
The American Hemans

Jennifer Putzi*¹

¹The College of William and Mary – United States

Abstract

In 1990, Nina Baym insisted on the "invent[ion]" of poet Lydia Huntley Sigourney, claiming, "As American women writers published in ever-larger numbers before the Civil War, one of them was bound to be construed as an epitome of the female author in her range of allowed achievements and required inadequacies." What Baym fails to note, however, is that Sigourney was simultaneously admired and disparaged throughout her career for her imitation of yet another "epitome," the British poet Felicia Hemans. While other American female poets were compared to Hemans, Sigourney was the only one to be labeled "the American Hemans." In fact, as Edgar Allan Poe asserted in a critique of Sigourney's popularity, the American poet took advantage of the comparison with Hemans, insisting on her admiration for her British counterpart, but also carefully asserting authorship of her own work. In this paper, I will examine the politics of the "American Hemans" label, particularly in a cultural moment prioritizing literary nationalism. I will demonstrate the risks and advantages of Sigourney's embrace of this label by looking at the production, circulation, and (mis)attribution of "Death of an Infant," one of her best-known poems both in her day and in our own. The success of "Death of an Infant," I will argue, was at least in part due to the constant (re)iteration of poems about the death of small children in nineteenth-century America. But the poem also owed its popularity to developing ideas about poetic authorship and celebrity that gained traction in the United States because of the transatlantic fame of Felicia Hemans.

*Speaker