“To Bind in Admiration All Who Gaze”:
Lydia Sigourney’s Sentimental Ekphrasis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of Lydia Sigourney’s poetic descriptions of artworks to argue that her work is concerned with the changing place of the visual arts in Americans’ lives in the middle of the nineteenth century. Sigourney’s ekphrastic poems guide the reader through a process of emulating the visual forms that they describe, encouraging readers to embody the emotional experience of the works. Such experience trained Americans to approach the increasing number of reprinted art images in books and periodicals, as well as preparing the ground for a growing gallery culture later in the century.

DRAWING, the simplest of languages, is understood by all.
Rembrandt Peale. Graphics; a manual of drawing and writing, for the use of schools and families (1835).

Introduction

That the antebellum public framed artistry in terms not of the static original art object, but a more flexible formulation of artistic poses, capable of being infinitely modulated, is nowhere more evident than in the vogue for a democratically fashioned approach to art instruction. At its height in the 1830s and 40s, the approach left its mark in inexpensive drawing manuals, passages of drawing instruction in popular periodicals, and sections of conduct books such as Lydia Sigourney’s Letters to Young Ladies (1833), where she praises drawing for its practical moral benefits:

A taste for Drawing heightens the admiration of Nature by enforcing a closer examination of her exquisite workmanship, from the hues of the wild flower, to the grandeur of the forest, and the glowing beauties of the extended landscape. […] Those who make such advances in Drawing and Painting, as to be able to sketch designs and groups from History, derive high intellectual pleasure, from this elegant attainment. (110-11)

This consideration of the arts as a means toward “intellectual pleasure” contributed, like many other writings of this period, to bringing the fine arts to a popular, often female, audience. While many authors spoke of drawing from nature, one element that separated this period’s thoughts on arts instruction from those of the late eighteenth century was precisely the assumption that readers would initiate or supplement their drawing practice by copying engravings from books or periodicals or by looking at works from within the family sphere. In turn, the de-
...mocratization of drawing practice was seen as a training ground for reading these same images; as the visual arts became increasingly accessible through reproduction and commercially accessible originals, they required a more visually savvy viewing public. Drawing, writers maintained, had the ultimate goal of training the eye to see the very type of image that the hand produced (Korsmeyer 509-20).

Sigourney’s ekphrastic poetry emerges from this artistic environment and, like the drawing manuals of the same period, functions as a training ground for the interpretation of a fluid and dynamic visual culture. These poems see artworks not as distanced high cultural objects, but as scenes to be studied for desirable ends such as “intellectual pleasure” or “heighten[ing] the admiration of Nature”; they see art as a conduit toward the same aims, both moral and intellectual, as a middle-class education. The images that they draw on are broadly accessible: either unnamed images that are familiar types from print culture or specific pieces that were widely reproduced. This ekphrasis follows a new conception of art in the antebellum period, one that understands art not as a part of the elite ‘ornamental’ education of the Republican era, nor as part of the high-cultural space of the late-century gallery but as an essential part of an educational model that emphasizes emotional exchange and social networks. At precisely the time when technological reproduction of imagery seemed to render ekphrasis redundant, it became a newly valuable medium, one more about the act of viewing—how to approach images, what to draw from them, and what to avoid—than any particular aesthetic.

None of Sigourney’s poems derive from a museum environment, a telling fact both for her own canon and for middle-class art culture at large. Sigourney was uniquely positioned to write an ekphrasis of the emergent gallery. Though she had little access to original art in her childhood, her friendship with her father’s employer, and later this employer’s grand-nephew, Daniel Wadsworth, granted her opportunities to experience a developing museum culture firsthand. Wadsworth was one of America’s first wealthy patrons of the art, and it was at his home that Sigourney “first enjoyed the luxury of studying fine pictures” (Letters of Life 90). Wadsworth also secured Sigourney a teaching position in his hometown of Hartford and in 1815 the publication of her first volume, Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse (Letters of Life 89, 202, 325). In the 1840s, Wadsworth was the benefactor behind the Wadsworth Athenaeum, one of America’s first public art museums, built in Hartford, where Sigourney lived for most of her life. Sigourney mentions the Athenaeum in her late-life autobiography as an institution with which her readers would be familiar, but it made remarkably little impact on her ekphrastic canon (90). The art collection included mostly American historical canvases, as well as Wadsworth’s collection of works by Thomas Cole and Thomas Sully, bequeathed after his death in 1848. None of these works or artists appear in Sigourney’s poetry, which drew primarily on genre scenes and well-known reproductions of European works. This absence testifies to the limited impact of American public collections on Sigourney and likely also on her broadly middle-class audience.¹

¹ In fact, the Athenaeum did little to foster public education and postured more as a “shrine of the muses” than a “palace for the people” (Orosz 155). For an account of the founding of the Athenaeum, see Orosz 149-55.
The more accessible sources of Sigourney’s ekphrasis suggest an entry into both her poetic canon as a whole and the foundations of antebellum ekphrasis. In looking at antebellum illustration and artwork, critics have tended to focus on the moral content of these images and the messages that they promoted to an increasingly visual-literate reading public (see, for instance, Lehuu 102-25). Likewise, criticism of Sigourney has been heavily weighted toward the ethics and morals that the poetry does or does not advance. Sigourney’s ekphrasis provides an opportunity to investigate what the first of these readings have taken for granted—the changing place of visual art in Americans’ lives, and the effect that these shifts had in the public’s approach to art during this period—while providing a sense of Sigourney as a writer concerned with process and form, not merely didactic moralism. From her first volume of poetry in 1815 to her last in 1862, Sigourney wrote at least thirteen poems easily identifiable as ekphrastic, not including the several more that focus on directions to an artist in the composition of an artwork (what John Hollander calls “imperative” ekphrasis), the verse meditations on art-objects interspersed in the travelogue *Pleasant Memories from Pleasant Lands*, or the poems to American monuments (23-25). Sigourney’s ekphrastics all contain some reference to a ‘picture,’ painting, or sculpture in their titles. All refer to a particular image that was widely reproduced, or a type of image to which readers had ready access, rather than the more remote scenes from the still-emergent American galleries or lesser-known European churches. These poems focus on genre scenes familiar from gift books and periodicals, the family portraits that hung on walls, and the widely-circulated engravings of ‘masterworks.’

This reliance on image ‘types’ is arguably the most significant marker of Sigourney’s ekphrasis. It not only locates the poetry within an era when such forms would be recognizable to a wide range of readers but connects this seemingly niche canon to broader sentimental aesthetics. Kerry Larson identifies Sigourney’s poetic mode precisely through her use of such types: by working from a “stable stock of recurring images and highly stereotyped scenarios,” Sigourney ensures the reader’s emotional and imaginative participation in the scene of her writing (84). For such “literary egalitarianism,” as Larson terms it, the burgeoning print sphere would have been an unmitigated blessing as it offered a seemingly endless supply of easily recognizable scenes (77). Sigourney’s ekphrasis, then, is not a tangential offshoot of a larger canon, but rather a possible metonym for it: a

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2 This is particularly true of Sigourney’s early criticism, but the sense of Sigourney as an elegist and proponent of abstracted moralities lingers in more recent, nuanced work. See for instance Wood; Richards (70-71).

means of thinking about the form of spectatorship and participation that Sigourney demands of her readers.

This participation, despite the apparent informality of Sigourney's verse and her own stress on its spontaneity, operates within a consistent set of rules. The dominant trait of this ekphrasis is concern with the emotionalized subject of the artwork rather than the particular characteristics of the object. Shifting metaphors and the frequent failure to cite a particular artist or title of the 'picture' in question complicate readers' attempts to envision a concrete image. The very subjects that Sigourney chooses for her ekphrastic representation highlight emotion over form; without exception, Sigourney's ekphrastic images are moments of suspension, moments of stillness between heightened activity or even violence, moments centered on a mode of sympathetic affect: the poems encourage readers to enter into this emotional space by echoing gestures or movements from the images described.

The forms of address work to heighten this emotional participation, as Sigourney's speakers move between direct address, apostrophe, and collective gestures. Sigourney's poetry often relies on a direct address to readers to bridge the gap between author and audience, followed by a movement to the collective 'we' or 'us' to bridge to the gap between individual readers. Her ekphrastic poems also rely on apostrophe, the moment when a poetic speaker turns away from the audience to address an absent or imaginary figure. (That these poems generally are not illustrated only heightens this 'absence'). Mary Louise Kete calls apostrophe "the essential rhetorical trope of sentimentalism," because in gesturing toward absence, apostrophe creates a link between the actual and the ideal (or as Kete puts it, "temporality and eternity") and so offers the possibility within the poem of a "nonviolated community" (17, 45, 47). Though this construction applies most obviously to elegiac verse, it has its place in ekphrasis. These poems cannot offer a link between the living and the dead, but they can draw a line for readers between their actual and ideal selves, with absent images standing in as models. And culminating in a collective 'we,' as these poems often do, they imagine this path as one that individual readers take together.

Sigourney's "Lady Jane Grey: On Seeing a Picture Representing Her Engaged in the Study of Plato" (1837) models many of these characteristics. Thrust into power through a politicized turn of events in 1554, Grey ruled as queen for only a matter of days before being imprisoned and ultimately executed on her usurper's orders. In Sigourney's hands, as in most nineteenth-century accounts, Grey is a Protestant model of studiousness, piety, and strength in adversity. At the same time, as in all of Sigourney's ekphrastic poems, the moral lesson that the writing instills is complicated by its visual impetus. The poem moves through several scenes of Grey's life, but its central ekphrastic moment in the second and third

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4 The perception of Grey as a Protestant martyr and innocent political pawn is one dependent on the circulation of apocryphal letters and testimonials from after Grey's death into the eighteenth century. Sigourney echoes this perspective in framing Grey's reign as engineered primarily by the Duke of Northumberland, her father-in-law. See Guy.
stanzas is key to defining both her character and the poem’s ideals of visual spectatorship:

Hark! the hunting-bugle sounds,
Thy father’s park is gay,
Stately nobles cheer the hounds,
Soft hands the coursers sway,
Haste to the sport, away! away!
Youth, and mirth, and love are there,
Lingerest thou, fairest of the fair,
In thy lone chamber to explore
Ancient Plato’s classic lore?

Old Roger Ascham’s gaze
Is fix’d on thee with fond amaze;
Doubtless the sage doth marvel deep,
That for philosophy divine
A lady could decline
The pleasure ’mid yon pageant-train to sweep,
The glory o’er some five-barr’d gate to leap,
And in the toil of reading Greek
Which many a student flies,
Find more entrancing rhetoric
Than fashion’s page supplies. (ll. 7-26)

The poem does not name the painting, but depictions of this scene were familiar from histories of England and books of biographical sketches designed for children’s education. These sources align well with Sigourney’s own use of the instructive scene: both the poem and a prose biography of Grey’s life were later reprinted in Sigourney’s juvenile readers. The appropriateness of the scene as an educative model is immediately apparent: it centers on the Tudor educator Robert Ascham’s discovery of Grey absorbed in Plato’s Phaedo while the rest of her family is out to hunt. Ascham apparently marveled at Grey’s reading Plato “with as much delight as some gentlemen would read a merry tale in Boccaccio” (qtd. in Guy 9). In Sigourney’s hands, the comparison becomes more relevant to her own cultural moment: the Grey who can in Plato “find more entrancing rhetoric / Than fashion’s page supplies” is a figure whose victories speak directly to the would-be virtuous readers of Sigourney’s audience. Grey’s ability to resist the frivolities of the fashion magazine or the allures of the “pageant train” make her an instructive model, rather than a historically and experientially distant Protestant martyr.

The focus of this instructive pose is on a visual restraint that Sigourney’s readers almost inevitably echo. Grey is both a textually-absorbed subject and an object of “Ascham’s gaze,” both mesmerized and mesmerizing. She shows control over her own visual environment in resisting the visual entrancement of fashion plates, even as her own image is (unconsciously, of course) capable of inspiring a similar entrancement, or “fond amaze.” The reader’s gaze is defined by the same

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5 Sigourney reproduced accounts of Jane Grey’s life—and in particular her encounter with Robert Ascham—in How to Be Happy: Written for the Children of Some Dear Friends, 87-88; The Boy’s Reading-Book: In Prose and Poetry, For Schools, 50-51; Letters to Young Ladies, 119.
restraint, as she in her own “lone chamber” takes in Sigourney’s didactic text. The scene of the poem—characterized by only few physical markers, and notable principally for the emotional intensity of Ascham’s “fond amaze”—models for this dutiful reader how they themselves should expect to be seen. The act of visual restraint does not deny the power of the image but promises readers that they themselves can become the entrancing images.

The final stanza of the poem culminates in the speaker’s echoing of Grey’s restrained model of spectatorship. By this point in the poem, the reader has seen Grey through her imprisonment in the Tower of London and the execution of her husband, Guildford. This final scene focuses on Grey’s own execution. But Sigourney’s poem not only elides acknowledgment of an ekphrastic source for this moment—a significant omission considering that the most reprinted Jane Grey painting of the 1830s was Paul Delaroche’s _Execution of Jane Grey_ (1834)—it resists any visual representation of scene at all (Bann and Whiteley 102-10):

Away! Away! I will not see the deed.
Fresh drops of crimson stain the new-fall’n snow,
The wintry winds wail fitfully and low;--
But the meek victim is not there,
Far from this troubled scene,
High o’er the tyrant queen,
She finds that crown which from her brow
No envious hand may tear. (ll. 71-78)

This alternate execution and coronation models the same visual restraint as Grey’s abstention from the hunt. In both cases, the viewer avoids the violent spectacle of one scene for the ideality of another, whether the philosophy of Plato or a spiritual coronation.

The emphasis here on emotional transference and ideal, generalized images is deeply rooted in the concerns of early nineteenth-century education. Among these concerns is the educational philosophy—what Richard Brodhead calls “disciplinary intimacy” (71)—that inspired much of Sigourney’s pedagogical writing. Influential among many educational thinkers of the 1830s and 40s, the theory is based on the idea that children learn best through love of the instructor rather than through the threat of corporal punishment or rigorous discipline; the teacher is a personified and sentimentalized authority modeled on, and in many cases enacted by, the mother. This teacher-parent plays a minimal outward role in regulating the child’s actions and instead becomes “an inwardly regulating moral consciousness” (Brodhead 72). The student internalizes the sentimentalized figure of authority in much the same way that the ideal reader of Sigourney’s ekphrastic poems internalizes the central image.

The reflection of educational principles found in Sigourney’s poems of image spectatorship is evidence of a profound shift in cultural conceptions of the visual arts. Sigourney’s ekphrastic writing is indebted to a relatively new model of the visual arts in the antebellum period, one that saw imagery as having an important place within middle-class education. The conception of the arts and arts education for women in particular shifted from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth, from an elitist ‘ornamental’ practice that showed leisure time
and improved the prospects of good marriage, to one of ‘industry’ that evidenced desirable qualities such as patience, devotion, and the development of skill. These qualities, which moved artistic practice into the moral realm, were highlighted in women’s conduct books and writings on women’s education throughout the nineteenth century. In such texts, visual art was touted as “the mightiest means of moral culture,” but most conduct books and drawing manuals were vague as to how this “moral culture” was to be instilled (qtd. in Zlotnick 1). Sigourney’s ekphrastic poems emphasize the process of reading an image over the final culminating moral and thus provide a clearer primer on how images teach. By demonstrating a relation to the image that is, much like the mother-child relationship of “disciplinary intimacy,” based in empathy, these poems show the extent to which viewing practices were intertwined with emotional bonds.

At the same time, the nature of this emotion—divorced from a specific agent, produced in order to be reproduced—can also tell us something about the task of Sigourney’s poetry more generally. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins argue that one reason for the continual disappearance and “(re)discovery” of nineteenth-century American and British Poetesses in recent scholarship is that the Poetess is “not the content of her own generic representation: not a speaker, not an ‘I,’ not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self” (523). The Poetess, working within the conventions of women’s ‘sentimental’ verse, emits emotion from a speaker who is not herself, but a lyrical type of Woman. My own reading of Sigourney’s ekphrasis attempts to locate this lyric absence within a mode that centers prominently on an absent subject. Most of these poems elide the lyric ‘I’ altogether, and the voice of the Poetess serves only to emulate the gestures of an (unpictured) artwork, and to present this emulation as a model for further reproduction. Poetry here is not, as John Stuart Mill famously defines it, “feeling confessing itself to itself”; Sigourney’s ekphrasis functions as a means of reproducing a generalized emotion through the particular body of the reader. Insofar as this feeling is ‘personal,’ it is the reader who provides particularity. And as all ekphrasis is, in its simplest sense, a copy, an attempt at artistic emulation, Sigourney’s ekphrasis culminates in a copy of a copy, refined to a sentimental essence. This mode of image description is the product of artistic conventions that see production of the copy as an end in itself, a goal not only in didactic poetry, but in the visual arts and education.

### The Reproduced Image

Sigourney’s “Powers’s Greek Slave” (1860) is one of the poems in her canon that best exemplifies her literary dependence on reproduced imagery, and yet in spite of the specificity of its subject it maintains the distanced abstraction that is the hallmark of her ekphrasis overall. The poem centers on Hiram Powers’s sensationally popular life-sized marble nude of a young woman, a captive of the Turks during the Greek Revolution of the 1820s and 30s who is sold into the slave trade in Istanbul. She is modestly posed with chains around her wrists and a cross necklace dangling from one hand, a symbol of Christian purity in the face of adversity. And in spite of this detailed backstory—with which most viewers would
have been familiar—the poem reads more as a guide to art viewership than as a study of a particular artwork, much less one of the most controversial sculptures of the period. Like “Lady Jane Grey,” this work evades moral prescriptivism—or one could say, moral clarity—in its emphasis on emotional transfer and spectatorship. It focuses on the act of reading an image to the extent that it entirely elides the historical issues that made the statue famous, including the situation of African slaves in America and questions about the propriety of full nudity in contemporary sculpture. Even the statue’s relation to Greek independence, a cause with which Sigourney was actively involved, shows little real presence in this poem (Haight 30-32). In contrast to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetic meditation on the same artwork, it is clearly not a political statement (Hollander 161-62).

The absence of obvious social issues from the poem, though, does not imply Sigourney’s disengagement from the writings and responses surrounding the statue. In fact, in many ways the poem reflects the contemporary treatment of the work and the artist’s own desire to see his work textually mediated through reading prior to—or instead of—a gallery visit. Sigourney’s poem participates in the broad outpouring of ekphrastic poems on the statue that appeared in newspapers, periodicals, or other publications in the years after it toured the United States in 1847-48. This popular ekphrastic canon is only an extension of the mediation that Powers himself saw as necessary to the statue’s proper reception by the American public, which, the artist feared, might see only nudity where Neoclassical ideality was intended. These fears were not unfounded: Horace Gree-nough had been mocked for his bare-chested depiction of Washington only a few years before, and Powers had felt the sting of propriety when a prospective buyer of his Eve Tempted (1842) backed out when accused of “indiscretion” in attempting to bring a nude sculpture to “quiet, old fashioned, utilitarian” Albany, New York (qtd. in Kasson 165).

The subject of The Greek Slave threatened to meet with the same response: it was an undraped nude of a young Greek woman—albeit in a modest Classical Venus pudica stance—who had been captured by the Turks during the Greek Revolution and would be sold into sexual slavery. The widespread acclaim that the statue eventually met with was more than anything a testament to Powers’s careful verbal construction of the work. In interviews about the statue, he stressed the anonymous figure’s narrative, constructing a history for the slave that focused on the intensity of her emotional state and was intended to guide audiences to “best experience the uplifting effects of the pure abstract form” (Kasson 168). Further contributing to this effect were the pamphlets that the artist’s friend Miner Kellogg published to accompany the statue’s 1847-48 American tour, which Kellogg managed. The pamphlets brought together laudatory poems and reviews published in various newspapers and magazines, alongside essays of support by clergymen emphasizing the statue’s propriety and spiritual force.

This textual abstraction of the work makes it an ideal candidate for Sigourney’s meditation. Like the poetess’s untitled objects of ekphrasis, The Greek Slave is constructed in advance as an emotional experience rather than a physical struc-

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6 For more on the narrative building of The Greek Slave, see Kasson 167-70.
ture. And like these other works, the original source for Sigourney’s poem is unclear: the outpouring of poems and prose descriptions of the work in both local and national publications suggest that Sigourney’s inspiration was (at least in part) textual, while the possible visual sources were nearly as varied. The December 1857 issue of *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, for instance, centers on an announcement that the journal has bought a copy of the statue to give away to a subscriber in its annual award competition, and in anticipation of this event, prints several poetic and prose responses to the statue in addition to some full-page engravings of the work. This same issue includes a biography of Sigourney extending over two pages, a portrait of the poetess, and her ten-stanza quasi-ekphrastic poem “Greenwood Cemetery.” It is likely, then, that Sigourney saw this issue of the journal prior to the composition of her own poem, but even within this context, several of the ekphrastic descriptions may have been sources of influence. Where Sigourney’s relatively late poem sets itself apart from most other treatments of the work is in presenting the act of spectatorship as one that, rather than distancing viewers from the Ideal work, brings them closer to it. “Powers’s Greek Slave” both engages contemporary treatments and stresses the interchangeability of the spectator and the artwork that is a central factor of Sigourney’s ekphrastic canon.

Contemporary dialogues around the work and emotional exchange both come into play from the poem’s first line: “Be silent! Breathe not! Lest ye break the trance.” Entrancement was a common means of describing audiences of the statue, whom writers typically depicted as silenced and awe-struck. As a review from the 1847 *New York Courier and Enquirer* notes: “It is extremely interesting to watch the effect which the statue has upon all who come before it. Its presence is a magic circle within whose precincts all are held spell-bound and almost speechless” (qtd. in Kellogg 26). Such a “spell-bound” state also often applies to viewer descriptions of the statue itself. Most contemporary reviewers note the statue’s attitude of introspection: “the intense concentration of the brows, the resolution of the lips, and the sad abstraction of the features generally” (qtd. in Kellogg 27).

H. T. Tuckerman’s poem on the work even comments on the “rich and dreamy languor [that] holds thee in a grateful trance” (qtd in Kellogg 21). The “trance” of Sigourney’s first line can then refer to both audience and artwork. Emotion, even at this early point in the poem, is a free-floating entity.

The rest of the first stanza focuses on the statue’s trance-like absorption in abstracted memory and the speaker’s access to this emotion:

She thinketh of her Attic home; the leaves  
Of its green olives stir within her soul,  
And Love is sweeping o’er its deepest chords  
So mournfully. Ah! Who can weigh the wo  
Or wealth of memory in that breast sublime! (ll. 2-6)

The memories that the speaker can retrieve from the statue’s “soul” are intangible feelings rather than fully formed images. The concept of “love [...] sweeping o’er its deepest chords / So mournfully” is wholly abstract: the referent of “its” is unclear and “chords” has several seemingly applicable definitions. (Fittingly, one of these definitions is “a feeling or emotion,” as in the phrase ‘touched a chord.’) The last
line of the stanza—“Who can weigh the wo / Or wealth of memory in that breast sublime!”—underlines the unquantifiable nature of the thought that the speaker accesses, set in implicit contrast to the more tangible elements of the slave’s presentation, the physical details that Sigourney’s description carefully avoids.

This sense of the statue’s emotional weight contributed significantly to its popularity. Viewers generally understood that the figure inspiring the statue was destined for the Turkish harems which drew exoticist fascination. In choosing to depict a moment of contemplative repose between the violence of her past capture and the degradation of her future, Powers allowed viewers to experience the emotional power of the scene without any—or too much—indelicacy: “[Powers’s] Greek slave pauses on the threshold of a momentous change in her life; her future in the harem is the great unstated drama that gives the sculpture its poignancy” (Kasson 171). Unlike in many of the other artistic depictions of the harem in the early nineteenth century, the violence and sensuality of Powers’s scene remains implicit. This subtlety ties the statue to Sigourney’s general predilection for moments of moral introspection posed between moments of action, which we see develop in the poem’s next stanza:

Yet errs he not who calleth thee a slave,
Thou Christian maiden?
Gyves are on thy wrists;
But in thy soul a might of sanctity
That foils the oppressor, making to itself
A hiding-place from the sore ills of time. (ll. 7-12)

The “sanctity” of the figure’s soul in the fourth line of this stanza is embedded between the “gyves” on her wrists in the third line and the “oppressor” in the fifth line. Because “to foil” has secondary connotations of dishonoring or deflowering, this fifth line gestures toward the slave’s future, while the “gyves” of the third point back to the moment of her capture. The “sanctity” of her soul, signified in Powers’s statue by a cross dangling from her wrist, is the meditative stance that links and undoes the violence of both the past and the future. This emphasis on Christian contemplation reverses the power dynamic of slave and captor, finding in interiority the “hiding-place” that reality does not provide.

In the final lines of the poem, Sigourney similarly flips the positions of viewer and art-object:

What is the chain to thee, who hast the power
To bind in admiration all who gaze
Upon thine eloquent brow and matchless form?
We are ourselves thy slaves, most Beautiful! (ll. 12-15)

With this final assertion, the transformation that began in the poem’s first line with the order to “Be silent!” is complete. As speechless viewers, we are reduced to the power of a “gaze” while the art-object, with her “eloquent brow,” has gained the power of expression. Her physical chains become meaningless in light of her spiritual powers while our actual freedoms become immaterial in light of the bonds of our helpless “admiration.” That the statue is able to “bind” us by her beauty signals that our own transformation into art-object is complete. Not only
are we chained in the act of gazing, we are also silent and breathless, slaves to
the art-object we thought we were encountering from above. This transformation
once again encapsulates Sigourney’s most basic principle of art spectatorship: an
audience can read a work only by embodying it.

This viewing model had particular resonances with female antebellum audi-
ences. The connection between women’s bodies and the marble nudes of Classical
statuary was commonly made during this period, fueled in part by prescriptive
literature and women’s magazines which used classical figures as models of fash-
ion, hairstyle, and correct posture. Images of the Venus de Medici as the natu-
ral, straight-spined woman became commonplace in the anti-corset movement to
which Sigourney and many others contributed. The connection could cause self-
consciousness for the female viewer of statuary, who had only recently been per-
mitted into galleries of sculpture (Winterer 157-58). It also, however, permitted
women to take on the novel position of natural connoisseurs. Clara Cushman, for
instance, in her review of The Greek Slave, calls it “a work which only [women]
can truly appreciate” (qtd. in Kellogg 29). In her article on the statue, Joy Kasson
notes a similar phenomenon in regard to one of the engravings that appeared in the
December 1857 issue of The Cosmopolitan Art Journal, showing the statue in the
Dusseldorf gallery: “Unlike other depictions of art spectatorship published at the
same time, this engraving shows women actively looking at the sculpture, appear-
ing to explain and interpret it to their male companions, who look not at the sculp-
ture but at them. The sculpture appears larger than life, and its proximity enlivens
the women who surround it” (183). The women in the engraving, in other words,
take on precisely the didactic roles which works, such as Sigourney’s ekphrasis,
prime them for—even as they themselves become elements in an artistic image.

This image of didactic poses transported into the gallery aligns perfectly with
Sigourney’s own model of viewership. Sigourney’s ekphrasis, which stresses emo-
tion and gesture over a particularized object and places emphasis on the disem-
odied ‘eye’ of spectatorship over the individual perception of the speaker’s ‘I,’
makes art available to anyone willing to enter into its imaginative space. This
entrance, though, requires that readers consider the sight of the image as a direct
encounter, a movement that was at the time of Sigourney’s writing both nostalgic
and forward-looking. On the one hand, it drew on a model of schooling, based
in home education, that was becoming increasingly outmoded. On the other, it
foresaw a means of transferring the emotional bonds of pupil and teacher to a
depersonalized print sphere. And in so doing, it also found application in the mu-
seum culture that, as the massive success of The Greek Slave’s U.S. tour indicat-
ed, would have an increasing part in the American art world. In this sense, then,
even as Sigourney’s ekphrasis did not reflect the gallery culture of her own time,
it could anticipate a moment later in the century when this sphere too would align
with the inclusive spirit of her own sentimentalized art objects.
Works Cited


