Hemans’ Passion

Sentimental she may have been, but Felicia Hemans’ Victorian critics seemed most struck, and most impressed, by her consistent lack of passion. “She is no sibyl, tossed to and fro in the tempest of furious excitement,” writes George Gilfillan in 1849, “but ever a ‘deep, majestic, and high-souled woman’—the calm mistress of the highest and stormiest of her emotions.”1 William Michael Rossetti draws attention in 1878 to Hemans’ keen sense of restraint, her “[a]ptitude and delicacy in versification, and a harmonious balance in the treatment of [her] subject.”2 And in his 1848 Female Poets of Great Britain, Frederic Rowton offers much the same:

Diction, manner, sentiment, passion, and belief are in her as delicately rounded off as are the bones and muscles of the Medicean Venus. There is not a harsh or angular line in her whole mental contour. I do not know a violent, spasmodic, or contorted idea in all her writings; but every page is full of grace, harmony, and expressive glowing beauty.3

Hemans’ contemporaries similarly noted the poet’s reserve, as in Francis Jeffrey’s important review of 1829:

It is singularly sweet, elegant, and tender—touching, perhaps, and contemplative, rather than vehement and overpowering; and not only finished throughout with an exquisite delicacy, and even severity of execution, but informed with a purity and loftiness of feeling, and a certain sober and humble tone of indulgence and piety, which must satisfy all judgments, and allay the apprehensions of those who are most afraid of the passionate exaggerations of poetry.4

This essay has benefited immeasurably from ongoing exchanges with Emma Mason. Sincere thanks go as well to Carolyn Williams, Jonah Siegel, Charles LaPorte, and Barry V. Qualls.

Not passion, then, but delicate versification; not “spasmodic” in style, but harmonious. Much important recent criticism has focused on what seems to be Hemans’ gushing overflow of powerful feeling. Less has been said about the peculiar tendency of Victorian and late-Romantic critics to praise Hemans specifically not for overflowing with powerful feeling. Along with Arthur Symons, nineteenth-century readers seem to have valued Hemans’ “idealisation of the feelings” precisely insofar as it escapes “the grip of a strong thought or vital passion.”

We will consider shortly the specific mechanisms Hemans employs to restrain the passion of her verses. I want to suggest first, however, that in so restraining passion, Hemans participates in a movement gaining strength through the 1820s, an early manifestation of the confrontation Richard Hengist Horne elaborates in his 1844 New Spirit of the Age, the “poetical antagonisms” between reason and passion. Hemans’ formal and thematic restraint aligns her with conservative cultural critics of her time such as Thomas Love Peacock, who in 1820 disparages “the rant of unregulated passion, the whine of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment.” Invectives inspired by the passionate works of Byron, Scott, and those who tried to imitate them swelled into broad cultural critiques demanding restraint. John Keble lays out one of the more influential of these arguments in 1827, gesturing to what would become the Tractarian doctrine of reserve and calling for “a sober standard of feeling.” Keble warns of the “excitement” in modern poetry “sought after with a morbid eagerness.” He later dilates on this view in his “Inaugural Oration” of 1832, the first of Keble’s lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford: “the glorious art of Poetry [is] a kind of medicine divinely bestowed upon man: which gives healing relief to secret mental emotion, yet without detriment to modest


reserve: and, while giving scope to enthusiasm, yet rules it with order and due control." That Keble delivered this lecture in the year of the great reform is by no means coincidental; Keble's anxiety regarding the fallout from political change translates into a theory of poetry resonant with the concerns of his conservative peers: "the functions of noble poetry and good citizenship," Keble affirms, are "closely intertwined."10

Contrary to such reasoned order and control, however, poets like Byron and Scott seemed to their contemporaries to have thrown intellectual reserve to the wind, and to have become absurdly famous as a result. John Wilson complains in 1830 that in the poetry "of our own age, we miss the principle of Intellectual strength."11 Henry Taylor echoes Wilson in 1834, mocking those poets to whom "[a] feeling came more easily . . . than a reflection."12 Intellectual reflection is not what poems like the Corsair and the Bride of Abydos are about, Francis Jeffrey argued in 1814; they picture instead "the stronger passions," feelings that "enchant and agonise" readers' minds, providing alternately "divine inspiration, or demoniacal possession."13 It is such passionate enchantment and agony, finally, that Hemans' poetry seems entirely to avoid, and Victorian and late-Romantic readers heralded her work precisely because it does not conjure "demoniacal possession."

Hemans' style of reasoned feeling gained in popularity as the appetite for Byron's temperamental passion waned. In August, 1819, a writer for the Edinburgh Monthly Review announced the collapse of Byron's popularity, explaining that the desire for passionate verse "has now cooled," "[t]he multitude have had enough":

Mental is like bodily excitement; whatever produces it will, by repetition, lose its power of even causing sensation. . . . By an exhibition of passions far beyond what we ought at least to sympathise with, [Byron] at once gloried in the field of his proper strength, and wooed and won that darling popularity. . . . But even this concentrated poetry has lost its pungency; and passion the most maddening lies tranquil in boards, a brutum fulmen [dulled thunderbolt], on the bookseller's table.14

That 1819 saw Byron’s verses lying unread in British bookshops isn’t quite true, but it may have become more true by 1823, when the poet complained to Thomas Moore of being “as low in popularity and bookselling as any writer can be.” 15 Thus the EMR was proved right in predicting Byron’s fall from grace, temporary as it may have been, just as it was in predicting—in the very same essay—the future success of a young poetess of the day, Felicia Hemans: “Poetic nobility she has already attained; nevertheless her honours may yet be far more distinguished and illustrious” (209). To the writer in the EMR, Hemans’ ascent and Byron’s fall are a natural pairing, for Hemans capitalizes on precisely the quality Byron was seen most to lack: restraint. In Hemans’ verses, the EMR notes approvingly, there is to be found not even a single example of “inflated epithets . . . sound without sense . . . a hobbling measure, an unseemly rhyme” (208); the poetry, in its execution at least, is flawless. And most important, it is nothing like Byron’s.

It was a set of opinions that would be repeated in various guises throughout the 1820s. Critics praised Hemans’ innate sense of balance in direct contrast to the poetics of the previous generation. In this narrative of poetic accomplishment, Hemans’ aesthetic of restraint arrives just in time to relieve public exhaustion with Romantic overflow, Byronic cavorting, and gothic sensibility. A reviewer in 1820 thus presents Hemans as a kind of restrained Wordsworth: “[t]he verses of Mrs. Hemans appear the spontaneous offspring of intense and noble feeling, governed by a clear understanding, and fashioned into elegance by an exquisite delicacy and precision of taste.” 16 George Bancroft notes in an 1827 omnibus review of Hemans’ work that “[a] great deal has been said of the sublimity of directing the passions; we hold it a much more difficult, and a much more elevated task, to restrain them.” 17 And, perhaps most significant, Maria Jane Jewsbury, a close friend of Hemans, writes in The Athenaeum that Hemans’ “taste for the beautiful, so fastidious, so universal, so unsleeping,” successfully avoids the exaggerated use of “passion” and “power” endemic to their time. 18


18. [Maria Jane Jewsbury], “Literary Sketches. No. 1. Felicia Hemans,” Athenaeum (12 February, 1831) 104–5 (105). Jewsbury’s acerbic comments on passion and power con-
These passages all support Emma Mason’s recent argument that Hemans “championed feeling as that which comprises reason and thought as well as emotion” (26; my emphasis). Indeed, as we shall see, Hemans restrains passion specifically to avoid the unreasoned, “spasmodic” effects of her predecessors. Her aesthetic privileges form and balance as a means of confining within thoughtful structure the spontaneous overflow of passionate feeling: an important revising of the unbridled poetess tradition.

1. Inward Passions

Hemans proved her technical dexterity while still quite young. Of her second publication, the 1812 Domestic Affections, biographer Henry F. Chorley notes the “singular harmony and finish of numbers.”19 If the volume’s sentiments seem conventional (there is “no individuality discernible,” Chorley complains [14]), they at least appear in a pleasing form, as suggested by the poem “Moon-light”:

Oh! at this hour, this placid hour,
Soft music, wake thy magic pow’r!
Be mine to hear thy dulcet measure,
Thy warbling strains, that whisper, pleasure;
Thy heavenly airs, of cadence dying,
And harp to every zephyr sighing;
When roving by the shadowy beam,
That gilds the fairy-bow’r and woodland-stream!20

The poem develops as a series of commonplace emotions depicted through well-trodden patterns of figurative language. And yet the “harmony” of Hemans’ meter, which elegantly reflects the stanza’s “dulcet measure” and “heavenly airs,” indicates the arrival of a serious poet, and one not readily categorized within the poetics of sensibility.21

---

21. Isobel Armstrong has suggested that women poets intentionally used “[t]he language of emotion, affect, and feeling,” which “is so powerfully overdetermined in women’s poetry of this time.” The whole “point” of these overdetermined figures, writes Armstrong, “is their banality.” Women poets made use of conventional emotive rhetoric as “an attempt to
Hemans' two subsequent publications, *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816) and *Modern Greece* (1817), advance her formal style into what one reviewer mistook for "the production of an academical, and certainly not a female, pen." The poems take up political issues, such as Napoleon's theft of Italian artwork and the establishment of the Elgin Marbles in England, and they show Hemans' familiarity and engagement with the aesthetic debates of her time. As ever, they are highly structured, *The Restoration* in well-balanced heroic couplets and *Modern Greece* in modified Spenserian stanzas. They are, as Stephen C. Behrendt writes, "*not . . . like those* [poems] of her female contemporaries." Hemans' volumes disregard the "strategies" that Dorothy Mermin argues "enabled [eighteenth–century women poets] to write," while adopting the very formal structures Mermin identifies as likely to have been avoided by her female predecessors: "iambic pentameter, formal odes or epics, exalted diction, or (with a few significant exceptions) classical allusions." Hemans' poetry also remains increasingly aloof from intense passion, that staple of the poetess tradition, favoring instead a distanced and intellectually-engaged relation to feeling. Through both form and subject matter, then, Hemans departs from earlier models of women's poetry, earning her the attention and respect of her peers: "Indeed," as Behrendt points out, "approbation for Hemans's early poetry often reflected the extent to which formal and stylistic aspects of her verse replicated or emulated those of her male contemporaries and their late eighteenth–century classicist predecessors" (95).

Hemans' commitment to refined structure enters *The Restoration* as an explicit subject in her discussion of the Laocoön, and she engages specifically with Winckelmann's landmark essay on the statue. Like Winckelmann, whom she quotes in the footnotes to her poem, Hemans draws attention to the statue's expression of pain without rage; the suffering man confronts an excruciating death, and the death of his children, with noble endurance. "[T]he universal and predominant characteristic of the Greek masterpieces," Winckelmann had written, "is noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur"; this Laocoön "raises no terrible clamour." The statue, what would otherwise be considered nervous disease or hysteria ("Gush of the Feminine" 24–25). Hemans highlights that control through her formal rigidity.


25. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of*
in other words, represents the containment of the man’s feeling within his disciplined body, much as disciplined form contains the passion of Hemans’ verses:

And mark yon group, transfixed with many a throe,
Sealed with the image of eternal woe:
With fearful truth, terrific power, exprest,
Thy pangs, Laocoon, agonize the breast,
And the stern combat picture to mankind,
Of suffering nature, and enduring mind.
Oh, mighty conflict! tho’ his pains intense,
Distend each nerve, and dart thro’ every sense;
Tho’ fixed on him, his children’s suppliant eyes,
Implore the aid avenging fate denies;
Tho’ with the giant-snake in fruitless strife,
Heaves every muscle with convulsive life,
And in each limb Existence writhes, enrolled
’Midst the dread circles of the venomed fold;
Yet the strong spirit lives—and not a cry,
Shall own the might of Nature’s agony!26

The suffering Laocoon embodies an ideal of mental control that was to become through the 1820s the governing doctrine of Hemans’ aesthetic. Though “[e]xistence writhes” in the man’s suffering body, “not a cry” will reveal the depth of his agony. “The calmer the state of a body,” Winckelmann had argued, “the fitter it is to express the true character of the soul” (43). Virtually paraphrasing Winckelmann, Hemans writes in a letter of 1823 that “there can be no real grandeur [in works of poetry] unless mind is made the ruling power, and its ascendancy asserted, even amidst the wildest storms of passion” (14 May 1823; Chorley 38). Insofar as the Laocoön’s physical experience of pain—“Distend each nerve, and dart thro’ every sense”—submits to the ascendancy of the man’s “enduring mind” and “strong spirit,” the statue poses as an analogue for Hemans’ aesthetic ideal: polished, beautiful verse that bespeaks a restrained and inward passion.27


However clear Hemans may have been with respect to her own ideal of poetic composition, it remained difficult for her to decipher the changing tastes of her late-Romantic public (The Restoration was reviewed favorably, but it did not sell well). Letters of the period following the publication of Modern Greece show Hemans questioning both her formal style and her tendency to employ the rhetoric of sensibility. To her publisher John Murray she writes in 1817, "I have now seen how little any work of mere sentiment or description is likely to obtain popularity, and have had warning enough to give up that style of writing altogether" (FH 481). The solution, she suggests in an 1819 letter to her uncle, B. P. Wagner, is a move from either lyrical effusion or "academic" description toward narrative metrical romances of the sort produced by Byron and Scott. Hemans calls these poems "Novels in Verse": "I shall certainly ere long, make an attempt to write something in this popular style, though I must own it will be much against my inclination" (FH 484). But Hemans never quite composes a "Novel[] in Verse," at least not in the style of Byron or Scott. The poems she writes in the years following, starting with the Tales and Historic Scenes in Verse of 1819, offer instead a melding of passion with "academic" subject matter, a new juxtaposing of romance and narrative that maintains throughout Hemans' characteristic formal rigor. Stephen Behrendt suggests that this period marks the 'feminization' of Felicia Hemans, a move "more and more in the direction of 'feeling' . . . and away from 'taste'" (106). The contrary may well be true; Hemans never abandons either the conventions of emotive lyricism that mark her earliest poetry or the political, well-structured formalism of The Restoration and Modern Greece. Rather, Hemans combines these styles into poetry in which narrative both restrains passionate feeling and brings to life the "academic" elements she favored in her early compositions.

The key issues for Hemans' developing aesthetic turn around balance:
how to assert one’s mind without forfeiting lyrical “storms of passion”; how to write passionately and yet maintain a coherent story; how to render dignified formal structure without sacrificing both passion and narrative; how, in other words, to achieve something like the tranquil grandeur of the Laocoon, a great and noble work of art that balances suffering and repose, that tells a captivating story with both unwavering emotional intensity and exquisite outer form. These issues belong not only to Hemans, but to her time as well; Hemans’ successful balancing act, traced in the pages that follow, supported her enduring reputation through the nineteenth century because it satisfied her late-Romantic and Victorian readers’ desire for restrained and inward-looking works of art.

2. Binding Arabella

Hemans’ first attempt at a new style of poetry, *Tales and Historic Scenes in Verse*, is modeled quite clearly on Byron; each poem is introduced by a one or two-page prose headnote, what Byron calls an “Advertisement.” Hemans uses these notes to frame and give structure to the lyrics that follow. For while Hemans’ poetry includes elements of narrative—fragments of story that resonate with the headnotes—her narrative never approaches the descriptive clarity of Byron or Scott; Hemans concentrates on emotional, rather than narrative, development. Hemans’ “Alaric in Italy,” for example, opens with a nearly three-hundred-word quotation from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, plus a note directing the reader’s attention to the fifth volume of Gibbon’s work. The poem then leaps with confidence into the scene without having to rehearse the narrative details:

Heard ye the Gothic trumpet’s blast?
The march of hosts, as Alaric pass’d?
His steps have track’d that glorious clime,
The birth-place of heroic time[.]

* (FH 140)

While Hemans includes elements of narrative, she presents those elements as knowledge her readers already have, thereby enabling the poem to concern itself more with atmosphere, emotion, and reflection on the unfolding events. Chorley later draws attention to Hemans’ method, “those poems in


which a short descriptive recitative (to borrow a word from the opera) introduces a lyrical burst of passion, regret, or lamentation.” He notes that Hemans’ “form of composition became so especially popular in America, that hardly a poet has arisen since the influence of Mrs. Hemans’ genius made itself felt on the other side of the Atlantic, who has not attempted something of a similar subject and construction” (47).

Hemans uses this alteration between “descriptive recitative” and “lyrical burst[s] of passion” to greatest effect in Records of Woman, a volume whose every poem seems designed to interrogate passion. Records of Woman showcases the balancing act between narrative and lyric that was to become paradigmatic in poetry of the Victorian era. “Arabella Stuart,” the first poem in Records, opens with a two-page prose version of the story to follow. Hemans explains how Arabella Stuart (1575–1615), a threat to the thrones of both Elizabeth I and James I, was separated from her husband, William Seymour, to ensure that she remained childless and thus would not produce a rival heir. She was imprisoned in the Tower of London and, after a fabulously unsuccessful attempt at escape, she eventually went mad and died. Hemans’ poem follows her prose history as a series of nine first-person lyrical utterances, described in the introduction as a “record of [Arabella’s] fate, and the imagined fluctuations of her thoughts and feelings” (FH 332). Much like the monodramatic arts popularized in the eighteenth century, Hemans’ lyrics trace Arabella’s development as a series of passionate states.31 The poetry, then, focuses on those passages of Arabella’s life that, because internal and private, are necessarily unknown to historians. “The whole life of this lady,” writes Isaac D’Israeli in his 1793 version of the story, “seems to consist of secret history, which, probably, we cannot now recover. . . . What passed in that dreadful imprisonment cannot perhaps be recovered for authentic history.”32 Hemans quotes the latter passage in her introduction to suggest that, whereas her opening prose narrative covers the story of Arabella Stuart that history knows to be true, the subsequent lyric poems imagine a story that history has only suggested.

To the extent that the poem “Arabella Stuart” offers a story, it is as a progression of Arabella’s states of feeling and mind. Each of the nine monologues marks a step in the development of Arabella’s “secret history,” for Hemans removes the narrative elements from the poem itself; the reader encounters only the thoughts and feelings that pass through Arabella’s mind:

Now never more, oh! never, in the worth
Of its pure cause, let sorrowing love on earth
Trust fondly—never more!—the hope is crush’d
That lit my life, the voice within me hush’d
That spoke sweet oracles[.]

(FH 334)

To make sense of these sentiments, the reader must replace them back within the prose history; each of the nine lyric poems fits into a piece of Arabella’s past. Or, to put it another way, the lyric poems mark Arabella’s emotional states as imagined by Hemans, who touches down at various points along the narrative trajectory to take account of the emotional situation. Reading the poem requires a mental jumping back and forth between lyric and narrative. The passage above, for example, opens the sixth lyric. Just prior to this moment, the fifth lyric closes dramatically with Arabella’s anxious anticipation of escaping from prison to join Seymour at sea:

I hear my veins beat.—Hark! A bell’s slow chime!
My heart strikes with it.—Yet again—’tis time!
A step!—a voice!—or but a rising breeze?
Hark!—haste!—I come, to meet thee on the seas.

(FH 334)

Between “I come, to meet thee on the seas” and the line that follows—in the gap between lyrics five and six—Arabella fails in her attempt to escape from prison, a scene narrated at length in Hemans’ prose introduction. Arabella returns to the tower under heightened security, the chances of a future escape all but impossible; her anguish is reflected in the opening line to the sixth lyric, “Now never more, oh!” The reader understands the course of events—that is, the history that transpires between “I come, to meet thee on the seas” and “Now never more, oh!”—only if she remembers (or re-reads) the narrative of the prose introduction; the lyrics themselves make no effort to recount the crucial events that structure Arabella’s utterances.

The effect of this complete separation of narrative from feeling is to contain Arabella’s intense, lyric passion within the poem’s formal structure. Much as Arabella is herself imprisoned, her progressive stages of passion appear isolated and subject to observation, as if each feeling were a logical correlative of the narrative trajectory rather than the ungoverned expression of an individual’s passion. Hemans’ form seems even more striking when her version of “Arabella Stuart” is compared to a ballad of the same name published in Thomas Evans’ Old Ballads, Historical and Narrative (1810), a poem with which Hemans would have been familiar, as two of its
stanzas serve as the epigraph to the D’Israeli essay she footnotes in her preface. In keeping with the form of most traditional ballads, Evans’ “Arabella Stuart” combines the outlines of narrative with first-person passages spoken by both Arabella and her husband, Seymour:

Where London’s Tow’r its turrets show,
    So stately by the Thames’s side,
Fair Arabella, child of woe,
    For many a day had sat and sigh’d.

“And why,” that hapless lady cried,
    “From royal race am I deriv’d?
“Had I to peasants been allied,
    “Happy, tho’ poor, I then had liv’d.”33

Evans’ Arabella cannot extricate herself from her context; appropriately enough, her “sigh’d” emotion is aurally indistinguishable from her location by the river “side.” Arabella speaks as one “[f]rom royal race . . . deriv’d,” as a woman entirely constructed by circumstance:

“Because by birth to kings allied—
    “Ah me! How cruel the pretence!
“My name offends the ear of pride;
    “My being born—is my offence.”

Like most figures in traditional ballads, Evans’ Arabella lacks the ability to express directly the emotions she feels. The reader encounters the effects of emotion rather than the emotions themselves, as when Arabella describes her tears that “so fast . . . must pour” (101). Insofar as Evans’ Arabella narrates rather than expresses emotion (she describes her tears but does not explore the internal workings of her sorrow), she remains bound to the conditions of her history; she neither attempts nor contemplates an attempt to transcend the limitations of her circumstances, the narrative into which history has written her.

Hemans’ Arabella, on the other hand, exists in a lyrical space removed from her historical narrative. Though Hemans works with well-worn ballad material, she remakes her version of “Arabella Stuart” within a new generic structure. And while the form of Hemans’ poem—the separation of the lyric from the narrative—seems to contain the passions of the speaker, it also provides space in which Arabella emerges as a passionate lyric voice.

As Arabella progresses toward insanity, she articulates a passionate freedom that comes, paradoxically, as a result of her incarceration:

Hear, Mercy! hear me! None
That bleed and weep beneath the smiling sun,
Have heavier cause!—yet hear!—my soul grows dark—
Who hears the last shriek from the sinking bark,
On the mid seas, and with the storm alone,
And bearing to th' abyss, unseen, unknown,
Its freight of human hearts?—th’ o’ermastering wave!
Who shall tell how it rush’d—and none to save?

(FH 336–37)

The passage suggests a series of parallel enclosures: the doomed ship bearing its “freight” of human cargo; the narrative encompassing Hemans’ lyric poems; and Arabella herself, a storehouse of intense feeling bound within a prison cell. The language returns consistently to flow and overflow—“bleed,” “weep,” “shriek,” “th’ o’ermastering wave!”—and yet the governing motif remains one of restraint. The people on the ship cannot extricate themselves from their fate, and Arabella cannot alter the circumstances of her captivity, much as the lyric poem remains bound to the conditions of the introductory prose narrative. This ultimate impotence of passion is precisely Hemans’ point. The poem indulges in the pleasures of uninhibited passion because the restraining formal structures ensure that, as with the passionate throes of the Laocoön, the overall work of art will communicate “not a cry” but rather a nobility of form.

We can note more distinctly the effect of passion and form in “Arabella Stuart” by considering the structure of Hemans’ earlier poetry. Much of Hemans’ poetry prior to Records of Woman accomplishes either narrative or passionate lyricism, but rarely both at once. In “The Widow of Crescentius,” a poem from Tales and Historic Scenes (1819), for example, a complex narrative suggests a wide range of emotional experience, but Hemans refuses to allow the emotion to enter her poem as first-person utterance, as passionate lyric outpouring. In the story, Stephania, the poem’s eponymous widow, avenges the death of her husband by poisoning the Holy Roman Emperor Otto. Much like the ballad poems that Hemans’ form imitates, “The Widow of Crescentius” describes and rarely expresses emotion, as when Stephania approaches a reunion with her husband that turns out to be his execution:

Bride of Crescentius! as the throng
Bore thee with whelming force along,
How did thine anxious heart beat high,
Till rose suspense to agony!
Too brief suspense, that soon shall close,
And leave thy heart to deeper woes.

(\textit{FH 75})

Unlike Arabella’s passions, which appear directly before the reader as first-person lyric expression (“I hear my veins beat.—Hark!”), Stephania’s suspense and agony emerge as part of narrative description. Arabella invites her reader to experience her beating veins—“Hark!”—whereas the “deeper woes” of Stephania’s beating heart remain always at a distance via the poem’s third-person narration.

Narrative dominates “The Widow of Crescentius” even at those moments when Hemans might most easily have written lyrically, as when she describes the song of Otto’s minstrel-boy, who is actually Stephania in disguise:

He breathes each wounded feeling’s tone,
In music’s eloquence along;
His soul’s deep voice is only pour’d
Through his full song and swelling chord.

(\textit{FH 85})

This relatively staid description of pouring feeling invites comparison to the language of flow and overflow in the intense conclusion to “Arabella Stuart.” Arabella here offers a final and necessarily unheard address to Seymour:

What were it then, if thou
With thy fond eyes, wert gazing on me now?
Too keen a pang!—Farewell! and yet once more,
Farewell!—the passion of long years I pour
Into that word: thou hear’st not—but the woe
And fervour of its tones may one day flow
To thy heart’s holy place; there let them dwell—
We shall o’ersweep the grave to meet—Farewell!

(\textit{FH 338})

Arabella’s lyricism, the desperate longing of her “Farewell!” and the impulsive enjambments that nearly hide her rhymed couplets (a far cry from the rigid, end-stopped heroic couplets of \textit{The Restoration}), highlights by contrast the descriptive nature of “The Widow of Crescentius.” The earlier poem gallops aggressively through its tetrameter couplets in a style familiar to readers of Byron, Scott, and ballad poetry in general, whereas Arabella’s
pentameter couplets relax into a freer, more expressively lyric style. Stephania pours emotion into a song unheard by the reader—we encounter only a third-person description of Stephania's feeling—while Arabella speaks directly her passionate "Farewell!"

The only unreservedly expressive moment in "The Widow of Crescentius" comes at the poem's end, when, as Otto dies from the poison she administered, Stephania emerges from her disguise to confront the emperor. Emotional as Stephania's monologue is, it remains a staged performance very much in the tradition of metrical romance:

"Yes! these are death-pangs—on thy brow
Is set the seal of vengeance now!
Oh! well was mix'd the deadly draught,
And long and deeply hast thou quaff'd;
And bitter as thy pangs may be,
They are but guerdons meet from me!
Yes, these are but a moment's throes,
Howe'er intense, they soon shall close.
Soon shalt thou yield thy fleeing breath,
*My* life hath been a lingering death.[..]

*(FH 87)*

Stephania presents her emotion dramatically, to an audience, in a manner importantly distinct from Arabella, who uses metaphor, analogy, and the seemingly unself-conscious exploration of her feelings. Unlike "Arabella Stuart," "The Widow of Crescentius" foregrounds plot and, while incorporating elements of sentimental verse, the poem largely keeps that sentiment restrained—that is, narrated—rather than expressed lyrically. There is something, too, in Stephania's sing-song ballad meter that calls attention to the poem as a dramatic production rather than the internal meditations of a thinking and feeling individual. If *Tales and Historic Scenes* shows Hemans experimenting with "Novels in Verse," romances modeled in part on Byron and Scott, *Records of Woman* suggests a freedom of feeling paradoxically enabled by careful formal design. The latter volume demonstrates the benefit of juxtaposing lyrical gush with narrative form, ensuring, as Hemans puts it, that "*mind* is made the ruling power, and its ascendancy asserted, even amidst the wildest storms of passion." Like the prisoners of the doomed ship at sea, Arabella may gush all she likes; she abides regardless as a captive of narrative and formal design and, as such, as the product of a reasoning mind. Hemans' lyrics, as Francis Jeffrey affirms, remain "finished throughout with an exquisite delicacy, and even severity of execution,"
avoiding even at their most gushing moments “the passionate exaggerations of poetry.”

The two epigraphs to “Arabella Stuart” introduce and make explicit the generic confrontation staged so brilliantly throughout Records of Woman. The first is from Byron’s The Prophecy of Dante (1821): “And is not love in vain, / Torture enough without a living tomb?” The second epigraph is a misquoting of Ippolito Pindemonte’s Clizia which, as Susan Wolfson has argued, Hemans most likely lifted from Madame de Staël’s novel, Corinne: “Fermossi al fin il cor che balzò tanto,” [“Stopped at last, the heart that had beat so strongly”] (FH 332).34 Byron’s poem gives voice to Dante as he suffers in political exile from his native Florence. Hemans’ use of Byron gestures both to the obvious thematic connections between Dante and Arabella Stuart (like Dante, Arabella “love[d] in vain” and was kept imprisoned in “a living tomb”), and to Hemans’ indebtedness to Byron’s style; like so much of Hemans’ poetry, “Arabella Stuart” is a response both to and against the form of Byron’s metrical romance. The Pindemonte epigraph, on the other hand, regards the passionate, non-narrative components of Hemans’ poem. The passage appears toward the end of Corinne, in a chapter entitled “Fragments of Corinne’s thoughts.” Readers of the novel are told that Corinne, near death, wrote these pieces “when she was making futile efforts to become capable again of sustained work.”35 But the thoughts themselves, which appear as isolated feelings listed one after another, utterly evade narrative coherence. As with Arabella’s passionate lyricism, Corinne’s thoughts make sense only when understood in the context of her life story.

Hence like Records of Woman as a whole, Hemans’ epigraphs to “Arabella Stuart” juxtapose the narrative structure of Byron’s metrical romances with the passionate, lyrical style of Corinne, who stood among the most important figures of women’s sentimental lyricism.36 Chorley identifies this generic balancing as a merging of “the Spirit of romance and chivalry” with “a female form,” resulting in “affections deeper, if less strikingly picturesque, than mere devotion to beauty, or mere fidelity to the knightly vow of valor and courtesy” (56). Arabella’s deeper affections come precisely through the poem’s formal enclosures. The poem is a progress toward lyric poetry, from historical prose narrative to “the Spirit of romance and chiv—

34. Wolfson notes that Hemans’ misquotation mirrors that found in Corinne, suggesting Hemans took her epigraph directly from the French novel (FH 339).


aly” to the suffering of an isolated lyric voice. Each generic form frames that which follows. Like a series of increasingly smaller concentric circles, “Arabella Stuart” moves inward until it flows with something like pure—though highly contained—lyric passion.

3. Morbid Passions

And yet, it must be said, the space Hemans creates for passionate flow leads almost inevitably to either insanity or death, and frequently to both. Indeed, Records of Woman rarely offers up a lyric moment unless it produces a corpse, such is the awkward position of passionate lyricism—and especially lyric poetry by women—in the late-Romantic period. It is no coincidence that the two figures who for Hemans’ contemporaries most exemplified the figure of the poetess—Sappho and Corinne—die tragic deaths after careers of passionate song. In Hemans’ own poem on Sappho, “The Last Song of Sappho” (1831), the poetess stands on the verge of death and sings of her heart, “whose music made [the strings of her lyre] sweet,” and which now “Hath pour’d on desert sands its wealth away” (FH 466). Sappho is only one of Hemans’ many women to confront a death necessitated by a sincerity and abundance of passion. In Records of Woman alone, “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” “Properzia Rossi,” “Edith, A Tale of the Woods,” and “The Grave of a Poetess” all suggest a necessary correlation between passion and death. The Victorian poetess flows outward in gushes of song and ultimately dies literally pouring her heart out. Consider, for example, the lyric climax of “Indian Woman’s Death-Song.” The Indian woman, whose husband has deserted her for another wife, seeks death to relieve her unreciprocated passion:

The voice that spoke of other days is hush’d within his breast,
But mine its lonely music haunts, and will not let me rest;
It sings a low and mournful song of gladness that is gone,—
I cannot live without that light—Father of waves! roll on!

(FH 378)


Death seems a necessity to the Indian woman because she refuses to sever her passionate bonds to her husband; her feeling “will not let [her] rest,” and she would rather die than suffer the pain of lost love. Many of the most important critics of Hemans’ day faulted precisely this sort of self-eclipsing passion. Peacock writes of passion creating “a splendid lunatic . . . a puling driveller . . . or a morbid dreamer” (130). Hazlitt, anticipating Henry Taylor, denounces Byron’s “passion . . . at once violent and sullen, fierce and gloomy,” that seems at last “a mind preying upon itself, and disgusted with, or indifferent to, all other things.” Such inwardly-turned individuals cannot extricate their thoughts from the intensity of their emotions. Three decades later, Samuel Smiles would argue in his 1859 Self-Help, a touchstone for Victorian conduct and moral values, that the “tendency which in England has been called Byronism”—that is, “discontent, unhappiness, inaction, and reverie”—can be overcome only through the “spirit of industry,” which “will gradually lead [a man] to exercise his powers on objects outside himself.”

Hemans positions herself distinctly within this critique of “Byronism” and immoderate attention to one’s feeling self. The turn inward to dwell only on one’s own passions, the refusal to look outside oneself, leads in Hemans not only to unhappiness and inaction, but to insanity and death. The Indian woman thus is so caught within her own passionate sorrow, the inner “voice” that “sings a low and mournful song,” that she kills not only herself but her infant daughter as well.

Like many of the Records of Woman, “Indian Woman’s Death-Song” reads easily enough as an invective against cultures that abuse women, cultures that compel women to lives of morbid passion (“my babe!” the Indian woman addresses her daughter, “born, like me, for woman’s weary lot” [FH 378]). But Hemans’ more explicitly aesthetic arguments contest such readings. Her insistence, for one, on intellectual engagement, “even amidst the wildest storms of passion,” indicates the need for distance from overwhelming passion. Hemans’ demand that “mind [be] the ruling power” over passion hardly accords with the impulse to throw oneself over a cataclysm—and with one’s daughter, no less—because of a “wasting of the heart” (FH 378). Better to put passion to some productive use, like the


sculptor Properzia Rossi who, though she ultimately wastes away from want of love, first reworks her “dream of passion and of beauty” into a sculpture of Ariadne,

    Something immortal of my heart and mind,
    That yet may speak to thee when I am gone,
    Shaking thine inmost bosom with a tone
    Of lost affection[.]

    (“Properzia Rossi,” FH 352; my emphasis)

When the sculptor Rossi successfully engages her talent and begins to create the Ariadne—“It comes,—the power / Within me born, flows back”—her morbid introspection dissipates and “[a] sudden joy lights up my loneliness,— / I shall not perish all” (FH 353). The act of artistic creation, a melding of passion with form, epitomizes Hemans’ aesthetic ideal:

    The bright work grows
    Beneath my hand, unfolding, as a rose,
    Leaf after leaf, to beauty; line by line,
    I fix my thought, heart, soul, to burn, to shine,
    Thro’ the pale marble’s veins.

    (FH 353)

Here the artist’s inner passion moves outward into the work of art, a “mould / Wherein I pour the fervent thoughts, th’ untold, / The self-consuming!” (FH 353), and she is content so long as the process of creation continues. Rossi’s error, it seems, is in not sufficiently enabling her artistic genius; she ultimately allows her “deep affections, that o’erflow / My aching soul” to hold sway over the talent that “might have given / Birth to creations of far nobler thought” (FH 354). She retreats from the external forms that might have contained passion to her own debilitating introspection.

It is through form, finally, that Hemans’ poetry resists the fate of the women whose lives she describes. Like Properzia Rossi’s Ariadne, and like the Laocoön, Hemans’ poetry appears “full of grace, harmony, and expressive glowing beauty,” a poetic version of “the bones and muscles of the Medicean Venus” (Rowton 386). The passion of her verses emerges only through highly mediated structures, including balanced meters and, as in “Arabella Stuart,” narrative enclosures. Embedding passion within form, Hemans attempts to recuperate extreme feeling from excessive self-indulgence, to enable “mind [to be] the ruling power, and its ascendancy asserted, even amidst the wildest storms of passions.” From the perspective of her late-Romantic and Victorian critics, who universally celebrated her
dispassionate approach, Hemans was successful in this endeavor. Even if Hemans' tales lead always to death and insanity, she yet follows Winckelmann's ideal aesthetic vision, using poetic form to bind passionate feeling within noble structure. It was to such venerable structures that Victorian poets would turn whilst navigating the rocky straits of post-Romantic sensibility.

University of Maryland