George Frederic Watts painted in the name of women’s rights. Paintings of nude women, painted by male artists, have been read as misogynistic, or as paternalistic embodiments of a political structure that spoke for the natural authority of males. It can now be argued that some paintings of nude women by male artists embodied the principles of a woman’s rights. Watts painted portraits of scores of women’s suffrage supporters and was close to the most important leaders of the women’s suffrage movement including Millicent Fawcett, Josephine Butler, Olive Schreiner, Mrs. Grote,

Mrs. Pattison, Agnes Garrett, Isabella Ford, Russell Gurney, and Jane Nassau Senior. Roughly seventy of Watts’s associates were supporters of the women’s suffrage movement and many of these friends were closely tied to the painting, sale, and purchase of representations of women.

Through research in the archive of the Watts Gallery in Compton, near Guildford, and through intensive biographical work into the gender politics of Watts’s sitters and patrons, it is possible to state that the Victorian art world had a substantial contingent of male and female supporters of women’s suffrage. Watts’s painting, Lady Godiva, stands as a powerful example of Victorian feminist art. He presents her not as a Godiva for a peeping Tom, but as Godiva the political hero who inspired Harriet Martineau and Josephine Butler. Watts’s She Shall Be Called Woman (1892) is a monument to the New Woman. In 1895 he painted Josephine Butler so that he could donate her portrait to the National Portrait Gallery. It is no surprise that the Art Journal of 1904 wrote just after his death that “the New Woman . . . is very appreciative of the Britomartial quality in Watts’s paintings.” What is remarkable about Watts is that his ties to women’s suffrage began to form in the 1850s, formed in the 1860s, and were deeply rooted by the 1870s. Application of archival and historical materials to Watts’s paintings will begin a radical redefinition of the tensions in Victorian art world. At last we can understand why Watts’s style after 1868 rejects the cult of female beauty being advocated by many his fellow artists who, like Frederic Leighton, worked against equal rights for women. It is time to look at the documents and reanalyze the paintings.