘feeling’ that articulates and keeps the flawed logic of race in its place.”¹⁴ That is, “*everyday* racism defines race, interprets it, and decrees what the personal and institutional work of race will be.”¹⁵ As a consequence, our mundane, “desiring” selves are integral to racist interactions, placing the erotic “at the threshold of ideas about quotidian racist practice.”¹⁶ We can extend Holland’s focus on desire or the erotic to a larger set of quotidian practices. I will refer to these practices as *emotive*, not only to bring them closer to “mood,” but also to emphasize the importance of their expression in art, literature, and daily being.

This function of “feeling” offers us one way of bringing up race (and its emotional lifeblood, racism) in scholarship on the Romantic period, including Pfau’s project in *Romantic Moods*. In Mary Favret’s explication of that project, “for Pfau romantic literature does not simply grasp history-as-present, as James Chandler has shown in *England in 1819*; rather, romantic literature records the feeling (mostly anxious) of being historical.”¹⁷ The subjective feeling of historicity is a well-discussed topic in multiple corners of critical race theory. Notably, Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) “illuminate[s] the terror of the mundane and the quotidian.”¹⁸ Pain, Hartman

13. There is also extensive work done on race and mood, the latter defined in a more clinical and/or psychiatric sense and particularly in reference to depression. This is important work, but falls outside the ambit of this chapter.

14. (Holland 2012) 6.

15. (Holland 2012) 3.

16. (Holland 2012) 12.

17. (Favret 2009) 1163.

18. (Hartman 1997) 13.

contends, “must be recognized in its historicity and as the articulation of a social condition of brutal constraint.”¹⁹ Pfau ultimately makes a similar point, claiming that “history... manifests itself, not only affectively but also cognitively, as a complex aggregation of effects that both circumscribe and constrict the subject.”²⁰

Romantic historicism closely resembles the conflation of one’s “‘self self’” and “‘historical self,’” a formulation I draw from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014).²¹ In the poem, the speaker recalls a conversation about the “battle between” these two kinds of selves. This initiates a scenario where one’s body makes visible a history (and a historicity) that was already there; it is an example of how the past can disrupt our groundedness in the present. Black Americans are encumbered by the history of racial violence and come to represent an antiquated way of being; since the present is now “post-race” (it isn’t) and people “don’t see color” (they do), Blackness comes to be associated with historical pain, and this cultural amnesia and myopia causes present harm.

The historicity of feeling and the feeling of historicity are central components of contemporary racialization. Pfau notes how, for Kant, feeling “attests to the subject’s fundamental disposition to a constructive engagement with the world as a nexus of social and moral relations that needs to be continually fashioned new.”²² This is an example of how *Romantic Moods* records the broader role of feeling in the creation of the social world of modernity. We can carry this further and argue that mood is a fundamental

19. (Hartman 1997) 51.

20. (Pfau 2005) 202.

21. (Rankine 2014) 14.

22. (Pfau 2005) 18.

aspect of Romanticism's role in the history of race. Historicity proves to be a Romantic mood that still sets the terms by which we discuss racial subjection in the present. Specifically, mood plays a large role in the *triumph* of race as an ideological means of perceiving and inhabiting the world from day to day. Following Marlon Ross, we can say that the Romantic era saw the routinization of race, where race became a distinct structure of feeling in addition to a means of subjection and subjectivation.²³

This routinization is apparent in narratives of interracial contact. In discussing a scene from Mungo Park's *Travels into the Interior of Africa*, for example, Simon Gikandi notes that while it "would appear extraordinary that a bride had been exchanged for slaves, or that bodies were bartered for gold dust... what is perhaps more interesting about Park's account is *the quotidian nature of these transactions and the matter-of-fact tone he adopted in describing enslavement* in the political economy of the Sahel."²⁴ Gikandi's observation from this 1799 excerpt indexes what Marlon Ross describes as "a rather extraordinary accommodation that occurs across the romantic period: the operation of race becom[ing] increasingly innocuous, increasingly quotidian, increasingly real and realistic across political parties, social cliques, and morally antagonistic camps."²⁵ This occurs slowly enough over the period that we can see in, for example, "the [succeeding] editions of the *Interesting Narrative*, the familiar face that designates the African fluctuates, re/marking blackness as both a skinnable, and thus valuable, commodity and

23. See "The Race of/in Romanticism: Notes Toward a Critical Race Theory" (2013), pages 26ff. I borrow the word "subjectivation" from Jacques Rancière to describe the processes by which "a people" become individuated subjects. For more, see *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010).

24. (Gikandi 2011) 65.

25. (Ross 2013) 26.

as an unskinnable, real, empirical object that can be spotted by anyone with sight to see.”²⁶

When it comes to black writers themselves (rather than white observers or readers), Ross describes this paradoxical situation as “writing b(l)ack” and “talking b(l)ack”:

This process of writing back originates in the late eighteenth century when African-identified individuals, in the process of acquiring European literacy, begin to speak *as* Negroes about the condition of becoming Negroid. Writing back, for both Africans and those Europeans interested in trying to engage with them, is necessarily learning how to write “black”—that is, how to speak through and in a grammar in which the case is un/intentionally inflected as racialized.²⁷

It is important that these Black romantic-era writers contemplate “the condition of *becoming* Negroid,” not necessarily of always being so; this emphasizes cross-racial contact as the condition of possibility for racial belonging. It also posits anti-blackness as a historical “sentiment integral to white identity.”²⁸

I will complement Ross’s thoughts on writing/talking b(l)ack by paying attention to “feeling b(l)ack,” to modes of using, representing, or subverting the sensuous and/or

26. (Ross 2013) 44-5. Also novel in the Romantic period are evolutions to “the discourse of raciology,” developments that stemmed from, according to Paul Youngquist, “the materiality of its claims.” With this materiality, “Black bodies don’t just *represent* deviation from a norm of truth and beauty, they also *embody* it” (*Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism*, 58).

27. (Ross 2013) 38.

28. (DiAngelo 2018) 90.

emotional dimensions of race. If Ross is correct, then the “extraordinary accommodation” afforded to race as a world-defining concept transforms in certain ways over the Romantic era. I wish, however, to reverse this formulation. That is, instead of viewing the emotive everydayness of race/racism—or what Ross calls “a routinizing racial economy”—as a Romantic-era product or occurrence, we should see the idea of a European “Romanticism” as a product of race, where Romanticism itself is an emotive register of historical conditions like empire and slavery.²⁹ Phrased differently, Romanticism, in its current scholarly configuration, takes certain material facts, like the body and/in the system of racial capital, to set the conditions of possibility for ideological and aesthetic contrast.³⁰ This would explain why certain recurring topics of Romantic discourse (and subsequent scholarly engagements with it) presuppose whiteness and other modes of privilege: interiority, feeling, power, autonomy, freedom.

III

White Fragility and the Racially Fragile

DiAngelo’s concept has been in use since at least 2006, but the 2011 article “White Fragility” popularized the idea.³¹ White fragility is, at its heart, a pedagogic

29. (Ross 2013) 52.

30. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) makes a similar claim on the Romantic period, and I aim here to extend it to white fragility and anti-blackness.

31. See “‘I’m leaving!’: White fragility in racial dialogue.” In B. McMahon & D. Armstrong (Eds.), *Inclusion in Urban Educational Environments: Addressing Issues of Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice* (pp. 213-240). The latter article was cited 605 times via Google Scholar’s metrics. See “White Fragility” from *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* (2011).

principle and a means of evaluating responses to certain interpersonal situations.³²

There is also a growing body of work in Romantic scholarship pointing to the period's complicities in white supremacy. Less has been done to connect it to white fragility in particular, even though such connections are copious. For Romanticism, there are two key aspects of white fragility: the drive to keep whiteness meaningless and the problem of the body.

Whiteness so often exists as a trace, imperceptible and without meaning. But merely the "suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses."³³ This state of affairs explains why "fragility" is such an apt word. Defensive strategies arise because many white people "consider [any] challenge to [their] racial worldviews as a challenge to [their] very identities as good, moral people."³⁴

Paradoxically, while "white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of

32. While the term may be DiAngelo's, other critical race theorists, activists, and historians have proposed similar ideas and explored similar dynamics before. In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (2016), for example, Carol Anderson demonstrates how individual emotions (in this case, rage) serve to maintain racial inequalities, though she uses a different approach from DiAngelo's. Anderson historicizes this political register of emotion, and broadens it beyond interpersonal exchanges as well. Unlike the limited (and often minimal) amount of "racial stress" that triggers white fragility, white rage is triggered *in particular* by "black advancement" (3). It "works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. White fragility, however subtle its deleterious consequences, is usually perceptible, and almost by design: its purpose is to draw attention away from racism, anti-blackness, white supremacy, misogynoir (or misogyny more broadly), and other social structures that dis sever whiteness from victimhood. But akin to how white fragility "holds racism in place," white rage, Anderson suggests, "manages to maintain [for white people] not only the upper hand but also, apparently, the moral high ground." That said, the bibliography in DiAngelo's 2018 book is a terrific resource for further reading, and displays the intellectual tradition to which her book contributes.

33. (DiAngelo 2018) 2.

34. (DiAngelo 2018) 2.

superiority and entitlement” and serves to maintain the racial status quo. Since part of this nexus of power involves the neutral character of whiteness, white fragility “holds racism in place” by keeping whiteness invisible and marking moments of its *visibility* as an upsetting to the natural/ized order.³⁵ One troubling consequence is that the invisibility of whiteness has historically amplified the political invisibility of nonwhite peoples.³⁶

This invisibility marks another aspect of white fragility found within Romantic scholarship—the question of the body and how it is used in identity formation. Feeling is fundamentally rooted in material bodies and thus is political because bodies are political, in part, through feeling and having those feelings recognized:

Many of us see emotions as naturally occurring. But emotions are political in two key ways. First, our emotions are shaped by our biases and beliefs.... Our emotions are also political because they are often externalized; our emotions drive behaviors that impact other people.³⁷

Social interactions exert a tacit, affective pressure, or a force that is to be felt by somebody, some-where, some-time.³⁸ Members of the body politic who are marginalized

35. (DiAngelo 2018) 4.

36. Work has been done to combat these invisibilities, especially in bringing more attention to the “weight of world-historical priority” that relied upon colonialism and slave labor (Scott 35). David Scott has argued that this “priority” in Western academia reveals “the fragility of the [world-capitalist] structure, its fundamental dependence on, and vulnerability to, the action (however coerced) of the [enslaved]” (Scott 35). The admission that modernity was made possible by such coercion can fill some with shame, guilt, anger, or other negative affects. But this fragility among scholars works to keep the marginalized invisible by keeping the whiteness of white supremacy invisible. I invite further examinations of this scholarly fragility in Romantic literary studies in future projects.

37. (DiAngelo 2018) 132.

38. (Shotwell 2011) 20.

because of body-politics can have their grievances diminished and dismissed as mere matters of “identity.” But identity is the offspring of power and power conscripts us to modernity.

Instead of drawing our focus to how power operates on (and how it creates) the margin, white fragility holds our attention on structures of power and identity with regard only to those who are already privileged within the social status quo. But attention to those *with* power often comes at the expense of those without it. The feelings that prop up white supremacy and other unjust distributions of privileges and rights—be they disdain, disgust, or the veils of false victimhood—are not in and of themselves an end, but a means, in the sense that they do not always remain “just” feelings but can lead to action.³⁹ My focus here will be race and white fragility, but extreme sensitivity to the interpersonal discomfort of the relatively privileged—while understandable—must itself be further scrutinized so that critical discussions centered on white fragility do not become another crutch for centering whiteness yet again.

IV

On Black (In)vulnerability

The Black body’s supposed incapacity to feel has been an issue for centuries, in

39. As DiAngelo observes, if “hatred is the emotion we feel because of our prejudice, extreme acts of discrimination, such as violence, may follow” (20).

no small part due to the global legacy of African chattel slavery.⁴⁰ We see this in the evolution of the idea of “childhood.” Many scholars have tracked an important shift in Western notions of childhood, from early modern and Puritan notions of children as little adults to nineteenth-century celebrations of childhood as a time of innocence and creativity. Romantic notions of childhood, from Rousseau to Blake to Wordsworth, are a crucial piece to this history.⁴¹

Robin Bernstein has more recently argued that notions of childhood innocence are predicated on white supremacist assumptions of Black pain and vulnerability.⁴²

Wordsworth and William Blake may have presented children’s perspectives “in human and literary terms,” but from the nineteenth century onwards, innocence was explicitly aligned with white children.⁴³ This association stemmed from Black children’s “alleged

40. This fact is also true for women more generally, but in different ways. In the case of Black and Brown peoples, the assumption is a resistance to pain; for women, it is often a dismissal of pain. The latter case does not technically *doubt* or *deny* the capacity to feel pain, it ignores it. The historical truth of this state of affairs is evidenced by the idea of “hysteria.” Studies have also shown that women wait longer at hospital emergency rooms than men (see work by John Guillebaud, for example). Women and people of color overlap, however, with prescriptions for pain relief; women are prescribed up to 25% less than men (see Pletcher, Kertesz, et al, “Trends in opioid prescribing by race/ethnicity for patients seeking care in US emergency departments,” 2008). For a more accessible case study, see Joe Fassler’s “How Doctors Take Women's Pain Less Seriously” from *The Atlantic* (October 2015).

41. For more on this, see the following: Linda Austin, “Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy;” Galia Benziman, *Narratives of Child Neglect in Romantic and Victorian Culture*; Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*; Eric Hopkins, *Childhood Transformed: Working-class Children in Nineteenth-Century England*; James Holt McGavran, *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuities, Postmodern Contestations*; Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, and many others.

42. Bernstein Bernstein details this racialization of “childhood innocence” in *Racial Innocence* (2011).

43. (Benziman 2007)168. See also Bernstein, pp. 4ff.

ability or inability to feel [pain]” which sent “white and black childhood into distinct trajectories” and persists in keeping them apart to this day.⁴⁴ If “childhood was defined... as vulnerability... then the black juvenile... was defined out of childhood.”⁴⁵

Ironically, as Black children were being written out of childhood, Black adults were taking their place. “Romantic racialists” in particular cast “‘the Negro’ as ‘childlike’” to “strategically [suture] abolition to white supremacy.”⁴⁶ Paradoxically, then, enslaved Black adults were infantilized (and therefore in need of education and training) while Black children were viewed as adults (by virtue of being written out of childhood). Much of the present-day myth of Black invulnerability springs from these chiasmic perceptions. Neither adult nor child, the Black body was left outside Western modernity’s notions of progressive human time.

To that end, pain and feeling fueled a vicious cycle that perpetuated the traffic in Black lives. Jeremy Bentham’s famous footnote advocating for animal rights—where he insists that “the question is not, *Can they reason?* nor, *Can they talk?* but, *Can they suffer?*”—sheds some light on this cycle.⁴⁷ Bentham’s “they” refers to nonhuman animals, but he arrives at this conclusion by comparing them to those “under the denomination of slaves.”⁴⁸ But can *they* suffer? Slavery operates through a logic where physical pain is used to discipline and punish Black bodies, implying that they can, in

44. (Bernstein 2011) 20.

45. (Bernstein 2011) 20.

46. (Bernstein 2011) 25. For example, Edmund Burke proposed the creation of a post for “either a free Negro or a white man to... instruct Negroes in the church catechism.”(Dykes 1942) 40.

47. (Bentham 1789) 309.

48. (Bentham 1789) 309.

fact, “suffer.” But, the constant use of physical pain is justified by the idea that those of African descent *cannot* suffer, or at least cannot feel as much pain as people of other races. This incentivizes the use of even more pain.⁴⁹

As we know, sentimental literature of the long Romantic period operated in the reverse, depicting the Black body as a pained body, often excessively so. In abolitionist poetry by Hannah More, Robert Southey, Ann Yearsley, and others, the enslaved subject’s personhood was coterminous with its status as a tortured object. Take, for instance, Southey’s sixth sonnet from *Poems on the Slave Trade* (1797), which opens “High in the air expos’d the Slave is hung” and proceeds to describe his stoic acceptance of his pain. This poem shows how the subject of sentimental antislavery literature and art is, according to Lynn Festa, “granted only a diluted form of humanity,” and specifically one “grounded in pain and victimhood.”⁵⁰ In contrast, Blake’s illustrations for John Gabriel Stedman’s 1791 *Narrative of a Five Year’s Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* may seem to conform to this model, mining racial trauma for aesthetic purposes. But there is a starkly unsentimental character to images like “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave” and the more famous “A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows” (which might, in fact, have inspired Southey). In the latter image, for example,

49. The viciousness of this cycle is readily apparent and the cycle continues to haunt us in the present. The instances of this are far too numerous to name. From the June 2015 pool party in McKinney, Texas, or the death of Sandra Bland, or the killings of Tamir Rice and Aiyana Stanley-Jones. In an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, adult “white men... get to authorize pain and whose pain is legitimate” (DiAngelo 2018) Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why it’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018). (DiAngelo 137). And, to invoke Judith Butler, those in power determine whose life is worthy of grief and, thus, meaningful. 50. (Festa 2010) 10. See also Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Tradition*.

the skulls that litter the floor around him does not imbue the blank expression of the hung man with stoic acceptance but with hopeless moribundity. These illustrations undermine Stedman's text when they attempt to paint the horrors of slavery as they are felt in the lived experience—both corporal and emotive—of the enslaved. I sense that they are primarily intended to display feeling, not contrived to cull it from a genteel audience.

The fact that Blake's illustrations remain today a famous instance of *abolitionist* art, despite appearing in a text that did not espouse abolitionist values, attests to their efficacy in becoming something beyond sentimentalism. In the eighteenth century, when so many believed that Black women and men did not feel physical or emotional pain, showing suffering could affirm their human vulnerability. In a world so habituated to dead, dying, or agonized Black people, the prints show the process of objectification and the pain actual people felt under a regime of white supremacist terror. Moreover, they do this without needing the tears of the well-intentioned sentimental abolitionist, tears which evince a fragility that takes the attention away from the enactment and afterlife of violence.

Blake is not above reproach and this does not exculpate him or his contemporaries in the abolitionist movement. But it does elucidate the difficulty in examining the historical role of felt pain in race and the future role of felt pain in antiracist action. To acknowledge the one is important work; but to only acknowledge the other is to perpetuate a reduction of the Black body to a "diluted form of humanity."

Gendered / Feeling

In the section from his *Philosophical Inquiry* entitled “Darkness terrible in its own nature,” Edmund Burke relates a story of a blind boy “receiv[ing] his sight” and being “struck with great horror at the sight” of “a negro woman.”⁵¹ He claimed that “the boy’s reaction was not due to any ideological associations” that pair Blackness with ugliness or disfigurement.⁵² Instead, as Debra Walker King makes clear in her discussion of the passage, “the ‘disagreeable’ marking of blackness dominated her body and stripped it of any human resemblance.”⁵³ As a Black woman, she is used to further develop Burke’s definition of the sublime as something characterized by terror and a need for self-preservation. This is unlike the other women Burke invokes in earlier parts of the *Inquiry*, where he uses the feminine body to discuss the beautiful. These “beautiful” women are racially unmarked. If, “like sensibility, beauty existed under the shadow of slavery,” then invisible whiteness would be a prerequisite for either.⁵⁴ And, as mentioned above, if “innocence” is a concept reserved for white children, is “fragility” reserved for some subject positions and denied to others as well?

There is a kind of gender-inflected fragility not afforded to women of color. DiAngelo dedicates an entire chapter to “white women’s tears,” where she notes that while the fragility of white men “most commonly shows up as varying forms of dominance and intimidation,” white women possess a different range of responses,

51. (Burke 2015) 131.

52. (King 2008) 30.

53. (King 2008) 30.

54. (Gikandi 2011) 69. That said, the “beauty of African women and men,” according to Eva B. Dykes, was “frequently commented upon in anti-slavery literature” of the period (44).

including crying.⁵⁵ This crying, DiAngelo argues, effectively “reinscrib[es] rather than ameliorat[es] racism.”⁵⁶ Tears, of course, communicate connection and pity; they can be a way to relate to the experience of, in this case, people of color. But they can also distract from that pain, as this anonymous woman of color notes:

you are crying because you are uncomfortable with your feelings when we are barely allowed to have any.... we are not allowed to have any feelings because then we are being difficult. We are supposed to remain stoic and strong because otherwise we become the angry and scary people of color.... We are abused daily, beaten, raped, and killed but you are sad and that’s what is important.⁵⁷

The point is not that only people of color experience violence. Instead, the issue is whose suffering is validated and treated *as* suffering.⁵⁸

A sonnet by William Wordsworth seems to take small steps toward redressing this fact by granting a humanity defined in part by Romantic feeling to a woman of color. The poem is one of the Calais sonnets, which Coleridge considered to be more akin to “political essays” than lyrics:

We had a fellow-Passenger who came

55. (DiAngelo 2018) 134.

56. (DiAngelo 2018) 132.

57. (DiAngelo 2018) 136. A tendentious and perhaps troubling possibility is that the field itself has “fallen for” one of the strategies of white fragility. If this quote is any measure, then an exclusive or predominant concern with the sadness or general emotive states of white writers came (and continues to come) at the expense of focus on nonwhite pain. I leave others to explore this possibility, as well as its present and/or historical accuracy.

58. To be sure, in the “white racial frame, not all women are deemed worth of recognition” (DiAngelo 137). White men, “when forced to do so... could acknowledge white women’s humanity” and deploy it as a pretext to harass or harm people of color. This humanity, DiAngelo notes, “has yet to be granted to women of color” in particular.

From Calais with us, gaudy in array,
 A Negro Woman like a Lady gay,
 Yet silent as a woman fearing blame;
 Dejected, meek, yea pitiably tame,
 She sat, from notice turning not away,
 But on our proffered kindness still did lay
 A weight of languid speech, or at the same
 Was silent, motionless in eyes and face.
 She was a Negro Woman driv'n from France,
 Rejected like all others of that race,
 Not one of whom may now find footing there;
 This the poor Out-cast did to us declare,
 Nor murmured at the unfeeling Ordinance.

The "Negro Woman," forlorn about a recently issued ordinance "chasing... all Negroes from France by decree of the government," responds to the "proffered kindness" of the other passengers with brief, "languid" replies or with silence.⁵⁹ Throughout the poem, the speaker attempts to align himself with the woman. She is "meek [and] pitiably tame," a tamed object of sympathy he feels sorry for. But even if she is the ultimate ethical subject, she occupies an ambivalent moral position in the poem. The speaker simultaneously tries to relate to her and individuate her (and her race) from the other passengers. Whether he succeeds in this balancing act is up for debate. On one hand, the poem exhibits the speaker's white fragility; on the other hand, a generous reading evinces how it contests Black invulnerability.

First, in her appearance. She is presented as a woman who is *like* a "Lady," rather than described or labelled as a Lady in her own right. While it may not be deliberate, Wordsworth lets slip the inherent whiteness in characterizing a person a noble. She possesses qualities that make her ladylike, but affinity is not congruency. And her

59. It is important to note that Wordsworth either misunderstood or misrepresents the ordinance, which is most likely Napoleon's decree re-establishing slavery in French territories.

blackness seems to discomfit some of the other, presumably white, passengers. The mention of their “proffered kindness,” which she replies to with a “motionless” silence or a “weight of languid speech,” casts the white passengers as the wronged party. The scenario paints their deed as supererogatory, though it is not. This detail sets her up as detached from the warm conventions of the social.

Such detachment is, of course, a common aspect of Romantic dejection and suggests that the speaker paints dejection in such circumstances as natural. Given the circumstances, it seems to say that dejection is expected, and so are languid speeches and mournful ruminations. The poem suggests the presence of shame the other passengers feel after she “declares” to them the cause of her sorrow. And while the final line states that she did not “murmur... at the unfeeling Ordinance,” the word choice there (“murmured”) is glaring when juxtaposed to her “declaration” just one line earlier. Her progression toward silence speaks volumes.

Her silence, I am suggesting, is not reducible to an example of Enlightenment-era regulation, the management of one’s person as a property. The poem opens a space that allows, instead, a despair that takes her out of the social. We might compare her to the dejection and melancholy in, for example, Shelley, Keats, or Byron. Or, we can see her as manifesting a feeling recognizable to readers of Charlotte Turner Smith, a poet to whom Wordsworth himself felt indebted (a fact that undergirds some contemporary readings of

Wordsworth as writing in a feminine mode).⁶⁰ Smith's most famous collection of poems, *Elegiac Sonnets*, was largely responsible for bringing the sonnet form back to prominence.⁶¹ Like the Calais poems, these were "political essays" that displayed the emotive and affective dimensions of sexual oppression. Smith's *Sonnets* embody the "melancholy" that Pfau argues is partly constitutive of Romantic interiority.

Wordsworth's sonnet emphasizes the socio-affective weather by rhyming the words "dejected" and "rejected." Wordsworth rhymes these words at the *beginning* of lines five and eleven. This curious reversal of rhyming conventions calls attention to the causal relationship between the two words—she is dejected because her "race" was rejected, a poetic pun on her Blackness as a marker of a distinct population and as a "skinnable" property of her personhood. But it also formally reflects the poem's central action: that of a "Negro Woman" looking b(l)ack and feeling b(l)ack. The poem achieves a representation of Black emotional vulnerability without supplanting it with white fragility.

VI

Revolutionary Failures

To end this investigation of the intersections of race and feeling in the Romantic

60. For more on this, see Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth and Helen Maria Williams; Or, the Perils of Sensibility* (2010); Judith Page, *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* (1994); Marlon Ross, *Contours of Masculine Desire* (1989); Susan Wolfson, "Lyrical Ballads and the Language of (Men) Feeling: Wordsworth Writing Women's Voices" (1994), and others.

61. For more on this aspect of Smith's reception, see Stuart Curran's introduction to *The Poems of Charlotte Smith* (1993).

period, I turn to slavery in relation to the epoch's revolutions. A critical commonplace hails Romanticism as a revolutionary era, with socio-economic, militaristic, and political upheavals all across the Atlantic. The main test case for much of the twentieth century on this topic has been the French Revolution.⁶² C.L.R. James's magisterial *The Black Jacobins* notwithstanding, the Haitian Revolution is only now beginning to achieve significant attention among scholars of Romantic literature.⁶³ A major concern in scholarship on the latter is—understandably—its racial character, namely, how it made manifest in the world something unheard and unthought before by those in power: a free Black state in the Northern half of the Western Hemisphere. Conversely, scholarly concern for the former has concentrated on disenchantment, apostasy, and a sense of its failure. For example, Wordsworth's sonnet aims, among other things, to call attention to the irony by which Revolutionary France has no place for Black citizens, and to label it hypocritical as a result. Ironically, then, Romanticism sees both a failed European revolution and, in the words of C. L. R. James, "the only successful slave revolt in history."⁶⁴ Why have we focused so much on the failure rather than the success?

The disappointment in the French Revolution, most notable in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy Shelley, points to its own structure of feeling and punctuates some of the most canonical English language texts of the Romantic era. David Scott suggests

62. See, for example, James Chandler's *Wordsworth's Second Nature*; Mary Favret's *Romantic Correspondence*, Lynn Hunt's *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s*, Willard Spiegelman's *Majestic Indolence* and many more texts from the 1960s onwards.

63. While the most prominent text would still be C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*. Others include Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*; Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*; and David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity*.

64. (James 1963) ix.

that this sense of failure points to a distinctly Romantic view of history as “a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm.”⁶⁵ The faith in a revolution that uproots an unjust existence manifests, generically, as romance and it resides at the core of the Romantic aesthetic. Thus, even while the French Revolution “altered forever the epistemic and political conditions in which thought and action were possible in the modern world,” the subsequent Reign of Terror ran counter to the progressive romance of perfectibility.⁶⁶ It was, in this sense, a failure. This defeat contributes to the melancholy, paranoia, and trauma that make up Pfau’s affective triptych.

Yet these are not the moods typically attributed to revolutionary Black subjects within white cultural productions. In fact, in the case of “failed” slave revolts across the Americas, *paranoia* generally describes white fears about Black and Brown uprisings. Laws regulating or outrightly prohibiting meetings of enslaved Black peoples evince this. But there are not many depictions of paranoia felt *by* the agents of those uprisings. Melancholy (and arguably, trauma) are more easily found because they were key tools of abolitionist literature.

For example, melancholy is certainly the psychological state of the titular character in “The African Boy” (1768), a poem by Edward Jerningham.⁶⁷ In the poem, the speaker asks the “*little mournful Moor*” why he linger[s] on the shore.” The child responds to the “*Benign Enquirer*” that he waits for a now free “Captive Train” to

65. (Scott 2004) 13.

66. (Scott 2004) 13.

67. (Jerningham 1796). For more on this poem, see p. 52 of Eva Dykes’s *The Negro in English Romantic Thought*.

“Triumphant come” with their “hands unshackled... [and] minds as free.”⁶⁸ Describing the violent death of his mother, the boy turns at poem’s end to the speaker to say “I cease to mourn— / Succeeding Joy shall have its turn.” While it features recognizable sentimental abolitionist tropes, the poem ultimately concerns a young Black subject anticipating revolt.⁶⁹ It does not, however, limn a *defiant* child but a “*mournful*” one, longing to see the “festive heart[s] and glee” of other emancipated Africans after they avenge his mother’s death. The tragedy underlying the poem is the fact that the uprising the child expects is impossible and, to some, unthinkable; according to the poem, neither the hands nor the minds of the enslaved will be unshackled, and glee is not for them. The boy ends the poem hinting that he knows this—robbed of even the Sunrise—when he hopes in a parenthetical aside that he wishes this “hope not throb in vain.”

Even if not successful in imagining an abolitionist revolution, the poem is strange in how it interpolates the racialized subject into the moods of Romanticism. It raises an important question: if the dominant moods of Romanticism are melancholy, paranoia, and trauma, and Romance/Romanticism is the generic underpinning of “revolution,” how are such moods and genres instantiated when discussing the attempts at revolution by enslaved persons in the Romantic era? Phrased differently, do these affective structures change when the Romantic subject is not white? Can we only ever have a white

68. (Jerningham 1796) 91.

69. Perhaps not this poem per se, but the conditions of the enslaved would be generative topics to extend some of the main conclusions from Emily Rohrbach’s insightful study, *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation* (2015). Rohrbach’s sense of “anticipation” and the idea of “dark futurity” she discusses could further complicate and be complicated by “darkness” as it pertains to race. Rohrbach’s text also connects aesthetics (in this case, poetics), affect, and the political atmosphere in various useful ways.

Romantic subject?⁷⁰ Looking at the figures of revolt (or revolution), provides an opportunity to envision what may change and what new conceptions of Romanticism become available when we open Romantic subjectivity to nonwhite peoples.

A key component of what is at stake here is our understanding of the function of feeling. The Romantic subject is the quintessential feeling subject of modernity. When T. E. Hulme described his distaste for Romanticism, he presented this aspect as its chief defect.⁷¹ Or, conversely, when Eva Dykes placed Romanticism in dialogue with slavery in 1942, her study mainly concerned “sympathy,” or feeling for the Other; she opens the book with a claim “that one phase of romanticism revolves around the amelioration of the condition of the lowly and oppressed.”⁷² This centrality of feeling partially defined Romanticism from the late nineteenth century onwards. Comparing the Romantic era to the post-war 1960s, M. H. Abrams suggested that the “pervasive sense of estrangement, of a lost and isolated existence in an alienated world, is not peculiar to our own age of anxiety, but was a commonplace of Romantic philosophy.”⁷³ As both a social and an individual act, feeling is a fundamental element of Romantic subjectivity.

Representations of revolt cast these questions into sharp relief. When members of an oppressed populace rebel, they actualize simultaneously their pain and their agency,

70. Manu Chander’s *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* offers one set of answers this question by looking at the Romantic figure (and figuration) of the poet.

71. From “Romanticism and Classicism” (1924): “I object even to the best of the romantics. I object to the sloppiness which doesn’t consider a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other.... The dry hardness which you get in the classics is absolutely repugnant to them. Poetry that isn’t damp isn’t poetry at all [to them].”

72. (Dykes 1942) np.

73. (Abrams 1970) 218.

grievances underwritten by a belief in altering the world as it is. There are countless instances—and types—of resistance by enslaved people, many of which are inaccessible in the archive.⁷⁴

Perhaps as a result, much work on the intersection of feeling and slavery focuses on sentimentalism, the “moral failures” of enslavers, and the efforts of abolitionists.⁷⁵ Without wishing to be dismissive of this work, I think its attention to abolitionists’ reactions rather than slavery and slave revolts needs to be recognized as a study of white fragility. Another case of such fragility is found in condemnations of plantation uprisings and slave revolts that urge reform in lieu of revolution. This stance, ironically, was vigorously opposed by Edmund Burke, himself a champion of the accretive model of social change. Burke advocated for “the complete abolition of the African trade” over and above “any scheme of regulation and reform.”⁷⁶ Burke’s position brings us back to failure since it suggests that every continuing second of slavery signals a defeat of the human—or rather, the humane—spirit.

David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) is perhaps the most strenuous critical effort to displace the power of romance from our reading of Romantic-era

74. I draw this formulation from Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s “An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event,” a chapter from his 1995 book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.

75. (Boulukos 2013) 33. See, for example, Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility* (2005) and Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism* (2015). This is also common with scholarship on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the novel’s reception. There are exceptions, of course, and they include Lynn Festa’s *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, Franny Nudelman’s “Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering” and various essays from Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler’s *Sentimental Men*. Also see more on the “cult of feeling.”

76. (Dykes 1942) 40.

politics. Rather than romance, with its plots of success or failure, Scott suggests tragedy. Tragedy, as form, genre, mode, and mood, “questions... the view of human history as moving teleologically and transparently toward a determinate end.”⁷⁷ As noted above, such movement characterizes “romantic” historical emplotment, which has a vested interest in revolution. While the distinction between national “revolution” and slave “revolt” (or “rebellion,” “insurrection,” or “conspiracy”) proves to be a value-laden one, perhaps the former term’s conceptual baggage limits its value. “Revolution” leads back to a prototypical Romantic subject. It fails to account for the limited options for resistance open to people of color. This is an era featuring such events as the Sierra Leone expedition of 1786, the “Mina Conspiracy” of 1791, the Pointe Coupée insurrection of 1796, Gabriel Prosser’s attempted revolt of 1800, numerous mass suicides of enslaved people such as 1803’s event at Igbo Landing in Georgia, Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion, and many other events. One is hard-pressed to call this list a series of successes; but they still add to a movement. If we integrate into the Romantic mode a subjectivity that can look at these losses in terms of something other than failure—a subjectivity that is at once nonwhite, romantic, vulnerable, and resilient, and in which those ideas are not at odds—then we see the Black Romantic subject as both tragic and revolutionary. Integrating this figure begins to outline a Romanticism that brings to consciousness the feelings felt by vulnerable individuals and groups. To be human would then entail having a revolutionary fragility forged by the oppressive weight of repressive power, a fragility in stark contrast to the reactive one that wields such power.

77. (Scott 2004) 12.

CODA: BLACK WOMEN AND/IN THE SHADOW OF ROMANTICISM

In March 2017, a controversy erupted in response to the biennial show at the Whitney, which featured the debut of *Open Casket*, a painting of Emmet Till's corpse. Critics believed that Dana Schutz, the white artist, capitalized on the wounded Black body. Another artist, Hannah Black, even petitioned for the painting's destruction since it treated "Black pain as raw material."¹ In her defense, Schutz claimed that while she did not "know what it is like to be Black in America," she felt connected to Till's mother, Mamie Till Bosley. "I do know what it is like to be a mother" she said, "my engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother."² This raises a new objection, however: if Mamie Till Bosley was the person the artist connected with, then perhaps she should have been the subject for *Open Casket*. Schutz equated the dead son with the living mother, subsuming the latter into the painting of the former.

The debates on cultural appropriation and the aesthetic representation of Black bodies that followed were (and are) necessary and robust. But the *Open Casket* affair also participates in a long tradition of Black women serving as the occasion for a sustained discourse on race while remaining in the shadows of that discourse. To quote Sharon Holland, the "*gendered* spectacularity" of violence to Black men in "historical watersheds such as Emmett Till... and James Byrd" obfuscates the history of concurrent violence perpetrated against Black women.³ We see a similar dynamic play out, I will suggest, in contemporary scholarship on Romanticism. This is not limited to the scant

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1. (Black 2017) np.
 2. (Kennedy 2017) np.
 3. (Holland 2012) 3.

number of studies on the figuration of Black women in the Romantic period, though this is an exacerbating factor. Nor is my intention here to be archival about the presence of Black women in Romanticism, which would require a study far beyond the ambit of this Coda. Rather, I aim to be more gestural, to invite more dialogue on these issues going forward. It is time for an open conversation on race and Romanticism today—a conversation including who we see in our classrooms and why—by thinking about what we can say about race *in* the Romantic period.

To that end, I hope I can speak *with* Black women by speaking *of* them; but I do not presume that I speak *for* them or (as I truly hope) *over* them. I will end, then, by relating practices and advice that could benefit our field moving forward shared with me by Black women scholars.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that Blackness has been understudied within the history of Romanticist criticism, though it has, to be fair, recently gained more prominence.⁴ The pairing is usually made in reference to slavery in general and the Haitian Revolution in particular. No doubt, this is important work that listens to unheard voices and rescues into visibility the unseen. Unfortunately, Romantic Blackness remains

4. See major book length studies, such as, in this study's references, works by Thomas, Lee, Scott, Baucom, Buck-Morss, and Hickman and much more. See also Debra Walker King's discussion of Burkean sublimity and Blackness in *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, 29ff. This is very far from an exhaustive or comprehensive list, and more can be found in the bibliographies of the items I noted here.

largely limited to slavery, and coverage limited to slave narratives.⁵ Further, in spite of the popularity and British success of Black and/or enslaved authors like Phillis Wheatley and Gustavus Vassa during the Romantic century, Black subjects/actors have been enshrined more fully in the American and African-American literary canons than in eighteenth century or Romantic studies.

This is an unwelcome state of affairs, given the abundance of important events and figures in the history of race and racism that occur in the period. The Romantic century saw *Somerset v Stewart* (1772), the *Zong* massacre (1781), the life of Sarah Baartmann (1789-1815), and the mass circulation of “slave narratives” from Briton Hammon in 1760 to the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in 1850. The traditional Romantic canon of white male poets, then, overshadows not only the rise of women writers but minority Anglophone authors as well.

Great work has been done to uncover and examine this history. That said, has the status of Blackness as a critical object in Romantic studies significantly changed since 2013? How about the year 2000? Or 1942? Each date saw the publication of a key text in this mode of scholarship—*Race, Romanticism, and the Atlantic*, edited by Paul Youngquist, in 2013; Helen Thomas’s *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* in 2000; and, finally, *The Negro in English Romantic Thought* by Eva Beatrice Dykes, in 1942. In “The Race of/in Romanticism: Notes Toward a Critical Race Theory” (from which I have derived my own title for this Coda), Marlon Ross answers these questions emphatically in

5. This has the additional consequence of making such narratives the face of Black cultural production in America and beyond. For more on this dynamic; see (McHenry 2002)Elizabeth McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002) for more.

the negative. Ross suggests that “‘the Negro Question’” in Romanticism continues to focus “almost exclusively on how writers of the period approached the abolition debates concerning the slave trade and colonial slavery.”⁶ In other words, white answers become the primary object of attention in Romanticist approaches to “‘the Negro Question.’”

For Youngquist, “Romanticism is white;” it is the “cultural production of a majority white culture whose whiteness becomes visible only in relation to its raced Other.”⁷ The “raced Other” can be easily located in scholarship on slavery; unfortunately, some of the most important critical work on this topic has been imported from other fields and disciplines. That is, periodically, scholars from outside the field re-insert Blackness as a vital object of study for Romanticists, usually by insisting that slavery is a key subtext of the age (which, we can safely say, it is). We see this play out in influential work by Ian Baucom, Susan Buck-Morss, Jared Hickman, and David Scott. But these books too cling most closely to slavery and/or the Haitian Revolution. Recalling Ross’s point, however, that “‘the Negro Question’” in Romanticism continues to primarily emphasize white writers and the abolition debates, we see how this importation of scholarship outside the field has directed our focus to abolition, slavery, and Black men like Toussaint L’Ouverture and Frederick Douglass. Making Toussaint and Douglass into Romantic figures re-centers the intellectual work of white writers and casts a light on Black men. To be sure this is real progress. Yet, still focusing on these two sets of voices racializes the Romantic ideology. That is, we take as a given that some voices and figures are undoubtedly “Romantic,” even as we work to deconstruct the concept. Romantic and

6. (Ross 2013) 25.

7. (Youngquist 2013) 81.

Romanticist answers *to* a question (live slavery) presuppose that the question itself is not necessarily “Romantic.” This leaves Blackness generally in Romanticism but not of it.

And Black women remain invisible.

The importation model as well as this valence of the Romantic ideology overdetermines Blackness and its gendering. With notable exceptions, critical focus lies on how the period highlights Black men within slave discourse as the fugitive, the rebel, or the suffering, penitent slave.⁸ But if Hortense Spillers—speaking in part about the intra-African enslavement—is right that “the quintessential ‘slave’ is *not* male, but [the] female African,” then it behooves us to expand our focus, within slavery and beyond.⁹

But how? I do not have the answer to that question. Rather, I am going to now share principles I have learned over the years from Black women in the academy. Some are in my home institution and others are not; some I reached out to, and many I have only had the honor to read, hear, or meet. Nonetheless, I think a more consistent commitment to the following practices can help us bring women of color into better visibility within our field. This is far from being a comprehensive list, but it may help to lay a foundation for a set of better practices moving forward.

The first is to “Do the work” and this refers to two things.¹⁰ First, try to consider

8. There are, of course, exceptions to this; one might be Blake, who features many women in his illustrations for Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Journey*. See also Lee’s contribution to the Youngquist collection.

9. (Spillers 2003) 215.

10. This formulation serves as an umbrella term for a wide variety of advice I have heard or have been given over the years. I do not take credit for the phrase, which is sufficiently common in general and throughout Black Studies and Decolonial praxis. I am indebted here to presentations by Keisha-Khan Perry and Alexis Haynie. I am also grateful for Manu Chander, Andrew Goldstone, Elizabeth Greeniaus, and Dorin Smith for helping me better formalize broader dimensions of the phrase.

the above-mentioned racial and gender dynamics and avoid the historical and present-day trap of having white voices stand in for Black ones and Black men stand in for the raced Other. The second, I fear, is to do a little more work to expand our vision. I hesitate to ask academics to do even more work—we teach, we write, we serve—but I think we should be doing more to catch up with so many of our colleagues and our students. I do not consider myself a specialist in Africana Studies or in Critical Race Theory; but just as I am expected to know the work of and the work on Wordsworth, I also feel compelled to have a fuller sense of what is happening in Black Studies, Decolonial Theory, and Critical Feminism. And the fact of the matter is that we are not *really* expected to do this work, while many scholars in those fields are expected to have at least some familiarity with the history, theory, and objects that we study. Additionally, many students from disadvantaged backgrounds come in with knowledge that we can learn from, just as what we can teach can augment their perspectives.

After “do the work” comes acknowledging the fact that “race does not equal racism” or, as Spillers once phrased it, “race is both concentrated and dispersed in its locations.”¹¹ This is a crucial point in Sharon Holland’s 2012 book *The Erotic Life of Racism*. It is also a key insight from Ross’s essay, where this principle proves to be a condition of possibility for moving beyond the abolition debates in Romantic studies. I ask that we think about “race”—a deep-seated, ideological, quotidian aspect of our social phenomenology—concurrently but separately from racism, defined as the affective, unequal distribution of privileges, rights, life, and so on across phenotypic-skin and cultural lines. Similarly, scholars like bell hooks have urged us to examine “white

11. Spillers, 2003, #72148} 380.

supremacy” more and “racism” less, to think more about the perpetration of unjust systems and not only the victimization they engender. In other words, we must consider alongside the “positive” project of white supremacy the negative one of systemic anti-blackness.

Race is not just about the relations between certain groups but is simultaneously more diffused and more intimately personal. We could think more about the everydayness of racial belonging, of racial perception, of claiming a race for oneself or imposing a race on another. Race circulates throughout the space I currently occupy as a Black man; it is partially anchored in my singular embodiment and the visual field. But I do not automatically bring *racism* into the room when I bring race. Racism’s psychological and emotional registers—like anger or resentment or perceived ingratitude—are not the product of my physical being but my embeddedness in racist culture.

In short, I suggest that we expand our view of race in the period. To be clear, we can continue working on slavery without letting *that* be our only engagement with the deeply quotidian, socio-personal ordering of the world we inhabit and have inherited from the long Romantic period. We can recall Blake’s poem “The Little Black Boy” and the boy’s mother who educates him and thereby interpellates him into a system of racial valuation.¹² Or we can look at Percy Shelley’s “The Witch of Atlas” and the part played by an African woman in the history of that poem’s world.

12. There are many readings of this poem as an abolitionist text. It certainly moves beyond the spectacularity of violence. There are numerous examples of the enslaved mother in abolitionist verse. See Lee (175-177) for more.

My third and final bit of advice is “Don’t forget the women.”¹³ On its face, this is the heart of my argument here, to not subsume Black women under Black male voices. In the Romantic period, this means instead of only returning to Vassa, to turn also to the work of Mary Prince. Moving beyond Toussaint (or slavery in general), we can also study the life and work of Mary Seacole. It also means examining the period’s aestheticization of women of color, across a variety of cultural productions and from a host of different authors.

But for me, “don’t forget the women” is most about the politics of citation. It asks, “who are we turning towards, who are we quoting? In effect, who are we positioning as producers of theoretical knowledge? Citation is a way to enter a conversation and cede ground to those already doing the work. It is not enough to treat Black women (or anyone) as only anthropological subjects; *how* we do this is just as important *that* we do it. So I hope we have a more diverse body of criticism to draw from going forward; footnotes speak volumes.

Now, since I am asserting “don’t forget the women,” I want to end by remembering one woman in particular, a woman forgotten in part because of the politics of citation.

Her name is Eva Beatrice Dykes. She received her PhD from Radcliffe and was the first Black woman to qualify for a Doctorate degree in America.¹⁴ Born in

13. I am indebted to Shannon Eaves and the seminar on “Black Bodies” hosted by the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis for this exact articulation.

14. Because of the timing of Radcliffe’s graduation, she was the third to receive the actual degree. Nonetheless, Dykes was the first to successfully defend and meet all of the qualifications.

Washington, D.C. in 1893, Dykes received Bachelor's degrees from Howard University in 1914 and Radcliffe in 1917. A year later, she was awarded her Masters and she received her doctorate in 1921. She taught at Howard University for fifteen years until moving to Oakwood University in 1944. Dr. Dykes was the author, as I have noted, of *The Negro in English Romantic Thought* in 1942. Her book is impressively and thoroughly researched, a goldmine of historical data and compelling analysis, and is very sympathetic to both major and minor figures of British Romanticism. But despite being right at the forefront of this research paradigm, Dykes has largely forgotten or overlooked or unknown by the vast majority of twentieth century scholars. In this respect, Dr. Dykes is an allegory for the type of silencing I brought up earlier with *Open Casket* and Mamie Till Bosley: a Black woman at the forefront of a critical discourse on race, left in the shadows of that discourse.

Why we, as a field, have not claimed with honor this woman and her incredible legacy leaves me stunned. While Abrams, Hartman, and Frye still show up on a graduate course syllabi, Dykes does not. We could change that.

Here is a quote from the book's preface:

Despite the various conceptions of the word "romanticism" and the difficulties critics have encountered in their attempts to define it succinctly, all agree that one phase of romanticism revolves around the amelioration of the condition of the lowly and oppressed.¹⁵

But do we, in fact, all agree with this? Perhaps Dykes is asking us to believe that Romanticism *can* revolve around the lowly and the oppressed. That, at its best, this is a

15. (Dykes 1942) ix.

field of study intimately tied to the vulnerable.

Maybe. But I asked whether the status of Blackness as an object of study had changed since 1942; this quote suggests that it has not. It still focuses on white writers' words on abolition; and it presents Romanticism as a well-intentioned discourse to address suffering while positing slavery as Romanticism's central ethical foundation and dilemma. And yet Dykes did this work in 1942. That our scholarship in the present is rife with the same critical moves suggests the need to carry her work further.

So: How do we talk about Blackness without re-centering white people or white privilege? How can we talk about Blackness in the Romantic period without an exclusive focus on abolition debates? And how can we not efface Black women in our efforts to answer the previous questions? If we are to lift *every* voice out of the shadow of Romanticism and into the light, then I hope we can work together to find some answers.

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