

INTRODUCTION



## Opening the Gatehouse: On and Around “Housing Romanticism”

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The storm and night are on the waste,  
As fast ... I haste,  
Home to my own four walls. (Carlyle “My Own Four Walls” 2: 263)

In 2012 Janet Larson, Francesca Saggini, and Anna Enrichetta Soccio argued for the need to reframe and project house studies into the twenty-first century in these terms:

[r]endered seemingly unproblematic by their concrete substantiality, and incontestable for their human necessity ... houses present themselves as secure spaces for confirming the identities of their inhabitants, defending “inside” against “outside”, the “private” from the “public”, and upholding ... a sense of stability against the ravages of change. (Larson, Saggini, Soccio 1)

These initial considerations fostered critical questions that the editors of and contributors to this special issue feel are even more relevant today: “How is the inhabited dwelling both a lived experience and the image of an episteme? How do house representations operate as signs for the dynamic interplay of diverse, contending forces?” (2).

In recent times, new dwellings and the ensuing relational and inter-relational networks they triggered have contested, expanded, and inevitably transformed the traditional idea(l) of house embedded in humanist discourse, powerfully imposing the necessity to reshape the analysis of the domestic past and present as the document of human experience in its flow. Questions arise around the surge in short-term home rentals (associated with Airbnb or one-off party house lettings); the idea of “co-living”, often glamorized in TV series; “tiny houses” and micro-flats as kooky solutions to the ever more impending social housing collapse; the housing crisis produced by the lack of social opportunities; the house bereavement experienced by asylum seekers, relocated migrants, and diasporic subjects, often crammed in dormitories or refugee camps, which purport to rethink radically the concepts of *domophilia* and *Heimat* into a novel pan-national space of belonging; the Great Recession of the early twenty-first century forcing millions of Americans from their homes into “phantom” houses—unlived houses of memory. All of the above issues repeatedly veer into concerns about attachment, “belonging”, and community; therefore they must be continuously reframed in

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terms of changing culture. The significance of “wall” itself, once associated with the house as a shelter, providing sanctuary and escape from the intrusiveness of the world wistfully mused upon by Thomas Carlyle in his poem “My own Four Walls”, has changed dramatically and perhaps definitively over the last few years. To paraphrase Michel de Montaigne, the house “is the mirror wherein we must look, to know ourselves as we should” (18). We shall go back to this age-long, thought-provoking idea of the house as a mirror of both the human and the social in concluding these introductory remarks.

This special issue of *European Romantic Review* on “Housing Romanticism” raises key questions about the importance of houses as a critical touchstone of both modernity and contemporaneity. From the conservative ideal of the Great Good Place of eighteenth-century poetry, rooted in classical antiquity, through the Georgian country house, the Regency town house, the Victorian poetics of the hearth, and the Modernist fictions of “bricks and mortar” firmness to today’s paper and screen re-readings of the country house idyll (from Austen to Altman, from Ishiguro to Tan), our culture is saturated with narratives of houses and houses whose stories await to be narrated. More recently, home makeover shows (the counterpart of cosmetic and fashion makeover shows) have drawn prime-time attention to critical concepts such as improvement, transformation, and self-fashioning, thus spectacularizing and deconstructing the Bachelardian intimate poetics of home. However, Gaston Bachelard’s words can still offer a solid conceptual and methodological point of departure for all those scholars who want to approach and reconfigure house studies from renewed angles through the transversal, multi-dimensional avenues opened by migration studies, urban anthropology, art history, and affect theory: “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (47).

House studies participate in—though they do not specifically belong to—many of the fields with which the contributors engage: literature, architecture, heritage studies, cultural history, gender studies, sociology, the history of science. Therefore, one of the aims of the authors is to prove that disciplinary “catch-all terms of convenience” (Gamer 2) risk eliding the complex process of formation of the concept of “house”; rather, this issue seeks to re-establish the relation of discrete branches of learning to each other, within the purview of a broadly humanistic project. Three related notions emerge from this claim: houses remain the best measure of human progress, or lack thereof; houses are a powerful illustration of human imagination; and houses are certainly one of the best, though problematic, representations of the self in its shifting exchanges with the world. The eight essays here collected enter into dialogue with all of these critical tenets, looking in turn at re-housing Romantic facts and Romantic fictions.

This special issue on “Housing Romanticism” finds its genesis in two panels on “Housing Romanticism: Facts and Fantasy” organized by Carmen Casaliggi, Francesca Saggini, and Maximiliaan van Woudenberg at the 2019 British Association for Romantic Studies conference, “Romantic Facts and Fantasies,” hosted by the University of Nottingham. In the relentless heat of those blithe summer days, little could the conference delegates imagine that a very short time later a global pandemic with lockdowns and quarantines would confine many of them—indeed, many of *us*—to our homes. In an epoch-changing social reshuffle challenging our ideas of both social spaces and privacy, our personal living spaces would soon collapse and collide with working places. Out of the blue, cherished family coziness turned into an epidemiological

trench, thus changing our understandings and conceptions of, and above all experiences with, house and housing for the foreseeable future and possibly forever. Unexpectedly, the comforting, “behind closed doors” myth of Western modernity arisen in the eighteenth century rapidly transformed into that bare-all privacy destroyer: the newfangled “in front of the camera” panoptic imperative many of us had quickly to become familiar with to carry on with our work as best we could.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, doors may have closed fast all over, but houses reluctantly opened to virtually connected workmates and vague acquaintances. Against this still unstable background of paradigm shift, crisis, and renovation, interweaving the planes of global macro-history with those of individual micro-stories, the present collection of essays must be considered a “home” production, too, with discussion, writing, research, and editing taking place in our discrete home offices, via ever-present Zoom calls, online libraries, and cloud repositories, amid our transfigured personal living spaces.

Unsurprisingly, such dramatic historical change impacted our editorial choices at the level of form and content, on both the topics of the essays we solicited from the authors and the theoretical stance we as editors adopted. Therefore, the methodological declension we chose for this issue ultimately aimed to re-signify and chart the concept and discourses of houses and housing in Romanticism as we knew them by applying a multi-layered, nuanced “then/now” heuristic approach to them. Major wars, domestic and international upheavals, forced relocations of individuals and peoples due to religious or political persecution, migrants, and refugees: the Romantic period looks disturbingly close to Zygmunt Bauman’s *liquid times* (2006), upsettingly reminding us that even the most distressing human lessons of the past are destined never to be learnt (Brinkley Rosane; Angeletti and Bradshaw).

From the theoretical viewpoint, we maintain that *change* is the sign that can yoke past with present. Change is a token of possibility and transformation, flux and transfiguration, with brick-and-mortar house facts merging and overlapping with “the houses of air” of metaphor and domestic fantasy (Lee 30–43). In the age of Romanticism, shifting gender ideologies and mobile social hierarchies went together with notable technical improvements in many fields of *τέχνη*, from agriculture to transport, from science to mechanics (McKeever). The modern Western idea(l) of a house as symbol—the material illustration of an individual’s teleologic trajectory, the plastic and icastic representation of both desirable domestic security and one’s own future achievables—shaped that age as much as it still does ours: temporary houses or houses made to stay; houses to end up in or to start over from. In several Western cultures, owning a house is still perceived as a project and a progress, the end as well as the means to reach that end, a form of symbolic, at times actual, grounding, a rooting, a sign of achievement and completion. House ownership is thus often perceived as a personal and social *becoming* that finally settles into a *being*. We must not forget the dark side of homes, their ever-present “shadow” projection (to paraphrase Carl Gustav Jung): the “non-homes”, those dwellings with which we have no sentimental or social connections but that circumstances may impose upon us.<sup>2</sup> They are the troubling phantoms of a denied or now lost domesticity.

If early nineteenth-century geopolitical borders forcibly shifted, walls and domestic perimeters similarly altered. For one, the refugees in flight from the Continental wars were confronted by a very recognizable notion, now ingrained in our everyday experience: as postulated several years ago by Bachelard, this humanity on the move came to



realize firsthand that a house is *not* a home. All of us are painfully reminded of this very basic notion in our everyday existence by the images we see in front of our eyes or on the screen. This evidence confirms that, indeed, some houses are necessarily neither a journey's end nor a life choice. Rather, they are halfway houses, perhaps even downright prisons, furnished only with the bare necessities. Such everyday objects mimic a carapace, now brittle, now ductile, while evoking illusionary comfort and human connection. (In this respect, the COVID-19 house is an excellent case in point; see Boccagni, Brodesco, and La Bruna.) Home can thus be the subway platform that a handful of random domestic items (a television set, a pillow, a camping gas stove, and that unstable, yet all-too-precious Wi-Fi connection) can turn into an improvised shelter while bombings destroy above-ground houses and buildings as in the very recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Home is also the trolley overflowing with the castoffs of our capitalistic comforts that the homeless and the other wretched of consumerism pitifully cling to and push around the streets of "lowly nowheres" (Bauman), those invisible heterotopias right in the heart of our megalopolises. Home can be the heart-rending debris of domesticity mocked by makeshift beds made out of waste cardboard, or soaking wet park benches, or foul stairs covered with a ripped foil heat blanket. Finally, home may even transmediate into our ubiquitous smartphones (the true skeleton keys to our 4.0 interiority) the digital prosthetics whose SIM cards preserve fleeting moments of intimacy and snapshots of our daily life. These are the new immaterial walls that enshrine our twenty-first-century selves and guard our relations with our new environment.

As mentioned, houses in literature, within and beyond Romanticism, are not a mere assemblage of bricks and mortar, roofs, rooms, and furniture. Houses are dwellings that embody "lived experiences and the image of an episteme" (Larson, Saggini, and Soccio 1); they are the products of the experiencing of time, social and cultural forces, power relations, and aesthetics. This special issue on "Housing Romanticism" engages with a variety of approaches to the study of the house in the Romantic period and explores whether this tenet of firmness still holds true in a world in flux continually challenged and rewritten, restructured or dismantled by diasporas, relocations, border-crossings, and transformations in identity, society, and culture. Following the 2019 conference theme from which it arose, this collection of interdisciplinary and comparative essays examines the importance of the house (a spacious and capacious term with which the editors signify, in wide-ranging fashion, any dwelling place, regardless of its architectural form and purpose) as a sign reflecting the dynamic interplay of several diverse and contending forces: individual and collective, (trans)national and artistic, theoretical, socio-cultural, and psychological. The eight essays are divided into two equal sections on, respectively, the house in fiction and the house in fact, highlighting the connections between houses of the mind and factual houses in Romantic discourses.

Opening the section on fiction, Jerrold Hogle examines the insecurity in the rise of the haunted-house motif in the decades between the origin of the haunted castle in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and the haunted house as a motif in Victorian literature where ghosts are often revealed as psychological projections. The rise of the haunted house in Romantic-era literary works during the 1790s to 1820s, Hogle maintains, epitomizes the fundamental relationship between the Gothic and the Romantic, where in the latter period it is often reinterpreted with imaginative and even ironical resolutions.

The next essay by Gillian Skinner shows how homes and dwelling places in Sarah Fielding's *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn* (1759) are a counterpoint to the critique of the novel's young heroine, Miss Lucum. In Skinner's analysis, the alienation from domestic spaces throughout the novel allows readers to reflect on the structural injustices that frame the protagonist's experience while simultaneously insisting on her responsibility for her own actions. Fielding's narrative blends didacticism with social criticism in linking home and reflection.

The next two essays in the first section explore domestic space in Romantic-era homes. Diego Saglia charts the presence and significance of Oriental domestic spaces in Romantic-period Britain, both in fiction and reality, problematizing current appropriations of the East and its containment inside a domestic sphere. Starting with the small Moorish-style pavilion at the back of William Beckford's Bath home in Lansdowne Crescent, Saglia traces the spreading of consumer Orientalism between the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries that inspired fictions of Eastern interiors in fictional works depicting upper-class life, whether favorably or not, as in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812) and Thomas Skinner Surr's *A Winter in London* (1806).

The final essay on the Romantic house in fiction is by Paolo Bugliani and suggestively explores the significance Leigh Hunt and Charles Lamb attributed to the domestic interior as the private space to perform the essayistic act. Bugliani illustrates how these famous periodical essayists were often happy to portray an image of a domesticity which was among the most tangible literary outcomes of that "politics of familiarity" recognized as one of the most important techniques of early nineteenth-century prose.

The second section of the special issue starts by combining discourses on fictional houses with discussions of real buildings. To begin with, Carmen Casaliggi examines the significance of Roman art and architecture in Germaine de Staël's novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), with a particular focus on Corinne's house museum in Trastevere and her country house in Tivoli. It emerges that the dichotomy between public and private, facts (actual buildings of Rome) and fantasies (fictional houses and their interiors as described in the novel), reflect Corinne's love for Europe, whilst also problematizing the way in which the novel houses an exposure to difference which in turn appears to shape Staël's own literary identity.

Next, Maximiliaan van Woudenberg examines the house as a space for intercultural transfer of knowledge and how the home of the man of science functioned as a hub in disseminating knowledge transnationally. The essay examines the opening of mummies by Professor Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in visiting private houses in London, as well as Blumenbach's own professorial house in Göttingen as a conduit for disseminating knowledge of Dr. Edward Jenner's smallpox vaccination in Germany. The final case study discussed by van Woudenberg shows the confluence of Anglo-Franco-German literature converging on Villa Diodati, casting the famous villa as the site of communal reading inspiring creativity.

Francesca Saggini maps Frances Burney's life and works from the vantage point of material studies, considering some of the houses the author lived and worked in. The tension between the contending discourses of "public" house and "private" house (the house as a space for entertainment and a cultural hub used to promote visibility and augment cultural capital opposed to the "private" house as the locus of intimacy and family life) is exemplified by the juxtaposition between the houses Burney lived in as

her father's daughter (in particular the famous house in St Martin's Street, London) and the idyllic Surrey cottage Burney and her French émigré husband, Alexandre d'Arblay, were able to build with the profits from her third novel *Camilla; or, A Picture of Youth* (1796), quite significantly named "Camilla Cottage".

Closing the issue is Jeff Cowton's fascinating piece on the house museum of Dove Cottage, where William Wordsworth, while living in Grasmere (1799–1808), wrote ground-breaking poetry that he hoped would "live and do good". Cowton explores in detail the role of a literary house museum in fulfilling the wishes of its central figure, examining the role that new interpretation techniques and community engagement can play in bringing the writer's life and writing to new audiences. The special issue thus comes full circle and explains that indeed, the houses of the past and the present must engage in mutual reinvigoration and resignification, advocating for new ways of housing Romanticism.

As developed by the eight essays of this collection, that suggest cross-genre and cross-media connections, revisions, and reconfigurations in light of our post-COVID-19, war-torn years, the house, specifically the Romantic house, represents clearly much more than aesthetically pleasing architecture. It constitutes a transhistorical and transcultural discourse created by the negative or positive affective, cognitive, and intimate relationships an individual or a group of individuals can build with a place and a space both synchronically and diachronically, in the present and in time. Walls, rooms, furnishings are dynamic, relational, almost biologic, and sentient entities: they have a life, and they have stories to tell, as suggested by those half-twins of the imagination, *lives* and *leaves*.

The unnamed female protagonist of Matthew Gregory Lewis's notorious monodrama *The Captive* (Covent Garden, March 22, 1803) stages many of the discourses we presented in this homy introduction, by evoking the concepts of non-home and protean home, sanctuary and protection, while soliciting consciousness and our critical thinking at the same time:

My tyrant husband forged the tale  
Which chains me in this dismal cell;  
My fate unknown my Friends bewail,-  
O, Gaoler, haste that fate to tell! (226)<sup>3</sup>

First and foremost, the character's wailing reminds us that, as in the famous Wildean epigram, the modern Western house may indeed represent the rage of Caliban (that is, our own rage) seeing his face in the domestic mirror. Yet, as in a multifocal glass, the house mirror can also reflect serenity, vision, nostos, that *hic manebimus optime* maxim reported by Titus Livius to evoke the serendipitous harmony between a dwelling place and the human spirit. Upon closer inspection, the representation of the house (what the house represents for us as well as how we represent it) means us in time. Be they on the page or inside our head, be they in cement or in the imagination, houses are forever inhabited by "I", as the Everyman-style first-person narrator in Andrea Bajani's *Il libro delle case* is (un)named.<sup>4</sup> "Housing Romanticism", the title we have chosen for this special issue of *European Romantic Review*, signifies a look at the real and imaginary houses that Romanticism built and inhabited as well as the connections and transhistorical ties these houses were able to foster once and can still foster for "I", and for us, in our time.



## Notes

1. For control over personal space and possessions in the Georgian era, see Vickery.
2. On the theory of “non-homes”, particularly in vulnerable contexts, see Łukasiuk and Jewdokimow.
3. For a discussion of Lewis’s monodrama in connection with our theory of the modern Western house as Caliban’s mirror, see Lewis’s well-known reconstruction of the audience reaction in his 19 April, 1803 letter to Lady Holland, cited, among others, in Malenas Ledoux (1).
4. The title of the book may be translated into English as “the book of houses”.

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