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The Tragedy of Fame: Reclaiming the Legacy of L.E.L.

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by
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Table of Contents

Introduction

My first experience with Letitia Elizabeth Landon was no doubt similar to that of most people: I read *The Improvisatrice* and heard the story of her mysterious death in Africa. The poem appealed to me, enough that I decided to write an essay arguing that its point was misinterpreted by critics, who believed it to be about unrequited love rather than a writer's fraught relationship with her readers. Yet this exercise did not take me very deep into Landon's bibliography, and the question of why she was so seldom read today despite being famous during her life lingered in the back of my mind. It was not until I read more of Landon's work that I came to realize that there was more to both the poet and the woman than I could have begun to suspect.

It is difficult to discuss the work of a writer without understanding her intention in creating art, or the view which she takes of her own craft, and so the first chapter deals with Landon's writing process as she describes it, and the influence of Romantic writers Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth on this process. In Landon's case, her writing process is an original creation with very clear roots in the early Romantic period. Coleridge and Wordsworth, who had nearly polar views on what a poem is and how it is made, are interpreted and reconciled into a single writing process. Understanding this process and its origins is essential to understanding Landon.

I begin by outlining the central ideas of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Then, I provide instances of these ideas in Landon's writing, culminating in a more thorough explanation of the forces at work in one of Landon's best-known poems, *The Improvisatrice*. What follows is an exploration of Landon's writing process as she describes it herself in her essays, providing the opportunity to show definitively the adoption and conflation of the ideas of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

This chapter explains how ideas of artifice, authenticity, sympathy, autobiography, and fiction are related in Landon's poetry, paving the way for arguments made in the other two chapters. Understanding the nature and origins of Landon's writing process, and knowing that her private life and her writing are very deliberately kept separate, allows for a more nuanced discussion of fame, the topic of the next chapter.

Literary fame has two ingredients: writing that merits the attention of the public, and the creator of that work who becomes famous as a result of her writing. This second chapter similarly involves a reading of Landon through the writers who influenced her from the Romantic period, only in this case the writers in question are John Keats, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. Landon wrote in a time when readership expanded to levels that her predecessors had not yet seen. The potential for fame, as well as the demands of readers, were drastically augmented. This chapter is as much about a writer's struggle for fame as it is about a writer's struggle with her readers.

Fame is portrayed in the poems of Keats, Shelley, and Byron as something to be both desired and dismissed, for the rewards it gives are scarcely worth the price pursuing it takes. Building up a public reputation may be rewarding in life, but after death the image one cultivated so carefully falls into the hands of the public. In Landon's poetry, this handing off of control takes place during the poet's actual life, making her the witness to the public's taking over of her image. Landon's portrayal of fame is not abstract, as her readers can be seen to have altered her perception through both attempts to liken her personal life to her poems, and accusations against her moral character.

Landon, because she was famous, not independently wealthy, and a woman, had very little control over how she was seen by the public. Her creation, L.E.L., helped for a time to keep

attention away from her, but with time her careful machinations lost to the relentless inquiries and accusations of her readers and critics. This loss of control was complete with Landon's death, when biographers, poets, and critics alike were free to portray her in whatever way they pleased. The third chapter addresses specifically this: the development of Landon's image after her death.

Landon's decline from national celebrity to relative obscurity was quick and decisive, and her work was scarcely discussed for well over a century after her death. Such a rapid decline cannot be attributed to chance or the natural decay of reputation that comes with death—there is a specific reason behind it. Building on the Romantic portrayal of fame, in which readers control a writer's legacy, I examine how Landon is portrayed and understood in the pieces published on her after her death up until the present day. As it turns out, the Landon who is portrayed after her death is quite different from the one readers fell in love with during her life.

The first key portrayal of Landon came in an elegy by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, another popular woman writer of the time and a contemporary of Landon. Barrett Browning's letters reveal an interest in Landon as a person, but a rather dismissive attitude toward her writing. Consequently, the Barrett Browning elegy contains no reference to her writing at all, instead portraying a selfish, directionless woman. Christina Rossetti, another well-known Victorian, came across Landon after her death and was driven to write an elegy to her in the 1860's. This elegy mirrors Barrett Browning's in subject, structure, and similarly focuses on Landon's faults while completely ignoring her poetry. I follow the consistent negative portrayal of Landon in elegy and criticism up until its eventual dissipation at the end of the 20th century, and address the question of why, exactly, Landon moved so quickly from the dizzying heights of fame to the most obscure region of anonymity.

Criticism of Landon has started anew within the past few decades, and continues to

spread. As such, this project is not an attempt to draw attention to Landon, or to urge critics to produce more literature on her life or her work. Instead, I want to urge caution as critics continue their investigations into Landon's work. For it was a mishandling of Landon's legacy that caused her condemnation into obscurity in the first place. Now, over 150 years after her death, critics and readers have the chance to approach Landon as she has never been approached before: free from both the obscuring effects of celebrity and manipulation of her image following her death. Now is the time when Landon's full work can be read and given the proper attention it deserves. A new tradition can be formed, one worthy of the writer to whom it belongs.

Chapter 1: Reconciling the Past

"Now society is a market-place, not a temple: there is the bargain to be made—the business to be followed ; novelty, curiosity, amusement, lull all the strong passions to sleep, and, in their place, a thousand petty emotions hurry about, making up in noise what they want in importance."
Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, Romance and Reality*

The resolution of dichotomies and contradictions by a single writer represents an attempt to unify and preserve the Romantic period at a time when its relevance was being called into question. Mary Waters identifies Letitia Landon as writing "at the hub of a contemporary debate on literary values in which both sides viewed literature as a force for social amelioration, but disagreed over the qualities that made it effective" (Waters). The literary world was changing during Landon's life, as readership broadened to include many previously-excluded uneducated people. This influx subsequently helped birth a "professional reviewing class," who saw its sworn duty to be protecting the sanctity of literature from the sudden influx of new readers. Faced with the task of selling her poetry, Landon does not just undertake to make a living, but to enter the debate over literature herself, incorporating the work of her predecessors to legitimize both it and her own writing. Waters notes Landon's reluctance to align herself with female contemporaries, preferring instead the men who would later constitute the Romantic canon. Waters writes, "Landon defends her own work, including its sentimentality, by aligning it with a nascent canon of male Romantic poets and a literary inheritance constructed on the basis of aesthetic achievement rather than gender expectations or commercial success"(Waters). This alignment is a profound moment in the English Romantic period since, in bringing the contradicting ideas of its founders into accord, it unifies the ideas that form its base while at the same time making them relevant in a literary environment which demanded both increasing accessibility and literary merit. Landon's writing is designed to be infinitely self-sustaining: it is built to generate sympathy through its use of potent emotion, and can be written for as long as

the author has the ability to continue fabricating this emotion.

To fully explore the creative process that forms Landon's philosophy of poetry, it is important to first grasp the perception of her artifice both by her contemporaries and by modern critics. Ghislaine McDayter provides a concise summary, writing, “The claim that Landon's poetic philosophy was one of manipulation was well established during her own life.” Yet this observation was not made in an attempt to understand the intricacies of her process, but rather to dismiss her as irrelevant. Both Landon and many of her female contemporaries were deemed “guilty of being simple phrase makers, reliant on pretty but often incoherent language that replicated the verse and themes of other greater poets” (McDayter 339). The “greater poets” referenced in this critique are, predictably, the poets one normally associates with embodying the English Romantic movement: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats. McDayter refines this observation of the transparency of Landon's influences by arguing that these contributions, specifically those of Wordsworth, suggest something unique about the source of Landon's creativity, namely that her poetry does not just originate from artifice and manipulation, but, in fact, renders artificial the subjects with which it engages. Her view is that Landon's writing alters rather than imitates Wordsworthian principles. The distinction between imitating and altering one's influences is crucial to understanding the composition of Landon's writing.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, contemporaries and close friends, count themselves among the first generation of English Romantic writers. Conscious or not of the fact that their writing would come to help define a literary movement, these two men wrote essays that made crucial contributions to the modern understanding of English Romanticism. An

insistence on creativity, emotional authenticity, and the unique character of the poet himself are subjects touched on by both Coleridge in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria* and Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1801. Who the poet is and what he is capable of are the subjects of these essays and, although Coleridge and Wordsworth do not necessarily agree on most of these matters, their ideas became cornerstones of the era in literature that was to come. Landon certainly read these works as she matured as a writer, and their influence is quite apparent in both the language she uses and the topics she discusses in her own essays and poetry. Her interpretation and subsequent manipulation of Coleridge and Wordsworth's ideas result in her own description of literature and how it must be made.

What is important to notice in the writing of both of these poets is the consistent presence of contradiction. Coleridge and Wordsworth establish conflicting forces within their own works in the form of dichotomies. In addition, the two men found themselves at odds with one another on several key issues of defining the poet and what he is capable of. Yet, both in their time and in Landon's, one perspective was not favored above another and thus one could be exposed to conflicting ideologies without any indication of which was more correct. This is reflected in Landon's writing. Her philosophy of poetry shows a reconciliation of the contrasting elements both within the individual writings of these supposed founders of English Romanticism and the conflict between the ideas of these two thinkers. The result is something familiar, with origins that can be easily traced. Yet this does not stop Landon's ideas from being radical and innovative. Before arriving at these ideas, however, it is important to first understand those that served as the raw materials for Landon's own.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Tools of the Poet

One of the purposes served by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is to explain, in broad strokes, the essential qualities of the poet. Coleridge does this by outlining a series of dichotomies: two distinct components that serve a common purpose. While all aspects of these dichotomies are viable choices for the poet to make, Coleridge suggests that, in writing, one must choose between them. The first such choice he describes is in the creative process, when the poet has at his disposal are the forces of imagination and fancy.

Imagination and fancy are described as "two distinct and widely different faculties," with the former clearly being the more powerful and important (Coleridge 476-477). Imagination itself is divided into the primary and the secondary. "The primary imagination," Coleridge writes, "I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (477). There are two aspects to the primary imagination: its role as an agent of human perception, and its ability to create. Yet Coleridge is not describing perception and creation as they are normally understood or practiced by humans. Imagination is the gift of the poet, and so it must be something that transcends the standard abilities of the body.

The perception of imagination does not use as its conduit the senses, such as sight or hearing. Rather, it is the "prime agent." As an agent of perception, imagination does not process stimuli like a physical organ might, but instead facilitates and permits perception, influencing "all human perception." He who has a potent imagination has eyes and ears like any other person, but his perception of the world is altered. Coleridge is not completely clear on how specifically the imagination changes perception, but he does link this heightened perception to

creative ability. Primary imagination is the closest man can come to the act of creation as practiced by God Himself. The process takes the form of a repetition in the "finite mind," or the mind of a human. What is actually being repeated is "the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM," or the ability of God to create. The transfer is one of divine power into a finite, mortal mind. The result is the ability to create, as a poet does, anything the mind is capable of conceiving.

The secondary imagination, by contrast, is "an echo of the former...differing only in *degree*,[1] and in the *mode* of its operation" (477). So, like the primary, the secondary is an agent of perception that grants creative ability to the one who wields it. The difference is that while the primary imagination can, like God, create something out of nothing, the secondary imagination is limited by what already exists in the world. Coleridge writes, "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate... it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (477-478). The secondary imagination creates by using existing objects as the raw material for some new creation. The world is dead, argues Coleridge, and the secondary imagination is capable of changing, and, thus vitalizing the inert objects it addresses.

Fancy, by contrast, has only the manipulative aspects of secondary imagination without any of the creativity. Coleridge explains that fancy "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites...it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association" (478). It is likened to a kind of memory, lending to the mind only things that exist or have existed in the mind's experience, concrete and unchanged. Fancy does not create anything, only manipulate. It cannot even, as secondary imagination does, infuse life into the "fixed and dead"

1 Here, as in the rest of these essays, italics are presented as they appear in the original texts.

objects of the exterior world. This restricting definition, and the dismissive way in which Coleridge describes fancy, suggests its inferiority to both kinds of imagination in the creative processes available to the poet.

This hierarchy is reinforced when Coleridge applies these principles to one of his predecessors, William Shakespeare. His proof of Shakespeare's genius occurs in stages, beginning with the definition of a poet as being one with "deep feeling and exquisite sense of beauty, both as exhibited to the eye in combinations of form, and to the ear in sweet and appropriate melody...under the command of *his own will*" (486). Next, Coleridge proves Shakespeare's possession of fancy, "the faculty of bringing together images dissimilar in the main," by citing *Venus and Adonis*, a narrative poem. Shakespeare, by writing, "A lily prisoned in a jail of snow," combines the standard images of a lily and snow in a way that is unusual and evocative. "Still mounting," Coleridge continues, "we find undoubted proof in his mind of imagination" in *King Lear* when "the deep anguish of the father spreads the feeling of ingratitude and cruelty over the very elements of heaven" (486). He goes on to describe imagination as "the greatest faculty of the human mind" (486). It is clear, then, that while there is a certain division in characteristics between imagination and fancy, there is also a clear order of quality: fancy is certainly a quality of the poetic psyche, but its importance and potency pale in comparison to the imagination.

The question of Shakespeare's quality as a writer creates another dichotomy which Coleridge addresses, namely the one between imitation and originality. He asks whether or not Shakespeare is "a great dramatic poet on account only of those beauties and excellencies which he possesses in common with the ancients...or are these very differences [from the ancients]

additional proofs of poetic wisdom?" (487). Essentially, the question is whether Shakespeare is great because of the ways in which he imitates his esteemed predecessors or because of his own innovations. Coleridge rephrases this dichotomy several times, listing "results and symbols of living power as contrasted with lifeless mechanism, of free and rival originality as contradistinguished from servile imitation...a blind copying of effects instead of a true imitation of the essential principles." Yet despite the seeming bias he displays in these examples, Coleridge assures his reader that he is not "about to oppose genius to rules" but instead to create yet another dichotomy to reconcile imitation and originality: mechanic and organic forms (487).

The mechanic form, creating work based on a set of manmade rules, corresponds to imitation. Coleridge explains that "The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form...as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened" (488). When using this form, the artist already has an idea in mind of what his work will look like. In the case of a poem, this could include rhyme scheme, subject matter, line count, or any other number or combination of poetic conventions. But beyond that, the predetermined form can correspond to a certain writer. For example, one can choose to follow the form of the Spenserian sonnet, thus paying homage to a specific writer from the past.

The organic form, by contrast, is purely original and has origins completely independent from works and forms exterior to it. Coleridge describes it as being "innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form" (488). This is essentially the opposite of mechanic form. While the mechanic form demands a set of rules prior to starting to write, the organic form necessarily requires an absence of rules because it must develop itself as it is being written. In a sense it is

improvised, a creation of the moment without limitations from the past or projections of what it may look like in the future. Works of literature written in this form are purely original by definition, because they could not be organic if they were influenced at all by other forms. Shakespeare, who both demonstrates similarity to the writers who came before him and shocking originality, practiced both forms. Like fancy and imagination, both imitation and originality have their uses for the writer, and while one may be superior, both are necessary. Without making use of both dichotomies, whether it be in the creative process or in form, one cannot be a writer.

Wordsworth's Dichotomies and the Creative Process

Having thus established Coleridge's foundations for poetry, it is necessary to turn to Wordsworth. His *Lyrical Ballads* in general, and the Preface to the poems that compose it in particular, serve as his manifesto for a revolutionary new way of writing and thinking about poetry. Creating a "more permanent" kind of poetry, however, required distinguishing Wordsworth's new ideas from traditional and inferior ones, and this meant establishing a series of dichotomies to clearly set the boundaries between worthy and unworthy poetry (Wordsworth 265). While Coleridge described the variety of tools available to the poet, Wordsworth draws a distinction between good poetic choices and bad ones, between a capable poet and an incompetent one.

The concepts of fancy and imagination, so critical to Coleridge's exploration of poetics, are mentioned only once in the Preface, and dismissed as irrelevant within a few words. When discussing the abilities of the poet, Wordsworth writes that "no words, which his fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality

and truth" (270). Fancy and imagination, according to Coleridge, are powers of creation and reorganization, which either alter reality or create new realities to titillate the mind of the reader. For Wordsworth, any kind of artifice is ultimately inferior to poetry which accurately translates the experiences and feelings of reality. The idea that good poetry is imitative of reality is further explained when Wordsworth elaborates, "it is impossible for the poet to produce upon all occasions language as exquisitely fitted for the passion as that which the real passion itself suggests" (270). The ultimate goal is the reproduction of this passion, an imitation of an experience of real life. While Wordsworth concedes that a complete imitation is impossible, it remains the ultimate goal.

Another dichotomy is presented in the writing process, in which spontaneity and careful planning are synthesized into one procedure. Wordsworth describes a method that, at first, seems contradictory and nonsensical. He at once states, "good poetry is the spontaneous outflow of powerful feelings" and soon after asserts, "poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who...had also thought long and deeply" (265). Spontaneity seems impossible when it is preceded by deliberate contemplation. This is reconciled later in the Preface with the concept of spontaneity through deep contemplation. Wordsworth explains that this phenomenon "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind" (273). There are three essential steps to the writing method that are outlined in these passages. First, the poet must have an experience, some sort of encounter with reality which, at the time, created in him an emotional

reaction. Later, he carefully recalls and considers this moment as he is preparing to write. This recollection produces in the poet's mind an emotion "kindred" to the one originally experienced, creating a sudden, spontaneous emotional state in which the poet begins to write. Once again, the recreated emotional state is only cousin to the original one, maintaining forever a boundary between poetic writing and the real world it attempts to imitate. This convoluted and contradictory process, however, is the only way in which a poet can reliably take control of spontaneous emotion, and use it as a tool to create. When the writing actually begins, the poet is then faced with the decision of what kind of language to use.

Wordsworth frequently and decisively distinguishes between the flowery and ineffective language used by other poets and the "language really used by men" that he leverages in *Lyrical Ballads* (264). While this "very language of men" is not exactly defined, it seems to represent a kind of poetic language that is immediately accessible to not just the educated literary critic, but the uneducated country dweller whose speech Wordsworth purports to emulate (267). He elaborates, "Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart...are under less restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language" (264). In plainer terms, Wordsworth seeks uninhibited and transparent language, and he believes that he will find this in "rural life" (264). This means, of course, that he has nothing but scorn for the more elaborate and abstract language of his poetic contemporaries.

Wordsworth distinguishes himself from "poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion that they...indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (265). He later elaborates that he himself has "abstained from the use of many expressions...which have been foolishly repeated by bad poets" until they lose all of their

meaning (267). Wordsworth's goal in terms of language, then, is to not only create something new in the realm of poetry, but to draw attention away from the rapidly degrading state of poetry around him. He sees plain and honest language as the only way to counteract the "deluges of idle and extravagant" writing that are cheapening his profession (266). There can be no intermingling of the "very language of men" and "poetic diction" which Wordsworth claims he has "taken as much pains to avoid...as others ordinarily take to produce" (267). In order for the new poetry presented in *Lyrical Ballads* to take root and become the new norm, Wordsworth needs to completely separate himself from other kinds of writing, and so the dichotomy he establishes between his style and that of other writers is unbridgeable.

The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* necessarily creates these clear divisions because an intermingling of dichotomies is fatal to revolution. Wordsworth distinguishes between good poetry and bad, between making content up and imitating reality, between effective poetic language and cheap, meaningless phrases. There can be no common ground between these divided sides, because to concede ground to inferior writing would be to cheapen Wordsworth's own message. The poems within the *Lyrical Ballads* are meant to create a "class of poetry...well adapted to interest mankind permanently" (263). In order to create this new class, it needs to completely separate itself from other forms of poetry. Thus Wordsworth's dichotomies are, for him, necessarily irreconcilable. The only one which is not is the relationship between spontaneous emotion and tranquil recollection. This exception can be accounted for by the fact that this particular creative process is unique to Wordsworth and critical to his writing process. Language choice and source material are decisions to be made by any poet, but to write by recalling experience and recreating emotion is to write Wordsworth's poetry. Ultimately, that is

the object of the Preface: to define the kind of writing particular to this one poet. This poetry itself is based on, as Waters puts it, "the poet...arousing sympathy through pleasurable emotion." It is the writer's powerful emotions in the moment of writing that allow this to take place.[2]

To summarize before moving on to Landon's adaptation, Coleridge and Wordsworth describe poetry as being a series of choices, ranging from the creative source for the writing, the kind of language used, or the decision between improvisation and adherence to a tradition. While both men engage with all three of these issues, they are not in agreement. Coleridge sees the poet's greatest power as being that of the imagination, which affords the poet the godlike ability to create using only his mind. Fancy, or manipulation of what already exists, is inferior to this. Wordsworth, on the other hand, insists on the superiority of concrete experiences, rendered slightly different through recollection, over the creations of the poet's imagination. While Coleridge recognizes the merit of imitation through the mechanic form, Wordsworth embarks on a new direction in poetry, attempting to distinguish himself as much as possible from his peers. The result is that these two documents, foundations of the English Romantic movement, arrive at very different conclusions. This is the moment where Landon enters into the equation. Rather than attempt to separate herself from the diverging paths and choices of the first generation of Romantics, she opts instead to embrace them, incorporating language and ideas from both writers. The resulting philosophy of poetry is a remarkable reconciliation and adaptation of the divergent and incongruous foundation of the Romantic movement.

Landon's Incorporation: *Romance and Reality* and *The Improvisatrice*

2 A more thorough discussion of sympathy's crucial role in the poetry of Wordsworth and Landon can be found in Chapter 3.

Landon identifies and incorporates the ideas presented by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria* in both her essays and her poetry. In the case of imagination and fancy, the central principles remain the same: imagination is a creative and fancy a modifying force. However, the difference lies in who, according to Landon, is capable of possessing each and how these powers can both enter and leave the poet. In her novel, *Romance and Reality*, Landon identifies and obliquely defines both imagination and fancy through the medium of fiction.

The character Algernon, a young man who is "a poet in all but expression," suggests that he has the fancy requisite to be a poet, but that his imagination has not sufficiently developed (*Romance* 28). Algernon possesses "that deep love of beauty—that susceptibility to external impressions—that fancy which, like the face we love, invests all things it looks on with a grace not their own" (28). She describes fancy in the same terms that Coleridge uses: it is a force of the mind that changes what already exists in the world. Algernon is particularly vulnerable to "external impressions," meaning that he is more inclined to occupy his mind with what he can see rather than to attempt to create something of his own. While he undoubtedly possesses fancy, one of the characteristics of a poet according to Coleridge, he lacks imagination, arguably the more important of the two.

Algernon's lack of imagination is a symptom of his priorities; that is to say that he values falling in love above the solitary and sorrowful life of a poet. Landon writes that Algernon is at a stage in life when, having fallen "desperately in love...the heart asks for some more real object than the fairy phantoms of its dreams: passions chase fancies; and the time was now come when the imagination would exert its faculty rather to exaggerate than to create" (28). Algernon's concentration on an exterior object, namely the woman he loves, has fed his fancy and

diminished his imagination. His fancy imbues his love with qualities, enhancing his memories and causing him to get lost in “the revery of the lover” (28). But because his mind is devoted to altering what already exists, his imagination is left unused and, thus, powerless. Since Landon emphasizes Algernon's youth (writing that he “was just nineteen” [28]), it is tempting to conclude that Algernon's situation is common to the young, and that many poets find themselves, at one point, in his position. This is, as Landon reveals later, not completely the case. Algernon's example serves to show that Landon has aligned herself with Coleridge in terms of his understanding of fancy and imagination. But Coleridge's influence is not just present in the vocabulary of Landon's writing; it can also be seen in its structure. To see her engage with mechanic and organic forms, one must turn away from her novel and examine one of her best known poems, *The Improvisatrice*.

This poem creates through its narrator and subject matter a complicated maze of implications about the poet and the process of creating poetry. The poem's title references a poet archetype, originally created by Germaine de Staël. McDayter, summarizing Angela Esterhammer, describes the role of the improvisatrice, writing, “these fictional female artists were able to compose poetry spontaneously based either on the suggestions of her audience or on the circumstances and emotions pressing upon them at the moment of composition...unmediated and unpoliced by literary imperatives or restrictive psychic barriers” (McDayter 340). Without “bothering in Wordsworthian terms,” Landon describes a poet writing under the influence of powerful feelings, like the “spontaneous outflow of powerful feelings” described by Wordsworth (340). The narrator of *The Improvisatrice* is just such a person (the poem's first line, “I am a daughter of that land” [*Improvisatrice* 1] leaves little doubt of the narrator's identity). The poem

which follows, then, is an improvised creation of a poetess with the ability to spontaneously create. Given the performative nature of the improvisatrice and the presence of an audience to her art throughout the poem itself, *The Improvisatrice* initially seems aligned with Coleridge's philosophy of writing through the mechanic and organic forms. By using the trope of the improvisatrice, credited to Madame de Staël, Landon is applying the mechanic form by obtaining a subject from a previous writer. At the same time, the fact that the narrator is improvising the poem she relates as it goes along adheres to the organic form. In one poem, she unifies two of the branching choices presented by Coleridge's philosophy. But the unification does not end there: Wordsworth's influence is also clearly present in *The Improvisatrice*.

Both the spontaneous overflow of emotions and the tranquil recollection are present in this poem, and both are visible in the presence and, later, absence of the narrator. The narrator's improvised story "might seem to mitigate any need for recollection on the poet's part," McDayter argues (McDayter 341). But at the same time, "it is equally evident that any textual moment of immediacy experienced by the poem's Improvisatrice is of course carefully drawn and rendered by Landon herself" (341). While the narrative of this poem is improvised to an anonymous audience, the poem itself, which is experienced by the reader, is a result of the careful and deliberate work of Landon's own hand. In that sense, it represents both a spontaneous outburst of emotion and the labor of a solitary poet. The split from pure improvisation is best captured at the poem's conclusion when, after the narrator dies, a new one takes over. In her final moments, the first narrator claims, "It is deep happiness to die, / Yet live in Love's dear memory" (*Improvisatrice* 1517-1518). Several lines later, the new narrator, self-identifying as "A wanderer through Italia's land" takes over (1533). This wanderer enters the home of the late narrator's love,

whose choice to wed another caused the improvisatrice's death. The man is now a grim shadow of his former self, “wan as Grief's corroded page” (1540). But his abode, “rather like a genie's home,” is filled with countless works of art (1548). The most notable of these is a picture of the improvisatrice herself, who “looked a form of light and life, / All soul, all passion, and all fire” (1567-1568). The immediate, spontaneous improviser becomes a piece of art in her admirer's house, where “he mused his weary life away” brooding over her portrait (1546). Although he himself is not a poet, he recalls emotion from a state of isolation and tranquility just as Wordsworth describes. As Angela Esterhammer puts it, “The lively responsiveness previously associated with improvisation is arrested, at the end of a poem like *The Improvisatrice*...into a static pose, as the dead or dying poetess is replaced by her portrait” (Esterhammer 333). Life becomes death but, more importantly, the present becomes the past and immediate experience becomes a recollection. *The Improvisatrice* utilizes the diverging philosophies of the first generation Romantics and creates not just a cohesive poem, but also one that remains at the forefront of discussions on Landon's poetry.

The Manufacture of Authenticity

The basis for Landon's writing process bears an unmistakable resemblance to Wordsworth's, emphasizing strong feeling during the creative process. In an essay entitled “On the Character of Mrs. Hemans's Writings,” Landon opens with the words, “'Oh! Mes amis, rappellez-vous quelquefois mes vers; mon ame y est empreinte.[3] Such is the secret of poetry. There cannot be a greater error than to suppose that the poet does not feel what he writes” (“Character” 173). Landon's use of the present tense is worth noting in these lines. She does not

3 In English: Oh! My friends, recall my verses; my soul is imprinted upon them.

say that the poet “has felt” what she writes, suggesting that she is writing about an emotion that was experienced in the past. Instead, the poet “feels what he writes,” meaning that she is under the influence of an emotion during the actual writing process. From the first words of this essay, the importance of Wordsworth's poetic thought is brought to the forefront. Claiming that her “soul is imprinted” on her writing seems to insist on authenticity and the writer not attempting to manufacture her emotions to ease the process.

Yet manufactured is exactly what these feelings are, and Landon herself admits that she writes about feelings that she has never herself experienced. Wordsworth writes that poets are only able to create in recollection a feeling akin to what they felt in the past. Landon argues that the poet's sorrow allows her to write about sorrows that she herself has never felt before, but is able to experience through the process of writing. Critics and readers of Landon's poetry often assumed that her writing was autobiographical. In the Preface to *The Venetian Bracelet*, Landon addresses these assumptions, writing, “With regard to the frequent application of my works to myself, considering that I sometimes pourtrayed [sic] love unrequited, then betrayed, and again destroyed by death...the conclusions are not quite logically drawn, as assuredly the same mind cannot have suffered such varied modes of misery” (*Venetian* 103). Landon confesses here to writing about forms of sorrow which she has not herself experienced. As McDayter writes, “This celebration of authentic passion through poetic experience is wholly and openly manufactured” (McDayter 341). But it cannot come as much of a surprise that the emotions behind Landon's writing are inauthentic, since the very language that comprises these poems is itself artificial.

Landon sees conversational language—one of the cornerstones of Wordsworth's poetic vision—as being completely incompatible with the process of writing poetry. She begins by

condemning the nature of conversation in general, writing, “In childhood, the impetus of conversation is curiosity...but one of its first lessons as it advances, is that a question is an intrusion, and an answer a deceit. Ridicule parts social life like an invisible paling; and we are all of us afraid of the other” (“Character” 175). The fear of ridicule influences interpersonal discourse, depriving it of real meaning since people are afraid of having their true selves known, and thus vulnerable to criticism. Landon deduces that this fear “may be in great measure attributed the difference that exists between an author's writings and his conversation. The one is often sad and thoughtful, while the other is lively and careless” (175). Speech and writing are decidedly separated for Landon, meaning that the language of common life which Wordsworth so deeply values over what he refers to as “poetic diction” is, in fact, a hindrance in Landon's mind. This difference arises from the conflict that Landon sees as existing between the poet and the rest of the world, between what is written and what is spoken and, most importantly, between a poet and his audience.

The poet is incapable of meaningfully interacting with her public, either through spoken word or through poetry, unless she is in a state of isolated separation. Landon writes that “Fame...is but the fulfillment of that desire for sympathy which can never be brought home to the individual” (173). Sympathy from a reader is only considered fame if it is the kind that cannot be “brought home,” that is to say that the reader does not express this sympathy in-person to the poet. This is not such a radical claim; a writer's fame can only spread if her readers tell their friends and colleagues about a particular piece they have read. But Landon takes this farther when she writes, “Praise—actual personal praise—oftener frets and embarrasses than it encourages. It is too small when too near. There is also the fear of mistaking the false Florimel

flattery for the true Florimel praise" (173). Here she incorporates the inadequate nature of vocal communication, claiming that directly praising a writer not only does not contribute to fame, but actually can damage the writer's ability to practice her craft. Because the spoken word cannot be trusted, any praise delivered in this way runs the risk of being misinterpreted by the poet as a veiled criticism, or a disingenuous compliment. It is only when there is a physical distance between the poet and her audience that she is able to best practice her craft. Even the feelings of the poet, so important to her ability to create, must remain in isolation. Landon explains that "no indication" of a poet's feelings "would probably be shown in ordinary life: first, because the relief of expression has already been found in poetry, and secondly, from that extreme sensitiveness which shrinks from contact with the actual" (175). Poetry becomes not just a means of expressing a feeling, but the only actual way for these feelings to exist outside of the poet's own mind. Unable to exist adjacent to the "actual," the poet's feelings, the key to generating the "sympathy" necessary to fame, are only able to exist in the specific poetic language inside of a poem. Waters reflects that this desire for fame "prompted many reviewers to dismiss her sentimentality as either personally authentic but intellectually trivial or as an insincere pose for the sake of sales" (Waters). These reviewers are incorrect on both counts. Landon's artificial writing served the purpose of paying her bills and widening her readership, but it also served a much more important task: the preservation of the integrity of literature.

The use of the imagination, the godlike creative power described by Coleridge, is what allows Landon to generate powerful feelings that she herself has never experienced in her writing. And it is the loss of this ability to create feeling and sympathy that heralds the decline of one's ability to write. In *Romance and Reality*, Landon describes the phenomenon, writing, "In a

little time, imagination...will be left only to the young. Look on all the great writers of the present day;—are they not living instances of the truth of this assertion?...literary life grows too like the actual one...imagination gives place to memory...and poetry ends in prose" (Landon 37). Literature cannot be authentic, since as soon as it begins to mirror the author's own life it becomes something else entirely. A writer's life necessarily must remain separate from her work because "The personal is the destroyer of the spiritual, and to the former everything is now referred." Landon's fear is that, as she explains in *The New Monthly Magazine,* by privileging the life over the writing, "We talk of the author's self more than his works, and we know his name rather than his writings" (Waters). The personal life can captivate, but in doing so it destroys the writing that life produced.

It is tempting to read Landon's work as autobiographical, particularly given how closely her death parallels those of her protagonists. Yet to do this would be to disregard not only Landon's deliberate attempts to keep her personal life distant from her writing, but her vision of what writing should be. Carefully manipulating the philosophies of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Landon presents a vision of poetry that is her own, and at the same time unquestionably Romantic. Writing is founded in powerful personal feeling and has as its aim the creation of sympathy in the reader, like Wordsworth argues in the Preface. However, Wordsworth's key ingredients of authentic language and personal experience are replaced by Coleridge's creation: the seemingly limitless creative power of the imagination. Imagination, through which the creation of feelings foreign to the writer's own life is possible, provides the source material. Like Coleridge, Landon emphasizes the importance of the imagination over virtually all else in the writing process. Inducing sympathy through the use of powerful emotions

is inherited from Wordsworth, while forsaking the external world for the wonders of the mind is inherited from Coleridge. In allying the philosophies of these two first-generation Romantics, Landon becomes a kind of Romantic herself, armed with the tools of both writers and generating material that reflects the complexity and depth of the wide range of her poetic philosophy. At its root, her poetry is built on a system of emotional commerce. The writer's powerful feeling allows for the reader to sympathize with a piece, contributing to the writer's fame. This is the service rendered from the public to the writer. In return, Landon argues, the writer must never stop creating, must never lean on the crutch of immediate personal experience, because to do so is to cheapen the art, to blur the line between the written and the real so much that they become indistinguishable. The real world does not suffer from this merge. The true casualty of losing imagination is writing itself, for the more it resembles real life, the less it exists as its own entity.

Chapter 2: The Creation and Theft of Fame

"He is only a true poet, who can say, in the words of Coleridge, 'My task has been my delight; I have not looked either to guerdon or praise, and to me Poetry is its own exceeding great reward.'"
Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry"[4]

Even the most shallow investigation into Letitia Landon's career will yield an interesting fact: critics and readers refer to her interchangeably by both her given name and her initials, L.E.L. Landon wrote under this pseudonym throughout her career, these three letters that eventually took on a life of their own as their owner's celebrity grew to astronomical heights. Even from the first time her initials appeared to the public, when the only personal details about her available to the public were that she was a young woman "yet in her teens!" despite her being actually in her twenties at that time, there began to grow a gap between Letitia Elizabeth Landon and L.E.L., the mysterious poetess whose mystique captured the imaginations of her readers (*Selected Writings* 12). Landon biographer Laman Blanchard writes, "No two persons could be less like each other...than L.E.L. and Laetitia-Elizabeth [sic] Landon...The pen once out of her hand, there was no more sturdy questioner, not to say repudiator, of her own doctrines than her own practice" (Blanchard 33-34). Glennis Stephenson refines this idea further by arguing that Landon deliberately constructs a separate self in poetry, one designed to appeal particularly to the tastes of her audience. Stephenson elaborates that, in creating a separate literary persona, Landon "quite consciously set out to promote herself in the manner she felt would best assure her popular and critical success: she composed in accordance with society's idea of a poetess, and she carefully constructed the poetic self that became known as L.E.L" (*Construction of L.E.L.* 2). L.E.L. made Landon as famous as any writer of her time, but her fame was a different kind from that experienced by her Romantic peers. While John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron all mused on fame and the longevity of their work after their deaths, Landon found herself in a

4 Landon is citing Coleridge's preface to his *The Poetical Works of S.T. Coleridge*, published in 1828.

distinctly different position from all of them. Unlike her wealthy male peers, Landon wrote for a living, meaning that being unable to sell her work equated to being unable to eat or provide for her family. As Julie Watt puts it in her Landon biography, “her fame, her fortune...and the security of her place in fashionable society depended on her meeting exactly what fashionable society wanted in terms of reading matter” (Watt 2-3). In addition, being a woman meant that Landon was perceived differently by all those who read her. Assumptions were made, rumors were spread, and reviews were written all because of her gender.[5] Yet this does not mean that no common line exists between Landon and her Romantic peers on the topic of celebrity. Both she and her peers understood fame to exist in a state of conflict: writers crave it, but at the same time understand and fear the perils that come with it. Landon too saw the contradictions of fame, but in a different way from Keats, Shelley, and Byron. Obtaining fame was not the trouble for Landon, but rather mastering and controlling it. L.E.L. became Landon's tool for creating famous writing while keeping her own life out of the public eye.

Romantic Fame: Keats, Shelley, and Byron

Fame as defined by the second-generation Romantics tends to take two forms: the elusive goal toward which one strives during life, and the monument that remains after one's death.[6] The poems of John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron provide multiple depictions of these two manifestations of fame. Poems about pursuing fame dwell on the struggle involved in making one's name known and, ultimately, the arrival at a state of renown that can be either idyllic or a complete sham. Yet fame is of no use if it does not endure after one's life is over. As these poems

5 The role of Landon's gender in reviews of her work is explored more thoroughly in Chapter 3.
6 This monument is, for the sake of brevity, referred to as a writer's “legacy” in these chapters.

suggest, one's legacy is just as subject to the ravages of time as one's life. And, despite the solitary work that goes into creating a poetic legacy, it is often subject to the whims and modifications of others. The easiest place to begin an investigation into Romantic-era understandings of fame is the conveniently-titled “On Fame” by John Keats.

Fame is likened to a “wayward girl” in the poem's first line, and is portrayed as something not just difficult, but impossible to obtain unless incidentally (“Fame” 1). This concept is reinforced over and over throughout the first stanza, as Keats writes, “Ye love-sick Bards! repay her scorn for scorn; / Ye Artists lovelorn! madmen that ye are! / Make your best bow to her and bid adieu, / Then, if she likes it, she will follow you” (11-14). From these lines it seems that fame is something which cannot be obtained when a writer pursues it, and which only becomes available when it is unwanted. Yet the didactic tone of these lines suggests something deeper at play. The poem's narrator instructs poets who desire fame to scorn it, so that they might later obtain it. Yet by following these instructions, the “love-sick Bards” demonstrate their desire for fame, and thus remain incapable of achieving it. Following this poem's advice will bring one no closer to fame, since it “will not speak to those / Who have not learnt to be content without her” (5-6). No amount of work can bring fame; it only comes to those who devote none of their energy to it.

The pursuit of fame, then, is more than just a fruitless endeavor, but also a deathblow to a poet's creative ability. The second stanza begins with the lines, “How fever'd is the man, who cannot look / Upon his mortal days with temperate blood” (16-17). The fever, that which makes “madmen” out of “Artists lovelorn,” is a result of being ill at ease with the finite nature of life. Unable to accept mortality, artists become obsessed with prolonging their renown after death. Yet

rather than bring about extended life, this desire ends it prematurely. As the narrator explains, “It is as if the rose should pluck herself” (20). Yet should the rose remain patient, she “leaves herself upon the briar / For winds to kiss and grateful bees to feed” (24-25). Only then, forgoing selfishness for temperance, can the rose serve others and thus be herself served. For a writer, concentrating on his legacy prevents him from focusing on the life in front of him. He plucks himself, leaving himself unable to create work for his own time that will be appreciated by his readers and, thus, bring his renown. The point remains at the poem's conclusion: while there is nothing wrong with fame itself, it cannot be a writer's goal. Such a preoccupation can only be in vain. While this poem concentrates on the perils of fame, it does not engage with the potential benefits conferred upon those who actually do achieve it. Percy Shelley, in “Adonais” which, interestingly enough, is an elegy dedicated to Keats, addresses the upside of fame.

Dedicated to the fictional Adonais, this poem's opening stanzas are filled with pain and mourning, with the only hopeful moments being references to the enduring life that fame can bring. The narrator exhorts the “sad Hour” of Adonais's death to encourage its “obscure compeers” by saying, “"With me / Died Adonais; till the future dares / Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be / An echo and a light unto eternity!"” (“Adonais” 4, 5, 6-9). Although the hour of Adonais's death is tragic, it delivers a message unto all other hours, a reminder that the legacy of Adonais persists and acts as a beacon of light for not only those who remember his life, but those who have never even met him. Fame counteracts the sorrow of the moment of death by preserving memories of the fallen far into the future. For this reason, it is a worthy goal to cultivate one's legacy in life.

To be forgotten after death is to be avoided at all cost, since the prize of fame is not just

its own reward, but a way to avoid the complete death brought about by perishing in anonymity. Those who claim fame, “Whose tapers yet burn through that night of time / In which suns perished,” are far more fortunate than others who, despite being “more sublime,” were “Struck by the envious wrath of man or god” and “sunk, extinct in their refulgent prime” (40-43). Despite their sublimity, despite the glory of their mortal lives, these latter individuals end their lives in extinction. No lights carry on their legacy after death, and their glory, no matter how bright, is forgotten. The narrator describes those who seek to avoid this fate while they still have time, “treading the thorny road / Which leads, through toil and hate, to Fame's serene abode” (44-45). The toil of a writer is worth the prize that waits at the end. “Poets' food is love and fame,” as Shelley writes in “An Exhortation” (“Exhortation” 2). Fame is as crucial to a poet's existence as anything else.

Despite their differing opinions as to the worthiness of actually pursuing fame, there is consensus between Keats and Shelley that creating a legacy is a difficult task. Whether it is a trap that lures ambitious poets in and weakens their ability to create or a daily struggle against oneself and one's readers, there is no easy choice. This pessimistic view of fame as something that may or may not even be worth the undeniably difficult task of obtaining it can be tied to the personal lives of Keats and Shelley, which informed their work and perspectives. Keats, who met an early end at the age of 25 after succumbing to tuberculosis, felt from the beginning of his career “a foreboding of early death and applied himself to his art with a desperate urgency” (Greenblatt 880). Dying at such a young age, the literary world was left to wonder what Keats could have accomplished had he been given more time. The idea of unrealized potential, a lack of consummation, is present in many of Keats's own poems, such as the declaration in “Ode on a

Grecian Urn," "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal" ("Ode" 17-18). In "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats reveals his anxiety that he may die, "Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain" ("Fears" 2). To return to the image of the flower from "On Fame," Keats is concerned that he may be forced to depart from the world before he is ripe. That, even if he manages to avoid the temptations of fame and not pluck himself, he will nevertheless be plucked by the unrelenting hand of time.

Percy Shelley lived only slightly longer than Keats, but lacked any kind of audience. Shelley was a radical who alienated his family and his friends through his rejection of most of the world around him By 1819, "close to despair and knowing that he almost entirely lacked an audience, Shelley wrote his greatest works" (Greenblatt 742). Continuing to write in exile and anonymity until his death, Shelley left behind a large body of work largely unseen by the literary world. His wife, writer Mary Shelley, compiled and helped to publicize his work and was able, to a certain extent, to rehabilitate his image. Read after his time, Shelley accumulated the following he did not have in life. His "politics, vilified during his lifetime, made him a literary hero to later political radicals: the Chartists...Marx and Engels...the British Labour Party" (743). Finding himself scorned and under-appreciated in life, it is not surprising that Shelley concludes in "A Defense of Poetry" that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" ("Defense" 850). Recognizing the importance of his work, Shelley continued to write despite having so few readers. He could not have known for certain that his work would later immortalize him, but passages on fame from "Adonais" suggest an awareness that a "serene abode" awaits at the end of one's arduous struggle for recognition. But this observation in "Adonais" is made shortly after its subject's death, and so the true lasting power of his fame is yet to be tested. To see how a

legacy endures past one's death, it is necessary to turn to another one of Shelley's poems, “Ozymandias,” as well as a passage from Lord Byron's *Don Juan*. Their reflections provide a bleak glimpse of the reality of one's legacy.

“Ozymandias” describes, in a few lines, the decay of seemingly endless power in life to near nothingness in death. The narrator of the poem meets a traveler who informs him, “'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, / Half sunk, a shattered visage lies” (“Ozymandias” 2-4). If this statue represents one's legacy, then its state of ruin is a testament to the ravages of time on that legacy. The narrator learns that, except for this statue, “nothing beside remains” (12). This statue, commemorating one “'Ozymandias, king of kings,” is a testament to the effect of time on a legacy (10). In the beginning of “Adonais,” there is a glimpse of this inevitable fade into obscurity. In that opening stanza, Shelley writes that Adonais's fame will endure until “the future dares forget the past.” There is no telling how long it will take for this to happen, but in “Ozymandias” this process of forgetting is portrayed in the concrete image of a statue, once representative of a king and his achievements, now lying in disrepair, with no sign of the kingdom it was meant to commemorate. The words on the statue's pedestal, declaring, “'Look on works, ye Mighty, and despair!'” once served as warning to those who would aspire to Ozymandias's greatness, or challenge what he had created (11). In the statue's current state, the words serve instead as a warning to those who seek fame of any kind at all, who expect their names to endure past the end of their lives. How can an artist, ascending to renown in his life, help but despair at this ruined statue in the center of an empty desert? If all the king of kings is capable of preserving is a statue in the process of being devoured by the desert, then there is no hope for any poet's legacy to outlast the inevitable dismantling that comes with

time. Indeed, as Lord Byron points out in *Don Juan*, even the legacy in its unsullied state is seldom an appropriate tribute to any person's life.

Byron, like Shelley, recognizes the struggle inherent in obtaining fame, but sees the resulting legacy as being too detached from what it is meant to represent to have any real value. He writes that for fame, “men write, speak, preach, and heroes kill, / And bards burn what they call their 'midnight taper,' / To have, when the original is dust, / A name, a wretched picture, and worst bust” (*Don Juan* 5-8). The labor that these people undertake—writing, speaking, preaching, killing—is not meant to immortalize itself, but rather to create what Byron sees as a cheap imitation of itself: the name, picture, or bust that is not the equivalent of the hard work and dedication that went into creating it. Even the greatest creations of mankind, those meant to inspire awe in generations to come, remain little more than frivolities. Byron moves on to “Old Egypt's King / Cheops” (9-10) who “Erected the first pyramid / And largest, thinking it was just the thing / To keep his memory whole, and mummy hid” (10-12). It is hard to imagine that a pyramid could be dismissed as just as useless a tribute to one's life as a poorly-crafted painting or bust, but Byron's next lines reveal this to be exactly the case. “But somebody or other rummaging,” he writes, “Burglariously broke his coffin's lid. / Let not a moment give you or me hopes, / Since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops” (13-16). The pyramid was not only desecrated by grave robbers, but Cheops himself, interred within this monument, has decayed into nothingness. The pyramid has become just a structure, with nothing left of its once-famous inhabitant.

Accelerated Decay: “The Wreath” and “The Woodland Brook”

This idea of a grave robber, coincidentally, hints at something important in all the depictions of fame just discussed, namely that control over celebrity lies in the hands of one's admirers. The creation of fame serves the public, and the legacy a famous person leaves behind remains in the care of the public. In the case of Keats's "On Fame" and Shelley's "Adonais," those successful in becoming famous are depicted as clearly performing a public service. Keats writes that, by not prematurely plucking itself, the rose provides sustenance for bees. Shelley, in describing what remains after Adonais's death, states that his "fame shall be/An echo and a light unto eternity." That his fame serves as a light makes it a beacon, meaning that it exists to illuminate the world for others. It is not just a monument to Adonais, but rather a means through which he can inspire others after his passing. But fame does not just serve the public; it is owned by the public as well. In "Ozymandias," the cruel features of the statue's face "Tell that its sculptor well those passions read" ("Ozymandias" 6). Ozymandias controlled his actions in his life, but the face that he would present to generations to come was created by another person entirely. It is impossible to know what Ozymandias truly looked like, only what the artist saw. Cheops commissions his own pyramid in *Don Juan*, but its value lies in the hands of other people. It is the grave robber who, after Cheops's death, deprives the tomb of its significance. In Landon's poetry, the famous poet similarly is not fully in control of her legacy. The essential difference is that this loss of control can take place so rapidly that the poet herself sees it happen.

In "The Wreath," the poem's speaker is confronted by the apparent fading of her own relevance when she interacts with a younger version of herself. The poem uses the image of a floral wreath that has just been cast on the ground, an act which causes the speaker no small amount of dismay. "Nay, fling not down those faded flowers," the poem begins, "Too late they're

scatter'd round / And violet and rose-leaf lie / Together on the ground" ("Wreath" 1-4). These flowers, discarded seemingly without thought, were treated with reverence and care not long ago. "How carefully this very morn / Those buds were cull'd and wreath'd," Landon writes, "And, 'mid the cloud of that dark hair, / How sweet a sigh they breathed!" (5-8). The wreath evokes images of the laurel wreath, a symbol of the poet dating back centuries.[7] Yet the wreath described by Landon does not serve as a sign of one's renown through eternity. This wreath, harvested and discarded in the same day, confers only a fleeting honor. But Landon is not suggesting through this imagery that fame can come and go in a day, rather that one can live to see it both in its prime and in utter ruin. The speaker regrets her original request that the flowers be respected, saying, "Ay, I was wrong to ask of thee / Such gloomy thoughts as mine! / Thou in thy Spring, how shouldst thou dream / Of Autumn's pale decline!" (25-28). These four lines, within the context of the discarded wreath, describe Landon's understanding of fame and differentiate it from that of her peers in the Romantic canon. One is capable of obtaining fame, and doing so at a young age. The unnamed other character in this poem, "Young, lovely, loved," does not seem to be suffering the kind of hardships described by Keats and Shelley of those who attempt to become famous (29). Fame seems to have come easily to her, and her attitude reflects that. The speaker imagines her reply, saying, "That glancing smile, it seems to say / 'Thou art too fanciful: / What matters it what roses fade, / While there are more to cull?" (21-24). She does not realize that, at a certain point, she too will be culled when a younger, more talented, and more beautiful woman comes to take her place. In Landon's mind, the hardships of fame do not come before achieving it, but rather after. The celebrity is doomed to see her own notoriety fade, to become less relevant as she becomes less novel. But this fate is not unavoidable: the despair of

7 The Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri, for example, is often depicted wearing a laurel wreath.

seeing fame fade can only take hold if it is tied to one's self-worth. This is made clear in “The Woodland Brook,” another poem which deals, in part, with the folly of self-obsession.

The first stanza of this poem intimately entwines the concepts of vanity and a desire for fame, and reveals how impotent this combination can be. The speaker begins by describing a flowing brook, and then elaborates, “And with a patient look / The pale narcissus o'er thee bends / Like one who asks in vain for friends” (“Brook” 4-6). Landon recalls the myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection and eventually transformed into a flower, forever gazing at itself. Yet the flower's attention is not completely directed inward: it also “asks in vain for friends.” The flower's self-obsession cannot be satisfied by its own attention, but also requires that of others. Of course, the narcissus is rooted in the ground and thus unable to leave its eternal vigil, thus preventing its desire for attention from ever being satisfied. The commentary on fame is implicit within these lines. Requiring fame as a necessary ingredient for fulfillment is a vain endeavor. Since fame according to Landon is fleeting, any writer who enters the field to become a celebrity is doomed to dwindle into obscurity. Fame cannot last; the only legacy a writer can hope to leave behind is her work. Landon makes clear in both her poetry and essays that the writing itself is far more important than its creator.

The Voice of Poetry

In Landon's poems, characters who die frequently become pieces of art, existing for the gratification of those who remain to enjoy them. McDayter observes, “The conclusions of many of Landon's poems are frequently peopled with lover figures who turn into 'statues' and 'cold portraits' as a result of lost love” (McDayter 342). *The Improvisatrice* provides both an example

of this and an insight into Landon's thoughts on the poet's death. After the improvisatrice narrator has ended her own life, a new narrator enters the home of Lorenzo, the man who forsook her and drove her to suicide. Consumed as he is with regret, Lorenzo has filled his home with pieces of art, one of which is "One picture brightest of all there! / Oh! Never did the painter's dream / Shape thing so gloriously fair!" (*Improvisatrice* 1552-1554). The painting is of the deceased first narrator. The new narrator goes on to describe the remarkable detail of the picture, the qualities that make it seem to be itself alive. "You almost heard the silvery words," the narrator claims, that the woman in the painting seems to be singing (1566) . This is art speaking to future generations after the artist has died. Although the improvisatrice's life was full of torment, unrequited love, and ultimately ended tragically, the art she leaves behind reflects only the beauty of her craft, not the difficulties of her life. Here again lies another definitive division between the poet's work and her life. But if this were not clear enough, Landon directly makes this claim in the preface to *The Improvisatrice*, and elsewhere.

Claiming that poems have their own voices separate from that of the writer means that, when the writer can no longer speak, her work can continue to deliver its message. Landon writes, in the Preface to *The Venetian Bracelet*, "I now leave the following Poems to their fate: they must speak for themselves. I could but express my anxiety, an anxiety only increased by a popularity beyond my most sanguine dreams" (*Venetian* 103). Again in the Preface to *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems*, she asserts, "Poetry needs no Preface: if it do not speak for itself, no comment can render it explicit" (*Improvisatrice* 51). It may seem contradictory that Landon claims that poems need no preface in the form of a preface. This would be the case if she did not deliver the same claim, albeit in a more complex way, in her poetry itself. At the end of

The Improvisatrice, a new narrator takes over, one with no name, class, gender, or personal knowledge of Lorenzo or the deceased improvisatrice. Yet this narrator is capable nonetheless of looking at the painting of this woman and experiencing in that moment her "Dark flashing eyes, like the deep stars," her "cloud of raven hair," and her "soul...passion, and...fire" (*Improvisatrice* 1557, 1568).[8] These last lines show how, without any kind of introduction or prior understanding of art or the people it depicts, a person—any person—can have a meaningful experience with a piece of art, provided the artist's work is of sufficient quality. No preface, no introduction, is necessary.

For Landon, the poet's primary duty—and surest way of achieving immortality through fame—is to create this kind of art rather than attempt to become famous in life. "The Wreath" shows that fame comes and goes, that no matter how gifted one might be, the passage of time always presents another younger, more engaging artist for the public to follow. "The Woodland Brook" deepens this observation on fame by arguing that a single-minded pursuit of fame is inevitably pointless. *The Improvisatrice* offers the solution: creating excellent works of art that are capable of existing on their own without the writer's fame or an explanation to sustain them is the surest way to leave behind a legacy of work that will exist as a source of gratification long after the writer's death. Personal glory does not enter into the equation because it is the poems that become famous, not the writer. Byron dismisses this fame of inanimate objects in *Don Juan* as leaving behind "A name, a wretched picture, and worst bust." The difference in priorities between Landon and Byron is profound, particularly considering the similarities in their rapid trajectories into fame.

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8 These images evoke Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Coleridge writes, "Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!" ("Kubla Khan" 49-50)

The great tragedy of fame for the second generation Romantics, then, is that writers pursue it for themselves in life, and then completely relinquish their hold on it after they die. The endurance of a legacy hinges entirely on how it is handled by those who remain after a writer's death. History is full of examples of writers, Landon included, who were celebrities in life and then faded to obscurity shortly after their deaths. One would imagine that this harsh reality and the wary tone used by these writers in describing fame would act as deterrents. To see how completely this was not the case, it is necessary to turn more closely to Lord Byron. Byron provides a natural segue from the canonical Romantic writers to Letitia Landon, since the two of them held one thing in common: their nearly unprecedented celebrity as writers, and the way in which they cultivated this fame. Brooke Allen writes of Byron, "The main task for any biographer intrepid enough to take on the subject of George Gordon...is to give equal time to both versions of the man: Byron as he really was, and Byron as a symbol" (Allen 369). The parallels between this assertion and Blanchard's observation on the gulf between Letitia Landon and L.E.L. are immediately apparent. In fact, it is difficult to enter into any discussion of Landon's celebrity without at least mentioning Byron. However, to equate their positions—that is, the nature of their lives as celebrities and the ways in which they interacted with their respective audiences—would be to grossly oversimplify both of them, both as writers and as people. Yet Landon read Byron, and matured as a writer in his shadow. Understanding how Byron dealt with celebrity in his time provides a lens with which to understand how unique Landon's own position was.

The evident conflict between Byron's dismissal of celebrity in *Don Juan* and the fact that he become perhaps the most well-known writer of his time exists for a reason: Byron himself

was deeply in conflict on the issue of his own fame. Allen provides an excellent summary of this conflict, writing that “Byron took great pains to construct and groom his public image, and his relationship with his own renown is strikingly modern; like many a twenty-first century celebrity, Byron courted fame and then backed away when its embrace became too rough...He sought fame, needed it, feared it, scorned it, craved it” (370). If any reconciliation exists between Byron's writing and his reality, this is it: he both loved and hated fame, recognized its perils alongside his peers, yet craved it just the same. This represents not just a conflict in his desires, but one in his outward behavior as well. Allen cites Byron's friend, Lady Blessington, as writing in 1823, “Byron had so unquenchable a thirst for celebrity, that no means were left untried that might attain it: this frequently led to his expressing opinions totally at variance with his notions and real sentiments” (370). This was written the year before Byron's death, making it clear that, even after becoming a renowned celebrity the desire for acclaim still drove Byron's actions. On the surface, this seems quite similar to the manufacture of feelings described by Landon in her writing process.[9] Landon admits to not having possibly felt the degrees of sorrow that her poems portray after already establishing that a poet cannot write what she does not feel. But the vacillation of Byron and the emotional manufacture of Landon are not the same thing; in fact, they underline the principal difference between the two of them.

Byron's desire for fame exists outside of his poetry, meaning that poetry was a means to satisfy a desire for celebrity that was separate from any wish to write. Allen quotes Byron as saying, at the age of sixteen, “I will cut a path through the world or perish in the attempt. Others have begun life with nothing and ended Greatly. And shall I who have a competent if not a large fortune, remain idle, No, I will carve myself the path to Grandeur” (370). This quote, and the

9 Landon's fabrication of emotion is elaborated upon in the Chapter 1

observation by Lady Blessington, show little change in Byron's desire for fame and, most important of all, neither quote mentions poetry. His preoccupation is greatness, not mastery of the poetic form. This is most clear in examining what, exactly, Byron wrote about, particularly at the beginning of his life. *Hours of Idleness* was the first volume of poetry Byron published at the age of 19, and its subject matter—himself—is very apparent. Jerome McGann describes *Hours of Idleness* as "Byron's first mythologized account of his own person, his first attempt to create in poetry, and thereby *be*, 'A being more intense' (CHP III, 6) and admirable than ordinary men" (*Fiery Dust* 16). The self-referential nature of *Hours of Idleness* was just as clear to critics of Byron's time as it is to McGann. Many of the initial reviews "do not attack its puerilities, nearly all direct their remarks...to the dramatized person of the author" (5). This initial foray into poetry was not under scrutiny so much as Byron himself was, so extensive were the ties between the man and what was written on the page. McGann astutely observes, "the book seems to be to some extent propaganda in a literal sense—which is to say a bastardization of poetry for wholly unpoetic ends (i.e., the furtherance of Byron's public reputations and the political career which he contemplated at that time)," and concludes by citing Paul West as saying, "It is Byron and Byron's idea of himself which hold his work together" (24). The overall impression one gets from these remarks, both by Byron's contemporaries and modern scholars, is that Byron's entrance into the world of poetry was opportunistic at best and exploitative at worst. Writing poetry offered a chance for an audience to access the product Byron hoped to sell: himself. In this instance, poetry served as a vehicle simply for increasing reputation. There is no indication of a desire to induce pleasurable feelings in the reader like those described by Wordsworth, or of exercising the awesome power of creation to write beautiful works the likes of which cannot be

seen in the world in the way of Coleridge. Propaganda is the perfect word for it. This is quite different from the mission of Letitia Landon's poetry. If Byron's work is the vehicle for him to deliver himself into the arms of his readers, Landon's serves a quite different purpose, namely the diversion of public attention from herself, and the ability for poetry to exist apart from the life of its creator.

Landon's writing confers fame upon L.E.L. while allowing her private life to remain exactly that. To understand this, it is necessary to return to her views regarding fame and the necessity of a poet's privacy. In “On the Character of Mrs. Hemans's Writings,” Landon declares that “Fame...is but the fulfillment of that desire for sympathy which can never be brought home to the individual” (“Character” 173). For a writer to achieve fame, she must cause her readers to feel sympathy, thus “fulfilling” the author's “desire” to have others sympathize with her feelings. The readers repay being given the pleasant experience of sympathy by reading more of the writer's work, thus allowing her to become more famous. But that does not explain that the sympathy “can never be brought home to the individual.” The individual here must be the writer, because one must have more than one reader in order to be famous, so it cannot refer to the audience. This is where the fabrication of emotions enters into the equation. The emotions described in Landon's writing, and those with which her readers sympathize, are generated by her imagination so that she is able to keep her personal life and the world of her writing entirely separate. So her readers feel sympathy, but it is not for Landon, and this is why the sympathy is not brought back to the writer. It is brought back to L.E.L.

Byron's mythologized self acted as the model for L.E.L., which served the opposite purpose. By creating characters similar to himself and actively inviting comparisons between his

writing and his own life, Byron furthered his fame through a larger-than-life version of himself not dissimilar in nature to L.E.L. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, born within a year of Landon, describes the "rush every Saturday afternoon for the 'Literary Gazette'...which contained the three magical letters L.E.L. And all of us praised the verse, and all of us guessed at the author" (*Construction of L.E.L.* 2). Stephenson admits "just how tempting it is for a critic, even today...to confuse Landon with L.E.L." (14). Readers and critics of the 19th and the 21st centuries were drawn in by L.E.L., assuming she was identical to the Byron of literature, that the sorrow in her poems was representative of the real-life tribulations of the writer behind the scenes (Landon herself references the "Frequent application of my works to myself" in the Preface to *The Venetian Bracelet).* And while these readers and critics were content to categorize Landon as a female Byron, a woman writer confiding the sordid details of her own life with the world, something entirely different was taking place. Landon emphasizes again and again the importance of maintaining a distance between a writer's work and her personal life. The stories of doomed love and forsaken women that concluded with the initials L.E.L. were just as fictional as the poetess that Landon's public imagined her to be. L.E.L. became an object of public fascination while her creator remained shrouded in mystery. Yet this could not last forever—inevitably the lines between L.E.L. and Landon started to blur until their final collision at the moment of her death.

The Collapse of L.E.L.

The attacks on Landon's character that began in the latter part of her career shared two things in common: they were anonymous, and they resulted from the very same sense of secrecy

that Landon used to protect herself from the public. In 1826, after a series of slanderous remarks appeared anonymously in the press accusing Landon of an affair with her editor, William Jerdan, she addressed this scandal in a letter to her friend. “It is only because I am poor, unprotected, and dependent on popularity,” Landon writes, “that I am a mark for all the gratuitous insolence and malice of idleness and ill nature” (*Selected Writings* 13). Later, in the 1830's, the literary world “began to be deluged with anonymous letters accusing L.E.L. of immoral conduct generally, and in particular of being the mistress of a married man” (Enfield 93). Landon's response to these accusations, similarly contained in a letter to a friend, identifies the cause of these personal attacks as being ignorance about the facts of her life and conduct. “I can understand that success must bear the penalty of envy,” the letter reads, “but it is those who know nothing about me, or my habits, who are the most bitter against me” (95). She concludes, “I only say, if you think my conduct worth attacking, it is also worth examining. Such examination would be my best defence...As regards myself, I have no answer beyond contemptuous silence” (96). Unlike Byron, whose poetry forced personal details of his life upon his readers “by reference to a variety of publicly verifiable facts and situations (ancestry, age, schooling, youthful environment, home, etc),” Landon kept her personal life out of her poetry, and thus found herself facing these baseless, but persistent and widespread accusations (*Fiery Dust* 5). Already, her life not yet over, her audience had started to take control of her legacy. Biographer D.E. Enfield is merciless in commenting on the frivolity of Landon's writing, the grating nature of her personality, and even her personal appearance, but remains unequivocal on one point: “There can be little doubt that Letitia remained to the day of her marriage a stainless virgin” (Enfield 96). Nevertheless, it is difficult to find a biography or even short commentary on Landon's life without stumbling upon

the controversy that surrounded her later in her career. These scandals were based in nothing but ignorance, if Landon and her biographers are to be believed. This serves as a tribute to the public's power in taking over the public image of a writer, something to which Landon was more susceptible than her wealthy, male peers. But these slanderous claims were only the beginning. The final, tragic, captivating moments of Landon's life shattered the carefully-constructed barrier between Landon's private life and her writing, decidedly ripping her legacy from her grasp and placing it in the hands of those who barely knew her.

Despite her deliberate control over her public image, Landon was ultimately subject to the will of her audience even more than her nearest equivalent in celebrity, Byron. Landon admits in one of her responses to accusations against her moral character that she is "dependent on popularity." This is not simply the dependency of a writer who wants to maintain her level of popularity, but the dependency of a poet whose ability to eat depends on people paying for her work. "Having no family background" meant that Landon had no inheritance to rely on and, by 1824, "The unexpected death of her father...left Landon the sole support of her mother and younger brother" (Chapman 15) (*Selected Writings* 12). Landon designed L.E.L. so that the public needed her, craved details on her life, and rushed to purchase poetry emblazoned with her initials. And Landon depended on the allure of this illusion not just to grow her reputation, but to earn her livelihood. Her situation could not be more different from that of Byron who, given a considerable inheritance at a young age, decided to turn it toward writing so that he might become one of the great men of his time.[10] These two kinds of fame are similar in the amount of attention given to each writer, but very different at their cores. Byron's fame, and the fame of many of his contemporaries who did not write for a living, was a luxury. Should Landon have

10 Byron famously refused payment for his writing, claiming that to be paid for it would be "ungentlemanly."

been deprived of her fame, on the other hand, writing would cease to be an option. In this light, Landon's decision to keep her personal life separate from her work becomes not just an attempt to preserve the integrity of literature, but a means of ensuring that she would always have material to keep her public interested, and food on her table.

Designed to be infinitely self-sustaining, Landon's poetics are a bottomless well of sympathy-generating work. Unlike a poet like Wordsworth, who declares in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that good poetry has its root in the writer's memory, or Byron, who relies on his own persona to generate poetry and pique the interest of his audience, Landon uses the power of the imagination as a source for her creative work. So long as the public is unable to know the true details of her life (and indeed, the baseless accusations against her character suggest that the mystery of Landon remained intact well into her career), Landon remains capable of fabricating all manner of emotions with which her audience can engage, keeping them wondering about the true details of her life. But, unfortunately for Landon, this process could only remain while she lived to keep it up. Upon her death, the illusion of her life was eclipsed by the mystery of her passing.

Landon's mysterious death so closely mirrored that of so many of the protagonists in her poems that she seemed to become one herself, creating the tantalizing opportunity to read her work autobiographically. Although to do such a thing would be to violate one of the fundamental tenets of her writing, the details of Landon's death read like something out of a mystery novel. In July of 1838, Landon bid farewell to England and moved to Cape Coast, in Africa,with her recently-acquired husband, George Maclean. In October, she died at the age of thirty-six. While the exact series of events that led to her death are not known, Laman Blanchard's book contains a

credible account based on depositions taken at the inquest on the day of Landon's death (*The Woman Behind L.E.L.* 173). The morning that Landon's maid, Elizabeth Bailey, meant to return to England, Bailey had difficulty opening Landon's door. As it turned out, Landon was slumped against the door, inert and with an empty bottle in her hand. Accounts differed slightly, theories about some sort of coverup or conspiracy flourished, but the unavoidable truth was that she had died alone and far from home, and nobody knew exactly why (174). Rumors circulated about Maclean's mistress, whose discovery had precipitated either Landon's suicide or her murder. Speculation abounded, but with so little conclusive evidence, the Landon's death was and will perhaps forever remain a mystery. What is certain is that the admittedly captivating story of Landon's final days has become more canonized than any of her poetry. For example, Julie Watt's book, *Poisoned Lives: The Regency Poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.) and British Gold Coast Administrator George Maclean,* published within the past five years, is a double biography serving the purpose of documenting Landon's life and, in part, attempting to clear the sullied name of Maclean, who shouldered more than his share of suspicion for his wife's end. In 1992, Glennis Stephenson herself admits the temptation of concluding that Landon "finally became too caught up in her own myth, in her own creation, that her sordid demise was the result of a desire to live out the exotic life of which she wrote" (*Construction of L.E.L.* 14-15). And, finally, McDayter astutely observes, "it is actually her *death* that has captured the imagination of her critics and biographers...The poet's body of work, it is implied, was important to document only inasmuch as it shed light on that far more interesting 'body' – the near-dead body of L.E.L. discovered stretched upon the floor of her room" (McDayter 337). Both Landon and her work were swallowed up in this single phenomenon, a death so anomalous and singular that it served

the purpose of preserving the name of Letitia Elizabeth Landon for what she would consider exactly the wrong reason.

Both Landon and the second-generation Romantic poets make clear their disdain for fame, but it seems that Landon, who was as famous as the most well-known of these canonical writers, is the only one whose rejection of celebrity is unequivocal. Keats's "On Fame" displays the conscious pursuance of celebrity as selfish and futile, but the poem nevertheless reads like a guidebook to becoming famous (by forgetting about fame, one becomes famous). Shelley's "Ozymandias" seems to be an argument against fame, but "Adonais" tells a different story: the journey toward the "serene abode" of fame is arduous, but arriving there puts one in a position to be the subject of lengthy elegies describing one's greatness. And lastly, Byron offers a humorous dismissal of fame in *Don Juan*, but the unmistakable autobiographical nature of his foray into poetry, *Hours of Idleness*, suggests a different kind of motivation entirely. Keats, Shelley, and Byron recognize the faults of fame: it is ephemeral, difficult to attain, and can distract from creating quality writing. At the same time, their poetry makes clear that despite these dangers, fame is something that must be pursued, whether it is worth it or not. For Landon, who lived virtually her entire professional career as a celebrity of the highest order, the message is different. The relationship between the famous writer and her fame is one of conflict and contradiction, but not in the same way that the second-generation Romantics understood it. The conflict in fame does not come from friction between its costs and its benefits, but rather from the writer's need for an audience and her necessity for privacy. In "On the Character of Mrs. Hemans's Writings," Landon writes, "It is curious to observe the intimate relation that subsists between the poet and the public...those who would shrink from avowing what and how much

they feel to even the most trusted friend, yet rely upon and crave the sympathy of the many" ("Character" 173). A writer needs to be famous in order to have a meaningful connection with other people through sympathy, but must at the same time keep the personal details of her life to herself in order to continue creating literature, rather than the kind of autobiographical work that Landon scorns. It is deep emotional conflicts like this one that drives critics like Stephenson to classify Landon as "the desperately lonely, unhappy, and persecuted woman forced to hide her true self" (*Construction of L.E.L.* 14-15). The reality is that Landon's personal life remains today as much of a mystery as it did during her career. Her death was both a blessing and a curse. It prompted countless readers and critics to consider her work—against her wishes—as autobiographical. At the same time, however, it shrouded the woman in one last impenetrable mystery, one that has and will continue to endure. As if to prove her musings on fame correct, her death has prolonged her fame. However, it has come at the cost of her work receiving the treatment she would have wanted.

Chapter 3: Accounting for the Disappearance

"The book grew and grew, eventually including not only works by sixty-two poets but also descriptions of their contexts—accounts of their lives, poetic careers, and literary reputations. It occupied eight years of my professional life and is, in an odd way, an expiation for my complicity, my collaboration with the collective forgetting of our time."
Paula R. Feldman, "Endurance and Forgetting"

A poet's readers can make her famous, and her work can help to prolong this fame after death. But readers die just like writers do, and even literature, more resilient to the ravages of time than mortal flesh, can fall out of print and cease to be circulated. The surest way of appraising a writer's legacy is seeing if and to what extent she influenced the writers who survived her. Letitia Elizabeth Landon's life and death left a mark on the poetry that was to come after her, inspiring both poems that were directed at her and stylistic choices that pay homage to her. But as is the case with fame, it is not the writer herself who is able to choose how she will be preserved by those who are inspired by her work later on. In Landon's case, this attempted preservation—at least, in the 19th century—was quite thorough. Jerome McGann writes, "The tendency to mythologize 'L.E.L.' is evident in the numerous poems written for and about her, both during her lifetime and long after her death. Writing a poem to L.E.L. became a rite of passage for numerous early nineteenth-century readers and writers, women and men alike" (McGann 16). It would be a formidable task indeed to address all the poems written in Landon's honor, but the truth is that not all of these tributes should be read equally.

Instead, attention is most fruitfully paid to the poems written by those who had a similar status in the literary community as Landon: those with audiences of their own, whose published works were both widely-read and influential. Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were two of the most iconic writers, particularly among the community of female poets, of the Victorian period. As such, their elegies dedicated to Landon provide insight into her influence on

two levels: how she was understood by the writers who came after her, and how the new generation of readers would learn about the late poetess, who could no longer captivate readers with her mysterious three initials at the bottom of her most recently-published work. Yet the picture that emerges of Landon in these poems is one quite different that which one gets from reading Landon's own work. What is far more believable is that these elegies for Landon were, at least in the cases of mainstream writers like Barrett Browning and Rossetti, vehicles for a mission quite different from that of simply honoring a fallen peer. Virginia Blain writes, "Certainly both Barrett Browning and, subsequently, Christina Rossetti aimed in their elegies to assert a power superior to L.E.L.'s" (Blain 2). Read in this light, the elegies become, rather than ways of showing solidarity with Landon, attempts by Barrett Browning and Rossetti to distance themselves, to show how their novel ideas are greater than those of the late Landon. But before engaging with the elegies, it is crucial to first note what kinds of attitudes Barrett Browning and Rossetti had toward Landon and her poetry, prior to the writing of any elegies.

Authors of Oblivion: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in 1806, just four years after Landon, and thus had an opportunity to read and form an opinion of Landon as she rose from obscurity to fame. Serena Baiesi notes, "Barrett Browning had an ambivalent relationship with Landon's poetry...she initially allied herself with the talent of her closest predecessors: Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon in particular" (Baiesi 153). This initial alignment with Hemans and Landon shifted with time, first in one direction and then in the other. In a letter from 1835, Barrett Browning writes, "I did not mean however to raise Laetitia [sic] Landon on as high a pedestal as Felicia Hemans,

nor even upon a near pedestal to her's. She is...deficient in energy & condensation as well as in variety. I used to think when her laurel was first growing that it would become a higher tree; but it will not now" (Brownings' Correspondence 3, 159). She does, however admit, "there does appear to me a good deal to admire in her poetry even as it is! There is a vividness & a naturalness, both in the ideas & the expression of them—yes! & a pathos too! She is like a bird of a few notes" (159). Barrett Browning expresses similar sentiments in 1836, writing in another letter about Landon's "very brilliant imagination & her *nature turned toward music,* – altho they might have been brighter & stronger & more harmonious...than now they are" (193-194). She slightly adjusts this stance in 1841, after Landon's death, when she writes, "If I had those two powers to choose from – Mrs. Hemans's and Miss Landon's – I mean the raw bare powers – I would choose Miss Landon's" (Baiesi 153). The shift in favor between Hemans and Landon notwithstanding, one thing is consistent in Barrett Browning's opinions toward Landon: she sees her as having a considerable amount of raw talent, but her poetry is not correspondingly remarkable. Barrett Browning's elegy, then, is not written to a poet by whom she is inspired, or one to whom she looks up, but rather an inferior writer who was unable to make full of use of her talents.[11] But despite her admittedly broad complaint about Landon's work, namely that she did not use her talents to their full potential, there is one major gulf between Landon and Barrett Browning that accounts for this accusation of a misuse of poetic ability.

As it turns out, it is one of Landon's most critical beliefs on poetry that Barrett Browning sees as her greatest flaw as a writer. In two letters from July of 1841, while discussing Laman

11 Despite her dismissal of Landon's accomplishments, Barrett Browning still seems captivated by the woman herself. In one July, 1836 letter she asks Mary Russell Mitford to, "tell me your mind with regard to Miss Landon's poetry? And whether you know her personally" (BC 3, 181). In September of the same year, she writes to Mitford, "Of [Landon's] personal history I know nothing at all...Are you acquainted with her?" (194). Whether she was aware of it or not, it seems that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was just as intrigued by L.E.L. as the rest of Landon's readership.

Blanchard's recently-published Landon biography, Barrett Browning expresses remorse that Landon's life should end, “Just as she had outstretched her hand to touch nature, & to feel thrillingly there that poetry is more than fantasy” (BC 5, 72). This letter recalls Barrett Browning's remarks on Landon making full use of her talents. She suggests that, had Landon had more time to experiment with poetry that was not fantasy, she could have undergone tremendous growth as a writer. In the next letter, she takes a harder stance, writing, “The fatal point was...she believed that great lie, *that poetry is fiction* – and it was fatal to her not merely as a poet but as a woman. It is a creed desecrative of the soul, & of nature, & of 'supernal spirits.' The ruin of it, extends beyond literature” (97). In her introduction to *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Ruth Adams elaborates on this, arguing that Barrett Browning's “work carries the burden of illustrating her conviction that poetry must deal with the contemporary scene” (Adams xix). This is equally clear in her writing, particularly in the long poem *Aurora Leigh*, in which Barrett Browning writes, “if there's room for poets in this world...Their sole work is to represent the age,/Their age, not Charlemagne's, – this live, throbbing age...To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce/Cry out for togas and the picturesque,/Is fatal, – foolish too” (Barrett Browning 5: 200, 202-203, 208-210). The repetition of the word “fatal” can leave little doubt: Barrett Browning sees it as the poet's duty to reflect the world around her, and departing from this directive is a transgression so serious it is considered deadly to a writer's work.

Landon, by contrast, believed that a writer's personal life and her writing should be kept separate, that the source of creativity should be imagination rather than personal experience. In *Romance and Reality,* she writes, “In a little time, imagination...will be left only to the young. Look on all the great writers of the present day;—are they not living instances of the truth of this

assertion?...literary life grows too like the actual one...imagination gives place to memory...and poetry ends in prose" (*Romance* 37). She further refines the necessary divide between literature and real life by observing that, when writers create autobiographical work, "We talk of the author's self more than his works, and we know his name rather than his writings," resulting in the overall degradation of literature (167). This is, without a doubt, a fundamental and unbridgeable disagreement in the writing philosophies of Landon and Barrett Browning. Despite the admiration that Barrett Browning may have for Landon's talents, the fact that they not only have different beliefs in what the source of poetry is, but definitively assert that deviating from these beliefs will render poetry nonexistent, means that the two will always be at odds on the subject of writing.

Christina Rossetti's position is quite different from Barrett Browning's, in that she was only seven at the time of Landon's death, and thus only wrote about the event several decades later. Rossetti and her brother, Dante, were "evidently familiar with L.E.L.'s works and, ten years after her death, eager to possess volumes of her verse" (Leighton 75).[12] There are, as Baiesi notes, similarities between the attitudes, if not the styles, of Landon and Rossetti. She asserts that Rossetti "sympathized more than Barrett Browning with Landon's fear and discomfort towards public judgment, and she too felt the necessity to wear a mask to disguise her real personality in her writing" (Baiesi 156). Rossetti also used "the devices of the dramatic monologue to stage a central female narrative voice," a trait that is conspicuous in Landon's writing, and which can be seen in Rossetti's elegy of Landon (156). But regardless of Rossetti's feelings toward Landon's

12 Serena Baiesi incorrectly claims that Christina Rossetti "became acquainted with Landon's works through her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, in a letter dated 1848, mentioned Landon's long poem *The Improvisatrice* to his sister, asking if she knew the poet and if she had some of her works" (Baiesi 156). Baiesi cites this letter as having appeared in Angela Leighton's book, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. Leighton, however, writes that "In 1848, the 20-year-old Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote to his brother William: 'The only book I have picked up in L.E.L.'s *Improvisatrice*, for which I gave ninepence. By the bye, have you got her *Violet* and *Bracelet* with you?'" (Leighton 75).

poetry, her elegy offers a crucial glimpse into how Landon was perceived following her death, since Rossetti only encountered her work after Landon's passing. Her and Barrett Browning's elegies are important not just because they were written by two well-known and widely-read poets of the period, but because they offer two perspectives: one from someone who matured as a writer with Landon, who defined herself alongside and against her, and one from a writer who encountered Landon after the fact, who had little to no experience of the social phenomenon that was L.E.L.'s elevation into fame. Measuring one elegy against another allows for an opportunity to see how understandings of Landon changed from the early to the late 19th century, and to discern to what extent Landon's image as a writer was usurped by the writers and critics who survived her. Interestingly, both elegies are inspired by the same poem by Landon, "Night at Sea." Given its status as one of the last poems Landon wrote while at the same time serving as the inspiration for the elegies of Barrett Browning and Rossetti, "Night at Sea" holds particular import in this investigation of Landon's legacy.

Readings and Misreadings of "Night at Sea"

"Night at Sea" consists of the speaker's disorientation while on a journey across the ocean, and her longing for the company of her friends, whom she is leaving behind by undertaking this trip. "By each dark wave around the vessel sweeping," Landon writes, "Farther am I from old dear friends removed" ("Night" 11-12). The idea of displacement, of isolation, recurs throughout the poem, such as in the next stanza, as the speaker reflects, "The very stars are strangers...They shine not there, as here they now are shining" (21, 25). Also recurring in the poem is a question which concludes most stanzas: "My friends, my absent friends! / Do you

think of me, as I think of you?" (9-10). But to immediately assume that this poem is simply a lament for missing friends would be a mistake. While the speaker makes this sentiment clear, it is not the main subject of the poem. To find this, one must turn to the poem's title and conclusion which have no mention of friends or melancholy. "Night at Sea" specifies a time, suggesting that these thoughts occupying the speaker's mind come with the quiet and isolation at night, that a poem titled "Day at Sea" would not mention pining for home and being lost, but rather the excitement of the journey and life on a sea vessel. The last stanza helps to confirm these thoughts as being inspired only by night:

> A dusk line in the moonlight—I discover
> What all day long I vainly sought to catch;
> Or is it but the varying clouds that hover
> Thick in the air, to mock the eyes that watch?
> No; well the sailor knows each speck, appearing,
> Upon the tossing waves, the far-off strand;
> To that dark line our eager ship is steering.
> Her voyage done—to-morrow we shall land. (111-118)

Any mention of missing friends, present in the poem's every other stanza, is replaced here by the "dusk line" toward which the ship is sailing, a sign of not only the end of the voyage, but a shift from night into day. Dusk is the period just before night, but another way of understanding it is the stage that separates night from day. The ship sails toward its destination just as the sky moves toward day. And as both of these things happen, the speaker is freed from the spell of homesickness. It is important to keep in mind that, despite the fact that Landon wrote this poem while herself on a journey at sea, it is not meant to be autobiographical.

If anything, Landon is attempting to convey the change the mind undergoes when on a ship at night. Sea travel did not agree with Landon at first, but with time the quieter nights of her

journey served as an opportunity to both reflect and write (Watt 179). Standing on the ship one evening, Landon wrote, "All seemed to be racing—I can use no other word—up and down the heaven, with the movement of the vessel. It is tremendous to look up, and see the height to which the sails ascend – so dark, so shadowy...you cannot understand how [the ship] is not lifted out of the water" (179). Landon, the real Landon, who spent the majority of the journey in tremendous discomfort, was struck by the difference between the day-to-day activities of the ship and the ship at night enough to write these sentences. It is possible that the thoughts of the speaker in "Night at Sea" are similarly inspirations of the moment, which fade as soon as the night does. But this is merely an attempt at an explanation; "Night at Sea" was not meant to be Landon's farewell to poetry, so there is no reason to suspect that she abandoned her firm belief in keeping autobiography out of literature in this instance. With this is mind, the possibility that Barrett Browning and Rossetti had ulterior motives in writing their elegies for Landon begins to crystallize into near certainty. Barrett Browning's 1839 elegy, "L.E.L.'s Last Question," not only reads "Night at Sea" as autobiographical, it attributes Landon's supposed longing for company as a selfish need for love from others. But "Night at Sea" must be read as fiction not just because of the principles behind Landon's writing, but also because facts from Landon's life suggest that it was nothing more than another L.E.L. poem, not a deviation from the norm. Fortunately, two thorough biographers—Landon's personal acquaintance Laman Blanchard and a 21st century biographer, Julie Watt—have accounted for both the creation of this poem and the circumstances surrounding it.

Marriage and the journey to Africa were not intended to bring an end to Landon's career, but rather provide her the opportunity to reach even greater levels of productivity. George

Maclean, “surprisingly for a Victorian husband...arranged that his wife should retain as her own the money she should make from her writing. 'What shall I not write in three years!' she exclaimed” (Watt 177). Later, when asked how she would communicate without any friends to talk to, Landon replied that she would “talk to them through my books” (178). More subtle but equally worth noting is the interesting divergence which occurred in Landon's signatures. Letters after her marriage, many of which are cataloged in Blanchard's *Life and Literary Remains of Letitia Landon*, are signed L.E. Maclean (Blanchard 198). The two poems written on Landon's journey and sent by Landon to be published in the *New Monthly Magazine* are signed L.E.L. (195), like the rest of her work. Landon took her husband's name, and her signature in letters reflects this. But her literary persona remained unaffected by marriage. Explaining in a letter to Blanchard written from the castle, Landon writes, “You may suppose what a resource writing is...If my literary success does but continue, in two or three years I shall have an independence from embarrassment it is long since I have known. It will enable me to comfortably provide for my mother” (198). L.E.L. did not disappear with Letitia Elizabeth Landon. She had long-term plans of continuing to write, and any reading of “Night at Sea” should take that into account.

Realizing that Barrett Browning is making an autobiographical reading of “Night at Sea” is not especially difficult given the poem's title and its status as an elegy. Barrett Browning takes no risks in ensuring that the reader is aware of the words, “Do you think of me as I think of you?” alluding to them in the title, placing them in an epigraph and then again as the first line of the poem. In the poem, Landon utters these words as, “under brighter skies than erst she knew, / Her heart grew dark, and groped there, as the blind, / To reach across the waves friends left behind” (“Last Question” 4-6). Barrett Browning is transposing Landon's question from the ship

to Africa itself. The poem “Night at Sea” has been completely abandoned, and the question central to this elegy masquerades as something that was written in a heartfelt letter rather than a piece of fiction. By divorcing the question from its context, Barrett Browning is free to speculate as to what this wish for recognition from her friends indicates about the character of this imagined Landon. But this choice to read Landon autobiographically raises a problem: Barrett Browning makes clear in her 1841 letters that she knows of Landon's choice to write poems with their roots in fiction, rather than fact. Either Barrett Browning only became aware of this after delving deeper into Landon's writing after her death, or she knew that “Night at Sea” was not meant to be autobiographical but read it as such anyway. Regardless of intention, “L.E.L.'s Last Question” requires that “Night at Sea” be autobiographical, because the poem is not so much about Landon's life or poetics as it is about what the late poet could have done better. The criticism of Landon is twofold: the emphasis on her “last question” portrays her as profoundly self-absorbed, while the lack of any mention of her writing subtly suggests that this writing is hardly worth being mentioned.

The poem concludes with a religious turn, turning Landon's vain pining into a call for greater awareness of God. The Landon of “L.E.L.'s Last Question” is insatiable in her desire for attention. “Could she not wait to catch their answering breath?” Barrett Browning writes, “Was she content, content, with ocean's sound, / Which dashed its mocking infinite around / One thirsty for a little love?” (36-39). The image here is potent: surrounded by water, Landon is thirsty. With her husband, and a ship full of people with whom she can associate, she still longs for love, never happy with the attention she is getting at the moment. But, at the poem's end, the “last question” of L.E.L. is spoken by someone else entirely: God. “But while on mortal lips I

shape anew / A sigh to mortal issues," Barrett Browning begins her final stanza, "HE who drew / All life from dust, and for all, tasted death, / By death and life and love, appealing, saith, / Do you think of me as I think of you?" (57, 60-63). It is more likely that Barrett Browning is directing this admonition at her readers rather than at the deceased Landon. Landon's question—at least as it is imagined by Barrett Browning—however, serves as the platform from which she is able to draw attention to man's ignorance of God. The Landon of this poem is selfish and craves attention and, like most people, would benefit from directing her energy at appreciating God.[13] A similar religious turn takes place in Christina Rossetti's 1863 elegy, "L.E.L.," which carried with it the subtitle, "Whose heart was breaking for a little love," another adaptation of Barrett Browning's already very liberal adaptation of "Night at Sea."

"L.E.L." similarly focuses on Landon's supposed need for attention, but does so by appropriating her voice in a fictional setting in which she is still alive. "Downstairs I laugh, I sport and jest with all;" Rossetti begins, "But in my solitary room above / I turn my face in silence to the wall; / My heart is breaking for a little love" (Rossetti 1-4). Once again, the Landon of the elegy is surrounded by people, given the chance to have the love she wants, but remains unsatisfied and melancholy. The thirsty woman surrounded by water has been replaced by the lonely woman surrounded by friends. This continues largely unchanged for five stanzas, until once again a turn takes place in the final one. It reads, "Yet saith a saint: 'Take patience for thy scathe; / Yet saith an angel: 'Wait, for thou shalt prove / True best is last, true life is born of death, / O thou, heart-broken for a little love" (36-39). Here, the imagined Landon's need for attention is once again put under scrutiny and deemed inferior to a more religious approach. The

13 Religious content like this is not unusual in Barrett Browning's poetry. *The Look, A Thought for a Lonely Death-Bed* and *Work and Contemplation,* all poems written just in 1844, contain references to "The Saviour," "Christ," and the "Christian Church" respectively (Barrett Browning 1, 5, 9).

construction of both elegies is formulaic: Landon's neediness is presented and elaborated upon, and then a solution is reached in the final stanza, reliance on God rather than on the attention of others. Christianity is commonplace in much of Rossetti's poetry although, as Jerome McGann argues in his essay, *The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti*, it has been misunderstood by critics. Regardless, Landon serves a cautionary tale in "L.E.L.," a woman who died alone and far from home, but whose sorrow could have been eased had she known where to look. Though both elegies are based on one of Landon's poems, neither references her actual work. Barrett Browning's elegy is at best a too-literal interpretation and at worst a complete misreading of one of Landon's final poems, and Rossetti's response to this elegy inherits its flaws, making presumptions about Landon's life that are as baseless as those made by Barrett Browning's poem. Baiesi contends that what Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti are responding to is more generally Landon's "self-centered request for sympathy," but this too represents a literal interpretation of fiction (Baiesi 156-157). It is true that sympathy plays a critical role in Landon's poetry, but not in the way that it is portrayed in these elegies. Landon's sympathy has its origins in Wordsworth's poetics, and thus it is a tool to benefit her poetry and her readers, rather than satisfy selfish desires.[14]

Generating pleasure in readers is at the core of Wordsworth's Preface. He writes that the "necessity of producing immediate pleasure" in poetry is "an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe...a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure" (Wordsworth 270). The source of this pleasure, as he goes on to elaborate, is sympathy. "We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure," he writes: "I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is

14 A more complete explanation of Wordsworth's influence on Landon's poetic process can be found in Chapter 1.

produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure" (270). The poet's duty is to "bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes...modifying only the language...for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure" (269). Landon similarly believes in the necessity of strong feelings in poetry, writing in *On the Character of Mrs. Hemans's Writings* that poetry is "an art more connected with emotion than any of its sister sciences" ("Character" 173). These emotions are, like those described by Wordsworth, intended to create sympathy, since poets "rely upon and crave for the sympathy of the many" (173). But this need for sympathy satisfies not a selfish impulse, but merely the writer's desire to continue creating art for the public. Landon refines this idea later, writing, "Fame, which the Greeks idealized so nobly, is but the fulfillment of that desire for sympathy which can never be brought home to the individual" (173). Landon requires emotional connections and the sympathy they create in poetry just like Wordsworth does, but for a slightly different reason. When readers sympathize with a work, the impression which they carry from it is lasting enough to augment the fame of the writer. But, importantly, the writer's "desire for sympathy" is never "brought home to the individual." Because the work itself and, in Landon's case, the larger-than-life L.E.L., stand between the reader and the writer, the writer does not herself receive the reader's sympathy. Sympathy's role is in increasing the poet's fame, allowing her to write more and to reach more people. A desire for personal attention, separate from her writing, does not enter into the equation. But the assumptions made about Landon's character, and the dismissal of her written work as irrelevant or insufficient in an elegy bearing her name, compose the vision of Landon that was passed down to future generations of readers, living in a literary world without the specter of L.E.L. looming overhead, or the promise of a new set of poems to appear soon in the

New Monthly Magazine or the *Literary Gazette.* The Landon of the Barrett Browning and Rossetti elegies, rendered by the former just after her death and revitalized by the latter several decades later, was far less captivating than the living Landon, and one needs only examine reviews of her work from before and after her death in order to see why.

Praise to Persecution: the Trend of Landon Criticism

Landon's fame did not just come from titillating her readers; critics often sang her praises in reviews, even when the work being reviewed had left a negative impression. A review of *Ethel Churchill*, a novel, published in an 1838 edition of *Fraser's Magazine*, begins critically, lamenting the lack of moral fiber in any of the story's characters. “But,” the reviewer admits, “though an uninteresting tale, no one can read it without admiring the astonishing qualities of the authoress. There are a hundred beautiful poems in it, and a thousand brilliant *mots*, which would have made the reputation of a dozen of the French memoir-writers” (Thackeray 89-92). A reviewer in the 1831 issue of *The Athenaeum, Journal of English and Foreign Literature, Science, and the Arts*, critiques, “We were always of opinion that Miss Landon's poetry failed in giving a just estimate of Miss Landon's powers...[it] often abounded in carelessness, and dealt too much in the superficial” (Athenaeum 793). Nevertheless, the reviewer admits to the undeniable quality of Landon's ability, writing, “'Erinna'...proved that there was iron in the rose; the 'Lines on Life' breathed wisdom born of tears and nursed of truth; whilst...her later poems have proved her in possession...not only of fancy, that builds with gold and gems, but of truth and thought, that bring the living spirit” (794). These reviews do not portray the entire range of comments made by critics about Landon's work, but rather show that, even when the specific

novel or poem being reviewed was deemed unworthy, Landon's ability as a writer was not called into question. She had established herself not just as a celebrity or a society icon, but as a proven writer. Naturally, she had her detractors among the critic community, but often these reviews would feature discrediting claims such as, “Love is the great business of a woman's life; and any one who discourses with but ordinary ability on this all-important topic, finds in a woman a ready, patient, and admiring listener” (Roebuck 50-67). Or “You know very well that I am no great believer in female genius; but nevertheless, there is a certain feminine elegance about the voluptuousness of this book” (Lockhart 237-238). The coexistence, even within one review, of praise and dismissal is quite similar to the sentiments expressed by Barrett Browning in her letters. Even Landon's detractors noted her worth as a poet, and her massive following during her life is a testament to her ability to captivate an audience. Yet in the years following her death, and up until the late 20th century, Landon was seldom discussed and barely read. With time, the colossus of L.E.L., and the woman behind her, became symbolic not of an innovative poetic genius and literary celebrity, but of a talentless fraud, not worth being mentioned alongside the other writers of her time.

The fading into obscurity begins, of course, with “L.E.L.'s Last Question,” a widely read and commonly anthologized piece of Barrett Browning's canon. As a prominent woman writer of the 19th century, Barrett Browning's elegy served to introduce Landon to other writers like Christina Rossetti, and also to readers who were not alive at a time when they would have been aware of Landon's work. In the former case, Barrett Browning's influence can clearly be seen in Rossetti's poem “L.E.L..” Rossetti's poem is not only subtitled by a line clearly inspired by “L.E.L.'s Last Question” (“One thirsty for a little love” in Barrett Browning's poem becomes

“Whose heart was breaking for a little love” in Rossetti's), it also focuses on Landon's imagined selfishness, and ends with a reference to salvation through faith in God. Barrett Browning became an ambassador for Landon to future generations, and this was the beginning of the end for Landon's legacy. Her elegy was the vessel, carrying a misreading of Landon's work and person to the future. Rossetti had access to Landon's entire work as a source for her own elegy, but chose to write on nothing by Landon herself, but on an elegy by a different writer. Barrett Browning and Landon did not see eye-to-eye on what poetry was, and as such Barrett Browning understood her contemporary to be an inferior writer. Believing Landon to be deluded by the idea that poetry should stem from the imagination, Barrett Browning saw Landon's considerable talents going to waste. It is perhaps for this reason that “L.E.L.'s Last Question” contains little reference to Landon as a poet, and is mostly focused on her as a person. Barrett Browning was intrigued by Landon, and did not actively dislike her at all, but did not respect the woman's art enough to immortalize it in an elegy. This continued in Rossetti's elegy. Even though Rossetti was exposed to Landon through her brother, who recommended poems such as *The Improvisatrice*, the elegy that she later wrote similarly looks at Landon as a person rather than as a writer. It does not matter if Rossetti read or even loved Landon's poetry; the decision to continue in the footsteps of Barrett Browning, to ignore the poetry in favor of a critique of the woman, continued the process started by Barrett Browning in the 1840s. Rossetti's elegy was written in 1863, meaning that Landon had been dead for a little over twenty years and still no effort by a well-known writer of the time had been made to resuscitate the her writing.

In 1928, D.E. Enfield published *L.E.L. A Mystery of the Thirties*, but rather than bring Landon's poetry back into critical discourse, Enfield was content to depict Landon as a talentless

writer, giving the impression that the book was only written to take another look at her death. “The poems of L.E.L. are out of print,” Enfield writes, “and are not likely to be reprinted. The cause lies, not so much in the decline of public taste...as in the poems themselves” (Enfield 59). Enfield categorizes Landon under modern terms, claiming that her writing “has, in fact, that peculiar combination of qualities which mark what is at present known as the 'best seller' – facile sensuality, immense seriousness, and exact conformity with the taste of the moment. It is equally plain that it could not possibly have outlived the generation for which it was written” (66). The reason behind this is that “Letitia had not the least touch of literary conscience. Flat lines, false rhymes, repetitions, redundancies, inaccuracies, anachronisms, absolute nonsense lie so thick on her pages that it is a thankless task to point them out” (66). Interestingly enough, Enfield's own book is as fraught with baseless claims and blind jabs at the truth as Landon's writing supposedly is with “absolute nonsense.” Take, for instance, Enfield's account of Landon's death, which is ruled suicide in this book, despite any hard evidence to that end. “L.E.L.,” Enfield writes, “with her fine feelings, and her rich gifts, had married like any heartless society lady, like any provincial spinster, simply for the sake of being talked about, because she was afraid of being an old maid, and because she cared more for the image of herself reflected in the eyes of the world than for her own integrity” (180). Claims like this, masquerading as biography, are the bane of good scholarship and yet, in many of the books on Landon written even in the past decade, Enfield's book emerges as a source, so sparse is the scholarship on the subject. Enfield's attempts to identify the faults in Landon's poetry consist of quotes from *The Improvisatrice* taken out of context, preferring all-encompassing generalizations to specific criticisms with supporting evidence. At the very least, Enfield's conclusion that Landon committed suicide places *L.E.L. A*

Mystery of the Thirties firmly within the category of fiction, certainly not biography.[15] Yet this book continues in the tradition of Barrett Browning and Rossetti, belittling Landon's writing and focusing on the phenomenon of her death. Whether Enfield was instrumental in it or not, the notion that Landon was a talentless writer endured into the 1980's.

Reclaiming the Legacy

Paula Feldman, who holds the C. Wallace Martin chair in English at the University of South Carolina, recalls her early opinion of Landon as being initially consistent with Enfield's. In her essay, "Endurance and Forgetting," Feldman in part discusses how she came to begin teaching Landon alongside Felicia Hemans, another largely ignored poet of her day. "I never considered teaching Landon and Hemans," Feldman writes, "for they seemed mere historical curiosities...Partly, of course, I believed what was widely held—that Hemans and Landon were mere popular hacks. Who has time to question every truism?" (Feldman 19). The editor of *The Brownings' Correspondence,* to provide another example, glosses Landon in a footnote as simply "a minor poet," not referencing the influence of her work or the vastness of her fame (BC 3, 183). It was not until Feldman "pulled Landon's poetry off the shelf, this time giving the volume a fuller, closer reading," that she found "poems that resonated for [her]" (Feldman 20). That Feldman, a professor who taught woman writers in the 19th century, could so handily dismiss Landon without having thoroughly experienced her is a testament to the strength of the portrayal of Landon that had been established by this point, some 150 years after her death. But Feldman's experience was, in fact, representative of a larger movement to rehabilitate Landon's poetry. And

15 *L.E.L. A Mystery of the Thirties* is, in fact, cited in Chapter 2 during a discussion of Landon's public image. The citation consists of a letter written by Landon and Enfield's testament to Landon's virtue. There is little reason to doubt the veracity of Enfield's claim in this very particular instance, because Landon's innocence in the face of accusations of adultery have been refuted by Glennis Stephenson, who was a close acquaintance.

because this new understanding of Landon is emerging from a period of ignorance of her poetry, critics are in the unique position to reclaim Landon from Barrett Browning and Enfield. Tricia Lootens, also a professor and modern critic, writes, “what critics rescue, we partly create; and the construction of our generation's 'Letitia Landon' is at a crucial stage. Consigned to near oblivion only a few years ago, Landon's work now appears not merely in reprint editions or in the pages of a canonical text...but in its own ambitious selected teaching edition” (Lootens 242). Indeed the period of “oblivion” is coming to an end, but what is also vanishing is the long-held assertion that Landon was an inferior poet, or that her work could only survive in the time in which it was written. That she is even being considered in modern scholarship is a testament to the worth of her bibliography. It is no surprise that Landon was forgotten for so long. After all, there is nothing compelling about a self-absorbed poet whose talents were considerable, but whose work was not only unremarkable, but decidedly lacking in several respects. No critic or reader could be drawn in by a writer whose sole preoccupation was the attention of others, who abused the craft of writing so that she could elevate herself in society. This is the Landon of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But this image of her is born from her legacy, which Landon did not create.

If Landon seems imitative, or simplistic, or poetically unambitious, it is because one is not taking into account every aspect of a woman who was as complex as a writer as she was alluringly mysterious as a person. She wrote with a passion that drew in her readers, that drove them to speculate that surely this L.E.L. was pouring her heart out to the world, a beautiful, lovesick woman confiding her woes from a thin guise of anonymity. But behind this heartfelt presentation was Letitia Landon's boundless imagination: part fountain of emotion and verse, part cold tool, used to manipulate the sympathy of readers so that they may continue to crave her

work. The more one reads of Landon, the more questions one has, the less certain one becomes that she is like this writer or that writer. The one consistency in Landon is her elusiveness. But it is a common characteristic of great art that it lies forever just beyond our reach. It is the same with Landon. She is worth pursuing, an unreachable goal wrapped in mystery and sealed from any certainty by the long years. To study Landon is to study the Artist herself. She is a tragic, yet joyful figure, alone even when her name is uttered by thousands, but possessing a power that inspires questions far more satisfying than any answers could ever be.

Afterword

L.E.L. scholarship has become more common over the past two decades, and continues to remain active. Of the 75 results turned up by a simple search of "Letitia Landon" on EBSCOhost, 69 were published after 1990. Among these are dissertations published as recently as 2012, meaning that fledgling academics are making their first major contributions to the field of literary criticism by writing about Landon. She is not just a reemerging subject, but a writer who has taken a place on the cutting edge of criticism.

And while biographies continue to be written, they occupy only a fraction of the recently-published material that is available on this remarkable woman and writer. For instance, *Celebrity, Femininity and Masquerade: Reading Letitia Landon's Romance and Reality* by Claire Knowles offers an investigation into one of Landon's novels, an oft-ignored segment of her bibliography. *Classics as Souvenir: L.E.L. and the Annuals* by Jennifer Wallace engages with annuals and gift-books, publications that reached new heights of popularity during Landon's career. Annuals were essential to Landon and many other women writers who would have had difficulty finding other mediums in which to publish their work.

This project will have accomplished its goal if it encourages readers to immerse themselves not just in Landon's work, but in the wealth of excellent Landon scholarship that is only now beginning to be written. The emerging understanding of her life and works forms the basis of what will be taught to generations of scholars to come.

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