

PLAY TERM 2021



*Loïs Mailou Jones' 'Initiation, Liberia' (1983)*

# NOT PINK

“A Feminist Society Publication | First Edition”





*'Smoke and Mirrors'* by Lisa Brice



*'After Embah, 2018'* by Lisa Brice

A large rectangular area at the top of the page is filled with a vibrant pink marbled pattern. The marbling consists of swirling, organic shapes in various shades of pink, from light to deep magenta. The text 'EDITORS' NOTE' is centered within this area in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

# EDITORS' NOTE

It is with great pleasure that we announce the launch of **NOT PINK**, a new publication for feminist society!

We believe that it is fundamental for us to explore and engage in conversations and academic study of issues concerning women present, past and future. We were incredibly lucky to discover that we received submissions from a wide range of subject areas and to see submissions from across year groups.

The oeuvre of the first edition has formed a diverse collection of articles, reviews and creative submissions concerning the experience of women. We hope that this range of subjects explored in this magazine will broaden our appeal and encourage more students, in the future, to participate and engage with this magazine and our society as a whole.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to NOT PINK – art historians, historians, classicists, authors and poets alike for creating such a spectacular first edition. We would especially like to thank Ms Barton and Ms Goodman for contributing to the formation of this magazine!

We are extremely happy to present you this edition and we hope that reading this magazine will bring you as much joy as it does to us.

~ *Nyahalo and Sofia.*



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# A HISTORY OF FEMINISM, FROM THE START OF RECORDED HISTORY TO 1900

*by Rafael Castro*

Feminism is a broad ideology that has adjusted with time, location and individual perspectives on the world. Feminism bears various definitions - each with their own merits and limitations - but for the sake of this article, I will define feminism as: the belief that men and women should be equal. It is important to note the longevity of the feminist movement, and it's presence generations before the first suffragette campaigns.

Despite the differences from feminism, It is important to acknowledge matriarchal societies and their presentation of 'proto-proto-feminism'. There have been many matriarchies throughout history: Tacitus description of a Germanic tribe, named the Sitones, where 'women are the ruling sex' is similarly observed in the Elamite people of Southwestern Iran and their devotion to a supreme Goddess as opposed to a God. The Haenyeo, a matriarchal civilisation developed in Jeju, South Korea, trained female free divers to harvest molluscs and provide for their families. The presence of matriarchies in the past begs the question: how did patriarchal societies take over? Whilst there's no clear answer to this question, I personally believe it to be a simple result of circumstance. Through the machinations of history, certain societies, that happened to be patriarchies, took hold in Eurasia and the patriarchy became the societal norm.

But that's not to say that feminism, equality between the genders, is a new construct. This thousand-year advocacy is known in academic parlance as proto-feminism. While this is a vague term, I will define it as being, feminist action before the Enlightenment. For example, Plato supported women's rights to learn, work and act in society equally to men; unfortunately, he lived in ancient Athens which was not feminist. In the Islamic religion, scholar Ibn Asakir also supported feminism - specifically the right for women to become academics. Unsurprisingly, his ideas were heavily scrutinised by critics, such as Muhammed ibn al-Hajj, who was appalled by women having 'loud voices' and 'showing their private parts while men read books'. The absurdity of these claims just goes to show how far men would go in order to deny women equality; unfortunately, it appears people like Muhammed ibn al-Hajj had their ideals prevail in the long term. Even though there were female leaders in the medieval era, acting masculine was the only way to achieve power - an example being Queen Elizabeth I's 'heart and stomach of a King' speech. Along with maintaining power, securing it was an issue in itself; until 2011, the male primogeniture was still implemented.

During the Renaissance, The rebirth in classics not only forever changed European culture, but led towards the Enlightenment itself. The fundamental social contract of Europe was shifting - allowing the feminist movement to gain some momentum. Some feminists of this period included Catherine of Aragon, who commissioned Juan Luis Vivre to write a book about how women should have education, and the author of The Supreme Excellence of Women over Men - Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa; he stated that women were not only just as good as men, but even superior.

Christine de Pizan was the author of one of the earliest feminist novels in history: The Book of the City of Ladies (1405), where Christine de Pizan introduces the concept of women ruining men. The Three Virtues, Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude and Lady Justice build a city by women, for women whilst simultaneously discussing many important women during history. With The Virgin Mary as their Queen (more on pg 6).

That aside, what we have learned is that early feminism seems to be primarily focused on equality



of education and the belief that equal education prompts equality; however, this could be weighted by the fact we are naturally getting past sources from scholars, who are more naturally inclined to value learning. Unfortunately, this wasn't enough to get the provoke change - that would have to wait until the Industrial Revolution.

Feminist movements really started to grow in number and power with the start of the Enlightenment due to the change in ideals on how society should be run. Many prominent liberal philosophers, like Jeremy Bentham and Marquis de Condorcet advocated for equality between the sexes - Marquis directly attempting to reform the French Revolution in order to include women's rights. Around the same time, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*; while Wikipedia lists this one of the first feminist pieces, the *City of Ladies* is also feminist and was written centuries before. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* argues that women receiving education, yet emphasises the importance of modest values and a disconnection between female emotions and control over. Once again, educational equality is evidently still the dominant theme in feminism.

In the 19TH century; despite feminist philosophers' and writers' best efforts - women were not politically nor socially equal to men at all, not even able to own property. Fortunately, during this century, there would be feminist revolution, driven by increased female involvement in world affairs and a burgeoning suffragette movement in the UK and America. There were many notable female authors during this time, including Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Mary Ann Evans (nom de plume being George Eliot) – who all shed light on hardships and frustrations of being a woman. Certain male authors such as George Meredith, George Gissing and Thomas Hardy, also supported feminism. The feminist movement grew so rapidly in this century that the rest of the world was forced to act. In 1855, Caroline Norton gathered enough public support to introduce a bill which made divorce easier in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857.

Feminist movements are starting to coalesce into powerful organisations. This however stimulates the inevitable internal conflict. For example, Harriet Martineau's movement didn't like Wollstonecraft's

for being dangerous, and they didn't like Caroline Norton's contributions either. These organisations were strengthened by some new feminist journals – an example being the *English Woman's Journal* and their associated club called Ladies of Langham Place. Members included Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Rayner Parks and Anna Jameson. There were also other women's organisations associated with the *English Woman's Journal* being created, for example, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women; it still exists today as a charity called Futures for Women.



In addition, The first ideas of feminism were being fulfilled in education. Schools dedicated to female education, such as Queen's College (1848) and Bedford college (1849), started opening. Emily Davies and Leigh Smith also founded the first higher-education institution for women and got 5 whole students. This became Girton College in Cambridge. Newnham College and Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford were also soon founded. Sadly, there weren't many female students. To illustrate this, is the fact that when the Ilbert Bill proposed that the Indian judicial system try British criminals, Bengali women supporting it said that they were more educated than the English women opposing it because more Indian women had degrees than British women at the time. This was in 1833, and India was in fact a colony of Britain...

Meanwhile, women's campaigns tested their new political skills and forced important reforms for women's rights, for example, passing the Married Women's Property Act 1882; now, in the eyes of the law, married women were actual humans now with their own identity instead becoming one legal entity with their husbands. This took until 1882. 1882 was also the year that married women were able to



finally participate in our economy. Parliament then repealed the Contagious Diseases Acts: aka which allowed the authorities to arrest women who lived in certain areas, suspecting them of being prostitutes, and forcing them to test for STD's. This led to women's groups supporting the rights of prostitutes. The repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act concerned Josephine Butler, who emerged as the natural leader of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1869 - Saying that, not only were they terrible, but that they demeaned women and men by promoting a sexist double standard; and didn't attack the root issue of soldiers getting STDs from prostitutes! Her actions paid off in 1886 when the act was finally repealed. There were other smaller social movements too. For example, there was Annie Besant's movement to improve the conditions in which women worked in factories - raising awareness in interviews and magazines like *The Link*.

Arguably, the struggle for the right to vote and stand for office, was, and is, one of the most important struggles in the history of feminism. This lasted a century, but it was certainly a cause worth fighting for. After all, the right to participate in our political system is one of, if not the, the most important rights possible. Female suffrage as a concept most likely started with the French Revolution; but despite the formation of the Society of Revolutionary Republic Women in 1793, these efforts didn't really go anywhere (most likely due to its abolition after one year). However, even though women weren't able to vote, they still affected politics; in countries such as Germany and Italy had women participate in the precursor to the 1848 liberal revolution. (Author's note, "Germany" and "Italy" weren't actual nations at this time and were a bunch of little nations, but this isn't an essay about 1800s political history, this part's about ... 1800s political history. Whoops.) That aside, there actually were some brief times when women could vote before the 1900s, like in the Pitcairn Islands in the Pacific Ocean, where women could actually vote in the 1830's. But - as you can guess - women being able to vote on a small island isn't exactly a victory for feminism. (There were some other times beforehand when women could vote, but random islands being socially progressive is funny so... yeah). Meanwhile, it's the 1800's!

During this century, burgeoning suffragette and suffragist movements would take off across the world - demanding the right for women to vote. Since I could write another 2000-word essay on this global phenomenon, I'll just cover the successes during this period. In America, some states individually introduced female suffrage: women in Wyoming (of all states) were able to vote and run for office in 1869! Another small part of a bigger superpower is the Isle of Man, which let women vote completely in 1881. Later on, some bigger nations gave women the vote (but not much bigger, come to think about it!) New Zealand let women vote in 1893 following a campaign led by Kate Sheppard, though they unfortunately didn't let women actually run for political office, and West Australia in 1895.

To conclude, I believe it's important to discuss less known about aspects of the history of feminism: such as the feminists of the Medieval Period, the Muslim World and into the Renaissance with Christine de Pizan. It is also interesting to see how feminism has changed over the years to how it is nowadays; likely because educated people are more likely to have their views recorded in history, early feminism mostly focused on educational equality between the sexes, but more radical views still persisted in the early discourse calling for total equality. However, despite these beliefs, feminism would only begin to score victories in the 1800s, overlapping with feminism's ideas expanded to include equality in more than just educational equality; the feminist movement moved towards changing laws to give women more power socially and economically; the rights for women to partake in our economy, control their relationships through divorce, and the repeal of many horrifying laws like the Contagious Diseases Act were all pivotal moments in the struggle for equal rights that often get overlooked when discussing feminism. Of course, there was also the push towards voting rights for women which was important; but this is a relatively new understanding of the basic tenets of feminism; it would see more successes in the 1900s, with major nations like the UK and America letting women vote in elections in 1918 and 1920 respectively. Feminism is older than you think it is, and has gone through many new changes as time has progressed; we can only guess where it will go in the future.





# THE LIFE AND MURDER OF HYPATIA

*by Rosie Cotton*

In March of 415 CE, a mob of Christian zealots murdered a scholar in Alexandria. Dragged from a carriage, hauled to a church, stripped naked, beaten to death with broken pottery and burned, the violent manner of this death added weight to a name of enough renown regardless. The scholar's name is most likely one you have not heard before: Hypatia –

one of the last great academics of ancient Alexandria. The first recorded women to study mathematics, astronomy and philosophy, she was a polymath caught up in a time of religious strife – two facts that, together, that would lead to her eventual demise.

Hypatia was the daughter of Theon, the last attested member of the Museum at Alexandria. He passed on to her his knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, and it is thought that she assisted her father in writing and editing several works that have survived. Theon's version of Ptolemy's *Almagest* was one such work, in which an Earth-centric model for the universe was established that would remain unchallenged until Copernicus and Galileo. His preservation of, and commentary on, Euclid's *Elements* was another, which became the standard edition of this work on geometry until the nineteenth century. Despite her father's own success, Hypatia did not remain long in his shadow. The historian Philostorgius professed that she "far surpassed her teacher, and especially in astronomy, and taught many others the mathematical sciences".





*This fictional portrait of Hypatia by Jules Maurice Gaspard, originally the illustration for Elbert Hubbard's 1908 fictional biography, has now become, by far, the most iconic and widely reproduced image of her*

She wrote her own commentaries, elucidating for a wider readership Diophantus's *Arithmetica*, the *Conics* of Apollonius, and *The Astronomical Canon*. None of these works have survived. Hypatia's commentaries moved her father's effort to preserve Greek mathematical and astronomical knowledge into more recent and difficult areas, thus having a profound impact on the survival of early thought in mathematics. Later, Descartes, Newton and Leibniz are among the great names who expanded on the areas in which she worked.

It is evident that Hypatia's appetite for learning was not satisfied with knowledge of only Science. Around 400, she became the head of the Platonist school in Alexandria, where she shared her understanding of philosophy with large crowds of the public and many loyal students. Wealthy young men – all her students were men – were sent from across the empire to receive from her the best education that could be bought. A tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia written by Damascius claims that her womanhood in an entirely male-dominated sphere of society, although so unheard of, was not an obstruction to her teaching: "Putting on the philosopher's cloak

although a woman and advancing through the middle of the city, she explained publicly to those who wished to hear either Plato or Aristotle or any other of the philosophers".

Hypatia's own philosophy was of the Neoplatonist school – the final form of pagan Greek philosophy. A development upon the ideas of Plato, with some Aristotelian and Stoic elements, this was the belief that everything emanates from "the One" or "the Good" – the highest level of being and source of all perfections. A life spent on the study of geometry, algebra, astronomy and the abstract nature of numbers would no doubt have suited her philosophical interests perfectly; It is a platonic theory that such abstract entities as numbers are objective, independent of the physical world and the symbols used to represent them. Her philosophy also led her to embrace a life of dedicated virginity – possibly in keeping with Plato's theories on abolishment of the family system.

Aristocratic and influential, Hypatia was both adored and revered by the men she taught and worked alongside. Damascius describes her as "exceedingly beautiful and fair of form. . . in speech articulate and logical, in her actions prudent and public-spirited, and the rest of the city gave her suitable welcome and accorded her special respect". This was a woman who clearly found no intimidation in an assembly of wealthy and educated men - who it seems admired her greatly for her mind, irrespective of her gender. Why was it then, that this loyal support turned so sour before her murder?

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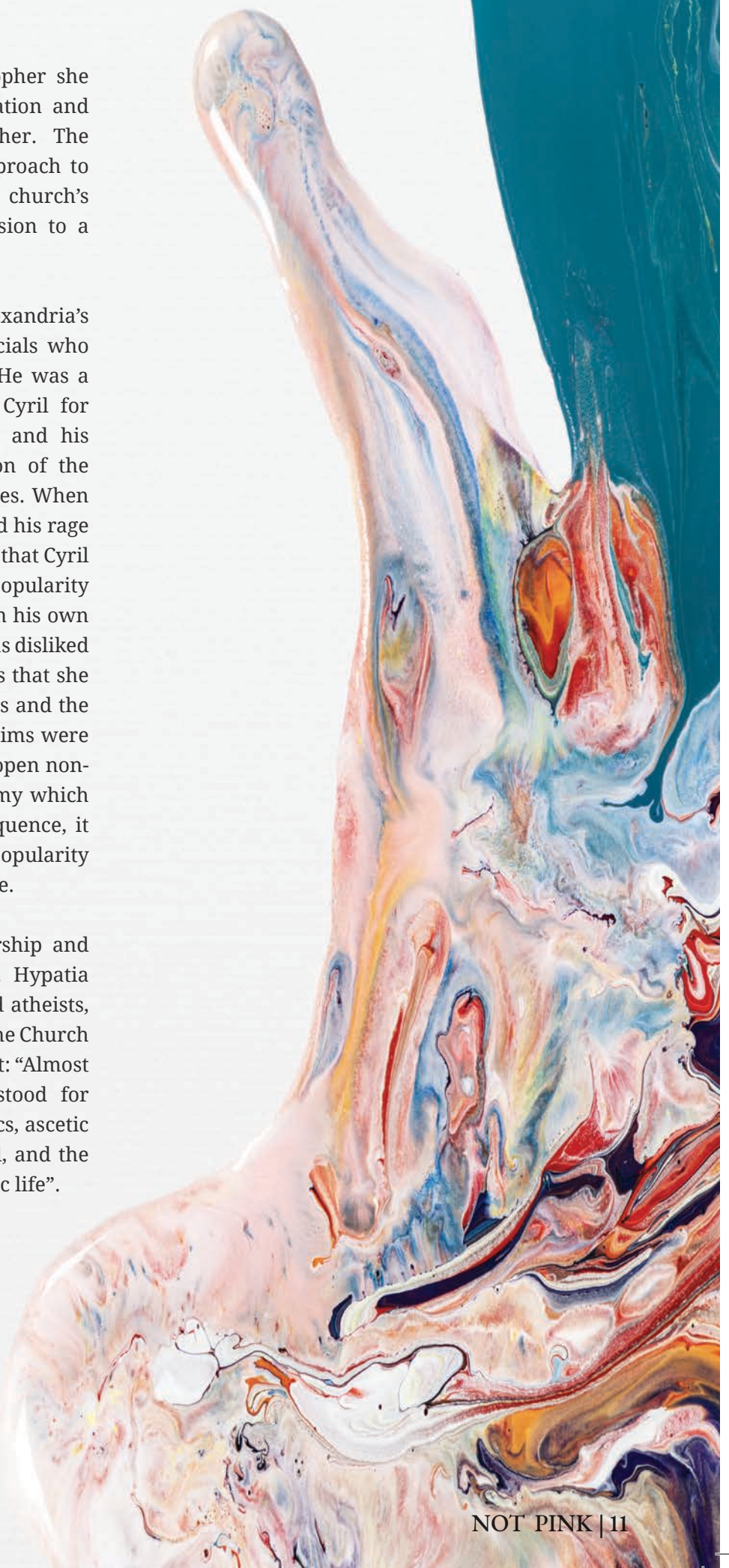
In 412, the violent extremist Cyril succeeded Theophilus as bishop of Alexandria. Alexandrian schools were not divided by religion, and so Hypatia taught Christians and pagans alongside one another. She chose not to take a definite side in the power struggle of the time between Christianity and the ancient world, instead encouraging personal meditation on the nature of reality without tethering to any particular deity.



However, in viewing herself as a philosopher she was classified a pagan, as classical education and paganism were intimately bound together. The spirit of inquiry fostered by Hypatia's approach to spirituality was greatly at odds with the church's religious indoctrination based on submission to a higher power.

Hypatia's admirers included Orestes, Alexandria's governor – one of many government officials who sought her advice on municipal matters. He was a moderate Christian who disapproved of Cyril for encroaching on his civil responsibilities, and his intolerance towards the Jewish population of the city. The two powerful men became enemies. When Cyril failed to assassinate Orestes, he shifted his rage onto an easier target – Hypatia. It is thought that Cyril envied this accomplished female scholar's popularity and powerful allies across the empire, from his own high position of authority in which he was disliked and unwanted. The bishop incited rumours that she was a sorceress who had bewitched Orestes and the public through her Satanic wiles. These claims were quickly believed by some, based upon her open non-Christian philosophy and work in astronomy which was inseparable from astrology. In consequence, it seems that the cost of Hypatia's success, popularity and vocal opinion in Alexandria was her life.

Following her violent death, both scholarship and paganism in Alexandria lost momentum. Hypatia became a symbol for feminists, pagans and atheists, and was later used by Voltaire to condemn the Church and religion. Deakin sums up her legacy best: "Almost alone, virtually the last academic, she stood for intellectual values, for rigorous mathematics, ascetic Neoplatonism, the crucial role of the mind, and the voice of temperance and moderation in civic life".





# Chained Up

Body stuck in past, that I'm not left in  
Dancing in the dark, destruction warning,  
Clanking on the rails, of our Trojan horse,  
Every single men, stuck here by their action

Stupid little choices,  
Stupid little girls

Buried in the forest with strands of chestnut hair  
Peeking through the leaves, cold tears, cold to despair;  
And questions was I asked and words were said to me,  
That actions not undone will chain my to this lead.

To these men, caged by blood in fractured eyes,  
To these men, spurred on by a woman's touch,  
To these men who left bodies on wet floors,  
With strands of hair in broken, crowded drawers -  
Men once we were

Some saw flames disguise the cracks in porcelain skin  
But I just saw a girl sat stiff as stone  
gemstones

Not a second to atone for a stupid little girl  
And muddy shattered bones between those roots  
Of some underworld

I left her where no track of steps had worn a  
path  
Where buds of plants of trees could never last,  
Too dark to let life breathe or believe in life at  
all.

Far from graves that gave their dead  
A final bed

Pillow for head  
Walked in silence, disappear,  
And saw myself that now was rooted here.

So here I am, with nothing but four walls,  
And window lets me see the garden closed  
To me, locked up, still broken from my fall.

Outside, each one awakes and notice not a  
thing  
So does the morning traffic, and planes that  
still take flight

Dark silhouettes of life still bloom, inch by  
inch, in morning sun,

But shadows to the West will stay  
Even in the very height of day.

*~ Elizabeth Heywood*





# ANNA KOMNENE: 'THE QUEEN OF SCIENCES' AND THE FIRST FEMALE HISTORIAN

*by Caitlyn Tan*

History is a subject which is crowded with men; it is both written by men and typically about them. While it is not difficult to think of male historians (Herodotus and Sima Qian come to mind) as well as notable male rulers (Henry VIII, Qin Shi Huang, Julius Caesar, the Emperor Claudius to name a few), when one has to come up with female historians or rulers, some find it a lot more arduous. After some careful thought, one might think of Boudica (30- 61 CE), the Iceni queen who rebelled against Roman rule, or Empress Wu, who ruled China during what has often been considered a 'Golden Age' (reign: 690-705)]. Anna Komnene, a Byzantine princess widely considered the first female historian, was not only an extraordinary anomaly in a society in which history was almost solely written by men, but also made an integral contribution in the form of *The Alexiad*, the



*'Mosaic of Alexios I Komnenos'* by Unknown Artist (Public Domain)  
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only account of the First Crusade (around 1096 - 1102 CE) written in Greek which has vastly expanded the knowledge of this period in history. Komnene was remarkable for several reasons; she had a brilliant mind and a superb education, she was motivated to go beyond what was taught to her and expected of her. Besides this, Komnene managed to perform remarkable feats with her education by writing an amazing history and being involved in Byzantine politics although reviled as a conspirator.

The eldest daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Alexios<sup>1</sup> Komnenos and Empress Irene Doukaina<sup>2</sup>, Anna Komnene (1083-1153 CE), also spelled Anna Comnena, had the privilege of being born in a culturally significant location and having a good education. This colourful character was born in Constantinople, the capital city of the Byzantine Empire at the time which served as a flourishing port due to its position between Asia and Europe. In 330 CE, it had been the site of 'New Rome', a city filled with culture and affluence, and its vibrancy seems likely to have influenced Komnene's own education and cultural outlook. Having been born in a still-thriving city, alive with art, architecture and constant change, Komnene lived through what has been classified as the time of 'Middle Byzantium' (from 843-1204 CE).<sup>3</sup> That episode helped to inspire the blossoming of monumental and architectural art, including manuscripts, cloisonné enamels, ivory carvings and stonework which can still be seen today, and is indicative of the cultural backdrop to Komnene's early life.

Anna Komnene was well educated, as was not uncommon with some medieval aristocratic women. Komnene credits her parents with her education, and it could also be suggested that her mother, Empress Irene, was particularly supportive because she advocated for Komnene to take over the throne. While there was some provision for women's education in Byzantium, namely, three years' elementary education from the age of six was supplied to most girls and women of higher classes<sup>4</sup>, (women in lower classes tended to be seldom educated, with their education

1 Latinised as Alexius Comnenus

2 Also Irene Ducas

3 This era saw the an increase of the use of icons, the 'Great Schism' of 1504, with the division between the Western church (led by Pope leo IX) and the Eastern Christian churches (led by Miichael Cerularius), this was also a time of increased wealth and relative stability.

4 This typically consisted of writing, reading, sacred history, music and arithmetic



'Anna's mother Irene Ducas', details of a 12th-century mosaic in the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

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being limited to 'the study of manuscripts and hagiographies by combining some basic knowledge'<sup>5</sup>) higher education for women was still considered unbecoming for a woman, and much of Komnene's own education came from her secret employment of Michael of Ephesus<sup>6</sup> as a tutor. While it could be argued that without the cooperation of her parents and her own status of an aristocratic woman, she may have been unable to enjoy such eventual prominence or even have the means to further her education, Komnene's

5 Marina Nasaina, 'Women's position in Byzantine Society', <https://centerprode.com/ojsh/ojsh0101/coas.ojsh.0101.04029n.pdf>, accessed 29/05/2021

6 He wrote commentaries on Aristotle, and was part of a group organised by Komnene



own perseverance to continue her studies made her remarkable and different to other Byzantine princesses at the time.

Considering the importance of religion to Byzantine society, it is perhaps unsurprising that most Byzantine princesses behaved piously and dedicated much of their life to religion. An example of this is Arcadia<sup>7</sup> who ordered the construction of a monastery dedicated to Saint Andrew<sup>8</sup> in Constantinople or Simonida<sup>9</sup> who became a nun. While Komnene was religious and there are religious values placed in *The Alexiad*, what makes her particularly different from other Byzantine princesses is her interest in subjects deemed less appropriate for women, such as military affairs, and writing about them. Moreover, it is very difficult to find an historian comparable to Komnene throughout the Byzantine era. No other Byzantine historian wrote about the First Crusade in Greek (information about this time was important considering it included the recapturing of Jerusalem as well as the creation of Christian states in the Holy Land which endured for two hundred years) and her accomplishments, including that of writing *The Alexiad* and sponsoring other scholars such as Eustratius of Nicaea, remain exceptional by the standards of her era.

Furthermore, Komnene's brilliant mind and character has made way for a legacy. In Sir Walter Scott's 'Count Robert of Paris'<sup>10</sup> Anna Komnene is fictionalised and portrayed as beautiful ('a beauty of the very first rank'), strong ('voice [...] which gained strength [...] as she proceeded with the following passage, 'tired of being an object of some inattention to [a] guest'), intelligent ('she was willing to gather an idea of the feelings of her audience') as well as 'fair' and 'the soul of wit and genius'. Komnene is also described as both 'highly intelligent and well educated'<sup>11</sup> and 'a historian of

the highest calibre. 'Overall, Komnene's reputation precedes her so that, even in fiction, she has the reputation of a woman who is dangerous, powerful and extremely intelligent.

Not simply a scholar, nor just an historian or solely a conspirator, Komnene was a medieval polymath. Indeed, she had been educated in Rhetoric, Linguistics, History, Theology, Medicine, Mathematics, Philosophy and Greek Literature. Niketas Choniates<sup>12</sup> wrote that she 'was ardently devoted to philosophy, the queen of all sciences, and was educated in every field'. While some of her education was most likely orchestrated by her parents, her own academic reach and ambition was remarkable. Georgias Tornikes said at her funeral that she studied ancient poetry (such as 'The Odyssey', where it is believed she had to teach herself, or at least do some personal studying on Ancient Greek in order to understand the text<sup>13</sup>) in secret because, while it was not necessarily forbidden, her parents disapproved of her learning about polytheism. Similar to Komnene's hiring of Michael of Ephesus, this account of Komnene illustrates her ability and desire to further her own knowledge, even to the extent of upsetting her parents or social status.

Not only was Komnene well-educated, but also extremely accomplished; she could quote from Homer and the Bible, and had reportedly read all of Aristotle's writings. One of her teachers claimed that her constant requests for Aristotle had worn out his eyes. Homer's *Iliad* was considered an important textbook for education in the Byzantine empire, more so than *The Odyssey*, but, Komnene's relationship with literature seems to have been exceptional; the Bishop of Ephesus stated that she had reached 'the highest summit of wisdom, both secular and divine'. Furthermore, Anna Komnene seems to have been something of an expert in the field of medicine. She was made the head of a 10,000 bed hospital and orphanage

7 Arcadia (400 - 444 CE), the third daughter of the Roman emperor Arcadius

8 The saint of fishermen, miners, protection against sore throats etc.

9 Simona Nemanjić (1294 -1336 CE) was a Byzantine princess and a queen consort of the Kingdom of Serbia

10 Sir Walter Scott, 'Count Robert of Paris', (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1831)

11 Angeliki Laiou, 'Why Anna Komnene?' in Thalia

Gourma-Peterson (ed.), *Anna Komnene and Her Times* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000) p.1

12 A Byzantine historian, statesman and theologian (1155 -1217 CE)

13 Leonara Neville, 'The Princess who rewrote history', [https://www.ted.com/talks/leonora\\_neville\\_the\\_princess\\_who\\_rewrote\\_history/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/leonora_neville_the_princess_who_rewrote_history/transcript?language=en) accessed 28/05/2021

in Constantinople, built by her father, and was thought to have become an expert on gout, to the extent that she personally treated her father, who was susceptible to the disease.

In Byzantine society, the genders remained unequal, the disparities between the rights of genders prevalent, as in so many medieval societies. Women did possess rights equivalent to men when it came to inheriting property; however, the Byzantine ideal of women's behaviour leaves no doubt that their sphere of influence and control was almost exclusively domestic. Angelika Louie summarises the influence of women of the higher classes by stating:

'Aristocratic women played an important role in politics and society. They were the medium through which alliances between aristocratic families were made and since they had property of their own, in the form of both dowry and patrimonial property, they had considerable economic power. Names, lineage, property, and family connections were transmitted along the female as well as the male line; and aristocratic women were as acutely conscious and proud of their lineage as their male relatives.<sup>14</sup>

The scarcity of rights that women had at the time, coupled with the limited extent of activity to which they were typically allowed, contrasts strongly with the breadth of Komnene's pursuits and successful development of a political identity. It is in this context that she is perhaps most remarkable. Within her lifetime, she was often reviled as a schemer - and indeed the slur of 'conspiracy' is one which has often been associated with powerful women of independent views. Eventually, she would be removed from political life by force<sup>15</sup>, but, as the oldest child of Alexios Komnenos, she was born into a family without sons and therefore in direct line of succession. Her brother, John II Komnenos, was born in 1087, but her dynastic ambitions were cemented when she married Nicephorus Bryennius ten years later in 1097. Both her mother, the Empress Irene, and Anna herself attempted to get Emperor Alexios to name Anna Komnene's husband Nicephorus as his successor

<sup>14</sup> Shepard, 814

<sup>15</sup> She was given a sentence of 35 years and exiled by her brother John II Komnenos for allegedly attempting to usurp the throne

to the throne and to get rid of John II Komnenos. Considering the limiting influence Byzantine society allowed women, the fact that Komnene and her mother may have been actively attempting to take back what she considered her throne was something unusual. The extent to which Komnene was complicit in these events - both the extent of her actions (such as a supposed plot to) assassinate her brother, or even engaged in a conspiracy at all, is a matter of debate. Niketas Choniates' negative views, which it has been argued were mostly due to his own views on gender and misogyny<sup>16</sup>, on Anna Komnene suggest that Komnene was ambitious and believed the throne had been stolen from her by her brother<sup>17</sup>. Whatever the truth of it, the affair led to Komnene being forced to leave court and then being sent to a convent of Kecharitomene<sup>18</sup> after the death of her husband in 1137 CE, to both her and her husband's names being dishonoured and to their assets being seized. Life at the convent must have been sedate in comparison to the tumultuous times which had preceded it for Komnene. However, she used it well, devoting her energies to the composition of *The Alexiad* which detailed the accomplishments of her father's reign. While it could be argued that Komnene was able to create such a masterpiece because of the time she had in the convent or even that she was a historian because of it, this is not entirely true. Komnene had always been a historian, this was just most likely her first official work. Furthermore, the values of family and being filial were important to people in Byzantium and she most likely wanted her father's legacy to continue. To this day, it serves as an integral source on the reign of Alexios I.

The *Alexiad* recorded a period of Byzantine history about which modern scholars struggle to obtain information. It is widely considered to have been well written as she made artistic flourishes in the sense of personal intrusion and rhetorical virtuosity to the history of the time. To many eyes, it is almost a work of poetry, a stylistic contrivance seldom seen since the days of the Ancient Greeks more than a

<sup>16</sup> Ioulia Kolovou, 'Twelfth-century Greek Byzantine princess, historian, scholar- and conspirator?', <https://dangerouswomenproject.org/2016/04/20/anna-komnene/>

<sup>17</sup> The conspiracy was allegedly revealed in a piece of writing by Komnene that expressed her annoyance at her husband's reluctance to carry out the plot when her brother ascended the throne

<sup>18</sup> This convent was originally founded by Irene Doukaina and was located in Constantinople, while it was still in the capital, the convent maintained strict seclusion



thousand years earlier. It is certainly believed to have been modelled on Ancient Greek epic; it is not written traditionally and takes creative liberty, almost becoming a piece of literature, which, considering her interest in Ancient Greek poetry as well as Byzantine tradition, is perhaps unsurprising. The departure from a conventional style is sometime perceived as a 'mistake' however that would be to ignore the fact that the 12th century was characterised by an abundance of literary exploration in which the borders of genres were sometimes intentionally disregarded; Komnene's piece does not only act to illustrate the history of the time, but is also a piece of history itself. Seen in this light, *The Alexiad* then becomes an invaluable source not only because of its details but what it can tell us about the values of the Byzantines themselves. For example, there is an emphasis on family and religion in her writing, both which were considered invaluable in Byzantium at the time. Moreover, while *The Alexiad*'s primary purpose was to present Byzantine history and her father's reign, a substantial portion of it was dedicated to supplying information on medical theory. Komnene's many and varying interests illustrate the versatility of her mind and her unusual brilliance. Moreover, the way in which she wrote *The Alexiad* was unique and considered, perhaps because of his own negative views on gender as a 'gendered' narrative with 'elaborate affectation of rhetoric'<sup>19</sup> that 'betrays the vanity of a female author' by Gibbon; Joan Hussey describes her work as 'mature and markedly individual'. For example, she writes arguably more measuredly than other Byzantine historians about women, writing that Anna Dalassene<sup>20</sup> 'formed a very good plan'<sup>21</sup> and also, perhaps stylistically, adds her own emotion into the history as well, such as when she states 'having written so far, dizziness overwhelms my soul, and tears blind my eyes'<sup>22</sup>. The reason why *The Alexiad* is 'a masterpiece of Byzantine literature'<sup>23</sup> may be because of the way in which it was written; through personal intrusions and an establishing of personality, *The Alexiad* does not only act as an encompassment of

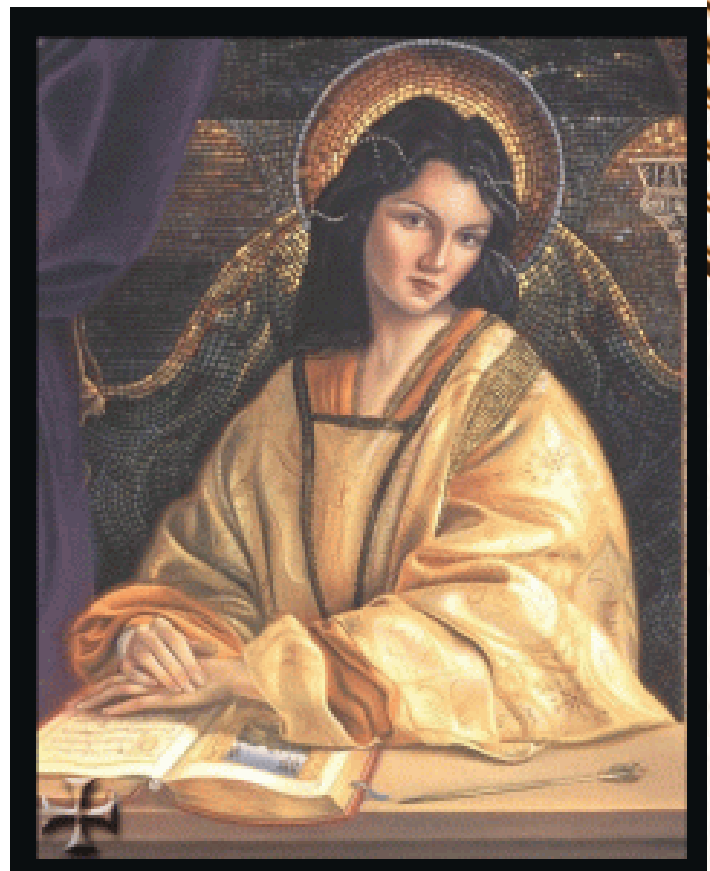
the values of the time but ensures her own legacy, even without any transformation into an animal under great stress.

'It is extraordinary that nobody nowadays under the stress of great troubles is turned into stone or a bird or a tree or some inanimate object; they used to undergo such metamorphoses in ancient times (or so they say), though whether that is myth or a true story I know not. Maybe it would be better to change one's nature into something that lacks all feeling, rather than be so sensitive to evil. Had that been possible, these calamities would in all probability have turned me to stone.'

- Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*

Taken at face value, that suggests an admirable historical method on her part. Scholars have also determined that Komnene was able to access and use official documents from the imperial archives. While *The Alexiad*'s primary purpose was to illustrate Alexios I's merits as an emperor, it also allows for Komnene's reactions to those events. In particular, it contains many passages which are focused on emotions, perhaps in order to combat the belief in Byzantine society that women should not write about battles. Komnene's own lucid descriptions of military tactics, battles and weaponry illustrate her

*'Painting inspired'* by Anna Komnene



19 Edward Gibbon, 'History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', Vol. V (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 263.

20 Anna Dalassene (around 1025 - 1105 CE), (also Anna Dalassena) was a Byzantine noblewoman who was the mother of Alexios I Komnenos and guided Byzantium when her son was absent on military campaigns

21 Anna Komnene, 'The Alexiad', Book II, 'The Revolt of the Comneni'

22 Anna Komnene, 'The Alexiad', Preface

23 Lynda Garland (reviewer), Review of 'Anna Komnene and her times' in Thalia Gourma-Peterson (ed.), (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000) p.1

own capabilities and her knowledge of war, she is described to excel ‘in her detailed accounts of machines or instruments, like the cross-bow and the various helepoleis<sup>24</sup> invented by allies or enemies’<sup>25</sup>

Anna Komnene may not have been an active advocate for her gender. Such a concept would have been hard to understand during the time in which she lived and wrote, and indeed she seems to have been no admirer of her own gender and wanted to differentiate herself from other women rather than to champion them. Besides this, Komnene also considered her mother and grandmother as superior to other women. Komnene considered her mother Irene Doukaina as superlative as she was loyal to both her family and religion, and her grandmother Anna Dalassena as clever and brave, as many of the Empire’s administrative duties were passed to her from her son.

Komnene’s portrayal of gender was still unconventional. While it may be unrealistic to deem her a feminist, or even a proto-feminist, simply because those terms and views did not exist at the time, Komnene may have been more realistic about her gender than the other, predominantly male, historians; the very fact she wrote *The Alexiad* acts as an example of what a woman was capable of achieving in this period. Komnene attributes intellect to both women and men and permits, in *The Alexiad*, women to escape from limiting societal gender roles. When writing about the Revolt of the Comneni, Komnene states ‘the man seeing the stubbornness of the women [...] realising that they were growing bolder’<sup>26</sup>. Komnene expresses emotion, but also notifies the reader that she will stop expressing emotion in order to return to her duty of history, which illustrates control: ‘I could have wept my life away in tears [...] let us proceed with our history’<sup>27</sup>. With the exception of her father’s funeral, where crying and expressing sorrow was culturally appropriate, there is nothing faint-hearted about the women she depicts. Her beliefs seem to be predominantly that intelligence, and other qualities, are much more important than gender.

Komnene remains a singular character, whose place in history has been earned by her own accomplishments, her unusual intellect, brilliance and versatility. Komnene is an icon; she was an extraordinary woman by the standards of any era who successfully demonstrated that women could make exceptional contributions and behave strongly, incredibly and resolutely in a male-dominated time.

‘The stream of Time, irresistible, ever moving, carries off and bears away all things that come to birth and plunges them into utter darkness, both deeds of no account and deeds which are mighty and worthy of commemoration.’

- Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*

24 Meaning ‘taker of cities’, it was essentially a movable siege tower, invented by Demetrius I, King of Macedon

25 Introduction by Peter Frankopan, *Anna Komnene, ‘The Alexiad of Anna Comnena’* in Peter Frankopan (ed.), translated by E. R. A. Sewster, (Great Britain: Richard Clay, 1969) p.15

26 Anna Komnene, ‘The Alexiad’, Book II, ‘The Revolt of the Comneni’

27 Anna Komnene, ‘The Alexiad’, Book IV, ‘War with the Normans’



# HOW ACCURATE IS THE VIEW THAT EMPRESS MATILDA'S FAILURE WAS AS A RESULT OF HER GENDER?

by Nikita Lavender

In both 1135 and 1141 Matilda failed to claim the crown for herself. Gender has been described by Hollister as “Maud’s great impediment”<sup>1</sup> and one can see that being the only self-established woman in a male, military society worked against Matilda. Yet gender was not the only obstacle facing the Empress: the attitude of Henry 1st and his creation of a disputed succession increased prejudices against her. Equally, Matilda’s own attitude and poor political decisions lost her the support of waverers and led to her defeat in London and Winchester.

To understand the difficulties facing Matilda because of her gender, we must also understand how the context of military society in post-conquest England and the traditions of female succession and power affected her cause. While Stafford argues that “throughout the early Middle Ages many of the circumstances existed which could allow women’s power to develop”<sup>2</sup>, but these circumstances usually

1 C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I (Hampshire, 2001)*, p. 309

2 Pauline Stafford, *‘The Medieval World’ (Oxford, 2018)*, ed. P. Linehen, J. Nelson, p. 123

*Image of matilda*





only existed when women acted as Queen consorts or regents. Women's autonomy in the twelfth century was 'in the power' of their male guardians and husbands, meaning that they could only exercise power or influence on behalf of a man.

The importance of gender, and the constraints which it placed on women, can be seen in the language of the twelfth century chroniclers. They were "almost unanimous in describing the empress's actions as manlike"<sup>3</sup> when trying to be complementary. Equally, when trying to insult Matilda, contemporary chroniclers would refer to her 'intolerable feminine arrogance'<sup>4</sup>, using her gender as a weapon against her and the Angevin cause.

One must also understand the military, as well as the political, context. Stenton argues that the imposition of Norman military society ended the 'rough equality' which Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed with men<sup>5</sup>. Fenton suggests that masculinity in eleventh and twelfth century England started to be defined in terms of military prowess and efficiency and being a King became synonymous with being an effective military leader.<sup>6</sup> This counted against Matilda and all women in terms of their fitness to rule.

As a woman, Matilda was not trained to be a military leader or bear arms and could not lead knights into battle as Stephen or, later, Henry 2nd did. Hence, her ability to secure peace within the Anglo-Norman Empire, which was one of the main roles of Kingship, was significantly weakened. Stringer has argued that Matilda's failure to protect her men in both London and Winchester (as they were ambushed by Queen Matilda twice) shows how a lack of military experience disadvantaged Matilda in the fight with Stephen for the crown.<sup>7</sup>

One must ask how Stephen could be so successful in

taking the crown, an action which ultimately meant that Matilda never could. One reason is that Henry 1st was an oppressive and tyrannical ruler whose behaviour towards the nobility of the Anglo-Norman empire helped Stephen to take the throne. Henry 1st and his Norman predecessors exploited feudal incidents and patronage in order to maintain the loyalty of the barons of England. This exploitation can be shown in the pipe roll of 1130. This led to uncertainty and disputes surrounding the ownership of land, so that, when Henry died in 1135, the barons saw a "chance of vengeance"<sup>8</sup> and took advantage of his death to solve sometimes generational disputes, resorting to 'robbing and pillaging'.<sup>9</sup> This reaction to Henry's death led England into disarray. With so much internal conflict, Bradbury argues that "succession by a minor or a woman did not at this time seem to answer such a situation."<sup>10</sup> This suggests that Stephen was crowned in part because he was a man and therefore the nobles believed he would be able to control the situation.

Another reason why Matilda did not initially succeed to the throne was her husband. The Normans and the Angevins were, as Peers describes it, "traditional rivals."<sup>11</sup> If Matilda had been a man, the marriage would not have held the same weight. The Empress could not be a military commander, an indispensable role for a monarch at the time, therefore the nobility will have expected that by accepting Matilda as Queen, they would be accepting her husband as their general.<sup>12</sup> The negative effects of the marriage to Count Geoffrey were exacerbated by the fact that the nature of Matilda's succession was undefined and the nobility were unclear as to the role which Geoffrey would play within England after the death of Henry 1st. The Durham chronicler stated that it was agreed that Geoffrey should succeed to the kingdom if Henry died without a male heir born in lawful marriage.<sup>13</sup> Although Hollister believes that the Durham chronicler's view is "dubious"<sup>14</sup>, he is

3 Betty Bandel, *The English Chronicler's Attitude Toward Women*, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 16, No.1 (January 1955), p. 117

4 William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen*, ed. and trans. P.G. Walsh and M.J. Kennedy (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 41

5 Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Women in History* (New York, 1957), pp. 28 & 348

6 Kirsten A. Fenton, *Gender, Nation and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury*. (Vol. 4, Boydell & Brewer, 2008), p. 73

7 Keith J. Stringer, *The Reign of Stephen Kingship, Warfare and Government in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford, 1993), p. 38

8 *Gesta Stephani*, p.5

9 Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*, ed. and trans. Thomas Forester (London: Henry Bohn, 1854), p. 453

10 Jim Bradbury, *Stephen and Matilda: The Civil War of 1139-53* (Gloucestershire, 2012), p. 12

11 Chris Peers, *King Stephen and the Anarchy* (Yorkshire, 2018), p. 11

12 Peers, p. 12

13 SD, ii, pp. 281-2; Marjorie Chibnall page 57

14 Hollister, p. 324



not the only chronicler who believed Geoffrey was going to gain power in the Anglo-Norman empire; Henry of Huntington<sup>15</sup> and the chronicler of Le Mans<sup>16</sup> held similar opinions. Despite the view of these chroniclers, most historians do not believe that Henry intended Geoffrey to be King of England. For example, in 1131 and 1133 there is writing of more oaths being taken to Matilda, neither of which included Geoffrey. Moreover, Geoffrey is not known to have ever been part of Henry's court. However, the uncertainty surrounding the succession led the Anglo-Norman nobility to believe that, if they supported Matilda, there was a threat of an Angevin ruler.

Carpenter argues that Henry caused the succession dispute, because, while he wanted Matilda to succeed him "he had failed to secure the position of the Empress" and "he had built up those of both Stephen and Robert, thus laying the foundations for the former's usurpation and the latter's championship of the Empress's cause, the heart of the civil war."<sup>17</sup> It is clear that Carpenter does not view Henry's attitude to the succession and his failure to secure Matilda's position as being deliberate. One of the main arguments against Henry's intention to have Matilda succeed him is that he did not secure her with any land in either England or Normandy. Bradbury refutes this by stating that Henry "[assumed] that she would take over the royal lands" and therefore did not give her any land prior to his death.

However, Chibnall is more persuasive than Carpenter or Bradbury in arguing that "King Henry kept his options open to the day of his death. He lived in hope of a grandson."<sup>18</sup> This is because her analysis is supported by Henry's treatment of William Adelin. William Adelin was Henry's only legitimate son, who died in the White Ship disaster of 1120; before his death Henry seems to have supported his claims with much more zeal than he did Matilda's later on. For example, in 1120 Louis VI granted Normandy to be held by William and had William do homage to him, all as a result of the actions of Henry 1st. This established William in Normandy, in a way Matilda

was not at the time of her father's death in 1135.

Chibnall's argument is also flawed, as the view that Henry did not want Matilda to succeed him ignores the oaths taken to her in his reign. One can see the importance of the oaths taken to Matilda, as Stephen's supporters throughout the civil war came up with various different reasons why the oaths taken to Matilda were not valid, with the most convincing being that, on his deathbed, Henry expressed regret that he had forced his barons into taking an oath and designated Stephen as his heir instead. This suggests that the oaths did hold significance as, if they did not, the royalist party would not have dedicated so much time disputing their legitimacy.

Despite Stephen's usurpation of the throne in 1135, by 1141 Matilda was in a strong position. Her forces had captured Stephen at the Battle of Lincoln and it seemed as if Matilda would succeed in her wish to become Queen of England. However, instead of being crowned, the Empress was driven out of London and then Winchester by Stephen's wife, Queen Matilda. The Queen's actions showed how women could balance diplomacy with warfare and succeed, albeit as a conduit for a male. Chibnall argues that, through this failure, Matilda proved "that she had neither the political judgement nor the understanding of men to enable her to act wisely in a crisis."<sup>19</sup> In the Durham ecclesiastical elections, Matilda supported William Cumin against the wishes of the Durham monks which helped her to lose the crucial support of the Church. Matilda's treatment of the Londoners was equally detrimental, as she continued to ask them for money, despite their request that she reduce their financial burdens.

Matilda's arrogance also helped to alienate her supporters. Warren argues that Matilda was driven out of London in 1141 because she was "headstrong, overbearing, and unbelievably tactless"<sup>20</sup>. There is a wide array of contemporary chroniclers who support Warren's analysis. Henry of Huntingdon states that she was 'elated with insufferable pride'<sup>21</sup> when she came to London in 1141. Equally, the *Gesta Stephani* states that when former royalists submitted

15 Henry of Huntingdon, *The Chronicle of Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Thomas Forester (London: Henry Bohn, 1853), p. 260

16 *SD*, ii, pp. 281-2; Marjorie Chibnall page 57

17 Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery* (London, 2004), pp. 161-2

18 Chibnall, page 57

19 Chibnall, p. 115

20 Warren, p. 27

21 Henry of Huntingdon, p. 275



to Matilda, she received them ungraciously, ‘insulting and threatening them.’<sup>22</sup> All of this evidence corroborates Chibnall’s view that Matilda was driven out of London as a result of her lack of “political judgement”.

As one would expect, Warren, Henry of Huntingdon and the chronicler writing the *Gesta Stephani* (the first book) were all biased towards Stephen, and their negative descriptions of Matilda can be seen as propaganda. However, there was contemporary and unbiased evidence that Matilda lacked wisdom and humility. Despite being an Angevin apologist, William of Malmesbury hints that the Empress ignored advice for “moderation and wisdom”, and acted in an arrogant and haughty manner.<sup>23</sup> In response to these criticisms, Hanley states that, “if Matilda had not acted ruthlessly then she could have been held up as an example of why women were unfit to rule due to their softness.”<sup>24</sup> There is also evidence that Matilda’s political judgement regarding Henry’s reign was positive. For example, she advised Henry not to invade Ireland in order to give it to his brother William and it is suggested that she told him not to appoint Thomas Beckett as Archbishop of Canterbury (although, to Henry’s detriment, he did not take this advice). Of course, this change in political judgement could simply be seen as Matilda having learnt from her previous mistakes and being able to be more objective when she was advising someone else.

Matilda, in never being crowned Queen of England, was a failure. She made poor political decisions herself and the inconsistent policy of Henry 1st regarding the succession put Matilda in an even weaker position, especially when he married her to Geoffrey. However, Matilda’s marriage would not have been nearly as important had she been a man trained to be a military leader. Her determination simply did not harmonise with the attitudes of the nobility and the church towards women during the twelfth century. Matilda’s failure is almost entirely the result of her gender and the prejudices which that created against her.

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22        *Gesta Stephani*, pp. 10-11, 118-21

23        William of Malmesbury, *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle of the Kings of England From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen*, ed. and trans. J.A. Giles (London: Henry Bohn, 1847) p.521

24        Hanley, p. 155



# CHRISTINE DE PIZAN: AUTHOR, POET, FEMINIST

by Martha Carus-Bird

I'll leave Christine's introduction to the infamous Simone de Beauvoir, who summarised her extraordinary achievements best: her writings are *'the first time we see a woman pick up her pen in defence of her sex'*. Not only was Christine the first to write explicitly pro-female theses, she was also the first ever woman to earn her living exclusively from her writings. A fascinating, trailblazing woman, who unfortunately, not everyone knows about.

Born in Venice in 1364, Christine moved to Charles V of France's Court at the age of five, where her father, Tommaso de Pizzano, worked as the physician and astrologer. Fortunately for history, her father ensured she received an ample and rigorous education, certainly in comparison to the levels of education available to most women in the fourteenth century. Her mother held a markedly different view, instead wanting Christine to spend her time *'spinning like other women'*. One of the few times where a husband's sway over his wife was actually beneficial. However, her scholarship did not prevent her getting married young: aged fifteen. She married Etienne du Castel, one of Charles' court officials. Etienne died in 1389 during a Black Death epidemic. So, in order to support her three children and her recently widowed mother, Christine turned to her quill.

By 1393, Christine was working at Charles VI's Court in Paris, writing love ballads, but soon followed political writings, including her poem, *'L'Épistre de Othéa a Hector'* (also known as *'The Epistle of Othea'*), published in 1400, in which she reaffirmed the classical view that goddesses were the deities responsible for the creation. Her first allegorical tale, *'Le livre du chemin de long estude'* (*'The book of the path of long study'*) was written in 1403, fulminated intensive warfare and its consequences in breeding

*Christine de Pizan*







Christine de Pizan

amoralistic societies across Europe. Responding to the political climate of the ongoing Hundred Years' War, she suggested that peace could be achieved by a single, idealistic monarch, supposedly by one to be found at the French Court too. Her thesis is delivered in the scope of a dream-vision, the framework she utilises for several other pieces of her work, and it begins with her narrator reading Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Make no mistake: this was an educated, able and eloquent young woman, her intelligence and passion fuelling her brave, political works.

In 1404, she wrote Charles V's biography, and the following year she wrote her masterpiece, *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (or, *The Book of the City of the Ladies*). This novel is a feminist masterpiece, a retort to the misogynistic writings on courtly love. She saw these romantic ideals as deeply harmful, instead urging men to view women not as unattainable objects of desire, but instead as real people worthy of respect.

*The Book of the City of the Ladies* is a collection of short prose pieces, collated together to form a 'city' which serves to house righteous women, shielding them from misogyny. Christine places herself as the protagonist of her tale, constructing her treatise around an allegorical dream-vision she receives. She is sitting in her study reading Lamentations (Mathelous'

antifeminist rant, written 1295, expostulating women for making men wretched through marriage), when three Virtues (Reason, Rectitude and Justice) come to her to rectify this incorrect, harmful view of women that Mathelous' has preached. She is told that God has appointed her to write a book to dispel these misogynistic accusations. Christine uses religious symbolism, teachings and morality in order to destruct the harmful stereotypes men preached about women, who commonly used religious examples to prove their theses.

“

In her *'Book'*, Christine discusses several key historical women: from Queen Fredegund of France, who 'ruled over the kingdom of France most wisely after her husband's death'; to the righteous virgin Cloelia, who escaped imprisonment to return to Rome, after initially being handed over to a Roman enemy according to the terms of a treaty; to Biblical icons, such as the *'wise and noble Queen Esther'* who freed her people from persecution under King Ahasuerus (perhaps disappointingly, she does this through enthralling the King with her *'dazzling beauty'*).



Despite understanding that education was vital for young girls, and writing that ‘if it were customary to send little girls to school and teach them the same subjects as are taught to boys, they would learn just as fully...maybe they would understand them better...for just as women’s bodies are softer than men’s, so their understanding is sharper’, Christine falls short on modern feminist ideals in never actually demanding that girls receive schooling. Indeed her main objective was to defend female virtue, as opposed to demanding and ensuring equal rights and opportunities. Nevertheless, she was a trailblazing, feminist writer who sought to rectify the misogynistic wrongs she saw in fifteenth century Europe.

In total, Christine penned forty-one (surviving) works, and her literature was received far and wide; Henry IV of England received a personalised edition of *‘Le Livre de trois vertus’* in 1404, and she personally oversaw the production of detailed manuscripts for Isabeau, Queen of Bavaria. Interestingly, she had no specific patron or court, freeing her to write for whomever, and on whatever, she so pleased. Unlike most female literary figures of the Middle Ages (take Julian of Norwich, who penned the first known work by a woman in the English language, and was also an anchoress), she was not an abbess, or a nun, and although deeply religious, she did not work in, nor for, the Church.

Christine herself was the epitome of an outsider, which only serves to make her achievements all the more impressive. In a world intoxicated on sexism, she was a woman breaking down barriers and writing contemporary literature that shocked. She was an Italian in France; one of the few deserving meritocratic members of a staunchly elitist and hierarchical royal court. Her position as a misfit endowed her with an objective perspective on society that permitted her to both observe and criticise the wrongs she saw omnipresent in her world.

Although many know about, and indeed may have even studied, Chaucer’s *‘Canterbury Tales’*, few may know of, and have read, Christine and her magnificent writings. She deserves to be read, to be talked about, and to be respected. Her writings are incredible and the first in the Middle Ages to explicitly speak out against the pervasive literary misogyny and omnipresent cultural sexism that she constantly witnessed. Without women like Christine, proving female worthiness and intelligence, who knows where we would be today. And indeed there were other women just like Christine, and other women who held congruent beliefs: when we study Christine, we must view her through the lens of exceptionalism. The theory of exceptionalism teaches us that when we see women like Christine, we aren’t just seeing her: women like this cannot exist in a vacuum. We are able to see the army of strong, powerful women, standing right beside her, urging her on and supporting her. Making female success acceptable and welcome.

“

Women constitute 0.5% of written history, and across time, there has been an active effort not to include women in its chronicles. We have a monumental, exciting task facing us, one which has already been commenced fortunately, in ensuring that females throughout history garner the respect they deserve. Learning about Christine, and others like her, is not only interesting and enthralling, it is also crucial.





*Ophelia* (1852) by John Everett Millais



# HOW DO NINETEENTH CENTURY PAINTERS REVEAL GENDER IDEALS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE TIME THROUGH THEIR VISUAL INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S FEMALE CHARACTERS?

by Sofia Margania

## Rationale:

I have always been fascinated by the contemporary attitudes exhibited in depictions of women in art. Recently, my interest in William Shakespeare and theatre productions has been renewed by the National Theatre's commitment to bringing theatre to our homes following the lockdown of 2020. Together these interests led to me exploring various portrayals of Shakespeare's women in painting.

## Introduction:

As well as assuming dominance over contemporary playwrights, Shakespeare came to influence a significant number of visual artists interested in replicating scenes from his plays. Richard Altick<sup>1</sup> writes that 'pictures from Shakespeare accounted for about one fifth—some 2,300—of the total number of literary paintings recorded between

<sup>1</sup> Altick, Richard. 1985. "Painting from Books: Art and Literature in Britain, 1760-1900." Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

*'Ophelia'* (1852) by John Everett Millais







*'Desdemona'* (1892) by Rodolfo Amoedo

1760 and 1900' in Britain.

The most famous artistic group which depicted literary characters was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) formed in 1848, who derived their subjects from the classic works: from the Bible to Shakespeare. Artists influenced by the Romantic and Gothic became interested in exploring the sublime and the 'dark, irrational and dreadful side of nature and experience', in contrast to the cold, sterile empiricism of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Much of their subject matter focuses on female figures, particularly the central women of Shakespeare's plays. By looking at depictions of female Shakespearean characters painted in the nineteenth century, it is possible to see how these artists interpreted Shakespeare's words through the lens of Victorian gender norms.

The analysis in this essay will consider the following paintings: Ophelia (1852) by John Everett Millais (Fig. 1); Desdemona (1892) by Rodolfo Amoedo (Fig. 2); Romeo and Juliet (1892) by Frank Dicksee (Fig. 3); Titania and Bottom (1790) by Henry Fuseli (Fig. 4); and Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers (c. 1812) by Henry Fuseli (Fig. 5). These depictions of women can be divided into

<sup>2</sup> Farmer, John David. "Henry Fuseli, Milton and English Romanticism." *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* (1973-1982), vol. 68, no. 4, 1974, pp. 15-19. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4108656. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

three tropes: women as innocent victims (Ophelia and Desdemona); women as romantic lovers (Juliet and Titania); and women as she-devils (Lady Macbeth).

### Women as Victims

The image of the dying woman was one of the most common ways of depicting the innocent, gentle and pure victim<sup>3</sup> in Victorian painting, as evidenced in Millais' depiction of Ophelia, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1852.

Millais' painting recreates the scene in *Hamlet* when Ophelia drowns herself. Millais is faithful to Shakespeare's description of her death:

*When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide  
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element.*

### **('Hamlet', Act IV, Scene VII, lines 169-75)**

Millais responds to the visceral imagery in this speech

<sup>3</sup> Gorham, Deborah. "The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal". Routledge, October 2012

with natural detail and colourings. The aureole of violets symbolises not only faithfulness, but also chastity and death; the silvery brown of Ophelia's dress and its stylised flowering pattern reinforce the popular Pre-Raphaelite notion of the fragile and decorative woman-as-flower.<sup>4</sup>

Millais depicts Ophelia as a vulnerable, young woman lacking agency, which is consistent with Shakespeare's text. All of the male figures in her life—her father, her brother and her partner Hamlet—attempt to control her. For instance, after learning that his mother has married his uncle, Hamlet projects his anger onto Ophelia, commanding her 'to a nunnery'. Hamlet exposes his misogynistic attitudes, implying that a nunnery would prohibit her from being unfaithful. However, this line has another meaning—one which would have been familiar to an Elizabethan audience—to send her to a brothel.<sup>5</sup>

Millais translates this ambiguity into his painting. Coined by Sigmund Freud,<sup>6</sup> the 'Madonna/Whore Complex' suggests that women can either be 'good', chaste, and pure 'Madonnas' or 'bad', promiscuous, and seductive 'whores'. Ophelia, here, is both a 'whore' and a 'Madonna'. Her facial expression, with her half-shut eyes and thrown back head, resembles, according to Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, a woman in a 'near orgasmic state.'<sup>7</sup> This sexualisation is further evidenced through Ophelia's tight-fitting bodice and loose, red hair. However, as in the text, she is presented as being passive; her hands are placed in the pose of submission and the viewer sees her accepting her fate.

Desdemona from Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, is not a drowned woman. Nonetheless, she is, a dying woman, subject to abuse, control and manipulation. Rodolfo Amoedo's painting depicts the aftermath of Desdemona's death at the hands of her husband,

*Othello*, in Act V Scene II. In this painting, Desdemona simultaneously inhabits both the 'whore' and the 'Madonna' roles. Amoedo objectifies her beauty with loose, red hair (like Millais' Ophelia) and an exposed breast (both symbolising sexuality); yet contrasts this with white sheets and nightdress (symbolising chastity). Her chastity is questioned, conforming to a common nineteenth-century trope of the 'fallen woman'.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Ophelia, Desdemona could be seen as a woman with some agency over her actions.<sup>9</sup> In the play, Desdemona instigates her relationship with Othello (Act I Scene III) and attains her goal of marrying him. She speaks out against her father and exerts herself to get Cassio reinstated as Othello's lieutenant. These actions reveal her wit and skill in managing challenging situations. Desdemona has so far justified Amoedo's interpretation of her as a fiery vixen.

However, Desdemona's defiance of patriarchy begins and ends with her father; she turns into a docile, passive wife upon her marriage to Othello, remaining loyal to him despite his verbal and physical abuse. Her submissiveness comes to light in Act V Scene II when she takes on the blame for her own murder, saying: 'Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell'. Amoedo's Desdemona is inherently passive: we, as the onlookers, are allowed to gaze upon an intimate scene in a private space, and Desdemona is stripped of her autonomy.

### Women as Romantic Lovers

Both Juliet and Titania are examples of Shakespeare's women in love: one in the early stages of youthful romance, as seen in Frank Dicksee's 1892 *Romeo and Juliet*, and the other in a jealous but enduring marriage, in Henry Fuseli's 1790 *Titania and Bottom*.

In Dicksee's depiction, Juliet is the epitome of the young, chaste and passive lover. Dicksee depicts proto-Renaissance architectural features, such as

4 Benton, Michael, and Sally Butcher. "Painting Shakespeare." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1998, pp. 53–66. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3333305](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3333305). Accessed 4 Aug. 2021.

5 Levin, Richard C. "More nuns and nunneries and Hamlet's speech to Ophelia." *Notes and Queries*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1994, p. 41+. Gale Academic OneFile, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A15103309/AONE?u=anon~b94f23ef&sid=googleScholar&xid=a57b2944](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A15103309/AONE?u=anon~b94f23ef&sid=googleScholar&xid=a57b2944). Accessed 4 Aug. 2021.

6 Kerrigan, William. "A Theory of Female Coyness." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1996, pp. 209–222. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40755098](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40755098). Accessed 4 Aug. 2021.

7 Sebag-Montefiore, "Clarissa, Sensuality, lust and passion: how the Pre-Raphaelites changed the way the world sees women", (*Guardian*, 2018).

8 Nead, Lynn. "The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1984, pp. 26–37. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1360063](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360063). Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.

9 Dicks, Robert. "Desdemona: An Innocent Victim?" *American Imago*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1970, pp. 279–297. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/26302631](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26302631). Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.



*'Romeo and Juliet'* (1892) by Frank Dicksee



multiple columns with stylised Corinthian capitals which are associated with virginal goddesses and allude to Juliet's virginity. Juliet's dress is purposefully ambiguous—it resembles both a dress and a nightgown. While its whiteness is associated with innocence and purity, its tight bodice and exposed shoulders could be indications of sinful conduct. Juliet winds her arms around Romeo's neck as he grasps her waist. This sexually charged gesture would have been shocking to a contemporary audience.

It is fitting to note that Juliet often seems to know her mind. In Act I Scene III, Juliet contradicts the social convention that fathers should determine the destiny of their daughters when she reveals that she wants to pursue a romantic relationship only once she has a connection with someone.<sup>10</sup> In the text, Juliet proposes to Romeo, saying: 'If that thy bend of love be honourable, thy purpose marriage'. Her boldness continues through this pseudo soliloquy as she exchanges her 'self' to Romeo for his shedding of his 'name'. This act could have been interpreted as an emasculation of Romeo.

<sup>10</sup> Donkor, Michael. Character analysis: Romeo and Juliet. Published 19 May 2017. <<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/character-analysis-romeo-and-juliet>> Accessed 23 July 2021.

However, while Juliet initiates their romantic relations in the text, she does not seem to do so in the painting. Her face, though elated, is passive and receptive of Romeo's affections.

Fuseli's Titania and Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a more sexual depiction of a female lover. This painting portrays Act IV Scene I; Oberon, the king of the fairies, casts a spell on Queen Titania to penalise her for her pride. The powerful fairy queen is duped into falling in love with Bottom whose head has been transformed into that of a donkey. In the play, Titania's sudden acquisition of feelings for Bottom 'provides a perfect image of love's irrational frenzy'.<sup>11</sup> Queen Titania and Bottom are both objects of derision as the audience is persuaded to laugh with the King of the Fairies, Oberon, at the two fools. Titania assumes centre stage, with the lighting illuminating her pale, feminine body. Titania looks lovingly at Bottom and is depicted as the initiator of romance, which is highlighted through her close adjacency.

Fuseli highlights Titania's overt sexuality. Her robes hide her private parts and a string across her chest accentuates her breasts. This portrayal of Titania fits into the trope of women as goddesses, often depicted in a passive state of relaxation with pensive facial expressions. Fuseli's depiction of Titania as a nude (which audiences would be familiar with) rather than a representation of female nakedness removes a sense of

<sup>11</sup> Miller, Ronald F. "A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Fairies, Bottom, and the Mystery of Things." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1975, pp. 254-268. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2869606](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2869606). Accessed 5 Aug. 2021.



*Titania and Bottom* (1790) by Henry Fuseli





*'Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers'* (c. 1812) by Henry Fuseli

power and autonomy from her. Her body is arranged to display it to the viewer looking at the painting. This Titania is, therefore, part of the tradition of European nude paintings which have been made to appeal to the male viewer's sexuality whilst ignoring her own.<sup>12</sup>

### Women as She-Devils

The she-devil embodies danger and rejects traditional modes of femininity. In Henry Fuseli's painting, the murderous Lady Macbeth is depicted as threatening her frightened husband, replicating the action in Act II, Scene II:

*Infirm of purpose!*

*Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil.*

**(Macbeth, Act II, Scene II, lines 53–56)**

He uses the contrast between the blacks and the greys with the ghastly white to create a haunting ambience. Macbeth and his wife are not unlike devils here, residing in their psychological dungeon and facing the consequences of their crimes. Fuseli demonstrates the power balance between the two figures: Lady Macbeth surges forward, her long skirt flowing, her finger harshly pressed against her lips.

In contrast with her husband's stark rigidity, her body language is active and harsh. While ambition in a man is often portrayed as a "good" thing, in a woman it is seen as something distasteful. We can see this disdain reflected in her whiteness, possibly in reference to the blood spilled by her hands. In the dress and the forefinger, we see remnants of the future Lady Macbeth, who dies at the end for her sins.

### Conclusion

Despite these artists' attempts to recapture the ideals of Shakespeare's era, their paintings exemplify Victorian attitudes towards women. There is a fascination evident, especially in the paintings of dying or near-dying women, with the consciousness and the morality of Shakespeare's women. In the images of women as romantic lovers, we see representations of feminine passivity sexually objectified for the Victorian male audience. The polar opposite of the ideal Victorian woman—the she-devil as represented by Lady Macbeth—represents Victorian men's greatest fear: a confident, assertive woman who successfully fulfils her goals. Across all of these interpretations, the timelessness of Shakespeare's ideals is revealed to be pictorially grounded—even trapped—in the beliefs, prejudices, and patriarchal views of the nineteenth century.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, John, and Michael Dibb. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC Enterprises, 1972.





## ABOUT EMILIA

by *Morgan Lloyd Malcom*

In August 2017 I had my first cup of coffee with Michelle Terry who had recently been announced as the next artistic director of The Globe. When I arrived it was she that told me all about Emilia Bassano. Told me of a woman forgotten by history who was one of the best cases of being the ‘Dark Lady of The Sonnets’ and therefore potentially Shakespeare’s lover but also a woman who was a talented writer herself, a mother and feminist of the time. Someone who somehow had the wherewithal to publish her poems and therefore is regarded as one of the first English woman to do so. Someone who perhaps knew that if she didn’t publish she stood no chance of ever being remembered. When Michelle told me about her I remember a shared astonishment at the fact that she was so unknown. But at the same time a recognition of why. A woman whose voice has been ignored for so long? A woman whose talent has been ignored? A woman who probably voiced concerns at her lack of opportunity and was dismissed and therefore had to take matters into her own hands? A woman only remembered as the potential lover and maybe even ‘baby mother’ of the most famous playwright in history? A woman who juggled writing, love, children and life? A woman. A woman and her story untold. It all felt not only recognisable but relevant.

When I began researching with my wonderful director Nicole Charles we realised how little there was written about her and that what had been written was not necessarily reliable. As with most historical interpretations there isn’t much to go on and it entirely depended on who

Poster for the play ‘Emilia’, inspired by the life of the 17th century poet and feminist Emilia Bassano



was analysing what there was. Many historians who had written about her had formed an opinion on her based on writings of Simon Forman who she visited as her astrologer and a kind of counsellor. He recorded their sessions. On the one hand it’s a valuable document and if it didn’t exist perhaps we would not know anything at all about Emilia. On the other hand we found it very hard to believe every word he wrote. He openly admits that she wouldn’t have sex with him (which seemed to be something he tried to do with many of his female clients) and the bitterness shines through many of his descriptions of her.

“She was maintained in great pomp. She is high-minded – she hath £40 a year and was wealthy to him that married her, in money and jewels. She can hardly keep secret. She was very brave in youth. She hath many false conceptions.





*Portrait of Emilia' Lanier* by Nicholas Hilliard

She hath a son, his name is Henry'. Later on he writes of her 'shows the woman hath a mind to the quent, but seems she is or will be a harlot. And because... she useth sodomy.' And 'She was a whore and dealt evil with him after'. And 'to know why Mrs Lanier sent for me; what will follow, and whether she intendeth any more villainy'.

We found it hard to take much of what he said about her seriously and in fact we were pretty angry that his words have come to be so important in the retelling of her story for so many. For so many people of that era it would have been impossible to make a mark and be remembered. They didn't record things like we do now. There was no such thing as diarist. People didn't journal. Notes and pamphlets and letters definitely circulated but they would be read and discarded – used to line drawer or wipe a bum. To survive and be remembered as 'someone' your relevance and achievements needed to be published. Our version of Emilia knew this. Our version recognized that if she was going to be remembered she needed to publish her poems. Which she did. Not may original copies exist and the more recent publication of them by AL Rowse unfortunately includes a lot of what Simon Forman said about her in the introduction. I wanted

to re-publish some of her poems with the play to hopefully give them exposure through a different lens.

Our Emilia was fiercely intelligent, a writer, a survivor, a fighter, a mother and an educator. We know from court records that she set up a school for girls, that she fought for inheritance owed, that she lived to the ripe old age of seventy-six, that she birthed two children, lost one as a baby and many others as miscarriages. That she was the daughter of migrants from Italy and would have suffered prejudice and injustice. That she wrote many poems that she published and no doubt wrote more. That she knew that to be published as a woman she needed to get past the censor and write religious poetry and within it she hid messages for her fellow woman. To challenge the normal narratives. To challenge their oppressors. To not be deterred. Our Emilia spoke through the ages to us. She's our hero.

“

For every Emilia there are hundreds of other talents and voices lost history. We must seek them out and amplify them. Let's stop re-reading the same old narratives...there are so many more out there we haven't heard yet.





# BACK IN TIME

*by Max Rosenfeld*

My eyes open to a sea of blur and haze, light bouncing, dancing, and reflecting all around me as I try to blink into focus. Having thrown a hand at my alarm to silence it, I realise it isn't here, but in my head: my ears ringing in an atonal melody of incessant cacophonous torture. Making that movement still has me wincing in pain - I feel like an old decrepit car, my muscles sore, my joints stiff and my breathing shallow. Three more blinks disperse the moisture in my eyes and bright light explodes into my head, a feeling so similar to exiting a cinema, a feeling of disappointment at the conclusion of a film.

Slowly and painfully sitting up, I look around, anticipating a nightmare but instead I find a peaceful countryside landscape stretching all around the incline I'm sat on. A village of worn brick and loosely tiled roofs sits at the end of a fairytale winding road - I can just make out a horse-drawn carriage idling towards the cluster of houses. Thinking nothing of this, I look up to find a single white stain on a pristine canvas of blue. Thinking too much of this, I find myself questioning whether this is an unexplained reality or merely a dream and what am I doing here and where am I and who else is here and where is everyone? The clear, shrill sound of a whistle cuts my panic short. Questions are prisoners in my mind, struggling and fighting to burst out of their captivity, but the sound reassures me that I'm not dreaming - the piercing quality I can almost see in the note is too real to be fake, too vividly engrained in my memory to leave ambiguity.

I force myself to stand and stumble up the hill, shivering, sweating, my head throbbing. Before me and all around me lies a sea of cheers that swell up and strike me back into consciousness. As the hill sinks to reveal the crowd, I am lost. Lost in a crowd of bowler hats, flat caps, and flat-brimmed hats, of wide-collared shirts and tight-waisted dresses, of people from a different time.

I approach a young man, looking for an explanation. He is clean-shaven, with amber hair fluttering in the breeze, wearing an outdated suit, and holding a cartoon-like top hat. Despite seeming approachable, all he can offer is an echo to the phrase I heard a few moments earlier - a gruff voice declaring that "they're coming". As cheers intensify once more, a sound like the pelting of hail establishes itself as a competitor to the now deafening cheers - Horses gallop into view, vast creatures with lusciously groomed hair, two leaders side by side, separated only by this final stretch. As seven horses come and go, life switches to an agonisingly slow speed as a woman climbs under the barrier and it all hits me. Clutching her flag, she throws herself under the most majestic and luxurious of horses, and life seems to stop.

This is 1913 and Emily Davison has just sacrificed herself for the suffrage movement. I turn away, powerless, and walk entranced back to the hill - my throat hurts and my face heats up as tears form in my eyes. Shame suffocates me as I curl up on the damp grass. A woman has just died because of what people as privileged as me have said to her, done to her, and denied her. Even with the hindsight I brought with me, I gag at the tragedy of what I have just witnessed.

The shock stays with me as the sky morphs and moulds before my eyes. I sit paralyzed as reds and oranges spill into the deep blue, and the sun sinks below the horizon. In a serene moment of twilight stillness, I turn around to look at the racetrack. The moonlight bounces, dances and reflects off her purple and yellow flag left stranded and forgotten on the track. In a moment of clarity, I see the symbolism and know never to forget what she did that day.





*'Look and Learn' no. 127 (20 June 1964) By Neville Dear, English (b.1923)*





# HOW ARE SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC REGARDING WOMEN EXPLORED IN OTTO DIX'S 'PORTRAIT OF THE JOURNALIST SYLVIA VON HARDEN'?

*by James Moss*

## Rationale:

Having been introduced to Otto Dix and other Interwar artists in German lessons, I was struck by the sombre yet intense imagery seen in his paintings, especially his works concerning the effects of war on one's physical and psychological health. This coupled with my interest in Women's Rights and Feminism led me to choose 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden' as the main focus of this investigation, as it skilfully explores themes regarding sexuality, equality and physicality.

Otto Dix, 1891-1969, was a German painter and printmaker who fought in the First World War, scarred by what he saw. He was one of the forerunners of the New Objectivity art movement, which had the intention of rejecting Expressionism and favouring a new Realism, depicting the unprecedented upheaval and harsh reality of life in contemporary Germany. Dix's 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden', 1926, highlights this social uncertainty, providing a

vivid portrayal of the 'New Woman', which became prominent after the First World War when women no longer wanted to live under patriarchal control.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will explore the drastic change in women's appearance and behaviour by considering the social context the 'New Woman' archetype. Other important areas which will be analysed are whether the life of the 'New Woman' was as liberating as what was proposed; and if they were able to prosper in the very misogynistic society.

## Context:

The term 'New Woman' was coined in 1877 by Charles Reade<sup>2</sup> and was a topic of discussion in many countries at the time. There had been literature discussing the topic dating back to the late 1800s. An influential example of this is the 1879 play 'Nora oder Ein Puppenheim' (Nora or a Doll's House) by Henrik Ibsen<sup>3</sup>, which outlines a woman breaking free from her traditional family and a life lacking freedom and happiness in order to live her life on her own terms.<sup>4</sup>

There is also more contemporary context that aided the creation of the physical embodiment of the 'New Woman' led to the creation of the Weimar Republic in August 1919. Germany was made a republic, with a Government and President. Censorship<sup>5</sup> was also abolished allowing more people to voice their opinions of life in Germany and what needed to be

1 Atina Grossmann argues that "This New Woman was not merely a media myth or a demographer's paranoid fantasy, but a social reality that can be researched and documented." [Grossmann, A., 'Girlkultur or Thoroughly Rationalised Female: A New Woman in Weimar Germany?' in Friedlander, B., Cook, B. W., Kessler-Harris, A. and Smith-Rosenberg, C. (1986), Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change, Indiana University Press, p. 64]

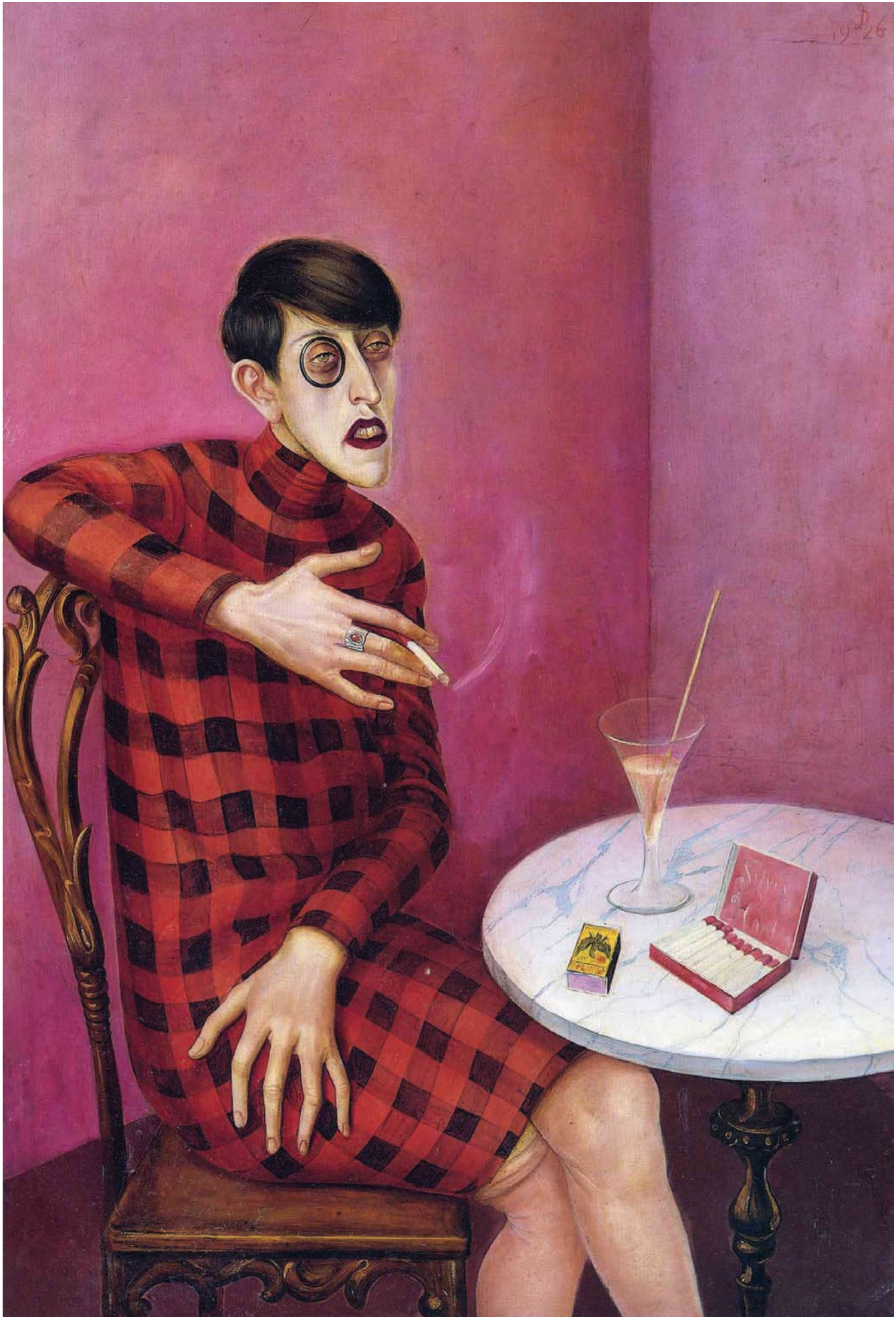
2 It was used in his 1877 novel 'A Woman Hater', which focused on exploring trade unions and women doctors as well as voicing the need for equal treatment of women. He stated in Chapter XVII that "The worst of it was, he felt himself in the power of this new woman, and, indeed, he saw no limit to the mischief she might possibly do to him."

3 Ibsen, H. (1879), Nora oder ein Puppenheim, Urauführung Kopenhagen, Erstdruck: Kopenhagen (Gyldendal). Hier in der Übers. v. M. v. Borch.

4 A quote from the end of the play that discusses the contemporary society's encouraged lifestyle of women is "I have to find out who is right, society or me."

5 Censorship, before the Imperial Press Law of 1874, allowed the government to censor materials such as newspapers and books before publishing. A government-issued licence was also required to publish before 1874. However the government was still notified before anything was published, so that they could monitor it and prosecute if needed.





*'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden'* by Otto Dix, 1926



changed. Rudiger Graf comments on this stating “In Weimar Germany, the future appeared to be malleable and various visions of radically alternative futures or even utopias were vigorously debated.”<sup>6</sup> All Germans were also given equal civil liberties, leading women gaining the right to vote in Germany in November 1918.

Under the Weimar Constitution, the perceived freedom of women increased dramatically in contrast to the late 18th Century and earlier. Women in past generations were with the four Ks - Kinder (Children), Küche (Kitchen), Kirche (Church) and Kammer (Bedroom) - being used as an overarching checklist for a ‘good woman’<sup>7</sup>. A pertinent example of this is Leibl’s 1878 painting (fig. 1)<sup>8</sup>, This is what the ‘New Women’ wished to counteract. Women were now able to work, live independently. Women began to cut their hair into the famous ‘Bubikopf’ style, wear shorter and more form-fitting clothing. socially drink and smoke. Sylvia von Harden (figs. 3 and 4), 1894-1963, was a German poet and journalist. Despite her lengthy career as a writer, she is most well-known for being the sitter in the eponymous painting ‘Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden’.



*Portrait of Rosine Fischler*, 1878, Wilhelm Leibl

6 Graf, R. (2009), *Anticipating the Future in the Present: “New Women” and Other Beings of the Future in Weimar Germany*, *Central European History*, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 649

7 “Vier K gehören zu einem frommen Weib, nemlich, dass sie Achtung gebe auß die Kirche, Kammer, Kuche, Kinder.” [Wander, K. F. W. (1870), *German proverbs Glossary: A Treasury for the German People* (2nd Edition)] This phrase dates back to the late 1800s and was most likely originally used by Emperor Willhelm II.

8 “She must sacrifice herself in every way, live a life of service, and always stay at home” [Hodsdon, R. E. (1915), *The Position of Women in Germany, Especially Since 1800: Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in History in the Graduate School of the University of Illinois*, p. 19]



*‘Contemporary photographs’ of Sylvia von Harden*, c.1920s



*Examples of 1920s fashion*



**Chapter 1: How does the portrait reflect changing expectations of women's appearance?**

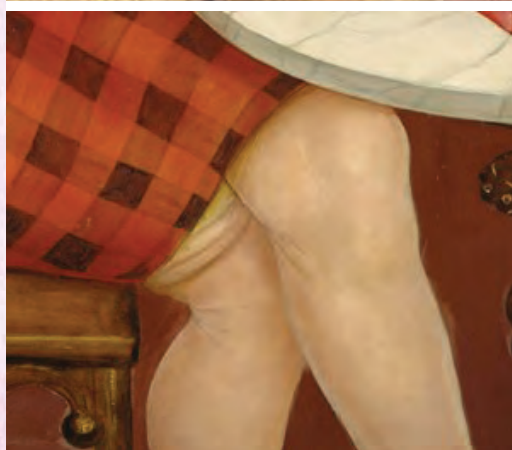
This chapter will explore how the 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden' explores and highlights the changing fashion of the 'New Woman' in Germany. Von Harden is seen as lacking the previously common and desired femininity of women. She is very androgenised, linking to Dix's wish for her "to show Weimar society's understanding of von Harden as an 'intersexual' type" as proposed by Althea Ruoppo.<sup>9</sup>

Her androgyny is seen through multiple features of her angular face, body and clothing dishevelled appearance, seen through her bulbous eyes and large eye bags (fig. 8), rolled down stocking (fig. 9), and yellow teeth (fig. 10).

This the 'New Woman' men of the time, who were allowed to look more unkempt and understated.<sup>10</sup> This motif was also seen in many contemporary works in the New Objectivity movement, for example in Jeanne Mammen's work (fig. 11),

Dix's pink walls are extremely bright, previous paintings of women, which usually included backgrounds of muted colour palettes and nature (figs. 12 and 13), alluding to the fertility and passivity that was made a standard for women. pushing her to the front picture plane forcing all the attention onto her, make this work seem very invasive, alluding to the increased authority of the 'New Woman'.

The use of pink and red throughout the painting is a common occurrence in Dix's works of women. Dix's 1925 portrait (fig. 14) and



*Details from 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden'*

9 Ruoppo, A. (2010), *Paradigmatic Portraits from Weimar Germany: Martha Dix, Sylvia von Harden, and Anita Berber According to Otto Dix*, Art & Art History Student Papers, Providence College

10 "Men's costume remained less conspicuous and hardly changed after the late eighteenth century." [Ganeva, M. (2008), *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933*, Camden House, p. 8]



*'Female Nude', c.1880s, unknown artist*



*'Die Nachricht', 1908, Caspar Ritter*





'Boring Dolls', 1929, Jeanne Mammen



'The Window Garden', 1863, August Friedrich Siebert



'Young Woman seated by a Stream' (Contemplation), before 1886, Wilhelm Amberg

1923 portrait (fig. 15).<sup>11</sup> Red is also a colour associated with passion, intensity and danger, implying these 'New Women' had more vibrant and intense personalities from their increased liberties.

**Chapter 2: How does the portrait reflect the changing behaviour of and opportunities for women?**

This chapter will explore how the 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden' reflects the changing conduct and etiquette of the 'New Woman' in Germany. Her posture is also not traditionally 'ladylike' as she has her right arm up, resting casually on the chair. The fact that she is smoking in a public setting suggests that the 'New Woman' did not care about previous taboos.<sup>12</sup> She is also seen with alcohol,

11 Berber was a prostitute; von Harden was an Avantgarde writer and journalist while Mrs. Dix was a divorcee. Von Harden's job was not to entertain or appease men, like a prostitute or dancer did; Journalists were working to comment on and analyse society of the time. By Dix painting a female journalist, the intended power and scandal of this work is increased. It provides an insight into the increased authority and intelligence of the 'New Woman'.

12 "tobacco use was a visible symbol of patriarchy as men owned the means of production, distribution and consumption, both literally and metaphorically" [Elliot, R. E. (2001), 'Destructive but sweet': cigarette smoking among women 1890-1990, Vol. 1, p. 87]



'Suicide', 1916, George Grosz



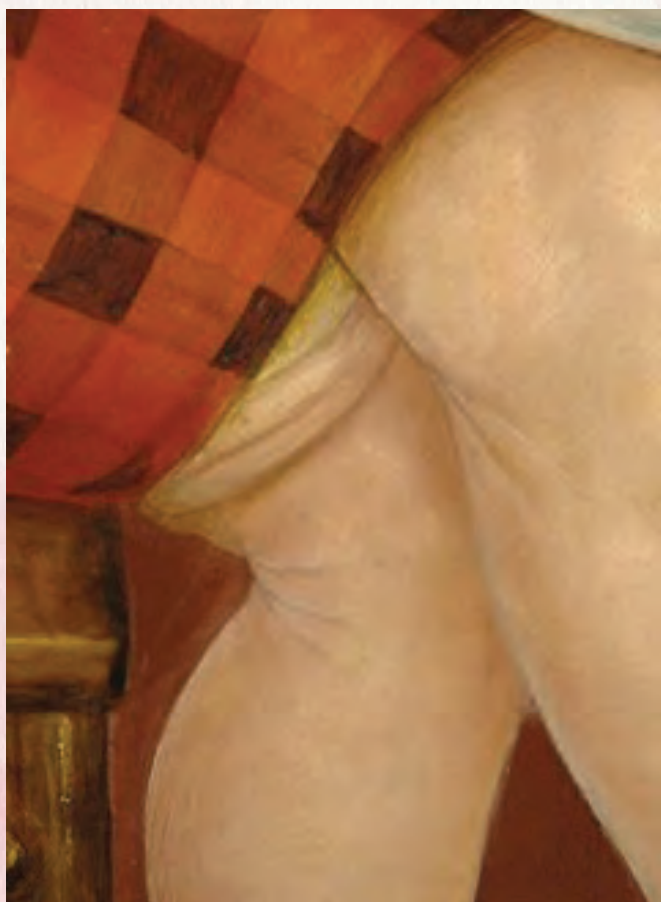
Detail from 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden'



Details from 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden'







*Details from 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden'*



*'Female Corpses', 1922, Otto Dix*



*'Lust Murder I', 1922, Otto Dix*

adding to this lack of regard for previous social roles of women.<sup>13</sup>

The monocle (fig. 18), an object previously only used by men, is also seen, implying that von Harden is fully educated and can read. Her hands and crooked fingers (fig. 19) are seen as elongated and masculine, perhaps implying how women “held Germany’s future in their hands”.<sup>14</sup> Dix’s exaggeration of her hands in the painting alludes to her work, something revolutionary in itself.

She does not have company and drinks alone, a liberty available due to her independent income. for many

<sup>13</sup> Women who drank socially would cause injury “both to [her] health and pocket, especially in families” [unknown author/s (1884), Drink in Germany in The Coffee Public-House News and Temperance Hotel Journal, Oxford University, p. 151]

<sup>14</sup> McElligott, A. (2009), Weimar Germany, Oxford University Press, p. 151





*'Lotte'*, 1927, Christian Schad



*'Bar'*, 1930, Jeanne Mammen

the life of the 'New Woman' in Weimar Germany was envisaged as one full of liberty and promised prosperity. However, façade of the proposed 'New Woman' was soon removed by Hitler when he was voted to power in March 1933, leaving a struggling working class of women.<sup>15</sup> Von Harden's disordered appearance could be an indication of the lack of stability of the 'New Woman' in Weimar Germany.

Rolled-down stocking could be a reference to 'Lust Murders' and sexual violence in Germany at the time.<sup>16</sup> This is seen in Dix's 1922 painting (fig. 22) and 1922 drawing (fig. 23) in which murdered women and prostitutes are seen, with their bodies mutilated. The increased sexual freedom of women, which in theory reduced the extent of

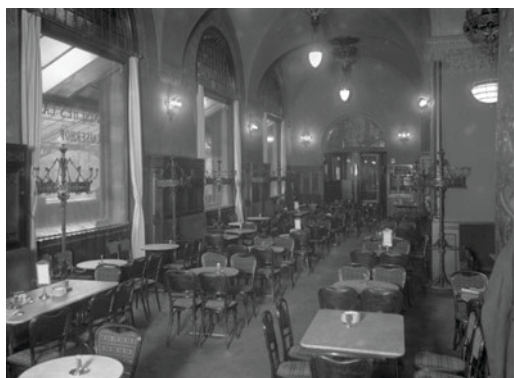
<sup>15</sup> Their new role in society is outlined through Hermann Goering's 1934 document named 'The Nine Commandments of the Worker's Struggle', where he stated that women should "take a pot, a dustpan and a broom and marry a man."

<sup>16</sup> According to Maria Tatar "The rank-and-file soldiers positioned themselves as victims or martyrs who sacrificed for the fatherland and then were betrayed by the women who stayed home and supposedly took over the labor force, Women became the enemy. You repair the trauma by killing the feminine." [Tatar, M. (1995), *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany*, Princeton University Press, pp. 41-64]



*'Bar'*, 1930, Jeanne Mammen





*Images of the Romanisches Café,  
c.1920s*



*Details from 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden'*

sentiment against prostitution, also placed them in greater danger. Von Harden's depiction as an independent woman drinking in a bar was not unique, with the woman in Schad's painting being fully isolated (fig. 24) while the woman in Mammen's drawing completely ignores the men around her (fig. 25).

Christian Schad, another leading New Objectivity artist similar opinions of society as Dix. This is vividly explored through Schad's 1926 painting (fig. 26). 'sfregio' scar,<sup>17</sup> he is the violence women could be subjected to in the name of 'love'. Furthermore there is a distinct Narcissus Triandrus (Orchid Daffodil) painted, implying they are both proud of their sexual abilities.<sup>18</sup> The increased sexual liberties of women at the time.<sup>19</sup>

Through the 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden', the 'New Woman' is supposedly more free to express her true self and to do as she pleases. However it is clear that the quality of life of women in Weimar Germany did not improve despite the optimistic outlook by feminists after the First World War.<sup>20</sup> This is what New Objectivity artists like Dix and Schad wanted to portray.

17 A 'sfregio' scar is a large scar down the side of a face, usually inflicted by men who wished to portray their possession of their lover and to make them unattractive to others, practically leaving those women no choice but to stay with them.

18 Danto, A. C. (2007), *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, Columbia University Press, pp. 247-248

19 This is further alluded to through the fact that in a caption for this work written in 1977, Schad stated "my pictures are never illustrative, if anything, they are symbolic." [Schad, C. quoted by Jill Lloyd and Michael Peppiatt in *Christian Schad and the Neue Sachlichkeit*, W.W Norton & Company, p. 229]

20 Rudiger Graf states that these women saw "the becoming of a new time" and said that women "had the task of reforming the sense of life and improving the faith of humanity." [Graf, R. (2009), *Anticipating the Future in the Present: "New Women" and Other Beings of the Future in Weimar Germany*, *Central European History*, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 662]



*'Young woman at the Romanisches' Café, c.1924*





*'In Berliner Café (Im Romanischen Café)'*,  
1930, Jeanne Mammen



*'Sonja'*, 1928, Christian Schad

### Chapter 3: How is the significance of Sylvia von Harden's location explored in the Portrait?

This chapter will discuss how the setting of 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden' explores the socio-economic position of Weimar Germany and how the effects regarding women are referenced. The painting depicts von Harden in the Romanisches Café in Berlin, which was a meeting place for intellectuals, artists and journalists a breeding ground for analytical discourse on political, social and economic matters.<sup>21</sup> Von Harden (figs. 3 and 4) was a regular at the café,<sup>22</sup> as was Dix, Grosz and other leading New Objectivity artists. Therefore she had the ability to access a place only for the highly educated, allowing her to meet and learn from other female journalists and writers. This was only popularised during the Weimar period. There are a number of works by New Objectivity artists based in the Romanisches Café, notably Mammen's 1930 drawing (fig. 33) and Schad's 1928 painting (fig. 34).

The fact that Sylvia von Harden is present in such a prestigious and previously male-dominated area alludes to the progressive changes regarding women implemented during the Weimar period.

#### Conclusion:

Otto Dix's 'Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden' explores the new societal life for women in a number of ways, He also expresses the breaks from tradition seen through von Harden's appearance and proposed behaviours. The newly asserted dominance seen through the 'New Woman' and the new ability for women to question power, were too revolutionary and drastic for society to accept. Dix's fundamental wish to provide a realistic representation of life at that time is heavily present here and problematic representation of contemporary Germany as a country of hope by exploring the negatives and hardships of life there.

<sup>21</sup> Despite gradually losing its significance and later being fully destroyed during the Second World War, it is seen as one of the most influential cafés for the Arts in Weimar Germany as argued by Shachar Pinsker. [Pinsker, S. (2010), *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe*, Stanford University Press, pp. 105-144]

<sup>22</sup> Catling, J. (2000), *A History of Women's Writing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland*, Cambridge University Press, p. 134



### Cover Illustration

Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden, 1926, Otto Dix, oil and tempera on panel, 121x89cm.

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### Videos:

Smarthistory (2009), Dix, Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden,  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHkZWu9tgpw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHkZWu9tgpw)

### Websites:

[www.moma.org/artists/1559](http://www.moma.org/artists/1559)  
[www.georgetownhistoryjournal.org/spring-2016-edition/casting-the-new-woman-in-the-weimar-republic-1919-33/](http://www.georgetownhistoryjournal.org/spring-2016-edition/casting-the-new-woman-in-the-weimar-republic-1919-33/)



# the nights (After Rupi Kaur)

i would not have known what to do  
if you were not to me what the moon is to the tides  
if you were not to me what the tides are to the sand

tell me about your favourite nights and i'll tell you  
mine are the lingering ones we string together  
treading our winding new timeline together  
voices leaving dusky dusty footprints in  
expansive dreaming restlessness

i wonder if you will ever understand that your hands  
are to me what gold is to a spinning wheel  
only in fairy tales could i trade my fortune for your time

someday i will be able to show you that your love  
for me is what a lighthouse is to a struggling boat  
that your steady presence has taught me  
whole globes sleep at the heels of women  
that we should never forget  
what we are fighting for and what we are igniting for

~ *Neha Agrawal*





# HOW DOES TEXT CREATE MEANING IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF SHIRIN NESHAT AND LALLA ESSAYDI?

by *Jemima Chen*

## Rationale

When I visited the British Museum's exhibition on "How the Islamic World Influenced Western Art", I was drawn to Islamic art's strong heritage which I had not been exposed to before.<sup>1</sup> The last pieces in the show were by Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat [Figures 1 and 2], I planned to investigate the tradition of calligraphy in Islamic art history and to explore the difficult relationship these women had with the western world contemporary life in Iran and the Arab world."<sup>2</sup> Storytelling is an interest Essaydi shares- she said. Neshat and Essaydi represent the modern Arabic-Islamic art world from the role of both native and bystander, which makes the message under their images more nuanced.

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition ran from October 2019-January 2020, and its full title was "Inspired by the East: How the Islamic World Influenced Western Art."





Both women choose to use text as the medium with which to adorn their subjects, and its importance is attested by Patricia Rivas, who wrote that “text has... become part of the dominant currency of contemporary art.”<sup>2</sup>

Neshat and Essaydi manipulate the impact of this “currency” in several ways. They toy with the strong traditions that calligraphy has in their respective Islamic countries in order to subvert them. As for the literal meaning of their text, This juxtaposes their work in terms of political commentary or personal ruminations. Both Neshat and Essaydi selectively alienate either their Islamic or Western audience with visual or linguistic obfuscation, in order to make their work universally appealing yet exclusively personal.

### Shirin Neshat

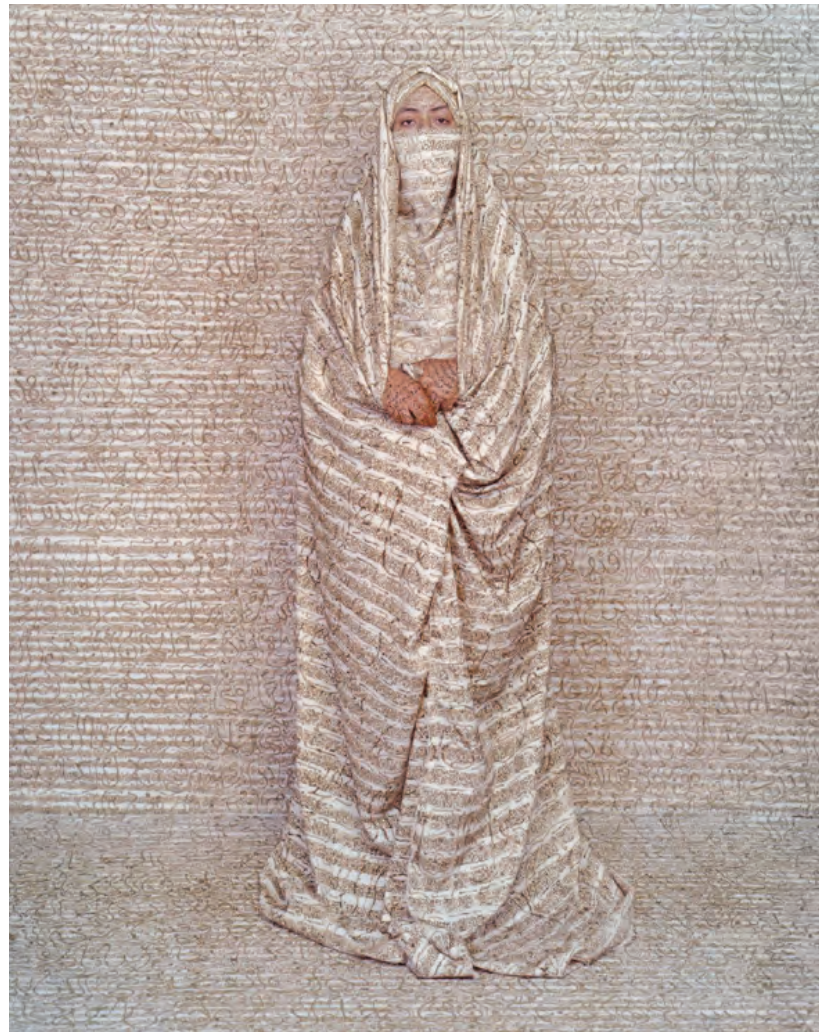
Shirin Neshat was born in Iran in 1957.<sup>3</sup> In 1975, aged 17, she left Iran to finish her education in California and graduated from Berkeley in 1983 [Figure 3]. Back in Iran, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 had completely transformed her homeland. There was a return to conservative social values, which included disbanding laws protecting womens’ rights in marriage and increasing anti-Western sentiment. Neshat, a Western-educated woman, now found herself an exile from her native country.

### Lalla Essaydi

Essaydi was born in Morocco in 1956 in a harem. She left in 1990 to finish her education in Paris, and in 1999 she attended Tufts University in Boston. Essaydi has expressed that it was while

<sup>2</sup> Martin Rivas, Patricia: Text in the Visual Arts: From Nothing to Everything (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Abel-Hirsch, Hannah: Shirin Neshat: Unraveling the American Dream from British Journal of Photography (2020).



*'Les Femmes du Maroc', Shirin Neshat, 2005*

she was at Tufts that she realised the West’s ignorance about Islamic countries.

Essaydi was thus inspired to reassess her culture and to produce work that would defy these expectations: “I had to go back...”

### Chapter 1: Context- The Rise of Feminist Art

When Shirin Neshat arrived in California in 1975, America was experiencing its first wave of feminist art.<sup>4</sup> Hélène Cixous published *The Laugh of the Medusa* in 1975 [Figure 9], which introduced the idea of “écriture féminine”. The concept of “female writing” was Cixous’ call for women “to seize the occasion to speak” and to control their narrative, The artists were thus exposed to this climate of re-evaluating the narrative and the power of using women as the canvas.

### Chapter 2: Subverting the Islamic Tradition of Writing

The Islamic world is rooted in the importance of writing, beginning from Islam’s genesis in the Quran. Utilising Arabic

<sup>4</sup> Which was spurred by the art historian Linda Nochlin’s essay on “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in 1971.





*'Way in Way Out, from Women of Allah'*  
series, Shirin Neshat, 1994



*'Shirin Neshat (left)'* at Berkeley, circa 1979



*'Shirin Neshat (left)'* at Berkeley, circa 1979



*'The Women of Algiers'*, Eugène Delacroix, 1834

script Essaydi elevates the importance of her work to something divine.<sup>5</sup> By using her calligraphy to copy modern poetry by Iranian poets, Neshat directly recalls calligraphy's original purpose in Iran, and compares her work to her country's first "precious artistic works".<sup>6</sup>

As calligraphy of the Quran was seen as a sacred task, it was originally reserved for men.<sup>7</sup> Both artists therefore modernising perceptions of the Islamic scribe. By appropriating traditions from their culture which command great respect, the artists command great respect from those who view their work.

### Tradition in Essaydi's Work

Essaydi uses henna to write Maghribi script directly onto her models' bodies, and challenges decorum by using a traditionally feminine medium to write in the manner of sacred script [Figure 12]. sense of female kin-ship is continued in Harem Women Writing [Figure 13]. Essaydi portrays an example of washī, another tradition associated with harem women who would write small verses on their clothes as a means of expression. This technique was "also an approach in seducing men in order to allure them with their intelligence", much like how henna was seen to allure men by drawing attention to the female flesh.<sup>8</sup> Essaydi is reminding the viewer of the sexual connotations of the harem, but also of the female solidarity and individuality that existed.

### Tradition in Shirin Neshat's Work

Neshat focuses on the ubiquitous tradition of poetry. According to her, "Poetry and calligraphy are innate in Iranian culture."<sup>9</sup> Neshat creates meaning in her work through deliberate interaction with the Iranian audience. Traditionally in Iran, poetry has always been "deeply subversive", and in some ways more inclined to the female narrative.<sup>10</sup> Essaydi focuses on female traditions through subversion, whereas Neshat employs poetry to connect with her Iranian audience on the topic of female agency. Neshat and Essaydi convey different tones in their art work due to the different literal meanings of their text.

Essaydi makes her work unreadable by layering her calligraphy

5 The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Unit 2: Arabic Script and the Art of Calligraphy (accessed 2020).

6 Mirazzi, Firouzeh: Persian Calligraphy (2009).

7 In contemporary Islamic society both men and women can be calligraphers.

8 Davidson, Kimberly: The Oriental Woman, An Analysis of Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat (2013).

9 Marse, Amor: The Word as a Weapon from Interartive (2014).

10 Ibid.





over itself in varying sizes. This method both exposes and protects her subject's thoughts. In *Odalisque with Slave* [Figure 5], Ingres uses textures to create a rich painting. The nude subject reclines on a silk blanket which is upturned to show its reverse gold side, ostentatiously exhibiting the "luxury" of the East. The sense of drama is supported by a red curtain in the corner, whose carnal colour suggests the sexual promiscuity of the harem.

Essaydi deliberately obstructs this sexual view of her subjects by using unintelligible script as the only source of ornament. She says that "My image is... decorated with their own voices". Essaydi's insistence on the agency of these women is expressed not only literally through the calligraphy's meaning but aesthetically as their written thoughts adorn themselves.<sup>40</sup> Using monochromatic tones instead of the rich colours of Ingres' work and using fabric in a modest rather than provocative way at once harks back to yet subverts typical Orientalist imagery. However, some art historians believe that Essaydi's text lacks meaning. Kimberly Davidson argues that the "Arabic calligraphy is not used as a means of expression, but as an aesthetic element drawn to the Western eye."<sup>11</sup> This may be because Davidson associates Essaydi's use of calligraphy with the Hurufiyya movement [Figures 15 and 16], which relies more on aesthetic than meaning.<sup>12</sup> The literal meaning of Shirin Neshat's calligraphy is

11 Davidson, Kimberly: *The Oriental Woman, An Analysis of Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat* (2013).

12 The Hurufiyyah movement was a 20th century movement where modern Islamic artists manipulated the intricacy of ancient calligraphy into a visual image.

*'Bullets Revisited #3'*, Lalla Essaydi, 2012

used to send a political message. She sometimes copies religious quotes from the Quran about Muslim women's duties to God and to men which Amore Marse argues are used in a critical manner "to protest against the loss of rights in Iranian society".<sup>13</sup>

Neshat also used the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad.<sup>14</sup> In *Untitled* [Figure 17] Neshat

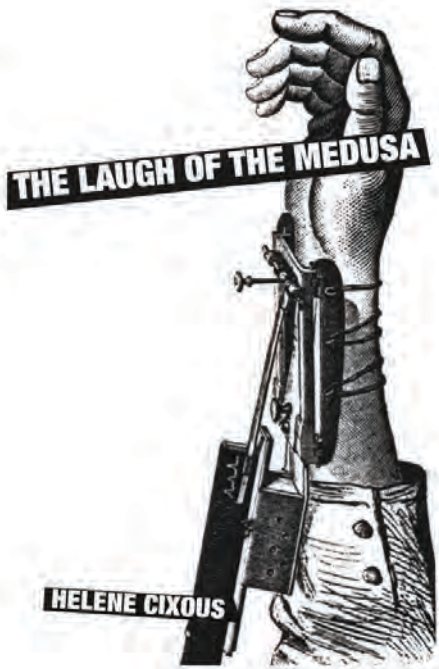
13 Marse, Amor: *The Word as a Weapon* from *Interartive* (2014).

14 Farrokhzad was a 20th century female Iranian poet whose work about changing the traditional values of Iranian women were an affront to the Iranian clergy, and as such was deemed immoral by the post-revolution Iranian government.



*'S.O.S. Starification Object Series. One of 36 playing cards from mastication box'*, Hannah Wilke, 1975





'Cover art for *The Laugh of Medusa*', by Hélène Cixous, published in 1975.

copies out Farrokhzad's poem *I Feel Sorry for the Garden* which compares women to a "dying" garden "slowly forgetting its green moments" under the government's persecution.<sup>15</sup> Fereshteh Daftari argues that *Untitled* shows Neshat's preoccupation with using text as social commentary.<sup>16</sup> In *Speechless* [Figure 18], Neshat copies the radical poet Tahereh Saffarzadeh's poem "Allegiance with Wakefulness", in which a woman calls out to be involved in the Iranian revolution alongside "her brothers".<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup>The theme of revolution is continued by a gun pointing directly at the viewer, which establishes the militant role women played in the Iranian revolution. The subject is on

15 Neshat, Shirin: Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*. 1996 from MoMA, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006).

16 Fereshteh Daftari: Shirin Neshat. *Untitled*. 1996 from MoMA, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006).

17 Tahereh Saffarzadeh was a radical Iranian female poet whose work supported Khomeini's revolution. Marse argues that by copying Khomeini's poetry Neshat is giving a voice to the militant Muslim women who followed Khomeini's idea of "sacrifice and martyrdom" in order to defend themselves from the "tyranny" of the Shah, showing Neshat's interest in the narrative of all Iranian women whatever their political alignment.

18 Fereshteh Daftari: Shirin Neshat. *Speechless*. 1996 from MoMA, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006).



'Maghribi Script of the Quran', North Africa or Spain, 13th-14th Century AD



'Persian Farsi script of the Quran', India, Early 16th Century



*Converging Territories #25*, Lalla Essaydi, 2004

the foremost picture plane, creating a power dynamic where the woman is more dominant.

#### Chapter 4: Deliberately or Indeliberately Alienating the Audience?





*'Harem Women Writing', Lalla Essaydi, 2009*



*'Les Femmes du Maroc #14', Lalla Essaydi, 2005*



*'Untitled', Madiha Umar, 1978*

Though Lalla Essaydi acquiesced that she wanted her calligraphy to be “unreadable”, she emphasised that this was “not because I do not want people to understand what I am writing.”<sup>19</sup> However, Essaydi still wished to alienate the Western eye in order to express her opinions about Orientalism. In *La Grande Odalisque* [Figure 19], Essaydi directly challenges Ingres’ painting of a harem woman [Figure 20]. Instead of reclining nude, Essaydi’s model wears clothes adorned with calligraphy in order to hide the body instead of exposing it. Whilst Essaydi knowingly mimics Ingres to entice the Western viewer, her calligraphy covers her subject to protect and empower them.<sup>20</sup>

Some art critics disagree that Essaydi does enough to subvert Orientalism. Benjamin Genocchio argues that the illegibility of the text renders Essaydi’s message of empowerment vain, as “it becomes just another decorative element enhancing the aesthetic appeal” of her work.<sup>21</sup> He adds that the womens’ voices are not heard because Essaydi’s script is unreadable, and that she “leaves her women stuck in the same Orientalist fantasy that she purports to critique.”<sup>22</sup>

Shirin Neshat has also received criticism for reflecting Orientalist imagery rather than subverting it. Davidson argues that the artist’s persistent use of the black veil “repeats harmful stereotypes rather than disarming them”, as those who wear a veil seem more “anonymous, passive and exotic”

19 Sand, Olivia: Profile: Lalla Essaydi from the Asian Art Magazine (2016).

20 Ibid

21 Genocchio, Benjamin: Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism, from the New York Times (2010).

22 Ibid.





*'Ezkor Rabbak Eza Nasayt', Jamil Hamoudi, 1985*



*Untitled, Shirin Neshat, 1996*



*'Speechless', Shirin Neshat, 1996*

to the Western viewer.<sup>23</sup> Neshat's inclusion of translations of the script allows Western audiences to understand the literal meaning of her photos, and her neat calligraphy done on top of the image makes the Farsi legible to Arabic speakers.

Rather than trying to isolate viewers in order to empower her subjects (like Essaydi), Neshat is engaging her audience so that they may try to understand Iran's tumultuous identity post-revolution. Marse argues that this accessibility makes her work more universal- that the "codes to interpret the message are clear... and they can be understood by people from different languages, cultures and religions."<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat use the female body as the canvas to record history. Their Islamic heritage allows them to both use and subvert traditions of calligraphy. While their interest in tackling Orientalism can often allow their work to become the genre that they are critiquing, the complex layers of textual meaning and visual imagery means that the interpretations behind these two artists' work are endless, because of their appeal to the personal and universal. It is just more important that viewers participate. As Essaydi said, "Good art has to have substance, has to have aesthetics- it has to have all these kinds of things to make people want to engage."<sup>25</sup>

23 Davidson, Kimberly: *The Oriental Woman, An Analysis of Lalla Essaydi and Shirin Neshat* (2013).

24 Marse, Amor: *The Word as a Weapon* from *Interartive* (2014).

25 Sand, Olivia: *Profile: Lalla Essaydi* from the *Asian Art Magazine* (2016).

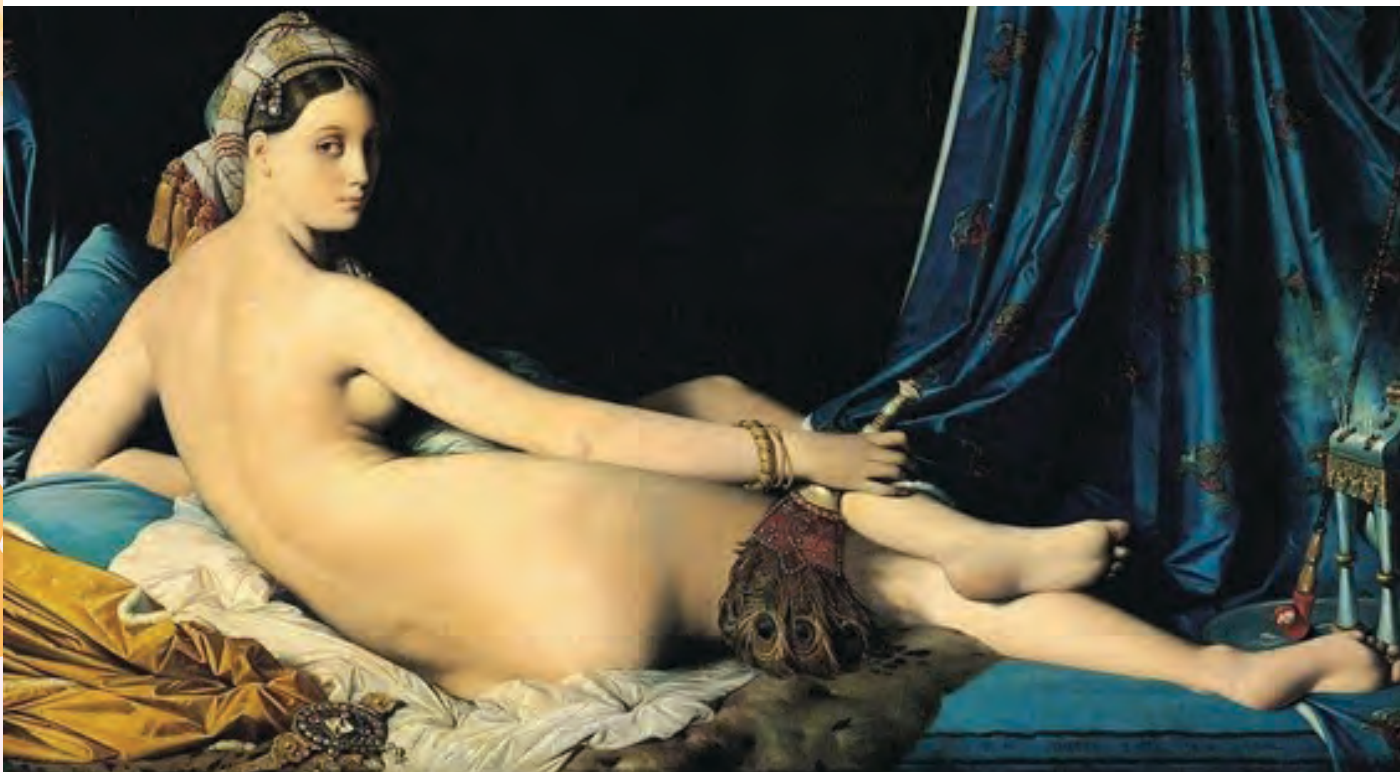


*'La Grande Odalisque', Lalla Essaydi, 2008*



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*'La Grande Odalisque'*, Jean August-Dominique Ingres, 1819





*'Rebellious Silence'*, Shirin Neshat, 1994



# GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN FRANCE

by Clara Hartley

In 2017, a French textbook was published with the innocuous title *Magellan et Galilée – Questionner le Monde*. Although written to teach history to six-year olds, it brought an ongoing social and political debate to the forefront of French society – that of gender-inclusivity within language. This debate was kickstarted in France in 1984, when the Minister of Women’s Rights, Yvette Roudy, established a commission to address the need for the feminisation

of the French language. This was followed in 1997 by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who initiated a report with the same aims. Their recommendations for creating a more gender-inclusive language, however, were firmly rejected by L’Académie Française, the authority charged with determining the legitimacy of the French language. In 2017, L’Académie responded to the textbook *Magellan et Galilée* with similar outrage – because it was written using gender-inclusive language. To explain why many feel French needs a gender-inclusive update, and how this would actually work, we need to look (briefly!) at French grammar.

If there’s one thing that people remember from French lessons, it’s usually the pain of memorising which nouns are masculine, and which feminine. They may also remember that adjectives change endings to agree with the gender of the noun, and that certain nouns have separate masculine and feminine forms which tend to look similar, but with slightly different endings. So a female cook is ‘une cuisinière’, whilst a male cook is ‘un cuisinier’. To pluralise these nouns, we add an ‘s’, so that a group of female cooks would be referred to as ‘les cuisinières’. But here’s the catch – if a solitary male chef joins the group, the group is





suddenly to be referred to as ‘les cuisiniers’, even if there are ninety-nine female chefs, and one male chef. The same applies to the French pronouns for they, ‘ils’ (masculine) and ‘elles’ (feminine). If one man joins a group of ten women, they are no longer ‘elles’, but ‘ils’, because ‘le masculin l’importe sur le féminin.’ The masculine takes precedence over the feminine. It is this grammatical rule which demonstrates the reason that so many teachers, authors, academics, activists, and politicians have sought to fix the gender-imbalance in the French language.

Imagine a class of six or seven-year olds learning grammar anywhere in La Francophonie (the French-speaking world). They come to the grammatical question of how a group of mixed genders should be described, and the teacher tells them that ‘the masculine takes precedence over the feminine’. This phrase, which the teacher is required to use (France has a highly-centralised education system), is imprinted into the children’s minds class after class, year after year. But to what extent does this grammatical rule affect the students’ lives beyond grammar? The question of whether language is prescriptive (governing the way we perceive the world) or descriptive (a result of the way we perceive

the world) is far too large and hotly-contested to tackle here, but some linguists suggest that language may partially shape our understanding of the world. Roman Jakobson, a celebrated linguist, writes that ‘languages differ essentially in what they must convey, and not in what they may convey.’ That is to say, it is not that language allows us to think in a particular way, but that it obliges us to think in a particular way. In French, for example, you are often obligated to think in terms of gender – in English, the statement ‘I saw my neighbour’ does not make reference to gender, but in French, the speaker must specify their neighbour’s gender (voisin or voisine). If it is true that language impacts our perception of the world, it can also serve as a vital tool in the fight for gender equality. As Eliane Viennot, author of *Non, le masculin ne l’importe pas sur le féminin* writes, ‘language isn’t just a way of communicating.’ It ‘expresses how we see the world and transmits our vision of society. We want to use language to make women more visible.’ Thus a grammatical rule such as ‘the masculine takes precedence over the feminine’ is not merely a grammatical rule taught in the classroom, but a lens that changes how children grow up to view their world.

*France*





How did Magellan et Galilée achieve its gender-inclusive text? Its changes to vocabulary are extremely simple. Nouns referring to a group of mixed genders contain both the masculine and feminine forms, so that a group of male and female farmers would be described as ‘les agriculteur-riche-s’, thereby combining ‘agriculteurs’ (masculine) with ‘agricultrices’. Écrivain and écrivaine, for example, would be written as Écrivain-e. In a group of mixed genders, the pronoun ‘elles’ are used when there appears to be more women than men, and vice versa for the pronoun ‘ils’. The publisher argued that these decisions, based on recommendations from the French High Council for Gender Equality, promoted gender equality and inclusivity. L’Académie Française, however, was not so thrilled. It was, in fact, furious. L’Académie condemned the use of this gender-inclusive language, calling it an ‘aberration’, which puts the French language in ‘mortal danger’. It feared that increased inclusivity would lead to ‘disunity’ for French as a language, and confusion for pupils and teachers. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that L’Académie is hardly a paragon of gender equality

itself, and perhaps embodies the very issues which proponents of gender-inclusive writing are working to solve. Of the thirty-four ‘Immortels’ (academy members), four are women. And since it was established in 1635, eight of its seven-hundred and thirty-two members have been women. Maybe – just maybe – it is not L’Académie’s place to question efforts to tackle gender equality.

Some argue that changes to grammar do little to further equality in a meaningful way; real solutions require creating new laws, putting women in

positions of power, and narrowing the gender pay-gap. Whilst I agree that these propositions are vital – grammatical changes will never resolve inequality alone – language is ubiquitous, and this social ubiquity gives it the power to subliminally influence our daily lives. As such language is constantly manipulated, by propaganda, by advertisements, and even by daily news. Small changes to language have a subtle, yet profound influence on our perception of society, and thus, in conjunction with other structural changes to society, and this what can lead to social change.

The gender imbalances within L’Académie itself are just one reason for which many feel that France would benefit from a more inclusive language. As I have discussed, some research suggests that language does in part impact the way we perceive the world – though the study of linguistics and gender is still very much in its infancy, and there is not yet enough evidence make conclusive statements. Gender-inclusive language however, is also in its infancy. Feminised versions of job titles (such as ‘cuisinier’ becoming ‘cuisinière’) were shocking mere decades

ago for many French citizens. The fact that both versions of the title are now entirely normalised demonstrates language’s ever-evolving nature, and proves the futility of preventing language adaptation. Despite current outrage from some more conservative linguists, or perhaps because of it, it seems the debate around gender-inclusive language in France is not going to be ignored this time. If France does want a more gender-equal society, a language revolution would be a good place to start.







# That's what she said

Feminist quotes round - Match the quote with the kick ass woman who said it



1. *"When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful."*
2. *"Power's not given to you. You have to take it."*
3. *"Knowing what must be done does away with fear."*
4. *"What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."*
5. *"Change your life today. Don't gamble on the future, act now, without delay."*
6. *"The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity."*

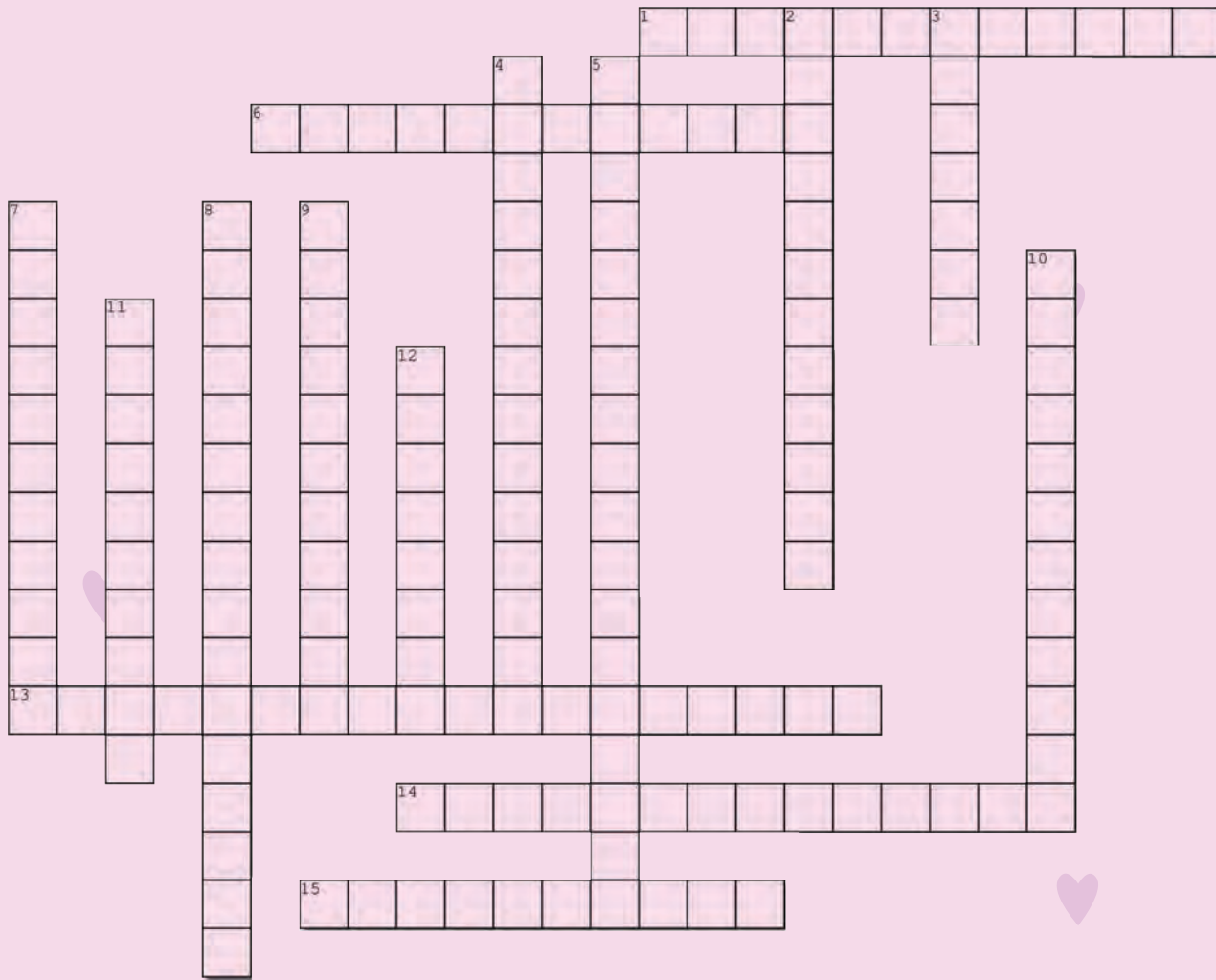
a. Simone de Beauvoir b. Jane Goodall c. Malala Yousafza d. Beyonce e. Amelia Earhart f. Rosa Parks

c. Malala Yousafza d. Beyonce f. Rosa Parks b. Jane Goodall a. Simone de Beauvoir e. Amelia Earhart



# FEMINIST QUIZ!

COMPLETE THE CROSSWORD PUZZLE BELOW



## ACROSS

1. Who was the first british woman in space?
6. Who was the first Indian female prime minister?
13. Who was the first woman to get a medical degree?
14. Who wrote 'The Handmaid's Tale'?
15. Who was the first woman to win Wimbledon?

## DOWN

2. Which suffragette was killed by the King's horse?
3. Who is considered to be the first known female mathematician and one of the "last great thinkers" of Alexandria?
4. Who was the first African-American Woman to win and be nominated for an Academy Award?
5. Who wrote 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects'?
7. Which female mathematicians is regarded as the the world's first computer programmer?
8. Who was the first female Prime Minister of the UK?
9. Which nurse made a significant difference during the Crimean War?
10. Who is known as the 'Mother of Pride'?
11. Who was the first woman to win a Nobel prize?
12. What is the name of Prophet Muhammad's first wife?

Answers for across: 1) helensharman 6) indiragandhi 13) elizabethblackwell 14) margaretatwood 15) maudwatson 2) emilydavisson 3) hypatia 9) maryseacole 10) brendahoward 11) mariecurie 12) khadijah  
 Answers for down: 4) harrimcdaniel 5) marywollstonecraft 7) adalovelace 8) margaretrhatcher



## WHICH FEMALE ICON ARE YOU?

- What's your favourite food?

- 1) *Caviar*
- 2) *Soup*
- 3) *Cheese Toastie*
- 4) *Risotto*
- 5) *Strawberries*

- Would you rather:

1. *Have new designer clothes every day privately tailored for you but have your bank account reduce by £25 every week for 50 years.*
2. *Become a neuroscientist in three years but never see anyone besides your professors during that time (including your pets!)*
3. *Swap lives with your favourite fictional character but never go back to your real life*
4. *Be the richest person in the world but have your life monitored 24/7 by cameras*
5. *Learn how to play every instrument in existence but never in tune*

- Favourite hobbies:

- 1) *Drawing & Fashion-blogging*
- 2) *Statistics! And Volunteering*
- 3) *Reading & Writing*
- 4) *Giving talks & Running a Book Club*
- 5) *Acting & Sculpting*

- Choose Your Favourite Subject Combination:

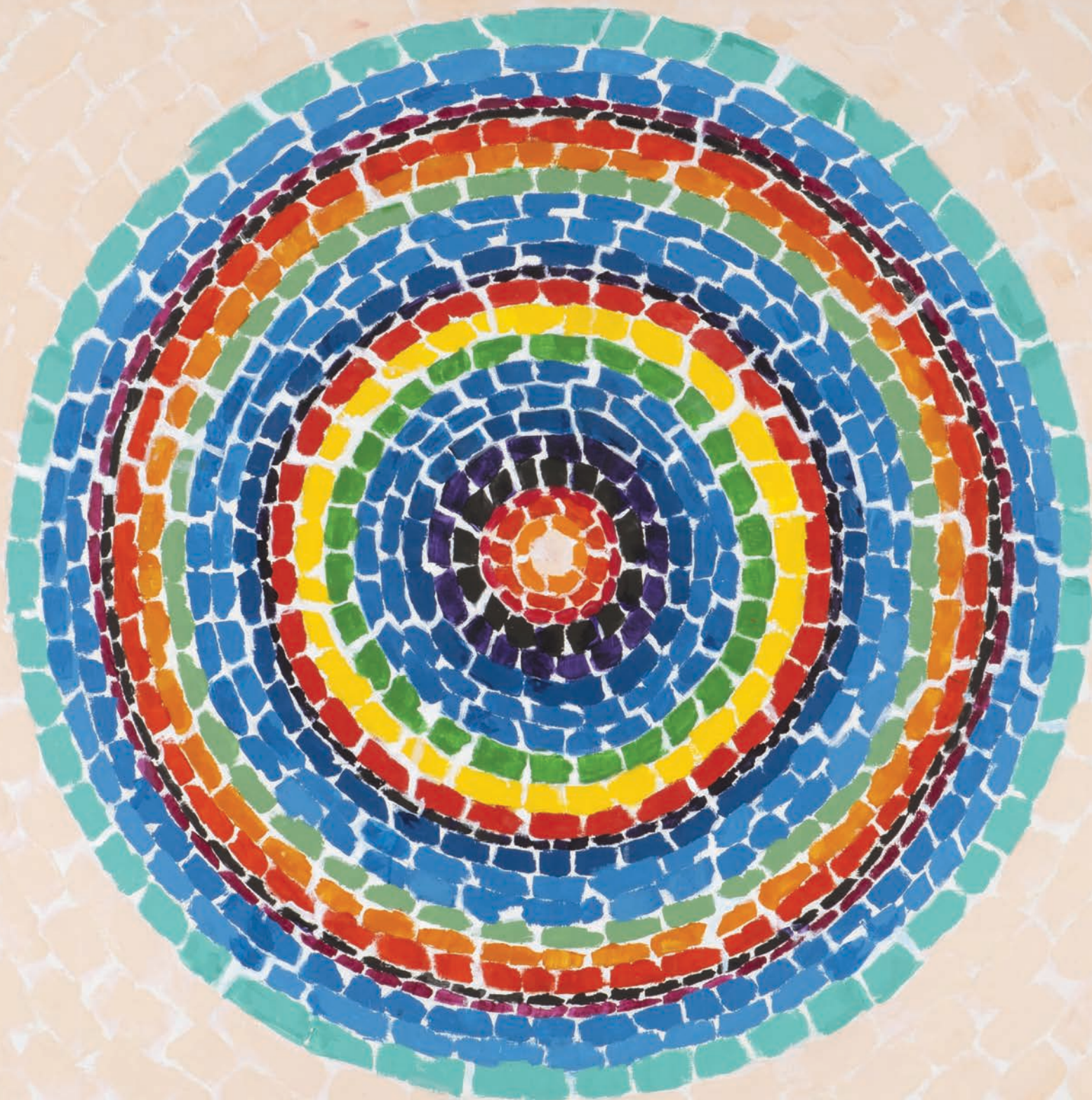
- 1) *Art, Art History, Maths, Economics*
- 2) *Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Maths*
- 3) *English Literature, French, Music, Drama*
- 4) *Economics, English Literature, Maths, Drama*
- 5) *French, Drama, Music, Art*

Count the frequency of each number in your answers – the most frequent number is your female icon!

1) Coco Chanel 2) Florence Nightingale 3) Jane Austen 4) Oprah Winfrey 5) Sarah Bernhardt



*'The Eclipse'* by Alma Thomas, 1969



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