

**“The Nothingness of Fame, At Least to Woman”:
Felicia Hemans and the Price of Celebrity**

By [Alex Grammatikos](#), Carleton University

Thou shalt have fame! Oh, mockery! give the reed
From storms a shelter,—give the drooping vine
Something round which its tendrils may entwine,—
Give the parch'd flower a rain-drop, and the meed
Of love's kind words to woman! Worthless fame! (“Properzia Rossi” 77-81)

<1>The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British literary market, with its ever-expanding consumer base, provided an unprecedented number of authors with the opportunity to publish their works. In order to become successful, writers had to negotiate the demands of the public sphere, which included forging a marketable role for themselves within it. Felicia Hemans is a particularly good example of a writer who strategically exploited the opportunities provided by this newly-established commercial field on her way to becoming one of Britain’s most famous and profitable poets during the 1820s. Despite her immense popularity as a domestic poetess([1](#)) in the 1820s, however, Hemans was not initially successful. Instead, as her correspondence with friends and publishers in the earlier part of her career reveals, Hemans struggled to negotiate effectively her role in the print market. For example, in an 1813 letter to her friend (and fellow writer) William Stanley Roscoe, a then twenty year old Hemans asks for publication advice and comments, “I know not what apology to make for thus troubling you, but that I am so little conversant with subjects of this nature, & that I have no literary friends to interest themselves in bringing me forward” (*Selected* 479).

<2>Hemans’s struggles as a writer looking to publish were certainly not unique to her but rather reflect the kinds of pressures exerted upon amateur authors writing for a public market. As John Brewer discusses in *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, professional writers entering what he calls the “expanding maze or labyrinth” (140) of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publishing had to contend with the fact that “they did not fit into prevailing ideas about how the literary world was constructed” (144). And although Brewer comments that “by the late

eighteenth century the professional author, the creator of unique works of literature, had become a recognizable type . . . [whose] creativity not only shaped what he wrote but conferred on him a public authority to explain how it should be interpreted” (151), this authorial figure to which he alludes is unmistakably male. In fact, as Brewer’s analysis of the gendered nature of cultural relations in this period elsewhere demonstrates, women looking to publish were often viewed as “inherently immodest” for offering up their works for public consumption (“The Most Polite Age” 354).

<3>If male writers could depend on readers to recognize their genius, female writers like Hemans were not granted this same privilege. Instead, women authors had to contend with a print market (and society) that heavily regulated their creative output and expected specific kinds of writing from them. “A publishing woman,” Susan J. Wolfson comments, “always risked censure, which quickly materialized if her talents were spent against the prevailing opinion of a sexual character” (*Borderlines* 15). Because female writers were forced to approach public writing differently from male authors—that is, they had constantly to be aware of how their gender impacted their work’s reception—the ways in which they navigated the “labyrinth” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publishing also necessarily differed from their male counterparts.

<4>The various letters Hemans composed over the course of her career demonstrate how savvy she became when negotiating the early nineteenth-century print market. Her correspondence also reveals, however, her intensifying frustration with having to compromise her poetic output in order to satisfy the demands of the literary market, especially at the peak of her popularity in the 1820s. Taken together, Hemans’s letters provide us with yet another lens through which to reassess the poet’s career and, more generally, to examine the kinds of barriers women writers in the early nineteenth century encountered when writing for a public.

<5>In this article, I argue that Hemans’s mounting dissatisfaction with her poetic vocation arose from her recognition that a disparity existed between her literary success and her artistic freedom and reputation. Although Hemans was by the late 1820s the best-selling female poet in England, her poetic content and style were nonetheless dictated, and therefore limited, by the demands of the print market. What Hemans began to realize near the end of her career, I suggest, is that she was bound by her own earlier decision to enact the role of domestic poetess. Hemans’s willingness to adopt the persona of domestic poetess may have allowed her to profit from her writing, but it certainly did not grant her the literary autonomy and respect that she felt she deserved. Instead, she was forced to continue to generate the kind of poetry that made her popular—it was not so simple for Hemans to thwart her domestic poetess persona once she had donned it. Analyzing letters composed by Hemans throughout her poetic career allows us better to understand how the nineteenth-century print market, which afforded

female writers like Hemans greater opportunity for paid publication, simultaneously produced anxieties and obstacles for these writers by restricting their artistic freedom and imposing gendered literary identities upon them with which they were not always entirely satisfied.

<6>In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that we need to consider both authors' "positions" (that is, the amount of clout artists possess in a specific social or artistic sphere) and their "dispositions" (that is, the several ways in which writers negotiate their roles in the literary field) in order to appreciate "the practices of writers and artists" (61). According to Bourdieu, the relationship between positions and dispositions is dialectical: writers' positions dictate their dispositions while dispositions also in turn shape positions. For Bourdieu, there is always "a degree of conscious strategy, [and] cynical calculation" (73) undertaken by writers when they are attempting to popularize their work in the print market. Nowhere is such "strategy" and "calculation" more clearly exhibited than in two letters Hemans writes to her publisher John Murray in 1817.(2)

<7>In the first letter, written on 26 February 1817, and with which she had enclosed *Modern Greece* (a poem Murray published in June of the same year), Hemans begins by addressing Murray's contention that her current topic of literary interest—"The Arts"—is not one that appeals to a large audience.(3) She tells Murray, "Had I been more fully aware of the very limited taste for the Arts which you inform me is displayed by the Public, I should certainly have applied myself to some other subject; but from having seen so many works advertised on Sculpture, Painting, &c. I was naturally led to imagine the contrary" (*Selected* 480). Hemans performs a balancing act here: while she acknowledges Murray's suggestion about the unpopularity of the Arts, Hemans also emphasizes that she wrote *Modern Greece* as a result of examining what types of works were currently being published. Because she had seen "so many works advertised" on such subjects as sculpture and painting, she believed that her poem on a similar topic would be a guaranteed success.(4) Hemans illustrates to Murray, therefore, that she composed *Modern Greece* because she mistakenly overestimated the popularity of "the Arts" as a subject for poetry and not because she is opposed to writing a kind of verse that will profit both her and her publisher.

<8>It may seem peculiar that Hemans anticipates the failure of a poem that has not yet been published. However, it is important to recognize that, even though Hemans is in this part of her letter referencing *Modern Greece*, Murray's comment about "the very limited taste for the Arts" was actually made in relation to the poet's earlier work, *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1815), a poem that critics universally praised, but which was a minor financial failure.(5) As such, Hemans's defence of *Modern Greece* at the beginning of her letter also functions as a defence of her earlier published *Restoration*. And indeed, throughout the rest of

the letter, Hemans is forced simultaneously to justify the reasons for *Restoration's* lack of success and convince Murray that *Modern Greece* will be profitable.

<9>In the remainder of her correspondence, Hemans offers Murray various options for ensuring the popularity of her future poetry. After lamenting *Restoration's* failure to spark public interest, Hemans tells Murray that she has,

reason to think that part of the second edition would have sold very well at Oxford, as I have been told by friends that many of their acquaintance there, had enquired for it, and would have purchased it immediately had it been on the spot—I should have mentioned that circumstance to you at the time the 2d. Edition made its appearance, but imagined you must have been aware of it—As I have several friends at both Universities, and one in particular of great interest and high literary reputation at Cambridge, I cannot but think that the present work, if published, would be well received there and at Oxford. (*Selected* 480-1)

Hemans here astutely balances apologizing to Murray for the failure of her *Restoration*, mildly criticizing him for failing to recognize a potentially lucrative market for the poem at Oxford and Cambridge, and reassuring him that *Modern Greece* will be profitable if sold to the correct audience. Hemans's willingness to offer Murray advice on how to do his job suggests that she began to understand the important role authors played in helping publishers best market their work.

<10>In fact, in what is arguably her shrewdest suggestion, Hemans concludes her letter by telling Murray, "Perhaps it would be more advantageous that it [*Modern Greece*] should not be known to proceed from a female pen" (*Selected* 481). It was certainly not uncommon practice for both female and male writers to publish their works anonymously. However, for Hemans, leaving her name off *Modern Greece* was a pointed strategy to disguise her gender so that the poem would be taken more seriously, thus increasing her chances of profiting from it. Hemans realized that concealing her "female pen" was particularly important for a poem like *Modern Greece* because its main focus—the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles debate—was considered subject matter reserved for male writers who were afforded an education in the Classics. Indeed, when reviews for *Modern Greece* appeared, the majority of critics believed the poet to be male. *The Eclectic Review* deemed the poem "the production of a man of genuine talent and feeling" (598) and the *New British Lady's Magazine* even suggested it was one of Byron's: "We think we trace a noble and self-exiled Poet here—The Poem has all his majesty and grandeur" (70). By leaving her name off of her poem, Hemans was able to attain the "majesty" and "grandeur" usually reserved for her male contemporaries.

<11>Despite this high praise, however, *Modern Greece* was only moderately profitable.⁽⁶⁾ Paula R. Feldman notes that Hemans “had to wait four years for a sum only a third the size of the one Murray had paid for her previous book,” as he decided to split profits from the poem with her rather than pay her upfront as he had done with *Restoration* (154). Hemans’s experiment with *Modern Greece*, I suggest, reveals something significant about poetic persona and literary profit in the early nineteenth-century print market. Hemans might have been able to imitate a male writer by withholding her identity, but she certainly could not attain the level of success writers such as Byron enjoyed because, unlike him, Hemans was unable to use her poetic persona to her advantage. By deciding to publish her poem anonymously, Hemans deprived herself of a marketable authorial persona that so many early nineteenth-century writers depended on to bolster their reputations. Tom Mole identifies the Romantic era as the age of “celebrity culture” and suggests that the early nineteenth-century print industry’s “branding” of the author “palliated the feeling of alienation between cultural producers and consumers by constructing a sense of intimacy” (16).⁽⁷⁾ If Hemans wanted to create such “intimacy” between herself and her readers, she would have to adopt a different strategy from the one she employed with *Modern Greece*. Instead of posing as a male writer, she would have to give into the dictates of the print market by transforming herself into a domestic poetess and playing up this private role in the public realm.

<12>Five months after the publication of *Modern Greece*, Hemans once again writes to Murray to discuss her future compositions. In the letter, she thanks Murray for offering to help her determine “upon a subject likely to excite a more general interest than my former publications could claim” (*Selected* 481). Hemans reveals that she is eager to obtain Murray’s advice concerning suitable subject matter for her future work and is frustrated that she is not profiting from her poetry to the degree that her contemporaries are.⁽⁸⁾ She makes this latter point most apparent when she tells Murray, “The sum you have given [for Byron’s poems] really seems immense—I observe you have his Lordship upon your seal, I really think he ought to wear you on his” (*Selected* 481).⁽⁹⁾ Although Hemans adored Byron and his poetry,⁽¹⁰⁾ she was jealous that Murray was willing to pay him so well for his work, while Hemans, writing essentially on the same subjects as Byron, received only a fraction of his earnings. Also aggravating for Hemans was the fact that Byron could dictate how much he would be paid in advance for his publications (“I observe you have his Lordship upon your seal”) while she was reduced to waiting to be compensated for her work. At this point in his career, Byron had achieved a considerable amount of success which allowed him to control the terms of publication of his works with Murray. Hemans, on the other hand, had to continue to modify her poetry and appeal to Murray for professional advice, resulting in an envy of Byron which is palpable in this letter.

<13>If Hemans was to become popular, she would need to modify her poetic style and content. Hemans realized this and even tells Murray “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” (*Selected* 481). Hemans’s suggestion that she give up writing “work of mere sentiment or description” is ironic, of course, because this is exactly the kind of poetry that makes her popular. In fact, Stephen Behrendt suggests that Hemans’s work between 1817 and 1820 transitions from a poetry of *taste*, “which has to do more with the formal features of the text . . . and with the veneer of the ‘classical’ style,” to a verse of *feeling*, “which has to do with sensibility, emotive power and affectional response on the reader’s part” (106). According to Behrendt, Hemans’s willingness to embrace the “cult of domesticity” and write poems that emphasize “feeling” results from her having read reviews of her work that focus on her gender and celebrate the feminine qualities of her poetry (102).

<14>Behrendt’s argument that critical reviews “undoubtedly influenced Hemans’s decisions about redirecting her subsequent career” (102) is interesting in light of my discussion of the poet’s experience with John Murray and *Modern Greece*. The critical reviews of *Modern Greece*, which commended Hemans’s “masculine” style of writing, would have indicated for the poet that she was making the right career choice by continuing to produce this “classical” style of work. However, although Hemans received accolades for *Modern Greece*, she would have also realized that the majority of these were directed at a writer believed to be male and that hiding her “female pen” could only provide her with a partial degree of renown, not to mention a fraction of her male contemporaries’ earnings. Reading reviews that praised the feminine qualities of her work surely helped Hemans make the decision to alter her writing style, as Behrendt argues, but so too would have the kinds of interactions she had with John Murray in which she learned the importance of developing a style of writing that allowed her to produce a gendered authorial personality which she could use to her public benefit.

<15>Though Hemans had from her earliest letters exhibited a kind of Bourdieuan “strategy” and “calculation,” it is only in the late 1810s that Hemans begins to consciously develop her “disposition” as a domestic poetess and write the sentimental verse for which she became famous. In an October 1819 letter to James Simpson concerning the publication of her poem *The Meeting of Wallace and Bruce on the Banks of the Carron*, Hemans insists, “I want to appear as Mrs. Hemans in the title page of the prize poem” (*Selected* 482). By underlining “Mrs.,” Hemans makes it apparent that she wants to emphasize her marital status, even though she and her husband Captain Alfred Hemans had separated one year earlier.⁽¹¹⁾ In addition to underscoring her wifedom, Hemans was also aware which associations discredited her domestic persona and polarized her readers. In the same letter to Simpson, Hemans comments that her first name “is the subject of so many animadversions and allusions to Rosa Matilda, Laura Maria, and all the Della Cruscian tribe” (*Selected* 482). Although Hemans had her tongue

firmly in her cheek with this comment regarding the literary pseudonyms of Charlotte Dacre, Mary Robinson, and Robert Merry, respectively, her observation nonetheless illustrates that she was intensely aware that her foreign-sounding first name immediately connected her to a group of sentimental writers which her Tory-based readership reviled.⁽¹²⁾ And in another letter, this time in 1828 to her publisher William Blackwood, Hemans tells him that some of her friends have chided her for including Percy Bysshe Shelley's name in an epigraph to one of her poems and requests that Blackwood expunge the maligned poet's name from her publication (*Selected* 486). Even though Hemans clearly enjoyed reading Shelley's poetry, she simply could not risk being associated with such a radical writer if she wanted to ensure her work would sell.⁽¹³⁾ In order to remain convincing in her role as England's national domestic poetess, Hemans was forced to conceal her poetic influences and interests.

<16>At a time when the popularity of novels was prompting progressively more booksellers to avoid publishing poetry, Hemans remained successful, doing so in large part by publishing her work in literary annuals and magazines with considerable profit. Chad Edgar writes that

Between the years 1825 and 1828 Hemans published in periodicals and annuals 14 of the eventual 19 poems included in *Records of Woman* (1828). In addition to doubling the profits that she received for the composition of each poem by publishing it twice, this process of publishing a collected poems volume enabled Hemans to reap the benefits of test-runs. (125)

Hemans became by the mid-1820s one of the best-selling and highest-earning writers in England. So popular was she that by 1827, Hemans could negotiate her rates with Blackwood in the same way that Byron had done with Murray.⁽¹⁴⁾ Hemans's ability repeatedly to convince Blackwood to pay her the amount she requested is particularly impressive considering the publisher's "frank, energetic, shrewd, and strong-willed" character (Morrison 23).

<17>Despite her immense success, Hemans recognized that her fame was transient; she tells one correspondent "I have always the strangest fear of being forgotten" (*Memorials* 145). By the end of her career, Hemans wanted to ensure that she established herself as a serious poet whose work would not only become part of the British literary canon, but also influence its future direction. Hemans demonstrates her desire for literary permanency as early as 1828 when she tells Blackwood of *Records of Woman*, "I have other reasons, besides the hope for profit, for wishing to publish this volume, in parts of which I have expressed more of my own personal feelings, than in any thing I have ever before written" (*Selected* 497). And in the 1830s, Hemans becomes even more specific about the type of work she wants to develop: religious verse. In an 1834 letter, she describes herself as "bound to higher and holier tasks" and declares that it is, "my true task to enlarge the sphere of sacred poetry, and extend its

influence" (*Memorials* 253). According to Julie Melnyk, Hemans's turn to sacred verse allowed the poet to escape "the confines of affectional tradition" (74).

<18>Bourdieu explains that "The work of real emancipation, of which the 'post' of artist or poet is the culmination, can be performed and pursued *only* if the post encounters the appropriate dispositions, such as disinterestedness and daring, and the (external) conditions of these virtues, such as a private income" (63). According to Bourdieu, writers can liberate themselves from dominant cultural powers only if they are willing to take risks and if they are financially independent. He proceeds to argue that, "Thus we find that as a rule those richest in economic, cultural and social capital are the first to move into the new positions" (68). Bourdieu's assessment of a writer's relationship to the literary market is instructive when accounting for Hemans's attempt to establish a new kind of verse at the end of her career (sacred poetry) and interesting to consider vis-à-vis gender: what exactly could a female writer during the early nineteenth century accomplish with the economic, cultural, and social capital that she had amassed?

<19>Hemans may have wanted to create a work of "pure and holy excellence . . . which might permanently take its place as the work of an English poetess" (*Selected* 521), as she tells her friend Rose Lawrence in 1835, but this did not necessarily reflect what the English public or her publisher Blackwood expected from her. Feldman writes that, "with the artistic freedom Blackwood accorded her, her work would increasingly become more explicitly autobiographical and eventually devotional" (169). Although Blackwood did grant Hemans "artistic freedom" as Feldman notes, it should be emphasized that he would also often try to pressure her to write the kind of work he thought would sell: namely, prose and narrative poems. Blackwood tells Hemans in a letter written at the end of 1831, "I hope you are proposing some prose articles for me, and that you are likewise going on with a poem of some length—an interesting Irish tale would be very popular, and be much more effective, for beautiful as your little pieces are, people look for something different from you" (*Selected* 516). Further, although Hemans had the opportunity to publish her more personal and religious poetry, these works were not as financially remunerative as her shorter sentimental lyrics. Edgar notes that *The Forest Sanctuary* (a long, religious lyric) "was not commercially successful" (124) and Wolfson indicates that Blackwood could only offer to split profits from *Records of Woman* with Hemans rather than pay her in advance, an arrangement, we recall from Hemans's past literary relationship with Murray, which the poet disliked (*Selected* 497).

<20>Perhaps, we may speculate, Hemans would have been able to establish her brand of religious verse in the British literary canon if she had not died of edema in May 1835. However, it seems likely that Hemans realized that, despite wanting to alter the direction of her writing, the reading public would still consider her a mere *poetess* and read her work accordingly. The

letters Hemans composed during the same years her verse was becoming more religious portray a woman who had become disillusioned with her fame and the public's perception of her as a sentimental poetess. Importantly, Hemans's later letters reveal that she was conscious of her domestic persona *as a construction*, which prompted her to become critical of the authorial roles that the commercial field imposed on writers. Hemans had to become famous before she could recognize that the literary market, which had admittedly compensated her monetarily, also prevented her poetic growth and imposed a literary persona upon her which she could not easily circumvent.⁽¹⁵⁾ All the tensions of Hemans's negotiations in the publishing market throughout her career come to the forefront in her later letters.

<21>Hemans articulated her resentment in her letters by rebuffing her role as a feminine domestic poetess and criticizing the print market that had created this persona. She tells a close friend in 1829 that she is disenchanted with her fame and, thinking back on her life in Bronwylfa and Rhyllon, comments, "How much more was I was formed for their quiet happiness, than for the weary part of *femme célèbre* which I am now enacting!" (*Selected* 502). Although Hemans apparently desired a peaceful domestic life, she begins to realize that, ironically, fame prevents the "quiet happiness" which is central to her domestic persona. Accordingly, Hemans became increasingly uncomfortable with the celebrity that developed as a result of her reception as a domestic poetess, a persona which she of course helped to cultivate. Hemans is even more explicit about her distaste for her gendered literary persona when writing to an unidentified addressee about an article she had read about herself in an 1831 edition of the *Athenaeum*. She proclaims, "I utterly disclaim all wish for the post of 'Speaker to the Feminine Literary House of Commons'" (*Selected* 513), a title bestowed upon her by her friend Maria Jane Jewsbury. By the late 1820s and early 1830s, Hemans had begun to resent the highly gendered nature of her public persona and wanted her poetry to neither represent her sex nor the work of her female contemporaries.

<22>Hemans's literary objectives and values in the latter part of her career were clearly averse to those of the cultural field that both generated her and which she helped to produce. She felt that she had not been sufficiently reimbursed—not monetarily, but with cultural capital—and was, as a result, resentful of the literary market. She was particularly hostile toward London, the main hub of the British publishing market. For example, upon reading that Jewsbury had died in India of cholera, Hemans declares, "Yet I would rather, a thousand times, that she should have perished thus, in the path of her chosen duties, than have seen her become the merely brilliant creature of London literary life, living upon those poor *Succès de société*, which I think utterly ruinous to all that is lofty, and holy, and delicate in the nature of a highly-endowed woman" (*Memorials* 255). And in another letter, still about Jewsbury, she writes that London is "a worthless lot for a nobly-gifted woman's nature!" (*Memorials* 256).

<23>Hemans surely did not believe that it was a thousand times preferable to die of cholera than become involved in the London literary scene, but by using her friend's death to (amongst other things) criticize London literary life, Hemans demonstrates that she was becoming increasingly bitter about her own literary reputation as a woman. Particularly important are her terms "brilliant creature" and "Succès de société," the first of which suggests that female writers with intelligence were regarded as curious oddities ("creatures") and the second indicating that women could find fame in popular society but not be regarded as serious writers. Despite being an outsider to the London print market as a result of living in Wales and Ireland all her life she nonetheless experienced the peculiar reception received by literary women whose works had been published for a public audience.

<24>Hemans was intensely aware and self-conscious about her own reception and public image and in a letter to her friend Henry Chorley from Dublin in August 1832, she reveals that her literary reputation makes her feel alienated from both sexes:

I appear to be regarded as rather a "curious thing"; the gentlemen treat me as I suppose they would the muse Calliope, were she to descend amongst them; that is, with much solemn reverence, and constant allusions to poetry; the ladies, every time I happen to speak, look as if they expected sparks of fire, or some other marvellous thing, would proceed from my lips, as from those of the Sea-Princess in Arabian fiction.
(*Selected* 516)

No doubt, Hemans revelled in the attention she received and there are certainly worse fates than being a Greek muse of epic poetry or the Sea-Princess from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Nonetheless, the most distinct element in this letter is Hemans's despair at being isolated from her fellow human beings and, specifically, her own sex. While the men behave respectfully toward Hemans, the women are more offensive, regarding her as a kind of chimera. Hemans recognizes that women have a more difficult time communicating with her—she even *Orientalizes* herself to express her feelings of alterity—and jokingly concludes her letter by stating, "I should be strongly tempted to do something very strange amongst them, in order to fulfill the ideas I imagine they entertain of that altogether foreign monster, a Poetess, but I feel too much subdued for such capricci at present" (*Selected* 516).

<25>Mole argues that the Romantic print market's "practices for branding an individual's identity in order to boost his or her cultural visibility and create a fascination with his or her personality and private life enabled certain individuals to rise to prominence above the Romantic surfeit of public personality" (22). Hemans is an excellent example of the type of writer who was able to "rise to prominence" because of the public's "fascination" with her private self, a point which her letters demonstrate she recognized. Despite this awareness, however, Hemans was nonetheless dissatisfied with how the public regarded her, and in her

later letters, she reacts negatively to how the print market's exploitation of her domestic persona took on a life of its own. Mole notes that writers "[experienced] the subjective trauma of commodity capitalism in a particularly acute fashion" (4) and suggests that, in an increasingly anonymous nineteenth-century commercial field, "Many authors despaired of finding a sympathetic audience, and denigrated the marketplace and the reading multitude as a result" (16). Hemans may have been willing to play the domestic poetess but she was certainly not prepared for the ways in which the market would exploit, and the public interpret, that role. As a result, Hemans felt that she had been transfigured by her fame and alienated by the marketplace and her readers who restricted the direction of her career.

<26>Understanding how the early nineteenth-century literary marketplace shaped Hemans's poetry and literary persona allows us to appreciate more fully the trajectory of her career and forces us to question our preconceived notions about her literary output and poetic character.(16) During a period when authors, and especially female writers, were provided with greater opportunities for having their works published, Hemans forged a professional life for herself by composing poetry that she knew would engage a large readership. However, as her popularity increased, she began to discover the price of fame for literary women. She had to first gain celebrity, economic independence, and (some amount of) literary capital before she could recognize her own predicament as a female writer in an early nineteenth-century print market. Once she observed that popularity did not necessitate literary respect or cultural clout, Hemans became increasingly acrimonious about and saddened by her poetic career. She had given the print market and the public what they had asked for from her, but she was not in return sufficiently reimbursed, at least in her own eyes. Rather, Hemans and her poetry continued to be associated with her gender and resulted in various patronizing opinions and remarks about her work as a *female poetess* from the likes of Francis Jeffrey.(17)

<27>What Hemans's correspondence over the course of her career highlights is the gendered nature of the labyrinth of early nineteenth-century publishing. However numerous they were, the "hazards, pitfalls, and dead ends" (*Pleasures* 140) that Brewer details tended to be unevenly divided between men and women. The Romantic print market may have provided female writers with increased opportunity for publishing, but women were often forced by publishers and readers to adopt literary roles (like that of the domestic poetess) which they were not always entirely comfortable with if they wished to succeed in a highly competitive literary market. Hemans's decision to transition from a seemingly male poet to an overtly feminine poetess over the course of her career reflects exactly this kind of pressure.

<28>Of course, male authors were also frequently forced to respond to the demands of the print market and their publishers. For example, Byron in 1815 was frustrated that his "attempt to use *Hebrew Melodies* to move his poetry in the direction of a new moral and theological

seriousness was compromised both by the literary marketplace in which he took up his position and by Murray's handling of the collection's physical production" (Mole 105). Naturally, Byron was resentful that his readers and publisher expected him to continue producing the kinds of stories that appeared in his incredibly popular "Eastern tales." Byron's failure to push his career in a different direction with the *Hebrew Melodies* does not, however, discount the fact that a male writer like Byron could use his amassed literary and economic capital to experiment with new poetic themes and personas much more openly than could his female colleagues (and even remain beloved and respected, albeit infamous, while doing so). In fact, his incredibly popular and risqué *Don Juan* was written partly a result of his freedom to experiment with his verse and challenge readers' expectations of his work. In contrast, although Hemans was able to forge an extremely lucrative career by positioning herself as a domestic poetess—her career earnings were around £3000(18)—she was not as free to experiment with her verse as Byron was, nor did she ever garner the amount of public respect or cultural capital that her male colleague enjoyed. Instead, female writers like Hemans continued to be perceived as somewhat anomalous, unnatural, or equivocal. Byron referred to her as "Mrs. Hewoman's" (158) and "Mrs. Heman" (182) and Hemans deemed herself a "literary ogress" (*Memorials* 107) and an "altogether foreign monster" (*Selected* 516). Even when purporting to enact the most conventional of gender roles—the domestic, sentimental woman—a woman writing for the market was still not adequately female; at best, she was a transvestite-like figure and at worst, an ogress or foreign monster. As long as Hemans was famous for writing about domestic womanhood, she would be prevented from actually embodying it.

<29>By the end of her life, Hemans had concluded that women trying to achieve fame through writing were engaged in a futile endeavor which robbed them of their own identity, authorial and otherwise. A particularly good example of Hemans's unease with how her literary career shaped her personhood is her reaction to seeing six sculptures of herself by Angus Fletcher, created for marketing purposes: "Imagine my dismay on visiting Mr. Fletcher's sculpture-room, on beholding at least six Mrs. Hemans, placed as if to greet me in every direction. There is something absolutely frightful in this multiplication of one's self to infinity" (*Memorials* 188). Hemans had of course willingly posed for these busts in 1829 and understood they would be used to promote her career, but her disturbed response to these physical embodiments of herself allows us to see how anxious she was about how her fame manifested itself and altered her as a person: the uncanny Mrs. Hemanses which stared back at the poet were not completely recognizable even to the person they were meant to portray. In an 1831 letter to a friend, Hemans once again uses a sculpture to reflect upon female fame, but this time, rather than a bust of herself, she describes (and identifies with) English artist John Gibson's sculpture of Sappho. She explains that the sculpture—in which Sappho is in the process of resignedly dropping her lyre before committing suicide as a result of being abandoned by her lover Phaon—"seems to speak piercingly and sorrowfully of the nothingness of Fame, at least to

woman" (*Selected* 512). When Hemans describes fame as "nothingness . . . at least to woman" she surely cannot be thinking of monetary compensation, as her career earnings indicate. Rather, fame had become "nothing" for Hemans because, even after enacting the role of sentimental poetess which the print market demanded of her, she never received the recognition she thought she deserved. Instead—as her transfiguration of Sappho's story of lost love into one about the "nothingness of fame" reflects—Hemans by the end of her career felt that literary women who ventured into the print market were destined to become lonely outcasts left both physically and psychologically altered as a result of writing for the public.

Endnotes

(1) Hemans was most acclaimed for her sentimental poetry which emphasized the importance of female domesticity, a cultural and social ideal that became progressively more dominant as the nineteenth century advanced. Tricia Lootens, for example, writes that Hemans "positioned herself as a national poet" whose ultimate goal was to create "a feminine position that inextricably connected nation and family" (239). For further reading on Hemans as England's (unofficial) national poetess and on her role in helping to foster the cult of domesticity, see Susan J. Wolfson. "Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception." *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*. Ed. Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt. Kentucky: UP of Kentucky, 1999. 214-41 and Stephen C. Behrendt. "'Certainly not a Female Pen': Felicia Hemans's Early Public Reception." *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 95-114. ([^](#))

(2) John Murray was one of England's most successful booksellers: his roster of clients included Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and Jane Austen. He became Hemans's publisher in 1815. For more on John Murray's immense success as a publisher, see Humphrey Carpenter. *The Seven Lives of John Murray: The Story of a Publishing Dynasty 1768-2002*. London: John Murray Publishers, 2008. ([^](#))

(3) Although Murray's letters to Hemans have not survived, it is clear that Hemans is in this letter responding to an earlier letter that Murray had sent to her. For more on the Hemans-Murray correspondence, see Paula R. Feldman. "The Poet and the Profits: Felicia Hemans and the Literary Marketplace." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 46 (1997): 148-76. ([^](#))

(4) Hemans was correct about "the Arts" being a very popular topic of discussion during the period in which she was writing *Modern Greece*. In fact, the British Museum had just purchased the Parthenon Marbles from Lord Elgin in 1816 and they were part of an extremely popular, and contentious, exhibit. This fact does not negate Murray's advice, however, as his objection

to Hemans's topic of choice was probably due to the fact that the market had been saturated with a plethora of compositions about Greek and Roman works of art. For more on the popularity of Greek Art in the early nineteenth century and the "Elgin Marbles controversy," see Fani-Maria Tsigakou. *The Rediscovery of Greece: Travellers and Painters of the Romantic Era*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1981. (▲)

(5) Paula R. Feldman notes that Murray did not break even on *Restoration* until 1828 (152). (▲)

(6) Susan J. Wolfson notes, "When the first edition sold out by 1821, netting over £50, Murray issued a second" (*Selected* 34). (▲)

(7) For further reading on Romantic celebrity culture, see *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850*, Ed. Tom Mole. New York: Cambridge UP, 2009 and *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Culture*, Ed. Eric Eisner. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2009. (▲)

(8) In fact, in an 1819 letter to her uncle B.P. Wagner, Hemans tells him she is aware that "Novels in Verse," such as those written by Byron, Scott, and Moore, are, "the present fashionable taste" and explains, "I shall certainly ere long, make an attempt to write something in this popular taste, though I must own it will be much against my inclination" (*Selected* 484). (▲)

(9) Murray paid Byron £2000 for *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*. (▲)

(10) Hemans enthusiastically read Byron (and even wore a locket with a piece of his hair in it) until 1830, when Moore's *Memoirs* were released and it was revealed that Byron had made some very disparaging remarks about Hemans to Murray. For more on the Hemans-Byron literary relationship, see Susan J. Wolfson. "Hemans and the Romance of Byron." *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 155-80. (▲)

(11) Hemans's determination to establish her wifedom is not only ironic because her husband Captain Hemans had left for Italy in 1818 never to return to his family, but also because Hemans's domestic situation was far from typical: as the sole income earner in her household, she spent most of her day reading and writing while her mother and/or siblings took care of her five sons. For more on Hemans's domestic situation, see Susan J. Wolfson. "'Domestic Affections' and 'the Spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender." *Revisioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*. Ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner. Pennsylvania: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994. 128-166. Further, although it was common for female writers to sign their works with "Mrs.," this does not discount the fact that Hemans's insistence on being known as "Mrs Hemans" is an important instance of the poet's self-fashioning. (▲)

(12) Susan J. Wolfson comments that these writers were, “brutally satirized by Tory William Gifford . . . In 1819 FH [Hemans] was seeking advice about her poetry from Gifford (now editing the Quarterly) and developing a cordial relationship with him” (*Selected* 483).^(^)

(13) Henry F. Chorley notes that “Ode to the West Wind” was “one of the lyrics she loved best” (122) and Hemans herself states about “Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples,” “the lines written in the Bay of Naples seem to me quite a union of music and picture in poetry” (207).^(^)

(14) In a letter written in 1827, Hemans tells Blackwood about joining his roster of writers at *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, “I really shall have pleasure in becoming an occasional contributor to a work possessing so many writers of talent, provided you should not object to the mode of remuneration to which I am accustomed” (*Selected* 494). She goes on to ask for the high rate of 24 guineas per sheet of poetry. In another letter written four years later, Hemans is even more frank about her asking price, telling Blackwood, “Mr. Colburn has lately raised the terms on which I sometimes wrote for him, to two guineas a page—if I should not hear from you to the contrary, I shall conclude that you will not be less liberal” (*Selected* 515). Blackwood agreed to her request and Hemans became his best paid writer.^(^)

(15) Mary Robinson is one example among many female writers who, like Hemans, became dissatisfied with the print market and reading public’s construction of her authorial and private personas. Although Mary Robinson was already popular as an actress before she became a poet, she too was extremely conscious of her need to negotiate the demands of the commercial field and how the public “read” her. For a particularly good account of Robinson’s celebrity and self-fashioning, see *Women’s Writing* 9.1 (2002). See also Tom Mole. “Mary Robinson’s Conflicted Celebrity.” *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850*. Ed. Tom Mole. New York: Cambridge UP, 2009. 186-205.^(^)

(16) See Tricia Lootens. “Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine ‘Internal Enemies,’ and the Domestication of National Identity.” *PMLA* 109 (1994): 238-53.^(^)

(17) In his review of Hemans’s *Records of Woman*, Francis Jeffrey acknowledges the poet’s “female genius” (34) but also states that “Women, we fear, cannot do every thing; nor even every thing they attempt” (32) and spends a significant portion of the review lamenting the fading literary fame of such writers as Keats, Shelley, and Byron.^(^)

(18) Feldman writes that Hemans’s total career earnings “[rival] the lifetime earnings of such successful authors as Charlotte Smith and Amelia Opie, who relied heavily upon prose, both more lucrative and dependable as a source of income than poetry” (175).^(^)

Works Cited

- Behrendt, Stephen C. "‘Certainly not a Female Pen’: Felicia Hemans's Early Public Reception." *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 95-114. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. Print.
- Brewer, John. "The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious': Attitudes towards Culture as a Commodity, 1660-1800." *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*. Ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer. New York: Routledge, 1995. 341-61. Print.
- . *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Print.
- Byron, George Gordon. *Byron's Letters and Journals, Vol. 7: Between Two Worlds*. Ed. Leslie Marchand. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977. Print.
- Chorley, Henry F. *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans with Illustrations of her Literary Character*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, & Blanchard, 1836. Print.
- Edgar, Chad. "Felicia Hemans and the Shifting Field of Romanticism." *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 124-34. Print.
- Feldman, Paula R. "The Poet and the Profits: Felicia Hemans and the Literary Marketplace." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 46 (1997): 148-76. Print.
- Hemans, Felicia. *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.
- . "Properzia Rossi." *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. 351-55. Print.
- Jeffrey, Francis. "ART. II.1. Records of Woman: with other Poems." *The Edinburgh Review* 50.99 (1829): 32-47. Print.
- Lootens, Tricia. "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity." *PMLA* 109 (1994): 238-53. Print.

Melnyk, Julie. "Hemans's Later Poetry: Religion and the Vatic Poet." *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 74-92. Print.

Mole, Tom. *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*. New York: Palgrave, 2007. Print.

Morrison, Robert. "William Blackwood and the Dynamics of Success." *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition, 1805-1930*. Ed. David Finkelstein. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. 21-48. Print.

"Review 'Modern Greece, A Poem.'" *Eclectic Review* 6 N.S. (December 1818): 598-601. Print.

"Review 'Modern Greece, A Poem.'" *New British Lady's Magazine* 1 N.S. (1817): 70. Print.

Wolfson, Susan J. *Borderlines: The Shifting of Gender in British Romanticism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006. Print.

---. "'Domestic Affections' and 'the Spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender." *Revisioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*. Ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner. Pennsylvania: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994. 128-66. Print.

---. "Hemans and the Romance of Byron." *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 155-80. Print.