David Stewart, "The Return of Godiva and the Foundations of George Frederic Watts' Feminist Nudes"

Godiva is best known today as a sensuous chocolate to be consumed with lingering pleasure. For men in the 19th century, paintings of Godiva usually had the same meaning. They offered up the promise of viewing and savoring female flesh. By 1874, when Watts began painting *The Return of Godiva*, he was well aware of such representations. He painted it to attack male Victorian artists who demeaned Godiva. As Mary Watts wrote, it was painted "as a protest against the many studies of the nude model exhibited under this title." The art critic of *The Academy*, probably Mrs. Pattison, came close to understanding Watts's painting. In 1874 she wrote that its subject was "the cost to the woman herself which such an action as this must have been performed." Watts paints the torture that such women must face. Godiva made it her job to cut taxes, she entered a political sphere defined and controlled by men, and she paid a humiliating price. Mrs. Pattison, who understood Watts's painting, had been his friend since the late 1850's, and she sat next to Mrs. Grote at the first public meeting held in favor of women's suffrage. She understood what it meant to face public censure while fighting for a just cause.

Watts's pro-feminist painting does not come out of the blue. In 1873, his closest friend was Jane Nassau Senior and, in 1873, she broke the glass ceiling in government jobs for women by being hired as the first woman inspector to report to Parliament. This was a watershed year in the history of women's employment and her friends in the women's movement understood the gravity of her actions, knew her as a supporter of women's rights, and knew her as a supporter of women's suffrage. Upon the death of Senior, Watts wrote a letter, in what can only be described as a fit of anger, to his particularly sexist patron, Charles Rickards; "I have lost a friend who could never be replaced even if I had a long life before me, one in whom I had unbounded confidence, never shaken in the course of friendship very rare during 26 years, Mrs. Nassau Senior, whom I dare say remember taking about with me, who was called by a friend of yours "That Woman" I think when you read the biography of "That Woman" for it is one that will be written that very few canonized saints so well deserved glorification, for all that makes human nature admirable, lovable, & estimable, she had very few equals indeed, & I am certain no superior, it is not too much to say that children yet unborn will have cause to rue this comparative early death."

In 1873 Watts painted portraits of three women's suffrage supporters and painted them for a permanent home in the National Portrait Gallery. They included John Stuart Mill, Charles Wentworth Dilke, and James Martineau. While Mill was sitting to Watts, Millicent Garrett Fawcett came to Little Holland House to observe his progress. John Stuart Mill was the most important man in the women's suffrage movement, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett was its most important woman. As striking a gathering of feminist figures as this sitting was, it was not out of the ordinary for Watts. He had painted Russell Gurney in 1866 while he was preparing to lead the call for women's suffrage in Parliament. Many women's rights supporters were intimate members of the Little Holland House circle, such as Tom Hughes, Jane Nassau Senior. John Sineon. Anne Thackeray, and Henry Taylor, while many others came to sit to Watts or to visit. George Eliot was also a warm friend of Watts's during this period as was William Michael Rossetti. Rossetti was a member of the London Committee for Female Suffrage and was active in supporting the cause for decades to come, even when his art criticism failed to match his politics. Watts's circle was in considerable measure a feminist circle.

Watts's *The Return of Godiva* expresses the powerful meaning that Godiva had for many Victorian women who entered the public sphere. As Dorothy Mermin pointed out in her 1993 book, *Godiva's Ride, Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880*, Lady Godiva was the mid-century feminist ideal for women in England on the cutting edge. For Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Josephine Butler, Godiva was a role model who inspired courage and self-sacrifice. She was a woman whose self-exposure violated sexual barriers and changed politics. Josephine Butler's essay, *The New Godiva* makes just this use of Godiva. Watts's Godiva is a painting that was begun in the hardest days of the women's rights movement, when women were most savagely attacked for breaking free of their separate sphere. It was a time when the cost to women of independent action was painfully noted and heroically borne by women who Watts knew extremely well such as Jane Senior and Ellice Hopkins. Watts admired these women and complained of women who refused to be less. This painting is a monument to women's heroism, and it was painted at a time when Senior, Hopkins and Butler were sacrificing their lives for women's rights and for the health of poor and sexually exploited children who were slaves to prostitution. Watts had to ensure that Godiva sacrificing her body for the good of her sisters, would not become Godiva giving up her body to the pleasure of men. Watts had painted women that way before, but he would not do it again. Here, he employs a treatment of surface and form that obliterates erotic appeal. He cancels out all modeling of Godiva's breasts. She is nude, yes, but in place of sensuality he gives a trowelled, crusty, and unappealing surface of a kind that disgusted his critics. She subjects herself to the full force of British patriarchy against the weight of the many men and many women who would attack her with the scandal and the ridicule of *"That Woman."* Watts's painting is a monument to the women brave enough to withstand the pain and collapse he witnessed at close hand. Watts's Godiva marks the sacrifice and calls forward feminist martyrs in the spirit of Martineau, Browning, Butler, Hopkins, and Senior. Watts painted Josephine Butler for a home in the National Portrait Gallery in 1894 and *She Shall Be Called Woman* for exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1892, but he began his feminist works decades before the 1890's at a time when his best friends were leading the women's rights movement through some of its most difficult days.