

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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ISSUE 11.3 (WINTER 2015)

Special Issue:

Relations: Literary Marketplaces, Affects, and Bodies of 18<sup>th</sup> - and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Women Writers

Guest Edited by Julia Fuller, Meechal Hoffman, and Livia Arndal Woods

### ***A Ménage à trois at the Monthly Museum***

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<1> When the playwright Hannah Cowley answered a sonnet published by Robert Merry in *The World* in 1787 with one of her own, she began a public exchange of verses that almost immediately and infamously came to be known as Della Cruscan poetry. The highly sentimental and melodramatic correspondence between Merry, writing pseudonymously as Della Crusca, and Cowley, writing as Anna Matilda, was soon joined by Mary Robinson, under the penname of Laura Maria, along with several other lesser poets. The productions of the literary circle were not only avidly read but widely imitated, to the point where the critic William Gifford famously complained that “a thousand other nameless names caught the infection; and from one end of the kingdom to the other, all was nonsense and Della Crusca” (xiii). Despite Gifford’s attempts to end the spread of Della Cruscanism, Jerome McGann notes that “it pursued a vigorous life well into the 1830s” (81), flourishing in dozens of popular magazines and journals. What was less commonly imitated than Della Cruscan style was its model of literary exchange among correspondents. Yet some two decades later, the *Ladies’ Monthly Museum, or Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction* would host a similar pseudonymous exchange of nearly eight years’ duration, less well known but nonetheless remarkable for the insights it provides into contemporary affective, aesthetic, and literary relations.

<2> The *Ladies’ Monthly Museum*, a popular and successful magazine published between 1798-1829, featured fashion news and plates, celebrity biographies, serialized stories, and at the very back a column devoted to poetry titled “The Apollonian Wreath.”<sup>(1)</sup> The bulk of the poems came from a small group of regular contributors, many of whom signed their work only with initials or pseudonyms. One such contributor, with the assumed name of Oscar, published a pair of typically sentimental sonnets in the July 1811 issue that speak to his fear of never finding tranquil rest before “the grave’s cold sleep” (13) and of the melancholy pleasure of wandering alone by ivy-covered ruins at “eventide” (1). These poems excited the keen interest of a poet calling herself Agnes, who published verses in the October issue entitled “To Oscar,” noting, “The two following Quartorzaines were written immediately after perusing the sonnets signed ‘Oscar’ in the Monthly Museum for July” (237). Agnes tells Oscar how his poems

“touch’d a chord/That long shall vibrate through this thrilling frame” (5-6). Oscar promptly replies with “To Agnes” in the very next issue, touched that his words were not in vain, and praising Agnes’s “ravishing” lyre (13) and “sweeter song” (9). In the December “Notes to Correspondents,” the editor (whose marketing instincts seem underdeveloped) writes, “The sonnet of Agnes to Oscar shall appear in our next; but we must abstain from inserting such complimentary pieces in future, as such productions are only interesting to themselves” (60). Undeterred, Oscar continues writing to Agnes without explicitly addressing her by name, as in “Irregular Lines, written after perusing some beautiful stanzas, by an unknown lady,” clearly referring to Agnes’s “Lines written during Indisposition,” and Agnes similarly responds with “Stanzas Addressed to \*\*\*\*\*,” taking the additional precaution of signing herself with only the initial “A.” Others began to take notice of their correspondence: in 1813 one “Palemon” published “Stanzas Addressed to Oscar and Agnes,” urging them to meet, and the new editor J. W. H. Payne publically apologized to the pair on behalf of the magazine: “We beg to observe to OSCAR, that we are sorry for the taste and judgment of the Editor who could refuse the correspondence of OSCAR and AGNES on the ground of its possessing only an exclusive interest . . . since all the productions of these two valuable Correspondents possess intrinsic merit” (180).

<3> With the publication of another poem titled “To Oscar” in September 1813, the correspondence gained its third central voice. A poet calling herself Ora, from “Thule’s stormy strand” (22), takes up “the wild harp of the North” (24) to thank Oscar, the “Fair son of genius” (31) for his “sweetly pensive” and “soothing lays” (1, 3). Oscar, apparently not wishing to offend either his old or new correspondent, replies with “Stanzas” praising both Agnes and Ora. Ora next however turns her attention to Agnes, telling her, “Oft have I hung delighted on thy lay” (1) and wishing that she could “watch beside thee with a sister’s care/ . . . /Sooth all thy pains, and all thy sorrows share” (10-12). Agnes replies to Ora much as she did to Oscar, thanking her for her tribute, telling of her visceral response to it—“in every pulse that kindness felt” (24), and, hinting at her failing health, expressing the hope that the two might meet in heaven if not on earth. This is the last contribution from Agnes, and after several tributes to Ora from other correspondents and several more poems exchanged between Ora and Oscar in 1815-1816, the correspondence ends with one last poem from Ora to Agnes. Two years later, in January 1819 an unusual page-long notice appeared in the *Monthly Museum* announcing Oscar’s untimely death at the age of twenty-five, followed by an outpouring of elegies; while a total of nine poems mourning him appeared in the next three issues, none were signed by either Agnes or Ora.

<4> What do we know of Oscar, Agnes, and Ora outside of their verse exchanges? We know that Oscar very much wanted to know who Agnes was from an editor’s note in the June 1812 issue: “We have received a letter from Oscar, begging information of his fair eulogist, Agnes: we assure him we know nothing of the lady, and if we did, could not divulge it, unless authorized by the correspondent herself” (352). So far, however, I have found no evidence that they met, or indeed of who Agnes was. But Oscar did find out who Ora was, and we now know as well from the reprinting of her *Monthly Museum* poems in an 1816 volume published under her real name and from a *Monthly Museum* review explicitly making the connection that she was the Shetland writer Dorothea Primrose Campbell.<sup>(2)</sup> As for Oscar’s identity, although the announcement of his death in the *Monthly Museum* does not provide his real name, it mentions how he “exerted himself to the utmost in promoting the subscription for Miss

Campbell's *Poems*; edited them with great care, and took infinite pains in recommending them to the public" (60). Two years earlier, in February 1817, Campbell, writing to Sir Walter Scott to thank him for accepting the dedication of her *Poems* to him, had referred to her editor as Mr. Cove; earlier the same month Scott had replied to a letter from a Mr. J. H. Cove thanking him for the trouble he had taken on Campbell's behalf. Thus we can be reasonably certain of Oscar's surname.<sup>(3)</sup> While Campbell tells Scott that Mr. Cove "is an entire stranger to me," she and Cove possibly corresponded during the editing of her poems, although I have found no extant letters between them or as yet any further certain biographical information about him.

<5> It seems most likely that the relationality of the trio was primarily textual, and in fact the poems that they write to one another tell us more about their larger conceptions of literary production and reception than about their personal circumstances. They share several important features with the Della Cruscan exchanges: like the Della Cruscan poems, the poems of the *Monthly Museum* trio are situated in the liminal discursive state of private correspondence conducted in a public medium. Second, they too occupy the curious status of works of art that are simultaneously responses to works of art. Third, while the exchanges in both cases consist of individual lyric poems, as a whole they are dramatic in nature, ongoing dialogical chains of creation and reception. And fourth, the *Monthly Museum* poets inherit and reproduce wholesale the stances, tropes, and rhetoric of the late eighteenth-century poetry of sensibility: their songs allude to unspecified troubles, woes, and sorrows soothed temporarily by one another's effusions. Each poet details affective and physical responses to "the sorrows of affliction," "relentless time" (Oscar, "Irregular Lines" 3, 11) and "folly's scenes" (Agnes, "Lines written during Indisposition" 21), describing pensive tears, drooping heads, and melancholy sighs. They present themselves not as poets but as minstrels with harps and lyres of golden and silver strings. Instead of writing, they sing lays and pour strains, praising each other's songs as ravishing, sweet, and fascinating, while deprecating their own as simple, humble, and unworthy tributes to genius.

<6> In some ways, in fact, the *Monthly Museum* poems adhere even more strongly to the conventions of sensibility than did their predecessors. The trope of the lyric "I" as a lonely sufferer, so central to the poetry of Charlotte Smith and her followers, would seem no longer relevant to a community of poets rejoicing in having found kindred spirits and sympathy. But surprisingly, the vain hope of ever finding such company, a commonplace of the poetry of sensibility, is merely replaced in Oscar, Agnes, and Ora's poems by the vain hope of ever fully realizing the pleasures that such company promises: "to meet on earth it is not giv'n" mourns Agnes ("To Ora" 50), a happiness that Ora too dismisses as a "vain . . . wish" ("To Agnes" [1814] 13) and "idle dream" ("To Agnes" [1817] 17), its fulfillment seemingly denied by pecuniary and medical as well as by literary circumstances. All they can do, state their poems, is mitigate one another's sorrows, not eradicate them, with the pathos of their solitude and pain even heightened by the tantalizing prospect of potential never quite able to be fulfilled, a tension between sharing and "fated or perhaps willed withholding" that Nancy Yousef so fruitfully explores in *Romantic Intimacy* (1). The discourse of sensibility in fact proves to be so powerful that it simply accommodates the new interchanges of sympathy that might seem likely to displace it. The well-established tradition may have proved attractive, though, in terms of the advantages it provided: it allowed Oscar, Agnes,

and Ora to assess and praise one another's skill in manipulating the conventions of its discourse, to mirror and affirm one another's affective experience, and to bring a fresh edge to sensibility's melancholy solitude by way of contrast with the joys of personal attention and mutual consolation which they offer and to which they attest.

<7> And yet even as they adhere to the conventions of sensibility, their poetry is distinct from that of their Della Cruscan predecessors in several important regards. Notably, the rhetoric of the *Monthly Museum* poets is less heavily inflected with heterosexual eroticism than was that of the Della Cruscan poets. In *The Poetics of Sensibility*, McGann notes how the Della Cruscans transformed the genre of the troubadour exchange and the *tenso* such that the women who were once its poetic subjects assume positive textual roles and become themselves agents in "a specifically heterosexual exchange" (81). Jacqueline Labbe too points to the eroticism and physicality of Della Cruscan imagery, arguing in *The Romantic Paradox* that Della Cruscan romance is primarily "sexual, rather than sensual" (40). While the *Monthly Museum* poets frequently describe responding to one another's words in terms of physical arousal—Agnes's swelling "young bosom" and "thrilling frame" ("To Oscar" [1811] 4, 6), Oscar's "devoutly heav'd breast" ("Stanzas" 17) and "glowing cheek" ("To Agnes" [1811] 11), they respond to and address one another in similar terms regardless of gender. Agnes, for instance, tells Oscar how his poetry "often brings/Across my cheek the blush that feeling owns" ("To Oscar" [1812] 7-8) but then tells Ora as well of the "glowing cheek" and "the glistening eye/That glanced so swiftly o'er each line" ("To Ora" 13-15). That Agnes and Ora respond in affective terms as fervently to each other's poems as they do to Oscar's defines the exchange less as exclusively heterosexual than as more broadly pansexual in nature.

<8> Another significant difference from the Della Cruscan exchanges is that the less-gendered eroticism of the *Monthly Museum* poems is tempered with the rhetoric of friendship, virtue, and piety. All three poets manifestly subordinate *eros* to *agape*: while they detail and stage affective response, their conclusions often sublimate their eroticism to "affection's glow" (Agnes, "To Ora" 4) and to gratitude for "the soothing 'voice of friendship'" (Agnes, "Stanzas addressed to \*\*\*\*\*" 62). Moreover, the poets' responsiveness to one another's words is posited as spiritual and sanctioned by divine example: Agnes characterizes God as "One" who "never hears unfeelingly" ("To Ora" 37-40). They use celestial terms as well to describe the most precious gift they bring to one another, that of sympathy: Ora hopes that Oscar may receive "joys that taste of heaven above / In sympathy's soul-touching charm" ("To Oscar" [1814] 19-20), and Agnes similarly describes "the seraph tones of heav'nly sympathy" ("Stanzas addressed to \*\*\*\*\*" 9). The emotional comfort they have received from one another's work is expressed in tandem with the generous hope that the others may be equally comforted and consoled in turn. Oscar for instance writes of forgetting his own griefs in mourning another's, and Ora unselfishly writes to Agnes in hopes that Oscar's verse as well as her own might bring comfort:

And may those strains, which most you love to hear,  
Long, long from OSCAR'S soul entrancing lyre,  
Delight thy gentle heart, and charm thy ear,  
With all of friendship's warmth, and all a Poet's fire!  
(*"To Agnes"* [1814] 22-25)

It is significant that the “strains” are loved rather than the poet himself; also significant, is the penultimate reference not to love’s but to “friendship’s warmth.” That the “Poet’s fire” issues from a “soul entrancing lyre” exemplifies the way that the physical excitement expressed within the exchange is contained within its overtly spiritual and nonsexual values.

<9> In their double focus on self and other, the *Monthly Museum* poems, then, may be seen to partake of both sensibility and sentimentality. Alluding to McGann’s important distinction between the two terms, Claire Knowles comments how “this distinction also suggests a movement away from the solipsism characteristic of sensibility (where the sufferings of the self typically take center stage) to sentiment’s more socially engaged and self-reflexive engagement of powerful emotions” (13), a movement that she traces in early nineteenth-century women’s lyric poetry. And indeed the Oscar/Agnes/Ora correspondence is poised between solipsism and social engagement: even as the poems are affective records of individual suffering, they are also empathic attempts to alleviate the woes of kindred spirits.

<10> Further evidence of the ways in which the poets sought to establish bonds between one another may be seen in the striking structural, syntactical, and rhetorical similarities of their poems, consciously echoing and mirroring one another’s form and content. Throughout the course of the exchange, the poems follow a more or less set pattern: they normally detail physical and emotional responses to the most recently published poem, praise the poet for his or her power and skill, and apologize for his or her own inability to convey appreciation adequately. Although the exchange features progressively stronger terms of praise—for instance, Oscar’s “harmonic lyre” in Agnes’s first poem to him (“To Oscar” [1811] 14) has become a “harp of genius” in her second (“To Oscar [1812] 3)—the poems remain more or less interchangeable in terms of their structure of adulation and self-abnegation. Moreover, there is a substantial overlap of diction between the three poets throughout the correspondence. Even given the stock vocabulary of sensibility and sentiment, their poems are more alike in diction than those of the other regular contributors to the *Monthly Museum*.<sup>(4)</sup> The similarity is partly due to the fact that they occasionally incorporate phrases and lines from one another’s poems into their own, but they also often appropriate rhymes and verse forms as well, thus seeking to resemble if not actually merge with one another, creating a group identity.

<11> That Oscar, Agnes, and Ora sought to establish and sustain the bonds of their community of three by means of writing poems for one another suggests that they shared an underlying assumption of contemporary readers of poetry, one which routinely identified the speaker of the poem with the author. In *Relationships of Sympathy: The Writer and the Reader in British Romanticism*, Thomas J. McCarthy claims that for Romantic readers, “successfully reading a lyric poem . . . demanded nothing short of the reader’s relating to the poet as one human being to another” (148). Such a model, he notes, is posited by Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, which describes sympathetic reading as “ultimately a dialogical and communicative act akin to a relationship between two people” (33). As he puts it, “In so far as the lyric ‘I’ implies the presence of a listening Other (‘you, the reader’), . . . it represents an emptiness—on both personal and aesthetic levels—to be entered into by the reader through sympathy” (153). From this model, then, a sympathetic, creative response by one poet to another simply makes the process of reading still more overtly dialogical and directly communicative. The exchange between

Oscar, Agnes, and Ora may thus be seen as a logical extension of the dynamic already implicit within reading, an interactive process in which all three serve as readers and writers, and subjects and authors, responding to one another in ways that are at once highly stylized and intimate.

<12> The *Monthly Museum* exchange, then, exemplifies the social engagement predicated by sentimentality's investment in the other, an engagement manifested in its ongoing chain of sympathetic reading and writing. The series does not merely invite sympathy but enacts it by the poets' compassionate responses to one another's *cris de coeurs*. McCarthy suggests that "for Schleiermacher and the Romantics, feeling was an essential element not only of efficacious writing and reading, but also of the sense of community and relationship which writing and reading could generate and give expression to" (39), and this is borne out by evidence of a broader community established by the exchange. Tellingly, over its course several other poets sought to join the correspondence: Palemon published the aforementioned poem "To Oscar and Agnes," Malvina published "To Oscar," and Richard Hatt and Lorenzo wrote several times to Ora. That their sympathies extended beyond the writing of lyric poems to one another is apparent from the list of subscribers to Ora's 1816 *Poems*, which includes Agnes, Oscar, Hatt, and several more of the regular contributors to the *Monthly Museum*. Moreover, the unprecedented spate of elegies for Oscar following the announcement of his death attests to a wider community sufficiently moved and emotionally involved by the exchange to mourn for his loss and pay personal tribute to him. All in all, the poems published by and about the trio demonstrate the social function that lyric poetry took on in a culture where, as Stephen Behrendt puts it, "writers of both genders, and from across the economic, political, and ideological spectrum, understood themselves to be participants in an active—even an interactive—*community* of writers and readers" (4). As a platform for a Regency network fostering emotional, social, and literary bonds, the *Monthly Museum* at one shilling sixpence an issue must have been regarded by its readers and contributors as a considerable bargain.

#### Endnotes

(1)When *The Lady's Monthly Museum* changed hands in 1814, its title was changed to *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* and the volume numbers began afresh, hence the discrepancies in the citations below.[\(△\)](#)

(2)See my "Dorothea Primrose Campbell: A Newly Discovered Pseudonym, Poems and Tales," *Women's Writing* 21.4 (2014), 592-608, for a fuller account of Campbell's publications as Ora for the *Ladies' Monthly Museum* and of the production, editing, and promotion of her 1816 *Poems*.[\(△\)](#)

(3)Campbell's letter of February 17, 1817 to Sir Walter Scott is in the National Library of Scotland, MS. 3888 (ff.20-21). Sir Walter Scott's letter of February 1, 1817 to Mr. J. H. Cove is in the collection of the Fales Library, New York University, MS. 7969. While in my article on Campbell mentioned above I identified an "Oscar W. Cove" who might have been Oscar, also noting the "L. H. Cove" in the subscription list for her 1816 *Poems*, Linda Riddell helpfully solidified the connection by pointing to Campbell's 1817 letter to Scott, in "Sir Walter Scott's Piano: The Life and Times of Dorothea Primrose

Campbell," *The New Shetlander* 270 (Yule 2014), 17-23. Given the discrepancy between the L. H. Cove of the subscription list and the J. H. Cove who is listed as the recipient of Scott's 1817 letter in the Millgate Union Catalogue of Walter Scott Correspondence, however, much about Oscar's identity remains obscure. While I have been unable to trace records of an L. H. Cove, the Parish of St. Saviour, Southwark, lists a John Cove of High Street as buried on June 21, 1818 (2909), who could conceivably be Oscar given the *Monthly Museum's* announcement of his death in January 1819.(△)

(4)I used the textual analysis program TextSTAT (<http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/en/textstat/>) to obtain word frequency counts for the works of all three poets individually and for the corpus of their poems as a whole, as well as for the poems addressed to them by Palemon, Richard Hatt, Malvina, and Lorenzo. The nouns most commonly used by Oscar, Agnes, and Ora include "heart," "lyre," "ear," and "love;" the most commonly used adjectives are "sweet," "trembling," and "vain."(△)

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