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■ Hemans, Felicia (1793–1835)

Early nineteenth-century British poet Felicia Hemans produced many successful texts touching on themes of national, religious, and gender identity. Her *Female Characters of Scripture: A Series of Sonnets* (1833, 1834), in particular, is currently attracting increased attention from scholars concerned with the overlap between literary history and biblical studies (Clarke 101). This is largely due to the focus of the sonnets series on women's capacity for prophecy, composition, leadership, and loving action.

Felicia Dorothea Browne was born in Liverpool on September 25, 1793, to an Anglican mother of mixed German and Italian lineage and an Irish father. She was taught world literature and biblical narrative from an early age. Hemans's biographer L. H. Sigourney writes:

Her intellectual training, within the quiet sanctuary of home and under maternal supervision, progressed prosperously. The study of languages aided her development of mind and power of expression. With French and Italian she became early familiar, to which she afterwards added Spanish and Portuguese. She also acquired the rudiments of German, and continued in future years to deepen her knowledge of that noble language, which, it was remarked by critical observers, gave to her own productions an added tone of sublimity. ("Memoir," 30)

Her later poetry contains recurrent images of mothers' teaching their children from Scripture. In "To a Family Bible"—one of her *Sonnets: Devotional and Memorial* (1834)—she writes: "My mother's eyes upon thy page divine, / Each day were bent—her accents grave and mild / Breathed out thy lore" (lines 3–5). Felicia Browne loved her mother dearly; her first poem, written at the age of eight, was titled "On My Mother's Birthday." She began publishing individual poems at the age of fourteen. Her first collection, *Poems*, was published in 1808. When she married Captain Alfred Hemans in 1812, they moved to Northamptonshire, but the captain lost his position, and they began living with Felicia's mother in Wales. In 1818, after the birth of their fifth son, Alfred Hemans left for Italy and never returned. Felicia Hemans turned to her writing as a means to support herself and her children.

From the publication of *The Forest Sanctuary and Other Poems* (1825), Hemans received favorable reviews in British and American journals alike. *The Forest Sanctuary* tells the story of European Protestant dissenters taking refuge in the wilds of America. Even before she composed her *Female Characters of Scripture*, however, Hemans was expressing her faith in verse. "Arabella Stuart," the opening poem of *Records of Woman* (1828), lauds "woman's spirit strong / in the deep faith which lifts from wrong / A heavenwards glance" (lines 32–34). Modern critic Emma Mason refers to the "failure of emotional restraint" in *Records of Woman* and then states: "This failure is absent, however, in Hemans's religious sonnets, marked as they are by a

consistent recourse to the Bible” (89). Yet it is important to remember that the Bible itself is not always marked by “emotional restraint”; its scenes are at times full of passion, and Hemans’s sonnet series vividly portrays the passionate grief, joy, and love expressed by biblical women.

Female Characters of Scripture: A Series of Sonnets (1833, 1834) begins with two separate “invocations” to the women of the Old and New Testaments and then goes on to dedicate one sonnet each to Miriam, Ruth, Rizpah, the Shunammite Woman, “the penitent at Christ’s feet” (unnamed by Hemans, as in Luke 7), and the women of Jerusalem at the cross; two sonnets are devoted to Mary and Martha of Bethany; two sonnets reflect the experiences of Mary Magdalene; and four sonnets contain references to Mary the mother of Jesus. More attention could have been paid to women from the Old Testament: Deborah, Esther, and Rahab are strangely absent. Fascinatingly, Jewish American Rebekah Hyneman responded to Hemans with a more extensive survey of Old Testament women in her own *Female Scriptural Characters* (1853), which takes “the sestet of Hemans’s first invocation as its epigraph” (Harris 1030).

Revising the classical invocation of the muses, Hemans’s two invocation sonnets seek inspiration in a female cloud of biblical witnesses, sister poet-prophets whom her verse will honor. At the beginning of Hemans’s first invocation, she calls on the women of the Old Testament: “Daughters of Judah” (line 10), “Ye of the dark, prophetic, eastern eyes” (line 11). Modern critic Julie Melnyk observes, “The Old Testament women of her ‘invocation’ sonnet represent a golden age of women’s song” (87). In Hemans’s second invocation, she turns to the women of the New Testament: “Ye faithful! Round Messiah seen” (line 1). The imagery is much softer in this sonnet: “From *your* hearts subdued / All haughty dreams of power had winged their flight” (lines 6–7). Melnyk argues that Hemans projects Victorian ideals of submissive femininity on to these New Testament women, but they express a paradoxical strength *in* weakness, which Hemans depicts as more sublime than the prophetic grandeur of the Old Testament.

Hemans begins her actual survey of biblical “female characters” with a prophetic Old Testament figure in “The Song of Miriam.” In the Bible, Miriam leads the Israelite women, after the triumph at the Red Sea, with the words “Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea” (Exod. 15:21). In “The Song of Miriam,” Hemans focuses entirely on this female prophet, mentioning neither her brother Moses nor Aaron: “Miriam’s voice o’er that sepulchral realm / Sent on the blast a hymn of Jubilee” (lines 3–4). Miriam’s ability to sing with joy amid a “sepulchral,” or tomb-like, scene inspires Hemans. Addressing “Bright Poesy!” (10), Hemans mourns the loss of sacred themes in contemporary literature: “How hath it died, thy seraph note of praise, / In the bewildering melodies of earth!” (11–12). Within her sonnet on Miriam, Hemans calls for a return to “the life springs” (14) of God-sourced poetry. She next moves chronologically

through the Old Testament with the sonnet “Ruth,” which draws on imagery from John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819). Keats imagines “the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn” (66–67). The Bible does not mention Ruth weeping in the fields, but Keats does, and Hemans follows Keats, envisioning a “forlorn” Ruth (line 3). Hemans writes, “I see thee stand / Lone, midst the gladness of the harvest band— / Lone as a wood-bird on the ocean’s foam” (4–6). Unlike Keats’s Ruth, however, Hemans’s Ruth is strong and determined. The sonnet concludes:

and if thy gentle eyes
Gleam tremulous through tears, ’tis not to rue
Those words, immortal in their deep Love’s tone
“*Thy people and thy God shall be my own!*”
(lines 11–14)

Hemans’s description of Ruth ends on an uplifting, soundly biblical note.

Hemans educates her reader by also drawing attention to more obscure women from the Old Testament: Rizpah and the Shunammite woman. “The Vigil of Rizpah” begins with 2 Sam. 21:10 and describes Rizpah watching over the slain bodies of Israelites in a mountainous landscape: “Alone before the awfulness of night” (line 2). In 2 Sam. 21, Rizpah guards the bones of her kinsmen, protecting them from vultures and wild animals. Hemans depicts her as a woman of passionate grief, with “drooping head” (5), who nevertheless “recks not” (7) the “wild rocks” (12) because she is sustained by “mightiest Love” (14). Hemans’s final sonnet, focusing on a woman from the Old Testament, “Reply of the Shunam[m]ite Woman,” also celebrates love. The sonnet begins with quotation of 2 Kings 4:13 and then celebrates the Shunammite woman’s devotion to home, emphasizing her “household love” (12) and cultivation of “home’s dear charities” (14). Hemans’s Shunammite woman typifies Victorian femininity, challenging Melnyk’s thesis that it is only Hemans’s New Testament women who embody such ideals.

The first of Hemans’s sonnets about a New Testament woman is titled “The Annunciation” and represents the angel Gabriel’s call on Mary to bear God’s Son. This sonnet does contrast the young Mary with a woman announcing “victory” (line 7) on “her proud lyre” (8), meaning Miriam. However, Hemans’s next sonnet, “The Song of the Virgin,” celebrates Mary as a prophet-poet whose “calm spirit lightened into song” (4) with words “free and strong” (6). In this sonnet on Mary’s “Magnificat,” Hemans challenges purely martial definitions of strength, concluding:

Full many a strain, borne far on glory’s blast,
Shall leave, where once its haughty music pass’d,
No more to memory than a reed’s faint sigh;
While thine, O childlike virgin! through all time

Shall send its fervent breath o'er every clime,
Being of God, and therefore not to die.
(lines 9–14)

Hemans implies that the “Magnificat” is stronger than any national anthem. Mason notes, “Hemans’s sonnet serves to rescue Mary from [a] one-dimensional domesticated role as Christ’s mother, granting her a clear poetical voice that bears song” (93). Mary’s role as composer and prophetess is key for Hemans as a poet.

The next sonnet in the series, “The Penitent Anointing Christ’s Feet,” adheres to Scripture by leaving the “sinner” of Luke 7:37 nameless. The sonnet begins by envisioning angels mourning over her life of pointless “pleasure” (line 3) and then ends with “a song of joy in Heaven, / For thee, the child won back, the penitent forgiven” (13–14). These last lines recall Christ’s parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. Hemans follows this with her next sonnet, “Mary at the Feet of Christ,” focusing on Mary of Bethany, who sat listening to Christ’s teaching, emphasizing progression from repentance to discipleship (Luke 10:38–42). Mary of Bethany appears as a “meek listener at the Saviour’s feet” (4), free from “feverish cares” (5) and full of “silent worship” (6). Given a “fresh childhood” (7), she is reborn into childlike wonder. This receptive attitude brings her “quiet” (9), and her “calm soul” (11) is like a well “deep and still in its transparent rest” (12). Hemans’s next sonnet, “The Sisters of Bethany after the Death of Lazarus,” follows Mary into her time of grief and foreshadows the death and resurrection of Christ (John 11:1–45).

In “The Memorial of Mary,” Hemans focuses on the anointing of Christ with perfume before his death. As preface to this sonnet, she quotes Matt. 26:13 and then adds a note: “See also *John*, xii. 3.” It is John who identifies the woman by name, recording how “Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume,” and “poured it on Jesus’ feet” (NIV). Matthew 26:13 contains Jesus’s words: “Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (NIV). Hemans’s poetic speaker addresses Mary directly: “Where’er the child / Looks upward from the English mother’s knee, / With earnest eyes in wondering reverence mild, / There art thou known” (lines 6–9). Fascinatingly, Hemans places the English child in Mary of Bethany’s position, as contemplative learner gazing up in wonder, and Hemans’s “English mother” acts as representative of Christ, the teacher. To conclude her sonnet, Hemans asks the rhetorical question: “Oh! say what deed so lifted thy sweet name, / Mary!” (12–13), which she answers in her concluding line: “One lowly offering of exceeding love” (14).

The final three sonnets in *Female Characters of Scripture* trace the central presence of women at the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The first of these sonnets is titled “The Women of Jerusalem at the Cross.” John 19:25 records that “there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his

mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." Hemans's sonnet lauds the "bright lingering" (4) of these women who are like "pale stars of tempest hours" (1) as they witness "the death-cloud within the Saviour's eye" (6). The light of their faith is a bright constancy "in the shadow of his agony" (8). Hemans suggests that their faithful courage transcends time to reach women readers of all historical periods: "O blessed faith! A guiding lamp, that hour / Was lit for woman's heart!" (9–10).

"Mary Magdalene at the Sepulchre" moves through grief toward resurrection. The sonnet begins with an image of weeping that recalls Rizpah, Ruth, and the sisters at Bethany: "Weeper! To thee how bright a morn was given / After thy long, long vigil of despair" (1–2). Hemans imagines Mary Magdalene's hearing "that high voice which burial rocks had riven" (3) and falling to her knees, "awed by the mighty gift" won by "tears and love" (14). In these sonnets Hemans returns again and again to the theme of devoted, faithful love. The capstone sonnet of the series is "Mary Magdalene Bearing Tidings of the Resurrection." Hemans presents Mary's spreading the news of the resurrection as her particular "task of glory" (1). She applies a martial word, "glory," to Mary's announcement of resurrected life. For Hemans, this announcement is "nobler" (2) than even the "awful music" (3) of Old Testament prophecy. Mary Magdalene's task was to "wake mankind" (5) to the reality of the resurrection; she was called "to send the mighty rushing wind" (7) with the tidings "*Christ is arisen!*" (9). Like Jesus's conquering of a supposedly shameful death through the resurrection, Mary has herself been "raised from shame to brightness!—*there doth lie / The tenderest meaning of His ministry*" (12–13). Hemans concludes her sonnet series by paralleling Christ's facing of death, even the shame of death on a cross, and then rising to the glory of heaven, with each believer rising from the shame of sin to the light of salvation.

Hemans persevered in writing religious sonnets to the end, even dictating a "Sabbath Sonnet" on April 26, 1835, as she was suffering from scarlet fever. On her deathbed, Hemans stated: "I am a tired child, weary, and longing to mingle with the pure in heart. I feel as if I were sitting with Mary, at the feet of my Redeemer" (Sigourney, "Essay," xxii). Hemans died on May 16, 1835. Her brothers installed a memorial at St. Asaph Cathedral that reads: "In memory of Felicia Hemans, whose character is best portrayed in her writings."

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