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Felicia Hemans and the Mythologizing of Blake's Death

Paula R. Feldman

In February 1832, Felicia Hemans, at that time Britain's most popular and widely read poet, published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* a short poetic drama entitled "The Painter's Last Work.—A Scene," confiding in a conspicuous footnote that the piece was "suggested by the closing scene in the life of the painter Blake; as beautifully related by Allan Cunningham." Though Cunningham's early sketch of Blake in *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects*¹ has received attention from almost all of Blake's biographers, Hemans's poem has been entirely overlooked; though it was frequently reprinted throughout the nineteenth century in dozens of British and American editions of Hemans's *Poetical Works* and was, therefore, a far more widely disseminated account of Blake's death than Cunningham's, modern scholars have been unaware of it, in part because Hemans's complete *Works* have not been reprinted since they last appeared in an Oxford University Press edition in 1914.

Hemans spent most of her life in Wales and is unlikely ever to have met Blake. She visited London only briefly as a child (in the winters of 1804 and 1805), never to return. What she knew of Blake before reading Cunningham is unclear; but her friend William Wordsworth might have mentioned Blake to her on one of their walks together in the Lake District where she vacationed during the summer of 1830, shortly before drafting her poem.² Still, she was probably unaware of the errors, embellishments, and outright fabrications in Cunningham's account.³ Cunningham had written of Blake:



1. Felicia Hemans (1828). Engraved by Edward Scriven after a portrait by William E. West. Harriet Hughes, the poet's sister, used this engraving for the frontispiece to her 7-volume, 1839 edition of Hemans's *Works*.

He had now reached his seventy-first year, and the strength of nature was fast yielding. Yet he was to the last cheerful and contented. "I glory," he said, "in dying, and have no grief but in leaving you, Katharine; we have lived happy, and we have lived long; we have been ever together, but we shall be divided soon. Why should I fear death? Nor do I fear it. I have endeavoured to live as Christ commands, and have sought to worship God truly—in my own house, when I was not seen of men." He grew weaker and weaker—he could no longer sit upright; and was laid in his bed, with no one to watch over him, save his wife, who, feeble and old herself, required help in such a touching duty.

The Ancient of Days was such a favourite with Blake, that three days before his death, he sat bolstered up in bed, and tinted it with his choicest colours and in his happiest style. He touched and retouched it—held it at arm's length, and then threw it from him, exclaiming, "There! that will do! I cannot mend it." He saw his wife in tears—she felt this was to be the last of his works—"Stay, Kate! (cried Blake) keep just as you are—I will draw your portrait—for you have ever been an angel to me"—she obeyed, and the dying artist made a fine likeness.

The very joyfulness with which this singular man welcomed the coming of death, made his dying moments intensely mournful. He lay chaunting songs, and the verses and the music were both the offspring of the moment. He lamented that he could no longer commit those inspirations, as he called them, to paper[.] "Kate," he said, "I am a changing man—I always rose and wrote down my thoughts, whether it rained, snowed, or shone, and you arose too and sat beside me—this can be no longer." He died on the 12th of August, 1828,⁴ without any visible pain—his wife, who sat watching him, did not perceive when he ceased breathing.

While Cunningham emphasizes Blake's cheerfulness in approaching death and the technical achievement of his last drawing ("a fine likeness"), Hemans responded to another aspect of this account, one to which she was particularly attuned. Famous for celebrating the "domestic affections," Hemans had only recently published *Records of Woman* (1828), highlighting the nobility and courage of heroines in various difficult and often melancholy circumstances; she was herself still emotionally devastated from having nursed her mother in her last illness. So her attention was drawn to the suggestions in Cunningham's account of Catherine Blake's extraordinary character and the painfulness of her situation; in Hemans's retelling, the focus shifts from the painter and his remarkable skills even at "death's door" to a valorization of his artistic subject—the woman he loves and admires. William's declaration to Catherine in Cunningham's account, "you have ever been an angel to me," forms the subtext to Hemans's retelling.⁵ To foreground this aspect of the drama, she takes her epigraph from Thomas Campbell's "Gertude of Wyoming":

Clasp me a little longer on the brink
Of life, while I can feel thy dear caress;
And when this heart hath ceased to beat,
oh! think,
And let it mitigate thy woe's excess,
That thou hast been to me all tenderness,
And friend to more than human
friendship just.

Proficient in Italian, Hemans probably set her poetic drama in Italy because of her great admiration for Italian art and literature.⁶ It seems likely that she gives the Italian name "Francesco" to the William Blake character to underline his frankness, sincerity, and openness ("franchezza"), to suggest the spiritual freedom he embodies, and perhaps to point towards the reassurance he gives his wife ("francheggiare"). Similarly, it appears she names the Catherine Blake character "Teresa" to suggest at one and the same time the earthly region ("terra") she must continue to inhabit and her fear ("terrore") of approaching widowhood. Following is the text of Hemans's dramatization of the death of Blake as it was first published in 1832. It is worth quoting in its entirety because all subsequent appearances reprint a substantially revised, inferior text.

Scene—A Room in an Italian Cottage. The Lattice opening upon a Landscape at sunset.

Francesco—Teresa.

Teresa.

The fever's hue hath left thy cheek,
beloved!
Thine eyes, that make the day-spring in
my heart,
Are clear and still once more. Wilt thou
look forth?
Now, while the sunset with
low-streaming light—
The light thou lov'st—hath made the
chestnut-stems
All burning bronze, the lake one sea of
gold!
Wilt thou be raised upon thy couch, to
meet
The rich air fill'd with wandering scents
and sounds?
Or shall I lay thy dear, dear head once
more
On this true bosom, lulling thee to rest
With vesper hymns?

Francesco.

No, gentlest love! not now:
My soul is wakeful—lingering to look
forth,
Not on the sun, but thee! Doth the light
sleep
So gently on the lake? and are the stems
Of our own chestnuts by that alchemy
So richly changed?—and is the
orange-scent
Floating around?—But I have said
farewell,

SCENES AND HYMNS OF LIFE.

WITH OTHER

RELIGIOUS POEMS.

BY

FELICIA HEMANS.

"How beautiful this dome of sky,
And the vast hills, in fluctuation fix'd
At thy command, how awful! Shall the soul,
Human and rational, report of Thee
Even less than these?"

WORDSWORTH.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD, EDINBURGH:
AND T. CADELL, LONDON.
MDCCCXXXIV.

2. Title page to the first of Hemans's books to include "The Painter's Last Work," a poem about the death of Blake. This 1834 version differed significantly from the text that appeared two years earlier in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

Farewell to earth, Teresa! not to thee,
Nor yet to our deep love, nor yet awhile
Unto the spirit of mine art, which flows
Back on my soul in mastery!—one last
work!
And I will shrine my wealth of glowing
thoughts,
Clinging affection and undying hope,
All that is in me for eternity,
All, all, in that memorial.

Teresa.

Oh! what dream
Is this, mine own Francesco? Waste thou
not
Thy scarce-returning strength; keep thy
rich thoughts
For happier days! they will not melt away
Like passing music from the lute;—dear
friend!
Dearest of friends! thou canst win back
at will
The glorious visions.

Francesco.

Yes! the unseen land
Of glorious visions hath sent forth a voice
To call me hence. Oh! be thou not
deceived!
Bind to thy heart no *earthly* hope, Teresa!
I must, *must* leave thee! Yet be strong,
my love,
As thou hast still been gentle!

Teresa.

Oh, Francesco!

What will this dim world be to me,
Francesco,
When wanting thy bright soul, the life of
all—
My only sunshine!—How can I bear on?
How can we part? We that have loved so
well,
With clasping spirits link'd so long by
grief—
By tears—by prayer?

Francesco.

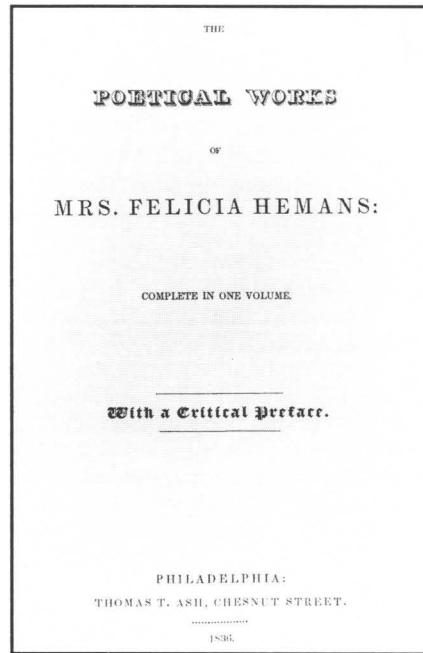
Ev'n *therefore* we can part,
With an immortal trust, that such high
love
Is not of things to perish.

Let me leave

One record still, to prove it strong as
death,
Ev'n in Death's hour of triumph. Once
again,
Stand with thy meek hands folded on thy
breast,
And eyes half veil'd, in thine own soul
absorb'd,
As in thy watchings, ere I sink to sleep;
And I will give the bending flower-like
grace
Of that soft form, and the still sweetness
throned
On that pale brow, and in that quivering
smile
Of voiceless love, a life that shall outlast
Their delicate earthly being. There—thy
head
Bow'd down with beauty, and with
tenderness,
And lowly thought—even thus—my
own Teresa!
Oh! the quick glancing radiance, and
bright bloom
That once around thee hung, have
melted now
Into more solemn light—but holier far,
And dearer, and yet lovelier in mine eyes,
Than all that summer flush! For by my
couch,
In patient and serene devotedness,
Thou hast made those rich hues and
sunny smiles,
Thine offering unto me. Oh! I may give
Those pensive lips, that clear Madonna
brow,
And the sweet earnestness of that dark
eye,
Unto the canvass—I may catch the flow
Of all those drooping locks, and glorify
With a soft halo what is imaged thus—
But how much rests unbreathed! My
faithful one!
What thou hast been to me! This bitter
world,
This cold unanswering world, that hath
no voice

To greet the heavenly spirit—that drives
back
All Birds of Eden, which would sojourn
here
A little while—how have I turn'd away
From its keen soulless air, and in *thy*
heart,
Found ever the sweet fountain of
response,
To quench my thirst for home!
The dear work grows
Beneath my hand—the last! Each faintest
line
With treasured memories fraught. Oh!
weep thou not
Too long, too bitterly, when I depart!
Surely a bright home waits us both—for
I,
In all my dreams, have turn'd me not
from God;
And Thou—oh! best and purest! stand
thou there—
There, in thy hallow'd beauty,
shadowing forth
The loveliness of love!

Francesco's answer to Teresa's fear of impending loss, her apprehension of life's painful mutability, is to create, as his last tangible gift, a portrait of her own face. He offers this declaration of his love and this testament of his admiration and gratitude as a consolation, an immortal remnant of their mutual, enduring love. Hemans's work ends, not like Cunningham's with the focus firmly on William Blake, but instead in a celebration of Catherine Blake, her virtue, strength, and beauty. Transformed into an icon of "the loveliness of love," Teresa/Catherine is deified as the Madonna of the home, halo and all, the sunny solace of Francesco/William in a "cold unanswering world." Together husband and wife become a single emblem of love's perfection and of its eternal character. But the iconography is every bit as much verbal as visual; as Francesco draws, he eloquently describes the qualities he sees in Teresa's face. The poem itself becomes a verbal painting, as Hemans, like Francesco, describes the process of artistic creation in the very act of creating. Though Cunningham tends to dismiss much of Blake's poetry as "utterly wild" and emphasizes Blake's achievement as a visual artist, Hemans clearly reached a different conclusion after reading the poems he quotes; her



3. "The Painter's Last Work" appeared in this 1836 American edition of Hemans's *Poetical Works* and in dozens of other collections published throughout the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic.

Blake character, with his verbal tribute to Teresa, is as much poet as painter. It is hard to escape the implicit parallel between the portrait drawn by the dying Blake and Hemans's own creative act, here and elsewhere, of foregrounding and celebrating the quiet dignity and heroism of women. In fact, Francesco's chief virtue would seem to be his capacity for appreciating Teresa's enormous worth and his skill in immortalizing her in art, even on his deathbed.⁷

Two years after its first publication, Hemans included "The Painter's Last Work," substantially revised, in *Scenes and Hymns of Life, with Other Religious Poems*.⁸ Her own health was by this time seriously deteriorating, and the nature of her poetry was becoming increasingly devotional. Her shifting poetic focus leads her to include three more lines from Campbell in the epigraph:

Oh! by that retrospect of happiness,
And by the hope of an immortal trust,
God shall assuage thy pangs when I am
laid in dust!

Retaining the name "Teresa" for the Catherine Blake character, she alters the name of the William Blake character to "Eugene," an even more forceful statement about his value, for it recalls the Greek terms for "generous" or "noble" (literally "well-born"). While twentieth-century critics have found fault with Blake's view of women, it is worth noting that his contemporary, a poet who championed the female perspective, often in subtly subversive ways, drew an unqualified positive portrayal of him, much more approving in many respects than Cunningham's. Though there are minor revisions throughout this second version, the major alteration is to the conclusion. Hemans deletes the last stanza—the final nine lines of her earlier version—and adds the following:

Teresa.
(falling on his neck in tears.)

Eugene, Eugene!
Break not my heart with thine excess of
love!—
Oh! must I lose thee—thou that hast
been still
The tenderest—best—

Eugene.

Weep, weep not thus, belov'd!
Let my true heart o'er thine retain its
power
Of soothing to the last!—Mine own
Teresa!
Take strength from strong affection!—Let
our souls,
Ere this brief parting, mingle in one strain
Of deep, full thanksgiving, for God's rich
boon—
Our perfect love!—Oh! blessed have we
been
In that high gift! Thousands o'er earth
may pass
With hearts unfreshen'd by the heavenly
dew,
Which hath kept *ours* from
withering.—Kneel, true wife!
And lay thy hands in mine.—
[She kneels beside the couch; he prays.]
O, thus receive
Thy children's thanks, Creator! for the
love
Which thou hast granted, through all
earthly woes,
To spread heaven's peace around them;
which hath bound
Their spirits to each other and to thee,
With links whereon unkindness ne'er
hath breathed,

Nor wandering thought. We thank thee,
 gracious God!
 For all its treasured memories! tender
 cares,
 Fond words, bright, bright sustaining
 looks unchanged
 Through tears and joy. O Father! most of
 all
 We thank, we bless Thee, for the
 priceless trust,
 Through Thy redeeming Son
 vouchsafed, to those
 That love in Thee, of union, in Thy sight,
 And in Thy heavens, immortal!—Hear
 our prayer!
 Take home our fond affections, purified
 To spirit-radiance from all earthly stain;
 Exalted, solemnized, made fit to dwell,
 Father! where all things that are lovely
 meet,
 And all things that are pure—for
 evermore,
 With Thee and Thine!

This melodramatic prayer of thanks-giving changes the final emphasis of the poem from a celebration of Catherine/Teresa to a more conventional celebration of God the Father—from a matriarchal to a patriarchal vision, from the human to the divine. The painter/poet now becomes priest as well. Hemans revises Cunningham's construct this second time to reflect the way in which her own agenda and notion of her poetic role had changed toward the end of her life. But in both of her retellings, Blake is neither the wild eccentric nor the mad painter, but a sensitive, generous, and talented artist/poet with a nobility of spirit and an enormous capacity for love. That Felicia Hemans, a poet who probably sold more books than Byron, identified with Blake and mythologized his death in such a positive way to a large general reading public only four and a half years after the event, suggests that the story of Blake's early posthumous reputation may be far more complex and interesting than biographers have so far acknowledged.

¹ 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830) 2: 140-79.

² Henry Crabb Robinson records reading Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to Wordsworth on 24 May 1812 and notes, "He was pleased with some of them, and considered Blake as having the elements of poetry a thousand times more than either Byron or Scott."

³ Some early reviews did take notice of the unreliability of certain aspects of Cunningham's account. See, for instance, *The Athenaeum* for Saturday, 6 February 1830 and the *London University Magazine* for March 1830. John Linnell also made no secret of his dismay at the liberties Cunningham took with the truth. [G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969) 395.] Mona Wilson believes that the speech beginning "I glory in dying" and the other beginning "I am a changing man" are Cunningham's own inventions. See *The Life of William Blake* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1969) 191, 301, 370n372.

⁴ Blake died in 1827, and was 69, not 71.

⁵ She also draws on Cunningham's later observation: "The affection and fortitude of this woman [Catherine Blake] entitle her to much respect. She shared her husband's lot without a murmur, set her heart solely upon his fame, and soothed him in those hours of misgiving and despondency which are not unknown to the strongest intellects."

⁶ One of her earliest books was *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy: a Poem*, 1816.

⁷ Disconcertingly, life has a way of imitating art. Only three years after the first publication of "The Painter's Last Work," Hemans was herself dying, writing until nearly the end. Biographers and contemporary readers would make much of her last poem, "Sabbath Sonnet," dictated from her deathbed, amid fever and delirium.

⁸ Published in 1834, in Edinburgh, by William Blackwood and in London by T. Cadell.

The Image of Canada in Blake's *America a Prophecy*

Warren Stevenson

The theme of *America a Prophecy*¹ is less the emergence of a new nation—about whose post-revolutionary course, involving as it did the persistence of slavery, Blake had major reservations—than the downfall of tyranny as a prelude to the millennium. More than any of the other English romantics, with the possible exception of Shelley, Blake had a global perspective, reflected in his frequent use of the term "America" and its cognates with reference to a hemisphere comprising two continents. Blake's earliest such reference is the one in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (pl. 13) to the "North American tribes"; in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1:20) Bromion, epitome of British imperialism, exclaims to Oothoon, "Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south"; and in *Milton* (35:17) the similar phrase "America north & south" occurs, continuing the continental emphasis. Compare *Jerusalem* (58:43): "Britain is Los' Forge; / America North & South are his baths of living waters."²

In *America a Prophecy*, notwithstanding the poem's revolutionary bias, one notes the continental drift of such lines as, "Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic" (14:17). And in the text of the Preludium, in which the "shadowy daughter of Urthona" confronts Orc, her sibling ravisher, in addition to the former's curious use of the Bromionesque phrase "my American plains" (2:10), there is reference to Canada (twice), Mexico, Peru, and Africa.

The atypical doubling of the Canadian reference is particularly intriguing. In his most pointed overture during the aforementioned verbal exchange, Orc tells the unnamed "Dark virgin," his sister-love, "anon a serpent