

Hope in the Ruins of 'Ozymandias': Reimagining Temporal Horizons in Felicia Hemans 'the Image in Lava'

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Abstract : Felicia Hemans' memorializing of the unwritten lives of women and the consequent allowance for marginalized voices to remember and be remembered has been considered by many critics in terms of ekphrasis and elegy, terms which privilege the question of whether Hemans' poeticizing can represent lost voices of history or only her poetic expression. Amy Gates, Brian Elliott, and others point out Hemans' acknowledgement of the self-projection necessary for imaginatively filling the absences of unrecorded histories. Yet, few have examined the complex temporal positioning Hemans inscribes in these moments of self-projection and imaginative historicizing. In poems like 'The Image in Lava,' Hemans maps not only a lost past, but also a lost potential future onto the image of a dead infant in its mother's arms, the discovery and consideration of which moves the imagined viewer to recover and incorporate the 'hope' encapsulated in the figure of the infant into a reevaluation of national time embodied by the 'relics / Left by the pomps of old.' By examining Hemans' acknowledgement and response to Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ozymandias,' this essay explores how Hemans' depictions of imaginative historicizing open new horizons of possibility and reevaluate temporal value structures by imagining previously undiscovered or unexplored potentialities of the past. Where Shelley's poem mocks the futility of national power and time, this essay outlines Hemans' suggestion of alternative threads of identity and temporal meaning-making which, regardless of historical veracity, exist outside of and against the structures Shelley challenges. Counter to previous readings of Hemans' poem as celebration of either recovered or poetically constructed maternal love, this essay argues that Hemans offers a meditation on sites of reproduction—both of personal reproductive futurity and of national reproduction of power. This meditation culminates in Hemans' gesturing towards a method of historicism by which the imagined viewer reinvigorates the sterile, 'shattered visage' of national time by forming temporal identity through the imagining of trans-historical hope inscribed on the infant body of the universal, individual subject rather than the broken monument of the king.

Keywords : futurity, national temporalities, reproduction, revisionary histories

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