



The Subversion and Redefinition of Conventions of Femininity in the Poetry of Felicia Hemans and Lord Byron

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Concerning gender conventions, Felicia Hemans and Lord Byron do not initially appear particularly subversive. Indeed, Hemans's contemporary portrayal was one that embodied all the feminine stereotypes of her age, her poetry apparently exemplifying 'the ready sensibility, the devotedness, the faith of woman's nature' as described by Frederic Rowton.¹ Byron too was perceived as a representation of contemporary attitudes towards gender, championing stereotypically misogynistic views, 'I do not despise Mrs Hemans -but if she knit blue stockings instead of wearing them it would be better.'² However, this essay will argue that Hemans's and Byron's work conversely question the gender stereotypes of femininity they appear to endorse, although the extent and effect of both poet's achievement of this aim varies greatly. The challenging of female conventions within Byron's and Hemans's poetry is arguably made principally through depictions of their female characters - firstly, of their suffering in consequence of the gendered codes that oppress them, and secondly of their retaliating and liberating themselves from such codes through violence. In this manner, both poets subvert and redefine female conventions, particularly those of nationalism, resulting in ranging degrees of empowerment of their female characters. Byron and Hemans thus arguably criticise the traditionally masculine deeds of militant strength associated with idealistic nationalism and, in varying degrees, advocate in replacement a feminised nationalism founded on subverted female conventions of devotion and sacrifice.

The depiction of female suffering in the work of Hemans and Byron may provide some evidence for the argument that both poets portray the ineptitude of gender conventions. Hemans utilises conventions of gender in order to highlight the suffering that results from striving to achieve the impossible ideals of womanhood, her poetry 'undercut[ing], even while they reinforce, conventional views of women'³ as Paula R. Feldman suggests. Therefore, in so doing, Hemans arguably implies the cost of upholding such gender roles on both her wellbeing as a woman and as an artist. For example, as Hemans herself comments, 'In talk of tranquillity and a quiet

¹ Frederick Rowton, quoted in Wolfson, Susan J. "Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception." *Approaches to Teaching British Women Poets of the Romantic Period*. Ed. Stephen Behrendt et. al. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1997) p.219.

² *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-82), Vol.7 p.182

³ Feldman, Paula R. ed. Introduction to *Felicia Hemans: Records of Woman, with Other Poems*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999.) p.xx

home, I stare about in wonder, having almost lost the recollection of such things.’⁴ Similarly, Byron’s reputation about conventions of femininity is also arguably misleading, for although largely conforming to gender roles, Byron often does so in a manner that simultaneously questions them through the portrayal of women’s suffering as a result of such conventions. For example, in *Don Juan*, Byron comments critically on gender politics, ‘The gilding wears so soon from off her fetter, / That but ask any woman if she’d choose / (Take her at thirty, that is) to have been / Female or male? A schoolboy or a Queen?’⁵ (14.25) The assumption that any woman would choose the role of a schoolboy, the lowest of men, over that of a queen, the highest of women, is significant in his apparent sympathy towards women’s sufferings.

Furthermore, challenging gender conventions of nationalism are arguably a significant aspect of both Hemans and Byron. Though often described as a patriotic poet, ‘a defender of hearth and home’,⁶ as Feldman states, it is conversely arguable that Hemans is far from uncritical about the British nation, her work often containing, ‘its child martyrs, its female victims, its devastation of domestic affections, and the hollowness of its “glory” and “fame”’,⁷ as Wolfson notes. This illustrates Hemans’s



Figure 1. Gulnare, pictured with knife. From *The Gallery of Byron Beauties; portraits of the principal female characters in Lord Byron's poems*. From original paintings by eminent artists (London: Tilt and Bogue, 1836)

desire to portray the repressive and damaging effects of feminine conventions of nationalism in reality. For example in Hemans’s ‘The Wife of Asdrubal’, the wife of a governor who surrendered his city and thus his national identity to invaders, kills their children and herself in vengeance for his cowardly betrayal. Thus the Wife’s infanticide and suicide subverts traditional notions of nationalism, wherein a woman’s role was the nurturing of her children to become model citizens. Instead Hemans arguably suggests that in the failure of men, whose true responsibility it is to provide role models to their children, death appears to be the only truly nationalistic resolution. As Anne K. Mellor suggests, Hemans’s apparent endorsement of ‘the glory and beauty of maternal love’ is endangered by ‘the fragility of the very domestic

⁴ Wolfson, Susan J. “‘Domestic Affections’ and ‘the spear of Minerva’: Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender.” *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*. Ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner. (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) P.133

⁵ *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, 5 vols., ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-86). All quotations of *Don Juan*, as well as of Byron’s other poems, are from this edition and are hereafter cited in parenthesis.

⁶ Feldman, ed. Introduction to *Records of Woman* p.xx

⁷ Wolfson, Susan J. ed. Introduction to *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. P.xvi

ideology it endorses.⁸ Hemans's focus on the struggles of women as a result of the failure of the gender conventions of nationalism, and by implication, the patriarchal conventions that inform them, illustrates the contrast of conventional ideals forced on women and the realities of having to live up to them.

In addition, both Hemans's and Byron's subversion of feminine conventions of nationalism has its basis in their portrayal of suffering women as figures of rebellion and liberation rather than victims. The failure of established gender roles is made clear in Byron's *The Corsair* when the stereotypical masculine rescue of the helpless female is reversed. Initially, the character of Gulnare adheres to her feminine role and is kept silent and passive by her master Seyd, 'Another word and-nay-I need no more' (3:178-86). Yet Gulnare soon rejects this role and instead transcends feminine convention and commits murder in order to free herself in a nationalistic triumph over her oppressor. Rejecting cultural types, Gulnare empowers herself by adopting masculine conventions, using a phallic 'secret knife' (3:364) to kill Seyd, 'since the dagger suits [Conrad] less than brand, / I'll try the firmness of a female hand' (3:380-81). Moreover, the spot of blood that Gulnare righteously anoints on her forehead after the murder is arguably representative of the authority she has gained through her adoption of masculine power. As Cheryl Fallon Giuliano states, 'Gulnare discovers her body as an artistic medium. Her body is her blank page, but it is not blank in the sense of passive, lack, or absence. Rather her blank page accommodates her self-expression.'⁹ However, more than this, the blood stain is a mark of Gulnare's sexual liberation from gendered conventions. A traditional sign of men's ownership of women, the blood stain of marital consummation and proof of virginity is reclaimed by Gulnare, enabling her to take control of her body and her actions. As such, Gulnare refuses the definitions of femininity that deny her the right to feel and act on her own accord, allowing her to embrace emotion, 'feared...thanked...pitied-maddened-loved' (3:295).

Moreover, Hemans takes the argument further, utilising feminine experience to challenge gender conventions of nationalism, for example, Hemans's 'The Suliote Mother', like Byron's *The Corsair*, criticises the notion of nationalism founded wholly on masculine connoted militantism, for the men of the poem fail in battle, leaving their women and children vulnerable. Hemans advocates, in replacement, the passionate nationalist spirit of feminine martyrdom founded on their gendered constrictions of affection and self-sacrifice. Hemans's 'Indian Woman's Death-Song' for instance depicts a woman who, in vengeance of her husband's adultery having 'hath looked upon another's face' whilst his wife's 'hath faded from his soul',¹⁰ drowns herself and her daughter in order to embrace a truer nationalism than the world of men can offer. In this violent act, the Indian woman stakes her 'claim for a freedom elsewhere denied',¹¹ as Nancy Moore Goslee notes, but more than this, she protects her daughter from the miserable life that befalls women, 'And thou, my

⁸ Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) P.124

⁹ Giuliano, Cheryl Fallon. "Gulnare/Kaled's "Untold" Feminization of Byron's Oriental Tales" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (Autumn, 1993), Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/450749> p.792

¹⁰ Felicia Hemans, "Indian Woman's Death-Song" in *The Poetical Works of Felicia Hemans* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee and Co., 1861) p.468. All quotations from Hemans's poetry are from this edition, and are hereafter cited in parentheses.

¹¹ Goslee, Nancy Moore. "Hemans's 'Red Indians': Reading Stereotypes." *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*. Ed. Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) p.249

babe! though born, like me, for woman's weary lot, / Smile!...Thy mother bears thee far, young fawn! from sorrow and decay' (468-9). As Tricia Lootens suggests, such women are 'figures in extremis...whose sanity, and perhaps even humanity, is questionable'¹² and as such their violence, often stretching to infanticide and suicide, subverts the most deeply ingrained conventions of women as maternal figures. Thus a connection is made between female conventions of maternity and rebellion from those restrictions, which thus describes a markedly feminine form of patriotic nationalism. The Indian woman escapes from a tyrannical masculine figure to the safety of one of Hemans's rare positively connoted masculine figures, that of the river, 'father of waves' (469) in which she drowns herself. It is in this manner that Hemans's redefinition of nationalism is emphasised, for if it may be described as a love of one's homeland, the Indian woman's desire to literally be one with her land suggests not just a longing for freedom but also demonstrates the ultimate act of devotion and sacrifice for one's homeland.



Figure 2. "The Heroine of Saragoza." From *Forty Illustrations of Lord Byron* by George Cruikshank (London: J. Robins and Co., 1824-26)

phallic emblem of the sword, and depicting her as 'arous'd' portrays the Maid as a woman fully capable of sexuality and aggression with none of the oppressive connotations of Lady Macbeth. Despite this however, Byron largely appears incapable to wholly transcend conservative gender politics, 'her long locks...foil the painter's power, / Her fairy form, with more than female grace' (1:571-72).

Byron's *The Maid of Saragoza* may similarly be viewed as a symbol of women who resist traditional gender stereotypes in order to evoke a feminine nationalism, for her depiction is met with appreciation of her strength and courage, albeit mitigated with adherence to conventional gender codes. As Giuliano notes, 'Explicitly calling forth the example of Lady Macbeth, Byron's Maid is "all unsex'd" by a traditionally masculine militarism.'¹³ Yet conversely it is arguable that Byron's attributing her with symbols of masculinity is in fact empowering, 'Is it for this the Spanish maid, arous'd, /...And, all unsex'd, the Anlace hath espous'd, /...and dar'd the deed of war?' (1:558-61). Granting her the

¹² Lootens, Tricia. "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine "Internal Enemies," and the Domestication of National Identity." *PMLA* 109 (1994) P.243

¹³ Giuliano, "Feminisation of Byron's Oriental Tales" p.799

Furthermore, another example of Byron's contradiction of gender codes is the depiction of Kaled in *Lara*, who literally personifies woman's transcending of gender definitions by wearing male clothing. This physical representation of adoption of male attitudes, as Terry Castle suggests, encourages 'female sexual freedom and beyond that, female emancipation generally'. Therefore, females dressing as males allow women to assume 'not only the costumes but the social behavioural freedoms of the opposite sex'¹⁴ and thus gain empowerment that would usually be denied them. In addition, the mention of Kaled's potential fame, 'What now to her was Womanhood or Fame?' (2.519), also allows her chance of self-assertion through the breaking of



Figure 3. Kaled, in masculine dress. From *The Gallery of Byron Beauties; portraits of the principal female characters in Lord Byron's poems*. From original paintings by eminent artists (London: Tilt and Bogue, 1836)

feminine convention. Like Gulnare, Kaled has the opportunity to empower herself through creative expression, the telling of her story and subsequent fame, and as such depict herself as a woman who cannot be silenced easily. Kaled's expression comes in an even clearer manifestation than Gulnare's spot of blood - that of writing, 'traces [of] strange characters along the sand' (2:625). Therefore, both Kaled and Gulnare break free of feminine convention, adopting masculine mannerisms of intelligence and aggression in order to empower themselves and to become authors of their own destinies, which in turn undermines traditional masculine ideologies of nationalism. Furthermore, the poem's final lines are intriguing in their ambiguity, 'This could not last-she lies by him she lov'd; / Her tale untold-her truth too dearly prov'd' (2:626-27), for the ending it alludes to may be Kaled's

writing and her very life, suggesting an ending of her new found authority. Conversely 'This could not last' may refer to the masculine ideology of gender stereotypes that, as is hinted to throughout Byron's works, inexorably result in disaster.

Moreover, both Byron and Hemans are not totally uncritical about the breaking and remoulding of female conventions. For example, Hemans's 'The Indian City' strongly embodies the notion of maternal nationalism, wherein the character of Maimuna brings about the destruction of an entire city in revenge of her dead son. "Not yet, not yet I weep, / Not yet my spirits shall sink or sleep! / Not till yon city, in ruins rent, / Be piled for its victim's monument' (465). Yet Hemans does not ignore the devastating effects Maimuna's quest causes, even as she ennobles her for it. Indeed, 'The Indian City' arguably serves to demonstrate the dangers of imposing

¹⁴ Castle, Terry. "Eros and Liberty at the English Masquerade, 1710-90," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17 (1983-84) p. 164

femininity onto masculine connoted militant nationalism— Maimuna's righteous martyrdom comes at the cost of hundreds of lives. Therefore, just as Hemans promotes the link of femininity and patriotic nationalism, she undermines it just as strongly, arguably demonstrating 'the failure of domestic ideals...to sustain and fulfil women's lives',¹⁵ as Wolfson suggests. More than this, it appears to be women's desertion of traditional gender codes such as passivity and tenderness, and their adoption of masculine conventions, such as physical violence and military conquest – as demonstrated in the almost immediate transition from Maimuna's words of a 'deep heart wrung' to violent action, 'unsheathe the sword' (466) – that destroys established and harmonious society as represented by the Indian city.

Byron goes further even than this, many of his works demonstrating the empowerment of women as being synchronous with the emasculation of men, and as such, these women are punished by being reverted back to their stereotypical places. In *The Corsair*, for example, when Gulnare takes on the masculine role of violent avenger, 'since the dagger suits [Conrad] less than brand, / I'll try the firmness of a female hand' (3:380-81), Conrad is simultaneously weakened. The pun on 'brand' arguably implies the stigmatisation of Conrad, and thus men in general, of women's adoption of strength and aggression, and consequently such women are thoroughly defeminised, 'That spot of blood [on Gulnare's face], that light but guilty streak, / Had banished all the beauty from her cheek!' (3:426-27). Furthermore, Gulnare is soon returned to her conventional feminine role, as she 'drops her veil, and stands in silence by; / Her arms are meekly folded on that breast.../ The worst of crimes had left her woman still!' (3:517-22), and in this manner the woman once again is veiled and rendered silent and passive. Nevertheless, Gulnare's return to feminine stereotypes is arguably unconvincing, as Wolfson suggests, when discussing the rhyming of 'womanhood' with 'subdued', she states, 'Neither with sound nor meter does the iambic 'subdued' subdue the dactyl 'womanhood', which, as word and class, retains its potential of insurrection.'¹⁶ Moreover, this argument may be taken further, as Gulnare's abrupt disappearance from the poem may demonstrate. This suggests that both Byron and the interior text itself cannot control Gulnare's rebellion, having gone too far to reverse and so, having no language for this new empowered female, the poem abandons her.

Both Hemans and Byron empowers their female characters by giving them the ability to control their own destinies, yet ambiguously depicts these acts as almost always resulting in death. Hemans consistently links the strength and protectiveness of her female characters with their self-destructive tendencies, such as in 'Wife of Asdrubal'. A poignant example of feminised nationalism enacted through the subverted feminine convention of maternal love, the poem depicts its heroine punishing her husband, who has abandoned his country to invaders, by killing their children and herself in front of him. Whilst Hemans does not avoid the natural shock that results from the connection of maternity with infanticide, 'Is that a mother's glance, where stern disdain, / And passion, awfully vindictive, reign?', it is in this moment wherein the Wife appears most empowered, addressing her husband directly and insulting him, 'Live, traitor! live!...since dear to thee, / E'en in thy fetters, can existence be / Scorned and dishonoured live! – with blasted name, / The Roman's triumph not to grace, but shame'. (149-150) Whereas Asdrubal has traded his freedom for his life, his wife conversely attains liberation in death by escaping the

¹⁵ Wolfson, "Domestic Affections" p.145

¹⁶ Wolfson, Susan J. "Couplets, Self, and The Corsair," *SiR* 27, 4 (Winter 1988) p.507

invaders enslavement, and thus depicts female sacrifice as the ultimate expression of nationalism rather than masculine connoted political power which, as Asdrubal's desertion demonstrates, is subject to failure. Therefore, it is arguable that it is Hemans's female characters' desire to escape the betrayal and oppression from feminine conventions which lead them to view it as a nationalistic duty to kill themselves and their children in order to free them from a cruel and unjust existence. Consequently, the choice of death comes to represent a political as well as spiritual liberation, freeing women from male conquest in mind, body and spirit. Moreover, by choosing death, the poet's women not only assert their patriotism by affirming their rights as citizens, but also regain their self-worth as human beings.

Conversely, the deaths that Byron's female characters suffer are arguably not a victory for their transcending and redefining of female codes of national identity, but a punishment for it. For instance, in *Don Juan*, Juan's romance with Julia ends with her being condemned to life-in-death in a convent and Haidee, whose caring of Juan is full of death imagery, also suffers an untimely death. Any initial admiration for such women for refusing gendered restrictions is tempered by the acknowledgment that in doing so these women are destroyers of cultural convention, literally represented in their murder of men who embody such conventions, such as Gulnare's murder of Seyd in *The Corsair*. As Wolfson suggests, it appears there are 'fatal consequences when the law of gender is violated: the annihilation of self in both its social identity and psychological integrity'.¹⁷ Therefore, even though Byron depicts his heroine's deaths as a sign of their incapability to defeat masculine oppression of established society in life, their martyrdoms nevertheless acknowledges their longing to affirm their nationalistic pride and self-worth. Moreover, just as the female characters of Byron's works strive to break free of the conventions that repress them, the texts themselves, through the very construction of these self-empowered women, seek a similar freedom that they cannot yet attain. Therefore, Byron's although work is revealed to be profoundly rooted in the cultural ideology of his times and apprehensive of change, it simultaneously denounces those same conventions through the depiction of its destructive force, and thus subtly implies a futile aspiration to escape its bounds altogether.

In conclusion, both Hemans's and Byron's emphasis on feminine suffering as a result of female conventions of nationalism suggests a desire to subvert these gender codes in order to establish what may be perceived as a truer form of nationalism than the male dominated world can provide, one based on feminine affection and self-sacrifice. Yet the extent and effect of each poet's accomplishment of such aims differ significantly. Hemans's female characters powerfully illustrate the negative consequences of adhering to idealistic female conventions of nationalism in reality 'reflect[ing] her gift for valorising the domestic affections to underscore the sorority of female suffering'¹⁸ as Sharifah Aishah Osman suggests. Conversely, Byron strongly adheres to such conventions, reducing his empowered female characters to stereotypical passivity. Yet this is marked by critical scrutiny, like Hemans, the gender issues that pervade Byron's works both support their ideological basis and suggest the prospective dangers of these conventions. Therefore,

¹⁷ Wolfson, Susan J, "‘Their she Condition’: Cross-Dressing and the Politics of Gender in Don Juan" *ELH* Vol. 54, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987) p.601

¹⁸ Osman, Sharifah Aishah. "‘Mightier than death, untameable by fate’: Felicia Hemans's Byronic Heroines and the Sorority of the Domestic Affections" *Romanticism on the Net* Number 43, August 2006 Stable URL: <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2006/v/n43/013590ar.html?vue=integral#re1no7>

although Byron's works by no means break free of the gendered roles of his age, his depiction of women who transcend and redefine notions of female conventions of nationalism is significant through its questioning of the negative consequences of women breaking such codes of gender. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many of both poet's female characters' empowerment is synchronous with their deaths, and so this ambivalent imagery suggests that both Hemans and Byron viewed the rebellious woman as a similarly ambivalent character, evoking respect and compassion as well as mistrust and horror. Despite this however, throughout Hemans's and Byron's work it is clear that their characters' actions are driven not by an innate evil but by the oppressions of their gender conventions and so, paradoxically, the only chance for these women to regain their humanity is death. Therefore, if a woman's empire is her home, then both Hemans's and Byron's criticism of the female stereotypes of nationalism that inform this trope, depicted through the oppressed lives of their female characters, poignantly illustrates the cost that a patriarchal nation such as England has upon its women.

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