

LETITIA ELIZABETH LANDON

1802–1838

Letitia Elizabeth Landon, whose initials became one of the most famous literary pseudonyms of nineteenth-century Britain, was born and educated in Chelsea, London. She published her first poem in the weekly *Literary Gazette* in March 1820, when she was seventeen, and soon thereafter became a principal writer and reviewer for the magazine. Her first important collection of poems, published in 1824, was *The Improvisatrice*—a work that suggests Landon's fascination with Germaine de Staël's *Corinne* and with the Italy that she never visited but encountered in the pages of Staël, the Shelleys, and Byron. It went through six editions in its first year and was followed by *The Troubadour*, *Catalogue of Pictures*, and *Historical Sketches* (1825), which went through four. She quickly followed these with *The Golden Violet* (1827), the first of many editions of her *Poetical Works* (1827), and *The Venetian Bracelet* (1829). She also wrote essays, short fiction, children's stories, several novels, and a play; and she edited—and contributed hundreds of poems to—the albums, gift books, and annual anthologies that became a staple of British literary production of the 1820s and 1830s. All this highly remunerative work appeared from the pen of “L.E.L.,” the pseudonym that she first used in the *Literary Gazette* and that attracted increasing numbers of readers and also poetic responses, as it was disclosed by stages that the author behind the initials was female, young, and a great beauty. To this day many of Landon's books continue to be cataloged under the pseudonym, and one “feminist companion” to literature in English has an entry for “L.E.L.” but none for “Landon.”

Landon and Felicia Hemans, as “L.E.L.” and “Mrs. Hemans,” were the two best-selling poets of their time—the decade and a half following the deaths of Keats, Percy Shelley, and Byron in the early 1820s—and were major inspirations to subsequent writers such as Elizabeth Barrett and Christina Rossetti. Unlike Hemans, Landon attracted scandal, partly because of her casual social relations with men and partly because of her principal subject matter, the joys and especially the sorrows of female passion. (In her preface to *The Venetian Bracelet*, she attempted wittily, but without success, to forestall this biographical reading of her poems: “With regard to the frequent application of my works to myself, considering that I sometimes portrayed love unrequited, then betrayed, and again destroyed by death—may I hint the conclusions are not quite logically drawn, as assuredly the same mind cannot have suffered such varied modes of misery. However, if I must have an unhappy passion, I can only console myself with my own perfect unconsciousness of so great a misfortune.”) There were rumors of affairs with, among others, William Jerdan, who was editor of the *Literary Gazette*, the journalist William Maginn, and the artist Daniel Maclise. She was engaged to the editor John Forster, future biographer of Dickens, but had to break the engagement because of these rumors. In 1838 she married someone she had known for only a short time, George Maclean, governor of the British settlement at Cape Coast Castle, west Africa (in what is now Ghana). She arrived with Maclean at Cape Coast in August 1838 and two months later was dead, reportedly from an overdose of prussic acid. Wild rumors—of suicide or of murder (at the hands, some speculated, of Maclean's jealous African mistress or mistresses)—began circulating when news of Landon's death reached England. They appear now to have been unfounded. The nineteenth-century public insisted, however, on using Landon's poetic personas to interpret the circumstances of her death.

Landon perfected, and reviewers helped maintain, several of these personas: the pseudonymous, therefore anonymous, writer of passionate love lyrics; the Romantic

"improvisatrice" jotting down verses in the interstices of an intense social life; the renowned beauty who constantly fails in love and, in lamenting her crushed feelings, becomes the female equivalent of the Byronic hero; and an early version of the Victorian "poetess" composing songs to appeal to a burgeoning cult of domesticity. As in Hemans's poetry, some of these personas are not wholly compatible with some of the others. But their variety and vitality captivated readers.

From The Improvisatrice

*Sappho's Song*¹

Farewell, my lute!—and would that I
Had never waked thy burning chords!
Poison has been upon thy sigh,
And fever has breathed in thy words.

5 Yet wherefore, wherefore should I blame
Thy power, thy spell, my gentlest lute?
I should have been the wretch I am,
Had every chord of thine been mute.

10 It was my evil star above,
Not my sweet lute, that wrought me wrong;
It was not song that taught me love,
But it was love that taught me song.

15 If song be past, and hope undone,
And pulse, and head, and heart, are flame;
It is thy work, thou faithless one!
But, no!—I will not name thy name!

20 Sun-god, lute, wreath, are vowed to thee!
Long be their light upon my grave—
My glorious grave—yon deep blue sea:
I shall sleep calm beneath its wave!

1824

1. From Landon's long poem *The Improvisatrice*, which she described in a prefatory comment as "an attempt to illustrate that species of inspiration common in Italy, where the mind is warmed from earliest childhood by all that is beautiful in Nature and glorious in Art." In this song, however, Landon's heroine, an artist and a poet who performs her compositions, looks to Greece and to the legends that had grown up around Sappho

(7th century B.C.E.), founder of the lyric tradition, whose poems have survived only in fragmentary form. Presented as a renunciation of song, and even as a suicide note of sorts, this poem draws particularly on the legend that tells of how Sappho drowned herself in the Aegean Sea, distraught over the handsome boatman Phaon's refusal to reciprocate her love.