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“BRITANNIA'S POET! GRAECIAS HERO SLEEPS!...”: PHILHELLENIC POETRY BY WOMEN, 1817-1852

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ABSTRACT

The verse of the four major British and American women poets Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Browning, Agnes Strickland, and Lydia Huntley Sigourney, from 1817 to 1852, extensively treats the theme of philhellenism. Also, the verse of minor women poets, mainly of the United States is rife with philhellenic sentiments. The thematic matrix that unifies the philhellenic verse of all these women poets is three-fold: a) admiration for Hellenic culture or Greek Paideia; b) Christian faith; and c) certain historic events related to the Greek Revolution of 1821. Due to the literary, cultural and political impact of his poetry during the first half of the nineteenth century, Lord Byron is a pivotal figure in the discussion and assessment of the philhellenic verse of those women. The four-fold aim of this study involves a) presentation of the texts; b) their dependence on Byronic models or dramatic events of the Revolution; c) intertextual comparison of the poems on the basis of thematic similarity; and d) the interrelation of these poems to the overall poetic output of each poet. This aim is achieved within the scope of a historical and cultural analysis pertaining to the combined influence of historical events as well as an ancient Greek cultural and Christian ambience. The feminine sensibility of the women poets themselves is what, above all, sets, the theoretical background of this poetry. The study traces the roots and growth of philhellenism as this originates from Hellenism, goes through a Byronic phase and culminates in its political phase which was born in the years of Greek Revolution. It focuses more specifically on the philhellenic verse of Felicia Hemans and in particular its cultural and political aspects as expressed in her major work *Modern Greece* and in poems like “The Suliote Mother”, “The Sisters of Scio” and “The voice of Scio”, plus several others. Moreover, the cultural and political aspects of Elizabeth Browning’s philhellenic verse as expressed in her major work *The Battle of Marathon* and in a number of other poems on Rhigas, Captain Demetrius, and the 1821 outburst are dealt with. The close examination Agnes Strickland’s major philhellenic work *Demetrius* follows next, inspired by Byron’s poetry as well by the events related to the massacre of Scio. Lydia Sigourney’s philhellenic verse is characterized by the author’s strong cultural, political and feministic beliefs. Of particular political and historical interest is her poem “Missolonghi”. Helen Maria Williams is the most important of the minor women poets dealt with in this study; her poetry in general focuses on all aspects of philhellenism (cultural, Byronic, political). Finally, all the findings in the four-fold aim of the study are summarized and related to the data stated in the beginning.

