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# Lydia Sigourney and the Ekphrastic Promise

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## Abstract

"Lydia Sigourney and the Ekphrastic Promise," examines Sigourney's experiments with the mode of ekphrasis against the context of transnational Romanticism's transformation of the classical mode of vivid description into the "art" that is most obviously "about art." Although Sigourney's importance to American literary culture has begun to be recognized, little attention has been paid to what I argue is an evolving poetics concerned with the problem of verbal representation. In honor of our French locale, my discussion will focus on "Napoleon at Helena," which is a powerful meditation on Napoleon's original tomb on St. Helena, with its famously unfinished epitaph (due to an argument over how his name should be inscribed, the tombstone was inscribed only with Ci-Git, or 'Here Lies.'). Not unlike her British contemporaries, Felicia Hemans and John Keats, Sigourney adopts ekphrasis as a means to establish her own ethos or standing as a poet. Yet, as in "Napoleon at Helena," her ekphrases also express an anxiety about the ability of any verbal or visual means of depicting what the mind can imagine.

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