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## Essay Review of Lucasta Miller. L. E. L. : The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the Celebrated "Female Byron."

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movements. Her formalist approach, coupled with her original close readings and her carefully chosen examples of the novel, are rewarding and encourage the reader to see character as networks and surfaces.

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**Lucasta Miller. *L. E. L. : The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the Celebrated "Female Byron."***  
New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2019. 401 pp. \$30 (c) \$20 (p).

Letitia Landon has until recently been poorly served by scholarship, going back to D. E. Enfield's thin *L. E. L.: A Mystery of the Thirties* (1928). In 1951, she was fodder for Rosemary Ashton's hybrid novel-biography *Letty Landon*, and then it was not until the 1980s that a trickle of academic interest can be discerned, followed by the flood of the last two decades. A starting point was an essay in *Victorian Poetry* in 1992 by Glennis Stephenson, "Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice: The Construction of L. E. L.," which pointed to the now dominant strand of interpretation that views Landon as a self-conscious performer. Stephenson's *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L. E. L.* (1995), was, I believe, the first university press monograph, and Jerome McGann's influential *The Poetics of Sensibility* (1996) argued that we have systematically misread Landon and many others as membership in the Romantic canon became more exclusive (the "Big Six" phenomenon). F. J. Sypher's heroic efforts on L. E. L.'s behalf resulted in his invaluable edition of the letters (2001) and a biography (2004); both, alas, are out-of-print and unavailable in the used book market. Thus prior to Miller's work, biographical knowledge has been outpaced by mostly feminist critical work intent on trying to find a framework for reading. Unanchored by scholarship on her life, Landon's poems, and to a lesser extent her fiction, have become a Rorschach test for critical ingenuity.

It is perhaps in reverse order that a lively popular biography should appear before an authoritative dryasdust or university press life. For a biography of a poet who dwelt among the untrodden ways

of the poetess tradition, Lucasta Miller's new life of Letitia Landon has scored a remarkable success, with laudatory reviews in *TLS*, *The New York Review of Books*, *New York Times*, *The Economist*, *New Statesman*, and features on Radio 4 and other mass media. Miller's Landon is firmly entrenched at the center of English literary culture in the 1820s and 1830s, and there is a thrill in following her trajectory from the child being watched at her games by her neighbor William Jerdan to her strange death in Cape Coast Castle in what is now Ghana. Turning to Landon after publishing *The Brontë Myth* (2005), Miller has explored every possible nook and cranny looking for some semblance of the truth about a figure shrouded not so much in mystery as in mystification. Her efforts have turned up a good number of hitherto unknown sources, particularly for Landon's childhood and her last two years, and the book is also enriched by over sixty illustrations and color plates, including hitherto unpublished or unknown images gathered from all over the globe. Miller considers in depth not only Landon's image as shaped by herself and Jerdan, but also the suite of portraits that accompanied her fame by H. W. Pickersgill, Daniel Maclise, John William Wright, and Thomas Sully, all of which are reproduced.

Miller's subtitle calls Landon "the celebrated 'Female Byron,'" and she indicates that Landon was widely referred to as such while alive. I do not think that is exactly right (she cites the phrase only from an anthology first published in 1848), but what is true is that Miller's book makes the case that the biographical lens was (and is) as essential for reading Landon as it is for Byron. Both Byron and Landon had open secrets—for Byron his bisexuality and probable incestuous affair with half-sister, Augusta Leigh. Previous biographies, beginning with that of Landon's friend Laman Blanchard, were knowingly, then unknowingly, based on a lie about her secret, and the workings of the lie have colored the way in which her poetry and fiction have been understood. In 2001, Cynthia Lawford revealed in the *London Review of Books* that Landon was the mother of three children, fathered by her mentor William Jerdan. These children were born out of London and squirreled away out of sight. Landon, as far as we know, had little or no subsequent contact with them. Lawford's startling revelation took far too many years to sink in as the old interpretive pathways were hard to abandon. The

biographical introduction in the latest edition of the *Norton Anthology* (2018), for instance, mentions only “rumors” of affairs, and no mention of children. In the *TLS* review of Miller’s book, Daisy Hay truthfully writes that although it is eighteen-years late, “The existence of L. E. L.’s children is the great revelation of Miller’s biography.”

Rather than push it to the side, Miller’s starts from Landon’s semi-cloaked amatory relationships, and she argues that they radically change the way her writing must be read: “The equivocal way in which she played on her backstage sexual ‘secret’ is also the key to understanding much of her poetry” (33). Miller finds the cover-up to her private life “in diaries or letters” and her confessions “in her most public utterances, her poetry” (70). As Miller remarks in an interview, “There was almost no line in L. E. L.’s work or her contemporaries’ accounts, which could be fully made sense of ‘straight’ i.e. in a vacuum. Everything required contextualization, because she was so completely of her moment and so embraced being ‘modern’ in Baudelaire’s sense of ‘the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent.’”<sup>1</sup> Many critics remark on the performative or marketing construct of “L. E. L.” Miller shows that in some cases “L. E. L.” is in earnest and “Letita Landon” a performative superstructure. In other cases, Miller sends us back to the work to read in a new light. Is Landon’s breakthrough book *The Improvisatrice* (1824) a somewhat sentimental reiteration of *Corinne*? Might it be “in fact sophisticated high camp” (88-89)? Miller admits the poems in Landon’s last volume, *Flowers of Loveliness*, veer towards kitsch, but “Like the best kitsch, however, it is not blandly shallow but deeply shallow, embracing shallowness as a form of covert rebellion” (253). We teachers of Landon welcome the opportunity to read her slant, and in each case the reading is supported by our enhanced understanding of a talented, devious, and tormented woman.

Landon’s childhood is interpreted with an eye to what is to come. Chapter 3, “Keeping Up Appearances,” takes its title from Landon’s unfinished novel, *Lady Anna Granard, or Keeping Up Appearances*. Miller reshapes the scant details, found chiefly in Blanchard’s *Life and Literary Remains*, the few letters, and also trawls the later fiction—including *A Woman’s Story* by Anna Hall

which, like *Lady Anna Granard*, she believes is based on Landon's life—to present a portrait of Landon's family as one of marginal respectability, with an ineffectual father and a social-climbing mother. Childhood's end comes when the teenage Landon, prompted by her mother, sends some poems to her neighbor William Jerdan of the *Literary Gazette*. Jerdan, Miller imagines, had been ogling her for quite some time.

Jerdan has not been of much interest to scholars. He was a mediocre poet (publishing in his own magazine as “Teutha”), a boring essayist, and the sort of magazinist whom wits hoaxed with fake submissions. The editorial figure of the schmaltzy and sentimental seducer Denis Burlap in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counterpoint* comes to mind. It is perhaps a sign of the mediocre nature of much late Romantic writing that he had such prominence. Miller sees him with a Svengali-like influence, a mentor who trained up a young girl for his pleasure, and also for his profit once her amorous poems as “L. E. L.” began filling the “Original Poetry” section of the *Gazette*. She notes, however, that it was a “mutual seduction” with something in common with the “erotic brinkmanship of *Les liaisons dangereuses*” (64). Without too much of an effort and presumably without a wager, Letty next door became Jerdan's lover. Alcohol may have been involved, according to the publisher Richard Bentley: “Mr Jerdan's connection with this unfortunate lady was but too true. . . . [I]t happened on a day when Mrs Jerdan & her daughters had gone to the theatre, L. E. L. was induced to partake of champagne.”<sup>2</sup>

Landon's sexual initiation seems to have emboldened her; Miller finds her a belated Regency or second-generation Romantic ironist rather than a proto-Victorian. Landon constructs “L. E. L.” by “mirroring, splitting; doublespeak; the notion of identity both as a costume put on and as vested in the eye of the beholder”—one constant being her understanding “of human relationships in terms of brutal power dynamics” (65). Miller constructs Letitia Elizabeth Landon by wisely not trying to resolve all the contradictions. Noting the occurrence of the fame/shame rhyme in Landon's verse, Miller devotes a chapter to each, emphasizing the greater the former, the greater the risk of exposure: “In aiming at Sappho's glory, Letitia had flown too high” (102). The “Shame” chapter begins, as was

perhaps inevitable, when Landon's pregnancies could no longer be hidden or knowledge of them suppressed. In March of 1826, the *Sunday Times* (then not connected with the *Times*) published a paragraph titled "Sapphos and Erotics" that instigated a small cluster of articles that later came to be seen as a jealous persecution of an innocent young woman, but which accurately, though unkindly, stated the truth. Miller deftly navigates the psychological cost for Landon and the effect this exposure, possibly related to blackmail and soon ended by unknown means, had on her feelings, behavior, and her writing. For Landon, Miller speculates, Keats's famous equation of Beauty and Truth would now read as "a teasingly empty tautology" (122), and Romantic lyres (like the one carved on Keats's tomb), also reflected Romantic poets as liars, those who let the fancy cheat reality without acknowledgment.

As Landon matured and put some distance between her and Jerdan, she makes friends her own age, such as Edward and Rosina Bulwer, and later the Irish painter Daniel Maclise. Miller tracks the tightrope she walks with her secret into the 1830s, explains her centrality to the giftbook phenomenon, and the personal and economic reasons for her transition into fiction. She unpacks, as best the scanty publishing archives allow, the complications of Landon's finances, showing the ways in which Jerdan, who handled much of the detail, exploited her work for his own interests. A high point, of sorts, occurs during Landon's extended summer trip to Paris in 1834, followed by her engagement to the youthful John Forster that September. In Paris one senses the Landon that might have been a respected poet, meeting peers such as Heinrich Heine. Landon was only twenty-eight years old, and already not only a famous "poetess" but a literary power through her editorial work in *The Literary Gazette*, *New Monthly Magazine*, and the giftbooks. An English woman of letters, however, could not at this time live the life of Madame De Staël, much less George Sand.

Friends in private, and even reviewers, had been urging her to marry ever since 1824; as a wife she might be safe, if not happy. The younger Forster was recently in London from Newcastle, and as Miller notes not yet in his teens when the *Sunday Times* story appeared. While it is possible that Landon might have married someone who did not care about her children—the actress Maria

Foote's famously out-of-wedlock children did not prevent her marriage to the Earl of Harrington in 1831—she apparently found Forster's naiveté more appealing. Inevitably, he got wind of the truth, accosted her, and Landon, probably with relief, broke off the engagement rather than confess the truth or enter a union shadowed by an enormous lie. The pressure after this debacle only increased, including financial pressure, and worries about her brother Whittington's stalled career.

The tragic last act of Landon's story is the most complicated, and Miller's work explains, for me, things that have always puzzled about her meeting with George Maclean—a man not just from the hinterlands of Newcastle, but from the isolation of the West coast of Africa. Miller pulls together a detail-filled speculation that explains how in order to meet Maclean Landon attended a party at a mansion in Hampstead given by nonliterary merchants for a colonial governor, and how the vectors of Society (Landon's friendship with Lady Blessington), politics, and money resulted in a proposal of marriage, followed by the hard-nosed tactics used by Landon to hold Maclean to his promise. The last two years of Landon's life account for about 100 pages, and Miller makes good use of both old and new sources, such as the hitherto unknown diary of Maria Liddiard, whose parents, connected with merchants in the Africa trade, had known Landon since at least 1831.

The details of Landon's end for a long time overshadowed the rest of her life and her work: the lonely marriage ceremony, taciturn Scottish groom, insistence on accompanying him to Africa, possible presence of a native wife, prussic acid, hasty inquest, letter from home, silencing witnesses, and so forth. What intrigues me is the statement, found first very late in the book, that "Letitia was an addict" (271), based in part on a letter to the *Times* immediately after her death was known. Laudanum usage was of course very common, so the letter writer (Miller suggests Emma Roberts) was probably right. It is late in the book, however, to assert a deep connection between opioids and Landon's creativity: "Her drug use was comparable to that of jazz improvisers such as Miles Davis and Charlie Parker, who used heroin as a facilitator, to dampen performance anxiety and to block distraction, as too much conscious cognition could block the improvisatory flow" (273).

*L. E. L.* is a scholarly work that is cognizant of but does not engage in a dialogue with the latest scholarship. I personally would like to see discussion in the text where Miller's points intersect with those made by other Landon scholars, but I understand why the editors at Knopf did not. The book offers much new information, and documents a number of new explanatory tacks when confronted with the headwinds of a Victorian cover-up. Having spent some time myself in Landon's peculiar milieu, I support the general portrait of Landon that Miller presents, and value the book both for its research (including the plates), and for the range of intertextual connections it suggests for Landon's verse. Miller brings before our eyes the complex and sometimes bewildering literary London of the 1820s and 1830s, not quite "Romantic," and becoming slowly, sometimes kicking and screaming, "Victorian." I am disappointed, however, in a number of areas, which I will list below. These categories are, perhaps, common to many trade biographies that make a priority of a tale well told, and at least a hope of profit.

#### Reaching too hard

It seems required that biographers of "minor" writers overstate their importance. "No writer of Letitia Landon's generation," Miller asserts, "achieved wider currency in terms of sheer word count or name recognition. Given her lifetime fame, her subsequent disappearance from standard literary histories, even if only as a name, remains a conundrum" (6). The first claim is questionable (surely her friend Edward Bulwer, born the year after Landon, has as good a claim), and the second is hyperbolic as well—"standard" literary histories such as the nineteenth-century volume of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1933), Albert C. Baugh's *A Literary History of England* (1945), and Ian Jack's volume in the *Oxford History of English Literature* (1963) all give some space to "L. E. L." It could be argued, in fact, that Baugh's judgment that Landon's "life . . . has an abiding interest not found in her poetry (1263) will be reinforced by Miller's book. We are told that *The Improvisatrice* "sold out in a day" (89); no source is cited, but Jerdan in the *Literary Gazette* states that "nearly the whole of a large impression was rapidly disposed of" on the first day (10 July 1824),



which is not exactly the same thing, especially in a puff piece. What distorts more are the barrage of claims that strike me as taking away from whatever Landon and her works were in and of themselves. She is seen as “proto-postmodern” (15); like “pop music in the 1960s” (16); “like Heine” (24); a writer who precedes Dickens in serial fiction (26); and Browning and Tennyson in the dramatic monologue (27); with further comparisons or claims of precedence with Henry James, Jane Austen, Wilkie Collins, Schiller, Hans Christian Anderson, even Karl Marx—as well as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. I find “L. E. L.” to be more unique than comparable, but this mania for comparison is also found elsewhere; the latest essay on her work adds Gertrude Stein and Andy Warhol.<sup>3</sup>

Another common failing is that in defending writers of the new canon, they are never allowed to nap. We can all agree with Horace that “even Homer nodded,” because his epics are otherwise so powerful. For Landon, “The very roughness around the edges of her verse was designed to make her seem like an untutored genius. If she wrote a clunky line, she left it in because it added to the effect” (87). About another passage, “The very badness of the lines is shift. . . . The creaking versification only comes to life if one imagines Letitia speaking the words with coquettishly simulated wide-eyed innocence” (116). Someone brought the later Wordsworth’s clunkers to life by imaging them spoken by a bleating old sheep—but that does not make them good. Miller still has some ways to go to convince one that the traditional explanation for Landon’s clunky lines, that she wrote too much too fast to make too little money, is wrong.

### **Too much straining after relevance of phrase**

Sometimes the prose seems to go too far in avoiding scholarly dryness, and can cast the aura of the present too strongly on the alien world of the past. Here are a few examples: “raise her game,” “on trend,” “fashion forward,” “boho style,” “in crowd,” “love bombed,” and perhaps most annoyingly, “toy boy” to describe John Keats in his relationship with Isabella Jones, then used again for Edward Bulwer and Caroline Lamb, and finally to assert that “toy boys were *de rigueur* among the women writers of the period” (189). We know

very little about Landon's parents. Miller thinks "the couple first hooked up in London, perhaps encountering one another at some ticketed event, the Regency equivalent of online dating" (35), and on the next page speculates that her mother's "background was less *comme il faut* than John Landon's, which might explain why she had not previously succeeded in hooking a husband" (36). (Landon's parents met and married at least a decade before the Regency, and the source for "online dating" behavior is from the 1840s.) Some repetitions seem like authorial tics. Jerdan is called Landon's "Svengali" a dozen times or so, but Miller correctly states that their relationship was "much more complex" than that of Trilby and Svengali in Du Maurier's novel (72). But each repeated use of "Svengali" implies that it was not, and casts their story into the world of melodrama. My objection to these idioms is not only a matter of taste; they reflect an imposition of our sensibilities on the psyches of the past, and distort our understanding of Landon's life and literary self-image.

#### Lack of qualification

Scholars are cursed by tentativeness. We are too often like Jürgen Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*, grinding away on our "special subject" to come to narrow conclusions. Miller can be faulted in the opposite direction. Where one might write "possibly" or "perhaps," she leaps to "probably" and too often leaps again to "must have been."

An example of such a leap is the statement that Landon's address was "leaked" to *Blackwood's* in 1824 "in an attempt to solicit invitations with the aim of establishing her as a literary lion" (90). While there may be some truth this—the article in *Blackwood's* is very odd—there is simply no evidence either of a "leak" or of this "aim." The article in question was by William Maginn, who knew very well Landon's address. Miller shapes a story of the later Romantics around their being a "forbidden poetic counterculture" (32), an almost satanic cult obsessed with sex and death, going so far as to claim that "masochistic pain and narcissistic self-destruction were central to L. E. L.'s poetic self-image." Almost every mention of Byron, Shelley, and Keats drills in on this aspect. For instance,

Shelley “drowned himself and his companions” by “recklessly refusing to trim the sails of his yacht” (30). This claim is obviously unprovable; the only reliable witnesses to Shelley’s possible refusal drowned along with him. Why did Landon in 1822 not inscribe a memorial volume of Keats’s 1817 poems? “She *must* [my emphasis] have been afraid of appearing too pushy” (75). A “bland and smooth” letter to the poet Bernard Barton is sealed in wax with “an all-seeing eye”; this “was a private joke at the myopic Barton’s expense.” Or maybe it was just the seal that was within reach? Who knows?

A perfect example of the slippage might be this statement: “Hall had a particular interest in art criticism and later founded an art magazine. He was *probably* [my emphasis] the author of the disapproving critique of Pickersgill’s portrait of Miss Landon in the rakish Spanish hat that appeared in *The European* in 1825” (133). Beyond the fact that Hall was interested in art, is there any evidence that Hall wrote the “Fine Arts” column for the *European Magazine* at this time? Emily Lorraine de Montluzin’s “Attributions of Authorship in the *European Magazine*, 1782-1826” (<http://bsuva.org/bsuva/euromag/>) has no attributions to Hall, and his two memoirs published late in life also do not mention any work for the *European Magazine*.

### Sexing things up

Throughout the book there is a tendency to sex things up, which is certainly an antidote to a century and a half of anodyne accounts. Sometimes it is subtle: Landon once appeared as Shakespeare’s Perdita at a private party—so Miller connects this with “the courtesan Mary Robinson” (121) who was famous in that role. Was Mary Robinson a courtesan? No. An affair with the Prince of Wales does not equal an occupation. The *DNB* calls her an author and actress. In discussing Landon’s youthful reading in Cooke’s library, mention is made of “Hugh Kelly’s soft-porn *Memoirs of a Magdalen* (1767), a *Fanny Hill* spinoff” (54). The *Memoirs*, however, are directly connected to *Clarissa* and definitely not a spinoff of Cleland’s pornographic novel. Sometimes Miller leaps into the techniques of fiction. She quotes Landon writing to Rosina Wheeler,

later the wife of Edward Bulwer, and then states, “Jerdan was obviously looking over Letitia’s shoulder as she wrote, titillated by the idea of employing his young lover as a conduit through which to flirt with his best friend” (95). One might imagine that true, but there’s no internal or external evidence that it was so. Miller quotes a hyperbolic paragraph publicizing *The Golden Violet* that Jerdan placed in the *Literary Gazette* and concludes: “The trainer was rewarding his songbird with punishment, humiliating her with praise. He probably hoped that salacious stories would actually boost the sales of the *Gazette*, while revealing him in the flattering role of sexual conquistador” (108).

#### Simple factual errors

There are also errors of fact, not uncommon in long, detail-filled biographies, that do not affect the argument of the book, but are nevertheless disconcerting as the tally adds up. The Countess of Blessington did not establish “her London salon at Gore House in Kensington in 1829” (135)—she moved back to London in 1830, and rented Gore House beginning in 1836. Miller states that a portrait was sold in 1823 to “the second Marquess of Landsdowne, who may have been the illegitimate half brother of Henry Colburn” (81). The second Marquess died in 1809, and if he was illegitimate, how did he become a Marquess? (Regardless, I can find no connection between Colburn and Landsdowne.) It was not Grantley Berkeley’s “uncertain birth” that was “proved by a legal case in the House of Lords” (220) but that of his eldest brother, William. The information that Landon’s friend Anna Maria Hall attended the same school as Landon is not found, as Miller asserts, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (132), and the drawing Daniel Maclise made of Anna cannot be both executed in the 1820s (132) and in 1833 (caption to color plate). Miller quotes an attack on Landon in *The Westminster Review* in 1827, which she says was probably written by John Stuart Mill; the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* positively gives the essay to Roebuck—on the authority of Mill. Unimportant in themselves, “Facts” such as these escape from important books such as this one and accrue a life of their own.

*Works Cited*

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2. *The Archives of Richard Bentley & Son, 1829-1898*. Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1976. Reel 39, Vol. 80.
3. Sarah Storti, "Letitia Landon: Still a Problem," *Victorian Poetry* 57, no. 4 (2019): 534.

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**Christopher Herbert.** *Evangelical Gothic: The English Novel and the Religious War on Virtue from Wesley to Dracula*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019. x + 278 pp. \$45 (c), \$45 (e-book).

**Mark Knight.** *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2019. ix + 187 pp. \$69.95 (c), \$19.95 (e-book).

Evangelicalism and nineteenth-century novels have long been recognized for their mutual hostility. Simplistic accounts of this animosity have been rendered obsolete by work following Elisabeth Jay's foundational study of *Anglican Evangelicalism and the Novel in Religion of the Heart* (1979). Scholars have examined far-reaching contributions of evangelicalism, within and beyond Anglicanism, to print culture, and in recent decades have drawn our attention to novels written by evangelicals. Yet that evangelicalism should prove to be formally indispensable to the mainstream novels in which it is often parodied—that it might have provided them with their deep structures and motivating interests—has rarely been suggested or demonstrated. That the point should now seem obvious testifies to the achievements of these two studies. The work of seasoned scholars, Herbert's *Evangelical Gothic* and Knight's *Good*