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Daniel DeKerlegand
University of New Orleans

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Muted Vocalization in Hemans' *The Forest Sanctuary*

DANIEL DEKERLEGAND

Catherine Barragy Mackin Memorial Prize Winner

For a female poet such as Felicia Hemans, 19th century English society presented a number of daunting social norms that made it difficult for women of verse to continue any old or to forge any new female poetic consciousness outside of the narrow tradition of domestic poetry. It is interesting, thus, to examine the ways in which Hemans daringly appropriates masculine narrative traditions and reconstructs them in a feminized manner. In *The Forest Sanctuary*, for example, the result is often a careful revision of the British chivalric tradition in which the patriarchy, despite purporting to protect the domestic structure, violently dissolves the familial bonds that hold the society together. Traditionally, British poets would use female subjects in poetry in order to create a mirror through which the male writer could aggrandize his own ego; however, in *The Forest Sanctuary*, the male narrator of the poem becomes a mirror for Hemans, reflecting her own idealizations of those “feminine” qualities which perhaps offer to society a salvation from the self-destructive tendencies of the patriarchal state.

In her watershed examination of the state of women in literature, 1928's *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that English patriarchal society has historically not only made literary success nearly impossible for women due to its removal of women from the distribution of personal wealth, but has also appropriated femininity

in literary texts in order to reinforce male superiority. Woolf asserts that there is a paradox inherent in the canonical works concerning the figure of the woman, that is, “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history” (43). Through the construction of powerful female figures in the Western canon, it seems that the patriarchy of male writers created a false depiction of the female experience in order to reinforce their own creative capability, for, as Woolf notes, though “some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband” (44). The irony of this paradox, however, is that in their egotistical self-reflection through the image of a woman, male patriarchy perhaps inadvertently inspired silent female bards to sing for the first time. In *The Forest Sanctuary*, Hemans reverses this tradition of male subject/female object by proclaiming herself as an epic poet and choosing her object of focus to be a male conquistador.

That Hemans chose to write *The Forest Sanctuary* in the epic genre is quite astounding, considering that the epic represented in literature the ultimate expression of the masculine experience. The choice represents to a large degree the first instance in which a female poet knowingly transgressed the established boundaries of what sort of intellectual expression was acceptable for a woman; rather than compose the work in a ballad form, Hemans chose to portray her intellectual capability in the most respected form of all. As Gary Kelly notes in the introduction to the 2002 collection of Hemans’s work *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, Hemans was somewhat fortunate in the fact that she was able to attain a rather liberal education in a time in which there were no available universities for women (18). Able to educate herself in European literature, she possessed a capability mostly unheard of for women of the time; however, her home-schooling would have remained a fairly alienating intellectual experience, and it is this sense of alienation and longing for connection that consistently reoccurs throughout her work, perhaps especially in *The Forest Sanctuary*, where the narrator is indeed entirely exiled from the civilized world he so admires.

Hemans's adoption of the epic form in *The Forest Sanctuary* creates a paradoxical admiration and disgust for the civilized world of the patriarchy whose loftiest poetic form has provided her, the oppressed, with a means of voice. As David Rothstein argues in his 1999 essay "Forming the Chivalric Subject: Felicia Hemans and the Cultural Uses of History, Memory, and Nostalgia," Hemans develops in her poetry a "conservative cultural nostalgia based on idealized, feminized versions of gendered subjectivity, domestic and social unity, male social governance, and aristocratic tradition," though her nationalistic idealism operates in "relation to feminine, counter-hegemonic versions of chivalric history, culled from sites and domestic and national memory, primarily the home and the warrior's tomb" (51). *The Forest Sanctuary* perhaps exemplifies this "counter-hegemonic" stance for, more so than some of Hemans's shorter works, the text is highly critical of the violence of the national structure.

In order to enact a powerful rejection of the hegemony, Hemans chooses to transfer a passivity more traditionally attributed to female characters to the character of a former conquistador. The narrator's depiction of the religious dissenters' march to death is illuminating, for, in it, Hemans mirrors through the male narrative a feminine meditation on the destructive power of an oppressive state. In seeing the sisters Inez and Teresa being led to their execution, the narrator laments "I knew/the beauty on those brows, though each young face/Was chang'd—so deeply chang'd!—a dungeon's air/Tis hard for lov'd and lovely things to bear" (239). In its callous execution of the protestant others, the dogmatic religious structure systematically exterminates the pacific, seemingly innocent women, which in turn causes the narrator himself to revolt against the senseless violent conformity of the system. Therefore, in this scene the female characters, rather than becoming mirrors reflecting the superiority of the male narrator, become mirrors reflecting their own moral superiority to the unjust society.

Even further, the power structure's disregard for these female characters seems to eradicate the familial bonds that preserve the culture itself. In their death, the sisters will leave their father with

their “lutes hanging hush’d upon the wall,/And silence round the aged man, bereft/Of each glad voice, once answering to his call./Alas, that lonely father! doom’d to pine/for sounds departed in his life’s decline” (239-241). The lute, symbolic of the bard, is made useless under the oppressive power of the state; thus, it seems that these female poets and song-makers are banished to the dungeon and to literary death, as were, to a large degree, the female poets of pre-20th century England. In this passage, one of the most memorable from *The Forest Sanctuary*, Hemans seems to suggest that the silencing of women within the poetic tradition only serves to catalyze the destruction of a society.

It is in her emphasis upon the necessity of the vocalization of women that Hemans comes to a conclusion concerning her own aesthetic needs, and necessitates her own appropriation of the epic form. If the epic traditionally compiles the knowledge and cultural history of a people, *The Forest Sanctuary* represents the first epic voicing of Western female poetry breaking away from its previous silence. As Diego Saglia notes in his 2007 essay “‘A Deeper and Richer Music’: The Poetics of Sound and Voice in Felicia Hemans’s 1820s Poetry,” the construction of harmonious sound is key to Hemans’s poetry. Saglia states that “the sonic contributes to the narration of specific tales, of historically, geographically, and ideologically rooted narratives, while it simultaneously opens up a reflection on the nature and status of poetry as localized utterance and performance” (352). As an example, he reminds that *The Forest Sanctuary* begins with the apostrophic statement “The voices in my home!—I hear them still!” (228).

The narrator, exiled from Spain, emphasizes the fact that, despite his isolation, the language of his birth still defines his existence. As the narrator sings his epic story in the forest, he tells his sleeping son “Thou shalt not feel thy bursting heart rebel/As mine hath done; nor bear what I have born,” and promises “This shall not be thy lot, my blessed child!” (231). Therefore, through the narrator’s song, he forges for his son a new existence; though steeped in pride for the homeland of Spain, the narrator’s song undoes the tyrannical structure. Similarly, through Hemans’s epic song, she forges for the

female poetic tradition a new existence less constrained by patriarchal tyranny.

Thus, it appears that in Hemans's verse the continuity of structured sound is essential in maintaining the goodwill of a society, and that when a culture's lutes are forcibly left "hanging hush'd upon the wall," the society itself will fall. Therefore, in this quite direct sense, the silence of the female bard such as Hemans herself could presage the decay of the entire culture. In her 1994 essay "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity," Tricia Lootens relates that Hemans "ransaked extensive readings and literature, folklore, and world history for exemplary narratives in which the threatened or actual dissolution of family ties intersected with the exercise of feminine national heroism" (241). Through her paradoxical examination of the effects of nationalism, Hemans examines the point at which the power of the state undermines its most essential element, the family; certainly, through its religious hegemony, the Spanish state has torn the narrator and his son from the necessary voice of the mother.

Hemans further complicates the paradoxical intersection in *The Forest Sanctuary* by casting an anonymous male figure as the central sufferer of the text, rather than casting a tragic female character as the hero. The effect is a transference of gender through which Hemans forces her male readers to identify with the agony of silence and isolation enacted upon women through the violence of the patriarchy. It is through this gender transference that Hemans is able to portray a universal, asexual muteness. Though the narrator of the epic poem is a male, the true culture building characters are in fact the females of the poem, such as the narrator's absent wife and the two sisters of Alvar.

In stanza 34, the narrator watches the two sisters as they are lead off to their death, and he then reflects upon one of the figures; interestingly, the text is nonspecific as to which sister he sees, thereby representing the two together as a sort of original "sister." The scene develops an image of a woman torn from her familial tradition by patriarchal power. "And if she mingled," the narrator states, "with the festive train,/It was but as some melancholy star/Beholds the dance

of shepherds on the plain,/In its bright stillness present, though afar” (240). In their isolation, the female bards of *The Forest Sanctuary* are unable to shepherd their own flock, and are instead forced to watch as life takes place outside; the irony, however, is the reality that the familial structure of the flock cannot maintain itself without the presence of the female voice, particularly that of the mother-poet.

No matter how talented, the position of a female poet like Hemans during the English Romantic period would have been akin to that of the star; no matter how brightly it could burn on its own, it was destined to view the goings on of the poetic community as the eye of a stranger. Interestingly, Keats’s 1819 sonnet “Bright Star” sets up a similar opposition, though from the point of view of the male poet, in which the star itself is a projection of Fanny Brawne, while the narrator’s desire for the “steadfastness” of the celestial object is a transference of Keats’ own desire to absorb his own femininity. Thus, in her trope of the female poet as the celestial object which the male narrator sees from below, Hemans comments upon the melancholy detachment between male and female poetic voices, due to the overbearing pressure of gender and social roles enforced by a hegemonic culture.

In almost all cases, the male poet’s dismissal of the female poet seems to be an illogical one, for, the male poet often paradoxically derides the female poet for her gender transgression while simultaneously praising her for her genius. Deborah Kennedy, in her 1991 essay “Hemans, Wordsworth, and the ‘Literary Lady,’” relates a remark made by Wordsworth in a letter to George Huntly that Hemans’s “conversation, like that of many literary Ladies, is too elaborate and studied— and perhaps the simplicity of her character is impaired by the homage which has been paid her— both for her accomplishments and her Genius” (270). Thus, despite Wordsworth’s admiration for Hemans’s intellect, he is quite unwilling to mark her existence within the poetic community itself— that is, to call her “poet” rather than the dismissive “literary Lady.”

The tragedy of Felicia Hemans’s poetry and of *The Forest Sanctuary* in particular is that the genius of her voice always seems to some degree unfulfilled. The evidence of her isolation from the

male poetic community causes one to wonder what greater aesthetic heights her work could have achieved had it not been so silenced by the prejudices of her age, and had she not been so hampered by the behaviors expected of a woman at the time. Elements of Hemans's voice seem to appear in later poetry written by women in English who were perhaps more able to fully cohere their aesthetic craft, due to more access to education and publishing. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for one, seems to struggle with Hemans's voice in order to free it from its more nationalistic and suppressive tendencies. Even later, H.D.'s hermetic epic *The Trilogy* seems to resound with the best aspects of Hemans's verse, in which she uses experience of isolation as a meditative channel for visionary experience. Certainly, it seems that Hemans's deserved place in English letters has yet to truly be decided.

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