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# Women and the Modelling of Victorian Sculptural Discourse

Hilary Fraser

This article focuses on a selection of nineteenth-century female art critics and connoisseurs who were prominent art writers of their day but whose contribution to the critical history of sculpture has since fallen out of view. I argue that women modeled a sculptural discourse that was distinctive, often personally driven and biographically inflected, and gendered. They deployed various forms of life writing – biography, autobiography, memoir, personal reminiscence, *Bildungsroman*, letters, gallery journals – as a vehicle for connoisseurship about sculpture. Cosmopolitan in outlook, they understood the importance of personal networks in both the production and the reception of art. Furthermore, female writers responded to the corporeal connections between viewers, models and figurative sculpture in their work. Writing about the three-dimensional representation of the human body in sculptural form enabled women to comment obliquely on issues such as female creativity, sexuality and education.

*Keywords:* Women; Nineteenth Century; Sculpture; Life Writing; Art History; Criticism

In one of the most famous scenes in literature, George Eliot (1819–1880) places her heroine in the sculpture galleries of the Vatican. 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 “the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world” as a nightmarish assault.<sup>1</sup> Dorothea’s encounter with ancient statuary is key to the development of her characterisation and the unfolding plot of *Middlemarch* (1872). But, while it takes an extreme form here, the experience of confusion before works of sculpture, of not knowing how to respond, was, according to several art critics, not an uncommon one. Elizabeth Eastlake (1809–1893), who as the wife of the first Director of the National Gallery had a special interest in how the general public engaged with artworks, remarked in 1870 that “the subject of sculpture ... is one on which it is peculiarly difficult for a practical, hardworking, hurried, journal-led public to reason.” She believed that it was hard for most people to respond to sculpture in an informed way, because it “requires a class of education for which they have few opportunities and small occasion,” a class of education that Dorothea, like many Victorian women, lacked. “At the same time,” Eastlake notes, “sculpture has a superficial side which peculiarly invites superficial judgment.” Ironically, then, she

observes, this is an art form that “has two aspects — the one very low, the other supremely high.” She elaborates:

To fashion a lump of clay into the likeness of a solid object is a mighty easy manufacture — to know the conditions, capacities and limits of true style in sculpture is very high art. The multitude are caught by the mere imitation of familiar things, and give praise and encouragement to that of which they know not the utter facility. The appreciation of real plastic excellence requires a rare and peculiar training upon a naturally elevated feeling, and is, therefore, confined to the very few. The charm of antique sculpture and that of classic scholarship are pretty much on the same level; both are equally incomprehensible to the ignorant.<sup>2</sup>

Reviewing “The Sculpture of the Year” for the *Art Journal* in November 1886, another critic, the American author Leonora Lang (1851–1933), notes that the sculpture rooms of the Royal Academy are, as usual, empty – a place where “ninety-nine visitors out of every hundred” go to meet a friend or rest when they’re tired – owing to “the undeniable fact” that sculpture is an art form that people find hard to understand. In her view, this is because:

It is so different from anything they are accustomed to, that they have no standard of comparison: there is nothing in the unbroken colour of the surface to catch their eye, and it requires a certain amount both of training and imagination to supply the colours and textures that can barely be hinted at. To the ordinary unlearned Englishman a likeness is a likeness, and no reasonable person could possibly “ask for more.”<sup>3</sup>

This was the context in which sculpture became a topic in the Victorian periodical press, most famously in the crusading articles by Edmund Gosse (1849–1928) on “The New Sculpture” in the *Art Journal* in May, July, September, and October of 1894, and his 4-part series on “Sculpture in Daily Life” in the *Magazine of Art* published in the following year.<sup>4</sup> Gosse’s journalism was influential, and has received due critical attention from scholars of nineteenth-century sculpture.<sup>5</sup> Here, my focus is instead on the female critics, such as Eastlake and Lang, who were prominent art writers of their day but whose contemporaneous contribution to the critical history of sculpture has since fallen out of view. Anna Jameson (1794–1860), Emilia Dilke (1840–1904), Marion Hepworth Dixon (1856–1936), Helen Zimmern (1846–1934), Florence Fenwick Miller (1854–1935) and countless other Victorian art historians and critics wrote about sculpture. Their aim was to help those ordinary citizens, many of them women, who experience bewilderment before a work of sculpture, to understand what it is they are looking at and how to judge it. Other female writers explored the poetics of sculpture, like George Eliot, in narrative fiction or, like Margaret Sandbach (1812–1852), in ekphrastic poetry. And others again, such as Vernon Lee (1856–1935), wrote about sculpture in the context of their work in psychology and aesthetics, in an endeavour to arrive at a deeper understanding of

their own physiological and emotional responses to statues. Throughout the Victorian period women engaged in contemporary debates about sculpture in imaginative and original ways and in a variety of forms. The recent exhibition “Sculpture Victorious” at Tate Britain and the Yale Center for British Art has generated fresh interest in Victorian sculpture and made us look at it from new perspectives, not least in relation to sexuality and gender.<sup>6</sup> It seems time, then, to expand our sense of the contemporary critical discourses surrounding sculpture in Victorian Britain by considering the part female connoisseurs and critics played in modeling a sculptural discourse that was distinctive, often personally driven and biographically inflected and, I suggest, gendered.

The most recent, and the most compelling, work on Gosse’s sculpture criticism has drawn attention to the private catalyst for his passionate championing of the medium: namely his love (that could not at that time be openly acknowledged) for the sculptor Hamo Thornycroft (1850–1925).<sup>7</sup> There was also an intimate, sexual dimension to some of the sculpture writing by women I will be looking at. Eliot herself, of course, appreciates and exploits the erotic sub-text of the encounter between her puritanically clothed heroine and the unclothed Ariadne, and other writers respond to the corporeal connections between viewers, models and figurative sculpture in their critical work. In what follows, I explore how women’s writing about sculpture drew on and was structured around the personal in these and different ways. I focus, for example, on how women deployed various forms of life writing – biography, autobiography, memoir, personal reminiscence, *Bildungsroman*, letters, gallery journals – as a vehicle for connoisseurship about sculpture and the establishment of interconnections between the Old Masters, the ancients and the contemporary.<sup>8</sup> Cosmopolitan in outlook, they understood the importance of personal networks in both the production and the reception of art. They have sometimes been criticised for trading on their connections, for name-dropping references to their private knowledge of (mostly male) contemporary practitioners and connoisseurs, and for their undue reliance on the biographical, but here I make a case for reassessing this emphasis on the personal in their work. I take a series of case studies, including both critics and practitioners, with the aim of demonstrating both the importance of female networks and the generic diversity of women’s creative engagement with sculpture. Beginning with a published defence by Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908) of her own sculptural practice and Eastlake’s account of the work of both Hosmer and the poet and patron Margaret Sandbach in her *Life of Gibson*, and concluding with Vernon Lee’s experiments in physiological aesthetics and the recommendations by fresco specialist Mary Merrifield (1804–1889) that women learn about proportion in dress by studying classical sculpture, the article argues for the role of female critics in developing a distinctive sculptural discourse for the nineteenth century that honours and affirms the personal experience of both artist and critic in the creation and the reception of sculpture.

Sculpture hit the headlines in 1882 when the sculptor Richard Belt (1851–1920) sued his former professional partner, Charles Bennett Lawes (1843–1911), for libel. Lawes had published an article questioning the authorship of Belt’s work, and accusing him of employing so-called “ghost” sculptors who actually made his statues. Belt won his suit, and, as Gosse observed twelve years later, the trial put to rest the “picturesque and absurd tradition of the ‘ghost,’ the unseen Italian who entered the studio at night when the foppish and incompetent pseudo-artist had shown his clients into the street, and now carried on the real work.” Gosse says the trial made clear to the general public that “the sculptor does not dash with poetic frenzy on a mass of marble and cut out the limbs of his statue as if he were slicing cheese.” But equally, he points out, “it was very clearly propounded, and rubbed by a hundred newspapers into the stupidity of the ordinary citizen, that it was not the case that all sculpture was done by somebody else, that all sculpture presented exactly the same features and might have been done by one man or a firm of men, and that there was recognised among artists an individuality of touch.”<sup>9</sup>

Eighteen years before the Belt trial, the Rome-based American sculptor Harriet Hosmer had brought a similar libel suit against two London magazines, the *Art Journal* and the *Queen*, that had published anonymous claims that her statue *Zenobia* (1859) (Figure 1) was not really her own work but was produced by her Italian artisan studio assistants. Hosmer responded forcefully to these allegations, which recapitulated rumours circulating earlier that her work was “really” the work of her teacher John Gibson (1790–1866), in an article titled “The Process of Sculpture,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1864. She starts by correcting “the false, but very general impression, that the artist, beginning with the crude block, and guided by his imagination only, hews out his statue with his own hands.” “This disclosure,” she writes, “I am aware, will shock the many, who often ingeniously discover traces of the sculptor's hand where they do not exist,” but it is the skilled workmen who “translate the original thought of the sculptor, written in clay, into the language of marble.”<sup>10</sup> Hosmer nevertheless powerfully asserts the distinctive creative genius of the sculptor who models the original clay and, she claims, rightfully deserves recognition as the true artist.

These two cases might seem comparable – in both instances the integrity of the sculptor is in question, and is defended on the grounds that the production of any work of sculpture is a fundamentally collaborative process involving many hands. Significantly though, the allegations made against Hosmer, and accordingly her defence of her artistic practice, were very differently inflected because of her gender. Having devoted the first half of her article to a detailed account of how a large scale sculpture is made, Hosmer turns to the charges made against her, and comes to the real meat of her argument: “We women-artists have no objection to its being known that we employ assistants,” she writes; “we merely object to its being supposed that it is a system peculiar to ourselves.” She explains that when the Danish master sculptor

Bertel Thorwaldsen (1770–1844) was commissioned to produce his twelve statues of the Apostles, “he designed and furnished the small models, and gave them into the hands of his pupils and assistants, by whom, almost exclusively, they were copied in their present colossal dimensions.” “The great master,” she observes, “rarely put his own hand to the clay; yet we never hear them spoken of except as ‘Thorwaldsen’s statues.’” Likewise, she points out that when Bengt Erland Fogelberg (1786–1854) was commissioned to produce his vast equestrian statue of Gustavus Adolphus, “physical infirmity prevented the artist from even mounting the scaffolding; but he made the small model, and directed the several workmen employed upon the full-size statue in clay, and we never heard it intimated that Vogelberg [sic] was not the sculptor of that great work.”

But what if these celebrated works had been produced by women, she asks? “I am quite persuaded,” she writes, “that, had Thorwaldsen and Vogelberg [sic] been women, and employed one-half the amount of assistance they did in the cases mentioned, we should long since have heard the great merit of their works attributed to the skill of their workmen.” It is not some shameful secret that sculptors need assistance; indeed, she concludes

It is high time ... that the public should understand in what the sculptor's work properly consists, and thus render less pernicious the representations of those who, either from thoughtlessness or malice, dwelling upon the fact that assistance has been employed in certain cases, without defining the limits of that assistance, imply the guilt of imposture in the artists, and deprive them, and more particularly women-artists, of the credit to which, by talent or conscientious labor, they are justly entitled.<sup>11</sup>

The magazines duly retracted their allegations. Hosmer’s spirited defense of her own practice and that of her fellow women-artists as being no different to the studio processes followed by their celebrated male counterparts nicely demonstrates the gendering of Victorian sculptural discourse. By educating the general public about how a piece of sculpture is actually made, she puts paid to the notion that the female body is ill-equipped for such work, in much the same way as others demolished spurious theories that disqualified women from having the capacity to vote or to undertake degrees or, indeed, to paint.

As Deborah Cherry writes in her fine chapter on Hosmer’s *Zenobia* in *Beyond the Frame*, the statue “has been one of the most discussed works in feminist art history.” It was, she notes, “exhibited at a watershed in debates over sculpture and at a critical moment in the history of women and women’s art” and “was produced and perceived within a complex and contradictory matrix of contemporary politics, slavery, sovereign power, and the protocols of sculpture, at the centre of which were troubling and unresolved questions of women’s authorship and authority.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars such as Susan Waller and Cherry herself have explored the part played by female art

critics in the production and reception of the work.<sup>13</sup> Anna Jameson, whose *Handbook to the Courts of Modern Sculpture* from the 1851 Great Exhibition had established her reputation as an authority on sculpture, appears to have been a significant influence on *Zenobia*. Hosmer discussed her work at length with the older art historian while it was in preparation, although Jameson died in 1860, before the work was completed and exhibited. And Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904) reviewed it when it was shown at the International Exhibition (1862), concluding that it provided “definite proof that a woman can make a statue of the very highest order;” that “a woman – aye, a woman with all the charms of youthful womanhood – can be a sculptor, and a great one.”<sup>14</sup>

Anna Jameson counseled both the sculptor and her supporters in ways that highlight the vexed question of the promotion and reception of female artists such as Hosmer. Jameson advised her friends against “bepraising” the sculptor immoderately, a tactic that she felt would be counterproductive. And she counseled Hosmer herself to take no notice of “the malignant sarcasm of some of your rivals in Rome as to your having Mr Gibson at your elbow.”<sup>15</sup> Jameson had had her own experience of being belittled by male critics. John Ruskin (1819–1900) famously reported to his father that Jameson, whom he met in Italy, “has some tact & cleverness, & knows as much of art as the cat,”<sup>16</sup> and he no doubt conveyed his contempt to her. And she was experienced in negotiating her way through the professional art world. So too was her friend, Elizabeth Eastlake, and it is interesting to look at the way that Eastlake chose to promote Hosmer’s work ten years later: as part of her biography of Hosmer’s teacher and mentor in Rome, the Welsh sculptor John Gibson.

Frances Power Cobbe was critical of Eastlake’s *Life of John Gibson, R.A. Sculptor* (1870) because it includes only edited highlights of Gibson’s unpublished autobiography, which Cobbe had read in full and adjudged to be “one of the gems of original literature, like Benvenuto Cellini’s.”<sup>17</sup> The feminist Cobbe might also have disapproved of Hosmer being given a subsidiary role in this account of a male sculptor’s life, as his student and friend, and the source of some of the funnier anecdotes about his unworldly and impractical behavior – his inability to take a train and arrive at his destination without mishap, for example. Yet Lady Eastlake too, like Jameson, was used to being a woman in a man’s world, and knew how to be strategic, and her *Life of Gibson* conveys very effectively the important role not only of female artists such as Hosmer, but also of professional networks of female writers and female patrons in the world of nineteenth-century sculpture. Such women emerge strongly as characters in their own right in Eastlake’s biography.

Eastlake’s *Life of Gibson* is an edited collection of the sculptor’s fragmentary autobiographical reminiscences, his correspondence with friends, and accounts of him by a few close friends (mainly women), including Eastlake herself.<sup>18</sup> The very existence of Gibson’s rudimentary autobiography was, we are told, due to a woman: Margaret Sandbach, his patron, his friend, and his muse. Mrs Sandbach hailed from Liverpool, and was the granddaughter of William Roscoe (1753–1831), biographer and historian of the Renaissance, and Gibson’s first patron. Eastlake explains that she

was responsible for encouraging Gibson to begin writing his autobiography; indeed, as his scribe she penned the beginning of it from his dictation, prefacing it with some words on his character. Their life writing collaboration came to an abrupt end with Margaret Sandbach's premature death from breast cancer, but she remains a strong presence in the sculptor's autobiographical writings and in Elizabeth Eastlake's edition of his *Life*. Eventually Harriet Hosmer took over Mrs Sandbach's supervisory role, and for three years she and Gibson dined every Saturday night with his friend the Egyptologist Robert Hay (1799–1863) for the purposes of reviewing the autobiographical notes the sculptor had made that week and keeping him at it.

Not only did these women play a very active part in the authoring of Gibson's autobiography; they also, as Eastlake demonstrates, wrote about sculpture. Hosmer was uniquely able to give a first-hand account of her experience of working with him in his studio, just as Gibson himself wrote about his own pupillage with Antonio Canova (1757–1822). And Margaret Sandbach, whose poetry inspired some of Gibson's sculptural works, in turn wrote and published ekphrastic poetry in response to a number of his pieces, including *Aurora*, *The Hunter and Dog*, his statue of the statesman William Huskisson, and his marble bas-relief *The Hours Leading Forth the Horses for the Chariot of the Sun* (Figure 2). Her poem on the latter captures the energy and movement of Gibson's sculptural personification of the sun's diurnal journey:

NOW the bright steeds on Heaven's unpaven floor  
 With airy footing paw the amber light ;  
 Fanned by the wings that bear the glowing Hours  
 Serene in sunlit ether. Serving Him,  
 Lord of their dear obedience, forth they lead  
 The fiery coursers for his radiant car,  
 The Sun's bright chariot. To the hand of beauty  
 Bends the proud might of strength, and keen impatience  
 Curbs its intense desire. Oh union rich  
 Of power and grace, for God's great world united!  
 Means beautiful to ends triumphant! soon,  
 Along the path which first Aurora traced,  
 Shall fly the King of day, clad round with glory,  
 Joy-breathing, and life-giving journeying on,  
 Blessing the grateful earth with loving eyes.  
 Till casting off his burning robes of light.  
 He lets the purple draperies of the Eve  
 Fall on his crimson couch.<sup>19</sup>

Eastlake quotes from a selection of Sandbach's poetry in the *Life*, including an ode she wrote on the return of Bertel Thorwaldsen to Rome after a three-year stay in Copenhagen.<sup>20</sup> Gibson records in his reminiscences that Sandbach wrote a poem in

response to Thorwaldsen's sculpture of Christ too, which Eastlake mentions but was unable to trace.

What Eastlake achieves by her method is a composite eye-witness account not only of the life and work of Gibson, but also of the artistic community then working in Rome, and the very active part played by women in that network.<sup>21</sup> This is a story of collaboration, not only within but also beyond the studio. Its very composition conveys the importance of sociability and cultural exchange for Anglo-American and European sculptors learning their craft and establishing their reputations in a city that was the site both of the finest collection of ancient sculpture in the world and of the modern political struggle for independence. Female sculptors and writers on art are represented as having a natural place in this cosmopolitan community, rather than being in need of special pleading. Like Hosmer in her article, Eastlake regards them as being no different, professionally, from their male counterparts. Her account doesn't, though, deny them their femininity. Eastlake, a woman who herself wrote brilliantly about the art of dress in relation to the fine arts, includes and would have appreciated Gibson's letter to Margaret Sandbach in which he responds to her request for a Roman scarf:

I mentioned this to Williams; he, being a painter, is a judge of colours; but we decided to ask a lady friend who is rich and has good taste. She came; I said to her that I am most ignorant of female affairs, though if Mrs. Sandbach dressed like a Greek lady I should know how to purchase the stuff, and also to cut out the dress and to dress her up in it better than her lady's maid could. Thus you must be satisfied with what our lady friend has chosen for you. When you put it on I will tell you how you look.<sup>22</sup>

If Sandbach is here fancifully imagined as a Greek statue, Hosmer is also figuratively given a sculptural shape, as "the only pupil Gibson ever professed to teach, and in whom he may justly be said to have raised a living monument to himself."<sup>23</sup> The impression is given of a good-humoured, affectionate relationship between the pupil and her teacher. Eastlake draws on Hosmer's own account, including Gibson's comment on *Zenobia*. "He was very funny sometimes in his criticisms," Hosmer is reported as saying.

I remember asking him to come and see the sketch of *Zenobia* which I was then preparing. He looked at it for some time in silence, and I began to flatter myself that I should have some praise, but the only remark he deigned to make was, "Yes – there is such a thing as equilibrium." "But," said I, "this is only to see how the drapery comes in." "Under all circumstances," says he, "there is such a thing as equilibrium – yes – I will leave you to your troubles."<sup>24</sup>

Laughter, practical jokes between the two, the energetic and competent young woman helping out the unworldly older sculptor of whom she said "He is a god in his studio, but God help him when he is out of it"<sup>25</sup> – this is the tenor of the relationship

Eastlake describes. “No one,” she says, “needed such bright and helpful companionship more than Gibson. In his own studio he could take very tolerable care of himself, but out of it he was not fit to go a day's journey alone.” She depicts them as an eccentric and well-matched couple:

Never was generous master more gratefully repaid — never was there a more interesting relation between teacher and scholar — or, it may be added, between man and woman. In certain respects the characters of each were identical — namely in love of truth, and in devotion to their common occupation. Otherwise two persons could scarcely be found less alike, or who more keenly relished each other's idiosyncracies. To the shrewd, racy, Transatlantic young lady the serene simplicity and guilelessness of the sculptor were matters as much of the keenest mirth as of the profoundest respect — while her ever playful wit and independent, original ways were a new zest in a life which Time had begun to rob of its earlier companions and interests. In matters of art Gibson found in her the most tractable of scholars — in matters of life and action, the devotion of a daughter, mingled with the shrewd sense of one who knew intuitively what he could never learn. Meanwhile the Gibsoniana of his innocent mistakes and foibles, as given by her lively tongue, will never be forgotten by those who have listened to them; all tempered as they now are by the pathos investing one who is heard no more.<sup>26</sup>

## II

Gibson's views on the importance of artists, sculptors in particular, spending time in Rome's cosmopolitan community of students, learning from both the classical and modern masters, and opening their minds to all that was best in contemporary art practice, were ones Eastlake and other cosmopolitan women critics and connoisseurs shared.<sup>27</sup> In both her *Life of Gibson* and a later article in the *Edinburgh Review* on the life and works of Thorvaldsen, Eastlake emphasizes the transformative experience of going to Rome for the Danish sculptor too — and again the role of a woman, the determined Baroness Christine Stampe (1797–1868), whose doomed project to domesticate and polish Thorvaldsen and return him to Copenhagen is amusingly described.<sup>28</sup>

Even more emphatically than in their writing about painting, women such as Eastlake stressed the importance of bringing an international and a historical perspective to British sculpture. Their continental networks and their linguistic competence enabled them to translate European culture to a monolingual audience, the past to the present; to bring both the newest art and an understanding of its history to a domestic sculptural tradition that had become, by mid-century, somewhat moribund. It is true that in so doing they sometimes built on the privilege of friendship, and were partial in their praise, but so too were their male counterparts. As previously noted, Edmund Gosse, who did so much to define and promote the so-

called “New Sculpture,” was an intimate friend of the sculptor Hamo Thornycroft, one of its chief practitioners.

In the absence of the professional and educational credentials that were available to their male counterparts, women resourcefully made the most of their personal networks. One woman who traded on her connections was Helen Zimmern – Meaghan Clarke rightly observes that her reviews were “largely adulatory” and were peppered with name-dropping references to artists on whom she laid claim to friendship<sup>29</sup> – but in so doing she did bring artists who might otherwise have remained unknown on this side of the Channel to the notice of the British, enabling something of the cosmopolitan conversation Eastlake felt was so crucial to a revitalised national sculpture. In an article published in the *Art Journal* in 1896, for instance, Zimmern draws attention to a contemporary Italian sculptor associated with the Symbolist movement and Art Nouveau, Leonardo Bistolfi (1859–1933). Zimmern includes her translation of his own commentary on his sculpture as part of her discussion of his work. She wishes to make this young sculptor known to British readers, she says, because he is one of a group of Italians who have broken with the classical tradition and endeavoured to bring sculpture into the modern age; because “he is modern in his ideals as well as in his emotions.”<sup>30</sup>

Bistolfi’s modernity is most apparent in his monumental sculptures, in which, she argues, he pondered “on man’s existence, on life and death, its meaning, its origin, its purpose,”<sup>31</sup> and it was one of these, the imposing work of 1892 known as *The Sphinx* for the tomb of the Pansa family at Cuneo, that first drew him to Zimmern’s attention. She calls it “a poem in marble, a proud interrogation flung into the high heavens by suffering man, defiantly demanding a solution of this ‘mystery of nights and days’”. The sculptor conceived it as a symbolic representation of “‘La Morte’ – Death as we moderns regard it,” and its refusal of the traditional consolations provoked much debate. She declares, “The Sphinx inaugurates a new departure in tombstone art,” because it symbolizes “the terrible poetry of death and the grave ... embodying all the restless pathetic sentiments of our contemporary agnostic views.” “It haunts the memory,” she writes, “like a strophe of Omar Khayyam, whose doctrine it recalls.”<sup>32</sup>

Zimmern stresses the unorthodoxy of Bistolfi’s monumental sculpture, taking her cue from the sculptor himself. Bistolfi explains how a memorial triptych he created at the cemetery of Casale, for example, to a father and three of his children, endeavours to represent in material form memory itself (Figure 3). Zimmern observes that “the living child, sculptured in the round, forms a marked contrast to the other figures so lightly indicated, and by its substantiality renders the idea of life as opposed to the dimness of death.”<sup>33</sup> Another monument discussed in the article, Bistolfi’s own favourite, and just completed in 1895, was erected to the memory of Sebastiano Grandis, one of the Italian engineers who created the Mont Cenis Tunnel, the first Alpine tunnel to connect France and Italy, and Bistolfi explained how he wanted his

monument to convey “the image of the man as seen across the poetry of death.” As Zimmern notes, “The body of Grandis is represented as lying in a crypt, quarried out of the material he subjugated by his genius.”<sup>34</sup> His work as an engineer is represented by a bas-relief of workmen tunnelling into the rock carved in the granite wall within which he rests.

The only way most British people would get to “see” these tomb sculptures was via these images reproduced in the journal, and Zimmern’s translation was the only encounter they were likely to have with a sculptor whose work was so foreign. This would likewise have been the case with the historical sculptors of eighteenth-century France that Emilia Dilke brought to Anglophone readers in the second of her monumental four-volume study of French art, *French Architects and Sculptors of the XVIII Century* (1900). Indeed, as she points out, “Many of the finest achievements of these great artists have been hitherto little known even in their own country, and it is not without a sentiment of surprise that Parisians have visited those exhibitions of ‘l’art retrospectif’ which have this year brought to light, amongst the works of earlier times, so many obscure master-pieces by the artists of the eighteenth century.”<sup>35</sup>

Dilke’s object, in her dense, scholarly and well illustrated study, is, she explains, “to trace the traditions by which the chief amongst these men were guided; to give such an account of their lives as may render them something more than mere names to us; to bring order into our conception of their works; and to support the conclusions of the text by typical illustrations of their performance.”<sup>36</sup> Again, she attempts to bring the makers of sculpture to life as well as bringing their work out of obscurity. She selects the most influential sculptors in order, she says, to “illustrate the nature of that artistic development which corresponded to the renewal of human ideals by which the eighteenth century was distinguished.” These sculptors, she argues, “give a new direction to the ‘sculpture d’appartement’ and assert their independence – giving to the statue, and finally to the statuette, a new significance.”

Never was the range of interest wider. We pass from the pathos of a great sorrow nobly embodied in the "Tomb of the Dauphin" by Guillaume Coustou fils, to admire the individual and poetic creation of Pigalle's "Mercury" or Houdon's no less famous "Diana." We see Falconnet's audacious "Peter the Great" triumphant on the quays of the Neva, and rejoice with Clodion, whose gay and splendid vitality animates alike work that dares the daylight in the courts of palaces, or dignifies toys fitted only for the boudoir or the closet.<sup>37</sup>

Dilke brings her formidable learning to her project to construct a comprehensive national cultural history of a period through its art, a history that is everywhere inflected by the personal.<sup>38</sup> Lucy Baxter (1837–1902), who lived in Florence and published books on Italian Renaissance sculpture in the 1880s under the name Leader Scott, did something similar for Italian history when she published, in the same year as Dilke’s *French Architects and Sculptors of the XVIII Century*, *The Cathedral*

*Builders* (1900), a study of the whole field of Romanesque architecture through the particular lens of the Comacine masters, who were responsible, she argues, for disseminating architecture and sculpture into France, Spain, Germany, and England.

But British sculpture did not lend itself to such scholarly endeavours or to grand narratives. Describing the national characteristics of the modern English school of art in the early 1850s, Anna Jameson's view is that, "with some brilliant exceptions, the general faults are negative, - a want of largeness of style, a poverty of invention, a want of fire and vigour in conception, and of elegance in execution." (By contrast, French sculpture has all of this in spades, but is also adjudged to be "capricious ... sensual ... meretricious," characterised by "the voluptuous, and the ferocious sentiment."<sup>39</sup>) Sculpture in Britain was generally regarded as being in the doldrums until its regeneration with the advent of the "New Sculpture," as defined by Edmund Gosse in 1894. Leonora Lang adduced several reasons for sculpture's decline: it admitted of a very limited number of suitable subjects, compared with painting; "the eminent unfitness of modern dress, especially in the case of men, for representation either in bronze or marble;" the fact that sculpture was originally designed to be displayed in the open air, and the sculptor had his athletic undraped models before him in the Palaestra – not so today; and finally that there are so few modern buyers for ideal art.<sup>40</sup> The critic Marion Hepworth Dixon finds it hard to identify a modern School of British Sculpture at all, because, whereas "the French have a passion for form," "in England the individual is more or less paramount," and therefore, she predicts, "I doubt if we shall see a great school of sculpture in Great Britain."<sup>41</sup>

As a consequence, it was upon the individual that most sculptural critics focused. In Marion Hepworth Dixon's case, she wrote a number of thoughtful articles in the 1890s on the British sculptor Edward Onslow Ford (1852–1901).<sup>42</sup> Frederic Leighton (1830–1896) – his sculpture, which was seen to have inaugurated the so-called New Sculpture – as well as his paintings and illustrations, was another subject for female critics. Both Emilia Dilke (as Francis Pattison) and Leonora Lang wrote on him.<sup>43</sup> As far as I'm aware, no female sculptors had substantial studies dedicated to their work in the nineteenth century, even by female critics, although certainly they were included in general reviews of Royal Academy and other exhibitions by reviewers such as Leonora Lang. By the end of the century, women critics were attempting more serious analysis of the work of female practitioners in terms of their negotiation of gender issues. Helen Zimmern, for example, wrote an article in 1900 on "The Work of Miss Bessie Potter" for the *Magazine of Art* in which she describes the Chicago-based sculptor as "mainly a woman's sculptor," noting that "She finds her subjects in American modern women, those nervous, highly-strung, excitable products of a virile people which is made up of all races and all climes." Zimmern characterizes sculpture as a "masculine" art, but attributes Potter's particular skill to her female identity. Discussing her sculpture entitled *Young Mother*, for example, Zimmern describes how "The young sculptor has caught to perfection the tone and

atmosphere which is most attractive, and herein she turns to advantage her sex, with its fine sensibilities. Yet rarely under her hands does a figure lose in strength or force, as is almost universally the case with women sculptors who are apt to fall short in this masculine art.”<sup>44</sup> Florence Fenwick Miller wrote a full-page character sketch in the *Woman’s Signal* of another American Sculptor Adelaide Johnson (1859–1955),<sup>45</sup> and indeed it was more often than not American women, such as Johnson, Anne Whitney (1821–1915), and Harriet Hosmer, who spent formative time in Rome honing their sculptural skills by studying its unrivalled examples of antique statuary, and who led colourful and unconventional lives, that were singled out for special notice.<sup>46</sup>

### III

It was not only practitioners who learnt their craft in Italy, but also critics and aestheticians, some of whom also led colourful and unconventional lives that shaped their work and their professional reputations. If Hosmer and her colleagues knew the importance of undergoing a proper training in “the process of sculpture,” the expatriate British writer Vernon Lee schooled herself as an observer, labouring to understand the process of *looking at* sculpture and, more, the physiological and psychological effects upon the viewer of each individual sculptural encounter. In the 1890s Lee and her beloved collaborator, Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson (1857–1921), developed a carefully articulated aesthetic of empathy, beginning with an article on “Beauty and Ugliness” published in 1897. Of particular interest are the women’s observations on their embodied emotional response to sculpture, found in their gallery notes, described by Lee as a “*study of what took place in myself in the presence of various statues, what associations of ideas, what feelings were awakened, and how I reacted psychologically both towards the visual form of the statue and towards the thing which the statue represented or the emotion it expressed.*”<sup>47</sup> Lee argues that figurative sculpture especially lends itself to their project, “as the statue has the same general shape as ourselves,” and because “all form which we recognize as human awakens or can awaken the various orders of feeling which are awakened by human beings.”<sup>48</sup>

As Lynda Nead has argued, “the writing that came out of this ecstasy of self-observation remains some of the most extraordinary art criticism of the period.” Lee’s recording of her own kinaesthetic responses to sculpture represents an earnest attempt to understand “the velocities of looking,” to discover how spectators are, quite literally, “moved,” psychologically and physically mobilized, by apparently static artefacts.<sup>49</sup> One of the statues she writes about is the celebrated *Ariadne* in the Vatican (Figure 6), the very sculpture before which, in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* with which we began, Dorothea is standing in a state of dreamy contemplation when the fictional German Nazarene artist Naumann catches sight of her. For Vernon Lee:

The *Ariadne*, with all her pretentious modeling and drapery, seems to me one of the worst statues in existence: a woman arrested in the act of falling off a

sofa on which she is lying in a hideously uncomfortable position. The drapery, so far from keeping her in place, *as lines*, drags her down ... she is derived from the recumbent goddesses of the Parthenon: only here the legs, feet and drapery contradict that mountain quality of the great original. It is the *inertness*, the visible tumbling *out of bed* which makes the public think that she is sleeping. "One must be asleep in order to tumble out of bed like that!" we unconsciously say to ourselves.<sup>50</sup>

It seems unlikely that Dorothea had such thoughts about the statue in the famous fictional scene, or that her body responded empathetically to the impression that it represents a woman tumbling out of bed. Indeed, we are told that she was "not looking at the sculpture, probably not thinking of it;" it is she who is looked at as a potential subject by the young artist.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Eliot draws attention for her own purposes to the deep connections, both visual and metaphorical, between the modern woman and the sculptural representation of the mythic Ariadne before her.

Both scenes are inflected by a consciousness of gender. Still in the Vatican sculpture gallery, Lee reflects "Women do better in a gallery, are more tolerable than men, because skirts and hats make them in a slight degree architectural: and because the *action* of their gait is dissimulated. A 'well-hung' skirt is one which substitutes a more agreeable movement to the real one of their legs."<sup>52</sup> By this account, Dorothea's white beaver hat that makes a halo about her head and the architectural long cloak, the "Quakerish gray drapery" she wears that puts Naumann in mind of a nun or a Madonna, should have helped her "do better" than she did in the sculpture gallery. But, as we know, Eliot's unschooled heroine cannot understand the nature of her response to the ancient statuary, and is next seen "sobbing bitterly" in the boudoir of her handsome apartment in the Via Sistina. Dorothea is as ignorant and inarticulate in the face of the sculpture she finds so viscerally disturbing as she is about the other unfamiliar passions that rock her in Rome. For she lived, we are told, at a time when "Travellers did not often carry full information on Christian art either in their heads or their pockets."<sup>53</sup> Eliot's nod here to Anna Jameson's ground-breaking study of Christian iconography *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848) takes in forty years of writing on art that had been produced in the period between the novel's setting in 1829–32 and its publication in 1871–72. Some of this was on sculpture, and some of it was, as we have seen, by women. It is interesting to find Vernon Lee taking up the Ariadne thread another quarter of a century on, and supplementing the "information" about artworks that by this time was standardly available in guidebooks to travellers and gallery visitors like Dorothea with a new framework for thinking about the individuality of their own personal responses to sculpture. It is a framework that allows for the possibility that women may look at sculpture – particularly figurative sculpture in which they find the same "general shape" as themselves – in ways that are highly personal and distinctive, and that draw on their own life experiences.

Some of these women brought both their shape and a feminist agenda to their writing about sculpture in ways that were explicitly gendered, enlisting sculpture specifically to reinforce a political point about women. Such writing does not always appear in mainstream art critical texts. Fresco expert Mary Merrifield's mid-nineteenth-century strategic interventions regarding the exclusion of female art students from life classes are a case in point. "While fully concurring in the propriety of having separate schools for male and female students," she wrote in 1854 in a book about women's fashion called *The Art of Dress*, "we do think that a knowledge of form may be communicated to all persons, and that a young woman will not make the worse wife, or mother, for understanding the economy of the human frame, and for having acquired the powers of appreciating its beauties." In the absence of opportunities for life-drawing, women can at least study figurative sculpture. Although she notes that "there are still some persons whose minds are so contracted as to think that, not only studies of this nature, but even the contemplation of undraped statuary, are contrary to the delicacy and purity of the female mind," she enjoins women to educate themselves in the human form by studying classical sculpture. More generally, Merrifield recommended all women, not just artists, to improve their taste and fashion sense by modelling their dress according to the classical proportions of Greek statuary, rather than distorting their natural shape by wearing tight-laced corsets. She declared that a cast of one of these statues "should be found on the *toilette* of every young lady, who is desirous of obtaining a knowledge of the proportions and beauties of the figure," in order that she may understand the importance of symmetry, harmony and proportion, and see for herself that disproportionately small waists make her figure "not only deformed, but positively ugly," so that "tight-lacing will die a natural death."<sup>54</sup> As in the case of the debates that surrounded Hosmer's *Zenobia* and Hiram Powers' controversial *Greek Slave* (1851),<sup>55</sup> contemporary political issues around the policing of the body (the exclusion of women from life classes, tight lacing) are focalized in writing about sculpture. Indeed, as I hope to have shown, from Merrifield and Eastlake through George Eliot to Vernon Lee, writing about the three-dimensional representation of the human body in sculptural form enabled women to comment obliquely on issues such as female creativity, sexuality and education. It also allowed them to enter a newly opened professional field, as art historians and critics, in which they could use their personal networks to inform and promote their work. They brought a range of distinctive voices, and often an interestingly personal inflection, to their critical engagement with sculpture, and they deserve to be heard alongside Edmund Gosse if we are to broaden our understanding of the critical discourses around sculpture in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012), 209.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of John Gibson, R.A., Sculptor*, ed. Lady Eastlake (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1870), 15–16. The best recent study of the Eastlakes is by Susanna Avery-Quash and Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World* (London: National Gallery, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Leonora B. Lang, “The Sculpture of the Year,” *Art Journal* (Nov. 1886): 329–32, 330.

<sup>4</sup> See the recent edition of Gosse’s series of essays in the *Magazine of Art*, 1895–96, *The Place of Sculpture in Daily Life*, ed. with an introduction by Martina Droth and an Afterword by David J. Getsy (Chicago: Soberscove Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Mark Stocker, “Edmund Gosse on Sculpture,” *University of Leeds Review* 28 (1985–86): 283–310.

<sup>6</sup> See its excellent catalogue, *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901*, eds. Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Note, in particular, David Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 65–68; Michael Hatt, “Near and Far: Homoeroticism, Labour and Hamo Thornycroft’s Mower,” *Art History* 26.1 (February 2003): 26–55; Jason Edwards, “Generations of Modernism, or, a Queer Variety of Natural History: Edmund Gosse and Sculptural Modernity,” *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14.2 (2015): n.p.; and Getsy, “Afterword: Toward a Practicable Sculpture,” *The Place of Sculpture in Daily Life*, 81–86.

<sup>8</sup> See Julie F. Codell’s excellent analysis of the explosion of biographical literature on artists in late nineteenth-century Britain, *The Victorian Artist: Artists’ Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Gosse, “The New Sculpture 2,” *Art Journal* (July 1894): 199–203, 203.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Hosmer, “The Process of Sculpture,” *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1864): 734–737, 735.

<sup>11</sup> Hosmer, “The Process of Sculpture:” 736–37.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850–1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 101–41, 141. On Hosmer, see also Kate Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Biography* (Amherst: University of

Massachusetts Press, 2010); Gabrielle Gopinath, "Harriet Hosmer and the Feminine Sublime," *Oxford Art Journal* 28, 1 (2005): 61–81; Dolly Sherwood, *Harriet Hosmer, American Sculptor, 1830–1908* (Columbia and London: Missouri University Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Waller, "The Artist, the Writer, and the Queen: Hosmer, Jameson and 'Zenobia.'" *Woman's Art Journal* 4, 1 (Spring-Summer 1983): 21–28; Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 113–17, 121–22.

<sup>14</sup> F. P. Cobbe, "What shall we do with our old maids?" *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1862): 594–610, 602–5. Quoted in Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Jameson to Bessie Rayner Parkes, 19 July [1858], Parkes Papers, VI, 25; and Anna Jameson to Harriet Hosmer, 10 October [1858], Harriet Hosmer Papers. Quoted in Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 114 and 105.

<sup>16</sup> Harold I. Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents 1845* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 215–16.

<sup>17</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe* (2 vols, London: R. Bentley, 1894), vol. 2, 29.

<sup>18</sup> See Caroline Arscott's convincingly argued "Venus as dominatrix: nineteenth-century artists and their creations" in which she proposes: "In their efforts to give us Gibson the genius his biographers, in collusion with Gibson himself, show us a subject in erotic thrall to overlapping female entities, all of whom stand for art and beauty." *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality*, eds. Katie Scott and Caroline Arscott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 109–125: 122.

<sup>19</sup> Mrs H. R. Sandbach, "THE HOURS LEADING FORTH THE HORSES FOR THE CHARIOT OF THE SUN. A basso-relievo in marble by Gibson." *Aurora and Other Poems* (London: William Pickering, 1850), 19.

<sup>20</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 65–73, 79.

<sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* provides an evocative account of the Anglo-American artistic community in Rome at mid-century, and suggests the prominent role of women in that society.

<sup>22</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 171.

<sup>23</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 226.

<sup>24</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 229.

<sup>25</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 231.

<sup>26</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 229–30.

<sup>27</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 50–51.

<sup>28</sup> *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 67–73.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke, *Critical Voices*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Helen Zimmern, "A Modern Italian Sculptor," *Art Journal* (1896): 335–40, 336.

<sup>31</sup> Zimmern, "A Modern Italian Sculptor," 337.

<sup>32</sup> Zimmern, "A Modern Italian Sculptor," 337–8.

<sup>33</sup> Zimmern, "A Modern Italian Sculptor," 339.

<sup>34</sup> Zimmern, "A Modern Italian Sculptor," 339.

- <sup>35</sup> Emilia Dilke, *French Architects and Sculptors of the XVIII Century* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), v–vi.
- <sup>36</sup> Dilke, *French Architects and Sculptors of the XVIII Century*, vi.
- <sup>37</sup> Dilke, *French Architects and Sculptors of the XVIII Century*, v.
- <sup>38</sup> See also Dilke's writing on the sculpture of other periods, for example (as E.F.S. Pattison) in *The Renaissance of Art in France* (2 vols, London: C. Kegan Paul & Co, 1879).
- <sup>39</sup> Anna Jameson, *A Handbook to the Courts of Modern Sculpture* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1854), 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Lang, "The Sculpture of the Year:" 329–30.
- <sup>41</sup> Marion Hepworth Dixon, "Onslow Ford, A.R.A." *Magazine of Art* 15 (Jan. 1892): 325–30, 325.
- <sup>42</sup> See "Onslow Ford, A.R.A." *Magazine of Art* 15 (1892): 325–330; "Onslow Ford, R.A." *Art Journal* 60 (1895): 294–297; "Onslow Ford, R.A." *Lady's Realm* (September 1899): 557–562; "Onslow Ford, R.A.: An Imaginative Sculptor," *Architectural Review: For the Artist and Craftsman* 8 (1900): 257–263.
- <sup>43</sup> See E.S.F. Pattison, "Sir Frederic Leighton, P.R.A." in *Illustrated Biographies of Modern Artists*, ed. Francois G. Dumas (Paris, 1882); Leonora Lang, *The Life and Work of Sir Frederick Leighton, Bart., Sir John E. Millais, Bart., L. Alma Tadema* (London: Art Journal Office, 1886).
- <sup>44</sup> Helen Zimmern, "The Work of Miss Bessie Potter," *Magazine of Art* (1900): 522–23.
- <sup>45</sup> Mrs Fenwick Miller, "Character Sketch: Adelaide Johnson," *Woman's Signal* (9 April, 1896): 1.
- <sup>46</sup> See *The Fortunate Pilgrims: Americans in Italy, 1800–1860* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1964); William L. Vance, *America's Rome* (2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- <sup>47</sup> Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness, and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company, 1912), 253.
- <sup>48</sup> Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 218, 265–6.
- <sup>49</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film C.1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 37.
- <sup>50</sup> Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 259. See Gibson's admiring account of the *Ariadne* in *Life of Gibson*, ed. Eastlake, 179–80.
- <sup>51</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 205.
- <sup>52</sup> Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 260.
- <sup>53</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 205, 207.
- <sup>54</sup> Mary Merrifield, *Dress as a Fine Art* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, & Co., 1854), 22–24.
- <sup>55</sup> See Joy Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).