

Barbara Bodichon's Epistolary Education

Meritxell Simon-Martin

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Unfolding Feminism

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PREFACE

In 1849, after having read John Stuart Mill's best-selling book, *Principles of Political Economy*, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, aged twenty-one, wrote in her notebook: 'Philosophers and reformers have generally been afraid to say anything about the unjust laws both of society and country which crush women. There never was a tyranny so deeply felt yet borne so silently, that is the worst of it.' In an appeal to action, she hoped that there would be 'some who will brave ridicule for the sake of justice to half the people in the world.' Bodichon was indeed one of those. She wrote and campaigned in favour of women's educational, professional, legal and political rights throughout her life. Publishing in the twentieth century, her biographers have all lamented that, despite being one of the leaders of the mid-Victorian feminist movement, little has been written about her. Having been the object of wide scholarly interest since, Bodichon is certainly a well-studied figure today. This book seeks to revisit Bodichon with a view to drawing the attention to the limits of her feminist 'achievements'—a dimension of her contribution to the mid-Victorian women's movement that Bodichon Studies have tended to overlook.

According to women's historians, the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' were not coined in the English language until the 1890s. The expressions Bodichon and her contemporaries used were 'woman's rights women' to refer to themselves and 'the (woman's) movement,' 'the cause' or 'the woman question' to their cause. In this book I use the term 'feminist' and 'feminism' as a shorthand to acknowledge Bodichon's (and her co-workers') awareness of women's unequal position in society vis-à-vis men and her combat against this discrimination.

In order to revise Bodichon's feminism, I explore the significance of letter-exchange in providing her a daily source of education, understood here as *Bildung*—the lifelong process of self-formation.

Throughout this book I deliberately use the terms 'individual'/'individuals,' 'man'/'men' and male pronouns when referring to *Bildungstheorie* to reflect the original masculinist orientation of this educational concept. Reading Bodichon's personal correspondence through the lens of a gender-blind philosophical term can be regarded as an incompatibility. How can I apply this masculinist educational concept to a feminist historical study? Throughout this book I argue that *Bildung* is a thinking tool that permits underscoring the significance of letters in the development of Bodichon's feminism and that a revised reading of this educational concept permits highlighting its problematic implications. Seeking to contribute to Epistolary Studies, my study of Bodichon's epistolary *Bildung* is also a theoretical reflection on epistolarity and an epistemological discussion of letters as sources of historical knowledge that, I hope, will enhance our understanding of doing historical research.

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To Julio

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