



Romanticism on the Net

Introduction to “Romantic Futurities”

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Biographical Note

Colette Davies is an AHRC-funded PhD student at the University of Nottingham. Her thesis focuses on authorship and representations of authorship and the Romantic literary marketplace in novels published by the Minerva Press between 1785 and 1800. She is one of the Postgraduate Representatives for the British Association for Romantic Studies and was a co-contributor for the ‘Romantic Novel’ section of the *Year’s Work in English* between 2018-2020.

Amanda Blake Davis is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in English Literature at the University of Derby and an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of English at the University of Sheffield. As a Postgraduate Representative for the British Association for Romantic Studies, Amanda co-organized the 2020 “Romantic Futurities” BARS Early Career and Postgraduate Conference. She has published articles in the *Keats-Shelley Review* and *English: Journal of the English Association*.

1. Futurity encroaches pervasively upon Romantic-period authors’ writings, inspiring both the utopian, perfectibilian hope for a future state and the fear of repeating past downfalls and failed revolutions. Between moments of doubt and disappointment, Mary Wollstonecraft’s “anticipat[ion of] the future improvement of the world” is sustained by her imagination’s enduring ability to “sketch futurity in glowing colours” (68 and 87). But futurity also darkens the present. As Emily Rohrbach makes clear, “Romantic-period writers understood their world to be shadowed by a dark futurity, even inhabited by it” (1). This understanding is cognately expressed in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s claim that “Poets are

the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present” (701). Between shadows and gleams, futurity occupies Romantic thought.

2. This special issue’s topic and title, “Romantic Futurities”, is taken from the British Association for Romantic Studies’ 2020 Early Career and Postgraduate Conference, which was arranged to take place at Keats House, London. We could not have anticipated the extent to which the theme would become apposite in the spring of 2020. The outbreak of Covid-19 hit academia hard, as it did for many industries, professions, and vocations across the world. Universities, libraries, and archives shut their doors. Research trips and in-person conferences were cancelled, and the stereotype of the isolated and solitary academic became an unpleasant reality for many. To stave off researcher isolation, “Romantic Futurities” was transformed into a virtual conference, and the conference website hosted 380 visitors and 9,200 total views in June 2020. This conference urged, alongside studies of futurity in Romantic writings, reflections upon the historical future, the anticipatory future, posterity, reconsiderations and reformulations of the canon, and the future of the field of Romantic Studies.
3. The field of Romantic Studies is inherently bound up with discussions of identity and canonicity. Identity and canonicity are symbiotic, vexed and intertwined; as Michael Gamer writes in *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry*, “there is no certain way of knowing the future regard of readers or posterity; when one can only inscribe one’s claims for notice by assembling out of existing works a unified body capable of

standing in for the author” (7). The articles in this special issue are largely drawn from the “Romantic Futurities” conference, and offer new approaches to texts, forms, and individuals, shedding light on individuals and texts which traditionally have lain outside of the canon. We are grateful to the editors of *Romanticism on the Net* for giving us the opportunity to co-edit this special issue and showcase the work of early-career researchers alongside leading scholars in our field. These articles indicate that new reflections on and revisitations of Romantic texts and individuals, occasioned both by modern rediscoveries and the tensions released in clashes between historical logics and our contemporary moment, will help to ensure the field of Romantic Studies has a dynamic and promising future.

4. Identity is brought to the fore through a range of perspectives in Simon Clewes’ “‘Albert’s soul looked forth from the organs of Madeline’: Anticipating Transness in William Godwin Jr.’s *Transfusion* (1835),” where Godwin Jr.’s identity as a late Romantic is coupled with an anticipation of transness in *Transfusion*. Clewes draws out a trans narrative within Godwin Jr.’s only novel, wherein the act of a blood transfusion between Albert and his sister Madeline becomes a means of scrutinising the binary gender construct. Modern trans and gender theory are employed alongside the novel’s contemporary medical context and biographical implications, as Clewes presents Godwin Jr.’s neglected *Transfusion* alongside his half-sister’s seminal work, *Frankenstein*, focusing in particular upon the figure of the Female Creature. Clewes offers a valuable study of the novels’ intertextual dialogue through the lens of trans theory, sparking an innovative direction for future scholarship in Romantic Studies and gender.

5. In “Fibres, Globules, Cells: William Blake and the Biological Individual,” Tara Lee considers how Blake’s backward glances to eighteenth-century biological thought anticipate scientific advances and discoveries during the Romantic period. By emphasizing Blake’s approach to science through the medium of art, Lee reveals how Blake’s unique metaphorical figurations of the individual look toward nineteenth-century developments in cell theory. Lee’s article shifts in focus from Enlightenment empiricism to nineteenth-century innovations in medicine, foregrounding two theoretical strands of biological thought: fibre theory and globule theory. Lee demonstrates how Blake’s poetry, art, and writings on artistic form engage with and criticize both theories on the cellular formation of the human body, establishing that Blake’s figurations of the individual centre on his own identity as an artist and printmaker.

6. In “[L]ife among the dead’: Translation and Shelley’s “On a Future State,”” Amanda Blake Davis considers how Percy Bysshe Shelley’s seemingly empirical tract on a future state after death, “On a Future State” (1818-19), can be newly understood as a prose poem, and one that is influenced by Shelley’s estimation of Plato as “essentially a poet” in *A Defence of Poetry*. Shelley translates Plato’s metaphor for the dead body as broken lyre from the *Phaedo* into “On a Future State,” where translation gives new, poetic life to the fragment’s prosaic substance. The appearance of the broken lyre in “On a Future State” evidences Shelley’s ongoing interest in Plato’s *Phaedo* as a source of poetic inspiration, predating his recorded reading and translation of the dialogue in May 1820. Ultimately,

Shelley's identification of Plato as a poet who "rejected determinate forms" offers insight into Shelley's own identity as a poet engaged in formal experiments.

7. Rayna Rosenova's article, "Envisioning History: Helen Maria Williams' *Peru* and Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*," argues that the titular poems were vehicles through which Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith explored distinctions between the past and the present. Rosenova draws attention to the fictitious characters, the interpolation of personal narratives with historical episodes, and to the role of the poems' speakers as "poet-prophets." Such presences have implications for how the poems record and represent historical moments. Smith and Williams, Rosenova contends, interspersed "small narratives of individuals" with grand scale histories. Thus, she contends that their poetry, with its lyric qualities, illuminates the instability of historical narratives and questions the way the discipline of history constructs its canonical movements and episodes.

8. This focus on perception and presentation carries into Colette Davies' "Foins and Diamonds: Using Material Culture, Reviews, and Prefaces to reappraise the Minerva Press." Davies' article investigates discourses on imitation and originality in the Romantic period. It focuses on Eliza Parsons' invocation of foils and diamonds in her preface to *Ellen and Julia*, arguing that Parsons frames her novel in a way which illustrates the societal and literary purposes of imitation, or foiling. Parsons' novel, textually conscious of its imitative qualities, provides a case study prompting scholars to consider where originality ends and imitation begins and whether it is at all possible to divest originality from imitation and vice versa.

9. In “The South Seas on Stage,” Michael Gamer traces Charles Darwin’s voyage on the HMS Beagle and Captain Cook’s explorations of the South Pacific. Gamer draws compelling connections between Darwin’s focus on the people and cultures of the islands of the South Pacific and the fascination of London society in the 1770s and 1780s with the Pacific Islander, Omai. Omai’s presence in London, Gamer observes, was due to the “early-career researcher” Joseph Banks. Balancing occasions when Banks managed Omai’s calendar with times when Omai controlled his own diary, Gamer highlights Banks’ influence and its limits. He argues that Omai was conscious of the semiotic and cultural significance of his presence in London and conducted himself accordingly. Thus, his article establishes the importance of visual representation and perception, explores the Romantic era’s fascination with what was perceived to be new and extraordinary, and considers how two individuals acted and navigated London society as they expanded its experiences and interactions.

10. This special issue closes with a reflective Afterword by Emily Rohrbach. Along with situating the articles in this issue alongside new and innovative work in our field, Rohrbach offers thoughtful insight into how academia has changed during the course of the past two years, and considers how Romanticism might help us navigate the hopes and uncertainties of a post-pandemic future.

Works Cited

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