S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

4:1 2018

Transitions

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

ISSN 2421-4353

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
http://www.skenejournal.it
info@skenejournal.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

Contents

Special Section

Lilla Maria Crisafulli*

Felicia Hemans's History in Drama: Gender Subjectivities Revisited in *The Vespers of Palermo*

Abstract

Within the framework of a transnational discourse and a new vision of Europe, that focused on the attention of Great Britain towards the South and towards Mediterranean countries, Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) fashioned a historical discourse that addressed some of the fundamental issues of the time. These issues include the new role played by women in the public sphere; the relationship, no longer just between mothers and daughters, but also between fathers and sons; the long European wars and Colonial expansion; the feminization of heroism and citizenship and the problematic presence of women warriors. All these issues, which are at the same time global and transnational, are engaged with and staged in Felicia Hemans's plays, such as *The Siege of Valencia* (1823) and *The Vespers of Palermo* (1823). In the latter play, central to the investigation of this essay, Hemans also discusses the question of Italian freedom that Lady Morgan had already publically addressed in her volume *Italy*. This essay will attempt to demonstrate how Hemans reshapes gender subjectivities, in the context of national and transnational history.

Keywords: Felicia Hemans; *The Vespers of Palermo*; gender subjectivity

In this essay I will not go into the intricacy of Felicia Hemans's voluminous output, but I will try to throw some light on one among Hemans's more intriguing, and less examined, works, namely the tragedy in five acts *The Vespers of Palermo* (1823).

It might be helpful to begin with a quotation from Stuart Curran's groundbreaking essay "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered". Curran, focusing in particular on the work of Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-38), claims:

> Hemans and Landon, to be sure, paid a price for their celebrity . . . For the bourgeois public of the 1820s and 1830s, their names were synonymous with the notion of a poetess, celebrating hearth and home, God and country in mellifluous verse that relished the sentimental and seldom teased anyone into thought. There are other and darker strains in their voluminous pro-

* University of Bologna – lilla.crisafulli@unibo.it

> duction – a focus on exile and failure, a celebration of female genius frustrated, a haunting omnipresence of death – that seem to subvert the role they claimed and invite a sophisticated reconsideration of their work. (Curran 1988: 189)

This quotation helps explain why memory is so necessary in order to reconstruct a female genealogy, and to celebrate women's genius over time, a question that has been ignored for too long.

It was certainly daring for a woman not only to write a play but also to conceive the ambitious plan to have it performed in the early nineteenth century. It is not by chance that, more than a century later, Virginia Woolf was still complaining about the empty shelf for women playwrights. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Woolf lamented not so much the absence of women playwrights in dramatic history, but the strategic way in which they have been silenced and removed by histories of drama. I do not intend to examine this past collective amnesia, since brilliant revisionist work has successfully restored women playwrights' voices over the past two decades. Stephen C. Behrendt reminds us that it was only "toward the end of her brief career Hemans had become an 'ultra representative' of the heavily gendered values for which women's writing was celebrated in the critical press and in the general culture," since "Hemans's earlier works frequently earned praise, paradoxically, for not being like those of her female contemporaries" (2001: 95). In the light of this consideration, I wish to start this essay by surveying a few quotations that provided the ground for the discrimination that Hemans and other women writers have experienced as a consequence of their intellectual commitment.

The first quotation is by Francis Jeffrey. In 1829, in the *Edinburgh Review*, in reviewing Hemans's *Records of Woman* (1828) and *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825), Jeffrey, while complimenting the collected poems as "infinitely sweet, elegant and tender – touching, perhaps, and contemplative, rather than vehement and overpowering . . ." (1829-30: 34), cannot avoid adding further and more explicit general considerations. To Jeffrey, women had to stay as far as possible away from the arenas frequented by the male imagination (in terms of topics and of literary and dramatic genres), and cultivate instead their own feminine imagination, (related to their private and domestic spheres). Jeffrey explains that such a separation of spheres was due to the self-evident inability of women to represent credibly the 'affairs of the world':

> [Women] cannot, we think, represent naturally the fierce and sullen passions of men – nor their coarser vices – nor even scenes of actual business or contention – and the mixed motives, and strong and faulty characters, by which affairs of moment are usually conducted on the great theatre of the

> world. For much of this they are disqualified by the delicacy of their training and habits . . . and from much they are excluded by their actual inexperience of the realities they might wish to describe. (32)

It seems odd that Francis Jeffrey should be unable or unwilling to think of Felicia Hemans as an author capable of dealing with topics and genres that can hardly be dismissed as merely feminine, especially with reference to dramatic works such as *The Siege of Valencia* (1823) and *The Vespers of Palermo*, where social, political and gender conflicts are acutely displayed, and blood and violence copiously exhibited. But Jeffrey was not the only man to underestimate Hemans's talent on the account of her sex. Another leading figure of contemporary criticism was John Taylor Coleridge who in his essay on Hemans, published in the *Quarterly Review* in October 1820, just two years before the publications of her two verse tragedies, wrote:

> Mrs Hemans is a woman in whom talent and learning have not produced the ill effects so often attributed to them [women]; her faculties seem to seat meekly on her, at least we can trace no ill humour or affectation, no misanthropic gloom, no querulous discontent; she is always pure in thought and expression, cheerful, affectionate, and pious. It is something at least to know, that whether the emotions she excites be always those of powerful delight or not, they will be at least harmless, and leave no sting behind: if our fancies are not always transported, our hearts at least will never be corrupted: we have not found a line which a delicate woman might blush to have written. (Coleridge 1820: 130-1)[1]

So far, according to these well-known critics, no clouds seemed to have contaminated the 'meek, pious, affectionate' mind of Hemans, deprived as it was, according to Coleridge, of "ill humour or affection, of misanthropic gloom, and querulous discontent", although much could be said about the "dark and subversive strains" (131) that run through it, as Curran's pioneer-

[1] Until not long ago, this review was attributed to William Gifford, editor of the *Quarterly Review*. Only recently it has been attributed to one of his contributors, John Taylor Coleridge. Nanora Sweet, editing with Barbara Taylor Hemans's pamphlet poem, *The Sceptic*, for the website *Romantic Circle*, provides us with some interesting insights. She reconstructs the complex story of the composition of the poem, its implicit reference to Byron and the critical response that followed its publication in which Coleridge's review has to be placed. Sweet writes: "In her 1820 pamphlet poem, *The Sceptic*, twenty-six-year-old Felicia Hemans attacked Lord Byron's scepticism about the afterlife on the grounds that as a posture, it was dishonest, and as a program, it added darkness to a world already sufficiently dark. For her pains, she was welcomed by John Taylor Coleridge in the *Quarterly Review* as an alternative to 'the most dangerous writer of the present day,' while herself remaining 'always pure in thought and expression, cheerful, affectionate, and pious'" (2004).

ing essay pointed out. Moving onwards, at least chronologically, we next come across William M. Rossetti's "Prefatory Notice" to *The Poetical Works of Mrs Hemans,* edited in 1873, in which he remarks:

> One might sum up the weak points in Mrs. Hemans's poetry by saying that it is not only "feminine" poetry (which under the circumstances can be no imputation, rather an encomium) but also "female" poetry: besides exhibiting the fineness and charm of womanhood, it has the monotone of mere sex. Mrs. Hemans has that love of good and horror of evil which characterize a scrupulous female mind; and which we may most rightly praise without concluding that they favour poetical robustness, or even perfection in literary form. (1873: 24)

Rossetti was even more trenchant in his desultory judgement on Hemans's literary production, when it came to deal precisely with her drama. Having to introduce *The Vespers of Palermo*, he confirms his impression of her poetry as weak and excessively feminine. These faults, he believes, had determined the failure of its performances of some decades earlier:

> Mrs Hemans's talent was not of the dramatic kind. Perhaps there never yet was a good five-act tragedy written by a woman; and certainly the peculiar tone and tint of Mrs. Hemans's faculty were not such as to supply the deficiency which she, merely as a woman, was almost certain to evince. Even as a narrative poet, not to speak of the drama, she shows to no sort of advantage: her personages not having anything of a full-bodied character, but wavering between the romantically criminal and the longwindedly virtuous – poor supposititious creatures, inflated and diluted. (16)

But was Felicia Hemans's sex really shaping (and limiting) her imaginative powers, as these male nineteenth-century critics asserted, or, rather, was it these critics who failed to recognize that it was her gender perspective to destabilize traditional expectations, challenging the heteronormative notions of femininity of her time? One way to answer these questions is by investigating Hemans's use of history, in particular in her drama. Gary Kelly's argument provides us with a good starting point:

> Hemans clearly represents history as a masculinist project that is destructive of the subjectivity and domesticity central to post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic bourgeois ideology and culture. . . . In these works she critiques both masculinist history and male-authored historiography, and does so both thematically and formally. Thematically, she represents masculine history's destructive impact on women and the feminine in a wide range of times, places, societies, and cultures. Formally, she resists masculine history and historiography by using pathetic romance or verse narrative in which a prominent narrator explicitly sympathizes with the victims of masculine history. (2010: 87)

In Kelly's perceptive critical analysis, Hemans dissociates her feminine subjectivity from history, seen mainly as a "masculinist project", to the point that her drama expresses a Romantic feminist liberalism. She offers the reader a diverse and transgressive critical perspective to male-authored historiography.

In her drama, however, Hemans seems committed to a more complex and conflictual representation of history that vehicles what, elsewhere, has been defined as a severe revision of history, a fresh concern for "global literature or, else, cosmopolitan aesthetics" (Singer and Sweet 2014: 3). Such vision creates the image of a new, and rather "unfamiliar" (1) Hemans. Sweet and Melnyk, in their introduction to a volume of collected essays dedicated to Hemans, underline the close nexus that Hemans's work establishes with history, and argue: "'Why Hemans now?' is alike a matter of history, gender, and critical method. We could not understand what is at stake in Hemans without a sense that history itself is at stake. A reader of Robertson, Gibbon, and Sismondi, Hemans was a student of historical process in ways we have only just begun to understand. . . . Like the millennium itself, Hemans's work poses questions about history's 'ends'" (Sweet and Melnyk 2001: 2).

The Vespers of Palermo might be a fitting example of Hemans's conflictual and multifaceted way of dealing with history, and making of the past the site of contemporary national and international concerns, and of the reasons that her work received such a hostile critical response by her contemporary male critics. The play was published in 1823; Hemans's friends and advisors, Henry Hart Milman and Reginald Heber, suggested that she submit the play to Covent Garden. Hemans was very anxious, as her letter to Milman demonstrates :

> As I cannot help looking forward to the day of trial with much more of dread than of sanguine expectation, I most willingly acquiesce in your recommendations of delay, and shall rejoice in having the respite as much prolonged as possible. I begin almost to shudder at my own presumption, and, if it were not for the kind encouragement I have received from you and Mr Reginald Heber, should be much more anxiously occupied in searching for any outlet of escape, than in attempting to overcome the difficulties which seem to obstruct my onward path. (Browne Owen 1839: 51-2)

In spite of the author's anxieties, the play was accepted and performed on 12 December 1823, but, as the dramatist had predicted, it was not welcomed by the audience and the critics and was immediately withdrawn. Nevertheless, Hemans's fame as a poet was such that the cast included famous performers, among them Charles Young as Procida, Charles Kemble as Raimond, Sarah Bartley as Vittoria, Frederick Henry Yates as Montalba,

and Frances Harriet Kelly as Constance. Apparently, it was Kelly's acting that caused particular hostility towards the play (Browne Owen 1839: 73). A few months later, on 5 April 1824, thanks to the advice and support of Joanna Baillie and Walter Scott, the play was staged once more, but at the Edinburgh Theatre, again for just one night. The cast included Harriet Siddons, Henry Siddons's widow who also contributed a new epilogue for the play. This time the audience and Scottish reviewers seemed to enjoy the performance. Despite this positive answer, however, Hemans, by then a single mother of five sons – her husband having left the family a few years earlier to sail to Italy for ever – decided that theatre was not the way for her to gain the income she needed to support her children. Still, she does not hide her belief that behind her failure there were the prejudices reserved to her sex that made her enterprise difficult, if not impossible. On December 1823, four days after the first performance of her play, she wrote to Milman:

> . . . and I almost wish, as far as relates to my own private feelings, that the attempt may not be made. I shall not, however, interfere in any way on the subject. I have not heard from Mr. Kemble; but I have written both to him and to Mr. Young, to express my grateful sense of their splendid exertions in support of the piece. As a female, I cannot help feeling rather depressed by the extreme severity with which I have been treated in the morning papers. I know not why this should be; for I am sure I should not have attached the slightest value to their praise; but I suppose it is only a proper chastisement for my temerity; for a female who shrinks from such things, has certainly no business to write tragedies. (1839: 72-3)

Then, rather significantly, she adds:

> If ever I should try the fortune of the theatre again, I must endeavour to censure the strictest secrecy as to my name till my fate shall be decided: there is a prejudice, I am satisfied, against a female dramatist, which it would be hardly possible to surmount. (1839: 72 and Chorley 1837: 103)

If theatre did not give rise to the desired results, the printing of the play signalled the value of her dramatic works, to the great satisfaction of her publisher John Murray. as pointed out by Paula Feldman: "But drama was to be her big money maker, if not her artistic triumph . . . Anticipating a lucrative, popular success, Murray deviated from his usual practice with Hemans and paid her 210 pounds outright for the copyright" (Feldman 1997: 157).[2]

The Vespers of Palermo, like some of her other dramatic poems – to quote only a few: "Cœur de Lion at the Bier of His Father" from the collection *The*

[2] See also Murray Archives, Ledger B, f. 305 and Smiles (1891: 2, 33), qtd in Feldman (1997), Armstrong and Blain (1999: 78).

Forest Sanctuary: and other poems (1825) that contains several historical poems, and *De Chantillon, or the Crusaders, a Tragedy*, (1823) – have a medieval setting. According to David Rothstein, it was Hemans's use of medieval history that aroused the interest of readers towards these texts, given the great popularity that the Middle Ages enjoyed at the time. As Rothstein notes, the "medieval revival" well served the nationalistic needs of Great Britain, in search of the reconstruction of a national identity that the long war against France had damaged:

> The "medieval revival" of the early nineteenth century provided inspiration for a new strain of nationalist imagery and discourse that would evolve and help to shape British subjects for nearly a century preceding the Great War. (Rothstein 1999: 49)

Rothstein goes on, in the conclusion to his essay, to allege Hemans's political conservativism:

> By rewriting chivalric history through the discourse of domestic sentimentalism and patriotic mourning. Hemans's poetry promoted new uses for medievalist representations in early nineteenth-century Britain: she therefore contributed to a new current in the discourse of chivalric nationalism. . . . Hemans's texts foster a conservative cultural nostalgia based on idealized, feminized versions of gendered subjectivity, domestic and social unity, male social governance, and aristocratic tradition. (51)

Rothstein's assumptions, however, are put in question by Hemans's more characteristic disregard of discourses of conservative cultural nostalgia and of "male social governance", precisely when she shapes plots staging women in history. This is the case with other historical works by Hemans, such as *The Abencerrage*, taken from *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819), where she dramatizes the love story between Albin Hamet and Zayda during the conquest of Granada by the Spanish, in 1492. Zayda's involvement in the political scenario displays a stubborn will. Zayda rebels against her destiny and gives voice to an ethics of war and resistance:

> Thou that wilt triumph when the hour is come,
> Hasten'd by thee, to seal thy country's doom,
> With *thee* from scenes of death shall Zayda fly
> To peace and safety? – Woman, too, can die!
> And die exulting, though unknown to fame,
> In all the stainless beauty of her name!
> Be mine, unmurmuring, undismay'd, to share,
> The fate my kindred and my sire must bear.
> (Hemans 2008: 75, 2.315-22)

In another poem, *The Wife of Asdrubal*, from the same collection, Hemans goes so far as to stage maternal infanticide. Asdrubal, the governor of Carthage, gives the Romans the city in exchange for his life. Nevertheless, the people of Carthage, together with Asdrubal's wife and children, decide to remain in the city, burning it down and dying in the fire. Asdrubal's wife, before her husband's eyes, stab their two children and jump into the fire with them. Her final tragic act demonstrates her desperate love for her children, whom she does not want to fall into the hands of the Romans, but also by way of an extreme act of revenge and punishment towards her husband's betrayal of Carthage: a "wild courage" that Hemans passionately celebrates:

> The flames are gathering round – intensely bright,
> Full on her features glares their meteor-light;
> But a wild courage sits triumphant there,
> The stormy grandeur of a proud despair;
> A daring spirit, in its woes elate,
> Mightier than death, untameable by fate.
> The dark profusion of her locks unbound,
> Waves like a warrior's floating plumage round;
> Flushed is her cheek, inspired her haughty mien,
> She seems the avenging goddess of the scene.
> Are those her infants, that with suppliant cry
> Cling round her, shrinking as the flame draws nigh.
> Clasp with their feeble hands her gorgeous vest,
> And fain would rush for shelter to her breast?
> Is that a mother's glance, where stern disdain,
> And passion, awfully vindictive, reign?
> Fixed is her eye on Asdrubal, who stands
> Ignobly safe amidst the conquering bands:
> On him who left her to that burning tomb,
> Alone to share her children's martyrdom;
> Who, when his country perished, fled the strife,
> And knelt to win the worthless boon of life.
> (95, 23-44)

In Hemans's plays, women's "wild courage" is performed more than once; likewise, roles played by female warriors, like Asdrubal's wife, are frequently present. In the play *The Siege of Valencia* (1823), for instance, we find two different but equally subversive modes of shaping female and national courage. Two women, Elmina and Ximena, mother and daughter, are ready to sacrifice their own life: for maternal love, on the part of Elmina; for love towards her people, in the case of Ximena. Elmina, in the vain hope of saving the lives of her sons – taken hostage by the Moors besieg-

ing Valencia – betrays her people's trust and disobeys her husband's determination, deciding to open the gates of the city to the besiegers. Ximena, instead, dramatically disguises herself as a man in arms and, like a true woman warrior, leads her people to freedom, only to die when the victory is almost at hand. Both women, therefore, offer examples of unconventional and destabilizing behaviour, as far as gender rules are concerned: Elmina disregarding the traditional patriarchal hierarchy within the family and the community, Ximena breaking the gender boundaries prescribed by society for her sex. Their rebellion, however, equally ends tragically: Ximena dies fighting the Moors, Elmina has to bear her husband's and children's death. As Gary Kelly points out, Hemans's use of death and acts of self-sacrifice, massively present in her drama and in her history poems, visibly convey her political protest and personal anxiety in a time of historical turmoil and of social catastrophes. History uprooted people's everyday life, destroying certainties and generating anxiety. According to Kelly "the prolonged global crisis of Revolutionary and Napoleonic disruption and violence, which was perceived at the time as an unprecedented and profoundly transformative world-historical event. Romantic death was figured as meaningful death and set against the meaninglessness of mass death" (2001: 197).

Likewise, *The Vespers of Palermo* displays a deep anxiety although staging a more intricate plot and set of gender roles, and representing interactions between characters that are somewhat more difficult to disambiguate. In the play, Hemans reprises the topic of "The Death of Conradin", a poem included in *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819). In this tale in verse, young Conradin's death on scaffold is narrated in a melancholic and touching strain echoing a passage from Sismonde de Sismondi's *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* [*History of the Italian Republics in the Middle Ages*, 1809-18], a work in several volumes much admired by Hemans, in which Sismondi demonstrates that modern European culture finds its roots in the medieval Italian free cities. Not by chance, Hemans quotes in an epigraph to her poem the very passage by Sismondi that movingly describes Conradin's execution by Charles d'Anjou. Hemans depicts this final scene through a set of images that intersect the public and private spheres, and offer the readers an emotional crescendo. Before his people, Conradin faces death with great dignity and courage, but his last thought is a tender regret for the miseries his death will bestow upon his mother:

> Yet 'midst his people, undismayed, he throws
> The gage of vengeance for a thousand woes;
> Vengeance that, like their own volcano's fire,

May sleep suppressed a while – but not expire.
One softer image rises o'er his breast,
One fond regret, and all shall be at rest!
"Alas, for thee, my mother! who shall bear
To thy sad heart the tidings of despair,
When thy lost child is gone?" That thought can thrill
His soul with pangs one moment more shall still.
The lifted axe is glittering in the sun –
It falls – the race of Conradin is run!
Yet, from the blood which flows that shore to stain,
A voice shall cry to heaven – and not in vain!
Gaze thou, triumphant from thy gorgeous throne,
In proud supremacy of guilt alone,
Charles of Anjou! – but that dread voice shall be
A fearful summoner even yet to thee!
(Hemans 2008: 103)

These lines, that versify what legend and history have made together of this tragic event, convey a sense of sentimental domesticity and, at the same time, a threatening political awareness of what Conradin's violent death will mean for the people of Sicily and will provoke as a consequence. As foretold in the closing of the poem, "he throws / The gage of vengeance for a thousand woes". *The Vespers of Palermo* powerfully performs those consequences. The slaughter of Conradin and of his followers that also meant the end of any freedom for Sicily is still vividly resented by the Sicilians, whereby the revenge that the verses evoked becomes the main plot of the play. Even though, both in history and in her play, this revenge is accomplished, Hemans seems reluctant to offer an easy way out of the dilemma produced by the intersection between public and private spheres. How can retaliation be considered a success if marred by blood? And is it possible to avoid the use of violence when a just cause necessitates it? Also, can we really avoid to see or hear what takes place outside, if it inevitably finds a resonance at home or has a serious impact on one's own country and life? Such questions deeply troubled Hemans's own time.

In the same year as *The Siege of Valencia*, *The Vespers of Palermo* was published. It is similarly set in the south of Europe, but this time in Italy, and, more precisely, in Sicily. As with *The Siege of Valencia*, *The Vespers of Palermo*, while retelling medieval historical events, foregrounds contemporary concerns about the destiny of Southern Europe. Diego Saglia, highlighting Hemans's deep interest in the political upheavals of the time, suggestively mirrored in her verse drama, points out the intense commotion

that crossed the entire south of Europe, particularly in the 1820s.[3] Saglia also underlines how, in the period, theatre and drama become controversial terrains "where the cultural and political identity of Italy are debated" (2003: 254).

Thus, the two plays resonate with the contemporary political events and show, with the same tragic intensity, individual and collective fears and hopes, unexpected acts of courage and vicious revenge, equally embodied by male and female characters. *The Vespers of Palermo*, set in the thirteenth century, refers to the massacre of the French invaders of the city by the people of Palermo in revolt. The struggle of the people of Palermo aimed to regain long lost freedom, after the young king Conradin of the House of the Swabia had been brutally executed in 1268 by Charles I of the Anjou dynasty, who had then taken over Sicily. According to the legend that spread soon after the victorious rebellion, the revolt was sparked off by the sound of bells announcing the evening vespers. Hemans recalls the historical facts and the legendary story, adding to them a familial and emotional dimension.

The play is divided in five acts. It opens with Procida, one of the leaders of the patriots and the revolt (a real historical figure known as Giovanni da Procida), who comes back from his exile in disguise, in order to secure his life. On hearing some peasants express their hatred towards the French invaders, Procida urges them to rebel and to take revenge for the humiliations they received under French tyranny, thereby regaining their past glory. The second scene is set in a castle where Vittoria, the fictional widow of Conradin, lives and cultivates day by day her thirst for revenge, which Procida, on meeting her, openly admits to sharing. Vittoria in her appearance and behaviour is also an ideal embodiment of Sicily. Moreover, as Nanora Sweet has pointed out with reference to the poem *Dartmoor*, in Hemans the widow is always a sign of dispossession (1994: 171); accordingly, Vittoria, widow of the patriotic leader captured and killed by the invaders, metaphorically stands for a land subjugated to the foreign yoke. Not by chance, Eriberto, the French viceroy of

[3] Saglia (2005: 99) summarizes the political intricacy of the time as follows: "The decade after the 'pacification' of Europe decreed by the 1815 Treaty of Vienna, and especially the early to mid-1820s, was a period of intense socio-political agitation both in Britain and on the Continent. Southern Europe, in particular, saw the first stirrings of Risorgimento revolutionary activities in Italy in 1820-21, and, in 1820, the reinstatement of a constitutional monarchy in Spain and the beginning of a *trienio liberal* terminated by the French military intervention of 1823. In 1821 the Greek war of independence broke out with the national revolt started by the *Philiki Etairia* secret society, while in Portugal the liberal revolution of 1820 forced King João VI to grant a constitution in 1822, which he withdrew the following year, thus plunging the country back into an absolutist regime".

Sicily, wants to marry Vittoria, in part because he declares his love for her, but also in order to avow his rights over the island. At first, she refuses since she still cherishes Conradin's memory. In the third scene of the first act, two new characters enter: Constance, the viceroy's sister, and Raimond, the son of the revengeful Procida. As Marjean Puriton has perceptively argued, Hemans's play is filled with Shakespearean resonances that the dramatist uses in order to "[transform] Shakespearean dramaturgy to a consciousness-raising strategy in *The Vespers of Palermo* about the nature of performing bodies on the stage of politics as well as the stage of Covent Garden" (2004: 144).

Hemans, reproducing the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues that caused the death of the two lovers, Romeo and Juliet, in the contrasted love between the French Constance and Raimond, offers her audience the possibility to sympathize with the two lovers' sad destiny, while also providing her spectators with the opportunity to become aware of the political terms that provoke that dispute. Raimond will die, wounded by the French, while Constance will end in a convent bitterly complaining about the reasons of her lover's death.[4] In the meantime, Vittoria, represented by Hemans as a strong-willed and relentless woman, decides to accomplish Procida's plan of retaliation making Eriberto believe that she will marry him when the church bells will ring to announce the evening vespers. Procida's scheme is to have the people of Palermo masked as invited to the wedding and ready to kill all the French assembled for the ceremony once the bells of the church toll. Disguise and dissimulation go hand in hand with the plot while, once more, recalling Shakespeare or, using Purinton's own words: "Hemans has intertextually woven a revision of the 'mousetrap' from Shakespeare's Hamlet, where players stage 'The Murder of Gonzago' to trap Claudius into revealing his guilt" (ibid.).

Finally, the massacre is planned on Montalba's cry 'let them all perish!" (Hemans 2008: 2.4, 252):

> Let them all perish! – And if one be found
> Amidst our band, to stay th'avenging steel
> For pity, or remorse, or boyish love,
> Then be his doom as theirs!

[4] In drawing Constance's character and writing the final scenes of her play, Hemans may have thought of Constance, Queen of Aragon (1247-1302). Constance of Aragon was the daughter of Manfredi, the previous king of Sicily, and wife of Peter III of Aragon. She was regent, in the absence of her husband for the War of the Sicilian Vespers. Then she remained a widow and, after the death of her son Alfonso III, dressed as a nun. Unsuccessfully, she attempted a reconciliation between her two sons, James II and Frederick III, sovereigns of Aragon and Sicily, who were fighting each other. Dante remembers her as the "good Constance" (*Purgatory* 3.143). See http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/costanza-regina-d-aragona (last access 23 March 2018).

Raimond, deemed by Montalba a "fond dreamer" (253), tries to stop the bloodbath, expressing faith in more peaceful means to change the oppressive political situation. But what he really abhors is the mischievous stratagem to defeat the French oppressors. He unsuccessfully tries to contrast his father's and the other schemers' respective decisions:

> Raimond. (*Rushing forward indignantly.*)
> Our faith to this !
> No! I but *dreamt* I heard it! – Can it be?
> My countrymen, my father! – Is it thus
> That freedom should be won? – Awake! Awake
> To loftier thoughts! – Lift up, exultingly,
> On the crown'd heights, and to the sweeping winds,
> Your glorious banner! – Let your trumpet's blast
> Make the tombs thrill with echoes! Call aloud,
> Proclaim from all your hills, the land shall bear
> The stranger's yoke no longer! – What is he
> Who carries on his practised lip a smile,
> Beneath his vest a dagger, which but waits
> Till the heart bounds with joy, to still its beatings?
> That which our nature's instinct doth recoil from,
> And our blood curdle at – Ay, yours and mine –
> A murderer! – Heard ye? – Shall that name with ours
> Go down to after days? – Oh, friends! a cause
> Like that for which we rise, hath made bright names
> Of the elder time as rallying-words to men,
> Sounds full of might and immortality!
> And shall not ours be such?
> (2.4, 253)

Raimond's genuine allegiance to the old chivalric codes and values sounds out of place here, destined to end in a tragic fashion. The tragedy reaches its peak when the bells ring: Procida's plan is put into action and the massacre of all the French invitees to the banquet accomplished. While Raimond succeeds in saving Constance's life, finding a refuge for her in a nearby wood, an accusation of disloyalty is launched against him, and he is condemned to death by his own father. The final scene of the tragedy is set in the garden of a convent, where Constance has later found asylum, and where Raimond's body lies wounded to death, after having heroically defended the people of Palermo from the French assault that had taken place sometime after the massacre. Procida arrives and admits his mistake in judging his son's intentions and actions. Beside his son's body, Procida confesses his failure as a father, blinded as he was by his thirst for revenge and his search for fame. In distress, he declares his repentance at not hav-

ing given voice to "[t]he depth, th'intenseness, and the agony, / Of . . . his suppress'd affection":

> The depth, th'intenseness, and the agony,
> Of my suppress'd affection? – I have learn'd
> All his high worth in time – to deck his grave!
> Is there not power in the strong spirit's woe
> To force an answer from the viewless world
> Of the departed? – Raimond! – Speak! forgive!
> Raimond! my victor, my deliverer, hear!
> Why, what a world is this! – Truth ever bursts
> On the dark soul too late: And glory crowns
> Th'unconscious dead! And an hour comes to break
> The mightiest hearts! – My son! my son! is this
> A day of triumph? – Ay, for thee alone!
> (*He throws himself upon the body of Raimond*)
> (5.7, 278-9)

Hemans's tragedy presents two levels of narration: one public and political, based on historiography (the insurrection of the Sicilians against the French), and one private and domestic, the product of pure invention: the love story between Raimond and Constance, the false betrayal of Raimond, Vittoria as Conradin's widow and her desire of revenge, and the final admissions of Procida's own faults and lack of trust in his son. Hemans succeeds in skilfully combining strong expressions of individual emotions as well as credible drives for actions. What takes place in *The Vespers of Palermo* is, then, an attempt to give voice to the mixed and turbulent feelings that two European generations must have felt and experienced during the French revolutionary and post-Napoleonic years. Hemans's plots generate disturbing questions about right and wrong in a time of conflict and within a distressed social world. Interestingly, she petitions for scenarios of peace while giving substance and authority to theatres of war. In addition, in *The Vespers of Palermo* Hemans represents gender roles in a rather unsettling and ambivalent way: while Procida displays his masculine desire to fight and revenge, Raimond instead is the warmest supporter of loyalty and dialogue. His excessive sensibility conveys a feminine inflection that seems ill-suited to the representation of the brave warrior and valiant patriot that he will eventually prove to be. Conversely, Vittoria, Conradin's faithful widow, fiercely opposes any negotiations and leads the revolt to the point of making of her own female body the very site of war and revenge. Yet, towards the closing of the play, she turns into a sort of Lady Macbeth figure, almost crazed for all the blood she had mercilessly caused:

Was it for me
To stay th'avenging sword? – No, tho' it pierced
My very soul? – Hark, hark, what thrilling shrieks
Ring thro' the air around me! – Can'st thou not
Bid them be hush'd? – Oh! look not on me thus!
(4.2, 265-6)

Constance, the sweet and fragile female, who throughout the play is on the verge of becoming the scapegoat of the conspiracy, in the end turns out to be the spokesperson of an alternative message. With her last speech the emotional dimension enters into the political dimension and interferes with the political dispute. Accusing Procida of indifference towards Raimond, she cries out her anger:

CONSTANCE. (*starting.*)
Art *thou* his father?
I know thee now. – Hence! with thy dark stern eye,
And thy cold heart! – Thou canst not wake him now!
Away! he will not answer but to me,
For none like me hath loved him! He is mine!
Ye shall not rend him from me.
(5.7, 278)

Hence, Constance embodies a feminine subjectivity that plainly addresses Hemans's apprehensions and contrasts the annihilation of the individual life. In Hemans's history plays individual death means and stands for the mass death that her age widely and tragically beheld. Constance's verbal allegation of the failure of the paternal and familial bond, while allowing the emotional dimension to enter into the political dimension and interfere with the political dispute at work, can at the same time also be interpreted as an ironic comment on domestic idealism. Susan J. Wolfson's remarks in regard to Hemans's collected poems, *Records of Women* might be equally applied to *The Vespers of Palermo*: "*Records* looks two ways, at the cultures it constructs and at Hemans's own. Although Hemans does not reflect critically on such displacements, this double orientation has a social force in its common and recurring story: the failure of domestic ideals, in whatever cultural variety, to sustain and fulfill women's life" (Wolfson 1994: 145).

If the play has convinced Peter Trinder that "although the overt issues are national and political – the rising of a conquered and repressed people, the resurgence of an underground liberation movement . . . – the real concerns of the author are essentially domestic and personal: family, affections loyal and love" (1984: 15), Gary Kelly, instead, exploring the use of history in Felicia Hemans and Mary Shelley, affirms that their 'female perspective' in dealing with history from a public and private standpoint offer a more

authentic representation of the past. According to Kelly, they give voice not only to the leading figures whose actions have left their imprint on history, but they also represent the subjective and inner life of the individuals who have taken part in those actions and made that history or, more often, have suffered because of it (1997: 200). In this way, Kelly suggests that women's interest for history may be interpreted as real need: "a feminization of the public political sphere in order to break the cycle of 'masculine history'" (199). While agreeing with Kelly's conclusions regarding Hemans's desire to unsettle macro history, making new places for women's needs and aspirations, and giving her audience the possibility to see what consequences it has on the life of the individuals, on the other hand, one might point out that Hemans is also refusing to provide conclusive and conventional answers. To Diego Saglia, in fact:

> Like Italy in Romantic-period tragedies, Hemans's Sicily in *The Vespers of Palermo* is an ideologically relevant heterotopia, to borrow Michel Foucault's term for an ideal geography or space concentrating a tension between different or opposite dimensions. In its heterotopia of thirteenth-century Palermo, the tragedy of the Vespers highlights the difficulties in extricating tolerance from intolerance, righteous from misguided vengeance, legitimate from indiscriminate violence, and a police state from a community that respects and protects individual freedom. (2003: 366)

Undeniably, behind the author's interest in the South and, in this case, in medieval Italian republican history, lay another story that tells of a more contemporary and unfortunate historical narrative. After the conservative partition of Europe in 1815, decreed by the Holy Alliance, the cries for independence and freedom of the Southern European countries were heard strong and loud across Europe, in particular in the 1820s. A series of upheavals broke out in Spain, Italy and Greece. In Italy, Naples and Sicily rebelled, demanding the adoption of something resembling the Spanish constitution of 1812. Other cities followed suit, in Romagna, Piedmont and so on. Unfortunately, the consequences were disastrous and the respective governing regimes became even more repressive and suspicious. Therefore, the question that was posed after having witnessed, even from distance, the end of all the hopes that had inspired those revolts and fired the souls of those patriots ready to die rather than remain slaves of the joke of a foreign power, was what was now to be done. Percy Bysshe Shelley's Beatrice in his tragedy *The Cenci* answered the question with a parricide, his *Prometheus* with a more idealistic universal love.

Not long before the 1820s, the outbreak of the French Revolution had split Britain into two factions and animated a heated debate between those who sided for a gradual reform and those who requested an immediate change.

The second Romantic generation, and Hemans among them, was well aware of the devastations that the revolutionary and the post-revolutionary years had produced in Britain and all over Europe. The poet Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825) ended her brilliant publishing career because in her poem *1811* she gave voice to the general anger and dissatisfaction against an establishment that had been deaf to any request for reconciliation. Two generations of people had been on the front line, fighting and dying on the battlefield, or suffering the consequences of the war. The post-revolutionary era was no better, since people had to witness, as Hemans did, the rise of new despotic regimes and the collapse of the ideals of equality and international brotherhood, that had seemed possible after the French declaration of rights. Hemans's *The Vespers of Palermo* embodies all these ambiguities, conflicts and contradictions, split, as it is, between a deep sympathy towards the people who are subject to despotic regimes and need to regain their freedom, and the author's incapacity to distance herself from the turmoil of the recent years of war. The play, therefore, is a unique blend, not only or not primarily of conservative or liberal ideas, but of urgent human concerns. It stages fears and hopes, extreme and altruistic gestures of selfsacrifice, an appeal for freedom as well as arbitrary acts of revenge and violence. The chilling calls of the rebels who shout "kill all" and "spare none" – including in the "all" women, children, old and young people – closely recall the tragedy in three acts, *The Massacre*, written in 1792 by the radical actress and playwright Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821). The play, that was, because its plot, neither performed nor published, stages an enigmatic revolutionary mob that assaults Tricastin's house and finally murders Madame Tricastin and her children, the most vulnerable characters in the play. Inchbald's *The Massacre* creates a claustrophobic and alienating atmosphere that discloses a melancholic warning.

The ambiguity that John-David Lopez discerns in *The Siege of Valencia* may equally be detected in *The Vespers of Palermo* in which Constance and Vittoria, as much as Elmina and Ximena, stand for the two sides of public discourse in a politically impassioned climate. Lopez writes:

> This double-thread is perhaps the key to the ambiguity in Hemans's work, and to persistent misreadings of her work. Unsatisfied with notions of female weakness she provides examples of unparalleled feminine strength, of feminine ability to enforce a public ethos. But Hemans sidesteps being drawn into a whole-hearted endorsement of that masculine public ethos by providing also an anguished voice of discontent. . . . If we are to give Hemans her full due, both voices must be heard (2006: 85)

Thus, on the one hand, the episode of the Sicilian Vespers in Hemans's drama acquires a symbolic meaning in view of the Risorgimento, the patriotic movement that will finally make of Italy a unified nation, after centu-

ries of vain struggles. On the other hand, however, Hemans's *Vespers* expresses other and more painful concerns. Aileen Forbes, in her essay on *The Siege of Valencia*, underlines Hemans's ambivalence towards the spectacle of infanticide, quoting Jacques Derrida's provocative question on the Gift of Death regarding the role of woman in an 'economy of sacrifice':

> Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double 'gift of death' imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman? A woman's sacrifice or a sacrifice of woman? (Qtd in Forbes 2006: 160)

Forbes drops this Biblical question and does not go on to answer it, but it does help us make some sense of the instability of the sign that Hemans's drama consigns to her readers, especially when she asserts:

> *The Siege of Valencia* reconceptualizes sacrificial responsibility through a gendered revision of Abraham's ordeal. Refashioning the biblical narrative of near-sacrifice that glorifies the faith of the patriarch, Hemans exhibits a fully executed sacrifice that shifts our ethical perspective from patriarchal duty to maternal passion where passion arises as a feminine mode of responsibility. (161)

I agree with Forbes that the scene Hemans depicts in a *The Siege of Valencia* stages in various ways a theatre of sacrifice. I also believe that very much the same could be said of *The Vespers of Palermo*, where "the feminine mode of responsibility" is perceptible in the invisible voiceover that seems to comment and judge the actions performed in the play, together with the private and public consequences that they cause. Nevertheless, Hemans's plays also give shape to a consistent and dialectical vision of history that, precisely thanks to its dialectics, somehow defeats any definitive interpretation. Reflecting upon her dramatic writing, she unveils an unpredictably confident and positive perspective, when, writing to her editor William Blackwood in 1828, she says:

> I am sensible how very great a difference there is, I will not say of merit, but of subject and interest between my earlier and later poetical works; whatever they may contain of character at all peculiar to themselves, began, I think, to develop itself in the volume of the Siege of Valencia, and I attribute this greatly to my having gained courage, about that time, and not before, to draw from my own thought and feelings. (Letter dated 27 October 1828. Blackwood Archives, National Library of Scotland, ACC 5307, qtd in Forbes 2006: 159)

Hemans, therefore, admits that something changed while writing her more mature dramatic works, since they gave her a new courage "to draw from . . . [her] own thought and feelings": maybe not the wild courage of some of her female characters, but the courage to see and perform the opposite drives and conflictual emotions of her contemporary and destabilizing historical age. In Hemans's drama women are placed at the centre of stage as much as at the centre of history shaping a new historical consciousness and reformulating gender historiography. In other words, Hemans's drama opening the way to the 'regendering' of the past also rewrites history politics. Yet, I still believe that Hemans's history play should be read not mainly from an essentialist gender perspective – where women are created in order to denounce the sins of the past, so as to be able to overcome them in the present – but, rather, from a more complex and challenging perspective. Using the words of the historian Joan Scott, this challenge "requires analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice" (1996: 155). Scott goes on the conclude, "Instead of a search for single origins, we have to conceive of processes . . . it is the processes we must continually keep in mind. We must ask more often how things happened in order to find out why they happened" (166-7). This might be a more appropriate critical approach to adopt when reading Hemans's drama.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Isobel and Virginia Blain (1999), *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian. Gender and Genre, 1830-1900,* London: Macmillan.

Behrendt, Stephen C. (2001), "'Certainly not a Female Pen': Felicia Hemans's Early Public Reception", in Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (eds), *Felicia Hemans Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave: 95-114.

Browne Owen, Harriet Mary (1839), *Memoir of Mrs Hemans,* in *The Works of Mrs Hemans*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons / London: Thomas Cadell: 1-315, vol. 1.

Chorley, Henry F. (1837), *Memorials of Mrs Hemans with Illustrations of Her Literary Character from Her Private Correspondence*, London: Saunders and Odey, 2 vols.

Coleridge, John Taylor (1820), "Mrs. Hemans's Poems", *Quarterly Review*, 24 (47.5): 130-9.

Curran, Stuart (1988), "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered", in Anne Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 185-207.

Feldman, Paula R. (1997), "The Poet and the Profits: Felicia Hemans and the Literary Marketplace", *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 46: 148-76.

Forbes, Aileen (2006), "Besieged Vision: *The Siege of Valencia* and Felicia Hemans's

Theatre of Sacrifice", *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 55: 158-67.
Hemans, Felicia Dorothea Browne (1823), *The Vespers of Palermo; A Tragedy. In Five Acts*, London: John Murray.
— (2008), *The Poetical Works of Mrs Hemans*, in Charlotte Payne (ed.), *British Women Romantic Poets Project*, Davis: University of California, http://digital.lib.ucdavis.edu/projects/bwrp/Works/hemafpoetic.htm#p102 (last access 12 December 2017).
[Jeffrey, Francis] (1829-30), "Felicia Hemans", *The Edinburgh Review*, 50 (99): 32-47.
Kelly, Gary (1997), "Last Men: Hemans and Mary Shelley in the 1820s", *Romanticism*, 3 (2): 198-208.
— (2001), "Death and the Matron: Felicia Hemans, Romantic Death, and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State", in Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (eds), *Felicia Hemans Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave: 196-211.
— (2002) (ed.), *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.
— (2010), "Felicia Hemans, Schillerian Drama, and the Feminization of History", in Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam (eds), *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*, Farnham: Ashgate: 85-99.
Lopez, John-David (2006), "Recovered Voices: The Sources of The Siege of Valencia", *European Romantic Review*, 17: 69-87.
Purinton, Marjean D. (2004) "Shakespeare's Ghost and Felicia Hemans's *The Vespers of Palermo*: Nineteenth-Century Readings of the Page and Feminist Meaning for the Stage", *Intertexts*, 8 (2): 135-64.
Rossetti, William M. (1873), "Prefatory Notice" to *The Poetical Works of Mrs Felicia Hemans*, London: Ward Lock and Co., http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hemans/rwm-preface.html (last access 21 December 2017).
Rothstein, David (1999), "Forming the Chivalric Subject: Felicia Hemans and the Cultural Uses of History, Memory, and Nostalgia", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1): 49-68.
Saglia, Diego (2003), "'Freedom's Charter'd Air': The Voices of Liberalism in Felicia Hemans's The Vespers of Palermo", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 58 (3): 326-67.
— (2005), "Mediterranean Unrest: 1820s Verse Tragedies and Revolutions in the South", *Romanticism*, 11 (1): 99-113.
— (2005) "'Freedom alone is wanting': British Views of Contemporary Italian Drama, 1820-1830", in Laura Bandiera and Diego Saglia (eds), *British Romanticism and Italian Literature: Translating, Reviewing, Rewriting*, Amsterdam: Rodopi: 237-54.
Scott, Joan Wallach (1996), "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", in Joan Wallach Scott (ed.), *Feminism and History. Oxford Readings in Feminism*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press: 152-76.
Singer, Kate and Nanora Sweet (2014), "Beyond Domesticity: Felicia Hemans in the Wider World", *Women's Writing*, 21 (1): 1-8.
Sweet, Nanora (1994), "History, Imperialism and the Aesthetic of the Beautiful. Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment", in Mary A. Favret and Nico-

la J. Watson (eds), *At the Limits of Romanticism. Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism,* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 170-84.

— (2004), "'A darkling plain': Hemans, Byron and *The Sceptic; A Poem*", https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/sceptic/darklingplain.html (last access 23 March 2018).

Sweet, Nanora and Julie Melnyk (ed.) (2001), *Felicia Hemans Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Trinder, Peter (1984), *Mrs Hemans*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Wolfson, Susan J. (1994), "'Domestic Affections' and 'the spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender", in Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefer (eds), *Re-Visioning Romanticism. British Women Writers 1776-1837*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 128-66.