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Feminist Scholarship Review: Women's Self-Expression Across the Centuries

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Feminist Scholarship Review

Women's Self-Expression Across the Centuries



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Co-Editors

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the centuries, men have overshadowed women in all genres of writing and the arts. Their voices have gone undetected, and unheard. In recent years, there has been a movement of women trying to uncover their sisters' long neglected voices. It's difficult to put together the pieces and create a coherent voice for women in different time periods. However, sometimes, it is in the densest of silences that the most illuminating connections can be made.

In this edition of the Feminist Scholarship Review, English Professors Michele Martinez and Sheila Fisher uncover the voices of women through examining their art and writing. In Michele Martinez's essay "Sister Arts and Artists: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and the Life of Harriet Hosmer," Martinez examines the biographical and literary significance of women and sculpture, focusing on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epical *Aurora Leigh*. Sheila Fisher writes about her experiences teaching literature written by Medieval women ranging across centuries, countries, and genres, from Dhouda in 9th-century France to Sei Shonagon and Murasaki Shikibu in the 10th century of Heian Japan to Christine de Pisan in the early 15th century. She addresses the necessity of not being discouraged by the women's silences in history and the importance of extracting women's voices through their writing.

This edition of the Feminist Scholarship Review enlightens us on the importance of women's voices and expressions in art and writing. We hope that this volume adds to the understanding of the role of women in times when their voices were silenced.

Jillian Rutman

**SISTER ARTS AND ARTISTS: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S
AURORA LEIGH AND THE LIFE OF HARRIET HOSMER**

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Department of English
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“What He doubts is, whether we can *do* the thing
With decent grace we've not yet done at all.
Now, do it; bring your statue, you have room!”¹

For long centuries women never seem to have attempted sculpture at all; perhaps because it was then customary for the artist to perform much of the mechanical labour of the marble-cutter himself; perhaps because women could rarely command either the large outlay or the anatomical instructions. But in our time things are changed. [...M]ost marked of all by power and skill comes Harriet Hosmer, whose *Zenobia* (now standing in the International Exhibition, in the same temple with Gibson's *Venus*) is definite proof that a woman can make a statue of the very highest order.²

Classical antiquity gave us the notion of the arts as sisters, but actual sisterhood among women artists did not emerge in England until the mid-nineteenth century. In 1856 painter and reformer Barbara Bodichon founded the Society of Female Artists, and in 1859 thirty-eight women presented to the Royal Academy a petition requesting admission to the exclusively male schools. During the early 1850s in Rome, female American neoclassical sculptors according to Henry James arrived in a “white marmorean flock,” following the example of Harriet Goodhue Hosmer (1830–1908), whose success in a field overwhelmingly dominated by men was heralded by members of the women's movement.³ Thus, it is not surprising that two mid-Victorian defenses of women artists—Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Frances Power Cobbe's essay “What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?” (1862)—pause in their arguments to invoke a woman sculptor, who in her commercial and critical

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens, OH, 1992), p. 537 (V. 830–33). All citations refer to book and line numbers.

² Frances Power Cobbe, “What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?” *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1862), rpt. *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and the Langham Place Group*, ed. Candida Ann Lacey (New York and London, 1986), pp. 344–77 (p. 369).

³ In *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (New York, 1903), Vol. 1, p. 257, Henry James called Hosmer “the most eminent member of that strange sisterhood of lady sculptors.” See William H. Gerds, Jr., *The White Marmorean Flock: Nineteenth-Century Women Neoclassical Sculptors* (Poughkeepsie, NY, 1972); Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 141–65; and Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge and London, 2001).

success widened artistic and economic opportunities for unmarried middle-class women.⁴ This essay will explore the biographical and literary significance of women and sculpture in EBB's epical *Aurora Leigh*, arguing that neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics are crucial elements of its feminism.

Aurora Leigh is a Victorian "long poem," the wild child born from a union between Landon's *A History of the Lyre* (1829) and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850). With a witty, erudite narrator, who has much to say about literature, art, and society, EBB transforms Eulalie, Landon's portrait-of-the-poetess-as-an-abandoned-Sappho, into Aurora, an emancipated woman, whose art takes precedence over marriage. Moreover, Aurora's account of her own intellectual development and vocational calling echoes Wordsworth's inspired meditations on nature, books, and the mind in *The Prelude*. To *Aurora's Leigh's* family tree, I would add a sibling: Byron's exiled hero Childe Harold, whose descriptions of Greco-Roman sculpture from Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818), are impassioned meditations on artistic genius and fame. James Heffernan has argued that for Byron sculpture "embodies an ideal form superior to any actual one. [...] Byron traces works of sculpture to the soul of the sculptor alone, a soul possessed of ideal forms that are 'never to be found in actual nature'"⁵ Although Byron did not coin the idea that poets and sculptors share the divine power to shape or to carve an ideal, his identification with imagined sculptors greatly influenced EBB. In *Aurora Leigh* she adopts his Pygmalion-like view that poets and sculptors can perfect nature's imperfections and bring the ideal to life.

EBB's interest in Byron's poetry, her correspondence with connoisseur friends, and her close friendship with Harriet Hosmer suggest why sculpture is one of the governing metaphors of *Aurora Leigh*. EBB's knowledge of ancient and modern art is evident in her letters to Hugh Stuart Boyd, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Anna Jameson, and Robert Browning.⁶ Yet only a sonnet published in 1850 "Hiram Powers's 'The Greek

⁴ See Dolly Sherwood, *Harriet Hosmer, American Sculptor, 1830–1908* (Missouri, 1991); Julia Markus, *Across an Untried Sea* (New York, 2000); and *Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Leland S. Person (Iowa City, 2002).

⁵ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London, 1993), pp. 124–133 (125). On eighteenth-century connoisseur-poets and Byron, see also Stephen A. Larrabee, *English Bards and Grecian Marbles: The Relationship Between Sculpture and Poetry Especially in the Romantic Period* (New York, 1943), pp. 149–74; and Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago, 1958), p. 248.

⁶ On EBB's use of sculptural metaphors to describe translating Greek, see my doctoral dissertation *Pygmalion's Image: Ovid, Sculpture, and Women's Poetry 1770–1880* (UMI, 1999). Hugh Stuart Boyd was a fellow classicist and correspondent, with whom EBB discussed matters of Greek translation and scholarship when she lived at Hope End. Benjamin Robert Haydon was the famous defender of the Parthenon sculpture, known as the Elgin Marbles, and became an epistolary friend in 1841 after EBB moved to London. Anna Jameson, who helped EBB elope with Robert in 1846 and lived in Bellosguardo, near Florence, wrote a handbook on the sculpture court for the Crystal Palace Exhibition, and actively assisted Hosmer with the historical materials used in the making of *Zenobia*.

Slave” (1850) has received any critical attention for its representation of a female statue.⁷ In *Aurora Leigh*, numerous sculptural conceits and analogies reflect not only EBB’s revision of a Byronic mode that celebrated male artists and viewers but also her commemoration of Hosmer, who according to the women’s movement in England was the most impressive woman sculptor of her time.⁸

So why did EBB and other women’s movement writers such as Frances Power Cobbe view sculpture as the highest of the sister arts and the closest in kinship to poetry? In “What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids,” an essay on women’s employment published after EBB’s death, Cobbe argues that given a masculine education-classical language instruction, Grand Tour travel, and the study of neoclassical aesthetics and technique-women could (and did) produce great art. Her evidence is Hosmer’s *Zenobia*, a full-length statue of a captive queen, and EBB’s *Aurora Leigh*, which she compares to a “chiselled steel corslet.” Cobbe argues that a great poet renders heroic action and dramatic insight but that the power and skill of the sculptor is closest to the act of divine creation.

Although *Aurora Leigh* is not strictly a *roman-a-clef*, Hosmer’s unconventional lifestyle and occupation are reflected in EBB’s portrait of her poet-heroine. It has been well-documented that Anglo-American women artists and writers traveled abroad to escape constraints on women’s education and sexuality by seeking communities amenable to their ambitions and desires. For Hosmer in particular, Rome and Florence offered exclusively female households, which promised companionship and even the possibility of romance. In a letter to her male patron, Hosmer insisted that she was a “faithful worshipper of Celibacy,” believing that “an artist has no business to marry. For a man it may be well enough, but for a woman, on whom matrimonial duties and cares weigh more heavily, it is a moral wrong.” As Hosmer’s biographers have shown, celibacy signifies the sculptor’s rejection of heterosexual norms and preference for female “romantic friendships” and domesticity. *Aurora Leigh* promotes the virtues of a woman-centered life, although ultimately the plot reflects EBB’s own ideal of heterosexual love and art.

Aurora’s use of sculptural conceits to describe the art of poetry prepare the reader for an extended analogy in Book VIII. During a final debate about women and art with her suitor Romney, Aurora speaks directly to women artists, hoping to mitigate their fears about skeptical male critics. The conceit of an Apollo-like statue represents Aurora’s Byronic desire for fame as well as her historical perspective, which she describes in a discussion of epic poetry in Book V: “Every age,/Through being behold too close, is ill-discerned/By those who have not lived past it” (V. 167-68). Urging poets to “exert a

⁷ The sonnet has been considered in the context of abolitionist poetry but not English poetry on sculpture. See Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago and London, 1989), pp. 158–60; and Kasson, pp. 46–72.

⁸ In addition to petitioning the Royal Academy on behalf of women artists, Barbara Bodichon established with Bessie Rayner Parkes *The English Woman’s Journal* (1858–64), which promoted women’s property rights, higher education, and gainful employment. Contributors to the *Journal*, included Frances Cobbe as well as Isabella Blagden and Matilda M. Hays, who like Cobbe had lived in Italy during the 1850s and 1860s. Hays’s laudatory article about Hosmer appears in the first issue. See M. M. H., “Harriet Hosmer”, *English Woman’s Journal* 1 (July 1858), pp. 295–306.

double vision," Aurora uses the metaphor of the male colossus to suggest how one should view the past age and then anticipates that her own might very well take the shape of a woman.

This rest of this essay will appear in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* in a special issue entitled "'Unfolding the South': Anglo-American and Irish Expatriate Communities in Italy" in April 2003.

**"ECHOING THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE"¹:
TEACHING WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

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Many years ago, around the time when most of our juniors would have been entering kindergarten, I was invited to give a talk on "Women in the Middle Ages" at a local community college. Flush with my post-doctoral reading in feminist theory and women's history (they didn't do feminist theory in my department when I was in graduate school - let alone in relation to the Middle Ages), I eagerly accepted the invitation. On a sun-flooded Connecticut noon, in a bright glass-enclosed modernist space, I proceeded to give my talk to an encouragingly large audience, mostly of women students who ranged in age from their 30's through their 60's.

I told them that, basically, we could never know about women in the Middle Ages because their voices had been silenced. In the first place, I pointed out, "woman" was a construct, an Other essentialized in patriarchal discourse, and thus fundamentally unknowable. In the second place, when we turned to the Middle Ages, "woman" was further unknowable because, unless she were a member of elite classes, there were few if any historical records left about her, and besides, she could not express herself because she would most likely have been illiterate. Even if she were a privileged woman with access to writing, her expressions were so overdetermined by the hegemonic discourse of male writers that we couldn't really hope to find the woman in the text.

In this sunlit, glass-walled space, I went on in this way for at least 45 minutes. Then came the Q & A. At first, there was the sound of silence. And then a decidedly frustrated-looking woman raised her hand and said, with conspicuous irritation in her voice: "All you've told us here is what we can't know. That's not telling us much of anything. There's got to be something to know. How long did women live? How old were they when they died? What were their lives like? I get your point, but there's got to be more to it than that. You've got to know more than that."

I was as frustrated at that moment as she was. Let alone feeling pretty defensive. So I proceeded, perhaps somewhat aggressively, to reel off what I knew about the material reality of medieval women's lives. I carried on at some respectable length with all the "facts" that my audience seemed to want to know and that I had not provided them. And I concluded by repeating, somewhat smugly that, nonetheless, we still can never know what women working in the field thought about their lives, or even what most "ladies in castles" thought about theirs because the power of language didn't belong to them. So there. Pyrrhus never knew such a victory.

Needless to say, this was not a conclusion that my audience found illuminating in that sun-flooded room. It was, though, a lesson that shed its light on me. As frustrated as

¹ This title and its influence on this essay are due to the fact that, when I was thinking about this essay, I had just bought the reissued "Simon & Garfunkel: Live From New York City, 1967" CD.

my audience and I were that noontime many years ago, the fact still remains that, so far as I can tell, there will always be more about the Middle Ages that we don't know than that we do, and this problem is compounded exponentially for medieval women. In some fundamental way, this drives me nuts. If I wanted to spend my life teaching and studying what you could never know, I would have gone into philosophy or religion or physics. Still, in one sense, there's no more that I can do about this as an empirical reality than I can do about the fact that I'm not immortal.

In another sense, there is something I can do about this, as my audience taught me many years ago, long before I ever undertook teaching a course in medieval women writers. There'd better be. Certainly, when we study medieval women writers, whether we like it or not, we "echo the sounds of silence." But what does this seeming paradox really mean? Is silence a sound? If we echo it, what do we hear? Is there anything there? Yes, there is. There'd better be. And this is where the frustration and exhilaration of teaching medieval women writers happens, as we explore what it means to "echo the sounds of silence."

How best to do this? First, we must cast our nets, as it were, widely, globally. Even though I offer my course in the English Department, there is so little writing extant from women in England during the Middle Ages that one could not make an undergraduate course from it. This, in and of itself, is a sobering lesson, but it is one that has its advantages because we fill the gap left by this particular silence with women's writings from outside of England. The writers we study range widely across centuries, countries, and genres, from Dhouda in 9th-century France to Sei Shonagon and Murasaki Shikibu in the 10th century of Heian Japan to Christine de Pisan in the early 15th century; from manuals of conduct for errant sons, to diaries, to what's called the "first novel" in world literature, to deportment books.² We study Provencal women's love lyrics and women's mystical experiences of the Christian godhead. We study, in short, capacities for (self) expression in the course of many centuries of global literary history. In the process, we set these writers in dialogue with each other, and thus we can create conversations that could never have occurred in "real life," as we discover the commonalities and the significant differences between and among these women. If, in this way, we can make silence echo, if we spend a semester listening to this rich chorus of voices, where, then, are the sounds of silence?

They exist not only in the voices that will always, of necessity, be absent, but also in the very texts produced by these few literate women who had the wherewithal to write, because to what extent, we must ask, did these texts give voice to the women who wrote them? What was being silenced, what were they silencing even as they wrote? This is where listening to and for the sounds of silence counts. This is where I encourage my students to attend carefully to what feminist theory has taught us about the capacity of texts to be "double voiced." This amounts to having my students deploy what they already know about differentiating between text and subtext, but now for a different ideological purpose. In training themselves to hear the "double voice" in medieval women's writing, my students can find a way to get beyond their frustrations with the

² See the list of recommended readings for full bibliographical citations to these women's writings.

conservatism in many of these texts and with the self-abnegating stance that many of these women use to frame their writing. By doing so, they can hear the often, though not always subversive voices and messages muted within these texts.

Listening to the "sounds of silence," to what the text does not or cannot explicitly say, can bring us closer to understanding what writing may have meant for medieval women. It can also bring us closer to understanding the nature of the world in which they wrote. If Dhouda, in her manual for her son, uses a biblical exemplum of self-sacrifice in the animal kingdom as a model of right Christian conduct, to what degree, in her isolated castle, is she calling for a more benign and more nurturing model of male aristocratic behavior than anything apparent in her own horrifying political circumstances?³ If, in the 15th-century, Christine de Pisan asks noble and aristocratic women to exercise a behavioral self-surveillance that we would find stultifying, is she being a disconcertingly conservative woman who buys into her culture's stereotypes of women's frailties, or is she providing a disconcertingly "realistic" assessment of how women have no choice but to be decorous in order to survive?

And what happens to the issue of silence for women when we leave medieval Christian Europe and encounter a culture like that of 10th-century Heian Japan, in which aristocratic women were expected, were assumed to be both literate and sexually active? Were these court women "better off" than their aristocratic western European sisters because they were not linguistically and sexually repressed? As these women hide themselves from the outside world behind *shoji* screens and fans and layers of robes and toe-length hair, as they receive and send morning poems to men whom they may never have seen face-to-face in broad daylight, we have to ask what of the self is both voiced and silenced here. And what of the *ennui* conspicuous in Murasaki Shikibu's *Diary* and in Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*⁴ as they write about a life at court which they have earned because of their literary accomplishments? If you are, to some extent, expected to write in order to retain your position in a highly competitive court, does writing in any way make you free? Is it a form of self-expression, or within even these aristocratic circles, is the self inevitably silenced? What is more, are these the best questions we can be asking of these texts? Are questions about the connections between self-expression and freedom going to illuminate for us what writing meant to women so far removed historically, geographically, and experientially from us?

Perhaps not, but then again, we may have no choice but to ask of these writings and their authors questions important to us in our time and in our particular historical circumstances. What is more, such questions set up echoes as they reverberate with issues that seem central to the texts themselves and to their contexts. While, for us, the medieval Christian fetishization of virginity can seem the antithesis of freedom as it articulates a repressive sexual silencing of women, the plays of Hrosvit, the first medieval European dramatist, would suggest a very different function for virginity. Interestingly,

³ One of her sons was taken from her at birth, and her sons and her husband would be executed in the internecine disputes of the post-Carolingian period.

⁴ See the list of recommended readings for full bibliographical citations for these texts.

Hrosvit's very name means "strong voice."⁵ And in her play, "Dulcitius," three wise young women use their virginity as a means of active and very vocal resistance to the ruling male authority figures of their world. Their virginity becomes not a means of repression, but a defense against it, not a way of silencing women, but of empowering and freeing them, even if, in the end, they must give their lives to protect their integrity. They meet their fate talking; they have the last word.

But women's self-expression does not always signal such freedom and empowerment in the Middle Ages (not that choosing to die to protect your virginity, even if you're talking all the way, represents precisely what we would understand as freedom). While the illiterate Margery Kempe used all the resources available to her to persuade at least two male scribes to write her life in the first "autobiography" in English, that autobiography itself records an experience filled with the persecution she endured for speaking her mind, even though she was simultaneously, she believed, speaking the word of God. Nowhere is the danger attendant on writing as self-expression for medieval women more dramatically and tragically evident than in the case of Marguerite Porete, a 14th-century mystic. She was judged a heretic. She and her book, the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, were burned together at the stake.⁶ The silence here is deafening, amid the crackling of flames.

Still, when we study medieval women writers, the silences are neither so loud nor so looming as they seemed to me many years ago. Of course, they are there. They always will be. But the more we read and discuss and write about these women's work, the less we will participate in a silencing of them that comes from marginalizing their voices. The more we create dialogues between and among them and between them and us, the more clearly we will be able to hear what they're saying. Needless to say, as we study and question, as we investigate and discuss, we risk, perhaps, hearing in the silence only our own echoes. But I don't think so, not if we learn to listen as carefully and as mindfully as we can.

⁵ See Wilson, p. 31.

⁶ See Gwendolyn Bryant, in Wilson, pp. 205 ff.

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