

Felicia Hemans

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Felicia Dorothea Hemans was a prolific poetess born on September 25, 1793, in Liverpool, England. As a child, Hemans's was taught by her mother in several languages. Hemans had published an entire volume of poetry by the age of fourteen. In her later years, Hemans became famous among her literary peers including William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott. Much of Hemans's work was centered in the balance between the domestic sphere and the intellectual world. Hemans herself was patriotic and devoted to the advancement of the British and the Empire. Hemans, mother of five children, also significantly valued family and faith. She passed away at forty-one years old, and her legacy remains in her most popular and well recognized poem, "Casabianca."

This was published in *The Monthly Magazine* in August, 1826. It is based on true historical events from the Battle of the Nile in 1798. Casabianca was the thirteen-year-old son of the commander aboard the French ship L'Orient. Casabianca's father was wounded in battle and taken below deck, and young Casabianca waited for his father's instructions to leave his post above. Once made aware of his father's condition, he left to be with him, and the ship exploded. Hemans's poem slightly differs from the historical event. The poem is written in the standard closed ballad stanza. The quatrains are made up of an alternating iambic tetrameter and an ABAB rhyme scheme. "Casabianca" was widely popular and taught in schools across the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where children were required to learn the poem and recite it.

Further Reading

Lootens, Tricia. "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity." *PMLA*, vol. 109, no. 2, 1994, pp. 238-53.

Melnyk, Julie, and Nanora Sweet, editors. *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Palgrave, 2001.

Robson, Catherine. "Felicia Hemans, 'Casabianca.'" *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*. Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 91-122.

“Casabianca”⁷

The boy stood on the burning deck
 Whence all but he had fled;
 The flame that lit the battle's wreck,
 Shone round him o'er the dead.

Yet beautiful and bright he stood, 5
 As born to rule the storm;
 A creature of heroic blood,
 A proud, though child-like form.

The flames rolled on—he would not go,
 Without his Father's word; 10
 That Father, faint in death below,
 His voice no longer heard.

He called aloud:— “Say, Father, say
 If yet my task is done?”
 He knew not that the chieftain⁸ lay 15
 Unconscious of his son.

“Speak, Father!” once again he cried,
 “If I may yet begone!

⁷ [author's note] Young Casabianca, a boy about thirteen years old, son to the Admiral of the Orient, remained at his post (in the Battle of the Nile) after the ship had taken fire, and all the grass had been abandoned, and perished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had reached the powder.

⁸ A military leader; a captain (definitions from *OED*).

And” —but the booming shots replied,
 And fast the flames rolled on. 20

Upon his brow he felt their breath,
 And in his waving hair,
 And looked from that lone post of death,
 In still, yet brave despair.

And shouted but once more aloud, 25
 “My Father! must I stay?”
 While o'er him fast, through sail and shroud,⁹
 The wreathing¹⁰ fires made way.

They wrapt the ship in splendour wild,
 They caught the flag on high, 30
 And streamed above the gallant child,
 Like banners in the sky.

There came a burst of thunder sound—
 The boy—oh! where was he?
 Ask of the winds that far around 35
 With fragments strewed the sea!

With mast, and helm,¹¹ and pennon¹² fair,
 That well had borne their part—

⁹ A rope attached to a ship's mast, part of the rigging.

¹⁰ The action of twisting or contorting.

¹¹ The wheel by which the rudder is managed, sometimes extended so as to include the whole steering gear.

¹² A long pointed streamer or flag on a ship.

But the noblest thing which perished there,

Was that young faithful heart!

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