



University Library, Special Collections & Archives
Highlight for September 2010

New acquisition of Felicia Hemans manuscripts and correspondence.

Felicia Dorothea Hemans née Browne (1793-1835) was a prolific and renowned Romantic poet. In 1826 the *Literary Chronicle* called her *the first poetess of the day*¹ and with the exception of Lord Byron the sales of her publications during her lifetime, outstripped those of all other Romantic poets. Wordsworth himself lamented Hemans's death in his *Extempore Effusion on the Death of James Hogg* (1837):

Mourn rather for that holy spirit,
Sweet as the spring, as ocean deep;
For her who, ere her summer faded,
Has sunk into a breathless sleep.

Felicia Dorothea Browne was born in Liverpool in 1793, one of six children born to George Browne and his wife, Felicity Dorothea, (née Wagner). The Browne family moved to Wales when Felicia was seven years old and at this time, her favourite pastime was to sit in the apple tree and read Shakespeare. Felicia began writing poetry at a very young age, and *Poems by Felicia Dorothea Browne*² was published in 1808 when she was just 15 years old.

Felicia Browne married Captain Alfred Hemans in 1812 and together they had 5 children - all boys - between 1813 and 1817. In 1818 the Hemans separated and Captain Hemans settled in Rome, leaving Felicia and their young family in Wales. This was to become a permanent separation and the two never met again.

Hemans's *Records of Woman: With Other Poems* (1828) concentrates on the various hardships faced by women and many of the trials in these poems were reflected in her own life - she had been responsible for the financial maintenance of her family for ten years when it was



1 *Literary Chronicle* 379 (August 1826) 518-19, p. 518.) .

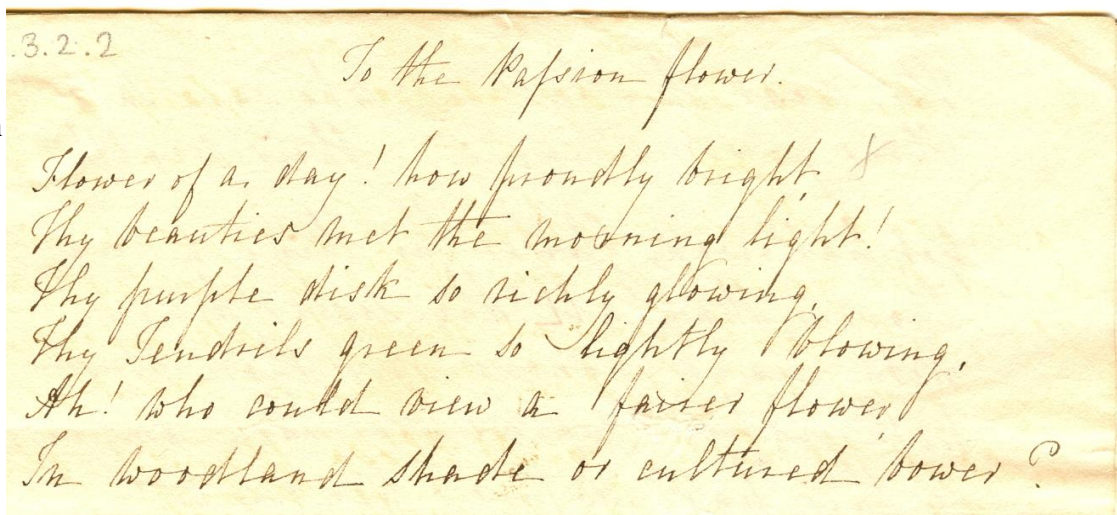
2 *Poems by Felicia Dorothea Browne*, 1808. Special Collections and Archives: SPEC G36.21

published, including not only her five sons, but also her mother and sister.

Hemans's literary manuscripts and correspondence are kept within archives all over the world, including the National Library of Scotland, and the Houghton Library, Harvard University. There have been manuscript poems and correspondence belonging to Hemans within Liverpool University's Special Collections and Archives for over 25 years. Recently however, the archive was approached with the possibility of a further, more extensive deposit of material belonging to Hemans. The material was donated by Sir Sydney Giffard in July 2010, and had been discovered in an old trunk in his attic. The new collection which is now catalogued includes signed manuscript poems with amendments by Hemans, correspondence, and a notebook.

One particularly interesting find within the new acquisition has been a letter in which Hemans writes that she is completing a tragedy about the Sicilian Vespers, which became the play *The Vespers of Palermo* (1823). Hemans sold the copyright to the play for 200 guineas in 1823 and it was performed at Covent Garden, where unfortunately it was badly received. However, it was then taken to Edinburgh and performed with an introduction by Sir Walter Scott, with more success and Hemans struck up a regular correspondence with Scott from this time.

There is also a signed manuscript (pictured here) which includes the poem *To The Passion Flower* (Sept 1815). This manuscript was sent by Hemans to her friend Miss Maynard and it has several



nice annotations, one of which reads, "This poem with considerable additions is now 1816, printed by (John) Murray". Murray was an Edinburgh publisher who also boasted Byron as one of his authors. The collection of manuscripts highlights the place that Hemans held in Victorian society, and provides an insight into the way her poetry was written.

Text by Helen Donald.

References:

Nanora Sweet, 'Hemans, Felicia Dorothea (1793–1835)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12888>, accessed 16 Sept 2010]

Felicia Hemans MS and contemporary printed editions in Liverpool University Library: MS.3.1(82-83); MS.26.4(6); MS.28.3(1-3). Felicia Hemans books (SC&A): <http://library.liv.ac.uk/search/?searchtype=a&SORT=D&searcharg=Hemans&searchscope=3>

Special Collections & Archives website: <http://sca.lib.liv.ac.uk/collections/index.html>

SC&A literary mss webpage: <http://sca.lib.liv.ac.uk/collections/colldescs/modlitmss.html> (with link to listing of Hemans MS.28.3).