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Andrea Henderson. Romanticism and the Painful  
Pleasure of Modern Life (book review)

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## Reviews

Andrea Henderson. *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Hardback: ISBN-13: 9780521884020. Price: \$93.00; Paperback: ISBN-13: 9780521175449. Price: \$39.99

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**Romantic Cultures of Print**

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“The desires of [...] heroes and heroines of Romantic literature,” writes Andrea Henderson, “would seem to be precisely for the painful nonsatisfaction of desire: they are attracted most to those people who keep them in suspense, dominate them, and even humiliate them.

Their lovers are *belle dames sans merci* and ‘Barbarous, unfeeling, un pitying’ men whom they nevertheless not only find irresistible but actively idealize” (1-2).

From this premise, *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life* argues that “Desire as we now understand it, as a thing in itself, a mark of healthy subjectivity, and an illimitable fund of energy, is an historical artifact, as is our expectation that desire will always outstrip satisfaction” (17). Deploying cultural materialism to tease out her claim, Henderson acutely and authoritatively situates the shifting definitions of desire within the rise of eighteenth-century commodity capitalism. In a world where everything was being made available for perusal and purchase, a world in which the very excess of accumulable things

indicated the degree to which no human being could possibly possess them all, the individual had to learn “how *not* to have all that advertisers, merchants, and trendsetters proclaimed was essential for happiness” (3). Excess meant negotiating a new relationship to lack, one that, Henderson contends, is being worked out across the field of Romanticism’s representations of erotic, gendered desire. Giving a specifically material and political twist to Mario Praz’s assertion of Romanticism’s “mysterious bond between pleasure and suffering” (1), Henderson argues that “‘Romanticism’ is precisely a technique for making self-sacrifice feel like self-indulgence” (5) and powerlessness “a thing of beauty” (38).

This eminently readable and thoroughly researched book covers an impressive range of texts—fictional, political, biographical, philosophical—in its consideration of desire’s exquisite tyrannies. Henderson begins with a chapter, teasingly entitled “Finance and Flagellation,” on the work of Hogarth, Addison, and Defoe, to establish the links between “speculation” in its double sense of economic futurism and the determinations of another’s erotic desires. Closely reading a number of Hogarth images (which unfortunately Cambridge UP has reproduced far too small to be legible), Henderson argues the gendered implications of finance capitalism and its relation to the powers of affect: “finance capitalism,” she writes, “taught men to revel in suspense and emotional extremes, and to take new pleasure in a powerful and independent female sexuality. Thus did the gendered metaphors of political rhetoric [particularly of the South Sea bubble] become a potent means for understanding modern sexuality” (46). These gendered metaphors, both masculine and feminine, and the ways in which they subtend the paradox of wanting (not) to have, are the focus for the remainder of the book. Chapter Two examines the novels of Frances Burney over the course of her career, as she links desire to a relatively unproblematic idea of want in the early *Evelina* to the learning to control desire and its satisfactions in *Cecilia*, through *Camilla*’s complex negotiation of desire with its aristocratic associations now being subject to democratic impulses, and finally to *The Wanderer*, which “defines and celebrates a specifically Romantic-era form of commodity fetishism” that “salvages speculation and the painful pleasures that accompany it by

distinguishing political and economic speculation and then roundly denouncing political speculation [eg. the optimism of the French Revolution, now some twenty-five years old] while looking to economic speculation for the equalizing [Burney] seeks” (102). This oscillation between the political and the economic, and between the economic and the gendered, is repeated in Chapter Three on Joanna Baillie who, Henderson argues, invokes a desiring consumerist voyeurism to democratize the passions while inculcating a means to control those passions: not everyone can buy in an economically inequitable world, but everyone can shop. These two chapters, some of the strongest work in the book, move from the High Street shop to the picturesque in fashion (and later, in garden design), from physiognomy to theater reform, and from sadistic *pleasure* to masochistic *desire*—in that, according to Henderson, it is the transformation of passions that can be satisfied by pleasure into passions that can be extended—if attenuated—by desire that marks the aesthetics of the period.

In many ways, *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life* is charting a shift from the large to the small—from landscape vista to synoptic garden design, from global markets to drawing-room trinkets, from the totalizing Augustan imagination to the personal and idiosyncratic experience of disappointment. It’s not surprising, then, that much of the book dedicates itself to the vicissitudes of domestic life—a life that’s interesting in its own terms but also a microcosm of larger political and aesthetic preoccupations. The final chapter on Keats and Coleridge is a lovely example of this. In an argument that will be as useful to undergraduates as it will be for seasoned scholars, Henderson locates in the “suburban” poetry of Keats “an eroticism grounded less in the deferral of pleasure”—as it had been in Frances Burney’s early heroines—“than in the awareness that the transitory nature of pleasure makes the experience of it always, of necessity, painful” (224). The painful pleasures of ephemerality are then redoubled for Keats by the fact that the objects of natural pleasure have been relocated from the vast, amorphous land tract to the supposedly contained and fixed suburban garden, a garden that seems to produce that ephemerality all the more. Coleridge replicates the problem but in another tone—that of temporal, rather than spatial, concentration that renders the beloved object

distinct only in the past or future, never in the present. The desire to capture, spatio-temporally, the fleeting ephemerality of experience is, Henderson reminds us, the same sensibility that produced the first official photograph in 1839, and it moves us beyond the desire merely to secure the shadow ere the substance fade. Rather, “this desire had everything to do with a love of evanescence,” she argues via Geoffrey Batchen; “the early photographic experimenters did not simply want to capture a scene but to capture images they considered beautiful for their transience” (240). So too what Henderson calls the “mastery and melancholy” of pleasure in the suburban garden, the lime-tree bower.

Such questions of mastery and enjoyment, and of submission to insatiable desire, are always questions of sexuality, a sexuality the book discusses in terms of heterosexual gender politics. These questions are most fully taken up in a chapter on Hazlitt, Byron, and Lamb, the one chapter in the book that gives me some pause. Its opening move is certainly convincing: the argument that “Romantic-era representations of eroticized submission often dramatize a fascination with and an ambivalence toward power inequities, for they celebrate hierarchy, while, through their excesses, making it appear absurd” (171) follows the by-now familiar SM theory of writers such as Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia. Henderson then brings the nuances of this argument to Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris*, a book that “recounts, in fictionalized form, the story of 45-year-old Hazlitt’s infatuation with Sarah Walker, the nineteen-year-old daughter of his landlord” (172). By tracing the painful pleasures of Hazlitt’s on-again, off-again, courtly-love inflected relationship with Walker, Henderson argues that *Liber Amoris* “does not simply offer a carnivalesque subversion of normative power relations; the power imaginatively conferred on S [the biographical representation of Sarah Walker] serves as a guard against egotism even as it makes available a mediated pleasure in power. The private character of this relationship makes it a safe forum for the indulgence in tyranny” (185). While this sounds fine, Henderson then makes a rather delimiting move, arguing that *Liber Amoris* “is not simply an anomaly, an autobiographical eyesore in the larger landscape of Hazlitt’s writings, but intimately linked to his development as a political thinker and writer” (193). Leaving aside the

question of why anomaly and eyesore might be “simple,” I’m more taken by the way H’s complex relationship with S becomes “simply” an allegory for Hazlitt’s complex relationship to politics in general and Napoleon in particular. Writes Henderson of Hazlitt, “he hoped to find in his relationship with Walker some compensation for political disappointments [...]. *Liber Amoris* represents an effort to work through political quandaries on an emotional and erotic level” (193). H’s sexuality, then, is always a displacement for something else—an argument I’ll buy, but that something else is a stable and stabilizing affective investment that is itself never considered as a displacement or a symptom: the investment in national politics. Writes Henderson,

Whether Jacobin or Tory, female or male, aristocrat or commoner, many thinkers and writers of the early nineteenth century found in scenes of erotic submission the means for *thinking through* the terror and hopes of an age of revolution. Turning to courtly love [in Hazlitt], images of Eastern despotism [in Byron’s *Don Juan*], or memories of the schoolroom [Coleman’s *The Rodiad*] to fuel their fantasies, they explore varied effects of eroticizing the hierarchies that had become the center of public debate at the turn of the century. The fictions they produced served sometimes to resuscitate hierarchy and sometimes to render it ridiculous. [...] When the public realm disappointed, or when it seemed disarmingly unstable, hierarchy at home, with all its nuances, frustrations, and satisfactions, seemed the best way to practice modern politics.

222-23, emphasis added

While this notion of how sexuality works is endemic to historicism’s methodologies, it offers quite a circumscribing notion of what should read “it offers quite a circumscribing definition of what sexuality might be and how it might work. While no one wants to return to the bad old days of Freudian reductionism, where certain political engagements are mere displacements for frustrations with mommy and daddy, I am equally unconvinced that we deploy our sexuality solely as a way of

“practicing modern politics,” as if the sexual object could only displace one thing and that one thing must be the political (which itself is a displacement for nothing at all).

To be fair, Henderson is aware of this tension in her book, and suspects herself of subordinating “representations of idealizing, submissive desire” to “more palatable themes” such as “the knot of causality that links Romantic art with Romantic-era politics and economics” (274). If the book does indeed do this, it is in complete accord with the orthodoxies of Cultural Materialism that submit all aspects of the personal to the grand narrative of The Political. But what’s more intriguing to me is the book’s dialogue with the very discourse that might shatter that hermeneutic stability, the discourse of psychoanalysis. (And here I’m obviously thinking less of old-style Freudian determinism than of the post-Lacanian, queerly inflected notions of the ego as the object of shattering, the post-human that can no longer seek in conscious engagement the signified of its symptoms.) As early as page 9, Henderson introduces in a footnote Leo Bersani’s *The Freudian Body* and the “shattering of the human subject” in art, a shattering that Bersani links directly to the experience of masochism. In contemporary uses of that shattering, and especially in the queer work of Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, and Bersani himself, the de-centered ego comes to be that which resists easy alignment with all forms of social signification, including an easy adherence to a political discourse that sexuality might trope. On page 86, Henderson makes a coy reference to Burney’s heroines enjoying their symptom, and gives us its source in Žižek in an endnote. Considering Žižek’s psychoanalytic point that enjoying your symptom is necessary because your symptom can never be worked through—its referent can never be identified and stabilized—it’s notable that Henderson repeatedly engages with psychoanalysis but always within footnotes (see also page 98 n51 and pages 188-89 n22). The psychoanalysis this book knows risks resisting the political stability the book also knows. The effect of consigning psychoanalysis to a footnote, then, is to replay at a formal level the book’s own interest in containing unsatisfied desire. The implications of the shattered ego flirt with us, they draw us toward their attractions for a plenitude we can’t possibly fulfill, but then they slip out from under us by appearing under the main body of the



argument. Perhaps one of the greatest pleasures of *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life*, then, is the way in which it performs a dialogue so crucial to late historicism, the dialogue with a psyche that threatens to undo it.

## Biographical note

**Steven Bruhm** is the Robert and Ruth Lumsden Professor of English at The University of Western Ontario, and author of *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (1994) and *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (2000).

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