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1

Impure Affections: Felicia Hemans's Elegiac Poetry and Contaminated Grief

Michael T. Williamson

Felicia Hemans's poems of mourning have largely been read as sentimental, ambiguously patriotic attempts to uphold familial and national honor.¹ In this essay, I offer an alternative view of Hemans as a self-conscious *elegist* whose elegiac *corpus* can be read as a revisionist commentary on the elegiac tradition. Instead of responding to death as an occasional intrusion into life, Hemans writes elegiac poems that lament the waste of women's psychic and imaginative energy on a world tainted by male death, deplore the absence of any commemorative interest in the histories of dead women, and represent dramatically disfiguring subject positions for women mourners, ranging from 'The Suliote Mother', who fears that her son will gladly accept a surrogate father from among the men who have killed her husband and who threaten to rape her, to 'The Lady of Provence', a surviving wife who must repair mourning customs that have been left in disarray by her husband's incompetence and possible cowardice. This engagement with the aftermath of death insistently shifts our attention away from the significance (or symbolic potency) of the dead and toward the *living* figure of the woman mourner and her mourning habits.

Significantly, Hemans creates mourning women who must imagine and manage the post-mortem space between death and the afterlife even though they have been denied the transformative, melancholic energy that is so central to elegies written by men.² What results are representations of *impaired* and *contaminated* mourning that disrupt the elegy's traditional thrust towards consolation by contrasting idealized images of mourning women as purifiers and sanctifiers of male death with the messy, dislocating, and often disfiguring business of articulating a response to death.³ On one hand, Hemans seems to suggest that a mourning

woman's prescribed role is to purify a bloody, isolating, duplicitous, self-destructive world whose circumference is ringed with men laid prostrate by the regressive pull of their own violence and betrayals. Consolation, in this view, comes from performing the symbolic work of compensating for ignoble male deaths. At the same time, however, she asks readers to witness the elegy as an anticonsolatory social drama of *contamination and purification* in which the mourner, not the mourned, must be cleansed after an immersion in death and grief that gives rise to utterances and gestures that are entirely contrary to ideals of composed, resolute, faithful 'feminine' mourning. Instead of working toward consolation, these women must *atone* for the things they say and do when they mourn. Hemans thus eschews the conventional elegiac simulation of 'genuine', immediate first-person grief in order to create carefully framed dramas of mourning in which women comment with their fraught utterances and gestures on idealizations of women as mediators between earthly corruption and heavenly purity.

Further, whereas the liminal phases before and after death typically require rituals of purification by which the elegist transforms the contaminants associated with death and bodily decay into metaphoric processes of renewal, regeneration, and inheritance,⁴ Hemans redirects our attention away from dramas of elegiac transformation and inheritance and toward often unsuccessful dramas of *survival*. Far from inheriting the potency of the dead, and far from creating what Peter M. Sacks calls 'substitutive artifact[s]' which provide 'figurative or aesthetic compensation' for loss and enable the mourner to deflect (his) desire away from the dead,⁵ Hemans's elegists contend with codes of conduct that punish them for expressing their grief indecorously and which therefore deeply impair their ability to figure forth substitute figures for the dead.⁶ Women who mourn their husbands are supposed to view dead men as irreplaceable, after all, but as the psychologist Robert Jay Lifton points out, the requirement of fidelity to the dead often takes the form of impaired mourning that equates any affirmation of vitality with a betrayal of the dead.⁷ Dramas of survival, restitution, and repentance, not dramas of consolation, mark Hemans's reversal of the conventional dyadic relationship between mourner and mourned: the living, not the dead, are the true subjects of the elegy.

I

Writing in a culture that *condones* the containment and even erasure of a mourning woman's psychic energies, Hemans shows in 'Edith: A Tale

of the Woods' how mourning contaminates a woman and requires her, in a cruel contradiction, to atone for the way she has mourned her husband's sudden, violent death. Edith, an Englishwoman who has emigrated to North America, finds her husband dying in the woods after a battle with the 'Red Indians'. Hemans's description of Edith's vigil beside her dying husband seems at first to conform to the conventional pose of the faithful mourning wife:

Alone she sate; though many lay around,
They, pale and silent on the bloody ground,
Were severed from her need and from her woe,
Far as death severs life. . .
. . .
Of him alone she thought, whose languid head
Faintly upon her wedded bosom fell;
Memory of aught but him on earth was fled⁸

Instead of sentimentally yet resolutely healing this psychic wound, however, Edith desperately attempts to staunch her husband's wound with her hair and her torn clothes:

While heavily she felt his life blood well
Fast o'er her garments forth, and vainly bound
With her torn robe and hair the streaming wound –

(p. 378)

Hemans's uses the conventional erotic signs of loosened femininity – torn clothes and unbound hair⁹ – in ways that dramatically transform ideals of sentimental 'feminine' mourning and erotic 'feminine' purity into a shockingly physical image of a desolate survivor's panic-stricken attempt to thwart death by immersing her hair and clothes in her husband's blood. If a figure of purity whose role is to guide spirits gets drenched in her husband's blood, Hemans asks, how may her torn clothes be repaired, her wandering hair cleansed, her fumbling hands restored to their proper place, her mind purified of the taint of her body's immersion in death and blood?

By erasure. Edith is adopted by a kind pair of Native Americans who love her as a daughter. She then becomes an unassuming missionary whose message of Christian consolation flows gently forth like a summer's breeze until she dies. The presence of comforting surrogate parents and Edith's demurely effective work as a missionary urge us to read Edith's

grief as fortunate fall into useful, redemptive sorrow. But Hemans's description of consolation as a 'purified' garment of 'chastened grief' that Edith wears well (pp. 379–80) suggests her more deliberate criticism of the rhetoric of self-sacrificial atonement that runs through the poem. Furthermore, the genuinely consoling and humane kindness of Edith's surrogate parents masks a fettering of affect that binds her verbal and physical gestures to a moral economy of mourning designed to preserve and recirculate female 'virtue' at the expense of a woman's vitality. Edith dies, then, not because her work on this earth is over, but because she has not been consoled by that work, because the kindnesses of her 'native' surrogate parents threaten to taint her 'Englishness', and because her status as a survivor of a horrific scene of mourning simply cannot be resolved by a return to England or by the assumption of a fulfilling feminine vocation. In this way, the poem is deeply anti-consolatory; the self-chastening socialization of desire that produces consolation in the male elegiac tradition¹⁰ is totally inappropriate for a woman whose idealized role as a widow depends on containing and 'socializing' her desires and whose social validity as a missionary depends on mediating and subduing the desires of others.

The poem should be consoling, but Edith's function as a mediator dooms her to a liminal half life. Mediation and the supervision of women's emotions are closely allied, after all, and their alliance is usually clearest when mourning women die of grief. The conclusion to 'The Domestic Affections' (1812), for example, offers an early version of mediating agents who smooth the contradictions between idealized, sanitized commemorations of feminine conduct and the messy suffering of mourning. After idealizing a mourning mother as a patiently gentle, soothing 'angel of repose' who guides her dying child to heaven, Hemans suddenly transmutes this patient, stoic cipher into a suffering flesh-and-blood woman. She asks,

But who may charm *her* sleepless pang to rest,
Or draw the thorn that rankles in her breast?
...
Must the fair blossom, withered in the tomb,
Revive no more in loveliness and bloom?

(p. 33)

In spite of the requisite promise of heavenly reunion, Hemans leaves the mother unconsolated and, in a challenge to the very discourse of feminine

consolation the poem has previously endorsed, transmutes her into 'Affection', an *ironically unconsoled* personification of consoling domestic feminine purity.

Although the tendrils of Affection's sympathy extend across the globe to British subjects, her own home is a barren, grief-stricken place: neither husband, nor parent, nor relative, nor neighbor, nor clergyman comes to her aid. Hemans follows this sudden evacuation of the domestic space, previously a site of redeeming feminine consolation, by introducing the 'spirits of departed friends' who gently 'breathe' words of consolation into Affection's ear. The only consolation available to her is the paradoxically contaminating breath of spirits who console (and purify) sentiment by removing the contaminants of anguish or doubt. Purified, Affection ascends to a heaven where, 'sublimed, ennobled', she devotes herself to '[e]xalting rapture, not assuaging woe' (pp. 34–5). A heavenly house with Christ might, after all, be a far better thing than an empty house of mourning, and it is no wonder that Affection turns her back on the very purpose (the mediating business of 'assuaging woe') that had previously defined her as a personification of feminine virtue.

The close proximity between consolation from the dead and Affection's death shows how consolation from the dead covers up gross failures on the part of the *living*. Hemans's sensitivity to the isolation of women mourners is reflected in the way she affiliates herself with unhonored dead subjects who have not been absorbed into the stream of national memory. In an occasional elegy, 'To the Memory of General Sir Edward Pakenham' (1815?), she shows how feminine grief arbitrates the decision to exclude dead men from the annals of national memory. Pakenham, the commanding officer of Hemans's brother's regiment, did not die a glorious death; he was killed after directing the British Army's disastrous and embarrassing New Orleans campaign in 1815. This doubled loss of Pakenham and of national pride spurs Hemans to construct an economy of feminine mourning in which decorous feminine mourning is most appropriate for men who died in defeat.

First, she represents celebrations of victory against Napoleon in the Peninsular Wars as ghoulish affairs in which 'triumph so prevailed o'er grief, / We scarce could mourn the dead!' and 'each teardrop' was 'worthy of a warrior's grave'. Then she laments Pakenham's death in a war whose circumstances resist popular rhetoric of liberation and celebration and place Pakenham firmly outside the circulation of triumphant national commemoration:

We mourn not that a hero's life
 Thus in its ardent prime should close;
 Hadst thou but fallen in nobler strife,
 But died midst conquered foes!

(p. 478)

The correspondence between 'noble' strife and victory in national mourning is only partially obscured by Hemans's apparent dissatisfaction with Pakenham, but in the poem's concluding stanza she distances herself entirely from jingoistic mourning habits of patriots:

And many a tale of triumph won,
 Shall breathe the name in Memory's ear;
 And long may England mourn a son
Without reproach or fear.

(p. 478)

Whereas the subject of a companion elegy, 'To the Memory of Sir Henry Ellis, Who Died in the Battle of Waterloo', is named by the 'approving word' of a male 'lord of war' whose voice *transcends* the vanities of 'trophied marble' (p. 479), Pakenham's name is preserved surreptitiously. Many a 'tale of triumph won', rather than ardent mourners, 'breathe', rather than proclaim or etch, his name into the receptive, maternal ear of Memory. Memory's nurturing attributes protect England from the fear attendant on drawing too near a defeated soldier's possibly contaminating legacy or, as is more subversively the case, from the imputation of seditious mourning for a general unaffiliated with victory.

Apart from its usual function as a verb signifying inhalation or exhalation, 'breathe' can mean 'to whisper', 'to utter with vehemence', 'to aspire', and, paradoxically, 'to contaminate', depending on who (or what) breathes where. When 'tales' of national triumph 'breathe' Pakenham's name into Memory's ears, this intimate, almost secretive disclosure of knowledge runs the risk of contaminating an ideal of a pure, heroic, masculine community of dead men. By insisting that Pakenham's name and the circumstances attending his death be added to the tales of victory, and by insisting that such an addition will not sully the waters of national memory, however, Hemans creates a space for a critical reading of Britain's war with the United States and resists a full endorsement of a nation glorified by victory. In doing so, she emphasizes the role that collective memory plays in housing and protecting *both* the dead and

their mourners from scrutiny and criticism. Since the circumstances of Pakenham's death *must* be recorded, the elongation of remembrance ('*long* may England mourn a son') suggests that a record of ignoble strife, while whispered quietly and subversively along with tales of bravery, may endure longer than the tears shed so economically over the more easily placed bodies of the victorious dead.

II

By countenancing the ignominy of defeat, Hemans challenges the jingoistic tendencies of national mourning. She continues that challenge in *Lays of Many Lands*, a collection of 'folkloric' poems in which legends of incompetent male mourners stand in sharp relief against representations of effective female mourning that is unfettered by a rhetoric of contamination. In 'The Sword of the Tomb', for example, she considers how an overzealous male mourner may contaminate the patriarchal legacy he so earnestly wishes to inherit (p. 334). Sigurd, the poem's protagonist, tries to steal a sword from his dead father's tomb but accidentally shatters the urn containing his father's ashes. With the 'scattered dust' of his father burning on his hair, Sigurd kills himself over a desecration that not only disinherits him but also dooms his father's spirit to eternal wandering. The artifacts left by the dead are static representations of a form of power that can only turn in on itself to destroy transgressive male offspring.

The poems in which women mourn and are mourned in *Lays of Many Lands*, on the other hand, map out the space for women to mourn without the fear of being contaminated by their expressions of grief.¹¹ At times, Hemans surmounts the difficulties involved in representing feminine affections against a tradition of monumentalizing 'trophied marble' which has insistently excluded women's lives from the historical records engraved on tombstones and scepulchres. In 'Greek Funeral Song, or Myriologue', she grafts women's voices onto the monologic structure of the classical elegy by transforming a quotation from C. Fauriel's *Chants Populaires de la Grece Moderne* into an elegy for a dead soldier performed in turns by three women, a mother, a bride, and a sister.¹² In Hemans's headnote, Fauriel tells us that the 'Myriologia' is a form of poetry '*toujours compose et chantes par les femmes . . . toujours chantes sur un air qui differe d'un a un autre*' (p. 349), and Hemans uses the form to represent three possible subject positions for mourning women. The mother compares her dead son to a flower 'untouched by slow decay' and likens herself to a 'withered stem', while the bride implores her husband to '[t]ake me

from this dark world with thee'. Both refuse to be consoled by tales of glorious victory in battle. The mother bitterly reflects on the way her son's 'glowing childhood's time' has been annexed by the battlefield when she cries, 'I lulled thee not to *this* repose, Ianthis!'. The bride carries this bitter regret further when she asks, 'But where was I when thou didst fall beneath the fatal sword?' (p. 350) instead of Theocritus's much echoed 'Where were you, nymphs, where were you when Daphnis was wasting?' Unlike the passive muses and nymphs of the male tradition (who receive blame instead of doling it out) the wife claims the authority to mourn her own absence from the battlefield when she says,

I would that I had followed thee, Ianthis, my beloved!
And stood, as woman oft had stood, where faithful
hearts are proved! –

That I had bound a breastplate on, and battled by thy side –

(p. 351)

Chafing at the 'womanly' activities of preparing food, praying, or 'singing some sweet song of old' while men fight, she gives voice to a conservative strand in Hemans's poetry in which 'fidelity', or women's social and sexual honor, is 'proved' in death and self-sacrifice.

Only the sister is able to offer both the consolations of the classical elegiac tradition and a domesticated version of consolation. She invokes the trope of sameness by which dead subject and mourner are twinned by remembrance and recalls their childhood and offers a garland of spring flowers as a 'more meet' substitute for garlands of warfare. Because her social role as a woman is not exclusively defined in relation to her brother's (she calls him 'my brother and my friend'), she is able to mourn his death as a loss of pleasure (his own as well as hers) rather than as a catastrophic failure of the domestic affections to sustain male life. The sister's conclusion neither circles back to reconsider the positions of the mother and bride nor negates the force of their bitterness. Instead, her song represents an appendage to that bitterness by consoling it with flowers, symbolic representations of fragile beauty cut short in its prime which Hemans also uses as an ironic substitution for dead men when she writes, 'Bring flowers to die in the conqueror's way' in 'Bring Flowers' (1825).¹³

The poem's conclusion is less static and conservative than it may first seem. Hemans's research into folklore enables her to imagine a space for female mourning that *displaces* the dead male warrior, often seen as a

representative of all that is best in a culture, from the center of the elegiac stage. In his place, we hear the public proclamations of women whose impatience with the failure of conventional gender roles is *performed*, not in the privacy of lyric speech, but in a sanctioned public space where the ear of an emergent Greek nation can hear their refusal to celebrate so costly a victory and witness their impatience with the conventional elegiac extraction of enduring national virtues from a cold corpse.¹⁴

Hemans's direct engagement with the textual reproduction of 'found' forms of mourning like the *myriologue* enables her to consider women's exclusion from the discourse of commemoration. When confronting the tomb of a knight and his wife in 'The Effigies', for example, she considers the wife's anticipation of her husband's death in battle and asks, 'But when did Fame take heed / Of griefs obscure as these?' (p. 591), a question that points to a problem in *recording* the work of female mourning: battles leave traces, worrying does not. Female mourning produces so few artifacts, Hemans argues, because women are seldom permitted to represent the dead, while dead women leave so few memorial records because, as Hemans suggests in 'Elysium', they die slowly and demurely, '[a]s a stream shrinks from summer's burning eye' (p. 427).¹⁵ Even Christ's often-invoked consoling promise of an afterlife undercuts the creation of substitutive memorials – who needs them when his voice calls?

III

This denial of the transcendent power of grief runs through Hemans's representations of contaminated scenes of mourning (as opposed to contaminated mourners) in her next volume of poetry, *Records of Woman* (1828). In 'Costanza', for example, an abandoned woman offers consolation, forgiveness, and the 'refuge' of love to Cesario, a dying knight who has forsaken her. The poem concludes with an exhalation of breath:

He bowed his head – it fell
On the wronged bosom, which had loved so well;
And love, still perfect, gave him refuge there –
His last faint breath just waved her floating hair.

(p. 402)

The last breath of a redeemed sinner carries with it the combined taint of contamination and a delicately and perpetually deferred hint of

sexual fulfillment. Earlier, Constanza's hair is touched by a 'stream of sunset' which makes her hair 'seem all a vision's mist of glory, spread / By painting's touch around some holy head, / Virgin's or fairest martyr's' (pp. 399–400), but Cesario's erotic displacement of Costanza's hair transforms her from a 'pale Madonna' into a figure whose bodily presence belies the ethereal air surrounding her. Costanza's bodily presence as a woman thus hovers beneath her saintly aura and her role as an abstraction; Cesario's breath both exalts and effaces the ideal of saintly feminine forgiveness.

If this death-bed redemption offers the promise of belated, perhaps tainted consummation between mourner and mourned, the tainting of grief is more pronounced in 'Juana' (1828). As Costanza's suppressed double, Juana implores her dead husband's corpse to return to her, redeemed by the fullness and constancy of her grief. The poem's headnote tells us that Juana's husband, Philip the Handsome of Austria, 'treated her with uniform neglect' during his lifetime, and Juana speaks to his corpse with a 'wildness and a tenderness in strange resplendence blent' as she implores her husband to 'wake / And learn my watchings and my tears, beloved one! for thy sake' (p. 396). Her motives for mourning shade into revenge as she imagines *owning* her redeemed husband:

And thou wilt smile – my own, my own, shall the sunny smile be
Which brightly fell, and joyously, on all but me erewhile! . . .

. . .

'Awake! I sit in solitude, that thy first look and tone,
And the gladness of thine opening eyes, may all be mine alone.

(p. 397)

Juana's solitude complicates her masochistic injunctions, since by refusing to allow her husband to be covered with a 'robe of death', she leaves him exposed to the world, hovering suspended between bodily decay and the funerary rituals that would make him more gloriously and officially dead. When the monologue ends, Hemans appears to have confirmed the lesson from the poem's headnote, 'too much we give / Unto the things that perish', but Juana's wild patience also represents a nightmarish version of the saintly feminine death-bed vigil:

In the still chambers of the dust, thus poured forth day by day,
The passion of that loving dream from a troubled soul found way,

Until the shadows of the grave had swept o'er every grace,
 Left 'midst the awfulness of death on the princely form and face.

(p. 397)

The passionate 'dream' of a 'troubled soul' becomes, ironically, a passive *defacement* of the dead that turns the 'fair young corpse' trope of the classical elegy into a phantasmagoric vigil in which a woman presides over decay. Furthermore, Hemans suggests that the regenerative, redemptive power of sentimental Christian feminine affection is often motivated by thoughts of ownership and appropriations of male beauty that are hardly pure, saintly, or holy and that speak powerfully to the failure of social rituals to mediate between the ideals of domesticity and the experiences of women's lives.

IV

The poems of mourning in *Records of Woman* show how conventional gender roles, even when reconfigured by crisis, imprison women's affective energies. In the innovative experimental poems of mourning from her next volume, *Songs of the Affections* (1830), Hemans mines the contradictions inherent in working within a transformative genre which denies women the power to change the dead into stable figures of consolation. 'The Lady of Provence' suggests that a woman may serve as a preserving force in the construction of national myth by covering over male shame. Upon hearing that her husband has run from the battlefield to avoid defeat, the protagonist, Clothilde, invokes the moral and political power of a male lineage as she responds, 'Dost thou stand by the tombs of the glorious dead, / And fear not to say that their son has fled?' (p. 416). Because the remaining male members of her kingdom accept defeat and ignominy, Clothilde takes it upon herself to preserve the honor of her people. She ventures onto a gruesome battlefield to search for her husband's body, and after finding him she organizes his burial in spite of the approaching 'burst of the Moslem scimitar' (p. 418). Once she is back among the ancestral graves, she delivers a short speech in which she tells her husband's corpse, 'I have won thy fame from the breath of wrong' then implores him to call her forth to death. Duplicating a familiar rhetorical strategy, the narrator calls Clothilde's death a freedom from future bondage and exile, and concludes with a starkly unsensational summary, 'She hath lived – she hath loved – her task is done' (p. 419). Although Clothilde's heroic mourning knots the

end of a male lineage by preserving her husband's 'fame', the real excitement of the poem comes not from her role as a preserver, but from her journey onto the battlefield and from her ability to function despite the total devastation of Provencal male nobility. This 'freedom' is then reinscribed and contained as a freedom in death, an escape from the contaminating residues of life.

The conclusion to 'Woman On the Field of Battle' is more despairing than the starkly forceful summary that concludes 'The Lady of Provence'. The dead woman's 'work' on the battlefield, by the poem's end, has become a futile expenditure of affective energy:

Only one thought, one power,
Thee could have led,
 So through the tempest's hour,
 To lift thy head!

Only the true, the strong,
 The love, whose trust
 Woman's deep soul too long
 Pours on the dust!

(p. 449)

As a reflection on the depletions that are women's 'gendered fate',¹⁶ this echo of Juana's desperate mourning points out the difference between the soldiers who lie around her, who fight for 'stormy play / and joy of strife' or, worse, 'to fling away / A weary life', and the woman whose constancy, strength, love and trust are wasted. These attributes are not even properly *owned* by the woman: the cascade of definite articles points neither to the men whom she sought to comfort nor to her own singular power.

If this syntactic erasure of agency suggests Hemans's emerging but as yet undisclosed discomfort with the containment of a mourning woman's strength and purposefulness, we find a more daring criticism of the role of the woman mourner in 'A Spirit's Return' (1830), an elegiac dramatic monologue in which a mourning woman uses occult science and her will to bring her dead lover back from the grave. In a formal and ideological development that anticipates the death-bed dramatic monologues that Tennyson, Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning will write later in the century, Hemans casts her speaker's 'communion' with the dead as reported speech, a dramatic monologue spoken to a living interlocutor. The speaker's mourning habits, therefore, are both spoken to

and witnessed by an auditor who stands for the world of 'real' social relations against which the speaker's colloquy with the dead is framed. Speaker and auditor act out the contradictory characteristics of women's functions as purifying figures whose critical, often reformist energies are hemmed in by imputations of their uncleanness as mourners.

The monologue appears at first to be a ritualized confession, a self-cleansing recognition of (or submission to) the dictates of the social world:

Thy voice prevails – dear friend, my gentle friend!
 This long-shut heart for thee shall be unsealed,
 And though thy soft eye mournfully will bend
 Over the troubled stream, yet once revealed
 Shall its freed water flow; then rocks must close
 For evermore, above their dark repose.

(p. 409)

The purification of a woman mourner is accomplished by speech in the presence of a feminine 'soft eye' rather than by the softly sacrificial dying we have seen in other 'domestic' poems.

This emphasis on speech rather than mute gestures, as in 'Ancient Greek Myriologue', is significantly unconventional. In fact, as the speaker tells her story it appears briefly as if Hemans has written a cross-gendered monologue about a male 'Romantic' protagonist, like Shelley's *Alastor*, for whom 'the silver chords of brotherhood / Were early loosed'. We find, however, that the speaker's home has been a site of silent mourning when she says, 'the voices from my home / Passed one by one, and melody and mirth / Left me a dreamer by a silent hearth.' Instead of representing a woman who is simultaneously strengthened and depleted by the conventions of 'domestic' mourning, Hemans creates a woman who is energized by deaths in the non-binding, frictionless hearth which she leaves to search for a Byronic form of occult knowledge.

This knowledge serves her well after her lover dies. Unlike *Affection*, who can only die once she has finished guiding the souls of her family to heaven, and unlike Hemans's other mourners, whose desires can only be expressed as contaminations of an ideal of feminine purity, the speaker wishes for a communion with the dead that is both a prophetic and an *intellectual* fulfillment of her desires. She tells her auditor,

I tell thee that a power
 There kindled heart and lip – a fiery shower

My words were made – a might was given to prayer,
 And a strong grasp to passionate despair,
 And a dread triumph! Knowest thou what I sought?
 For what high boon my struggling spirit wrought?
 – Communion with the dead! – I sent a cry
 Through the veiled empires of eternity,
 A voice to cleave them! . . .

...

I asked, and I was answered: – Full and high
 Was that communion with eternity,
 Too rich for aught so fleeting! – Like a knell
 Swept o'er my sense its closing words – 'Farewell,
 On earth we meet no more!' – and all was gone

(pp. 411–12, 413)

This moment of communion challenges the basic tenets of the religious faith it seems to uphold: if the dead can return to speak their bliss, what is the point of converse with the living? Tennyson, for whom Hemans clearly served as a precursor,¹⁷ also considers this question in an apologetic letter to Edmund Lushington in Section 85 of *In Memoriam*. Whereas Tennyson represents the intrusion of a fantasy of communion with the dead into the public epistolary form, however, Hemans takes a greater risk by casting a record of 'communion' with the dead as part of a monologue addressed to an auditor who, unlike the reader of an epistle, may reply and censure the speaker.

In a more sophisticated version of the reversals that mark Hemans's revisionary engagement with elegiac form, the drama of the poem lies less in the spirit's return than in the situation of social speech that frames it. Instead of drawing the speaker back into the folds of the living, Hemans uses the auditor's presence to reinforce the separation between the speaker's iconoclastic mourning and the auditor's more idealized mediating feminine purity. The stunning final verse paragraph concludes when the speaker abandons converse with the living, which she calls 'a void, a chain!' (p. 414) and speaks instead to her lover's spirit. Unlike later Victorian conventions of death bed hallucinatory mania, which cast madness as a cover for the speaker's disengagement from the living, Hemans represents a mourner's turn toward the dead as an exercise in intellectual choice that is clearly differentiated from her auditor's sentimental gaze and which brooks no contaminating repentance for her success as a mourner.

V

Hemans's life-long project of imagining women's responses to death transforms the elegy from a poetic sub-genre dependent on the accident of death into a vehicle for social criticism whose power lies in its representations of the grief of imagined *others*. This expansion of personal grief beyond localized, historical contingencies and beyond the transcendent consolations of individual creativity (best exemplified in the conclusion of Shelley's 'Adonais') enables Hemans to create a legendary version of world history in which previously peripheral and unrepresented 'obscure griefs'¹⁸ of mourning women replace the dead men on the center of the elegiac stage. She refuses to provide mourning with moments of luminous brilliance, however, precisely because she so insistently argues against women's cultural, political, and social power to effect the transformation of dead men into stable memorialized figures. Hemans thus makes her readers aware of women's disenfranchisement as mourners who are neither permitted to inherit the legacy left by the dead nor to gain access to the powerful representational apparatus that confers the new life of the spirit on dead flesh in the male elegiac tradition. This confluence of private affect and public utterance recasts what might otherwise be *secluded* idealized behaviors (midnight vigils by a dying person's bedside, vigils of waiting for a man's return, for example) as public performances of grief.¹⁹ Such performances urge later elegists, particularly Alfred Tennyson, to stretch beyond the requisite virtues of patience and loyalty and to countenance the 'other' emotions of women mourners.²⁰

Notes and References

1. For Hemans as an imperial elegist, see Tricia Lootens, 'Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine "Internal Enemies", and the Domestication of National Identity', *PMLA* 109 (1994), pp. 238–53. For her 'tightly ribanded melancholy', see Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 44. For a reading of Hemans as a sentimental precursor to harder-edged modern women poets see Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 21, 297, 300, 301, 312, 313.
2. For a controversial comment on the exclusion of women from the elegiac tradition, see Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 13. For a more careful argument, see Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 75.
3. For a discussion of Hemans's 'consciousness of exile', see Nanora Sweet, 'History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful: Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment', in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, eds Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson

- (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 170–84. For a discussion of collisions between women's ambition and sentimental idealizations of feminine conduct, see Susan J. Wolfson, "'Domestic Affections" and "the spear of Minerva": Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, eds Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 128–66. See Herbert Tucker, 'House Arrest: The Domestication of English Poetry in the 1820s', *New Literary History* 25 (1994), pp. 521–48 for Hemans's 'vaporized' representations of domestic space.
4. See Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 96–7. See also pp. 324–5. Lifton points out that a discourse of purification is often invoked by 'victimizers' (often oppressive regimes) when they construct a 'public theater' for enforcing the distinction between the victimizer's 'immortality' and the victim's 'death taint'. For an account of purification as a form of inheritance, see Sacks, pp. 36–7.
 5. For the now classic (and largely unchallenged) description of this deflection of desire, see Sacks, pp. 4–8.
 6. For a moving account of impaired mourning among survivors of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima, see Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: The Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House), pp. 484–504. See also Lifton's comment that 'the anguish of [symbolic, abstract, and social] formulation is the basic reparative process following any significant psychic disruption', Lifton, p. 525. In Lifton's view, this anguish is often exacerbated by the social isolation of survivors of violent death or disruption.
 7. Lifton, *Death in Life*, p. 504.
 8. Felicia Hemans, *The Poetical Works of Mrs Felicia Hemans* (New York: The American News Company, 1910), p. 378. All future references to Hemans's poetry are from this edition, with page numbers marked in the text.
 9. For the observation that a woman's unbound hair is often a 'code for the eruption of feminine power from cultural norms', see Wolfson, p. 150.
 10. Sacks, pp. 144–5; 189–90.
 11. In 'Indian Woman's Death-Song' (1828), for example, the consolations afforded women by the promise of a Christian afterlife are recodified as abstract principles ('freedom' and 'peace') to which desperate abandoned women may only gain access through the suicidal act of merging with nature.
 12. This grafting of a 'found' poetic form onto a classical elegiac model is an ambitious undertaking, since it revivifies the dialogic form of the pastoral elegy, long abused and satirized in the eighteenth century. For a sustained discussion of the pastoral in English poetry, see Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 263–332.
 13. For the confluence of the faded flower, shame, and redeemed contamination, see Hemans's 'The Penitent Anointing Christ's Feet'.
 14. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Mother and Poet' (1862) reminds us, a woman elegist most powerfully invokes the confluence of maternal and poetic creativity by exercising her powers of *refusal*. See Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 448.

15. Instead of representing a stream watering the grave of the dead and serving as a natural manifestation of human affective energies (as Matthew Arnold does in his 1850 elegy for Wordsworth, 'Memorial Verses'), Hemans represents women *as streams* with no one to mourn them as they shrink under 'summer's burning eye'.
16. Wolfson, p. 151.
17. For Hemans's influence on Tennyson's career, see Tucker, pp. 542–5.
18. See 'The Effigies', Hemans, p. 591.
19. Lootens, p. 248. For Lootens, mourning becomes an opportunity for Hemans to promote fictive interaffiliations between the domestic affections and the expansion of empire.
20. For a consideration of the role the dead may play as figures whose presence preserves cultural standards of morality and virtue, see Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For a discussion of the public role of the mourner through whom elegiac sentiments circulate, see Schor, p. 177. Schor shows how figuring the dead as virtuous exemplars (or 'moral creditors *in perpetuum*') keeps alive an *exchange* of affection, since tribute to the dead, paid out again and again, reinforces on earth those virtues that are housed with the dead in heaven. I would argue that the public role of the auditor in a dramatic monologue makes this 'economy' of sentiment considerably more provisional and open to revision.

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