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Beyond Description: Shapeshifting Ekphrasis and Feminist Reclamation of the Female Figure in a Selection of Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis engages in a feminist reclamation of the female figure within nineteenth-century ekphrasis, investigating how women poets redefined the interplay between the visual and the verbal to challenge patriarchal depictions of women in both art and literature. Traditionally, ekphrasis—the verbal depiction of a visual image—has been associated with the male poet's authoritative gaze. This study begins by analysing selected ekphrastic poems by the nineteenth-century painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, where the female subject is portrayed as a passive object of aesthetic contemplation. In contrast, a selection of women poets from the same era—including Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Pfeiffer, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Felicia Hemans, Edith Wharton, Alice Meynell, and Michael Field—developed alternative ekphrastic strategies that resisted this objectification. Central to this exploration is the notion of shapeshifting ekphrasis: a versatile mode of writing that defies confinement and transforms static representations of women into dynamic sites of feminist critique. Through their reinterpretations of paintings and sculptures, these women poets destabilised the relationship between image and text, creating an ekphrastic approach that affirms female agency. Their poetry not only engaged with visual art but also challenged restrictive modes of representation across various media, such as music and sculpture, thereby offering alternative perspectives on the interpretation of the female figure. Despite the prominence of ekphrasis in nineteenth-century poetry, critical attention has predominantly focused on male poets, leaving the contributions of women largely unexplored. This thesis addresses that gap by illustrating how women transformed ekphrasis from a form of aesthetic control into a platform for feminist critique and self-expression. By tracing this evolution through the poetry of selected nineteenth-century women, the thesis demonstrates how their work not only contested patriarchal visual representations but also established a distinctly feminist form of ekphrastic writing that confronted the objectification of women and subverted aesthetic conventions through their verse.

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All sources referenced in this thesis are acknowledged through in-text citations in accordance with the MLA 9th edition format. A complete list of these sources can be found in the accompanying 'Works Cited' section.

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Contents

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I wish to acknowledge that I used Grammarly as a proofreading tool to improve and refine the language and structure of this thesis. However, all analyses, arguments, and conclusions are entirely my own, and this submission reflects my original research.

Table of Figures

Introduction

"To a Lady in a Picture"

Sitting in that picture,
Smiling night and day,
Do you never weary,
Long to weep or pray?
Though your dress is velvet,
And your hair is gold,
I see something in your eyes
That you have not told.

—Louise Chandler Moulton (1909)

The depiction of the female figure, both recurrent and often idealised, occupies a central place in much of the visual and literary production of the nineteenth century. The poem referenced above effectively captures this recurring imagery of the immobile and observed woman framed within a picture, "smiling night and day." However, the speaker, nineteenth-century American poet Louise Chandler Moulton (1835-1908), looks beyond this performative, smiling facade and perceives the more profound hidden perspective that the female figure cannot convey through words: "I see something in your eyes / That you have not told". Feminist theory is relevant here because it highlights the differing ways in which male and female perspectives engage with a female-centred image. Notably, feminist theorists like Mary Devereaux, in her work, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator" (1990), have addressed the extensively debated topic of the *gaze* and its relationship to image interpretation. She argues that while the concept of the gaze pertains to the act of looking, it also encompasses 'a way of thinking about, and acting in, the world' (337). The concept of the *male gaze*, following Laura Mulvey's theory about the gendering of the gaze in her text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), refers to the concept that 'man is the bearer of the gaze, woman its object' (803). As a way of challenging the idea that the female figure is merely observed and gazed at by the male viewer, this thesis examines how a selection of nineteenth-century women poets used ekphrasis (the verbal depiction of the visual) to engage with and subvert dominant representations of the female figure in art. Within nineteenth-century Western art, male artists frequently depicted the figure of the woman not just as subjects of artistic exploration but as objects of visual

pleasure, underscoring qualities that would appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of their male viewers. Through this lens, the female figure became a canvas onto which male artists projected their idealised visions, illustrating the complexities of gender dynamics and the relationship between art, audience, and representation during the nineteenth century.

This thesis centres on *shapeshifting ekphrasis*, a critical framework I introduce to analyse how nineteenth-century women poets challenge the traditional fixity of ekphrastic representation. *Shapeshifting* refers to poetic strategies that make ekphrasis fluid rather than stable: the visual subject is reanimated, fragmented, or re-voiced, constantly blurring the lines between artwork and poem, viewer and subject. Unlike traditional ekphrastic modes that reinforce the viewer's authority or stabilise meaning through description, shapeshifting ekphrasis highlights changeability, relationships, and movement through time. This allows women poets to contest the historically objectifying visual forms of the female body. My use of *feminism* has a dual purpose. For this thesis, I view feminism as a lens focused on power, gendered authorship, and representation politics. Informed by the concept of *feminist ekphrasis*, I argue that through their ekphrastic poems, these women poets questioned who has the authority to speak about women's bodies, who gets to frame and fix their meanings, and how poetry can resist the authoritative gaze of painting and the viewer. Simultaneously, I recognise that these poets did not necessarily see themselves as part of feminism, especially in its later, organised stages. Instead, their work embodies nuanced, often implicit feminist practices tied to specific historical contexts, engaging with themes such as women's agency, authorship, and visibility throughout the nineteenth century. By attending to these historical nuances, this thesis employs feminism as a flexible analytical lens to interpret women's ekphrastic contributions to visual culture through the poetic strategy of shapeshifting ekphrasis. This thesis fills a gap in scholarship on feminist ekphrasis by women poets in the nineteenth century, beginning with an examination of how Pre-Raphaelite painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti's inscribed frames reinforce his authority and control over female representation, and how women poets of the nineteenth century challenged such restrictions. Rossetti is positioned here not as a chronological origin point nor as a universally normative 'masculine' figure, but as a strategically symbolic case through which the structural dynamics of a traditional ekphrastic authority can be most clearly observed. As both painter and poet, and as an artist who repeatedly inscribed poems onto the frames of his own paintings, Rossetti

occupies a uniquely self-authorising position in which visual and verbal control unite. These inscribed frames form ekphrastic containment, fixing the image's meaning and regulating the viewer's interpretive access to the female figure. While Rossetti's gaze and masculinity cannot be treated as wholly representative of nineteenth-century ekphrasis, his practice offers a concentrated instance of a model in which the female subject is doubly framed: both by the image and by the text that speaks for it. Chapter One, therefore, establishes Rossetti as a critical point of reference rather than a totalising norm, enabling a sustained comparison with the strategies developed by women poets across the century. When later chapters refer to "traditional," "conventional," or "male" ekphrasis, these terms do not invoke an undistinguishable masculine practice but rather return implicitly to the specific dynamics of authority, fixity, and representation exemplified by Rossetti's inscribed ekphrasis, against which women poets articulate alternative, fluid, and shapeshifting modes of engagement with visual culture.

While informed by Paula Curras-Prada's object-centred ekphrasis and W.J.T. Mitchell's theorisation of ekphrastic tension, the term shapeshifting ekphrasis is original to this thesis and foregrounds a distinct feminist perspective. Additionally, by extending ekphrasis beyond painting to include musical and object-based forms, I show how these poets engaged with an object-oriented feminist lens that challenged visual traditions and reclaimed representational authority. This approach reveals that female poets did not simply respond to art; rather, they complicated and destabilised the ekphrastic tradition, altering the dynamics between subject and object in their ekphrastic rewrites. The selection of poets and poems examined in this thesis is guided by the combination of historical range, formal engagement with visual culture, and the capacity of individual works to clarify feminist and feminine interventions and interpretations in poetic ekphrasis. Rather than aiming for an extensive survey, I focus on poets whose works demonstrate a sustained and self-conscious engagement with visual art, and whose ekphrastic poems foreground questions of authority, spectatorship, and the representation of female subjects. Canonical figures such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edith Wharton are included because their well-documented engagements with visual culture enable feminist ekphrasis to be situated within and read against established literary and critical traditions. At the same time, poets such as Emily Pfeiffer and Rosamund Marriott Watson are foregrounded precisely because their contributions to ekphrastic practice

have been comparatively overlooked, despite their innovative formal strategies and explicit attention to the politics of looking. Within each poet's oeuvre, the poems selected for analysis are those that most distinctly stage an encounter between text and image and that exemplify the shapeshifting dynamics central to this study, whether through the destabilisation of the visual object, the reconfiguration of the viewer-subject relationship, or the reanimation of marginalised or silent figures. Together, these selections enable a comparative and cross-generational analysis that reveals not a singular feminist position but a pattern of historically situated responses through which women poets reimagined ekphrasis across the nineteenth century. This thesis advances discussions in feminist literary studies, art history, and visual culture by emphasising the vital role of a distinctly female voice in the development of ekphrasis and showing how women's poetic voices reclaimed visual culture for themselves. Consequently, it explores a feminist ekphrastic trajectory that departs from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's ekphrastic frameworks, which embody a tactile and masculine dominance over the female form. Instead, it investigates a series of poetic interventions by women that challenge, dismantle, and complicate this ekphrastic control throughout the nineteenth century.

1. Defining Ekphrasis: From Description to Dialogic Encounter in the Nineteenth Century

The literary mode of ekphrasis has experienced significant transformations from its classical roots to its diverse expressions in the nineteenth century. Numerous contemporary scholars and critics have examined the concept of ekphrasis, which originates from the ancient Greek term "*ekphrazein*," meaning "to speak out" or "to tell in full", as noted by Jean Hagstrum in his text, *The Sister Arts* (1958) (19). By tracing the trajectory of ekphrasis and its evolution across the works of ancient scholars, contemporary academics have added to our understanding of how this form has changed. Historically, this rhetorical exercise involved the detailed description of an image and was a key aspect of rhetorical studies for students of persuasion in ancient Greece. Ruth Webb, in her work *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (2016), argues that the primary ekphrastic features of rhetoric are *energeia* (visibility) and *sapheneia* (clarity), which evoke imaginative and emotional responses to the listeners/readers through vivid description (63). Critic James Fromm, in his text "Ekphrasis Reconsidered" (2015), elaborates that the concept of *energeia* is characterised as a process of 'making the lifeless living through metaphor,'

bringing forth the visibility of the depicted image through language and clarity (*sapheneia*) (3). The relationship between art and poetry is inherently intertwined, as highlighted by Horace's phrase in his *Ars Poetica*: "Ut Pictura Poesis" or "As is Painting, so is Poetry" (253). This expression underscores the parallel nature of painting and poetry, highlighting how both media function as modes of representation. Ancient Greek poet Simonides also states that 'painting is silent poetry, and poetry is speaking painting' (Qtd. by Rawles 190). This idea fosters a dialogue about the interconnectedness of visual and verbal art forms that move beyond mere description. Classical texts, such as Homer's description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad*, established an ekphrastic encounter that appeared to suspend the narrative, creating a visual instance. Therefore, through using language, the writer brings the image to the reader's 'mind's eye' (Webb 20). This tradition persisted through the Renaissance and into the eighteenth century, highlighting the interplay between the visual and the verbal in the works of critics, artists, and poets. Notable examples from the Renaissance include Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435) and, later, Leonardo da Vinci's *A Treatise on Painting* (1651), both of which asserted the supremacy of painting over poetry. James Heffernan's article on "Alberti on Apelles: Word and Image in 'De Pictura'" (1996) simplifies Alberti's argument by stating that Alberti believes that there lies a 'story told with the silent rhetoric of images rather than in the audible language of words', highlighting the depictive stance of painting/images over the poetry/words (348). Da Vinci believed that the painter's ability to imitate nature vividly made painting 'the most commendable' art form, as it faithfully conformed to the image it imitated (156). In "The Indeterminate in Nineteenth Century Poetry and Painting" (1999), Lawrence Starzyk posits that ongoing questions regarding the tension between visual representation and verbal expression hinge on 'whichever medium produces the closest resemblance, correspondence with, or trace of the object depicted' (689). The distinction between the representational capacities of poets and painters in conveying their images as clearly as each medium permits is rooted in the ability of words to fully encapsulate the poet's interpretation, in contrast to the painter's fixed and static image. This dynamic intensifies the contention between the two forms of media, as depicted in scholars' ancient and contemporary commentary on the ekphrastic technique, tracing its progression from an ancient rhetorical literary practice to an act of merging the visible and the verbal.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of art as a form of imitation had changed to include the rise of new concepts of art and aesthetics, which, according to Stephen

Halliwell in his article on "The Aesthetics of Mimesis" (2009), 'marked a complete break with older, especially mimetic, ways of thinking' (345). The Romantic and Victorian periods saw a marked shift in the function and complexity of ekphrasis. As W.J.T. Mitchell notes in his text *Picture Theory* (1997), ekphrasis in the modern period becomes a "*paragonal*" form: a site of contest between word and image, where poetry attempts not only to describe but to rival or surpass the visual arts (27). This heightened intermedial awareness is especially evident in the nineteenth century, when the emergence of public exhibitions, the rise of art criticism, and the reproduction of images in print created new opportunities for poetic engagement with the visual realm. Amidst the industrial, imperial, and ideological transformations of the time, both poetry and painting grappled with evolving conceptions of gender, authorship, and spectatorship. With a surge of visual stimuli and consumer goods permeating the nineteenth century, critic Jean-Louis Comolli, in his text "Machines of the Visible" (1980), notes that the era was characterised by a 'frenzy of the visible,' reflecting the explosion of visual stimuli that accompanied these changes (122). With the opening of public museums in Britain, such as The British Museum in 1753, the impact of the archaeological and historical discoveries had a resounding effect on writers' experiences with recording and retelling elements from the past. In the early nineteenth century, poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821), as well as Victorian writers like Robert Browning (1812-1889) and art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), responded distinctly to the objects and images they encountered in museums and art galleries. As John Hollander notes in his article "The Poetics of Ekphrasis" (1988), 'Particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is a good deal of such poetry, addressing… works of art… and taking up a range of stances toward their objects' (209). This situates ekphrasis within a broader cultural context rich with art-viewing, particularly significant as museums emerged as public institutions in the nineteenth century, providing writers, poets, and art critics the opportunity to reflect on the visual stimuli that inspired them. Technological advancements, such as the introduction of steel-plate engraved illustrations in 1822, significantly contributed to the widespread popularity of drawings and artworks in books, making them accessible to the public at affordable prices. This innovation allowed images to reach a broader audience in a way that merged the word and the image on the page. Another significant avenue for disseminating images to a broader audience was *The Illustrated London News*, first published in 1842. Released weekly, this newspaper represented a notable

shift in increasing public exposure to a vast array of images and illustrations. In "The 'Illustrated London News' and the Invention of Tradition" (1994), Virginia McKendry said these illustrated weekly publications became 'a pictorial magnet for readers ravenous for visual coverage of current events and cultural topics' (82), underscoring the importance of both the word and the image in the nineteenth century. In her text, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (2000), Kate Flint highlighted how, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, printed images served as advertisements that created a literary 'environment to be read' (123). These images spread throughout the surrounding areas, increasing visual stimuli. Together, these images and texts contributed to the nineteenth century's heightened awareness of the connection between words and images, developing an ekphrastic dynamic. This dynamic also established the conditions under which women poets could utilise ekphrasis to navigate and, at times, challenge the visual dominance prevalent during their era.

To understand the importance of ekphrasis's evolution, particularly in the nineteenth century, it is essential to see how female poets used and challenged the depiction of women in their ekphrastic poetry. A vital part of this discussion involves the contributions of prominent art critics John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Walter Pater (1839-1894), who played a crucial role in exploring the relationship between painting and poetry during this period. In Ruskin's volume *Modern Painters: Volume III* (1856), Ruskin commented on the importance of seeing and describing the object as it really is:

> The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think. But thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion—all in one. (268)

From the above passage, Ruskin emphasised the importance of sight, which can be taken in the context of depicting an image and representing it fully through language. Ruskin also introduced the concept of 'word-painting,' which corresponds with the ekphrastic technique of accurately representing and describing an image to vividly depict it for the viewer. In *Modern Painters: Volume IV* (1856), Ruskin explains that the key to creating a true ekphrastic depiction, whether by a painter or a poet, is the ability to immerse the viewer in their own vision. This approach enriches the truthful portrayal of a landscape or image,

enhancing the viewer's mental picture with a deeper, more meaningful representation. Ruskin addresses these purposes in his volume, stating:

> The aim of the great inventive landscape painter must be to give the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts, and to reach a representation which… shall yet be capable of producing on the far-away beholder's mind precisely the impression which the reality would have produced. (35)

In this context, Ruskin emphasises the significance of the artist's accurate portrayal of the image as a means of linking the artist's perspective and depiction to that of the viewer. This process establishes a connection between the artist and the observer: 'the artist not only places the spectator, but… makes him a sharer in his own strong feelings and quick thoughts.' (134). Ruskin's ekphrastic technique was developed to emphasise the artist's ability to craft vivid visual representations of landscapes or scenes, which reveal the deeper 'mental vision' the artist perceives when observing the image (35). This approach deepens the viewer's immersion, transforming them from mere spectators into participants who share in the artist's experience.

Building on Ruskin's claim about the significance of clarity of sight in depicting and appreciating art, Walter Pater presents his own argument, further highlighting the deeply introspective and subjective impression that the viewer gains from the artwork. In his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater claimed: 'To see the object as in itself it really is… is to know one's own impression as it really is… What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure?' (xxix). While Pater begins by focusing on the critic/viewer's impression of the artwork, 'As in itself it really is,' he ultimately redirects that gaze inward towards the self's experience of art. He does not ask what the artwork *itself* says, but rather what it does *to* him. Based on this divergence from Ruskin's insistence on faithful vision, Pater shifts the act of looking from the external qualities of the artwork to the internal state it evokes. As Elizabeth Helsinger observes, while Ruskin's concepts of ekphrasis in *Modern Painters* insist that 'the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and to tell what it saw in a plain way' (27) Pater destabilises that clarity by emphasising the instability of individual perception. In this sense, Ruskin employs 'word-painting' to recreate a visual scene with almost 'tactile vividness', while Pater transforms the ekphrastic mode into a means for aesthetic self-reflection, turning the gaze inward (Hewison 45). These criticisms suggest a significant shift in the trajectory of ekphrasis by the end of

the nineteenth century. Initially, the focus was on maintaining a keen eye for the details of the image; however, it gradually transitioned toward highlighting the individual and the significance of subjective experience in interpreting and depicting art. This transition from Ruskin's focus on visual clarity to Pater's subjective ekphrastic impression creates a distinct backdrop for nineteenth-century women poets. Their ekphrastic writings navigate the tension between the external authority of the image and the internal perspective of personal experience, where they redefine how women in art are seen, described, and felt, as will be explored in later chapters.

2. Feminist (and Feminine) Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis emerged as a particularly charged site for negotiating the visibility and creative agency of women, as poets and as visual figures. Traditionally seen as a rhetorical exercise in vivid description, ekphrasis in the nineteenth century evolved into a powerful tool not only for aesthetic exploration but also, as this thesis argues, as a form of resistance. For women poets, ekphrasis became a means to reconfigure the terms of representation, to interrogate the structures embedded in looking and being looked at, and to reclaim or rewrite the female image from within a predominantly masculine visual culture. In this context, ekphrasis emerges as a potent vehicle for representing the often-silenced female figure in artworks, allowing women poets to reclaim and amplify their voice and presence in both art and literature in the nineteenth century. In addition to their prominence as major nineteenth-century poets, women poets such as Christina Rossetti, Michael Field, Felicia Hemans, and more have been the subject of substantial feminist and poetics scholarship. For Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), Mary Arseneau's *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (2004) foregrounds the religious perspectives in her work, while Terry Spaise's "Not 'As She Fulfils His Dreams' but 'As She Is': The Feminist Voice of Christina Rossetti" (1997) highlights her resistance to patriarchal depictions in her poetry. Michael Field's experimental poetics have been examined by Jill Ehnenn, as seen in "Looking Strategically: Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in Michael Field's 'Sight and Song'" (2004) and her book *Michael Field's Revisionary Poetics* (2023), which situates their work within feminist and queer aesthetic discussions. Felicia Hemans has similarly been reconsidered through feminist lenses, with James McGavran's "Felicia Hemans's Feminist Poetry of the Mid-1820s" (2014) and Paul Hamilton's "The Feminist Humanism of Felicia

Hemans" (2022), both emphasising her negotiation of gender and cultural representation within a feminist perspective. While these studies have examined their feminist voices and cultural interventions, far less attention has been paid to their use of ekphrasis, particularly feminist ekphrasis. Scholars have often overlooked the contributions of women poets to this genre, particularly before the twentieth century. Existing studies on women's ekphrastic poetry are scarce, and those that do exist rarely explore the unique perspectives and poetic techniques employed by nineteenth-century female poets, specifically in the ways that they depict and reinterpret female-centred figures in art. Recognising this not only reshapes our understanding of ekphrasis in the nineteenth century but also highlights the contributions of women poets in reinterpreting the female figure beyond the constraints of male-dominated artistic traditions.

The nineteenth century also saw a growing tension between representation and spectatorship, particularly in relation to the female figure. This era saw an increased development of the depiction of women as both subjects and objects within the cultural sphere, complicating the dynamic in how they were represented and how they engaged with those representations. Deborah Epstein Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (1995) suggests that female figures in Victorian literature and art were often portrayed as 'struggling to escape from the status of spectacle and become a spectator' (12). Nord also examines texts by authors including Dickens to illustrate how women were depicted as embodiments of 'urban distress and passive subjects' in these narratives (13). In contrast, the rise of consumer culture in Victorian society provided women with new opportunities for spectatorship. The rise of department stores and public spaces enabled women to participate in public life as consumers. According to William Leach's "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption" (1984), 'The culture of consumption had a transformative effect on women', which, in turn, meant that shopping gave nineteenth-century middle-class women 'a measure of economic power they lacked by not working' (319). The existence of middle-class women shoppers in the public sphere was a 'disruptive figure', according to Erika Rappaport, as the family's 'respectability and social position depended upon the idea that the middle-class wife and daughter remain apart from the market, politics, and public space' (142). This duality, in which women are depicted as both objects of the gaze and potential spectators themselves, sets the stage for examining how a select group of nineteenth-century women poets navigates these constraints in their own work.

As Isobel Armstrong argues in *Victorian Poetry* (1993), the Victorian poem often stages a conflict between interiority and externality, with the gaze functioning as a mediating force between the subject and the object (27). Therefore, early nineteenth-century women poets, such as Adelaide Anne Procter (1825-1864) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), among others, utilise ekphrasis as a way to examine and interrogate their own representation of the feminine aesthetic that 'enabled the woman poet to revolutionise it from within, by using [feminine poetics] to explore the way a female subject comes into being' (Armstrong 324). By creating a distinction between visual and verbal elements, ekphrasis offers another perspective that connects both forms while maintaining the viewer's role as an interpreter of the image. In that regard, Heffernan's examination of ekphrasis claims that the relationship between the visual and the verbal media has an opposed and almost violent resistance that is 'fought on the field of language itself'; in other words, the verbal seeks to rival or encompass the visual, often unsuccessfully. (7). On the other hand, contemporary theorist Anne Keefe, in her work "The Ecstatic Embrace of Verbal and Visual" (2011), dismissed the idea of a hypothetical battlefield between visual and verbal representation in ekphrasis. She argues that the *paragonal* status of ekphrasis has a broader function beyond mere resistance. The *paragone*, which refers to the 'competition between different forms of representation', has been closely linked to the ekphrastic tradition (Mitchell 136). Keefe suggests that the ekphrastic space is both flexible and "fluid," allowing for various interpretations and perspectives for the spectator (135). When the reader is immersed in the ekphrastic text, particularly ekphrastic poetry, they are transported to a textual space where the artwork described in the poem and its language come alive in their mind through the poet's interpretation of the imagery, which they have seen and rewritten into a poem. The reader's imagination is thus invited to join the conversation between the poem and the artwork, creating a dynamic ekphrastic experience. Mitchell suggests that while the image is depicted as 'silent and available to the gaze', this characteristic also applies to the female figure in images (163). While Heffernan positions the relationship between verbal and visual media as inherently oppositional, where words struggle to contain, rival, or resist the authority of the visual, Keefe, in contrast, critiques the battlefield metaphor and argues that ekphrasis functions within a more fluid and flexible space that allows for multiple perspectives and interpretations. Building on these debates, I contend that feminist ekphrasis permits fluidity and confrontation to coexist, recognising the tensions between word and

image as described by Heffernan, while also embracing the flexible, interpretive perspectives emphasised by Keefe. I propose that feminist ekphrasis serves as a space where tension and diverse interpretations operate simultaneously to produce female subjectivity, enabling female poets to assert agency while critically engaging with visual representation.

Using feminist ekphrasis as a critical framework, this thesis examines the ekphrastic poems written by nineteenth-century women poets, showing how they reinterpreted and subverted conventional portrayals of women in art. Elizabeth Loizeaux in her work *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (2008), defines feminist ekphrasis as a mode that 'recognises that a woman's place as a viewer is established within, beside, or in the face of a male-dominated culture, but that the patterns of power and value implicit in a tradition of male artists and viewers can be exposed, used, resisted and rewritten' (Loizeaux 81). Loizeaux's commentary explores the role of women as viewers within an ekphrastic context, focusing on how they interpret and represent the works of male artists. This engagement allows women to interact with the depicted images through their own ekphrastic poetry, creating a space where they can safely challenge and offer alternative perspectives. In doing so, they challenge the expectations of the masculine gaze within a space they have crafted for themselves, effectively bridging the divide between imagery and poetry, as well as addressing the tensions between their experiences and contemporary social or political issues. While the tradition of ekphrasis has primarily centred on the concept of 'woman as image, man as the bearer of the look,' which positions the male gaze as the driving force behind the representation of the female image (framing women as passive subjects rather than active observers), feminist ekphrasis serves as a direct challenge to this notion (Mulvey 837). Heffernan further argues that ekphrasis is often framed as a deeply gendered concept, asserting that 'the voice of male speech strives to control a female image… of male narrative striv[ing] to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space' (1). This notion of fixating or immobilising the image of women as a symbolic "beauty poised in space" illustrates how traditional ekphrasis primarily aims to capture the female form for the gaze of a predominantly masculine audience, using both language and visual representation. The work of critics such as Griselda Pollock, particularly her text "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature" (1988), further illustrates the connection between female subjectivity and visual art in the representation of women. Pollock emphasises how women have often been perceived through a distinctly objectifying gaze that fulfils a specifically male fantasy

regarding their image, claiming that: 'creativity was naturalised as masculine through the circulation of woman as the beautiful, mysterious, desired and loved image for the desiring masculine gaze' (161). Therefore, reclaiming the representation of female subjectivity of a selection of nineteenth-century women poets through feminist ekphrasis is the central focus of this thesis. By combining verbal and visual elements within an ekphrastic context, I aim to highlight how a group of nineteenth-century women poets expressed a distinct female identity and self-awareness through their ekphrastic poetry. This approach offers a more nuanced feminist perspective that extends beyond mere visual interpretation.

3. Shapeshifting Ekphrasis

The concept of *ekphrastic shapeshifting*, a term I coined after examining Marriott Watson's ekphrastic poem "'The Depths of the Sea', After Burne-Jones" (1886) in Chapter Three, focuses on the theme of shapeshifting and transformation of the central female figure in the ekphrastic poem. While the specific term "ekphrastic shapeshifting" does not appear in existing scholarship, I aim to establish and develop the concept further in the second half of the thesis and apply it to the ekphrastic poems in the subsequent chapters. Building on established feminist critiques of ekphrasis and theories of the gaze, this thesis introduces the idea of ekphrastic shapeshifting as a mode of poetic engagement that resists the stillness of visual representation and asserts the agency of female voice and perception. Drawing on established feminist theories, this concept aligns with recent feminist approaches that view ekphrasis as a site of resistance, negotiation, and transformation. Therefore, shapeshifting ekphrasis refers to the ways that women poets in the nineteenth century transform the static and frozen image represented in a certain way into a reanimated and reconfigured figure that moves between silence and narrative in the ekphrastic poem. This idea draws upon the work of B.K. Fischer and her concept of feminist ekphrasis, where she details that contemporary feminist ekphrasis goes through three distinct and transformative waves: "*ekphrastic umbrage,"* which represents the first wave outlined as a mode of using ekphrasis as a mode that exposes and subverts the objectifying male gaze, and converting frozen and static images into speaking bodies of agency (3). The second wave, "*ekphrastic sociability*," refers to the transformation of ekphrasis into a mode of dialogue and connection that focuses on 'collaboration, as well as institutional and political participation or resistance' (3). The third wave, termed "*ekphrastic optimism*," highlights fluidity and transformation that go beyond boundaries or binaries (4). I contend that this third wave mainly centres on shapeshifting.

This perspective promotes breaking down fixed binary categories, allowing for a multi-vocal and evolving ekphrastic identity to emerge. It develops and enhances the feminist ekphrastic perspective, particularly in relation to nineteenth-century women poets. Paula Curras-Prada's description of feminist ekphrasis in her 2022 article titled "Feminist Ekphrasis and Object-Orientation in the Poetry of Mary Jo Bang and Bernadette Mayer" forms a theory that is 'constructed upon objects that advocate for an active female viewing subject and a dignified, equally active poetic object' (82). She emphasises that ekphrasis functions as a conduit of representation, transforming the silent and static object into an animated agent in its own right. In later poems discussed in the thesis, works featuring feminised or inanimate objects such as relics, statues, musical compositions, or paintings act as vessels for memory, grief, and transformation. They illustrate the concept of *feminist object poetics*. This approach blends feminist theory with object-oriented ideas, following Curras-Prada's notion of '*feminist object-orientation'*, which she defines as 'a gender-based, ironical subversion of the subject/object tyranny that has long served the purposes of patriarchy' (95). Curras-Prada's theory further develops Katherine Behar's idea of *object-oriented feminism* (2016), which examines 'the political and ethical potential of being an object' (41). These elements are crucial to understanding and developing the feminist ekphrastic approach explored through the works of nineteenth-century women poets. Sarah Ahmed's (2007) concept of queer phenomenology adds a further phenomenological and affective dimension to the feminist object poetics outlined above. While Curras-Prada's notion of feminist object-orientation and Behar's object-oriented feminism foreground the political and ethical implications of objecthood, Ahmed's work examines how bodies are oriented toward objects and how objects themselves come to matter through patterns of attention, use, and affective proximity (15). In *Queer Phenomenology* (2007), Ahmed emphasises that objects accumulate meaning through the ways they are approached, handled, remembered, or passed over, becoming vessels for lived experience rather than static forms. This framework is particularly relevant to the ekphrastic poems examined in this thesis, in which feminised or inanimate objects, such as relics, statues, musical compositions, or paintings, function as repositories of memory, grief, and transformation. The emphasis on disorientation further aligns with the thesis's concept of shapeshifting ekphrasis, as both frameworks describe moments in which the relation between subject and object is unsettled, thereby allowing alternative feminist meanings and representations to emerge within nineteenth-century visual culture.

4. Chapter Outline and Theoretical Framework

Before outlining the individual chapters, it is necessary to clarify the methodological approach that supports my readings of ekphrastic poetry, particularly my decision to prioritise close analysis of the poems themselves. While this thesis is concerned with poems that engage directly with works of visual art, its analytical focus remains primarily on the poetic texts rather than on sustained comparative close readings of images and poems. This methodological decision reflects the central concern of the thesis: to examine how women poets reconfigure ekphrasis as a site of textual authority, agency, and interpretive resistance. Rather than treating the poem as a secondary response to a pre-existing image, I read ekphrasis as a dynamic literary practice through which women poets actively reshape the circumstances of visual meaning. As a result, images are approached contextually, as constraints, or points of friction, rather than as stable objects requiring formal analysis. This approach is particularly aligned with the thesis's feminist framework, which prioritises the reclamation of voice and the disruption of visual dominance, and with the concept of shapeshifting ekphrasis, in which the visual referent is often destabilised, displaced, or transformed within the poem itself. By foregrounding close readings of the poems, the thesis emphasises how women poets negotiate, resist, and reimagine visual culture through language, without reinscribing the superiority of the image that ekphrasis has historically been understood to serve.

When the subject of an image is a woman, the act of ekphrasis can perpetuate patriarchal modes of perception, rendering the female figure doubly silent, both visually and textually. In the ekphrastic works of the nineteenth century, often authored by men, this silence frequently manifests as idealisation, fetishisation, or mythologisation of female subjects. This trend is exemplified in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and the Pre-Raphaelites, underscoring the importance of Rossetti's inscribed ekphrastic works in this thesis. Through his integration of visual and verbal elements, Rossetti asserted his ekphrastic dominance and authority, focusing primarily on female images and using them within the frames of his paintings to exercise a dual form of control over the representation of women. By starting with Rossetti, this thesis aims to illustrate how women poets, both preceding and succeeding him in the later chapters, employed ekphrasis as a means to challenge conventional depictions of female figures in art and literature. The visual representation of the female figure in art has often been perceived as an 'exercise in

oppression', confining the female image to the interpretations and depictions dictated by the male perspective for a primarily male audience (Loizeaux 17). As a result, art and literature can be viewed as extensions of this gaze, eliciting a voyeuristic perspective on the female subject in both painting and poetry. The first chapter will adopt a multi-faceted approach, incorporating textual, visual, and contextual analysis to examine a selection of Rossetti's ekphrastic works, particularly those poems inscribed on the frames of his paintings. The purpose of selecting a range of Rossetti's inscribed ekphrastic works for analysis in the first chapter is to highlight his portrayal of sensualised female beauty in both his paintings and poems, reflecting the ekphrastic dynamic that influences the representation of the female figure across his artistic media. For Rossetti, this technique is evident in many of his combined works, where he departs from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's practice of mimicking nature, instead incorporating his own 'invented poetic symbols' that resonate within both his poetry and art (Cruise 125). Rossetti's paintings and poems contributed to his relegated artistic status and influence, where British art critic, Frederic George Stephens (1827-1907), noted Rossetti's unique dual talent both as a painter and a poet stating: 'nowhere in Time's vista… do we see many shapes of those who, as painters and as poets have been alike illustrious… none is superior to Rossetti' (6). Rossetti's poetry serves as a distinct means of revealing his inner emotions, which he sought to depict in his paintings. Therefore, his ekphrastic poems act as vehicles for his self-expression and the inner construction of an ideal and spiritual world. Esther Wood observed that Rossetti's poetry features a distinctly "self-revealing" nature that sheds light on the depths of his ekphrastic dynamic (262). Wood further explores how we can deepen our appreciation and understanding of Rossetti's poetry. She suggests that rather than asking, "What did this man intend to teach us?", we should concentrate on recognising the masculine perspective embedded in Rossetti's work. She poses two critical questions: "What kind of manhood is revealed here? What are the visions by which it lived?" (262). By focusing on the concept of 'manhood' and the constructed visions that emerged from the poet's perspective, Wood highlights the significance of the masculine viewpoint in Rossetti's oeuvre. This focus highlights how his engagement with ekphrastic discourse, evident in both his paintings and poems, is a key aspect of his artistry. Rossetti was deeply engaged with his inner experiences, emotional subjectivity, and his moral and idealistic vision, especially in his ekphrastic works, which further exemplify the strong connection within his artistic perspective.

By examining a selection of Rossetti's inscribed works in an ekphrastic context, I examine how he depicted the female form, positioning women in roles of passive observation and effectively highlighting the constraints imposed by the masculine gaze. This deliberate orchestration facilitates a dialogue that allows each work to illuminate and enhance the other, reflecting Rossetti's ekphrastic technique of utilising the borders of his paintings to hold the space for representing his female subjects within them, shaping a type of ekphrastic control. This analysis examines broader themes of objectification and the complexities of female identity as reflected in Rossetti's body of work. The first chapter focuses on how Rossetti enhances the ekphrastic technique by using the frames of his paintings as channels for ekphrastic expression. By inscribing his ekphrastic poems directly onto the frames, he asserts his control over the work. This ekphrastic exchange is crucial in highlighting the restrictive and often oppressive gendered view of vision prevalent in the art and literature of that period. This dynamic underscores the gender divides between gaze and medium, particularly evident in several of Rossetti's ekphrastic works, some of which will be analysed in this chapter, such as "A Sea-Spell" (1877), "Lady Lilith" (1868), and "The Day-Dream" (1880). This analysis will set the tone and direction for the subsequent chapters, which will examine the ekphrastic practices of various women poets in the nineteenth century. It will illustrate how these poets reclaimed female-centric imagery from a masculinised perspective, transforming it into interpretations that are distinctly feminine and feminist. This approach highlights their perspectives beyond the confines of the interpretations offered by poets and painters like Rossetti in their collaborative ekphrastic works.

In the second chapter, I shift my focus from Rossetti's inscribed ekphrastic authority discussed in the first chapter to explore how women poets who preceded him (specifically Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)) also employed ekphrasis centred on the female figure, but in distinctly different ways. These poets engaged with and transformed traditional ekphrastic conventions that represented female figures prior to Rossetti, effectively repositioning the female figure and voice as active presences from within a distinctly patriarchal culture of the early nineteenth century. This approach disrupts the conventional ekphrastic gaze that aimed to confine women within a static aesthetic or narrative framework. These early engagements with ekphrasis laid the groundwork for later developments, challenging the idea that Rossetti's ekphrastic techniques developed in isolation. Instead, his work exists within a broader trajectory shaped

by women poets who actively redefined the genre before, alongside, and after him, even if their ekphrastic perspectives, which reshape the female image, have not received the same attention as those of their male counterparts. The restricted roles available to women writers during the early nineteenth century significantly impeded their recognition as independent creative forces. Society often relegated women poets to the status of "poetess," a term that carried connotations of inferiority compared to their male counterparts, who were referred to as "poets". This distinction not only reflects the cultural biases of the era but also illustrates a broader, deeply entrenched gender divide that affected the creative spaces available to both men and women. Within an ekphrastic poetic context, the gendered sphere of the woman poet[ess] is also exemplified through the concept of the "Poetess Tradition" that refers to an established 'feminine space within the Victorian literary marketplace' (Brown 184). Despite facing systemic barriers, women poets discovered ways to express their voices and perspectives. As Armstrong noted, 'It is probably no exaggeration to say that an account of women's writing as occupying a particular sphere of influence, and as working inside defined moral and religious conventions, helped make women's poetry and the 'poetess'... respected in the nineteenth century as they never have been since' (125). In this context, women's writing earned "respect" mainly if it adhered to established moral and religious norms. However, what happens when women write beyond these prescribed conventions? Are they any less deserving of respect for venturing outside the boundaries of what society considers respectable and acceptable? The existence of a distinct feminine sphere or space that was reserved for women's writing in the early nineteenth century was presented as 'separate, or "other", to serious and intellectual scholarly pursuits' of their time (Jenner 3). The rise of local newspapers, literary periodicals, and magazines during the mid-nineteenth century provided new avenues for publication and outreach. These platforms enabled women poets to publish their work and reach a wider audience. This was a crucial step toward gaining recognition in a male-dominated literary landscape, as seen in texts such as *Forget-Me-Not*, *Literary Souvenir*, and the *Keepsake*, among others. Nevertheless, the legacy of these barriers continues to influence the understanding and appreciation of women's contributions to the ekphrastic tradition, where the 'Voice of the poetess... took the form of a self-consciously feminine self-staging in verse', further exemplifying the distinct voice of the woman poet within the poetic ekphrastic context (Brown 184). However, with the cultural, technological, and political changes that occurred in the following years, the works of women poets were

making an illustrious rise. Notably, the works of Landon and Barrett Browning exemplify this trend, as they harnessed the ekphrastic tradition to articulate their perspectives, establishing a distinctive voice for women within the early Victorian period that illustrated how women poets readapted and altered the ekphrastic tradition in their own unique way.

Through an examination of Landon's ekphrastic poems, specifically "The Bridal Morning" (1828) and "Remembrance" (1837), within the context of gift annuals, I aim to uncover the nuanced ways in which her poems engage with visual art, particularly art featuring female figures. Landon appears to have been actively adopting a unique female voice that transcends traditional poetic boundaries in a distinctly '(proto)feminist way' (Craciun 204). I aim to highlight how Landon's ekphrastic technique showcases her exploration of female subjectivity and perspective within the sphere of a 'poetess' or feminine poet. By embracing her identity as a 'poetess,' she skillfully navigates the balance between subversion and imitation. This approach allows her perspective to shine through, contributing to the early feminist voices that emerged prior to the onset of the feminist movement in the 1830s. Meanwhile, I suggest that Elizabeth Barrett Browning utilises the image of the female figure in a selection of her ekphrastic poetry, using it as a powerful vehicle to express her feminist concerns and critiques of societal and gender norms. Widely recognised for her engagement with various social issues such as slavery in America, the exploitation of prostitutes, and the harsh realities of child labour, Browning's body of work also offers a nuanced exploration of women's roles and identities in the early Victorian period. I aim to examine how her feminist voice is expressed in her ekphrastic poem "A Portrait" (1844), by analysing the ways in which she captures the complexities of female identity and agency within the context of an artwork that she imagines and describes. Additionally, I will explore how she skillfully intertwines feminist themes with political commentary in her second ekphrastic poem, "Hiram Power's Greek Slave" (1850). Barrett Browning's strategies diverge from the conventional ekphrastic technique. In these two poems, she actively interrogates the role of women as passive subjects in art. Critic Anthony Harrison notes that women poets often used their poetic techniques as a means of self-actualisation and assertion; he states, 'Women poets exposed, reappraised, and circumvented ideologies felt as constraining,' echoing the feminist perspective that suggests women poets utilise their ekphrastic poetry in a similar manner (114). Harrison further asserts that Barrett Browning's poetic attempts in this case to 'empower herself... all the while retaining the

stance of self-effacement' (114). This mode of feminist ekphrasis, in which the poet reveals the constraints of visual representation, establishes a connection between Barrett Browning's work and that of Landon, particularly in how both poets critique the passivity, idealisation, and confinement of the female subject within artistic traditions. Like Landon, Barrett Browning incorporates themes of ekphrastic disillusionment in her poems, addressing the depiction of the female subject as seen through the lens of ekphrastic entrapment and idealisation.

For the third chapter, I analyse a selection of ekphrastic poems by Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890) and Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911), expanding on the ekphrastic portrayal of the female image established in the previous chapter on Landon and Barrett Browning. Building upon the study already conducted on Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson by Joseph Bristow in his article "'The Armytage-Tomson-Watson Sequence': Poetic Illustrations in the Periodical Press, 1886-96" (2006), I aim to expand his examination of the two poets and their ekphrastic work. While his article primarily centred on the poets' cultural standing in society and their influence in the periodical press at the time, it was through his work that I discovered their poems and became interested in analysing how they employed ekphrasis from a feminist perspective. I intend to explore how Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson responded to the artwork of Pre-Raphaelite painters Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) and G.F. Watts (1817-1904), as well as the domestic painter William Quiller Orchardson (1832-1910). In this investigation, I examine *haptic ekphrasis* (a tactile, embodied response to visual art) as a counterpoint to the distancing effects of detachment from the gaze. This concept offers a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the female gaze and experience by emphasising the multisensory dynamics of the feminist ekphrastic mode employed by Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson. Jill Ehnenn's theory of haptic ekphrasis, seen in her article "Haptic Ekphrasis" (2021), highlights the importance of not only sight but also emotion and touch in evoking a deeper understanding of artistic expression. Ehnenn's theory focuses on how women in the latter half of the nineteenth century used ekphrasis to move beyond mere description, engaging with the emotions and tactile qualities of the artwork through their poetic interpretation. Like the analysis of Landon and Barrett Browning's ekphrastic work in the previous chapters, the theory of feminist ekphrasis takes a significant role in analysing the ekphrastic poems of Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson. In her analysis of women's ekphrastic poetry in her text, *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from*

Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler (2009), Jane Hedley argues that female poets writing about voiceless artworks are using their writing to express their own artistic, political, and psychological beliefs clearly and forcefully (64). Through the process of gazing at and interpreting art, I believe that mid to late nineteenth-century women poets Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson assert their own 'authority over art' and take on an active role in the re-creation and interpretation of art rather than serving the roles of being passive objects of inspiration (Hedley 64). In their responses to art, I suggest that Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson express their efforts to assert their own authority over the visual image. Instead of being passive subjects who merely perform and exhibit for the viewer, they seek to give the central female figure an active role in its creation and interpretation, transforming ekphrasis from a tool of containment into a means of feminist resistance. In this case, ekphrastic poetry allows women poets to develop a distinct "female self-awareness" that transcends the limitations often imposed by male-dominated artistic traditions (Showalter 52).

Another technique employed by Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson is known as *ekphrastic absence*, which is further explored in this chapter. This technique emphasises how an ekphrastic element conveys imagery or a narrative that originates in a painting or image but extends beyond what the viewer can see in the poem, adding additional meaning to the depicted image. The concept of ekphrasis as a form of expansion blurs the boundaries between the picture and the poem, as well as between the viewer and the speaker (Atherton 83). Ekphrastic absence resembles John Hollander's idea of *notional ekphrasis* from his article "The Poetics of Ekphrasis" (2012), which involves interpreting and describing an artwork that does not physically exist. It begins with the painting and then extends beyond it through poetic interpretation (209). This technique enables women poets to utilise the image as a starting point for expressing their voices and interpretations in a manner that transcends the limitations of the medium. I begin by analysing Pfeiffer's poetic response to Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones' (1833-1898) painting "The Annunciation" (1879). Pfeiffer's poetic response does not describe the painting in a traditional ekphrastic manner; rather than dwelling on visual details, the poem reinterprets the scene by focusing on the central female figure's inner experience, bringing a more intimate and profound experience of the female subject. Another of Pfeiffer's ekphrastic poems that I analyse is "Hope" (1888), a poetic response to G.F. Watts's allegorical painting "Hope" (1886). This poem transforms the meaning of Watts' artwork from one of passive endurance to active interpretation and

renewal. Pfeiffer's reinterpretation shifts the representation from a static image to a dynamic narrative of struggle, renewal, and transformation. She showcases her ability to create a feeling of experiencing both the painting and the ekphrastic poem through her engagement with the female figure from the painting.

Although Rosamund Marriott Watson was a lesser-known female writer from the late nineteenth century, she still engaged with art in her writing, producing ekphrastic poems. To navigate gender bias and the stigma of being a two-time divorcee, she published her writing under various pseudonyms, such as R. Armytage and Graham R. Tomson. This strategy helped her publish more of her work and reach a wider audience, but it also led to her work and prominence being lost over time. Throughout her life, she made significant contributions to various journals, including *The Pall Mall Gazette, The Scots Observer, The Yellow Book*, and *The Academy.* Her poetry often centred on the portrayal of female figures, providing a unique perspective on femininity and the female form. In this chapter, I begin by analysing her ekphrastic poem, "Le Mariage de Convenance—After! (Orchardson)" (1886), emphasising the theme of absence as it relates to the departure of the female figure from the confines of the painting. For this chapter, I propose that through the concepts of ekphrastic absence and ekphrastic shapeshifting, Marriott Watson invokes a distinctly *femme fatale* archetype within the ekphrastic tradition, aiming to redefine the roles of subject and object, effectively reversing them. Furthermore, to enhance her feminist perspective on this tradition, I suggest that Marriott Watson reimagines an ekphrastic reversal of the gaze. This illustrates how a feminist viewpoint became increasingly prominent in the ekphrastic works of women poets during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Four centres on a selection of ekphrastic poems by Michael Field, the collaborative pseudonym of aunt and niece duo Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913). Their 1892 volume, *Sight and Song*, represents a notable feminist exploration of ekphrastic poetics. While their work has garnered considerable attention in recent years, my focus will specifically be on their female-centred ekphrastic poems from this collection to emphasise their contribution to feminist ekphrastic discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, to honour the collaborative effort of the two poets, throughout this chapter, I will refer to both poets as 'Michael Field'. Their work uniquely combined an aesthetic representation of female figures in ekphrastic poetry with a

reconfiguration of poetic authority, gender, and desire. Writing together as a duo introduces a polyvocal dynamic to the ekphrastic discourse among women poets in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Writing together under a singular masculine persona, Bradley and Cooper's authorial collaboration not only challenges the patriarchal notions of authorship but also progresses the traditionally masculine domain of ekphrasis from within. This is evident in their 1892 collection of poems *Sight and Song,* which features poetic responses to prominent works of visual art, situating itself deliberately within the aesthetic and ekphrastic traditions of the period. However, it simultaneously subverts those traditions through its feminist awareness and interrogative gaze. Through analysing a selection of Michael Field's ekphrastic poems in *Sight and Song*, I investigate how they reimagine the ekphrastic form through a feminist and collaborative lens, focusing specifically on their poems: "La Gioconda", "A Portrait", "Venus and Mars", and "The Sleeping Venus" (1892).

Where earlier chapters will examine how nineteenth-century women poets, such as Landon, Barrett Browning, Pfeiffer, and Marriott Watson, challenged the visual aspect of traditional ekphrasis (resisting containment within the image or disrupting the passivity assigned to the female subject) Michael Field extend this challenge by occupying the role of the ekphrastic observer with a difference: they neither master the image nor surrender to it. Instead, their ekphrastic poems engage in a dialogic, self-reflective relationship with the paintings, where their collaborative authorship becomes both a method and a metaphor for their feminist re-articulation of the poetic gaze, paving the way for a reclaiming of their ekphrastic vision and interpretation. Building on W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of *ekphrastic fear* (1993), which describes the tension between the verbal and visual as a site of anxiety and desire, this chapter shows how Michael Field's ekphrastic poems dramatise and undo the fantasy of aesthetic mastery over the female subject depicted in the painting. In poems such as "A Portrait" and "La Gioconda", the poetic voice hovers between admiration and unease, evoking female subjects who are both visually arresting and emotionally impenetrable. Their refusal to disclose meaning fully or to conform to masculine ideals of beauty and narrative closure becomes a mode of resistance. At the same time, the poem "Venus and Mars" enacts a gender reversal that positions the male figure as the object of eroticised passivity, with Venus rendered as a tragic, knowing enchantress, thus performing a feminist transformation of the mythic and visual tradition of the female subject from a desirable muse for the

masculine gaze to a wise and disillusioned woman. In “The Sleeping Venus”, Michael Field depict a departure from the conventional portrayal of the nude female as a passive object of male desire, portraying the figure of Venus as an autonomous, self-aware figure, depicted in a state of serene repose integrated with the natural landscape.

By referencing the collaborative authorship theories articulated by Mary Lorraine York in her work, *Rethinking Women’s Collaborative Writing* (2002), they highlight the creative potential of collaborative writing as a subversive alternative to patriarchal authority structures. Michael Field’s ekphrastic practice does not aim to freeze or capture the image; instead, it focuses on sharing and exploring its emotional and symbolic dimensions. This approach highlights the collaborative direction taken by Michael Field, who noted in their shared journal that their literary work was “like a mosaic,” uniting both of their creative abilities into one cohesive space (Michael Field 3). This collaborative approach emphasises their ekphrastic method, which seeks to explore and interpret the canon of the female subject in the paintings. By focusing on the dual representation of the woman figure, the poets effectively illustrate how these depictions reflect both their individuality and the broader social narratives surrounding femininity. Through an examination of the documented ekphrastic representations in Michael Field's shared journal, *Works and Days* (1888-1914), I explore how they demonstrated their ekphrastic technique during visits to various British and European art galleries. Understanding their ekphrastic process and interaction with art is crucial to grasping their methods of interpreting and representing the female figure in paintings. Their ekphrastic method included the act of *translating* visual aesthetics into verse, as depicted in the details of their interactions with paintings in galleries: ‘We are fixing our eyes on the Madonna and Child, painted by Millet for the Church of Notre Dame de Lorette, Paris… and we go off like the couples in Watteau—only not to talk of love but the safer subject of art’ (81). This process formed the foundation for their ekphrastic technique in *Sight and Song*.

In the fifth and final chapter, I shift from a strictly chronological structure of ekphrastic practice to examine a thematic and intermedial dynamic among a selection of nineteenth-century women poets, namely Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), Alice Meynell (1847-1922), and Edith Wharton (1862-1937). This thesis features a deliberate dual structure, combining a broadly chronological approach with a focus on the artistic media discussed in the poems. The chronological framework helps trace how women’s engagement with

ekphrasis evolved across the long nineteenth century, without implying a straightforward or linear development of feminist awareness. Instead, it highlights recurring strategies, tensions, and themes in women's poetic responses to changing aesthetic, cultural, and institutional contexts. Alongside this, the thesis also considers the artistic media involved, primarily two-dimensional images such as drawings, paintings, prints, as well as sculpture and other physical forms. These categories serve as flexible analytical tools rather than strict divisions, acknowledging moments where ekphrastic practice transcends or challenges them, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's engagement with sculpture in "Hiram Powers's Greek Slave". The final chapter integrates these principles through a more intermedial and thematic approach, connecting poets from different periods in the nineteenth century to explore how multiple media complicate, expand, and reshape feminist and feminine perspectives on ekphrasis. Overall, the thesis shows that although women's ekphrastic practices are rooted in specific historical contexts, they are not confined to a single medium or chronological sequence, but instead present a dynamic, adaptable feminist discourse throughout the nineteenth century. Although written decades apart, I believe these poets' ekphrastic works continue to provide valuable insights into how women poets addressed female-centred themes, reinterpreting them through their distinctive voices and shaping a uniquely female discourse in the nineteenth-century ekphrastic tradition.The discussion aims to illuminate a distinctly feminist perspective that has often been overlooked in the study of feminist ekphrasis by these poets: rather than focusing exclusively on the depiction of the female figure in paintings, I will explore how these poets emphasise female-oriented inanimate objects in a selection of their ekphrastic poems. This approach aims to provide a multi-dimensional analysis and interpretation of the feminist (and feminine) ekphrastic techniques utilised by women poets throughout the nineteenth century. I highlight the contribution of poets who adopt a 'feminine' ekphrastic perspective on this theme because, while my primary focus is on examining distinctly feminist viewpoints, I am also mindful of early nineteenth-century women poets like Letitia Elizabeth Landon in the second chapter and now Felicia Hemans, who may not employ overtly feminist themes in their ekphrastic poems.

In this chapter, the ekphrastic poems that I analyse are Felicia Hemans's poem on a fossilised cast of a mother and child in "The Image in Lava" (1827), Alice Meynell's *musical ekphrasis* in "Soeur Monique", and the *sculptural ekphrasis* in Edith Wharton's "The So-Called Venus of Milo" (1889). I propose that Hemans and Wharton's poems serve as distinct

examples of *object-based ekphrasis*. This approach directs the ekphrastic gaze beyond the object itself and encourages us to look into the feminine being it represents. In doing so, it reveals more profound meanings about femininity through the lens of the depicted object. This approach also explores how inanimate objects, such as Hemans's fossilised cast and Wharton's sculpture of Venus, become sites of poetic resistance, agency, and subjectivity, specifically articulated by women poets. Katherine Behar's concept of object-oriented feminism aligns with the engagement of inanimate objects within an ekphrastic context. Behar describes it as follows: 'Object-oriented feminism approaches all objects from the inside-out position of being an object too, with all its accompanying political and ethical potentials' (26). In this framework, the depicted objects are not passive entities; rather, they act as co-participants in the feminist discourse, utilising a form of poetics that challenges interpretations dominated by male-centric viewpoints. In other words, focusing on how feminist ekphrasis intersects with object-oriented strategies acts as a distinct 'advocate for an active female viewing subject and a dignified, equally active poetic object,' enabling a mutual relationship between the subject and object, between the gaze and the object being looked at (92). I begin the chapter with Felicia Hemans's poem "The Image in Lava", which was published in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Annual* in 1827 and then republished in her poetry collection titled *Records of Woman* in 1828. "The Image in Lava" exemplifies the merging of ekphrasis and feminist object poetics. The poem is accompanied by an annotation at the end of the poem: 'The impression of a woman's form, with an infant clasped to the bosom, found at the uncovering of Herculaneum' (307). This annotation functions not merely as a factual representation but as a critical framework that sets the poem's exploration of maternal love, memory, and the endurance of feminine affect. The annotation also situates the poem within the realm of archaeological discovery by referencing the excavations at Herculaneum. By doing so, Hemans bridges the gap between the ancient past and her contemporary moment, allowing readers to engage with the relic as a symbol of enduring human emotions that transcend the bounds of time. Hemans wrote around thirty-eight ekphrastic texts during her time that illustrate various media, including portraits, sketches, watercolours, and a range of funerary monuments (Scott 36). For this chapter, I focus specifically on her poem "The Image in Lava" because of the unique way that Hemans addresses the female form through her description of an ancient fossilised figure.

In addition to the concept of object-based ekphrasis, I also focus on the concept of *musical ekphrasis* in Alice Meynell's poem, "Soeur Monique". The ekphrastic representation encompasses the depiction of sensory experiences, including sound. Siglind Bruhn has defined the term musical ekphrasis as a form of ekphrasis that 'narrates or paints a fictional reality created by an artist *other than the composer* of the music: a painter or a poet' (17). In her extensive research on the unique relationship between sound, music, and representation, Bruhn explores the differences between the sister arts of painting and poetry in relation to music. She examines how this connection fits within the tradition of ekphrasis, defining it within the contexts of both painting and literature. The poetic language used serves as a vehicle to explore the evocation of sound, music, and auditory experiences. Poets, for instance, strive to capture and illustrate the essence of a musical composition, the atmosphere of a soundscape, or the emotional reactions recalled by auditory experiences through their descriptive language. An early nineteenth-century example of sound/musical depiction in ekphrastic poetry can be found in John Keats's renowned work, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), where he writes:

> Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

In these lines, Keats captures the imagined music and sounds represented by the urn, which, despite being silent (following the traditional gendered notion of the silent female other), evokes a richer auditory experience in the observer's mind. This encapsulation portrays and conveys the auditory experience through vivid imagery, translating these emotions and sensory experiences into a poetic response. Writing a poetic response to a musical piece operates in an ekphrastic manner, similar to poetry inspired by paintings, where one form of art represents another. In the poem, much like Keats' ekphrastic poem, Meynell immerses herself in the narrative by directly addressing the figure of the nun, "Soeur Monique". This approach draws us into her perception of the musical piece, blending the ekphrastic technique with the song's musicality. Through her poetic response, she introduces what I propose as a distinctly feminine perspective that resonates throughout the ekphrastic poem.

After analysing Meynell's musical ekphrastic approach in her poem, I turn to analyse the ekphrastic poem of American writer, Edith Wharton, who was most noted for her novels and short stories, rather than her poetry. I suggest that her poem, "The So-Called Venus of Milo" (1889), marks a further evolution of feminist ekphrasis by interrogating one of the

most iconic representations of female beauty in Western art. Rather than celebrating the statue's apparent perfection and idealisation, Wharton resists the aesthetic concept of ideal femininity that often accompanied the representation and interpretation of sculptures, especially ancient sculptures of Venus. Instead, I suggest that Wharton utilises the space of the ekphrastic representation to dwell on the silence and absence of the sculptural form, creating an ekphrastic response that focuses on loss and fragmentation of the aestheticised female body, as well as the beauty and endurance of Venus. Rather than reanimating the statue into a sentimental or redemptive figure, I believe that Wharton treats Venus not as a subject to be saved but as a philosophical relic or testament to how female bodies are preserved in culture through aesthetic and symbolic meaning. Wharton's feminist ekphrasis operates not through an overtly political or moral critique, but through her attention to the absence, ambiguity, and dissonance between the form and meaning behind it. By situating Wharton and her ekphrastic poem at the end of the trajectory of feminist strategies employed by Felicia Hemans and Alice Meynell, both of whom utilise intermedial objects to express a feminist voice that explores themes of loss, voice, and resistance, I aim to observe a shift in nineteenth-century feminist and feminine ekphrasis. This shift moves from reclaiming silenced female figures to an exploration of fragmentation, which reveals the aesthetic and ideological frameworks within which these figures are positioned.

This thesis traces the emergence of a feminist ekphrastic poetics in nineteenth-century women's poetry, arguing that these writers strategically engaged with, resisted, and reconfigured the visual politics of gendered representation in a tradition historically shaped by the male gaze. It starts by examining how Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry and painting frame the female figure through inscriptive and restrictive ekphrastic perspectives. His work provides a foundation showing how women poets have historically reshaped and continue to reshape the female figure in art, both prior to and following Rossetti, a poet and painter who employed ekphrastic techniques in his work. Examining the subversive and self-aware ekphrastic poetry of earlier women poets, such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I argue that they employed a self-reflexive style of ekphrasis. This approach challenges the traditional authority of the poetic voice and subtly reasserts agency for the female subject, demonstrating how proto-feminist ekphrasis can still be present within the ekphrastic poem. The thesis then turns to Emily Pfeiffer and Rosamund Marriott Watson, whose haptic and multisensory approaches to ekphrasis offer a counter-visual poetics that

resists fixed objectification by invoking touch, atmosphere, and affect. Examining the haptic element deepens the understanding of ekphrastic feminist object poetics, as it integrates Behar's object-oriented feminism with feminist ekphrasis. This approach broadens the ways in which women poets utilise ekphrasis as a form of resistance and transformation, moving beyond traditional portrayals of female subjects in painted artworks. This illustrates how women poets, by the mid-nineteenth century, were gaining prominence in their writing and actively seeking to destabilise the depiction of women in art through their ekphrastic interpretations. Building on this shift, the fourth chapter examines how a selection of Michael Fields' ekphrastic poems from their significant volume, *Sight and Song*, illustrates how their collaborative and feminist ekphrastic techniques significantly influenced their representation of the female subject in art, particularly Renaissance art. Their portrayal of female subjects reveals a clear shift from that of earlier women poets, such as Landon and Barrett Browning, who depicted women in art differently. Michael Fields's work shows a more self-reflective approach, emphasising the female figure's own autonomy in the paintings, where the subjects seem to be distancing themselves from their painted images. The final chapter broadens the study of feminist ekphrasis by moving beyond a strictly linear analysis of women poets' ekphrastic works. I aimed to introduce a different yet related perspective on how nineteenth-century women poets interpreted and depicted feminised, frozen objects within their ekphrastic poems, complementing the feminist ekphrastic techniques explored earlier. The works of Felicia Hemans, Alice Meynell, and Edith Wharton exemplify this approach, as their poetic engagement with silent or fossilised female forms reanimate these objects as symbols of historical memory, mourning, and creative potential. While continuing to analyse the representation of the female figure through ekphrasis, my focus now shifts to understanding how these representations can be viewed through a feminist lens. By centring female poetic responses to visual culture, this thesis contributes to broader conversations in feminist literary criticism, art history, and ekphrastic studies, showing how poetic form became a vehicle for challenging and transforming the visual regimes of gender in the long nineteenth century.

Chapter One

Framing the Female Figure: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Ekphrastic Authority

Within nineteenth-century Western art, male artists frequently depicted the figure of the woman not just as subjects of artistic exploration but as objects of visual pleasure, emphasising qualities that would appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of their male viewers. Through this lens, the female figure became a canvas onto which male artists projected their idealised visions, illustrating the complexities of gender dynamics and the relationship between art, audience, and representation during the nineteenth century. A prominent figure in this discourse is Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), a key member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who moved between creating paintings and poetry to articulate his distinctive vision of the female figure. The visual representation of the female figure in art has often been perceived as an exercise in oppression, confining the female image to the interpretations and depictions dictated by the male perspective for a primarily male audience. As a result, art and literature can be viewed as an extension of this gaze, eliciting a voyeuristic perspective of the female subject in both paintings and poetry. This chapter will adopt a multi-faceted approach, incorporating textual, visual, and contextual analysis to examine a selection of Rossetti's ekphrastic works, particularly those poems inscribed on the frames of his paintings. The purpose of selecting a range of Rossetti's ekphrastic works for analysis in this chapter is to highlight his portrayal of sensualised female beauty in both his paintings and poems, reflecting the ekphrastic dynamic that influences the representation of the female figure across his artistic mediums. Rossetti's emphasis on vividly depicting the beautiful and sensual qualities of women in his art highlights a critique raised by fellow Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt (1827-1910). Hunt argued that Rossetti's aesthetic creations often prioritise purely pleasurable experiences rather than conveying more profound significance or meaning: 'I see Rossetti as advocating as a principle the mere gratification of the eye if any passion at all—the animal passion to be the aim of art' (Qtd. by Barringer 149). By examining a selection of Rossetti's inscribed works within an ekphrastic context, we can explore how he depicted the female form in ways that position women in roles of passive observation, effectively highlighting the constraints imposed by the masculine gaze. This deliberate arrangement facilitates a dialogue that allows each work to illuminate and enhance the other, reflecting Rossetti's ekphrastic technique of utilising the borders of his paintings to

hold the space for representing his female subjects within them, shaping a type of ekphrastic control. This analysis addresses broader themes of objectification and the complexities of female identity as they manifest in Rossetti's oeuvre. This analysis will also examine how he metaphorically and directly employed the boundaries of the frame to constrain the female form within the limits of the ekphrastic representation. Through this discussion, the chapter shows that his art reflects the societal attitudes towards women during his time. Analysing key paintings by Rossetti with their related ekphrastic poems reveals a complex conversation between images and words that extends beyond simple depiction. This ekphrastic interplay is instrumental in revealing the restrictive and often oppressive gendered model of vision that pervaded the art and literature of the time. This exploration will establish the tone and direction for the subsequent chapters, which will delve into the ekphrastic practices of a selection of women writers in the nineteenth century, following Rossetti.

The ekphrastic form is intricately tied to the poetic and artistic work of Rossetti and his fellow Pre-Raphaelites, which was showcased in the periodical magazine *The Germ*, organised and published by Rossetti's brother, William Michael Rossetti, during the 1850s. This publication exemplifies what Lindsay Smith (2012) refers to as a 'particular twinning of the visual and the verbal,' an ekphrastic concept that lies at the heart of the early philosophy of the Pre-Raphaelites (96). The connection between the visual and the verbal is distinctly defined and interlinked in the works of Rossetti. He acknowledges that his poetry and painting are intertwined in a manner that enhances each medium. Through this perspective, the dynamic between the visual and verbal takes shape in his statement: 'My own belief is that I am a poet… primarily, and that it is my poetic tendencies that chiefly give value to my pictures; only painting being—what poetry is not—a livelihood—I have put my poetry chiefly in that form' (Qtd. by Ainsworth 2). In his statement, Rossetti recognises the poetic dimension inherent in his paintings. He posits that his poetry added literary value and quality to his paintings, thereby elucidating the significant correlation he established between the mediums of poetry and painting. This assertion suggests that his poetry functions not merely as a supplementary element but as a vital component that enhances the interpretive depth of his visual artworks. Oswald Doughty (1949) observed the recurring themes and imagery in Rossetti's paintings and poems, commenting that "the feeling pervading his [Rossetti's] pictures was such as his poetry ought to suggest" (115). Doughty's statement

underscores the interconnected dynamic between Rossetti's visual art and literary works, both of which convey a shared aesthetic sensibility. The relationship between Rossetti's painting and poetry can be understood through three approaches, as noted by Ainsworth: 'Rossetti's translation of the poetry of others into his own idiom through pictures; his poems on paintings by other artists; and the poems he wrote to accompany his own pictures' (81). For this chapter, I will focus specifically on the poems that Rossetti inscribed on the frames of his own artworks. This emphasis will enable me to explore a distinctive aspect of Rossetti's ekphrastic practice, particularly in terms of how he portrays the female figure. Rossetti's combined artistic practice and vision demonstrate a deep engagement with the female form, which garnered significant backlash and criticism from his contemporaries. One of the most vocal critics of the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Rossetti's poetry and painting, was writer Robert Williams Buchanan (1841-1901). In his scathing critique, *The Fleshly School of Poetry* (1871), Buchanan condemned Rossetti's poems as "trash," "nasty," and "fleshly," expressing concerns over the poets' perceived immoral imagery and themes, where he also claimed that Rossetti has the 'painter's imitative power developed in proportion to his lack of the poet's conceiving imagination' (329-43). Buchanan briefly elaborated on Rossetti's technique, which expands on Rossetti's approach to ekphrasis. He examined how Rossetti employed this literary device in his 1850 poem, "Blessed Damozel". In analysing the poem, Buchanan highlighted the meticulousness of Rossetti's artistic vision, describing the poem's opening stanzas as 'A careful sketch for a picture which, worked into actual colour by a master, might have been worth seeing' (40). Buchanan emphasises his interpretation of the relationship between visual art and verbal expression, arguing that poetry and painting should remain distinct from one another. He contends that poetry often imposes its limitations on visual art, asserting that 'Poetry is something more than painting, and an idea will not become a poem because it is too smudgy for a picture' (42). In this context, the poetry inscribed on the frames of Rossetti's paintings serves as a border that effectively connects both the poem and the image within those frames.

In a similar tone, in 1913, writer and critic G.K. Chesterton commented on Rossetti's inscribed works, stating that 'His poems were too pictorial. His pictures were too poetical,' highlighting Rossetti's distinct interplay between the poetical and the pictorial (187). In this context, Rossetti's dual works of art create a dialogue between the realms of poetry and the

visual arts, prompting a reflective interplay between the two media. For Rossetti, this technique is evident in many of his combined works, where he departs from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's practice of mimicking nature, instead incorporating his own 'invented poetic symbols' that resonate within both his poetry and art (Cruise 125). In this context, Rossetti's ekphrastic works from the 1860s onward feature distinct motifs and significant symbolism. This is particularly evident in his double works, a central concept for understanding Rossetti's artistic and ekphrastic methodology. In these works, the painting and the poem serve as integrative and parallel expressions that cannot be separated. Elizabeth Helsinger (2008) suggests that 'with double works, each is inextricably bound to the other; painting and poem must be read with extra care in light of one another' (69). Consequently, the symbolic relationship between the painting and the poem is an essential aspect of Rossetti's ekphrastic (double) works. This intertwining is apparent in his ekphrastic paintings and their corresponding poems: "Proserpine" (1874), "The Blessed Damozel" (1847), and "Sibylla Palmifera" (1866). Each of these works enhances the other through their symbolic engagement, elevating the spiritual and aesthetic ideals that Rossetti sought to embody in both his paintings and poetry. Rossetti's practice of inscribing poetry onto the frames of his paintings serves as a form of textual framing that dictates how the viewer perceives the image. By deliberately employing the frames of his paintings, Rossetti enhances the interplay between visual and literary elements in his ekphrastic poems/paintings. Before delving deeper into Rossetti's use of the frame as a method for his ekphrastic representation, it is essential to trace the development and evolution of the frame over the nineteenth century. This exploration will clarify how its functions, form, and relationships with the paintings and their artists have evolved. By gaining a clearer understanding of how the frame operates within the context of Rossetti's era, we can better understand the ways in which its functions evolved and were employed by Rossetti himself. The function of the frame, according to Catherine Roach (2009), 'serves the same function as quotation marks do in writing, acknowledging an exterior source for the encapsulated material' (14). Frames around the artwork function as a boundary that separates the artist's internal creative vision from the external environment. By inscribing directly on the frames to assert his control and enhance the ekphrastic depiction of the female figures he aimed to portray, the interaction between the visual image and the accompanying literary text becomes more profound and offers commentary on the narrative in Rossetti's paintings. The painted image is contained within

this enclosed margin, representing the artist's conception, while the surrounding space reflects the painter's reality beyond their internal perception and imagination. Defining the frame involves understanding its role as a tool that displays the image while shaping it into a form that fits within a specific visual structure in a distinct space. Without the linear confines of the frame, the artwork seems to float within the realm of the 'real world,' as opposed to the imagined realm contained within the image itself. The concept of 'in-betweenness' becomes particularly significant when exploring the theory of the frame as a divider between the visual image and the real world. When viewers observe a framed artwork, they are essentially looking 'in' at the image contained within, with the frame serving as the mechanism for that perception. Jose Ortega (1990) discusses the essential interaction between the frame and its surrounding environment, arguing that this relationship is crucial for containing the creative elements within the frame. He presents the frameless image as resembling 'a naked, despoiled man,' suggesting that the frame's contents appear to spill out and dissolve into the surrounding atmosphere (187). Ortega's characterisation of the frameless image as 'naked' emphasises the frame's role as a protective covering or shroud, safeguarding the vulnerable and exposed essence of the artwork within its defined boundaries. Arthur Danto's *Philosophy of Art* (2006) describes the aesthetic role of framed artworks by pointing out that a painting 'drew its beauty from the world, ideally having none of its own to contribute to what one saw, as it were, through it' (49). This highlights the frame's role as a vessel meant mainly to showcase and elevate the image inside, with the frame itself seen 'through' it and drawing the viewer's attention to the depicted image. This contrasts with Ortega's perspective of the frame as just a protective shell. By deriving its beauty from the external world, the viewer is allowed to envisage an image that is not physically part of reality, thanks to the physical boundaries created by the frame. Thus, the frame symbolises a duality, where 'the outer boundaries defend the picture against the exterior and the inner boundaries support a unifying integration with respect to the picture' (Redies and Groß 1). Similarly, Redies and Groß's definition presents the frame as a powerful shield that both guards the image from the outside world and also allows it to be aesthetically presented externally to the outside world.

In the nineteenth century, the frames surrounding paintings underwent significant transformations that reflected the evolving visual, cultural, and social contexts of the time. These changes were particularly notable due to substantial advancements in visual culture,

as discussed in the introduction. As the design and placement of frames evolved throughout history, the functions of the frames were adapted to better fit the contexts within and beyond their borders. Prominent art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) emphasised the importance and impact of picture frames and their makers when he remarked on the works of fourteenth-century Italian painters, architects, and sculptors during a lecture at Oxford University in 1872. Published as part of a series of six lectures on woodwork and metal engraving, Ruskin posed the crucial question:

> Have you ever considered, in the early history of paintings, how important also is the history of the frame maker? It is a matter, I assure you, needing your very best consideration. For the frame was made before the picture. The painted window is much, but the aperture it fills was thought of before it…Who thought of these; - who built? (1903, 289)

In the nineteenth century, a renewed fascination with the visual culture of the Italian Renaissance emerged. Barbra Savedoff (1999) highlights the evolution of frame design during this period, which aligns with Ruskin's observations regarding the frame's significance in the Renaissance. Savedoff argues that 'Early frames were not an afterthought added to an already finished painting... in the Renaissance, separately constructed frames continued to be commissioned prior to their paintings,' reflecting a consistent perspective on frame construction that carried into the nineteenth century (348). Frames played a crucial role in shaping paintings' visual production, presentation, and development. Frames have enhanced the spectator's visual experience by integrating themselves as a medium of artificial representation or illusion. John Payne (2007) emphasises that the frame is connected to the 'world of illusion,' positioning it as both a physical and liminal element that conveys a windowed form of representation (5). He also examined how the frame is linked to 'the illusion of architecture, the illusion of space, the illusion of the window, the illusion of the surface and material content' (Payne 5). The representation of the painting within its setting is defined by the placement of the frame on the wall, the way light reflects off the surface of the canvas, and the overall colour and design of the structure that supports the artwork. Although frames delineate the painted edges, separating the imaginary from the real world, their style, design, and positioning are essential for the painting.

The making of frames shifted from the skills and artistry of carpenters and furniture makers to the mass-produced, factory-made frames that became widespread in the nineteenth

century. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, many artists began to oppose the mass-produced frames standard of the time, viewing the design of their frames as an integral part of their artwork (Savedoff 29). Experimentation with design choices, various materials, and different frame shapes and sizes flourished among artists, particularly the Pre-Raphaelites, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, partly due to Ruskin's influence and his assertion of the importance of the authenticity of the materials used in the frames, along with the craftsmanship (Roach 37). Some examples of these experimental frames include using geometric shapes and attaching symbolic meanings that add to the narrative of the painting's contents. These can be seen in a selection of frames, such as William Holman Hunt's *The Birthday (Edith Waugh)* (1869) and Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* (1877). Ruskin's teachings and lectures on the creative significance of art and design inspired many artists and thinkers who shared his belief in the necessity of developing unique and authentic artistic skills and practices. They aimed to replace the machine-produced works of what he deemed 'dishonest' and 'cold' art (Qtd. by Wedderburn 238). Frame historian Lynn Roberts (1986) provides insight into the declining value of nineteenth-century frames, attributing this to the industrialisation of frame-making alongside the rise of fast and market-driven designs. She critically observed that 'Victorian frames tended to be debased both in workmanship and propriety... and mouldings [were] chosen for their superficial opulence rather than their suitability' (155). This assessment highlights the shift in focus from quality craftsmanship to the allure of decorative excess that characterised many products of the time. In response to these trends, William Morris (1834-1896), a prominent figure in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, emerged as a significant advocate for a return to traditional artistry in the decorative arts throughout the mid to late nineteenth century. Morris's philosophy sought to challenge the prevailing industrial practices that he believed led to a loss of integrity and aesthetic value in art and design, including the style and manufacturing processes of nineteenth-century frames (Roach 2009, 56). Morris and like-minded contemporaries endeavoured to resurrect the stylistic qualities and artisanal techniques of earlier artistic periods, particularly those of the Renaissance and Medieval eras. They aimed to reestablish an emphasis on beauty in all dimensions of interior and exterior environments. Consequently, from the 1860s to the 1890s, frames began to reclaim a more distinctive and refined presence, characterised by their design and attention to craftsmanship. The influence of Flemish painters on framing techniques is particularly evident in the works of several Pre-Raphaelite

artists, such as Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893) and Rossetti. These artists often sought to replicate the distinctive style of Flemish frames, known for their intricate gilding. The edges of these frames were frequently embellished with a layer of gold leaf or rich, golden paint, creating a radiant sheen that enhanced the artwork's visual appeal and produced an illusion of light emanating from the piece itself. This dynamic interplay of light and shadow was further highlighted by the rough, textured surfaces of oak frames, which provided a striking contrast to the opulent golden tones (as seen in the figures below) (Roberts 156). Consequently, the frames not only bordered the artwork but also enriched the overall sensory experience, creating a more immersive viewing environment. These frames emphasise their distinct role in defining the boundaries of the image they contain, functioning as an additional layer of context that deepens our understanding of the artwork. This interplay between frame and art is particularly evident in the works of Rossetti, where intricately designed frames complement the imagery, inviting viewers to engage with both the visual and thematic elements of the pieces.

Figure 1. “The Hayfield”, Ford Maddox Brown (1856)

Figure 2. “A Christmas Carol”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1867)

This aesthetic dialogue between frame and painting forms more than a decorative relationship; it establishes the groundwork for understanding how Rossetti transforms the frame into an active site of meaning, thereby establishing his ekphrastic intent. By inscribing directly on the frames to assert his control and enhance the ekphrastic representation of the female figures he sought to depict, the interplay between the visual image and the

accompanying literary text enriches and comments on the narrative inherent in the pictorial work. During the nineteenth century, Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Hunt, Millais, Burne-Jones, and Stephens engraved or inscribed verses from poets like Shakespeare, Marlowe, Tennyson, Byron, and Blake onto the frames of their works. This practice was intended to engage viewers with the artwork and to add layers of meaning and symbolism that would enrich the overall representation of the painting. However, Rossetti distinguishes himself from other artists by inscribing his own poetic reflections onto the frames of his paintings rather than using the verses of established poets. In this context, ekphrasis comes into play as the inscribed verse is deliberately chosen to mirror or amplify the imagery presented in the artwork. This principle also applies to the titles of paintings, which were often printed or engraved alongside the artist's name and date on the artwork or its frame. By inscribing on the frame, Rossetti articulated his poetic interpretation onto the borders of the painting, providing the picture with a voice. This approach allowed him to speak *for* the female figures he rendered in his paintings and poems. The contents of his paintings often portray women in contemplative and constrained poses, filled with emotional depth and symbolic meaning. Simultaneously, his poetry expresses the thoughts and feelings that accompany these visual depictions.

By focusing on Rossetti's ekphrastic representation in this chapter, we can investigate how ekphrasis informs his interpretation and depiction of the female figure, both in the poem and within the constraints of the painting. Rossetti's ekphrastic technique is uniquely expressed through his innovative practice of inscribing on the frames of paintings. He states, 'Picture and poem bear the same relation to each other as beauty does in man and woman: the point of meeting where the two are most identical is the supreme perfection' (510). This emphasis on the 'point of meeting' between the two media invites consideration of the relationship between these arts within a gendered discourse. This discussion examines the interplay between painting and poetry, highlighting their convergence into what he describes as 'supreme perfection', a state that exists within their 'point of meeting'. His quote reflects a vision of the intermediality inherent in the ekphrastic dynamic. He likens the relationship between these two media to the interaction between men and women, drawing on historical associations that frame these art forms through a gendered lens. This comparison reveals the tension and anxiety that emerge from their rivalry. James Heffernan (1993) asserts that a

tension exists between the verbal and the visual, which connects to the gendered perspective that defines it:

> [Ekphrasis] evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language, it is intensely paragonal… The context it stages is often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space. (1)

The verbal and poetic elements are often associated with a masculine voice, whereas images and paintings convey a sense of feminine silence and stillness. This suggests that Rossetti's representations are restrictive, highlighting the dominant influence of the masculine gaze on the depiction of the female form and image through ekphrasis. Critics such as W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) highlight the discord between the masculine gaze and the 'female power to enchant, subvert, or threaten' in ekphrastic portrayals across the two media (108). This dynamic underscores the gendered divide between gaze and medium, particularly evident in several of Rossetti's ekphrastic works, some of which will be analysed in this chapter, including "A Sea-Spell" (1877), "Lady Lilith" (1868), and "The Day-Dream" (1880).

I. The Framing Device as a Means of Control in “A Sea-Spell”

Figure 3. “A Sea-Spell”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1877)

In examining Rossetti’s painting and poem titled “A Sea-Spell” (1877), I emphasise how he employs ekphrasis to limit female representation through specific gendered interpretations present in both the visual and poetic forms. In the 1860s, Rossetti moved away from the predominantly Dantean and medieval themes that had initially inspired him, instead embracing works infused with mythic and symbolic elements, featuring his wife and mistresses as muses. In doing so, he recreates his perspective of them within a space that distorts their true selves into his own vision. It was common for Rossetti to create his painting before composing the accompanying ekphrastic poem, thereby exemplifying his ekphrastic approach and establishing that he asserts his visual representation before his poetic one. This

is evident in his works *A Vision of Fiammetta* (1878) and *The Day Dream* (1880), where Rossetti completed the paintings before the corresponding poems, allowing him to explore the "gaps" between the visual and the verbal in a way that engages with an active interpretive process (Gracia 213). In the case of "A Sea-Spell", the painting was commissioned by one of Rossetti's wealthiest patrons, Frederick Leyland (1831-1892), who had a keen interest in acquiring works featuring a central female figure playing a musical instrument, serving as decorative adornments for his walls. This point also highlights the central theme of this chapter, where Leyland, along with many other patrons, collectors, and Victorian male viewers, objectified and fetishised the female body, treating it as a site of 'oppression and sexual commodification' (Badia 2006, 54). The central figure of the painting is the Siren, a formidable creature from Greek mythology celebrated for her mesmerising songs that captivate unsuspecting sailors, ultimately luring them to their demise. This image reflects a prevalent theme of the Victorian era, when the femme fatale archetype gained significant popularity. Though images of the 'femme fatale' have roots in classical mythology, the French term, meaning 'deadly woman,' gained wider popularity in literary and cultural contexts during the late 1800s, with English references appearing around 1879 (Di Laurea 82). The femme fatale symbolised a defiance of societal norms, embodying a seductive, alluring, and often dangerous woman who challenged the era's restrictive ideals of femininity. In contrast to the expected image of the virtuous and demure woman that society endorsed, the femme fatale represented the complexities and contradictions of female identity.

William Michael Rossetti (1829-1919), Rossetti's brother, provided an ekphrastic interpretation of the painting, enriching the narrative with his own perspective. He stated: 'The idea is that of a Siren, or Sea-Fairy, seated in a tree, whose lute summons a sea-bird to listen, and whose songs will soon prove fatal to some fascinated mariner' (75). In Greek mythology, the harpy is shown as having a bird's body and a beautiful woman's head, although W.M. Rossetti referred to the figure as a 'Siren'. Dante Rossetti emphasises her human traits, depicting a seabird alighting on her right shoulder. This choice allows him to interpret the mythological figure in a more feminine light than traditional depictions, ultimately shaping viewers' perceptions of her as a captivating yet lethal woman rather than strictly adhering to ancient representations. As with many of his other paintings, the female figure takes the forefront; her body is contorted in a way that conveys a sense of concentration

over the musical instrument she holds, even while her facial expression seems distant and alien. She appears to be surrounded by the flora and confines of the frame, emphasising the mythological and fantastical world that Rossetti has placed her in, in which she seems to be trapped. Although the Siren is positioned on the right side of the canvas, her body leans toward the left, which heightens the sense of confinement and tangled restraint that seems to envelop her within the artwork's confines. Meanwhile, the inscription of the poem on the frame appears to extend its meaning and interpretation beyond the borders, seemingly distracting the eye in a manner that deepens the connection between the image and the poem. While the female figure is contained within the artwork, the piece simultaneously invites the viewer into the world that Rossetti has crafted and narrated, asserting his authority over the image contained within. The Siren is permitted a voice solely through her musical instrument, a dulcimer lute, which she clutches—though she seems to hold it incorrectly. Her fingers strum the strings with deliberate grace, yet without words; this evokes the image of a caged songbird, further enhancing the imagery of being held within the confines of the borders around her. Through her music, she entices and lures the male gaze towards her, relying on her melodies rather than spoken language.

When examining the inscribed sonnet, it is essential to recognise that Rossetti's ekphrastic poems effectively direct the viewer or reader's gaze and interpretation beyond the spatial and temporal dimensions of the ekphrastic work. Critic Lynn Pearce (1994) articulated that Rossetti's inscribed poems are 'intended not to correct one viewing possibility so much as to impose the right one, the *only* one,' thereby emphasising the dreamlike and aestheticised world in which Rossetti asserts his poetic representation of the inscribed painting, reinforcing the idea of the woman as an object rather than an active agent in his own interpretation (40). Dinah Roe (2018) argues that Rossetti's inscribed frames are not merely decorative borders; instead, they serve as significant thresholds that invite the viewer deeper into the fantastical world Rossetti has created (12). This notion underscores how Rossetti employs ekphrastic techniques to represent and portray the female figure in ways that extend far beyond the physical limitations of the frame itself. The frames serve as portals, encouraging viewers to cross into a narrative that delves into Rossetti's ekphrastic and poetic vision. In this context, they become gateways that allow an exploration of themes that transcend the boundaries of reality, space, and time, thereby asserting a representation that defines his vision and

interpretation of the female form it embodies. Looking at "A Sea-Spell", the sonnet was initially written seven years before Rossetti constructed the painting. A quote from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (1816): 'A damsel with a dulcimer/ In a vision once I saw', was going to be inscribed onto the frame initially, illustrating the influence of the Romantics had upon Rossetti's ekphrastic vision, where the dulcimer lute remained in the painting and the poem (Rossetti 96). Rossetti's sonnet begins:

> Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree,
> While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell
> Between its chords; and as the wild notes swell
> The sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea.
> But to what sound her listening ear stoops she?
> What netherworld gulf-whispers doth she hear?
> In answering echoes from what planisphere,
> Along the wind, along the estuary? (Rossetti, "A Sea-Spell" 1-8)

The first section introduces the musical instrument by presenting it to the reader as 'Her lute hangs shadowed,' depicting it as an object of temptation concealed within the shadows and mystery of the apple-tree. This tree is rich in symbolism, representing the seduction and temptation associated with Eve and the archetype of the fatal feminine seductress. The Siren's mystical influence continues as she appears to induce an intoxicating and magical power, or 'the sweet-strung spell', exerted over the viewer as she weaves the chords of her instrument for that purpose, which appears to affect the sea-bird and tempts its attention from the sea to the branches around her. The following lines illustrate Rossetti's interjection as he poses a question to the viewer/ reader, prompting reflection on the seemingly nefarious motives of the Siren.

This inquiry serves as a reminder of her perceived dangerous and otherworldly nature, which could pose a threat to the anxious male observer: 'But to what sound her listening ear stoops she? / What netherworld gulf-whispers doth she hear?' (lines 5-6). By adopting a more assertive and disruptive perspective that interrogates the intentions and status of the perceived perilous female figure, the Siren is demonised and appears to be 'frozen in the masculine gaze… [as a] creature consumed (and controlled) by sex' (Ussher 34). This approach additionally confines the female form within narrow parameters of representation, echoing Silke Binias's assertion (2006) concerning Rossetti's sexual anxieties and how they 'project biased associations onto the painting' (61). In the second stanza, we can glean further insights

into how Rossetti intensifies the sense of sexual anxiety, as well as the role and dynamic of the Siren within the painting, and the fate that awaits the gazer who looks upon her:

> She sinks into the spell: and when full soon
> Her lips move and she soars into her song,
> What creatures of the midmost main shall throng
> In furrowed surf-clouds to the summoning rune:
> Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,
> And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die? (Rossetti, "A Sea-Spell" 9-14)

It is worth noting how Rossetti intricately portrays the actions of the Siren, revealing her movements as both distorted and constrained, which effectively places her in a confining role throughout the poem. The imagery of phrases such as 'she sinks,' 'stoops,' and the doomed sailor who 'hears her cry' conveys a sense of tragic helplessness; the Siren seems to be a victim of her own circumstances, ensnared by the expectations of her role and compelled to continue her enchanting melody for the audience—be it viewer, reader, or listener. The concept of entrapment takes on greater complexity when we consider that, up until the pivotal moment when 'her lips move and she soars into her song,' the Siren appears to lack a genuine voice of her own. Instead, she behaves as though she is a mere puppet, controlled by the unseen strings of the narrative that dictate her actions and choices. The position she occupies in the external setting not only emphasises her vulnerability but also indicates a struggle for autonomy. She appears confined within the limits of both the frame and the poem, which diminishes her individuality and sense of agency. The only sound she produces is a captivating tune designed to ensnare not only men but also other creatures of the sea, as underscored by the evocative lines, 'What creatures of the midmost main shall throng' (lines 10-11). This underscores how Rossetti portrayed the Siren as both a perilous and hypersexual mythological figure/object, as well as a captive of her own allure and representation, in a way that brings to mind John Berger's (2008) claim about the act of looking, stating that 'men act and women appear' (41). The Siren thus finds herself ensnared in an unending cycle of seduction, performance, and voyeurism for the male onlooker. This recalls Heffernan's earlier observation regarding the male voice that seeks to define and control the passive female image, 'that is both alluring and threatening,' as a means to 'overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space' (1). In this ekphrastic work, Rossetti establishes a unique approach to his ekphrastic interpretation of the female form, where the frame serves not only

to contain the Siren's image but also functions as a literal, metaphorical, and poetic device that transcends the limitations of his representation.

II. Gendered Ekphrasis and the Male Gaze in “Lady Lilith” (1868)

Figure 4. “Lady Lilith”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1867). Showing the face of Fanny Cornforth

Figure 5. “Lady Lilith”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1872-73). Showing the face of Alexa Wilding

In the context of this chapter, the observation that women are positioned as ‘being looked at, rather than looking’ highlights a crucial aspect of the ongoing discussion about their restrictive roles, as they are addressed in Rossetti’s inscribed ekphrastic paintings/poems (Mitchell 45). This positioning often renders women as static visual objects of beauty, primarily intended for male observers to gaze upon. Such a dynamic paints women as malevolent and seductive figures, enchanting enough to tempt men into their lethal allure, as was noted with the *femme fatale* model. A prime example of this is found in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's inscribed ekphrastic poem, paired with his painting Lady Lilith (1867) (Fig. 4), which prominently features a vilified yet captivating female figure gazing at herself in a handheld mirror while she combs her hair. Rossetti’s painted image of Lilith emerges as a distinctive representation of the *femme fatale* archetype, encapsulating the literary theme of the alluring yet perilous woman—an idea that Rossetti also explored in his artwork, intricately inscribed within the frame of his painting. Much like his portrayal of the Siren in “A Sea-Spell,” Rossetti evokes a specific male anxiety tied to the depiction of dangerous female figures in both the painting and the poem. In Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith*, the depiction of

Lilith emphasises the gendered gaze, as the female figure turns away from the viewer and becomes captivated by her own reflection. This creates a disruption in the typical portrayal of the female figure, as the viewer adopts a distinctly intrusive gaze while observing Lilith in her intimate setting, where she is focused solely on herself, oblivious to the observer. The inversion of her gaze—shifting from the viewer to her own reflection—echoes Lucinda Ireson's (2013) observation about the female form in art: that her gaze becomes less menacing when directed towards 'her own image' (124). From a psychological perspective, positioning the female figure in the painting to gaze at herself creates a significant dynamic for the viewer. This intentional gaze allows spectators to appreciate her beauty and presence without feeling challenged or threatened by the possibility of 'female transgression'—the risks associated with being scrutinised or judged by an active female gaze (Ireson 130). Adopting a Freudian perspective on the female castration complex offers insight into power dynamics between genders. At its core, this concept highlights the perceived threat that the male feels from the perceived lack of the threatening female genitalia, stemming mainly from the female gaze, where Freud asserts, 'Probably no male human being is spared the horror of castration at the sight of the female genitals' (198). In this context, the manifestation of the female gaze is seen as inherently threatening, implying a capacity to 'castrate' or diminish the male's sense of self and authority. As Stephen Heath (1978) observed, '[i]f the woman looks…castration is in the air; the Medusa head is not far off' (192). This statement references the Medusa complex, which intertwines with the notion of the formidable and castrating female, characterised by her snake hair and gaze that turns men to stone upon their sight of her. In response to this perceived threat, males frequently attempt to assert control by redirecting the female's attention away from themselves. This redirection is evident in Rossetti's "Lady Lilith."

Rossetti began painting *Lady Lilith* in 1863 and finished painting it in 1867, where it represents a figure of a woman who appears to be in another enigmatic setting that could be seen as a bedroom with elements that could be from exterior or indoor settings, where he referred to it as a 'Toilette picture' due to its intimate setting (Rossetti 188). The painting was described by H.C. Marillier (1899):

> She is the incarnation of the world and the flesh, with all sorts of latent suggestions of the third element. A beautiful woman, splendidly and voluptuously formed, is leaning back on a couch combing her long, fair hair while, with cold

> dispassionateness, she surveys her features in a hand mirror. She is not only the Lilith of Adam, the Lilith who in "Eden Bower" makes that weird compact with the serpent, but the Lilith of all time, lovely but loveless. (132)

In Jewish folklore, Lilith is historically represented as Adam's first wife, who was often associated with the iconography of being depicted as a she-devil and temptress who preyed on men. Fulfilling a type of male fantasy, the trope of the seductress as the source of evil and sexual desires for the enthralled male has many similarities to the Medusa figure from ancient Greek mythology. The depiction of the serpent alongside Lilith evokes the association that snakes have with the figure of Medusa. In this imagery, the snakes represent Medusa's power to petrify those who gaze upon her, compelling them to view her only through a mirror or reflection. Through the incorporation of inscriptive elements on the frame, Rossetti seems to utilise the boundaries of the frame and the textual framing as a mechanism to engage with the figure of Lilith. This arrangement places her within a context for the male gaze to observe her without her returning the gaze, invoking Mitchell's concept of the Medusa figure as a menacing female '*other'*, where she 'must be seen through the mediation of mirrors... if she were actually beheld by the poet, he could not speak or write' (21). In the painting, Lilith is depicted through ekphrasis, portrayed in a state of self-absorption as her gaze drifts away from the viewer, seemingly entranced in her own world. While this representation does not overtly indicate a threatening nature, the sonnet inscribed alongside her conveys a contrasting narrative that underscores her menacing status.

In the original version, the artwork featuring Fanny Cornforth (1835-1909), the mistress of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was created between 1866 and 1868, while the inscribed sonnet was written in 1867. However, Rossetti later replaced her image with that of model Alexa Wilding between 1872 and 1873 (Fig. 5), likely at Leyland's request, who had also collected the previous artwork, *A Sea-Spell*. Wilding appeared in a majority of Rossetti's paintings and sketches, including *La Ghirlandata* (1873), *Sibylla Palmifera* (1870), and *Veronica Veronese* (1872), among others. Jan Marsh (1998) highlighted that, in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, women played a significant role in their paintings and aesthetic vision. However, she argues that 'while their faces are seen everywhere—in oil paintings, watercolours, drawings—their voices are never heard' (1). She goes on to claim that the women in Pre-Raphaelite paintings were portrayed as 'silent, enigmatic, and passive figures, not individuals engaged in activity but objects for the painter and spectator to gaze upon'

(Marsh 1). This demonstrates how artists such as Rossetti manipulated their models to enhance the visual appeal of their paintings, even going so far as to exchange one model's face for another to create a more sensual and mysterious effect, as seen in Rossetti's work, *Lady Lilith*. Although Rossetti was captivated by Wilding's beauty and allure, he wrote to his mother in 1873 that he found her dull and uninteresting, viewing her primarily as a subject for his art. He described her as a 'really good-natured creature—fit company for anyone and quite ladylike, only not gifted or amusing. Thus she might bore you at meals & so on (for one cannot put her in a cupboard) …' (Rossetti 95). The mention of being unable to 'put her in a cupboard' reveals an ironic juxtaposition between how he perceived Wilding and how he depicted his female figures in his inscribed ekphrastic paintings, as if they are confined within the boundaries of his paintings, like the cupboard he references in his letter. This contrast highlights the dynamic between Rossetti and the female figures he depicted in his paintings, as well as his manipulation of their representation to demonstrate his control over the portrayal of female subjects. By using the features of the female figure to emphasise Lilith's sexualisation, Rossetti's substitution of Cornforth's face for Wilding's highlights how he replaces the female figure in his paintings with the one he, and other male viewers, prefer to see and enjoy observing. The sonnet inscribed onto the frame begins:

> Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told,
> (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
> That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
> And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
> And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
> And, subtly of herself contemplative,
> Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
> Till heart and body and life are in its hold.
> The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
> Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
> And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
> Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (Rossetti, "Lady Lilith" 1-14)

The inscribed ekphrastic poem merges seamlessly with the image of the beautiful woman gazing at herself in the mirror, transforming her reflection and presenting her to the viewer in a demonic guise. This portrayal effectively strips her of autonomy, rendering her femininity as a threatening evil that challenges the male observer. When examining the

influence of the inscribed poem on the image within the frame, it becomes clear that, as with the previously analysed ekphrastic work in this section, the poem associates Lilith with a sinister and duplicitous feminine archetype. The initial three lines characterise Lilith as a deceitful witch, drawing a parallel between her and a serpent whose ‘sweet tongue could deceive’ (line 3). This analogy evokes a Medusa-like quality in Lilith’s depiction, in which her treachery is encapsulated by serpentine imagery, reflecting anxieties surrounding female sexuality in the traditional narrative of Lilith. She is represented as a treacherous witch, imbued with traits of both a snake and a spider—drawing in her victims and ensnaring them with deceit and seduction.

However, fellow poet Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909) critiques this portrayal, asserting that the figure of Lilith in the painting lacks these supposed malevolent characteristics: ‘Of evil desire or evil impulse she has nothing; and nothing of good. She is indifferent, equable, magnetic; she charms and draws down the souls of men by pure force of absorption, in no wise willful or malignant’ (Swinburne 122). Nevertheless, resonating with the 'Eden story' and the 'ancient female divines,' Rossetti asserts that the imagery of snake-like qualities is deeply rooted in the archetype of Lilith within a historical and literary context (Harris 3). In addition to her capacity for manipulation through her speech, her fair hair is depicted as an additional form of destructive, seductive femininity, weaponised against the male observer, as evidenced by the description, ‘enchanted hair was the first gold’ (line 4). The symbol of the hair acts as a ‘symbol of beauty and a means to entrapment’ that Rossetti asserted to the image of Lilith in the painting and the poem, which can also be noted in the final line of the poem, ‘And round his heart one strangling golden hair’ (line 14) (Binias 4). In the following lines, Rossetti further portrays Lilith as a spider patiently awaiting her prey, ensnaring her male victims to come and admire her beauty. At the same time, she bides her time for them to succumb to her entrapping gaze:

> And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
> And, subtly of herself contemplative,
> Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
> Till heart and body and life are in its hold. (lines 5-8)

Notably, her perceived danger influences her reversal of the male gaze. Her stillness, coupled with her ‘contemplative’ demeanour, seems to amplify the sense of powerlessness and lack of control experienced by the male observer when she asserts her independence and engages

in self-reflection, highlighting the male anxiety associated with the way Rossetti interprets her in the poem. Lilith 'draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,' (line 7) mirroring the previously discussed poem, "A Sea-Spell," in which the Siren similarly uses her lute to enchant the male observer to their demise, in a prototype evocative of 'the full-bodied, full-throated, long-haired… version of lethal womanhood' (Allen 6). The concluding six lines of the poem enhance the representation of the femme fatale that Rossetti established, illustrating a connection between the painting and the text, as well as between the poet and the viewer, which becomes intertwined in a disjunction that harmonises the two modes, as evidenced in the following lines:

> The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
> Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
> And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
> Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

The lethal representation of Lilith is emphasised by Rossetti's poignant observation of the flowers that surround her: 'The rose and poppy are her flowers' (line 9). This symbolic choice serves to illuminate the complex duality of her feminine identity. The rose, often associated with love, romance, and deep passion, contrasts sharply with the poppy, a flower linked to toxicity and mortality. The juxtaposition of these two flowers encapsulates the multifaceted nature of Lilith, portraying her as both alluring and dangerous.

By presenting such a polarising image, Rossetti deepens the viewer's and reader's interpretation of Lilith, accentuating both her beauty and her lethal potential. This interplay between love and death enhances the overall representation of Lilith as a seductive and deadly female figure of the femme fatale, as does the interplay between the image and the poem, the observer and the reader. Rossetti's speaker directly addresses the figure of Lilith with the exclamation, 'O Lilith' (line 10), marking a shift in tone and narrative as he enquires about the fate of the men she has ensnared with her 'soft-shed kisses and soft sleep' (line 11). The poem concludes with the speaker reflecting on the gaze of a 'youth's eyes' (line 12), which has fallen prey to the petrifying allure of Lilith. This leads him to succumb to her deadly enchantments that have rendered his 'straight neck bent', conjuring a subtle imagery reminiscent of the castrated phallus (line 13). This imagery evokes Grant Scott's (1994)

observation of the Medusa figure, whose seduction simultaneously promises to immobilise and 'threatens to castrate the enthralled male' through her penetrative gaze (122). Lilith's sensuality parallels the menacing allure of Medusa's serpent-like hair, vividly encapsulated in the line, 'And round his heart one strangling golden hair' (line 14). In this context, the golden hair symbolises not only the grip of her seduction but also the intensity of her gaze, which gradually constricts around the male viewer's perception, effectively transforming him into a helpless victim of her commanding and predatory nature. This dynamic offers a critique of the male gaze itself, suggesting that it attempts to contain the figure of Lilith within the limits of its own perception. By doing so, it seeks to reduce her to a static image, confining her to the rigid boundaries imposed by their interpretations rather than allowing her to exist as a multifaceted and autonomous being. The figure of Medusa serves as a central element in exploring anxieties surrounding female visual power and ekphrastic control. In the artwork, Lilith's introspective gaze, reflected in the mirror, disrupts conventional expectations of spectatorship by rejecting direct visual contact with viewers. This gaze loop echoes Medusa's dangerous visual independence, where the gaze does not grant mastery but threatens it in return. Rossetti's poem, inscribed on the frame, helps convert this visual danger into a narrative warning, portraying Lilith within a fixed interpretive framework through descriptive language. Through Medusa's symbolism, Lady Lilith embodies a traditional ekphrastic logic in which female visual power is both staged and regulated, ultimately confined by the combined authority of image, text, and frame. Rossetti effectively freezes this dynamic within the narrative, framing her as though gazing through a figurative window at a dangerous object or lethal creature. Rossetti's inscribed poem represents a distinct method by which he encapsulates and immobilises the female image within the confines of his frame. He achieves this specifically through his modes of representation and by inverting the narrative of the Lilith figure found in both the painting and the ekphrastic poem. His interpretation transcends the limitations of the frame, as he inscribes his envisioned version of the Lilith figure as a femme fatale, illustrating the male gazer's anxieties about being scrutinised by the female form depicted in the painting. In this way, Rossetti's inscribed frames demonstrate how ekphrasis can function not only as a dialogue between word and image but also as an act of containment. The combination of text and frame highlights the gendered power dynamics of ekphrastic discourse, where the male gaze fixates on the female form, reducing it to material and textual confinement.

III. The Idealised and Enclosed Female Figure in “The Day-Dream” (1880)

Figure 6. “The Day-Dream” Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1880)

Rossetti’s ekphrastic depictions of women often place the female figure within a dreamlike and aestheticised realm, which serves to reinforce the notion of woman as an object of contemplation rather than an active participant in her own narrative. The sense of confinement is further accentuated in his ekphrastic poetry, particularly in works such as *The Day-Dream* (1880). In this piece, as in his earlier ekphrastic creations, Rossetti utilises the technique of inscribing poetry around the painting to exert ekphrastic control. This method enables the male poet-artist to construct a narrative on behalf of the silent female figure, effectively muting her voice and agency. In the case of this particular poem, Rossetti amplifies the theme of detachment from reality and agency by incorporating nature as a symbol of confinement, which ultimately serves to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the female

subject rather than her sense of agency. The poetic inscription that adorns the painting's frame further underscores the dual role of the female figure as both the subject of male authorship and an object of contemplation. She is situated within the confines of Rossetti's artistic, poetic, and visual domain, where the male gaze moulds her identity. This type of literal and metaphorical framing confines her to a specific narrative and restricts her autonomy, transforming her into an object to be deconstructed and interpreted rather than an independent subject with her own story and desires. Through this context, Rossetti's ekphrastic work can be seen as an assertion of artistic and poetic control over the visual representation of the female figure, ensuring that the viewer experiences the image through his prescribed lens.

The Day-Dream (1880) is among Rossetti's final completed works, often regarded as his 'last worthy painting' (Waugh 204). Commissioned by Constantine Alexander Ionides (1833-1900), their extensive correspondence reveals Rossetti's meticulous focus on the painting's quality. He expressed his satisfaction, stating, 'I am glad to say it is far advanced and will be beyond question as good a thing as I ever did' (Qtd. by Doughty 619). Rossetti was also attentive to how the painting should be displayed and exhibited, as indicated by the numerous letters he wrote to Ionides about this matter, in which he remarked:

> The picture itself need not stand more than a foot at very utmost from the ground, to be seen to advantage by a seated person … The picture should slope forward … It should be as far away from the white dado as possible, and the stand not made light but dark. The picture cannot help looking dull otherwise, though it is very brilliant if it gets a chance. It ought to stand with the light from the left of spectator, as here, otherwise it will lose in effect. (Qtd. by Baker and Richardson 2)

Rossetti's observation underscores the importance of the painting's placement on Ionides' walls. This positioning is crucial for him, as it allows him to assert his influence over the relationship between the image and the text, even in terms of the space in which the painting is situated. The painting features his mistress and muse, Jane Morris (1839-1914), in a green dress as she sits in the branches of a sycamore tree, holding a honeysuckle in her limp hand while an open book lies on her lap. As with Rossetti's previously analysed ekphrastic paintings, the central figure of the woman is depicted with a posture that suggests she is bent inward, as if seeking solace amid the encroaching branches that envelop her. This imagery not only evokes a profound sense of tightness and constraint but also highlights her isolation

within the natural world. Her expression is distant, with a gaze that reflects contemplation and a sense of reverie.

Highlighted in Mark Samuels Lasner's text, which centres on the works of the Pre-Raphaelites and other 1890s artists, the description of the painting serves as a key means of capturing the essence of the image. It states: 'This subject is merely one of natural sublimity' (21). This observation highlights the significance of the female figure's positioning within the natural landscape, which enhances the fantastical and idyllic quality of her frozen and 'still' portrayal within the framed space of the painting. The inscribed poem begins:

> The thronged boughs of the shadowy sycamore
> Still bear young leaflets half the summer through;
> From when the robin 'gainst the unhidden blue
> Perched dark, till now, deep in the leafy core,
> The embowered throstle's urgent wood-notes soar
> Through summer silence. Still the leaves come new;
> Yet never rosy-sheathed as those which drew
> Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore.
> Within the branching shade of Reverie
> Dreams even may spring till autumn; yet none be
> Like woman's budding day-dream spirit-fann'd.
> Lo! Tow'rd deep skies, not deeper than her look,
> She dreams; till now on her forgotten book
> Drops the forgotten blossom from her hand. (Rossetti, "The Day-Dream" 1-14)

Caught in a moment of in-betweenness, the present tense skillfully conveys the natural setting, evoking a timeless quality that resonates with the female subject lost in her reverie. The phrases "Still bear young leaflets" (line 2), "Perched dark, till now..." (line 4), and "Still the leaves come new" (line 6) suggest a sense of waiting and anticipation, reflecting the interplay between stillness and movement in both the natural world and the subject's introspective state. This is further emphasised by the cyclical and continuous nature of the dream-like state that Rossetti's speaker seems to evoke in the subsequent lines:

> Yet never rosy-sheathed as those which drew
> Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore.
> Within the branching shade of Reverie (lines 7-9)

Rossetti seems to intertwine the natural element with the concept of unfulfilled desire through the frozen depiction of the female figure in his ekphrastic poem, presenting her as suspended in a moment of contemplation. Consequently, his inscription of the poem serves to amplify

the image of the woman, transforming her into a ‘spectre that incites desire yet can never fulfil its promise, as she remains a virtual image’ (Danahay 384). The portrayal of this woman is intricately woven into the fabric of the poem, where she emerges as a muse who ignites Rossetti's exploration of beauty. In this role, she not only captivates him as ‘the focus of intense subjective desire,’ reflecting his deep personal longing and admiration, but also embodies ‘extraordinary powers and forces,’ suggesting that she possesses an inherent strength and influence that transcends mere physical allure (Henderson 912). This duality underscores the pivotal role of the female figure in Rossetti's ekphrastic vision, highlighting her capacity to evoke profound emotional responses and aesthetic reflections that deepen the sense of unfulfilled desire prevalent in Rossetti's work. Rossetti’s ekphrastic practice primarily focuses on female subjects. At the same time, his works featuring male figures are less frequent and typically lack inscribed poetry. There are some notable instances where he engages with male subjects through ekphrasis, one of which is in his painting *Dante’s Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice* (1856) (Fig. 7), where he depicted the Italian poet Dante Alighieri witnessing the death of his beloved Beatrice, drawing inspiration from Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*. While the painting does not feature inscribed poetry, it embodies an ekphrastic approach by visually interpreting a literary source centred on a male protagonist.

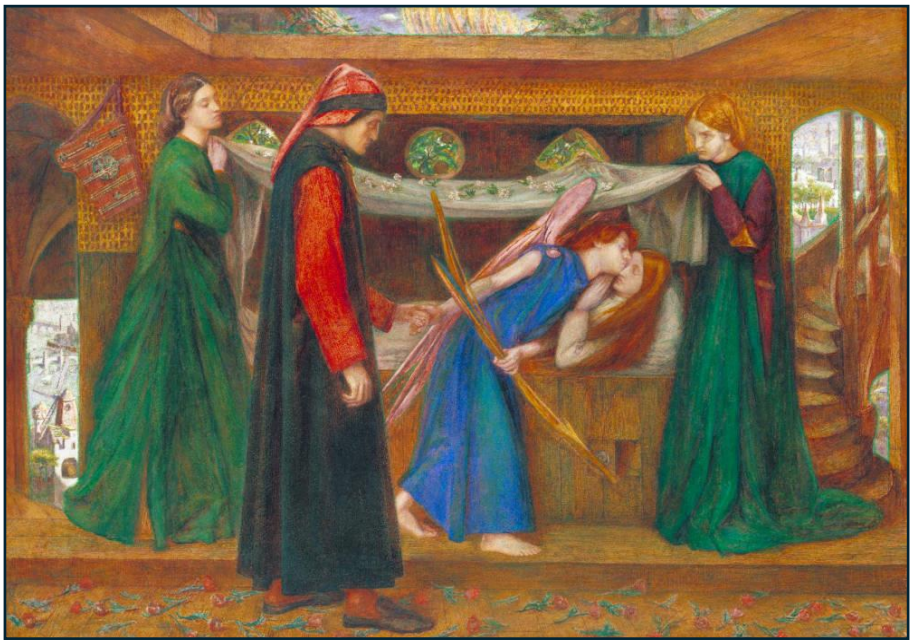

Figure 7. “Dante Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1856)

In the concluding lines of “The Day-Dream”, Rossetti positions the female figure as a central object of admiration. During her moment of introspection—when her gaze diverts from the observer—she seemingly embodies a powerful sense of agency and allure. This evocative imagery underscores her capacity to captivate and maintain an enduring presence without directly engaging with the viewer. This theme resonates profoundly throughout Rossetti's oeuvre and is articulated with precision in these lines:

> Dreams even may spring till autumn; yet none be
> Like woman’s budding day-dream spirit-fann’d. (lines 10-11)

Rossetti's assertion that a woman's gaze and power eclipse even that of nature reveals a profound understanding of the subject in this painting, framing her as a silent muse. This female figure holds extraordinary aesthetic significance for him, exemplified by her almost ethereal quality described as "spirit-fann'd" (line 11). Such a portrayal intensifies the sense of unease surrounding her direct gaze, an anxiety that echoes in the final lines of the poem:

> Lo! Tow’rd deep skies, not deeper than her look,
> She dreams; till now on her forgotten book
> Drops the forgotten blossom from her hand. (line 12-14)

In these lines, Rossetti illustrates the female figure’s gaze as more profound than the skies themselves, a poetic elevation of her presence. However, he swiftly reasserts his ekphrastic control by guiding her back into a realm of dreaming, ‘She dreams’ (line 13), suggesting that her thoughts and reflections are subsumed within the contemplations of his interpretation rather than being autonomous. This dynamic illuminates how Rossetti essentially occupies the role of a daydreamer, envisioning the female figure within the confines of his imagination. His use of ekphrastic control not only shapes her portrayal but also reflects his internal state, revealing his desire to capture her essence while simultaneously confining her within the boundaries of his artistic vision and representation, exemplified as ‘being staged enactments’ of the masculine gazer’s desire (Danahay 380). Through this interplay, Rossetti intricately crafts a narrative that explores the tension between admiration and possession, highlighting the complexities of ekphrastic control.

To conclude this chapter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s use of inscribed ekphrasis in “A Sea-Spell,” “Lady Lilith,” and “The Day-Dream” exemplifies his artistic and poetic assertion of control over the female figure. By integrating poetry directly onto the frames of his

paintings, Rossetti creates a double enclosure- a visual and textual structure that restricts the female subject within a prescribed interpretation. The interplay between text and image ensures that the viewer approaches these women through Rossetti's poetic lens, reinforcing their roles as aestheticised, dreamlike, or fatal figures rather than autonomous subjects. Each of these works demonstrates Rossetti's tendency to frame women within mythic or symbolic archetypes. "A Sea-Spell" transforms the female figure into a siren, rendering her both alluring and dangerous, yet fundamentally passive- a conduit for male desire rather than an agent of her own narrative. "Lady Lilith" reimagines the biblical demoness through a Pre-Raphaelite lens, emphasising her beauty and vanity while subtly containing her power within Rossetti's controlled aesthetic vision. "The Day-Dream", by contrast, offers a more contemplative, melancholic female figure, but whose agency is similarly curtailed by an environment that reinforces her inwardness and passivity. In each case, Rossetti's poetic inscriptions act as authoritative interpretations that dictate how the female figure *should* be understood, denying the possibility of alternative readings. Rossetti's inscribed ekphrasis highlights Victorian concerns about gender roles, authorship, and artistic authority. His practice of framing paintings with poetry emulates Victorian efforts to shape and restrict the female figure within strict ideological limits, portraying women as muses, seductresses, or idealised dreamers. His method of combining word and image ultimately enacts a form of painterly and poetic ventriloquism, where the female figure is both the subject of representation and the object of artistic possession. This analysis of Rossetti's inscribed ekphrastic strategies provides a crucial foundation for understanding how a selection of nineteenth-century women poets resisted, reworked, and reclaimed ekphrasis as a space for female agency. By moving from Rossetti's inscribed frames, which confine and control, to the fluid, dynamic ekphrasis of women poets, this thesis traces a trajectory from framing to unframing, from confinement to re-voicing, demonstrating how feminist ekphrasis in the nineteenth century emerged in direct response to the very artistic and poetic structures that sought to enclose the female figure.

Chapter Two

From Object to Subject: Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1839) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

As established in Chapter One, an analysis of a selection of Rossetti's inscribed ekphrastic poems shows that the inscriptions on the frames of his paintings create a liminal space between text and image. This effectively guides and shapes the interpretation of the female form depicted within the artwork. These inscriptions often reinforce the idealised or mythical femininity portrayed in the paintings, confining the female figure within a predetermined aesthetic framework. The inscribed frames act as both a boundary that contains his ekphrastic response and a trap that ensnares the women represented within, offering a compelling perspective on the constraints of the male gaze upon the feminine figure. This creates a type of ekphrastic authority over the female image. However, this textual framing paradoxically emphasises the act of representation itself, allowing for the possibility of contested meanings and reinterpretations. Although Rossetti's inscribed works reinforce the containment of the female figure within the visual realm, women poets of the early nineteenth century, such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), were already engaging with and transforming ekphrastic conventions before Rossetti, challenging the passive objectification of women in visual art. Their poetry repositions the female figure as an active presence, disrupting the traditional ekphrastic gaze that sought to fix women within an aesthetic or narrative frame. In this context, ekphrasis emerges as a potent vehicle for representing the often-silenced female figure, allowing women poets to reclaim and amplify their voice and presence in both art and literature. These initial interactions with ekphrasis set the stage for subsequent developments, reinforcing the view that Rossetti's work is part of a wider movement influenced by women poets who redefined the genre before and during his time.

The tradition of poetic ekphrasis has notably lacked female representation. Scholarship on women's ekphrastic poetry, especially feminist ekphrastic poetics, remains relatively limited, though key studies lay important groundwork for this thesis. Jill Ehnenn's research on Michael Field has been particularly influential, highlighting how women's ekphrastic writing emphasises touch, closeness, and emotional connection to challenge detached visual mastery, especially through the senses of Sight and Song. Sharon Smulder's

essay “Pretexts for Revision in Alice Meynell’s ‘The Shepherdess’” (2000) provides a detailed analysis of Meynell’s reimagining of ekphrastic poetry, showing how poetic response can serve as a space for aesthetic reconsideration rather than mere description. Recently, Heather Bozant Witcher’s Victorian Women Poets (2002) situates women’s poetry within broader cultural contexts, uncovering lesser-known poets and emphasising their innovative approaches and their interactions with visual and material culture. Together, these works underscore women poets’ active challenge to traditional aesthetic authority and norms. They also raise questions about cross-generational themes, intermedial relationships, and specific tactics women poets used to redefine ekphrasis as a feminist form, issues that this thesis aims to explore. Scholars have often overlooked the contributions of women poets to this genre, particularly before the twentieth century. Existing studies on women’s ekphrastic poetry, especially feminist ekphrastic poetics, are limited. Works such as Jill Ehnenn’s analysis of Michael Field and haptic ekphrasis, Sharon Smulders’ “Pretexts for Revision in Alice Meynell’s ‘The Shepherdess’” (2000), and Heather Bozant Witcher’s *Victorian Women Poets* (2022), provide valuable insights into nineteenth-century women’s poetry.

Nonetheless, they rarely explore the intersection of a feminist perspective with the ekphrastic techniques employed by female poets of that period. Recognising this issue not only reshapes our understanding of ekphrasis in the nineteenth century but also highlights the contributions of women poets in reinterpreting the female figure beyond the constraints of male-dominated artistic traditions.

Isobel Armstrong (1996) asserted that various early nineteenth-century women poets wrote poetry as a way to examine and interrogate their own representation of the feminine aesthetic in a way that ‘enabled the woman poet to revolutionise it from within, by using [feminine poetics] to explore the way a female subject comes into being’ (Armstrong 324). By defining and creating the space between the visual and the verbal, the act of ekphrasis generates a new perspective that aligns between the two media while also maintaining the spectator’s position. In that regard, according to James Heffernan’s (1993) significant examination of ekphrasis, he argues that the relationship between the visual and the verbal media has an opposed and almost violent resistance that is ‘fought on the field of language itself’ (Heffernan 7). On the other hand, contemporary theorist Anne Keefe (2011) dismissed the idea of a hypothetical battlefield between visual and verbal representation in ekphrasis.

She argues that the *paragonal* status of ekphrasis has a broader function beyond mere resistance. This *paragonal* tradition, dating back to antiquity, revolves around the interplay between visual art and the written word, highlighting the distinct characteristics of both media (Kennedy and Meek 43). Keefe suggests that the ekphrastic space is both flexible and 'fluid,' allowing for various interpretations and perspectives for the spectator (135). When the reader is immersed in the ekphrastic text, particularly ekphrastic poetry, they are transported to a textual space where the artwork described in the poem and its language come alive in their mind through the poet's interpretation of the imagery, which they have seen and rewritten into a poem. The reader's imagination is thus invited to join the conversation between the poem and the artwork, creating a dynamic ekphrastic experience. This interplay, also known as an 'ekphrastic encounter,' between the reader's imagination, the poem's language, and the artwork evoked by the poem generates a new ekphrastic space within the bounds of the poem and the poetic interpretation (Kennedy and Meek 136). Just as poets and artists like Rossetti used this ekphrastic space to take hold of the represented female image and mould it into their vision of feminine aesthetic, women poets have also used this 'ekphrastic encounter' or ekphrastic space to subvert and interrogate the represented image of the female subject in ekphrastic poetry. The contemporary theory of feminist ekphrasis plays a significant role in analysing the works of nineteenth-century women poets in this chapter and the following chapters of this thesis. It sets the groundwork for the various ways in which the women poets have utilised the ekphrastic technique in their poetry. Contemporary theorist Elizabeth Loizeaux (2012) defines feminist ekphrasis as a mode that 'recognises that a woman's place as a viewer is established within, beside, or in the face of a male-dominated culture, but that the patterns of power and value implicit in a tradition of male artists and viewers can be exposed, used, resisted and rewritten' (Loizeaux 81). Loizeaux's commentary explores the role of women as viewers within an ekphrastic context, focusing on how they interpret and represent the works of male artists. This engagement allows women to interact with the depicted images through their own ekphrastic poetry, creating a space where they can safely challenge and offer alternative perspectives. In doing so, they challenge the expectations of the masculine gaze within a space they have crafted for themselves, effectively bridging the divide between imagery and poetry, while also addressing the tensions between their experiences and contemporary social or political issues.

Shifting the focus from contemporary ekphrastic techniques to those used by women poets in the early nineteenth century reveals that their identity as women writers restricted them to a feminine sphere. This limitation often overshadowed the quality of their literature, particularly their poetry, as society focused more on their gender than on their literary contributions. Consequently, their work was frequently overlooked in a predominantly male-dominated literary landscape. The restricted roles available to women writers during the early nineteenth century significantly impeded their recognition as independent creative forces. Society often relegated women poets to the status of "poetess," a term that carried connotations of inferiority compared to their male counterparts, who were referred to as "poets". This distinction not only reflects the cultural biases of the era but also illustrates a broader, deeply entrenched gender divide that affected the creative spaces available to both men and women. Within an ekphrastic poetic context, the gendered sphere of the woman poet[ess] is also exemplified through the concept of the "Poetess Tradition" that refers to an established 'feminine space within the Victorian literary marketplace' (Brown 184). Despite these systemic barriers, women poets found ways to share their voices and perspectives. Armstrong argues: 'It is probably no exaggeration to say that an account of women's writing as occupying a particular sphere of influence, and as working inside defined moral and religious conventions, helped make women's poetry and the 'poetess'... respected in the nineteenth century as they never have been since.' (125). The existence of a distinct feminine sphere or space that was reserved for women's writing in the early nineteenth century was presented as 'separate, or "other", to serious and intellectual scholarly pursuits' of their time (Jenner 3). The rise of local newspapers, literary periodicals, and magazines during the mid-nineteenth century provided new avenues for publication and outreach. These platforms enabled women poets to publish their work and reach broader audiences, a crucial step toward gaining recognition in a male-dominated literary landscape, as seen in publications such as the *Forget-Me-Not*, *Literary Souvenir*, and *Keepsake*, among others. Nevertheless, the legacy of these barriers continues to influence the understanding and appreciation of women's contributions to the ekphrastic tradition, where the 'Voice of the poetess... took the form of a self-consciously feminine self-staging in verse', further exemplifying the distinct voice of the woman poet within the poetic ekphrastic context (Brown 184). In 1812, Isaac Disraeli illustrated the patriarchal view of the female writer earlier in the century, stating: 'Of all the sorrows in which the female character may participate, there are few more affecting than that

of an Authoress', or in this case, the "poetess" (48). However, with the cultural, technological, and political changes that occurred in the following years, the works of women poets were making an illustrious rise. Notably, the works of Landon and Barrett Browning exemplify this trend, as they harnessed the ekphrastic tradition to articulate their perspectives, establishing a distinctive voice for women within the early Victorian period that illustrated how women poets readapted and altered the ekphrastic tradition in their own unique way.

I. Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1839)

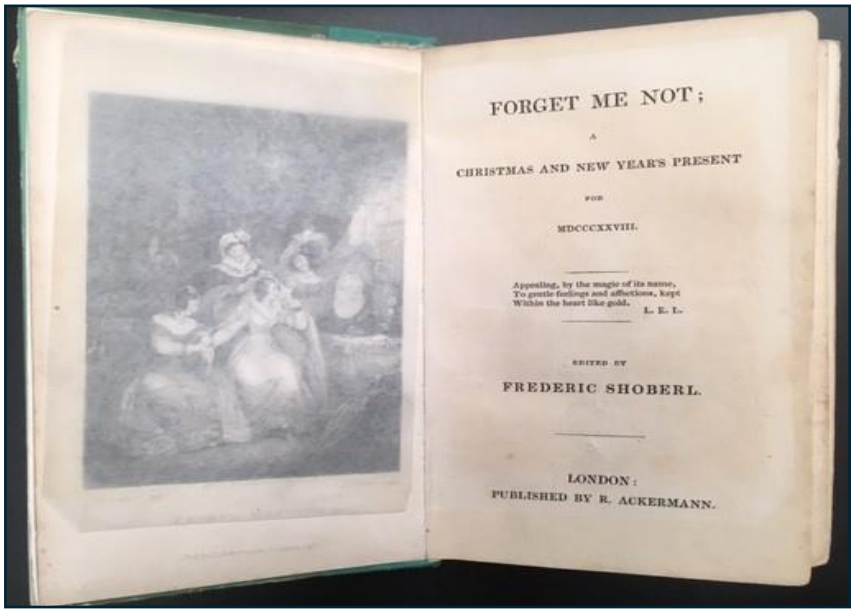

Figure 8. "The Bridal Morning," painted by J. Stephanoff,
engraved by E. Finden, "Forget Me Not" (1828)

The emergence of the printing press, along with the availability of newspapers, magazines, and gift annuals at accessible prices, led to a significant increase in poetry readership during the early Victorian period. Between the 1820s and the 1850s, the rise in popularity of gift annuals and magazines played a pivotal role in fostering a vibrant pictorial and literary marketplace. The printed pages of these elaborately decorated annual gift books, crafted as Christmas presents, created a distinct literary atmosphere, featuring a wide variety of works, including dramatic poems, travelogues, and captivating short stories. Each volume was thoughtfully curated to include picturesque engravings, which often illustrated themes of nature, such as serene landscapes, or celebrated the beauty of women. These artworks not only enhanced the visual appeal of the texts but also served to reinforce the central themes explored within the accompanying poems and narratives. These publications became notable for their unique presentation of ekphrastic content, where poems were strategically placed alongside engraved images on adjacent pages. This design not only enhances the reader's experience but also illustrates the distinct manner in which writers of the annuals utilised the ekphrastic technique to create a dialogue between text and image. Like Rossetti's inscribed frames, the layout of these annuals functions as a specialised ekphrastic space or container. This format allows for a more profound representation of the poets' creative expressions,

inviting readers to engage with the content on multiple levels. Among the diverse voices featured in these publications, Letitia Elizabeth Landon stands out for her compelling ekphrastic poetry. By exploring a selection of Landon's ekphrastic poems within the framework of gift annuals, we can uncover the nuanced ways in which her poetry interacts with visual art. Her verse not only responds to the imagery presented but also invites readers to reflect on the emotional and thematic connections between the written word and the visual landscape. This examination highlights how Landon's ekphrastic technique transcends mere description, evolving into a rich exploration of perception, imagination, and artistic interplay.

This trend persisted for approximately thirty years, shaping the gender dynamics between poetry and visual imagery through the combined format of gift annuals. However, the literary value of these annuals prompted much debate, with numerous critics and writers deeming them 'little more than pretty baubles—handsomely designed and illustrated but notoriously devoid of serious literary merit' (Rappoport 444). Robert Southey (1828), a contributor to the annuals, referred to them as 'picture books for grown children,' while poet Alfred Tennyson described them as 'vapid books' (Qtd. by Cruthven 3). Many critics initially ridiculed these annuals, which were primarily aimed at a female audience, and often dismissed the works produced by their female poets. Writer William Thackeray (1837) famously critiqued the works of female writers in the gift annuals and mocked the literary style and the attached engraving image of the artworks associated with the poems, saying:

> Miss Landon, Miss Mitford, or my Lady Blessington, writes a song upon the opposite page [of an engraving], about water-lily, chilly, stilly, shivering beside a streamlet, plighted, blighted, love-benighted, falsehood sharper than a gimlet, lost affection, recollection, cut connexion, tears in torrents, true-love token, spoken, broken, sighing, dying, a girl of Florence; and so on. The poetry is quite worthy of the picture, and a little sham sentiment is employed to illustrate a little sham art (758).

During the early Victorian period, the poetry produced by women was frequently dismissed as a mere 'sham,' reflecting a broader societal bias that deemed it too 'feminine' and 'inferior' when measured against the works of their male peers (Thackeray 758). This critical perception undermined the artistic contributions of women poets and reinforced a significant divide in the representation of ekphrastic poetry. The prevailing attitudes of the time further illustrated the profound impact of patriarchal expectations, which were not only imposed on the female image but also shaped the identity and output of women poets. These women were

often pressured to conform to the strict ideals of femininity that adhered to the domestic ideology, emphasising the roles centred around home and family. This limited framework dictated what was considered 'proper' for women, ultimately stifling their creative expression and reinforcing gendered stereotypes within literary discourse (Jenner 11). Landon stepped out of these constraints in her own way, asserting her status as a "Byron of our Poetesses" (Qtd. by Blain 81). Landon appears to have been actively fostering a distinctive female voice that transcends traditional poetic boundaries in a distinctly '(proto)feminist way' (Craciun 204). By embracing her identity as a 'poetess,' she skillfully navigates the balance between subversion and imitation. This approach allows her perspective to emerge, contributing to the early feminist voices that preceded the first-wave feminist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. It highlights how Landon challenged the constraints imposed by patriarchy. This approach not only challenges the conventional roles assigned to female poets of her time but also enables her to infuse her own voice into her work, marking her as a significant proto-feminist figure in the early nineteenth-century literary landscape. When examining Landon's poetry, including her ekphrastic poetry, it is essential to recognise that her style, while seemingly simple, masks a depth of complex meaning beneath its surface.

Critics such as Isobel Armstrong (1995) highlight that Landon's poetry has a notably 'deceptive' quality, enabling women poets of the nineteenth century, including Landon herself, to express multiple layers of meaning (13). Similarly, Joseph McMullen (2009) argues that Landon, through her literary persona L.E.L., manages to both challenge and conform to the boundaries typically imposed on the poetess. This duality underscores Landon's independence as a writer who sought to support herself and her family by producing poetry that addressed mainstream topics like 'romance, sensuality, and vicariousness' (6). McMullen also emphasises Landon's use of 'mistranslation and retranslation' as poetic techniques in her work. This theory can be applied to examine the ways Landon engages with the engravings in her ekphrastic poems. He defines this concept by stating that 'L.E.L.'s language is one of translation of the self and all women into words,' which suggests that Landon's poetic language and style convey deeper and more profound meanings that elevate the female voice (McMullen 73). Even from an ekphrastic perspective, it seems that she employs mistranslation to adapt language and concepts, ultimately 'creating

her own language' (McMullen 75). Consequently, Landon seems to employ her unique poetic voice even in her ekphrastic poetry, modifying and deepening the meanings of the engravings and enhancing her visual interpretation of the images.

1. “The Bridal Morning” 1828:

Figure 9. “The Bridal Morning”, J. Stephanoff and E. Finden, “Ladies’ Literary Gazette” (1827)

The poem begins:

Thy bridal morning? They are now
The last braid of thy tresses wreathing;
The last white pearl is on thy brow,
The orange flower’s beside thee breathing.

Why, thou art queen-like; that rich zone,
The satin’s snowy folds confining,
Is bright with every Indian stone
Whose hues have caught the day-break shining.

And thou art fair—O, very fair!
And suitest well thy gay adorning;
Thy clear brow and thy sunny hair,
Are they not beautiful as morning?

But thou art yet less fair than pale—
Pale!—it is but a bride’s sweet sorrow;
Fling over her the silver veil—

That cheek will be more bright to-morrow.

No more, no more!—the rose hath said
Farewell to that pale cheek for ever;
Those gems may cast a meteor red
Upon that face, but the heart never.

Those eyes have tears they may not weep,
Those lips words never to be spoken:
As weak as frail, thou canst not keep,
Nor yet forget, vows thou hast broken.

Her eye is on the mirror fixed,
Yet sees she not on what she gazes;
The past has with the present mixed,
Till both seem one in memory's mazes.

That long past hour—what doth it here,
The slumbering pulses to awaken?
His image—how can that be dear?—
His image whom thou hast forsaken?

What does it here?—that cypress grove,
That hour of moonlight and of dreaming;
That one fond dream of early love,
Half of life's worldliness redeeming?

The curl he took, the ring he gave—
The vow that bound your hearts together!
O froth, such is on ocean's wave!
O change, such is in April weather!

And has that fickle heart been won
By baubles such as those around thee?
This chain of gold—is this the one
In which thy newer love has bound thee?

Go, queen it in the lightest hall;
Be there the gayest and the brightest:
Soon words were little to recall
What now in vanity thou slightest.

Go, glittering slave! Go, school thy brow:
Henceforth thy heart must still its beating;
Go forth—thy lord awaits thy vow—
Thy lover! Shrinkest thou from such meeting?

In vain! Thine early dream is past,
Thy heart is sold—there are its fetters:--
Love's flowery contract did not last;
This may—'tis writ in golden letters.

O shame, that every this should be!
Gold thus o'er love and faith prevailing!
Great curse! Where shall we fly from thee,
When even woman's faith is failing? (Landon, "Bridal Morning" 1-60)

In line with the arguments put forth by Jerome McGann and Daniel Reiss (1997), who describe Landon's commodified poetic writing on beauty and aesthetics, particularly in relation to female beauty, as positioning her as a 'poet of disenchantments' who 'executes a series of disillusions,' I suggest that Landon uses the ekphrastic technique of engravings alongside her poems to explore the theme of *disillusionment* (63). According to McGann and Reiss, Landon's ekphrastic dynamic between the picture in the annual and her ekphrastic poem creates an 'odd and disturbing disjunction between the events elaborated in the poem and the scene rendered in the picture… The final work is therefore extremely disorienting, even a touch surreal' (167). This 'odd and disturbing' disconnect between the image and the words in Landon's poem shows she is moving beyond simply describing the image. She is shifting into disillusionment, where her ekphrastic approach involves creating a disconnect and disruption between the visual and her poetic interpretation. Instead of following the visual depiction, she offers her own interpretation and understanding of the female figure in the image. Regarding the commercialisation of gift annuals, these publications were marketed to a distinctly female audience and attained a popularity that financially supported Landon and her family. Her contributions to gift books reflected the literary market's shift toward accommodating a growing middle-class female readership. This shift transformed the gift annual into a 'gift of exchange' and gradually established it as a 'site for women's (often subversive) work' (Rappoport 443). It is essential to analyse Landon's ekphrastic techniques and consider how they interact with the prevailing expectations of women's poetry, which was often perceived as primarily sentimental. Additionally, it is crucial to explore how she leverages this sentimentality to subvert the genre within an ekphrastic framework. In this chapter, I argue that Landon's two ekphrastic poems challenge the traditional view of the beautiful, motionless female figure depicted in the accompanying engravings. While her ekphrastic work may initially seem to adhere to the conventional practice of representing and

objectifying the female subject, I believe she is strategically using that tradition to subvert it. This approach allows her to infuse a more feminist perspective that subtly emerges within her seemingly traditional ekphrastic poems. This aligns with Loizeaux's view of the ekphrastic dynamic from a feminist perspective, where the ekphrastic poem serves not only to highlight the differences between the female and male gaze but also to expose their similarities. This approach aims to 'disturb the very terms of antagonistic dualism on which... patriarchal culture is founded' (103). Through her ekphrastic poems, Landon highlights the limitations placed on female imagery, showing how such representations reduce women to mere beautiful and static visual spectacles. This is a recurring theme in a selection of her ekphrastic poems that centre on a female figure.

Alongside the engraving (Fig. 8), the ekphrastic poem "The Bridal Morning" establishes a dynamic interaction between the image and the figures in the artwork, guiding the reader's focus to both the poem and the visual piece. Inspired by the portrayal of a young bride preparing for marriage, the poem captures a pivotal moment before a woman becomes a wife, pausing the scene at a moment of change. Landon engages with the idea of moving away from framing female subjects within an ekphrastic context by subtly resisting the confinement of women to the male gaze and the control often associated with ekphrasis. Although her poem seems to adhere to the conventions of aestheticised femininity, it also complicates and challenges the notion that women can be fully contained within ekphrastic representations. The poem begins by establishing a distinct painterly composition, highlighting static details surrounding the female figure. This approach directs the reader's attention to the female subject's physical attributes, as illustrated in the first stanza:

> Thy bridal morning? They are now
> The last braid of thy tresses wreathing;
> The last white pearl is on thy brow,
> The orange flower's beside thee breathing. (line 1-4)

The poem initially seems to engage in a traditional ekphrastic portrayal of the bride's preparation for her wedding, as evidenced by the lines, "The last braid of thy tresses wreathing; / The last white pearl is on thy brow" (lines 2-3). The figure appears to be depicted as if she is an artwork herself—an adorned, aestheticised object whose beauty is framed by jewels, silk, and the visual trappings of wealth and status. The language mirrors the descriptive quality of a painted portrait, resembling the style of the Pre-Raphaelites,

particularly in their portrayals of women in art. However, beneath this surface description, it appears that Landon's ekphrasis resists the static, controlled ideal of bridal beauty by revealing an emotional and psychological reality that contradicts the external image. There also lies a subtle yet pervasive sense of finality and end, as seen in the phrases "The last braid" and "The last white pearl", where the word "last" in both lines evokes the sense of finality and stasis. In the second stanza, Landon shifts her focus to address the woman depicted in the accompanying engraving directly. This emphasis on the bride's beauty and adornment also introduces a theme of tension and resistance, where it appears that Landon 'undermines the notion of marital happiness' in her ekphrastic poems, as Rappaport mentions (450).

Additionally, the speaker muses, "Why, thou art queen-like; that rich zone, / The satin's snowy folds confining" (lines 5-6). This phrase underscores the notion of confinement that accompanies the transitional moment that the female figure is experiencing in the engraving, where the wedding gowns' "satin snowy folds" hold the woman in their confines. By freezing this pivotal moment in time, Landon highlights the inner conflict experienced by the bride, revealing the dissonance between her outward appearance in the image and the internal emotions she seems to be experiencing. This tension represents a departure from traditional ekphrastic control, as Landon destabilises the image by exposing an emotional struggle and anxiety that is not immediately visible in the image. The bride's beauty is recontextualised and undermined to reflect the physical effects of her evident distress; her pallor overshadows her elegance: "But thou art yet less fair than pale—/ Pale! —it is but a bride's sweet sorrow" (line 13-14). The Victorian feminine ideal, which emphasised paleness and fragility, was a prominent standard of beauty in nineteenth-century art and literature. This ideal was characterised by 'clear, smooth, soft, nearly transparent skin that was pale in colour—possessing an almost brilliant whiteness' (Day 81). However, Landon employs this notion of beauty in a subversive way. In her work, the bride's pallor is not merely a sign of delicacy; instead, it reflects suppressed grief and regret. This contrast emphasises the bride's static beauty in the image while hinting at an internal narrative that remains hidden beneath the surface. The figure of the bride is given her own inner emotional and psychological senses, which allows for a space to question and portray the dissonance that steps away from the framed image and takes the reader to a space beyond the visual domain.

In the seventh stanza, Landon uses the imagery of mirrors to highlight the fragmentation of the self as it is experienced by the female subject in the image:

> Her eye is on the mirror fixed,
> Yet sees she not on what she gazes;
> The past has with the present mixed,
> Till both seem on in memory's mazes. (lines 25-28)

Incorporating the mirror motif in an ekphrastic context shows how both the engraving and the poem engage with the division and fragmentation of the female identity. The woman depicted in the image appears to be trapped within a static representation, which undermines her feminine identity in relation to societal expectations. Although she gazes into a mirror, she does not truly see herself, intensifying the sense of dissolution and disconnection. This is evident in the line: "Her eye is on the mirror fixed, / Yet sees not on what she gazes" (lines 25-26). The mirror serves as a 'catalyst for introspection,' allowing the figure in both the image and the poem to engage in an ekphrastic dialogue (Ireson 207). This dialogue is emphasised by the voice within the ekphrastic poem, highlighting the mirror as a tool that empowers the female subject to move beyond traditional visual conventions. Instead of merely being an object to be viewed, the bride in this context strives to step away from her role as a visual object, redirecting the gaze inward toward herself. Looking at the engraving, it can be seen that the women surrounding the bride all appear to have their focus directly on her in the centre of the image, whereas the bride herself is looking at a mirror across from her, where her reflection appears distorted, revealing a deeper internal meaning hidden beneath the surface of the image of the bejewelled bride.

Landon critically examines the commodification of the bride depicted in the engraving, highlighting that her love and affection were gained through superficial gifts such as "baubles," "chains of gold," and "fetters." This choice of language exposes the transactional aspects of the bride's situation, where the image of the bride is both commodified and used as a way to challenge that very commodification. By employing direct and confrontational language, Landon effectively underscores the ways in which her poem challenges the conventional boundaries of ekphrasis. Instead of merely providing a descriptive account of the engraving, she shifts her focus to engage directly with the figure of the bride. In doing so, she emphasises the theme of disillusionment, which serves as a critical lens through which the reader can explore the emotional complexities surrounding

the bride's experience. This narrative elevation allows Landon to weave a more decadent, more intricate tale outside of the engraving, transforming the poem into an exploration that transcends the limitations of the original image. She does this by bringing attention to the materiality of the bride in the image, as she directly asks the question, “And has that fickle heart been won / By baubles such as those around thee?” (lines 41-42), illustrating the narrative of a woman interested in her own financial gains outside of the sentimental perspective. Landon’s confrontational language aims to expose the economic and social constraints imposed on the woman, as depicted in the engraving. The lines, “Love’s flowery contract did not last; / This may -- ‘tis writ in golden letters,” resemble Rossetti’s inscribed ekphrastic frames analysed in the previous chapter, which aimed to fix meaning around the female figure. While Rossetti’s inscriptions impose control, Landon reveals the inscribed contract as a form of oppression, as seen in the lines “writ in golden letters.” Furthermore, in addressing the image of the bride, Landon makes accusations, commanding, “Go, queen it in the lightest hall,” “thy heart is sold,” and “Go, glittering slave!” These phrases compel the bride to confront the reality of her own subjugation. The term “glittering slave” encapsulates the objectification of the bride, highlighting her role as a visual possession, adorned and displayed for the male gaze both within the image and within her situation as a bought bride, particularly relevant to the early nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition, which would have carried a distinct weight at the time as well. While the poem does not address slavery explicitly, Landon’s ekphrastic positioning of the bride as a visually adorned yet immobilised figure aligns with the structures of ownership, exchange, and spectacle that echo contemporary representations of enslavement. Landon’s poem repurposes the rhetoric of slavery to critique the objectifying dynamics of the bride. The poem concludes with Landon's assertion of the contractual and economic union depicted in the engraving, revealing that this union represents a marriage of commodification, essentially a transaction for the bride's affection. Landon ends the poem with a contemplative line stating, “Even woman’s faith is failing,” which highlights the troubling circumstances surrounding the bride in the image, underscoring the ekphrastic disruption and interjection that Landon has added to her representation of the image.

2. “Remembrance” (1837):

Figure 10. “Remembrance”, E. T. Parris and L. Stocks, “The Keepsake” (1837)

The poem begins:

> Love taketh many colours, and weareth many shapes,
> As from the hidden heart within its lighted life escapes;
> Stern circumstances is round it, till what in Heaven had birth
> Seems but an added misery, to this our weary earth.
>
> There were two that loved each other, they were but children then,
> Companions in the wild wood, and comrades in the glen;
> The beautiful was round them, and feeling took its tone
> From the face of lovely Nature, by whose side it had grown.
>
> Within an ancient castle, their childhood had been past,
> Around whose Gothic turrets like a spirit moan’d the blast,
> With a voice of many ages, for that castle stood on high
> When the banner of the red cross flung its sunsets o’er the Wye.
>
> The birch copse and the wild flower, the battlements above,
> The forest’s summer darkness, gave its colouring to love;
> And the poetry indwelling, nay, that is the heart of youth,
> Was developed in such elements to a diviner truth.

But the boy springs up to manhood, the girl to woman grows,
So the sapling gives the oak tree, the bud becomes a rose;
Alas! For childhood, leaving its fairy land behind—
The green grass dies with summer, so fares it with the mind.

The world was now before them, they enter'd in its coil,
Like the serpent's rainbow circles, and with as deadly spoil;
He wedded with another, I know not of his bride,
I only speak of her who grew in girlhood at his side.

Her hair was glistening blackness, a sort of golden gloom,
Like sunshine on the raven's wing, a softness and a bloom;
Dark, like the nightfall, on her cheek the dusky eyelash lay,
But the sweet eyes beneath were blue as April or as day.

Her cheek was pale as moonlight, that melancholy light,
When the moon is at her palest, grown weary of the night;
Pale, sad, and onward looking, as if the future threw
The shadow of the coming hours it felt before it knew.

My God! The utter wretchedness that waiteth on the heart,
That nurses an unconscious hope, to see that hope depart;
That owns not to itself it loves, until that love is known,
By feeling in the wide, wide world so utterly alone.

No face seem'd pleasant to her sight, one image linger'd there,
The echo of one only voice was on the haunted air.
Speak not of other sorrow, life knoweth no such pain,
As that within the stricken heart, which loves, and loves in vain.

Yet she , too, at the altar gave up her wan cold hand,
That shudder'd as they circle it with an unwelcome band;
Ah! Crime and misery both, the heart—on such a die to set,
The verist mockery of love is striving to forget.

She stands before her mirror, it is her wedding day,
But she hath flung aside in haste her desolate array;
Down on the ground her bridal wreath is dash'd in bitter scorn—
That hour's impassion'd agony, alas! It must be borne.

And long years are before her, long, weary, wasting years;
Though tears grow heavy on the lash, she must suppress those tears;
The past must be forgotten, and 'tis the past that gives
The truest and loveliest light which the future lives.

Such is a common history, in this our social state,

Where destiny and nature contend in woman's fate;
To waste her best affections, to pine, to be forgot,
To droop beneath an outward smile—such is woman's lot. (Landon, "Remembrance" 1-56)

The poem above, "Remembrance," was published in *The Keepsake* in 1837, an English literary annual that existed from 1828 to 1857. With advancements in illustration technology, these literary annuals showcased engravings alongside collections of poetry, essays, and short fiction, all designed to appeal to a young female audience. This poem is intricately linked to an engraving on the opposite page. At first glance, "Remembrance" may seem like another piece of what Thackeray deemed 'sentimental' poetry, centring on the familiar themes of lost love and longing—common motifs that critics often argue reflect the superficiality prevalent in this genre. However, Landon's work transcends these initial impressions. Like her previous ekphrastic poem, "The Bridal Morning", she strategically uses the interplay between text and visual representation to infuse a proto-feminist perspective into her writing. By doing so, Landon not only challenges but also subverts traditional notions of feminine beauty and idealism that dominated the artistic and cultural landscape of her time. Both her poem and the accompanying image depict the archetypal figure of a beautiful bride. Nevertheless, Landon complicates this portrayal through the act of 'dismantling the sexual politics of the look, along with... the blurring of limits between the poetic subject and the poetic object' (Kinloch 103). To convey her feminist critique, she employs various techniques, including *ekphrastic disillusionment*, which exposes the gaps between the idealised image and its deconstructed poetic representation within an ekphrastic discourse. The theme of disillusionment here relates to the speaker's struggle with social and cultural issues, which aims to criticise and highlight those concerns. As the poetic language and elements of romance and love shift into feelings of disenchantment and disappointment, the speaker's perspective evolves. This amplifies the sense of awareness and critique centred on the female subject's experience in the poem.

The following technique that I believe Landon adopts is *ekphrastic interjection*, where her voice intrudes to emphasise the image's limitations, and the speaker and poet's voices blend into one. I argue that these techniques collectively work to dismantle the idealised representations of the female subject in her ekphrastic poem, unveiling the pervasive tension between societal expectations and the complexities of female interiority.

The engraving depicts a beautiful young bride leaning against a dressing table, clutching her heart as she gazes away from a mirror placed before her on the dresser. The young woman's gaze is turned away from the viewer as she focuses on a wedding wreath lying at her feet. Similar to "The Bridal Morning," the bride is situated in an enclosed space, which enhances the sense of confinement and introspection she is experiencing. Although she is visible to the viewer, the setting highlights a voyeuristic theme. It presents the female figure in a static, frozen representation contained within the image. The poem begins with Landon setting the scene for an imagined scenario that is not depicted in the engraving. This illustrates how Landon incorporates her subjective interpretation of an inner world that exists beyond the engraving, representing her ekphrastic interjection:

> Love taketh many colours, and weareth many shapes,
> As from the hidden heart within its lighted life escapes;
> Stern circumstances is round it, till what in Heaven had birth
> Seems but an added misery, to this our weary earth.
>
> There were two that loved each other, they were but children then,
> Companions in the wild wood, and comrades in the glen;
> The beautiful was round them, and feeling took its tone
> From the face of lovely Nature, by whose side it had grown. (lines 1-8)

In these stanzas, we explore a pastoral and romantic narrative that Landon is creating, with various natural imagery permeating it, such as the “wild wood” and “comrades in the glen”, as they navigate a childhood love in a “lovely Nature” (lines 6-7). This narrative follows the structure of traditional ekphrasis; however, in this case, Landon introduces an image that is not visible to the reader, highlighting the tensions between the representation of the image and the poem itself.

Creating a distinct narrative that moves beyond the boundaries of the image illustrates how Landon actively interrupts the pictorial representation she constructs, where she inserts subjective emotion into what might otherwise be a static scene, as seen in the lines: “Love taketh many colours” and “The beautiful was round them, and feeling took its tone” (line 1-7). This technique resists traditional ekphrasis, which often seeks to preserve and idealise the figure in the image. Instead, referring to the contrast between the past and the present, memory appears to function as an alternative ekphrastic mode. As seen in the following stanzas, Landon interjects the dynamic between the past and the present, where the female

subject is caught between two conflicting frames: the idyllic past of youthful love and the present reality of her unwanted marriage. The past is painted as: “an ancient castle” (9), “a voice of many ages” (11), and is noted as a “fairy land” (19), evoking a childlike dream of the past. The imagery of memory also takes on a distinctly pictorial quality:

> But the boy springs up to manhood, the girl to woman grows,
> So the sapling gives the oak tree, the bud becomes the rose;
> Alas! For childhood, leaving its fairy land behind--
> The green grass dies with summer, so fares it with the mind.
>
> The world was now before them, they enter’d in its coil,
> Like the serpent’s rainbow circles, and with as deadly spoil;
> He wedded with another, I know not of his bride,
> I only speak of her who grew in girlhood at his side. (line 17-24)

Here, Landon constructs love as a landscape painting, filled with the natural beauty of trees, flowers, and medieval architecture, creating an image within the image. Yet this romanticised vision of love is something that *once* was—an image from the past, now lost: “The world was now before them, they enter’d in its coil” (line 21). The presence of memory functions as a spectral image that disrupts the expected ekphrastic frame, where the bride’s past love is not fully depicted, but his absence haunts the poem: “No face seem’d pleasant to her sight, one image linger’d there,/ The echo of one only voice was on the haunted air” (lines 37-38). The phrase “one image linger’d there” suggests an ekphrastic moment, but not one of admiration or longing; it is one of anguish. Instead of functioning as a site of admiration or longing, this memory becomes a wound, revealing the failure of representation to capture emotional reality. The alluded “echo” of this lost love permeates the image, suggesting that lost love operates like an ekphrastic painting that refuses to be erased. Landon forms an ekphrasis of absence, serving as a disruptive and melancholic representation that highlights the disruptive nature of this state of disillusionment. This aligns with feminist revisions of ekphrasis, where women poets disrupt the authority of the gaze by introducing movement, temporality, and loss into the traditionally fixed image. Landon thus forces the reader to recognise the woman’s interiority, which cannot be contained within the visual frame.

Landon extends her subjective interjection even further when the tone changes from a dreamlike description of the past and the present by her statement: “I know not of his bride,/ I only speak of her who grew in girlhood at his side” (line 23-24), further intensifying the act

of disillusionment and ekphrastic interjection. This supports my argument that Landon emphasises the female subject in the poem not simply to offer an objective description, but rather to convey her focus and intention. Her interjection serves to present an alternative, nuanced portrayal of the female subject in the poem, challenging the traditional ekphrastic depiction of women as naive and one-dimensional, particularly within a romantic setting. Like a verbal painter, Landon immerses herself in the narrative through the use of the first-person 'I' statement, directing the reader's attention to vivid visual descriptions of the bride. In doing so, she employs visual language to create an ekphrastic representation of the female subject, where the portrayal relies heavily on richly aestheticised imagery:

> Her hair was glistening blackness, a sort of golden gloom,
> Like sunshine on the raven's wing, a softness and a bloom;
> Dark, like nightfall, on her cheek the dusky eyelash lay,
> But the sweet eyes beneath were blue as April or as day.
>
> Her cheek was pale as moonlight, that melancholy light,
> When the moon is at her palest, grown weary of the night;
> Pale, sad, and onward looking, as if the future threw
> The shadow of the coming hours it felt before it knew. (line 25-32)

In a style akin to artworks that depict women with luminous, almost otherworldly beauty, the interplay of darkness and light—black hair infused with golden undertones, nightfall-coloured lashes framing blue eyes—suggests an effort to present the female subject as a visual object rather than a living, breathing individual. This imagery resonates with Landon's characteristic use of ekphrasis, where female figures are often portrayed as though they belong to paintings, sculptures, or tapestries. However, she subverts this representation in the narrative, as demonstrated in the subsequent lines: "Yet she, too, at the altar gave up her wan cold hand,/ That shudder'd as they circle it with an unwelcome band;" (lines 37-38). Landon exposes the way that the bride's body is being used as an object of possession rather than a subject of love, where the visual imagery of the bride's "wan cold hand" suggests a lifelessness as if the bride is literally becoming frozen into place. The act of "circling" her hand with the wedding ring mirrors the way frames are used to enclose paintings—her fate is sealed within this imposed image and this marriage.

One of the most prominent moments in the poem occurs when the bride stands before the mirror on her wedding day:

She stands before her mirror, it is her wedding day,
But she hath flung aside in haste her desolate array;
Down on the ground her bridal wreath is dash'd in bitter scorn--
That hour's impassion'd agony, alas! It must be borne. (lines 41-44)

In the context of *mimesis*, mirrors serve as unreliable reflections of the objects being perceived. Both mirrors and paintings offer visual representations, but they differ in reliability. Paintings depict static images that are frozen in time. In contrast, mirrors can represent subjects in a more dynamic manner, since individuals in front of a mirror can move or alter their appearance (Weber 6). The female figures who appear "before her mirror" or are depicted in portraits often trigger either a moral awakening or reveal moral shortcomings in male characters, such as in Holman Hunt's "The Awakening Conscience" (1853) (Weber 12). In this case, the mirror acts as a significant motif that is often characterised by the female figure affirming the aesthetic image imposed upon her; however, Landon subverts this expectation, where instead of admitting or adjusting her reflection, the bride actually rejects it, where she "flings aside" her wreath, refusing the symbol of matrimony. This act disrupts the ekphrastic tradition by replacing the passive acceptance of the female subject with active defiance, where the female subject in the poem does not conform to the image of the bride in the engraving.

In the final lines, the speaker of Landon's poem moves beyond the ekphrastic description to comment on how women are portrayed in art and poetry, noting that their "social state" determines the "woman's fate". The focus shifts from discussing the painting to emphasising the main message that showcases Landon's early feminist viewpoint and voice. Through these lines, she expresses her position and reflects on the social and cultural status of women of her time:

Such is a common history, in this our social state,
Where destiny and nature contend in woman's fate;
To waste her best affections, to pine, to be forgot,
To droop benheath an outward smile—such is woman's lot. (lines 53-56)

The poet depicts the fate of the female subject as part of a broader societal pattern that reflects on the "common history" and *"our* social state". In doing so, the poem and accompanying image go beyond mere representation and meta-poetically address contemporary issues affecting women. They show how women have historically been subjected to similar forces

of aestheticisation and containment, contributing to a theme of disillusionment that emerges in the ekphrastic poem. This serves as a feminist strategy that disrupts and resists the limitations placed on the female subject within both the poem and the image. According to Duewa Jones (2015), 'ekphrasis repeats and remembers; it reassembles in words what was already assembled as image' (413). In this context, Landon's proto-feminist ekphrasis challenges the traditional role of ekphrasis as it 'repeats and remembers,' reclaiming agency over representation and transforming it from a method of containment into one of critique and resistance that also disrupts the reality of the reader's experience.

II. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806 – 1861)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning utilises the image of the female figure in a selection of her ekphrastic poetry, using it as a powerful vehicle to express her feminist concerns and critiques of societal and gender norms. Widely recognised for her engagement with various social issues such as slavery in America, the exploitation of prostitutes, and the harsh realities of child labour, Browning's body of work also offers a nuanced exploration of women's roles and identities in the early Victorian period. This showcases her remarkable ability to blend the visual and the poetic across a selection of her poems. Critics like Michele Martinez (2011) have explored Barrett Browning's engagement with the visual arts, particularly in works such as "On a Picture of Reigo's Widow: Placed in an Exhibition" (1826), "The Picture Gallery at Penshurst" (1833), and "A Portrait" (1844). In these poems, she addresses the representation of figures depicted in portraits, illustrating a form of visual engagement and ekphrasis in her poetry. Another one of Barrett Browning's works that featured various themes of visual imagery is her verse novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), which follows a woman's life as she is used as a vehicle to voice Barrett Browning's opinion on the constraints that an educated woman experiences in the field of literary publication and, controversially, the theme of the 'fallen woman'. In this section, I will examine how her feminist voice is expressed in her ekphrastic poem "A Portrait" (1844), analysing the ways in which she captures the complexities of female identity and agency within the context of the artwork she describes. Additionally, I will explore how she skillfully intertwines feminist themes with political commentary in her second ekphrastic poem, "Hiram Power's Greek Slave" (1850). By the late 1830s and early 1840s, Elizabeth Barrett Browning had become a prominent figure in the literary world. Her publication of *The Seraphim and Other Poems* in 1838 marked a significant turning point in her career, as she published under her own name for the first time, where she claimed it was 'the first utterance of my own individuality' (Qtd. in Kenyon 6). By the mid-nineteenth century, Elizabeth Barrett Browning had established herself as a highly acclaimed poet in both Britain and America, particularly following the publication of her two-volume *Poems* in 1844. While much existing scholarship had focused on this collection and on her later verse-novel Aurora Leigh, this chapter turns instead to a selection of her ekphrastic poems written during the 1840s and early 1850s. By situating these works within Barrett Browning's broader poetic and cultural context, the chapter

foregrounds ekphrasis as a crucial site for her feminist engagement. In these poems, ekphrastic encounter becomes a means through which Barrett Browning reflects on women's embodied experience, authorship, and visual representation, contributing to the development of a distinctly female subject position within early Victorian ekphrastic practice.

In a foreword penned by writer and poet Alice Meynell (1847-1922) for the 1902 edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's collection titled *Poems*, Meynell asserted that Barrett Browning's poetry merits significant recognition. She noted that Barrett Browning wrote with a distinctly feminine perspective across various subjects, including art, love, motherhood, and the unification of Italy. Meynell emphasised that Barrett Browning contributed a complementary power to the representation of human experiences (4). Meynell highlighted that Barrett Browning's gender should not diminish her greatness as a poet, where she claimed that there is 'no separation of sexes' when it comes to recognising her talent and capabilities among the best poets of her era (5). When examining how Barrett Browning employs the female subject in her poems, it becomes evident that she uses this subject to explore the relationship between text and image. This exploration addresses the dynamics between the traditionally passive feminine image and the assertive masculine gaze. Barrett Browning's strategies diverge from the conventional ekphrastic technique. In these two particular poems, she actively interrogates the role of women as passive subjects in art. Antony Harrison (1990) notes that women poets often used their poetic techniques as a means of self-actualisation and assertion. He states, 'Women poets exposed, reappraised, and circumvented ideologies felt as constraining,' echoing the feminist perspective that suggests women poets utilise their ekphrastic poetry in a similar manner, where Harrison further asserts that Barrett Browning's poetic attempts in this case to 'empower herself... all the while retaining the stance of self-effacement' (114). This mode of feminist ekphrasis, in which the poet reveals the constraints of visual representation, establishes a connection between Barrett Browning's work and that of Landon, particularly in how both poets critique the passivity, idealisation, and confinement of the female subject within artistic traditions. Like Landon, Barrett Browning incorporates themes of ekphrastic disillusionment in her poems, addressing the depiction of the female subject as seen through the lens of ekphrastic entrapment and idealisation. However, Barrett Browning distinguishes herself from Landon by adopting a more direct approach in her ekphrastic voice. Rather than masking her ekphrastic

interpretation behind sentimentality and romance, as Landon does, she strives for clarity and directness in her ekphrastic poetry.

1. “A Portrait” (1844):

I will paint her as I see her.
Ten times have the lilies blown,
Since she looked upon the sun.

And her face is lily-clear,
Lily-shaped and dropped in duty
To the law of its own beauty.

Oval cheeks encoloured faintly,
Which a trail of golden hair
Keeps from fading off to air:

And a forehead fair and saintly,
Which two blue eyes undershine,
Like meek prayers before a shrine.

Face and figure of a child,--
Though too calm, you think, and tender,
For the childhood you would lend her.

Yet child-simple, undefiled,
Frank, obedient, -- waiting still
On the turnings of your will.

Moving light, as all young things,
As young birds, or early wheat,
When the wind blows over it.

Only, free from flutterings
Of loud mirth that scorneth measure—
Taking love for her chief pleasure.

Choosing pleasure, for the rest,
Which come softly – just as she,
When she nestles at your knee.

Quiet talk she liketh best,
In a bower of gentle looks,--
Watering flowers, or reading books.

And her voice, it murmurs lowly,
As a silver stream may run,

Which yet feels, you feel, the sun.

And her smile, it seems half holy,
As if drawn from thoughts more far
Than our common jestings are.

And if any poet knew her,
He would sing of her with falls
Used in lovely madrigals.

And if any painter drew her,
He would paint her unaware
With a halo round the hair.

And if a reader read the poem,
He would whisper—"You have done a
Consecrated little Una".

And a dreamer (did you show him
That same picture) would exclaim,
"'Tis my angel, with a name!"

And a stranger, when he sees her
In the street even—smileth stilly,
Just as you would at a lily.

And all voices that address her,
Soften, sleeken every word,
As if speaking to a bird.

And all fancies yearn to cover
The hard earth whereon she passes,
With the thymy-scented grasses.

And all hearts do pray, "God love her!"—
Ay, and always, in good sooth,
We may all be sure He doth. (Barrett Browning, "A Portrait" 1-60)

This poem is an example of *notional ekphrasis*, an ekphrastic technique first introduced by John Holander in his text *The Poetics of Ekphrasis* (1988). In contrast to *actual ekphrasis*, which focuses on the poet's response as a viewer of an artwork, notional ekphrasis focuses on a fictional artwork that highlights the intentions and language of the poet (Hollander 43). The connection established between Barrett Browning's poem and the invisible 'portrait' it conjures reveals a distinctive dynamic: Barrett Browning simultaneously positions herself as both a poet and a viewer of this imagined art. This dual identity allows

her not only to convey her interpretation of the artwork but also to assume the role of the painter. By bridging the gap between poetry and visual art, Barrett Browning intricately weaves her voice into both mediums, creating a rich interplay that allows her to express both feminine and masculine perspectives within ekphrasis, further challenging traditional representations of the female subject in poetry and art. While Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley ("Ozymandias", 1817) and John Keats ("Ode on a Grecian Urn", 1819) engage in ekphrasis mainly as a dialogue with imagined or historical artworks, Barrett Browning intervenes more directly, using ekphrasis to establish a gender-conscious interpretive authority over her subjects. Her ekphrastic poems do not merely describe or reflect upon the artworks; they reconfigure the visual and social hierarchies embedded within them, expanding the meaning of ekphrasis to highlight how her strategy transforms the dialogue between the word and the image, exploring gendered ideas of seeing and being seen.

In "A Portrait," Barrett Browning uses this technique to portray a more comprehensive image of the constraints young women face in a patriarchal society. She does not simply depict this constraint; instead, she redefines and reshapes it through her poetic perspective. She illustrates this entrapment in the poem by portraying the girl as a muse and an idealised object meant to be admired and gazed upon. Barrett Browning also incorporates multiple perspectives that reveal the instability of representation. By doing so, she creates a multi-layered interpretation that illuminates her feminist critique, inviting the reader to engage deeply with the tension between societal limitations and the asserted role of the female subject in paintings and portraits. Barrett Browning's creation of an imaginary artwork compels the reader to confront the constructed nature of female representation, thereby generating its own visual representation of the ekphrastic tradition. The poem begins with Barrett Browning asserting her stance as not only a poet but as a painter, creating the image of the central figure in the ekphrastic poem in real-time, where she opens the poem with a declarative statement of artistic intent: "I will paint her as I see her" (line 1). This assertion mimics the authoritative position of a portrait painter, but the phrase "as *I* see her" introduces a self-awareness that acknowledges the poet's subjective gaze, inviting a deeper consideration of Barrett Browning's assertion of her own female gaze that breaks away from the traditional masculine gaze of the artwork and poem. By constructing a verbal portrait of the girl, Barrett Browning reminds us that representing the female subject is inherently a

mediated and subjective act. She does not simply create an idealised picture of the female subject. Instead, she draws attention to how the act of representing itself limits and defines women and young women in ways that constrain their autonomy, holding them within the subjective gaze and interpretation of the viewer. The imagined portrait reinforces traditional tropes of femininity that emphasise the elements of passivity, innocence, and beauty in the following lines:

> And her face is lily-clear,
> Lily-shaped, and dropped in duty
> To the laws of its own beauty. (lines 4-6)

The poem highlights the beauty that elevates the woman's glory, portraying her in a childlike, fragile manner. It presents her as a static object of admiration rather than an active participant. The following stanzas provide a detailed and nuanced portrayal of the female subject, breaking her physical features into distinct and painterly elements. This structured list format enhances the visual imagery and invites readers to scrutinise how Barrett Browning constructs our understanding of feminine representation.

By emphasising specific attributes, Browning reveals how the act of gazing can impose limitations on the female subject, trapping her within the narrow confines of the observer's perspective:

> Oval cheeks encoloured faintly,
> Which a trail of golden hair
> Keeps from fading off to air:
>
> And a forehead fair and saintly,
> Which two blue eyes undershine,
> Like meek prayers before a shrine.
>
> Face and figure of a child,--
> Though too calm, you think, and tender,
> For the childhood you would lend her. (lines 7-15)

The interplay between observation and confinement reveals significant insights into the portrayal of the female subject, particularly in how her physical features are represented. In this context, the young girl is depicted in a manner that both accentuates her beauty and simultaneously diminishes her individuality, reflecting a longstanding aesthetic tradition steeped in detailed visual descriptions. Phrases like "lily-clear," "golden hair," and "blue

eyes" not only serve to paint a vivid picture but also borrow heavily from the conventions of portrait painting, which emphasise careful attention to composition, colour harmony, and symmetrical balance. Barrett Browning's descriptive techniques allow her to exert a degree of control over the imagery she creates, shaping the viewer's perception in specific ways. However, this control also raises critical questions about how young women are confined within rigid aesthetic expectations that dictate how they should be viewed and understood. The physical qualities of the female figure are depicted with a strain of idealisation and saint-like attributes, as seen in phrases such as "And a forehead fair and saintly," "Like meek prayers before a shrine," "With a halo around her hair," and "And her smile it seems half holy" (lines 10-12-31). These lines enhance the representation of the female form, imbuing it with muse-like qualities. Yet, Barrett Browning seems to subtly critique this limitation of confining the female subject to static beauty by emphasising that the portrait is not just an image but a social construct. Such concerns are central to the discourse of feminist ekphrasis, which seeks to uncover and challenge the limitations imposed by traditional representations. By scrutinising these constraints, Barrett Browning exposes the paradox of femininity in art—where women and girls are both celebrated for their beauty and simultaneously objectified, revealing the complex dynamics of power, representation, and identity in the artistic realm. The poem's recurrent emphasis on the child-like qualities of the female subject highlights her passivity and obedience. She is portrayed as "undefiled, / Frank, obedient, waiting still / On the turnings of your will." (lines 16-18). Positioning the female subject as a receptive figure, this stanza suggests that their existence is shaped by external forces-- "On the turnings of *your* will" -- rather than their own volition, suggesting a lack of autonomy in the confines of representation, as she is there to serve the spectator and follow what their gaze determines.

Barrett Browning adds a multilayered interjection that challenges the tradition of ekphrastic idealisation by layering various artistic interpretations of poets, painters, readers, and dreamers:

> And if any poet knew her,
> He would sing of her with falls
> Used in lovely madrigals.
>
> And if any painter drew her,
> He would paint her unaware

With a halo round the hair.

And if reader read the poem,
He would whisper “You have done a
Consecrated little Una.”

And a dreamer (did you show him
That same picture) would exclaim,
“T’is my angel, with a name!”

And a stranger, when he sees her
In the street even, smileth stilly,
Just as you would at a lily. (lines 40-51)

By presenting multiple artistic perspectives, Barrett Browning intricately highlights how the central female figure is not merely observed but is also profoundly transformed by the conventions of art. This transformation underscores the inherent instability of artistic representation; the notion of a portrait is fluid and subject to change based on the viewer’s expectations and interpretations. Barrett Browning uses various roles for the gazers observing the girl to emphasise how artifice plays a critical role in shaping both the depiction of the female figure and the nature of poetic expression itself. The painter's use of a halo suggests a tendency to sanctify the female muse, effectively stripping her of the complexities that define her humanity: “He would paint her unaware / With a halo round her hair”. This portrayal elevates her to the status of a religious icon, mirroring the ‘woman’s glory’ associated with a passive and obedient female subject (Wollstonecraft 81). Such representations often limit the female figure’s depth, as she is depicted as ‘unaware' with a diverted gaze, reinforcing her objectification. Through the distinct perspectives of the reader, the dreamer, and the stranger, Barrett Browning illustrates varying ways in which the female figure is constructed as an object of universal admiration. This admiration reduces her to a symbolic and almost inhuman ideal, which is evident in the reactions of each observer: the reader declares, “You have done a / Consecrated little Una’”, the dreamer exclaims, “’Tis my angel, with a name!’”, and the stranger observes, “When he sees her / In the street even, smileth stilly.” Each response demonstrates how different individuals project their own meanings and desires onto her, reinforcing the notion that the female subject is continually reshaped by the perceptions of those who gaze upon her. This focus on the significance of the gaze resonates with John Berger’s (1972) assertion about the representation of women in

art; the female subject is redefined as an ‘object of vision’ under the assertive male gaze directed toward her depiction (47). This concept is particularly relevant to the portrayal of the girl in the poem.

As Barrett Browning concludes the poem, she incorporates a communal prayer for the divine protection of this complex female image, inviting readers to reflect on the layers of meaning surrounding her portrayal and the implications of viewing women primarily through the lens of admiration and objectification:

> And all hearts do pray, ‘God love her!’
> Ay, and always, in good sooth,
> We may all be sure He doth. (lines 58-60)

In “A Portrait," Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses notional ekphrasis intentionally to challenge how the visual and cultural norms influence portrayals of the female form. Her poem creates an image of a girl while also questioning the limitations and societal expectations tied to such depictions, highlighting how artistic conventions and societal norms have historically restricted female subjects. Barrett Browning’s ekphrasis acts as a form of critical reflection: by “painting” her subject with words, she emphasises the act of representation itself and draws attention to the power relationships among viewer, artist, and subject. This approach reveals how the female figure is often idealised, objectified, or restricted within traditional visual and literary norms, reflecting wider gendered power structures in the nineteenth century.

2. “Hiram Power’s Greek Slave” 1850:

Figure 11. “The Greek Slave”, Hiram Powers (1846)

Figure 12. “The Virginian Slave, Intended as a Companion to Powers’s ‘Greek Slave’”, John Tenniel, “Punch” (1851)

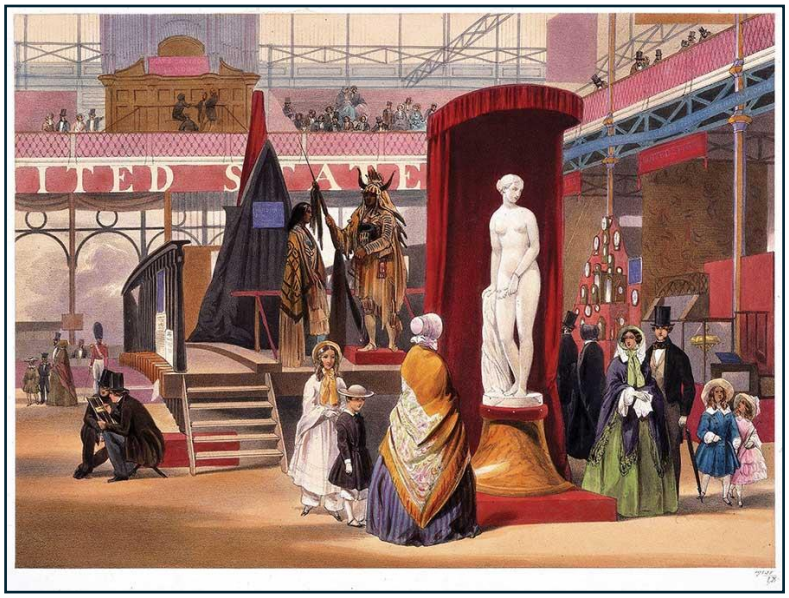

Figure 13. “The 1851 Great Exhibition” from “Recollections of the Great Exhibition, 1851”

In 1845, the American Neoclassical sculptor Hiram Powers (1805-1873) exhibited his famous sculpture of a chained nude female figure in London, and later at the Great Exhibition in 1851. The statue garnered significant admiration and positive feedback from the public, especially when it was displayed at London's Crystal Palace during the Great Exhibition of 1851. This exhibition included a section dedicated to showcasing works from the United States (Figure 6). The shackled female figure represents a Christian woman who was captured and subsequently displayed at a Turkish slave market after her abduction during the Greek War of Independence (1821-1832) (Droth and Edwards 15). The piece, known as "The Greek Slave," played a key role in earning Powers' international success and recognition for his meticulous attention to detail. The statue embodies certain Victorian ideals in both its style and its symbolic significance concerning slavery in America: it is described as 'classical and modern, sensual and chaste, Eastern and Western... it stands at the crux of the most urgent political crisis of the era, the conflict over transatlantic slavery and emancipation' (Kasson 47). Powers added his own interpretation and representation of who this female figure is in a text that accompanied his work at the exhibition, stating:

> The Slave has been taken from one of the Greek Islands by the Turks, in the time of the Greek revolution... Her father and mother, and perhaps all her kindred, have been destroyed by her foes, and she alone preserved as a treasure too valuable to be thrown away. She is now among barbarian strangers... and she stands exposed to the gaze of the people she abhors, and awaits her fate with intense anxiety, tempered indeed by the support of her reliance upon the goodness of God. Gather all these afflictions together, and add to them the fortitude and resignation of a Christian, and no room will be left for shame. (Qtd. by Wunder 172)

Power's explanation of the statue provides a clear parallel to the ekphrastic poem that Barrett Browning published in 1850, as both works complement each other in their depictions of the statue. Barrett Browning navigates this depiction in her ekphrastic poem, drawing on the various interpretations and emotions that the statue evokes. The statue not only represents a historical and cultural artefact but also embodies themes of suffering, beauty, and transcendence. Heffernan further asserts, 'To represent a painting or sculpted figure in words is to invoke its power—the power to fix, excite, amaze, entrance, disturb, or intimidate the viewer—even as language strives to keep that power under control' (7). Different representations of the statue also come from critics who noted its symbolism of beauty and admiration. They described it as 'one of the most exquisite objects in the museum' and referred to it as 'the centre of a bevy of admiring spectators' (Wunder 198). Critics also

remarked that the statue exemplified ‘an extraordinary refinement of imitation’, highlighting the ekphrastic and mimetic nature of the statue (198). James Heffernan (1993) highlights the profound ability of ekphrasis to convey meanings that extend beyond the limitations of any single representation (35). In this regard, the statue of the Greek Slave serves as a significant figure. It transcends its mere existence as a physical object, inviting viewers to engage with a deeper resonance that it evokes. In a review published in New York in 1847, the power of the statue’s beauty and image appears to render its viewers ‘almost speechless’, and the spectators find themselves ‘yield[ing]... to the magic of its power, and for many minutes gaze upon it in silent and reverential admiration’ (Qtd. by Kasson 72). By exploring the symbolism of the statue and connecting it to current issues of slavery, Barrett Browning examines how the female subject is depicted in her ekphrastic poem, “Hiram Power’s Greek Slave” (1850), and how she uses the imagery of the female figure from the statue to promote her abolitionist viewpoints.

David Kennedy (2019) emphasised how ekphrasis acts as a ‘variety of encounters: not only between word and image but also between literary texts’ (15). These views become more prominent in Barrett Browning’s poem, where she uses the power of the statue’s aesthetic beauty and the symbolism it evokes, along with the image of the female subject, as a way that moves beyond mere representation and into direct moral critique that resists traditional ekphrasis and the male interpretation:

> They say Ideal beauty cannot enter
> The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
> An alien Image with enshackled hands,
> Called the Greek Slave! As if the artist meant her
> (That passionless perfection which he lent her,
> Shadowed not darkened where the sill expands)
> To so confront man’s crimes in different lands
> With man’s ideal sense. Pierce to the centre,
> Art’s fiery finger! And break up ere long
> The serfdom of this world. Appeal, fair stone,
> From God’s pure heights of beauty against man’s wrong!
> Catch up in thy divine face, not alone
> East griefs but west, and strike and shame the strong,
> By thunders of white silence, overthrown. (Barrett Browning, “Hiram Power’s Greek Slave” 1-14)

Traditional ekphrastic poetry often aims to capture a visual object within a descriptive frame, allowing the viewer—and, by extension, the male poet—to control its interpretation. However, Barrett Browning disrupts this approach by refusing to treat the statue as merely a beautiful object for admiration. She challenges this mindset right from the first line, stating, “They say Ideal beauty cannot enter / The house of anguish,” (lines 1-2), where she immediately questions the relationship between aesthetics and suffering. This opening line critically addresses the tradition that separates aesthetic beauty from human pain. The phrase “They say” indicates her scepticism towards prevailing interpretations that reduce the statue to merely a representation of sublime suffering, painting an image of pious anguish that is often associated with visual objects like statues, where Barrett Browning appears to be creating an active voice that destabilises the reader’s perspective of this represented object. In doing so, Barrett Browning compels the reader to consider the ethics of representation, suggesting that “Ideal beauty” cannot coexist with a focus on aesthetics while real suffering and oppression occur.

In the following lines, Barrett Browning brings the image of the statue to the forefront of the reader’s perception, where she declares, “On the threshold stands / An alien Image with enshackled hands” (lines 2-3). The statue is not described at length or in much detail other than representing her as “An alien Image”, suggesting that she has come from a foreign land, illustrating how she is uprooted and displaced “On the threshold” as she is set up for the view of people’s admiration, frozen in that stance for their admiration. The ekphrastic representation of the statue exhibits a degree of fluidity, enabling the poet to modify or reinterpret the image of the statue in a manner that enhances the portrayal of the female figure. Barrett Browning also appears to be questioning the intentions of the artist, where she states:

> Called the Greek Slave! As if the artist meant her
> (That passionless perfection which he lent her,
> Shadowed not darkened where the sill expands)
> To so confront man’s crimes in different lands (lines 4-6)

The phrase "Called the Greek Slave!" reveals irony in the statue's title. The addition of "As if the artist meant her" expresses doubt about how the artist represented the statue. This criticism suggests that the statue’s portrayal as a "passionless perfection" was something "lent" to her by the artist, implying that her aesthetic beauty might obscure the deeper political

issues and "crimes" that need to be addressed. Barrett Browning subverts the traditional ekphrastic dynamic by not depicting the statue's subject as an eroticised object. Instead, she presents her as a figure of resistance, stating, "To so confront man's crimes in different lands." In doing so, Barrett Browning challenges both the spectator and the reader to look beyond the statue's passive beauty and recognise its potential as a condemnation of oppression.

One significant ekphrastic technique that Barrett Browning employs in this poem is *apostrophe*—the act of directly addressing the figure of the work of art. While the statue itself cannot speak, Barrett Browning's poem allows it to serve as both a witness and commentator on the injustices of slavery. By using the figure of the female subject of the statue, this ekphrastic technique creates a dynamic space that facilitates an 'open and fluid exchange between the arts, complicating the historically inscribed generic boundaries and power dynamics... Reflect[ing] the social relationships of inequality often mapped onto the ekphrastic encounter' (Keefe 135). This idea is evident in the lines, "Pierce to the centre, / Art's fiery finger! And break up ere long / The serfdom of this world" (lines 8-10). Barrett Browning transforms the statue's perspective from that of a frozen and mute representation of captivity to a revolutionary symbol. The statue's symbolic perfection is utilised to inspire change and challenge the conventions that require transformation, as it seeks to "pierce to the centre" and ultimately "break up ere long" the conventions of the "serfdom of this world". The phrase "Art's fiery finger" suggests that art has the power to incite change and disrupt oppression, shifting "The Greek Statue" from a mere aesthetic object to an active force that calls for justice. The poem's final lines highlight Barrett Browning's main ekphrastic techniques, in which she universalises the figure's suffering to represent more than the imagery of an enslaved Greek woman. Instead, she symbolically portrays the broader theme of slavery, including the plight experienced in the United States:

> Appeal, fair stone,
> From God's pure heights of beauty against man's wrong!
> Catch up in thy divine face, not alone
> East griefs but west, and strike and shame the strong,
> By thunders of white silence, overthrown. (lines 10-14)

In the concluding lines of the ekphrastic poem, Barrett Browning powerfully conveys a plea to the statue by exclaiming, "Appeal, fair stone." This urgent call implores the statue to

harness its “heights of beauty” as a catalyst for addressing the deep-seated injustices and wrongs perpetrated by humanity. Rather than merely a static object of admiration, she envisions the statue as an autonomous entity that can leverage its beauty to inspire profound change. By invoking her beauty as a means to challenge her status as a visual spectacle and transforming her into a figure that actually uses her beauty to “strike and shame the strong”. Through her work, Barrett Browning emphasises the role of ekphrasis as a technique that intricately intertwines visual imagery and poetic expression. This blending not only transforms the portrayal of the female subject but also serves as a powerful medium for addressing and challenging the societal oppression prevalent during her time. Instead of representing the female figure as a mere victim of circumstance, Browning elevates her to the status of a symbol of justice and strength. By using this female figure as a focal point, she reinforces the idea that beauty can wield power and influence. In doing so, the poem not only showcases the aesthetic appeal of the female subject but also highlights her capacity to compel men to recognise and confront the injustices around them. This transformation from victimhood to empowerment reflects Barrett Browning’s ekphrastic technique in her poem. The poem's closing lines highlight this point further, where Barrett Browning uses the silence of the statue as a mode of resistance, as noted in the phrase: “By thunders of white silence, overthrown”. This paradoxical phrase transforms silence into a powerful force of protest. The “white silence” of the marble statue is not a sign of passivity but an active challenge to injustice. The imagery of “thunders” suggests that even without speech, the statue has the capacity to condemn and overthrow oppression through her silence. The juxtaposition of “thunder” and “silence” evokes subtle yet immense power, positioning the statue as a force that holds this power within itself, reversing the traditional ekphrastic dynamic—rather than the poet ‘speaking for’ the artwork, the silence itself becomes an act of defiance. By refusing to ventriloquise the enslaved woman, Barrett Browning engages in a feminist revision of ekphrasis, allowing the female subject’s silence to speak volumes against oppression. The poem’s exploration of silence and marble must be read within the specific historical context of slavery that shapes Barrett Browning’s broader political perspective. Writing during a time of vigorous abolitionist debate, she was highly aware of the visual and rhetorical systems through which enslaved bodies, especially those depicted as sculptural or idealised, were displayed, aestheticised, and spoken for. The phrase “white silence” in the poem therefore has a dual, charged meaning: it refers both to the literal whiteness of marble and the statue’s

silence, and to the racialised frameworks that emphasise suffering, making it monumental and more acceptable within a predominantly white visual culture. The “white silence” of the statue thus functions simultaneously as a distinct critique of oppression and as a reminder of the boundaries of representation, highlighting the complexities involved in speaking about slavery through aesthetic and ekphrastic methods.

In conclusion, Barrett Browning’s feminist ekphrasis is placed in contrast to Landon’s earlier critique of the male gaze, where beauty is often an illusion that conceals suffering. Unlike Landon, Barrett Browning does not merely expose the flaws of aestheticisation; she repurposes the ekphrastic mode as a political weapon that underscores the 'gendered antagonism' between the domains of images and words (Heffernan 7). In examining the work in the context of Landon and early Victorian ekphrastic modes, it becomes clear that Barrett Browning’s poem mirrors a growing feminist consciousness within the tradition of ekphrasis. The deliberate choice to describe a woman raises critical questions about the framing and perception of female identity in both art and society. Rather than merely accepting the traditional portrayals of women, Barrett Browning’s engagement with ekphrasis encourages an exploration of how these representations can be restrictive and reductive. This approach aligns with broader scholarly investigations into how women poets of the time reworked ekphrasis as a means of resisting the confinement typically associated with the female figure. They did not seek to reject artistic representation outright; instead, they aimed to expose its contradictions and limitations, revealing the complexities of female identity in an era that often sought to simplify and control it.

Chapter Three

Subverting the Gaze: Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890) and Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911)

This chapter expands on the ekphrastic depiction of the female image established earlier by early nineteenth-century women poets, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It examines how two subsequent poets, Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890) and Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911), positioned themselves after the early ekphrastic techniques of Landon and Barrett Browning. Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson's ekphrastic poetry employs a poetic technique that highlights touch and presence, redefining traditional ekphrastic practices and aligning with the contemporary notion of *haptic ekphrasis*. By merging verbal and visual elements into a unique space, we can highlight a distinct female identity or self-awareness that enables a deeper feminist perspective, one that extends beyond mere visual interpretation. It raises a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the female gaze and experience through the element of haptic ekphrasis, highlighting the act of a multi-sensory dynamic within the feminist ekphrastic mode as employed by Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson in their ekphrastic poems. Jill Ehnenn's (2021) theory of *haptic ekphrasis* highlights the importance of not only sight but also emotion and touch in evoking a deeper understanding of artistic expression. Ehnenn's theory focuses on how women in the latter half of the nineteenth century used ekphrasis to move beyond mere description, engaging with the emotions and tactile qualities of the artwork through their poetic interpretation. In addition to the various methods women poets employed to utilise ekphrasis in the nineteenth century, emphasising the haptic element within an ekphrastic framework enhances feminist approaches to viewing and depicting the female subject in art. Ehnenn's haptic theories from feminist and cinema studies provide a different perspective, describing it as a 'Hermeneutic lens and ekphrasis as a technology of feeling,' which can be used to analyse nineteenth-century ekphrastic poetry (102). This approach helps reveal the poets' deeper connection to themes such as 'touch, hands, skin, and surface' through this interpretive lens (103).

I believe that Marriott Watson and Pfeiffer's ekphrastic poems demonstrate how they shift between the artwork's image and their interpretation of the female subject, highlighting

an alternate way of looking at and embodying the female figure through ekphrasis. This technique allows them to reshape the portrayal of women in the painting, moving beyond traditional representations and giving a deeper, more nuanced and materialised voice in their poetry. In this context, women poets employ ekphrasis to challenge, confront, and redefine the traditionally masculine discourse linked to ekphrasis, all through a distinctly female perspective or 'woman's place', as Elizabeth Loizeaux explains (81). This approach challenges the predominantly masculine viewpoints often represented by male painters, sculptors, and writers, aimed at a primarily male audience. Portraying the female figure through the lens of the female gaze allows for feminist resistance against the authority of the male gaze and the representation imposed on the female body and image. By creating a dialogue between the visual and the verbal, the act of ekphrasis generates a new perspective that bridges both media while also preserving the viewer's position. This chapter investigates how feminist ekphrasis transcends mere description by embracing a more tactile and sensory exploration of the dynamic relationship between painting and poetry, as noted in the selected ekphrastic poems of Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson. It extends beyond the artwork itself to reveal a deeper understanding of female self-awareness within the ekphrastic tradition. This continues the investigation from the previous chapter, focusing on how women poets employed the ekphrastic technique to challenge the tradition of passive, silent imagery and the authoritative masculine voice. It also showcases the diverse ekphrastic methods utilised by women poets in the nineteenth century.

Like the analysis of Landon and Barrett Browning's ekphrastic work in the previous chapters, the theory of feminist ekphrasis takes a significant role in analysing the ekphrastic poems of Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson. In her analysis of ekphrastic poetry, Jane Hedley (2009) argues that female poets writing about voiceless artworks are using their writing to express their own artistic, political, and psychological beliefs clearly and forcefully (64). Through the process of gazing at and interpreting art, I believe that mid to late nineteenth-century women poets such as Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson assert their own 'authority over art' and take on an active role in the re-creation and interpretation of art rather than serving the roles of being passive objects of inspiration (Hedley 64). In this case, ekphrastic poetry allows women poets to develop a distinct 'female self-awareness' that transcends the limitations often imposed by male-dominated artistic traditions (Showalter 52). In their

responses to art, poets like Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson express their efforts to assert their authority over the visual image. Instead of being passive subjects who merely perform and exhibit for the viewer, they seek to take an active role in its creation and interpretation, transforming ekphrasis from a tool of containment into a means of feminist resistance. One technique employed by Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson in this chapter is known as ekphrastic absence. This approach emphasises how an ekphrastic element conveys imagery or narratives that originate from a painting or image but extend beyond what is visually apparent, thus adding layers of meaning to the depicted artwork. Similar to notional ekphrasis, where interpretation and description focus on artwork that does not exist, ekphrastic absence begins with the painting and then delves into poetic interpretation that transcends its confines. This technique enables women poets to use the image as a foundational point for expressing their voices and insights, surpassing the limitations inherent to the medium.

I. Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890):

Victorian Welsh poet and writer Emily Pfeiffer (1827-1890) made some significant contributions to the ekphrastic tradition in a selection of her poetry. Her ekphrastic poems, which draw inspiration from and engage with visual art, frequently emphasise female figures, providing a lens through which to examine women's roles in both art and society. By investigating these specific works, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Pfeiffer incorporated feminist themes into her poetry, using the ekphrastic form to challenge prevailing perceptions of women. Her writings not only reflect her personal artistic vision but also play a critical role in the broader development of feminist ekphrasis during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, signifying a significant shift in the representation of women's experiences in literature. Despite growing up without a formal education, she was a self-taught scholar who managed to educate herself after marrying German merchant Jurgen Edward Pfieffer in 1850. Seven years after her marriage, she began to publish her works, and it appears that her husband was supportive and significantly helpful in connecting her with influential literary groups. During her lifetime, Pfeiffer was engaged in poetry, art, and social writing. Pfeiffer was significantly involved in feminist issues, particularly in advocating for women's rights to education, work, and independence. She played an active role in the "Society for Promoting the Employment of Women" in 1859, which aimed to provide employment opportunities for women when their roles were strictly limited to the domestic

sphere. From the 1870s until her death, Pfeiffer published eight volumes of poetry. In 1874, Jurgen Pfeiffer sent critic Matthew Arnold a copy of Pfeiffer's work titled *Gerard's Monument and Other Poems,* where Arnold showed his appreciation by stating: 'I have to thank you for sending me Mrs. Pfeiffer's poems, which I have from time to time noticed in the *Spectator* and always with pleasure. Believe me' (Qtd. by McGann and Riess 72). Another reviewer in the *Daily Telegraph* expressed his admiration of her work, stating:

> It is refreshing to come on a volume of pure and simple poetry, such as *Gerard's Monument* by Emily Pfeiffer, which had undoubted claims to high praise in these 'degenerate days' of poetic inspiration. Mrs. Pfeiffer is really a poetess… The volume is full of beauty; one sure to be delightedly perused by those who can appreciate true poetic feeling and genuine unrestrained expression. (Kegan 1)

Looking at this reviewer's exact terms when showing appreciation for Pfeiffer and her poetic work with a contemporary lens, it is interesting to note the subtle yet distinct way he emphasised Pfeiffer's role in the literary sphere. Describing her work as "pure and simple" and "full of beauty" supports the high standing and appreciation she received for producing poetry at the time. The high regard for Pfeiffer, however, was undermined by the reviewer's characterisation of her as a "poetess," a term that positioned her within the traditionally gendered representation, solidifying her status across the divide between female and male poets of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Though the reviewer intended to recognise her as a literary icon of her time, she was still limited to the traditional role of the woman's sphere: 'Mrs. Pfeiffer is really a poetess...' (Kegan 1). This limitation was also observed in previous successful and prominent nineteenth-century female poets, who were often relegated to the position of a poet laureate of their time, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. This aligns with what contemporary critic Susan Brown (2000) asserts as a 'commodified aestheticism that frequently conflates the woman poet's body with her literary corpus', claiming that the woman poet or "poetess" serves as the mere inspiration and vision for poetry rather than perceiving her as the creator of poems in the Victorian period (92).

Brown's assertion about the distinctly gendered and limiting representation of Pfeiffer's poetry is further supported by the highly critical and negative feedback Pfeiffer has received during her time. This point is illustrated in a review published in *The Times* regarding Pfeiffer's early work, *Gerard's Monument,* which states: '*Gerard's Monument* is

a metrical romance, full of fancy and feeling. Mrs. Pfeiffer has caught something of the plaintiveness and simplicity of the old ballads, but her verse also has a distinct impress of its author's own individuality…' ("Female Poets" 1874). The reviewer, Frederic Rowton, characterises Pfeiffer's poetry as "full of fancy and feeling," highlighting her talent while placing her work within the stereotypical view of feminine writing that is often perceived as lacking literary quality and value. Therefore, Rowton suggests that Pfeiffer's gender seems to influence the perception of her work: he comments that 'her verse has a distinct impress of its author's own individuality,' implying that her poetry may not stand on its own without her gender impacting its interpretation. This raises questions about whether her work is given the respect and representation it deserves, independent of her sex. Rowton also adopts a deeply misogynistic stance, articulating a narrow perspective on the 'female mind.' He argues that, in his view, women are incapable of producing poetry that matches the depth and quality typically associated with male poets. This perspective not only undermines the significant contributions of female writers throughout literary history but also perpetuates the stereotypes about gender and creativity during the nineteenth century, stating:

> Poetry is the conflict of the elements of our being. When Shakespeare, or Milton, or Byron, or Wordsworth writes this conflict seems as much in the order of nature as a storm at sea, whereas female poetry… is too apt to give us the idea of a desperate attempt to stir a storm in a teacup… Whatever is said, the fact remains that the female mind has seldom or never produced poetry of the first order… Women have tried and they have failed – because it was not in them. No disabilities of education have intervened… Ploughmen and apothecaries' boys may thrill mankind, but it is thousand to one that the most cultivated woman in the world will set us yawning if she takes to writing verse. It is women who inspire the best poetry in the world; how, then, can it be expected that they should write it…? ('Female Poets' 1874)

Pfeiffer and women poets' work demonstrate how critics often diminish their originality, viewing them mainly as sources of inspiration rather than creators. The reviewer claims, 'The fact remains that the female mind has seldom or never produced poetry of the first order... It is women who inspire the best poetry in the world; how, then, can it be expected that they should write it?'.

Armstrong (1996) observes that this reaction exposes a notable 'uneasiness' about women's creative potential (320). Such discomfort is reflected in the idea that women have a specific role in art, with the statement 'It is women who inspire the best poetry in the world' implying they are primarily muse-like figures rather than artists. This is reinforced by the

question, ‘How, then, can it be expected that they [women poets] should write it?’ which underscores the portrayal of female poets as muse objects for male poets, suggesting their poetry is of lesser quality and describing their attempts as ‘setting us yawning’. Pfeiffer challenges these assertions, arguing that they dismiss the intelligence and creative talent of women poets. In a letter to the journal, Pfeiffer responded:

> As a woman I cannot but lift up a protesting voice against any attempt to close ‘our case’, while every day is bringing fresh witnesses into action... That we can be speculated about now in this advanced stage of the world’s history more as if we were some extinct species than beings who stood side by side with man from the beginning, is in itself a striking result of that tyranny of circumstances which has retarded female development... Every authoritative announcement of a woman’s inherent disqualifications for the highest labours of the mind retards the issue, which time has still to resolve. (Qtd. by Armstrong 494)

Pfeiffer’s statement reflects the persistent struggle against the limitations imposed by patriarchal literary and social structures that hinder women’s creativity and poetic endeavours. Her protest against the perception of women as an “extinct species” rather than as intellectual equals to men aligns with the broader feminist arguments of the period, which sought to challenge the “tyranny of circumstances” that hindered female intellectual and creative development in the nineteenth century. Pfeiffer’s assertion that focusing on a ‘woman’s inherent disqualifications for the highest labours of the mind’ hinders progress further, exemplifying this tension, where she acknowledges the prevailing biases while actively resisting them. Angela Leighton’s (1992) comment aligns with Armstrong’s observations on women’s poetic agency, emphasising how female poets navigated their roles within a literary culture that sought to categorise them through sentimentality rather than intellect. Leighton states that Victorian women poets ‘wrote against the heart, resisting the assumption that poetry was naturally the language of feeling for a woman’ (4). This notion connects with Pfeiffer’s critique of the “tyranny of circumstances” that “retarded female development”, where Pfeiffer, like other women poets of her time, was pushing back against a literary culture that viewed women as objects of speculation and inspiration rather than active intellectual participants. This perspective intersects with the ekphrastic framework, where Pfeiffer’s protest about women being “speculated about” as if they were passive subjects rather than active participants mirrors the concept of feminist ekphrasis and how women poets attempted to: ‘rewrite the visual tradition, to speak back to the images that had so long fixed them in place’ (Leighton 137).

I believe that Pfeiffer expands her stance beyond traditional ekphrastic boundaries by criticising male-dominated structures that govern artistic and intellectual representation. She emphasises the significance of the female perspective and her portrayal of what she observes. This relates to her assertion that the female subject can assert herself in visual representations that transcend the divisions between visual and verbal, masculine and feminine, saying:

> The lion has so long been the painter, that he is apt too wholly to ignore the aspect which his favourite subject may take from the point of view of the lioness. If the latter will sometimes tell the truth, and tell, not what she thinks she ought to see, but of what she really sees, many an intellectual picture which has hitherto satisfied the sense of mankind, may be found to be somewhat out of focus. (Qtd. by Olverson 28)

Pfeiffer's analogy of the lion as the painter and the lioness as the neglected but perceptive observer highlights the inherent bias in representation—whether in visual art, literature, or cultural narratives—where the dominant perspective has long been male. By asserting that the lioness has a different yet equally valid way of seeing, Pfeiffer steps outside the conventional ekphrastic framework, bringing forth a mode of representation that acknowledges and centres the female gaze. Pfeiffer suggests that the artistic "truths" that have long been accepted are, in fact, "somewhat out of focus" when viewed from a female perspective, aligning with feminist reworkings of feminist ekphrasis that sought to reposition women as subjects rather than objects of artistic and poetic contemplation. Pfeiffer also asserts that the lioness [woman] must tell "not what she thinks she ought to see, but what she really sees," thereby directly rejecting the roles of passivity that women as poets and muses often inhabit. Therefore, Pfeiffer's statement acts not only as a critique of traditional ekphrasis but also serves as a call to action: to realign artistic and poetic vision through the eyes of the woman resisting the passive role she is assigned.

1. “To E. Burne Jones, On His Picture of the Annunciation” (1886):

Figure 14. “Annunciation”, Edward Burne-Jones (1879)

Pfeiffer’s ekphrastic poem, “To E. Burne-Jones on His Picture of the Annunciation” (1886) responds to Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones's (1833-1898) 1879 painting *The Annunciation*. It was published in her collection *Sonnets and Songs* in 1880. Although Pfeiffer also wrote another ekphrastic piece called “Suggested by the Picture of the Annunciation by E. Burne Jones,” published in the same year, I focus on “To E. Burne-Jones" because of its direct engagement with the painter. Pfeiffer asserts a dialogue with the artist, particularly concerning the depiction of the female subject, creating a conversation between the painter and the figure he painted. Pfeiffer’s poetic response does not describe the painting

in a traditional ekphrastic manner; rather than dwelling on visual details, the poem reinterprets the scene by focusing on Mary's inner experience. The poem's title, "To E. Burne-Jones on His Picture of the Annunciation," directly addresses the artist rather than merely his work. This approach suggests a dialogic relationship with the male painter, rather than simply offering a passive interpretation of the painting, where addressing the painter in the title also suggests that Pfeiffer is asserting herself as a critic rather than a mere observer. Pfeiffer engages with the painting not as a fixed image but as something that can be responded to and reinterpreted, subtly critiquing the way that Burne-Jones depicted the image of the Annunciation and showing that her own poetic voice offers an alternative reading of it. By directly engaging with the image of Mary in the painting, Pfeiffer does not appear to be celebrating Burne-Jones's artistic vision; instead, she seems to speak not only *about* the artwork but also *beyond* it, foregrounding the lived experience of the female subject rather than the male artist's perspective. The poem begins:

> Thou so to deepest heart the hope divine
> Hast taken, that it blossoms forth anew;
> And lo! A vision opens on our view--
> A Virgin other than of Judah's line.
> No maiden waking to the golden shine,
> The spring-tide sun of joy undreamt, undue;
> This maid hath known to wait and learnt to sue--
> A weary woman watching for a sign.
>
> The burthen of the world is on her heart,
> Her eyes have seen its sorrow, wept its sin;
> She heedeth not the angel for her part,
> Feeling the witness of the life within:
> The hope grown quick, the miracle of birth,
> The living love that shall redeem the earth. (Pfeiffer, "To E. Burne-Jones on His Picture of the Annunciation" 1-14)

The painting depicts two ethereal central figures: a youthful Virgin Mary and the angel Gabriel, with olive tree branches encircling the Virgin. Her expression is one of passive acceptance, reflecting her reaction upon hearing that she will bear Jesus Christ. The arches and background surrounding the figures in the painting reflect Burne-Jones's fascination with Italian architecture, which he developed during his fourth visit to Italy in 1873. Additionally, the style resembles that of Renaissance painter Fra Angelico (1395-1455), where both Burne-Jones's and Fra Angelico's paintings feature similar arches and enclosed spaces that surround

the figures of Mary and the angel. The painting was displayed at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1879. It received varying responses, with some critics dismissing it, such as the *Illustrated London News* saying, 'As regards to the Annunciation... for an artist of our day to pretend to be inspired by the ignorant pictures and to see with the untaught eyes of the painters of the fourteenth or the fifteenth century, is too absurd to bear reflection' (*Illustrated London News* 1879, 415). Other critics have described the painting as 'delightful' and showcased 'the revived Renaissance' (*Times*, 1879, 3).

The influence of the Italian style is evident in Burne-Jones's work, particularly during his visits to the Galleria degli Uffizi, where he sketched a small representation of a figure from Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat*. Another important factor that shaped Burne-Jones's depiction of the Virgin in his painting is art critic Walter Pater's 1870 essay "A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli" published in the *Fortnightly Review*. In his essay, Pater discusses how Botticelli depicted his Madonnas as feeling 'dejected' by the 'intolerable honour of their destiny' and 'perpetually saddened by the looming presence of the great things from which they shrink' (157-158). The painting reflects this sentiment, with the Virgin's face looking sombre and "dejected," a mood Burne-Jones aimed to depict in his art. This visual detail contrasts with Pfeiffer's ekphrastic poem, where she directly questions the notions of these elements. The poem begins:

> Thou so to deepest heart the hope divine
> Hast taken, that it blossoms forth anew;
> And lo! A vision opens on our view –
> A Virgin other than of Judah's line. (lines 1-4)

Traditional Annunciation scenes often depict the Virgin Mary as a passive, humble, and obedient figure, receiving the angel's message with submission and reverence. Pfeiffer, however, transforms Mary into an active, weary figure who has suffered and understands the burdens of the world. The first two lines: "Thou so to deepest heart the hope divine / Hast taken, that it blossoms forth anew," address a second person, "Thou," presumably referring to the Virgin Mary. However, this reference also suggests a more abstract and universal presence. These lines illustrate the internal and profound sense of the divine that Mary has embraced within her "deepest heart," emphasising the emotional and spiritual depth she possesses rather than highlighting her external image. The internal experience of the Virgin is likened to a seed planted within her, implying that divinity is alive and growing inside her,

much like the process of pregnancy. The phrase “blossoms forth anew” emphasises themes of fertility and renewal, highlighting the physical and tactile experience. This suggests that the Virgin is not only creating something new and vibrant within her but is also actively internalising and transforming the divine message. Rather than merely experiencing it on a spiritual level, she embodies this transformation, making it a tangible, bodily experience. Looking at the following lines introduces us to a vision of a new and different Mary: “And lo! A vision opens on our view-/ A Virgin other than of Judah’s line” (lines 3-4). The exclamation “And lo!” evokes Biblical language, framing the poem as a prophetic revelation. This establishes Pfeiffer's vision, conveying a re-envisioning narrative of the Virgin Mary for the reader to interpret.

Through her own words, she offers a different representation of the religious scene. The following lines depart from the conventional, sacred image of Mary as the Jewish Virgin and bring forth “A Virgin other than Judah’s line”. This immediately marks a departure from tradition, suggesting that Pfeiffer’s Mary differs from the one represented in religious and artistic canon, redefining the narrative into a more universal and human sense that goes beyond the known and into a new reinterpretation of female subjectivity:

> No maiden waking to the golden shine,
> The spring-tide sun of joy undreamt, undue;
> This maid hath known to wait and learnt to sue –
> A weary woman watching for a sign. (lines 5-8)

The following lines illustrate how Pfeiffer contrasts two versions of Mary: the traditional Virgin, who is represented as a “maiden waking to the golden shine” of divine revelation, reflecting the conventional imagery of the Annunciation, which often depicts Mary as distressed, startled, innocent, or passive when receiving the heavenly grace. Pfeiffer re-imagines Mary as “*This* maid,” representing an experienced and patient being who is not naive or innocent of suffering. The phrase “hath known to wait and learnt to sue” suggests an image of a woman who has endured uncertainty and looked for meaning. The final line, “A weary woman watching for a sign”, reframes Mary as an active participant in the divine process, where rather than simply waiting for the angel’s message, she is already expecting something, positioning her as a woman of experience and anticipation, aligning with feminist ekphrasis that reclaims Mary’s voice and interiority, shifting her from the traditional passive figure of divine selection to a knowledgeable woman with agency and experience.

The first two lines from the second stanza continue the shift into the other Mary's internal perspective: "The burthen of the world is on her heart, / Her eyes have seen its sorrow, wept its sin" (lines 9-10). Here, Mary is depicted as no longer the untouched and naive virgin traditionally portrayed in religious paintings. Instead, she is a woman who bears the immense weight of the world's suffering. The phrase "burthen of the world" conveys both an emotional and physical burden, linking Mary to the responsibility of bringing her child, Jesus, into the world. This also reflects her awareness of the struggles that exist in the world that she is introducing her child to. The following line, "Her eyes have seen its sorrow, wept its sin", portrays Mary as an aware witness to human suffering, which counters how the Virgin is represented in the imagery of the Annunciation as an enclosed, innocent, unaware young woman. Pfeiffer here brings forth the haptic and tactile element into the poem, where the figure of Mary is represented as a woman who feels deeply, both emotionally and physically, where the focus shifts from the visual spectacle to touch, feeling, and embodied experience, making Mary's internal perspective central to the ekphrastic representation. The lines "She heedeth not the angel for her part, / Feeling the witness of the life within" (lines 11-12) further illustrate how Pfeiffer's representation of Mary moves further away from the traditional image of the obedient and passive Virgin Mary, where instead of reverently listening to the angel's proclamation, Mary ignores him: "She heedeth not the angel". This illustrates how Mary did not need the angel to tell her what she already knew internally about the life growing inside her: "Feeling the witness of the life within" (line 12). This line acts as a distinct example of haptic ekphrasis, where the revelation is shifted from the spoken word (the angel's prophecy) to bodily sensation (the quickening of the unborn child) within Mary. The poem concludes with the two lines: "The hope grown quick, the miracle of birth, / The living love that shall redeem the earth" (lines 13-14), highlighting the emphasis on the miracle of birth as a profoundly human and female act rather than a purely divine one. The phrase "hope grown quick" references the moment of 'quickening', where the mother feels fetal movement, representing an intimate and maternal awareness of life within her. Rather than centring the divinity of Christ as the divine saviour, the poem suggests that Mary's maternal love "shall redeem the earth", further challenging patriarchal Christian narratives, offering an alternative reinterpretation of Mary as a woman of experience, endurance, and haptic knowledge.

2. “Hope” (1888):

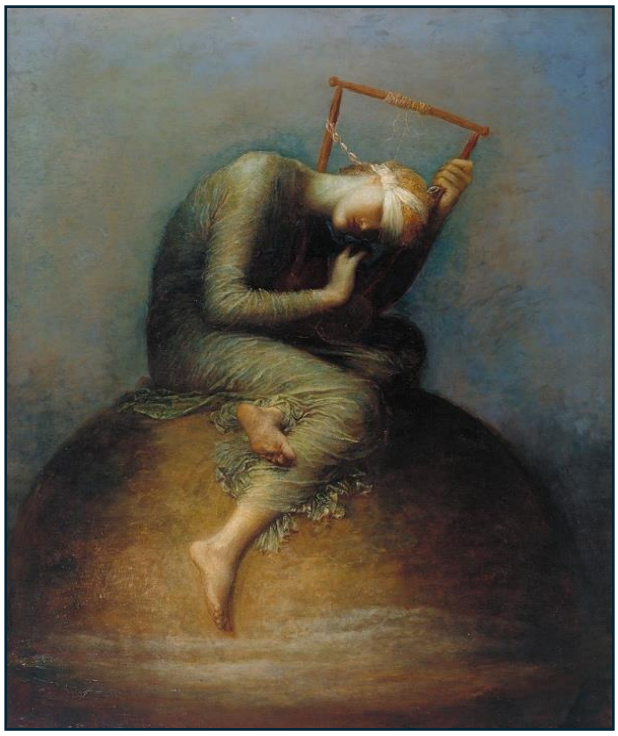

Figure 15. “Hope”, George Frederic Watts (1886)

Pfeiffer's ekphrastic poem “Hope,” published in 1888, explores feminist themes and tactile ekphrasis by responding to G. F. Watts' allegorical painting *Hope* (1886). This poem transforms the meaning of Watts' artwork from one of passive endurance to active interpretation and renewal. In Watts' painting, the figure of Hope is depicted as blindfolded, seated on the world, and playing a lute with only one string remaining. This imagery represents fragile optimism in the face of despair and hopelessness. However, Pfeiffer's poem reinterprets this portrayal, shifting from a static visual representation to a dynamic narrative of struggle, renewal, and transformation. The painting features muted colours and depicts a leaning figure labelled ‘Hope.’ However, some critics argue that it resembles a figure of ‘despair’ due to Watts’ portrayal and the emotions it evokes (Chesterton 48). The early reception of the painting was notably mixed, highlighting the varied perspectives of its audience. Critic Theodore Child, writing for the *Fortnightly Review* in 1886, characterised *Hope* as a ‘ghastly and apocalyptic allegory,’ suggesting that the painting conveyed a sense of despair and foreboding (789). Conversely, French critic Claude Philips offered a more nuanced perspective, describing the work as ‘an exquisite concept, insufficiently realised due

to a failed execution' (76). His comment highlights the painting's possible distinctiveness, while also noting its technical shortcomings. Watts elaborated on the meaning behind the figure in the painting, claiming that '*Hope* need not mean expectancy. It suggests here that the music can come from the remaining chord (Qtd. by Tromans 80). The figure of Hope in the painting appears visually contained and constricted. This figure is reminiscent of Rossetti's painting of the siren discussed in earlier chapters, where the woman leans against a musical instrument, her eyes distant or, in this case, blindfolded, preventing her from engaging with the viewer's gaze.

Pfeiffer begins with an epigraph that showcases her ekphrastic response before she explores her poem. The epigraph serves as an additional reinterpretation, allowing her to engage more deeply with the painting and reveal its symbolic meaning. This creates a double ekphrastic approach to her depiction of the painting, *Hope*. She does not merely describe the painting; she actively engages with the painting through the epigraph:

> After the picture by Mr G. F. Watts, R. A., --at the Grosvenor Gallery, 1886, -- in which Hope is represented drooping over a lute, of which all the strings but one are broken. She is seated on the globe; the time is night; the darkness is pierced by a single star; the eyes of Hope are bandaged. (Pfeiffer 380)

Showcasing her ability to interpret beyond the image in the painting, Pfeiffer sets the stage for her poetic interpretation, creating a feeling of experiencing both the painting and the following ekphrastic poem simultaneously through this approach. The poem begins:

> Hope, thou hast wandered far into the night,
> Thy weariness has made the world its throne
> While all thy life hands trembling on the tone
> Which stands thy darkened eyes in lieu of light.
> Thy lute has felt the storm's extreme despite,
> And but one string whence music has not flown
> Is left to it, one string wherewith alone
> To sound the spirit's depths or prove its height.
>
> Oh win for us the secret of that tense
> Unbroken midmost chord! It may recall
> The scattered tones, nay, haply may surprise
> Thee with a vision to inform the sense;
> And gift thee out of wreck and wrong withal
> To see the city of God to music rise. (Pfeiffer, "Hope" 1-14)

The first two lines highlight the movement and embodiment that the figure of Hope has in the poem, where Pfeiffer directly addresses her and sets her movement in motion: “Hope, thou hast wandered far into the night, / Thy weariness has made the world its throne” (lines 1-2). The figure of Hope is not seen as a static or fixed icon of optimism; instead, Pfeiffer interprets her as in motion, wandering and searching through darkness. This contrasts with Watts’ painting, where Hope is visibly frozen to a seated position on the globe. “Thy weariness has made the world its throne” -- Hope’s weariness is not just presented as an emotion but a physical presence that dominates the world. Unlike traditional male-dominated ekphrasis, which tends to idealise or aestheticise female suffering, Pfeiffer’s Hope is physically engaged with exhaustion and weariness, similar to the Virgin in The Annunciation, making it tangible and haptic rather than merely symbolic. Conveying the paradoxical relationship between the experience of palpable suffering and the positioning of the subject as a sufferer, the female subject here evokes a ‘technology of feeling’, wherein feeling is defined as ‘*both* touch and emotion, as tactility and what *exceeds* tactility’, as described by Ehnenn (89). In the following lines, the haptic element is addressed further, where Hope’s experience is not merely seen but felt: “While all thy life hands trembling on the tone / Which stands thy darkened eyes in lieu of light” (lines 3-4); Hope is felt through the trembling of her hands and not through sight. This illustrates Pfeiffer’s’s departure from traditional ekphrasis that focused on sight and visual imagery, as seen in the phrase: “Which stands thy darkened eyes in lieu of light”. Hope cannot see (her eyes are covered, as in Watts’ painting), so she must rely on touch and sound to navigate her condition. This emphasis on haptic experience (feeling, hearing, touching) over the visual aligns with feminist resistance to the male gaze, which historically objectifies and aestheticises women’s suffering.

Pfeiffer depicts the lute as a symbol of survival and endurance: “The lute has felt the storm’s extreme despite, / And but one string whence music has not flown” (lines 5-6). The lute is personified (“The lute has *felt*”), but its suffering is described in terms of touch and sensation, where it has ‘felt’ rather than being depicted as damaged or affected by suffering. The phrase “but one string” depicts the lute as a symbol of resilience and survival, where, although it was nearly destroyed, it still holds one string of potential. This rejects the idea of total despair and suggests agency in Hope’s ability to create something new from what remains after despair and destruction. The lines “Is left to it, one string wherewith alone / To

sound the spirit's depths or prove its height" (lines 7-8) illustrate that the lute is no longer merely a passive object (as it is in Watts' painting); instead, it becomes an instrument of expression. Hope's remaining string is both a constraint and an opportunity, where it can be used to "sound the spirit's depth or prove its height", reinforcing the transformative power of sound and touch over sight. The second stanza begins with the speaker directly addressing Hope, "Oh win for us the secret of that tense, / Unbroken midmost chord!" (lines 9-10). Pfeiffer appears to be urging Hope to interpret her remaining string and to persevere by playing the single remaining string and eliciting a sound from it for the collective "for *us,*" witnessing Hope's movement and agency. Pfeiffer's direct engagement with the figure of Hope in the painting, rather than merely describing her in the poem, recalls Loizeaux's approach of 'envoicing the silent image' and beseeching it to speak for itself rather than being held within the confines of frozen and voiceless representation (23). The concluding lines integrate the elements of sound and music as tools of new ekphrastic creation that bring change and transformation from despair into redemption that is not merely seen but created through sound, touch, and perseverance:

> The scattered tones, nay, haply may surprise
> Thee with a vision to inform the sense;
> And gift thee out of wreck and wrong withal
> To see the city of God to music rise. (lines 13-16)

Hope's vision is no longer something external imposed upon her by a divine force or a male artist; rather, it is now self-generated through her own sensory experiences. Pfeiffer expresses this when she says, "Thee with a vision to inform the sense; / And gift thee out of wreck and wrong withal" (lines 13-14). Instead of waiting for salvation from outside sources, Hope now has agency. Her engagement with the last remaining strength allows her to restore what was lost, taking her from a state of fragmentation into a state of creation. The phrase, "To see the city of God to music rise," suggests that the broken lute in the painting symbolises loss. However, Pfeiffer inverts this meaning by envisioning music as a generative force that allows new creations to emerge from destruction. This transformation enables Hope to actively build something new from the remnants, redefining her role and making her a creator rather than merely a symbol of suffering.

In both "Hope" and "To E. Burne-Jones, On His Picture of the Annunciation," Emily Pfeiffer emphasises the sensory and emotional aspects of female experience through poetic

language that highlights touch and feeling, thereby challenging the dominance of visual authority. Her tactile ekphrasis opposes the detached, objectifying gaze often found in male artists' portrayals of women, instead emphasising tactile intimacy and emotion that go beyond mere sensation, embodying presence and emotional connection. By moving away from a strictly descriptive ekphrastic approach, Pfeiffer's poetic voices offer an alternative portrayal of female subjects, focusing on inner emotional worlds and sharing a sensory connection with the figures in the artwork. Pfeiffer proposes alternative perspectives rooted in feminine modes of perception and understanding. Her reinterpretation of iconic images, such as the Annunciation, challenges the power of visual authority and presents the female figure as an active participant, both within and outside the frame. This tactile reinterpretation sets the stage for the feminist ekphrastic poetry of Rosamund Marriott Watson, whose work similarly critiques and reshapes the gendered dynamics of representing women, but in a more direct and critical engagement with the painted images, complementing Pfeiffer's tactile depiction of female subjectivity.

II. Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911):

Rosamund Marriott Watson (1860-1911) is a lesser-known female writer from the late nineteenth century who also incorporated art and imagery into her writing. To navigate gender bias and the stigma of being a two-time divorcee, she published her writing under various pseudonyms, such as R. Armytage and Graham R. Tomson. This strategy helped her publish more of her work and reach a wider audience, but it also led to a decline in her work and prominence over time. Throughout her life, she made significant contributions to various journals, including *The Pall Mall Gazette, The Scots Observer, The Yellow Book*, and *The Academy*. Her poetry frequently focused on the depiction of female figures, offering a distinctive perspective on femininity and the female form. She was also celebrated for her physical beauty and charm, which, combined with her use of male-coded pseudonyms, positioned her uniquely at the intersection of masculinity and femininity in her work. Linda Hughes (1995) described Marriott Watson as embodying a 'combined beauty and the beast, a monster of domestic and maternal affection' (95). This imagery connects with the way a selection of Marriott Watson's poems features themes of feminine monstrosity and transformation that appear to bridge the divide between masculine and feminine, as well as fear and seduction. An example of this is found in Marriott Watson's poem "The Ballad of the Bird-Bride" (1889), which explores the metamorphosis of a seagull into a woman. Another of her poems that features this theme is "A Ballad of the Were-Wolf" (1891), which narrates the tale of a woman transforming into a werewolf. These works showcase her fascination with shape-shifting female figures, a theme that is also present in her ekphrastic poem, "The Depths of the Sea, After Burne-Jones," published in *The Academy* in 1886. Edward Burne-Jones' painting inspired Marriott Watson's poem, creating an ekphrastic dialogue with themes and motifs akin to those found in Pre-Raphaelite depictions of sirens, sibyls, and shapeshifters. This suggests a shared exploration of these themes and motifs. The idea of shapeshifting ekphrasis is especially relevant here because Marriott Watson uses it in her two poems, "'The Depths of the Sea', After Burne-Jones" (1886) and "Le Mariage de Convenance—After! (Orchardson)" (1886). In these poems, the concept of shapeshifting and transformation is more distinctly explored within an ekphrastic framework, as they depict female subjects being transformed through the perspectives of women speakers. This approach alters their depiction from the original paintings, going beyond visual

representation. In her article, “Shape-Shifting as a Quest for Liberation, Empowerment, and Justice” (2016), Safaa Abdel Nasser defines the motif of shapeshifting as a literary mode that ‘gives vent to all repressed desires and inhibited animal instincts that need to be compensated for as well as an outlet for forbidden fantasies’ (1). Similarly, ekphrasis, at its core, is an act of translation or interpretation from the visual to the verbal; however, in this case, ekphrasis can serve more than merely describing the image. It can be used as a mode of transformation and embodiment, reshaping the subject depicted in the image. In this way, ekphrasis becomes a shapeshifting process, where the original image is repurposed, reimagined, or subverted. The artwork changes shape in the poem, just as the poem may also reshape its own subjectivity in response. The fluidity of the poetic speaker’s gaze, rather than assuming a fixed viewing position, allows it to move between gazing, being gazed at, and merging with the figure in the artwork, emphasising empathy, embodiment, or identity.

1. “‘The Depths of the Sea’, After Burne-Jones” (1886):

Figure 16. “The Depths of the Sea”, Edward Burne-Jones (1887)

In a letter describing his only painting exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1886, Burne-Jones stated, 'I think a picture of black water with something vague floating in it wouldn't take long. It would be "suggestive," and people like that' (Qtd. by Munro et al. 77). The painting was titled *The Depths of the Sea*. The central figures in the painting are the drowned mariner and the siren, who is attached to his lifeless body. This artwork captures the ambiguous and mysterious imagery of the siren. This figure is often portrayed as enticing men to their downfall, much like the depiction in Rossetti's poem and painting, "Sea-Spell". However, in Burne-Jones' rendition, the siren has already ensnared her prey, illustrating the moment of the siren's violence in the painting and the accompanying ekphrastic poem. The painting elicited various responses from critics and fellow Pre-Raphaelite members, such as F.G. Stephens, who described the painting as a 'new and difficult subject,' where he also showed his admiration of the 'wicked triumph gleaming in her eyes while she smiles over victory' (Qtd. by Bristow 523). Julia Cartwright (1894) also described the painting as:

> A mermaid, with a strange smile on her lips, is seen dragging her mortal lover down to her home in the rocky, column and shell-strewn caves of the deep, all unconscious that the breath has left his body and that the manly form she clasps in her arms is growing cold in her embrace. (24)

The interpretations of the siren portray her as an enigmatic and dangerous figure that embodies a classic *femme fatale* image, characterised as a 'seducer and destroyer of men' (Allen 1). Burne-Jones' painting presents a distinct interpretation of the *femme fatale* archetype, which Marriott Watson seeks to reconfigure through an ekphrastic perspective. In this reimagining, the roles of subject and object are reversed. The siren, instead of being passively described, takes on an active role, while the mariner, who is typically the observer, is rendered powerless and aestheticised. The poem begins:

> Yea, draw him gently through the strange sea-ways
> Down through the dim, green, water whispering.
> Thy cold lips have not kissed so fair a thing
> As this young mariner for many days.
> So well he sleeps, he will not wake to praise
> Thy wan bright loveliness, nor feel thee cling
> Around him, neither smile to hear thee sing,
> Though thou did'st lure him hither with thy lays.
> The bubbles sigh and sparkle overhead,
> How white thou art, But he is paler still,

Pale with despair of young days forfeited.
Smiling thou bear'st him to thy chill green bed.
Of brightest, bitterest triumph take thy fill,
Thou hast his body, but the soul has fled.
(Marriott Watson, "'The Depths of the Sea' After Burne-Jones" lines 1-14)

In the first lines, Marriott Watson appears to be engaging with active ekphrasis, transforming the stillness of the image into movement: "Yea, draw him gently through the strange sea-ways / Down the dim, green, water whispering" (lines 1-2). The siren is no longer a passive figure; instead, she actively draws the mariner down into the depths. The phrase "strange sea-ways" evokes an alien, liminal space, emphasising a world separate from the structures of the painting. The speaker introduces a tactile element to the poem with phrases like "dim," "green," and "water whispering," which evoke a multisensory experience involving colour (green), sound (whispering), and motion (water shifting). Together, these elements create an immersive and mysterious environment. In the following lines, Marriott Watson further challenges the male gaze by emphasising the siren's perspective and her unfulfilled desires: "Thy cold lips have not kissed so fair a thing / As this young mariner for many days" (lines 3-4). Instead of focusing on the siren's physical beauty and aesthetic depiction, the poem highlights her "cold lips," a tactile detail that portrays her as a force of nature rather than merely an object of male desire. This inversion continues with the representation of the mariner as "so fair a thing," where the male subject is transformed into an aestheticised object for the Siren's own fulfilment, reinforcing the ekphrastic reversal of the gaze that Marriott Watson implements in this poem. Additionally, the phrase "for many days" implies longing and predation, shifting the power dynamic. The Siren is not merely decorative, but an assertive agent, complicating the narrative by performing a role different from the traditionally passive female figure in art.

The following lines illustrate the ironic role of praise and admiration, where the female subject appears to be unable to achieve this admiration from the (male) object of her desires, showcasing another way that Marriott Watson broke away from traditional ekphrasis:

So well he sleeps, he will not wake to praise
Thy wan bright loveliness, nor feel thee cling
Around him, neither smile to hear thee sing,
Though thou did'st lure him hither with thy lays. (lines 5-8)

Here, the siren's haptic presence is intensified, where she clings to the mariner, yet he does not feel or react to her. This inversion further emphasises the power shift, where she appears to dominate the physical space, constricting and clinging to the mariner, even though his emotional and mental absence, as well as his lack of response, undermine her traditional role as an object of male admiration and attention. The phrase "lure him hither with thy lays" directly challenges the concept of male agency in narrative traditions. Marriott Watson highlights the siren's voice as a powerful force but also critiques the expectation that women's songs—and, by extension, their voices—must serve only as temptations or dangers. Resisting the siren's song reflects a deeply gendered concern, revealing the masculine fear of a female figure whose voice can provoke such a strong reaction. Consequently, the notion that sirens use their voices to entice men and to confront them underscores a male anxiety about allowing women to speak publicly. This is exemplified in the representation of sirens, illustrating the dangers of a woman's voice that defies patriarchal gender norms (Warner 399). The lines, "The bubbles sigh and sparkle overhead, / How white thou art, But he is paler still" (lines 9-10) heighten the haptic element of breath and sound through "the bubbles sigh and sparkle", engaging the reader's sense of movement and sound. The comparison between the mariner's pallor and the siren's complexion highlights how Marriott Watson subverts aesthetic conventions. In nineteenth-century imagery, paleness and whiteness often evoke an image of ethereal and fragile beauty. However, Marriott Watson contrasts the siren's "wan bright loveliness" with the mariner's deathly pallor. This contrast emphasises the passive role of the dead mariner, who serves as an object, and the active, assertive nature of the siren within the ekphrastic tradition.

The depth of the feminist intervention is further highlighted in the final lines of the poem, where Marriott Watson appears to be undermining the male poetic tradition of noble sacrifice, framing the fate of the mariner in terms of loss rather than glory: "Pale with despair of young days fortified. / Smiling thou bear'st him to thy chill green bed" (lines 11-12). The siren's smile introduces an additional layer of irony that complicates her portrayal as a deadly monster. It suggests that she carries him "gently" to his death, highlighting a duality between seduction and destruction. She exists in a liminal space between these two representations, acting as both a predator and a nurturing force. Marriott Watson blurs the line between the conventional monstrous female who challenges patriarchal societal norms and a female

figure who asserts her own desires and voice. This portrayal transforms the male subject into a passive object, subverting traditional subject/object roles in this ekphrastic poem. The concluding lines of the poem capture the feminist challenge to traditional ekphrastic conventions: "Of brightest, bitterest triumph take thy fill, / Thou hast his body, but the soul has fled" (lines 13-14). The siren's victory is described as a "brightest, bitterest triumph," suggesting that her apparent success subverts the typical roles assigned to female subjects, such as the seductress or the saviour. In this context, the siren acts as a monstrous figure who blurs the lines between the conventional portrayals of femininity and masculinity. By taking on traits typically associated with a dominating, masculine force that claims what it desires, the siren challenges established gender boundaries and 'infringes upon the social sphere often linked to masculinity' (Andriano 6). The final assertion, "Thou hast his body, but the soul has fled," highlights the limitations of her possession. However, the siren physically holds the mariner, but he still escapes her grasp through the intangible nature of his soul. This subtly critiques the notion of female power defined solely by control over a male body, suggesting that true agency must go beyond material conquest.

In "'The Depths of the Sea', After Burne-Jones", Rosamund Marriott Watson employs a shapeshifting ekphrasis to reclaim the submerged female figure from passive, sensualised objecthood, presenting her through a lens of fluid agency and embodied transformation. The Siren, often portrayed as either monstrous or decorative, becomes a figure whose identity alternates between predator, mourner, and mother in the poem. This instability challenges the traditional, fixed representations of women prevalent in visual art and ekphrasis. The mariner's descent into the sea also symbolises transformation, shifting from an active agent to a passive object, and from life to an aestheticised death. This reversal highlights the fragility of masculine dominance within the ekphrastic tradition, as exemplified by the triumph of the female subject in the poem. Through the Siren's ambiguous victory, Marriott Watson develops a poetics of fluidity and inversion, aligning her ekphrastic approach with feminist efforts to contest static portrayals of women. Her tactile, shapeshifting ekphrasis not only reinterprets the painting but also dissolves boundaries, giving voice to what lies below the surface and reclaiming the image's space and the speaker's voice as sources of feminine strength. Marriott Watson challenges the traditional visual focus of ekphrasis by infusing her poem with tactile textures, as seen in the clinging limbs,

whispering waters, and cold kiss. These elements create a sensory dynamic between the subject and her environment. The reader is invited into a close, embodied perception of the female subject, moving beyond distant observation. This shifts away from the male gaze and establishes a feminist approach that emphasises embodied experience over detached viewing, thereby contesting the dominance of vision as a primarily masculine mode of representation. The poem can be read as a feminist response to the mythic and painterly tradition depicting women as either muses or monsters, vessels of male desire or its punishment. By writing from within the image rather than simply about it, Marriott Watson's poem enacts a feminist ekphrastic space that is shifting, sensual, and unstable.

2. "Le Mariage de Convenance—After! (Orchardson)" (1886):

Figure 17. "Le Mariage de Convenance", William Quiller Orchardson (1886)

Marriott Watson's ekphrastic poem, published in *The Academy* in 1886 under her pseudonym R. Armytage, responds to a domestic painting by William Quiller Orchardson (1832-1910) that addresses the theme of May-December or May-September marriages, an idiom that refers to a significant age gap in romantic relationships. This painting, titled *Mariage de Convenance—After*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1886 and is part of a series of works Orchardson created between 1884 and 1887. The series consists of three paintings that showcase his depiction of domestic and interior scenes while reflecting his views on the cultural issues surrounding marriages of convenience between older men and

much younger brides. This theme was extensively examined in nineteenth-century art and literature, highlighting it as both a challenge of the early nineteenth century and a recurring issue in the late Victorian era. Similar themes can be observed in other artworks, such as *Till Death Do Us Part* by Edmund Blair Leighton (1878) and *The Arranged Marriage* by Vasili Pukirev (1861), which prominently feature age-disparate marriages. Public reactions to these unions often sparked debates regarding the implications of such significant age gaps, raising concerns for both the bride and groom that extended beyond their marriage. In an 1845 text titled *The Midwife's Guide*, the subject of May-December or May-September marriages—particularly those of convenience—is discussed. The author notes that parents of young daughters frequently sought to marry their teenage daughters to wealthier, older gentlemen for financial gain. The text further elaborates on the disastrous outcomes that can arise from such marriages, often leading the young woman into a life of misery and dissatisfaction. He elaborates:

> This makes the woman (who still wants a husband, for the old miser is scarce the shadow of one) either to wish, or, may be, to contrive his death, to whom her parents thus, against her will, have yoked her; or else, to satisfy her natural inclinations, she throws herself into the arms of unlawful love: which might both have been prevented, had the greedy inconsiderate parents provided her with a suitable match. (145)

Orchardson's two paintings, *Le Mariage de Convenance* (1883) and *Le Mariage de Convenance—After!* (1886), display a connected scene that depicts the unhappiness and subsequent disappearance of the woman from the painting and her marital fate. In *Le Mariage de Convenance* (1883), the figures of the man and woman are separated, sitting at opposite ends of an elaborate dinner table. The young woman's gestures and body language reveal unhappiness, boredom, and discontent, while her older husband seems to be trying to attract her attention by leaning towards her. Stephen Kern (1998) describes this as, 'The husband presses against the table, as he is unable to do against his wife, while she has pushed away from the same table as she has no doubt pushed away from him in bed many times before' (384). The atmosphere of the painting evokes tenseness and rigidity, as seen by the faded and dim colour scheme that Orchardson uses in the painting. The narrative of the painting invites interpretation by the viewer, as noted by Walter Armstrong in 1895, who states that these scenes 'afford glimpses into the kaleidoscope of society' (56). This perspective highlights the prevalence of this social phenomenon in the nineteenth century and underscores how individuals were actively drawing attention to these issues.

In *Le Mariage de Convenance—After!* (1886), the much older husband is the central figure in the image. He is slouched in his chair, facing away from the table depicted in the previous scene, and his expression of dejection is evident as he stares into a cold fireplace. The only sign of the woman's presence is her portrait on the wall behind him, which is partially obscured by shadows. Both artworks provide insight into what Lauren Palmor (2016) described as 'anticlimactic and misguided matrimony' (206). Despite the gentleman appearing as the sorrowful victim, is it, in fact, the woman who lacks control over her own destiny in a patriarchal society and oftentimes has to resort to a marriage of convenience for her own stability in a society that is rife with 'corrupt economic forces' of the nineteenth century (Bristow 527). This theme is echoed in Marriott Watson's ekphrastic poem, "Le Mariage de Convenance—After!", where she suggests that both parties share the blame for their situation. However, the woman is likely to endure the consequences of this decision. In this poem, Marriott Watson employs feminist ekphrasis to shift the focus from the male subject's suffering to highlighting the perspective of the absent young woman, destabilising the traditional patriarchal narrative and emphasising her silent point of view. The poem begins:

> The spacious room seems bare
> And drear beyond compare,
> A man with sparse grey hair
> Sits grim and lonely,
> Brooding on sin and shame,
> His smirched and ruined name,
> Which was the most to blame?
> He? Or she only? (lines 1-8)

Marriott Watson's use of visual emptiness and spatial barrenness reflects the stark desolation within the painting. The adjectives "bare" and "drear" in the opening lines emphasise the emotional sterility between the husband and wife. The lines, "A man with sparse grey hair / Sits grim and lonely," provide a direct reference to the male figure in the painting. His physical description highlights his age and demeanour, with the words "grim and lonely" capturing his isolation. The following lines reveal the man's mental state as he sits, "Brooding on sin and shame, / His smirched and ruined name" (lines 5-6). This suggests he is deeply engaged in moral and internal reflection. The phrase "sin and shame" carries connotations of scandal, which brings forth Marriott Watson's subtle feminist critique: *his* name is tarnished

and destroyed, indicating that patriarchal society punishes him—but even more so, the woman. The term "smirched" evokes the idea of a stain or defilement, underscoring the tangible consequences of disgrace he faces. This hints at a 'scandalous' event occurring outside the painting's depiction, highlighting the absence that the poem captures. The rhetorical question in the lines "Which was the most to blame? / He? Or she only?" (lines 7-8) disrupts the male-centred ekphrastic approach, where Marriott Watson's speaker shifts the attention from him to *her* blame ("Or she only?"), revealing Marriott Watson's subtle feminist intervention. She draws attention to the gendered double standards in Victorian morality, where the use of "only" implies that, while both may be guilty of committing a marriage of convenience, the woman likely bears the heavier burden.

The second stanza illustrates the theme of entrapment, exploring how time affects the couple in a gendered manner. Each partner ages at a different rate, symbolising not just the physical differences but also the emotional and social disparities that exist between them. This contrasting ageing process serves to underscore the unequal experiences faced by each individual within the relationship, deepening the sense of confinement and highlighting the complexities of their shared existence:

> When June and Winter wed
> They shoe Time's steeds with lead;
> To love and laughter,
> To Life's full swirl and stir,
> Though years must bring to her
> Even a bitterer,
> More sordid, "After." (lines 9-15)

The metaphor of "June and Winter wed" illustrates a metaphor of unequal marriage, with youth (June) joined with old age (Winter), foreshadowing the inevitable mismatch between the age-disparate couple. The following line highlights how Time is personified as having "steeds", an allusion to the relentless pace of fate. However, time is weighed down ("shod with lead"), meaning that for the woman, time does not move freely but drags, suggesting the oppressive nature of such a marriage. The lines, "To love and laughter, / To Life's full swirl and stir" (lines 11-12) appear to contrast "love and laughter" (the expectations of a happy marriage) with "Life's full swirl and stir", which suggests not just activity but turmoil. The sensory richness of these two lines immerses the reader in the woman's emotional world and desires. Marriott Watson shifts the scope to focus directly on the woman instead of the

man, “Though years must bring to her” (not the man), highlighting a crucial and distinct aspect of the female experience and reclaiming agency in the ekphrastic process. The absence of the female figure is significant because it resists allowing the painting to dictate her representation. Instead, Marriott Watson gives voice to what the painting suppresses: the young wife’s emotional turmoil and the aftermath of a marriage of convenience. By centring her suffering, the poem exposes the human cost of such marriages and resists reducing the woman to a decorative, silent figure. Though she never speaks directly, her experience remains central in the poem, articulating what the painting leaves unsaid. The final lines evoke a sense of impending doom and increasing suffering of the woman over time, reinforcing a subtle feminist argument that while both suffer the consequences, *hers* will be worse: “Even bitterer, / More sordid, ‘After’” (lines 14-15). The phrase "More sordid" indicates a sense of degradation, which could refer to social disgrace, emotional despair, or even economic ruin. The final word, "After," enclosed in quotation marks, carries significant weight. It implies an unspeakable aftermath, a realm that transcends what is depicted in the painting, using this absence as a way to bring forth Marriott Watson’s feminist interjection. This ekphrastic gesture is significant because it acknowledges what the painting cannot portray: a feminist critique of the aftereffects of an empty and disparate marriage.

This chapter has explored how Emily Pfeiffer and Rosamund Marriott Watson used ekphrastic shapeshifting and haptic techniques in their poems to challenge dominant representations of the female figure in nineteenth-century visual traditions. By engaging with the works of Edward Burne-Jones and William Quiller Orchardson, Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson recreated the traditional ekphrastic dynamic between poem and painting, where, through their ekphrastic interpretation, they rejected the passive depiction of the female subject and reenvisioned the female figure with a feminist and transformative lens. Their poems reshape the visual narratives in the artworks and assert the agency of the female subject through their poetic voices. Pfeiffer’s “The Annunciation” and “Hope” exemplify an embodied and haptic form of feminist ekphrasis, one that highlights the elements of touch, sensation, and emotion over the visual element. In “The Annunciation”, Pfeiffer reimagines the iconic scene of divine visitation not as a moment of silent submission but as one charged with inner life, uncertainty, and sensory intensity. The poem embodies Mary’s represented subjectivity, destabilising the conventional representation trope of passivity and replacing it with a more nuanced emotional and physical experience that adds to the female subject’s

inner experience. The ekphrastic poem “Hope” also involves a tactile experience, enabling Pfeiffer to oppose the detached aesthetic portrayal typical of visual allegory by embedding female agency and perception within the poem's textures. At the same time, both poems highlight what can be identified as shapeshifting ekphrasis —a strategy that represents a transformative and shifting representation, resisting fixed and static interpretation. In “The Annunciation”, the poem shifts between third-person observation and inner embodiment, as if the speaker momentarily inhabits Mary’s inner experience. This not only dissolves the boundary between the viewer and the female subject, but it also acts as a reclamation of the female figure from the static confines of visual representation. In “Hope”, the allegorical figure shifts between being an abstract entity and embodiment, destabilising the idea of the artwork as a specific idea or metaphor.

Rosamund Marriott Watson’s ekphrastic poems, “The Depths of the Sea” and “Le Mariage de Convenance—After!” further develop these feminist ekphrastic techniques. In “The Depths of the Sea”, Marriott Watson responds to Burne-Jones’s ethereal aestheticisation of female violence with an embodied, counter-narrative. Her haptic emphasis on the tactile imagery of the figures in the poem destabilises the visual representation that freezes the female subject in place, creating a resistance to the conventional visual focus of ekphrasis. The shapeshifting element in the poem is equally evident, where the voice alternates between external description and internal identification, creating a figure that resists objectification and being rendered a monster, insisting on the complexity of the female subject. In “Le Mariage de Convenance—After!”, Marriott Watson critiques the concept of marriage as depicted in Orchardson’s painting, transforming the scene into a site of social criticism. The poem introduces an “after” narrative, one that remains beyond the frame of the painting to reveal the aftermath of patriarchal constraint. In this context, haptic ekphrasis effectively conveys both the physical and emotional impact of an absent female presence, while shapeshifting ekphrasis enables Marriott Watson to seamlessly transition between perspectives, ultimately denying the reader a stable or coherent scene. The woman's identity and role within the poem remain elusive, as she is depicted through memory, atmosphere, and impression, resisting the viewer's need for resolution. Together, these poets demonstrate how feminist ekphrasis in the mid-to-late nineteenth century evolved not only by utilising ekphrasis as a mode of expression, but by altering its terms and uses in their poems. Through the dual techniques of haptic and shapeshifting ekphrasis, Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson

dismantle the authority of the fixed, male-authored gaze, offering instead a poetics that is tactile, fluid, and resistant to closure. Their ekphrastic strategies centre on women's lived and felt experiences to foreground agency, ambiguity, and emotional depth in their poetic responses to visual art. In doing so, Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson contribute to the broader trajectory of feminist ekphrasis explored throughout this thesis, not merely as a technique that reflects on visual art, but as a means to critique gendered ideologies and reclaim interpretive authority over the female subject as sites of aesthetic and political transformation.

Chapter Four

Reclaiming Ekphrasis: Michael Field's Collaborative Ekphrasis

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the collaborative poets Michael Field, a pseudonym for aunt and niece Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913), emerged as a distinctive voice in Victorian ekphrastic poetry. To honour the collaborative effort of the two poets, throughout this chapter, I will refer to both poets as 'Michael Field'. Despite having published eight collections of poetry and twenty-five volumes of verse drama, Michael Field had their legacy largely unrecognised in the decades following their deaths. However, their work has since been the subject of extensive research and analysis by contemporary scholars, leading to a renewed interest in the poetry and drama produced by the two poets. Some of the leading scholars who have explored Bradley and Cooper's literary experimentation in their poems include LeeAnne Richardson in her text, *The Forms of Michael Field* (2021), and Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo in their monograph, *Michael Field: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (2007). Other interdisciplinary essays include Joseph Bristow's "Michael Field's Lyrical Aestheticism" (2008) and Nicholas Frankel's "The Concrete Poetics of Michael Field's *Sight and Song*" (2008), among others. Michael Field's work uniquely combined an aesthetic representation of female figures in ekphrastic poetry with a reconfiguration of poetic authority, gender, and desire. Collaborative writing as a duo introduces a polyvocal element to the ekphrastic discourse among women poets in the late nineteenth century. I believe that the collective voices of these poets strengthen the overall thesis, highlighting the ekphrastic feminist voice they express through selected poems. This enriches the exploration of the ekphrastic tradition in this thesis, which centres on female subjects and redefines them through their representations. Writing together under a singular masculine persona, Bradley and Cooper's authorial collaboration not only challenges the patriarchal notions of authorship but also progresses the traditionally masculine domain of ekphrasis from within. This is evident in their 1892 collection of poems *Sight and Song,* which features poetic responses to prominent works of visual art, situating itself deliberately within the aesthetic and ekphrastic traditions of the period. Yet, it simultaneously subverts those traditions through its feminist awareness and interrogative gaze. This chapter explores how a selection of Michael Field's ekphrastic poems from *Sight and Song* reimagines the ekphrastic form through a feminist and

collaborative lens, focusing specifically on their poems “La Gioconda”, “A Portrait”, “Venus and Mars”, and “The Sleeping Venus” (1892). Where earlier chapters have examined how nineteenth-century women poets, such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Pfeiffer, and Rosamund Marriott Watson, challenged the visual aspect of traditional ekphrasis—resisting containment within the image or disrupting the passivity assigned to the female subject—Michael Field extend this challenge by occupying the role of the ekphrastic observer with a difference: they neither master the image nor surrender to it. Instead, their ekphrastic poems engage in a dialogic, transformative, and self-reflective relationship with the painting. Their collaborative authorship serves as both a method and a metaphor for their feminist re-articulation of the poetic gaze, reclaiming their ekphrastic vision and interpretation.

Furthermore, the idea of shapeshifting ekphrasis offers a unique perspective on how Michael Field infused their feminist voices into their reinterpretations of the female subject in poetry. This chapter explores how Michael Fields’ collaborative ekphrastic and feminist voice provides a key insight into the portrayal of female subjects in paintings, challenging conventional interpretations. It underscores the development of these representations through the voices of late nineteenth-century women poets. It investigates their role in advancing feminist ekphrasis, moving away from traditional, patriarchal portrayals of women in art. Building on W.J.T. Mitchell’s idea of ekphrastic fear, which explores the tension between words and images as sources of anxiety and desire, and the concept of shapeshifting ekphrasis, this chapter demonstrates how Michael Field’s ekphrastic poems dramatise and deconstruct the illusion of aesthetic mastery over the female subject portrayed in the painting. In poems such as “A Portrait” and “La Gioconda”, the poetic voice hovers between admiration and unease, evoking female subjects who are both visually arresting and emotionally impenetrable. Their refusal to disclose meaning fully or to conform to masculine ideals of beauty and narrative closure becomes a mode of resistance. At the same time, the poem “Venus and Mars” enacts a gender reversal that positions the male figure as the object of eroticised passivity, with Venus rendered as a tragic, knowing enchantress—thus performing a feminist transformation of the mythic and visual tradition of the female subject from a desirable muse for the masculine gaze to a wise and disillusioned woman. In “The Sleeping Venus”, Michael Field depict a departure from the conventional portrayal of the

nude female as a passive object of male desire and portrays the figure of Venus as an autonomous, self-aware figure, depicted in a state of serene repose integrated with the natural landscape.

To provide a clearer understanding of this dynamic, the chapter draws on the theories of collaborative authorship proposed by Mary Lorraine York in her text, *Rethinking Women's Collaborative Writing: Power, Difference, Property* (2002). These theories emphasise the creative potential of collaborative writing as a subversive alternative to patriarchal structures of authority. In *Sight and Song*, Michael Field employ a dual voice that creates a polyvocal and non-dominating perspective, one that both observes and listens. Their ekphrastic practice does not aim to freeze or capture the image; instead, it focuses on sharing and exploring its emotional and symbolic dimensions. This approach highlights the collaborative direction taken by Michael Field, who noted in their shared journal that their literary work was 'like a mosaic,' uniting both of their creative abilities into one cohesive space (Michael Field 3). This collaborative approach emphasises their ekphrastic method, which seeks to explore and interpret the representational conventions of the female subject in the paintings. By focusing on the representation of the female figure, the poets effectively illustrate how these depictions reflect both their individuality and the broader social narratives surrounding femininity. The poets documented their ekphrastic interpretations of paintings by Renaissance artists in a shared journal called *Works and Days* (1888-1933) during their visits to various British and European art galleries. Each poet wrote individual fragments based on what they observed and later collaborated on poems, as reflected in their diary entries. Their entries show how they interact with and engage in translating visual aesthetics into verse, as demonstrated by the details of their interactions with paintings in galleries: 'We are fixing our eyes on the Madonna and Child, painted by Millet for the Church of Notre Dame de Lorette, Paris… and we go off like the couples in Watteau—only not to talk of love but the safer subject of art' (81). This process formed the foundation for their ekphrastic technique in *Sight and Song*. Influenced by the writings and correspondence of prominent art critics of their time, particularly John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Walter Pater (1839-1894), Michael Field developed their own interpretations based on these critics' ideas. Ruskin's discussions on the importance of "truth" and the purity of perception had a significant impact on Michael Field's ekphrastic interpretation. In the preface of their text, *Sight and Song*, they emphasised the

value of seeing without the interference of thought and opinion, aligning with Ruskin's belief that the ‘innocence of the eye’ influences the way we interpret and represent paintings (Ruskin 61). The relationship between Ruskin and the two poets was significant, with Ruskin acting as a mentor and close friend, particularly to Bradley. His influence is evident in their early works, but over time, both poets distanced themselves from him, especially as Bradley moved away from the religious beliefs Ruskin valued. In the mid-1870s, this divergence intensified when Ruskin criticised Bradley in a letter, calling her ‘too stupid’ and a ‘false disciple’ (Michael Field 19-156). Her remark about having ‘lost God and found a Skye Terrier’ highlighted her shifting priorities and her move away from Ruskin’s strict moral framework toward a more personal exploration of identity and desire. Her choice to embrace a Skye Terrier, rather than clinging to Ruskin's spiritual teachings, reflects her quest for individuality over religious expectations. This transition not only signifies a departure from Ruskin's influence but also marks her journey toward establishing her own individual artistic perspectives within the dynamic of ‘Michael Field’.

In the case of Pater and his influential impact on the poets’ aesthetic representation, he, like Ruskin, garnered deep admiration for his work and teachings on aestheticism. However, they sought to restructure and transform Pater’s ‘sensorial epistemology’ to develop their own version of focusing on the artwork’s own voice through their ekphrastic approach (Fraser 563). In their journal, Michael Field expressed a desire to move away from Pater’s ‘ego-centric’ method of appreciating and perceiving visual art by focusing solely on the deeply introspective and subjective viewer’s impression of the artwork, where he claims: To see the object as in itself it really is... is to know one’s own impression as it really is... What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure?’ (Pater xxix). While Pater begins by focusing on the critic/viewer’s impression of the artwork, ‘As in itself it really is,’ he ultimately redirects that gaze inward towards the self’s experience of art. From that point, Michael Field noted the subjective direction that he took with his interpretations, stating, ‘Pater often issues his own emotions, which are very peculiar to himself, as if they were the result of other individualities—to whom he has not been able to give the value of an ‘I’ ’ (Qtd. by Parejo Vadillo 17). This observation demonstrates that his personal biases and subjective viewpoint heavily shaped Pater's interpretation of artworks as an art critic and observer. This reveals the limitations of Pater's critical approach and highlights the

importance of considering multiple perspectives when analysing works of art. In contrast, as stated in their preface to *Sight and Song*, Michael Field aimed to shift the focus of interpretation to highlight the figures within the artwork itself, allowing them a voice and space for their representation, stating:

> The aim of this little volume is, as far as may be, to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what they objectively incarnate. Such an attempt demands patient, continuous sight as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective enjoyment. (vi)

Their preface asserts that their ekphrastic method is also a method of translation, where the goal is to act almost as a medium for the artwork itself, attempting to purify the gaze of any subjective influence, as seen in Pater's criticism. Their ekphrastic effort is evident in their attempt to create a poetic interpretation that collaborates not only between the two poets but also between the artwork and the poets themselves. They strive to make the artwork "speak" rather than simply commenting on it. The influences of Pater and Ruskin, as well as the ways in which Michael Field step away from their theories, will be further explored in the analysis of their ekphrastic poems in this chapter.

1. “La Gioconda” (1892):

Figure 18. “Mona Lisa”, Leonardo da Vinci (1506)

Michael Field sought to reimagine the ekphrastic practice through an experiment in the act of looking, with their intent being focused on the act of translating the image into verse. Through this practice, they reinterpreted the traditionally subjective, often male-dominated genre of ekphrasis as an act of contemplative, feminist mode of seeing. “La Gioconda” is a notable example of this method, serving as an ekphrastic response to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1506). The painting had already become an iconic subject by the late nineteenth century, not merely for the artist’s innovation, but for the myth that surrounded the central female figure. Often fetishised in male-authored texts, where Pater famously described her as possessing ‘the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome... the mysticism of the Middle Ages’ (17). Pater’s influential characterisation of the painting has shaped numerous interpretations of this iconic Renaissance figure. In his memoir, the poet Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947) noted that his friends often quoted Pater’s famous

description, emulating his portrayal of the female figure as both a captivating and perilous beauty (234). La Gioconda's depiction situates her within the status of a seductive and timeless figure that is ultimately stripped of her agency and reduced to the male observer's projection. Michael Field's "La Gioconda" offers an alternative to this tradition. Rather than treating the *Mona Lisa* as a surface for symbolic or sexual projection, the poem reconstructs her presence through what Ana Parejo Vadillo terms a "transparent ekphrasis," that attempts to honour the art object's own voice while disrupting dominant aesthetic conventions (82). Here, the figure is neither a muse nor a mystery, but a woman holding subtle power, restraint, and embodied presence. The poem begins:

> Historic, side-long, implicating eyes;
> A smile of velvet's lustre on the cheek;
> Calm lips the smile leads upward; hand that lies
> Glowing and soft, the patience in its rest
> Of cruelty that waits and doth not seek
> For prey; a dusky forehead and a breast
> Where twilight touches ripeness amorously:
> Behind her, crystal rocks, a sea and skies
> Of evanescent blue on cloud and creek;
> Landscape that shines suppressive of its zest
> For those vicissitudes by which men die. (Michael Field, "La Gioconda" lines 1-11)

The poem opens with a strong indication of the ekphrastic gaze, where Michael Field bring the focus by directly focusing on the eyes of the *Mona Lisa*: "Historic, side-long, implicating eyes". The "side-long" glance implies secrecy, distance, and even seduction, but paired with "historic" and "implicating", these eyes are not passive—they accuse, entangle, and carry the weight of history in her gaze. With the eyes being the first features that Michael Field note in the poem, this exemplifies the distinct way that they depicted the figure of the *Mona Lisa* literally gazing back at the viewer. The ekphrastic text creates a connection between the viewer and the subject portrayed, as the figure depicted in the artwork seems to meet the spectator's gaze with its own. Both menacing and silent, the *Mona Lisa's* figure challenges male dominance in speech, inspiring fear and fascination in the male viewer. Pater's depiction of her also reflects this complex interplay, where he famously described her as:

> The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire… She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave. (18)

Pater's portrayal emphasises his visual representation, presenting the *Mona Lisa* as a source of both intrigue and allure, which serves to 'half fascinate, half repel' the viewer, as noted by Kathy Psomiades (1992). This interplay of fascination and apprehension in the male gaze draws a parallel with the imagery of the ancient Greek monster, Medusa, a reference point that both provokes and captivates the male observer (62). According to Grant Scott (1994), Medusa's gaze embodies a duality that 'at once promises to stiffen and threatens to castrate the enthralled male' (122). Within the context of the poem, it appears that Michael Field sought to illuminate the presence and gaze of the frozen female figure represented by the *Mona Lisa*. This figure has historically been silenced and fetishised by male creators. This assertion continues in the following lines that depict the *Mona Lisa*'s unsettling calmness in her patience and her frozen stance:

> A smile of velvet's lustre on the cheek;
> Calm lips the smile leads upward; hand that lies
> Glowing and soft, the patience in its rest
> Of cruelty that waits and doth not seek (lines 2-5)

Here, Michael Field refrain from framing La Gioconda as a passive object of male desire, instead attending to her self-possession, especially in the unsettling tension of the "hand that lies/ Glowing and soft," which paradoxically carries "the patience… of cruelty that waits". The portrait, as described, becomes charged with dormant agency, exemplifying a refusal to be easily deciphered or contained. This restrained menace and impenetrability introduce what W.J.T. Mitchell (1993) theorised as ekphrastic fear, which features the anxiety that the image might speak back and that the painted subject possesses a subjectivity that resists the poet's control (27). The line "of cruelty that waits and doth not seek/ For prey" embodies this: the *Mona Lisa* is not an object to be consumed but a figure whose quiet composure may conceal unfathomable and deadly power. Mitchell describes ekphrastic fear as evolving from the 'imagined animateness' of the image, and this very animateness, as seen in La Gioconda's 'implicating eyes', which further unsettles the observer. In the following lines, Michael Field conveys a profound sense of sensuality and eroticism in their portrayal of La Gioconda, demonstrated in the lines: "a dusky forehead and a breast/ Where twilight touches ripeness amorously" (lines 6-7). Ehnenn (2004) notes that Michael Field's poetry frequently 'celebrates women's autoeroticism,' presenting their female subjects as autonomous and

complex within their painted setting (47). This is evident in the previous line, which highlights the subject's self-contained allure, rather than framing it through the lens of a desiring male observer.

Within a shapeshifting ekphrastic context, the figure of the *Mona Lisa* is depicted as a subtly dynamic and destabilising presence in the poem. The features of her eyes and smile offer a site of distinct shapeshifting, where they are not passive elements meant to be gazed upon. Instead, they *implicate* the viewer, eluding direct confrontation or interpretation. Her eyes shift the direction of the ekphrastic interpretation, suggesting that the female subject does her own looking rather than remaining in the status of being looked at. Her smile is not fixed either, where it is described as "velvet, lustrous, and calm". There is an element of movement that suggests transformation and flow rather than stasis. It resists a set meaning, where it appears that she is always becoming something else. The feature of her hand evokes potential energy and strength, or a dormant type of power that defies passivity. It disrupts the traditional ekphrastic depiction of the evocative masculine action versus the female stillness and passivity, where the figure of the *Mona Lisa* appears capable of cruelty but chooses restraint, illustrating a conscious and controlled power that subtly transforms her from a state of frozenness to one of activity. Feminist agency in this case is enacted not through overt rebellion but through a refusal to be fully available to the gaze. In lines 6 and 7, the reference to "twilight", which presents a liminal time of day, suggests a transitional state that reinforces the in-betweenness of the female subject. The image of her "dusky forehead" and her "breast" touched by twilight creates a distinctly sensual and visual image that connotes a distinct merging between the atmosphere and the body of the subject, blending together. This furthers the theme of shapeshifting by fusing the female body with the changing environment around her. This idea is further developed in the following passage. The final lines of the poem shift to bring the background of La Gioconda to the forefront, changing the perspective to look beyond the sitter and into the represented world behind her:

> Behind her, crystal rocks, a sea and skies
> Of evanescent blue on cloud and creek;
> Landscape that shines suppressive of its zest
> For those vicissitudes by which men die. (lines 8-11)

The landscape possesses a distinctly static quality, suggesting a natural world beyond the sitter that conveys a still and frozen atmosphere, one that resists the observer's interpretation.

Mirroring the sitter's own stillness and unsettling presence, the background aligns with Michael Field's feminist resistance, which emphasises a refusal of direct interpretation. Rather than adhering to the ekphrastic tradition of projecting narrative desire, Field's work highlights the painting's resistance to interpretation, further underscoring the feminist concept of shapeshifting. This is evident in the sitter's ambiguous features, characterised by her "historic" eyes, "calm lips," and an embodied potential for cruelty and detachment. These elements generate a sense of ekphrastic fear while simultaneously denying resolution.

Consequently, the poets do not seek to conquer the image through explanation or elaborate ekphrasis; instead, they engage in a prolonged act of looking *with* the painting and its female sitter, rather than merely looking *at* her. The final line suggests that, while the landscape is beautiful and "shines suppressive of its zest," so too does the sitter. This resistance creates a tension that suppresses the "vicissitudes" and turbulent changes that often lead to men's demise. This notion implies that the *Mona Lisa*, and by extension femininity itself, exists beyond the fleeting struggles and mortality of men. This aligns with Michael Field's feminist reimagining of the ekphrastic tradition, where the figure of La Gioconda embodies agency and complexity, challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations that confine her to a stereotypical seductive status. In contrast to Pater's view of the female figure as a fearful being, Psomiades notes that women writers in the nineteenth century often depicted female figures as monstrous or possessing monstrous features (77). In this case, Michael Field also projected their own desires to distance themselves from patriarchal perceptions of women, highlighting their separation from a patriarchal society by embracing qualities that reject conformity. This allowed them to maintain a presence within the margins of representation, as La Gioconda represents in her portrait. Michael Field's subversion of the image as an entity that 'consumes' those who observe her transforms the notion of the gaze, saturating the image with a self-awareness that allows it to prey upon its viewers rather than being merely a passive object of observation (Ehnenn 36). Pater's interpretation of La Gioconda presents the painting's figure as an embodiment of 'female otherness,' a concept arising from the interplay of speaking/seeing masculine desire and fear directed toward the silent female image (Mitchell 30). In contrast, Michael Field offer an alternate and feminist perspective by depicting the female figure as one who gazes back at the viewer, asserting her status as a predator and resisting interpretation by the observer. While Pater conjures an

image of a mysterious and alluring figure, Michael Field reinterprets the female figure, emphasising the painting's formal and emotional textures.

2. "A Portrait" (1892):

Figure 19. "Portrait of a Woman", Bartolomeo Veneto (1525)

As stated in their preface, Michael Field aimed to 'translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what they objectively incarnate' (Michael Field 1). For Michael Field, to *sing* is not simply describing or translating a painting into verse; it is to embody and interpret the image in a way that is empathetic and attuned. In this quotation, they assert a departure from the traditional ekphrastic approach, which often aimed to interpret, possess, or explain an artwork's supposed meaning or subject matter. Instead, they propose an alternate way of looking at the artwork by engaging in the act of listening to what the painting is already saying and translating that into verse. The phrase "pictures sing in themselves" suggests that the painting is already expressive, speaking, and even singing. It is not a mute or silent object waiting to be interpreted or narrated by the poet or the viewer. Instead, they have their own voices that the poet and viewer can attune to and detect. This emphasis on empathetic and profound interpretation of art suggests a distinction from Pater's more self-reflective and emotion-

driven poetic interpretation. Pater's aesthetic criticism focuses on personal impression as the foundation of meaning in the interpretation of an image, asserting that 'the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know *one's own impression* as it really is' [Italics added] (Pater xixx). In contrast, Michael Field's approach seeks to allow the artwork to express its own voice, embodying its agency and the manner in which it desires to be perceived, thereby representing a unique mode of feminist ekphrastic interpretation. I contend that their poems aim to decentre the self and instead give interpretive agency to the artwork, where, rather than being absorbed into the viewer's internal feelings, the image is imagined as speaking its own truth. While Pater's emotional ekphrastic response is rooted in the *self*, prioritising what the artwork makes him feel and reaffirming the dominance of the interpreting subject, it makes the artwork passive, a blank surface for the male viewer's own emotions. On the other hand, I believe that Michael Field's empathetic response is rooted in *otherness*, where the poet attempts to imagine the perspective of the artwork or the figure within it, rather than subsuming it into personal feeling. Michael Field's response instead tries to restore agency, voice, and presence to the silenced figure and frames interpretation as a collaborative dialogue. This also connects to what critics such as Parejo Vadillo and Thain have asserted that Michael Field's Sight and Song acts as a 'radical feminist project' that rewrites ekphrasis not as possession, but as a relation/connection to the image (81).

The poem "A Portrait" serves as a particularly significant lens through which to analyse the intersection of Michael Fields' ekphrastic poetics with feminist ekphrasis and the notion of ekphrastic fear. Drawing inspiration from Bartolommeo Veneto's Renaissance painting *Bust of a Courtesan* (1525), this ekphrastic piece reimagines the female subject as an active participant in the creation of her own image. In the painting, the figure is presented as a veiled woman adorned with flowers, exposing a breast while gazing at the viewer; the poem emphasises her rejection of the passive muse role, positioning her instead as the author of her own representation. This approach directly engages with the concept of feminist ekphrasis, which utilises the theory of 'female self-awareness' to establish a 'point of meeting' between the image and the poem (Showalter 29). It also highlights the female gaze's capacity to reclaim agency and challenge the traditional narrative of visual/verbal discourse. Furthermore, Michael Fields' portrayal of a female figure who not only poses but also orchestrates her own portrait evokes Mitchell's concept of ekphrastic fear—the anxiety that

an image may possess its own voice, undermining the authority of the poet or observer (Mitchell 32). In this poem, the figure of the woman transcends mere representation; she commands it. Rather than following a traditional poetic gaze that controls or idealises the painted female figure, their ekphrastic poem emphasises a sitter who is self-aware, embodied, and resilient through time and interpretation. In doing so, they not only challenge dominant aesthetic standards but also construct a feminist framework for representing female subjects, highlighting their collaborative nature and resistance to the constraints of visual and poetic domination. The poem begins:

> A crystal, flawless beauty on the brows
> Where neither love nor time has conquered space
> On which to live; her leftward smile endows
> The gazer with no tidings from the face;
> About the clear mounds of the lip it winds with silver pace
> And in the umber eyes it is a light
> Chill as a glowworm's when the moon embrowns an August night.
>
> She saw her beauty often in the glass,
> Sharp on the dazzling surface, and she knew
> The haughty custom of her grace must pass:
> Though more persistent in all charm it grew
> As with a desperate joy her hair across her throat she drew
> In crinkled locks stiff as dead, yellow snakes…
> Until at last within her soul the resolution wakes
>
> She will be painted, she who is so strong
> In loveliness, so fugitive in years:
> Forth to the field she goes and questions long
> Which flowers to choose of those the summer bears;
> She plucks a violet larkspur, —then a columbine appears
> Of perfect yellow, —daisies choicely wide;
> These simple things with finest touch she gathers in her pride.
>
> Next on her head, veiled with well-bleachen white
> And bound across the brow with azure-blue,
> She sets the box-tree leaf and coils it tight
> In spiky wreath of green, immortal hue;
> Then, to the prompting of her strange, emphatic insight true,
> She bares one breast, half-freeing it of robe,
> And hangs green-water gem and cord beside the naked globe.
>
> So was she painted and for centuries
> Has held the fading field-flowers in her hand
> Austerely as a sign. O fearful eyes

> And soft lips of the courtesan who planned
> To give her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned
> Her doom, who bade her beauty in its cold
> And vacant eminence persist for all men to behold!
>
> She had no memories save of herself
> And her slow-fostered graces, naught to say
> Of love in gift or boon; her cruel pelf
> Had left her with no hopes that grow and stay;
> She found default in everything that happened night or day,
> Yet stooped in calm to passion's dizziest strife
> And gave to art a fair, blank form, unverified by life.
>
> Thus she has conquered death: her eyes are fresh,
> Clear as her frontlet jewel, firm in shade
> And definite as on the linen mesh
> Of her white hood the box-tree's sombre braid,
> That glitters leaf by leaf and with the year's waste will not fade.
> The small, close mouth, leaving no room for breath,
> In perfect, still pollution smiles—Lo, she has conquered death! (Michael Field, "A Portrait" lines 1-49)

The first stanza presents the painted woman as an enigmatic and impenetrable figure, where her beauty is described as "crystal" and "flawless", implying an untouched and preserved surface that remains detached and resistant to interpretation, "Where neither love nor time has conquered" space (line 2). This theme highlights the concept of shapeshifting ekphrasis, where the female subject in the poem becomes a symbol of resistance that refuses to be interpreted through the image. By transforming from a static, openly observed figure in the painting, the woman in the poem regains control and asserts her own unwavering representation. The theme of ekphrastic resistance recurs in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*, where the female figures depicted in the selected poems transcend the boundaries of their portrayals in paintings, manifesting an alternative expression that emphasises their agency and control within the poetic narrative.

The speaker admits that the woman's expression yields "no tidings"—there is no straightforward narrative to be extracted from her gaze or smile. This resonates with ekphrastic fear, where instead of imposing a narrative, Michael Field's speaker remains in a position of attentive, restrained observation, aligning with the philosophy of their preface of letting the artwork "sing in itself". In the second stanza, the sitter appears to transition to a more active and aware perspective, where the woman seems to see herself "often in the glass"

(line 8) and understands that her beauty is impermanent: “The haughty custom of her grace must pass” (line 10). This inward gaze marks a departure from traditional ekphrastic depictions, where the woman is a mute object of male admiration. Instead, she becomes an agent of her own representation in the poem. In the next lines, the description of her hair in line 13— “crinkled locks stiff as dead, yellow snakes”—evokes the figure of Medusa, suggesting a concealed resistance to the gaze, where the figure of Medusa also featured in Michael Fields’ previous poem, “La Gioconda”. The reference to the female sitter’s hair, especially blonde hair, represents a significant aspect of female sexuality and status within the context of autonomy and self-expression. Elizabeth Gitter (1984) argues that golden hair was often closely associated with ‘female sexuality’ and ‘sexual power’ (936). Gitter posits that women’s hair has frequently been depicted as a symbol representing the moral and sexual status of the female characters it illustrates. She contends that in the portrayal of Victorian women, particularly those characterised as malevolent figures, their hair functions as a tool for entrapment and seduction (938). In the case of this poem, the woman appears to harness her hair to shape her image, as she draws it “across her throat… Until at last within her soul the resolution wakes” (lines 12-14). This suggests that she deliberately uses her hair as a shield against the gaze, highlighting the female subject’s agency and her ability to use her willpower to manage her environment and herself.

The third stanza furthers the resolution of the sitter as she consciously chooses to assert her authorship over her own image: “She will be painted, she who is so strong / In loveliness, so fugitive in years” (lines 15-16). Here, it seems the woman is actively constructing her own representation, fully aware that her beauty will eventually fade with time. This suggests a deep self-awareness on her part, which brings to mind the concept of ekphrastic fear, shifting the traditional ekphrastic narrative from the representation of the figure in the painting to her representation of herself. This shift becomes even more unsettling in the subsequent lines, where the sitter's agency is highlighted through the concept of ekphrastic intervention. Here, the sitter engages with the visual symbolism of her representation by moving beyond the confines of the frame and into a space outside the painting: “Forth to the field she goes and questions long/ Which flowers to choose” (lines 17-18). Her movement towards gathering flowers reasserts her control over impermanence. It aligns her with natural cycles instead of being a passive object: “Which flowers to choose of those the summer bears… These simple things with finest touch she gathers in her pride”

(lines 18-21). The fourth stanza further emphasises the female figure's role as the architect of her own representation, incorporating traditional iconographic imagery, exemplified by her exposed breast, which she presents on her own terms. The stanza opens with the woman adorning herself, thereby reinforcing her position as the creator of her own identity:

> Next on her head, veiled with well-bleachen white
> And bound across the brow with azure-blue,
> She sets the box-tree leaf and coils it tight
> In spiky wreath of green, immortal hue; (lines 22-28)

The wreath she adorns on her head symbolises the "immortal hue," representing her aspiration to preserve her legacy and engage in constructing her own experience and narrative, rather than serving as an object of seduction. This is further illustrated by the subsequent lines that showcase her intent to deliberately reveal her breast, not for voyeuristic pleasure, but as a conscious artistic gesture aimed at subverting the male gaze:

> Then, to the prompting of her strange, emphatic insight true,
> She bares one breast, half-freeing it of robe,
> And hangs green-water gem and cord beside the naked globe. (lines 26-28)

Her agency is depicted as a “strange, emphatic insight” that appears to propel her toward self-revelation, both for the observer and for her own discovery. From a marginalised female perspective, the idea of shapeshifting explores how the female speaker continues to assert her own agency, seemingly transforming right before our eyes as we read the poem. Her actions- “She bares one breast” and “And hangs green-water gems”- highlight how her behaviour is framed as expressive choices in the poem, rather than as if she were a mannequin supporting the painting. This challenges how the female subject engages with the painting and how she resists the narrative structure imposed on her in the poem.

The female subject further accentuates this portrayal with a “green-water gem” she wears. This act not only identifies her as the subject but also as a co-creator of the image, strengthening the feminist message conveyed in this space. The fifth stanza reflects on the sitter’s enduring presence in art, as seen in the following lines:

> So was she painted and for centuries
> Has held the fading field-flowers in her hand
> Austerely as a sign. O fearful eyes
> And soft lips of the courtesan who planned
> To give her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned
> Her doom, who bade her beauty in its cold
> And vacant eminence persist for all men to behold! (lines 29-35)

Her endurance is captured in the painting, where her portrait seems to have outlasted her. However, the flowers she selected are “fading,” symbolising the paradox of preservation and decay. This evokes the sitter’s desire to be valued for her aesthetic and visual allure rather than being objectified for the pleasure of “all men to behold.” Though she is a courtesan, the poem refrains from eroticising her; instead, she has surrendered “her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned / Her doom” (lines 33-34). This paradox suggests that preserving her beauty through painting has resulted in it being confined to “its cold / And vacant eminence” (lines 34-35), allowing all men to gaze upon and fetishise her. This illustrates a loss of her autonomy through the very act of capturing her beauty in art, framing her as a tragic figure, both empowered and doomed by her desire for permanence. In a way that emphasises the distinct authority of painting and the visual over the female image, she seems to be caught within the painting that aims to contain and freeze her. Yet, she persists, standing firm amidst this portrayal that renders her static and motionless. Through being painted and observed, she appears to have “held the fading field-flowers in her hand” (line 30), symbolising her perseverance. She holds up and centres these flowers “Austerely as a sign” (line 31), representing her resilience despite the encasing depiction. The speaker suggests that the woman in the painting is not just an aesthetic object but a presence that challenges and resists being portrayed and serving the masculine gaze. Although her beauty is captured in the painting “for all men to behold," she remains persistent and eternal in her own agency.

In the sixth stanza, the speaker reflects on the emptiness beneath the image, noting that the sitter has “no memories save of herself” (line 36) within the portrait. Her identity appears to be shaped solely by her aesthetic efforts; in attempting to preserve herself and be painted, the speaker suggests she has surrendered her identity and autonomy to the artwork. This reduction transforms her into a “fair, blank form, unverified by life” (line 42). This seems to comment on the stagnation of painting, which renders the female subject frozen and immovable for the sake of depiction. The woman in the painting is depicted differently from earlier stanzas, where she was shown moving freely and asserting control over herself and her environment outside the painting. Here, she appears as a static, immobile figure who “Had left her with no hopes that grow and stay” (line 39), leading her to find “default in everything that happened night and day” (line 40). This highlights her status as a frozen object, rendered immobile by her representation in the painting. However, Michael Field's portrayal is mindful of the constraints placed on the female figure within the painting,

drawing attention to these limitations instead of merely perpetuating them. In the final stanza, the sitter achieves a kind of immortality, but it is uncertain:

> Thus she has conquered death: her eyes are fresh,
> Clear as her frontlet jewel, firm in shade
> And definite as on the linen mesh
> Of her white hood the box-tree's sombre braid,
> That glitters leaf by leaf and with the year's waste will not fade.
> The small, close mouth, leaving no room for breath,
> In perfect, still pollution smiles—Lo, she has conquered death! (lines 43-49)

Michael Field present a paradoxical assertion regarding the representation of the female subject in art, suggesting that while the figure of the woman in the painting devotes herself entirely to the realm of artistic expression, she simultaneously achieves a form of immortality and "conquers death." Her gaze is depicted as "fresh" and "clear," which evokes a sense of timelessness and eternal presence. However, this representation is deeply complex; her "small, close mouth" indicates not only a state of silence but also the absence of breath, evocative of a lifelessness that starkly contrasts with her immortal portrayal. This juxtaposition highlights a significant theme in feminist ekphrasis: the tension between the visual endurance encapsulated within the artwork and the silenced subjectivity of the female figure (Heffernan 38).

The phrase "perfect, still pollution" serves as a distinct metaphor, suggesting that her preservation within the confines of the painting comes at a substantial cost. In claiming her victory over death, the female figure sacrifices both her life and voice, underscoring the price of being immortalised in art. Michael Field do not simply celebrate her image uncritically; instead, they highlight the haunting perfection that keeps the sitter in a paradoxical state, where her agency is both recognised and erased. This is evident in how the female subject shapeshifts in the poem's earlier part, followed by an alternate depiction of the same figure within the painting, where her representation is immobilised, yet she remains resistant to that portrayal. This critical approach signifies a radical shift away from the painter's authority, embodying a feminist and collaborative approach to ekphrasis. It provides an alternative perspective on how the female subject interacts with being observed, asserting her agency and resisting interpretation even when confined within the image. This concept both anticipates and disrupts what Mitchell identifies as the "desire to make the image speak," while also recognising that the image possesses its own capacity for expression, resonating

on its own terms (32). Therefore, “A Portrait” functions as a self-reflective feminist ekphrasis, where the female figure in the portrait both is and authors her own representation. She is both subject and object, mortal and immortal, painter and painted. Her smile, her flowers, her bare breast, her gaze—all are composed not for the pleasure of the male viewer, but for the endurance of her aesthetic legacy. In doing so, Michael Field dismantle the possessive and often eroticising lens of traditional ekphrasis, asserting instead a feminist vision in which the sitter resists interpretation, controls her image, and in doing so, “has conquered death”.

3. “Venus and Mars” (1892):

Figure 20. “Venus and Mars”, Sandro Botticelli (1485)

While “A Portrait” explores the tensions between female agency and aesthetic fixity through the self-fashioning of a solitary female subject, “Venus and Mars” shifts the dynamic further by reimagining the mythological figures within an erotic and relational framework. Here, the interplay of desire and power enacts a more fluid and embodied mode of feminist and shapeshifting ekphrasis. This is achieved through poetry that resists the traditional ekphrastic impulse to dominate or decode the painted image. Instead of reiterating the conventions of masculine aesthetic representation, Michael Field develop a mode of feminist ekphrasis that critically examines the gendered gaze, reclaims the agency of the female subject, and prioritises an intimate, speculative approach to viewing. As Ehnenn asserts,

Michael Field's work 'develops a poetics of spectatorship in which looking becomes an act of queer-feminist desire and critical attention' (153). While this chapter does not emphasise the queer aspect of their ekphrastic work, it focuses on the feminist ekphrastic discourse in relation to the "poetics of spectatorship" expressed in their ekphrastic poems. In the previous poems, "La Gioconda" and "A Portrait", Michael Field's ekphrastic strategies focus on the solitary female sitter, whether portrayed as iconic or anonymous, who resists full interpretation. In "La Gioconda", the *Mona Lisa* becomes a symbol not of mystery as much as an iconic image that resists interpretation. Her gaze, smile, and the stillness of the background all contribute to an ekphrastic rendition full of tension and unease. Michael Field's description of "La Gioconda" repositions her as a figure of subtle power and judgment. Their poem reflects what feminist theorists such as Griselda Pollock (1988) have identified as 'the historical construction of woman as image, but never the image-maker' (126). In Michael Field's vision, La Gioconda is no longer an enigma for male consumption and eroticised interpretation, but a visual challenge to the very act of looking. Similarly, "A Portrait" depicts a female subject initiating her own aesthetic transformation, consciously engaging with her image for her own type of mythmaking, not to please the viewer but to outlast them. She is not merely looked at; she looks back, sculpting herself into a symbol of timeless endurance, reflecting Mitchell's notion of ekphrastic fear by asserting her own visual experience outside of the portrait.

Transitioning from these portrayals of female self-possession and resistance, "Venus and Mars" presents a distinct yet interconnected concept of feminist ekphrasis as articulated by Michael Field. Instead of concentrating solely on the female subject, the poem explores a mythological reconfiguration of the classical allegory through a gendered perspective. Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (1483) is a Renaissance painting that showcases the sensual beauty and allure of the Greek goddess Venus, while the God of War, Mars, is depicted in a vulnerable and spent state as he lies back in slumber. Venus watches over the sleeping Mars while satyrs play, mock, and disarm him of his armour and weapons. Traditional interpretations of the painting depict Venus as the symbol of love conquering war, highlighting the way that both the figures are featured in the painting. Michael Field's poem, on the other hand, disrupts this imagery, where they portray Venus not as a triumphant figure, but as a tragically aware enchantress who recognises the illusions of love and the cost of her own erotic status. By reframing Venus in this manner, Michael Field critiques the traditional

and limiting depictions of her femininity, which often portray her as a figure who is both revered and desirable, yet simultaneously isolated, diminished, and exploited. This role reversal functions as a feminist examination of aesthetic conventions, suggesting that the power to gaze and narrate has been reclaimed within the poem. It underscores the feminist ekphrastic approach of Michael Field, as they reposition the female figure in art, creating a space where the painted woman is not silenced but instead rendered central, self-aware, and significant. The poem begins:

> She is fate, although
> She lies upon the grass,
> While satyrs shout Ho, ho!
> At what she brings to pass;
> And nature is as free
> Before her strange, young face
> As if it knew that she
> Were in her sovereign place,
> With shading trees above.
> The little powers of earth on woolly hips
> Are gay as children round a nurse they love;
> Nor do they watch her lips.
>
> A cushion, crimson-rose,
> Beneath her elbow heaves;
> Her head, erect in pose
> Against the laurel-leaves,
> Is hooped with citron hair
> That cunning plaits adorn.
> Beside her instep bare
> And dress of crimpled lawn
> Fine blades of herbage rise;
> The level field that circles her retreat
> Is one grey-lighted green the early sky's
> Fresh blue inclines to meet.
>
> Her swathing robe is bound
> With gold that is not new:
> She rears from off the ground
> As if her body grew
> Triumphant as a stem
> That hath received the rains,
> Hath softly sunk with them,
> And in an hour regains
> Its height and settledness.
> Yet are her eyes alert; they search and weigh
> The god, supine, who fell from her caress

When love had had its sway.
He lies in perfect death
Of sleep that has no spasm;
It seems his very breath
Is lifted from a chasm,
So sunk he lies. His hair
In russet heaps is spread;
Thus couches in its lair
A creature that is dead:
But, see, his nostrils scent
New joy and tighten palpitating nerves,
Although his naked limbs, their fury spent,
Are fallen in wearied curves.

Athwart his figure twist
Some wreathy folds of white,
Crossed by the languid wrist
And loose palm of his right,
Wan hand; the other drops
Its fingers down beside
The coat of mail that props
His shoulder; crimson-dyed,
His cloak winds under him;
One leg is stretched, one is raised in arching lines:
Thus, opposite the queen, his body slim
And muscular reclines.

An impish satyr: blows
The mottled conch in vain
Beside his ear that knows
No whine of the sea-strain;
Another tugs his spear,
One hides within his casque
Soft horns and jaunty leer;
While one presumes to bask
Within his breastplate void
And rolls its tongue in open-hearted zest;
Above the sleeper, their dim wings annoyed,
The wasps have made a nest.

O' tragic forms, the man,
The woman—he asleep,
She lone and sadder than
The dawn, too wise to weep
Illusion that to her
Is empire, to the earth
Necessity and stir

Of sweet, predestined mirth!
Ironical she sees,
Without regret, the work her kiss has done
And lives a cold enchantress doomed to please
Her victims one by one. (Michael Field, "Mars and Venus" lines 1-84)

The female figure in the poem is positioned not as a passive muse, but as an autonomous, mythic force— "a fate" (line 1), asserting the figure of Venus as the subject of the poem. The scene is a classical one, where the figure of Venus appears to settle herself within a natural scene, "upon the grass, / While satyrs shout Ho, ho!" (lines 2-3). However, Michael Field feminise the mythic setting by centring the woman's power over nature and mythic creatures, rather than the other way around. The satyrs, symbols of lust and chaos, "shout Ho, ho!" not to provoke her, but in response to her agency— "what *she* brings to pass" (line 5). The following line represents the inversion of the gaze: "And nature is as free / Before her strange, young face / As if it knew that she / Were in her sovereign place" (lines 6-9). Nature is personified as recognising the power of Venus, representing a different take on the ekphrastic tradition, where it depicts the female figure without containment—she commands the landscape.

In contrast to the traditional passive female subject of ekphrasis, as represented by Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of 'to-be-looked-at-ness', this woman is sovereign, natural, and self-possessed, where even the nature that surrounds her appears to recognise Venus in her autonomous place (82). Like nature, the satyrs that surround Venus in the poem are represented as joyful and domesticated children who are drawn to her presence: "The little powers of earth on woolly hips / Are gay as children round a nurse they love" (lines 11-12). Essentially, however, the following line, "Nor do they watch her lips", illustrates a subversion of the male gaze, where their averted gaze challenges the ekphrastic tradition of voyeuristic spectatorship. This aligns with Mitchell's ekphrastic fear directed towards the fear of the image (or woman) of speaking back; yet the female figure in the poem does not need to utter anything, as her presence alone enacts her power. In the second stanza, a balanced blend of Venus with nature enhances her portrayal as a figure of force and power, rather than being framed by the natural world. Hilary Fraser (2006) asserts that Venus seems to 'connect her sexual potency with her gaze' (567). The lines, "A cushion, crimson-rose, / Beneath her elbow heaves" (lines 13-14), provide a textual sensuality that depicts her figure without objectifying her, where it appears that her body is comforted rather than being on display.

Her pose echoes classical portraiture, as she is shown: “Her head, erect in pose / Against the laurel-leaves, / Is looped with citron hair / That cunning plaits adorn” (lines 15-18). The “laurel-leaves” suggest poetic victory and glory, while the image of the “cunning plaits” shows her interest in self-adornment—she decorates herself, not for the viewer, but as part of her own mythic-making.

The description of Venus in the following lines, “Beside her instep bare / And dress of crimpled lawn / Fine blades of herbage rise” (lines 19-21), evokes how she blends with the earth in a way that evokes the concept of *ecofeminist ekphrasis*. Coined by French critic, Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974, ecofeminism focuses on challenging the representation of women within their environment centering on the ‘oppression of women and the oppression of nature and draws a connection between the two’ (Qtd. by Esther Vinent 23). This approach examines how women’s connection to nature reclaims feminine imagery, which has traditionally been undervalued, and reinterprets it to showcase an alternative perspective. It highlights how these representations reflect and reinforce both the oppression of women and environmental degradation, offering a pathway for change and resistance to emerge. From an ecofeminist perspective, ekphrasis functions as a means to establish a connection between gender, visual representation, and the environment, employing nature and the environment to emphasise social or representational issues depicted in ekphrasis. Ecofeminist ekphrasis further challenges traditional representations of women and nature in the ways that they have both been portrayed in art and poetry. In the case of this poem, the landscape that surrounds Venus appears to shift with her rather than frame her: “The level field that *circles her retreat*” [Italics added] (line 22). The blending of woman and earth here aligns with the idea that the female figure operates as a force in the natural world, rather than being confined within it, further enhancing the feminist direction that Michael Field took in this ekphrastic poem. The third stanza reveals that Venus’s body takes on a plant-like and growing form, highlighting how her body engages with nature in a way that blends them together: “She rears from off the ground / As if her body grew / Triumphant as a stem / That hath received the rains” (lines 27-30). Challenging the aesthetic tradition that portrays the female figure as static imagery resonates with the ethos presented in the preface of *Sight and Song*. In their work, emphasis is placed on the importance of depicting the visual subject through careful, immersive observation rather than through possessive and subjective interpretation.

The depiction of Venus and Mars in the painting suggests a reversal of traditional power roles, with Venus looking at Mars's prone form. The subsequent lines in the poem reinforce this shift, illustrating a unique form of shapeshifting driven by the female subject. This is noted by the gaze of the figure of Venus: "Yet her eyes alert; they search and weigh / The god, supine, who fell from her caress / When love had had its sway" (lines 34-36). The figure of Venus appears to be looking and contemplating, evoking a distinct self-awareness and sense of interiority as the goddess gazes back at the figure of the god Mars, who lies "supine" and drained of energy. The reversal of the gaze—from the traditional masculine perspective that observes a static female image to the active female subject that looks at the passive male figure—underscores the feminist ekphrastic strategy of empowering the female subject's gaze. This shift enables the female figure to see and act rather than merely being seen and objectified. The next stanza shifts the poetic perspective to portray the unconscious male figure in the image, highlighting visual details that appear almost sculpture-like: "Athwart his figure twist / Some wreathy folds of white" (lines 49-50). Ironically, the male body is being aestheticised and looked at now, alluding to the extent of the inversion of the gendered gaze between Venus and Mars. This gendered power dynamic is further alluded to in the lines "Thus, opposite the queen, his body slim / And muscular reclines" (lines 59-60), where Venus is represented as "the queen". She is royalty and he, her subject, inverting the ekphrastic tradition further by making the male figure the adorned body, while the woman the figure of command and assertion. The final stanza represents the figure of Venus as a woman who is now framed as beyond grief: "O tragic forms, the man, / The woman—he asleep, / She lone and sadder than / The dawn, too wise to weep" (lines 73-76). The figure of Venus here is reminiscent of "La Gioconda's" enigmatic and eternal sadness that is rife with her own awareness, where Venus is seen as "too wise to weep". The gendered contest discussed here, first theorised by Heffernan, revolves around how the speaker aligns with Venus rather than Mars (27). This reverses the traditional power dynamic of the gaze, with the male figure (Mars) now depicted as silent and dormant, while the female figure observes him with a sense of control and disinterest. This moves away from the typical male poetic authority or dominance in the poem by decentering the male viewpoint from the narrative. It enables a female perspective to alter the power dynamic of the gaze, turning her into the gazing subject who directs her gaze at the static male figure. This change further reinforces the feminist shapeshifting theme.

The poem concludes on a complex note of feminine isolation and control without sentimentality. The two gods in the painting are reduced to being merely a “man” and a “woman”, highlighting their differences, with the male figure asleep, while she is represented as “lone and sadder than the dawn” (lines 74-75) in her solitary space. The final line underscores the feminist ambiguity of her power: “And lives a cold enchantress doomed to please / Her victims one by one” (lines 82-83). She is not a celebrated or admired figure, but is doomed to eternally please, representing a figure of both enchantment and burden. This poem reflects a profound revision of traditional ekphrastic strategies by centring the mythological Venus not as the passive subject of male desire, but as an autonomous figure whose gaze, actions, and symbolic presence reframe the dynamics of erotic power. Unlike classical or patriarchal representations of the goddess of love, where her beauty exists solely for the male viewer, Michael Field’s Venus is represented as more complex, shifting between being both an object and an agent of desire. This poem extends the feminist ekphrastic strategy already seen in “La Gioconda” and “A Portrait” by disrupting the gaze of traditional ekphrasis. Instead of inviting a voyeuristic perspective, “Venus and Mars” places the viewer under the gaze of the female subject. Her agency is constructed with detachment, wisdom, and isolation.

4. “The Sleeping Venus” (1892):

Figure 21. “Sleeping Venus”, Giorgione (1510)

Following the disparate gendered dynamics and the representation of Venus in "Mars and Venus," where Venus shifts from being a mere object of the gaze to asserting herself into the traditionally masculine role of gazer, the female subject in the former poem takes on a more active role in her depiction. This change transforms the ekphrastic mode into a shapeshifting one, altering the traditional portrayal of Venus as an eroticised object meant to be looked at. In this way, I believe Michael Field continued asserting their feminist perspective by shifting the narrative not only to reclaim the female figure from the confines of the canvas but also to reimagine her in a way that affirms her presence beyond her role as a spectacle. In "The Sleeping Venus", the poets continue modifying the figure of Venus from her traditional depiction in paintings into a female form who is transformed from her usual portrayal into a being who uses her body and environment to her advantage. This Venus does not arise from the sea in a moment of mythic spectacle for male spectators, but instead, she rests amid the hills and fields, merging her form with the natural world around her. In doing so, I suggest that Michael Fields' poem works as a form of ecofeminist ekphrasis, where the female body and the natural elements surrounding her are aligned in a shared space of creativity and sacredness. As Stacy Alaimo (2010) states in her text, *Bodily Natures*, ecofeminism works to dismantle binaries between nature and culture, body and mind, femininity and reason, inviting readers to 'inhabit the contact zone between bodies and environments' (2). Michael Fields' Venus also exists within this "contact zone," where her body reflects the shape and form of the surrounding nature, erasing the boundaries between woman and world. Instead of being perceived as static objects meant for admiration, this highlights the feminist and shapeshifting nature of feminist ekphrasis, as well as its integration with other forms of feminist theory.

The collaborative work of Bradley and Cooper intertwines in a way that, as Sarah Parker (2013) observes, their poetry 'repeatedly resists binary logic—male/female, artist/muse, nature/culture—by engaging in a… doubled form of looking and speaking' (109). Their "doubled form of looking" is further illustrated in the analysis of their ekphrastic poem "The Sleeping Venus," which is especially relevant, where the gaze is not singular, masculine, or possessive, but plural, attentive, and reverent. The speaker's voice expresses desire and admiration, yet does so without violating or possessing the figure it describes; instead, the female figure continues to resist the "binary logic" by using the surrounding nature as further modes that enhance her identity and agency rather than comparing women

to nature in a way that diminishes her or dehumanises her. Instead, nature is used to elevate her and bring her forward through its connection to her body and being, establishing it as a means of resistance and solidarity against the masculine gaze and authority. Ecofeminist ekphrasis here examines the relationship between art, nature, and female representation, highlighting the resistance to patriarchal depictions of women in visual culture. This is particularly evident in classical paintings of nude female bodies, as illustrated in this poem, which questions the prevailing narratives about this imagery. Moreover, the poem's feminist techniques move beyond ecofeminism and the collaborative into a broader examination of the revitalisation of the feminine presence and permanence. As in the other ekphrastic poems examined in this chapter, "La Gioconda", "A Portrait", and "Venus and Mars", the female subject is depicted not as fleeting or temporary as a gaze, but as an enduring, sovereign, and deeply connected figure within the aesthetic, emotional, and earthly connections. In this way, the female subject in "The Sleeping Venus" contributes to the ekphrastic trajectory in a manner that resists interpretation, where the poetic voice refrains from performing traditional acts of representation and instead focuses on the sense of inner admiration and appreciation. Inspired by the Renaissance painting *Sleeping Venus* (1510) by Giorgione, the painting features a nude woman sleeping on a crimson bed in a natural landscape. According to Udo Kultermann (1990), the depiction of Venus in the painting marks a significant departure from earlier portrayals of the feminine form in a state of slumber. Throughout history, the representation of the sleeping woman has undergone significant evolution. In these depictions, she is often portrayed in ways that highlight her sexuality, whether she is being observed by a masculine gaze or lost in her own thoughts (Kultermann 134). Similarly, in the case of the previous ekphrastic poem, the figure of Venus in "Venus and Mars" was depicted as gazing at the god of war, Mars. At the same time, he lies asleep across from her, asserting the power of her gaze and presence over the observer and the other beings in the painting surrounding her.

In the case of the sleeping Venus in the painting *Sleeping Venus*, she is depicted as still maintaining her power and sexuality even while in slumber; this is suggested further in the ekphrastic response that Michael Field have written on the painting:

> Here is Venus by our homes
> And resting on the verdant swell
> Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes:
> She has left her arched shell,

Has left the barren wave that foams,
Amid earth's fruitful tilths to dwell.
Nobly lighted while she sleeps
As sward-lands or the corn-field sweeps,
Pure as are the things that man
Needs for life and using can
Never violate nor spot—
Thus she slumbers in no grot,
But on open ground.
With the great hill-sides around.

And her body has the curves,
The same extensive smoothness seen
In yonder breadths of pasture, in the swerves
Of the grassy mountain-green
That for her propping-pillow serves:
There is a sympathy between
Her and Earth of largest reach,
For the sex that forms them each
Is a bond, a holiness,
That unconsciously must bless
And unite them, as they lie
Shameless underneath the sky
A long, opal cloud
Doth in noontide haze enshroud.

O'er her head her right arm bends;
And from the elbow raised aloft
Down to the crossing knees a line descends
Unimpeachable and soft
As the adjacent slope that ends
In chequered plain of hedge and croft.
Circular as lovely knolls,
Up to which a landscape rolls
With desirous sway, each breast
Rises from the level chest,
One in contour, one in round-
Either exquisite, low mound
Firm in shape and given
To the August warmth of heaven.

With bold freedom of incline,
With an uttermost repose,
From hip to herbage-cushioned foot the line
Of her left leg stretching shows
Against the turf direct and fine,
Dissimilar in grace to those

Little bays that in and out
By ankle wind about;
Or that shallow bend, the right
Curled-up knee has brought to sight
Underneath its bossy rise,
Where the loveliest shadow lies!
Charmed umbrage rests
On her neck and by her breasts.

Her left arm remains beside
The plastic body's lower heaves,
Controlled by them, as when a river-side
With its sandy margin weaves
Deflections in a lenient tide;
Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,
Falling inward. Not even sleep
Dare invalidate the deep,
Universal pleasure sex
Must unto itself annex—
Even the stillest sleep; at peace,
More profound with rest's increase,
She enjoys the good
Of delicious womanhood.

Cheek and eyebrow touch the fold
Of the raised arm that frames her hair,
Her braided hair in colour like to old
Copper glinting here and there:
While through her skin of live-gold
The scarce carnations mount and share
Faultlessly the oval space
Of her temperate, grave face.
Eyelids underneath the day
Wrinkle as full buds that stay,
Through the tranquil, summer hours,
Closed although they might be flowers;
The red lips shut in
Gracious secrets that begin.

On white drapery she sleeps,
That fold by fold is stained with shade;
Her mantle's ruddy pomegranate in heaps
For a cushion she has laid
Beneath her; and the glow that steeps
Its grain of richer depth is made
By an overswelling bank,
Tufted with dun grasses rank.

From this hillock's outer heaves
One small bush defines its leaves
Broadly on the sober blue
The pale cloud-bank rises to,
Whilst it sinks in bland
Sunshine on the distant land.

Near her resting-place are spread,
In deep or greener-lighted brown,
Wolds, that half-withered by the heat o'erhead,
Press up to a little town
Of castle, archway, roof and shed,
Then slope in grave continuance down:
On their border, in a group.
Trees of brooding foliage droop
Sidelong; and a single tree
Springs with bright simplicity,
Central from the sunlit plain.
Of a blue no flowers attain,
On the fair, vague sky
Adamantine summits lie.

And her resting is so strong
That while we gaze it seems as though
She had lain thus the solemn glebes among
In the ages far ago
And would continue, till the long,
Last evening of Earth's summer glow
In communion with the sweet
Life that ripens at her feet:
We can never fear that she
From Italian fields will flee,
For she does not come from far,
She is of the things that are;
And she will not pass
While the sun strikes the grass. (Michael Field, "Sleeping Venus" 1-144 lines)

The opening stanza situates Venus within a fertile and lush landscape, emphasising her integration with nature: "Here is Venus by our homes / And resting on the verdant swell / Of a soft country…" (lines 1-3). In this poem, Venus is portrayed as transcending the traditional depictions of her earlier representation, particularly as seen in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1486), where she emerges from the enclosed "arched shell" (line 4) of her creation. This evolution is underscored by her departure from the "barren wave that foams" (line 5). In contrast, Michael Field seems to trace Venus's ecological context, linking it to

her representation and sensuality with the line, “Amid earth’s fruitful tilths to dwell” (line 6). By placing Venus “on open ground” (line 13) surrounded by “great hill-sides” (line 14), the poem aligns her with the earth’s vitality and representation, combining them into a symbolic relationship that is distinctly established in the beginning lines of the poem, highlighting the dynamic between femininity and nature. Venus is repositioned from a mythic detachment to an immediate domestic space: “by our homes”, placing her in a more grounded, earthly, and non-idealised position that removes her from the status of a mythological, exotic being. This disrupts the voyeuristic detachment placed on the classical nude by breaking the space and distance between the viewer and the subject. Similar to "A Portrait" and "La Gioconda," this female figure embodies both an inhuman quality and an intimate humanity. Consequently, the primary aim of Michael Field’s feminist ekphrasis is to ensure that their poem neither consumes nor controls the female figure but instead acknowledges her deep connection to landscape and legacy. The following lines, “Pure as are the things that man / Needs for life and using can / Never violate nor spot…” (lines 9-11), illustrate a critique of the masculine gaze and the patriarchal inclination to objectify or possess the female body. The speaker asserts that Venus, akin to the "sward-lands or the corn-field" (line 8), cannot be confined or violated. Instead, it is the "open ground" and natural light that define her, portraying her as a being that resists objectification. This idea is further underscored by the phrase that she "slumbers in no grot, / But on open ground" (lines 12-13), emphasising her dignity and self-possession in relation to her natural location.

The relationship between the figure of Venus and the surrounding natural environment in the *Sleeping Venus* is intricately intertwined, offering a distinct reimagining of their traditional association. As Marina Najera (2018) notes, patriarchy has historically shaped portrayals of the interconnectedness between women and nature, often depicting both as ‘marginal beings’ that reinforce the subordination of disempowered groups (8). Similarly, critic Lawrence Buell (1995) argues that patriarchy relegates representations of nature and women to the status of passive ‘others,’ thereby justifying their exploitation. As he asserts, ‘the natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interests, and one of those interests has been to make it serve as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups: non-whites, women, and children’ (Buell 21). In contrast, Michael Field reclaim the association between woman and nature, using their dynamic in “The Sleeping Venus” not as a symbol of passivity but as a site of vitality,

autonomy, and resistance. Rather than submitting to patriarchal constructs, Venus's unity with the natural world asserts her self-possession and power, challenging the disempowering symbols historically imposed upon both women and the environment. This reimagined relationship between Venus and the natural world is especially evident in the second stanza, where the poem foregrounds her deep and organic relationship with the earth:

> And her body has the curves,
> The same extensive smoothness seen
> In yonder breadths of pasture, in the swerves
> Of the grassy mountain-green
> That for her propping-pillow serves:
> There is a sympathy between
> Her and Earth of largest reach,
> For the sex that forms them each
> Is a bond, a holiness,
> That unconsciously must bless
> And unite them, as they lie
> Shameless underneath the sky (lines 15-26)

The concept of the woman as spectacle, as articulated in Lyn Pykett's *The 'Improper' Feminine* (1992), offers a distinct framework that highlights the visual portrayal of Venus in the second stanza. Pykett suggests that the 'improper' feminine is represented as: 'threateningly sexual, pervaded by feeling, knowing, self-assertive, desiring and actively pleasure-seeking' (16). This situates the spectacle of femininity as a mode of cultural anxiety in the nineteenth century, where the 'improper woman' becomes a visual spectacle, with her body and her sexuality displayed as both modes of fascination and moral fear in Victorian culture (Pykett 16). While patriarchal structure posits the female figure as a passive object, made visible and available for the consumption of the controlling gaze, Michael Field subvert this representation. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze comes into view here, where she suggests that 'in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed', reflecting the way that women have been staged as spectacle, visually eroticised and positioned solely for the viewer's pleasure (27). Yet in "The Sleeping Venus", this dynamic of spectacle is inverted. Venus is not posed for a voyeuristic gaze, nor is her body fractured or fetishised, instead, she is immersed in a visual ecosystem that blends her with the hills, the pasture, and sky in a distinct harmony that refuses objectification. Although their depiction initially appears to align with the conventions of spectacle—emphasising Venus's "curves," "extensive smoothness," and her exposure "shameless underneath the sky"

(line 24), the poem ultimately illustrates Venus's body not just as on a surface level for human pleasure, her body is intertwined with the natural world itself, where her curves mirror the "breadths of pasture" (line 17) and "grassy mountain-green" (line 18). This alignment reframes spectacle as a mode of solidarity and unity rather than suppression: Venus is not isolated and staged for visual consumption but merged with the sacred vitality of the earth. The bond between woman and nature, described as a "holiness" (line 21), elevates both beyond objectification, presenting a vision of feminine and ecological autonomy that resists patriarchal structures of dominance.

The following stanzas further underscore Venus's status as an interconnected figure with nature, highlighting her autonomy as an entity that embodies traits such as "bold freedom" (line 41) and "uttermost repose" (line 42) through the processes of the natural world. Michael Field continues to portray Venus in a way that links her self-possession to her physical attributes and to the natural environment, even when describing her erotic autonomy in the fourth stanza:

> Her left arm remains beside
> The plastic body's lower heaves,
> Controlled by them, as when a river-side
> With its sandy margin weaves
> Deflections in a lenient tide;
> Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,
> Falling inward. Not even sleep
> Dare invalidate the deep,
> Universal pleasure sex
> Must unto itself annex—
> Even the stillest sleep; at peace,
> More profound with rest's increase,
> She enjoys the good
> Of delicious womanhood. (lines 55-68)

This stanza is notable for its distinct portrayal of female erotic pleasure and bodily integrity, which connects to how the 'improper feminine' is depicted in Pykett's description. Michael Field deliberately avoids the spectacle by not staging Venus for erotic consumption, instead blending her with the surrounding landscape, thereby rejecting the voyeuristic gaze. Rather than inviting the viewer's gaze, the poem insists that Venus is self-contained within her sensuality. The phrase "she enjoys the good / Of delicious womanhood" (lines 67-68) is profound for its depiction of female pleasure that is separate from male desire, and echoes similar assertions in the previous poems, "Venus and Mars" and "A Portrait", where women

resist emotional, and in this case, physical dependency. Michael Field represent Venus not as an immobilised object for the gaze but as a living, breathing extension of nature's own forces, where natural rhythms and movement animate Venus's body:

> The plastic body's lower heaves,
> Controlled by them, as when a river-side
> With its sandy margin weaves
> Deflections in a lenient tide: (lines 99-102)

Within the ekphrastic tradition, the woman is often trapped within the static frame of the artwork, her vitality frozen to preserve her as an aesthetic object. Yet here, Michael Field transform ekphrasis into a means of liberation, where the poetic gaze does not confine, but rather revives the female figure, merging her with the timeless and eternal processes of nature. Venus's agency is retained even in sleep: "Not even sleep / Dare invalidate the deep / Universal Pleasure" (lines 104-105). This particular stanza undermines the traditional portrayal of Venus in Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* painting, where her sleep is an invitation for voyeurism. The theme of representing sleeping women in visual art is often rife with symbols of erotic and violent connotations because of the vulnerable and exposed depiction of the female body, as it is often presented exposed and seemingly open for the spectator's gaze. Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada (2014) argues that when a male viewer observes a painting of a female nude, he is inclined to project his desires onto her, thus confining her within the limits of his eroticised viewpoint (17).

In contrast, Michael Field subverts the voyeuristic perspective of Venus in the poem, portraying sleep as a state of empowered inaccessibility, where Venus's intimacy remains self-contained and closed off. This theme is highlighted even more in the final stanza, where Venus is presented as unfading and everlasting in her fixture in "Italian fields" (line 140), where she is no longer a mythic outsider or detached divine anomaly, but rather a persistent and enduring entity that is intertwined with the natural world around her. Rather than being immortalised by art, Venus herself becomes timeless:

> And her resting is so strong
> That while we gaze it seems as though
> She had lain thus the solemn glebes among
> In the ages far ago
> And would continue, till the long,
> Last evening of Earth's summer glow
> In communion with the sweet
> Life that ripens at her feet:

We can never fear that she
From Italian fields will flee,
For she does not come from far,
She is of the things that are;
And she will not pass
While the sun strikes the grass. (lines 131–144)

The lines “while we gaze it seems as though / She had lain thus” (lines 132-133) illustrate how Venus transcends and endures beyond the act of gazing, remaining perpetually beyond possession. Her slumber is characterised as “strong,” indicating agency rather than passivity, and she seems to have anchored herself within the very earth through her timelessness. In contrast to traditional ekphrastic subjects, who are distanced from the viewer and frozen within a painted frame, Venus is portrayed as a dynamic, ongoing force— “of the things that are” (line 142). She embodies a profound connection to both time and ecology; rather than being immobilised, Michael Field’s ekphrasis animates and honours her enduring bond with the natural world. This presents an image of womanhood that is inseparable from the rhythms of the earth, rendering her immune to patriarchal constraints. In this poem, Michael Field bring their feminist ekphrastic method in a way that refocuses on the mythic figure of Venus from an eroticised figure through a lens of vitality and endurance, where they offer a version of the mythic female figure that defies her depictions in the image.

To conclude this chapter, I propose that Michael Field intentionally reimagine the female figure through collaboration, both in art and myth. Through their dual authorship, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper generate a poetic voice that resists singular interpretation. This collaborative voice becomes a feminist intervention in ekphrasis, where the female figure no longer remains a static surface to be described, but emerges as a force that destabilises the viewer’s power and interpretation. The poems analysed in this chapter further interrogate the visual traditions that fix and fetishise the female form. In reworking mythological subject matter through a late nineteenth-century aesthetic lens, the poems engage in a distinct critique of gendered spectatorship, while also affirming the enduring relevance of female agency in visual and poetic representation. The reinterpretation of female figures in the selected ekphrastic poems underscores Michael Field's attempt to depart from traditional portrayals of women depicted in paintings. Their work provides varied and profound interpretations of mythological and traditionally eroticised female figures, such as the "La Gioconda," the courtesan in "A Portrait," the isolated Venus in "Venus and Mars,"

and the reclining Venus in "The Sleeping Venus." These interpretations present the figures as self-aware entities who control their own frozen and static positions within the artworks to challenge the passivity typically imposed upon them. Michael Field employ this approach in their selected poems as a means of subverting the ekphrastic tradition. By verbally "repainting" the female subjects from the paintings, they utilise these static representations as a means of transcending them. Ultimately, these strategies illuminate the diverse ways in which femininity in ekphrastic poetry by women writers serves to create a distinct interplay between the contributions made to the ekphrastic poem and the influences from historical portrayals. These ekphrastic poems represent how Michael Field integrated their ekphrastic mode, which involved their feminist, ecofeminist, and collaboratively authored approach. Their method of translating the image into a poetic “song” redefines poetic looking as an embodied act rather than a method of ekphrastic authority, as seen in Rossetti’s ekphrastic techniques in the earlier chapters.

Chapter Five

Intermedial Feminist Ekphrasis and the Reframing of the Female Subject in Felicia Hemans, Alice Meynell, and Edith Wharton's Ekphrastic Poems

This final chapter departs from a strictly chronological structure to focus instead on a thematic and intermedial dynamic among nineteenth-century women poets who engage with diverse artistic media, such as sculpture, music, and ancient relics, to critique and rewrite dominant visual and aesthetic ideologies. While the thesis opened by exploring Dante Gabriel Rossetti's ekphrastic inscriptions and the ways in which his poetic framing of the female figures in visual art reinforces containment and control, this final chapter returns to the question of poetic and visual authority and ekphrastic representation. It does so by tracing how women poets from the early nineteenth century through to the fin-de-siècle subvert that very containment through poetic acts of reclamation and resistance. Their ekphrastic poems engage with the established hierarchies of gender and representation, not by passively describing the artworks, but by interrogating their symbolic and ideological framework in a way that repositions female subjects as sites of complex emotional, cultural, and material agency. Building on the previous chapters' analysis of how nineteenth-century women poets reclaimed and reinterpreted ekphrasis, from Letitia Elizabeth Landon's subtle ekphrastic strategies to Michael Field's revisioning of aestheticised female figures, this chapter turns to widely unconsidered themes of musical, sculptural, and object-based ekphrasis by women poets in the long nineteenth century.

Felicia Hemans's poem on a fossilised cast of a mother and child in "The Image in Lava" (1827), Alice Meynell's musical ekphrasis in "Soeur Monique" (1875), and the sculptural ekphrasis in Edith Wharton's "The So-Called Venus of Milo" (1889) set the premise of this chapter. Though written decades apart, these works together stage a distinct feminist reorientation of ekphrasis across different media. Hemans's poem, which focuses on the cast of a mother and child preserved in volcanic ash from Pompeii, opens the chapter with a distinct example of *object-based* ekphrasis. Focusing on depicting the emotional and poignant representation of maternal grief and embodied immortality, the poem refuses to glorify the image of the monument and instead frames it as a site of embodied grief. In doing so, Hemans reclaims the materiality of history to inscribe a distinctly feminine legacy, as depicted in the figure of the resilient mother, one that surpasses time and architectural

creations. From Hemans's emotional material relic, the chapter moves to Alice Meynell's "Soeur Monique", a poem that reimagines a baroque musical composition through both representation and erasure of the female subject of a nun, sister Monique. The poem operates as a form of *musical ekphrasis*, drawing attention not to a visual object but to sound, silence, and memory. Meynell's feminist ekphrasis, like Hemans's, highlights absence and invisibility, focusing not on the grandness of canonical representation but on the silenced woman figure whose presence in the musical work remains unseen (and unheard) over the medium's representation of her. Edith Wharton's "The So-Called Venus of Milo" then extends these concerns by turning directly to the ideological function of classical sculpture in the construction of feminine ideals. Wharton's speaker dismantles the myth of "Venus" as an eternal emblem of feminine beauty. Instead, Wharton emphasises the violent decontextualisation imposed upon the female subject. This poem, as a work of *sculptural ekphrasis*, critiques not only the aestheticisation of the female body but the patriarchal gaze that determines what is preserved, displayed and idealised. Though these poems span over various decades and function across distinct artistic forms, they unite thematically in their feminist reworking of ekphrasis. They articulate a counterargument to Rossetti's ekphrastic interpretation: rather than seeking to possess or define the artwork's subject, these poets allow their female figures to remain unfixed, unresolved, and resonant in the ekphrastic space that they create outside of the painted form. This final chapter thus progresses the critical direction initiated in the first chapter: from male-defined, static female forms framed by Rossetti's poetic-painted inscriptions to women's dynamic reimaginings of the ekphrastic act itself. Feminist ekphrasis, in these final works, emerges as a practice that moves beyond describing or even reclaiming the female image, transforming the very media of representation and offering a distinct challenge to aesthetic authority and the gendered politics of looking, listening, and knowing the female subject.

I. Felicia Hemans “The Image in Lava” (1828):

During the transition from the late Romantic to the early Victorian periods, there was a marked increase in interest in plastic and textile arts. This era saw a growing appreciation for sculptures that depicted human form and intricate textile designs. The excavations of historical sites, notably the finds in Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748, allowed people of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to engage with an imagined view of the past. The establishment of accessible museums and art galleries, such as the British Museum (1759), the Louvre (1793), and the National Gallery (1824), along with the rising popularity of engravings and illustrations, enabled a broader audience to experience artworks and images of plastic art (Simonsen 319). During the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, women writers faced significant barriers and complications when it came to engaging with classical arts. Their limited opportunities to access and view ancient relics or literature in museums, as well as to read and write about these works, stemmed from complex societal norms regarding femininity. In contrast to their male counterparts, women were frequently deprived of the opportunity to study Latin or Greek, which further limited their exposure to ancient culture and artworks. Even in instances where their male guardians permitted them to engage with the classics, they imposed restrictions to shield them from the 'indecencies' present in those texts (Hurst 2). As the century progressed, women experienced a notable increase in their access to translated classical literary texts and engraved reproductions of ancient artworks and figures. Additionally, they gained more opportunities to visit museums and exhibition halls, further enhancing their engagement with these ancient artefacts and casts. Writers such as Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), previously discussed in earlier chapters, acquired knowledge of classical languages, including Greek and Latin, through private study at their residences or via correspondence courses, as noted by Jennifer Wallace (243). Hemans’s education in the classics allowed her to engage distinctly with it, as evidenced by her publication of various translations and ekphrastic poems that drew inspiration from literary figures and sculptures. Notable examples include “Modern Greece” (1817) and “The Statue of the Dying Gladiator” (1812). She also engaged with portraits and wrote poems such as “To My Own Portrait”, which was published posthumously in 1839, and “Properzia Rossi” in 1828, where,

according to Grant F. Scott, Hemans was one of the most prominent ekphrastic poets in the Romantic period (36). Hemans's "The Image in Lava" begins:

> Thou thing of years departed!
> What ages have gone by,
> Since here the mournful seal was set
> By love and agony!
>
> Temple and tower have moulder'd,
> Empires from earth have pass'd,
> And woman's heart hath left a trace
> Those glories to outlast!
>
> And childhood's fragile image
> Thus fearfully enshrin'd,
> Survives the proud memorials rear'd
> By conquerors of mankind.
>
> Babe! Wert thou brightly slumbering
> Upon thy mother's breast,
> When suddenly the fiery tomb
> Shut round each gentle guest?
>
> A strange, dark fate o'ertook you,
> Fair babe and loving heart!
> One moment of a thousand pangs
> Yet better than to part!
>
> Haply of that fond bosom
> On ashes here impress'd,
> Thou wert the only treasure, child!
> Whereupon a hope might rest.
>
> Perchance all vainly lavish'd
> Its other love had been,
> And where it trusted, nought remain'd
> But thorns on which to lean.
>
> Far better then to perish,
> Thy form within its clasp,
> Than live and lose thee, precious one!
> From that impassion'd grasp.
>
> Oh! I could pass all relics
> Left by the pomps of old,
> To gaze on this rude monument,
> Cast in affection's mould.

Love, human love! What art thou?
Thy print upon the dust
Outlives the cities of renown
Wherein the mighty trust!

Immortal, oh! Immortal
Thou art, whose earthly glow
Hath given these ashes holiness
It must, it must be so! (Felicia Hemans, "The Image in Lava" lines 1-44)

Hemans's "double" and "feminine" poetic voice intersect with her depiction of 'silence and absence' in her ekphrastic poetry, as noted by Armstrong (318). Armstrong highlights how Hemans's ekphrastic poem employs her feminine and maternal voice to interpret and underscore the absence of the monument, specifically the fossilised figure of the mother and child. By using a "double" voice, she brings forth the voice of the silent object that has been overlooked in history. Hemans offers a nuanced perspective that intertwines the themes of mourning with both ekphrastic and aesthetic appreciation. She reshapes and transforms the figure, conveying a melancholic representation through the speaker's "emotional resonance," which uses the silence of the depicted figure as a way to express emotion, which is imparted by the speaker (Armstrong 319). Brian Elliott further considers that Hemans's ekphrastic techniques focus on themes of 'individual loss, a lament for the inevitable dissolution of identity in the sands of time', focusing on the fragmentation of identity within the ekphrastic poem (28). Hemans's earliest relationship with art was documented in a letter in 1811, where she states, 'I have been reading lately the memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds, with his discourses to the Royal Academy, and I am so enthusiastic an admirer of the beauties of painting, that I derived both pleasure and instruction from the perusal' (Qtd. by Simonsen 326). Her fascination with the act of observing a painting and deriving both "pleasure and instruction" offers a deeper understanding of her ekphrastic techniques and representations. The subjective emotions she experiences while engaging with a work of art inform her use of ekphrasis, serving as a means to translate and express her interpretations and artistic appreciation in her ekphrastic poetry. Scott also claims that Hemans's ekphrastic representations further enhance the dynamic between the visual and the verbal in a way that 'reinforce[s] each other, combining powers to evoke a human response from the audience' (36). Her ekphrastic dynamic showcases her subjective voice and

perspective, eliciting a response from the reader and drawing them closer to the space between the image and the poem. In essence, Hemans's ekphrastic focus is on bringing forth a distinctly subjective female voice that recasts the depiction of the excavated human remains. She focuses on depicting a distinct space that unites the speaker's subjective interpretation with themes of elegy and timelessness, where, according to Elliott, Hemans's ekphrastic poems '…muse on the negative, on spaces or topics whose existence is unprovable or mitigated by unbridgeable expanses' (24). This approach allows her to interrogate how classical representations of women are recontextualised within her own work, as depicted in her ekphrastic poem "The Image in Lava" (1827).

Armstrong suggests that Hemans may have encountered information about new discoveries at the Pompeii excavation site, which was published in *The Times* magazine in 1827 (219). It is also possible that she saw impressions or images of the human casts from the site, which could have prompted the "image" of the mother and child in the poem (Armstrong 219). Published in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Annual* in 1827 and then republished in her poetry collection titled *Records of Woman* in 1828, "The Image in Lava" exemplifies the merging of ekphrasis and feminist object poetics. Feminist object poetics is a poetic approach that merges Behar's object-oriented feminism with Loizeaux's feminist ekphrasis, emphasising that the female body in art is neither merely depicted nor subjected to a male gaze. In this poem, Hemans reinterprets the image of the female figure from the ancient cast not only by describing it visually but also by imbuing it with emotional depth, thereby adding interiority and agency to the depicted object. Additionally, the poem is accompanied by an annotation at the end, which reads: "The impression of a woman's form, with an infant clasped to the bosom, found at the uncovering of Herculaneum" (307). This annotation functions not merely as a factual representation but as a critical framework that sets the poem's exploration of maternal love, memory, and the endurance of feminine affect. The annotation also situates the poem within the realm of archaeological discovery by referencing the excavations at Herculaneum. By doing so, Hemans bridges the gap between the ancient past and her contemporary moment, allowing readers to engage with the relic as a symbol of enduring human emotions that transcend the bounds of time. In this poem, Hemans focuses on a fossilised cast of a mother and child preserved in volcanic ash, foregrounding the concept of an object poetics that diverges from the earlier ekphrastic poems analysed in this chapter that focused on painted images.

Focusing on the preserved embrace of a mother and child exemplifies feminist object poetics, emphasising the agency and significance of objects associated with women's experience, and in this case, distinctly maternal experience. Hemans begins the poem with a direct apostrophe, where she addresses the relic and personifies it as a "thing of years departed" (1), setting the tone for her ekphrastic engagement with the object in a more emotionally resonant manner rather than aesthetically describing it, as seen in the "mournful seal" of "love and agony" embedded on the object itself. The representation of the cast as a fragmented "thing" creates what Elliott describes as a 'strangely liminal art object, ambiguously isolated and without historical context' (26). This relic provides the poet with the opportunity to infuse her personal meditations and subjective interpretations into the object's context. As such, the object functions as a vehicle that, through its ekphrastic portrayal, encapsulates the elegiac themes that blend between silence and absence, which Hemans seeks to emphasise in her ekphrastic poem. In the following stanza, Hemans emphasises the mother figure's endurance as a symbol of feminine resilience and perseverance that surpasses the glorified and grand man-made historical structures:

> Temple and tower have moulder'd,
> Empires from earth have pass'd,
> And woman's heart hath left a trace
> Those glories to outlast! (lines 5-8)

The contrast between the grandeur of these temples and towers and the "trace" left by a mother's love foregrounds the focus on the feminine experience and presence, surpassing traditional historical monuments and challenging patriarchal narratives of legacy and permanence. The focus on the sense of grief and loss depicted in the poem is brought forward through the symbolic status of the woman and the child's outlasting presence and death over the glorified monuments and structures. Tricia Lootens also argues that Hemans's poem represents a type of 'feminine antiwar writing', where the lines "the cities of renown / Wherein the mighty trust" detail how the maternal affection and experience withstand the passing of time and empire (27). Hemans continues to conjure up the dead figures of the mother and child in the following lines, where the preserved "fragile image" (3) of the child is described as "fearfully enshrin'd" (4), suggesting both reverence and the terror of sudden death, with this image outlasting the "proud memorials" (5) of conquerors, reinforcing the theme that the intimate experience of the mother and child hold greater enduring significance

than the masculinised displays of power. Meilee Bridges asserts this claim by stating that Hemans 'elevates the feminine so that it not only transcends death but also endures beyond any vestiges of the martial conquest and imperialism that would be traditionally linked with masculinity' (31). While Hemans's poem may elevate the feminine, it also portrays the female image through synecdochical fragments, such as a "woman's heart" (7), "fond breast" (14), and "loving heart" (18). These elements transform the mother figure into a collective image that extends beyond mere physical traits, thereby severing the connection between the historical relic and the presumed woman narrating or perceiving the female figure in the cast.

In the concluding stanzas, Hemans emphasises the maternal agency represented by the figures of the mother and her child, particularly in the context of their frozen status that remains throughout time. The speaker asserts that it is far better to "perish" (29) together than to "live and lose thee" (31), highlighting how the maternal body that holds the child "within its clasp" (30) becomes an enduring symbol rather than a political or heroic act. The mother's embrace here, immortalised in volcanic ash, is not just a passive form—Hemans re-centres the woman's agency through this very act. Immediately following this assertion, Hemans shifts both tone and perspective in the following stanza, stepping into the role of an observer: "Oh! I could pass all relics" (33). This transition allows her to use the signifier "I" as she reflects on her own emotional response to the scene before her. This personal viewpoint offers a more subjective and introspective lens through which she contemplates the fate of the "rude monument" (35) that symbolises the mother and child. The phrase "cast in affection's mould" (36) implies a strong, lasting connection, highlighting how this object serves as a means for Hemans to behave in a manner that Scott previously discussed, aiming to provoke a reaction from the audience or readers. Through this blend of observation and introspection, Hemans deepens the emotional resonance of her imagery, reflecting how the object of the ancient relic propels her stance on the masculine-coded narrative of wars, rulers, and monuments, as highlighted by Lootens's assertion that Hemans's poem also acts as an 'antiwar' poem:

> Love, human love! What art thou?
> Thy print upon the dust
> Outlives the cities of renown
> Wherein the mighty trust! (lines 37-40)

Hemans focuses on the emotional resonance and emotion that "outlives the cities of renown" (39), that the "mighty" trust, asserting a distinct feminist claim: that the affective and embodied experiences of women, especially those set in material form as depicted in this poem, outlast history. Hemans goes beyond merely describing the object; she reshapes the value system by portraying maternal affect as eternal. In the final stanza, she explicitly places the object of the cast at the forefront, speaking directly to it and saying, "Immortal, oh! Immortal / Thou art, whose earthly glow / Hath given these ashes holiness" (41-43). Hemans elevates maternal love depicted in the lava, calling it "immortal." The "earthly glow" symbolises both the physical warmth of love and the literal heat from the volcanic eruption, blending human emotion with natural forces from the past. Hemans's sentimental and emotional ekphrastic portrayal of the ancient mother and child relic highlights her interest in applying her ekphrastic techniques to historical figures. This approach allows her to express her own voice and subjective perspective, asserting, 'I have so often found a kind of relief in throwing the colour of my own feelings over the destiny of historical characters, that it has almost become a habit of mind' (Qtd. in Rothstein 23). By intertwining subjective emotion with material preservation, Hemans's poem reexamines the boundaries between subject and object, as well as the connections between the past and present, life and death, and emotion and matter. By redirecting the emphasis from solely portraying a visual object to emphasising a maternal figure and her child, Hemans confronts the traditional hierarchy that determines which subjects are considered appropriate for artistic depiction. The lava cast is portrayed not merely as a passive relic but as an active participant in the narrative, revealing a distinctive expression of feminist ekphrasis as demonstrated by women poets in the early nineteenth century.

II. Musical Ekphrasis in Alice Meynell's "Soeur Monique" (1875):

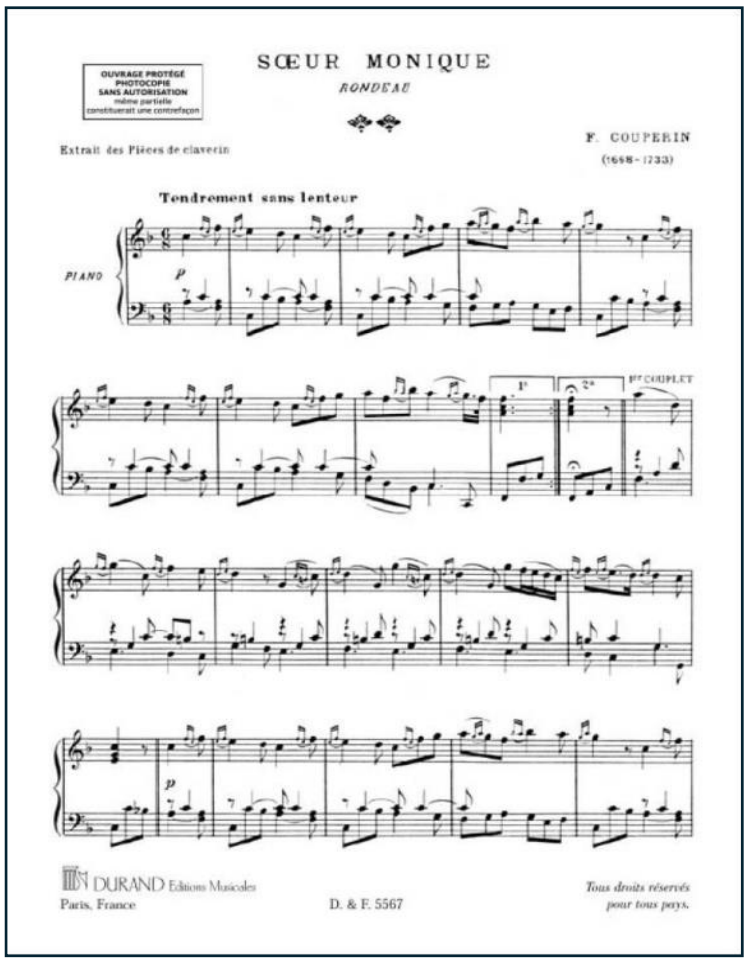

Figure 22. "Soeur Monique", Francois Couperin (1730), Kalmus eedition (1985)

Alice Meynell (1847-1922) played a significant role in the aesthetic movement in the late 1800s. Her early education and family's artistic background shaped her, with her mother being musically gifted and her sister, Elizabeth Butler (1846-1933), recognised as a well-known military artist. Meynell grew up surrounded by art from an early age. In the 1860s, she converted to Catholicism, a theme that is evident in several of her poems, including her ekphrastic work "Soeur Monique" (1875). Ruskin was one of the first to read her poetry and praised her early work, stating that they were 'the finest things I've seen or felt in modern verse' (Qtd. by Badeni 93). In her adult life, Meynell collaborated with her husband, Wilfrid Meynell (1852-1948), who was a notable editor and publisher of various journals and

magazines. As her reputation as a writer and art critic grew, she also supported her sister by writing reviews of her artwork for different journals and periodicals. Often using a pseudonym, this practice enabled her to build connections and professional relationships with other writers and artists throughout her career. She published her writings and art reviews in various journals, including *The Spectator, The Pall Mall Gazette*, and *The Art Journal*, throughout the 1890s. Meynell was also a significant contributor to the women's suffrage movement, serving as vice-president of the "Women Writers' Suffrage League", which highlighted her interest and influence in the fight for women's rights and equality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her unique experiences and exposure to art and literature played a significant role in shaping her relationship with these fields, which is reflected in her ekphrastic works, including her ekphrastic poem, "Soeur Monique" (1875).

Following the depiction of the female figure in Felicia Hemans's "The Image in Lava" (1827), where the fossilised image of a mother and child transforms from an ancient object into an icon of endurance and historical erasure, this section shifts focus to another form of ekphrastic memorialisation that alters the portrayal of the female figure through its poetic reinterpretation: *musical ekphrasis*. Meynell offers a distinct response to the constraints of enclosed femininity in her ekphrastic poem, "Soeur Monique" (1875). Based on the baroque musical piece *Sœur Monique* by the eighteenth-century French composer and harpsichordist François Couperin (1668-1733), the ekphrastic poem finds resonance in a mode of sound that conveys restraint, introspection, and quiet autonomy. The musical piece was called a rondeau, a French poetic form derived from the word 'round,' which features the repetition of lines or rhythm throughout the piece (Anderson 23). This structure creates a lyrical and cyclical quality reminiscent of a song set in poetic form. Musical ekphrasis, in this context, enables a distinct kind of feminist poetics, one that listens rather than looks, foregrounding mood, temporality, and affect over a visual spectacle. Ekphrasis has been defined as the vivid depiction and description of visual art, where the relationship between the visual and verbal elements enhances the portrayal of meaning and interpretation. This depiction also encompasses sensory experiences, including sound. The term *musical ekphrasis* has been defined by Siglind Bruhn (2000) as: 'The musical equivalent to ekphrasis, by contrast, narrates or paints a fictional reality created by an artist *other than the composer* of the music: a painter or a poet' (17). In her extensive research on the unique relationship

between sound, music, and representation, Bruhn explores the differences between the sister arts of painting and poetry in relation to music. She examines how this connection fits within the tradition of ekphrasis, defining it within the contexts of both painting and literature. The poetic language used serves as a vehicle to explore the evocation of sound, music, and auditory experiences. Additionally, Meynell's ekphrastic poem represents what Steven Scher (1981) describes as *verbal music*: 'a form of music in literature that can incorporate verbal approximations of both musical (acoustic) sounds and musical structures, attaining a "music-like texture" to sometimes "create plausible literary semblances of actual or fictitious music"' (173). Like verbal music, musical ekphrasis transcends mere imitation and introduces a more interpretive quality when representing notes. The outcome is a 'poetic rendering of the intellectual and emotional significance, as well as the implied symbolic content of music, as perceived by the listener', making verbal music one of the most genuinely literary aspects of music-related literature (Scher 174). Through carefully selected words and vivid imagery, the poem seeks to evoke a compelling narrative that reinterprets the meaning within the music, effectively showcasing the poet's command of the ekphrastic technique. Although ekphrasis involving music does not appear to have the same dynamic relationship as with visual art, for a poet to combine poetry and music effectively, they must either set aside their conventional ideas or 'revise and expand upon them', as noted by Lydia Goehr (389). To bridge the gap between the two distinct media, the poet strives to engage the reader's "mind's eye" by vividly illustrating a scene or element from the musical landscape (Saleem 1).

Through rich and evocative language, the poet aims to transform the sounds and emotions of the music into a vibrant tapestry of imagery, allowing the reader to immerse themselves fully in the experience. This descriptive journey is designed to evoke a heightened sensory awareness, enabling the imagery of the musical scene to come alive in the reader's imagination and inviting them to visualise, feel, and connect with the essence of the music in a way similar to the visual ekphrastic discourse. The feminist reinterpretation engages with the music, emphasising a more clearly defined female presence. Here, the musical piece functions as a representation that creates a specific image of the female form. In this context, the ekphrastic poem 're-presents' and 're-interprets' the female figure shown in the music, transforming her from a mere musical element into a more tangible figure that highlights the ekphrastic depiction (Bruhn 29). The opening lines of Meynell's "Souer Monique"

immediately highlight the connection between sound and the central female figure of the nun. Meynell's ekphrastic poem consists of ten stanzas; each one reflects her detailed appreciation of the harpsichord's complexities and its ability to evoke mood and imagery:

> Quiet form of silent nun,
> What has given you to my inward eyes?
> What has marked you, unknown one,
> In the throngs of centuries
> That mine ears do listen through?
> This old master's melody
> That expresses you,
> This admired simplicity,
> Tender, with a serious wit,
> And two words, the name of it,
> 'Soeur Monique.'
>
> And if sad the music is,
> It is sad with mysteries
> Of a small immortal thing
> That the passing ages sing,--
> Simple music making mirth
> Of the dying and the birth
> Of the people of the earth.
>
> No, not sad; we are beguiled,
> Sad with living as we are;
> Ours the sorrow, outpouring
> Sad self on a selfless thing,
> As our eyes and hearts mild
> With our sympathy for Spring
> With a pity sweet and wild
> For the innocent and far,
> With our sadness in a star,
> Or our sadness in a child.
>
> But two words, and this sweet air.
> Soeur Monique,
> Had he more, who set you there?
> Was his music-dream of you
> Of some perfect nun he knew,
> Or of some ideal, as true?
>
> And I see you where you stand
> With your life held in your hand
> As a rosary of days.
> And your thoughts in calm arrays,

And your innocent prayers are told
On your rosary of days.
And the young days and the old
With their quiet prayers did meet
When the chaplet was complete.

Did it vex you, the surmise
Of this wind of words, this storm of cries,
Though you kept the silence so
In the storms of long ago,
And you keep it, like a star?
-Of the evils triumphing,
Strong, for all your perfect conquering,
Silenced conqueror that you are?
And I wonder at your peace, I wonder.
Would it trouble you to know,
Tender soul, the world and sin
By your calm feet trodden under
Long ago,
Living now, mighty to win?
And your feet are vanished like the snow.

Vanished; but the poet, he
In whose dream your face appears,
He who ranges unknown years
With your music in his heart,
Speaks to you familiarly
Where you keep apart,
And invents you are you were.
And your picture, O my nun!
Is a strangely easy one,
For the holy weed you wear,
For your hidden eyes and hidden hair,
And in picturing you I may
Scarcely go astray.

O the vague reality!
The mysterious certainty!
O the strange truth of these my guesses
In the wide thought-wildernesses!
-Truth of one divined of many flowers;
Of one raindrop in the showers
Of the long-ago swift rain;
Of one tear of many tears
In some world-renowned pain;
Of one daisy ‘mid the centuries of sun;
Of a little living nun

In the garden of the years.

Yes, I am not far astray;
But I guess you as might one
Pausing when young March is grey,
In a violet-peopled day;
All his thoughts go our to places that he knew,
To his child-home in the sun,
To the fields of hisregret,
To one place i' the innocent March air,
By one olive, and invent
The familiar form and scent
Safely; a white violet
Certainly is there.

Soeur Monique, remember me.
'Tis not in the past alone
I am picturing you to be;
But my little friend, my own,
In my moment, pray for me.
For another dream is mine,
And another dream is true,
Sweeter even,
Of the little ones that shine
Lost within the light divine,--
Of some meekest flower, or you,
In the fields of Heaven. (Meynell, "Soeur Monique" lines 1-107)

The poem's speaker listens rather than looks, interpreting the emotional expression of the musical pieces as a kind of feminine utterance. This auditory form of ekphrasis resists the fixed depiction of the visual, allowing for a more fluid and dynamic engagement with the media. Capturing the temporality of the music, the first three stanzas set the scene by bringing forth the reader's perception of the mysterious central female figure as a "Quiet form of silent nun" (line 1). From the very first line, the nun is portrayed as a silent figure, similar to the silenced female subjects in paintings, captured in the artwork to be seen but remain silent. The speaker interacts with the solitary female figure, prompting reflection on her existence and significance, particularly through the language she uses about the way the female subject appears to her. This is depicted in the following lines:

What has given you to my inward eyes?
What has marked you, unknown one,
In the throngs of centuries
That mine ears do listen through? (lines 2-4)

I believe that Meynell asserts her ekphrastic approach by articulating her perceptions of the figure of the nun, thereby creating a connection between her insights and the reader's "mind's eye" (Saleem 1). This technique not only enhances the narrative but also invites readers to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of this female figure in the ekphrastic portrayal presented by Meynell's speaker. This dialogue highlights Meynell's effort to transcend traditional portrayals of the female figure in the music piece. Over time, the speaker relates to the fictional nun's sense of confinement in the following lines: "What has marked you, unknown one, / In the throngs of centuries" (lines 3-4). She draws attention to how sound plays a crucial role in shaping her perception of the figure as she poses the question, "That mine ears do *listen* through?" [italics added] (line 4). This line suggests a profound engagement with the auditory experience, inviting readers to consider how listening can reveal layers of meaning and emotional depth that are not immediately visible in the visual aspect alone. Additionally, I believe the speaker attempts to shift the female figure from a musical context into the reader's view, using language to reshape her into a form that is emerging before us. The speaker continues to develop the nun's image, already suggested by "This old master's melody" (line 6), as if she is trying to uncover her identity through the music of the composer, which confirms her as "Soeur Monique". The speaker emphasises the importance of the musical elements in the poem, using them to reflect on the female subject and her presence within the music. In the next stanza, she reveals an inner narrative centred on the musical aspect, highlighting how the music captures a melancholic sadness of "a small immortal thing" (line 14). This reflects a philosophical connection between life and death, intertwining the themes of music and life's truths: "That the passing ages sing" (line 15) not just for herself, but for a broader collective, represented in the "people of the earth" (line 18). The speaker's voice underscores how music immortalises the female figure, even in moments of melancholy and isolation. The speaker continues to venerate the musical element within the philosophical landscape she depicts, transitioning her perspective from sadness to a sense of enchantment and wonder: "No, not sad; we are beguiled" (line 19).

In this stanza, the speaker shifts focus back to the female subject, emphasising a distinct change in her role within the poem and reaffirming her importance, bringing her to the forefront once again: "But two words, and this sweet air. / Soeur Monique" (lines 30-31). The subsequent lines also draw attention to the masculine perspective, illustrating how it

encompasses the female subject through the musical composition, always on the periphery and never far away from her perception. This highlights how the masculine gaze, particularly in its depiction of the nun, contains her within that representation of her:

> Had he more, who set you there?
> Was his music-dream of you
> Of some perfect nun he knew,
> Or some ideal, as true? (lines 31-34)

The speaker questions the portrayal of the nun within the ethereal "music-dream" setting (line 32) in which she is placed. By situating the female figure in such a fantastical context, the text underscores themes of idealisation and the dehumanising aspects that reduce the female figure to an ethereal and magical being. This portrayal confines her to the role of muse or inspiration for the male creator, rather than allowing her to be a creator in her own right within the artistic practice. The speaker addresses this point in the lines: "Was his music-dream of you / Of some perfect nun he knew / Or of some ideal, as true?" (lines 32-33). The nun is depicted as 'perfect' and 'ideal,' which highlights the portrayal of perfect femininity, even within the realm of spirituality.

This is similar to the representation of mythologised and idealised female figures in the painted works of artists like Rossetti, discussed in earlier chapters. The female voice now underscores the concept of ekphrasis as a form of gendered power. Heffernan's argument that ekphrasis is often portrayed as a power struggle between 'the voice of male speech… [that] strives to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening' is significant, as women are reworking this argument and attempting to reject this appropriation (29). Within a feminist ekphrastic context, and in this poem's case, I argue that Meynell turns this interior vision of the female figure in the musical piece not to display or fetishise her, but to highlight her subjectivity and presence. This is further exemplified in the subsequent stanzas, where Meynell continues to address the nun, almost empathising with her and her status as a symbol of an idealised female allusion to purity and piety. She further affirms the presence of the nun in a manner that draws her forward into the reader's view, as if transitioning into a visual form: "And I *see* you where you stand / With your life held in your hand" (lines 35-36) [Italics added]. Meynell is transforming the image of the nun before us, reinterpreting her from the musical composition and portraying her in her own words. This reaffirms her status and shifts her role from being a "victim" of her depicted state to one of "agency" and presence

in the poem (Loizeaux 36). This point is also evident in the following stanza, where the speaker continues engaging with the nun, inquiring about her patience and perseverance when faced with internal turmoil and external conflicts that are happening *to* her: "Did it vex you, the surmise/ Of this wind of words, this storm of cries,/ Though you kept the silence so" (lines 44-46). The speaker continues to memorialise the figure of the nun and assert her lasting strength, even as she is silenced by her representation, where the speaker refers to the female figure as a "*Silenced* conqueror that you are" [Italics added] (line 51). The speaker further develops this idea in the subsequent stanza, where the following lines underscore a crucial aspect of the poem. They illuminate how Meynell's voice emerges in her representation of the female figure from a masculine perspective, thereby highlighting Meynell's subversion of this concept:

> Vanished; but the poet, he
> In whose dream your face appears,
> He who ranges unknown years
> With your music in his heart,
> Speaks to you familiarly
> Where you keep apart,
> And invents you as you were. (lines 59-65)

The speaker transitions the narrative from the nun to the male poet or creator who conjures her image, envisioning her through his idealised perspective. A particularly striking aspect of this dynamic is how the female figure seems to be shaped and conceptualised in the male poet's imagination, as reflected in the line: "And *invents* you as you were" [Italics added] (line 65). This tactic aligns with David Kennedy's idea that ekphrasis is used to express the voices of still images in paintings, which could also apply to Meynell's musical ekphrastic method when engaging with the frozen female figure in the music: "If the characters in a painting could talk, this is what they would be saying" (100). Meynell seems to engage with the nun by asking questions that reflect her experience rather than speaking *on her behalf*. Meynell continues combining between music and visual imagery in the following lines, where she affirms the existence and presence of the nun by depicting her through a visual image that does not appear to frame her or constrict her, but rather that functions as a mode of freeing her and asserting her significance: "And your picture, O my nun! / Is a strangely easy one" (lines 66-67). By invoking the visual image of the nun, Meynell navigates the interplay between musical and visual elements in the poem. This combination creates a

distinct ekphrastic approach, where sound and image work in tandem to engage with the figure of the nun. As a result, this representation liberates her, allowing her to become a dynamic and free entity within her own portrayal. Through this dynamic, the act of giving a voice and presence to the female figure becomes what Loizeaux observes to be 'an important tool of political liberation and a standard technique in feminist ekphrasis' (105).

The following two stanzas depict how the figure of the nun is not reduced to a symbolic or specific image, where instead, the speaker "*divines*" (line 76) her presence through various symbols, such as the "many flowers" (line 76), "a white violet" (line 95) and emotional resonance, emphasising inner life over external spectacle. This approach models feminist object poetics, where the female figure becomes an agency of meditative presence, not a silent object for display. Instead of treating the figure of the nun as a static icon (e.g. in devotional art and imagery), Meynell's speaker envisions her through the elements of flowers, scent, and emotional memory: "Of one daisy 'mid the centuries of sun" (line 81), "The familiar form and scent" (line 94). The nun appears as a lively figure: "A little living nun / In the garden of the years" (lines 82-83). This portrays her as a symbol of growth and resilient femininity that defies silent objectification and idealisation. Meynell's speaker reinterprets the nun not merely as a silent emblem of chastity or religious symbolism, but as a vibrant feminine presence linked to memory and creativity. She invites the reader into an imaginative reverie about the female figure, fostering a sense of co-creation rather than mere consumption of her image.

The final stanza of the poem brings us back to the figure of the nun, Soeur Monique, where the speaker directly addresses the nun, "Soeur Monique, remember me" (line 96). This second-person invocation bridges the realms between the nun and the speaker, underscoring that the nun is not a mere artefact or a relic of the past, but a living presence in the speaker's moment. This highlights and foregrounds female agency, even in death or memory, as a personal kinship between the speaker and the female figure. While traditional ekphrasis describes an object, Meynell communicates with the female presence, where the feminine subject is no longer being looked at; she *acts*. The speaker asks, "Pray for me" (line 100) even in the poetic afterlife, as a way of reclaiming female subjectivity within the ekphrastic form. Both the speaker and the figure of the nun have a profound connection that transcends the confines of the musical piece. They seem to merge into a single entity, as expressed in

the lines: "'Tis not in the past alone / I am picturing you to be; / But my little friend, my own" (lines 97-99). By intertwining Meynell's interpretation of the musical composition with the representation of the nun, they unite in their shared experience of perseverance and endurance within the spaces of religious and artistic endeavour. This interaction between the speaker and the female figure in the ekphrastic poem highlights the idea that women poets in the late nineteenth century often faced a complex web of conflicting gender ideals. Each act of poetic creation appeared to 'simultaneously reinforce and challenge the patriarchal notions of femininity' (Anderson 29). In this context, ekphrasis serves as a means to expose the flaws of traditional social structures, emphasising "abuses of power" and problematic patriarchal representational norms, while also promoting necessary restructurings of female representation in art, as highlighted in feminist ekphrasis (Weber 76). In contrast to traditional (male) ekphrasis, which tends to fix, possess, or idealise the female figure, Meynell's approach to the female figure here is dynamic and interior. Her ekphrasis does not render the nun as an icon but as a distinct female presence that avoids objectifying representation.

In "Soeur Monique", Alice Meynell composes a distinctly feminist ekphrasis that reclaims the female figure from the fixed status of patriarchal visual culture, reimagining the nun not as an object of religious iconography, but as a feeling presence in poetic and spiritual connection. By drawing on the musical piece of Francois Couperin of the same name, Meynell enacts a form of musical ekphrasis that evokes the rhythms of memory, devotion, and connection. Her poetic language resists rigid visualisation of the figure of the nun, instead translating image and music into a fluid encounter through her ekphrastic rendition. Meynell intricately links the solitary female figure to the reader, inviting them to engage with her perspective by dissolving the distance between the two, enacting a connected gaze that defies fetishisation and objectification. This transforms the ekphrastic tradition from one of representation to one of presence and connection, where memory and the female form are not captured but communed with. This approach fosters a more nuanced understanding of both the artistic expression and the significance attributed to femininity in the realms of music and visual art, ultimately revealing the complex connections between the music piece and the ekphrastic poem. Rather than merely documenting or describing the emotions elicited by the

musical piece, Meynell attempted to convey a profound self-awareness about the intricate meanings embedded in her reinterpretation of the nun.

III. Edith Wharton's Sculptural Ekphrasis in "The So-Called Venus of Milo" (1889):

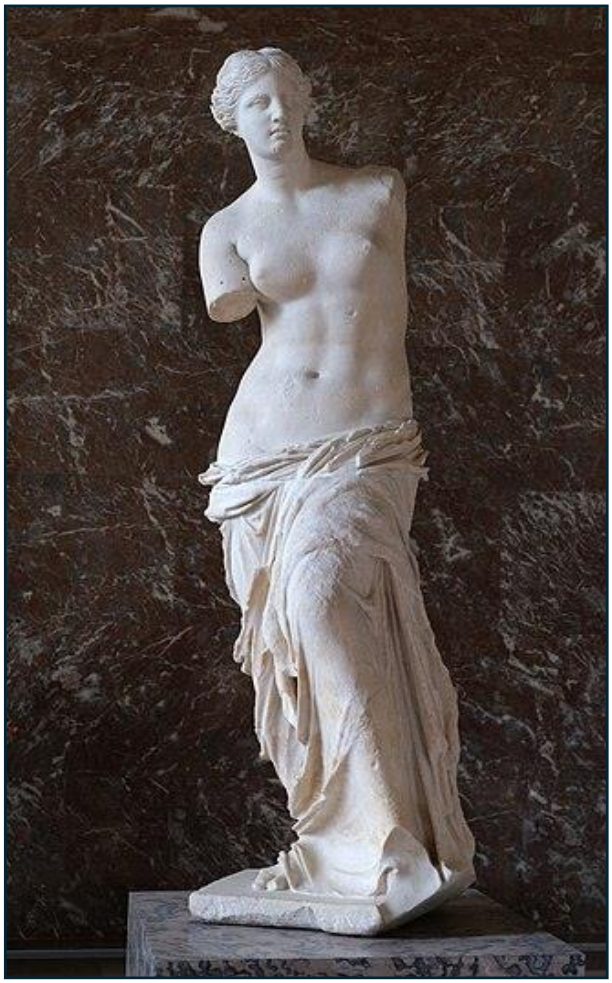

Figure 23. "Venus de Milo", 2nd century BC

American writer and poet Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was renowned for her distinct knowledge of art. The French writer Paul Bourget remarked that 'there was not a painter or sculptor of whose work she could not compile a catalogue' (Qtd. by Lewis 69). Her profound interest in visual art significantly influenced her ekphrastic poetry, in which she explored the works of artists such as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rossetti, among others. Visual art also plays a prominent role in her prose. In her acclaimed novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Edith Wharton drew inspiration from Sir Joshua Reynolds' artwork, from which the title of her novel is derived. One of Reynolds' paintings with the same name depicts a young girl symbolising innocence and youth. She also depicted scenes of *tableau vivants* in her

narrative, which are defined as: ‘theatrical masquerades designed for the amusement of an idle, bored crowd’ (Singley 81). In this context, Wharton employed a visual interpretation method across a selection of her novels and ekphrastic poems, highlighting how visual embodiment is woven into her works. While her novels received significant attention and praise over the years, her poems, especially those about works of art, have not attracted as much attention as her prose. Irene Goldman-Price curated a collection of Edith Wharton's poems titled *Selected Poems of Edith Wharton* in 2019, which offers a valuable resource for reading Wharton’s poetry, especially her ekphrastic works. This collection features poems centred on artworks from different periods, such as “Two Backgrounds” (1892), “A Picture by Sebastiani” (1895), and “The ‘Apollo and Marsyas’ of Perugino” (date unknown). It also features Wharton's poem titled “The So-Called Venus of Milo” (1889), which I focus on in this section. Wharton draws substantial inspiration from the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She responded to his poem-painting “Beata Beatrix” (1870) with her work titled, “The ‘Beata Beatrix’ of Rossetti” (1893?). Wharton appears to write within the framework of traditional gender roles, examining the distinctions between masculine and feminine identities. According to Dianne Chambers, her work 'embodies and delineates the cultural conflicts surrounding male and female roles in America at the beginning of the twentieth century' (8). In her ekphrastic poetry, she merges representation and interpretation, engaging with the tradition of ekphrasis and feminist object poetics in a way that seeks to amplify the voices of silenced female figures or feminised objects.

Wharton’s “The So-Called Venus of Milo” (1889) provides a distinct late nineteenth-century example of sculptural ekphrasis that departs from the conventions of both late Romantic idealisation and Victorian moral justification. It addresses the fragmented classical statue of the Venus of Milo, one of the most mythologised and symbolically objectified female figures in the Western canon. Throughout history, the depiction of Venus and her body was seen as a fetishised and sensualised spectacle for the masculine gaze. Philip McCouat argues that the nude figure of Venus in Diego Velázquez’s 1651 painting *The Rokeby Venus* (also known as “The Toilet of Venus”) presents the goddess with her back to the viewer, while her blurred features reflect in a mirror. McCouat contends that the painting reduces the female form to a mere ‘physical body,’ serving as an object of male desire (“From Rokeby Venus to Fascism”). In this context, Venus’s body transforms into a vessel for male

fantasy, where the Venus of Milo, despite lacking arms, does not lose her beauty or status as an aesthetic figure. She remains confined within the ideals of male desire and idealisation. Wharton's poem resists the aesthetic concept of ideal femininity that often accompanied the representation and interpretation of sculptures, especially in ancient sculptures of Venus. Instead, she dwells on the silence and absence of the sculptural form, creating an ekphrastic response that is about the loss and fragmentation of the aestheticised female body, as well as the beauty and endurance of Venus. Rather than reanimating the statue into a sentimental or redemptive figure, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning does in "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" (1850), Wharton treats Venus not as a subject to be saved but as a philosophical relic or a testament to how female bodies are preserved in culture through aesthetic and symbolic meaning.

Wharton's feminist ekphrasis operates not through an overtly political or moral critique, but through her attention to the absence, ambiguity, and dissonance between the form and meaning behind it. Her Venus is at once immortal and mutilated, celebrated and decontextualised. By placing Wharton and her ekphrastic poem at the end of the trajectory of feminist strategies employed by Felicia Hemans and Alice Meynell, both of whom use intermedial objects to express a feminist voice that explores themes of loss, voice, and resistance, we can observe a shift in nineteenth-century feminist ekphrasis. This shift moves from reclaiming silenced female figures to an exploration of fragmentation, which reveals the aesthetic and ideological frameworks within which these figures are positioned. The Venus of Milo statue transcends its status as merely an ancient artefact; it has evolved into a visual object that invites a multitude of interpretations and has inspired a range of modern art styles. Salomon Reinach observed that by the end of the nineteenth century, scholars had produced over two thousand pages of critical research on the statue (Qtd. by Kousser 227). Discovered in 1820 by a farmer on the Aegean Island of Milos, this statue, officially known as the Venus of Milo, stands at six feet tall and is crafted from marble, depicting the goddess with a striking posture and notably absent arms. According to Gonda Van Steen, the statue was considered more valuable for its allure as an "object of display" than for its importance as a relic of antiquity (7). The statue's origin is unknown, but it is estimated to date back to the 2nd century BC (Kousser 228). It is now housed in the Louvre, where it is recognised as one of the most famous representations of the Roman goddess Venus, who is known as

Aphrodite in Greek mythology. The mythological figure of Venus has been associated with various aspects of femininity, both positive and negative. The enduring impression and rich mythology surrounding the figure of Venus are deeply intertwined with the diverse characteristics and qualities attributed to her since her mythological inception. In her analysis of Venus, Nora Clark highlights that key traits defining Venus encompass fidelity, sexuality, motherhood, and an intrinsic connection to nature, each embodying different aspects of femininity (1). These attributes are frequently associated with the archetype of the ideal woman, presenting a multifaceted image of feminine virtue. Clark vividly depicts Venus as a 'prototype of visual beauty and desire [that] continues to inspire contemporary personas, whether alluring or off-putting' (2), illustrating her lasting impact on modern conceptions of femininity. Moreover, she notes that throughout the centuries, poets have paid tribute to the essence of Venus in their literary creations, employing various forms of 'epigraph and lyrical homage' (Loizeaux 21). The poetic homage that Wharton employs in her ekphrastic poem is one of many examples of her inclusion of Greek mythology and allusion within her ekphrastic poems. Some of her poems feature mythic motifs and function as kinds of rewrites, such as "Chartres" (1895), "Phaedra" (1898), and "Artemis to Actaeon" (1909). Reginald Shepherd asserts that recurring characters or archetypes of mythology are 'projections and embodiments of human fears, desires, and primal impulses' (1). The scholar Emily Orlando highlights that Wharton is 'deeply committed to interrogating and intervening in the sexual politics of representation' (19), indicating her engagement with the complexities of gender and identity.

Chambers further emphasises that Wharton's own experiences as a female writer navigating a changing cultural landscape in America profoundly influenced her literary themes. Chambers argues that Wharton was not only deeply aware of her social context but also vocal in her critiques of the era's evolving attitudes. She lamented the decline in society's appreciation for art and beauty, poignantly stating, 'What a horror it is for a whole nation to be developing without the sense of beauty' (Qtd. by Chambers 59). Moreover, as Clark notes, the pervasive 'condescending American attitudes toward women' were significant barriers that Wharton identified as contributing to the "artistic and intellectual sterility" that plagued America during her time (25). Through her writings, Wharton sought to challenge and illuminate these societal issues, advocating for a deeper understanding of beauty and art in a

rapidly changing world. In this context, Wharton's feminist ekphrastic voice emerges in the poem:

> Who gave thee wings, thou wingless Victory,
> That shouldst have shone o'er Athens to this hour?
> Methinks the god of mutability,
> Sole moon of destiny's rebellious sea,
> Who lords it lonely o'er the tides of power,
> One night when Athens in thy shelter slept
> Saw thee on thy white citadel, and wept
> To think thy splendour and thy strength should be
> Like foam across the flood of ages swept.
>
> Yea, he who feasts upon the fall of Kings,
> Who thrones at Actium, as at Salamis,
> Bound to thy throbbing shoulders his fleet wings,
> And bade thee flee the storm's first thunderings,
> Lest, losing thee, the after-world should miss
> Its holiest heritage. Thy limbs august,
> Beneath the senseless turf of Milo thrust,
> Slept through the changes of a thousand Springs,
> Then leapt again victorious from the dust.
>
> But, born to this late century, that perceives
> How often victory and defeat are one,
> And how of both the baser part survives,
> Thy guardian-god, in lieu of laurel-leaves
> That fade and fall so soon beneath the sun,
> Gave thee the name that, since the world began,
> Outblossoms death, and bade thee be to man
> The principle of beauty that outlives
> Themistocles and Caesar, Christ and Pan. (Edith Wharton, "The So-Called Venus of Milo" lines 1-36)

By looking directly at the title of the poem, "The *So-Called* Venus of Milo" (emphasis added), it evokes a distinct sense of irony and contradiction. By choosing to phrase it this way rather than simply calling it "The Venus of Milo," Wharton intentionally highlights her critical viewpoint regarding the notion of beauty, the cultural idolisation of the female form, and the societal expectations placed on women at the close of the nineteenth century. The addition of "So-Called" implies scepticism about the idealised image of Venus, suggesting that what is commonly celebrated as beauty may be a façade, pointing to deeper issues surrounding women's roles and identities during this transformative period. The poem begins

with a tone that is almost urgent and pleading. Instead of the conventional ekphrastic method that merely describes the statue, the speaker steps into the role of inquiry. Echoing the themes of Meynell's earlier ekphrastic poem, she confronts the idolised figure, asking why it is positioned to be gazed upon and claimed by the male perspective. This approach transforms the static/frozen object into a subject of observation, provoking a deeper exploration of its purpose and the implications of its gaze: "Who gave thee wings, thou wingless Victory/That shouldst have shone o'er Athens to this hour?" (lines 1-2). By positioning herself alongside the statue, Wharton invites a dialogue with the figure of Venus, pondering the hypothetical wings that might have adorned her. She contemplates how the statue's presence should have endured eternally in her beloved homeland of Athens, emphasising the poignant feelings of displacement and dislocation that define the statue's current existence—captured and displayed in a state of forced idolisation: "That *should* have shone o'er Athens to this hour?" (line 2) (italics added).

Wharton also skillfully weaves together intertextual elements and subtle allusions throughout her ekphrastic poem. To illuminate her central theme, she describes a tapestry of Greek legends that shape her portrayal of Venus and women more broadly. For instance, in her evocative description of the Venus statue's "wingless" state, Wharton artfully contrasts it with the iconic winged figure of Victory, or Nike, another ancient sculpture, renowned for representing the goddess who embodies triumph in both peace and conflict. Through the striking imagery of the statue's "winglessness," Wharton conjures a powerful vision of a once-mighty goddess, revealing an unsettling dichotomy between strength and perceived vulnerability, as she grapples with the implications of her halted flight and the constraints of her circumstance. In the subsequent lines, Wharton weaves a captivating mythic narrative that chronicles the journey of Venus, illustrating her poignant removal and transformation from a mighty figure of antiquity to a mere symbol of the feminine ideal in Wharton's contemporary era. The speaker details the persona of a masculine "god" (line 3) or "lord" (line 5) that embodies the relentless march of time and change. This divine observer gazes sorrowfully upon the unjust unravelling of Venus's radiant glory alongside her exquisite "splendour and strength" (line 8). This emotional struggle is encapsulated in the lines: "Methinks the god of mutability, / Sole moon of destiny's rebellious sea, / Who lords it lonely o'er the tides of power, / Saw thee on thy white citadel, and wept" (lines 3-7). In these

phrases, the imagery of Venus, once majestic and revered, now appears fleeting and fragile against the relentless flow of time, recalling a similar tone to Keats' ekphrastic poem, "Ode to a Grecian Urn" (1819).

Wharton's phrase "like foam" (line 9) appears to subtly hint at the connection between Venus and her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, derived from the Greek word "aphros," meaning "foam". In ancient mythology, Venus/Aphrodite emerges from the sparkling sea foam formed by the spilt blood of her father, Uranus. Wharton employs a range of watery imagery—such as "rebellious sea," "tides of power," "wept," and "the flood"—to evoke the elemental nature of Venus's creation, a narrative vividly captured in various literary and visual forms. Notably, Botticelli's iconic fifteenth-century painting, "The Birth of Venus" (1480), presents this mythic moment with distinct clarity, and Wharton likely encountered this painting during her lifetime. Furthermore, scholar Viola Parente-Capkova suggests that the image of Venus emerging from the foam serves as a profound "natural mirror," reflecting the watery imagery of femininity that is mythologised in the depiction of women (189). Bram Dijkstra asserts that the water's surface acts as a reflection of 'the source of woman's being,' encompassing the idea that, like Venus, she has emerged from this origin and, akin to Ophelia, is destined to return to it (132). Parente-Capkova emphasises that the concepts of "water" and womanhood are intrinsically linked, especially in the works of fin-de-siècle writers. She articulates that water symbolises not only "life, birth and rebirth, creation and creativity" but also carries the weight of "death and oblivion," highlighting its multifaceted significance in both literal and metaphorical terms (189). Wharton underscores another important aspect of Venus tied to her origin from seafoam: her connection to the sea. By citing the historic Athenian naval battles of Actium and Salamis, Wharton strengthens her intertextual references, illustrating that Venus is not only associated with fertility, sexuality, and motherhood but is also venerated as a goddess of the sea and seafaring. Her powers are extensive and encompass a variety of realms.

In the following lines, Wharton expresses sadness over the statue's loss of glory and status through the voice of an incarnated god, who "feasts upon the fall of Kings, /Who thrones at Actium, as at Salamis" (lines 10-11). This god begs Venus to "flee the storm's first thunderings" and to preserve the world's "holiest heritage." Referring to the statue as the "holiest heritage" reflects the perspective of many late nineteenth-century writers, including

Wharton, who envisioned a matriarchal society and integrated this figure into their works. They sought to explore the 'origins of the human race' and, specifically, the relationships between the sexes, finding in matriarchal societies symbols of feminine strength and wisdom (Chambers 161). Wharton, like her contemporaries, aimed to 'resuscitate dead goddesses,' as noted by Sarah Sherman (291). By connecting Venus's narrative with the statue's discovery, Wharton sought to 'recuperate the Greek goddesses, with their vast powers, complex personalities, and active sexuality,' thereby offering a refreshing contrast to the feminine stereotypes prevalent in the nineteenth century (Singley 93). From a feminist perspective, Wharton emphasises the decline of Venus's and, by extension, women's roles in the social and literary spheres. Although the poem evokes the timeless beauty and magnificence of Venus, she is driven away from her status and glory, only to be reborn centuries later: "Thy limbs august, / Beneath the senseless turf of Milo thrust, / Slept through the changes of a thousand Springs, / Then leapt again victorious from the dust" (lines 12-15). This passage contains profound references to displacement, loss of power, and defeat. These themes continue in the subsequent lines: "But, born to this late century, that perceives / How often victory and defeat are one, / And how of both the baser part survives" (lines 19-21). In this stanza, Wharton emphasises the connection between Venus's struggles and the trials faced by women of her time. By blurring the lines between "victory and defeat," she portrays the 'cultural anxiety and gender war' that arose from the dual status of women as both "woman and author" at the close of the nineteenth century (Chambers 26). Chambers further argues that Wharton 'lived and wrote during a period in America when gender differences were the topic of vigorous debate,' which underscores the themes of resistance and conflict that Wharton appears to be moving against in this poem (27).

In the last lines of the poem, Wharton depicts the stagnant attitude of the late nineteenth century regarding women's roles in the literary field:

> Thy guardian-god, in lieu of laurel leaves
> That fade and fall so soon beneath the sun,
> Gave thee the name that, since the world began,
> Outblossoms death, and bade thee be to man
> The principle of beauty that outlives
> Themistocles and Caesar, Christ and Pan. (lines 22-27)

The invocation of Themistocles, Caesar, Christ and Pan places Venus as a force outside and beyond patriarchal lineage and religious systems. The lines “And how of both the baser part survives” and “in lieu of laurel leaves” reference the resistance faced by women in literature and the restricted roles they were assigned in society. Women were denied the “laurel leaves,” the ancient symbol of poets and writers, which represents the respect and recognition they deserved as authors in their own right. Instead, like the statue of Venus, they were relegated “Beneath the senseless turf of Milo thrust” (line 19). Wharton’s reconfiguration of Venus as an eternal principle of beauty that “outblossoms death” functions not only as a reclamation of classical female iconography but also as a pointed intervention in the discourse surrounding the New Woman. As Coultrap-McQuin notes, late nineteenth-century women writers were frequently dismissed as ‘”tough, aggressive, pedantic, vain, and ugly”, and the act of writing was perceived as potentially destructive to a woman’s role and desirability’ (30). Within this cultural framework, Wharton’s Venus becomes more than a sculptural echo of antiquity; she is a counterfigure to stereotypes of the New Woman, one who asserts her authority not through aggression or rebellion, but through a quiet, transformative endurance and resilience that transcends “Themistocles and Caesar, Christ and Pan” (line 27). Wharton’s decision to place a feminised principle of beauty at the centre of a poem about power and historic legacy allows her to challenge the patriarchal and misogynistic standards that sought to contain both female creativity and presence. In this way, Wharton’s poem can be read as a shapeshifting feminist ekphrasis that aligns with New Woman ideals, not by mimicking cultural traits, but by poetically claiming space for female autonomy within and beyond traditional forms. Wharton intricately reimagines the depiction of the benevolent "god" of time and transformation, who, from the very beginning of Venus’s narrative in the poem, assumes the role of an assertive masculine figure hovering reverently over her. This figure commands, “Gave thee the name that, since the world began” (line 24). Through her portrayal of these monumental masculine figures, Wharton boldly asserts that the essence and identity of Venus surpass the confines of religious, mythological, and historical male archetypes. This notion underscores a powerful assertion of creative autonomy and representation for the female figure during the latter half of the nineteenth century, one that boldly transcends the limitations of time.

Wharton explores the ideology immortalising the female figure and its aesthetic influence, bringing to light the masculine dominance of standards and the idealisation of beauty in relation to the Venus statue. This is not simply a praise of a statue, but a re-inscription of the statue's meaning through a feminist lens. Through the language of myth and reimagination, the figure of Venus in the poem undergoes a type of transformation that aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of feminist "counter-memory", where women poets reconstruct the silenced or erased histories by imagining into the gaps themselves (154). Wharton deconstructs the Venus archetype to highlight the representation of women in various forms of art and literature. Orlando observes that Wharton elucidates the fact that by thus representing women in art and literature, the artist suggests how women are or how they should be' (4). This observation is particularly evident in the poem's lines: "bade thee be to man / The principle of beauty," which presents a contrasting viewpoint to the traditional visual narratives that have depicted women primarily as muses and sources of inspiration, rather than as creators in their own right. The act of representing the female figure, in this perspective, argues Orlando, 'refers to the act of depicting a body in fiction or the visual arts… and are a kind of repackaging: acts of re-presenting something or someone' (3). Through 'acts of *mis*representation' of women within her texts, Wharton questions the way that the male gaze exemplifies and stereotypes the women of her time (Orlando 4).

Chambers contends that although the writings of Wharton have addressed various issues regarding societal, literary, class status, and relationship matters, 'many of Wharton's narratives centred on women who failed to tell their stories', and in the present case, their stories are told through the statue of Venus of Milo (27). Ultimately, Wharton's nuanced perspective on women at the close of the nineteenth century resonates with Camille Paglia's assertion that, 'Though the woman was at the centre of early symbolism, real women were powerless' (261). Additionally, as acknowledged by Rosemary Ruether and Rosemary Keller, Wharton's poetic focus on "interest in matriarchy" through the lens of the Venus statue serves as 'a modern attempt to recapture and validate the sentimental and Victorian aspects of femininity,' breathing life and meaning into the often-overlooked narratives of women in a historically male-dominated society (Qtd. by Betterton 92). Wharton's poem functions as a deeply intermedial ekphrastic poem, where it not only describes sculpture but also thinks sculpturally, embracing absence, ruin, and fragmentation as distinct parts of her

feminist representation of the figure of Venus. Her feminist voice emerges through her refusal to restore Venus to wholeness or idealisation, instead finding power in what remains lost, buried, or broken. In relation to Hemans's mourning relic and Meynell's musical ekphrasis, Wharton's Venus is a monument of survival and immortalisation, pointing toward a modernist feminist ekphrasis that interrogates history, materiality, and representation itself.

By the early twentieth century, feminist ekphrasis underwent a profound transformation, shifting away from Victorian modes of sentimental reclamation toward the more experimental, self-aware techniques of modernist women poets. In *Stealing the Language* (1986), Alicia Ostriker theorises the way modernist women poets are beginning to use the "oppressor's language" as a means to regain their authority and autonomy in writing and poetry (16). She also claimed that modernist women poets revisited the traditions of their predecessors with both homage and critique, where they 'credit their predecessors with contributing "the line of feeling…" while also attempting to surmount the "mental and moral confinements of their forebears" (73). In this shift, ekphrasis became not just a mode of witnessing and describing female images but a space to disrupt established narratives and aesthetic norms. B.K. Fischer mentions that feminist ekphrasis has allowed poets such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Marianne Moore, Anne Carson and Mary Jo Bang (among others) to reclaim silenced female figures, turning "the female model" from a silent object to a speaking subject across a broader range of aesthetic strategies and techniques that explored these different conventions in a different format. Furthermore, W.J.T. Mitchell's essay on "Ekphrasis and the Other" discussed the reversal of traditional gendered power dynamics, stating: 'All this would look quite different, of course, if my emphasis had been on ekphrastic poetry by women' (32). Katherine Mullin argues that poetic and aesthetic shifts within a broader feminist modernist movement are rooted in the same changes, noting that 'modernism displays tendencies… later associated with postmodernism' as she continues to assert that the period from '1890 to 1930—exactly the rise of feminist activism—saw women asserting new aesthetic modes that question realism and romantic narrative alike' (136). This approach transforms ekphrasis into a space where female subjectivity and presence are reshaped through poetic self-awareness and the dynamic portrayal of women in ekphrastic poetry.

This chapter concludes by exploring the intermedial and feminist dimensions of ekphrastic poetry through the works of Felicia Hemans, Alice Meynell, and Edith Wharton. It provides an in-depth look at how these poets engaged with material and visual culture to challenge dominant artistic and cultural narratives. Their poems- “The Image in Lava” (1827), “Soeur Monique” (1875), and “The So-Called Venus of Milo” (1889)- demonstrate that feminist ekphrasis goes beyond simple description, functioning as a critical and creative act that interrogates gendered portrayals of women in art. A key aspect is their intermedial approach, with each poem emphasising a different medium, such as a fossil, a musical piece, or a shattered sculpture, and examining the cultural constraints and silences tied to that medium. Within the broader scope of the thesis, this chapter marks a significant advancement in feminist ekphrasis. Hemans, Meynell, and Wharton's use of objects, music, and sculpture as subjects reveals their role not merely in poetic reflection but also as sites of resistance and critique. Their works challenge the static, objectified image of women in art by giving these objects voice, context, and critique, illustrating how feminist ekphrasis redefines and morphs representation across various media. Throughout the nineteenth century, women poets developed feminist ekphrasis as a mode that not only challenged but redefined artistic representation. What unites these diverse approaches to ekphrasis is the consistent effort by women poets throughout the nineteenth century to transform the traditional role of women in art from passive objects into active agents of meaning-making. By giving voice to the silent female figure, they aim to restore context to the fragmented image and challenge the gaze that confines women to being mere visual objects. Each poem serves as a space where hidden histories emerge, silenced voices are heard, and the boundaries of ekphrasis are expanded. By examining these feminist ekphrastic techniques, the chapter prompts a reevaluation of ekphrasis and the depiction of women in art. It shows how nineteenth-century women poets employed poetry and imagery to express their viewpoints and reinterpret traditional representations across various visual media, thereby expanding the concept of ekphrasis and redefining the ways women can be portrayed, speak, and persist in cultural memory.

Conclusion

Tracing the evolution of the ekphrastic tradition through a feminist lens reveals how a select group of women poets in the long nineteenth century reinterpreted and redefined the portrayal of female figures in art as sites of agency, resistance, and transformation. This thesis critically analyses the ekphrastic techniques employed by a range of women poets traced across the nineteenth-century. It explores their contributions to the theory of feminist ekphrasis, highlighting how these poets challenge the passivity and idealisation of female subjects depicted in visual art. This study enhances our understanding of how nineteenth-century women poets, both before and after Dante Gabriel Rossetti's ekphrastic works, utilised ekphrasis as a means of resistance and confrontation, even when such defiance manifested subtly. Historically, female figures in art and literature have often been portrayed through an idealised and objectified masculine gaze, which confines their representation within the parameters established by that gaze. This act results in women's images being rendered static and unchanging. In contrast, the feminist ekphrastic responses employed by women poets demonstrate their efforts to reinterpret and reshape the portrayal of these depicted female figures, offering new meanings and interpretations through the practice of ekphrasis. One of the central contributions of this thesis is the introduction of *shapeshifting ekphrasis* as a feminist strategy that redefines how nineteenth-century women poets engaged with visual and material culture. I believe that when considered within the context of the ekphrastic technique, the idea of shapeshifting becomes a new kind of transformation and merging. This occurs between the image and the word, reflecting the changes and evolutions that unfold as the female subject shifts from the image to an alternative or different representation in the ekphrastic poem. While the term “shapeshifting ekphrasis” is original to this study, it drew upon existing scholarship on feminist ekphrastic strategies.

Drawing on but moving beyond existing theories of ekphrastic tension and object-centred ekphrasis, my concept of shapeshifting ekphrasis extends the feminist ekphrastic gaze to include not only paintings but also musical and object-based forms, offering a new interpretive framework that underscores the role of women’s ekphrasis that challenges and reshapes the representational boundaries of their depictions in art. Another significant contribution to the ekphrastic field is the connection I drew between Rossetti’s inscribed frames and his use of ekphrastic authority to influence the portrayal of female images in both

his paintings and the accompanying verses in the first chapter. This highlights the limited scholarly attention this concept has received and shows how the selected women poets transcended the traditional idealised feminine portrayal shaped by masculine perspectives in the nineteenth century, where I argue that poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning subverted the traditional ekphrastic representation of the female subject. By examining how they reworked the image of a venerated and revered female figure in their ekphrastic poem, I contend that this highlighted the entrapment of the representation of the female figure within a patriarchal society. This strategy also highlighted the muse-like qualities that women and the female subject were expected to embody and be objectified by in art. In this context, poetic shapeshifting ekphrasis is used alongside a feminist ekphrastic strategy to transform the female subject from her static representation in the image, object, or musical piece into a representational space of agency and fluidity.

This thesis began by examining the ekphrastic approach of nineteenth-century poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti in Chapter One, with a particular focus on the ekphrastic poems inscribed on the frames of his paintings. The poems “Sea Spell” (1877), “Lady Lilith” (1868), and “The Day-Dream” (1880) were selected for their distinct yet interconnected approaches to the portrayal of female figures in the accompanying paintings and the verses inscribed on their frames. These figures are set against idealised landscapes that enhance their depicted beauty and performative presence. The inscribed poems amplify Rossetti's portrayal of these female figures, almost as if he is solidifying his interpretation of the feminine ideal for both the viewer and himself. This approach effectively silences the voice and narrative of the depicted female form, removing their own stories and agency from the representation. Through a close analysis of these inscribed poems, it is revealed that Rossetti's control over the representation of female figures reinforces a sense of silence and stillness in the interplay between visual and verbal elements, highlighting what I believe to be his ekphrastic dominance over the female form. Through understanding the techniques of control and containment that Rossetti utilised in his inscribed ekphrastic poems, the opening chapter established a critical lens through which to understand how women poets challenged such restrictive ekphrastic forms of the female image. I focused on Rossetti’s dual status as a poet and a painter, which contributed to the thesis on how the female form was exploited through

both image and the accompanying words, representing a moment of double silence inflicted on the female subject depicted in both media.

In the following chapters, I expanded the focus to survey and investigate the shaping of resistance and the revision of the ekphrastic technique employed by women poets, both prior to and following Rossetti. This approach aimed to demonstrate how these poets represented the female form in diverse ways, emphasising the elements of their ekphrastic reinterpretation of the female image. By situating this analysis within an interdisciplinary context, I aimed to trace how the selected women poets transcended the image of the woman in artworks beyond the confines of the idealised feminine portrayal shaped by masculine perspectives in the nineteenth century. In Chapter Two, I analysed the ekphrastic poems of early and mid-nineteenth-century poets, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. By examining how the female figure is represented in their poems, which were published alongside engravings in various periodicals, I argued that these depictions enrich their exploration of female subjectivity and identity within the realm of femininity. Landon's ekphrastic poems navigate a delicate balance between subversion and imitation. Her engagement with the female figure in the images alternated between adhering to the ekphrastic tradition, where the female figure is often situated within patriarchal expectations, and achieving a transformation that adds new layers of meaning to the inner world and experiences of the women depicted in the engravings. She employed a self-conscious narrative voice that exposed the themes of melancholy and entrapment masked by surface beauty. In this context, the images acted as mirrors that reflected both the fractured aspects of the female figures and Landon's internal self, establishing a distinctly female voice that anticipated the feminist ekphrastic voice. I contend that her feminine and proto-feminist ekphrastic approach redefines the ekphrastic representation of women, bringing societal boundaries to the forefront through her subversive interpretations of female-centred images in her poems, "Bridal Morning" (1828) and "Remembrance" (1837). On a related note, a prominent feature of feminine and proto-feminist ekphrasis in Barrett Browning's work is her employment of ekphrasis to articulate concerns and critiques regarding societal and gender norms. This showcases a significant contribution to the feminist ekphrastic tradition that emerged after her time, as well as that of Landon. In her ekphrastic poems, "A Portrait"

(1844) and “Hiram Powers’s Greek Slave” (1850), she employs the image of the female figure as a means of blending political commentary with artistic subject matter.

Barrett Browning’s ekphrastic poetry resists the objectifying tendencies of conventional ekphrasis by allowing female subjects, whether mythological, religious, or unknown, to speak. In doing so, she not only disrupts the male gaze but also contributes to the poetic mode of feminist ekphrasis, specifically, proto-feminist ekphrasis, which laid the groundwork for feminist ekphrasis. The poem presents an imagined artwork that I propose compels the reader to confront the constructed nature of female representation. In doing so, it generates a distinctive visual embodiment of the feminist ekphrastic tradition. Barrett Browning seems to employ this tradition to assert her own perspective, taking control of the portrayal of the female subject. By positioning herself as both poet and painter in this poem, she shapes a nuanced self-awareness of the gaze directed at the female figure, challenging and confronting that concept. In Barrett Browning’s poem “Hiram Powers’s Greek Slave,” the female body and image are employed to generate a distinct voice, addressing political issues through the symbolism of the statue’s beauty. This approach reflects Barrett Browning’s commitment to advancing her abolitionist and political views through her ekphrastic engagement with a female subject. She transcends representation by utilising the beauty and symbolism of the statue, allowing the female figure to serve as a medium for direct moral critique that challenges traditional ekphrasis and male interpretation. Her poems interrogated the authority of the gazing subject and embedded moral and emotional critique within the ekphrastic encounter. I argue that an examination of her poetic method contributes to the theory of feminist ekphrasis by revealing how women poets critique the passivity and idealisation of female subjects portrayed in visual art. This analysis enhances our understanding of how early nineteenth-century women poets employed ekphrasis as a means of resistance and confrontation, even if such defiance appears subtle.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, ekphrastic poetry by women poets evolved in tandem with advancements in visual culture and the shifting status of women in literary and artistic domains. These social, visual, and political shifts influenced how women perceived the representation of women in art and, in turn, how they reflected on their own identities through their ekphrastic voices. To highlight the advancements in the ekphrastic realm and the contributions of women poets like Emily Pfeiffer and Rosamund Marriott Watson during

this time, I examined how their ekphrastic voices developed a distinct mode of confrontation and resistance in Chapter Three. These poets appear to assert authority in their voices and their representation of female figures in their works. I contend that this chapter is significant as it underscores the contrast between the ekphrastic approaches of early nineteenth-century women poets and those of their later counterparts. The latter poets demonstrate a more distinct and pronounced feminist perspective in their ekphrastic expressions, marking a notable evolution in this poetic form. Their poems repositioned the female subject from a distinctly feminine perspective or space, using ekphrasis, to confront and reshape the traditionally masculine discourse associated with the representation of female figures in art during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Portraying the female figure through the lens of a female gaze creates a form of feminist resistance against the dominance of the male gaze and the representations imposed upon the female body and image. This approach enables the female gaze to look back at the viewer, challenging the way women have traditionally been observed. Emily Pfeiffer and Rosamund Marriott Watson's ekphrastic poems were examined through Siglind Bruhn's concept of *haptic ekphrasis*, contributing to the expanding scholarly research on haptic ekphrasis.

Meanwhile, I drew connections between haptic ekphrasis and feminist ekphrasis, emphasising how Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson in the latter half of the nineteenth century used ekphrasis to transcend mere description. They immersed themselves in the emotional and tactile qualities of the artwork, incorporating these elements into the depiction of the female subjects. This approach enriches their exploration of the evolving narratives of struggle, renewal, and transformation. I contend that this ekphrastic approach deepens our understanding of the ekphrastic works by nineteenth-century women poets, highlighting the feminist perspective they pursued and their engagement with the often-silent female figures in art. Pfeiffer's poems "To E. Burne Jones Annunciation" (1886) and "Hope" (1888), along with Marriott Watson's poems "The Depths of the Sea" (1886) and "Le Mariage de Convenance—After!" (1886), effectively recast the female subject from a static image into an autonomous being within the poems. In this chapter, I introduced the concept of *shapeshifting ekphrasis*, which underscores the fluidity and transformation of the female subject as represented in the poems, thereby facilitating a multi-vocal and transformative ekphrastic identity. In this way, Pfeiffer and Marriott Watson's ekphrastic poems foreground

a feminist strategy of encounter between the tactile, emotional, and often spiritual resonance of engaging with art and the female body without reducing it to an object for consumption.

Chapter Four focused on the collaborative ekphrasis of the poetic duo, Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913), who wrote under the masculine pseudonym, Michael Field. Their ekphrastic work brought further transformation to the feminist ekphrastic tradition in the nineteenth century. Their ekphrastic text, *Sight and Song* (1892), offers an alternative mode of ekphrasis that highlights their techniques of careful looking and listening, while also transforming the structure of the gaze itself. Through a combination of experimentation and aesthetic appreciation, I believe that Michael Field offered interpretive readings of paintings that centre on female autonomy, desire, and interiority, further adding to the feminist ekphrastic tradition explored in this thesis. Drawing on Ana Parejo Vadillo's notion of *transparent ekphrasis* and W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of *ekphrastic fear*, both of which explore the tensions between words and images, the subject and the object, as well as the intricate relationship between painting and poetry, I suggest that these theories enhance our understanding of how Michael Field reimagined female subjects within their ekphrastic poems. They shifted from specific, fixed representations in paintings to various forms expressed through poetry. To present a more comprehensive survey of their transformative feminist ekphrastic gaze, I analysed a selection of their poems from *Sight and Song*, beginning with “La Gioconda”, “Venus and Mars”, then “A Portrait” and “Sleeping Venus”. The selected poems engaged with the female figure in a way that highlighted the various ways in which they represented the female subject, drawing inspiration from Renaissance paintings. Their poetic translations of the artworks reshaped the way the female form is defined in the artwork, where their representation resists projection and idealisation, instead allowing space for ambiguity, silence, and resistance within the female image. Their silence here assumes a more self-aware and assertive space, enabling them to claim their autonomy without being *spoken for*, as seen in Rossetti’s silencing of female subjects in his double works. Michael Fields’ poems demonstrated how ekphrasis can engage in a feminist discourse, presented in a polyvocal and collaborative perspective that added depth to their ekphrastic renditions of the female form. I believe the idea of shapeshifting ekphrasis extends to their selected poems, which exhibit changing tones, perspectives, and identifications with the female subjects, blurring the lines between speaker, subject, and image. After analysing

their poems, I found that their feminist ekphrastic techniques involved departing from the conventional portrayal of the nude female in paintings, from a sensualised and passive image to an autonomous and self-aware figure.

In the final chapter, Chapter Five, I examined the works of Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), Alice Meynell (1847-1922), and Edith Wharton (1862-1937) to illustrate how feminist ekphrasis can be realised through engagements with both inanimate objects and female-oriented themes. My goal was to bring together the writings of female poets across different decades who explored the female subject, highlighting how ekphrasis interacts with various artistic media, including sculpture, music, and ancient relics. This approach offers a distinct feminist perspective that has often been overlooked in feminist ekphrasis, which tends to focus predominantly on the representation of the female figure in paintings. Instead, I investigated how ekphrasis could engage with inanimate objects in ways that breathe life into them, developing their autonomy and voice. This thesis underscores the significance of the ekphrastic dynamic in examining objects and object-oriented feminism alongside ekphrasis, particularly in relation to its focus on female representation in static art and imagery, which often renders the female subject immobile and objectified. From the fossilised cast of a mother and child in Hemans's "The Image in Lava" (1827), to Meynell's musical ekphrasis in "Soeur Monique" (1875), and the sculptural ekphrasis in Edith Wharton's "The So-Called Venus of Milo" (1889), these poems resist the stillness imposed by both time and patriarchal vision. Instead, they animate objects with voice, memory, and critique, participating in what Curras-Prada theorised as a *feminist object poetics*. In each instance, ekphrasis becomes a means by which women poets reclaim interpretive authority over the representation of the feminised object, reawakening lost or silenced narratives and underlining female presence within historical and aesthetic discourse that contributes to the study of feminist ekphrasis. In this chapter, I explored the concepts of musical ekphrasis and object-based ekphrasis, revealing a deeper connection between the principles of object-oriented feminism and ekphrastic poetics. I examined the sculptural or object-oriented ekphrasis as utilised by Wharton and Hemans, focusing on how they engage with the female subject in their works. They employ the space of ekphrasis to illuminate themes of silence and absence, resulting in an ekphrastic response that underscores loss and fragmentation. Additionally, through musical ekphrasis, the ekphrastic poem responds to the musical composition, with poetic

language serving as a medium to explore the emotions and experiences that sound, music, and auditory stimuli evoke in the poet. Building on ekphrastic and feminist scholarship, I suggest that this approach goes beyond a traditional ekphrastic response centred on images, providing richer insights into the techniques employed by women poets of the era.

Collectively, these chapters illustrate how nineteenth-century women poets not only engaged with the ekphrastic tradition but also actively transformed it. Their poems provide a thorough critique of the visual conventions and power dynamics that positioned women as mere objects to be viewed and interpreted by men. Through my analysis of their work, ekphrasis emerges as a radical and transformative practice, allowing women to respond to the male gaze, reimagine the female form as an autonomous entity, and develop alternative modes of aesthetic engagement. While this thesis has focused on British women poets (excluding American poet Edith Wharton) of the nineteenth century, further research could explore how shapeshifting ekphrasis manifests in transatlantic or European poetic traditions. Applying this concept to American poets or women writers in other European countries could shed light on wider patterns of feminist re-engagement with visual culture. Alternatively, the study of feminist ekphrasis could be expanded to a broader scope by examining ekphrastic representations across a global setting with other female writers. This could contribute to the feminist ekphrastic tradition, which focuses on highlighting the voice of the female writer and the depicted female subject in various forms. Additionally, this study has focused primarily on poetic responses to traditional fine art, and future work might consider how nineteenth-century women poets engaged ekphrastically with emergent media forms such as photography, theatre, or *tableaux vivants*.

Examining how women's voices interacted with various media in the nineteenth century provides a more comprehensive understanding of how visual culture impacted female writers and their voices during that period. Another promising avenue for further research lies in comparative studies between male and female uses of ekphrasis, particularly in relation to the depiction of female subjects in art. By examining the differences and similarities in how women's and men's representations of the female figure are portrayed in ekphrastic poetry, we can gain valuable insights that add to the gendered reception of art and visual culture during the nineteenth century. Finally, examining how shapeshifting ekphrasis functions in other literary genres, such as the novel, can provide valuable insights into its

potential to expand and evolve across various literary forms. This, in turn, can further enrich the emerging field of feminist ekphrasis. In their negotiations between poetry and painting, the selected nineteenth-century women poets demonstrated a feminist, shapeshifting ekphrastic mode that redefined how women were represented in art. This approach paved the way for examining how the ekphrastic technique challenged traditional portrayals of women in art and helped to reshape how they were depicted in nineteenth-century cultural narratives.

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