

***Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*, by Andrew Elfenbein. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.**

In *Byron and the Victorians* (1995) Andrew Elfenbein located the shift from British, literary, homosexual prehistory to history in the career of Lord Byron whom he described as a "homosexualised genius." In *Romantic Genius* he explains the term as "an association between genius and mysteriously unfathomable depths of erotic transgression" (203), examining the work and lives of six "literary outsiders" (37) from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (hence homosexual prehistory) who illustrate the foundations of the myth of the link between homosexuality and aesthetic genius. Published in the *Between Men ~ Between Women* series, a forum for current lesbian and gay scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, *Romantic Genius* contributes successfully to both literary history and the history of (homo)sexuality. Its success lies in its author's acute appreciation of the complexities and ambiguities of sexual practices and representations from the early modern period to the present, his incisive analysis of the homosexualised genius over three centuries (mindful of the vagueness of his key terms such as "effeminacy" and of course "genius"), and his "attention to the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of specific textual representations" (13). A welcome addition to his work on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is his brief discussion in the Conclusion of twentieth-century directions for the homosexualised genius. It is refreshing that, whereas most eighteenth-century treatises assumed that genius was male, Elfenbein devotes considerable attention to some female geniuses of the period who can also be problematically described as lesbian.

"William Beckford and the Genius of Consumption," as the chapter title suggests, examines the work of an eighteenth-century writer whose talent lay not in originality, but in blatantly 'feminised' behaviour, namely collecting and consuming. By imbuing his novella *Vathek* (1786) and its characters with the same quality, Beckford thus demonstrated an attribute that eighteenth-century theorists associated with genius: male geniuses had feminine traits. Immensely rich through inheritance, he was able to use his vast collection of Oriental manuscripts to develop a work of genius, a term then particularly applicable to "the Eastern manner of writing," according to William Duff in his *Essay on Original Genius* (1767). To Beckford's linking in life and work of effeminacy, genius and luxury can be added a further component, necrophilia. Elfenbein demonstrates this connection by including as an appendix a hitherto unpublished manuscript, Beckford's "Idyllium of Hylas" in which the youth is reduced by certain nymphs to a perpetual death-in-life. In Elfenbein's apt description, the "idyll presents the beautiful, dead boy as the ultimate limited edition" (48). Yet another component intermingled with Beckford's aspirations to genius relates to Adam Potkey's reading of *Vathek* as an "exaltation of pederasty" (Elfenbein 40). It is curious that Elfenbein goes on to explore how genius and paedophilia, not pederasty, are intertwined in Beckford's imagination. A shortcoming of this enterprise (and slippage) is that Elfenbein does not clarify his understanding of what constitutes paedophilia. Gay and lesbian studies requires that such emotive terms are used precisely, and unfortunately

the reader is here left unaware if Beckford unashamedly practised either pederasty in the Greek tradition or the molesting/collecting of pre-pubescent boys or both.

In "The Domestication of Genius: Cowper and the Rise of the Suburban Man," Elfenbein examines the association between the cultivation of domestic genius in the middle-class suburban home where the "respectable" man cultivated uniqueness and originality in private, and the secret, deviant life of the sodomite. Ironically for a poet seemingly both a tortured genius and a periodic madman, William Cowper was the most widely loved role model for nineteenth-century middle-class (married, suburban) men. Elfenbein examines the unsettling effects on some nineteenth-century readers of the solitary, secret (autobiographical) figure in Cowper's major poem, *The Task* (1785), whose celibate bachelorhood is somewhat incongruous in a setting so closely associated with women, marriage, and the family. The chapter skilfully explores the fine line between domestic genius with its attendant feminine traits and sexual deviance in a society in which the suburban man's masculinity depended on his "violent repudiation of homosexuality" (80). It seems that, so troubling was Cowper's reclusive life to his nineteenth-century biographers such as Robert Southey, the false rumour of his hermaphroditism provided a welcome explanation for his apparent gender dysfunction. Elfenbein clearly demonstrates that matters of gender are inexhaustibly intertwined with homophobia.

Gender transgression is central to Elfenbein's argument concerning Anne Damer, a genius by dint of her usurpation of a strictly male preserve, sculpting. As also an aristocrat, one of those forever under scrutiny by the middle classes for evidence of immoral practices, Damer exposed herself to criticism and libel that drew on gossip concerning her prominent and passionate same-sex friendships (especially with actresses). Elfenbein strives to undermine the certainty of eminent gay and lesbian scholars such as Randolph Trumbach who claim Damer as "the first modern lesbian" (111). Whereas he incisively investigates Damer's letters, her visual art, her novel *Belmour* (1801), and her (non-professional) theatrical roles, in an attempt to complicate the issue of her sexual practices and identity, Elfenbein does not succeed in challenging either version of the lesbian continuum espoused by Adrienne Rich and Martha Vicinus. He does well however to intertwine sexuality with economics, for he highlights the privileges and opportunities accorded such financially independent women as Damer whose lives were not directly affected by the gossip and murmurings of the sexual/gender police.

On the other hand the poverty stricken Anne Bannerman was compelled to work as a governess, an occupation which may have stifled her poetic output. Unlike Damer, Bannerman partook of "all the clichés [of the cult] of genius, such as sublimity, obscurity, medievalism, and enthusiasm" (125). Little is known of Bannerman's life especially after her final publication in 1807, and Elfenbein succeeds admirably in arousing the interest of his reader in this remarkable woman who managed to publish a range of sonnets, dramatic lyrics, and Gothic ballads without once privileging heteronormativity, yet without ever writing a love poem from one woman to another. Elfenbein's chapter on Bannerman, "Lesbianism and Romantic Genius," is paradigmatic of his work as a whole in consistently contextualising his subject's

“sexuality.” We cannot speak of Bannerman as a lesbian poet without considering associations among late eighteenth-century notions of sex/gender representations, male and female genius, and lesbian desire. Like Mary Wollstonecraft in her novella *Mary: A Fiction*, Bannerman controversially exploited the category of genius by choosing situations in her verse that organically led to passionate addresses between women. As Elfenbein concludes, “Genius demanded that Bannerman push the limits of acceptable poetry in ways that most women writers never did” (147).

In an unapologetic gay reading of what he calls the “Blakcan Ridiculous,” Elfenbein examines the camp and the comic in William Blake’s epic *Milton*. He finds that Blake, an honorary icon in the intertextual heritage of queer art and a poet of the absurd, both parodies the conventional sex/gender system and restores an excitement to cross-gendered genius that ‘straight’ eighteenth-century writers had flattened. Taking *Ololon* as his starting point, Elfenbein reinstates the character as, not Milton’s Emanation, as much of last century’s recent criticism has insisted, but rather as “an odd, omnigendered character” whose force lies not in “*her* weakness but *their* unpredictability” (153). While Elfenbein’s reading is original and incisive, with a campy edge (at one stage he has fun juxtaposing “nether regions” with “bottom rung” [163]), his use of the derogatory term “straight male mind,” for Blake, “the mind that believes in its own self-sufficiency” (156), has something of the glib “us versus them” argument about it. It is unclear if he uses “straight” as a synonym for “heterosexist” and/or “homophobic,” and its repeated use in analysing a work as elusive as *Milton* requires further theorisation.

In a brilliant final chapter Elfenbein explains how Coleridge’s early nineteenth-century Gothic narrative *Christabel* revolutionised both the representation of lesbianism in literature and the parameters of genius. Elfenbein is the first critic of Coleridge (one of the first writers paid to be a genius) to explore the relationship of *Christabel* to an eighteenth-century collection of obscene songs, jests, and riddles, *The Frisky Songster*, a work Coleridge had mentioned but one which critics have evidently thought too crude and “low” to investigate seriously in relation to a poet as highly canonised as Coleridge. Whereas in *The Frisky Songster* women undress for each other providing titillation for a heterosexual imagination, Elfenbein argues that the female undressing in Part I of *Christabel* “has nothing to do with men, maleness, or heterosexuality in the way traditional lesbian representation had” (189). Furthermore, *Christabel*’s hypnotic mood and trancelike repetitions establish it as a new type of work of genius, certainly sublimely mysterious experimental art, but a departure from previously familiar literary modes of genius, notable for their high-flown diction (for example, Bannerman) and visionary extravagance (for example, Blake). Like all the writers Elfenbein discusses, Coleridge’s goal was to indicate through his treatment of desire that he had access to a far greater range of emotional experience than that of his audience. “Only thus could they [all] be recognised as geniuses” (38).

Romantic Genius succeeds in furthering the burgeoning investigation of the connection between literature and unconventional sexuality. Gay and lesbian scholars who do not necessarily have a strong interest in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century verse have much to learn from Elfenbein’s study of the meanings, faultlines, and

intersections of genius, effeminacy, sapphism, and literary mystique. Scholars who consider themselves students of literature primarily and sexuality incidentally may find themselves reassessing their priorities. That the work defies simple classification is all to its credit.

Bruce Parr

***The Murder of Madeline Brown*, by Francis Adams. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001.**

Francis William Lauderdale Adams (1862-93), consumptive, charismatic and caustic, arrived from England in 1884, turned his analytical gaze upon “marvellous Melbourne” and used it as the setting for a murder mystery, *Madeline Brown's Murderer* (a “realistic and sensational novel”). First published in 1887 by the Melbourne firm Kemp and Boyce, this is a racy *fin de siècle* murder mystery by a writer whose work spanned many genres. Adams later retitled the book *Madeline Brown: Australian Social Life*, but the novel shows only vestiges of the political and social analysis that usually drive his writing; as Stephen Knight has remarked, “the more excitable title suits the book better.”² Now republished under a new variation of its title, *The Murder of Madeline Brown* is being marketed as crime fiction, with a strong emphasis on its evocation of Melbourne in the 1880s.

U.S. crime writer Laurie R. King commented that if she had been told *The Murder of Madeline Brown* was written in 1987 rather than 1887, she would have believed it, despite the obviously Victorian setting.³ An introductory essay by Melbourne crime writer and former journalist Shane Maloney also picks up on the modernity and freshness of a novel that appeared in the early days of urban crime fiction, the same year as Sherlock Holmes made his appearance, and just one year after the success of another Melbourne novel, Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*. Stephen Knight drew attention to this out-of-print, out-of-copyright publisher's “gift” in his 1997 history of Australian crime fiction, *Continent of Mystery*. He identified Fergus Hume and Francis Adams as early proponents of the urban crime novel, and specifically of the “thriller of Melbourne social life.”⁴

² Stephen Knight, *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction* (Melbourne: MUP, 1997: 73). The annotated copy of the novel showing Francis Adams's revisions is held in the Mitchell Library as “Special MS Copy C,” rather than the State Library of Victoria as indicated in Knight's discussion.

³ Laurie R. King, discussing *The Murder of Madeline Brown* with Michael Cathcart, Shane Maloney and Meg Tasker, ABC Radio National, 4 Sept 2000.

⁴ Stephen Knight, *Continent of Mystery* (72). Knight suggests that Adams was influenced by *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, and that Hume in turned used elements of Adams's narrative and character development in his subsequent novels, *Madame Midas* (1888) and *Miss Mephistopheles* (1890).