



## Research article

# “Lone are the paths”: A Review of British Women Romantic Poets

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## Abstract

The Romantic Era saw significant advancement and change; it was also characterised by firmly rooted patriarchal beliefs. Women were relegated to the roles of housewives, carers, and wives because they were viewed as inferior to males. Women were excluded from the literary canon and their voices were muted during the period, which was mirrored in the patriarchal values of the literary community. However, female poets like Felicia Hemans, Mary Robinson, and Dorothy Wordsworth expressed their courage in emphasising the wonder of nature and stirred powerful feelings in their audience. They frequently wrote about nature in terms of how it evokes feelings such as pleasure, pain, and desire. They used nature to express their sentiments and experiences. They focused their attention not only on domestic affairs and social obligations but also proved their worth and craftsmanship, gathering experiences of nature's beauty.

**Keywords:** Romanticism, male, woman, nature, canon, and culture.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author/s declared no conflicts of interest.

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research.

**Article History:** Received: 12 March 2025. Revised: 24 June 2025. Accepted: 27 June 2025. First published: 30 June 2025.

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**Published by:** [Aesthetix Media Services, India](#) ↗

**Citation:** Hani, B. U. E. & Ali, Z. (2025). “Lone are the paths”: A Review of British Women Romantic Poets. *Rupkatha Journal*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v17n2.09g>



## 1. Introduction

The male poets of the Romantic revival period emphasised the importance of both nature and social concerns. The female poets exercised their talent to address the causes of women and social concerns during the Romantic Revival period; they did not focus on the spontaneity of expression or overwhelming feelings. They emphasised family and community care, as well as the attendant practical responsibilities, rather than the male writer's detached self. Women writers work for the cause of domestic affairs. The well-known poets are Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Felicia Dorothea Hemans, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.). these poets had to find out their own ways to describe socio-cultural concerns and look for amicable solutions in their poetry. (Crisafulli & Pietropoli, 2007, p. 1-8)

The political system of the 17th and 18th centuries, which was ultimately led by men, consistently denied women a dignified position in society. The Romantic period, during which women were increasingly becoming part of the literary canon, was never properly recognised. The certain patriarchal politics that led in such discrimination included: lack of educational opportunity, consideration of women as a weaker sex in society, and prescribed gender roles.

In the 1990s, feminist literary historians called attention to the vast output of female writers, poets, playwrights, novelists, historians, political theorists, and scientists in England between 1780 and 1830. (Labbe, 2010, p. 1) Their work fundamentally altered the British literary landscape. Education for all to be stretched among both sexes was powerfully endorsed in Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792). The conservative writer, such as Hannah More, was instrumental in emancipating education for all classes, irrespective of caste, creed, and culture. (Mellor, 2000, p. 11) Many critics and writers saw the Romantic Period's constantly growing female readership as a dangerous diversion and a cultural threat, fearing that female readers would degrade literature, substituting their vulgar, low-brow taste for the aesthetic judgments of better-educated men (Mellor, 2000, p. 11). They also feared that reading would expose women to new ideas, facts, and hitherto unknown wants, perhaps increasing female rationality at the expense of domestic obligations.

The widespread readership of women led to the development of large markets for women writers. Women chose to read novels, poems, plays, and general information books authored by other women. Notable poets such as Charlotte Smith, Anna Barbauld, Anna Seward, Hannah More, Mary Tighe, Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, and Letitia Landon are worth mentioning. (Dey, 2018, p. 3). Women writers enhanced their printing skills to attract female readers of the era and to showcase their scholarship and intelligence. Romantic writers, especially those representing the male-dominated literary scene, were more antagonistic towards the circle of scholarly women known as 'bluestockings', the circle surrounding Elizabeth Montagu, highlighting both the commercial success and cultural importance of these women writers and readers (Dey, 2018, p. 3). Beginning in the 1790s, leading male writers of the Romantic period challenged social norms by secretly ridiculing or openly condemning learned women.

## **2. Literature Review**

Although female authors displayed significant literary and creative brilliance, women were ostracised from the literary scene at the time due to patriarchal politics, which also made it very difficult for them to gain recognition and success. While the Romantic Era signalled progress and notable changes, it was also characterised by deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs. Women were confined to roles as housewives, caretakers, and guardians because they were regarded as inferior to men. Women were excluded from the literary canon, and their voices were silenced during this period, reflected in the patriarchal values of the literary community. Women faced substantial obstacles to recognition, with the dominant male voice often overshadowing their contributions. Due to patriarchy, male voices predominated in literature, and women's contributions were dismissed, discounted, or regarded as inferior. Women brave enough to compose and publish their works faced harassment, abuse, and mockery. Listening to female poets often proved to be a difficult and unenjoyable experience. (Millier, 2011)

## **3. Comparative Outlook**

The patriarchal policies of the Romantic Era directly contributed to the marginalisation of female poets. For example, Felicia Hemans was praised for her moral themes but was rarely given the philosophical depth often associated with male poets like Wordsworth or Coleridge. The literary community largely overlooked and undervalued women's contributions, as their voices were silenced and their work neglected. Despite their evident talent and creativity, female poets were effectively pushed out of the literary scene, and their work was buried and lost for a long time. The patriarchal values that influenced Romantic writing are still evident today, as seen by the underrepresentation and undervaluation of female poets in the literary canon. These enduring patriarchal attitudes continue to impact literature, and women poets still fight for acceptance and recognition, despite significant progress in gender equality. Even though contemporary efforts to revisit and rediscover women writers of the Romantic period are ongoing, their work remained marginalised during the era itself. Although many women writers of the Romantic age actively sought to secure their place within the literary canon, the persistent marginalisation of their contributions has maintained their obscurity in mainstream literary histories.

Despite these challenges, some women exerted effort throughout the Romantic Era to oppose patriarchal ideals and assert their rights. One of the earliest pieces of feminist literature was Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman', written in 1792. In it, she argued for women's equality as well as their right to political representation and education. Other female authors, including Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Ann Yearsley, used their writing as a platform to challenge patriarchal ideals and emphasise the value of women's viewpoints and experiences.

## **4. Methods and Genre**

Despite three decades of efforts to broaden the canon of Romantic authors and investigate how their texts addressed socio-political issues of the time, Romanticists continue to feel the need to

defend a diverse canon of male and female writers. They continue to claim that Romantic speech occurs socio-rhetorically in a 'community...characterized by complicated ideological and intellectual gradations,' as Stephen Behrendt puts it (Behrendt, 2009, p. 5). The driving metaphor of Behrendt's most recent study, *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* is an interacting 'community' in which writers from varied socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds respond to public issues and each other's works.

The works published between 1770 and 1835 included major poetic creations by women Romantic writers of that period, who demonstrated their talents in poetry, prose, novels, and other forms of writing. Lucy Aikin, Matilda Betham, Felicia Hemans, Mary Howitt, Mary Leadbeater, Mary Russell Mitford, Hannah More, Amelia Opie, Sydney Owenson, Mary Robinson, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, Agnes Strickland, and Ann Yearsley are among those who prospered for their creative contributions to literature. Women poets often published their poetry anonymously, and some used pen names so society could recognise their work without revealing their identities. This first book was, in a way, a trial, a test of the waters. 'The Last Autumn at a Favourite Residence: With Other Poems' (1828) by Rose Lawrence is an example (Lawrence, 1836). When a second edition was published the following year, she acknowledged her authorship on the title page. They often printed small editions privately for distribution only to family and friends. Gentry were reluctant to have their names linked with commercial publications, fearing it might diminish their social standing by suggesting they were engaged in trade. Even if the title page of such works did not name the poet, the book was far from anonymous to its readers or other contemporaries.

'Legend of Love' exemplifies this phenomenon well. The original edition, published in 1805, was limited to fifty copies. Tighe's name does not appear anywhere in the book. However, she signed the copy at the British Library, likely identifying herself similarly to how she must have signed or inscribed her work to the other forty-nine recipients through signatures, notes, letters, personal inscriptions, or personal presentations. Psyche was common in that the poet's name appeared in the second edition, the first commercial printing, which in this case was post-mortem (Tighe, 2005). Other affluent poets, such as Susanna Blamire, Carolina Baroness Nairne, and Catherine Maria Fanshawe, shared their writings privately through manuscripts but did not publish them. After their deaths, their poetry was collected and published under their names. In reality, only a small number of Romantic-era women poets' identities remain unknown today. Even with books like 'Corinth and Other Poems' (1821), whose author is now unknown but might have been Miss Earle, we cannot be certain the work was truly anonymous when first published. An interested contemporary might have approached Viscountess Anson; the volume was dedicated to identifying the author. Anonymous poets often wish to conceal their identity. If Viscountess Anson had declined to reveal the truth or been unavailable for any reason, any of the subscribers, including Joanna Baillie, could have disclosed the poet's name, as they were unlikely to subscribe to a volume whose author they did not know. As time has distanced us from the human context of unattributed volumes, authorial identifications that were obvious or easily discovered at the time of publication have been lost. The poet's contemporaries were often aware of their authorship, either through social or family connections or by clues in dedications, advertisements, and subscriber lists.

When women of the Romantic era practised anonymity, it was frequently either a transient state or a transparent pose. Hannah More was incensed when, shortly after the purportedly anonymous

'Coelebs in Search of a Wife' (1808) was published, the Christian Observer published a harsh assessment, which she interpreted personally. Some pseudonyms were designed to be obvious. Did anyone truly doubt the author of other works signed 'By the Author of Frankenstein' after Mary Shelley was discovered to be the author of 'Frankenstein' (1818)? 'The original Poems, for Infant Minds' (1804), was written 'By Several Young Persons,' as stated on the title page. Even though thirty additional British publications with this signature followed within the next three decades, Jane Taylor and her sister Ann were made famous by the volume and subsequent volumes signed 'By the Authors of Original Poems.' The identity of the 'Authoress of The Observant Pedestrian' who wrote 'Blossoms of Fancy Original Poems' and 'Pieces in Blank Verse' (1811) may be unknown today. However, her contemporaries may not have been so dim.

Male poets seem to have used anonymity and pseudonymity almost as often as their female counterparts. This includes works like Byron's 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers' (1809), Lara (1814), Samuel Rogers' 'Jacqueline' (1814), the first part of 'Italy' (1822), George Crabbe's 'The Candidate' (1780), William Blake's 'Poetical Sketches' (1783), published as 'by W. B.,' and Thomas Moore's 'The Poetical Works of the Late Thomas Little' (1801) (Shesgreen, 2009). The regular publications of literary magazines concealed the identities of some prominent writers and poets of the Romantic revival. As some of the writings were either anonymous or pseudonymous, serious readers could not identify the true source of literary contributions. A common characteristic among women romantics worldwide is their consistent use of poetry as a critique of life. These women romantics challenged the social and cultural conventions of their time through poetry. They expressed their personal viewpoints and experiences on various topics, such as gender roles, sexuality, marriage, and religion.

The restrictions and expectations society placed on women, as well as how these restrictions affected their experiences and relationships, were common topics explored by women love poets. However, male poets tend to emphasise personal experience and emotion more. Moreover, women poets were often not regarded as seriously as their male counterparts and faced greater difficulties in publishing their works. This resulted in a smaller body of work by women poets compared to men, and less recognition of their contributions to literature during that period (Breen, 1992).

If we examine the poem 'Kubla Khan' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and 'The Homes of England' by Felicia Hemans, we notice many similarities in themes, yet clear differences in the poets' ideologies. Although both poems address the topic of love, the ways this theme is conveyed differ significantly. The type of love depicted in each poem is quite distinct. In 'Kubla Khan', romantic love between a man and a woman is portrayed as a powerful and transformative force, depicted in a grandiose and romanticised style. The poem describes love as a 'damsel with a dulcimer' who sings 'of Mount Abora,' presenting it as a magical and supernatural experience.

"A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid

And on her dulcimer she played,

Singing of Mount Abora" (Coleridge, 1912).

The love between a mother and her child, however, is depicted in 'The Homes of England' in a more realistic and nuanced manner. According to Hemans, love is a mirror of a person's feelings and experiences.

"There woman's voice flows forth in song,  
Or childhood's tale is told,  
Or lips move tunefully along  
Some glorious page of old" (Hemans, 1872).

The theme of love in each poem also varies. The setting of Kubla Khan is Xanadu, an exotic and distant place that the Mongol ruler Kubla Khan is said to have built as a 'pleasure dome.' The palace and its surroundings are vividly described in the poem, including a 'sunless sea' and 'caverns measureless to man.' The love and devotion between a mother and her child are portrayed in *The Homes of England*, which is set in a more intimate and domestic environment. The poem is filled with descriptions of the English countryside and the emotions they evoke.

Furthermore, *Kubla Khan* is written in a more grand and idealised style, depicting a man's and a woman's love as a powerful and transformative force. The poem describes the palace and its surroundings as a place of beauty and wonder, filled with mysterious and supernatural qualities. The complexities and difficulties of relationships are portrayed in *The Homes of England* in a more realistic and subtle manner. When considering the depiction of nature in the poems by both male and female poets of the Romantic era, it is clear that both genders represent nature equally in their works, yet there is a significant difference in their relationship with nature.

Male Romantic poets explored nature as having the power to give human existence profound meaning. Many male poets, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, highlighted the majesty, strength, and sublimity of nature in their works. They often wrote about the remarkable and even awe-inspiring aspects of nature. Male Romantic writers frequently discussed nature in terms of its ability to evoke transcendence and spiritual connection. They often examined how nature can uplift spirits and foster a sense of being connected to something greater than oneself. They also highlighted nature's capacity to inspire astonishment, awe, and reverence in their writings. Additionally, the Romantics often considered nature's metaphorical and symbolic meanings, turning to it to explore philosophical and spiritual questions such as the nature of life and the relationship between humans and the divine (Ross 1989).

Women Romantic poets expressed their personal experiences and perspectives through their writings on nature. Many female poets of the era, such as Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Robinson, and Felicia Hemans, emphasised the beauty of nature and its ability to evoke strong emotions in their readers. They used nature as a means of conveying their unique sentiments and experiences, often describing how it could stir feelings like pleasure, grief, and desire. Many women Romantic poets regarded nature as a vital part of their own lives and experiences, not merely something to be admired or loved. They explored the interactions between nature and their own lives, including themes like motherhood, domesticity, and the passage of time. Additionally, women poets frequently highlighted the relationship between nature and household life in their writing. They often employed nature as a medium to express the joys and sorrows of family life, illustrating how it interacted with domestic responsibilities such as gardening and raising children (Hickok 1984).

Male Romantic poets often celebrated nature as a source of beauty, sublimity, and an object of contemplation. They regarded it as a force capable of elevating the human spirit. In contrast, women Romantic poets frequently wrote about how nature intertwines with human experience and reflects individual emotions and feelings. Examining William Wordsworth's poetry reveals a vivid portrayal of nature as a powerful and majestic force with the ability to uplift people's spirits. He often wrote about nature's magnificence and its capacity to evoke feelings of awe and transcendence. Wordsworth believed that nature profoundly influences the human mind and emotions, offering healing and helping individuals discover their true selves. In his writings, he explored how the beauty of the natural world can inspire awe and reverence in those who observe it. He also discussed the psychological and spiritual bonds that connect humans with nature. For example, in the poem "The Daffodils," he describes natural beauty and how this beauty fosters a connection with him and ultimately aids in his personal growth. The poem clearly illustrates how nature has been a source of happiness and inspiration for humans. These lines are worth quoting here.

"For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils" (Wordsworth 2002).

For the women Romantics, the depiction of nature reflects their personal emotions and their interaction with nature is mostly intersected with their domestic life. For example, Letitia Elizabeth Landon in her poem 'The Improvisatrice', the poet shares her personal feelings as she starts the poem by saying-

"I AM a daughter of that land,  
Where the poet's lip and the painter's hand  
Are most divine,—where the earth and sky,  
Are picture both and poetry—  
I am of Florence. 'Mid the chill  
Of hope and feeling, oh! I still  
Am proud to think to where I owe  
My birth, though but the dawn of woe!" (Landon 1824)

Furthermore, the poem of the male romantics dealt with individual experiences of beauty and emotions. At the same time, the women wrote about the societal constraints faced by women and the complexities of relationships. For example: When Keats wrote 'Thing of beauty' he presented his individual experience by saying: -

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever.

Its loveliness increases, it will never.

Pass into nothingness; but will keep.

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep.

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing" (Keats, 2016).

But if we read the poem 'From the Emigrant' we can experience the societal issues wrapped with the personal experience of the poet. She writes-

"So many years have passed,

Since, on my native hills, I learned to gaze

On these delightful landscapes; and those years

Have taught me so much sorrow, that my soul

Feels not the joy reviving Nature brings;

But, in dark retrospect, dejected dwells

On human follies, and on human woes" (Franklin, 2024).

These differences between the perspectives of male and female romantics were caused by gender and politics. While the Romantic movement celebrated the individual, nature, and emotion, the social conditions of women at the time were marked by limited opportunities and legal inequalities. Women were predominantly confined to domestic roles and were not legally permitted to own property, vote, or pursue certain professions. They also faced barriers to higher education and were generally expected to marry and raise families. The idea of the 'Angel in the House' – a virtuous, domestic woman – was widespread in literature and society, and women who did not conform to this ideal were often criticised or marginalised (Ross 1989). Marriage was regarded as the most desirable and respectable choice for women, and spinsterhood was often viewed as a failure. Women were denied access to higher education and were generally expected to be subservient to men, both in the home and in society. They were also bound by strict codes of conduct and behaviour, which aimed to preserve their purity and virtue.

Writings on nature by women Romantic poets reflected their personal experiences and perspectives. Many women poets of the time, including Felicia Hemans, Mary Robinson, and Dorothy Wordsworth, emphasised the wonder of nature and how it could evoke powerful feelings in their audience. They often wrote about nature in terms of how it might inspire emotions such as pleasure, pain, and desire. They used nature as a means to express their own specific sentiments and experiences. Many women Romantic poets believed that nature was more than just something to be observed and admired; it was an essential part of their own lives and experiences. In their writings, they frequently highlighted the links between nature and aspects of their own lives, such as parenthood, domesticity, and the passage of time (Tighe, 2005).

During the Romantic Period, publishers and editors were mainly male, which meant that women, in addition to suffering mentally from their desire to enter the masculine world of poetry, had to deal with the external demands of a male-dominated profession. Having their works published seemed to be an act of drawing attention to women as subjects rather than objects, thus risking

their modesty, which was a core part of femininity. Women used various techniques to challenge societal stereotypes (Kant, 2000). They often claimed that they published reluctantly, at the request of friends or family, and included apologetic notes with their editions, reassuring readers that they wrote only for personal pleasure or as a hobby. Women poets were published, though mainly for commercial reasons rather than genuine respect for them as writers. There was still prejudice against educated women: manuscripts were redrafted by publishers or booksellers who, as men, believed their judgement to be superior to that of the author. Manuscripts were adapted by publishers and booksellers to fit what they considered appropriate for a woman writer. Women poets faced male judgement before publication and condescending critique afterwards. This criticism targeted technical elements of the poems rather than their overall quality. During the Romantic era, women poets used their writing as a form of protest and critique, challenging societal restrictions and pushing for greater freedom and equality.

Critics such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Jane Montefiore concluded that women romantic poets had psychological and social inhibitions but failed to develop a distinct woman's perspective. These poets did not create their unique genre because of social pressure to hide the divide between what was expected of them and what they truly felt (Breen 1992). What the women poets masked is well expressed in these words of Anna Barbauld:

"Then, then, abandon each ambitious thought;  
Conquest or rule thy heart shall feebly move,  
In Nature's school, by her soft maxims taught  
To separate rights are lost in mutual love." (Barbauld, 1792)

## 5. Conclusion

British women romantic poets utilised their intellectual insight combined with personal experience to highlight universal themes. The subjects explored by these poets were not solely personal but expanded to a broader perspective. Poets such as Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson, and L.E. Landon moved away from the traditional romantic notion that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever' or 'ever let your fancy roam', instead delving into domestic issues, nostalgic feelings, the desire for livelihood, and their fundamental concerns for sovereignty.

Science deals with ideas, poetry with images; science with universals, poetry with particulars. Contrasting science with the arts, Ransom, in his celebrated essays 'Poetry: A note on Ontology', describes "science gratifies a rational or practical impulse and exhibits the minimum of perception. Art gratifies a perceptual impulse and exhibits the minimum of science." In the poetry of women romantic poets, we find aesthetic science as icons or images. This kind of language use may be called delegated efficacy, where words convey their meaning by virtue of being "substitute exerting the powers of what is not there (VanGraber 1968)." Hence, words refer to absent objects and ultimately become symbols of them.

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