



“The Blazing Muse”

Hysteria and the Politics of Popularity

Over the past century, two very different representations of Byron have dominated literary criticism and the popular imagination: Byron, the self-styled Gothic hero of Byromania, and the more “mature” Byron of political satire and *Don Juan*. Both Byrons have been well represented in literature, film, and criticism, but over the years the difference between them has been marked by a line drawn in the sand of Romantic studies, instigated in part by the influential commentaries of M. H. Abrams, Leslie Marchand, and, most notoriously, T. S. Eliot.¹ This cultural division of the Byron corpus, however, has a powerful antecedent among Byron’s own contemporaries, and twentieth-century critics are arguably simply following the lead of their predecessors when they differentiate the “legitimate” poet from his status as popular icon. As Andrew Elfenbein points out, nineteenth-century critics were quick to recognize the cultural “one-upmanship” to be had from creating a division between the “lowbrow” reader of the fantasy romances and the more astute readers of Byron’s “true” character:

Particularly for presumptive members of Britain’s social or artistic elite, Byron was significant less because of his sexual attractiveness than because his career allowed them to distinguish themselves from the reactions of “ordinary” readers. Such elite readers were attracted to Byron as a means by which to demonstrate the fitness of their cultural judgments by criticizing him in a uniquely “personal” way.²

Elfenbein goes on to note, this “critical distance from Byromania is familiar to students of Romanticism” precisely because so many of Byron’s contemporaries were very vocal about their distaste for, in

Keats's terms, the "figure he cut" in literary society. Effectively, what Byron's figure helped to "cut" was this demarcation between "fan" culture and academic scholarship so carefully policed in literary culture until the present day. As a result, the Byronic hero of the romances is still generally relegated to the realm of popular culture and film to which he is thought to belong. We find the "iconic" Byron making star appearances in Hollywood and beyond with a remarkable frequency. In *Lady Caroline Lamb* (1972), a heavily made-up Richard Chamberlain depicts the young Byron as an emotionally unstable opportunist who writes poetry for profit while inspiring near nymphomania in any woman ill-fated enough to hear it. In one scene, he reads *Childe Harold* to an audience of spellbound women whose breasts heave with a violence equaled only by the swelling crescendos of the film's soundtrack. Notably, we hear not a word of his poetry. Caroline herself, played by an equally over-the-top Sarah Miles, ends up killing herself for love of Byron by hurling herself into a Turneresque thunderstorm without a sufficiently woolly wrap. Similarly, in the 1988 film *A Haunted Summer*, a thoroughly Gothic Lord Byron appears on the staircase of the Hôtel d'Angleterre, black cape swirling with menace, as Claire Claremont clings wantonly to his arm. Ken Russell's *Gothic* (1986) represents Byron as a parody of this version of the Byronic since he is depicted not as a poet at all, but as one of his own worst vampiric monsters. Most recently, we find mass-market thrillers entitled as, for instance, *Lord of the Dead*, which represents Byron as a vampiric seducer à la Anne Rice,³ and a BBC web cartoon series called *Ghosts of Albion* (2003), in which the poet is depicted as a thoroughly rakish ghost who seeks to seduce one of the series' living, Victorian heroes.

Past Byron scholarship has worked hard to disassociate the poet from this kind of pop-Gothic depiction, seeing it as the inevitable but regrettable offspring of nineteenth-century Byromania. Echoing Coleridgean assumptions about what happens to literature when the barbarians are given the keys to the gate, a number of critics worried that Byron's reputation as a poet had been seriously undermined by his popularity and about the seemingly uncontrollable desire associated with Byromania.⁴ Certainly the recent film adaptations of Byron's life would have supported such critics' concerns, presenting, as they do, images of Byron wearing more make-up than his leading lady, of his perverse sexuality, and of his destructive behavior. In the most recent BBC biography of Byron starring Jonny Lee Miller (2003) we are even presented with the unedifying image of Byron in curling papers as he prepares for his next spectacular appearance as the "lion" of the social

season. Based on such images, it might well be argued that popular culture has reproduced (and continues to reproduce) Byron in its own image: feminine, passionate, and laughably shallow. Byron's redemption from his 'pop' image could thus only be achieved by insisting upon his "manly" and active commitment to the "real" *political* realm, and, in order to enact this redemption, he had to be distanced from the source of his embarrassingly feminine popularity—his early fantasy Romance tales.

The Romances have traditionally been defined by Byron criticism as a creative aberration on the part of the poet, a kind of poetic adolescence that Byron had to pass through in order to emerge as a "serious" poet who was in full command of his creative powers. This developmental trajectory, of course, partially parallels the Victorian perception of Byron's entire poetic corpus, astutely outlined by Elfenbein, as a kind of pap poetry that Victorian youth would cut their literary teeth on, allowing them to progress to more substantial reading matter as they too matured.⁵ This Victorian rhetoric, particularly concerning the early Romance tales, is very gendered, with the poetry's supposed immaturity and excessive passion associated both with adolescent sensibilities and with feminine hysteria. Byron's early work, the reader is repeatedly told, is vacuous, melodramatic, and excessive in every way, mirroring the emotional traits of its assumed target audience, the unsophisticated readership of women and adolescent boys. Indeed, anyone who still confessed to enjoying this poetry had to be prepared for the inevitable condemnation that would follow. Readers of early Byron, no less than Lady Caroline Lamb in Robert Bolt's film of that name, should expect to be chided by those who were more "searching in their tastes" to quote William Lamb. "Lord Byron," proclaims the cinematic William with derision, "writes like a housemaid with the vapors," and what this then suggests about the emotional maturity and taste of his *readers* is better left unsaid. Of course, some critics *do* go on to say it, one among many being Byron's recent biographer Fiona MacCarthy, who claims that

the correspondence [from Byron's fans] shows the remarkable capacity of Byron's more neurotic female readers to construct their personal scenarios around him, convinced by the intense emotionalism of his poetry that they are addressing "a feeling Heart."⁶

Repeated references to Byron's readers as "squealing females" and neurotics have become commonplace and largely unquestioned in Romantic criticism.

What needs to be noted about this critical narrative of Byronism as pathology, born of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century critical rhetoric, is the manner in which so many modern critics, until very recently, have energetically replicated it when describing popular culture in general. With the recent explosion of interest in popular culture as an academic discipline, such language is certainly beginning to be questioned (although, notably, it is still not acceptable to *be* a fan in the academy, only to study fan behavior). But while Elfenbein's wonderful critical analysis illuminates the Victorian representations of Byronism, and Dino Franco Felluga's has been equally adroit at uncovering eighteenth-century representations of diseased passions and imagination that ground so many of the early attacks on Byronism, little criticism has been done to extend this analysis to the present day. Depictions of mass readership as a hysterical and emotionally underdeveloped mob so prevalent today both in criticism and in the media are not, in fact, modern inventions, but rather the echo of a much earlier call to arms in the cultural crisis that was seen to be taking place in the early nineteenth century. It was the rise of republicanism that portended the equally revolutionary birth of "mass" culture.

The following chapter will examine the ways in which this extant language of aberration and feminine hysteria, still used to define popular culture, emerged out of the nineteenth-century's cultural anxieties about mass production, the growth of what Arthur Hallam would refer to as that "hydra, the Reading Public," and the feminization of culture, all of which were seen to be embodied by the event known as Byromania.⁷ In the following, I will suggest that it is not an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century rhetoric of Burkean conservatism to which we should look for our own definitions of popular culture and fan "hysteria"—a definition based on a fear of feminine tendencies to perversion, excess and addictive tendencies—but rather to Freudian concepts of violent repression and referred desire. By reading Byromania through this very different lens by which to understand both the poet's relation to his popularity and to his "hysterical fans," a far more nuanced and radical reading of Byron's romances *as* a politic begins to emerge. Popular culture is not, as so many critics over the past century have suggested, at its most dangerous to the status quo when it reveals itself to be anarchic, passionate, and irrational; on the contrary, the greatest threat to authorized culture is when this hysterical sister, fandom, emerges as the repressed expression of unspeakable desires.

"Inconsequential Revolts": Politics and Pathology

In any examination of Byron's relationship to his feminized readership, it is always the Turkish Tales and the poet's early romances that come in for the greatest part of the blame. The romances, it is argued, fed the frenzy of the poet's fan base, and ultimately created the monster of Byromania since these poems were read as erotic fantasies. Marilyn Butler goes so far as to argue that not only was the early poetry not "political," it actually operated as an escape mechanism from the actual political issues of the day.⁸ Texts like *The Corsair*, we are told, with "their amorous or erotic charge, diverted Byron's readers from their own political frustrations."⁹ Certainly, for Walter Bagehot, Byron's romances become the literary equivalent of the racy book kept under a schoolboy's mattress: "a stray school boy may still be detected in a wild admiration for the *Giaour* or the *Corsair* (and it is suitable to his age, and he should not be reproached for it), but the *real* posterity—the quiet students of a past literature—never read them or think of them."¹⁰ To this, Samuel Chew adds a corrective: "in this there is of course much truth, but Bagehot shows no awareness of the fact that not by the immature oriental tales has Byron been held in remembrance," but rather by his more "manly" satiric poetry.¹¹ Of course, many of Byron's critics have come to privilege his later satires over his earlier romance tales since the former are seen as socially engaged, political, and thus "real." Byron's later work is redeemed by its attempts to motivate political activism (*Don Juan*) while his romances set out to seduce his feminine audience (the Turkish Tales). David Crane's biography of Trelawny, *Lord Byron's Jackal*,¹² offers a good example of this kind of political resuscitation of the early, "oriental" poet. It argues that the emergence of Byron's "mature" political writing came only after the poet's maturation as a man and his disassociation from the damaging influences of an effeminate, Italian lifestyle—a lifestyle Crane explicitly links to his emotionally overheated popular romance poems.

One of the most moving aspects of his last year is the way his letters and actions reveal a gradual firming of purpose, a steady discarding of the fripperies and conceits of his Italian existence, a unifying of personality; an alignment at last of intelligence and sensibility—a growth into human greatness which mirrors the development of his literary talents from the emotional and psychological crudity of Childe Harold into the mature genius of Don Juan.¹³

For Crane, as for Chew, Byron's maturation as a poet and as an individual coincided with his turn from the soft feminine "fripperies"—which presumably left him poetically "flaccid"—to "firm" political activism.

This commentary concerning Byron and his "feminine" poetics becomes particularly significant when we place it alongside the rhetoric frequently used to describe a female poet, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, who had much the same professional trajectory as Byron, and who is commonly referred to as "the female Byron" by critics of her own day. Landon was viewed as *the* poet of passion and her poetry repeatedly examined issues of lovelorn and deserted women; her style was most commonly referred to as "Byronic" for those emotional extremes so controversially remarked on in the *Tales*.¹⁴ Landon, who is enjoying a resurgence of critical interest at present, operates as a template of this language concerning Byron's "failure" as a poet and as a man during his early fame.¹⁵ What Landon provides for many of Byron's critics is an alarming example of what might happen to Byron's own poetic reputation should the discourse of his success as an emotional and commercially astute poet and as a celebrity be maintained. To be either is to be condemned to the realm of Landon—a poet frequently dismissed, even by many feminist critics, as irredeemably feminine, emotional, and unworthy of "canonization."¹⁶ Thus, Germaine Greer famously accuses Landon of a kind of pathology referred to as "Woman of Genius Syndrome,"¹⁷ while other critics damn her for capitulating (albeit very successfully) both to the commercialism and rampant commodification of the late Romantic period. Angela Leighton is accused by yet another Landon critic, Emma Francis, of seeing "Landon's aesthetic of sensibility and sensuality as politically flaccid, a continuous emotional ooze which cannot contain itself sufficiently to ossify into a basis for analysis or action."¹⁸ Such passages begin to explain the otherwise opaque comments by critics like Crane and William J. Calvert who insist, above all else, on Byron's great "hardness" of purpose and potential to "ossify" into critical analysis. Calvert argues, for example, "Byron is rock—and the hard outcroppings may indicate geologic epochs or hot underflows of lava that are worth noting and understanding."¹⁹ Far from being emotionally "sloppy" or politically "flaccid," as his similarities to such feminine poets as Landon might lead us to believe, Byron is as hard as any poet can get without actually becoming petrified in our imagination as a walking phallus. It would be easy to simply mock this unconsciously sexualized and misogynistic language, but there is a serious issue at stake here. Byron's emotionalism

and astute self-commodification must, in many critics’ eyes, be rescued from its feminizing associations if he is to be viewed both as a “real” poet and as a real man.

Notably, Marlon Ross is quick to recognize Byron’s own self-consciousness about this “feminine” role in the commodification of his poetry, and for him the poet’s “maturation” is marked not so much by his new political activism, but by a “self-possession” that makes it clear he has refused to “[soften] his masculine guise” for the sake of what he understands to be a “vulgarized and feminized” audience. But if, as Ross has so cogently argued, this was Byron’s own strategy for disassociating himself from the feminine realm of his poetic fame, his critics have been quick to further his endeavors. As Robert Escarpit argues, such a critical differentiation is actually *demande*d since the “essential features of Byron’s character” (his political engagement) have been “consciously and willfully erased” over the years through the critical emphasis on Byron’s more artistically dubious romances:

After having been re-established by John Murray on account of his performance in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, and after having been engaged by Murray in his literary factory as a specialist of melancholy moods, of inconsequential revolt, powerless bitterness and mysterious exoticism, Byron later was amicably but firmly dismissed by his publisher and literary advisors when, having exhausted the poor resources of that vein, he tried to strike back through *Don Juan* towards the main stream of militant poetry which in his heart of hearts he had never forsaken.²⁰

Similarly, Algernon Swinburne argued that Byron was redeemed only by his political radicalism since his poetry aimed at the masses was effete and superficial. For Swinburne, Byron “wrote from the heart” as the *true* Byron only when he wrote about politics:

A just and contemptuous hatred of Georgian government, combined with a fitful and theatrical admiration of the first Bonaparte, made him too often write and speak like a vilely bad Englishman—“the friend of every country but his own”: but his sympathy with the cause of justice during the blackest years of dynastic reaction on the continent makes him worthy even yet of a sympathy and respect which no other quality of his character or his work could now by any possibility command from any quarter worth a moment’s consideration or regard.²¹

William Ruddick suggests that Swinburne and his generation of writers, while brutally condemning Byron as a “feminine” poet were, as we see in the preceding argument, nonetheless absorbing and being thoroughly influenced by the politics of *Don Juan*. Thus, they soon saw the truth of Byron’s genius, claims Ruddick, and “moved beyond superficial imitation of his social panorama technique” since such imitations were little more than “reanimations of the ‘Byronic Hero’ figure.” They turned, instead, to the great lessons of the poet’s political philosophy, as presented in his last poems, to reach the poet’s most sincere and profound “truths”—truths that inevitably reveal the poet as a political rather than a romance writer.²² Chew is in full agreement with such a view, since he lauds John Morley’s analysis of Byron as “masterly” and perhaps the best biography of Byron largely because he gives us “an admirable estimate of Byron as the heir to revolutionary thought, the popularizer and propagator of revolutionary sentiment, and the embodiment of revolutionary sentiment.”²³ For a long line of critics like Morley, who were invested in resuscitating the poet’s reputation, Byron’s “truth” *had* to be positioned within his political work; his other more popular writing was reprehensible pandering to an unworthy audience that the poet himself eventually dismissed. In this way, it is only by releasing Byron from his mania, Morley implies, that the real “Byron” can live on into critical posterity—and for him the “real” poet is unproblematically defined; he was “the greatest literary organ of revolution” in England.²⁴ Indeed Escarpit tells us that it has been an ongoing preoccupation for Byron critics to determine “which, *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan* is the better poem and which more truthfully expresses [the poet’s] personality.” In such debates, says Escarpit, the critic must necessarily choose between “the meretricious symbol of a cheap romanticism or the harsh truth of a historical man.”²⁵ Byron can be one or the other, not both.

The Politics of Hysteria

Before we can understand Byromania *as* a politic closely associated with the birth of popular culture, however, we must first understand the political atmosphere that made this association between a feminized literary popularity and radical politics possible in the first place. As we have already seen, the violent events of the mid-1600s and their association with a growing religious “enthusiasm” in the populace set the stage for the development of new theories of “crowd psychology” in nineteenth-century Britain.²⁶ As Jon Mee puts it, British society remained “haunted by the fear of the combustible matter within both the individual

and the body politic," both of which seemed to be ignited by the inflammatory nature of enthusiasm, whether experienced through religious sublimity or literary transcendence.²⁷ And because the experience of enthusiasm was read as being a state of unmediated access both to God and to the people's will it became increasingly associated, at least in more conservative minds, with a state of antiauthoritarian chaos, if not actual anarchy.²⁸ By the early nineteenth century, however, much of the specifically religious association with enthusiasm had been either dropped or forgotten.²⁹ "Enthusiasm" increasingly becomes synonymous with "fanaticism." And for Mee, "what these more general understandings of the dangers of enthusiasm tended to retain from the primary religious discourse was the idea of the peculiar vulnerability of it to the masses."³⁰ In short, the political rhetoric surrounding the term "enthusiasm," which had been circulating since the mid-1600s, lay an ideal foundation for the new political discourse of mob hysteria emerging out of conservative responses to the French Revolution. Just as "enthusiasm" or "fanaticism" in the eighteenth century came to signify the "tendency within the population to be swept by crazes,"³¹ so historical events in the nineteenth century seemed to validate this definition.

As the French Revolution began to emerge as a political movement closely associated with millennial enthusiasm, it was perhaps inevitable that Britain should come to see it already in the context of its own civil war and political tensions. Certainly much of the conservative British response to the French Revolution can be understood in relation to its own political battles with the problem of enthusiasm. But what still needs to be explored is how enthusiasm, fanaticism, and later crowd hysteria all came to be signified by feminine excess. After all, the English Civil War was not an event associated with women, and the French Revolution was born out of Enlightenment philosophies of reason and propelled by masculinist depictions of the classical Republic. How then, did the entity known as "the crowd" get marked by the language of hysteria, femininity, and mass culture by the twentieth century?

Certainly, the shift would have seemed an unlikely one on July 14, 1789, when the Bastille fell. An enthusiastic Charles James Fox pronounced upon news of the Revolution that it was "much the greatest event that ever happened in the history of the world!"³² Mary Wollstonecraft similarly celebrated the Revolution as the dawn of a new age in which the light of reason would replace the past darkness of oppression and superstition. As she put it, "the revolution in France exhibits a scene, in the political world, not less novel and interesting than the contrast is striking between the narrow opinions of superstition, and the

enlightened sentiments of masculine and improved philosophy.”³³ For Wollstonecraft, this “new dawn” would pave the way for “a revolution in female manners” that would educate women to be more “masculine,” which is to say more “rational.”³⁴ Wollstonecraft’s hope that the revolution would “masculinize” women has laid her open to some severe criticism from feminist critics over the last century,³⁵ but, ironically, the Revolution itself was made increasingly more *feminized* in the historical imagination. From Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), until the present day, the Revolution has been commonly condemned by its detractors as a “fall” into a feminized politic.³⁶ Conrad Donakowski, for example, claims that the French Revolution produced “the most dramatic translation of western myth and cult in recent times” since it began to

reorient [civilization] from the “higher” to the “lower” classes and faculties of man. Socially, this meant a change in reverence from the precepts of the classes to the instincts of the masses; philosophically, a reorientation from knowledge to experience; psychologically, a change in emphasis from reasoned assessment of an objective world toward spontaneous expression of the subjective; and sexually, a change from an Apollonian, masculine ideal toward the supposedly feminine.³⁷

Such an interpretation of the French Revolution is important to examine for several rhetorical reasons since it clearly aligns the Revolution with a fall from “the polite precepts of the upper classes to the instincts of the sub counter-cultures.”³⁸ In so doing, it aligns the French Revolution not only with the realm of passive consumption and mass production spoken of by Radway,³⁹ but also with the emotional, the irrational, and the feminine. This view has established itself as the abiding myth of the French Revolution in the popular imagination, and we still see the feminized discourse that grounds so many assumptions about mass production and popular culture as its cultural inheritance. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, after the nineteenth century, mass culture is

persistently described in terms of a feminine threat. Images of the raging mob as hysterical, of the engulfing floods of revolt and revolution, of the swamp of big city life, of the spreading ooze of massification, of the figure of the red whore at the barricades. . . . The fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always also a fear of women, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass.⁴⁰

Certainly for Donakowski the events of the Revolution suggest a fall from upper- to lower-class sensibilities, from the acts of great men to indiscriminate mobs, from reason and Apollonian light to hysteria and Dionysian orgies of blood. In recent years, historians of the French Revolution such as Lynn Hunt have carefully charted the manner in which such shifts in Revolutionary imagery occurred and how the Revolution, despite Wollstonecraft's fondest hopes, became identified with the feminine only in this "irrational" manner.⁴¹ The question then becomes, how did the move from one vision of the French Revolution to the other also create a gendered understanding of popular culture and the fan?

During the early years of the Revolution, many in England had been caught up in the utopianism of the moment only to regret their support in later years as a kind of fanaticism. Wordsworth speaks for a generation when he excuses his past republicanism because of his youth and the contagious "spirit of the age":

Oh! Much have they to account for, who could tear,
By violence, at one decisive rent,
From the best youth in England their dear pride,
Their joy, in England; this too at a time
In which worst losses easily might wear
The best names, when patriotic love
Did of itself in modesty give way
...
In which apostasy from ancient faith
Seemed but conversion to a higher creed;
Withal a season dangerous and wild,
A time in which Experience would have plucked
Flowers out of any hedge to make thereof
A chaplet in contempt of his grey locks.

(1850 *Prelude* 10.300–314)

Despite the seductive irrationality of this "dangerous and wild" season of revolution, Wordsworth was well aware at the time that the Revolution was thought—even by him—to be motivated *not* by enthusiasm (and thus not by the same dangerous fanaticism popularly associated with the English civil war), but by reason:

I could almost
Have prayed that throughout earth upon all souls
By patient exercise of reason made

Worthy of liberty, upon every soul
 Matured to live in plainness and in truth,
 The gift of tongues might fall, and men arrive
 From the four quarters of the winds to do
 For France, what without help she could not do.

(1850 *Prelude* 10.134–140)

In fact, the Revolution was celebrated as the very flowering of humanity's capacity to reason. Thomas Paine represented the opposition between a republic and a monarchy as the opposition between "reason and ignorance":

government in a well-constituted republic, requires no belief from man beyond what his reason can give. He sees the *rationale* of the whole system, its origin and its operation; and as it is best supported when best understood, the human faculties act with boldness, and acquire, under this form of government, a gigantic manliness.⁴²

In France, the cult of Reason was introduced, organized around celebrations in Notre Dame where Reason was celebrated as a new divinity.⁴³ While this cult did not prosper as a practice, these rituals nonetheless marked the reverence with which Reason was held during these years. Even in England it was viewed as quasi-divine, as is evidenced by Wordsworth's aforementioned imagery of the Pentecost and the heavenly gift of tongues.⁴⁴ Here was the new path to humanity's salvation and it would not be an exaggeration to argue that it was represented as the means by which humanity could return to a new Eden. Robert Southey, among many others, described the Revolution as the beginning of a new "visionary world" in which mankind would see the "regeneration of the human race," while for Wordsworth, the Revolution was a "renovation of the natural order of things."⁴⁵ For many intellectuals in England, the fall of the Bastille marked the beginnings of precisely an Edenic era in which Man, led by Reason, would return to a state before the Fall. As the historian Carl Cone remarks:

There was a kind of millennialism in the Jacobins' thought rather than scientific determinism. The well-being of men must follow upon political reform, simply because the people's voices and votes must give expression to their desires, and because government controlled by the people must give effect to their demands.⁴⁶

Thus, revolution is “reasonable” because it allows the populace to return to a natural state of freedom after having been fettered and silenced by artificial institutions. In true Enlightenment terms, humanity is perfectible and what has halted civilization’s progress to a paradise on earth is the oppressive restraint of artificial institutions. For Girondists like Condorcet and radicals like William Godwin, what the Revolution set out to realize was a “vision of human development in which all these institutions [church, aristocracy, guild] were to be deemed not simply moral evils, but obstacles to the natural course of progress to civilization that would prevail if only these groups and institutions could be extirpated.”⁴⁷ The human subject had become degraded through centuries of restrictions on its freedom, both personal and political. Once these restrictions were removed the populace could at last “give expression to their desires” and thus become fulfilled and happy.⁴⁸

But while the millennial hopes of the early Revolution had been marked by the popular discourse of France as an Edenic realm where the people would finally be free to “express their desires,” the Terror revealed all too clearly that such unrestricted “expression” could produce a terrifying *second* Fall. Indeed, if the Terror in France was not enough, Britain could turn to its own history, specifically its civil war, for further evidence of what such widespread political euphoria could do to the stability of a nation. The upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s remained worrying reminders of what might happen to the nation’s body politic when possessed by a state of unrestricted religious or political enthusiasm. As was noted even at the time, such millennial enthusiasm on the part of a nation’s leaders was in danger of producing nothing less than a diseased imagination that “disposes a man to listen to the Magisterial Dictates of an over-bearing *Phansy*, more than to the calm and cautious insinuation of free *Reason*.”⁴⁹ With the rising violence of Jacobin rule it seemed that, like the British civil war before it, the French Revolution could bring about mob rule rather than a new Eden.

This vision of the Revolution is the one more familiar to modern readers of English literature who have been confronted, all too often, with the bloodthirsty cackles of Charles Dickens’s Madame Defarge as she enthusiastically knits the family names of victims for the guillotine in *A Tale of Two Cities*. But what made this shift in imagery from reason to irrationality possible in the first place is the Revolutionary violence that broke out in the early 1790s. On September 2, 1792, in what became known as the September Massacres, violence broke out in the streets of Paris leaving at least fourteen hundred people dead, many of whom were

tortured and abused before being brutally murdered. Revolutionary historians remain conflicted about how to explain this act of seemingly unmotivated mob violence, the single most horrific and inexcusable event of the revolutionary years.⁵⁰ Nineteenth-century Britain, equally confused by the bloodshed, became increasingly more disillusioned by the revolutionary movement as a result and more convinced of its “fanaticism.”

Having been enthusiastically supportive of the Revolution across the channel until the massacres, British intellectuals once friendly to the Girondin cause now began to reevaluate their support. By the accession of Napoleon, most had come to view their earlier republican ideals as the tragically misguided opinions of their past, less rational selves. This past was both their nation’s own historical past, remembered in the violence of the civil war’s enthusiasm, but also their personal past. Thus for figures like Wordsworth, the Terror became linked in his mind with Reason’s hideous offspring. It was a monstrous child who demanded

Head after head, and never heads enough
 For those who bade them fall. They found their joy,
 They made it, ever thirsty as a child,
 (If light desires of little ones
 May with such heinous appetites be matched)

(1850 *Prelude* 10.362–366)

If, for Wordsworth and his early republican sympathizers, the initial promise of the Revolution had been that of a return to Paradise itself, the tragedy of the Revolution was that a serpent had yet again found its way into this new Garden of Eden. It was not that such a paradise was unattainable, but rather that it had been corrupted and destroyed by an alien, monstrous force—specifically a force identified with uncontrollable appetites, irrationality, infantile desires and hysteria.⁵¹ In short, “the serpent” that threatened this republican paradise was the fanatical mob, and, as Wollstonecraft would forcefully contend, it was women that Western culture had long established as most susceptible to the serpent’s charms.

The cultural seeds of anxiety regarding the close relationship between crowds and femininity had been planted in the English mind long before the Terror. Enthusiasm, at its worst, was repeatedly perceived as something that women were more susceptible to than men, largely because of their more impressionable and “fleshly” nature. They were more likely to be attracted to, and swayed by, what was considered to be

the more bodily pleasures of religious enthusiasm, for example. Thus, as Jon Mee points out, women prophets—or indeed any woman who acted within the public realm—became “a standard figure brought forward in discussions of female hysteria” since they had surrendered proper femininity to the ravishment of their spirit.⁵² Equally, any male who had succumbed to the dissolving powers of enthusiastic visions was thought to be “unmanly” precisely because he had been “ravished” by a vision that dissolved not only the proper boundaries of subjectivity in his experience of the sublime, but also those of gender as well. Identity and sexual norms were seen to become blurred and problematic in this realm, the true “enthusiast” becoming the embodiment of the easily swayed individual who had no identity outside of his or her association with this new monstrous entity.⁵³

But while this feminization of the crowd was well on its way to being established in the cultural imagination by the end of the eighteenth century, it took the French Revolution to really develop and confirm it. Indeed, in France, the mob became ubiquitously characterized as an irrational, feminized force of violence and perversion.⁵⁴ Madelyn Gutwirth is particularly lucid on this point: “that the female form should have come to embody in legend the most sensational aspects of French Revolutionary murderousness is not an accident: it is instead a culturally overdetermined eventuality.”⁵⁵ Certainly Mary Wollstonecraft would have agreed, for as we have seen she too recognized that women had to shake off such past cultural associations with Eve and the Fall if they were to ever break free of patriarchal oppression. “We must,” she argues, “get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin: the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora’s box, and the other fables.”⁵⁶ It was not long before all the unpleasant events that occurred in the Revolution were attributed to an “other” feminine force. If the Revolution had fallen from an Eden ruled by Reason into a violent realm of disorder and death, it was at the feet of women that Europe would largely lay the blame.

Edmund Burke has become perhaps the most famous spokesman for this misogynist view with his representation of the “vilest of women” threatening Marie Antoinette with their phallic pikes, but he was by no means alone.⁵⁷ Generally believed to have unhealthy appetites and addictive natures, the feminized mob was viewed as monstrous, pathological, and hysterical. The German Girondist Konrad Engelbert Oelsner argued in his “Letter from Paris” (1792) that it was women who led the excesses of the Massacres and Terror, and their supposed brutality became a common theme in revolutionary discourse: “I must say that it is the women who,

in all the stormy scenes of the Revolution, have always been the first to invent and execute atrocities, or to incite men to commit new tortures and bloody deeds."⁵⁸ Nor did such feminine excesses come as a surprise to the Jacobin leaders who were, if possible, even more damning in their view of women. As André Amar proclaimed, speaking on behalf of the Committee of General Security in 1793, women by their very physical organization, were more susceptible to the kind of excitement that would make it impossible for them to behave according to the dictates of revolutionary reason: "Let us add that women are disposed by their organization to an over-excitation which would be deadly in public affairs and that interests of state would soon be sacrificed to everything which ardor in passions can generate in the way of error and disorder."⁵⁹ Women were seen to be incapable of the reason essential to build a revolutionary paradise and, just as eighteenth-century England had condemned women for being too susceptible to the raptures of religious enthusiasm,⁶⁰ so too the French Revolutionaries saw women's susceptibility to passion not only as a threat to the health of the republic's body politic, but also as a breeder of hysteria.⁶¹ As the convention noted, the involvement of women in the public sphere could only lead to "the kinds of disruption and disorder that hysteria can produce."⁶²

Quarantining women from the public realm was one obvious way by which nineteenth-century culture attempted to protect itself from the irrational violence of hysterical outbreaks, and this was attempted by the Jacobins throughout their leadership. But this strategy created its own logical problems: if women alone were constitutionally formed to be susceptible to hysterical violence, why did mob violence continue in the populace even *after* women had been excluded from the public arena. If hysteria was a woman's disease, how was one to explain the same hysterical behavior in men? As a response to this conundrum, medical research began to analyze the affects of revolutionary unrest on the minds of the general populace by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Philippe Pinel initiated the most famous study of what came to be known as "revolutionary insanity," through his work with hysterics and the insane in the years following the French Revolution. As Hippolyte Taine, another scholar of the nervous temperament, writes, this disease can be seen as the direct result of "unnatural" excitement: "the passions . . . become intensified through their mutual interaction: crowds, clamour, disorder, longings and fasting, end in a state of phrensy, from which nothing can issue but dizzy madness and rage."⁶³ Based on the medical theories of Pinel, Taine, and others like them, there was a growing concern that the hysterical behavior in women was

not solely the result of a physiological disorder originating in a woman's constitution. Women were certainly seen to be far more susceptible to its infection because of their physiognomy, but this was increasingly seen as a disease originating from *outside* the body of the subject. No longer located in the wandering convulsions of the womb, hysteria was being rewritten as a disease of the nerves, that attacked the subject through external stimuli—specifically the excitement of current political events. As George Man Burrows argues in his *Commentaries* (1828):

Insanity bears always a striking relation to public events. Great political or civil revolutions in states are always productive of great enthusiasm in the people, and correspondent vicissitudes in their moral condition; and as all extremes in society are exciting causes, it will occur, that in proportion as the feelings are acted upon, so will insanity be more or less frequent. Accordingly, Pinel has observed, how common mental alienation was in France, from the effects of revolution, and Dr. Hallaran remarked the same, as the effect of the last rebellion in Ireland. Rush has given many examples of the influence of the American revolution on the human body and mind. . . . These affections were so frequent amongst among the royalists that Rush gave them the specific name of '*Revolutiana*,' and they bore the character of despondency; to the species of insanity pervading the revolutionists, that of '*Anarchia*,' bearing the opposite character.⁶⁴

Similarly, John Brown argued in his well-known English translation of *Elementa Medicinae* (1795) that all living tissue was characterized by its state of "excitement":

Excitement, the effect of exciting powers, the true cause of life, is, within certain boundaries, produced in a degree proportioned to the degree of stimulus. The degree of stimulus, when moderate, produces health; in a higher degree it gives occasion to diseases of excessive stimulus: in lower degree, or ultimately low, it induces those that depend upon deficiency of stimulus or debility.⁶⁵

Hysteria and other emotional disorders were caused by the effects of too much or too little "excitement" upon the nerves and could be caused by politics, coffee, or sexual passion. The ramifications of this shift in the cultural understanding of hysteria were dramatic. Hysteria was now no longer interpreted solely as a "woman's disease" restricted to a specifically gendered body; it now had the alarming capacity to attack

and rewrite the bodies of both genders *as* feminine when they were exposed to the contaminants of nervous excitation. Thus, Taine argues that even if women were not the most guilty parties in the anarchic events that had become associated with the Terror, any who participated in its chaos would have proven themselves to *be* feminine on some level. He dismisses the republican assembly en masse in precisely these terms: “The truth is, they display the nervousness of women, and, from one end of the Revolution to the other, this excitability keeps on increasing.”⁶⁶ Hysteria had been translated from a containable, individual disease, to a mass, worryingly contagious epidemic. It had become, quite literally, a sign of the times.

This new understanding of hysteria as a disease of the “unsexed” nerves did not exonerate women from much of the blame so commonly leveled against them in relation to this condition. Men could contract hysteria, but it was only “feminine” men that were susceptible. In eighteenth-century medical documents it was most commonly assumed that hysteria originated in the subject’s “softness”—a softness to which, as we have seen in our discussion of enthusiasm, women were thought to be dangerously open, but also to which men were liable. According to Thomas Trotter, the influential writer of the *View of the Nervous Temperament* (1807):

The female constitution therefore, furnished by nature with peculiar delicacy and feeling, soft in its muscular fibre, and easily acted upon by stimuli, has all its native tenderness increased by artificial refinements. Hence the diseases of which we now treat, are in a manner the inheritance of the fair sex.⁶⁷

Taine reminds us that men (of a specifically “soft” or feminine temperament) could develop the disease, but the tendency to do so was an “inheritance” of women—women were the carriers. Further, this new emphasis on the cultural origins of the disease did not alter the medical profession’s assumption that hysterical women were responsible for their own convulsive state. Beizer notes that the eighteenth-century specialists

began to emphasize an affective rather than a somatic etiology, tracing the disease to moral causes, or passion. But this meant that women were more prone to hysteria than men were, for their nature was more delicate and impressionable, their responses more emotional—and necessarily so, for their maternal destiny so commanded. Denied a

literal etiological role, the womb nevertheless returned as a metaphoric agent of hysteria.⁶⁸

Doctors like William Cullen, who ascribed hysteria to neurological causes, nonetheless traced its origin to uterine problems, arguing that this was why it is so prevalent in nymphomaniacs.⁶⁹ By the end of the century, however, Pinel had succeeded in disassociating hysteria from actual female anatomy by linking it to the violent excesses experienced by the populace during the French Revolution, but the more subtle associations between hysteria and female sexuality would remain. Even as Pinel came to define hysterical outbreaks for his own generation as a "revolutionary disease," the symptomatology and origins of hysteria remained highly gendered. It may have been viewed as a mental illness brought on by any number of sensual causes including "great physical or moral sensitivity, abuse of pleasures, vivid and recurrent emotions, voluptuous conversation and reading," but all of these influences were culturally viewed as thoroughly "feminine" tendencies.⁷⁰

In short, very little had actually changed for women despite the medical profession's reassessment of hysteria's origin from the wandering womb to an individual's lack of "substance." Now a woman's womb had come to *metaphorically* rather than physically signify the "emptiness" and softness of her general character. Such softness would be redeemed by maternity in healthy women, while for unhealthy women this void of "excitement" could become a sort of vacuum that demanded repeated sensual "filling." At worst, women in such diseased states would become nymphomaniacs; at best, they would be creatures given over to insatiable appetites in everything from novel-reading to eating spicy foods in an attempt to fill the "void" at their center.⁷¹ Such was their propensity to addiction that not only had women become addicted to the "fleshy raptures" of religious enthusiasm in the past (as Mee points out, Jonathan Swift even "made the female genitalia the oracle of enthusiasm"⁷² a century earlier), but also even "the contents of the circulating library [were] devoured with indiscriminate and insatiable avidity."⁷³ The *Bon Ton* magazine of May 1793 declared rather hysterically that "every day continues to furnish fresh instances of female insatiability, insomuch that one would be inclined to think that most stimulating, indeed maddening, of all disorders to which the human body is liable—the *furor uterinus*—was become epidemic."⁷⁴

"Byromania," I argue, was seen as just one more example of such feminine insatiability operating upon the cultural corpus. It wasn't simply British women that were being infected by nervous disorders as the

critic's reluctant reference to the ungendered "human body" suggests; Britain's entire populace was becoming hysterical. As Trotter worriedly remarked, it was becoming the case that "*nervous disorders* . . . may be justly reckoned two thirds of the whole, with which civilized society is afflicted."⁷⁵ For these critics, the nation's disease could be traced back to excessive cultural "stimulation" experienced by the populace at large, not only through recent access to the foreign substances of tobacco, tea, and spices, but also as we shall see in Chapter 4, the more worrying domestic stimulants of novels, periodicals, and journals. As Thomas Love Peacock playfully remarks in *Nightmare Abbey* (1817), the overstimulation and excitement of the senses brought on by recent tastes and events in Britain had made the nation "nervous" and "hag ridden":

Tea has shattered our nerves; late dinners make us slaves of indigestion; the French Revolution has made us shrink from the name of philosophy, and has destroyed in the more refined part of the community (of which number I am one) all enthusiasm for political liberty. That part of the *reading public* that shuns the solid food of reason for the light diet of fiction, requires a perpetual adhibition of *sauce piquante* to the palate of its depraved imagination.⁷⁶

Importantly, there is no distinction made by these theorists between the sources of fictional and material contaminants: a "real" revolution has no more potential effect on the subject than a fictional one. Hence we have Catherine Morland's wonderful confusion of literary "horrors"—which she describes as "something very shocking indeed"—with actual political riots in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.⁷⁷ As Adela Pinch remarks "Eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists are preoccupied by and at the same time strangely unconcerned about the question of *where* feelings come from: whether one is responding to a person, or a representation of a person suffering seems, in many cases, ultimately not to make any difference to the emotional experience itself."⁷⁸ Thus, "exciting" literature was seen to be just as dangerous a stimulant as an actual riot because it produced the same emotional impulses upon our nerves. While the Romantic era certainly saw a literary culture that gave new validation and tolerance to the excitement and experience of enthusiasm in its poetry, "it was only because literariness itself came to be seen as part of the process of regulation"⁷⁹ that it *was* tolerated as something that would not destroy the very culture it sought to enrich. As we shall see, Byromania, which was "unregulated" in every sense of the word, may not have caused a revolution in fact, but it was nonetheless