Introduction

In Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796), the hero and heroine, struggling to escape the evil monk, Schedoni, pause to admire the scenery. From the summit on which they stand 'the whole lake of Celano' bursts 'upon their view' and gives rise to typically gendered aesthetic responses.[1] The feminine Ellena reacts to the beautiful, while the hero Vivaldi reacts to what is sublime and magnificent. The response of their loyal but rather simple-minded servant, Paulo, is more anomalous:

> "Ay, Signora!" exclaimed Paulo, "and have the goodness to observe how like are the fishing boats, that sail towards the hamlet below, to those one sees upon the bay of Naples. They are worth all the rest of the prospect, except indeed this fine sheet of water, which is almost as good as the bay, and that mountain, with its sharp head, which is almost as good as Vesuvius – if it would but throw out fire!" (*The Italian* 159)

Although Paulo appreciates the 'prospect', his view is comically inappropriate, disorderly, and ill-considered. Lacking Vivialdi's perspective, he is incapable of generalising, which is, according to the neoclassical standards of taste Radcliffe is influenced by, a flaw. Similarly, while he clearly appreciates the sublime, he seems to have only a limited understanding of it. His suggestion that the mountain is 'almost as good as Vesuvius – if it would but throw out fire' shows, to say the least, equivocal judgement. Paulo's apparent inability to make developed judgements of taste seems to confirm the social order: his partial perspective makes him unfit for social responsibility as surely as Vivaldi's sublime vision confirms his suitability to rule. This set-piece suggests that while ordinary people like Paulo are capable of appreciating spectacle, they are still not fully functioning subjects as regards either politics or taste. Teasingly, however, Radcliffe elsewhere complicates this, suggesting that, even if Vivaldi and Ellena have confident responses, confusion in relation to the aesthetic is not confined to the lower ranks. If Schedoni's guide, for example, does not know whether 'to laugh or cry' when confronted with theatrical representation, neither, frequently, does Radcliffe's audience (318).

Ten years later, Sydney Owenson's use of the language of taste is equally emphatic. In *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), her dilettante aristocratic hero finds his sensibility and taste corrupted by the vices of fashionable life to such an extent that he can no longer enjoy high cosmopolitanism.[2] However, on a visit to Ireland he gradually becomes involved in the study of Irish history, language, and oral culture, hence recovering from his ennui. Owenson's strategy is to dignify the Irish present by promoting a culturally prestigious past, endorsing the taste and orality of the Irish peasantry. For Owenson the emphasis is on the revivifying effects of local culture and its lower class embodiment. Her hero, Horatio, reflects: 'in the first circles of all great cities (as in courts), the native features of national character are softened into general uniformity, and the genuine feelings of nature are suppressed or exchanged for a political compliance with the reigning modes and customs' (16). Here his remarks retain vestigal traces of the neoclassical association of the universalising perspective with the ability to govern. However, the connection is degraded; it is no longer that courtiers experience a variety of cultures in order to form a taste superior to local prejudice. Rather, their cosmopolitanism represents the erosion of nervous sensibility. Owenson's argument in favour of particular local taste is offered as a corrective to sophisticated, standard responses to the aesthetic.

---

[1] Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, ed. and intro. Frederick Garber (London: Oxford UP, 1968), vol. 2, p. 159. For an insightful discussion of the visual politics of *The Italian*, see Diego Saglia, 'Looking at the Other: Cultural Difference and the Traveller's Gaze in *The Italian*', *Studies in the Novel* 28 (1996): 12–37.

The divergence between the two writers is indicative of more than the difference between Owenson's Irish nationalism and Radcliffe's alleged conservatism. Taste had always had a political dimension but, as the overdetermined and all but ubiquitous use of its language in these works reflects, the fierceness of political debate after the American and French Revolutions brought the concept under greater pressure. Suitably adapted by writers like Radcliffe, elements of neoclassical taste could be used (albeit sometimes playfully) to protect a view of the social order predetermined by class and gender. However, I would argue, there was an alternative approach that did not position taste as a secret of the upper classes.[3] Instead, the discourse of taste could be used to ensure that the 'right' kind of aesthetic experience was no longer formulated as accessible only to the social elite.

This study argues that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed a revolution in taste; from an aristocratic conception of taste linked to the power to rule, disinterestedness, and universality to a more democratic model. This radicalisation of taste occurred in part as a result of the impact of the debates following the American and French revolutions. During this period, disputes over taste frequently took place in marginalised forms themselves regarded as being in bad taste: the Gothic, the sentimental novel, the romance, and the tale. Often considered feminised, these genres positioned the apparently exclusive quality of taste as something which might be possessed by a greater number of people. This, in turn, allowed the middle classes to begin to reimagine the role of the lower ranks in the political life of the nation.

---

[2] Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (1806), ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), p. 11.

[3] See Daniel Cottom, *The Civilized Imagination: A Study of Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

Not only has commentary on taste in these genres been insufficiently examined, but the contribution of women writers to this debate has been marginalized. In terms of Romantic aesthetics, women's writing is invariably positioned in relation to the sublime and the beautiful. Of course, this topic forms an important starting point, but female commentary on taste had a more complex influence on Romantic aesthetics and dealt with a far wider range of concerns than modern scholarship acknowledges. It insisted on connections between taste, utility, sentiment, and morality. This ethical discourse on taste is explored here in relation both to better known literary figures – Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Austen, Smith, and Edgeworth – and to a range of more minor writers, whose significant contributions to the debate have been largely overlooked: Clara Reeve, Sophia and Harriet Lee, Eliza Fenwick, Mary Brunton, Joanna Baillie, Elizabeth Hamilton, and Priscilla Wakefield.

Exploration of this topic is overdue for a number of reasons. Most histories of taste concentrate on the early to mid eighteenth century, when the civic humanist account of taste as a signifier of political fitness was most influential. The neoclassical ideas that supported this were gradually eroded in the latter half of the century, challenged in particular by Gothic and sentimental fiction. Histories of taste present this as a period of decline for the notion, in a number of ways. After all, while the word *aesthetic* was not in common usage in Britain till the 1830s, this was nonetheless a time when the notion of a commonly available aesthetic experience was gaining ground amidst anxiety that taste was purely subjective. Further, while Kant's notion of a subjective but universal judgement of taste is an exception, it did not prove influential in England in the period.[4] Hence the scholarly assumption is that the growing emphasis on subjectivity and on the association of ideas weakens the possibility of agreement on artistic manners and all but finishes taste as a central concept. The role of 'taste' as a hierarchizing mechanism (that is, as a way of determining the cultural capital of the art work) seemed threatened.

However, it is possible to argue that, rather than the importance of taste in the period decreasing, a shift took place in its meaning which generated anxiety. Hester Lynch Piozzi, for example, suggests in 1794 that taste is a 'word profaned by so many coxcombs' who 'profess a TASTE for what they do not even understand'; similarly, Wordsworth remarks irritably in his 1815 *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* that 'TASTE' is 'a word which has been forced to extend its services far beyond the point to which philosophy would have confined them'.[5] Remembering that Wordsworth is attacking the 'factitious influence' of a select group, 'the PUBLIC', in this essay, it seems both Piozzi and Wordsworth are suggesting that the wrong people are assumed to have cultural capital (Wordsworth, *Selected Prose* 411). They are not denying the role of taste, merely redirecting it. Wordsworth, for example, is concerned that the reader may not remember that 'TASTE' 'is a metaphor, taken from a *passive* sense of the human body, and transferred to things which are in their essence *not* passive – to intellectual *acts* and operations' (409). Wordsworth is keen to ensure that 'taste' is not positioned, as Shaftesburian sensibility had been, as a purely instinctive response to sensory stimuli: taste is not collapsible into a simple formulation of aesthetic experience as immediate, unreflective. Instead, 'taste' is something requiring mental effort, and as such subject to control and direction. 'Taste', it seems, no longer involves choosing between one art object and another; rather, it is a question of judging between different treatments of aesthetic experience. As the opening of Piozzi's piece shows, the viewer, whether 'poet', 'painter', or 'coxcomb', is as much on trial as the piece of art or the prospect. Given the growing sense of a common access to aesthetic experience, it was no longer enough to claim the status of gentleman to be considered tasteful. As this book indicates, the matter was far more fiercely contested.

---

[4] George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), p. 4.

[5] Hester Lynch Piozzi, *British Synonymy; Or, an Attempt at regulating the Choice of Words in Familiar Conversation. Inscribed, With Sentiments of Gratitude and Respect, to such of her Foreign Friends as have made English Literature their Peculiar Study*, 2 vols (London: G.G. and J Robinson, Paternoster-Row, 1794), p. 305; William Wordsworth, Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', in William Wordsworth, *Selected Prose*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 409.

But if taste was still an important concept, not only for philosophers and poets but also more generally in this period, key areas of the discourse of taste have nonetheless been neglected. This has arisen partly as a result of the historical difficulty in defining taste itself. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault, distinguishing the episteme of the Classical Age from that of the modern, remarks:

> Not that reason made any progress: it was simply that the mode of being of things, and of the order that divided them up before presenting them to the understanding, was profoundly altered.[6]

In these terms, eighteenth-century discussions of taste can be seen to form part of a meta-enquiry during this period into the 'order that divided [things] up'. Even in its less philosophical manifestation, as a jargon on which 'every tongue rang changes', as I suggest above, discussions of taste frequently signalled an attempt to redefine on what authority judgements about sensory information on the world should best be made.[7] While this interest in epistemological authority ties aesthetics to debates concerning the more direct exercise of power, it also ensures that taste occupies a particularly unstable discursive space. This space has usually been recognisable by the presence of familiar key motifs (the sublime, the beautiful, the picturesque) or through key debates (of which that on the standard of taste has been examined most exhaustively). In particular, within scholarly writing, this instability has led to concentration on those texts (often philosophical in nature) apparently most securely concerned with aesthetics.

---

[6] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. xxii.

[7] Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, eds Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols (London: Pickering, 1989) 7:7; subsequently *Works*.

My book acknowledges taste as a discourse with a strong philosophical strand that attempted and ultimately failed to define its central notion. However, it does not aim to assess the philosophical (in)coherence of such accounts. Instead, it directs attention to the pervasive and popular use of the language of taste, often ignored in the history of aesthetics. Tracing the relationship of taste and its opposite, Agamben notes that ironically the 'novel … born to satisfy the exigencies of bad taste, ended up occupying centre stage in literary production'.[8] A glance at the late eighteenth-century novel shows the actual extent of this incongruity. Even given the fluctuating status of the genres, by the end of the century the romance, the sentimental and Gothic novel, children's literature, and the tale were among the most important forums for the discussion of taste. This is not as paradoxical as it might appear. As a comparatively vulgar genre, the novel was frequently subject to attack, criticised for its allegedly seditious content or poor style. Given the novel's dubious status, writers were anxious to distinguish their own works from more 'frivolous' attempts. They promoted their own cultural capital in the Preface, in choices of epigraph, or in the plot itself, but they also reflected seriously on the nature of taste. In addition, because gender often played a role in the criticism of the novel, women writers found themselves particularly implicated in this process. And some, most notably Wollstonecraft, were eager to emphasise that the problem of taste did not only affect young women but had far broader implications.

Yet the contribution of women writers to taste within these previously devalourized genres has received little critical attention. In the cases where criticism, often feminist in perspective, has approached the topic, the account remains fragmentary, touching on unusual attitudes to the aesthetic in the work of individual women writers but failing to provide a large-scale narrative. Scholarly discussions of women's position in relation to aesthetics have often reinscribed the handicap represented by the gender bias in the discourse of taste.[9] It is still, for example, a critical commonplace to stress the devalorizing nature of women's association with ornamental rather than the critical or creative, and with the beautiful rather than the sublime. Even sophisticated studies focusing on the relationship between gender and taste often concentrate on these areas of well-trodden ground. Robert W. Jones, in *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century*

---

[8] Giorgio Agamben, 'The Man of Taste and the Dialectic of the Split', *The Man of Content* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994) pp. 13–27, 21.

[9] The association of masculinity and sublimity has been reflected in a critical concentration on the latter: see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976); Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), and Neil Hertz's *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublim*e (New York, Columbia UP, 1985).

Britain (1998), for example, considers the frequently remarked association of the feminine with the beautiful.[10] Alternatively, for some critics, the association of Romantic women's writing with the particular and the beautiful is replaced by a tendency to represent it in relation to the sublime as a transgressive appropriation of a more 'masculine' aesthetic.[11]

Although complicated, questioned, and sometimes weakened, such gendered formulations of the dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful still underpin present-day criticism. Indeed, the textbook commonplace that renewed scholarly interest in women's writing led to a destabilising of the notion of Romanticism rests firmly on such assumptions. Writing by women is perceived as different (more modest, more interested in sentiment and the quotidian), a situation that arises because, in the past, feminist criticism often focused on the unique nature of such work. Yet while this was an important move in terms of gaining acceptance for such writers, it also led to their ghettoization. In some instances, for example, women writers of the late eighteenth century are positioned as quite separate from Romanticism, seen as continuing earlier eighteenth-century aesthetic values. This is a dangerous tactic because it is possible to see such writers as outdated, less farsighted than their bold male Romantic counterparts. Another strategy has been to place such writers in terms of an essentially divided Romanticism. For example, in *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne K. Mellor suggests there are two Romanticisms, masculine and feminine (and when feminine Romanticism is linked with women writers, of course the danger is that it is seen as inadequate). Alternately, in *The Contours of Masculine Desire*, Marlon B. Ross suggests that Romantic ideology emerges as a defence against the increasing numbers of women poets in this period; here feminine qualities are hijacked, becoming acceptable when appropriated and transformed by emotional (but not inappropriately feminine) men.[12]

This study recognises that the issue of marginalisation remains a thorny one in relation to women writers of the period. The values seen by critics as representing the tasteful in the early to mid eighteenth century (for example, the neoclassical emphasis on generalisation, disinterestedness, and rationality) or in the Romantic period (originality, exploration of feeling, emphasis on the primitive rather than the civilised)[13] are all, when most powerful, seen as masculine. A cynic might assume that the dominant aesthetic values, whatever they might be, always are positioned in this way – and that there is then a slippage between 'masculine' and 'male' that ensures the canonization of male rather than female writers. Nonetheless, this study does not seek to correct this imbalance by an extensive or point-by-point comparison of male and female writers (although patterns of influence and unexpected similarities of thought are revealed). Instead, this study (following Marlon B. Ross) recognises that more time needs to be devoted to examining the work of women writers in order for a more integrated and accurate understanding of the period to emerge. In particular, examining the work of such writers in relation to taste will, it is hoped, aid in the development of this more accurate understanding by revealing that taste itself is something malleable, under debate: that cultural prestige (whether for poet, writer or ordinary citizen) is something fiercely contested. What emerges is that the narrative of taste is not merely one of exclusion (as Cottom hints in *The Civilized Imagination*), but also of inclusion. Further, examination of debates around taste in women's writing highlights this period as a time when apparently neoclassical values and those usually considered Romantic were both present. Such values were adapted, combined, and assessed, their role in shaping an ethical society considered evaluated. Indeed, this debate or testing is, if anything is, the quintessential feature of the discourse of taste in this period. This study proposes, through re-examining debates around taste, to examine such complexities. Hence it traces the discussion of taste from the illuminating remarks made by Clara Reeve and Barbauld on the value of tradition to Sydney Owenson's critique of Romantic aesthetics in *Florence Macarthy* (1818).

---

[10] Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

[11] One example here, though sensitive to the difficulties also present for the lower classes, is Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's P, 1998). Also pertinent is Patricia Yaeger's essay, 'Toward a Female Sublime', in Linda Kauffman ed., *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) pp. 191–212.

[12] Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire; Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

This study does not suggest, then, that women's commentary on taste is bound by any necessary because essential similarity, but it does suggest that the complication of gender discourse in the late eighteenth century gave women writers a common and particular point of entry into discussions on taste. Building on the work of Ross, Mellor, Johnson, Labbe and others, the comlexity of the relation of the discourses of gender and taste in the period can be appreciated. Thus, while it is possible to represent the hackneyed association of women and the beautiful as purely restrictive, not only did middle-ranking women have considerable access to the tasteful and the culturally prestigious, but this access was facilitated by their perceived connection to ornament and the beautiful. That women's access to the *belles lettres* had at any rate grown during the eighteenth-century is confirmed by the efforts of periodicals such as *The Spectator*.[14] In addition, the association of ornament and femininity meant that female involvement in the aesthetic sphere could be defended in unimpeachably hegemonic terms. Women were allowed authority over the ornamental because this was how they themselves were expected to appear. This is stated in its bluntest form by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: in *Emile* (1762) he connects female taste and artistic activity with vanity: 'This voluntary progress [in embroidery] is easily extended to drawing, for this art is not without its importance for the art of dressing oneself up tastefully'; women should not, however, draw figures or landscapes, but: 'Leaves, fruits, flowers, draperies, everything which is useful for giving an elegant turn to clothing'.[15] Women are allowed to be producers of the aesthetic only as long as the primary aesthetic object they create is themselves. Representative of this attitude to ornament, Rousseau's heroines, Sophie and Julie, stimulated a lengthy novelistic debate in which politics and taste intersected.[16] Rousseau's account confirmed women's access to the sphere of the tasteful. Further, it granted them a metamorphic potential that was a source of both authority and difficulty to conservative and radical women writers alike.

---

[13] For such classifications of the aesthetic qualities of the period, see Walter J. Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1946).

[14] Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 7 vols (London: Buckley and Tonson, 1712); subsequently *Spectator*. See *Spectator* no. 10 (1: 53–8, 57).

This, along with the already existing tendency to criticise young female novel readers, in turn gave a growing urgency and authority to women's commentary on taste, and a new significance to the aesthetic choices of their heroines. In particular, following Rousseau, such writing saw the increasing politicisation of the female figure. The connection of the female body with nation and the symbolic relation of female chastity to national pride is an enduring one.[17] However, in the last three decades of the eighteenth century, it is increasingly the case that much of the political significance of the female figure is expressed through women's manipulation of the codes of taste: not only their dress, their accomplishments, or their reading but the way their taste as a whole affects the community has the greatest political significance. In the novels of the 1780s and 90s the potential for political disaster is ultimately indicated by the sexual fall of a female protagonist, but (since such a disaster can only occur once for each heroine) during the course of such narratives it is necessarily signalled by her lapses from good taste.

Warnings of aesthetic, sexual, and political disaster, articulated through the female figure, were accompanied by a critique of taste's role in a healthy society. Here I re-examine these areas of debate, often considered by modern commentators to have been less persuasive or marginal. For example, in discussions surrounding the function of art, utility is often portrayed by modern criticism as representing a threat to the integrity of the aesthetic, particularly in terms of Romanticism; in fact, as my study will show, the case was considerably more complex.[18] Similarly the status of detail, often portrayed as devalorized within the discourse, is open to reinterpretation,[19] as is that of sentiment.[20] In their more vulnerable moments, all these are seen by contemporary scholarship to be inadequate or dangerous facets of flawed, feminised accounts of taste. In contrast, this study considers them as important elements in a complex debate concerning taste and citizenship. Their inclusion marks an attempt to change 'the order of things' in both philosophical and political terms.

---

[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or on Education* (1762), trans. and intro. Allan Bloom, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 367, 368. See also Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities* pp. 149–86.

[16] Sophie and Julie are Rousseau's heroines in *Emile* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) respectively; see *Eloisa, or a Series of Original Letters*, trans. William Kendrick (1803), 2 vols, *Revolution and Romanticism, 1789–1834, A Series of Facsimile Reprints* (Oxford: Woodstock, 1989).

[17] See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1992).

As I discuss in the first chapter, for eighteenth-century commentators on taste, one of the most obvious ways of determining this order was by considering the opinions of the past. Both politically and aesthetically, tradition could provide reassurance that the right choices were being made. Yet towards the end of the century and during the Romantic period, both competing (and sometimes partially invented) indigenous literary traditions and the American and French Revolutions meant that the value of tradition was under interrogation. The work of Clara Reeve (with her Old Whiggish education) and of the dissenter Anna Letitia Barbauld reveals more about the political and religious basis of this interrogation of tradition. For Reeve the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had meant a break with tradition for British society, a break distorting standards of taste and critical judgement. In Barbauld's analysis, a sublime of tradition had been constructed to support the

---

[18] See John Whale's *Imagination Under Pressure: 1789–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), where Whale suggests that a reshaped form of imagination and taste is set up by thinkers including Wollstonecraft and Hazlitt in opposition to utility (97). See also Flint Schier, 'Hume and the Aesthetics of Agency', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 87 (1986–87): 121–35, and *Virtue and Taste; Essays on Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, Philosophical Quarterly Supplementary Series vol. 2, eds Dudley Knowles and John Skorupski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). Particularly relevant is 'Taste, Virtue and Class', David Brooke, 65–82.

[19] Reluctance to concentrate on detail was incorporated into even the methodology of commentary on aesthetics. However, in the 1960s the direction began to change. See Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 571–84, and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (London: Oxford UP, 1969). For a discussion of the development of the criticism of aesthetics as it relates to representation of gender difference, see the introduction to Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds, *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) pp. 1–22.

[20] The low aesthetic status of sentiment is evident in the low status of the sentimental novel through the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Edith Birkhead gave an interesting discussion of the term *sentiment* in her article 'Sentiment and Sensibility in the Eighteenth-century Novel', in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, vol. 11, comp. Oliver Elton (Oxford, Clarendon P, 1925). See also R.F. Brissenden, Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade (London: Macmillan, 1974); Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London, Methuen, 1986); and G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1992).

Established Church (and by implication the state). Importantly, then, both writers are emphatic concerning the link between narratives of politics and narratives of taste (although Reeve is more concerned with the effects of art, specifically fiction, and Barbauld extends this to see the aesthetic operating more broadly). Further, both offer alternatives to what they see as the current positioning of tradition: Reeve suggests that an accurate mode of vision, true taste, is held by subjects usually disempowered and feminised; Barbauld proposes a 'devotional taste', an internalised sublime that would influence Romantic writers as diverse as Wollstonecraft and Coleridge. Crucially, they are both aware of the power of the discourse of taste to reshape the country, to allow the devalued and disempowered to speak, to expose what has been hidden.

Both Reeve and Barbauld struggled, however, against a sense of the forcefulness of established modes of interpretation, and, as I explore in Chapter 2, the same difficulty haunted Wollstonecraft. It is often assumed that women writers have little to say about the Romantic notion of original genius: Wollstonecraft's work belies this claim. Extending Barbauld's critique of the operation of the sublime, Wollstonecraft suggests that social corruption is supported by a false, Burkean notion of the sublime and the beautiful. The alternative is an independent mode of thought drawing on the individual's original powers of perception: taste and the artistic activities connected with it here aid such freshness of vision. Wollstonecraft's sometimes awkward self-positioning in respect to such original thought has much to reveal about the problematics of Romantic authorship more generally. She provides an insightful analysis of the difficulties facing the original thinker: in this account, language, the senses, and, perhaps most importantly, feeling are easily distorted (even always-already contaminated) by society.

As Wollstoncraft's work suggests, the dangerous force of the aesthetic experience and the vividness of the imagination produce emotional excess that needs to be controlled. The next two chapters hence examine ways of directing aesthetic experience, exploring two major (but by no means mutually exclusive) approaches. Chapter 3 examines the treatment of emotional detachment through Gothic, children's fiction, and educational literature, an investigation that involves a rewriting of our notions of women writers' use of detail. Works by Radcliffe, Fenwick, Smith, and Wakefield imply that without knowledge both of the quotidian, and of the circumstances and systems that connect the features of the landscape, the spectator cannot achieve sufficient detachment to make a tasteful or an ethical judgement. Yet such writers suggest that while a variety of perspectives might grant disinterested detachment and a heightened ethical sense to the tasteful spectator, the structure of the recipient's mind was equally important. Chapter 4 picks up on this theme by examining a range of more psychologically orientated accounts of taste. While Romantic interest in the law of association is well established, little attention has been paid to women's contribution in this area. Maria Edgeworth and Joanna Baillie used a more psychological approach to taste in order to construct a spectator who could possess all the sensibility of taste without becoming dangerously vulnerable to feeling. However, perhaps the most democratic account of aesthetic judgement is offered by Elizabeth Hamilton, who argues for a shared taste, vital for all ranks, which would guarantee the health of the community.

As I examine in Chapter 5, both the notion of common aesthetic experience and the idea that such experience still needed an (albeit difficult to define) direction can be traced in the Romantic tale. In his 1800 Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth made what came to be seen as a quintessentially Romantic move when he avowedly turned to the lower ranks of the Lake District to examine ‘the real language of men’.[21] However, an examination of the contribution of women writers to the tale and short story enables a fuller account of the emerging emphasis on variation in terms of both class and nation in the aesthetics of the Romantic period. In particular, it can be argued that the growth in the ballad and folk tale seen from the mid-eighteenth century onwards gained extra impetus as a result of an increasing suspicion of fashionable and cosmopolitan life. In addition, however, collections of radical short stories by women writers compared the effects of various national and regional political systems on the lower as well as upper classes. In the process, the ability of lower class subjects to make judgements of taste was acknowledged. This can be demonstrated through examination of an unacknowledged source for the national tale, the collection of tales or short stories (such as, for example, Charlotte Smith’s *Letters of a Solitary Wanderer* [1800], Harriet and Sophia Lee’s *The Canterbury Tales* [1797–1805], and Elizabeth Gooch’s *Wanderings of Imagination* [1796]). In relation to the national tales of Edgeworth and Owenson (and particularly when seen in the context of Owenson’s 1818 *Florence Macarthy: An Irish Tale*), these works were important in establishing the importance of belonging in relation to taste. Attachment was as important for the tasteful spectator as the detachment of disinterestedness.

As the social position of these writers (in the middle and lower upper ranks) suggests, this study in part examines how the ‘genteel’ re-imagined the role of the lower ranks within the nation, creating a more democratic aesthetic that aided the avoidance of revolution.[22] In *Distinction* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu suggests that such pronouncements by the culturally authoritative are a way of continuing to deny others the right to speak. He refers to Marx and Engels’ notion of a society in which ‘there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other things’.[23] He finds that, despite such ‘apparent generosity’:

> the indulgent populism which credits the common people with innate knowledge of politics equally helps to disguise and so consecrate the ‘concentration in a few individuals’ of the capacity to produce discourse about the social world, and through this the capacity for consciously changing that world. (397)

---

[21] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 241.

[22] For ‘genteel’ see Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter* (London: Yale UP, 1998), p. 13.

[23] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction; A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 397.

While acknowledging this tendency, this study's examination of largely middle class commentary is not an unconscious perpetuation of this 'concentration' of the right to comment 'in a few individuals' nor a denial of the importance of working class voices. Instead, it acknowledges that middle class intellectual ideations both of the broader potential of humanity and of particular social groups are enablers of political change. In Bourdieu's terms, the power to speak that these 'few individuals' claimed makes the examination of this aspect of their work all the more vital. By positioning the lower ranks as potentially tasteful, such commentary enabled another reading of working people. Instead of being objects of ridicule or fear, they could now potentially be seen as politically responsible. As such, this aesthetic commentary by women writers in often-devalued genres represents an important intervention in the post-Revolution debate. Via the language of taste, these writers participated in what Alfred Cobban called 'perhaps the last real discussion of the fundamentals of politics in this country'.[24]

---

[24] Alfred Cobban, ed. *The Debate on the French Revolution 1789–1800* (1950), 2nd ed, *The British Political Tradition* 2 (London : Black, 1960), p. 1.