

# Elegy and Exile: Letitia Landon's *The Zenana*

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## ABSTRACT

The popular lyric poet Letitia Landon, known as «LEL», died in October 1838, in the Cape Coast in west Africa, poisoned by the ingestion of hydrocyanic acid; she had married George Maclean, a British colonial governor, earlier the same year. The shock of Landon's sudden death was compounded by its mysterious circumstances, quickly giving rise to rumours of suicide, murder, adultery, and cover-up. Landon's first posthumous collection included a reassuring and almost certainly dishonest «Memoir» of the poet. The publication of *The Zenana* in 1839 fulfilled both a literary and a social need. The volume served to cool down the strong possibility of scandal in the circumstances around Landon's death, to sanitize Landon's reputation, and give her admiring public a final re-affirming taste of her exquisite work. This article interprets the «text» of Landon's death in the light of new biographical work on Landon and Maclean, re-evaluation of poetry of the 1830s, and debates about the nature of modern elegy.

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The poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon, known universally as LEL, made two journeys between Britain and west Africa.<sup>1</sup> Her outward journey was aboard the brig *Governor Maclean*, sailing from Portsmouth to Cape Coast in present-day Ghana, via Madeira, in the summer of 1838. Her symbolic return journey was in the form of a body of work, information and misinformation, news, rumour, and scandal, the idea of LEL transformed forever in her brief disappearance from the public gaze. Landon's mortal remains were buried on the night of her death, in torrential tropical rain, after a hasty postmortem inquest, and still lie in the courtyard of Cape Coast castle.<sup>2</sup>

Landon was extraordinarily prolific as a writer; some of her work is hard to trace, because she often wrote anonymously for small payments, placing her poems in ephemeral publications. Landon bibliographers such as Glenn Dibert-Himes and Cynthia Lawford confirm that she produced — at least — six complete volumes of poetry, ten poetry annuals, three novels, and a volume of stories; another novel and a tragedy were published

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<sup>1</sup> Following established practice, this article will distinguish between «Landon», when referring to matters of biography, and «LEL» when discussing the constructed authorial persona, or the poet's public reception.

<sup>2</sup> Information on Landon's biography is drawn mainly from Watt (2010) and Miller (2019), with some material from Greer (1995).

posthumously.<sup>3</sup> A large quantity of occasional lyrics, critical reviews, and short stories is still being identified and catalogued. As Miller explains in the introduction to her life of Landon, biographical and critical interpretation of the poet changed greatly with the emergence of descendants of her relationship with William Jerdan, which was previously assumed to be non-sexual and without issue: «Feminist critics of the 1990s [...] dismissed the gossip about her love life as a clear example of patriarchal prejudice: the smearing of a woman simply because she had dared to step outside her proper sphere by publishing at all» [MILLER 2019, p. 11]. Anne Mellor's chapter on the poet and her career in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) is in many ways a landmark intervention in the modern interpretation of LEL. Yet on re-reading in 2023, it is striking how heavily the emphasis falls on Landon's agency, her creation and strategic manipulation of her profitable alter-ego; this contrasts sharply with Miller's conclusions based on long-suppressed evidence, in which Jerdan appears not as a publisher and mentor, but much more like an abuser who groomed and controlled a very young woman, exploiting her both sexually and financially. Miller's reading of the poems is in turn deeply inflected by this knowledge, tracing a career-long addiction to evasiveness, ambiguity, and concealment in plain sight. If Landon was in control of her marketable image, with its enticing combination of innocent passivity and knowing sensuality, it was a continual strain for her to maintain this image while constantly at risk of moral scandal and reputational ruin. As Germaine Greer observes, the poet's «documentation is a curious compilation of breathy eulogy and coarse innuendo» [GREER 1995, p. 261]. A narrative of flattery, seduction, betrayal, and lonely demise lives on in modern interpretations of her life and work.

In a frequently quoted anecdote, Edward Bulwer-Lytton witnesses to her titillating celebrity among young male readers in his student days:

There was always in the reading-room of the Union a rush every Saturday afternoon for the «Literary Gazette»; and an impatient anxiety to hasten at once to that corner of the sheet which contained the three magical letters, «L.E.L.» And all of us praised the verse, and all of us guessed at the author. We soon learned it was female, and our admiration was doubled, and our conjectures tripled. Was she young? Was she pretty? And – for there were some embryo fortune-hunters among us—was she rich? [WATT 2010, p. 30]

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<sup>3</sup> See «An Index to the Poetry of Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-38)» by Glenn Dibert-Himes and Cynthia Lawford, in LANDON 1997, pp. 387-506.

The rapid brutality of Landon's fall from public favour is plain to see in the following sarcastic notices in the press:

A well-known English Sappho, and like her Greek prototype famous for the amorous glow of her fancy, has just been detected in a faux pas with a literary man, the father of several children. [*Sunday Times* 1826, quoted in MILLER 2019, p. 103]

In the course of a few months [LEL] acquired so perceptible a degree of *embonpoint*, as to induce her kind friend Jerdan to recommend a change of air, lest her health and strength should be affected. She followed his advice, and strange to say, such was the effect of even two months' absence from Brompton, that she was returned as *thin* and poetical as ever!' [*The Wasp* 1826, quoted in MILLER 2019, p. 109]

### **The castle**

The term «Cape Coast» is an English mistranslation of a Portuguese name. A fortress on the Atlantic coast of modern-day Ghana, it still stands today, its guns trained on unseen enemies out to sea, restored and maintained by the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, along with other «slave castles», as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Cape Coast Castle had been a fortified European trading post since the seventeenth century. The site fell under British rule during a colonial war with the United Provinces in the 1660s, becoming the primary British stronghold on the west coast of Africa. George Maclean was appointed not as the governor of a colony, but as the commander of the castle itself, and President of the Council of Merchants; the limits of his jurisdiction in the surrounding area were ill-defined. By this time, trading in enslaved people had been unlawful in the British Empire for over twenty years, following the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1807); the Slavery Abolition Act (1833) had followed. In the 1830s, therefore, Cape Coast, like many British territories, was in transition: the eighteenth-century high point of slave trading was over, and yet the territory was not established as a colony under direct British rule as the Gold Coast until the 1860s. On his appointment in 1830, Maclean was given a specific brief to root out illegitimate slaving activity on the stretch of coast over which the castle presided. The castle itself maintained a military presence, and was used to accommodate prisoners, a troublingly

ambiguous concept.<sup>4</sup> In 1836 a complaint had been made that British West African traders were flouting the 1824 Slave Trade Consolidation Act (proscribing any indirect financial dealings with known slavers), abetted in this by Maclean [MILLER 2019, p. 231]. The complainant proved to be not credible and Maclean's personal enemy; Maclean was vulnerable to slanders and accusations throughout his tenure at Cape Coast, yet it is unlikely that commercial companies active in that area could operate entirely without some contact with the continuing trade in slaves, which remained a part of commerce in Ashanti, Brazilian, and Portuguese territories [WATT 2010, pp. 169-70 ff.]. In 1842, shortly after Landon's death at Cape Coast, Maclean was again investigated for abusing his office, following allegations that British traders had been supplying slave ships in territory under his jurisdiction. Maclean was also indicted with the illegal imprisonment of large numbers of people without trial, and for fraudulently claiming the right to administer capital punishment in the colony. He was exonerated at a parliamentary select committee, when it was accepted that he held no legal powers to prosecute the slavers, yet also relieved of his position [WATT 2010, p. 224 ff.].

In her «Memoir», Emma Roberts emphasizes Landon's admiration for Maclean's integrity:

No one could better appreciate than L.E.L. the high and sterling qualities of her lover's character, his philanthropic and increasing endeavours to improve the condition of the natives of Africa; the noble manner in which he interfered to prevent the horrid waste of human life by the barbarian princes in his neighbourhood; and the chivalric energy with which he strove to put an end to the slave-trade. [LANDON 1839, p. 29]

In her two months at Cape Coast Castle, Landon wrote many letters reassuring her friends about her pleasant situation and cheerful state of mind, some of them confessing to feelings of isolation and loneliness, and some of them «protesting too much»; in one letter signed Letitia Maclean (15 October 1838), Landon describes herself as «a feminine Robinson Crusoe» [LANDON 1839, p. 34. ]; but the theme she returns to again and again is solitude.

«The castle is a fine building—the rooms excellent. I do not suffer from heat; insects there are few or none, and I am in excellent health. The solitude, except an occasional dinner, is

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<sup>4</sup> «The cleaning was carried out by the prisoners—most of them debtors confined for unspecified terms in the fort prison—under the supervision of a soldier with drawn bayonet. Like most slaves, they worked badly» [GREER 1995, p. 351].

absolute; from seven in the morning till seven when we dine, I never see Mr. Maclean, and rarely anyone else. We were welcomed by a series of dinners, which I am glad are over [...] But fancy how awkward the next morning; I cannot induce Mr. Maclean to rise, and I have to make breakfast, and do the honours of adieu to [the] officers—white plumes, mustachios, and all. [...] On three sides we are surrounded by the sea. I like the perpetual dash on the rocks; one wave comes up after another, and is for ever dashed in pieces, like human hopes, that only swell to be disappointed.» [LANDON 1839, pp. 34-35]

### **The death**

Mrs Letitia Maclean, née Landon, died on 15 October 1838, poisoned by excessive ingestion of hydrocyanic acid (then known as «prussic acid»), a sedative commonly prescribed for patients who had become desensitized to laudanum through over-use. In her biography, Miller evaluates extensive evidence, both direct and indirect, in the correspondences around Landon's death, and finds that the balance of probability strongly suggests suicide due to multiple sources of personal stress, notwithstanding Landon's protests about her serenity of mind as the solitary English lady in Cape Coast Castle [MILLER 2019, pp. 263-282].

The inquest into Landon's death in October 1838 was made up of members of the British West Africa trading association and others with every reason to protect Maclean's reputation; the inquest was carried out under Maclean's own jurisdiction in the Cape Coast castle. Strenuous efforts to eliminate the clear potential scandal of suicide, and all that might imply about Maclean as a husband, may have inadvertently led to more sinister developments. Landon's doctor was emphatic that he had never prescribed her with prussic acid and therefore did not furnish the means of self-slaughter. Everyone knew *how* she died; drinking prussic acid straight from the bottle (the recommended dose was very sparing, one drop in a glass of water) was fatal, and no one disputed the decision to dispense with a full postmortem investigation. But *why* did she die? The allegation of a murder soon followed, supported for a time by Landon's brother Whittington, who later recanted. A racist scenario began to circulate of Ellen Maclean, George's «country wife», having acted against her rival, with the connivance of Maclean himself. The story was easier to swallow thousands of miles and several weeks' journey away in London, where Ellen could be imagined as an exotic and hot-blooded native concubine, moved by passionate jealousy to destroy her rival; in fact Ellen was a family woman, very accustomed to British society, who may have been directly involved in trade in her own right; she came from a family of mixed African and British heritage, and was almost certainly literate in English. [MILLER 2019, pp. 284-286]

Speculation about the death of a former literary star, luridly fallen from grace, began to circulate immediately: among papers published in Africa, *The Courier* and *The Watchman* were quick to pick up the story; and from January 1839 onwards the news circulated in Britain, with coverage in papers and periodicals such as *The Scotsman* and *John Bull*. *The Morning Post* seems to have been the first paper to air the possibility that Landon had been murdered [WATT 2010, pp. 199-200].<sup>5</sup> A conflict arose among British officials in west Africa. Maclean had long been caught between his explicitly Abolitionist orders from the British Colonial Office and the powerful commercial interests on the coast, in particular Matthew Forster, foremost among the traders who tacitly continued to deal with slavers, who had long pressurized Maclean to tolerate or overlook more than he was willing. Richard Madden, a committed Abolitionist, was despatched to Cape Coast with a brief to investigate both the rumours of murder, which he quickly dismissed, and the complicity with slaving, which he confirmed in angry and forthright terms. When the matter went to a parliamentary Select Committee, Maclean was exonerated and his reputation cleared; Matthew Forster was also an MP, and exerted influence in many spheres [MILLER 2019, pp. 287-290].

Emma Roberts's «Memoir» in *The Zenana* played an early part in maintaining an official version of Landon's death by misadventure — a tragic accident, untainted by distress or felony: «unless in some moment of actual delirium, brought on by excessive bodily anguish, she never wilfully would have destroyed herself. [...] Could distress of mind have driven her to so fatal an act, I cannot but think that it would have been committed long ago» [LANDON 1839, pp. 14-15]. The definitive memoir, however, was published a few years later, in the form of Samuel Laman Blanchard's *The Life and Literary Remains of L.E.L.* (1841). Notwithstanding his initial suspicion that Landon had committed suicide, Blanchard had been carefully chosen as a biographer, for his gentle, conflict-averse nature, as a writer who could be trusted to praise Landon and lament her loss, while avoiding inflammatory controversy. The book was effective in allowing the sensation of Landon's life and death to fade from public attention, but it was universally deemed a failure. Blanchard himself committed suicide in 1845; Miller brilliantly observes that Bulwer's statement that both Landon and her biographer had killed themselves was the only published allusion to her suicide by any of her circle [MILLER 2019, p. 299].

## The book

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<sup>5</sup> Watt and Miller do not agree as to the likely cause of Landon's death. Watt speculates that Landon may have had an undiagnosed heart condition, which the hydrocyanic acid was treating inappropriately, exacerbating the spasmodic symptoms that she and others refer to. Miller is fully committed to the explanation that Landon had developed an addiction to the drug first prescribed as a pain-killer, and that her death is somewhere in the grey area between a deliberate act of suicide, and suicidally reckless self-medication [WATT 2010, p. 203 cf. MILLER 2019, p. 282].

The revival of scholarly attention to Landon's writing continues to prioritize poetry as commodity in nineteenth-century material culture, the construction of consumer taste, and the commercial production and distribution of books. As David Stewart observes, there is a concomitant uncertainty about how — or even whether — to interpret the actual content of the poems, as objects of critical interest in themselves [STEWART 2018, p. 98]. In Anne Mellor's phrase, LEL provides her reading public with «a purchasable icon of female beauty» [MELLOR 1993, p. 112]; Mellor argues that Landon's decorative craft, expertly adapted to the aesthetic taste of a specific paying audience, constitutes a critique of the commodification of female beauty, with its assumptions about the philosophical depth and endurance of the dominant masculine form of Romanticism [MELLOR 1993, pp. 107-143]. A certain quality of emptiness beneath the exquisitely crafted exterior is a persistent problem encountered by scholars who write on Landon: «Her poems inhabit a world of absolute artifice, of pure surface. They do not justify themselves by reference to an external reality, but exist purely on the page» [STEWART 2018, p. 100]. And yet Stewart is also concerned to displace the assumptions of «failure» which can adhere to poets like Landon when anomalous aesthetic criteria are applied to them. The flatness of style in Landon's verse that many critics have observed — its apparent lack of depth or even «quality» — is also apparent in its general lack of development over time; Landon found her «voice» precociously early, found a willing and profitable audience for it, and continued to produce more of the same, in prodigious quantities. Like her near-contemporary Thomas Hood, Landon has been affected by a style of materialist criticism that makes a literary text more or less equivalent to the economics of its production and consumption. David Stewart's *The Form of Poetry of the 1820s and 1830s: a Period of Doubt* (2018) seems to me to have gone a long way to redress this imbalance, with a series of astute readings, which learn from and respond critically to dominant historicist methods, while also acknowledging that poems have denotative content — they tell specific stories, articulate specific feelings, and must be allowed to be *about* things. Above all, Stewart is a subtle critic of the literary self-awareness in the practice of writers like Landon and Hood, focusing our attention on their deceptive subtlety. Nevertheless, Landon's superbly fluent facility of composition can be conducive to an impression of poetry with very little depth of meaning to be explored, a text consisting of «pure surface», leaving the critic nowhere to go. Stewart negotiates this potential impasse by helpfully re-framing the debate: Landon's self-aware poetic method does not invite and thwart an analytical search for depth, but rather appeals to a visual and intellectual interest in surface; her poetry is not to be mined, but rather traced as it were in two dimensions [STEWART 2018, pp. 96-

104]. This balanced approach responds to both textuality and material culture, applying nuance to the gender binary between masculine posterity and feminine ephemerality proposed by some critics.<sup>6</sup>

The elegiac tradition in poetry is concerned not only with mourning and laying to rest, but also with the symbolic transportation of human remains; in Landon's case, what remained was textual as well as bodily, corpus as well as corpse. *The Zenana* is a product of the transportation of Landon's symbolic body out of colonial west Africa, back to a genteel and abolitionist Britain, intent on detoxifying and concealing its legacies of enslavement. The collection is a significant attempt to memorialize LEL, and to impose some control over her postmortem transmission and reputation. The thematic heart of the publication can be found somewhere in the conjunction of Emma Roberts's memoir of the poet, the title poem with its symbolic themes of feminine orientalist adventure, and LEL's elegy for Felicia Hemans — re-printed following earlier publications in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1835) and *Fisher's Drawing-room Scrap Book* (1838). When printed in *Fisher's*, for which Landon served as editor, «The Zenana» had been lavishly decorated with engravings of Indian tombs, monuments, and ruins, in the sentimental orientalist manner. When *The Zenana, and Minor Poems* was published in 1839, it was unlikely to be many readers' first encounter with the news of her death; it was an intervention to redress the power of rumour and scandal. Emma Roberts's «Memoir» is a quick and effective biographical response, written with the authority of someone who claimed to have been close to Landon, reassuring social anxieties provoked by rumours of sexual intrigue, murder, and suicide.

*The Zenana* is an anthology of elegiac lyrics and narratives. It contains one of Landon's finest short poems, «Felicia Hemans», which offers an arrestingly simple definition of the poetess as a coalescence of the poet and the woman, united in their sacrificial role of feeling deeply and conveying those feelings elegantly, for others to feed on. The title poem offers a series of nested elegiac tales within a melancholy framing narrative. The two central characters are alike enslaved, transported, lovelorn, and betrayed. In considering *The Zenana* in relation to the genre of elegy, I will invoke two main paradigms — the ethical discomfort of the modern elegist and related questions of self-elegy, and the sub-genre of the *tombeau*, the specific instance of a poet's elegy for a fellow poet. A noted critic of modern elegy, Jahan Ramazani writes: «modern elegists are wracked by what I call the economic problem of mourning — the guilty thought that they reap aesthetic profit from loss, that death is the fuel of poetic mourning» [RAMAZANI 1994, p. 6]. In a straightforward way, the *tombeau* may be defined as a poet's elegy for a fellow poet — Jonson on Shakespeare, Shelley on Keats, Auden on Yeats. Landon's poem commemorating Felicia Hemans assumes a significant place in this tradition. In a more critically exacting

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. BENNETT 1999, discussed by STEWART, p. 102.



sense, the *tombeau* is characterized by the poetic mediation of inheritance and succession. A *tombeau* is a commemorative poem in which a poet lays a comrade to rest and, in doing so, makes a considered intervention in their emerging postmortem reputation. Although typically eulogistic in stance, the key factor in a true *tombeau* is that it transmits a specific view of the poet's achievement and thus mediates future interpretation of their work. A by-product of the genre — or alternatively, for the cynic, its undeclared mission — is the long-term association of the elegist's name with that of the deceased, and the intermingling of their reputations.<sup>7</sup>

Landon's «Felicia Hemans» is noted as a competent and florid elegy for the older poet, but it is also an effective *tombeau* in that it offers a specific aesthetic theory of Hemans's composition, and announces itself as her literary resting place: «a grave which is a shrine» [p. 251].<sup>8</sup> Landon's interpretation of Hemans's achievement is basically an aesthetic of sacrifice (or alternatively exploitative predation), the theme which emerges from her use of the Prometheus analogy in the third stanza:

Yet what is mind in woman but revealing  
In sweet clear light the hidden world below,  
By quicker fancies and a keener feeling  
Than those around, the cold and careless, know?  
What is to feed such feeling, but to culture  
A soil whence pain will never more depart?  
The fable of Prometheus and the vulture  
Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart,  
Unkindly are they judged—unkindly treated—  
By careless tongues and by ungenerous words... [LANDON 1839, p. 249]

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<sup>7</sup> A key prototype for this effect is Stéphane Mallarmé's «The Tomb of Edgar Poe» («*Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe*», 1887), in which Mallarmé enacts an exchange of properties between Poe's and his own poetic styles, offering to absorb a little of Poe's trademark macabre, and in turn causing the reader to colour future re-readings of Poe with some of his own sonic experimentation and ambiguity.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of Landon's poetic response to Hemans in terms of female literary agency and social critique, see Lucy Morrison's «Effusive Elegies or Catty Critic: Letitia Elizabeth Landon on Felicia Hemans», e.g.: «Landon's poetic address of Hemans challenges the double standard nineteenth-century critics applied to these poets and their works» [MORRISON 2007, p. 6]; «In emphasizing the discrepancy between Hemans's life and her public image, Landon indirectly insinuates the need for her own work and life to be separately considered as well. She both admires Hemans's work and perceives her subversion of assigned roles in her duplicitous embrace of domesticity» [p. 36]. For Judith Pascoe, Landon's career serves to demonstrate «the conflation of public and private spheres that occurred whenever women wrote poetry [and yet] a cultural narrowing of the possibilities for female authorial performance as the century proceeded» [PASCOE 1997, 229].

The elegy makes a statement about the role of the poet as a mediator of natural beauty, but also about the specific instance of the woman poet, who draws both form and substance from the experience of suffering. In this sense, she anticipates the function of the self-conscious modern elegist, summarized by Geoffrey Hill in a weary parenthesis in «September Song» (1968): «(I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true)» [Hill 1994]. Ramazani traces further contradictions relating to the gender of elegy in nineteenth-century print culture:

Elegies [...] posed a risk to women poets. For them, the genre was doubly problematic in gender terms—«masculine» as an élite literary form yet «feminine» as a popular cultural form and simulation of mourning. A female poet who wrote elegies risked being tainted by the type of «poetess» or «nightingale,» at a time when securing literary credentials required that she shun it. [RAMAZANI 1994, p. 21]

Landon's choice of the Prometheus myth to convey this idea is curiously masculine, with its implied presence of a martial male body in torment, producing an unresolved awkwardness in the claim she makes about female suffering for aesthetic gain. At any rate, the striking image of Prometheus on the rock proposes a sacrificial, even parasitic, relationship between a male-dominated society feeding on the emotional sustenance provided by women and/or poets. The violence of the image hardly resonates with Hemans's writing or her public persona; this is surely Landon making «an elegy for herself».

«Zenana» is an anglicized Urdu word, meaning the part of a wealthy household (either Hindu or Muslim) that was reserved for women and for female seclusion. More neutral than the titillating idea of a harem, the *zenana* is nevertheless a part of the standard array of exotic colour deployed by orientalist poetry in English during the Romantic period. The editorial choice of «The Zenana» as the title piece demarcates the collection as a space for feminine experience and a melodramatic tale of a female life and death, with the further implication that the posthumous book was a vessel for the poet's reputation. The publication of *The Zenana* in 1839 simultaneously fulfilled a literary and a social need. The volume served to cool down the strong possibility of scandal in the circumstances around Landon's death, which various interested parties would find damaging — Maclean from a political and moral perspective, and Jerdan in relation to both personal and business interests, his prominence and wealth as a publisher having been substantially built on the fashioning of LEL for the public taste. *The*

*Zenana* also served to repair and sanitize Landon's reputation, to give her admiring public a final re-affirming taste of her exquisite work, and give them permission to enjoy it as respectable readers.

The long title poem uses a similarly diffuse structure to Landon's earlier collection *The Improvisatrice*: an oriental narrative of tragic female incarceration and sacrifice is interspersed by a series of tales and lyrics sung to the protagonist Nadira by the minstrel Zilara. Like her mistress the child bride Nadira, Zilara is enslaved and exiled, pining languidly for the delights of her homeland. The women are not clearly distinguished through either plotting or dialogue, and their voices blend into one another, to form a continuous music of eroticized yet somewhat unexamined female suffering. The narrative is characterized by languor and inertia, drifting inevitably to a melancholy close in decorative feminine grief...

Zilara finishes her song of the sacrificial death of Kishen Kower. The zenana remains quiet. Nadira communes with the beauty of nature, but remains desolate in her solitude; she appeals to the sun as a revelation of divine eternity, and measures human grief and human death as trivial by comparison. Zilara is pining for a lost love, a man who rejected her before her enslavement and arrival at Murad's household to share the zenana with Nadira. Moohreeb is Murad's prisoner, defeated in war. Zilara begs Nadira to have Moohreeb released, even though she knows he has another bride. After a sleepless night, Murad returns with his victorious army the next day; Nadira makes Zilara's request, which is quickly granted. That night, Moohreeb's boat is seen leaving Delhi by the river, and the following morning Zilara's dead body is found leaning on a white stone tomb. Nadira cherishes Zilara's lyre until it can be played no more, and Zilara's grave becomes a shrine to love and song, bedecked with ephemeral flowers, which bloom and die, decorated with shells from the ocean and resonant with strange music.

Long did the young Nadira<sup>9</sup> keep  
    The memory of that maiden's lute;  
And call to mind her songs, and weep,  
    Long after those charmed chords were mute  
A small white tomb was raised, to show  
That human sorrow slept below;  
And solemn verse and sacred line  
Were graved on that funereal shrine. [...]  
Oh! if her poet soul be blent<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Nadira*: 'sultana' (1834).

With its aerial element,  
May its lone course be where the rill  
Goes singing at its own glad will;  
Where early flowers unclose and die;  
Where shells beside the ocean lie,  
Fill'd with strange tones; or where the breeze  
Sheds odours o'er the moonlit seas:  
There let her gentle spirit rove,  
Embalmed by poetry and love. [LANDON 1839, pp. 70-71]

The close of the poem is entirely typical of Landon's style, and a suitable gift to initiate a new reader to the pleasure of her work; Landon's closing lines are accomplished, almost unimprovable within their own chosen limitations. Harriet Linkin is able to find a purposeful, even optimistic, interpretation of the frequent spectacle of decorative female death in Landon, observing that if she often returns to images of «the silenced female», she does so «to rewrite Romanticism, to insist on the silenced female as an image constructed by a social reality that need not prevail in the Romantic aesthetic» [LINKIN 1997, p. 181]. Notwithstanding readings of this kind which attempt to reinstate some agency at an unpromising graveside, Landon's poems repeatedly find their utmost eloquence in the erotic closure of a last line gesturing into blank space.

### **The truth**

In the late 1830s, the story of Landon's death, and the *idea* of Landon's death, acted as a kind of crucible of unwelcome knowledge — literary, moral, and political. The literary establishment was confronted with the unwelcome knowledge that Jerdan, his business partners, and his customers, had created the expedient myth of LEL, built her up as a «a purchasable icon of female beauty» and stimulated a romantic curiosity among readers, only to let her fall and ruin her own reputation. They had both an aesthetic and financial stake in the whole process, rise and fall. The poetic taste that Landon had created with such consummate skill revolved around an aesthetic of eroticized female submissiveness and sacrifice; the story of her death was the culmination of her writings in embodying this aesthetic.

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<sup>10</sup> i.e. referring to the songstress Zilara, not to Nadira.

Morally, the gender dynamics of nineteenth-century bourgeois society were laid bare for anyone who cared to see. William Jerdan had had a long-term extra-marital relationship with Landon, while exploiting her marketable feminine myth; she had three children by him. Landon's reputation was in ruins, to the extent that she embarked on a hasty middle-aged marriage and emigrated to a distant colonial outpost in order conveniently to remove herself from the public gaze. Jerdan continued to preside over his lucrative publishing business, and to be an arbiter of literary taste in London; he even indulged in some distasteful memorializing of Landon, claiming credit for fashioning her genius for the reading public.<sup>11</sup>

The political knowledge of the case goes well beyond gender politics, however. Maclean, with some justification, continually fell under suspicion of tacitly tolerating the illegal continuation of slave-trading in British-controlled western Africa. The death in mysterious circumstances of his fallen celebrity wife focused public attention on him once again. The taint of rumour and scandal surrounding Letitia's death — including the theory that the «country wife» Ellen had had Letitia murdered — further damaged his reputation and gave fuel to his enemies. The flirtatious society poet, who died miserably thousands of miles from home, whose remains were hastily buried in the rain, became a focus for the unwanted knowledge of British imperial guilt. Landon's own feted poetic style, which had typified the bourgeois literary taste of the 1820s and '30s, by recycling the fashionable orientalism of its day, with tales of exotic (almost white) princesses, noble warriors, and tragic sacrifice, relinquished its pretence of innocence, and was enfeebled in its encounter with historical truth.

The case is revealing also in terms of poetic genre. There is considerable consistency between the various readings of Landon as a poet, revolving around ideas of lyrical fluency, a narrow repertoire of endlessly repeated themes and moods, and a widely acknowledged superficiality of style. For example... there is the fashioning of LEL as a «purchasable icon of feminine beauty» (Mellor); the poems' propensity to live upon the page with little sense of external object, enraptured by their own reflexive textures (Stewart); and there is the literary life entirely devoted to masquerade and equivocation, as Landon balances riskily between the chaste and erotic possibilities of her LEL persona (Miller). The discourse of elegy may be added to these themes: Landon's poetry not only consists of numerous formal elegies and elegiac moments in narrative, in which bereavement is lamented and aestheticized; the elegiac is a pervasive mood of melancholy which captures and repeatedly expresses a fundamental idea — that poetic language is forever doomed to lament the loss and absence of its

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<sup>11</sup> «My poor, dear, all but adored L.E.L.—the creature whose earliest and precocious aspirations it was mine to cherish and improve, whose mind unfolded its marvellous stores as drawn forth and encouraged by me—well did she sweetly paint it when she said '*We love the bird we taught to sing.*'» [William Jerdan, letter to Lady Blessington, quoted in MILLER 2019, p. 291]

signified, turning in on itself in its inability to move on, becoming static, self-involved, gorgeously two-dimensional.

Landon may have had just one story to tell, and one song to sing. But the stories that eddy around her life and death continue to have far-reaching repercussions in our understanding of nineteenth-century culture.

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