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The role of the Peninsular War in
Forging British National Identity

by Susan Valladares

'Now then, for my magnificence! — my battle! — my noise! — and my procession! — You are all ready?'¹

With a flourish of drums, an orchestra playing *Britons Strike Home* and *Rule Britannia*, the English fleet advances, fire ships destroy the Spanish squadron, and the rivers of England and all their tributaries come together in a triumphal procession. Puff's *The Spanish Armada*, the mock play-within-a-play in Sheridan's phenomenally popular *The Critic* (1779), thus effects patriotic appeal through a hyperbolic expression of British heroic history. As a ridicule of Britain's exaggerated response to the threat of a Spanish invasion, the comic finale serves as a useful reminder that for much of the eighteenth century Spain and Britain were regarded as 'hereditary enemies'.² The War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1714), the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718–1720), the War of Jenkins's Ear (1739–1748), the American War of Independence (1779–1783), and even the early phases of the Napoleonic Wars, saw British and Spanish interests at loggerheads.³ In May 1808, however, this enmity was forced to undergo radical redefinition when Napoleon attempted to overthrow Bourbon rule in Spain. The Spanish resistance, dramatically emblematised by the sanguinary *Dos de Mayo* rebellion against Murat's troops, gripped the attention

of the British nation, finding fevered expression in various media, including newspapers, translations, travelogues, letters, cartoons, poems, plays, and novels.

According to Coleridge, whose play *Remorse*, set in fifteenth-century Spain, was Drury Lane's hit tragedy for 1813, 'the Spanish cause made us all once more Englishmen'.⁴ The questions this statement raises about the relationship between Spanish politics, the articulation of national identities, and more specifically gendered ideas of citizenship, will be central to this article. By shifting the focus from Coleridge's 'Englishmen' to 'Englishwomen', it will address how female literary interaction with early nineteenth-century Spain opened up a geopolitical space charged with anxious questions about national identity and belonging. Taking 1808 as an important turning point in Anglo–Hispanic relations, this article explores how the Peninsular War afforded an opportunity for literary women to engage in a rewriting of both national and literary agency.

In *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1992), Linda Colley persuasively illustrates how Britain's wars with France were crucial to the forging of British national identities and, more specifically, their gendered manifestations. She shows how Francophobia, and even the rhetoric of separate spheres, could be used by women as a means of translating their desire to act into a *duty* to do so.⁵ Her astute analysis of 'womanpower' and its ingenious applications by women of the time is, however, notably silent on the important role played by the Peninsular War, which, as this essay will argue, equipped women with a new sense of patriotic agency. Why then, did Spain become such an important site for national (and personal) self-realisation? What was the significance attached to Spain as a Romantic geography? Can women's engagement with the Spanish imaginary pre-dating the Peninsular War be distinguished from writings contemporaneous to the military campaign in Iberia? How much of a turning point was 1808?

In her play *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1783), Hannah Cowley, David Garrick's one-time protégée, approaches the Spanish other with a

brilliant sense of cultural entrepreneurship and political maneuvering. By inserting a series of authenticating details into her narrative — such as the *converzationes* that characterised Spanish interaction, the *fandango* as a traditional dance, and the *pistole* as local currency — Cowley renders Madrid immediately recognisable. This setting in a real, rather than merely speculative, Spanish landscape is critically important for the play’s successful advancement of English political and ideological sovereignty.

Opening on the heels of the Great Siege of Gibraltar (June 1779 to February 1783), the play uses war as its overarching metaphor. This is signalled early on by the prologue’s roll-call of the English military heroes Samuel Hood and John Manners. In Act I, scene ii, when Don Caesar comically expresses his despair at Olivia’s haughty temper, he does so through the use of simile, comparing her to Gibraltar, which ‘no Spaniard can find pregnable’.⁶ His comparison was sure to have roused the patriotic spirit of audience members, coinciding as it did with international bulletins on the Anglo–Spanish conflict. Don Caesar’s simile is, however, ultimately self-defeating. Through clever linguistic positioning, Cowley ultimately invites audience complicity not with the exasperated father, but with the daughter’s defence of her autonomy. Cowley refers the audience to the military situation underlying the play’s Spanish setting, allowing her to mobilise patriotic zeal into an appreciation of her heroine’s unconventional defiance of an oppressive patriarchy.

In *A Bold Stroke for a Husband*, the public narrative of Gibraltar’s resistance to Spanish rule becomes an interchangeable metaphor for Olivia’s private interest in securing her amorous independence. For Cowley, the Spanish setting allowed the articulation of a discourse at once political and domestic. From Olivia and Marcella’s indifference to their fathers, to Victoria’s cross-dressing and the disguises of Minette the maid (who, in dressing as her mistress, genuinely arouses Julio), the play establishes a dialectic of freedom and restraint that is both dangerous and empowering. In her use of the image of the archetypal Spanish veil, Cowley presents personal identity as both fluid and mutable. The veil’s possibilities for masquerade offer Cowley’s female

characters a means of probing different kinds of persona, before finally arriving at the limits of their own identity. Cowley's late eighteenth-century Spain serves as an arena for play, experimentation, and deliberate misapprehension.

Nevertheless, despite its manifold claims to authenticity, Cowley's Madrid is never more than a site for the carnivalesque. Ultimately more surreal than real, the play permits a temporary suspension of order and decorum that, however exciting, is necessarily limited. In Derridean terms, the 'detour' must invariably result in a 'retour'.⁷ Despite their successful defiance of paternal authority, Olivia and Marcella are ultimately transferred to the patriarchal surveillance of their soon-to-be husbands. Even Victoria, for all the rebelliousness implied by her disguise, provides the most conservative of justifications for her course of action, explaining it as a 'duty' undertaken to secure her children's legal rights. Financial recuperation and romantic rescue bring an emphatic end to the Spanish flirtation. Instead, Cowley provides her audience with a traditional, and culturally acceptable, conclusion. As if to wed her comedy to English moral values, Cowley confirms that eighteenth-century Spain could only ever be foreign and other.

By the end of 1808, however, when Spain became the focal point of the British military campaign against Napoleon, changing political realities meant an increased interest in the validation of all things Spanish. In August 1808, failures to understand properly the state of affairs in the Peninsula had resulted in the signing of the Convention of Cintra. This agreement between the British and French essentially enabled the defeated French general Junot to make a glorious escape (with men, weapons, belongings, and even their loot) under the protection of the Royal Navy. In Britain, the Convention was seen as nothing short of a national disgrace, prompting Wordsworth's vituperative Cintra pamphlet (1809) and a public inquiry held between November and December 1808. This article will argue that this period of political uncertainty and instability was peculiarly well suited for the intervention of British women writers. Restricted to the peripheries of cultural commentary, politically engaged nineteenth-

century women took advantage of their marginal status in order to participate in the exciting changes to the hegemony's perception of the Spanish other.

Writing to her aunt in Liverpool in December 1808, a young Felicia Hemans declares herself an unembarrassed '*enthusiast*' for the cause of Castile and liberty. Hemans explains:

my whole heart and soul are interested for the gallant patriots, and though females are forbidden to interfere in politics, yet, as I have a dear, dear brother, at present on the scene of action, I may be allowed to feel some ardour on the occasion [...]⁸

The letter registers Hemans's multifaceted sense of selfhood: she is an anxious sister, 'an enthusiast' for a foreign cause, a female barred from political interference, an avid reader, Miss Wagner's 'little obstreperous niece', and, above all, an author in her own right. Her fascinating string of revised subject positions underscores how, in the absence of news about the Peninsular campaign, the young authoress was busily staking a very personal claim for participation in what she imagines as the Spanish 'theatre of glory'.

Experienced as a matter of 'heart and soul', Hemans's commitment to Peninsular politics finds its emotional validation through her familial attachments. This is borne out by the linguistic detailing of her letter, wherein the epizeuxis emphasising George as a 'dear, dear brother' effectively echoes her earlier self-assurance that 'surely, surely' the Spaniards would be 'crowned with success'. The repetition, by fastening the two subjects together, suggests that George's progress in 'virtue and true heroism' relied upon concrete military success in the Peninsula. Moreover, by tying George's patriotic realisation to Spain, Hemans simultaneously defines her own patriotism, characterised and validated by a loving interest in her brother's welfare.

For Hemans, then, private sympathy justified public engagement. Even the narratorial logic of Hemans's letter is structured so as to introduce her literary activities as a sort of compensation for the newspaper that

has ‘not yet arrived’, and her irrepressible anxiety to learn of George’s progress. The range of reports coming in from the Peninsula would undoubtedly have excited the interests of the intelligent and spirited young writer. On 11 July 1808 for instance, if she had read *The Morning Chronicle*’s Spanish affairs column, Hemans would have learnt of the defeat of Marshal Bessieres at Saragossa, ‘no quarter having been given to the French’. The newspaper described ‘[a] splendid result’, and delighted that success should have been bestowed upon ‘the first efforts of an irregular and undisciplined levy, against armies of veteran troops, long habituated to victory’.⁹ ‘Irregular’ indeed: poorly equipped and inefficiently led, Spain’s armies were among the worst in Europe. As a result, much of the Spanish resistance was dependent upon its civilian population and the second front provided by guerrilla warfare, including women and even children. Remarkably, it was the efforts of one woman to save her town from the occupying French forces that brought public notice to guerrilla resistance efforts.

Augustina Aragon, the Maid of Saragossa, arrived upon the battery of Portilla with Amazonian mien. According to Charles Richard Vaughan’s *Narrative of the Siege of Zaragoza*, she

[...] rushed forward over the wounded and slain, snatched a match from the hand of a dead artilleryman, and fired off a 26 pounder, then jumping upon the gun made a solemn vow never to quit it alive during the siege.¹⁰

The active verbs ‘rushed’, ‘snatched’, ‘fired’ and ‘jumping’ testify to the new models of female agency precipitated by the Peninsular War. Unlike the female warriors of the French Revolution who, as Colley explains, had forced the royal family to leave Versailles and return to Paris, Spanish women were taking up arms to defend the home, not desert it.¹¹ Unsurprisingly then, it was not only Vaughan, Byron, and fellow male eulogists who celebrated the heroic exploits of the young Augustina, but women too. Augustina’s celebrated heroism offered female writers a paradigmatic example of the public roles available to women during a time of war.

It is no coincidence that in the immediate aftermath of this famous siege Hemans should have found herself reading Madame de Genlis's 'most delightful French romance', *La Siege de la Rochelle*.¹² A Protestant–Huguenot stronghold in the sixteenth century, La Rochelle had been besieged by France in 1627, enduring fourteen months of heroic resistance before it finally fell, three-quarters of its population having starved. It was an obvious historical parallel to the siege of Saragossa.¹³ In the letter of 1808 referred to above, Hemans explains to her aunt that it was Lady Kirkwall who brought 'these volumes, which I have perused with such enthusiasm'. Significantly, she chooses to describe her fascination with the French romance by relying on the same verb — 'peruse' — that is used in the opening of her letter to describe her fevered search for news relating to the war.¹⁴ The verbal echo underlines how literature provided the logical outlet for the young writer's political aspirations. Moreover, Lady Kirkwall, as her aunt would know, was not only a generous friend to the young authoress, but an admired critical arbiter. As the letter states, Lady Kirkwall had bestowed 'great commendation' upon Hemans's early poem and nationalist effusion *England and Spain; or, Valour and Patriotism* (1808).¹⁵

Defining liberty as the allies' common cause, *England and Spain* celebrates a vision in which 'glory smiles to see IBERIA's name, / Enroll'd with ALBION's in the book of fame!'.¹⁶ Despite being idealistic and sincerely enthusiastic, Hemans's poem is nevertheless fraught with tensions. The alliance, with all its mythical couching, was in fact a new departure from the complex historical relations that had marked well-established Anglo–Hispanic prejudices. The tension becomes clear in the opening sections of Hemans's poem, which readily employ the commonplace 'us/them' dynamics of nationalism:

Hail, ALBION, hail! to thee has fate denied
Peruvian mines and rich Hindostan's pride;
The gems that Ormuz and Golconda boast,
And all the wealth of Montezuma's coast:
For thee no Parian marbles brightly shine;
No glowing suns mature the blushing vine;

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No light Arabian gales their wings expand,
To waft Sabæan incense o'er the land;
No graceful cedars crown thy lofty hills,
No trickling myrrh for thee its balm distils;
Not from thy trees the lucid amber flows,
And far from thee the scented cassia blows!
Yet fearless Commerce, pillar of thy throne,
Makes all the wealth of foreign climes thy own.¹⁷

Defining Britain's naval supremacy through a series of negations, Hemans forcefully differentiates the British Empire from its Spanish counterpart. 'Peruvian mines', 'Montezuma's coast', and 'Arabian gales', however exotic and attractive, are implicitly tainted by what came to be termed the 'Black Legend' — the negative portrayal of Spain as a superstitious, oppressive, and cruel imperial power. Hemans's readers, long accustomed to Protestant anti-Spanish propaganda, would have had trouble separating such images from this vision of Spain. Within the ideological framework of Hemans's poem, these images are, nevertheless, ultimately employed toward enabling rather than reductive ends. Structuring her verse through an anaphoric repetition of 'No', Hemans's consecutive negations conclude with an ironic flourish, realising a cumulative affirmation that justifies Britain's commitment to an ideologically Protestant ethic of empire.

Aspirations to commerce, honour, and profit determined British imperial ideology in the Romantic period. As the lead-up to the Peninsular War had made strikingly clear, Napoleon's Spanish invasion had been, above all, an attempt to bring Britain, 'this nation of shopkeepers', to its knees.¹⁸ Hemans's interest in defining Britain's commercial empire suggests that, at least on one level, English intervention in Spain could also be a means of alleviating economic crisis. Since the Continental Blockade, Spanish and South American ports had been effectively closed off to British merchants, raising the economic stakes involved in forming an alliance with the Spaniards. Entangled imperial, naval, and commercial interests played a decisive role in expanding Britain's geopolitical horizons.

The intensely national concerns inscribed into Hemans's Spanish sympathies were grounded upon a very real awareness of the imperial economy.

Cultural contact and conflict define the progress of Hemans's poem. Borrowing from the epic annals of Spanish history, Hemans relates the legacies of the Cid and Gonzalvo of Cordoba in order to contextualise how Spain, a plural nation of ethnic and religious diversity, had achieved a sort of national renaissance through martial valour and heroism. This fascination with the Spanish national spirit offers a powerful auxiliary to Hemans's own discovery of patriotic citizenship. Her poem's focus on Spanish history is intriguingly preceded by a verse that makes an argument for historical revisionism: 'Those times are fled, when stern thy castles frown'd,/Their stately tow'rs with feudal grandeur crown'd'.¹⁹ In defining and redefining Spain and its related imaginings, Hemans was also scripting for herself the role of a literary female patriot.

When Hemans concludes her poem with the anticipation of British victory, her final tableau is significantly inflected by gender: peace, conforming to traditional allegorical representations, is personified as feminine. But it is worth noting that Hemans inflects the desirability of this diplomatic feat with a peculiarly sexualised vision, which calls upon Peace to

Descend once more! thy hallow'd blessings bring,
Wave thy bright locks, and spread thy downy wing!
Luxuriant plenty laughing in thy train²⁰

Not merely an object of desire, in Hemans's conclusion, the feminine is an acknowledged and commanding subject in its own right: Peace has 'Realms and monarchs bend before [her] throne'.²¹ Despite the comment she makes to her aunt, Miss Wagner's 'little obstreperous niece' refuses to accept that females should be 'forbidden to interfere in politics'. Instead, she adroitly chooses to assert the active agency of the feminine subject into a narrative powerfully concerned with national self-determination.

Although taken up for publication by Cadell & Davies, *England and Spain* languished sadly in the hands of the firm, with no sales or reviews. Hemans was only sixteen at the time of its composition. It is likely that her publishers were somewhat uncertain of underwriting the risks — financial, but perhaps more pertinently, ideological — of distribution. The combination of women’s artistic expression with a narrative of national and military supremacy was met with latent hostility by the conservative male establishment. As a result, female writing coeval with the Peninsular War was often precariously poised between the private and public, sometimes intentionally so. Lady Barbarina Dacre was an accomplished member of the bluestocking literati and a charismatic social figure. But when it came to publishing her Spanish-inflected plays, *Gonzalvo of Cordoba* (1810) and *Pedrarias* (1811), Dacre made a self-conscious choice to remain in the theatrical closet. In 1821, when her poems and dramas were finally published, they were restricted to private circulation.

In her Preface to the 1821 edition, which includes both *Gonzalvo* and *Pedrarias*, Lady Dacre addresses her coterie of friends on ‘the tremendous difficulty of dramatic composition’. She claims:

I am at length convinced that tragedy is not the field for female powers. Its province is to portray those violent and terrible passions, which must be treated with boldness beyond the courage, and a force above the strength of a woman; and which, some of them at least, demand a coarseness from which she naturally sinks.²²

Prefaces can be notoriously coy: Lady Dacre’s is no exception. Note how she qualifies her conclusion that women are not suited to the writing of tragedy by adding the temporal observation ‘at length’, suggesting a begrudging and even intentionally ambiguous conclusion. Perhaps most revealing of all is the fact that, although the preface describes the task of dramatising de Florian’s romance (*Gonzalvo of Cordoba*) as surpassing the difficulties she had imagined, the following year she set herself the much more ambitious task of writing *Pedrarias*, a global drama of cross-cultural romance based on Marmontel’s *Les Incas*.

In *Pedrarias*, Lady Dacre, like Hemans in *England and Spain*, draws upon history in order to validate her Spanish romance. Explaining that ‘great liberties’²³ were taken with Marmontel’s narrative, she inserts footnotes referring to Robertson’s scholarly *History of America* (1777), and carefully translates the culturally specific beliefs which animate her Peruvian characters. Dacre strikes an important balance between fact and fiction. Historical revisionism, as in Hemans’s poem, offers the opportunity simultaneously to rework stale perceptions of otherness and prop a new sense of the writing self.

Lady Dacre uses the form of closet drama as a space in which to rehearse new outlets for the gendered identities inspired by the Peninsular War. Her reluctance to publish and her putative disclaimer against female-authored tragedies are predominantly tactical. At the end of the Preface she concludes:

I would, therefore, as soon recommend the profession of arms to my countrywomen, because there has been one Maid of Saragossa, as tragedy to my sister, because there exists only one Joanna Baillie.²⁴

The ‘recommendation’ is bathetic. Consider for instance, Dacre’s tongue-in-cheek use of the ambiguous negative ‘as soon’ to signal her irony in recommending women to the professions of arms and tragedy. Her concluding comment that there exists ‘only one Joanna Baillie’ seems to signal challenge rather than warning. As such, for all its stylised sense of absurdity, Lady Dacre’s commentary ironically effects a celebration of defiant, publicly commemorated women.

The Peninsular War, the Romantic theatre, and gendered ideas of agency coalesce in Dacre’s comparison of the Maid of Saragossa and the Scottish dramatist Joanna Baillie. Hemans, meanwhile, who referred to Spain as a ‘theatre of glory’, acknowledged her own participation in a culture of spectatorship bringing together women and the war in Iberia. The new Anglo–Spanish alliance of 1808 excited Britons’ sympathy and curiosity. And, crucially, at the heart of the Spanish campaign stood the heroic figure of the Maid of Saragossa, who became for Hemans and Dacre, albeit in quite different ways, an emblem of female agency. A model figure

of publicly celebrated female action, the Maid of Saragossa permitted Hemans and Dacre to marshal their literary endeavours to the drumbeat of a national cause.

In Cowley's drama, the Spanish was pointedly the 'other' culture. By contrast, the Peninsular War, in encouraging Britons to normalise their inherited images of Spain, prompted women writers to lift the Spanish veil and invest the narrated culture with a narrating voice of its own. With both political and personal investments in the Spanish campaign, Hemans's and Dacre's rewriting of Anglo-Spanish history effectively entailed writing themselves into a public discourse of war and nation. In early nineteenth-century Britain, female literary identity was being expressed and made significant by a newly redefined European global context.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Critic; or, A Tragedy Rehearsed*, 2nd edn (London: T. Becket, 1781), p. 97.
- ² See Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Napoleonic Wars: The Peninsular Wars 1807–1814* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), p. 14.
- ³ Fremont-Barnes, p. 14.
- ⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life & Opinions*, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), I, p. 189.
- ⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, 2nd edn (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 277.
- ⁶ Hannah Cowley, *A Bold Stroke For a Husband* [1783], in *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*, ed. by Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer (Lancashire: Broadview Press, 2003), pp.1–39 (p. 7).
- ⁷ See Jacques Derrida, ‘The White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 207–272.
- ⁸ *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. by Susan Wolfson (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 475. All subsequent references to the letter refer to the same page of this edition. Emphasis original.
- ⁹ *The Morning Chronicle*, 11 July 1808, ‘The Morning Chronicle’ section, p. 2.
- ¹⁰ Charles Richard Vaughan, *Narrative of the Siege of Zaragoza* (London: James Ridgway, 1809), p. 15.
- ¹¹ Colley, p. 252.
- ¹² See note 8 above.
- ¹³ In 1813, the points of contact between the two sieges would be rendered unmistakable by R. C. Dallas’s timely translation of *La Siege de la Rochelle; or the Christian Heroine*.
- ¹⁴ She writes to her aunt, ‘You have, I know, perused the papers (as I have done with anxiety [...])’. See note 8 above.
- ¹⁵ See note 8 above.
- ¹⁶ Felicia Hemans, *England and Spain; or, Valour and Patriotism* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1808), p. 3.
- ¹⁷ Hemans, *England and Spain*, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ Fremont-Barnes, p. 25.

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¹⁹ Hemans, *England and Spain*, p. 15.

²⁰ Hemans, *England and Spain*, p. 26.

²¹ Hemans, *England and Spain*, p. 26.

²² Barbarina Lady Dacre, *Dramas, Translations, and Occasional Poems*, 2 vols (London: privately printed, 1821), I, pp. viii–ix.

²³ Dacre, I, p. 93.

²⁴ Dacre, I, p. ix.