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Review of *Equivocal Beings* by Claudia Johnson; and  
*Sexual Power in British Romantic Poetry* by Daniel  
Watkins

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the most useful contribution to this project and is likely to significantly revise our maps of Romanticism.

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**Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s—***

***Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney and Austen***

(Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1995), xi + 239. \$34.95

(cloth); \$14.95 (paper).

**Daniel P. Watkins, *Sexual Power in British Romantic Poetry***

(Univ. Pr. of Florida, 1996), xvii + 157.

A Review by Diane Long Hoeveler, *Marquette University*

"Sadism demands a story," claims Laura Mulvey, or is it more accurate to recognize that story demands sadism, as Teresa de Lauretis counters? The dispute between these positions might be taken as the larger subject and terrain of two recent and very interesting studies of the Romantic period, Claudia L. Johnson's *Equivocal Beings* and Daniel P. Watkins' *Sexual Power in British Romantic Poetry*. Whereas Watkins focuses on scenes of sadistic violence against women in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, Johnson emphasizes the buried (and vaguely sadistic) narrative of gender and politics told by the major female authors of the 1790s—Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, and Austen. Read together these two critical studies suggest the major directions in which Romantic studies has moved over the past decade. On one hand, critics have tended to mount a critique that takes into account either a focus on the male or the female authors as a tradition that can be read separately and apart from each other, while on the other hand, critics have veered toward examining the texts of the period by interrogating the intersection of the political and the sexual, or at least what constitutes "the political" and "the sexual" as literary critics understand those categories of meaning.

*Sexual Power* self-consciously places itself within a "recuperative" movement conducted by male Romanticists who think that "feminist" attacks on "visionary romanticism" have gone too far: "my effort is to place romanticism in its historical and ideological complexity in the belief that only in this way can romantic utopian desire be fully understood, recuperated, and put in the service of a historicist and feminist project" (xii). As a true feminist, Watkins wants to explain why the canonical male Romanticists indulged in so many depictions of sexual violence against women. He wants, in short, to apologize for what we might recognize as an embarrassingly persistent strain in their poetry; he wants "to insist that romanticism be understood and explained as history rather than consumed as nostalgia" (xiii). As the theoretical underpinnings for his argument, Watkins uses a lit-

tle-known essay by Robert Sayre and Michael Lowy (in a collection of essays that Watkins himself coedited) in conjunction with Angela Carter's controversial work on pornography and the sadeian text, *The Sadeian Woman* (1978).

The thesis of *Sexual Power* as Watkins enunciates it: "the romantic portrayal of gender necessarily depends first not upon language but rather upon the decline of feudal, or aristocratic, patriarchy and the emergence of capitalist, or bourgeois, patriarchy, and it therefore is bound up with historical acts of violence and oppression" (28). In a theoretical introductory chapter, Watkins lays out his attempt to explain "the historically specific *logic* of gender stratification" (30), while he makes a plea for the need to "explore the common assumptions and logic shared by sadistic violence and romantic visionary idealism, in an effort to implicate romanticism fully in the historical conditions under which it was produced" (30).

To support his thesis, Watkins discusses a few well-known passages: Wordsworth's appropriation of Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey," the boat-stealing scene in *The Prelude*, and "Nutting." His selections for Coleridge include brief discussions of *Christabel*, "The Nightingale," "The Eolian Harp," and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. And in the most polished section of the book, he discusses only Keats's "Ode of Psyche." To my mind, the most interesting aspect of these text-based analyses occurs when Watkins brings in other theorists to elucidate the poetry under discussion. Thus he uses Fernand Braudel (33), the Marquis de Sade (43), and Jean-Joseph Goux (52) in relation to Wordsworth; Annie Le Brun (79) is cited in conjunction with Coleridge, while Marx (108) is used to analyze Keats's presentation of Psyche as a commodity.

Watkins' discussion of Wordsworth makes a number of interesting points, arguing finally that Wordsworth's "rush into nature's arms is not a simple escape from politics but

rather an embrace of a masculinist logic that is vigorously ideological and hence political; it is a logic, moreover, that duplicates, at the level of ideology, the very ethic of violence that the poet would escape by turning self-consciously away from the world of public citizenship" (35). Seeking to resuscitate Wordsworth, Watkins comes to the same conclusion that the "feminist" critics he condemns have reached. The same "logic" occurs in his discussions of Coleridge's poetry. Here Watkins has to admit: "romantic visionary idealism sometimes covers over the logic of gender—which is, at bottom, a sadeian logic—upon which it often depends for its coherent expression. In obscuring, or even burying, its enabling logic, romanticism effectively evades an important dimension of its historical and cultural construction, one involving ideological violence against women. Any credible effort to defend and extend the claims of the romantic imagination must address this difficult fact" (80).

In his detailed and interesting discussion of Keats's "Ode to Psyche," Watkins makes his most explicit statement about the pornographic, sadeian logic of "industrial capitalism which carries within it a need for violence against feminine existence" (120-21). According to Watkins, at the heart of sadeian logic is not physical violence, "but rather the absolute domination of femininity by masculinity and the definition of pleasure as domination" (121). This position, however, can be read as simply another way of averting one's eyes from the reality of physical violence, not simply against female characters in a poem, but against the real women whose backs lifted England out of its feudal economy and into a machine age.

In all of these discussions Watkins focuses on the sexual violence done to female characters in the name of masculine privilege and out of the fear of a new capitalistic economy that the male psyche felt threatened by. Thus the poets scapegoat women, doling out to them the violence that became one means by which the bourgeois poet could project onto another (helpless) object his own sense of historical displacement and redundancy. But ultimately Watkins is caught, it would appear, by his own attempts to excuse or apologize for the Romantic poets: they couldn't help it, he seems to be saying throughout this study, for history made them do it.

Claudia Johnson's thesis in *Equivocal Beings* is considerably more complex, while her analyses of the novels under discussion are at times subtle and sophisticated. The historical presence hovering over Johnson's text is Edmund Burke, specifically his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and in particular his highly inflamed voyeuristic fantasy of Marie-Antoinette fleeing the revolutionaries who had invaded her bedroom, the very sanctum of her sacred and besieged femininity. A man's need to cry out and moan over the fate of a threatened woman would appear to be yet another sadistic scenario, this time displaced or elided by a fair amount of masochistic posturing by the sentimental male writing the

narrative. The sadistic punishment of women, the trope of the besieged heroine is, for the male authors of the 1790s, "not the unthinkable crime which chivalric sentimentality forestalls, but rather the one-thing-needful to solicit male tears and the virtues that supposedly flow with them, and the preposterousness of [the women writers'] work emerges from and engages this horrifying realization" (15). But Johnson finally is not interested in Burke or the political theme that surfaces now and again in her book; her real focus is on the female author of the 1790s, who felt herself stripped of her traditional gender markings when the sentimental man assumed the characteristics that were formerly ascribed to the "female." As she asserts, the "sentimental man, having taken over once-feminine attributes, leaves to women only two choices: either the equivocal or the hyperfeminine. For if the man Werther is already the culture's paragon of feeling, then any feeling differentially attributed to women must be excessively delicate, morbidly *over-sensitive*" (12).

Johnson claims that under the sentimental dispensation "gender codes have not simply been reversed. They have been fundamentally disrupted, and this is why Wollstonecraft's intensely homophobic phrase 'equivocal beings' is so germane. As we shall see again and again, the conservative insistence upon the urgency of chivalric sentimentality fundamentally unsettled gender itself, leaving women without a distinct gender site. Under sentimentality, all women risk becoming equivocal beings" (11). But what exactly does this statement mean? The slippage between Johnson's and Wollstonecraft's definitions of "equivocal beings" actually implies that Johnson is trying to argue that under sentimentalism women were forced (somehow, against their will?) to define themselves as women-identified, or protolesbians (16; 48), to use Johnson's term. And the use of the term "homophobia," which floats throughout this text, imparts an even more threateningly politically correct agenda to her argument.

Johnson claims that Burke's obsessive chivalry was actually an ideological move designed to "register dominant values in and on the bodies of citizens; and it produces reverent political subjects disinclined to rape the queen or to lay a violent hand to the endearing frailty of the state" (6). As Johnson rightly argues, "under sentimentality the prestige of suffering belongs to men" (17), but what do you do about the spectacle of female suffering that marches across the pages of women's literature throughout the 1790's? Johnson chooses to read it as an ambivalent gesture by women themselves to regain a sense of agency and subjectivity that had been denied to them by their culture. Getting men to buy into the claims of a nostalgic sentimentality, however, required that the issues be of national importance, with nothing less than the fate of dear old England at stake: "the political rupture of the 1790s also gave rise to a war of sentiments about sex, a war in which controversialists, each intensely invested in heterosexual feeling as a foundational political virtue, routinely charge their opponents with devi-

ance of the direst possible consequence, for the fate of the nation is understood on all sides to be tied up with the right heterosexual sentiment of its citizens" (11).

Johnson would appear to see "heterosexual feeling" as a national and ideological conspiracy of the direst conservative consequences. Her "progressive" agenda, therefore, causes her to discover that same-sex friendships and relationships between women were the secret wellspring of hope and optimism for women writers during the 1790s. This highly questionable claim can only be supported by an even more highly selective use of sources, as well as some eccentric readings. But no matter; Johnson is able finally to discover a submerged "proto-lesbian" (96) text in all of the female authors she chooses to analyze here. She claims that these novelists write "resistances to the uncomfortably overlaid heterosexual spousal or parental plot, and vergings onto homosocial and homoerotic narrative that bypass male sentimentality as well as (in Burney's phrase) the 'FEMALE DIFFICULTIES' to which it inevitably leads" (19).

When Johnson analyzes Wollstonecraft's first novel, *Mary: A Fiction*, she presents the novel as a "weirdly elliptical protolesbian narrative [that] undomesticates female desire" (16). Her major claim about this novel, however, is that the friendship between Mary and Ann is a "homoerotic" (50) one, concealing its "lesbian" (54) leanings, with Henry only a pale and weak substitute for the true love object, Ann. In a reading that confuses centuries, imparting to Wollstonecraft a modern sensibility she could not have possessed, Johnson claims, "Ann's hyperfemininity constructs another woman as manly, imparting an affectively butch/femme character to this 'romantic' friendship which, even if it does not deconstruct sex and gender altogether, still deessentializes them by making it impossible to maintain that masculinity inheres in male bodies alone" (54). In an equally polemical reading of *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, Johnson tries to argue that Wollstonecraft's final position advocates a "proto-lesbian space" (96) for Maria and Jemima as a household of two women raising a female child. In fact, Johnson goes so far as to claim that "the emancipated, sturdy, purposive, mutually respecting, and rationally loving couple Wollstonecraft spent her career imagining is, finally, a female couple, the couple whose unrepresentability made *Mary* so difficult and strange" (69). To mount such an argument requires, of course, ignoring Wollstonecraft's passionate letters to Imlay, which are never cited here, as well as her rigorously-pursued heterosexuality with Godwin. In light of her own life it seems safe to say that Wollstonecraft was not a woman to "expel men and manfulness" from the domestic scene, "undomesticating women and their bodies, and bringing female homosociality into representation as a moral, if not yet as a clearly political, alternative" (69).

As for Radcliffe, Johnson argues that her gothic novels "obsessively restage the confounding spectacle of exorbitant

female suffering appropriated by men of feeling." As such, "Radcliffe's novels tend to prohibit female complaint" (16), while *The Romance of the Forest* in particular masculinizes sentimentality as an ambivalent "gesture of respect to women" at the same time it is "an act of appropriation disabling them, their pleasure, and their fellowship with other women" (78). Perhaps the most eccentric reading in this book occurs when Johnson charges the naive and innocent Clara La Luc of masturbation. In a reading that would, I think, more than startle Radcliffe's sensibilities, Johnson outs the naughty Clara for fingering her lute just too much for her own good: Clara: "This lute is my delight, and my torment!" Johnson: "And as if to make the masturbatory implications of this pleasure clearer, the narrator describes her inability to keep her resolution 'not to touch her lute that day'" (88). Drawing out the lesson of poor Clara, Johnson advises her reader: "The waywardness of women's pleasure must be broken, and their homoerotic and autoerotic tendencies extirpated in order to fix their desires within a heterosexual matrix whose authoritarian character is concealed" (89).

In the final long section of the book, a discussion of Burney's novels *Camilla* and *The Wanderer*, Johnson claims that "sentimentality upsets all markers of gender" (16), while "female subjectivity itself is cast into doubt as culpable, histrionic, and grotesque" (16). Again, Johnson ferrets out another same-sex friendship between Lady Aurora and Juliet/Ellis in *The Wanderer*, trying to read innocent arm squeezes as lesbian passion: "It is impossible to read these, or any descriptions of Lady Aurora's and Ellis/Juliet's relationship without confronting the ecstatically homoerotic space opened out by warps in sentimental ideology itself. Although Burney's plots are typically structured around the quest for paternal reconciliation, the yearning for the intimacy of maternal and/or feminine sympathy is a far deeper and more potent element in them" (178-79).

In a lively and engaging coda, Johnson examines the sexuality of Emma, suggesting that the meddlesome Emma's problematic sexuality is no problem at all. Emma's only problem would appear to be her inability to live quietly in a world that enforced compulsory heterosexuality (195): "Austen desentimentalizes and deheterosexualizes virtue, and in the process makes it accessible to women as well" (199). Once again I think Johnson is in the realm of wishful thinking about both the authors she studies and their creations, characters who just seem—in spite of Johnson's best efforts to raise their limited consciousness—unable to resist the allures of the "heterosexual courtship plot." Neither Johnson's book nor Watkins' resolves the question of whether sadism demands a narrative or narrative demands sadism. Both books have much to recommend them, however, and both suggest the problematic and somewhat quixotic directions that the field is taking at this moment.