

Author



Making Whole the Woman Writer: The Deployment of the Promethean Myth in L.E.L.'s "Felicia Hemans"

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English

Theresa Nguyen became involved in research through several independent study courses with Professor Hugh Roberts. Her work in these courses enhanced her knowledge of Romanticism, and she developed a specific interest in women writers of the Romantic period. For this project, she examined one woman poet's efforts to work out and defend her position as a writer through an elegy on a fellow woman writer, a process Theresa found to be a fascinating one that involved many other fields, allowing her to expand her research into culture and genre. Theresa has recently completed her Master of Philosophy degree in English Studies in Eighteenth Century and Romantic Literature at the University of Cambridge.

Key Terms

- ◆ Elegy
- ◆ Fame
- ◆ Prometheus
- ◆ Sensibility
- ◆ Women Writers of the Romantic Period

Abstract

Through the memorialization of Felicia Browne Hemans in the poem "Felicia Hemans," Letitia Elizabeth Landon works to resolve the double bind that fame presents to women writers. Hemans and Landon, like other women writers of the Romantic period, had to contend with the paradoxical situation of needing celebrity to succeed financially, while that same celebrity also threatened their reputation. Landon employs, ultimately appropriates, and finally renovates the conventions of form and mode, of elegy and of Sensibility, in terms that allow for a positive position of female celebrity. She does this through a reworking of the Promethean figure into a body of Sensibility with which the woman writer can be identified and therefore inserted into a mythic tradition of creators. Hemans is then presented to be fully active and wholly creative—as being both Prometheus and the vulture who tormented him—thus occupying the whole image of creative genius. Finally, by securing eternal fame for Hemans as a literary grandmother, Landon constructs a literary genealogy for women writers in which she can situate herself.

Faculty Mentor



This paper provides an original and suggestive reading of Letitia Landon's elegy on Felicia Hemans—a remarkable instance of one widely read woman poet of the early nineteenth century publicly mourning the death of another. Theresa Nguyen complexly situates the poem within the overlapping contexts of the poets' biographies, the history of women's writing, the history of Sensibility and its reception, and the wider Romantic obsession with the figure of Prometheus. Nguyen's essay reads Landon's poem as attempting to turn the standard tropes of the Eighteenth Century literature of Sensibility on their heads so as to break the woman author out of the prison of purely passive receptivity. This project, entirely of Nguyen's own devising, gave her invaluable experience in literary research and scholarship, which she put to good use at Cambridge University.

Hugh John Roberts

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Introduction

In her posthumously published 1839 elegy, “Felicia Hemans,” Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802–1838), known as L.E.L., transforms the death of the titular poet into an occasion to articulate and resolve the problems faced by women writers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In spite of the prevalence and popularity of women writers during the Romantic period, their position was still problematic. In response to this situation, Landon writes to prove the female’s, as well as her own, creative capabilities. She does this by commemorating and elegizing Felicia Browne Hemans (1793–1835), who, possessing both great talent and widespread fame, is the representative woman writer of the time. Landon connects this enterprise with the construction of a tradition of women writers, which is realized by conceiving of Hemans as a literary grandmother of sorts.¹

Through the person and figure of Hemans, Landon explores the predicament of the woman writer that results from the divisions between the perceived feminine domestic and the masculine public spheres. Working first through the elegiac mode, Landon transforms the male-dominated genre’s notion of competition between the dead and the living into that of a lineage—building a relationship between herself and Hemans to construct a heritage of woman writers. The mode of Sensibility simultaneously pervades and challenges all of her efforts: as a literature that opens up the means of expression to women and yet limits them by the rules of propriety. These problems are worked through and eventually resolved by positioning Hemans within the Promethean myth. By linking Hemans to Prometheus and finally to his tormenter, the vulture, Landon demonstrates how the woman writer actually engages in both female and male poetic creativity. She is at once the grounds and the means of art; she is both the passive teller of effusive poetry and the active creator of dynamic works of genius. Indeed, the woman writer occupies the whole image of the poet.

Fame’s Double Bind

Because of Hemans’ wide-reaching fame and literary success, Landon takes her to be the exemplary woman writer. In the nineteenth century, Hemans was the most widely read woman poet, and following close in popularity was Landon, who rivaled Lord Byron for the position of the

most popular poet between the 1820s and 1830s (Kelly 15, Mellor 1179, and Landon 11). In addition to their shared dominance of the literary scene, Hemans and Landon had lives that were similar in many ways. Both were prodigies who started writing and publishing in their teens. Their literary talent and blossoming careers quickly became the means to support their families in the absence of a male provider: the desertions of both father and later husband for Hemans, and the death of her father for Landon. Hemans and Landon wrote profusely, publishing numerous volumes of poetry in addition to regular contributions to periodicals—in which their poems were often published together—as well as gift books and annuals. Despite their similar lives and shared positions of celebrity, Hemans and Landon neither met nor had much communication. It is only on and after the occasion of Hemans’ death that Landon explicitly writes about Hemans and her work.²

The position of women writers during the Romantic period was made difficult because of paradoxical pressures imposed by society. Writing, publishing, and the resulting fame moved them out of the domestic sphere and into the public, allowing them to trespass into male territory. This did not mean that women could not claim a role on the public literary scene—but by participating in the public sphere, they risked exposure to criticism not only about their works, but also their moral integrity and reputation. They and their honor were highly susceptible to rumors and accusations of impropriety, due to the ease with which the woman who trespassed on the public sphere could be confounded with the “public woman” or prostitute, a risk that was bolstered by participating in the literary marketplace, where literary works circulated as commodities. Thus, fame for the woman writer presented a double bind: she needed celebrity to succeed economically, and yet such publicity threatened her reputation. This situation was intensified for Hemans and Landon because they were both deserted by the men in their lives, and “suffered from the slur of unrespectability which was readily put upon ‘unprotected’ women” (Leighton 51). Although they were wide open to the slander of society, they bore this intense scrutiny in order to write, and thereby support their families and survive. In their responses to publicity and fame, Hemans and Landon greatly differed.

Hemans’ response was a strategic avoidance of the public sphere, limiting her public image to a portrait of a proper lady poet. Early in her literary career, Hemans already worked to contain her personal life in the private sphere and

¹ In her letter to Chorley dated January 7, 1841, Elizabeth Barrett Browning asserts that “I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none.” Referenced in Derek Furr’s “Sentimental Confrontations,” 47n.

² These few pieces were composed after Hemans’ death in 1835: they are the poems “Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans” (1835) and “Felicia Hemans” (1839, composed 1836) and the prose piece “On the Character of Mrs. Hemans’ Writing” (1835).

safeguard it from possible scandal by restricting relationships, both personal and literary, to proper people. She rejected a request from Percy Shelley to engage in correspondence, saving herself from becoming involved in the numerous storms of scandals that constantly surrounded him. She chose instead to write to more socially accepted poets such as William Wordsworth (Wolfson xvii).

In addition to keeping scandal at bay, Hemans was careful to separate her personal life from her public writing. In spite of her status as an unprotected female, Hemans continued to present herself as protected by being connected to a man. Even though she had been deserted by her husband, she always published under her married name of “Mrs. Hemans,” a move that allowed her to “claim new authority for her patriotic yet acceptably feminine work” (Kelly 21). Her continuous “connection” to a man allowed her freer rein in her literary work, and yet Hemans was careful not to intrude too far into the male domain, producing a body of work that was “a primer of the domestic affections, of religious and patriotic piety.” As the respectable Mrs. Hemans, she was taken as “the epitome of the ‘feminine’” (Wolfson xvii).

Hemans’ fastidious self-positioning demonstrates how carefully women writers had to negotiate their incursions into the public sphere. It is telling that Hemans and Landon perhaps never met because Hemans’ cautious management of her position and her celebrity highly contrasted Landon’s open relationship to the public sphere: “Hemans, as a woman, though not always as a poet, played safe and stayed at home; L.E.L. as both woman and poet, openly embraced the public stage of her professional success, and died” (Leighton 57).

Landon wholly entered the public sphere as both woman and woman writer; however, she was unable to negotiate this precarious terrain without injury to her reputation and her personal life. Rampant and malicious rumors of impropriety finally threatened two marriage engagements: Landon broke off her engagement to John Forester, a literary reviewer of the *Examiner* (who later became famous as Charles Dickens’ biographer) because he questioned her reputation. Similarly, George McLean, the governor of an African settlement, almost walked away due to persistent rumors of affairs. However, after reconciling, they married in 1838; soon thereafter Landon died. Ironically, it has recently been discovered that these scandals actually have a factual basis: Landon had a long affair with William Jerdan, the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, that grew out of a very close working relationship (Lawford). The rumors and scandals surround-

ing Landon did not cease with her death. Instead, the mysterious circumstances surrounding it only prompted a flurry of speculations of the ultimate impropriety—suicide. Both Hemans’ and Landon’s situations thus reveal how fraught the position of the woman writer was in the public sphere.

The Prospects and Limitations of Sensibility

In addition to the predicament and the pressures of being in the public sphere, women writers faced further problems according to the mode in which they wrote—particularly those involved in the broader project of Sensibility. The mode of Sensibility is grounded in the physical body, which serves as the means and the surface on which emotion is displayed: “This organic sensitivity is the physiological basis for a sensationist epistemology and a psychology of sympathy” (Van Sant 1). Accordingly, the language and the images of Sensibility center on the system of feeling: the heart, the nerves, the tactile sense, and the tear. Also integral is the notion of “delicacy;” it is this keenness of feeling that enables the body to react in sympathy to scenes of suffering, thereby asserting one’s humanity and creating valuable connections. Emotion gains the important quality of sociability: “The culture of sensibility understands emotions as social energy that moves through persons, speech, objects, places and texts as they are viewed, read, or remembered” (Ellison 85). Thus, the literature of Sensibility seeks to present scenes of suffering to demonstrate the author’s ability both to sympathize and to incite such sympathy from the reader.

Because of the centrality of emotion and the high degree of delicacy involved, the mode of Sensibility is often coded as feminine. Feeling is an ability in which women could claim superiority over men; women, not men, were “delicate” creatures. Thus, “Sensibility was a distinctly feminine field of knowledge, which, although available to both men and women, was particularly associated with the feminine figure” (Ellis 24). As such, it was the woman’s literary domain, in and with which women naturally had a special capability to work.

In this mode of feeling reacting to the world, the literature produced was seen as extemporaneous, an organic flow of emotions and of words. The “language of the heart” employed by women writers was so natural that that it was simply “writ[ten] from impulse, and rapidly as they think” (Stephenson, *Landon* 10). Due to the impromptu and flowing nature of Sensibility, their writing was especially prone to characterizations as lesser work, work without thought, and therefore lacking genius:

The manner in which women wrote was as prescribed as the matter, and a critical commonplace was there was little, if any, conscious artistry in their works; they were often seen to exemplify a debased Romanticism—Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which, rather than being recollected in tranquility, are immediately spewed out upon the page. (Stephenson, “Poet” 65)

This conception of women’s writing is embodied in the construction of the woman poet as an improvisatrice, one who “gush[es] forth her effusions like a natural spring” (Peterson 118). Landon especially took to this characterization, entitling a best-selling poetic volume *The Improvisatrice* (1824). Laman Blanchard, the publisher of Landon’s posthumous volume, *The Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.* (1841), treats her poetry as “natural productions: ‘Just as the grass grows that sows itself’” (Peterson 118). The language of Sensibility was seen as natural, and nothing more than a product of the feminine feeling heart.

More damaging was the criticism leveled at women writers questioning the propriety of their use of the language and the mode of Sensibility. While Sensibility seemed very much associated with and favorable to the woman writer, its material nature limited the very access it gave. The principal project was exteriorizing the interior; that is, making one’s inner feelings and sufferings public and legible. In this endeavor, the body itself—as the material seat of the capacity for “feeling”—was thoroughly examined and poetically displayed. Thus, women were treading on dangerous grounds, as their literary reflections on private emotions could easily be accused of being an immodest and improper public parade of highly physical and intimate images. The discussion of the female body itself was suppressed because it involved the discussion of sexuality, specifically the feminine, which should be confined to the private domestic sphere. The woman writer had to navigate the precarious situation of discussing and publishing such things, all the while maintaining her propriety, which was particularly difficult with the eighteenth century’s specific addition of a “refined sense of what is modest” to the notion of “delicacy” (Van Sant 3). Moreover, the project of Sensibility and its exteriorizing of the interior threatened the notion of separate spheres, working to overcome and to merge the division between the public and the private. Consequently, the corporeal exhibition inherent in the literature of Sensibility impeded women poets’ ability to freely mobilize the mode to full advantage, and exposed them to criticism of both their literary and personal lives and behavior.

The Woman Creator

Landon presents and negotiates these layers of paradoxes faced by the woman writer through her literary exploration of suffering, including both its efficacy and ineffectiveness in the poem “Felicia Hemans.” As Landon sets out to elegize Hemans, she tries to establish the notion that the woman writer does indeed deserve the monumentalizing gesture of literary elegy by making a case for the value of her writing: that it is not a thoughtless and futile expression of transient emotion, but a means of culturing poetic work and sympathetic bonds. In keeping with this cultivation of bonds, Landon frames her elegy of Hemans in terms of building a literary genealogy between and beyond them: “the female elegy is a poem of connectedness; women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead, whereas the male initiates need to eliminate the competition to come into their own” (Schenck 15). These aims are realized through and succeed because of the mythic figure of Prometheus. Though he is a familiar figure in Romantic evocations of poetic or political genius, here he is transformed by the mode of Sensibility, becoming a strikingly original construction that empowers the woman writer.

From its very presentation in the fourth and the penultimate stanza, the myth already links the woman writer to Prometheus, for the “fable of Prometheus and the vulture / Reveals the poet’s and the woman’s heart” (55–6). This myth involves the titan who dares to steal fire (and, in some versions, creates man) and thus suffers eternal punishment by a vulture that devours his ever-regenerating liver. By using Prometheus as the means of symbolizing the woman writer, Landon builds a bridge between the two: the mythic and the poetic creators. As the mythic creator, Prometheus is conceived of by the Romantics as the “archetype of the romantic poet as the artistic creator of ‘souls’ or ‘interior forms’” (Gillespie 203). Following this figure, the poet, who possesses organic genius, is then considered as the second Prometheus and, through this association, the woman writer is securely positioned in the tradition of artistic creators.

Through her particular Promethean alignment, Landon argues for some sort of equality between male and female creators and poets that strongly contrasts those constructed by the male Romantics such as Byron and Shelley. The most important aspect of the myth for both men lies in the acts of defiance by Prometheus: in stealing fire from the gods and in his continued resistance to Jupiter. The theft of fire is both a rebellion against the divine and a transformative gift to mankind. In his “Prometheus” (1816), Byron

describes the defiant titan's act as one prompted by sympathy and benevolence:

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness,
And strengthen Man with his own mind (35–8)

Prometheus's action is described in terms of Sensibility: possessing a sympathetic bond with man, he feels for man's gloomy situation. However, Byron does not leave Prometheus to react in the mode of Sensibility, that is, merely to bear witness to such bonds through a tearful response. Rather, Prometheus actively commits a "Godlike crime" to alleviate, and to elevate and empower man from his dark condition.

Furthermore, the Prometheus who is punished by "the Thunderer" (26), Jupiter, is not simply a suffering body subjected to evisceration by the vulture. Although he undergoes a "silent suffering, and intense" (6), Prometheus continues to be highly creative, in that he is constructed as an extremely legible text: "Thou art a symbol and a sign / To Mortals of their fate and force" (45–6). Thus, his suffering is taken as the occasion for the assertion of the defiant will, which in turn becomes the opportunity to teach man. It is in "thy [Prometheus's] patient energy, / In endurance, and repulse / Of thine Impenetrable Spirit" that "A mighty lesson we [man] inherit" (40–2, 44). Accordingly, the emphasis for Byron is on the eternal defiance, the endurance of the will, in the face of bodily torture. His will not only renders Prometheus the liberator and emblem of man, but also the means through which man can transform suffering—death being its extreme instance—into conquest: "a firm will, and a deep sense, / ... / Triumphant where it dares defy, / And making Death a Victory" (55, 58–9). Highlighting creative might and will, Byron is able to claim the male prerogative of revolutionary power. Prometheus's initial rebellion and his continuous defiance are acts of revolution, transforming man's situation in both life and death. As such, Byron's version of the myth does not easily allow for the association and inclusion of the woman writer in the tradition of Promethean creators.

In contrast, Landon's approach to and eventual deployment of the Promethean myth does not concentrate on Prometheus's acts of defiance. Rather, it focuses on what Byron was quick to gloss over: namely, the pain of eternal torment. Interestingly, Landon does not expand upon Byron's depiction of Prometheus' torture, which consists of objects linked by proximity: "A silent suffering, and intense;

/ The rock, the vulture, and the chain" (Byron 6–7). Instead the perpetual torture is not even mentioned explicitly, the myth is simply presented as "The fable of Prometheus and the vulture" (55) with an emphasis on the bond between the two mythic figures. It is this relationship between Prometheus and the vulture that is valuable in Landon's project, because it is a connection consisting of constant and eternal pain, and it is a sign that makes explicit the relationship of the woman writer to fame. The suffering for both Prometheus and the woman writer is more than just physical torture; it is also social and critical: "Unkindly are they judged—unkindly treated— / By careless tongues and by ungenerous words" (57–8). By aligning the woman writer with Prometheus, the speaker points out the paradoxical situation in which the woman writer is simultaneously celebrated and shamed for her incursion into the public sphere. Her public position and resulting fame allow her the power to voice her feelings—to rebel—but they also torture her by generating slander and fame.

As a Promethean figure, the woman writer is tortured because of her defiant act of attempting to give fire to the reading public through the creation, publication and circulation of her work. In such a public position, she is afflicted by the embodiment of negative effects of fame—the vulture. It eviscerates the woman writer by criticizing and censuring with "cruel sneer, and hard reproach, repeated" (59). The critic, the vulture personified, cannot read the woman writer properly, forming unkind judgments rather than bonds of sympathy, and thus pointing to the illegibility of the woman writer's spectacle: her corpus, literary and physical.

The Illegible Tear: The Shortcomings of Sensibility

The issue of legibility, particularly in the writings of Sensibility, is brought to the fore in the stanza preceding the discussion of the Promethean myth. Here, Landon interrogates the efficacy of suffering through a reworking of the tear. The tear of Sensibility is at once a physical and a public marker of private pain and emotional response. Women's writing is thus symbolized because their productions flow forth as rapidly and naturally as a tear. Serving as the basis for the formation and cultivation of sympathetic bonds between the sufferer and the observer, the author and the reader, the tear is taken to be patently authentic and, therefore, the means of getting at the essential truth of empathic suffering.

However, Landon's version of the tear is unable to fully perform its function of rendering public what is private. It is presented as a part of a question, which already points to its ineffectiveness: "What do we know of the unquiet pillow, / By the worn cheek and tearful eyelid prest" (37–8). The query already introduces doubt because the speaker is unsure of how to read Hemans' tear. Moreover, the question asks, "What do we know?" asserting the inability of the speaker and the audience to know of and about Hemans' tear when it is entirely private and isolated.

Although there is an actual tear of Sensibility on Hemans' eyelid, it is not clearly presented as such, lacking as it does a strong physical influence. Within the adjective, "tearful eyelid" (38), the tear is simply a piece of evidence supporting Hemans' suffering and does not function as it should: as a unique agent conveying interiority outwards as a physical sign. This lack of effectiveness questions the efficacy of woman's writing. If such writing is mere emotion, or tears, how can it effectively cultivate sympathetic bonds, let alone produce anything legible?

Central to the failure of the tear is its location on the "unquiet pillow" (37) in the bedroom. Located entirely within the domestic sphere, the tear is utterly isolated within the most private chamber where it is inaccessible to the public, to the reader. Locating the tear in this private realm calls to mind Hemans' decision to not enter public life, and not to publicize her private family situation and problems. As a consequence, all the suffering endured by Hemans is rendered ineffectual, bringing about no relief for her or her reader. Cut off in this manner, the tear proves to be ineffective. It is through the cultivation of the Promethean body, not the tear, that Landon finally is able to assert the creative capacity and, consequently, the legibility of the woman writer.

Cultivating the Promethean Body

Because of the failure of the physical sign, the tear, Landon turns to the physical body, smuggling it in through her presentation of the Promethean myth. She calls attention to the centrality of the body in the elegy and, on a larger level, in the literature of Sensibility. Prohibited from an explicit discussion of Hemans' body by the cultural code of conduct, Landon puts the mythic body of Prometheus forth as a representative. With a masculine and divine figure, Landon has greater liberty to explore and discuss how the body is a landscape for the cultivation of the pain of Sensibility.

Ironically, Landon's use of the masculine body of Prometheus renders it feminine and victim, subject to the intrusive masculine force of the vulture's beak. He becomes a female figure because of his passive position as the respondent to and recipient of suffering. This transformation from powerful masculine to victimized feminine further makes it a stand-in for the woman writer's physical and emotional body.

The Promethean body gains agency as the site for the production and cultivation of suffering. This issue is raised in the question that applies the fable to Hemans' situation, "What is to feed such feeling, but to culture / A soil whence pain will never more depart?" (53–4). The image of cultivating pain demands an identification of the soil's location, where the pain is produced: the deployment of the myth suggests that it is located in the body. In this case, the vulture is likened to a plow, and the body to the material soil. This evisceration of Prometheus embodies the project of Sensibility—to expose the interior world of pain and "keener feeling" (51). More importantly, this application of suffering in terms of Sensibility moves pain beyond mere suffering to produce something new. The torturous suffering of Prometheus is shown to be productive in the endeavor of "cultur[ing] / A soil whence pain will never more depart" (53–4). It is in plowing the soil, in wounding the body that sustenance is brought forth. In the situation of the woman writer, the process of such cultivation is the act of creation and writing.

The crop produced is the artistic work itself. The image of the body as the grounds of such a crop renders Prometheus and Hemans more than just the passive body or the inactive sufferer. It makes them creators on a par with the masculine poets of Romantic genius. Landon's peculiar presentation of the myth allows Prometheus to continue to create in spite of his position as a chained and suffering victim. More importantly, the woman writer is proven to be an active agent capable of producing not merely a naïve record of natural feeling, but cultivated and cultivating poetry.

Inherent in this notion is a sustained creative process, which opposes the prevalent conception of the gush and flow of the feminized writing of Sensibility. This idea presents an alternative construction of women's writing that is more than mere tears: highly cultivated creations that are deliberately reflected upon. The pain resulting from torture is not simply displayed on the body; rather, it is actively transformed into a part of the creative process. The cultured suffering allows for the production of the "fine music of the

spirit's chords" (60). These "soothing numbers" do not simply entertain; they have the more important and meaningful purpose of alleviating the human condition, for they "Gave other lips the joy thine own had not" (61–2). The fineness of the music and its ability to affect its listeners provide evidence for the deliberate and reflective, therefore masculine, cultivation inherent in women's writing.

This construction of the woman writer and her work as both masculine and feminine reaffirms the assertion in the opening stanza of Hemans' work as capable of male genius. There, the speaker laments the loss of Hemans and her work, writing that contained "Deep thoughts that at thy will to being started" (7). The portrayal of these thoughts belies the effusive nature of feminine writing. Being deep in nature, they need to be actively sought out and brought forth. Moreover, the imagery of deep thoughts implies the project of Sensibility: the thoughts are deep within the bodily soil, which must be exteriorized, brought forth into the public form of writing. These deep thoughts are identified in conjunction with "feelings, teaching us our own were true" (8), thereby representing the cultivated thought and poetry of the woman writer as both masculine and feminine at once. It is in the combination of thought and feeling, "male" and "female," that the woman writer's Promethean body becomes the grounds for the cultivation of dynamic and constructive writing.

The vulture is the instrument of suffering, which justifies its equal billing in Landon's description of the Promethean myth: "The fable of Prometheus and the vulture / Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart" (55–6). As the masculine violent force, it is the complement to the feminized Promethean victim. The vulture has heightened agency because of its aggressive violence on the body. Its evisceration of Prometheus's liver in the terms of cultivation is likened to plowing the body in order to produce poetic work. As such, the vulture embodies the masculine qualities of creative and cultivating agency—qualities deficient in the feminized Prometheus.

The equal and complementary importance of the vulture raises questions of how to read the ambiguous "they" of the lines immediately following: "Unkindly are they judged—unkindly treated— / By careless tongues and by ungenerous words" (57–8). These lines, the suffering prompted by criticism, are what ultimately connect the woman writer to Prometheus, as well as the vulture to the woman writer. As the critical instrument in the cultivation of pain, the vulture is then unjustly disqualified as being merely a tool. The vulture, like the woman writer, is reha-

bilitated by Sensibility, gaining importance and status as the instigator of physical suffering. By linking the woman writer to the vulture, Landon allows Hemans a role beyond that of the passive, suffering, but rich, soil. As the soil, she can only produce when acted upon, when wounded, by the vulture. So the woman writer as the vulture has dynamic agency as the essential cause, the first step, in the cultivation of poetic achievement. She actively cultivates fruitful pain by producing literary spectacles to which her audience reacts, assuming the masculine roles of cultivator and creator.

Landon's depiction of Hemans as both Prometheus and the vulture aggrandizes the woman writer. She is more than a suffering body; she is the grounds and the agent of cultivation and creation. As a result, Hemans does not merely compete with the male poet, she displaces masculine activity altogether. She occupies the whole of the Promethean myth, as both titular figures become reflections of the woman writer. Moreover, she takes up both images, both gendered aspects, of the writer and finally embodies the whole creative process: she is both reactive feminine and active masculine, soil and plow, cultivated and cultivator. These inclusive moves work to subsume categories of gender into the larger image of creator and writer. By positioning her as both and whole, Landon is able to put Hemans forward as entirely worthy of being the literary grandmother of a tradition of women's writing.

Death and the Woman Writer

The deployment of the Promethean myth constructs Hemans as a worthy and highly capable writer; however, it does not resolve the predicament of being a public woman. Associated with the mythic and the masculine, the woman writer is still a female intruder in the public sphere. Moreover, the eternal nature of Prometheus, and thus his torture, traps Hemans as the object of criticism. For "soothing numbers" created, her "warm and loving heart [is] required" only by having "Its best affections wronged, betrayed, and slighted— / Such is the doom of those who love too well" (61, 69, 71–2). However, being mere mortal, Hemans is able to escape the eternal doom suffered by Prometheus. Death liberates Hemans by making her suffering finite, since her heart only "In this harsh world, ... awhile must dwell" for "Fame's troubled hour has cleared" (70, 77). The mortality of the woman writer frees her from torturous criticism and, yet, allows her immortality.

The death of Hemans renders her Promethean body fully visible to the public and private spheres, but without the criticism of impropriety. Previously isolated in the private

bedroom, she cannot transform her suffering into an effective text. The subsequent move to a transcendent position, taken immediately before the Promethean lines, locates the woman writer in an open space where association with the male, the mythic Prometheus, can be made and legibility found. Landon shifts and moves Hemans out of the bedroom to an elevated position: “Yet what is mind in woman, but revealing / In sweet clear light the hidden world below” (49–50). Her mind, and thus Hemans herself, is repositioned higher, to an entirely public place—a heavenly, mythical one that is free of scandal and gender restrictions. Moreover, because this transcendent move is achieved not by mere emotions but by the mind, both an explicitly feminine one and—by association with Prometheus—an implicitly masculine one, Landon is able to construct Hemans as a praiseworthy poet. The move toward transcendence can be read as part of “the deification of the dead one in a process that lifts him out of nature, out of the poem, and out of the successor’s way” (Schenck 15). This removal of the dead is seen as a major move in the masculine elegy in which the agenda is to make room for the speaker as successor. This characterization implies competition and rupture between the living and the dead poets. However, in doing so, Landon positions herself as a “[woman inheritor who] seems to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead” (Schenck 15). It is from the transcendent heavenly position that Hemans is able to create sympathetic bonds and that Landon successfully connects her to Prometheus, opening up the opportunity for the construction of a lineage of women writers.

In death, not only is Hemans the empowered vulture, but she is also characterized in another avian image—the “weary dove” that “should close its pinion, / Fold up its golden wings and be at peace” (73–4). The dove contrasts strongly with the intense violence and masculinity of the vulture, because it is a feminine symbol of peace and, as the sacred bird of Aphrodite, it is representative of love and of sympathetic feeling. Thus, Hemans is able to extend the cultivated fruits of her suffering, which are in a way transformed into peace, to others through the creation of sympathetic bonds. As the dove “close[es] its pinion,” she is able to move beyond suffering: “Enter, O ladye, that serene dominion / Where earthly cares and earthly sorrows cease” (75–6). That “serene dominion” hints to the power available to Hemans upon her death. She is then able to continue and extend her “heart’s sweet empire” that her literary influence, her “gentle sway,” produced “over land and sea” and now over the living (25–26).

The effectiveness of death in transcending the Promethean myth advances the project of cultivation. Occupying the entire image of the creative artist, Hemans is able to fulfill her own needs and desires: “The beautiful, which was thy soul’s desiring, / But only from thyself its being drew” (67–8). This cultivation of Hemans’ self is extended in death to benefit her audience, as well as the next generation of women writers. For it is “now [that ‘Fame’s troubled hour has cleared’] replying, / A thousand hearts their music ask of thine” (77–8). Death becomes a part of the cycle of cultivation because it allows for the creation of a lineage between Hemans and the “thousand hearts.” These hearts, these future writers, look to Hemans and her music as the seeds of their own poetic creations. Thus, her body opens up to be the fertile grounds for the cultivation of other writers’ work. Accordingly, the earthy marker of her body is transformed: “Sleep with a light, the lovely and undying / Around thy grave—a grave which is a shrine” (79–80). Hemans’ grave is not limited by its nature as an utterly private setting. It possesses a “lovely and undying” light that allows for its transformation and transcendence into a shrine. There, Hemans’ Promethean body continues as the site of connection, drawing forth an audience of pilgrims, bestowing upon them cultivated music; and ultimately cultivating a tradition of women writers.

Through this renovated myth, the woman writer transcends the division between the public and the private as well as that between life and death. In her death, and in spite of her death, Hemans continues to remain an influential figure to her fellow women writers and to her successors. Her posthumous career persisted with full force: it “was as remarkable [as her career during her lifetime], with scores of selected and collected editions appearing between 1835–1920 alongside critical attention in Europe and America” (Sweet 1–2). Landon draws from the fruitful soil of Hemans’ oeuvre the seed of a tradition of women’s writing. This beginning grows into a genealogy that explicitly extends into the Victorian period through Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Although Barrett Browning declares that she “look[s] everywhere for Grandmothers & see[s] none,” (Furr 47n) she does draw from Hemans’ and Landon’s work only to cultivate a different sort of poetry. Through this continued act of cultivation, Barrett Browning “pays tribute to their powerful influence” (Furr 45). As the site of sustained cultivation and poetic creation, Hemans shows herself to be a true literary grandmother in the tradition of woman writers.

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