"Blest Contemplation's Placid Friend"

The Moon as a Mighty Confidante in the Works of Romantic Women Poets and Beyond

ORSOLYA ALBERT

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Abstract: The article inspects the unduly overlooked literary output of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century female poets, focusing chiefly on the innovative aspects of their Moon representations. The lunar poetry of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Tighe, and Felicia Hemans relies partly on past conventions while bravely departing from traditional representations and seeking new directions. In their works, the Moon becomes the site for synthesising not only the past and present but also light and darkness, reason and fancy, beauty and sublimity, science and myth, coldness and congeniality. The pieces seem to fit neatly into the concept of Feminine Romanticism, as coined by Anne K. Mellor, espousing a deconstruction of hierarchies between the subject and Nature. However, the analyses of the Moon motif in these poems may shed light on how Mellor's framework could be reconsidered and extended.

It would prove to be an exceedingly difficult endeavour to find an image as pervasive in literary works and as multifaceted as that of the Moon. Departing from the celestial body's classical associations with the goddess Diana or Artemis, and hence with femininity, chastity, and, quite paradoxically, fertility, one can trace its trajectory throughout diverse epochs and survey its numerous successive connotations with mysticism, superstition, the passage of time and changes in mental and bodily functions. Although lovers furtively dash to their secret appointments under the cover of the night, many refrain from placing complete trust in moonlight due

to its perceived volatility: "O, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, / That monthly changes in her circled orb" (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.109–110). Her unreliability propelled the Romans to call her an outright liar, the *Luna mendax* (Jensen 95), while the eighteenth-century Lunar Society, constituted by the preeminent figures of scientific thought, relied on her guidance on their way home from their secret meetings (Mheallaigh 14). Despite her changing nature, the women poets of the early Romantic and Romantic period to be discussed in the present study depict the Moon as a sisterly, soothing associate; she is not the witness of the *rendezvous* but the one with whom a clandestine meeting is arranged.

The primary undertaking of this article is to scrutinise the thus-far relatively neglected lunar poetry of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century female poets, pinpointing the correspondences and differences between their portrayals of the Moon. The scope of the essay extends to the works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825), Charlotte Smith (1749–1806), Mary Robinson (1757–1800), Helen Maria Williams (1759–1827), Mary Tighe (1772–1810), and Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), but writings of earlier and later authors and even of various genres receive a mention to contextualise the pieces. Arguably, the image of the Moon prevalent in the poetry of these women writers is created via a juxtaposition of contrasting characteristics that may co-exist without negating one another. The paper will explore how the representations of the Moon may destabilise the light-darkness dichotomy by blending the qualities traditionally associated with the elements of the dualism. The Moon inspires both the faculties of reason and of imagination in the course of the persona's nocturnal excursions; in addition, she is conceived to be simultaneously beautiful and sublime in the Burkean sense, a gentle companion who also happens to be the cold and mighty Queen of the Night. Though evidently entrenched in the neoclassical and earlier representational conventions, their utilisations of the Moon trope are not devoid of innovation since the Moon's special status as both a cherished confidante and an unfathomable entity is unique.

By virtue of the celestial orb's affectionate yet cold disposition, these lunar poems form part of Anne K. Mellor's suggested alternative canon of Romanticism, Feminine Romanticism. The representative works of Feminine Romanticism reject rigid hierarchies and treat Nature with familiarity and intimacy (3). Albeit the "ecstatic experience of co-participation in nature" erases fixed binaries, Mellor's definition conveys the impression that there is a tension between the perception of the natural world as an "overwhelming power," engendering the Burkean sublime, and

the Feminine Romantics' genial, caring Nature (97). This dichotomy can dissolve when the speaker is simultaneously alarmed by the enigmatic aura of the astronomical object and comforted by her amiability.

Light and Darkness in Western Thinking

One can maintain without hesitation that Western systems of thought are structured by the light-darkness binary, with a clear preference exhibited for daylight. Jacques Derrida considers the light v. darkness opposition "the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics" (27). The beginning of the Gospel of John immediately comes to mind as a testimony to how light is conventionally assigned a positive value, signalling presence and life, while darkness is associated with absence and death. Additionally, light renders things visible and knowable, hence "the Enlightenment yearned for the splendour of the sun" (Brown, "Romanticism and Enlightenment" 41), while darkness is equated with ignorance, superstition, and religious mysticism.

Ruth Salvaggio offers a feminist critique of the Enlightenment by calling attention to how in hierarchical systems of representation, "phenomena that proved difficult to control—madness, fluidity, colour, shade, and darkness—took on a feminine demeanour" (x). The fall of dusk often demarcates the limits of the comprehensible, and it is no coincidence that in Greek mythology, the dominion of the night is ruled by Nyx. As the female embodiment of the threat of primaeval darkness, she represents the antithesis to the masculine vitality of the day (Bronfen 20). Numerous efforts have been made to terminate the hitherto unrivalled reign of light; Martin Heidegger found that it is imperative to "learn to acknowledge the dark as something unavoidable" since "the dark is the secret of life," essential for what he calls the "unconcealment of truth" or *Aletheia* (qtd. in Burik 355). The mildly glowing Moon in the poems to be analysed can function as a liminal "conceptual space" where the ostensibly contradictory qualities of the light v. darkness dichotomy exist side-by-side (Mheallaigh 3).

Jennifer Keith contends that, more generally, a sense of intense isolation permeates the poetry of the late eighteenth century, provoking an interrogation of the viability of past systems and models, and manifesting itself in "a poetic vision where social, poetic, and metaphysical comforts drop away" (272). The end of the eighteenth century is also the time when a "revolution in female manners" unfolded,

demanding the acknowledgement of women's rationality and right to equal treatment (qtd. in Mellor 33). Various groups of female intellectuals devoted themselves to the improvement of women's lives, pressing for economic and educational reforms (Mellor 39). Yet, the literature of the period is frequently discussed in negative terms, inserted into a narrative of development as a "miniature dark ages," after which Romanticism shines forth (Keith 271–272). Marshall Brown's *Preromanticism* (1991) utilises the prefix as a marker of distinction, an indicator of a failed innovatory project, and Keith sets out to apply a similar classification in her own account of the era (271–273). The selection of lunar poems perused in this essay could defy both of these suggested approaches due to their inventive and reconciliatory aspects.

Journey by Moonlight

As darkness falls, the personae of the many poems written by women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries retreat to the tender night, contemplating the trials and tribulations of the day by the comforting moonlight**.** During these solitary saunters highly suitable for self-scrutiny and cogitation, the speakers withdraw from the diurnal spaces and gain access to a "countersite" to the day, a Bakhtinian chronotope (Bronfen 110). In the nocturnal scenes of the poems, time and space become inseparable (Bakthin 84); it is only by the "pale beam" of the Moon that the speaker in Charlotte Smith's piece "alone and pensive" "delight[s] to stray" ("Sonnet IV" ll. 1–2). Elisabeth Bronfen underlines how the night is simultaneously "another way of reckoning time; a time that cannot be reckoned; a time of reckoning" (xi). With the setting of the sun, a territory becomes accessible where time appears to pass differently; the meticulously ordered and partitioned hours of the day are replaced by a fluid temporality which may bewilder the senses. This period perceptibly cannot be accounted for within the conventional chronological frame. Consequently, the chronotope of the night is ideal for intense and undisturbed meditation, facilitated by the stimulating company of the Moon. The nocturnal space-time is also fit to be regarded as "bounded and unbound; a sanctuary, a promise, and a chance" (xiii). Even if the arrival of the dawn is inevitable, the soothing darkness seems to surround the subject, thus providing an opportunity for introspection and to beseech the Muse. Nevertheless, parts of the nocturnal landscape are bathed in "soft and shadowy colours" of the moonbeam, resulting in a "chequer'd scene" where light and shadow coexist (Barbauld, "Verses Written in an Alcove" ll. 3–4).

Contemplation in the company of the Moon is far from being a static activity in these poems. Indeed, nightly perambulations or, to borrow Amato's expression, "noctambulations" (165) constitute a special category of leisurely, pensive walks. A more general taste was developed for solitary strolling in the era, evolving from a merely pragmatic undertaking into a "'poetic' mode of locomotion offering a sense of communion and an elevated state of mind" (Amato 103). Undisturbed by daylight struggles, one can explore the time and terrain of seemingly endless possibilities. The case of the female noctambulator deserves special consideration since nightly walks could be seen as subversive when embarked on by women. Walking was generally held to be a masculine activity; nocturnal walks for women were not only perilous but also discouraged and heavily judged because of their sexual connotations (Solnit 234–235).

In Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "A Summer Evening's Meditation," the vibrant rays of the "sultry tyrant" impede contemplation and, therefore, the composition of poetry, while the "more grateful hours" of shielding darkness and the gentle glow of the stars and the Moon facilitate such endeavours (ll. 1–2). When the sight of the dazzling Sun ceases to torment the onlooker, the stars "with mild maiden beams / Of temper'd light, invite the cherish'd eye / To wander o'er their sphere" (ll. 4–6). The wanderer's progression is, therefore, synchronous with the movement of her animated stare directed at the sky, which may now travel without hindrance. Therefore, the journey of the speaker is both terrestrial and cosmic. By drifting through the landscape without a clearly defined destination, the mind is also permitted to wander and conquer uncharted areas. From the kinaesthetic energy originates a form of creative exuberance at every step.

The interconnectedness of the mental and physical activities of the female walker in particular leads Mellor to the conclusion that this way, a "subjectivity-in-process" is born, a form of "embodied consciousness" (160). Rambling and reflection may allow the surpassing of confines and engender a "union with self, nature, and others" (Amato 102). As it will be demonstrated later on, the speakers' non-hierarchical engagement with the elements of the landscape results in a shared sense of empathy, chiefly catalysed by the Moon; nevertheless, the inherent otherness and inscrutability of the natural objects remain respected.

Reason and Fancy

Interactions between Fancy, Reason, and Contemplation are frequently featured in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poems written by women. Fancy suffered from a poor reputation in the period because of its supposed connection with revolutionary fervency; female poetry was perceived as especially susceptible to being perilously fanciful (J. C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry* 112). The superfluity and rebelliousness of Fancy are generally embraced in the inspected lunar poems; nevertheless, Fancy is often accompanied by Contemplation and Reason, which alternately concur, facilitate, or sometimes regulate the free flow of imagination. What is vital for the present study is that Fancy, Contemplation, and Reason become feminised alike as a consequence of their common tie to the Moon.

Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), depicts rationality as both feminine and Moon-like: "Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face, beaming with benevolence; and it will be impossible for the dark hand of despotism again to obscure its radiance, or the lurking dagger of subordinate tyrants to reach her bosom" (qtd. in Mellor 68). From the middle of the eighteenth century, more and more periodicals were published to cater to a growing female readership, acknowledging "women's rational capacity and fitness for intellectual pursuits" (Batchelor 33). *The Lady's Magazine* emerged as one of the most prominent periodicals in the late eighteenth century, introducing on its pages "every thing that can improve and embellish the Female Mind, or be esteemed a Branch of Female Education" ("Address to the Fair Sex" 3). Fascinatingly, in its earliest issues, the magazine featured numerous pieces by a contributor called "The Female Rambler" seeking to instruct women on "how to travel through the world" and drawing attention to the limitations on female movement (Batchelor 54, 56). Kinesthetics and cogitation once again appearing as intertwined, it is hardly surprising that on the occasion of moonlit walks, the celestial orb becomes "Blest Contemplation's placid friend" (Robinson, "Ode to the Moon" l. 2).

Although contemplation was normatively assessed to be a masculine occupation, a gradual shift occurred in its perception during the eighteenth century (Browning 404). In Mary Darwall's "The Pleasures of Contemplation," deep reflection is enjoyed primarily in the company of feminine astronomical objects:

QUEEN of the halycon breast, and heavenward eye,
Sweet Contemplation, with thy ray benign
Light my lone passage thro' this vale of life,
And raise the siege of Care! This silent hour
To thee is sacred, when the star of Eve,
Like Dian's Virgins trembling ere they bathe,
Shoots o'er the Hesperian wave its quivering ray. (ll. 1–7)

While "Sweet Contemplation" is directly linked to the Moon due to her "ray benign" and as a queen of the "heavenward eye" in Darwall's work, Barbauld's Contemplation is more closely connected to the female walker who can finally depart from home as the night begins to fall, and can immerse herself in uninterrupted ponderings:

… 'Tis now the hour
When Contemplation, from her sunless haunts,
The cool damp grotto, or the lonely depth
Of unpierc'd woods, where wrapt in solid shade
She mused away the gaudy hours of noon,
And fed on thoughts unripen'd by the sun,
Moves forward; and with radiant finger points
To yon blue concave swell'd by breath divine. (ll. 17–24)

The "solid shade" of the woods or her cave is wrapped around Contemplation almost like a nightgown or a shawl. Just like the persona, she is forced to spend the hours of daylight inside, in the enclosed, private sphere of the grotto, and muse away the time when the circumstances are not yet provided for the free flow of ideas. Only at the dead of night, the "the noon of thought" (l. 51), can Contemplation finally make her departure from the shadowy shelter, and subsequent to an unsatisfying meal consisting of "thoughts unripen'd by the sun" (l. 22), she entreats the speaker to indulge in an uninhibited study of the sky and the crescent Moon as "wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars" (l. 52).

Rational reflections are habitually invoked by the experience of the changing nature of the Moon in these poems. The speaker is reminded of the ephemerality of life, the materiality of the body and its inevitable physical deterioration. Charlotte Smith's "Sonnet XLIV. Written in the Church Yard at Middleton

in Sussex" confronts the reader with the shocking sight of the human remains which were washed out by the forceful flood engendered by the Moon: "Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave; / But vain to them the winds and waters rave" (ll. 10–12). The spectator of this arresting scene is prompted to consider her own impermanence and feels envious of the deceased, being exhausted by the storms of life. On account of her seemingly supernatural powers and repeated disappearance and re-appearance in the sky, the Moon becomes the herald of mortality in Mary Robinson's ode as well:

> And as I mark, thy faint reclining head,
> Sinking on Ocean's pearly bed;
> Let Reason tell my soul, thus all things fade.
> . . . . . .
> Those eyes, that beam with Friendship's ray,
> And glance ineffable delight,
> Shall shrink from life's translucid day,
> And close their fainting orbs, in Death's impervious night. ("Ode to the Moon" ll. 31–33, 55–58)

The parallels drawn between the reclining head, the closing eyes of the moribund and the dimming light of the orb are especially striking. The Moon as an ocular metaphor, originating in ancient times, is admirably versatile, interpretable both as an emblem of sympathy, a tearful eye beaming with the rays of Friendship, and as a *memento mori*, the closing eyes of the dying (Mheallaigh 24). The Moon's operation as an effective reminder of mortality also derives from its fashioning in Western imagination as a heaven-like location where "the wretched may have rest" and "the sufferers of the earth perhaps may go, / Released by death" (Smith, "Sonnet IV. To the Moon" ll. 8–10). In antiquity, the Moon was commonly equated with the Elysian fields where those favoured by the gods dwelt after their retirement from their terrestrial existence (Montgomery 14). The mythological envisioning of the heavenly orb as Elysium arguably coincides with later Christian conceptualisations of the Moon. Identified conventionally with Mary, the "Queen of Heaven" in Christian iconography (Otto 283–284), and with Queen Elizabeth from the 1580s (King 43), the celestial entity is endowed with qualities such as chastity, gentleness, benevolence, and serenity. Similar to the attitude of the speaker

in "Sonnet XLIV. Written in the Church Yard at Middleton in Sussex," the persona of "Sonnet IV. To the Moon" expresses her longing for the "benignant sphere" and that "I soon may reach thy world serene, / Poor wearied pilgrim—in this toiling scene!" (ll. 10, 13–14). Such desire resembles a longing to reunite with the mother.

The light of the Moon conjures up memories of things past, "of the years that for ever are fled" and "of joys that have vanish'd; of hopes that are dead / Of friendships that were, and are not" (Tighe ll. 21–24). The sense of the tragic distance and inaccessibility of the lost time is intensified by the failing light of the Moon and the concomitant mournful aura permeating the nocturnal scene. The presence of the "melancholy orb" allows one to succumb to nostalgia and "mourn that hope to me in youth is lost" (Williams ll. 2, 12). Of considerable importance may be that Sappho, "the first poet of the Moon" (Mheallaigh 4), also accentuates the contrast between the permanence of the persona's solitude and the advancing of time, accompanied by the changeful phases of the Moon:

> Well, the moon has set
> And the Pleiades. It is the middle
> Of the night. And the hour passes by,
> But I sleep alone.

Sappho's significance in the development of lunar poetry is undeniable since she renders the symbol of the Moon ever more intricate by bestowing new qualities upon it (Mheallaigh 24). Approaching the already familiar topos from a uniquely female perspective inaugurates new layers of meaning, such as the interplay of the Moon's gazing eye and female desire, and, one may add, the link between the passing of time and female experience (Mheallaigh 24). Daniel Robinson highlights in his seminal work *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (2011) that Mary Robinson was commonly referred to as "the English Sappho" because of her attempted revisioning of the figure of the Sapphic poetess in her sonnet sequence entitled *Sappho and Phaon* (111–112). The connection between the transience of life and the female poet's temporary reputation is one of the central concerns of these sonnets. The Moon bears witness to the self-destruction of Robinson's Sappho in "Sonnet XLIII" and "XLIV. Conclusive" of the cycle; accordingly, a parallel is drawn between the poetess' professed passing into oblivion and the fading of the Moon. Naturally, waning is always followed by the period of waxing and

thus all hope should not be abandoned; this way, the periodical change of the orb is both disconcerting and comforting.

The "transitory beam" of the Moon, however, while leading to the recognition of existence's finitude as "all things fade" (Robinson, "Ode to the Moon" l. 33), can also pacify the speaker "with FANCY's aëry dream" (l. 22). The "moonlight composure" that steals over the mind of the speaker in Mary Tighe's "To the Moon" is simultaneously "poetical, pensive, and sweet" (ll. 19–20). Moonlight can, therefore, enkindle both sweet obliviousness to day-time troubles and a pensive mood. Enraptured by the mysteries of the night sky, Barbauld's speaker is "seize'd in thought" while, at the same time, "on fancy's wild and roving wing [she] sail[s], / From the green borders of the peopled earth (ll. 71–72). Nonetheless, the nocturnal scene also offers complete escape from the worries of the day. The landscape of Barbauld's "Verses written in an Alcove" turns into the land of fairies where "pining grief and wasting anguish" "never keep their vigils" since "care was only made for day" (ll. 15–16, 12). The persona of Mary Robinson's "Ode to the Moon" is similarly absorbed in a fantastical vision by the moonlight:

> And oft, amidst the shades of night
> I court thy undulating light;
> When Fairies dance around the verdant ring,
> Or frisk beside the bubbling spring,
> When the thoughtless SHEPHERD'S song
> Echoes thro' the silent air. (ll. 7–12)

Robinson's "thoughtless shepherd" is unconscious of the way the melody is composed and how it departs from his lips, with the notes bubbling up like the spring beside which the fairies perform their unfettered movements. The mild light of the Moon awakens Fancy and "can visionary thoughts impart, / And lead the Muse to soothe a suff'ring heart" (Williams ll. 13–14). Composition, requiring Fancy, is assisted by the inspiring beams of the Moon. Felicia Hemans also finds that the moonlit scene is the ideal location and time to encounter the Muse:

> COME, gentle muse! now all is calm,
> The dew descends, the air is balm;
> Unruffled is the glassy deep,

While moon-beams o'er its bosom sleep
. . . . . .
Oh! at this hour, this placid hour,
Soft music, wake thy magic pow'r! (ll. 1–4, 9–10)

Music and magic conjured by the placid Moon liberate the self from the constraints of daylight. These instances of self-abandonment could easily be labelled as Dionysian; accordingly, they can produce a harmonious collaboration as the "estranged, hostile or subjugated nature again celebrates her reconciliation with her lost son, man" (Nietzsche 26).

Mary Robinson points out in the Preface to *Sappho and Phaon* that there exists a tension between the all-consuming, Dionysian devotion and the rational, Apollonian aptitude for poetical form. Robinson writes that the story of Sappho "presented to my imagination such a lively example of the human mind, enlightened by the most exquisite talents, yet yielding to the destructive controul [sic] of ungovernable passions" (6). Both the Apollonian apprehension of *techne* and restraint required to apply poetic structures and the Dionysian liberation of poetic imagination, the thoughtless, formless song, are instigated by the sight of the Moon. Intriguingly, in a later commentary on the sonnet, William Wordsworth conceives of the poetic form as an instance of "intense Unity" which resembles less an architectural structure with distinct partitions and more like an "orbicular body,—a sphere" (qtd. in Curran 40).

Therefore, both the Apollonian stasis and the Dionysian dance-like, cyclical appearance and vanishing of light likewise characterise these configurations of the Moon. As Sappho in Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* prepares to leap into the foams of the sea from the Leucadian cliffs due to her unrequited love for Phaon, evening steals over the scenery and Sappho's "glowing, palpitating soul" greets "returning Reason's placid beam" with a sigh of relief as it can "calm rebellious Fancy's fev'rish dream" ("Sonnet XLIII" ll. 9–10, 12). Similarly, in the conclusive "Sonnet XLIV," the Moon as "Celestial Sympathy, with humid eye, / Bids the light Sylph capricious Fancy fly" (ll. 2–3). The cosmic wanderings of Barbauld in her "A Summer Evening's Meditation" end with the retreat of both faculties as "fancy droops, / And thought astonish'd stops her bold career" (ll. 98–99). Consequently, moonlight possesses the power to alternately bring about the unregulated flight of fancy and the reawakening of reason, the undisturbed state of inspiration and

the sensible realisation of evanescence, being both the locale and the catalyst for the unification of impulse and rationality.

The Sublime and the Beautiful

The apparently irreconcilable aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful, as defined by Edmund Burke, also dwell side by side in these poems. The reunion of these two qualities is inherent in the Moon's identification with Diana, the graceful yet dangerous huntress. Charlotte Smith's persona in her "Sonnet XLIV. Written in the Church Yard at Middleton in Sussex" acknowledges the arresting abilities of the "mute arbitress of tides" (l. 1), paying homage to Shakespeare's "governess of floods" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.103). Her power is sublime since it is astonishing and unsettling, fitted "to excite the ideas of pain, and danger" (Burke 36):

> Press'd by the Moon, mute arbitress of tides,
> While the loud equinox its pow'r combines,
> The sea no more its swelling surge confines,
> But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides. (ll. 1–4)

The observer is situated close enough to the scene to be affected by its destructive potential but keeps the distance to evade actual danger, which results in a mixture of joy and dread, hence the sensation of the sublime (Burke 47). Burke's development of the idea of sublimity relies greatly on what he describes as sympathy. Albeit the feelings of the other are transferred to the spectator, he finds alleviation in the awareness of his own freedom from such emotions; quite shockingly at first glance, he writes that "I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others" (41–42). An inquiry into what exactly Burke means by "delight" here divulges that it is fused with the distress of the other and consequently is of utmost importance for sympathy since "the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer" (43). By contrast, the speaker in Smith's "Sonnet XLIV. Written in the Church Yard" wishes to eradicate this distance and longs for a complete identification with the other, the remains of the corpses washed out by the flood: "While I am doom'd—by life's long storm opprest, / To gaze with envy, on their gloomy rest" (ll. 13–14). Macabre perhaps the spectacle, yet the beholder pays heed

to the mingling of the bones with shells and seaweed as feasible instances of unification and accord (ll. 9–10). The following section will elaborate on how this depiction of unison may align with Mellor's Feminine Romanticism.

The ambiguous status of the Moon is a principal source of its sublimity. The motif of the Moon is customarily linked to obscurity, being sometimes visible and then invisible, near but unreachable (Burke 58). Burke comments on these protean features and explains how "a light now appearing, and now leaving us, and so off and on, is even more terrible than total darkness" (77). The Moon's contemporaneous "greatness of dimension" and remoteness on the night sky is confusing and stir up a sense of awe (66). Encountering such a phenomenon upsets the belief in the dependability of sense perceptions, leading to a re-evaluation of what one has hitherto accepted as real on the basis of empirical evidence (Mheallaigh 52). This observation may also provide grounds for questioning Enlightenment's unwavering trust in sensory experience. Nonetheless, the Moon owns "softer virtues," which are ascribed to beautiful objects and are deemed to be feminine by Burke, such as "easiness of temper, compassion, kindness" (100). The gentleness, benevolence and the moderate light of the Moon are accordingly acclaimed in the selected poems; it is salient that these properties are normatively associated with the eighteenth-century cult of modesty (Backscheider 199). Moreover, these qualities are inherent in her role as a willing auditor and confidante since during the pensive occasions spent in her company, she "sheds a soft calm upon my troubled breast" (Smith, "Sonnet IV" l. 6). Even if the Moon of the Romantic women poets is usually a "mild maiden," quite aggressively, she "seems to push / Her brother down the sky" (Barbauld ll. 4, 9–10). The staging of this conflict supports the theory that her mildness does not thwart her assertiveness. Additionally, McCarthy detects a Miltonic vein in Barbauld's apprehension of space as a "womb of chaos" (l. 98) and applauds her as a daring appropriator of Milton's sublime, which is now exploited to introduce "a women's universe" (94–95).

One cannot help but wonder whether Burke's description of the physique of a beautiful woman could be analogous to the almost voyeuristic gaze with which a scientist may observe the celestial body, beholding "the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is carried" (105). Therein lies the spectator's capacity to assert his position of supremacy and overpower nature "by framing, manipulating and consuming it" (Hitt 130) or,

in the words of Mellor, to "penetrate, possess and interpret" it (21). Aphra Behn's play *The Emperor of the Moon* (1688) satirises exactly this strange fascination via Doctor Baliardo's obsession, scrutinising the surface of the orb constantly through his telescope. With the persistent striving to map the body of the Moon, the discipline of selenography points to a similar direction. Yet, this intrusively inquisitive gaze is perhaps returned as a result of the Moon's recurring depiction as a human face or eye, enabling a reciprocity of looks. From another point of view, it is in the Moon's power to defend herself against such unwelcome attention because of her unattainability. Mheallaigh goes as far as to declare that a "(female?) fantasy of panoptic control" may emerge as the stare of the sublime Moon-eye reaches into the soul of the subject while she retains her elusiveness and evades human surveillance (26). Additionally, Widger argues that the female walker can substitute "looking down upon nature" by "looking around" (16); this "eco-ethical gesture" can entail the acknowledgement of the restrictedness of her perspective and the ultimate inaccessibility of the astronomical object, as it shall be discussed later (4).

Science and Myth

Conventional identifications of the Moon with Greek and Roman lunar goddesses abound in the Romantic poetry composed by women. She is persistently apostrophised as the "PALE GODDESS of the witching hour" (Robinson, "Ode to the Moon" l. 1) or the authoritative "queen of the silver bow" (Smith, "Sonnet IV" l. 1) and pictured as "DIAN's bright crescent" (Barbauld l. 7). Yet, one would not be misguided to argue that these poems also engage in a dialogue with the scientific discoveries of their age. Richard Holmes states that the end of the eighteenth century marks what Samuel Taylor Coleridge dubbed as the second scientific revolution; in this "age of wonder," a reciprocity existed between science and the Romantic movements. Moments of scientific exploration were often interpreted as events of Romantic revelations when one could glimpse into the underlying order of things. Müller proposes that the interrelatedness of all-natural forms (*Wechselwirkung*) was foregrounded in scientific discourse with the advent of Romanticism (3).

Already at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Edward Young exclaims in his *Night Thoughts* that "an undevout Astronomer is mad" (qtd. in Browning 398). In his pivotal work about the Romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel mentions how divine features were granted to outer space with the rise of astronomy; the aim

was to save God by making him "marry the world of appearances" (14). The surveillance of the night sky with the hope that its workings may be brought to light is necessarily paired with a religious appreciation for the perplexing phenomena, believed to be testimonies to the deity's might and unfathomable nature. Primarily writing about the cosmic voyage genre but perhaps considering astronomical literature more generally as well, Browning emphasises how the readers of these works are encouraged to raise "the question of how one should negotiate the relationship between religious devotion and a pursuit of scientific knowledge, and how one should understand the relevance of gender identity to this question" (404). Importantly, scientific knowledge became more widely accessible in the period, and numerous books sought to instruct not only men but also women and children on multiple topics within a variety of disciplines, usually in a dialogic form. Elizabeth Carter, a Bluestocking who was famously well-versed in an astounding number of subjects, translated Francesco Algarotti's *Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy Explain'd for the Use of the Ladies* (1739) (Browning 402) and Jerome de Lalande's *Astronomie des Dames* (1785) also sought to impart knowledge of the night sky on the same audience.

Bearing in mind Charlotte Smith's keen interest in biology and familiarity with the Linnaean taxonomy (Bailes 235), her capacity to represent lunar phenomena in an accurate and detailed fashion could hardly be a coincidence. Smith does not simply rely on the classification system designed by Linnaeus, but she also criticises its artificiality (Bailes 238). This attitude may manifest itself in her "Sonnet XLIV. Written in the Church Yard," which successfully documents the Moon's influence on tides without demystifying and renouncing the figure of the queen of the night. She manages to faithfully report on the conjunction of the equinox with the rise of waters and ponder about the implications of the event for her own destiny. The idea that the same natural forces control and shape the life of the observer yet again reinforces a feeling of unity.

Browning relates Barbauld's "A Summer Evening's Meditation" to the tradition of cosmic voyage literature popular at the beginning of the eighteenth century and even insists that Barbauld rather successfully "out-Miltons" her forerunners (397). Nonetheless, she not only evokes the stars' roles as celestial moral guides and the figure of Milton's Eve, but also appears to participate in the scientific dialogue of her age. The inspiration for the trajectory of her interstellar voyage may have been Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, of which Barbauld was an avid reader during her formative years (McCarthy 94). The work seeking

to promote science among the uninitiated is divided into six parts or nights; during each of these nights, a dialogue commences about the different planets and other spectacles that the universe may disclose to the naked eye. The second and third nights focus specifically on the Moon and its assumed habitability, affirming that "the moon is an earth too," and that its residents are likely to worship the Earth just like we admire the Moon (Fontenelle 41, 53). Nevertheless, the theory according to which the Moon has no light of her own is upheld in the book, and she is the dutiful servant of those who wish to travel by night, contributing to the "pleasurable accommodation of man" (44). Such theorisation about plurality and the debatable status of Earth as the only planet suitable for the sustaining of life brings to mind William Herschel's fascinating, although fallacious proposition, raising doubts about the centrality of our globe: "Are we not a larger moon to the Moon, than she is to us?" (qtd. in Holmes). The scientific interests of the women poets are thus immediately detectable in the poems, yet they do not lead to disenchantment, and the traditional allusions to mythology are preserved.

Closely monitoring the eclipse of the Moon and her capacity to govern the waters may unveil to the spectator the hidden truths of Nature about the rhythm of life and transitoriness, in line with the pursuits of Romantic science. Yet, the great revelations characteristic of numerous poetic pieces of the Romantic canon perhaps never did come; some of the selected poems seem to problematise the construction of Nature's role as a source for transcendence, judged to be potentially exploitative. They are more likely to respect the Moon's and the infinite sky's ultimate unknowability. In Hitt's view, the nocturnal meditational piece of Barbauld calls for ethical engagement with nature which necessitates humility on the part of the sky-gazer; Barbauld thus criticises the overabundance of the Wordsworthian "egotistical sublime" (142).

"Celestial Sympathy"

Anne K. Mellor's Feminine Romantic tradition, functioning as a "countersite" to mainstream Romanticism, is chiefly characterised by a "cooperative rather than possessive interaction with a Nature troped as a female friend or sister" (3). The possibility to position the lunar poetry of Romantic women authors within this framework deserves some consideration. While Mellor maintains that the primary connection between the subject and Nature is that of kinship, arising from

a kind of synergy and compassionateness, a thorough examination of the trope of the Moon in these poems may reveal that the appreciation for benignancy and softness does not preclude the due veneration of the Moon's majestic forces and her possible nonchalance. It is despite this purported detachment that women poets decide to entrust their accounts of struggles to the celestial body.

Under the dark veil of the night, the boundaries between the human and non-human become undetectable as identities intermingle, sympathy and affinity prevail. In Smith's "Sonnet III. To a Nightingale" and Robinson's "Ode to the Nightingale" and "Second Ode to the Nightingale," the speakers identify with the eponymous bird as they are all "Pale Sorrow's victims" (Smith, "Sonnet III" l. 9). The poems undoubtedly echo the myth of the mutilated Philomel who was transformed into a nightingale; both Robinson and Smith seek to stress how the poet and the bird unite in their song about shared misfortunes, addressing the Moon and inspiring empathy in the whole of Nature:

> In snowy west, I tell my pains
> Beside the brook in icy chains
> Bound its weedy banks between,
> While sad I watch night's pensive queen,
> Just emblem of my weary woes:
> For ah! where'er the virgin goes,
> Each flow'ret greets her with a tear
> To sympathetic sorrow dear (Robinson, "Second Ode
> to the Nightingale" ll. 41–48)

Significantly, the whole of Nature, "each flow'ret" responds with "sympathetic sorrow" to the Moon. In "Ode to the Moon," Robinson's Moon herself becomes a "languid eye" who "sheds its soft tears upon the painted vale" (ll. 17–18). Charlotte Smith's persona also wishes to participate in this unity infused with sympathy, seeking to join in with the nightingale's song and share with the Moon her own "tale of tender woe" (ll. 2, 10). Myers acutely observes that Smith strategically emulates Petrarch in her sonnets "to elicit from readers an intellectual and emotional reciprocity missing from her immediate circumstances" (241). Mary Darwall's earlier address to Contemplation also speaks about this experience of being attuned

to one's environment: "All Nature joins to fill my labouring breast / With high sensations…" (ll. 8–9).

The feelings of sympathy and empathy conferred principally on the Moon but flowing through the entirety of the nocturnal scene, being responsible for the special rapport between the different life forms, may be rooted in the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility. The poetry of sensibility emerging at the end of the eighteenth century valued exactly this "willingness and ability to respond to others," indicating a "rare emotional capacity" (Spacks 249). Additionally, sensibility entailed an apprehension of social injustices because of its concern with the suffering of the individual, resulting in a "symbiosis and the tension of the social and the personal" (Spacks 250). Regardless of the highly introspective stance of their speakers, Curran finds that Smith's pieces are imbued with a "conversational intensity" (31).

Mellor agrees that dualisms in Feminine Romanticism are resolved through a form of collaboration and unity. Borrowing Carol Gilligan's theory of the ethics of care, she asserts that Romantic women writers refuse to construct a truly threatening Other. By dismissing "oppositional polarity," they attempt to establish a non-hierarchical structure of sympathy and likeness (3). Noctambulation by moonlight, as defined at the beginning of the paper, is therefore key for the shaping of female subjectivity: "Feminine Romanticism was based on a subjectivity constructed in relation to other subjectivities, hence a self that is fluid, absorptive, responsive, with permeable ego boundaries. This self typically located its identity within a larger human nexus, a family or social community" (Mellor 209). Indeed, the speaker of the poems comes to being via walking by and engaging with the parts of nocturnal Nature, experiencing a reciprocal understanding and compassion.

However, the present assortment of lunar poems also shows the potential to somewhat challenge the framework established by Mellor. In Mellor's view, part of the undertaking of the female Romantic poets was to domesticate the sublime of the male tradition. The feminised nature into which the poets of this canon readily venture is "not an overwhelming power, not even an all-bountiful mother"; rather, the female speaker "feels comforted, even addressed by, female nature, with whom she communes either in words or in song" (97). Mellor thereby aspires to construct a dichotomy between sisterly intimacy and awe-inspiring otherness. The analysis of Moon poetry performed in this essay may offer ample evidence for quite the opposite, namely that these two qualities could be co-present in the Nature of Romantic poetesses, encapsulated in the image of the mighty sphere of the night. She listens

attentively, and her presence can pacify the disquietude presiding over the subject's mind, while her sublime supremacy is also praised. The alternation of her phases makes her a harbinger of mortality, a fact that does not prevent the persona to value her mildness and cordiality.

Quoting passages from Dorothy Wordsworth's diary, Mellor contends that she absorbs the "expanse of nature without the terror of the Burkean sublime" (161). The impressive number of moonlit walks recorded in the journals of Dorothy Wordsworth are indeed usually categorised as "pleasant" or, when she aims to dramatise the significance of these wanderings, "very pleasant" (Wordsworth 39). Conversely, the account of a night walk on 18 March 1802 included in *The Grasmere Journal* clearly displays the traits of Burke's sublimity. The Moon is obscure, as it is overcast, but then emerges again from behind a mountain, and the walker cannot suppress her desire to vocalise her simultaneous unrest and reverence: "O the unutterable darkness of the sky & the Earth below the Moon! & the glorious brightness of the moon itself!" (81). The sight of the Island house illuminated by the "bright soft" moonlight and surrounded by the impenetrable blackness urges the spectator to pronounce that it "needs must be a holy place." Wordsworth declares that she "had many many exquisite feelings" and avows that the experience "made me more than half a poet" (81). Accordingly, she cannot settle down for reading but has the irresistible impulse to write as soon as she arrives home from the stimulating excursion, which enterprise, unfortunately, she "gave up expecting William" (81). Other instances of the Moon's yearned companionship from the journals are relatively easy to locate; after a strenuous visit from Thomas Wilkinson who bombarded Dorothy Wordsworth with questions, she confesses that "[she] was glad when he left [her]" because "[t]hen [she] had time to look at the moon while [she] was thinking over [her] own thoughts" (84).

Even though in lunar poetry, the Moon is repeatedly likened to a personified friendship whose "mild and genuine ray / Through life's long evening shall unclouded last" (Smith, "Sonnet XXVIII. To Friendship" ll. 5–6), her distant and cold mien is equally recognised. It is not uncharacteristic of the poets discussed here to paint the "Night's regent" as uncaring, beaming "at the tumult of the troubled earth," and hence being "unvex'd by all their conflicts" (Smith, "Sonnet LIX" ll. 6, 8, 14). These portrayals of discord between the speakers' and the Moon's emotional states may indicate the speakers' acceptance of the ultimate unknowability of the celestial object. In spite of the presumed dispassion of the Moon, the speakers of these

poetic pieces decide to open their hearts to the caressing but cold beams of Cynthia. Nor is it rare that they question this contradictory attraction to the remote orb, only to restate their intention to treat her as their closest associate while showing respect for her autonomy and otherness:

> What is it that gives thee, pale Queen of the Night,
> That secret intelligent grace?
> Or why do I gaze with such tender delight
> On thy fair, but insensible face?
> What gentle enchantment possesses thy beam
> Beyond the warm sunshine day?
> Thy bosom is cold as the glittering stream,
> Where dances thy tremulous ray.
> . . . . . .
> Then still I must love thee, mild Queen of the Night!
> Since feeling and fancy agree,
> To make thee a source of unfading delight,
> A friend and a solace to me. (Tighe ll. 1–8, 29–32)

There is a discrepancy between the face of the spectator, turned towards the celestial orb and glowing with an expression of sympathy and hope, and the blank visage of the Moon looking back at her without any trace of sensibility. Mirroring in psychology refers to the mimicry of the other's nonverbal signs with the hope of establishing a rapport; Gordon explains how "facial empathy uses our own face as a mirror of the other's face" (730). The ancient visualisation of the Moon as a mirror reflecting the surface of the Earth may not be accidental and could perhaps be evocative of an analogous underlying gesture (Mheallaigh 198). In the case of Tighe's poem, mirroring malfunctions because the Moon does not reflect the emotions exhibited on the observer's face. Refraining from the choice to force her emotional state on the Moon, the speaker decides to trust her as a friend, undeterred by her resistance. The effect that the Moon exerts on her is a form of enchantment that sunlight lacks and which the persona simply cannot grasp as it seems to be antithetical to her coldness. Instead of the chain of calculated, rational arguments, here it is "feeling and fancy" which have the last word on the matter. Smith also unabashedly confesses her love to the night and to its empress, the Moon:

I love thee, mournful, sobersuited night,
When the faint moon, yet ling'ring in her wane,
And veil'd in clouds, with pale uncertain light
Hangs o'er the waters of the restless main. (ll. 1–4)

Conventionally negative epithets, like "mournful" and "sobersuited" become the objects of fondness in Smith's sonnet. Nor does the speaker shun the obscure atmosphere created by the lingering, "uncertain light" of the "faint moon."

Conflicting qualities like darkness and light, the Moon's gloomy shadow and the soothing rays are juxtaposed and equally cherished by Helen Maria Williams's "Sonnet to the Moon." To be more precise, the poem is authored by Williams's heroine Julia and is included in the volume *Julia, a Novel; Interspersed with Some Poetical Pieces* (1790):

Come! and o'er earth thy wand'ring lustre shed,
Thy deepest shadow, and thy softest light;
To me congenial is the gloomy grove,
When with faint light the sloping uplands shine;
That gloom, those pensive rays alike I love. (ll. 4–7, emphasis added)

Exalting both the "deepest shadow" and the "softest light," the "gloom" and the "pensive rays," the speaker recognises the Moon's convoluted character. Backscheider's succinct appraisal of the work chimes in with Hitt's discussion about the capitalisation on nature as a locus for apotheoses: "Williams is replicating the movement of many of Smith's sonnets but without the kind of revelatory moment common to the sonnets of Wordsworth and Keats" (351). The intentional election of certain genres, most often the sonnet form by the women poets of Mellor's canon is argued to disclose their repudiation of the eighteenth-century rigid hierarchies between literary forms (Mellor 11). "A self experienced in relation to other selves" becomes accessible resulting from these choices, which remains unavailable "to the self-absorbed, often abstracted meditations of either the epic poet or the odal hymnist" (11). Sonnets about night passages and odes written to the Moon can once again unite both of these attitudes as the persona's introspective stance does not inhibit her openness to her surroundings.

Just how inclined these women poets were to enter into a respectful relationship with the Moon is perceptible in their sometimes undeniably unique employment of lunar imagery as indicated by the preceding sections. Their renunciation of hierarchical structures and discomfort with applying polarities are exemplified by their portrayal of the Moon as a complex entity, encompassing both light and darkness, beauty and sublimity, being seemingly within reach but proving to be unattainable. Informed in their work not solely by mythology but perhaps also by the breakthroughs of contemporary science, these women poets of Romanticism chose to make equal use of traditional representations and innovative perspectives.

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Contributor Details

Orsolya Albert received both her BA and MA degrees in English Studies from ELTE and is currently a first-year doctoral student at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her interests range from Romantic poetry to Victorian children's literature and nineteenth-century theories of aesthetics more generally. Her PhD project inspects a possible connection between health and the aesthetic experience of the beautiful in the short stories and essays authored by Vernon Lee.