

BROKEN VOWS AND BROKEN HOMES:
THE POLITICS OF PRE-RAPHAELITISM IN
FLORENCE CLAXTON'S *THE CHOICE OF PARIS*

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“Florence [Claxton] had done what no female artist in all the world had attempted before,” writes Ellen Clayton in her 1876 *English Female Artists* of a painter and illustrator who has long since been interred in the annals of art history: “She made a drawing on wood for a weekly illustrated paper” (2:44). With such a set-up, this achievement may strike us as a bit anticlimactic. More interesting to the student of British art and culture, perhaps, are the ideologies revealed in the remainder of Clayton’s brief biographical description of Claxton: “There were ladies who engraved, though not for newspapers, which involves a very unpleasant amount of hurry, bother, downright drudgery, and ‘night work’ ... but as yet, no woman had thought of trying to solve the mysteries of preparing and executing a wood-block.” Clayton concludes her account by adding that Claxton “also made watercolour drawings, very bright and attractive, chiefly large-sized heads of beautiful girls. On her marriage with Mr. Farrington, of Romsey, in 1868, Florence Claxton, however, withdrew from the profession and now makes no claim to be considered as belonging to the artistic world” (2:44-45).

More than simply providing an overview of Claxton’s career, Clayton’s synopsis situates Claxton within an implicit body of rules regulating the creation of art by women in Victorian England. These rules delineate appropriate artistic subjects and media, and they determine where and when a woman may claim a place alongside her male fellows. Left unaddressed in Clayton’s passage, however, are larger questions about what constitutes the “artistic world” circumscribed by such rules and what constitutes “belonging” within it. These questions are particularly complicated with regard to Claxton. A married woman who spent her adult life pursuing art apart from the husband she supposedly retired to attend to, a humourist and satirist just as often censured as praised for her wit, a pioneering draftswoman in a profession dominated by draftsmen, a participant in London’s best art exhibitions, and