

**The Rescue of *Lusia* by *Albion*:
Representations of Portugal in British Women's Peninsular War Poetry¹**

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*My son, behold this lovely flower,
It bloomed in a secluded bower;
Some idle hands misjudging tore
The floweret from the stem,
Its beauteous tints revive no more,
It cannot profit them !
(C. Tonna)*

We propose to begin this brief article on representations of Portugal in some British women's poetry of the early nineteenth century with a background summary of the known records and facts of the Peninsular War; a distinctly male-constructed imperial history, yet one which was very uniquely absorbed, and artistically interpreted, by the often neglected and forgotten female side. We will attempt to show that women poets as different as Felicia Hemans and Charlotte Tonna, both well known for their patriotic inclinations, mainly saw in these momentous events, taking place in a remote and exotic location designated as 'Portugal', as a precious opportunity to inscribe their voices in a male-dominated British literary history.

In December 1807, after the refusal of the Prince Regent of Portugal to stop all the traditional trading with Great Britain, Napoleon Bonaparte's army led by Marshal Junot invades the country and captures the city of Lisbon, in the attempt to tighten France's trade blockade of Britain. The invasion was indeed only made possible because the Spanish government, under King Carlos IV, had agreed at Fontainebleau to allow a French army to pass through Spain in return for most of the eventually conquered Portuguese territory.²

Five months later, in August 1808, a British army would land in Portugal under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley, the future duke of Wellington, who manages to win a

¹ Parts of this article were originally presented at the 2nd International Congress of Anglo-Portuguese Studies, organised by CETAPS, which took place at *Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian* in Lisbon, in April of 2011.

² It would soon regret this greediness because only three months later, in March 1808, French forces captured Madrid and Napoleon installed his own brother Joseph as King of Spain. This led not only to a major revolt in the Spanish Provinces but also to the first guerrilla warfare.

decisive victory over the French at Vimieiro, near Lisbon.³ Later, in April 1809, Wellington feels encouraged to undertake a new campaign in Portugal, where he finds that the enemy forces had captured Oporto this time; with the help of a re-trained and re-organised Portuguese army under William Beresford, Wellesley catches Marshal Soult when he crosses the Douro River and thus brilliantly seizes the military initiative.⁴ He and his victorious Anglo-Portuguese army would then move forward into Spain, where at Talavera they fight a hard and bloody battle to defeat Joseph Bonaparte's army; a new victory which eventually earned Wellington the title of viscount.⁵

But Wellington's dashing Peninsular campaigns apparently did more than just to liberate Portugal and stop the trade blockade; they aroused a very considerable interest among British historians and the reading public throughout the nineteenth century.⁶ In his 1991 article entitled "The Romance of War, or the Highlanders in Spain" (1991), Brian Dendle is careful to stress that "The war in the Iberian Peninsula

[...] was savagely fought by British, Spanish, Portuguese, and French troops, as well as by Spanish and Portuguese irregular forces (the *guerrilleros*). [...] The sufferings caused by the war were immense, including the looting and devastation of French-occupied Spain, the starvation of many Spaniards and Portuguese, and a very high casualty rate among the troops involved. (49)

In spite of the appalling bloodshed and suffering taking place abroad, many British writers were indeed bent on banking on this imaginative opportunity. And Dendle does refer to the existence of several novels on the Peninsular campaign written in English, and by men, especially between 1825 (a prolific year) and 1845, forming a sub-genre of nineteenth-century

³ This in spite of the disastrous Cintra Convention, which allowed the trapped Frenchmen to withdraw their troops and loot on British ships back to France.

⁴ Crossing the Douro by a masterly manoeuvre, Wellington caught the Marshal with his forces dispersed trying to hold down the Portuguese irregulars in the mountains, and drove him back into northern Spain.

⁵ Learning that another Napoleon army had taken up a position on the upper Tagus covering Madrid, Wellesley set off up the river from Lisbon, accompanied by the Spanish army, and defeated the French at Talavera in July 1809. After constructing his fortified defensive Lines of Torres Vedras and defeating Massena at Bussaco in 1810, Wellesley and his allied army would subsequently win a series of decisive battles over the Portuguese-Spanish border, culminating with the captures of Salamanca and Madrid.

⁶ For the British, the campaign represented the success of a small and previously despised army, under the remarkable leadership of Wellington, over Napoleon's veterans. Colonel William Napier's *History of the War*, published in six volumes between 1828 and 1840, enjoyed a remarkable success, and it was largely written to counter Spanish claims that the deliverance of Spain was due to Spanish efforts.

British fiction and attesting to the huge popularity of the theme.⁷ Being based either on direct observation or on careful historical research, the sub-genre's outstanding feature is its 'realism', including a great frankness regarding the hostility existing at times among the 'allied' forces. Besides an obsession with the problems associated with Catholic rule, this type of novel also reflects stages in the formation of British nationalism in the nineteenth century, with the earlier novelists stressing British courage and the superior discipline of its troops.

In comparison, a much greater degree of idealisation of setting, character and circumstances, derived mostly from indirect report or reference and imaginative allusion, occurs in the Peninsular War-inspired British poetry, which has a much earlier manifestation than the novel, and in which issues of nationalism and hero-worship assume more intimate or romantic proportions. This is mainly the perspective of women poets, whose gender had not allowed a direct participation in the events of the war and who were dependent on the reports of others – husbands, fathers or brothers. Susan Valladares, in her article "Romantic Englishwomen and 'the Theatre of Glory'" (2008), addresses the issue of "how female literary interaction with early nineteenth-century Spain opened up a geopolitical space charged with anxious questions about national identity and belonging" (106). She stresses that this period of political uncertainty and instability was peculiarly well suited for the intervention of British women writers and that the Peninsular War, in particular, afforded an opportunity for literary women to engage in a rewriting of both national and literary agency.

One such case was that of the young Felicia Dorothea Browne (1793-1835), later known as Felicia Hemans, the popular Romantic woman poet and contemporary of Byron and Shelley. She was a learned and precocious writer, who not only published as early as 1808 but also on subjects related to the Napoleonic Wars, namely the ode in heroic couplets *England and Spain: or Valour and Patriotism* of 1808 and *The Domestic Affections* collection of 1812.⁸ She is indeed one of the first women poets to write about the Wars. Besides having a historical or nationalistic interest in these events, Hemans also possessed personal reasons for addressing such a theme, as both her husband (Captain Alfred Hemans) and two of her brothers (Thomas and George Browne) were doing military service in the Iberian Peninsula at

⁷ He referred not only to their literary merit but also to the realistic, almost caustic (though often prejudiced), view of their experiences. He also notices that the accurate rendering of history is generally of far greater importance in them than novelistic intrigue proper.

⁸ She also wrote *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* (1816) and *The Siege of Valencia: a Dramatic Poem* (1823).

the time of the Wars, and she had become interested in all aspects of Spanish and Portuguese history and culture.⁹

In fact, she wrote a poem in heroic couplets in 1811 entitled "To my Eldest Brother, with the British Army in Portugal", in which she envisions her relative "distant far, amidst th'intrepid host, / Albion's firm sons, on Lusitania's coast" (25-26), and anticipates the happy moment of his return (*Domestic Affections*, 1812). Hemans would later on say, "those events are so associated in my mind with the most vivid recollections of early youth that I could almost fancy I had passed that period of my life in the days of chivalry, so high and ardent were the feelings they excited" (Wolfson, 177). In a letter to her aunt of December 1808, Iberia is indeed the main subject of her thoughts and words at this time – "my dream by night, my vision of the day" (Wolfson, 178).

Hemans clearly began her career by imagining Spain and Portugal as the embodiment of a fading chivalric ethos (a preservation of common European Gothic identity) but hers became also a political cause. By supporting British intervention in the Peninsula and deciding to write about it at a time when many of her Whig patrons argued for peace with France, Hemans defied not only societal expectations for women, but also the expectations of her republican supporters. Henry Chorley, one of her memoirists, would emphasise her cultural work in defining that feminine *locus* for ideals of gender and nation.

England and Spain describes how the British army under Arthur Wellesley issued forth to join forces with the guerrilla fighters of Spain and Portugal. The poem praises the Anglo-Spanish alliance and openly calls for a renewed commitment to the Peninsular War, editing out all the negative stereotypes of Iberian greed and rapacity. Hemans adopts a language and tone reminiscent of the revolutionary rhetoric of the 1790s, such as the progress of Liberty. To crush the pride of hostile France, she, as a bard, expresses her aspiration to encourage the warriors with the praise songs that "swell the harp, the lyre, the voice to bless, to triumph and to rejoice." Nevertheless, as shown in her poems in *Domestic Affections* (1812), the war-field is filled with "those cries" which "rend the air of death, of torture and of despair" (320-30). In "War and Peace", a mother thinks about her son who fell upon the battlefield and will never return, but she conceals her "deep sorrows in her inmost heart" (87).

In "To My Eldest Brother with the British Army in Portugal" and "To My Younger Brother, on his return from Spain", Hemans thinks about Thomas and George, who had

⁹ Captain Hemans was an army friend of her brothers, who were in Spain fighting against Napoleon (Susan Wolfson, *Felicia Hemans*, 476). In 1811, he came back to England, weakened and scarred from war. The couple married in 1812. When she was turning nineteen, her third volume, *The Domestic Affections and Other Poems* (1812) appeared.

served Sir John Moore and the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers.¹⁰ In the latter poem, written after the fatal retreat and the battle of Corunna, she is confident that "the angels of mercy would shield her brother with care in the heat of the combat's alarm" (23-4). In "The Call of Liberty," she states that the gallant Spaniards should fight ferociously for freedom "or they should die", and she praises highly their noble spirits. She eagerly requires them to teach Britain the invincible spirit for freedom and, as poet, she proclaims the end of a tyrant (Napoleon)'s reign.

Five years after the end of the Peninsular War in 1814, the *Literary and Philosophical Intelligence*, of May 1819, announced in its "Varieties" column that "A volume of Poems founded on the Events of the War of the Peninsula, *written during its progress and after its conclusion*; by the wife of an officer (*now on half pay*) who served in its campaigns, will soon appear" (my emphasis).¹¹ In 1817, coincidentally, Captain Alfred Hemans had just been made redundant with the end of the war in Europe in 1815. The first publication of *Poems founded on the Events of the war in the Peninsula by the Wife of an Officer* would indeed occur anonymously in 1819, with printing work by W. Tiffen and dedication to Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington.¹²

In September 1820, *The New Monthly Magazine* not only referred to this new publication but also included a critical remark of the poems therein contained. After referring to the first, "A Sketch written in the year 1814", the author presents the following commentary on the second poem, "The Convent Bell":

[...] with much power and elegance of language, and fervid beauty of description. The incidents are not crowded, nor obscure; *the circumstances are romantic, but strictly probable*; the touches of passion are exalted by noble sentiments of public and private duty, and by *the chastened spirit of feminine elevation* with which they are painted. The characters are brought home to the bosom of the reader by the force of individual identity. [...] The poem is evidently the production of a mind of a high order [...] the Hero of Waterloo may well be proud of the just tribute paid to his splendid abilities by *this animated Poetess*. (336-37, my emphasis)

This long poem in seven cantos told the story of a group of British soldiers that, after the victorious battle of the Douro under Wellington, seek food and shelter in the secluded Convent of Saint Clara, before they move on to Talavera in Spain. It is there that their

¹⁰ The whole title of the poem, inserted in *Domestic Affections* (1812), is "To My Younger Brother, on his Return from Spain, after the fatal retreat under Sir John Moore, and the battle of Corunna".

¹¹ A similar announcement appeared in the 'Poetry' column of the *Literary Register* a month later, in June 1819.

¹² This is according to a digitised copy by the University of Oxford, in 2006, made from the original book deposited in the Bodleian Library in November 1829.

wounded Irish commander falls in love with a beautiful and noble Portuguese nun; an ill-fated romance that ends with the death of the hero in the battlefield and of the grieved nun in the convent.¹³ Given the interest of the tale and the amount of publicity it received in the press, it is somehow surprising how the identity of the authoress is never mentioned or even speculated upon.

In her work on “Women Poets and Anonymity in the Romantic Era” (2002), Paula Feldman states that “during the period 1770-1835, women rarely published books of verse anonymously”; on the contrary, “[they] proudly placed their real names on the title page from the very outset of their careers” (279). Feldman refers that “such was the case with [...] Felicia Hemans, [...] Hannah More, [...] Mary Robinson, [...] Charlotte Smith [...] and many others” (279). One might, therefore, ask which poetess at this particular period could be either publishing for the first time and/or fearful of being recognised as a writer.¹⁴ We know that Hemans was an assumed authoress, that she had been publishing regularly since 1808, and that in the same year of 1819 that “The Convent Bell” appeared she published *Tales and Historic Scenes in Verse*.¹⁵

Paula Feldman also mentions the fact that “When a woman did bring out a book of poetry anonymously, [...] her name appeared quickly on the title pages of subsequent editions and later volumes” (279). That could well be the case of another woman writer of this period, the social novelist, reformist and religious tract writer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846).¹⁶ She also wrote some verse¹⁷ and her thinly disguised pen name, ‘Charlotte Elizabeth’, would be the one in fact to appear as the author of *The Convent Bell and Other Poems*, edited in New York by Harriet Beeche Stowe, in 1845 (more precisely, twenty-six

¹³ The theme is reminiscent of the story of the famous seventeenth-century Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado, present in her *Lettres Portugaises* of 1669. And, indeed, an English translation of this work—*Letters from a Portuguese Nun to an Officer in the French Army* – by W. R. Bowles had appeared in London in 1817, that is, just two years before the publication of *the Convent Bell*. It is very probable that the author read this work, which may have served as an inspiration for her own.

¹⁴ Putting aside the wish to keep one’s identity secret, the exceptional situations of an anonymous publication could be explained by its being the poet’s first book and functioning as a sort of testing of the waters.

¹⁵ This evidence should in principle exclude her from being considered as the author of “The Convent Bell”. Nevertheless, as we have seen previously, Hemans’s personal circumstances at this period and the specific literary features of her work may complicate and even question this exclusion.

¹⁶ Only three years older than Hemans, Tonna would nevertheless live eleven years more than her contemporary.

¹⁷ She also wrote poems, two of which, *The Maiden City* and *No Surrender*, were written specially for the Orange cause, being very vigorous and popular songs.

years after the original edition).¹⁸ One cannot help wondering why an authoress would wait almost thirty years to claim a given work as her own.

A plausible reason for this anonymity and publication abroad is present in Tonna's *Personal Recollections*:

I was going on most prosperously, when an attempt was suddenly made from another quarter to *establish a claim to the profits of my pen*. The demand was probably legal, according to the strict letter of existing statutes, [... but] it *greatly reduced the value of my copyrights* [...] and I found myself checked in my career [...] (237, my emphasis).

Apparently, she began writing under the pen name 'Charlotte Elizabeth' in order to prevent her first husband, George Phelan, from appropriating the proceeds from her literary career. Furthermore, as she writes, "the strict incognito to be preserved would secure me from any charge of inconsistency" (238), that is, an incoherence between her more respectable religious work and her writing of foolish romances.¹⁹ Thus, fear of public notoriety together with an attempt to preserve her profits, may explain this mystery.

Despite their obvious differences in terms of family background and mental and religious attitudes, the life circumstances of Hemans and Tonna were remarkably similar and would exert an equivalent impact in their respective works. Coincidentally sharing the family or maiden name of 'Browne', the two women were also exposed to the Protestant religion from an early age. They both boldly resolved to earn their living as writers, especially after the death or abandonment of their respective fathers resulted in financial hardship for their families; Tonna writes that:

[...] my own situation soon rendered it *needful to turn the little talent I possessed to account*. [...] I found a ready market for whatever I wrote, so that the name was considered a sufficient guarantee for the book. (237, my emphasis)

The two writers early and quickly married military men, both of them Captains in the British army; both were deserted by their respective husbands and had bitter experiences of love, both women lived for a period in Ireland²⁰ and, last but not least, both had brothers (if not also

¹⁸ According to *the Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, Volume 4 (1800-1900) by Joanne Shattock, a collected edition of Tonna's works was also being published by Stowe between 1844 and 1847.

¹⁹ The idea of hiring herself out to another 'master' that was not God was contrary to her views of Christian principle.

²⁰ About eighteen, Tonna married an Irish man, Captain George Phelan of the 60th Rifle Corps who was on leave of absence, and between 1819 and 1824 lived on his small estate in County Kilkenny, while he spent most of his time in Dublin. Hemans spent her last years (from 1828) in her brother's Dublin residence. Ironically, George Browne became a British Commissioner of Police, eventually tasked with the repression and policing of contemporary uprisings.

husbands) that were involved in the Peninsular campaigns.²¹ But there were also fundamental differences between the two writers. While Hemans had enjoyed an enlightened, republican and cosmopolitan education and living, Tonna became mostly known in her own time for the narrowness of her religious views and the extreme bias she displayed against Catholicism.²²

Also in contrast with Hemans, her *Personal Recollections*, published in 1841 and posthumously in 1847, register a very biased attitude towards Portugal, the country where her only brother was stationed during the Peninsular Wars²³ and where he would inclusively live afterwards for a ten-year period, “on the staff of the Portuguese army” until the establishment of the Portuguese ‘Cortes’ and the dismissal of all British officers. According to his sister, he had inclusively cultivated some of the land in the interior, “Which he had gallantly fought to rescue” (209). She writes that:

It was a subject of continual sorrow to me that he was residing in the heart of *an exclusively Popish country*, far from every means of grace; not even a place of worship within many leagues, and *wholly shut out from Christian intercourse*. (153, my emphasis)

Tonna’s brother (John Browne), who according to her had “served in the Peninsula with the highest possible credit, regarded [...] as one of the best officers in the service” (211),²⁴ had only returned to England to marry, going back to Lisbon with his bride and also Tonna’s mother; thus, leaving the writer lonely and depressed with this double separation forced upon her. She describes as her mother

[...] had been learning to prize her native land in *a disgusting region of all that is most directly opposed to liberty, civil or religious; to honourable feeling, just conduct,*

²¹ The military regiments 60 and 62, to which Charlotte Tonna’s first husband Captain George Phelan belonged, had also participated in the Peninsular War.

²² Tonna’s first publications were untitled religious tracts espousing her ultra-conservative Protestant views, which she began producing in the early 1820s, namely for the Dublin Tract Society. These were controversial even in her own time and some of her fellow-Evangelicals were forced to distance themselves from the extremism there revealed. She served successfully as editor of *The Christian Lady’s Magazine* (1843-46), of *The Protestant Magazine* (1841-45) and of *The Protestant Annual* (1841-46), to which she also made substantial contributions under the pen names of ‘The Watchman’ and ‘Charlotte Elizabeth’.

²³ In *Personal Recollections*, Tonna provides only a brief sketch of her brother’s military career. But from an obituary contained in the *Quarterly Review* for July 1829, we learn that he obtained a commission in 1809 and joined the 48th Regiment in Spain where he fought in the Peninsular War (1808-1814), following a period in which he commanded a Portuguese infantry regiment.

²⁴ In *Recollections*, Tonna refers that “he became on the field a lieutenant” and that “He had also been an especial favourite with John VI of Portugal; and the high polish of a court was superadded to all the rest” (232). She further comments that later on her brother would even refuse the appointment of “aide-de-camp” to King John, with any military rank and title that he might desire; preferring a half-pay unattached company in the British to any thing that a foreign service could offer” (232-33).

honest principle, or practical decency: In short, she had been in Portugal! (103, my emphasis)

Upon her brother's return to England, Tonna would anonymously publish a poem in seven Spenserian stanzas entitled "My Brother", in which she welcomes him to his "island home". In this composition, later inserted in *Izram, a Mexican Tale and Other Poems* (1826), Tonna reveals some facts not only about her brother's stay in Portugal but also her own thoughts and feelings regarding the impact of this experience in her own life. But, as Susan Valladares observes, "female writing coeval with the Peninsular War was often precariously poised between the private and the public" (114). The poet uses the arguments of British nationalism and family ties to lure her brother back home, after "sixteen burning summer suns" had elapsed in his "far abode". Portugal is "a moral sty" within which Britons are "condemned to seek/ Truth's trampled pearl", where "patriot honour" is "couched in falsehood's blinking eye" and where they have met "War's sternest blast of devastating breath". Tonna's brother has, nevertheless, managed to "flourish in an alien soil" as "A goodly seed in *thankless desert* sown". In the end, the poet seems also to hint negatively at the Portuguese aftermath dismissal of British troops: "*ingrates*, reckless of thy generous toil, / Uproot the shelter when the storm's o'erblown".²⁵

This more personal and realistic picture does not coincide with the fictionalised or idealised representation of both the country and the people of Portugal that had occurred in *The Convent Bell*. For example, when one of the characters refers to "the dazzling sky, / A gold and purple canopy, / [...] vying with gorgeous flowers, / That nature in this lonely place / has strewed, to shame our richest bowers" (Canto I, stanza VII), and the author herself describes with awe the picturesque beauty and natural sublime of the Mondego region that her British heroes have traversed:

There in the bright unclouded ray,
The silver stream pursues its way,
And winds along through orange bowers,
Whose golden fruit and pearly flowers,

²⁵ In spite of her avowed aversion for Portugal, Tonna appears to have become romantically interested in a Portuguese nobleman – Alexander, Count Calharez, the eldest son of the Duke of [Palmela](#). Apparently, he was attending the same Military College at Sandhurst as the author's brother, and she met him often on his way to the mass. Tonna described him as "a most elegant youth, of fine mind, delicate feelings, and the sweetest manners possible" (238). She secretly hoped to see him converted to Protestantism, though he was "devotedly attached to Romanism", but "the College did not suit his taste" and, to Tonna's infinite regret, he eventually left England to Portugal. Later on, when she heard news of his death, she made him "the subject of many prayers", wishing to trust in his soul's salvation.

Breathe their rich perfumed sigh,
 And shine amid the foliaged shade,
 Like heaven's bright host of stars displayed
 On evening's purple sky.
 There blooms, remote from rude alarms,
 The signal of the Patriarch's Dove,
 And myrtles form with bending arms
 A bower might grace the Queen of Love ;
 While with their depth of green entwines
 The lighter hue of clustering vines.
 And far remote, and towering high,
 The dark Sierra meets the sky,
 Forming, with wild majestic screen,
 A giant barrier to the scene,
 Where yet no human step intrudes,
 To break its awful solitudes
 (Canto I, stanza XIV)

But also, and more surprisingly, when the poet describes the characters in the Convent of Saint Clara, namely Father Bernardo and Sister Maria. Regarding the first, she writes that “A purer heart, a kinder soul, / Ne’er dwelt beneath the monkish cowl; / Much had he read, and studied long, / [...] Peaceful and mild, and innocent, / [...] The ray of love and mercy shone” (Canto II, stanza V). As for the second, Saint Clara’s “darling child” and her hero’s beloved, the poet reserves the following appreciation: “A holy peace, a calm repose, / Her downcast eye expressed” and “not one perfect sister-mind, / So pure, so steadfast, and refined, / She found among the crowd” (Canto IV, stanza III). The poet also contrasts her to the lighter but more spirited Castilian nun that “Had lately graced St. Clara’s fane”, who is responsible for “The Guerrilla” song in Canto IV.

As Elizabeth Kowaleski points out in her article “The Heroine of Some Strange Romance” (1982), Tonna’s autobiography “provides the best demonstration of the contradictory pressures she experienced during her writing career” (141). She had failed to “reconcile intense energy, intellect, and creativity with the notions of female sexual identity she had learned” (141). Tonna’s attraction to fictionalised fantasies and anxiety about becoming an unusual heroine of romance, motivated in part by her stay in Catholic Ireland, are present in the following passage, which is highly revealing of the theme and location of “The Convent Bell”:

[...] something of a *monastic mania* seized me. I determined to emulate the recluses of whom I had often read; to become a *sort of Protestant nun*; and to fancy my garden, with its high stone-walls, and little thicket of apple-trees, a *convent-enclosure*. (116, my emphasis)

In another passage from *Recollections*, Tonna stresses how Protestant principles withhold her at first from visiting a neighbouring convent, “which formed a *principal attraction to the military*, and other strangers in Kilkenny”, and where she finds “a most interesting nun”, “[...] in personal appearance, in manner, in feeling, *realizing the visions of my girlish romance* when reading idle stories in novels on such topics” (152, my emphasis). But when the nun leads her to the chapel and prostrates before a “richly gilt cross”, Tonna speaks of the “abomination from which my soul revolted with unspeakable horror [...] the act of idolatrous homage rendered to a thing of wood and stone” (153).

Tonna’s mixed revulsion and attraction for Catholic cultures most probably derived not only from popular anti-Catholicism, especially rife during the first half of the nineteenth century,²⁶ but also from English Gothic novels like those of Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis, which frequently used motifs of Catholicism with unnatural and sinister connotations of seclusion – the abbey, the monk, the nun, the priest– in their plots. In the years prior to 1833 various publications denounced convents through the medium of a story of an imprisoned nun.²⁷ The sentimental novels used the convent as a backdrop, a convenient device for the separation of would-be lovers and a mechanism for the creation of difficulties and stumbling-blocks to a happy resolution. The authors were usually women, or wrote anonymously, suggesting they were likely to have been women.²⁸

For Charlotte Tonna, at least, both motives were extremely alluring: the commercial demands of a romantic plot and feminine Protestant ideological fervour. But, as I have suggested previously and as Diego Saglia argues, there may also have been other motives:

[...] during the peninsular war, this conventional plot was endowed with *a strong political and military subtext*, and intercultural sentimental relationships were transfigured into allegorical representations of Spain [including Portugal] as *a lady in*

²⁶ There were several incidents in Europe which alarmed Protestant observers, who feared a growing Catholic Church. During the 1820s, it appeared to be resurgent in Europe, with the passing of Catholic Emancipation in Great Britain and the formation of Catholic missionary societies in Austria and France for the purpose of promoting Catholicism throughout the world.

²⁷ The anonymous *Anecdotes of a Convent* (1771), *The Convent: or the History of Sophia Nelson* by Anne Fuller (1786) and *The Nun* (1833) by Mary Martha Butt (later known as Sherwood).

²⁸ John Russell, the later Victorian Whig statesman, also wrote *The Nun of Arrouca* (1822), which was suppressed after publication, possibly because of the sexual connotations surrounding the main plot. Coincidentally, the sentimental story tells of the love affair between a nun, Sister Catherine, and an army officer Edward Pembroke, who has been fighting in the peninsular campaign against Napoleon. These ill-starred lovers, being unable to consummate their passion, decide to separate. Dissatisfied, Pembroke goes in search of his lost love. After many years, he finds her but is so shocked by her emaciated and lustreless appearance that he falls ill and dies. Given the obvious similarities between this plot and the one presented in *The Convent Bell*, one cannot help thinking about mutual influence, especially because the respective dates of publication are so near. It is possible that Russell may have appropriated the anonymous story, adapting it to his own purposes.

distress, the French as her assailants, and British soldiers as *heroic knights coming to her rescue*. (226, my emphasis)

Saglia argues in his *Poetic Castles in Spain* (2000) that during the cross-cultural sentimental encounter with the English or British man, Iberian women tend to lose their foreign status (226). As “different objects of a fascinated gaze”, they often “encode representations of their own foreign countries” (226). The tale present in *The Convent Bell* discloses how “sentimental tales elaborate cultural difference and the confrontation between submissive femininity and dominant masculinity” (229). For Saglia, the war is both an internal and an external factor in the tale, being crucial in defining the events of the poem as well as the publication by “the wife of an officer”. By dedicating the introductory volume, “A Sketch written in 1814”, to the future Duke of Wellington, the author automatically inscribes her poem within an official, male-sanctioned discourse on the conflict. “Described as a messianic apparition, Wellesley is metamorphosed into a triumphant hero/angel hovering benignly over the desolate fields of Iberia” (Saglia, 228). As Hemans’s *England and Spain*, Tonna’s collection of poems is justified by the masculine values it depicts.

The poem’s narrative is divided between the military world and that of love and the softer affections in the convent. “As a tale of sentiment”, Saglia argues, “it re-elaborates the topos of the [thwarted] love story between a knight errant and a reclusive lady” (229)

Recapitulating these two models of identity, the text endows them with *clearly gendered attributes*: the dimension of the military and Britain are *masculine areas of agency*, whereas the Iberian convent (the nuns are both Spanish and Portuguese) is a *place of feminine immutability* removed from the busy scenes of the world. (230, my emphasis)

These two opposite dimensions are sharply brought together at the start of the second canto when one of the soldiers, the Englishman FitzArthur, trespasses on the privacy of the nun’s cells in his wanderings around the convent of St. Clara:

And *ardently he longed to pry*
Within the Convent’s cells,
And *feast his bold unhallowed eye*,
Where in St. Clara’s sanctuary,
Each veil-clad votaress dwells.
He railed against the bigot sway
That *doomed them to despair*,
And mused if they were old and grey,
Or gentle, young and fair;
And vowed it was his high resolve
These doubts by force or fraud to resolve.
(Canto II, stanza III, my emphasis)

The natural curiosity of the foreign Protestant man is mixed with the author's implicit criticism of reclusive monasticism; while reprovably depicting the inquisitive male gaze intent on a series of female objects of desire, the author seems to justify this gross intrusion with the alleged unnatural state of these women caused by religious bigotry.

The same salvational arguments, reproduced by the convent's Abbess herself, had allegedly justified the British military intervention: "Two heroes of that godlike band/ Who brought us life and liberty!" And, furthermore, Father Bernardo's thankful speech is another very explicit example of this:

"*Conquest* already crowns your toil, —
The blood of those invading bands
Has streamed upon *our ravaged soil*;
Well have ye fought, and freely bled,
Be *Lusia's blessing* on your head!"
(Canto II, stanza XIV, my emphasis)

The general development of the poem, culminating in Ronald's attempt to abduct Maria ("the lone unsheltered flower") in the sixth canto, seems to bear out the idea of traditional male conquest. This, in turn, simply reproduces what happens in the military field, with the description of the double victories of the Douro and of Talavera in cantos three and seven, respectively:

[...] the startled Frenchmen wait
To close Oporto's royal gate,
While we his flying rearward greet,
And *charge them on from street to street*;
With headlong force and thundering shout
We rushed upon the flying rout,
And drove them, -- till the pitying night
Cast her dark mantle o'er their flight.
(Canto III, Stanza IX, my emphasis)

It is significant that Ronald, the hero, finds Maria and the other cloistered nuns very much as the British army finds the Portuguese nation: helplessly subject to a tyrannical force and at the complete mercy of violence and bigotry:

[...] the succeeding leagues disclose
The path of our remorseless foes.
The ravaged field, the trampled vine,
The smoking hut, their step declare,
With many a dark and fearful sign
That murder's crimson hand was there.
In horror, hunger, nakedness,

~*The remnant from their coverts crept,*
And prayed the Lord our arms to bless,
While *frantically they wept*
O'er the retrieveless scene of spoil,
The wreck of their industrious toil.
(Canto III, Stanza I, my emphasis)

In sharp contrast with this vulnerable picture of ravaged and weeping Lusitania, stands the often evoked and highly praised image of Britannia or Albion, which as a powerful protective oak tree “spreads her shade o’er other lands, / While her protecting arms extend / A refuge for the poor, / And virtue, strength, and beauty blend / Her empire to secure” (III, stanza XII).

If, on the one hand, the poem allegorically represents and glorifies British imperialism, justifying it on the grounds of cultural superiority, on the other hand, woman only finds her place and identity within the male sphere, and this includes the female author of the poem, who defines herself as the mere ‘wife of an officer’. The Portuguese nun herself, Maria, dreams of a happy, rural life with Ronald in Britain: “happier in some cottage bower”, “To share with thee the peaceful hour, / To tend our white flocks on the plain” (VI, stanza II). This rejection of her homeland dislocates the idyllic representation of Portugal to Britain and reveals how the poem is unable to come to terms with Iberian difference. Diversity, whether it is geographical or religious, is seen as incomprehensible and menacing. As Saglia emphasises, “The tale by the wife of an officer is [...] extremely revealing about its ideological allegiance” and “its elaboration of cultural supremacy is carried out through the intercultural love-story and its mechanisms of identity” (235).

The resolution which is offered at the end of the poem – the death of Ronald in the battlefield (Talavera) and the fading of Maria in the convent (“a living grave”) – seems to state unequivocally the author’s view that such an affair, though very chaste and even idealised, was doomed from the very beginning. The intrinsically transgressive nature of the liaison (seen by the author herself as an “inglorious thrall”), allied to the marked cultural and racial difference, are both reiterated throughout the poem and dictate its outcome. Such ill-fated endings were not uncommon in Hemans’s historical romances and they seem in fact coherent with both hers and Tonna’s respective personal experiences of unhappy love. But the ending of *The Convent Bell* seems to suggest not only the author’s belief that a British soldier’s “bright renown” should not be dimmed by an unhallowed love but also that it is far preferable that he dies in the battlefield than that he should “shame [his] country’s warlike race”.

To finalise, it is central to an understanding of these women's poetry that Britain was at war with France practically from the year of their birth (1790-3) until 1815, a span of more than twenty years. There were two possible ways of reacting to this. If, like Anna Letitia Barbauld, you clung to the ideals of the French Revolution, you were likely to denounce the wars, as Barbauld did in her poem entitled *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*: "With grandeur's growth the mass of misery grows" (320). If, on the other hand, your brothers and husband had seen active service, as was true of Hemans and Tonna, you were more likely to strike a patriotic or nationalistic attitude. While Barbauld was reviled for drawing attention to the high costs of war and foretelling Britain's eventual decline, both Hemans's *England and Spain* and Tonna's *The Convent Bell* were, not surprisingly, very well received by the contemporary critics and the general public.

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