

## The Peasant Poet

- He loved the brook's soft sound,  
The swallow swimming by;  
He loved the daisy-covered ground,  
The cloud-bedappled sky.  
5 To him the dismal storm appeared  
The very voice of God,  
And where the evening rack° was reared *mass of clouds*  
Stood Moses with his rod.  
And everything his eyes surveyed,  
10 The insects i' the brake,  
Were creatures God Almighty made—  
He loved them for his sake:  
A silent man in life's affairs,  
A thinker from a boy,  
15 A peasant in his daily cares—  
The poet in his joy.

1842–64

1930

## FELICIA DOROTHEA HEMANS

1793–1835

Born in Liverpool and brought up in Wales, Felicia Hemans published her first two volumes—*Poems* and *England and Spain, or Valour and Patriotism*—when she was fifteen. She followed these four years later with *The Domestic Affections and Other Poems* (1812) and from 1816 on into the 1830s produced new books of poetry almost annually: short sentimental lyrics, tales and “historic scenes,” translations, songs for music, sketches of women, hymns for children. She also published literary criticism in magazines and wrote three plays. Her work was widely read, anthologized, memorized, and set to music throughout the nineteenth century and was especially popular and influential in the United States, where the first of many collected editions of her poems appeared in 1825. When she died she was eulogized by many poets, including William Wordsworth, Letitia Landon, and Elizabeth Barrett—a sign of the high regard in which she was held by her contemporaries.

A tablet erected by her brothers in the cathedral of St. Asaph, in north Wales, reads in part, “In memory of Felicia Hemans, whose character is best portrayed in her writings.” But there are several characters in her poems, and some of them seem not entirely compatible with some of the others. She is frequently thought of as the poet (in the nineteenth century as “the poetess”) of domestic affections, at the center of a cult of domesticity in which the home is conceptualized as a haven apart from the stresses of the public world, to which only men are suited. Her poems have been viewed as celebrations of a feminine ethic founded on women—especially mothers’—capacities for forbearance, piety, and long suffering. Among her most popular pieces in this vein, “Evening Prayer, at a Girls’ School” depicts the

happy ignorance of schoolgirls whose enjoyment of life will end when they reach womanhood, and “Indian Woman’s Death-Song” is the lament of a Native American woman whose husband has abandoned her, sung as she plunges in her canoe over a cataract to suicide with an infant in her arms.

Many of Hemans’s longer narratives, by contrast, recount the exploits of women warriors who, to avenge personal, family, or national injustice or insult, destroy enemies in a manner not conventionally associated with female behavior. In *The Widow of Crescentius*, Stephania stalks and poisons the German emperor Otho, the murderer of her husband; in “The Wife of Asdrubal,” a mother publicly kills her own children and herself to show contempt for her husband, a betrayer of the Carthaginians whom he governed; the heroine of “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” boarding the ship of the pirates who have killed her husband, annihilates them (and herself) in a conflagration rivaling the monumental explosion described in “Casabianca.” Among the numerous themes of her work, patriotism and military action recur frequently; there may be a biographical basis for these motifs, given that her two oldest brothers distinguished themselves in the Peninsular War and her military husband (who deserted her and their five sons in 1818) had also served in Spain. But some of her most famous patriotic and military poems are now being viewed as critiques of the virtues and ideologies they had been thought by earlier readers to inculcate. “The Homes of England,” for example, has been read as both asserting and undermining the idea that all homes are equal, ancestral estates and cottages alike; and in “Casabianca,” the boy’s automatic steadfastness has been interpreted as empty obedience rather than admirable loyalty.

Hemans was the highest paid writer in *Blackwood’s Magazine* during her day. Her books sold more copies than those of any other contemporary poet except Byron and Walter Scott. She was a shrewd calculator of the literary marketplace and a genius in her negotiations with publishers (which she carried on entirely through the mails). Her self-abasing women of the domestic affections and her scimitar-wielding superwomen of the revenge narratives exist side by side throughout her works. These and other seeming dissonances clearly enhanced the strong appeal of her poems to a wide range of readers, men as well as women.

## Casabianca<sup>1</sup>

The boy stood on the burning deck  
Whence all but he had fled;  
The flame that lit the battle's wreck  
Shone round him o'er the dead.

5 Yet beautiful and bright he stood,  
As born to rule the storm;  
A creature of heroic blood,  
A proud, though childlike form.

The flames roll'd on—he would not go  
10 Without his Father's word;  
That Father, faint in death below,  
His voice no longer heard.

He call'd aloud:—"Say, Father, say  
If yet my task is done?"  
15 He knew not that the chieftain lay  
Unconscious of his son.

"Speak, Father!" once again he cried,  
"If I may yet be gone!  
20 And"—but the booming shots replied,  
And fast the flames roll'd on.

Upon his brow he felt their breath,  
And in his waving hair,  
And look'd from that lone post of death  
In still, yet brave despair.

25 And shouted but once more aloud,  
"My Father! must I stay?"  
While o'er him fast, through sail and shroud,  
The wreathing fires made way.

They wrapt the ship in splendour wild,  
30 They caught the flag on high,  
And stream'd above the gallant child,  
Like banners in the sky.

1. Young Casabianca, a boy about thirteen years old, son to the Admiral of the *Orient*, remained at his post (in the Battle of the Nile) after the ship had taken fire, and all the guns had been abandoned; and perished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had reached the powder

[Hemans's note]. The Battle of the Nile, in which Nelson captured and destroyed the French fleet in Aboukir Bay, took place on August 1, 1798. Admiral Casabianca and his son (who was in fact only ten) were among those killed by the British forces.

There came a burst of thunder sound—  
The boy—oh! where was he?  
35 Ask of the winds that far around  
With fragments strew'd the sea!—

With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,  
That well had borne their part,  
But the noblest thing which perish'd there  
40 Was that young faithful heart!