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Women Artists and Activism in Ellen Clayton's "English Female Artists" (1876)

≈ Abstract

In her biographical compilation *English Female Artists* (1876), Ellen Clayton documented the lives of many talented and hard-working women as a means of bringing to light and celebrating their role in the history of art. Moreover, she also explored these artists' biographies in order to problematize more general issues, thus entering into one of the most significant initiatives of the period: the movement for women's rights, with proposals including the improvement of women's education, their access to art academies, and the amelioration of laws regarding marriage, family and employment. Of particular interest are the lives of celebrated artists who were also leading activists in the period, such as Laura Herford, Eliza Bridell-Fox and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. Therefore, this study aims to explore not only Clayton's approach to female artists within the specific domain of art, but also the incursions that they made into broad social and political issues regarding women. Finally, the presence in various biographies of the term "sisters" is particularly revealing in that Clayton, through her text, could be said to be assembling as many women as possible, not just artists, as a means of fighting for their rights together as sisters.

Palabras clave:

Ellen Clayton; *English Female Artists*; women artists; women's rights movement; Victorian period

≈ Resumen

En su compilación biográfica sobre mujeres artistas *English Female Artists* (1876), Ellen Clayton documentó las vidas de numerosas mujeres talentosas y muy trabajadoras para reivindicar su participación en la historia del arte. Además, también aprovechó las biografías de estas artistas para abordar temas más generales, adhiriéndose así a una de las iniciativas más relevantes del período: el movimiento por los derechos de las mujeres, con propuestas que incluyen el progreso en la educación de las mujeres, su acceso a las academias de arte y la mejora de leyes sobre el matrimonio, la familia y el empleo. En particular, cabe reseñar las biografías de artistas célebres que también fueron activistas destacadas de la época, como Laura Herford, Eliza Bridell-Fox y Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. Así, este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar no solo cómo enfoca Clayton el análisis de la artista en su propio ámbito específico, sino también las incursiones de la autora en temas sociales y políticos más generales relacionados con las mujeres. Finalmente, la presencia en varias biografías de un término significativo, "hermanas", es particularmente revelador, ya que Clayton podría estar intentando reunir a través de este texto a la mayor cantidad posible de mujeres, no solo artistas, para luchar todas juntas como hermanas por sus derechos.

Keywords:

Ellen Clayton; *English Female Artists*; mujeres artistas; movimiento por los derechos de las mujeres; época victoriana

Ellen Clayton published her two-volume biographical collection *English Female Artists* in 1876, and was able to assemble a considerable number of women therein. However, as she states in the initial paragraphs of the work, women painters “have left but faintly impressed footprints on the sands of time” (1876, I, 2)¹. Thus, the main purpose of her collection was to recover and celebrate both past and contemporary female artists. The former were few in number, and many had fallen into oblivion, principally as a result of the difficulties that they had experienced in their artistic endeavors, in that, as Clayton recurrently notes, art was not regarded an appropriate practice for them. Considering its title, the scope of Clayton’s collection is apparently narrow, in that it refers to English women artists in particular. However, she does not in fact restrict the women in her collection to those from England, but includes women from the whole of Great Britain, and even from other nations, provided that they have spent a significant part of their lives in Britain and have made considerable achievements in art or in the improvement of the circumstances of women artists. Clayton’s *English Female Artists* is divided into two volumes, the first comprising biographies of women artists until the first half of the nineteenth century and the second devoted to the remainder of this century up to the publication of the text. The two volumes have different organizational schemes. In the first, there are several sections describing the history of painting in Britain chronologically, followed by the biographies of the most remarkable women painters from each period. Around twenty-five women artists are portrayed rather extensively, while over a hundred are just recorded in a few lines. In the second volume, by contrast, 108 women’s biographies are organized in alphabetical order in various chapters which deal with specific genres and the artists associated with these, such as figure painters (36 artists), landscape painters (21), portrait and miniature painters (8), painters of flowers, fruit and still life (17), animal painters (6), humorous designers (4), decorative artists (2) and amateurs (14).

Interestingly, just a century later, in 1971, Linda Nochlin would choose a pointed title for her groundbreaking article on art history from a feminist perspective: “Why have there not been great women artists?”, establishing a similar issue to the one addressed by Clayton. In the same manner and following the tenets of second-wave feminism, equivalent recognition and recovery work was done by Sheila Rowbotham in *Hidden from History. Rediscovering Women in History from the Seventeenth-Century to the Present* (1974) and Dale Spender in *Mothers of the Novel. 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (1986). Thus, there is clearly a tradition of different female intellectuals and scholars, who have contributed to the significant and necessary issue of recovering women from the past; a tradition which started with Christine de Pizan and her *La Cité des Dames* at the beginning of the fifteenth century and has persisted until the present, as the extensive work of such scholars as Gina Luria Walker proves (2013; 2018).

In the collection under study here, Clayton does not restrict herself to describing the limitations that women had to face in terms of their artistic activities or careers, but also used their biographies to problematize broader issues regarding women’s role and place in society. In this way she entered one of the most significant public debates of the day, one which the Victorians termed the “Woman Question”. In Clayton’s text, women from different historical periods stand shoulder to shoulder as a means of providing the reader with admirable instances of women’s

endeavors. However, the author took every opportunity to describe their activities “beyond the frame” of their work of art, in Deborah Cherry’s words (2000), and thus to highlight the difficulties that women artists faced in a repressive society, and how they struggled for rights such as education, but also for financial and marital equality, which would allow them to work and thus provide for themselves and their families. Most importantly, some of the artists in Clayton’s collection were also renowned activists, such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827–1891), who was at the forefront of many of the feminist campaigns of her time.

Ellen Clayton

Eleanor Creathorne Clayton (1834–1900), also known as Ellen Clayton, was a writer but also an artist. For this reason she did include her own biography in the text: “There is always a certain personal interest attaching to the writer of a book; therefore a slight account of this otherwise insignificant designer may be acceptable to some readers” (1876, II, 324). Her own presence in the collection allows us a perspective on aspects of her life which might otherwise be difficult to find. She was born in Dublin, into a family of artists on her father’s side, but her family moved to London when she was seven years old. Her life, as described, was one of constant work, spent either writing or drawing designs of various kinds.

As a writer, Clayton cultivated various genres. She wrote “a series of biographies for young ladies, to be issued in monthly parts” (II, 326). In fact, apart from the compilation of women artists’ lives examined here, she published biographical collections on noble women, women of the Reformation, opera singers and women warriors². Throughout her life, Clayton wrote regularly for the periodical press, in particular *London Society*, *Judy*, and several other illustrated periodicals. Yet she also contributed to periodicals with sketches: “humorous designs ..., always drawing the subjects on the wood herself” (328). At the same time, she published at least three novels and various books for children, together with designs in water colours for comic calendars, valentine and conversation cards.

In light of these biographical details, Clayton, like many other women, found a place for her literary and artistic activity mainly in the periodical press, an ever-growing market during this period, as the astonishing figures found in Victorian directories of periodicals demonstrate (Fraser 2012, 58). As this thriving and rapidly evolving market also became more democratic, women were able to develop a professional career and make a living out of it, yet they continued to suffer the condescension of male critics, or indeed their disdain (Fraser et al. 2003, 37). Clayton in particular benefited from her family’s involvement in the periodical business and cultivated several journalistic genres, including illustrations, as noted above. As she herself acknowledged, she was well connected within the world of publishing of the period, and more importantly, she was able to forge a name for herself because publishers often approached her for work. It was ultimately this kind of privileged access that allowed Clayton to begin publishing collections of women’s biographies.

In terms of artistic fields, Clayton worked actively in those genres associated with the press industry. Yet the dedication of *English Female Artists* to Elizabeth Thomson, Lady Butler (1846–1933), one of the most remarkable painters of the period,

~ demonstrates that she was also acquainted with prestigious artistic circles of her time. Lady Butler achieved fame as a painter of military battle scenes and in the dedication Clayton mentions her most celebrated painting, *Calling the Roll after an Engagement, Crimea*, better known as *The Roll Call* (1874), relating its title to the list of the women she would record in her text: “A roll call of honourable names” (I, i).

Women, Art and Biography in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

Women art critics and art historians of the nineteenth century have suffered the neglect of modern scholars; however, recent studies, such as Clarke (2005), Losano (2008) and Fraser (2014), have contributed to the field with rigorous and thoughtful work. They have demonstrated the existence of a notable number of women who handled diverse genres and who wrote extensively about art. Those women, including Anna Jameson (1794–1860), Alice Meynell (1847–1922) and Ellen Clayton herself, had to read and assess a significant number of works on art history and current critical art studies, not only from their country and in their language, but also from the rest of Europe and in other languages, in order to publish their own studies. As Walker has noted, they responded, as other female historians had done before, to the absence of art histories which included female authorities with their own works (2018, 5). Indeed, the emergence of art history as a new discipline in the nineteenth century worked in women’s favor, providing them with the possibility of a new professional activity, in that this branch of knowledge was still in the process of defining itself (Fraser 2014, 12). Moreover, in the Victorian period old notions of art started to collapse, and thus a notable number of women were able to enter a shifting art world, which provoked a greater visibility of the woman artist, with Clayton’s collection being one consequence of this emerging context.

In the Victorian period, often referred to as the golden age of biography, a great diversity of biographical texts were published in a variety of formats, such as books, journals, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and specialized compendia, as well as accounts of the lives of diverse individuals, including eminent women, warriors, doctors, singers and artists (Altick 1979, 77–78). In fact, among the many biographical texts that emerged during this century, collections of biographies, and in particular collections of women’s biographies, became especially popular. According to Booth, between 1830 and 1940 more than nine hundred all-female collections of biographies were published in English (2004, 2). The feminization of this genre was clear, in that it was a type of historical text cultivated mainly by women and aimed at women (Spongberg 2002, 109–10). As the number of all-female galleries increased during the second half of the nineteenth century, women’s lives started to be grouped together, not just because the women excelled in some specific way or another, but because they stood out in a particular domain, art in the present case. Hence, more and more texts of this type were available for a growing number of women readers. Besides, commercial trends were crucial for the popularity of biographical writings, as they were conditioned by readers’ tastes, but also by the financial needs of printers and authors (Burstein 2004, 100).

The collections published by Clayton were addressed primarily to a female readership. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, the women’s literacy rate reached almost 90 percent (Lyons 1999, 313). The expansion of the reading public, particularly

of certain specific groups of readers, plus the mass publication of books, was instrumental in the creation of special texts addressed to special audiences, namely women and children, and indeed young girls. Even though women were mainly seen as readers of fiction, this was considered a dangerous pastime, and the bourgeois educational agenda thus advised them to read other types of texts, such as biographies. According to medical and psychological theories of the period, young women were more predisposed to identify themselves with the heroines of the texts they read; therefore, female biographies were deemed particularly inspiring (Flint 1993, 38). Indeed, collections of biographies like those by Clayton often served as gift books or school prize books for girls (Booth 2004, 29). Clayton herself explains in her autobiography that her collections were used largely for this purpose (II, 327).

Victorian society was governed by an ideology of separate spheres, which meant that women’s sole role was at home, while men were in charge of public affairs. Women had to exert their influence by providing the required attention and comfort for their family so that children could be raised and educated properly. However, observing the lives of Victorian women, and particularly those of female artists, it is evident that the boundaries between the public and private spheres were fluid, with more and more women “constantly testing, negotiating and remaking” them (Morgan 2007, 4). Moreover, analysing female intellectuals’ existing practices during this period, it is palpable that they were “keenly aware of the obstacles that intellectual misogyny perpetuated” and had to resort to innovative approaches (Walker 2018, 5). Thus, some women historians gave testimony to women’s agency in the public arena, while retaining the main assumptions of the ideology of the separate spheres. They recorded women’s values according to patriarchal beliefs, highlighting their nursing abilities, compassion and fortitude, but also portraying them as public individuals capable of building a better future for themselves, as the women artists in Clayton’s collection illustrate. Conservative sectors, and particularly men, were concerned with women’s increasing presence in a variety of new spaces, including the arts and sciences, in that this might threaten the male status quo. As a consequence, critics and reviewers, who were mainly men, frequently adopted a patronizing attitude towards women writers and artists, considering their work to be of lesser quality, as opposed to those with masculine qualities, typified as including penetration, strength, vigor and impartiality (Maitzen 1998, 12). Such an attitude is exhibited in a review published just after the publication of Clayton’s text in *Art Journal*: “Without any attempt at Art-Criticism, Miss Clayton tells the stories, long or brief as they may happen to be, of our Art sisters very pleasantly and very creditably both to them and to herself” (quoted in Fraser 2014, 23).

The second half of the nineteenth century was also remarkable in terms of the interest in art as reflected in the proliferation of museums and art galleries. In this regard, Hoberman notes that in the middle of the century there were fewer than sixty museums in Britain, while in 1887 the numbers had grown to more than 240, thanks to new legislation which permitted the use of public funds for the creation of such institutions (2016, 111). Additionally, the audience for art and the interest in learning about art expanded significantly, as did the appetite for knowledge about the lives of artists (Fraser 2014, 12). Thus, the public presence of women artists increased and they became the “strongest source of female social and creative potential” (Losano 2008, 1–2), which is clearly illustrated in Clayton’s compilation.

Two of the most influential women in the history of art, Angelika Kauffmann (1741–1807) and Mary Moser (1744–1819), occupy a relevant space in Clayton's text. They were not English, but were "the only females ever considered worthy of walking in the ranks of the Forty" (I, 298), that is, the forty artists who founded the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1768. Curiously enough, when the painter Johann Zoffany portrayed all the founding members of the Royal Academy in the painting *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771–1772), both Moser and Kauffmann were physically absent, appearing instead in two portraits on the right-hand wall in the picture. They were excluded from the painting due to the presence of two nude men sitting for the artists; thus, they are represented paradoxically as objects or models, rather than as agents of artistic works (Pollock 2003, 64). According to Amanda Vickery, Zoffany's renowned painting epitomizes "the ambivalent recognition and conditional institutional support extended to female artists" (2016, n. pag.).

As noted above, Clayton mentions the scarcity of women painters in Britain on the initial pages of her text, which might also be the motivation for including not only such foreign artists as Kauffmann and Moser, but also Susannah Hornebolt (1503–c.1554), Lavinia Teerlinc (1520–1576), Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–c.1656) and Maria Varelst (1680–1744), to mention but a few. They usually visited and stayed in the British Isles in order to work for the English monarchs, as the most admired schools of painting were on the Continent. Moreover, Clayton laments the fact that many of the artists, although English, are of foreign origin: "It is a little strange, and might perhaps be somewhat mortifying, to find that so few of our lady artists are of direct English descent" (II, 135).

Early in her biographical compendium, Clayton affirms the need to recover and dignify the figure of the woman artist. Later on, when recording the life of Anne Killigrew (1660–1685), she articulates this idea in a more detailed way, mentioning art historians' oblivion; but also, among other things, underlining the silent and tranquil personality of most artists, as well as their habitual amateurism. However, the fundamental role of patriarchal oppression in shaping women artists' life choices is also implicit:

Furthermore, nineteenth-century biographers, and particularly women, when designing their texts, had one main purpose in mind: to inspire readers by means of worthy women's lives, following what Maitzen labels the "rhetoric of exemplarity" (1998, 48). Clayton does not explicitly declare this, but Elizabeth Ellet, who had also collected biographies of women artists some years before, did formulate such an idea in the preface to her text:

It is certainly a remarkable fact that – with the exception of one or two queens, some leading literary women and actresses, and a few of the most distinguished heroines – the historians, the letter-writers, the biographers, even the diarists, have been persistently mute regarding the sayings and everyday doings of eminent Englishwomen. Scarcely a witty phrase, an illustrative incident, a trait beginning with the familiar "One day," has been hastily jotted down. Of her female artists, the muse of English history has been curiously reticent. We feel as if in presence of a circle of wax models; we see the outward form, may chance to come

upon traces of much extolled work, but the difficulty is to discover what the silent, toiling student, seated tranquilly in front of her easel, is really like, even if we are told she was one of the wittiest and most delightful of women. A dusty niche in a dry "Biographical Dictionary," or "Memoirs of Learned Ladies," does not enable us to believe in them as realities. (I, 66–7)

The layout and approach of the biographies in Clayton's text vary considerably depending on the subject, this presumably being a consequence of the quantity of information available and gathered by her. In this regard, she repeatedly notes the scarcity of data and materials about these women's lives and her difficulties in constructing interesting biographies for most of them. For instance, she claims about one of these women that: "In the case of this gifted young artist, there is absolutely nothing in the way of story to tell, beyond the two facts, already so largely known,

The aim has been simply to show what woman has done, with the general conditions favorable or unfavorable to her efforts [...]. Should the perusal of my book inspire with courage and resolution any woman who aspires to overcome difficulties in the achievement of honorable independence, or should it lead to a higher general respect for the powers of women and their destined position in the realm of Art, my object will be accomplished. (1859, vi)

that she is passionately devoted to her art and perseveringly industrious" (II, 133). The arduous work of female painters is indeed commonplace in the text, and Clayton underlines the fact that it is thanks to their constant effort that they have attained a well-earned place in public life, and also as professionals and as members of different academies. Still, there is a long way to go:

Most of the women described were born into families of artists and learnt their skills from relatives, as was the case with Kauffman and Moser, whose fathers were also painters. Many women also had the opportunity to meet other artists and received lessons from family friends. In some cases, however, they were not allowed to study, or indeed it was considered unnecessary for a gifted girl to learn or practice drawing because she was already able to do it well enough. This was the case with Louise Jopling (1843–1933): "Although always fond of drawing, she was never permitted to cultivate her taste, her father considering it 'a selfish amusement'"

It cannot be denied that since the days of Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser, and the female honorary members of the same period, the Academy has studiously ignored the existence of women artists, leaving them to work in the cold shade of utter neglect. Not even once has a helping hand been extended, not once has the most trifling reward been given for highest merit and industry ... it is only by slow, laborious degrees that women are winning the right to enter the lists at all, and are then viewed with half contemptuous indulgence. (I, 388–9)

(II, 107). Yet since painting was not a mere entertainment for the majority of these women, they achieved their goals

and were able to create admired works of art after much perseverance and effort. The case of Frances Reynolds (1729–1807), Sir Joshua Reynolds' sister, is particularly surprising, as was her brother's attitude towards her artistic pursuits:

Frances was resolved to be a miniature painter, in spite of the contemptuous opinion expressed of her attempts by her brother. Where, or from whom, she had picked up her theories and practice of painting on ivory, or at what time she had commenced her studies, it is impossible to say. In St. Martin's Lane, however, she was surrounded by an artistic atmosphere, and heard plenty of artistic talk. She copied her brother's pictures assiduously in water colours, but he never gave her the slightest instruction, and hated to see her at work. (I, 153)

Nevertheless, in Clayton's opinion talent was also instrumental, and she quotes one of the greatest literary and art critics of the nineteenth century, William Hazlitt, in stating this idea:

The great secret of our curiosity respecting the lives of painters is, that they seem to be a different race of beings, and to speak a different language from ourselves [...]. The greater secret of this "curiosity" is surely the feeling that there is a divine link of spiritual kinship between ourselves and the creator of a noble or beautiful painting. It is a friend, and no stranger, who has painted the "Ecce Homo", "The Gevartius", "The Last Supper", "The Shepherd's Chief Mourner", "The Infant Samuel", "The Old Temeraire". (II, 88)

The fruit of these women's hard work and talent is seen in the lists of their paintings – some of which are very long – that Clayton includes at the end of each biography. Furthermore, women painters cultivated a vast array of genres, as the different sections of the second part of the compendium illustrate; however, they were particularly attracted to landscape and still-life painting. As Clayton observes, nature painting was required in private teaching and many girls and young women began by painting landscapes and elements from nature, such as flowers and plants (191); on the other hand, a genre such as animal painting was not a favored area among women (303), perhaps again due to the social preconception about women's inclination toward ornamental art.

Concerning figure painters, studying the nude was particularly difficult for women, as it required attending art academies and schools, and also because it was not considered decent and appropriate for women (Nochlin 1988, 159; Pollock 2003, 62). Even though the second half of the nineteenth century brought about great advancement, Clayton notes in one of the biographies that this widespread prejudice was still effective in the 1860s: "this branch of art [figure painting] was much against her father's inclination – he shared the common prejudice against such study for a woman" (II, 15). In order to paint human figures, Clayton observes that some women had to gather in private houses and arrange a kind of clandestine school in which the model could sit undressed for them (83). The author also notes that women did not generally cultivate the genre that she herself most often practiced: humorous sketches. The reason, in her opinion, was once again related to gender differences, as men were thought to possess a

sense of humor, while women preferred to be admired for their wit, this being an attribute well-regarded in social gatherings: "Wit is fine and elegant: wit shines and scintillates in drawing-rooms and boudoirs, but Humour may run the risk of stepping over the boundary lines of vulgarity" (319).

Women Artists and the Women's Rights Movement

The female artist has traditionally been a highly controversial figure, in that women have been regarded, firstly, as the muse or model for artists, and not as the painter; secondly, as innately artistic, being particularly inclined to natural beauty and imagination, but incapable of practicing high-art genres (Losano 2008, 2). Precisely because of its controversial nature, the image of the woman artist constituted "a nodal point for discussion of numerous problems relating to women and social realm" (8). Clayton's text is a clear instance of this and, in her numerous biographies, issues including women's artistic education, art training, professionalization, their access to academies, and their financial situation, among others, are discussed. More importantly, all these issues can be easily associated with more general problems which were arising in Victorian society regarding women: education, marriage and family, employment, friendship and networks, law, politics and unionization.

The perseverance and effort that Clayton mentions as the central attributes of women in their artistic life were also exhibited by some of them when defending women's rights. Given their common interests, various women artists participated in similar organizations and projects, and attended the same schools, academies and exhibitions. Clayton herself reveals how she became acquainted with other female artists while visiting the National Gallery and the British Museum as a student (II, 325–6). This led to the emergence of public and private networks and associations of women based on art, which would be instrumental for the development of feminism in the second half of the nineteenth century (Cherry 2000, 21–4; Morgan 2007, 5, 8). At this moment, women began a concerted struggle against the rules imposed on them by patriarchal society, and indeed Clayton gave voice to this oppressive situation in her text, alluding to "The prejudice against women of any position in society taking any profession but the elegant one of gentlewomen" (II, 152). This made yet more necessary the alliance of women to face their plight:

The moment she dares to cross that Rubicon which separates so widely the professional artist from the fashionable amateur, she forgets, more or less, her social position, and is thenceforth barely tolerated, if not altogether cut by society as an inevitable consequence of having set its law at defiance, and outraged its time-honoured conventionalities. All the fame in the world could not reconcile a family to the possession or infliction of such a member. (153)

In *English Female Artists*, Clayton refers with the above words to her homeland, Ireland, as a distinctive culture, where those prejudices against women were even harsher. Indeed, although being part of the British Empire at that moment, in Ireland, together with family and education, religion was another key element that worked against women's active participation in public life. The ideology of separate spheres was constantly preached

from the pulpit by both the Catholic and Protestant clergy. It was a common assumption until recently, for instance, that women's rights were better protected by keeping them at home, since working women might be a threat to the family and thus to the interests of both men and women (Earner-Byrne and Urquhart 2017, 313, 316). However, in Clayton's subsequent collection of biographies, which grouped women warriors under the title *Female Warriors. Memorials of Female Valour and Heroism, from the Mythological Ages to the Present Era* (1879), she explored in greater depth the prejudice against active and assertive women, as an issue that affected all women, irrespective of their origins:

Popular Prejudice, having decided that woman is a poor, weak creature, credulous, easily influenced, holds that she is of necessity timid; that if she were allowed as much as a voice in the government of her native country, she would stand appalled if war were even hinted at. If it be proved by hard facts that woman is not a poor, weak creature, then she must be reprimanded as being masculine. To brand a woman masculine, is supposed to be quite sufficient to drive her cowering back to her broidery-frame and her lute. (I, 3)

Clayton and many women like her did not fear popular prejudice and dared to pursue their desire to become trained artists, even professional ones. Nevertheless, family and domestic duties were an additional burden for women artists, and Clayton mentions marriage as a general cause for interrupting or even giving up an artistic career (II, 34). Moreover, motherhood was particularly critical, and Clayton expressed it by means of a very pertinent claim: "Babies, that truly feminine impediment" (108).

As observed above, receiving tuition was vital in order to achieve professional status in the arts. Interestingly, one of the most curious locations in which women could be instructed in artistic practices was that provided by Eliza Bridell-Fox (1824–1903), whom Clayton describes as "not only an artist, but one who takes an enthusiastic interest in the progress of those who study art, more especially in female students. By her vigorous efforts to free the hard and laborious way, she has done much to aid the upward pilgrimage of girls now studying" (II, 80–1). Indeed,

She ... started an evening class for ladies, conducted on co-operative principles, for the practice of drawing from life [...]. This class Miss Fox commenced for her own practice and benefit as much as for that of others, and the first year she shared with the rest of the class the needful expenses, her father kindly lending a large room – his library – for the meetings. (83)

These classes run by Fox were frequented by several female artists whose biographies are recorded by Clayton, in particular Laura Herford (1831–1870) and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, who, apart from being skilled artists, were leading activists in the women's rights movement (Cherry 2000, 24). As artists themselves, one of their main concerns was to ensure women's access to art academies. Clayton mentions Laura Herford as the woman to whom all female students of art owed the most, and narrates a curious episode during the initial steps of her own struggle:

Lord Lyndhurst, in a speech to the Royal Academy dinner, spoke of the advantages offered by the Academy Schools to 'all her Majesty's subjects'. Miss Herford thereupon addressed a letter to him, in which she pointed out the anomaly that half of her Majesty's subjects, those namely of her Majesty's own sex, were entirely excluded from the schools. (II, 3–4)

Clayton subsequently mentions a well-known episode in which Herford sent a drawing to the Academy signed only with her initials, and it was admitted. When her real name and sex were unveiled, Herford was nonetheless given permission to study. Hence, "this may be considered the first important opening to women to share in the art educational privileges accorded to their brothers" (84). Once women obtained permission to enter art schools and academies, they participated enthusiastically, as Clayton's text clearly illustrates.

Clayton also exalts the role of a distinguished woman painter, Bodichon, who devoted her life "to right the wrongs under which so many helpless sisters suffer" (167). She was in fact the promoter of the most relevant campaigns for women's rights in the period. Along with other influential women – the writers Anna Jameson, Mary Howitt, Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among others –, she presented a petition in the House of Lords to guarantee that women could keep their own property and money in unhappy marriages (168). Her efforts also addressed the improvement of the education of girls from the low classes, in that she offered them instruction at a modest price (169–70). Bodichon's lifelong concern for women's education is also illustrated in her participation in the foundation of Girton College, Cambridge, "the first institution of the kind opened in England where women could obtain the same educational advantages offered to men at universities" (173). In Clayton's biography of Bodichon, her activities as a writer are also mentioned, as she wrote "papers and pamphlets on the disabilities of women", as well as contributions to the *Englishwoman's Magazine*, one of the first magazines exclusively devoted to women's issues, which was "printed and supported" by her (175).

Bodichon's publications addressed her main concerns regarding women's circumstances, with titles such as *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1854), in which she graphically described the adverse legal consequences of marriage for women: "she loses her separate existence, and is merged in that of her husband" (1854, 13). In 1857 she published an essay entitled *Women and Work* (1857) in order to vindicate women's right to work and, years later, a brief treatise on women's suffrage, *Reasons of the Enfranchisement of Women* (1866). In the latter, Bodichon introduced the inventory of powerful reasons to justify her position with these words:

That a respectable, orderly, independent body in the state should have no voice, and no influence recognized by the law, in the election of the representatives of the people, while they are otherwise acknowledged as responsible citizens, are eligible for many public offices, and required to pay all taxes, is an anomaly which seems to require some explanation. (1866, 2)

By the time Clayton's text was published, the women's suffrage movement had begun in Britain and a women's suffrage petition had already been presented in Parliament (1866), signed among others by Bodichon herself. Yet Clayton does not mention this remarkable historical event. Nevertheless, she was acquainted with the suffrage movement and with some of the women who were involved in it, as some years later, when she published her last biographical collection on women warriors, she dedicated the text to Madame Ronniger (1879, vii). Clayton shared her artistic interests with Ronniger, in that the latter was both an artist and the editor of the journal *Aesthetic Review and Art Observer*; however, Ronniger was also a well-known suffragette, who participated assiduously in the movement by giving lectures on women's suffrage throughout the country during the 1870s (Crawford 1999, 606–7).

Clayton, though, decided not to go further, and did not integrate such revolutionary ideas as women's right to vote into her gallery of women artists. The intended audience of the text might usefully be taken into consideration here, since, as already mentioned, texts of this type were often used as gift books for girls, and parents and school boards would have considered the inclusion of such information as excessively radical. Financial reasons should also be taken into account, in the sense that Clayton was commissioned by a printing manager to write the book, due to the increasing popularity of the genre and hence with an eye on the substantial profits that such a book might make. Most importantly, despite Clayton's general support for the women's rights movement in the text, certain biographies include comments and remarks that corroborate the fact that gender differences were deeply rooted in Victorian society. On the one hand, when describing the artistic works of some of the women, the author notes attributes such as tenderness, charm and delicacy, which might be seen as references to so-called "feminine" qualities in a patriarchal society, and thus suggesting a conscious or unconscious bias in her artistic assessment. On the other hand, Clayton effusively praises the women she portrays in terms of their artistic skills and achievements, but it should also be noted that occasionally she applauds their domestic accomplishments as exemplary qualities, as the sources she uses did. This paragraph about the life of Mary Beale (1633–1699) is particularly illustrative:

One of those happy lives, hers, full of sweetness and dignity and matronly purity, which it is next to impossible for

a biographer to render "interesting". No pathos throws its romantic shadow over her – no gay humour or bright originality lights up her sober figure as she stands before her easel. The most remarkable event is some new picture begun or "finish". The "dearest heart" of her husband, the admired mother of her "boys" and "daughter Mall", the centre of a large, appreciative circle of friends, she is only unlike thousands of other contented English wives and mothers in her distinguishing artistic talent. (I, 51)

Conclusion

In her biographical collection *English Female Artists*, Clayton presented a notable group of women artists, as well as information about them, creating a kind of mosaic in which multiple women's biographies were disposed. Undoubtedly, these women's artistic abilities merited description, and Clayton tried her best to do so, even when little material was available. Yet more important, perhaps, is the way in which the author stresses the many obstacles that women had to overcome, these provoked chiefly by reasons of gender, and affecting not only women's education and their access to art schools and academies, but also their difficulties in other critical aspects of their lives. As occurred in early compendia of women's biographies, including hagiographies, catalogues and defenses of women, in which women were seen to constantly suffer adverse circumstances with resilience, Clayton tries to foster empathy among her readership, which, being overwhelmingly female, was itself the victim of patriarchal society and its rules. It is remarkable that on occasions the author refers to the group of artists she reviews as "artistic sisters" (I, 72; II, 135), "sister artists" (146), "professional sisters" (I, 358), and even "a sisterhood of artists" (40). She thus expresses the close ties by which all these women are bonded, creating the notion of a sisterhood in which Clayton includes herself, in that her own life is also a piece in this large biographical mosaic. Furthermore, in Clayton's opinion, they belong to a larger group constituted by "sisters of the pen" and "of the buskin" (2). Ultimately, Clayton, along with many other female biographers of this period, uses the figures of remarkable women, in this case artists, to denounce the situation of women and to call for their rights. Henceforth, inspired by the examples of the women portrayed in this collection, female readers could join an actual or imagined community of women, all of them being sisters with artistic aspirations, yet also with significant social and political responsibilities.

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Notes

¹ All subsequent quotations from Clayton's *English Female Artists* refer to this edition.

² On the topic of women warriors' biographies, see Lasa Álvarez (2019).