Recasting women's stories : in the poetry of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Christina Rossetti

Takiguchi, T.

EPILOGUE

Poetry as a Gift for the Audience

Heroines of the poetry of Hemans, Landon, and Christina Rossetti often address their interlocutors as "my friends" when they speak in first-person monologues. Who are these "friends"?

The speaker in "Parting Song" by Hemans asks her "friends" when they will think of her. The epigraph to the poem is taken from the last song of Corinne, the heroine in Staël's novel, who creates it to perform for her audience before her death. In the novel Corinne experiences "parting" several times. She leaves her father's land Britain, to live as an improvisatrice in her mother's land Italy. After falling in love there with an English gentleman, she has to part with him and wastes away. Before death she bids farewell to her audience in Italy. The speaker of "Parting Song" identifies with Corinne and the sad story of her life. The "friends", then, include the speaker's beloved, the audiences of her songs, and other people who have been involved with her life. The eponymous heroine of "Arabella Stuart" addresses her husband from her solitary chamber in the Tower, hoping that her voice of suffering reaches him, her "friend". In Arabella's dream he appears as both her ally and her foe: he is an ambiguous figure. Despite her expectations, he never comes to rescue her. The poem is meant as a letter to be read only after Arabella dies. The poem is the heart-felt cry of a woman whose voice is unheard by the one(s) she loves.

Landon's speaker in "Night at Sea", referring to "Parting Song", implores her "absent friends" to kindly remember her. The poem was published in a magazine soon after Landon's death, as if it were the deceased poet's last message to her readers and to the society she belonged to. In the long narrative poem "A History of the Lyre", the heroine Eulalia wishes to be connected with her "friends", even if she feels that they are cold and indifferent to her. Hers is the voice of a

woman poet who hopes that her songs have the power to evoke sympathy among her audiences, and hopes to be connected with them by bonds of affection.

Christina Rossetti's heroine in "Eve" sits before her son's body, slain by his brother. She regrets that she plucked "bitterest fruit" to give to Adam, whom she calls "my friend, husband, lover" (line 30). Despite all her weeping, he never shows up to respond to her song. Those who appear as friends instead of Adam are "piteous beast[s]", who hear her voice and answer "grief with grief" (lines 41, 66). The animals variously show their sympathy with her, shedding tears, crying out, quaking, or kneeling. They appear as representatives of the song's sympathetic audience. The poem, then, expresses the hope that women poets (whose ancestor is Eve) will be received warmly by their communities when they sing of their sorrows. Rossetti's "Goblin Market" sings of an ideal sympathetic community where women help each other, each of them receiving a warm welcome and support. The poem narrates how one of the sisters, Lizzie, saves the life of the other, Laura, exposing herself to danger. In the epilogue Laura tells her children the sisters' story. At this moment Laura is a woman poet telling a story, just like Rossetti. She holds the hands of her children, the audience of her song, and tells them to cling together, for "there is no friend like a sister" (line 562). The epilogue portrays the poet and her audience united by a bond of sympathy, and a vision of a happy community where women's blissful stories are passed down from generation to generation.

The speaker of the dramatic monologue "From House to Home" dreams of heaven. She tells her "friend" – the auditor of the monologue – of her dream, implicitly asking what he or she thinks of it. The poem ends without the speaker receiving her auditor's response. Similarly, the poet cannot immediately receive her readers' responses to her poem. It follows that as long as the poem remains as a literary legacy (unlike many of Sappho's poems that have disappeared over time), the poet through the poem continues to speak to her readers: her contemporaries as well as future generations. Behind the monologue speaker addressing her "friend" is the poet indirectly addressing us, her audience, as is the case with a number of dramatic monologues written by Hemans, Landon, and Christina Rossetti.

The implication that the monologue speaker's "friend" may be us, the audience of the poem, is also found in the self-referential structure often seen in the three poets' works.[1] A self-referential structure (sometimes highly complex) can be explained in a simplified way as follows: the relation of the real poet, her poem and its audience corresponds to that of the poem's speaker, her artwork and its viewers. This correspondence opens up the possibility that the speaker addressing the viewers of her artworks stands in for the poet addressing her audience. If this is so, then we are being implored not to remain passive when reading a poem. Talked to and questioned, indirectly but persistently, we are encouraged to take seriously the concerns of the monologue speaker. The poem's speaker and the poet may receive sympathy, approval, support, or advice from their audience. They may win fame, honor and wealth for their performance. At the same time they face a big danger: they may be ignored, or rejected, by their audience. The more the speaker and the poet seek sympathy, the more painful the rejection may be. Even if they get a response from their audience, if it is a negative response the blow may be even harder to take.

In Landon's "The Golden Violet" (1827), the speaker of the poem speaks directly to the audience of the poem, as if to emphasize her role as spokesperson for the author of the poem.[2] The golden violet is a crown of victory conferred on the best performer at the storytelling contest for minstrels. A beautiful countess hosts the contest in an attempt to revive the dying tradition of minstrelsy. Participants offer their songs to the audience, and in return receive rewards of honor and sympathy.[3] In the countess's stately castle hall twelve poets perform songs featuring courtly love and exciting adventures. Gift-exchange appears in various forms in these twelve inset poems. The different characters continue their quest for love, victory and prizes, making use of the best of their wisdom and bravery. Their goal is to obtain a reward at the cost of any sacrifice required. During their

---

[1] For the self-referential structure of their poems, see Chapter 2.

[2] "The Golden Violet", in Letitia Landon, *The Golden Violet, with Its Tales of Romance and Chivalry: and Other Poems* (London: Longman, 1827).

[3] For a discussion of gift-exchange in Hemans' poem, see Chapter 2.

journeys a variety of things are given from one person to another, such as a magic ring, a lock of hair, gold and silver, and these are exchanged for money or bartered for intangibles such as affection and loyalty. This cumulative gift-exchange gives layered meanings to the poet's crown, "the golden violet", at the climax of the poem.

Gold is a color that often appears in the gift-exchange in this poem, and entails layered meanings of a gift. Firstly, symbolizing a special reward, the color signifies an impulse for death and destruction: it drives people to push forward in defiance of the risk of death. Examples are found in the characters of knights who brave death in order to win a prize. Secondly, the color of gold indicates that the gift is something pure, something offered from the bottom of one's heart, but also suggests that the gift can be a commodity bought with money, that can be traded for other commodities.

A clear example of layered meanings of a gift is found in the episode of a cruel count who murders his wife Agatha, in order to marry another woman for the sake of her wealth. When Agatha is stabbed in the breast and falls into the water, her blood and golden hair are mingled and float away on the waves. The scene suggests that for the count, the wife is a commodity to be bought and sold, or exchanged for another woman. When they married, Agatha thought that she was offering herself, her true heart, to him, and that the ring he gave her was a sign of his true heart for her. But she was mistaken. In his perception he "bought" her with the golden ring, which for him was not a symbol of his true heart. The gift from a true heart, it turns out, can be powerless in the face of mercenary gift-givers. Years later, the murderous husband himself dies, when diving into the water to retrieve the golden ring. He had taken it from his dead wife's body, meaning to use it to "buy" a new wife, but dropped it into the water by mistake. His fatal dive suggests that his obsession with wealth (gold) is mingled with an unconscious desire for death, and finally brings about his ruin.

When the twelve poets finish performing their songs full of these layered significances, the contest approaches its climax, the prize-awarding ceremony. The audience and the poets, filled with expectation, await the announcement of the winner. The countess, the hostess of the contest, unbinds the golden flower from her raven hair, and holds it up so that everyone can see. However, at this very

moment, the speaker of "The Golden Violet" breaks off her story:

> The dream is past, hush'd my lute,
> At least, to my awaking, mute;
> Past that fair garden and glad hall,
> And she the lady queen of all.
>
> (page 234)

We cannot stop wondering: was the contest with all its participants and songs just a dream? Has the golden violet disappeared altogether? The speaker now seems to speak directly to us:

> Leave we her power to those who deign
> One moment to my idle strain;
> Let each one at their pleasure set
> The prize – the Golden Violet.
>
> (234)

This is how the golden violet is handed over and entrusted to us, the audience of the poem. It is as if a flower painted in a picture emerged from the frame as a real flower that we can touch in the three-dimensional world.

While we are puzzling over this, the speaker starts to sing emotionally of her insecurities and sorrows as a poet. She sings that the poet has his hopes and sorrows when he descends to earth after singing a song in paradise. He wonders whether "his spirit's sacrifice / Shall brighten, touch'd with heaven's own fire, / or in its ashes dark expire" (236). This shows the poet-speaker's fear that her gift for the audience may come to nothing. She now desperately seeks a reward from us:

> Feelings whose truth is all their worth,
> Thoughts which have had their pensive birth
> When lilies hang their heads and die,
> Eve's lesson of mortality.
> Such lute, and with such humble wreath
> As suits frail string and trembling breath,
> Such, gentle reader, woos thee now.
> Oh! o'er it bend with yielding brow:

> Read thou it when some soften'd mood
> Is on thy hour of solitude;
>
> (238-39)

The speaker yearns for warm exchanges of mutual affection with her "gentle reader[s]". Since she offers her songs born from true "feelings" and pensive "thoughts", she wants her readers to respond with their hearts. The relationship she wants with her audience is a gift-exchange that is "pure", not mercenary.

However, she already senses that her poems might be relegated to the status of a mere commodity. She entrusts the golden violet to us. What if we give her the flower in return for her gift of songs, in our attempt to respond to her entreaties? If we do, the gift-exchange between her and us may become a destructive exchange, and her songs only a commodity to be bought with money. Her songs may be seen as disposable: they may entertain us temporarily, but we may tire of them easily and abandon them after a while. Just like Agatha, who was murdered by her husband who "bought" her with a golden ring, the speaker's poems may be ignored, and destroyed, by her audience. Realizing this danger, the speaker keeps begging us for a reward, as if propelled by an unconscious desire for death. She concludes the poem:

> Bethink thee, kindly look and word
> Will fall like sunshine o'er each chord;
> That, light as is such boon to thee,
> 'Tis more than summer's noon to me;
> That, if such meed my suit hath won,
> I shall not mourn my task is done.
>
> (239)

She will not regret ("mourn") having performed her task. The word "mourn" means to feel or show sorrow for the death of someone or something. The speaker has a clear premonition that as a result of offering her gift of poems to her audience, those poems, or her spirit, may be destroyed. Landon's age saw the development of a commercial society in Britain, in which collections of poems were often bought as gifts for friends, loved ones, and family members. For some poets this was a confusing development: they may have profited

from increased sales of their books, but often deplored their poems being treated as commodities and disposed of when readers tired of them.[4] "The Golden Violet" may suggest Landon's desperation to become involved in this commercialized literary world, with full awareness of its potential dangers. The fate of the poet-speaker and the destination of the golden violet are now in our hands. Receiving the gift of a poem from the poet-speaker telling minstrels' stories of gift-exchange, we also need to give her a gift in return. Holding the dangerous flower with its message of death and destruction, we keep standing in a daze, listening to the imploring voice of the poet.

It is not only the poet-speaker who is in danger of death and destruction. She has entrusted the golden violet to us, and that means that the danger is now with us as well. This may be a message from the poet that reading poems requires deep moral and personal commitment, which entails taking the risk of finding we need to reconstruct our beliefs and ideals, and an invitation to accept this risk and read her poems with this kind of commitment. We receive this message from Landon, and it is still with us when reading the poems of Christina Rossetti, who continues questioning her audience. Landon and Hemans explored in their poems the relation between the poet and her audience, her society. Their questioning expressed through the speakers in dramatic monologues was passed on to Rossetti, who goes on pressing us for answers. Poetry is a kind of gift to us from these poets, and as their "friends" we are asked to give them back a gift – our response, our commitment.

---

[4] Outstanding examples of commercial projects making use of the popularity of poems were publications called annuals, such as *Keepsake* and *Forget Me Not*. Hemans and Landon are known to have been considerably involved with this kind of publications, while William Wordsworth, for instance, wavered between profiting by publishing in annuals and feeling contempt for such "mercenary" publications. For his ambivalent attitude about publishing in annuals, see Peter L. Manning, "Wordsworth in the *Keepsake*, 1829", in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing & Reading Practices*, eds. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 44-73.