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English 624

5 October 2009

Dangerous Women: The Idea of Beauty and the Power of Gaze

Landon's poem "Verses" begins with a direct address, "Lady" (1). This single word poses the first question of the poem. Who is Landon addressing? Landon could have opened the poem with "Your Grace," which would be fitting, as the subject that is placed in conjunction with the poem is an engraving of Georgiana, Duchess of Bedford. Instead, she abruptly starts with the generically female designator of "Lady," a term which could be read as either a title or a descriptor. The term has the effect of immediately putting Landon and Georgiana on similar footing and stripping Georgiana of any special status. The term "Lady" also, if only by inference, widens the circle of people the poem could address. And already, only one word into the poem, we are in muddy waters. For Landon could be addressing Georgiana, she could be addressing the image of Georgiana, she could be addressing all her female readers, she could be addressing a personified idea of female beauty, or a mix of all of the above. In their introduction, McGann and Riess raise the issue of Landon addressing herself as well, suggesting that the "Lady" of the poem could be the face in a mirror (24).

So who is the subject of Landon's ekphrastic conversation? The dexterity of Landon's poem is such that the person addressed is constantly shifting and merging until the actual addressee ceases to matter. This removal from individuality is ultimately one of Landon's major points in "Verses," a poem that keeps shifting between gaze and subject, body and object, and questions of agency and power. Landon does this through subtle changes in the

subject of her poem, and by a very blunt connection with the page. Her poem is placed next to, and is at least in tenuous conversation with, an engraving of Georgiana by Charles Heath, based on a painting by Edwin Landseer. Landseer and Georgiana were “engaged in a long-lasting liaison” (Thompson). From the start then, “Verses” is a poem about an object of male gaze, subverted into a poem about the female gaze. The work of Landseer and Heath are subsumed into the work of Landon, and Georgiana is left as a subject and a vessel for the differing gazes of three artists. Georgiana is also left exposed to the gaze of all the readers of *The Keepsake for 1829*, a book meant for wide distribution.

Can she still be Georgiana? Or is she now some kind of being trapped between a public and private sphere? After all, by the time Landon even begins to address some version of Georgiana, she is addressing a triple remove, from the person of Georgiana, to the painting by Landseer, to the engraving by Heath. Adding to the objectification of Georgiana, the Duke of Bedford, who owns the painting, releases the portrait by Landseer to Heath for the engraved reproduction, and it is the Duke of Bedford who is thanked and acknowledged by the editor of *The Keepsake for 1829* (v). Georgiana has no agency at all in this private and public exchange of her image. This serves Landon’s purposes nicely as she will continue the disembodiment of Georgiana, slowly separating her from her current frame and placing her into a series of greater removes.

Before taking Georgiana out of her frame, Landon first removes all sense of agency from Georgiana, shifting her from person to image to object in just a few lines. Once past the word “Lady” (1) the description is completely concerned with Georgiana’s body. There is no reference to the setting, no discussion of the urn to the right of the image, with its engraved female figures, the trees, the flowers in her hand, the odd sources of light, or the outspread

landscape that seems to be on the verge of a storm (with its imagery of clouds, darkness, and windswept branches). There is no discussion of Georgiana's purpose, position, or life. The poem is solely focused on her body.

This focus has the effect of disconnecting Georgiana from her surroundings, making her appear unanchored and unstable. In poems such as "Corinne At The Cape of Misena," Landon spends considerable time on the setting and details of the paintings she addresses, placing the figure into a frame of both image and story. The fact that Georgiana is pulled out of her landscape suggests that Landon is objectifying Georgiana, making her all body, and subject to the same kind of scrutiny of gaze as Landseer and Heath.

On the surface, the description of Georgiana is of a lovely woman, "thy face is very beautiful, / A calm and stately beauty: thy dark hair / Hangs as the passing winds paid homage there;" (1-3). But Landon's description does not match the image. Georgiana looks longingly rather than calm, inward and reflective, and somewhat sad. The stormy landscape only adds to that sensation. Her hair is crowned with vines, but otherwise highly styled, not at all subject to the homage of the wind. She is stately however, distant and removed, blank, devoid of the animating energy for which she seemed noted (Thompson).

Rather than address the subjectivity of Landseer and Heath and re-claim Georgiana, Landon adds to the subjectivity and the rest of the description gets increasingly murkier:

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! (4-8)

Georgiana is wearing pearls at her neck and ears, which are not mined from the “earth’s rich veins” (5). It is unclear what is on her wrist, but regardless Landon’s lines, “And gems, such gems” (4) evokes imagery of a woman almost dripping jewelry, but the actual image of Georgiana is notably restrained. There is no white robe in the engraving. In fact, Georgiana’s dress is rather plain, featuring only a bit of lace at the shoulder line and a wrap circling around one arm and held in the opposite hand. There is little at all queen-like about the image. Nor is there anything to evoke images of ancient conceptions of beauty.

In fact, the commonplace nature of the engraving is one of the most striking things about the image. It is not difficult to imagine Georgiana as the daughter of a rich merchant, rather than the wife of a Duke. The disconnect between the picture and the text is striking and destabilizing. Landon pulls this textual slight of hand to evoke the idealized vision of beauty, regardless of its missing pieces in the image, in order to carry what she needs, personified beauty, into the rest of the poem.

In the center section of the poem, lines 8-18, Landon casts Georgiana, as personified beauty, into the past, and sets up the turn of the poem. The line, “A shape such as in ancient pictures dwell!” (8) is punctuated with an exclamation point. The only other exclamation point in the poem comes after the line “With brand and banner, would have honour’d thee!” (14), thus the two lines are visually connected. In both instances Landon is calling attention to the power of beauty, putting the personified beauty of Georgiana above that of the “sovereign Beauty” (10) that chivalry honors. Landon undercuts the power of beauty by noting that in the days of chivalry, beauty outdid love and, in so doing, raises the question of the relationship between love and beauty in her time as well.

It is important to note that all of Landon's text is coded. Just as Landon uses Georgiana's image to make her point, carefully adding objects to the image of Georgiana, she uses the possibilities of different readings to make her point as well. After all, this is a poem by a woman who earns her money by making people like her work. She is aware of the commodification occurring on both sides of the poem, Georgiana's and her own. She therefore delivers a poem that can be read on multiple levels. On one hand, a reader could scan the lines and agree that Georgiana was indeed a beautiful woman and would have, in fact, fit perfectly into the days of old with shining knights and their ladies. On the other hand, given Landon's subversive description of Georgiana, in particular the description of objects that do not exist in the painting, the subtext at work in these lines is anything but a meditation on the lovely visage of the Duchess of Bedford. Rather, Landon is offering up a more global question on female agency and self-determination. What is the point of beauty, and on what factors is it decided? Who has the power of representation, and to what ends is it employed?

These are not idle questions for Landon, and her poem turns biting as it develops. Having taken Georgiana out of the engraving and placed her in a fictitious world where her visage trumps even "sovereign Beauty," (10) she now turns to the conceit of a story, a "chronicle," (15) stating that if Georgiana's picture had been a legend instead of a portrait, then poets would have written of how she enslaved Kings, made heroes sigh, and sent thousands of hopeless and nameless men to their death through her beauty. She would be Helen. But Landon will not let this stand. Georgiana, as woman, as object, as beauty personified is not Helen. When beauty did work, if it worked at all, it was in ancient days or days of chivalry. Now there is no room in the world for Helen, or for a modern day version of Helen. Georgiana is imperiled.

Landon makes this clear with her question, “What hath romancing lute, or fancied line,/ Or colour’d words to do with thee or thine?” (23-24) Nothing says Landon. Left now is only the reflected “charmed light” (22) of beauty, de-personified, simply existing in the world, adrift. Beauty has been overset and even poetry, that “dreaming minstrel” (20) cannot bring it back. There will be no “chords” (25) or “measures” (26) or “music” (26). Even “homage” (30), a word that reconnects Georgiana, back again, to the days of chivalry, is left empty.

What is left, of either beauty, or Georgiana, or the objectified version of Georgiana is only “vague imagination” (21). Landon has dismissed beauty; she has stripped poetry of its power to reflect upon it, and has left only objectification. Georgiana is back in her frame, subject to a series of endless gazes. Only this time it is not just the gaze of men. Landon has added her own gaze, a darkly disenchanted one that well knows what happened when Landseer painted the portrait of Georgiana, and completely understands the commodification of the world she and Georgiana occupy.

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