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Revolutionary Women

Fatal Women of Romanticism. Adriana Craciun. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xviii+328 pp.

British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World. Adriana Craciun. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xii+225 pp.

Reviewed by [Eric Eisner](#), George Mason University

<1> Adriana Craciun's two recent studies of Romantic-era British women writers are provocative interventions into a lively field. Each of Craciun's books targets a different master narrative popular in recent critical accounts of the period, allowing us to see ideas and formations such formulations tend to occlude. In *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, Craciun looks past the old idea of the "femme fatale" as an index of male sexual fantasy or panic, asking instead about the very different ends to which Romantic-era women might have put their own imaginings of female violence or violent seduction. The institutionalization of gender-complementary models in studies of Romanticism has made it harder to ask such questions, as Craciun notes. In *Fatal Women*, however, she demonstrates that surprising and potent affiliations between women and murderous desire stand out in the work of diverse figures such as Mary Lamb, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Dacre, Anne Bannerman, and Letitia Landon. In *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World*, Craciun returns to Wollstonecraft and Robinson, showing how these two feminists shared with Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams a Francophilic, revolutionary cosmopolitanism specific to the 1790s. This book's focus on feminist reworkings of the "citizen of the world" ideal adds an important qualifying perspective to our growing understanding of the way women writers of the 1790s and just after contributed to the consolidation of discourses of British nationalism.⁽¹⁾

<2> One might expect a study like *Fatal Women* to engage primarily with psychoanalytic theory, but in this book Craciun draws rather on the work of Michel Foucault, Thomas Lacqueur, Judith Butler and other historians and theorists of sexuality and the body (Lacanian theory does inform the chapter on Mary Lamb). Craciun's central contention is that the "femme fatale" figure offered ambivalent attractions to women writers because of its capacity to trouble not just reigning ideologies of gender but also the theory of natural sexual difference constructed along with those ideologies. The hegemony of the "two sexes" model, even by the early nineteenth century, was less than total, and perhaps less than assured. Mary Lamb's murder of her mother, Charlotte Corday's assassination of Marat, the sensational life and death of Marie Antoinette, mobs of market women in the Parisian street—such spectacular episodes raised difficult questions about the supposedly non-violent female body. At least for some women writers, such questions could not be contained either by invoking the dialectic of rage and rebellion described by some feminist criticism (where female aggression is understood as a response to the experience of powerlessness under male oppression), or by placing such "unsexed" bodies outside the realm of female "nature." Like more fantastic versions of the fatal woman—mermaids, enchantresses, and demon lovers in the works of Landon, Bannerman and Dacre—the female violence associated with the Revolution fascinated as well as disturbed women writers of the period because it suggested the instability of the "natural" body itself.

<3> In both books, Craciun is most persuasive when she is able to show how particular writers evolved distinctive, often self-contradictory responses to the competing views of female difference culturally available in this tumultuous period. Thus, in *Fatal Women*, an excellent chapter examines how the actress, poet and novelist Mary Robinson—an early supporter of the Revolution—appropriated Marie Antoinette as a seductive and empowering figure. Placed at the head of Robinson's imagined "Aristocracy of Genius," Marie Antoinette could conflate ideals of republican motherhood and the meritocracy of letters with a nostalgia for the public influence and sexual freedom afforded women in the salon culture of the *ancien régime*. Another interesting



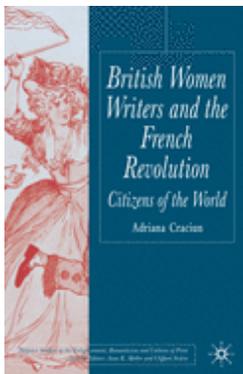
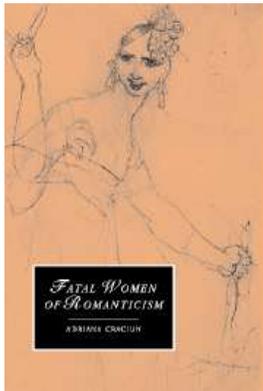
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chapter shows how both Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft called for strengthening women's bodies, a position widely parodied by conservative critics. By strengthening their bodies, Wollstonecraft argued, women would both erase the condition of physical inequality and better perform their biologically specific civic duty as mothers. But where Wollstonecraft shrank from imagining women as agents of physical aggression, Robinson on several occasions seemed to endorse violence as a means of upholding the affronted dignity of persons or nations. She argued in support of the right of women to defend their honor by challenging intransigent lovers to a duel with pistols—once again appropriating an aristocratic stance to achieve radicalizing gender effects. In an amazing pseudonymous letter, she threatened the Scottish Lord Advocate Robert Dundas with vengeance à la “Mlle. Cordet [*sic*]” for his “sanguinary harsh measures employed against the Reformers” during his 1794 prosecution of the founders of the British Convention (53).

<4>In the chapter on Lamb, Craciun makes a strong case that, contrary to the doctrine of the author's friends, editors, and most modern critics, there are not two Mary Lambs—the madwoman and the fully benevolent woman writer. Rather, Lamb's “position as murderer made possible her position as author,” both because the murder of her overbearing mother (in what was deemed a fit of insanity) seems to have freed her to write, and because, for Lamb, the urge to write appears to have been bound up with writing's violence and with a real pleasure in the “power of writing as aggression” (32). Craciun locates a similarly defiant aggressive pleasure in the sadistic, amoral glee with which virtue is invariably undermined in Charlotte Dacre's Gothic extravaganzas (she places Dacre's novels *Zofloya; or, the Moor* [1806] and *The Passions* [1811] and her poetry in *Hours of Solitude* [1805] alongside the writing of the Marquis de Sade and “Monk” Lewis rather than in a tradition of “female Gothic”). She situates Dacre's treatment of the desiring body and the diseased imagination in the context of eighteenth-century medical discourse on sexuality. Here, Craciun seems less sure, ultimately, how to go about reading Dacre's writing politically: she is sharp in locating a critique of corporeality in Dacre's fiction and in noting that critique carries no inherent political value, but her hunt for “subversive potential” in these fictions seems to me framed in somewhat limiting terms (153).

<5>The Dacre chapter might be an instance where the organization of the book around the careers of individual writers does not best serve the historicist ends of Craciun's inquiry, but, when it comes to such little-studied writers as Dacre or Bannerman, detailed accounts of the writers' careers are nonetheless welcome in themselves. While Wollstonecraft and even Robinson are now nearly full center on the Romanticist's critical radar, Dacre and Lamb are still at the margins and Bannerman just barely on the screen at all (Andrew Elfenbein devotes an interesting chapter to Bannerman in his *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Mode* [1999]). Craciun's careful discussion of the role of class and gender in shaping the publication and reception history of Bannerman's Gothic poems will be useful to readers just getting to know the poet, though the connection to the larger discussion of female violence and the construction of gendered corporeality is more muted here. Meanwhile, Landon, as Craciun observes, has been the deserved subject of a great deal of critical attention lately. Craciun's discussion of her poetry nonetheless makes a signal contribution in presenting an L.E.L. very different from the one we usually see. Craciun's L.E.L. is a savvy, complicated “city poet” (like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh), whose images of decomposition and festering underworlds, in Craciun's reading, respond to contemporary urban anxieties about sanitation, public health, and the proximity of the dead and the living. This chapter is, perhaps, too diffuse to be fully persuasive in its argument for Landon's “materialist social critique”—though a stronger case could certainly be made. Nonetheless, the chapter is undeniably suggestive in highlighting Landon's concern with a very different kind of “overflow” than the poetic. There are useful intersections here with Samantha Matthews's recent work on the cemetery imagination in *Poetical Remains: Poet's Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (2004).

<6> Craciun's studies are typically Romantic in locating in the early 1790s a moment of radically transformative possibilities later foreclosed. In *Fatal Women*, such possibilities include alternative imaginations of the sex/gender system; in *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, they include modes of transnational identification opened by the Revolution and then tested by the course of Revolutionary politics and the British reaction. This is an exciting book, striking for the detail of its argument and for the excellent archival research it presents. The wide range of material Craciun ably synthesizes demonstrates impressively “how the Revolution and revolutionary wars continued to expand the horizons of British women writers' imaginations and influence” (56). Craciun's scholarship also reveals, as she hopes it does, how much more we still have to learn about the complicated vociferous debates of the 1790s and especially about the

thinking and action of the fascinating individuals who participated in these debates. Craciun is the co-editor, with Kari Lokke, of an earlier volume of essays on the subject, *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution* (2001).

<7> Craciun's focus is on "a specifically Francophilic cosmopolitanism [that] took hold among predominantly middle-class British women writers during and after the 1790s, when the franchise's relationship to property (and sexual) rights came under intense scrutiny" (2). Such cosmopolitanism is thus distinct from the variety popular among aristocratic men earlier in the century, in which the purported universality of the "citizen of the world" ideal is a screen for the supposedly disinterested judgment of the male property owner. The cosmopolitanism of British women writers of the 1790s is also distinct from the increasingly nationalist discourses of both the conservative reaction *and* of radical men, whose turn to a patriotic ideal of the "free-born Briton" offered little to women looking for a model for their own political participation. What is powerful about Craciun's conception of this feminist cosmopolitanism is the way it manages at once to identify a coherent structure of ideas linking different writers, and at the same time to point up the subtle negotiations that each writer made between claims based on universality and those based on difference. Along the way, Craciun has interesting things to say about contemporaries such as Anna Barbauld, Mary Hays, and Anne Plumpetre. She skillfully explores the differences among these various cosmopolitans and the contradictions within their various articulations of the "citizen of the world" ideal.

<8> A nice illustration of Craciun's eye for detail comes when she revisits Robinson's pseudonymous letter invoking the figure of Corday. Robinson's 23 January 1794 letter (signed "Tabitha Bramble") is carefully placed alongside other events of that month: the sedition trials of the radicals Skirving and Margarot (presided over by Dundas); the London SCI's 17 January address expressing outrage over the prosecution of the Scottish reformers; the Queen's birthday on 18 January; and a series of poems Robinson published in newspapers that month. Craciun explains how Robinson's letter to Dundas proclaiming the people's right of defense against tyranny picks up and reformulates, to feminist and cosmopolitan ends, the "staunchly nationalist and masculine" language of the SCI: "Like the SCI, Robinson cites the Glorious Revolution as moral precedent, but she chooses as her instrument of retribution not the (implicitly masculinized) Protestant English people, but Charlotte Corday, a French republican woman" (*British Women Writers* 73). Craciun goes on to show how recognizing Robinson's active political engagement helps us to grasp the political subtexts of her poetry and fiction, beginning with the "Ode for the 18th of January" (1794) and extending to the channel-crossing protagonists of her fiction and to later appearances of the "Tabitha Bramble" pseudonym in poems of 1797-1798. (Strangely, the Bramble persona is identified as Welsh in *British Women Writers* but as Scottish in *Fatal Women*). Robinson emerges from this account an even more complicated, and more radical, figure than we had imagined.

<9> If cosmopolitanism is often cast by its opponents as a turn to abstraction against the more vital claims of the local, the cosmopolitan ideals of these writers were in many ways nourished, as well as pressured, by local exigencies and attachments. These come to the fore in an engaging chapter on Helen Maria Williams's *Letters from France* (1790-1796). Making the case that "much of Williams's rhetorical and aesthetic strategy in the *Letters* she owes in fact to Robespierre," Craciun explores what she sees as Williams's "uneasy rivalry with Robespierre for the role of true representative of the French Revolution" (100). Her discussion of Williams is compellingly situated not just within a broad network of literary representations of Robespierre in the 1790s, but also within the scene of Williams's own day-to-day experience of Revolutionary politics—the friendships, factional alliances, and power plays that shape the positions Williams takes in her prose.

<10> Unlike Williams, Charlotte Smith watched the Revolution unfold from a distance—though Craciun has found archival evidence to suggest that Smith did indeed travel to France in 1791. Yet like Williams, Smith was closely engaged with revolutionary politics, and in her novels, Craciun finds her articulating a radical cosmopolitanism "that looked farther across national and continental boundaries as the revolutionary wars continued, in search of an elusive community that could live up to Rousseauvian ideals while overcoming their contradictions" (146). The flood of French émigrés to other European nations, and especially to England, provides the backdrop of Craciun's discussion of Smith's 1790s novels, which moves widely across a range of pro- and counter-revolutionary representations of the émigré figure. Craciun even includes an interesting excursus on Smith's American friend Joel Barlow's attempt to sell large numbers of French émigrés on the idea of settling in a newly built Ohio "paradise" Callinopia (hundreds of émigrés

émigrés on the idea of settling in a newly built Ohio paradise, Campions (hundreds of émigrés found that they had bought into a scam and the settlement failed). While this chapter will be an essential reference point for further research on the émigré phenomenon, its very scope makes it difficult for Craciun to treat any particular work in much detail, making the individual readings less persuasive than the larger claim for Smith's distinctive take on the "citizen of the world" ideal, one that is "surprisingly mobile and self-critical, even if finally not universally inclusive" (146).

<11> It would be interesting to hear more than we do here about the continuities or differences between the cosmopolitan feminisms of the 1790s and later visions of the citizen of the world by nineteenth-century British women writers such as Barrett Browning. Craciun's epilogue seeks to link up her account of the Francophilic British feminisms of the 1790s with modern characterizations of feminism as split by an "Anglo-American"/"French" divide, with Wollstonecraft a key originary figure for constructions of the Anglo-American tradition. Although the connection is worth pursuing, as presented here it feels like a jump: as with the theoretical reflection on the concept of "cosmopolitanism" in the Introduction, Craciun's framing devices remain somewhat distinct from the discussions they enclose. But this is not to take anything away from the rigor, meticulousness and intelligence of Craciun's exemplary engagement with her subject. Craciun offers her account of Mary Robinson in *British Women Writers* as a "test case of how much, and what kind of work, still needs to be done before we can propose master narratives to encompass women's writing in this period" (61). In both these studies, Craciun's patient historical contextualization makes stunningly clear how women writers negotiated a complex weave of literary, social, and political contradiction; her work suggests how valuable the archives will continue to be to literary scholarship of this period. Attuned to the local but with a flexible, sympathetic reach across national, literary and historical divides, Craciun's approach reflects the virtues of the cosmopolitan stances she admires.

Endnotes

(1) See for example Katie Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997). (△)