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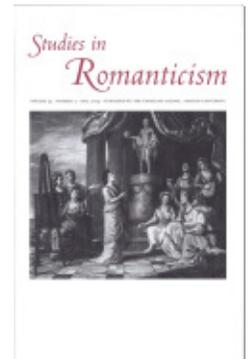
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Hemans and the Politics of Literature

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England and Spain and The Domestic Affections: Felicia Hemans and the Politics of Literature

IN THE WAKE OF OVER A DECADE OF IMPORTANT RECOVERY WORK ON Felicia Hemans inspired by the groundbreaking scholarship of such critics as Marlon Ross, Stuart Curran, and, of course, Anne Mellor, the question of “Why Hemans *Now*?” a question posed some time ago by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk about the importance of Hemans to Romanticism, might just as easily be phrased today as: “Who’s/whose Hemans now?”¹ Out of Mellor’s once well-recognized and universally-acknowledged domestic Hemans, eager critics have spun out a dazzling array of new incarnations, including Diego Saglia’s anti-domestic “heroic” Hemans, Donelle Ruwe’s “bourgeois” Hemans, Margot Louis’s “sentimental” Hemans, Gary Kelly’s “liberal” Hemans, and, a personal favorite, E. Douka Kabitoglou’s “transvestite” Hemans. Although these constructions are not necessarily incompatible they are sometimes antithetical, as in Tricia Looten’s “imperial Hemans” and Nanora Sweet’s anti-imperialist “republican” Hemans.²

1. See Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Curran, “Romantic Poetry: The I Altered,” in *Romanticism and Feminism, 185–207; Romanticism and Gender*, and Sweet and Melnyk, “Introduction: Why Hemans *Now*?” in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Sweet and Melnyk (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

2. Saglia, “Epic or Domestic?: Felicia Hemans’s Heroic Poetry and the Myth of the Victorian Poetess,” *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani* 2, no. 4 (1997): 125; Ruwe, “The Canon-Maker: Felicia Hemans and Torquato Tasso’s Sister,” in *Comparative Romanticisms: Power, Gender, Subjectivity*, eds. Larry H. Peer and Diane Long Hoeveler (Columbia: Camden House, 1998), 134; Louis, “Enlarging the Heart: L.E.L.’s ‘The Improvisatrice,’ Hemans’s ‘Properzia Rossi,’ and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26, no. 1 (1998): 1; Kelly, “Death and the Matron: Felicia Hemans, Romantic Death, and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State,” in *Felicia Hemans*, 196; Kabitoglou, “The Pen and Sword: Felicia Hemans’s Records of Man,” in *Romantic Masculinities*, eds. Tony Pinkney, Keith Hanley, and

In some ways, the numerous incarnations of Felicia Hemans offer a simple commentary on the generative nature of interpretation itself. Though this nature is anything but straightforward, I want to make a special case about the peculiarity of Hemans's mode of writing that I argue may help us account for the seemingly endless ways of reading Hemans, not only among her contemporaries but also among many of her critics today. Examination of the special characteristics of Hemans's poetry, what I call, to borrow Rancière's theoretical framework, the politics of her literature, is then less about an investigation of the ideological positionings of Hemans's texts or even their coded representations of social, cultural, and political struggle.³ Rather it is more abstractly about the way in which her poetry frames, as Rancière puts it, the relation between what can be said and what can be seen, or, to state it in historical terms, what could be said and what could be seen in post-1790s Britain. When applied to politics proper, such an investigation moves away from ideological critique toward a rhetorical and textual analysis of how literature gives rise to different modes of perception of the political that make possible different ways of speaking about the world. To that end, this essay considers those aspects of Hemans's writing that not only make possible but also encourage antithetical appropriations of her work without apparent contradiction. In placing the destabilizing literary tropes of her poems in stark relief to the more stable narrative structure that often frames them, Hemans's writing dramatizes the political, a style of writing that brings to life the dynamic nature of early nineteenth-century political debate and thought. In the absence of definitive proof of Hemans's personal political commitments—Hemans never openly declared herself Whig, Tory, republican, or other—not to mention the unfavorable conditions that made it difficult for women to comment openly on the political world, reading the politics of Hemans's texts in this way may not only foster a greater appreciation of Hemans's aesthetic mode, the value of which critics continue to debate, but also illuminate more broadly our understanding of the ways in which women in the Romantic period, as Anne Mellor has argued, fully participated in the public sphere.

Discussion of the politics of Hemans's writing seems particularly apt

Fred Botting (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997), 107; Lootens, "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity," *PMLA* 109, no. 2 (1994): 247; Sweet, "History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetic of the Beautiful: Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment," in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, eds. Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 171.

3. See Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," *SubStance* 33, no. 1 (2004): 10–24.

given the fact that Hemans's earliest poetry involved a direct engagement with the most heated political debate of her time. In 1808, Hemans, then Felicia Browne, launched her prodigious writing career with a 622-line occasional poem in heroic couplets directly responding to the Spanish resistance to Napoleon's invasion of Spain earlier that year. Hemans had already published a small collection of poems, but *England and Spain; or, Valour and Patriotism* proved by far her most ambitious work to date and was no doubt intended as a public announcement of her arrival on the literary scene. Like many of the poems of her so-called early period (1808–1823), *England and Spain* contained an overt political message, insisting on British intervention in the Peninsula and encouraging a renewed British commitment to the cause of liberty both at home and abroad. Although Hemans clearly understood the restricted position of women in politics, she expressed every intention to intervene. Writing to her aunt shortly before the publication of *England and Spain*, Hemans insisted that “though females are forbidden to interfere in politics, yet as I have a dear, dear brother, at present on the scene of action, I may be allowed to feel some ardour on the occasion.”⁴ While seemingly demure, Hemans's comments clearly signal a determination to participate in the current debates about the war as well as belie the scope and depth of *England and Spain*.

As Sweet has pointed out, Hemans's early poetry found sponsorship among Liverpool's powerful Whig patrons and influential dissenting circles,⁵ but her decision to support the war, a position that ran contrary to her pro-peace Whig supporters, clearly reveals her willingness to stake her own claims in debates over pressing national concerns. Although the popular Spanish resistance to Napoleon in May 1808 initially led to widespread enthusiasm in Britain, the Spaniards' solicitation for British aid initiated what would turn out to be a protracted controversy over British intervention and the value of Spanish independence. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's June 15, 1808 parliamentary speech, linking the liberation of Spain with the “emancipation of the world,” may have initially served as a rallying cry uniting Whigs, Tories, and reformers behind an inspiring call for national independence.⁶ Yet, after a series of military defeats later that year, John

4. Henry F. Chorley, *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans with Illustrations of her Literary Character from her Private Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Lea and Carey, 1836), 13.

5. For more on how Hemans's early poetry became implicated in what Sweet calls a “culture of disestablishment,” an outgrowth of Whig Opposition, see Nanora Sweet, “‘Lorenzo's Liverpool and ‘Corinne's’ Coppet: The Italianate Salon and Romantic Education,” in *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, eds. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 244–60.

6. Sheridan, *Speeches of the Late Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan (Several Corrected by Himself)*, ed. “by a constitutional friend” (London: Patrick Martin, 1816), 5:370.

Moore's disastrous retreat at Corunna, and the universally condemned Convention of Cintra, British public opinion was much more open to questioning Britain's decision to interfere in Spanish affairs. As public debate began to refocus on the Spaniards' questionable commitment to their own war of independence and the prospects of their likely success, political oppositions once again flared up, igniting a print war that clearly divided pro-war Tories in one camp from their anti-war Whig counterparts in the other.

Leading the charge was the *Edinburgh Review*, which in July 1808 reinforced Samuel Whitbread's warning against "being romantic in the cause of [Spanish] liberty."⁷ The journal's commitment to an anti-romantic and pro-peace Whig portrayal of the conflict turned on two practically minded questions: "whether or not the Spaniards are likely to succeed" and "how are they to seek success."⁸ Attempting to "preach reason in a conflict of passions," the author, Henry Brougham, concluded that despite their noble efforts, the superiority of Napoleon's army almost guaranteed "that the Spaniards [would] be defeated."⁹ Although Brougham presented the case as merely a matter of practical analysis, it became increasingly apparent that what the author really objected to was the Tory representation of the Spanish conflict as simply a struggle for national independence rather than an opportunity for universal reform. In Brougham's view, the Spanish situation demanded "a total and radical change in their government, and in their whole domestic policy," a transformation Brougham conceded was "decidedly revolutionary."¹⁰ Three months later, in a joint article with Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, Brougham went a step further, explicitly comparing the events in Spain to the French Revolution. According to Brougham and Jeffrey, "the Spanish revolution," like the French, pitted the interests of the people, specifically the "lower orders," against the "aristocracy."¹¹ If Spain, in spite of the odds, should triumph, "the mass of the people" required a representative form of government "sufficiently radical," as they put it, to "prevent the repetition of the former abuses, and carry reform—change—revolution (we dread not the use of this word, so popular in England before the late reign of terror), salutary, just, and necessary revolution, over all the departments of the state."¹²

7. [Henry Brougham], "A Letter from Mr Whitbread to Lord Holland, on the Present Situation of Spain," *Edinburgh Review* 12 (1808): 443.

8. [Brougham], 434.

9. [Brougham], 443.

10. [Brougham], 442–43.

11. [Henry Brougham and Francis Jeffrey], "Don Pedro Cevallos on the French Usurpation of Spain," *Edinburgh Review* 13 (1808): 226.

12. [Brougham and Jeffrey], 221.

Jeffrey's and Brougham's attempt to reinterpret the war as a "necessary revolution," however, merely provided a platform for their call for universal reform. Although the Spanish War of Independence promised the kind of state transformation so desperately sought after in Britain, Jeffrey and Brougham doubted both the Spanish commitment to such radical change and the promise of success. For these reasons, Jeffrey and Brougham urged their readers not to support Britain's "fatal policy," but instead to refocus on reform at home, which, the Spanish revolution despite its likely failure, reminded Britons, was absolutely necessary.¹³

In its first issue of March 1809, the Tory *Quarterly Review* offered its own polemic on the Spanish question, zeroing in on the Peninsular War debate as the single most important topic on which the magazine would define its political perspective for its readers. Countering the anti-war stance of the *Edinburgh Review*, George Ellis and George Canning discounted disparaging remarks made against the Spanish allies and portrayed the war positively as "a spectacle, certainly not less improbable than the wildest fictions of romance."¹⁴ In pointing out the similarities between the Peninsular War and the "fictions of romance" and celebrating Spanish national history from the Reconquest to the present, Ellis and Canning invoked commonplace associations between chivalry and the values of traditional political power: military prowess, imperial conquest, and national influence. According to Ellis and Canning, Spain exemplified "the undaunted spirit of the universal nation," a concept of the nation embodied in their struggle for national autonomy and self-determination.¹⁵ As such, the Spanish War of Independence was decidedly not a revolution, at least "in the French sense of the term," but rather a campaign for the restoration of the institutions and values that formed the basis of Spain's history and national character.¹⁶ In this way, the *Quarterly Review* defended Spanish efforts to restore the King and its ancient institutions, which detractors mistakenly dismissed as "ill-timed and unmeaning loyalty."¹⁷

Surely more can be said about the role the Peninsular War debate played in intensifying political divisions in post-1790s Britain, but the contest between the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review* reveals the political minefield Hemans willingly and knowingly entered in writing about the Peninsular War. Despite Brougham's skepticism toward the idealization of

13. [Brougham and Jeffrey], 230.

14. [George Ellis and George Canning], "Affaires d'Espagne, Nos. 1 to 5.—Confédération des Royaumes et Provinces d'Espagne contre Buonaparte, Nos. 1 to 6, &c.," *Quarterly Review* 1 (1808): 1.

15. [Ellis and Canning], 15.

16. [Ellis and Canning], 6.

17. [Ellis and Canning], 5.

Spain, Hemans fully commits to it in *England and Spain*. Stereotypically representing the Iberian nation as a “land of ideal virtues, heroism and unbroken tradition of patriotic feeling,” the poem celebrates the Spaniards for their “loyalty, by perils unsubdued; / Untainted faith, unshaken fortitude.”¹⁸ Iberia’s “valour and patriotism” is then linked to its chivalric militarism, which the poem celebrates through its commemoration of Spain’s national heroes: El Cid, El Campeador, El Gran Capitan Gonzalo de Córdoba, and Almanzor, the Victorious (319). Spain’s national heroic tradition thus begins with the Reconquest and culminates in the reign of Charles v, whose imperial enterprises are lauded as inaugurating the “golden days” of cultural refinement, peace, and liberty (333). With the rhythmic march of heroic couplets the poem then quickly escalates to an outright call for Britain “to wield / The beamy spear” and revive the “martial ardour” of its own heroic past (320).

It is easy to see how the poem’s anti-Napoleonic tirade and vehement call to arms became easily appropriated for support of Tory policy abroad, specifically answering Whig fears concerning the fickleness of the Spaniards by insisting on their fervent patriotism and steadfast devotion. More significantly, however, in reconstructing England’s national heroic past as a series of military ventures in the pursuit of fame, fortune, and empire, Hemans portrayed Liberty as a right secured through conquest, imperial pursuits, and economic dominance. Though fate has denied England “Peruvian mines and rich Hindostan’s pride,” the riches of the world are England’s to possess, for “fearless Commerce . . . / Makes all the wealth of foreign climes thy own . . . / Then wafts their gold, their varied stores to thee, / Queen of the trident! empress of the sea!” (322). The war in Spain, consequently, is framed within the larger narrative of empire, interpreting valor and patriotism, the poem’s key concepts, in terms of a militaristic nation-making process and perpetual imperial expansion.

Yet right from its opening lines, the poem begins to set up another, counter reading. In framing the conflict as the most important moment in the global struggle between “Liberty” and “Oppression,” Hemans adopts a language and tone reminiscent of the revolutionary rhetoric of the 1790s that still figured in much of the writing of reformers like her patron William Roscoe, who remained committed to the principles of the French Revolution (319). In fact, *England and Spain* opens by echoing the lines of Roscoe’s well-known revolutionary song “Unfold, Father Time,” which he wrote for the “friends of liberty” in Liverpool to commemorate the storming of the Bastille: “Too long had Oppression and Terror entwined /

18. Felicia Hemans, *The Works of Mrs Hemans; with a Memoir of her Life, by her Sister*, ed. Harriet Mary Owen (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1839), 1:330. All further references to *England and Spain* are cited parenthetically in the text by page.

Those fancy-form'd chains that enslave the free mind."¹⁹ *England and Spain* similarly begins, "Too long have Tyranny and Power combin'd, / To sway, with iron scepter, o'er mankind" (319). By consciously adopting a radical voice to describe the struggle between Liberty and Oppression, Hemans taps into a contentious liberal discourse that sought to reinterpret the Peninsular Campaign as a global contest between the forces of progress and the retrograde logic of the *ancien régime*. In fact, in its inclusion of England in its history of liberticide, citing English persecution of Scotland in the thirteenth century, for example, Hemans's poem radically shifts the object of reference in "Tyranny and Power combin'd" from Napoleon to England itself. For though Freedom has "long . . . slept in dead repose," Britain's support of the Spanish patriots now provides an important opportunity to continue its own liberal tradition exemplified in figures like King Alfred, Milton, and, somewhat ironically, William Wallace.

The call for Liberty to "rise . . . and, break . . . from thy trance," therefore, is strikingly ambiguous (320). On one hand, it is a call for securing Liberty through the nation-making enterprise and British imperial expansion. On the other, it is a call for, as Gary Kelly puts it, "a renewal of the nation's libertarian traditions," framing the Peninsular War as an international campaign for the universal cause of freedom.²⁰ But how exactly is Hemans able to produce this ambiguity within a poem that by most accounts seems straightforward and unproblematic?

On one level, the ambiguity of the poem is due in large part to its deliberate erasure of referential traits and a tendency toward abstraction, a strategy Hemans would become quite adept at employing even in her more formally experimental poems like *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* and *Modern Greece*. Here England and Spain are absented from history through their idealization as Albion and Iberia, other nations like Gaul, Lusitania, and Ausonia are similarly mythologized, and concepts like Liberty, Oppression, and Genius are abstracted through apostrophe. The poem, thus, pulls in two directions, oscillating between its figurations of England and Spain as historically specific, geographically localized and developing nations in the midst of a particular political crisis, and their representations as idealized communities, whose chivalric virtues are fixed in permanent national mythologies and unchangeable principles.

On another level, the poem depends on the alternation of these two registers to advance its central argument. Creating a dialectical framework in which the binaries of localized and idealized nation, and actual and mytho-

19. William Roscoe, "Unfold, Father Time," quoted in Henry Roscoe, *The Life of William Roscoe* (London: T. Cadell, 1833), 1:107.

20. Kelly, "Introduction" to *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Kelly (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 20.

logical history are finally synthesized, *England and Spain* supersedes Tory and Whig distinctions to gesture toward a new kind of political discourse that revises and updates British perceptions of the Spanish in the modern world while maintaining a view of history that values the romance of the nation state, even as it looks beyond it. In coding Spanish resistance as an episode in the epic struggle between “Freedom” and “Oppression” and portraying history in teleological terms as the inevitable triumph of liberty culminating in peace, the poem answers the *Edinburgh Review*’s question of “whether the Spanish are likely to succeed” in the affirmative, invoking Whig ideology to answer the party’s own political objections. In similar fashion, by expanding the ideology of progress to international and global contexts, Hemans argues that predicting the inevitable defeat of the Spanish is incompatible with Whig doctrine, thereby reversing the *Edinburgh Review*’s conclusions through a reinterpretation of the implications of the magazine’s own ideological premises. But by the same token, Hemans also counters attempts by the Tory party to interpret the war solely as an issue of national independence and loyalty to institutions. The war, according to Hemans, was fought on behalf of greater and more important goals based for the most part on universalizing the principles of the French Revolution. While Hemans may be personally reluctant to describe Spain’s war of independence in Jacobinical terms, she shows little hesitation in exploiting those connections, rewriting Tory support of the war as support for the revolutionary principles on which Opposition Whigs based their program of reform.

Many who read *England and Spain* today find it difficult to think of it as other than, as Peter Trinder writes, a conventional poem consisting mostly of “derivative stuff.”²¹ Like many of her modern critics, contemporary reviewers were also quick to dismiss Hemans’s poem, finding little in it to praise other than its effective use of, as the *British Critic* put it, “the most approved artifices of poetic style.”²² To say that Hemans’s poem is a conventional piece of poetry is of course to say a great deal. As Paul Hunter reminds us, eighteenth-century poetic forms like the one Hemans purposely adopts “signaled ambition and seriousness, indicated the express intention of engaging in extended argumentative discourse, and promised the basis for systematic consideration of important issues.”²³ The heroic couplet in particular, the privileged form of many long, complex eighteenth-century philosophical essays and argumentative poems, becomes in fact a vehicle for elaboration, explication, and modification of meaning. Through the

21. Trinder, *Mrs Hemans* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1984), 8.

22. *British Critic* 35 (1810): 402.

23. Hunter, “Couplets and Conversation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. John Sitter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

proliferation of allusions, digressions, and comparisons, Hemans complicates and diversifies her representation of the political in a way that moves from broad generalizations to more nuanced argument and reflection. Hemans's topical poem on such a politically charged subject as the Peninsular War thus does not suggest a simple reification of conventional and static ideas about the nation, but rather an earnest attempt to grapple with the complex issues surrounding Britain's controversial foreign policy. In fact, by daring to speak in contradictory ways, Hemans not only exposes the ideological contradictions deeply embedded in party disputes over the question of Spain, but does so by adopting an eighteenth-century poetic form that, as Christine Gerrard reminds us, "both mirrored and embodied party-political debate."²⁴ In this way Hemans dramatizes the political, re-enacting the political contest between Whigs and Tories through an aesthetic rendering of the competing ideological claims invoked in the Spanish question.

Yet on a deeper level, the politics of Hemans's poem is not found in its expression, critique, or subversion of Whig, Tory, or other political sentiments. Rather the politics of Hemans's poem inheres in its ability to bring visibility to the conceptual frameworks structuring public discussion on a very specific issue and then subjecting those frameworks to social, cultural, and political critique. By adopting a revolutionary voice to promote the principles of national and imperial aggrandizement, *England and Spain* produces a striking incongruity for an audience who naturally seeks out meaningful comprehension. The need for intellectual clarification, however, is never satisfied in the poem despite the ideological closure promised by its poetic form. Hemans finds nothing problematic about ending her vehement call to arms with a paean to peace. Although there is reason enough to attribute this incongruity to her "ambiguous politics," as Saglia has argued, there is a sense in which the feeling of incongruity creates the potential for an exploratory politics open to challenging the exclusive claims of ideology.²⁵ By forging an alliance between Tory and Whig ideals in a poem explicitly about new political alliances, Hemans expresses the fluidity of the positions she adopts and the contingency of those positions on historical circumstances that at times call for new formations. In doing so, Hemans both dramatizes the indeterminacy of political ideology and invests the occasion with the power and influence to shape political thought, or, in other words, the power to determine the conditions that give ideology its force and character. In this context, valor and patriotism, the pillars of the poem's central message, are exposed as mere slogans, dramatic flashes with particu-

24. Gerrard, "Political Passions," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 37.

25. Diego Saglia, *Poetic Castles in Spain: British Romanticism and Figurations of Iberia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 115.

lar meaning within the Spanish conflict, but subject to a variety of meanings in a variety of different contexts. As such, *England and Spain* problematizes and critiques the idea of political ideology as deterministic of politics, revealing instead a practical politics in which ideology and political disposition are not bound in any necessary way.

The effect of this practical politics—a politics embodied in how Hemans's poem opens up new ways of speaking of the political through a rewiring of the relationship between conflicting ideologies—is ultimately to provide access to it, particularly for groups excluded from the governing political discourse. As a woman "forbidden to interfere in politics," Hemans illustrates precisely how to interfere, denying the binary power of Whig and Tory establishment thought to point toward her goals of integrating and transcending party divisions. Hemans's vision of history, in which nations retain their cultural distinction even as they pursue a universal set of values, amounts to a political fantasy made visible only through a conventional literary form that can validate it. But this fantasy is ultimately about possibility, where what can be said or not said, represented or not represented, argued or not argued is for anyone to decide, including a sixteen-year old girl expected to stay clear of politics. Hemans's mode of writing is arguably egalitarian in that it permits, in fact, encourages, political engagement among marginalized groups left out of the national debate who, like her, with brothers facing the very real possibility of death, stood the most to lose from Britain's decision to go to war.

Given the subversive nature of Hemans's mode of writing, it should come as little surprise that her reviewers would want to dismiss her and that those closest to her would recommend that she avoid politics altogether. Embarrassed by her pro-war arguments in favor of British intervention in the Peninsula, Matthew Nicholson, a friend of the Browne family and Whig patron of Hemans's early work, encouraged Hemans to focus instead on writing poetry of the home and hearth. Shortly after Hemans's brother George returned from the war in December 1809 "wounded and disillusioned," Nicholson took the occasion to try and "check Felicia's military ardour, or rather her expression of it in poetry." As he explained to Mrs. Browne, "I think his [her brother's] measures and her own disappointed hopes of victory will operate more powerfully than any preaching to convince her that politicks are unworthy of her Muse." Instead, Nicholson recommended that Hemans write proper feminine poetry that cultivated "the tender sensibilities of innocence and nature."²⁶

Although Hemans heeded the advice, many of her poems, including

26. Francis Nicholson, "Correspondence Between Mrs. Hemans and Matthew Nicholson, an Early Member of this Society," *Manchester Memoirs* 54, no. 9 (1910): 17–18.

"The Domestic Affections," hardly avoid "rousing the passions by declamation."²⁷ Subverting Nicholson's binary division between the political and the domestic, Hemans insisted that her patriotic verses lauding military valor were not only consistent with, but in fact integral to, her lines celebrating domestic affections. As she had done in *England and Spain*, Hemans denied ideology the power to determine her politics, resolving yet another apparent paradox through an assertion of a political will both resistant to ideological containment and open to new modes of political speech. By considering the impact of war on the home and the troubled relationship between war and peace, *Domestic Affections* as a collection directly addresses the perceived contradiction between glorifying the nation and celebrating the domestic affections. By equating the nation with the home and reimagining Spanish chivalry as the ultimate protector of feminine values, Hemans creates an imperialist vision that reconstitutes the defense of empire as the defense of domestic life. Yet, her insistence that the domestic affections provide a platform for the articulation of loss, suffering, and sorrow politicizes the domestic through a reinstatement of its role in the life-and-death struggle of the nation. For Hemans, it can be argued, domestic values alone constitute the domain of the political, since the decision to risk the life of loved ones is most justifiably left to those who remain to mourn their loss. In this way, Hemans provides a political imperative for women, not simply as guardians of the private sphere and protectors of domestic values, but as political agents who bear the responsibility of conferring the right to lead brothers and husbands to "scenes of destruction" onto the state that must now take into account their voices. Consequently, *The Domestic Affections* does not mark the beginning of Hemans's shift away from politics to a more feminine poetry of the private sphere, as most critics assert; rather, it signals the formation of a gendered nationalist poetics that both feminizes her conspicuous political engagements and politicizes the home as a site for development of Britain's national and imperial mission.

Despite the suggestion of its title, the various sonnets, odes, and songs that make up the collection almost exclusively focus on the conflict abroad. Yet, unlike *England and Spain*, these poems, as many critics have noted, begin to contest the chivalric idealism of that poem through a careful consideration of the disastrous consequences of war on domestic life.²⁸ This tension between the domestic and the chivalric can be seen especially in her poems to her brothers. Torn between the impulse to celebrate her brothers

27. Nicholson, "Correspondence," 18.

28. See, for example, Susan J. Wolfson, "'Domestic Affections' and 'the Spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, eds. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 128-66; and Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, 129.

as national heroes and her desire for their return home, Hemans writes a series of poems that posit the domestic space as a site of refuge from war and a place of spiritual and emotional regeneration. Rather than glorifying the Peninsular Campaign as she had done in *England and Spain*, in such poems as “To my Eldest Brother with the British Army in Portugal” and “To My Younger Brother, on His Return from Spain,” Hemans instead welcomes her “cherished wanderer[s] to . . . home once more”: “from scenes of destruction, from perils unblest; / Oh! welcome again to the grove and the field, / To the vale of retirement and rest!”²⁹ Indeed, her love for her brothers and her love for the Spanish cause soon became sources of conflicting desires. Although Hemans still represents her brothers as Albion’s heroes, her patriotic rhetoric cannot conceal the “horrors” that they must endure (51).

Hemans’s maturing sense of the political and historical realities of the Peninsular War finds particularly dramatic expression in “War and Peace—a Poem.” Hemans here produces a series of vignettes that focus on the intense grief and suffering of the unsung victims of war. Initiated by a series of qualifying clauses following a cautionary “yet,” these vignettes, like the halting syntax that opens them (97–106), interrupt the main narrative to pause and reflect on “the horrors of relentless war” (97). “Yes,” the poem repeatedly asserts, Britain has consistently triumphed over oppression and proved matchless in arms and influence, but even an unwavering patriotism cannot erase the grief and sorrow caused by loss and suffering (94). Such is the case with Sir John Moore, whose heroic self-sacrifice at the battle of Corunna is both the cause for commemoration and remorse:

MOORE! thy bright sun in fame, in victory set,
Tho’ dimm’d with tears, tho’ clouded with regret!

(101–2)

The recognition of the powerlessness of “bold Victory” to console the bereaved leads to a dramatic shift in tone and poetic mode, one that moves away from the declamatory style of *England and Spain* toward a more sober and reflective expression of mourning. The image of the mother weeping over her dead son in particular, an image that constitutes the poem’s most memorable passage, dramatically expresses the hidden cost of war, highlighting the inadequacy of ceremony and ritual to bring comfort to those left behind:

29. Felicia Hemans, *The Domestic Affections 1812* (New York: Woodstock Books, 1995), 146, 50. All further references to *The Domestic Affections* are cited parenthetically in the text by page.

But could their pomp console her wounded breast,
 Dispel one sigh, or lull one care to rest?
 Ah! suff'ring Parent! fated still to mourn,
 Ah! wounded heart!—*he never shall return.*

(103)

The emphasis on the mother's suffering—"her soul-consuming grief" (104)—and the finality of her son's death set up the poem's final act of sympathy:

He fell!—her woe, her soul-consuming grief,
 Mourns in no language, seeks for no relief;
 Forbids the mind in sympathy to glow,
 The voice to murmur, and the tear to flow.

(104)

In presenting the paralyzing sorrow that resists articulation, Hemans gives voice to those who are traditionally silenced by grief.

The woman who silently grieves and dies alone will become an important figure in Hemans's later poetry; here, however, mothers, widows, and "Orphan-maid[s]" are represented as figures of pain and loss who perform their suffering on an international stage (104). England's mothers weep, the poem makes clear, because Napoleon has made war necessary, but once the enemy has been defeated, Albion must let "the combat cease" (95). On one hand, Hemans's irenic vision appears to check the jingoistic tendencies of her earlier writing. In demanding a relinquishing of arms in favor of domestic tranquility, Hemans returns, it would seem, to the more properly feminine poetry critics like Nicholson had encouraged her to write. On the other hand, the call for peace functions as a political demand placed on the nation by the victims of war, who, unlike the party leaders in Parliament or the Tory and Whig ideologues of the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, have the right to demand compliance. Once a private affair and on the margins of public debate, death and the "suff'ring Parent" now take center stage in the national discussion over British intervention in the Peninsula. As those most affected by the state's decision to allow its sons to be killed in battle, families left to shed "tears of blood" are alone imbued with the authority to sanction war in Hemans's writing. Suffering accordingly invests the mourners of England's dead with a political subjectivity capable of speaking to the nation. The appeal to Albion to "wave thy sword again, / Call thy brave champions to the battle-plain!" consequently formulates a new argument in favor of Britain's war policy, one that avoids the ideological trappings that justify the cost of human life without displaying it or

authorize the use of force without exposing its violence. The right to take life can only perversely follow from an unwavering commitment to a political ideology that, as she had demonstrated in *England and Spain*, is by nature indeterminate. In the face of the real threat of extermination, the decision to risk death must be made by those who are at risk of dying.

Although the poem on an argumentative level resolves the inherent contradiction between its bellicose and irenic visions by representing conflict as a necessary evil, it is clear that Hemans's real contribution to nineteenth-century political discourse is her investment of the home with the power to mobilize the nation both to wage war and to exercise the right of conquest. In her final act of politicizing the domestic, Hemans equates the home with empire, thereby transforming the conflict abroad into a matter of domestic concern. As Tricia Lootens many years ago demonstrated, "Hemans's conception of the home as both separate empire and the prerequisite for empire was also early and explicit."³⁰ In poems like "Song" for example, domestic affections become a form of colonial desire. Longing for a tranquility only made possible by an immersion in the exotic, the poet entreats,

Oh! bear me to the groves of palm,
Where perfum'd airs diffuse their balm!
And when the noon-tide beams invade,
Then lay me in the embow'ring shade;
Where Bananas o'er my head,
Mingling with the Tam'rind spread.

(24-25)

Secluded from the world of hostilities, the poet sips on "cocoa's nectar" and "citron's juice," enjoying the beautiful colors of the exotic birds that "amidst the foliage, raise / Melodies, in varied lays" (25). Similarly, in "The Indian Lover" nature readily "spreads her lavish bloom" with "ambrosial odours rare," exotic fruit, and wild birds with "tints of orient beauty drest," reproducing the peace and tranquility that Hemans more commonly attributes to the domestic affections (36-37). The bower, in particular, emerges as a sign of home, a refuge from the destructive reach of war and violence, but also a sign of imperial wealth. In this context, military violence is made to seem unfortunately essential to the preservation of domestic peace. For "Domestic bliss," Hemans writes in "The Domestic Affections," "dwells, unruffled, in her bow'r of rest, / *Her* empire, home!" (150). Home, consequently, is where the empire is, and the home must always be defended.

30. Lootens, "Hemans and Home," 249.

If the politics of literature is embodied in the framing of the relation between what can be said and what can be seen, Hemans's conflation of the language of empire with the language of domestic affections is certainly political. In promoting a new system of meaning in which the rhetorical modes of writing make possible new ways of speaking about the nation and empire, Hemans gives rise to new perceptions of that relationship that are potentially transformative. Although domesticating the empire has certain political implications, particularly in the way in which such a strategy was often used to justify violence and induce social consent, Hemans's writing just as readily creates the conditions and possibility of critique of that violence, made undeniably visible through its dramatization of suffering and grief on an international stage. To Mellor, the tension between these two possible ways of reading Hemans precisely illustrates "the fragility of the very domestic ideology [her poetry] endorses."³¹ There is, however, another politics at play, one found in the linguistic structures of her writing, be it the ironic synthesis of Tory and Whig ideals in *England and Spain* or the reconfiguration of the language of the home into the language of empire in *The Domestic Affections*. In both cases, Hemans's writing allows those "forbidden to interfere in politics" to enter wholeheartedly without having to subscribe to any one political ideology. The leveling effect of Hemans's mode of writing, a mode we know appealed to a great majority of nineteenth-century readers, has also produced ambivalent readings of her work, then and now. In commenting on Hemans's "equivocal politics," Sweet argues Hemans "seemed a Tory among Whigs, a Whig among Tories."³² I argue that this was precisely the point.

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31. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, 124.

32. Nanora Sweet, "The Bowl of Liberty: Felicia Hemans and the Romantic Mediterranean" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 1993), 72.

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