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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 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 that 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. Still, she was probably unaware of the errors, embellishments, and outright fabrications in Cunningham’s account. Cunningham had written of Blake:

The very joyfulness with which this singular man welcomed the coming of death, made his dying moments intensely mournful. He lay chanting 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, 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. 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.

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.
Proficient in Italian, Hemans probably set her poetic drama in Italy because of her great admiration for Italian art and literature. 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 ("terrone") 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.

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,

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


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. 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 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; Through Thy redeeming
And in Thy heavens, immortal!—Hear our prayer!
Exalted, solemnized, made fit to dwell,
For all its treasured memories! tender cares,
Vouchsafed, to those that love in Thee, of union, in Thy sight,
For all its treasured memories! tender cares,
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 1854, 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* 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) Bremion, 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