The Poetics of Sisterly Celebrity: Sarah Hale, British Women Poets and the Gift of Transatlantic Fame

Páraic Finnerty

Abstract

This essay explores the celebrity of British women poets in early nineteenth-century America, when print culture on both sides of the Atlantic encouraged and catered for the desire of readers for ever-closer relationships with poets by commercially circulating and disseminating their poems, biographical information and visual representations. It focuses on Sarah Josepha Hale's participation and intervention in these cultural mechanisms by examining her gift book *The Ladies' Wreath: A Selection from the Female Poetic Writers of England and America* (1837) and, in particular, its expanded second edition (1839). Reinforcing while also complicating celebrations of women poets in this period as figures associated with gentility, domesticity, sentiment and ideals of femininity, Hale draws on the discourse of fame and celebrity to underline women poets' achievements and professionalization and the diversity, variety and intellectuality of their poems, and to position British and American women poets and readers within a transatlantic poetic sisterhood.

Keywords: women's poetry, poetess, transatlantic, Felicia Hemans, Sarah Josepha Hale, gift books, celebrity

Since the twentieth-century *fin de siècle*'s anthologizing and canonical reclamation of nineteenth-century British and American women poets, scholarship has demonstrated the popularity, commercial success and influence of women poets in this era (Mandell, 2003; Bennett, 2003). As poetry under the influence of aesthetics of late-eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century became increasingly linked to sentiment, interiority and the individual expression of thoughts and personal experience and, accordingly, associated with the domestic, the private and the feminine, women seemed predisposed to excel as poets in an activity that had previously been the high-cultural province of classically educated men (Ledbetter, 2009: 3-17). This re-gendering of poetry coincided with the emergence of celebrity culture, when new forms of mass-media dissemination promulgated and facilitated obsessive interest in and fascination with the private lives of public figures and representations of publicized individuality, which in turn shaped the experience and understanding of subjectivity and identity, particularly for celebrities and their admirers (Mole, 2007; Eisner, 2009; Mole, 2009). In this period, 'fame as a concept underwent a process of feminization and enabled women to embrace celebrity' (Brock, 2006: 1); however, the 'category of literary fame' raised particular challenges for women poets, who faced difficulties and contradictions, which reflected 'broader tension[s] between private and public identities', as they 'negotiat[ed] a passage between domestic and professional spheres' (Salmon, 2013: 181). Although critical approval could be reluctantly given or be accompanied with condescension and belittlement, women became marketable poets and public figures always in relation to their embodiment of (and sometimes deviation from) normative femininity and their poetic validation of the sanctity and virtues of the domestic sphere over the pains and perils of renown (Behrendt, 2012). Conceptualized as unmediated, spontaneous and personally expressive, their poetry, even more so than men's, became the

perfect vehicle for commercial success and celebrity: their verse was presented and marketed as offering readers the illusion of intimate, authentic presence and a relationship with poets based on shared experiences and sympathies. Women poets achieved renown not through their ‘dissemination of the unique’, which had become from the early modern period onwards the central pathway to fame, but for their ‘paradoxical uniqueness’; their poetry disseminated ‘a more intense and more public version’ of representative femininity (Braudy: 1997: 265, 371, 372). Their celebrity stemmed from the cultural belief that their poems gave readers access to an already worshipped and revered, yet publicly hidden, middle-class figure who symbolized privacy, modesty, humility and ‘eternal womanhood’: the ‘angel in the house’ (Lootens, 1996: 45-77). If fame for women was ‘an unnatural phenomenon that [they] experienced with great reluctance’ and something that was not ambitiously pursued but accidentally and passively achieved (Weber, 2012: 2, 16), then there was also a sense in which the tension between having a public status and embodying ideals of domestic femininity could actually intensify a woman’s always already reluctant celebrity and contradictory allure. In a nineteenth-century culture advocating an ideology of separate gendered spheres, a published woman poet was a remarkable, much-discussed, contradictory and fascinating figure.

This essay delineates and offers nuances to these cultural realities and trajectories by examining early nineteenth-century US print culture’s celebration of British women poets and how this mediated the emerging fame of their American counterparts. The essay centres on one gift book – *The Ladies’ Wreath: A Selection from the Female Poetic Writers of England and America* (1837), and its subsequent enlarged second edition (1839) – edited by Sarah Josepha Hale, one of the most influential female editors of the century. This gift book catered for yet complicated the antebellum demand for women’s poetry that was believed to

emanate or effuse unmediated from the hearts of modest and retiring, yet public and confiding women. In her preface and introductory notes to each poet, she re-imagines the fame of women poets, who were often referred to as poetesses, by associating it with their inventiveness, originality and artistry, as well as underlining their moral and literary superiority to men. Her paratextual materials, which included biographical portraits, created intimacy between readers and poets and positioned both groups within a sisterly community, which is made visible through the discourse of celebrity, but built on egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationships between women that stemmed from their shared powers of moral sympathy and identification, common experiences of suffering and unwavering commitment to domestic duties. Hale's gift book challenges associations of women poets within the early nineteenth-century marketplace solely with their production of domestically located, affect-laden, self-expressive poetry by underlining their works' diversity, variety and intellectuality and by locating British and American women poets and readers within a transatlantic poetic sisterhood.

Gift Books, Celebrity and the British Poetess Brand

As well as being printed and reprinted in newspapers, periodicals, anthologies and within single-authored volumes, nineteenth-century poems were included along with prose pieces and illustrations in gift books (or literary annuals). From the 1820s to the mid-century, these volumes became popular on both sides of the Atlantic and shaped the way poetry was culturally circulated and understood (Janzen Kooistra, 2011: 11-33, Harris, 2014). These elaborately bound commodities were 'purchased, offered, possessed, displayed, contemplated, read, copied, admired, and praised' and 'loaded with values involving aesthetics, rituals, gender, and class' (Lehuu, 2000: 79). Exhibited and discussed within the

domestic sphere as signs of taste, cultivation and distinction, gift books fulfilled a growing demand for literature among a middle-class audience in Britain and America. *The Atlantic Souvenir, A Christmas and New Year's Offering for 1826* (1825) was the first American gift book; it was published annually until 1832, when it became *The Token*. Samuel Griswold Goodrich, the American publisher of *The Token*, described gift books as 'messengers of love, tokens of friendship, signs and symbols of affection, and luxury and refinement' (quoted in Lehuu, 2000: 77). Such publishers carefully produced and advertised these books as collectable artefacts associated with sentiment and the feminine and meant to appeal to and function as gifts for women. Gift books signified social, familial or amorous relationships between the giver and recipient and were 'both derivative of and substitute for' an earlier vogue for gifts of devotional, religious, instructive texts (Lehuu 2000: 83). Although such American volumes followed the layout of and even used similar titles to their British equivalents, as well as including the writings of well-known British writers, they prioritized contributions from American writers and artists and helped establish the careers, reputations and marketability of figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Henry Wentworth Longfellow, Lydia Sigourney and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Together with newspapers, periodicals and anthologies specialising solely in poetry, gift books were fundamental to the circulation of women's poetry and the popularization and professionalization of women poets in the early nineteenth century. It was their publication in British gift books in the 1820s and 1830s that made British women poets such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon not merely public poets but literary celebrities on a par with Byron or Wordsworth (see Harris, 2015; Knowles, 2012; Behrendt, 2012). In 1830s American print culture, 'celebrities were largely European – Byron and Hemans were particularly marketable names – while contributions from American poets were often printed

anonymously' (Richards, 2004: 11-12). As a result, American gift books, along with other print media, printed and reprinted works by 'brand names' such as Hemans to increase sales and literary kudos. A perfect reinforcement of the gift book's connections with the feminine, domestic and spiritual, women's poetry such as Hemans's was 'for the everyday': it was 'direct in expression, musical in appeal, and affective or sentimental in content, dilating on losses familiar to all'; 'the resilience of the human spirit; the various joys of domestic work and social life; the love of everyday objects and animals; ... the beauty of nature...[; and] faith in an afterlife' (Kooistra, 2011: 131). Drawing attention to reciprocal links between the verbal and the visual that were present in their material form, gift books interconnected their own material beauty with both the beauty of the sentiments expressed by the poems and the physical beauty of the women poets. The inclusion of biographical information about and / or images of these women in such volumes further confirmed a nineteenth-century cultural conflation of the woman poet's body and her poems, whereby the woman was 'the ultimate poet, or poem' (Richards, 2004: 39) and the commonplace idea that to speak as a woman was to 'offer up both the lyric voice and the sacrificial body of the paradigmatic poetess for consumption as an aestheticized object' (Brown, 2000: 183). The positioning of women's poems within gift books accentuated the complicity of the self-expressive lyric that facilitated 'the reader's emotional investment in the writer's personality' with structures and mechanisms of mass-mediated celebrity involving an 'accelerating set of technologies of publicity' and 'ultimately impersonal and abstracting literary and market systems' (Eisner, 2009: 2, 21, 23). Accordingly, women poets and their poetry, like the commercial gift books in which they appeared, symbolized privacy, sincerity, sentimentalism, domesticity, morality, personality and spirituality, yet were concomitantly components within – while seeming antithetical to – a literary market place and public realm increasingly associated with

industrialization, materialism, publicity, profit and dehumanization. It was such complicity that played a role in the already evident critical devaluing and deriding of women's poetry as derivative, generic, formulaic and mechanically produced similitude and as a sign of the workings of the impersonal commercial marketplace. The twentieth-century fate of these women and their poems is inextricably connected with their nineteenth-century construction and reception that show the 'range of ways that persons become personifications of poetic media' (Richards, 2004: 198).

The US print circulation and dissemination of the works of Hemans generated and then supplied an increasing demand for information about this celebrity's private life and physical appearance. Nineteenth-century American readers, like their British counterparts, associated Hemans's work with 'harmonious, decorous domesticity', feminine patriotism and 'Christian pacifism', but her immense popularity and influence in America 'underscores the ways in which American national identity developed through as well as against notions of "Englishness"' (Lootens, 1999: 244-45). What has not been fully explored is that Hemans was the most famous member of a group of British women poets whose works and personal lives were much discussed in US print culture. As early as 1820 one newspaper, reprinting a piece from the *London Monthly Magazine* entitled 'Female Literature of the Present Age', referred to the existence of a group of women poets that included Joanna Baillie, who was praised for the intensity and grandeur of her 'expression of deep feeling'; Hemans, whose verse was acclaimed for its 'grace and beauty'; Mary Russell Mitford, honoured for her fine and genuine sensibility and poems that display 'the sweetest and most characteristic qualities of womanhood'; and Hannah More, celebrated for the 'great earnestness of expostulation, great purity of thought and great felicity of language' (*Providence Patriot, Columbian Phenix*, 1820). By the 1830s Landon, Mary Howitt, Caroline Norton, Maria Jane Jewsbury

and Caroline Bowles were added to this British grouping by US newspapers, which usually connected the private histories and publications of these poets, as in the following piece entitled ‘Lady Poets’:

Mrs Hemans is still residing in Dublin, occupied in the education of her sons: she will shortly publish a volume of scared poetry—Hannah Moore is alive, but in a state that would render death a blessing: a Memoir, by a “constant friend,” is already prepared.—Miss Landon has been staying at Oxford, on a visit to her uncle, the head of Worcester College: a new novel from her pen is nearly finished. Miss Mitford sojourns at Three Mile Cross: her tragedies laid by till a more fitting seasons. Mrs Howitt, a member of the Society of Friends, who resides at Nottingham, has prepared a series of tragic dramas, with the highest moral tone. From Joanna Bailie the world hears nothing; she resides at Highgate in comparative solitude, but enjoying daily intercourse with a few chosen friends. Miss Bowles is unhappily not in good health; she lives at Leamington, in Hampshire. Miss Jewsbury (Mrs Fletchet) is on the wide sea with her husband, voyaging to India. Mrs Norton is deserting the muses for the Court Magazine, and a novel which we believe will shortly appear (*Virginia Free Press*, 1833).

This survey is representative of the manner in which American readers are being encouraged to connect, as was often the case in celebrity discourse, these women poets with a particular geographical or domestic location or personal or familial circumstances, as well as with new publications by or about them. Other US newspaper pieces offer readers information about these women’s public and private lives and physical appearance, particularly Hemans’s and Landon’s, derived from personal accounts of actual encounters or meetings with these celebrities (*New Hampshire Statesman*, 1853).

Despite a drive towards delineating an American literary tradition, epitomized by the inclusion of male and female poets in works such as Samuel Kettell's *Specimens of American Poetry* (1829), George B. Cheever's *The American Common-Place Book of Poetry* (1831), and Rufus W. Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842), US antebellum newspapers and periodicals began to position and inextricably connect the names, lives and works of American women poets with those of the members of this celebrated British female collective. American women poets who specialized in poems of 'ardent feeling, refined art, and undoubted metrical talent' were not simply culturally conceptualized as 'the American pupils of Mrs. Hemans and Miss Landon' (Stedman, 1881: 821). Instead US print culture encouraged American readers to see British and American women poets as part of a poetic sorority. Henry Woodbury, for example, offered his readers the following 'catalogue of lady writers', which included highly praised and ranked poets, but did not distinguish them according to nationality: 'a More, a Hemans, a Hale ... an Osgood, a Sigourney... a Howitt, a Smith, a Landon' (Woodbury, 1852: 336). Hemans and Sigourney were most frequently presented as seemingly interchangeable 'gifted females' or the respective national representatives of an international female poetic tradition: the 'name of Hemans deservedly stands at the head of female poets in England, as does that of Sigourney in the United States'; or alternatively, Sigourney was referred to as 'the Hemans of America' or 'American Hemans' (*Globe*, 1835). While some, for example Edgar Allan Poe, stressed the almost too close similarities between Sigourney and Hemans, others, such as the novelist and poet Catherine Sedgwick, writing in 1837, drew attention to key differences between British and American women poets (see Bennett, 2007):

While others, for example, [Hemans] seems to me to have belonged to another age of the world, to have been a Sappho or a Corinne . . . a creature of those times when the

elect few had no sympathy with their race, when they were born for music and song . . . and *not* to be linked in with their kind. . . . She shows how inadequate sentiment is, how feeble the theory of beauty compared with that sense of duty . . . which gives an interest to the meanest of our fellow-creatures, and a dignity to the commonest office of social life (Quoted in Bennett, 2007: 265).

Even here we see the way in which British female celebrity becomes a means of confirming and authorising the careers, professionalism and cultural distinctiveness and visibility of American women poets, who specialize, for Sedgwick, in a more socially, politically and morally focused poetry.

Sarah Hale and the Gift of Women's Poetry

As well as publishing her own poetry, prose and plays and having a profound influence on nineteenth-century American literary culture as editor of *Ladies' Magazine* (1828-1836) and *Godey's Lady's Book* (1837-1877), Sarah Hale edited numerous gift books. With her first she offered something novel: fulfilling a demand in the 1830s American marketplace for women's poetry, she published a gift book that exclusively included poems by women, akin to anthologies such as George Coleman and Bonnell Thornton's *Poems by Eminent Ladies* (1755) and Alexander Dyce's *Specimen of British Poetesses* (1827), but with a transatlantic remit of works by well-known British women poets and American poetry's rising female stars. Her marketing innovation was clearly successful enough to merit a second edition, 'improved and enlarged', two years later. Unlike other gift books, Hale does not intersperse her volume with illustrations; instead it features only two images, one of Hemans on the frontispiece and the other of a wreath on the title page. Her decision to objectify and aestheticize only Hemans downplays the gift-book form's usual interconnection between

women's poetry and images of specular femininity (Harris, 2015: 242) and draws attention to yet hides the corporeality of the other British and American poets behind their most marketable representative. However, at various points in the introductions she provides for each of the selected poets, Hale offers accounts of their physical appearance. Readers are given: an account by 'a gentleman who visited her in 1827' of the 'remarkably fine face' of the elderly Joanne Baillie – an 'estimable author', a 'celebrity' whose 'name is indeed much better known than her works' (Hale, 1839: 69-72); a description by an 'American gentleman, who visited her in 1824' of the appearance of the well-known Hannah More, 'who needs no eulogism...[and] has built her own monument' (1839: 93, 94); a report of the faded beauty of the 'genius' Anna Laetitia Barbauld by her niece (1839: 103, 105); and mention of the 'very prepossessing' appearance of Sarah Louisa P. Smith and the 'exceedingly beautiful' Lucretia Davidson, two American poets who died young (1839: 325, 341).

Combining the gift book's conventional associations with moral instruction, piety, refinement, domesticity, spirituality, ornament and idealized femininity (Harris, 2014: 232-4), the front matter's wreath is explained, as is the volume's function as a 'gift-book for all seasons' containing 'with original notices and notes prepared especially for young ladies', in a section from the preface to the first edition:

I cannot but believe that this book will find favor in the eyes of my own sex. It is particularly intended for young ladies — as a mirror, bright and polished, in which they may see reflected the beauty of virtue, the loveliness of the domestic affections, and the happiness of piety; as a wreath, whose flowers will always bloom to give pleasure, whenever the heart is opened to their influence (Hale, 1837: 4).

What becomes even clearer in her subsequent introductions, and clearest still in the preface to her second edition, is that notwithstanding Hale's stated aims and concerns, her wreath is a

delineation and foregrounding of the achievements and renown of women poets. The above section is removed from the preface to the second edition which expands and gives greater emphasis to the real purpose of this volume, as she puts it in words included in both editions:

To promote the reputation of my own sex and my own country, were among the earliest mental emotions I can recollect — and had I then been told that it would be my good fortune to gather even this humble Wreath of poetical flowers from the productions of female writers, I should have thought it the height of felicity (Hale, 1837: 385; 1839 411).

Hinting at her commitment to literary nationalism, she celebrates the achievements of her sex and specifically those of her countrywomen. Functioning as the expected prose element within gift books, her introductions individuate the poets by examining the distinctive features of their poetry that merit their fame and by offering information about their private lives and histories to draw attention to and stress their contemporary celebrity. While establishing each poet as an exemplary figure, Hale unsettles any attempt to reduce these women and their poems, respectively, to ideals of femininity and stereotypical poetess verse. Her decision to section off rather than intermingle her chosen British and American women allows British poets, whose introductions and poems are placed first, to act, as they did in 1830s US print culture, as conduits for their American contemporaries. Despite Hale's appropriation of the commonplace interconnection between women poets or poems and flowers (see also 1839: 17, 195, 207), her wreath is only deceptively 'humble' and decorative: in fact, it associates the achievements of these women not merely with temporary celebrity but with posthumous fame symbolized by the laurel wreath.

Appropriating an already highly commercial gift-book form designed with women in mind, *The Ladies' Wreath* does not merely represent the beginning of Hale's commitment to

creating commodities for 'a specifically female adult audience in her book publications at the same time that she promoted the idea of a separate women's culture in her magazines' (Okker, 1995: 54). Under the guise of a gift book, Hale produces her first sustained engagement with women's fame and attempts to offer readers details of their public and cultural achievements and private lives (see Hale, 1853). Hale's gift book illuminates a cultural milieu powerfully shaped by women's moral, social and literary influence that has made women's poetry commercial and popular and women poets celebrities. Their poems, even more so than men's, fulfil what Hale calls the 'office of Poetry': 'to elevate, purify, and soften the human character; and thus promote civil, moral and religious advancement' (1839: 3). The critical and popular recognition that women are 'morally gifted to excel' as poets is a sign of humanity's cultural advancement and social progress. Women's deserved renown is owing to the 'influence of [their] taste and genius on literature [which] has essentially changed the national taste of the English, and the character of their poetry'; 'the cultivation of female talent' will continue 'in every country' to make 'more moral and delicate, refined and perfect' the 'public taste', the 'literary atmosphere' and the 'tone of literature and especially poetry' (1839: 4-5). Women's poetry will not merely have 'temporary popularity': in this new order, it 'can never become obsolete, or exhausted, or injurious' and will not 'die and be forgotten' because it inculcates 'reverence and love towards God, or piety' awakens 'the spirit of national aggrandizement, or policy' and teaches 'the true relations of men to each other and to Nature and Philosophy' (1839: 3). Complicating a separate sphere gender ideology by drawing on the influence and authority of an emerging discourse of sentimentality, Hale honours the 'enduring moral power of female genius' presenting it as the basis of literary and moral authority and of fame (8).

Hale supplements her celebration of female renown with an interrelated rhetoric in which women's domestic and creative duties are no longer incompatible but aligned: entering the public sphere for women is not about compromising their propriety, morality or privacy, but about fulfilling their civic duties and roles as society's guardians, educators and arbitrators of social and moral improvement (Okker, 1995: 67-68). Her intrusions into the private lives of women poets as well as her inclusion of their visual descriptions are justifiable proof of the ability of these commendable women to integrate their public, domestic and artistic duties (Okker, 1995: 100-2). The ever-exemplary Hemans's 'excellence in private life' and her performance of the 'humbles duties' was, as Hale emphasizes, congruent with her 'cultivation of the highest gifts of intellect' (19). Moreover, the private histories of other British and American women poets, Howitt (171-2), Jewsbury Bowles (222), Mitford (236), Sigourney (249) and Anna Maria Wells (310) are similarly used to unsettle a correlation of poetic fame and female creativity with personal sorrow, sacrifice, doom and abandonment, popularized by Germaine De Staël's *Corrine or Italy* (1807). Such commentary complicates the articulation of these ideas in some of the poems included in the gift book including Hemans's 'Woman and Fame' (1839: 34-35) and Landon's 'Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans' (1839: 156), which pays tribute to Hemans by emphasising her personal suffering and that fame meant she was 'Not half enough beloved': 'While what to others triumph seemed, / To [her] was sacrifice?' (1839: 156). While such poems underline the difficulty of women achieving fame while maintaining respectability, Hale draws on celebrity discourse to suggest alternatives. Her reader is given the example of Landon, who specialized in poems of 'passionate genius and disappointed love', but was a socialite who 'lived in the sunshine of the world too much. It is said that she is very fond of society, and shines among the fair, fashionable and fascinating of the London world, as a "bright

particular star”— and that never has a disappointment of the heart occurred to cloud her vivacity’ (132).

Perhaps aware of levels of ambivalence about women’s celebrity and the commodification of sentiment within their poetry, Hale, like other publishing women at the time, stresses the range, variety, originality and intellectuality of women’s poetry and attempts to expand perceptions about what was culturally sanctioned for women poets to address. She draws on examples from a female transatlantic community to prove her claims of the distinctiveness and diversity of women’s poetic genius against those who argue that there is only one ‘true feminine style’:

Let such critics compare the poems of Mrs. Hemans and Mary Howitt—of Miss Taylor and Miss Landon—of Mrs. Sigourney and Miss Gould. Are not all these productions beautifully feminine? And yet all differ in their style of beauty. The truth is, woman has not such unlimited range of subjects as man has, but in the manner of treating those within her province, she has a freedom as perfect as his; and the delicate shades of genius are as varied and as distinctly marked in one sex as its bold outlines are in the other. There are more varieties of the rose than of the oak (6-7).

Her introductory materials discuss the poetic style of her chosen poets, challenging ideas about women’s poetry as affect-laden and self-expressive by underlining women’s artistry and inventiveness. Yet this strategy is complemented by her treatment of British and American poets, in turn, as celebrity figures that appeals to ‘an expanding audience of readers willing and eager not only to read the actual poetry of these authors but also to view the public display of what would otherwise be the private lives of women’ (Kete, 2012: 30-31). Her use of celebrity discourse points to levels of discontinuity between the facts of the women poets’ lives and the sentiments of their poetry, and, perhaps, to her recognition of the

need to balance ‘privacy with visibility to enhance public interest in [women’s] lives and work’ (Easley, 2011:12). But the tension between a discourse of female representativeness and celebrity-led assertions of individuality and uniqueness seems, at times, to necessitate ever more invasive ways of capturing each woman’s specificity or complexity. Women’s achievement of a public position brings with it levels of personal exposure to which Hale acquiesces, so she can establish a form of fame that, for her, is inextricably connected with the ability of women poets to transcend themselves and connect with readers.

Sisterly Celebrity: Woman and Fame

The introductions within Hale’s book confirm recent scholarship that notes the ‘interplay of presence and absence in women’s literary careers’ (Easley, 2011: 50) and the position of women poets as ‘[c]aught between self-promotion and self-effacement’ and experiencing ‘a complex desire to be both displayed and concealed, simultaneously to construct a gendered public persona and to abscond from that persona’ (Mole, 2011: 12). Hale seeks to unsettle the notion that women poets create intimacy with readers through forms of artless self-revelation that interconnect their bodies, lives and poems. While Hale notes the attractions of stereotypical poetess poems – the ‘child-like simplicity in [a poet’s] feelings, that makes the reader of her unstudied effusions love her at once’ (1839: 115) or the ‘fervidness in the expressions’ (1839: 115, 363) – she uses the works of famous British women to create levels of ambiguity in the commonplace idea that women poets write exclusively in this way. Essentially, she opposes the conception of women’s poetry as predominantly connected with ‘tender and flowery description which may be termed *sentimentalism*’ with alternative viewpoints that underscore the ‘reflective, serious, and at times sublime’ nature of women’s poems (1839: 207). Taken as a whole the gift book implies that the studious, carefully

revised, witty, and intellectual and even philosophical poetry of British women has inspired and validated similar strains within American women's poetry. Intent on emphasising women's artistry and genius, Hale offers readers, at times intrusive, biographical details about her chosen British celebrities.

Although acting as Hale's exemplary genius, Hemans's unhappy marriage and the 'domestic infelicity' that 'so tried and tortured her sensitive heart' are mentioned; Hale confides: 'Suffice it to say, that her husband left her and his five young sons to struggle as they might, with sorrow, and the cold, selfish world' (1839: 20). Hale also mentions a recently published private letter of Hemans that reveals the poet had 'the loving, hoping heart of a true woman' and 'the poet of home' (1839: 19). While certainly there to fascinate readers and offer insight into this public figure's private life, the introduction encourages and discourages such interest, suggesting that out of respect for Hemans, readers should forebear from adverting to such 'scenes and suffering' (1839: 20). Moreover, Hale's celebrity gossip is used to underscore that Hemans's genius derives from her ability to transform and fictionalize '[her sincere] struggles and [her] sorrows' (1839: 18). In a similar manner, Hale intrudes into the private life of one of the most commercially successful celebrity poets of the period, Landon. Again, while her poems 'bear the impress of individual and real feeling' and emerge from 'her own heart and experience', they are works of 'genius, creative power' and 'judgment and taste' (133, 129). Readers are warned that when Landon depicts 'the woes of despairing and forsaken lovers, she is not describing her own case': 'No gentle reader of [her works] must identify the suffering heroines of those poems with the accomplished writer' (1839: 132, 33).

Hemans 'stands pre-eminent among [Hale's] female poetic writers', 'can never die' and possesses a 'genius [that] will never be dimmed, nor the song of her harp [be] forgotten'

because she has ‘thrilled the chords of the human soul, which, while the race of man continues, cannot but respond to her sentiments’ (1839: 17). She is a ‘mystic prophetess’ praised for her wonderful ‘perception of the *beautiful*’: her fame is a result of her ability to express not her own ‘blighted hopes’ or personal ‘sadness’, but rather the anguish of humanity before the reality of the death and decay of nature and beauty (18). Her literary endurance is tied to the generative effect that her poetry can have on readers’ hearts and imaginations: Hemans is ‘endowed with the power of expressing “thoughts which create thoughts” in the minds of others’ (1839: 17-18). Having experienced ‘with her mind’s eye and felt in her own soul all that she has portrayed’, she compels ‘the sympathy of her readers to follow her bidding, and by the dream of the poet to interpret their own feelings, and struggles and sorrows’ (1839: 18-19). Hemans’s ‘unparalleled success’ comes from ‘her sympathy with her own sex’ and the ‘inestimable benefit [of her work for] the young imaginative reader’ (1839: 19). She becomes the ‘Bard of eternity’ and ‘Immortal glory’ not by displaying herself in her poetry, but instead by revealing readers to themselves.

Throughout her volume, the fame of women poets derives from their ‘creative power’, imagination and reason (133, 247) to shape their actual and deeply felt experiences into poems that engage readers (132, 171, 221, 320, 326). While Hale draws attention to other women poets who follow Hemans’s strategy, it is an American, Sigourney, who comes closest to Hemans in terms of achieving the self-effacing strategy that grants lasting fame. Like Hemans, Sigourney possesses a ‘fount of sympathy in her heart’, fine perceptions, a contemplative mind and an ability to awaken sympathy in others (248), but her poems lack ‘fervency’ and passion because she ‘fear[s] to pour forth the full gush of her feelings’ (249). Hale’s inclusion of Sigourney’s poem ‘Felicia Hemans’ in the *Ladies’ Wreath* is provocative. The poem connects Hemans’s achievement of a ‘glorious name’ with the fact that ‘every

unborn age / Shall mix thee with its household charities' (274). Reinforcing and perhaps even inspiring Hale's ideas, Sigourney's tribute connects fame with the establishment of intimate relationships between celebrity poet and fan reader. Referring to Hemans, Hale asks 'who that ever read the outpourings of her soul was not her friend?' (21).

Even if Hale's gift book is given by a man as a sign of courtship, or familial, marital or domestic relations, Hale's gift book is in every sense a sign and token of female friendship. Hale constructs her audience not as anonymous and impersonal, but through the language of friendship and sisterhood as well as 'tutelary community-building' (Loeffelholz, 2004: 120). Like other nineteenth-century female editors, she is using her publication to foster 'a network of women's writing' and 'community of women writers' in conversation with each other and making such 'professional kinship' of engaging with and responding to by each other's work a key aspect of the literary marketplace (Brown, 2000: 191). Her conceptualization of women's poetry as centring on shared experiences and feelings and as offering 'some benefit or consolation to those who are suffering similar sorrows, or struggling with similar difficulties' (1839: 409), which goes to the 'heart of the reader at once, and exalts the strain, no matter what the theme may be' centralizes female same-sex bonds (1839: 363). The importance of such relationships are reinforced by Hale's inclusion of poems about female friendship (1839: 164-5, 274-75, 374) and tribute poems by women poets to their dead precursors that evoke the fact that 'much popular women's poetry of the nineteenth century' attempted to forge 'social networks and transmit cultural and formal understandings of value within and through time' (Richards, 2004: 25). Moreover, female attachments dominate from the volume's dedication to Hale's friend Mrs Abbott Lawrence to various references to actual friendships between women poets such as between Jewsbury and Hemans, Landon and Mary-Ann Browne, and Landon and the American poet Emma Embury

(1839: 193, 204, 297), as well as Hale's own friendships with the American poets, which make it 'a difficult and delicate [task] to write about ...[her] own countrywomen, and esteemed correspondents or personal friends' (1839: 245).

Hale illuminates a supportive intellectual and creative female poetic community in which members celebrate the 'genius' and 'excellence' of each 'sister of the lyre' (207), locating poets and readers in the rhetoric and reality of emotional bonds of intimacy and mutuality and reciprocity between women in nineteenth-century US culture (see Weber, 2012). Assuming a sisterly role within this all-female egalitarian space of shared interests and experience (Okker, 1995: 23, 55), her gift book unsettles expected hierarchical relations between celebrities and fans to stress their shared membership of a supportive community of women poets who act as models combining the moral instructiveness of 'self-sacrificing' loving mothers with the 'warm confiding and exalting affection of a sister' (1839: 7). Again such attachments are underscored by the poems within her volume, for example, 'Sister' and 'Stanza to a Sister' and 'Stanza' (1839: 75-6, 307-8, 346-7), as well as her presentation of British and American women poets as 'sisters' of the lyre or 'sister authors' (409) and 'our' poetesses (1839: 158, 172, 277, 297). Female readers are encouraged to admire 'the fame of Joanna Baillie' and to delight in the 'proud station which this gifted sister of the lyre has won, thus to become, as it were, a teacher of genius, a beacon in the path of intellectual glory' (1839: 71). Similarly, Hale writes: 'every true sister of the lyre feels a companionship with Caroline Bowles. And she is a model to which we delight to direct the attention of our young ladies' (1839: 221). Explicitly referring to Landon's reception in America, Hale notes that 'no modern English writer of poetry is now more popularly known among us than L.E. L. Her lyrical effusions find a place in our newspapers from Maine to Florida, and her beautiful "Poem on the death of Mrs. Hemans" has given her a warm place in the heart of

many a devoted admirer of that sweet songstress. Thus kind and affectionate should be the feeling of each sister of the lyre towards the accomplished, the gifted L. E. L' (133). Hale's discourse of celebrity sisterliness corresponds to the strategic use by female contemporaries of 'literary character studies of famous female authors' to offer inspirational examples, create affective bonds between writers and readers, and make a case for women's place within the public sphere (Weber, 2012: 6-7)

Conclusion

Although at points she differentiates between British women poets and her countrywomen, owing to her own nationalistic leanings (1839: 297-8), Hale's gift to American women foregrounded the importance of transatlantic cultural and personal connections and of seeing and celebrating American women's literary achievements, success and celebrity in relation to that of their British authorizing and inspiring precursors and contemporaries. Along with comparable strategies within US print culture, Hale's drawing of attention to the lives and poetry of American women poets via the celebrity and fame of British women poets culminated in the publication in the late 1840s of three anthologies dedicated exclusively to American women poets: Caroline May's *The American Female Poets* (1848), Rufus W. Griswold's *The Female Poets of America* (1849) and Thomas Buchanan Read's *The Female Poets of America* (1849). While these anthologists, like Hale, include biographies and/or portraits of some of the anthologized poets, May and Griswold, unlike Hale, see a woman's poetry 'as little more than a function of her life, that is, a guide to [each poet's] character and a record of her experience': for them, the 'woman as poet was more significant than the poetry she wrote' (Wendorff, 2003: 111). These volumes anthologize celebrities, connecting name, literary work, personality and visual or verbal portrait, but without offering, as Hale's

does, the gift of fame as a reward for works of diversity, originality and genius. While these anthologies no longer needed a British celebrity-endorsement, they removed and isolated American women poets and their writings from the transatlantic poetic sisterhood of shared experience and aspiration, intellectuality and renown, to which, as Hale shows, they fundamentally belonged.

References

- Behrendt S. C. 2012. William Wordsworth and Women Poets. *European Romantic Review*, 23(6): 635-650.
- Bennett, P. B. 2003. *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800–1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, P. B. 2007. Was Sigourney a Poetess? The Aesthetics of Victorian Plenitude in Lydia Sigourney's Poetry. *Comparative American Studies* 5(3): 265–289.
- Braudy, L. 1997. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. New York: Vintage.
- Brock, C. 2006. *The Feminization of Fame, 1750–1830*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Brown, S. 2000. The Victorian Poetess. In J. Bristow, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.180-202
Cambridge University Press.
- Easley, A. 2011. *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850–1914*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Eisner, E. 2009. *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Globe*. 1835. Hemans and Sigourney. 18 Nov. *19th Century U.S. Newspapers*.

- Hale, [S. J.] Hale ed. 1837. *The Ladies' Wreath: a Selection from the Female Poetic Writers of England and America*. Boston: Marsh, Capen Lloyd.
- Hale, S. J. 1853. *Woman's Record: or, Sketches of all Distinguished Women, from "The Beginning" Til A. D. 1850*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publisher.
- Hale, [S. J.] ed. 1839. *The Ladies' Wreath: a Selection from the Female Poetic Writers of England and America*. Boston: Marsh, Capen Lloyd, Web.
- Harris, K. D. 2015. *Forget Me Not: the Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1825-1855*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Kete, M. L. 2011. The Reception of Nineteenth-Century American Poetry. In K. Larson ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.15-35.
- Knowles, C. 2012. Celebrity, Femininity and Masquerade: Reading Letitia Landon's *Romance and Reality*. *European Romantic Review* 23(2): 247-263.
- Kooistra, L. J. 2011. *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing: the Illustrated Gift Book and Victorian Visual Culture, 1855-1875*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University.
- Ledbetter, K. 2009. *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lehuu, I. *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000.
- Loeffelholz, M. 2004. *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lootens, T. 1996. *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender and Victorian Literary Canonization*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

- Lootens, T. 1999. Hemans and her American Heirs: Nineteenth- Century Women's Poetry and National Identity. In: I. Armstrong and V. Blain, eds. *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender & Genre, 1830-1900*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 243-260.
- Mandell, L. ed. 2003. The Transatlantic Poetess: Special Issue. *Romanticism on the Net* 29–30. <www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n29/index.html>.
- Mole, T. 2007. *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mole, T. ed. 2009. *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750–1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- New Hampshire Statesman*. 1853. Miss Letitia E. Landon. 25. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.
- Okker, P. 1995. *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth- Century American Women Editors*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Providence Patriot, Columbian Phenix* 1820. Ladies' Department. 2 Aug. 1820: *19th Century U.S. Newspapers*.
- Richards, E. 2004. *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salmon, R. 2013. *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stedman, E. C. 1881. Poetry in America. *Scribner's Monthly*, 22(6): 817-828
- Virginia Free Press*. 1833. Variety. 22 Aug. 1833. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.
- Weber, B. R. 2012. *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: the Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Wendorff, L. C. 2001. 'The Vivid Dreamings of an Unsatisfied Heart': Gender Ideology, Literary Aesthetics, and the 'Poetess' in Nineteenth-Century America. *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 15(2): 109–129.

Woodbury, H. E. 1852. 'Woman in her Social Relation', *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*, 45: 333-37.