

Essay

# What Would the Goddess Do? Isis, Radical Grandmothers, and Eliza Sharples “All Reform Will Be Found to Be Inefficient that Does Not Embrace the Rights of Woman.”

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Received: 26 January 2018; Accepted: 29 March 2018; Published: 4 April 2018



**Abstract:** Recent research in the Huntington archive provides new information for assessing the importance of Eliza Sharples’s meaning as a radical feminist, critiquing and using Christianity and pagan female Gods to establish her authority and further her feminist cause.

**Keywords:** Sharples; feminism; pagan religion; radical republican groups; freethinker; the Rotunda; Isis

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“All Reform Will Be Found to Be Inefficient that Does Not Embrace the Rights of Woman.”  
(Sharples 1850)

In early December 1831, republican Richard Carlile remarked that his new follower Eliza Sharples, was “young, amiable, beautiful, and ha[d] a mind to become a Messiah.”<sup>1</sup> In a missive to Carlile portentously dated 25 December 1831, Sharples asserted her desire to “commence [her] new career” as a “female reformer”, declaring her divine status with the apostrophe, “ISIS POSTOPHORI—MY POSTOPHORI OMNIA—” (“Isis the one who is the (letter) bearer of all things”).<sup>2</sup> Thus, Sharples equated her persona with the second coming of Christ. Elsewhere, I argue that nineteenth-century women writers experienced “mother-god-want”, a term I base on Barrett Browning’s longing for spiritual foremothers upon whom the woman writer could look back as part of her literary heritage. I suggest that early nineteenth-century millenarians, such as Joanna Southcott, and socialist feminists, such as Eliza Sharples, were radical grandmothers who pioneered new religious crusades featuring Christian and pagan female divinities, which indirectly inspired later Victorian women writers to imagine their own “symbolic female divinities” as a means of creating powerful potentialities for women (Browning 1897; Houston 2013, pp. 1–2). Indeed, Sharples’s references to a female Christ

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. (Campbell 1899) further references are to this edition and appear in the text. Hereafter, Sharples is referred to in the notes as ES and Carlile as RC.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in Campbell (1899, p. 155). I thank Monico Cyrino for her help translating the Greek. This letter is the first written use of “Isis” as far as can be ascertained. Campbell states that RC gave ES this name, noting that for practical situations it was decided that ES should be “known as Mrs. Sharples Carlile” and her signature as “Elizabeth Sharples Carlile” (Campbell 1899, pp. 159, 167–68). Campbell suggests that by using the name “Isis”, her mother “preserved her incognita” and “kept herself free from all private calumny” (p. 159). When RC asked her to change her first name to “Elizabeth”, ES writes, “I feel justified in rejecting the half of my name, still, my dear, if you prefer the name of Elizabeth, to that, of Eliza, and ask me to take it, I will [double underline] Elizabeth Sharples Carlile” (Richard Carlile Papers, 1819–1900. Huntington Museum (HM) Mss RC 1-621: 61; further references to items in the collection are to this archive and appear in the text as RCP followed by the item number).

possibly provided Florence Nightingale with that imagery, and her descriptions of an omnipotent Eve may have influenced Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (Houston 2013, pp. 114, 34).

The millenarian and socialist movements that accompanied the French Revolution spread the idea of the need for a female divinity and can be seen in the arts, politics, and religion. Romantics like Wordsworth, Goethe, Schiller, Blake, Keats, and Byron, along with Macpherson and Carlile, returned to the mystical motif of pagan goddesses or a quasi-pantheistic sanctification of Mother Nature. That the "pinnacle of female participation in radical politics" was occurring in the early nineteenth century can be seen in the religions founded by lower-class women like Southcott, Ann Lee, and Luckie Buchan that included belief in a female god (Parolin 2010). Other radical political groups, such as the Saint Simonians and Owenites, sought the "advent of the Mother" and expected the Second Coming to be that of a female saviour since "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost have fail'd."<sup>3</sup> For example, James Elishma Smith, one of Owens's radical associates, asserted that "Hitherto God has been worshipped as a man; let us now worship the female God."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, John Goodwyn Barmby made obeisance to the "Woman-Saviour" in his communist journal.<sup>5</sup> Sharples added her voice, saying that the time had come for "woman" to "reign, and the kingdom of the man" to "be no more" (Sharples and Carlile 1832).

Working as an apprentice tinsmith, Carlile (1790–1843) was radicalized after reading and publishing the works of Thomas Paine. A notorious free speech activist, he was dogged in his political commitment to republicanism and freethinking and spent long periods of time in prison for violating the repressive Six Acts laws Parliament passed after the Peterloo Massacre. Confinement allowed extensive time to write his numerous radical publications, including *The Republican* (1819–1826), *The Deist* (1819–1820), *The Gauntlet* (1834), and *The Prompter* (1830–1831), along with copious letters to political figures. As "infidel Missionaries", he and Rev. Robert Taylor traveled the country debating the clergy in an effort to prove that Christianity was based on superstition and idolatry (Campbell 1899, p. 117). In 1830, he opened the Rotunda on Blackfriars Lane, featuring speakers like Robert Owen, William Cobbett, and Daniel O'Connell, as well as himself and Taylor. As James Epstein notes, the Rotunda was one of the new venues providing the radical working classes with a place for group education and protest, particularly during the Reform debates.<sup>6</sup>

Coming from a respectable middle-class family in Bolton, Sharples (1803–1852) experienced a crisis of faith in 1830 when her beloved clergyman father died unexpectedly. An intelligent, well-educated woman, Sharples became enamored of Carlile's writing. In 1831, she started corresponding with him during one of his many stints in prison and by December of that year, decided to take up his cause, courageously travelling to London to meet him. In the letters introducing herself, Sharples praises Carlile's "exalted, noble, and generous mind" and asks him to be her "instructor". But when Carlile's agent informed Carlile about Sharples's request to visit him in jail, it was not so that Carlile could instruct her, but, rather, so that she could "explain her views" to him (qtd. in Campbell 1899, pp. 150, 152, 156). She never returned to her family even though it meant bitter poverty for the rest of her life. Carlile was estranged from his wife, and Sharples soon fell in love with him. By December of 1831, he was calling Sharples "Isis", and, though it may have begun as a pet name, Sharples seized upon it as a momentous, self-defining political and spiritual moniker to be used on stage, in the periodical press, and in the domestic arrangements with her difficult paramour.

Since Taylor and Carlile were in prison for much of 1831 and 1832, neither could resume speaking at the Rotunda, causing a loss of revenue. Desperate to keep it open, Carlile developed a remarkable plan to feature and advertise Sharples as the first radical female speaker ever to grace the Rotunda

<sup>3</sup> "St. Simonism in London by Fontana and Prati Chief and Preacher of St. Simonism in London," 1834; qtd. in (Taylor 1978); "To the Lady of the Rotunda," *Isis* 8 (31 March 1832), 112.

<sup>4</sup> *The Crisis* 4 May 1833; qtd. in (Taylor 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Barmby (1842), "Venus Rising from the Sea". Other sources for this paragraph include: (Houston 2013; Malmgreen 1983; Harrison 1979; Goldstein 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Epstein (2003); for more on RC's life see (Campbell 1899; Parolin 2010; Weiner 1983; Gilmartin 2005).

stage, along with being the first woman to publish a radical journal. It was hoped that the novelty of a beautiful woman speaker, known as the “Lady of the Rotunda” or “Isis”, would draw more crowds and grow the radical movement. Neither Taylor, Carlile, nor Sharples seemed to consider the fact that Sharples had no training as a public speaker and ended up sounding dull and rote. Once the initial novelty and fanfare subsided, attendance dwindled, and, as a result, *The Isis* (1832) folded after a year of publication.<sup>7</sup> In the biography of her father, Sharples’s daughter Theophilia Carlile Campbell explained that “there is no doubt at all” that Carlile “outlined all her lectures” and that in 1832, Eliza spent most of her time preparing two to four lectures a week based on his drafts (Campbell 1899, p. 159).<sup>8</sup> Thus, until recently, Sharples was written about as being a mere extra in her common-law husband’s story.

How Sharples’s performance of Isis should be analysed in terms of agency has engaged a number of feminist scholars studying the radical socialist-feminist movements of the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Helen Rogers finds that by “flamboyantly” placing her “own experience and that of women at the centre of her unique vision of radical Christianity”, Sharples produced a “powerful model of female agency” (Rogers 1998, pp. 52, 54, 59). Suggesting that Sharples and Carlile “shared an intellectual partnership”, Christina Parolin notes that she also led him to rational Christianity (Parolin 2010, p. 247).<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Edith Frow and Edmund Frow conclude that Isis “developed her own political brand of feminism, especially in relation to the unsatisfactory position in which she found herself as the ‘other woman’” (Frow and Frow 1989). More recently, Laura Schwartz has suggested that Sharples experienced a “counter-conversion” from Christianity to Freethought probably as a result of a psychic break experienced upon the death of her father, whereupon she switched her allegiance from one man (her father) to another (Carlile) (Schwartz 2013).

This concern with Sharples’s agency and spiritual metaphysics is key to my study of the collection of Richard Carlile Papers (RCP) held at the Huntington Library, which features handwritten blue books of Sharples’s speeches given at the Rotunda in the winter of 1832, as well as letters between Isis, Carlile, and Robert Taylor written during this time.<sup>11</sup> This rich archive lends an opportunity to analyse the personal record vis-à-vis the publications and public performances at the Rotunda and does not seem to have been fully considered up to now, thus allowing a more nuanced understanding of her “allegiances”. Based on these materials, I suggest that, along with radical groups that used “revolution as tactical talk” in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Sharples utilized Isis as part of a strategic, fluid language that accomplished a range of purposes, fulfilling intense personal needs while proclaiming a socialist-feminist agenda (Thomis and Holt 1977). Interrogating the patriarchal essence of Christian godhood, she taught that in overthrowing Christianity’s powerful emotional grip and anthropomorphic Father in Heaven, men and women had to become educated in all forms of

<sup>7</sup> Helen Rogers argues that ES’s failure was due to her association with RC, the “resistance of male radicals” to “female autonomy”, her conflicted message, use of the rhetoric of political reform, and use of personal experience (“The prayer, the passion and the reason’ of Eliza Sharples: freethought, women’s rights and republicanism, 1832–1852”, in (Yeo 1998)). Anna Clark suggests that “the role of the female prophetesses was anchored in visionary proclamations and in other-worldly spiritual context”, and thus, their influence was “evanescent and could not translate into female authority in the wider society” (Clark 1997).

<sup>8</sup> In *Radical Spaces* p. 250, Parolin notes that Home Office spy Abel Hall recorded seeing a few of the speeches and attested that some were in RC’s or Taylor’s handwriting but that other parts were in ES’s handwriting (Home Office Papers, HO64/12, 14 February 1832, fo. 38). Rogers suggests joint authorship since there is “closer attention” paid to “questions of sexual politics and women’s role in radical reform in *Isis* than in Carlile’s other works” (“The prayer, the passion and the reason’ of Eliza Sharples,” 57). My own study of Sharples’s and Carlile’s handwriting from examining the letters and the handwritten discourses suggests that the first and third discourses are, in the main, in her handwriting.

<sup>9</sup> See Clark’s *Struggle for the Breeches*; Barbara Taylor’s *Eve and the New Jerusalem*; (Rogers 2000); and (Parolin 2010); Angela Keane helps explain the sparse work on ES: “over-attention” to women-authored literary texts “eclipsed research into the networks of publication, distribution and subscription to which working class women were central” (Keane 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Early on, Carlile was “persuaded of the need to destroy the power and privileges of organized religion” (Weiner 1983, p. 63).

<sup>11</sup> The collection contains nine boxes of materials, with box 9 including some of the handwritten discourses (1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13) ES gave at the Rotunda in 1832 and reprinted in *The Isis* soon thereafter. There are also more than three dozen letters from ES to RC, the bulk of which are in box 3.

knowledge and science, an activity that would make them allegorical gods and bring “republicanism and happiness” to the world (“Second Person,” 614; “Ninth Discourse,” 115).

In addition, performing Isis when Sharples was, in all probability, pregnant boldly enacted her philosophy. On stage and in the domestic sphere, her very body argued for the right of a woman to own her body, make sexual choices for herself, obtain knowledge, and participate unapologetically and fully in the public sphere without fear of reprisal for enacting her reproductive rights and rights of personhood. While Carlile cautioned her to keep the pregnancy quiet, she begged him to make it public; demanding that her male lover accept equal emotional responsibility for the relationship, she expected him to live up to her feminist political commitments (Rogers 1998, p. 69).<sup>12</sup> Likewise, though in ways she may seem a dupe, the sheer intensity and verbal precision of her writing bears the signs of a developing agentic self. Carlile’s own words suggest that he was all but cowed by her: calling her a “wild-fire”, he wrote that he “fear[ed] nothing about you but your own temper”, to which she responded that her fiery temperament would “not be easily extinguished” (RCP 293, 44; 1832).

Like Wollstonecraft, who made no apologies for her sexual freedom or her vehement rhetoric and who thus could not be referred to by respectable female authors until George Eliot bravely reviewed her in the essay “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft” in 1855, Sharples seems to have been extinguished from the nineteenth-century feminist record. Ironically, the very “wild-fire” that brought Wollstonecraft and Sharples public attention also would have made it difficult for later generations of moderate Victorian proto-feminists to directly acknowledge their influence. As Gail Malmgreen has argued, the rise of Victorian domestic ideology, along with the rejection of feminist activism by lower-class radical movements, slowed the progress of women’s emancipation and temporarily silenced many of its voices.<sup>13</sup>

One letter from the RCP, hitherto unnoticed by scholars, as far as it is possible to tell, illustrates how difficult it was for Sharples to succeed as Isis on stage when the very men who put her up to it also rebuked her for being unfeminine and ill-prepared to speak. Carlile’s close associate Taylor was initially “much delighted with” the idea of Sharples lecturing at the Rotunda, effusing that as “[t]he Goddess”, she “is indeed Isis Omnia to our cause” (12 January 1832; qtd. in (Campbell 1899, p. 160)). After the idea became reality, he was appalled by Sharples’s speaking and writing skills and sent a brutal letter to Carlile to complain. Dramatically stating that he had received a “cicatrix”, without naming Sharples as the cause, he asserted that “gallantry requires” that the truth “be rather understood than expressed.” Depicting Carlile as “idiotically” taking up a “desperate” scheme, he grouched that “[he] never [saw] the Isis without a cold shiver running through” (RCP 217; 1832).<sup>14</sup>

Calling it “frightful Suicide” to let “her” “sink” our “Argosy in sight of port”, Taylor feared Carlile had become a “laughingstock”. In an anecdote about Charles Kemble of the famous acting clan, enacting a role without having rehearsed beforehand, Taylor commented that, though Kemble was a fool, “[h]e did not” write “speeches to be delivered by other persons” immediately thereafter, nor “find so great a fool” as “would undertake to deliver” said speeches—an attack on Sharples. Sympathising with Carlile’s “commercial difficulties”, Taylor brooded that “our Good Cause” was undermined by avarice “putting a whip” into their enemies’ hands. Avowing that “not every number of the Isis” had been “worthy” of Carlile, Taylor admonished that “both of us” must do “much better”, thus implying the need to muzzle Sharples (RCP 217; 1832).

Taylor continued the epistolary bludgeoning, exclaiming that if Sharples was to be viewed as the epitome of stage presence, “[he could] never stand before an audience again!” He warned that if a

<sup>12</sup> In RCP 62 (1832), ES was shocked and insulted that even freethinkers cut her because she was an unwed mother. She scorned the Misses Laws for accepting the double standard by continuing to support RC but ignoring ES in public settings.

<sup>13</sup> Malmgreen (1978, p.20); see also Billone (2007) on how Victorian women writers had to mask their more radical intentions.

<sup>14</sup> This letter was dated by curators as circa 1831; but internal references to *Isis*, which only began in publication in 1832, indicate that it had to have been written during that time, probably in the early winter, since by April he was writing apologies for said letter. The Huntington Library has now made this change based on my research.

speaker could not be “entertaining as well as instructive, and flash and strike and excite—and charm” he or she would “[n]ever be able to draw an audience twice.” Though he supported any “male or female” talent able to “disturb the stagnation” of mainstream politics, he believed that “Truth is no lady’s man—and will not dissemble” to “gratify female vanity”. In other words, mortal women were not meant to be public speakers. Pointing to exceptions that proved the rule (“Hypatia—was a prodigy, Isis Divinity”), Taylor observed that it was “unbecoming of the character of a Woman to aspire to be a public teacher—” (RCP 217; 1832).<sup>15</sup>

Taylor’s unpublished letter makes a fascinating jumping off point for understanding the complexity of Sharples’s authority as a speaker and writer, as well as her representation of a socialist-feminist form of Christianity. First of all, details in Taylor’s incendiary letter bely the suggestion that he and Carlile were Svengalis who wrote most of her speeches, thereby inveigling Sharples to their own purposes. Indeed, if the letter complains that she sounded ridiculous, misreading the lectures by rote, it also implies frustration that too often she followed her own inspiration rather than merely mimicking Carlile and Taylor’s words. In addition, it is difficult to argue that she merely followed Carlile’s lead when faced with her following statements: “I am not content to be an imitator” and “My soul is in this publication [*Isis*]; for it is here I feel that I do the most good; here I desire to concentrate whatever energy I have.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly, though she followed Carlile’s lead in what to say, she was also developing as a unique and compelling agent, co-creator, political activist, and spiritual visionary.

But Taylor’s letter also illustrates the misogynist Catch-22 facing radical women of the time, showing that even radical male colleagues undermined their female associates for breaking gender conventions. Unfairly judged for not being educated enough (like a man) to give public speeches, Sharples was also already found wanting because, as Taylor put it, it was “unbecoming” for women to “aspire” to speak on stage. Taylor’s demand that a speaker “flash” and “strike”, though fine for a man, would not have been acceptable for a middle-class female who needed to establish her bona fides as both lady-like and intelligent. Likewise, as a middle-class woman trained to be modest in bearing, on stage Sharples did not exhibit the flare that comes from being confident in moving about in one’s own body and making declarative statements to a large group or giving emphasis through forceful bodily gestures that Taylor, as a man who assumed his right to be a public speaker, would have felt comfortable displaying. What is astonishing is that she forged ahead with her public speaking though utterly unprepared for the stage, even despite receiving no help or training after it became clear that she was destined for failure in this venture because she was a woman.

Aware of how a loud, gesticulating woman would appear, Sharples herself historicized how women would always be found wanting when it came to speech: because St. Paul had famously “forbad women to speak in churches”, their “whole power of speech has been concentrated for domestic scolding” (“The Editress to Her Readers,” 25 February 1832, 39; “First Discourse,” p. 1). Attempting to undo Paul’s critique of women, she bitterly critiqued attacks on her speaking style. When *The Times* ridiculed her Lancashire “aspiration of words” (i.e., pronouncing “as” as “has”) (“The Fourth Discourse,” 25 February 1832, p. 38), rather than abandoning the effort altogether, Sharples fought back, asserting that “[her] mind’s resolve [was] quite enough for its capability of performance” and that she was “made of sterner material, than to yield to trifling difficulties” (25 February 1832, p. 39).

<sup>15</sup> Within weeks, Taylor realized that this correspondence had hurt the friendship, and he told Carlile that a recent installment of *The Isis* featured “much good writing and more than enough to remove all doubt that it [is] no woman’s writing and no other man’s writing than yours”, a backhanded swipe at Sharples (RCP 232, 230; 1832). Thereafter, he apologized, but the damage was done, and Taylor and Carlile went their separate ways. The friendship ended when Taylor derided the couple in a lecture on “matrimony, harlotry, moral marriage, bastards”, thus reaffirming his own conservative notions about marriage (qtd. in (Rogers 1998, p. 70)). We do not know if Sharples ever read the damning letter, but she did come to dislike Taylor and despised his stage performances (see RCP 56; 1832).

<sup>16</sup> These statements appear in two of her “The Editress to Her Readers” columns in *Isis*, 18 February 1832, p. 23 and 14 April 1832, p. 151; except for separate references to the handwritten blue books in the RCP, further references to the published version of *Isis* are to the digitized Nineteenth-Century Collections Online and appear in the text.

Positing that “[she had] yet to learn that pronunciation ha[d] anything to do with talent or argument”, she concluded that it proved her “superiority” because “no fault can be found, but that of aspiration of words or letters” (“Fourth Discourse,” p. 38).

Nevertheless, she seemed to have experienced impostor syndrome, being at once cocky and chagrined about her performances. In “The Ninth Discourse”, where she admitted the centrality of questioning and debate to the acquisition of knowledge, she noted a “defect on my own part” because she would not accept questions from the audience, and she would not speak “extempore”. In response, she promised that “in a few months, I hope to find myself supported by a few ladies, in public debate and questioning, with any gentlemen who may be pleased to hold disputations with us, on subjects that are rationally and decently disputable.” As to speaking extemporaneously, she admitted that she waited “only for a little experience, a little confidence, to trust to speaking, and to give the public time to estimate the reality of my character” (“Ninth Discourse,” 31 March 1832, p. 117). As illustrated by Taylor’s disdain for her speaking, facing interrogation from a large group of men in public would have been disastrous for almost any woman of the time.

In estimating Sharples’s temperament, we should pay attention to her statement that “[s]uppressed speech gathers into a storm”, for the tone of her writings was turbulent and forthright, suggesting her impatience with contemporary gender ideology and her readiness, even precipitateness, to press forward with the demand for bold changes in society. Likewise, her conviction that knowledge was the source of godhood and could be a source of self-empowerment for women acted as a ballast for her unorthodox actions (“The Editress to Her Readers,” 25 February 1832, p. 39; “First Discourse,” p. 1). Believing in human “perfectib[ility]”, she asserted that “where the purpose is good and strong, the capabilities of the person will grow to its complete management” (“The Editress,” 31 March 1832, p. 119; “The Editress,” 25 February 1832, p. 39). Dedicating herself to “constant and laborious education”, she was “bent on self and general improvement” (“The Editress,” 31 March 1832, p. 119; “The Editress,” 25 February 1832, p. 39). With that education she herself “ris[es] into a sense of self-importance” so that though “[she was] not a professed and practised orator” when she stood “before [an audience of] a thousand”, she felt “the importance of [her] task, and [was] as bold as a lion.” “Catch[ing] inspiration in the ratio of the importance of [her] task”, she felt “all the more confident” the greater the “criticism” (“The Editress to Her Readers” of 14 April 1832, p. 151). In a feminist dynamic, she knew that in voicing women’s oppression she had begun to relieve it, while also extending her authority to further name injustice.

The thirteen copy books in the RCP containing handwritten lectures help adjudicate Sharples’s agency in writing and speaking. While most of the RCP lectures are in Carlile’s handwriting, with a few by an unknown hand, perhaps Taylor’s, a hefty portion of the “The Third Discourse” and “The First Discourse” are in Sharples’s hand, along with slight revisions and notes she made on Carlile’s handwritten lectures.<sup>17</sup> The fact that she helped write down most or all of these two lectures presenting her to the public for the first time suggests that Sharples had some agency regarding her performance, particularly since the content of the two speeches includes vigorous feminist stances that were not chief amongst Carlile and Taylor’s beliefs.

Illustrating self-awareness and self-confidence regarding positionality, at the beginning of “The First Discourse,” Isis acknowledged that there was “no precedent” for a woman standing on the Rotunda “boards” to lecture, and, without initially naming Carlile or Taylor, explained that she was there to plead their cause and “endeavour to reason before you, as they reasoned before you” (11 February 1832, p. 1). Sharples then provided her own credentials, showing that she was not Carlile’s minion. Noting that she had left a “happy home” because of “the excitement which religious persecution has roused”, she had committed herself to expressing her own form of faith based on

<sup>17</sup> The following are by ES: “The First Discourse,” *Isis*, 1 (11 February 1832), pp. 1–5, RCP 70; parts of the “Third Discourse of Eliza Sharples,” RCP 71: 12–52, reprinted in *Isis* as “The Third Discourse of the Lady at the Rotunda,” p. 1 (18 February 1832). It is unclear if there are other handwritten *Isis* lectures housed elsewhere.

studying whatever was “true” and in opposition to “superstition” (“First Discourse,” p. 1). Thus, she vowed to “launch the frail bark of my intellect, my soul, my genius, my spirit, on the ocean of politics” because “[she was] fired with the daring to buffet its waves”, and “ride on the whirlwind” (“First Discourse, p. 3). Exulting that “[she had] dared to take the station of a lecturer here”, she acknowledged that she was a “novel priestess” and implied that she was capable of leading her own “parishioners” (“First Discourse,” p. 4).

Indeed, in the inaugural discourse she proclaimed that she intended “to gather power round [her] in this establishment”, and she challenged the men-only crowd, pointedly asking, “which of you will not accept me for your general, your leader, your guide?” (“First Discourse,” p. 3) Again, women’s rights were not at the top of Carlile’s agenda, so it would seem that Sharples made the decision to highlight it in the first lecture. In fact, in “The First Discourse,” she inextricably linked her rational faith to advocacy of feminism, implying that true religion could not be separated from belief in women’s equality. Mocking those who would undermine talk about politics “from a woman!” she proclaimed: “YES, I will set before my sex the example of asserting an equality for them with their present lords and masters, and strive to teach all, . . . that the undue submission, which constitutes slavery, is honourable to none” (“First Discourse,” p. 1). Maintaining that she was “a free and independent woman” and “not” an “organ” of Carlile and Taylor’s “sentiments”, Sharples put the male audience (and Carlile) on notice that women’s rights must be key to the radical movement and that Sharples would continue to speak on these matters.

Sharples argued in the “First Discourse” that she was her own agent; having “formed a mind and found a soul of my own”, she was “unpersuaded by any one” and “[would] use no argument until [she] underst[ood] it, and adopt no maxim until [she] ha[d] studied it” (“First Discourse,” p. 4). Likewise, she explained that her revision of the Christian religion was based on “careful examination” and “honest criticism” of “every existing proposition” pronounced by the “creeds”, “gospels”, and “theories of philosophers” (“First Discourse,” p. 3). Rogers rightly contends that “the ultimate authority” for Sharples was her own thought, which allowed her to deconstruct the “Cartesian dualities of mind and body” (Rogers 1998, pp. 61, 54). Sharples explains the process in “The Third Discourse” thusly: “My profession is that of an inquirer, a thinker, a reasoner, a speaker according to no other gospel than my own thoughts. I speak as the spirit within me dictates” and “according to the impulsions of the body” and believe “no man’s doctrine, unless I can make it my own, by understanding it, after referring for comparisons to things in existence” (18 February 1832, p. 22). Thus, she recognized the rigorous energies occurring between the mind and body when they empirically and logically track and interrogate ideas and impulses.

As she made “progress in philosophy” under Carlile’s tutelage, she also believed that it was her duty to “diffus[e]” that “knowledge and instruction to mankind” (qtd. in (Campbell 1899, pp. 153, 156)). Thus, she asserted that “[o]n these boards” and “everywhere, that my voice can be heard or my pen can reach, I will struggle for more liberty; —not for myself, for I am free” but “for others who are not free” (“First Discourse,” p. 2). When in “The First Discourse”, Sharples called her audience to “awake! arise!” and “recover your lost position, be as gods, knowing good from evil”, she was also teaching a key principle of her feminist religion, that obtaining knowledge actuated divinity and that women were as capable of attaining knowledge and godhood as were men (“First Discourse,” p. 2; “Eighteenth Discourse,” 23 June 1832, p. 262). Revising Christianity through a feminist lens, she applauded Eve, who understood that if you would “be as gods, knowing good and evil, you must pluck that fruit from the tree of knowledge.” As a modern Eve, Sharples boldly “resolve[d]” not to take just “one piece of fruit” but to “strip the tree” and offer it to any man or woman who desires it (“Ninth Discourse,” p. 117).

Sharples voiced her feminism throughout *Isis*. Complaining that women were trained to be “slaves” and “creature[s] of fear, prejudice, misconception, or thoughtlessness”, she contested that contemporary British women were lower in “dignity and human intellect” than an ancient “Roman matron” who had the right to “expan[d]” her knowledge (“The Editress to Her Readers,” 14 July 1832,

p. 354). These words imply an understanding of why she herself would ultimately be rejected. As noted earlier, audiences were not ready for such sentiments from a woman, nor was she formally educated enough yet to make these statements publicly through a systematic rhetoric and well-taught speaking style. Years later, when Carlyle was dead and Sharples was living in desperate poverty, she fondly remembered “[l]ecturing with spirit and animation” and being “admired by many” (Sharples 1850). The curious memory of being spirited belies Taylor’s account and perhaps represents Sharples’s wish that she had lived up to her own expectations for being a wild-fire when performing Isis on stage.

Wearing the mantel of Isis, Sharples could critique the Christian religion that she felt had oppressed her and imagine a pagan mythos that would allow women to grow in spiritual and political power. Contrasting Christianity’s offerings with pagan practices, she suggested that Isis was far more worthy of a second coming than was Christ. One of the constant refrains in the lectures was that the term “god” was an “allegory”, representing true principles rather than anthropomorphic beings (“First Discourse,” p. 2). Thus, bracketing Christ as an anthropomorphic personage, she saw him instead as the “Principle of Reason” (“The Editress,” 18 February 1832, p. 23). As she explained, when the “dignified Pagan” went to the temple, it was for the purpose of meditating on the “principle” the god represented rather than the god per se. In a way, then, being Isis was a feminist allegorical response to Christian oppression, so that assuming that she had become the model of godlike potential, she exhorted, “so here will I aspire to be, in example, an Isis Omnia” (“First Discourse,” p. 4).

The lectures were also concerned with the symbols religions provide to men and women for imagining their potential. She pointed out that “Christianity featured representations of ‘a dove, a young woman and a child, a weeping, a dying, and a dead Saviour, with death’s head and bones and all the horrors of the cross.’” These images suggested that, fearful of a “gaping” hell, the good Christian was ultimately just a “degraded”, “miserable sinner” with no hope for happiness in this life (“The Editress,” 31 March, 1832, pp. 118–19). Where Christianity proposed the “base idea” of the self as “radically vicious”, the pagans set forth “Venus”, “Diana”, “Pallas”, and “Isis, Omnia, that beautiful personification of all that is delightful on earth” (“The Editress,” 31 March 1832, pp. 118–19). The modern “second coming of Christ”, Sharples argued, would be the “advent and epiphany of Isis”, with pagan feminism triumphing over patriarchal Christianity to bring a Second Coming of “republicanism and happiness” to the world (“Second Person,” p. 614; “Ninth Discourse,” p. 115). Believing in human “perfectib[ility]”, the pagan also trusted in the possibility of a “paradise of the earth” (“The Editress,” 31 March 1832, p. 119).

Whether they were all exactly in her own words or not, Sharples’s grandiose claims put her persona in the mode of enacting divinity, and it is difficult to imagine her not being affected by that potent dramatic stance. At the height of her short lived fame, she proclaimed that “I feel like the God who can bring together his elements of wrath and hurl destruction on the wickedness of mankind” (“The Editress,” 31 March 1832, p. 119). Gloating that she was “pleased” that “[she] who, six months ago, was absolutely without prospect, without purpose in life”, was now “waving the magic wand of intellect” over “this real Egyptian darkness” that required a “goddess for its removal”, she also boasted of the “thousand” people who “bo[wed]” like “idolators to a goddess” (“The Editress,” 10 March 1832, p. 71). One idolator genuflected: “GODDESS, Whence came you? . . . I am no longer ashamed to confess, that I too can worship such a goddess. . . . I see a new thing. I see woman in all her glory” (Frank, “To Isis,” 25 February 1832, p. 46). “No Faith” wrote that Sharples should be “worshipped as a goddess—as a real Messiah—as the real saviour of mankind” (“To the Lady of the Rotunda,” 10 March 1832, p. 70). Meanwhile, “Hermes” asserted that the “appearance” of the “fair Goddess” will “give rise to a new era in the history of our country” and that “children, yet unborn, will be taught to lisp your praises” (“To the Editress of the Isis,” 17 March 1832, p. 96).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hermes also declared that she had “earn[ed] deathless fame” for her “brilliant genius” and was an “High Priestess of the Temple of Truth and Reason”, p. 96. It is possible that these letters were written under pseudonyms used by RC; but since he did write to the publication under his own name, we might assume they are from legitimate parties. ES was pleased by

The private letters also offer a unique perspective, indicating that Sharples took her divine persona seriously in the domestic sphere and expected her increasingly self-directed revision of Christianity to mean as much there as it did on stage.<sup>19</sup> Her daughter Theophilia never ceased referring to her mother as “Isis”, using that appellation far more than the term “mother” when referring to her in Carlile’s biography and thereby publicly continuing the tradition of calling her by that honourific after her death.<sup>20</sup> In one instance in the *Life*, Campbell refers to Sharples as becoming the “‘Isis’ of our story”, indicating the importance of the name (p. 147). One wonders if the children were instructed from childhood to refer to Sharples with this odd appellation, and, if so, what effect that had. As well, how long did Sharples use this name? We do not know. In any case, Theophilia’s repeated reference to her mother as “Isis” uncannily reinstalls Sharples in that powerful positionality.

In contrast, Sharples’s sister Maria saw the name “Isis” as being far worse than the heathen acts it represented. A conventional Christian, Maria abhorred Sharples for defiling her “reputable and respected”, “always retiring and obscure” family.<sup>21</sup> But Maria seemed more offended by Sharples’s insistence on being called “Isis” than that she was a publicity-seeking unwed mother. Indeed, Maria began her letter huffily: “Her Sister Maria to the Editress My dear Eliza—Isis [double underline],—I suppose I am to call you since you have renounced your Christian name—and taken one instead, which I can find only in the Heathen Mythology” (RCP 204; 1832). Clearly, as Maria intuited, being forced to refer to Sharples as Isis automatically put her in the position of interrogating assumptions about the gender of divinity and opened a space within which to imagine women as having godlike agency and potential.

Turning to the letters, one can see why Carlile’s epistles were so disheartening to Sharples.<sup>22</sup> He complained that she was “always in extremes”, being “sometimes too gay for sober observation, sometimes too sad even to be worth pitying” (qtd. in (Campbell 1899, p. 226)). In a letter responding to her criticism that he impregnated her and then decided he did not want romance, Carlile dumbly asserted that “I am as chaste toward you, in mind and body and thought, as the infant at your breast.” He follows with a qualifier that illustrates his capacity for brutality:

but, remember, I am not a man to be trifled with, to be jeered, nor to be easily duped. You have seen my promptitude in resenting an insult from Mr. Taylor and my resolution in carrying out the resentment. I shall deal with you precisely the same if you so deal with me (RCP 294; 1832).

A punitive teacher with the worst of tin ears, he insulted Sharples by comparing her to Taylor: “You have his weakness and waverings and much of his impatient suspicious irascibility, without his genius and study. Instead of growing in philosophical improvement, you are diverging from it”, suggesting that she did not follow his ideological lead in lock-stop. He also remarked that despite her belief that he favored philosophy over loving her: “My soul burns with a steady and pure flame of desire to see and be with you; but I cannot degrade myself so far as to exhibit folly and madness about

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her fame, publishing a reader’s description of Isis’s attributes in the 24 March 1832 edition of *Isis*: she represents “truth and nature” and avows that “I am all that has been, that shall be” (E. R., “To the Editress of the Isis,” p. 104).

<sup>19</sup> Sharples (1850). ES proudly noted that “Mr. Owen has invited me to lecture” (RCP 36; 1832). In another letter she reveals pleasure in her increased fame when she went to Saltair: “I was introduced” as “‘Lady Isis’”, and “warmly and I may say affectionately received, my fame they were pleased to say had spread abroad in Lancashire, and the Cooperatives were anxiously awaiting the time” when she and RC could visit. The same letter refers to meeting a man who had “heard a sermon preached” “all about me” (RCP 27; 1832).

<sup>20</sup> Campbell refers to her mother as “Isis” throughout the *Life* (1899): pp. 148, 155, 158, 164–165, 167–69, 185, 187, 190–91, 194–95, 228–29, 231–32, 234.

<sup>21</sup> ES’s mother “never forgave Isis”; when ES was dying, a friend asked Mrs. Sharples to let ES come home; the response: “As she has made her bed so she must lie” (qtd. in (Campbell 1899, pp. 155, 235)).

<sup>22</sup> To my knowledge, no scholar has examined the 1832 letters as an oeuvre. Campbell quotes them and reflects on the historical record but does not analyse them as rhetorical, political documents. Rogers and Parolin refer briefly to these letters. The letters between RC and ES are “very difficult to arrange” because there are no dates (Campbell 1899, p. 168). An unknown hand, perhaps Campbell’s, often cleans up ES’s grammar and punctuation. I quote verbatim to capture ES’s personhood; to my knowledge these letters have not been transcribed nor published.

it, and to be food for the sport of my enemies.”<sup>23</sup> Romance was not a part of his vocabulary. Carlile ends the letter, scolding that after apologizing to her for his behavior he was surprised and angry to receive another letter of complaint from her “so soon” (RCP 294; 1832). With smug condescension, in another message he wrote, “I will always endeavour to set you a good example; to rise above you in character and temper and goodness” (RCP 293; 1832).

Sampling his letters goes a long way to explaining why Sharples responded to him like a “wild-fire”. She had developed the amour-propre one would expect from the masculine sex of the time period, and, as noted above, taking the name of “Isis” seemed to increase her sense of pride as well as resistance to fulfilling the fawning role Carlile expected from women. She had not left her comfortable former existence for that. Indeed, Sharples’s letters illustrated a growing sense that her Osiris needed instruction in domestic and gender politics, something his own vaunted “Philosophy” did not teach him. What becomes clear is that Sharples expected that the name change would help effectuate the principles of gender equality in the private sphere that she was preaching from the stage. Demanding political consistency across the public and private spheres, she called on Carlile to leave off traditional sexual politics and incarnate the progressive principles he preached.

As seen in the public lectures, Sharples’s letters featured a temperament to command and be heard, which must have touched a raw nerve with Carlile, a “paterfamilias who demanded total obedience” (Weiner 1983, p. 124). But she was ready to take pride of place beside if not above this man who had his own god complex, proclaiming that he was “crucified” by his country: “I am the Jesus Christ of this Island, and this age” (qtd. in (Weiner 1983, p. 134)). In every way, Sharples seemed to challenge Carlile and her public to recognize her unmarried, pregnant body as a site of divinely sanctioned authority. Even her complaint that Carlile “ought to share in nursing” their son because her breasts hurt should be seen as a political gesture resulting from her feminist religious stance (RCP 59; 1832). Indeed, Sharples’s letters, with their relentless recriminations on being prudishly barred from visiting Carlile in prison because she was pregnant, as well as her critique of his desire for a “Philosophical” love, attempted to pose these purportedly minor female complaints as the very argument of an Isis—in other words, if a woman is not to be taken seriously in the private sphere, how can she receive respect in the public arena?

The letters do exhibit fawning submissive admiration for Carlile, but this is accompanied with astringent demands and fearless combat. The logical progression of her lengthy arguments indicates some training in rhetoric and is coupled with strained punctuation and unrestrained emotion, as the raw force of unfiltered feelings merged the role of Isis as divine afflatus with Eliza the sometimes choleric, abused common-law wife. At once the goddess and much put-upon mistress, she took offense easily. But when considering the less attractive attributes of her letters, one must keep in mind that Carlile seemed to have been apathetic about obtaining visiting privileges for her, advising, instead, that she should love him philosophically rather than romantically, a flippant piece of advice to a woman pregnant with his child—especially since, at the same time, he happily entertained many adoring women in his prison cell.

Sharples’s use of the divine persona was explicit in her strategic salutations. Entitling a majority of the more than three dozen letters “Isis to RC”, she signaled that she was serious about what the appellation meant and intended the stark interpellation, in which the subject (Isis) wields power as the Alpha and Omega and I Am who calls the object to an inferior, worshipful position. Thus, Carlile is reduced in power through literal abbreviation (“RC”) as the unspeaking recipient of truth from the goddess. The strategic opening anoints the whole letter with authority—whether it includes pedestrian complaints or intellectual disquisitions. Reading the letters as an oeuvre, it is apparent that assuming the name of the goddess helped Sharples navigate the quotidian gender politics that came to a head

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<sup>23</sup> An unknown hand struck through the underlining of “but I cannot degrade myself so far as.”

when she managed the couple's political and personal business while he was in prison.<sup>24</sup> Speaking as Isis, she developed a feminist philosophy to defy Carlile's downgrading of emotional wisdom, as well as his blithe erasure of the categorical, logical ramifications of pregnancy for women in a conservative culture.

Letter 31 exemplifies how Sharples overrode Carlile's woolly thinking. Beginning with the wonderful salutation "Isis to RC. 'The light fingered Goddess' to her friend, and beloved companion", she points out his lack of emotional skills, saying, "you desire me to be happy, and you my friend, a prisoner! 'be really happy,' you say; think of my situation for a moment, and then you will be led to exclaim! no, poor girl, I must make . . . her happy, her happiness will depend upon me." Pointing out that he (and his philosophy) had shown little understanding of women, she responded with unmediated emotion: "I am waiting oh! how anxiously, for your liberation, and then, and not till then shall I be able to say, 'I am happy'" (RCP 31; 1832). Turning a domestic argument into a divine admonishment, Sharples indicated to Carlile that, despite being unmarried, pregnant, and impoverished, she retained her dignity, and thus, rebuked smarmy advice to "be happy". Implying that he should be consistent in his own emerging feminism, with the loaded salutation she charges Carlile to remember to whom he is writing, as it were.

In a similar move, combatting Carlile's complaint that while he was engaged in politically important matters she fulfilled mere domestic duties, Isis reminded him that she had her own heroic trajectory. Saying, "I must, and will, be something", like him she needed to find an important role in public debate (RCP 36; 1832). In Letter 37 (1832), she declared her "determina[tion]" to gain knowledge and "become, as talented, as noble" and "virtuous" as he was. In the same letter, further avowing that "I am willing to sacrifice, and suffer, every thing, in the vindication of the 'Rights of Women'", she reviled the "slavish degradation to which Christianity [triple underlined] had reduced the female mind" and vowed to obtain for the female sex "those privileges, which the women of old, once enjoyed and which we are still entitled" (RCP 37).

At this point, she referred to another powerful woman, "exclaim[ing] in the language of Queen Elizabeth!" that "By God! I'll unpack you!" referring to the clergy she so abhorred. Seeking a herstory, then, she longed for the "women of England" to know "and understand, how the foundation of the Protestant religion, was laid, through, and by the blood of a most virtuous woman. The wife of Henry the eight! King of England." And, rebuking the patriarchal system, she asked, "Can a truly virtuous woman respect Laws, that were first introduced, to sanctio[n] a most foul, and diabolical Murder!" (RCP 37; 1832). Thus, Sharples astutely uncovered how illegal acts were underwritten by male privilege and then systematized through the imprimatur of history. In turn, she deconstructed the sanctimonious patriotism and piety that concealed the patriarchy's crimes whereby a king murders his wife for not producing a male heir.

Obviously Carlile was not as emotionally committed to the relationship as was Isis. When her brother informed her of their mother's illness, Sharples told Carlile that she felt "torn" by "cauterizing emotion" and longed to see her family. Worrying that if she returned home, "I feel quite assured . . . I shall never see you again", she queried, "what say you to that; are you willing to relinquish . . . your Isis!" (RCP 28; 1832) Fearing her brother's letter was a ruse to get her to abandon Carlile and return to her sedentary, submissive middle-class gender role, she was also concerned that leaving would affect the political work she and Carlile were doing: "t'would be death to me, and your hopes; and your, and my cause." Consequently, she pleaded with her paramour to aid her in deciding how to respond. Believing that returning home was "madness itself", and that her "brain [would] turn", she prodded: "Remember you are my friend, my husband! and never did I require your love, your care so much as now" (RCP 28; 1832). With the starkly described agitation, Isis intuited the feminist credo that the

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<sup>24</sup> In March of 1832, ES "took over management of both the Rotunda and of Carlile's publishing business" (Campbell 1899, p. 39).

personal is political. Not only was sharing her distress an inherent part of their relationship—it was also crucial to their shared political cause.

In other words, Sharples averred that if they could not share and respect each other's personal troubles, then their so-called political philosophy was disconnected from reality. In Letter 39, self-titled "Love, without Hope" [double underline], she referred to an incident (vaguely referred to as "what passed, last evening") that made her see that Carlile's intellectual love had brought her to "destitution". She implied that there could be no intellectual love between them if there was not first a strong sexual and romantic love. Hence, whatever the incident was, it had made her "destitute, of [his] philosophy", caused her to lose her "Reason", and left her with a "distracted brain". At this point, Sharples seemed to be suffering a breakdown but described her feelings meticulously. Saying that she "wept until there was not the least moisture, in my whole frame", she described being "Feverish" and experiencing "not exactly delerium [sic], but something bordering on insanity! My mind seemed a perfect caos [sic]."<sup>25</sup> Though dizzy, she tried to "compose" herself and exclaimed, "Would, that I were a dog, or a brute, destitute, of every, finer, or tenderer, passion", for then "this misery had been spared me, then, Is not sensibility, too acutely felt, a curse to human nature: given us", to "torture, and distract us" (RCP 39; 1832).

One can see why Carlile viewed her as melodramatic. Yet, given her very real material destitution, she argued that at the very least he owed her acknowledgement of her emotional dignity and respect for their sexual and intellectual commitments to each other. In Letter 43, she exclaimed: "I saw you last night, my beloved! My Osiris! oh yes! I saw you and the sight gladdened, my sad heart." Because she was seldom allowed to visit Carlile, just seeing him through the jail cell window from afar became a spiritual revelation. Capturing the poverty of his philosophy when pressed against her jouissance, Sharples exulted, "I returned! and looked, and looked, again ten minutes! Philosophy said go home, get, to bed, . . . Oh yes do let me, see you! Through the medium of any persons; The, the . . . Devil himself I care not! So I see you!" (RCP 43; 1832). As Hamlet schooled Horatio, Isis taught how small was Osiris's philosophy if it did not respect her intuitive impulsions that were capable of revealing his numinous personhood and thus creating a metaphysical communion with the Other upon which his abstract philosophising about socialism could be enacted.

Sharples's "wild-fire" also included her insistence on maintaining her own erotic desires and speaking about them honestly and openly. For example, she wrote that the "charms" of sex ("natural love") "presented themselves immediately" in their relationship [double underline] (RCP 45; 1832). Seeing sexual love as "power", she "drank deep" "draughts from the fountain of Love", and "soon found out" the "delightful sensation" and "cheering influence" love offers (RCP 45; 1832). Freely using double entendre, she referred him to the 63rd Psalm, which reads, "I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night", and she reminds him of "a thousand endearing expressions, almost thrusting themselves, upon my paper" (RCP 34, 35; 1832). "Thrusting" sexual pulsations unapologetically underwrite the letter. Fearlessly fallen, she insisted that her impregnated body was an ensample of erotic, moral, and spiritual love in her private life just as she had filled that position in her public life.

Sharples's most theoretical feminist response to Carlile is found in Letter 44. Here it is important to acknowledge that, given her own ambitious developing feminist philosophy and her explicit understanding of her ongoing debate with Carlile as "Philosophical," she views her letters on the order of an apologia rather than an apology. In the more than two-thousand-word missive, she countered the "very ugly letter",<sup>26</sup> in which he apparently told her she was "the most unamiable woman" he "ever saw", and that she was "sullen fretful peevish", and "ugly and filthy" in his eyes. She quoted him saying that her "manners" caused him "distres[s]" for they "[were] often times bad and ungracious."

<sup>25</sup> An unknown hand inserted an "h" into "caos."

<sup>26</sup> The letter appears to have been destroyed, but ES quotes it in RCP 44 (1832).

She also quoted his ominous command that “there be no more nonsense!” accompanied with his assertion that he did not like “that foolish kind of love wild and romantic. It is not good, nor lasting.”

In response, Isis pointed out his male privilege, arguing that his “cold, calculating, stern philosophy” was illogical and ineffectual. Though he “preac[hed] philosophy”, her “predicament” (her pregnancy), showed that he had acted in “direct opposition, to the doctrine [he held]”, for, having indulged in “Love’s” “doctrine”, and having brought “[her] affection to such a pitch of love”, by “implant[ing] the seed”, now “when [he saw] the fruit, [he was] alarmed!” (RCP 44; 1832). Here, of course, she referred to the literal and figurative meanings of his “seed”, for she was about to give birth. Catching Carlile in hypocritical loopholes, the former student fearlessly pointed out the patriarchal blind spots of the master’s philosophy with its blunt narcissism, self-aggrandizement, and negation of female experience.

Enacting Isis also helped Sharples to steel herself against Carlile’s threats. She exhorted: “you may preach you may pretend, you may assume an angry appearance, you may threaten!” but, quite simply, she remarked, “it will not do.” Noting that “I am right in my calculation”, she queried, “How in the name of heaven, can you expect me to be reasonable, in such a delemma [sic]”. Calling him to account for a gendered philosophical lens that unequally distributed erotic and emotional caretaking between them, she made her own ultimatums: “Decide Richard Carlile Will you have your Isis”, who is “wild, romantic loving, kind, affectionate, though “sometimes erring”, who makes “you a little angry at times, hoping fearing sincere, faithful, unchangeable, warmhearted, kind generous, thoughtless, but grateful, thankful for your kindness and sensible of your worth” (RCP 44; 1832). Thus, Sharples rid herself of the mendacious standards that barred women from speaking their love and frustration forcefully to a man who himself was unfettered by fears of impregnation, abandonment, humiliation, abuse, or indifference.

If he preferred a philosophical relationship, she reasoned, then he must relinquish the perquisites he enjoyed. Acidly rejecting the idea of friends with benefits, she wrote that if he wanted her to act the philosopher only, he must accept that: “I will view every change with philosophical indifference” and “when I again behold you! I shall be a stone!” with “no exhibition of feeling” (RCP 44; 1832). Skewering philosophy unmoored in the material, one that allowed him to send her a note to pay the holder 5£, she mocked, “This upsets my philosophy because I have not got it [the money].” His “philosophy”, she pointed out, had no power to come to her “aid” in the gritty conditions she faced as a pregnant, unmarried woman. His privileged masculinity was like that of the “ancient Philosophers”, who, living in a “retired spot of ground”, had a “mind at ease” and all “wants supplied.” Isis concluded the letter with her own catechism, asking, “Must your Isis love, you, or must she not?” . . . Philosophy or Love!!! Now what say you—I will have you make a choice, No both” (RCP 44; 1832).

Isis’s argument continued in Letters 45 and 46, where she rejected Carlile’s negative characterization of her “wild-fire” passion. Writing that “tho wild” and “fierce”, her passion was not “easily extinguished”, she explained that it was set on “a solid foundation”, based on “Integrity and Truth”, and focused on a “worthy noble, virtuous, brave, and generous object!” Schooling him on melding reason with love, she lectured: “No Richard Carlile, you know very little of . . . the heart, and affection of your Isis, when you say, ‘such love is not lasting. . . . No no, I,ll [sic] none of your Philosophy, give me Love! Love! Love!” (RCP 46; 1832). Hence, rejecting Carlile’s “moderate” love, she called “My Osiris!” and “Beloved friend of my bosom” into an “unbounded”, [double underline] space where they could be “united.” (RCP 45, 58; 1832). Defying Carlile’s efforts to control her, Sharples wrote that love “must be free has [sic] the air we breathe” and that she wished to be a “scientific lover” and “paragon” of “faithful”, “uncontaminated unsophisticated unmixed natural love” (RCP 45; 1832).

Potent in their appeals, passion, and intellect, Sharples’s letters to Carlile in 1832 reflected the intersections of gender with the radical socialist movements occurring in early nineteenth-century Britain. Studying Sharples’s performance of Isis helps us to understand one strand of this extraordinary time period as laying the foundation for later, more moderate, feminist spiritual models. Working out her radical feminist politics through the imprimatur of divinity and enacting her own spiritual,

intellectual, and psychological transformation by appropriating the name of “Isis”, Sharples declared through her most intimate relationship and most public transfiguration that she could achieve a form of female sovereignty. In doing so, she aided later feminists to reimagine Christianity, erotic love, and god, while exemplifying her own argument that women will rise to the height of their potentiality only when nourished by egalitarian political and religious action.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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