

Buyer Beware: The Gift Poetics of Letitia Elizabeth Landon

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Letitia Elizabeth Landon's early works have most frequently interested scholars as adaptations of the myth popularized by Germaine de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), in which a woman poet's lyrics inspire both national fervor and tragic love. Ellen Moers, tracing the legacy of *Corinne* in British and American nineteenth-century literature, calls Landon "one of Corinne's disciples."¹ Not only did Landon translate *Corinne* itself, but she also wrote "The Improvisatrice" (1824), a poem about a poet who, like Corinne, was "a maker and reciter of spontaneous verses" (*Lit-errary Women*, pp. 183–84). Angela Leighton identifies the "Improvisatrice" of the poem as "another Corinne," whose fluent verse "mimes the notion of woman's unstoppable flow of creativity."² It is evident that Landon's poetic performances owe much to the legacy of *Corinne*. In this essay, however, I want to draw attention to a different, but equally central, legacy. Shaping such works as "The Improvisatrice," but belonging more

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¹ *Literary Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1976), p. 181.

² *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 47, 58.

particularly to Landon's own oeuvre, is what I call a "poetics of giving." Landon's gift poetics runs through the body of her work, and it signals, in the earliest years of her publishing career, how and it signals, in the earliest years of her publishing career, how her poetry is to be read. The eponymous speaker of "The Improvisatrice" claims that poetry—particularly her own—is a gift to be given and received: "... in that great and glorious dowry / Which Genius gives, I had my part."³ She then emphasizes the circularity of her poetic gift as she immediately and passionately "pour[s] her full and burning heart / In song . . ." (ll. 28–29). The image of poetic overflowing, rather than professional measure, underscores the inevitability of this open circulation of poetic gifts.

While critics have overlooked this poetics of gift circulation, they have given a great deal of attention in recent years to the commercial circulation of Landon's poetry itself. Scholarship on Landon (better known in her own day by the signature initials "L.E.L.") has examined the ways in which her work is implicated in systems of exchange. Leighton, for example, notes the incongruity of a wage-earning Corinne;⁴ though Sael's independent heroine could afford to perform out of choice, Landon's own performances were often motivated by need. The finances behind the gift-book publishing phenomenon, Landon's relationship with her publisher, her appeal as a young and beautiful poet of sentiment, and the salaries she commanded have all been well documented, and they help to explain how she became a market success. But this focus on consumption within the literary market remains problematic. Not only have critics generally oversimplified Landon's relationship to commodification and sales, but also—and more important for my discussion—their fixation on her role in the capitalist marketplace has made us less ready to analyze her relationship to the gift, her other strategy of exchange. Through her publishing strategies, as well as the very language of her poetic work, Landon's simultaneous reliance on both gift and sale models complicates the process of exchange. When Landon

claims to give instead of sell, her reader's role is undefined, and the obligations that the gift entails put Landon in a position of power.

In this essay I explore the marketing strategy, thematic approach, formal style, and legacy of reception that comprise Landon's "gift poetics," and I show how this poetics is significant both for reading her work and for reconsidering a line of women's poetry neglected by Romantic and Victorian scholarship alike. I argue that L.E.L. does not deal in beauty, love, or self, but in power—and that what we see in her art is, finally, a deceptively strong poetics of giving mediated by marketing strategies that treated her poetry as "gifts" in order to sell them.



Landon first published in *The Literary Gazette*, a popular weekly literary review edited by her neighbor William Jerdan and notorious for the practice of "puffing" publishers' leading authors.⁵ She had success publishing collections of verse as well, including *The Improvisatrice* (1824), the title poem of which focuses attention on her gift poetics. But she was also quick to take advantage of a publication form more peculiar to her time, contributing hundreds of poems and later serving as editor for a new kind of publication: the literary annual.

Over the past decade, scholarship on literary annuals or "gift books" has reintroduced a once popular genre to a critical audience. As we now know, when the first British gift book was introduced for the 1823 holiday market, it started a thirty-year trend that would have a huge impact on both British and American publishing. Dozens of imitators sprang up, competing to offer the public the most elaborately illustrated and elegantly bound albums available. These albums, of roughly

³ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "The Improvisatrice," in *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, ed. Jerome McGann and Daniel Rieess (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1997), p. 52, ll. 26–27. Subsequent notes refer to this collection as *Selected Writings*.

⁴ See *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 47.

⁵ See Richard Pearson, *W. M. Thackeray and the Mediated Text: Writing for Periodicals in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 4–5; Douglas K. Morris, "Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review, The," in *British Literary Magazines: The Romantic Age, 1789–1836*, ed. Alvin Sullivan (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 236; Robert Duncan, "Literary Gazette, The," in *British Literary Magazines*, pp. 243–44; and Leslie A. Marchand, *The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1941), pp. 147–48.

three- to four-hundred printed pages, presented a range of literary material: lyric poetry, dramatic scenes, travel essays, and tales of adventure and/or love. The books were valued as physical works of art as much as for their literary content. Silk covers and gilt edges were only part of the appeal: the albums also boasted engravings of well-known paintings. Most frequently depicting either exotic landscapes or idealized young women in a fairly narrow range of poses, these engravings often dictated, at least nominally, the topics of the poems or short stories accompanying them.

The quality of the written and engraved contributions in gift books was (and still is) loudly debated. Gregory O'Dea refers to the annuals as "little more than pretty baubles, hand-somely designed and illustrated but notoriously devoid of serious literary merit."⁶ O'Dea's recent assessment echoes a long tradition of gift-book bashing. In an infamous 1837 essay William Makepeace Thackeray derides them:

Miss Landon, Miss Mitford, or my Lady Blessington, writes a song upon the opposite page [of an engraving], about water-lily, chilly, stilly, shivering beside a streamlet, plighted, blighted, love-benighted, falsehood sharper than a gimlet, lost affection, recollection, cut connexion, tears in torrents, true-love token, spoken broken, sighing, dying, girl of Florence; and so on. The poetry is quite worthy of the picture, and a little sham sentiment is employed to illustrate a little sham art.⁷

These two sentences epitomize the first one hundred and fifty years of gift-book criticism: gift books were written largely by and for women; their subject matter—love, affection, pity, sentiment—was "sham," unworthy of literary merit; and their poetry and tales were further debased by being written to illustrate artwork rather than the other way around. As Kathryn Ledbetter puts it: "Male elitists saw an opportunity to attack the

literature in the annuals as purely feminine, thus inferior."⁸ Yet these books were popular. The preface of the *Literary Souvenir* (1826), for example, remarks that its predecessor, "under disadvantages of no ordinary nature," nevertheless sold six thousand copies.⁹ Ledbetter notes: "S. C. Hall estimated the public spent 100,000 pounds each season for annuals during their peak in the 1830s" ("BeGemmaed," p. 235). Samuel Carter Hall, who was closely connected to Landon and the world of publishing as editor of the *New Monthly Magazine*, had reason to know; he was also the editor of an annual gift book, *The Amulet: a Christian and Literary Remembrancer*.

At stake in the extraordinary popularity of gift books was their explicit claim to moral stature and benevolent purpose. The preface to the 1830 *Forget Me Not* proudly advertises its inclusion of engravings, not because of their beauty, quality, or subject matter but because of the gift books' generous transmission of them:

We rejoice to see that the selfish satisfaction of locking up masterpieces of art for the exclusive gratification of the possessors, is giving way to a more liberal feeling, which induces proprietors of such productions to communicate to others some portion of the pleasure which they afford. . . .¹⁰

Not only did gift books make art and literature available to a large audience, but they also gave a moral tenor to their distribution success by pitting themselves against "selfish" proprietors. As the self-styled vehicles of "liberal feeling," these costly productions described their literary aims as "combining simplicity of style with elevation of sentiment, and possessing a salutary moral tendency in its general effect."¹¹

Also invested in the books' classification as "gift," the editor of the *Literary Souvenir* (1826), in which three of Landon's

⁸ "BeGemmaed and beAmuleted": Tennyson and Those 'vapid' Gift Books," *Victorian Poetry*, 34 (1996), 242.

⁹ [Alaric A. Watts], preface to *The Literary Souvenir; or, Cabinet of Poetry and Romance*, ed. Watts (London: Hurst, Robinson, and Co., 1826), p. v.

¹⁰ [Frederic Shoberl], preface to *Forget Me Not*, ed. Shoberl (London: R. Ackermann and Co., 1830), p. vi.

¹¹ [Anon.], preface to *Friendship's Offering* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1832), p. v.

⁶ "Perhaps a Tale You'll Make It": Mary Shelley's Tales for *The Keepsake*, in *Leonora's Departures: Mary Shelley after "Frankenstein"*—Essays in Honor of the Bicentenary of Mary Shelley's Birth, ed. Syndy M. Conger, Frederick S. Frank, and Gregory O'Dea (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press and Associated Univ. Presses, 1997), p. 62.

⁷ [William Makepeace Thackeray], "A Word on the Annuals," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, 16 (1837), 758.

poems appear, thanks the writers who "have so obligingly favoured me with their contributions" (p. xi), promoting the idea that generous contribution, rather than trade, drove the gift-book market. The very publication of annuals, by these accounts, was benevolent. The books were "gifts," shared liberally, prescribing morality and promoting the affectionate sentiments aimed for in such titles as *Friendship's Offering*, *Friendship's Gift*, *Affection's Gift*, *Token of Friendship*, *Pledge of Friendship*, and *Forget Me Not*.

The annuals thus offered contradictory messages: they were "gifts," but they were also material objects for sale. And they sold well at a time when a tough market made publishers reluctant to attempt volumes of poetry. Focusing on this aspect of gift-book publishing, Peter J. Manning has demonstrated how the large salaries commanded by the annuals tempted such well-known authors as William Wordsworth.¹² Similarly, Paula R. Feldman and Judith Pascoe have each looked at gift-book sales and marketing in order to show how women writers, including Felicia Hemans, Mary Shelley, and Landon, were also able to rely on the annuals for steady and comfortable incomes.¹³

Critics have extensively acknowledged Landon's relationship to the publishing world of gift annuals. Her gift-book work helped her to maintain both extraordinary literary popularity and financial success, and these publications were a financial necessity for the family she supported, as Leighton notes: "In the absence of fathers and husbands, . . . [Landon] wrote what was required by the market, and in sufficient quantities to keep [herself and her family] from the 'absolute poverty' which was the lot of untrained, unprotected middle-class women" (*Victorian Women Poets*, p. 48). This need justified her to an audience that held reservations about women's writing, and it still inter-

¹² See Manning, "Wordsworth in the Keepsake, 1829," in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 49–51.

¹³ See Feldman, "The Poet and the Profits: Felicia Hemans and the Literary Marketplace," in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830–1900*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 80–81; and Pascoe, "Poetry as Souvenir: Mary Shelley in the Annuals," in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 173–84, 277–79.

ests critics today, who have been glad to add Landon to a list of women able to make a living through their literary productions. But Landon did not simply limit herself to "what was required by the market": she also courted the market, extended its sales possibilities, and often delivered more than her buyers expected, earning an income of at least £250 per year in the process.¹⁴

In this confused economy of gift sales, gift-book profit for Landon and others was recorded not only in pounds, shillings, and pence but also in readership and a loose rein for the imaginative powers of authors. Elizabeth Barrett Browning knew that publishing in gift books "would increase her public recognition."¹⁵ And the nature of that public was important. Ledbetter notes that annuals gave their writers "much needed exposure to a burgeoning new middle-class readership which included a growing number of female readers" ("BeGemmaed," p. 236), and, as she has shown, Tennyson was another writer who benefited from this exposure early in his career.

For its middle-class readership the elegant gift book was a status symbol, trading on class aspirations by filling its pages with titled contributors, editors, and images. For a growing female readership the gift book, by becoming a site for women's (often subversive) work, gained even greater value as an object of exchange. The books were not as straightforward as their early critics thought; many studies of female authorship and audience, uses of sentiment, and the relationship between text and illustration have by now repudiated Bradford Allen Booth's early claim about the gift book: "not its bitterest critic could say its moral tone was subversive."¹⁶

Women edited many of the annuals and contributed vast quantities of text to them. Peter J. Manning observes: "Lady Blessington's resourceful editorial drugging year after year challenged the notion upon which the annuals were built, that

¹⁴ See Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 113.

¹⁵ Beverly Taylor, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Subversion of the Gift Book Model," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 20 (1993), 62.

¹⁶ Bradford Allen Booth, preface to *A Cabinet of Gems: Short Stories from the English Annuals*, ed. Booth (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1938), p. 7.

women were domestic, incapable beings" ("Wordsworth in the *Keepsake*," p. 56). Though the subversive nature of women's work was largely concealed by its framing in the books as "gift," women's editorial work on the annuals, the writings they contributed to them, and the relationship of those writings to the engravings they were meant to illustrate could all disrupt gender expectations. For example, though the opening engraving of the 1828 *Forget Me Not* is of a bridal morning, it is nevertheless sisterly rather than romantic love that occupies the first pages of the book. Felicia Hemans's "The Sister's Dream" (the first poem in the annual) tells of a girl who is visited in sleep by the ghosts of her three sisters. The poem asks: "will she not / Wake with more painful yearning at her heart? / Will not her home seem a yet lonelier spot, / Her talks more sad, when those bright shadows part?"¹⁷ It is significant here that happiness of home and heart are figured in terms of sisterhood, not marriage.

The opening engraving in the *Forget Me Not* is itself, at first glance, fairly benign (see Figure 1).¹⁸ In its center sits a smiling woman surrounded by a group of female friends and servants who are assisting with her bridal preparations: one clasps a bracelet on her arm, another fixes her veil, and a third admires the vignette. For a modern viewer the shadowed figure of a black page, set somewhat apart from the women whose white garments bind them compositionally together, disrupts the tableau of (white) female solidarity.¹⁹ The servant's rich robes and bejeweled turban speak more of his mistress's wealth (also signified by the jewels and robes on the dressing table and chair of her boudoir) than of his own status. This figure offers a striking contrast to the others, underscoring the elevated sta-

¹⁷ Felicia Hemans, "The Sister's Dream," in *Forget Me Not*, ed. Frederic Shoberl (London: R. Ackermann and Co., 1828), p. 1.

¹⁸ J. Stephanoff and E. Finden, *Bridal Morning* (engraving, 1828), Special Collections, Univ. of Virginia Library.

¹⁹ I use the word "black" to describe this figure in the sense suggested in Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), p. 131: "Blackness" in the eighteenth century was of course used to characterize persons from the Indies, the Americas, Africa, or the South Pacific; it was also applied to the Irish as a mark of their Celtic origins, and more generally to the laboring classes, especially coalminers and chimney sweeps." Nussbaum also notes the "racial muddles" that synthesized Indian, African, and white complexions (see pp. 151–52).



FIGURE 1. J. Stephanoff and E. Finden, *Bridal Morning* (engraving, 1828).

tus of white womanhood at the expense of black servitude.²⁰ The overall effect of the image, however, as in Hemans's "The Sister's Dream," is one of a pleasant, sisterly community.

²⁰ I am indebted to Felicity Nussbaum for personally bringing many of the iconographical issues surrounding the servant figure of this engraving to my attention.

Like "The Sister's Dream," Landon's poem "The Bridal Morning" undermines the notion of marital happiness. Appearing one hundred pages further into the annual as a belated companion to the opening engraving, it criticizes the very terms of marriage. In verses distanced from the engraving as much by content as by pagination, L.E.L. describes a woman who has forsaken love for money: "This chain of gold—is this the one / In which thy newer love has bound thee? / . . . / Go, glittering slave! / . . . / Thy heart is sold."²¹ The ease with which marriage figuratively becomes slavery suggests that their terms are not so dissimilar, and that a bridal "morning" may be easily transformed into bridal *mourning*. Moreover, when we read the engraving alongside Landon's poem, the servant, nearly opposite the bride's mirror, might also be her slavewlike double.²² While the lady companions cast their eyes downward toward the bride, the bride and servant alone turn their gaze toward the mirror, which reflects the bride's image of herself but not the slavewlike alternative that Landon's verses suggest. (It is interesting that the servant's reflection does not appear in the mirror, and that the other women do not appear to notice him.)

The image and verses draw on at least two different eighteenth-century traditions for simultaneously depicting race and gender: in the first, the figure of a turbaned, black male stereotypically connoted excessive sexuality;²³ in the second, women rhetorically equated the circumstances of marriage with slavery.²⁴ Moira Ferguson notes that, in part due to

²¹ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "The Bridal Morning," in *Forged Me Not* (1828), p. 103.

²² In 1828 the status of black servants in England was ambiguous. Despite a legal ruling in 1772 that forbade the forcible removal of slaves from England, and despite the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, colonial slavery itself was not abolished until 1834. See Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 116; and Harry Harner, *The Longman Companion to Slavery, Emancipation and Civil Rights* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), pp. 72–78.

²³ See Nussbaum, *Limits of the Human*, pp. 204–5; and David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth-Century English Art* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 74–81. While Dabydeen's discussion of Hogarth's plates for *Marriage à la Mode* highlights the ways in which they "us[ed] the blacks to laugh at the upper classes," my focus here is on those plates' depictions of the black servants as sexualized. The aristocrats in Hogarth's plates were clearly objects of ridicule, while those in the image I am describing—though ambivalently treated in verse—are not.

²⁴ See Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, pp. 24–25, 106; and Michael Meyer, "Virtual and Real Slavery: Women on Abolition," in *Re-mapping Romanticism: Gender—Text—Context*:

this equation, by 1828 "women had become thoroughly identified as writers and agitators" against slavery—as well as for women's rights (*Subject to Others*, p. 264). But Landon's poem does not simply echo either of those traditions.

Though in the engraving the cupid poised above the hanging clock directs his arrow at the servant rather than the bride, in Landon's poem it is the bride's lust that is questioned. Similarly, the verses describing the bride's matrimonial choices indicate that her marriage is forced neither by patriarchal dictate nor by need: she is a slave not to marriage but to her own faithlessness and love for luxury. The trope of slavery in Landon's poem, though it might be spurred by the presence of a black servant in the engraving, has little to do with him, and nothing to do with abolition. Instead, Landon directs her poem against the excess wealth associated with capitalism, mercenary marriages, and possibly colonial trade as well. The servant's feathered attire thus serves to signify capitalist corruption rather than the bride's elevated status.

When we recall that it is published in a gift book, Landon's verse takes yet another twist. In addition to licensing her use of ideologically charged engravings for her own purposes, publication in a gift book offered a distinct contrast to the language of sale that her poem castigates. As a reputed poet of love, Landon put her heart and soul on display in her verses—or so, at least, her audience often felt. If her verses were for sale, then her emotion was too, and only the guise of a gift economy (such as the one marketed by the literary annuals) could separate Landon from the criticism she directs in "The Bridal Morning" at a more capitalist "heart . . . sold."



The gift status of literary annuals was important for Landon, but it was also complicated. The annuals' profits—financial and otherwise—call that status into question and prompt us to reflect on why they were often called gift

Selected Papers Delivered at the Symposium of the "Gesellschaft für englische Romanistik" held at the University of Erfurt (November 1999), ed. Christoph Bode and Fritz-Wilhelm Neumann (Essen: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 2001), p. 151.

books. While literary critics and historians have emphasized the annals' sales at the expense of overlooking their status as gifts, twentieth-century anthropological, philosophical, and theological theories on gift giving provide a useful starting place for much-needed speculation about the gift status of gift books. "Gift" has been a loaded term since Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le Don*, (1924, first translated into English in 1954). Mauss's anthropological studies of the so-called "primitive" societies of Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest revealed the basis of their economies in gift exchanges that are at once alliance-forming and agonistic. In particular, *potlatch*—the conspicuous destruction of wealth by giving or offering up goods and services—is important for this discussion. Mauss writes that *potlatch* imposes obligation on the recipient while it confers honor on the one who gives: "banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs" are among the goods and services exchanged "in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare."²⁵ The paradox of a transaction that at once explicitly rejects reciprocity but also implicitly demands—and receives—a return has intrigued scholars from various critical camps.

Eymological ambiguity echoes the paradox of anthropological (voluntary/compulsory) gift giving; as Mauss and others have shown, "gift" can mean either present or poison, as well as, more neutrally, a state of being (*as gift* equals "it gives" equals "there is"). Functionally, gift giving is equally ambiguous. John Milbank notes how the "sharp distinction between legal contract on the one hand, and gift on the other hand" collapses upon examination: "if certain public activities are still contaminated by the supposedly 'private' grammar of giving, it is inversely the case that free, private, [*sic*] giving is secretly pervaded by hidden contract and obligation."²⁶ Milbank's theological discussion of gift exchange follows the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida in questioning the very possibility of a

"gift." For Bourdieu giving is merely collective "self-deception," an effort to conceal the reciprocity of the "gift" exchange; for Derrida the gift fails because any acknowledgment of it constitutes its return and thus cancels the gift.²⁷

The self-contradictory nature of the one-sided "free" gift is important for philosophical treatments of giving. The very ambiguity in the terms of gift or contract that lead to these philosophical cancellations of "gift" is also useful in a cultural treatment of gift-book circulation. Why were these books called "gifts"? And what was at stake for their contributors in treating them as such?

Landon's role in a poetic marketplace hinges on the ambiguity of the gift; her poetry, like her publishing, skillfully engages with and uses that ambiguity for poetic profit. Her audience was not permitted to buy everything, and it is in L.E.L.'s *gifts*—those spaces of her poetic economy where she obscures her readers' role and asserts her own—that she is most subversively authoritative. We have seen how annals, as gift books, not only gave their writers the liberty to publish subversive texts, but did so under the auspices of benevolence. I turn now to Landon's own rhetoric of giving, where her self-destructive display is an essential element in her manipulation of these tropes of offering and gift giving.

As Mauss notes, gifts are mechanisms through which the donor can "display generosity, freedom, and autonomous action, as well as greatness" while also placing the recipient under obligation that is all the greater for its being unstated: "the gift necessarily entails the notion of credit" (*The Gift*, pp. 23, 36). The festival of *potlatch* is a useful concept for understanding the offerings that Landon's own poetry makes. *Potlatch* obligates its recipients: "One loses face for ever," Mauss remarks, "if one does not reciprocate, or if one does not carry out destruction of equivalent value" (*The Gift*, p. 42). So too we may be certain that, for L.E.L., gift poetry demands a response even while it offers the illusion that her work is self-sufficient, that it cannot

²⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 5.

²⁶ "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology*, 11 (1995), 122, 123.

²⁷ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 105; and Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 13. See also Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given," pp. 129–30, for a concise discussion of Bourdieu and Derrida.

be bought or sold, and that it can only be given directly from her hand to her reader's eye. Her reader will compensate by participating in her mythologizing—by admiring her, desiring her, sympathizing with her—but, above all, by expending his or her own energy on the subject of L.E.L.

L.E.L.'s poetry blatantly offers up loss as the subject of her work and the gift that will obligate her audience. Alas, she writes in "Erinna" (1826), "... day by day / Some new illusion is destroyed. . . ."²⁸ Not only illusions, but also the very poet who ob-serves them, is destroyed in her verses:

Oh! the mind
Too vivid in its lighted energies,
May read its fate in sunny Araby.
How lives its beauty in each Eastern tale,
Its growth of spices, and its growth of balm!
They are exhausted; and what is it now?
A wild and burning wilderness. Alas!
For such similitude. Too much this is
The fate of this world's loveliest and best.
(ll. 286–94)

The sales pitch is threefold. It tells us that the mind—or, more specifically, the mind of a poetic persona often conflated with L.E.L.—is vivid and beautiful, exoticized by Eastern spices and balm. This is Landon's self-commodification in masterfully seductive form. But the commodification is not merely para-physical and exotic; it is also made gratuitous. In carefully paratatic style, Landon does not let one word suffice where two can do. The world's "loveliest" and "best," "its growth of spices" and "its growth of balm," make her commodity a liberal one. It is "too vivid" and "too much"; the "wilderness" is "wild" as well as "burning"; the poem deals not with one but with "each" Eastern tale. *Pollatch*-style, this poetic excess makes a show of linguistic generosity. And Landon does not then leave the generous object neatly packaged for its readers' consumption; instead, she makes its exhaustion a combusive display.

A number of Landon scholars have discussed the self-destructive aspect of L.E.L.'s poetry. Anne K. Mellor views Lan-

don as exhausting categories of the beautiful, thus "undermin[ing] the very construction of femininity upon which her poetry was grounded" (*Romanticism and Gender*, p. 120). Leigh-ton reads this weariness in the woman herself, describing her as "exhausted," a "woman living on the edge of her nerves" (*Victorian Women Poets*, pp. 54, 53). And Jerome McCann and Daniel Riess have called Landon "a poet of disenchantments" who "executes" a series of "disillusions."²⁹ In a similar vein, Cynthia Lawford concurs that L.E.L.'s picture of the perfect woman is "man's ideal destroyed by man's worldliness and by her feminine sensibility"; she elsewhere writes that L.E.L. herself "had taken a fancy to the role of martyr for love."³⁰ What all of these accounts miss, however, is both the agency involved in the representation of this disenchanting exhaustion or martyrdom and the gift economy that accompanies it. These critics may notice Landon's exhaustion, but they do not notice the woman who sets it up for display. Susan Brown goes further, to be sure: "The persona of L.E.L.'s poetess is a self-consuming artifact, self-consciously delivered as an aesthetic object to the reader."³¹ But even this acknowledgment of Landon's self-consciousness serves solely to transform her self-consumption into an aesthetic object, a specular commodity that is sold in the marketplace.

Landon's self-destruction is more than commodity. Adriana Craciun takes a different perspective: "I locate an alternative poetics in Landon's later works, one which instead of embodying the beautiful to self-destructive ends, reveals destruction and decay as the inescapable condition of all social and proper bodies."³² While Craciun's reading offers an interesting path for Landon scholarship, it too accepts the "undeniably self-destructive currents in Landon's early poetry" (p. 196) as internal and separate from her later destructiveness, rather than purposeful and performative. For Landon, however, self-

²⁸ McCann and Riess, introduction to Landon, *Selected Writings*, pp. 24, 23.

²⁹ Cynthia Eve Lawford, "The Early Life and London Worlds of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, a Poet Performing in an Age of Sentiment and Display," Ph.D. Diss., City Univ. of New York, 2001, p. 253; and Cynthia Lawford, "Diary," *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2000, p. 37.

³⁰ Brown, "The Victorian Poetess," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 186.

³² *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), p. 196.

²⁸ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "Erinna," in *Selected Writings*, p. 96; ll. 264–65.

destructive displays affect more than self, and her role does not cease with the delivery and consumption of the object. The important point to note here is that L.E.L. is self-consciously the *giver* as well as the gift object transacted.

The distinction between gift and giver seems obvious, and it is one that has received a good deal of attention in studies of kinship organization for its privileging the authority of the (male) giver at the expense of the (female) gift. Gayle Rubin, for example, analyzing a structure of patriarchy, notes: "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it."³³ In Rubin's model, "the asymmetry of gender—the difference between exchanger and exchanged"—privileges male authority at the expense of female authority (p. 183). Luce Irigaray similarly argues that exchanges marginalize women: "The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men's needs/desires, of exchanges among men."³⁴

I am arguing here, however, that the conflation of exchanger and exchanged operates in precisely the opposite manner—since the transactions that take place serve to privilege Landon's authority. Those critics who seek to read L.E.L. as only a self-consuming article tend to privilege the power of the system or the authority of the publishers who deliver her to her audience. But if Landon is instead not only the object exchanged but also the agent behind the exchange, then she ceases to be merely a deliverable object and becomes instead an empowered partner in the spectacular offering of self. Landon is the commodity, of course, but she also helps to negotiate its expenditure. In Bourdieu's terms, her "demonstrative expenditure" functions as a kind of *potlatch* and "represents, like any other visible expenditure of the signs of wealth . . . , a kind of legitimizing self-affirmation through which power makes itself known and recognized" (*Logic of Practice*, p. 131). By offering

³³ Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), p. 174.

³⁴ Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 175.

up her own self-destruction, L.E.L. legitimates her powerful presence and therefore implicates others in similar destruction.

The destructive nature of the gifts that L.E.L. offers is most explicitly revealed in "The Offering," a poem that appeared in *The Amulet* for 1831. The name of the poem refers at once to its status as gift object, Landon's act of "offering" it to her public, the sacrificial content of that poem, and the other gift books with which her audience would have been familiar, with titles such as *The Young Ladies' Offering* and *Friendship's Offering*. The superstitious title of the annual, moreover, purports to situate the poem outside of a capitalist marketplace. "The Offering" tells of vanishing beauty and departed poetry. Its speaker is "weary and exhausted," and she pledges her poetry away from the world that has "lost its attraction":

I offer up affections,
Void, violent, and vain;
I offer years of sorrow
Of the mind, and body's pain:

I offer up my memory—
'Tis a drear and darkened page,
Where experience has been bitter,
And whose youth has been like age.

I offer hopes, whose folly
Only after-thoughts can know,
For instead of seeking heaven
They were chained to earth below!³⁵

Offering not once but, in the course of the longer poem, five times, these verses partake in a kind of repetitive excess similar to that which we saw in "Erinna." The gratuitousness of the phrases "drear and darkened," as well as "Void, violent, and vain," is further emphasized by the alliteration that makes one word appear visually, as well as thematically, interchangeable with another. These offerings—which gain gift-like resonance through association with the names of the other gift books—are negative. Landon makes a display of self-destruction here:

³⁵ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "The Offering," in *The Amulet: A Christian and Literary Remembrancer*, ed. S. C. Hall (London: John Westley and Co., 1831), p. 148.

not only is she sacrificing her affections, memory, and hopes, but she is also hinting at the destructive side of that sacrifice for its recipient. What sort of obligation does the gift of violence, pain, bitterness, and folly entail? Readers can perhaps distance themselves from the obligations of these sacrifices, but less easily can they extricate themselves from the obligations of the poem itself, also a sacrificial offering, also a tribute to L.E.L.'s destructive self. By linking the poem both to the sacrifices that its speaker claims to make and to the larger gift-book market, Landon suggests that all are complicit in her project of sacrificial offerings and spectacular obligations.



Not all of Landon's offerings self-destruct; indeed, Landon frames many of her "gifts" as lasting artifacts. In "Medallion Wafers" (1823), for example, she uses inexpensive copies of art as inspiration for her own verses, with the idea that both art and verse will remain treasured objects to their recipients. The verses address the lover who (we are to understand) used the wafers to seal the correspondence that he gave to the female narrator of the poem. Thus, as Daniel Riess points out, "Landon's narrator fetishizes the wafers, transferring her out, 'Landon's narrator onto them.'³⁶ Key to my argument, though, is the way in which the transfer of desire is extended into the poem itself. In this construction, purchasing Landon's work gives access not only to the "exquisite copies of the finest works of ancient and modern Art" that she flaunts in an advertisement in the *Literary Gazette*,³⁷ but also to the romantic desire with which she has imbued the wafers. By attaching romantic significance to the wafers, Landon increases the exchange value of her "copy": the wafers alone will only bring their owner artistic satisfaction; her poems give all that—and more. Her "Introduction" (1823) to her "Medallion Wafers" series begins:

I do so prize the slightest thing
Touched, looked, or breathed upon by thee,
That all or aught which can but bring
One single thought of thine to me,
Is precious as a pilgrim's gift
Upon the shrine he most loves left.³⁸

Here, in addition to establishing a fictive frame for her effusions on the medallions, Landon sets out how her readers should treat her poetry. Just as the speaker of the poem reads her lover in the wafers, so too should Landon's readers interpret *her* touch, look, and breath—"precious as a pilgrim's gift"—in her verses. The religious imagery is meaningful: Landon's writings on the medallion wafers function like the Eucharistic wafer, representing a body to devout readers such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who wrote about Landon in a famous 1831 quotation recalling his college-day interest in "the three magical letters of 'L.E.L.'": "Was she young? Was she pretty?"³⁹ Her readers transfer the desire that they experience for her onto her words, the "inexpensive copies" of her own desirable self. She manipulates her market value by explicitly aligning herself with "the slightest thing / Touched, looked, or breathed upon" by the initials—of wafer-like substance—L.E.L. She commodifies herself through the commodification of her writing, and then sells that commodity in the guise of a precious "gift."

Landon's gifts are generous—so generous that they often attempt to out-thing the thing itself, so to speak, as in this case of the medallion wafer. As we have seen, her poetry—written largely as "poetical sketches" to accompany engravings⁴⁰—was both ekphrastic and anything *but* ekphrastic. Though her lyrics often referred to the visual art from which they derived their titles, the visual descriptive value of the verses was slight. "The Hyacinth," a tag poem for a picture of the same name in *Flowers of Loveliness* (1838), barely glances at the "golden tresses" and

³⁶ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "Introduction [from *Medallion Wafers*]," in *Selected Writings*, p. 43; ll. 1–6.

³⁷ [Edward Bulwer-Lytton], "Romance and Reality. By L.E.L.," *New Monthly Magazine*, 32 (1831), 546.

⁴⁰ See McCann and Riess, "Introduction," p. 12.

³⁶ "Letitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 36 (1996), 812.

³⁷ [Letitia Elizabeth Landon], "Medallion Wafers," *Literary Gazette*, 25 January 1823, p. 63.



FIGURE 2. W. H. Egleton, *Hyacinth* (engraving, 1838).

"childish head" that the engraving encircles with flowers (see Figure 2).⁴¹ The other two women pictured, the natural landscape behind the tiled foreground, the various details of a woven basket, and the faint figures carved into the block on which the golden-tressed child sits all vanish from the poet's verse, which uses the engraving to launch its own discussion of memory and mysteries:

⁴¹ W. H. Egleton, *Hyacinth* (engraving, 1838), Special Collections, Univ. of Virginia Library.

Little we know the secrets that surround us,
And much has vanished from our later day;
Nature with many a mystery has bound us,
And much of our old love has past away.⁴²

By calling into question the seemingly innocent enough flowers that figure in the artwork, L.E.L. privileges her own ability to reveal their haunted meanings. To get at the root of the hyacinth, the reader must look past both the living flower and its first remove—the artistic rendering—to its second remove, its poetic translation. This hierarchy of representation points to a distillation of meaning through the removes that Landon can offer in the medium of the annual.

Landon's verses thus make claims about what she can offer and deliver along with—or in addition to—the objects they describe. We have seen how Landon's "Improvisatrice" treats poetry as an overflowing, effusively generous gift. And in "Erinna" the speaker notes: "It had seem'd to me / A miser's selfishness, had I not sought / To share with others those impassion'd thoughts" (ll. 250–52). If Landon's verse is *gift*, then it cannot afford to be miserly, and her "impassion'd thoughts" or overflowing of emotion make their marks in the duration and pace of her generous verse. Similarly, in an essay titled "On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry" (1832), Landon distinguishes between "selfish" and "generous" verse:

A world of generous emotions, of kindly awakenings, . . . a world of thought and feeling, now lies in the guardianship of the poet. . . . Enthusiasm is no passion of the drawing-room, or of the pence-table: its home is the heart.⁴³

Just as she deals in emotional generosity (a gift, not "of the pence-table"), so too does Landon refuse to measure her poetic effusions. She trades in linguistic excess, not thrift, and her descriptive economy is not the closed economy of the heroic

⁴² Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "The Hyacinth," in *Flowers of Loveliness: Twelve Groups of Female Figures, Emblematic of Flowers* (London: R. Ackermann, 1838), not paginated [2 pages].

⁴³ [Letitia Elizabeth Landon], "On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry," *New Monthly Magazine*, 35 (1832), 471.

couplet or the tight verse-form often associated with matters of love, the sonnet. Repetition, length, emotional effusion, and poetic removes are all open in Landon's verse; generosity is style as well as conscious theme for her.

But, avowals of generosity aside, we have already seen that gifts are never pure, and that they always entail obligation, reciprocity, and return. What then does this "generosity" bring Landon? Returning to her most effusively generous poetic narrator, we see that she gains even more potency by pitting her representational abilities against those of male poets. The nature of the poetic gift described in "The Improvisatrice" is subversively gendered; the female speaker in the poem is an astute observer, and her observance often trumps the male gazes that she encounters.

"The Improvisatrice" invokes "Divinest Petrarch!" (l. 56), who vowed his lyre to Laura and love. In Landon's retelling, when Petrarch gazes at his beloved Laura, "There was a blush, as if she knew / Whose look was fixed on her's [*sic*]" (ll. 61-62). Yet the knowing eyes look upward. Laura gives her lover no sign of her awareness, and his gaze, it seems, lacks the power to draw her even as he details each aspect of her, "he num-ber[ing] one by one" each of her graces (l. 79). It is important that the speaker of the poem, the Improvisatrice, also gazes on Laura and also paints her tresses and shades: "I painted her with golden tresses, . . . / A cheek which had the crimson hue" (ll. 68, 72). Still more telling is the moment when the speaker chooses her own Laura—Lorenzo—to gaze upon, and thus deftly appropriates the traditionally male *blazon* of the poet. Though she "shrank before Lorenzo's eye" (l. 932), she does not hesitate to fix her own gaze on him and to "number one by one" the details of *his* graces, beginning with his noble brow and working downward:

... He had the same
Thick-clustering curls the Roman wore—
The fixed and melancholy eye—
The smile which passed like lightning o'er
The curved lip.

(ll. 937-41)

Although it may be too much for the Improvisatrice to meet Lorenzo's glance, he is no more capable of eye contact than she is:

We looked round with those wandering looks,
Which seek some object for their gaze,
As if each other's glance was like
The too much light of morning's rays.

(ll. 943-46)

This is not the voice of a specular object. Landon's speaker lays claim to a Petrarchan gaze, and though her "cheek blushed warm" (l. 930), she is as steady an observer as the male she describes. The poem, meanwhile, keeps attention fixed on both, asserting itself not only in the words "look" and "gaze" but also in the authority with which Landon selects and describes details. Like her speaker, Landon knows that her readers' eyes are upon her. Instead of blushing, she returns their gaze with an observant one of her own. If, as Beth Newman notes, "the gaze can serve to destabilize the viewer as well as to confer mastery, especially if the gazer is caught looking by another subject who sees the gaze and perceives it as an expression of desire,"⁴⁴ then here both L.E.L. and her speaker, through their benign "gift" of poetic genius, gain mastery over the male gaze.

The gaze and its attending authority are sites of contention for Landon scholars. Linda H. Peterson suggests that between Romantic poets (such as Landon) and later Victorian writers, "there is a shift . . . from a male viewer to the female poet, from art produced to satisfy masculine desire to art for the sake of the female poet."⁴⁵ Similarly, Mellor takes the annals' engravings as "ideological propaganda" that "promoted an image of the ideal woman as specular, as the object rather than the owner of the gaze." Aligning herself with this ideology (or, in any case, targeting its market), Landon produced portraits

⁴⁴ "The Situation of the Looker-On: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*," *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 1,094.

⁴⁵ "Rewriting *A History of the Lyre*: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the (Re)Construction of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet," in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, p. 116.

of herself that would vend her, too, as "an acquirable artifact of beauty" (*Romanticism and Gender*, p. 111). But even if L.E.L. used her image, as the object of her audience's gaze, to boost her sales, this move hardly dispossesses her of her own gaze. The verses we have just examined emphasize Landon's ability and authority to determine relationships through seeing and uttering them. Moreover, as McGann and Riess point out, even the women whom Landon portrays resist being mere specular objects: "The women in Landon's poems are shrewd observers of their spectacular society—cold spectators of a colder spectacle repeatedly masked in the warm colours of dissimulating love" (introduction to *Selected Writings*, p. 24). In her "generic" poetics of giving, Landon profits by using a feminized gaze to undermine male authority, and she links that gaze back to her poetic economy.

In *The Keepsake* for 1829 Landon includes "Verses," written on an engraving of a portrait of Georgiana, Duchess of Bedford (see Figure 3).⁴⁶ At nearly as far a remove from its original object as what we saw earlier in "Medallion Wafers" and "The Hyacinth," this poem shows an awareness of its distance but nevertheless turns that distance to its advantage. "Verses" begins ekphrastically:

Lady, thy face is very beautiful,
A calm and stately beauty: thy dark hair
Hangs as the passing winds paid homage there;
And gems, such gems as only princes cull
From earth's rich veins, are round thy neck and arm;
Ivory, with just one touch of colour warm;
And thy white robe floats queen-like, suiting well
A shape such as in ancient pictures dwell!⁴⁷

The abundance of simile points away from, but does not diminish, the painterly moment in which Landon notes the shades and details of the portrait. Her verse invites a shared look at

⁴⁶ Edwin Landseer, *Georgiana, Duchess of Bedford* (engraving by Charles Heath after oil portrait, 1829), Special Collections, Univ. of Virginia Library.

⁴⁷ [Lettitia Elizabeth Landon], "Verses," in *The Keepsake*, ed. Frederic Mansel Reynolds (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., 1829), p. 121; ll. 1–8.



FIGURE 3. Edwin Landseer, *Georgiana, Duchess of Bedford* (engraving by Charles Heath after oil portrait, 1829).

this "Lady" but then rejects the possibilities that its visual representation can contain: "If thou hadst lived in that old haunted time, . . . / . . . / Then had this picture been a chronicle, / Of whose contents might only poets tell" ("Verses," ll. 9, 15–16). The poet's task is apparently no longer to chronicle the lady's honor, for "thou art of the Present—there is nought / About thee for the dreaming minstrel's thought" (ll. 19–20).

This acceptance of a shift in the poet's task is complicated, though. The line "thou art of the Present" is ambiguous. Set apart from the rest of its sentence by a dash, it could be either an independent clause or an apostrophe. Read as a closed thought, the poem addresses the Duchess ("thou") and reminds us that she is a modern lady. Read as apostrophe, however, the poem addresses the physical, present-day painting of "thou art." The fault in poetic translation is then a function of the modern art that fails to inspire poetry as well as "ancient pictures" did. But regardless of who finally is to blame for this poetic impotence, it is important to note that it does not apply to all poets:

The poet hath no part in it, his dream
Would too much idleness of flattery seem;
And to that lovely picture only pays
The wordless homage of a lingering gaze.
("Verses," ll. 27-30)

The poet whom L.E.L. silences is clearly contrasted with the Sapphic, feminine tradition of verse with which she aligned herself in "The Improvisatrice" and again aligns herself here. Thus the "wordless homage of a lingering gaze" is not hers; while the "poet hath no part" in the portrait's music (and is effectively silenced at its feet), this poet is gendered *male*. L.E.L.'s "Verses" may undermine the male poetic voice and the inspirational power of her contemporary visual art, but they certainly do not leave her wordless.

What the verses do leave, however, is the reader's "lingering gaze" on that last couplet. Here the gaze—often associated with authority in a relationship—is male, but its authority is undercut by the silent worship that the "lovely picture" commands. While L.E.L. can gaze on the art and yet find words to describe its "calm and stately beauty," it appears that she is, again, privileged in that ability. But if Landon is privileged and the male poet is compromised by their respective powers to gaze, then it is also important to note that their other tasks are distinct as well. It is significant that in this couplet Landon pairs "gaze" with "pays": the rhyme brings the idea of an economy of exchange into this scenario of artistic display and veneration.

While the woman is at once the represented object of art and the voice that represents her, the man is her "wordless" consumer. Whether her words or her body are on artistic display, and despite their marketing as "gifts" to an adoring public, it is crucial to remember that Landon expects—and receives—payment in exchange for their mass consumption. Some of that payment is tendered in money; some is in worship; but all is paid.



Gifts obligate as well as oblige their recipients, and Landon's audience was no exception. It is not Landon's poetry that Thackeray takes to task in his scathing 1837 "A Word on the Annuals." On the contrary, he repeatedly praises her talent, even as he criticizes her for publishing poetry to accompany engravings in the annuals: "a woman of genius" who "writes so many good things." Landon is at fault, according to him, because she "can write so well, and affix to this endless succession of paltry prints, verses indifferent sometimes, but excellent so often" ("A Word on the Annuals," pp. 758, 762). The "paltry prints," then, are to blame—even though we have seen how she subverts them—because her contemporaries took her illustrative verse at face value. But why impute blame to something as minor as the occasional production of verses to Landon's poetry, as a "gift," should be outside and above the market economy:

She will pardon us for asking, if she does justice to her great talent by employing it in this way? It is the gift of God to her—to watch, to cherish, and to improve: it was not given her to be made over to the highest bidder, or to be pawned for so many pounds per sheet. An inferior talent . . . must sell itself to live—a *genius* has higher duties; and Miss Landon degrades hers, by producing what is even indifferent. (p. 763)

The gift-book market, and, as we have seen, the rhetorical strategies that Landon herself uses, teach us to read her poetry as "gift" rather than sale. Thus, according to her contemporaries,

she has duties—to her talent, to God, and to her audience. But her audience, too, owes her something. Even Thackeray, the critic of “sham art,” “execrable” taste, and “abominations” (p. 758), will seek her pardon for his remonstrance of her, noting that he has “not meddled with the prose or verse which illustrates the illustrations,” because “Miss Landon writes so many good things” (p. 762). Though a gift entails higher duties for the donor, it demands too that the recipient greet it with higher appreciation and hold it in higher value than any object of quantitative value, purchased “for so many pounds per sheet.” Critics who read Landon’s poetry in terms of purchases instead of gifts miss this important burden placed on the recipient.

The obligation that Landon places on her reader, however, is as much about her body as it is about her verse. She anticipates her readers’ gaze and even courts it, and her poetry begs to be read, in part, as her response—physical and verbal—to it. Her poetic strategies make purchasing her poetry some form of access to the physical entity that has touched and breathed on it (or at least on its manuscript). Her alignment of fleshly and textual bodies, at whatever remove, is an effective marketing strategy that complicates the artistic commodification of her poetry.

Landon’s physical relationship to a culture increasingly interested in material production and consumption is veiled by her language, as well as by the “gift” economy that she often either invokes or uses for her publications. Her repeated tropes of veils and masks at once distance her from her readers and lure them closer. On the one hand, they make it nearly impossible to fix L.E.L. in any one voice or position: “It was my other self, that had a power” (“Erinna,” l. 87). On the other hand, her poetry also teaches us that the lyre serves the heart as “interpreter” (“Erinna,” l. 48), and so we are left with the supposition that reading Landon’s poetry will allow us to penetrate her own heart. In “The Improvisatrice” she hints at this unveiling:

And shall I own that I was proud
To hear, amid the gazing crowd,
A murmur of delight, when first
My mask and veil aside I threw?

(ll. 751–54)

But we are not to forget that Landon’s poetic personae will “Never let the veil be thrown / Quite aside.”⁴⁸ Neither can we forget for one moment that they are conscious of the gaze that anticipates such an action:

For well my conscious cheek betrayed
Whose eye was gazing on me too!
 (“The Improvisatrice,” ll. 755–56)

L.E.L. manipulates the mysteries of her body in order to eroticize her verse. As Leighton suggests, this manipulation “seek[s] to reclaim woman’s poetic selfhood as a physical identity translated as a kind of writing” (*Victorian Women Poets*, p. 58). But while Leighton sets this reclaimed physical, poetic presence in conflict with depictions that turn “the woman into a form of sexual or artistic property for the man” (p. 61), poetic agency complicates that binary. The relationship between Landon’s language and her body becomes more elaborate than degrees of representation. Helena Michie asks: “If women are simultaneously language and body, what does it mean to represent their bodies in language?”⁴⁹ For Landon, herself a coded sign, the representation of her body in text helps in part both to figure that body as gift and to sell it.

Eroticization of the semi-veiled body is explicit in Landon’s sensual language. In addition to the crimson cheeks, beating pulses, and passionate lips of “Erinna,” L.E.L.’s general focus on love is suggestively seductive. Using her extensive research on Landon’s life, Cynthia Lawford persuasively argues that much of L.E.L.’s poetry is a veiled seduction of her publisher, William Jerdan:

Women poets were not supposed to let female voices hold up their body parts for competitive examination. They were not to conjure up the sexual energies excited by breathing in another’s sighs. Why does Landon tread onto this dangerous ground? If the editor was the intended “Love,” and if he suspected it and

⁴⁸ [Letitia Elizabeth Landon], “Song (Where, oh! where’s the chain to fling)” (1826 version), in *Selected Writings*, p. 100, ll. 33–34.

⁴⁹ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 7.

possessed sufficient ego to publish what she secretly addressed to him, then L.E.L.'s eroticism has an object and therefore a reason for the risks it takes. ("Early Life," p. 242).

Lawford insists that "with every single one of Landon's love poems, we have to keep in mind the possibility that the poem was intended to send some kind of signal to Jerdan" (p. 244). She further argues that this seduction was a way for Landon to assert power. We should note, however, that the seductive poetry that Lawford discusses targeted a much larger audience than just Jerdan. Text and body alike were more subtly veiled to Landon's other readers, but, though they deliver a different object, they function to seduce the average reader as well as Jerdan. The erotic hold that Landon may have had on Jerdan was translated into a more culturally acceptable reading in her general public: "The sexually enticing L.E.L. came to embody an idea of refinement by sweet, ardent feelings rather than the restraints of convention" ("Early Life," p. 258). But there can be no doubt that Landon uses the gift of textual/sexual alignment as a deliberate seduction strategy in her poetry. Her poetic and physical bodies worked together to demand and increase interest in both.

This sales strategy was not without its drawbacks. Landon's early-Victorian audience was ambivalent about the sexual conventions she shunned, and it questioned both the physicality of her verses and the illustrations that accompanied them. Ann R. Hawkins notes how the *Fraser's* review of Landon's gift book *Flowers of Loveliness* (1838) "critiques the physicality of the women presented in the images . . . as pornographic by the standards of the time." Landon's verses (such as the previously discussed "Hyacinth") were read as similarly pornographic; as Hawkins puts it: "L.E.L. writes verses for lascivious pictures that make men dream of public women, so L.E.L. becomes at best a pimp, at worst a prostitute herself . . . her poetry becomes a second body for L.E.L., one that is 'pawed over' for a price."⁵⁰ Rumors

⁵⁰ Ann R. Hawkins, "'Delectable' Books for 'Delicate' Readers: The 1830s Giftbook Market, Ackermann and Co., and the Countess of Blessington," *Kentucky Philological Review*, 20 (2002), 24.

of Landon's illegitimate children only intensified the scandalous nature of her embodied art.

But as Harriet Devine Jump and others have shown, scandalous editors and writers did not deter the public from purchasing gift books. And as I have argued here, the very nature of those books as "gifts" helped to legitimate the publication of books whose more explicit "sales" or subversion would have compromised them. Jump notes the irony of gift-book "didacticism," given the scandalous reputations of some of the women who edited them; she argues that the Countess of Blessington, by publishing "conventional" pieces, was successful *despite* her racier private life.⁵¹ I think that what both her success and Landon's success show is less "irony" or even a "strategy for combating the potentially dangerous effects of the rumours which surrounded them" ("False Prudery," p. 10) than it is the skill of women in the marketplace whose "woman's world" was not the private, domestic one that the annuals touted, but instead was a publicly embroiled, commercial realm more in keeping with their racier private lives.

There are two indications of the lasting impact of Landon's strategic alignment and gift of verse and body. We can see it, first, in the obsession of her readers with the truth behind her romantic relationships and with her fatal overdose of prussic acid—which is still as great now, over one hundred and fifty years after her death, as it was in her own day. Second, we can see it in the passion with which her contemporaries demanded to have back the body they felt they owned. Charles Swain's elegy to Landon, "A Vision of Tombs. Addressed to the *Forgotten Me Not*" (1840), is telling. This poem—addressed to a gift book and memorializing other gift-book writers as well—focuses most ardently, and at greatest length, on Landon. The poem links her work to her body. It claims that the nation in possession of her work is the rightful owner of her body as well, and it demands a final return on the gifts of both that have circulated throughout her career:

⁵¹ Harriet Devine Jump, "'The False Prudery of Public Taste': Scandalous Women and the Annuals, 1820–1850," in *Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts: Divergent Femininities*, ed. Emma Higgins and Daniel Duffy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 3, 10, 7.

Give back our lost and loved! Restore our dead!
 Return once more her first and dearest name!
 We *claim* her ashes! 'tis a Nation's claim!
 Her—in her wealth of mind—to thee we gave;
 Yet—*plead we for the dust of that dear frame*:
 Oh, bear our world-lamented o'er the wave!
 Let England hold at last—'tis all she asks—her Grave!³²

This poem is emphatic. The culture that has been given Letitia Elizabeth Landon's words also has a stake in her ashy remains. Though England "gave" her to West Africa, her immolation there (reminiscent of the *potlatch* discussed earlier) obligates some form of reciprocity.

Whether or not Landon orchestrated the mysterious death mourned by Charles Swain and so many others, there is no doubt that she was an active participant in constructing her own mythological status. The power of that status rests largely on the gift poetics that helped to form it. Only by attending to the question of this "gift" economy can we begin to appreciate the extensiveness of her power as an author who once demanded readership but has only recently begun to receive serious critical attention. It is a tribute to Landon that her poetics could so deftly use a unique system of commercial exchange while also mounting a critique of it. And it is a gift to twenty-first-century scholars that, by doing so, she has offered us a new strategy for rereading such a generous collection of poetic works.

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ABSTRACT

Jill Rappoport, "Buyer Beware: The Gift Poetics of Letitia Elizabeth Landon" (pp. 441–473)

In this essay I draw attention to a poetics of giving that runs through the body of Letitia Elizabeth Landon's work. Landon (or "L.E.L.") has most frequently interested scholars either as a poet of tragic love or as evidence that early-nineteenth-century women writers could support themselves in a commercial market. But this dual focus remains

problematic. Not only have critics generally oversimplified Landon's relationship to love, commodification, and sales, but also—and more important for my discussion—their fixation on her role in the capitalist marketplace has made us less ready to analyze her relationship to the gift, her other strategy of exchange. Through her publishing strategies, as well as through the very language of her poetic work, Landon's simultaneous reliance on both gift and sale models complicates the process of exchange. When Landon claims to give instead of sell, her reader's role is undefined, and the obligations that the gift entails put Landon in a position of power. In this essay I explore the marketing strategy, thematic approach, formal style, and legacy of reception that comprise Landon's "gift poetics," and I show how this poetics is significant both for reading her work and for reconsidering a line of women's poetry neglected by Romantic and Victorian scholarship alike. I argue that L.E.L. does not deal in beauty, love, or self, but in power—and that what we see in her art is, finally, a deceptively strong poetics of giving mediated by marketing strategy that treated her poetry as "gifts" in order to sell them.

³² Charles Swain, "A Vision of Tombs. Addressed to the 'Forget Me Not,'" in *Forget Me Not*, ed. Frederic Shoberl (London: R. Ackermann and Co., 1840), p. vi; emphases in original. Rpt. in *The English Gift Books and Literary Annals, 1823–1857* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey Ltd., 1978), fiche 1 of 4.