

Felicia Hemans 1793 - 1835

Shortly before her death, Felicia Hemans predicted that 'my poetry, except some half-dozen pieces, may be consigned to oblivion.' It was a strange statement coming as it did from someone already famous and celebrated as one of the most popular poets of her day, and given that her contemporaries included Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Scott. Achieving fame as a poet was a considerable accomplishment, for a 'poetess.' Felicia Hemans was certainly encouraged and respected by her peers and developed personal friendships with both William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott. Lord Byron was so appalled by Hemans' 'Modern Greece' that he wrote to his bookseller instructing him not to send anymore poems by 'Mrs. He-Woman.' However, when Byron read Hemans' 'Restoration,' he relented and pronounced it 'a good poem - very.' One of Hemans' favourite ornaments was a brooch containing a lock of Byron's hair. How Hemans acquired the hair is unknown. Today, Hemans is best remembered for her poem 'Casabianca,' or at least for its arresting first line: 'The boy stood on the burning deck,' but Hemans wrote volumes of poetry, songs, articles, translations, literary criticism and three plays. Hemans was the highest paid contributor to *Blackwood's Magazine*, but she also wrote for the *Edinburgh Magazine* and *New Monthly Magazine* as well. Felicia Hemans attracted an ardent following not only in England and in Wales, where she grew up, but also in Scotland and in America. Hemans celebrated Scottish folklore and nationalism with poems such as 'Dirge of the Highland Chief in "Waverley"', 'The Death of Clanronald' and 'Wallace's Invocation to Bruce,' for which she won a poetry prize. When she died, Hemans was eulogized by William Wordsworth, among others, and songs, poems and biographies were written in her memory. The conduct book, 'Mrs. Hemans' Young Woman's Companion,' went through multiple editions and was still being published with her name in the title years after her death. However, Hemans' prodigious output was not entirely a labour of love. Throughout her adult life, Hemans was plagued by financial worries, illness and depression: 'My spirits are as variable as the lights and shadows... I put myself in mind of an Irish melody, sometimes, with its quick and wild transitions from sadness to gaiety.' Hemans' sister Harriet described her 'fluctuations of spirits; and their fitful gaiety, through which an under current of sadness might always be traced,' which probably accounts for Hemans' rather gloomy prediction of transient fame.

Many of Hemans' poems seem sentimental and conventional, which ensured Hemans' continued popularity throughout the Victorian age, but there is also a poetic tension in Hemans' writing, a questioning of the values the poem or other Hemans' poems appear to endorse. Does 'Casabianca,' for instance, celebrate the boy's loyalty or deplore a misplaced sense of duty that costs the boy his life? Is 'England's Dead' a celebration of the British Empire or a mourning of the human cost of imperialism? Faithfulness to a person or cause is praised and yet questioned throughout Hemans' poetry. Many of Hemans' poems seem patriotic, even jingoistic, but in 'The Battle-Field,' 'Where thousands lay down in their anguish, and died,' the soldiers are 'unwept and forgot!' In 'The Brother's Dirge,' a soldier who has been captured by the enemy and is being held as a slave mourns his sailor brother who has died at sea and the ignorance of their sister at

home who is unaware of the fate of either of her siblings. The poem offers no justification for their sacrifice. Another ambiguous and recurring character is the long suffering wife who has been betrayed or abandoned. In 'The Forest Sanctuary,' the returning husband finds that 'the bride/Of my young days, the wife how loved and tried!' is hopelessly estranged. Although the wife has been faithful, there is no possibility of forgiveness nor reconciliation. Revenge is the theme of many Hemans' poems, such as 'The Guerilla Leader's Vow,' where the speaker has become obsessed with vengeance. Hemans also created surprisingly strong, determined and vindictive women, the woman warrior on a quest. Women in 'The Widow of Crescentius' and 'The Bride of the Greek Isle' find malicious satisfaction in murdering the men who have widowed them. Even more unconventional are Hemans' women scorned in 'The Wife of Asdrubal' and 'Indian Woman's Death-Song' who take revenge on their husbands by murdering their own children and committing suicide. The poems end with the imminent deaths of the women, and the poet passes no judgement on their actions, leaving the reader, in a very post-modern way, to decide for herself, or himself, if the women are heroic or merely horrific.

Felicia Dorothea Browne Hemans was born into a very supportive family, which was fortunate because she would need their support for the rest of her life. Born on September 25, 1793 in Liverpool, Hemans was the fifth of her parents' seven children. Her father, George Browne, was a successful merchant, and her mother, Felicity Wagner Browne, the daughter of the Tuscan Consul at Liverpool. Hemans probably inherited her facility for foreign languages from her mother who personally educated her three daughters at home. The precocious Felicia Browne was fluent in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and, of course, in her native English by the time she was in her teens. She also knew Latin and some German. In her thirties, Hemans would teach herself to become fluent in German. Additionally, the young Miss Browne played the piano and harp and was particularly fond of Welsh and Irish folk music. Her sister was a very talented musician who would later write music to accompany Hemans' verse, but Hemans' favourite pastime at the age of six was to sit in an apple tree and read Shakespeare. Hemans read extraordinarily rapidly and probably had a photographic memory as she entertained her family and friends by reciting long passages of poetry or prose after having read through it only once. In later life, Hemans's sister noted that Hemans often amused herself by reciting aloud from memory, 'repeating to herself whole chapters of the Bible, and page after page of Milton and Wordsworth.'

Before Felicia turned seven years old, her father lost a great deal of money and retired from business. In an effort to economize, the Browne family moved to Gwrych, near Abergele in northern Wales, and the picturesque location could not have been better chosen to inspire a budding poet. The Brownes moved into an old mansion surrounded by the high hills and near the sea, and the precocious Felicia Browne began writing poetry at the age of eight. It was a strange childhood, but Hemans remembered it as being idyllic: 'oh, that I were but the little girl in the top of the apple-tree again.' The Brownes published their daughter's first book of poetry, *Poems*, in 1808 when Hemans was only fifteen. Hemans' early poetry reflects her youth, her love of family and of nature, her spirituality, and her control of poetic form. Impressed by her poetry, and by rumours of what biographer John Correll in 1865 described as her 'extreme beauty,' Percy Shelley

began writing to Felicia Browne, although Mrs. Browne, probably wisely, discouraged the correspondence as being improper. Hemans' second book, published in 1808, was *England and Spain, or, Valour and Patriotism*, a narrative poem inspired by her brothers' military service. In 1809, the family moved from Gwrych to Bronwylfa, near St. Asaph, Wales. George Browne left his family and emigrated to Canada to try his luck in business again, but Browne never regained his fortune and died in Quebec. It was Hemans' first experience of being virtually abandoned, though not her last. Hemans remained close to her mother and to her siblings for the rest of her life, living either with or very near at least one of them.

When Felicia Browne was an impressionable fourteen year old, she met an acquaintance of her brothers, a dashing and handsome older man, Captain Alfred Hemans, a fellow officer who had served with her brothers in the Peninsula War. The young Miss Browne and Captain Hemans became engaged when Felicia was only fifteen or sixteen. Mrs. Browne discouraged the match and persuaded her daughter to wait until she was older, but when Felicia Browne was nineteen, and her ardour unabated, Mrs. Browne relented and the couple married in 1812, shortly after the publication of Felicia Hemans' third book, *Domestic Affections and Other Poems*. The young Mrs. Hemans only left her mother's home for about one year. When Captain Hemans's regiment was disbanded and he was discharged with half pay, Felicia and Alfred Hemans returned to live with Mrs. Browne. Felicia Hemans would remain in her mother's home until Mrs. Browne died in 1826. In 1818, just before the birth of her fifth child, Alfred Hemans left his pregnant wife and four small sons and moved to Italy. Felicia Hemans never saw her feckless husband again. In the first six years of her marriage, Felicia Hemans gave birth to five sons and published three books, *The Restoration of Works of Art in Italy* (1816), *Modern Greece* (1817) and *Translations from Camoens and Other Poets* (1818). It became the pattern for the rest of her life. For the next seventeen years, Mrs. Hemans was a working mother who received no help from her husband.

With five little boys to support and 'such a variety of nursery interruptions,' Hemans wrote under trying conditions, as she confided to her sister: 'When you talk of tranquillity (*sic*) and a quiet home, I stare about in wonder, having almost lost the recollection of such things. A devoted and affectionate mother, Hemans never-the-less needed to be alone in order to work, but, as she wrote at home, solitude was difficult to achieve: 'I have been pursued by the household troops through every room successively, and begin to think of establishing my metier in the cellar,' and Hemans was only partly in jest. Hemans' favourite poem, 'The Forest Sanctuary,' was written in a laundry room, the only room in the house where Hemans could disappear. Weather permitting, Hemans often wrote in a dingle of trees while her sons played around her. Hemans tried her hand at writing magazine articles, translations and songs, almost anything that seemed to promise financial reward. In 1822, Hemans published *Welsh Melodies*, and Hemans was paid 200 guineas for the copyright to her play *The Vespers of Palermo* in 1823. *Vespers of Palermo* was performed at Covent Garden and in Edinburgh, but when *Vespers* received bad reviews, Hemans accepted it philosophically: 'a female who shrinks from such things, has certainly no business to write tragedies.' Hemans produced two additional plays, *The Siege of Valencia* and *De Chantillion*, but both plays failed to sell and Hemans

appears to have given up on writing for the stage. Hemans published *Lays of Many Lands* and *The Forest Sanctuary* in 1825. According to Hemans' sister, 'her poetry... was like the pelican's heart-blood, poured forth... to feed her brood.' Hemans felt that the pressure to earn a living had interfered with her art: '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 effusion.'

After the death of her mother in 1826, Felicia Hemans wrote to her husband proposing a reconcilliation and offering to join him in Rome, but Alfred Hemans refused the proffered olive branch. By this time, Felicia Hemans' health was failing. She suffered from a heart condition and survived a series of debilitating heart attacks. In 1831, Hemans moved to Dublin to be near her brother, now General Browne, Commander of the Forces in Ireland. At the end of her short life, Hemans lost the use of her legs, probably as the result of a stroke, and was confined to her bed or to a sofa. Felicia Hemans died on May 16, 1835, and is buried in St. Ann's churchyard in Dublin. She was 41 years old.

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