

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.

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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*.)

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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.