

Book Reviews

Christine Alexander and Pamela Nutt, eds., *Felicia Hemans: Selected Early Poems* (Sydney: Juvenilia Press, 2021), 85 pp., \$15.00, ISBN 9780733439797

‘The following pieces are the genuine productions of a young lady, written between the ages of eight and thirteen years. By this information it is not intended to arrogate them that favour to which they may perhaps have no intrinsic claim; but if it should appear that they possess a degree of merit sufficient to obtain the approbation of the reader, the circumstances under which they have been produced may give them that additional interest to which they are most truly entitled’ (3). This lukewarm endorsement, taken from William Roscoe’s preface to Felicia Hemans’s *Poems* (1808), encapsulates the dual fascination with and disbelief in girls’ writing skill felt amongst the literary elite during the nineteenth century. The recently published edited collection of Hemans’s early poems demonstrates her precocious talent and foregrounds the enormous advantages of family wealth and connections for nurturing juvenile writing.

Felicia Dorothea Browne, later Mrs. Hemans (1793–1835), launched her writing career at the age of fourteen when she published a volume of ninety-seven poems written between the ages of eight and thirteen. The Juvenilia Press’s *Selected Poems of Felicia Hemans* showcases a selection of these poems. Founded in 1994, and now based in Sydney, the Juvenilia Press publishes the works of young writers in slim editions. Dedicated to providing scholarly frameworks for understanding the juvenile productions of writers past and present, the press does not exclusively print nineteenth-century juvenilia. In addition to Victorian child writers,

including Robert Louis Stevenson, the Brontës, and Lewis Carroll, the juvenilia of Philip Larkin and Margaret Atwood are represented in the catalogue. The extensive introduction to this volume showcases the lengths to which the editors have gone to assemble archival evidence from disparate locations, a difficulty felt keenly by those scholars working with archives to locate traces of childhood experience.

The editors understand Hemans's juvenilia to be composed of those works she published until the age of eighteen, after which time she published under her married name. This interpretation aligns with the understanding of other scholars working on youth production; as Beth Rodgers (2018) observes, especially for girls, matrimony often ended manuscript and collaborative writing projects. The editors frame Hemans's poetry as displaying a 'development towards maturity', an approach that communicates a narrative of work-in-progress, reflecting, to some extent, the critical response that Hemans received at the time of publication. Indeed, the printer who published the poems, G. F. Davies, was also the London agent of William Blackwood of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in which Hemans published frequently in her adulthood. However, the editorial focus on the child writer as a budding talent might go against the grain of the prevailing focus in recent children's literature and culture studies, which, as Emma Uprichard (2008) suggests, formulates the child as a 'being' and not a 'becoming'.

That said, the editors convincingly argue for the importance of the juvenile productions they present. For example, they take seriously Hemans's ability to emulate particular poetic forms. They highlight how, in the history of Romantic and Victorian women writers, Hemans occupied a significant intermediary position; she was influenced by Hannah More, Mrs Trimmer, and Mrs Barbauld, and herself influenced later poets like Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She was also commercially successful, and her poetry sales eventually outstripped those of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The young Hemans was a well-connected writer and enjoyed a rich cultural life in an affluent family.

Following a model of subscription-based publishing that had been established in the seventeenth century, Hemans had subscribers, a manager in her mother, and well-connected patrons, including the Lady Viscountess Kirkwall, who was a family friend. The volume of *Poems* cost her patrons half a guinea.

The *Selected Early Poems* presents several colour images of Hemans's juvenilia, including attractive images of her collages from childhood – and detailed endnotes. The poems appear mostly in chronological order, as they were originally presented, and the editors provide an

analysis of metre and poetical themes in the introduction and endnotes. Her poetic inspiration included her family, the nature of North Wales where she was raised, and patriotic sentiments.

Hemans wrote several poems dedicated to her brothers, who fought in the Peninsular War, and 'To Patriotism' (36), which reflects on the Napoleonic Wars. She penned poems to her mother and aunt on their birthdays, along with the more melancholic poem 'On The Death of My Dear Sister Eliza, Inscribed To My Mother' (10). The teenage Hemans was fluent in several languages, and the volume includes a poem in French, 'Astre de la Nuit' (21), written when she was twelve years old. Poems evoking a classical pastoral tradition are also featured, as are verses paying tribute to 'Shakspeare' (27) and Burns (50).

Contemporary reviews of Hemans's volume of juvenilia were less than favourable and advised the author to embark upon further years of reading before turning her attention to the pen. One reviewer, the prominent critic and children's writer Anna Laetitia Barbauld, drew attention to Hemans's spelling error in 'To the Moon' (14), where she spelled the name of the Greek goddess Selene as 'Cyllene'. The editors of the *Selected Early Poems* indicate that Barbauld's criticism briefly dampened Hemans's enthusiasm for poetry, but it quickly recovered and, by the age of eighteen, she published the poetry volume *The Domestic Affections* (1812).

Women writers commonly imparted similar advice to girl writers even later in the nineteenth century; the prominent girls' author Charlotte Yonge suggested that girls ought to read during their adolescence and not attempt to write until later in life, and writers in late-Victorian girls' magazines dealt out the same advice. Scholars of Victorian childhood should rejoice that girl writers habitually ignored this guidance, and that we can read Felicia Hemans's *Selected Early Poems* as another example of the rich and significant early writing efforts of nineteenth-century girls.

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Joseph Bristow, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings from Arrest to Imprisonment* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2022), 672 pp., £65.00/\$85.00, ISBN 9780300222722

That Oscar Wilde was tried and found guilty of gross indecency is well known, but the trials and the legal points involved represent a complex challenge to laypersons and scholars alike. *Oscar Wilde on Trial* offers