

The first instapoet

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How Letitia Elizabeth Landon sold her image and bought poetic fame.

BY LINDALL GORDON

Why did Virginia Woolf detest the poems of Letitia Elizabeth Landon (known as “LEL”)? In *Orlando*, when Woolf’s androgynous, time-travelling writer inhabits a woman’s body in the 19th century, she contrives to spill ink over LEL’s lines. With this gesture, Orlando blots out the “poetess” style of overdone emotion, and at the same time signals the obliteration of LEL’s international fame in the 1820s and 1830s. This followed her mysterious death at the age of 36 in – of all remote and improbable spots – Cape Coast Castle, a white-washed building with dungeons for slaves on the slave-trading coast of West Africa, now Ghana. In her biography of LEL, Lucasta Miller’s stellar research blows two centuries of accumulated dust off a phenomenon worth unearthing.

LEL: The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon excavates layer upon layer of the London world this young woman inhabited. What emerges in fascinating detail is the extent of corruption in the literary marketplace, which, a century later, still resembled – in the words of Woolf – “the Underworld”.

This book takes biography to a new level, making it

difficult to place. It goes beyond the facts of a life and its connections, from Letitia's portly paternal uncle Whittington Landon, provost of Worcester College, Oxford, to an unkempt Irish adventuress and writer called Anna Maria Hall and her editor husband, SC Hall, who, bent on respectability, cast Letitia in the same irreproachable mould. (Mr Hall, it turns out, was the model for Dickens's arch-hypocrite, Pecksniff, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.) Miller's determination to distil meaning from fact brings her work close to the sort of detection found in Joseph Conrad, whose aim is to make us "see". This venture is all the more heroic for a seeker's uncertainties. It demands exploratory imagination along with surface fact: in this case, the sudden death of a famous person long ago.

When it comes to mysteries, the first question has to do with the victim's character, her situation and frame of mind. This propels the narrative back to Letitia Landon's teenage years. She had an extraordinary facility with words and could turn out accomplished verse on any subject in record time. In 1822, when she was 20, it was natural to mimic Byron and Shelley. Dangerous models: in her early poetry marriage is a grubby transaction; affairs the Romantic ideal.

Deftly and surely, Miller peels away the extravagant melancholy of the poet's lovelorn mask to reveal a sexual bargain: Landon's long affair with William Jerdan, the rather beefy, middle-aged editor of the *Literary Gazette*. He published Landon's poems, promoting her as a girl prodigy, a "Female Byron". By 1825 she was the superstar of poetry, filling the supposed "pause" in literary history after the early deaths of Keats, Shelley and Byron. Jerdan prided himself as mentor, but he was also grooming his protégée. A "Svengali", Miller says, and all the more sinister because he believed himself benevolent, encouraging Landon, yet all the while edging her into his clutches.

We recognise a type who preys on young women craving fame. Jerdan invented a lucrative brand in "LEL", and

hard-working Landon obliged with quantities of poems for Jerdan's publication. According to his later autobiography, she earned about £250 a year – a decent income in those days – yet Miller reveals that Landon remained poor and in debt. It's reasonable to assume that she was a cash-cow for Jerdan, as well as serving him as unpaid co-editor, but it may be equally plausible that she helped to support a beloved brother who found it hard to make his way and was often needy.

The sexual contract had to be secret. Jerdan was married and father of some 23 children, many illegitimate. As his mistress, Landon was vulnerable to reputational damage, all the more so as a woman exposed in the public arena where the print-shops sold her image. Like Rupi Kaur and many of today's Instagram poets, Landon traded in both poems and portraits. But the "hyper-feminine" images she deployed – the long-lashed equestrienne; the doe-eyed doll with cinched waist in 1833; the blank-faced fashion-plate in 1835 – were not merely postures for mass consumption. The fake facade was her protection.

The detective trail leads to the secret births of three children, who were given away to preserve the poet's other trademark image: girlish innocence in a pink gingham frock. The ambiguity in all Landon said and did is epitomised by the shortness of that frock: as Miller explains, frocks showing the ankles were worn by little girls but also by prostitutes. Teasing a fan who visits her at home with her grandmother, the girl prodigy skips neatly backwards until she's out of sight. I love Miller's tart, ironic voice as she unpicks the lies and obfuscation of editors, businessmen, journalists and even Landon's doctor, Anthony Todd Thomson, who must surely have known of her pregnancies. Miller finds that Dr Thomson was in Jerdan's pay as his medical columnist. Most keenly of all, Miller unpicks the shifts of the poet herself as a creature of her shifty world.

Unlike the modern examples of the #MeToo generation of

abused women and those children abused by clergymen, LEL was not wholly a victim. There was a degree of “complicity” in selling her body for the sake of celebrity (which LEL hoped would persist beyond her lifetime). Miller calls it a “Faustian” pact. For the deeper that LEL was embroiled in the twists and turns of commercial production, the harder it became to know who she was.

The very challenge of this biography is that the subject has lent herself so completely to her array of guises, manifested in contrived portraits – in 1823 a Neapolitan poet-performer in a turban, modelled on the famous portrait of Byron in Albanian dress; in 1829 a demure minstrel, said by the *London Magazine* to be “an imposter” (the image above left and on the cover of the book); or a dressy flirt with hand on hip (the image on the cover of the US edition) – that it’s impossible to find her with any certainty. The elaborately finished drawings of LEL by Daniel Maclise almost mock the polish of the masquerades, except for one candid sketch in profile, at her writing table, showing her to have been short and quite ordinary.

So it is that the life of a long-forgotten “poetess” turns out to showcase an unmarked period in English literary history between the licence of the younger Romantic poets and the moralistic cant of the Victorians. Once again Miller refreshes literary history, as in her earlier *The Brontë Myth* (2001), with the shifting shapes of critical ideology, sometimes simplistic, sometimes absurd, down the years.

LEL’s 1829 poem “Lines of Life” (the one Orlando blots) offers a confession of lost authenticity:

I teach my mouth its sweetest smile,
My tongue its softest tone;
I borrow others’ likeness, till
Almost I lose my own.

These lines “are indeed an authentic dispatch from the heart of the hypocrisy culture in which Letitia actually lived”, Miller concedes, but as the poem goes on and on, she begins to wonder if this is just another act. The title comes from Shakespeare’s Sonnet XVI, which casts doubt on the “painted counterfeit” of art, arguing that progeny, not the pen, can outlast time. Yet despite all we learn of LEL’s manipulations, this poem does convey something genuine: a writer’s fear of “withering ridicule” and also the void left by a cynical milieu:

I hear the spiritual, the kind,
The pure, but named in mirth;
Till all of good, ay, even hope,
Seem exiled from our earth.

The aspiring poet sells her soul – her gift itself – for ephemeral fame, as she shifts in line with the market from one persona to another. One of her admirers, the poet Elizabeth Barrett, reflecting on Landon’s “raw bare powers”, said, “I fancy it would have worked out better... with the right moral and intellectual influences.”

This observation is borne out by the contrasting fate of the young Charlotte Brontë, another admirer of LEL, who shared a wish “to be forever known”. At first Brontë wasted her gift on romantic fancies, in thrall to the Byronic temper she and her brother stoked. But then she transformed herself under a first-class teacher in M Heger, who set a standard of sense and correctness. Letitia Landon had no such luck, and after a malicious *Times* exposé in 1826, the facts of which she denied, scandal crept upon her. In 1835 Jerdan began to cultivate a new girl-poet, who became another secret mistress and mother of more children.

At that stage Landon became engaged to a younger man, a newcomer to the literary scene, John Forster, who was to be friends with Dickens and later his biographer. But rumours of

Landon's sexual history led Forster to break with her. The only solution was to find a man outside her world. This happened when she met George Maclean, governor of Cape Coast Castle, who was on a rare visit to London. By the time scandal reached his ears it was too late to risk a breach of promise. Landon had a further hold: a hint she knew of his "country wife", a temporary arrangement with a local woman. The feelings of the engaged pair turned sour, but Landon needed marriage to nullify scandal and take her far away. The couple married in London and she then sailed with him on his return to his post in West Africa.

Four months later Landon was dead. On 15 October 1838 her body was discovered against the door of the room she shared with her husband, and in her hand a bottle of prussic acid (commonly prescribed as a painkiller pre-aspirin, administered by adding a drop in water). It looked like suicide, but there were suspicions of murder.

When Landon's brother called for an inquiry, political and commercial interests ensured that nothing was done. Relevant papers were said to be lost and Landon's maid was silenced – forced to retract her adverse reports of Maclean's cold and tyrannical behaviour towards his wife.

One of Landon's last letters confides that her husband had stated an intention to break her spirit. This took a strange form: she was to leave their room at 7am and not return until 1pm, when he would emerge. Nor was she to use any of several unoccupied rooms in the castle. He insisted she occupy her time with "servants' work", washing, ironing, cooking, although there were plenty of servants at hand. Might this add up to a situation in which she could no longer write? A possible conclusion is that Maclean shut off the gift that was death to hide.

LEL brings this domestic tyranny to light, alongside the

concealed manipulations of commerce. In 1833 the bill drawn up by Sir James Stephen (Virginia Woolf's grandfather) to abolish slavery throughout the empire was passed. Yet in 1838, when Landon arrived in West Africa, slavery still underpinned trade around Cape Coast Castle. The governor, all brass buttons and epaulettes, painted as a responsible, upright figure endorsing the law, was a pawn in the hands of big business. The book traces a link between him and a successful soap manufacturer whose vital ingredient was palm oil produced or carried by slaves. This soap-man, for the sake of some advantage, had instigated Landon's fatal meeting with Maclean.

It comes then as no surprise to find the title of a late chapter is "Heart of Darkness". Here is an explicit reminder of Conrad's great tale about the way "the powers of darkness" can claim a person for their own. The tale links "The horror! The horror!" of an African journey with what lurks in the hearts of men in the remote reaches of the Congo as well as back in the "sepulchral city" – Brussels or London or any centre of supposed civilisation. TS Eliot used "The horror! the horror!" as his original epigraph to the degraded London of "The Waste Land".

Detection of this order has a revelatory impact. We see the network of manipulations, hypocrisy, commercial evil. Lucasta Miller's investigation into the corroded promise of one young life opens up an abyss and, holding our gaze, speaks eloquently to the present.

LEL: The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the Celebrated "Female Byron" by Lucasta Miller is published by Jonathan Cape (16pp, £25)