

Hemans's "Casabianca" serves as such a text for Wendell Harris. The poem delineates the boundaries of his expanding canon: it assists in establishing the "real, if unstated, limits" of current "pluralization." Moreover, "Casabianca" appears to be in alignment with the undesirable functions of Victorian literature in particular: in the scenario created by "Canonicity," Hemans's poem could break through the canon's limits only if impelled by a "rush to defend" or to renew Victorian "sentimental description and inspirational storytelling." The inclusion of "Casabianca" in the canon would thus represent, in some sense, a revolutionary (or devolutionary) return to Victorianism.

Wendell Harris is fair in terming my approach to "Canonicity" eccentric. In this sense, I, not he, am guilty of "worrying": I have read a rich essay and pounced on a single illustrative statement, like a dog on a chew hoof. Perhaps only a Hemans reader could have been guilty of such behavior. As such a reader, I am delighted to hear Wendell Harris open up multiple sources for possible shifts in Hemans's canonical status.

Daniel A. Harris speaks of "the fashionable trinity of race, class, and gender." Concern with that "trinity" does not preclude attention to religious ideologies; rather, as I sought to demonstrate, it demands such attention. For the Hegelian vision that so often casts nineteenth-century women as redemptive "internal enemies" of the state is of course deeply religious, and this vision, as well as Hemans's own explicitly Christian conceptions of feminine virtue, stands at the heart of my essay.

Treating poetic interplays between patriotism and sexual politics is a difficult project. I understood my analysis of "The Hebrew Mother" to be more complex than Daniel Harris finds it; no doubt he intends his own reading of the (fascinating) Hyneman poem to be less dichotomizing than it seems to me. Certainly he makes an impressive argument for the need to locate Hemans's choice of a "Hebrew" mother within the highly charged religious struggles of her time. On a broader level, I think that his response also highlights a concern that remains merely implicit in my own work: the extent to which Hemans's verse engages in the characterization and authorization of the state as a Christian institution. That point seems crucial to a full reading of Hemans's domestic patriotism—and not incidentally, to a better grasp of how such patriotism shapes, and is shaped by, questions of "race, class, and gender."

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The Contemporary Elegy

To the Editor:

Z. Bart Thornton's letter about Jahan Ramazani's essay on contemporary elegy ends with a brief discussion of Eileen Myles's poem "On the Death of Robert Lowell" (*Forum*, 109 [1994]: 284–85). Thornton attributes to this poem "elegiac ambiguity, a wry sense of the anxiety of influence, and a canny insight into pop culture"; he also writes that "the narrator's initial embittered nonchalance . . . has yielded to a melancholy resignation to loss." The poem that Thornton thoughtfully and carefully evokes, however, includes the lines "O, I don't give a shit," "The guy was a loon," "The old white haired coot," and "Fucking dead."

In "Matters of Poetry," a lecture delivered at the Library of Congress on 7 May 1993, Mona Van Duyn asked, "[W]ho has not read the gorgeous, inflated rhetoric of praise in a review and then suddenly burst into laughter at the quoted passage the critic has been talking about, the bad, flat, inept lines that provoked the incandescent praise?" Had Thornton managed to discuss Myles's poem without quoting from it, he might have been more convincing. As it is, I wondered at first whether his intention was parodic. Alas, I believe that his letter was written in earnest.

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Reply:

Rachel Hadas comes to a puzzling conclusion. After citing some of the critical terms I use, she attempts to nullify my reading through a selective examination of some of the lines I "thoughtfully and carefully" evoke. Because the lines are frank and unadorned, Hadas concludes that they cannot be part of Myles's larger poetic project (i.e., bringing ambiguity and awkwardness to the seemingly staid elegiac form). I am surprised that Hadas, herself a poet, overlooks the vibrancy of the poem's subtext; in doing so, she ignores Myles's use of a simplicity that is rooted in modernist aesthetics and is as resonant and dense as that of William Carlos Williams or Raymond Carver.

In addition, Hadas assumes that there is an unproblematic correlation between the poem's diction and its deeper meaning. This kind of assumption, which has been challenged by Saussure and assaulted by a panoply of poststructural theorists, is by no means