

INTRODUCTION

Felicia Dorothea Browne Hemans

1793–1835

HEMANS'S FAME

By the late 1820s, beset by budding poets seeking advice and support, by fans seeking autographs, inscriptions for their albums, or just a glimpse of the famous “poetess,” Felicia Hemans was waxing wry and rueful about “the dust of celebrity,” with more than a few of her letters and poems sighing of “the nothingness of Fame, at least to woman.”¹ This weariness was the consequence of a remarkable career. In the United States and Britain, she was one of the best-selling poets of her century and one of the first women to make a living by writing verse. Between 1808 and 1835 nineteen volumes of her works appeared, some in multiple editions. By the 1820s, with increasingly appreciative reviews in the establishment press and a regular presence in popular magazines and ornate annuals, “Mrs. Hemans” had emerged as England’s premier “poetess,” celebrated as its epitome of “feminine” excellence. This icon sentimentalized a success born of industry and facility, business acumen and alertness to the literary market, as well as talent. Adept in a range of genres and verse forms (sonnet, ode, heroic verse, ballad, epistle, narrative, monologue, drama, lyric, didactic), literate, imaginative, and intellectually appetitive, Hemans fashioned popular themes with a transhistorical, international range of subjects, drawing on literatures past and present, English and Continental. Well into the century, her work was admired by a wide readership, including men and women of letters. Her books were cherished gifts and prizes; many poems were public favorites, memorized and anthologized, illustrated and set to music. *Casabianca* (“The boy stood on the burning deck”) became a standard at recitals; Americans took *The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers* (“The breaking waves dashed high”) to heart, while *The Homes of England* and *England’s Dead* became virtual national anthems for the British.²

It was with such pieces that “Mrs. Hemans” became the “undisputed representative poet of Victorian imperial and domestic ideology.”³ But as the title lost luster, this sifting of her works was further thinned by late-century anthologizers, and then cast out altogether as pretty pieties. If Wordsworth advanced the “Poet” as a man speaking to men, “poetess” Hemans seemed a woman speaking only to nineteenth-century sentimental culture, and not even all women. By 1880, A. Mary F. Robinson, a young scholar and poet who might have embraced Hemans as a predecessor, wanted only to dissociate herself. “Fifty years ago few poets were more popular than Mrs. Hemans; her verses were familiar to all hearts,” she began her headnote for T. H. Ward’s *English Poets*. This anthology offered just one dirge, one ballad, and *Casabianca*. “These simple, chivalrous,

pathetic” domestic lyrics, “sprung from a talent expressive but not creative, [. . .] stamped with feminine qualities,” were Hemans’s “claim to remembrance,” and even then it seemed weakening, her poems “chiefly forgotten, and without injustice” (4.334–35). Although Hemans was still popular in the 1880s, her prestige in canonical estimations was slipping. Robinson’s view was not unusual, and it was predictive. Eighty years later, Ellen Moers’s compendious *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1963) had even less to say of Hemans, citing her only as a cautionary example of “precocious” yet ultimately “facile” talent.⁴ The bicentennial of her birth, in 1993, passed without the parade of conferences, exhibits, special issues of journals, anthologies of essays, and new editions that have been marking other bicentennial milestones of the “Romantic” era.

But Hemans was gradually, then emphatically, being rediscovered as new historicism and feminism began to reshape the landscape of Romantic studies.⁵ Her work was attracting interest not as a historical curiosity from the shop of outworn tastes, but for its currency, for its sounding of dissonances in nineteenth-century cultural ideals. Her perspectives, moreover, seemed to cast in new lights the traditional canon of male “Romantic” poets (an early twentieth-century construction that, with minor adjustments, held up through the 1980s).⁶ Emerging from a complex social and political vision, Hemans’s career of writing and its erratic reception history—from polite discouragement, to emerging appreciation, to celebrity, to condescension, to obscurity, to critical and scholarly recovery, to renewed classroom interest—cut to the core of a number of our current critical concerns: how women’s poetry is shaped in a gendered culture; how aesthetic value is determined in a given historical setting; how we represent the Romantic era of poetry; and (as the Victorian “Mrs. Hemans” suggests) how we represent Hemans herself. Her celebrity in her own day became her curse in literary history, and the modern recovery, in no small part, has been a project of rescuing her from the terms of her nineteenth-century popularity.

I first heard of Hemans in Wordsworth’s *Extempore Effusion* (1836), where a reverential elegiac stanza is matched by an affectionate headnote that still managed to voice discomfort about her ignorance of household skills. Then I found Byron, in a letter of 1820 to John Murray (also Hemans’s publisher), jibing at “your feminine *He-Man*” and “Mrs. Hewoman’s”—the punning and insistent misspelling of her surname aimed at her intellectual pretensions. Like many male poets, Byron preferred women in their place, not his. “I do not despise Mrs. Heman—but if [she] knit blue stockings instead of wearing them it would be better,” he said to Murray. In 1977 editor Leslie Marchand identified Byron’s reference: “a popular poetess of the day” (7.158). Wanting to know more about a poet able to put Byron and Wordsworth on such rare common ground, I opened Ian Jack’s *English Literature, 1815–1832* (1963), only to find, under the rubric of “other minor and minimus poets of the period,” one page of condescension, which included the following slam: “She took the pulse of her time, and helped to prevent it from quickening. [. . .] The general level of her work is high, but unfortunately it almost always stops short of memorable poetry. Many of her better things [. . .] might be the work of a poetical committee. For her, we feel,

poetry was a feminine accomplishment more difficult than piano-playing and embroidery [. . .] We read her, we commend, and we forget" (168). Forget we did. It was not until the 1970s that a coordinated recovery of women's writing took shape,⁷ and even then Hemans was no immediate beneficiary. Many critics, female as well as male, continued to dismiss her as "a popular versifier" and a defender of "obsolete ideologies."⁸ Even some of the newer anthologies settled for short lyrics easily dismissed as "chauvinistic, sentimental, and derivative."⁹ In 1993 the influential *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (6th ed.) cast her with minor "lyric poets" (863) and presented a Victorian sampler: *Casabianca, Pilgrim Fathers* and *England's Dead*. The durability of this "Hemans" is reflected in Germaine Greer's cursory glance, as late as 1995, at her as a poet of "quaintness and insipidity," remembered only "if at all" for *Casabianca*.¹⁰

The difficulty of reviving Hemans is felt even by readers who take her seriously, such as Stuart Curran. In his pioneering essay of 1988 he hoped to identify a complicated poet, arguing that while Hemans's contemporaries made her "synonymous with the notion of a poetess, celebrating hearth and home, God and country in mellifluous verse that relished the sentimental and seldom teased anyone into thought," there were "other and darker strains"—"a focus on exile and failure, a celebration of female genius frustrated, a haunting omnipresence of death—that seem to subvert the role [she] claimed and invite a sophisticated reconsideration." But five years on, Curran took another measure, here not against the icon of "poetess" but against Wollstonecraft. This time, he was arrested by a definitive mode of Hemans-restraint by which she "became, above all, the creator and enforcer of [an] ideological control masking itself as praise for feminine instinct and female duty," indeed, became "the major figure" in a cosmopolitan "bourgeois literary culture" that "she exemplified and may in some sense be said to have forged." Curran does concede that the scene of this forging was "a trap of cultural contradiction," and other critics have continued to be fascinated by this circumstance. In one of the first sustained rereadings of Hemans, Marlon Ross proposed that her poetry was distorted by being held to a hypostasized "Romanticism" formed on a male canon; he resituated her in relation to a community of writers both male and female, and in relation to the reading public who made her famous. Norma Clarke saw "Felicia" exploiting conventional images of "femininity" (passivity, helplessness, suffering, and retreat into domesticity from the conflicts of worldly life) as "a defence against personal unhappiness which had significant general implications." (Even Greer sensed the terms, if not the argument, when she sneered at Hemans as one of those women who, straining off from their writing the rage and bitterness of an enforced self-discipline, took pride in "the pure mush that they were then able to offer the complacent public, whose certainties they were endorsing at such secret and unremitting cost to themselves.") Cora Kaplan interpreted the "normative morality" and "the emerging Victorian stereotype of the pure, long-suffering female" in Hemans's work as a symbolic discipline that turned anger inward and romanced death as the only resolution: "bitter, feminine but pre-feminist consciousness is disguised by proper sentiments." Isobel Armstrong

discerned in Hemans an emerging tradition of women's poetry defined by such doubleness: "an affective mode, often simple, often pious, often conventional" turns out to be "subjected to investigation, questioned, or used for unexpected purposes"; "the simpler the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it." Tricia Lootens shifted this surface-and-depth paradigm sideways, describing a "body of work whose development often seems more centrifugal than linear and whose force seems to derive from its erratic course among and through contradictions." Complex and illuminating readings continue to be offered by such major critics as Anne Mellor and Jerome McGann.¹¹

Not only are Hemans's more troubling works, which Victorian anthologizers ignored, now returning to light, but even the old anthology favorites are presenting more problematic aspects. The supposed patriotic celebrations for which Hemans is famous prove on closer reading to betray a death-haunted consciousness. *England's Dead* asks readers to ponder the empire, not as a realm on which the sun never sets, but as a global graveyard: "There slumber England's dead!" More than a few such poems come trailing dark clouds of "glory." To nineteenth-century eyes, *Casabianca* was a tribute to a youthful war martyr to weep over (or, in mocking temper, parody). Yet a French boy's futile call to his dead father ("unconscious of his son") for release from his post is no "simple, chivalrous" poetry, but a grim meditation on patriotic and patriarchal obligations.¹² Hemans's exotic historical or cultural displacements (a French family, ancient Carthage, medieval Valencia, Renaissance Italy, Tudor England, the American West) may seem strategically distancing and derealizing, but their fictionality allows disturbingly familiar issues to emerge, with the foreign scene returning a sign of a universal condition.¹³ Hers is an imagination repeatedly drawn to the latent tensions in cherished ideologies. Living in an era dominated for nearly a quarter century by warfare against Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France—warfare that involved her brothers and a husband-to-be—Hemans may seem at one with the romance of patriotism that idolized military leaders such as Nelson and Wellington. But her poetry also addresses a public that had mixed feelings about war—a public that was quick to memorize a dirge that concluded in a rhyme of "gory" and "glory": Charles Wolfe's *The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna* (1817) (one of her brothers was there). This is the same culture that responded to Byron's mordant critiques of military glory in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *A Romaunt* (1812) and *Don Juan Canto VII* (published the same year as Hemans's *Siege of Valencia*, 1823). Hemans's poetry reflects this cultural ambivalence and is more remarkable for this quality than for its famed pieties. She insists that readers confront the violence of war, its child martyrs, its female victims, its devastation of domestic affections, and the hollowness of its "glory" and "fame."

Hemans could tap into these conflicting currents precisely because she was so adept in the mainstream—a complexity that also ripples through those famed "feminine qualities." Her references to male-authored traditions and texts could pay homage, or they could turn oppositional and ironic, reworking subjects from

the perspective of women's lives, desires and dissatisfactions. Her signal achievement was a genre she would eventually call "Records of Woman," featuring women as historical figures, as repositories of cultural values (heroines of "domestic affection"), as interpreters (herself included) of history and social structure, and (not the least) as perpetual victims of men's rivalries, political contentions, and wars. Gender was the haunt and main region of her song: she wrote of woman's social fate in a man's world, her sufferings and love-longings, her abandonments, desperate suicides and infanticides, her release only through death. Alternating with celebrations of the paradise of home and all its loves, Hemans limned the oppressions and devastations of domestic life. She wrote in an intensely personal way of socially specific conflicts: between being an artist and being a woman; between affection and ambition, between family and fame. That she was not always (or even fundamentally) a poet of sweetness and light was noted even in her own day. But in their imaginary investments, most nineteenth-century readers found ways to contain her challenges, ascribing the shadows to a hyper-susceptible "female melancholy," or celebrating a "feminine" heroic of forbearance and patience, faith and martyrdom.¹⁴ In the post-Wollstonecraft, revolution-anxious 1820s, Hemans's contemporaries did not want to hear in her repeated connections of the political to the personal, and of private life to the public world, any emerging critique of the ideology of "feminine" virtue or "universal" female fate.

Reviewing the poetry that comprised, then compromised, Hemans's literary stature, we have recovered her crosscurrents. We have noticed that the central conflicts of her most powerful narratives, and even some unlikely suspects (*The Domestic Affections*), remain spectacularly unresolved, not just on a predictable sociohistorical level (that's life), but on the level where some critical schools tell us resolutions should take shape and perform their mystifying work: the level of aesthetic harmony (that's art). As Lootens remarks, Hemans's poetry "is never simply Victorian," and where "most Victorian, [. . .] perhaps least simple" (239). With historical distance and close reading, we are seeing a poetry more apt to be strained by rhetorical effects and thematic configurations that tap into and voice a cultural unconscious of fragmented, contradictory awarenesses.

THE FAME OF "MRS. HEMANS"

To appreciate the recovery of Hemans from Victorian constructions, we need to look more fully at the constituent parts of the figure so easily, and until quite recently, so persistently adopted. One thing that Greer's flawed representation, for example, does make clear is the systematic selectivity and distortion that Hemans's canon underwent in order to conform to a fundamentally negative sense of female capacities. Sharing the fate of several other powerful and intelligent women writers, Hemans was reduced to a few pieces, a process that purified, by bleaching out, the fabric of her most intellectually ambitious and most politically sharpened poetry. Whether in idealization or in disparagement, she was taken as the epitome of the "feminine," her poetry a primer of the domestic

affections, of religious and patriotic piety, and of the “female” (more particularly, maternal) responsibility for binding these sensibilities together. “Critics and casual readers have united in pronouncing her poetry to be essentially feminine,” Lydia Sigourney (a poet known as “the American Hemans”) summed her praises in 1840; “The whole sweet circle of the domestic affections,—the hallowed ministries of woman, at the cradle, the hearth-stone, and the death-bed, were its chosen themes,” all sites of “the disinterested, self-sacrificing virtues of her sex” (xv). When *Edinburgh Monthly Review* said in 1820, on the cusp of Hemans’s fame, that she “never ceases to be strictly *feminine* in the whole current of her thought and feeling,” it meant that she displayed “the delicacy which belongs to the sex, and the tenderness and enthusiasm which form its finest characteristic” (3.374).

This admiration is often contingent on assumed incapacities. Take the encomium that Hemans’s friend Henry Chorley issued in his *Memorials* to this “essentially womanly” character, and the poems so inspired: “Their love is without selfishness—their passion pure from sensual coarseness—their high heroism [. . .] unsullied by any base alloy of ambition. In their religion, too, she is essentially womanly—fervent, trustful, unquestioning, ‘hoping on, hoping ever’—in spite of a painfully acute consciousness of the peculiar trials of her sex” (1.138). This well-meaning praise presents the “essentially feminine” as a perfection through negations: “without selfishness,” “unsullied” by ambition, “unquestioning” of contradictory awareneses. So, too, the premier critic of the age, Francis Jeffrey, writing in 1829 at the height of her fame, called “the poetry of Mrs Hemans a fine exemplification of Female Poetry.” The fineness was keyed to negative verdicts: “Women, we fear cannot do every thing; not even every thing they attempt,” he begins this influential essay.¹⁵ The rest of its paragraph is a parade of negative incapacities:

They cannot [. . .] represent naturally the fierce and sullen passions of men—nor their coarser vices—nor even scenes of actual business or contention—and the mixed motives, and strong and faulty characters, by which affairs of moment are usually conducted on the great theatre of the world. For much of this they are disqualified by the delicacy of their training and habits, and the still more disabling delicacy which pervades their conceptions and feelings; and [. . .] by their actual inexperience, [. . .] by their substantial and incurable ignorance of business—of the way in which serious affairs are actually managed—and the true nature of the agents and impulses that give movement and direction to the stronger currents of ordinary life. Perhaps they are also incapable of long moral or political investigations, where many complex and indeterminate elements are to be taken into account, and a variety of opposite probabilities to be weighed. [. . .] They rarely succeed in long works, [. . .] their natural training rendering them equally averse to long doubt and long labour. (*Edinburgh Review* 50.32)

Hemans often represents public and private in dialectical formation, but Jeffrey insists on a dichotomy: Women’s “proper and natural business” is “private life.” Their “delicacy” amounts to faint praise; Jeffrey himself says “disabling.” He

concludes by urging Hemans to respect that “tenderness and loftiness of feeling, and an ethereal purity of sentiment, which could only emanate from the soul of a woman.” This means, among other things, that this woman ought to stick to “occasional verses” and not “venture again on any thing so long as *The Forest Sanctuary*” (47), a work Hemans herself regarded as “almost, if not altogether, [her] best” (*CM* 1.123).

Jeffrey’s occasion was the publication of second editions of this poem and *Records of Woman*, but he does not note the many ways these works contest the terms of his praise. *The Forest Sanctuary* opens with a lurid *auto-da-fé* during the Spanish Inquisition; the latter is a universalizing chronicle of war, blood feuds, torture, murders, suicides, infanticide, betrayal, and fatal heartbreak. Subsequent praise of Hemans observed Jeffrey’s strictures and prescriptions more closely than had Hemans. When in 1848 Frederic Rowton edited *The Female Poets of Great Britain*, he celebrated her ability “to represent and unite as purely and completely as any other writer in our literature the peculiar and specific qualities of the female mind. Her works are [. . .] a perfect embodiment of woman’s soul: [. . .] *intensely* feminine. The delicacy, the softness, the pureness, the quick observant vision, the ready sensibility, the devotedness, the faith of woman’s nature find in Mrs. Hemans their ultra representative” (407). Echoing the consensus, Rowton uses “representative” not just in the sense of being “representative of” but also of “representing to,” as in conveying a conservative gender prescription. This is the story he tells in his “Introductory Chapter”:

Man is bold, enterprising, and strong; woman cautious, prudent, and steadfast. Man is self-relying and self-possessed; woman timid, clinging, and dependent. Man is suspicious and secret; woman confiding. Man is fearless; woman apprehensive. Man arrives at truth by long and tedious study; woman by intuition. He thinks; she feels. He reasons; she sympathises. He has courage; she patience. He soon despairs; she always hopes. The strong passions are his; [. . .] The mild affections are hers; [. . .] Intellect is his; heart is hers. [. . .] Female Intellect seem[s] to be rather negative than positive: [. . .] fitted more for passive endurance than for aggressive exertion. (xxiv-xxv)

Rowton goes on to say that his selections will “amply illustrate and fully prove the[se] distinctions,” but he has selected precisely those works that seem to exhibit these “she” capacities. A different selection might show Hemans equally endowed with the capacities ascribed to “Man.”

If Rowton and Jeffrey allow themselves to beg the question, they (like Chorley) assumed the benevolence of their motives. A self-confessed champion of “Female Intellect” and “the poetical productions of the British Female mind” (xvii), Rowton even goes so far as to echo Wollstonecraft in blaming any apparent deficiencies in woman’s intellectual capacity on “our system of educating females,” and to ask whether “such a word as *Poetess*” should not be replaced by “Female Poet” (xviii). But as his anatomy of gender suggests, this nicety is a distinction without a difference. In the culture of letters, “poetess” operates as signal differential, and it is no coincidence that in the 1820s the term adhered to

women, such as Hemans and Landon, who were presenting the female poet as a professional calling.¹⁶ Chorley meant only to be descriptive when he wrote, at the conclusion of *Memorials*, that “the woman and the poetess were in [Hemans] too inseparably united to admit of their being considered apart from each other” (2.355), but such compounding easily served Rowton’s oppositions. Alluding to the etymology of “poet,” George Gilfillan (another admirer, writing just before Rowton) decided that “in its highest sense, the name of poet” had to be denied Hemans: “A *maker* she is not.” To the degree that she exemplifies the “feminine” she loses credit: “Mrs. Hemans’s poems are strictly effusions. And not a little of their charm springs from their unstudied and extempore character [. . .] in fine keeping with the sex.” Having been fit into the mold, Hemans becomes the mold: “we consider her by far the most feminine writer of the age. [. . .] You could not [. . .] open a page of her writings without feeling this is written by a lady” (*Tait’s* n.s. 14.360–61). W. M. Rossetti’s *Prefatory Notice* to his later Victorian edition of Hemans follows suit. Having already indicated “the deficiency which she, merely as a woman, was almost certain to evince” for the higher genres (16), he gallantly accords “Mrs. Hemans [. . .] a very honorable rank among poetesses” (24).

The nineteenth-century honors to Hemans as “most feminine” always imply a double-negative, “not un-feminine”—not, that is, of the Jacobin sorority lambasted in 1798 by Tory Reverend Richard Polwhele in *The Unsex’d Females* (neutered by entering the public sphere of speech an action).

Survey with me, what ne’er our fathers saw,
A female band despising NATURE’s law,
As “proud defiance” flashes from their arms,
And vengeance smothers all their softer charms.
I shudder at the new unpictur’d scene,
Where unsex’d woman vaunts the imperious mien.

(11–16)¹⁷

In the double negatives of this cultural grammar, what Hemans was “not” was an unfilial, defiant, denatured, Amazonian, unpatriotic, immodest spawn of Wollstonecraft; she was strictly “feminine, according to the masculine acceptance of the word,” so Wollstonecraft herself satirized the term in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In an age in recoil from such polemics, Hemans seemed to idealize “essentially feminine” as essentially “domestic” and “self-sacrificing.” In 1820 *Edinburgh Monthly Review* warmly praised “the modesty of Mrs. Hemans, for whose gentle hands the auxiliary club of political warfare, and the sharp lash of personal satire are equally unsuited,” and admired her for “scrupulously abstaining from all that may betray unfeminine temerity” (374–75). Warne’s Chandos Classics edition of her work (1889) urged “lady readers” to study Jeffrey’s review (from which it quotes lavishly) “in its entirety”: “it commences with an estimate of womanly powers which appears to us to answer many of the vexed questions of the present day” (xxiii–xiv). Warne’s later Albion

edition (1900) amplifies the advice by way of elegy: the waning popularity of Hemans's "essentially feminine" genius seems due to a "lamentable change in the tone of modern society. The age [the 1890s] that gave birth to the cry of 'Women's Rights,' and to the unfeminine imitators of masculine habits, was not likely to appreciate the voice of the *true* woman that spoke in Felicia Hemans" (xv–xvi).

This is not to say that Hemans's nineteenth-century admirers did not notice her wide reading and intelligence, but rather that they saw such accomplishments tempered by "feminine" propriety. Writing in 1820 with the 1790s in mind, William Gifford, infamous for his satires of Della Cruscan women, could accept Hemans's obvious "reflection and study," because "talent and learning have not produced the ill effects so often attributed to them; her faculties seem to sit meekly on her" (*Quarterly* 24.130–31). "You are saved the ludicrous image of a double-dyed Blue, in papers and morning wrapper, sweating at some stupendous treatise or tragedy," Gilfillan chimed in the 1840s. He applauded the lack of "pedantry": "the authoress appears only the lady in *flower*" (*Tait's* n.s. 14.361). This florid romance of the "exquisitely feminine" was so immune to Blue stigma that it could absorb such stark contradictions as the eponym of *The Wife of Asdrubal*, taking revenge on a husband turned traitor both to his family and his country: "sternly beauteous in terrific ire . . . / She might be deem'd a Pythia," Hemans writes, in a figure that apparently escaped Robinson's notice ("no Pythian enthusiasm fills the poet and compels us to forget her womanhood," she sighed [*Ward's* 4.334–35]). Hemans's longest and most ambitious poems (*War and Peace*, all of the *Tales*, and *Historic Scenes*, *The Siege of Valencia*, *The Forest Sanctuary*, almost all of the *Records of Woman*) pulse with domestic and political strife, violence and warfare, an aesthetics of equivocation, or voices of protest and latent critique. Victorian reports tend to elide these stories and voices, as well as the circumstances of Hemans's life unsuited to their cherished image of "Mrs. Hemans": her education, her failed marriage, the assistance she had with domestic obligations and, not the least, her professionalism.

HEMANS'S LIFE

Born in Liverpool in 1793, the same year that England launched nearly a quarter of a century of war against France, Felicia Browne lived in this bustling city until 1800, when her merchant father, suffering business reversals, closed up shop and moved the family to a coastal village in North Wales. If its beauty and serenity were an important influence on the young girl, so too was her mother, whose devoted care included encouraging her to use the large home library. She read avidly, memorized poetry, studied music and art, and learned French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian from her mother, Latin from the local vicar, and later, German. Felicia Browne began to write poetry (her first subjects were her mother and Shakespeare) and by age fourteen, with her mother's management, published a handsome illustrated quarto, *Poems* (1808), undertaken

to help pay for her education. It was sold by subscription, and on its list appeared Captain Alfred Hemans (an army friend of her brothers, who were in Spain fighting against Napoleon) and Thomas Medwin. Medwin reported the poet's talents and beauty to his teenage cousin Percy Shelley, who ventured a correspondence.

Though Mrs. Browne intervened in this correspondence (saving her daughter from the chance fate of Shelley's other infatuations), one of Shelley's better impulses was to offer sympathy to the poet in the wake of the disappointing reviews of *Poems* (see the headnote to "Reception: Lifetime"). The poet was stung, but she was persistent. *England and Spain, or, Valour and Patriotism* appeared in 1809 (to no sales and no notice) and she was finishing another long poem, *War and Peace*, an impassioned plea for peace in an age of war. She fell in love with Captain Hemans when they met in 1809. In 1810, her father left the family behind to seek a fresh start in Canada, where he died two years later. Captain Hemans returned to England in 1811, weakened and scarred from war, and the couple married in 1812, the year she turned nineteen and her third volume, *The Domestic Affections &c* (including *War and Peace*) appeared, the same year Byron changed the literary landscape with his epic of alienation, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Hemans's volume, assembled by a family friend, did not attract notice, and when the Captain's postwar appointment ended in a discharge without pay, they and their baby boy joined her mother's household in Wales. Hemans kept writing, and her first genuine success came with a poem keyed to Britain's triumphant emergence as world power after the fall of Napoleon. This was her topical poem, *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816), which Byron praised and his publisher Murray purchased for a second edition. Soon after, Murray published *Modern Greece* (1817) and a volume of translations and original poetry (1818). There were four boys by this point, and Hemans was pregnant again. In 1818, just before the birth of their fifth son, the Captain left for Italy. The reasons were unclear; the "story" was his health, but Hemans's friend Maria Jewsbury suggested that he was uncomfortable living off his wife's income (see "Egeria"), and a later memoir reports his complaint that "it was the curse of having a literary wife that he could never get a pair of stockings mended" (echoing Byron's crack about bluestockings).¹⁸ The marriage never mended either (repeating her father's desertion). The idealism of hearth and home for which "Mrs. Hemans" would become famous was haunted by these desertions, even as the Captain's departure strengthened her determination to support her family with her writing.

If the marketplace was a challenge, so was home, despite all the advantages Hemans enjoyed. In 1822 this mother of five boys, ages three to ten, wrote to a friend that she felt herself in "the melancholy situation of Lord Byron's 'scorpion girt by fire'—'Her circle narrowing as she goes,' for I have been pursued by the household troops through every room successively, and begin to think of establishing my *métier* in the cellar." All that "talk of tranquillity and a quiet home" made her "stare about in wonder, having almost lost the recollection of such

things, and the hope that they may probably be regained.” Yet there were enough practical advantages—a sister, a mother, and brothers to help, no husband to press for wifely service and obedience—that Hemans had time to read, study, and write, and her career took off. *Tales, and Historic Scenes* (1819), a wide-ranging critical view of politics and culture, was well reviewed and commercially successful. By 1820 she was winning prize competitions and further favor with the public and the reviewers. In rapid succession she produced *Wallace’s Invocation to Bruce*, *The Sceptic*, *Stanzas to the Memory of the Late King* (which expressed sympathy for the suffering of George III), *Dartmoor*, and *Welsh Melodies*. New venues for publishing poetry opened with the founding of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1817, and the inauguration of the annuals fad with the publication of *Forget Me Not* in 1822. Hemans quickly grasped the importance of these venues, especially for women’s poetry. As sensitive as she was to the value of performing “the feminine” in mainstream British culture and its male-managed literary institutions, she was also alert to women’s power as purchasers and readers. Throughout the 1820s she sold her work to magazines and annuals, then gathered many of these pieces for volumes from Murray and then William Blackwood. Her fame was clinched with *The Forest Sanctuary &c* (1825 and 1829), *Records of Woman &c* (1828, with several subsequent editions), and *Songs of the Affections &c* (1830).

Amidst this acclaim, her family life also bestowed, paradoxically, an important public advantage: the installment of “Mrs. Hemans” as a poet not only *of* home but sited *at* home, under “the maternal wing” (a phrase used throughout the nineteenth-century biographies). The professional who would dismay Wordsworth (also a poet at home, whose work was materially enabled by the labor of the women of his household) by seeming “totally ignorant of housewifery” thus avoided the stigma of “unfeminine” independence. A dyspeptic W. M. Rossetti manages to be warmest to this “admired and popular poetess” when he can speak of her as a “loving daughter” and a “deeply affectionate, tender, and vigilant mother” (15). The death of her own mother in 1827 was a devastating loss, deepened by the relentless breakup of the household, as older sons left for school and siblings married or moved away. To escape the emptiness, Hemans moved with her younger sons to a village near Liverpool, where she found schooling for them and literary and musical society for herself: Chorley, the poets Rose Lawrence and Mary Howitt, the vivacious writer Maria Jane Jewsbury, and a charming young musician, John Lodge, with whom she flirted and who arranged musical settings for her poems (see her lively letters to him in the summer of 1830). She met Wordsworth and Scott and enjoyed summer sojourns with each. But her health was weakening from emotional and physical stress, and in 1831 she sent her two oldest boys, Arthur and George, to their father in Italy and moved to Dublin, to be near her brother George and his wife. Although she again found good society and continued to write and publish, the Irish climate proved a disaster. She became very ill and bed-ridden in 1834, and died a few months before her forty-second birthday, in 1835, only eight years

after her mother—and with regrets about the poetry she never realized: “My wish ever was to concentrate all my mental energy in the production of some more noble and complete work” (letter to Rose Lawrence, 13 February 1835).

Chorley, in his *Memorials*, was unsure how to evaluate the effects of Hemans’s domestic situation on her poetic sensibility. While “the peculiar circumstances” of her being “in a household, as a member and not as its head, excused her from many of those small cares of domestic life,” he wondered whether this relief liberated a “search for knowledge” or removed a defense against “melancholy.” He understood the larger bearing of this question on the lives of intelligent and ambitious literary women but left his speculation about Hemans at the level of personal psychology: her tendency to dwell “a little too exclusively upon the farewells and regrets of life—upon the finer natures broken in pieces by contact with a mercenary and scornful world” (*CM* 1.43–44). Yet it is a combination of social and psychological forces that produced in Hemans’s poetry a distinctive self-consciousness about female artistic careers. Two late, self-reflecting poems, *Corinna at the Capitol* and *Woman and Fame*, both first published in the annuals marketed chiefly to women, advise domestic humility but wind up contradicting such advice with the energies of aesthetic elaboration. *Corinna* takes as its subject a poet of antiquity and the modern version of her created by Germaine de Staël in the wildly popular novel *Corinne, ou l’Italie* (1807). “Corinna” (the eponym of the poem as published in *The Literary Souvenir*, 1827) was the most renowned Boeotian poet of Greek antiquity after Pindar, and was said to have won five victories over him for the lyric prize. Alluding to this prototype, Staël’s heroine is also accomplished and famous, but pays dearly: she dies of a broken heart, rejected by the Englishman who was initially enchanted by her, against his standards of social propriety. Hemans’s poem forces the glory of Corinna/Corinne into this larger economy, imposing a frame of moralizing instruction with an admonitory epigraph and these final lines:

Happier, happier far, than thou
With the laurel on thy brow,
She that makes the humblest hearth
Lovely but to one on earth!

(*Literary Souvenir*, 191)

Her epigraph is from Staël herself: “Les femmes doivent penser qu’il est dans cette carrière bien peu de sorts qui puissent valoir la plus obscure vie d’une femme aimée et d’une mère heureuse.”¹⁹ The French synonymy of *woman* and *wife* (*femme*) is to the point: this is the essentialized cultural prescription.

Yet between this epigraph and the concluding lines falls not the shadow, but the electric brilliance, of Corinne’s performance. When Hemans republished the poem in *Songs of Affections &c*, she retitled it *Corinne at the Capitol*, matching the title to book 2 of Staël’s *Corinne*. There Staël presents the heroine for the first time, celebrated in her glory, and elaborates her triumph, giving the text of “Corinne’s Improvisation” and concluding in an apotheosis: “No longer a fearful

woman, she was an inspired priestess, joyously devoting herself to the cult of genius." Hemans represents the "Improvisation" in 42^{1/2} lines of present-tense drama punctuated by repeated "now"s and swelling with a radiant lexicon: *fires, Joyously, festal, triumphs, glory bright, golden light, ascending, freedom, proudly, gemlike, summit, rich music, victorious notes, proud harmony, thrilling power, tide of rapture, flush*, "the joy of kindled thought / And the burning words of song." By contrast, the moralizing coda can't sustain more than 5^{1/2} lines, and thus the poem becomes a text of subversive disproportions—a characteristic of Hemans's representations of insoluble conflicts in all spheres, from the personal and domestic, to the social and patriotic, to the religious and metaphysical.

Woman and Fame (1829) is linked to *Corinne* in theme, drawing its epigraph from the last four lines of the earlier poem. It repeats the fundamental and unresolvable conflict by which Hemans and many of her contemporaries saw female fame as a purchase against female happiness. Its argument disparages woman's fame against the durable nurture of "home-born love." Yet this proves to be another poem at war with its lesson, a war again waged by the pressures of its aesthetic elaborations:

Thou hast a voice, whose thrilling tone
Can bid each life-pulse beat,
As when a trumpet's note hath blown,
Calling the brave to meet:
But mine, let mine—a woman's breast,
By words of home-born love be bless'd.

(*Amulet*, 90)

The paradox is clear: Hemans's imagery, if not her argument, associates artistic achievement with the thrill of life itself, only to force a turn at the couplet (this turn shapes the structure of each of the poem's first three stanzas) back into a domestic sphere—one she argues is "bless'd" but which she can imagine only in opposition to the life-pulse to which her own talents beat.

Out of such contrary pressures—intelligence, ambition, insecurity, domestic affection, and material necessity—emerges a keenly tuned critical capacity, neither absorbed in complacent pieties nor polemically oppositional, but one whose necessary placement in the mainstream culture made Hemans especially alert to the crosscurrents. Her close friend Rose Lawrence described her, at the height of her celebrity, in terms strikingly at odds with the icon of "feminine" propriety established by the reviews: "In the world, as it is called, [. . .] it fared with her as it has done with all other women of genius, from Madame de Stael, downward: she was frequently accused of heresy and schism, and several times regularly convicted of contumacy and non-conformity," among the provocations, the way "her brilliant conversation rose above the level and conventional tone of society. Her pleasantry was not always genuine or happy" (*Recollections* 316–17). The poetry that Hemans developed for, in, and against this "world" is often unpredictable, courageous, filled with unexpected surprises and juxtapositions. The

conflicts that appear in and across her work more directly reflect the complexity of the period—its international politics, its views of war, its attitude toward domestic and gendered life—than the orthodoxies into which her critics, for a variety of ideological motivations, have tried to place her.

THIS EDITION

Whatever our view of Hemans, informed discussion needs more accessible sources and better scholarly resources than have been available, notwithstanding the interventions of recent anthologies. The compendious nineteenth-century volumes are long out of print, as are the lifetime volumes (except for a few facsimile reprints, some of them now out of print, too). The best of the big posthumous volumes, by Blackwood, retain Hemans's copious textual notes and embellish with excerpts from reviews and memoirs—a form popularized in Murray's landmark edition of Byron in the 1830s. But the last volume of Hemans was Oxford University Press's severely reduced edition of 1914, which remained in print for a couple of decades. Despite its University Press imprint, it is far less adequate than the best of Blackwood's: printing corrupt texts, shearing off Hemans's notes (as essential to her textual display as Byron's or T. S. Eliot's notes to theirs), excluding plays, not supplying any essays or letters, and unmarked by any help beyond line numbers, Oxford's is no resource for scholars, even if it could be had. The memoirs of the 1830s (Chorley and Hughes) include some letters, but excerpted and edited to accord with "feminine" propriety, while some of Hemans's most interesting correspondence—her business dealings, for instance—has languished in archives. In the absence of a standard edition, citations in critical discussion have been hodgepodge, often relying on corrupt texts. The best recent anthology selections suffer from some of these same problems, as well as restraints of space and classroom-oriented annotation.²⁰

Building on the recent recovery of Hemans, I developed this edition in order to meet the need for substantial, professionally prepared materials on which informed discussion may develop. As such, this publication is meant both as a contribution to literary study, making the work of this important writer available, and as an intervention in a scholarly enterprise that has been in want of a common, reliable reference. While it is a selection (in advance, I hope, of a complete edition of her poems and letters), it is ample and wide-ranging, representing both the poetry that fostered Hemans's fame and the texts that the nineteenth century winnowed away. Contents range from her third volume, *The Domestic Affections* (1812), up to the work she published in the mid-1830s. Five major works appear entire: *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, *Modern Greece*, *Tales, and Historic Scenes*; *The Forest Sanctuary*; and *The Siege of Valencia*—as well as an entire subgroup, *Records of Woman*, in which the aggregate, like that of *Tales*, is an important macrotext. There is also a sample of her essay writing, one on the relation of poetry and contemporary politics. Many letters appear here for the first time since the 1830s, many for the first time ever—presenting Hemans's views of her contemporaries, her negotiations with

her publishers, and her reflections on her writing and her emerging celebrity. The “Chronology” gives a detailed account her life in the context of her career, the contemporary literary culture it engaged, and key historical events. The section titled “Reception” spans the nineteenth century: along with some newly published letters, I include samples of major reviews that appeared in her lifetime, widely published elegies, and landmark memoirs, prefaces, and literary biographies. The “Bibliography,” moving into this century, is both a reference and a demonstration. Its first section lists Hemans’s chief lifetime publications, with information on the magazines where she most frequently appeared. A list of other important nineteenth-century commentaries, memoirs, and critical essays supplements the “Reception” section, and a list of editions provides a resource and a story, the nineteenth-century volumes reflecting Hemans’s formation in the culture of the annuals, the twentieth-century anthologies showing both the sway of Victorian canons and the emergence of revisionary interests. The bibliography of modern resources includes critical essays on Hemans, Web sites, and general studies illuminating her situation as a woman writer in the Romantic era—those decades marked by war and political unrest, by commercial bustle and empire, and wending toward the Victorian culture that would find its lights, and try to avoid seeing its shadows, in Felicia Hemans.

NOTES

¹ Letter to Rose Lawrence, summer 1830; another from early 1831. Among the poems, *Woman and Fame*, *Properzia Rossi*, *Corinne at the Capitol*.

² For an account of Hemans’s durability on publishers’ lists, see Paula Feldman, “Endurance and Forgetting” 14–17. Feldman notes that when most of Hemans’s work went out of copyright in the 1870s there was a surge of new editions, including volumes in Edward Moxon’s various series: *Popular Poets in the 1870s* (selling well into the 1880s), *Standard Poets*, and *Library Poets*. In 1914, Hemans joined the 53-volume Oxford Editions of Standard Authors.

³ Norma Clarke, *Ambitious Heights* 45. Here and throughout, brief references signal an item listed in the Bibliography, with complete publication information.

⁴ (Rpt. Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977) 301. Moers’s study, it should be noted, generally slights poets, and all Romantic-era ones. It would not not be until the 1980s that a recovery would emerge as a wide-scale project. Hemans has only a very minor place in such canon-defining collections as Ward’s nineteenth-century anthology, *English Poets*, and the 1906 *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and no place at all in Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1860s to 1880s), William Stanley Braithwaite’s *Book of Georgian Verse* (1908), or Geoffrey Griegson’s *The Romantics, An Anthology* (1942).

⁵ Important forces in and heralds of this recovery were Stuart Curran’s “The ‘I’ Altered” (1988), Marlon Ross’s *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (1989), and Norma Clarke’s *Ambitious Heights* (1990).

⁶ For the tenacity of this canon (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, P. Shelley, Keats), one need only note that in 1985, it still defined the MLA’s authoritative bibliography, *The English Romantic Poets* (4th edition, edited by Frank Jordan).

⁷ Following Moers were Patricia Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1975), Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Favoring novelists, these studies had several related projects: fresh discussions of the few women in the received canon; attention to lost or neglected writers; analyses of women’s rhetorical strategies for representing their

experience, and a comparison of these practices to the representations of women and gender dynamics by canonical male writers. For my review of this history and its consequences for the study of Romantic-era women writers, see *British Literature: Discipline Analysis*.

⁸ In 1985 Alan Hill's footnote identified her merely as "popular versifier" (*Letters of Dorothy Wordsworth* [Oxford: Clarendon], 175). In 1991 Virgil Nemoianu cites her to chasten the canon liberalizers of the 1980s, warning us that once popular, now marginalized writing was "par excellence the domain of conservatism," replete "with acquiescence, formalized harmonies, and translations of obsolete ideologies" ("Literary Canons and Social Value Options," *The Hospitable Canon: Essays on Literary Play, Scholarly Choice, and Popular Pressures*, ed. Virgil Nemoianu and Robert Royal [Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins], 240).

⁹ Jennifer Breen, *Women Romantic Poets, 1785–1832* (London: J. M. Dent, 1992), 160. Meant to remedy "long-neglected achievements" (back cover), this anthology mentions Hemans only once in passing, in the introduction (xii), ridicules her in the notes ("She was an admirer of William Wordsworth's poetry but he did not reciprocate this admiration" [160]), and represents her with two of her duller poems: *Dirge*, a short piece of conventional pieties on the death of a child, and a reverential *To Wordsworth* (147–48). Both the attitude and the selection recall Ward's *English Poets* and the 1906 *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

¹⁰ Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls* 60. Innocent of most recent discussions of Hemans, Greer was also unembarrassed by factual mistakes, ignorance of her canon (e.g., 144; and 262, 509, where volume titles are incorrectly cited), and research no more ambitious than a single Victorian preface (92–94)—a regrettable and ironic slip-shodiness. Norton's 7th edition does a bit better, releasing her from the dubious category of "minor lyric poet," and supplying two more poems, the anthology favorite, *The Homes of England*, and one of Hemans's own favorites, *A Spirit's Return*.

¹¹ Curran, "The 'T' Altered" 189 and "Women Readers" 190, 194; Ross, *Contours*; Clarke, *Ambitious Heights* 76; Kaplan, *Salt and Bitter and Good* 93–95; Armstrong, "A Music" (ed. Leighton) 251; Lootens, "Hemans and Home" 241. Mellor notes how often the celebration of "the enduring value of the domestic affections, the glory and beauty of maternal love, and the lasting commitment of a woman to her chosen mate" evokes "the fragility of the very domestic ideology it endorses" (*Romanticism & Gender* 124); and McGann summed up the poetry as "haunted by death and insubstantiality" ("Literary History, Romanticism, and Felicia Hemans," *Poetics of Sensibility* 187).

¹² For revisionary discussions, see Armstrong, *ibid* 258–59, and Lootens, *ibid* 241.

¹³ See my "Domestic Affections and the Spear of Minerva," and more generally, my essay on the reception of *The Siege of Valencia* ("Revolving Doors of Reception").

¹⁴ See Angela Leighton, *Writing Against the Heart* 11–12.

¹⁵ The essay became canonical by force of lavish quotation in 1839. The preface to Warne's *Chandos Classic* (ca. 1889) is still quoting it generously (xxiii).

¹⁶ See Leighton, *Writing Against*: the mystique of the woman poet that emerges in the 1820s, especially in the celebrity of Hemans and L.E.L., "offers to subsequent generations of women both an enthusiastic incentive to write and a subtly determining myth of what being a woman poet means" (2). Mellor tracks the cult and culture of the "poetess" into twentieth-century accounts, which shift only tonally; that is, they do not condescend to the category. She does not read Hemans in the counter-tradition she calls the "Female Poet" ("The Female Poet and the Poetess" 261–62).

¹⁷ Polwhele gives this footnote for the quoted phrase: "A troop came next, who crowns and armour wore, / And proud defiance in their looks they bore.' Pope. The Amazonian band—the female Quixotes of the new philosophy, are, here, too justly characterised." Pope's verse is from *The Temple of Fame* (1711) 342–43; the troop is answering "the direful trump of Slander." In Charlotte Lennox's popular novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), the heroine lives in a fantasy-world constructed from her reading of French romances.

¹⁸ By this time, Byron's letter to Murray had been published in Moore's *Life* (with asterisks replacing Hemans's name). For the Captain's grumble, see *A Short Sketch* (1835) 489. For

Jewsbury's hunch, see *The History of a Nonchalant*. Peter Cochran is right to note that “whatever the case, he had the power, as a man, to leave” (13).

¹⁹ *LS* 189. See the notes to *Corinne* for the translation and source. For the Corinne myth, see Moers, ch. 9, and for Hemans and Corinne, Leighton, *Writing Against* 32–34.

²⁰ A welcome development is Paula Feldman's edition of *Records of Woman, With Other Poems*.