



L.E.L. in and out of the Birkbeck Album: Poetics and Politics

Isobel Armstrong

Letitia Elizabeth Landon's contributions to Anna Birkbeck's album may seem out of place among entries by radicals and reformers associated with the London Mechanics' Institution, among them John Bowring, William Hone, Robert Owen, and John Thelwall. Yet contrasting sentimental poetics with radical politics fails to capture the radical aesthetics of the 1820s. Thelwall, for instance, placed Landon, whom he called 'Sappho', among 'Poets and Poetry of the Age'. The album authors include editors of journals that shaped Landon's career: William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, where Landon made her reputation in the 1820s; and Samuel Carter Hall, the editor of *The Amulet* and the *New Monthly Magazine*, which were important venues for her later poems. This article analyses the Landon poems entered into the Birkbeck album after being published in the *Literary Gazette*, together with later poems published in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* (1832) and the *New Monthly Magazine* (1836), teasing out the poetics and politics of her poetry in challenging an egotistical, Wordsworthian strand of Romantic writing, and arguing instead for 'the public circulation of affect and the necessity of dreaming as a social need'.



Two of Letitia Landon's poems, signed by the poet, appear in Anna Birkbeck's album. Both had previously appeared in the *Literary Gazette*, the periodical edited by William Jerdan, where Landon's earliest poems were published.¹ A third, 'Lights and Shadows', also appeared in the album under the heading 'MS Lines presented to Miss Spence by Miss Landon author of the *Improvvisatrice* [sic]'.² These women were part of a network of young writers, professionals who lived by writing, mostly for periodicals, as a preliminary for publishing books. Elizabeth Isabella Spence, more senior, was known primarily for her travel writing about Scotland, her latest publication being *Letters from the North Highlands* (1817). Another album contributor, the journalist Samuel Carter Hall, soon to be the editor of *The Amulet: A Christian and Literary Remembrancer* from 1826 to 1837, identifies an overlap between the album and a key publishing network. Landon was a friend of his wife, Mrs S. C. Hall, an Irish writer, who was just beginning a literary and journalistic career, but would become a prolific story and poem writer.³ Her *Sketches of Irish Character* was published in 1829. To this group we could also add Emma Roberts, another friend of Landon, who contributed 'To ____' to the album, an address to an unnamed lover.⁴ She too was a story writer and was, a little later, to make her name with accounts of India, *Scenes and Characters of Hindostan* (1835), published first as articles in the *Asiatic Journal* from 1832. These two friends help to explain why Ireland and India bulk large in Landon's work and suggest how close and interlocked were the networks around the Birkbecks.

The Birkbecks seemed alert to the up-and-coming as well as to established literary and political figures. Their group testifies to an interrelated salon and album culture in which editors of the periodicals that published the genre of female-authored stories and poems met and mingled with their authors and with each other at the formal social gatherings initiated by women hostesses designated salons or soirées. In a precarious literary world, presence at salons was a professional necessity. A typical salon in which Landon appears is described by Louisa Devey in her *Life of Rosina, Lady Lytton*.⁵ Isabella

¹ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, 'Song | How vain to cast my love away'; 'Song | Oh say not Love was never made', *Literary Gazette*, 10 November 1821, p. 716, transcribed in *The Album of Anna Birkbeck*, Birkbeck, University of London, pp. 23, 27. Luisa Calè directed me towards material and advised me about the contents of this article. It could not have been written without her help. I thank her for her meticulous scholarship and her support throughout the writing of this article.

² 'Lights and Shadows', *Literary Gazette*, 31 January 1824, p. 74, transcribed in *The Album of Anna Birkbeck*, p. 5.

³ S. C. Hall, 'The trumpet sounded thrice', *The Album of Anna Birkbeck*, p. 11.

⁴ Emma Roberts, 'To ____', *The Album of Anna Birkbeck*, pp. 30–31.

⁵ Louisa Devey, *Life of Rosina, Lady Lytton*, 2nd edn (Sonnenschein, Lowrey, 1887), pp. 48–49 (Landon at the salon of Miss Benger), cited in Cynthia Lawford, 'Turbans, Tea and Talk of Books: The Literary Parties of Elizabeth Spence and Elizabeth Benger', *CW³ Journal*, 1 (2004) <<https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/1751/901911.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>> [accessed 10 August 2024].

Spence, herself a contributor to the Birkbeck album (p. 7), conducted a salon in her second-floor apartment at Quebec Street, Portman Square, which was attended by Landon and other Birkbeck album contributors: William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*; Samuel Carter Hall, who much later succeeded Bulwer Lytton as editor of the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1833, a periodical to which Landon would contribute, demonstrating the power of these networks; and Alaric A. Watts, editor of the *Literary Souvenir; or, Cabinet of Poetry and Romance*.⁶

But what was Landon doing in the Birkbeck album? What were her poems of love and betrayal doing, in this avowedly radical circle? Other contributors to Anna Birkbeck's album were John Thelwall, campaigner for universal suffrage and innovative speech therapist — he and George Birkbeck were close, deeply committed to adult working-class education; John Bowring, Unitarian and radical reformer; William Hone of the famous blasphemy trials of 1817, at which the freedom of the press was at stake; Robert Owen, utopian socialist and founder of the cooperative movement; and William Crawford, less well known but a staunch Liberal MP for the City of London. The Birkbecks also invited unusual women to their gatherings: Eliza Louisa Emmerson, correspondent of John Clare, made two contributions in 1826; and Barbara Hofland, educator, writer of schoolbooks and stories for children, contributed two poems in 1827. Did Landon belong to the category of the unusual woman?

If each of the lives of the seventy contributors to Anna Birkbeck's album could be fully researched it would almost certainly be seen as a microcosm of reformist and radical thinking of the 1820s — catholic, open (not all their guests agreed with Birkbeck's agenda and vice versa, and some forms of radicalism contradicted others) — and essentially democratic. Birkbeck himself was an emancipatory but hard-headed thinker. In a speech at the London Mechanics' Institution of 1825, he remarked that if the (implicitly) lower classes are found wanting 'we ought to blame the culture, not the soil'.⁷ The 'most humble enquirers' are capable of 'enlarging [...] dominion over matter' through 'the charms of literature, the powers of science'. Bacon tells us that knowledge is power, but 'knowledge is wealth — is comfort — is security — is enjoyment — is happiness' — a hint of utilitarianism here. And he adds that politically, the acquisition of knowledge has produced 'more constant obedience'. He was no revolutionary.

So, to reiterate, where is Landon's place in this context? Was she an anomaly? It may seem that she was an anomaly because we know so little about her politics, but at

⁶ William Jerdan, 'A Charm', *The Album of Anna Birkbeck*, p. 99; S. C. Hall, p. 11; Alaric A. Watts, 'The Lady and the Merlin', pp. 45, 46, 47.

⁷ 'The New Lecture-Room', *Mechanics' Magazine*, 11 December 1824, pp. 188–89.

this stage of her career she was already a major figure, a poet who had already gained a following. I turn first to the two poems she wrote down in the Birkbeck album — slight, light, and compact. She must have had them by heart. They were both published in November 1821, but undated in the album.

Song

How vain to cast my love away
 On bosom false as thine
 The floweret's bloom that springs in May
 Would be a safer shrine;
 To build my fondest hopes upon
 Tho' fragile it may be
 That flower's bloom is not sooner gone
 Than hope that trusts to thee.
 Love asks a calm and gentle home
 Or else his life is o'er;
 If once you let its pinions roam,
 Oh then 'tis love no more.
 The aspin's changeful shade can be
 No shelter for the dove
 And hearts as varying as that tree
 Can be no place for love.
 Hope lingered long and anxiously
 O'er failing faith but now,
 I give thee back each heartless sigh
 Give back each broken vow.
 I'll trust the stay of tulip dyes
 The calm of yon wild sea
 The sunshine of the April skies
 But never more to thee.

Song

Oh say not Love was never made
 For spirit light as mine
 Must Love then seek the Cypress shade
 Rear but a gloomy shrine

Oh say not that for one most meet
 The revelry of youth
 Thinkest thou my wild heart cannot beat
 With deep-devoted truth.
 Tho mirth may many changes ring
 Tis but an outward show
 Even upon the fond dove's wing
 Will varying colours glow
 Light smiles upon my lip may gleam
 And sparkle o'er my brow,
 Tis but the glisten of the stream
 That hides the gold below
 Tis love that gilds each mirthful hour
 That lights the smile for me.
 I hope smiles would lose their all of power
 Did they not glance on thee.

Landon was 19 when these poems appeared (she was born in August 1802). But from the start there are no traces of immaturity. What characterized her poems was an unusually self-conscious and sophisticated banality that seems a deliberate choice: she was not an expressive lyrical poet but chose an analytical mode that relied on familiar tropes and figures, well worn and known, well circulated and linguistically conventional. But she did not use these in a conventional way. In these poems an element of the intellectually scandalous haunts the elegant triteness.

Both poems are constructed on an ABAB rhyme pattern, alternating four-stress and three-stress lines. But this simple, even simplistic, structure is disrupted by the irregular indentations of the lines, which have no discernible pattern and set up a confusing anti-design. The last eleven lines of the first poem, for instance, never return to the initial indentation: similarly, the last five lines of the second slope away from the form of the first lines. Aurally regular, visually discontinuous, these poems are puzzles.

Both poems turn on negatives that are implicitly troublesome — 'no more', 'no shelter', 'no place', 'never', in the first poem, to which I now turn. 'That flower's bloom is not sooner gone | Than hope that trusts to thee'. (The slight rhythmical glitch of 'not sooner' draws attention to the phrase.) It was 'vain', to no avail, to trust to the lover's 'bosom': love requires stability; if its pinions 'roam' it ceases to be love; the changeful 'aspin' (aspen) is no place for the dove — and implicitly its wings — to rest. But, a first inconsistency: pinions and doves are meant to fly. This is followed

by further, more knowingly flagrant inconsistencies. The lyricist will ‘trust the stay of tulip dyes’, the calm moments of the ‘wild sea’, the ‘sunshine’ of April, the month of showers, the precarious moments of experience, rather than love’s continuance. They are paradoxically more reliable than the lover. The ‘stay’ or continuance of the tulip’s colours — and ‘stay’ here is both a curb or check and a support — is implicitly a short ‘stay’, in parallel with the transience of the flower’s ‘bloom’ earlier, a transience made more complex when the bloom *on* a flower is separated from the brevity of its blooming. If we start from the unrealistic presupposition of permanent stability we are bound to discover a metaphysically unstable universe, the poem says. And yet there are two poems in one here, just as the poem splits into aural and visual elements. One accepts an analytic of discontinuity, the other works through the affective and ethical ‘hopes’ (see line 5) of love. The ‘heartless sigh’, the ‘broken vow’, the ‘bosom’ that implies comfort and almost feminine care; these ethical and affective conditions continue to be meaningful and valid. They drive human desire and sexual love irrespective of the theoretical conclusions that commit to an unstable universe. These, desire and the impotence of desire, are presented as an unstated antithesis that is simply not resolved. They stand side by side.

The second poem is equally edgy, turning on surface and depth and attempting to refuse the antithesis of shallow and profound — ‘Oh say not [...] Oh say not’. The lyricist is associated with the ‘revelry’ and implicitly with the superficiality of youth. The speaker repudiates love as mourning — ‘the Cypress shade’ — and yet claims depth for herself, a ‘deep-devoted truth’. But depth is actually repudiated or called into question in the poem in favour of ‘gleam’, ‘sparkle’, ‘glisten’, ‘glance’. This vocabulary of superficiality is, she claims, in reality, in continuity with the buried alluvial gold that actually creates the surface play of light on water — the superficial, surface manifestation of its own *light* actually ‘hides the gold below’. Hence the slightly suspect ‘gilds’, which suggests a surface coat, almost a disguise. The poem ends with an edgy subjunctive and negative difficult to parse: ‘I hope smiles would lose their all of power | Did they not glance on thee.’ Again, a slight rhythmical glitch. The line can simply be expressed as one in which every word takes a stress denoting unequivocal certainty — / / / / / / / / — or: — / /- /- /- /-. It is a glitch that persuades one to take notice. The latter scansion is much more uncertain, suggesting the uncertain glance. If they did not ‘glance’ on you, this sentence affirms, I hope my smiles would lose all their power. But there is a determined superficiality in ‘glance’ too. It signals a look, but a transitory look, a look that quickly moves away. The glance turns out to be about power. Youthful ‘revelry’ is actually manipulative after all.

The power of these poems lies in their combination of recognized desire and, by definition, its perpetual endlessness, with an unexpected intellectual steeliness. The

poems encounter, as well as desire, with its unequivocal regret and sadness, a much more equivocal universe of metaphysical discontinuity, a world that inverts the surface–depth antithesis and invokes power play. I think it is this intellectual strength that persuaded the influential Thelwall, along with many others, to consider Landon as a highly gifted poet — she was ‘Sappho’ to him. Judith Thompson, in a fascinating and comprehensive essay on Thelwall, describes the manuscript of *Musalogia*, only recently discovered by her, and unknown to Thelwall scholars until now.⁸ It contains a mock-heroic satiric poem on ‘Poets and Poetry of the Age’, specifically commenting on the poets and poetry of the 1820s.⁹ Thompson comments that in ‘Lady Bards and Lady Wits’, ‘the acknowledged star is Letitia Landon’ (p. 98). In a 120-line passage Thelwall warns against William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, and his influence over Landon. Thompson assumes that Thelwall warns against literary faults, but the lines ‘wishes that the petted child | Had been his care ere she was spoiled’, carry an obvious innuendo. He must have been one of the few people to have seen, or to admit to seeing, that Jerdan was grooming Landon, and had been doing so from the moment she came into his power as a contributor to the *Gazette* at the age of 17. This could only be the meaning of his warning. Thelwall himself, at 52, had married the 17-year-old Henrietta Cecil Boyle, and had written, Thompson says, erotic poetry whose models range from Anacreon to Byron. He must have been conscious that his own middle-aged sexual feeling paralleled that of Jerdan. But he had married, not seduced, the girl he loved. In the interval between the publication of these two poems in the *Literary Gazette* and their reappearance in the Birkbeck album, scarcely 20, Landon was to bear her first illegitimate child of three, Ella Stuart (this may have been 1823; Landon’s biographer is unsure of the exact date).¹⁰ For the rest of her career Landon suffered the necessity of concealed motherhood imposed on her by Jerdan’s married state. But we must assume that she also experienced both sexual betrayal and sexual desire in a complex and conflicted relationship of exploitation. It is interesting that despite his knowledge of sexual transgression, Thelwall still continued to see her as among the most powerful women poets of the 1820s. His respect goes some way to enable us to understand Landon’s in fact authoritative presence in what was in many ways a culturally heavyweight album.

⁸ Thelwall contributes elaboratively complimentary poems to Anna Birkbeck’s album: ‘The Apology’ (pp. 51–52) and ‘The offering’ (pp. 53–55).

⁹ Judith Thompson, ‘Citizen Juan Thelwall: In the Footsteps of a Free-Range Radical’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.1 (2009), pp. 67–100 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25602179>> [accessed 30 August 2024]. This is a marvellous piece of detective work, uncovering not only Thelwall’s Wordsworthian affiliations but discovering this hitherto unknown manuscript of 213 poems: ‘I found my 1000-page Holy Grail’ (p. 86).

¹⁰ See Cynthia Lawford, ‘Diary’, *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2000 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n18/cynthia-lawford/diary>> [accessed 19 August 2024].

Was Thelwall's respect justified? Here I turn aside to discuss the designation *Poetess*. It has become customary to discern most female poets of the early and even later nineteenth century under the category *Poetess*. Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans, in particular, receive this moniker, with its assumption of the centrality of cliché, now become habitual.¹¹ Originally, in the late twentieth century when nineteenth-century women poets, to wonder and delight, were being rediscovered, the term was a useful way of getting women poets to be read and taken seriously at all. It facilitated invaluable research. The deliberate gendering was a strategic move. For instance, as early as 1999, Tricia Lootens, the exuberant doyenne of nineteenth-century women's poetry, in a historicist reading of the category of the *Poetess*, made a serious study of Landon and the *Poetess* tradition — 'Receiving the Legend, Rethinking the Writer: Letitia Landon and the *Poetess* Tradition'.¹² Recently, Marjorie Stone has convened an invaluable forum on the *Poetess*, 'one of the most hotly debated figures in the study of Victorian literature and culture', as Christopher Keep has described it, introducing the debate with a fair and discriminating reading of the issues. On the one hand, the term 'occluded' the variety and aesthetic richness of women's poetry in the period; on the other, its 'instability' could be strategically exploited to open up the 'radical potential' of women's writing.¹³ The forum certainly elicited some wonderfully original research and real subtlety. For instance, Lootens takes the opportunity of pointing out that the *Poetess* is not 'white', a factor that needs to be recognized as colonial history becomes more insistent.¹⁴ 'What does "Poetess Studies" mean?', she asks, using her justified authority in the sphere of women's poetry to ask this fundamental question (p. 203). There is some uncertainty. Alison Chapman wonders whether the *Poetess* can become an encoding term in online digital enterprises such as her own *Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry* (DVPP), rather less confident than Susan Brown that 'the poetess operates as a gendered historical and cultural category'.¹⁵ 'What remains of the conventional "poetess poetry" category',

¹¹ See, for example, two articles in *English Literary History*: Alexander Freer, 'Landon's Clichés', *ELH*, 90.1 (2003), pp. 77–106, doi:10.1353/elh.2023.0003; and Kylan Rice, "'Bird, Jewel, or Flower?": On the Tokenization of Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry', *ELH*, 90.3 (2023), pp. 767–98, doi:10.1353/elh.2023.a907208.

¹² Tricia Lootens, 'Receiving the Legend, Rethinking the Writer: Letitia Landon and the *Poetess* Tradition', in *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, ed. by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt (University Press of Kentucky, 1999), pp. 242–59. Virginia Blain was one of the earliest critics to seriously address the *Poetess* figure, even before Lootens. See Virginia Blain, 'Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Eliza Mary Hamilton, and the Genealogy of the Victorian *Poetess*', *Victorian Poetry*, 33.1 (1995), pp. 31–51 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002517>> [accessed 30 August 2024].

¹³ Christopher Keep, 'Editor's Note', *Victorian Review*, 48.2 (2022), pp. v–vi (p. v), doi:10.1353/vcr.2022.a900609.

¹⁴ Tricia Lootens, "'Am I Not a *Poetess*?'", *Victorian Review*, 48.2 (2022), pp. 200–06 (p. 201), doi:10.1353/vcr.2022.a900623.

¹⁵ Susan Brown, 'Graphing the *Poetess*', *Victorian Review*, 48.2 (2022), pp. 194–200 (p. 198), doi:10.1353/vcr.2022.a900622. Brown's graphing does go some way to authenticating the term *Poetess* by showing the curve of the word's usage from 1800 to 1900, but this statistical research requires now a sustained historical and cultural study to give meaning to these statistics.

Chapman asks, after we have ‘identified its major poetic attributes (e.g. repetition, simple rhyme) and expanded its horizons beyond a few major poetesses?’¹⁶ In order to discover attributes it seems necessary to define them beforehand. And yet it is patently clear that Landon’s Birkbeck poems end up complicating rhyme by invoking other elements of form, so that even rhyme does not remain ‘simple’.

I do not question that the designation Poetess was a historical category. Luisa Calè has reminded me of a publication of 1825: *Specimens of British Poetesses; Selected and Chronologically Arranged*, where three poems by Landon end the volume. Edited by Alexander Dyce, it includes eighty-nine poets writing between 1460 and 1821. ‘Poetess’ here seems to mean any woman who wrote poems. Yet it is clear that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, did her best to dissociate herself from the Poetess and the album book conventions and their oppressive expectations of the Poetess figure.¹⁷ But I feel that after Marjorie Stone’s wonderfully scrupulous symposium, from which we have all learned so much, it is time to explore women’s poetry in other ways. It is too easy to fetishize the Poetess; too easy, given the obligatory definite article and the capital P, to reify the woman poet’s work. Thelwall’s term, ‘Lady Bards’, indicates that there were alternative formulations. Whatever its usefulness in other contexts, in Landon’s case the term Poetess comes to have a narrowing function, eliciting from her work only those characteristics we designate in advance as belonging to the repertoire of the Poetess.

In the rest of this discussion, I will look at three poems that suggest why Landon earned the respect of intellectuals in her day. She was herself an intellectual. Two of these poems are in the first volume of *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap Book* for 1832, a few years after her poems were entered into the Birkbeck album (and three years after the birth of her third child, Laura Landon, in 1829). The third poem is in the *New Monthly Magazine* of 1836, which had been taken over by Samuel Carter Hall as editor in 1833 after a brief period edited by Bulwer Lytton, who tried and failed to follow a radical agenda. I have chosen them as ‘mid-career’ poems (though a career cut off all too prematurely), poems where we might expect to see a maturation in her work, though Landon’s early death turned these poems into ‘late’ work.

¹⁶ Alison Chapman, ‘Poetess Futures: Unsettling Victorian Poetry at Scale’, *Victorian Review*, 48.2 (2022), pp. 190–94 (p. 193), doi:10.1353/vcr.2022.a900621.

¹⁷ Barrett Browning’s remark in August 1837, that she did not hold any kind of annual, ‘gild it as you please, in too much honor & awe’, is well known: see Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Julia Martin, 16 August 1837, *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, ed. by Philip Kelly, Ronald Hudson, and Scott Levis (Wedgestone Press, 1984–), III: 1832–1837 (1985), pp. 270–74 (p. 273), digitized at <<https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/668/?rsId=416907&returnPage=6>>; and Beverly Taylor, ‘Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Subversion of the Gift Book Model’, *Studies in Browning and his Circle*, 20 (1992), pp. 62–69 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002517>> [both accessed 30 August 2024].

The first poem, 'Storrs, Windermere Lake', is a three-stanza work in which each stanza's eight lines only rhyme on every other line.¹⁸ It is one of Landon's many rewritings of Wordsworth, but the central reference is to Rousseau's *Reveries*:

I would row out to the middle of the lake [Bienne] when it was calm, and there, stretching out full-length in the boat, my eyes looking up to the sky, I would let myself float and drift slowly, wherever the water took me, sometimes for several hours at a time, plunged in a thousand delightful reveries.¹⁹

These 'delightful reveries' are an ego-made prolongation of the present: 'The present lasts forever' (p. 55). In Landon's reverie, her 'I would' is in the subjunctive, a wish, a hope, a possibility, not a certainty. Her 'charmed bark' would instigate a dream of solitariness in the 'silver silence', but this state is alert to what is around her. This silence is a special silence created by water itself, as the 'silver' of water waves and the muting of sound waves combine, a typical kind of Landon dexterity, converting the banal to an insight. The intrusion of another vessel would 'wake' this silence (Landon does not use the obvious rhyme, 'break'), a wakening that includes the lake's silence and herself:

No oar should cleave its sunny tide;
 But I would float along,
 As if the breath that filled my sail
 Were but a murmured song.

The breeze becomes a kind of lullaby. Rousseau's deliberate solipsism contrasts with Landon's alertness to the external world. Still in the subjunctive (where Rousseau's use of that same 'would' — 'I would row' — is a confident auxiliary designating the present) the hypothetical drift would 'Live early youth anew', a youth 'that coloured life with its own hues'. It is a commitment to the secondary act of memory (signalled at the start of the volume in the first introductory piece).²⁰ And here the 'would' of the subjunctive signifies longing. Youth reflexively colours life with its youth, the syntax suggests: 'The heart's true Claude Lorraine'. The intervention of the Claude Lorraine glass, an eighteenth-century optical instrument for framing and gradating the tones of

¹⁸ L.E.L., 'Storrs, Windermere Lake', *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book, with Poetical Illustrations* (Fisher, Son, and Jackson, 1832), p. 14.

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. by Peter France (Penguin Classics, 1979), p. 54.

²⁰ See title page: 'Gifts are the beads of Memory's rosary', L.E.L., *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book*.

a view, suggests not only the mediating function of memory but its essential secondary constructedness, since the glass entailed the perceiver *turning her back* on the view itself in order to see its reflection transformed by the tones of the glass. This, Landon says, is how we see the past. It is a kind of artifice, but an enabling one: it enables the revival of sociality, past faces, voices, and — another of those unexpected Landon turns, a compensation of fantasy that turns its back on the ‘real’ past — friends she has ceased to love ‘I’ll still think loved’. Landon challenges the great male Romantic theme of memory here and offers her own reading. ‘But to be young was very heaven’, Wordsworth wrote.²¹ Enough of his poetry was available to Landon for her to read his account of memory, the past, and youth as individualist and inward-looking.²² For her, neither Rousseau nor Wordsworth understood memory through the longing for communality. It is this that precipitates the *need* for dreaming: ‘If thy banks were not Paradise, | Yet should I dream they were.’

This poem, a meditation on the agency and ethics of reverie, one of the few in which she uses the lyrical first-person ‘I’, rarely used in her Fisher’s volume of 1832, continues Landon’s thoughts on the public circulation of affect and the necessity of dreaming as a social need. But it is not free-standing. There is a fine line between the affective community signalled in the poem and the isolation of masculine solipsism as seen in Rousseau and Wordsworth. A footnote glosses the poem: ‘the return of the first warm feelings of youth’ are not the priority for the poet amid the ‘calm and picturesque scenery’ of Windermere. A deeper therapeutic state is enabled. But one of those strange self-undermining non sequiturs, of which Landon is capable, occurs. The note appears to endorse the solipsism that is implicitly undermined in the poem: ‘shut out as it were from the world’, it is possible to regain the ‘spring-time of the spirit’. And the note goes on to remark that it was at Storrs, a secluded country mansion on the shores of Windermere, that the exhausted George Canning recuperated before he died, presumably in search of that ‘spring-time’: it quotes Fisher’s *Illustrations of Lancashire* on the ‘lofty energies’ exhausted ‘in the preservation

²¹ William Wordsworth, ‘The French Revolution, as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at its Commencement’, in *Poems*, 2 vols (Longman, 1815), II, p. 69; William Wordsworth, ‘Prelude’ (1850), in *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (Norton, 1979), p. 397 (XI. 109).

²² Landon states that ‘Wordsworth truly says “that, with the young, poetry is a passion”’, misquoting Wordsworth’s ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ (1815) in her anonymously published essay ‘On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry’, *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, November 1832, pp. 466–71 (p. 470); reprinted in *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess (Broadview Press, 1997), pp 160–69 (p. 167); p. 278, n. 58. For the essay’s attribution to Landon, see p. 277, n. 48. Compare Wordsworth’s ‘With the young, of both sexes, Poetry is, like love, a passion’, ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’, *Poems*, I, p. 342.

of a nation's welfare' (p. 14). Canning, Foreign Secretary among the many roles of his parliamentary career and Prime Minister for only 119 days, at the end of his life, was a fierce anti-Jacobin and indeed anti-European. He is most famous for his turn to America and Latin America — 'I called the New World into existence, to redress the balance of the Old' — in 1826.²³ Europe ceased at the Atlantic and England began there. One motivation was trade, the opening of new markets, and the pursuit of imperial domination by other means.²⁴ He was a complex figure, unusually a supporter of Queen Caroline in the crisis of George IV's accession and an abolitionist, refusing the presence of slavery in Trinidad, for example. It is a complexity that would have appealed to Landon. But overriding these characteristics would have been Canning's commitment to the strenuousness of trade. Landon believed that the national culture was shaped by its commitment to the vitiating energies of 'the hurry and highways of life'.²⁵ In the essay in the *New Monthly Magazine* already mentioned, she proposed the softening power of poetry as a palliative for this malady. Modern poetry conjures 'generous emotions' in the face of the hardening and 'selfishness' engendered by an overactive mercantile society: 'Enthusiasm is no passion of the drawing room, or of the pence-table.'²⁶ The counting house and the social life of the drawing room, a women's preserve, are equally affected. Women are shaped by culture even when they are not direct participants in 'the counting house'. Implicitly through the non sequitur that unexpectedly introduces Canning, solipsism, and the pursuit of trade, exhaustion of the spirit and the pursuit of markets are complementary states, creating one another. Solipsism is necessarily gendered here. In her poem Landon attempts to develop a new kind of feminine reverie that is different from the ego-bound culturally produced withdrawal seen in Rousseau. Enforced withdrawal is predicated on intense economic and mercantile activity. As if to affirm that these are not opposites but aspects of the same state, the engraving accompanying the poem displays the secluded Storrs, enfolded with trees and slightly recessed to the right of the image. But its boundary walls extend far into the ostensibly peaceful lake, and a flagstaff and pennon, declaring ownership, terminates the extension (*Fig. 1*).

²³ 'Address on the King's Message, Respecting Portugal', *Hansard*, 12 December 1826 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1826-12-12/debates/8fa97366-66bd-43f9-b594-4cf0e2ce8bba/AddressOnTheKingSMessageRespectingPortugal>> [accessed 19 August 2024].

²⁴ Derek Beales, 'Canning, George (1770–1827)', *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, entry dated 2004, rev. 2023), doi:[10.1093/ref:odnb/4556](https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4556).

²⁵ Landon, 'On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry', p. 164.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

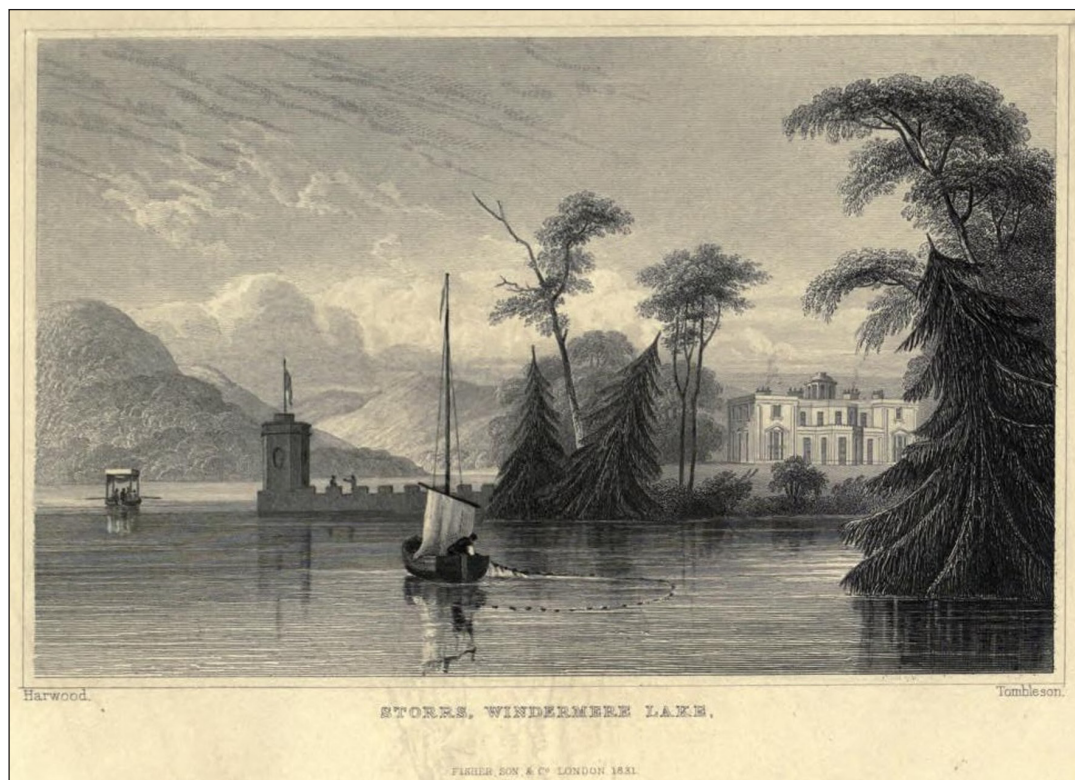


Fig. 1: William Tombleson after Harwood, 'Storrs, Windermere Lake', in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* (Fisher, Son, and Jackson, 1832), facing p. 14. University of Toronto.

'The Upper Lake of Killarney' continues the preoccupation with reverie and dream, amplified with Landon's persistent interest in folk tale, magic, and myth, the myth in this case emanating from colonial Ireland.²⁷ This poem is told in a persistent historic present, as if fixed and fixated, to emphasize the obsessional nature of longing and desire, with its need to keep things from becoming the past. It is uncannily parallel to Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', also published in December 1832, and shares his interest in folk tale also assigning loss and desire to women — both he and Landon knew Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (published in various editions between 1825 and 1828), and Landon, of course, knew Croker, personally: he helped her with the first volume of the *Scrap Book* and contributed two poems. The difference between this and Tennyson's poem is that the female protagonist *voluntarily* isolates herself from the social world — here, the patriarchal and sexually demeaning life of the father's 'hall', where 'love and flattery woo her ear'. Landon calls these ironically the 'enchanted twain', courtship and the mores of the masculine hall. It

²⁷ L.E.L., 'The Upper Lake of Killarney', *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book*, p. 17.

is the word ‘flattery’ that disables this world. Her ‘maiden’ seeks instead, in the privacy of her own ‘lonely bower’, the alternative and deeper enchantment of ‘the spirits of the haunted Lake’. It is a movement between two kinds of impossible states. She waits obsessively for the moonlit fairy train of the Chieftain O’Donoghue, a mythical figure who was absorbed into the lake and who reappears by night, fading with the day. The affinity of the two, the girl and the mythic figure, is signalled by the ‘fairy fall’ of the young woman’s step in the first stanza, in tune with the phantasmagoric movement of the ‘shining train’, and the magical intensity of the erotic gaze — the ‘chieftain lifts his glorious brow’. The girl’s ‘azure eyes’ in the first stanza pair with the fairy figure’s ‘lingering eye’ in the second.

There are echoes of Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, as the post-enchanted state of lack and lustrelessness invades the poem: ‘And chill and gray comes morning light, | And clear and cold the Lake flows on’. Landon adapted Croker’s account of the O’Donoghue legend so that his return takes place at night, not in the day: the lake shines with ‘silver moon-beams’ and the ‘rainbow’ intensity of a moonlit waterscape. In the Croker account O’Donoghue walks on the water until absorbed by it and returns, heralded by a running wave, to make a circuit of the lake in daylight every May morning until he and his train fade.²⁸ Landon may have been influenced by the account of the ethereality of Croker’s phantom attendants — ‘as the moonlight fairies glide through the fields of air’ to intensify the enchantment and its ethereality by relocating the magic scene to the night (p. 320). She begins her poem with three seemingly demythologizing rhetorical questions, each initiated by ‘Why’. And she ends with a final question:

How many share such destiny,
 How many, lured by fancy’s beam,
 Ask the impossible to be,
 And pine, the victims of a dream.

The commentary is equally condemnatory, quoting Kate Kearney, the victim ‘of folly, of love, and of madness’. The narratorial questions in ‘The Lady of Shallot’ augment her mysteriousness: ‘But who hath seen her wave her hand? | Or at the casement seen her stand?’. Landon closes down such escalating mystery. ‘Close, close the casement, not for sleep, | Over such visions eyes but weep.’

Yet the answers to the questions are in the poem itself and the disapproval is surely a pseudo-objection that voices conventional gender criticism. It is not simply disapproval of transgressive behaviour that is at stake. The girl’s longing, feminine desire, for myth and magic that offers a fuller imaginative world and a richer creative experience than

²⁸ Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, 2nd edn (Murray, 1826), pp. 318–20.

the conventional sexual subjugation to which she is subject is endorsed by the poem's imagery. But she is caught between two impossibilities.

This way of creating unease through the poem's seeming negations is typical of the indirection by which Landon proceeds. She is appealing to the immersive reading experience and the 'affective community' formed by readers of the annuals that Josephine McDonagh has described, and at the same time asking more obdurate readers to test out her generalizations.²⁹ The poem is predicated on the public circulation of affect as a way of enabling thought. Its generalizations are further tested by the accompanying plate illustrating Lake Killarney and its landscape, a mundane daylight scene that does not even prompt the viewer to think with intensity of the water as 'chill', 'clear and cold' (Fig. 2). A fisherman is in the foreground, innocuous enough, but read in conjunction with the poem, we remember that fishing rights (you would be a poacher if you fished without the formally sanctioned licence of possession), ownership of water, and masculine privilege, sexual fishing, all cohere round this image. It is this world that oversees the erasure of creative myth.

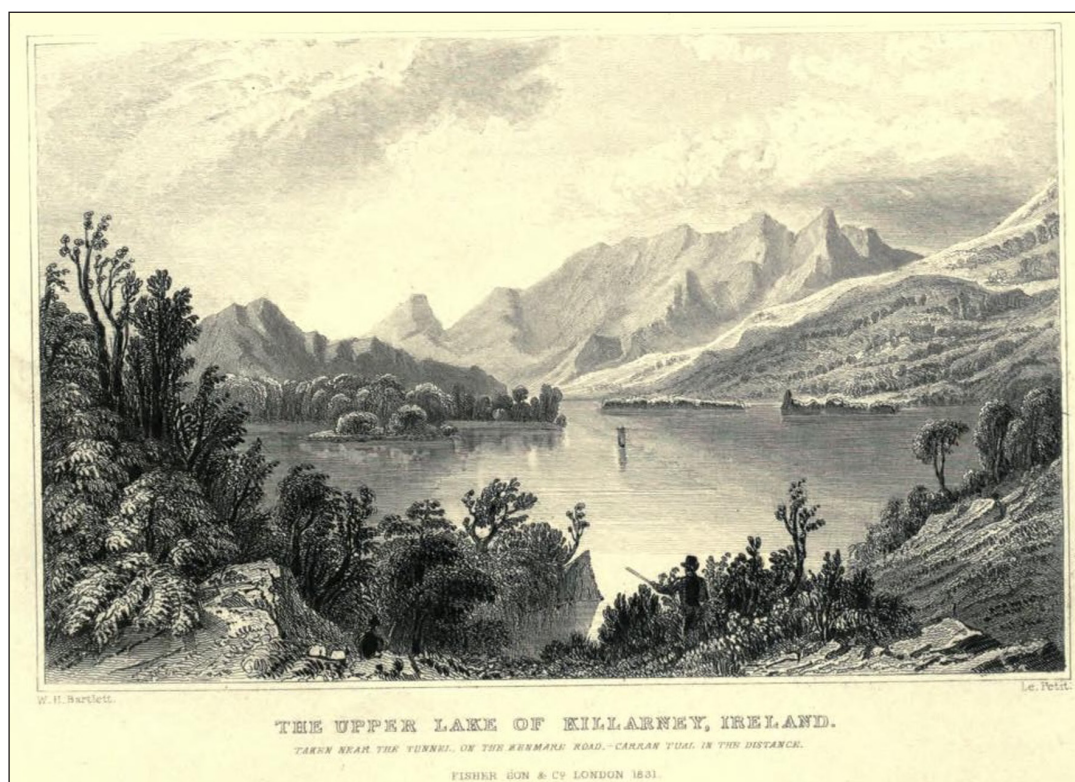


Fig. 2: William le Petit after William Henry Bartlett, 'The Upper Lake of Killarney, Ireland', in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* (Fisher, Son, and Jackson, 1832), facing p. 17. University of Toronto.

²⁹ Josephine McDonagh, 'Women Writers and the Provincial Novel', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1830-1880*, ed. by Lucy Hartley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 125-42.

These poems alone suggest how widely read Landon was in Romantic literature and contemporary mythological writing. The third poem I discuss turns on the play of two contemporary texts. It is ‘Rienzi Showing Nina the Tomb of his Brother’, a poem among the series ‘Subjects for Pictures’, published in the *New Monthly Magazine* for 1836.³⁰ Six twelve-line stanzas each followed by a two-line refrain, in Landon’s favourite metre and rhyme scheme — a four- and three-stress pairing rhyming ABAB — achieve a kind of gravitas by virtue of the stanza length. In an environment full of Gothic signifiers (cypress, moss, a cross) we hear that Rienzi, the last of the Roman tribunes, courts the patrician Nina by the tomb of his brother, who has been murdered by a faction of aristocrats. The wooing of Nina is reiterated in the refrain — ‘There was the stately Nina woo’d, | There was she won’. It is a tale of compensatory love as Nina is invited to share in Rienzi’s obsession. The final stanza begins:

Ah! The glorious mind’s aspiring
 Needeth some repose
 [...]
 There were mighty words and hopes
 Shared with his beloved one;
 Thus was the bright Nina woo’d,
 Thus was she won.

The fiduciary language of the last stanza and particularly of stanza 4 creates uneasiness, however:

In that grave his brother laid him,
 ’Neath the evening star;
 While revenge and sorrow made him
 What earth’s great ones are.

What *are* ‘earth’s great ones’? And there is a dangerous reflexivity in the verb ‘laid him’ that suggests Rienzi has almost buried himself. Whose Rienzi are we talking about? For there were two contemporary accounts of Rienzi available to Landon and the poem does not indicate which. One was Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *Rienzi: The Last of the Roman Tribunes* (1835); the other was Mary Russell Mitford’s drama, *Rienzi: A Tragedy* (1828).

³⁰ ‘Rienzi Showing Nina the Tomb of his Brother’, *New Monthly Magazine*, June 1836, pp. 178–79.

Their readings of *Rienzi* are diametrically opposed. Bulwer Lytton epigraphs Gibbon and Byron's *Childe Harold*:

While the tree
Of freedom's wither'd trunk puts forth a leaf,
Even for thy tomb a garland let it be —
The Forum's champion, and the People's chief.

His novel celebrates the democratic ideal and yet is a tragedy of democracy (it is post-1832). The idealistic *Rienzi* is assassinated by the populace when he puts up taxes for waging the very war against the barons fought in defence of the populace. Mitford's *Rienzi*, on the other hand, is a low-born fanatic malcontent who becomes despotic, killed by the barons whom he conquers and represses. Reactionaries win. Nina does not appear in Mitford's text. Landon has created a dreamwork crossing of texts, in which Bulwer's Nina appears and Mitford's motive dominates — obsession with the killing of the brother. In Mitford's play *Rienzi* enters with a 'tomb-stone' for the death of liberty.

For Landon the political and the personal are wound together. For *Rienzi* is not sharing his heart with Nina — she is being asked to share her heart not with him, but with his dead brother, as the syntax of 'share' in stanzas 5 and 6 suggests: 'By his heart's first care, | Did *Rienzi* ask another | In that heart to share'. Landon understands the fixations of mourning, as the poem connects death with phallic power. Nature turns to stone, a cypress rises like a column over the tomb 'Like a stately column given | By the summer to the dead', participating in a man-made symbol for the victor, a memorial to masculinity. The recurrence of 'share' actually marks the dissymmetry of feminine experience and the exclusion of women from male bonding and from the democratic process itself.

Conclusion

Landon's presence in the Birkbeck album and her evident awareness of political texts prompts speculation about her politics. It is clear Landon was an avid reader who often incorporated her immediate reading in her poems. For example, the first poem in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* of 1832, 'Pile of Fouldrey Castle', refers to the Wars of the Roses, and may have had Landon's friend, Emma Roberts's *Memoirs of the Rival Houses of York and Lancaster* (1827) in mind. Though her biographer points out her 'Byronic' tendencies, and that her first poem, 'The Roman', suggests republican sympathies, she does not credit Landon with serious political beliefs, but with a mixture of postmodern 'twisted' writing and imitative kitsch, whether of Shelley, Keats, or

Heine, provocatively posing as the fallen woman poet, Sappho, who knowingly ‘teased’ her audience.³¹ It is hard to assign any political meaning to Bulwer Lytton’s famous undergraduate enthusiasm that prompted ‘a rush of his fellow male students every Saturday afternoon’ for the *Literary Gazette*.³² Though it does indicate that Landon thrilled men as well as women.

The pages of the *Literary Gazette* in which Landon first published do not help with a political understanding of Landon through Jerdan. Though its full title was *The Literary Gazette; and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Politics*, it was not an overtly political journal. Its pull was created by its publication of a wide spectrum of reviews of publications and artistic events, not only from England but from across Europe. It was a compendium of particular discussions across a spectrum of topics from medicine to history. It was a cosmopolitan journal, its popularity the result of its wide coverage of literature and the arts. It did not adopt an overt political stance, though it went along with the major quarterlies in reviling, mainly on moral grounds, the work of Byron, Shelley, and Keats (this despite publishing poems derivative of all three poets by Landon). It seemed to be a publication at ease with the implicitly conservative status quo. It is noticeable, for instance, that whenever discussions of France occur, the view taken is always cautiously anti-revolutionary. One discussion in the first year of the *Gazette*’s publication speaks as if the psychic constitution of a nation must change when ‘the laws which it had been accustomed to hold sacred are subverted, and the constitution which was deemed inviolate is overthrown’.³³ There is nothing to suggest the politically unconventional here, or least of all Birkbeckian radicalism.

More helpful, and more interesting, because Landon was a close friend of Mrs S. C. Hall, is the project of *The Amulet*, to which Landon contributed numbers of poems. If we take a sample of *The Amulet* from 1833, the point I have termed Landon’s mid-career, and as it happens the year of the abolition of slavery, what emerges is a profile that might be termed Anglican progressivism. Landon contributed four (unexceptionable) poems. But interestingly, after a patriotic editorial in which he championed the British annuals against the German and boasted of the high quality and cost of engravings (150 guineas for plates ‘in size not above four inches by three’), Hall lists what he sees as

³¹ Lucasta Miller, *L.E.L.: The Lost Life and Mysterious Death of the ‘Female Byron’* (Vintage, 2020), pp. 21–27. This is a strange biography. It is odd to see so much scholarly research energy and archival work devoted to a subject so clearly disliked. At risk of putting words into her mouth, I think Miller would argue that the Birkbecks were simply taken in by Landon, along with Thelwall.

³² Quoted in Miller, p. 12.

³³ Review of *Two Sketches of France, Belgium, and Spain; in Two Tours during the Summers of 1771, and 1816*, *Literary Gazette*, 22 February 1817, p. 70.

important contributions for 1833.³⁴ Much of the content is theological, on Christian churches abroad and in the East, by divines. But there are two articles on the slave trade, clearly abolitionist in their stance, one by the Bishop of Calcutta (Revd Daniel Wilson, Heber's successor) circulated by the Anti-Slavery Society and another by 'a distinguished Naval Officer' titled 'The Actual State of the Slave Trade on the Cape of Africa'. Anthropological essays on the extinction of Canadian 'Aborigines' and on 'Polynesian Researches' are listed. Awareness of colonial exploitation is evident. In the body of the annual we find contributions that consolidate Hall's liberal, quasi-radical leanings. There are contributions from feminists old and young: Mary Howitt, who was to become one of the Langham Place group later in the century; Amelia Opie, a recognized reforming figure from the Romantic movement; and Caroline Norton, social campaigner, who was to become entangled in a notorious divorce case. There are two contributions 'By the Author of the Corn-law rhymes', that is, Ebenezer Elliott, more than a gesture to working-class experience. Similarly, Allan Cunningham, author of Scots ballads, features as a contributor. Indeed, the often abjected extremities of the British Isles, Ireland and Scotland, are represented, together with working-class experience, the colonies, and slavery. This is Landon's context.

This later political context helps to explain Landon's presence in Anna Birkbeck's album. The three poems I have discussed suggest something of Landon's intelligence and why a man of Thelwall's intellectual standing — and indeed Birkbeck himself — would respect her. Yet this profile, helpful though it might be, ignores the complexity of Landon's work: her oeuvre perpetually explores the cost of existing within the gender relations of her historical moment. The poems are always more unexpected and complex than her political position indicates. There is a kick of surprise to so many of them.

This is why the intelligence I have spoken of does not, of course, wholly account for the hold Landon had on women readers in particular, but also on men, as the familiar tale of Bulwer Lytton rushing to read the *Gazette* as an undergraduate suggests. For whatever she wrote, whether the early Birkbeck album poems, or the later mid-career pieces — on reverie (Storrs), or myth (Killarney), or the politics of mourning (Rienzi) — she seems to have found an algorithm for unfulfilled desire, the desire that wants itself. This has its intertextual resonances way into the century. We find it, for instance, in the 'balked desire' of Christina Rossetti's Laura, in *Goblin Market* (1862).³⁵ Or earlier, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's very first illustrated album poem, 'A Romance

³⁴ S. C. Hall, 'Preface', *The Amulet: A Christian and Literary Remembrancer*, ed. by S. C. Hall (Westley and Davis, 1833), p. i.

³⁵ 'Goblin Market', in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed. by R. W. Crump and Betty S. Flowers (Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 5–19 (p. 12).

of the Ganges', in *Finden's Tableaux* (1838), edited by Mary Russell Mitford.³⁶ This poem delicately picks up on an episode in Landon's *The Improvisatrice* (1824). There, in an allusion to the supposed Indian love ritual of casting small lighted vessels on water to determine the faithfulness of love by the survival of the flame, Landon's Indian girl finds her vessel fails her. She dies as a suttee bride.³⁷ Barrett Browning's Indian girls likewise set their lighted vessels afloat. They too are failed, though the failure and anguish is psychological and social. It is clear that Landon was a sophisticated — even a learned — poet, but her legacy was the many forms in which desire takes possession of the self.

³⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'A Romance of the Ganges', in *Finden's Tableaux*, ed. by Mary Russell Mitford (Tilt, 1838), pp. 29–31.

³⁷ 'She trimmed the lamp, and breathed on each bloom [...] | Called thrice on her absent lover's name; | And every pulse throbbed as she gave | Her little boat to the Ganges' wave.' 'The Indian Bride', *The Improvisatrice*, in *Poetical Works of Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, 2 vols (Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1850), I, pp. 28–36 (p. 29).

