

WOMEN CHARACTERS' CROSS-CULTURAL
(SELF-)DEVELOPMENT IN MARY MARGARET BUSK'S *ZEAL AND
EXPERIENCE: A TALE* AND *TALES OF FAULT AND FEELING*

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This article focuses on the importance of women characters' education in Mary Margaret Busk's *Zeal and Experience: a Tale* (1819) and *Tales of Fault and Feeling* (1825). A translator and cultural mediator, Mary Margaret Busk (1779–1863) was one of the first women writers to publish review articles on European literatures in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a high-brow, conservative journal with a large readership and, it has often been assumed, mostly written by male authors. This contribution intends to analyse the importance of women characters' education in her tales, which also foregrounds her interest in cross-cultural relations.

Keywords: cultural mediation, moral tales, transcultural studies, Romantic women writers.

This article focuses on the importance of women characters' education in Mary Margaret Busk's novella, *Zeal and Experience* (1819) and in the short story collection *Tales of Fault and Feeling* (1825). Moreover, the autobiographical inspiration and social realism of some of the tales will be foregrounded: it will be shown that in some of her tales women move across cultures, struggle to contribute to supporting their families and to counteract their husbands' economic and social inadequacy. Busk's tales focus on female characters' self-development in situations that highlight cultural clashes. My contribution intends to show that her interest in cross-cultural relations is evident also in her fiction, from *Zeal and Experience: A Tale* to her collection *Tales of Fault and Feeling*.

A translator and cultural mediator, Mary Margaret Busk (1779–1863) has attracted some attention within the study of literary reviewing (Prigmore 1952, Curran 1998), Anglo-Italian, Anglo-German relations (Saglia and Bandiera 2005, Howard 1993, Ashton 1980) and Anglo-Japanese reception (Williams 2017). She was one of the first women writers to publish review articles on European literatures in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a high-brow, conservative periodical founded in 1817, with a large readership and, it has often been assumed, mostly written by male authors. In fact, the journal accepted few contributions by women and Alan

Lang Strout's bibliography for the years 1817–1825 identifies only five other women contributors of articles and reviews: Caroline Bowles Southey (1786–1854), Amelia Gillespie Smyth (1788–1876), Lady Rosemary Clerk (1745–c.1832), Anne Grant (1755–1838), and Felicia Hemans (1793–1835). Busk's fiction and reviews show her interest in European languages and cultures, her support of women's cross-cultural lay education and their right to become published authors. Busk published 32 articles according to Eileen Curran's and the *Wellesley Index* identification (Curran 1998, 9) and her articles deal mostly with German and Italian works, with few articles dealing with French, Swedish, and Polish literatures. Busk's interest in European literatures is also evident in her short fiction.

A short biographical introduction will explain Busk's ability to become a published author and thus enter the public sphere. Busk [*née* Blair] grew up in a nonconformist family. Her father, Alexander Blair, was a soap manufacturer and timber trade merchant from Birmingham, as well as a proprietor of the Royal Institution and a close associate to the Lunar Society (Latané 2004, 102). He thus had connections with Sir Joshua Reynolds, James Watt, Joseph Priestley, among other prominent intellectuals of the time, and was on close terms with James Boswell. Concerning Mary Margaret Busk's education, Eileen Curran thinks that "whatever her schooling, Busk's writings show that she had read the standard authors, was taught composition and rhetoric by a demanding stylist, and learned French, Italian, Latin, and Dutch" (1998, 12). She had some knowledge of Dutch due to her mother's influence: Mary Johnson (1749–1827) was a society hostess and her father, Alexander Johnson, had lived in The Hague. The talk of scientific experiments must have reached Busk through her parents' coteries and traces of an interest in sciences can be gleaned from her articles. In 1796 Mary Margaret Blair married William Busk (1769–1849), a barrister of the Temple (London). He became MP winning a by-election in 1812 in Barnstaple, Devon, voting with the Whigs. During his time in Parliament, he was "a regular and consistent voter with opposition during the 1812 session" (Thorne and Fisher 1886), although he never spoke in the house. He later lost the next election, blaming his opponents' bribery and incurring large losses of about £10,000.¹ He sold the estate he had bought in Ponsbourne to become an MP, and the Busks moved to London. Mary Margaret Busk's first reviews were thus part of her effort to contribute to the family finances. The Busks travelled regularly to Germany and Europe and she must

¹ He thus contacted Lord Holland and Francis Horner for support, but never won again. According to Curran and Latané, a major blow to his finances was a loan to Mary Margaret Busk's father. According to Maria Edgeworth, in 1819 William Busk had lost most of his resources and was also accused of fraud. Edgeworth writes that Mr. Busk had won "30,000 by a bit of gambling insurance on 2 missing East India ships," but the ships' reappearance and the implication of foul play meant that "he could never show his face at Lloyds afterwards—has now lost all since—and in a poor way" (1971, 173–74).

therefore have improved her knowledge of German, French, Spanish, and Italian through her travels. Her first prose work is *Zeal and Experience: A Tale*, published in 1819 by the London publisher Hookham, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy. In 1822, Busk published her first article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in the section entitled "Horae Germanicæ." She started reviewing through family connections: her brother, Alexander Blair, introduced her to John Wilson, main writer of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, at a time when the family finances had become difficult in the 1820s, and her identified articles for the journal had reached a total of 32 by 1838. Busk's brother, Alexander Blair was a close collaborator of John Wilson, then professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh University and author of a large number of articles for the magazine. His most famous publication was "Noctes Ambrosianæ," under the pseudonym of Christopher North. According to Wilson's biographer, Elsie Swann, Alexander Blair was working as what would be called today a ghost writer; indeed, Wilson acknowledged his need for Blair's help (Swann 1934, 166).

Mary Margaret Busk's *Zeal and Experience: A Tale* betrays her attempt at imitating Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, rather focussing on women's struggle after marriage and thus introducing a variation to the courtship and marriage plot. The definition of its genre, "tale," reflects her adoption of a prose form shorter than the novel, but in fact includes a significant plot and character development that is most commonly in line with the genre of the *novella*. As Tim Killick has cogently argued, Britain saw a significant success of short fiction in the first half of the nineteenth century. Killick further underlines not only the lack of a homogenous British tradition of tales, but also its debts to the European tradition and in particular to the recent German tradition of tales, inspired by oral narratives and legends, as pointed out by Robert F. Marler and Charles E. May (Marler 1974–76 and May 1994, qtd. in Killick 2008, 6). Killick also attributes the success of the form to the prominence it was given in periodical publications, in particular in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, with R. P. Gillies's significant contribution of articles to the section "Horae Germanicæ," for which Busk also wrote (2008, 13). Busk's early association with the journal may have inspired her to write her first tale, which Killick classifies within the genre of the moral domestic tale (2008, 3). Although the editions I have consulted do not include a preface, the title page bears a quotation from Ovid: *Ex Ponto, Epistola IX, III, verse 24*, "corrigere at res est" (Ovid 1872, 347), that is, "correction is as much more arduous a thing" (2003), in which the poet praises Aristarchus' commentary of Homer. This epigraph highlights the moral aim of the tales, whose implied purpose is to educate its readers and to "amend" their behaviour.²

² According to James H. Horowitz, Ovid's epistles were popular in eighteenth-century England and gave rise to a tradition of epistolary complaints mainly written by women (2014).

The plot of *Zeal and Experience* focuses on Lord Frederic Bellamont and Caroline Moncrief's marriage and on Caroline's ability to find her position in society. The tale sets the trend for Busk's later writings, identifying women's unsatisfactory education as the cause of their later struggles in life. *Zeal and Experience* focuses on Caroline's inadequate education and her social isolation until her marriage at the age of 18. As the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs Moncrief, Caroline is described as spoilt by her parents, who nevertheless provide her with some "acquirements":

The spoiling, however, did not go quite to the extent of depriving her of all education, for she was taught what young ladies usually learn: as her abilities were excellent, she learned readily; but, as her own inclination was her law, it will easily be believed that her acquirements were superficial. (1819, 1)

The narrator vaguely mentions some formal education suitable for young girls, without clarifying the form or content of the teaching Caroline received—maybe from a governess or in a private school, as was common practice in the first half of the nineteenth century. The absence of a set programme of schooling and her own ability to choose her subjects and occupations is identified as responsible for her "superficial acquirements." In fact, the tale focuses on parents' ability to prepare their daughters for their future role as wives and mothers. Caroline's stubbornness, resulting from her parents' unwillingness to refuse her anything, is thus identified as a possible obstacle to accompanying her husband in his social commitments and being welcomed into his family and circle. Caroline struggles to keep up with the active life in society and thus loses her husband's interest and affection. Busk portrays the stress the young woman suffers when introduced to society by her new family, and the narrator foregrounds her social inadequacy and shyness in public. Her husband thus becomes dissatisfied with her behaviour:

The first impression, however, *was* favourable. Caroline's beauty surpassed the expectation her husband's praises had awakened [...]. But the reserve and embarrassment with which she received that mother's gracious advances, and his father's studied compliments, equally surprised and mortified him. (1819, 14, emphasis in the original)

Busk portrays realistically the demands for women's presence in social gatherings and their expectations for frivolity and light conversation, thus showing her desire to introduce social commentary in her tale. Caroline becomes soon dissatisfied with the superficial attitude she is encouraged to adopt, as she relies on her parents' religious and moral example. Similarly, Lord Frederic relies on his mother's judgement and thus grows increasingly dissatisfied with Caroline's behaviour at social events:

Caroline censured the indelicacy, the levity, the impropriety of fashionable dress and conduct; and her censures coming as home to her mother and sister-in-law, as to any members of the great world, a reciprocal coolness ensued, which, in Lady Selina, took the form of anger, in the Marchioness, of contempt, and in Lady Frederic, of condemnation. Lord Frederic, warmly attached to his mother, was vexed at his wife's behaviour at home; and, abroad, the unmerciful raillery, hoaxing, and pity with which he was assailed respecting her, formed too mortifying a contrast to the incessant flattery and admiration addressed to himself, to be endured without some degree of irritation. (1819, 46–47)

Caroline's refusal to follow commonly accepted norms for women's dress code and conduct in public is sanctioned by the women in Lord Frederic's family: her stubbornness leads Caroline to refuse to take part in dancing and to dress according to the fashion of the day and she is judged as "a Methodist parson in petticoats" (1819, 42). Caroline's parents' social isolation and their religiosity is responsible for her lack of experience in the rules of sociability: the narrator describes her as "graceful, though unfashioned" (1819, 2). Lady Selina, Lord Frederic's mother, instructs her on the conversation she can entertain when socialising and about the need to avoid any topic that may be deemed too personal: "When you know the people, you will be able to judge who are worthy of more amusing subjects: till you do, it will be safest for you to follow their lead" (1819, 31). Despite a certain success in her first public engagements, Caroline experiences the contrast between her early life and education and the new demands imposed on her: "how woefully had she, upon being transplanted to a larger theatre, fallen short of her mother's expectations and of her own ideas of propriety. She had wasted her days and nights, her time and health, in dissipation" (1819, 33).

Lady Selina soon refuses to help her in society as she finds that "her ideas of merit—female merit at least,—are confined to the qualities of a Methodist" (1819, 63). The tale describes Lord Frederic's progressive withdrawal from his newly wedded wife. She does not accept his offers of a singing master, and fails to learn horse-riding under her husband's tutoring. Her refusal to accept his suggestions for tutoring that could improve her social skills and to accompany him to social events is responsible for their progressive estrangement. Lord Frederic furthermore accepts the flirtatious company of a Mrs Harlowe, thus causing Caroline's sense of neglect and betrayal. Frederic's departure to take part in Wellington's Portuguese battles against general Massena leaves Caroline alone with her new-born son Charles. In Frederic's absence, Caroline's marriage and her social reputation is eventually redeemed thanks to her friendship with a new acquaintance, Mrs Orville: having learnt about her unstinting praise in society and of her irreprehensible conduct, Caroline is able to overcome her stubbornness and to adopt her as mentor and advisor. Mrs Orville provides her with some practical devices to win back Lord Frederic's interest and love, and to regain her social reputation. It appears that her solution is to accept her husband's "libertinism"

and to win over his female admirers' alliance by befriending them. Mrs Orville's stratagem seems thus in line with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's project of a separate education for boys and girls in *Émile, or On Education* (1762) and his advice that the young Sophie should be brought up mainly for Émile, as a "companion given to him" (Rousseau 357).

However, both Mrs Orville and Caroline share a passion for reading. Mrs Orville considers this interest a disadvantage for women and goes so far as to call her learning a "sin" to be hidden from her husband:

I had not fashionable accomplishments; my education had been rather solid than ornamental, —rather a boy's than a girl's; and, though I might have gained celebrity for my learning, that was the only celebrity that would not have answered. I knew his contempt and dislike for female learning to be excessive; and blessed my father's cautions to conceal unusual acquirements—which had kept him ignorant of my sins of that nature. (1819, 2:39)

In fact, Mr. Orville grows to praise his wife's learning and her reading of Homer: women's learning is thus accepted as a private accomplishment, and its ostentation should be avoided as far as possible. Caroline's main "fault," as suggested by the title, is finally identified with her desire to reform the world, rather than focussing on herself and her love for Lord Frederic. Thanks to Mrs Orville's example and education, she is eventually able to win her husband back by cultivating her abilities, such as singing and riding, and by putting up with his liaisons. The tale concludes by narrating Caroline's ability to overcome the pain of her parents' death by focussing on her new-born child. When visiting her birthplace, she is finally able to understand her parents' unsatisfactory education, which she identifies as the origin of her blunders: "She wandered through the desolate rooms where she had received her mother's instructions, had been encouraged in her petulant rebellions by her father's laugh, and had listened to Lord Frederic's vows of endless love" (1819, 252).

Nevertheless, the tale does not adopt a moralising attitude, but rather celebrates women's abilities to occupy their lives by cultivating themselves, including practising sports such as riding, in line with Mary Wollstonecraft's teachings concerning women's need for physical exercise, as she explained in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "Besides, by the exercise of their bodies and minds, women would acquire that mental activity so necessary in the maternal character, united with the fortitude that distinguishes steadiness of conduct from the obstinate perverseness of weakness" (1989, 250). Moreover, the extensive use of dialogue in Busk's tale creates a multiplicity of voices, or polyglossia in Mikhail Bakhtin's words (1981, 300), which provides the reader with contrasting readings of Caroline's situation: this use of dialogues and of internally focalised third-person narration furthers avoiding

a single moralising attitude and encourages the reader to understand Caroline's difficulties, her psychological state, and the choices she is faced with.

Busk pursued her interest in the tale with the collection *Tales of Fault and Feeling*, which comprises nine short stories divided into three volumes. The only critical assessment I have been able to identify so far is Killick's *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth-Century; The Rise of the Tale*. Killick regards Busk's tales as examples of the genre of the "moral tale," which became extremely popular alongside the novel in the Romantic period. According to Killick, these were short stories "which to a greater or lesser degree, sought to elevate the morals of its readers, or which presented a model of decorous behavior suitable for emulation" (2008, 74). Women sought this particular form of writing as a means to enter the public sphere by publication, but also as part of a trend identified by Patricia Comitini as "vocational philanthropy" (qtd. in Killick 2008, 75). When writing, female authors could embrace a radical agenda, as was the case with Mary Hays, an evangelical one, as did Hannah More with her illustrated *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1797), or aspire to educational objectives, as did Maria Edgeworth with the *Parent's Assistant* (1796–1800). Busk belongs to a group of writers including Mary Russell Mitford, or Marion and Margaret Corbett, who adopted a more conservative view and did not overtly express a desire for a change in gender relations. Nevertheless, as did Wollstonecraft, Busk believed in the need for women's education and defended women's aspiration to become published authors. For Killick, "they were women for whom a sense of authorial responsibility was the primary shaping force on their work, and who emerged briefly from 'the shelter of private life' precisely in order to proclaim their right to stay there: women who felt uncomfortable with the mantle of author and whose voices may have failed to echo down the years, but were nonetheless potent at the time" (Killick 2008, 77). Killick places Busk among the women writers who sought to keep art and religion apart, avoiding any explicit didacticism or sentimentality:

Tales of Fault and Feeling, belying somewhat the sentimentality of its title, consciously distanced itself from collections that wallowed in emotion and while Busk was willing to draw on characters and situations derived from the sentimental novel, she was simultaneously careful to draw a line between her own tales and the excesses associated with that mode. (2008, 104)

An example of this achievement is "Arthur Errington," a tale that, I think, has an autobiographical inspiration. It narrates the financial struggles of two young aristocrats, Arthur and Lady Grace Raynhurst, the former of whom strives to maintain a standard of living in line with his political aspirations, only to face financial ruin. Lady Grace is portrayed as the best manager of the family finances

with her effort to “economize” (Busk 1825, 1:10). After a brief time in France and Flanders, the couple adopt a life without luxury, but they are eventually restored to their wealth by Mr Browell’s admiration of Lady Grace’s resilience and support of her husband. I suggest that an echo of William Busk’s failed election campaign and of his debts could be identified in the short story. Similarly, travelling abroad is a temporary solution for the Raynhursts in order to avoid insolvency, which might have been inspired by the Busks’ financial difficulties and their decision to reside abroad. Busk creates in Lady Grace the figure of the strong wife, thus demonstrating women’s ability to adjust to complex financial situations when required, despite social expectations concerning husbands’ responsibility for monetary matters.

Busk’s tales portray situations of contrast between different cultural traditions, and religion is introduced as one aspect of them. Characters are often presented as facing a moral dilemma due to their cultural difference and their dislocation. In the introductory section of “The Unknown Champion,” Busk claims her purpose to be to illustrate the conflicts and passions in the post-revolutionary era, as best displayed in the German context:

In no part of Europe has this effect been more apparent, than in Germany; for no where, save in the parent state, has either the fraternizing or the conquering spirit generated by the conflict of all the best and worst passions and principles of humanity, passed with a more desolating, and also, perhaps, no where with a more beneficial influence. (1825, 1:31)

The short stories “Miriam,” “The Unknown Champion,” “The Young Cacique,” and “Ida, Heiress of Unspinnen,” differ in their setting and historical background, which range from England during the Civil War in “Miriam,” through eighteenth-century Germany in “The Unknown Champion,” to sixteenth-century Chile in “The Young Cacique,” and Medieval Switzerland in “Ida, Heiress of Unspinnen.” Nevertheless, these tales all depict strong female characters’ ability to withstand their parents’ or guardians’ opposition to their love and to avoid religious extremism and feuds. Others, such as “The Merchant’s Daughter,” set in Medieval Sicily, foreground debasing male ideologies: when Pietro of Aragon refuses to comply with his promise to marry her, Camiola Turinga chooses to isolate herself in a convent despite the king’s intervention in order to force his brother to respect his engagement.

Among the most successful examples is “Parental Guilt,” a short story in the Gothic mode exploring the theme of incest and supernatural visitations in dreams. Juliet Villeroy has to overcome her parents’ mysterious conflict and finds herself divided between her father’s political ambitions and her uncle’s decision to educate her in France and Italy, where, in contrast to her father’s religiosity, she is brought up in the appreciation of arts and in the principles of the *encyclopédistes*:

At Paris, Juliet's vivid imagination had been chiefly employed in the service of her wit; but at the age of fifteen, it received new energy, a new impulse, a new direction, from a visit to the fair land of Italy, an introduction to its harmonious language, to all the fruits of Ausonian genius in poetry, painting, and music, to all the wondrous monuments of classic ages, which still adorn that scene of classic recollections. Juliet left Italy an enthusiast,—but not in religion. (1825, 1:18–19)

Juliet's education prepares her to take an active part in choosing her husband, but her parents' "faults" will be the cause of her downfall. Having rejected the advances of Mr Rycroft, encouraged by her father, Juliet falls in love with Lord Glenmere, the son of a Jacobite exile in Ireland. Her affinities with him are identified as the result of their Irish descent and their common knowledge of French and of French culture; indeed, Lord Glenmere addresses Juliet in French and bi-culturalism is foregrounded as a source of their attraction. Having seen her deceased mother in frequent nightmares, Juliet fears for her mental sanity until Lord Glenmere confirms that he was the cause of her parents' separation because he had a relationship with her mother when she was travelling in Italy. He confirms, therefore, that Juliet is his illegitimate daughter. While the incest is averted by the supernatural intervention of her dead mother, Juliet takes upon herself the consequences of her mother's extra-marital relationship, and after a short residence in an austere Carmelitan convent in France, she dies young. Both in Juliet's mother's and in Juliet's own experience, clashes between different religious and cultural backgrounds, mainly identified in the Catholic and Protestant religions, and in the Irish, French and English cultures, are the cause of misunderstandings and of the couples' separation. However, the idea of parental guilt due to unsatisfactory education is often presented and it blurs the cultural differences. Moreover, the Gothic mode is introduced through the device of the ghost appearing in a dream. While the use of a ghost may suggest a Shakespearean influence, Juliet's mother does not seek vengeance but has the role of revealing a hidden secret. Moreover, the dream invites the character to interpret signs and search for hidden secrets. As Anne Rouhette points out, dreams are often present in women writers' literature in the long eighteenth century as a means to foreground the need for interpretation: "The critical attention devoted to the character's dream echoes that which the reader must pay to the work as a whole in the act of reading. In both cases, it is a narrative which he or she is invited to interpret" (2019, 3). Busk may thus be seen to find inspiration in the recent tradition of writing by women, including for example Anne Radcliffe's novels that use dreams as hermeneutical devices.³ In the tale "Parental Guilt," the nightmare invites the reader to assess the origins of Juliet's suffering: religion is offered as her only source

³ On this subject, see Sage 2021.

of consolation, as her mother's extramarital relationship causes her renunciation of love. Juliet's father is not completely exonerated from "parental guilt," as he does not hesitate to sacrifice his daughter for personal interests in encouraging her to accept Mr Rycroft's proposal.

Several of Busk's stories are set in medieval times or during the English Civil War (1642–1651). In those periods, Busk identifies a misogynistic male "chivalric" culture that accepts men's liaisons and their threat to their families' stability. As she states in "The Merchant's Daughter": "laxity of morals, with regards to the female sex, [was] prevalent in courts and camps, among princes, knights, and troubadours" (1825, 2:54). In these situations, Busk often celebrates women's resilience by introducing retribution in the form of social punishment for the lovers, regardless of their social origin. A case in point is "The Merchant's Daughter," in which Pietro of Aragon, brother to the king of Sicily, is banned by the king for not having respected the engagement he made when Camiola Turinga paid the ransom for his captivity. Moreover, these short stories reflect Busk's interest in European and world history.

Alongside her reviewing for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Athenaeum*, and *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, Busk developed an interest in European and world history, as well as women's place in historical narratives. Thus, her *Manners and Customs of the Japanese* (1841), inspired by Dutch travellers' accounts of their journey in Japan, was one of the first histories of the country before it opened to commerce with the West. As Williams claims, it is "a work of synthesis and scholarship, which blends information from travellers with original commentary" (2017, 22). Busk's work provides a unique introduction to Japanese women's lives, devoting a chapter to "Social and Domestic Life," in which she writes about traditions and habits concerning marriage, birth, childbearing, and divorce. Busk introduces frequent comparisons with the condition of women in Europe as a mark of the advancement of a civilisation, and situates Japan as being in an intermediary position between East and West, and, as Williams points out, finds "points of overlap between the status of women in both countries" (2017, 22). Her ambitious four-volume *Mediaeval Popes, Emperors, Kings, and Crusaders, or, Germany, Italy, and Palestine, from A.D. 1125 to A.D. 1268* (1854–1856) adopts a transcultural approach, as the volume reassesses German and Italian medieval history through the perspective of the crusades and of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, which reigned in both countries.

Busk's interest in history is in line with the findings by recent studies showing that historical writing became increasingly part of women's recommended reading, especially when its didactic aim was clearly pointed out. Moreover, British women were also successful writers of histories, with the notable examples of Catharine Macaulay's *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick*

Line (1763–1783) and Mary Hays's six-volume *Female Biography, or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of all Ages and Countries* (1803). According to Greg Kucich, women's involvement with history was due to a dissatisfaction with previous historical narratives, as several women writers found mainstream history much too curtailed in its explorations of affections and of society (2000, 200–201). Thus, Macaulay's search for greater "sympathizing tenderness" in her history and Hays's work both focus on women's sufferings and difficulties (Hays 1803, 1:vii). Busk addressed the originality of her subject matter in the "Preface" to her history: she situates her work in the context of German medievalism; moreover, her desire to instruct the British reader is paramount, by offering a synthesis and "a comprehensive but condensed portraiture of society in those ages, and especially in Germany" (1854–1856, 1:v). Busk finds in the period "the extremes of vice and virtue, of brutal ferocity and of chivalrous courtesy," but also identifies the emergence of women as historical subjects and cultural actors, due to the "chivalrous and troubadourish idolatry of woman" (1854–1856, 1:ix). In a review of Giustina Renier Michiel's *Origine delle Feste Veneziane* she also notes that some women became professors at universities, while education was being denied to women at large.⁴

Despite her medievalism, Busk invokes the primacy of present moral values over those held in the Middle Ages:

For who does and can look at the past free from a bias impressed by the present? Not even the most philosophical appear to escape it. Secondly, these princes are variously appreciated according as the moral standard by which they are measured is taken from the opinions, habits, and sentiments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or of the more enlightened, refined and polished nineteenth? Need it be said which is the fair standard for comparison? (1854–1856, 1:ix)

Moreover, she tends to celebrate British superiority and, according to Judith Johnson, in Busk "the value of cultural exchange is once again heavily weighted against the Europeans and is valuable only for the light that it shines on the British themselves" (2013, 88).

⁴ "Our readers are probably aware, that in Italy there is, or at least there was, no medium in female education, and whilst the great body of women, even of the higher classes, could hardly scrawl their names, and were destitute of such common information as may be acquired at a Sunday School, some of their compatriot sisters were Professors of Law, Mathematics, philosophy, and what not, at the most celebrated Universities of the Ausonian Peninsula". (Busk 1831, 498). She means Elena Cornaro Piscopia (1646–1684), who obtained a degree in Philosophy at the University of Padua in 1678, and Laura Maria Catarina Bassi (1711–1778), who became the first woman in Europe to teach philosophy at the University of Bologna after having defended her doctorate in Philosophy in 1732.

To conclude, Busk's historical narratives and her tales, often set in the past, in a British or European setting, reflect her interest in women's self-education, in European languages, and in women's history. In a review of an Italian history of literature, Busk reflected on the consequence of the tendency to confine women's literature to an appendix, and protested that "in our insular ignorance [we] should never have suspected that to speak of Sappho, for instance, was to digress from the history of Hellenic poetry" (1836, 433). As has been pointed out by recent studies, Victorian anthologies were responsible for excluding women writers from the canon and recovering their voice should be one of the main objectives in literary history.

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