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THE TRANSFIGURATIONS OF CAROLINE NORTON

By Kieran Dolin

THIS PAPER AIMS TO CONTRIBUTE to the resurgent study of relations between literature and the visual arts in nineteenth-century England by exploring a variety of representations of the highly visible poet and law reformer, Caroline Norton.¹ One aspect of these intersecting discourses is the image of the author and the processes and effects of its representation. Linda M. Shires in “The Author as Spectacle and Commodity” argues for the inseparable but potentially troubling relation between literary authority and authorial spectacle in Victorian England. Some authors embraced theatrical self-display, others presented a more reserved image to their public. Whereas, Shires suggests, “the need to shape the self through display” (202) was increasingly accepted as a strategy for literary success, the countervailing social pressures on women writers to shun the immodest exposure of publication have been demonstrated by Dorothy Mermin in *Godiva’s Ride*. Perhaps no writer illustrates the tension created by these opposed imperatives more graphically than Caroline Norton.

Norton is known today for the scandalous and unproven accusation — showcased in the title of Alan Chedzoy’s biography, *A Scandalous Woman* — that she committed adultery with Lord Melbourne. Feminist scholars and legal historians have recognized the importance of her campaigns to reform the laws governing married women in Victorian England, campaigns that arose out of her bitter personal experiences.² As she wrote in her 1855 pamphlet, *A Letter to the Queen*, “I have learned the English law piecemeal, by suffering under every one of its defects of protection” (62). Writing was a major resource in her reformism, and her marital history channeled and dominated her professional life as a writer. Before the breakdown of her marriage, her work as a poet and editor of annuals was a major source of family income and the basis of a growing literary reputation. She was profiled in the “Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters” in *Fraser’s Magazine*, a series that the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* calls one of the most important innovations of that journal (Houghton 305). As a society beauty surrounded by scandal and as a famous author, her portrait was painted by Daniel Maclise, William Etty, and many others. Occasions for literary and social spectacle abounded, though always defined by norms and representational codes. In this paper I wish to focus in detail on two allegorical portraits by Maclise that, in representing Norton sympathetically, construct a political and social identity for her and present a visual image of the relation between

literature and politics. A study of these artworks and related writings by Norton offers insights into the transformations of her persona from society lady to writer and from scandalous woman to representation of Justice.

Nina Auerbach's wide-ranging study of individuality in Victorian culture, *Private Theatricals*, draws from the history of theatre a sense that selfhood was anxiously experienced as performative and subject to transfigurations. This latter trope is particularly useful in understanding the successive spectacles in which Norton was voluntarily or involuntarily engaged. Not only does it emphasize the changing forms embodied by Norton, but it draws attention to the processes of linguistic and visual representation. The verb "transfigure" has in addition to its general meaning of "to transform," and the specific biblical reference to Christ's transfiguration, a "*transferred figurative*" sense of "to elevate, glorify, idealize, spiritualize." The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is my source here, supports the figurative meaning with three quotations from Victorian authors (11: 258). Caroline Norton invokes this meaning in a poem which is the second of my scenes of representation. In constructing a study of this woman writer around the idea of transfiguration, I do not wish to replicate the idealizing tendencies of Victorian discourses of gender or to forget the nexus between spectacle, gender, and power. Consequently, I have drawn on feminist critiques of visual and literary representation pioneered by Griselda Pollock and on Walter Benjamin's materialist reading of modern allegory. As a linguistic process, transfiguration can be generative of new meanings, but the figures that are its products can be canonized as inherited truths. This paper is attentive to both possibilities, but its primary interest is in the former, in the shifting spectacle of Caroline Norton, the meanings she embodied, and their effects on social change.

Norton's contemporaries remarked on her theatricality. Frances Kemble recalled her as "extremely epigrammatic in her talk, and comically dramatic in her manner of narrating things" (qtd. in Feldman 507). Lady Eastlake viewed her with a mixture of appreciation and suspicion:

She is a beautiful and gifted woman; her talents are of the highest order, and she has carefully cultivated them, has read deeply, has a fine memory, and wit only to be found in a Sheridan. . . . [S]he is a perpetual actress, consummately studying and playing her part, and always the attempt to fascinate — she cares not whom. (qtd. in Chedzoy 264)

Evangelical values of earnestness and sincerity along with social norms of feminine reserve are invoked here in opposition to theatrical self-display. Yet female performance was central to social life in the class to which Norton belonged. As a young unmarried woman during the London "Season," for example, Norton was invited to perform exhibition quadrilles, one a masque of the months and their produce (she was August), the other on the theme of "Paysannes Provençales" (Chedzoy 43–44). Such transfigurations, employing allegory and exotic imagery, epitomize the carefully choreographed spectacle of femininity produced for the male gaze in the aristocratic marriage market. In this context the problem posed by Norton for observers such as Eastlake was not performance itself but the self-directed and unbounded use of her "talents."

In reading the transfigurations of Caroline Norton, I am building on the work of Mary Poovey, whose illuminating study of Norton's campaign to reform the marriage laws notes the convergence of self-representation and role-playing in the pamphlets of the 1850s.

Norton's crucial transformation "from the silent sufferer of private wrongs into an articulate spokesperson in the public sphere" depends on a "self-authorization" that is achieved rhetorically by "splitting herself" into recognizable roles: as the wronged woman and the crusader against injustice (64–65). Norton's case for legal reform is uniquely advanced by representing her own history in passionately personal but legally inflected rhetoric. In the pamphlets she tries to correct, and to stabilize, the mobile images of herself produced by lawyers and the press. Her legal writings become another scene of representation involving Norton in which we may trace a movement from object of discourse to speaking subject, an attempt at self-transfiguration in the name of "The Spirit of Justice."

1. The Authoress at the Breakfast Table

THE PROFILE OF CAROLINE NORTON IN "The Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters" in *Fraser's Magazine* for March 1831 is an example of authorial spectacle as then conceived in the literary marketplace. Written by William Maginn to accompany a lithograph drawn by Maclise (Figure 18), it evinces a powerful urge to place and contain "Mrs. Norton" within the domestic sphere: "What has a lady, the head of a household, to do with staring at the stars, or any other wondrous body stuck over head? We display her as the modest matron making tea in the morning for the comfort and convenience of her husband" (222). Norton's image becomes the site of a discursive battle: a previous portrait of her gazing at the stars, published in the *New Monthly Magazine*, is ridiculed as "nonsensical" and a "caricature." Its conventional iconography of the romantic poet is replaced by that of the elegant poetess brewing a poem "as fluent, as clear, as lucid, and as warm as the liquid distilling from the urn." The intersecting pressures of Norton's marriage and career disappear in the glamorous spectacle of the gifted society matron, "happy in all the appliances of wealth and fame."

Critical patronage is openly tied to conformity with this image:

We shall always be found ready to attend her whenever she makes another expedition into the realms of prose, as we understand she meditates, or of rhyme, with the due devotion of critical cavaliers. We think that a lady ought to be treated, even by Reviewers, with the utmost deference — except she writes politics, which is an enormity equal to wearing breeches. (*Fraser's*, March 1831 222)

The domination and condescension implicit in chivalric discourse can rarely have been so disarmingly admitted. The fantasy of this spectacle is made more obvious by the trajectory of Norton's subsequent career, in which domestic violence, sexual scandal, the death of a child, debt, libel, and still other enormities compel her to "write politics." In Maclise's lithograph Norton sits beneath a portrait of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, her grandfather. He is, according to the commentary, drawn bibulously with a red nose, instantiating a moral as well as a gender difference from "fair Mrs Norton." Norton always upheld gender difference and male superiority as an article of faith; in placing her beneath an irresponsible patriarch the picture is apt, both in showing the power exerted by the feminine ideal over her and in suggesting the discrepancy between ideal and experience. What Maginn chose not to notice was that the legacy of Sheridan, playwright and Whig politician, included a passion for politics as well as for authorship.

Figure 18. Daniel Maclise, "Mrs. Norton." Illustration, from *Fraser's Magazine* 3 (1831): 222.

2. Raphael and La Fornarina

IN 1839 NORTON TRAVELED TO ITALY, seeking respite from the legal battles over access to her children and from her social ostracism. Her travelling companions were her sister Helen, her brother-in-law Lord Dufferin, and her uncle Charles. Even here she could not escape the voyeuristic and moralistic gaze of the public for she was pointed out, but

pointedly not spoken to, by English people in galleries, hotels, and other public spaces (Chedzoy 195). Spectacle in this instance was not self-fashioned and author-centered but the product of gossip and slanderous publicity. Whilst the holiday was not wholly a success, it did produce some significant poems in which Norton reflects on Italian art, on being an object of the gaze, and on scandal and its impact on relationships.

In Sonnet II, part of a group published in 1840, Norton praises Raphael and celebrates the legend that his painting, the “Transfiguration,” was held aloft in procession at the front of his funeral bier.³ In Norton’s rendering the painting represents the apotheosis of Raphael as well as the scriptural Transfiguration of Christ:

While on thy brow, and on that work divine
Borne with thee, glow’d from thine Italian sky
A light whose glory spoke of immortality! (12–14)

This representation of light as an intimation of sanctity derives as much from the “visionary gleam” of Wordsworth’s Immortality ode as from the Gospel accounts, for Norton relates the preservation of Raphael’s idealism to his early death, “Ere age or weakness dimmed one brilliant ray / Of thy rapt spirit’s high imaginings!” (3–4). Norton participates in the Victorians’ construction of Raphael as a hallowed genius: “oh, thou that didst combine / Sculpture and painting and the gift of song” (10–11), blessing him and extending the attribution of sacredness to his “work divine.” The interplay of light and matter in this poem allows the painting to be invested with divinity in a repetition of the illumination of Christ’s divinity through the transfiguring light on the mountain.

In a companion poem dedicated to La Fornarina, the painter’s mistress, Norton blesses “that sweet face / Whose nameless beauty from thy canvas shines” (7–8). La Fornarina is idealized as Raphael’s beloved; her exclusion from history is for Norton a desirable obscurity: “Yet would I be forgot, as she is now” (13). This desire for oblivion can be interpreted as a reaction to Norton’s own sense of exposure as the alleged lover of Lord Melbourne in one of the nineteenth century’s most celebrated trials, as a fanciful wish to assume the working-class obscurity of “the woman-baker.” Other sonnets of the 1840 sequence explore the isolation and rejection of the beloved in the aftermath of a relationship and the role of slanderers in hastening its end, which suggests that the sonnet form is a vehicle for expressing, or perhaps shaping, her desires.

Nonetheless, the “Fornarina” sonnet is significant as invoking the traditional gendered division of labor in artistic production between the masculine creator and the feminine muse. Raphael remains the subject addressed in this poem, and La Fornarina is the object of Norton’s discourse. Transfiguration works to diminish her status. Her “nameless beauty from thy canvas shines / Dependent still upon her Raphael’s fame” (8–9). As part of its drive to install La Fornarina in this “dependent” position, the poem leaves out of account other knowledges or speculations produced around her name since the sixteenth century, including her identification as Margherita Luti from Siena (Ponente 124). The only statement reproduced is one that reflects credit on the painter, in which the woman is the topos of a famous figure of speech. A note to the poem explains that “Leo X, visiting Raphael in his studio, and seeing there the Fornarina, asked who and what she was? The painter replied, ‘*Sono i miei occhi*’” (285). This may be literally translated as,

"They are my eyes." Norton's sonnet celebrates the painter's evasive answer as well as the rhetorical art of figuration:

And blest was she thou lovedst, for whose sake
 Thy wit did veil in fanciful disguise
 The answer which thou wert compell'd to make
 To Rome's High Priest, and called her then "Thine Eyes" . . . (1-4)

We may question "for whose sake" this wit is deployed: it protected Raphael's reputation as well as the woman's, and it presumably saved the Medici Pope the embarrassment of further enquiry! Norton romanticizes the incident as an example of chivalrous protection in keeping with her view of Raphael as "seraphic" (14). At one level, the wit functions to spiritualize him by disembodiment her sense of sight: "they are my eyes" identifies La Fornarina as his muse. At another level, what is concealed is also revealed by the logic of the metonymy with its claim of possession, its assumed mastery of speech, of situation, of another's faculty. Here, "they are my eyes" reduces La Fornarina to the object of Raphael's controlling, consuming gaze. At the structural level, metonymy works by association, establishing relationships of contiguity between things. In this case, the evasion at the literal level is accompanied by an implication of closeness at the figurative level. In celebrating this figuration, the poem oscillates between respect for propriety and pleasure in transgression, between openness and secrecy in ways that have echoes in Norton's life. Thus, the sonnet locates La Fornarina in both the roles identified by Griselda Pollock as "ascribed to the feminine position" in western ideologies of art, that of muse and that of model (96).

Norton is content to consign herself to Fornarina's position, both her obscurity and her dependent status in art history, and concludes with her own devotion to Raphael, wishing "Once to have press'd my lips on that seraphic brow!" (14). The ideology of supreme male creativity is reinscribed in the concluding couplet of this sonnet, even at the expense of the fame of the female poet. The speaking subject of the poem comes forward strikingly, but only to rehearse a gesture of feminine adoration and sacrifice. In 1834 Emily Eden mischievously dubbed Norton "the Fornarina" to Melbourne's Raphael, claiming to have heard the nickname from his lips (Hoge and Olney 44-45n3). However, these sonnets suggest that the epithet is less significant for its implication about her private life than as an emblem of her spectacular experience as a subject for painters, as a professional writer, and as a woman scandalously defamed.

3. *Erin*

TURNING NOW TO SOME OF THOSE VISUAL representations, Daniel Maclise's oil painting, "Caroline Norton, a study for the great Fresco of Justice in the House of Lords" (Figure 19), depicts her as Erin, a traditional female embodiment of Ireland. The appeal of Erin for both painter and subject is obvious, for both were of Irish descent. In Norton's case, she had never lived in Ireland but was proud of her famous Irish grandfather, Sheridan. Norton's own raciness, wit, and social daring were attributed to her Irish origins as racial characteristics unaffected by her English education and residence at Hampton Court. An important influence in Norton's self-fashioning was a love of the sentimental lyric, both

Figure 19. Daniel Maclise, *Caroline Norton as Erin*, c. 1846. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Patrick Guinness.

those of her own composition and others', and this poetic sensibility was an aspect of her Hibernophilia, recognized and accepted by English society. Alan Chedzoy reports that from her girlhood she loved Tom Moore's *Irish Melodies*, and that after Norton's "coming out" she met and befriended Moore, the loyal friend of her grandfather. One product of their friendship was that they became a popular duet, playing and singing these lyrics together in London drawing rooms.

I will have more to say about the songs below, but at this point it suffices to observe that through them Norton was an embodied sign of Ireland as poetic, and of Ireland as feminine, and was performing a representation of cultural identity inflected by racial and gender discourses. It is no surprise then that a portrait of her should be painted in the guise of Erin. L. P. Curtis summarizes the qualities invested in Erin in his study of Victorian caricatures of Irish faces, *Apes and Angels*:

Erin was a stately as well as sad and wise woman, usually drawn wearing flowing robes, embroidered with shamrocks. Her hair was long and dark, flowing down her back; her eyes were round and melancholy, set in a face of flawless symmetry. Occasionally she wore a garland of shamrocks and appeared with a harp and an Irish wolfhound in the foreground. Erin suggested all that was feminine, courageous and chaste about Irish womanhood, and she made an ideal Andromeda waiting to be rescued by Perseus. (75)

In this portrait, Norton is pictured gazing upwards and into the distance, impassively standing between two pillars on which rest the harp and scroll she holds. The painting does not differ markedly from other conventional representations of Erin, except in its rather limited iconography. The hair is tied back rather than flowing, which offsets the neck and face and suggests that the claims of individual portraiture have weighed more heavily than those of allegory. Norton is the major signified, rather than Erin. In addition, her gown is not embroidered with shamrocks but with stars, a change that facilitates the transfiguration of the subject. The harp is almost alone as an icon of Ireland, for there is a significant transformation in the garland, which is not made up of shamrocks but of laurel. In this switch, the poetical associations of Ireland overdetermine its meaning, replacing a local floral symbol with a classical one. To read this absence metonymically, it erases any sign of the politicized territory of Ireland from the text. The figure of Erin is not located in any ground but set against a blank screen. This may be appropriate given the long residence of the Sheridans in England, but it entrenches one's sense of the painting as a portrait of an individual in Irish costume rather than a representation of Ireland. With its reduced contextual specificity, the facial expression of Maclise's Erin becomes of prime interest. Norton's face is pictured in repose, the eyes directed upwards and the mouth half-smiling. This Erin appears hopeful rather than sad, complacent rather than unsatisfied, a function of its preference for individual over collective identity. The distance of its gaze is perhaps a measure of its distance from Irish nationalist politics.

This distance cannot be explained solely by reference to individual displacement but is part of the nineteenth-century discourse of Erin. C. L. Innes locates Curtis's summary of Erin in a history of female personifications of Ireland. She identifies sources in Celtic and Catholic mythology, in the ancient bardic tradition, and in the literature of the Gaelic revival. An important link between ancient and modern sources is the *aisling* poems of the seventeenth century, which represent Ireland in a dream vision as a beautiful woman pleading for rescue from the invader (Innes 19). For Innes, the lyrics of the eighteenth-century revival by writers such as Moore, James Clarence Mangan, and Lady Morgan are dilutions of the *aisling*, translations that sweeten and depoliticize the tradition. The mid-nineteenth-century figure of Erin emerges from this complex of history and literature as passive and sad. Moore's "Erin! The Tear and the Smile in Thine Eyes" (226) imagines a sentimental transfiguration of the woman's eyes:

Erin, the tear and the smile in thine eyes
 Blend like the rainbow that hangs in thy skies!
 Shining through sorrow's stream,
 Saddening through pleasure's beam
 Thy suns with doubtful gleam
 Weep while they rise.

Erin, thy silent tear never shall cease,
 Erin, thy languid smile ne'er shall increase,
 Till, like the rainbow's light,
 Thy various tints unite,
 And form in heaven's sight
 One arch of peace!

Despite Moore's known nationalism, it is hard to resist the implications of the rainbow as a figure of union. The poem stresses the inseparability of joy and sorrow for Ireland in the inversions central to stanza one, "Shining through sorrow's stream / Saddening through pleasure's beam," so that in terms of its tropes, the fusion of light and moisture in the rainbow is inevitable, while in terms of syntax it remains negative or at best conditional. Either way, Erin must wait, and Ireland's dream of freedom is etherealized and transfigured into a Biblical symbol of peaceful covenant. The parties to such a covenant would presumably be the various Irish factions, but given that the rainbow symbolized a protective agreement between a superior power, Yahweh, and his faithful adherent, Noah, this figure is open to the counter-reading of a union between colonizing Britain and colonized Ireland. The equivocal "languid smile" of Moore's passive, tearful Erin is simplified in the vague, shadowed half-smile of Maclise's representation. Maclise translates the openness of Moore's discourse into visual terms not only in this portrait but in his illustrated edition of the *Irish Melodies* published by Longmans in 1845, two years earlier.

The openness of Moore's songs and of the literature of Celtic revival in general allowed them to be linked to both nationalist and unionist politics. As Innes rightly notes, Moore's lyrics "were much appreciated both in England and Ireland for their languorous and sonorous nostalgia, evoking an Ireland distant and vague in time and place" (31). Seamus Deane and Mark Storey have written persuasively of the positive impact of Moore's "sad songs" on Irish nationalist sentiment and poetry (Deane 98; Storey 11). However, the interest of this paper is Erin in England. Moore's own intentions were nationalist, but his acceptance into fashionable London society suggests a domestication of oppositional energies. Hazlitt scathingly condemned Moore for turning "the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box" (qtd. in Storey 9). In England, Moore and Lady Morgan and later another "wild Irish girl," Caroline Norton, come to represent Ireland as Other to their English hosts, a place of poetry, simultaneously desirable and dangerous, the emotional, unstable, primitive realm repressed in the rational, ordered, self-consciously modernizing England. In this sense the availability of a personal, privatized reading of Moore is vital, for it enables his work to be depoliticized, to be marginalized as a quaint survival, an outcome metonymized in his nickname, "the Minstrel Boy." It is on this basis and with these effects, too, that Erin is represented by Maclise as Caroline Norton, woman poet, and not as a female symbol of Irish sovereignty.

4. *Spirit of Justice*

MACLISE'S ERIN, PERSONALIZED, POETIC and ultimately decorative, found its major home in Clondeboyne, the seat of the Marquises of Dufferin. This was doubly appropriate, for not only was Clondeboyne one of the "great houses" of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, but Lady Dufferin was Norton's sister, Helen. In the light of this appropriation of Irish symbol and poetry, we can approach the further transfiguration of Norton into the Spirit of Justice in the House of Lords (Figure 20). The fifth Marquis, Norton's nephew, writing to Richard Garnett, confirmed the identification of the two portraits:

The figure of "Justice" in the House of Lords is an exact portrait of Mrs Norton taken from life. I think I showed you the original in oils. The dress in the fresco and in the picture is identical, but in the latter her hand is resting on a harp, whereas in the House of Lords she is holding a balance. (qtd. in Lyall I: 83)

From a postcolonial perspective, there is a bitter irony in Maclise preparing for a pictorial representation of British Justice with a picture of Ireland, but it is an irony unremarked by the authors of the Arts Council catalogue of a major exhibition of Daniel Maclise's work in 1972. It was equally unremarked by the Marquis of Dufferin. Whereas the catalogue concerns itself with provenance, media, and aesthetic judgment, Lord Dufferin's comment is significant for highlighting the ready substitution of symbols that enables one allegory to be converted into another. Not only does this suggest the conventionality of icons, but it emphasizes the constant presence of the female body as capital in an economy of signification and power.

Marcia Pointon has written that "allegory regularly requires the body . . . [and] therefore serves to reinforce the role of woman in representation" (113). This conclusion is amply justified by the artistic scheme adopted for the rebuilt Palace of Westminster following the fire of 1834. "The Spirit of Justice" was commissioned for the Chamber of the new House of Lords as one of six frescoes of subjects "illustrative of the functions of the House of Lords and the relation in which it stands to the Sovereign" (Boase 332). Of the six, three were allegories, Justice, Chivalry, and Religion, and three were subjects taken from English history to illustrate the allegorical topics. Justice is exemplified by Prince Henry acknowledging the authority of Chief Justice Gascoigne, Chivalry by Edward the Black Prince receiving the Order of the Garter from Edward III, and Religion by the baptism of Ethelbert. What is striking about this scheme is that it employs idealized female figures for the allegories and exclusively male protagonists for the histories. This monumental and didactic art for the reformed Parliament of a modern age therefore perpetuates the traditional ideology that history is the province of men and that the ideals that men uphold are best represented by embodiment in female form.⁴

Marina Warner has written in *Monuments and Maidens* of the discontinuity between the allegorized Justice as woman and the actual conditions of women's lives, a gap that is particularly observable in Victorian England. As Warner notes, this was a period when "married women were unable to control their own property, administer their own earnings, or even, on separation, retain control of them" (126); it was also a time when allegorical representations of Justice derived from Athena and images of Athena herself proliferated. Warner offers a feminist critique of the myth of Athena and argues that in

Figure 20. Daniel Maclise, *The Spirit of Justice*, 1847–49. Fresco. Reproduced by kind permission of the Palace of Westminster.

such stories as her intervention on behalf of Orestes, she propounds the primacy of “father-right” for Western culture. The myth underwrites the gendered distribution of power in Athens: “Athena herself, a masculinized, patrilineal yet female figure, fathered but not mothered, who embodies as Athena Polias the city and its citizens, represents the reconciliation of . . . contrary themes in Athenian identity: it is derived from a woman’s body, but its instruments, controllers and agents are men” (118). The “aegis of Athena”

therefore represents for Warner a “virtuous consent to patriarchal monogamy” (124). This Athenian code strongly resonated with Victorian domestic ideology, and this connection, Warner argues, founded an abiding interest in Athena among Victorian classicists.

Warner cites Norton’s campaigns to reform the laws relating to women as a successful attack on the Athenian model of woman and as contributing to the eventual decline of Athena’s popularity as an image. It is crucial then that Norton is at once a model for Justice (and hence Athena), a woman who suffered injustice from Victorian restatements of “father-right,” and a campaigner for women’s rights. The processes involved in these transfigurations provide an unrivalled means of understanding Norton’s achievement as writer and woman.

Allen Horstman in his history, *Victorian Divorce*, represents the disparity between the fact that Norton was unable to obtain a divorce and the fact that Norton allegorized Justice in the House of Lords, where divorce petitions were argued, as an irony. It fills him with incredulity at first — “Caroline Norton is Justice!” — but then he reasons that Norton, “with her great powers of publicity, demanded justice” (44). As a response to the contradiction between woman as Spirit of Justice and Norton the subject of the law, this is apt, for it points to Norton’s reformist writings and to the way her experience of injustice galvanized her and other women into political action. However, both elements of this argument, irony and appropriateness, can be refined if the fresco is located in its historical context.

The irony involved in Norton embodying Justice is bitter: she who was denied justice is used to model it in the abstract. To read the fresco from the perspective of the present is to think of Norton as the author of the scathing pamphlets, *English Laws for Women* and *A Letter to the Queen*, with their comprehensive and passionate denunciations. However, these date from 1854 and 1855, while the fresco was painted between 1847 and 1849. Norton was not yet known as the outspoken critic of married women’s legal position but rather as the third party in her husband’s criminal conversation suit against Lord Melbourne and as the prime mover of the Infant Custody Bill of 1839. This legislation chipped away at the absolute “father-right” of the common law by granting separated wives a right to apply for custody of their children under the age of seven and for access to older children. The bill was introduced into the Commons by Serjeant Talfourd, but it was Norton who articulated the rationale for reform and who lobbied politicians to support it. Norton’s major pamphlet in that campaign, *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor*, was addressed to a member of the House of Lords, as was much of her lobbying. She had from the early days of her marriage cultivated political friendships with Whig peers such as Lord John Russell, Lord Lansdowne, and of course Lord Melbourne. Historians report that in the early 1830s she regularly entertained politicians, making her house a “modest salon” and “aspir[ing] to the kind of behind-the-scenes influence exercised by the great Whig ladies of the previous century” (Hoge and Olney 6; Orr 14). This dream was shattered by the ostracism visited upon Norton after the Melbourne scandal, but her lobbying skills were reawakened by the campaign to reform custody law. Norton’s political activity, then and subsequently, was focused upon the ruling elite and was undertaken entirely within the ordinary channels of the Parliamentary system. Nor did she upset the gendered distribution of power in her society by seeking to influence or to appeal to assistance and protection from established, masculine centers of power. Some of her legal writings were published and hence not “behind-the-scenes,” but others were

printed for private circulation, and their arguments are, as I shall demonstrate, appeals for change rather than assertions of right.

Norton's poetry was increasingly implicated in the politics of reform. Her anonymously published *A Voice from the Factories* (1836) attempted to enlist support for Lord Ashley's Parliamentary campaign to regulate the use of child labor in factories. Though focused on a Romantic concept of the innocent child whose life the reader is invited to "watch through his day" (stanza XLIV), the poem lacks particularity in its images and is dominated by abstract diction. In the prefatory Dedication to Lord Ashley, the author claims to have "strictly adhered to the printed Reports" of the commissions of enquiry to make its case (viii). Its adherence is most marked, however, not in the selection of evidentiary detail but in its reproduction of the commissioners' mode of enquiry. The reader is positioned as "[t]he stranger who surveys" (XLV) and invested with an instinct for justice and a power of decision: "Examine and decide. Watch through his day / One of these little ones" (XLIV). The poem therefore presents a view from Westminster rather than "a voice" from the underclass:

Are there not changes made which grind the Poor?
Are there not losses every day sustained, —
Deep grievances, which make the spirit sore?
And what the answer, when *these* have complained?
"For crying evils, there hath been ordained
The REMEDY OF CHANGE; to obey its call
Some individual loss must be disdained,
And pass as unavoidable and small,
Weighed with the broad result of general good to all." (XXVII)

Through the "remedy of change" the poem advocates reformism as a political philosophy that preserves both liberal values and England's parliamentary government through judicious regulation. The dedication to Lord Ashley compares him to William Wilberforce and trusts to his success as the "Liberator and Defender of those helpless beings" (ix). Through its structure, its anonymity, and its elevation of male leadership, then, the poem subserves political orthodoxy.

Likewise Norton's most ambitious poem, *The Child of the Islands* (1845), is dedicated and addressed to the infant Prince of Wales, whose secure future is contrasted with the uncertainties and privations of working-class children during the "hungry 'forties." The poem admonishes the rich to accept their social responsibility for the welfare of the poor and to weigh the political consequences of neglect,

Neutrality is Hate: the aid withheld,
Flings its large balance in the adverse scale;
And makes the enemy we might have quelled,
Strong to attack, and certain to prevail . . . (LXXIV)

Still, the Preface curries favor with the governing classes by proclaiming their demonstrated willingness to act: "voice after voice, and spirit after spirit, among the noble-hearted and influential, have risen to support the cause of the helpless; till the reign of

Victoria bids fair to claim a more hallowed glory than that which encircled the ‘golden age’ of Elizabeth” (xii). Upon this class basis and with professed modesty (“if I have executed my task imperfectly, it has not been for lack of earnest feeling”), Norton published her “Condition-of-England” poem under her own name. This phase of Norton’s “writing politics” culminated as the fresco was being painted when, during the revolutionary year of 1848, she wrote a series of letters to the *Morning Chronicle* concerning Chartism, urging workers to rely on the existing protection of the aristocracy and not on radical mass movements.⁵ Viewed in this light, Norton was a highly appropriate choice in the context of the 1840s to model a representation of Justice on the walls of the chamber of the Lords.

It is highly likely that Maclise, knowing of her campaign to reform the custody law and of her poetic engagement in social reform, chose her deliberately as the model for his Justice. Gill Perry has written that in Sir Joshua Reynolds’s allegorical portraits “women’s suitability for the[ir] symbolic roles was usually directly related to their actual roles in society” (23). Although Reynolds’s theory of history painting no longer commanded universal assent, it was still one influence among others.⁶ This principle animates Maclise’s portrait of Norton as Erin. That allegorical portrait is further transfigured, more thoroughly allegorized, in the Spirit of Justice. In this respect, Norton’s reputation as a mother who sought and obtained the aid of the legislature on behalf of young children and as a campaigner for justice in a self-declared “age of reform” ensured that she was a recognizable icon of Justice for Maclise.

However, an allegorical portrait must negotiate the expectations and understandings of those who commission it and of its intended audience as well as those of the artist. Once these factors are taken into account, Lord Dufferin’s simple identification of Justice with the portrait of Norton must be qualified. In the first place, as Warner has shown, female embodiment is an accepted, indeed central, device of traditional iconographic discourse in societies where actual power is the preserve of men. The existence of such a discourse militates against individual recognition of political agency by women. In the House of Lords, the peers who made laws were male; peeresses watched from the Visitors’ Gallery. In addition, the political function of the space must be considered. Norton as a known Whig might well have been too partial or controversial a person to embody the abstraction of Justice. Her reforms, her history, her pamphlets aroused considerable opposition among conservatives, despite what may seem to us the limited scope of their claims. Another difficulty would have been the lingering scandal of the Melbourne case, which remained powerful for decades, notwithstanding Norton’s gradual re-entry into society, including her presentation to Queen Victoria in May 1840 (Chedzoy 169). A key element of Norton transfigured as Justice then is the disindividuation of the portrait. This imperative is accomplished by a notable distortion of the face of the model, particularly in the shaping of the mouth. This result, visible from a comparison of the two paintings though unacknowledged by Lord Dufferin, involves a sacrifice of the portrait genre’s major requirement of “likeness” for the conceptual signification of allegory (Perry 29, 30). The Spirit of Justice is represented by a woman whose most marked characteristic is a downturned mouth, denoting severity, rigor, and impersonality. These are the characteristics of the “Athenian” common law that Norton sought to modify. As a vision of justice, then, this sign of woman has little in common with the actual life of its model.

If portraiture predominated over allegory in the “Erin” painting, the reverse is true of the “Spirit of Justice.” The conventional iconography of justice fills the foreground of

the fresco with multiple narratives and symbols. Before analyzing details, two general features of representation may be noted. First, the balance of the composition follows the lines of the arched space in which the fresco stands. With Justice in the center, flanked on one side by the Angel of Mercy and the other by the Angel of Judgment bearing the sword, the other figures are arranged vertically down either side of the design. Beneath the angels are the judges, then agents of justice, and at the bottom beneficiaries of justice (a mother and child on one side, a freed slave and a citizen on the other). This design provides an aesthetic equivalent to the symbol of the scales, which testify to a general belief that justice consists in measuring and balancing what is due. Secondly, the medievalism of the imagery, visible in the presence of the angels and the knight and in the dress of the judges and the woman, is consistent with the Gothic style of the architecture, and together they inscribe the value of tradition in an era of change.

In a critical commentary on the fresco, T. S. R. Boase suggests that “the ‘Justice’ suffers from the wholly inadequate imagination of the main symbolization” (353). This criticism applies to the top half of the composition, Justice herself, the angels, the sword and scales, the judges civil and ecclesiastical. The cause of this deficiency is not personal, but “the lack of a firm iconographical convention.” What is interesting here is the implicit symbolic power of the subordinate figures in the hierarchy. These images, particularly those on the right, exhibit a confident specificity and yet have recognizable iconic functions. The freed slave, the genuflecting man holding a charter of liberty to his breast, and the captured criminal whose bloody knife is displayed before Justice, all embody aspects of nineteenth-century reform. Even in the absence of a “firm iconographical tradition,” we can read these figures respectively as allegorizing the emancipation of slaves, the extension of the franchise through the Reform Act of 1832, and the modernization of law enforcement through the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829. Taken together as an allegory, the fresco offers a grand narrative of history as the progressive implementation of justice.

The Arts Council catalogue reads the fresco in this way, as “a tribute to the humanitarian instincts of the age,” focusing especially on the freed slave. While Norton’s agreement with this interpretation is made clear in the passage from *English Laws for Women* quoted below, modern historians emphasize that patriotic and economic considerations dovetailed with humanitarian concerns in the successful anti-slavery movement in Britain and its colonies.⁷ Linda Colley has shown how this campaign promoted Britain’s self-image as an upholder of liberty in the wake of the American and French Revolutions and was fundamental to its imperial successes later in the century. This complex of motivations may well explain the subordinated figuring of the slave in the fresco. Though his chains have been removed, he remains in an abject, kneeling position at the foot of the grouping: his downcast head is at odds with the optimistic outward gaze of the other figures. To adopt one of Walter Benjamin’s terms, here the fresco becomes for me a “configuration pregnant with tensions” (254). Reading “against the grain” opens up the meaning of the kneeling slave and suggests that he is not worshipping justice, but awaiting it. His liberation is incomplete.

The lack of a “firm iconographical convention” is not unique to the allegorical paintings of the Houses of Parliament; rather, it is a recognized feature of the “discrediting of allegory” in the nineteenth century, following the collapse of an “externally given system of significance” (Spivak 327, 332). Recognizing this, Benjamin identifies a structural instability in modern allegories. According to Jenny Sharpe, he defines allegory “not

simply in terms of preexisting codes of meaning, but also in terms of signification that exceeds what the codes can explain. The movement between the two poles of a fixed image (convention) and unfixing interpretation (expression) is what [Benjamin] calls the ‘antinomies of the allegorical’” (143–44). To read the slave allegorically, then, is to see the image as more than, or as other than, a tribute to Wilberforce’s success and a reference to the continuing campaign to free slaves in the southern American states. The abject “expression” alerts readers to other categories of persons who regarded themselves as enslaved. In her later pamphlet, *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Norton begins her argument with a Whig narrative of history:

Our children are born to the tranquil inheritance of privileges that were struggled for in our time, with fury, ferment and heart-break. They stand on conquered ground; ground that was inch by inch a battle-field to their fathers [sic]. . . . Where is the great question of Roman Catholic Emancipation? Where are the restrictions on trade? . . . Where are the grosser corruptions of our Parliamentary representation? (7–8)

Norton invokes the law of progress, but leaves it to individual agents to make the first move in various campaigns. She sets herself to make the change in the laws governing married women. Her strategy for kickstarting this campaign, for shocking English complacency, is to follow her narrative with an emphatic analogy that implies the unfinished agenda of reform: “I find, in the slave law of Kentucky, an exact parallel of the law of England for its married women” (*English Laws* 19). The slave analogy was furthered by John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* in 1861, when he noted that modern arguments for unimpeded father-right adopted the same grounds as ancient justifications of slavery (17). These new developments in Victorian political thought, logical extensions of reformist discourse, underpin a changing interpretation of the figure of the abject slave.

The legal status of women is directly encoded in the fresco in the image of the woman and child protected by the knight on the lower left. According to conventional codes this image refers to the ideal of aristocratic paternalism and chivalrous protection of the weak celebrated by Norton in her *Morning Chronicle* letters, by Disraeli in his *Young England* trilogy, and by Norton’s friend and Disraeli’s colleague, Sidney Herbert. The inclusion of married women — along with children, criminals, and the insane — under this umbrella of protection was legally prescribed. The fresco offers a narrative of achievement, of effective protection: the criminal caught, the knight’s gauntlet thrown down in defense of the weak. One of the antinomies of this allegory, as I have argued, is the gap between its visual rhetoric of self-congratulation and the suspension of this mood in certain images. Another way of putting this is to suggest an opposition between images of tradition and those of modernity: while a judge with head down reflectively sits on either side, on the right are male representatives of major modern reforms; yet on the left is a medievalist image of relations between the sexes that embodies not a changing ideal but a conservative movement to entrench a traditional vision. Caroline Norton invoked this protective ideal in her life, petitioning the courts for access to her children, and also in the pamphlets she addressed to legislators. She discovered that the ideological promise of protection was not fulfilled by the legal concept of coverture. In agitating for changes to the law, however, she continued to uphold protection as the goal and the criterion against which existing laws could be judged. We may as surely locate Caroline Norton in the bottom left of the

fresco, pleading for justice for herself and her children at the traditional courts of power, as at the apex of the arch of justice.

The new Palace of Westminster was not actually used for sittings of Parliament until 1852. In 1854 Norton prefaced her pamphlet, *English Laws for Women*, with a reference to the deferral of debate on the Marriage and Divorce bill, noting it had run a poor second to the Crimean War in securing the interest of the politicians. The presence of an allegory of Justice on the wall of the chamber did not guarantee the transmission of its ideals into practice. The politicians' idealistic duty to protect the vulnerable receded from the Notice Paper, replaced, Norton astutely noted, by the patriotic call to arms. An iconographic parallel to this absorption in masculine politics was that, owing to their location by the river and the inexperience of the artists in this medium, the frescoes began to darken and lose their color and definition almost immediately.

5. "Pearce Stevenson"

I TURN NOW FROM PICTORIAL TO LITERARY texts, and from representations of Norton to representations by her. A temporary and voluntary transfiguration adopted by Norton in her *Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill* was the adoption of a pseudonym creating a masculine persona of an experienced commentator on public affairs. "Pearce Stevenson" represents an attempt at authorial disguise rather than authorial spectacle. This strategy was necessary to answer objections that the reform of the Custody of Infants Bill was undertaken to confer a special and private benefit on Caroline Norton. While the other pamphlets are intensely personal, as Poovey and others have argued, this is, initially at least, a generalized contribution to social and legal policy discussion.⁸ Impersonality of voice and the authority of precedent are two key elements of legal discourse adopted in this pamphlet.⁹

Stevenson (I omit the quotation marks henceforth) begins by appealing to decided cases in order to contest the assertion of "the 'divine prescriptive right' of fathers over their children" (1). Having established both his speaking position within the discourse and the principle of recognized legal limits to "father-right," he proceeds to offer an epitome of the objections to the Custody of Infants Bill and to subject them individually to a worldly-wise critique. Pearce Stevenson then uses as his primary case study in support of reforming the law the example of the *Greenhill v. Greenhill* case. Decided just prior to the introduction of the Bill, this case demonstrated graphically that neither law nor equity could intervene in support of a mother claiming custody rights of her very young daughters against the wishes of an adulterous father. On Mrs Greenhill's refusal to give up the children, the father sought an order for her imprisonment, which was granted, but the desperate mother fled with her children to France. Stevenson uses this case to establish the extent of "father-right" even in unworthy cases and the law's neglect of children's welfare through its exclusion of maternal love. It presents the same injustices as Norton's own case and a further ground for changing the law. The Norton case is introduced only in the latter half of the pamphlet, where it is broached indirectly through a critique of misrepresentations of Norton and Serjeant Talfourd made in an intemperate personal attack in the *British and Foreign Quarterly*. Within this frame, the innocence and maternal feelings of "Mrs Norton" can be represented in the third person, as part of a professedly rational argument:

In the outline of her case, as I have given it, there is nothing overcharged; I have not appealed for sympathy by dwelling on particulars of sorrow or endurance; I have abstained as much as possible from accusation of others, my object being merely explanation and defence, and my interest in the matter not being to obtain pity for Mrs Norton, but a clear understanding of one of the grounds on which the opponents of Serjeant Talfourd's Bill have chosen to make their stand. (87)

Pearce Stevenson's insistence that there is "nothing overcharged" in his discourse is reiterated throughout the pamphlet. He promises a "'plain statement' of fact" (4) and offers a "simple outline" (73) in refutation of the inventions of the slanderous "Reviewer." The latter is said to prefer "legal fiction" to "simple fact" (84n). The *Plain Letter* assumes a correspondence theory of language and is distrustful of rhetorical display. Its commitment is to a plain style that purports to provide access to objective reality. Stevenson reflects on realist narrative as a vehicle of reform: an account of an earlier case is said to be "one which false reasoning and vain plausibilities cannot touch; which without any exaggeration or romantic colouring, stands out in simple and severe relief, a case of most gross cruelty savagely inflicted; and which calls on all honest and humane minds, for sympathy and indignation" (103). "Romantic colouring" is the property of lies, illusions, legal fictions, false reasoning. This author is tough-minded in his noting of inconsistencies and inequities: having enumerated the many checks on women's conduct, he asks, "But where are the checks on men?" (20). This incipient gender critique is accompanied by an astute calculation of the rewards and penalties for sexual misconduct by husbands and wives under the existing and the altered laws.

Despite appealing to the authority of a plain style, rhetorical devices and figures abound. Conventional allegories of Virtue and Vice are applied to women in this debate. Poovey has pointed to the prevalence of melodramatic distribution of good and bad extremes in character and plot in *English Laws for Women*, and such oppositions are rehearsed in the *Plain Letter*. Most significantly, idealizations regarding motherhood are advanced:

Did this author never see that very usual and customary sight, a modest and affectionate wife? Did he never see a woman watching the cradle of her sick child? Did he never see a mother teaching her little one to pray? Did he never see the welcome of a long absent son to his home, the embrace of the aged mother, the tears of the young sisters? . . . Such pictures are, I thank God, no images of romance, but common everyday scenes from English domestic life. (96–97)

The denial of "romance" does not disguise the sentimental idealism of these pictures or the text's investment in the image of woman transfigured into domestic angel as a strategy for expanding the legal rights of mothers. Parallelism and rhetorical questions underscore this conservative iconography.

The "unbroken and perpetual" bond (49) between mother and child is the ideological core of this pamphlet. How can this value be introduced into a legal discourse that denies married women a separate existence, let alone a speaking position? How can Stevenson make it count in law, when it is already overdetermined as a sacred role? How can he speak about it as a man? In broaching the topic, Stevenson reclaims and redefines the ground of the Bill's opponents: "Sir Edward Sugden, in his masterly, though somewhat

lawyerlike, speech . . . admitted that ‘he believed men had very little notion of the intensity of a woman’s affection for her children’; and certainly they could not shew more ignorance of its intensity than in the argument before us” (48). Here the author claims status for maternal discourse by depreciating that of the law. Having initially invoked the authority of precedent, Stevenson later critiques the slavish perpetuation of doctrine through “PRECEDENT (the lawyer’s God)” (71). Where Sugden wraps motherhood in a mist of sublime unknowability, revered but politically inconsequential, Stevenson declares it “the master feeling of [a woman’s] life, the strong root of all the affections of her heart” and the one area of the law where she has no remedy for injustice (11). This antithesis between emotional plenitude and legal nullity rhetorically stages an imbalance that cries out for redress. Yet Stevenson’s confident declarations eventually prompt a qualifying statement of his discursive authority, an acknowledgment of his gender and an admission of his indirect knowledge: “so thinking and so feeling (as it is natural to suppose she would think and feel)” (49). The tension between the masculine persona and the argument attesting to the nature of motherhood finally produces an implication of the transfigured gender of the pseudonym: “I do not think I speak in ignorance of feminine feeling when I say . . .” (49). In her urgent advocacy of mother-right, Norton discovers the limit of the male voice’s authority.

6. Subject and Servant

ONE OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF the pamphlets of 1854–55 is Norton’s self-representation. She reorients English legal discourse on marriage by speaking in a strongly personal voice. The first-person pronoun “I” is liberally used, often in conjunction with the trope of writing as speech — “Again I say” (35), “Now again, I say” (85), “I declare” (127), “I appeal” (128), “this I will venture to say” (144), “I have, as I said before, learned the English law piecemeal, by suffering under it” (145) — personalizing the argument of the *Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill*. These exhortations and appeals, these repeated performatives, are the signs of its determined assertion of rights withheld, particularly the right to speak:

After the action against Lord Melbourne (in which, according to the preposterous English code, I could have *no personal defence* nor any means of showing how I had been treated as a wife): I consulted counsel whether I could not now divorce my husband: whether a divorce “by reason of cruelty” might not be pleaded for me; and I laid before my lawyers the many instances of violence, injustice and ill-usage, of which the trial was but the crowning example. I was then told that no divorce I could obtain would break my marriage; that I could not plead cruelty which I *had forgiven*; that by returning to Mr Norton I had “*condoned*” all I complained of. I was an ENGLISH WIFE, and for me there was no possibility of redress. The answer was always the same. The LAW. (70)

The italicized “I” denotes Norton the legal subject, enmeshed in the negatives and false inferences of legal discourse, the fiction of non-existence, the construction of condonation, the denial of standing. Articulating this denial is the speaking subject of the pamphlet, the silent, suffering woman turned agent of political reform. Opponents of divorce law reform

are also endowed with voices (77, 105), as is the law itself (55–56), in a sustained performance of critical mimicry that highlights the attributive power of law.

Norton begins her *Letter to the Queen* by pointing out “the grotesque anomaly which ordains that married women shall be ‘non-existent’ in a country governed by a female Sovereign” (4). The conventions of respectful address from loyal subject to Queen are combined with an insistence on the common interest of gender:

Madam, —— I will not do your Majesty the injustice of supposing, that the very different aspect the law wears in England for the female sovereign and the female subject, must render you indifferent to what those subjects may suffer; or what reform may be proposed, in the rules more immediately affecting them. (8)

Whereas previous pamphlets were addressed to an audience of male legislators, the singular rank and gender of the addressee of *Letter to the Queen* provide a distinctive structural principle. A major strand of the argument traces the history of the sexual double standard and its ideological consolidation through legal inequity in the lives of the Queens and Queens Consort of England. Their marital histories, their relations with other women, their experience (or non-experience) of motherhood, the laws relating to women passed during their reigns — all are successively invoked in support of Norton’s appeal for justice. Consorts and aristocratic women have suffered under the law, have been abused without legal redress for centuries, as Norton and others continue to do. Norton’s history of royal marriage as scandal is predicated on a contrast with the life of the present Queen: “more of the ‘beauty of womanhood’ adorns the destiny of Queen Victoria than has belonged to the barren reigns of former English Queens” (133). Norton idealizes Victoria as wife and mother, ideals she herself upheld despite the acrimony of her marriage. These ideals form the conservative justification for changing the law, to ensure proper legal protection for women in unsuccessful marriages. Victoria is unique, too, in presiding over the improved legal condition of women.

The Queen is addressed, then, both as a woman and as a monarch. Indeed the first step in the argument of the *Letter* is to picture the Queen performing a ritual of her relationship to the law, at the opening of the new hall of Lincoln’s Inn in 1845:

It was the very poetry of allegiance, when the Lord Chancellor and the other great law officers did obeisance in that Hall to their Queen; and the Treasurer knelt at a woman’s feet, to read of the amendments in that great stern science by which governments themselves are governed; whose thrall all nations submit to. (7)

Norton’s reverential commentary memorializes the occasion and effects its discursive repetition. The medievalist hierarchies and gestures of the “Spirit of Justice” are reproduced in Norton’s “poetry of allegiance” with its chivalric centerpiece, “the Treasurer [kneeling] at a woman’s feet.” Alternating between references to “the Queen” and “a woman,” Norton employs the common constitutional trope of the “King’s two bodies,” the body natural and the body politic.¹⁰ Yet her treatment only serves to emphasize the dissonance introduced into this jurisprudential transfiguration by the femininity of the incumbent:

The image of Lawful Power, coming in such fragile person, to meet them on that vantage ground of Justice, where students are taught, by sublime theories, how Right can be defended against Might, the poor against the rich, the weak against the strong, in their legal practice.
(7)

This constitutional fiction has been used to highlight the power of the Crown, which transforms the weakness of the body natural, as in Queen Elizabeth's speech to the troops at Tilbury in 1588 (Gilbert and Gubar 30). Norton, however, oscillates between the two bodies, to create the binary code of superiority and dependence required by chivalric discourse. Similarly, the formulaic process of legal education is transformed into a quest romance, the Inn itself into a "vantage ground of Justice." "Sublime theory" animates this view of law, which replicates the conceptual as well as the physical level of the allegory in the House of Lords.

This tableau of "Lawful Power" positions Victoria as the passive muse of her male knights. The gender of legal agency was underlined in the ceremony through the election of Prince Albert as an honorary barrister. Norton's investment in this royal ritual is unusual. As David Cannadine has demonstrated, the period 1830–1870 witnessed a decided lack of interest in royal spectacle among the press, participants, and people. There was, he argues, "no syntax of spectacle, no ritualistic idiom. The whole was not greater than the sum of its parts" (116). The *Letter to the Queen* is notable for its confident allegorizing, its relish of the "glittering courtly vision," and its aesthetic and ideological production of meaning. Its expertise situates Norton as a privileged insider, one who possessed the key to what Cannadine calls "a group rite in which the aristocracy, the church and royal family corporately reaffirmed their solidarity . . . behind closed doors." More than this, if the text functions as a discursive repetition of the original ritual, it installs its speaking subject among the ranks of the Queen's defenders of right.

From this idealized account of the self-image of law, Norton moves to actual cases of marital breakdown including her own in which "Might" is allowed to override "Right." Just as the myth of Justice is represented through the worshipped body of the Queen, so the practical working of the law is represented through the oppressed body of Caroline Norton:

I have, as I said before, learned the English law piecemeal, by suffering under it. My husband is a lawyer; and he has taught it me, by exercising over my tormented and restless life, every quirk and quibble of its tyranny; of its *acknowledged* tyranny; acknowledged, I say, not by wailing, angry, despairing women, but by Chancellors, ex-Chancellors, legal reformers and members of both Houses of Parliament. (145)

Norton characterizes her "tormented and restless life" in Biblical terms as "days of humiliation" (121) and dares to imagine that she can be the vehicle of redemption for herself and others: "I believe . . . that I am permitted to be the example on which a particular law shall be reformed. Does that also create a smile?" In transfiguring herself into an exemplary body displaying the "tyranny" of the law, she knowingly courts ridicule for claiming a historic role and a "special Providence." Norton deflects accusations of presumption, arguing theologically that Providence "guards the lowest as it guards the highest" (122), and cites the example of Hagar, the expelled concubine in Genesis, whose

tears in the desert were transformed into a fountain. Hagar offers a case of a despised woman whose bitter experience gave way to blessing. It is at first surprising that Norton, who canvassed on behalf of married woman and whose authorial name always included the markers of her marital and class status, The Honorable Mrs. Norton, should represent herself as a type of Hagar. This typology not only constructs Norton as a disgraced wife and recalls her social banishment, but it holds out the promise of transfiguration, the end of suffering and the reform of defective law.

If Hagar is a figure of implicit self-recognition for Norton, then the practice of self-representation in *Letter to the Queen* shifts between an iconography of incorporation in the body politic and that of expulsion. This abasement is but the prelude to a further, more glorious transfiguration. Norton supports her hope by reference to the profound changes in the history of the Buonaparte family, their swings between obscurity and fame, defeat and power. This argument is surprising on two grounds. First, its pragmatically neutral account of political fortune is at odds with the context's emphasis on justice through law.¹¹ Secondly, Norton's history stresses the unpredictability and extremity of change in individual lives: while the ending is useful to her, the plot suggests randomness. Thus, the example conflicts with the orthodox Whig philosophy of history advocated elsewhere in the pamphlet, the belief that English history shows the progressive enlargement of personal liberty and that individuals are the agents of historical change. "A very shallow reader of history might prove, that from time immemorial, changes in the laws of nations have been brought about by individual examples of oppression" (132). This axiom underlies Norton's belief in the exemplary status of her case and her determination to use writing as a vehicle of change. At this point, the rhetoric of exemplarity eschews individual spectacle in favor of attention to interconnecting mechanisms of change: such examples are "the little hinges on which the great doors of justice are made to turn." This analogy, which assumes the agent's place in a system of power, more accurately describes Norton's historic role than the extravagant transfigurations of expelled Hagar or Napoleon returned.

When Norton imagines the Spirit of Justice in this text, it is as an advertisement for effective English jurisdiction. She presents as a hypothetical case a melodramatic allegory of a cabin boy assaulted at sea whose attacker is charged: "The Spirit of Justice moved with that ship 'over the face of the waters,' and English law and public government avenge him, who perhaps had not one private friend in the world" (29). Recalling the paternalistic certainties of the Maclise fresco, this vignette enables Norton to adduce the lack of comparable legal protection for married women at home. The existing law of divorce is condemned in abstract terms that nonetheless rely on the familiar allegorical resources of personification and binary opposition: "There is tyranny in these laws which uphold the strong against the weak; which make so monstrous a difference between rich and poor" (124). Norton's fluency in this discourse, her confident assumption of a speaking position, her incisive reformulation of its tropes, leads me to conclude that her experience of modelling the feminine figure of Justice provided the lineaments of a new self-image that found its mode of representation in the exemplary subjectivity of the *Letter to the Queen*.

Norton ends the pamphlet by subscribing herself Queen Victoria's "Subject and Servant" (155), locating her appeal for change firmly within the existing governmental system. Epistolary etiquette supplies the formal markers of a continuing social identity, demands a signatory subjection, which sits oddly beside the critical and revisionist text of

the letter. Such modes of address emphasize the conservative, or corrective, nature of her plea and set limits to her claim: "Madam, — in families as in nations, Rebellion is a disease that springs from the *malaria* of bad government. WRONGS MAKE REBELS. Those who would dwell submissive in the wholesome atmosphere of authority, revolt in the jail fever of tyranny" (124). Differential diagnosis apart, Norton's analogical argument links the reform of the marriage laws with earlier gradualist changes designed to manage the populace without ceding significant power. Rebellion, it seems, is an uncomfortable role for a "poet of allegiance." Despite her suffering, then, Norton loyally invokes the name of Queen Victoria, "the one woman in England who *cannot* suffer wrong" (154), in arguing a case for moderate reform. This figure, protected, revered, but a passive, constitutional monarch nonetheless, stands finally in the place of the Spirit of Justice. As her "servant," Caroline Norton locates the "great doors of justice" at Westminster and exploits word and image to clear obstructions from them.

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NOTES

1. The appearance of two recent collections, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. Christ and Jordan, and the special issue of *Victorian Poetry* 33 (1995) on "Word and Image" are signs of the vitality of this interdisciplinary enquiry. They provide a good introduction to its multiple possibilities.
2. There is an incisive summary of Norton's case in Shanley (22–29). Norton's contribution to Victorian feminist campaigns are well discussed in Forster, *Significant Sisters*, chapter 1, and Caine, *English Feminism*, 66–70. In a previous article on Norton's pamphlets I include a narrative of her legal travails.
3. See Fraser (43–90) for a general study of the significance of Raphael to the Victorians.
4. The philosophy of history and the aesthetic ideal of history painting underlying the interior design of the new Palace are fully discussed by both Boase and Mancoff (65–100).
5. For a summary of the letters see Chedzoy (224). The letters have been transcribed and reproduced in electronic form by the Victorian Woman Writers Project of Indiana University.
6. Nineteenth-century German influences on art theory and practice in England and especially on the Parliamentary frescoes are surveyed by Vaughan. For a critique of Reynolds's account of the political significance of painting and that of his successors, see Barrell.
7. The connections between the abolition of slavery and the emergence of industrial capitalism have been widely debated by historians. I have found the account offered by Colley, *Britons*, most useful, with its contextualization of the slavery campaign in the complex process of Britain's formation as a modern national entity. For a detailed review of historical scholarship on slavery and capitalism, see Drescher.
8. Fraser and Brown (174–76) discuss the combination of autobiography and reformist polemic in *English Laws for Women*. For an argument contrary to that developed here, that the *Plain Letter* is "over emotional and long-winded," see Forster (40).
9. Goodrich, *Reading the Law*, offers an incisive introduction to the study of law as a discourse.
10. The classic history of this jurisprudential fiction is Kantorowicz. Although a medieval idea, the phrase remained current in succeeding centuries. The anomalies to which it gave rise were scathingly critiqued by Maitland in the last year of Victoria's reign.

11. Norton's benign view of the return of Napoleon contrasts markedly with the radical critique of the "farcical" repetition of Napoleon III offered by Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

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