



## **BIROn** - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

---

Enabling open access to Birkbeck's published research output

### Women and the art of fiction

#### **Journal Article**

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/5386>

Version: Published (Refereed)

#### **Citation:**

Fraser, H. (2010) Women and the art of fiction – <i>Yearbook of English Studies</i> 40(1/2)
---

© 2010 Modern Humanities Research Association

[Publisher version](#)

---

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

---

[Deposit Guide](#)

Contact: [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk)

# Women and the Art of Fiction

HILARY FRASER

*Birkbeck, University of London*

In the middle of the nineteenth century, opportunities for the public to view the fine arts in Britain, as well as in Continental Europe, expanded on an unprecedented scale. The National Gallery more than doubled the size of its collection between 1843 and 1855, and initiatives such as the contest for the decoration of the new Palace of Westminster in 1843 provided a catalyst for major exhibitions of public art. The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 meant that even works in private collections were made available to the public gaze and reached mass audiences. This new exposure to the fine arts enabled an explosion of visual pleasure, but the novel experience of viewing painting and sculpture in such rich abundance induced anxiety among some spectators. One visitor to the Manchester Exhibition, New England novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, records:

I was unquiet, from a hopelessness of being able fully to enjoy it. Nothing is more depressing than the sight of a great many pictures together [. . .]. We went first into the gallery of British Painting, where there were hundreds of pictures [. . .] but I could not fix my mind on one more than another; so I left my wife there, and wandered away by myself [. . .] it was dreary to think of not fully enjoying this collection, the very Flower of Time, which never bloomed before, and never by any possibility can bloom again.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, Hawthorne is registering here in part the problem of excess: how to appreciate the single, discrete work of art amidst such plenitude. But here, and elsewhere, he also conveys a deeper aesthetic anxiety about his ability to respond appropriately to art that seems endemic to his times, an ‘unquiet’ that his wife, the painter and illustrator Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, who remains in the gallery when he makes his escape, seemingly doesn’t share. Indeed, her own journals, published as *Notes in England and Italy* in 1869 (after her husband’s death, since he disapproved of female authorship), make it clear that she was an enthusiastic and discerning critic of art.<sup>2</sup> This was something that Hawthorne, who had to work hard to educate his own visual sensibilities, readily acknowledged and celebrated in the attributes he gives to the young American artist Hilda in his novel *The Marble Faun* (1860):

<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Our Old Home, and English Notebooks*, 4th edn, 2 vols (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), II, 521.

<sup>2</sup> On Sophia Peabody Hawthorne see Julie E Hall, “‘Coming to Europe,’” *Coming to Authorship: Sophia Hawthorne and her Notes in England and Italy*, *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 19 (2002), 137–51; and Annamaria Formichella Elsdén, “‘How Can I Write Down the Flowers?’: Representation and Copying in Sophia Peabody Hawthorne’s *Notes in England and Italy*”, in *Roman Fever: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), pp. 71–94.

She was endowed with a deep and sensitive faculty of appreciation; she had the gift of discerning and worshipping excellence, in a most unusual measure [. . .]. She saw — no, not saw, but felt — through and through a picture; she bestowed upon it all the warmth and richness of a woman's sympathy, not by any intellectual effort, but by this strength of heart, and this guiding light of sympathy, she went straight to the central point, in which the Master had conceived his work. Thus she viewed it, as it were, with his own eyes, and hence her comprehension of any picture that interested her was perfect.<sup>3</sup>

Hawthorne's highly gendered account of Hilda's exquisite 'womanly' sensibility to the beautiful, even though her own visual agency is entirely subsumed into the vision of the Master painter, is widely regarded as modelled on Sophia's aesthetic sensibility (both were copyists, adept at capturing and translating the essence of a work of art) and seems informed by his own experience of museum and gallery visits in England and Italy, especially Rome, with his wife:

Happy were those [. . .] whom she ever chose to be the companions of her day; they saw the art-treasures of Rome, under her guidance, as they had never seen them before. Not that Hilda could dissertate, or talk learnedly about pictures; she would probably have been puzzled by the technical terms of her own art. Not that she had much to say about what she most profoundly admired; but even her silent sympathy was so powerful that it drew your own along with it, endowing you with a second-sight that enabled you to see excellencies with almost the depth and delicacy of her own perceptions. (p. 50)

In this new age of tourism and ever-expanding museum, gallery, and exhibition culture, there must have been many who would have appreciated such a companion to give critical guidance on how to respond to art. It was within such a milieu that art journalism and the modern academic discipline of art history originated and began to become professionalized and institutionalized. Among those who wrote articles for the periodical press, monographs on artists, historical surveys, guidebooks, and other kinds of art literature designed to aid, direct, and regulate public taste were female art specialists, both historians and critics. Some, like Elizabeth Eastlake, Emilia Dilke, and Julia Cartwright, made the 'intellectual effort' required to develop technical expertise and a critical language to 'dissertate' and 'talk learnedly' about pictures, as professional art historians. Many more, like Sophie Hawthorne herself, moved beyond the 'silent sympathy' admired by her husband and published their writing about art in the form of travel journals, journalism, diaries, letters, poetry, and other less academic genres than the formal art historical treatise. Others again, like Hilda, inhabit works of fiction, and in this form mediated their authors' views on the contemporary art world. Women's engagement with art was thus articulated across a variety of genres.

<sup>3</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, ed. by Susan Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 46. Subsequent references to this and other literary works discussed during the course of the essay will mostly be given in the text.

Although in their day women made a significant contribution to mainstream contemporary aesthetic debate, as well as working within women's artistic and intellectual networks and forming distinctively female cultural discourses, much of their critical and historical work on art has fallen out of view for modern readers; indeed, the submerged history of women's discourse on art offers a particularly compelling instance of Deborah Cherry's observation that 'feminine spectators have remained beneath the surface of historical discourse'.<sup>4</sup>

However, women's fictional engagement with art and aesthetic issues has remained more on the literary historical radar, and it is clear that for many female novelists, whether art professionals or not, the visual arts and their characters' relation to them constituted a language for writing about the social position of women, and about questions of gender and sexuality. Women's writing about art in fiction is often less ideologically circumscribed than their formal art historical writing, which has been characterized by some modern feminist art historians as complicit in the formation of a professional discipline that is deeply and fatally gendered. Cherry herself, for example, draws attention to the failure of nineteenth-century women art historians to exercise influence at this important moment of canon formation, noting that '[t]heir writings participated in the discipline of art history at a crucial stage in its development, and their silence contributed to the structural exclusions of women artists in the history of art and the public collections of the early twentieth century'. She concludes: 'in refuting sexual difference and refusing women artists, these writers assisted in the framing of those discourses of art which became hegemonic in the later nineteenth century, in which masculinity was inscribed as the central area of study and the pivotal term of reference'.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with this rather harsh assessment of nineteenth-century female art historians, our reading of other genres, such as biography and autobiography, suggests that we need to look outside mainstream art historical writing in order to appreciate the full extent of women's contribution. It does seem that women felt liberated to write about art from an explicitly gendered perspective in their fiction. This essay will consider some of the ways in which women, including those who did not write either principally or professionally about art, introduced the visual arts and artist figures in critically distinctive ways into their fiction, and can be said in this form to have contributed to nineteenth-century art discourse more broadly conceived. Art and artists, including female artists, feature prominently in Victorian women's novels, and if, as Cherry contends, women were indeed complicit in the exclusion of historical female artists from the canon of great Masters, it might

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> Cherry, p. 72.

equally be said that their novels fully articulate the multifarious modes of that exclusion within both the profession and institutions of art and the culture at large.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, any student of the Victorian novel will be aware of key scenes in which a female author uses an encounter with the visual arts to convey something profound about their fictional heroine and more generally about women's lives. Lucy Snowe's encounter with the paintings of Cleopatra and 'La Vie d'une Femme' in *Villette* (1853); the unveiling of Lady Audley's portrait at the heart of her boudoir and her mystery in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862); the challenges posed by ancient statuary and modern painters to Dorothea Brooke on her wedding journey to Rome in *Middlemarch* (1871–72): these are only the best-known examples. To what extent can such fictional texts be viewed as complementing and supplementing the formal literature on art by nineteenth-century women so disparaged by Cherry and others? Was it in Victorian women's fiction, indeed, that some of the questions most urgently addressed by modern feminist art historians were first, as it were, sketched out? It is by reading the art of fiction, I suggest, that we can make the most effective counterclaim against the charge of women's 'silence' or at best their docile acquiescence in the gender blindness of art history in the nineteenth century. In their writing about female art and women artists, their fictional use of encounters with works of art, and their representation of the nineteenth-century art world, female novelists contributed to contemporary critical debates about art. We can reframe the questions we ask of these iconic aesthetic encounters, picturesque ateliers, artistic heroines, and their fictional dealers and patrons by locating them within a broader discursive context of nineteenth-century art history in which women looked at and wrote about art.

In the large body of literature addressing the pressing question of what an impecunious middle-class woman is to do to earn her living (written often by women who were themselves making a career as writers in order to support themselves and their families), one of the few genteel professions represented as open to her, alongside that of writer, governess, or needlewoman, was, of course, to become an artist and sell her work. Fiction abounds with heroines who, finding themselves abandoned, orphaned, widowed, married to or obliged to flee from a profligate husband, resort to art as a means of support, compromising their reputations in the manner so iconically suggested by Emily Mary Osborn in her painting *Nameless and Friendless* (1857; see Figure 1). Helen

<sup>6</sup> See Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008); Lyn Pykett, 'Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Representations of the Female Artist in the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s', in *Victorian Woman Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 135–50; and Denis Denisoff, 'Lady in Green with Novel: The Gendered Economics of the Visual Arts and Mid-Victorian Women's Writing', in *Victorian Woman Writers*, ed. by Thompson, pp. 151–69.

‘Graham’, for example, the heroine of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), retreats with her son to the remote moorland mansion of the title, where in order to support them both she sets up her studio, adopts an assumed name, and must even sell her pictures under false names — ‘Fernley Manor, Cumberland, instead of Wildfell Hall’ — doubly displaced, lest she be tracked down by her husband.<sup>7</sup> Nameless and friendless indeed. Olive Rothersey, the eponymous heroine of Dinah Mulock Craik’s novel *Olive* (1850), obliged to support herself and her ailing and eventually blind mother on the death of her father, seizes the opportunity to develop her natural talent for and interest in art when they become lodgers in the house of a professional painter, Michael Vanbrugh, and his sister Meliora, and becomes a successful artist. While Margaret Oliphant, in her 1870 novel *The Three Brothers*, portrays in Mrs Severn the young widow of a second-rate artist who is supporting herself and her children through her own art work. Mrs Severn, the reader is reassured, ‘was not a partisan of work for women, carrying out her theory, but a widow, with little children, working with the tools that came handiest to her for daily bread’.<sup>8</sup> In each case their status as fee-earning artists is legitimated by need, rather than a consequence of ambition: Olive, we are told explicitly, is not driven by ‘yearning after fame’ or ‘genius-led ambition, but by the mere desire of earning money’ — a motivation scorned by her mentor, whose lofty disregard for pecuniary reward is heavily ironized by Craik (his refusal to compromise his art for the market eventuates in his sister’s death from starvation: ‘the painter dreamed his dream, the little sister stayed at home and starved’).<sup>9</sup> Notably, each of these creators of fictional artist-heroines — Anne Brontë, Dinah Craik, Margaret Oliphant — wrote out of economic necessity, in order to support themselves and their family.

Just as Brontë’s knowledge of art benefited from her brother Branwell’s artistic training, and Oliphant’s from her husband Frank’s (only moderately successful) career as a professional artist, so we are shown in these fictional portraits of women artists how crucially dependent they were on having indirect access, through the male artists in their immediate domestic circle, to the formal education they themselves were denied. Craik had herself studied drawing at the Government School of Design in 1843, but her heroine has no access to formal training. Simply being around Vanbrugh’s studio increases Olive’s passion for art, and, she writes, ‘while her hand secretly laboured to attain perfection, her mind was expanding, so that the deeper things of Art were opening unto her’ (p. 113). Vanbrugh, culpably obtuse and contemptuous of the needs of the women who tend to him, observes with some surprise and despite

<sup>7</sup> Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. by Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *The Three Brothers* (New York: D. Appleton, 1870), p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Dinah Mulock Craik, *Olive and The Half-Caste*, ed. with Introduction by Cora Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 119, 304.



FIGURE 1 *Nameless and Friendless* (1857) by Emily Mary Osborn (oil on canvas).  
© Bridgeman Art Library/Private Collection.

himself, when Olive demonstrates her artistic sensibility and understanding, “you seem to know all about it [. . .]. You might have been an artist’s daughter or sister” (p. 113). Indeed, his own sister, though she has no aspirations to become an artist herself, ‘had quietly gathered up a tolerable critical knowledge’ of art. She explains to Olive: “[y]ou see, when I was a girl, I ‘read up’ on Art, that I might be able to talk to Michael. Somehow, he never did care to talk with me, but perhaps he may yet” (p. 117). When Olive asks why she didn’t become an artist herself, she agrees that ‘plenty’ of women have been painters: “There was Angelica Kauffman, and Proserpina Rossi, and Elisabetta Sirani. In our day, there is Mrs A\_\_\_\_ and Miss B\_\_\_\_, and the two C\_\_\_\_s. And if you read about the old Italian masters, you will find that many of them had wives, or daughters, or sisters, who helped them a great deal” (p. 118). She herself clearly falls into this latter category, but the erasure of the names of contemporary women artists eloquently conveys how they too are marginalized and liable to be written out of history.

“The young woman has a pretty talent”, reports Mr Welby, RA, patronizingly of Mrs Severn, “and her husband taught her after a fashion how to use it”.<sup>10</sup> The dependence of such women as Olive and Mrs Severn upon a kind of arbitrary coincidence of their ‘pretty talent’ and the education and experience of a man willing to teach her ‘after a fashion’ is a theme that emerges in other stories too. In Anna Mary Howitt’s serially published novella *The Sisters in Art* (1852), a once successful Italian sculptor, now fallen on hard times, helps raise the sights of the female artist-heroine and her friends and gives them access to casts they can copy, and to a kind of artistic ambition and professionalism that Alice Law cannot hope to find at the private academy of art for young ladies that she attends (although it should be noted that Alice and her friends do reciprocate by helping the impoverished sculptor to make a living, doing detailed anatomical sketches for him from which he can make wax models for medical demonstrations).<sup>11</sup> In this respect Victorian fiction tells us what modern feminist art historians tell us about the importance of women having an entrée into the Victorian art world via their artist-fathers, brothers, husbands, and family friends, and how inadequate such arrangements often are (*The Sisters in Art* is about the setting up of a School of Art and Design that provides a proper education for women of all classes and backgrounds). But it also tells us, as modern feminist critics do, of the importance of *female* networks in enabling women to become artists. In *The Sisters in Art* Alice is mentored, to be sure, by Giuseppe and by a male landscape painter from her native Yorkshire, but she explains how she was also well instructed as a child by her female guardian, ‘a lady who had herself a very noble power in art’ (p. 286). And it is the collective talent of the three young women at the centre of the story, together with the warm-hearted support of Alice’s aunt, the generosity of their landlady, and above all the financial assistance and patronage of Mrs Cohen — their ‘sisterhood in art’, in other words — that enables them to realize their ambition of setting up a Female School of Art, which will mean that young women with talent will no longer have to depend on such ad hoc and contingent arrangements. Similarly, in *Olive* it is the artist’s sister, Meliora, who acts not only as the heroine’s teacher, but as her agent, negotiating the sale of her first painting for her, and it is a woman, Mrs Fludyer, who becomes her patron.

But if such novels convey something of how, in reality, as well as in utopian idealism, women played a prominent and active role in the Victorian art world, as recent feminist art historians have shown us, they also represent the barriers women faced not only in terms of acquiring a thorough education in art to equal

<sup>10</sup> Oliphant, *The Three Brothers*, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Mary Howitt, *The Sisters in Art*, in *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art*, 2 (1852), 214–16, 238–40, 262–63, 286–88, 317–19, 334–36, 347–48, 362–64.



that of their male counterparts, but also in relation to the prejudices with which they had to battle. Women, many felt, were not capable of being great artists. They could only manage, at best, so-called ‘female’ subjects. As Mr Welby, RA, opines in Oliphant’s *The Three Brothers* (1870), ‘a woman may content herself with the homely sort of work she can do; but a young fellow aims at high art’ (p. 86). Even by the end of the century, the view expressed so paradigmatically by Charles Tansley in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) — ‘women can’t paint, women can’t write’ — widely prevailed.<sup>12</sup> The heroine of Ella Hepworth Dixon’s novel *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Mary Erle, who has ambitions to become a painter, has a suitor, Vincent Hemming, who considers painting ‘especially in water-colours’ to be ‘an eminently lady-like occupation’. Even her feminist friend, Alison Ives, observes that “‘no woman ever made a great artist yet, [. . .] but if you don’t mind being third-rate, of course go in and try’”. Her jaundiced view that, for a female artist, South Kensington and the Royal Academy will be followed inexorably by “‘portraits of babies in pastel or cottage gardens for the rest of your life’”, suggests Dixon’s understanding of the ways in which the ideological limitation of women’s capacity to engage in cultural production of ‘third-rate’ domestic and floral subjects had been internalized even by many enlightened women.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, Mary abandons her painterly ambitions.

The fullest exploration of how such ideological barriers operated is to be found in Craik’s *Olive*, in which the artist Michael Vanbrugh is the mouthpiece for all the institutionalized prejudices against women becoming anything more than, like Mrs Severn, painters of ‘pretty groups of children’ or vapid landscapes (*The Three Brothers*, p. 86). His very name vests him with the authority of the old Masters, and he is fully cognizant of his place in a kind of Apostolic Succession of genius. ‘He took his art for his mistress’, we are told, and emulated the great Florentine master who was his namesake (p. 112). Olive herself ‘regarded the old artist with as much reverence as if he had been Michelangelo himself’ (p. 112). He decides eventually to move to Rome, where, he rhapsodizes, “‘once again I will lie on the floor of the Sistine, and look up worshippingly to Michael the Angel’” (p. 145). He fantasizes with Olive about “‘how we should go together to the City of Art, dwell together, work together, master and pupil [. . .]. We should be like the brothers Caracci — like Titian with his scholar and adopted son’”. Warming to his theme, and rolling out the myth of succession, he sighs: “‘would that you had not been a woman! That I could have made you my son in Art, and given you my name, and then died, bequeathing you the mantle of my glory’” (p. 157). He invites her to be his wife instead, as the only role he can fit her into, since he already has a sister. She declines.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Stella McNicol and Hermione Lee (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (London: Methuen, 1894), pp. 54, 42.

Vanbrugh, the type of the male artist genius, ‘had reduced the womankind about him to the condition of perfect slaves’ (p. 156). His sister’s ‘whole life had been pervaded by one grand desire: to see her brother president of the Royal Academy. When she was a schoolgirl and he a student, she had secretly sketched his likeness — the only one extant of his ugly, yet soul-lighted face — and had prefixed thereto his name, with the magic letters, “P.R.A.”’ (p. 117). The world they inhabit is one in which women’s potential for talent is subsumed by the imperative to give every advantage to the son of the family — as, in real life, Branwell Brontë, for example, was given a privileged education over and above his more talented sisters. Naturally, such men would be anxious to protect their privileges, and Michael, when his sister introduces the idea that Olive might be a painter, ‘stood, flourishing his mahl-stick and palette — looking very like a gigantic warrior, guarding the shrine of Art with shield and spear’ (p. 121). Michael is predictably dismissive of such a preposterous proposal and at first refuses to look at that ‘rubbish’ (p. 121), her work, instead wanting her to model for him, as the mother of Alcestis (modelled by her own mother), for her look of ‘passive misery’ (p. 122). When he does look at them, he reluctantly admits to finding some talent there, but he doesn’t hold back on the subject of women painters:

‘I am not such a fool as to say that genius is of either sex, but it is an acknowledged fact that no woman ever was a great painter, poet, or musician. Genius, the mighty one, does not exist in weak female nature, and even if it did, custom and education would certainly stunt its growth.’ (p. 123)

It is ‘impossible’ for a woman to become a *great* artist, according to Vanbrugh, because the term implies:

‘Not only a painter, but a poet; a man of learning, or reading, of observation. A gentleman — we artists have been the friends of kings. A man of high virtue, or how can he reach the pure ideal? A man of iron will, unconquered daring, and passions strong — yet stainless. Last and greatest, a man who, feeling within him the divine spirit, with his whole soul worships God! [. . .] This is what an artist must *be* by nature. I have not spoken of what he has to make himself. Years of study such as few can bear lie before him — no life of a carpet-knight, no easy play-work of scraping colours on canvas. Why, these hands of mine have wielded not only the pencil, but the scalpel; these eyes have rested on scenes of horror, misery — even crime. I glory in it; for it was all for Art.’ (pp. 124–25)

Vanbrugh is heavily ironized in the novel, but his views on the gender of genius are ostensibly endorsed by the narrator, who avers: ‘The hierarchies of the soul’s dominion belong only to man, and it is right they should. He it was whom God created first, let him take the pre-eminence’. For woman’s ‘sphere is, and ever must be, bounded; because, however lofty her genius may be, it always dwells in a woman’s breast. Nature, which gave to man the dominion of the intellect, gave to her that of the heart and affections’. And, he adds, ‘there scarce ever lived a woman who would not rather sit meekly by her own hearth,

with her husband at her side, and her children at her knee, than be the crowned Corinne of the Capitol' (p. 126).

It is a familiar enough view of woman's 'nature' and capacities, of course, but interestingly subverted in a novel that has an artist-heroine, one who, moreover, is shown to be capable of moving beyond 'the mere prettiness of most women-painters to the grandeur of sublimer Art', one who works in a range of genres, including history painting and allegory, and who through her arduous labour makes herself 'worthy of being ranked among those painters who are not of the passing hour, but for all time' (p. 127). What makes this possible is that Olive is defined less by her womanhood than by her disability. It is repeatedly stated throughout the novel that Olive is 'deformed', expected by no one (least of all herself) to marry and enjoy the 'normal' womanly satisfactions of life, which frees her to devote herself to art, like a man can, and to become a 'genius', as he can. For some women, the narrator tells us, 'chance, or circumstance, or wrong, sealing up her woman's nature, converts her into a self-dependent human soul. Instead of life's sweetnesses, she has before her life's greatnesses' (p. 126). Olive is one such, and her disability becomes enabling, placing her in a position from which she can overcome the disabilities faced by other women who wish to become professional artists:

Olive could do many things with an independence that would have been impossible to beautiful and unguarded youth. Oftentimes Mrs Rothesay [her mother] trembled and murmured at the days of solitary study in the British Museum, and in various picture galleries; the long, lonely walks, sometimes in wintertime extending far into the dusk of evening. But Olive always answered, with a pensive smile.

'Nay, mother; I am quite safe everywhere. Remember, I am not like other girls. Who would notice *me*?' (p. 127)

Her disability unsexes her, and so does her 'genius'. Vanburgh 'never thought of her sex at all' (p. 127). She had an 'almost masculine power of mind', an 'ardent, almost masculine genius' (p. 145). "'Though you are a woman,'" he tells her, "'you have a man's soul — the soul of genius'" (p. 157). Olive, then, becomes a successful artist, although she remains to all intents and purposes very womanly, and shows none of the monstrous egotism that characterizes the self-styled modern master Vanburgh. She continues to position her studio in one half of the living room, to tend to her mother and anyone else who needs her, and indeed proves to be enough of a woman that the hero falls in love with her. She confesses to her mother, "'Mamma, I think, on the whole, I am happier here than I was at Woodford Cottage. I feel less of an artist and more of a woman'" (p. 185).

The sense of conflict between womanhood and artistic identity articulated in *Olive* — one that is familiar to us from, for example, Barrett Browning's *Aurora*

*Leigh* (1857) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) — is very particularly inflected in the case of the visual arts. In Anne Thackeray Ritchie's intriguing novel *Miss Angel* (1876), the heroine is fatally divided between her art and her social success as a woman and object of desire. It is of special interest because it is explicitly based on the life of Angelica Kauffmann, who with Mary Moser was one of the signatories to the petition to the king for the establishment of a Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, and a founding Fellow (she is represented among the gathered academicians in Henry Singleton's painting of 1795 — both in person and, significantly, in a framed portrait — while in Johann Zoffany's 1772 group portrait of the academicians setting up a life-drawing class she and Moser, who as women were excluded, appear only in the form of pictures on the wall). *Miss Angel* constantly draws attention to the tension between its heroine's professional ambitions on the one hand, and her 'womanly' social and romantic ambitions on the other; between her artist's gaze, and her to-be-looked-at-ness as a woman. The title, ironically suggesting a female counterpart to 'Michael the Angel', alludes to Joshua Reynolds's nickname for the young painter, and much is made of the relationship between the two artists, each of whom painted portraits of the other. When she is first taken to Reynolds's studio, she admires professionally the light and the painter's palette and pencils, but 'then, with some sudden impulse, she sprang up into the sitter's chair'.<sup>14</sup> In a key scene Angelica leaves a glittering party at Reynolds's house, at which she has been described as both his 'living Muse' and his 'rival', to go to his studio to 'enjoy a different feast' (pp. 115–16). He, clearly smitten with her, finds her looking at one of his paintings, with a painter's eye: we are told that

Angelica had in that instant become a painter again, as some people do who have two lives to lead. She was looking at the picture, and for a moment she had forgotten the painter, and was wondering at his work, at the breadth and grace of that lovely combination of colour, of feeling, of flowing ease. (p. 116)

She gazes at the painting (Reynolds's full-length portrait of Lady Elizabeth Keppel, portrayed as a bridesmaid making sacrifice to Hymen) 'with some sort of hope that she could look, and admire, and try to realize the gracious mystery of this new master's art' (p. 117). But while hers is explicitly the look of an artist at that moment, she becomes the object of Reynolds's, and the narrator's, gaze, like another picture in his gallery. And indeed a painting by Margaret Isabell Dicksee, entitled *Miss Angel — Angelica Kauffmann Visits Mr. Reynolds's Studio* (1892), depicting an earlier scene from the novel, does actually make a picture of her in his studio (see Plate 1, p. 72). This is a manoeuvre that occurs throughout the novel, from the very first page, where the narrator enters the story of the artist's

<sup>14</sup> Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Miss Angel and Fulham Lawn* (London: Smith, Elder, 1908), p. 92.



PLATE I *Miss Angel* — *Angelica Kauffmann Visits Mr Reynolds's Studio* (1892)  
by Margaret Isabel Dicksee (oil on canvas). © Fine Art Photographic Library,  
London/Private Collection.

life via an engraving of Reynolds's portrait of Angelica Kauffmann, probably by Francesco Bartolozzi (see Figure 2):

It was the picture of a lady some five or six and twenty years of age. The face is peculiar, sprightly, tender, a little obstinate. The eyes are very charming and intelligent. The features are broadly marked; there is something at once homely and dignified in their expression. The little head is charmingly set upon its frame. A few pearls are mixed with the heavy loops of hair; two great curls fall upon the sloping shoulders; the slim figure is draped in light folds fastened by jeweled bands, such as those which people then wore. A loose scarf is tied round the waist. Being cold, perhaps, sitting in Sir Joshua's great studio, the lady has partly wrapped herself in a great fur cloak. (p. 1)



FIGURE 2 *Angelica Kauffmann* by Francesco Bartolozzi, published by John Boydell, after Sir Joshua Reynolds (stipple engraving), published 3 September 1780 (c. 1777–78). London, National Portrait Gallery (NPG D14701).

Thereafter, we are repeatedly shown the artist heroine with ‘the little head [. . .] charmingly set upon its frame’ as if she is indeed the framed subject of a painting. She is a ‘sweet living picture’ for her friend Antonio, the Italian painter whom she will eventually marry, as she stands, brush and palette in hand, before Titian’s magnificent *Assumption*, hung above the high altar of the Frari Chapel in Venice, which she had been commissioned to copy (p. 12). Yet by dint of imagining herself into the painting, as ‘one of the women in the crowd looking on with the amazed apostles’, she seems to evade his gaze, avoid being framed by him, and become absorbed into the noble art to which she aspires, a witness to its elevating power, like the women onlookers she empathetically imagines beyond the frame of the painting (p. 13). Later, in the sacristy of the same church, as Angelica gazes upon Giovanni Bellini’s *Madonna and Child with Sts Nicholas, Peter, Benedict, and Mark*, wondering at ‘the noble Pesari heads [bent] in reverent conclave before the gracious and splendid Madonna’, and observing especially how ‘measured and liberal it all is; what a stately self-respect and reverence for others’, the woman who is to become her own first patron, Lady W, looks admiringly at Angelica herself and, interrupting the young painter’s still concentration on the painting, says: “‘I wish I could paint you as you are now, child’” (p. 54). The fictional Angelica is, then, it is emphasized, both painter and the subject of paintings, as was the historical Angelica Kauffmann. She is known not only for her large-scale historical and allegorical subjects, but also for her self-portraits, of which there are many, but of course in these it is the female artist who has control over her own representation, and they do convey a sense of self-possession that the fictional Miss Angel, at least, lacks.

In Craik’s *Olive*, it is the heroine’s mother, Sybilla Rothesay, rather than her ‘pale, deformed’ self, who is the great beauty, and who is described throughout the novel as the subject of painting: ‘Any poet, painter, or sculptor, would certainly have raved about Mrs Rothesay’. She is ‘a Venus de Medici transmuted from the stone’ (pp. 18, 7, 9). Olive herself is, by contrast, described as possessing ‘scarce one charm that would prove its lineage from the young beautiful mother, out of whose sight it instinctively crept’ (p. 18). When her father first saw her, he ‘turned away, putting his hand before his eyes, as if to shut out the sight’ (p. 23). The visual objectification of Sybilla Rothesay is played out in the novel as she becomes the actual model for both Vanbrugh and her daughter and, more, as she herself loses her sight, rendered unable to see her daughter’s paintings of her. Visuality and subjectivity are closely aligned, and being shut out of the sight of both her parents seems to enable the development of Olive’s own vision. But even as she finds visual agency, and becomes more confidently the mistress of her art, training the eye for beauty that attracts her among other things to her young neighbour Sara Derwent, and hiring professional models to

sit for her, poor, unattractive Olive herself even, within this visual economy, becomes the object of the gaze:

as she sat with her hands crossed on her knee, her bending head and pensive eyes out-gazing, [Olive] added no unmeet picture to the still beauty of the scene. Many a lovely woman might have coveted the meek yet heavenly look which cast sweetness over the pale features of the deformed girl. (p. 96)

As with other artist-heroines such as Miss Angel, there is some reciprocity of vision in the case of Olive. She is ‘watched — long and earnestly; but by an innocent watcher’, Sara’s young brother Lyle Derwent (the formulation here implying that there may be male watchers who are not so innocent), while in turn the boy’s own delicate beauty ‘pleased her artist’s eye’ (p. 97). However, for professional models, this and other novels of the period suggest, the objectification is complete, and they often come to a bad, or at least a sad, end. Olive is taken by Vanbrugh’s sister to visit a ‘strange foreign-looking woman’ who goes under the name Mrs Manners; Meliora explains that she was one of her brother’s models and had sat for his *Cleopatra* (p. 129). Ironically, in light of her own future fate, she tells her friend that the woman is “‘slowly dying, and I shouldn’t wonder if it were of sheer starvation; those models earn so little”” (p. 129). Olive recalls seeing her at the time of the painting, in all her magnificence: “‘Oh, she was a grand, beautiful woman, like an Eastern queen [. . .]. What an eye she had, and what a glorious mouth!”” (p. 129). They find the wrecked beauty even now ‘on a grand scale’, reclining half-dressed: ‘the large but perfect proportions of her form reminded Olive of the reclining figure in the group of the “Three Fates”’ (pp. 129–30). It transpires that Celia Manners was the discarded mixed-race mistress of Olive’s own father, acquired when he worked away in the West Indies.

*Olive* has frequently been read as, in Cora Kaplan’s words, ‘both a companion and a counter-text to *Jane Eyre*’:<sup>15</sup> Celia Manners is clearly a fictional relative of Bertha Mason, and blindness, as Heather Tilley argues in a fine discussion of the two texts, a key trope of both novels.<sup>16</sup> But it also bears comparison with Brontë’s *Villette*, published three years later in 1853. During a visit to a gallery in Villette, Lucy Snowe stands before a painting of Cleopatra that could have been Vanbrugh’s, in which the ‘huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen’ similarly reclines in a state of undress and is painted on a ‘grand scale’ — she estimates her weight at ‘fourteen to sixteen stone’.<sup>17</sup> Much has been written about this scene, of course: M. Paul’s shock at seeing her sitting ‘coolly down, with the

<sup>15</sup> Kaplan, Introduction to Craik, *Olive*, p. x.

<sup>16</sup> See Heather Tilley, *Blindness and Writing, 1800–72* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Mark Lilly and Tony Tanner (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 275.



self-possession of a garçon' before such a painting, and his referral of her to the more suitable subject of 'La Vie d'une Femme', while he, she notes, 'looked at the picture himself quite at his ease, and for a very long while' (p. 277). He admits of 'des dames' looking at the Cleopatra in mixed company, but not a 'demoiselle'. The exchange resonates with Frances Trollope's account of her visit to the antique statue gallery at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), where she is shocked to discover that men and women are not permitted to view the antique casts together, and is informed that "'the ladies like to go into that room by themselves, when there be no gentlemen watching them"'. 'I never felt my delicacy shocked at the Louvre,' she reports, 'but I was strangely tempted to resent as an affront the hint that I received, that I might steal a glance at what was deemed indecent.'<sup>18</sup> In *Villette* Lucy Snowe brings a similarly critical eye not only to the vulgar morality of Belgian museum culture, and to the artistic shortcomings of works such as the Cleopatra that fail to meet the requirements of her thoroughly realist aesthetic, but also to the very conventions of the nude. She observes caustically of the Cleopatra:

She lay half-reclined on a couch; why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed around her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material — seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery — she managed to make inefficient raiment. (p. 275)

The painting which, she complains, 'seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection', is dismissed as a 'coarse and preposterous canvass', 'an enormous piece of claptrap' (p. 276). Lucy is prepared to question the received view that this is good painting, and apply her own judgement. We come away from this scene with a sense less of the objectified women on view in the gallery, the Cleopatra and La Femme, than of the keen-eyed spectator and independently minded art critic, Lucy Snowe, who preferred to be left alone rather than endure the sociability of gallery culture, for, permitted to look properly at the art works displayed, she was 'happy; happy, not always in admiring, but in examining, questioning, and forming conclusions', that is, developing a critical attitude towards art (p. 274).

Sculptural representations of Cleopatra provide the *mise en scène* for numerous novelistic disquisitions on 'womanhood' in the period. Two of the artist-protagonists in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, Miriam and Kenyon, discuss the latter's (fully clothed) sculpture of Cleopatra, with her 'full Nubian lips, and

<sup>18</sup> Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. by Donald Smalley (New York: Knopf, 1949), pp. 268–69.

other characteristics of the Egyptian physiognomy' in a key scene of the novel in which the exotically beautiful Jewish painter almost confesses her dark secret to the American sculptor (p. 98). The Cleopatra, and Miriam herself, both racialized and sexualized, are explicitly contrasted with the New England puritan Hilda, whose 'womanhood is of the ethereal type' (p. 99). Statuary is deployed to point up a similar contrast in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, when the fictional German Nazarene painter Naumann draws his friend Ladislav's attention to a young woman he wishes to paint, who is standing in 'the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty'.<sup>19</sup> She is not looking at the sculpture by which she stands, but providing, with her quakerish spiritual beauty, a model for 'the most perfect young Madonna'. Her dreamy inattention to the art works around her is later explained. Dorothea Brooke, or Mrs Casaubon as she now is, who had hitherto been 'fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort', is utterly overwhelmed by 'the weight of unintelligible Rome' on her disastrous wedding journey, experiencing 'Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings' and 'the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world' as a nightmarish assault (p. 174). These scenes magnificently convey, through the scopophilic objectification of Dorothea and her own lack of visual agency when confronted with the bewildering visual surfeit of Rome, how her lack of education renders this potentially strong, independent, and ambitious young woman vulnerable and passive when she is exposed to a cultural world beyond the sheltered life of her girlhood. Without knowledge and visual agency she can only be subject to what others make of her, like the model Naumann would like her to be.

The issue of women's education is at the heart of *Middlemarch*, of course, and of other fiction by Eliot, as it is of *Villette*, and it is a theme of many other mid-nineteenth-century novels. The specific question of women's education in art is taken up by other writers too. The focus of *Sisters in Art* by Anna Mary Howitt, herself a painter and author of the autobiographical *An Art Student in Munich* (1854), is on the development of a new ethos in art education for women according to which the teaching of art and design are integrated and embedded in a broader education in humanities and science, where women are envisaged as working collectively and collaboratively, and, importantly, as having the education to approach art critically. The very form in which Howitt's story was published — serially in the *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art* (a journal that announces itself as being devoted to painting, sculpture, architecture history, biography, art-industry, manufactures, invention and discoveries, local and

<sup>19</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (London: Everyman, 1997), p. 170.

domestic scenes and ornamental works, and has a 'Ladies Department', mainly concerned with embroidery) — by the same token, signifies this ethos. Howitt inserts her utopian fictional vision for women's art into a mainstream art journal, both thematically and formally proposing an alternative to the very concept of a 'Ladies Department'. The story realizes an alternative role for women in art than that of the model and muse. Lizzy Wilson, for example, is educated to become a productive and self-supporting artist rather than a model, like Giuseppe's daughter, who had disappeared and was feared fallen and lost (though even she is sought out by the 'sisters', and her own daughter and granddaughter are rescued from sharing her fate).

Lizzy is frequently identified as a fictional correlative of Howitt's friend Elizabeth Siddall, here represented as an artist rather than as the mythologized wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti she was to become after her death from a laudanum overdose in 1862. The 'legend' of Siddall was at the centre of a new wave of feminist work on the Pre-Raphaelites in the 1980s, initiated by an article published by Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock in the *Art Journal* in 1984.<sup>20</sup> Like Howitt, these critics recuperated Siddall as an artist in her own right, but they also probed the larger question of 'woman as sign' in the Pre-Raphaelite imaginary. Pollock argues that Rossetti's drawings of Siddall's and other female faces are not portraits; rather, they 'operate within an emergent regime of representation of woman in the 1850s. They signify in the ideological process of a redefinition of woman *as image*, and *as visibly different*'. In short 'they are symptoms of and sites for the renegotiation and redefinition of femininity and sexuality within the complex of social and gender relations of the 1850s'.<sup>21</sup>

This is an insight that women novelists contemporaneous with Pre-Raphaelitism intriguingly anticipate. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, for instance, in her sensation novel of 1862, *Lady Audley's Secret*, creates a protagonist who exemplifies precisely the doubleness of the 'femme fatale' that Pollock identifies in those obsessively repetitious Rossettian images of female faces: an angel/fiend, who signifies at once the spiritualized bourgeois feminine ideal and a dangerous conjunction of perverse sexuality, erotic fantasy, and class infiltration. Indeed, the discovery of Lady Audley's secret begins when George Talboys penetrates her boudoir and recognizes his ostensibly dead wife in a Pre-Raphaelite portrait of the angelic lady of the house:

Yes, the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde

<sup>20</sup> Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, 'Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall', *Art History*, 7 (1984), 206–27.

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (Routledge: London, 1988), p. 113 (emphasis original).

complexion, and a strange sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

It was so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint mediaeval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Audley declares that he doesn't like the portrait: "there's something odd about it". His cousin Alicia suggests that "sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes", adding: "We have never seen my lady look as she does in that picture; but I think that she *could* look so" (p. 73).

Pollock observes of the kind of Pre-Raphaelite painting from which this description derives that the 'myth of woman is that she is simply revealed by the genius of the artist'.<sup>23</sup> In Braddon's text Lady Audley/Lucy Graham/Helen Talboys is of course literally revealed in the painting. Its meticulous realism enables George Talboys to identify her as his wife, and its lurid and fantastic exaggeration of her features and colouring suggests the madness that is eventually discovered to lurk within the beautiful form. But Braddon deploys the generic Pre-Raphaelite iconography of woman in her description of Lady Audley's portrait in ways that also suggest her appreciation of how, in its peculiar conjunction of bourgeois realism and hallucinatory fantasy, Pre-Raphaelitism initiated a new regime of representation that played a crucial role in shaping Victorian ideas about womanhood. Not only does George recognize his wife in the portrait, and Alicia recognize the ruthlessness and insanity that the artist reveals within her apparent perfection, but, I suggest, Braddon herself recognizes something 'odd' about Pre-Raphaelite representations of women, and understands the role of such visual images in the maintenance of a gender order in which women are fetishized as angels and demonized as fiends.

Vernon Lee was to tackle the issue of the Pre-Raphaelite woman more directly two decades later, not in her art criticism, but in her controversial novel *Miss Brown*. The novel's chief interest lies in its dissection, over three volumes, of the artist Hamlin's scopophilic obsession with the beautiful young nursemaid with the Pre-Raphaelite looks whom he makes his model, and who has no more identity for him than as the object of his eroticizing gaze. It reveals Lee's acute awareness of the constitution of woman as spectacle in the contemporary visual economy. Anne Brown is constantly described in terms of art works: her head

<sup>22</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 122.

is likened to ‘certain mournful and sullen heads of Michaelangelo’; she is ‘a picture by an old master’. At one point she asks herself bitterly: ‘Did he care for her only as a sort of live picture?’.<sup>24</sup> It is men who are endowed with visual agency in this text and Lee does not allow her trapped heroine any escape. Anne dreams of going to Girton, and has her opportunities for freedom. At one point in the story her philanthropic cousin Richard Brown, who, significantly, is losing his eyesight, tells her he will have to engage a young man as his secretary. But she cannot act: ‘Anne felt a lump in her throat. Oh that she had been a man, instead of being this useless, base creature of mere comely looks, a woman, set apart for the contemplation of aesthetes’ (III, 63). She succumbs at the end of the novel to the pressure to become Hamlin’s wife.

*Miss Brown* is a novel in which the visual field is definitively masculine — although it does contain an intriguing vignette of an advanced young woman ‘studying eye-surgery with a famous Rhenish oculist’ (I, 211–12) — and in which the female protagonist’s abject dependence upon a man is explicitly connected to their specular relation. It firmly links the visual economy with the sexual economy. While it is the male artist protagonist, Hamlin, who has the ‘delicate, handsome features’ and the ‘fair, almost beardless complexion’ of the corrupt and ‘effeminate’ male family line (II, 48, 51), and his model and protégée Anne Brown whose features are ‘monumental’ — her nose ‘massive, heavy’, her lips ‘thick, and of curiously bold projection and curl’, her neck ‘round and erect like a tower’, and her chest, again, ‘massive’ (I, 24–25) — it is in the feminized artist and aesthete that patriarchal power is vested. Hamlin’s ancestors were slave-owners in the West Indies, and Miss Brown’s name bespeaks her racial origins. When Hamlin wonders if she is Jewish, or ‘some Eastern, dashed with Hindoo or Negro’ (I, 27), she explains that she has Moorish blood, and at one point sees herself as having a ‘strange, half-southern, half-Jewish, and almost half-Ethiopian beauty’ (II, 48–49).

The play with physical tropes of masculinity and femininity and the inscription of exoticism in the novel are mechanisms by which critique is established, not only in Lee’s story, but also in a novel by her friend, the art historian Maud Cruttwell. Cruttwell’s *Fire and Frost* (1913) tells the highly wrought tale of a young female art historian living and working among the Anglo-American community in Florence, even (like Cruttwell) writing a book on Mantegna, who seems remarkably like an idealized portrayal of Maud Cruttwell herself. Clare Glynne is described as ‘a young woman of about twenty-eight, built on the lines of a Greek ephèbe, tall and straight, with blue eyes that looked you full in the face, and a fair skin slightly tanned with exposure to the Italian sun’.<sup>25</sup> She and her

<sup>24</sup> Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1884), I, 25, 126, 309.

<sup>25</sup> Maud Cruttwell, *Fire and Frost* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1913), p. 3.

American friend Sibyl are portrayed as ‘energetic, healthy young women, clad in tailor-made serge of faultless cut’ (p. 3). Cruttwell’s heroine is an independently wealthy, forward-thinking ‘new’ woman of ‘good birth’ who, after the fashion of Mona Caird’s and Kate Chopin’s fictional prototypes, inhabits aesthetic interiors, smokes ‘blonde Turkish cigarettes’, and has ‘a horror of marriage, considering it a fetter which chains the body, hampers the mind, and necessitates the complete sacrifice of the personality on one side or the other’ (p. 5). Early in the story she tells her friend that she might perhaps marry “‘if I found someone with exactly the same temperament and ideas as myself. But that is impossible, since he would have to be a man and I’m a woman, and there is nothing in the world so dissimilar as a man and a woman”” (p. 12). Despite this unambiguous announcement of her proclivity for women and emphatic disavowal of marriage, she is inveigled into marrying an Egyptian ‘boy’, declared to be ‘exactly like Pollaiuolo’s bust of a young warrior in the Bargello’ (p. 58). He turns out to be a bad lot, shaped (despite Clare’s best efforts to educate him through art) by the ‘old Koranic teaching of his childhood’ that ‘man is the only being that really counts in the world! Women were created merely to minister to his needs, like his horses and dogs’ (p. 285). They eventually are divorced, and Clare ends the novel as a successful writer and collector, with her own gallery at her villa in Florence — like Cruttwell’s friends the Berensons.

*Fire and Frost* conjures a world that, despite its extravagances and melodrama, is recognizably that of the late nineteenth-century Anglo-Florentine art circles in which Cruttwell and Lee moved. It fictionalizes aspects of her own and her friends’ professional and personal lives in ways that allow her to address feminist issues that are eschewed in her formal art historical writing but which intersect with that body of work in interesting ways. Figures such as Vernon Lee and the Berensons are absorbed into the text at every level. Like Lee, whose youthful precocity is revealed in her juvenilia and early publications, Clare is said to have ‘adored art’ from a young age. The friends with whom Clare shares her passion for art are a husband–wife couple named Maryx (Mary X?). Ferdinand Maryx, who had helped Clare in her art studies and whose restored Florentine home is filled with art like a museum, is portrayed as sexually indeterminate: ‘a small man, delicately built as a girl’, yet who looked like ‘a cross between Don Quixote and an Assyrian bull, with his dark flashing eyes, above which the eyebrows nearly met, his hooked nose, black moustache, and pointed beard’ (p. 24). Cruttwell’s description of the Hungarian-born Maryx calls to mind the appearance and tastes, not to mention the lineage, of her Polish-American Jewish friend and mentor Bernard Berenson.

Cruttwell’s novel provides as much evidence as her art critical writings of her saturation with Berenson’s and Lee’s aesthetics, and also shows the fictional

influence of the 'new woman' writers of the turn of the century; but what is of interest to me here is the way the novel as a literary form enables her to address questions relating to the professional life of a female art historian in ways that are virtually completely expunged from her critical work. For Cruttwell, as for Lee herself, and indeed for a number of other women who wrote about art in the nineteenth century, fiction offered an alternative medium of expression to the more ideologically circumscribed discourse of art history, one that enabled women to rehearse with greater freedom issues relating not only to the gender politics of their profession and the writing of art's histories, but to sexuality, visuality, and intersubjectivity. In their novels and stories Victorian woman may be seen to have *imagined* and given substance to the female artists and patrons that would have a place in some future history of art, even if actual female painters are largely absent from their accounts of art past. Through their deft use of narrative voice and a range of characters they are able to convey competing views about the place of women in the Victorian art world, and especially to dramatize the conflicted identity of the woman artist. Plot and tone, especially irony, are effectively deployed to show the barriers to women's full professional engagement in art practice. Inventive narrative forms enable the exploration of experiences that cannot be so effectively rendered in the factual historical prose expected of either art criticism and history or popular guides to art. Fictional encounters with invented works of art can convey the experience of art more than accurate catalogues of artefacts in galleries, and the ways in which that experience may be gendered. A proper account of art historical writing by women in the nineteenth century, then, must include the much wider range of genres in which they wrote about art than simply their formal treatises, which, while in themselves much more interesting, I think, than some critics suggest, represent only one dimension of their contribution to the historiography of art.