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“Casabianca” as a Triumph and Critique of Patriotism

“[P]erished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had reached the powder,” as Hemans’ note described the Battle of Nile between British and French navy in 1798, Giocante Casabianca, with his legendary as well as romantic death, had inspired Hemans to rewrite the historical anecdote in her noted poem “Casabianca.” While the poem, designated as the compulsory recitation text in British elementary schools until 1950s, plays an influential role on the consolidation of the patriotism with its affecting narration, “Casabianca” in truth also lies the potential reading of the critique to the extreme and therefore toxic patriotism. In the essay, I would analyze the narrative framework of “Casabianca,” especially the title and Hemans’s choice of taking Giocante and his father Captain Luc-Julien-Joseph Casabianca of the *L’Orient*, the French opponent, as her protagonist. Further, I would examine the poem itself and explain how the ambivalent and extreme disparity between the patriotic ideal and the indifferent reality leads to the destabilization and backlash against men’s unreasonable faith in patriotism. In my opinion, “Casabianca” tellingly points out the triumph and the critique of the patriotism as the two sides of the same coin.

Instead of naming the title as the boy’s given name or the full name, Hemans decides to make his family name Casabianca in the lead. The design not only is about the presence of “[t]hat Father, faint in death below” (line 11) in the poem making the general “Casabianca” more appropriate, but suggests that both the individuals in the poem are reduced to a label, which embodies the noble Corsican family always loyal

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to France. (For instance, Raphaël, Comte de Casabianca, relative of the boy Giocante Casabianca, also serves as a French general during the Napoleonic regime.) In fact, the reduction of individuals into a general categorization is a common phenomenon during the wartime. In such a manner, the authority could simply manipulate people to form or to reinforce the border of their own “imagined communities,” according to Benedict Anderson. Besides, the public tends to be more unsettled and thus is easy to be incited as well as mobilized to have hatred toward others. However, what makes “Casabianca” more complicated yet delicate is the interference of the personal affection between the son and father. While they remain the father-son relationship during the war, it is the boy’s absolute fidelity to the chieftain determines his action: “The boy stood on the burning deck / Whence all but he had fled” (line 1-2). To some degree, his identity as a son (who would run to his silent father and check his condition) or merely a human being (who would escape from the flaming ship in no time) is devoured by his only and exclusive identity as a soldier who always obey his chieftain. So far, we indeed could say the poem describes a heroic, selfless and ideal exemplar of a patriotic soldier. Still, as “the flames roll’d on” (line 9), the boy “would not go / Without *his Father’s* word” (lines 9-10); further, “He call’d aloud:—‘Say, Father, say / If yet my task is done?’” (lines 13-14)—it seems that the boy is almost on the verge of breaking down, crying his father for help in a way of asking the leaving permission from the chieftain. Throughout “Casabianca,” the boy’s shifting identity reflects his hesitating attitude toward the dilemma, whether to fulfill his responsibility as a faithful soldier or to fled for life in a practical manner. The boy’s uncertainty in truth reveals the instability of the patriotism, which I would illustrate later in the next paragraph. Besides, Hemans’s choice of the French adversary as the protagonist, as far as I am concerned, not only suggests the universality of the noble / problematic patriotism, but also serves as a disillusionment of the magnificent empire,

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propelling readers to realize that the imperial glory is actually built on the countless sacrifices / deaths in vain of machine-like soldiers, who are fully motivated by the patriotic impulse due to the deliberate propaganda exercised by the ideological state apparatuses.

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Speaking of “Casabianca” itself, with the boy’s exclamation bursting out loud as one of the irrefutable evidences, Hemans questions how brutal as well as disastrous it would be once the so-called ideal patriotism is thoroughly practiced in the reality. In the second stanza of the poem, one might at first consider the description pro-patriotic with its exaltation: “Yet beautiful and bright he stood, / As born to rule the storm; / A creature of heroic blood, A proud, though childlike form” (lines 5-8). Nevertheless, as the poem goes on, the boy’s undaunted image turns out to be incompatible to the fact: “‘Speak, Father!’ once again he cried, / ‘If I may yet be gone!’” (lines 17-18) Pointing out the truth that the boy isn’t wholeheartedly willing to stand the “lone post of death” and wait for his doom (line 23), Hemans indeed destabilizes the superficially valiant representation of the boy, revealing the actually terrified boy as a mere human with flesh and blood, who is unfortunately imposed with the military responsibility as well as the absolute order. Precisely, the oxymoron “brave despair” echoes the dilemma the boy confronts—to be or not to be. Still, at the end of the poem, poignantly the boy is gone “[w]ith fragments strew’d the sea” (line 36). On the one hand, we surely could interpret the boy’s impractical death (for his adherence to the rigid rules) as Hemans’s critique to the patriotism. Falling victim to the extremity of the patriotism, the boy tragically proves its potential toxicity and brutality with his struggle to escape from its exploitation as well as his own mythical death. Not to mention the last stanza: “But the noblest thing which perish’d there / Was that young faithful heart” (lines 39-49), Hemans once again demonstrates how a loss of young life is reduced to a symbolized and metaphysical “thing,” a “young faithful heart.” To this point, the death of the boy

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is nothing but a patriotism emblem for the national propaganda. On the other hand, what we have criticized as unrealistic could also be idealistic to some degree. From the consequentialism perspective, the boy's useless death signifies the pureness and the sheer pursuit of patriotism. Undoubtedly, with her dramatic as well as sentimental portrayal near the end of the poem, Hemans' sublimation of his death evokes readers' reverence and compassion for the departed servicemen, reinforcing people's support of the patriotism. All in all, it is the multiple meanings of the extremity of patriotism that allow us to reconsider whether it is a pure or an overindulgent act for the young boy to stand on the burning deck in Hemans' "Casabianca."

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Works Cited

Hemans, Felicia Dorothea. "Casabianca." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 10th edition, vol. D., Norton, 2018, pp. 905-6.

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I mark this piece 92. I have never read the title of this poem in this interesting way.