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Women's Writing and the Contemporary Future in British Romanticism

Women Writers and the Contemporary Future explores the ways that women writers of the British Romantic period could, through their literary writing, participate in the political debates of their era. Specifically, it considers how women writers could experiment with time in order to distance themselves from their present moment, a strategy which enabled women to assert their voices within a masculinist public political discourse that tended to trade in predictions for the future, either hopeful or apocalyptic. My guiding research questions are: how did women writers of the British Romantic engage powerful male writers about the most pressing political issues of their day, speaking as they were from a marginalized position? What led these writers to experiment with time and futurity? Who controlled the feeling of contemporariness in the Age of Revolution, and who could claim to live within it? How was time itself situated differently for men and women? To what extent could women "belong" to their historical moment, given their political and social marginalization? My work suggests that the era's efforts at social progress split across highly gendered lines in debates over what constituted the contemporary.

The proposed research traces how the passage of time became a political factor for British women writers in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. As male cultural commentators were predicting catastrophe in a turbulent and apocalyptic age, many women styled themselves benevolent visitors from the future. These writers included Catherine Macaulay, Britain's first openly female historian, the feminists Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, the poets Hannah Cowley, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Charlotte Smith, and the pioneering novelists Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë. These writers often described themselves, oxymoronically, as "future historians," denying the present even its ability to be contemporary with itself. The future, in this discourse, seemed to be happening already, and could be discovered in the gaps of dominant political and literary discourses.

These writers were remaking the very meaning of being contemporary, and doing so in the era when capitalism and war were transforming the meaning of 'clock time'. Their work put women and gender at the centre of history. As the contemporary future became an available discourse for Romantic-era women writers, it enabled those who would otherwise have been marginalized in political debates to challenge many of Great Britain's most hegemonic institutions, such as imperialism, sexism, capitalism, the slave trade, the monarchy, and conjugal heterosexuality.

This research explains how and why Romantic-era women writers--historians, cultural critics, novelists, and poets--were developing impossible temporalities. It expands our understanding of nineteenth-century women's writing and offers new ways to think about the feminist implications of time within literature. It challenges current understandings of time in the nineteenth century and nineteenth-century women's writing and reveals women writers to have been innovative theorists of temporality and utopia. It brings attention to texts that have not received much scholarly attention and develops new ways of reading major authors of the period. It examines women's participation within historical public political debates, tracing that participation through history into contemporary philosophy and gender studies. Unusually, it presents nineteenth-century utopianism as a significantly feminist tradition. Seeing utopia in this way encourages us to see utopia as a time rather than a place, and the future as something embedded in the present instead of awaited or deferred.