

“My name is the right one”: Lady Elizabeth (Rigby) Eastlake’s Professional Art Criticism

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Writing in her 1876 essay, “The Letters and Works of Michael Angelo,” Elizabeth (Rigby) Eastlake (1809-1893) argues that Michelangelo’s letters help us to see the artist and the Renaissance without the “highly coloured glasses” used by prior art historians, who superficially “obscure the faults of the period” (124). Eastlake aims to see beyond the legends promulgated by Giorgio Vasari and his Victorian followers, considering the actual challenges faced by famous Renaissance artists. Michelangelo’s preoccupation with money, his constant struggles to be paid by Italy’s rulers is in Eastlake’s analysis indicative of a culture that failed to allow financial independence to even its best artists. As we will see, Eastlake’s criticisms of the Italian Renaissance betray an anti-Catholic bias. However, she was primarily motivated by a desire to establish herself as an art historian focused on expertise and carefully researched facts about artists and artworks.

Eastlake’s emphasis on the art historical fact was central to her strategy of establishing herself as a professional essayist. Eastlake began her career in the 1830s and early 1840s as a travel writer and translator, two common ways in which women entered the publishing world. Women, with their supposedly more keen observational skills, were thought to be especially suitable for travel writing, a genre which often referenced local artworks and was important to the later development of art criticism. But

as art writing became increasingly masculinized beginning with the emergence of John Ruskin in 1843, women critics sought to differentiate themselves. As she began to focus on art writing in the 1840s, Eastlake claimed to be more committed to the art historical fact than such canonical male critics as Ruskin and Vasari. This factualism included the precise attribution of artworks as well as the analysis of the material conditions under which artworks were produced. This art historical expertise, pioneered by Anna Jameson and significantly formulated by Eastlake and Emilia Dilke, threatened male art critics (Ruskin belittled the contributions of all three) and exacerbated at least one Victorian fear about professionalization: that women would lose their feminine qualities by catering to the culture's growing need for scholarly expertise. As a result, women critics were often both sexualized by their male counterparts and criticized for their factual approaches.

While distinguishing herself from Vasari and Ruskin, Eastlake helped shape two developments in professional Victorian art criticism: the analysis of artistic form and an art critical writing style that could rival even the most famous artworks for the attention of readers and viewers. Eastlake argued that she was both a more precise writer and more concerned with formal analysis than Ruskin, the figure often considered the first professional art critic in Britain. Beginning her career as an essayist on a variety of subjects, Eastlake gradually gained expertise in specific art historical fields, especially German culture. In doing so, Eastlake marks a key change in the nineteenth-century essay: from a focus on the reporting of observations to the conveyance of specialized knowledge in prose accessible to a broad audience. Despite her status as one of the earliest professional art critics in Britain, Eastlake has rarely been studied in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. My aim in this essay, however, is not simply to recover Eastlake as a neglected woman writer, but to show her larger importance to Victorian art commentary. While we usually imagine professional Victorian art criticism as dominated by Ruskin, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and their male

followers, Eastlake demonstrates both the early influence of women critics and an alternative aesthetic approach centered on the history of art.

I. Elizabeth Eastlake and Definitions of Professional Victorian Art Criticism

Elizabeth Eastlake was born in 1809 to Dr. Edward Rigby, an obstetrician, and his second wife, Anne (Palgrave) Rigby. Beginning in 1827, Elizabeth spent two years in Heidelberg, learning the German language and culture. She traveled to Reval, Russia in 1841 to visit her sister, a journey that formed the basis of her well-received first book, *A Residence on the Shores of the Baltic Told in Letters* (1841). The book gained the attention of John Lockhart, who convinced her to begin writing for the *Quarterly* ("Eastlake, Elizabeth," *DNB* 598). Eastlake published twenty-one articles, reviews, and books on a variety of topics, including art, prior to marrying in 1849 the painter and first director of the National Gallery, Sir Charles Eastlake (Sheldon 643). Eastlake's partnership with Sir Charles furthered some of her already established interests in the arts. Roughly one-third of the approximately seventy-five books and articles that she produced during her career addressed art, and many of these were written during her marriage. This focus on art is striking given the variety of subjects – including literary criticism, children's literature, biography, and general cultural topics – that Eastlake addressed. Eastlake was in fact one of only a handful of Victorian women writers who were both highly published and specialists in something other than novel writing. In her essay, "The Hero as Man of Letters," Carol T. Christ notes that many of the some fifteen hundred women included in the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* wrote just a single entry; "Only eleven women in the entire index have more than fifty entries to their name, and four of them are novelists" (21). Of the seven remaining prolific women writers who were not novelists, Christ lists Elizabeth Eastlake as the only specialist in art history.

As was common for women growing up in early nineteenth-century Britain, Eastlake did not attend any kind of formal school, art or otherwise.

Because of growing national interest in improving the arts and design, the situation soon changed for women. To take the most prominent mid-century example, Emilia Dilke (who became the foremost French art historian in Britain) graduated from the South Kensington Art School in 1861, where she received an education in the arts almost on par with that enjoyed by male students. Eastlake, by contrast, was educated by a governess, though “largely self-taught” (Lochhead 2). On her own, Eastlake began drawing at the age of eight (Lochhead 3). Like her predecessor Anna Jameson, Eastlake gained her knowledge about the arts through wide travels that were unusual for a middle-class family at that time. During these travels, she developed her “habit of sketching and painting which she retained throughout her adult life” (Nunn 112). Indeed, though Eastlake had no formal training in the arts, her sketches attest to her skill.

Despite her lack of formal schooling, Eastlake quickly established herself as a respected specialist on the arts. John Steegman remarks that in the 1840s and 1850s, “[John] Ruskin had by no means reached the position of revered authority that he attained later, while the position of Lady Eastlake, though of quite a different kind, was a remarkably strong one” (7). Steegman’s *Victorian Taste*, a re-issue of his 1950 *Consort of Taste*, was published in 1970. There has since been no sustained consideration of Eastlake’s influence on British taste. The only book entirely devoted to Eastlake is Marion Lochhead’s 1961 biography. Studies of Eastlake for the past thirty years or so have either considered only her literary criticism (and that usually excerpted and out of context) or have briefly listed her among other art historians.¹ Neither approach accounts for her full cultural influence. Despite this particular neglect of Eastlake, recent scholarship in art history and literary studies demonstrates a growing interest in Victorian women’s art criticism.² Meaghan Clarke’s *Critical Voices: Women and Art Criticism in Britain 1880-1905* studies the late-Victorian critics Alice Meynell, Florence Fenwick-Miller, and Elizabeth Robins Pennell. Judith Johnston and Kali Israel have written book-length studies of the earlier

critics Anna Jameson and Emilia Dilke, respectively. Especially within the past year, there has been renewed interest in Eastlake as well.³ However, a more comprehensive account of the contributions of early-Victorian art critics remains to be written.

Although Eastlake remained influential up until her death in 1893, she failed to achieve the notoriety enjoyed by well-known male critics in the late-Victorian period, and she was rarely studied during the first half of the twentieth century. This oversight is in part due to the self-promotional strategies of some male critics, including Ruskin himself. Most Victorian art critics were, by the 1870s, celebrating Ruskin and other male critics at the expense of women's contributions. Sidney Colvin, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge, representatively wrote in 1879, "It has come to pass from a variety of causes, and not least from the stimulating power exercised by a master of letters, Mr. Ruskin, that a greater amount of intelligent interest is now directed to the works of art in England than was ever directed before; and this interest naturally reflects itself in current criticism" (211). It was certainly in Colvin's interests to claim that Ruskin, a man who held a corresponding institutional role (the first Slade Professorship at Oxford) and whose art critical style he consciously followed, was primarily responsible for the improvement in Victorian art criticism.

For the most part, we continue to think of professional Victorian art criticism as begun by Ruskin and then consolidated by male writers in the 1870s. In *Professions of Taste*, for example, Jonathan Freedman charts a masculine trajectory that begins with Ruskinian moralism, proceeds to a Paterian "aesthetic consciousness," and ends with "Oscar Wilde's mastery of the mass market" (202). Writing in his 1985 *Paintings From Books*, Richard Altick states (in words that closely echo Colvin's quotation above) what remains the standard gloss: "By the 1870s ... the quality of English art criticism was beginning to improve. ... the *new men* were better equipped for their job and so were more effective in cultivating intelligent public interest in art" (236-37, emphasis mine). Altick attributes the rise of art criticism to William Thackeray, F.G. Stephens, Colvin, and that figure

whom Altick calls the “magisterial Ruskin” (237). In other studies, when women are mentioned as professionals, they are discussed only briefly. Elizabeth Prettejohn’s 1997 “Aesthetic Value and the Professionalization of Victorian Art Criticism 1837-78” cogently delineates different modes of criticism, but says little about women critics, except for half a sentence devoted to Emilia Dilke, whom Prettejohn calls “the leading expert on French eighteenth-century art” (79). Likewise, Kate Flint reserves only a paragraph for women writers in her two chapters on art criticism in *The Victorians and The Visual Imagination* (2000), though she usefully notes “the depth and extent of their knowledge, despite the fact that they lacked the formal educational background which was assumed to underpin the authority of their male counterparts” (194). Most early women writers, including Eastlake, gained their expertise from private study and first-hand experience – not from the kind of university education enjoyed by Ruskin and others. A few scholars have nevertheless recognized the early professionalization of women critics. In particular, Katharine Walke Gillespie asserts that “Eastlake’s writings are first-rate examples of modern art criticism – a discipline that was then [in the 1850s] being codified” (79). However, Gillespie is still in the minority in dating professional Victorian art criticism as early as the 1840s and 1850s.⁴

The tendency to define women writers as amateurs or to leave them almost wholly out of narratives about the specialization of art criticism exposes a central problem in our understanding of Victorian professionalization. While the Victorians used the term professionalization “loosely and with changing emphasis” (Gourvish 18), we more narrowly define the movement as one marked by increasingly systematic education, specific credentials, and professional associations. These criteria are suitable for those professionals usually studied: lawyers, doctors, and clergymen. But, as women writers illustrate, the professional practices of Victorian art critics varied widely. In addition to their diverse educations and claims for expertise, art critics did not – like professionals in the more well-known fields – form associations until late in the nineteenth century.⁵ More useful

than specific criteria is the kind of sociological definition advanced by Magali Sarfatti Larson, for whom professionalism is "an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources – special knowledge and skills – into another – social and economic rewards" (xvii). Though some women critics like Jameson relied on her art criticism to provide her with an income, others, including Eastlake, were insulated from this need and were motivated primarily by the social rewards of being considered an expert.

As Harold Perkin has demonstrated, social acceptance of the professions was by no means "natural" or uncontested despite the conditions that favored their development – increases in wealth, urbanization, population, and industrialization. Professionals had to persuade the public that they were providing expert and useful advice, not merely catering to their own needs (Perkin 260). Perkin has famously termed professionals the "forgotten middle class" because of their supposed focus on public welfare over financial rewards. Making their services seem necessary was perhaps more difficult for Victorian art critics than for professionals in other fields because they had enjoyed little respect in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and because they purported to teach something that people fancied they already knew. However, as specialized art knowledge became a necessity for both a broader public and for gallery directors, art critics were viewed as fulfilling a vital social role. Directors of emergent art institutions like the National Gallery were increasingly expected to determine the correct attributions of their holdings, not only to be sure that they were labeled appropriately, but also to rule out copies or forgeries. While these directors were often experts in their own fields, they also relied on art critics for information. As an accomplished painter, President of the Royal Academy, and Keeper of the National Gallery, Sir Charles Eastlake was already highly knowledgeable as he took over the first directorship of the National Gallery. Yet, as he sought to expand the Gallery's then-meager collection, Charles surely relied on his wife's expertise in art history, particularly in the areas of Italian and German painting.⁶ However, Charles rarely

mentions his wife's role in his letters and travel diaries, perhaps because of gender codes that discouraged men in such high positions of authority from admitting that they were indebted to a woman's judgment.

II. Male Advice and Scholarly Independence: Laboring to Become a Professional Woman Art Historian

In 1874, almost a decade after the death of her husband Sir Charles in 1865, an increasingly annoyed Elizabeth Eastlake wrote to her publisher John Murray about the revised version of Franz Kugler's *Handbook of Painting: The Italian Schools*. This was a book that Elizabeth and her husband translated together in 1850, but which she now claimed was almost solely her own work because "not a tenth part remains as in his edition" (*Letters* 396). Elizabeth was not unwilling to acknowledge that her husband had played a role in an earlier version of the book; she remarks that readers will find such a notice in her preface. However, she believed that naming her husband in the preface precluded the necessity of identifying him as the current editor: "The desire, therefore, to insert Sir Chas' name on the title page or advertisement of the work can be of no further tribute to him" (*Letters* 396). Eastlake's letters consistently demonstrate a desire for recognition of her scholarly achievements. In a savvy move that suggests that she was also attentive to market realities, Eastlake writes Murray, "there can be no doubt that my name is, in every sense, the right one for this work [Kugler's *Handbook*], and that it also would increase its mercantile value" (*Letters* 396). Though Sir Charles was famous as a painter and the first Director of the National Gallery, he was not, as Elizabeth realized, the most well-known writer in the family. Murray compromised by maintaining Charles Eastlake as primary editor, but adding, "revised and remodeled from the latest researches, by Lady Eastlake," a solution that did not satisfy Elizabeth (Ernstrom 471). Elizabeth makes a further argument for primary editorial credit by emphasizing her hard work in revising the *Handbook*: "the labour I have bestowed on it ... has been very arduous" (*Letters* 396). Eastlake here and

elsewhere challenges the stereotype of intellectual work as somehow different from physical labor. Again, Murray attempted to placate Eastlake, offering an additional £50 (*Letters* 396). Although Elizabeth accepted the money, she was surely disappointed to gain a rather small monetary reward instead of her name alone on the title page.

Further underscoring her commitment to intellectual labor, Eastlake viewed careful, firsthand study of artworks as important to the success of her writing. Due to her own stature as a critic and because of her friendship with Jameson, Eastlake was asked to complete *The History of Our Lord As Exemplified in Works of Art* (1864), which was left unfinished at the time of Jameson's death in 1860. Eastlake seems to have been motivated to complete the work both by a genuine regard for Jameson and by a desire to further her own take on the subject. In researching the book, Eastlake wrote, "I have been working *very hard* in the Gallery here (Munich): I am so constantly taking notes now for my particular object that I see no chance of getting any sketches, unless I could have time to draw for my own purposes" (*Journals and Correspondence* 2:141, my emphasis). Eastlake's drawing "for my own purposes" suggests that she views the project as in large part her own, even though it was begun by Jameson. The time pressures that Eastlake mentions were a result of her ambitious research agenda coupled with her social position as the wife of the then-most prominent arts administrator in Britain. While her marriage to Sir Charles provided her with an insider's access to art, Elizabeth found that being his social companion took "far too much time" away from her laborious research (*Journals and Correspondence* 2:111). The Eastlakes knew many of the most prominent artists and art critics in Britain and abroad, a fact that certainly furthered Elizabeth's career, but that also required her to correspond frequently and to attend numerous social functions. Further, Elizabeth traveled abroad to assist her husband in acquiring art for the National Gallery. While these trips surely added to Elizabeth's knowledge, they must also have made difficult her ability to focus on particular research projects.

In addition to interfering with her work schedule, Elizabeth's marriage impeded her career by sometimes convincing others that her essays were wholly indebted to her husband. The *London Quarterly Review* representatively claimed in 1864 that "Sir Charles is not only a distinguished artist, but ... a distinguished writer on art. ... To this knowledge Lady Eastlake has of course had access" ("The History of Our Lord" 417).⁷ Some recent commentators have repeated this derivative view of her art criticism. For Pamela Gerrish Nunn, "it was only with her marriage in 1849 ... that art took on a certain prominence in her writings" (112). However, it is important to note Elizabeth's earlier interest in art as evidenced by her 1846 article on "Modern German Painting" and her 1836 translation of J.D. Passavant's *Tour of a German Artist in England with Notices of Private Galleries, and Remarks upon the State of Art*. At times, Eastlake seems to confirm her dependence on Sir Charles. In her preface to *Five Great Painters*, a collection of her earlier essays on Renaissance artists, she "founds her claims to the indulgence of the reader on no study or thought of her own, but solely on the advantages enjoyed by her for long years at the side of the late Sir Charles L. Eastlake" (n.p.). However, despite her frequent citation and critical use of source materials in these essays, she rarely refers to her husband's writings. Nor does she apologize for any lack of knowledge in the actual essays that make up *Five Great Painters*. Eastlake's prefatory apologies for her supposed lack of knowledge thus seem less factual than strategic, allowing her early on to mollify readers who might fear an independent and overtly scholarly woman, but then to demonstrate her expertise in the body of her works. To take an important example of another woman critic employing a similar strategy, Jameson apologizes in her preface to *Sacred and Legendary Art* that she needed six years to write the book. However, her admission turns out to highlight her scholarly diligence and the resulting specialization of the book, as no other critic had managed to cover "the particular ground that I had chosen" (viii). Both Jameson and Eastlake viewed themselves as producing original scholarship in the field of art history.

Eastlake's success as a professional writer was in part due to the advice of male editors, publishers, and collaborators. But there is also in these exchanges an apparent power imbalance due to Elizabeth's gender, and Elizabeth sometimes belittles herself when writing to these figures. As she published her first travel book, *A Residence on the Shores of the Baltic* (1841), Eastlake valued the comments provided by her publisher John Murray, admitting that she was prone to attending only to positive reviews of her work, "for which arrogance I deserve the severest of animadversions in my eyes, namely a reproof from yourself" (*Letters* 57). Eastlake seems here a child in need of scolding from a parent. Likewise, Eastlake informed Murray, "I can only wish that all novices like myself might fall into such kind and encouraging hands" (qtd. in Lochhead 31). Although Eastlake was indeed relatively new to the publishing world, she had five years earlier translated Passavant's book and placed her first essay, "Letters to John Henry Merck, from Goethe, Herder, Wieland & C" in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* (Sheldon, *Letters* 44-45). Eastlake's epistolary comments on this essay to Dawson Turner indicate as well her earlier conception of herself as an emerging professional writer: "I am anxious for many reasons to persevere in such attempts, the chief of which is the hope of improving in information and style" (*Letters* 44). It is thus very possible that Eastlake was flattering her publisher in 1841 rather than professing her great need for advice.

Eastlake became more overtly independent later in her career; her disagreement with Murray over the revised Kugler book provides just one example. In February 1876, fewer than two years after the Kugler controversy, Eastlake rejected a book Murray had sent her for review: "As I imagine it may have been sent with a view to some notice in the Quarterly R.; I may venture to say that I am now engaged in reviewing M:Angelo's Letters for the Edinburgh R ... & fearing that it might be difficult for me to remunerate you for this copy, I prefer to return it, & have ordered a copy from a bookseller" (*Letters* 413).⁸ Eastlake emphasizes her reputation as a writer by letting Murray know that she is already in

demand with another publisher. Murray would not receive another letter from Eastlake for more than four years when, in March 1880, she wrote proposing a biography of another well-known woman of letters, Harriet Grote. Although Eastlake's letter is conciliatory, she reminds Murray that she is not reliant on him to publish her work: "Should you feel inclined to publish this it would make only a small, rather large printed vol: If not I think I should offer it to Macmillan, but of course I should prefer your name attached to a work on her" (*Letters* 485).

III. Establishing a Professional Identity through Historical Factualism

New developments such as photography and the amassing of artworks in public exhibitions and galleries made the correct attributions of paintings much easier, though far from foolproof, in the mid-nineteenth century. However, canonical Victorian art critics, including Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, shunned this kind of historical research in favor of legends about artists. Representatively, in his 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater has little respect for what he calls the "mere antiquarianism" of seeking correct attributions (78). Thus, he describes Leonardo Da Vinci's completion of an angel in the corner of his master's painting: "the pupil had surpassed the master; and Verrocchio turned away as one stunned, and as if his sweet earlier work must thereafter be distasteful to him, from the bright animated angel of Leonardo's hand" (80). Pater admits that "the legend is true only in sentiment" (80), yet this sentiment is for him more important than historical facts. Indeed, Pater, like many Victorian critics, bases his story on Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (here, Vasari's account of Verrocchio) rather than on any original research.

Women critics were not the only figures to reject such legends in favor of correct attribution. Eastlake's friend and prominent art critic Sir Austen Henry Layard complained in the *Quarterly Review* that many of the paintings displayed at the 1857 Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition were misattributed or outright forgeries (173, 243). However, women critics, Jameson and Eastlake most prominently, were some of the first

writers in Britain to challenge long-standing assumptions about who painted which artworks. In her 1848 *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Jameson corrects many of Vasari's biographies and attributions, reasoning, for example, that Giotto could not have painted the marriage represented in one of the frescoes: "Giotto died in 1336, and these famous espousals took place in 1347; a dry date will sometimes confound a very pretty theory" (23). Likewise, writing in her 1854 review of Gustav F. Waagen's *Treasures of Art in Great Britain*, Eastlake challenges Vasari's assertion that a painting inscribed as a Raphael is in reality a Perugino (490). On the contrary, claims Eastlake, the painting is undoubtedly Raphael's first altarpiece and his only crucifixion. Eastlake also critiques Waagen himself (the well-respected director of the Berlin Gallery and Professor of Art History at Berlin University) by correcting his attributions and qualifying his enthusiasm for expanding the canon of great masters by arguing for "caution" ("Treasures of Art" 484). However, she also agrees with Waagen that some paintings attributed to other Italian masters are in fact by Leonardo or Michelangelo (488). Jonah Siegel has described the nineteenth-century fascination with attribution as one that sought "to reduce the number of works ascribed to a celebrated author of the past" (169). But this critical exchange between Waagen and Eastlake demonstrates the very different approaches that art critics could take. While Waagen sought to increase the number of works ascribed to masters, Eastlake cautiously judges each work based on its own qualities. Not merely a translator, admirer, or summarizer of Waagen's work, or a follower of any particular trend in art criticism, Eastlake views careful and correct attribution as central to her factual approach.

Eastlake's attributive practice underscores the centrality of the carefully researched fact in her art historicism. This factualism was key to the most prominent aim of her writing: positioning her historical method as superior to art criticism – both Renaissance and nineteenth century – that reproduces legends. Despite the large gap in time between these two periods, art writing had changed little. Like Vasari in the sixteenth century,

writers on art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were usually artists themselves such as William Blake and Sir Joshua Reynolds. Art writing tended to be either technical advice for artists (for example, Reynolds's *Discourses on Art*) or legendary stories about artists in the Vasari vein. The independent, specialized art writer was a mid-nineteenth century development.

Seeking to highlight her own expertise, Eastlake writes in her 1875 essay on Leonardo da Vinci that a central problem in Renaissance Italy was that art writing was "not calculated to enlighten or encourage the man of acutely sensitive calibre" (10). By contrast, Eastlake suggests the value of her own work to educate her audience through her historical research. She implicitly appeals to her readers by including them in such a select, "sensitive" group. As in her discussions of attribution, Eastlake was critical of Vasari, noting his "puerile gossip, which throws a doubt on many of his statements" ("Leonardo" 22). She admits that *Vasari's Lives* "have sometimes the value of genuinely professional criticism," but claims that the book is "inaccurate" (11). Eastlake finds Vasari's contemporaries even less historically believable, and accuses Michelangelo's early biographers of "careless inaccuracy" ("Michelangelo" 161). In these essays on Renaissance artists, Eastlake thus consistently contrasts the "inaccuracy" and "gossip" of early modern art criticism with her supposedly more factual historical method. Likewise, in *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Jameson notes that she has corrected events in the life of Giotto "in accordance with more exact chroniclers than Vasari" (24). While Jameson and Eastlake were far from alone in hoping to raise the status and quality of Victorian art criticism, they were distinctive in doing so through researched historical facts that often contradicted Vasari and other canonical critics.

Eastlake further distinguishes herself even from Jameson in describing the material conditions under which Renaissance artists worked. I note in my opening to this essay Eastlake's analysis of Michelangelo's preoccupation with money as indicative of his time rather

than as a personal failing. By contrast, Pater's artists tend to occupy his *Renaissance* without regard for everyday concerns. Pater writes of Leonardo, "We see him in his boyhood fascinating all men by his beauty, improvising music and songs, buying the caged birds and setting them free, as he walked the streets of Florence, fond of odd bright dresses and spirited horses" (80). Eastlake's Leonardo is, on the other hand, often at the whims of the Italian aristocracy, dependent on meeting their extravagant demands in order to receive payment. Of most concern to Eastlake, government corruption in the high Renaissance caused the exploitation of artists by the ruling classes and their treatment as mere tradesmen, "little differing in rigorous matter-of-fact stipulations from those we nowadays conclude with carpenter or mason" ("Leonardo" 10). By extension, Eastlake makes a progressive and nationalistic argument in suggesting that British Victorian artists encounter better treatment than their Italian Renaissance counterparts. However, despite the neglect of artists in the Renaissance, art flourished, "too healthy in her instincts and certain in her processes to be affected by conditions, however unsympathetic, tyrannical, and even prohibitory" ("Leonardo" 11). Eastlake here argues for a separate aesthetic sphere that is to some extent immune from material conditions; unlike Ruskin, she does not believe that art is necessarily a reflection of the culture in which it is produced. This Kantian framework allows Eastlake to explain why Renaissance Italy managed to produce such great artists despite corruption and the mistreatment of artists.

Positing a separate aesthetic sphere in which the arts can flourish regardless of material conditions also enables Eastlake to confront the problem that vexed many Protestant Victorian art commentators: that of Catholic inspiration for both early modern and nineteenth-century artworks. Like many other Protestant critics, Eastlake sought to separate the general religious inspiration from its specifically Catholic reference. Thus, Eastlake writes that Leonardo's *Last Supper* "produces a really religious impression ... because it so truly tells the awful tale; but that

impression was not the necessary result of Leonardo's own spiritual aspirations – aspirations not seen in any other work by him" (61). Leonardo happened "to paint Church pictures" because of his time period, "not his own tendencies" (62). While Eastlake's approach was typical of Protestant writers, her anti-Catholicism is more overt than contemporary critics like Jameson, who tried to avoid religious connotations altogether. "I hope it will be clearly understood," writes Jameson in her preface to the first edition of *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), "that I have taken throughout the aesthetic and not the religious view of Art." Religious works "may cease to be Religion, but cannot cease to be Poetry; and as poetry only I have considered them" (viii-ix). Middle class and the first writer in Britain to earn a living solely from art criticism, Jameson was necessarily careful in her prefaces and introductions to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Because she considers many works inspired by Catholicism in *Sacred and Legendary Art*'s survey of Christian symbolism, Jameson was particularly worried about the strong anti-Catholic sentiments in Britain in the 1840s. Jameson's apparent focus on aesthetics – that she calls "poetry" – instead of religion was thus in part a response to this anxiety. Taking a contrasting and anti-Catholic approach, Eastlake is not surprised that the Catholic Church encouraged some good painting during this time as "Art, respectively ancient and modern, never attained such perfection as under an elaborately organised Idolatry, and a sumptuously supported Superstition" (103). Eastlake's other essays on this subject suggest that such "Idolatry" and "Superstition" are products of the Catholic Church. Implicitly, Eastlake claims that her own art histories avoid such myths, focusing instead on facts and realistic stories.

Eastlake's factual method provides insight into her most studied essay: that on *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, and the Report of the Governesses' Benevolent Institution (1848). Scholars have focused most on Eastlake's scathing comments on *Jane Eyre* as a book written by an author who "combines a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion" (94). Far less attention has

been paid to her contrasting approval of the factualism of both the Governesses' Report and *Vanity Fair*, sections which are often omitted in anthologized versions of the essay. In terms remarkably similar to her essay on Michelangelo, Eastlake describes William Thackeray's successful realism: "the personages are too like our every-day selves and neighbors to draw any distinct moral.... For it is only in fictitious characters which are highly coloured for one definite object ... that the course of the true moral can be seen to run straight" (83). The "highly coloured" achieves a superficial effect rather than the insight into real people and events that Eastlake sought – and which she believes Thackeray manages with his character interactions.

In a move that further parallels her own work, Eastlake celebrates the stories included in the Governesses' Report for their factualism. For Eastlake, these stories correct what she sees as the impossible and destabilizing Romanticism of *Jane Eyre*, allowing us to sympathize with the plight of governesses, but only enough to provide financial support for those who are out of work. Eastlake does not allow for upward class mobility or even a different career for these women. In an effort to keep the governess in her place and to emphasize reason over emotion, Eastlake claims that the English governess is "a bore to almost any gentleman, as a tabooed woman" (95). Despite her conservative ideology in matters of class, Eastlake's factual method allowed her to analyze the material conditions of the governess. According to Mary Poovey, "Lady Eastlake's formulation of the governess's plight is as explicit as anything written in the 1840s about the class and moral concerns that dovetail in the governess" (148). Eastlake understood the economics of the governess problem well: because of the oversupply of governesses, the market system itself would not motivate employers to pay more. This low salary and the frequent need of governesses to support other family members prevented most of them from saving for their retirement, a fact that Eastlake reinforces in the eight case studies she cites ("*Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre*" 97). Eastlake realizes as well that the economic conditions

which prevented governesses from making a comfortable living were the same ones that allowed the middle class to employ less fortunate women from their own class: “the real definition of a governess, in the English sense, is a being who is our equal at birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth. ... there is nothing upon the face of the thing to stamp her as having been called to a different state of life from that in which it has pleased God to place you” (94-95). On the one hand, Eastlake betrays a conservative, organic conception of society in her reference to God’s pleasure. However, her comment is also subversive in calling attention to what has become a theoretical commonplace, but was much less openly discussed in Victorian times: the difficulty of distinguishing the middle-class governess from her middle-class employer.

Based almost solely on this one excerpted review of *Jane Eyre*, Elizabeth Eastlake is often stereotyped as simply conservative in matters of class and gender, a bias that has prevented her recognition as a key woman of letters. Julie Sheldon astutely remarks, “Elizabeth’s now rather obscure status appears to me to stem from the perception that she was a woman writer without being a woman’s writer” (Introduction 2). Eastlake’s comments on *Jane Eyre* coupled with her refusal to join publically with feminist causes (unlike Jameson and Dilke) have led some commentators to label her as an anti-feminist (Sheldon, Introduction 2). However, as my analysis of the Governesses’ Report makes clear, Eastlake was an astute and sympathetic observer of the particular challenges facing middle-class women, even as she sought to prevent class mobility. She also promoted women’s independence in less public, but no less significant ways. Allying herself with other, more overtly feminist art critics like Jameson and Dilke, Eastlake empowers women within her art criticism, especially in her placement of Eve as a central figure with a direct relationship with God (Ernstrom 473). Regarding women’s educations and careers, Eastlake wrote to the art critic Sir A.H. Layard in January 1878, “I think they have a right to break through that ideal of feminine helplessness which gentlemen deem so attractive, and prepare for

the possibility of helping themselves" (*Journals and Correspondence* 2:255). Supporting this goal of career independence, Eastlake helped establish in 1857 the Society of Female artists.

IV. Literary Style, Painterly Form

In *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*, Hilary Fraser and Daniel Brown claim that Oscar Wilde's "'The Critic as Artist' [1890] provides an effective summation of what 'criticism' had come to mean by the end of the century," especially in Wilde's insistence that criticism had supplanted the art object as the ultimate work of art (298). Gilbert remarks to Ernest in their dialogue,

Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery coloured in its noble eloquence ... is at least as great a work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that bleach or rot on their corrupted canvases in England's gallery.... Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? (Wilde 141-42)

Fraser and Brown note that both art and literary criticism began to professionalize in the 1840s, particularly through the work of Jameson and Ruskin (314-15). However, although pointing to Jameson's "highly innovative" treatment of Christian iconography, Fraser and Brown do not mention Eastlake's crucial role in finishing Jameson's *History of Our Lord* (1864) or Eastlake's originality as an art critic. Like her predecessor Jameson and also like Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, Eastlake well understood the importance of prose that could equal the work of art under discussion. But scholars tend to view these male art critics as almost solely responsible for developing a prose style that led to literary modernism. In this vein, Harold Bloom characterizes Pater as the "hinge upon which turns the single gate" (186-87) between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary

styles. For Bloom, Pater represents the one moment dividing Matthew Arnold's objectivism from fin de siècle notions of individual sense impressions. Like Gilbert's comments in "The Critic as Artist," such a perspective occludes the role of women critics in developing an art critical style attentive to differing impressions of the art object.

Eastlake posits the difficulty of verbalizing visual sights while also suggesting that her words explain art's power – a move that serves to explain the need for her expertise. To take one example reminiscent of Pater's *Renaissance*, Eastlake notes that Michelangelo's statues in the Medici tombs "defy analysis, and have lain there for centuries without furnishing a hint of their creator's intention" (188). But Eastlake still puts their effect in words: "when all criticism is exhausted, we only the more reach the estimate of that astounding power which takes our admiration by storm – uninspired by which, these statues would have been simply hideous or ridiculous" (188-89). Significantly, criticism has a role in bringing readers to this point, even if it fails to capture art's full force. Pater employs a similar technique in remarking that historians have already traced Leonardo's works and writings, "But a lover of strange souls may still analyse for himself the impression made on him by those works, and try to reach through it a definition of the chief elements of Leonardo's genius" (64). While remaining committed to art historical facts, Eastlake too emphasizes individual sense impressions. Also like Pater, Eastlake suggests a key role for the specialist, through what Pater calls in his Preface to the *Renaissance* the art critic's "certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (xxx). Eastlake's identification of the "astounding power" of Michelangelo's statues allies her with such a temperament. Writing two years after Pater's first edition of the *Renaissance* (1873), Eastlake might seem merely to be copying his style and ideas. However, art critical style and the special disposition of the true art expert were early and central preoccupations in her career.

These concerns were especially apparent in Eastlake's reviews of Ruskin. In an 1856 essay on the first three volumes of Ruskin's *Modern*

Painters and his 1855 "Academy Notes," Eastlake characterizes Ruskin's work as showcasing "active thought, brilliant style, wrong reasoning, false statement, and unmannerly language" ("Modern Painters" 387). By contrast, Eastlake promises to deliver sound conclusions about art couched in the simplest language. Scholars have failed to account for Eastlake's attempts to establish an art critical style alert to both careful language and scholarship, reading her critique as instead an ad hominem attack on Ruskin. Employing a binary of objective journalism versus personal essay to categorize Eastlake's writings, Lochhead characterizes the review of Ruskin as one of "the great prose-hymns of hate" (116). I would contend that Eastlake's comments on Ruskin seek neither personal revenge nor objective journalism, but a carefully reasoned assessment of his work. Ignoring these professional motivations, J.L. Bradley notes in his introduction to *Ruskin: The Critical Heritage* that Eastlake was biased against Ruskin for his unfavorable review of her husband's painting *Beatrice* in his 1855 "Academy Notes" as well as for his mistreatment of her friend and Ruskin's wife, Effie Ruskin. Again demonstrating the tendency for twentieth-century scholars to repeat the opinions of canonical male critics, Bradley's assessment of Eastlake's review as a "scurrilous piece of invective posing as criticism" mostly repeats Ruskin's preface to his 1856 "Academy Notes" (written just after Eastlake's critique). Ruskin suggests that Eastlake's supposed anonymity encourages bias that demeans the profession: "a lying critic, discovered, has infected with his own disgrace the men behind whom he stooped, and cast suspicion over the general honour of his race" (*Works* 14:45). However, most insiders in the Victorian art world knew that Eastlake wrote art criticism for *The Quarterly Review* in these years, even though she did not sign her name to these particular works. Ruskin assumes, as have recent scholars (for, of course, different reasons), that signing was an indication of professionalism. Yet individual women critics like Eastlake wrote signed, unsigned, and pseudonymous works; the issues of identity for women in signing are too complex to fit neatly into a professional/amateur binary.⁹

Demonstrating her professional rather than solely personal motives, Eastlake had found fault with Ruskin's art critical style two years before his unfavorable review of her husband's paintings (neither Ruskin nor Bradley acknowledges these earlier critiques). In her March 1854 remarks on Waagen's *Treasures of Art in Great Britain*, Eastlake unfavorably compares recent criticism – such as Ruskin's – with that of Waagen, whose "opinion is given with a simplicity, distinctness, and temperance of language particularly refreshing after the violence and dogmatism, the flippant and fine writing, with which the criticism and philosophy of art has of late been treated among us" (468). Instead, then, of reading Eastlake's review of Ruskin as merely an act of revenge, we should consider how she defines her own critical practice and style against those of the now-more-famous author. Importantly, she opposes her career to Ruskin's "hobby" ("Modern Painters" 401). Her 1854 review of Waagen had, by contrast, defined professionalism in art criticism: "The education of the professed critic in art is essentially the same as that of the student in the exact sciences. Nothing is left of feeling, predilection, or wish – his stand must be taken upon a slowly gathered accumulation of facts, each one resting securely on that beneath it" (467). Though Eastlake was herself relatively prolific, she viewed much of her writing as the result of laborious study. For Eastlake, Ruskin writes merely to have something to write about rather than to cultivate his expertise: "One great proof, were there no other, of the falseness of Mr. Ruskin's reasoning, is its quantity" ("Modern Painters" 432). While earlier artist-writers like William Blake contrasted prolific amateur critics with serious artists (that is, themselves), Eastlake relies upon a new figure: the professional critic (that is, herself).

Also like Jameson and Pater, Eastlake was adamant that the form of the artwork itself should be analyzed. Few critics have recognized, as do Andrea Broomfield and Sally Mitchell, the importance of Eastlake's formal analyses: "In her defense of the aesthetic object as meaningful in and of itself, Eastlake may be viewed as working in a line of descent which originated with Immanuel Kant and culminated in the Art-for-Art's-Sake

Movement" (81). This primacy of formal analysis places Eastlake's criticism as an alternative to that of Ruskin, who tended to emphasize the social and moral dimensions of art. Eastlake criticizes Ruskin and other critics for emphasizing stories about artworks, which was in mid-century the most popular form of criticism: "every exhibition shows that the story is all the uneducated care for" ("Modern Painters" 400). Eastlake's commitment to form and her critique of narrative criticism is striking for the early date of its expression. While, for example, James McNeill Whistler suggests that his disdain for literary interpretations in the "Ten O' Clock Lecture" (1888) is new, Eastlake directly attacks this mode as early as 1856 in her critique of Ruskin and thoroughly considers form in her 1846 article on "Modern German Painting." This 1846 article is extremely specific about the technical defects of Germany's artists: "it is impossible, in the want of unity, breadth and chiaro oscuro, and in the laboured execution of the oil-painters, not to recognise the mechanical joining of detached parts – the heavy opaque shadows – the hatchings and frequent retouchings of the same colour, inseparable from the line of fresco" ("Modern German Painting" 341-42). Eastlake's use of such terms as "chiaro oscuro" (the commonly anglicized form of "chiaroscuro") and "hatchings" highlights her ability to educate readers about form.

In her focus on form, Eastlake in fact closely fits recent definitions of professional Victorian art criticism, even though she began writing about art some twenty-five years before the date commonly assigned to the consolidation of the discipline. Flint and Prettejohn describe how such formalist critics as F.G. Stephens and Sidney Colvin appealed to society's élite in the 1860s through formal descriptions, while those who focused on stories about art – the generalist writers – continued to mediate art for the masses. According to Flint and Prettejohn, we thus see beginning at this time and continuing throughout the nineteenth century two separate and distinct strands of art criticism. However, women critics like Eastlake tend to combine formal analyses with narrative descriptions. Eastlake complains, for example, in "Modern German Painting" that Eduard

Hildebrandt's inclusion of too many details ruins the story being told in his *Murder of the Young Princes in the Tower*. The princes are "fast asleep," writes Eastlake,

while, as if purposely to heighten the effect of their peace and innocence, two figures stealthily approach – "flesht villains – bloody dogs" – their countenances full of those evil passions which give work for the painter in every line – one of them grey in crime. The bed, too, on which the children are lying, is all an artist can wish – bringing a broad mass of light into the middle of the picture, and enabling him to concentrate all attention to the figures lying upon it. (336)

Eastlake's narrative description in the first part of the quotation heightens the emotional effect of the painting (here, the contrast between the innocence of the children and the "evil passions" of the villains) in an effort to engage and instruct readers. In the second sentence, Eastlake muses about the form of the painting itself – the broad mass of light that provides the painting's focal point. Indeed, form seems Eastlake's primary concern as she notes that the subject of the painting allows Hildebrandt to showcase "beauty of forms, strength of contrast, and breadth of light" (336). Eastlake's delicate parallelism in this last quotation demonstrates her attentiveness to her own literary style. In short, Eastlake combines technical details about the painting with a compelling narrative description.

As in her histories of the Renaissance, Eastlake's formal analyses of foreign nineteenth-century painters are tinged with anti-Catholic bias. Most strikingly, she attributes the imitative tendencies of German artists to their "going over to the Roman Church" in 1814; "Viewing this step in a moral light we have nothing to say.... but, viewing it in an aesthetic sense, we believe that it was the worst step they could take" ("Modern German Painting" 326). Through her use of aesthetic instead of religious terms, Eastlake attempts to conceal her Protestant and nationalist biases. Because German artists merely copy Italian painters rather than creating original

works inspired from nature, reasons Eastlake, they have sacrificed formal effect: "enamoured of that religious earnestness and simplicity which they found in the early masters, they became enamoured also of their technical defects" (325). While Eastlake sought to differentiate her art critical method from that of Ruskin, she here seems close to his argument in "The Nature of Gothic" that social conditions influence the kind of art produced. However, she is primarily motivated by a desire to censure nineteenth-century movements that emulate older Catholic inspirations. For Eastlake, these revivals impossibly try to recreate the "simplicity" of older social conditions, a simplicity that can no longer exist in European painting.

This anti-Catholic bias notwithstanding, Eastlake was one of the first critics in Britain to discuss how artistic form instead of a specifically religious inspiration could convey powerful emotions. As I note above, this was an approach influenced by Jameson. Judith Johnston and J.B. Bullen have shown that Jameson differentiated herself from her influential predecessor Alexis François Rio, whose book *De la poésie chrétienne* (1836) canonized works of Catholic art for their ability to express religious feeling (Bullen 275; Johnston 160). Rio's Catholicism bothered British Protestants, but his focus on spirituality was extremely popular. Jameson hoped that her aesthetic emphasis would capture the spirituality of Catholic artworks while avoiding their specifically religious connotations. While Johnston, Bullen and Michaela Giebelhausen have recognized Jameson's role in this movement, they do not trace Eastlake's use of formal criticism as a response to religious concerns. As I have already suggested, Eastlake differed from Jameson in advancing an anti-Catholic agenda rather than seeking to avoid religious controversy. Most important, Eastlake hoped to downplay the emotional effect of Catholic art by focusing on the techniques or formal "facts" of successful painting.

Conclusion

Writing in a June 1874 letter to William Boxall, the retired second director of the National Gallery, Elizabeth Eastlake complains about

purchases recently made by the new director, Frederick Burton: "I fear he has bought much that is second rate & much that is irreparably injured, & for enormous prices. That Venus & Amorini by S: Botticelli seems to me to be monstrous in price.... I do not envy him, but doubtless his set will approve, & he must learn experience" (*Letters* 392). Eastlake here claims her professional knowledge and skills in several important ways. She is attentive to issues of restoration, which was a pervasive problem in Victorian museum culture and in art critical discourse. She judges the value that the National Gallery has gained based on the price and quality of the artwork. Although Eastlake was one of the few mid-Victorian commentators to promote Botticelli, she questions the purchase of the *Venus & Amorini* for £1,627 from the Alexander Barker estate. Tellingly, Eastlake does not critique Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, which the National Gallery purchased from the same collection for £1,050. Recent connoisseurship, assisted by twenty-first century technology, has supported Eastlake's concerns; though the *Venus and Amorini* (now simply re-titled *An Allegory*) is a fifteenth-century Italian painting, it is not by Botticelli, as the *Venus and Mars* almost certainly is. Demonstrating her twenty-first century relevance, Eastlake's letter to Boxall was featured in the summer 2010 exhibition at the National Gallery in London, "Fakes, Mistakes, and Forgeries," which devoted an entire room to these two Fifteenth-Century Italian paintings.

Most significantly, Eastlake suggests in her letter that Burton has not yet developed the professional skills necessary to direct the National Gallery, abilities she sought to prove in her own career. Indeed, Eastlake hoped after the death of Sir Charles that she would be named the second director of the National Gallery. But this was hardly a possibility in the mid-1860s in England, when women occupied no such positions of bureaucratic authority. To a certain extent, Eastlake's career is thus representative of the relative lack of recognition afforded to mid-Victorian women scholars, recognition that might have taken the form of official roles or simply a greater acknowledgement of independent scholarly

achievements. But Eastlake's work also demonstrates the production of knowledge current in twenty-first century debates among specialists as well as in popular exhibitions about the history of art.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Robinson for a focus on Eastlake's literary reviews (especially on *Jane Eyre*), and Mitchell for a listing of Eastlake's art historical accomplishments.

² See Nunn for an overview of nineteenth-century women art critics. Other good but brief studies of women's art criticism can be found in Sherman with Holcomb. The standard account of the professionalization of women painters in the Victorian era is Deborah Cherry's *Painting Women*. Cherry briefly discusses Dilke as a professional art historian and Jameson as a prominent intellectual writing about the arts, but does not mention Elizabeth Eastlake.

³ Julie Sheldon edited in 2009 a new version of Eastlake's letters and published an essay re-evaluating her review of *Jane Eyre*. Sheldon's new biography of Elizabeth Eastlake is the first in almost 50 years. See Avery-Quash, Susanna and Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World* (London: National Gallery Company, 2011).

⁴ Adele Holcomb (who is the same scholar as Adele Ernstom, mentioned elsewhere in this essay) argues that Jameson was "the first professional English art historian," beginning in the early 1840s (171). By contrast, Laurie Kane Lew describes Jameson as an "amateur in matters of art" because of her informal training and supposed reliance on other scholars (831).

⁵ Meaghan Clarke notes that art critics were eventually represented by journalistic organizations – the Institute of Journalists (1890) and the Society of Women Journalists (1895).

⁶ The National Gallery acquired some 164 paintings during the tenure of Sir Charles. Steegman, Ernstom, and early historians of the National Gallery portray Elizabeth Eastlake as an equal partner with her husband in

the purchase of art. By contrast, in her recent introduction to Elizabeth Eastlake's letters, Julie Sheldon argues that this "partnership" model may be "overstated" (11).

⁷ I am indebted to Ainslie Robinson for this quotation and for her discussion of Lady Eastlake's supposed reliance on her husband.

⁸ In her edition of Eastlake's letters, Julie Sheldon has reproduced Eastlake's particular use of punctuation and spelling, which I maintain in quotations used in this essay.

⁹ See Clarke for an interesting discussion of later women critics' signing practices, especially her fifth chapter on Elizabeth Robins Pennell, whose writing was often anonymous or assumed to be the work of her husband, Joseph Pennell.

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