

proposes that Euripides “sees rhetoric as endangered not because force actively suppresses speech but because those in power need not heed rhetoric” (1037).

But Kastely is primarily concerned with the question of the rhetoric’s power to accomplish its intended ends and with the personal power, or lack of power, of a particular rhetor. An alternative and broader reading would recognize that Hecuba’s rhetorical act is not a completed text and that its significance lies beyond its effect on Odysseus or its specific subject. What rhetoric is concerned with is a complex social process of speech, context, and reception in which nondominant logoi, or antilogoi, continuously interact with and challenge the dominant logoi. Hecuba’s speech is an attempt not merely to oppose Odysseus and the existing dominant power but to challenge the principles on which that power is based.

Throughout the play, Hecuba shows the existing authority, which represents itself as self-evident, eternal, and immutable, to be culturally and socially generated and thus arbitrary and contingent. Hecuba’s appeal to *nomos* is an appeal to the understanding of that concept as conventional rather than natural. And she demonstrates repeatedly that *nomos* does not exist naturally or command universal authority and acceptance; it is, rather, the product of laws and customs. Although Hecuba’s rhetoric is ineffective in persuading Odysseus, it demystifies and subverts his authority by revealing that the event’s conclusion was not immanent and unalterable but determined by social and political forces—forces that can and should be challenged, as Jonathan Dollimore argues: “although subversion may indeed be appropriated by authority for its own purposes, once installed it can be used against authority as well as used by it” (*Political Shakespeare* 12). Hecuba’s repeated argument that the existing power originates in custom rather than in an eternal order of things subverts the status of the dominant ideology. Her rhetoric insists that political “domination is not a static unalterable thing; it is rather a process, one always being contested, always having to be renewed” (Dollimore 14).

Literary and rhetorical theories identifiable as new historicism, cultural materialism, or cultural studies have been concerned with the operations of power and with the historical, social, and political conditions under which discourse is produced. Although these critical approaches originated in the early 1980s, a number of their practitioners have more recently come to recognize the opposition between containment and subversion as too polarized and reductive. A particular discourse must be understood in terms of the multiple positions of the speaker, writer, performer, spectators,

and readers involved in the production, reproduction, or consumption of the discourse in the complex process of the discourse’s being spoken, written, or enacted (Louis Montrose, in *The New Historicism*, ed. Harold Veeger, New York: Routledge, 1988, 23).

The immense importance of Hecuba’s speech as a rhetorical act itself becomes more apparent when the play is placed in a larger context. Athenian drama was performed only once a year as the center of the festival honoring Dionysus and was produced and supported under political auspices. The festival consisted of a public ceremony including government officials and priests and was intended to express civic pride and to unite the community in religious convictions. It was within this context that Euripides presented his play and revealed the existence of oppositional and alternative positions. In doing so, he demonstrated that it is, in fact, the ceaseless interchange of logoi and antilogoi that opens up possibilities for an effective marginal rhetoric and an effective challenge to the dominant authority.

LISA HERMSEN
Iowa State University

Felicia Hemans

To the Editor:

Tricia Lootens’s “Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine ‘Internal Enemies,’ and the Domestication of National Identity” (109 [1994]: 238–53) usefully helps refurbish a poet the Victorians read avidly—from Landon and Barrett Browning to Tennyson, whose “Demeter and Persephone” directly echoes Hemans’s first “Invocation” in her “Female Characters of Scripture,” in *Poetical Works* (Philadelphia: Grigg, 1836, 373–75). Yet one wishes for a more complex understanding of nineteenth-century patriotism than what Lootens offers. Although the fashionable trinity of race, class, and gender excludes religion, religious ideologies have always commingled with secular forces in shaping national identities.

When one considers the pervasive Hebraizing tendencies of British culture since the Reformation, it seems limitary to interpret nineteenth-century Christian poems on Hebrew themes without reference to official British attitudes toward the status of Anglo-Jewry and thus the nation. Lootens, however, views Hemans’s “The Hebrew Mother” without cultural reference; the “exotic” heroine, Lootens writes (pushing the Hebrew away from local pertinence), surren-

ders her son “to be educated by the male authorities” in a context that “stresses the sexual-political implications of her action rather than the patriotic ones” (245). The distinction between the “sexual-political” and the “patriotic” will not stand: the allusion to 1 Samuel 1.1–2.10 (which Lootens misses) unites them. When Hannah, fulfilling her vow, presents Samuel in the temple, she leaves to male consecration the boy who will eventually anoint both Saul and David as kings; in this female sacrifice of maternal desire, politics and patriotism manifestly commingle. Hannah’s act, presaging the end of pre-Davidic theocracy, nevertheless marks the characteristic overlap of ecclesiastical and political functions in the Hebrew state. Given Christianity’s dependency on Jesus’s genetic descent from David and given the early modern meshing of nationhood and theology that Henry VIII achieved in establishing the Anglican Church within British Protestant statecraft, “The Hebrew Mother” dramatizes—both by analogy and by typology—the crucial moment in which church and state are prophetically, and legitimately, joined. The poem, like any of its time on a Hebrew theme, enters the political-religious discourse of the British *patria*. Through Hannah, Hemans reasserts the religious character of the British state at the precise historical moment when the idea of Britain as a Christian nation was most threatened—not by secularism but by religious egalitarianism. When male Dissenters were admitted to most civil liberties in 1828, “Britain” could still consider itself essentially Protestant (although no longer purely Anglican); when disabilities barring male Catholics were removed in 1829, “Britain” became merely Christian. Thus the furor that surrounded the long, wrangling effort (1830–58) to secure for Jews the rights to hold municipal and parliamentary office: when Lionel Rothschild entered the House of Lords *without* swearing his national allegiance “on the true faith of a Christian,” the Anglican political establishment was permanently altered.

“The Hebrew Mother” affirms the conservative Christian position in this debate; by presenting the Hebrew sources for a national(ized) religion, the poem underscores the Protestant foundations of the British Christian state—in such a way that the Hebrews themselves are debased. (Without such debasement, how could the analogue become a type?) In 1 Samuel 1.1–2.10, the unwaveringly patriotic Hannah (contra Hemans) sings a triumphant song praising the Lord that ranks her with Miriam, Deborah, and other Hebraic models for female poetic voice to which Victorian women, Christian as well as Jewish, often

sought access. The crisis of faith that Hemans’s Hebrew mother experiences in dedicating her son (“Wilt thou . . . lift up, in thy fear, / A cry which none shall hear? / What have I said, my child! Will *He* not hear thee?” [63–67]) is, indeed, a purely Christian crisis: it has nothing to do with the Hebrew Hannah’s consciousness of her covenant with God. Hemans’s poem further cancels Hannah’s self-empowerment as God’s vehicle by projecting a Victorian Christian trope of spiritual abandonment onto a transmuted Hebrew “source” in order to render Hebrew devotion suspect: the Hebrew doubts, while the (invisible, typologically predicated) Christian remains implicitly secure. The Christianized Hebrew who transcends her doubt and then offers her son to a priesthood that still embodies the theocracy (not simply the “male authorities”) demonstrates that the Christian state surpasses the Hebrew foundations on which it rests, even as actual Jews enter Victorian political and social life.

Hemans’s typological maneuver did not pass unnoticed in the Jewish literary community. The American poet Rebekah Hyneman responded directly to the theological-patriotic warp of “The Hebrew Mother” in her “Hannah” (“Female Scriptural Characters,” second series, in *The Leper: and Other Poems*, Philadelphia: Hart, 1853, 100–02). Here, Hannah’s address to Samuel reveals none of the maternal possessiveness that allows Hemans’s Christianized heroine to slight her covenant (Hemans 3–4):

Oh! would not that bosom be more than ungrateful,
If its own selfish promptings would plead for thee now—
If the joy of thy presence could make me unmindful
Of all my soul pledged in that grief-stricken vow!
(Hyneman, “Hannah” 21–24)

As this particular remonstrance rebukes Hemans’s depiction of the Hebrew mother, so “Female Scriptural Characters” argues with Hemans’s “Female Characters of Scripture”: taking the sestet of Hemans’s first “Invocation” as its epigraph, Hyneman’s own invocation in “Female Scriptural Characters” prophetically welcomes the “spirit band” (1) for which Hemans searches (7, 9) and summons Hebrew heroines whom Hemans recasts as types to anticipate the Virgin Mary and the domestic virtues of British Christian womanhood. Clearly, the Jewish American poet writing in a nation founded on disestablishmentarian principles pursued an agenda at variance from that of the British Christian who used Hebraic materials for a contemporaneously patriotic subtext. Hyneman’s revision of Hemans’s program—urging readers to consider

Hemans's work in context—suggests how biblical interpretation informed Victorian conceptions of patriotism and fostered the business of nation building. That both writers were voteless women—the one privileged by her Christianity, the other by her supposed equality in an oxymoronically creedless Christian nation—intimates the tangle that a mother's deliverance of a man-child to the nationalized religious institution entailed.

DANIEL A. HARRIS
Rutgers University

To the Editor:

Although I do not believe that meanings are undecidable, I, like everyone who occasionally writes for publication, am constantly forced to admit how difficult it is to be clear enough to avoid misreadings and consequent misapplications. And although I am glad to be read at all, not to mention cited, Tricia Lootens's somewhat eccentric use of a comment from my essay "Canonicity" (*PMLA* 106 [1991]: 110–21) so happily illustrates one of the points I make there that I am led to respond. In her essay on Felicia Hemans, Lootens writes, "Wendell V. Harris worries that unless we admit works such as 'Casabianca' to be beyond the literary pale—the 'real, if unstated, limits' of canonicity—we may be driven to 'defend the sentimental description and inspirational storytelling that delighted our grandparents'" (238).

The three major arguments of my essay are that "selective canons" (Alastair Fowler's term) reflect what are seen as the desirable functions of literature; that changes resulting from shifts in cultural perceptions of those functions may expand and diversify (pluralize) as well as limit these canons; and that the usefulness of a particular work of literature in fulfilling a particular function largely determines whether it becomes part of a selective canon. The paragraph to which Lootens refers reads as follows:

At present, pluralization appears to have real, if unstated, limits. For instance, there has been no rush to defend the sentimental description and inspirational storytelling that delighted our grandparents. The generation educated early in this century still happily quoted "Little Orphant Annie," "Excelsior," "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight," "Casabianca," and "The Good Time Coming," but the antielitist impulse has yet to rehabilitate Mrs. Hemans or Charles Mackay. (117)

I am not at all "worried" about the inclusion of "Casabianca" in selective canons, nor do I regard the poem as irredeemably beyond the limits of the potentially canonical. My point is precisely that any literary work may enter selective canons if enough critics find it useful for their purposes. That critics attacking the elitism they believe has governed canon selection have passed over the kind of poems I mention suggests that these critics have not found that kind useful for their purposes (perhaps because the critics' criteria are still tintured with certain "elitist" assumptions). Thus, among other possibilities, if Lootens's interesting essay should prove efficacious in awakening sufficient interest in Hemans's expression of what Lootens calls "Victorian domestic patriotism" or if a renewed taste for what I refer to as "sentimental description and inspirational storytelling" should arise ("sentimental" and "inspirational" are not in essence dyslogistic terms), Hemans might indeed enter the selective canon. Although that prospect strikes me as unlikely, it is not an impossibility; were it to occur, Hemans's inclusion would simply reflect a reasonably wide acceptance of the value of the functions her poetry was regarded as performing.

(Since sending this letter to *PMLA*, I have been interested, but not disconcerted, to discover that three of Hemans's poems, including "Casabianca," have been printed in the sixth edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.)

WENDELL V. HARRIS
Penn State University, University Park

Reply:

By raising the difficulty of making one's thoughts clear, Wendell V. Harris offers me an opening that I am grateful to take. I am sorry if I seemed to imply that his "Canonicity" argues for fixed canonical boundaries; in fact, the essay is admirably clear about the shifting character of those dividing lines.

What interested me about "Canonicity" was the use of "Casabianca" as a noncanonical text. Wendell Harris asserts, following Fowler, that "'selective canons' . . . reflect what are seen as the desirable functions of literature." It seems to me that such canons draw much of their identity and cultural force from relations to other groups of texts—call them "unselective noncanons." The texts within such "noncanons" reflect "what are seen as the [un]desirable functions of literature" and in so doing constitute canonicity by negative example.