

‘SISTERS IN ART’: REASSESSING THE ‘PRE-RAPHAELITE SISTERHOOD’

ALEX ROUND

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Abstract

How significant were friendships to Pre-Raphaelite women artists and writers? How did these connections play a formative role in their work? My thesis is the first to examine the impact of friendships amongst Pre-Raphaelite women artists and writers and how they used their friendships to challenge the masculine structures of the Victorian art and literary worlds. The figures explored in this research include Barbara Bodichon, Anna Mary Howitt, Bessie Parkes, Jane Benham, Eliza Fox and Elizabeth Siddall. These women established their own women's network that was built on creative and domestic friendships, as well as political alliances. Together, they utilised their friendships to challenge the masculine structures of the art community, and eventually wider aspects of Victorian culture.

Despite growing publicity following their first exhibition in 1848, women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle were significantly marginalised in comparison to their male counterparts.¹ For instance, John Ruskin criticised Howitt, advising her to 'leave contentious subjects alone'.² This subsequently led Howitt and other female artists to destroy some of their works. As a result, these women and their works have been excluded from the mainstream narrative of Pre-Raphaelitism. Notwithstanding the stigmas these women experienced, their work broke away from the feminine ideal defined by male-centric institutions. Marsh (1985) coined the term 'Sisterhood' as a way of identifying these women as more than the Brotherhood's 'muses', and rightfully as artists. Although 'Sisterhood' has been crucial in the efforts to recover them, the term's use in critical scholarship has proven problematic. These women should not be collectively generalised as the 'Sisterhood' as it still relegates their individual and collaborative achievements. Instead, they adopted their own

¹ Serena Trowbridge and Amelia Yeates, *Pre-Raphaelite Masculinities: Constructions of Masculinity in Art and Literature* (Routledge, 2017), p. 1.

² Jo Devereux, *The Making of Women Artists in Victorian England: The Education and Careers of Six Professionals* (McFarland, 2016), p. 158.

labels to further establish themselves as professional artists and writers, forming their own working partnerships that have hitherto been unknown. My thesis is the first to deconstruct the critical ideologies that have predominated in academic analyses of them, as well as recover the lives and works of these women, the friendships and bonds they formed and their creative agency, distinct from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

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Abbreviations

Individuals

AMH:	Anna Mary Howitt (later Watts)
BLS:	Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon - BLSB)
BRP:	Bessie Rayner Parkes (later Belloc)
CGR:	Christina Georgina Rossetti
DGR:	Dante Gabriel Rossetti
KJ:	Kate Jevons (Parkes's school friend)
ME:	Marian Evans (later Lewes)
WMR:	William Michael Rossetti

Associations and Journals

EWJ: English Woman's Journal

GCPP: Girton College Personal Papers

HSLN: Hastings and St Leonards News

ILN: Illustrated London News

RA: Royal Academy of Arts

SFA: Society of Female Artists

SPEW: Society for Promoting the Employment of Women

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Introduction

This thesis reconstructs the friendships formed amongst women artists and writers who moved in and around the Pre-Raphaelite circle. These friendships involved networks as diverse as occupational connections, religious and spiritual attachments, social and sentimental friendships, political alliances and any other way in which women established a bond or connection. More importantly, this thesis examines how these women used their friendships to not only challenge patriarchal structures of the art community but break the rigid structures of society as a whole. With reference to artistic and literary works that have been entirely overlooked by modern criticism, this research demonstrates how these women used their art and poetry to publicly engage their political thoughts.

In doing so, this study brings into focus some of the women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle that have been hitherto ignored in scholarship. The demands of research make it impossible to include full biographical histories and accounts of every woman associated with Pre-Raphaelitism. Thus, this thesis turns attention to the self-proclaimed ‘Sisters in Art’, a group of like-minded women who were directly affiliated with the Pre-Raphaelite circle from the late 1840s.¹ Developed out of long-term friendships, the group’s core members were Anna Mary Howitt (later Watts), Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon), Bessie Parkes (later Belloc), with other notable members such as the artists Eliza Fox, Elizabeth Siddall, Jane Benham, and the writer Marian Evans featuring at different stages.²

¹ I have chosen to capitalise the phrase ‘Sisters in Art’ as I view their network in a similar vein to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which has been branded and capitalised as the movement’s label since its inception.

² Despite Elizabeth Siddall arguably being too well-known in comparison to the others as a model, artist and poet, it is pertinent that Siddall be included due to the lack of scholarship on her as a networking artist who established her own friendships and actively collaborated with other women. In 1853, Siddall adopted ‘Siddal’ as her professional surname, as it was suggested by DGR that one ‘l’ was better than two. However for this thesis, I intend to retain the use of her original name. This decision is in light of Serena Trowbridge’s argument that ‘Siddal’ has come to represent her mythologised self, whereas ‘Siddall’ alludes to the real woman who lived, wrote, modelled and painted. See: Trowbridge, *My Lady’s Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Siddall* (Victorian Secrets Ltd, 2018). Throughout this thesis, I predominantly refer to Parkes, Leigh Smith and Howitt by using their maiden names. As indicated above, all three of them eventually marry, but Leigh Smith is the

All of these women in various forms sought to continue to establish the legacy of Pre-Raphaelite women, their networks, and their collaborative practice.

To date, no research has pieced together the archival manuscripts originating from this circle of women. This thesis represents the first comprehensive attempt to recover and analyse their entire correspondence, offering a deeper insight into their personal and professional lives, as well as the thought processes behind their artistic and literary work. By bringing together previously unconnected letters, journals, unpublished work and diary entries, this research breaks new ground in uncovering the collaborative dimensions of their work and friendships.

In light of this, the themes of female unity and friendship remain at the heart of this thesis. As Linda Nochlin contends, women artists in the nineteenth century were ‘consciously united and intent on bodying forth a group consciousness of feminine experience,’ and the ‘Sisters in Art’ were no different.³ Therefore, this study examines the formative role that these friendships played in their creative and political output, including their embracing the concept of ‘sisterhood’ as a model for their collaborative life and work. The roots of the early women’s movement in this friendship circle are also highlighted, as are the parallel networks of women writers, artists and thinkers who numbered amongst their friends and who encouraged and supported each other in their lives and careers. The complexities of these friendships, shifting between maternal mentorship, sisterly camaraderie and artistic partnership form the backdrop to many of the joys and frustrations that the ‘Sisters in Art’ personally and professionally experienced.

only one who is best professionally known by her married name. Thus, to avoid confusion, this thesis will continue to refer to Howitt and Parkes using their maiden names and change Leigh Smith to Bodichon when discussing any correspondence or work post-marriage.

³ Linda Nochlin, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ ed. by Catherine Grant (Thames & Hudson, 2021), p. 3.

What this research will also investigate, is the credibility of existing terms that have been used to identify Pre-Raphaelite women as a whole. The labels that have been used to collectively define women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle have been critically misused in scholarship, and in so doing generalises these women's artistic identities and relegates their individual and communal achievements. In providing a collective biographical study into the careers of the 'Sisters in Art' and their works, this thesis offers an alternate approach in identifying women by using the labels and terms that they self-consciously adopted.

This introduction is split into four parts: first, I outline the historical context on the exclusionary nature of the nineteenth-century art and literary communities and the historical erasure that women artists and writers have long been subjected to. Then, I examine the historiography of scholarship on Pre-Raphaelite women and the dearth of research on their friendships and their collaborative practice. I point out the lack of work undertaken on the 'Sisters in Art' in particular, clarifying that this study is the first to recover the lives of these women via their correspondence and unpublished manuscripts in depth. I also investigate the historical origins of the term 'sisterhood' as a communal ideal and to what extent women's creative and domestic networks have been uncovered. Finally, I address the application of pre-existing terms that have been used to critically define Pre-Raphaelite women in scholarship. In offering the 'Sisters in Art' as an example, I argue that we should view these women in light of their own labels that they constructed to further establish themselves and their careers.

Contextualising the Nineteenth- Century Woman Artist

Before delving into the lives of these women and their networks, it is important to understand the historical context in which their experiences as women artists are placed. The objections to an artistic career for women were mostly ethical, cultural and financial, but were chiefly

concerned with female propriety. To take up such a ‘male’ profession inevitably led to affronts of modesty and femininity, and to exhibit and promote work on a public level was initially seen as unacceptable, but a sufficient number of women were determined to thrive.

Nineteenth-century society was divided by various attitudes towards women artists and writers. In 1856, the *Spectator* commented that women are fundamental to the successes of the arts, but their inclusion was not without its limitations:

Women have appeared in the arts, in literature, in public business, as the handmaids of the greatest human influences. They can give expression to music where music becomes the voice of woman. They contribute a very important and useful portion of literature. They can appear as the ruling governors of the world. But into none of these cases enters that process which we may call the working out of reason, which is essentially a masculine function.⁴

There undoubtedly was a widespread notion that women could not paint, or possess artistic genius, and many believed that this was due to women being intellectually inferior to men who were seen as more ‘developed’. It was initially proposed by philosophers Herbert Spencer and Patrick Geddes that ‘male intelligence was greater than female [...] what we call more rapid intuition’.⁵ Charles Darwin supported these ideas in his work *The Descent of Man* (1896), asserting that men attain a higher eminence than women, and that women were born subordinate to men.⁶ Critics mostly embraced these ideas, justifying a woman’s inability to produce ‘real’ art because of their supposed inferiority. John Ruskin coined the denigrating term ‘paintress’, and he stated in print that the majority of women were without creativity.⁷ Although Ruskin sporadically supported a small number of women artists whom he ‘taught’,

⁴ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists* (The Women’s Press, 1999), p. 15.

⁵ Martin Fichman, *Evolutionary Theory and Victorian Culture*, 2nd edn (Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 136.

⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (D. Appleton, 1896), p. 564.

⁷ Anne Longmuir, *John Ruskin and the Victorian Woman Writer* (Taylor & Francis, 2024), p. 149.

they were ‘most frequently women he perceived to have handful ambition’.⁸ He criticised the likes of Howitt and dismissed her work entirely, instructing her to ‘leave complex subjects alone and paint him a pheasant’s wing’, believing women emotionally unable to tackle such complex subjects in their work.⁹ Nevertheless, Ruskin contradicted his earlier derogatory comments a decade later during ‘The Art of England’ lectures:

For a long time, I used to say, in all my elementary books, that, except in a graceful and minor way, women could not paint or draw. I am beginning, lately, to bow myself to the much more delightful conviction that nobody else can.¹⁰

Unfortunately, Ruskin’s contradictory comments represent a vast amount of criticism regarding women as professional artists and writers in the nineteenth century. Although women’s work was beginning to be somewhat acknowledged, a lot of their work was relentlessly criticised for having a lack of originality and inspiration. The *Athenaeum* once commented on the Society of Female Artists’ exhibition in 1866:

It is strange to find so few who display intellectual grasp, not merely of any method of treating a given subject in Art, but of the subject itself. Nine tenths of the works in question must have been made by those who have no insight beyond that of their eyes.¹¹

The reviewer of the *Illustrated London News* also discussed the lack of ambition amongst women artists in light of another exhibition headed by the SFA:

⁸ Alexandra Wettlaufer, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Sisterhood in Anna Mary Howitt’s ‘The Sisters in Art’’, *Victorian Review*, 36.1 (2010), pp. 129-146, (p. 142), doi:10.1353/vcr.2010.0005

⁹ Ibid. See chapter 6 for my discussion on Ruskin’s rejection of Howitt’s art.

¹⁰ Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists*, p. 14.

¹¹ ‘Fine Arts’, *Athenaeum*, 20th January 1866, p. 99.

Strength of will and power of creation belonging rather to the other sex, we do not of course look for the more daring efforts in an exhibition of female artists.¹²

The criticism received by women artists at the time indicates how women, by their very nature, were viewed as not artistically creative, at least not enough to match the ‘incomparable genius’ of male artists.

Notwithstanding, women began to hold an increasing number of professional occupations in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By 1901, over a quarter of professional artists and over a half of musicians and actors were female. As women gained opportunities and autonomy, the authority of men was inevitably curtailed. In light of this, despite Pre-Raphaelite women ‘automatically occupying a marginal status in relation to such a fraternal artistic community’, they still aspired to paint, write and establish their own professional careers.¹³

The Historiography of Pre-Raphaelite Women

The ways that Pre-Raphaelite women artists and writers challenged conventional norms through their collaborative efforts and within their works have been ignored in scholarship. The movement’s historiography explicitly shows this marginalisation, with the likes of Alan Gowans and Martin Harrison producing work that focuses solely on the Brotherhood’s successes. The women associated with the movement were initially mentioned in the Brotherhood’s memories, diaries and letters, but were not discussed in depth. For instance, Siddall is briefly mentioned in William Michael Rossetti’s memoirs. In an article he had written for the *Burlington Magazine* in 1903, he describes her rather grudgingly:

¹² ‘Society of Female Artists exhibition’, *ILN*, 30, 27th June 1857, p. 545.

¹³ Trowbridge and Yeates, *Pre-Raphaelite Masculinities*, p. 1.

Her life was short, and her performances restricted in both quantity and development; but they were far from undeserving of notice, even apart from that relation which she bore to Dante Rossetti.¹⁴

Rossetti's comments on Siddall favour her more for her beauty and her role as a model and wife than for her art or poetry. William Holman Hunt published an autobiography, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1905) five years before his death. In his memoir, Holman Hunt discusses Christina Rossetti and how she sat for one of his earlier paintings, and that because of 'the gravity and sweetness of expression possessed by Miss Christina Rossetti, I felt she might make a valuable sitter for my painting'.¹⁵ Whilst acknowledging that Rossetti had the aptitude to be a good model, there is no mention of her success as a poet. Dante Gabriel and William Michael were known to be particularly overbearing towards their sister's poetry despite being 'supportive' of her career. WMR published a posthumous collection of Christina's poetry with added biographical notes.¹⁶ Whilst identifying what he perceived to be her 'best' works, WMR commented on how certain poems that she never published such as 'Repining' (1847) are 'no doubt far from being excellent; yet it cannot be called that bad'.¹⁷ He also makes patronising comments regarding her tone, and in describing particular poems such as 'Three Nuns' (1897), sarcastically summarises the poem's premise as 'I want God – I sigh for Jesus'.¹⁸ Although it is evident that DGR was supportive of his sister's career, he often took it upon himself to revise her poetry. Alison Chapman analyses Dante Gabriel's changes as 'part of his wider attempt to re-feminise her poetry', proposing that he aimed to make Christina's poetry more

¹⁴ William Michael Rossetti, 'Dante Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 1903, 1.3, pp. 273-295, (p. 276).

¹⁵ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (Macmillan, 1905), p. 254.

¹⁶ William Michael Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti, with Memoir and Notes* (Macmillan, 1904).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

appealing to her readers and suitable for a female poet to publish.¹⁹ Dolores Rosenblum published DGR's justification for Rossetti's exclusion in one of his early letters, 'When I proposed she should join, I never meant that she should attend our meetings', which reinforces the exclusionary nature of the movement and the Victorian art community as a whole.²⁰ Violet Hunt's *The Wife of Rossetti* (1932) provided a biography on Elizabeth Siddall, including an insight into her personal and familial relationships. However, as the title suggests, the text is primarily centred on Siddall's workings with Dante Gabriel and the Brotherhood as one of their models, as she is just referred to as Rossetti's 'wife' and not by her name. The first line of the book concerns DGR, explaining that his history has 'been told, more or less', whereas Siddall's artistic and poetic work are briefly mentioned in the biography, but with no close readings or analysis.²¹

The 1960s saw the trajectory of the analytical and critical revival of the Pre-Raphaelites. However, few works acknowledge the female Pre-Raphaelites or their artistic contributions. Most scholars of the time, including Gowans and Harrison prioritised their discussions on the Brotherhood and their critical success. Gowans commented only on the contributions of the Brotherhood's second generation: Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne Jones and Arthur Hughes; whereas Harrison prioritised discussions on Edward Burne-Jones, as well as exploring the literary influences on the Brotherhood's works.²² As a result of this, women were further excluded from the narrative as scholars were more focused on conforming to the existing narrative instead of challenging it. That being said, attitudes surrounding women and their sexuality were beginning to change. In *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (1989), Jan Marsh observes that previous conceptions on Pre-Raphaelite women were

¹⁹ Alison Chapman, 'Defining the Feminine Subject: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Manuscript Revisions to Christina Rossetti's Poetry' in *Victorian Poetry*, 35.2, (1997), pp. 139-56, (p.153).

²⁰ Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (SIU press, 1986), p. xiii.

²¹ Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti* (E.P Dutton &Co, 1932), p. 2.

²² See: Alan, Gowans, *The Restless Art: A History of Painters and Paintings, 1760-1960* (Lippincott, 1966), p. 151; Martin, Harrison, *Pre-Raphaelite Paintings and Graphics* (New York: St Martins, 1973)

being gradually dismissed in favour of new ideas, remarking that Siddall had ‘lost her virginity’.²³ Nonetheless, as Marsh contends, these altered perspectives were based more on contemporary attitudes than new historical information, which suggests the slow advancement of scholarship on women artists and writers and their professional careers.

Since the 1980s, Marsh has catalysed the interest surrounding the lives and works of Pre-Raphaelite women with her influential work *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*. Marsh coined the concept ‘Sisterhood’ as a way of identifying these women as a collective, and more importantly, as established artists.²⁴ Along with Marsh, Gerrish Nunn published *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, which brings together a progressive collection of poetry, paintings and photographs produced by the women associated with the Pre-Raphaelite circle.²⁵ In response to these two works, there has been a surge of interest on Pre-Raphaelite women and their work, including Dinah Roe’s *Christina Rossetti’s Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (2007); and Serena Trowbridge’s *My Lady’s Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall* (2018) and *The Poems of Evelyn Pickering De Morgan* (2022), all which explore the lives and works of individual Pre-Raphaelite women in depth.²⁶ Trowbridge’s edited collections are the first to uncover and compile Siddall’s and De Morgan’s respective poetry. This demonstrates the progression of research not only concerning the art of Pre-Raphaelite women, but also their literary contributions.

In recent years, the interest in women associated with Pre-Raphaelitism has increased to the extent that it almost eclipses that of the men. The significance of women as artists, writers and even models are now taken seriously, emphasising how these women’s careers

²³ Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddall* (Quartet Press, 1989), p. 131.

²⁴ Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (Quartet Press, 1995), p. 2.

²⁵ Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (Thames & Hudson, 1999).

²⁶ Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti’s Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Serena Trowbridge, *My Lady’s Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Siddall*; and *The Poems of Evelyn Pickering De Morgan* (Victorian Secrets Ltd, 2022).

not only provided them with an income but also the possibility of creative partnership and the opportunity to professionally develop themselves.²⁷ Several exhibitions have also continued to bring Pre-Raphaelite women to the forefront of public attention. The 'Pre-Raphaelite Sisters' at the National Portrait Gallery (2020) challenged existing public perceptions of the movement on an international scale. Despite this, the works featured for the most part were painted by male artists and still focused upon many of the key women mentioned as models and muses. In her review of the exhibition, Elizabeth Prettejohn noted that although a vast range of works by Pre-Raphaelite women was featured, the exhibition, 'nonetheless, falls back on the standard characterisation of the movement as 'male dominated'.²⁸ Exhibitions such as 'The Rossettis' at Tate Britain and Delaware Art Museum (2022-23); 'Pre-Raphaelites: Modern Renaissance' at San Domenico Museum, Forlì (2024); and 'Victorian Radicals' at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (2024) also included a small selection of works by Pre-Raphaelite women but only presented them sporadically amidst the work of male artists. Other exhibitions including 'Uncommon Power': Lucy & Catherine Madox Brown' at Watt's Gallery (2022) and 'Painted Dreams: The Art of Evelyn De Morgan' at Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2024-25) have highlighted the lives and works of individual Pre-Raphaelite women, but there are several other women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle that are yet to receive similar treatment.

This thesis is the first collective biographical and archival study into the lives, careers and workings of the 'Sisters in Art'. As a feminist and activist, Bodichon has received the most attention, with Pam Hirsch's extensive biography *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*:

²⁷ Brian Eaton's research on his ancestor Fanny Eaton is a notable mention here. His book, *Fanny Eaton's Story* is the first to recount Eaton's story and experience as a paid, working model. Kirsty Stonell Walker's work on Fanny Cornforth is also worthy of mention, bringing Cornforth and her relatively unknown successful career to light. See: Brian Eaton, *Fanny Eaton's Story* (Blossom Spring Publishing, 2024); Kirsty Stonell-Walker, *Stunner: The Fall and Rise of Fanny Cornforth* (Unicorn Publishing Group, 2022).

²⁸ Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: In Conversation', *Aspectus* [Online] <https://aspectus.york.ac.uk/Issues/2-2020/in-conversation-pre-raphaelite-sisters?fbclid=IwAR3IVFON2KVo5-iKG8bwkadPP2pKf_qhLzh-Z7zm8aXr_Dp5ZCe6D01N16I> [Accessed 29/10/2021].

Feminist, Artist and Rebel (2010) and, more recently, Jane Robinson's *Trailblazer: The First Feminist to Change Our World* which was published in 2024.²⁹ However, few works have examined her poetry and early landscapes or her collaborative work with her 'art-sisters' and the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren. Parkes has a select few articles dedicated to her life and work, but the few biographical studies we have of her include her great-granddaughter Emma Lowndes's *The Life of Bessie Rayner Parkes, 1829 – 1925* (2012) and Deborah Parker Kinch's insightful PhD thesis. Again, these works mainly address Parkes's travel writing, religious faith and married life in France, and do not necessarily pay attention to her creative partnerships with the Pre-Raphaelites nor other women. As for Howitt, she has been mostly overlooked apart from Lenore Beaky's unpublished 1974 PhD thesis and Alexandra Wettlaufer and Susan Tallman's respective articles, both of which only address specific aspects of Howitt's life such as her fallout with Ruskin and her career as a spirit medium. Feminist art historian Deborah Cherry explores a vast range of women including Howitt, Parkes and Bodichon in *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (1993) and *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850 -1900* (2000), but seldom explores these women or their friendships in particular depth.

There is an evident shift in the historiography of Pre-Raphaelite women. This shift transitions from focusing on their 'liaisons' with the Brotherhood to focusing entirely on their artistic and literary efforts. Despite this, scholars are still looking at their work in conjunction with the Brotherhood and measuring the women's work in light of the men. The field needs to make a further cultural shift with regards to removing more women from their obscurity,

²⁹ 'Feminist' and 'Feminism' were not terms used in England until 1895, but long before the end of the nineteenth century there were identifiable actions and discourses that are now labelled by art historians as Feminist. Although I do try to apply other relevant terms wherever possible, I do use the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' at points during this thesis to refer to the women's rights activism of the 'Sisters in Art' and their circle.

reconstructing the friendships they formed and viewing the women's work as examples of creative and political collaboration, which is what this thesis aims to achieve.

Origins of the 'Sisterhood' and female networking

The use of 'sisterhood' as a religious communal ideal became a popular trope amongst nineteenth-century women.³⁰ The word 'sisterhood' resonated with familial overtones, but also with religious ones that was tied to reform and charitable work through the Anglican and Catholic churches.³¹ The development of Anglican sisterhoods was supported by Reverend William Dodsworth of Christ Church, Albany Street, which the Rossetti women regularly attended.³² The first Anglican sisterhood was established at Park Village West, near Regent's Park in 1845. From 1859, the Rossetti women began engaging with religious sisterhoods, with Christina volunteering at the St Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate, and her sister Maria entering the Tractarian All Saints Sisterhood in 1860.³³ By 1900, there were over 80 reported Anglican sisterhoods across the country, with each of them committed to social reform and providing care for the vulnerable and the poor. For instance, Lydia Sellon founded the Devonport Sisters of Mercy in 1848 as a result of her work with orphaned children. Within two years her community opened their own orphanage, school and training school for domestic servants, whilst also providing nurses to alleviate the hospitals during the cholera epidemic in 1849. Emily Ayckbowm founded the Community of Sisters of the Church in 1870 following her successful efforts during a cholera outbreak in Chester in

³⁰ Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 3.

³¹ See Helena Michie's '“There is no friend like a sister”: Sisterhood as sexual difference', *ELH*, 56.2, (1989), pp. 401-21.

³² Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti's Gothic*, p. 55.

³³ Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (OUP, 2018), p. 55. When editing her letters, WMR added a note in 1861 saying that Rossetti stayed there from time to time, but not for lengthy periods together. He later made no reference to the Penitentiary in his memoir. However, in a letter to Amelia Bernard Heimann in the summer 1859, CGR told her that had been 'away almost the whole time at Highgate'. Quoted in Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 27.

1866.³⁴ The sisterhoods of Clewer, Community of All Saints and St Mary the Virgin are also worthy of a mention: the Clewer Sisters, formed in 1851, acted as a sanctuary for prostitutes who wanted to leave the streets, offering a two-year course for ‘penitence’; the Community of All Saints was founded in the slums of Marylebone by Harriet Brownlow Byron, whose efforts saw the community spread to over 300 working class members by 1900; and St Mary the Virgin was one of the first sisterhoods to not discriminate between sisters on the basis of their education and status, placing all members in a single order.³⁵

Thus, religious sisterhoods served as a model of effective female co-operation in wider nineteenth-century society. Martha Vicinus remarks that religious sisterhoods ‘were clearly in the vanguard of women’s single-sex organisations’ and ‘offered examples of full trained and educated single women dedicated to nursing, teaching and good works’.³⁶ Dinah Craik also reflected on this in her essay *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women* (1858) in which she promotes a sense of unity among all women, regardless of their social class and education. She states that ‘entering a sisterhood, almost any sort of sisterhood where there was work to do, authority to compel the doing of it, and companionship to sweeten the same, would have saved many a woman from a lunatic asylum’.³⁷ Religious sisterhoods at the time encouraged more educational opportunities for women which, in turn, also encouraged them to work beyond the confines of their homes. The 1901 census appears to confirm the increasing popularity of religious sisterhoods amongst women: of professional working women over the age of 45, sisters comprised the third largest group.³⁸

³⁴ Mumm, *Stolen Daughters*, p. 9.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁶ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 55.

³⁷ Dinah Mulock Craik and Christina Rossetti, *Maude; On Sisterhoods; A Woman’s Thoughts about Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (NY UP, 1995), pp. 47-58.

³⁸ Mumm, *Stolen Daughters*, p. 1.

Nevertheless, many saw religious sisterhoods as women's excuse to avoid their marital and domestic duties. Penelope Holland spoke out against what she described as 'convent life' and stressed that if young and fertile women 'who are good and able, should know their vocation is the world, and not the convent'.³⁹ She warned in 1869 that female religious communities were increasingly seen by women as an escape from female domesticity, and therefore should be seen as a risk to the balance of everyday life:

Surely women would hardly wish to undertake so unattractive a life [...] it is often the noble and strong who, disgusted with the worrying littlenesses of society, turn to the convent in hopes of relief, and thus deprive the world of qualities which might otherwise prove a bulwark against evil.⁴⁰

Sarah Wister also stated in 1873 that interest in religious communities was growing due to the need to 'satisfy woman's growing aspirations', and that 'a sort of agitated interest in them is constantly increasing' which in turn poses a threat to our understanding of female moral values.⁴¹

Critics have also claimed that religious sisterhoods are contradictory in their ideals with regards to uniting women, by suggesting that sisterhoods isolate them. Lynda Palazzo suggests that religious sisterhoods exploited women's spirituality and rendered them barren on all levels.⁴² Likewise, Grace Jantzen notes the way religious sisterhoods strip women of their womanhood and the female community and prevent them from aspiring to pursue anything else:

³⁹ Penelope Holland, *Earnest Thoughts* (Macmillan, 1874), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Henry Codman Potter, *Sisterhoods and Deaconesses at Home and Abroad* (E.P. Dutton, 1873), p. 274.

⁴² Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* (Palgrave, 2002).

For a woman to develop in spirituality, she must put off womanliness, work against the grain of her gender rather than with it [...] to that extent she also cut herself off from the community of women, becoming ‘manly’ and thus other than women rather than continuing in solidarity with them.⁴³

It is interesting to note how Jantzen coincides ideas of female celibacy with being unfeminine, despite the general expectation for women to be virtuous and sexually submissive. Women at the time were actively encouraged to retain their moral propriety before marriage for the sake of their reputation.⁴⁴ However, if women were to abandon their aspirations of becoming the ideal wife and mother and instead achieve religious enlightenment, they would be condemned and stripped of their womanhood. This also coincides with how women who pursued professional careers at the time were seen as less feminine. As Ellen Jordan contends, strong-minded women were accused of being unfeminine because in the eyes of her critics she had invaded the public sphere, despite the progression of attitudes towards women’s work and education.⁴⁵ This idea is addressed by the ‘Sisters in Art’ in their correspondence, which will be explored further in forthcoming chapters.

There is limited evidence to suggest that Pre-Raphaelite women formally applied the terms ‘sister’ or ‘sisterhood’ to their work as the Brotherhood did. In a letter to her brother, Christina Rossetti references the ‘double sisterhood’ that connects her with her artist brothers.⁴⁶ It is known that Rossettis creatively collaborated with each other: Christina contributed to the Brethren’s magazine the *Germ*, whilst Dante Gabriel helped illustrate and publish collections of her poetry and William Michael helped with the editing process. Her

⁴³ Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (CUP, 1995), p. 54.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ellen Jordan, *The Women’s Movement and Women’s Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Taylor & Francis, 2002), p. 89.

⁴⁶ Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, p. 33.

experience in a religious sisterhood also informed much of her published poetry. For instance, 'Goblin Market' (1862) which touches upon themes of female unity and redemption following Laura's submission to the goblin men; 'Twice' (1864) which presents a fallen woman expressing her anguish towards her newly married ex-lover; and 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856) criticises how a female model (widely speculated to be Elizabeth Siddall) is painted, framed and controlled by the male artist. Clearly, there is evidence to suggest that Rossetti resonated with ideas of sisterhoods and female communities, often exploring the potentialities of women working together in her works.

Another notable example of the term being used by Pre-Raphaelite women concerns Howitt, who, much like her fellow women artists, sought to subvert the patriarchal ideals of the nineteenth-century art community. Howitt's *An Art Student in Munich* (1853) and *The Sisters in Art* (1852) are prime examples of this. Both texts incorporate references to artistic sisterhoods as well as promote the effectiveness of female collaboration and cooperation. Akin to her art and fiction, Howitt and her circle embodied the metaphoric sisterhood of the arts as painters, writers and illustrators, often using the terms 'art sisters' in reference to each other in their letters. Chiefly, these women embraced the idea of a collective sisterhood to reshape female artistic identity and promote women's professional advancement. Nonetheless, prior to this thesis, their friendship circle has never before received scholarly attention. It is this group of women and their collective achievements as the 'Sisters in Art' that forms the backbone of this thesis.

From an academic perspective, the field has scarcely considered the importance of female networking and partnership. It was not until the 1970s, when feminist academics sought to establish the existence of unified communities of women throughout history. Many concepts concerning the unification of women, such as the 'Woman Question' and Christine De Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* are discussed by feminist scholars to analyse women's

communities.⁴⁷ Some of these works include Dena Goodman's 'Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and Joan Kelly's *Women, History and Theory*.⁴⁸ In recent years, scholars have begun unearthing the friendships and working partnerships formed between women across a range of movements and disciplines. Stephen C. Behrendt outlines the relationships between Romantic women poets, discussing how Romantic women poets formed their own 'poetic Sisterhood' and took on 'an active role in a very public discourse on matters of genuine social, political, and economic importance'.⁴⁹ Amanda E. Herbert discusses how friendships formed between elite women, such as Mary Parker and Sarah Churchill during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, noting the 'functioning of female alliances within many diverse aspects of women's lives, from formal correspondence to daily negotiations with local shopkeepers'.⁵⁰ Other scholars have delved into how domestic friendships can lead to professional associations and artistic partnerships: Sylvia Harcstark Myers explores the emergence of the Bluestocking Circle through an analysis of their unpublished letters; and Zoe Thomas provides a comprehensive history of the women who networked with each other within the Arts and Crafts movement.⁵¹ Even American female sculptors in nineteenth-century Rome have been brought to attention. Dabakis outlines the importance of unearthing these women as sculpting is often the neglected medium.⁵² The University of York funded an

⁴⁷ Christine De Pizan and Rosalind Brown-Grant, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (Penguin Books, 1999).

⁴⁸ See: Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and The Woman Question* (Routledge, 1991); Dena Goodman, 'Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22. 3, (1989), pp. 329-350, doi:10.2307/273889; and Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory*, (Chicago University Press, 2014) for examples on works concerning historical concepts such as 'The Woman Question'.

⁴⁹ Stephen C. Behrendt, *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (John Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 242.

⁵⁰ Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 7.

⁵¹ Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (OUP, 1990); Zoe Thomas, *Women Art Workers and the Arts and Crafts Movement* (MUP, 2020).

⁵² Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

online women's research group called 'British Women Artists 1750 – 1950', founded by Katie Herrington and Alice Strickland in 2019. It is a network (of which I am a part) that brings together professionals who specialise in British art, including academics, researchers and curators.⁵³ More recently, *Connecting Women: National and International Networks during the Long Nineteenth Century* (2021) has been published, which is the first comprehensive study into the global and transatlantic networks formed between women artists and writers in the long-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, despite its vast contribution to knowledge, the 'Sisters in Art' and other networks formed between Pre-Raphaelite women are not mentioned.

As more efforts have been made to remove women Pre-Raphaelites from obscurity, the credibility of the terms 'sisters' and 'sisterhood' has been increasingly called into question. As Robert Wilkes and Glenda Youde noted in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: Art, Poetry and Female Agency in Victorian Britain* (2022), although these terms have been used in the titles of exhibitions and books (including this thesis) and have proven useful in bringing these women to the fore, they have become contentious.⁵⁴ Heather Bozant Witcher and Amy Huseby in *Defining Pre-Raphaelite Poetics* refrain from using terms such as 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood', calling for the need to dismiss the 'counterproductive terminology of the 'sister arts' in favour of language that highlights the multimodality or plurality of Pre-Raphaelitism'.⁵⁵ Critics have also since claimed that these terms can be read as unhistorical importations of feminist agendas, and that the terms have no further use in removing these women from their marginalisation. Alison Smith voices her concerns about this in her chapter 'The Sisterhood and Its Afterlife' in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, wherein she expresses concerns

⁵³ See: <https://www.britishwomenartists1750-1950.org/>

⁵⁴ Robert Wilkes and Glenda Youde, 'Introduction', *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: Art, Poetry and Female Agency in Victorian Britain* (Peter Lang, 2022), pp. 1-19, (p. 9.)

⁵⁵ Heather Bozant Witcher and Amy Kahrman Huseby, 'Introduction', *Defining Pre-Raphaelite Poetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1-27, (p. 11).

about grouping these women into a 'sisterhood'.⁵⁶ This view has also been considered by Peter Fuller, who argues it is anachronistic to present these women as such because it projects a contemporary 'proto-feminist' agenda onto the past.⁵⁷ Since Marsh's critical application of the term in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* as a label to collectively identify these women, it has been made clear by scholars that these terms are at risk of becoming overly broad or too politicised and losing their historical and critical significance.

Other art historians have worked towards transforming perceptions of women artists by separating them from their respective movements entirely. Whitney Chadwick asserts that women are merely inserted into already defined movements and styles and should be seen as individual artists and writers in their own right. She proposes that, 'women artists are occasionally presented as pioneers but more usually regarded as characteristic of a particular school'.⁵⁸ Pamela Gerrish Nunn remarks that 'the woman is relative to the man, his wife, his daughter or sister – she is defined by him and identified by reference'.⁵⁹ Deborah Cherry also rightly argues that women artists have been generalised and known as just 'women artists', without any consideration for their singular identities or individual artistic styles.⁶⁰ For so long in history, women artists and writers have been reduced to appendages to their male relative's fame or position, just as they have been marginalised by their respective movements. Yet despite efforts from feminist art historians to remove these women from this generalisation, we cannot completely separate them from the pre-existing labels which are currently misused in scholarship.

⁵⁶ Alison Smith, 'The Sisterhood and its Afterlife', *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), pp. 180-187, (p. 186).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁸ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (Thames & Hudson, 1990), p. 186.

⁵⁹ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *The Mid-Victorian Woman Artist: 1850-1879* (PhD Thesis: University College London, 1982), p. 30.

⁶⁰ Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900* (Routledge, 2000), p. 7.

In 'Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature', Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock interrogate the relation between representation and signification, asserting that the true meanings of the sign 'woman' derives not from the ideas of being a woman, but from the patriarchal systems in which the sign 'woman' is circulated, and that 'woman' is 'the signifier of difference in relation to men'.⁶¹ In this case, we do not identify Pre-Raphaelite women artists for who they truly are and what they paint, but we identify them in direct relation to the Brotherhood. The Pre-Raphaelite woman as a visual sign has clouded our perception of the Pre-Raphaelite woman artist. For example, women such as Elizabeth Siddall and Christina Rossetti have been identified as Pre-Raphaelite women, but not necessarily for their creative contributions, but because of their familial and marital connections to the Brethren. Cherry and Pollock's ideas are equally applicable to binary oppositions of 'sisterhood' and 'brotherhood'. The true meanings of 'sisterhood' cannot just derive from ideas of female community, but from the patriarchal systems of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which the term 'Sisterhood' can only be interpreted as signifier of the women's exclusion and as a subsidiary category in comparison.

However, there is historical warrant for applying the terms 'sister' and 'sisterhood' to identify Pre-Raphaelite women and their connections to not only the Brotherhood but with each other. As Elizabeth Prettejohn points out, the word 'sister' in the context of Pre-Raphaelitism can better serve as an apposite metaphor than as a label.⁶² As noted above, Christina Rossetti's own reference to her 'double sisterhood' (both artistic and familial) which connects her to her artist brothers is an example of why these terms are still important in better understanding relationships between the men and women of the movement.

⁶¹ Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, 'Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall', *Art History*, 7, (June 1984), pp. 206-227, (p. 210), [doi:10.1111/j.1467-8365.1984.tb00141.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.1984.tb00141.x).

⁶² Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Stunning Sisters' in *Aspectus* [Online] <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/166812/1/In_Conversation_Article_2020.pdf> [Accessed 23/11/2021].

Moreover, Howitt's repeated reference to her friends as 'art sisters' in her work and correspondence is another example of why the terms 'sisters' and 'sisterhood' remain significant. As a group, the 'Sisters in Art' travelled, wrote and painted together and devised a plan to unite women into a 'truer communion of pursuit, and to evolve from the unity of separate talents of which singly they are not capable'.⁶³ Therefore, as opposed to viewing these women in favour of the Brotherhood, the working practices of both the Brotherhood and the 'Sisters in Art' can be viewed in parallel: both groups are foregrounded on a strong sense of community, shared values, loyalty, and support. In *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Holman Hunt explains that true Pre-Raphaelitism at its inception was shaped by similar ideals:

One condition of our compact was that we should become helpful to one another, as a means of making our Body the stronger.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that aligning these women and their works with Pre-Raphaelitism is to recognise the underlying links to and even an initial dependence on the 'Brotherhood'. As Peter Funnell contends,

The roles of women within the Pre-Raphaelite movement cannot be seen in isolation; they must be understood in the context of the male-dominated art world and viewed in the shadow of the now famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. And the PRB itself has to be considered in the context of the other artistic Brotherhoods that became a phenomenon in European nineteenth-century art.⁶⁵

Context is everything, and the existence of art depends on layers of social, historical, cultural and artistic contexts, which this thesis will also acknowledge.

⁶³ Anna Mary Howitt, 'The Sisters in Art', *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art*, (1852), p. 319.

⁶⁴ Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, p. 369.

⁶⁵ Peter Funnell, 'Brotherhoods and Artistic Masculinities' in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, ed. by Jan Marsh (National Portrait Gallery, 2019), pp. 56-63 (p. 58).

Despite their similarities, the Brotherhood and the ‘Sisters in Art’ differed profoundly from each other in terms of aims, objectives and purpose. For the Brotherhood, networking enabled them to extend their influence and authority in the public sphere. As Mary Ann Clawson observes, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was ‘defined by masculinity’ in a ‘type of association between and among men’, which ‘was as much a part of the social relations of male dominance as the more recognized complex of male female interchange’.⁶⁶ As for the ‘Sisters in Art’, their constructions of an artistic sisterhood goes beyond the Brotherhood to manifest a direct engagement with feminist politics. Formed in a society with asymmetrical relations between the sexes, the ‘Sisters in Art’ not only supported each other through artistic partnerships and sisterly camaraderie, but politically and publicly they were dedicated to securing women’s rights, not only in the art community, but in the wider working sphere.

Although the use of ‘sisters’ and ‘sisterhood’ can be read as a generalisation in collectively identifying Pre-Raphaelite women, they still hold meaning, and best represent these women, their lives and interests at this current point of time. As the critical misuse and misappropriation of these terms continue, the need for a new approach in identifying them becomes increasingly clear. Thus, this thesis offers an alternative way of looking at these women, by applying the labels they used to refer to themselves and each other. Akin to how we view the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their labels as well as the methods and intrinsic values that they held as a group, we should be able to view the women in a similar vein. This study does not seek to dismiss any previous research, nor claim to completely separate these women from the Brotherhood. However, it is pertinent that we celebrate these women and their friendships by using the terms that they self-consciously adopted in light of the values and principles that they autonomously upheld.

⁶⁶ Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender and Fraternalism* (Princeton UP, 1989), p. 45.

This thesis is split into three sections: ‘Part I: Art and Opportunity’, ‘Part II: Independence and Identity’, and ‘Part III: Experience and Maturity’, with each part chronicling the story of the ‘Sisters in Art’ from their youth to their final years. Each chapter presents a detailed account of their lives and careers through their unpublished letters, diary entries and journals. Each chapter also documents the importance of the growing network of female friendships which sustained them in their professional endeavours and political ambitions. Chapter 1, ‘‘Sowing the seeds of ambition’: Early Beginnings’, begins by introducing Howitt, Bodichon and Parkes and how they came to meet through their initial Unitarian connections in the late 1840s. This chapter also explores their relationships with the older generation of women artists and writers. The older generation comprises several of their female relatives and friends including Julia Smith, Anna Jameson, Mary Howitt and Margaret Gillies. These women were not only central to Bodichon, Parkes and Howitt’s professional development but to their eventual collaborative practice. Chapter 2, ‘‘The Creative and Domestic Space’: Friendships at the Home and Studio’ looks at the women’s first attempts in professionally publishing and exhibiting their work and how they experimented with a range of forms, techniques and styles. Moreover, this chapter examines the formative role that the ideals of female collectivity and friendship played in several of their works, including Bodichon’s sketch *Ye Newe Generation*, and Howitt’s memoir *An Art Student in Munich*. Chapter 3, ‘The Politics and Poetics of *The Sisters in Art*’ provides an in-depth analysis of Howitt’s novella, *The Sisters in Art* and the impact that this text had on shaping the group’s collective artistic identity. This chapter also looks at how young women writers such as Howitt came to publish their work and the difficulties that they had in navigating the periodical press. Chapter 4, ‘‘Professional identities’’: Art, Poetry, and Womanhood’ places itself during the height of the group’s professional and political activity in the 1850s. This chapter examines how the ‘Sisters in Art’ continued to establish their professional identities

and how they worked in collaboration with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Several of their works are also discussed including Howitt and Bodichon's respective paintings *Margaret Returning from the Fountain* and *Ventnor* and Parkes's first published collection *Poems* and how they challenged patriarchal ideals. Chapter 5, 'Transcending Boundaries': Forming the Women's Art Alliance' examines the women's official entry into politics, as well as their importance to the development of organised feminism and the emergence of the early women's movement. This chapter also discusses the establishment of Langham Place and of the *English Woman's Journal* and how the 'Sisters in Art' played an integral part to their development and success. Chapter 6, 'Continuing Legacy' outlines the difficulties that the 'Sisters in Art' personally and professionally experienced in the later stages of their careers. Nevertheless, this chapter also looks at the continuity of their friendship into their final years and the lasting impact that they had on female networking and women's professional advancement.

The brief summary provided here, as well as its methodologies with archival and feminist art and literary history outlines the approach that has been taken in this thesis. As with any biographical and analytical study, I acknowledge that this thesis is inevitably shaped by particular interests, motivations and perspectives. Despite this, the comprehensive account provided here is the first that speaks to the lived experience of the 'Sisters in Art' and other women artists, writers and thinkers of their circle. It also encompasses the centrality of women's friendships and how these women fought for their voices to be heard and respected in the public working sphere.

PART I
ART AND OPPORTUNITY

1. Early Influences and Radical Unitarians

The story of the ‘Sisters in Art’ begins within the Unitarian circles through which their families were socially connected. Tracing their origins through these progressive circles not only helps us to understand their trajectory as professional artists and writers, but their emergence in the political realm. Moreover, as a result of their Unitarian upbringing, these women developed a strong sense of unity and female friendship which remained centrally important throughout their lives. Having been encouraged by each other and their families, Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes sought to become successful artists, writers and activists in their own right; their radical Unitarian connections enabled them the opportunity to acquire their own education and realise their full potential.

Through these Unitarian circles, the ‘Sisters in Art’ were also introduced to the older generation of women artists and writers who shared the desire to transcend the boundaries that restricted their sex. The group consisted of the women’s relatives, friends and associates, including Julia Smith, Margaret Gillies, Anna Jameson and Mary Howitt, among others. The younger generation were inspired by these women because they not only championed art, literature and politics as accessible professions for women, but because they worked for and ‘earned their own bread’.¹ The older generation were fundamental to the women’s creative and intellectual development, and played significant roles during their youth. This chapter will begin by assessing the impact that Unitarianism had on the women’s political consciousness. What will then be discussed is how the older generation spurred the ‘Sisters in Art’ to pursue their own ambitions and establish their own community of like-minded working women.

¹ BRP, GCPP Parkes 6/51.

The Impact of Radical Unitarianism

Unitarianism is a crucial cultural context in which to understand the ‘Sisters in Art’ and the early women’s movement in the nineteenth century.² As a movement, Unitarianism reconsidered the roles of women and stressed the importance of female education. Unitarian minister Lant Carpenter emphasised that ‘the education of infancy and childhood and much of the most important moral culture of the more advanced period will be derived, if obtained at all, from the female sex’.³ It was a widely shared belief that the influence of women in the upbringing of children became increasingly important. Therefore, Unitarians advocated for women to receive an education in order to ‘lay the foundations of the future patriot and Christian’.⁴ As a result of the favourable education they received, a number of Unitarian women became aware of women’s exclusion from wider society and subsequently developed a keen interest in social and political reform. As Olive Banks notes, although the majority of ‘first wave’ feminists came from an Anglican background, a great number of early feminists were the direct product of Unitarianism.⁵

Indeed, Leigh Smith, Parkes and Howitt were all connected to the Unitarian movement, but were predominantly encouraged by their radical Unitarian households and the liberties which their families bequeathed to them.⁶ Although Unitarians held progressive

² There have been a number of scholars who have retraced the origins of the feminist movement. Kathryn Gleadle stresses the need to realign the origins of the feminist movement in Britain with the Unitarian reformers who were active in the 1830s. Helen Plant observes that the records of women’s rights organisations active in Birmingham during the latter half of the nineteenth century were dominated by women who attended Birmingham’s leading Unitarian chapel, the Church of the Messiah. Ruth Watts also acknowledges that the majority of leading feminist figures either stemmed from Unitarian backgrounds or were associated with the movement. See Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement, 1831-1851* (St Martin’s Press, 1995), Helen Plant, *‘Ye are All One in Christ Jesus’: Aspects of Unitarianism and Feminism in Birmingham, c. 1869-90* (Routledge, 2016) and Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England, 1760-1860* (Taylor & Francis, 2014).

³ Lant Carpenter, *Principles of Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (Longman & Company) p. 202.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Olive Banks, *Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of “first wave” Feminism* (University of Georgia Press, 1987) and Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900* (Hutchinson, 1987).

⁶ Radical Unitarianism was born from the Unitarian ministry of William Johnson Fox at South Place Chapel in London 1824. Fox’s views on women’s suffrage and divorce, combined with his own personal issues concerning his speculative relationship with his ward Eliza Flower, excluded him from mainstream

beliefs about women's education, the movement still largely espoused conventional notions of female domesticity and submission. Therefore, it was the movement's contradictory nature towards women that prompted a small number of Unitarians to break away from mainstream Unitarianism and redefine themselves as 'radical Unitarians'. Among the 'radical' Unitarians who diverged from the movement's core ideologies was Benjamin Leigh Smith, who represented the constituencies of Norwich and Sudbury at the time. Leigh Smith was typical of many wealthy Unitarians in that he saw it as his 'duty to improve society, and education as the only 'charity' worth supporting'.⁷ He often donated to charitable causes, such as financing the construction of a two-storey building in Vincent Square in 1826, which served as a school for poor children. As well as education, food and warm baths were provided, with the school continuing its services until 1839. Leigh Smith's sister Patty documented her brother's good deed, stating: 'Do you remember the poor little things, flinging their arms about your legs in the streets of Westminster [...] And the silent meetings for mending one another's rags, Buchanan praying in the midst... it did good to Infant thousands, though it wore out at length'.⁸ Throughout his career, Leigh Smith lived up to his name as a successful politician born from an illustrious family, but there was one person who posed the risk of damaging his reputation, and that was Anne Longden.

Leigh Smith met Longden whilst on a visit to his sister in Derbyshire in 1826. After initial flirtation and Leigh Smith's frequent visits to Alfreton Park, Longden became pregnant by the end of the year. Rather than abandon her, Leigh Smith chose to support her by housing her in a rented lodge in Whatlington, providing her with the pseudonym 'Mrs Leigh' in a bid to keep her identity private.⁹ Their first-born Barbara Leigh Smith was born on 8th April

Unitarianism and prompted his resignation from the Unitarian church. See: Francis Edward Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent. The Monthly Repository, 1806-1838* (University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

⁷ Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon: Feminist, Artist and Rebel* (Random House, 2010) p. 6.

⁸ Patty Smith to Ben Smith c. 1848, WS/CUL.

⁹ Interestingly, the couple never married. It is not known why, but it is presumed that the pair rejected the conventional laws and legalities that came with marriage.

1827, and her younger brother and sisters were born soon after. Although Leigh Smith was not exiled from Blandford Square, nor from any of his other political affairs, their situation ruined Longden's and newly-born Barbara's reputation. His sister Frances Smith expressed her dismay at her brother's precarious position in one of her letters, 'Oh! How it grieves me to think of his thralldom, for he is really as clever a man as can usually be met with, and think to what conversation he is confined'.¹⁰ She viewed her brother to be the victim of an extra-marital affair when, in reality, it was Longden's reputation as an unmarried mother that had been tarnished. Following their return from America and the birth of their youngest son, William, Longden fell rapidly ill with tuberculosis and died in 1834, when Barbara was just seven years old.

Rather than leaving his 'illegitimate' children behind, Ben Leigh Smith devoted himself to their care, ensuring they were all treated fairly and equally, especially with regards to their education. The four siblings were sent to a local Unitarian secondary school and studied under the Misses Wood from 1838 to 1841. According to Hirsch, Ben Leigh Smith sent his children to this school to make them aware of the lack of facilities for working-class students and how difficult it was for them to receive a decent education at the time.¹¹ From 1848, Leigh Smith gave his children an annual financial endowment of £300, including his daughters. This was considered unusual at the time considering daughters were usually not treated as equals to their male relatives or given financial independence.

Encouraged by her liberal family life, Barbara Leigh Smith enjoyed a 'freedom not normally felt by women at the time'.¹² From a young age, she benefitted from reading sessions with her tutors and private painting lessons from the artists Cornelius Varley and

¹⁰ Frances Smith to Fanny Nightingale, 6th November 1832, Verney. Patty Smith's 'Reminiscences', WS/CUL.

¹¹ Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 18.

¹² Hannah Awcock, 'Turbulent Londoners: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 1827-1891'. *Turbulent London*. [Online] <<https://turbulentisles.com/2016/12/29/turbulent-londoners-barbara-leigh-smith-bodichon-1827-1891/>> [Accessed 22/03/2022].

William Collingwood Smith. She also regularly participated in political family discussions and in the ‘vibrant and political and literary salons her father organised in London and Hastings, where he invited the leading figures of the day’.¹³ As Leigh Smith matured, so did her interest in art, philanthropy and politics. Her father encouraged her to pursue these interests, which only fuelled Leigh Smith’s desire to abolish the ‘unjust laws both of society and country which crush women’.¹⁴ Thus, it is no surprise that she developed a force of character that would lead her to achieve prominence among philanthropists and feminist social reformers.

Born into a reputable manufacturing family, Joseph Parkes also became associated with radical Unitarian politics. As a religious non-conformist, Joseph was unable to pursue university study, so he enrolled as a solicitor’s clerk in London where he engaged in legal and parliamentary reform. In 1822, he returned to the Midlands following his family’s business collapse and established his own solicitor’s practice specialising in election law. After eight years of courtship, Joseph married Elizabeth ‘Eliza’ Rayner Priestley in 1824. The couple set up home in Temple Street, Birmingham and their first child was born the following year. On 16th June 1829, Eliza gave birth to a premature baby girl ‘covered in down and without fingernails’.¹⁵ A few weeks following the birth, the child’s health was failing and doctors informed the couple that she was unlikely to survive. Miraculously, the baby’s health improved, and so was formally and affectionately named, Elizabeth ‘Bessie’ Rayner Parkes.

From a young age, Parkes grew up within the communities and organisations that catalysed social and political reform. In the account of her childhood, Parkes recorded that her earliest memory was the day of passing of the 1832 Reform Act, a legislation which

¹³ Meritxell Simon-Martin, *Barbara Bodichon’s Epistolary Education: Unfolding Feminism* (Springer Publishing, 2020), p. 31.

¹⁴ BLS, ‘Abstract of Mill’, 1849, GCPP Bodichon.

¹⁵ Marie Belloc Lowndes, ‘Before she found Arcadia: The Early Life and Work of Bessie Rayner Parkes,’ 1942, annotated unpublished typescript, GCPP Parkes 15/32.

expanded parliamentary constituencies across industrial towns in the Midlands. She recalled this memory was ‘a sort of omen that began my [her] conscious life at the time of people’s triumph’.¹⁶ The principles of democracy and freedom, which underpinned the reform campaigns of the early nineteenth century, would later form the starting point for Parkes’s own pursuit in achieving equality for women. Although Parkes and her mother were close, they never quite agreed with Parkes’s staunch commitment to women’s suffrage. Joseph however set the foundations of Parkes’s career as a social and political reformer and mostly supported her in her endeavours.¹⁷

Parkes’s health as a child continued to cause particular concern. At seven years old, she suffered several inflammations of the chest, which the doctors blamed on the generally poor living conditions of city-life. In a bid to improve her respiratory health, Joseph Parkes sent his daughter to the progressive Leam House School in 1836.¹⁸ She first attended for around two months at the age of seven, before attending full time from the age of eleven. By the time Parkes had left in 1845, the school had expanded to accommodate the increasing enrolment of young girls. The school’s location and Unitarian ethos was favoured by families and students alike, because unlike other young girls of the time, the pupils received a respectably broad education. The Fields lectured their pupils on subjects not traditionally provided for young girls, such as astronomy, optics and hydrostatics, and unlike many schools, did not enforce a curriculum entirely ‘devoted to training in ladylike accomplishments in anticipation for marriage’.¹⁹ This was met with great enthusiasm from

¹⁶ BRP, ‘My Childhood’, and ‘My School Days.’ GCPP Parkes 1/2. This manuscript document is the source for all information and quotations related to BRP’s childhood and schooling contained in this chapter, unless otherwise specified.

¹⁷ Joseph Parkes encouraged his daughter to read and to publish her writing. However, surviving letters suggest that the pair disagreed on Parkes’s involvement with political campaigns. See my discussion on Joseph’s disapproval of Parkes’s pamphlets in chapter 5.

¹⁸ The school was in the rural hamlet of Leam and headed by the Unitarian minister William Field and his wife Mary.

¹⁹ Deborah Anna Parker Kinch, *A Cultural Historical Biography of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc (1829-1925)* (PhD Thesis, University of Portsmouth, 2021), p. 32.

Parkes who, as a young girl, was becoming increasingly aware of the lack of opportunities and professional facilities for women. In one of her letters recalling her years at Leam, Parkes penned that these lessons ‘were a great advance to girls who have seldom much opportunity of gaining clear and scientific knowledge’ and ‘imbued [her with] a strong taste for dabbling in experiments’.²⁰ Moreover, the almost-entirely female environment at Leam showed Parkes the potentialities of young women living and working together; the experiences that Parkes had in working with her female peers and teachers remained crucially important to her throughout her adult life.

The ideology of Unitarianism emphasised the importance of education, by which ‘individuals could achieve knowledge, happiness and virtue, as a force for eradicating social inequalities’.²¹ Nonetheless, Unitarian schools and their principles were not without their controversy, including the biased tutelage within Unitarian schools that remained in favour of male students. It was clear that there was still a divide in the sexes, as conventional Unitarians did not agree that the ‘classics’ would prepare young girls for their eventual domestic responsibilities. As previously suggested, radical Unitarians such as Harriet Martineau opposed these views. Martineau defended the teaching of the classics to young women, as it raised them to be wise and conscientious. In her work *Household Education*, she insisted that teaching young girls such subjects would benefit them in adult life: ‘for my part I have no hesitation in saying that the most ignorant women I have known have been the worst housekeepers; and that the most learned women I have known have been among the best’.²² Raised within these radical Unitarian circles, Parkes was especially thankful for the advantage she and her fellow pupils had been given for their futures and their sex: ‘What

²⁰ BRP, ‘My Childhood’, and ‘My School Days’, GCPP Parkes 1/2.

²¹ Ruth Watts, ‘Harriet Martineau and the Unitarian Tradition in Education’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 37.5, (October 2011), pp. 637-651, (p. 638), doi:10.1080/03054985.2011.621682.

²² Harriet Martineau, *Household Education* (Lea & Blanchard, 1849), p. 156.

mother educated at Leam would give her daughter a fashionable training, or endeavour to make her other than a noble independent woman, cultivating all her powers to the utmost limit God has put, undismayed by ridicule or the censure of the world?’²³ After her schooling, she remarked on Leam’s encouragement for its alumni to retain their religious faith and a sense of duty, as well as pursue their ambitions - all traits that profoundly influenced her future personal and political endeavours.

By the late 1840s, the radical Unitarians had developed a powerful social, political and cultural critique of Victorian society, especially concerning women’s role within it. Therefore, it is no surprise that Leigh Smith and Parkes, who were both bent on their purpose of changing the world in one way or another, would eventually come to meet. Their union was brought about by the Parkes family’s move to 6 Pelham Crescent in Hastings in 1846, where they became the tenants and neighbours of the Leigh Smith family for over four years. Leigh Smith and Parkes were just 19 and 17 respectively at the time.²⁴ The two women became incredibly close, often going for long walks, exchanging letters and sharing their views on art and literature. Chiefly, it was their mutually charged interest in women’s rights that strengthened their friendship, brought about by their own experiences as ambitious yet frustrated young women unable to access the same opportunities as men. As historian Jane Rendall comments, the bond between these two women was central to the development of their shared feminist consciousness.²⁵ Parkes felt that she had found a new companion in Leigh Smith, as she enthused in one of her early letters:

²³ BRP, ‘My Childhood’, and ‘My School Days’, GCPP Parkes 1/2.

²⁴ Priestley Parkes (Parkes’s brother) fell ill with tuberculosis in 1846 and was instructed by doctors to temporarily move to Hastings for the fresh air.

²⁵ Jane Rendall, ‘Friendship and Politics: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827-91) and Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925)’ in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, (Routledge, 1989), pp. 136-171, (p. 163).

To Hastings; mad in the train, singing, shouting, yelling, laughing. Oh how happy I was, thinking of the glorious winter to come, all the books to read, all the lovely rides, all the reading and talk with Barbara, all the acting and music [...] then came heaven down upon earth to my fancy, and I felt so intensely happy that I could scarce contain myself. Oh those free wild spirits the Smiths always seem to have, how glorious to feel their rush into one's own heart.²⁶

The two women during their time travelling between London and Hastings were able to share and vent their frustrations with life, as well as discuss their career aspirations. Leigh Smith wanted to be a professional artist and Parkes a published writer, and both women were connected by a desire 'to carve out a fulfilling, independent life for themselves'.²⁷ Both women also encouraged each other to practice their respective forms: Leigh Smith often painted watercolours for Parkes; and Parkes wrote poetry for Leigh Smith. One of Parkes's earlier letters comprises a poem addressed to Leigh Smith in 1847, when Parkes was just 18, and the pair were still neighbours. Her poem explicitly shows her frustrations towards the male sphere, and it is evident that women's rights is what dominated their conversations, particularly in the first four lines,

Dear Barbara,

In discussing various questions,
The truth of morals, or the fate of nations,
A subject co-important with the state,
Our Sex, has held due place in our debate.²⁸

²⁶ BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4.

²⁷ Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans, *Women on their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 49.

²⁸ BRP, letter to BLS, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/1 (For the full poem, see Appendix 1).

The shifts between humour and sincerity in Parkes' poem imply their strong friendship, especially the affection that Parkes felt towards her new-found friend. The subject in question that Parkes refers to is on women and their position in society, and the fact that Parkes states they discussed 'various questions' reinforces the depth of the intellectual discussions that they enjoyed together on social and political matters. Parkes explicitly references the writer Alexander Pope, boldly stating that 'Pope sorely has maligned all womankind'.²⁹ This verse letter parodies Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, critiquing the poem's misogynistic depiction of women and instead presents examples of female authors who embody noble qualities that Parkes argues women possess,

You cannot need another work to show it,
I need but name a Martineau and Howitt.³⁰

Throughout the poem, Parkes proposes a new way of looking at women and their roles within society. Parkes criticises how women are expected to spend their time, and suggests that women should actively pursue their own artistic endeavours as opposed to accepting art as a 'manly sport':

A bright idea! She seizes on her frame
(Alas not tapestry of historic fame,
When every woman was an artist too,
And her mind fancied what her needle drew)
No- on this canvas see a monster Bird,
(Sublimity oft verges to the absurd)
Its feathers boast of blue, and pin, and green,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had also, aged sixteen penned a critique 'Essay on Woman' that parodies Pope in a similar way. See Rebecca Stott and Simon Avery, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, (Routledge, 2003) p. 42. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was known to be an inspiration for many, particularly Bessie Parkes. Bessie dedicated one of her poems to Browning, titled: 'To Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *Poems* (John Chapman, 1852), p. 93.

While stripes of gold and silver intervene!³¹

Parkes's verse letter celebrates women embracing their own creative agency. In describing women as 'seizing' their frames, she proposes the idea that women can be creatively intelligent and passionate about their work. Parkes then proceeds to suggest women's true artistic capabilities, contesting the idea that women were without creative genius.³² As previously stated, the art and literary communities believed that women were emotionally unable to produce complex and thought-provoking work, a fact that evidently frustrated Parkes and Leigh Smith.

Leigh Smith's early letters to Parkes also suggest her obvious frustration. In 1847, Leigh Smith penned a short poem and dedicated it to Parkes, and provided an accompanying illustration of two figures cantering on horseback alongside a tree-lined river. As the poem and sketch infers, the pair evidently spent much of their time in Hastings together on horseback whilst enjoying their many intellectual discussions,

³¹ Ibid.

³² As discussed in the introduction, male art and literary critics generally believed that women's talents were unsuitable for the professional domain. For example, John Ruskin voiced in his lecture *Of Queen's Gardens* that women's intellect was thought to be imitative of their male peers and that women's abilities were strictly domestic, personal and private. Quoted in Rachel Dickinson, 'Of Ruskin, Women and Power', *Persistent Ruskin: Studies in Influence, Assimilation and Effect*, ed. by Keith Hanley, (Taylor & Francis, 2016), pp. 53-67, (p. 58).



Figure 1.1: BLS, letter to BRP (1847), GCPP Parkes 5/161. By permissions of the Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge.

To Bessie xxxxxx

You and I have talked a pace
Of everything and every place
Of everybody, live or dead
On horseback with the leaves o'er head

Oh! I remember very well,
You a hundred times did tell,
How you wish you could excel,
In poesy – of heaven and hell
We prated.

We have dealt heavy blows at Moses
And at this theory Lock supposes...³³

Both of their poems illustrate the depth of their friendship and the ambitions they shared:
Parkes's poem alludes to their shared desire to achieve their aspirations, and Leigh Smith's

³³ BLS, letter to BRP, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/161.

poem explicitly refers to Parkes's own ambitions to excel as a poet. Moreover, both poems serve as evidence of the pair's intellectual development, by discussing the work of other authors and their appraisals of them. Clearly, Parkes and Leigh Smith disliked male writers such as Pope, whose sexist attitudes informed the literature they were likely required to read when young.³⁴ Interestingly, Leigh Smith's reference to 'lock' could also allude to the philosopher John Locke, whose work was probably recommended to Parkes and Leigh Smith by their fathers to read. Locke proposed in his book *First Treatise* (1689) that 'the mother too hath her title', and that the role of the mother should be taken as seriously as the role of the father.³⁵ Locke's progressive views on women resonated with Unitarian principles regarding women and education. As Gleadle notes, the Unitarians were 'unequivocal in claiming Locke as their founding philosopher', as many of Locke's notions on the importance of the mother and educational theory resonated with the ideals of Unitarianism.³⁶ Conversely, Locke's works were viewed by radical Unitarians as contradictory, regarding his views on motherhood as a justifiable reason to exclude women and refrain them from engaging with socio-politics and economic matters. In light of this, Leigh Smith's reference to the 'theory that Lock supposes' can be read as a diatribe against Locke, as much as it can be read as an approval.³⁷ Nevertheless, regardless of Leigh Smith's intentions, the works of literature and politics that she and Parkes discussed in their verse-letters clearly informed and developed their political thinking.

The sketch depicts the two figures on horseback as close, and the landscape depicted appears tranquil and serene, implying Barbara's fond memories of their time there. There also

³⁴ Critics have argued that Pope's misogynistic views are evidenced by *Rape of the Lock*, through his parodying of the oppositional relationships between his male and female characters, naturally to the detriment of femininity. See: Sheila Delany, 'Sex and Politics in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*', *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, 1.1, (1975), pp. 46-61, [doi:10.1353/esc.1975.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.1975.0003).

³⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 188.

³⁶ Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists*, p. 10.

³⁷ BLS, letter to BRP, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/161.

appears to be a recurring theme of unity in the sketch, as evidenced by the two horse riders, the two tree trunks to the left of the sketch, and parallel of the bridle path and the river. This emphasises the strength of their friendship as a duet, both united in their aspirations to change the way society perceived women. Leigh Smith also addressed the poem to Parkes with six 'kisses', which shows the affection she had towards her friend. Many of their early correspondence in the late 1840s imply their youthfulness and plucky nature as young women, due to the shifts between humour and sincerity when discussing women's rights. Although their ideas were not quite as refined or established at this stage, their early correspondence shows their potential as the feminist scholars and reformers that they would eventually grow to be.

Besides the intellectual discussions they enjoyed together, Parkes and Leigh Smith regularly attended public lectures on women's suffrage and independence. For both women, the freedom to acquire their own income and establish their own careers was an absolute necessity. Parkes and Leigh Smith were openly dismissive of the stigma attached to middle-class women acquiring their own income, declaring in their letters that they 'should not mind losing caste at all'.³⁸ Both women recognised that they would never be considered as equal to men whilst remaining financially dependent on them, so they began looking for paid work as a result.³⁹ Philippa Levine observes that Victorian middle-class feminists such as Parkes and Leigh Smith took up paid work 'as a practical identification of their feminism, fuelled by belief more than necessity', reinforcing how financial independence for women was a priority for feminists, regardless of socioeconomic status.⁴⁰ Women's ability to take up paid work and

³⁸ BRP, letter to BLS, 13th February 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/6.

³⁹ Philippa Levine observes that Victorian middle-class feminists took up paid work 'as a practical identification of their feminism, fuelled by belief more than necessity', reinforcing how financial independence for women was a priority for feminists, regardless of socioeconomic status. See Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Figueroa Press, 2004), p. 84.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

engage with socioeconomics had been demonstrated by Harriet Taylor Mill's example, whose chapter in the *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) was well-received. Encouraged by her father and by Leigh Smith's positive review of the book, Parkes read *Political Economy* herself. In turn, Parkes recommended it to her school friend Kate Jevons, 'I am pegging away two hours a day at Mill's *Political Economy*; abstracting it. If you can get that book you will like it so much. My father told me to read it. It is hard but understandable, and so beautiful and lucid'.⁴¹

Desiring for themselves the freedom conferred on men through work, Parkes and Leigh Smith appropriated the discourse of Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) by writing their own abstracts. Given her upbringing and exposure to liberal and feminist discourse, Leigh Smith's abstract was politically charged. Despite her approval of the book's message, she does stress the need for further action in her concluding lines,

Philosophers and reformers have generally been afraid to say anything about the unjust laws of both society and country which crush women [...] But now I hope there are some who will brave the ridicule for the sake of common justice to half the people of the world.⁴²

Although Leigh Smith's abstract is the only one that is extant, Parkes did express a similar feminist awareness. In another letter to Jevons, Parkes draws upon the language of *Political Economy* when attempting to explain her career aspirations,

Perhaps in using the word 'productive consumer' I was hardly fair to my own meaning. I do certainly feel a great desire to be one; to create and possess and expend

⁴¹ BRP, letter to Kate Jevons, Hastings, 7th November 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/54.

⁴² BLS, Abstract on *Principles of Political Economy*, January 1849, GCPP Bodichon 4/2.

capital; but if I could be a great artist or author, unpaid, or do any great practical good, it would be still more.⁴³

It was this kind of political awareness and discourse that shaped and influenced the pair's earlier works. Thus, their early works predominantly serve as social commentaries, criticising social injustice and advocating for social reform. With each other's encouragement, Parkes and Leigh Smith submitted their abstracts to the *Birmingham Journal* and the *Hastings and St Leonard's News* for the first time.⁴⁴ In a letter to John Feeney, the editor of the *Birmingham Journal*, Parkes asked for his views on the possibility of pursuing a career in literature. Feeney replied quite patronisingly, pointing to her lack of experience in public writing, and urged her to 'not cast aside the prospect of domestic happiness'.⁴⁵ Despite Feeney's disparaging comments, Parkes and Leigh Smith continued to submit their work to both journals. Their persistence eventually paid off, with several of Parkes' poems and Leigh Smith's essays eventually featuring in the *Birmingham Journal*.⁴⁶ Both women also found moderate success with the *Hastings and St Leonards News*: Leigh Smith wrote articles on topics such as sanitary reform and the education of young girls while Parkes contributed pieces including a review of Mary Howitt's translation of *Brothers and Sisters*, as well as a selection of her poems.⁴⁷

⁴³ BRP, letter to Kate Jevons, April 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/56.

⁴⁴ BRP and BLS contributed to both journals on multiple occasions. An example of BRP's work submitted to the journal is 'A Scene of Every Day' 5 December 1849. BLS published a series of articles for the *HSLN* between June and August 1848. Her later text of the 1856 Married Women's Property Law was also published by *HSLN*. For further reading on their publishing records, see: Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey* (Taylor and Francis) and Gleadle's *The Early Feminists*.

⁴⁵ J.T. Feeney to BRP, 11th October 1847, PPG vol. IX/23.

⁴⁶ It is important to note that their works were published under their pseudonyms, which is probably why their submissions were accepted. Parkes published her first articles for the *Birmingham Journal* and *HSLN* using 'P', and Leigh Smith addressed herself as 'Esculapius'. For more discussion on pseudonyms, see my close reading of Parkes's 'Progression' in chapter 2.

⁴⁷ Mary Howitt frequently translated Scandinavian works, including that of Fredrika Bremer and Hans Christian Andersen. For Parkes's review, see 'Review of Brothers and Sisters', *HSLN*, 14th July 1848, pp. 76-81.

The role models of the authors Harriet Martineau and Mary Howitt, as evident in Parkes's earlier poem, were spurs to the young girl's efforts to pursue gender politics through their writings. Parkes often remarked of how she enjoyed Howitt's tales and poems in early childhood, more especially Howitt's 'Sketches from Natural History'.⁴⁸ It is through Mary Howitt that the girls were introduced to her daughter, Anna Mary. Aware of Mary's influential work on free trade and civil liberty concerning women, the young women were equally as keen to meet her daughter, who showed great artistic and literary talent from a young age. Anna Mary Howitt was born on 15th January 1824 to William and Mary Howitt, both hardworking and popular writers who established the *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*. The Howitt family became acquainted with the Leigh Smiths when they visited them in Hastings in 1845. In her *Autobiography*, Mary describes her initial impressions of the family:

Thou inquires [...] who our friends the Smiths are, who contributed so much to make our Hastings sojourn agreeable [...] The result is good; and as to affection and amiability, I never saw more beautiful evidences of it.⁴⁹

In the Leigh Smiths, the Howitts had found a timely source of support and comfort. During the previous year, the Howitts' youngest son Claude died from complications from an accidental leg injury he sustained at school in Heidelberg. Claude's death had a devastating impact on the family, and the Leigh Smiths supported them through their grief. In a letter written to Mary's sister, William Howitt informed her of the untimely death of their beloved Claude. It seems as though Mary Howitt was too heartbroken to write:

Mary's letters, I know, have made you aware by what a frail thread our dear Claude held possession of life. That slight filament gave way this morning. At twenty-five

⁴⁸ BRP, letter to KJ, 8th March 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52.

⁴⁹ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2 Vols, ed. by Margaret Howitt, (W. Isbister Ltd, 1889), 2, pp. 34-35.

minutes past eleven o'clock he breathed his last most easily and peacefully. I think you never knew the dear lad, with his extra-ordinary powers, great wit and humour, and of a loving disposition.⁵⁰

Every time the two families were together, Ben Leigh Smith reportedly footed the bill without question.⁵¹ At Christmas, the Leigh Smiths gifted them food hampers and toys for the younger children. On behalf of her family, Anna Mary Howitt wrote to Leigh Smith and the family thanking her 'many times' for their 'beautiful and most acceptable presents'.⁵²

It was not until 1848 that the Parkes family met the Howitts in person.⁵³ In *In a Walled Garden*, Parkes recalls meeting them with the Leigh Smiths one evening at a party, it was presumably one of Ben Leigh Smith's many social gatherings. It is possible that Parkes had been introduced to Howitt for the first time in person at this party, given that she recorded seeing her mother and younger siblings at the same gathering,

A vivid memory remains to me of an evening party, a sort of eminent gathering of art and literature, and of Mary Howitt seated in a corner of the room, her younger children at her knee.⁵⁴

It was from this point that the Howitts had formed a strong friendship with Parkes and her family. Parkes noted that the friendship between the two families was as strong as the bond they formed with the Leigh Smiths,

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵¹ Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 22.

⁵² Lenore Beaky, *The Letters of Anna Mary Howitt to Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 1974), pp. 125-128.

⁵³ Howitt and Parkes were aware of each other's existence two years before and had already begun exchanging letters.

⁵⁴ This is the earliest extant evidence that documents Parkes being in the company of the Howitt family. BRP, *In a Walled Garden* (Ward and Downey, 1895), p. 83.

They formed a close intimacy with a family with which my parents and I were also shortly to be tenderly and gratefully associated: that of Mr. Benjamin Smith [...] and until July, 1850, we were almost as one family, sheltered under the magnificent rock of the Castle Hill.⁵⁵

The Howitts' friendship with both families had also impacted their faith. In 1847, they abandoned their membership with the Religious Society of Friends as Quakers and began attending Unitarian church. Mary discussed the family's conversion to Unitarianism in her *Autobiography*. She wrote of her experience to her sister:

Anna Mary, Alfred and I have been this morning to the Unitarian chapel, and have heard a sermon, which pleased us greatly, on religion being a thing of every-day use and application. Dear William's prepossessions are all very strongly in favour of Friends, and he would like each of us to attend meeting [...] Do not be shocked, dear sister, at our attending a Unitarian chapel; for they are the people, after all, with whom we seem to have the most unity of feeling and opinion.⁵⁶

The Howitts' conversion to Unitarianism suggests the influence that both the Parkes family and the Leigh Smiths must have exerted on them. Although Quakers advocated for social action, male members still held 'their own meetings of discipline and transact all affairs belonging exclusively to their sex'.⁵⁷ This clearly did not resonate well with the Howitts, who gradually fell out of favour with Quakerism and found increasing affinity with the Unitarian church. Akin to Parkes and Leigh Smith, Howitt had unrivalled access to opportunities thanks to her parents' support. In 1840, the entire family moved to Heidelberg so the children could equally receive a decent education. Although Howitt was unable to access as thorough an

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁵⁷ 'The Covent of St. Bernard and the Avalanches', *ILN*, 2, (1843), pp. 407- 408.

education as her brothers, her parents took her to visit the studios of Moritz Retzsch and Wilhelm von Kaulbach – the latter being her future tutor. Of this trip, her mother wrote, ‘we have given Anna Mary opportunities of accomplishing herself which we had not in England’, which suggests the lengths that the Howitts went to in order to support their daughter.⁵⁸

Ben Leigh Smith encouraged his daughter and her friends to embrace the Unitarian principle that ‘gaining knowledge is a moral duty’.⁵⁹ This led to Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes enjoying ‘typically male’ subjects that covered a broad range of works on art, literature, politics and philosophy. Their letters show that they critically responded to the works of Dinah Craik, Goethe, Martineau and Wordsworth, all who played an important part to their artistic and professional development.⁶⁰ Of the works they discussed, Tennyson’s *The Princess* (1847) became a firm favourite. The poem is based on the founding of a women’s university where men are forbidden to enter. Unsurprisingly, the poem’s ideas and its questioning of gender norms chimed with the preoccupations of Parkes, Leigh Smith and Howitt, who gifted each other copies of the poem for Christmas.

Their exchanges on this poem suggest that the trio slightly disagreed on how to interpret *Princess Ida*. Leigh Smith’s replies concerning Tennyson’s poem are not extant, but Parkes and Howitt’s correspondence give an indication as to how Leigh Smith may have interpreted it. According to Parkes, Leigh Smith liked the poem and ‘saw nothing absurd in *Ida*’.⁶¹ Excited about the poem and anxious for her friends to read it, Howitt penned her admiration of the poem to the girls, describing *The Princess* as a ‘poem on women’s

⁵⁸ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, p. 326.

⁵⁹ Shelia R. Herstein, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827-1891): A Mid-Victorian Feminist* (City University of New York, 1983), p. 29.

⁶⁰ This list is not exhaustive, but their letters also reveal their responses to works by Bacon, Charlotte Bronte, Frederika Bremer, Butler, Carlyle, Chaucer, Maria Edgeworth, Fielding, Keats, Shelley, Richardson and Shakespeare- to name a few. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 34.

⁶¹ BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/20.

education, women's rights, women's true being'.⁶² Howitt felt that the heroine of the poem, Ida, resembled Leigh Smith's strong will and fiery enthusiasm. Parkes was also taken with the poem's heroine, and wrote of her admiration in a letter to Leigh Smith describing her as 'so bold & yet so quiet and stately withal, a very ideal of womanhood'.⁶³ Parkes responded that she agreed with Howitt's interpretation of Ida, but disagreed with Howitt's comparison of Ida to Leigh Smith. Parkes also stated that she agreed with Leigh Smith's thoughts that Ida was 'the cure of our great social evils',⁶⁴ but disagreed with Leigh Smith in that she 'thoroughly agreed with Tennyson's moral' intentions.⁶⁵ Instead, Parkes interpreted that *The Princess* stresses the need for both sexes to be considered with equal measure, stating that Ida actually 'went to the extreme and put the men below instead of equal'.⁶⁶ This epistolary exchange shows that by engaging with each other's perspectives, Howitt, Leigh Smith and Parkes developed their critical thinking and individualised their subjectivity. Moreover, it is the friction that emerges from their contrasting opinions that developed their reciprocal development and critical subjectivity.

Their discussions surrounding Tennyson's poem not only serves as evidence of their burgeoning friendship, but their growing interest in women's education and politics. Another early example of Parkes's poetic engagement with these issues is 'The Lady Abbess' (1849), which celebrates sisterhood and female friendship to the same ends as Tennyson's poem. In the poem, the abbess recalls her happy childhood before her separation from her sister when her father forces one to marry and the other into a convent. The poem ends with the abbess's

⁶² AMH, letter to BLS, quoted in Hirsch, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, pp. 34-35.

⁶³ BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/19 and 5/20.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ GCPP Parkes 5/19 and 5/20. Critical responses to Tennyson's poem have long sparked critical debate. There have been those (like AMH and BRP) who believed Tennyson to be a champion of women's rights and therefore interpreted the poem as covertly feminist. However, scholars such as Donald Hall challenges the idea that the poem can be read as feminist. See Donald E. Hall, 'The Anti-Feminist Ideology of Tennyson's 'The Princess'', *Modern Language Studies*, 4 (1991), pp. 49-62, doi:10.2307/3194982.

resignation, as she continues to endure her enforced seclusion and waits to be reunited with her sister in death. The date of this poem, around the same time that Parkes, Leigh and Howitt were reading Tennyson's *The Princess*, suggests a link between Parkes's evocation of 'sisterhood' of the convent and Tennyson's ambiguous fantasy of an all-female university. Tennyson's poem reflects masculine anxieties towards the idea of women working together outside of male governance. Parkes's approach on the other hand, focuses on the cruelty of patriarchal authority by denying the abbess the option to pursue marriage and motherhood and the sister the freedom to make her own choice. While 'The Lady Abbess' is an early example of Parkes's work, it demonstrates how Parkes, Leigh Smith and Howitt utilised these epistolary discussions to experiment with their creative voice and articulate their political thoughts.

Exchanging letters allowed Leigh Smith, Parkes and Howitt's friendship to flourish. Their correspondence served as an educational tool by allowing them to share their knowledge and develop each other's critical thinking. Via their epistolary network, Leigh Smith, Parkes and Howitt challenged existing preconceptions surrounding their sex and articulated their progressive thoughts. Above all, their earlier letters are testament to how their eventual women's political alliance was originated by true friendship and shaped by their shared ambitions.

The Teachings of the 'Older Generation'

The older generation were critical of society's exclusion of women and successfully campaigned against it.⁶⁷ In their campaigns for women's suffrage and legal rights, they demonstrated that in order to fully liberate women, they needed to prioritise making education accessible to them. Thanks to their efforts, the 1840s saw an upward trajectory of

⁶⁷ Kathryn Gleadle, *Early Feminists*, p. 138.

female education, with the development of institutions such as Queen's College and Bedford College. The former was founded in 1848 by Frederick Denison Maurice, with the intent of providing academic qualifications to women. The Unitarian Elizabeth Jesser Reid, however, aimed to establish an institution for women 'free from Anglican influence and open to dissenters and others', and founded Bedford College eighteen months later.⁶⁸

Prior to the College's establishment, Reid enlisted the help of her own circle of women whom she befriended through the abolitionist campaigns. Unitarian women were permitted to join the cause because of their moral and religious advantage as educated wives and mothers.⁶⁹ In 1840, Reid attended the world anti-slavery convention in London where she met Julia Smith, Mary Howitt and Anna Jameson, among others (Harriet Martineau was too ill to attend, but was also an active member). Their involvement with the movement became an unprecedented success, to the point where male members of more traditional evangelical groups grew uneasy with their growing influence. Despite their attendance, Reid and her friends were 'rejected on the first day of the convention after an all-male debate in which they were not allowed to speak' and were forced to silently watch the proceedings from the back galleries.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, for most of the women who campaigned for the cause, this would have been their first official step into politics; their involvement provided the foundations on which women would establish a platform to publicly engage with women's rights.

Inspired by the anti-slavery campaign, as well as the success of the recently opened Queen's College, Reid sought to open her own Ladies' College at Bedford Square. In the years prior to its opening, she cultivated her friends and began to discuss the possibilities of

⁶⁸ Rosemary Ashton, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London* (Random House, 2011), p. 27.

⁶⁹ See: Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (Taylor & Francis, 2004).

⁷⁰ Bonnie Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860* (OUP, 2000), p. 127.

founding 'a College for Women, or something like it'.⁷¹ Smith, Martineau and Jameson were among the women who attended her meetings. Although a few women such as Martineau pointed out the risks of opening Bedford soon after the opening of Queen's, the majority of those who attended the meetings readily agreed with Reid's plans.⁷² Jameson and Smith in particular were active supporters of Reid, with Smith pointing out to the others that even Reid's 'failures are better than other people's successes'.⁷³ Soon after the college's opening, Reid's friends either became members of the college's board, volunteered as teachers or enrolled as students themselves. As a college, Bedford offered subjects that were far more extensive and advanced than that at Queen's, providing women with an education far beyond that offered elsewhere for women.

Reid also enlisted the help of Leigh Smith, Parkes, and Howitt who became involved with promoting Bedford College to other prospective women artists and writers who wanted to further their training. Because of her aunt's connections to the college, Leigh Smith and her sisters enrolled as students along with Eliza Fox and encouraged the likes of Kate Greenaway and Laura Herford to attend.⁷⁴ Reid was undoubtedly an inspiration to Leigh Smith and Fox, who followed similar pursuits in enabling higher education for women. Leigh Smith later developed and opened Portman Hall School for working class children in 1852 and co-founded Girton College for women in 1869; and Fox held her own life drawing classes in her father's library for emerging women artists to be able to practice the human form.⁷⁵ Although there is little evidence that confirms Howitt's direct involvement with

⁷¹ Elizabeth Jesser Reid to Jane Martineau and Eliza Ann Bostock, April 1860 in Margaret Tuke, *A History of Bedford College for Women, 1849-1937*, (OUP, 1939), p. 317.

⁷² Ibid., p. 23.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁴ Eliza Fox was the daughter of the radical Unitarian minister William Johnson Fox. Through Bedford College and Cary's Academy, Fox befriended Leigh Smith, Parkes and Howitt and regularly took part in their later political and artistic campaigns.

⁷⁵ Brenda Colloms, 'Tottie Fox', her life and background', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 5, (1991), *JSTOR*, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/45185289>>, [Accessed 26/03/25].

Bedford College, there is correspondence to suggest that Howitt had attended briefly as a pupil. It is possible that her mother and Leigh Smith encouraged her, as well as her tutor at the time, Francis Cary, who held art classes at the college alongside running his own school.⁷⁶ Parkes promoted Bedford College in her writing, particularly in her later work. In *Essays on Woman's Work* (1865), she describes Reid as the 'most generous and indefatigable foundress', who brought her pupils in 'contact with the minds of several eminent professors of the day'.⁷⁷ Parkes also remarked on the high standard of education accessible at Bedford and stated that the college had transformed public perceptions of women in education.⁷⁸ Despite its initial setbacks, Bedford College was a success, with records showing that approximately 70 students had enrolled by the end of the first term.⁷⁹ Thanks to the efforts of Reid and her colleagues, women were not only able to acquire a liberal and extensive education for the first time but were also encouraged to pursue their academic and professional interests. Thus, in establishing Bedford College, Reid and her friends had set the stage for the younger generations of women who were beginning to emerge from their midst.

Julia Smith

Julia Smith was another profoundly influential figure for the 'Sisters in Art'. When parliament was in session from 1837, Benjamin Leigh Smith needed to travel to London and therefore enlisted 'Aunt Ju' to watch over the children. Smith remained beside her brother throughout the Anne Longden scandal and especially after Longden's death. She loved her nieces and nephews, both for her brother's sake and for her own. She especially loved Leigh

⁷⁶ Herstein, *A Mid-Victorian Feminist*, pp. 19-21.

⁷⁷ BRP, *Essays on Women's Work* (A. Strahan, 1865), p. 56.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ J.S. Cockburn, 'The University of London: The Constituent Colleges', *A History of the County of Middlesex*, 1, (1969), *British History Online* <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol1/pp345-359>>, [Accessed 22/01/2025].

Smith, who must have reminded her of her own audacious nature. She remarked of her niece's attentiveness in a letter she wrote to her artist sister Joanna Bonham Carter:

Barbara goes out every day... She knows every plant she has planted and watches them with a mother's care. Her garden will be in another year a second volume to her house, it will present a history of her life and travels in the form of leaves, flowers, fruit from at least three of the world's quarters.⁸⁰

Smith served as a member of Bedford's council for one year and lady visitor of Bedford College for five years alongside Jameson.⁸¹ Along with Martineau and Reid's support, Smith backed the decision to permit her niece Hilary Bonham Carter to travel to Paris for a year to study art in order to 'make a great stride with her drawing there [...] free from all home cares'.⁸² As for Leigh Smith, Smith personally aided her studies and provided her with a reading list that consisted of contemporary texts and political papers. Smith pointedly handed her own copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to Leigh Smith, which fuelled Leigh Smith's interest in women's rights. In 1845, Smith took her niece to the Theatre Royal Windsor where a fundraising bazaar was being held by female campaigners for the anti-corn league. This was a first-hand opportunity for Leigh Smith to witness women physically campaigning for social reform. This time, the League acknowledged the key role played by its female members and set out an appeal encouraging more women to attend,

TO THE WOMEN OF GREAT BRITAIN

⁸⁰ Julia Smith to Joanna Bonham Carter, 1880, GCPP Bodichon 11/20.

⁸¹ Lady Visitors were fundamental to the day to day running of Bedford. Initially Bedford's lecturers were all male, but Reid insisted that women should be on the council, and ensured that half of the board members were female. The Lady Visitors acted as chaperones to the students attending lectures and helped with the organisation and operation of the College.

⁸² Helen Heineman, *Restless Angels: The Friendship of Six Victorian Women* (Ohio University Press, 1983), p. 126.

LADIES. By a majority of the other sex you are excluded from direct interference in political matters... By this same majority and by universal consent you are invited to interpose in matters of charity...⁸³

Clearly, the efforts of women during anti-corn league and anti-slavery campaigns struck a chord with Leigh Smith, who at a later date attended slave auctions in America to witness the horrific nature of the slave trade in person. Much like her aunt and her friends, Leigh Smith was a staunch abolitionist. Leigh Smith was appalled by the brutality of both auctioneers and sellers. She condemned the lies being told about the slave trade in her letters, denouncing ‘all in America who would exclude the dusky skinned from the light of knowledge and the blessings of freedom which here all the white race so abundantly enjoys’.⁸⁴ Leigh Smith’s humbling experiences abroad would have led her to reconsider her understanding of freedom in England, and how attaining total social equality was far from being achieved.

Smith was also supportive of Leigh Smith’s friends, often noting how the group reminded her of her own friendship circle. Smith was particularly pleased to see that

all the young women of her [Leigh Smith] acquaintance are getting hold of some occupation or at least feeling the want of it. Few sit down contented now, with the life that was considered to do very well in my young days, made up of a little music and a little drawing and a good deal of visiting.⁸⁵

Smith encouraged Leigh Smith and her friends to refrain from settling for marriage and domestic duty and instead pushed them to acquire an independent income and career of their own. She particularly encouraged their artistic pursuits throughout their youth, often visiting

⁸³ Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 28.

⁸⁴ BLS, diary-letter to her family, 14th March 1858 in Joseph W. Reed, *An American Diary, 1857-1858: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon* (Routledge, 2019), p. 131.

⁸⁵ Julia Smith, letter to Julia Pertz, 5th August 1852, Garnett-Pertz papers Bms Eng 1304.1, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Quoted in Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 12.

them to view their latest works and provide critical commentary. In one letter to Parkes, Smith documented visiting Leigh Smith and Howitt to view the latter's work:

I had not seen Barbara for a whole age [...] I believe it was nearly 3 weeks, until Saturday when I came here. She looks pretty well – the better for a practice she has adopted of riding up into the mountains [...] She took me to see A M Howitt's tender, happy and yet suffering face [...] upon my mind I enjoyed her picture greatly and all the more for knowing her.⁸⁶

She also helped the young women acquire life experience, often chaperoning Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes on holiday during the summer months of their late teens. Many of their adventures involved visits to reform schools and rehabilitation centres for fallen women. In 1853, Leigh Smith and Parkes accompanied Smith on a trip to Ockley in Surrey for a writing retreat. After a few days in Ockley, Smith and the two girls continued their journey to Winchester, Bournemouth and Poole, whereupon Smith 'suddenly resolved to see Miss Carpenter's Kingswood Reformatory in Bristol and they made their way there by omnibus'.⁸⁷ The visits to reformatory schools like Kingswood must have made Parkes and Leigh Smith appreciate the strength of character and dedication that philanthropic work required. Both women would later pay homage to Mary Carpenter in their works and public speeches: Leigh Smith discusses Carpenter in *Women and Work* (1857) and Parkes features her in her poem 'Summer Sketches' and in the *English Woman's Journal*.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Julia Smith to BRP, undated, GCPP Parkes 6/137.

⁸⁷ BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35. Carpenter impressed Parkes and Leigh Smith with her humble and unselfish character. Mary Carpenter was a keen social reformer who also contributed articles on reformatories and the welfare of delinquent children to many journals including the *Birmingham Journal*.

⁸⁸ For further discussion on the women's trip to Ockley, as well as on 'Summer Sketches' and the establishment of the *English Woman's Journal*, see chapter 5.

It is also likely that Smith accompanied the girls in meeting other pioneering women, including Parkes's distant cousin, Dr Elizabeth Blackwell.⁸⁹ Blackwell's status as the first woman to qualify and register as a doctor must have piqued the interest of the older generation, as well as Leigh Smith and her friends. Parkes already had taken an interest in female practitioners such as Blackwell, believing that they could do 'a vast deal of good' and that female patients would prefer to confide in women on 'delicate' matters.⁹⁰ Upon Blackwell's visit to London in 1850, Parkes wrote to Blackwell and immediately arranged to meet her. After reconnecting with her cousin, Parkes wrote to Leigh Smith of Blackwell's 'energy, and hope; of repulses from men, and scorn of her countrywomen'.⁹¹ Parkes quickly set about enlisting Smith and Leigh Smith's help in including Blackwell in their network of women and supporting her professional endeavours. They invited Blackwell to their homes, gifted her flowers and paintings, and even explored the possibility of setting up her own women's medical practice.⁹² Blackwell was fascinated by this group of women, as well as their unconventional attitudes towards middle-class femininity. She noted in a letter that Parkes 'reads every heretic book she can hold of, talks of following a profession, and has been known to go to an evening party without gloves!'⁹³ Having established Blackwell as an ally and friend, Smith later introduced Blackwell to the rest of her circle, and was probably behind the meeting between Blackwell and Florence Nightingale, her other niece who aspired to pursue a career in nursing. Despite their differing views regarding the role of women in

⁸⁹ Parkes was distantly related to Elizabeth Blackwell through Sam Blackwell, who was the widow of Joseph Parkes's relatives, Harriet Twamley. Parkes was engaged to Sam Blackwell for over ten years after he proposed during the summer of 1854. However, plans for their marriage had been postponed by Parkes's hesitancy. This, combined with Blackwell's financial issues, led the engagement to dissolve in 1865.

⁹⁰ BRP, letter to KJ, 8th March 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52.

⁹¹ BRP, letter to BLS, 30th November 1850, Blackwell Family Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹² Quoted in Emma Lowndes, *Turning Victorian Ladies into Women: The Life of Bessie Rayner Parkes, 1829-1925* (Academica Press, 2012), p. 29.

⁹³ Elizabeth Blackwell, letter to Emily Blackwell, 20th November 1850, quoted in Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 54.

medicine, Nightingale always considered Blackwell as in inspiration in pursuing her professional ambitions.⁹⁴

Anna Jameson

Anna Jameson was regarded as another motherly figure by Parkes and her friends, whose literary contributions on feminist art history were among the first enunciations of male and female cooperation in the workforce and education. According to Michelle Tusan, Jameson provided a fresh perspective on women's rights and in particular – women and work.

Jameson delivered two lectures at Reid's home that were published as 'Sisters of Charity' and 'The Communion of Labour', which justified women's rights to work and the need to create 'a greater social role for women'.⁹⁵ Reflecting on these remarkable women from the older generation in one of her letters, Parkes singled Jameson out 'for the influence she exerted, not only in her writings, but in her person'.⁹⁶ According to Parkes,

The department of intellectual activity in which she [Jameson] naturally took most interest was that of the artist; and a group of young women, who pursued art in one or other of its branches, were among her constant visitors.⁹⁷

The 'Sisters in Art' were close to Jameson on a professional and personal level, with Jameson affectionately describing them as 'good and gifted girls' and as like her 'adopted nieces'.⁹⁸

Jameson was keen to encourage the likes of Parkes and Leigh Smith to engage with campaigns for social reform.⁹⁹ For instance, Jameson aided Leigh Smith with organising the

⁹⁴ Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale* (Penguin, 2009) pp. 152-54.

⁹⁵ Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 22.

⁹⁶ BRP, *Essays on Women's Work*, p. 57.

⁹⁷ BRP, 'A Review of the last six years', *EWJ*, Vol XII, No, 72, 1864, pp. 361-368.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Judith Johnston, *Anna Jameson: Victorian, Feminist, Woman of Letters* (Scolar Press, 1997), p. 219.

⁹⁹ Sheila R. Herstein, *A Mid-Victorian Feminist*, p. 71.

papers that were presented for the 1856 Married Women's Property Bill.¹⁰⁰ Jameson had herself fallen victim to these laws, when she was left a penniless widow following the death of her husband in 1854. Unsurprisingly, the campaign took on a significance for the personal lives of those involved; Leigh Smith must have been especially driven to ensure the campaign would be met with success. Jameson also became a literary mentor to Parkes, who encouraged her to openly challenge women's inequality in her written work. Jameson was especially pleased that Parkes had taken up the role of chief editor for the *English Woman's Journal*. Although Jameson did not contribute to the *EWJ*, she gave Parkes constructive criticism on the strengths and weaknesses of earlier issues and advised her on the editing of problematic articles. Parkes wrote of her gratitude for Jameson, and how she was 'accustomed to rely exceedingly on her judgment in all matters requiring knowledge of the world and tact'.¹⁰¹ Although Jameson did not agree with some of Parkes and Leigh Smith's views on marriage and their decision to publicly support their friend Marian Evans following her scandal, she still remained supportive of their work for the *EWJ*.¹⁰²

Of course, Jameson warned Parkes of the backlash that would come with publishing radical approaches to the 'woman question' based on her own experience. Following the release of *EWJ*'s first issue, it was not long until it attracted the criticism of editors.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, Jameson was right to warn Parkes of the scathing nature of critics. Parkes was left shaken by the personal attack on her own character and by the comments made on her reputation. However, Jameson was there to offer her support and encouragement, as well as sympathy and understanding of the hurt caused by such unnecessary remarks. In a letter, she

¹⁰⁰ See chapter 5.

¹⁰¹ BRP, letter to Harriet Hosmer, 30th December 1857, GCPP Parkes 9/32.

¹⁰² Marian Evans (George Eliot) was a renowned novelist and close friend of BLS and BRP. In 1854, Evans eloped with the philosopher and critic George Lewes, who was already married. Lewes was in an open marriage with his wife Agnes. Evans and Lewes's relationship was met with much disapproval. Even the likes of Jameson, Smith and Martineau condemned their actions. BLS and BRP were among the few to remain affiliated with her.

¹⁰³ For an in-depth discussion on the establishment and critical reception of the *EWJ*, see chapter 5.

also reassured Parkes that the furore would calm down and would strengthen the Journal's cause long term.¹⁰⁴

It was not just the younger generation who turned to Jameson for support: Jameson had loyal supporters in Parkes and her friends, especially after the breakdown of her marriage. After her estranged husband's death, Jameson and her family were left with nothing, since he left all of his money to a woman whose name Jameson had never heard of.¹⁰⁵ Aware of her dire financial situation, Jameson's closest friends collected a sum to buy her an annuity of £100 a year. Leigh Smith, Parkes, the Howitts and Reid were likely involved with the collection. Jameson was deeply touched by their kind gesture, singling out the young poet Adelaide Proctor in particular for her £70 donation in a letter to her: 'Dear friend, how I love you, not only for what you have done, but for the consummate judgement and delicacy with which you have done it!'¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the relationship between the older and younger generation was not only built on professional and political alliances, but on emotional and deeply personal friendships that stood the test of even the most difficult circumstances.

Mary Howitt

Mary Howitt was an incalculable source of inspiration for the 'Sisters in Art', both as a literary mentor and as a working mother. Howitt represented how women, regardless of their marital status and background, could make it possible to fulfil domestic and motherly duties and balance a career at the same time. In a memoir she published in *Girls Own Paper* about her friends, Fox recalled one time she visited the Howitts at their home,

¹⁰⁴ Anna Jameson, letter to BRP, 20th October 1854, GCPP Parkes 6/26.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Jameson, letter to Ottilie Von Goethe. Quoted in Beatrice Erksine, *Anna Jameson: Letters and Friendships (1812-1860)* (T Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1915), p. 284.

¹⁰⁶ Anna Jameson, letter to Adelaide Proctor, (undated). Ibid., p. 285.

The two younger children were scampering about after every butterfly and bird that flew past, while Mrs Howitt walked up and down, knitting and talking, talking and knitting. How her busy needles used to fly, turning out roll after roll of pretty lace edging, an art she was good enough to instruct me in.¹⁰⁷

Fox then concludes that Howitt and other women writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell were ‘happy wives and happy mothers; making their homes all the fuller and happier with their great gifts’, which suggests the respect that she held for Howitt her ability to balance her home life with her successful literary career.¹⁰⁸ Howitt was also revered by Parkes, who noted of her success: ‘Her books are in every shop throughout the kingdom; if she had a shilling on every copy she would be rich’.¹⁰⁹ Parkes admired Howitt for how she used her platform as a successful writer to promote other women writers and the women’s cause. Howitt frequently featured feminist writers in the *Howitts’ Journal*, whilst also supporting Scandinavian feminists such as Fredrika Bremer by translating their works to make them accessible for English readers. Howitt’s public respect was of great significance to her circle’s campaigns for women’s rights. Leading by example, she was particularly eager to persuade the public that progressive views on women could coexist with conventional femininity. As W.H. Ashurst observed, Howitt’s public reputation as a working wife and mother added ‘great weight’ to the cause.¹¹⁰

The Howitts were by this time acquainted with several literary figures, including Elizabeth Gaskell, William Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charles Dickens, with the latter often visiting Anna Mary and providing critical commentary on her writing.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Eliza Bridell-Fox, ‘Memories’, *Girl’s Own Paper*, (Lutterworth Press, 1890), p. 660.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ BRP, letter to Joseph Parkes, 1850, GCPP Parkes, 2/37.

¹¹⁰ W.H.Ashurst, letter to William Lloyd Garrison, 30th June 1840, Boston Public Library, MS,A,1,Z,v,9.

¹¹¹ Anne Lohrli, ‘Anna Mary Howitt’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (University of Toronto Press, 1971), doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/63040.

Howitt envisioned her own family as an opportunity for creative collaboration, and not only encouraged their children to contribute to their journal but to also network with people in their circle.¹¹² Despite their hectic and lucrative schedules, Howitt brought her daughters up to the profession, training Anna Mary to be an artist and author and Margaret a translator, and encouraged their artistic and literary pursuits to secure financial independence. In a letter to her sister, Howitt explains her intentions with her daughters:

Girls must be made independent. I am bent on A.M making £300 next year by translating; experience shows me that 9/10ths of the troubles and discomforts of families in this country come from lack of money. When I think of some, how wretched and hopeless does the lot of woman seem!¹¹³

Working collaboratively was an integral part of Howitt's literary success. Aside from her early work with her sister Anna, Howitt found a collaborative partnership in her husband William, with whom she established the *Howitts' Journal*. Writing to her sister just before the release of their first issue, Howitt describes their pride and excitement in preparing their periodical for release:

We are very, very busy, as on the 1st January comes out our own Howitts' journal [...] we are all in high spirits; and it is perfectly cheering to see how warm and enthusiastic people are about our journal.¹¹⁴

It was Howitt, however, who proved to be her mother's closest artistic companion. Mary spoke of her excitement about her daughter's help with sketches for a manuscript when she was ten years old,

¹¹² Linda H. Peterson, 'Collaborative Life Writing Ideology: The Auto/biographies of Mary Howitt and Her Family', *Prose Studies*, 26 (2003).

¹¹³ Amice Lee, *Laurels and Rosemary: The Life of William and Mary Howitt* (OUP, 1955), p. 165.

¹¹⁴ Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, p. 41.

I wish I could send you some specimens of Anna Mary's drawing. She is now illustrating my "Seven Temptations". She designs heads to illustrate the different characters. William has them with him in London, and has astonished several artists with them. Dear child! It is a fine talent, and, I doubt not, given for a good purpose.¹¹⁵

Howitt went on to produce illustrations for her parents' work. As a teenager, she contributed to her mother's *Hymns and Fire-side Verses* (1839) and her father's *The Boy's Country Book* (1839). Her illustrations in these works, however, are not acknowledged in the contents page, and are signed with just 'Anna Mary'. Although she clearly possessed great talent, Howitt's attention to detail is not yet as refined as it would become, and her composition needs development.



Figure 1.2: Anna Mary Howitt, sketch in Mary Howitt's *Hymns and Fire-Side Verses*, (1839)

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 1, p. 237.



Figure 1.3: Anna Mary Howitt, Illustration in William Howitt's *The Boy's Country Book*, (1839)

As Howitt matured, so did her art. Some of her best surviving work is featured in the *Howitts' Journal*. William and Mary wrote and solicited contributions to the *Journal*, whilst Anna Mary provided accompanying illustrations. Mary enjoyed *The Child's Corner* so much that she used it as a recurring feature to chronicle the collection of short stories dedicated to her younger readers.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ 'Child's Corner' is located in William and Mary Howitt, *The Howitt's Journal Of Literature and Popular Progress*, 1 (1847) p. 303. Courtesy of the Yale University Library.



Figure 1.4: Anna Mary Howitt, *The Child's Corner*, (1847)

Howitt's detailing had greatly improved since her juvenile illustrations. It is more professional than her earlier work, too, in the sense that Anna Mary interprets her mother's story and provides a perspective complementary to but different from the narrator's. Mary's column features 'The Young Turtle-Dove of Carmel', which tells the story of a turtle-dove's migration from its home in a monastery on Mount Carmel in Syria to Surrey, where it is caught by two well-intentioned children: 'It shall live with us; it shall love us; it shall have a mate and be so happy', claim the children, but the captive bird falls ill and dies within its cage.¹¹⁷ In a scene not included in her mother's story, Howitt's drawing captures the bewilderment of the children as they contemplate the dead turtle-dove, and in their grief and regret, comfort each other. Through *The Child's Corner*, Howitt provides an alternate perspective to her mother's story whilst also actively collaborating with her mother, by providing a child's vision as a complement to her mother's narrative.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 304-305.

Looking at *The Child's Corner*, the dead bird signifies their loss of innocence, in that the two young children have witnessed or are at least realising the gravity of what they have done. The binary oppositions of innocence and death became popular subjects that pervaded poetry and art at the time. It was similarly explored by the likes of poet Christina Rossetti, whom Howitt later befriended through her association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. For example, Rossetti's 'Dead in the Cold' (1872), describes a dead songbird left outside lying by a snowberry bush and 'Baby Lies so Fast Asleep' (1872) features a child with his mother coming to terms with the death of their new-born sibling. Although child mortality and loss of innocence are tough subjects to address, they were a common reality for young women like Rossetti and Howitt, with the latter suffering the loss of her brother Claude three years before *The Child's Corner* was produced. The illustration depicts the children wrapped in a close embrace, showing that they united in their grief. Their emotional closeness also suggests their dependence on each other for comfort, as well as the affectionate and supportive nature of their relationship. It is likely that Howitt had her youngest brother in mind when producing this work for the *Journal's* first issue. In light of this, Howitt's illustration of brother and sister can also be viewed as a touching tribute to Claude following his untimely death. In this sense, the *Journal* represents a truly familial production, with Howitt even incorporating Claude as part of the family journal, immortalising him in her work.

Through her published work, Mary provided her daughter with a platform to experiment with her artistic and professional identity whilst also working within the family's collaborative model. Howitt's contributions to the *Journal* marked her professional debut as an illustrator, with drawings being publicly acknowledged as the work of 'Miss Howitt' and 'AMH'. Her work continued to improve in terms of style and subject as she produced more accompanying illustrations for her parents' books. Howitt provided designs for her mother's

other works that explored the real-life experiences of children: *The Children's Year* (1847) and *Our Cousin in Ohio* (1849). Both turned out to be familial projects, with Mary writing both collections and Howitt providing the illustrations (both acknowledge Howitt's original designs on the title page).¹¹⁸ These works also involved other family members: *The Children's Year* turned its attention to the adventures of Howitt's younger siblings Charlton and Margaret, and *Ohio* featured her cousins as the story's protagonists.



FIGURE 7 "Dr. Jack's Death Bed"

Figure 1.5: Anna Mary Howitt, 'Dr Jack's Bed' in Mary Howitt's *Our Cousins in Ohio*, (1849)

In the preface of the American edition of *The Children's Year*, Mary Howitt expresses that 'she wished for writers to endeavour to enter more fully into the feelings and reasonings of the child; that he would look at things as it were from the child's point of view rather than from his own'.¹¹⁹ Although Mary specifically aims this request towards others writers, it is Howitt who foregrounded and captured the emotions of the children in her accompanying

¹¹⁸ Mary Howitt, *The Children's Year* (Longman, 1847); *Our Cousins in Ohio* (Darton & Oie, 1849).

¹¹⁹ John Holmes Agnew and Walter Hilliard Bidwell, 'The Importance of Children's Literature', *The Eclectic Magazine*, 50 (1860), pp. 38-44, (p. 38).

illustrations. For instance, in the sketch for *Dr Jack's Death Bed*, Howitt creates a scene only implicit in the story but crucial to understand the children's act of charity towards the dying man.¹²⁰ Akin to *The Child's Corner*, Howitt provides an alternate perspective to her mother's story whilst also in active collaboration; the fact that she is capturing a scene that is only implicit in the original story suggests her prowess as an artist who is capable of interpreting and depicting her own subject matter.

As Peterson contends, the Howitts' collaborative model promoted a new way of working.¹²¹ Howitt's working partnership with her parents not only influenced Howitt's own conception of herself as an artist, but played a formative role in the construction of the 'Sisters in Art' and their collective ethos. Thus, Mary Howitt's influence on the younger generation cannot be overlooked, both as a successful writer and as a progressive and hard-working mother who believed in her daughter's abilities.

Margaret Gillies

Their networks with the older generation were not only built on literary contributions, editorial and illustrative work, but they also made ties through portraiture. As the only portraitist of the older generation, Margaret Gillies played a different role in the promulgation of their progressive thoughts. Gillies knew the importance of her role as a woman artist and sought to use her art to dismiss conventional artistic styles:

¹²⁰ Howitt, *Ohio*, p. 89. AMH's illustration depicts the actual death scene of Dr Jack. The tale itself focuses instead of the children's gift of apples to the sick man. The contrast between the literary and the visual and subject interest of mother and daughter is quite apparent here.

¹²¹ Peterson, 'The Auto/biographies of Mary Howitt and Her Family', *Prose Studies*, p. 180.

Artists in general seize every opportunity of painting the nobility of wealth and rank; it would be far more grateful to me to be able to paint what I conceive to be true nobility, that of genius, long, faithfully, earnestly, and not without suffering...¹²²

Gillies was an artistic inspiration to the younger generation, particularly Howitt and Eliza Fox. She acted as a mentor, often providing tutelage and offering constructive commentary on their works. During one of her visits to London, Margaret Fuller recorded meeting Gillies in the company of Howitt and Fox in one of her early letters:

I saw some girls in London that interested me. Anna Howitt, daughter of W. and Mary Howitt about 22 has chosen the profession of an artist; she has honourable ambition, talent and is what is called a sweet pretty girl. Margaret Gillies is older; she has given up many things highly valued by English women to devote herself to Art, and attained quite a high place in the profession; her pictures are full of grace, rather sentimental, but that she is trying to shake off. For the rest she is an excellent, honest girl. But the one whom I like very much is Eliza Fox, only daughter of the celebrated W.J. She is about five and twenty; she also is an artist and has begun a noble, independent life.¹²³

Although there is no physical evidence that confirms any artistic collaboration, surviving correspondence implies that it was highly probable. In a letter to Leigh Smith in 1848, Howitt states that she has to prepare a composition for a private class led by Gillies, which suggests that Howitt informally trained under Gillies in the late 1840s at the same time as her tutorship under Francis Cary.¹²⁴ It is also suggested that Ben Leigh Smith commissioned Gillies to paint a portrait of Leigh Smith and her sister Bella, although it is not extant.¹²⁵

¹²² Margaret Gillies, letter to Leigh Hunt. Quoted in Charlotte Yeldham, *Women Artists in Nineteenth-century France and England* (Garland, 1984), p. 153.

¹²³ Margaret Fuller, *The Letters of Margaret Fuller: 1845-47*, ed. by Robert N. Hudspeth (Cornell University Press, p. 240.

¹²⁴ AMH, letter to BLS, 1848, MA 14350.9, The Morgan Library & Museum.

¹²⁵ Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 23.

Gillies chose not to depict aristocracy in her portraits, instead capturing the true genius of women artists, writers and reformers. As Wettlaufer notes, Gillies was a champion of her craft who ‘disrupted the boundaries of gender and genre by taking the feminine sphere of domestic display and inserted it into the masculine sphere of political engagement’.¹²⁶ Gillies allowed the faces of Martineau and Mary Howitt (to name a few) to speak directly to the viewers, calling attention to their professional identity and moving a ‘feminine’ art form into the public realm. Gillies’s first portrait of Martineau was painted at her request in 1832, and was chosen by Martineau as the front illustration for her *Autobiography* (1857). Martineau’s usage of Gillies’s portrait to begin her work is indicative of how these women promoted and supported each other’s professional status. It is clear that Martineau and Gillies’s collaborative model was successful, as the ‘Sisters in Art’ continued to follow the same method of collaboration by promoting each other and their art in each of their respective works.

¹²⁶ Alexandra Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Painting and the Novel in France and Britain, 1800-1860* (Ohio State University Press, 2011), p. 198.



Figure 1.6: Margaret Gillies, *Portrait of Harriet Martineau* (1853), Engraving. British Museum

Through her portrait of Martineau, Gillies projects an image of determination and focus. The set of her arm resting on her head suggests that she is deep in concentration. Here, Gillies paints Martineau as a woman who is confident in her position and not easily dissuaded from her thoughts. In keeping with the portrait genre, Gillies depicts Martineau's hair and clothing in detail: the elaborate lace and dress along with Martineau's immaculately placed hair connotes her femininity as well as her autonomy. Her portrayal of Martineau is attractive yet formal, and in keeping with the professionalism that Martineau maintained throughout her career. Above all, the most striking aspect of the portrait is Gillies's reference to Martineau's progressive deafness. Charlotte Yeldham interprets the gesture as an allusion 'to her receptivity to social problems', in which Martineau's pose emphasises her attentiveness, whereas Wettlaufer states that Gillies's reference foregrounds the author's difference, as well

as recognising it as her strength.¹²⁷ Nonetheless, Gillies paints Martineau as a self-assured woman despite the stigmatisation she probably endured with regards to her impediment. Gillies's empowering portrayal of Martineau's deafness also suggests their close bond as well as Martineau's trust in Gillies for allowing her to depict her so honestly.

Gillies also combines ideals of womanhood with professional identity in another portrait she produced of Mary Howitt. Gillies exhibited Howitt's portrait at the Royal Academy in 1847, and even one of Anna Mary Howitt at the RA in 1849, but this work is also not extant.¹²⁸



Figure 1.7: Margaret Gillies, *Portrait of Mary Howitt* (1840?), Engraving. National Portrait Gallery, London

Howitt's collaborations were successful, yet Gillies's singular portrait of Howitt highlights her individual success. Howitt is the sole focus of the painting, appearing confident and self-assured whilst her hands grasp what appears to be a feather or quill which is a reference to

¹²⁷ Alexandra Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist*, p. 204.

¹²⁸ Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 12.

her literary success. Similar to Martineau's portrait, the image connotes ideals of femininity through her lace collar and detailed bonnet, but her face also communicates agency and intelligence. Howitt's singular portrait is another example of how Gillies portrays her female subjects as actively and politically engaged. However, Gillies's double portrait of both William and Mary Howitt celebrates Howitt in a different way, by immortalising their collaborative partnership built on their genuine and happy marriage.



Figure 1.8: Margaret Gillies, *William and Mary Howitt* (1846), Oil on Ivory. Nottingham City Museums

As Wettlaufer notes, Gillies's portrait of husband and wife is an authentic portrayal of their marriage, as well as their professional relationship.¹²⁹ Gillies depicts both figures as individually autonomous: William is standing authoritatively before their worktable whilst holding a small book; and Mary is seated at his side and writing with a quill. Gillies also

¹²⁹ Alexandra Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist*, p. 211.

illustrates their successful working partnership: the coming together of their hands at the centre of their worktable symbolises the heart of their collaboration.

Gillies strove to represent women who represented ideals of female domesticity yet also actively participated in reform. Her portraits of her friends and associates construct a collective image of female identity that envisions women as mothers and wives but also as independent workers.

It has become clear that during the younger generation's early years, the seeds of an artistic and feminist education were being sown. The importance of family networks in the training and support of women artists and writers cannot be understated. As Deborah Cherry points out:

From the later eighteenth century, the practice of art was shaped by kinship links, intermarriage, familial training, and an increasing professionalization. Artist dynasties assisted in the formation of an occupational group with strong familial and professional ties.¹³⁰

The 'Sisters in Art' were not just influenced by their female relatives and associates on professional and artistic level, but witnessed them cross the line from surreptitiously supporting organisations run by men to asserting their own political authority. These women not only encouraged young women like Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes to pursue their professional ambitions but inspired them to find their political voice. Thus, after watching the older generation successfully establish their own careers and take on the political realm by storm, Leigh Smith, Parkes and Howitt may well have considered at this point what their own circle could potentially go on to achieve.

¹³⁰ Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women*, p. 20.

2. ‘The Creative and Domestic Space’: Friendships at the Home and Studio

By the late 1840s, Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes threw themselves into their respective training. Keen in their pursuit to become professional artists and writers, they had either taken up their art or writing professionally and lodged in nearby studios, or begun their artistic training by enrolling in the few art schools that would accept them. Leigh Smith enrolled at Reid’s Bedford College in Bedford Square; Howitt trained at the Henry Sass (later Cary’s) Academy on Charlotte Street; and Parkes began writing and publishing her work professionally. This crucial period also saw the construction of the group’s self-proclaimed ‘Sisters in Art’, which was built on their friendships, travels and collaborative artistic practice. As a group, they believed in the strong connection between work and identity, and embraced their desire for a socially engaged art. The example set by these women signalled the powerful potential of female collective engagement in the social (and eventually political) realm in the years to come. This chapter will explore how the ‘Sisters in Art’ explored and shaped their artistic identities, by engaging with various political and scientific discourses, and experimenting with a range of forms and styles.

Science and Politics in Parkes’s ‘Progression’ and Leigh Smith’s ‘Conformity to Custom’

During this period, Parkes sought to establish herself as a professional writer. She submitted a range of pamphlets and short stories to local periodicals, but most were rejected or returned. In 1849, she even attempted to write a novel, although she was not satisfied with the end result:

I do not think I could ever comfortably represent friends in a novel without feeling as if I were desecrating my own small temple of a few beloved names [...] I feel as if I

should, if ever published, be telling the very expressions I have used to Emma [Evers, a childhood friend], or to you [BLS]. In describing feeling it must be what one has felt only under fictitious names and that is unpleasant.¹

Parkes does not state in her correspondence exactly *why* she experimented with her writing, although it is likely that it was her professional ambitions that led her to experiment with different forms. It is also likely that she attempted to write pamphlets and prose to increase the chances of having her work accepted. Nonetheless, Parkes was much more comfortable in communicating her thoughts and feelings through her poetry. Throughout the late 1840s into early 1850s, she acquired invaluable experience in publishing poetry and essays for the *Birmingham Journal*, and *Hastings and St Leonard's News*. Several of Parkes's early published poems drew inspiration from the political and philosophical works that she read with Leigh Smith and Howitt in their teens. Examples of Parkes's poetic addressing of contemporary issues include 'Two Scenes of Infancy' (1848) and 'A Scene of Everyday' (1848), both which are stark depictions of poverty focused on the deaths of impoverished children. Parkes's poems express admiration for those fighting for social reform and optimism for a future of equality and independence - this was also the theme of 'Progression', Parkes's first published poem, which appeared in the *Birmingham Journal*. Concerned about the state of France following Louis-Philippe's abdication, Parkes responded to an equally concerned Leigh Smith providing reassurance:²

I quite agree with you that whatever becomes of France, Germany and Italy will have great reason to rejoice in the times [...] Yet France is a great mirror, the only thing is that it is better she should educate herself in freedom than under Louis Philippe. It is

¹ BRP, letter to BLS, 3rd August 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/34.

² Poor harvests in 1845 and 1846 in France led to an inevitable rise in grain prices; France later suffered a national famine as a result. The Paris Revolution was a time of widespread disorder and poverty, and severe government repression. King Louis Philippe eventually abdicated in favour of his younger grandson due to the country's dire situation, and was forced to flee to England in disguise for his own safety.

just like your duck in the pond when you were a child. She may get into bloodshed and trouble as you did into mud, by having your own way, but she is more likely to gain experience and self-government in the end.³

With the growing civil unrest and increasingly dire state of France in mind, Parkes composed 'Progression' a month later. Although the poem was written in response to the Paris Revolution, it is predominantly concerned with wider ideas of social reform and democratisation:

PROGRESSION

As a giant in the night,
Whose steps we cannot bear;
As the sound of a muffled drum,
Which steals upon the ear:
From every spot of Earth's domain,
From town and forest deep,
Arises her unfaltering tone
To waken us from sleep.

The clustered stars of yonder heaven
Unceasingly revolve,
And ever, 'midst their destinies,
Some gorgeous change evolve;-
Could Earth recount the works of God
Her younger vision saw,
T'would then unfold eternally
Creation's primal law.

The creatures large, and fierce, and bold,

³ BRP, letter to BLS, 30th March 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/21.

That stepped upon her breast;
The mighty forests, long held low,
Which rose at God's behest;
The suns, and arching zones of light,
Which shone, but shine no more,
Would open visions to our sight
Of one progressive power.

Thou canst not stand: we ever more
Urge onward or recede;
Our feeblest efforts lighten those
Of men whom we precede.
When Progress breathes in every leaf,
And shines from every star,
Oh, reader, pause a moment: *thou*
Each day canst aid – or *bar*.

P.⁴

Parkes combines her interest with the contemporary mood of progress and social reform. She describes progress as 'one progressive power' and part of 'Creation's primal law', reinforcing that progression is an inevitable and natural process. Parkes conceptualises progression in broad terms, alluding to ways in which society has already progressed through subtle references to emerging scientific progress, which had shaken world views at the time. For instance, the lines 'unceasingly resolve' and 'Open visions to our sight/The clustered stars' invokes ideas of astronomy, referring to the advancement of telescope technologies that broadened the scope of research on space.⁵ She also alludes to emerging geological research

⁴ 'P' [BRP], 'Progression', 22nd April 1848, *Birmingham Journal*, p. 3.

⁵ Practising Astronomy became popular among wealthy amateurs, who often commissioned their own telescopes, built observatories and founded prestigious societies. Robert Chambers, in his anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) discussed astronomy in evolutionary terms. As for women astronomers, women had modest recognition. However, as the number of girls' schools increased, many young women such as Parkes came to receive a more systematic education that provided by relatives. The

concerning the Earth's origins, 'The creatures large, and fierce, and bold', which is a plausible reference to Richard Owen's revolutionary work on dinosaurs and fossils, and the line 'Could Earth recount the works of God' possibly alludes to the discovery of Earth's true geological age.⁶ Parkes was not the only Victorian poet who engaged with scientific discourse in her work. Similar to 'Progression', Robert Browning's 'Caliban upon Setebos' (1864) is a response to recent astronomical research and emerging theories of evolution: 'Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match/But not the stars; the stars came otherwise/Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that/Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon'.⁷ Tennyson uses similar scientific allusions in his poem *In Memoriam*, wherein he describes the 'scarped cliff and quarried stone' and 'Nature, red in tooth and claw'.⁸ Akin to Parkes's reference, the line 'O, Earth what changes hast thou seen' is a direct reference to recent geological research on the history of the Earth.⁹ Even Parkes's associates, the Pre-Raphaelites encompassed science in their art and poetry. As John Holmes notes, Pre-Raphaelite painting was informed by 'geology and natural history in the case of landscape, psychology in the case of historical paintings, portraits and genres' and 'Chemistry, anatomy and geometry are all important points of reference in the *Germ*'.¹⁰ Despite the clear similarities between Parkes's references to science and that of her male contemporaries, their approaches to using them are different. Browning's poem concerns a cynical social outcast who openly contemplates the authoritarian role of God, whereas Tennyson's references to science are explicitly connected to his own grief following his friend's death. Parkes's approach, however, is far more

growing number of girls' schools prompted a demand for women teachers, this includes Reid's Bedford College. See Peggy Aldrich Kidwell, 'Women Astronomers in Britain, 1780-1930', 75.3 (1984), 534-546, *JSTOR*, < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/232943>>, [Accessed 26/03/25].

⁶ Richard Owen had made several contributions to science and public learning on fossils and anatomical structures. He had published *On the Archetype and Homologies of the Vertebrate Skeleton* (1848) as Parkes was composing 'Progression' for the *Birmingham Journal*.

⁷ Robert Browning, *The Poetical Works*, (Smith Elder and Co, 1897), pp. 593-594.

⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, (Ticknor and Fields, 1854)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science*, (Yale University Press, 2018), p, 9.

implicit, and instead highlights the positive impact that progression has had on the world. She unifies progress as a single force or entity, which connects the progresses of science with other, implied forms of progress. In light of this, Parkes is suggesting that we should not limit our thoughts and instead should be open-minded towards more change; she is implying that we should consider progressive thoughts about other aspects of society, possibly including the inclusion of women.

As in Parkes's poetry, a number of Victorian women writers frequently engaged with scientific and philosophical discourse to justify their reasoning for women's rights. Suffragist Katherine Russell published 'The Claims of Women' in the *Fortnightly Review* (1871), in which she argued for the opening of all jobs to women on the grounds that 'natural selection' would operate, 'and what they are fitted for they will perform'.¹¹ Author and activist Sarah Josepha Hale produced *Woman's Record* (1853), an encyclopaedia of distinguished working women, wherein she proclaimed that 'Medical science belongs to women more than to men [...] the female is the preserver; the study of the laws of health, and of the healing art, would harmonise with her feelings and intuitive faculties'.¹² Margaret Fuller, a notable ally to Parkes and her circle, published her manifesto, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843), which even incorporated ideas of historical and biological determinism. Though Fuller emphasised that woman must 'work as she will', she implied that such work would be defined by their 'especial genius'.¹³ As for Parkes, 'Progression' suggests the intellectual capabilities of women and ways in which they read and received science. Her scientific allusions in the poem demonstrate (albeit under a pseudonym) her own knowledge of scientific progress, and by extension, women's ability to comprehend, articulate and engage with such complex ideas. Parkes's references to science also suggest her interest in collaboration from a young

¹¹ Lady Amberley, 'The Claims of Women', *The Fortnightly Review*, 15 (1871), pp. 95-110, (p. 108).

¹² Sarah Josepha Hale, *Woman's Record* (Harper and Brothers, 1853), p. 903.

¹³ Margaret Fuller, *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Greeley & McElrath, 1843), p. 61.

age. Science is a collaborative practice which relies upon scientists to pool their knowledge and build on existing research to make new discoveries. Clearly, the collaborative nature of science resonated with Parkes, who explored the concept in her later poetry, and became part of her own network which was built on collaborative artistic practice.

As Boswell notes, Victorian women poets subtly used their writing to question, if not undermine, Victorian social conventions, especially regarding gender and theology.¹⁴ Parkes also used her poetry to covertly respond to the political discourse that concerned the inclusion of women. In 'Progression', she draws on progressive thoughts about women as equal to men, promoting the idea through the inclusive phrase 'one progressive power'. It is plausible that this 'one progressive power' that Parkes mentions calls for the unity of both men and women to progress as 'one', and that society cannot progress without equal consideration for the latter. Parkes's progressive views towards women are also suggested through how she frequently identifies Earth as female using the pronoun 'her'. She describes how Earth's creatures step 'upon her breast', and refers to 'her unfaltering tone' and 'her younger vision'. In discussing the concept of an empowered female Earth with regards to societal progression, she is implying that her readers must also think progressively about women. The personification of Earth as female empowers and champions the importance of women to the world.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the natural world has been often personified and depicted by society as a feminine agent.¹⁵ This is probably due in part to the conventionally 'feminine' attributes that have been associated with nature, such as nurture, fertilisation and reproduction. It is also due to the fact that male scientists and philosophers

¹⁴ Michelle Boswell, *Beautiful Science: Victorian Women's Scientific Poetry and Prose*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, (Maryland: University of Maryland, 2014), p. 160.

¹⁵ For example, as discussed by James Eli Adams, 'Woman in Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin', *Victorian Studies*, 33.1, (1989), pp. 7-27.

have dominated the discourse surrounding traditional configurations of nature and gender. For instance, Francis Bacon adopted rape imagery to illustrate men's power over nature, calling for the human race to 'recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest', and Charles Darwin claimed that women were closer to nature than to men in evolutionary terms, protesting that 'it is hard to avoid personifying the word Nature'.¹⁶ Ecofeminists have since commented on the conceptualisation of nature as feminine.¹⁷ Steve Adams and Gruetzner Robins stated that the terms 'Earth', 'femininity', 'woman' and 'nature' have been 'constructed within a patriarchal culture', suggesting that our understanding of nature as feminine and the conventional behaviours that align femininity with nature have been socially enforced.¹⁸ Barbara Lewalski adds to this, explaining that the link between women and nature is political when the control of both is advocated in the name of patriarchal dominance, emphasising how society's association of women with nature has led to the oppression of both.¹⁹ More recently, Leah Thomas addresses the dual oppressions of women and the environment as 'rooted in patriarchal structures', and that 'because we live in a capitalist and patriarchal society, the oppression of women and the destruction of nature are a natural consequence'.²⁰ As a result of this, Earth has been perceived as intrinsically feminine because it (and women) has historically been viewed as something to be subjugated, conquered or controlled.

¹⁶ Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne, *Francis Bacon: The New Organon*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 101. The quote was inserted in the third edition (1861): Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species: A Variorum Edition*, ed. by Morse Peckham (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), p. 165.

¹⁷ For more on Ecofeminism as a philosophical and critical movement, see Mary Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology: An Introduction*, (NYU Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Gendering Landscaping Art* (Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁹ Barbara Lewalski, 'Re-writing Patriarchy and Patronage: Margaret Clifford, Anna Clifford, and Aemilia Lanyer', in *Patronage, Politics, and Literary Traditions in England 1558-1658*, ed. by Cedric C. Brown (Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp. 59-78, (p. 69).

²⁰ Leah Thomas, *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People and Planet* (Little, Brown and Co, 2022).

On the other hand, just because the relationship between women and nature has traditionally been viewed as oppressive, it does not mean that this is the case.²¹ Although Parkes's Earth in 'Progression' is feminine, her feminisation of Earth is not to reinforce socially engrained conceptions of gender and nature, but to implicitly subvert them. Women were expected to be 'careful, vigilant, disinterested, even selfless in her responsibility for 'the being which she tends', which are the attributes that have been historically aligned with nature.²² But in personifying Earth as an authoritative woman with her own self-agency, Parkes is highlighting the importance of women to the continuity of mankind. She is reminding her readers of society's dependence on women, and their role in the functioning and general progression of humanity as a whole.

Again, it is clear that Parkes's early readings of Tennyson with Howitt and Leigh Smith were influential here, in that his poem 'The Princess' similarly discusses women and social progress in evolutionary terms. In the poem, Ida forcefully refuses to submit herself to the Prince and have children. As Adams notes, while Ida 'justifies her social goals in evolutionary terms [...] her refusal of the Prince is thus presented, not merely as a personal rebuke, but as a threat to the very survival of the species'.²³ Therefore, Ida's unconventional behaviour deeply unsettles the Prince, and in turn, the biological continuity and general progression of humanity. Although Parkes's approach is more subtle, it seems that her intention with 'Progression' was to not only call for unity following the Paris Revolution, but to suggest her own thoughts towards progression, particularly the importance of women in society to ensure its development and stability.

²¹ Catherine Roach, 'Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation' in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 6.1 (1991), pp. 46-59, (p. 51), doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00208.x

²² James Eli Adams, 'Woman in Red in Tooth and Claw', p. 11.

²³ Ibid., p. 21.

‘Progression’ is also an example of how Parkes not only experimented with her subject matter, but her poetic style. Thematically and stylistically, the poem reflects an undeniably Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. Although the Brotherhood’s first exhibition was not until four months after ‘Progression’ was published, Parkes, Howitt and Leigh Smith were familiar with the future members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at this stage, with Howitt studying alongside them at Cary’s Academy from 1846. It is possible that they shared and discussed ideas for potential works, and these conversations probably informed Parkes’s early poetry. Also, as mentioned above, both parties shared a mutual interest in science, which most likely informed their discussions and the subject matter in their works. The celestial imagery and language in ‘Progression’ mirrors Rossetti’s ‘The Blessed Damozel’, which was first composed in 1847, which was around the same time that Parkes had first composed ‘Progression’ prior to submitting it for publication. Therefore, it is possible that Parkes and Rossetti may have taken inspiration from each other. Rossetti’s poem adopts similar descriptions of the Earth and space as Parkes, ‘The stars sang in their spheres/The sun was gone now; the curled moon/Was like a little feather’, compared to Parkes’s ‘Progression’, ‘The clustered stars of yonder heaven/The suns, and arching zones of light/Which shone, but shine no more’ (9, 21-22).²⁴ Interestingly, Parkes’s ballad also alternates its meter between tetrameter and trimeter, just as Rossetti’s ‘The Blessed Damozel’ does. Despite the fact that ‘Progression’ is more politically informed and less religious than Rossetti’s poem, it is clear that Parkes engaged with Pre-Raphaelitism and its emergent aesthetic within her poetry. Parkes was evidently exploring her professional poetic identity and experimenting with a range of styles at this stage of her career.

Above all, ‘Progression’ offers a small tribute to her friendship with Leigh Smith. The reference to ‘*bar*’ in italics in the final line can be read as a reference to Leigh Smith whom

²⁴ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel & Other Poems* (J. Long, 1905), pp. 15-27.

she often nicknamed ‘Bar’ in her letters. The poem itself is a testament to the progressive texts and ideologies that Parkes and Leigh Smith frequently discussed in their letters. Leigh Smith was notably pleased with Parkes’s first published poem, and wrote to her expressing approval. However, it appears that Parkes was too self-critical, having said to Leigh Smith that she could do better than ‘Progression’ and explained that she ‘did not pick [it] out as the best, but as most suitable for the Birmingham paper at that time’.²⁵

Nonetheless, ‘Progression’ was Parkes’s first step towards becoming a professional writer. She used her father’s connection to the *Journal* to her advantage, having sent a first draft of ‘Progression’ to the editor John Feeney two years before it was eventually accepted.²⁶ Parkes found great difficulty in winning over editors with her ambitious work. In a bid to have her poetry more widely accepted by both editors and readers, Parkes published under a variety of pseudonyms, as anonymity was useful to women writers to circumvent any social stigmatisation and ‘avoid censure for their “unfeminine” presentation of themselves in the public sphere of the press’.²⁷ Parkes signed her early poetry with ‘P’, before adopting ‘EDR’, ‘ED Rayner’, and ‘Bernard’ in her other works. Each of these pseudonyms concealed Parkes’s identity as a female poet, with the latter providing her with a particularly masculine persona. Publishing her work under male pseudonyms helped to ensure that her early published works would be read in a more detached way rather than be viewed as direct expressions of her progressively radical thoughts.

Poetry became a significant feature in both national and local newspapers, as it was useful to editors for filling up empty columns, as well as for adding an element of culture to

²⁵ BRP to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes, 5/27.

²⁶ Joseph Parkes previously owned the *Birmingham Journal*, having bought the Journal in 1832 to publish his political agenda. He later sold it to John Feeney in 1844.

²⁷ Deborah Anna Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 56. Also see Andrew Hobbs and Claire Januszewski, ‘How Local Newspapers Came to Dominate Victorian Poetry Publishing’, *Victorian Poetry*, 52.1 (2014), pp. 65-87 for more on female poets who published under pseudonyms.

periodicals that provided cathartic relief for readers from depressing societal news.²⁸ Poetry was also popular amongst readers and writers as it was accessible to a wider audience than prose and commercially profitable. However, for poets such as Parkes who sought to engage with politics through their writing, poetry became their political mouthpiece. Both Parkes and Leigh Smith produced work that spoke about international politics. For instance, Parkes's 'Progression', along with Leigh Smith's sketches of herself weeping in front of the Eiffel Tower was their response to the Paris Revolution.²⁹ They also produced work specifically to add their voices to debates on local issues. Parkes composed 'No Thoroughfare', which demanded public access to the countryside, in response to Leigh Smith's wish for her to 'write for the H news [*Hastings*] about the beauty of the green fields and the necessity for people to see and love and study nature [...] a battle cry against the oppression of the selfish Squires'.³⁰ It seems from this point, Parkes and Leigh Smith began to work collaboratively; their correspondence in the late 1840s indicate that Parkes updated Leigh Smith on the submissions she had made to various editors, and Leigh Smith gave her advice on how to refresh her writing to suit the style of each paper.³¹ They had also at this point learnt how to navigate and take advantage of the literary market. Newspapers often selected 'seasonal' poetry, including the proliferation of Easter themed poetry around April, and festive verses around Christmastime. Parkes had caught onto this trend and with Leigh Smith's encouragement, published three poems related to Christmas and New Year in the *Birmingham Journal* between 1849 and 1850.³² It is clear that throughout this period, and

²⁸ Andrew Hobbs and Claire Januszewski, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 66. Hobbs and Januszewski state that by the mid-1850s, the local newspaper was the most read type of publication carrying poetry as opposed to books, magazines or London newspapers.

²⁹ BLS's sketch is extant, but in a private collection.

³⁰ BLS, letter to BRP, 1851, GCPP Parkes 5/167.

³¹ BRP, letter to BLS, 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/27.

³² 'A Carol for Christmas', *Birmingham Journal*, 22nd December 1849, 'Christmas Comes But Once a Year', *Birmingham Journal*, 21st December 1849, 'New Year's Eve and New Year's Day', *Birmingham Journal*, 28th December 1850.

with the support of her friend, Parkes was emerging as a talented published writer with a clear feminist consciousness, and an aptitude for marketing her work.

Leigh Smith's first written publications, however, were considered to be far more radical. As editor of the *Hastings and St Leonard's News*, William Ransom enabled her to write and publish a number of articles on women's emancipation. According to Hirsch, Ransom was considered as a great champion of the local press, and became a lifelong friend to Leigh Smith.³³ During the summer of 1848, Leigh Smith published her first article, 'An Appeal to the Inhabitants of Hastings', in which she addresses the lack of action amongst reformers with regards to children's health and the environment. Her other articles that were published during this period focused on women's rights. 'Conformity to Custom' argues that the concept of feminine 'innocence' is socially enforced:

The dependent and environed life of women of rank is not innocent. The creature, never stirring without a footman, seeing only the stuccoed and carriage thronged streets, never coming into contact with vice and crime, those mournful facts which all should know in order that they be better stimulated to ameliorate – this woman forfeits her rights and duties as a human being, and the conscientious seeker after good should not conform.³⁴

This is followed by an attack on the limitations of women's fashion. In 'Conformity to Custom', Leigh Smith proceeds to argue that if women conform to the dictates surrounding what they can and cannot wear, then they would effectively strip themselves of their rights. Of course, neither Leigh Smith, nor her friends conformed to expectations that they should wear corsets. Instead, they opted for practical clothing suitable for their expeditions abroad,

³³ Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 36.

³⁴ 'Esculapius' [BLS], 'Conformity to Custom', *Hastings & St Leonard's News*, 7th July 1848.

which is shown in Leigh Smith's sketches and poetry that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another of her articles, 'The Education of Women', pleads to the public to not enforce such rigid social constraints on their female relatives:

Let your blue [stocking] daughter, your political wife, your artistic sister, and eccentric cousin, pursue *their* paths unmolested – you will never make ideals of them; you will only make your home the scene of suppressed energies and useless powers.³⁵

Despite 'The Education of Women' being one of Leigh Smith's earliest published works, it is one of her most personal and emotionally charged appeals for women's rights. The article reinforces Leigh Smith's view that all women, should be able to acquire their own liberties and pursue their own interests and careers. Leigh Smith appears to allude to her own private circumstances, including that of her close female associates. The references that she makes in this passage are far too personal for it to be merely just a public appeal. For instance, 'eccentric cousin' probably alludes to her estrangement from her cousin Florence Nightingale and other family members because of her 'illegitimate' upbringing and radical views. Leigh Smith's relationship with Nightingale was strained, as Leigh Smith awkwardly refers to her as 'Patty's niece' rather than as her cousin in her letters.³⁶ Neither Leigh Smith, her parents nor her siblings were acknowledged by their extended family, and were often referred to as 'the tabooed family' as a result.³⁷ As for the reference 'Blue Stocking Daughter', Leigh Smith viewed the Society as influential with regards to her own intellectual and collaborative pursuits, having also mentioned them in her letters.³⁸ Interestingly, Leigh Smith also adds

³⁵ 'Esculapius' [BLS], 'The Education of Women', *Hastings & St Leonard's News*, 28th July 1848.

³⁶ Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 119.

³⁷ Marian Evans (George Eliot) referred to the Leigh Smiths as 'the tabooed family' in her letters. Quoted in Reed, *An American Diary*, p. 39.

³⁸ The Blue Stockings was a literary society led by Elizabeth Montagu in the 18th century who promoted women to become well-read and intellectual. These women were called 'blue stockings' in reference to the

‘artistic sister’ to the list, a term that is undoubtedly a reference to Parkes, Howitt and the other women artists and writers in their circle. This is an early indication of how they viewed themselves exclusively in relation to the predominantly male art community, as well as their interest towards establishing an artistic women’s community of their own.

Everything that Leigh Smith had experienced, read and written inspired her to commit herself to more action - but she did not know where to begin. Following her articles’ publication, Leigh Smith grew annoyed with having only talked about her thoughts as opposed to actually doing something about them. She wrote of her frustrations in a letter to Parkes,

I feel a mass of ideas and thoughts in my head and long for some expression, some letting out of, the restless spirit, in work for those for are ignorant. I feel quite oppressed sometimes with so much enjoyment of intellect [...] But what is the use of talking. I am always thinking and talking, never acting.³⁹

One of her first courses of action was to enrol and study drawing at Bedford College, following the encouragement of her Aunt Julia and the older generation. There, she spent every day practising her art with other women artists who were interested in women’s rights. Eliza Fox studied alongside her, as did Joanna Boyce and Laura Herford. For Leigh Smith and Fox in particular, several important things came out of their experience at Bedford College. For Leigh Smith, Bedford was undoubtedly the first step in her career as an educationalist. Despite the college’s limited facilities, the opportunities that Bedford provided to its students nevertheless inspired her to set up her own schools in later years. Fox’s time at Bedford prompted her to run classes of her own in her father’s library, which most of her

woollen worsted tights they wore instead of the conventional black silk. See Elizabeth Eger, *Bluestocking feminism: writings of the Bluestocking circle, 1738-1790*, (Pickering & Chatto, 1999).

³⁹ BLS to BRP, 1848, GCPP Parkes, 5/168.

friends at Bedford attended over the course of a decade. She also frequently volunteered at Leigh Smith's Portman School as a teacher in later years. Together, the pair organised art classes in the evening at their studios prior to their campaign for the admission of women into Royal Academy schools in the early 1860s. The possibility of providing a separate environment for women, offering full-time study, achieving credible qualifications and unmatched independence from domestic duties, clearly resonated with Leigh Smith and Fox who, as a result, became reformers and educationalists themselves.

At some point during this period they were studying under Francis Cary, the same master who had been teaching Howitt at his own school. Cary was hailed by the women for providing them with the same opportunities as their male peers under his tutelage. Cary's Academy, according to Fox, was the only art school where 'there was a possibility for girls to obtain any thorough art training'.⁴⁰ Cary was especially interested in Howitt, and believed her to possess a unique talent in drawing, although according to her mother, Howitt was 'always a little bit frightened' of him.⁴¹ Nonetheless, he was pivotal to her success - even providing free tuition to her following her family's bankruptcy and the subsequent collapse of the family *Journal*. Howitt's time at Cary's led her to become acquainted with other notable young artists of the age including Rossetti, Millais, Woolner and Holman Hunt as they were preparing for their entry exam to the RA long before they established the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Since Cary's Academy was geared to the passing of the RA's entrance examination, Cary tended to emphasise technique and restraint in his classes. For the young male artists this caused frustration: although Millais was a success, Holman Hunt refused to attend classes and Rossetti and Woolner accomplished little to nothing during their tenure at Cary's. Despite this, Howitt maintained long-term friendships with the Pre-Raphaelite

⁴⁰ Ellen Clayton, *English Female Artists* (Tinsley Brothers, 1876), p. 82.

⁴¹ Carl Woodring, *Victorian Samplers: William and Mary Howitt* (University of Kansas Press, 1952) p. 138.

Brethren, even after their admission to the RA. They would go on to inspire her artistically, as well as introduce her to their growing list of artists and writers who joined their circle - they even invited her to publish work in the *Germ* and the *Crayon*.⁴² Moreover, the collaborative model of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood would serve as an inspiration for Howitt and her 'Sisters in Art', despite being a burgeoning reminder of their artistic and social exclusion.

Feminist Consciousness in Leigh Smith's Early Welsh Landscapes

The year 1850 was an important year for the 'Sisters in Art'. Having completed her studies at Cary's, Howitt became increasingly annoyed at being left behind by their male peers who moved on to join the RA schools. She felt that it was unfair for women not to be permitted to attend the Royal Academy schools, nor be provided with the same opportunities as male artists, despite showing an equally impressive talent. Having exhausted the opportunities for study that England offered to women at the time, Howitt decided to continue her studies in Munich at the Academy of Fine Arts under Willem Von Kaulbach – the Academy's Director. She was accompanied by Jane Benham, another woman artist and friend of Howitt who wanted to continue her training. Fox wanted to join Howitt and Benham, but was restrained by worries over her father. She turned to Elizabeth Gaskell for counsel, who had agonised over the same problem.⁴³ After much deliberation, Fox's trip to Munich was never realised. Nonetheless, she supported Howitt and Benham's venture abroad and eventually pursued artistic study in Paris with Margaret Gillies two years later.

⁴² The *Germ* was a periodical produced and published by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1850. The journal aimed to disseminate their thoughts towards nature, art and literature, however it was not a success, and only survived 4 issues. Owned and edited by William Stillman and John Duran, the *Crayon* was, in its own words, 'a journal devoted to the graphic arts and the literature related to them'. The American periodical began in January 1855, and ceased in 1861. It published and reproduced many Pre-Raphaelite works, with William Michael Rossetti being their foreign correspondent. See Susan Casteras, *English Pre-Raphaelitism and its Reception in America in the Nineteenth Century* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990).

⁴³ Fox confided in Elizabeth Gaskell over father's worries. Gaskell addressed the conflict between the 'moral, if not a religious, responsibility and a desire for individual fulfilment' and reassured Fox that things will work out long term. See: John Chapple and Arthur Pollard, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Mandolin, 1997), p. 107.

With Fox unable to join them, Howitt and Benham successfully made the journey to Munich to engage in serious study of drawing and painting. However, soon after their arrival, it became clear that even Munich's Academy refused to admit women. Undeterred, they approached Kaulbach privately and urged him to allow them to work in his private studio; Kaulbach agreed and permitted them to practice at their leisure in his study. Kaulbach also provided them a room to sleep in for the winter. Although there is evidence in Howitt's correspondence to suggest that Kaulbach engaged with their studies, it is not clear how much formal instruction he gave them.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the women were excited with being able to live as independently as young male artists and embrace their artistic training and new lives in Munich.

During the same year, Leigh Smith's apprenticeship as an aspiring landscape painter was spent in studying and copying the techniques of other English landscape artists, such as Samuel Prout and David Cox. She took to committing herself to refining her watercolours, often travelling to the Lake District and Wales to practice in hopes of professionally exhibiting her work. During her travels, Leigh Smith was determined for her art to be taken seriously. In a letter written to Parkes during one of these trips, Leigh Smith explained the steps she had taken to improve her artistic style:

I must explain what I have done, that is given up colouring (my dear colour box is locked up for 6 months) 'some natural tears I shed' or very nearly but I was so convinced of my inability to draw that it was not so difficult to as I expected. It was wretched work! Colouring without form and so see me sticking to outlines and light

⁴⁴ One of Howitt's letters to Leigh Smith indicate that Kaulbach assigned them work to and engaged with their studies. Howitt stated that Kaulbach requested that she mount two of her designs prior to him visiting them and that he had set them 'gloriously to work'. See: Beaky, *The Letters of Anna Mary Howitt*, pp. 145-146.

and shadow. Mr Scharf, Aunt Julia and some other artists said ‘you may be an artist, for you love nature and colour well, but you have never learned to draw’.⁴⁵

In response to the radical steps Leigh Smith had taken, Parkes reassured her of her artistic skill, but nevertheless agreed with what Smith had advised with regards to refining her form,

I am glad you are going to study form because I always thought your colouring much the best of the two [...] I think you generalise too much in your drawings; give too much the suggestions of nature without a sufficient exactitude. This will narrow your public too much, to the people who sympathise with your view of the poetry in things.⁴⁶

Taking Parkes’s advice into account, Leigh Smith spent hours working on her form and composition, and divided her time between serious spates of studying the landscape and sketching it. Despite her gruelling routine, Leigh Smith relished her time in the country, as it not only offered her a space to work on her art away from the constraints of the city, but provided her with a wealth of subject matter that was easily accessible for a woman artist like her at the time. Although visiting the countryside (accompanied by a chaperone) became a popular pastime for Victorian women, in which ‘seeing, enjoying, and picturing country scenery were separated from seeing land as property’, the landscape inevitably became a source of creative inspiration.⁴⁷ Deborah Cherry suggests that the countryside empowered Victorian women as ‘spectators, writers and picture makers of landscape’ suggesting that it not only offered them an escape from social convention, but that it inevitably encouraged them to pursue professional artistic endeavours.⁴⁸ Leigh Smith was among the many women artists who were creatively stimulated by the landscape. Her travels to the countryside

⁴⁵ BLS, letter to BRP, GCPP Parkes, 5/165.

⁴⁶ BRP, letter to BLS, GCPP Parkes 10/10.

⁴⁷ Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, pp. 86-97.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

enabled her to explore and fashion a socio-political self, as well as provide the space for her to acquire and develop her artistic voice.

Unfortunately, the discourse of landscape art had been dominated by male artists up to the end of the nineteenth century, ‘who professed not only to be conquering nature but who also invented systems of representation for making it intelligible’.⁴⁹ Painting landscapes during the Victorian period was therefore initially regarded as a masculine practice, and that women artists were not capable of travelling and reproducing such technically ‘complex’ scenes. There was also a particular prejudice against women artists who practiced with watercolours, with male watercolourists blaming them for its gradual decline in popularity. The *Spectator* waded in on the debate:

Water-colour, as the grand-aunts of our generation understood and practiced it, is still practiced here; but too soon the last bonnet will have fitted from our fields and lanes [...] This is not to say that all the deluded are women, though many of them actually are. It is to assert that hardly anywhere on those walls are to be found the more masculine virtues of largeness and strength, whether in the relating of forms or of colours or of emotions.⁵⁰

There were even biased attitudes towards women artists and the subjects they could paint. These attitudes were drawn from what Hugh Jenkins describes as anxiety towards ‘the potential and potentially dangerous mobility of female figures’, in which men spoke of their concerns for women’s safety and the risk of losing their ‘feminine’ propriety.⁵¹ As a result, many middle-class women artists were unable to paint the same spaces as male artists.⁵²

⁴⁹ Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Gendering Landscaping Art*. p. 3.

⁵⁰ ‘Art – The Old Water-Colour Society’, *Spectator*, 28th April 1894, p. 584.

⁵¹ Hugh Jenkins, *Feigned Commonwealths: Their Country-House Poem and the Fashioning of the Ideal Community* (Duchesne University Press, 1998), p. 24.

⁵² Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (Routledge, 2015), p. 56.

Nevertheless, despite the general prejudice surrounding women artists, a sufficient number of women, including Leigh Smith, were determined to thrive.

Tim Barringer has observed of the rise and fall of the landscape genre that it ‘seems to have returned to prominence in the fine arts in Britain at moments of enforced insularity’.⁵³ In response to this, Leigh Smith’s tendency to carry a sketchbook with her at all times could be interpreted as what Margaretta Frederick describes is a ‘personal – even subversive- expression of her escape from societal codes of such ‘enforced insularity’.⁵⁴ While we are left with little to no surviving evidence of her large-scale exhibited works – works which were public presentations of her artistic ability – the small surviving sketchbooks filled with landscape and observational drawings are personal imprinted records of her own.⁵⁵ In light of this, Leigh Smith’s uncommonly liberal upbringing allowed her unrivalled independence. Different from other women artists, Leigh Smith felt compelled to achieve something more than merely producing pictures. She possessed a greater desire, coupled with her opportunity, to not only paint the landscapes that she viewed and enjoyed, but to transcend the boundaries of what women could do and achieve with her art.

Leigh Smith’s dedication to her studies and rigorous practice led to her successfully exhibiting her work in public for the first time. Both *View near Tremadoc* (1850) and *Dawn – near Maentwrog* (1850) were accepted by the Royal Academy and featured in the winter exhibition during the same year.⁵⁶ Neither painting has survived, although another of her

⁵³ Tim Barringer, ‘Landscape Then and Now’, *British Art Studies*, 10 (Autumn 2018) <<https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-10/landscape-national-contexts>>, [Accessed 04/02/2024].

⁵⁴ Margaretta Frederick, ‘Politics and Paint’: The Life Work of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon’ in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* ed. by Youde and Wilkes, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts. MDCCCL (1850). The Royal Academy digital archives, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/exhibition-catalogue/ra-sec-vol82-1850> [Accessed 25/01/2023].

works, possibly produced during the same year, depicts a similar landscape to what the latter's title suggests.



Figure 2.1: Barbara Leigh Smith, *View from my window: Maentwrog, Snowdonia* (185?), Private Collection

It is clear through what remains extant of Leigh Smith's correspondence, that she had a particular interest in Romanticism.⁵⁷ According to Hirsch, a number of Leigh Smith's sketches in her sketchbook are inspired by verses from Romantic poetry, with the front of her sketchbook inscribed with two cantos from Shelley's 'Queen Mab' (1821).⁵⁸ Above all, she felt particularly indebted to Wordsworth, having made a private pilgrimage to his grave in the Lake District and sketched it.⁵⁹ Leigh Smith was largely inspired by Wordsworth's poetry; his exploration of the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature helped Leigh Smith to articulate and understand her own connection with nature. She also respected Wordsworth for his public support towards women poets such as Felicia Hemans, and his attempts to promote

⁵⁷ Much of Leigh Smith's personal library was comprised of nature books and Romantic poetry. In her letters, she discusses William Wollaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1738), and conducts a close reading of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805). See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 42.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ BLS, Lakes Sketchbook, privately owned but on loan to Wordsworth Museum, Dove Cottage, Grasmere, Cumbria.

the work of several lesser-known women poets of his acquaintance.⁶⁰ In 1849, Leigh Smith wrote 'A Parable. Filia', a fable which is undoubtedly inspired by Wordsworth:

She saw that every tree had its leaves written over with beautiful hymns and poems,
and every flower had a song written on its open petals, and every time stone was
engraved with tales of wonder. On the mountain cliffs were written histories of
deepest wisdom, and on the sand under her feet were traced tales of the old world [...]
She saw the depth and wonder of nature, and felt her own ignorance and wished for
books that she might learn the languages of Nature.⁶¹

Wordsworth's poetry also informed Leigh Smith's early landscapes. Clearly, the political radicalism in young Wordsworth's poetry attracted Leigh Smith, and how he empowered the natural world to respond to social and political turbulence.⁶² *Maentwrog* in particular, is a clear indication of Wordsworth's artistic and political influence. Her depiction of the ominous mountains and wild landscape in *Maentwrog* mirrors Wordsworth's own words in *The Prelude* (1807),

I fixed my view
Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,
The horizon's utmost boundary.⁶³

In light of how Wordsworth utilised the landscape to question social and political power, *Maentwrog* is an early example of how Leigh Smith also infused her politics with her

⁶⁰ In 1829, Wordsworth inquired about assisting with a second edition of Rev. Alexander Dyce's *Specimens of British Poetesses* (1825). He also proposed to prepare 'an Account of the Deceased Poetesses of Great Britain – with an Estimate of their Works'.

⁶¹ BLS, 'A Parable. Filia', GCPP Parkes, 1/33.

⁶² For works specifically on Wordsworth and Politics, see Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (CUP, 1996) and Nash Meade, 'Rhyme and Revolution', *Scientia et Humanitas: A Journal of Student Research*, 10 (2020), pp. 44-51.

⁶³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; an Autobiographical Poem* ed. by Andrew Jackson George (D.C. Heath, 1888), p. 15.

art, depicting the landscape to engage her own feminist political consciousness. Looking at the painting, *Maentwrog* portrays an open field of view filled with possibility as opposed to a closed and oppressive landscape. Similar to the way that Leigh Smith refused to be restricted by her gender, her landscape invokes a sense of agency, freedom and defiance. The natural world for women artists became what Fabienne Moine suggests as ‘sites of resistance to the forces of economic, social and cultural domination’, in which these artists empowered nature, ‘providing agents with which the reader is encouraged to identify along gender-orientated lines’.⁶⁴ Therefore, the imagery and the language of open space became a metaphor from which women artists and writers could pull and encode rebellion and resistance. For example, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* describes how the heroine, when looking out at the moors, ‘longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen’, in which Brontë conceptualises her awareness of the boundaries that confine women, and the possibilities beyond their limits.⁶⁵ Similarly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning addresses women’s exclusion in her poem ‘The Prospect’, in which the speaker’s (presumably a woman) own possibilities are obstructed by a metaphorical ‘window’ that separates her from the outdoors, ‘Methinks we do as fretful children do/Leaning their faces on the window-pane/To sigh the glass dim with their own breath’s stain/And shut the sky and landscape from their view’.⁶⁶ As for Leigh Smith’s *Maentwrog*, the title of the painting suggests a similar setting to Browning’s poem, in which the viewers are also restricted by a ‘window’ that prevents them from accessing the landscape. However, Leigh Smith’s choice to paint the open landscape without the window obstructing its view symbolises freedom and possibility as opposed to confinement. Leigh Smith’s work not only acknowledges the boundaries that restrained women artists (and

⁶⁴ Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

⁶⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Wordsworth Editions, 1992), p. 94.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Nims and Knight, 1887), p. 366.

women more generally), but is encourages them to push beyond their limits, explore their creative potential and claim their own artistic identities.

Leigh Smith's landscapes 'reinforce, interrogate and question structures of domination and power', by challenging the restrictions imposed upon women artists and the subject matter they were able to access and paint.⁶⁷ As Margaretta Fredrick explains, Leigh Smith's 'feminist activism was sustained through documentation and evidencing of her personal experience, as manifested in her landscapes [...] her views of previously exclusive male-only environs pictured an opening of gendered spaces for herself; the excursions Leigh Smith embarked upon offered the opportunity to set her own limits, not those imposed upon her by the patriarchal time and place in which she lived'.⁶⁸ Leigh Smith's landscapes politicise transcendence; her extensive travels and ability to access and paint the landscape questions ideas of masculinity and male ownership, in which she claims the landscape for her own.

Leigh Smith's landscapes were well received by critics in terms of how they captured the 'true spirit' of nature as opposed to just depicting a landscape.⁶⁹ The artist F.W Burton stated that Leigh Smith's landscapes showed talent and had many fine qualities, despite their want of finish; and the poet, William Allingham noted that her landscapes 'captured the clouds and chasing shadows' of a particular moment, but, more significantly, they represented the mood of a landscape or, arguably, her own mood'.⁷⁰ The *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* later wrote of her ability to paint landscapes, paying particular attention to her use of colour:

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Margaretta Frederick, 'Politics and Paint', *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, p. 138.

⁶⁹ Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 43.

⁷⁰ Shelia R Herstein, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 157.

Among the canvasses the scenes [...] are such that only a born artist would dare to paint. The most vivid colours are dashed about in wonderful profusion, and such a critic as Ruskin has spoken in terms of high praise of her clever work.⁷¹

As mentioned above, among her supporters was the influential art critic and Pre-Raphaelite ally, John Ruskin, who often spoke of the palpable connection between man and nature. He claimed to have a greater capacity for taking pleasure in landscape than other men; proclaiming it to be the 'ruling passion of my [his] life'.⁷² In an essay written when he was just nineteen, Ruskin argued that a landscape painter 'must be capable of experiencing those exquisite and refined emotions which nature can arouse in a highly intellectual mind', and that the landscape was to be felt and closely observed, and not just replicated.⁷³ The fact that he had spoken highly of Leigh Smith's work suggests that he perceived her to be capable enough as a painter to truly depict the landscape. Her friends lauded her achievement in having her work exhibited at the RA for the first time, with Anna Jameson writing to Parkes that 'Barbara's works are full of that fresh feeling for nature, that absence of the conventional in treatment which delights me'.⁷⁴ It is likely that Jameson was not only referring to Leigh Smith's ability to paint landscapes accurately, but that her work provided a fresh perspective on the capabilities of women artists and their ability to travel, paint and market art to the same standard as male artists. Although Leigh Smith's work was inevitably met with some criticism, the glowing praise that Leigh Smith received for her landscapes is a testament to her emerging talent as a painter.

⁷¹ 'Death of Madame Bodichon', *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 13th June 1891, p. 7.

⁷² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 6 Vols, (Smith, Elder and Co, 1843-1885).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Vol I, p. 279.

⁷⁴ Anna Jameson, letter to BRP, 1856, GCPP Parkes, 6/12.

Ye Newe Generation and Howitt's An Art Student in Munich

Leigh Smith's expeditions to Wales and the Lake District were not the only trips that she had in mind. Having heard of Howitt's safe arrival in Munich and of her exciting adventures with Benham, Leigh Smith planned and self-funded another trip to Munich to visit them. Leigh Smith initially asked Parkes to travel with her, but Parkes and her family were experiencing a family trauma. Parkes's brother Priestley had died on 26th June 1850 after two long and painful weeks, which left the family struck with grief. Although she was not particularly close with her brother, nor had she spent much time with him when they were young, Parkes was still upset by his death and expressed to Leigh Smith that she wished that she had been kinder to him.⁷⁵ Leigh Smith maintained that getting away would be good for Parkes, and pleaded with Parkes's parents to permit her to travel unchaperoned on the grounds that she would be in safe company with her friends. They eventually allowed Parkes to go on the promise that they would meet them both in Munich and accompany them home.

Their trip took them to Belgium, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, both ditching their corsets and opting for skirts above the ankle and short black walking boots with coloured laces for ease of walking.⁷⁶ The coloured laces were likely an affectionate personal touch as well as a statement of defiance. Their choice of dress, Parkes maintained, was based on 'pure Kantian reason [...] and not female adornment', stating that their choice of clothing was made on comfort, practicalities and moral principle.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, their unconventional appearance and choice of dress inevitably attracted attention. Leigh Smith, equipped with the blue-tinted spectacles that she borrowed from Howitt for her poor eyesight, received the majority of the heckling. Parkes did not react well to much of the criticism; in a letter to Anne

⁷⁵ BRP, letter to BLS, 26th June 1850, GCPP Parkes 5/51.

⁷⁶ Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 44.

⁷⁷ BRP, letter to Anne and Bella Leigh Smith, 24 August 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/63. The term 'Kantian' derives from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in which he claims that reason is the faculty of principles and behaviour. Kant's book must have been another text that Parkes studied when she was younger.

and Bella Leigh Smith, Parkes complained that Leigh Smith's blue-tinted glasses were so 'frightful' that she drew laughter and cat-calls from the locals.⁷⁸ Naturally, Leigh Smith's reaction was far less defensive and she simply brushed off the comments. In response, she also penned a letter to her sisters, cautioning them to 'not believe a word Bessie says. She tells most dreadful stories [...] If I have my spectacles, she has her boots, which make sentimental Germans laugh, and with which she vows to stump out every bit of love from every heart which warms to her'.⁷⁹ Despite the array of comments they were subjected to, the pair nonetheless relished in their freedom and had fun in each other's company, especially at the expense of the occasional young, male admirer.

During their travels, Leigh Smith penned a poem called 'Ode on the Cash Clothes Club' (1850), which revisits her ideas in 'Conforming to Custom' on fashion reform. Leigh Smith dedicated the poem to her father, for the fact that he allowed her to travel unchaperoned at her leisure and gave her the freedom to make her own choices, especially when it came to fashion. 'Ode on the Cash Clothes Club' captures the pleasures of wearing such liberating dress:

Oh! Isn't it jolly
To cast away folly
And cut all one's clothes a peg shorter
(A good many pegs)
And rejoice in one's legs
Like a free-minded Albion's daughter.
When bodies are free
Their spirits shall be
Of a quite unknown elevation.
And women who dare

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ BLS, letter to Anne and Bella Leigh Smith, 2nd September 1850, GCPP Parkes 6/64.

To show their feet bare
Be a glorious part of the nation⁸⁰

Although it is a short and humorous poem at first read, it is still imbued with hints of feminism and nationalism. Leigh Smith suggests that the act of rejoicing in one's legs and freeing women's bodies and spirits should be celebrated, and lauds women like herself and Parkes who break away from the constraints of women's fashion by choosing to wear their preferred clothing. In stating that 'Women who dare/To show their feet bare' deserve to be a 'glorious part of the nation', Leigh Smith is encouraging women to abandon their corsets and embrace their bodies for the sake of their country and their sex. The line 'Like a free-minded Albion's daughter' is a reference to William Blake's poem 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion' (1793), which also implies Leigh Smith's progressive thoughts about women's sexuality. Blake's poem centres on Oothoon, a woman in Blake's fictional society who has no control over her virginity. Blake has the daughters of Albion look to the West, where Blake believed women would one day be able to claim their own sexuality. Leigh Smith's poem carries a similar message, in that if women were to liberate themselves and others, then they too would be able to claim their sexuality for their own. Much like her other written works, such as 'Conformity to Custom' and 'The Education of Women', this short poem is an example of how Leigh Smith and her friends used their work as a political diatribe - declaring their very progressive thoughts about women and their right to take ownership of themselves and make their own choices. Clearly, the pair acted on these progressive thoughts throughout their travels: both through their written work and the clothing they opted to wear in defiance to conventional norms.

⁸⁰ BLS, 'Ode on the Cash Clothes Club', letter to BRP, 1850, GCPP Parkes, 10/75.

When they reached Munich, the pair were thrilled to have finally reached Howitt and Benham, visiting them in the small lodgings that Kaulbach secured for them. Howitt recalled their reunion in a memoir that she published (with the encouragement of her mother and Elizabeth Gaskell) in *An Art Student in Munich* (1853), a collection of written entries detailing hers and Benham's experiences studying abroad.⁸¹ In reading *An Art Student*, it seems that Howitt was equally delighted by Leigh Smith and Parkes's arrival:

September 2nd – How delicious was my meeting with Justina [Leigh Smith] yesterday! At the moment when I was sitting at a solitary breakfast – for Clare [Benham] was yet asleep – with my mind full of Justina, and after having arranged and dusted everything in our rooms, to be ready for her, I heard the outer door open. I said to myself, “Justina!” The room door opened, and she entered. Of course the first thing we did was to cry for joy, and then to gaze at each other, to see whether really she were Justina and I were Anna. It seemed strange, dream-like, impossible, that we two could be in Munich together.⁸²

Soon after their arrival, the women explored the city. Their first stop was to Kaulbach's studio for Parkes and Leigh Smith to view his art collection, walking out of their way down Ludwig Strasse into the Ludwig Kirche. They then enjoyed a pleasant dinner together at the Meyerischen Garten, with Leigh Smith being particularly impressed with their *Mehlspeise*.⁸³ They wandered through the streets and painted and drafted poetry, often stopping for the occasional coffee that they drank with ‘indescribable relish’.⁸⁴ At one point, Leigh Smith even pledged to pay Howitt and Benham's rent for a month for them to move into larger and

⁸¹ Before they left for Munich, both Howitt and Benham were commissioned to report their experiences to a variety of periodicals: Howitt for the *Athenaeum*, *Household Works*, and Henry Chorley's *Ladies' Companion*, and Benham for the *Literary Gazette* and *Art Journal*. Howitt later compiled all of the articles she produced for periodicals into *An Art Student in Munich*.

⁸² AMH, *An Art Student*, p. 87.

⁸³ A German sweet pastry.

⁸⁴ AMH, *An Art Student*, p. 90.

more comfortable accommodation during their stay. The group set off on their expedition to find something more suitable, but they ultimately decided that their current abode best suited them. Nonetheless, Howitt and Benham greatly appreciated Leigh Smith's offer of financial support so that they could continue their studies. After a few days, Leigh Smith and Parkes begrudgingly left Howitt and Benham in Munich, and it is presumed that Parkes's parents met them as planned before their departure. Their adventure in Munich was clearly an unforgettable one for the four friends, with Howitt recalling their time together as 'days which we will never forget'.⁸⁵ Upon reflection, Leigh Smith concluded with Parkes that Howitt and Benham were living a 'delicious, free, poetical life', happy that her friends were thriving as independent working women - free from social and political ties.⁸⁶

Howitt and her friends saw themselves as a united front, travelling the world together and supporting each other's professional and personal pursuits. This collective image is encapsulated by Leigh Smith's ink sketches that she produced at some point during their trip. Leigh Smith captures the audacious spirit of the group in two particular sketches; the first sketch is of Parkes in front of a dramatic landscape, and the second, titled *Ye Newe Generation* (1850), depicts all four women marching together in unison.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ In *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, Hirsch claims the four main figures in the drawing are Leigh Smith, Parkes, Howitt and Benham. In *Painting Women*, Deborah Cherry names Fox as the fourth character instead. Meritxell Simon-Martin states that the drawing could be interpreted as Leigh Smith 'having in mind a collective understanding of the new generation of professional women', suggesting that there need not be any concrete assertion of who the fourth character is. Whilst I do agree with their standpoint, there is evidence that proves that Leigh Smith and Parkes were in Munich with Howitt and Benham for a time. Also taking into account the date that Leigh Smith produced the sketch, I believe the fourth figure to be Benham. Meritxell Simon-Martin, *Barbara Bodichon's Bildung*, p. 209.



Figure 2.2: Barbara Leigh Smith, *BRP* (185?), by permission of the Mistress and Fellows at Girton College



Figure 2.3: Barbara Leigh Smith, *Ye Newe Generation* (1850), by permission of the Mistress and Fellows at Girton College

Both sketches embody the ideals of friendship and solidarity, as well as capturing each woman's individual spirit. The first sketch by Leigh Smith is an affectionate tribute to Parkes and their friendship, and may be a testament to their travels across Europe together prior to joining Howitt and Benham in Munich. Portrayed against the backdrop of what appears to be a beach or lake at sunset, Parkes is hiking on mountainous terrain with her poetry in hand. Her flowing shorter skirt is also depicted, which complements the airiness of the landscape. The central figure of Parkes exudes confidence, optimism and purpose; her stoic stance projects a masterful identity on what looks to be quite a dangerous path to the mountain's

peak, and her steely gaze is focused on her destination, determined in reaching the top. The most visible aspect of this sketch is the movement of Parkes's dress and the exposure of her legs as she strides up the mountain, which reflects Leigh Smith's ideas in 'Conformity to Custom' regarding the constraints of women's dress. Above all, Leigh Smith depicts Parkes in a conquering light: her liberating dress and her upwards movement towards the mountain's peak denotes an almost celebratory energy, and the scene as a whole is suffused with ideas of progression and hope for the future as opposed to dwelling in the past.

Ye Newe Generation, as the title implies, portrays the four women at the peak of their optimistic and artistic youth. Leigh Smith's use of Old English 'Ye Newe' somewhat parodies the art world's outdated and medieval attitudes towards women, and emphasises their interest in a progressive future. They are depicted as a united front, warriors taking on the world together, which was pivotal to their formation as the 'Sisters in Art', and as individual artists and writers. Similar to Leigh Smith's singular sketch of Parkes, the women are portrayed against a dramatic backdrop which complements the women's heroic, unified stance. Each woman wields their respective artistic tools like weapons in a grand gesture, imitating the bravado of their male counterparts. Leigh Smith's sketch also embodies their individual personalities: Leigh Smith is leading the charge whilst wearing a captain's hat, Howitt and Benham are brandishing their brushes and palettes, and Parkes is holding her poetry book in the air in a striking action. At the same time, as in the sketch of Parkes, their unconventional wear signals their independence and their resistance to the conventional attire that young women were expected to wear, echoing Leigh Smith's message in 'Ode on the Cash Clothes Club'. Similar to artistic brotherhoods and their exclusive labels, the women's

use of clothing establishes their own exclusive and collective identity as women, ‘for whom mobility, labour, and art are more important than elegance and bourgeois propriety’.⁸⁸

In an image of solidarity and forward movement, the women’s figures merge as one in the face of their apparent adversary. It seems that their adversary, the bull, stands as a metaphor for aggressive masculinity, whilst implicitly invoking society’s ignorance as a whole. Leigh Smith depicts their antagonist through his head, horns and tail, eliding the rest of his body and in turn, the threat he poses, reducing the bull to nothing more than a parody. Behind them stands another woman who is cowering away in fear, although it is unclear whether she is horrified by the caricature bull or by the outlandish behaviour of the four women. In mocking the outdated attitudes towards women by men (and some women), Leigh Smith introduces a new model of women who are stronger and more powerful than their predecessors. The female figures in Leigh Smith’s sketches are united and confident in their stride, determined as women artists and writers to use their art to break the male-centric structures that they (and all women) were restricted by for so long.

This collective ideal of women, united and forward in their purpose, echoes a letter written by Howitt to Leigh Smith prior to her studies in Munich. In her letter, Howitt recalls a lecture that she attended with Fox at the Royal Academy. She laments her frustrations in being unable to train at the RA because of being a woman, despite being permitted to view and exhibit work there:

Did I tell you I went one night to hear Leslie. Lecturer at the Royal Academy. Oh! How terribly did I long to be a man so as to paint there. When I saw in the first room all the students’ easels standing about – lots of canvasses and easels against the walls, and here and there a grand ‘old master’ standing around, a perfect atmosphere of

⁸⁸ Alexandra Wettlaufer, ‘The Politics and Poetics’, p. 132.

inspiration, then passed on into the second room hung round with the Academicians' inaugural pictures, one seemed stepping into a freer, larger, and more earnest artistic world – a world alas! Which one's womanhood debars one from enjoying – Oh! I felt quite sick at heart – all one's attempts and struggles seemed so pitiful and vain [...] I felt quite angry at being a woman, it seemed to me such a mistake, but Eliza [Fox], a thousand times worse than I said, 'nay' rather be angry with men for not admitting women to the enjoyments of this world, and instead of lamenting that we are women, let us earnestly strive after a nobler state of things, let us strive to be among those women who shall first open the Academy's doors to their fellow aspirants – that would be a noble mission, would it not?⁸⁹

As in Leigh Smith's sketches, Howitt's language here is entirely corporeal, suggesting that she, Fox and the other women artists at the lecture collectively moved into the space. In her letter, she recalls witnessing the easels and canvasses leaning against the walls and the old master standing around, which contrasts with her movement of 'stepping' into the room. Although she is evidently frustrated with her 'womanhood' that 'debars her from enjoying' the same freedoms as men, her language is intensely driven, passionate and optimistic. She concludes that although it is her 'womanhood' that precludes her from entering the studio, it is also what she and her friends will use to force 'open the Academy's doors'.

It was thus, perhaps during their sojourn in Munich, combined with their growing frustrations regarding their exclusion from the Royal Academy and the wider working sphere that Howitt, Leigh Smith, Parkes and Benham began definitively to link the ideas of art, education, and independence with female collectivity. Though published a year after her novella, *The Sisters In Art* (1852), *An Art Student in Munich* is the first evidence of Howitt

⁸⁹ AMH, letter to BLS, 1848-52, Cambridge University Library, Add ms.7621.

seriously considering the concept of female artistic collaboration that she, and her friends would continue to formulate and establish in their later published works. In the memoir that documents Leigh Smith and Parkes's arrival, titled 'Justina's Visit – A Group of Art-Sisters', she uses the phrase 'art sisters', to collectively refer to herself and her friends for the very first time. She casts Leigh Smith as Justina, an alias that reflects Leigh Smith's interest in achieving political 'justice'. She refers to her as 'my beloved friend out of England, the sister of my heart', suggesting the intense friendship between the two women, and Howitt's devotion and respect for Leigh Smith.⁹⁰ Howitt continues to discuss her close bond with Leigh Smith through her description of the pair entering her studio:

There stood two sister easels, and a sister painting-blouse hung on each: the casts, the books, the green jug with flowers [...] our two pretty little sister bed-rooms in which a writing table, a pale green wall beyond, with a print of Raphael's upon it; and old-fashioned looking glass in a gilt frame, hung high, in German fashion; beneath it Justina's Highland landscape with its ruddy heathery foreground.⁹¹

Howitt's exhaustive description of the studio that she shared with Benham is suffused with ideas of female collectivity. The passage highlights the importance of sisterly unity through the repetition of references to 'two sister easels', 'two sister' painting-blouses and 'two pretty little sister bed-rooms', affirming that Howitt's experience in Munich was a shared one with Benham, with no particular emphasis placed on either artist. Moreover, Howitt features the work of her 'art sisters' including Leigh Smith's Highland landscape, which shows how they actively supported each other's art, and again, invokes ideas of female collaboration and empowerment. She also pays homage to each woman's individual talents, respecting that they

⁹⁰ AMH, *An Art Student*, p. 89.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

all have ‘the same aims in life’ yet are ‘so different from each other’.⁹² Here, she describes her circle as comprised of women who are individually talented but united in their beliefs, and recognises this as their strength; confirming that working together is the answer to their individual and collective successes:

Our meeting here [was]... to be the germ of a beautiful sisterhood in Art, of which we have all dreamed long and by which association we might be enabled to do noble things.⁹³

It is clear here that Howitt links art and feminism with collective effort and solidarity.

Although the ‘noble things’ that Howitt alludes to are based on entirely artistic pursuits and accomplishments, the group must have seriously discussed the potential of a women’s network and what they could achieve in wider society if they were to work together.

Therefore, according to Howitt’s *Art Student*, Leigh Smith proposed a paradigm of an ‘Outer’ and ‘Inner Sisterhood’, elaborating that:

The Inner, to consist of the Art-sisters bound together by their one object, and which she fears may never number many in their band; the Outer Sisterhood to consist of women, all workers and all striving after a pure moral life, but belonging to any profession, any pursuit. All should be bound to help each other in such ways as were most accordant with their natures and characters.⁹⁴

These women and their purpose stretched beyond the parameters of the art community. The ‘Art-sisters’ would serve as a model for more far-reaching co-operative societies, as they sought to gather women from all walks of life and backgrounds, united in their purpose to achieve social, economic and political equality and the enfranchisement of women. They

⁹² Ibid., p. 94.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

were inevitably met with a fierce opposition, who sought to disband and discourage them in their collective and individual efforts. Nonetheless, their ideas, as elaborated in Howitt's *The Sisters in Art* regarding female collaboration and their political image of artistic women in solidarity became critical in the feminist movement of the decades to follow.

PART II
INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY

3. The Politics and Poetics of *The Sisters in Art*

Before the ‘Sisters in Art’ became involved in public strategies of political engagement, through papers and public petitions, they recognised the power of their art and poetry to promote the cause of female education and the image of the professional working woman. For the group, as well as their relatives and wider circle of female colleagues, art was seen as integral to the shifting discourse of women’s work and professional identity; and it was through the increasingly politicised concept of female collectivity that they envisioned women’s true potential in achieving equality in the working sphere. Howitt’s most noteworthy contribution to this discourse is her novella, *The Sisters in Art* (1852), which foregrounded the group’s ideas surrounding female artistic collaboration as a ‘political means of advancing the visibility and viability of women in the fields of economic and cultural production’.¹ Written after her tenure in Munich, *The Sisters in Art* employs the image of young female artists exploring their artistic identities to the same ends as Leigh Smith’s sketches and Parkes’s poetry. Moreover, Howitt’s fictional ‘sisters’ and the traits they embody are modelled on the group (comprised of Leigh Smith, Parkes and Benham), and the events that take place in the story are testament to the women’s collaborative efforts and the ideas they discussed and developed during their venture abroad. This chapter will examine how the novella came to fruition, the significance of the text to the construction of the group’s collective identity, and how the concepts of unity and collaboration became the group’s point of creative inspiration and political instruction.

¹ Howitt’s *The Sisters in Art* is a novella, and should therefore be presented in singular quotation marks. However, for the sake of this thesis, I will italicise the novella’s title to avoid confusion with the term ‘Sisters in Art’ that is used to collectively refer to Howitt and her circle. Alexandra Wettlaufer, *Portraits of the Artist*, p. 104.

Kaulbach, Ruskin and Howitt's Artistic Identity

After two years spent studying in Munich, Howitt returned home personally and professionally reinvigorated. Her adventures in Munich with her friends had left her creatively inspired, and soon after returning, she eagerly retreated to her new studio at The Hermitage to begin her work.² Howitt's time spent at the Hermitage became a productive one for her and her family: Mary Howitt was busy continuing her translations of Fredrika Bremer, as well as drafting *Tales and Stories for Boys and Girls*; Margaret was working on her own translations; and Howitt was writing *The Sisters in Art* and *An Art Student in Munich* (1853), as well as producing her debut painting, *Margaret Returning from the Fountain* (1854). The old familial, collaborative practice between Howitt and her family had more or less resumed – at least as told from her mother's perspective. In her *Autobiography*, Mary reports how in the early 1850s she and her daughters worked together at home: 'For upwards of two years my daughters and I dwelt alone at The Hermitage, busily occupied in writing, painting and studying'.³ She wrote to William, who had travelled to Australia with their sons at the time that she and Howitt often sat 'together in the same room, each at our table, for an hour or two, never speaking. Then we say, 'How quiet and pleasant it is, and what a holy and soothing influence there is in this blessed work!'⁴

It was perhaps through Mary's influence as a mother and as a successful writer that Howitt came to publish her literary work. As stated in the previous chapter, the Howitts actively encouraged their daughters' professional endeavours, and taught them from a young

² The Hermitage was a cottage previously occupied by Rossetti and leased by Edward Bateman, who was engaged to Howitt at the time. Howitt had moved to The Hermitage with her mother and sister whilst her father and brothers were travelling to Australia. Howitt had fallen in love with Bateman, an artist also closely affiliated with the Pre-Raphaelites. Their engagement spanned throughout her time in Munich, Howitt had postponed their marriage to focus on her career, which Bateman supported. Their engagement dissolved in 1853. For the purpose of this thesis, I will refrain from discussing the women's romantic affairs in detail, so to not take focus away from their professional achievements.

³ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, pp. 89-90.

⁴ Ibid.

age to be financially independent and open to any opportunity for work.⁵ Therefore, it is likely that Mary encouraged Howitt to begin writing memoirs about her Munich adventures in hopes of publishing them. As suggested in their correspondence, Mary edited Howitt's memoirs into articles before sending them to various editors for consideration. As a result, Howitt became a regular correspondent for a number of periodicals, including the *Athenaeum*, Henry Chorley's *Ladies' Companion* and Dickens's *Household Words*, detailing her experiences as an art student, and writing columns on German life and culture.⁶ Following her publishing success, a number of her friends and colleagues suggested that she compile her memoirs into a complete volume, with Elizabeth Gaskell proposing that she publish them as 'a sort of "Art life in Munich"'.⁷ With their encouragement, Howitt eventually published *An Art Student in Munich* three years later to much critical acclaim.⁸

Of course, Howitt's literary success was not just down to the influence of her close circle. In her letters, Howitt demonstrates a good initiative and a critical eye for her own work. Writing to Leigh Smith, Howitt addresses her articles in *Household Words*, and proposes her plans for an article she is working on for the *Athenaeum*:

There are various faults I myself do find in those *Household Words* articles which deserve, it seems to me, criticism – and they would not have been there had I at all expected these descriptions would have been made public – or if I had chanced to be at dearest Mamma's elbow when she copied them – things that for public reading

⁵ The Howitt's encouragement of their daughters is made clear in Mary Howitt's autobiography. Mary's wish for her daughters to be financially independent was written in a letter to her sister Anna, which is quoted in Amice Lee, *The Life of William and Mary Howitt*, p. 164.

⁶ Charles Dickens was a family friend and associate of the Howitt family. It is likely that Dickens sought the help of Mary Howitt as his new journal's editor, who presented him with Howitt's letters.

⁷ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, p. 66.

⁸ The New York Times praised the book as 'one of those sunny works which leave a luminous trail behind them in the reader's memory', quoted in 'Notices of new books: An Art Student in Munich', *The New York Times*, 11th May 1854. At the time of Howitt completing *An Art Student in Munich*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti had expressed interest in reviewing it in a letter to his brother. He later remarked of the book's success in a letter to Thomas Woolner. Quoted in G.H. Fleming, *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (Rupert Hart-Davies Ltd, 1967), p. 174.

seem to be in rather bad taste – but perhaps I am fastidious [...] I’m going however to do my very, very best in an article for the *Athenaeum* on Kaulbach’s studio – about the Destruction of Jerusalem, the Battle of the Huns, Fall of Babel – I shall work at it as quite a little work of art – it shall be nice – I hear some of the papers have been translated into German, so if this should be translated I should like Kaulbach to see it – I would not have one word in it that could be anything but agreeable to him – I’m certain I can do it – and all who read the article shall feel how grand and poetical the life of a true artist may be.⁹

It is clear when reading her letters that Howitt’s time in Munich had a profound impact on her artistic identity. Watching Kaulbach intensely at work, surrounded by his panoramic paintings of religious scenes, along with the church bells ringing in the distance, would have been a subliminal experience for a young artist like Howitt at the time.¹⁰ Inspired by Kaulbach, Howitt began pursuing art with a quasi-religious passion, and began speaking of art and the role of the artist in religious terms. These beliefs become increasingly clear in her literary work, as well as in her correspondence. In a letter written to Leigh Smith, Howitt describes art as a spiritual gift that can draw humans into a closer relationship with God. Moreover, she addresses the religious role of the artist, likening artists to ‘mediators between God and man’, and proposes that women, being more spiritual by nature were especially suited for the creation of art, which ‘has ever been the blending of the beautiful and the tender with the strong and the intellectual’.¹¹ Here, Howitt elevates the importance of women artists, likening them to superior beings who possess inherent qualities and abilities that surpass

⁹ AMH, letter to BLS, 10th February 1851, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 155-156.

¹⁰ Kaulbach is best known for his six frescoes, all of which are suffused with religious themes: *The Tower of Babel*, *Homer and the Greeks*, *The Battle of the Huns*, *The Destruction of Jerusalem*, *The Crusaders at the gates of Jerusalem* and *The Age of the Reformation*. Howitt found these works influential, as is mentioned in the letter above.

¹¹ AMH, letter to BLS, 10th February 1851, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 155-156.

those of male artists. As in Parkes's 'Progression', Howitt justifies that when women are provided with equal opportunities for education (such as artistic training), they can contribute significantly to the betterment of society, influencing social morality and fostering positive change.

Much like her Pre-Raphaelite peers, Howitt read, discussed and cited John Ruskin's writing in her own work.¹² Ruskin emphasises the connections between art, nature and God. In *Modern Painters* (1843-1885), he proposes that art should 'raise and assist the mind in the reception of nobler ideas [...] for reading the mysteries of God', and that the artist possesses the ability to 'recognise the greater workings of God' through their work.¹³ Ruskin developed these ideas in relation to women's education and employment in his two-part work, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). Interestingly, *Sesame and Lilies* was well-received by a number of progressive women despite his reputation regarding his dubious support for women artists and writers.¹⁴ Although Ruskin's work was met with much criticism, the *Victoria Magazine*, founded and edited by women, urged its readers to let the 'book speak for itself, as much as possible, before we intrude any observations of our own, or notice the points [...] where we feel ourselves slightly at issue with our teacher'.¹⁵ According to Linda H. Peterson, Ruskin's

¹² AMH's *An Student in Munich* begins with an epigraph from Ruskin: 'There is to be seen in every street and lane of every city, that to be felt and found in every human heart and countenance, that to be loved in every road-side weed and moss-grown wall, which, in the hands of faithful men, may convey emotion of glory and sublimity continual and exalte[d]'. Leigh Smith's surviving correspondence at Girton College include letters exchanged between herself, Howitt and Ruskin and make frequent references to him; see the auction lists of 15 December 1953, preserved with the private papers of BLSB, Girton College, Cambridge.

¹³ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol 6, p, 245. Bethany Kwoka, 'Ruskin and Religion: contemplating 'the mysteries of God' in 'On the Truth of Colour'' (2009), *Victorian Web*, <<https://victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/kwoka11.html>> [Accessed 07/08/2023].

¹⁴ Ruskin did show support towards women artists that has often been overlooked in favour of his reputation. His correspondence suggests that he financially aided a girls' school at Winington and gave lectures there on the Bible, Geology and Art. He also gave open lectures to women on female education. As for artists, he encouraged the careers of Elizabeth Siddall, Octavia Hill, Kate Greenaway and Anna Blunden. Suzanne Fagence Cooper concludes that Ruskin's 'ingrained masculine viewpoint has undermined his reputation as a modern political commentator'. See Suzanne Fagence Cooper, *To See Clearly: Why Ruskin Matters* (Quercus, 2019).

¹⁵ 'Mr Ruskin on Books and Women', *Victoria Magazine*, 6 (1865), pp. 67-76. The *Victoria Magazine* was founded in 1863 by Emily Faithfull and Emily Davies. Emily Davies founded Girton College, Cambridge with Leigh Smith. The *Victoria Magazine* worked hand in hand with the *English Woman's Journal*.

Sesame and Lillies, particularly ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’, adopts the key principles and rhetoric of Anna Jameson’s writing and lectures on women’s work.¹⁶ In ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’, he suggests that women’s higher degree of innate empathy, sensitivity and intuition allows them to exert a powerful influence on men, and they need to be acknowledged as more than just ‘the shadow and attendant image of her lord’.¹⁷ As for women’s education, Ruskin suggests that girls be given free rein in a ‘good library of old and classical books’ and left alone ‘to find what is good’.¹⁸ Nevertheless, while Ruskin’s discussion on women and girls does elevate their position and significance, he still distinguishes a divide between men and women by insisting that whilst man’s ‘power is active, progressive, defensive’, women are ‘for rule, not for battle, - and her [their] intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision’.¹⁹ It is also important to note that although Ruskin considers the importance of women’s education, he does not actually propose specific reform, ‘whether out of a sense of occasion or resistance to the professionalization of women’.²⁰ Above all, he fails to address the need for women to be able to pursue careers or paid work. As Devereux notes, Ruskin’s ‘dichotomous definition of the supposedly innate strengths of each gender radically limit the woman’s opportunities as artist of any kind’.²¹ The ‘Sisters in Art’, however, actively suggest the measures required to achieve women’s reform: Leigh Smith, the training of women to work in education, medicine and skilled trades; Parkes, the education of women to work as teachers, editors and writers; and Howitt, the rights to pursue artistic training and art as a professional career.

¹⁶ As introduced in the second chapter, Anna Jameson was a key figure from the ‘old generation’, and mentor to the ‘Sisters in Art’. She closely supported their artistic and political endeavours. Linda H Peterson, ‘The Feminist Origins of ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’, in Dinah Birch and Francis O’Gorman, *Ruskin and Gender* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 86-106, (p. 88).

¹⁷ John Ruskin, ‘Sesame and Lillies – Of Queen’s Gardens’, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Vol 6 (Reuwee, Wattley & Walsh, 1891), p. 78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁰ Dinah Birch and Francis O’Gorman, *Ruskin and Gender*, p. 100.

²¹ Jo Devereux, *The Making of Women Artists in Victorian England*, p. 120.

Other women artists and poets (with whom Howitt was well-acquainted) also discussed women and their connection with God, suggesting that women were more spiritually (and morally) inclined than men. For instance, Christina Rossetti later observed in *Letter and Spirit* (1883) that women tend to be ‘the quicker-sighted in matters spiritual’; Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) posits the woman artist as having a broader vision that can see heaven and earth, the spiritual and the natural; and Louisa Starr emphasised women’s role as guardians of artistic and social purity and their religious duty to ‘uphold the right in Art, as well as the right in life’.²² In her letter, Howitt proceeds to discuss her own spiritual relationship with art, describing herself as ‘possessing an intense devotion and love for art, of a sensitive poetical temperament, which at times becomes somewhat morbid, yet earnest, persevering, with a constant aspiration after the spiritual and a much firmer faith in the unseen’.²³ She then reaffirms the important role of the woman artist and their difference from men, concluding that that women’s art ‘is of so different a character, of such a much more spiritual character than ordinary art’, and that ‘painting and writing [...] are the tools given us by God with which to do our work in the world’.²⁴ Here, Howitt ties women to a spiritual artistic identity, making a compelling argument for the social and moral importance of women’s artistic education. It is this connection between women, art and God that Howitt uses to justify women having access to artistic training in order to fulfil their religious and social duty. Although this spiritual nature would come to dominate Howitt’s vision in her later years, it is clear that at this stage in her career, she enjoyed a sensorial and

²² Christina Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (SPCK, 1883), p. 57. Quoted in Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (OUP, 2018) p. 53; Kathleen Renk, *Women Writing the Neo-Victorian Novel: Erotic ‘Victorians’* (Springer Nature, 2020) p. 55; Louisa Starr, ‘The spirit of purity in art and its influence on the well-being of nations’ in *Women in the Professions: Being the Professional Section of the International Council of Women: Transactions* ed. by I.M Gordon (Fisher Irwin, 1899), pp. 86-97, (p. 86).

²³ AMH, letter to BLS, 11th February 1851, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 157-159.

²⁴ AMH, letter to BLS, 10th February 1851, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 155-156.

experiential engagement with Spiritualism, and viewed it as deeply connected to the unique and important qualities of female artistic production.

Howitt, Serialisation and the Periodic Press

Howitt's work also encompasses the ideas of art and spirituality with female collaboration. She proposes the relationship between artists as a spiritual connection that fosters cooperation, mutual stimulus and inspiration. It is this collective image of empowered women and their spiritual impetus for art that is manifested in *The Sisters in Art*. In 1852, Howitt published her novella in the *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art* (with a second edition in 1880 to much popular acclaim), which at the time was one of the bestselling magazines on the market. The editor, John Cassell regularly hosted writers such as George Cruikshank and Ellen Wood at his residence in London, and was particularly well acquainted with the Howitt family, having worked with them on a number of occasions.²⁵ Although there is no surviving correspondence between Howitt and Cassell, it is likely that Howitt secured the publishing of her work through her parents, or by accompanying them during one of Cassell's evening soirées. During the same year as *The Sisters in Art*'s release, Howitt's father had been regularly writing articles on his journey to Australia for the *Illustrated Exhibitor*, so it is also possible that he or Mary had sent their daughter's drafts to Cassell to read and publish alongside his work.

The Sisters in Art is not only evidence of Howitt's talents as a writer, but of her ability to navigate and take advantage of the literary market. The novella is published in serial form, which had surged in popularity for a number of social and economic reasons.²⁶ Authors opted

²⁵ John Cassell, William Howitt and John Frederick Smith worked on *John Cassell's Illustrated History of England* together for many years. Mary Howitt's 'Woodnock Wells' was published in Cassell's other periodical, *The Working Man's Friend*. Howitt's father made a contribution of his own in the same issue of the *Illustrated Exhibitor* that features *The Sisters in Art*. It is titled 'Diary of a Voyage to Australia', and is a recollection of the expedition he and his sons Alfred and Charlton made to the Victorian gold fields to visit his brother, Godfrey Howitt in 1852.

²⁶ G. Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 13.

to write serial fiction as it enabled them to gauge their audience's reaction to the plot as it unfolded. Although it is not specifically mentioned why Howitt chose to serialise *The Sisters in Art*, Howitt likely published the novella in serial form to retain the interest of her readers and secure their investment in future instalments. Serial publication also enabled less affluent readers to purchase works that would be too expensive for them to purchase as a single edition, thus improving the availability of Howitt's work. Another possibility as to why Howitt chose to publish *The Sisters in Art* in serial form was the influence of her mentor Charles Dickens, who offered critical commentary on her writing and published her articles in *Household Words*.²⁷ The success of Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) is widely considered to have established the appeal of the serialised format within periodical literature, therefore Dickens's success with *The Pickwick Papers*, and his other serialised novels probably inspired Howitt to publish her own work serially.²⁸ All in all, Howitt was well-situated for success: she was persistent, well-connected and well supported by her family, friends and colleagues. As her mother noted, Howitt had 'both by her pen and pencil, taken her place amongst the successful artists and writers of the day', by possessing a genuine artistic talent and demonstrating an astute business sense with regards to marketing her work.²⁹

Notwithstanding, women often faced profound challenges in their pursuit of a literary career. Despite their talent, women writers in particular lacked the resources, money,

²⁷ Howitt wrote a series of articles for *Household Words*, titled 'Bits of life in Munich', which featured from 2nd November 1850 to 14th June 1851. Quoted in Linda H. Peterson, "'Mother-Daughter Productions': Mary Howitt and Anna Mary Howitt in 'Howitt's Journal', 'Household Words' and Other Mid-Victorian Publications", *Victorian Periodicals Review*, , 31.1 (Spring 1998), pp. 31-54, JSTOR, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20083052>> , [Accessed 26/03/25]. It is suggested that Dickens had taken a liking to Howitt. In a letter to her father, Dickens passed his 'kind regards to Mrs Howitt, and that charming little "bit of life" in Munich', alluding to Howitt and her articles for *HW*. Charles Dickens, letter to William Howitt, 24th April 1851, MS University of California.

²⁸ Dickens had also published *A Child's History of England* (1851) and *Hard Times* (1854) as serials in *Household Words*.

²⁹ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, p. 117.

education, status and networks needed to build prominent careers in the press industry.³⁰ The *Victoria Magazine* comments in 'The Payment of Women' that 'women's work is inferior to men's – a fact that arises, we are willing to admit, from their usually inferior training', which reinforces the lack of financial and educational support available for women.³¹ Though becoming more possible and frequent in the nineteenth century, a literary career was difficult for a woman to achieve, even for the few women who did receive an education. Although the likes of Howitt, Parkes and Leigh Smith had had supportive upbringings and received an uncommonly broad education, they were still restricted by their gender from the opportunities that were exclusively available to their male peers.

Despite women writers such as Howitt playing a significant part in the popularity of serial fiction in the press, its systematic control rested with Victorian men both as editors and consumers.³² The majority of their initial works were rejected by editors in favour of male authors, who did not believe writing to be a 'suitable' career for women. An article in the *London Review*, titled 'Literary Women', initially appears to be sympathetic to 'clever women' who cannot understand 'why men in general entertain a strong objection to feminine authorship'.³³ However, it proceeds to offer the 'real' reasons as to why writing fiction is 'not a suitable profession to which English gentlemen are pleased to see their sisters and their daughters turn'.³⁴ The author explains:

A literary education is the work of a long time; and women who write the best almost always display their want of its discipline sooner or later. Literary genius means

³⁰ Marianne Van Remoortel, *Women, Work and the Victorian Periodical: Living by the Press* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 10.

³¹ 'The Payment of Women', *Victoria Magazine*, 23 (1869) pp. 84-5. Quoted in Hilary Fraser, Judith Johnston and Stephanie Green, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (CUP, 2003), p. 161.

³² Linda K Hughes and Michael Lund, 'Textual/sexual pleasure and serial publication', *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth Century British Publishing and Reading Practices* ed. by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (CUP, 1995), p. 144.

³³ 'Literary Women', *London Review*, 8 (1864), p. 328.

³⁴ Ibid.

among other things the power of bringing sympathy and passion under the stern control of artistic law. Without this self-control, passion itself becomes weak or luxuriant; and sympathy degenerates into weakness. There is no other training that gives it except the laborious study and appreciation of classical models; and this training is almost out of the reach of women.³⁵

Interestingly, Marian Evans also addresses this in ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, wherein she criticises women writers who write for ‘foolish vanity’ as opposed to writing from necessity to ‘work for one’s bread’.³⁶ Although she acknowledges the fact that many published works written by ‘lady novelists’ lack depth, wit and genuine observation, she explains that such types of female authorship warrant the need for women’s education and opportunities to improve:

The standing apology for women who become writers without any special qualification is, that society shuts them out from other spheres of occupation... Society has its share of excessive blame as well as excessive praise.³⁷

Elaine Showalter asserts that the truth behind the rejection of professional women is because male critics were threatened by their prevalence and success in the literary market. Showalter states that men even believed women authors to be ‘engaged in a kind of aggressive conspiracy to rob them [men] of their markets, steal their subject matter, and snatch away their young lady readers, to see them as dominating because of superior numbers rather than superior abilities’.³⁸ As a result of this, male critics, editors and readers often refused to accept women’s emergence in the press. Figures such as John Morley formulated a distinction between the ‘circulating library novel’ and the high-culture novel written,

³⁵ Ibid., p. 329.

³⁶ ME, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, *Westminster Review*, 66.130, 1st October 1856, pp. 442-61, (p. 460).

³⁷ Ibid., p. 461.

³⁸ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (Virago, 2009), p. 62.

respectively, by an 'authoress' and a man.³⁹ In 1851, Coventry Patmore denied that women could write fiction, concluding that 'there certainly have been cases of women possessed of the properly masculine power of writing books, but these cases are all so truly and obviously exceptional, and must and ought always to remain so, that we may overlook them without the least prejudice to the soundness of our doctrine'.⁴⁰ Male editors and readers continued to justify the exclusion of women from periodicals by even claiming that women were too emotionally and intellectually incapable, believing that women would deplete the physical reserve necessary for childbirth and other womanly marital duties should they expend their energy in writing novels. In 1862, Gerald Massey wrote:

It is very doubtful if the highest and richest nature of woman can ever be unfolded in its home life and wedded relationships, and yet at the same time blossom and bear fruit in art and literature with a similar fullness. [...] The nature of woman demands that to perfect it in life which must half-lame it for art.⁴¹

Many women had no choice but to publish their work anonymously or pseudonymously because of the harsh criticism they endured at the hands of the patriarchal press. As in Parkes' and Leigh Smith's first writings, Howitt's name is not acknowledged or listed at any point in the *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art*, despite the novella's commercial success at the time. Stone observes that although anonymity was considered standard practice for periodicals, in which only the editor's name would be credited, 'anonymity and its variations affected how readily women's interventions could be taken up, responded to, and

³⁹ Gaye Tuchman, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (Taylor & Francis, 2012), p. 181.

⁴⁰ Coventry Patmore, 'The Social Position of women', *The North British Review*, 14.28 (1851), pp. 515-540, (p. 528).

⁴¹ Gerald Massey, 'Last Poems and Other Works of Mrs Browning', *North British Review*, 36, (1862), pp. 514-34, (p. 514).

remembered by others'.⁴² In light of this, anonymity was a way for women authors to contribute freely to periodicals, as there were concerns that identifying them as women 'would degrade them by exposing them to criticism on account of their gender'.⁴³ Therefore, it is likely that Howitt's name was omitted by Cassell to prevent both Howitt and the *Illustrated Exhibitor* from public scrutiny. Moreover, the text's progressive ideas surrounding female collaboration and its unfavourable depiction of its male characters would have been criticised and rejected by male readers, especially if it was acknowledged as a woman's work. The practice of anonymity was understandable and made sense for individual women in their pursuit of literary careers, but in light of Virginia Woolf's comment that 'for most of history, Anonymous was a woman', its effects over time have inevitably been damaging.⁴⁴ Because of the lack of references to women writers, women's work has been forgotten in a way that was not so true for men. Despite its historical significance to feminist art history, *The Sisters in Art*, along with the other contributions made by Howitt's circle, has been left overlooked.

Despite their marginalisation, women writers were active participants in newspapers, with recent scholarship unearthing many of their contributions that have hitherto been forgotten. Alexis Easley demonstrates the extent of women's contributions, remarking on the variety of content written by women to periodicals as diverse as the *Monthly Repository*, the *Metropolitan Magazine* and *La Belle Assemblée*.⁴⁵ The increasing popularity of serialised fiction was a facilitating factor for female authorship in newspapers. Palmer notes that serial fiction in particular enhanced the notoriety of women writers and thereby provided them with the opportunity to assert themselves in the periodical press. She argues that women writers

⁴² According to Walter E Houghton, roughly 70 per cent of contributions found in periodicals from 1824 to 1900 are unsigned or pseudonymous. See: Walter E. Houghton, 'The Wellesley Index: Notes on Index II', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 3.4 (1970), pp. 16-18, (p. 18), doi:10.4324/9780203991374; Alison Stone, *Women Philosophers in Nineteenth Century Britain* (OUP, 2023), p. 40.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Hogarth Press, 1929).

⁴⁵ Alexis Easley, 'Gender, Authorship, and the Periodical Press', *The History of British Women's Writing, 1830-1880* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 39.

‘benefitted from novel serialisation because it offered a convenient way for them to balance their domestic and authorial duties and provided regular payments rather than less frequent sums’.⁴⁶ It is clear that there is an important and overlooked correlation between the serialisation of novels in periodicals and the growing power of women writers manifested in editorial positions that allowed them to bolster their reputations and increase their audiences. Women like Harriet Martineau and Mary Howitt first established themselves as professional writers, and in many cases continued to support their literary work as novelists or poets through their writing for the periodical press. As for Howitt, the diversification of the press offered her a ‘valuable means of literary, artistic, social and political expression’, as well as the ability to control the dissemination of her work.⁴⁷ Moreover, contributing to periodicals allowed Howitt a wider platform to assert herself as both an artist and writer and, above all, to engage freely with progressive ideas such as female unity and collaboration that she envisaged in her life, just as in her fiction. Hilary Fraser draws attention to the fact that the *Illustrated Exhibitor*, which had a ‘Ladies Department’ (mainly concerned with ‘female matters’ such as needlework and fashion), was very much part of the gendered mainstream; and that by inserting ‘her utopian fictional vision for women’s art’ in such a journal, Howitt proposed both thematically and formally ‘an alternative to the very concept of a ‘Ladies Department’.⁴⁸ Howitt’s novella opened up the literary and artistic fields to women, and enabled them to consider not only the possibilities of establishing their individual careers, but of the potential that came with active female collaboration.

⁴⁶ Beth Palmer, *Women’s Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* (OUP, 2011), p. 4.

⁴⁷ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*, p. 147.

⁴⁸ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (CUP, 2014), p. 57.

A Close Reading of *The Sisters in Art*

Howitt's novella *The Sisters in Art* focuses on the development of a new ethos in art education for women, in which women are envisaged as working collectively, and as having the education to approach art critically. The tale realises an active role for women in art rather than just that of the model or muse, and projects the image of women as collaborative creators who seek to improve the standards of artistic education and (more generally) the treatment of women. Howitt's tale recounts the artistic education and adventures of Alice Law, an orphan who is placed in the care of her aunt and uncle following the death of her mother, Anne. Again, with reference to Dickens, Howitt's tale begins in a curiosity shop, owned by William and Susan Silver, Alice's wealthy aunt and uncle, and is described as equally chaotic and outdated as its owners:

It seemed used both as a counting and sitting room, for it contained a high desk and shelves of dusty ledgers, and glass-cases filled with small articles of rich china and bijouterie, whilst a parrot in a tub-like sort of cage, a fat apoplectic dog on the hearth-rug, a cloth laid for supper, and several articles of needlework scattered on a little table showed us its domestic use.⁴⁹

The setting presents a vivid portrait of the Silvers through the hectic space in which they live and work. The conflation of their commercial, social and domestic spheres in this description, is, as Matthew Rowlinson puts it, 'rarely a happy conjuncture, and often touches on the uncanny', and indicates the peculiar nature of the Silvers' marriage and work.⁵⁰ Although Mrs Silver is characterised as a 'ripely round' middle-class Victorian woman who is old-fashioned in her beliefs, she is shown to be affectionate towards her husband and welcoming to her

⁴⁹ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 214.

⁵⁰ Matthew Rowlinson, *Real Money and Romanticism* (CUP, 2010), p. 158.

visitors.⁵¹ Mr Silver, whose surname is emblematic of his character, is described as a ‘lank cadaverous-faced man’ and ‘like an old eagle from its eyrie’, and seems to value objects above human relations, and money over love.⁵² Howitt’s portrayal of Mr Silver and his selfish and obsessive tendencies echoes Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), in which its narrator, Master Humphrey, confessed ‘I have all of my life been attached to the inanimate objects that people my chamber... I have come to look upon them rather in the light of old and constant friends’.⁵³ In Mr Silver, Howitt represents both a bourgeois sensibility and a patriarchy wary of and resistant to the female artist, as he constantly fears that Alice is a threat to both his wealth and reputation. His misogynistic ignorance is shown through his bitterness towards Alice’s late mother for not marrying a rich Dutch art dealer: ‘he had sixty thousand pounds – and two Rubens’ that were worth five more [...] if the girl would but have married the old man, I should have got ‘em for a hundred or so apiece’.⁵⁴ His selfish attitude towards women is made apparent here, as he clearly views Anne as a commodity to exploit and exchange for his own financial gain. Anne did not wish to marry the man and subsequently fled London to escape the marriage and became a female companion in Yorkshire. There, she befriended her employer, Mrs Fountains, who became a motherly figure to Anne, who by then had adopted the name ‘Miss Gray’. Anne found happiness in her new life in Yorkshire, and stayed there with her husband and daughter until her death. In this passage, Howitt also makes frequent references to Anne Brontë, alluding to *Agnes Grey* with the use of alias ‘Miss Gray’ and the story’s Yorkshire setting. It is also a nod to the more apposite *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), in which its heroine Helen Graham, also a female painter, escapes an unhappy marriage and starts a new life with her son. According to Wettlaufer, Howitt’s cross-references to Brontë can be seen as a form of collaboration, in

⁵¹ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 215.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop: And Other Tales* (Lea and Blanchard, 1841), p. 11.

⁵⁴ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 215.

which she establishes a female artistic lineage between herself and Brontë as writers, and the fictitious Anne to Brontë's Helen Graham as painters.⁵⁵ Her allusions to other women writers and their works invoke ideas of female cooperation and empowerment, both of which were embodied by the 'Sisters in Art' through their own collaborative work with each other and their wider circle.

Addressing the artistic and social constraints endured by women, Howitt juxtaposes Silver, who sees women and art as commodities, with Alice, a woman actively engaged with the spiritual values of art as social labour. Despite Alice only needing a place to stay during her studies, and having an income of £50 per annum, Silver is still mistrustful of Alice and her 'true' financial intentions. Nonetheless, Silver agrees to house his niece after his wife's incessant pleading, but again dismisses Alice's professional ambitions and only views her in terms of potential value to his business. Silver seeks to take advantage of Alice's talent and good nature, and considers a number of jobs for Alice to do to make more profit:

She will be able to retouch a picture, hide with fresh tint any woeful fracture in a precious jay, or even paint some Holy Family or Italian landscape that, with a little baking, smoke drying, and varnish, would pass for a Correggio or a Claude.⁵⁶

Silver is unimpressed with Alice's aspirations to be a professional artist, and instead remarks that her beauty and femininity are her most notable assets, noting that she 'was so much more womanly than they expected, and her reserved and quiet, yet kind and gentle manner, was an enigma to them [...] they were proud of her beauty'.⁵⁷ Here, Silver embodies the prevailing

⁵⁵ Wettlaufer, 'Politics and Poetics', p. 135.

⁵⁶ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 240. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also used female family members as studio assistants to the extent that the women's works have been (until recently) wrongly attributed to the men. Emma Sandys is a prime example of this, with many of her works thought to be painted by her brother Frederick because of the general assumption that women could not paint that well.

⁵⁷ Ibid. On a second read of Howitt's novella, the language used here resonates with WMR's description of Siddall in his memoirs. These memoirs are discussed in the introduction.

attitudes held towards women which prevented them from pursuing anything other than marital duties. For men like Silver, the objections to an artistic career for women in particular were chiefly ethical, cultural and predominantly concerned with female propriety, since to take up such a ‘male-dominated’ profession inevitably led to affronts of modesty and femininity. Alice, however, rejects these notions, and actively pursues art as a working profession. Although Silver allocates only a tiny space for Alice to occupy as a studio within his shop, she takes ownership of the space, by filling it with her own possessions from Yorkshire including: ‘old china, growing plants, sketches of seaward coast and moorland height, and old quaint shapes in statuary’.⁵⁸ This scene of an artist’s haven, purposefully shaped by the artist, contrasts the accumulated mass of miscellaneous items that dominate the curiosity shop. Alice claiming ownership of her space, despite her uncle’s resentment, also signals her determination and assertiveness as a young woman in pursuit of her own success. The objects that fill Alice’s studio also become important to the education that Alice and her ‘sisters’ later offer to the next generation of young women artists as the story unfolds.

Notwithstanding, after settling in her new life, Alice grows restless, and begins to feel ‘a want of recognition and sympathy’.⁵⁹ She becomes frustrated with how her new family view art in favour of its monetary worth:

If they talked about art [...] it was the age and price of a picture or a vase, by whom last purchased, or when and where. But not a thought had they about the painter or the potter, not a word about shape or grace or grandeur – nothing but the length of years and amount of money price.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 287.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 240.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

She even expresses her dismay with ‘Mr C’s’ academy (a reference to Cary’s) and their treatment of art as a competition:

Gossip and commonplace talk was the rule without exception, and the only word about the picture on the easel or the sketch from life, was as to when it would be finished, or whether it was better than Miss So-and-so’s.⁶¹

Just like Howitt and her ‘Sisters in Art’, Alice is at odds with her environment. She is frustrated with society’s unethical approach to art education and its dismissal of art’s spiritual and social value. As previously shown, Howitt was quite vocal about what she perceived to be the ‘true’ meaning of art, often articulating in her letters the desire for a ‘new era in art when sentiment, feeling, moral teaching, in fact the religion of art shall be developed’.⁶² Thus, the story follows Alice’s artistic education as a spiritual endeavour, supported by a network of women who recognise and support her aspirations. This supportive circle, a nod to the older generation includes Mrs Fountains, Anne’s old employer and accomplished painter; Mrs Cohen, a wealthy, Jewish benefactress; Alice’s aunt, Susan Silver, who champions her niece’s artistic aspirations, and Nancy, Susan’s loyal maid-servant. Alice also befriends other young women who are equally devoted to art and the women’s cause – Lizzy Wilson and Esther Beaumont. The trio, who are equally and individually talented in their respective ways, establish their own collaborative sisterhood. The group is neither exclusive nor discriminative, and their sole purpose is to unite women into a ‘holier and truer communion of sympathy, taste, and pursuit, and to evolve from the unity of separate talents, a result of which singly they are not capable’.⁶³ Howitt does not privilege social class or situation in her vision of an artistic women’s collective. Lizzy, the daughter of a working class tailor is

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Beaky, *Letters of Anna Mary Howitt*, p. 34.

⁶³ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 319.

supported by Alice, not because of her poor social position, but because of her natural talent for artistic design. In response to Susan Silver's snobbish comments, Alice directly addresses the question of class: 'I don't believe that because people are poor, or in a humble class of life, they are "vulgar"', and insists that regardless of their background, friends are "those whom nature has made noble and good".⁶⁴ Alice also supports women outside of her circle, defending the daughter of Giuseppe (an old Italian sculptor and ally of the 'sisters') for taking up such an 'unsuitable' profession as art modelling. Mrs Silver coolly remarks how she has 'sunk into a model – that's being as wicked as she can be, and sinking as low, I think, as a creature can'.⁶⁵ Alice, however, interjects:

But her being the subject of an artist's brush or a sculptor's chisel, does not in its single sense make her vile; though I think we ought to make of no one a model, especially as images in the likeness of God, except the soul and character be as lovely as the body.⁶⁶

Alice's belief in equal treatment and opportunities for all women resonates with the Outer/Inner sisterhood paradigm that Howitt and Leigh Smith introduced in *An Art Student in Munich*. Whilst the 'Inner Sisterhood' comprises the 'Sisters in Art', the 'Outer Sisterhood' includes honest working women from all walks of life. Clearly, the aims and ambitions of the fictitious 'Sisters in Art' are parallel to the 'Sisters in Art' in reality, in which both groups visualise women in collective labour and solidarity regardless of their work and background.

It is likely that Lizzy Wilson is a fictional correlative of the artist, poet and model Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Siddall, who was a friend of Howitt, Leigh Smith and Parkes. Siddall came from similar humble beginnings to Howitt's Lizzy, and had worked at a milliner's shop prior

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 262.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

to becoming an artist. Siddall had become acquainted with the ‘Sisters in Art’ through her relationship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who befriended Howitt during their enrolment at Cary’s Academy. The group spent time together at Scalands, Leigh Smith’s Sussex home, where they frequently gathered to write and paint, and cared for Siddall’s ill-health away from the constraints of the city.⁶⁷ As opposed to the real Siddall, whose promising artistic efforts have been (until recently) subordinated to that of Rossetti’s, Howitt’s Lizzy is a talented and self-supporting artist who thrives under the nurturance of her ‘art sisters’. The solidarity between Alice and Lizzy is extended to Esther, a version of Leigh Smith whose acquired wealth and education further complements the attributes of the other two. Like Leigh Smith, Esther receives an income per annum by her supportive father, lost her mother at a young age, is already an accomplished artist and shares the same ‘large thoughts of art, and of nature as its great fountain of originality and truth’.⁶⁸ Chiefly, Esther is determined to improve the state of education for women to the same ends as Leigh Smith: she pays the rent for the studio she eventually shares with Alice and Lizzy, and financially contributes to the Female School of Art that the trio eventually establish. For Howitt and her circle, education was understood in both a compulsory and a vocational sense, encompassing the needs of women from the full spectrum of social backgrounds and further tied to a spiritual as well as an economic identity. Howitt’s fictitious group of sisters and their intent to improve provisions for women are a tribute to her circle’s own commitment to the women’s rights campaign in reality. Just as other works produced by the group, *The Sisters In Art* is a testament to their individual and collective success.

Although Howitt’s story presents an industrious women’s utopia in which the ‘sisters’ live, work and thrive together, not every female character in the text is supportive of their

⁶⁷ The ‘Sisters in Art’s’ painting expeditions with DGR and Siddall and their involvement in Siddall’s care is discussed further in chapter 4.

⁶⁸ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 316.

ambitions. Before her first encounter with Alice, Lizzy's drawings and dreams of being an artist are destroyed by her mother, 'because she wants her child to be a household drudge – to wash, to scrub, and nurse'.⁶⁹ It is implied that Mrs Wilson also beats Lizzy for reasons beyond Lizzy's control, such as being 'dirty and ill-dressed'.⁷⁰ It is interesting to ask why Howitt chose to portray a female character in such a negative light, especially when the novella's aim is to promote the unity and solidarity of women. It's probable that Howitt intended to shed light on the lives of the working-class and in particular, the treatment of working-class women, who were burdened with not only marital and domestic duties, but also working responsibilities. However, Howitt's depiction of Mrs Wilson is not necessarily a fair portrayal of working-class women, nor is her novella specifically aimed at their rights. In reality, many women similar to Mrs Wilson rejected the women's cause because of its exclusively middle-class nature. As Gleadle notes, middle-class activists like Howitt tended to 'universalise their own experiences, rather than truly addressing themselves to the needs of other classes. At no time did the early feminists suggest such measures as the creation of trades' unions for working women, which might have made a fundamental and direct contribution to the improvement of such people's lives'.⁷¹ Therefore, Howitt's objective to improve artistic education for women does not necessarily consider the needs of women from the working-class. Nevertheless, Howitt reminds her readers of the opportunities that women like Mrs Wilson have lost, and the fact that women, especially from lower social classes, do not have the choice to even consider artistic professions as a viable option for work. In contrast, Howitt's Lizzy signifies hope – the potential that women (when aided by other women) are able to pursue aims and professions beyond the parameters of their class.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 263.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Gleadle, *Early Feminists*, p. 520.

Much of the novella concerns the practical and theoretical parameters of art education, allowing Howitt to speak freely on the lack of opportunities and provisions available for women artists. As Alice, Esther and Lizzy discuss their plans for their art school, an admirer tells them, “Till education is made to form a correlative of art, art will not advance, nor half the sources of design be laid open [...] yes, do this for England, for considering the undoubted talent she has to deal with, her Female School of Design is a national disgrace”.⁷² The fictitious school alludes to the real Female School of Design that was founded in London in 1842, which offered lessons on textiles, embroidery and design as opposed to painting and sculpture. As Purnell writes, the School’s purpose was to ‘enable young women of the middle class to obtain an honourable and profitable employment, and partly to improve ornamental design in manufacturers, by cultivating the taste of the designer’.⁷³ The School started as a success, with its female students performing considerably well in comparison to male students. However, the ‘national disgrace’ that is spoken of in Howitt’s novella alludes to the government’s decision to relocate the School to the Theatre District in 1847, which was a questionable area for women to reside at the time. The school picked up again in 1852 (the same year as *Sisters in Art*) and eventually came under the patronage of Queen Victoria ten years later. Antonia Losano has noted that Howitt’s emphasis on the ‘low arts’ of illustration and design rather than more elevated genres for her art sisters represents an effort ‘to effect a revaluation and recuperation of these art forms’, while at the same time questioning Victorian artistic hierarchies.⁷⁴ Moreover, women embroiderers such as May and Jane Morris, (who were also affiliated with Pre-Raphaelitism) also sought to elevate needlework to art status in reality. Howitt’s novella not only makes clear the poor state of women’s artistic education, but reminds us of the resilience of women artists and their support towards each other and

⁷² Ibid., p. 335.

⁷³ Thomas Purnell, ‘Women and Art: The Female School of Design’, *Art Journal*, April 1861, pp. 107-108.

⁷⁴ Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Ohio State University Press, 2008), p. 120.

emerging women artists in the field. Although Alice is mentored by Giuseppe and by a male landscape painter during her childhood in Yorkshire, she is quick to remind readers of how she was also well instructed as a child by her female guardian, ‘a lady who had herself a very noble power in art’.⁷⁵ And so, it is the collective talent of Alice, Lizzy and Esther, the care of Susan Silver and Nancy, the generosity of their landlady and the patronage of Mrs Cohen – their ‘sisterhood in art’ – that enables them to realise their ambitions of becoming professional artists and setting up a Female School of Art which will mean that young women with talent will no longer be restricted or limited from the opportunities as their male peers.

Having had enough of her uncle’s selfish ways, Alice defiantly abandons the Silvers in pursuit of her own career in art, securing a little studio for herself, Esther and Lizzy in Fitzroy Square, which was a well-known artistic quarter in London. The ‘art sisters’ spend five years in their studio working on and developing their art, bringing together ‘three truths rarely found so united in design – the natural, the scientific, and the artistic’, placing an emphasis on the unity of the women’s individual artistic talent.⁷⁶ In their studio, the ‘art sisters’ articulate their belief in female collaboration, and prove it by joining forces for (and winning) a design competition sponsored by a Belgian firm. Alice explains to the owner of the Belgium firm exactly how the trio worked together to create the winning design:

The larger outlines you so much admire are mine; the geometrical curves, running from point to point, so beautiful in themselves, are Miss Beaumont’s; whilst the filling up in detail, the stray flower, the rounded boss, the delicate touches, so small in themselves, so much as a whole, are those of our young friend here.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 263.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 334.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Howitt's narrative begins as if it were meant to be the bildungsroman of an individual heroine, but as Alice grows in confidence and forms relationships with the other women, the narrative abandons its singular focus. Through their act of collaboration, Howitt demonstrates the strength of their collective endeavour achieved through friendship, empathy and shared labour. After discussing the success of their collaboration, Alice elaborates on the art sisters' next project:

Art does not consist in the mere ability to use the brush and pencil – there must be education, both moral and intellectual, and high in their kind, as well as resolutely carried onward [...] we shall, if possible, endeavour by-and-bye, to open an artistic school or college, in which art and literary education shall be made one.⁷⁸

At the story's conclusion, the group's plan finally comes to fruition. The Female School of Art is described as a wholly collaborative endeavour: the trio open their studio to young women artists two mornings a week, and instruct them on how to sketch and paint using Alice's items from her old studio, Giuseppe's casts, Colonel Fountains' curios, and flowers sent by Mrs Cohen from her conservatory. In addition, the school offers classes on mathematics, geometry and German twice a week, as well as hosting Esther's brother, who delivers a weekly lecture on anatomy to the students using Dr Falkland's anatomical collection 'as connected with design and the higher principles of art'.⁷⁹ Built on the site of the former curiosity shop with the inheritance left to Alice by Silver after his death, the opening of the women's school dedicated to art and education signifies Alice's triumph and reconciliation with her Uncle, who in death, has rectified the errors of his ways. Moving from the individual to the universal, the 'art sisters' later extend their classes to all women, envisioning the school as enabling 'a grand, noble life of duty, usefulness and ministry to the

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 336.

true advance of art, in connection with woman's mind and woman's labour'.⁸⁰ Here, the 'Sisters in Art's' belief in the moral importance of education is made clear. Howitt's fictional school exemplifies the effectiveness and potential of women's collaboration, further supporting their belief in what women could achieve with art and in the wider community if they were to work together. Although Howitt's ideas unfortunately never quite came to fruition, her vision of an artistic sisterhood dedicated to both the rights and education of women is fully realised in *The Sisters in Art*.

In the final stage of their journey, the 'sisters' spend up to three years studying art in Italy while their school is being built; while there, they embark on a search for the great-granddaughter of Giuseppe, who has spent his entire life mourning the 'loss' of the daughter he had previously rejected for becoming an art model. Although the trio discover that Giuseppe's daughter and grandchild died in poverty, they manage to find his great-granddaughter and return her to Britain safely. Once home, they reunite Giuseppe with his long-lost great-grandchild, giving him 'the richest blessing which this world holds'.⁸¹ Giuseppe, now finally able to rest, quietly passes away with his great-granddaughter at his bedside. In naming the child Angelica, Howitt makes a final reference to the artist Angelica Kauffman, who represents the past and the future of women's art.⁸² The child, like their artwork, is the product of the 'sister's' collaborative labour, and embodies the generations of young women artists that will continue their legacy in years to come. The 'sisters', having finally completed their mission and God's will, are able to return to their artistic haven and continue to work and prosper together in peace. Although the story's epilogue suggests that the women become engaged to marry, it is made clear that the fiancés support the women's

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 347.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.364.

⁸² Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) was one of the two female painters among the founding members of the Royal Academy. Although a Swiss painter, she had a successful career in London. She is widely considered as an inspiration to women artists, and established a legacy for forthcoming generations.

careers and are not presented as interfering with the lifestyle of the ‘sisters’. Instead, Howitt leaves her readers with this powerful concluding line:

But for the present, they remain together teaching and working – sisters in love and unity
– as SISTERS IN ART.⁸³

The connections between Howitt’s novella and the work of Pre-Raphaelite men and women are increasingly apparent. Howitt’s conclusion, which is centred on sisterly unity and love echoes that of CGR’s ‘Goblin Market’ (1859), wherein she concludes her story with a similar message:

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.⁸⁴

What makes *The Sisters in Art* also important in women’s art, literary and feminist history is that Alice and her circle not only practised collaborative writing and painting, but also theorised collaborative work as superior to individual endeavour. This ideology of collaborative work is prescient, almost prophetic for the lives of Howitt, Leigh Smith and Parkes and the dispersal and expansion of their working community. Refusing the exclusionary nature of male artistic brotherhoods, the group proposed a social and artistic engagement that embraced all women. Just as in Howitt’s novella, the ‘Sisters in Art’ created

⁸³ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 364.

⁸⁴ CGR, ‘Goblin Market’, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (Macmillan, 1862), 1-30, (p. 30). *The Sisters in Art* directly engages with Pre-Raphaelite language and ideals. Howitt’s novella was published seven years before ‘Goblin Market’, therefore it is possible that Rossetti drew inspiration from her friend. I consider *The Sisters in Art* to be Howitt’s masterpiece, and should be considered as a leading example of Pre-Raphaelite literature alongside other works by women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle. I intend to explore this further in future projects.

a structure for women that simultaneously mirrored and revised the male sphere. Yet, it is their political image of female solidarity and sisterhood that defined the course for women rights, both in the art community, and beyond.

4. 'Professional identities'- Art, Poetry, and Womanhood

Having arrived home from Munich, the 'Sisters in Art' reaffirmed their determination to make their mark on the world, for themselves and their sex. Their first experience of independent travel not only broadened their intellectual and artistic horizons, but it also strengthened their sense of being part of a supportive community of like-minded women. During the mid-1850s, the 'Sisters in Art' found themselves at the centre of a group of Pre-Raphaelite artists before they pursued their interests in women's suffrage, and the work they produced during this period became an important means of communication for their cause. This period also saw the peak of their artistic and literary collaboration, and their influence on each other's work as friends and professional colleagues. Striking examples of this include Howitt's *Margaret Returning from the Fountain* (1854) and *The Sensitive Plant* (1855), Parkes's debut collection of poetry *Poems* (1852), Leigh Smith's watercolour *Ventnor* (1856), and Howitt's and Leigh Smith's corresponding sketches of Elizabeth Siddall. This chapter will look at how they navigated their careers as professional working women, explore their connections to Pre-Raphaelitism, and examine how the ideals of unity and friendship continued to impact their artistic and literary work.

Navigating the Professional Art World

The 'Sisters in Art' continued to flourish as professional artists and writers. Concurrent with her literary success following the publication of *The Sisters in Art* and *An Art Student in Munich*, Howitt was also establishing herself as a professional painter. After working for over two years, she made her exhibition debut in 1854 at the National Institution of Fine Arts with her first professional painting, *Margaret Returning from the Fountain*. Unfortunately, what we know of the work is only from description, as its whereabouts are currently unknown.¹

¹ Until recently, the majority of Howitt's paintings have been declared as lost or destroyed. However, documents do show that *Margaret* had been bought from its original exhibition, probably by the painter, John Rogers Herbert. See Susan Tallman, 'Seeing Anna Mary Howitt in History' in *Picturing the Invisible: Exploring*

However, given what evidence remains of the painting, from Howitt's accounts and the accounts of others, it is suggested that she took inspiration from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragedy, *Faust* (1832).² In its review of the exhibition, the *Athenaeum* provides a description of Howitt's painting:

The flippant malice of her thoughtless fellows has probed Margaret to the quick, and has cast a shadow of despair over her deep grief and penitence. Her face shows that the heart-break has begun, the hand pressed on her temple that dull aching of her very blood which she could not soothe, no not with all the balms of Gilead.³

The painting's subject was, according to DGR, a 'bold' choice for a young woman artist, as it dealt with themes unsuitable for women artists at the time.⁴ It is probably because of this that the painting was initially rejected by the Royal Academy, where it was first sent. In a letter to Woolner, Rossetti spoke of Howitt's rejection:

I suppose you know that Miss Howitt's book, *An Art Student in Munich*, has been very successful. I am sorry to say that she has not been equally so with a picture of *Faust's* Margaret... The wretches have not hung it. It was an open-air picture, in sunlight, a most difficult task, and a very good picture. I have not seen her since they

Interdisciplinary synergies from the arts and the sciences ed. by Paul Coldwell and Ruth Morgan (UCL Press, 2022), pp. 160-177, (p. 167).

² *Faust* is a tragic play written by Goethe, who published it in two parts. The first part was published in 1808 and revised in 1829, and the second part was published posthumously in 1832. The play's titular character Faust seduces Margaret, and urges her to administer a sleeping potion to her mother so that the pair can consummate their love privately. Margaret's mother is subsequently killed by the potion, just as Margaret discovers that she is pregnant with Faust's child. As a result of Faust abandoning her and killing her brother, Margaret drowns her illegitimate child and is condemned for the murder. The play is widely considered to be Goethe's greatest work, and its central themes and characters became hugely inspirational to writers, artists, musicians and philosophers at the time. See: William Howitt, 'Faust Perceiving Margaret for the First Time', in *The Howitt's Journal: Of Literature and Popular Progress*, 2. 35 (1847), pp. 145-149, (p. 146).

³ 'Fine Arts', *Athenaeum*, 18th March, 1854, p. 346.

⁴ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Canvassing: Recollections by Six Victorian Women Artists* (Camden Press, 1986), p. 22.

sent it back, and hope she will not let it discourage her. But I do not think, for I never knew any artist with more genuine hopefulness and enthusiasm.⁵

Thereupon, Rossetti encouraged Howitt to send her work to the Portland Gallery, which was met with instant success. In a letter to Ford Madox Brown, DGR remarked that Howitt had ‘been kicking up quite a great row with her picture’.⁶ *Margaret* elicited a generally positive response from critics, with the *Athenaeum* concluding it to be ‘the finest picture so far of the year, and one of the best pictures – both as to the conceiving imagination and the executing hand – ever painted by a woman’.⁷ Howitt’s Pre-Raphaelite allies also praised her work: William Michael Rossetti wrote of the painting in the *Spectator*, ‘it would be difficult to recall a first picture of more assured promise’,⁸ and Dante Gabriel noted in a letter to Christina Rossetti that ‘she [Howitt] has painted a sunlight picture of Margaret (*Faust*) in a congenial wailing state, which is much better than I fancied she could paint’.⁹

It is not known why Howitt specifically chose *Faust*’s Margaret (also known as Gretchen) as the subject for her debut painting.¹⁰ However, given that it was common practice for Pre-Raphaelite artists to draw inspiration from literature, it is unsurprising that Howitt did the same with her work. Howitt must have found Margaret a particularly interesting figure to paint, given the character’s controversial status as a ‘fallen woman’.¹¹ In *Faust*, Margaret is

⁵G.H Fleming, *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, p. 182.

⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

⁷ ‘Fine Arts’, *Athenaeum*, 25th March 1854, p. 380.

⁸ William Michael Rossetti, ‘The National Institution’, *Spectator*, 18th March 1854, p. 302.

⁹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti, *Family Letters*, (Roberts Brothers, 1895), p. 120.

¹⁰ Goethe was one of the literary figures whom Howitt, Leigh Smith and Parkes discussed in their letters during their teens. William Howitt wrote of the play in the *Howitt’s Journal*, calling it ‘one of the most wonderful productions in the whole world of poetry’, therefore it is also likely that Howitt had access to the text through either parents.

¹¹ Victorian women who proved to be sexually or morally deviant were branded as ‘fallen women’ and socially condemned for their actions. However, these women mostly received harsh treatment without any consideration for their individual circumstances, nor how they came to be ‘fallen’ in the first place. Many women who were considered as ‘fallen’ were victims of domestic violence and rape at the hands of their parents, siblings and employers. See: Susan Mumm, “‘Not Worse than Other Girls’: The Convent-Based Rehabilitation of Fallen Women in Victorian Britain”, *Journal of Social History*, 29.3 (1996), pp. 527–46. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3788944>>, [Accessed 10/01/2024]. Mumm’s article details case studies of a number of young women who were branded ‘fallen’ by no fault of their own.

deceived into prostitution and is subsequently condemned and abandoned by Faust, and therefore is a popular figure among artists as she represents a ‘fallen woman’ who can be pitied for her state.¹² Therefore, Howitt probably painted Margaret to keep up with what was fashionable to paint at the time and to engage her voice with growing concerns for ‘fallen women’ and the complex issues surrounding them.¹³ Howitt and her circle were actively involved in the efforts at rehabilitating these women: Howitt’s mother Mary had for some time operated Urania Cottage, one of the established reformatory homes for homeless women.¹⁴ She and William also addressed the issue in *The Howitt’s Journal*, where she shared her belief that the ‘fallen woman’, although seen to be ‘a source of frightful contagion, could be transformed into a hardworking and benign member of society’.¹⁵ Howitt’s friend Christina Rossetti allied herself with ‘fallen women’ through her voluntary work at St Mary Magdalene’s Penitentiary from 1859, and explored their plight in her published poetry.¹⁶ Leigh Smith and Parkes called for ‘concerted female action’ and supported their rehabilitation of in their written works including Parkes’s *Remarks on the Education of Girls* (1856) and Leigh Smith’s *Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws*

¹² Helen Nina Taylor, ‘“Too individual an artist to be a mere echo”: Female Pre-Raphaelite Artists as Independent Professionals’, *British Art Journal*, 12.3 (2011), pp. 52-9, (p. 55), doi:10.4000/polysemes.10971.

¹³ During the 1850s, it finally became acceptable to paint the ‘fallen woman’ as a subject in paintings and art, and as a result, became an exciting feature in exhibitions at the time. Early depictions were initially meant to serve as warning to other women to avoid temptation and ruin. Richard Redgrave first broached the topic with his work *The Outcast* (1851), and Augustus Egg later produced *Past and Present* (1858), both of which negatively portrayed ‘fallen women’ as shameless and reckless. However, not every fallen woman was painted with such harsh criticism. The Pre-Raphaelites in particular (namely DGR, William Holman Hunt and Ford Madox Brown) recognised the complex emotions within fallen women and their situation and depicted the theme almost obsessively. See the following works that specifically look at the Pre-Raphaelite interest in ‘fallen women’: Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, (Yale University Press, 1999); Christopher Newall, *Pre-Raphaelites: Beauty and Rebellion* (LUP, 2016); and J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting* (Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Mary Howitt established Urania Cottage alongside Charles Dickens and Angela Burdett Coutts. Records suggest that they worked together from as early as 1846 to around 1858. See: Selma B. Kanner, *Victorian Institutional Patronage: Angela Burdett-Coutts, Charles Dickens and Urania Cottage, Reformatory for Women, 1846-58* (PhD Thesis, University of California, 1972).

¹⁵ Teja Varma Pusapati, *Model Women of the Press: Gender, Politics and Women’s Professional Journalism, 1850-1880* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

¹⁶ Christina Rossetti volunteered at St Mary Magdalene from 1859 to 1870. She taught reading, writing and employment related skills, such as sewing. Her poems, particularly ‘Goblin Market’ (1859), ‘Twice’ (1864) and ‘Cousin Kate’ (1860) are centred on ‘fallen women’. See: Mason, *Poetry, Ecology, Faith*.

Concerning Women.¹⁷ As for Howitt, she often hired ‘fallen women’ to model for her paintings to provide them with support and financial aid.¹⁸ Therefore, in her life as in her art, Howitt publicly expressed her support for the efforts at rehabilitating these women and reintegrating them back into everyday life.

Howitt was not alone in wishing to expose the prejudices suffered by ‘fallen women’ through her art. As Linda Nochlin notes, an increasing number of women artists were producing realistic and humanizing views of ‘fallen women’, primarily through highlighting their individual experiences and emotions and addressing the economic and social factors that caused their supposed downfall.¹⁹ Helen Nina Taylor states that women artists adapted the same literary subject matter as their male contemporaries, but in order to provide their own, independent perspective on events, in which their women are often presented as autonomous heroines’.²⁰ In light of this, their depictions of tragic female figures such as ‘fallen women’ are presented with more understanding and empathy than in comparable images from male artists. For instance, Julia Margaret Cameron depicts a solitary Margaret/Gretchen wearing a long black dress and holding white lilies as if in mourning in *Gretchen at the Altar* (1870-4); and Joanna Boyce (with whom the ‘Sisters in Art’ were acquainted) also paints the character as defiant in her work, *Gretchen* (1861). Howitt’s depiction of Margaret in such a ‘congenial wailing state’, along with her ‘heart-broken’ expression and her ‘hand pressed on her temple’, distinctively augments the complexity of her situation. Not only is her wailing an expression of grief, but her ‘congenial’ wailing in this case implies an accepted and acceptable form of repentance. Howitt’s use of sunlight in the painting is also interesting, as it indicates new

¹⁷ Inside the back cover of Parkes’s *Remarks* is an advertisement for Leigh Smith’s *Brief Summary* alongside a reprint of an article entitled ‘Prostitution’ from the *Westminster Review* of July 1850. See, ‘Prostitution’, *Westminster Review*, 53 (July 1850), pp. 238-268.

¹⁸ AMH, letter to BLS, July 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, p. 160.

¹⁹ Linda Nochlin, ‘Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman’, *The Art Bulletin*, 60, (1st March 1978), pp. 139-153, (p. 139).

²⁰ Taylor, ‘Too Individual an Artist’, p. 55.

beginnings for Margaret and the possibility that she can be redeemed. It is also possible that the sunlight not only symbolises the heroine's innocence and blamelessness in her situation, but also exposes the gravity and her shame in the 'sin' that she has committed. Works produced by women artists such as Cameron and Boyce offer a sympathetic portrayal of Margaret and put forward the idea that 'fallen women' can be considered victims opposed to villains.²¹ Howitt on the other hand not only paints Margaret as a victim, but highlights the harsh reality of her position. Through her effective use of sunlight and her depiction of a solitary Margaret in a 'congenial wailing state', Howitt suggests that Margaret is aware and accepting of her fate, in which she acknowledges herself as both innocent and guilty for her crimes.

Conversely, *Faust's* Margaret is depicted far less favourably, and in some cases, more provocatively by male artists, particularly the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Rossetti's *Faust: Margaret in the Church* (1848) shows Margaret slumped to the floor in distress with her faced away from the figure of the Virgin Mary. His later take on the subject, *Risen at Dawn, Gretchen Discovering Faust's Jewels* (1868), depicts Margaret/Gretchen as curiously examining Faust's treasure whilst her dress is suggestively slipping off her shoulders. Simeon Solomon's *Faust and Marguerite* (1856) depicts a smiling Margaret holding Faust's jewels in both hands whilst wrapped in Faust's embrace. Susan Casteras writes that in Victorian art, 'feminine themes (such as female morality and promiscuity) are bordered on a cultural fixation'.²² Yet, for their frequent depiction and over-representation in art, these women are nothing more than fictional replications. In other words, they are ideals created by male artists to control women's behaviour and self-representation. Their depictions of promiscuous

²¹ Resa Haile, Tamara R. Bower, *Villains, Victims and Violets: Agency and Feminism in the Original Sherlock Holmes Canon* (Brown Walker Press, 2019), p. 120.

²² Susan Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987), p. 177.

women allow male artists to reclaim an element of power by reducing them to objects of shame and pity and, in turn, ‘appease and empower the male spectator’.²³ Taylor points out how one need only look at the differences between portrayals of Margaret/Gretchen produced by women artists and the works produced by male Pre-Raphaelite artists to see how the men can ‘seem almost afraid of powerful women, while their female counterparts deliberately choose strong characters’.²⁴ The way in which these male artists portray Margaret in their respective works suggest their anxieties towards women who are autonomous and sexually empowered. Moreover, the fictitious constructions of ‘fallen women’ in male art overpower the harrowing experiences of real women, because the only women represented on canvas were the women men have created themselves. Women artists, on the other hand, are painting from a woman’s point of view and experience, and in ‘some measure portraying herself, not the interminable ‘other’ of the male artist’.²⁵ Howitt’s choice to cast the ‘ruined’ Margaret as her heroine allows the character an opportunity to tell her own story from her perspective and reclaim her own body. Here, Howitt not only asserts herself as a professional artist who is equally capable of depicting emotionally complex scenes, but engages her artistic voice in defiant opposition to male power and sexual predation.

Interestingly, a number of critics not only commended Howitt’s talent as an emerging young painter, but noted the painting’s Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic:

Anna Mary Howitt’s *Margaret Returning from the Fountain* illustrates a sad Margaret from the Faust legend. The picture exhibits Pre-Raphaelite propensities in its tremendous force of light, colour and composition. As the first painting of a young female artist, the picture is even more commendable, but no allowances need to be

²³Jessica Webb, ‘Why Women Fell: Representing the Sexual Lapse in Mid-Victorian Art (1850-65), *eSharp*, (2007), <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_41222_smxx.pdf> [accessed 23/11/2023].

²⁴ Taylor, ‘Too Individual an Artist’, p. 55.

²⁵ Ibid.

made for her age and sex; the picture would honour any artist and promises a distinguished career for Howitt.²⁶

The *Ladies' Companion* had similar comments:

Let us pause for a few minutes before a picture commanding the best place in the room: *Margaret Returning from the Fountain*, painted by Annie Mary Howitt. It attracts all lovers of Pre-Raphaelite schools, as it is treated on their principles, with their exceeding love of detail. The head is full of sentiment, and the attitude and dress are picturesque. A little more attention to the drawing of the limbs will make this young artist retain the fame which she has so suddenly gained.²⁷

Notwithstanding the patronising comments and observations these critics made about her work, Howitt's professional debut was a success. Following the exhibition at the Portland Gallery, Howitt had entered upon a period of confidence and productivity. Her friendship with the Brotherhood had matured into a professional association as she continued to seek exposure for her work through the same channels as the Pre-Raphaelites. Her diptych *The Sensitive Plant* (1855), also titled *The Lady*, is a surviving example of how Pre-Raphaelitism informed her work. Although its whereabouts are currently unknown, this work remains among the few of Howitt's works prior to her conversion to Spiritualism that are visually documented.²⁸

²⁶ 'The National Institution Exhibition 1854', *Art Journal* (1st April 1854), pp. 105-107.

²⁷ 'A Glance at the Exhibitions', *The Ladies' Companion*, Vol 5 (London: Rogerson and Tuxford, 1854), p. 329.

²⁸ The only visual documentation we have of this work are the black and white photographs as shown above. The work is now considered lost, although these photographs suggest that both parts have survived into the present day. Hopefully, they will one day be recovered and restored to their former glory. Please note: my analysis of this work is solely based on the digital reproduction of the surviving photographs, not the original painting.



Figure 4.1: Anna Mary Howitt, *The Sensitive Plant* (1855), photograph Julian Hartnoll, London. Both pieces are now lost.

Howitt's diptych is inspired by Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem of the same name, 'The Sensitive Plant' (1820).²⁹ Shelley's poem centres on a lush and vibrant garden, in which he uses several realistic depictions of flowers and plants to provide his reader with a detailed insight into the garden's beauty. Shelley introduces an unnamed woman who takes care of the garden as if it were her own children: 'If the flowers had been her own infants, she/ Could never have nursed them more tenderly'.³⁰ This woman, whom Shelley describes as 'An Eve in this Eden', (1.116) embodies the idealised spiritual woman who cares for nature, nurtures man and brings him salvation through divine love. However, as the season changes from summer to autumn, the woman dies, and the garden subsequently falls into decline. Howitt's diptych depicts the garden in both seasons, showing the garden first verdant, and then decayed, and the woman before and after her death.

²⁹ Shelley's poem was written following the death of his child and the subsequent marriage difficulties he was having with Mary Shelley.

³⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'The Sensitive Plant', *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (OUP, 1972) pp. 171-174, 1. 150-154.

Howitt's execution of the painting, through her extraordinary attention to detail, renders it similar to a German book illustration with a heavily ornate floral frame that is testament to her artistic skill. The diptych's resemblance to German illustrations can be read as a reference to Howitt's time spent in Munich, which undoubtedly impacted on her artistic output during this period. It is also a likely nod to her mother's German connections. Mary resided in Heidelberg in the 1840s and German literature heavily inspired her own writing and translation work. Aside from their connections to Pre-Raphaelitism, Howitt's frames are also possibly inspired by the works of Maria Sibylla Merian, who was a German entomologist, naturalist and botanical artist. Her book *Blumenbuch* (1675-1680) features thirty-six engraved floral plates hand painted by Merian. Howitt's elaborate botanical frames closely resemble the style and design of Merian's plates and title page.³¹



Figure 4.2: Maria Sibylla Merian, Title page, *Blumenbuch* (167?), Private Collection

³¹Maria Sibylla Merian, *Blumenbuch* (Johann Andreas Graff, 1675-1677-1680). *Blumenbuch* was published in three fascicules, and contain detailed illustrations of plant life and insects. Wreaths of flowers similar to this were used by Merian for the title-pages of the different sections to her pattern-book of flower engravings; *Merian's Drawings of European Insects* (1675-1690).

Howitt's frames intricately detail each of the flowers and plants to the same ends as Shelley's poem. The diptych's first frame depicts an abundance of daffodils, windflowers, bluebells, snowdrops and lilies, whereas the second frame illustrates fungi, nettles, thistles and other various weeds, all which represent the garden during the stages of its care and neglect. True to the Pre-Raphaelite style, Howitt's botanical frames depict each plant form as 'not only an identifiable species, but [is] also a particular specimen of that species'.³² For example, the first frame not only features wild daffodils *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, but poet's daffodils *Narcissus poeticus* and cyclamen flowered daffodils *Narcissus cyclamineus*, all which are different and specific types of the same flower. The frame also appears to contain both common and Spanish bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and *Hyacinthoides hispanica* and different types of lily including golden-rayed lilies *Lilium auratum*, 'Casa Blanca' lilies and water lilies *Nymphaea*.³³ Pre-Raphaelite artists depicted nature as having an individual identity, and their botanical illustrations in their paintings were often more highly finished than those of the figures. In *Modern Painters*, John Ruskin urged artists to 'go to nature in all singleness of heart... rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth'.³⁴ Ruskin's ideas resonated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who shared the belief that if they were to capture the true beauty of nature, 'they should go to Nature for an actual tree, and paint that'.³⁵ In a letter to Leigh Smith's sister 'Nanny', Howitt clearly followed this notion when completing *The Sensitive Plant*, recalling her recent expeditions to find the perfect treeline for her background:

³² Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 171.

³³ As stated above, my observations of this painting are only from what digitised reproductions of the surviving photographs. Thanks to the staff at Cypress Nursery for their help in identifying some of the flowers featured.

³⁴ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol 1, p. 417.

³⁵ David Masson, 'Pre-Raphaelitism in Art and Literature', *British Quarterly Review*, 16, (August 1852), pp. 197-220.

I have been down at Willesden and then at Esher, painting and am going down again almost immediately – there is a splendid bit of desolate hoary fir-wood at Esher that is just what I want for the background of my 2 Sensitive Plant design[s] – I must get it done before the cold weather comes.³⁶

The study of Botany became popular amongst middle-class women in the mid-nineteenth century. As the *Young Lady's Book* asserted, 'There is something peculiarly adapted to feminine tenderness in the care of flowers'.³⁷ This is due in part to the Linnaean system, which encapsulates much of what made Botany so fashionable amongst women at the time. In his landmark work *Species Plantarum* (1753), Linnaeus applied his integrated system of classifying, naming and describing plants to account for all plants then known to western science. Linnaeus sexed plants by paralleling the reproductive organs of flowers to the sexual organs of animals. He also wrote about plant species relationships by using analogies with human relationships, in particular marriage and wedding imagery.³⁸ The Linnaean system was considered easy for women to learn and use, and the tools required were relatively accessible. Despite this, critics claimed that through Linnaeus's new system, women were exposed to an education that was considered too 'inappropriate'.³⁹ Even some English translations of Linnaeus's work supposedly struggled with finding appropriate terminology for the anatomically explicit language.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Linnaeus's methods played a key role in the

³⁶ AMH, letter to Annie Leigh Smith, 6th August 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 162-166.

³⁷ *The Young Lady's Book: A Manual of Elegant Recreations, Arts, Sciences and Accomplishments* (Henry G. Bohn, 1859), p. 33.

³⁸ See: Markus Petzsch and Cassandra Falke, *Wild Romanticism* (Taylor & Francis, 2021).

³⁹ Botanist Johann Siegsbeck denounced the Linnaean system for its 'loathsome harlotry' and asked, 'Who would have thought that bluebells, lillies and onions could be up to such immorality?' in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1768. See: Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (CUP, 1999).

⁴⁰ For example, James Jenkinson translated the work in 1775, which prefixes an etymological dictionary explaining the classes and provides a glossary in an attempt to explain some of the sexually suggestive language.

dichotomisation of social categories of men and women, and led to Botany being considered as an inherently feminine practice.

In spite of their critics, a number of women published popularising books on their findings: Elizabeth Blackwell melded the herbal tradition with artistic skill in *A Curious Herbal* (1737-39), which contains hand drawn illustrations of plants with added descriptions and names in several languages and accompanied with information about each plant's medical uses; Priscilla Wakefield later published her *Introduction to Botany* (1796), in which she presents Botany as an activity shared between female family members as an informative practice; Harriet Beaufort's *Dialogue on Botany* (1819) provides new findings in plant physiology along with more descriptive taxonomies; and even Howitt's mother released a book titled *Floral Gems* (1851), which was a progressive guide for amateurs on the cultivation and analysis of plants.⁴¹ In being addressed specifically to female readers, these works encourage the scientific education of women to be taken more seriously.

Notwithstanding, it was because of the long-standing association between women and flowers that Botany succumbed to being undervalued as merely an 'amusement for ladies rather than the serious thoughts of men'.⁴² In other words, if women could access and practice Botany, then it was not considered a science. As Mrs E. E. Perkins states in *The Elements of Botany* (1837), 'it [Botany] requires no investigation... for this reason it is especially a feminine pursuit and one suited to the mother of a family'.⁴³ Mrs Loudon adds to this in *The Lady's Country Companion* (1845) by musing that sketching from nature is a 'country

⁴¹ Elizabeth Blackwell is not to be confused with Parkes's cousin Elizabeth Blackwell, who was one of the first female doctors and an ally of the 'Sisters in Art'. Elizabeth Blackwell, *A Curious Herbal: Containing Five Hundred Cuts of the Most Useful Plants*, (John Nourse, 1739), Priscilla Wakefield, *An Introduction to Botany in a Series of Familiar Letters with Illustrative Engravings*, (Thomas Burnfide, 1796), Harriet Beaufort, *Dialogues on Botany: For the Use of Young Persons* (R. Hunter, 1819) and Mary Howitt, *Floral Gems* (C.P. Huestis and Cozans, 1851).

⁴² John Lindley, *An Introductory Lecture Delivered in the University of London: On Thursday April 30, 1829* (J. Taylor, 1829), p. 17.

⁴³ Elizabeth Steele Perkins, *The Elements of Botany: With Illustrations* (Thomas Hurst, 1837), p. 8.

amusement in which a lady can properly indulge'.⁴⁴ The study of Botany was also seen as limiting for women. Jackson-Houlston observes that 'Botany confined women to the home and garden, both physically and mentally'.⁴⁵ Women who practised Botany were limited to where they could travel and were mostly unable to access the space required for serious botanical study. As aforementioned, this was a similar case for women artists, who were prevented from accessing the same spaces and (in some cases) subjects as their male peers. Critics implored women artists who wished to 'gain a shred of reputation to sit down with their best instructress – Nature'.⁴⁶ Because of this, flower painting was considered a suitable practice for women artists, as painting from still life was regarded as the 'sub-category of the lowest genre in the hierarchy'.⁴⁷ Flower painting was, therefore, presumed to keep women firmly in their place, since it used the 'second rate skills of imitation... as opposed to those first rate ones of invention which women were still begrudged'.⁴⁸

There is a clear link between this understanding of botany and Pre-Raphaelite art. In their domestic approach to scenes of nature, the Pre-Raphaelite style was also particularly suitable for women artists. The Pre-Raphaelites often used their skill in painting flowers to heighten the technical excellence of the whole painting. Technical accuracy in painting flowers was a skill that women artists were able to practise due to not being as socially mobile as their male contemporaries. In light of their technical expertise, Pre-Raphaelite women artists could align themselves with a style which was notable for its 'botanical attention to detail and masculine application of scientific reasoning', enabling women like Howitt to paint pictures with a degree of complexity and meaning as opposed to just

⁴⁴ Jane Loudon, *The Lady's Country Companion, or How to enjoy a country life rationally* (Longman, 1845), p. 376.

⁴⁵ Caroline Jackson-Houlston, "'Queen Lilies'? The Interpretation of Scientific, Religious and Gender Discourses in Victorian Representations of Plants', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11. 1 (2006), pp. 84-110, (p. 88), doi:10.1353/jvc.2006.0005.

⁴⁶ 'The Society of Female Artists', *Art Journal*, 20, (May 1858) in Olmsted, *Victorian Painting*, p. 581.

⁴⁷ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Scolar Press, 1995), p. 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

depicting still life.⁴⁹ Although Howitt may be conforming to what was expected of her as a woman artist of her time, it is clear that her interest in different species of plants and their various forms, and the attention to detail she uses in capturing these forms is evidence of her scientific mind. Women artists were expected to exhibit piety and sentiment rather than science and knowledge, and to show an ability to generalise rather than a grasp of detail. As in Parkes's 'Progression', Howitt's conscious choice to depict different specimens of plants demonstrates her scientific awareness, and by extension, women's capability to engage with technical terminology and scientific practice. In a letter to Leigh Smith, Howitt reflects on her time spent painting *The Sensitive Plant*, as well as her intentions with the painting's subject matter:

The dark mysteries of vegetable life and vegetable poisons, blending science in mystery, poetry and religion discourse in a way vastly to captivate my imagination.⁵⁰

Here, Howitt not only suggests her scientific awareness and draws on the connections between science, poetry and religion, but she describes how her painting of 'vegetable life' blends the two practices together.

Howitt also utilises floriography which is another method that the Pre-Raphaelites employed to imply a range of emotions and meanings through the cryptic symbolism of plants.⁵¹ Women in art were often symbolised by flowers, as demonstrated by Ruskin, who outlines in 'Of Queen's Gardens' how a 'woman grows as a flower does', and more generally, how 'the garden was a cultural symbol of female purity and unavailability'.⁵²

Looking at *The Sensitive Plant*, the flowers depicted in these frames not only illustrate

⁴⁹ Taylor, 'Too Individual an Artist', p. 57.

⁵⁰ AMH, letter to BLS, August 1854, MA 14350.18. The Morgan Library & Museum.

⁵¹ For more information on the art of Floriography, see: John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica* (Frederick Warne and Co, 1869) which details the history of Floriology and the meaning of certain flowers.

⁵² Susan Casteras, *The Substance or The Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (Yale Center for British Art, 1982), p. 20.

Shelley's poem but reflect ideals that are typically associated with femininity. For example: daffodils are said to symbolise joy and new beginnings, bluebells represent humility and constancy, and lilies are regarded as the symbol of purity and rebirth according to religious iconography.⁵³ Interestingly, Howitt's first frame also draws attention to one particular plant that stands next to the woman in the centre of the painting. It is possible that given the physical resemblance of its leaves, the plant in the painting is the actual 'Sensitive Plant' *Mimosa pudica*. This plant fascinated scientists because of its reactivity to predators and the contraction of its leaves as a defence mechanism. Not to mention that painters and poets also were attracted to the mimosa plant for its double sense of 'sensitivity' (both social and physical responsiveness), which served as a fitting metaphor for nineteenth-century ideals of modesty and chastity. Each of these plants represents the female gardener in the painting, and the traits that she supposedly embodies as the idealised woman and spiritual guardian of man. However, it is possible that the symbolism within the painting provides a wry comment on the elision of women with gardens, where the woman in the poem, the 'fairest creature from earliest Spring/Thus moved through the garden ministering/ Mid the sweet season of Summertime, / And ere the first leaf looked brown – she died!'⁵⁴ Also, the addition of the mimosa plant sprawled beneath the woman's body in the second frame supports the association of fragility and death between women and plants. Although it can be suggested that botanical painting acknowledges female submission, and evokes ideals associated with women's sexuality and propriety, it also offers an outlet for democratic inclusivity and individuation for women artists. In light of this, Howitt is possibly making the comment that such trite identification of women with flowers and with the mimosa plant in particular leads to female death or decay, and in turn, offers a democratic imperative that resists the

⁵³ Again, thanks to the staff at Cypress Nursery for providing me with a copy of Mandy Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion* (Random House, 2011).

⁵⁴ Shelley, 'The Sensitive Plant', pp. 171-174.

monologic discourse of patriarchy. Regardless of Howitt's intentions with *The Sensitive Plant*, her reproduction of such plants and her artistic precision is testament to her skill and ability as a painter.

Women's art was already subject to misogynistic criticism, but for artists like Howitt who had engaged with the Pre-Raphaelite style, critics were even more scathing and unforgiving. Although Howitt's careful execution of the plants was praised, critics were generally not taken by the painting or its subject. The *Athenaeum* declared that *The Sensitive Plant* had failed to evoke the same meaning as Shelley's poem, adding rather bluntly, 'We see only a shepherdess walking, and a woman lying dead', and that her 'delicacy of observation has grown almost morbid'.⁵⁵ The heightened colour palette in Howitt's diptych also did not go unnoticed by critics. Hepworth Dixon strongly disapproved of Howitt's Pre-Raphaelite style, reprimanding her for the vivid colour and meticulous detail which had become bywords for the movement. In a letter to Leigh Smith, Howitt recalls Dixon's visit to privately view *The Sensitive Plant* and emotionally (if not erratically) responds to his comments:

I mean however to struggle on manfully – or rather womanfully through all fogs – even through the fogs of criticism which I have an expectation will close round my pictures this year – at least round *The Sensitive Plant* ones, if I am to believe Mr Hepworth Dixon who after having bothered me all summer to let him see my pictures – came here on Saturday and seeing them declared himself disappointed and abused the pictures right and left... That green would be my destruction – there was no hope at all for me unless I took a dark studio in London – none at all! – As for *The Sensitive Plant*! – It was a perfect disgrace to me! – He abominated it! – It was Pre-Raphael

⁵⁵ 'Fine Arts', *Athenaeum*, 17th March 1855, p. 327.

[un]till it was insane! – Who ever saw such figures in nature! Who cared to have a flower garden in their houses! Who wanted Missal-pages painting now a days! “Not Mr Hepworth Dixon certainly!” thought I.⁵⁶

According to Nunn, ‘it was not simply Howitt’s Pre-Raphaelite technique that critics demurred at but the feminism with which it allied itself, clear to see when applied to feminism’s core concern, Woman’.⁵⁷ It may be in these terms that the contrasting absence of women from Leigh Smith’s early landscapes and Benham’s paintings is to be explained. Although Leigh Smith’s Welsh landscapes engaged with her feminist consciousness, they are by no means as radical as her written work, which was met with a more hostile response. Benham’s cast of male characters in *England and Italy* (1859) and *A Boy in Florentine Costume* (1859) were also subject to criticism, but did not provoke ideological opposition for having any explicit references to women.



Figure 4.3: Jane Benham, *England and Italy* (1859), Dr Mark Hirsh and Mrs Jane C. Hirsh

Howitt’s work, on the other hand, gives vivid evidence of the conviction with which Pre-Raphaelitism was explored by ambitious women artists keen to ‘transcend that collection of clichés, maxims, beliefs, fears and prejudices called femininity which were supposed to

⁵⁶ AMH, letter to BLS, 15th January 1855, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 194-203.

⁵⁷ Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (Manchester Art Galleries, 1997), p. 66.

define their capacities and efforts'.⁵⁸ Her artistic work, particularly at this point is more obvious in its engagement with feminist themes and, therefore, more at risk of criticism, regardless of whether she had aligned with Pre-Raphaelitism or not. Needless to say, the responses to Pre-Raphaelitism presented by the work of the 'Sisters in Art' provoke the belief that had these women received such gendered critical attention and had been presented with the same opportunities as their male counterparts, then much of their work would be accounted for and their names not obscured without trace.

The 'Sisters in Art' and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Even so, the 'Sisters in Art's' connections with the Pre-Raphaelites and their art only seemed to have strengthened at this point. Howitt had developed a close friendship with Rossetti which, as an affectionate cartoon of Howitt attests, was built on mutual respect for each other as artists. Rossetti would instruct Howitt on various facets of painting, and she would read the Howitt letters from Australia to him.⁵⁹



Figure 4.4: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Miss Howitt* (1853), Public Domain

⁵⁸ Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement* (Sphere Books, 1989), p. 59.

⁵⁹ G.H Fleming, *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, p. 132.

Alongside Holman Hunt, Millais and Elizabeth Siddall, Howitt and Leigh Smith were invited by Rossetti to join the Folio club, whose aims were to circulate the portfolio monthly for contributions based on a chosen theme.⁶⁰ According to Rossetti and Howitt's correspondence, July's theme was 'Desolation'. Rossetti's 'most beautiful' contribution was a preliminary design for his oil painting *Found* (1854), which depicts a young farmer who discovers that his lover has sunk into prostitution; Millais contributed a 'capital' early sketch of *The Romans Leaving Britain* (1853), which portrays a Roman soldier leaving a broken hearted British girl behind; and Siddall sketched a scene titled *Pippa Passing the Loose Women* (1854), which was inspired by Browning's poem of the same name.⁶¹



Figure 4.5: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Found* (1853), British Museum, London.

⁶⁰ The Folio club was founded in 1854, primarily at the instigation of Millais. Not only did it consist of members of the Pre-Raphaelite members, but it also included a larger number of artists and admitted women members. Other artists that were initially suggested for membership included Ford Madox Brown, Charles Allston Collins, Michael Frederick Halliday, John William Inchbold, Mark Anthony, John Leech, Dicky Doyle, John Mulcaster Carrick and Josef Wolf. Aside from Siddall, Howitt and Leigh Smith, two women artists were also initially included: Lady Waterford and Eleanor Vere Boyle. See: Dennis T. Lanigan, 'Sketching Clubs Associated with Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Circle', *Victorian Web*, (2021), <<https://victorianweb.org/painting/prb/lanigan3.html>> [Accessed 11/10/2023].

⁶¹ AMH, letter to BLS, July 1854 and AMH, letter to Annie Leigh Smith, 6th August 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 159-162.



Figure 4.6: John Everett Millais, Sketch for *The Romans Leaving Britain* (1853), Location Unknown



Figure 4.7: Elizabeth Siddall, *Pippa Passing the Loose Women* (1854), Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

According to Howitt, Leigh Smith produced a ‘wild and desolate and strong’ landscape called *Quarry by the Sea* (1854), which was greatly admired by the Rossettis, but is sadly not extant.⁶² As for Howitt, she was planning a series of paintings titled *The Castaway* (1854),

⁶² AMH, letter to Annie Leigh Smith, 6 August 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, p. 165. Although she was directly involved with the Folio, Parkes earlier poetry suggests her interest in the theme of the ‘fallen woman’. Her poem ‘City Scenes’ (1849), which was published in *The Hastings and St Leonard’s News* contrasts two women in an urban scene: one woman is wealthy and prosperous, and the other woman is ‘fallen’ and has succumbed to poverty. See Jane Rendall, ‘Friendship and Politics’, p. 150.

and contributed one of her drafts to the portfolio (also not extant).⁶³ In a letter to William Allingham, Rossetti provides a detailed account of Howitt's picture:

I've got the Folio here. It contains a design by Millais, of the Recall of the Romans from Britain; one by F.G Stephens, of Death and the Rioters; one by Barbara Smith – a glen scene; and one by A.M.H called *The Castaways* [...] involving a dejected female, mud with lilies lying in it, a dust-heap, and other details; and symbolical of something improper. Of course, seriously, Miss H is quite right in painting it if she chooses, and she is doing so. I daresay it will be a good picture.⁶⁴

Howitt had spoken to Rossetti about their contributions, and thought him the most sympathetic to her own thoughts concerning 'fallen women'. In a letter to Leigh Smith's sister Annie, Howitt describes her 'desolate contribution' and its impact on her artistic production:

It is a sketch for "The Castaways", the miserable flower-girl and her sheaf of despised lilies – it is desolate enough in all conscience – I have found in "Job" a wonderful motto for it – "He cast me into the mire, and I became dust and ashes" [30:19]. It is a capital thing doing these sketches and I have quite a mania upon me just now to do them and only wish I could spend a month in doing nothing else.⁶⁵

In the years following her first work, *Margaret Returning from the Fountain*, Howitt was clearly growing in confidence as an artist and developing a more expressive and radical artistic voice. In light of this, the theme of the 'fallen woman' continued to dominate

⁶³ Augusta Webster first published her poem 'A Castaway' (1867) years after Howitt's painting was first exhibited. Despite this, the similarities in terms of title, theme and subject are very interesting. Without seeing the painting in person, it is impossible to validate this, but it is plausible to suggest that Webster may have found inspiration in Howitt's work.

⁶⁴ Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 214.

⁶⁵ AMH, letter to Annie Leigh Smith, 6th August 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, p. 164.

Howitt's artistic work.⁶⁶ It is also evident that Howitt's interest in the subject had developed into an emotional attachment. In a letter to Leigh Smith, she voices her concerns for one of the young women she had hired to model for *The Castaway*:

My mind is also full of the sad, sad subject, more especially as I have begun the *Castaways* and have a poor girl who has a baby and yet no wedding ring sitting to me for it.⁶⁷

Howitt then describes her mother's intervention before continuing to express her concerns:

She [Miss Coutts] is very much interested about my poor Castaway woman about whom Mamma has had a great consultation with her – I am so pleased at this – But oh, darling, how difficult it is to do any real good in these sad cases! Spite of all our care and anxiety I fear this poor thing will be lost – I fear she has slunk away from us into the wickedness of London.⁶⁸

In another letter to Leigh Smith, Howitt states her intentions to begin working on an untitled piece that draws on the same theme (not extant):

As soon as I've finished my present work I mean to begin a picture from this strange text in Isaiah [...] The scene is the steps of a grand mansion in London – the time early morning – In the house is a great ball – Beneath the awning down the steps comes a beautiful elegant young lady as if returning to her carriage – A lovely pure young creature a sort of Bell- her dress of the richest white brocade, her sweet face looking out from beneath the hood of her scarlet opera cloak- and her arm glittering with bracelets just passing itself in the offered arm of as elegant a gentleman – Her

⁶⁶ The status of prostitution as a feminist issue did not arise until the 1870s, with Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Disease Act.

⁶⁷ AMH, letter to BLS, July 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, p. 160.

⁶⁸ AMH, letter to BLS, August 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 166-168.

face looking up with trust and love into his man's face – face But his face clouded with a sudden spasm as his eyes meet the eyes of another woman – of a hollow eyed, pale woman who clings in the anguish of her wounded soul to the air railing of that great house – Her face must exclaim “Thou saidist she shall be a lady for thou trusted in thy wickedness – thou sadist none seeth me!” – The woman faded and indignant with her passion carries in her arms a babe whose heavy sleepy head hangs innocently over her shoulder – The man she stands between his secret crimes and his honourable respectability – I think it a capital subject – do not mention it please to any one – except if you like to Bessie only I don't want the idea to ooze out.⁶⁹

The work described above explores the same themes as *Margaret* and *The Castaway*. However, rather than solely focusing on the ‘fallen woman’, Howitt calls attention to the man who has betrayed his wife and abandoned his mistress and child. The painting not only highlights the arrogance and infidelity of men, but openly criticises the ignorance of higher social classes. As aforementioned, many of the works Howitt had either produced or sought to produce make increasingly explicit social comments on the double standards of morality. Yet despite her earlier triumph with *Margaret Returning from the Fountain*, Howitt's later depictions of victimised women were increasingly criticised by the press. Alongside *The Sensitive Plant*, *The Castaway* was attacked for its tedious and repetitive morbidity. *The Castaway* was regarded by Hepworth Dixon as ‘merely the same story [as Margaret] over again’.⁷⁰ The *Athenaeum*, albeit admitting that *The Castaway* was a better picture than *The Sensitive Plant*, urged for Howitt to abandon such melancholy subjects and change artistic direction:

⁶⁹ AMH, letter to BLS, July 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 159-162.

⁷⁰ AMH, letter to BLS, 15th January 1855, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 202-203.

We hope Miss Howitt will not confine herself to these heart-broken, tear-stained subjects, but get out into the sunshine, and show us of what healthy joy the earth is capable. Why will she stand sounding the depths of this salt sea of human tears?⁷¹

Hirsch notes that the breaking off of her engagement to Bateman in 1853, combined with the criticism she received for her works led to Howitt becoming ‘severely depressed, swinging between bouts of hopelessness and bouts of frenetic excitement when ideas came so thick and fast that she found it hard to stick with one painting at a time’.⁷² Determined to get Howitt away from London and from her own affairs, Leigh Smith travelled with Howitt down to Sussex for a painting retreat.⁷³ The two women stayed at Mrs Samworth’s Clive Vale, where Holman Hunt had been working on *Our English Coasts* (1852) during his stay a few years prior.⁷⁴ Howitt wrote to her mother on 10th August, ‘We were very much amused by finding the traces of Holman Hunt’s painting in great spots of green, blue, and red, and traces of oil and turpentine upon a picturesque, little, stout oak table, which we had chosen also for our work; and thus quite unintentionally we have trodden in his steps’.⁷⁵

⁷¹ ‘Fine Arts’, *Athenaeum*, 2nd June 1855, p. 648.

⁷² Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 107. This is discussed further in chapter 6.

⁷³ Leigh Smith embarked on an extra-marital affair with the publisher John Chapman. She and the ‘Sisters in Art’ had a number of works published by Chapman in the 1850s and they were close associates. Leigh Smith eventually broke off the relationship as she refused to marry and lose her legal rights. Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 113.

⁷⁴ Clive Vale was owned by the widowed Ann Samworth, who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle. She exhibited her own work with Holman Hunt and Leigh Smith in the 1850s. Samworth’s children were close with Leigh Smith, with her second child Joanna Samworth eventually becoming an artist herself. Joanna was inspired by Leigh Smith and later contributed works to the Society of Women Artists. There little to no scholarship on the Samworth women, but the information gathered is part of a blog dedicated to Jerome Nicholas Vlieland, who was the husband of Frances Samworth, Joanna’s sister. See: <https://jnvlieland.blogspot.com/2020/08/clive-vale-house-and-frances-samworth.html>

⁷⁵ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, pp. 11-12.



Figure 4.8: William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts 'Strayed Sheep'* (1852), Tate Britain

It seems as though their trip to Hastings was a productive one: Leigh Smith exhibited landscapes from this trip both at the Royal Academy and at the Crystal Palace in May 1856 which were mostly praised by critics. From this exhibition, Ruskin had singled out her watercolour *Cornfield after a Storm* (1855) for particular praise.⁷⁶ As for Howitt, she had been commissioned by the wealthy philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts to produce a painting of Beatrice and Dante.⁷⁷ Howitt later documented their stay at Clive Vale Farm in her memoir 'Sojourn in the Farmhouse by the Sea', which was published as part of a two part series titled 'Unpainted Pictures' in the *Crayon* in 1854. Interestingly, Howitt applies the same fictional alias for Leigh Smith as she did in *An Art Student in Munich*:

September 12th – Justina and I have been located several weeks in this “love lorn” farm-house near the sea, and our pleasant life glides away only too rapidly, like a

⁷⁶ J.J. Piper, *Robertsbridge and its History* (Silverhill Printing Works, 1906), p. 25.

⁷⁷ Given that Rossetti had his own interest in Dante's poetry, it is likely that Howitt was influenced by him in her choice of Dante as the painting's subject. Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, p. 41.

bright happy dream. We have stored up in our memories many a joy to revisit us like fitful gleams of sunshine in after years amidst sterner and more stirring realities.⁷⁸

Clearly, their expeditions helped Howitt and Leigh Smith to escape the trials and tribulations of their everyday lives. In her life as in her fiction, Howitt envisioned an artistic haven for herself and Leigh Smith in which both women are free from all constraints and able to pursue their creative endeavours.

The pair came to enjoy their painting expeditions together and instructed each other on how and what to paint. During one trip to Scaland's Farm in 1854, (Leigh Smith's residence in Hastings), Howitt gave Leigh Smith instruction on how to paint with oils:

AMH [Howitt] says my little oils are very good for 1st productions from nature. My landscape is very PRB... My head is full of pictures and I shall be a selfish cove all summer for I must work out a grand picture landscape and one figure which is in my head distinct.⁷⁹

Another notable expedition that the pair enjoyed was a trip to the Isle of Wight in 1856. Leigh Smith and Howitt were staying at Ventnor on the south coast for the express purpose of landscape painting. On the 14th January, Leigh Smith wrote to their friend Marian Evans, 'Anna Mary read to me as we sat together in our studio overhanging the stormy sea after our day's painting'.⁸⁰ During this trip, Leigh Smith was working on *Ventnor, Isle of Wight* (1856), which was exhibited at the RA and the Crystal Palace alongside her Hastings

⁷⁸ AMH, 'Unpainted Pictures from an Artist's Diary II: Sojourn in the Farmhouse by the Sea', *Crayon*, 3 (March 1856), pp. 68-71. In the 'diary' that comprises the memoir's structure, this account is dated 18th September 1855. Note that both parts of 'Unpainted Pictures' were published in the *English Woman's Journal* eight years later. This memoir is very important in terms of documenting the life and works of Howitt post-1856. Along with Howitt's apparent 'breakdown', this text will be discussed further in chapter 7.

⁷⁹ BLS, letter to BRP, 1853, GCPP Parkes 5/180. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 51.

⁸⁰ BLS, letter to Marian Lewes, 14 January 1856, GCPP Bodichon 4/20. Quoted in Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, p. 103.

landscapes.⁸¹ The work that Howitt had produced during their stay on the Isle of Wight is not extant. However, given that Howitt would have been painting from the same scenes as Leigh Smith, it is likely that Howitt's work would have depicted similar, if not the same subject matter.



Figure 4.9: Barbara Leigh Smith, *Ventnor, Isle of Wight* (1856), Delaware Art Museum

Landscape painting was Leigh Smith's preferred genre and *Ventnor* demonstrates her vigorous response to, and conceptual grasp of, Pre-Raphaelitism. Of the series of paintings that she exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Crystal Palace, this work was particularly commended for its engagement with the Pre-Raphaelite style. William Michael Rossetti described the painting as being a 'capital coastal scene, full of real Pre-Raphaelitism, that is to say, full of character and naturalism in the detail, as well as multiplicity of it'.⁸² Leigh Smith embraces the Pre-Raphaelite attention to detail in every brushstroke: from the intricate

⁸¹ Geologist Robin McInnes has identified the viewpoint to near Luccombe, just to the east of Ventnor, looking northeast across Shanklin Bay to Culver Cliff in the far distance. It is suggested that the headland in the middle distance is Woody Point to the west of Ventnor (and not where it should be), but has been positioned there for artistic effect. I also had the pleasure in travelling to the Isle of Wight for the purpose of researching for this chapter and was able to see the viewpoint myself. See: 'Ventnor, Isle of Wight' by Miss Barbara Bodichon, née Leigh Smith (1827-1891), *Victorian Web*, 19th May 2018, <<https://victorianweb.org/painting/landscape/bodichon.html>> [Accessed 05/02/2024].

⁸² William Michael Rossetti, 'Art News from England', *Crayon*, 3.8, (August 1856), p. 245.

textures of the cliff face to the subtle variations in colour that mimic nature's play with light and shadow, each element contributes a realism that transports viewers into the scene. When looking at the painting, Leigh Smith skilfully captures the essence of Ventnor's charm; the towering cliffs stand proudly against the crashing waves which creates a dramatic contrast between the land and sea. Near the centre of the painting sit two figures, who are possibly modelled on Leigh Smith and Howitt. Leigh Smith's correspondence during this trip suggests that she and Howitt regularly sketched by the cliff side, and the hair colour of one figure mirrors Leigh Smith's own golden hair, which further supports the claim that the two figures are modelled on both women. She also renders the landscape by adopting the Pre-Raphaelite technique of colour: Leigh Smith's use of watercolour and bodycolour on paper brings out the vibrant hues and delicate details of the coastline. Above all, the entire scene is corporeal: Leigh Smith captures the waves crashing against the rocks, the clouds passing in the sky, and the shrubs as though they are waving in coastal winds. The two sketching figures are also a part of the landscape; they are present, but go largely unseen, enveloped within the vastness of the panorama and vegetation.

Landscapes painted by women artists tended to take place through domestic windows, and these 'circumscribed views could be seen as more appropriate for a feminine domestic audience than the commanding purview of the masculine gaze'.⁸³ For example, in 'Unpainted Pictures', Howitt's describes the view from Clive Vale Farm from their 'little sitting-room window', which supports the pre-conceived notion that women artists mostly accessed the landscape from afar and not physically.⁸⁴ Leigh Smith's earlier works, such as *View from My Window: Maentwrog*, also resonates with the general attitudes towards women artists in that their landscapes were more frequently exhibited as 'views', a word that suggests 'a personal

⁸³ Taylor, 'Too Individual an Artist', p. 56.

⁸⁴ AMH, 'Unpainted Pictures', p. 68.

rendering, a mood picture rather than a representation'.⁸⁵ As previously discussed in chapter three, the work's title suggests that although the landscape is painted solely from Leigh Smith's perspective, she is restricted by a 'window' that prevents her from accessing the landscape. However, when reconsidering her choice of title, Leigh Smith sets out to reclaim the word 'landscape' as an authentic objective transcription of material fact. In this landscape, Leigh Smith retains her own subjective position through her use of 'my', and detaches herself from the actual view that is represented. As an artist, she divorces herself from her creation hence why the emphasis is on the place where she stands. By placing the emphasis on 'my' before window in her title, she is claiming ownership of her own subjectivity while rendering the actual objective view of the landscape. In the case of *Ventnor*, Leigh Smith actually inserts herself and Howitt within the landscape, and in doing so redefines the view from their own perspective as both artist and object. In other words, Leigh Smith shifts her positions as not just creator and beholder of the landscape, but an active part of it. In objectifying herself and Howitt as part of the landscape, she erases all possibilities of subjectivity for her viewers and retains ownership of herself and the view she has created.

Howitt also troubles this idea of female subjectivity in 'Unpainted Pictures'. Although she acknowledges that her view of the landscape can be seen through their 'little sitting-room window', and that her account is an 'attempt to sketch a memory', her description of the view suggests that her perspective is not just a personal rendering, but a detailed and considerably accurate recollection of the landscape:

Our eyes rest upon the gentle undulations of the steep hill rising opposite to our window, beyond the sloping meadow which abruptly descends from the little gate of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

the farm-house garden. The steep ascent of the hill is varied by the green pasture-fields and the golden lines of ripening harvest, and is created by a coppice of oaks...

We have watched this old oak-grove under many aspects.⁸⁶

As in Leigh Smith's landscapes of Maentwrog and Ventnor, Howitt retains her and Leigh Smith's subjective position through the use of 'my' and 'our' in her detailed description of the view. In doing so, she claims ownership of the fond memories she shared with Leigh Smith at Clive Vale Farm whilst providing her readers with an objective and realistic account of her surroundings.

It was during these expeditions that Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes networked with some of their artist friends and colleagues. Among these colleagues were Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddall, who befriended the 'Sisters in Art' through Dante Gabriel. Eager to introduce his sister to his friends, Rossetti once wrote of Bodichon in a letter to Christina:

Ah! If you were only like Miss Barbara Smith, a young lady I met at the Howitts', blessed with large rations of tin, fat, enthusiasm, & golden hair, who thinks nothing of climbing up a mountain in breeches or wading through a stream in none, in the sacred name of pigment.⁸⁷

Rossetti was keen for his sister to be a part of this new and stimulating circle of women, often encouraging her to take part in their collaborative pursuits. According to Marsh, Rossetti had also sent an individual of Christina's *Verses* to Howitt, Bodichon and Parkes which they happily received.⁸⁸ When the 'Sisters in Art' finally came to meet Christina in 1855, they had

⁸⁶ AMH, 'Unpainted Pictures', p. 68.

⁸⁷ Letter from DGR to CGR, 8th November 1853, reproduced in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman, 1, (D.S. Brewer, 2002), p. 294.

⁸⁸ Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, p. 34.

reportedly so long heard and known of each other's activities that formalities were unnecessary.⁸⁹

At this point, Siddall's health had deteriorated and she spent much of her time with Rossetti in Hastings to recuperate. Her time spent in Hastings inevitably led to her meeting with the 'Sisters in Art', who were often in the area whilst on their painting expeditions. Leigh Smith had developed a fascination with Siddall who, according to Hirsch, must have reminded Leigh Smith of her mother's anomalous social position.⁹⁰ She wrote in a letter to Parkes:

I have got a strong interest in a young girl formerly model to Millais and Dante Rossetti; now Rossetti's love and pupil, she is a genius and will (if she lives) be a great artist, her gift discovered by strange accident such as rarely befall woman. Alas! Her life has been hard and full of trials, her home unhappy and her whole fate hard. Rossetti has been an honourable friend to her and I do not doubt if circumstances were favourable would marry her. She is of course under a ban having been a model (tho' only to 2 PRB's) ergo do not mention it to anyone.⁹¹

A second letter to Parkes echoes similar sentiments, but confirms Leigh Smith's suspicions that Siddall's recovery is doubtful:

I wrote in a great hurry as Dante Rossetti only came as the post was going out [...] I think Miss S. is a genius and very beautiful and although she is not a lady her mind is poetic and that D. Rossetti sympathises with and does not much consider the 1st. He wishes her to see Ladies and it seems to me the only way to keep her self-esteem from

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 50.

⁹¹ BLS, letter to BRP, 1850, GCPP Parkes, 5/172.

sinking. I do not think she will recover and perhaps this prevents one from thinking much about the future for them.⁹²

In April 1854, Leigh Smith helped organise one of Siddall's convalescent stays at Mrs Elphick's at 5 High Street, Hastings, in a room big enough for 'eating, drawing and sleeping'.⁹³ During the same month, Rossetti and Siddall returned to Hastings where Parkes joined them, noting in her journal:

Dante Rossetti brought Miss Siddal down on Saturday. Together they form the most touching group I ever saw in my life [...] she the tallest, slenderest creature, habited in pale lilac; with masses of red auburn hair looped up in a wild picturesque fashion – every line of her is spiritual grace, but I fear there is no hope for her, she seems to me in an early but hopeless stage of consumption [...] I never saw a creature who seemed to be so full of poetry [...] This girl 'Elizabeth' is intellectual whatever her education may have been.⁹⁴

Howitt does not specifically comment on Siddall in her surviving letters, but it is noted in her mother's *Autobiography* that she and Howitt 'saw a good deal of Miss Siddall' when staying at the Hermitage. Akin to Parkes and Leigh Smith's comments, Mary describes Siddall as 'very delicate' and 'an interesting woman'.⁹⁵

As in Howitt's novella, the 'Sisters in Art' took Siddall into their care, keeping her company, taking her out for long walks and nursing her back to good health. In return, Rossetti was grateful to Howitt, Leigh Smith and Parkes for their kindness to Siddall, referring to them in a letter to his mother as the 'ladies who have been most attentive to

⁹² BLS, letter to BRP, 1854, GCPP Parkes, 5/173.

⁹³ Ibid. Quoted in Anne Woolley, *The poems of Elizabeth Siddal in context* (MUP, 2021), p. 156.

⁹⁴ BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, 24 April 1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35.

⁹⁵ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, p. 348.

Lizzy’.⁹⁶ Their burgeoning friendship led to Rossetti and Siddall returning to Hastings again, this time meeting Leigh Smith and Howitt at Scaland’s Farm. During their stay, the group executed designs for each other and proposed ideas for future sketches together, which according to Rossetti, ‘did not seem to fatigue Lizzie much’.⁹⁷ They also frequently gathered to write and paint and, at one stage, Siddall modelled for the group with irises in her hair.⁹⁸ In a letter from Hastings to his brother William, Rossetti recounted:

Everyone adores and reveres Lizzy... Barbara Smith, Miss Howitt, and I, made sketches of her dear head with iris stuck in her dear hair the other day, and we all wrote up our monograms on the panel of the window, in memorial of the very pleasant day we had spent at the farm.⁹⁹



Figure 4.10: Anna Mary Howitt, *Elizabeth Siddal* (1854), Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library

⁹⁶ DGR, letter to Frances Rossetti, 7th May 1854, reproduced in Fredeman, *Correspondence*, p. 343. Rossetti sent Parkes a volume of his sister Christina’s poetry and a signed holograph of his poem ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (which Parkes had previously admired) as a token of his thanks. See: DGR, letters to BRP, 9th May 1854 in Fredeman, *Correspondence*, p. 345, and November 1856, GCPP Parkes 9/57-8.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ I had the pleasure in viewing these three portraits of Siddall together at ‘The Rossettis’ show which was held at Delaware Art Museum. It was the first time since their creation that all three sketches were reunited and presented together.

⁹⁹ DGR, letter to Ford Madox Brown, 23 May 1854, Fredeman, *Correspondence*, p. 49.



Figure 4.11: Barbara Leigh Smith, *Elizabeth Siddal* (1854), Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library



Figure 4.12: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Profile Portrait of Elizabeth Siddal with Irises in Her Hair* (1854), National Gallery of Canada, Gift of the Dennis T. Lanigan Collection, 2020.

All three portraits made on this occasion reflect each artist's individual style: Leigh Smith's sketch illustrates her preference for catching a likeness or as swiftly capturing a

landscape; Howitt's portrait shows the German influence of her studies in Munich, while the sitter's expression chimes with a later comment by Parkes, that Siddall was a 'remarkably retiring English girl who had the look of one who read her Bible and said her prayers every night'.¹⁰⁰ Rossetti's interpretation of Siddall is comparable with the copious number of portraits that he later produced prior to her premature death, her eyes are heavy lidded, with particular attention paid to her neck, lips and jawline. The choice to sketch Siddall with irises in her hair is an interesting one. It is perhaps an allusion to Greek mythology, wherein Iris, the messenger of the Gods, was 'fleet of foot' because 'the bloom of the flower is short', which is sadly prophetic of Siddall's short life. All in all, the three sketches are identical in subject and medium, but give us a unique opportunity to view different sides to Siddall through each artist's eyes: Leigh Smith brings out Siddall's dignity, Howitt her pathos, and Rossetti her austerity.¹⁰¹

Working together was a common activity for both the 'Sisters in Art' and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, where a sense of community in art was essential to their ethos. It is clear when looking at these sketches and their correspondence during this period that both groups were mutually inspired by each other. For instance, the 'Sister's' discussions surrounding the woman question stimulated the production of many works by Pre-Raphaelite male artists that explore, interrogate or complicate these ideals.¹⁰² According to Anne Woolley, Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes's 'intense' friendship with Siddall had also influenced the latter's creative output during this period.¹⁰³ For instance, *Pippa Passes* (1854)

¹⁰⁰ BRP, *A Passing World* (Ward & Downey, 1897) p. 24.

¹⁰¹ Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁰² Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood has been identified by scholars as misogynistic and patriarchal, a number of their works exalt the power of women. As Prettejohn proposes, the Brotherhood (despite their differences) should be 'commended for their openness to new forms of collaboration'. Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: In Conversation' in *Aspectus* <https://aspectus.york.ac.uk/Issues/2-2020/in-conversation-pre-raphaelite-sisters?fbclid=IwAR3IVFON2KVo5-iKG8bwkadPP2pKf_qhLzh-Z7zm8aXr_Dp5ZCe6D01N16I> [Accessed 29/01/2024].

¹⁰³ Anne Woolley, *The poems of Elizabeth Siddall in context*, p. 144.

and *Lady Clare* (1857) and much of her poetry comment on feminist themes. ‘At Last’ (1861) uses the ‘fallen woman’ trope to demonstrate the perils and bravery of a Victorian woman who bears a child prior to marriage. Although the protagonist of ‘At Last’ is aware of the consequences of her actions, she is not consumed by her own circumstantial misery. ‘Fragment of a Ballad’ (possibly 1854) explores the emotional transition of a young lovesick maiden to a woman who is frustrated by the constraints of her gender; and ‘The Lust of the Eyes’ (undated) subtly criticises the idea that women’s sole purpose is for the pleasure of men. Although Siddall has not often been attributed to other women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, her friendship with the ‘Sisters in Art’ was fruitful and collaborative. As suggested in their letters, the ‘Sisters in Art’ were just as influential and important in Siddall’s life and career as the Rossettis.¹⁰⁴

Leigh Smith’s use of the word ‘genius’ in her letters (according to its mid-century definition) carries an implication of artistic potential that even Siddall was probably unaware of.¹⁰⁵ Akin to her fictional correlative in *The Sisters in Art*, Siddall possessed the natural ability and intelligence to be a successful artist, but she was ‘untrained’ and without the agency that would propel her to excel on a professional scale. It is therefore plausible that Leigh Smith recognised Siddall’s inability to expose this artistry in herself and must have felt compelled as a staunch educationalist and reformer to intervene. However, as Woolley notes, Leigh Smith’s ‘championship’ of Siddall can be read as a ‘form of patronage or short-term philanthropic concern, not an equal interchange’.¹⁰⁶ Leigh Smith’s comment about Siddall having a poetic mind without being a lady implies that the two were normally assumed synonymous and the class difference between her and Siddall does seem to have been an

¹⁰⁴ Siddall’s friendship with Bodichon, Howitt and Parkes is definitely deserving of more scholarly attention. I hope to pursue this in future projects.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Genius’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: OUP, December 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/genius_n?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use

¹⁰⁶ Anne Woolley, *The poems of Elizabeth Siddall in context*, p. 157.

issue. Despite their honourable intentions, middle-class women had no true sense of the reality endured by working-class women, nor were some of their efforts entirely representative of their needs. The same in this sense can be said of Howitt's efforts to rehabilitate 'fallen women' and Parkes's advocacy for women's access to education. Perhaps the 'Sisters in Art' merely saw Siddall as an invalid requiring their charity, her reduced social status mitigating against her being regarded as a fellow professional. It can even be read that the sketches of Siddall produced by Leigh Smith and Howitt emphasise her poor status: her face with its averted gaze presents a blank and passive mask of beauty that fails to fully connect lower-middle-class model with upper-middle-class artists.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, their friendship with Siddall exemplifies the collaborative model they envisioned in Munich, wherein their collective artistic labour fosters empowerment and prosperity for all women. Their friendship also signalled the expansion of their women's collective and the formation of the Langham Place Group in the years that followed.

Literary Influences in Parkes's *Poems*

As for Parkes, her interest in women's education continued to play a formative role in her literary work. On the eve of her twenty-first birthday, Parkes had penned a prayer in her diary, asking God to aid her in leading 'a good life; one blessed for humanity, successful in arts and poetry, and happy for myself [...] May our generation and our sex be better for our having been born'.¹⁰⁸ However, this period saw an element of self-doubt in Parkes who began comparing herself to Leigh Smith and Howitt in her letters. In one letter, she voiced to Leigh Smith, 'What shall I do? What shall I educate myself for?' and admitted feeling that she was 'not in the least clever'.¹⁰⁹ Parkes became unsure of her literary talents, and her earlier works were not as commercially successful as she had hoped. Nevertheless, she continued to submit

¹⁰⁷ Cherry, *Painting Women*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁸ BRP, Diary for 1849, GCPP Parkes 1/4.

¹⁰⁹ BRP, letter to BLS, 5th December 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/39.

poetry for publication in the *Birmingham Journal* and the *Hastings and St Leonards News*. In November 1852, Parkes came to publish her first volume of poetry, *Poems*. Having recovered from her spell of self-doubt and insecurity, the publication of *Poems* was a profound moment for her, as her diary entry demonstrates:

My poems are out [...] They have had 3 favourable reviews, & [are] already connected with one of my deepest experiences. Many have now the deepest of my thoughts [...] I think they are going to succeed in the present and limited sense. In the future and nobler sense I have sworn myself that I will be a poet.¹¹⁰

As in many poetry collections of the time, Parkes's volume comprises a range of genres and themes. For instance, the first poem 'Warning' establishes a strong sense of urgency to prove her moral purpose as a writer. Poems such as 'The Highlands' and 'Summer Song' are written upon the theme of nature, and other poems in the collection, such as 'The Moors', show Parkes placing her poetry at the centre of her faith. In this, she was following the dominant trend in women's verse at the time. As Elizabeth Gray notes, 'expressions of piety [...] inform the majority of women's verse' in the Victorian era, especially in the work of women writers publishing in devotional anthologies and periodicals.¹¹¹

Friendship is also one of the key themes of *Poems*: the whole volume is dedicated to Leigh Smith; and the poem 'To E.B.' is a tribute to her cousin Elizabeth Blackwell. The poem 'To *****' is an ode to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who was Parkes's inspiration and literary heroine. Parkes had met Barrett Browning in the summer of 1852 at Anne Proctor's home and spoke of her visit in her journal:

¹¹⁰ BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, 13th November 1852, GCPP Parkes 1/35.

¹¹¹ F. Elizabeth Gray, *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), p. 6.

I went to Mrs Proctor's to meet Mrs and Mrs Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning!
At last, friend so long and so passionately as she has been to me. I knew her books so long ago, when I never heard her name, that she seemed to belong to myself like some saint to be worshipped... She, my idol... her whole being tho' exquisitely feminine is full of firmness and power.¹¹²

Clearly, meeting Barrett Browning in person was Parkes's realisation of what women could do with and achieve in literature. The poem, 'To *****' echoes the sentiments and imagery of Parkes's journal entry, in which she also refers to Barrett Browning as a 'friend'.¹¹³ Proctor passed on Parkes's poem to Barrett Browning who, after reading it herself, passed on her gratitude:

Mrs Proctor has brought your volume to me & pointed out the page which, she says, relates to me – and now, I can't help writing to you to thank you warmly from my heart for the words which have touched it so deeply. Thank you, thank you... Always I shall wish you the best good, - & you will believe...will you not?... that these are the wishes of a "friend".¹¹⁴

In declaring herself as Parkes's 'friend', Barrett Browning is reciprocating Parkes's sentiment of poetic friendship and female solidarity. As for Parkes, her tribute to Barrett Browning placed her in a tradition of women poets addressing each other, which functioned as an imagined dialogue across generations and helped establish a sense of poetic 'professional sisterhood'.¹¹⁵

¹¹² BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, 13th November 1852, GCPP Parkes 1/35.

¹¹³ BRP, *Poems*, p. 93.

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, letter to BRP, 27th August 1852, *The Browning Correspondence Online Edition*, <<https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/3365/>> [Accessed 07/02/2024].

¹¹⁵ Margaret Reynolds, 'Introduction' in *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Blackwell, 1995).

The revised edition of *Poems* includes the poem ‘Two Artists’, which was admired by Howitt and Leigh Smith: ¹¹⁶

TWO ARTISTS

Within a little room
Doth one dear Painter sit,
‘Tis fringed with summer bloom,
And the ivy drops o’er it:
Down doth the ivy drop,
To all the arts akin;
Shy little birds will stop
And slily peep therein.
The clouds are curious!
So is the upper blue;
And the tall tree-tops that laugh at us
Bend their great heads to you.
Of cloud and tree and spray
The faint wall-shadow dances,
Murmurs the summer wind always,
Envious of your sweet fancies!
Here doth full silence reign
Thro’ all the golden morn,
While dreams flit in and out again
Ere Art’s fair child is born.
Out on the far hill-side,
Begirt ith curling fern,
Where chasing clouds do ride,
Doth the other Painter learn.
There’s neither rock nor tree,
Nor restive mountain stream,

¹¹⁶ AMH, letter to BRP, 1855, GCPP Parkes 7/4.

Cloud-peak nor valley
Cut by a slanting beam;-
There's no flood in the meadow,
There's no bird in the sky,
Nor deep mid-forest shadow,
But fills this Painter's eye.
Perch'd on a crazy paling,
Deep in a hawthorn hedge,
Or briny air inhaling
Which whirls by ocean edge;-
Wherever Nature calls
Will this brave artist speed,
And I! – whate'er befalls,
Follow like Ganymede!

Bessie Rayner Parkes¹¹⁷

Throughout the poem, Parkes presents contrasting forms of artistic expression and their environments: the first artist works 'Within a little room' amid nature's charms, with birds, ivy, and sunlight providing inspiration; whereas the second artist ventures 'Out on the far hill-side' to capture the vast and untamed elements of clouds, mountains, and ocean. The poem's concise language and vivid imagery create a distinct contrast between the two artists and their respective settings, capturing the dreamy atmosphere of the studio and the boundless freedom of the natural landscape.

As Jane Rendall proposes, 'Two Artists' is likely a verse-portrait of Howitt and Leigh Smith respectively.¹¹⁸ It is suggested that the first painter working 'within a little room' is Howitt, who documented her similar experiences in sharing and working in a room with

¹¹⁷ BRP, 'Two Artists', *Poems* (John Chapman, 1852; 1855), pp. 32-33.

¹¹⁸ Rendall, 'Friendship and Politics', p. 150.

Benham in Munich. In *An Art Student*, Howitt describes their shared space as having ‘two sister easels’ and ‘two pretty little sister bed-rooms’, which echoes the themes that pervades Parkes’s poem.¹¹⁹ The other painter, ‘Perch’d on a crazy pailing/Deep in a hawthorn hedge’, is presumed to be Leigh Smith, who regularly painted at cliffside as her landscape *Ventnor* attests. Also, Parkes’s devotion to her friendship with Leigh Smith is discernible in the poem’s conclusion: ‘Wherever Nature calls / Will this brave artist speed, / And I! - whate’er befalls, / Follow like Ganymede!’¹²⁰ In depicting both artists and their contrasting artistic approaches, Parkes not only celebrates the talents of Howitt and Leigh Smith, but the diversity of creative expression. As in Howitt’s *The Sisters in Art*, Parkes’s poem champions women artists who are equally talented in their individual ways. The line ‘to all the arts akin’ can be read as a reference to ‘three truths rarely found so united in design’ that Howitt’s fictional ‘sisters’ (and in turn, the ‘Sisters in Art’) respectively embody.¹²¹

It was during their initial meeting in Munich that the ‘Sisters in Art’ first considered the powerful potential that came with female cooperation, and affirmed that they wanted to achieve something much bigger with their art. The work produced during this period shows that they established their professional working identities, and embraced the idea of a socially engaged art. However, it was the years that followed that they truly epitomised their stance and aspirations that espoused the cause of the early women’s movement. Leigh Smith, Howitt and Parkes realised their roles as artists and writers, and their need to turn their artistic and poetic voices into direct political commentary and engagement with the contemporary world. Therefore, it was perhaps here, where the workings of the ‘Sisters in Art’ really began.

¹¹⁹ AMH, *An Art Student*, p, 88.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

¹²¹ AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 334.

5. 'Transcending Boundaries' – Forming the Women's Art Alliance

The emergence of professional working women during the nineteenth century has been inextricably tied to political and social reform. As Wettlaufer reminds us, many women at the time 'self-consciously constructed an artistic identity that engaged with larger issues of representation, gender and labour', and used their work to express their own political thoughts.¹ The 'Sisters in Art', however, had their own ambitions to transcend the boundaries of what women could do and achieve with their work. They recognised the powerful potential that came with female cooperation, and concluded that women, regardless of class or profession, could come together not only to achieve access to artistic training, but rights to education, voting, property ownership and employment.² Consequently, the 'Sisters in Art' put their ideas into action by bringing together a wider network of women artists, writers and thinkers who were equally committed to the reform of laws which affected them. Together, these women facilitated the progress of the women's movement, both in the dissemination of ideas and arguments through their work and in terms of accessing the money, influential contacts and skilled workers needed to make their ideas a reality. This chapter will examine the group's political trajectory, discuss their efforts with the Langham Place Group and the *English Woman's Journal* and shed light on their collective successes that became central to the development of the women's movement in the present day.

Epistolary Friendships and Communities in Parkes's 'Summer Sketches'

By the mid-1850s, the 'Sisters in Art' were experienced artists and writers who were fully immersed in their cultural and social milieu. Their works featured regularly in leading

¹ Wettlaufer, 'Politics and Poetics', p. 129.

² Following her return from Munich, Benham was not as active a contributor to the conversations concerning women's rights as the other women were. Benham met and married artist William Hay in 1851 and had a son the following year. In the mid-1850s, Benham left London for Florence to help support the campaigns for Italian independence. Although she was still professionally active and was supportive of her 'art sisters', she spent much of her time in Italy hereafter.

exhibitions and periodicals, and their names became increasingly known in the public domain. As a result, the group attracted the attention of a number of notable figures who invited them to their social gatherings.³ Through the Howitts' literary connections, the group were invited to an evening soiree at the home of the radical publisher John Chapman, who subsequently became Parkes and Leigh Smith's main publisher at the time. Among the guests were the Unitarians James and Harriet Martineau, the novelist William Thackeray and Swedish writer Fredrika Bremer, a writer whose novels Howitt's mother had translated and the group much admired. In a letter to her mother, Parkes recalled how excited she was to be in Bremer's company:

I kissed her for all the hours and years which her creations have been like real experience to me... I am almost crying now I write it.⁴

Another guest that attended that evening was the writer Marian Evans (George Eliot), who had recently moved to London and was lodging at the Chapmans' home.⁵ Parkes had previously met Evans during a visit to Warwickshire and had quickly determined that she was 'very clever'.⁶ In March 1851, she wrote to Leigh Smith of her initial impressions:

I do not know whether you will like Miss Evans. At least I know you will like her for her large unprejudiced mind, her complete superiority to most women. But whether

³ Correspondence suggests that Parkes was twice invited by the poet Samuel Rogers to attend her social breakfasts and invited to dine at Castle Howard with the 9th Earl of Carlisle (the painter George Howard) at least once. Parkes and the Howitts were also regularly invited to the home of Adelaide Proctor, which was renowned at the time as one of the preeminent meeting-places for leading figures of literature. Aside from socialising with the literati, Leigh Smith was frequently in the company of politicians such as Richard Cobden and Jacob Bright and exiled political refugees from Europe such as Giuseppe Mazzinin, Lajos Kossuth and Ledru Rollin. See: Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 78 and Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 27.

⁴ BRP, letter to EP, 16th October 1851, GCPP Parkes 2/3.

⁵ I intend to refer to George Eliot by her real, maiden name. This is the name that Parkes and Leigh Smith use in their letters, and I believe is a true reflection of her during this period. It has been suggested that Evans was romantically involved with Chapman at some point during her lodgings at his home. Presumably, Parkes and Leigh Smith were unaware of this, especially given Leigh Smith's own romantic complications with Chapman a few years later. It is assumed that their fling had dissolved when Evans fell in love with George Lewes and moved out of the Chapman's home to pursue a relationship with him.

⁶ BRP, letter to BLS, 11th September 1851, GCPP Parkes 5/57.

you or I should ever love her, as a friend, I do not at all know. There is as yet no very high moral purpose in the impression she makes and it is that alone which commands love, every day I feel it more. I think she will alter. Large angels take a long time unfolding their wings, or, which I think is the case, they are coming, budding – when people have large minds, and a capacity of warm affection, must not their souls grow?⁷

As Hirsch observes, there is a clear sense here that Parkes was considering whether Evans met the criteria of the ‘beautiful sisterhood in art’ that she had discussed with Howitt, Leigh Smith and Benham in Munich.⁸ What is also clear in Parkes’s letter is her admiration of Evans’s ‘large unprejudiced mind’ and ‘complete superiority to most women’. Despite her initial reservations, Parkes’s friendship with Evans flourished over the coming years. In a letter to her friend Sara Hennell, Evans describes Parkes as ‘a dear, ardent, honest creature’ and reported that they were to be good friends.⁹ Parkes had also later admitted that Evans had a greater ‘capacity for warm affection’ than had been apparent at first.¹⁰ Their friendship was eventually extended to Leigh Smith, who wrote of her immediate attraction to Evans.¹¹ Evans returned Leigh Smith’s admiration, musing in her letters that she was ‘agreeably impressed with Barbara’.¹²

At this point, Evans was establishing herself as a professional writer and was employed by Chapman as the anonymous editor of the *Westminster Review*. On seeing some of Parkes’s drafts that were submitted for publication, Evans wrote to her encouragingly, ‘Publish all the poems with all my heart, but don’t stop there. Work on and on and do better

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ AMH, *An Art Student*, p. 95. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 61.

⁹ Marian Evans, letter to Charles and Cara Bray and Sara Hennell, 2nd February 1852. Quoted in Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot, a Life* (Penguin, 1997), p. 95.

¹⁰ BRP, letter to BLS, 6th March 1852, GCPP Parkes 5/60a.

¹¹ Gordon S. Haight (ed), *The George Eliot Letters* (Yale University Press, 1985), p. 110.

¹² Ibid., p. 99.

things still'.¹³ Parkes appreciated her comments, noting Evans's 'odd mixture of truth and fondness' and how she 'expresses every opinion, good and bad, with the most unflinching plainness and yet she seems able to see faults without losing tenderness'.¹⁴ Parkes also enlisted Evans's opinion on 'Summer Sketches' (1854), a poem that she had been working on for over a year. The inspiration for 'Summer Sketches' largely came from a trip that Parkes made with Leigh Smith and Julia Smith to Ockley during the previous summer. The three women stayed at the King's Arms Inn in Ockley, where they enjoyed serious spates of painting and writing and discussing works of literature and politics. Evans was invited to join them and arrived two weeks later, accompanied by her friend Sara Hennell, Chapman and his wife. After a few days of enjoying each other's company, Parkes, Leigh Smith and Smith continued their travels to Bristol to visit a reformatory school that was headed by Mary Carpenter, a friend of Smith's and one of the women who features in Parkes's poem. Evidence suggests that the group's travels did not stop there: they also travelled to Winchester, Bournemouth and Poole to visit a number of Smith's other colleagues and witness their reformatory work first hand.¹⁵

Clearly, the events of this summer had a marked impact on Parkes as she began work capturing some of them in verse, with a view to publication. Valuing the opinions of her friends, both as accomplished writers and as discerning critics, Parkes showed them early drafts of the poem for their comments. Evans, having read these samples, responded, 'I will read as many verses of your "Poem preparing for the press" as you like to send me. Miss Hennell and I were heartily amused by your specimen'.¹⁶ Appreciative of their feedback, Parkes continued to show Evans and Leigh Smith drafts of the poem, and from this point both

¹³ Marian Evans, letter to BRP, 15th July 1852. Quoted in Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, p. 44.

¹⁴ BRP, letter to BLS, 12th February 1853, GCPP Parkes 5/66.

¹⁵ BRP, Journal for 1852-1854, GCPP Parkes 1/35.

¹⁶ Haight, *George Eliot Letters*, p. 109. Leigh Smith's comments on Parkes's early drafts are not extant.

women became frequently involved with the editing process. According to Cherry, Parkes was collecting materials for the poem's third verse-letter during a sketching trip with Howitt and Benham later that summer.¹⁷ Therefore, although there is no surviving correspondence to prove this, it is possible that Howitt and Benham also became a part of the editing process and helped Parkes with revising and finalising the poem.

As in Howitt's *The Sisters in Art* and Leigh Smith's *Ye Newe Generation*, the fictitious group of women in Parkes's poem are modelled on the women who stayed in Ockley that summer; and the events that take place at the 'little country inn' in the poem mirror the adventures that Parkes and her friends enjoyed at the King's Arms in reality. Thus, Leigh Smith and Evans are implicated in the poem as not just editors and critics, but as the poem's protagonists. Parkes adopts the persona 'Lilian' for herself, and uses the names 'Ella' for Leigh Smith, 'Helen' for Evans, and 'Mistress Clare' for Smith. The creative agency shown by their fictional correlatives resemble that of Parkes's own circle, in which they held intellectual discussions, championed female reformers and challenged complex societal issues in their works.

Central to the poem are the protagonists' interests in social reform, particularly women's rights to work and improved education. Lilian and Ella discuss women's rights at various points in the poem, with Helen also directly addressing the issue in the third verse-letter. At the poem's conclusion, Lilian and her friends consider their own roles as women artists and writers, and how they can use their art and poetry to contribute to the women's cause. In light of this, 'Sketches' is evidence of Parkes navigating the relationship between her poetic and political identity. The poem also signifies a turning point in Parkes's career, in

¹⁷ Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 13.

which she seriously reconsiders her role as a poet and ways in which she can use her platform as a writer to engage her political voice.

Parkes's strategies for this take a range of characteristic forms. Throughout the poem, she incorporates a range of references that draw critical attention to women, often overtly praising their efforts and achievements as writers, thinkers and reformers. Parkes makes explicit references to real public figures such as Jane Scott, Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Fuller, whose recognisable names make the poem easily accessible to her readers. At the same time, Parkes makes a number of personal references that allude to her female friends and family which, for a general audience, often make the poem unintelligible. Following the poem's publication, many critics found it difficult to unpack some of the poem's cryptic messages, with the reviewer of the *Atlas* questioning why the poem was ever published.¹⁸ The poem can, therefore, be read as solely exclusive to Parkes's circle, and that she deliberately renders her work unreadable in order to make a point of her own exclusion as a woman writer. That being said, there is a recurring sense in this poem that Parkes and her friends desire to be included, both in the working sphere and as respected professionals in their craft. Regardless of her intentions, Parkes addresses women's inclusion and exclusion both within and outside of the public sphere, and explores ways in which women can embrace and interrogate these ideals.

The poem comprises of three verse-letters: the first two are written by Lilian (Parkes) on her adventures with Mistress Clare (Smith) and Ella (Leigh Smith) to their other friend, Helen (Evans), and the third is Helen's reply. The poem begins with a foreword that introduces the scene:

¹⁸ 'A Batch of Poets', *Atlas*, 22nd April, 1854, p. 18.

Lilian is writing at night in a little country inn and ‘all the implements of an artist lie scattered about the room, the books lettered “Gervinus”, “Keats”, and “Ruskin”’.¹⁹

It is interesting, given her friends’ professions, how Parkes likens her character and her ‘scattered’ tools to that of an artist; she sees writing as an art form and views poetry and painting as arts of equal power. Here, Parkes suggests that the visual and literary are interwoven: while visual art primarily relies on images to convey meaning and emotion, literature uses written language to create imaginary worlds, characters and narratives. Maria Frawley cites the written ‘sketches’ in such works as Jameson’s *Visits and Sketches Abroad and at Home* (1834), noting that it and other graphically written texts share the techniques of the painter, where they employ such devices as perspective, colour and shade.²⁰ As for ‘Sketches’, Parkes’s pictorial description of her adventures in Ockley is a form of visual stocktaking, using her writing to encapsulate her thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Much like her artist friends, Parkes draws inspiration from her surroundings, intertwining visual elements with text to create a cohesive and immersive experience for her readers.

Parkes’s reference to the political historian Gervinus, Keats and Ruskin not only suggests their influence on her as a writer, but affirms her connections to Pre-Raphaelitism, Romantic and German literature.²¹ Parkes’s nod to Gervinus refers to her interest in his work from her early teens; her reference to Keats highlights how her early readings of Romantic poetry influenced her subject matter; and her nod to Ruskin pays tribute to how his views on nature and Pre-Raphaelitism informed her poetic style.²² It is important to note, however, that

¹⁹ BRP, *Summer Sketches and Other Poems*, (John Chapman, 1854) p. 1.

²⁰ Maria Frawley, ‘We Got upon Our Elephant & Went out after Subjects’: Capturing the World in Watercolour’, *Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel*, ed. by Jordana Pomeroy, (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

²¹ Throughout this poem, Parkes frequently draws upon the ideas and methods of Romanticism, Pre-Raphaelitism and German philosophy. Aside from her more obvious connections to the former, the poem suggests that Parkes had potentially studied the works of other German Romantics and idealists aside from Gervinus such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Goethe and Pierre Hardot.

²² In a letter to Leigh Smith, Parkes discusses her reading of Keats’ ‘Endymion’ (1818). In this letter, she talks of the ‘hollowness of social life’ in Brighton and would rather be in the country, which suggests the impact that her reading of Romantic poetry had on her thinking. BRP, letter to BLS, 30th April 1848, GCPP Parkes 5/3.

these male figures are particularly renowned for their disapproval of women writers. As Jacqueline Pearson observes, the emerging ‘cultural prominence of women writers and readers caused not only comment but also anxiety in some male contemporary writers’.²³ Gervinus, for instance, expressed his contempt for women writers, stating that ‘we men should not tolerate such literary coffee societies [...] women’s minds are not nourished by science and life’.²⁴ Keats also had an active disdain for women writers and readers, in which his remarks about women bear out this hostility to the prospect of a female readership. In one letter he half-jokingly remarks that he wishes to ‘upset the drawling of the blue stocking literary world’.²⁵ Bluestockings he defines elsewhere as ‘Devils’ and ‘a set of Women, who having taken a snack or luncheon of literary scraps, set themselves up for towers of Babel in Languages Sapphos in Poetry’.²⁶ As previously discussed, Ruskin is known for his mostly misogynistic views and criticism towards women. Although Ruskin was personally in favour of Parkes’s poetry, he did reprimand her for her involvement in women’s suffrage, stating in a letter to Leigh Smith that he did ‘not at all’ like their ‘ladies’ reading room’.²⁷

Nevertheless, Parkes does take inspiration from Ruskin and Keats through her realist depiction of the city and the rural landscape. In her first verse-letter to Helen, Lilian narrates her railway journey from London to Ockley and describes the bustle of departure at the station with more slowly paced descriptions of the terrible condition of London’s poor children. As her train departs, she contrasts ‘dreary London, dark with smoke/But more

²³ Jacqueline Pearson, ‘Masculinizing the Novel: Women Writers and Intertextuality in Charles Robert Maturin’s *The Wild Irish Boy*’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 36.4 (1997), pp. 635-650, (p. 636), doi:10.2307/25601257.

²⁴ Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung* 4th ed (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1853). Quoted in Susanne Zantop, ‘Trivial Pursuits?: An Introduction to German Women’s Writing from the Middle Ages to 1830’, *Bitter Healing: German Women Writers from 1700 to 1830: an Anthology*, ed. by Susanne and Jeannine Blackwell, (University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 40.

²⁵ Hyder E. Rollins (ed), *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, Vol 2 (Harvard University Press, 1958) p. 139. For more information on the Bluestockings, see my analysis of Leigh Smith’s usage of the term in her poem ‘Ode on the Cash Clothes Club’, which is in chapter three.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol 1, p. 163.

²⁷ See Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, pp. 164-8.

obscured by crime' (l. 60-61) with pastoral images of Ockley, describing it as 'noble green by Nature dight.../The sense of freedom, rest, and calm/Falls on the town-sick heart like balm' (l. 191, 210-211). Parkes's contrast between the sordid streets of London and the quiet pastures of Ockley shows that the countryside offered her an invaluable space away from the city, in which she and her friends enjoyed the space and tranquillity that it had to offer. Her detailed description of Ockley also implies the ample sketching and writing opportunities the girls must have had during their trip, providing them with the chance to develop themselves as artists and writers.

Parkes then proceeds to reference a number of female writers and thinkers whom she perceives to be fundamental to the women's 'cause'. As the train draws closer to Ockley, the scenery prompts reflections on reformatory schools, which Parkes believed provided remedial hope for young boys and girls. Parkes begins with Mary Carpenter, the headmistress of Kingswood School that she, Leigh Smith and Smith had visited following their stay in Ockley that summer. In the poem, Lilian describes Carpenter as one 'who fills that hard and anxious part/A mother, to the motherless' (l. 104-105). Parkes emphasises the importance of Carpenter's role as a 'mother' to the poor and vulnerable in society, and shows the respect that she holds for Carpenter in holding that responsibility. She also suggests that the role of the working woman in society must be considered as equally important to the role of being a mother. In *Remarks on the Education of Girls* (1854), Parkes praises a recent Bill that enabled young offenders to be sent to reformatory schools instead of prison, and uses Kingswood as an example of how effective reformatory schools can be when they are headed by women. She calls it 'at once an evidence and a symbol of the important functions which lie ready to the hands of benevolent women', which reiterates the crucial role that reformatory schools play in the upbringing of children in society, and the importance of

women in work.²⁸ Parkes's friend and fellow poet Christina Rossetti stressed the importance of motherhood (despite refusing to fully commit to women's suffrage), stating that mothers should be given the right to vote: 'if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence [...] who so apt as mothers – all previous arguments allowed for the moment – to protect the interests of themselves and of their offspring?'²⁹ Although Rossetti believed that motherhood was a dutiful and honourable act (albeit within marriage), she also thought it to be a social responsibility that allowed for the function of everyday life. Parkes, however, takes these ideas further by elevating the state of motherhood and situating it as a political act, advocating for working women to be universally accepted within the working sphere and have access to the same rights as men entirely. Parkes challenges the punitive, paternalistic attitudes surrounding motherhood and asserts that women's position in society should not be solely attributed to domestic and marital duty. In aligning Carpenter's role as a 'mother' with her vocation as a feminist social reformer, Parkes asserts that the importance of women in reformatory work cannot be understated, and that women should be recognised for their effectiveness in the role.

Lilian continues to express her interest in women's education. Parkes references other schools funded, founded and built by women with Lilian recalling that 'happy Christians are taught at Shere' (I. 145), referring to the school that was founded by Louisa Bray and Laura Lomax in 1842. Much like Carpenter, Bray and Lomax passionately believed in the importance of education for the working class, and raised their own funds to build their own school house in the village:

²⁸ BRP, *Remarks on the Education of Girls* (John Chapman, 1854), p. 23.

²⁹ CGR, letter to Augusta Webster, 1878. Quoted in Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Burleigh, 1898), p. 112.

Shere School is not like ordinary schools, and was built under rather singular circumstances [...] I had the boldness to suggest building a School house, and I was thought out of my mind. Where were the funds to come from? Laura offered £100, and I £40, and from this beginning we proceeded by the kind help of my brothers and brother-in-law.³⁰

Shere School soon became a success. When Lomax died in 1855, her will created the Lomax Educational Foundation, which continued to finance the school and its eventual expansion. By 1892 there were over 250 people registered as students; reading and writing classes were offered to adults and baby classes were held for children below the age of three.

Continuing with the theme of women and education, Parkes then devotes fifty-four lines of the first verse-letter to praising Jane Scott, who was a patron of the Ockley School and the village. Scott became deeply concerned with the hardships faced by people living in poverty, and left the majority of her money in her will to be used for:

Erecting, building and fitting up a School House in the Parish of Ockley for the use of the poor inhabitants and affording them gratuitous instruction therein.³¹

She died prematurely at the age of 39, but the school was opened after her death in 1841. Parkes pays tribute to Scott's commitment to restoring Ockley and to the educating of young people:

And I, a stranger, taught by thee,
Shall honour and forget thee not,
And blend with thoughts of saintly deeds
Those plain words eloquent – Jane Scott. (I. 262-265)

³⁰ Diaries of Louisa Charlotte Bray, 8261/9/8, Albury History Society: Records, 1565-2006.

³¹ See: <https://www.ockley.org.uk/blog/emphatic-design-c75s2>

Scott was a remarkable benefactor to the people of Ockley. Although the ‘Sisters in Art’ never officially met Scott (as indicated in the poem), they evidently admired her work. Her references to women such as Scott, Carpenter, Lomax and Bray followed by her words in *Remarks* reinforce Parkes’s advocacy for female reformers and educationalists, as well as for the accessibility of education for girls and working-class children.

Parkes also makes references to the writer Elizabeth Gaskell, having probably made acquaintance with her through Fox.³² In the second verse-letter, Lilian and Ella discuss a female writer who ‘keepest a conscience in her pen’ (II. 427), who has been speculated to be Gaskell. Lilian states that ‘thy revealings learn with Ruth’ (II. 420), which is a possible allusion to Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* that was published earlier in the same year as the trip to Ockley. Gaskell’s novel attracted controversy following its release, as it dealt with themes of illegitimacy, and cast the fallen woman as the heroine. Parkes’s confidante Anna Jameson was ‘a great source of comfort to Gaskell during the furore over *Ruth*’, and it seems that Parkes also offered her support considering her tribute to the writer in the poem.³³ The journalist and abolitionist Margaret Fuller is also commemorated, with Lilian at one stage referring to Helen as ‘Margaret from thy seat in heaven’ (II. 340), which is a clear reference to Fuller and her untimely death.³⁴ Fuller became a worthy ally of the older generation, and was one of the American abolitionists who attended the World Slavery Convention alongside Reid, Smith, Howitt and Jameson in 1840. Despite Fuller’s short-lived career, she played a significant role in the campaigns for women’s rights in America. Parkes and her friends

³² Eliza Fox was close friends with Elizabeth Gaskell, who was also good friends with the Howitt family. She first met Gaskell following the publication of Gaskell’s first novel *Mary Barton* (1848). They subsequently became good friends and frequently contacted each other regarding their latest works. Most of Fox’s surviving but limited correspondence is part of Gaskell’s collection.

³³ Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Batsford, 1990), p. 570.

³⁴ Fuller is considered as one of America’s first great feminists. She and her entire family died in a shipwreck on the way back to New York City. Fuller was just 40 years old. Fuller writes about meeting the younger generation in her letters – Robert N. Hudspeth (ed), *The Letters of Margaret Fuller: 1842-44* (Cornell University Press, 1984).

admired her commitment to the cause, with Evans writing in tribute of Fuller in her essay, 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft' for the *Leader* in 1855.

Parkes's references to women such as Gaskell and Fuller in 'Sketches' suggest their influence on her writing and politics, and her references to reformers such as Carpenter, Scott, Bray and Lomax are testament to her experiences at reformatory schools and rehabilitation centres, witnessing their work first hand. Her tributes to these women also show the extent of the ever-growing network of women whom the 'Sisters in Art' befriended throughout their lives and careers. These women were crucial in helping obtain signatures for campaigns for women's suffrage, with figures such as Carpenter and Gaskell playing key roles in circulating the petition for the Married Women's Property Bill.

It can also be suggested that Parkes's references to these women echo how the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood mythologised female figures in their works. As Barringer contends, Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry is predominantly known for its idealised and often romanticised depictions of women.³⁵ Just as Leigh Smith and Howitt drew inspiration from Pre-Raphaelitism for their paintings, it appears that Parkes has also adopted Pre-Raphaelite methods in order to further establish herself as a poet. Interestingly, Parkes felt ambivalence towards Pre-Raphaelitism, noting that she appreciated the Brotherhood's radical rejection of the art establishment but disliked their depiction of women in their art:

The Pre-Raphaelites, whether influenced by special models who have sat to them for their pictures, or by some abstract notion of what is admirable, certainly clothe their female characters with very skinny and ill-expanded corporeal frames.³⁶

³⁵ Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 94.

³⁶ BRP, *Remarks*, p. 8.

Although Parkes admired their passion for their art and took inspiration from them, she clearly disagreed with the Brotherhood's methods, especially their treatment of women. In light of this, Parkes takes a different approach in mythologising her female figures. As opposed to the Brotherhood, who reduce their female subjects to objects of desire and pity, Parkes immortalises the women in her poem by referencing their individual and professional achievements. Parkes's poem and its treatment of female figures are a representation of the ethos of the 'Sisters in Art', in which they empowered women by celebrating their successes.

Chiefly, 'Sketches' is a testament to Parkes and Leigh Smith's friendship, and immortalises the bond they shared as successful, progressive, and likeminded women. In the second verse-letter, Lilian writes over a dozen lines praising Ella, describing her as sauntering down the street 'with a rustic air/Twisting roses in her hair' (1.306-307). In the midst of her sauntering, Ella suddenly calls for activity, and convinces Lilian to join her in climbing to the peak of Leith Hill to paint fir trees and enjoy the extensive views. Documenting their venture, Lilian describes the climb up the path as quite difficult:

Poor small pony, lank and thin,
Surely expiates some sin
Committed in a human state,
Trudging on resign'd to fate.
Women will not beat an ass -
Tempt him on with freshest grass. (II. 429-435)

Arrived at the top of the hill, the two women enjoyed the spectacular views throughout the day, in which they 'sat silently among the flowers/and [Ella] painted for eight mortal hours' (II. 481-482). They continued to bask in the warm sunshine before their descent, amidst 'mist gather'd round the pond-side flags', while 'the little boy (who call'd us sirs)/ Trotted besides us with the bags' (II. 551-553) took them back to their country inn. Lilian's description of

Ella in this passage emulates Leigh Smith's own strong-minded nature. Leigh Smith has been described by her friends in a similar vein, with Parkes likening her to 'ten horse power steam engine', Rossetti describing her as one who 'thinks nothing of climbing up a mountain in breeches or wading through a stream in none', and Elizabeth Gaskell calling her a 'strong fighter against the established opinions of the world'.³⁷ Of all the adventures that Parkes and Leigh Smith enjoyed over the summer, this passage in particular encapsulates the sincerity of their friendship, as well as the activities that they enjoyed away from their professional work and political discussions.

Throughout the poem, the friends alternate their discussion on women's rights with dedicated sessions of writing and painting, which mirrors the routine that Parkes, Leigh Smith and Smith carried out during their stay. Lilian outlines their daily routine, calling it a 'household plan/ Framed without the help of man' (l.236-237). This household plan is where Lilian and her friends find themselves 'Escaped from every social tie,/Dwell at this inn, and.../Live just the life that suits us best' (ll. 96-98). Parkes sets her fictional country inn in an entirely female world, with the only exception being the little boy who helped Lilian and Ella with their bags and referred to them as 'sirs'.³⁸ Lilian's depiction of this rural retreat for women reminds readers of how Parkes and her friends used the open space that Ockley provided away from the city to develop themselves as professional women artists and writers. Similar to Lilian's female world in 'Sketches', Parkes and her friends occupied Ockley as their own creative heterotopia; the countryside gave them the freedom to practice and refine their art and political thinking away from the constraints of the city. The idea that these

³⁷ BRP, letter to Kate Jevons, 8th March, 1849, GCPP Parkes 6/52; DGR, letter to CGR, 8th November 1853. Quoted in Doughty and Wahl, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 294; Elizabeth Gaskell, letter to Charles Eliot Norton, 5th April, 1860. Quoted in Shelia Herstein, *Mid Victorian Feminist*, p. 15.

³⁸ Interestingly, despite John Chapman being present at the writing retreat in Ockley, he is not mentioned or referenced once in the poem. It can be suggested that Parkes was wary of Chapman and his affiliations with other women (including Evans) and foresaw his romantic pursuit of Leigh Smith this early on.

women claim and occupy their own female creative space frequently recurs at various points of their artistic and political careers. This concept is not only explored in Parkes's 'Sketches' and Howitt's *The Sisters in Art*, but through the group's later establishment of the Ladies' Reading Room at 14a Princes Street, the 'Portfolio Club' and eventually Langham Place. Cherry touches on the importance of the female creative space, describing it as a 'heterotopia or counter site for the women's movement within a wider hostile culture'.³⁹ As Eliza Filimon explains, heterotopia can be defined as a 'place of different order' and refers to an actual place conceived as existing outside normative social and political space.⁴⁰ In light of this, and of Cherry's use of the term, the female world that Parkes constructs in 'Sketches' is a 'place of different order', as it is a female heterotopia that exists outside of social, political and cultural norm. Elizabeth Wilson discusses the idea of 'othered' female spaces in the context of the nineteenth-century city, aiming to bring out the relationship between women, space and the construction of their condition of marginality. She attempts to show, that while it is predominantly female spaces that have been 'othered', their marginalisation actually facilitates new opportunities for them.⁴¹ As such, society becomes not so much a place from which women are excluded, but a space which offers sites of female resistance. Heterotopias can be a space for women to embrace their exclusion and claim 'othered' spaces as their own. Just as she makes personal references in the poem to make a point of her exclusion, the fictional female world in 'Sketches' is another way of Parkes exploring how women can claim ownership of their own spaces despite their exclusion from societal and political norm.

³⁹ Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 32. Heterotopia as a spatial metaphor derives from the ancient Greek pronoun *heteros* 'other' and the noun *topos* 'place'. It is a concept elaborated by Michel Foucault to describe certain spaces that are somehow contrasting or contradictory to what is perceived as societal norm. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Eliza Claudia Filimon, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision* (Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014), p. 18.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder and Woman*, (Virago, 1991).

The 'Sisters in Art', both in their politics as in their art and fiction, occupy these heterotopic spaces to develop their creative and political identities.

The women's 'household plan' that consists of art, poetry and friendship also mirrors Parkes, Howitt and Leigh Smith's visions of a 'beautiful sisterhood in art', which is another example of how 'Sisters in Art' envisioned a creative space for themselves and other women.⁴² Lilian's discussions with Ella and her verse-letters to Helen parallel the epistolary conversations the women enjoyed as girls in which they dreamed of a women's industrious utopia - acquiring their own liberties, incomes and careers without the burden of patriarchy. Their discussions on women's rights becomes more apparent in the second verse-letter:

...the question which the age demands,
"What is a woman's right and fitting sphere?"
How best she may, with free and willing mind,
Develop every special genius,
...And...
Walk in a joint obedience with man,
And equal freedom of the law of God. (II. 272-278)

As Parker Kinch notes, the 'explicit feminist polemic within the poem reflects a shift in Parkes's understanding of her role as a poet'.⁴³ Through 'Sketches' and particularly in this passage, Parkes connects the role she must play in the campaigns for women's rights with her career and platform as a writer. In a brief dialogue that follows, Ella confirms that her 'pencil' and Lilian's 'pen' are intended for a much bigger purpose:

Lilian, you must write a poem
With these visions for a poem
So with pencil and with pen

⁴² AMH, *An Art Student*, p. 95.

⁴³ Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 87.

We must translate our thoughts to men. (II. 390-393)

These lines echo a previous conversation that Parkes and Leigh Smith had concerning the importance of their role as women artists and poets:

Oh dear Barbara, your picture frame has made me think. What shall I do! What shall I educate myself for writing? [...] I do not feel in the least clever. I can understand some things better than girls perhaps because, like you, I have had a peculiar education, but I can produce nothing and I cannot read any page of the Universe, much less translate it to my brethren.⁴⁴

Parkes's choice of language in her early letter is interesting. Although 'brethren' holds masculine connotations, it is possible that its religious connotations connect with Parkes's idea of 'reading' and 'translating' the universe as though deciphering a book. The 'Book of Nature' metaphor is a long-standing concept that was once used to suppress science since 'reading Nature' implied a rival source of truth to the Bible. For the Romantics and theorists of the late-eighteenth century, analogies written into the 'Book of Nature' by its divine author were meant to instruct its mortal readers, with the German philosopher Johann Herder contending that the Book 'thus speaks the analogy of nature, the pattern of God eloquent in all His works!'⁴⁵ The 'Book of Nature' was therefore regarded by the likes of Goethe, Pierre Hadot and Kant as a 'coded' didactic poem, and once properly read and deciphered, its language and symbolism contained true meaning.⁴⁶ In her letter, Parkes appears to be drawing upon these Romantic notions and the analogies associated with Nature as a living book.

⁴⁴ BRP, letter to BLS, 5th December 1849, GCPP Parkes 5/39.

⁴⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind* [1774] (Hackett, 2004).

⁴⁶ Jake Fraser, 'Metaphor as Archive: Blumenberg and the Book of Nature around 1800', *MLN*, 138, (2023), pp. 1132-1161, doi:10.1353/mln.2023.a917914. As discussed in chapter 3, Parkes cites Kant in her letters when justifying her choice to wear practical clothing on the grounds of 'moral principle'. As suggested in chapter 5 in my analysis of Howitt's painting, *Margaret Returning from the Fountain*, Goethe was accessed by the 'Sisters in Art' who regularly discussed his works of literature in their earlier years.

These ideas also seem to inform Parkes's own writing, with 'Sketches' also being a 'coded' poem that, once properly deciphered, carries true meaning.

The term 'brethren' in this sense can also be read as an exclusive label for her own circle of women. Similar to how the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood used the term 'brethren' to exclusively identify themselves, Parkes may have used the term to parody the Brotherhood and refer to her own group of 'art-sisters'. As Wettlaufer notes, the women's self-proclaimed labels that they used to identify themselves serve as 'both an inspiration and a symbol of exclusion'.⁴⁷ Although they were evidently frustrated with their situation, the 'Sisters in Art' embraced their exclusion by adopting and applying their own exclusive terms. However, Parkes's use of the verb 'translate' in both the poem and the letter suggests women's desire to be included. In her letter to Leigh Smith, she acknowledges their exclusion as women writers, but still feels the need to try to translate her thoughts and communicate with her peers to vie for some kind of recognition. In 'Sketches', Parkes's use of the phrase is more explicit in its direct reference to men. The women's need to translate their art signifies a curbing of communication, and the use of the imperative verb 'must' adds urgency to their mission to achieve societal inclusion. The change of the phrase from 'I can produce nothing...much less translate it to my brethren' in the letter to 'we *must* translate our thoughts to men' in the poem reflects their realisation of their importance as artist and poet and the recognition of their roles in the campaigns for women's rights.

Parkes's final letter consists of Helen/Evans's eagerly awaited reply. Parkes depicts Helen as equally ambitious as Lilian and her friends, as the conversation becomes entirely focused on women's rights. Helen's reply brings Lilian to the attention of recent calls for women's rights in America, as she sends copies of works that were written by 'brave New

⁴⁷ Wettlaufer, 'Politics and Poetics', p. 130.

England women penn'd', along with 'A few stray copies of *The Liberator*/And Wendell Phillip's speech' (III. 2-27). Much like Parkes and Leigh Smith's characters, Evans's Helen also confirms her dedication to her art, as well as her determination to achieve literary success,

From morn to eve, from morn to eve again,
Striving against the hindrance of time
And all the weight of custom; and I will,
I tell you Lilian, that I *will* succeed. (III. 34-37)

Evans here shares the desire to work and be successful, confirming that her writing will be the tool to do it. Evans, Leigh Smith, Smith and Parkes know that they must urgently use their poetic and artistic voices to bring women and their thoughts to light. As for Parkes, 'Summer Sketches' is her way of making clear the depth of her seriousness as a professional writer along with her commitment to women's reform, and as Parker Kinch puts it, 'turning her poetic voice into direct political commentary and engagement with the contemporary world'.⁴⁸

It is clear that 'Summer Sketches' had an impact on Parkes's thinking and literary output during this period. Many of the themes and concepts that inform Parkes's poem are further explored in her storybook, *A History of Our Cat Aspasia* (1855). Written two years after 'Sketches', *Aspasia* almost reads as the poem's epilogue, and revisits the characters of Lilian and Helen who continue to develop their ideas on women's rights. Aside from this, the pair recall their adventures with the eponymous Aspasia, who is based on a real-life cat of the

⁴⁸ Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 89.

same name whom Parkes and Leigh Smith adopted during their stay in ‘Pen-y-lan’ near Maentwrog in 1854.⁴⁹

Aspasia is also Parkes’s first attempt at writing children’s fiction, which was a lucrative market for writers at the time that was particularly ‘hospitable to women’, as it was considered as an extension of their ‘natural womanly capacities to teach and guide children’.⁵⁰ As for Parkes, her experiment with children’s fiction not only shows her versatility as a writer, but suggests her business-like work ethic and her ability to navigate the literary market. She deliberately sought out a new publisher, as she wisely judged Chapman and his radical connections to be unsuitable for her target audience. She also secured the publication of the story in time for the Christmas market, knowing that it would be at its most profitable. The book was a moderate success, which Evans describing the story in a letter to Parkes as ‘charming’.⁵¹ Despite the positive reception, Parkes decided at the time not to pursue a career in children’s fiction due to her commitment to women’s suffrage and preference for writing poetry.

Akin to ‘Sketches’, *Aspasia* is another work of collaboration. Not only does Leigh Smith return as a character (albeit under Evans’s fictional name), she also aided Parkes with editing the book so that it would be accessible for young readers. Parkes initially enlisted Leigh Smith to contribute a few ‘comical’ illustrations for the book, arguing that these ‘and

⁴⁹ Parkes and Leigh Smith’s choice to name the cat *Aspasia* is particularly interesting. They named her after the historical figure *Aspasia*, who was a metic woman in Classical Athens. *Aspasia* was revered for her intellect and has been portrayed in ancient philosophy as a teacher and rhetorician. Contrastingly, she has been portrayed by Old comedy as a prostitute and madam. In popular culture, she is viewed as both a sexualised and sexually liberated woman, and a feminist role model fighting for women’s rights. Parkes and Leigh Smith’s choice to name the cat *Aspasia* not only demonstrates their knowledge of the Classics, but they also seem to consciously connect this with their interest in women’s suffrage. They also seem to be making a point of why women who possess intellect have also been branded as sexually liberal. I argue that *Aspasia* represents male anxieties towards intellectual women who exert influence.

⁵⁰ Claudia Nelson, ‘Children’s Writing’ in *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women’s Writing* ed. by Linda H. Peterson (CUP, 2015), pp. 251-2.

⁵¹ ME, letter to BRP, 31st March 1856 in Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, p. 235.

our joint names' would make the book more appealing to a publisher.⁵² Leigh Smith politely declined Parkes's offer due to other work commitments, but she encouraged her sister Annie to provide her own illustrations which appeared in the published volume. *Aspasia* can also be read as another tribute to her friendships with Leigh Smith and Howitt, and their shared vision of a co-operative artistic sisterhood. The Associate Home for women artists, which they discussed together in Munich, and also features in Howitt's *The Sisters in Art*, is referred to directly at the end of the book. When Aspasia is deemed unsuitable for life in London and is left to stay in the country, Lilian (Parkes) concludes:

When Helen and I set up the Associate Home, of which we have been talking for the last ten years, and which is to include several other Artists and Authors...the very first domestic servant we establish by the new hearth will be our cat ASPASIA.⁵³

Although the book is but a minor contribution to Parkes's publication record, *Aspasia* serves as another example of how the ideals of unity and friendship informed Parkes's life and fiction and, above all, - her politics.

Entering the Political Realm

Concurrent with their travels and professional success as artists and writers, the 'Sisters in Art' were becoming increasingly known for their efforts in women's reform and education.⁵⁴ Aside from continuing to publish her prose and poetry, Parkes was busy working on *Remarks on the Education of Girls*, which drew heavily on her experiences at Leam as a model of the kind of education needed to enable girls to fulfil their intellectual, physical and moral

⁵² BRP, letter to BLS, 26th August 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/73.

⁵³ BRP, *The History of our Cat Aspasia* (Bosworth and Harrison, 1856), pp. 44-45.

⁵⁴ Although Howitt did not produce any work chiefly on promoting education, a letter to Leigh Smith suggests that she did help the pair with the 'cutting out' and 'mending' of Portman Hall's prospectus that was later issued in the local area. AMH, letter to BLS, November 1854, in Beaky, *Letters*, p. 182.

potential.⁵⁵ Leam gave Parkes an unusually good academic grounding, and recognising this as having a distinct advantage over other women her age, Parkes felt it necessary to call for everyone to have the right to a good education. Her personal reflections on her own education, together with her later experiences of visiting schools and carrying out some teaching herself, had led her to consider how education could be both a barrier to, and facilitator of, female empowerment.⁵⁶ In *Remarks*, Parkes advocates for girl's physical and mental training with the freedom to play, exercise and learn at will, and lists a number of subjects that she believes girls should have educational access to. She refers to Elizabeth Blackwell's lectures on the physical education of girls to demonstrate the 'benefits of muscular training' and argued that gymnasiums should be made universally accessible for the use of young women.⁵⁷ Parkes also alludes to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for its 'excellent remarks' on how important it is for girls to read and write.⁵⁸ Adding to this, she argues that girls should be allowed to read Chaucer, Dryden and Milton and asks 'how can that mind have a true appreciation of the ideas now operant in Europe, which ignores the forces which have formed, or those set in motion by George Sand?'⁵⁹ Parkes then promotes social and political economy as an important subject for women to study, both in training in logical thought and for understanding the day-to-day minutia of the modern world. In aligning her argument with Leigh Smith's *A Brief Summary*,

⁵⁵ BRP, *Remarks on the Education of Girls, with references to the Social, Legal and Industrial Position of Women in the Present day* (John Chapman, 1854). Quoted in Parker Kinch, *A Cultural Historical Biography of Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ Aside from her trips back to Leam, Parkes also visited schools in Birmingham and London to observe the teaching and occasionally teach lessons herself, although she felt herself unqualified to undertake the role. See: GCPP Parkes 5/40 and 5/55.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Blackwell, *The Laws of Life: With Special Reference to the Physical Education of Girls* (George P. Putnam, 1852).

⁵⁸ BRP, *Remarks*, pp. 6-9.

⁵⁹ This is arguably one of Parkes's more controversial statements in *Remarks*, and was singled out by critics as being particularly 'strong-minded'. George Sand was a French novelist who was known for her openly sexual novels and for her own liberally sexual nature. Parkes's argument for women being able to access Sand's work is that, as they were being frequently discussed in public, women should be aware of what they are discussing and be able to make up their own mind. BRP, *Remarks*, pp. 10-12.

as well as her own ideas discussed in ‘Summer Sketches’, Parkes stresses the need for women to be viewed equally within society and demonstrates the ways in which women have and can contribute greatly to the working sphere. As in ‘Sketches’, Parkes cites Mary Carpenter along with Elizabeth Blackwell for their respective contributions to philanthropy and medicine. She also singles out Howitt as a ‘cultivated woman’ for her success as an artist, author and illustrator.⁶⁰ Parkes poignantly concludes her pamphlet with a call to action addressed to all women: ‘If you care for your own responsibility before God... if you care for your generation and its honour among the ages, work for this cause’.⁶¹ After putting forward her argument and urging for the need to take action, Parkes’s final instruction puts the onus on to other women to act accordingly.

As for Leigh Smith, she funded and opened Portman Hall School in November 1854 with Elizabeth Whitehead.⁶² Portman Hall was progressive in the sense that it not only educated girls and boys from different social classes together, but it refrained from teaching subjects that hindered ‘intellectual curiosity and aesthetic sensibility’.⁶³ In other words, the school focused on teaching languages, drawing and crafting as opposed to the teaching of religion, which Leigh Smith believed to be ‘utterly useless’.⁶⁴ The staff were also prohibited from inflicting any kind of physical punishment on the children, which was seen as particularly uncommon practice for a school at the time. In Leigh Smith’s view, the importance of schools was in bringing together children of different denominations, learning toleration, forbearance, and charity.⁶⁵ For many of her students, especially those from the working class, Portman Hall provided plentiful opportunities that their circumstances could

⁶⁰ BRP, *Remarks*, pp. 12-21.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶² Elizabeth Whitehead was the eldest daughter of a Chelsea solicitor and also a radical Unitarian. She met Leigh Smith at the Misses Woods’ school in Clapton in their teens.

⁶³ Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 82.

⁶⁴ Leigh Smith thought that the teaching of religion in schools should be left to the religious institutions themselves. See: BLS, ‘Portrait of a School’ *Journal of Education*, 1st September 1886, p. 358.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

not otherwise allow. For instance, Leigh Smith regularly took the children on trips out of school, visiting museums and art galleries to widen their range of cultural experiences. As well as the paid mistresses, the school also had help from a number of Leigh Smith's friends and associates who aided with teaching.⁶⁶ When asked to contribute an entry to the 1861 Commission on Popular Education, Leigh Smith spoke of the importance of her lady volunteers:

I believe that much good can be done by ladies of culture giving a few hours a week to teaching in schools, and I most earnestly recommend the commissioners to open an examination and give certificates to volunteer lady teachers... The corps of volunteer teachers at Portman Hall School is unique, and the most successful part of the school.⁶⁷

While Leigh Smith continued to support the school financially, she became less directly involved as her involvement in women's politics increased. Nonetheless, despite its eventual closure in 1864, Leigh Smith was incredibly proud of what she and Whitehead had achieved.⁶⁸ Portman Hall demonstrated the effectiveness of co-educational public schools and the potential of providing equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their class. The school also inevitably served as a catalyst for Leigh Smith's later achievement of opening Girton College – the first university college for women.

At the same time, Leigh Smith was working on her most significant publication to date - *A Brief Summary of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1854). Leigh Smith

⁶⁶ Gleadle, *Early Feminists*, p. 180. Fox volunteered her services at the school and regularly held drawing classes. Leigh Smith's sisters (Bella and Nanny), Octavia Hill, Jessie White are also known to have volunteered.

⁶⁷ See BLS's submission to the Commission on Popular Education set up in 1858: *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol 21, 1861, pp. 103-4.

⁶⁸ Leigh Smith began diverting much of her time to politics, and Whitehead turned her attentions towards opening the first College for Working Women, which opened later that year. The pair also concluded that with Ellen Allen's resignation from her post as chief mistress, none of the existing staff were capable of taking over the role. See BLS, letter to Marian Evans, 2nd August 1863. Quoted in Mary Hilton and Pam Hirsch (eds), *Practical Visionaries: Women, Education and Social Progress 1790-1930* (Longman, 2000), p. 92.

felt compelled to enter the foray after reading Caroline Norton's *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854), which was written partly in response to the breakdown of the poet's abusive marriage.⁶⁹ Divorce became a topical issue following a number of high profile scandals in the press, and it was women like Norton who had endured the majority of the public criticism.⁷⁰ Thus, Leigh Smith's aim with her pamphlet was to lay out a clear description of the existing laws concerning women, as she thought it unreasonable that the majority of women were unaware of precisely what rights and legal support they were entitled to. It was perhaps also her intention to encourage her female readers in particular to voice their concerns and prompt them to take action.

Alongside Parkes's *Remarks*, *A Brief Summary* was the culmination of Leigh Smith's and Parkes's collaborative work as thinkers and writers. It was during their writing retreat in 'Pen-y-lan' that Leigh Smith and Parkes diligently spent their time together to edit the proofs of *Remarks* and draw up the plans for *A Brief Summary*.⁷¹ As a result, both pamphlets were published together by Chapman within the same year of them being submitted. Chapman marketed two tracts together, with both pamphlets containing advertisements that promoted the other inside their back cover and in the initial pages before the contents page. They were also marketed alongside a few other recent works which also dealt with the 'woman

⁶⁹ Norton married the barrister George Norton in 1827, and shortly after became the victim of George's coercive behaviour. Norton eventually left her husband in 1836, but George successfully claimed in court that Norton's earnings as an author was his own, and Norton was left penniless as a result. He later accused Norton of extramarital affairs and sent their three children to Scotland to prevent Norton from seeing them. See Antonia Fraser, *The Case of the Married Woman: Caroline Norton: A 19th Century Heroine Who Wanted Justice for Women* (Orion, 2021).

⁷⁰ Aside from Norton's experience, Leigh Smith's mentor Anna Jameson had previously been in the press for her own marriage woes, as well as Rosina Bulwer-Lytton's incarceration in 1858 for denouncing her ex-husband when he was standing in a by-election as a parliamentary candidate.

⁷¹ In a letter to Bella Leigh Smith, Parkes recalls her fond memories of their holiday in Maentwrog. She describes how she and Leigh Smith bathed naked in a lake 'in a most utterly crazy Diana like way'. Aside from Parkes also working on *Aspasia*, it was during this trip that Evans's relationship with George Lewes became public knowledge. Lewes was the editor of the *Leader* and was unhappily married but ineligible for divorce. Their eventual elopement in Germany caused great scandal, and despite their parents and colleagues condemnation of Evans (including Julia Smith), Leigh Smith and Parkes pledged their support to the couple. BRP, letter to Bella Leigh Smith, 3rd September 1854, GCPP Parkes 6/66.

question', indicative of the developing discourse on these issues in the radical press at this time.⁷²

A Brief Summary is divided up into seven sections which are titled: 'Legal Conditions of Unmarried Women or Spinsters', 'Laws Concerning Married Women', 'Usual Precautions against the Laws concerning the Property of Married Women', 'Separation and Divorce', 'Laws concerning a Widow', 'Laws concerning Women in Other relationships' and 'Laws concerning Illegitimate Children and Their Mothers'. Given its concise structure, the pamphlet was designed to be read and digested in one sitting. The pamphlet's accessibility and affordability also made it easier for people from all working backgrounds to obtain a copy.⁷³ Hirsch states that *A Brief Summary* is a shorter, summarised version of Wharton's *Exposition of the Laws relating to the Women of England* (1853).⁷⁴ This is true to an extent in that *A Brief Summary* also contains seven sections and largely discusses the same subjects, albeit it is five hundred and thirty-two pages shorter in length. However, as opposed to focusing on certain topics discussed in Wharton's *Exposition* such as 'Infancy' and 'Trustship', Leigh Smith shifts the emphasis to the rights and status of unmarried women and spinsters, stressing that being a single woman was the 'best case scenario' of a woman's legal position at the time.⁷⁵ Her introductory words are as follows:

A single woman has the same rights to property, to protection from the law, and has to pay the same taxes to the State as a man. Yet a woman of the age of twenty-one,

⁷² Inside the covers of *Remarks* and *A Brief Summary* were also advertisements for Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Women and Her Wishes* (1854), Theodore Parker's *The Public Function of Woman* (1853) and a reprint of an article from the *Westminster Review* titled 'Prostitution', which may have been written by Evans.

⁷³ *A Brief Summary* and Parkes's *Remarks* were each sold for 3d (threepenny), which is equivalent to £1.45 today.

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 86.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

having the requisite property qualifications, cannot vote in elections for members of Parliament.⁷⁶

Her opening sentences, therefore, suggest that being recognised by the State as a tax-paying and law-abiding citizen means that women should be acknowledged as equal to men. The following sections of the pamphlet are as equally blunt and direct. For example, in ‘Laws Concerning Married Women’, Leigh Smith clearly sets out what married women are and are not entitled to:

Money earned by a married woman belongs absolutely to her husband; that and all sources of income, excepting those mentioned above, are included in the term personal property [...] A married woman cannot sue or be sued for contracts – nor can she enter into contracts except as the agent of her husband.⁷⁷

Leigh Smith’s pamphlet is direct and instructive, which demonstrates her ability to strike the right tone and communicate her views through her writing clearly. What is also important is how her pamphlet reads as a personal appeal as much as a professional one. She completely rebrands Wharton’s section on ‘Concubinage and Harlotry’, a subject that resonates with Leigh Smith and her own issues regarding her ‘dubious’ parentage. Wharton’s text considers the issue of legitimacy, pointing out that the legal rights of an infant and ‘frequently the chaste reputation of its mother’ should be called into question.⁷⁸ Leigh Smith’s remarks, however, are far more personal, and take a less patriarchal stance:

⁷⁶ BLS, *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (John Chapman, 1854), p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ J.J.S Wharton, *An Exposition of the Laws Relating to the Women of England* (Longman, 1853), p. 15.

The rights of an illegitimate child are only such as he can acquire; he can inherit nothing, being in law looked upon as nobody's son, but he may acquire property by devise or bequest. He may acquire a surname by reputation, but does not inherit one.⁷⁹

The remaining pages of *A Brief Summary* are a commentary on the status quo. Much like the other sections of the pamphlet, Leigh Smith's concluding remarks are straight to the point:

Why should not these legal devices be done away with, by the simple abolition of a law which we have outgrown? [...] We do not say that these laws of property are the only unjust laws concerning women to be found in the short summary which we have given, but they form a simple, tangible, and not offensive point of attack.⁸⁰

Despite it being Leigh Smith's first official foray into law and politics, *A Brief Summary* became instrumental in bringing the issue of women's legal status to the forefront.⁸¹ It was also Leigh Smith's impassioned yet rational response to what was at the time a pressing issue for herself and her circle.

When Chapman published *Remarks* and *A Brief Summary* anonymously in 1854, they initially received favourable critical attention. The *Athenaeum* described *Remarks* as 'more original and more interesting' than previous publications on the topic.⁸² The *Westminster Review* (edited by Evans at the time) declared it a 'happy propriety' that 'these two thoughtful tracts' appeared simultaneously.⁸³ The *North British Review* also spoke positively in an article titled 'The Non-Existence of Women', focusing particularly on *A Brief Summary*

⁷⁹ BLS, *A Brief Summary*, p. 11.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁸¹ *A Brief Summary* was presented alongside the 1856 petition to Parliament. It was later presented by John Stuart Mill for the 1866 petition and later in 1870. A limited enactment of the Married Women's Property Act was achieved in 1870 before the Bill was formally passed in 1882. See below on why and how *A Brief Summary* played a key role in the formation of the Women's Suffrage Committee.

⁸² However, it is implied that the reviewer of the *Athenaeum* assumed that both pamphlets were not only the works of the same author, but the works of a man. This may have impacted their reading of the two works. The reviewer's favourable response to such controversial issues is positive nonetheless. 'Pamphlets', *The Athenaeum*, 9th December 1854, p. 1493.

⁸³ Marian Evans, 'Politics and Education', *Westminster Review*, January 1855, pp. 228-238, (p. 230).

and its connections to Norton's pamphlet.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, when the pamphlets were reprinted as signed editions two years later, they sparked public outrage, because, as the works of two women, they were deemed more outspoken and controversial. As Florence Davenport Hill previously cautioned in a letter to Leigh Smith, both works are 'astonishing', but will shock some women considerably.⁸⁵ In an article for *Blackwood's Magazine*, the novelist Margaret Oliphant opposed *A Brief Summary*, declaring that 'woman's rights will never grow into a popular agitation' and to suggest otherwise was 'the merest nonsense which ever looked like reason'.⁸⁶ The reviewer for the *Saturday Review* also criticised Leigh Smith's pamphlet, ridiculing the Law Amendment Society (LAS) for 'joining the ranks of feminine insurrection'.⁸⁷ A scornful article entitled 'Woman' appeared in the *National Review* and attacked the 'dishonest' and 'dangerous' ideas of several works concerning the 'woman question', especially *Remarks*.⁸⁸ Parkes's name is peppered throughout the article, and her arguments on women's education were completely disparaged. The writer proceeded to label women like Parkes 'unnatural' for rejecting the conventional feminine ideals which 'real women' embraced, and characterised them as 'the more neuter members of the sex' for defying their marital and domestic duties.⁸⁹ Even Joseph Parkes wrote a bad-tempered letter to his daughter, scolding her for publishing such radical ideas 'with the thoughtlessness of your own young single name unnecessarily on the title page'.⁹⁰ He acknowledged that the *National Review* article was 'unjust', but continued to reprimand her for her actions:

⁸⁴ JW Kaye, 'The Non-Existence of Women', *North British Review*, 18 (August 1855), pp. 536-562, (p. 536).

⁸⁵ Florence Davenport Hill, letter to BLS, 20 August 1854, 7/EMC/E10. Florence Davenport Hill was a friend of Leigh Smith's and staunch female reformer. She was also the daughter of Matthew Davenport Hill, an advanced Liberal MP and reformer of criminal law. The Davenport Hill family were supportive of Leigh Smith's political endeavours and checked through early drafts of *A Brief Summary* for any legal mistakes or incorrect assertions.

⁸⁶ Margaret Oliphant, 'Laws Concerning Women', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 79, (1856) <<https://archive.org/stream/blackwoodsmagazi79edinuoft#page/378/mode/2up>> [Accessed 01/05/2024].

⁸⁷ 'Law for Ladies', *Saturday Review*, 24th May 1856, pp. 77-78.

⁸⁸ 'Woman', *National Review*, October 1858, pp. 349-354.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Joseph Parkes, letter to BRP, 6th October 1858, GCPP Parkes 2/64.

You young English women will not believe, till older, in the natural distinctions of the two sexes; & that the males will never allow the females to wear men's clothes... You will learn a lesson, as you grow older... I often tell you, society cannot be so eagerly or practically revolutionised as you young inexperienced women imagine or desire.⁹¹

Notwithstanding the criticism they faced, Parkes and Leigh Smith were formulating key contributions to the growing debate on the 'woman question' and, true to their friendship, they encouraged each other as they did so. Through *Remarks* and *A Brief Summary*, Leigh Smith and Parkes made together their first contributions to radical political discourse, laying the foundations for the next stage of their endeavours to advocate for the rights and capabilities of their sex.

The 1856 Married Women's Property Bill

A Brief Summary was widely circulated and read, in part because both Harriet Martineau and William Johnson Fox drew attention to it in the press via their respective periodicals. It was also due to the efforts of Chapman, who published a second edition, and Davenport Hill, who brought the pamphlet to the attention of the LAS of which he was a member.⁹² The LAS received the pamphlet and took particular interest in Leigh Smith's discussion on the legal status of married women. From marriage, a husband inherited his wife's property and income, and was permitted to spend and dispose of them as he wished. However, the Court of Equity enabled wealthy families to protect a daughter's property, by 'settling' it with trustees who would act on the woman's behalf and out of the control of her husband. The legal position of married women was, therefore, a sensible choice for a first public campaign concerning women's rights, with the potential to gain widespread support. The 'Sisters in

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² The LAS was founded in 1844 by Henry, Lord Brougham. The Society was committed to updating pre-existing laws. Members of the LAS included Matthew Davenport Hill and his son Alfred, George Hastings and Mr Serjeant Manning.

Art' regarded the interest of the LAS as an opportunity to establish a new committee of women, beginning with the organisation of a petition to Parliament calling for married women to be legally recognised as independent working professionals with the ability to hold their own incomes. Justifying their own careers as artists and writers, the committee contended that 'married women of education are entering on every side the fields of literature and art, to increase the family income by such exertions' and that 'professional women are earning large incomes by pursuit of the arts'.⁹³ Using Leigh Smith's London drawing room at 5 Blandford Square as their main meeting place, as well as drawing on the experience of the older generation, the group launched a nationwide campaign collecting the signatures of as many women as possible, including those who had suffered under the existing laws.

The committee was chaired by Leigh Smith, Parkes, Howitt and Fox, and comprised of a number of women whom the 'Sisters in Art' had worked with and befriended throughout their lives and careers.⁹⁴ Akin to the Inner/Outer Sisterhood paradigm that the 'Sisters in Art' originally proposed in Munich, this committee united women from all backgrounds and professions who were equally committed to the women's cause. In light of this, the campaign itself was a wholly collaborative endeavour: the committee worked together in formulating and circulating the petition, as well as collecting as many signatures as possible. Aside from getting signatures, Parkes was tasked with finalising the wording of the petition, noting the importance of striking the right tone in a letter to Leigh Smith:

⁹³ 'The Property of Married Women', *Westminster Review*, October 1856, pp. 336-360, (p. 345). Quoted in Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 15.

⁹⁴ This included the older generation: Mary Howitt (the committee's secretary), Julia Smith, Elizabeth Jesser Reid and Anna Jameson, as well as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Cushman, Jane Welsh Carlyle, Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Martineau. Other members included Leigh Smith's sisters, Reid's sister Mary Sturch, Anna Blackwell, Amelia B. Edwards, Matilda Hays and Maria Rye, who was a solicitor's daughter who eventually took over Mary Howitt as the committee's secretary.

I thought it better to classify the women as merely “married & single”... I hope you will approve it, and that the artist soul will think it executed with dignity & simplicity [...] firm and safe upholders of the sacred cause of our own sex.⁹⁵

Notices promoting the petition and encouraging women to sign it appeared in regional newspapers around the country, which included a summary of the petition’s demands and a list of the committee members’ names. Mary Howitt attracted the public’s attention and conferred the gravitas of her respected status as a married woman and successful writer. She personally collected hundreds of signatures, and spent many hours with Octavia Hill pasting the sheets of the petition together.⁹⁶ Other leading female figures such as Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Martineau attracted attention by adding their names to the petition. When approached by Fox, Martineau agreed ‘with pleasure to do anything to help this rational object’ and began covering the petition’s progress in the *London Daily News*.⁹⁷ Howitt documented her own experiences in garnering the public’s support. In one letter to her sister, Howitt recalls the moment she collected the signature of an elderly lady who ‘on her death-bed, asked to be allowed to put her name to the petition, and thus wrote her signature for the last time’.⁹⁸ Leigh Smith worked hard to send the petition to women all across the country. During her painting expedition with Howitt on the Isle of Wight, she wrote to Evans in Coventry asking for her support:

I send you a copy of a Petition which I have set going and which has already been signed by H. Martineau, Mrs Gaskell, Mrs Howitt, Mrs Jameson etc. etc. Will you sign if I send a sheet and will you tell me any ladies to whom I can send sheets, perhaps among Mr

⁹⁵ BRP, letter to BLS, 21st December 1855, GCPP Parkes 5/79.

⁹⁶ Lee, *The Life of William and Mary Howitt*, p. 214.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 15. For Martineau’s coverage on the petition, see: ‘Notices’, *London Daily News*, 26th March 1856, p. 4. Lee was Howitt’s second cousin and Mary Howitt’s great-niece and had access to family documents and memories.

⁹⁸ Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, 1889, p. 116.

Lewes' friends there may be some... On second thoughts I send the sheet for signatures – return it if you have no one who will like to get it filled – before the 1st of March it must come back to me.⁹⁹

Evans promptly signed it and sent it on to Hennell, who then forwarded it to her friend Eleanor Cash. Writing to her friend, Evans thanked Hennell for her help with spreading word of the petition:

I am glad you have taken up the cause, for I do think that, with proper provisos and safeguards, the proposed law would help to raise the position and character of women.¹⁰⁰

The committee were thrilled with the campaign's success in attracting public attention, and quickly became aware of their new-found fame in the press. In a letter to Leigh Smith, Parkes reported how she had been introduced to a 'very old lady [who]... hobbled up from her chair to shake hands with "Miss Bessie Parkes" because she had seen my name to it in the Daily News!'¹⁰¹ The petition itself was a monumental achievement. In the space of only a few months, the group had collected between 26,000-28,000 signatures, with the original London petition containing over 3000 names alone. The committee were unable to present the petition themselves, as women were prohibited from entering Parliament. Thus, on 14th March 1856, the signatures were collated and presented to Parliament by Lord Brougham in the House of Lords and by Sir Erskine Perry in the House of Commons. Despite women's exclusion from Parliament, the LAS regularly held public meetings to keep the committee and the public

⁹⁹ BLS, letter to ME, 14th January 1856, Yale GEN MSS 963.

¹⁰⁰ ME, letter to Sara Hennell, 18th January 1856 in Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, p. 225. Evans first refers to the campaign as the 'cause' in this letter. As Hirsch notes, this is perhaps the first time the term 'women's cause' is used in reference to the women's movement. See Hirsch, p. 93.

¹⁰¹ BRP, letter to BLS, 19th March 1856, GCPP Parkes 5/82.

updated on the petition's progress.¹⁰² Unfortunately, after only a second reading, the campaign foundered, and it took many years and fresh attempts until the committee's efforts finally came to fruition with the Married Women's Property Act in 1882.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the collective efforts of the committee in leading the petition cannot be understated. As Parkes later observed:

In the effort to obtain signatures people interested in the question were brought into communication in all parts of the kingdom, and the germs of an effective movement were scattered far and wide.¹⁰⁴

Regardless of the petition's outcome, the whole experience had served as a training ground in political education for the 'Sisters in Art' and the women closely involved with it. Chiefly, the petition marked the group's serious emergence into politics, and laid the foundations for their future efforts in achieving equality for all women.

Establishing Langham Place and the *English Woman's Journal*

In the years that followed the 1856 petition, a broad movement with female working communities, specialist publications and single-issue societies such as Fox's art classes had been created. As a result of this surge in interest surrounding the cause, the committee had quickly determined that a larger and more established meeting place was needed to convene and coordinate their activities. As Lynne Walker notes, the founding of a woman's centre in London became the urban 'site of a women's community [...] based on the social networks, alliances and organisations of the women's movement'.¹⁰⁵ The committee had secured 14a

¹⁰² It was during one of these meetings that Mary Howitt reported that the petition reached the whole length of the House when it was unrolled in the Commons. Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, pp. 116-117.

¹⁰³ Although the Bill was initially rejected, the petition had a small success. Parliament introduced a clause which afforded protection to the property of married women separated from their husbands. See Barbara Nightingale Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College: Part Two* (Constable & Company, 1927), p. 42.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁵ Lynne Walker, 'Vistas of pleasure: women consumers of urban space in the west end of London 1850-1900' in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (MUP, 1995), pp. 70-85, (p. 76).

Princes Street, Cavendish Square in London's west end by the summer of 1857; and it was from these premises that the *Waverley Journal* and its successor the *English Woman's Journal*, and employment register and the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW) initially operated.¹⁰⁶ Also founded at Princes Street was the Ladies' Reading Room, which was allocated to be a space where members could sit, read and work. According to Parkes, the room was intended for:

the double purpose of collecting together all those magazines and papers in which literary women, and indeed all cultivated ladies, feel an interest... and also to be a place of rest and recreation to those innumerable women who are engaged in daily tuition, and other laborious paths of duty and bread-winning.¹⁰⁷

The Reading Room was started in a 'small and not very convenient room' situated 'over the little office which the [Waverley] *Journal* originally inhabited'.¹⁰⁸ Despite its size, the room became popular from the onset and had over seventy subscribers, including 'many teachers and artists'.¹⁰⁹ The *Waverley* (and later the *EWJ*) publicised lectures, workshops and events that were hosted by the committee, with Bodichon's public display of her watercolours being promoted as one particular attraction: 'Our lady readers who feel interested in the productions of their own sex would be gratified in making acquaintance with these works'.¹¹⁰ All in all, Princes Street was a resounding success, and was frequently commended by its members for being a practical and safe option for women where they could enjoy each other's company

¹⁰⁶ This is based on the address used by Parkes during the December of that year. In one letter to Harriet Hosmer, Parkes refers to being 'resolutely stuck in a little office'. BRP, letter to HH, 30th December 1857, GCPP Parkes 9/32.

¹⁰⁷ BRP, letter to BLSB, 19th May 1857, GCPP Parkes 5/85.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Judith Johnson, *Anna Jameson, Victorian, Feminist, Woman of Letters* (Scolar, 1997), p. 231.

¹⁰⁹ HH, letter to BRP, 23rd July 1864, GCPP Parkes, 9/33.

¹¹⁰ BRP, letter to BLSB, 30th January 1859 and 30th August 1859, GCPP Parkes, 5/87 and 89. From this point on, Barbara Leigh Smith will be referred to by her married name, Barbara Bodichon (BLSB). As aforementioned, this thesis will refrain from discussing the women's married lives and romantic affiliations where possible so that it does not detract from their professional and political achievements.

whilst following their own recreational pursuits.¹¹¹ As the committee envisaged, Princes Street offered an exclusive space that valued and expanded women's interests, countering men's far wider access to educational, professional and social networking opportunities, including male-only private clubs. The *Waverley*'s new home was, in parallel, conceived from the outset as a physical space for professional women, bringing the work of the women's movement out of domestic settings and into the public sphere.¹¹²

Following the *Waverley*'s success in building a platform for the women's cause, the committee sought to establish a new journal. Parkes and Bodichon quickly realised that in order to make the journal an explicit organ of the women's movement, they needed full financial and creative control. Thus, the *English Woman's Journal* was registered on 13th February 1858, with the majority of shareholders being women and radical Unitarian men.¹¹³ Working under a completely new name provided the opportunity of creating a publication that would provide a 'centre of meeting' for all women around the country who were committed or at least interested in improving their social, legal and economic position. From the outset, *EWJ* was avowedly a publication by women, for women and devoted to promoting their interests.

The *EWJ* claimed women's rights to speak for themselves within a male-dominated field that largely ignored or belittled women's interests. Each issue of the *EWJ* was a group effort, with Parkes assuming the role as chief editor, and the likes of Howitt, Bodichon, Fox and other members of the committee contributing works of fiction, illustration, biography and

¹¹¹ Johnson, *Woman of Letters*, p. 231.

¹¹² Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 151.

¹¹³ Bodichon, Annie Leigh Smith, Parkes, Maria Rye and Matilda Hays each had shares, along with Fox's father William Johnson Fox and other Unitarians including the industrialist Samuel Courtauld, lawyer William Strickland Cookson and the barrister James Vaughan.

poetry.¹¹⁴ Advertisements of reform bills and petitions were also a regular feature, alongside articles on aspects of women's education, employment and status.

From December 1859, 19 Langham Place became the committee's new headquarters, as well as the new home of the *EWJ* and the SPEW, the Ladies' Reading Room and a luncheon room. Over the next two decades, the committee's new address identified organised feminism with Langham Place. Aside from establishing the *EWJ*, the Langham Place Group (the committee's newly fashioned name) organised the Victoria Press and the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society, which helped women to find employment overseas. Many of the members also became involved in the Kensington Ladies' Discussion Society, a group of around fifty women who led round-table discussions relating to women's issues, as well as the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, an umbrella organisation for groups who were interested in social policy and healthcare.

As the range of backgrounds and interests suggest, the efforts of the Langham Place Group did not stem from a single, coherent ideal of womanhood. However, their shared goal to achieve equality for all women was built from the ambitions of Bodichon, Parkes, Howitt and Fox and the dreams that they envisioned twenty years prior. The concept of female collectivity, as articulated by the 'Sisters in Art' in their art and poetry, became the organising principle of the women's rights movement centred on Langham Place. Women working together was the hallmark of these endeavours, and the example set by the 'Sisters in Art' inspired this wider circle of women to unite and achieve equality for themselves when no one else dared.

¹¹⁴ The first issue of the *EWJ* began with Parkes's 'The Profession of the Teacher', followed by 'A House of Mercy', which is said to have been written by Howitt. Howitt's piece suggests her interest in the rehabilitation of 'fallen women'. Interestingly, Howitt's piece was published after her apparent emotional breakdown years before, which further supports the fact that Howitt was still professionally active. Later issues of the *EWJ* included articles on women's property by Bodichon, poems by Christina Rossetti titled 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock' and 'Gone Before', and travel memoirs by Amelia B. Edwards.

PART III
EXPERIENCE AND MATURITY

6. Continuing Legacy

By the 1860s, the Langham Place Group had quickly grown to be the largest organised women's network in London, with a horde of members joining and supporting their cause.¹ Their headquarters became a hive for the various activities of the early women's movement, including campaigning and enterprises training and employing women in a range of trades. The 'Sisters in Art' were unstinting in their efforts at the heart of Langham Place and in their loyalty to their friends and fellow committee members. They were not only integral to the organisation's establishment, but they also played a key part in its success and expansion, with Bodichon spearheading the group's political campaigns, Parkes fronting the *English Woman's Journal* and Howitt organising charitable campaigns for women and the poor. Aside from their efforts with Langham Place, these women also continued to exhibit their art and publish their prose and poetry, maintaining the platforms they built as artists and writers. All in all, the 'Sisters in Art' were at the height of their success: they had achieved prominence in their respective professions and their shared vision of an 'Associated Home' for women was in many ways realised.

However, it would soon prove difficult to hold together all the strands of their work as tensions grew within the group over religious beliefs and political objectives. This final chapter will address this period of turbulence, examining how the 'Sisters in Art' were individually impacted by personal and professional difficulties. Nonetheless, this chapter will also conclude that despite moving on and pursuing other projects, their friendship remained centrally important to them in their later years. Moreover, the legacy they established as the

¹ The exact number of members at Langham Place is unknown. Surviving documents suggest that the Kensington Society (spawned from Langham Place) had around 50 members. Also given that Parkes noted there to be over 1000 people subscribed to the *English Woman's Journal* by 1860, it is possible that Langham Place had attracted similar interest over the years.

‘Sisters in Art’ and the networks of which they were a part served indirectly as inspiration for future cooperative societies of women both in the art world and beyond.

Conflicting Voices and Religious Tensions within Langham Place

To her delight, Parkes reported to Bodichon in 1860 that the *EWJ* was turning out to be a resounding success. By the end of its second year, the *Journal* was ‘growing incalculably in weight and custom’ with its monthly circulation having already surpassed 1000 subscribers.² But only a year later, concerns were being made about the toxic environment engulfing the offices at Langham Place. At the centre of this was Matilda ‘Max’ Hays, who was regarded by other members as difficult to work with. There was also growing speculation that Hays had struck up sexual relationships with women which members feared would compromise the *EWJ*’s reputation.³ After reading several reports submitted by concerned members, Bodichon wrote to Parkes asking for some clarification. In her reply to Bodichon, Parkes defends Hays as a reliable worker and dismisses these claims as ‘very one sided [...] with all our faults and quarrels there is a real spirit of love at bottom, which is just what the outsiders cannot see’.⁴ However, in a separate letter to Bodichon, Parkes complains of ‘trouble’, ‘bullying’ and ‘contradiction’, admitting that there have been disagreements amongst the editors over the *EWJ*’s aims.⁵ She then threatens to ‘make a coup d’état [...] by buying up the whole Journal’, which suggests how quickly the conflict had escalated at this point.⁶ As chief editor of the *EWJ*, Parkes found it increasingly difficult to manage the disparate group of mostly volunteer workers, declaring herself as ‘quite spent’ after several incessant attempts at mediation.⁷

² BRP, letter to BLSB, 8th January, 1860, GCPP Parkes 5/96.

³ Parkes’s correspondence suggest that much of the conflict was centred on Hays and her apparently ‘intimate’ relationships with Procter and Lady Monson. See: Edith Procter, letter to BRP, 186?, GCPP Parkes 8/104.

⁴ BRP, letter to BLSB, 19th April 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/105.

⁵ BRP, letter to BLSB, 30th March, 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/103. In a letter to Bodichon, Evans described the *EWJ* office as ‘a coterie of women’, and warned her of the dangers of being too exclusive a club as it risked losing sight of the bigger picture. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 196.

⁶ A coup d’état is translated as a sudden, violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group.

⁷ BRP, letter to BLSB, 1862, GCPP Parkes 5/110.

In addition to the growing discord between her workers, Parkes was also facing pressure from others to resign from her post as editor. Following Hays's eventual departure from the *EWJ* and the SPEW, members of the committee believed that their fears concerning the *Journal's* respectability had been realised. To judge by the market, rather than by any moral claims, the number of subscriptions to the *EWJ* was in decline. By 1862, the company's treasurer Sarah Lewin reported that subscriptions had dropped to just 697, which was considerably less than the numbers they were achieving two years prior.⁸ Having become aware of the upset and shortfall in income, Bodichon wrote to Parkes advising her to step back from the *EWJ* for a much-needed rest and allow their other friend and colleague Emily Davies to take control.⁹ Parkes was offended by this, as she had felt she had dedicated all of her efforts to the *EWJ* and made emotional sacrifices for its success. Parkes's reply to Bodichon reflects her hurt and resentment:

You have always held the purse & been able to hire labour, whereas I have to trust right & left to the independent actions of those I combine with.¹⁰

This, combined with the *Journal's* growing financial problems, disparity among her staff and personal concerns for her health eventually caused Parkes to relent; but it is clear that her friendship with Bodichon had begun to feel the pressures of professional strain.¹¹

Religious differences were another key source of disagreement at Langham Place. Religion was an important part of the group's individual identities and largely informed their

⁸ Emily Davies, 'Family Chronicle', GCPP Davies 1/1.

⁹ Bodichon had met Davies in Algeria in 1858 and invited her to join Langham Place in 1861. Alongside Bodichon, Davies founded Girton College. For more information on Davies, see Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*.

¹⁰ BRP, letter to BLSB, 8th December 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/108.

¹¹ During the early 1860s, Parkes repeatedly complained of ill-health. In 1864, Parkes contracted a severe case of scarlet fever. In her memoirs, Parkes's granddaughter Marie Belloc Lowndes describes how Parkes would have died had it not been for the expert care provided by the Quaker nurse Mary Merryweather whom Parkes had gone to visit. See: Marie Belloc Lowndes, *I Too Have Lived in Arcadia. A Record of Love and of Childhood* (Macmillan, 1941), pp. 18-19.

sense of moral duty in their work. Non-conformist denominations, such as Unitarianism, were prominent within Langham Place, just as they were in the political circles in which Bodichon and Parkes grew up in twenty years prior.¹² Anglican women such as Davies and Emily Faithfull were also active campaigners whose affiliations with the Church of England played a key role in their work for social and political reform.¹³ Parkes, however, began expressing dissatisfaction with her Unitarian faith, as she found growing affinity with the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁴ This was due in part to her growing frustrations with the movement's rationalist approach to religious faith, complaining in a letter to Kate Jevons that 'many Unitarians of the modern school [...] crush their religion between eleven and half past twelve on a Sunday morning and make common sense do the rest of its work'.¹⁵ In light of this, it is not surprising that Parkes sought a more orthodox religion which she felt gave 'due importance' to 'prayer and outward worship' and 'things unseen'.¹⁶

Another contributing factor to Parkes's conversion was her experience in observing and working with Catholic sisterhoods. In 1860, Parkes travelled to Paris and visited La Salpêtrière, a public hospital and asylum for over five thousand women, and an infant school headed by the educationalist Marie Pape-Carpantier.¹⁷ During the same trip, Parkes also made the journey to witness the work of the Sisters of Charity, who were providing door-to-door

¹² Probably inspired by Evans, Bodichon began to depart from Unitarianism. In their later correspondence, the two women discuss 'freethought', a concept that became increasingly significant within feminist circles at the turn of the century. For further reading on 'freethought', read the first chapter of Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, religion and women's emancipation, England 1830-1914* (OUP, 2013).

¹³ Anglican women had some influence in their communities and were permitted to run their own organisations in parishes. At the centre of their faith was this sense of communion, which was clearly shown in the work of Davies and her earlier involvement with her father's parish. See: Ann B. Murphy and Deirdre Raftery, *Emily Davies: Collected Letters, 1861-1875* (University of Virginia Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Among other religious denominations such as Spiritualism and Mysticism, Roman Catholicism had also grown in popularity towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. For more information on the increased interest in Catholicism during this period, see Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (OUP, 1995); F. Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ BRP, letter to KJ, 11th November, 1847, GCPP Parkes 6/51.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ In the present day, La Salpêtrière it is still in operation and located in the 13th arrondissement of Paris.

medical care for the poor at the time. As reported by Parkes in an article for the *EWJ*, the Sisters of Charity were far more efficient in their care for impoverished women and children than English orphanages and workhouses.¹⁸ She particularly noted how the women were highly trained and educated, and that generosity came to them ‘by right divine’.¹⁹

In the following year, Parkes travelled to Dublin to attend a congress held by the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (NAPSS). During her visit, Parkes grew closer to the Irish writer Sarah Atkinson who she met in London two years before.²⁰ Atkinson took Parkes on a tour around the main Catholic institutions of Dublin which included St Vincent’s Hospital, Harold’s Cross and the Convent of Mercy, where they reportedly witnessed the sisters’ work first hand.²¹ Parkes’s experience in Dublin clearly had a profound impact on her intellectual and spiritual thinking, and was later stated to have been the reason for her ‘growing closeness’ to Catholicism:

It is often asked of converts how they became Catholic, what influence carried them over that great gulf which opened in the sixteenth century [...] to this question I have never made but one answer – I was converted by Ireland.²²

In the face of the ongoing tensions at Langham Place, Parkes must have looked to the women of the Catholic Church as models of female collectivity and effective cooperation. Moreover, her burgeoning friendships with Atkinson and Adelaide Procter (also a Roman Catholic) served as further examples of Catholic women whose faith played a formative role in their

¹⁸ BRP, ‘A Year’s Experiences in Women’s Work’, *EWJ*, October 1860, pp. 45-6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ There is evidence to suggest that Parkes had established networks of her own with Irish women writers. For more on Parkes and Atkinson’s creative partnership, see: Geraldine Brassil, ‘Feminist Networks Connecting Dublin and London: Sarah Atkinson, Bessie Rayner Parkes, and the Power of the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 5.1 (Spring 2022), pp. 27-50, doi:10.1353/vpr.2022.0001.

²¹ BRP, ‘My Acquaintance with Ireland and Mrs. Atkinson’, *Irish Monthly*, January 1895, pp. 22-25.

²² *Ibid.*

philanthropic work. Thus, perhaps inspired by these women, Parkes began attending mass and formally joined the Catholic Church in 1864.

As a radical woman who was already cynical of orthodox religion, Bodichon was ‘horried’ by Parkes’s ‘bias towards Catholicism’ and wrote to her expressing her concerns:

I cannot tell you how wrong your views seem to me to be, and what a bar to anything you ought to wish for, & which we both love to do. God forbid you should go over, & God forbid that the Catholic Church should ever take you in. It is no place for women.²³

In response to Bodichon’s pleas to reconsider her decision to convert to Catholicism, Parkes wrote to stress that the reasoning behind her new-found faith was not merely an ‘intellectual question’ but a personal one, and that Catholicism could provide her a source of comfort and stability:

At 32, with neither a strong body nor a strong brain, I feel that I require a settled belief in religious matters to keep me sane, healthy, happy.²⁴

Catholicism was in reality understood as a radical religion by a number of individuals who had converted. Notable figures including John Henry Newman and Oscar Wilde moved towards Catholicism as an intellectual refuge that opposed the ostensible stuffiness of Anglicanism and the Church.²⁵ Although many women including Bodichon and Davies regarded the Catholic Church as outdated and regressive, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Catholicism was for many a home for otherness, minorities and political

²³ Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 200.

²⁴ BRP, letter to BLSB, August 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/107.

²⁵ In light of Parkes’s assertion that she was ‘converted by Ireland’, Ireland and the concept of ‘Irishness’ were also perceived as the ‘other’ to English Anglicanism. See Oliver Rafferty, *Violence, Politics and Catholicism in Ireland* (Four Courts Press, 2016).

radicalism.²⁶ Therefore, despite her friends' reservations, Parkes's choice to convert to Catholicism was not just based on her need for religious stability but on the fact that her rights would be respected and her voice would still be heard.

Nevertheless, because of the growing friction surrounding religious beliefs and its place in the *EWJ*, Parkes had made conscious attempts to avoid the *Journal* being identified with any single denomination of faith. Despite this, members of the committee complained that Parkes was too selective in choosing articles to publish and accused her of editorial bias. During one instance, Parkes was troubled to receive an article submitted by Bodichon's husband that apparently attacked French Catholicism. In a letter to Bodichon, Parkes explains why she decided to not publish Eugene's article as it would upset some of her readers:

I have numerous Catholic and High Church subscribers & (without any references to my own opinions) how can I throw an apple of discord into the midst of them?²⁷

'Knowing Bessie's views', Davies had also taken issue with Parkes's editing of her short story that supposedly criticised Catholic sisterhoods.²⁸ She complained that Parkes's edits had censored most of the story and left it with 'no point at all'.²⁹ Perhaps rooted in her deep-seated contempt for Catholicism, Davies questioned Parkes's editorial style and criticised the *EWJ*'s usefulness as a political tool under her editorship.³⁰ She wrote to Bodichon:

In everything Bessie says I am struck with her amazing ignorance of what other people think and feel about things in general. If she had been brought up among either

²⁶ This is not to say that nineteenth century Catholicism as a religion was inherently supportive of women's rights. For more on Catholicism and its 'radical acceptance' of minorities in the late nineteenth century, see Fred Roden, *Catholic Figures: Queer Narratives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Kristin Mahoney's *Queer Kinship After Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (CUP, 2022).

²⁷ BRP, letter to BLSB, 19th April, 1861, GCPP Parkes 5/105.

²⁸ Emily Davies, letter to BLS, 3rd January 1863 in Murphy and Raftery, *Emily Davies: Collected Letters, 1861-1875*, p. 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ For more on religious divisions and women's suffrage in the 1860s see: Jane Rendall, 'A Moral Engine': Feminism, Liberalism and The Englishwoman's Journal', *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 112-38.

Church people or orthodox Dissenters, who between them constitute the great mass of English society she would know there is nothing at all new in women's working together [...] The new and difficult thing is for men and women to work together on equal terms, and the existence of the *EWJ* is not testimony with regard to that.³¹

Despite having the same interests at heart, both women were divided over their religious views and their respective approach to women's politics. As a member of the Anglican Church, Davies considered that men and women shared the same political and economic interests and that both sexes should work together to achieve women's equality.³² Parkes however believed that women's mission was to 'help other women and widen their participation in the public sphere as an opportunity to reform society through the distinct influence of female morality and skills'.³³ In response to Davies's criticism of her faith and the accusations of editorial bias, Parkes blamed some of the committee members of having 'no common religious principle', as she wrote to Bodichon:

I can work with Unitarians, because tho' I am not dogmatically a Unitarian, I have been trained in and still retain in a great measure their view of life and its duties... But I confess that when I get hold of minds which have been trained (or not trained) in the Church of England, I don't know how to deal with them – Emily Davies, Jane Crowe, E[mily] F[aithfull] and to a certain extent our own dear Isa, seem to me to have no floors to their interior domains! And one may talk with them by the hour without coming to a solid conclusion.³⁴

³¹ Emily Davies, letter to BLSB, 14th January 1863. Quoted in Murphy and Raftery, *Emily Davies: Collected Letters*.

³² This is not to say that Anglicanism itself was entirely progressive. Although the Anglican Church underwent significant feminisation during the Victoria period, Anglican women still remained in subjection to the Church's male governance and oversight. See: Susan Mumm, 'The Feminization of Nineteenth Century Anglicanism', *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume III: Partisan Anglicanism and its Global Expansion 1829-1914* (OUP, 2016), pp. 440-455.

³³ Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 176.

³⁴ BRP, letter to BLSB, 1863, GCPP Parkes 5/12.

Consequently, factions began developing within the offices at Langham Place. Such disagreements between Parkes, Davies and Bodichon only strained the relationships between them, as Bodichon increasingly turned to Evans and other members of the committee for their counsel.

At the same time, Langham Place and the *EWJ* continued to be mocked and reproached by the press. As a heterotopic site for organised feminism, Langham Place and its aims had divided public opinion with critics concerned that the centre threatened social order. A vitriolic article published by the *National Review* slated the *EWJ*, and the *Saturday Review* led the repeated attacks on Langham Place, denouncing their aims and objectives and questioning their reasons for opening the centre in the first place.³⁵ One particular article asked,

What business [...] have ladies with a reading room and a luncheon room? What is the reading in the morning-room of the Club which they cannot get at home?³⁶

It also suggested that the real purpose of their ladies' 'Club' must be,

a dubious lounge for the unprotected female, in which she can daily meet her like-minded and strong-minded sisterhood, to discuss the Divorce Court till half-past one, and then console the inner woman with sandwiches and sherry and the mutual confidences of the gynaeceum till half past six.³⁷

³⁵ 'Woman', *National Review*, October 1858. See chapter 6 for further discussion on this article and its repercussions.

³⁶ 'The Ladies' Club', *Saturday Review*, 7th January 1860, pp. 12-13. For the other article known for its criticism of the *EWJ* and Parkes as its editor, see 'Law for Ladies', *Saturday Review*, 24th May 1856, pp. 77-78.

³⁷ Ibid. The article's use of the phrase 'dubious lounge' has a striking connection to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Ernest Maltravers* (1837) wherein the character Madame de Ventadour states, 'What else have we to do with our mornings, we women? Our life is a lounge from the cradle to the grave'. This association with women and the home emphasises how women were prohibited from moving beyond the domestic space.

Unsurprisingly, female-led establishments were viewed with suspicion, as a number of men believed that spaces like Langham Place were attempts to reconfigure the boundaries between women and the public domain. As Parker Kinch contends, ‘such attacks showed how controversial and threatening women-only institutions were perceived to be, as attempts to usurp male space, power and knowledge’.³⁸ What is interesting about the article from the *Saturday Review* is the description of the Langham Place Group as a ‘strong-minded sisterhood’. The reviewer’s use of the phrase is intentionally derogative and seems to characterise the club as a performance of pointless political engagement. It seems to undercut the idea of their ‘strong-minded sisterhood’ by basing their afternoon activities on a variation of clichés of ladies’ gossip. On the other hand, the emphasis placed on the group as a ‘strong-minded sisterhood’ points up not only an exclusivity of access to Langham Place, but to the more widespread acceptance of its members. Despite the need for a ‘subscription or recommendation’ to be able to access its facilities, most women were accepted into Langham Place regardless of whether or not they held qualifications.³⁹ Thus, such opposition towards female spaces such as Langham Place not only demonstrates their importance in the nineteenth century but reminds us of their inclusivity and acceptance of all women ‘striving after a pure moral life’.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, disparity between its editors, combined with growing financial concerns and incessant public criticism made it impossible for the *EWJ* to continue. In 1864, after a six-year run during which over 70 issues were printed, the *EWJ* ceased publication. In the years that followed the *Journal*’s disbandment, Parkes and Bodichon continued to work for

³⁸ Deborah Anna Parker Kinch, *Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc*, p. 171.

³⁹ This is not to say that women of any social standing could automatically join. Because of the fees required, Langham Place attracted a mostly middle-class membership. Parkes discussed the ‘small criteria’ that needed to be met for admission to Langham Place. Women did not need qualifications, but they did need to uphold ‘undoubted respectability’.

⁴⁰ AMH, *An Art Student*, p. 95.

the cause, although Parkes's work at this stage was far less extensive than the gruelling years she devoted to the *EWJ* and to Langham Place.⁴¹ Nonetheless, it was in large part the initial success of the *EWJ* that the women's movement was provided with a voice, a platform with which ideas could be exchanged, developed and put into action on a national scale. As Parkes reported to Bodichon at the end of the *EWJ*'s first year:

When I think of the number of people of all sorts who have been brought into contact and some degree of sympathy with the work, I feel amazed at our success.⁴²

Thus, the Langham Place Group and the *EWJ* set the stage for organised feminism.

Notwithstanding the obstacles and pressures they faced, these women laid the foundations for future female-led networks and agencies who continued their efforts in achieving equality for women.

Howitt, Ruskin and *Boadicea*

Of the significant contributions that Howitt made to art and feminist history throughout her life and career, the one thing that she is remembered for (if at all) is her apparent breakdown following Ruskin's rejection of her painting, *Boadicea Brooding over her Wrongs* (1856).⁴³ Indeed, her career as an exhibiting artist had practically ceased by 1858, and surviving evidence does suggest that her falling out with Ruskin had a profound impact on her mental health prior to her conversion to spiritualism. Yet, despite what previous scholarship has

⁴¹ At the same time as producing *Essays on Woman's Work* (1866), which is a compilation of some of the articles previously published in the *EWJ*, Parkes rekindled her poetry career. In 1863, she produced a new poetry volume, *Ballads and Songs*, which was universally praised by critics. The *London Review* declared Parkes to be a 'true feminine poet', a comment that was echoed by John Ruskin and *The Reader*. 'Poems by Miss Bessie Parkes', *London Review*, 13th June 1863, p. 640; 'Ballads and Songs by Miss Parkes', *Reader*, 2nd May 1863, p. 426. As for Bodichon, she turned her attentions towards suffrage reform and played an active role in John Stuart Mill's campaign to be elected to Parliament. It was her working partnership with Mill that had effectively marked the starting point of the women's suffrage movement in Britain, with the 1866 Women's Suffrage Petition amassing over 1499 signatures across the country. The full petition name list is available to view on the UK Parliament website: <https://www.parliament.uk/1866/>.

⁴² BRP, letter to BLSB, 5th January 1859, GCPP Parkes 5/97.

⁴³ This painting is not extant, therefore my analysis of the painting below is subjective and limited to surviving documentation.

suggested, Howitt did not withdraw entirely from the working world. As Tallman observes, although this version of Howitt's story is 'seductive', it is 'full of holes'.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, in order to comprehend this crucial turning point in Howitt's life and career, it is important to revisit the events of the years preceding the establishment of Langham Place and the *EWJ*, and to Howitt's state of mind during those years. During this period, Howitt seemed to be reasonably content with her work. Following the success of *An Art Student in Munich* and *The Sisters in Art*, Howitt produced a third novel, *A School of Life*, which was published in America in 1855 and due to be published in Britain the following year. Dedicated to her brother Alfred, the book was commended by critics for showing a 'sympathy in all the struggles and trials of the poorer and middling classes of society', which not only suggests Howitt's continued interest in social reform, but also her confidence in publicly engaging with such topical issues.⁴⁵ Her assurance in her work and her skill is also evident in her memoir 'Unpainted Pictures', which was first published in the *Crayon* in 1856. In her memoir, Howitt recalls her painting expedition with Bodichon at Clive Vale Farm, describing the looks of surprise given her by the public when trekking up the hillside with a canvas strapped to her shoulders:

To reach my sylvan painting-room, I must ascend the pasture uplands... It is altogether a very 'up hill and down dale', and so much the more difficult as I have to carry along with me, backwards and forwards, a goodly-sized canvas, the only possible means for the conveyance of which is, so far as I have been able to discover, strapping it over my shoulders and then steadying it with my hands...we have set off these lovely bright autumnal mornings, a very lively and life enjoying little group –

⁴⁴ Susan Tallman, 'Seeing Anna Mary Howitt in History', p. 165.

⁴⁵ 'Editorial Notes – Literature', *Putnam's Monthly*, 6.31 (July 1855), p. 103. See AMH, *A School of Life* (Ticknor and Fields, 1855).

and no doubt somewhat eccentric in appearance, if one is to judge by the astonished looks which are cast after us by visitors.⁴⁶

At the same time, Howitt was helping gather signatures for the Married Women's Property Bill and likely took part in the early planning stages for the Ladies' Room that eventually opened at 14a Princes Street before it extended to Langham Place. At the very least, her correspondence during these years show that she was optimistic and hopeful. Although she received criticism for *The Sensitive Plant* and *Margaret Returning from The Fountain*, she referred to herself in a letter to Bodichon as a 'pioneer' and her work as 'pioneering', and acknowledged the fact that women were naturally subject to prejudice and negativity.⁴⁷ Although Howitt was notably sensitive, she continued to defy expectations and produce challenging and thought-provoking work regardless of the backlash that she knew she would inevitably face.

However, in the letters written about this time, Howitt also refers to experiencing bouts of excitement and exhaustion followed by intense feelings of depression. In her letters to Bodichon, Howitt admits to feeling her 'old nervous miseries ready to creep out upon any slight occasion – over fatigue or worry' and confesses her fears of a 'dark cloud' surrounding her and her future.⁴⁸ It is likely that several factors had contributed to Howitt's increasingly volatile state. Firstly, Howitt had broken off her engagement to Bateman, who had travelled to Australia with her father and brothers in 1852. This, combined with the fact that her brother Alfred decided to remain in Australia must have been an emotional blow to Howitt's well-being. This is supported by a letter written by DGR to William Allingham explaining that Howitt had 'fallen seriously ill since her father's return, and is still quite an invalid'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ AMH, 'Unpainted Pictures from an Artist's Diary II – Sojourn By the Sea', *Crayon*, 1st March 1856, pp. 68-71. Also briefly mentioned in chapter 4.

⁴⁷ AMH, letter to BLS, 15th January 1855, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 201-203.

⁴⁸ AMH, letter to BLS, 10th January 1855, in Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 199-201.

⁴⁹ Doughty and Wahl, *Letters of Rossetti*, 1, p. 239.

Another contributing factor is her constant indecisiveness and dissatisfaction with her work. In her letters, Howitt makes excitable and suggestive proposals for a number of paintings, yet there is no evidence to suggest that these works were ever executed.⁵⁰ Beaky has since determined this to be a sign of ‘hyperaesthesia, a morbid sensitivity of the nerves, originating either in excitement or fatigue, and ending in physical and emotional exhaustion’.⁵¹ Howitt’s constant shifts from proposing these elaborate designs to completely abandoning them clearly reflects her fear of disapproval and rejection by critics. Thus, we know for certain that there were periods during which Howitt found it difficult to paint, and surviving evidence shows that these frequent bouts of anxiety and depression continued to intensify and push Howitt to her emotional limits.

When residing at Scalands with Bodichon in the summer of 1855, Howitt began working on her first large-scale history painting *Boadicea Brooding over her Wrongs* which, according to her mother, was said to be her ‘masterpiece’ and an embodiment of all of her ideals.⁵² Although not extant, surviving evidence suggests that the painting’s subject was based on the fearless Celtic queen - Boadicea (Boudica).⁵³ Rather fittingly, Howitt’s model for Boadicea was Bodichon who, as an activist and campaigner for women’s rights, clearly embodied the heroic ideals of the warrior queen.

Boadicea was considered a problematic figure in the mid-nineteenth century. On one hand, she was criticised for her paganism, her brutality and the fact that she did not conform

⁵⁰ See Beaky, *Letters*, pp. 75-76. Beaky lists at least three paintings proposed by Howitt in her letters that are not mentioned in any surviving correspondence, nor are they named in any exhibition catalogues.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵² Quoted in Jan Marsh, ‘Art, Ambition and Sisterhood’ in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr, p. 40.

⁵³ Boadicea was the fearless leader of the ancient British Icenii tribe who led a failed uprising against the conquering forces of the Roman Empire in 60-61 AD. She led the revolt following her husband’s death which led to her daughters’ rape and enslavement, by the Roman forces. Boadicea became a popular cultural symbol in nineteenth century, and was later adopted by the suffragettes as one of the leading figures for their campaigns for women’s reform. For more on Boadicea and her historical significance, see Martha Vandrei, *Queen Boudica and Historical Culture in Britain: An Image of Truth* (OUP, 2018).

to typical moral standards expected of a woman at the time. According to Martha Vandrei, this interpretation was used to ‘demonstrate the unsuitability of women for positions of power without male guidance and, more importantly, the dangers of rejecting the civilising and moralising influence of Christianity’.⁵⁴ Thus, Boadicea could not be considered as a role model for women to follow, nor be placed in the ‘realm of exemplarity where women taught other women how to conduct themselves in an appropriately pious manner’.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Boadicea was also perceived as Britain’s first queen and ‘mother’ of the British Empire. Boadicea became an emblem of patriotic spirit and national identity, and was often depicted by artists alongside her two daughters as a reminder of her duty and the sacrifices she made for her people.⁵⁶ In light of this, Boadicea not only became a symbol of patriotism and imperialism, but as the image of the idealised Victorian mother. For instance, Thomas Thornycroft’s famous statue *Boadicea and Her Two Daughters* (1856-1885) represents Boadicea riding her chariot into battle with her two daughters.⁵⁷ Her militancy, as evident in this work incorporates a narrative that aligns the warrior queen with maternal instinct and protectiveness, therefore justifying her violence with her role as a mother and grieving wife.⁵⁸ John Thomas’s sculpture *Boadicea* (1855) presents her fiercely wielding her sword in the air as her two daughters cower by her sides. Boadicea’s robes surround both children, as if she is

⁵⁴ Martha Vandrei, ‘Who will be a coward when a woman leads?’: Boudica and the Victorian female hero’, *King’s College London Annual Conference, ‘Heroism’*, June 2009, pp. 1-7.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Victoria was seen as Boadicea’s progeny. Not only is Boadicea linked to Victoria by name (‘Boudica’ literally translates to ‘Victorious Woman’), but she laid the foundations for British Imperialism over which Victoria eventually presided. As a mother of nine, and as the British monarch, Victoria was a symbol of the idealised mother and of the British Empire in a similar vein to Boadicea’s own legacy as a mother and leader. For more on Boadicea’s connections to British female monarchs, see Jodi Mikalachki, *The Legacy of Boadicea: Gender and National in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 1998).

⁵⁷ Many critics noted a likeness between Thornycroft’s Boadicea and Victoria. Prince Albert took a personal interest in the work and lent two of his horses to Thornycroft as models. The Prince had even pronounced at one point that Boadicea’s chariot should be ‘the throne upon wheels’, a conscious evocation of Victoria and the crown. Quoted in Elfrida Manning, *Marble & Bronze: The Art and Life of Hamo Thornycroft* (Trefoil Publications, 1982) p. 38.

⁵⁸ In this sense, it can also be read that Boadicea was employed as a tool to justify the violence of Victorian Imperialism to the British public. For more on the connections between Boadicea and Victorian Imperialism, see Vandrei, *Queen Boudica and Historical Culture in Britain*.

shielding them in a defensive embrace. She is also similarly represented in poetry, with Tennyson's poem 'Boadicea' (1864) depicting her as a queen intent on avenging the assault of her land. Echoing Boadicea's rallying speech to her people, Tennyson's poem poignantly describes Boadicea as a 'lioness' as she stands in front of her two weeping daughters.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, it is conceivable to suggest that these interpretations of Boadicea by male artists and writers detract from her capabilities as a military leader and implicate her more as a tragic victim of war. As discussed in my analysis of Howitt's *Margaret Returning from the Fountain*, the portrayals of female figures such as Boadicea by male artists suggest men's anxieties towards powerful women and the threats they pose to hegemonic social order. As Taylor observes, the portrayals of women in art by men are attempts to reduce them to objects of submission for the gratification of male viewers.⁶⁰ To add to this, it can also be suggested that men's anxieties are not only towards autonomous women such as Boadicea but to their own fragile masculinity. In other words, the fictitious constructions of Boadicea by male artists are their attempts to control not only women's behaviour but their own self-representation. Thus, the depiction of Boadicea as a mother by these male artists are their attempts to undermine her authority as a leader in order to appease and empower themselves.

To women artists such as Howitt, Boadicea was a symbol of female resistance; a woman who represented defiance and revenge as opposed to submission and pity. In painting the warrior queen, Howitt continued to challenge contemporary institutions of art and female representation. As Cherry contends, the painting not only 'countered prevailing ideas of historical agency as the biography of great men', but also offered 'an interrogation of the hegemonic definitions of femininity represented in high culture'.⁶¹ As in her previous work,

⁵⁹ D Barron Brightwell (ed), *A Concordance to the Entire Works of Alfred Tennyson* (E. Moxon & Co, 1869).

⁶⁰ Taylor, 'Too Individual an Artist'. See my analysis of Howitt's *Margaret Returning From the Fountain* in chapter 4.

⁶¹ Cherry, *Painting Women*, p. 188.

Howitt's choice to tackle a subject such as Boadicea reminds us of her defiance to such outdated attitudes towards women artists and their artistic capabilities.

Unsurprisingly, Howitt's *Boadicea* was met with decidedly mixed reviews. Upon seeing the painting before exhibition, WMR restyled the work as *Boadicea Meditating Vengeance* and lauded it to be 'among the most remarkable of the new oil pictures'.⁶² After being rejected by the Royal Academy and later displayed at the Crystal Palace, the *Athenaeum* described *Boadicea* as 'the most promising new picture' but deduced that the portrayal of Boadicea was less palatable than 'Goethe's peasant girl' and that her earlier portrayal of Margaret was more emotionally authentic than 'the face of the agonised and revengeful mother'.⁶³ The same critic noted that Howitt's painting had 'grown firmer and fuller in tone', but criticised her subject on the grounds of originality and authenticity.⁶⁴ But despite the backhanded and contradictory nature of these comments, it was nothing that Howitt was not already accustomed to. As a woman artist, Howitt knew that she had to contend with prejudices that were beyond those faced by her male peers.

Around the same time as the 1856 Married Women's Property Bill, Howitt sent *Boadicea* to John Ruskin for his opinion on the work. To Howitt, Ruskin was a figure of great importance; his core beliefs on art and nature not only influenced her thinking but were key to the development of her artistic identity and practice.⁶⁵ There is little surviving evidence that details Ruskin's response, although Amice Lee provides an invaluable account in her biography of the Howitt family:

⁶² WMR, 'Art News from England', p. 245.

⁶³ 'Fine Arts', *Athenaeum*, 7th June 1856, pp. 718-19.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Though there is excellent warrant to suggest that the reviewer's criticism was gendered, it is important to note that the reviewer's opening remarks indicate that they were not impressed with the show as a whole.

⁶⁵ Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was cited by Howitt in her epigraph for *An Art Student in Munich*. As also suggested in chapter 5, Howitt's reading of *Modern Painters* influenced her artistic practice, particularly *The Sensitive Plant*.

One of the Harrison cousins was spending the day at the Hermitage when Ruskin's reply arrived. They were in the garden when Annie snatched and tore open the letter. Then came a cry of grief and anger as from a wounded creature – one could never forget it nor how she read out – almost screamed the words, “What do *you* know about Boadicea? Leave such subjects alone and paint me a pheasant's wing”. Waving the letter she rushed into the house crying, “A pheasant's wing – I'll paint him a pheasant's wing!”, and then as the family gathered round, sank down in a passion of hopeless grief.⁶⁶

The only other source that addresses the incident is Mary's *Autobiography*, wherein she recalls her daughter's retreat from the art world:

In the spring of 1856, a severe private censure of one of her oil-paintings by a king among critics so crushed her sensitive nature as to make her yield to her bias for the supernatural, and withdraw from the ordinary arena of the fine arts.⁶⁷

Aside from these revelations that were made years after the incident, Howitt's family spoke very little of this painful period in their lives.

In the days and weeks that followed Ruskin's response, Howitt began to distance herself from the public sphere. The letters exchanged between her friends and associates during this period reflect their concerns. In December that year, DGR wrote to Allingham, ‘Have you heard of the Howitts? I have seen them, though not very lately, and fear that Miss H. is anything but well... Do not say anything to anybody, though’.⁶⁸ Jameson wrote to Parkes informing her that she had written to Howitt as soon as she heard the news. In

⁶⁶ Amice Lee, *The Life of William and Mary Howitt*, p. 217.

⁶⁷ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, Vol 2, p. 117.

⁶⁸ DGR, letter to William Allingham, 18th December 1856. Quoted in George Norman Hill (ed), *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 1854-1870* (T.F Unwin, 1897), pp. 189-195.

Jameson's letter, she stated that she had written encouragingly to Howitt on how she was 'struck by the painting's originality' and that it showed 'good progress in all respects'.⁶⁹ With hopes of boosting Howitt's spirits enough to resume painting, Howitt's aunt even visited to commission a landscape, but to no avail.

A 'distressed' Bodichon and Parkes threw themselves into providing support and solidarity for their friend. On multiple occasions, Bodichon pleaded for Howitt to reside at Scaland's farm with her, but Howitt declined. Remembering the enjoyment the two of them had as members of Rossetti's 'Folio', Bodichon also devised a plan to revive the club (newly fashioned the 'Portfolio') with hopes that it would boost Howitt's confidence to exhibit her work publicly.⁷⁰ The founding members were women, including Bodichon, her sisters Bella and Nannie, Parkes and Proctor, with corresponding members such as Christina Rossetti also contributing their work.⁷¹ Over time, the members of the club had extended to some of the women involved with Langham Place including Jane Crow, Isabella Blythe and Emily Faithfull. However, it seems as though Bodichon's efforts were in vain, as there is no evidence to suggest that Howitt engaged with the 'Portfolio', as she continued to shrink away from her old art. Although a few years later, Parkes published another poetry volume, *Ballads and Songs* (1863) and poignantly dedicated the poem 'The World of Art' 'to AMH and all true artists'.⁷² Howitt's sister Margaret noted in a later letter to Parkes that she and her sister

⁶⁹ Anna Jameson, letter to BRP, 1856, GCPP Parkes 6/12.

⁷⁰ Similar to the Folio club's format, the group would decide on a monthly theme and produce a piece of work in response to it. In a letter Allingham, Bodichon describes how she and Parkes were on their way to 'The Portfolio' party' and discusses Parkes's poem that addresses the given theme 'Separation'. Helen Paterson Allingham, *Letters to William Allingham* (Longman, 1911), pp. 79-80.

⁷¹ Rossetti declined joining the 'Portfolio' meetings in person due to being 'too shy'. Once a member of the Portfolio, Emily Faithfull often read Rossetti's offerings. Christina Rossetti Letters, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Quoted in Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, p. 168.

⁷² Due to the fact that *Ballads and Songs* was published after the fallout from *Boadicea*, and that Parkes probably spent years working on it, I believe that Parkes's tribute to Howitt is a veiled and deliberate response to Ruskin's earlier comments.

were particularly touched by the poem, but again, there is no evidence that documents Howitt's personal involvement or response at the time.⁷³

'Impelled by the shock of Ruskin's letter', Beaky explains, Howitt became increasingly attuned to the 'spirits'.⁷⁴ In the years that followed the fallout from *Boadicea*, Howitt devoted her life to spiritualism alongside her husband and childhood friend, Alaric Alfred Watts.⁷⁵ Putting aside her oils, Howitt turned to spirit-drawing, a practice that involved Howitt putting herself into a 'passive state that allowed spirit forces to move her hand without volition'.⁷⁶ While her parents were accepting of her faith and eventually engaged with spiritualism themselves, many of Howitt's friends and family were dismayed when they heard the news of her sudden career change.⁷⁷ Evans wrote to Sara Hennell, 'Have you heard that Anna Mary Howitt, alas! has become a spirit medium?''⁷⁸ In another letter to Parkes, Margaret Howitt also admitted that her sister had been 'gassed by the poisonous miasma of Spiritualism'.⁷⁹ Despite her successful career as an 'extraordinary spirit medium', WMR's reflections on Howitt's lost potential as an artist speaks for itself:

All the members of this family had a great belief in dreams, premonitions and the like;

[...] this may have ushered in the extreme addiction which Miss Howitt eventually

⁷³ Margaret Howitt, letter to BRP, 13th January 1918, GCPP Parkes 7/33.

⁷⁴ Beaky, *Letters*, p. 92.

⁷⁵ Howitt married Watts in 1859 and they remained committed to their spiritualist beliefs until Howitt's death. In light of my decision to address Barbara by her married name 'Bodichon', I have decided to continue to refer to Howitt and Parkes by their maiden names. This is because Bodichon is more publicly recognised by her married name, and that Howitt and Parkes's married names (Watts and Belloc) detract from their published and professional identities. It is also to avoid further confusion with the number of women explored throughout the thesis. Their abbreviated names remain the same in footnotes and married names are indicated in bibliography in brackets.

⁷⁶ Tallman, 'Seeing Anna Mary Howitt in History', p. 169.

⁷⁷ As a spiritualist, Howitt published both independently and with her husband. A large number of her spirit drawings have survived into the present day and are currently held by the College of Physic Studies in London. Howitt's contributions to spiritualism were seen by many within the movement as culturally important.

⁷⁸ Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, p. 267.

⁷⁹ Margaret Howitt, letter to BRP, 13th January 1918, GCPP Parkes 7/33.

developed for spiritualism... If only the spirits had left her alone she would have drawn and painted very much better than she ever did under their inspiration.⁸⁰

According to scholars, Ruskin's letter marked the effective end to Howitt's career as an artist. As Peterson puts it: 'Art historians tend to blame Ruskin – or more generally, patriarchy, for the loss of a potentially great woman artist'.⁸¹ Beaky concluded that Howitt had been shattered by a combination of her inherently 'sensitive nature', crushing social strictures and Ruskin's cruelty.⁸² To art historians such as Cherry, Ruskin's words suggested an attack, not just on the execution of the painting, but on its intellectual validity and – through the italicised 'you' – the right of Howitt specifically to weigh in on topics of historic or moral import.⁸³ Much the same conclusion was reached by Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, who aligned Howitt's rejection by Ruskin with domineering male forces and the generally misogynistic perception of women artists by men.⁸⁴

To add to this, Ruskin has been generally blamed for the lack of surviving evidence surrounding Howitt's body of work. Amice Lee recorded that after receiving Ruskin's letter, Howitt's 'palette and brushes were put away, most of her paintings destroyed', suggesting that Howitt, in a fit of rage and despair ruined every picture of hers that she had physical access to.⁸⁵ To some extent, this provides a reasonable explanation as to why the majority of Howitt's works have been left unaccounted for. For the few art historians who have looked

⁸⁰ WMR, *Some Reminiscences* (Scribner & Sons, 1906), p. 171.

⁸¹ Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, p. 128.

⁸² Beaky, *Letters*, p. 77.

⁸³ Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, p. 127.

⁸⁴ Marsh and Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, p. 31. In 'Seeing Anna Mary Howitt in At History', Tallman points out that Howitt's conversion to spiritualism can also be read as an act of defiance. Spiritualism was seen by many as progressive in terms of offering women leadership opportunities that was otherwise unavailable. On the other hand, Ruskin was worried about the repercussions of spiritualism and the risks it posed to religious structure. Thus, Howitt's fierce dedication to spiritualism can be read as a resistance to Ruskin and his religious and artistic ideals. For more on Spiritualism as a progressive movement with regards to the woman question, see Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁸⁵ Lee, *The Life of William and Mary Howitt*, p. 217.

into Howitt's historical erasure, the works that are listed in surviving exhibition catalogues are completely untraceable and therefore presumed to be lost.

However, surviving evidence also proves that Howitt's professional career as an artist and author was not completely diminished, nor was she able to destroy her entire body of work. For instance, documents show that *The Castaway* and *Margaret* at the very least were purchased at their respective exhibitions; at least two commissioned works that we know of were owned by Burdett-Coutts who would have had them in her possession at the time; and as for Howitt's published novels and memoirs, they were already in the public domain and well out of her reach.⁸⁶ There's also evidence to prove that Howitt remained artistically and professionally active. In the year following the fallout from *Boadicea*, Charles Dickens wrote to William Howitt in 1857 that he would be paying a visit and was looking forward to seeing Howitt's new pictures.⁸⁷ In the same year, Howitt wrote to Parkes expressing her frustrations with a commission that she was working on.⁸⁸ In 1858, Parkes reported in the *EWJ* that Howitt had exhibited a sunset landscape titled *From a Window* at the Society of Female Artist's second exhibition.⁸⁹ As for her writing, Howitt wrote to Parkes about an article she was working on for the *Waverley* on works at the RA.⁹⁰ Her memoir, 'Unpainted Pictures', which was published in the *Crayon* in the 1850s also featured in the *EWJ* in 1862 during

⁸⁶ *The Castaway* was bought by Thomas Fairbarin and was featured in the Manchester 'Art Treasures' Exhibition in 1857. Quoted in Fredeman, *Correspondence*, pp. 54.57. Tallman contends that *Margaret* was possibly purchased by John Rogers Herbert, a benefactor of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Quoted in Tallman, 'Seeing Anna Mary Howitt in Art History', p. 167.

⁸⁷ Anne Lohrli, 'Anna Mary Howitt', *Dickens Journals Online*, 1971.

<<http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/authors/anna-mary-howitt.html>>, [Accessed 09/10/2024].

⁸⁸ AMH, letter to BRP, 11th May 1857, GCPP Parkes 7a/6.

⁸⁹ 'The Society of Female Artists', *EWJ*, April 1858, p. 206. Parkes also expresses her 'wish that one of her [Howitt] delicately-wrought figure-pieces had been here also, to bear witness to the thoughtful poetry of the pupil of Kaulbach'. This appears to be a subtle reference to the fallout following *Boadicea* and the fact that Howitt had ceased exhibiting her main body of work. Through her reference to Howitt's old master Willem Von Kaulbach, Parkes seems to be offering words of encouragement for Howitt to return to painting figures and exhibit them publicly.

⁹⁰ AMH, letter to BRP, 11th November 1857, GCPP Parkes 7/6.

Parkes's editorship.⁹¹ During the same year, Howitt wrote to Parkes asking whether she could advertise a charity event in Langham Place's Reading Room. The campaign in question was regarding a soup kitchen that she had stumbled upon and had organised a campaign to get donations of old clothes for the poor.⁹² Moreover, Howitt also continued to voice her support for women's suffrage. Not only did she contribute her signature to the 1866 Women's Suffrage Petition, but she published her writings on the topic as late as 1878:

I find it difficult to comprehend how, in an age in which exceptional legislation directed against particular classes of society is so universally deprecated, it can still be deemed right by any order of thinkers that women should be debarred from that highest of all culture which is provided by the exercise of individual responsibility in relation to important questions, some, especially and materially affecting themselves.⁹³

What is interesting here is Howitt's use of the word 'debarred', which echoes a previous letter that she wrote to Bodichon in 1848. There is a clear sense that Howitt's strong opinions towards women's exclusion remained close at heart:

Did I tell you I went one night to hear Leslie. Lecturer at the Royal Academy. Oh! How terribly did I long to be a man so as to paint there. When I saw in the first room all the students' easels standing about – lots of canvasses and easels against the walls, and here and there a grand 'old master' standing around, a perfect atmosphere of inspiration, then passed on into the second room hung round with the Academicians'

⁹¹ AMH, 'Unpainted Pictures from an Artist's Diary', *EWJ*, 9 (March 1862), pp. 11-20; (April 1862), pp. 100-104.

⁹² AMH, letter to BRP, 1862, GCPP Parkes 7/9. In this letter, Howitt also thanks Parkes for making her an honorary member of Langham Place, which proves that she still actively engaged with the group.

⁹³ AMH, 'Statement 30', *Opinions on Women's Suffrage* (London: Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1878). This, along with her contribution to the *EWJ* suggests that although Howitt was not instrumental to the women's movement in the later nineteenth century, she continued to support their cause.

inaugural pictures, one seemed stepping into a freer, larger, and more earnest artistic world – a world alas! Which one’s womanhood debars one from enjoying – Oh! I felt quite sick at heart – all one’s attempts and struggles seemed so pitiful and vain [...] I felt quite angry at being a woman, it seemed to me such a mistake.⁹⁴

Indeed, Howitt ceased exhibiting her work from 1858, and she did move on from previous endeavours to pursue her spiritualist faith, but it does not take away from the fact that she was still professionally active. In fact, evidence proves that in the midst of the speculation by scholars surrounding her ‘disappearance’, Howitt had actually been there all along.

Nevertheless, the whole incident regarding Howitt and *Boadicea* must have served as a painful reminder that, despite the progress that the Langham Place group had made in organising petitions and providing vocational opportunities for women, they were still nowhere near what they wanted to achieve. One prevailing issue was the lack of educational provision for women artists, with most art institutions still refusing access to their schools.⁹⁵ The only other option for women to get any kind of artistic training were the life classes that Fox held in her father’s library, despite the difficulties in sourcing and affording materials.⁹⁶ Linked by professional interests and networks of friendship, Fox’s classes provided a practical meeting-place for women like Bodichon and Howitt who were frustrated with being unable to access the same spaces as men. Thus, perhaps in response to the outrage caused by Ruskin’s comments towards Howitt, Bodichon and Fox devised a plan to launch the first feminist campaign for art education for women.

⁹⁴ AMH, letter to BLS, 1848-52, Cambridge University Library, Add ms.7621. Also discussed in chapter 3.

⁹⁵ The minor exception to this was Cary’s (Sass) Academy and Elizabeth Jesser Reid’s Bedford College. Both discussed in chapters 1 and 2.

⁹⁶ Fox married Frederick Lee Bridell in 1859, but later remarried a second time in 1871 and resumed using her maiden name as her professional name. Therefore, akin to Howitt and Parkes, I will continue to refer to Fox by her maiden name.

For nearly 100 years from its foundation in 1768, the RA gained a reputation for being among the world's most prestigious institutions. As the Academy itself admitted, the majority of artists who had achieved professional excellence were once enrolled in their schools:

Most artists practicing and exhibiting in the present day have been students in the Royal Academy... at present full three fourths of the Members of the Academy have been trained in these schools.⁹⁷

Unsurprisingly, none of these students were women, as the RA refrained from admitting female students and rejected the majority of them from becoming members.⁹⁸ But by 1859, letters by several women were published in the *Athenaeum* calling for the RA to provide women artists access to their training. Only a month later, a petition published by thirty-eight women (headed by Bodichon and Fox) appeared in the *EWJ* and the *Athenaeum*, with the letter also being disseminated to the RA's board of members.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Christine Lindey, *Keywords of Nineteenth-century Art* (Art Dictionaries Ltd, 2006), p. 17.

⁹⁸ Of the 34 original members of the RA, only two were women: Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser. Both were from artistic families and received their artistic training from their fathers. More importantly, both were invited to become members rather than be elected. It was not until 1922 that Annie Swynnerton became the first woman to be elected as a member of the RA.

⁹⁹ 'Passing Events', *EWJ*, 1st June 1859, pp. 287-288; 'The Royal Academy', *Athenaeum*, 30th April 1859, p. 581.



Figure 6.1: 'The Royal Academy', *Athenaeum*, 30th April 1859, p. 581. John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford

The letter states how women have been automatically put at a 'great disadvantage' due to the difficulties in acquiring decent tuition and facilities. Moreover, the letter justifies the need to accommodate women artists in the Academy's schools by pointing out that over 120 women have exhibited their work there since its inception. Jameson and Harriet Martineau were enlisted by the campaigners to help publicise and promote the petition further. Martineau reported that:

By this post arrives a letter and petition from a female artist, introducing herself in a business-like way, in order to get something done about the exclusion of female artists from the Royal Academy instruction. The present is the time for the move, she says, and begs me to help it on.¹⁰⁰

Despite the widespread publicity that this campaign had received, the petition itself initially foundered. However only a year later, the group were met with some success after Laura Herford became the first woman to be admitted to the RA schools.¹⁰¹ Although women's campaigns for access to the Academy's facilities and life-classes continued well into the twentieth century, the admission of women into the RA schools was a profound step for the women's movement. Chiefly, it was thanks to the collective efforts of Herford, Fox, Bodichon and so many others that women artists were gradually being accepted by the art world and by extension in the wider public sphere.

Remembering the 'Sisters in Art'

By the late nineteenth century, the lives and careers of the 'Sisters in Art' looked very different from their work which had filled their previous decades. After their tireless efforts campaigning and promoting Langham Place, combined with their personal and professional struggles, the group eventually disbanded and moved onto other things. Howitt continued to practise spiritualism and dedicated the rest of her time to her husband's literary career; Parkes married Louis Belloc in 1867 and moved to La Celle St- Cloud in France whilst continuing to publish her writing; and Bodichon spent most of her time between setting up Girton College and residing in Algiers with Eugene. Despite this, their friendship continued to stand the test of time and distance even in their final years.

¹⁰⁰ Harriet Martineau, 'Female Industry', *Edinburgh Review*, April 1859, p. 334.

¹⁰¹ Herford's admission in 1860 has often been attributed to the RA falsely identifying her work as that of a man's. She submitted her paintings with only her initials and not her full name. Embarrassed by their obvious blunder, the board had no choice but to begrudgingly accept Herford as their student.

Although Parkes kept a relatively quiet life in rural Sussex following Louis' death in 1872, she kept in regular contact with members of her circle.¹⁰² Her friendship with Bodichon strengthened during these years, becoming for both of them an important source of comfort and sisterly support. In 1877, when Bodichon suffered her first major stroke after her fiftieth birthday while she was temporarily staying in her cottage in Zennor, Cornwall, Parkes was the first to travel to Cornwall to oversee Bodichon's care and stayed with her for over a month. Bodichon also became a key figure in the lives of Parkes's children, Marie and Hilaire. Parkes would regularly write to Bodichon keeping her informed of their progress in school and of their academic achievements.¹⁰³ In her work, *The Young Hilaire Belloc* (1956), Marie fondly recalls spending their happiest childhood days with 'Aunt Barbara' at Scaland's Gate where they 'were welcome at all times'.¹⁰⁴

Howitt's surviving correspondence suggests that she also maintained close contact with Parkes and Bodichon in her later years. When Parkes resigned from her post as editor for the *EWJ*, Howitt wrote to her offering her support and invited her home for dinner to 'talk things over'.¹⁰⁵ She also kept in touch with Bodichon and Parkes about family matters, reporting happily that her nephew William Charlton had been born and that her brother Alfred was doing well with his new wife in Australia.¹⁰⁶ One of Howitt's last surviving letters is one that she sent to Bodichon in 1879 following her father's passing in Rome. Although Howitt expresses her sadness in losing such an important figure in her life, her letter is one of acceptance, stating that she is thankful for the support of her friends and that she is looking forward to better days.¹⁰⁷ This hitherto unknown photograph has only recently been

¹⁰² Parkes's 5 year marriage with Belloc was spent in France. It appears that the family relocated to Sussex following the death of her husband.

¹⁰³ Marie Belloc Lowndes, *The Young Hilaire Belloc*, (P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1956), p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-70.

¹⁰⁵ AMH, letter to BRP, 1864, GCPP Parkes 7/8.

¹⁰⁶ AMH, letter to BRP, 1865, GCPP Parkes 7/7.

¹⁰⁷ Mrs Alfred Watts (AMH), letter to Madame Bodichon (BLS), 9th March 1879 in Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, p. 287.

confirmed to be the only extant photograph there is of Howitt.¹⁰⁸ Given the fact that her married name is inscribed under the photograph and that she appears in mourning dress, it has been presumed that it was taken in 1879 following her father's passing.



Figure 6.2: Photograph of Anna Mary Howitt (Watts) (1879?), Private Collection.

In May 1884, Howitt left England to visit her mother, who remained in Rome after her husband's death. During their time spent together, the pair travelled to Dietenheim in June where Howitt produced a collection of sketches to accompany Mary's *Autobiography*. Away from the harsh constraints of London, Howitt began to recover from her frail health and had even finished a watercolour sketch of a quiet village street.¹⁰⁹ However, only a month

¹⁰⁸ This photograph was first uncovered by Giles Weyns on the 21st November 2024 when he had access to a private collection. Weyns contacted me to help with authenticating the date. Taking into account its daguerreotype, the inclusion of Howitt's married name, her mourning dress and aged appearance, I believe that this photograph may have been taken around the same time as her father's passing in 1879. This has yet to be authenticated. I am grateful to Giles Weyns for getting in touch and entrusting me with this special find.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography*, 2, p. 332. Howitt continued to suffer from episodes of what is suspected by Beaky to be hyperaesthesia.

year, Howitt contracted a cold which quickly developed into a severe case of diphtheria.¹¹⁰ Before her husband could even be informed, Howitt succumbed to her illness and died on 23rd July, 1884 aged only 60. Howitt's death came as a shock to her family and friends, with Mary recalling in her *Autobiography* that her 'beloved daughter Annie, unknowing it, came to Dietenheim to die.'¹¹¹ Although there is no surviving evidence that documents their response, a letter from Alfred Watts suggests that Bodichon and Parkes were devastated and wrote to him immediately upon hearing the news.¹¹² Howitt's obituary in the *Athenaeum* reflects on Howitt's 'sensitive grace', describing her as 'remarkably amiable, with a candid and impulsive willingness to be pleased and to please'.¹¹³ The tribute written in the *Academy* was equally reflective of her character, describing her as a 'highly gifted lady' whose 'ready and loving sympathy was the key-note of her character'.¹¹⁴ Rather poignantly, it concludes with the following note:

The gap left by her death will be one hard to fill; to her personal friends the recollection of her friendship will be an abiding joy.¹¹⁵

Although Bodichon continued her efforts in campaigning and promoting women's suffrage, questions were being raised over concerns for her health. Having lost her husband only a year after losing Howitt and two years after her Aunt Julia, Bodichon's health deteriorated even further after suffering another major stroke in October 1884. Bodichon eventually died on 11th June 1891. Perhaps as a final act of friendship, Parkes took it upon herself to write

¹¹⁰ Diphtheria is a serious bacterial infection that leads to breathing difficulties. In the present day, it is rare in developed countries owing to immunisation, but in the 19th century, diphtheria became one of the major causes of death especially among young children.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Alfred Watts, letter to Bessie Belloc (BRP), 5th August 1884, GCPP Parkes 7/38. In this letter, Alfred thanks Parkes for writing so quickly and that Margaret (Howitt's sister) is due to pay her and Bodichon a visit to explain the 'sad details'. He also pledges to visit Parkes and Bodichon when he returns to London, although is unable to write much at this stage due to processing his grief.

¹¹³ 'Mrs Alaric Watts', *Athenaeum*, 2nd August 1884, p. 145.

¹¹⁴ 'Obituary: Anna Mary Howitt – Watts', *Academy*, 2nd August 1884, p. 77.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Bodichon's obituary and had it published in the *Englishwoman's Review*. Parkes's tribute is as deeply heartfelt as it is personal, describing Bodichon when they first met in Hastings as 'a beautiful active girl of nineteen, ardent in every social cause' and who 'carried into her work the sunshine of her vigorous intellect and warm heart'.¹¹⁶ It was not until the 1920s that Parkes's own health began to decline physically and mentally. In 1923, her son Hilaire penned that she had 'failed rapidly, recognising people but losing the thread of what was said to her'.¹¹⁷ Parkes eventually became bedridden and later passed away quietly in her sleep on the 23rd March 1925. She was 95 years old. Although the majority of Parkes's contemporaries had already died, Howitt's sister Margaret passed on her condolences to Parkes's family, describing her as 'very gifted' and remarkable' and that 'her departure leaves a great black – a sort of landslip [...] a feature of seventy five years of my existence gone'.¹¹⁸

These tributes demonstrate the public interest in these women and the genuine remorse expressed at the time of their respective deaths. Moreover, the most used words across their obituaries are 'gifted', 'joy' and 'friend', demonstrating the profound impact that their friendship had on each other and the lives of others.

Indeed, these women were talented and respected artists and writers in their own right, but it was the friendships they shared as likeminded, ambitious women that was arguably their greatest achievement. It is also because of their unique bond that their memory lived on in the generations of working professional women who succeeded them. In light of this, an increasing number of women in the nineteenth century began to embrace the ideas of unity and sisterhood as an important component of their professional identity and advancement. By the turn of the century, tens of thousands of women had either founded or

¹¹⁶ BRP, 'Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon', *The Englishwoman's Review*, 15th July 1891, pp. 146-149.

¹¹⁷ Hilaire Belloc, letter to his son Hilary, March 1925. Quoted in A.N Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc: A Biography* (Gibson Square Books Ltd, 2004), p. 303.

¹¹⁸ Margaret Howitt, letter to Marie Belloc Lowndes, 30th March 1925, GCPP Parkes 7/36.

joined a women's club, with over forty established in London's West End alone.¹¹⁹ A number of networks and clubs sprung up where professional women could meet and support one another as well as contribute to the ongoing campaigns for women's rights. Although the 'Sisters in Art's' utopic vision of an Inner/Outer artistic sisterhood was never fully realised all those years ago, it was because of their efforts in supporting and connecting others that scores of women were compelled to take action and carve out an independent life for themselves.

At the heart of their extraordinary lives and careers was a serious dedication to their art, writing, and to securing a brighter future for women. However, in the present day, the individual and collective achievements of these women are yet to be completely uncovered, as well as the interconnecting networks of women of which they were closely connected. Thus, the legacy of the 'Sisters in Art', shaped by unity and friendship, deserves to be remembered.

¹¹⁹ Dora Jones, 'The Ladies' Clubs of London', *Young Woman's Journal*, 7 (1899), pp. 409-413. Some of these women's clubs/networks include: the Somerville Club, the University Women's Club, the Albermarle Club and the Pioneer Club, to name a few. Although the majority of these clubs were exclusively for educated upper class women, several of them (including Somerville) kept their membership subscription low in order to appeal to the poorer, working middle-class. Akin to the workings of Langham Place, these clubs provided women with a space to debate on topical issues, attend lectures and even offer professional and vocational training. See: David Doughan and Peter Gordon, *Women, Clubs and Associations in Britain* (Routledge, 2006).

Conclusion

The ‘Sisters in Art’ were always destined to exceed the expectations imposed on women in this period. As Bodichon once mused:

I am one of the cracked people of the world and I like to herd with the cracked such as AMH and BRP [...] I try to do it like other people but I long always to be off on some wild adventure [...] I want to see what sort of world this God’s world is.¹

Rather than limiting what they could achieve, their ambitions drove them to fight for women’s equality and to become respected artists and writers in their field. Their opposition to such androcentric attitudes catalysed wider interest in women’s suffrage and spurred subsequent generations of women to continue their efforts. Thus, as this thesis has demonstrated, the story of the ‘Sisters in Art’ is one part of a wider historiography, shaped by the same pioneering and determined spirit, which enabled women not only to achieve social equality and professional success but also to instigate historic change.

This collective biographical and critical study into the lives of these women appears to divide into three distinct parts: the years at the height of their optimistic youth; their professional trajectory as artists and writers; and their emergence into the political realm. However, the detailed examination I have presented here reveals the significant continuities between these three key stages. As evidenced by their early letters, journals and unpublished poetry, these women showed an acute awareness of women’s inequality from the beginning, an awareness which manifested into the public activism and philanthropic work of their later years. This thesis has also shown how their feminist principles and interest in radical politics are continually shown through their artistic and literary work. Although these women varied

¹ BLS, letter to Dorothy Longden, 1857, Bonham-Carter family papers, Hampshire Record Office, Winchester. Quoted in Herstein, *A Mid-Victorian Feminist*, 1985, p. 21.

in their individual tone, style and creative approach, as shown in Parkes's 'Progression', Howitt's *Margaret* and Bodichon's *A Brief Summary*, there is clear evidence to suggest that the 'Sisters in Art' self-consciously constructed their artistic and literary identities to directly engage their political voice.

Although this thesis discusses these women as individuals, it has also sought to foreground their collective achievements and the profound impact that they had on the rise and power of female networking. This study does not claim that the various women's clubs, communities and creative partnerships that emerged at the turn of the century were a direct product of the 'Sisters in Art' and their circle, but their collaborative model as the 'Sisters in Art' and their efforts with Langham Place and the *EWJ* probably influenced subsequent generations of women when establishing networks and partnerships of their own. Throughout the nineteenth century, women were made increasingly aware of the possibilities for their own professional and economic advancement that came with female networking. The example of the 'Sisters in Art' and their web of interconnecting networks of women friends, colleagues and allies facilitated the growth of the women's movement in the nineteenth century and set the precedent for organised feminism in the centuries that followed. Thus, this thesis has aimed to show how influential the 'Sisters in Art' were to the trajectory of feminism and working women and, despite not being directly responsible for the emergence of female networking, their efforts in establishing their own networks played a crucial part in the movement and its development and eventual success.

Prior to this thesis, several works by the 'Sisters in Art' have never before been discussed at length or brought to the forefront of academic attention. For instance, Howitt's novella *The Sisters in Art* and her paintings *The Sensitive Plant* and *Margaret* have been almost entirely overlooked by critics, as have the majority of Parkes's poems and prose and Bodichon's early Welsh landscapes. This study has also addressed scholarly misconceptions

by bringing unearthed evidence concerning these women to light. To address the obscurities surrounding Howitt's historical erasure following the fallout from *Boadicea*, I have presented several letters and memoirs that prove that Howitt remained professionally and politically active. With the help of fellow academics, I have also been able to authenticate and date a hitherto unknown photograph of Howitt, which suggests the contribution that this research has made in terms of removing women like Howitt from obscurity. This study has also made connections between a number of their works that demonstrate their collaborative practice, including Howitt and Bodichon's sketches of Elizabeth Siddall, and Parkes's *Remarks* and Bodichon's *A Brief Summary*, to name a few. Moreover, I have explored and shown ways in which their works share the same visual and literary languages, notably Parkes's 'Summer Sketches', Bodichon's *Ye Newe Generation* and Howitt's *The Sisters in Art* through their depictions of sisterhoods and female heterotopic spaces. As this study has suggested, the ideals of female unity and sisterhood were integral to their creative output, and their friendship continuously played a formative role throughout their careers.

In light of this, my research demonstrates the strength of female friendships across a range of artistic and literary forms, as well as the impact of active female participation in shaping social, gendered and political discourses. The many women that the 'Sisters in Art' became acquainted with at every stage of their lives were crucial in the numerous campaigns for women's suffrage. Several of these women also played equally important roles in the lives and careers of the 'Sisters in Art' and informed their artistic and political thinking. From their mentors of the older generation including Anna Jameson, Margaret Gillies and Julia Smith to professional colleagues such as Eliza Fox, Marian Evans and Jane Benham, this thesis is a tribute to the legions of women who are also a part of this story and contributed to such ground-breaking change.

This thesis has also discussed the women's symbiotic friendship with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Until recently, many scholars have overlooked the artistic partnerships between the men and women who moved in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, often focusing on the artistic friendships strictly between the men or between the women. However, as this study has shown, the 'Sisters in Art' enjoyed a fruitful collaborative partnership with the likes of Rossetti, Holman Hunt and Millais which began before the Brotherhood was formally established. The women's participation in the 'Folio' and the letters exchanged between the two groups show that their friendship with the Brotherhood was platonic, affectionate and sincere. In light of this, this thesis has not only demonstrated the impact that the 'Sisters in Art' had on the development of Pre-Raphaelitism, but also the impact that Pre-Raphaelitism had on the women's professional artistic output. Several of their works discussed in this thesis are shown to have experimented with the Pre-Raphaelite style, particularly Howitt's *Margaret* and *The Sensitive Plant*, Bodichon's *Ventnor* and Parkes's 'Progression'. Regardless of their artistic intentions, it is suggested that the 'Sisters in Art' utilised their association with the Brotherhood to further establish their professional careers and develop their individual artistic styles.

Prior to my research, few historians have offered a closer examination into women's creative and political collaboration, with even fewer assessing the significance of female friendship and the labels that they consciously self-adopted. In light of this, this study has been the first to collectively identify Bodichon, Howitt and Parkes as the 'Sisters in Art' and use the terminology they applied in their work and correspondence. As discussed in the introduction, labels such as 'sister' and 'sisterhood' and the ways in which they have been applied in scholarship continue to be a contentious issue. This thesis does not seek to dismiss any previous researches, nor provide a definitive answer in collectively identifying women without undermining their individual successes. But in offering the 'Sisters in Art' as an

example, I have shown that there is genuine historical warrant for applying terms such as ‘sister’ and ‘sisterhood’ because they were once the terms that these women opted to use. However, it is important to note that the individual achievements of these women are proof of why collective labels are seen in many ways as limiting. The extraordinary and multifaceted careers of the ‘Sisters in Art’ as explored in this thesis only demonstrate why we cannot use such pre-existing labels. Nonetheless, my research contributes to the ongoing discussion in scholarship, and offers a way of celebrating women’s individual and collective successes whilst recognising the labels that they personally applied.

This thesis does not claim to be a definitive or comprehensive biographical study of these women, as selections must be made, certain details foregrounded and other parts subsided in order for the thesis to achieve its purpose. Recognising such contingency is an inevitable part of any attempt to reconstruct the individual and collective identities of these women within the time and space available. There remain, therefore, several avenues for further research into the lives and works of these women and the feminist networks of their day. For instance, their work with the Langham Place Group and later campaigns for women’s suffrage as evident in their correspondence needs a closer examination, as do their collaborations with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the older generation of women whom preceded them. A closer examination into Howitt and Parkes’s specific career paths would also be beneficial: Howitt’s career as a spirit-medium deserves more recognition, as does Parkes’s career as a journalist and newly uncovered Dublin connections. Recently, Bodichon’s life as a feminist and educationalist has been better examined thanks to Pam Hirsch’s work and Jane Robinson’s updated biography which was published in 2024. Nonetheless, Bodichon is still overdue scholarly attention, especially with regards to her Algerian landscapes and potential connections to other Pre-Raphaelite women. This thesis also opens up possibilities for further investigation into women’s friendships and

collaboration across the long nineteenth-century as whole. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have become a part of my own network of scholars who are equally fascinated with the impact that female friendship has on artistic and literary production. From our shared research interests has emerged a collaborative model similar to that of the organised networks established by the ‘Sisters in Art’ and their circle. This signifies the potential for research into women’s friendships to grow and diversify, of which I imagine the ‘Sisters in Art’ would have heartily approved.

Historically, evidence suggests that women have often been subjected to intrinsic gender prejudices and excluded from mainstream social and political narratives. The ‘Sisters in Art’ envisioned a world in which women were seen, heard and supported, and this, combined with the various difficulties that they faced, reminds us of how important female communities and friendships are to women’s survival and success. Similarly, at a time in which academia is being atomised and made increasingly competitive, this research shows how important collaborative and professional support is among scholars. Even in the present day, where society often seems ruled by turmoil and chaos, female communities allow women to embrace their collective and diverse spirit. Thus, the continuity of women’s friendships throughout our history is not merely a cyclical trend or happenstance – it is a reflection upon this group of brilliant women who did everything in their power to foster positive change. As Howitt concluded in her novella all those years ago:

These friends thus brought together by circumstances had never separated. Time with them had effected no other change than to draw them together into a holier and true communion of sympathy, taste and pursuit, and to evolve from the unity of talents as result, of which singly they were not capable...

...But for the present they remain together teaching and working – sisters in love and unity – as SISTERS IN ART.²

The story of the ‘Sisters in Art’ remains a powerful, poignant testimony to the utopic vision of female collectivity shared by Bodichon, Howitt and Parkes and their wider circle. Chiefly, I hope that this thesis is a worthy testament to their friendship which not only played an important part in their own lives and careers, but in the emergence of the women’s movement in nineteenth-century Britain.

² AMH, *The Sisters in Art*, p. 364.

Timeline of Key Events

1824

- Anna Mary Howitt born on 15th January, Nottingham.

1827

- Barbara Leigh Smith born on 8th April, Whatlington.

1829

- Bessie Rayner Parkes born on 16th June, Birmingham.

1834

- Leigh Smith's mother, Anne, dies of tuberculosis. Buried on the Isle of Wight.

1836

- Parkes begins to attend Leam School, Warwickshire.

1838

- Leigh Smith and her sisters begin studying under Misses Wood.

1840

- The Howitt family briefly moves to Heidelberg.

1844

- Howitt begins illustrating for her parents' works.
- Claude Howitt dies from complications following a leg injury.
- The Howitts begin attending Unitarian church.

1846

- Parkes family move to Hastings for Priestley Parkes's health and become neighbours of the Leigh Smith family.
- Howitt enrolls at Cary's Academy.
- Howitt meets DGR, Woolner, Millais and Holman Hunt at Cary's.

1847

- The Howitts set up *The Howitt's Journal of Popular Progress*.

1848

- Parkes's first published poem, 'Progression', appears in the *Birmingham Journal* in May.
- The Howitts declare bankruptcy. Cary agrees to fund Howitt's school fees.

1849

- Elizabeth Jesser Reid opens Bedford College. Leigh Smith enrolls as a student.

1850

- Priestley Parkes dies 26th June.
- Howitt and Jane Benham travel to Munich to study under Willem Von Kaulbach.
- Parkes and Leigh Smith travel unchaperoned around Europe, August-September. They meet Howitt and Benham in Munich.
- Parkes first meets Marian Evans in Coventry.
- Leigh Smith exhibits *View From my Window: Maentwrog* and *Dawn, Near Tremadoc* at the RA.

1851

- Parkes meets Adelaide Proctor.

1852

- Parkes's *Poems* is published.
- Howitt's *The Sisters in Art* is published in the *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art*.
- Leigh Smith opens Portman Hall School.
- Parkes introduces Leigh Smith to Marian Evans.

1853

- Howitt's *An Art Student in Munich* is published.
- Parkes, Leigh Smith and Julia Smith travel to Ockley, Surrey.
- Howitt breaks off her engagement to Edward Bateman.

1854

- Marian Evans and George Henry Lewes elope to Germany and set up home together.
- Parkes and Leigh Smith meet Elizabeth Siddall for the first time.
- Howitt, Leigh Smith and DGR sketch Elizabeth Siddall at Scaland's Farm, Hastings.
- Sam Blackwell proposes to Parkes.
- *Summer Sketches and Other Poems* published.
- *Remarks on the Education of Girls* published anonymously.
- *A Brief Summary* published anonymously.
- Howitt exhibits *Margaret Returning From the Fountain*
- Leigh Smith opens Portman Hall School.

1855

- The 'Sisters in Art' help establish the Married Women's Property Committee.
- Second (revised) edition of *Poems* published.
- Howitt exhibits *The Sensitive Plant* and *The Castaway*.

1856

- Married Women's Property Bill presented to Parliament in March.
- Signed edition of *Remarks on the Education of Girls* and *A Brief Summary* are published.
- *The History of our Cat Aspasia* published.
- Howitt and Leigh Smith travel to the Isle of Wight.
- 'Unpainted Pictures', published in the *Crayon*.

- Howitt receives Ruskin's criticism of *Boadicea*.

1857

- Leigh Smith marries Eugene Bodichon in London in July.
- Parkes begins editing the *Waverley Journal*.
- The Ladies' Reading Room is established at 14s Princes Street, London.
- *Women and Work* published.

1858

- The English Woman's Journal Company is established. The first edition of the *EWJ* is published in March with Parkes as chief editor.

1859

- The *EWJ* and committee headquarters move to 19 Langham Place.
- The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW) is established.
- Howitt married Alaric Alfred Watts.
- Petition to the Royal Academy School for the admission of women students.

1860

- Ben Leigh Smith dies.

1861

- Parkes begins complaining of discord in the offices at Langham Place.

1862

- Parkes resigns as chief editor of the *EWJ*. Emily Davies steps in as editor.

1864

- Parkes contracts scarlet fever in March.
- Parkes is baptised in the Roman Catholic Church in July.

1865

- Joseph Parkes dies suddenly of pneumonia, 11th August.
- *Essays on Woman's Work* published.

1867

- Parkes and Louis Belloc marry in London, 19th September. The couple move to La Belle St Cloud, France.

1869

- Bodichon opens Girton College alongside Emily Davies.

1872

- Louis Belloc dies suddenly of heatstroke, 19th August.
- Bodichon buys the land for Girton College.

1879

- William Howitt dies, 3rd March.

1880

- Marian Evans Lewes dies, 22nd December.

1882

- Julia Smith dies.

1884

- Anna Mary Howitt dies of diphtheria, 23rd July, aged 60 years.

1885

- Eugene Bodichon dies.

1891

- Barbara Bodichon dies, 11th June, aged 64 years.

1925

- Bessie Parkes dies, 23rd March, aged 95 years.

*Please note: This timeline only lists the key events discussed during this thesis. It does not take into account any other biographical information that is otherwise irrelevant to the objectives and scope of the study and is not a full representation of the women's individual lives.

Appendices

Appendix 1: BRP, letter to BLS, 1847, GCPP Parkes 5/1

Dear Barbara,

In discussing various questions,
The truth of morals, or the fate of nations,
A subject co-important with the state,
Our Sex, has held due place in our debate,
Pope sorely has maligned all womankind,
To vice quick sighted, and to virtue blind;
With Eagle eye he scanned this God-made world,
His thunderbolt at minor follies hurled;
Dealing abuse, he called it manly sport,
And drew his human nature from a court.
I rant the present age may find a sample
To prove of all his censures an example
Where in high life the Daughter of a house
With misdirected zeal ensnared a spouse
And then employs that precarious time her morning
Between gay worsted work and gay adorning.
A bright idea! She seizes on her frame
(Alas not tapestry of historic fame,
When every woman was an artist too,
And her mind fancied what her needle drew)
No- on this canvas see a monster Bird,
(Sublimity oft verges to the absurd)
Its feathers boast of blue, and pink, and green,
While stripes of gold and silver intervene!
Its eyes are fearful with a yellow bead,
A scarlet house o'ertops its lofty head;
Beneath it lies a lake of Prussian blue,
Blue from the skies, yet – unreflective too!!!)

Oh heavens; as like that golden Goose to Nature
 In colour, plumage, beauty, form and feature,
 As its young worker to the glorious plan
 Of a Good Gods image stereotyped on Man.
 At three she ambles gently round the ring,
 To scan the dress and met the eye of Spring;
 Then to a Ball; if wit and whiskers fail
 To keep awake she must her friends assail.
 This swiftwinged scandal is a moral evil
 Quite unbecoming either man or devil.
 The last named worthy maps a human soul,
 But – o’er its character has no control;
 Nay, every often if his purpose suit
 He kindly leaves that excellent repute,
 And who of ladies fair would wish a baton
 Deemed too malicious to be used by Satan.
 (So Pope, in his imitable strain)
 Would paint this century could he live again.
 T’is a one sided picture; earth has shown
 We have some brains among our Sex, our own.
 Some kindly woman heart, some female mind
 To swell the chorus which uplifts mankind.
 Some of the “weaker Sex” who yet will dare
 To expedite male rulers in the air.
 And lay the wily arts of tyrants bare.
 You cannot need another word to show it;
 I need but name a Martineau and Howitt.
 Nay leave the walks of Genius; look below,
 Where midst the crowd the humble wild flowers grow.
 All are not frivolous; all are not deaf
 To voice of reason or to law of faith.
 How many a Mother labors for her son,
 His guide upon a higher path begun
 How many hovel homes behold a wife

Shedding the hearts best sunshine over life;
How many women labor night and day
Not for an idol or an end of day;
Passion and vanity in strong control,
To train for life and good an immortal soul,
Some I have know; and so in truth must you,
Who strong and earnest, good and gentle too,
Would both by law and reason give us scope
To fine for libel Alexander Pope.

Bessie R. Parkes.

Appendix 2: BRP, ‘The World of Art’, *Poems*, (London: John Chapman, 1852)

THOU that wouldst enter here,
Hold thy breath inward with a holy fear;
Put off thy shoes, thou in this place wilt see
The outward symbol of Divinity;
And so much of the mystery of things
As man may fathom with the light he brings:
A faint and flickering light, which can but show
The dim uncertain form of all we know;
Yet ever and anon shall fire from God
Flash on the Artists as they humbly plod,
Revealing more than knowledge; they must write
With firm recording hand the momentary sight.

Thou that wouldst enter here,
Fashion thy being with an aim austere;
Leave thou thy bitterness of heart behind--
Leave thou the wretched questions of the mind--
Take of grief, only such as, inly worn,
Hath grown incorporate, a blossomed thorn--
Take of love, only such as, nursed in prayer,

Serves to thy spirit as an altar stair--
All base ambitions see that thou forsake--
All the bright armour of a Christian take--
Turn thy face forward ever, cast thy lot
With saints and martyrs, and repent it not!

Thou must be open to all influence,
Whether of brain, or heart, or soul, or sense;
Thou must have nerves more subtle than the strings
Of that mysterious harp which sobs and sings
Under the elements, yet hold the sway,--
Summon and master dreams which shall not pass away.

Be humble in interpreting the light,
Like some clear window undiscerned by sight,
Save in its boundary arch, too sadly small
For that clear glory which might lighten all.
Yet confident as one who holds a torch,
And conquers darkness in a midnight church
For some small space around; be faithful, true,
As one who, standing under heaven's blue,
Sees truly all things visible--far skies,
And the fair flowery earth that near him lies--
And gives them truly back, nor fails to know
More noble those above than this below.

O Artist! Sculptor! Poet! go thy way
With far more trembling care than others may!
Thou art anointed to as high a place,
Wilt thou but know it, as a man may grace.
Great is the lot assigned thee, great the task
As even the most heroic soul dare ask:
Great be thy heart to meet it; it demands
A watchful spirit and untiring hands.

Not thine alone the burden and the care,--
Not thine alone the duty and the prayer,--
All earth prays with thee that thy hands be pure,
Thy work untainted and its teaching sure.

He who profanely touches things divine,
Carving base cups for sacramental wine;
Spoiling each sacred, sweet, and tender thought,
Bringing all natural gifts to worse than nought,
Wringing the heart of matter forth to show
What coarse and sensual meanings lurk below;
Or rather trailing his own evil mood
Over the innocent beauty God called good;
Placing on all he fingers such a mark
As proves his inner soul defiled and dark;
Sings the sad song our fallen hearts rehearse,
And spends his blessing to record the curse.

That he was born, is sorrow! Like a blight
Is Art's false priest, he darkens all our light,
He poisons what were else our healing springs,
And casts a slur on all most holy things.
Oh, far from all who labour and who pray,
Be such an awful vision swept away!
Better to perish as the poor field flower,
Which lives its beautiful unconscious hour;
Better to be that grass whose rock-sown blades
Utterly wither ere full summer fades;
Better to live unknown and die unwept,
In darkest, humblest shades of nature kept;
Better to know no hope, no power, no love,
No grace of earth below, nor heaven above,
Better the darkest doom can fall on us,
Better to have no life than use it thus!

But to the watchful eyes and praying hearts
Of those who nobly sought and used the Arts,

Whose very names all noble things suggest,
What shall Earth give them? Lo! they stand confessed
The intellectual kings of Man. Oh! more,
Ten thousand times more bright the crowns they wore
Than any kings of Men; 'twas theirs to be
Prophets and poets of the mystery;
They bore the brightness and the diadem
Which He who call'd them servants gave to them.
Calm are the nights, and happy are the days,
Of those who sing His love or paint His praise;
For them this glorious world reveals her sign,
The mystic warrant of her birth divine,
Unseen of duller eyes; for them are born
Fresh forms of beauty every eve and morn;
For them is nature but a shadowy veil
Of that white Throne before which suns are pale,
And the light blackness: clearly they discern,
And nobly render all the truths they learn,
Being with truth infused; happy is he
Who cannot measure what he strives to be!

O world of Art! O Shrine
Wherein we treasure all we hold divine,
How art thou blest!
Whoso is weary in this world of care,
Finds in thy presence a perpetual prayer
And patient rest;
Finds a reminder of those things which bide
When we and all our phantasms drop aside
Into the gulf of death, a hope sublime,
A realm unfading set apart from time.

Did the great heart of Faith itself decay,--
Were Cross and Church and Altar swept away,--
Thou from thy treasury couldst that faith restore,
And light the Lamp of Sacrifice once more!

O thou fair world of Art!
From whence my soul would never fain depart,
But dwell up there and be
Numbered among that goodly company,
No tint of whose bright freshness can decay,
Nor any silver utterance die away!
There lives whatever in past time befel,
There all that Sagas or that Epics tell,
All the great deeds that thrill a nation's heart
Live, bright and deathless, in the world of Art!
All beauty ever dreamt, all faith, all hope,
Hath there a glorious scope;
All of heroic, exquisite, or splendid--
There Raffaele walks a king with all his peers attended;
There the grand Sibyls sit, in whose dark eyes
Creation's unredeemed promise lies,
And thunderous prophets of gigantic mould
Wail us degenerate from the days of old.
There the fair woman of Venetian prime

Glow as when first she unveiled her face to Time,
And bade him spare that beauty from the tomb;--
He gave her Titian, and reversed the doom!
Our heavenly types, who move in sacred story,
Cast on the threshold a diviner glory,
And from one central figure, as a sun,
Streams of the heavenly radiance earthward run;
Cradled on lilies as a Child He lies,
And sleeps amidst a chorus of the skies,

Or waxes fair beside a Virgin's knee,
And walks in thoughtful prime by Galilee.

Many are there we know,
Who visit us in dreams we love them so--
The gracious poet and the stern-eyed saint,
And martyrs whom no flame could cause to faint,
Maidens and youths whom love did bind in one,
(That golden thread which doth through ages run,)
Pale matrons mourning in their widow weeds,
And babes whose promise gave a pledge for deeds.

Ah! thou fair world of Art,
From whence my soul would never fain depart,
Thy skies are ever grand!
They cast the shadow of immortal gloom,
Or glow and throb with supernatural bloom,
And open infinite vistas to the enchanted land.
Thy broad transparent river rolls along,
And every ripple breaks into a song;
On the green banks, where happy lovers go,
The golden apples grow,
And the fair fabulous birds of ancient tale
Warble their magic music without fail;
While winds that tremble round thy peaks of fire,
Bring down rich echoes of the angelic choir.

Ah, thou fair world of Art!
Happy are they who dwell in thee apart,
Who, being dead, yet live,--and cannot die,--
In blessed and blessing immortality;
Happy all bred in thine ethereal air,
And all deemed worthy of translation there!
Happy the meanest servitor who waits

Humbly expectant of thine awful gates.
Thou! nobler conquest than a world-wide throne,
Who dost with more than royal sway enrich thine own!

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