THE FIGURE OF THE POETESS
IN BRITISH SENTIMENTAL LITERATURE,
1820-1860

A Dissertation in
English
by
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This dissertation considers the development and deployment of the sentimental poetess as a construct of poetic identity in the late Romantic/early Victorian period in Great Britain. Through an analysis of the lives, work, and reception of four “poetesses” publishing between approximately 1820 and 1860, I show how the concept of the poetess was shaped both by external critical forces and by the efforts of the poets who may have identified with that role. Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.), Alfred Tennyson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning each adapt the figure of the poetess as a representation of their sentimental poetic project. Hemans conceived of this figure as a bard charged with the preservation of the feminine experiences of home and loss. Landon saw the poetess as a woman destroyed by the all-consuming poetic gift that she possesses and cannot live without. Tennyson responded to Hemans’s and Landon’s concepts of the poetess and then constructed for himself an identity as a male poetess, a man who adopts a feminine voice and subject position in his artistic endeavors. Finally, Barrett Browning reimagined the poetess as a profoundly modern figure whose primary role was to lend her voice and her power to inspiring social change.

The argument presented here reclaims aesthetic femininity, characterized by sentimental, domestic, and woman-centered poetics, as a crucial site of much-needed feminist analysis, while rejecting the continuing marginalization of female poets by demonstrating their participation in an ongoing literary discourse with their male peers.
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For my family.

But especially for Mom and Dad,

Because they never doubted me.

Or, if they did, they never told me so.

I love you.
INTRODUCTION

But how different the duties of this pink and perfumed page! We breathe the atmosphere of the Boudoir, a voluptuous langour fills the odour-laden air; we dwell in a forest of or molu, intermingled with rocks and caves of buhl; the velvet pillowing that sustains our form belies in hues and softness the flower-enamelled turf. Ghosts—filmy phantoms—of a thousand gentle octavos, flutter into life around us, and as they hover in the caressing air, solicit—roguishly resistless—an approving smile from our venerable visage. There is coquetry in the very play of their leaves, fascination in their gilded bindings, ruin to the peace of man in their vignetted title-pages!

—“The Poetesses of Our Day: Contemplations Introductory”
Dublin University Magazine, August 1837

It is easy to be critical on men; but when we venture to lift a pen against a woman, straight away apparent facies; the weapon drops pointless on the marked passage; and whilst the mind is bent on praise or censure of the poem, the eye swims too deep in tears and mist over the poetess herself in the frontispiece, to let it see its way to either.

—“Modern English Poetesses”
Quarterly Review, September 1840

The late Romantic period in nineteenth-century England saw the rise of a new literary figure: the sentimental poetess, whose complicated reception is reflected in the above quotations from contemporary critics. The Dublin University Magazine’s “filmy phantoms” of books and the Quarterly Review’s “pointless” pen represent the combined sense of fascination and fear that greeted these poetesses as they rose to literary prominence in the 1820s and 1830s.¹ For their critical audiences, poetesses were exotic creatures—delicate, erotic, and almost mythic—yet, despite their supposed fragility, their very mystery rendered them monstrous and threatening in those audiences’ eyes. The “Contemplations Introductory” constitute an almost-frantic six-page manifesto supposedly celebrating the “delicacy” and the “elegance” of poetesses, while H. N. Coleridge’s supposed inability to write critically of women makes manifest the

emasculating threat to the over-refined sensuality of the books described. In the “bower of jasmine” that the *Dublin University Magazine* imagines, men, unmanned by feminine creative power, find their “pens” falling useless from enervated fingers. Despite the *Dublin University Magazine* reviewer’s assertion that “in the primrose paths of Poesie the robed and ringletted sex has in all ages walked more gracefully than grandly . . . their fancyings have truly been more pretty than profound,” there is a profound sense of terror in these essays—and such claims of women’s inferiority seem designed to soothe the minds of the critics as much as those of their audiences.

The anxieties apparent in critics’, authors’, and audiences’ reactions to the poetess indicate the extent to which she became an increasingly contested and contestable figure as the Romantic period faded into the Victorian. From the death of Byron in 1824 until the mid-1840s, the sentimental poetess dominated the British literary scene, creating profound anxieties about the feminization of British literature—and, by extension, the national culture(s). Male and female writers alike tackled the issue of the poetess, seeking to celebrate and/or contain her power within the confines of a narrow sphere of artistic influence.

Critics’ success at erasing or containing the poetess after her short reign was astonishing. After twenty years of relatively serious critical attention, the poetess came to be memorialized as a mawkish hack, an underdeveloped dilettante, or a sweet lady-poet.

Throughout this project, I use “Britain” or “British” to designate the United Kingdom, then comprising England, Scotland, Wales, and all of Ireland, and its inhabitants. Although the majority of the literature I will discuss is English in culture and language, the dominance of English writers over the British literary scene sometimes obviates the need for a cumbersome discussion of the cultural boundaries in question, particularly in a generalist study, though where relevant I take care to acknowledge differing national identities (as in the case of Sir Walter Scott). Finally, the term “British” is the most appropriate for at least one of the poets discussed in this study—Felicia Hemans was English by birth and language, but her father was of Irish descent and she herself spent most of her life living in Wales, where she has been adopted as an honorary Welsh poet, and died and was buried in Ireland.
whose “verses have the monotone of mere sex,” as William Michael Rossetti said of Felicia Hemans. The twentieth century, led by the anti-sentimental tendencies of modernism, came to view the poetess as a poisonous muse, whose pernicious popularity acted like a disease, “infecting” even the “great” poets, like Tennyson, who followed her. Despite these imprecations, incarnations of the sentimental poetess, often depicted as a romantic and doomed young woman, persisted in the writings of her more respected literary heirs and, perhaps more memorably, in the literary creations of later writers, who struggled with their debt to the figure of sentimental poetess even as they mocked her poetry and her poetics.

This project analyzes the development and deployment of the figure of the poetess through four case studies of individuals who not only wrote about the poetess in their poetry, but whose careers are best understood as the careers of poetesses. Ultimately, I hope to redefine the term “poetess” as a concept divorced from physical sex; rather than a diminutive form of “female poet,” I suggest that the “poetess” be reimagined as a poet whose poetry and career follows a specifically “feminine” mode, which includes: (1) a

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4 See, for example, Harold Nicholson, “The Case of ‘L.E.L.’: Critics Off the Rails,” in which he argues, “So powerful was the pressure of this maidenly taste that it . . . afflicted even Tennyson’s early verses with a schoolmiss taint” (*The Observer*, 23 March 1958).
5 In Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, we see one such poetess in the figure of the late teenaged artist/poetess Emmeline Grangerford, who, no doubt inspired by the annuals and albums Huck spies amongst her family’s possessions (among them *Friendship’s Offering*, which Huck describes as “full of beautiful stuff and poetry”), is a kind of rural improvisatrice—“she could rattle off poetry like nothing. She didn’t ever have to stop to think. . . . She warn’t particular, she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about, just so it was sadful.” Twain’s use of the poetess in the figure of Emmeline Grangerford indicates the extent to which the poetess was seen as a quaintly old-fashioned figure; though it was published in the 1880s, *Huck Finn* is set in the 1830s or 1840s, and Twain’s readership would probably have smiled knowingly at the familiar and, in Twain’s hands, ludicrous figure of the young poetess. (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Emory Elliott [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 166.) Like Twain, Canada’s Lucy Maud Montgomery, author of the beloved children’s classic *Anne of Green Gables*, who wrote some thirty years after Twain, both embraces and questions the remnants of sentimentality that run throughout her work by setting her characters up as youthful poetesses, only to have them realize the absurdities of their behavior as they mature.
concern with the home as a crucial site of artistic and emotional power, (2) a focus on the lives of individuals caught in traditionally feminine subject positions, and (3) an outwardly-focused emotional pedagogy that hopes to teach the poem’s audience proper modes of feeling.

The four poets in question, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (“L.E.L.”), Alfred Tennyson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, help to bridge the “gap” between the Romantic and Victorian periods, with Hemans’s adult career beginning around 1819, and Barrett Browning’s ending in 1861. Tennyson’s career, of course, spans seventy years, but it is his early career, from 1830 to 1850, that I am concerned with here. All four of these poets wielded tremendous imaginative influence across the four decades of this project, Hemans and Landon in the 1820s and 1830s, and Tennyson and Barrett Browning in the 1840s and 1850s.

Key Terms

In this project I use the term “poetess” interchangeably with “poet,” “female poet,” and, especially, “feminine poet.” In doing so, I am ignoring the pejorative connotation attached to the word “poetess,” but I do so very deliberately. I am here aligning my work with that of Patrick H. Vincent, author of The Romantic Poetess, who argues that “by avoiding the label . . . we endorse the aesthetic and critical movements . . . that buried those women poets who found authorization in a culturally sanctioned, feminine poetics.” Other important scholars of women’s writing in this period, including Isobel Armstrong, Virginia Blain, and Anne K. Mellor, have similarly adopted the term, though Mellor uses the term “poetess” in such a way as to mark her inferiority to the

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“female poet.”\textsuperscript{7} Mellor tends to see the poetess in somewhat reductive terms—terms which allow her to privilege the overt political engagement of what she calls the “female poet” above the more home-centered (but still, I would argue, politically and socially relevant) work of the sentimental poetess.

In choosing to use the term “poetess” in a non-pejorative sense, I hope to move beyond the potential limitations of earlier feminist criticism, which has tended to devalue traditionally “feminine” poetics, such as those practiced by Hemans and Landon, seeing them as second-rate (at best) and/or complicit in anti-feminist patriarchal assumptions of gender relations. Ironically, however, in rejecting those writers who chose to adopt conventionally feminine voices, earlier critics managed to systematically eliminate important examples of women’s successes in the literary marketplace, creating a skewed impression of women’s professional authorial capacity prior to the twentieth century. Just as ignoring the literature of sentimentality because it makes us uncomfortable can be detrimental to our understanding of literary history as a whole, rejecting the poetess undermines our ability to fully comprehend the complicated structures of gender, identity, and the performance of either in nineteenth-century Britain.

The gender issues that lie at the heart of this project are complicated by what I see as a necessary reliance on potentially reductive terminology. I am using the words “masculine” and “feminine” here in a somewhat classical sense, in which “masculine” refers to that which is traditionally seen in an empowered subject position, with its

\textsuperscript{7} For example, Mellor argues that the female poet “inaugurated a tradition of explicitly feminist poetry, a poetry that insisted on the equality of women with men and the right of women to speak publically on subjects to which they could contribute a uniquely valid perspective and which had an impact on their daily lives” (“The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women’s Poetry, 1780-1830,” \textit{Studies in Romanticism} 36 [1997]: 265.) The implication here, of course, is that the poetess, unlike her predecessor, does not write feminist poetry, nor does she portray the equality of men and women in that poetry. It is this point that I wish to contest.
primary characteristic being detached reason/logic. “Feminine,” then, refers to those things that are traditionally placed in objectified, emotionalized, and secondary positions. In Edmund Burke’s terms, the masculine is the sublime, and the feminine is the beautiful, but I have attempted to resist fully embracing Burke’s dichotomy, if only because I see the feminine poetic position as one that negotiates the sublime through encounters with the beautiful.

Similarly, I will use the term “feminized” to denote that which has been relegated to a feminine position, whether politically, socially, or aesthetically, while “masculinized” refers to that which has been made more conventionally masculine, either through political or social dominance or through some perception of physical vigor and/or violence. I have chosen to use these terms despite their potential ideological baggage because both the poets whose work I am examining and the critics who responded to that work saw it in terms of the “masculine” and the “feminine.” Thus, for the sake of clarity and consistency, I will continue using this terminology, though I am aware that it furthers the construction of certain false gendered binaries that feminist, queer, and gender studies have tried to overcome.

Finally, when I refer to “feminine” literature, writing, or poetry, I do not mean that this poetry is only or even best composed by women, nor are these terms meant to evoke l’écriture feminine of French feminist thought. There are modes of writing in the nineteenth century that can be classified in gendered terms. However, using such a model of classification does not mean that these modes can equally be divided into “male work” and “female work.” Instead, I mean writing that adopts a central focus on the position of women (often an endangered or oppressed position), that looks towards the home as a
pivotal social and emotional space (either as a positive or a negative force), and that tends to be outwardly, rather than inwardly focused. “Feminine poetry,” which I define as sentimental poetry focused on the narration of emotion and with an almost-obsessive interest in the domestic and its signifiers, is not necessarily always the realm of women writers. It is, however, the realm of the poetess.

**Starting Points**

Critical study of the sentimental poetess has seen a steady increase over the past thirty years. Once derided as representative of a “gap in literary taste” and as an embodiment of women’s inability to compete on equal footing in the literary marketplace, the sentimental poetess now offers rich new material that can help broaden our understanding of literary history and the functions of gender and gendered writing within that history.

The dominant trend in critical scholarship on the poetess has been to view her work as part of a separate, female tradition of writing in the nineteenth century. Proponents of this theory, including Cheryl Walker, Angela Leighton, and Isobel Armstrong, argue that women writers are best read and understood in dialogue with each other, exclusive of their male contemporaries. Even when scholars have read women poets in context with their male precursors, peers, and successors, their readings have

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8 Nicholson, “Critics Off the Rails.”
9 Cf. Germaine Greer, “The Tulsa Center for the Study of Women’s Literature: What We Are Doing and Why We Are Doing It,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 1 (1982): 5-26, in which she describes women’s writing as “amateurish and unassuming” and argues that “women . . . [wrote] for their joy in the activity itself and eschewed the fierce competitiveness of the masculine literary establishment” (7-8).
10 *The Nightingale’s Burden* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1982).
tended to emphasize the separateness of the women’s writing. For example, in Marlon Ross’s *The Contours of Masculine Desire* (1988), women poets function primarily as a way to explain masculine Romanticism, which is a useful way of highlighting women poets’ involvement in the literary market, but which also positions them as “helpmeets” or muses in addition to creative individuals in their own rights.

There is merit to the argument that women saw themselves as part of a separate poetic lineage. Elizabeth Barrett’s inability to identify any poetic “grandmothers” reveals a sense of alienation as a woman writer from the tradition of the “grandfathers” that she claims to revere. Similarly, poets like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon saw themselves as the literary descendants of historical women poets like Sappho, Corinna, Erinna, as well as Germaine de Staël’s fictional Corinne. However, as Yopie Prins and Margaret Reynolds have shown in their work on nineteenth-century representations of Sappho, male writers, too, often positioned themselves in relation to her, while the writings of nineteenth-century writers—both male and female—reveal a network of influence and dialogue that transcends gender boundaries. Thus, more recent scholarship has begun to challenge the concept of separate spheres in poetry by broadening the discourse to examine men and women writers in equal dialogue with each other as part of

14 Elizabeth Barrett to Henry Fothergill Chorley, 7 January 1845, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, ed. Ronald Hudson, Philip Kelley, Scott Lewis, and Edward Hagan (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984– ), 10:9. Barrett’s assertion that she “look[s] everywhere for Grandmothers & see[s] none” has often been taken out of context. The dialogue between Barrett and Chorley on this subject spans several letters, and throughout Barrett demonstrates her familiarity with earlier women writers, including Anne Finch, the Countess of Winchelsea, and Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle. However, she declares that there were no “poetesses” in England before Joanna Baillie.
a vibrant literary discourse community.\textsuperscript{16} It is within this scholarly conversation that I position my work in this study.

Herbert F. Tucker’s “House Arrest: The Domestication of English Poetry in the 1820s” (1994) provided a starting point for this project.\textsuperscript{17} Tucker addresses the supposed “gap” between the Romantic and Victorian periods, and uses the poetry of several canonical male Romantics as well as Tennyson and Hemans to show the growing reliance on domesticity in British poetry in the 1820s and afterward.

Richard Cronin, picking up in his \textit{Romantic Victorians} (1999) where Tucker left off, examines male and female writers at the beginning of the Victorian period, and discusses the ways in which they incorporate and respond to Romantic ideas in their work. Cronin’s chapter on “Feminizing Romanticism,” which reads Tennyson in context with Hemans, Landon, George Darley, and Thomas Lovell Beddoes, may be the first modern critical text to explicitly position Tennyson as a poetess, though Cronin resists making that argument. Although he never qualifies or expands upon his assertion that Tennyson writes “as a woman” in several of his early poems, this claim helped to inspire the reexamination of the poetess that I undertake in this project.

There exists to date only one full-length study of the figure of the poetess that explicitly aligns the poetess as part of a distinct tradition within literary history. Patrick H. Vincent’s \textit{The Romantic Poetess: European Culture, Politics, and Gender, 1820-1840} (2004) takes a broad look at Romantic-era poetesses in three nations—France, Russia, and England—across the two decades of his study. Vincent describes his project as “part

\textsuperscript{16} One of the most exciting new texts to address the complicated genders of nineteenth-century writers is Susan Wolfson’s \textit{Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Wolfson addresses the gendered positions of two male and two female poets at the end of the Romantic period—Byron, Keats, Hemans, and Maria Jane Jewsbury.

of an ongoing effort by scholars . . . to draw the poetess out of the attics, archives, marginalia, and, most tellingly, out of the literary ‘remains’ so popular in 1830s and 1840s Europe.” Although his project is devoted to the cosmopolitan, multi-national context of the poetess, and mine is strictly limited to British literature, his study is an important example of how to approach the poetess on her own terms. In other words, rather than beginning from a point of apology for the overt sentimentality of much of the poetry produced by poetesses, we should approach this figure and the poetry that surrounds her as a serious endeavor worthy of critical inquiry.

The Rise of Sentimental Poetry

The figure of the sentimental poetess is inseparable from the discourses of sentimentality that became popular in Britain after the Napoleonic Wars. Paradoxically, though sentimentality encouraged a view of women as physically inferior, their supposedly greater emotional capacity enabled women writers to take center stage in the literary scene in the 1820s and 1830s.

While it remains consistently undervalued by scholars of British literature, sentimental literature has provided rich new ground for Americanists, as critics such as Ann Douglas, Jane Tompkins, and Amy Kaplan have returned to the popular novels and, to a lesser extent, the popular poetry of early- and mid-nineteenth-century Americans and revalued their intellectual and moral projects. Similarly, the study of the literature and

culture of sensibility in late-eighteenth century British literature has helped us to better understand the philosophical, political, economic, and social roles of sex, sexuality, and gender around the time of the French Revolution.20

However, the importance of sentiment and sentimental poetry, in particular, to the British literature of the nineteenth century has been widely overlooked by literary scholars.21 Despite the growing significance in the academy of sentimental poets like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the period and aesthetic to which they belong—indeed, which they helped to construct—remains a critical embarrassment to scholars of nineteenth-century literature. One of the reasons for this neglect is that, by modern and post-modern concepts of “objective” literary value, sentimental literature is decidedly lacking. Jerome McGann argues that, “Both romanticism and modernism organized themselves in relation to the traditions of sensibility and sentiment. So far as high culture is concerned, however, these traditions remain something of an embarrassment—at best a topic of academic interest, at worst a perceived threat to the practice of art.”22 The “perceived threat” lies in the fact that revaluation of sentimental poetry would necessitate a profound destabilization of twentieth- and twenty-first-century constructions of literary value.

21 Jerome McGann’s The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) may be the only study of sentimentality that offers a detailed discussion of sentimental poetry in its nineteenth-century incarnation. Fred Kaplan’s Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) and Michael Bell’s Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000) take a broader scope, Kaplan to prose and Bell to the social and ethical issues surrounding sentimental culture from the eighteenth century though modernism.
22 McGann, The Poetics of Sensibility, 1.
My goal here is not necessarily to construct a defense of sentimentality. However, a better understanding of the ethical and historical projects of sentimental poetry will allow us to better understand not only the development of English-language literatures, but how gendered constructs of artistic endeavors can play into those literatures. In order to do that, we must examine the rise of sentimental poetry in post-Napoleonic Britain, and the ways in which gender helped to shape that poetry.

As an aesthetic movement, sentimentality is superficially conservative, dedicated to reifying social hierarchies by underscoring the supposed happiness and “simplicity” of the working classes (often depicted in sentimental poetry, which tends to be medievalist in its approach, as rural peasants), the glories of patriotism, and the central importance of the home. However, while sentimental literature can certainly function as a tool for reinscribing conservative values, a closer reading of much of this literature reveals its subversive undertones, particularly in its deployment by female poets. Though it can be nationalistic, with strains of imperialist or jingoistic discourse, sentimental poetry is also cosmopolitan and often vaguely proto-feminist in its outlook, if only because it brought to light the sufferings and strengths of women caught in socially untenable situations.

The golden age of sentimental poetry in Britain came in the 1820s through the 1840s, as British society faced a number of fundamental social, economic, and political shifts. These shifts were reflected in the literature, as a greater value began to be placed upon the realm of domesticity and femininity. This shift was, in part, reactionary—as social unrest in the form of working class agitation threatened the perceived stability of the middle classes, the literature of those classes became more thoroughly invested in idealizing their own importance. External forces also contributed to this movement to
reaffirm the dominant values of the bourgeoisie. As British society emerged from the shadow of the Napoleonic wars and began to look forward to the solidification of its global dominance, it became more and more deeply invested in the spread of British imperialism and English nationalism, both of which were written into the literature of these decades.

In *The Taming of Romanticism*, Virgil Nemoianu describes this period as an English “Biedermeier.” 

Insofar as the decades of the 1820s through the 1840s deploy a similar set of aesthetic and moral values as the corresponding German Biedermeier, with its reactionary post-Napoleonic conservatism, we might accept this designation. However, sentimentality, with its roots in eighteenth-century philosophies of sensibility, and with its tremendous impact on the literary and aesthetic tastes of not only the late Romantic decades but much of the Victorian era to follow, cannot be explained simply by a look to the growing Continental conservatism embodied in the Biedermeier aesthetic.

Sentimental poetry shares with the earlier philosophy of sensibility a moral and emotional pedagogy, through which it seeks to teach its audience how to feel, and both philosophies represent a movement towards social stability through the affirmation of conservative values. The original rise of sensibility has been attributed, in part, to the growing commodification of literature in England following the Glorious Revolution of

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23 These decades correspond with the Biedermeier period in what were then the German states. Biedermeier aesthetics and values are characterized as bourgeois, reactionary, sentimental, and highly consumerist. For a fuller argument, see Virgil Nemoianu, *The Taming of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
24 Although the terms “sensibility” and “sentimentality” can be used interchangeably, for this project I am designating “sensibility” as the eighteenth-century manifestation of sentimental literature. It is a potentially false designation, but “sentimentality” is the more commonly used term for the nineteenth-century versions of this literature.
25 See, for example Janet Todd, *Sensibility*, in which she describes sentimental literature as “exemplary of emotion, teaching its consumers to produce a response equivalent to the one presented in its episodes. It is a kind of pedagogy of seeing and of the physical reaction that this seeing should produce, clarifying when uncontrolled sobs or a single tear should be the rule, or when the inexpressible nature of the feeling should be stressed” (4).
1688, as literary production shifted from the patronage system to the more capitalistic free-market structure. The early eighteenth century’s relative economic and political stability led to a further spread of the middle classes, while the mass distribution of books through circulating libraries increased the availability of written literature amongst that middle class. Janet Todd describes the growing rate of literacy as a phenomenon that “provoked an excited self-consciousness, an effort by writers to construct readers for themselves, and an awareness of writing as a theatrical performance.” Todd links this dawning sense of writing’s performative nature to the growing distance inspired by the commodification of literature; as writing became more influenced by popular demand, writers were no longer dependent upon aristocratic patronage for their livelihoods, but the new readers they attracted lacked the educational refinements of the earlier upper-class readers.

Similarly, middle-class women became increasingly powerful consumers of literature in the early nineteenth century, and sentimental poetry was often targeted at that group of readers. Like the rising middle classes of a century before, women readers often lacked educational refinement, and sentimental poetry sought to work not on their faculties of reason, but rather on their emotional responsiveness. Furthermore, as Britain’s imperial designs strengthened, and British culture, empowered by its final victory over Napoleon’s France, began to spread more actively to its distant outposts, there was an increasing need to reinforce the roots of that culture in the home soil, and, specifically, in the hearts and minds of the women who would raise and teach its children. Sentimentality may seem reactionary, and it has been classed as such, but it is

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26 See Barker-Benfield’s *The Culture of Sensibility* and Todd’s *Sensibility: An Introduction.*
27 *Sensibility*, 12.
also the harbinger of mainstream Victorian cultural values. While the culture and literature of sensibility sought to unite logic and feeling into the human ideal envisioned by Enlightenment thinkers, sentimental discourses anticipated and even created the Victorian era, with its myriad gender, social, and economic paradoxes.

“Keepsake” Annuals

The commodification of the sentimental aesthetic and the social changes surrounding it has been an important discussion point for various scholars of this period, and much of this discussion has zeroed in on the gift book or “Keepsake” annual phenomenon. From a waning poetic market in 1823 arose the beautifully bound gift books, originally popular in the German states and descended from private commonplace books, in which readers might record passages or whole poems that captured their attention. Inside their embossed leather or watered-silk covers, the gilt-edged pages of the annuals boasted engravings of various sentimental scenes, usually produced by popular artists. Alongside these illustrations were poems, essays, and short fiction contributed by leading writers, many, if not most, of whom were women.

*Forget Me Not, Friendship's Offering, The Keepsake, The Amulet, The Book of Beauty, The Literary Souvenir,* and *The Diadem* were but a fraction of the number of annuals produced in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. The titles of these gift books reflect

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their ultimate purpose—as commodified “keepsakes,” they became the mass-produced, nineteenth-century equivalent of mixed CDs, designed to be given as gifts to young ladies and sweethearts, perhaps as indicators of the giver’s affection.

For female writers, and female poets in particular, the advent of the gift-book in 1823 provided unrivaled financial opportunity. Mary Russell Mitford, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Lady Blessington, Caroline Norton, and Louisa H. Sheridan were among the many female editors of these volumes. Editorial duties, depending on the editor, ranged from collecting literary submissions to be included in the year’s publication to composing all of the contributions for that year. Mitford took the former tack with her Findens’ Tableaux of the Affections, which featured a number of works by her young friend Elizabeth Barrett, while Landon, who edited Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap-Book from 1832 until her death in 1838, composed the entire contents of those volumes herself. For most of these books, writers were recruited to compose a set number of lines on the subject depicted in a given picture, though more prominent authors, such as Sir Walter Scott, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, or Felicia Hemans, were given considerable freedom with (and compensation for) their submissions.

The annual fad lasted over twenty years, but peaked in the early 1830s, when in 1831 alone, according to Andrew Boyle’s An Index to the Annuals, at least sixty-two

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29 The term “Keepsake” annuals is a reference to both the books’ ultimate purpose and to their most successful incarnation: The Keepsake.

30 In George Eliot’s Middlemarch, one of Rosamund Vincy’s suitors brings her an annual, which signifies both the bourgeois values of Rosamund and her would-be lover and their mutual lack of literary discernment: “[Mr. Ned Plymdale] had brought the last ‘Keepsake,’ the gorgeous watered-silk publication which marked modern progress at that time; and he considered himself very fortunate that he could be the first to look over it with her, dwelling on the ladies and gentlemen with shiny copper-plate cheeks and copper-plate smiles, and pointing to comic verses as capital and sentimental stories as interesting” (Middlemarch, ed. David Carroll [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 267).
different annuals were printed. However, even at the height of their popularity, Patricia Pulham suggests, their ultimate meaning and purpose were potentially suspect. According to Pulham, the annuals, like the poetry they often showcased, perpetuated contradictory images of femininity and authorship. “Is [the annual] the kind of woman with whom the female poet may associate without damaging her reputation?” Pulham asks. “On the surface it would seem so—respectability, taste, and femininity being her avowed concerns. Yet, she is a commodity, sold in the marketplace.” Thus, the annuals reflect the contradictions of late Romantic/early Victorian society when it came to women writers. Even as the highly feminized and beautified exteriors of the annuals offered a way to make palatable their commodification of women’s minds, so the hyper-feminized depictions and expectations of women writers depicted within provided a way to contain the potential dangers of the kinds of female independence suggested by those writers’ very existence.

Highly-regarded writers like Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate of England, and Charles Lamb professed to disdain the annuals; Southey called them “picture-books for grown children,” and Lamb described submitting a poem to the annuals as “myself in frippery, strutting along, and vying finery with Beaux and Belles, with ‘future Lord Byrons and sweet L.E.L.’s,” but it is worth noting that both Southey and Lamb contributed. Early in his career, Tennyson offered annual contributions, as did Elizabeth Barrett and her future husband, Robert Browning. Women writers, in particular, could not afford to let the financial benefits offered by the annuals pass them by. Felicia Hemans,

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31 According to Richard Altick, in 1828, an estimated 100,000 copies of annuals were produced, boasting a total market value of more than £70,000—or about $7,000,000 in modern American terms. (The English Common Reader, 2nd edition [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1957], 362.)
32 “‘Jewels—Delights—Perfect Loves,’” 15.
33 Quoted in Margaret Linley, “A Centre that Would not Hold: Annuals and Cultural Democracy,” 61.
who, by Paula Feldman’s reckoning, was one of the highest-paid poets in pre-Victorian Britain (second only to Byron), provided at least 94 poems to the annuals.\(^{34}\) Landon, whose incredibly high copyright sales never resulted in the relative financial security that Hemans maintained, was one of the most prolific gift-book contributors; indeed, because so many of her poems and stories were published anonymously, we do not actually know how many more than Boyle’s calculated 162 contributions (in addition to the annuals whose contents she composed in their entirety) she may have provided.\(^{35}\)

The annuals were both a result of and a contributor to the sentimental culture of the late Romantic and early Victorian periods. Indeed, they came to be synonymous not only with mawkish bourgeois emotion but with the poetess herself. On both sides of the Atlantic, gift-books came to be one of the metonymic signifiers of an aspiring poetess long after both the gift book fad and the sentimental poetess had faded from popularity.\(^{36}\)

**Inspirations and Antecedents**

As I indicated above, one characteristic of the sentimental poetess was her self-identification with a long lineage of mythical, historical, and fictional women writers and


\(^{35}\) The contributions of several key late Romantic and early Victorian writers to the annuals as calculated by Andrew Boyle in *An Index to the Annuals* are as follows. Female writers: Elizabeth Barrett [Browning] (6), Lady Blessington (87), Felicia Hemans (94), Mary Howitt (127, plus all non-credited poems in *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrapbook, 1840-1842*), Maria Jane Jewsbury (74), Letitia Elizabeth Landon (162, plus the entire contents of *Heath’s Book of Beauty* for 1833 and *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrapbook 1832-1839*), Mary Russell Mitford (102), Mary Shelley (20). Male writers: Robert Browning (2), Lord Byron (11, all posthumous), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (25), Charles Lamb (4), Sir Walter Scott (15), Robert Southey (20), Alfred Tennyson (8), William Wordsworth (9).

\(^{36}\) See note 4, above—one of the markers of Emmeline Grangerford’s poetic nature is the family’s ownership of an edition of *Friendship’s Offering*. 
In addition to Sappho and her fellow Greek poetesses (including Corinna, Erinna, and Myrtis), poetesses and women writers turned to figures like Philomela, Ariadne, Miriam, and various incarnations of Christian paragons for inspiration and even, perhaps, a kind of solidarity. And in 1807, with the publication of Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne, ou Italie*, women writers of the nineteenth century were introduced to one of their most important foremothers.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that *Corinne* was the single most important work of the nineteenth century for women writers. Ellen Moers’s seminal, albeit flawed, analysis of the manifestations of Corinne that appeared in women’s fiction throughout the century illustrates how varied these manifestations could be. We find traces of Corinne in most of Hemans’s and Landon’s poetry, in Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, in the work of Charlotte Brontë, in more than one of George Eliot’s novels, and in the poems of Christina Rossetti. Corinne, for the women writers of Britain, was at once a patron saint and the martyr of a cautionary tale.

But Corinne, as important as she was, never existed, and Madame de Staël was an inadequate substitute. Although the terms of Mellor’s division of the female poet from

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38 See Walker, *The Nightingale’s Burden*.
41 “Performing Heroinism: The Myth of Corinne,” Chapter 9 in *Literary Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976). Moers’s analysis is undermined by her failure to adequately recall the details of *Middlemarch*; she describes the magnificent Dorothea Brooke as “the worst kind of product of the myth of Corinne . . . for she is good for nothing but to be admired. An arrogant, selfish, spoiled, rich beauty, she does little but harm in the novel. Ignorant in the extreme and mentally idle . . . Dorothea has little of interest to say, but a magnificent voice to say it in” (194-5). Moers has apparently conflated aspects of Dorothea’s character with that of her foil, Rosamund Vincy.
the poetess are problematic at best, it is absolutely true that the decades that divide the
careers of women like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Turner Smith, Mary Robinson,
and Mary Tighe from the careers of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon mark the
boundary between two different modes of women’s poetry. The reading public’s
expectations of poets, and female poets in particular, changed dramatically in the thirty
years that separate the women poets of the 1790s from the women poets of the 1820s, and
the roles those women poets played in the literary marketplace necessarily changed as well.

The women writers Mellor designates as “female poets,” while they did still
wrestle with public expectations of appropriate discourses for women, nevertheless had
better access to the political literary marketplace than did the poetesses of the next
generation. Women poets before and during the watershed decade of the 1790s wrote on
controversial topics like abolition, sexual politics, the French Revolution, and social
justice (i.e., the “Rights of Man”), without facing the vicious backlash that would end
Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s poetic career following the publication of *Eighteen Hundred
Eleven* in 1812. Mellor connects this tradition of women poets to women preachers, and
argues, in her separation of the female poet from the poetess, that the writings of the early
Romantic female poet was “explicitly political; it self-consciously and insistently
occupies the public sphere.” Although the poetess, with her moral pedagogy of
emotion, often did have a polemical, if not immediately political, purpose in her poetry,
that purpose is coded into the more standard feminine tropes of her poetry, and is thus far
more subtle than the polemical poetry of the earlier generation.

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42 See, for example, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. A Poem,” *Quarterly Review* 7 (June 1812): 309-313.
43 Mellor, “The Female Poet and the Poetess,” 262.
The women poets of the earlier generation were, as Deborah Heller has argued, part of a public discourse in their participation in Bluestocking salons, and that participation was implicitly sanctioned by the prominent male writers (including Samuel Johnson) who were themselves regular participants in salon gatherings. Stuart Curran characterizes the middle-class women writers who came to dominate the salon culture as women who, “in accordance with the expectation of their culture, publically distinguished themselves for their private virtues.” Although many of these writers focused on the novel and the essay, leaving poetry dominated by male voices, the poetic explorations of women like Helen Maria Williams or, later, Ann Yearsley were encouraged by the salon culture that authorized women’s public and political participation.

In part, the relative acceptance of women’s contributions to political writing can be attributed to the larger role they were expected to play in society. Because they were conceived of as a moral force, women could legitimately argue for the abolition of slavery or the importance of female education by framing those issues as central to the moral and spiritual health of the nation—or even the human race. Poems like Hannah More’s “Slavery” (1788), Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade” (1791), or Charlotte Smith’s “The Emigrants” (1791) framed their responses to socio-political questions as moral positions, thus ensuring their authorization of their own poetic voices.

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The changes in concepts of gender and authorship were brought about not just by post-Revolutionary wartime conservatism or, a decade later, by the social unrest that dominated Britain in the years immediately following Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, but also by the intervention of new male models of the poetic vocation. The roles and identities available to the poetess in the 1820s were, in many ways, reactionary, created in response to the two main models of the English poet that had developed through the publication of texts like *Lyrical Ballads* and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

Wordsworth built a career out of formulating and refining his poetic identity, which culminated at his death in 1850 with the publication of his poetic autobiography, *The Prelude*. Equally self-conscious in his approach to his public role was Byron, whose career was, in many ways, predicated on his notoriety and celebrity as much as his actual poetic output. Between them, Byron and Wordsworth represent the two options available to poets of the late Romantic and early Victorian periods. Other poets and writers of the time wrestled with the same issues, but it was Wordsworth’s conservative pastoralism and Byron’s semi-radical cosmopolitanism that represented the dominant cultural paradigms of the British poet.

Of course, the careers and poetics of both Wordsworth and Byron were predicated on socially masculine values, including mobility (social as well as intra- or international) and the ability to fully engage in the kinds of political, economic, and socio-sexual discourses that were usually closed to women in the early nineteenth century. Women could and did adopt some aspects of both the Byronic and the Wordsworthian formulations of the poet (both Hemans and Landon, for instance, engaged with both modes of presentation), but, constrained by increasingly narrow concepts of gender,
women’s success as poet(esse)s depended upon their ability to manipulate their audiences’ expectations of femininity, which often precluded the kinds of intra- and international mobilities that are central to Wordsworthian and Byronic poetics.

The masculine poetics of Wordsworth, Byron, and their contemporaries include, in my reading, the inwardly focused attention on the individual self that has come to dominate our understanding of Romanticism. However, even in their narrative poetry, some of which can be aligned with the sentimental tradition (Byron himself referred to some of his poetry as part of “that false stilted trashy style” popular with modern audiences, and it seems likely he was referring to his Oriental Tales), neither Byron nor Wordsworth ever engages in the same kind of emotive outpouring that distinguishes the later work of the poetess. The work of both Wordsworth and Byron, as well as that of the other canonical male Romantics (with the possible exception of Blake) tends to focus on inward emotion—recording the emotions of its writer, rather than inspiring an emotional response in its reader.

The nearest example of sentimental poetics from a male writer before the period addressed in this project can be found in the poetry of Sir Walter Scott. His commitment to narrative poetry aligns him much more closely with Felicia Hemans than with

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46 George Gordon, Lord Byron, to John Murray, 28 September 1820, in Byron’s Letters and Journals, ed. Leslie Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1973–82), 7:158. The relevant portion of the letter reads, “I do not despise [Mrs. Hemans]—but if [she] knit blue stockings instead of wearing them it would be better. You are taken in by that false stilted trashy style, which is a mixture of all the styles of the day, which are all bombastic (I don’t except my own—no one has done more through negligence to corrupt the language); but it is neither English nor poetry.”

47 Wordsworth’s well-known description of good poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is qualified by his continuing, “Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.” Later in the 1802 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, he further describes the process of poetic composition as a kind of transmutation of those “powerful feelings” through “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” The ecstatic mode of composition supposedly employed by poetesses, in which they pour their emotions onto the page without any kind of editing (a process that is, of course, largely a myth), is incompatible with the Wordworthian formula presented in the Preface.
Wordsworth or Byron, and it is probably not a coincidence that he has gradually been erased from the Romantic canon in favor of William Blake, whose idiosyncratic poetics are nevertheless much more similar to the self-absorbed passion of the later Romantics. Regardless of his influence, however, Scott, despite his position as an inspiration for and key precursor of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, Alfred Tennyson, or Elizabeth Barrett, does not fit the model of the poetess.

He is, first, excluded from this project because by 1820, his poetic career had given way to his novelistic career, and I am only interested here in the representation of the poetess in poetry itself (which is why I also ignore Landon’s novels and short fiction). Second, while Scott’s medievalist poetry is similar in both narrative construction and theme to that of later poets (Hemans, in particular), it generally lacks the emotive component that so distinguishes the work of the sentimental poetess. Whereas poetess poetry is committed to eliciting an emotional reaction from its audience, Scott’s narrative poems tended to be more novelistic than sensational. Finally, Scott does not offer models of the poetess in his poetry, and the work of the sentimental poetess tends to be deeply self-referential, as we will see in the work of Hemans, Landon, Tennyson, and Barrett.

Reading the Poetess

The work of each of the poets examined in this project shares not only an interest in the voices of women, but in the primary themes of what I am calling “poetess” poetry.

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48 See Isobel Armstrong, “Msrepresentations: Codes of Affect and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry,” in Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian, Gender and Genre, 1830-1900, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999), 3-32, in which she analyzes the reasons behind women’s commitment to affect in their poetry.
The dominant concerns here are a valuation of the home as the cornerstone of both national and individual stability, a recognition of the ways in which feminine poets transform into or are transformed into art objects themselves, and a preoccupation with the effects of fame upon creative capacity. These three themes are themselves intertwined—fame can erode the security of the home (or expose its inherent vulnerability), thus stripping the emotional and intellectual security supposedly provided by those home spaces and rendering the creative individual (the poetess) incapable of resisting the cultural forces that would rob her of her subjectivity and would transform her into an objet d’art. While none of these four artists views the function or the importance of these themes in quite the same way, all agree upon the pernicious effects of fame upon the ideals that “home” here represents (i.e., emotional support and intellectual encouragement).

In addition to being the first professional female poet in British history,49 Felicia Hemans was one of the most successful poets of the Romantic period, and the single most successful and influential female poet of the nineteenth century. She was not only foundational to the rise of sentimental literature in Britain, but her popularity in the United States was such that she is a crucial figure in understanding American sentimental literature, as well. Hemans’s importance as a woman poet and as a sentimental poetess places her at the forefront of this project.

The home, framed at once as a living space and, more broadly, as a nation or country, lies at the very heart of Hemans’s poetry. Her work positions home spaces as

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49 By which I mean she was the first woman writer to make and sustain a living solely from the earnings of her poetry. All professional women writers before Hemans (by which I mean those who lived by their pens and did not have an independent income) wrote both prose and poetry in order to get by. That Hemans was able to support herself and five sons on poetry alone, in a time when the poetic markets were less generous than in previous years, is a testament to her remarkable popularity and success.
fundamental to the survival of the individual and the nation, and yet, in her poetry’s grim march through global and social history, she also figures the home as always on the brink of extinction. Hemans’s project for the poetess, then, is the preservation of those doomed homes through song and story—she envisions women poets as the keepers of a threatened tradition, bardic figures charged with the creation of a feminine epic that would keep the memory, if not the reality, of their idyllic homes alive.

Ironically, however, Hemans’s positioning of women in an inherently performative role undermines the individual poetess’s creative stability. Along with war and conquest, Hemans, based upon her own frustrating experiences with celebrity, envisions fame as destructive to a home in which the creative talents necessary to the survival of the bardic poetess and her art are nurtured by affection. By taking on their performative duties, Hemans’s poetesses at once ensure the survival of their idyllic memories and their own destruction—they sing themselves to death in order to maintain the tradition of feminine self-sacrifice and heroism that lies at the core of the feminine epic.50

In contrast to Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the subject of Chapter 2, saw the feminine poetic experience not as a site of potential triumph even in the face of despair, but rather as one cause of despair itself. Landon’s own confrontations with fame in her experience with vicious rumors attacking her social and sexual behavior. In part, these rumors were a backlash against her tremendous popularity, and were fueled by Landon’s unconventional life choices, but their effects on Landon’s life were increasingly reflected in her poetry.

50 I am using a very loose definition of “epic” here, which I expand upon in the Hemans chapter itself. In short, I am using “epic” as a kind of shorthand for both long poems and poems that deal with events of national or international importance.
Landon’s wild popularity in the 1820s and early 1830s did not lead to the kind of lasting adoration that Hemans’s poetry inspired, but it was the myth of the pretty, ruined, and doomed Landon that most influenced the popular image of the tragic sentimental poetess. Landon imagined the poetess as a gifted individual whose talents set her apart from society. Landon’s poetesses, who have never had the kind of domestic idyll in their pasts that Hemans imagines for her gifted women, come to rely upon their fame for emotional sustenance. But in Landon’s formulation, that reliance upon fame eats away at the very talent that sustains the poetess, until she becomes little more than a hollow shell of herself. Landon’s vision of the poetess is a grim one, and when she herself died under mysterious circumstances at the age of 36, the story of the poetess as she imagined it came to be read as her own autobiography.

Although Alfred Tennyson is, obviously, not a female poet, Chapter 3, “The Victorian Poet ‘Lady-Clad,’” argues that his early career is best understood if we see him as a male poetess. Although his early poetry, from Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830) through In Memoriam (1850), is generally considered, with the exception of The Princess (1847), to be among his best work, much of the existing criticism on Tennyson fails to adequately address the literary context of these poems. They are usually read as responses to the work of Keats and Shelley, and the ways in which poems like “Mariana” or “The Lady of Shalott” adopt the themes and imagery of the poetry of sentimental poetesses has been all but ignored.

However, it is as a sentimental poet, a male writer in a feminine tradition, that Tennyson earned the wide popularity he had achieved by the time he was named Poet Laureate in 1850. Tennyson’s adoption of a feminine voice and position in “Mariana”
and “The Lady of Shalott,” both of which wrestle with the relationship between domestic spaces and women’s creativity, as well as with the seemingly inevitable transformation of the female artist into art, is echoed in the rhetoric of his writings against literary celebrity. In much of this early writing, and throughout his career, Tennyson appears to imagine himself in a feminine subject position relative to his critics and his audiences. These writings led many of his contemporaries to castigate him as a feminizing force in English poetry, which may have at least partially inspired Tennyson’s depiction of the hyper-feminine Prince in *The Princess* (1847).

*The Princess*, with its heteroglossic narration, indefinable genre, and inversions of gender norms, is a text that at once challenges and upholds the structures of early Victorian domesticity. The transvestite Prince’s incursions into Princess Ida’s separatist feminist university represent the male poet’s attempts to find a place within feminine poetic discourses, while the poem’s conclusion, with its apparent affirmation of hegemonic gender roles, actively celebrates literary androgyny, even as the poem itself explores the possibilities of men as feminine poets.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s confrontations with the legacies of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon form the foundation of Chapter 4. Although Barrett Browning’s career was far more similar to Tennyson’s than to that of either of her female predecessors, she nevertheless felt herself at once indebted to and disappointed by their lives and poetics. In her poetic responses to their deaths and in her correspondence with other women writers, particularly Mary Russell Mitford, Barrett Browning sought to negotiate her own position relative to Hemans’s and Landon’s feminine legacies. Although she began her career writing ballads in the sentimental and medievalist mode,
similar to those by Hemans and Landon, and published in many of the same arenas (i.e., annuals), Barrett Browning eventually began to rework her ideas of the poetess into the politically engaged proponent of modernity that we see embodied in the title character of *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

*Aurora Leigh* is the culmination of Barrett Browning’s ongoing attempt to negotiate space for an overtly political, educated, and yet feminine poet, and presents the feminine poetic voice as a kind of hegemonic constraint for the female writer. While remaining hyper-conscious of the limitations of women’s art in a literary world dominated by men, and committing some of the same sins that we see in earlier poetry (most notably, perhaps, in the character of Marian Erle, who functions as the text’s secondary poetess and who is ultimately rendered into a mute icon of the sacred feminine), Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh* transforms the sentimental poetess into a triumphant visionary.

In the end, I hope this project accomplishes two things. First, I hope to divorce the concept of the poetess from the female body by recognizing the ways in which a male writer can adapt his voice to speak in a feminine subject position, even as women writers are recreating or redefining that position. Second, I hope this project will continue to pique scholarly interest in the writings of Hemans and Landon, and through them their sentimental contemporaries, as part of a larger attempt to undermine what McGann describes as a “pre-reading” of sentimental literature.\(^\text{51}\) In so doing, not only will this project contribute to a more nuanced view of the nineteenth century as a whole, but it

\(^{51}\) In *The Poetics of Sensibility*, McGann argues, “We tend not to ‘read’ this poetry, we have tended not to do so for almost one hundred years. But it seems to me that we don’t ‘read’ it because we think we already know it. So we pre-read it instead, if we turn to it at all, or we mine it for information. But the writing as such remains largely unencountered” (4).
will, ideally, open a dialogue evaluating contemporary definitions of literary, artistic, and feminist value.
CHAPTER 1

“Spells O’er Memory”: Felicia Hemans as Bardic Poetess

Mourn rather for that holy Spirit,
Sweet as the spring, as ocean deep;
For Her, who, ere her summer faded,
Has sunk into a breathless sleep.

After Felicia Hemans’s death in 1835, William Wordsworth added the epitaph above as the penultimate stanza to his “Extempore Effusion on the Death of James Hogg.” This portmanteau elegy, with its tributes to no fewer than six of Wordsworth’s friends and acquaintances to die in the years between 1832 and 1835, devotes only this one stanza to Hemans, but in these four lines, Wordsworth anticipates the myth that would come to surround her. Hemans, whose poetry both celebrated and questioned the centrality of domestic spaces to the lives of individuals, was seen in Great Britain and in the United States as a kind of modern-day Vesta, a poetic goddess of hearth and home, whose premature death enshrined her as an angel of the house some twenty-five years before Coventry Patmore created the Angel in the house for Victorian audiences.

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1 The others are, in order of their appearance in the poem, Hogg (“The Ettrick Shepherd”), Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and George Crabbe.
2 It is worth noting that Wordsworth himself both underscored and undermined public expectations of Hemans’s femininity in an 1837 note he added to the text of “Extempore Effusion,” presumably after reading H. F. Chorley’s Memorials of Mrs. Hemans. In this lengthy note, Wordsworth reminisces about his brief acquaintance with Hemans. Somewhat in keeping with the tenor of his relationship with Hemans, Wordsworth’s recollection of their interaction is less the musing of a friend than the dismay of a father at what he perceives as her lack of fundamental femininity, referring to her as a “spoilt child of the world” whose talent and youthful beauty had conspired to leave her “totally ignorant of housewifery,” an ignorance which he himself tried to correct. Wordsworth was apparently responding to one of Hemans’s letters, in which she describes on encounter with the “great poet”:

Imagine, my dear —, a bridal present made by Mr. Wordsworth to a young lady in whom he is much interested—a poet’s daughter, too! You will be thinking of a broach in the shape of a lyre, or a butterfly-shaped aigrette . . . nothing of the sort, but a good, handsome, substantial, useful-
This public perception of “Mrs. Hemans” overshadowed later readings of her poetry to such an extent that her posthumous audience came to see her as “a lady rather than a woman, & so much rather than a poetess,” a reading that gradually eliminated the less conventional traces of the wildly popular and critically acclaimed poet(ess) whose work dominated the British and American literary scenes in the 1820s. What was left behind by well-intentioned memorialists like Wordsworth was an uncomplicatedly conservative, unfailingly feminine, and endlessly sweet vision of a woman poet. These readings are profoundly alarming, as they tend to disregard the violence and horror that run throughout her poetry. That her poetry constantly returns to the battlefield, to violated bodies, and to infanticidal mothers seems to have been either overlooked or disregarded by her posthumous readers, and yet to understand her conception of the poetess, which hinges upon the relationship between loss of home and memorialization, we must first recognize the ways in which Hemans’s poetry at once embraces and resists domesticity as fundamental to the feminine experience.

In disregarding the darkness inherent in much of Hemans’s poetry, her complicated relationship to domesticity has been elided and her poetry framed merely as a celebration of the “domestic affections.” I suggest instead that we read her poetry as forming a kind of “feminine epic,” in which the experiences of women, children, and looking pair of scales, to hang up in her storeroom. “For you must be aware, my dear Mrs. Hemans,” said he to me very gravely, “how necessary it is occasionally for every lady to see things weighed herself.” . . . I looked as good as I could, and, happily for me, the poetic eyes are not very clear-sighted, so that I believe no suspicion derogatory to my notability of character has yet flashed upon the mighty master’s mind. Indeed, I told him that I looked upon scales as particularly graceful things, and had great thoughts of having my picture taken with a pair in my hand.


other feminized subjects become central to concepts of cultural identity within a trans-national and trans-historical “empire of the heart.” Even as her poetry enshrines certain proto-imperial British values, particularly in its valuation of maternal love and domestic harmony, Hemans also exposes the suffering, brutality, and courage that she sees as central to the experiences of all women. In her poetry, the home becomes not only a female-centered universe, but a universe constantly threatened by its own vulnerable position in a patriarchal society.4 Whether destroyed by the state, by death, or by inconstant husbands, the homes of Hemans’s poetry are almost always lost to her speakers, if they ever existed at all, demonstrating how the apparent perfection of superficially idyllic domestic space can be undercut by both internal and external factors rooted in the structures of masculine epic.5

Masculine epic is, unlike Hemans’s feminine epic, nation-centered, rather than home-centered, with a focus on the political, economic, and, occasionally, religious importance of warfare. Hemans locates the importance of war and epic struggle in the individual spaces of the home, spaces metonymically aligned with the traditional sufferings of women and children during times of war. The heroic conventions of war, conquest, and exploration are pervasive in Hemans’s poetry, though nearly always offstage, and through her depiction of those events’ impacts on the home front, her


5 Jerome McGann observes that, “For Hemans, catastrophe is finally what Byron famously called ‘home desolation,’ and world-historical events are important only because they help to recall that fact” (*The Poetics of Sensibility*, 71). Similarly, Anne K. Mellor observes that Hemans’s poetry “emphasizes just how precarious, how threatened, is that [domestic] sphere—by the passage of time, by the betrayals of family members, by its opposition to the dominant ideology of the masculine public sphere, the domain of ambition, military glory, and financial power” (*Romanticism & Gender*, 124). While my readings align with those of McGann and Mellor here, neither explicitly connects Hemans’s “imagination of disaster,” as McGann calls it, with her overarching poetic project. Mellor and McGann both see Hemans engaging with the Burkean beautiful; I suggest that, instead, she is offering a feminine sublime.
oeuvre constitutes a retrieved epic, a “Penelopiad” in which typically masculine epic events such as wars and quests are ignored or deemphasized in favor of an exploration of feminine suffering in the face of multiple domestic betrayals.

For Hemans the voice of the poetess always arises out of these losses or their looming specters, and it is the poetess’s role to ensure that her sufferings, or those of her family, are not forgotten. In this grim celebration of women’s powers of endurance and self-sacrifice, the poetess takes on the role of the bard: a figure tied at once to nostalgia and to cultural preservation. Linked, through the Celtic revival of which Hemans was a part, to the subjugation and stubborn survival of the Welsh people and culture, the bard is an inherently feminized and yet triumphant figure in Hemans’s poetry. Just as the figure of the bard is, ultimately, an elegiac figure, representing a lost or buried culture, Hemans links her poetesses’ artistic production to the experience or the threat of loss of home, self, family, or love, which places her speakers in their feminine or subjugated position(s). Perversely, in Hemans’s ideology of idealized self-sacrifice, it is that feminized position that authorizes the voices of her poet-speakers.

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6 I borrow this term from the title of Margaret Atwood’s 2003 retelling of the experiences of the Odyssey’s Penelope.

7 Here, my reading departs from that of Anne K. Mellor, who argues that in Hemans’s worldview, “the destruction of [domestic] love leaves life without purpose and meaning,” and “all female love finally becomes nought but a memorial, the sign of something lost, of something that no longer exists.” Mellor’s reading devalues the importance of memory, which for Hemans is at once a way of reconciling fame and love, and also a way of preserving hope in the face of destruction. Mellor similarly rejects Hemans’s belief in an afterlife, thereby undermining both Hemans’s faith and, more importantly, the effects that faith has on her poetry’s reconciliation of hope and loss. (Romanticism & Gender, [New York: Routledge, 1993] 128-132.) There can be no songs, no record of the past, and no nostalgia, without the memories that Hemans preserves in her poetry, and memory, for Hemans, is also a record of hope.


9 Indeed, the role of the poet in Hemans’s poetry is in many ways similar to an idea articulated in Shelley’s work, specifically in Julian and Maddalo. There, Maddalo/Byron says, after encountering the
Hemans’s poetesses must, in their bardic role, take on the function of memorialists, preserving the heroic and often tragic struggles of the feminine domestic realm, which are often overlooked in the larger poetic tradition with its dedication to conventionally masculine heroics. The tragic irony of Hemans’s poetess, however, is that even as her voice depends upon the incipient loss of the home, so her stability depends upon the home’s preservation. Thus, the poetess is always already dying, literally embodying through her death the loss that her art is meant to convey. Hemans thus initiates, through her own ambivalent relationship to the performative nature of poetry, which she expresses in her letters and poems that focus on the destructiveness of fame, the transformation of the poetess into an objet d’art. The feminine epic is brought to life only through the poetess’s giving of her own lifeblood.

While a number of critics have identified Hemans’s experimentation with the socio-political consequences of domestic destruction, no one has yet linked her conception of those consequences with her construction of the poetess. Indeed, readings that acknowledge Hemans’s engagement with the literary and socio-political issues of her

poetic madman whose ramblings are the centerpiece of the poem, “Most wretched men / Are cradled into poetry by wrong / They learn in suffering what they teach in song” (lines 544-46). (Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 2nd ed., ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: W. W. Norton, 2002].)

David Rothstein argues that Hemans’s texts “helped to inculcate in her readers in Victorian parlors and schoolrooms throughout the [nineteenth] century . . . a feminine practice of historical awareness, or nostalgic memorialization, that venerated and authorized conservative, chivalric, feminized histories of home and nation” (“Forming the Chivalric Subject: Felicia Hemans and the Cultural Uses of History, Memory, and Nostalgia,” Victorian Literature and Culture 27 [March 1999]: 49-68).

Hemans’s “homes” are not merely the physical structures that constitute houses. Her poetry establishes “home” not as a physical place, but as an idealized space, often one that is not confined by four walls, but is represented by familiar landscapes (in the case of exiles) or intimate relationships. In her poetry, the home is the locus of national sentiment, but it can also be the nation itself—the homeland and the home are often identical.

day are still relatively new; over the past thirty years, critics have examined Hemans as a Romantic poetess, a proto-Victorian poetess, an important precursor to a separate tradition of women’s poetics during the nineteenth century, and as a key actor in the “domestication” and sentimentalization of English poetry near the end of the Romantic period. However, despite her gradual return to the literary canon, there has remained a temptation to read Hemans in a contextual vacuum—as a poet unconnected with those around her—or as an artist who exhibits “a substantial case of cultural lag,” whose work is devoted to the ideas and ideals of the eighteenth century, rather than her own. Hemans’s own letters reveal, however, that she was a critically engaged writer and reader, deeply invested in both the Celtic and Germanic influences of British Romanticism, who saw herself as the spiritual heir and aesthetic peer of writers like Mary Tighe, Joanna Baillie, William Wordsworth, and Lord Byron. Further influenced by Germaine de Staël, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and a number of German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian poets, Hemans’s work regularly looks beyond England, to the conventionally “romantic” locations of southern and central Europe, as well as to the fringes of Britain’s burgeoning empire, including India and the North American wilderness, thus expanding her romantic and domestic empire to the farthest reaches of the known world.

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18 Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, 3.
In my exploration of Hemans’s construction of the bardic poetess, I briefly discuss her biography in order to provide a background for my discussion of her public and critical reception and her reactions thereto. By looking at her private correspondence and several poems that deal with the subject of public performance and fame, I show how Hemans aligns public fame with home-destroying events like conquest and death. Then, I turn the ways in which she presents the conflicts of home, fame, and memory in the lives of three key poetess figures in her most important collection, Records of Woman (1828). Taken together, Hemans’s letters and poetry illustrate her belief in the importance of women’s voices and experiences in constructing a narrative of historical events.

**Life and Career**

Felicia Dorothea Browne was launched into a poetic career in 1808, with the publication of her *Poems* and *England and Spain, or Valour and Patriotism*. Though these juvenile publications garnered a very small amount of attention for the fourteen-year-old poet, some of it quite negative, she nevertheless gained enough supporters (and, presumably, enough profit) to encourage the publication of *The Domestic Affections* four years later, just before she married Captain Alfred Hemans, an army officer some years her senior.

Despite her precocious productivity and her belief that her marriage would not hinder her career, Felicia Hemans’s poetic output slowed considerably during the five and a half years of her marriage, no doubt because those years were largely consumed

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19 *England and Spain* was a reflection upon the Peninsular Wars, a campaign that not only involved two of Browne’s three brothers, but her future husband, as well.
20 The 1808 *Poems* not only brought Browne to the attention of Matthew Nicholson and William Stanley Roscoe (the son of the elder poet William Roscoe), who helped enable her later juvenile publications, but also drew the notice of the young Percy Bysshe Shelley, with whom Browne corresponded for a short time until her mother’s intervention ended the correspondence.
with childbearing and, at first, with the challenges of establishing a home.\textsuperscript{21} Fortunately for her future prospects, despite giving birth to five sons in five years\textsuperscript{22} Hemans still found time to compose two longer poems that, like her first volume, caught the attention of some of the most prominent poetic figures of the day. In an oft-quoted letter to John Murray, Lord Byron refers to *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816) as “a good poem—very,”\textsuperscript{23} though he was less pleased with its successor, *Modern Greece*, calling it “good for nothing; written by someone who has never been there, and not being able to manage the Spenser stanza has invented a thing of his [sic] own.”\textsuperscript{24} Aside from his assumption of the author’s masculinity (the poem was published anonymously), however, Byron’s opinion of *Modern Greece* was in the minority, and it was no doubt in large part due to the success of *Modern Greece* that Murray was willing to publish Hemans’s next three major poetic endeavors: her *Translations from Camoëns* (1818), *Tales and Historic Scenes of Life* (1819), and *The Sceptic* (1820).

In 1818, shortly before the birth of their fifth son, Captain Hemans left England for Italy, where he would remain for the rest of his life. Although publically this separation was said to be both mutual and carried out for the benefit of Captain Hemans’s health, while Hemans remained in Britain for both her career and her sons’ education, Harriett Hughes, Hemans’s sister and biographer, notes “it is, however, unfortunately but

\textsuperscript{21} The couple only lived independently for a little over a year. They returned to Wales to live with Hemans’s mother sometime after the birth of their first child.

\textsuperscript{22} Her children were Arthur (b. 1813), George Willoughby (b. 1814/15), Claude Lewis (b. 1816), Henry William (b. 1817), and Charles Isidore (b. 1818), who became moderately famous in his own right as an antiquarian.


\textsuperscript{24} Byron to John Murray, 4 September 1817, *Letters and Journals*, 5:262. Byron’s early respect for Hemans’s poetic abilities seems to have faded quickly. He is uniformly disdainful of her in his later letters, referring to her as “Mrs. Hewoman,” and declaring that “if [she] knit blue stockings instead of wearing them it would be better” (Byron to Murray, 28 September 1820, *Letters and Journals* 7:158.)
too well known, that such were not the only reasons which led to this divided course.”

Although Hughes further claims that the original separation was not meant to be permanent, there can be little doubt that it was, for all intents and purposes, the end of the Hemans’s short marriage.25 While we may speculate as to its effect on her mental and emotional health, the failure of her marriage, as Susan Wolfson points out, ultimately proved beneficial to Felicia Hemans’s literary career.26 With the blow of the separation and the burden of raising five sons alone no doubt cushioned by the presence of Hemans’s mother, sister, and brothers, with whom the couple had been living, the happiest and most productive years of Hemans’s life were those ushered in by the departure of her husband, during which her career exploded in popularity and influence.

The lack of any financial support from Captain Hemans forced Hemans to write and to publish as often as she could in order to support her large family. The necessity of earning money became something of a double-edged sword to her career, as her financial needs precluded her from composing the more nuanced poetry she believed herself capable of producing. Hemans herself was aware of the limitations her financial needs placed upon her career, writing to Rose Lawrence near the end of her life: “It has ever been one of my regrets . . . that the constant necessity of providing sums of money to meet the exigencies of the boys’ education has obliged me to waste my mind in what I consider mere desultory effusions.”27

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26 “This situation,” Wolfson writes, “relieved many of the conflicts usually besetting women writers: with no wifely obligation or husband to obey, with sisters [sic], mother, and brothers to help with the boys and run the home, Hemans had freedom to read, write, and publish.” (“‘Domestic Affections’ and ‘the spear of Minerva’: Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender,” in *Re-Visioning Romanticism*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994], 133.)

While it may not have lived up to her hopes, Hemans’s poetry was undeniably popular. She became a regular contributor to the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1821 and to *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1827, and, by 1823, according to Wolfson, was earning on average at least £200 a year—more than enough to support her large family. Even as she wrote regularly for the periodicals, in which she published her *Lays of Many Lands* and her *Songs of the Cid*, among other stand-alone pieces, Hemans wrote and sold her only drama, *The Vespers of Palermo* (1823), which she followed with the more successful *The Siege of Valencia* (1823) and *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825). After she completed *The Forest Sanctuary*, Hemans also started writing for the annuals, contributing at least ninety-four poems to thirteen different annuals between 1826 and 1832, and Paula Feldman estimates that Hemans may have earned up to £250 from annual contributions alone in a single year (1828).

This productive domestic idyll came to an end, however, with the death of Hemans’s beloved mother, Felicity Browne, in 1827. After Mrs. Browne’s death, the

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28 Paula Feldman claims that by 1831, Hemans was receiving *Blackwood’s* highest rate (£2 per page), which was more than any other contributor, including Sir Walter Scott. (See “The Poet and the Profits,” in *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain [Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan’s Press, 1999], 74.) Wolfson includes in her selected edition of Hemans’s works a letter from Hemans to William Blackwood in 1827 in which she accepts his offer to begin writing for *Blackwood’s*, but only on the condition that she receive her customary rate of 24 guineas per sheet, or approximately £1.11.5 per page. (*Felicia Hemans*, 494-5.)

29 *Felicia Hemans*, xxxvii.

30 *The Vespers of Palermo* failed miserably in its London staging, but was revived to moderate success in Edinburgh thanks to the help of Sir Walter Scott and Joanna Baillie.

31 Prior to the publication of these volumes, Hemans also entered and won several major poetry competitions, for which she was granted fairly substantial sums of money. In 1819, shortly after the publication of *Tales and Historic Scenes of Life*, Hemans won £50 for “Wallace’s Invocation to Bruce” in a competition whose contributors included James Hogg. Two years later, she won the Royal Society of Literature’s £52.50 prize for her “Dartmoor.” Thanks in part to her success in these competitions, Hemans was swiftly established as a respected poetess, whose work garnered critical as well as popular praise.

32 Feldman, “The Poet and the Profits,” 81. Feldman’s number is probably drawn from Andrew Boyle’s *An Index to the Annuals*. Wolfson only says the number is “close to a hundred” (*Felicia Hemans*, xxxviii).

33 Feldman claims that this estimate is “highly conservative . . . based upon the supposition that she received ten pounds from each British annual to which she is known to have contributed in any given year. Her actual remuneration was probably much higher.” (“The Poet and the Profits,” 73n.)
Browne children scattered, Hemans first to Wavertree, near Liverpool, where she hoped to secure better educational opportunities for her boys, and then to Ireland, to be closer to her brother. In the eight years between her mother’s death and her own, Hemans published several more complete volumes, *Records of Woman* (1828) and *Songs of the Affections* (1830), and *Hymns on the Works of Nature, for the Use of Children* (1833), *Scenes and Hymns of Life* (1834), and *National Lyrics, and Songs for Music* (1834). She continued her contributions to periodicals almost up until her death; her last poem was dictated from her deathbed three weeks before she died in May 1835 at the age of 41, leaving behind five grown sons, a massive poetic oeuvre, and an international reputation as “the poetess of the affections.”

Unlike many of her female contemporaries, neither Hemans nor her career ever suffered from the taint of scandal that often plagued independent literary women. While Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Hemans’s only real “rival” for the poetic spotlight in the 1820s and 1830s, was pursued by vicious rumors throughout her career, Hemans maintained a public image of the ideal woman, despite her education, her career, and the well-known separation from her husband, all of which could have provided ample fodder for scandal-mongers. In part, as Paula Feldman suggests, credit for this lack of notoriety belongs to Hemans’s resistance to active public participation in a literary social life. With the exception of the three years she lived in Wavertree, she spent almost the entirety of her adult life in relative seclusion in Wales and Ireland, never venturing to London after the age of twelve. Furthermore, unlike the scandal-hounded Landon, Hemans never lived

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34 This particular text was first published in Boston in 1827 and reprinted in London in 1833.
35 Fortunately for Hemans, her less intimate acquaintances, like Wordsworth, apparently placed the blame for the separation on her husband, and painted Hemans as the victim of an uncaring or profligate spouse.
36 “The Poet and the Profits,” 74.
entirely alone; even after the death of her mother and the subsequent break-up of the Browne household, Hemans was always accompanied in her travels by at least two of her five sons, and, with the exception of the several years spent in Wavertree, usually lived in the vicinity of one of her two surviving brothers. Finally, Hemans’s reputation was closely guarded by her immediate family after the failure of her marriage, and by her friends and remaining family members after her death. (These friends and family members included Hemans’s three biographers, Rose D’Aguilar Lawrence, Henry Fothergill Chorley, and Hemans’s sister Harriett-Mary Hughes (later Owen), each of whom sought, though in admittedly idiosyncratic ways, to promote and protect the poetic and personal reputation that Hemans had established for herself.)

This is not to say that Hemans isolated herself from the literary and political discourses of her day, or that she maintained a truly cloistered existence. Among her many literary acquaintances were William Roscoe, Joanna Baillie, Sir Walter Scott, Mary Russell Mitford, Mary Howitt, and William Wordsworth. Reginald Heber was a highly influential mentor in the early years of her mature career, and she shared a close friendship with Maria Jane Jewsbury until the latter’s untimely death in 1833. The importance of these relationships to her literary career, particularly in its early days, when she relied upon the patronage and mentorship of figures like Roscoe and Heber to encourage and challenge her, cannot be underestimated. More important to both her

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37 Rose Lawrence, responding to a criticism that Hemans had “too partial an affection for one of her boys,—of a fondness which kept him too constantly by her side,” acknowledges that Hemans kept him (presumably Charles, who was only seventeen when she died) with her in part because it afforded some measure of social protection. (Recollections of Mrs. Hemans, in The Last Autumn at a Favorite Residence with Other Poems: and Recollections of Mrs. Hemans, by Hemans and Lawrence [Liverpool: G. & J. Robinson, 1836], 335.)

38 Her younger brother, Claude, died in Canada in 1821.

39 It is interesting to note that, despite their shared status as the most popular poetesses of their day, and though both were regular contributors to the New Monthly Magazine, Hemans never corresponded with Letitia Landon, nor gave any definite indication as to her thoughts on Landon’s life or poetry.
career and her personal life, however, was her intensely close relationship with her mother, brothers, and sister, all of whom helped to enable and support the very public career of this very private woman.  

**Domesticity and Fame**

Because Hemans envisions poetic talent as dependent upon domestic happiness, the intrusion of fame into the domestic sphere represents not merely a threat to the poetess’s reputation, but to her very identity as a poet. By examining Hemans’s reactions to criticism and fame, as expressed in her letters and other “private” writings, we can see how she associates a public life with the loss of domestic happiness and with the threat of exposure. Hemans’s literary status created a great deal of social awkwardness for her, and she imagined herself somewhat at the mercy of her audiences. The frustration she articulates in her letters is also coded into her poetry, and a reading of one such coded poem, “The Sicilian Captive,” alongside the readings of her critical audiences will illustrate the extent to which Hemans saw the feminine poetic position as highly precarious and even deadly in its negotiations of the hostile critical gaze. Her sense of conflict between domestic happiness and fame is reflected in two key poems in which Hemans wrestles with the issue of public fame, “Corinne at the Capitol” and “Woman and Fame,” which provide a deeper understanding of how her views on fame and domesticity intersect with her conception of the poetess as the steward of feminine

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40 See, for example, Wolfson, “The ‘Domestic Affections’ and ‘the spear of Minerva,’” and Ross, “Records of Women: Inscribing Feminine Desire in the Poetics of Affection,” Chapter 8 in *The Contours of Masculine Desire*. Ross writes that “Hemans’s early domestic conditions are most congenial to the making of the most successful female poet of England,” stressing the importance of her family’s support to that success (290).
experience, and the extent to which she views fame as a threat to the bardic role she imagined for the poetess.

Although her reputation, both during her life and after her death, was relatively secure, Hemans’s relationships with her critical and popular audiences were fraught with the conflicts between Hemans’s desire for privacy and her audiences’ access to and expectations of her. Hemans’s responses to her audiences and admirers illustrate her attempts to negotiate—in both her poetry and her life—the public expectations of a successful feminine poet, which tended to blur the distinction between the woman and her work.

At times, it can be difficult to tell whether Hemans’s critics were examining the body of work or the body of the poetess. For example, in an 1828 *Noctes Ambrosianae* dialogue, James Hogg’s “Ettrick Shepherd” declares of Hemans that “it’s no in that woman’s power . . . to write ill; for, when a feeling heart and a fine genius forgather in the bosom o’ a young matron, every line of poetry is like a sad or cheerful smile frae her een, and every poem . . . in ae sense a picture o’ hersell.”41 This conflation of the work with her body, with each line a smile (and thus a personal and intimate gesture directed at the reader), hints at the proprietary nature of Hemans’s fame. Because of the sense of intimacy derived from her work, critics and popular audiences felt a sense of ownership and authority over the poetess, and thus sought only their own vision of her in her work.

In a review of *The Sceptic*, the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* affirms that, as a poet, Hemans “is not only free from every stain, but breathes all moral beauty and loveliness,”42 a compliment that refers less to her poetry than to her character as a

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41 *Noctes Ambrosianae No. XXXIX*, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 23 (November 1828), 629.
woman, and that highlights the level to which morality, beauty, and intimacy were entwined in Hemans’s reputation.

This conflation of the woman and her work was common throughout Hemans’s life, but became far more pronounced following the publication of her letters after her death. When her three biographers—Rose Lawrence in 1835, Henry Fothergill Chorley in 1836, and Harriett-Mary Hughes in 1839—printed those letters, it seems as though the critical audience became even more determined to “prove” Hemans’s femininity, horrified by the witty, flippant, and even sarcastic demeanor she displayed in her correspondence. Chorley’s two-volume *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans* (1836), which printed a wide selection of letters and tended to emphasis Hemans’s wit, drew particularly scathing reviews from publications as wide-ranging as the *Dublin University Magazine* and the *North American Review*, as well as a gentler rebuke from Hughes in her own *Memoir of Mrs. Hemans* (1839).43 The *North American Review*, though pleasantly surprised at Hemans’s tone of “ease, vivacity, and wit,” is nevertheless scandalized by Hemans’s sarcastic approach towards her adoring audiences. “Her good feelings should have repressed the lively sally,” the reviewer says, “even in confidential intercourse with her friends. *Friends will sometimes print.*”44 Though the *North American Review*’s frustration with Hemans clearly stems in some part from her having singled out her American admirers for especial mockery,45 its criticism of the *Memorials* is generally shared by British reviewers—critics on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrate a sense of

43 Lawrence’s *Reminiscences of Mrs. Hemans* is fragmentary at best, and reveals little new information to her readers, in part because Lawrence appears to have given Chorley access to her correspondence with Hemans for his *Memorials*.
45 “We fancy that her American admirers come in for a full share of ridicule... we Americans often make great mistakes that expose us to the derision of distinguished foreigners” (Ibid.).
ownership that interferes with an authentic reading of the poetess; the expectations of the
audience are, for the reviewers, generally more important than the truth of Hemans’s
experience.

Unlike the *North American Review*, which rebukes Hemans directly, the *Dublin
University Magazine*’s review focuses on Chorley, alleging that his choice of letters for
inclusion in his *Memorials* misrepresents Hemans. This review, attributed to W. A.
Butler, is resolute in its identification of Hemans with the characters of her poetry.
Butler’s critique of Chorley rests on the belief that Hemans’s “exterior life was in
harmony with that far profounder and more intimate existence, of which her works are
the portrait and the history,” and that Chorley failed to accurately portray “the poetry of
[her] life” in his *Memorials*. Chorley’s anticipation of this reaction in his observation that
the general public is less willing to accept wit in a woman apparently failed to placate the
disappointed readers of his *Memorials*, who could not reconcile their vision of the
“Poetess of the Affections” with the sharp-witted intellectual displayed in her letters.46
Butler complains:

> The majority of the letters are the letters of any woman of cleverness and
education; . . . they are most injudiciously selected for dissemination, as

presenting in undue prominence a certain portion of the writer’s mind (by no
means the portion with which her admirers will best sympathize) and omitting
that other and more exalted division of her nature in which she was solely or
preeminently herself.47

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47 “The Poetesses of Our Day. Number I—Felicia Hemans,” *Dublin University Magazine* 10 (August
1837): 139-40.
The peculiarity of this complaint from a reader acquainted only with Hemans’s poetry highlights the extent to which her audiences, both during her life and after its close, expected the poet to align exactly with their readings of her work.

This disjunction between Hemans’s social persona and the expectations of her audiences was as obvious when she was alive as it was afterward. Despite Hemans’s attempts to subdue her witty and often-flippant personality in social gatherings, being “wisely unwilling to risk the chance of being confounded with the heartless and satirical, whose laughter comes of disappointment and bitterness,”48 her audiences were often disappointed with her social presence. In a particularly astute observation of Hemans’s social difficulties, Chorley notes her inability “perform” for social audiences, saying, “She had never learned the feignings and prettiness of the world’s manner; nor, on the other hand, did she find it agreeable always to sit upon her throne, as it were, with her book of magic upon her knee, and her wand in her outstretched arm.” He continues that those who expected her to be the living embodiment of her poetry, “to have . . . a moral placarded and paraded upon every chance phrase of the conversation,” were usually thoroughly disappointed by her conversation and mannerisms.49 In other words, her readers, like the reviewers, sought in her the doomed, tragic characters she wrote, or thought she would embody the supposed sweetness of her lyric poetry, and visited her in the hopes of encountering in her personality the persona of the tragic poetess, only to be disappointed when confronted with the reality.

This kind of co-opting of celebrity hardly ceased with the nineteenth century, but given Hemans’s dependence on her poetic success for economic survival, the stakes for

48 Chorley, Memorials, 1:244.
49 Chorley, Memorials, 1:210.
her were necessarily higher than for the average twenty-first-century celebrity hounded by paparazzi and crazed fans. The sacrifice of her privacy was clearly a difficult one—Hemans refers to her fame in tired tones, alluding to her “weary celebrity,” and admits that her fame intensifies her sense of feeling “so alone, so unprotected,”50 while Chorley observes that “few indeed, who have led a life so retired, have been more buzzed about by the insect swarm, who love to make an idle noise in the neighbourhood of the gifted, than Mrs. Hemans.”51

As an outside observer who was nevertheless part of Hemans’s inner circle, Chorley was in a unique position to assess Hemans’s reception outside of critical circles. Hemans herself, however, was keenly aware of the attitudes of her acquaintances, and though she wrote about it with her characteristic dry humor, the letters are always tinged with an equal sense of sadness at the alienation that seemed to dominate her experiences outside of her family circle. From Dublin, for example, she writes to Chorley:

The gentlemen treat me as I suppose they would the muse Calliope, were she to descend among them; that is, with much solemn reverence, and constant allusion to poetry; the ladies every time I happen to speak, look as if they expected sparks of fire, or some other marvelous thing, would proceed from my lips. . . . If I were in higher spirits, I should be strongly tempted to do something very strange amongst them, in order to fulfill the ideas I imagine they entertain of that altogether foreign monster, a Poetess . . .52

In an earlier letter, she articulates a similar feeling, wryly observing that, “people really do take me for a sort of literary ogress, I think, or something like the sailor’s definition of

50 Hemans to ?, no date, in Chorley, Memorials, 2:11-12.
51 Chorley, Memorials, 1:135-36.
52 Hemans to Chorley, August 1832, in Chorley, Memorials, 2:258.
an epicure, ‘a person who can eat anything.’” These associations with monstrosity underscore the tentative balance between femininity and a chimerical hybridity that a poetess with Hemans’s levels of success faced. She is clearly aware, in her letters, of the risks associated with a woman’s public career, and the ease with which she could be ruined—financially, morally, and socially—for the slightest transgression, and despite her playful threats of doing “something very strange,” clearly felt stifled by the various and inconsistent roles she saw she was expected to play.

Thus, while she never regretted nor doubted the existence of her poetic abilities, in Hemans’s experience, fame denoted an always-public life surrounded by the constant threat of notoriety and monstrosity. Fame brought Hemans into a constant social spotlight after she left Wales and, more importantly, the domestic circle of her family. That her first real experience with the challenges of fame coincided with her first real foray into adult domesticity, following her move with her sons to Wavertree in 1828, undoubtedly linked the trials of fame and the loss of her prior domestic happiness in Hemans’s mind. Her letters from this period and afterward consistently reveal her discomfort with the ways in which readers and acquaintances anticipated their experience of her company. At Wavertree during what Chorley, quoting Charles Lamb, referred to as the “Albumean Persecution,” in which the owners of autograph albums would descend on popular writers in the hopes of collecting a signature, Hemans was constantly pursued by devotees of her poetry in search of autographs and snippets of original verse for their albums.

Hemans’s descriptions of the purveyors of the albums read like criticisms of modern-day paparazzi: they are both intrusive and apparently without conscience. Chorley describes Hemans’s reaction to the “thoroughgoing and coarse perseverance” of

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53 Hemans to ?, no date, in Chorley, Memorials, 1.258.
her admirers as a kind of patient martyrdom, driven by “the natural kindness of her heart,” but he also acknowledges her occasional outlet of frustrated whimsy, as when she asked a friend “to procure her a dragon to be kept in her court-yard.” Similarly, she fantasized about punishing the importunities of her admirers:

They had an Album with them, . . . absolutely an Album! You had scarcely left me to my fate . . . when the little woman with the inquisitorial eyes informed me that the tall woman with the superior understanding . . . was ambitious of possessing my autograph, and out leaped in lightning forth ‘the Album.’ A most evangelical and edifying book it is truly; so I, out of pure spleen, mean to insert in it something as strongly savouring of the Pagan miscellany as I dare. O the ‘pleasures of Fame!’

Even while traveling, Hemans could not find relief from her audience. In the summer of 1830, she visited the Lake District, where she met Wordsworth. While spending several weeks near Lake Windermere, she wrote of being visited by a party of Americans who “came and stayed all the evening with me, and I was obliged to play l’aimable, and receive compliments, &c., &c., &c.” The self-deprecating humor of this comment and her exasperation with her visitors is made more explicit in a similar letter to John Lodge written several days later: “Think of my being found out by American tourists in Dove’s Nest! . . . they brought credentials I could not but acknowledge. The young ladies, as I feared, brought an Album concealed in their shawls, and it was leveled at me like a

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54 Hemans to ?, no date, in Chorley, Memorials, 1:218.
56 Hemans to ?, 11 July 1830, in Chorley, Memorials, 2:123. Hemans signs the letter “your very faithful cousin,” but Chorley does not provide us with her cousin’s name.
pocket-pistol before all was over.” Understanding that the fame she relied upon for survival required the sacrifice of the privacy she coveted, the metaphorical “pocket-pistol” becomes rather less hyperbolic than it first appears; the album in question represents a kind of veiled threat whereby Hemans must comply with her guests’ desires for immediate creative activity, lest those guests feel slighted and carry with them reputation-ruining tales of unkindness or rudeness, thus risking Hemans’s popularity (and, therefore, her salability) with the American reading public.

“The Sicilian Captive,” read through the lens of Hemans’s frustration with her audiences, is a subtle illustration of Hemans’s sense of the precarious nature of the position the poetess had to maintain. First published in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1825), and then later republished as one of the miscellaneous poems attached to *Records of Woman*, “The Sicilian Captive” is the story of a Sicilian girl taken prisoner by Viking raiders who then sings herself to death in their hall. Like many of Hemans’s poems, “The Sicilian Captive” operates on multiple levels. While it functions on one level as an encoded rape narrative, and on another as a supposedly straightforward historical narrative, “The Sicilian Captive” is also an exploration of the position of the unprotected female poet before the eyes of an unforgivingly critical audience.

The version in *Records of Woman* begins with an epigraph from Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s “Unknown Female Head” (1823), which prefigures the sufferings and the fate of Hemans’s captive:

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57 Hemans to Lodge, 20 July 1830, in Chorley, *Memorials*, 2:128. It is unclear whether this is the same event referred to in the earlier letter, or if Hemans had simply fallen into a haven for roving American tourists.

58 Hemans’s use of one of Landon’s poems in her own work is a tacit acknowledgement that she was familiar with the other poet’s work. Other than her occasional borrowings for epigraphic purposes, however, Hemans never directly mentions “L. E. L.” in her writings.
I have dreamt thou wert
A captive in thy hopelessness; afar
From the sweet home of thy young infancy,
Whose image unto thee is as a dream
Of fire and slaughter; I can see thee wasting
Sick for thy native air.  

Although “An Unknown Female Head” was published in the New Monthly Magazine some two years before “The Sicilian Captive” appeared there, Hemans’s decision to add the epigraph to the later version of the poem may indicate her awareness of Landon’s suffering in front of a harsh audience. While “The Sicilian Captive” predates Landon’s first round of scandals by about a year, the later addition of the epigraph suggests that Hemans was aware of the poem’s applicability to Landon’s situation and added the poem in silent solidarity with her counterpart.

The theme of captive exile is a particularly poignant one for the Romantic period, for male as well as female writers, and Hemans and Landon, in particular, return repeatedly to the image of the female captive. In this poem, as in “Arabella Stuart,” which I will discuss in the next section, Hemans empowers her female prisoners to not only speak for themselves but to resist their captors through the employment of their artistic gifts, albeit in ultimately self-destructive ways.

“The Sicilian Captive” begins not with its title character, but with a frame narrative depicting celebrations in the hall of Viking warriors returning from the successful conquest of Sicily. Only after three quatrains describing the vivid revelry in

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59 Poetical Works. (London: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, 1914), 435. All subsequent references to Hemans’s poems will be to this text.
the halls is the captive introduced: “They had summon’d a softer voice to sing / And a captive girl, at the warriors’ call, / Stood forth in the midst of that frowning hall” (lines 14-16). The “frowning hall” highlights the potential hostility of the captive’s audience, and the threat inherent in their “request” for entertainment.

The exposure of the girl, whose “fragile frame / Seem’d struck with the blight of some inward flame” speaks immediately to a loss of privacy and the sense, recorded in Hemans’s letters, of being at the mercy of a potentially hostile audience. Similarly, the Sicilian girl’s response to her captor’s request that she perform for them is a deliberate echo of the response of the Israelites to their Babylonian captors in Psalm 137:60

They bid me sing of thee, mine own, my sunny land! of thee!
Am I not parted from thy shores by the mournful-sounding sea?
Doth not thy shadow wrap my soul?—in silence let me die,
In a voiceless dream of thy silvery founts, and thy pure deep sapphire sky;
How should thy lyre give here its wealth of buried sweetness forth?
Its tones, of summer’s breathings born, to the wild winds of the north? (lines 41-46)

Hemans’s use of the Babylonian Captivity as the central myth behind the captive’s song reiterates the structure of Hemans’s larger project. Tying the suffering of the Sicilian girl to the sufferings of the Israelites further universalizes the history of the feminine experience of domestic loss, which Hemans is determined to illustrate as anything but a

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60 Cf. Psalm 137:1-4:
By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
We hanged our harps on the willows in the midst thereof,
For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?
history of silence. Although she is tempted to die with her memories of her homeland left unshared, unspoiled, and intact, the captive capitulates instead and sings out her vivid memories of Sicily, which enables a kind of pyrrhic victory over her captors.

Rather than use her vocal power to curse those who have stolen her away, as the Israelite captives do, the Sicilian Captive seeks to replicate, if only for a moment, the beauty she has lost. She does so in part to preserve not only her own memories, but to plant in her vanquishers’ minds the image of what they have destroyed:

... my spirit shall awake,

And thro’ the mists of death shine out, my country! for thy sake!

That I may make thee known, with all the beauty and the light,

And the glory never more to bless thy daughter’s yearning sight! (lines 47-50)

She sings of the glory of “blue heavens,” ocean waves, and the scents of the gardens and the orchards. Her description is laden with sensory images, moving from sight to smell to sound and then back to the elegiac mood of the first two stanzas. These images of Sicilian landscapes are meant to evoke her “home” in the broader sense Hemans uses throughout her poetry. Again, here, “home” is not merely the physical site of the house, but the idealized space in which that house exists—a space that includes landscape, culture, and family relationships.

Before she evades her captors by dying, the girl defies them in her illustration of the cultural and climatic superiority of her southern culture. In her passionate description of Sicily, she subtly denigrates the place to which she has been removed—the italicized

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61 See Psalm 137:8-9:
O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.
here of the first stanza of her song (“How should thy lyre give here its wealth of buried sweetness forth?”) suggests a tone of derision in comparison to the natural climate of the lyre. She compares the “summer’s breathing” that characterize the lyre’s sweetness to the “wild winds of the north,” and in her suggestion that the lyre cannot produce its same music in the north, she further implies that the music of the Vikings lacks all the power and sweetness of her own.62

The captive’s song is not only set apart from the frame narrative by its long lines and its balladic rhythms, but by her persistent use of caesuras, which give the song a halting and reluctant quality that the frame narrative employs only in its description of the girl. The repeated use of caesura in connection with the captive reinforces both the reluctance of her performance and the fragility of her physical being. Significantly, her song breaks most often in its final stanza, after several stanzas of fast-flowing description, thus the song, like the girl, breaks down in its final sestet.

The description of the Sicilian girl is at once vague and evocative. Hemans gives impressions of a “proud pale brow” crowned by “waves of her dark hair,” while her “mournful eyes” hold “the clear midnight of southern skies” (an image that, admittedly, requires a great deal of liberal interpretation to make sense). Most importantly, however, is Hemans’s description of the girl’s “deep flush . . . like a crimson haze,” which she notes is “no soft hue caught from the south-wind’s breath, / But a token of fever, at strife with death” (lines 25-28). In short, the girl is already ill, her condition no doubt worsened by the grief of her brutal kidnapping, Hemans tells us, on what was to be her wedding-

62 Note, however, that Hemans makes no such claim—in fact, the frame narrative takes great care to highlight the music, poetry, and stern beauty of the war-hardened Norse: “Their songs of the sword and the olden time, / And a solemn thrill, as the harp-chords rung, / Had breath’d from the walls where the bright spears hung” (lines 10-12).
day. It is in fact this grief-fueled illness that allows the girl to rob her captors of their
triumph by dying at their feet, literally singing herself to death before them in a
spectacular suicide-by-song. In so doing, she denies them the use of her body as an object
of entertainment—they can no longer force her to perform musically or sexually for their
pleasure. Though the text gives no overt evidence of the sexual fate of the captive girl,
the brutal fate suffered by women in wartime and the traditional connection between
public performance and “fallen” sexuality allow us to recognize the ways in which rape is
encoded throughout this poem.

Her hair unbound, the captive slumps back against the wall, collapsing in death
even as she escapes her imprisonment and potential enslavement. Throughout her œuvre,
Hemans returns to the sexual signifier of unbound hair, and her image of the captive is
more than usually explicit: “There came a mist o’er her eye’s wild fire, / And her dark
rich tresses, in many a fold / Loos’d from their braids, down her bosom roll’d” (lines 78-
80). With her hair unbound and her body slumped in apparent defeat, the captive’s
physical form seems to indicate sexual submission, a macabre reimagining of the girl’s
thwarted wedding night. However, by singing herself into death, the captive has
triumphed over her captors and, as her song reveals, imaginatively returned to her home a
free woman. 63 Indeed, I would argue that she manages her escape twice—her song first to

63 When I presented a version of this reading at the British Women Writers Association Annual
Conference in 2008, Dr. Roxanne Eberle suggested that the captive might not, in fact, be dead. Rather, it
could be her creative powers—the minstrel, but not the woman—that dies in the Norse hall. This reading is
strongly supported by the sexual submission of the poem’s final image of the captive. In other words, if the
minstrel (her imagination or poetic genius) is dead while her body still survives, that submission is all that
will remain of her. She will no longer have the only escape available to her: her music. While this is a
provocative and intriguing interpretation of the poem’s ending, I have decided to remain with my original
interpretation, but feel that the reading suggested by Dr. Eberle’s comments is worth mentioning here.
allows her an emotional and imaginative return to her longed-for home, and her death enables the physical escape that she needs most desperately of all.  

Read as a commentary on the precarious position of the female poet, “The Sicilian Captive” is more than a little disturbing. It illustrates the extent to which fame in and of itself is a hollow achievement, one in which the artist becomes a constant performer, expected, like the Sicilian Captive, to perform for an audience whose reception of that performance is decidedly double-edged. Should the artist fail to deliver the kind of display expected, the audience could easily turn and punish her for her betrayal. That, for Hemans, is fame—life as a spectacle, as an object constantly at the center of a potentially punitive attention that can ultimately destroy even the gift that made the artist famous.

The underlying fear of monstrosity and the pressures of public performance, as indicated here, contrast sharply with Hemans’s experience of an idyllic home life wherein her mother, sister, brothers, and sons enthusiastically supported her creative endeavors. Since the loss of that home life in the late 1820s coincided for her with exposure to the demands of fame when she moved her family to Wavertree, it seems clear from both her poetry and her letters that Hemans associates a nurturing home environment with the ability to sustain feminine creativity.

While the “inconveniences of celebrity,” particularly the constant intrusions of autograph-seeking admirers, bothered Hemans intensely, she was more deeply troubled by the idea that her fame, following the death of her mother and the dispersal of the family household, brought little pleasure to anyone around her. In a letter to Mary

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64 A similar image of death as escape and triumph appears in Hemans’s Welsh Melodies. In “The Dying Bard’s Prophecy,” the speaker, having been mortally wounded in Edward I’s (apocryphal) massacre of the bards, envisions the slaughter as an ultimately pyrrhic victory, the bards’ deaths having, paradoxically, ensured the survival of their race by freeing them from Saxon chains.

65 Hemans to ?, 21 August 1829, in Chorley, Memorials, 2:51.
Howitt, Hemans says, “the pleasures of fame to a woman must ever be reflected,” and, in a similar letter to Mary Russell Mitford, circa 1828 or 1829, Hemans expands this statement, saying “fame can only afford reflected delight to a woman. Do you know that I often think of you, and the happiness you must feel in being able to run to your father and mother, with all the praise you receive.” Despite the potentially infantilizing nature of this image, it seems that Hemans envies not only Mitford’s joy at praise from her parents, but at Mitford’s ability to bring joy to her parents through her receipt of critical praise. For Hemans, presumably, one of the great joys of living with her mother had been her ability to gladden their home with her family’s genuine delight in her successes. In Hemans’s worldview, then, home is not necessarily the place of stifling confinement that some feminist critics might make it out to be, but rather a place wherein the besieged artist can find a measure of peace from the demands of fame in the outside world.

The contrast between that nurturing domesticity and the pressures of fame is articulated explicitly in two later poems of the 1820s: “Corinne at the Capitol” and “Woman and Fame.” “Corinne at the Capitol,” first published in the Literary Souvenir for 1827 under the title “Corinna at the Capitol,” has proven, for feminist critics, to be among the most vexed (and vexing) poems in Hemans’s oeuvre because its blatant celebration of female triumph seems to fall flat at the poem’s end, when Hemans, apparently inexplicably, shifts from a vision of artistic glory to what appears to be a trite moral about the value of domestic duties. However, as a closer reading will illustrate, this shift is neither so abrupt nor so disruptive, as it seems upon first reading.

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66 Hemans to Howitt, 11 December 1828, in Chorley, Memorials, 1:240.
67 Hemans to Mitford, no date, in Chorley, Memorials, 1:159.
68 The poem was retitled in 1830 and republished with Songs of the Affections.
The apparently minor revision of the poem’s title and protagonist’s name from Corinna to Corinne actually denotes a profound shift in the implied social and historical context. The Corinna of the original title refers to not to the title character of Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne, ou Italie*, but to the ancient Greek Corinna, the Boeotian poet believed to have been a contemporary of Pindar’s.\(^{69}\) Using Corinna as the model for her title character allows Hemans to dislocate from the present to a potentially distant time as well as a distant place.\(^{70}\)

The revised title, of course, brings us back to the present and to de Staël’s fictional improvisatrice. Like Corinna before her and Hemans after her, de Staël’s Corinne is a celebrated literary figure, an Italian-English improvisatrice who falls in love with Lord Nelvil, an English gentleman who eventually rejects her in favor of her beautiful, demure English half-sister. Hemans, like many other sensitive and intelligent women of her day, was profoundly affected by de Staël’s novel and identified with its protagonist;\(^{71}\) according to Chorley, Hemans wrote “C’est moi” beside a particularly moving passage in her copy of the text.\(^ {72}\)

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\(^{69}\) While she is best remembered for the legend that claimed she defeated Pindar in a poetic competition (some sources say she defeated him five times), Corinna’s poetry, like that of Hemans, engages mythological themes to comment on contemporary concerns.

\(^{70}\) Though her Corinna is not Greek but Italian, the antiquity implied by the use of the name may indicate an ancient Roman, rather than a contemporary Italian, setting.

\(^{71}\) Wolfson lists Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett, George Eliot, and Harriet Beecher among de Staël’s other devoted readers; she does not mention Letitia Landon, but Landon, who translated Corinne’s speeches into verse for a new English edition, was arguably more influenced by the story than any of her peers. (See Wolfson, *Felicia Hemans*, 460.)

\(^{72}\) *Memorials*, 1.304n. The passage in question is: “De toutes mes facultés la plus puissante, c’est la faculté de souffrir. Je suis née pour le bonheur, mon caractère est confiant, mon imagination est animée; mais la peine excite en moi je ne sais quelle impétuosité qui peut trouble ma raison ou me donner de la mort. Je vous le répète encore, ménagez-moi; la gaieté, la mobilité ne me servent qu’en apparence: mais il y a dans mon âme des abîmes de tristesse dont je ne pouvais me défendre qu’en me préservant de l’amour.” (“Of all my faculties, the most powerful is the faculty of suffering. I was born for happiness, my character is confident, my imagination is inspired, but pain excites in me I know not what impetuousity that can disturb my reason, or kill me. I repeat to you again, be caring of me; gaiety, mobilité [resilience] serve me only in appearance: but there are in my soul abysses of sadness against which I cannot protect myself...”)
Thus, the shift from calling the heroine of her poem after Corinna and calling her after de Staël’s Corinne is also a shift away from the distancing effect Hemans often employs in her work. While this poem, like de Staël’s novel, is set in Rome, the modern setting and characters suggested by the name “Corinna” bring the story closer to home, and closer to Hemans’s own experience, than the subtle implication of antiquity hinted at by the original use of the name Corinna. The result is that “Corinne at the Capitol” cannot be read as a depiction of the pageantry of the pagan world, but rather a triumph closer to that which Petrarch and Tasso expected to receive, a contemporary celebration of poetic apotheosis.

“Corinne at the Capitol” troubles feminist critics because it seems to undermine its own glittering vision of female triumph with its concluding claim for the superior happiness of the home-bound wife. Angela Leighton, for example, questions the effectiveness and sincerity of the final shift, pointing out how the poem “has gorged itself on the spectacle of the admired, successful woman” before it turns to its seemingly trite and conventional ending: “Before [Hemans] issues her punishing moral at the end, [she] writes five stanzas of pure appreciation of Corinne’s creative power.” Leighton suggests that Hemans’s interpretation of de Staël reflects an inability on Hemans’s part to reconcile her own ambitions with the social pressures of feminine respectability.

Leighton mistakes Hemans’s central ambivalence for a kind of moral “tidying-up,” a way of chastising the female artist and containing her threatening power, and the

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except by keeping myself away from love.”). Quoted in Wolfson, *Felicia Hemans*, 460. The English translation appears to be Wolfson’s own.  
73 *Writing Against the Heart*, 33.  
74 “Respectability haunts her poems about women artists, yet ‘admiration,’ which is precisely the inspiration and addiction of the Corinna story, is often the response elicited from her readers.” (*Writing Against the Heart*, 32).
poem’s for conclusion a renunciation of poetry in favor of domestic bliss—something that, as Leighton correctly points out, Hemans never attempted. However, abjuring fame, here, is not a renunciation of poetry, nor is Hemans’s claim for the superiority of domestic affection a chastisement of the triumphant Corinne. Rather, the concluding celebration of humble domestic happiness is Hemans’s acknowledgement of her debt to her nostalgic memories of domesticity, from which she draws inspiration and support. Even the epigraph Hemans attaches to the poem, also a quotation from de Staël (“Women must realize that there is in this career very little of conditions that are equal in worth to the most obscure life of a beloved wife and happy mother”), does not advocate abandoning the glory of the “crown of literature” in favor of the “obscure life of a beloved wife and happy mother.” In its complete form, the epigraph does suggest that glory is incompatible with domestic repose, but Hemans eliminates that passage from her own version of the quotation, instead choosing to focus on the superiority of domestic happiness, rather than the idea that a woman must renounce it to achieve glory. In other

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75 “Certainly in Felicia’s life there is no evidence to suggest that she was willing to relinquish her poetry to save her marriage.” (Writing Against the Heart, 32.) Of course, this reading implies that it was Hemans’s poetry that broke up the marriage—a suspicion generally held by feminist critics, but one that is based entirely upon supposition.

76 “Les femmes doivent penser . . . qu’il est dans cette carrier bien peu de sorts qui puissant valoir la plus obscure vie d’une femme aimée et d’une mere heureuse.”) From De l’influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations (1796 ; translated into English as A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and Nations [1798]).

77 Wolfson quotes the passage in its entirety, and offers what appears to be her own translation: “En étudiant le petit nombre de femmes qui ont de vrais titres à la gloire, on verra que cet effort de leur nature fut toujours aux dépens de leur bonheur. Après avoir chanté les plus douces leçons de la morale et de la philosophie, Sapho se précipita du haut du rocher de Leucade; Élisabeth, après avoir dompté les ennemis de l’Angleterre, périt victim de sa passion pour le comte d’Essex. Enfin, avant d’entrer dans cette carrière de gloire, soit que trône des Césars, ou les couronnes du génie littéraire en soient le but, les femmes doivent penser que, pour la gloire même, il faut renoncer au Bonheur et au repos de la destine de leur sexe: et qu’il est dans cette carrier bien peu de sorts qui puissant valoir la plus obscure vie d’une femme aimée et d’une mere heureuse.” (In studying the small number of women who have true titles to glory, one will see that this effort of their nature was always at the expense of their happiness. After having sung the sweetest lessons of morality and philosophy, Sappho threw herself from the top of the rock of Leucade; Elizabeth, after having conquered the enemies of England, perished victim of her passion for the earl of Essex. Finally, before entering on this career of glory, where the goal be the throne of the Caesars or the crowns of
words, for Hemans, if not for de Staël, a life of solitary fame is inferior to a life of companionate domesticity, but she does not advocate replacing one with the other.

As Nanora Sweet implies in her reading, the poem’s turn is not as unexpected as it first seems—the poem’s metrics reinforce its oppressive vision of fame. “Corinne at the Capitol” employs catalectic trochaic tetrameter—seven syllables a measure, rather than the standard eight, the final, unaccented beat being dropped—in six eight-line stanzas. The eight-line stanzas are visually evocative of the ottava rima stanza form favored by Byron in his late satires, but Hemans eschews this complicated form in favor of a series of four rhyming couplets. The rhymes highlight the poem’s persistently regular meter, which breaks only once in the entire poem. The first and only metrical variation comes in the third stanza’s “all the bright air as it floats” (line 22), where the unexpected spondee of “bright air” allows the pyrrhic “as it” to ease down to the final stressed beat of the line. This minor deviation is the only moment in the entire 48-line poem that does not follow the set meter, which imposes an almost militaristic regularity upon the text.

The strict metric regularity reinforces the ways in which the seemingly trite moral of the final stanza has been misread in the context of the rest of the poem. The speaker’s response to Corinne, “Happier, happier far than thou / . . . / She that makes the humblest hearth / Lovely but to one on earth” (lines 45-48) indicates not a conviction of Corinne’s failure as a woman, but a recognition of the unnatural and, at times, painful experiences


[79] Though we could read these lines as “headless” iambics, the poem seems rather more inclined to the tumbling gallop of trochees than the measured pace of iambics. (For this image, I am indebted to Timothy Steele’s All the Fun’s in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Verse [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999], 225-26.)
of social performance that dominate a woman’s experiences of fame. Though crowned with earthly artistic glory, Corinne must surrender her mind and her art to the expectations of her audience. The trochaic measure, with the catalexis at the end of each line creating a strong beat where there would normally be an unaccented syllable, turns the poem into a metrical cage, with the strong beats at either end of each line reinforced by the end rhymes that characterize the couplets that construct each stanza. Thus, like the poem itself, Corinne is limited on all sides, unable to exercise the freedom that Hemans, like her Romantic predecessors, values so highly. The hypothetical other woman’s life is happier than that of Corinne because her goals are simpler and her punishments for failure fewer. She does not have as far to fall as Corinne, and her failure would likely not be as public. It is also crucial to note that Hemans leaves unspoken how the hypothetical “she” chooses to make her hearth lovely. In fact, given the ways in which Hemans’s poetry seeks to create and celebrate artistic moments in the lives of all women, it seems plausible that this humble woman makes her home lovely through a domesticity that is also artistic (or even, as was Hemans’s role in her own idyllic family circle, through artistic contributions to the domestic space).  

“Woman and Fame,” published in the Amulet for 1829, takes the theme of the insufficiency of fame for female happiness and eliminates the ambivalence that characterizes “Corinne at the Capitol.” “Woman and Fame” uses an unconventional sestarima form. Rather than the standard iambic pentameters or tetrameters, however, the six-

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80 See Marlon Ross, who argues, “Hemans enjoys a rare feminine space in her household setting that encourages her poetizing activity because that activity is itself an extension of feminine space.” As an “extension of feminine space,” poetry in the Browne-Hemans household became Hemans’s domestic task, effectively freeing her from the day-to-day concerns of household management. (The Contours of Masculine Desire, 295.)
line stanzas of “Woman and Fame” are broken into a quatrain with alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines, followed by a rhyming tetrameter couplet.

The epigraph for “Woman and Fame” is, appropriately enough, the final four lines of “Corinne at the Capitol,” uniting the two poems in an explicit acknowledgement of “Woman and Fame” as a continuation and expansion of “Corinne.” While “Corinne at the Capitol” can easily be read as merely a poetic retelling of the triumphant coronation scene in Book II of de Staël’s novel (even more so after the 1830 title change), “Woman and Fame” does not allow its readers that comfortable privilege. Nor does it conveniently fit into the pattern of a dramatic monologue. Again, Hemans eliminates the distancing effects of her narrative poetry and brings her readers into a closer communion with the issue at hand. Indeed, the first-person speaker sounds uncomfortably like the poet herself, rejecting fame in favor of the domestic affections praised in “Corinne at the Capitol.”

“Woman and Fame” trumps “Corinne at the Capitol” by positioning its abjuration of fame not at the very end of the poem, but throughout, intertwining a discussion of the temptations of fame with a recitation of its weaknesses. The poem begins with the resonant line, “Thou hast a charmèd cup, O Fame! / A draught that mantles high, / And seems to lift this mortal frame / Above mortality” (lines 1-4.) This opening, of course, is immediately followed by a renunciative command: “Away! to me—a woman—bring / Sweet waters from affection’s spring” (lines 1-6). (This confirmation of the speaker’s femininity is at once amusing and poignant, since by 1829 Hemans had firmly cemented her reputation as an ideally feminine and female poet.)

Hemans’s speaker views fame as a tempter, whose gifts turn to dust the moment they are achieved. While the first three stanzas of the poem see the beauty and the glory
A hollow sound is in thy song‖ (line 19) and “A mockery in thine eye” (line 20), particularly when the poet or artist longs “For aid, for sympathy” (line 22).

This desire for aid and sympathy reaffirms my reading of “Corinne,” above—the joy of the hypothetical other woman at the end of “Corinne” is not merely rooted in pleasing others, but in sharing with a beloved and trusted equal the burdens of daily life. Hemans’s poet-speaker in “Woman and Fame” is tormented not because she must choose between fame and love, but because, in her loveless life, fame becomes meaningless. The poem’s final stanza directly articulates this frustration and the poet-speaker’s conviction that fame will not conquer loneliness:

Fame, Fame! thou canst not be the stay
Unto the drooping reed,
The cool fresh fountain in the day
Of the soul’s feverish need;
Where must the lone one turn or flee?—
Not unto thee, oh! not unto thee! (lines 25-30)

Again, as in “Corinne at the Capitol,” the artist never considers sacrificing her gift or her work for domestic happiness. Hemans sees no incompatibility there. What she mourns, and what she rejects, is the idea that the joys of public and critical recognition and
popularity will ever compensate the poetess for the feelings of love, comfort, and belonging that she associates with an idealized domestic space.

Though it is easy, particularly in such poems as “Corinne at the Capitol,” to conflate fame with artistic ability, the two are quite separate both in Hemans’s poems and in her own life. One indication of the distinction between the two in her work is the fact that Hemans never decries the recognition of women for meritorious artistic achievement. Indeed, her poetry actively celebrates such recognition. For all of her distrust of fame and her belief in the importance of the feminine sphere of home, Hemans also firmly believes in the importance of women using the skills and gifts bestowed upon them for the betterment of society. What she regrets, in poems like “Corinne at the Capitol,” “Woman and Fame,” “Properzia Rossi,” and “Joan of Arc at Rheims,” as well as handful of others, is the not the loss of the woman to the home but the loss of the home to the woman. For Hemans, more than perhaps any poet of her time, the basic comforts of domesticity, including expressions of love, are vital to the nurturance of artistic gifts, and she fears that fame, with its insistence upon false and intrusive performance, undermines that. Fame without a home supported by love cannot sustain artistic power, and Hemans’s frustrated rejections of fame always reiterate not a dichotomy between fame and love, but the inherent inferiority of celebrity to affection. (Of course, while we must be aware of Hemans’s negative experiences of fame and how they might influence her ways of writing about fame, we cannot ignore the ways in which social expectations of femininity and ambition necessitate her ambivalent response to the latter; a visible sense of literary
ambition would have undermined her feminine posture for a significant portion of her reading audience.\textsuperscript{81)  

Thus, although Hemans repeatedly denies the worth of fame for an artistic woman, assigning instead a higher value to household duties and love, she never actually condemns artistic achievement, nor does she dismiss fame out of hand. As Deborah Kennedy points out, in such poems as “Woman and Fame,” public fame and domestic happiness are not mutually exclusive, but can, in fact, work together in a kind of symbiosis.\textsuperscript{82} Kennedy is correct in her assessment here, though her argument does not explore the crucial third aspect of Hemans’s views of fame and affection. In the poems that decry fame as a replacement for love, Hemans clearly identifies love as the necessary support for, if not the source of, artistic genius. Thus, the apparent conflict between fame and domesticity that has troubled a number of feminist critics of Hemans has been inappropriately construed as a binary. What Hemans argues, in poems like “Corinne at the Capitol” and “Woman and Fame” is that fame alone provides insufficient support for the emotional (and, hence, artistic) needs of the feminine poet, and that without that support, the feminine poet is doomed to suffer.

After the loss of her mother and her sister’s marriage, Hemans found herself, for the first time in her life and career, in a household without any adult companionship. Her

\textsuperscript{81} In “The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women’s Poetry, 1780-1830,” Anne K. Mellor correctly identifies this apparent resistance to fame as characteristic of the sentimental poetess; however, I think Mellor disingenuously assumes that women who did not identify themselves as part of this tradition were not compelled to adopt a similarly self-abnegating stance before their reading publics. (\textit{Studies in Romanticism} 36 [1997]: 260)

\textsuperscript{82} Kennedy argues, “While Hemans insisted that fame was no substitute for familial affection, she did not, however, mean that the one had to be given up for the other.” (“Hemans, Wordsworth, and the Literary Lady,” \textit{Victorian Poetry} 35 [1997], 274.)
sons’ praise seemed to please and amuse her, but she apparently longed for the ability to share her success with another adult—not parental praise, but intellectual and artistic communion between equals. Living alone for the first time, without her husband, mother, sister, or any of her brothers, seems to have left her in the unenviable position of being unable to share her delight and her frustrations, as even her friendships were constrained by the bounds of propriety. Thus, the lamentations of her protagonists or narrators in her poems on fame and her own expressions of loneliness in her letters are not necessarily indicative of a childish mind but rather an awareness of the female artist’s desire for private as well as public intellectual discourse.

Read in the light of her biographical circumstances, Hemans’s infamous response to Mitford indicates not a belief in the inferiority of female accomplishment, but rather a conviction of the importance of community for the female artist. This sense of community, particularly within the home, is similarly articulated in her poetry, where the solitary female artist dies, both creatively and literally, of loneliness, having found fame an inadequate substitute for human contact. While the speakers of many of Hemans’s poems seek that sense of community in romantic love, this may reflect literary convention as much as Hemans’s actual mindset. Hemans’s real focus in much of her poetry seems to be on replicating the family circle she enjoyed in her mother’s household, rather than on recapturing some phantom of hypothetical marital bliss, but

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83 After winning the Royal Society of Literature’s poetry prize for “Dartmoor,” Hemans wrote to an unidentified friend: “I wish you had but seen the children, when the prize was announced to them yesterday. Arthur, you know, had so set his heart upon it, that he was quite troublesome with his constant inquiries on the subject. He sprang up from his Latin exercise and shouted aloud, ‘Now, I am sure mamma is a better poet than Lord Byron!’ Their acclamations were actually deafening, and George said that the ‘excess of his pleasure had really given him a headache.’” (Hemans to ?, no date, in Hughes, 74).

84 See, for example, “Edith: A Tale of the Woods,” “Madeline: A Domestic Tale,” and “The Memorial Pillar,” in Records of Woman. In each of these poems, it is the loss or restoration of the parent-child bond that is the locus of emotion in the text.
both of these goals are represented in her poetry’s emphasis on the preservation of domestic ideals through their enshrinement in nostalgic memories.

**Landscapes of Memory**

While “The Sicilian Captive,” “Corinne at the Capitol,” and “Woman and Fame” highlight the alienating qualities of fame and its inadequacy as a substitute for the “domestic affections,” the nineteen poems published as *Records of Woman* in 1828 are more directly concerned with the failure of domesticity and the consequences of that failure. The dominant theme of *Records of Woman: with Other Poems* is the loss of domestic happiness and its impact upon individuals (usually women) of different times and places. The collection continues Hemans’s discussion of fame’s inadequacy, but while many of the poems within engage in discourse with “Corinne at the Capitol” and “Woman and Fame,” they move beyond issues of fame and love into a densely-layered exploration of how the feminine poet must engage with and record the histories of her domestic “nation” in order to secure a firmer foundation for its future citizens.

*Records of Woman* marks a crucial period in Hemans’s career. It was published in the year following her mother’s death, and Hemans herself suggested *Records of Woman* was the most personal of her collections. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford shortly before she published *Records*, Hemans wrote, “I am about to publish a little volume, called ‘Records of Woman,’ of which I shall beg your acceptance: I have put my heart and individual feelings into it more than any thing else I have written.”85 Though this claim has led some critics to suggest that *Records of Woman* is, in fact, a record of

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Hemans’s continued grief over the failure of her marriage,\textsuperscript{86} of greater interest here is the way in which she explores the power of women’s expression, laying claim to a social and artistic role for the stories and voices of women. Though she engages in this exploration both before and after \textit{Records of Woman}, most notably in \textit{Songs of the Affections} (1830), nowhere else in her oeuvre is Hemans more focused on the artistic expressions of women than in this volume.

In “Arabella Stuart,” “Properzia Rossi,” and “The Grave of a Poetess,” the three poems in \textit{Records of Woman} that feature artistic women as their central figures, Hemans engages directly with the need for domestic stability to ensure artistic survival in a world dominated by masculine epic conventions, and contrasts that need with the apparently inevitable failure of artistic women to achieve that stability in life. Hemans’s vision of the poetess in these poems is doubled—she is at once the poem’s protagonist and its narrator, a victim of the circumstances recorded in the text, and a key actor in ensuring the survival of the memory of both the poetess herself and the domestic ideals she treasures. Thus, these poems are predicated not only upon the importance of the domestic space, but upon the inevitability of its incipient destruction and the importance of transmitting its memory to future generations.

Each of these poems makes use of a topography of memory, wherein the central figure engages with a homescape that represents or replicates her sense of abandonment or loss. In “Arabella Stuart,” that homescape is the greenwood or bower the title character imagines as a refuge from her prison cell, a natural landscape where she will be reunited with her husband, to whom her “effusions” are addressed. In “Properzia Rossi,” the

\textsuperscript{86} As in, for example, Grant Scott’s argument in “The Fragile Image: Felicia Hemans and Romantic Ekphrasis,” in \textit{Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century}, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 36-54.
landscape is transmuted from Rossi’s mind and workshop into her rendering of Naxos. Rather than an ideal, the landscape Rossi carves into her bas relief (itself a topographic landscape that functions as a way to preserve a record of Rossi’s pain) represents the loss of home, love, and hope. Finally, the speaker of “Grave a Poetess” wrestles with a world that has lost one of its gifted daughters (Mary Tighe), but finds peace in imagining Tighe in a truly ideal space: Heaven. The ways in which these poems engage with visionary homescapes and landscapes gesture towards the conflation of home and nation in *Records of Woman*. On its surface the least politically engaged of all of her collections, in *Records of Woman* Hemans most directly celebrates women’s contributions to home, nation, and art through her depictions of suffering, constancy, and courage.

Like the Sicilian Captive, the title character of “Arabella Stuart,” the first of the “Records,” uses poetic freedom to transcend literal imprisonment, and in so doing resists both her captors themselves and their justifications/intentions for the speaker’s imprisonment. However, whereas the Sicilian Captive can be figured as an Everywoman, with her anonymity serving to reinforce the universal nature of her experience, Arabella Stuart is a historical figure, a cousin of James I, whose confinement to a particular time and place Hemans uses to expand the feminine experience of imprisonment in a different way.

Hemans explicitly aligns Arabella Stuart with Torquato Tasso, the Italian Renaissance poet who was (supposedly) imprisoned and driven to madness because of his love for his patron’s sister. As he is for many in the Romantic period, Tasso is an important recurring figure in Hemans’s work, where he is subjected to a number of traditionally feminine experiences (including sanctified death) despite existing in a
masculine body. Though Hemans engages with the legend of Tasso in multiple poems about the poet himself,\(^\text{87}\) in “Arabella Stuart,” Hemans imagines an English Tasso in the figure of the innocent and persecuted Stuart.

As both the first poem in Records and one of only three poems therein that is narrated entirely in the first person (the others are “Properzia Rossi” and “The Grave of a Poetess,” which provides a vital clue as to how we are to categorize “Arabella Stuart” in the context of the collection), “Arabella Stuart” immediately commands the reader’s attention. The narrator in this poem, like the narrators of “Properzia Rossi” and “The Grave of a Poetess,” is imbued with an unfiltered poetic subjectivity that we rarely find in Hemans’s historical poetry. While there is no lack of female voices in her work, the expressions of those voices are often buffered by a frame narrative expressed by a neutral, androgynous, and omniscient third party. Only in a handful of her narrative poems does Hemans cede narrative authority to her protagonist, and such a concession requires careful attention to Hemans’s motivation in making this poetic choice.

One significant consequence of the first-person narration here is that it draws “Arabella Stuart” into a specifically feminine literary tradition. This is a “Record” in the style of Ovid’s Heroides or Pope’s Eloisa to Abelard, as Wolfson points out in her headnote to “Arabella Stuart,” with William Seymour, Arabella Stuart’s fugitive husband, in the position of Stuart’s effusions’ intended audience.\(^\text{88}\) Unlike “Properzia Rossi,” which is spoken aloud, apparently to no audience other than Rossi’s muse and her

\(^{87}\) See, for example, “Tasso and His Sister” and “Tasso’s Coronation.” Donelle R. Ruwe offers an interesting analysis of Hemans’s engagement with Tasso in “The Canon-Maker: Felicia Hemans and Torquato Tasso’s Sister,” in Comparative Romanticisms: Power, Gender, Subjectivity, ed. Larry H. Peer and Diane Long Hoeveler (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998): 133-57. However, Ruwe focuses on “Tasso and His Sister” and ignores Hemans’s reinvention of Tasso in “Arabella Stuart.”

\(^{88}\) Felicia Hemans, 331.
art, “Arabella Stuart,” like the letters of the *Heroides*, is meant to function as a concrete relic, preserving not merely the speaker’s story, but her own words.

Hemans’s lengthy headnote to the poem includes a quotation from Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature* describing the “effusions, often begun and never ended, written and erased, incoherent and rational” supposedly left by Stuart amongst her papers, which are partially represented in the nine sections of the poem. The mere inclusion of these details of Stuart’s biography establishes a definite claim for reading this piece as the “poetical remains” of a poetess, albeit one whose voice is stifled and rescued only by eventual historical intervention, but the deliberate choice on Hemans’s part to call Stuart’s writings “effusions” clearly cements Stuart’s position in *Records* as the counterpart to the title character of “Properzia Rossi,” as I will show when I turn to that poem. Similarly, the claim that these “effusions” are at once incoherent and rational links “Arabella Stuart” back to the larger narrative of mad poets, a narrative that is centered on Tasso and partially revived in the Romantic period by works like Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Julian and Maddalo*.

Stuart’s claim to the title of poet is further underscored by the epigraphs Hemans chose to follow the headnote. Hemans draws the first evident connection between Stuart and Tasso in her first epigraph, a quotation from Byron’s *The Prophecy of Dante* that reads, “And is not love in vain / Torture enough without a living tomb?” 89 This line is an explicit reference to Tasso, whose vain love for his patron’s sister supposedly led to his “living tomb.” 90 The second epigraph, slightly misquoted from Ippolito Pindemonte’s

*Clizia* (itself based upon an episode of unrequited love in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), reads, “Fermossi al fin il cor che balzò tanto.” As Wolfson has noted, this line is identically misquoted by de Staël’s Corinne in her death scene, indicating that *Corinne* was Hemans’s source for this quotation. Attentive readers who recognized both the quotation from Byron and the veiled allusion to *Corinne* would hopefully have drawn the appropriate conclusion—that Arabella Stuart, like Tasso before her, is a poet imprisoned and destroyed for love.

Unlike the Maniac in Shelley’s *Julian and Maddalo*, a Tasso figure whose effusions are similar in both style and content to Stuart’s, but which are delivered to the audience through the mediation of a potentially biased narrator, Stuart functions as the sole transmitter of her own story, while Hemans figures herself as Stuart’s silent editor or amanuensis. Given the similarities between the form and the content of the Maniac’s ravings and Stuart’s writings, it seems clear that Hemans here is responding to Shelley with a feminine, English Tasso whose sufferings serve both an aesthetic and a moral purpose. Stuart’s madness is not of the prophetic or wild kind displayed by the Maniac in *Julian and Maddalo*. Instead, hers seems to come from a confrontation with and resignation to the will of the divine, by which she is granted her creative powers as well as forced to endure the suffering that feeds them.

“Arabella Stuart” is divided into two distinct sections, though the numbering of the fragments runs concurrently from I through IX. The first five fragments make up

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91 The allusion to *Metamorphoses* subtly highlights this poem’s debt to *Heroides*.
92 “Stopped at last, the heart that had beat so strongly.” According to Wolfson’s note, the line in *Clizia* actually reads “Fermasi alfin quel cor che balzò tanto” (*Felicia Hemans*, 339).
94 There are clear parallels between Stuart’s texts and the Biblical Song of Songs, which is itself a record of suffering even as it is a poem of love. It seems unlikely that the devoutly Christian Hemans would have been unaware of these parallels.
section one, and trace Stuart’s first imprisonment, prior to her ill-fated attempt to reunite with Seymour and flee to the Continent. The final four fragments, divided from the first by a row of ellipsis points representing a kind of lacuna where Stuart’s narrative of her escape should be, mark the time of the second imprisonment, following the disastrous escape attempt, and chart Stuart’s gradual abandonment of all hope of reunion as she loses both her faith in Seymour’s love and her grip on life.

The poem’s opening line, “’Twas but a dream!” emphasizes the insubstantial nature both of Stuart’s effusions and, as will become evident as the poem goes on, Stuart’s grasp on her vision of domestic happiness. Stuart opens the poem with this exclamation as she recalls, apparently upon waking, a fantasy of freedom for herself and Seymour. The first line continues, “I saw the stag leap free, / Under the boughs where early birds were singing, / I stood o’ershadow’d by the greenwood tree” (lines 1-3), placing her in the position of observer as Seymour appears with a “princely band” of hunters. Stuart’s vision begins with the flight of the hunted fawn as the incipient invasion of the hunters disturbs the natural world:

. . . then the fawn

Shot, like a gleam of light, from grassy lawn

To secret covert; and the smooth turf shook,

And lilies quiver’d by the glade’s lone brook,

And young leaves trembled . . . (lines 5-9)

This disturbance is later soothed and faintly echoed in the reunited Stuart and Seymour’s consummation beneath the greenwood trees:
. . . and we, that met and parted,\footnote{Cf. \textit{Julian and Maddalo}, line 608: “They met—they parted.”} 

Ever in dread of some dark watchful power,

Won back to childhood’s trust, and, fearless-hearted,

Blent the glad fulness of our thoughts that hour,

Ev’n like the mingling of sweet streams, beneath

Dim woven leaves, and midst the floating breath

Of hidden forest flowers.” (lines 25-27)

While Stuart never explicitly positions herself at all within this vision, except as an observer, she clearly aligns Seymour first with the hunters and then with the stag of the first line. It is only after he flings away his spear at the sight of Arabella that Seymour is described in terms more appropriate to animals—he “bound[s] to” Arabella’s side, for example, which foreshadows Stuart’s later sense of guilt that Seymour is only imprisoned because of his love for her.

The nature images of Fragment I evoke not only the Song of Songs, with its erotic imagery dependent on the obscuring power of nature metaphors, but also more explicitly British associations—Robin Hood is intimately connected to the “greenwood,” as is the fantastic world of Shakespeare’s \textit{As You Like It}. The greenwood, as an unfettered and transgressive space, symbolizes freedom from political and social constraint—cross-dressing, for example, appears again and again throughout greenwood texts, and becomes a part of Stuart’s own escape attempt. That Hemans allows Stuart to associate her freedom with the greenwood both connects Stuart’s plight to that of other unjustly exiled or imprisoned aristocrats, and situates her within a balladic romance tradition comparable to that of the popular Robin Hood.
Stuart’s greenwood is transgressive in that it allows her and Seymour space to be together, despite their illegal marriage, but it is also part of Stuart’s direct alignment of domestic happiness and the natural world. Throughout the poem, Stuart envisions her domestic happiness in distinctly natural terms, as in Fragment V, where, as she waits for her escape, she

... sit[s] and dream[s]

Of summer-lands afar, where holy love,

Under the vine, or in the citron-grove,

May breathe from terror. (lines 84-87)

Similarly, after the escape attempt has failed, Stuart connects her domestic loss to a loss of the natural landscape—“Once more a prison-wall / Shuts the green hills and woodlands from my sight” (lines 112-13). Each reminder of the natural world, whether it be the weather changes associated with the changing seasons (Fragment VII), a bouquet of flowers sent to her by an unknown party (Fragment VIII), or “a swift bird singing past [her] cell” (Fragment IX, line 149) recalls to Stuart her loss and inspires both further suffering and further expression of her grief.

Each fragment engages either directly or indirectly with this naturalized vision of domesticity, as Stuart struggles to come to terms first with her separation from Seymour and, later, with the finality of her situation. For Stuart, as for the Sicilian Captive, poetry offers a connection to the home she has lost due to unjust outside forces; the fragments presented in this text are not merely her letters to Seymour, but her tragic attempts to recreate the domestic greenwood of her dreams and hopes in textual form. And, again like the Sicilian Captive, Arabella Stuart writes herself into death, and into silence,
envisioning her grave as her "voiceless chamber" (line 247) and crying, repeatedly, "Farewell!" However, whereas the Sicilian Captive leaves no trace of her art behind, leaving instead a silent body, Arabella Stuart’s silence here is incorporeal, represented in the end only by the body of her text. In this, she foreshadows the death of "Properzia Rossi," the most famous and, arguably, most important of Hemans’s poet-speakers.

Any serious analysis of Hemans’s conceptions of poetic identity must necessarily address "Properzia Rossi," the dynamic fourth poem in Records of Woman. One of the two dramatic monologues in Records of Woman, "Properzia Rossi" imagines the artistic and personal struggles of the Bolognese Renaissance sculptor as she crafts her final piece, a bas-relief of Ariadne on Naxos. More than any other poem in her massive oeuvre, "Properzia Rossi" demonstrates Hemans’s engagement with the struggles peculiar to artistic women.

Of the three figures featured in Records of Woman that are most easily identifiable as poetesses, one is imprisoned (Arabella Stuart), one is dead (Mary Tighe), and the third, Properzia Rossi, is, apparently, suicidal. However, even as Hemans recuperates Stuart from her silence and, as we will see, envisions Mary Tighe’s death as an accession to a higher form of poetics, so she makes Rossi’s last creation, her death song, a masterpiece, arguably the noble and holy work that Hemans herself had longed to create.

Hemans engages with several key tropes in feminine poetic myth in "Properzia Rossi." The most obvious of these tropes is that of the abandoned or unloved woman—Ariadne, Rossi, and, to some extent, Hemans herself each figures in the poem as one representation or variation on this theme: Ariadne, truly abandoned; Rossi, who feels as
though she has been abandoned by a man who has never loved her, and Hemans, whose marital separation results not in a tragic consummation of her art, but a sustained and vigorous independent career.

Based on a painting by Jean-Louis Ducis, Hemans’s poem is at once a tribute to the ecstasy of creation and a record of the inevitability of suffering for the female artist. “Properzia Rossi” is also an exploration of the transformative powers of creative ecstasy, through which the female artist becomes at once priestess, prophetess, and avatar. This trebling of female roles and feminine power forces the reader to reject an easy reading of the text as simply a rejection of fame or a dramatic farewell to creative engagement. Rossi’s final creation rises out of suicidal despair, but it is still creation, and the image she settles upon resonates on multiple levels, one female artist speaking to and through another from within the confines of the poem.

The poem is thus structured rather like Russian dolls, as it nests itself within and upon itself. The poem, itself an artistic artifact, records the creation of Rossi’s last bas-relief, the presentation of which (and the subsequent rejection of Rossi by her client/prospective lover) is illustrated in Ducis’s painting. These layers of production are replicated in the layers of narrative voice that create the poem itself—though Rossi is the speaker, and thus in some ways the author of this piece, even as she is both recreating and replicating the story of Ariadne, her voice is channeled through that of Hemans, each female artist representing another. Even Ariadne, who is not necessarily directly associated with artistic endeavor, carries with her name some measure of artistic association. (The discerning reader would associate, for example, Ariadne with Dionysus,

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96 Cf. Scott, 38, wherein he compares the text to a “Chinese box.”
a god known for music as much as for wine-soaked revelry. Alternatively, Shakespeare’s strange conflation of Ariadne with Arachne, creating “Ariachne” in *Troilus and Cressida*, inspires a long-standing confusion of the Cretan princess with the transfigured weaver.

As with many of the poems featuring historical figures in *Records of Woman*, “Properzia Rossi” is prefaced with an author’s note that frames the subject’s situation. In this case, Hemans clearly establishes Rossi as an artist, “a celebrated female sculptor . . . possessed also of talents for poetry and music,” and as a woman who “died in consequence of an unrequited attachment.” This description of Rossi seems to derive from the second edition of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568), in which “Madonna Properzia de’Rossi,” the only woman featured in the text, is depicted as both extremely talented and as having suffered an inappropriate attachment to a young nobleman. In this instance, however, Hemans chooses to elide much of the source text, most particularly the fact that Rossi, according to Vasari, was married.

Having established the historical veracity of the story, Hemans opens “Properzia Rossi” with an uncredited epigraph that is presumably her own work, and likely stands in for the voice of Rossi herself. Its bleak plea for a cessation of praise not only

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97 Nina daVinci Nichols makes a compelling argument for the persistence of the Ariadne myth(s) in nineteenth-century literature in *Ariadne’s Lives*. She teases out the various incarnations of the story, focusing, in particular, on the relationship of Ariadne to Dionysus, both through her mother, Pasiphaë, who was herself once betrothed to the god, and through Ariadne’s own eventual betrothal or marriage to him. (See *Ariadne’s Lives* [Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995], 170-172.)


100 Vasari was an important source text for Robert Browning as well as for Hemans. As Hemans read Italian, it is likely she was able to read Vasari without an English translation.
foreshadows Rossi’s despair, but echoes the laments of de Staël’s Corinne, to whom the following lines might equally apply:

———Tell me no more, no more

Of my soul’s lofty gifts! Are they not vain

To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?

Have I not lov’d, and striven, and fail’d to bind

One true heart unto me, whereon my own

Might find a resting-place, a home for all

Its burden of affections?

These lines might stand as the epigraph for the entire collection, as the theme of love or home destroyed, unrequited, or betrayed dominates Records of Woman. The epigraph does not directly indicate a desire for erotic love, leaving the explicit desire for the poem itself to fill out. Indeed, of all the poems in Records of Woman, only “Properzia Rossi” directly acknowledges the inability of artistic ambitions to fulfill romantic desires, and the conclusion of the epigraph reflects the singularity of this poem’s focus:

I depart,

Unknown, the Fame goes with me; I must leave

The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death

Shall give my name a power to win such tears

As would have made my life precious.

Again, this epigraph ties Rossi’s experience to that of martyred female poet figures like Sappho and Corinne, who die for love when fame proves insufficient. Though Rossi does not die in the poem as it stands, it is evident throughout the narrative that, even if she
does not actually commit suicide, she anticipates imminent death. Her belief that she leaves the earth “unknown” seems to reflect back on the transience of fame, but the phrase is more ambiguous than it first seems. Rossi is not unknown, though she might be forgotten after death. It might be more productive to imagine the ways in which she leaves the earth having not known it, or not having been known as anything more than an artist. Either way, what Rossi mourns here is not the loss of her fame or talent, but rather the loss of experience that would have deepened and strengthened that talent and thus, her career.

As Grant Scott notes in his analysis, the poem is divided into four sections—the conception, creation, examination, and farewell to Rossi’s masterpiece. However, what Scott does not notice are the ways in which the first and third and the second and fourth sections mirror each other in their tones and their intentions. The first section opens with a line that is at once an invocation, a cry of triumph, and a plea, as Rossi cries out, “One dream of passion and of beauty more!” (line 1). This ambiguous exclamation—is Rossi demanding or declaring?—followed up by apparent bargaining, “And in its bright fulfilment let me pour / My soul away!” (lines 2-3) immediately illuminates the struggle that dominates this poem. Properzia Rossi is at once artistically ambitious and yet determinedly suicidal in that ambition. Her determination to “pour [her] soul away” in her final sculpture suggests a kind of deliberate martyrdom, the artistic equivalent of the Charge of the Light Brigade—beautiful, desperate, and possibly pointless—that yet contradicts her awareness that her work and her legacy “might have been loftier far.”

101 Cf. Hemans’s “The Diver” (1830), in Poetical Works, 497.
Indeed, Rossi’s desire to pour all that remains of herself into her final creation evokes the persistence of suicide-by-song among Hemans’s female characters. Though this phenomenon is not strictly gendered (“Mozart’s Last Requiem,” for example, features a male speaker engaging in the same practice), it manifests more often in her epic and heroic poems featuring female speakers. The eponymous speakers of “The Sicilian Captive” and “Arabella Stuart” each enact a version of the song-suicide, and differ from Rossi, here, in that Rossi’s final energies go not into the poem itself, as the Sicilian Captive’s and Stuart’s do, but rather into the creation of the bas-relief. In this first section, Rossi explicitly states her desire to “leave enshrined / Something immortal of my heart and mind, / That yet may speak to thee when I am gone” (lines 9-11), an intention whose audience is, here, framed as the recipient of Rossi’s sculpture, the man she loves who does not return her love.

Section I lacks much of the momentum of the following two sections, in part because Rossi’s speech appears to be broken, as evidenced by Hemans’s regular use of dramatic caesuras, often marked by a dash, as though Rossi’s voice has choked off in her grief. What is more, she frequently directs her monologue inward, as in the first line, so that the audience of the poem shifts in mid-line from the unfaithful lover to her own inner power. For example, as she recites her litany of complaints against her unfaithful or unresponsive lover, she lists all that she has given him, albeit in a disconnected, third-person way, only to break off and resist the temptation to sink under her sorrow or anger:

. . . melancholy love

On thee was lavish’d; silent pang and tear,

And fervent song, that gush’d when none were near,
And dream by night, and weary thought by day,
Stealing the brightness from her life away—
While thou— Awake! not yet within me die! (lines 14-19)

The violence of this midline break is echoed in later lines, as well, serving to heighten the intensity of Rossi’s struggle.

If the opening lines of section I are an invocation, then section II begins with the fulfillment of that call. “It comes,—the power / Within me born, flows back” (line 25-26), Rossi declares. The return of her artistic gift, which she calls her “fruitless dower,” a term that, like her claim to be “unknown,” is ambiguously deceptive—does her art not count as creative “fruit”?—brings with it a sense of joy that seems out of place in a poem so underwritten by despair. Indeed, the second section is marked by its hopeful tone; though Rossi remains convinced of the inevitability of her death (she refers repeatedly to the time after she is gone), she is yet certain of some form of survival through her final work of art.

This particular section, like the previous one, makes considerable use of caesuras and enjambment, but here those devices serve to signify Rossi’s increased energy and the joy she derives from her art. Section II apostrophizes her vision of Ariadne, empowering it to serve as an avatar for Rossi after her approaching death:

. . . Thou art the mould,
Wherein I pour the fervent thoughts, the untold,
The self-consuming! Speak to him of me,
Thou, the deserted by the lonely sea,
With the soft sadness of thine earnest eye—
Speak to him, lorn one! (lines 43-48)

Rossi carves Ariadne in her own image, a gesture that is at once fueled by her own sense of abandonment, since the man she loves does not return her feelings, and of hope, as Rossi creates Ariadne’s image as an avatar, to speak for Rossi after she is gone, even, perhaps, as Hemans empowers Rossi to carry her voice into the future, to memorialize her beyond death. The self-portraiture of Rossi in Ariadne is an empowered version of the Sicilian Captive’s objectified fate. Rossi transforms herself into an objet d’art, literally transferring her voice to her creation, leaving behind a record that is, ideally, more stable than Arabella Stuart’s fragile effusions.

The third section of the poem recapitulates the despair of the first, as Rossi laments her inability to adequately portray the creations that she sees in her mind. Though she believes she “might have given / Birth to creations of far nobler thought” (lines 62-63), she has “been too much alone” (line 65), deprived of human love and companionship, and is thus unable to sustain her artistic nature. Rossi concedes her life and her gift, knowing herself to be dying, and admitting that “my brief aspirings . . . are ever but as some wild fitful song / Rising triumphantly, to die ere long” (lines 72-73).

The fourth and final section echoes the second by further empowering Rossi’s masterpiece to speak for its creator after her death. The choice of abandoned Ariadne as her final subject highlights both Rossi’s despair and her hopes of artistic immortality. The multiple outcomes of the myth of Ariadne highlight the dual possibilities of Rossi’s career. Though in some versions of the myth, Ariadne, left by Theseus on the isle of Naxos, dies, either by her own hand or by that of Artemis, in the oldest stories she becomes the faithful consort of the god Dionysus, and with him ascends to immortality.
By casting Ariadne in her own image and as a vehicle for her memory, Rossi here restores the forsaken Ariadne to her status as a goddess—immortal and empowered to speak for those who no longer have voices, and in so doing, belatedly restores that same immortal power to herself. The last lines of the monologue underscore this transmission of voices:

 Yet I leave my name—

 As a deep thrill may linger on the lyre
 When its full chords are hush’d—awhile to live
 And one day haply in thy heart revive
 Sad thoughts of me:—I leave it, with a sound
 A spell o’er memory, mournfully profound,
 I leave it, on my country’s air to dwell— (lines 121-27)

Rossi’s ability to imbue her final creation with her own power further opens up Hemans’s vision of feminine poetics as partly dependent upon the transmission of texts and memories and stories from one female speaker to another, thus enabling the voice of what I am calling Hemans’s feminine “bard,” who, like Rossi, and Stuart, and even the Sicilian Captive, is charged with casting these “spells o’er memory” to help preserve the larger narrative of women’s experience and the importance of domestic space/love in that experience.

In a self-conscious gesture towards her own ideal legacy, Hemans closes *Records of Woman* with an elegiac tribute to Mary Tighe. “The Grave of a Poetess,” the last of the “Records” of *Records of Woman*, which begin with a stifled female poet and close at the grave of one whose voice was heard and remembered. Written several years before
Hemans visited Tighe’s tomb, “The Grave of a Poetess” never actually names the woman about whom it is written, instead referring to her in the notes only as “the author of Psyche." Though the poem is, in fact, addressed to Tighe (the narrator uses possessive pronouns throughout), a great deal of emphasis falls on the poem’s speaker, the third and final first-person narrator of Records. Hemans understood that grief, like a funeral, is for the living, and her narrator mourns what she perceives, at first, as an irreparable loss:

Mournful, that thou were slumbering low,

With a dread curtain drawn

Between thee and the golden glow

Of this world’s vernal dawn. (lines 13-20)

In a voice that eerily prefigures those of the elegiac odes that followed her own death seven years later, Hemans’s speaker here mourns not only the loss to the world of Tighe’s voice, but the loss of the world to Tighe. The poetess can no longer see the “golden glow” of dawn, because she is, in the speaker’s words, “parted from all the song and bloom / Thou wouldst have lov’d so well” (lines 21-22). This loss, however, is not total, as the speaker discovers as her voice matures in the poem itself.

After several more stanzas of grief on Tighe’s behalf, that she cannot see and appreciate the beauty around her tomb in the springtime, the poem’s turn comes as the speaker envisions a the poetess in a brighter and more beautiful place, which she is uniquely equipped to enjoy. Removed from the negative aspects of life on earth (death, grief, sadness), Tighe’s heavenly poetry must be even more beautiful than it was on earth:

The shadows of the tomb are here,

Yet beautiful is earth!

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103 Hemans, Poetical Works, 276.
What seest thou then where no dim fear,
   No haunting dream hath birth?

Where couldst thou fix on mortal ground
   Thy tender thoughts and high?—

Now peace the woman’s heart hath found,
   And joy the poet’s eye. (lines 37-52)

In death, or, more probably in heaven, then, the speaker imagines Tighe will find not only rest from a life fraught with unhappiness, but a wider and more impressive scope for the poetic imagination, here figured as the “eye.” Indeed, the speaker throughout the poem connects the poet’s mind and the poet’s eye, realizing how much, for the Romantic imagination in particular, the poet’s powers of conception depend upon his or her powers of observation.

For the speaker of this poem, Tighe’s death is a loss to the world, and, it seems, a loss to the speaker personally, but he or she finds comfort in the idea that Tighe can be happier in a place where her genius can find greater visual and spiritual satisfaction, even as she is freed from the stifling constraints of the mortal world. Here, as in “The Sicilian Captive,” “Arabella Stuart,” and even “Properzia Rossi,” the poet’s death is her apotheosis, as she ascends to a new artistic and spiritual reality, leaving as her legacy a continuing tradition of feminine voices telling feminine stories.

In many ways, “The Grave of a Poetess” is as much Hemans’s own epitaph as it is Tighe’s. Shortly before Hemans visited Tighe’s tomb in County Kilkenny in 1833 she wrote, “I think I shall feel much interest in visiting ‘the grave of a poetess.’ . . . her poetry
has always touched me greatly, from a similarity which I imagine I discover between her
destiny and my own." This shared destiny allows Hemans, perhaps, to envision the
speaker of her poem as a future young poetess, visiting Hemans’s own grave and
reflecting on its inhabitant’s situation. Because she resists naming Tighe, or giving her
any identification in the text of the poem beyond the title “Poetess,” Hemans shifts Tighe
from the realm of the historical and specific into an almost mythological status, a symbol
as much as a woman. Even the way she chooses to designate Tighe in her footnote, as
“the author of Psyche,” contains a certain ambiguity, a veiled suggestion as to the
universality of Tighe’s creative experience.

The woman artist, a chimera creature in a society where femininity cannot be
reconciled with (“masculine”) artistic ambition, can only survive when both halves of her
self are nourished with intellectual and spiritual companionship as well as erotic or
familial love. The craving for love that modern critics find so uncomfortable, clichéd, and
anti-feminist responds not only to the social expectations of women, but to the lonely
frustration experienced by female artists whose struggles for intellectual recognition often
preclude the attention of men, for the heirs of Corinne’s Lord Nelvil want conventional
wives. The sorrow of Arabella Stuart, Properzia Rossi, and Mary Tighe, like that of
Corinne and Sappho before them, is in part an acknowledgment of their inability to
separate their artistic gifts from their femininity, and while they cannot relinquish their
artistic power in exchange for love, neither can they live without the sustenance love
gives to their artistic power. The result of this situation, for Hemans, is always death, and
the death of the woman is the death of the artist, and vice versa. However, as her poem to
Tighe demonstrates, Hemans envisioned death not as an ending, but as a restoration to a

104 Hemans to ?, no date, in Chorley, Memorials, 2:195.
divine love that will eliminate the complications of feminine poetic identity on the terrestrial plane.

“That Holy Spirit”: The Myth of “Mrs. Hemans”

If “The Grave of a Poetess” is Hemans’s premortem elegy for herself, it fails to adequately forecast Hemans’s critical and popular afterlife. The majority of the character studies, biographies, and eulogies that followed Hemans’s death served to calcify Hemans’s reputation as a poet who “supported conventional gender ideology and . . . decorously appears to confirm the expectations of her audience concerning why she wrote, and how she wrote.”105 Indeed, of the multitudinous character studies that emerged in the decades following Hemans’s death, few diverged from the growing reading of Hemans as hyper-feminized and stylized at best, and derivative at worst.106

This gilded, gift-book vision of Felicia Hemans seems to have its origins not in the three “authorized” biographies that appeared in the years following her death, but in the storm of tributes, elegies, and memorial reviews that emerged at the same time. Aided by her private letters, Hemans’s three primary biographers—Lawrence, Chorley, and Hughes—constructed a vision of Hemans that saw her both as an artistic genius devoted to her poetry and as a woman with a highly developed need for the affections of a close family circle. All three biographers cautiously avoided the dreaded stereotype of the


106 D. M. Moir [“Δ”] and W. H. Smith’s article “Mrs. Hemans” in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine (1848) is one of the few that does present a more rounded vision of Hemans and her poetics. Moir and Smith reject the concept of feminine versus masculine writing, and in doing so attempt to read Hemans’s poetry as a thing separate from the poetess herself. It is not surprising, then, that Moir and Smith’s overall impressions of Hemans are more favorable, on the whole, than those of their contemporaries as they argue for Hemans as an original and creative voice.
bluestocking poetess, while still paying tribute to Hemans’s evident intelligence, educational accomplishments, and quick wit, by highlighting her maternal duties and her strong sense of modesty and faith.  

Despite Lawrence’s, Chorley’s, and Hughes’s carefully nuanced views of the poet, however, it was the less authoritative biographies and memoirs, especially those published in works like Frederic Rowton’s *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (1853) or Eric Robertson’s *English Poetesses* (1883) that took hold of the nineteenth-century imagination. By 1852, Hemans had been enshrined as “by far the most feminine writer of the age,” whose work never breaches “the dignity and decorum of womanhood.”

George Gilfillan’s discussion of Hemans in his *Second Gallery of Literary Portraits*, though enraptured by her supposed femininity, does not allow her the title of poet, but instead argues that, like a musician, she can only bring to life her own emotions:

> With what purpose does a lady, in whom perfect skill and practice have not altogether drowned enthusiasm, sit down to her harp, piano, or guitar? Not altogether for the purpose of display—not at all for that of instruction to her audience—but in a great measure that she may develop, in lawful form, the sensibilities of her own bosom.

Gilfillan, adding to the passage quoted above, says, “Thus sat Felicia Hemans before her lyre—not touching it with awful reverence, as though each string were a star, but regarding it as the soother and sustainer of her own high-wrought emotions—a graceful

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107 However, by prefixing her *Memoir* to her seven-volume edition of her sister’s poetry, I would argue that Hughes implicitly authorizes the conflated readings that dominate the 1840s. In order to preserve her sister’s “feminine” image, and thus her poetic reputation, Hughes must promote, however subtly, the popular belief that not only is Hemans “best portrayed in her writings,” as one of her epitaphs reads, but that her life and those writings are, indeed, inseparable.


109 Ibid., 178.
alias of herself.” This conflation of Hemans, her poetry, and her reputation was used throughout the century both to deny Hemans’s creative power and, at the same time, to ensure that she was remembered as a perfect example of feminine poetic talent.

Ultimately, if Hemans’s poetry, as William Michael Rossetti later claimed, had the “monotone of mere sex,” or “lack[ed] deep thought or subtle emotion,” it was, for her critics, because she herself could never transcend her own femininity, or, more accurately, it was because her readers could never see past the femininity they had been told she inculcated in her works. In part, this perception of poetic femininity is based solely upon the importance of the home in Hemans’s poetry. What Gilfillan, Rowton, Robertson, and their peers fail to see in Hemans, however, is the extent to which that femininity is both constructed and devoted to further constructions of a national myth of female poetic heroism. Hemans’s figuration of domestic loss as the central inspiration for feminine poetics allows us to read her works as a poetics of mourning or nostalgia, but we must not neglect to recognize how mourning is resolved through the poet’s death. Hemans’s poetry ultimately indicates that not only is death the triumph and apotheosis of the feminine poet, it is the longed-for reunion with home, and a home where feminine poetics can achieve a greater success because there can be no further separation.

In her awareness of the importance of a safe domestic harbor for the artistic woman and of the dangers of fame, Hemans helped to promote the sense of instability that she saw as a predominant element of the feminine poetic experience. In order to stabilize the domestic realm that both supports and is supported by feminine poetics, however, she attempted to envision a feminine poet whose primary function was to

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110 Ibid., 179.
preserve the legacies of feminine heroism through the repetition of their stories and songs. Thus, for Hemans, the feminine poet—the bard of the empire of the heart—is always looking to the past for guidance into an uncertain and unstable artistic future.
“The Heart that Fed upon Itself”: Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s Consumptive Poetess

DEATH OF MRS. MACLEAN (‘L.E.L.’)—With a feeling of sorrow which thousands will in some measure share . . . we this day announce the death of Mrs. Maclean, the wife of Mr. George Maclean, Governor of Cape Coast Castle. She died suddenly on the 15th of October last, soon after her arrival on that fatal shore, which is the grave of so many valuable lives, but of none more valuable than hers. . . . the memory of which should be dear to all who can appreciate poetry, and wit, and generosity, the refinements of taste and the kindly impulses of the heart, that make human nature—and woman’s nature especially—most worth to be regarded with admiration and affection.

—Athenaeum, 1 January 1839

When the news of Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s death on Africa’s Gold Coast reached England on January 1, 1839, the tragedy seemed at first the natural, if sudden, end of a life that had been devoted to the stories of young, artistic women dying for love. After all, as the untimely deaths of John Keats (Italy, 1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley (Italy, 1822), Lord Byron (Greece, 1824), and Maria Jane Jewsbury (India, 1832) had already revealed, the world outside of England was a dangerous—even fatal—place for those who possessed a poetic constitution. Sailing to West Africa as Mrs. Maclean brought Landon’s life to the end she had indirectly imagined for herself in her many poetic visions of doomed artists.

Landon’s poetic fame faded quickly after her death, but from 1824 to 1838, she was one of the most popular writers in Britain. Though perhaps less well-regarded in critical circles than that of Felicia Hemans, Landon’s work was nevertheless in constant popular demand. She was at first a regular contributor of poems to a number of literary journals and to the annuals, and later in her career, she “edited” several of those same annuals, a process that involved composing their entire contents. While her poetry alone

1 Cape Coast Castle, where Landon died and is buried, was one colony on the Gold Coast in what is present-day Ghana.
constitutes an impressively large body of work, Landon also left behind her a significant prose oeuvre, including her critical reviews and articles for William Jerdan’s *Literary Gazette*, a number of short stories and “tales,” and several novels.

Despite this tremendous output—a remarkable accomplishment for any writer, let alone one who only lived to be 36—Landon’s work has been all but erased from the literary canon. This is particularly unfortunate, as Landon’s poetry, despite its occasional aesthetic weaknesses, offers a number of important and provocative contributions to literary scholarship. First, we cannot form a full picture of the shape of British literature without acknowledging the importance of sentimental poetry, and Landon is one of sentimentality’s most prolific and influential practitioners. Second, because she is so important to sentimental literature, and sentimental literature has been so devalued by modern and post-modern critics, it is worth returning to Landon’s work in order to reexamine twentieth- and twenty-first century figurations of literary worth, which have been shaped by highly gendered and politicized aesthetic projects. Third, Landon’s highly stylized sentimentality has been extremely influential in its approach to a moral pedagogy that challenges early Victorian social and sexual mores, as she engages with questions of masculinity, femininity, aesthetics, and sexuality in ways that both seem to support and subtly undermine the gendered ideals of her day. Finally, as part of this moral pedagogy, Landon offers a unique vision of the role, function, and poetic projects of late Romantic and early Victorian feminine poets. Thus, as I did with Hemans in the previous chapter, in this chapter I will read Landon’s life, work, and critical reception as stages in her construction of the figure of the sentimental poetess.
Two problems dominate the scholarship surrounding “L.E.L.” First, it can be difficult to unravel the biographical and poetic myths that surround Landon, and, second, because her poetry is so representative of sentimentality, it has proven difficult to establish the importance of her poetry to a larger literary canon that has been generally dismissive of sentimentality. However, without an understanding of Landon’s creative deployment of a sentimental feminine poetic identity in her poetry, we cannot develop a full picture of either the age in which she wrote or the influence she had on the poets and poetesses who followed her. Landon helped to create a poetic identity distinct from that presented by Felicia Hemans, and yet one that was rooted in the same idealization of passionate emotion and stylized sentimentality, and that sentimentality helped to shape the aesthetics and artistic ethics of the movements to follow. Without a fuller understanding of the identity Landon constructed for feminine poets, we can have no accurate picture of the social expectations placed upon those who followed and were, inevitably, influenced by her.

Perhaps more than that of any other poet of her day, Letitia Landon’s poetry is obsessed by its self-referential need to define the role of the poet. Poems by “L.E.L.” are peopled by medieval troubadours, Italian improvvisatori, and Greek lyricists, most of whom meet tragic ends, undone by love or by a physical and emotional inability to sustain their all-consuming poetic gifts. This chapter contends that the career of the poetess, as constructed by Landon, is based upon an aesthetics of consumption, in which the poet who functions as the arbiter of social, moral, and/or aesthetic virtue is destroyed by the very gift that sustains her. Landon’s poetesses are always already doomed, for she

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2 Again, I see “role” as having a double purpose here—it represents both the socio-historical function of the poet and the theatrical part he/she is meant to perform.
situates them as practitioners of a self-consuming art—to be a successful poet in Landon’s artistic universe requires draining one’s own poetic talent until it is entirely consumed, a process that the poet rarely survives. Landon’s feminine poet can be seen as an incarnation of the sexually fallen woman, whose inevitable doom is the consequence of ecstatic triumph. Like the fallen woman, Landon’s poet is shut out of full communion with her society, and, as is the case with Hemans’s poetesses, deprived of true companionship, the poetess dies of emotional starvation. Worst of all, there is no promise of an afterlife and very little of Hemans’s belief in the persistence of memory. Landon’s world is a transitory one, in which the memorial seems to last little longer than the life it seeks to memorialize.

While self-consumption is the dominant mode of the poetic identity put forth in Landon’s poetry, it is also the mode adopted by her society to describe Landon’s own existence. Because her death was apparently foreshadowed in her poetry, that same poetry came to be read as strictly autobiographical, and Landon herself became one of her own tragic heroines. Her biography thus aligned inextricably with her poetry, Landon’s posthumous critical fate was deeply complicated by the circumstances of her death, to the extent that the memory of the life and career of “poor L.E.L.,” as both her admirers and detractors would call her, would come to be defined solely by the manner and the tragedy of her mysterious death at the age of 36. As Landon herself knew all too well in her lifetime, death and sex sell, and the intertwined possibilities of sexual transgression and suicidal despair became her lasting legacy, coloring not only the memory of the individual, but the subsequent readings of her poetry, as well.
In their biographies, autobiographies and “personal reminiscences,” some of which were published decades after Landon’s death, her friends and acquaintances still speculated not only on that death, but upon the accusations of sexual misconduct that had undermined her reputation and soured more than one of her relationships throughout the 1820s and 1830s. The two most important biographies, both of which sought to restore Landon’s reputation, were written by her friends—Emma Roberts, who had lived in the same boarding house as Landon for several years, wrote a brief memoir of Landon in 1839, and Laman Blanchard, Landon’s literary executor, published *The Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.* in 1842. Later in the nineteenth century, the biographies and autobiographies of Landon’s acquaintances would often contain brief discussions of “poor L.E.L.,” but the only one to engage in an extended and semi-reliable\(^3\) discussion of her life, character, and writings was William Jerdan, Landon’s mentor, patron, and lover, in his *Autobiography* (1853). These “memorials” of Landon were devoted not to reading her work through her life or her life through her work,\(^4\) but rather to firmly separating her character from the image she presented in her poetry. Many of the later autobiographies that recall Landon’s life, such as that in S. C. Hall’s *Retrospective of a Long Life* (1883), are more interested in unraveling the mystery of her death rather than examining the circumstances of her life or her writings.

The twentieth century has been no less guilty than the previous one of preserving Landon’s biography at the cost of her work. Landon, or, rather, the mystery of her death, has been the subject of three fictionalized biographies since the turn of the nineteenth century: D. E. Enfield’s *L.E.L.: A Mystery of the Thirties* (1928), Helen Ashton’s *Letty*

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\(^3\) Jerdan’s reliability is suspect for a variety of reasons, not least of which is his vested interest in framing his relationship with Landon as that of a father and a patron, and not as that of a lover.

\(^4\) I would argue that the memorials and memoirs of Felicia Hemans take this approach.
Landon (1953), and Clyde Chantler’s *Eight Weeks: A Novel* (1965). Only over the past fifteen years—thanks to the work of F. J. Sypher, Glennis Stephenson Byron, Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess, Tricia Lootens, and, most recently, Cynthia Lawford—has Landon’s status as a legitimate and interesting poet received any serious and unapologetic scholarly attention.

Landon’s revival, like that of Hemans, owes much to the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s. In many ways, Landon is the easier of the two figures to reconcile with Second Wave feminist analysis, particularly given the evident sexuality of many of her doomed heroines and her own unconventional life. Germaine Greer, in the inaugural issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, encouraged this revival with her reading of Landon as a poet thwarted and victimized by the establishment, whose potential, according to Greer, surpassed her productions. After Greer, whose thesis on Landon was expanded significantly in her *Slip-Shod Sibyls* (1995), Landon was considered in some depth in Angela Leighton’s *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992) and Anne K. Mellor’s *Romanticism & Gender* (1993), though these critics, like Greer, continued to read Landon as an aborted poet, whose contributions to women’s poetry were, in the end, largely negative.

Thus, despite the work of earlier feminist critics—which helped revive Landon’s name, if not her critical cachet—Letitia Landon remains a troubling figure for several

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6 Though Greer’s treatment of Landon is a genuine attempt to place her in literary history, the already-shaky scholarship of *Slip-Shod Sibyls* (she misspells Whittington Landon’s name throughout) is further undermined by a number of baseless and distracting assumptions that undermine her argument. To select just one particularly outrageous example, Greer blithely declares that Landon, like her heroines, probably died a virgin—a noble attempt to salvage Landon’s reputation, perhaps, but one that assumes Landon’s marriage, about which we know very little, was not only loveless but unconsummated. (*Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection, and the Woman Poet* [London: Viking, 1995], 264.)
reasons. First, Landon criticism lacks the equivalent of the handful of devoted scholars who have established Felicia Hemans’s importance, particularly as the majority of literary scholars interested in Landon (with the notable exception of F. J. Sypher, who has devoted much of his career to making Landon’s work accessible again) have sought instead to illuminate the “real” woman behind the mask of “L.E.L.,” rather to focus on her poetry. Scholars remain fascinated by her life and death, and it is tempting, especially in a celebrity-obsessed age like our own, to become biographers rather than critics, or to be critics only in the hope of uncovering the missing pieces of her biography. (This is not to undermine the importance of biography. Cynthia Lawford’s recent work in uncovering Landon’s secret illegitimate children by William Jerdan proves just how much remains to be done to untangle the mysteries of Landon’s life.  

Second, while literary biographies are undeniably useful in formulating our understanding of the extent to which Landon created and enacted a public persona in the form of “L.E.L.,” we still lack strong analytic readings of her poetry. In part I attribute this lack to the fact that Landon’s poetry, even more than that of Hemans, is of an especially flowery cast, and can be frankly unpalatable to the modern reader, making it difficult, at first, to justify her critical importance. However, her poetry’s unfashionable nature should not stop serious critics from examining the key contributions she does make, particularly in her conception of the feminine poet.

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7 For examples of this, see Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L.E.L.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) and Cynthia Lawford, “The Literary Life and London Worlds of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, a Poet Performing in an Age of Sentiment” (doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2001). Although both Stephenson and Lawford offer insightful readings of Landon’s poetry, their focus is on the biography.

Though I do delve into biographical analysis, in part because Landon is still relatively unknown and thus some background is necessary, and also because she, like Hemans, found herself performing the role she created, this chapter is not meant to function as a literary biography; Cynthia Lawford’s 2001 dissertation, “The Early Life and London Worlds of Letitia Elizabeth Landon,” builds admirably upon the foundation offered by the earlier work of Germaine Greer and Glennis (Stephenson) Byron, and offers a much fuller look at Landon’s life as an author than I can present here. Rather, my chapter looks to some of Landon’s public and private writings—her criticism, poems, and letters—to analyze the way in which she uses both her fame and her rejections of that fame to build a public image of a poetic figure whose career is based upon incipient destruction through self-consumption. In other words, I see biography here as a means to an end—Landon’s personal circumstances and her reaction to them illustrate the ways in which her experience of fame may have influenced her conception of the poetess. Finally, biography also serves to illuminate Landon’s posthumous reception, in which her poetics of consumption is retroactively inscribed upon Landon herself, overwriting her poetry until public memory of her becomes little more than a cautionary tale, the story of a fallen Jeanie who succumbed to the literary Goblin Market and died for her sins.⁹

**Life and Career**

The extent to which Landon’s poetry constitutes an emotional autobiography became a point of contention even before her death. The scandals that dogged Landon’s life were, in part, fueled by some readers’ belief that the more sexually-charged passages

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⁹ See Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market.*
of her poetry could not have been written by an “innocent” young woman. However, both during her life and after her death, her friends and supporters often wrote about her (as she wrote about herself) as a light-hearted and sensitive woman whose poetry reflected very little of her own experience or temperament. Though we might read a shadowed premonition of her own death in her tragic poetry, by all contemporary accounts Letitia Landon bore little real resemblance to the tragic poetesses and fading girls who grace the pages signed “L.E.L.” Rather, Landon was apparently witty, high-strung, and flirtatious, though somewhat lacking in discretion—and it was precisely these traits that led to her gradual exclusion from polite society.

Landon’s career was launched while she was still in her teens, when her family’s next-door-neighbor, William Jerdan, publisher of the Literary Gazette, began publishing her poetry. By 1822, the signature “L.E.L.” was appearing in multiple literary periodicals, its author’s productions devoured by popular audiences with a feverish eagerness that Edward Bulwer-Lytton later describes as not only adulatory but mercenary and sexual in its nature:

At that time, poetry was not yet out of fashion, at least with us of the cloister [at Trinity College or Trinity Hall, Cambridge]; and there was always, in the Reading Room of the Union, a rush every Saturday afternoon for the ‘Literary Gazette’ and an impatient anxiety to hasten at once to that corner of the sheet which contained the three magical letters of ‘L.E.L.’ And all of us praised the

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11 Laman Blanchard and Emma Roberts are particularly keen to drive home this argument.

12 Bulwer-Lytton attended Trinity College for a single term in 1822. He then transferred to Trinity Hall, which he left in 1825, and from which he obtained an ordinary degree in 1826.
verse, and all of us guessed as to the author. We soon learned it was a female, and our admiration was doubled, and our conjectures tripled. Was she young? Was she pretty? And—for there were some embryo fortune-hunters among us—was she rich?^{13}

Bulwer-Lytton later became a friend of Landon’s, and both he and Landon were prone to effusive praise of the other in their reviews, but his story of “L.E.L.’s” passionate following is borne out by the success of her publications.

Landon’s works were produced with a rapidity that has now become almost legendary. We need only to look at the publication dates of *The Improvisatrice* (1824), *The Troubadour* (1826), *The Golden Violet* (1827), and *The Venetian Bracelet* (1829), each of which contained multiple poems—several of them in more than one canto—to see an illustration of her urgent compositional haste, a fact which becomes more remarkable when we realize that Landon was also writing poems for the annuals, for the *New Monthly Magazine*, and for the *Literary Gazette*, as well as penning sharp-tongued reviews for the latter.

Throughout the 1820s, Landon focused her writing on reviews and poetry, particularly narrative poetry. While she borrows names and characters from classical myth and history, Landon’s poems exist largely outside of time in an idealized, pseudo-medieval, often nominally Italian setting, and the stories themselves have been read as variations on a similar theme—love lost or betrayed and memorialized in song. Though, as I will show later in this chapter, there is far less about erotic love in her poetry than her contemporary reviewers claimed, a significant number of her poems offered love as the impetus for the tragic action that ensued. In her less grim tales, for example, her dark-

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^{13} “Romance and Reality,” *New Monthly Magazine* 32 (December 1831): 546.
haired heroines usually die of broken hearts when her heroes fall nobly in battle, while the darker stories feature betrayed (and fallen) women wreaking vengeance on their unfaithful lovers, only to die of repentant sorrow afterward.

In the 1830s, Landon expanded her repertoire to include novels, of which she completed and published three—*Romance and Reality* (1831), *Francesca Carrara* (1834), and *Ethel Churchill* (1837). A fourth novel, *Lady Anne Granard*, was planned out by Landon, but was finished by a third party after her death and published posthumously, while two other novels, *Heir Presumptive* (1835) and *Duty and Inclination* (1838) list Landon as their “editor,” which here probably means ghost writer. She also composed one verse drama, *Castruccio Castrucani* (1837), and a number of short stories and romantic “tales,” many of which were published in the literary annuals, supplementing her poetic contributions thereto.

In his *Autobiography*, William Jerdan records the prices at which the copyrights for Landon’s volumes of poetry were purchased. For *The Improvisatrice*, she received £300; for *The Troubadour*, her third volume, she received a rather staggering £600. Jerdan estimates that she earned at least £2585 over the course of her twenty-year career, assuming she earned approximately £250 a year, though she lived, he claims, on no more than £120 per year. The difference between these two sums is probably partially explained by the fact that she was supporting her mother and brother, and may have been paying someone to raise her illegitimate children by Jerdan (if we assume that Lawford’s conclusions are correct). A brief note in the August 13, 1826, issue of the London *Sunday Times* also indicates that Landon suffered a financial loss in that year “by the break down
of the booksellers.”

With only this sketchy evidence, it is difficult to pinpoint Landon’s entire financial situation, but her extremely frugal lifestyle and the intense workload that she took on seem to indicate that, whatever Jerdan’s estimates may suggest, Landon was never far from the ragged edge of genteel poverty.

Landon herself was well aware that her poverty, along with her radical decision to live alone, apart from her surviving family and without chaperonage, contributed to the scandals that threatened to ruin her. When the rumors began in 1826, Landon herself was aware of the fact that her social status and living conditions had a direct effect upon public opinion of her. She wrote to Katherine Thomson:

It is only because I am poor, unprotected, and dependent on popularity, that I am a mark for all the gratuitous insolence and malice of idleness and ill-nature. And I cannot but feel deeply that had I been possessed of rank and opulence, either these

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14 “Odds and Ends,” *Sunday Times*, 13 August 1826.

15 In her memoir, *Landmarks of a Literary Life* (London: 1893), Camilla Toulmin Crosland, a fiction writer and member of Lady Blessington’s circle, asserts that, out of £400 Landon received for one book, she bought herself only a pair of gloves, and describes Landon saving up to purchase fabric for a new dress, only to be given a gift of the fabric by an acquaintance who could not stand to hear of L.E.L. deprived (103-4). The accounts of various other friends of Landon’s make it clear that she rarely had more than two dresses—clearly, her money was all being funneled elsewhere. Lawford implies that Jerdan may have deliberately mismanaged Landon’s finances, as a way of keeping her under his thumb. (“Early Life,” 286, 336.)

16 Her sister Elizabeth Jane died sometime between 1819 and 1825 and her father John in 1825. Her brother Whittington and her mother, Catherine, both survived her, but it appears that Landon’s relationship with her mother was complicated. (Lawford offers a full discussion of this relationship in Chapter XXX of her dissertation.) Landon’s earnings contributed to her mother’s support and to her brother’s schooling. After her father’s death, Landon lived first with her grandmother, Letitia Bishop, and then in rented rooms above the girls’ school she had once attended.

17 Thomson was a friend of Landon’s, as well as a historian and a novelist who, in the 1850s and 1860s, included Landon in several works of “society” history. Thomson co-wrote several of these texts with her son, under the names Grace and Philip Wharton. (Rosemary Mitchell, “Thomson, Katherine (1797–1862),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, October 2006, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27319 (accessed September 25, 2007).)
remarks had never been made, or if they had how trivial would their consequence have been to me.\(^{18}\)

The frustration evident here is reaffirmed throughout Landon’s poetry, as we will see later in the chapter. Her protagonists, most of whom are orphaned celebrities, repeatedly meditate upon their positions as solitary women in prurient societies upon whose approval their success relies.

Most modern critics, following Landon’s contemporary biographers, nearly all of whom ferociously defended her, have assumed that the rumors of sexual impropriety were baseless.\(^{19}\) However, in 2001 Cynthia Lawford uncovered, with a fair degree of certainty, what appears to be the truth behind the rumors—that Landon entered into a twelve-year affair with Jerdan in or around 1822, and during the 1820s bore three children by him.\(^{20}\)

Lawford, whose doctoral thesis, “The Literary Life and London Worlds of Letitia Elizabeth Landon: A Poet Performing in an Age of Sentiment,” is a new literary biography of Landon, reads Landon’s poetry as predominantly autobiographical, and argues that Landon even codes messages to William Jerdan in the texts of her poems themselves. As she conducted her research, Lawford was contacted by the descendants of Landon and Jerdan’s children, who offered family lore and letters as evidence of their claims. After reviewing their family letters and conducting extensive research into local birth records (along with careful tracing of Landon’s periodic absences from London),

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\(^{18}\) Landon to Katherine Thomson, [June 1826], in *Letters*, 28.

\(^{19}\) Those who did assume sexual involvement on Landon’s part often assumed that the other party was either Maginn or Jerdan. Stephenson, for example, argues that Landon was probably involved with Maginn, although she offers insufficient evidence for this claim (*Letitia Landon*, 49). Greer likewise implicates Maginn and Daniel Maclise, although she believes both relationships were little more than flirtations (*Slip-Shod Sibyls*, 302-307).

\(^{20}\) Lawford, “Diary,” 36.
Lawford identified Ella Stuart (b. circa 1823), Fred Stuart (b. 1825), and Laura Landon (b. 1829) as the offspring of Landon and Jerdan’s affair.  

Lawford’s discovery stands to invalidate over 150 years’ worth of biographical attempts to acquit Landon of the charges laid against her by her society. This has, of course, proven rather disconcerting for the modern critics who have banked on Landon’s innocence—F. J. Sypher, for instance, in his 2005 biography, rejects Lawford’s conclusions, arguing that further validation of her evidence is yet needed to confirm her claims. While I do not dispute the need for further research into and independent corroboration of Lawford’s discovery, Sypher’s refusal to consider the current evidence is characteristic of Landon critics’ discomfort with the way this revelation forces us to reevaluate our beliefs about Landon’s life and the position she held in her society.

Lawford’s argument rests not only on the potentially explicit sexuality of the poems, but on documentary evidence supplied by the descendents of Ella and Fred Stuart (Laura Landon died without issue). She also reevaluates the previously discredited testimonies of Landon’s contemporaries and detractors on the assumption that the insinuations of Landon’s sexual transgressions (and pregnancies) were true. Because this adds a layer to Landon’s existence that we have never before been able to access, Lawford’s discovery necessarily affects how we read certain parts of Landon’s poetry. The evident sexuality of many of her poems has usually been assumed by modern critics to be entirely fictional.

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22 Although Lawford’s evidence of Landon and Jerdan’s affair requires critics to reassess the widely-held convictions of Landon’s total innocence, it does not follow that Landon was thus embroiled in every affair of which she was accused. Because she had an affair with Jerdan, we must not then assume that she also entered into liaisons with Bulwer-Lytton, Maginn, or Maclise.

23 Greer’s assertion of Landon’s virginity comes to mind here.
but it was those poems’ same sexual/sensual awareness that encouraged the scandal-mongers of Landon’s own day.

Though her personal life became increasingly more difficult as her career progressed, Landon maintained her solitary household until she married in 1838, and in addition to novel-writing and poetry, took up the editorship of a number of literary annuals, including *Fisher’s Drawing-Room Scrapbook* (1832-1840, the final volume being completed by Mary Howitt with contributions by Landon), *The Easter Gift* (1832), *Heath’s Book of Beauty* (1833; the editorship was subsequently taken up by Lady Blessington), *The English Bijou Almanac* (1836-1839), and *Flowers of Loveliness* (1838). Landon composed nearly the entire contents of each of these volumes herself, a fact which highlights the frantic pace at which she worked.24

In 1836, Landon met George Maclean, and following a tumultuous long-distance courtship, was married to him in a secret ceremony in June of 1838.25 They sailed to Africa two months later, and by October, Landon was dead. Though the public focus on her death gradually eliminated the memory of her career, as I have indicated, she had several posthumous publications, including parts of *Lady Anne Granard*, her final novel, and a collection of late poetry entitled *The Zenana* (1839), to which was appended Emma

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24 This was not a standard method of editing the annuals. Lady Blessington and Mary Russell Mitford each took the less onerous route of soliciting submissions from various poets. However, Landon’s method no doubt increased her revenue from each volume, since there was no need to pay for submissions. R. Shelton Mackenzie, quoting Edward Kenealy, asserts that one-fourth of the poems in the *Drawing Room Scrapbook* were, in fact, written by Maginn. (“Memoir of Dr. William Maginn, LL.D,” in *Miscellaneous Writings of the Late Dr. Maginn*, ed. Mackenzie [London: 1855], 5:lxxxiv.) However, the only evidence in support of this is Maginn’s word, and given what we know of Landon’s writing habits (and Maginn’s rather dubious character), it seems unlikely that this assertion is true.

25 Mackenzie writes, “It is said that she then [after the Forster incident] made up her mind to accept the first matrimonial offer made to her—that, in this mood, she was wooed and won by the late Captain Maclean” (“Memoir of Dr. William Maginn,” lxxv). This odd claim, here made by someone with no connection to Landon whatsoever, is characteristic of biographers’ struggle to justify the apparently ill-suited marriage.
Roberts’s memoir of Landon’s life, and the title poem of which was a reprinting of the experimental contents of Landon’s *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrapbook* for 1834.\(^{26}\)

In 1842, nearly four years after Landon’s death, Laman Blanchard published his *Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.*, which, for good or ill, is the closest thing we have to an authorized or authoritative biography of Landon. Blanchard goes out of his way to exonerate George Maclean in his wife’s death, and to eliminate the possibility of suicide on Landon’s part. By including a number of her private letters, as well as testimony from Landon’s brother Whittington, Blanchard’s biography made Landon’s life and death immediately available to the public in ways it had never been before. However, since its publication, the *Life and Literary Remains* has proven a vexed source of information; Blanchard conceals as much as he reveals, and that which he reveals is often left unexplained or deliberately vague.\(^{27}\)

Ultimately, despite her tremendous success during her lifetime, and despite her friends’ attempts to keep her legacy alive after her death, by the 1870s, “L.E.L.’s” poetry had faded so far from the public consciousness that she had become, as we see in the late memoirs and autobiographies of those who knew her, little more than a literary curiosity, whose fame needed to be explained to wider audiences.

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\(^{26}\) In 1833, Landon attempted to write the *Scrapbook* for 1834 (the annuals were published in December, but were dated for the coming year) in the same manner in which she wrote her earlier poems *The Improvisatrice, The Troubadour*, and *The Golden Violet*. Rather than allowing each poem/picture pairing to stand alone, she linked them as portions of a single, multi-voiced text. The experiment seems to have failed, however, for the following year Landon returned to the standard, stand-alone poetry that characterizes the annuals.

\(^{27}\) Cynthia Lawford accuses Blanchard of “whitewashing” Landon’s past, an accusation that seems justified, given Blanchard’s laudatory writing.
Fame and Infamy

As a public figure in a time of increasingly strict socio-sexual mores, Landon struggled to maintain a life and reputation untainted by either the dubious moralities of her poetic worlds or the expectations placed upon young, unmarried women of her day. Despite the protestations of Landon’s friends and peers that none of the emotions expressed in her poetry can be read as autobiographical, I would argue, following on the arguments of Cynthia Lawford, that in some of her heroines—the eponymous speaker of “Erinna” (1828), for example, and especially Eulalia of “A History of the Lyre” (1829)—we see some of Landon’s frustration with the demands of fame expressed in poetic form. This is not to suggest that either character is an avatar of her creator, but rather that Landon allowed some of her anger and hurt at the negative side of her reception to seep into her writing, as, indeed, any good poet is likely to do. As to her friends’ rejections of this possibility, modern critics should keep in mind that those friends’ first goal was protecting Landon. Acknowledging that her poems expressed any of her own sentiments or experiences might have further encouraged the rumors that had nearly destroyed her. Whatever else she was or may have done, Letitia Landon, as all of her friends and biographers have agreed, was and needed to be a consummate performer. Lawford argues that, “to possess any kind of respectability, Landon had to deceive just about everyone she encountered from the moment her affair with Jerdan began. Her observed life seemed to falsify her work, her very interest in tales of love.”

Lawford goes on to argue compellingly, however, that Landon’s apparent propensity for constant and complicated social performance does not preclude some measure of emotional truthfulness in her poetry. Of course, whether Landon’s poems are emotionally autobiographical or not has

28 “‘Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove,’” para 14.
little bearing on my reading of her construction of the role of the feminine poet in society. Indeed, critics’ persistent inability to unravel the “real” Landon or L.E.L. strengthens my own argument that both her life and her work can be read as performative and constructed.

Landon, unlike Felicia Hemans, was an active participant in increasing and maintaining her public visibility. Landon, who achieved fame in the same year as Byron’s death, was at the time an ideal candidate to fill the void left in celebrity culture by the loss of Byron. She was young, attractive, and talented, and with the considerable clout of William Jerdan and the Literary Gazette behind her, Landon could not help but be a force to be reckoned with—as a poet, as a critic, and, to a lesser extent, as a public figure.

If Bulwer-Lytton’s description of his university cohorts’ enthusiasm for Landon’s poetry and their curiosity about her life can be relied upon, even from her earliest career, Landon was the object of intense public scrutiny. However, like Bulwer-Lytton’s fellow students, the reviewers were often more interested in “L.E.L.’s” sex and youth than in her poetry, and with a few exceptions critics made as much of her biographical circumstances as they did of her poetry.29 While the public fascination with her life certainly helped to bolster Landon’s career, it also had the unfortunate effect of placing her—a young, unmarried woman who spent a great deal of unchaperoned time with older men—in

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29 John Arthur Roebuck in The Westminster Review, for example, was loath to treat Landon with kid gloves on account of her sex, and made a great show of treating her as “an equal, because we consider her an equal; we shall repress nothing out of regard to her weakness, because we do not consider her weak” (quoted in McGann and Riess, 303), while Blackwood’s, whose review was penned by none other than William Maginn, prefaced its discussion of The Improvisatrice with the disclaimer, “Now it is not because she is a very pretty girl, and a very good girl, that we are going to praise her poems, but because we like them” (190). By calling attention to her gender and appearance, even as Maginn professes to disregard it, Blackwood’s review automatically assumes a certain patronizing stance towards this “good little girl.”
untenable circumstances. The more her fame grew, the more obvious it became that she was not living a socially ideal life.

While, as we have seen, Felicia Hemans (in this respect perhaps savvier than Landon) equated her fame with exposure—and, thus, with vulnerability and the constant threat of attack—Landon’s early experience of fame might be better characterized as “display,” with all of its connotations of willing, even eager, performance on the part of the celebrity. Though later in her career Landon, too, came to see this display as detrimental to her health, her reputation, and her poetry, for the first several years of her career, she seems to have greatly enjoyed, encouraged, and even exploited the attention her fame brought to her.

In her letters to family and friends from the early and mid-1820s, Landon sounds predominantly amused by the electric response her celebrity seems to trigger in those around her. She reports her encounters with the strange effects of fame with the dry humor that characterizes many of her private prose writings. To Katherine Thomson, for example, Landon writes of a dinner party she attended while visiting her uncle in the countryside late in 1825:

> It was properly disseminated that I was “the London Authoress.” The consequence was that, seated by the only young man I had beheld, I acted upon him like an air-pump, suspending his very breath and motion; and my asking him for a mince-pie, a dish of which I had been for some time surveying with longing eyes, acted like an electric shock—and his start not a little discomposed a no-age-
at-all, silk-vested spinster, whose plate was thereby deposited in her lap—and last not least, in the hurry, he forgot to help me.  

Again, compared to the thinly-veiled anxiety and sense of dejection that we see in the recounting of similar situations in Hemans’s letters, Landon here is positively cheerful over her companion’s star-struck awe. She evidently sees no indication that her dining companion finds “the London Authoress” in any way monstrous, but instead locates his discomfort solely in her fame, irrespective of her femininity.

Landon’s experience of fame, however, was rarely as positive as the above letter implies. As I have already said, her reputation was the victim of several highly public scandals, and in order to fully understand Landon’s articulation of fame and its effects upon the feminine poet, we need first to examine the content and effects of these scandals.

Landon was still very young and new to fame when the rumors of her sexual liaison with Jerdan were first published in 1826. That year saw the publication, first, of The Ass, and later of its successor The Wasp, both of which were dedicated to satirizing the literary establishment as unflinchingly and ruthlessly as possible, and both of which placed Landon squarely in their cross-hairs. Prior to the emergence of The Ass, however, the first known rumors (according to Lawford) appeared in a far more reputable publication—the London Sunday Times. The Sunday Times was careful, of course, not to name names in its scandal-mongering, but its references to an “English Sappho” and her dalliance with “a literary man, the father of several children” are hard to apply to

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30 Landon to Katherine Thomson, Christmas 1825, in Letters, 23.
31 “Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove,” para. 35.
anyone else. Here, I am primarily interested the tabloids, for two reasons. First, they used Landon’s own literary style to drive their attacks, thus subtly implicating her as, literally, the author of her own ruin, and, second, they were able to be far less circumspect in their attacks by including both Landon and Jerdan by name.

The Ass was the marginally subtler of the two tabloids; its attack on Landon consisted only of two devastating imitations of her poetry. It was not what was said in these poems that implicated Landon in scandal; rather, it was the way the poems were phrased. In the April 29 issue, for example, verses entitled “The Charms of Nature, by L.E.L.” appeared among the “rejected articles” on the final page of the paper, with the comment that “Jerdan would not have [rejected them].” The poem is a crude and sexually suggestive pastiche of Landon’s style, which mocks both her effusiveness and her bourgeois background. For example, the first lines of the second stanza, “The spreading poplar throws its shade / For many rods around,” intimates a wide sexual availability on

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32 “Sapphics and Erotics,” The Sunday Times 5 March 1826.
33 Lawford has a fuller discussion of the Sunday Times pieces in her article “‘Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove’: L.E.L.’s Wooing of Sex, Death, Pain, and the Editor,” para. 35.
34 In its entirety, the poem reads:

The May is green upon the thorn,
   The Guelder-Rose is blue;
And, from its golden cup, at morn,
   The Hare-bell drinks the dew;

   The spreading Poplar throws its shade
   For many rods around;
   The Vi’let loves the open glade;
   The Heath the tangled ground;

   The Apple-tree with snowy top;
   The peach like burnished gold;
False Love, that like a mutton chop,
   Is flung aside when cold;

   The hail that’s but the heavens in grief,
   Congealing tears of rain;
   The true love, like a rump of beef,
   That’s cut and come again.

the part of its purported author, particularly given the bizarre use of the word “rods” in
the second line of the stanza. Similarly, the closing lines, “The true love, like a rump of
beef / That’s cut and come again,” with their vulgar pun on “come” and absurd
comparisons of love to decidedly plebian cuts of meat, at once denigrate Landon’s
poetry, her middle-class background, and her sexual purity.

The tabloid’s second poem attributed to “L.E.L.,” which appeared in the May 27
issue, was less crude than the first, but rather more explicit in its sexualization of
Landon’s poetry. Entitled “Bower of Love,” it ran a mere eight lines:

Mid gentle swells, and lonely dells,

Young love has built a bower,

And cover’d it with the white privet,

To shade the sultry hour.

And all the day, as the fair maids stray,

This bower is in their mind,

And the swains so true, they love it too

With a love not much behind.\(^\text{36}\)

It is difficult to know where to begin in parsing the meaning of this text, since so much of
it seems self-evident, and yet, like the best of rumor-mongering publications, when one
looks closely at it, it appears to say nothing at all. The “gentle swells and lonely dells” of
the first line suggest the “gentle swells” of breasts, while the privet, with its illicit
connotations represented in the Victorian language of flowers, where it signifies
“prohibition,” shades “the sultry hour.” “Sultry,” with its combination of dampness and

\(^{35}\) In 1826, “come” was already used as slang for sexual orgasm; the OED locates the first such usage
in the seventeenth century.

\(^{36}\) “Bower of Love. By L.E.L.” The Ass, 27 May 1826, 144.
heat laden with sexual connotation, opens the possibility that the privet shades the lovers’
trysts from the outside world, or perhaps the outside world from the lovers, and not from
anything so mundane as the noon sun. “[A]s the fair maids stray” is, perhaps, the most
obvious line here, while the closing lines seem to play off of a specific sexual position or,
possibly, a sexual taboo.

It was either these verses or the piece in the *Sunday Times* that Katherine
Thomson warned Landon about in the late spring or early summer of 1826. We do not
have Thomson’s letter, but we do have Landon’s reply, which constitutes a frustrated
(Lawford refers to it as “wonderfully shallow” defense of her own poetry:

> When my “Improvvisatrice” came out, nobody discovered what is now alleged
against it. I did not take up a review, a magazine, a newspaper, but if it named my
book it was to praise “the delicacy,” “the grace,” “the purity of feminine feeling”
it displayed. . . . But success is an offence not to be forgiven. To every petty
author, whose works have scarce made his name valuable as an autograph, or
whose unsold editions load the bookseller’s shelves—I am a subject of envy—and
what is envy but a name for hatred? With regard to the immoral and improper
tendency of my productions, I can only say that it is not my fault if there are
minds which, like negroes, cast a dark shadow on a mirror, however clear and pure in
itself.

After this letter, Landon seems to have let the matter of the verses rest, but the tabloids
had not finished with her. *The Ass* finished its run in July of 1826, and in late September

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37 Lawford indicates that Thomson was referring to the *Sunday Times*, which is certainly more
plausible, as it is unlikely Thomson would have admitted to reading *The Ass* (“Thou shalt bid thy fair hands
rove,” para. 36).
38 “Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove,” para. 37.
39 Landon to Thomson, June 1826, in Letters, 28.
it was replaced by *The Wasp*, which in its second issue printed an attack on Jerdan, in which Landon was directly maligned:

He has been mainly assisted in his poetical efforts by his *literary* and *personal* friend, Miss *Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, whose contributions have been productive of as much comfort to the *Literary Gazette* as her society has been to its editor. This young lady is a most useful and indefatigable contributor, and the salubrious air of Sloane-street and Brompton-row (between which places she passes her time), has been of peculiar advantage both to her *mental* and *bodily* health. With respect to the latter, it is a singular circumstance, that altho’ she was a short time since as thin and aerial as one of her own sylphs, she in the course of a few months acquired so perceptible a degree of *embonpoint*, as to induce her kind friend Jerdan to recommend a change of air, lest her health and strength should be affected. She followed his advice, and strange to say, such was the effect of even two months absence from Brompton, that she returned as *thin* and poetical as ever.  

The barely-veiled references to an affair between Jerdan and Landon and an apparent pregnancy provides one of Cynthia Lawford’s pieces of evidence for the existence of the couple’s illegitimate children.  

Certainly, if Landon successfully—or mostly successfully—hid a long-term affair, three pregnancies, and the resulting children from an inquisitive and invasive society, she must be praised as a consummate actress. And, if her poetry offers any

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41 Lawford analyzes this publication and discusses Landon’s whereabouts in October 1826 in greater detail in her “‘Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove’: L.E.L.’s Wooing of Sex, Pain, Death and the Editor,” which examines much of the scandal’s evidence in detail.
insight at all into her experience, it seems clear that, by the late 1820s, she had developed a distaste for her own duplicity. We see this reflected in several of her poems from the time, including the highly important “Erinna” and “A History of the Lyre,” which I will discuss in fuller detail later. Here, I wish to look more closely at one of Landon’s rare lyric poems, which not only reveals a self-disgust in the voice of the speaker, but, unlike “Erinna” or “A History of the Lyre,” attacks the society in which deceptiveness is not only encouraged, but required.

Landon rarely wrote in an unmediated first-person voice. That is to say, most of her poetry belongs to the dramatic or narrative mode, with clearly delineated characters. Of course, nowhere can we turn to a poem and assert that its speaker represents the voice of Letitia Landon, because nearly all of her poems are clearly ventriloquized. However, in both the mediated poems like “Erinna” and “A History of the Lyre” and some lyric poetry from this period, we can occasionally infer that the speaker is rather closer to the author than the speakers of poems like The Improvisatrice or The Troubadour.

Published with “A History of the Lyre” in The Venetian Bracelet (1829), “Lines of Life” disrupts Landon’s usual poetic displacement by dropping back into the first-person voice of what appears to be a poetess disgusted by her own attempts to fit into a hypocritical and duplicitous society. Though it takes on a first-person voice, the story it tells is the same story we find in “Erinna” and lurking behind Eulalia’s tale in “A History of the Lyre”—the same story, in fact, that seems to dominate Landon’s poetry in the late 1820s. The speaker of “Lines of Life” casts herself as one detestable performer among a society of detestable performers—“I live among the cold, the false, / And I must seem like them; / And such I am, for I am false / As those I most condemn” (lines 10-14). The
self-loathing speaker might well be speaking for Eulalia or even, if we wish to risk inferring the biographical through the poetical, for Landon herself. After twelve stanzas of self-recrimination and impotent anger, the speaker turns and declares, “Surely I was not born for this!” (line 49). 42

This turn to a higher purpose and the speaker’s claim that “song has touched my lips with fire” and, later, her desire to know if “my charmed chords / Wake to the morning light of fame / And breathe again my words,” along with the poem’s ballad meter form, require us to read this speaker as the voice of a poet, and a poet whose transgressions against her art have forced a revaluation of her career.

Though Stephenson reads this poem as Landon (the woman) taunting her audiences from behind the mask of L. E. L., 43 it seems to me that this poem is at least partially reflective of Landon’s own feelings, not just because it anticipates some of the sentiments she will voice in some of her letters and critical writings slightly later in her career, but because it deals with a theme that she cannot seem to escape at this stage. If Lawford is correct, by the time “Lines of Life” was published, Landon was preparing to give birth to (or had just recently given birth to) her youngest child, Laura Landon. That this child, alone of the three offspring of Jerdan and Landon, shares one of her parents’ names, perhaps indicates that Landon was growing weary of hiding her double life. 44

If this reaches too far in biographical speculation, then it is harder to ignore Landon’s increasingly bitter tone towards fame in her later critical writings. In a signed

42 This and all subsequent references to Landon’s poetry, unless otherwise noted, come from Poetical Works of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, “L. E. L.,” 1873, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1990).
44 Lawford notes in the “Diary” that it was Laura Landon who declared Letitia Landon to be her mother at her baptism in 1850; it is possible that Laura took her mother’s name then.
review for the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1836, Landon writes, “Fame is but a beautiful classical delusion. The inspiration of the poet is like the inspiration of the Delphic oracles: what was once held divine is now confessed the promptings of an evil spirit mocking the votaries of whom it made victims.” This attitude towards fame dominates much of her writing—prose and poetry alike—in the 1830s, and bleeds over into her personal writings as well.

Landon’s attitude towards fame was, perhaps, most drastically altered by the second round of scandals, which took place in the mid-1830s. The details of the scandals are unclear, but it appears that Landon’s fiancé, John Forster (later the biographer of Dickens), was alerted to rumors of sexual misconduct on Landon’s part, and confronted Landon with them in 1835, spurring her to break off their engagement. Although these rumors were not as widely-publicized as those of the 1820s, the appearance of Landon in Grantley Berkeley’s *My Life and Recollections*, in which he paints Landon as the victim of Maginn’s seduction and blackmail in order to justify his own fatal attack on James

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46 What we do know is that in 1835 anonymous letters were sent to Landon’s friends, accusing her of conducting an affair with a married man. (In retrospect, it seems likely that the married man in question was Jerdan.) Landon wrote several letters to friends about the situation—the longest of which, to Anna Maria Hall, cites Mrs. Maginn’s claim that Landon wrote twenty-four love letters to Daniel Maclise. According to Landon, Mrs. Maginn then began to claim that Landon had written love letters to her husband (Landon to Anna Maria Hall, no date, in *Letters*, 140). Based on this letter, it has been assumed that Mrs. Maginn was responsible for the poison-pen letters that Landon’s friends received. Michael Sadleir, in *Bulwer and his Wife: A Panorama* (London: Constable & Co, 1931), attempts to debunk this story by pointing out that Maginn and his wife were on excellent terms in the 1830s, and that whatever interest Maginn may have had in Landon seems to have faded long before he married. (Mackenzie claims that Maginn proposed to Landon in 1821 but was refused [“Memoir of Dr. William Maginn, LL.D,” lxxxiii].) Sadleir does not, however, discount the possibility of an early affair between Maginn and Landon, though he does attempt to exonerate Bulwer-Lytton (and, to a certain extent, Landon) in the whole matter. (See Sadleir’s Appendix V for a detailed and convincing account of the scandal and Bulwer-Lytton’s relationship with Landon.)
47 Landon claimed to be completely unaware of the rumors, and broke off the engagement, she said, because Forster had brought them to her notice and asked her to refute them. (Landon to Bulwer-Lytton, no date, in *Letters*, 138-39).
Fraser and his duel with Maginn,⁴⁸ may indicate that the rumors were more public than Landon had hoped. In any case, the 1830s scandal is important not because of its details, but because it seems to have been the last straw for Landon. Gone is the cheerful attitude towards fame she demonstrated in the 1820s. In its place, no doubt encouraged by her constant exposure and its effects, is a creeping and pervasive despair that appears in both her letters and her prose writings. To Anna Maria Hall, for example, Landon wrote shortly after the Forster affair:

> I have long since discovered that I must be prepared for enmity I have never provoked, and unkindness I have little deserved. God knows that if when I do go into society, I meet with more of homage and attention that most, it is dearly bought. What is my life? One day of drudgery after another; difficulties incurred for others, which have ever pressed upon me beyond health, which every year, by one severe illness after another, shows is tasked beyond its strength; envy, malice, and all uncharitableness—these are the fruits of a successful literary career for a woman.⁴⁹

Landon follows this with a rather disingenuous comment on her inability to stave off the scandals that continue to plague her. Though she claims, “I can do nothing. It is impossible to lead a more quiet life, or less to provoke personal animadversion, than I do,” it is clear from several contemporary accounts that Landon was not nearly as quiet or innocuous as she claims to have been.

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⁴⁹ Landon to Anna Maria Hall, 1836, in *Letters*, 141.
Henry Fothergill Chorley, a critic for the Athenaeum from 1830 until 1868, describes Landon’s influence as a reviewer thus: “it would not be easy to sum up the iniquities of criticism (the word is not too strong), perpetrated . . . by a young writer and a woman, who was in the grasp of Mr. Jerdan, and who gilt or blackened all writers of the time, as he ordained.” Though Chorley absolves Landon of some of her guilt by painting her as the puppet of Jerdan and Maginn, he adds that “it is hard to conceive any one, by flimsiness and by flippancy, made more distasteful to those who did not know her, than was Miss Landon.” Chorley is an admittedly biased source; the fact that his anger towards Jerdan and his Gazette lingers nearly twenty years after the latter’s death indicates that Chorley was more than willing to maintain a lifelong grudge against his former rivals. However, his is one of the few potentially reliable contemporary accounts of Landon from an outsider to her circle, and if Chorley is immoderate in his anger, that anger nevertheless reveals the power Landon wielded in the literary community. If Chorley’s response is anything to judge his contemporaries by, it is entirely probable that Landon, as William Jerdan’s critically powerful and socially vulnerable protégée, attracted a great deal of personal enmity through her reviews and, probably, the success of her poetry.

I would theorize that performance, for Landon, was not merely a survival skill, but a vital part of her literary career. I also believe it may have been intrinsic, and she could no more stop playing a role than she could stop writing. However, the endless role-

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50 He was, of course, also a friend of Hemans and her biographer.
52 Chorley, “Miss Landon,” 9.
53 Camilla Crosland describes Chorley as “strictly honourable and reliable, but eccentric and ‘crotchety’ . . . But, above all things, he was ‘a fine gentleman’” (Landmarks of a Literary Life, 101).
playing seems to have taken a horrifying toll. In addition to the frequent illnesses that seem to be the lot of poets (including, in Landon’s case, what appears to have been epilepsy\textsuperscript{54}), descriptions of Landon by her contemporaries sound disturbingly like modern accounts of bipolar disorder. She is described as both intensely high-spirited and prone to depression; Chorley, for example, describes her bursting into “a flood of hysterical tears” while meeting with him.\textsuperscript{55} Leighton suggests, and I would agree, that Landon’s apparent emotional instability indicates a mind strained and overwhelmed by the demands of her career.\textsuperscript{56} Unfortunately, this same instability is part of the mythos of the poetic temperament; it is entirely possible that it was yet another act in Landon’s one-woman show.

**Consuming Passions**

In order to fully understand how Landon presented a model of the sentimental feminine poet, and how self-consumption plays into that model, we need first to understand the poetic and aesthetic project that she theorized in her critical writings and letters. The aesthetics and poetics of sentimentality are inseparable from Landon’s conception of contemporary poetic identity, in part because she defines the poet within the bounds of emotion and its effect on society.

Landon’s private writings on the subject of her sentimentality suggest that she rarely took her project too seriously. For example, to she writes Richard Bentley in 1833, that “autumn, when people have nothing to do but be melancholy in the country, is the

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\textsuperscript{54} McGann and Riess, Introduction to *Selected Writings*, 16.
\textsuperscript{55} “Miss Landon,” 11.
\textsuperscript{56} Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, 52-53.
very time for a writer like myself, who endeavours to make them yet more miserable.”

Similarly, in a letter to T. Crofton Croker, she refers to sentiment as “the court card of the poet’s hand,” suggesting that she is well aware of sentimentality’s ability to trump its audience’s emotional reactions. This admittedly tongue-in-cheek approach to sentimentality notwithstanding, Landon clearly saw important social benefits to the production and deployment of sentimental literature in the hands of a feminine poet.

Emma Francis argues in “Letitia Landon: Public Fantasy and the Private Sphere,” that Landon’s poetry constitutes “a kind of pedagogy of heterosexual romance, as a model of the value of loving in ‘actual life’ as well as in literature,” a formulation that allows Landon space to function outside of the ideology of poetic domesticity that characterizes Hemans’s work. While I find Francis’s use of “pedagogy” to describe Landon’s poetic project extremely productive, I believe she is, like many critics before her, reducing Landon’s poetry to its romantic components. However, Francis’s argument helpfully draws upon the erotics of Landon’s poetry, suggesting that Landon’s space for femininity rests upon her dependence on the erotic elements of a woman’s life. The erotics of her poetry are permissible, Francis claims, because Landon relies upon her supposed sexual innocence to support her erotic sentimentality:

Landon stakes her poetics on sexuality but simultaneously flaunts her own innocence of the passions she depicts, the fact that her own initiation into them has yet to take place. Her attraction for her early nineteenth-century readers lay at

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57 Landon to Bentley, 17 September, 1833, in Letters, 93.
58 Landon to Croker, 1833, in Letters, 96.
least partly in the way in which she arouses but then holds off sexuality, her strategy of hyperinvestment in and eroticization of her own virginity.\textsuperscript{59}

This strategy reinscribes the existence Landon’s performative abilities—she acts the coquette in her poetry even as she paints herself as a wounded innocent in her letters and, more obliquely, in her criticism.

Francis’s argument, despite its limitations, can offer a useful way of positioning Landon’s poetics within the limited feminized discourses available to women writers of the 1820s and 1830s. Hemans had already appropriated the domestic for her own writing, so Landon, whose style and content of writing necessitated a feminine persona, thus established herself within the realm of virginal erotics and erotic virginity, a position that justifies her poetic success among those possessed of what William Jerdan might call “the breast of youth”—her flirtation with destruction (both personal and professional) is, arguably, designed to appeal to younger and more unconstrained audiences.

How, then, does this eroticized femininity relate to the consumptive nature of Landon’s poetic identity? In many ways, this is easier to address than the relationship between domesticity and poetry that Hemans relied upon. I would argue that the common critical mistake of assuming that Landon only wrote about love stems, in part, from the erotic possibilities that exist in her depiction of the muse/artist dyad—even when that eroticism is strictly and destructively narcissistic. The poetess or feminine poet is both muse and artist, creator and created; poetesses, as we have seen in the \textit{Dublin University Magazine} review of Hemans’s work, were assigned the position of muses to the larger society. Given the erotic nature of the muse/artist relationship, which is always construed as a female/male dyad, the artistic woman becomes a dangerous and unstable figure in

the traditional conception of the role of the poet. In Landon’s day, mainstream society had yet to recognize the same-sex desires that run throughout Sapphic poetry; lacking this framework with which to understand the possibilities of female muse/female artist, there remains only one role. Women artists are secondary to their male peers not because they lack talent, but because they must always serve as muse even as they struggle with their own art.

This struggle, then, becomes self-consuming as the dyad turns in upon itself, the female artist reflexively drawing upon herself as muse. Since Landon’s muses and artists are not strictly female, but feminine, this dynamic remains intact even in the rare cases where her poets are embodied as men. The embodiment of Landon’s poets is somewhat secondary to her construction of their (or her own) poetic identity; however, as we will see when we come to Tennyson, male embodiment allows greater possibilities for escaping this self-consuming dyad.60

In the Preface to The Venetian Bracelet (1829), her fifth volume of poetry, Landon responds directly to criticisms leveled against her in the Westminster Review, which in an 1825 review of The Improvisatrice advised her “to free herself as much as possible from her poetical vocabulary, to nurse her poetical thoughts, [and] to avoid the subject of love” if she hoped that “her reputation as a poet should rest on a solid and permanent foundation.”61 The Westminster Review shifted from advice to attack in 1827, with a long article accusing Landon of “preaching up this perfect subordination [of women], and of bestowing admiration upon those qualities which fit women for being

60 Landon’s The Troubadour, which I do not discuss in detail in this chapter, offers one such possibility. Because her poet-hero’s muse exists outside of himself—she is, in fact, a young woman of his acquaintance—he is able to enact one of Landon’s few happy endings.

useful and agreeable slaves; while those unfortunate attributes, which render the domination of men precarious, are visited with corresponding reprobation.”  

To these criticisms, Landon finally responds, defending her choice of subject matter in a passage that has become one of the most famous and useful for critics of feminized writing since the collection’s publication:

Believing as I do in the great and excellent influence of poetry, may I hazard the expression of what I have myself sometimes trusted to do? A highly cultivated state of society must ever have for concomitant evils, that selfishness, the result of indolent indulgence; and that heartlessness attendant on refinement, which too often hardens while it polishes. Aware that to elevate I must first soften, and that if I wished to purify I must first touch, I have ever endeavoured to bring forward grief, disappointment, the fallen leaf, the faded flower, the broken heart, and the early grave . . . [As to] my frequent choice of Love as my source of song, I can only say, that for a woman, whose influence and whose sphere must be in the affections, what subject can be more fitting than one which it is her peculiar province to refine, spiritualise, and exalt?  

Here, Landon adopts and empowers the mantle of “feminine duty” to defend not only the content and subject matter of her poetry, but its social importance, as well. Using this concept of femininity also allows her to respond indirectly to the Westminster Review’s claim that her poetry exalts the subservience of women. Rather, Landon suggests, by rejecting selfishness and an obsession with refinement, as she does in the character of Adeline (the coquette whose treatment by Landon in The Troubadour was critiqued by

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63 Preface, The Venetian Bracelet, in Selected Writings, 102.
the *Westminster* as “heartless”), she encourages the development of positive moral traits in men and women. Feminine sentimentality leads to the salvation, not the further erosion, of society.

In its way, this declaration of poetic independence is a daring move on Landon’s part. By 1829, women’s poetry had long since moved out of the political realm it had occupied, however briefly, from the 1790s until the early eighteen-teens—perhaps brought down in part by the hostile reception of Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s disastrous *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812). Poetry for children and poetry ostensibly confined to the realm of the “domestic,” such as that of Felicia Hemans (though we have seen how Hemans’s vision of the domestic is anything but confined) seemed to be the realm of women poets. Landon’s response to her critics here is a defense of sentimentality in a post-Byronic age. By claiming and reifying the importance of the erotic feminine, Landon is demanding recognition for aiding in the salvation of the masculine. If women’s poetry is, as her critics seem to be arguing, meant to revive the moral and spiritual character of the nation through emotional intervention, then what better way to approach that moral pedagogy than through exploiting that most emotional of human relationships—romantic/erotic love?

As a critic herself, Landon was well-positioned to make her ideas of the role and position of the feminine poet available to a wider audience. Her criticism is known to have been prolific; however, we are only certain of the authorship of a handful of the reviews she wrote for the *Literary Gazette* and the *New Monthly Magazine*, among others. In the reviews that we know to be hers, however, she returns again and again to two common themes. First, she seeks to reify this moral pedagogy, arguing for the
importance—if not necessarily the originality—of sentimental literature. Second, as we have seen in her discussion of Chateaubriand, above, and as we will see in her discussion of Hemans, she consistently returns to the theme of the consumptive destruction inherent in the existence of a poet, and a feminine poet in particular.

In “The Ancient and Modern Influences of Poetry,” originally published in the New Monthly Magazine for November 1832, Landon theorizes the position of poetry in modern society by arguing for its importance as an impetus to further civilization, which, in turn, allows her to subtly position the feminine poet as a powerful and irreplaceable literary figure. Landon’s article, like Thomas Love Peacock’s “Four Ages of Poetry,” published some twelve years before, sets out to compare the position and quality of poetry in different ages of the world. She begins by placing poetry in a purportedly historical context (though, characteristically for Landon, this context is in fact profoundly ahistorical). “The influence of poetry has several eras,” she writes. “First as it tends to civilize; secondly as it tends to prevent that very civilization from growing too cold and too selfish. Its first is its period of action; its second is that of feeling and reflection: it is that second which at present exists.” She identifies three key sources for poetry—religion, war, and love—then argues that poetry “originates in that idea of superior beauty and excellence inherent in every nature—and it is employed to keep that idea alive; and the very belief in excellence is one cause of its existence.” Here, as in her response to the Westminster Review, we see Landon theorizing poetry in such a way as to privilege the feminine poet as its most invaluable practitioner.

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65 Ibid., 61.
Interestingly, however, Landon makes several rhetorical gestures that we might more immediately expect from the conventional male reviewer of the time. She argues, first, that “the little now written possesses beauty not originality,” and, building on this idea, “we are now producing no great or original (the words are synonymous) poet. We have graceful singing in the bower, but no voice that startles us into wonder. . . .”

Landon’s denigration of female poetry—metonymically associated with the bower—is, however, not a direct slight against the poetic capabilities of women. Rather, Landon suggests that it is society itself that allows only “graceful singing in the bower,” and forbids the creation of a Byronic or Wordsworthian poet-hero. Attributing to society the characteristics of “selfishness . . . indifference . . . and ridicule,” Landon further asserts “we allow no appeals save to our reason, or to our fear of laughter. We must either be convinced or sneered into things. Neither calculation nor sarcasm are the elements for poetry.”

Here, again, we see her subtle defense of the feminine, long associated not with reason but with sympathy and sentiment. If, as she claims, reason is no proper source of poetry, then emotion, traditionally the province of the feminine mind, must be the true fount.

In addition to the bastardized masculinization of culture, Landon blames the depreciation of poetry on society’s move towards personalities, rather than minds: “We talk of the author’s self more than his works, and we know his name rather than his writings. There is a base macadamizing spirit in literature; we seek to level all the high places of old.”

Here, it is all but impossible not to see some version of Landon the poet.

66 Ibid., 64.
67 Ibid., 64.
speaking through Landon the critic, and decrying her frustration with the public’s claim to her private life.

Felicia Hemans’s death in 1835 allowed Landon space, possibly for the first time, to speak in prose as a woman poet about another woman poet. Her “On the Character of Mrs. Hemans’s Writings,” published in the *New Month Magazine* in August 1835, three months after Hemans’s death, is heavily informed by Landon’s perception of her own career, and in many ways says less about either Hemans or Maria Jane Jewsbury Fletcher (who Landon discusses in a short appendix to her tribute to Hemans) than it does about Landon herself.

There is no small amount of envy in Landon’s description of Hemans’s career when she claims that, “Mrs. Hemans was spared some of the keenest mortifications of a literary career. She knew nothing of it as a profession which has to make its way through poverty, neglect, and obstacles; she lived apart in a small, affectionate circle of friends.” Despite her consciousness of the differences between her own challenging existence and the comparatively easy life of Felicia Hemans, Landon nevertheless saw herself, Hemans, and other female writers such as Maria Jewsbury, as kindred spirits joined in their ostracism from the rest of society. Landon’s image of fame as “a royal mourning in purple for happiness” and her description of a literary career as “the aspiring, the unrest, the aching sense of being misunderstood, the consciousness that those a thousand times inferior were yet more beloved,” echo the sentiments put forth in her poetry about the dangers of poetic genius for a woman. “Genius,” Landon writes, in a clear echo of
Hemans’s own sentiments, “places a woman in an unnatural position: notoriety frightens away affection, and superiority has for its attendant fear, not love.”

Landon further developed this idea in the two elegies she wrote for Hemans. The first, entitled “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans” (*New Monthly Magazine*, August 1835), is a pastiche of one of Hemans’s own poems, “Bring Flowers,” borrowing Hemans’s chorus of “Bring flowers, bring flowers,” to mourn the elder poet in her own poetic style. Because “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans” is both a fairly standard elegy and somewhat derivative, I find Landon’s second poem on Hemans, simply titled “Felicia Hemans” (published in *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrapbook* for 1838), to be the stronger and more interesting of the two elegies.

“Felicia Hemans” is Landon’s answer to Hemans’s “The Grave of a Poetess,” an elegy for a dead poetic ideal. Even as Tighe serves as both muse and avatar for Hemans, here Hemans becomes the avatar of Landon’s poetic identity. As Hemans mourns the loss of Tighe and celebrates the beauty of her (fictionalized) grave, so Landon celebrates Hemans’s life and mourns the sorrow that she imagines must have dominated it.

In the first stanza, Landon envisions Hemans as a supernatural figure, a ghostly muse or angel of poetry who was in life “known only by the music on the air” (line 10) and who, in death, has taken the loveliness of her poetry into the grave. In the second stanza, Landon expands on her idea of Hemans as an instructor of feelings, “teaching us our own were true” (line 8), whose lessons comprise the “treasures” of “The heart’s sweet empire over land and sea” (lines 17 and 26).

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Landon’s insistent vision of Hemans as an angel-muse is, perhaps, consistent with the image that Hemans herself projected, but in the third stanza, in particular, we see Landon’s own frustrations bleeding through the speaker’s voice and being projected onto Hemans. “Was not this purchased all too dearly?—never / Can fame atone for all that fame hath cost. / We see the goal, but know not the endeavour, / Nor what fond hopes have on the way been lost” (lines 33-36). This claim, of course, contradicts Landon’s earlier assertion that Hemans’s poetic career had been relatively easy and untouched by the privations of public life, but it bolsters Landon’s continuing discussion of poetic fame as the ultimate inducement to self-consumption through devastating loneliness.

Like Hemans’s “The Grave of a Poetess,” “Felicia Hemans” ends with the living poetess looking to the dead poetess’s afterlife for the hope of spiritual and emotional succor. In Landon’s poem, however, the afterlife is far more ambiguous than the heavenly landscapes Hemans suggests are now Tighe’s domain. Landon’s speaker says:

Enter, O ladye, that serene dominion,

Where earthly cares and earthly sorrows cease.

Fame’s troubled hour has cleared, and now replying,

A thousand hearts their music ask of thine.

Sleep with a light, the lovely and undying

Around thy grave—a grave which is a shrine. (lines 75-80)

Though the “serene dominion” could certain be read as a Christian heaven, given the penultimate line’s use of the word “sleep,” I believe the “serene dominion” is, rather, the “undiscovered country” of death, here, as in Hamlet, conflated with sleep. The “thousand hearts” of the antepenultimate line could conceivably be a reference to the heavenly host,
but, again, given the image of the grave as a shrine in the final line, the thousand hearts seem more likely to belong to Hemans’s grieving audiences or, possibly, to the aspiring poetesses of the nation.

Landon is far less interested in the actual person of Felicia Hemans than she is in the idea of “Mrs. Hemans,” the beloved and saintly poetess. “Felicia Hemans,” like “Erinna,” recasts the historical poetess as one of Landon’s own characters, a delicate yet pure-of-spirit figure who cannot help but be devoured by the part she plays in society. “The fable of Prometheus and the vulture,” Landon’s speaker says in “Felicia Hemans,” “Reveals the poet’s and the woman’s heart” (lines 55-56). This fable, in which Prometheus is punished by Zeus for bringing the gift of fire to humanity, features its hero’s liver (here figured as a heart) being torn out by a vulture. As with the best of mythical Greek torments, this event repeats daily. Though the figurative vulture is never explicitly identified in the poem, Landon intimates it is both the poetess herself and her audiences that function in this capacity. Thus, the final stanzas situate Hemans as yet another self-consumptive poet, a woman who longed for “the beautiful, which was thy soul’s desiring, / But only from thyself its being drew” (lines 68-69). Landon’s poetesses, even those as beloved and pure of heart as her version of Hemans, resemble psychic vampires who cannot help but feed on themselves.

The consumptive nature of the poetic gift is key to Landon’s vision of the poetess. She rarely allows her truly gifted poet-speakers an escape from their doom, and even when she steps outside of the realm of fantasy and into the more realistic world of contemporary elegy, she continues to reinforce the sense of inevitability that dominates her poetic landscapes.
Consuming Selves

Where Felicia Hemans’s poetry attempts to negotiate the socio-historical position(s) of feminine poets, Landon’s illustrates the intellectual and spiritual costs of being a feminine poet. For Hemans, the feminine poet, like anyone in a feminized position, is always already bereft—of nation, of home, of family, or of love. Landon takes Hemans’s poetics of loss a step further by denying her feminine poets a stable and identifiable inner self. Landon’s consumptive poet figures are always already doomed to physical and mental collapse, and unlike Hemans, Landon offers no hope of immortality in art, and no redemption through erotic or spiritual love, because, it seems, the only real love is narcissistic and self-reflective.69

Most of Landon’s long poems feature a poet or artist as their central figure(s). The Improvisatrice (1824), the poem that made her famous, is the first of her important long poems, and the first of many of Landon’s works to engage with a version of Germaine de Staël’s Corinne, ou Italie (a new translation of which Landon would contribute to in 1833).70 While The Improvisatrice appears, like de Staël’s Corinne, to be a relatively modern tale, The Troubadour (1825) and The Golden Violet (1826), the two long poems that follow The Improvisatrice, are placed in an idealized medieval Europe, and use the cosmopolitan figure of the poet-singer as the locus of their central stories. Despite The

69 Kari Lokke suggests that, in Landon’s poetry, it is the loss of audience that turns the poetess’s powers inward, causing her to devour herself from the inside, However, while Landon’s The Improvisatrice follows this pattern, with the title character’s love for and loss of her primary audience leading directly to her slow self-destruction, the audience’s importance is deemphasized in the later poems. In “Erinna” and “A History of the Lyre,” the poetesses are driven to self-destruction through their own sense of emptiness, as I will show in this section. (“Poetry as Self-Consumption: Women Writers and Their Audiences in British and German Romanticism,” in Romantic Poetry, ed. Angela Esterhammer [Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishers, 2002]: 103.)

70 Landon translated Corinne’s speeches into verse, while Isabel Hill translated the main body of the text.
Troubadour’s misleading title, however, only The Golden Violet contributes significantly to our understanding of Landon’s formulation of a specifically feminine identity. Whereas The Troubadour focuses more on its protagonist’s military prowess and romantic devotion than his poetic gifts, The Golden Violet, in its contrasting depictions of male and female poetic expression, stands as a potentially important precursor to Tennyson’s The Princess, published some two decades after Landon’s text.

In addition to her long poems, each of which is an integrated text, with the longer narrative divided by shorter, interpolated lyrics and ballads, a number of Landon’s shorter, non-integrated poems figure into her vision of poetic femininity. Of these, the most important are “Erinna” and “A History of the Lyre,” which, though featuring different protagonists and different narrators, nevertheless function in many ways as two halves of the same story.

More than one critic and biographer of Landon has identified her career with Byron’s, particularly in the suddenness with which both poets found themselves celebrities. After the publication of the first two volumes of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Byron famously wrote that he “awoke . . . and found [himself] famous.”71 Landon’s experience was similar, though she was considerably younger than Byron when she awoke to her fame, and her Childe Harold was The Improvisatrice. And, even as Childe Harold was assumed to be an incarnation of Byron himself, so too was the improvisatrice believed to be a version of her author. However, while the identification of Byron and Childe Harold is, arguably, a justified assumption, Landon’s society’s conflation of her with her protagonist not only revealed a failure of literacy (since the improvisatrice is

71 Quoted in Thomas Moore, Life of Lord Byron, with His Letters and Journals (London: John Murray, 1854), 2:138.
clearly based upon Corinne), but, more dangerously for Landon, helped to encourage the tradition of reading poets through their work.

*The Improvisatrice* is uncharacteristic not simply because it portrays its heroine’s destruction through a romantic relationship, but because, in doing so, it shifts Landon’s conventional feminine artist/feminine muse dyad out of the narcissistic framework she relies upon in later texts. That is to say, the hero of *The Improvisatrice*, Lorenzo, functions largely as a muse or inspiration for the title character, and it is his apparent failure to reciprocate or acknowledge his inspiration of her that dooms the improvisatrice.

Like most of Landon’s important long poems, *The Improvisatrice* is an interpolated text. In addition to offering the audience samples of the title character’s work, the inner poems of *The Improvisatrice*, which feature young women and girls dying for faithless or undeserving men, serve to foreshadow the grim ending of the frame narrative. The plot of that frame narrative echoes that of Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne*, and prefigures Felicia Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi”—Landon’s improvisatrice is both an improvisational singer and an accomplished painter, whose requited but unfulfilled love for Lorenzo leads to her decline and death. The unnamed improvisatrice first encounters Lorenzo at one of her public performances, where she sees him “leaning on a galley’s prow,” and experiences an orgasmic rush at his silent observation of her performance. The improvisatrice describes the moment as an awakening both sexual and artistic:

My hand kept wandering on my lute,

In music, but unconsciously

My pulses throbbed, my heart beat high,

A flush of dizzy ecstasy
Crimson’d my cheek; . . .

Consciousness, without hopes or fears,
Of a new power within me waking,
Like light before the morn’s full breaking
I left the boat—the crowd: my mood
Made my soul pant for solitude. (lines 464-75)

The eroticism of this awakening is later echoed in Erinna’s first experience of public fame in “Erinna.” In fact, in The Improvisatrice, more, perhaps, than in any of her other poems, Landon draws an explicit connection between public performance and erotic pleasure. However, though the improvisatrice performs in front of crowds (of men), she performs for only one—and it is not until she finds his gaze upon her that she recognizes her sexual as well as artistic self.

Shortly after the improvisatrice’s erotic awakening, she shares a brief physical encounter with Lorenzo at a masquerade ball. Here, again, we see her investment in performing for the pleasure of Lorenzo. Remembering the murmurs of pleasure she hears from the audience at unveiling, the improvisatrice declares, “LORENZO! I was proud to be / Worshipped and flattered but for thee!” (lines 759-60) When she witnesses Lorenzo’s marriage to another woman, thereby losing the only audience who can sustain her creative ecstasy, she loses all genuine interest in her art and music, and, thus, all interest in her the abilities that sustain her very existence. She produces a final piece of art—a painting of Ariadne on Naxos, with Lorenzo its intended audience: “I had now but one hope:—that when / The hand that traced these tints was cold—/ . . . / LORENZO might
these tints behold” (lines 1343-46). It is at this point that Lorenzo, now a widower, reenters the narrative, and, just as he was the chief witness to the improvisatrice’s crucial erotic awakening, is now the sole witness to her death.

The frame narrative, which is related in first person by the improvisatrice, necessarily breaks off at this point, but her death does not mark the end of the text. An unidentified third party takes over the narrative for a short epilogue, in which the speaker recounts a visit to Lorenzo’s lonely palace. There, Lorenzo, like a benign forerunner of Robert Browning’s Duke of Ferrara, has made his art gallery into a shrine to his “minstrel love,” dominated by a painting of the improvisatrice and her lyre mounted upon a pedestal. The improvisatrice thus becomes herself a piece of art, existing, as her compositions once did, for the pleasure of Lorenzo.

The songs that are scattered throughout the text are meant to be the compositions of the narrator, and their prescient applicability to the improvisatrice’s fate is presumably meant to arouse only the reader’s, not the speaker’s, suspicions. The intercalary songs circle obsessively around a single theme—the painful inextricability of love and death. The improvisatrice returns again and again to young women dying for their loves, with their loves, or out of grief for an unrequited or betrayed love. The first such composition is, appropriately enough, “Sappho’s Song,” which, like most late-Romantic representations of Sappho, is in reality a last song, a final burst of poetry before the fatal leap. The songs, of course, foreshadow their singer’s fate; they show us not only her death, but her eventual apotheosis into the doomed heroine of one of her own productions. The improvisatrice herself, though arguably not entirely aware of the outcome of her own story, tells her audience (who is, presumably, Lorenzo) that she
“ever had, from earliest youth, / A feeling what my fate would be” (lines 40-41), and that it is in her “sad . . . shades” that that fate was revealed.

The improvisatrice’s claim to “a tone of prophecy” in her work was, after Landon’s death, adopted by her audiences (both her fans and her detractors) as itself a piece of prophetic truth. Because it was the character for which she was most remembered, and because she deliberately cultivated the image of herself as an improvisatrice, Landon came to be almost entirely identified with this character, and, as we have seen, her poetry defined by this poem’s content. However, I would argue that the title character of *The Improvisatrice* is somewhat uncharacteristic of Landon’s poetesses. She appears to thrive on her fame, and her artistic gifts are neither the source of her loneliness nor of her romantic conflict. Unlike Erinna or Eulalia (the poetess of “A History of the Lyre”), the improvisatrice never renounces her gift, preferring instead to allow it to swallow her whole in her grief. Though the loss of her audience of one, with its concurrent loss of love, seems to be the root of the title character’s slow decline and self-consuming despair, the presence of a lover at all sets *The Improvisatrice* apart from Landon’s later compositions.

*The Improvisatrice*, while somewhat uncharacteristic and juvenile in its execution, does, however, mark a serious foray into what should define Landon’s career—not tragic love, but the constant reiteration of a highly stylized and ultimately destructive poetic identity, in which fame and performance are, paradoxically, a source both of creative ecstasy and of creativity’s inevitable decline. In both “Erinna” and “A History of the Lyre,” Landon’s exploration becomes more sophisticated, far less focused
on the erotic or romantic aspects of the poetess’s life, and more interested in the psychic cost of constant performance.

These two later poems may be read as essentially two versions of the same story. In each, the highly successful public poetess, Erinna/Eulalia, withers under the constant spotlight of her fame, which undermines her gift, and she slowly dies without it. This grim forecast of the poetess’s fate is reminiscent of Hemans’s rejections of fame, but while Hemans locates the source of the poetess’s grief in her loss of a domestic space and the secure sense of self it inculcates, Landon identifies a more immediate loss. In essence, the public persona of Landon’s poetess is ultimately revealed to be a corrosive façade, which eats away at its own foundations until nothing remains, and the façade collapses. There is no escaping this persona—the poetess craves the sexual and creative ecstasy brought to her by fame, but in order to sustain that fame, she must betray the very gift that inspired her success. Landon offers no hope for creative salvation in nature, in domestic spaces, or in romantic love. Like Tennyson’s Mariana, Erinna and Eulalia, destroyed by their own success, become shadows of their former selves, wandering in groves or in gardens of twilit ruins and waiting for death.

“Erinna,” published with The Golden Violet in 1826, belongs to the relatively small number of Landon’s poems that she wrote about prior to their composition. Because she often wrote so quickly, it seems that Landon rarely dwelled upon her poetic intentions or ideas in personal letters. With “Erinna,” however, in addition to the author’s note before the text, we have several of Landon’s comments to her friends on the poem. For example, Landon wrote to Emma Roberts, “I want if I can to draw the feelings of a

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72 The poetess of “A History of the Lyre” is referred to in the text as both Eulalie and Eulalia. It is not clear which is the nickname and which is the poetess’s given name, as the two are used interchangeably.
poet acted upon not by neglect, but by success and all the shadows and miseries belonging\[sic\] thereunto.”

Similarly, to Katherine Thomson, “Other poets have painted a very sufficient quantity of poetical miseries; but my aim is not to draw neglected genius, or ‘mourn a laurel planted on the tomb’—but to trace the progress of a mind highly-gifted, well-rewarded, but finding the fame it won a sting and a sorrow, and finally sinking beneath the shadow of success.” If nothing else, these letters gives us some insight into the exigence for this poem—it is clear that Landon saw a need for poetry that addressed the destructive nature of poetic success, and that she saw that destruction as a key part of the poetic identity she was creating.

In her Introductory Notice to “Erinna,” Landon claims that the poem predated the choice of heroine, and that it was only when she encountered a reference to the historical Erinna in The Brides of Florence that she found for her poem “a local habitation and a name.” Though Landon acknowledges the historical reality of Erinna’s existence, she admits that the socio-historical details of Erinna’s life do not interest her. While the poem is located in a vaguely Grecian setting, it shows rather more of the influence of de Staël than Sappho. Thus, rather than an accurate picture of the classical world in which the historical Erinna might have existed, Landon declares that “feelings are what I wish to narrate . . . my aim has been to draw the portrait and trace the changes of a highly poetical mind. . . . Erinna is an ideal not a historical picture.” This claim is somewhat disingenuous on Landon’s part, for it raises the question—an ideal of what?

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73 Landon to Emma Roberts, December 1826, in Letters, 37.
74 Landon to Katherine Thomson, October 1826, in Letters, 35.
75 Introductory Notice to “Erinna,” in Poetical Works, 214.
76 Erinna was a fourth-century Greek poet whose work now exists in various extant fragments, the largest of which is known as “The Distaff.”
77 Introductory Notice to “Erinna,” in Poetical Works, 214.
If Erinna is the ideal of the poetic woman, Landon would seem, at first, to be making a peculiar argument for the inability of women to handle the pressures of a poetic career. Erinna’s resignation of her lyre and her rejection of further development of her talent could be (mis)read, like Hemans’s “Corinne at the Capitol,” to be an admonishment to women not to attempt artistic careers. However, Erinna’s abjuration of her gift is less an instance of devaluing women’s poetic contributions than it is an indictment of the society that fails to support such endeavors.

While “A History of the Lyre” locates its protagonist’s suffering on the grounds of a ruined villa, the visual scenery suggesting the graveyard that Eulalia knows will be her home in the near future, Erinna’s site of suffering/realization is an olive grove. Erinna’s early communion with nature in her first ecstatic flush of triumph prefigures that of Aurora Leigh on her twentieth birthday, when Romney Leigh finds her crowning herself with laurel. Erinna’s triumph, however, is a solitary one, as is her realization of her emptiness two years later, and it is the constant solitude that has ended her career.

Orphaned (a fate shared by the improvisatrice and, later, Eulalia), Erinna “had been lonely from . . . childhood’s hour” (line 45), but, having embraced her gift, believes that “my lyre would be / My own heart’s true interpreter” (lines 47-48), and will function as “a sweet and breathing bond / Between me and my kind.” However, while her music and poetry bring her fame, they fail to bring her the “companionship, / Mingling affection, calm and gentle peace” that she longs for.

“Erinna” is a song of renunciation. As in Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi,” the reader is a silent eavesdropper to the female artist’s agonized rejection of both fame and the genius that brought her fame. However, while Rossi mourns the loss (or, more properly,
the unrequitedness) of a specific love, Erinna’s is a rejection based upon the total erosion of all of her ideals. Like a widow or a rejected lover entering a convent, or, perhaps even more fittingly, like Christ on Gethesmane, Erinna’s renunciation comes through a vigil in a holy place—here, the olive grove wherein she first embraced her gift.

Erinna’s destruction, like that of Eulalia in “A History of the Lyre,” is brought about by the naked realities of fame—the “hollowness” of praise, censure, and “earthly judgment pass’d / By minds whose native clay is unredeem’d / By aught of heaven” (lines 210-12), a passage that seems to reference scandal-mongers and critics. Erinna’s cry, “O dream of fame, what has thou been to me / But the destroyer of life’s calm content!” (lines 215-16) could presumably stand as the epigraph to all of Landon’s interrogations of poetic identity, but she does not allow this line to stand alone.

Erinna’s destruction is not only engendered by the “hollowness” of fame and its “rewards,” but by the loneliness that continues to plague her. “Fair as are / The visions of a poet’s solitude,” Erinna says, “There must be something more for happiness; / They seek communion,” and in that communion, Erinna has failed. Though critics have argued that Landon’s poetesses die for love,78 or the lack thereof, neither Erinna, nor her doppelgänger Eulalia, ever mentions erotic love as the fundamental lack in her life. Rather, each seeks, as do Hemans’s poet-speakers, the communion of equal minds—trusted friendship, which could, presumably, exist in the erotic love that is so often assumed to be the missing component of these poetesses’ lives. Modern critics’ continued readings of Landon’s laments as laments for erotic love veer dangerously close to

tautology, rather than interpretation. We know Landon wrote about love, therefore everything Landon wrote must have been about love.

I would argue that Landon’s poet-speakers, like Hemans’s, seek not *eros*, but *agape*—not erotic love, but a transcendent, even sacred, communion. The need for spiritual and intellectual communion far surpasses the need for heteronormative eroticism in Landon’s poet-speakers. Even in *The Improvisatrice*, the poetess’s isolation—her loss of audience and muse—seems to be as much the root cause of her downfall as her unfulfilled desire for Lorenzo.

Erinna longs not only for intellectual communion, but for a kind of emotional immortality. She locates her poetic power in her ability to affect the hearts of her audience, and her hope for her poetry’s future is that it might be “number’d mid the young poet’s first delights; / Read by the dark-eyed maiden in an hour / Of moonlight, till her cheek shone with its tears” (lines 340-42). Her poetry, she says, is “the mournful history / Of woman’s tenderness and woman’s tears” (lines 349-50), and it is with women and with the young that she hopes to establish an enduring sentimental and sympathetic rapport.

Like the improvisatrice, however, Erinna must leave her lute to speak for itself—“thy truth, thy tenderness, be all thy fame!”—because her encounters with fame have forced her to devour all of her genuine sentiment, leaving her utterly bereft of the ability to write her poetry: “that too is gone from me; that which was / My solitude’s delight! I can no more / Make real existence of a shadowy world” (lines 313-15). This loss, spurred by the loss of her idealism and her artlessness, forces Erinna to abandon her art in order to salvage what remains of herself. However, it seems unlikely that Erinna has saved her
life by leaving her art behind. We see, in the story of Eulalia, that the hollowing-out of self required by poetic fame, even after the poetess gives up her art, is always a fatal prospect, and it is Eulalia’s story that picks up where Erinna’s leaves off.

The ruins that dominate the scenery of “A History of the Lyre,” published in The Venetian Bracelet (1829), reinscribe the loss of domestic space that we see mourned in Felicia Hemans’s work. However, Eulalia’s ruins stand for more than simply her shattered home. They are symbolic of her shattered self, and represent the grave that lies in her very near future. The ruins have always already been ruins—there is no sense of a domestic idyll in Eulalia’s past, nor is there any hope for such tranquility in her future.

As in de Staël’s Corinne, we are brought into “A History of the Lyre” by a male narrator, an English outsider in Roman society whose interest in Eulalia, unlike that of Lord Nelvil in Corinne, is apparently a purely intellectual one. The impetus for the telling of Eulalia’s tale is her portrait—a “rudely-pencill’d sketch”—held by the narrator’s unidentified auditor. The narrator begins to ruminate on his brief encounters with Eulalia, “once the delight of Rome for that fine skill / With which she woke the lute when answering / With its sweet echoes her melodious words” (lines 8-10). However, the narrator is telling Eulalia’s story after she and her talent have faded away entirely, left only in the memory of those who knew her, and in the artistic remnants (such as her portrait) left behind. The narrator here functions much like Lorenzo in the epilogue of The Improvisatrice, left to keep the memory of the artistic woman alive even after, apparently, her songs and words have faded.

The narrator’s first glimpse of Eulalia is evocative of a Gothic tale—he is led by an unnamed companion to the ruins of a “fallen palace” where “yet there stood / Pillars
unbroken, two or three vast halls, / Entire enough to cast a deep black shade; / And a few statues, beautiful but cold” (lines 37-40). There, he hears music, and sees a white-clad woman, with black hair streaming to her feet, pacing back and forth in the “ancient gallery,” occasionally singing and strumming the lute she carries, “as if she thought / Rather than spoke” (lines 76-77). The narrator describes her as a “young Pythoness,” a prophetess as well as a poet, and her presence consecrates the ruins as “a haunted shrine / Hallow’d by genius in its holiest mood” (lines 88-89).

This haunting vision, however, is shattered by the narrator’s next glimpse of Eulalia, where she, wearing a red and gold gown, “Leant on a couch / The centre of a group, whose converse light / Made a fit element” (lines 98-100) and the narrator declares, “I only knew / EULALIA by her touching voice again” (lines 103-104). This apparent contrast leaves the narrator stunned, and he describes it as “both sad and strange, / To see that fine mind waste itself away” in the glittering halls where she, surrounded by adorers, makes witty conversation that the narrator compares to “a noble stream . . . lost in artificial waterfalls” (lines 128-31). Eulalia, when the narrator demands an explanation of her shallow frivolity, replies—quite sharply:

    Speak not of this to me, nor bid me think;
    It is such pain to dwell upon myself;
    And know how different I am from all
    I once dreamed I could be. Fame! stirring fame!
    I work no longer miracles for thee. (lines 154-58)

Eulalia describes her suffocation in the rarified air of fame, and its slow erosion of her gifts through constant loneliness and artifice. She compares herself to an Eastern tulip—
“Ay! it has radiant colours . . . / 'Tis redolent with sunshine; but with noon / It has begun to wither” (lines 195-98)—and longingly suggests that she would be happier as a lily of the valley, “almost hidden by the large dark leaves” (line 181), and yet offering a beauty to those who would find it.

Despite the evidence of her suffering and misery, Landon insists upon Eulalia’s agency in her situation, refusing to cast her as the victim of an unfeeling society. Eulalia accepts her role as a performer, even as she admits that this role has been ultimately destructive to her life and happiness. Eulalia acknowledges her own complicity in her fate:

I am vain,—praise is opium, and the lip
Cannot resist the fascinating draught,
Though knowing its excitement is a fraud—

Delirious,—a mockery of fame. (lines 244-47)

However, even as Eulalia admits her desire for and love of praise—expressed in terms laden with illicit and erotic desires—she also emphasizes her inability to control or suppress her gift, thereby ensuring that she has not become a public figure merely for the fame. “I did not choose my gift” (line 202), she tells the narrator, explaining her passionate and poetic nature as a “fine electric throb” in her mind (line 215). That nature is lost not just in Eulalia’s search for fame, but in the constant performances and false faces demanded of such a search:

We dress our words and looks in borrow’d robes:
The mind is as the face,—for who goes forth
In public walks without a veil at least?
'Tis this constraint makes half life’s misery.

'Tis false rule: we do too much regard

Others’ opinions, but neglect their feelings;

Thrice happy if such order were revers’d. (lines 227-33)

Here, again, is the corrosive façade, which suffocates the mind and heart by forbidding genuine emotional connections. Though Eulalia first casts it as a woman’s burden, she abandons gendered distinctions when she turns to the telling of her own story.

Casting her fate as inevitable, Eulalia “trace[s] the young poet’s fate” for the narrator, imagining for him a young man whose “song has led / The way before him” (lines 279, 283-84), and who, turned by the flattery of his friends and audiences has come to “somewhat overrate / His talents and his state,” but “These scenes soon change,” Eulalia warns (lines 287-88). The poet’s audiences will grow bored and turn away, and “worldliness / Has crept upon his spirit unaware,” embittering the poet and turning him “sceptic to the truth which made / His feelings poetry” (lines 285-88). In the end, this turn to worldliness destroys the poet’s gift, his imagination withers, and Eulalia ends the tale with, “What can he do / But hang his lute on some lone tree, and die?” (lines 303-304).

It is clear that Eulalia speaks of herself in this tale; her story, however, is also Erinna’s and, arguably, Landon’s. (Certainly there are moments in Eulalia’s tale that echo Landon’s critics in a particularly haunting manner.) Eulalia, having betrayed her gift in the face of worldly fame, cannot face attempting to revive it. “Sometimes,” she confesses:

I look round with vain regret,

And think I will restring my lute, and nerve
My woman’s hand for nobler enterprise;

But the day never comes.” (lines 371-74).

This confession ends Eulalia’s monologue, and ends the narrator’s first interaction with her—he returns to England, and the audience is treated to a brief digression on the narrator’s bride Emily. Three years later, fearing for Emily’s health, they travel to Italy and seek out Eulalia in Rome. There, they find Eulalia dying, and as she walks with Emily in her garden of ruins, she says to the narrator:

You see . . . my cemetry here—

Here, only here, shall be my quiet grave.

Yon statue is my emblem: see, its grasp

Is raised to heaven, forgetful that the while

Its step has crush’d the fairest of earth’s flowers

With its neglect. (lines 440-45)

Eulalia’s voice ends permanently there—the narrator picks up with only two and a half more lines, which tell simply of Eulalia’s death and burial in her chosen grave. The poem breaks, here, however, and a further two lines are added after the only stanza break in the entire text. These final lines—“Peace to the weary and the beating heart / That fed upon itself!”—are properly only a line and a half, as only the first of the two lines contains the requisite ten syllables (lines 448-49). They stand, perhaps, as Eulalia’s epitaph, even as the poem itself is her eulogy, and the ruined villa is both her cemetery and a reimagining of Eulalia herself.

This image of self-consumption is reinforced by the physical symptoms Landon’s dying heroines manifest. She often describes them with pale cheeks—Eulalia, the
narrator observes, is as pale as the marble statues around her—and unnaturally bright eyes, or with a hectic flush upon their cheeks.\textsuperscript{79} Though slow wasting marked by pale cheeks and bright eyes admittedly are a “poetic” approach to death, such images are also often used as literary indicators of tuberculosis—or consumption.\textsuperscript{80} It is not only Eulalia’s heart that has “fed upon itself,” but her entire being—her gift consumed itself in her search for fame, and in that final consumption, her body did the same.

How does self-consumption relate to the civilizing impulse that Landon identifies as central to modern poetry? First, like Hemans, Landon lays claim to the power of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Eulalia’s self-destruction is unquestionably tragic, but it also serves to help reunite the narrator of “A History of the Lyre” with his love. Because she does not serve as a romantic foil for the speaker, but rather as an erotic muse or guiding spirit of love, Eulalia’s sacrifice furthers the “taming” or domesticization of masculinity that we see throughout sentimental poetry. The man who might otherwise have continued to wander, unattached, through Europe, is inspired by Eulalia to return home to England and claim his young bride. His careful attentions to his wife Emily’s comfort and health in the concluding section of the poem reinforce his complete devotion to a safely contained sentimental erotic relationship.

For Landon, as we see in these poems, the function of the poetess is to inspire love and passionate sentiment in those around her. She is not destined for love—erotic or

\textsuperscript{79} See B. Meyer, “Till Death Do Us Part: The Consumptive Victorian Heroine in Popular Romantic Fiction,” \textit{Journal of Popular Culture} 7 (2003): 287-308. Meyer argues that the literary establishment had a number of key signifiers of consumption: “Wasting, feverish flushing, and difficulties breathing were also commonly held to be part of the disease. … Popular opinion also generally regarded consumption as a slow disease, downplaying medicine’s recognition of forms of the disease that would rapidly overwhelm the sufferer. As the disease progressed, sufferers were held to often become more other-worldly. In addition, they sometimes were viewed as becoming both more spirited and experiencing heightened intellectual capacities.” (290)

otherwise—herself; indeed, as we see with “Erinna,” she cannot have both love and art. The role-playing necessary to support her public function is totally destructive to the poetess, and leaves nothing of her to be loved. Because she cannot have both love and art, she must choose—Erinna chooses the possibility of companionship, no matter how slim a possibility that is, sacrificing her art, and Eulalia embraces her art until it dies within her, and she wastes away without it.

The Myth of “Poor L.E.L.”

Despite the best efforts of Emma Roberts and Laman Blanchard, who tried to separate Landon from “L.E.L.,” public opinion had cast Landon as one of her own heroines before she had been dead a decade. The tragic role of the feminine poet that she had imagined in her work became the only role available to her memory. By dying young, Landon became the next figure in the tragic genealogy of feminine poets, following in the doomed footsteps of Sappho and Corinne, and further inscribing the inextricability of death, femininity, and poetry on the cultural consciousness.\(^1\) To make an anachronistic comparison, by the 1850s Landon had become the Marilyn Monroe of her day—a doomed pop-culture heroine, whose fame came to rely largely on her value as a posthumously exploited sexual commodity.

It is largely Laman Blanchard’s biography of Landon that drives this myth; in part, this is because Blanchard’s text is assiduously devoted to divorcing Letitia Landon from “L.E.L.” Blanchard argues that:

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\(^1\) I would argue that we still see the lingering traces of this attitude today, though now embodied in figures like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton—suicidal female artists whose tragedy is as fascinating to audiences as their work.
... she less frequently aimed at expressing in her poetry her own actual feelings and opinions, than at assuming a character for the sake of a certain kind of effect, and throwing her thickly-thronging ideas together with this most passionate force, and in the most picturesque forms. Sorrow & suspicion, pining regrets for the past, anguish for the present, were in L.E.L., not moral characteristics, but merely literary resources.  

This disconnection between the emotions of Landon and those of L.E.L.’s poetry was emphasized by Landon’s friends and family members in nearly all of the available posthumous texts. Readers who chose to believe Blanchard—Elizabeth Barrett, in particular—were frustrated and disappointed by this determined separation between the emotions of the woman and those of poetess. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, who had known Landon, Barrett mourned Landon, and, by expressing her disappointment in Landon’s supposed emotional performances, imposed her own vision of poetics upon the lost poetess, or, rather, Landon as she saw her through Blanchard’s reading:

Poor, poor LEL! ... She was the actress, & not Juliet. Her genius was not strong enough to assert itself in truth. It suffered her to belie herself—& stood by, while she put on the mask. Where is the true deep poetry which was not felt deeply & truly by the poet? What is the poet, without the use of his own heart? And thus, the general character of Miss Landon[’]s most popular poems is ... melancholy without pathos. ... Poor LEL! Just as she had outstretched her hand to touch nature, & to feel thrillingly there that poetry is more than fantasy ... to die so.  

\footnote{Blanchard, 37.}

Barrett’s belief that Landon’s poetry was divorced from any true sentiment is rooted in Blanchard’s emphatic denial of any real connection between Landon’s tragic poetry and her personality. While such an assertion of Landon’s emotional ventriloquism thus makes her out to be a highly accomplished actor—or even a liar—Blanchard, at least, seems to believe that this perception is preferable to seeing Landon remembered as a fallen woman and a suicide. The effect of this claim of emotional performance, however, was, perhaps, rather the opposite of what Blanchard had intended. It resulted not in admiration for Landon as a fiction writer, but in contempt for her performances and pity for her ultimate failure.

As the “poetess tributes” of the mid- to late-nineteenth century indicate, pity, exasperation, and, eventually, contempt became the dominant emotions associated with Landon. Of these posthumous critics, only Frederic Rowton was uniformly admiring of her work, and it is almost certainly not a coincidence that he was one of the few critical biographers to reject Blanchard’s assertions outright. Rowton argues:

...there is a mournfulness of soul which is never to be seen on the cheek or in the eye: and this I believe to have dwelt in Mrs. Maclean’s breast more than in most

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84 In “Thou shalt bid thy fair hands rove,” Cynthia Lawford argues that discussions of Landon seemed to waffle between describing her as innocent—but dishonest, or fallen—but truthful.
85 Blanchard, of course, did kill himself several years after he published Landon’s biography, but this fact may not be relevant to how he wanted Landon perceived.
86 Among these tributes are Anne Katherine Elwood’s Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England (1845), George Washington Bethune’s British Female Poets (1848), Frederic Rowton’s The Female Poets of Great Britain (1848), and Jane Williams’s Literary Women of England (1861). Eric Robertson’s English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies (1883) is slightly later than these texts, but its content is very much in the same vein as the earlier works. (It is, perhaps, a critical marker of Landon’s status relative to that of her contemporaries that she does not appear in George Gilfillan’s Gallery of Literary Portraits (1850), the second volume of which features both Hemans and Barrett Browning among its limited number of women authors.)
87 Here I would note that Elwood’s Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England is a predominantly journalistic text, and is thus predominately characterized by a studied neutrality. It records the facts of the lives of the “literary ladies” without comment, and makes no attempt to judge the quality of their literary productions. The chapter on Landon is largely derived from Blanchard’s biography and contains almost no sense of Elwood’s impressions of Landon.
people’s. How otherwise are we to understand her poetry? We cannot believe her sadness to have been put on like a player’s garb: to have been an affectation, an unreality: it is too earnest for that.88

Rowton, here, thus rejects Laman Blanchard’s claim that “the author ceased to exist when the pen was laid down,”89 in favor of a vision of Landon as a truthful and emotionally transparent poet.

Rowton, however, was decidedly in the minority. By the late nineteenth century, Landon’s writing was, as S. C. Hall intimates in his memoir, neither reprinted nor read, while she remained ensconced in public memory only as “poor L.E.L.”90 The effect of all of this pity, sympathy, and condescension on Landon’s posthumous reputation was eerily similar to its effect in Landon’s life. She became a cautionary tale for feminine poets, an ancestor of the suicidal Judith Shakespeare to be imagined by Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own. In her posthumous reception, Landon’s poetic impact was reduced to a resigned “what if.”

Landon’s construction of the poetess brings together two apparently disparate threads—self-consumption and erotic performativity. However, as Dan Latimer has demonstrated, and as we see in poems such as Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and in the practice of buying and selling the annuals (see Harriet Devine Jump for a discussion of the erotics and economics of the gift book industry91) consumption—whether it be represented in disease, through food, or through economics—is inextricably

88 Ibid., 427.
89 Blanchard, 231.
linked to performance and to sexuality. Landon used these connections in her portrayal of a feminine sentimental poet; her vision of that poet, however, was turned against her, exploiting her public life and private letters in biography and scandal in order to cement the idea of a feminine poetic subjectivity that is always linked to the feminine poet’s decline and destruction.
CHAPTER 3

The Victorian Poet “Lady-Clad”: Tennyson’s Career as Poetess

Let School-Miss Alfred vent her chaste delight
On ‘darling little rooms so warm and bright!’
Chaunt, ‘I’m aweary,’ in infectious strain,
And catch her ‘blue fly singing i’ the pane.’

Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The New Timon* (1846) offers a classic example of the attitude with which many of Alfred Tennyson’s contemporaries responded to the feminine and sentimental tendencies in his early poetry. “School-Miss Alfred” became a well-known epithet for the poet who, four short years after Bulwer-Lytton published his attack, was to become Queen Victoria’s Poet Laureate. Despite his authorship of such stereotypically “masculine” lyrics as “Ulysses” and “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” Tennyson left behind him a poetic legacy steeped in the feminine sentimental poetics of the 1830s, a legacy that twentieth-century critics have spent generations frantically attempting to justify or overwrite.

Bulwer-Lytton’s identification of Tennyson as a “school-girl” comes near the beginning of a long and largely unacknowledged critical tradition that struggles to respond to the sentimental tendencies of the Victorian Laureate. From as early as 1830, critics recognized (and wrestled with) Tennyson’s evident literary femininity. His contemporaries and rivals used his “effeminacy” to fuel their critical disdain, while his friends attempted to turn it to Tennyson’s advantage, casting him (in Arthur Henry Hallam’s words) as the next “poet of sensation,” and aligning him with Percy Shelley and
John Keats while deliberately ignoring his more immediate (and less esteemed) peers—Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon.¹

While my argument in this chapter has its roots in the claims of several modern critics, particularly those of Richard Cronin and John Hughes,² who have identified and acknowledged key moments of femininity in Tennyson’s poetry, I have taken the argument further to its logical conclusion. I argue that Tennyson’s poetry and his public reception position him as a feminine sentimental poet—in fact, a male poetess, as his poetry and his engagement with poetic fame align him with the role of the poetess as it was being imagined in the early 1830s. Tennyson’s self-conscious adoption of the role of poetess is evident both in his adoption of certain poetic tactics and subjects embraced by Hemans and Landon, the definitive sentimental poetesses of the early 1830s, while the reactions of his friends, peers, and critics indicate that Tennyson’s feminine self-fashioning both played into and disrupted their ideas of gender and poetics.

In this chapter, I argue that Tennyson should be read as a male poetess, not merely because he identifies with women or because he imitates “their” style, but because in his early independent³ poetry (from Poems, Chiefly Lyrical to In Memoriam), he writes from a home-centered, sentimental, and commercial viewpoint that critics and admirers alike recognized as uniquely and specifically feminine and thus fundamental to the poetess aesthetic created and promoted by and around Hemans and Landon. By looking at examples of both his feminine poetry and his reception as a feminine poet, this chapter will show how Tennyson’s early work contributes to our understanding of the figure of

³ That is, all of the early volumes except for Poems by Two Brothers (1827).
the poetess, and how his career is best understood if we recognize his role within the sentimental aesthetic.

Tennyson’s explorations of the figure and role of the poetess manifest themselves in two ways in his poetry. First, as I indicated above, his early poetry is thematically and narratively aligned with that of his female counterparts, most notably Felicia Hemans, in his obsessive focus on domestic spaces and their symbolic and literal intersections with human relationships. Second, much of the poetry belonging to the later part of this early period (i.e., from the 1842 Poems through In Memoriam) is distinguished by a struggle between Tennyson’s growing engagement with a national ideology centered on the domestic and his depiction of hyper-masculine heroes whose attempted rejection of the home reflects a larger cultural (or authorial) tension in regard to gender and gendered spaces. These two themes converge in The Princess, with its cross-dressing hero seeking to restore domestic harmony by invading and inhabiting the feminine spaces controlled by the coldly ambitious Princess Ida.4

This chapter begins with an examination of Tennyson’s early career and reception, focusing in particularly on the ways in which his critics and friends recognized his femininity, even as they decried its apparent effect on the masculine ethos of early Victorian literature. I then discuss how Tennyson’s conception of fame and celebrity and their effects align him with the similarly fame-loathing female poetesses of his day. Next, through a reading of two key poems from Tennyson’s earlier career (“Mariana” and “The

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4 This is not to argue, however, that Tennyson was a feminist or a gay man. Both of these assertions are well outside the scope of the interpretation I am proposing here. While Tennyson was certainly sympathetic to certain feminist causes, he clearly never advocates the elimination of gender difference or any of the more radical feminist goals of the nineteenth century. As for his sexuality, aside from the fact that any attempt to classify nineteenth-century sexual preference is anachronistic, it is irrelevant to this discussion, which is confined to Tennyson’s literary gender identification(s).
Lady of Shalott”), I show how he adopts and explores the confines of a feminine voice and position as part of his engagement with the role of the poetess. Finally, I offer in a detailed discussion of The Princess, which I read as a literary representation of Tennyson’s internal struggle with the multiple and flexible gendered identities in which he situated himself.

Thaïs E. Morgan asks, in the introduction to Men Writing the Feminine (1994), “What does it mean to say that a male author writes the feminine? Is he writing as (identifying with) a woman? Or writing like (mimicking, and perhaps mocking) a woman? Or writing through a woman (an Other that confirms his own identity as the Same)?”

Richard Cronin’s assertion that “Tennyson, in [a handful of his early poems], writes quite uninhibitedly as a woman,” seems to indicate that Cronin, at least, tends to see the answer to Morgan’s question in identification and mimicry. However, I see Tennyson as both identifying with and writing through a woman, or, rather, a feminine position. By situating himself as a poetess, Tennyson established himself, for the Victorians at least, as a greater poet than his more obviously masculine contemporaries.

Cronin is one of a handful of Tennyson scholars who have noted and grappled with Tennyson’s engagement with femininity in his early poems, but no critic to date has attempted an in-depth analysis of how that work, particularly that which was published before In Memoriam, is best understood as the work of a poetess. Instead, many critics

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6 Romantic Victorians, 107.
7 Margaret Reynolds comes closest with her analysis of Tennyson’s borrowings from and appropriations of Sapphic poetry in his early lyrics. The sexual intricacies of Sappho’s poetry, particularly in its early nineteenth-century incarnations, seem to illuminate for Reynolds the possible implications of Tennyson’s relationship with Arthur Henry Hallam, who shared his interest in Sappho. (“Fragments of an Elegy: Tennyson Reading Sappho,” Tennyson Society Occasional Paper 11 [2001].) Similarly, Linda M. Shires’s “Rereading Tennyson’s Gender Politics” offers an insightful analysis of Tennyson “as a male
have seemed determined to overwrite the femininity of his characters and speakers with “universal” (which is to say non-gendered or even male-gendered) significance. There is a kind of frantic discomfort in some modern criticism of Tennyson’s earliest work (particularly the “girl” poems of 1830 and 1832), which is apparently driven by a desperate need to understand why a man would write in the way that Tennyson does—or, rather, why a man would willingly embrace the socially-overdetermined role of poetess.

Cronin, for example, never offers any coherent definition of or explanation for his remarkable assertion that Tennyson “writes quite uninhibitedly as a woman,” instead moving on to discuss the financial considerations that may have moved Tennyson to adopt a woman’s voice. Although his argument is one of the very few to baldly assert that Tennyson’s Shelleyan tendencies owe more to Hemans and Landon than to Shelley himself, Cronin’s discussion of Tennyson’s poetry is too brief to offer any real insight. Cronin’s argument for Tennyson’s feminization rests largely on the failures of his male contemporaries—namely George Darley and Thomas Lovell Beddoes, whose respective inabilities to articulate poetic masculinity, Cronin argues, established the post-Romantic aesthete who started his career by insisting on the autonomy of art, [and who] also courted his own feminization” (47). (In Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse, ed. Thaïs E. Morgan [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990], 46-65.)

8 Jerome Hamilton Buckley, for example, argues that the title characters of “The Hesperides” “are the correlatives of the artist, or, more generally, of the mind devoutly dedicated to the imaginative life,” while the Lady of Shalott “is the dedicated artist, the complement or antitype of the poet, perhaps properly understood in Jungian terms as the anima, the unconscious self,” and the Soul of “The Palace of Art” is the ultimate representation of the artist. (Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967], 47-55.) Although it is tempting to read this universalizing impulse as a positive trait, a kind of gender-blindness, the erasure of the femininity of Tennyson’s empowered female speakers suggests not gender-blindness, but misogynistic discomfort with the feminine.

9 Howard W. Futweiler, speaking of the “girl” poems’ reception in the 1830s, says, “And yet we do wonder why the chorus of praise from such varied quarters—Mill, Hallam, Fox—should greet a body of lyrics about young women, written by a poet in his early twenties. What moved a poet of genius to choose such a topic?” Although it does not appear to be intentional—Futweiler spends much of the chapter extolling Tennyson’s engagement with the “woman question(s)” of the nineteenth century—this question hints at the source of critics’ discomfort. Why on earth would a young man choose to write about and as that inferior creature, a woman? (“Here a Captive Heart Busted”: Studies in the Sentimental Journal of Modern Literature [New York: Fordham University Press, 1993], 39.)
male poet as “an empty skull,” devoid of the energy that characterized the poetry of Byron, Shelley, or Keats.\textsuperscript{10} Cronin, however, limits Tennyson’s feminine voice to a specific group of poems, including the “girl” poems of the 1830 Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, “The Lady of Shalott,” “Œnone,” “Fatima,” and “The Palace of Art.” For Cronin, Tennyson’s choice to write “as a woman” is precisely that—a choice predicated on the realities of the poetic market, which at the time was dominated by the work of women. What Cronin’s argument lacks, however, is a clear reason for these supposed failures, especially given critics’ repeated cries for a “masculine” voice in the poetry of the 1830s. Ultimately, Cronin’s larger concern is not with Tennyson’s poetic femininity, but in the ways in which that femininity represents a larger failure on the part of potentially “masculine” poets.\textsuperscript{11}

Generally speaking, most critics, following Carol Christ’s feminist reading of Tennyson in Martha Vicinus’s A Widening Sphere (1977),\textsuperscript{12} have identified Tennyson’s femininity as an attempt at broader commentary on masculinity. However, this attempt is not, in Morgan’s terms, meant to use the Other (woman) to reaffirm the Same (man) so much as it is a way of critiquing masculinity.\textsuperscript{13} John Hughes, for example, argues that “Tennyson’s works . . . aspired to ultimately masculine positionings of self, but . . . [he] was always animated by an encrypted but constitutive dimension of (what is best called) feminine sensibility that yearned . . . for self-revelation or expression.”\textsuperscript{14} While Hughes

\textsuperscript{10} Romantic Victorians, 107.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{13} Christ argues that “the ambivalence with which each writer [Coventry Patmore and Alfred Lord Tennyson] portrays man’s aggressiveness explains much about his idealization of women’s passivity and asexuality. She represents an ideal freedom from those very qualities he finds most difficult to accept in himself” (147).
\textsuperscript{14} “‘Hang There Like Fruit, My Soul,’’” 96.
goes on to offer an intriguing analysis of what he calls Tennyson’s “transgendered” desires, his argument remains largely speculative, lacking concrete examples of this desire in the poetry, and is more invested in defining Tennyson’s conception of frustrated masculinity than the specifics of his “feminine imagination.”

For my purposes, this “feminine imagination” is not merely Tennyson’s identification of art as a feminine force, but his ability to imaginatively place himself in a subject position traditionally occupied by women, while he embraced and performed many of the same complicated rejections of fame and poetic success that were expected of female poetesses. Through both his poetry, wherein he persistently recreated the poetess as an abandoned woman, as the embodiment of Art, and as an Amazon, and in his relationship to his critical and popular audiences, Tennyson created and enacted the figure of the male poetess.

**Tennyson’s Femininity**

If Felicia Hemans or Letitia Landon had any direct influence on Tennyson, it has been lost to history. Apart from a single reference to “Mrs. Hughes (a sister of Mrs. Hemans . . .)”,15 he never mentions either poet in any of his extant letters from his pre-Laureate days. Indeed, were it not for their intense popularity—bordering on ubiquity during the late 1820s and early 1830s—we might safely assume that he had never read either. However, though none of their books are listed among his library, it is unlikely

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15 Tennyson to Elizabeth Russell, 10 March 1833, in *The Letters of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981-1990), 1:88. Tennyson informs his aunt that Harriett Mary Hughes (Owen), Felicia Hemans’s younger sister, had set Tennyson’s “The Ballad of Oriana” to music, and was asking for his permission to publish. Tennyson adds, “Of course I gave it, though somewhat reluctantly for I think it very dubious whether she may have touched the right key.”
that a young writer with an eye to publication would not be well-read in the periodicals of his day. Even if he never purchased or read any of Hemans’s or Landon’s published collections, it is inconceivable that he did not encounter their poetry in the periodicals or the annuals in which they published.\textsuperscript{16} Given the lack of evidence, it may seem presumptuous to argue that there is a system of influence here, and that Tennyson, consciously or otherwise, is operating within the confines of a poetic identity formulated by Hemans and Landon. However, whether or not Tennyson read Hemans or Landon (and I believe he did\textsuperscript{17}) is ultimately irrelevant to their influence on his early work and its adoption of a sentimental aesthetic. The figure of the poetess, as it was promoted by their work and reputations, established a discourse within which Tennyson situated himself for the first twenty years of his long career.

Like the careers of Hemans and Landon, Tennyson’s career was built upon an obsession with loss, even though his earliest poems were written before the death of Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, which would become the defining incident of Tennyson’s life and career. The shadow of Hallam overwrites Tennyson’s career from their first meeting in 1829 until at least 1850, when Tennyson published his great elegy, \textit{In Memoriam A.H.H.}\textsuperscript{18} As Tennyson’s intellectual inspiration and principal cheerleader, Hallam was instrumental in supporting and promoting Tennyson’s early publications. As

\textsuperscript{16} According to Charles Tennyson’s biography of his grandfather, Elizabeth Tennyson (Alfred’s mother) made a practice of reading Hemans aloud to her boys while on walks. If this is true, Charles Tennyson’s dating of these excursions must be mistaken; he incorporates this anecdote in the 1800-1808 portion of his biography—and Hemans did not begin publishing as “Mrs. Hemans” until 1814. Since the story also contains a reference to Mrs. Tennyson’s “tall sons,” we can assume that the incidents took place in the early 1820s, when Alfred and his brothers would have been teenagers. (\textit{Alfred Tennyson} [London: Archon Books, 1968]: 14.)

\textsuperscript{17} Charles Tennyson also recounts a story of his grandfather, while traveling with some acquaintances circa 1839, “murmuring poetry, talking ‘huskily,’ and abusing Mrs. Hemans” (175).

\textsuperscript{18} I would argue, in fact, that Hallam or, more properly, the loss of Hallam, never stopped being Tennyson’s artistic prime mover. Hallam’s presence overwrites \textit{Idylls of the King} and haunts Tennyson’s own life in the person of his first living child (after the stillborn son of 1851), Hallam Tennyson.
Tennyson’s best friend, intended brother-in-law, and confidant, Hallam was the literary, if not the literal, love of Tennyson’s life, and the “ten years of silence” between Tennyson’s major publications of 1832 and 1842 is generally acknowledged to have been a direct result of Tennyson’s prostrating grief following Hallam’s sudden death in 1833.

However, even before Hallam’s death, Tennyson’s poetry drew on tropes predominantly associated with the sentimental productions of the female poetesses of his day. A startling number of his poems are focused on women and girls, either as narrators or subjects, and only rarely are these women framed as objects of the poet’s desire. Often, they appear to ventriloquize the voice of the poet himself, and though his feminine self-positionings would decline in his later career, he never entirely abandoned the pose.

Tennyson’s career spanned six decades; for the purposes of this argument, I have designated everything prior to the publication of *In Memoriam* and Tennyson’s acceptance of the Laureateship in 1850 as his “early” (that is, sentimental) career. The 1842 *Poems* consists almost entirely of poetry in the sentimental vein of the earlier volumes, while *The Princess* anticipates *In Memoriam*’s queer(ly) unstable gender dynamics both in its depiction of its cross-dressing Prince and the Amazonian Princess Ida, and in its eventual capitulation to heteronormative gender identities in the mass.

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19 This is in no way meant to discount Tennyson’s apparently steady love for his wife, Emily Sellwood Tennyson. I am not attempting here to make any kind of comment on Tennyson’s sexuality.

20 An alternate theory is that the harsh critical reviews of 1830 and 1832 shocked Tennyson into his “silence.” This theory is certainly borne out by his determined reticence on the subject of his poems and by the fact that Tennyson was writing, although not publishing, during this period. Ultimately, it is likely that the real cause of the “ten years of silence” is some combination of the loss of Hallam (and, thus, the support and inspiration he provided) and the earlier poems’ reception, along with the various troubles that plagued the Tennyson family during the 1830s. Harold Nicholson, for all that his analysis of Tennyson is seriously problematic, offers a very compelling account of the way in which Hallam’s death exacerbated the frustrations already caused by the negative reviews of 1832. (*Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character, and Poetry* [London: Constable, 1925]. See chapter V, “The Ten Years’ Silence,” for Nicholson’s analysis.) Jerome Buckley and Christopher Ricks likewise offer nuanced readings of the poems written during the “silence” in order to show how these complicated pressures contributed to Tennyson’s refusal to publish. (See Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet*, especially chapter IV, “The Silent Years,” and Ricks, *Tennyson* [New York: Macmillan, 1972], especially chapters V and VI.)
marriages that conclude the story. If The Princess is the final chapter in Tennyson’s early career, then In Memoriam is the coda—encompassing and recapitulating seventeen years of work, and, like The Princess, ultimately reaffirming heteronormativity and conventional gender dynamics in its conclusion.

For my purposes, Tennyson’s career officially begins in 1830, with the publication of his Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, though I could conceivably date this stage of his career from “Timbuctoo” in 1829. Poems, Chiefly Lyrical is notable not merely for its status as Tennyson’s inaugural work, nor simply for the fact that it includes early versions of some of his most important lyrics (including “Mariana” and “The Kraken”), but for the remarkable sentimentality and femininity of its content. By femininity, here I mean the sheer number of lyrics titled with women’s names, many of which are spoken in women’s voices. Collectively, these lyrics have been referred to as “the girls of 1830” or the “girl poems”; their numbers include “Claribel,” “Lilian,” “Isabel,” “Mariana,” “Madeline,” and “Adeline.” In addition to the “girls of 1830,” Poems, Chiefly Lyrical includes a handful of other texts that, while not named exclusively for young women, feature a feminine point of view or subject. These include “The Mermaid,” “The Ballad of Oriana,” “To— [Sainted Juliet!],” “The Dying Swan,” and “Hero to Leander.” Finally, “Recollections of the Arabian Nights,” as John Killham intimates in his reading of the poem, contains textual clues indicating that Tennyson’s focus in this poem is, specifically, the heroine of the Arabian Nights tale “Noureddin and the Fair Persian.”

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21 Christopher Ricks has dated several similar poems to this same period, namely “Amy,” “Marion,” and “Lisette,” none of which were published in Tennyson’s lifetime.

This trend continued in Tennyson’s second volume, the 1832 *Poems*. The poems titled with women’s names, including “Mariana in the South,” “Eleänore,” “Fatima,” “Œnone,” “Rosalind” (and its companion poem, “‘My Rosalind, my Rosalind!’”), “Margaret,” and “Kate,” were joined by those addressed to or spoken by unnamed women identified only by their titles or positions—“The Lady of Shalott,” “The Miller’s Daughter,” “The Sisters,” “The May Queen,” and “The Hesperides.” Finally, the 1832 *Poems* includes two longer poems that engage directly with women or feminine forces in imagined positions of power or influence—“The Palace of Art” and “A Dream of Fair Women.”

The majority of the “girl poems” of 1830 and 1832 are narrated not by the title character, but by an outside observer, presumably masculine, who dwells upon the appearance or character of the lady in question. Unlike “Hero to Leander,” “Fatima,” “Œnone,” “The May Queen,” or “The Sisters,” these poems are not plot-driven, but rather pictorial. This quality led Jerome Buckley to condemn the “girls,” with the exception of “Mariana,” as “the shadowy muses of society verse. . . . Each is fashioned as if for illustration in the style of the popular annuals of the period, the Christmas gift books.”

Margaret Reynolds characterizes similar arguments in rather more forceful terms, suggestion that “‘Girlie’ poems is what they have become [for modern critics], simpering illustrations for a soft-porn collection parading their vital statistics,” as much of an embarrassment for today’s critics as for those of Buckley’s day and even those of Tennyson’s.

These feminine elements in Tennyson’s early poetry have always been a factor in his critical reception. As early as 1833, one American reviewer identified Tennyson as

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the worst offender among modern English poets who “have become the most affected, misty, and unnatural beings in creation.” The anonymous reviewer castigates Tennyson and other modern English poets for their “pretty little silly phrases that mean about as much as the simpering sentimentalism of a boarding-school miss,” accusing them of corrupting (read: feminizing) the “genuine springs of the English speech” with their elaborate language and imagery. Victorian anxieties about masculinity repeatedly manifest in the literary criticism of much of the nineteenth century, and Tennyson was one central figure upon whom those anxieties rested. A short analysis of several important works of criticism from the nineteenth century clearly indicates that Tennyson’s audiences were aware of, even if they did not actively acknowledge, the strong similarities between Tennyson’s work and that of the female sentimental poetesses of the day.

Prose critics’ responses to Tennyson, as I suggest above, had distinct rhetorical similarities to the receptions of Hemans and Landon, sometimes even when those critics were attempting to distance Tennyson from that tradition. Arthur Henry Hallam’s review of Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, for example, casts Tennyson as the next “poet of sensation,” the heir to an aesthetic belonging first to Shelley and Keats. Hallam’s review was published in the Englishman’s Magazine (August 1831), and garnered for its subject and its publisher little more than widespread ridicule. In an 1832 review of Tennyson’s Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, “Christopher North” blamed Hallam’s essay for the demise of the day.


Englishman’s Magazine, which failed in October 1831, saying that “The Essay ‘on the genius of Alfred Tennyson’ awoke a general guffaw, and [the magazine] expired in convulsions.” 26 Although North ultimately praises Tennyson, with special emphasis on his “delicate perception of the purity of the female character,” 27 the first half of the review lambastes his “silliness” and “weakness,” thus underscoring North’s perception of Hallam’s error. North’s description of the “superhuman—nay, supernatural—pomposity” of the review is surprisingly apt; in his enthusiasm for his subject, Hallam’s essay distinctly echoes the puffed-up rhetoric of the review in the Literary Gazette with which William Jerdan launched Letitia Landon’s career in 1824. Both reviewers are inclined to praise their subjects far out of proportion to their actual contributions, and in their grandiose claims, diminish the respectability of their subjects in the eyes of critical audiences. 28

The superficial resemblances to Jerdan’s puffery aside, the significance of Hallam’s essay for this project lies in his attempt to align Tennyson with Shelley and Keats as “poets of sensation.” Hallam further contrasts Tennyson against Wordsworth, whom he describes (rather unjustly, as Steven C. Dillon points out 29 ) as a poet of reflection, rather than sensation, Wordsworth’s work lacking the immediacy of feeling that Hallam identifies in Tennyson’s. In Hallam’s description, poets of sensation live “in a world of images,” where emotion and form are constantly combined. In this visionary company Hallam situates Tennyson, claiming that “his ear has a fairy fineness” and

27 Ibid., 734.
28 Hallam trumps Jerdan in one respect: his insistence that Tennyson’s gift (his “share in [Keats’s and Shelley’s] characteristic excellencies”) ensures his unpopularity. This perverse claim seems to be a blatant attempt, despite Hallam’s claims to the contrary, to provoke the audience into purchasing Tennyson’s book and thus proving Hallam wrong (42).
praising his “vivid, picturesque delineation of objects, and the peculiar skill with which he holds all of them fused . . . in a medium of strong emotions.” The rather feminizing descriptions that appear in Hallam’s list of Tennyson’s qualities, including the “fairy fineness” of his ear and his “luxuriance of imagination” are gently tempered by repeated allusions to his power, control, and strength—masculine adjectives designed to shore up the reputation of poets of sensation.\(^30\)

While Hallam’s summary of Tennyson’s aesthetic is evocative of that which is used to discuss Felicia Hemans, in particular—“There is a strange earnestness in his worship of beauty, which throws a charm over his impassioned song, more easily felt than described, and not to be escaped by those who have once felt it”—the terminology Hallam chooses separates Tennyson from the popular sentimental poetry that his work most resembles, while still acknowledging his poems’ dependence on the very emotions and ideas that drive sentimentality.\(^31\) In effect, by calling Tennyson a “poet of sensation,” Hallam gestures towards sentimentality (and its forebear, sensibility), with its emphasis on the importance of beauty and emotion in art, while his terminology and his classification of Keats and Shelley as Tennyson’s most important precursors serves to separate him from the femininity attached to sentimentality.\(^32\)

Later reviews and critical analyses were less concerned with promoting Tennyson’s popularity, and thus tended to emphasize his continuing poetess qualities. In

\(^31\)Ibid., 42.
\(^32\)In his choice of terminology, Hallam also unintentionally anticipates the Victorian discourse of sensationalism, which itself belongs to the tradition of sensibility/sentiment in its deliberate use of emotional shock to illustrate a specific moral or ethical point.
1850, George Gilfillan described Tennyson as a poet whose “fancy loves, better than is manly or beseeming, the tricksy elegancies of artificial life—the ‘white sofas’ of his study—the trim walks of his garden—the luxuries of female dress—and all the tiny comforts and beauties which nestle round an English parlour,” and, furthering the association of Tennyson with his male Romantic predecessors, adds, “In this union of feminine feebleness and imaginative strength, he much resembles John Keats.” Gilfillan imagined Tennyson’s work would be neither popular nor successful, and doubted his own inclusion of Tennyson among his “great poets,” but, like Christopher North before him, argues for Tennyson’s “great powers,” even if he “is, as yet, guiltless of great achievements.”

Alfred Austin was not nearly so generous. In an 1869 article in Temple Bar, Austin, who was to succeed Tennyson as Poet Laureate, described “The Poetry of the Period” as “not great, but little,” and names Tennyson as this “little” poetry’s most characteristic creator. Austin’s argument was that Tennyson, contrary to the claims of his popular audience, was not a “great” poet. In fact, Austin asserts that Tennyson is “unquestionably not a poet of the first rank, all but unquestionably not a poet of the second rank, and probably . . . not even at the head of poets of the third rank, among whom he must ultimately take his place.” While this assessment merely disparages the quality of Tennyson’s poetry, and does not directly indict its (or its poet’s) masculinity, it

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33 According to a footnote in his chapter on Tennyson, the majority of Gilfillan’s text was written prior to the publication of The Princess and In Memoriam.
quickly becomes clear that Austin finds Tennyson lacking because his poetry lacks a strong masculine character.

Austin compares Tennyson’s work to a garden—“a beautiful, exquisite, tasteful, sweet-smelling, brightly-glittering garden, but—a garden,” and argues that gardens are inherently unoriginal and imitative. Thus, as a gardener, in touch with the beautiful and not the sublimity of “the sea, the sky, the mountains, the far-stretching landscape, stormy winds that fulfil His Word, the planets, the intolerable thunder, grim murder, vaulting ambition, mad revenge, earthquakes, and Promethean discontent,” Tennyson as a poet cannot be great.37

Austin’s argument, framed as it is in a Burkean aesthetic that privileges the sublime as both “great” and masculine, and the beautiful as “little” and feminine, clearly aligns Tennyson with the latter, and, in fact, stops just short of claiming Tennyson cannot be a great poet because he is a poetess. However, while Austin does not actually state the above, his rhetoric makes the argument for him. Tennyson’s poetry is “delicate, subtle, pathetic,” “exceedingly pretty, soothing, elegant,” and “the poetry of the drawing-room, not the music of the Spheres.”38 This is a particularly telling criticism. As with the comparison between the garden and untamed natural landscapes, the contrast between the drawing-room and the heavenly Spheres is not merely a contrast between the little and the great, or the beautiful and the sublime. Drawing-rooms are, perhaps, the single strongest signifier of middle-class domesticity, and thus middle-class femininity, of the

37 Ibid., 185.
38 Ibid., 189.
mid-nineteenth century. As a poet of the drawing-room, with a “dainty and delicious,”
muse, Tennyson is “sweet, tender, touching, polished . . . a gentleman”—or a poetess.  

The most memorable and remembered attack on Tennyson’s femininity came, however, not from the prose reviews, but from another source entirely: Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The New Timon* (1846). This long poem has long been ignored and no doubt would have been forgotten were it not the source of the infamous “School-Miss Alfred” (quoted at the beginning of this chapter). This epithet echoes earlier reviewers’ comparison of Tennyson to a “boarding-school miss” (a favorite phrase of both British and American reviewers in the early 1830s), a designation that simultaneously denigrates Tennyson’s masculinity and maturity, while suggesting that his poetry would only appeal to similarly feminine and puerile audiences.

In a move that smacks of sour grapes, especially one hundred and sixty-odd years later, Bulwer-Lytton’s speaker—the poem’s omniscient narrator(prefaces his dismissal of Tennyson’s “chaste delight” with an attack on the feminization of modern poetry. Bulwer-Lytton’s speaker’s determination to separate himself from this “womanized” mode of poetry allows him both to attack Tennyson for succeeding, and to defend his own lack of success by blaming the feminization of the literary market and its subsequent lack of originality for his own failure:

I seek no purfled prettiness of phrase,—

A soul in earnest scorns the tricks for praise.

If my verse be denied the Poet’s fame,

This merit, rare to verse that wins, I claim:

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39 Ibid., 191, 184.
No tawdry grace shall womanize my pen!

Ev’n in a love song, men should write for men!

Not mine, not mine, (O Muse forbid!) the boon

Of borrowed notes; the mock-birds modish tune,

The jingling medley of purloin’d conceits,

Outbabying Wordsworth, and outglittering Keates [sic],

Where all the airs of patchword-pastoral chime

To drowsy ears in Tennysonian rhyme! (II.54-65)

The accusations of poetic theft that dominate this passage underscore Bulwer-Lytton’s speaker’s assertion that Tennyson’s poetry is both inauthentic and unmanly—and that this counterfeit femininity has been adopted solely to appeal to the public. Describing Tennyson’s poetry as successful but unoriginal (hence the “boon” of “borrowed notes”), not to mention faddish and feminine, again amounts to an accusation of writing gift-book verse fit only for schoolgirls. The savagery with which Bulwer-Lytton attacks Tennyson, and the fact he is the only poet named in this passage who is explicitly feminized, though both Keats and Wordsworth are indicted as frivolous or unmanly, suggest that Tennyson strikes Bulwer-Lytton as exceptionally feminine. Mariana, in particular, provided Bulwer-Lytton with an easy target. The echoes of gift-book verse had already been noted by more than one reviewer; Bulwer-Lytton, possessed of political and personal motives, was merely the most direct.

Bulwer-Lytton concludes his attack on Tennyson by returning to the assertion that popularity is a symptom of poetic failure or, at the very least, pandering:

Tho’ praised by critics, tho’ adored by Blues,
Tho’ Peel with pudding plump the puling Muse,
Tho’ Theban taste the Saxon’s purse controls,
And pensions Tennyson, while starves a Knowles,41
Rather be thou, my poor Pierian Maid,
Decent at least, in Hayley’s weeds array’d,
Than patch with frippery every tinsel line,
And flaunt admired, the Rag Fair of the Nine! (II.78-86)

This comparison of poetic popularity with a kind of foppish concern for sartorial fashion
is a further argument for the feminization of the popular poet. It also reveals Bulwer-
Lytton’s anxieties about poetic masculinity, which are returned in Tennyson’s furious
public response to this poem, printed in Punch under the name “Alcibades” in February
1846.42 “The New Timon, and the Poets” turns Bulwer-Lytton’s attack back upon him,
accusing him of being “The padded man—that wears the stays—/ Who killed the girls
and thrilled the boys / With dandy pathos when you wrote” (lines 8-10), and having “The
old mark of rouge upon your cheeks” (line 38). Kathryn Ledbetter characterizes this
exchange as homophobic, and to the extent to which homophobia reflects broader
anxieties about gendered behavior, she is correct.43 However, in order to avoid reducing

41 This line is the heart of Bulwer-Lytton’s attack. He was furious that Tennyson, whom he believed to
have an independent income (the circumstances were quite complicated, but on its face Bulwer-Lytton was
right), should have received a government pension, while the playwright James Sheridan Knowles was
impoverished and denied support. Bulwer-Lytton adds a footnote to this passage, arguing that Tennyson, as
a coterie poet who has “moved no one,” is far from deserving of the £200 yearly stipend he had just been
awarded by the Crown. The irony here, of course, which Tennyson himself notes in his response, “The
New Timon, and the Poets,” is that Bulwer-Lytton was far more of a coterie poet than Tennyson (at least by
1846), and—although Tennyson makes no mention of this—was among Letitia Landon’s closest friends
and most ardent supporters, and Landon was, perhaps, far more deserving of the title “coterie poet.”

42 Tennysonian legend has it that John Forster submitted the poem to Punch, but accounts differ as to
whether or not he did so with Tennyson’s permission. (Ricks, The Poems of Tennyson, 736.)

this fascinating dialogue to accusations of “deviant” desire, I suggest we read it as indicative of the pervasive anxiety about literary gender.

Tennyson’s answering salvo to Bulwer-Lytton, however, is far more personal and caught up in issues of public appearance and dress than Bulwer-Lytton’s attack on Tennyson. The latter focuses solely on the poetry, characterizing Tennyson’s literary persona as that of a poetess; Tennyson’s attempt at a defense directly targets Bulwer-Lytton’s public and personal personae. The root of Tennyson’s disgust here seems to be not only a growing discomfort with the apparent femininity of his own writing,44 but also his loathing of Bulwer-Lytton’s adoption of faddish dandyism—itself an effeminate pose—to court fame.

**Feminizing Fame**

As his response to Bulwer-Lytton indicates, Tennyson’s relationship to fame is complicated by his ambivalent feelings towards the culture of literary celebrity. Tennyson both longs for fame and despises its effects upon the artist who attains it—a position that imitates those of the female poetesses of his day. Because he was a male poetess, Tennyson never experienced fame as the pyrrhic victory it proved for his female peers. The burdens of fame articulated by Hemans and Landon cannot be construed in any kind of like manner for a poet whose early career was sheltered both by his relative lack of early fame and by his sex.45 No man of the period, even one who is best understood as

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44 Aubrey de Vere notes in his diary for 18 April 1845 that “[Tennyson] said he would willingly bargain for the reputation of Suckling or Lovelace, and alluded to ‘the foolish facility of all Tennysonian poetry’” (quoted in Aubrey de Vere: A Memoir, Based on His Unpublished Diaries and Correspondence, by Wilfrid Ward [London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1904]: 71-72).

45 Similarly, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, Elizabeth Barrett never experienced fame in the same manner as her predecessors, in large part because, unlike Hemans and Landon, she was “protected” by living under, first, a patrial and then a marital roof.
performing a feminine literary role, would be at risk for the kinds of blatantly sexualized reception that threatens women in the public eye. Thus, Tennyson’s loathing of the culture of celebrity need not necessarily be inspired primarily by a sense of social responsibility or decorum such as may have contributed to female poetesses’ rejections of fame, but rather by a personal distaste for the kinds of attention garnered by literary popularity.

Tennyson was a lazy letter-writer, a fact complained of by several of his friends and biographers, and thus we have few accounts in his own words of his early encounters with his limited fame. What we do have, however, are a number of incidents in which his friends record their memories of him expressing his loathing of biographers and autograph-seekers. In part, this distaste may be attributed to Tennyson’s notorious shyness. Furthermore, given the often-precarious state of Tennyson’s mental health, and the distressed circumstances of much of his early career, he came to view celebrity, with its accompanying invasions of privacy, as a poisonous interference in the personal and professional lives of public figures.

In an undated letter to Henry Taylor, published in his autobiography (1886), Julia Margaret Cameron writes that Tennyson:

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46 Hallam wrote to John Kemble in 1832, “Alfred’s coming [to London] seems to be mainly attributable to your letter three months ago—at least his answer to questions, why he comes to London, is said to be, ‘I have never answered John Kemble!’ One would have thought taking pen in hand was less trouble than coming 50 miles; but different persons have different estimates of difficulty.” (In *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. Jack Kolb [Columbus: Ohio State University, 1981]: 597.) In 1858, Tennyson wrote to Dr. and Mrs. Robert James Mann, “You know that any day I would as soon kill a pig as write a letter” (*Letters*, 2:211), which is rather more dramatic than his statement to John William Parker several months earlier that “letter-writing is very disagreeable to me. It is not the way that I naturally express my thoughts and feelings” (*Letters*, 2:197).

47 Though Taylor tentatively dates the letter circa 1860-1862, Cameron’s reference to the popularity (“mad worship”) of Swinburne, which I have not quoted here, means the letter cannot have been written earlier than 1865. (*Autobiography, 1800-1875*, 2 vols. [London: Longmans, Green, 1885], 2:193.)

48 Taylor, later Sir Henry, was a public servant and poet, author of the popular play *Philip Van Artevelde* (1834), and a close friend of both the Tennysons and the Camerons, as well as divers other
was very violent with the girls\textsuperscript{49} on the subject of the rage for autographs. He said he believed every crime and every vice in the world were connected with the passion for autographs and anecdotes and records,—that the desiring anecdotes and acquaintance with the lives of great men was treating them like pigs to be ripped open for the public; that he knew he himself should be ripped open like a pig... 

It is a delicious irony that Cameron adds, “Then he said that the post for two days had brought him no letters, and that he thought there was a sort of syncope in the world as to him and his fame.”\textsuperscript{50}

While Cameron’s account comes well after Tennyson had achieved the intense popularity that characterized his middle age, his distaste for literary celebrity is evident as early as the late 1830s. Christopher Ricks, in his critical biography of Tennyson, quotes a long, “bitter unfinished cogitation,” written circa 1839, in which Tennyson’s “hatred for biographical prying and for the literary world is heard.”\textsuperscript{51} Although Ricks’s claim that this is “one of the most directly personal poems that Tennyson ever wrote” is, perhaps, an unfounded assertion, it is nevertheless the case that the sentiments Tennyson’s speaker expresses in this poem are identical to those which Tennyson expresses in his personal writings and which were recorded by his friends and acquaintances. Based on this, it seems reasonable to assume that this particular poem is an accurate reflection of some of figures, including James Spedding, Aubrey de Vere, and Isabella Fenwick. He sat for a number of Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs, and she and Tennyson figure prominently in the second volume of his autobiography.

\textsuperscript{49} Presumably Annie (Anne Isabelle) and Minnie (Harriet Marian) Thackeray, the novelist’s daughters. In the same letter, Cameron writes that “Tennyson talked very pleasantly that evening with Annie Thackeray and L— S—” (quoted in Taylor, 2:193). As the Thackeray sisters were more or less inseparable, it seems likely Minnie is the other girl to whom Cameron refers. L— S— is probably Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf), who married Minnie Thackeray in 1867.

\textsuperscript{50} Quoted in Taylor, 2:193.

\textsuperscript{51} Tennyson, 160-161.
Tennyson’s thoughts on the subject of fame, rather than, for example, a fragment of a dramatic monologue.

The voice of the speaker is that of a morose aspiring poet, who knows the inevitable price of publication, particularly in the modern day, when the lives of literary celebrities were, as Tennyson would later say, “ripped open for the public.” In this attitude, the poem bears a thematic resemblance to Letitia Landon’s “Lines of Life,” although that poem turns the recrimination of society inward, rather than focusing on the vagaries of public media:

Wherefore, in these dark ages of the Press,
(As that old Teuton christened them) should I,
Sane mind and body, wish to print my rhyme
Fame’s millionth heir-apparent?

I today

Lord of myself and of my ways, the next
A popular property, nauseate, when my name
Shot like a racketball from mouth to mouth
And bandied in the barren lips of fools
May yield my feeling organism pain

Trice keener than delight from duest praise? (lines 1-4, 9-15)

Tennyson’s horror of fame bears distinct echoes of that articulated by his female peers, albeit in somewhat more visceral terms than those adopted by Hemans and Landon in their attacks on fame. As a male poetess, he was able to voice feelings of nausea or to use
phrases like “ripped open like pigs,” which would be unseemly (or worse) coming from a woman writer. The sentiments, however, remain the same—the literary celebrity is public property, and the very popular or very scandalous (the poetess, whether male or female, or a literary superstar like Byron) were more vulnerable than all the rest.

This poem goes on to explore the speaker’s feelings of conflict between public expectations of his gender and his own sense of a gendered self:

And if I be, as truecast Poets are,

Half woman-natured, typing all mankind;

So must I triple-man myself and case

My humors as the caddisworm in stone (lines 16-19).

Although Tennyson’s claim that “all truecast Poets” are “half woman-natured” is apparently a reference to the idea that “every true poet is inclusively woman, but the worse man on that account.” Tennyson’s use of it here suggests that his poet-speaker believes himself caught between critical expectations that a poet be more hyper-masculine (“triple-man myself”) and his own nature. His sense that to be successful he must hide part of himself away and obey only specific social expectations is, here, an inverted version of the frustrations experienced by Hemans and Landon, and, later, by Barrett. While female poetesses find that fame requires them to play up their femininity, Tennyson identifies femininity as a liability for the male poetess, which underscores the

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Aubrey de Vere attributes this belief to Coleridge in a letter to Mrs. Edward Villiers circa 1841. He writes, “I have still been sitting up very late. There is but one person in London for whom I would do this—but that one lives two miles off, which has occasioned me some long walks home at two o’clock on fine mornings, when I have generally found my fire out and my room very cold. Who is that person—a lady? Certainly, if, as old Coleridge said, every true poet is inclusively woman, but the worse man on that account—Alfred Tennyson” (Aubrey de Vere: A Memoir, 76).
extent to which poetesses experience gender norms as a fundamental part of their audiences’ reaction to them.

While at this early date Tennyson could not anticipate the future extent of his fame, it is clear that he dreads its potential influence on his life. A similar poem, written nearly a decade later and published in the *Examiner*, is even more reminiscent of Hemans and Landon—in this case, their respective elegiac poems on Tighe and Hemans—with its comparison between the life of an ordinary individual and that of the poet:

   And you have missed the irreverent doom
   Of those that wear the Poet’s crown:
   Hereafter, neither knave nor clown
   Shall hold their orgies at your tomb. (lines 9-12)

The poem, titled “To —, After Reading a Life and Letters,” goes on to castigate the culture of celebrity that seeks to devour every piece of available information about any literary figure, and in its closing lines clearly echoes the work of the earlier poetesses:

   Who make it seem more sweet to be
   The little life of bank and brier,
   The bird that pipes his lone desire
   And dies unheard within his tree, (lines 29-32)\(^{53}\)

Here, in the penultimate stanza, we can see a strong resemblance to the closing lines of Hemans’s “Corinne at the Capitol” (“Happier, happier far than thou / . . . / She that makes the humblest hearth / Lovely but to one on earth”) and Landon’s “A History of the Lyre,” where the poetess Eulalia unfavorably compares herself to a tulip, and praises the shaded,

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\(^{53}\) This is also, perhaps, an echo of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” with the suggestion of “mute inglorious Milton[s]” suggested by the unheard bird.
unnoticed life of the lily of the valley. In the final stanza of Tennyson’s poem, the echoes of Landon are more pronounced, though probably unintentional:

Than he that warbles long and loud
And drops at Glory’s temple-gates
For whom the carrion vulture waits
To tear his heart before the crowd! (lines 33-36)

Landon’s “Felicia Hemans,” the second elegy she wrote for her predecessor, makes identical use of the Prometheus myth, though she relates it only to the experience of women in the literary marketplace. Because the Prometheus story was such an important one for the Romantics Tennyson admired, I doubt there is a deliberate reference to Landon here, though it is inconceivable that any reader familiar with both poems (as, perhaps, Elizabeth Barrett Browning might have been) would not recognize the similarities. In other words, regardless of Tennyson’s awareness of Landon’s (or Hemans’s) feelings on the subject of fame, his own rejection of the culture of celebrity places him within their sphere.

**Domestic Spaces**

In addition to being hyper-focused upon female figures and voices, Tennyson’s early poetry is distinguished by a fixation with domestic spaces. In his earliest work, these domestic spaces are explicitly aligned with poetry; Tennyson, unlike his male romantic predecessors, finds poetic inspiration within the home, rather than in nature. Although in his later volumes this fixation on domesticity would become part of a more
obviously nationalistic agenda, in poems like “O Darling Room,” “Mariana,” and “The Lady of Shalott,” the domestic is framed as a means to poetic end.

Tennyson’s explorations of domesticity could take on a ridiculous dimension, as with his rather bizarre tribute to enclosed spaces in “O Darling Room”:

O darling room, my heart’s delight,

Dear room, the apple of my sight,

With thy two couches soft and white,

There is no room so exquisite,

No little room so warm and bright,

Wherein to read, wherein to write. (lines 1-6)

Although “O Darling Room,” arguably one of the most marvelously trite poems in English literature, garnered Tennyson a tremendous amount of justified ridicule following its publication in the 1832 Poems, it offers key insights into his reliance on and conception of domestic space as a place of poetic inspiration. Despite its lyrical drawbacks, “O Darling Room” proposes a crucial contrast between the “darling room,” with its two “soft, white” couches evoking a kind of maternal sexuality and the more threatening and overwhelming natural spaces the poet lists in the second and third stanzas:

For I the Nonnenwerth have seen,

And Oberwinter’s vineyards green,

Musical Lurlei . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Yet never did there meet my sight,
Not any room so warm and bright,

Wherein to read, wherein to write. (lines 7-18)

Given this deliberate confinement of poetic activity to an enclosed room, and a room described in distinctly feminine terms, it is unsurprising that so many of Tennyson’s early poems rely upon images of domestic harmony or disharmony to establish their internal value systems.

The locus of Tennyson’s sentimental and political structures is the home; specifically, it is the English manor house, with all of the cultural symbolism it contains. Victorian ideologies, of course, placed the home, with its devoted angel-mother and hardworking father, at the very heart of the imperial project. The keystone of England’s foundations was the idyllic bourgeois hearthside, and conservative and liberal writers both relied on the sentimental weight of England’s equation with its homes, as in poems like Felicia Hemans’s “The Homes of England,” to garner support for their positions. Sentimental poetry, particularly that composed by the poetesses of the 1820s and 1830s, was, for all of its fixation on female bodies (a fixation we see in Landon’s poetry), equally consumed with the domestic spaces that safeguard or imprison those bodies. Like that of his fellow feminine poets, Tennyson’s early poetry takes up the literal and symbolic concept of home in order to draw his audiences’ sympathies for his subtle and consistent critique of masculine irresponsibility and its devastating impact on the feminine sphere of the home.

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For Tennyson, as for Hemans before him, domestic spaces are fraught with internal dichotomies that preclude any easy resolution.\(^{55}\) They represent at once safety and imprisonment, creative fecundity and sterility, education and ignorance, empowered solitude and crushing loneliness, love and hate. His characters, plagued by their inability to come to terms with loss or the threat of loss, are unable to reconcile these dualisms and are rendered static by their own indecision. Those characters who do escape (the Lady of Shalott, Ænone, and Ida) often do so at the cost of their lives or freedom.

Tennyson’s use of the domestic can be divided into three recognizable threads. First, there are the poems that draw upon what Lionel Stevenson calls the “high-born maiden symbol”\(^ {56}\)—poems like “Mariana” and “The Lady of Shalott,” in which the central figure, a woman or feminine figure of noble descent, is imprisoned within a domestic space that mirrors her mental and emotional state, escape from which is only possible through death. Second, there is the escapist thread, in which Tennyson, while apparently celebrating male freedom from domestic space, in fact adopts a feminine position to castigate those men who abandon their responsibilities, as in “Ænone,” “The Lotos-Eaters,” “Ulysses,” and “Locksley Hall.” Finally, in two poems from opposite ends of the early career, we see Tennyson’s struggle, embodied in conflicted, often heroic, female figures, with the idea of artistic solitude. *The Princess* finishes what “The Palace of Art” and, to a lesser extent, “The Lady of Shalott” begin, shifting the symbology of the earlier poems into a more concrete narrative reflecting gender confusion and confronting the realities of internal and external domestic threats.

Bulwer-Lytton’s deployment of “Mariana” in his attack on Tennyson in *The New Timon* (1846) was, in many respects, the use of an easy target. Despite the “airy fairy Lilian[s]” of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, it is “Mariana” that makes most visible Tennyson’s debt to the poetesses of his day. “Mariana” replicates the subject, tone, and mood of the poems that peppered the literary annuals in the 1820s and 1830s, particularly in its haunting portrayal of the abandoned, weeping woman trapped in a ruined home.\(^{57}\)

Herbert Tucker cites the “stanzaic form of the poem, its domestic setting, and above all its obsession with desire and abandonment” as key indicators of its debt to the “album poems.”\(^{58}\)

However, while “Mariana” is very much a set-piece poem, as the poems of the literary annuals tended to be, Tucker goes on to argue that Tennyson “adopts the conventions of that verse only to turn them . . . inside out,” correctly identifying the visual descriptions of Mariana’s “moated grange” as a departure from the usual modes of pictorial verse, which tends to be less fixated on external detail.\(^{59}\) It is the rotting homescape that Mariana inhabits, rather than her emotional landscape, that drives the sentimentality of the poem. Mariana, with her constant repetition of “I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!” is a human reflection of the decay around her, a horrific inversion of the formula in which a lovely young wife metonymically represents a peaceful and welcoming home. In other words, rather than the angel in the house,


\(^{58}\) Most of Tennyson’s actual album poems—“Anacreontics,” “A Fragment [Where Is the Giant of the Sun],” “No More,” and several sonnets—actually lack the “stanzaic form” Tucker claims is characteristic. “St. Agnes’ Eve,” first published in the *Keepsake* for 1837 as “St. Agnes,” which does maintain a regular stanza, is the exception, rather than the rule, in Tennyson’s annual poems.

\(^{59}\) Tucker, “House Arrest,” 543.
Mariana is the ghost, her mental and emotional devastation eternally played out upon the buildings around her.

Both Mariana’s constant refrain and the narrator’s seemingly endless catalogue of desolation invite the reader to partake in Mariana’s isolation and despair. Sentimental literature’s express purpose is to draw the reader into sympathy with its subjects, and “Mariana,” with its unflinching portrait of hopelessness and grief, functions as a classic example of sentimental verse. As Kathryn Ledbetter observes, women consume images of other women as models for their own self-construction, a phenomenon the annuals both enabled and promoted.60 “Mariana,” like many of Tennyson’s earliest poems, encourages a similar level of identification by appealing to the readers’ own experiences of love, loss, or isolation.

By locating his text solely within the confines of the decaying manor, Tennyson, like Hemans before him, consciously embraces the importance of the home in the English imagination.61 “Mariana” is an intensified vision of the destruction wreaked upon domestic spaces by irresponsible men or masculine quests that leave their families broken or destitute. In other words, Tennyson has taken what Jerome McGann calls Hemans’s “imagination of disaster”62 and made it starkly visible in his depiction of Mariana’s “moated grange.”

However, while Hemans appears to be more interested in home as an emotional and imaginary space, Tennyson is here invested in the physical place of the house, as his

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60 Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals, 24.
61 This is a trend that continues throughout his career; “Locksley Hall,” for example, casts the titular estate as the focal point of the poem, and yet the text itself appears to have little to do with the Hall itself. Similarly, The Princess, Maud, and “Enoch Arden” have as much to do with home spaces as they do with the eponymous characters of those poems.
62 The Poetics of Sensibility, 71.
The obsessive cataloguing of rotting fixtures indicates in “Mariana.” The catalogue of outdoor furnishings that opens the poem immediately distances the reader from Mariana:

With blackest moss the flower-pots

Were thickly crusted, one and all:

The rusted nails fell from the knots

That held the pear to the gable-wall.

The broken sheds looked sad and strange:

Unlifted was the clinking latch

Weeded and worn the ancient thatch

Upon the lonely moated grange.

She only said, ‘My life is dreary,

He cometh not, she said; (lines 1-10)

It takes nine lines—nearly the entirety of the stanza, to reach the title character of the poem, and we never achieve any sense of Mariana’s inner thoughts. All of the interiority in the poem belongs to the grange—the poem is, in fact, inside-out, with interior emotions projected onto an exterior construct (the building). The closest we get to Mariana’s inner thoughts are her falling tears in stanza two, her sleepwalking in stanza three, and her incessant refrain of “I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!”

By locating the grange in a desolate fen, Tennyson highlights Mariana’s sense of abandonment. The presence of other beings—I hesitate to call the ghostly faces, footsteps, and voices in the penultimate stanza “people”—indicate Mariana’s belief in her own separateness. Abandoned as she is, Mariana is no doubt also “fallen,” and her literal haunting by “older” presences suggests the nagging presence of a potentially

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63 Herbert Tucker makes a similar argument in “House Arrest.”
condemnatory society beyond the confines of the moat and the fen. For all of Mariana’s moaning, it seems possible, even likely, that she waits not for rescue, but for a promised companion that never comes. Her unexplained sojourn in the moated grange anticipates the imprisonment (and fall) of Tennyson’s most iconic female figure: the Lady of Shalott.

One of the reasons critics have struggled so profoundly with “The Lady of Shalott” is that the gender of the poem’s author seems to preclude the most apparent reading. Had the poem appeared with the signature “L.E.L.,” for example, the Lady would quite clearly be read as another variation of Corinne or Sappho—an artist abandoning the “shadows” of her artistic creation in favor of love, only to lose art, love, and life in the psychological cataclysm of the poem’s conclusion. The poem, signed by a female poetess, would quite clearly be yet another exploration of the unstable and untenable position of the female artist in the vein of “Properzia Rossi” or “A History of the Lyre.”

However, perhaps because “The Lady of Shalott” was written by a male poetess, critics have simultaneously managed to overlook and overread the implications of gender in this poem. Generally speaking, the Corinne/Sappho model has been disregarded, and the poem’s supposed antecedents are nearly all the work of male authors. Thus, like “The Palace of Art,” “The Lady of Shalott” has been read as an exploration of artistic isolation, but always in strictly non-gendered terms. In other words, no one has tried to read the Lady specifically as a representation of the female or feminine poet, despite her obvious qualifications for that position.

In part, this oversight can be traced to critical assumptions about gender. If all (or most) artists are assumed to be male, which is itself a gendered position distinguished by
a lack of a gender (in other words—“male” is default, universal, and therefore without gender), then reading the artist as an explicitly female figure seems nonsensical. Or, to put it another way, while male creativity, understood to be universal, can be made to represent female creativity, the same argument is rarely made in reverse, so acknowledging the Lady’s highly gendered position makes it more difficult to universalize the poem in analysis. However, by deliberately ignoring the Lady’s femininity, or arguing that it is only because Tennyson figures the creative soul as female that the Lady of Shalott is, in fact, a “lady,” critics have missed a key point of convergence between Tennyson and his immediate contemporaries.

The Lady’s imprisonment in the tower, like that of the Soul in “The Palace of Art,” represents the isolation of the artist. However, by gendering her female, and locating her artistic abilities in the traditionally feminine skill of weaving,\(^{64}\) Tennyson aligns the Lady both with her important classical foremothers, whose weaving served both a communicative and alienating/distancing function, and with her more contemporary sisters—the poetesses and improvisatrices of Madame de Staël (Corinne), Felicia Hemans (“Properzia Rossi”), and Letitia Landon (The Improvisatrice, “A History of the Lyre,” and “Erinna”).

The Lady is descended from such storied weavers as Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne. In the myths attached to these figures, weaving functions as a locus of power in the face of apparent powerlessness. The Lady cannot leave her tower, nor can she look

\(^{64}\) Of course, in Tennyson’s England, the division of labor in the textile cottage industry cast weaving as “man’s work.” However, the Lady, by virtue of her title and position, clearly belongs to the aristocratic tradition, in which weaving, like embroidery, served a largely decorative purpose, and was seen as female labor. Given Tennyson’s reliance on classical sources in the early poems, it is also important to consider the consistent alignment between women and weaving in classical mythology. Penelope, Philomela, Athena, and Arachne are probably the most important sources here, as each derives a significant amount of her power or autonomy from her weaving.
down upon the world itself, but within these confines she engages with a kind of imaginative escape, rendering the visions seen in her mirror into creative endeavor through her weaving. Her art, however, is bizarrely self-reflexive. Ricks points out, in a key footnote to his edition of “The Lady of Shalott,” that the mirror is not merely a magical element of the fairy tale. He explains that weavers would mount a mirror “behind the tapestry so that the worker could see the effect from the right side,” which means that, while the mirror reflects Camelot and its environs, it also reflects the images woven into her magical web. Thus, the shadows that the Lady weaves are at once a reflection of Camelot and, presumably, a reflection of her own weaving—in the end, the combination of tapestry and mirror functions rather like two mirrors facing each other, each reflecting itself back.

Perhaps it is in part this reflexivity that wearies the Lady, who, like her nearest literary relations, is constrained by the narrow boundaries of female experience and cannot sustain her spirit or her creativity:

   But in her web she still delights
   To weave the mirror’s magic sights,
   For often through the silent nights,
   A funeral, with plumes and lights
   And music, went to Camelot:
   Or when the moon was overhead,
   Came two young lovers lately wed;
   ‘I am half sick of shadows,’ said
   The Lady of Shalott. (lines 64-72)

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The juxtaposition of the young lovers and the Lady’s weariness of her “shadows,” along with the Lady’s choice to glimpse Lancelot in the following section, have enabled the reading that the Lady dies for love of Lancelot. However, as in Landon’s “Erinna,” it is never clear what, exactly, drives the Lady to renounce her art and her solitude. While Lancelot and the young lovers seem to indicate it is erotic love that the Lady seeks, the connection is tenuous at best, and Lancelot represents freedom as much as he does erotic fulfillment, while the two young lovers may serve to highlight her own sense of solitude.

Donald S. Hair argues that the vision of Lancelot in Part III of “The Lady of Shalott,” which describes him in vivid detail for a full four stanzas, and explicitly sets him up as a representation of a sun or a sun-god, aligns the poem with the myth of male heroism in which the hero “[penetrates] into a secret or forbidden place where [he] discovers and releases the mysterious sources of fertility and vitality,” which are usually linked to a female figure. Hair acknowledges, albeit rather disingenuously, the sexual significance of this myth, but adds that its origins are in natural history—“the sun awakening the dormant life in the seed.” Hair claims that this myth is the “basis” of “The Lady of Shalott,” among others, and locates the primary agency of the poem in Lancelot’s passage through Part III. This reading disenfranchises the Lady’s creativity by arguing that is only when Lancelot’s appearance destroys her “web” that she is “awakened.” That this awakening leads directly to the Lady’s death and subsequent transmutation into an objet d’art does not to seem to concern Hair or disrupt his reading of this “heroic” journey.66

If it is love that destroys the Lady, then Tennyson’s conception of that love seems to regard its inspiration as unworthy of her affection. If anything, despite his glorious

appearance, Lancelot is yet another of the Lady’s “shadows,” a hollow reality who fails
to live up to his promise. The language used to describe him is less that of a sun god, as
Hair claims, than it is that of the meteor or falling star he is explicitly compared to in line
98. Like “some bearded meteor, trailing light,” Lancelot’s coming is both a temporary
flash of light and a herald of disaster. While his appearance apparently predicates the
Lady’s choice to look upon Camelot, it is never explicitly clear that it is he she turns to
see. (In fact, the first thing she sees is a water-lily blooming, a plant that is associated
with undines and with sudden seizures—either of which is appropriate, given the
Lady’s “fairy” status, Lancelot’s sudden power over her, and the curious calm with which
she goes to her death.)

The Lady’s death, like that of the title character in The Improvisatrice and Eulalia
of “The History of the Lyre,” metamorphoses her from artist into art. Unlike Landon’s
poetesses, however, Tennyson’s Lady appears, at first, to leave neither her work nor the
knowledge of her work behind. The Lady’s effacement seems complete—she lacks both
love and fame, and without either, can be remembered only for her “lovely face.” Indeed,
even her name, if she had one, has been erased—she is left with only the title inscribed
on her boat.

The Lady is, in fact, anonymous. Even the poem’s narrator asks, rather coyly,
“But who hath seen her wave her hand? / Or at the casement seen her stand?” (lines 24-
25). She exists not as an individual, but as an idea, a presence known only by her voice—
and that heard by only a few. Even in death, she is unrecognized by her neighbors, as the
narrator echoes the question, presumably of the townsfolk, “Who is this? and what is

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67 Richard Folkard, Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and
Rivington, 1884), 463.
here?” The watchers “crossed themselves for fear,” perhaps recognizing in this “fairy lady” the supposed monstrosity of creative femininity (lines 163-64).

The narrator, however, bridges the gap between the Lady’s self-knowledge and her neighbors’ apparent ignorance of her existence. Like the unidentified speaker of Landon’s “A History of the Lyre,” the narrative voice here appears to be someone with intimate knowledge of the Lady. Were this poem a dramatic monologue, the reader would be in the position of eavesdropper. Instead, the reader is displaced as eavesdropper by the invisible narrator, whose presence and knowledge is never explained, but whose work, the poem itself, functions as the Lady’s epitaph and memorial—one far more fitting than that left by Lancelot.

In the 1832 version of the text, the poem closes not with Lancelot’s infamous, “She has a lovely face, / God in his mercy lend her grade, / The Lady of Shalott,” but with a final word from the lady herself:

They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,
Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire and guest.
There lay a parchment on her breast,
That puzzled more than all the rest,

The wellfed wits at Camelot.

‘The web was woven curiously
The charm is broken utterly,
Draw near and fear not—this is I,

The Lady of Shalott.’ (lines 163-71, 1832 text)
While this earlier text lacks the some of the lyrical quality of the 1842 stanza (“But Lancelot mused a little space; / He said, ‘She has a lovely face’” has something more of a ring to it than “‘The web was woven curiously / The charm is broken utterly’”), it also restores a certain amount of agency to the Lady while simultaneously poking fun at the “wellfed wits” of the townsfolk. Even in the 1832 version, though, the Lady is rendered inactive, in this case by her own words. The passive construction of “The web was woven curiously” is both awkward and entirely ambiguous. However, if the townspeople’s fear is rooted in some horror of her autonomy and creativity, the Lady’s admonition to “Draw near and fear not” is encouraged by her disavowal of her own agency.

It is possible that this destruction of the Lady’s agency is, in fact, the fulfillment of the mysterious curse. All of the Lady’s actions in the final section of the poem display a dream-like quality, and her death seems less intentional than inevitable. She is described in the second stanza of Part IV as being “Like some bold seër in a trance / Seeing all his own mischance” (lines 127-28) and when she gazes down to Camelot again, it is with a “glassy countenance” (line 129). Both the “trance” and the “glassy” look indicate that the Lady is neither fully aware of nor in control of her actions, a reading that is underscored by the repeated use of the word “float” to describe her final journey. “She floated,” while entirely accurate from a nautical perspective, is also a phrase that emphasizes the Lady’s total lack of direction and control, both of which have been stripped from her with her art—which, itself, “floated wide” after it “flew” (or was thrown?) out her tower window.

The Lady’s fate in death parallels that of her literary and historical predecessors—Corinne, Sappho, Hemans’s visions of Mary Tighe and Properzia Rossi, and Landon’s
fictional Improvisatrice and Eulalia—all of whom become *objets d’art* upon their deaths. While she has always been subject to the readers’ gazes, it is only when she moves her gaze outside, and herself views a man, that she becomes subject to the gaze of that man and others. Her transmutation from living artist into dead (and static) art, significantly, takes place through her song, as though she, like so many of Hemans’s poet-speakers (particularly Properzia Rossi and the titular character of “The Sicilian Captive”), sings herself to death.

As Alisa Clapp-Itnyre argues, “song” is a genre primarily associated with women. Hemans, in particular, makes great use of the genre in her poetry, and the fact that it is the Lady’s song that heralds her death reaffirms her position as a poetess. Throughout the poem, she is engaged in typically feminine pursuits through which she is able to transform and articulate the limited knowledge she is allowed to experience within her constrained environment. The manner and circumstances of her death, which align her not merely with Elaine of Astolat (with whom the Lady will later be conflated), but with *Hamlet’s* Ophelia and, more immediately, with Hemans’s titular “Indian Woman,” whose death song accompanies her over a cataract, cast the Lady as an abandoned lover, but the poem itself, with its ambiguous encounter with Lancelot, does not bear out this reading.

Instead, I see the Lady’s positioning as both a poetess and a suicidal abandoned lover to be a furthering of the metonymic association between poetic ability and thwarted desire that is formulated by Hemans and Landon in their poetry. Tennyson clearly situates the Lady as yet another Corinne or Sappho, and, in a standard poetess move,

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indicts not the woman’s artistic desires, but the social constraints placed upon her as the cause of her death. The Lady, then, like Mariana before her, is a defense of the poetess, even as the poem seems to critique her apparent capitulation to social pressure.

Both “Mariana” and “The Lady of Shalott” were revised for their inclusion in the first volume the 1842 Poems. In this publication, Tennyson’s relationship to sentimentality and to domesticity become more complicated, as the 1842 volumes represent the beginning stages of his transition from a sentimental poetess into a Victorian poet. The 1842 Poems expands Tennyson’s readings of domesticity into a more fundamentally nationalist context with its inclusion of The English Idyls. This group of poems—which includes “The Gardener’s Daughter,” “The Epic” (and its companion poem, “Morte D’Arthur”), “Dora,” “Walking to the Mail,” and “Audley Court”—further promote the ineffably English sentimentality that Felicia Hemans helped to create and that would be such a defining feature of Victoria’s reign.69

However, while the English Idyls offer a vision of England that appears to conform only to the shallower reading of Hemans’s poems (that is, the reading that ignores the violence and despair that underlies so many of her most revered texts), poems like “Locksley Hall” and “Ulysses,” and even apparently innocuous texts like “Galahad” and “St. Agnes’s Eve,” all maintain the ambivalence towards domestic spaces that we can see in “Mariana” and “The Lady of Shalott.” Where the 1842 poems begin to shift away from his earlier texts is in Tennyson’s increasing engagement with masculinity, shifting away from poems dominated by women and becoming more broadly inclusive of male heroes. However, Tennyson’s heroes, particularly those who appear in the 1842 Poems,

69 “Edwin Morris” was added to the Idyls in the seventh printing of Poems in 1851. (Information on which poems qualify as the English Idyls is taken from Christopher Ricks’s The Poems of Tennyson, 1969.)
generally fall into one of two types: the ambivalently androgynous man (Galahad) and the hyper-masculine adventurer (Ulysses). Both figures become key characters five years later in *The Princess*, which combines Tennyson’s concern with domestic spaces and his often-conflicting ideologies of gender in its exploration of masculine and feminine modes of poetic expression.

**The Princess**

In 1884, Tennyson’s *The Princess* took the stage in transmuted form in Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic *Princess Ida*. W. S. Gilbert described his treatment of Tennyson’s text as a “respectful perversion,” as with typical Gilbertian irreverence *Princess Ida* lambastes feminism and its adherents, stripping Tennyson’s original text of its complicated nuance and turning its majestic heroine into a burlesque bluestocking monstrosity. Though *Princess Ida* is outside the scope of this project, it is worth noting that Gilbert’s recreation of *The Princess*, in its removal of the crucial frame narrative and radical simplification of the text, anticipates *The Princess*’s twentieth- and twenty-first century critical reception. Generally speaking, post-nineteenth-century scholarship has removed the narrative and epic poem, leaving only the interpolated and intercalary lyrics for critical consumption.⁷⁰

The various reimaginings of *The Princess* reveal the discomfort with which it has been received by critical audiences. Later in his career, Tennyson himself rejected it, famously saying that, although “truly original, it is, after all, only a medley.”⁷¹ It is

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⁷⁰ The most commonly anthologized lyrics are “Tears, idle tears,” “Now sleeps the crimson petal,” “Come down, O maid,” and “Sweet and low.” With the exception of “Sweet and low,” the intercalary lyrics, generally speaking, have been less positively regarded.

⁷¹ Quoted in Ricks, *Poems*, 743.
difficult even to summarize the plot of *The Princess*, if only because the first question that arises is “which plot?” Like several of Tennyson’s earlier poems (including “Morte d’Arthur,” with its prefatory poem “The Epic,” and the Sleeping Beauty retelling “The Day-Dream”), and like the *Arabian Nights* he admired, *The Princess* opens with a frame narrative set in the present day.\(^{72}\) The role of Scheherezade in this frame, however, is played by seven men who weave the story of an Amazonian Princess, her university of women, and the effeminate Prince who comes to win her hand.

If the method of the story’s telling were not problematic enough, *The Princess* is further challenged by its engagement with controversial issues of the nineteenth century, including the role of the working poor, evolution, marriage, and, of course, women’s education.\(^{73}\) The seriousness with which these social issues are presented clashes at times with the burlesque elements of the story, further heightening the thematic instability of the text.

The problems hinted at in Tennyson’s “only a medley” (and in the poem’s subtitle, “A Medley”) are not merely those of thematic unity, but, more importantly, generic and tonal homogeneity. In the frame narrative, the story-tellers cannot decide whether to make the story mock-heroic or true-heroic, burlesque or sublime, and the battle between these extremes is played out in the story’s bizarre shifts from sublime grandeur to comic pratfalls. It is a highly unstable poem, with its layered narration, its

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\(^{72}\) Of the numerous source texts that John Killham identifies for *The Princess*, several feature layered narrative techniques; the most important is probably *Arabian Nights*. Killham also notes that in Tennyson’s “Recollections of *Arabian Nights*” (1830), the tale he focuses on is “Noureddin and the Fair Persian,” which offers several key character models for *The Princess*. (See Tennyson and *The Princess: Reflections of an Age*, 179-84).

\(^{73}\) For a full exploration of the socio-cultural context in which *The Princess* was conceived, see Killham’s *Tennyson and The Princess*. Among other issues, Killham addresses the Saint-Simonian and Owenite movements, the state of feminism in the decades leading up to the poem’s composition, and the social impact of pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories.
genre-bending struggle between the heroic, the epic, the burlesque, and the romantic, and, of course, its constant play upon gender expectations not only in the Prince and Princess Ida, but in the cast of characters that surround them. In both its genre- and gender-bending, *The Princess* anticipates Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, though the latter is ultimately more successful its attempts to stand up to its own disruptions of narrative and poetic expectation.

Critics have struggled to identify a dominant political ideology in *The Princess* almost since its publication; it is constantly being revalued in attempts to determine if it is anti-feminist or feminist, conservative or liberal, reactionary or progressive. However, though the political implications of *The Princess* continue to be a point of contention for Tennyson scholars, and Tennyson’s feminism/anti-feminism has implications for this project, I will not attempt to identify his political leanings here. In part, this is because I believe Tennyson’s feelings on feminism are, in fact, irrelevant to our understanding of how he plays the part of a poetess in his early career. Moreover, because I am interested in *The Princess*’s reading of gender and poetics, many of the key feminist arguments in the text (including the question of women’s education) do not directly relate to my reading.

Lindal Buchanan’s Bakhtinian reading of *The Princess* informs my reading here, as I draw upon her identification of the carnivalesque in both the frame and internal narratives, wherein she aligns the carnivalesque with the anti-patriarchal elements of the text, and the noncarnivalesque with authority and patriarchy. Buchanan further asserts that the “contending male and female voices in the text have decidedly ideological implications,” but, unlike many earlier feminist readings, she argues that, “despite its
apparent surface closure, *The Princess* does not in fact succeed in its project of re-establishing a stable patriarchy.”  

Like Buchanan, who relies heavily on the heteroglossic elements of the text to establish the enduring echoes of the feminine voices, I diverge from readers like Terry Eagleton\(^75\) and Donald E. Hall\(^76\) in their claims that women’s voices are completely subsumed in *The Princess*, and I maintain that, even if the female speakers are ultimately silenced, nothing like a full realization of patriarchal heteronormativity can be identified in the text.

The final image of *The Princess* is a solemn description of “little Lilia,” the Prologue’s fiery young feminist, removing the colored silks she had wrapped around the broken statue of her ancestor, Sir Ralph. For Buchanan, Lilia’s disrobing of Sir Ralph signals the end of the carnival, and thus the reinstatement of social norms and hierarchies.\(^77\) However, the dialogic implications of the narrative cannot be shut down by the conclusion of the carnival. Instead, they are preserved, albeit in altered and subdued form, in the poet-narrator’s rendering of the final text, which he describes as “moving in a strange diagonal” through masculine and feminine poetic conventions.\(^78\)

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\(^76\) “Reading Tennyson Reading Fuller Reading Tennyson,” Chapter 2 in *Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid-Victorian Male Novelists* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). Hall resists any attempt to read The Princess as a feminist or even quasi-feminist text; “even judged by the modest feminist ideals of its day,” Hall argues, “Tennyson’s poem is reactionary. . . . *The Princess* dramatizes a relentless process of silencing self-interested women and quelling agitation that disrupts patriarchal order” (46). The feminist passages of the text he reads as Tennyson’s attempt to usurp the limited power available to women in order to reinscribe the hierarchies of patriarchal culture. While Hall’s reading is somewhat reductive (for one thing, he discounts the possibility of authentic feminist endorsement of the text), its message is one of valid caution for the feminist reader of *The Princess*. Where Hall is absolutely correct is in his assessment that “The Princess captures patriarchy in action” (46).

\(^77\) “Doing battle,” 577.

\(^78\) Buchanan argues that, at the poem’s conclusion, “the fact remains that men have expressed feminist discourse and ideology to a greater extent than women. The female word has evidently become an audible enough voice in the Victorian heteroglossic mix to be internalized by both men and women, and an internally persuasive voice continues to contend dialogically with authoritative discourse even when that
of voices through which the narrator’s “strange diagonal” cuts represent the multiple voices of Tennyson himself, as he struggles to recreate his career in a new mold beyond that of the sentimental poetess.

The ways in which the poem explores this shifting identity are twofold. First, there is the complicated interweaving of voices in the frame narrative, which allows Tennyson to explore the various possibilities of poetic genders and genres, as he moves from epic narrative to lyric, sometimes in the voice of a man, sometimes in the voice of a woman, and sometimes in the voice of a man imitating a woman. Second, in the inner narrative, the relationship between the masculine Ida and the feminine Prince moves through a carnival of gender and genre possibilities until it settles on an ostensibly androgynous and genre-blending conclusion. I will first discuss the role of gender identity and genre conventions in the frame narrative, and then look at how the internal narrative affirms the possibilities set forth in the frame.79

Tennyson was fond of attempting to explain The Princess to his audiences, and Hallam Tennyson reports his having said that “there is scarcely anything in the story which is not prophetically glanced at in the prologue,” thus underscoring the relative importance of the prologue to the rest of the poem. The prologue, which is set in the (then-)present day, opens at Vivian Place, the ancient seat of Sir Walter Vivian, where the unnamed narrator (the Poet)80 and six of his college friends, including the younger voice is too threatening to be expressed during noncarnival periods” (591). In other words, the male voicing of feminist ideas in the body of the poem itself continues to challenge hegemonic gender roles even after the poem’s carnivalesque mood has ended.

79 I am using the “final” 1851 version of the text here, meaning that I am incorporating the intercalary lyrics and the Prince’s cataleptic seizures into my discussion. Where there are textual differences that affect my reading of an 1851 line, I will add a footnote to that effect.

80 James W. Hood refers to this narrator simply as The Poet, an admittedly lofty approach that is nevertheless useful, given the text’s multiple narrators, none of whom were identified in the print versions (although they are given names and character in the manuscripts) save the younger Walter Vivian. Gerhard
Walter Vivian, gather with the local farmers and scholars from the nearby Mechanics’ Institute. There, amidst the Institute’s displays of new inventions (most of which are steam-powered and mechanical) and Sir Walter’s diverse collections of trinkets and art from distant times and places, the Poet encounters a book recording the deeds of Sir Walter’s ancestors. Among them is a noblewoman who led her people in battle—a Hemansian heroine who “armed / Her own fair head, and sallying through the gate, / Had beat her foes with slaughter from her walls” (lines 32-34). The Poet, his friends, and a group of ladies, including Walter’s younger sister Lilia and her stern spinster aunt Elizabeth, congregate at the ruins of the abbey on the Vivian estate, the burial place of a heroic Vivian ancestor, Sir Ralph. There, amidst the young men’s recitations of their college antics, Lilia raises the question of women’s education and rights. High-spirited Lilia, described as “half woman half child,” has draped the broken statue of her ancestor in “a scarf of orange” and “a rosy silk,” making him “glow like a sunbeam.” The cross-dressing of Sir Ralph is Lilia’s first deliberate act of rebellion, and simultaneously signals both the “lowering” of this ancestor to a woman’s position and the elevation of her noble female forebear to her rightful heroic place. The Poet makes this connection evident for us; as his friends retell stories of their college exploits, he appears to only half-listen, distracted by mental images of the past:

But while they talked, above their heads I saw

The feudal warrior lady-clad; which brought

Joseph argues that the narrator of the frame narrative is Tennyson himself or “almost identical with him,” an argument I am not certain can be fully supported by the frame story. (Tennysonian Love [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969], 76.) I prefer Bernard Bergonzi’s argument, following Wayne Booth’s theory in The Rhetoric of Fiction, that, while Tennyson’s voice is implicit in the text, it is indistinguishable from those of the narrators (the principal narrator, his six friends, the Prince, and, though Bergonzi does not include them in his assessment, the ladies at the Vivian Place picnic.) (“Feminism and Femininity in The Princess,” in The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, ed. Isobel Armstrong 35-50, [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1969], 40.)
My book to mind: and opening this I read

Of old Sir Ralph a page or two that rang

With tilt and tourney; then the tale of her

That drove her foes with slaughter from her walls,

And much I praised her nobleness, and ‘Where,’

Asked Walter, patting Lilia’s head (she lay

Beside him) ‘lives there such a woman now?’ (Prologue, lines 118-26)

Reading the stories of the two side-by-side, the Poet makes explicit the comparison hinted at in Lilia’s playful robing of Sir Ralph in her scarves. However, while the drapery on Sir Ralph’s statue brings the presence of the noble female warrior into the present day, Walter’s response (and Lilia’s, below) safely restore her to a distant past—albeit for distinctly different reasons. Walter’s response is melancholic, almost nostalgic, taking a medievalist approach that idealizes a nonexistent past state of nobility. Lilia, on the other hand, sets the tone of the women’s songs throughout the text by rooting her protest firmly in the present:81

. . . There are thousands now

Such women, but convention beats them down:

It is but bringing up; no more than that:

You men have done it: how I hate you all!

Ah, were I something great! I wish I were

Some mighty poetess, I would shame you then,

That love to keep us children! O I wish

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That I were some great princess, I would build
Far off from men a college like a man’s,
And I would teach them all that men are taught;
We are twice as quick! (Prologue, lines 127-37)

It is telling that Lilia locates persuasive and transformative power, first, in poetic talent and then in political or social might. Lilia’s youthful exuberance and naïveté contribute to a certain fantastic whimsy in her declared desires, and yet, that whimsy disguises Tennyson’s deliberate location of power in female figures. Lilia (and Tennyson) exist in a historical moment wherein the locus of literary and political power is centered on a woman. Begun circa 1839, The Princess indicates its poet’s awareness not of only the young queen who had only recent acceded to the throne, but also of the intense popularity of his female contemporaries.

Lilia’s impassioned speech inspires the plot of the coming narrative; her playful draping of Sir Ralph and her brother’s reaction to her speech set the tone. When the group decides to tell a tale, at her brother’s urging Lilia is cast as the heroine: “make her some great Princess, six feet high, / Grand, epic, homicidal,” and the Poet as “the Prince to win her” (lines 217-20), and with Lilia’s encouragement, the seven gentlemen take turns in weaving the story of Princess Ida, interspersed with lyrics narrated by the ladies present in their circle.

The Poet, reflecting on this endeavor in his retelling of it, reports that the tale requested of the tellers must be “something made to suit with Time and place”:

A Gothic ruin and a Grecian house,

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82 According to Ricks, Poems, 741-43.
83 While Hemans and Landon were dead before Tennyson began writing The Princess, their recent popularity could not have escaped him; meanwhile, Elizabeth Barrett’s literary star was on the ascendancy.
A talk of college and of ladies’ rights,
A feudal knight in silken masquerade,
And, yonder, shrieks and strange experiments
For which the good Sir Ralph had burnt them all—

This were a medley! (Prologue, lines 224-30)

The reader is thus warned of disgressions and inconsistencies; the seriousness of their location and the playfulness of the mood create competing atmospheres, which are primarily divided along gender lines. The ladies, charged by the Poet to sing “From time to time, some ballad or a song / To give us breathing space” (lines 234-35), provide the sad, sentimental, and realistic lyrics that divide the sections of the men’s fantastical epic.

The inner narrative begins not with the title character, but with the unnamed prince⁸⁴ to whom she had been betrothed as a child. His feminine attributes are made immediately clear to the audience: “A prince I was, blue-eyed, and fair in face, / Of temper amorous, as the first of May, / With lengths of yellow ringlet, like a girl” (I.1-4). The Prince’s “comparative want of power,” as Hallam Tennyson put it, is displayed both through his “too emotional temperament”⁸⁵ and emphasized by the cataleptic seizures he periodically experiences (added to the text in the fourth edition of 1851) which cause him to “feel [him]self the shadow of a dream” (I.18). Having spent his life imagining his bride, wearing her image and a lock of her hair next to his heart, the Prince is dismayed and disappointed, when the time comes for them to wed, to learn that Ida has retreated with her ladies and refuses to marry.

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⁸⁴ In Princess Ida, Gilbert names the Prince Hilarion, but no such naming ever takes place in Tennyson’s text.
Defying his father’s desire to personally “crush her pretty maiden fancies dead / In iron gauntlets” (I.88-89), the first of many disturbing threats leveled by the Northern King against the Princess, the Prince and his companions—Florian, his “other heart / And almost [his] half-self,” and Cyril, “a gentleman . . . given to starts and bursts / Of revel” (I.50-55)—secretly journey to the Southern Kingdom in the hope of staving off war and discovering Ida’s reasons for breaking her engagement.

When they learn that she—with the help of Florian’s widowed sister, Psyche, and another widowed lady, Blanche—has opened a university for women in her father’s summer palace, the Prince and his companions seek entrance to speak to them. Though warned that any man who trespasses in Ida’s domain is condemned to death (a warning later reiterated through the palace’s incorporation of an image of Actaeon over the gates), the Prince, reminded of how he and his friends “presented Maid, / Or Nymph, or Goddess” (I.93-94) during court feasts, decides they will disguise themselves as women and infiltrate the university.

There, Psyche recognizes her brother, and betrays Ida’s laws to protect him. When they are all discovered through Cyril’s recklessness, Ida banishes Psyche (in absentia, Psyche having lost her way in the chaos that followed the men’s revelation) and temporarily adopts Psyche’s infant daughter, Aglaïa. To prevent war between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms over Ida’s refusal of the marriage contract, the Prince and his companions (supported by the Northern King’s army) agree to a tournament with Ida’s brothers (supported by the army of Gama, the Southern King). Although her brothers win the day and, thus, Ida’s freedom, at the sight of all of the wounded men, Ida softens and agrees to take them into her college and allow her scholars to nurse them
back to health. The story ends with a reestablishment of heteronormativity and a
destruction of the college, as all the scholars-turned-nursemaids wed the men they have
tended. The central six characters pair off, Cyril with Psyche (whose daughter is restored
to her by a repentant Ida), Florian with Melissa, the daughter of Ida’s other confidante,
Blanche (a nasty proto-lesbian stereotype in action who is safely exiled by the end of the
poem), and, to complete the fairy tale, the Prince with the newly-contrite Princess Ida.

The world of the internal narrative of *The Princess* suggests that it is impossible
for a world to exist in which men can embrace feminine positions (such as that of the
poetess, as the Prince does) and women traditionally masculine ones (as in Ida’s case).
Despite Ida’s heroic attempt to keep her university alive, it (and she) fall victim to a
society unwilling to accept grand changes. Similarly, the Prince, with all of his feminine
sensitivity, is overtaken by bloodlust in the tournament and, despite his reversion to
passivity following the battle, is nevertheless established in a position of masculine
dominance above Ida by the end of the story.

In my reading, the university represents not female education per se, but rather
female artistic accomplishment. In this reading, the Prince, attempting to infiltrate this
realm in his women’s clothing and with his sentimental poetry, represents the male
poetess (Tennyson), and Ida a woman poet who mistakenly sees sentimentality as
repressive and weak. Because the text ultimately defends sentimentality, albeit a
sentimentality that marries an idealized vision of heteronormative domesticity (complete
with an ideology of complementary, rather than equal, genders) with the traditional
structures of epic or quest romance (including the battle scenes, in particular), Ida is
finally portrayed as an uncritical reader and, thus, a failed poetess.
The first description of the university, given by the three men riding up in “maiden plumes,” is laden with evocations of both sentimental poetry and women’s poetry, in particular. The fountains are surrounded with jasmine and roses, the gates are guarded by a statue of a winged woman (Nike, perhaps?), and the doors framed by a bust of Pallas and maps of the earth and sky. Most importantly, as the transvestite men move through the empty streets, “all about [them] pealed the nightingale, / Rapt in her song, and careless of the snare” (I.217-18). The nightingale, associated with the rape of Philomela, is, of course, a powerful symbol for female poets of the Romantic period. Her appearance here, “careless of the snare” foreshadows Ida’s situation—in the next book, she will go on about her great work ignorant of the three wolves in sheep’s clothing who have entered her domain.

Book II begins with the men being brought before Ida, who is described in terms that leave the reader in no doubt as to her magnificence and her power:

There at a board by tome and paper sat,

With two tame leopards couched beside her throne,

All beauty compassed in a female form,

The Princess; liker to the inhabitant

Of some clear planet close upon the Sun,

Than on our man’s earth; such eyes were in her head,

And so much grace and power, breathing down

From over her arched brows, with every turn

Lived through her to the tips of her long hands

And to her feet. (II.18-27)
Already, Ida is a living fantasy—Lilia’s fantasy, to be precise. She is the grand, epic princess Lilia wishes she could be, and she immediately rejects the sentimental fantasies of the Prince that the disguised men describe to her.

Ida, despite the grandeur of her appearance, is a complicated figure, as extreme in her own way as the Prince’s father, a rampant chauvinist whose interpretation of the marriage state as a form of violent conquest functions as something of a paper tiger throughout the text. Ida’s extremism takes a remarkably similar form to that of her adversary; like the Northern King, she rejects domesticity and any hint of “weakness.” Her tame leopards serve as evidence of her mastery over “nature,” while her decorating choices and threats of death for male trespassers underscore the intensity (and bloodthirstiness) of her mission. Ida rejects all that is soft and feminine, even going so far as to consider casting the two-year-old Aglaïa out of the palace, but this extremism is no more acceptable to Tennyson than that of the Prince’s father.

“Grand, epic, and homicidal” Ida is deliberately constructed to realize both Lilia’s fantasies and the satiric designs of her brother. She is at once a great princess, the founder of a college for women, and a poet, but she is also merciless and often cruel. Her father, describing her transformation to the Prince, says: “then, Sir, awful odes she wrote, / Too awful, sure, for what they treated of, / But all she is and does is awful” (I.137-39).

Gama’s description of Ida’s odes here seems to rely upon the now-archaic definition of “awful,” meaning “awe-inspiring.” To modern ears, this sounds like an out-of-character

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86 Cf. Jerome Buckley: “Princess Ida in the final analysis is more than the Prince’s alter ego and complement; like the Lady of Shalott or the soul in ‘The Palace of Art,’ she is at her most intense the poet’s anima, the projection of Tennyson’s own aesthetic vision and conflict. In her absence she is represented at the court of the Prince by an artifact, ‘a great labour of the loom,’ reminiscent perhaps of the magic web woven in Shalott. . . But her concept of the noble makes no allowance for sympathetic feeling; her art recognizes no human frailty. Though not herself exempt from a fierce imperious rage, she aspires to be like ‘the placid marble Muses, looking peace’ upon the aloof aesthetic of her university” (Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, 101-102).
denunciation of his daughter, but after his description of Ida’s “dismal lyrics” (I.141) Gama clarifies his meaning and estimates as to the worth of Ida’s “awful” poetry: “And they that know such things . . ./ . . . would call them masterpieces: / They mastered me” (I.143-45).

Ida’s influence over her weak-willed father and the romantic Prince are, perhaps, unworthy estimates of her poetic and heroic power. The devotion of her brothers, Arac and the unnamed twins, and of the brilliant Lady Psyche (who begs Ida’s forgiveness, even after Ida has all but held Psyche’s daughter hostage) provide a more balanced estimation of the nobility of Ida’s character and, perhaps, the quality of her poetry. However, her violent tendencies, though softened by the end of the text, threaten to transform this majestic figure into a monster. Only when she, like her leopards, is “tamed,” softened by mercy and self-doubt, is she a suitable mate for the poet(ess)—the Prince.

What is particularly interesting is that Ida’s capitulation is framed not as a return to some “innate” feminine state of being, but rather as a surrender to overwhelming social and familial pressure. She is broken down by the destruction of all she holds dear and apparently feels responsible for the Prince’s condition. Buchanan observes that the poems she reads while sitting at the Prince’s bedside (“Come down, O maid” and “Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white”) represent her attempts to persuade herself to accept his suit, and mark her shift from composing her own poetry to reading that composed by others (presumably men). However, these poems, like “Tears, idle tears,” and “O Swallow, Swallow,” both of which she earlier rejects, are in the sentimental mode—Ida

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87 “Doing battle,” 587.
capitulates not only to the pressure of her society, but to love poetry of the very kind she has eschewed until now.

The Prince is allowed a certain measure of androgyny that is forbidden to Ida, and though both characters must ultimately readjust their gender positionings in order to align themselves with Tennysonian constructs of gender,\textsuperscript{88} the Prince is allowed a more fluid identity at the poem’s end.\textsuperscript{89} Though the Prince experiences a testosterone-filled bloodlust when faced with battle, he describes this experience as dream-like: “I dreamed / Of fighting” (V.481-82). Caught in one of his seizures, he is stripped of what might become hyper-masculine posturing (such as that displayed by his father), and we are left with an almost lyrical account of the battle. Even while engaging with masculine epic, he is caught in the sentimental, seeing his Princess at the threshold of domesticity and warfare: “Between a cymballed Miriam and a Jael, / With Psyche’s babe, was Ida watching us” (V.500-501). The Prince’s fall is, of course, a deeper regression into the feminine, particularly in his coma state. The bizarre reversal of Sleeping Beauty that is Ida’s capitulation, where she kisses the “sleeping” Prince, and herself awakens to her more feminine self, is also a transference of her power to the Prince. He is ultimately awakened, however, not just by this transference, but by Ida’s enactment of her own capitulation when she reads, for the first time, sentimental verse aloud. The Prince thus absorbs Ida’s intellectual poetics without abandoning his own sentimental roots, thus becoming a new ideal poet. “Now sleeps the crimson petal,” though read by Ida during

\textsuperscript{88} Tennyson’s feelings on performances of gender in daily life were, to say the least, complicated. He wrote in one late notebook that “Men should be androgynous and women gynandrous, but men should not be gynandrous nor women androgynous,” while his epigram “On One Who Affected an Effeminate Manner” reminds the addressee that “man-woman is not woman-man” (Poems, 1424).

\textsuperscript{89} Cf. Christopher Ricks, who notes that, “In the falsely, ingeniously, consolatory world of The Princess, manliness becomes compatible with prolonged disguise as a woman” (Tennyson, 193).
the Prince’s coma, is nevertheless a precursor to the new poetry made possible by this transformation.\(^\text{90}\)

There can be no doubt that *The Princess* concludes on an ultimately patriarchal and heteronormative note. Ida is devoured by self-doubt and the Prince’s love, Lilia is silenced, and the college of women is utterly destroyed. However, as we have seen throughout not only Tennyson’s work but also that of Felicia Hemans, it is not merely the conclusion of the text that should form our reading of it.\(^\text{91}\) Tennyson’s investment placing his “lady-clad” prince inside the female discourses of the academy represents the male poetess’s attempt to adapt in a predominantly female-centered literary sphere. Furthermore, the narration of the internal story itself is an exercise in the creation of a new aesthetic, embodied in the “medley,” with its melding of “masculine” (epic) and “feminine” (lyric) poetry.\(^\text{92}\)

\(^{90}\) A. Dwight Culler concludes that “Princess Ida . . . is . . . a symbol of the development of Tennyson’s poetry. The Prince, listening to the music in his heart, had gone to the warm southern kingdom to seek her, but found that she had returned to the borders of the north and taken up her stand on a frosty mountain. When he melted her heart and persuaded her to come down into the valley, marry, and have a child, he was essentially asking her to take up her abode in the English Idyl. For this form, based on love, centering upon marriage and the child, is that which he found most in harmony with his genius. Certainly it is that in which his poetic problems were ultimately resolved.” (*The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977): 148.)

\(^{91}\) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asks how the “elaborately imagined and riveting edifice” of the women’s college can collapse so easily when penetrated by a male presence. Sedgwick, haunted by the “recognizable, searching, and . . . radical feminism” of Ida’s university, where “separatism, Lesbian love, a re-vision in female-centered terms of Western history, mythology, and art, a critique of Romantic love and the male traffic in women, and a critique of the specular rationalism of Western medical science” comprise elements of the core curriculum, ties its collapse to the feudal class dynamics that drive the poem. However, in doing so, she ignores the fact that she, like other readers, has been profoundly affected by Ida’s vision; Tennyson, like Hemans in “Corinne at the Capitol,” creates a seductive vision that is never fully reversed by the concluding moral, because that conclusion is unable to erase or undermine the power of the earlier vision. (“Tennyson’s Princess: One Bride for Seven Brothers,” in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985], 126.)

\(^{92}\) See also Linda M. Shires, “Rereading Tennyson’s Gender Politics.” Shires argues that “*The Princess* is critically important for its ideological contradictions, and for its multiplicity and compromises, rather than for its reassertion of heterosexual marriage as the most viable option for a man and a woman as life’s work. In other words, radical gender constructions do remain in play, exceeding the stability of a hermeneutic closer, which attempts to suppress differences” (54-55).
With the ending of the internal story, we return to the frame narrative, where the poet-speaker is urged to “[dress] it up poetically,” the result of which is the text before the reader. The narrator notes that, in trying to balance the mock-heroic (requested by the gentlemen) and the true-heroic (requested by the ladies), he “moved as in a strange diagonal, / And maybe neither pleased myself nor them” (Conclusion, lines 27-28). This “strange diagonal” marks the precarious demarcation between not only the burlesque and the sublime, but between the work of the sentimental poetess and that of the Victorian poet, between whom the underlying tensions are the impetus for the telling of The Princess.

As poets (or poetesses), Ida and the Prince represent two possible aesthetic trajectories. Ida, the intellectual (and thus “masculine”) poet, rejects sentimental, emotive, and nostalgic verse, while the Prince, the sentimental (and thus “feminine”) poet, embraces the very qualities she abhors, and is unable to provide the “Valkyrian hymn” Ida would rather hear. They can agree, however, on the third poet of the bunch, Cyril, whose drunken recitation of a “tavern-catch” goads the Prince into inadvertently revealing his identity. Neither the poet (Ida) nor the poetess (the Prince) recognize a bawdy song as a work of artistic merit; furthermore, Cyril’s poor taste and “wild” behavior, as represented by his bawdy entertainment (and the casual chauvinism he displays in Book II), cast doubts upon the virtue of his character. (Florian voices this concern when Psyche disappears with Cyril, saying “I dread / His wildness, and the chances of the dark,” clearly intimating that his sister’s safety—here, chastity—is at risk.)

The melding of these two aesthetic trajectories into a single, unified voice is, from a feminist perspective, profoundly troubling, because that voice is that of the newly-
masculated Prince. But read as an allegorical union of the sentimental with the intellectual poet, the subsumation of Ida represents Tennyson reconciling his sentimental past with his public intellectual future—a union that can also be seen in the use of the intercalary lyrics of *The Princess*.

The lyrics scattered throughout *The Princess* serve several functions in the text. First, they underscore the complicated heteroglossia that helps maintain some of the narrative’s instability. Second, by representing a multitude of voices, they function as a dialogue between Tennyson the sentimental poetess and Tennyson the preeminent Victorian poet.

The lyrics as heteroglossic elements have been discussed in a number of earlier articles, including Buchanan’s “Doing Battle with Forgotten Ghosts: Carnival, Discourse, and Degradation in Tennyson’s *The Princess*” and Alisa Clapp-Itnyre’s “Marginalized Musical Interludes: Tennyson’s Critique of Conventionality in *The Princess*.” However, no one has yet recognized the extent to which the songs function both as a normalization of men voicing sentimental poetics and as a reaffirmation of sentimental poetics as a predominantly female artistic outlet.

Clapp-Itnyre reads the intercalary songs of the frame narrative as elements of a key feminist subtext in “this creative collaboration which privileges male discourse and conventions and demotes music, realism, and women accordingly.”93 She goes on to argue that modern scholarship has similarly ignored the interlude lyrics in favor of those located within the longer (male) narrative, thereby contributing to the privileging of male poetic voices. Clapp-Itnyre reads the interlude lyrics as set in the present day of the frame

93 “Marginalized Musical Interludes,” 228.
narrative, rather than the pseudo-medieval past of the inner narrative, and as portrayals of the real-world challenges of Victorian domesticity.

This brilliant reading of Tennyson’s use of the feminine genre of the song intersects in useful ways with my own argument. Clapp-Itnyre’s assertion that “songs” are considered the domain of women (or, in this argument, poetesses) is clearly born out by the careers of Hemans and Landon and their peers, whose poems were often titled “songs,” as though to reinscribe their legitimacy as feminine artistic accomplishments. What is important about Tennyson’s use of the interlude songs, however, is the fact that, for all that they are voiced by women, they are written and recorded by men. Sedgwick points out the irony that these lyrics are so widely anthologized—*The Princess*, as she puts it, “has come to be valued and anthologized almost exclusively on the basis of its lyrics, its self-proclaimed ‘women’s work.’”94 This “women’s work,” however, was completed by a man—both the Poet of the prologue and Tennyson himself. Even as he moves into the new phase of his career, represented by the epic portions of *The Princess*, Tennyson retains his sentimental and lyrical roots.

I read *The Princess* as a representation of Tennyson’s internal struggle, through which he attempts to find a poetic role for himself outside that of the poetess, which he has enacted since the beginning of his career. That *The Princess* and *In Memoriam* both end with an attempt to embrace conventional gender norms, but are both unable to undo or completely undermine the unconventionality of their earlier explorations, indicates that

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94 “One Bride for Seven Brothers,” 133.
Tennyson would never be fully able to leave behind the poetess, even despite his attempts to robe himself in conventionality as Victoria’s Laureate.\textsuperscript{95}

_The Princess_ is Tennyson’s final work as a poetess; _In Memoriam_, though published three years later, was already complete, and thus its function is best characterized as an epilogue to his sentimental career. In abandoning the mode of the poetess, Tennyson turns to his more stringently “Victorian” mode, which is to say more actively masculine and imperialistic, with considerably less emphasis on the feminine aspects of domesticity or poetics. Like Ida, subsumed into the Prince (the lily slipping under the lake), Tennyson the sentimental poetess is swallowed up by Tennyson the Victorian poet.

**Conclusion**

In 1925, nearly thirty years after Tennyson’s death, Harold Nicolson declared:

Tennyson was terribly unfortunate in the literary taste of his age. A supermely great man would doubtless have triumphed over the taste of his contemporaries and directed it into better channels; but Tennyson, though great, was not supremely great. And the atmosphere of his age affected him perniciously.\textsuperscript{96}

While it is clear, eighty-three years after this account of Tennyson was published, that Nicolson himself was “perniciously” affected by the atmosphere of his own age, his assessment of Tennyson’s relationship to the literary moment of the 1830s and 1840s is nevertheless an accurate one. Tennyson’s early poetry, the poetry for which we know him

\textsuperscript{95} Several other critics have recognized _The Princess_ as a commentary on Tennyson’s poetic vocation, though no one has recognized his earlier alignment with the sentimental poetess. Michael Thorn, for example, argues that, with the publication of the Princess, Tennyson’s public persona was beginning to take shape (Michael Thorn, _Tennyson_ [New York: St. Martins, 1992], 219-23).

\textsuperscript{96} _Tennyson: Aspects of His Life_, 19.
best today, was steeped in the literature of sentimentality, and embraced the primacy of the domestic and the feminine in that literature. In the poetry of 1830, 1832, and 1842, Tennyson returned repeatedly to female voices, images of feminine poets, and lyrics so centered on home spaces as to feel almost claustrophobic. *The Princess* sought a reconciliation of this poetess aesthetic with Tennyson’s growing commitment to a poetry more engaged with the present day and with more typically masculine modes of poetry.

Ultimately, Tennyson anticipated Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s argument for the value of the present day in poetry; even in his most sentimental and medievalist verse, he is incapable of escaping the realities of the nineteenth century, and it is in the transition from the displaced sentimental to that which is solidly placed and timed in the present day that Tennyson makes the first gesture towards the Victorian poet. However, even at his most “Victorian,” even as he transitioned to writing the often-triumphalist, nationalistic, and occasional verse that was demanded of him as Poet Laureate to Victoria’s Empire, Tennyson continued to present the ambiguously gendered figures that so often appeared in his early poetry. Throughout his career, we see characters, most notably his Arthur and, much later, his Robin Hood, that are still closer to the Prince than to the hyper-masculine Ulysses. However, after he accepted the Laureateship, Tennyson never again wrote entirely as a male sentimental poetess, and in those poems where he comes closest (as in many of the poems that comprise *Idylls of the King*), it seems as though there is always some quest for balance, as though a masculine hero could erase or at least provide a counterweight to the feminine poet.
CHAPTER 4

“No Perfect Artist . . . From Imperfect Woman”: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Confrontations with the Poetess

ELIZABETH: My life had reached its lowest ebb. I was worn out, and hope was dead. Then you came. . . . Robert, do you know what you have done for me? I could have laughed when Doctor Chambers said that I had healed myself by wanting to live. He was right! Oh, he was right! But he little knew what lay behind his words! I wanted to live—eagerly, desperately, passionately—and only because life meant you—you—and the sight of your face, and the sound of your voice, and the touch of your hand! Oh, and so much more than that! Because of you the air once more was sweet to breathe, and all the world was good and green again.

—Rudolf Besier, The Barretts of Wimpole Street, Act III.

Rudolf Besier’s play The Barretts of Wimpole Street (1939) adopted the existing narratives of the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and crystallized them into a single pervasive cultural myth that has long overshadowed the woman at its center. The central image of this myth is that of Perseus rescuing Andromeda; while Marjorie Stone uses this parallel to critique such readings, Dormer Creston, writing some ten years before Besier, unselfconsciously titled his biography of Barrett Browning1 The Andromeda of Wimpole Street. Louise Berkinow summarizes these the myths of Barrett and Browning in terms that highlight the extent to which they had become a kind of sentimental touchstone, a fantasy of rescue that might have been crafted by Walt Disney himself:

1 Any scholar or biographer of Elizabeth Barrett Browning must wrestle with what name to call her. The complexities surrounding Barrett Browning’s multiple names are, perhaps, only rivaled by those connected to the names of Marian Evans/George Eliot. Prior to her marriage, Barrett Browning called herself “Ba” and signed most of her poetry “E. B. Barrett” or “EBB,” for “Elizabeth Barrett [Moulton] Barrett,” and then, after her marriage, for “Elizabeth Barrett Browning.” Although Marjorie Stone makes a compelling argument for her preference of “EBB” in her Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry on Barrett Browning, I have opted for this latter construction simply for the sake of consistency within this larger project. I reject “Browning” on the grounds of its being confusing, and while I acknowledge the anachronism of “Barrett Browning,” especially as “Barrett” is her middle, and not her second last name, it seems to be the most internally consistent choice. Although Letitia Elizabeth Landon published almost exclusively under “L.E.L.,” I resist this appellation for scholarship as it tends to create an artificial dichotomy between the woman and the poetess. While “EBB” does not signify, in my opinion, a similar disconnect, I am reluctant to begin using initials at this point. For the sake of historical accuracy, however, I will refer to Barrett Browning as “Barrett” when referring to works composed or events that transpired before her marriage on 12 September 1846. All subsequent events and works will use the name “Barrett Browning,” and when speaking of her career as a whole, I will use the latter construction.
. . . sweet, invalid, dear Miss Barrett. Pale, frail “Ba” in the closed room, victim of perpetual illness. Doll’s face, those ringlets round her head. Dear Miss Barrett, lying there the day long, wasting away, waiting for—at last, it comes, the life-force incarnate, virile Robert Browning! . . . Miss Barrett runs away with Mr. Browning, into the warm sun, cured.²

In their fundamental absurdity, these readings underscore the extent to which the legend of the Brownings in the twentieth century has come to supersede the reality of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s life and, in particular, her poetic career. While the biographical myths’ overshadowing of Barrett Browning’s work is reminiscent of the afterlife of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, for Barrett Browning this overshadowing did not result in a near-total erasure of her place in literary history. Rather, it has merely allowed critics and readers to foreground the autobiographical (or even “confessional”) works that Barrett Browning herself tended to devalue, while her passionate and erudite explorations of gender, genre, and social crises have only recently been restored to the critical or the public eye.

Although it is primarily the widespread interest in her romance with Robert Browning that has precipitated critical and popular audiences’ neglect of all of Barrett Browning’s works except Sonnets from the Portuguese,³ the disavowal of the majority of her oeuvre has been further enabled by Barrett Browning’s critical engagement with the sentimental poetess tradition. This engagement shaped the trajectory of her career from

its beginning as she was both drawn to and resistant to the discourses and poetic modes
promoted by Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. If Tennyson was the unlikely or
illegitimate offspring of this tradition, then Elizabeth Barrett was its heir apparent.
However, she was not an eager ascendant to the position left vacant by Letitia Landon’s
death in 1838. Instead, Barrett struggled with her inheritance from these literary
steppmothers,\(^4\) acknowledging their gifts and their contributions to her own poetics, and
yet unwilling to embrace the ideology of femininity she believed they helped to promote.

Barrett was well aware of the weight of the tradition Felicia Hemans and Letitia
Landon had created; her letters, of which there are thousands, are filled with her
commentary on the legacy bequeathed to her by her predecessors, and her poetry at once
explores and resists the elements of feminine sentimentality that defined the careers of
her contemporaries. However, her infamous inability to identify any literary
“grandmothers,” as well as the erasure of Hemans and Landon from literary history, has
left modern critics with an inaccurate sense of her debt to these predecessors.

Although Barrett Browning, like Tennyson, properly belongs to the Victorian era,
hers poetic development is firmly rooted in late Romantic sentimentality. In this chapter, I
discuss Barrett Browning’s response to her predecessors and their aesthetic projects, then
show how, in her career and in particular in her verse novel *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett
Browning engages with modernity and her idealizations of embodied androgyny to
reimagine what was, for her, the problematic figure of the sentimental poetess in the light

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\(^4\) Barrett’s letter to Henry Chorley lamenting her inability to identify any literary “grandmothers” has
been quoted extensively. Because Hemans and Landon were only thirteen and four years older than Barrett,
respectively, I hesitate to call them her literary “mothers.” I have thus decided on “steppmothers,” both
because of the ages of the women involved and because the conventional paradigm of the
stepmother/daughter relationship seems uniquely apropos in this context. For a more detailed discussion of
this letter in regard to Barrett’s placement in this project, see pages 7-8 of my introduction.
of her own uniquely Victorian ideals of art. In order to show Barrett Browning’s engagement with the figure of the sentimental poetess, and the ways in which she both accepts and rejects the conventions of that figure formulated by Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, I will first discuss Barrett Browning’s earlier career and the ways in which she engages with the sentimental poetics of both Hemans and Landon. I will further trace the development of her own poetics as she articulates it through her letters, many of them to Mary Russell Mitford, and through other private writings and early poems. Finally, I will turn to *Aurora Leigh*, the culmination of Barrett Browning’s engagement with the figure of the poetess, in order to show how she attempts to resolve her own conflicted relationship to her literary stepmothers and their feminine poetics in the face of the social and political changes of the eighteen years between Letitia Landon’s death and the publication of *Aurora Leigh*.

As I indicated above, despite her positive critical and popular reception in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century relegated Barrett Browning to the cellar kitchen in the mansion of literature, to use Virginia Woolf’s memorable image,\(^5\) where she “clatters her silverware and eats peas off the point of her knife” alongside Hemans and other supposedly “minor” poets. Even the advent of feminist scholarship did little to retrieve Barrett Browning from the canonical basement; in the rare case where early feminist critics turned to poetry, Barrett Browning was often overlooked in favor of Emily Brontë or Emily Dickinson, whose careers better fit the early second-wave feminist paradigm of exclusion and silence.\(^6\) Again, while this critical resistance partly


stems from the fact that Barrett Browning’s career has been overshadowed by her biography, I would argue that her rejection by twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical audiences stems from the same source as those audiences’ rejections of Hemans and Landon and critics’ disavowal of much of Tennyson’s oeuvre. In spite of Aurora Leigh’s decidedly forward-thinking gender politics and proto-modernist exploration of literary form, modern scholars are frankly uncomfortable with the apparent sentimentality of much of Barrett Browning’s poetry, and as a result she has been classed as only a love poet—and not a very good one, at that. After all, Barrett Browning is responsible for the constantly misread, overexposed “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”

Barrett Browning’s biography helps to fuel this critical reputation as “nothing more than” a love poet. Her courtship and elopement with Robert Browning, a story with all the earmarks of a fairy tale, has always captured the public imagination, but never more so than in the twentieth century. In fact, it was this romance that defined the position Elizabeth Barrett Browning would come to occupy in the literary imagination. If Hemans was framed as the conscience or ideal of patriotic motherhood, and Landon’s reputation designated as a cautionary tale for ambitious young ladies, then Barrett Browning was offered up as a rare instance of the combination of artistic and feminine triumph. It is no coincidence that the one work of her impressive oeuvre that has remained a key part of the public imagination in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is Sonnets from the Portuguese, read, of course, as a direct poetic retelling of Barrett Browning’s secret courtship with her future husband.7

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7 This is not to say that the Sonnets are entirely without autobiographical content. However, by reading them solely as a record of the Browings’ romance, we risk devaluing their contribution to larger issues like nineteenth-century sonnet revival and feminist poetics, to name just two.
It is unsurprising, then, that the bulk of the scholarship on Barrett Browning completed to date has taken the form of critical biographies, apparently at the expense of textual scholarship. As yet, there still exists no critical edition of all of her work, although Margaret Reynolds’s scholarly edition of *Aurora Leigh* is an invaluable resource, as is the ongoing *The Brownings’ Correspondence* project.\(^8\) The critical biographies that constitute the majority of Barrett Browning scholarship, however, provide key insights into not only Barrett Browning’s poetic development, but into also her engagement with the poets of her day. Thus, I am indebted the work of several earlier scholars of Barrett Browning, who have helped to reestablish the importance of her work to the Romantic and Victorian canons.\(^9\)

While these scholars offer various readings of Barrett Browning in context both with her male predecessors and contemporaries and (though to a lesser extent) with the women who came before her, no one has yet offered a specific analysis of Barrett Browning’s engagement with the poetess as that figure was formulated by Hemans and Landon. Angela Leighton comes closest with her inclusion of Barrett Browning in her *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1993), but Leighton’s reading of Barrett Browning focuses more on her rejection of their poetics than it does on the ways in which she shares their ideals.

Leighton asserts that Barrett Browning “takes the story of woman’s creativity out of the self-echoing island of books which her predecessors had inhabited, and sets it in

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\(^8\) *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, ed. Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson, Scott Lewis, and Edward Hagan (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984–).

the contemporary world; she takes the woman poet off the stage of isolated self-
appreciation, and gives her real work to do in society.” 10 While this is a problematic
assertion in many ways, particularly in regard to Hemans, who was rather more grounded
in the contemporary than any of her peers gave her credit for, it is nevertheless an
accurate reading of Barrett Browning’s own sense of her role in relation to her two most
important predecessors. In other words, Barrett Browning’s aesthetic project is tied not
just to her predecessors’ poetics, but, in many ways, to her perception of how their lives
influenced those poetics. While Landon, perhaps, conforms to Leighton’s reading of
sentimental poetics as an aesthetic in which “feeling [is] a poetic end in itself,” Hemans,
as I have shown, imagined her work as a social as well as an aesthetic project. Barrett
Browning, who generally favored Landon’s poetics above Hemans’s, nevertheless shares
with the latter a distinct commitment to the social position of women. Thus, Leighton’s
claim that “Barrett Browning begins where L.E.L. left off,” while true in the sense that
Barrett Browning envisioned herself as Landon’s heir, rather than Hemans’s, perpetuates
the myth of Barrett Browning’s independence from the tradition that came before her.

Similarly, Marjorie Stone, in her critical biography of Barrett Browning, analyzes
Barrett Browning’s general exclusion from the early feminist criticism of the 1970s and
early 1980s, 11 highlighting Barrett Browning’s importance to the transition between
Romantic and Victorian thought. Stone intimates that Barrett Browning’s erasure stems
from her connection to the sentimental tradition, a tradition from which both Tennyson

10 Writing Against the Heart, 80.
11 This is not to say that there was no interest in Barrett Browning during this period. However, what
little attention was paid to her tended to be glancing at best. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar
afford Aurora Leigh a mere five pages in The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1979), while Margaret Homans’s Women Writers and Poetic Identity (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1980), which argues for a feminine tradition of women’s writing, overlooks Barrett Browning entirely
in favor of Emily Dickinson.
(erroneously, as I discuss in the previous chapter) and Robert Browning were believed to be separated. However, while Stone’s argument proposes a crucial and insightful rereading of Barrett Browning as a key figure in the development of Victorian poetics, she reinscribes the errors of earlier scholarship by disregarding the importance of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon both as Romantic poets and as poets whose work exerted a profound influence on Barrett Browning.

Furthermore, while Stone and Beverly Taylor have each offered useful readings of the parallel gender concerns of *Aurora Leigh* and *The Princess*, little attention has been paid to the ways in which Barrett Browning responds to Tennyson’s enactment of the poetess as it is represented in his early work. Tennyson’s and Barrett Browning’s parallel poetic development and the dialogue that manifests itself in their poetry are key to understanding how they were both drawing from the same tradition on their shared trajectory to early Victorian literary stardom.

On the whole, the critical revival of Elizabeth Barrett Browning has tended to paint her as an isolated figure, a sort of real-life Lady of Shalott whose separation from society mirrored her isolation from the “poetess” tradition in which she was actually immersed. Most of her biographers read her in relation to her immediate male predecessors (Byron, Shelley, and Keats), connecting her to the canonical Romantic tradition, and in particular to its most intellectual and abstract form, instead of to the highly sentimental tradition that ran parallel to the canonical one.

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This reading represents a significant departure from earlier scholarship of Victorian poetry, which saw Barrett Browning as a sentimental figure whose work, to use the words of one early twentieth-century critic, was “feeble . . . inevitable in the case of a woman feeble in spirit as well as body.” The perception of *Aurora Leigh* as a work of strident feminist commentary did little to help assuage twentieth-century critics’ mental anxieties about the worth of “Mrs. Browning” as a poet or a poetess. Indeed, it seems as though most of the best recent work on Barrett Browning is determined to save her from sentimentality by focusing on her position as a political poet whose engagement with abolition, Italian independence, and social reform in England clearly show her to be a woman who was deeply committed to social issues. However, by imagining that Barrett Browning’s political engagements are separate from, rather a key part of, her position as a sentimental poetess, we continue to disregard the importance of this tradition in mid-nineteenth century literary history as a whole.

**Confronting Her Literary Stepmothers**

If there is a pattern to the events of the lives of those whom society recognizes as poetesses, it is a pattern framed by precocity, fragile health (often culminating in early death), and the ever-present grief of some shattering loss. Elizabeth Barrett’s early career replicates the same patterns as those of Hemans, Landon, and Tennyson, and from that pattern emerges not only the myth of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the delicate

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14 Barrett identified some part of this pattern when she wrote to Mitford on the death of Landon, “I had a prophet in my thoughts about her ever since she went away. It is a fatal climate, and the longest years do not seem to go to the lives of poetesses.” (Elizabeth Barrett to Mary Russell Mitford, 5 January 1839, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 4:115.)
Victorian Rapunzel freed from her tower by a triumphant Browning, but also the reality of Barrett, the active intellectual who grappled with questions of gender identity, modernity, and poetics, even as she was literally crippled by grief and illness.

Elizabeth Barrett’s precocious entrée into the literary world was precipitated by her father, Edward Moulton-Barrett. In 1820, when his daughter was only 14, Moulton-Barrett had her twelve-book epic, *The Battle of Marathon*, printed in a limited edition of 50 copies. Her father’s influence in this book’s creation, however, demonstrates the first of Barrett’s important personal differences from her predecessors. Whereas familial monetary pressures spurred Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon into public careers as teenagers, and forced them to exploit their youth and femininity to enhance their fame, while familial ambition precipitated the writing of the Tennyson brothers’ *Poems by Two Brothers* and Tennyson’s *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* when he was barely out of his teens, Barrett wrote, particularly in her early life, for herself and her family. Her early publications in literary periodicals were usually anonymous, as were her first two published volumes: *An Essay on the Mind* (1824) and her translation of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* (1833), neither of which received any critical notice.

Although she occasionally contributed to periodicals from 1821 onward, Barrett’s adult career began in 1838, when she published *The Seraphim, and Other Poems*. She had begun publishing under E.B.B. in the mid-1830s, but it was this first signed volume that garnered her real critical attention. Her 1844 *Poems by E. B. Barrett*, secured her fame and, eventually, the attention of Robert Browning, whose well-known

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letter saying, “I do, as I say love these books with all my heart—and I love you, too,” launched the most famous love story in nineteenth-century literary history.\footnote{Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, [10 January 1845], The Brownings’ Correspondence 10:17.}

Despite her biographical adherence to the framework I named above, Barrett’s adult career is somewhat anomalous in this project. Unlike Tennyson, she had no “ten years of silence”; even when she wrote in obscurity, she was publishing, albeit to little notice. Unlike that of Hemans, her juvenile career was almost entirely private, and unlike those of Landon, Barrett’s publications reflect her ability to carefully choose the subjects and publication venues of her poetry. The differences in her professional circumstances, however, are entirely due to the differences in her financial circumstances. While the Moulton-Barretts were far from wealthy,\footnote{Although Edward Moulton-Barrett owned a large number of Jamaican estates, he lost a significant amount of money and faced the calling-in of his debts in 1832, forcing the family to leave their beloved home, Hope End. Furthermore, with eleven children (the third daughter, Mary, died in childhood) ranging in age from 26 (Elizabeth, whose invalidism could not have been inexpensive) to 8 (Octavius) to provide for, their circumstances could not have been luxurious following this financial catastrophe.} they had enough income that the surviving daughters of the family, Elizabeth, Henrietta, and Arabella, were required neither to write nor to marry (in fact, as any scholar of the Brownings is aware, they were expressly forbidden from the latter) to keep the family alive. Barrett was not supporting her family or herself; in addition to the money she made from her writing, she inherited £4,000\footnote{Approximately $400,000 today.} from her grandmother upon her death in 1830, and several thousand more when her uncle Sam died in 1837.

Thus, because she was not dependent on her writing for her survival, Barrett was able to choose where and when to publish, and was not required to enact in public the kind of performances that were required of Hemans and Landon. Because of her relative financial independence and the protection of her family, Barrett’s early career more
closely resembles that of Tennyson, at least insofar as she was not nearly so dependent upon the whims of the public or her publishers. It is unsurprising, then, that Barrett was not a prolific contributor to the annuals, though she did contribute several poems to *Findens’ Tableaux* and to *Schloss’s English Bijou Almanack*, both of which were edited by her friend Mary Russell Mitford. Later, she contributed several pieces to the well-regarded *Keepsake*. Her contributions to the *Athenaeum*, one of the most prominent intellectual journals of the time, reflect a similar practical discrimination. In the 1820s and 1830s, she occasionally contributed poems to the *New Monthly Magazine* and to the *Literary Gazette*, both of which had featured poetry by Hemans and Landon during the same period, while in her later years her poems appeared in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the *Independent*, and the *Cornhill Magazine*, among others.

Although Barrett wrote and published regularly throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s, there is a short but significant break in her work following the drowning death of her favorite brother, Edward Moulton-Barrett (known as “Bro” in the family that called Elizabeth “Ba”) on July 11, 1840. “Bro” drowned while sailing at Torquay, whence he had accompanied his sister against their father’s wishes. Barrett’s health, which had been fragile since her teens (and was the sole reason for the Barrett siblings’ presence in Torquay), was seriously threatened by the tragedy, and her subsequent

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19 Boyle’s *Index to the Annuals* lists her as having contributed six poems to two annuals: five to *Findens’ Tableaux* and one to the highly-regarded *Keepsake*. W. S. Barnes has since uncovered several more annual publications—one more in the *Keepsake*, and five contributions to *Schloss’s English Bijou Almanack for 1843*.

20 Barrett refused to accept payment for her first contribution (“The Romance of the Ganges, which appeared in *Findens’ Tableaux* for 1839), insisting Mitford, who was supporting her elderly father, keep Barrett’s £5 contributor’s fee. (See Barrett to Mitford, 17 June 1837, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 3.258–9.) It is unclear whether she accepted payment for her four contributions to the *Tableux* for 1840.
prostration precipitated a three-month literary silence.\textsuperscript{21} The disruption to Barrett’s writing was total: among her extant letters, there is nothing between a letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd\textsuperscript{22} on 8 July, 1840, and a note to Mitford tentatively dated to early October of that same year.\textsuperscript{23} If there were any letters from her hand in those intervening months, they have since been lost. In the note to Mitford, Barrett apologizes for having to renege on her promise to write for \textit{Findens’}, and Barnes records a thirteen-month gap between Barrett’s periodical publications, with none appearing from July 1840 until August 1841.

In losing Bro, as Angela Leighton suggests, Barrett lost her most reliable critic. Until his death, she had, in effect, the very devoted support that the poetesses before her had lacked and pined for. Bro was her Hallam, “her companion and arbiter . . . a moral guide and the beloved object of her literary addresses.”\textsuperscript{24} Leighton goes on to elucidate the ways in which Barrett used silence as a way of sustaining her grief, unlike Tennyson, who poured his out onto the page in the poems that would become \textit{In Memoriam}. For Barrett, Bro’s name is that which can never again be spoken or referred to; as Leighton points out, she repeatedly tells friends in her letters that she “cannot write of these things,” and, indeed, she does not. She rarely writes of Bro again, though there are moments, which I will discuss later, where her poetry evokes a haunting level of grief.

The shattering grief and guilt that accompanied Bro’s death would haunt Barrett for the rest of her life, but by the spring of 1841 she was writing again,\textsuperscript{25} though she still

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\item\textsuperscript{21} Barrett’s grief following Bro’s death was compounded by the fact that he was the second of her brothers to die that year. Their brother Sam had died in Jamaica in February.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Her old tutor of Greek.
\item\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The Brownings’ Correspondence}, 4:297.
\item\textsuperscript{24} Angela Leighton, \textit{Elizabeth Barrett Browning} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 77-78. Leighton makes the Hallam comparison explicitly later in the same chapter, saying, “[Bro’s death], like the loss of Hallam for Tennyson, was to be a lifelong draw on her imagination” (80).
\item\textsuperscript{25} In January of 1841, her letters to R. H. Horne detail the plan of a collaborative drama between them. In August of 1841, “The House of Clouds” appeared in \textit{The Athenaeum}. Although Horne’s \textit{The Poems of}
struggled with illness and depression. She contemplated publication throughout 1842 and
1843, and in 1844, Barrett released her second major collection of poetry, simply entitled
*Poems*. While it was this two-volume work that established her at the forefront of the
English literary scene in general and as the most prominent woman writer of the day, her
career had not idled in the six years that separated *The Seraphim* from *Poems*. Many of
the poems published in *Poems* had originally appeared in literary periodicals—most in
the *Athenaeum*, though a handful had appeared in *Blackwood’s*, and one (“The Cry of the
Human”) in *Graham’s Magazine*. Her reputation was such that Richard Hengist Horne
could safely include her in *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844) before the publication of her
*Poems*.26

Among the most important relationships Barrett developed in her early literary
career was her friendship with Mary Russell Mitford, author of the popular series *Our
Village*, whose short stories and poems had been a staple of periodical and annual
literature for more than two decades before she was introduced to Elizabeth Barrett.
Though she lived quietly with her parents, whom she supported with her writing, Mitford
had a wide circle of literary acquaintances, and had corresponded briefly with both
Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon prior to their deaths.

Mitford and Barrett were introduced by John Kenyon, Barrett’s publisher, distant
cousin, and life-long friend, in 1836. They struck up a voluminous correspondence and

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26 Horne claims to have chosen the poetesses for inclusion from H. N. Coleridge’s 1840 essay in the *Quarterly Review* on “Modern English Poetesses.” Coleridge names nine women (among them his wife Sara), and while Horne includes only Barrett and Caroline Norton in *A New Spirit of the Age*, he lists all but one of the remaining seven. (The ninth, who Horne describes as “a lady of rank, whom it was a pity to introduce in company where she has no claim to rank,” was Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan.) (“Modern English Poetesses,” *The Quarterly Review* 66 [September 1840]: 374-418.)
close friendship that lasted until Mitford’s death in 1854. In their long correspondence, they returned often to the struggles they shared as women writers, and Barrett frequently turned to the careers of Hemans, Landon, and Mitford as examples (and cautionary tales) for her own career, the ambitions of which Mitford encouraged and praised.

Barrett’s letters—to Mitford in particular, but to other correspondents as well—illustrate her complicated emotional relationship with her predecessors. Even as she acknowledges their talents, she is frustrated by the faces they presented to the world, particularly in regard to the concept of feminine (and female) genius and the role of the woman poet. On the whole, Barrett tended to prefer Landon’s work to that of Hemans, because she identified in Landon a greater potential for poetic genius, but at the same time she was often more greatly disappointed in Landon’s failure because of what she perceived as her destroyed potential.

Several critics have speculated that Barrett’s complicated feelings towards her own mother, who died in 1828, were one reason why she found it so difficult to relate to

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27 Barrett’s letters to Mitford have been published in Meredith B. Raymond and Mary Rose Sullivan’s *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, 1836-1854* (Waco, TX: Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 1983), in addition to their inclusion in *The Browning Correspondence*.

28 In 1842, Mitford wrote to Barrett, “My love and my ambition for you often seems to be more like that of a mother for a son or a father for a daughter (the two fondest of natural emotions), than the common bonds of even a close friendship between two women of different ages and similar pursuits. I sit and think of you, and of the poems that you will write, and of that strange, brief rainbow crown called Fame, until the vision is before me as vividly as ever a mother’s heart hailed the eloquence of a patriot son. Do you understand this? and do you pardon it? You must, my precious, for there is no chance that I should unbuild that house of clouds; and the position that I long to see you fill is higher, firmer, prouder than ever has been filled by woman. It is a strange feeling, but one of indescribable pleasure. My pride and my hopes seem altogether merged in you.” (Mitford to Barrett, [?27] March 1842, in *The Browning Correspondence*, 5:275.)

29 See Angela Leighton, “Elizabeth Barrett Browning,” chapter 3 in *Victorian Woman Writers: Writing Against the Heart*, for a detailed discussion of how she sees Barrett reacting against her predecessors. While I think Leighton is accurate as to her reading of Barrett Browning in relation to Hemans and Landon, as I indicate in earlier chapters, I believe her reading of these earlier poetesses is flawed.

30 Dorothy Mermin observes that, “Inferior as she rightly thought her, [Barrett] nonetheless felt that her real rival was L.E.L., not Homer or Byron or even Mrs. Hemans, whom she considered too ladylike and deficient in passion to be seriously reckoned with” (*Origins*, 32).
Felicia Hemans. Mary Moulton-Barrett was, according to her oldest daughter, “One of those women who can never resist,—but, in submitting & bowing on themselves, make a mark, a plait, within, . . a sign of suffering. Too womanly she was—it was her only fault.” In much the same vein, Barrett criticized Hemans for the “conventional excess of delicacy which was the flaw in her genius.” Several years prior to that statement, she wrote to Mitford of Hemans:

I admire her genius—love her memory—respect her piety & high moral tone. But she always does seem to me a lady rather than woman, & so, much rather than a poetess—her refinement, like the prisoner’s iron . . enters into her soul. She is polished all over to one smoothness & one level, & is monotonous in her best qualities. We say, ‘how sweet & noble,’ & then we are silent & can say no more—perhaps, presently, we go to sleep, with angels in our dreams.

This opinion she maintained throughout her readings both of Hemans’s poetry and of the various memorials of her career. After rereading Chorley’s Memorials of Mrs. Hemans in 1844, Barrett expanded on her criticism of Hemans, saying, “She was too conventionally a lady, to be a great poetess—she was bound fast in satin riband. Her delicacy restrained

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31 Angela Leighton hints at this suggestion in her chapter on Elizabeth and Mary Moulton-Barrett, “‘Ghostly mother, keep aloof’: The Daughter’s Disaffiliation,” in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in which she discusses Barrett’s rejection of “womanliness” in favor of poetic ambition (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 61).

32 Barrett to Browning, [27 August 1846], The Brownings’ Correspondence, 13:306

33 Barrett to Mitford, 10 January 1844, The Brownings’ Correspondence 8:157-8. In same passage, she contrasts Hemans to the more “masculine” Harriet Martineau, whom Barrett characterizes as having “clear & healthful discernment, & capability of generalizing.”

34 Barrett to Mitford, The Brownings’ Correspondence 6:165-6. Barrett’s orthographic style features several idiosyncratic punctuation marks, most notably her use of the two-dot ellipsis, which functions somewhat like a dash. She also uses varying lengths of dashes—and her emotional state, as I will discuss later, is often reflected in her use of these symbols. The more her writing is broken up by the long dashes and two-dot ellipses, the more excited Barrett seems to be. The editors of the Correspondence have scrupulously preserved Barrett’s stylistic choices; following their example, I have tried to do the same.
her sense of Beauty—and she had no reverence for Humanity, through the morbid
narrowness of her sympathies.”

If Barrett’s distaste for the extremes of gendered behavior and her preference for a
more nuanced view of humanity than she saw in Hemans’s work affected her reading of
Hemans, it also caused some conflict in her attitude towards Landon, whom she rarely
referred to as anything but “poor L.E.L.” In 1835, Barrett described Landon to Lady
Margaret Cocks as “toujours tourerelle,” and “deficient in energy & condensation as
well as in variety.” Despite this apparent condemnation, Barrett continues, “Nevertheless,
there does appear to me a naturalness, both in the ideas & the expression of them—yes!
& a pathos too! She is like a bird of a few notes. They are few—but nature gave them!”

However, although she was inclined to refer to Landon as “toujours tourerelle” (a phrase
she used more than once in her discussions of Landon), Barrett also keenly admired her
gift. After reading Laman Blanchard’s *Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.* in 1841,
Barrett later wrote to Mitford that if she could choose between Hemans’s poetic gift and
that of Landon:

I mean the raw bare powers . . I would choose Miss Landon’s. I surmise that it
was more elastic, more various, of a stronger web. I fancy it would have worked

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36 Though translated “always a turtledove,” the reference is to “perdrix, toujours perdrix”—“partridge,
always partridge”—referencing a tale told by Horace Walpole and meaning that one can have too much of
a good thing.
37 *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 3:159. The clarification is apparently in response to Lady
Margaret’s (unavailable) response to an earlier letter by Barrett, wherein she writes, “M” Hemans, dead!
‘There, cracked a noble heart!’ Did you see Miss Landon’s Stanzas upon her death, in the new Monthly
Magazine, this summer? and an address to Miss Landon on the subject of those stanzas, in the next number
but one of the same Magazine? I should have liked to hear your opinion of both poems. And did you ever
observe that the two poetesses of our day, Felicia Hemans & Lætitia Landon are ‘lætæ cognomina ambo’
[felicitably together in name]?” (Barrett to Cocks, [November 1835], *The Brownings’ Correspondence*,
3:153.)
38 A work she would criticize in 1844 for its “undefinable vulgarity” in comparison to Chorley’s
*Memorials of Mrs. Hemans.*
out better—had it been worked out—with the right moral & intellectual
influences in application. As it is, Mrs. Hemans has left the finer poems. Of that
there can be no question. But perhaps . . & I do say it very diffidently . . there is a
sense of sameness which goes with the sense of excellence,—while we read her
poems—a satiety with the satisfaction together with a feeling “this writer has
written her best,”—or “It is very well—but never can be better.”

Oddly, despite her interest in Landon, Barrett is rarely able to speak of her without
automatically comparing her to Hemans. Although Barrett clearly articulated her sense of
their differences, it is equally clear that Hemans and Landon were inextricably linked in
her mind—a connection that is replicated in the poetry she wrote to and about them.

On a fundamental poetic level, Barrett was haunted by both of these earlier
women, drawn by their success, but at the same time unable to reconcile their apparent
failures with her own intellectual accomplishment. Given this sense of haunting, it is
fitting that Barrett’s one-sided poetic dialogue with Landon began over Landon’s first
elegy for Felicia Hemans. Landon’s poem, “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans,” is a
pastiche of one of Hemans’s own poems, “Bring Flowers.” In “Stanzas on the Death of
Mrs. Hemans,” published in the New Monthly Magazine in July 1835, Landon commands
her audiences to mourn Hemans’s passing and paints the other poet as a martyr to fame
and sentiment. Barrett’s response, titled “Stanzas Addressed to Miss Landon, and
Suggested by Her ‘Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans,’”40 which was published in the
New Monthly two months later under the signature “B.,” rebukes Landon for her attempt

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39 Barrett to Mitford, 15 July 1845, The Brownings’ Correspondence, 5:75.
40 Later retitled “Felicia Hemans (To L. E. L., Referring to her Monody on the Poetess)” for its
inclusion in the 1844 Poems. (All references to Barrett Browning’s poetry, except those to Aurora Leigh,
are based upon The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning [London: Henry Frowde, 1904].)
to appropriate Hemans’s poetry to mourn her, and, in a gesture reminiscent of Hemans’s
“The Grave of a Poetess,” suggests that the dead poetess is ultimately happier than the
living by being placed triumphantly in heaven.\footnote{This poem was copied into a commonplace book kept by Felicia Hemans’s sister, Harriet Hughes Owen, after her sister’s death, and which is now in the Pforzheimer Collection at the New York Public Library. A significant portion of this book’s earlier pages are devoted to Hemans and her success.}

The poem begins, “Thou bay-crowned living One that o’er the bay-crowned Dead
art bowing,” thus acknowledging both Hemans’s and Landon’s lauded status as, if not
rivals, then at least poetesses of the same rank. However, as the poem’s second line
immediately indicates, Barrett senses an attempt on Landon’s part to overshadow
Hemans, which the poem depicts in a strikingly literal way:

And o’er the shadeless moveless brow the vital shadow throwing;

And o’er the sighless songless lips the wail and music wedding;

And dropping o’er the tranquil eyes, the tears not of their shedding!— (lines 2-4)

The image of Landon’s “vital shadow” falling over Hemans’s “shadeless . . . brow”
suggests a kind of appropriation on Landon’s part of Hemans’s voice and position.
Barrett thus hints that Landon’s adoption of Hemans’s own lyric represents an attempt on
Landon’s part to usurp or, at the very least, overwrite Hemans’s position and history with
a version constructed by Landon.

Although she rebukes Landon for her apparent presumption, Barrett also
encourages her to resume her role as poetess and arbiter of public sentiment. In the
second stanza, she advises Landon to “Take music from the silent dead, whose meaning
is completer, / Reserve thy tears for living brows, where all such tears are meeter” (lines
5-6), and in the third, expanding on the theme of “bring flowers,” suggests that Landon
bring flowers not to Hemans, but “flowers to crown the ‘cup and lute,’ since both may
come to breaking” or “flowers to soothe the ‘captive’s’ sight” (lines 9 and 11). These commands are all focused on the idea, which Barrett arrives at in the penultimate stanza, that Hemans, united with Christ in Heaven, does not need either Landon’s pity or that of the world, but that the world itself will need Landon’s gifts (and those that Hemans left behind) in order to cope with the challenges of life.

However, this pious sentiment is overwhelmed by a sense that Barrett’s objection is not to a lack of religiosity in Landon’s poem, but to the all-too-common impulse of contemporaries to rewrite or reimagine the lives and motives of the dead. Even as Barrett chastises Landon for this very sin, telling her to “bring not near the solemn corse, a type of human seeming” (line 13), she commits it herself in her fifth and sixth stanzas in her defense of Hemans’s sorrow. Even as Landon appears to be writing her own elegy in both of her poems on Hemans, it is tempting in this poem to read Barrett’s lines as autobiographical:

Would she have lost the poet’s fire for anguish of the burning?—
The minstrel harp, for the strained string? the tripod, for the afflated Woe? or the vision, for those tears in which it shone dilated? (lines 18-20)

Barrett answers her own question in the negative in the following stanza, but betrays something of her own ambivalence towards Hemans in that stanza’s final lines. Hemans’s “mystic breath,” she says, “drew from rock, earth and man, abstractions high and moving / Beauty, if not the beautiful, and love, if not the loving” (lines 23-24). Though Barrett herself was, at this point, very much a poet of abstraction, here she seems to be somewhat frustrated by Hemans’s inability to produce “the beautiful” and “the loving”—the concrete embodiments of “beauty” and “love”—from humanity and the earth.
The poem concludes not with Hemans, but with an expressed hope that Landon, too, would be praised after her death as Hemans has been praised, and that in the meantime, Landon should celebrate, and not mourn:

Be happy, crowned and living one! and, as thy dust decayeth,

May thine own England say for thee what now for her it sayeth—

“Albeit softly in our ears her silver song was ringing,

The footfall of her parting soul is softer than her singing.” (lines 29-32)

The pathos inherent in the poem’s closing lines is amplified, of course, by Landon’s unexpected death three years later, and by the knowledge that Landon’s final years were not happy, and that her death did not result in the praise Barrett wished for her. The footsteps of Landon’s “parting soul,” as Barrett (and the rest of England) would be all too aware, were anything but quiet, as I indicated in chapter two.

Barrett’s employment of fifteen-syllable lines (fourteeners with feminine end rhymes) forces a kind of poetic deceleration in the reading of the text. However, while this unusual versification creates a sense of careful deliberation, that sense is partially undermined by Barrett’s use of feminine end rhymes, where an emphasized syllable at the end of each line might produce a stronger sense of conviction concerning Hemans’s posthumous fate. Instead, the poem leaves us with an impression of Barrett’s own ambivalence towards her predecessor, highlighted, perhaps, by Barrett’s relative inexperience with occasional verse. However, by the time she eulogized Landon in

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42 The version printed in the New Monthly lacked the fourteeners. Instead, the lines were broken into a more regular eight- and seven-syllable pattern, with the seven-syllable line retaining the feminine ending of the version I discuss here.

43 According Barnes, this poem was Barrett’s ninth periodical contribution. Several of her earlier poems, most notably “Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron,” were also occasional, but it was not a kind of poetry in which she had done a great deal of mature experimentation.
1839, Barrett had developed both a wider reputation and a less awkward approach to her occasional poetry.

“L.E.L.’s Last Question” was published in *The Athenaeum* on January 26, 1839—twenty-five days after the news of Landon’s death reached England. “L.E.L.’s Last Question” begins with a line borrowed and slightly revised from one of Landon’s last poems, “Night at Sea,” which was written in August of 1838 during her voyage to West Africa with her husband, and published posthumously in the *New Monthly Magazine* in January 1839. Nearly every stanza of that poem ends with the refrain, “My friends, my absent friends! / Do you think of me, as I think of you?” and it is this line that Barrett chooses for her opening: “Do you think of me as I think of you, / My friends, my friends?” In an obvious homage to Landon’s poem (and echoing Landon’s approach in her monody on Hemans), Barrett closes several key stanzas of her poem with the same refrain.

Barrett identifies in this line an echo of the pathos that dominated Landon’s life and career. While in “Felicia Hemans” she rebukes Landon for using her own fame as a justification for her reading of Hemans’s life, in “L.E.L.’s Last Question” Barrett focuses on Landon’s lonely humility. The speaker of Barrett’s poem is especially careful to point out that “She asked not, ‘Do you praise me, O my land?’ / But, ‘Think ye of me, friends, as I of you?’” (lines 27-28). Barrett seems to have an instinctive grasp—perhaps through her reading of Landon’s own poetry—of the vision of Landon as “poor L.E.L.” that would arise in the weeks, months, and years following Landon’s death. Barrett commits the same errors of misreading Landon as the rest of Landon’s audience, imagining her as a poet who sung of “love and love,” for whom “all sounds of life assumed one tune of
love.” (This reading is, of course, merely a more tactful way of putting Barrett’s earlier
description of Landon as “toujours tourerelle.”)

However, even as she perpetuated Landon’s public image as a poet of “love and
love,” Barrett’s poem sees in Landon both the “minstrel” and the lonely woman who died
“with all her visions unfulfilled” (line 47). The fifth and sixth stanzas imagine Landon on
her journey to Cape Coast, wondering, “Was she content, content, with ocean’s sound /
which dashed its mocking infinite around / One thirsty for a little love?” (lines 37-39)

There is considerably more evident emotion in this poem than in “Felicia
Hemans”; in part, this may be a function of Barrett’s increasing maturity as poet as well
as her less ambivalent feelings towards Landon. “L.E.L.’s Last Question” eschews the
complicated verse form that Barrett used in “Felicia Hemans” in favor of the more
familiar iambic pentameter. This metrical pattern, being considerably more natural than
the iambic heptameters of the earlier elegy, enables a much less convoluted display of
emotion.

Ultimately, Barrett saw both Hemans and Landon as victims of their femininity,
both sacrificing genius to ideals—in one case decorum, and in the other, love. While her
frustration with both is palpable in both her letters and her poetry, Barrett nevertheless
cannot help but be influenced by the poetic ideals they put forth, adopting in her own
poetry something of Landon’s focus on the body and an intellectual high-mindedness that
is reminiscent of Hemans (albeit not in a way that Barrett did or could recognize).
Regardless of her ambivalence towards both of these important “stepmothers,” Barrett
remained fascinated by them, and treasured the keepsakes of them that she would receive after their deaths.⁴⁴

**Confronting Fame, Modernity, and Femininity**

Barrett’s consistent appearances in the periodicals, her growing fame, and the publication of *Poems by E. B. Barrett* (1844) completed what *The Seraphim* had begun, and established Barrett as one of the most prominent poets of the new Victorian age. Her poetry in the 1844 volumes showcased her development as an intellectual and as a poetess as she wrestled with the concerns and formulated the poetic theories that led to the creation of *Aurora Leigh*.

Among the issues with which Barrett was preoccupied in the mid-1840s were the political role of the poet, particularly when that poet was also a woman; the nature of fame, femininity, and androgyny; and a growing awareness of the importance of contemporaneous poetry, as opposed to the medievalist poetry she favored in her earlier career. This section will look briefly at the state of Barrett’s public reputation in the mid-1840s, then examine how *Poems by E. B. Barrett* explores the issues of gender and modernity, and, finally, contextualize that examination with a discussion of how Barrett’s letters from this period reflect her increasing awareness of the social importance of the poet and that poet’s use of her fame.

The question with which Barrett wrestled throughout her career haunts the 1844 *Poems*—how do women reconcile their femininity with their “masculine” ambition to

⁴⁴ Among these were two of several seeds sent by Landon from Africa to Mitford for her garden, and then forwarded to Barrett as a gift from Mitford, and one of Felicia Hemans’s commonplace books (now in the possession of the Houghton Library at Harvard University), given by Hemans’s youngest son Charles to Barrett Browning in 1854.
publish? How can a “masculine-minded” woman (as Barrett saw herself) be taken seriously in a literary arena where the available discourse is formulated on conventional femininity? In other words, how does a woman who sees herself as a poet, in the traditional, masculine sense of the term, reconcile herself to the role of poetess?

Barrett directly tackled these questions in the pair of sonnets addressed to George Sand (whom Barrett admired, albeit with a great deal of ambivalence) that she published in the 1844 Poems, “To George Sand. A Desire” and “To George Sand. A Recognition.” The first of the pair expresses the speaker’s desire to see Sand struck by a miracle that imbues her with “the angel’s grace,” thus purifying her work and making it accessible to “child and maiden” (i.e., “innocent” readers). The “recognition” of the second poem is the speaker’s recognition that true androgyny is impossible on this side of the “heavenly shore / Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!” (lines 13-14).

Both poems celebrate Sand’s androgyny, but both also call for a more comprehensive engagement with femininity. The first of the pair begins by addressing Sand as “Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man,” but then seeks for her work a kind of moral purity that Barrett feared Sand lacked. The second poem leaves behind the issue of the work’s morality in favor of wrestling directly with her femininity, asking Sand, “True genius, but true woman, dost deny / The woman’s nature with a manly scorn / And break away the gauds and armlets worn / By weaker women in captivity?” (lines 1-45)

45 In 1842, Barrett wrote to Mitford of reading Sand’s Lèila: “the worst which is offensive in [Rousseau], is innocent to what is bad in her. It really does strike me to be so—altho’ perhaps my impression may have exaggerated itself in my recoil from the occasional position of her womanhood. . . . ‘Leila’ again, made me blush in my solitude to the ends of my fingers—blush three blushes in one . . . for Her who c’d be so shameless—for her sex, whose purity she so disgraced—& for myself in particular, who c’d hold such a book for five minutes in one hand while a coal-fire burnt within reach of the other.” (Barrett to Mitford, 27 November 1842, The Brownings’ Correspondence, 6:179.)
4). The speaker, however, cannot permit Sand to deny what the speaker sees as her essential nature—“Ah, vain denial!” the sonnet continues.

The speaker of these sonnets is clearly a woman herself, claiming Sand as a “sister” to be admired and yet pitied. In “A Recognition,” Sand is described in terms that suggest a kind of poetic suttee, her femininity most evident as she artistically immolates herself before a wide public audience—“while before / The world thou burnest in a poet-fire, / We see thy woman-heart beat evermore / Through the large flame” (lines 9-12). The metonymic conflation of suttee and feminine self-sacrifice that dominated sentimental poetry of the early 1830s is evoked here to highlight the impossibility of literary or literal androgyny for female artists.

While “A Recognition” closes with suttee, the opening images of “A Desire” conflate Sand with the Biblical Daniel with her “soul, amid the lions” (line 2). By opening with this Biblical image, “A Desire” not only reaffirms Sand’s holy androgyny, but indicates the focus of the poem. Although it is “A Recognition” that ends with a gesture towards a heavenly utopia where androgyny is possible, it is also the more mundane of the two sonnets, in that it is focused not on Sand’s potential, but rather her reality. “A Desire” conflates Sand with various symbolic figures—lions, swans, and angels—and ends with her union, equally symbolic, with the sexless and pure (and thus equally angelic) figures of the child and the maiden. From this ethereal vision, Barrett

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46 Perhaps most evident in poems like Maria Jane Jewsbury’s “Song of the Hindoo Women, While Accompanying a Widow to the Funeral Pile of Her Husband” and Landon’s “Immolation of a Hindoo Widow.”

47 This image also echoes The Sunbeam’s review of Essay on the Mind, Prometheus Bound, and The Seraphim, and Other Poems. At the end of the series of reviews, the reviewer notes, “A smouldering fire is consuming [Barrett], which, if it do not quickly blaze into radiance, will slay her in the flesh, that, uncontrolled, she may rise to glory in the spirit.” (Reprinted in The Browning Correspondence, 4:400.)

48 This, incidentally, was the second of Daniel’s major Biblical trials. In the first, he was to be burnt alive, but survived through his faith in God. It is possible that the suttee image at the end of “A Recognition” also refers to Daniel’s experience in the Babylonian furnace.
turns in “A Recognition” to the concrete and the embodied, focusing not on the image of angelic wings rising from Sand’s “strong shoulders,” but rather on her “woman’s hair . . . all unshorn” (line 7) and her “woman’s voice forlorn” (line 6). This shift to the physical body in “A Recognition” highlights the contrast between the Earth’s reality and that proposed by Barrett in her final image of heaven, “Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!”

The concerns with gender and androgyny revealed in these sonnets were employed in much more subtle ways in some of the other poems in Poems by E. B. Barrett. Like her fellow poetesses, Barrett’s understanding of femininity was a nuanced one, often encompassing male as well as female experiences. In her “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” Barrett depicts a male poet in a feminized position, placing the Lady Geraldine of the title in the more empowered role to which she is entitled by her social position.

“Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” one of the most successful poems of the 1844 volume, anticipated Aurora Leigh not only in its contemporary setting, but also in the ways in which it adapted the tropes of earlier sentimental poetry. Narrated by a young poet in the form of a letter to his friend, “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” echoes Landon’s The Troubadour (1825), the title poem of her second volume, in which the narrator/hero is a poet and warrior who endures multiple martial and erotic trials before attaining both poetic and marital success. Bertram, the low-born poet-speaker of Barrett’s poem, is in love with the aloof Lady Geraldine, who invites Bertram to her country house, where he falls more deeply in love. When he overhears her vow to a rejected suitor that her

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49 Bertram is reading Camoëns when he hears this conversation; Barrett’s engagement with Camoëns as inspiration is apparent, not only in “Catarina to Camoëns,” which serves as something of a pendant to
husband will be “noble, / Ay, and wealthy,” and she “shall never blush to think how he was born,” Bertram, overcome by his passion and disappointment, exhausts himself with a rant against Geraldine’s perceived superficiality, at the end of which he is rendered unconscious, apparently by nothing more complicated than Geraldine speaking his name. When his letter is finished, and his intent to leave her house before dawn and travel to “far and foreign lands”\(^{50}\) (line 364) revealed, Geraldine confronts Bertram and confesses her love to him, resulting in their union. (This confrontation is, however, complicated by the way in which it is narrated, a complication that I will discuss shortly.)

Bertram’s confrontation with social difference places him in a feminized position relative to Geraldine and to the people with whom she associates. Their refusal to recognize him as an individual rather than an insensate object of curiosity frustrates Bertram and threatens to stifle his creativity:

Quite low-born, self educated! somewhat gifted, though, by nature
And we make a point of asking him,—of being very kind.
You may speak, he does not hear you; and besides, he writes no satire:
All these serpents kept by charmers leave the natural sting behind. (lines 41-44)

The class dynamics implicit in these lines of overheard dialogue serve to remind Bertram of the untenable position in which the combination of his creative work and his social dependency places him. Assured that “he writes no satire,” the upper-class guests speak freely before Bertram, believing him to be free of his sting—effectively emasculated—by being “kept” by Lady Geraldine. Meanwhile, in overhearing this slight, Bertram “grew

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\(^{50}\) Thus deliberately replicating the rejected speaker of Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall,” published two years before “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship.”
scornfuller, grew colder, as I stood up there among them, / Till, as frost intense will burn you, the cold scorning scorched my brow” (lines 45-46). This freezing is also a kind of silencing—Bertram cannot speak, nor can he write out his scorn until he has reclaimed his authentic voice (and, thus, his masculinity), in his coming confrontation with Geraldine.

The feminization (through silencing and powerlessness) of the lower classes became a recurring theme in Barrett’s political poetry, and manifested itself particularly in *Aurora Leigh*, with its careful rendering of complicated gender and class politics. In “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” which is not, on its surface, a poem with a political message, the social politics are woven into and driven by the central romance. Bertram’s impassioned attack on Geraldine, which he partially transcribes in his letter, focuses not merely on her rejection of him, but on the entire social system that is predicated upon the rejection of the lower classes by the upper:

Learn more reverence, madam, not for rank or wealth—*that* needs no learning;

*That* comes quickly, quick as sin does, ay, and culminates to sin;

But for Adam’s seed, MAN! Trust me, ’tis a clay above your scorning,

With God’s image stamped upon it, and God’s kindling breath within. (lines 297-300)

Bertram’s anger continues in this vein, asking again and again what right Geraldine (and her peers) have to “scorn, despise, revile” God’s works.

This scene reverses the gendered dynamics of the first half of the poem. No longer is Bertram the devoted follower that he has been (in stanza XXXVII he compares
himself to a dog). Instead, he has claimed his voice and his “masculine” authority, turning his feminine devotion into a kind of attack on Geraldine’s supposed values:

As it is—your ermined pride, I swear, shall feel this stain upon her,
That I, poor, weak, tost with passion, scorned by me and you again,
Love you, madam, dare to love you, to my grief and your dishonor,
To my endless desolation, and your impotent disdain! (lines 317-20)

Compared to the stoic suffering of other devoted lovers in Barrett’s sentimental poetry, such as the title characters of “The Romaunt of Margret” and “Bertha in the Lane,” Bertram’s rage is particularly dramatic. He rejects the silent feminine suffering enacted by Margret and Bertha, as well as a host of other sentimental protagonists, instead turning his misery into a weapon against Geraldine.

This weapon is peculiarly gendered in its own way; Bertram’s claim that his love will be to Geraldine’s “dishonor” hints at sexual as well as social judgment. Although he never touches her, and it is clear that he has no intention to do so, there are indicators throughout the poem of Geraldine’s sexual interest in Bertram, not least of which is her invitation to Wycombe Hall. In that scene, Geraldine is described as being “paler at the first word of her speaking, / But, because a silence followed it, blushed somewhat, as for shame” (lines 53-54). Though it is clear to the reader that Geraldine is attracted to Bertram, his belief in her distaste for him allows him to believe that this scene will contribute to her sense of having been “dishonored” by Bertram’s love.

The poem’s conclusion is marked by a shift in narrative voice as Bertram finishes his letter, and the story is taken up by an omniscient narrator. Bertram, with his “deep unwritten thoughts of grief” (line 372) believes himself to be hallucinating when he sees
Geraldine standing “twixt the purple lattice-curtains” (line 374). The narrator offers no commentary on this apparent vision, and describes Geraldine as white-faced, motionless, and moonlit. The ethereality of the scene and Bertram’s conviction that she is not Geraldine, but a vision, undermine the reliability of this scene’s realism, leaving the reader with the suggestion that this is Bertram’s fantasy. The shift in narration, however, is probably meant to quell doubts as to the scene’s validity by removing narrative authority from the overwrought and potentially susceptible Bertram.

Geraldine does not speak in the conclusion until its eighth stanza. She continues to approach Bertram “in a gliding measured pace” (line 390), smiling and weeping, and when she finally speaks, it is only to ask if Bertram could love someone as unworthy as she. Again, we see here an obvious reestablishment of traditional gender roles, with Geraldine handing her power to Bertram. However, the poem ends with Geraldine’s voice, repeating her vow to love a man “rich . . . in virtues” and “very noble” (line 411). While she has undoubtedly surrendered some of her social and sexual agency to Bertram, the fact that Geraldine has the last word, above the poet himself, is perhaps a gesture towards equality, which will be more fully explored in *Aurora Leigh*.

Although the plot of the poem is apparently a straightforward romance, its poetic project is a radical one. The philosophy at the heart of “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” is reminiscent of that in Barrett’s “The Poet’s Vow” or in Tennyson’s “A Palace of Art.” The artist cannot exist in any fictive ivory tower, nor can he or she become embittered by society. For the art to survive, the artist must allow him or herself to feel, to suffer, and to love. The concluding stanza of Bertram’s letter emphasizes this conviction; he tells his friend that he will not allow himself to die of grief, because “There’s no room for tears of
weakness in the blind eyes of a Phemius: / Into work the poet kneads them, and he does not die till then” (lines 367-68). In other words, the poet must craft his suffering into his work, and until that project is done he cannot allow himself to die. (It is interesting, however, that Bertram chooses the word “kneads,” a word associated almost exclusively with bread-making, and thus with women’s kitchen work.) Even after he and Geraldine have overcome their miscommunications, it seems clear that Bertram will continue to funnel his passion into his work; in this, he is the immediate ancestor of Aurora Leigh, although his philosophies ring closer to those of Romney.

“Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” while still using a nominally balladic plot (the high-born lady and her low-born swain), is a clear departure from much of Barrett’s earlier poetry, which tends much more towards the pseudo-medieval settings commonly used by her sentimental peers. Her earlier ballads, including “The Romaunt of the Page,” “The Lay of the Brown Rosary,” “The Romaunt of Margaret,” and “Isobel’s Child,” many of which Barrett composed for inclusion in Findens’ Tableaux, take place in unspecified medieval European locations. Barrett’s ballads were tremendously popular; it was those ballads that secured her reputation as a poet both before and after Poems by E. B. Barrett.51 However, while her exploration of the ballad form helped to pave the way for her later success, in her mature career, she began to move away from this form and towards more experimental modes.

The fame that Barrett received as a result of Poems by E. B. Barrett, and, in particular, “Lady Geraldine’s Courtship,” which was an immediate success, and her growing visibility in the literary world was never the trial to her that it was to Hemans

51 See Margaret Stone, “A Cinderella Among the Muses: Barrett Browning and the Ballad Tradition,” chapter 3 in Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
and Landon or even Tennyson. Unlike her predecessors and peers, Barrett saw fame as a desirable goal. She did not hoard her privacy as Tennyson and, later, Browning did. In fact, as she indicates to Browning in one of her letters to him, she found the publication and dissemination of letters to be an important element in biographical publication:

I, for my part, value letters . . . as the most vital part of biography. . . . Who would put away one of those multitudinous volumes, even, which stereotype Voltaire’s wrinkles of wit . . . even Voltaire?—I can read book after book of such reaching, or could! . . . [I]t is a wrong and selfish principle . . . —because we should all be ready to say that if the secrets of our daily lives & inner souls, may instruct other surviving souls, let them be open to men hereafter, even as they are to God now—Dust to dust, & soul-secrets to humanity—there are natural heirs to all these things.

Barrett’s feelings on the publication of letters were expressed earlier in a letter to Mitford, which, like the letter to Browning, above, arose from Harriet Martineau’s stance on the subject. In this earlier letter, it is clear that Barrett’s objections are not founded on purely intellectual reasons, but religious ones, as well. “As if,” she writes to Mitford, “when we have seen God, we shall care for man seeing us!” In part, as Eric Eisner suggests, some of the importance Barrett attached to the preservation of letters may stem

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52 For an account of Browning’s attitude towards publication of the letters and the steps he took to safeguard his and his wife’s privacy, see Kelley and Hudson, Introduction to The Browning Correspondence, 1:xxxiv-xxxviii.

53 Barrett to Browning, [16 February 1846], in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 12:77. This passage arose during a discussion of Harriet Martineau’s determination to have her letters returned to her by her friends or burnt by the same. Barrett strenuously objected to Martineau’s stance on this issue.

54 She adds, “For M’s Hemans, with that conventional excess of delicacy which was the flaw in her fine genius, to exclaim, . . . ‘Do not let them print my letters’, was only a characteristic circumstance & disappoints us in nothing.” (Barrett to Mitford, [9-10 January 1844, in The Brownings’ Correspondence 8:157-58.)
from her own position as a literary fan as well as a literary celebrity. The keepsakes of Hemans and Landon that I mentioned above, along with her avowed poet-worship of fellow poets like Tennyson and Browning, all highlight the extent to which Barrett, unlike her predecessors and peers, was interested in promoting the culture of literary celebrity.

It is thus unsurprising that Barrett not only collaborated with Richard Hengist Horne on his *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), but appeared in it herself. This was probably her first public “portrait”; while *The Seraphim* was published under her name, little was known about the book’s author, other than that she was a woman. The reputation established in *A New Spirit of the Age*, however, was not necessarily entirely dependent upon her literary abilities. Horne described Barrett as a “lady, or ‘fair shade’” whose seclusion is so total that future generations might doubt her existence. Horne apparently sought to imagine Barrett as an untouchable fairy-tale vision of a woman poet:

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56 Although it has been suggested that Barrett contributed a great deal of material to the Tennyson, Carlyle, and Landor chapters, and possibly to Wordsworth and Monckton Milnes (Mermin, *Origins of a New Poetry*, 81; Elvan Kintner, *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1845-1846 [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969], 1:134), Barrett herself adamantly refused authorship of any of the essays in a letter to Browning: “I did not do—and w’d not have done, . . one of those papers singly. It w’d have been unbecoming of me in every way. It was simply a writing of notes . . of slips of paper . . now on one subject, & now on another . . which were thrown into the great cauldron & boiled up with other matter,—& retranslated from my idiom where there seemed a need for it. . . . And nothing IS MINE . . if something is of me or from me, rather.” She adds, “I had some of the mottos to find too!”—in fact, there remain extant several letters from Barrett to Horne filled with suggestions for mottos. (Barrett to Browning, 25 July 1845, *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 11:2). Barrett also contributed to Horne’s *The Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, Modernized* with her “Queen Annelida and False Arcite” and “The Complaint of Annelida to False Arcite.”

57 A fact that “Christopher North,” at least, used to great effect in his August 1838 *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* review of *The Seraphim*, imagining “many a gentle girl” reciting Barrett’s verses to their adoring parents, and proclaiming that “Surely Poetesses . . . are very happy, in spite of all the ‘natural sorrows, griefs, and pains’ to which their exquisitely sensitive being must be perpetually alive.” (The infantilizing tone of “Christopher’s” review notwithstanding, the details of Barrett’s life remained unknown to the public. (Similarly, H. N. Coleridge’s “Modern English Poetesses,” published in the *Quarterly Review* in September 1840, and from which Horne claimed to draw inspiration, focused on Barrett’s work, and not her life.)
Confined entirely to her own apartment, and almost hermetically sealed, in consequence of some extremely delicate state of health, the poetess of whom we write is scarcely seen by any but her own family. But though thus separated from the world—and often, during many weeks at a time, in darkness almost equal to that of night, Miss Barrett has yet found means by extraordinary inherent energies to develop her inward nature; to give vent to the soul in a successful struggle with its destiny while on earth . . .

“Hermetically sealed” and invisible to the world except for her “constant correspondence with many of the most eminent persons of the time”—Horne’s description owes rather more to the Lady of Shalott than to Barrett herself. He further paints her as the cheerfully industrious invalid (perhaps anticipating a similarly ideal fictional future Elizabeth—Beth March) who “has now endured”:

six or seven years of this imprisonment . . . not with vain repinings, though deeply conscious of the loss of external nature’s beauty; but with resignation, with patience, with cheerfulness, and generous sympathies towards the world without;—with indefatigable “work” by thought, by book, by the pen, and with devout faith, and adoration, and a high and hopeful waiting for the time when this mortal frame “putteth on immortality.”

This image, just as damaging in its way as those fabricated around Hemans, Landon, and even Tennyson, would become the enduring one of her career, and Browning’s “rescue” of Barrett only served to further inculcate this myth in the public consciousness.

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58 A New Spirit of the Age (London: Smith, Elder, 1844), 134.
59 Ibid., 134.
Horne’s vision of the secluded poetess and the subtle condescension implied in his enclosing “work” in scare quotes served to safely feminize Barrett in the public eye even as he defended her “blue” tendencies (as his entry on her goes on to do). The apparent rejection of the concept of poetry as labor may be one reason why, in response to his commentary on her “The Death of Pan,” which she was editing for inclusion in the 1844 Poems, Barrett writes to Horne, “If I fail ultimately before the public . . . it will not be because I have shrunken from any amount of labour . . . where labour c^{d} do anything. I have worked at poetry—it has not been with me reverie, . . but art. As the physician & lawyer work at their several professions, so have I, & so do I, apply to mine.”

This insistence upon her right to be recognized as a professional (and to be treated as such) is replicated in a letter sent some three weeks prior to the one quoted above, in which she directly addresses his entry on her in A New Spirit of the Age. Although she begins by saying “I beseech you not to suffer yourself EVER by any sort of kind impulse . . . to say or modify a word relating to me,” she goes on to point out that he fails to discuss her poetry in any detail: “the notice as it stands can be called ‘inadequate’ only in one way, . . that you enter on no analysis of my poetical claims in it.” This is a fairly striking oversight, but not one that is limited to Horne’s discussion of Barrett. His reading of Caroline Norton is even more superficial, and the chapter devoted to the two of them as the representative poetesses of the age contains a mere twelve pages. Despite the humble tone of her letter, Barrett seems to be keenly aware of the importance of honest

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61 Barrett to Horne, [1 June 1844], in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 9:3.  
62 For comparison, Horne devotes 75 pages to Dickens, 22 to the Howitts, 30 to Wordsworth and Hunt, 32 to Tennyson, and 20 to Martineau and Jameson. Mary Shelley merits a mere 10 pages, and William Harrison Ainsworth the least of all at 7.
criticism to her career and the seriousness she feels it deserves. She assures Horne that she values sincerity above false kindness, and urges him to offer her genuine critique.

To her brother George, however, Barrett was considerably less circumspect in her criticisms of Horne’s assessment of her. She identifies in Horne’s essay a gesture towards the potential monstrosity of the poetess, and the learned poetess in particular: “the ‘Spirit of the Age’ speaks very kindly of me . . & analyzes me into the extreme of Greek, Latin, Hebrew & Chaldaic, shows me shut up in a dark room, . . & frightens people away from me, with very beneficent intentions, . . as a sort of dictionary-monster, past bearing.” She expresses to George her wish that Horne had offered honest critique, no matter how severe, of her writing, saying that “It w’d have been more really flattering to me as a writer—.”

Barrett’s insistence to Horne (among others) that she be treated as the professional she was indicates her own awareness of the attitude that her contemporaries often took towards women writers, assuming them to be dilettantes. However, Barrett herself was not directly confronted with the problems of being both female and a poet until she was well established in her career. In February 1845, Barrett received a request from the Ladies Committee in Leeds for the Anti Corn Law Bazaar to write a poem for the Bazaar. In a letter to John Kenyon written immediately after the receipt of this request, Barrett asks for counsel on her decision. Although, as she wrote to Mitford, “every feeling within [her] was pulling one way (in favor of the application),” in the hopes of being able to “write an agricultural-evil poem to complete the Factory-evil poem into a national-evil

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63 Barrett to George Goodin Moulton-Barrett, [3 April 1844], in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 8:289-90.
64 Barrett to Mitford, 11 February 1845, in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 10:65.
cycle" (as she explained to Kenyon), two days later she wrote to the Ladies Committee, declining their invitation. In a palpably frustrated letter to Mitford written the following day, Barrett laments that all of her friends were against her participation. Barrett’s words, which seem to constitute something of a revelation, on her part, of the real status of a poetess before her public are worth quoting in full. Her family’s reactions were, perhaps, the most insulting to her:

Papa was against it, which, if he stood his ground, was enough of course to decide the question. . . . dearest Mr. Kenyon wrote to me on the same side. And then all my brothers . . whom I had a regular quarrel with, by the bye, because they took up the argument on wrong grounds altogether, & abused the League & laughed at the ladies’ committee, & at the idea of my verses doing good at all, – – a woman’s verses!—oh, think of the impertinence of it—& how I was like a very Pythia for rage, . . the divine inspiration apart!66

Due in large part to Kelley, Hudson, Lewis, and Hagan’s careful editing, the reader of Barrett’s letters can see how her emotional state influences her orthographic style. While her stylistic idiosyncrasies (such as her propensity for using a two-dot ellipsis as a punctuation mark similar to a dash) are consistent throughout her correspondence, there is a marked difference in sentence construction, capitalization, and language use between the love letters to Browning, which give the appearance of having been written in haste and with great emotion, and her usual correspondence with friends. The letter quoted here is highly uncharacteristic of the usual style of the Mitford letters, as Barrett makes far more use of dashes, her two-dot ellipsis, and, in particular, exclamation points, in this

65 Barrett to Kenyon, 8 February 1845, in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 10:60.
66 Barrett to Mitford, 11 February 1845, in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 10:65
letter, which indicates that her emotional state was rather turbulent, to say the least, when she wrote it.

Barrett’s frustration with her own position is further complicated by the interruption of the critical world, represented here by Kenyon and Chorley, into what appears to have been a dramatic family scene:

– And then, to close the scene & clench the whole series of arguments, Mr Kenyon came, & told me that he had seen Mr Chorley, & that Mr Chorley declared it would ruin me for ever if I attempted such a thing, . . that my poetical reputation was at a crisis, . . & that from the moment I trusted it into the air of that region, it would fall flat, . . that nobody would read or buy me any more, as a matter of principle, . . nobody! & that my utility, from that hour, would be circumscribed, shackled, undone,—that the act would be fatal to me as a writer!

Barrett anticipates Mitford’s empathy for her situation, and, more importantly, conveys to her fellow female writer her sense of failure against her own literary and personal principles:

your letter made itself welcome,—& after all, it could scarcely make me feel surer than I was before, & am at this moment, that in refusing I have not acted as generously as I ought to have, nor from as high motives. I am not satisfied with myself—not at all. What was the folly called ‘my poetical reputation,’ in comparison to the duty to which I was invited? I too, who have always professed & desired to sacrifice nothing to poetical reputation . . not even my own views of art & composition! Indeed I am displeased with myself.
The disappointment expressed in this confession is Barrett’s disappointment not only in herself, but in her social position. Unable to disobey her father, and afraid of ruining her literary reputation, she declares that her whole decision here “is nothing but the doing of evil that good may come.”

This appears to have been Barrett’s first real encounter with the potential limitations of her position, and its impact would stay with her. The conflict between social and familial duty will haunt her later poetry, as she weighs the cost of poetic involvement in politics against personal sacrifice not only in *Aurora Leigh*, but in a number of her later lyrics (most especially, perhaps, in “Mother and Poet”). Although she had long been aware of the peculiar challenges faced by women writers, her frustrations here would become an intellectual flashpoint in the poetics of her later career.

At this point in her career, however, for Barrett it became clear that this conflict was very deeply rooted in gender. In another letter to Mitford, four days after the above, she wrote, “Is it not hard to have a power & see a duty, & yet find it impossible to apply one to another? A man would act—a woman . . . .!” Then, after venting, once again, her frustration against her family, she added, “The secret of the bearing of men towards women, let it be ever so much ‘made up of adorations’ & the like, is just . . contemp.”

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67 Ibid., 10:65-66. Dorothy Mermin is the only biographer of Barrett Browning who discusses this minor crisis, which she brilliantly connects not only to the legend of Lady Godiva, which Barrett references repeatedly in the letters of this period, but to Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” which she wrote for the Anti-Slavery Bazaar in 1847. As Mermin puts it, “She no longer had reason to avoid vexing her father, having irreparably done so already [by marrying], and it pleased her to think her poem too ferocious for the Americans to print.” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*, 156-57.) Although Angela Leighton ignores it in her biography of Barrett Browning, she does discuss this incident in her chapter on Barrett Browning in *Victorian Women Writers: Writing Against the Heart*. There, Leighton connects this incident to Barrett’s growing awareness of her father’s irrational paternalism and the ways in which it connects to broader social injustices (97).

68 Barrett to Mitford, 15 February 1845, *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 10:77.
This series of letters continues with a discussion of men who treat women writers like children or expect them to be the “angel in the house” that Coventry Patmore had yet to imagine. And it was Barrett’s awareness of this frustration, of her own infantalization by the men in her life, that would be carried into her new life in Italy and given voice by her avatar, Aurora Leigh.

*Aurora Leigh*

*Aurora Leigh* brings together the most important themes in Barrett’s writing: the role of women, the importance of poetry as response to social injustice, and the acknowledgement of the importance of modernity in contemporary poetry. In 1845, Barrett confided to Browning:

> my chief *intention* just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem—a poem as completely modern as “Geraldine’s Courtship,” running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing rooms & the like “where angels fear to tread”;—& so, meeting face to face & without mask, the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly.  

Just over a decade later, this novel-poem was finally a reality, published in 1856 as Barrett Browning’s magnum opus, *Aurora Leigh.*

As, perhaps, the first female *Künstlerroman* that directly deals with the development of the poet(ess), *Aurora Leigh* is the logical culmination of this project. Barrett Browning uses her fictional avatar to create a vision of the ideal fulfillment of poetic ambition in a woman. However, in order to realize this vision, Aurora, like Barrett

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69 Barrett to Browning, 27 February 1845, *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 10:103.
70 The book was published in December of 1856, but was postdated 1857. For accuracy’s sake, I will continue to refer to it as having been published in 1856.
Browning herself, must be transplanted—or translated—to a society potentially less restrictive than that of England. In this resolution, *Aurora Leigh* reverses the conclusion of Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne*, bringing the story full circle by empowering the artistic woman over the meek English girl de Staël’s Lord Nelvil chooses for his wife.

*Aurora Leigh* is, as Cora Kaplan argued in the introduction to her 1978 reprint of the poem, a mosaic of references and allusions to other works of its day.\(^7\) Marjorie Stone further explicates some of these connections, emphasizing Barrett Browning’s use of Victorian “sage” discourse in the construction of her visionary poetess,\(^7\) and in particular the ways in which *Aurora Leigh* responds to *The Princess*.\(^7\) In their careful analysis of *Aurora Leigh*’s engagement with contemporary and earlier texts, however, most critics have tended to overlook Barrett Browning’s debt to and association with feminine poetics as they were formulated by Hemans and Landon in their respective projects.\(^7\) As a contemporary, woman-centered epic poem, *Aurora Leigh* subtly elaborates on Felicia Hemans’s project of giving voice to feminine experience, while Aurora’s own determination to live and love triumphantly without being consumed by either her


\(^7\) *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 134-88.

\(^7\) See, for example, Beverly Taylor, “‘School-Miss Alfred’ and ‘Materfamilias’: Female Sexuality and Poetic Voice in *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*,” and Marjorie Stone, “Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*."

\(^7\) Linda H. Peterson is one of the few critics to directly address Barrett Browning’s repeated allusions to Letitia Landon throughout *Aurora Leigh*, though she focuses on Barrett Browning’s use of Landon’s *A History of the Lyre* (1829). Peterson argues that “Barrett Browning . . . corrects Landon’s opening passage—and, more broadly, the preface to and plot of *A History of the Lyre*—by taking (auto)biographical forms identified with the Romantic poetess and reconfiguring them to serve the development of the Victorian woman poet. In these corrections, she revises the constructions of the poetess as they appeared in Landon’s works and in a spate of biographies about Landon published in the two decades before *Aurora Leigh.*” (“Rewriting *A History of the Lyre*: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the (Re)Construction of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet,” in *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain [Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999]: 116.) To my knowledge, no one has clearly identified the subtler debts of *Aurora Leigh* to Hemans’s overall project.
audiences or her art invokes and destabilizes the grim fates of the poetesses imagined in Landon’s poetry.

Aurora Leigh herself is a hybrid of the women, real and fictional, who come before her. She is named for George Sand (Amandine Lucile Aurore Dupin Dudevant), and certain aspects of Aurora’s history recall Sand, both to Barrett Browning’s contemporary reviewers and to modern critics. Her lineage and upbringing (half-English, half-Italian, and raised by conventional relatives in England) recall that of de Staël’s Corinne. Her earlier career is based on that of Letitia Landon, and her narrative voice clearly echoes that of Jane Eyre, whose fictional “autobiography” is the nearest precursor to Barrett Browning’s text. Finally, Aurora’s flight to and then triumph in Italy references not only Barrett Browning’s own life, but the popular conception of Italy as a place of relative freedom from English social and cultural constraint; the novel’s autobiographical elements cannot be ignored, but they are, perhaps, less important than they may appear to be upon first reading. In other words, Aurora Leigh should not be

75 W. E. Aytoun, who reviewed Aurora Leigh for Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, said of Aurora that “she is made to resemble too closely some of the female portraits of George Sand” (“Mrs. Barrett Browning—Aurora Leigh,” Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine 81 [January 1857]: 33), while Stone in Elizabeth Barrett Browning (42), among many others, points out the use of Sand’s name.

76 In a letter to Anna Jameson, Barrett Browning denied any deliberate borrowings from Brontë’s text, implying that she could not properly remember the circumstances of Rochester’s disfigurement in Jane Eyre: “I can’t leave this subject without noticing . . . what you say of the likeness to the catastrophe of ‘Jane Eyre.’ I have sent to the library here for ‘Jane Eyre’ (but haven’t got it yet) in order to refresh my memory on this point; but, as far as I do recall the facts, the hero was monstrously disfigured and blinded in a fire the particulars of which escape me, and the circumstance of his being hideously scarred is the thing impressed chiefly on the reader’s mind; certainly it remains innermost in mine. Now if you read over again those pages of my poem, you will find that the only injury received by Romney in the fire was from a blow and from the emotion produced by the circumstances of the fire.” (Barrett Browning to Jameson, 26 December 1856, in The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ed. Frederic G. Kenyon [London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1898], 2:245-46.) However, the similarities between the texts, including the fires, the blinding of Rochester and Romney, and even the often-unreliable narrator (see Lisa Sternlieb, “Jane Eyre: Hazarding Confidences,” Chapter 1 in The Female Narrator in the British Novel [New York: Palgrave, 2002], for a discussion of Jane Eyre’s status as an unreliable narrator) all indicate that, even if Barrett Browning was not deliberately incorporating parts of Brontë’s text into her own, she was clearly influenced, consciously or not, by Jane Eyre.
read as Barrett Browning’s own story, but rather an attempt to universalize feminine poetic experience, which includes the experiences of the text’s author.

*Aurora Leigh*’s engagement with and revision of earlier women’s texts are complicated by the ways in which it also functions as a direct response to Tennyson’s *The Princess*. Like *The Princess*, *Aurora Leigh* concerns itself with the effect of gender roles on social institutions and expectations. Both texts are also radical experiments in genre, and their unstable genre identifications serve to highlight the instability of gender relations within the narratives. However, while Tennyson ends with a clear reestablishment of hegemonic gender norms poorly veiled under his gesture towards androgyny, the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh* gestures towards an alternative family structure in its ostensibly heteronormative conclusion.

The extent to which *Aurora Leigh* can be read as a “feminist” text forms a crucial part of the modern dialogue surrounding the text. Whether or not it fits modern conceptions of the term, however, *Aurora Leigh* is clearly a text deeply engaged with issues of gender and social justice, both of which are ultimately inextricable from the poetic theory that the poem both articulates and embodies. Even as her poetic development depends upon resolving her sense of displacement (a woman writer in a masculine literary market, an Italian child in England, a stringently moral woman in a hypocritical society), Aurora’s moral/emotional development requires a reconciliation of her intellectual ideals and the reality of her social and ethical position. This is effected, first, through Aurora’s gradual acceptance of her own femininity, which she comes to recognize is not irreconcilable with her poetic ambitions, and, second, through her removal to the idealized Italian countryside, where she not only is reunited with her
cousin and would-be lover, Romney Leigh, but is able to envision a “New Jerusalem” wherein poetry will play a crucial role in effecting social change. Ultimately, Aurora’s artistic journey enables her not to become a poet in the masculine mode, but more truly a poetess, capable of uniting the feminine with the masculine, and thus able to sustain a relationship of intellectual and spiritual equals.

Barrett Browning’s contemporary setting is a crucial part of not only the story of *Aurora Leigh*, but the poetic/aesthetic theory put forth and defended by its title character.

Book V of *Aurora Leigh* opens with four hundred lines that explicate Aurora’s aesthetic and, more specifically, literary ideals, a discourse through which Aurora apparently ventriloquizes Barrett Browning’s own feelings. These passages, articulating the most radical aesthetic stance in this whole radical text, contend that the poet’s most important role is that of chronicler of his or her own time, a role then belonging to the novelists, as *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* would argue in its review of *Aurora Leigh* in 1857.

Aurora insists that for poets “To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce, / Cry out for togas and the picturesque, / Is fatal,—foolish too” (lines 208-10). She describes the medieval and classical pasts adopted by Hemans, Landon, and Tennyson in their poetry as a kind of betrayal (hence her “distrust”) that can only birth a dead poetry:

I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times,

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77 Radical in its genre, if not always in its politics.
78 Aytoun writes, “It is not the province of the poet to depict things as they are, but so to refine and purify as to purge out the grosser matter. . . . The language is not that of common life, which belongs essentially to the domain of prose” (34).
79 All textual references to *Aurora Leigh*, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Margaret Reynold’s critical edition (*Aurora Leigh* [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992]).
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
To sing—oh, not of lizard or of toad
Alive i’ the ditch there,—’twere excusable,
But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,
Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
As dead as must be, for the greater part,
The poems made on their chivalric bones;
And that’s no wonder: death inherits death. (V.189-99)

Aurora’s rejection of the highborn and chivalric—to the extent where she acknowledges that a poem on a lizard or toad in a castle ditch would be preferable to one about the castle’s inhabitants—aligns her (and, by extension, Barrett Browning) with Wordsworth’s defense of the commonplace in *Lyrical Ballads*. Margaret Reynolds and Rod Edmonds each maintain that this passage is directed at Tennyson, whose medievalist *The Princess* left Barrett Browning thoroughly unimpressed. However, it seems important here to acknowledge that it is not merely a reaction to Tennyson or an attempt to usurp Charlotte Brontë’s position as a female novelist, but also a positive and active defense of the role of a poet as an artist of the ordinary. Unlike Wordsworth, however, with his focus on the simplicity of rural life, Aurora embraces the urban, the middle-class, and the complicated:

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80 In the Norton critical edition based upon her scholarly edition of *Aurora Leigh*, Margaret Reynolds argues that, rather than to *The Princess*, this scene is a response to “The Epic,” the frame poem for “Morte d’Arthur,” in which Tennyson, as he did in *The Princess*, creates a modern setting for the telling of a medieval tale (*Aurora Leigh* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996], V.190n). Edmonds focuses on the relationships portrayed in *The Princess* and on Arthur Hugh Clough’s *The Bothie* as the models of “helpmeet” marriages that *Aurora Leigh* consciously rejects (*Affairs of the Hearth* [London: Routledge, 1988], 162).
Nay, if there’s room for poets in this world
A little overgrown, (I think there is)
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne’s,—this live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles. (V.200-207)

This defiant declaration of the poetic importance of the contemporary is further expounded in the next stanza, in Aurora’s widely-quoted description of her own era as “The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age” (V.216), urging herself (and, presumably, poets like her) to “Never flinch, / But still, unscrupulously epic, catch / Upon the burning lava of a song” (V.213-15) the age as she describes it.

This determination to embrace contemporary culture is thwarted, however, by Aurora’s equally strong determination to reject the sentimental, the emotional, and the personal in her poetry. Her art is to be an art of abstractions, of intellect. Only when she achieves a sense of balance between the sentimental and intellectual—in other words, only when she balances the feminine and the masculine—is she able to write the contemporary epic.

Aurora’s development as a poetess is haunted by the ghostly presence of various female figures, both literal and symbolic, real and imaginary. The first of these is Aurora’s dead mother, whose loss when Aurora is a child instills in her “a mother-want about the world” (I.40). The opening passages of Aurora Leigh juxtapose Aurora’s
“mother-want” with her artistic gift, thus framing the whole text as a search for and desire to reconcile feminine influence upon the artist. Aurora opens her narrative by stating her intention to write a book for her own purposes, to “write [her] story for [her] better self” (I.3-4). After the first stanza break, however, Aurora immediately begins the ongoing juxtaposition of her creative output with motherhood, positioning herself not as the mother, but as the child, young enough still, she says, to “catch my mother at her post / Beside the nursery door” (I.15-16).

The third stanza break establishes the conflict between artist/child and mother even more firmly. “I write. My mother was a Florentine,” this third section begins. There is no precedent for Aurora’s declaration that she writes. There is no clear reason for this declaration at all, except to contrast it to her memories of her mother. She writes, and resurrects her mother, “whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me / When scarcely I was but four years old” (I.30-31). This resurrection is, perhaps, an attempt to atone for Aurora’s sense of having killed her mother in order to live:

. . . my life,

A poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp

Which went out therefore. She was weak and frail;

She could not bear the joy of giving life,

The mother’s rapture slew her. (I.31-35)

Recent critics have tended to identify in her depiction of Aurora’s mother Barrett Browning’s ambivalence towards her own mother, who gave birth to twelve children in

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81 According to Cora Kaplan, Aurora uses the phrase “I write” “four times in the first two stanzas of Book I.” In this assertion she is mistaken (the first reference is in the third verse paragraph; before that, Aurora uses grammatically different forms of the phrase, including “I . . . have written,” and “[I] will write.” The simple declarative is only used once in the book’s opening verse paragraphs. (Introduction, 10.)
twenty years, as well as her own disastrous experiences of pregnancy.82 This image of motherhood as a kind of ecstatic possession—which is later replicated in Marian Erle’s description of her experience of mothering—also gestures towards Hemans’s “Properzia Rossi,” whose creativity is figured as gestative possession.83 (Properzia Rossi, for instance, feels her power “flowing back” into her, overcoming her as she creates, almost automatically, her sculptured legacy, a kind of silent daughter.)

Aurora resists this ecstatic experience of creativity/motherhood, and tends to view her mother’s posthumous portrait, which arguably represents this experience, with ambivalence born of equal parts fear and fascination. This passage, probably one of the most frequently quoted sections of Aurora Leigh, assigns to her mother all of the various roles later enacted by other women (including or, perhaps, especially Aurora herself) throughout the text:

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
A still Medusa with mild milky brows
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon

82 In a note to the Norton edition of Aurora Leigh, for example, Reynolds claims, “The tensions surrounding EBB’s conceit on labor and childbirth are based as much on her own mixed experience of miscarriage and birth as on her memory of her mother’s long years of childbearing” (I.35n). Four of Barrett Browning’s five pregnancies ended in miscarriage, the last of which, in 1850, was so debilitating that the Brownings were warned against future pregnancy. (See Barrett Browning to Arabella Barrett, [13-15 August 1850], in The Brownings’ Correspondence 16:177.)

83 The importance of the myth of Danae throughout Aurora Leigh underscores this idea. While Aurora figures Zeus’s rape of Danae (he comes to her in a shower of gold and fathers Perseus) as a kind of divine possession, the result of which is creative endeavor, Marian uses this same myth to describe her own violent rape, and the gold coin left behind is her son. We also cannot overlook the Christian story of the Virgin Mary’s conception of Christ via the Holy Spirit as an important allusion here; Marian’s insistence that her son’s father is God (in addition to her entirely unsubtle name) forces us to recognize that Barrett Browning may be revising Christian myth as well as classical.
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords

Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first

Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked

And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;

Or my own mother . . . (I.154-64)

What is often overlooked in critics’ readings of this fascinating passage is Aurora’s explanation of why and how she identifies in this portrait so many different variations of female power. To the portrait, she says, her father’s “melancholy eyes” and her nurse Assunta’s “awe” are constantly drawn, thus “That way went my thoughts / When wandering beyond sight.” However, while her guardians’ morbid obsession with the portrait encourages Aurora’s own fixation upon it, it is, in part, books that spur her various interpretations of her mother’s face:

And as I grew

In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously,

Whatever I last read or heard or dreamed,

Abhorrent, admirable, beautiful

Pathetical, or ghastly, or grotesque,

With still that face . . . which did not therefore change,

But kept the mystic level of all forms

Hates, fears, and admirations . . . (I.146-51)

Aurora’s early education, conducted by her father in the shadow of “that face,” is conducted almost entirely out of books, but her emotional education is summarized in his dying admonition to “Love!” He taught her, she says, “what he had learnt the best /
Before he died and left me,—grief and love” (I.185-86). This early training, however, is subsumed by her subsequent experiences, and it is not love (a feminine emotion) that Aurora learns, but rather femininity presented through masculine systems.

Aurora’s prim English aunt, who raises her after the death of her father, represents the culture of codified feminine behavior embodied in conduct guides and discourses of female education. Under her aunt’s tutelage, Aurora absorbs the “accomplishments” expected of young English women—a little education, and a great deal more dancing, music, and crafting—while reading “books on womanhood / To prove, if women do not think at all, / They may teach thinking” (I.427-29). These books teach women’s “Potential faculty in everything / Of abdicating power in it,” and Aurora, in speaking of this, demonstrates how she has perfected the art of the barbed aside, a more honest version of the double-speak practiced by women like her aunt and, later, Lady Waldemar, whose discourse is dependent upon the manipulative potential of self-serving sacrifice.

While Aurora’s aunt represents the narrow moralism of upper-class English society, Lady Waldemar characterizes its hypocritical sexual double standards. Each of these two women offers a model of acceptable upper-class English femininity, and each serves to underscore Aurora’s conscious rejection of that femininity. However, while Aurora rejects her aunt’s teachings and speaks deprecatingly of her “kindness” to her orphaned niece, she nevertheless appears to present her aunt judiciously, apparently making allowances for her limited worldview. To Lady Waldemar, Aurora is less kind, and although Aurora’s vitriol towards this figure can mask their similarities, it is nevertheless crucial to recognize the ways in which Lady Waldemar functions as Aurora’s dark double throughout the text.
As the fixed star at the center of the constellation of characters that is the novel, Aurora is mostly closely orbited by two oppositional figures, each of whom also serves as a double to Aurora herself. The complicated triangle of doubling and reflection set up between Lady Waldemar and Aurora, Aurora and Marian Erle, and Lady Waldemar and Marian allows them to enact in their own lives the roles Aurora assigned to her mother’s portrait, and thereby helping Aurora to continue her ongoing education in the kinds of femininity available to her. Lady Waldemar is the Lamia, the Medusa, and the fiend; Aurora is the Muse (or so Lady Waldemar deems her), the witch, the fairy, and Psyche who has lost sight of Love; Marian, then, is the ghost, the angel, our Lady of the Passion, and the sprite—each embodying and enacting the roles Aurora imagined for women in the face of her dead mother.

Even as Aurora’s mother’s face never changes as the roles shift in her mind, however, none of these roles is fixed upon any of these women. If they are doubled, they are therefore occasionally the same—Aurora and Lady Waldemar both, for instance, love Romney Leigh (romantically, that is, while Marian loves him with a kind of ecstatic

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84 See, for example, Book VII, lines 146-47, “To buy your [i.e., Romney’s] life is nearly impossible, / Being sold away to Lamia,” and lines 170-74, “No, Lamia! shut the shutters, bar the doors / From every glimmer on thy serpent-skin!”

85 See Book V, lines 613-19, “She’s very pretty, Lady Waldemar. / Her maid must use both hands to twist that coil / Of tresses, then be careful lest the rich / Bronze rounds should slip: —she missed, though, a grey hair. / A single one, —I saw it; otherwise / The woman looked immortal.” (Although there is nothing directly referring to the Medusa in this lines, the “Bronze rounds” evoke images of snake-like coils in Lady Waldemar’s hair, while the references to her immortal beauty are reminiscent of Medusa’s pre-metamorphosis state.

86 As in Book II, lines 85-87, “I have seen you not too much / Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest / To be a woman also,” and Book V, lines 1196-99, “But even a witch to-day / Must melt down golden pieces in the nard / Wherewith to anoint her broomstick ere she rides.”

87 This association is more indirect, but given Aurora’s persistent identification with magic and, in her youth, with the natural world, it seems apt.

88 See Book V, lines 1099-1100: “Alas, / Poor pretty plaintive face, embodied ghost!” Furthermore, since she persists in claiming to be dead, Marian seems to imagine herself as ghostly.

89 Again, like Aurora’s identification with the fairy, this is an indirect rather than direct reference. Either Marian or Aurora could be the fairy or the sprite, but Marian’s nature-spirit upbringing and her disappearance both seem more indicative to me of a “sprite.”
reverence). Both interfere with Marian’s life, thus enacting the same kind of noblesse oblige that defines much of Romney’s philanthropic career. Both are laden with the prejudices that come with their class.

Throughout the text, Marian is established as Aurora’s conscious double—Aurora claims her as “sister” and speaks of her as beloved, even before their reunion in Paris. Marian is the polar opposite of Lady Waldemar—self-sacrificing, noble, and chaste, an idealized peasant figure who might have been borrowed entirely from Wordsworth or Hemans. Marian’s self-education and appreciation of nature is Wordsworthian, but the brutality of her experiences, though articulated in blunt terms that Hemans never attempted, is nevertheless strikingly reminiscent of the experiences Hemans recorded in *Records of Woman*. In Marian, Barrett Browning brings to life both what she admired and what she detested in Hemans’s poetry.

Marian’s narrative is twice recorded by Aurora; her life story fills some five hundred lines across Books III and IV, while her broken retelling of her betrayal, rape, and recovery takes another five hundred at the end of Book VI and the beginning of Book VII. These thousand lines devoted to Marian’s voice or Marian’s story establish her as a kind of secondary poetess, whose sentimental narratives provide a moral pedagogy for the larger story. Her pseudo-Wordsworthian childhood (far less idealized than any Wordsworth would have imagined, with her abusive, drunken father and her mother’s attempt to sell her into sexual slavery) ought, perhaps, to have made Marian into the heroine of this narrative. Instead, she functions as the shadow protagonist, the passionate,
saintly woman whose story enables the heroine to achieve greater levels of compassion and self-awareness.\textsuperscript{90}

Before Aurora can be made to understand—or even permitted to hear—Marian’s narrative, she must relinquish her preconceived notions of female purity and guilt. At this moment, Aurora, having left England, with its strict rules of social conduct for women’s thoughts and behaviors, abandons the training instilled in her by her aunt and by the books she has read, and takes steps towards recognizing feminine experience. For Aurora, Marian becomes a holy figure, literally “Marian,” both in her insistence that her son has “no father but God,” and in Aurora’s desire to “find a niche / And set thee [Marian] there . . . the child and thee / And burn the lights of love before thy face” (VII.126-8). This determination to transmute Marian from a living, breathing woman into a religious icon echoes the translation of fictional poetesses into \textit{objets d’art} in the works of Barrett Browning’s predecessors. Just as Hemans’s Properzia Rossi and Landon’s Improvisatrice are ultimately represented only by their creations, and just as the Lady of Shalott becomes nothing more than a visual curiosity, so, here, Marian becomes beauty and inspiration incarnate—a Muse, rather than a poetess herself.

In Marian, Aurora identifies both feminine self-sacrifice and the strength embodied in that sacrifice. While, in her mother’s case, the “mother’s rapture slew her,” Marian is restored to life by motherhood, and her complete absorption in her son becomes a new martyrdom, one Marian enters into with joy. Thus, with this figure, the first woman Aurora encounters who can take her victimization at the hands of the

\textsuperscript{90} Unfortunately, Barrett Browning’s use of a working-class character, and a victim of human trafficking at that, as a foil for and illustration of Aurora’s privilege is problematic at best, and Marian’s apotheosis into a quasi-medieval version of the Angel in the House exacerbates, rather than assuages, this potentially exploitative adoption of disenfranchised women.
patriarchal social structures and turn it into strength, Aurora herself is able to reexamine her notions of art, love, and sacrifice.

Throughout the text, Aurora’s gradual turn to full engagement with literary femininity is represented by her shift from a more stereotypically masculine textuality (represented by her father’s books and her male competitors) to a feminine orality. Aurora consistently seeks ways to work as a woman within the masculine textual system—her confrontation with Romney over her “ladies’ Greek” is just one instance of her attempt to find a space for feminine writing within masculine systems. Her repeated return to Marian’s story, especially following the sale of her father’s books in Book V, highlights her increasing acceptance of her feminine voice. However, in order to fully come to terms with herself as a visionary poetess, Aurora must first perform the various roles of those poets and poetesses who come before her.

In Book II, on her twentieth birthday, Aurora reenacts Corinne’s coronation in the Capitol91—but while Corinne’s triumph draws Lord Nelvil to her, Aurora’s playful self-crowning with a wreath of ivy is interrupted by an amused Romney, who proceeds, first, to condescend to her—“chances are that, being a woman, young, / And pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes, / You write as well . . and ill . . upon the whole / As other women” (lines 144-47)—and then, to propose marriage. Aurora’s inevitable refusal of Romney, who, with rhetoric strongly reminiscent of that of Jane Eyre’s cousin/suitor St. John Rivers, urges her to give up writing and bury herself in his plans for social reform, also demands that she defend not only her poetic calling, but the social role of poetry:

    Ah, your Fouriers failed,

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91 This scene in de Staël’s Corinne is later reimagined by Hemans in “Corinne at the Capitol” and by Landon in both “Erinna” and The Improvisatrice.
Because not poets enough to understand
That life develops from within.—For me,
Perhaps I am not worthy, as you say,
Of work like this: perhaps a woman’s soul
Aspires, and not creates: yet we aspire,
And yet I’ll try out your perhapses, sir,
And if I fail . . why, burn me up my straw
Like other false works—I’ll not ask for grace;
Your scorn is better, cousin Romney. I
Who love my art, would never wish it lower
To suit my stature. I may love my art.
You’ll grant that even a woman may love art,
Seeing that to waste true love on anything
Is womanly, past question. (I.483-97)

This diatribe—the last word in the debate between Aurora and Romney—is laden with irony on Aurora’s part, particularly in its closing lines, where Aurora flings Romney’s own accusations (that women love only individuals, and not masses of society) back in his face. There is also a subtle implication that Romney himself is “womanly”; several stanzas earlier, Aurora argues that Romney has “a wife already whom you love, / Your social theory” (I.408-9). If women “waste true love on anything,” then Romney, too, is feminine here—foreshadowing the poem’s conclusion, when the broken Romney returns, humbled, to Aurora.
Following the death of her aunt and her meager inheritance of £300 (Aurora having rejected Romney’s attempt to bestow upon her £30,000), Aurora takes up lodgings in London and writes. Although Aurora manages to preserve a “respectable” reputation, her early career is very obviously borrowed in part from Letitia Landon’s:

I did some excellent things indifferently,

Some bad things excellently. Both were praised,

The latter loudest. And by such a time

That I myself had set them down as sins

Scarce worth the price of sackcloth, week by week

Arrived some letter through the sedulous post,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

With pretty maiden seals, —initials twined

Of lilies, or a heart marked Emily

(Convicting Emily of being all heart);

Or rarer tokens from young bachelors,

Who wrote from college . . . (III.205-16)

Aurora’s popularity among the young and her praise in the press is, for her and for her author, further evidence of her failure to create the great art she believes herself capable of. She experiments in genre; Book V lists her critics’ responses to her various experiments, which clearly draw upon Barrett Browning’s own. Aurora writes descriptive poetry, a failed pastoral, and successful ballads, but it is the epic that draws her.

However, in Book V, Aurora still refuses to embrace the personal and the experiential in her poetry. She vows, “This vile woman’s way / Of trailing garments,
shall not trip me up: / I'll have no traffic with the personal thought / In art’s pure temple” (V.59-62). And yet it is her refusal to engage with the personal that prevents her success. Her pastoral failed because “it was a book / Of surface-pictures—pretty, cold, and false” (V.130-31), and only when she publishes her long narrative poem, a record of her personal experiences and a reflection of this “double-breasted Age” is she recognized as a true poet(ess) by critical and popular audiences.

Even with her success, however, and even following her reunion with Marian, Aurora has not fully matured as an artist or a woman, and thus has not reached her ultimate status as the visionary poetess. As a rebirth of the sentimental poetess, Aurora must create an art of emotion, and when she has returned to Italy, Aurora is confronted with the reality of her own loneliness and distance from humanity. In two key scenes, a confrontation, first, with God and, then, with Romney, Aurora (assisted by Marian) is able to transcend her narrow conceptions of femininity and artistry in order to attain fulfillment as an artist, a woman, and poetess.

In the first scene, which takes place near the end of Book VII, Aurora finds herself in church, where she “knelt, / And dropped my head upon the pavement too / And prayed” that God would ignore her prayers and listen only to “the run and beat / Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood— / And then / I lay, and spoke not: but He heard in heaven” (VII.1270-72). Joyce Zonana argues convincingly that this scene represents Aurora’s acceptance of an internal source of inspiration, rather than the divine source, which she consistently imagines as Jove in his rapacious forms (impregnating Danae through a shower of gold, and, in Aurora’s rather confused misremembering of Greek
myth, Io as a gadfly\textsuperscript{92}). However, Zonana fails to explain why, if this moment represents Aurora’s moment of acceptance, Book VII ends with her confession that she is neither reading nor writing. Book VII ends with Aurora at her lowest ebb—not at her moment of triumph.\textsuperscript{93}

The second necessary confrontation briefly frames Aurora as a Sapphic figure, poised for her final leap from the Leucadian cliffs. Watching a sunset in lonely solitude, Marian having taken her child in to bed, Aurora imagines Florence “As some drowned city in some enchanted sea, / . . . drawing you who gaze, / With passionate desire, to leap and plunge / And find a sea-king with a voice of waves” (VIII.38-41). At the close of this dream-like stanza, Aurora sighs, “Methinks I have plunged, I see it all so clear . . . / And, O my heart, . . . the sea-king!” (VIII.59-60).

The stanza break that follows—in the middle of the line—creates a gasping caesura, a moment of suspended breath until Aurora speaks again, “In my ears / The sound of waters. There he stood, my king!” (VIII.60-61). Romney, of course, has arrived. In the ensuing conversation/confrontation, it becomes clear that Romney has not married Lady Waldemar, as Aurora had feared, but has instead journeyed to Italy determined to find Marian and marry her. Marian, of course, rejects him a second time, determined that her son will have no father but God, and thus once again reaffirming the appropriateness of her name.

With Marian having rejected Romney, he and Aurora are finally joined, each having been long in love with the other. It has been suggested that the conclusion requires Aurora to figuratively abandon her fellow woman in favor of Romney, rejecting Marian.

\textsuperscript{92} In the actual story, Juno sends the gadfly to punish Io for Jove’s adultery.
in order to establish a heteronormative household. In this reading, Marian becomes a kind of signifier for Aurora’s art; in her acceptance of Romney, Aurora cries, “Art is much, but Love is more,” which has been read as a rejection of the former in favor of the latter. Yet even as Romney and Aurora consummate (spiritually, emotionally, and almost certainly physically) their union under the stars he can no longer see, Marian’s presence lingers unseen in the house. Given her adoration of Romney and her devotion to Aurora, who claims her as a sister, it seems likely that Marian will continue to live under their roof, thus creating a platonic ménage-a-trois that foreshadows Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1861), wherein another Marian is the platonic partner in a similar household.⁹⁴ Given the ethic of community and self-sacrifice that is central to the last books of *Aurora Leigh*, a typically heteronormative conclusion, in which Marian and her fatherless son are cast out of Aurora and Romney’s home, would be unthinkable.

Aurora’s declaration that “Art is much, but Love is more” marks her acceptance of emotion, sentimentality, and, thus, femininity. It allows her to balance the intellectual abstract that she imagined for her career with the emotional truths that she has discovered through her process of poetic development. Confronted with Romney’s blindness and his confession of his total failure, she, like Tennyson’s Ida before her, comes down from her figurative palace to meet the feminized “sea-king” on his own ground. However, even as Aurora humbles herself to reach Romney, so Romney must be humbled to be worthy of Aurora.

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⁹⁴ Of course, in Collins’s novel, it is the fragile and damaged Laura who is the mother and lover, while the passionate, intellectual Marian is the spinster/virgin sister. Moreover, if Barrett Browning is deliberately recreating the ending of *Jane Eyre*, then it is possible that Marian will fill the role of Adèle, who is (essentially) cast out to make room for the new family of Jane, Rochester, and their son.
Though this has been seen as a reworking of the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, Barrett Browning’s ending owes more to Tennyson than it does to Brontë. Rochester must be humbled to be worthy of Jane, while Jane must be elevated, in turn, to meet him as an equal. In *The Princess*, Ida, too, must be humbled, but no significant changes are demanded of the Prince. Only Barrett Browning, in her vision of equality, requires both partners to reevaluate and ultimately reject their cold-hearted theories in favor of a new, more honestly emotional social project. In short, neither Romney nor Aurora must be placed in the subservient position; both must embrace their femininity in order to meet each other on equal ground.

It is as equals, then, that the poetess and the social reformer face the new dawn (a literal aurora) and envision the New Jerusalem that they will found together. The conclusion of *Aurora Leigh*, with its apocalyptic visions of social justice, transforms the role of the poetess. She is not just the chronicler of women’s experience, nor simply the arbiter of emotion, but the instrument through which social change can be imagined and effected. The Muse becomes the Sibyl.

Though it was an immediate popular success, with the first edition selling out in two weeks, *Aurora Leigh* was not universally acclaimed by the critics. Conservative reviewers were troubled by its gender politics; liberals were unable to accept its

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95 Note that Romney’s journey begins where the Prince’s ends. In his proposal to Aurora in Book II, Romney says, “Life means, be sure, / Both heart and head, – both active, both complete, / And both in earnest. Men and women make / The world, as head and heart make human life” (lines 130-33). Compare this to the Prince’s speech in Book V of *The Princess*: “And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time, / Sit side by side, full-summed in all their powers, / Dispensing harvest, sowing the To-be, / . . . / Then springs the crowning race of humankind” (lines 271-80).

96 “You will like to hear that in a fortnight after publication Chapman had to go to press with the second edition.” (Barrett Browning to Anna Jameson, 26 December 1856, in *Letters of Mrs. Browning*, 2:245.)

97 The *Blackwood’s* review, for example, reads, “we must maintain that woman was created to be dependent on the man, and not in the primary sense his lady and his mistress. The extreme independence of
experimentation with genre. Henry Fothergill Chorley, for example, writes in the *Athenaeum* that “we regret to declare that Mrs. Browning’s longest and most matured effort, jeweled though it be with rich thought and rare fancies, is in its argument unnatural, and in its form infelicitous.”\(^9^8\) Then, as now, there was no category for Barrett Browning’s “novel in verse,” and its readers were frustrated by Barrett Browning’s attempt to combine the strengths of both genres without falling prey to their weaknesses.\(^9^9\)

Both Chorley and George Eliot, writing for the *Westminster Review*, argued for the importance of Barrett Browning’s femininity in the creation of her poem. “Mrs. Browning has shown herself all the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess,” ends the first paragraph of Eliot’s notice.\(^1^0^0\) Chorley insists that “to overlook [Barrett Browning’s sex] is rendered impossible by the poetess herself,” and adds that “Mrs. Browning is never unwomanly in her passionate pleadings for woman: unwomanly she could not be.”\(^1^0^1\) However, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (unsurprisingly) adopted a rather different tone, accusing Barrett Browning’s heroine of being unfeminine and suggesting that Barrett Browning herself is, too.\(^1^0^2\) In short, *Aurora Leigh*’s critical

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\(^{99}\) Even Virginia Woolf, herself a great experimenter in the novel form, could not reconcile herself to this experiment. She complains that the blank verse stilt the novel:

> Following the lilt of her rhythm rather than the emotions of her characters, Mrs. Browning is swept on into generalization and declamation. Forced by the nature of her medium she ignores the slighter, the subtler, the more hidden shades of emotion, by which a novelist builds up, touch by touch, a character in prose. . . . The poem becomes one long soliloquy, and the only character that is known to us, and the only story that is told us, are the character and story of Aurora Leigh herself. (“Aurora Leigh,” 688.)


\(^{101}\) “Aurora Leigh,” 1425.

\(^{102}\) To *Blackwood’s* “Aurora Leigh is not an attractive character. . . . She is not a genuine woman; one half of her heart seems bounding with the beat of humanity, while the other half is ossified. What we miss in her is instinctiveness, which is the greatest charm of women.” The reviewer goes on to suggest that
reception threatened to reinscribe many of the very attitudes that the book itself rejected, but discerning readers were able to see and appreciate the novel’s engagement with and promotion of new ideals of gendered poetics.

Thus, it was not the critical reception but the popular one that established the importance of *Aurora Leigh* and its author. Barrett Browning was astonished at the positive reception she received overall, having expected a different attitude entirely from her audiences. In the United States, where, Barrett Browning told Anna Jameson, “the publisher is said to have shed tears over the proofs,” *Aurora Leigh* entered into national history, as Susan B. Anthony carried a copy with her as she criss-crossed the nation in support of women’s suffrage. By the end of the century, *Aurora Leigh* had been reprinted some twenty times on each side of the Atlantic, and it even survived the early part of the twentieth century, with no less biased a critic than Virginia Woolf declaring it, “with all its imperfections a book that still lives and can be read. . . . We laugh, and we protest, and we find a thousand absurdities it may be, but we read to the end enthralled.” Although Woolf concluded her essay mourning the fact that there was no “novel-poem of the age of George the Fifth,” she might better have mourned for the

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Barrett Browning would be a better poetess were she less of an intellectual: “Whenever she deserts her theories, and touches a natural chord, we acknowledge her as a mistress of song,” a dubious compliment at best. ("Aurora Leigh," 32-33, 39.)

103 Barrett Browning wrote to Anna Jameson of the book’s popular reception, “I confess to you that I am entirely astonished at the amount of reception I have met with—I who expected to be put in the stocks and pelted with the eggs of the last twenty years’ ‘singing birds’ as a disorderly woman and freethinking poet! People have been so kind that, in the first place, I really come to modify my opinions somewhat upon their conventionality, to see the progress made in freedom of thought. Think of decent women taking the part of the book in a sort of effervescence which I hear of with astonishment.” (Barrett Browning to Jameson, 2 February 1857, in *Letters of Mrs. Browning*, 2:252.)

104 Ibid., 2:253. Barrett Browning expands, slyly, to her mention of the publisher’s tears, “(perhaps in reference to the hundred pounds he had to pay for them).”

105 According to Margaret Reynolds, Anthony presented her edition to the Library of Congress in 1902, and inscribed it, “With the hope that Women may more & more be like ‘Aurora Leigh’” (Preface to *Aurora Leigh*, viii).

106 “Aurora Leigh,” 689-90.
novel-poem of the age of Victoria, for by the mid-twentieth century, *Aurora Leigh* had all but disappeared, and its author had faded into the caricature imagined by her many mythologizers.\(^{107}\)

**Posthumous Career/Conclusion**

Barrett Browning’s reputation did not long survive her. In T. H. Ward’s *English Poets* (1883), William T. Arnold closes his short critical biography of her by concluding that, “She has added a charm to motherhood only less than that added by Raffaello *sic* himself, and the pleasant fate will be hers of being faithfully read by many a generation of young lovers.”\(^{108}\) How kind (as *Aurora Leigh* might say). Similarly, Edmund Gosse declared that Barrett Browning’s “success, it must be admitted, grows every day more dubious. Where she strove to be passionate she was often hysterical; a sort of scream spoils the effects of all her full tirades.” He goes on to argue that “she remains readable mainly where she is exquisite, and one small volume would suffice to contain her probable bequest to posterity.”\(^{109}\)

These later rejections notwithstanding, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s influence remained crucial throughout the nineteenth century. She successfully adapted the more conventionally Romantic mode of Hemans’s and Landon’s poetesses through her critical engagement with modern social issues, and, more successfully than Tennyson before her, managed to integrate feminine poetics with a “masculine” devotion to social progress and idealism. Rather than focusing merely on the “wrongs of woman,” Barrett Browning

\(^{107}\) See Reynolds, Preface to *Aurora Leigh*, ix.


confronted those wrongs through the figure of the poetess in order to inspire a movement towards social justice. This transformation of the poetess into a more visibly active and socially engaged figure who nevertheless maintained many of the typical structures of normalized femininity provided a crucial framework for the women writers who were to come.
EPILOGUE

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
‘Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy . . .’

—Christina Rossetti, “Goblin Market” (1862)

Hence we may learn, you poets, that of all
We should be most content. The earth is given
To us: we reign by virtue of a sense
Which lets us hear the rhythm of that old verse,
The ring of that old tune whereto she spins.
Humanity is given to us: we reign
By virtue of us a sense, which lets us in
To know its troubles ere they have been told,
And take them home and lull them into rest
With mournfullest music.”

—Jean Ingelow, “Gladys and Her Island” (1874)

In 1850, a young woman of nineteen, the youngest daughter of a literary family and herself already a published poet, composed a short didactic story about a tortured young poetess who, like so many of her kind, dies young, unable to reconcile her talents with her faith and her perceived feminine duties. Despite its timeliness, particularly given the publication of Aurora Leigh six years later, this story remained unpublished for nearly four decades, and was only brought forth after the death of its author.

That author, of course, was Christina Rossetti, and the story her earliest extant work of fiction, “Maude.” Published by William Michael Rossetti after his sister’s death, “Maude” illustrates Rossetti’s early fascination with the figure of the poetess, as well as the seeds of Rossetti’s own life-long struggle with faith and ambition. Maude, already a passionate writer of “verses” by age fifteen, is a curious, inconsistent figure, driven by equal parts ambition and self-loathing. Her last request is that her beloved, angelic cousin Agnes “destroy what [verses] I evidently never intended to be seen.” The narrative
perspective shifts to Agnes in the final pages of the story, and she buries with Maude the latter’s locked commonplace book, “with all its words of folly, sin, vanity; and, [Agnes] humbly trusted, of true penitence also.”

As these passages indicate, although she was born too late to be a sentimental poetess, Rossetti was nevertheless one of the most important inheritors of the tradition. “Maude” represents two important lines of inheritance for the sentimental poetess. First, the story gestures towards the later, often-comic prose visions of the poetess I mentioned in my introduction. Despite her physical fragility, Maude does not die the expected death of the teenaged poetess. No mysterious wasting diseases for Rossetti’s heroine! Instead, she dies (slowly, of course) from injuries sustained in an unfortunate carriage accident, and though it is a quiet, sentimental, ideal death (indeed, curiously quiet for the passionate, witty Maude), the bizarre method by which Rossetti brings her heroine to her end points toward a rejection of the trappings of the poetess tradition.

Second, “Maude,” in its presentation of the conflicted, ultimately doomed girl of talent who is tempted by fame and restrained by faith, gestures toward the continuing anxieties that surround women’s writing for the public. Ten years later, in her most famous poem, “Goblin Market,” Rossetti’s complicated, anxious desire for and resistance to poetic success and/or fame is allegorized through the metaphor of the otherworldly fruit, and it is the sister who samples that forbidden fruit who is doomed to repeat the fate of Maude (and of “poor L.E.L.”). And yet, that Rossetti enables her heroine, Lizzie, to be bathed in, and yet uncorrupted by, that same goblin fruit indicates that the intervening years have enabled Rossetti to imagine a female poet who does not have to wholly reject the world in order to reach the divine.

What changed in those intervening ten years? The poetess found a place in the world—a place outside of the metaphorical enclosure of the bower or the pages of the annual. As the sentimental poetess came to be seen as overly refined or voluptuous—images fueled by her associations with the opulent annuals, with middle-class drawing rooms, and with Tennysonian palaces of art—the literature of the period that marks the end of her reign became more and more infused with a kind of Utilitarian sensibility that demanded greater usefulness for women as a whole. What haunts Maude, and what seems to haunt her creator, is not simply her sense of her own sinful vanity, but also her lack of usefulness. Laura, in “Goblin Market,” loses pleasure in her busy, industrious life once she tastes the goblin fruit. Poetry, clearly, must be made useful—and Lizzie’s salvation of her sister represents one way in which this could be achieved.

Rossetti and the poets of her generation—women such as Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Bessie Rayner Parkes, to name just a few of those born in the 1820s and 1830s—struggled with many of the same concerns that dominated the careers of their predecessors, including fame, war, and women’s suffering, but, following in the footsteps of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, also directly addressed the wider social concerns of their time (e.g., women’s rights and education, prostitution, and vivisection). What we see in the work of this next generation of women writers, in poems such as those from which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is a lingering commitment to the emotional education of the audience, and yet with a newer attempt (or, perhaps, a resurrection of the first-generation Romantic women poets’ attempt) to direct their social education, as well. Lizzie’s embrace of the deadly goblin fruit—poetic fame—suggests that the way to purify poetry and make it useful is to use it as social
critique, while its writers still embody the moral purity expected of women. Poems like “Goblin Market” and Jean Ingelow’s “Gladys and Her Island,” with their strange, fantastical explorations of women’s engagements with poetry, negotiate a new path between the didactic and the frivolous, the sentimental and the ironic. It is with poems like these that the poets of Rossetti’s generation, led and inspired by the poets who came before them, took up the mantle of social commentator without abandoning the position of moral and emotional guide that had been the role of the sentimental poetess.

The focus on social responsibility adopted by the Victorian heirs to the sentimental poetess in their work is a reflection of the Utilitarian spirit of work that dominated women’s writing in the mid-Victorian period. *Aurora Leigh*’s 1856 publication is bookended by two prose works, Florence Nightingale’s “Cassandra” (1852) and Dinah Maria Mulock’s *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women* (1858), that are deeply invested in promoting an active social role for women. This search for usefulness, however, reflects a more serious Victorian preoccupation: the search for identity.

How, then, can this search for identity, as it is practiced by Rossetti, Ingelow, and other poets of their generation, be traced back to the sentimental poetesses discussed in this project? What is the legacy of Hemans, Landon, Tennyson, and Barrett Browning to Victorian identity formation? Although the influence of these poetesses is too complex to fully trace in a short conclusion, it is in mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity and national identity that their legacies are most evident.

As I said in my introduction, and have attempted to demonstrate throughout this project, the work of a poetess primarily focuses on the lives and experiences of individuals placed in feminine subject positions, the majority of whom are, necessarily,
women. The primacy of women’s experiences in the age of the sentimental poetesses anticipates the centrality of the “Woman Question” to Victorian society. The term “Woman Question” is, of course, a misnomer—it is not one question, but many, and the legacy of the poetess speaks to most of those questions. The particular interventions of Hemans, Landon, Tennyson, and Barrett Browning in these questions are most evident in their insistence upon women’s place in the historical record and in the ways in which their poetry anticipates the increasing medicalization of the female body in Victorian scientific discourses.

Felicia Hemans retrieved from history a record of women’s suffering and strengths, and established herself as the voice of those experiences. Letitia Landon, with her tragic poetics deeply embedded in the eroticized bodies of dying women, helped to entwine genius and hysteria in the fragile bodies of imaginary women. Tennyson, whose poetess career was subsumed into his self-consciously masculine Laureate career, nevertheless carried his Hemansian nostalgia and focus on women’s experiences into the powerful works of his middle career, with glimpses of his poetess self appearing in the woman-voiced poems of *Idylls of the King* and in the heroine of *Maud*. And Barrett Browning, heir to Landon’s poetics and Hemans’s popularity, offered transformative possibilities for the role of women poets and of women’s bodies. If Landon and Tennyson only recognized in women’s bodies a fragility incapable of sustaining genius in a masculine world, Hemans and Barrett Browning saw instead a strength unsurpassed by that of their male heroes. From these two strands emerge Rossetti’s weak-willed Laura and Christ-like Lizzie—the whore and the virgin, the victim and the savior.
In Letitia Landon’s work, there is a subtle conflation of genius and hysteria in the female body that is reimagined in Barrett Browning’s Marian Erle. Both Landon and Barrett Browning connect the sufferings of women and the subjugation of women’s bodies to erotic and poetic ambition (theirs or those of others), although Barrett Browning, unlike her predecessor, can imagine success in the person of Aurora Leigh. In part, this reflects Barrett Browning’s unacknowledged debt to Hemans, who refuses to consign the poetess to a tragic fate without the hope of transformation through memory.

The role of memory in each of these poetesses’ work brings me to the second area of traceable influence of the poetess: the establishment of a Victorian national/imperial identity. National consciousness depends upon the belief in a shared mythology of British (or English) triumph and courage, and the literary community helps to build those myths, as William St. Clair argues in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004). St. Clair, describing the society created by an increasingly literate population whose lives were steeped in the literature of the Romantic period, argues that such a society would be: a culture self-confident and used to success, international in its outlook with a particular fascination with the exotic east, a culture which celebrates and admires war, conquest, patriotic death in battle, and military values generally, a culture which, in the tradition of revived romance, admires honour and respect from equals rather than virtue as such. It would be a culture deeply imbued with what today is called ‘heritage’, inventing imaginary pasts and semi-fictional history, fascinated by ruined castles, suits of armour, stained-glass windows, battles long ago, and medievalism of all kinds. . . . And all this would be superimposed upon an English pastoral/bucolic myth, continuously repeated in the childhood reading
of each successive generation and uninterruptedly repeated during adulthood, . . .
which sees country life as more authentic than town life, and dreams of a
harmonious, social order, in which all groups from the lord to the leech-gatherer
are content with their divinely appointed lot.²

St. Clair, like so many critics before him, downplays the poetess’s influence in creating
the Victorian obsession with its own “heritage”—a particularly egregious mistake, given
his own recording of Hemans’s impressive sales figures and his assertion that these
beliefs depend on “childhood reading.” (Hemans’s relegation to the schoolroom has been
well-established, not only in this project, but by various earlier critics.³)

Tennyson’s adoption of the role of Hemans’s bardic poetess in his own national
tale, *Idylls of the King*, is one example of how Victorian national identity became
intertwined with Romantic conceptions of memory and memorialization. Matthew
Reynolds argues that that *Idylls of the King* (which includes Tennyson’s early “Morte
d’Arthur,” a poem that, as the title suggests, is in part a reflection upon the death of
Arthur Henry Hallam) “suggests the deep relation between grief and nineteenth-century
feelings of nationhood, both dwelling on the past, both longing to discover continuities
between it and the present.”⁴ Reynolds here articulates the fundamental connection in
Victorian society between mourning and nationhood—a connection that, perhaps,
underscores the utter appropriateness of Tennyson, the lifelong mourner, as the Victorian
Laureate.

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³ See, for example, Tricia Lootens, “New Criticism and the New Classroom: Teaching Felicia
University Press, 2001), 249.
While Hemans and Tennyson see nostalgia and grief as the necessary companions to national identity, Landon and Barrett Browning subsume national identity into the question of women’s individual identities. In the poetry of both, memory and identity manifest in physical markers upon the bodies of their characters—in the consumptive tragedy of the Improvisatrice and Eulalia, in Romney Leigh’s hysterical blindness, and in the transformation of Marian Erle’s martyred body into a holy icon. The preoccupation with the role of memory in identity formation in these texts relies upon a personal or individual construction of identity. Aurora’s flight to Italy and Eulalia’s apparent lack of national ties negates national identity, or, rather, promotes national hybridity as the solution to the poetess’s identity crisis.

These various examples of the complex intertwinings of memory, identity, and nationalism suggest the ways in which the work of the sentimental poetesses discussed in this project anticipates and lays the foundation for central themes in Victorian literature. As I hope I have shown throughout this study, the poetess represents one key point of literary continuity between the Romantic and Victorian periods. Rossetti, Ingelow, and their peers, in taking up the mantle of the poetess, implicitly acknowledged the importance of that figure in the formation of Victorian identity.
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