The “Suppression” of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography

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It is in the stories we tell our children that the myths that define culture are most clearly transmitted. Thus, Gloria Kamen’s 1996 children’s book, *Hidden Music: The Life of Fanny Mendelssohn,* represents the distillation of a story that has become central to biographical representations of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel.[1] The story is this: Fanny, equally talented as her brother Felix, was denied by her patriarchal father the professional career in music to which she aspired and was not allowed to publish her music by her repressive brother. Her music was allowed to appear only under her brother’s name. Her “voice” was effectively silenced by men, and her early death tragically ended her attempts to publish, so that she and her music were lost to history. This story, or variants on it, can be found in a variety of popular and scholarly sources. It is a primary theme of Fran oise Tillard’s 1992 biography, *Fanny Mendelssohn,* known in its German edition as *Die verkannte Schwester* (*The Unrecognized Sister*), which asserts that Fanny was “enjoined to keep quiet.”[2] In her edition of Felix’s and Fanny’s correspondence, Eva Weissweiler observes that after 1980 female musicologists discovered a female composer “blocked by Felix in the publication of her works.”[3] That the story has solidified into wide acceptance is demonstrated by the emphasis it is given in the entry on Hensel in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary,* which hypothesizes that Felix “may have been motivated by jealousy, fear of competition, protectiveness or pa-

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[1]Gloria Kamen, *Hidden Music: The Life of Fanny Mendelssohn* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[2]Fran oise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn,* trans. Camille Naish (Portland, Oreg.: Amadeus, 1996), pp. 14–15. At the 1997 Fanny Hensel Conference at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, Tillard stated that the German title was the publisher’s, not hers.

[3]Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, *“Die Musik will gar nicht rutschen ohne Dich”: Briefwechsel 1821 bis 1846,* ed. Eva Weissweiler (Berlin: Propyläen, 1997), p. 7: “Von Felix in der Veröffentlichung ihrer Werke blockiert.”

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ternalism."[4] This article offers a critique of the story, examining its roots as well as the reasons for its continuing popularity, and utilizing it as a case study for the ways in which feminist biography can undermine itself.

As feminist cultural critics attempt to "change the subject," they find that the life-narrative is an effective tool, so it is not surprising that Hensel's biography has received increased attention in the past twenty years.[5] Biographers of talented women have traditionally portrayed them as "abnormal" for their gender or have downplayed their achievements to demonstrate that they fulfilled expected feminine societal roles.[6] The story of Fanny the composer, suppressed by her successful brother, initially appears to subvert such conventional biographical models, adopting what Maureen Quilligan has described as feminist biography's legitimate imposition of new and different "shapes" on human life.[7] For Alison Booth, feminist biography is sometimes a story "generated in the gap between the female characters' potential and their achievement";[8] likewise, Devoney Looser's rules for feminist biography include "measuring the degree of rebellion inherent in a woman's achievement."[9] Thus the story of Hensel's publishing struggles would seemingly be the result of a new feminist interpretation of her life. In this, the story fulfills the goal described by Ruth Solie that we need to learn "the pain of any 'normal' woman attempting to live a life beyond the boundaries of the script she was handed."[10]

Reexamination of the documentary evidence for the story of Fanny Hensel's suppression, however, demonstrates that it is, at best, an exaggeration and that it is actually rooted in nineteenth-century ideology. The story originated in two primary published sources. The first is the letter that Felix Mendelssohn wrote in 1837 in reply to his mother Lea's request that he encourage his sister to publish her music. Part of the letter that contained Mendelssohn's oft-cited negative response was first published by his brother Paul and his son Carl in the second volume of his letters, which appeared in 1863 (see Appendix, p. 129).[11] The second source is *Die Familie Mendelssohn* by Fanny's son, Sebastian Hensel. His two-volume family history first appeared in 1879 and went through numerous editions in German and English. Despite the bowdlerization of its letters, Hensel's book served as the most influential force in establishing Fanny Hensel's posthumous reputation. Over one-third of the book is devoted to Fanny, and thus it functions as a biography of her. It includes letters from Abraham Mendelssohn to his teenage daughter Fanny, defining her future role as housewife, as well as Felix's official "welcome" to the guild of professional composers after she began sustained efforts to publish in 1846. The story of the dilemma regarding her publishing, however, is told largely through her son's voice.

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[4]Marcia J. Citron, "Mendelssohn(-Bartholdy) [Hensel], Fanny (Cäcilie)," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell (2nd edn. London: Macmillan, 2000), vol. 16, p. 388. Elsewhere, Citron treats the relationship of Fanny Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn in more detail and frequently without many of the exaggerations critiqued in this article. Nonetheless, the relationship is of central importance in her Hensel scholarship. See, for example, "Felix Mendelssohn's Influence on Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel as a Professional Composer," *Current Musicology* 37/38 (1984), 9–17; "The Lieder of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel," *Musical Quarterly* 69 (1983), 570–73; "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: Musician in Her Brother's Shadow," in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 152–59; and *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 54–56, 65, 99, and 110.

[5]Alison Booth, "The Lessons of the Medusa: Anna Jameson and Collective Biographies of Women," *Victorian Studies* 42 (1999/2000), 260. Many scholars date the beginning of scholarly treatment of Hensel from Victoria Sirota, *The Life and Works of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel* (Mus. A. D. diss., Boston University, 1981).

[6]See Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988).

[7]Maureen Quilligan, "Rewriting History: The Difference of Feminist Biography," *Yale Review* 77 (1988), 261–62.

[8]Alison Booth, "Biographical Criticism and the 'Great' Woman of Letters: The Example of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf," in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. William H. Epstein (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1991), p. 95.

[9]Devoney Looser, "Heroine of the Peripheral? Biography, Feminism, and Sylvia Plath," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 8 (1993), 182.

[10]Ruth A. Solie, "Changing the Subject," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993), 61.

[11]Letter of 24 June 1837, in Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1833 bis 1847*, ed. Paul and Carl Mendelssohn Bartholdy (5th edn. Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1865), pp. 141–42.

The evident goal of Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy and his nephew Sebastian Hensel was not to provide accurate documentation for twentieth-century biographers, but to create socially acceptable images of the lives of their famous relatives for public consumption. In a letter to Karl Klingemann after Felix's death, Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy envisioned his brother's published letters as a source of moral instruction; he wrote that "alone the work could become, in my opinion, a guiding star for many, many people."[12] Sebastian Hensel's stated desire to produce "the chronicle of a good middle-class family in Germany"[13] resulted in his becoming an apologist for his unusual mother. His book continually attempts to demonstrate that, despite his mother's tremendous intellectual and musical gifts, she nonetheless conformed to appropriate social roles for women, that she was actually a "typical" daughter, wife, and mother. Like previous biographies of women, Hensel's book is liberally sprinkled with just such frequent assurances that Fanny conformed to societal expectations of "womanliness" and that she had no desire to step outside the domestic sphere. His emphasis on his mother's reluctance to publish and Paul's inclusion of the letter that documents Felix's disapproval are both products of a larger agenda, that of making sure that the images of Felix and Fanny conformed to nineteenth-century bourgeois gender roles. The widespread anti-Semitism of the period and the family's Jewish heritage further necessitated a portrayal that in no way deviated from cultural norms.[14] Reviewer Louis Ehlert specifically commented on this story of a family "which was so rich in significant, sincere and exemplary people" appearing in a time when "every day throws a sinister pamphlet on our desk."[15]

Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Sebastian Hensel were successful in their aim. Felix Mendelssohn was praised as the perfect Victorian gentleman, representing a model man; in America, the *Atlantic Monthly* even called for religious societies to circulate his letters.[16] Fanny and the rest of the Mendelssohns were also seen as conforming to moral ideals. In his 1882 review of Sebastian Hensel's book, Edward Dowden praised the family, writing that "a family history is not always a record of kindness, truth, purity, mutual help. . . . Goodness in a group of persons, and in an eminent degree, is rare; goodness with genius, one and indivisible, is still rarer."[17] Fanny's image thus reflected contemporary ideals of what constituted an ideal woman. The story of her request that her Jewish grandmother, Bella Salomon, "forgive Uncle Bartholdy" [Jacob Bartholdy] for his conversion to Christianity was frequently recounted as evidence of her "innate goodness."[18]

The danger for modern biographers in providing a feminist critique of this tale is that to critique it, or even to suggest that Fanny found her life situation more frustrating than Sebastian Hensel was willing to admit, one must first uncritically accept a story told from the perspective of nineteenth-century men with a professed agenda. Even if Felix Mendelssohn did not fully support his sister's publishing en-

[12]Letter of 10 December 1847, in Ingeborg Stolzenberg, "Paul Mendelssohn-Bartholdy nach dem Tode seines Bruders Felix: Ein Brief vom 10. Dezember 1847 an Karl Klingemann . . . ," *Mendelssohn Studien* 8 (1993), 184: "Allein das Werk könnte meiner Meinung nach ein leitender Stern für viele, viele Menschen werden."

[13]Sebastian Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn 1729–1847, nach Briefen und Tagebüchern,* ed. Konrad Feilchenfeldt (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1995), p. 877: "als Chronik einer guten deutschen Bürgerfamilie."

[14]Tillard has made a similar point in "Felix und Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy—Verkörperung bürgerlicher Perfektion," in *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Komponieren zwischen Geselligkeitsideal und romantischer Musikästhetik,* ed. Beatrix Borchard and Monika Schwarz-Danuser (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1999), pp. 237–47. For detailed discussion of the role of anti-Semitism in late-nineteenth-century biographical writings about Felix Mendelssohn, see Marian Wilson Kimber, "The Composer as Other: Gender and Race in the Biography of Felix Mendelssohn" in *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History,* ed. John Michael Cooper and Julie Prandi (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[15]Louis Ehlert, review of Sebastian Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn, 1729–1847,* in *Deutsche Rundschau* 17 (1878), 469: "welches so reich war an bedeutenden, wahrhaftigen und vorbildlichen Menschen"; ". . . während jeder Tag ein unheimliches Pamphlet auf unseren Schreibtisch wirft?"

[16][W. L. Gage], review of *Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy from 1833 to 1847* in *Atlantic Monthly* 15 (January 1865), 127.

[17]Edward Dowden, review of Sebastian Hensel's *The Mendelssohn Family (1729–1827* [sic]*) from Letters and Journals,* in *The Academy* 21 (21 January 1882), 37.

[18]"Fanny Mendelssohn," *Musical Times* 29 (1 June 1888), 340.

deavors, one must still consider the source of the over-emphasis on this issue. Feminist criticism of the Mendelssohn family's story has centered entirely on Fanny in its suggestion that she was not as happy in her domestic life as her son suggested. It has not considered that the story's emphasis on the male family members' seemingly very active role in Fanny's life might be a product of gender ideology as well, an attempt to show Felix Mendelssohn's appropriate male behavior for the period. Sebastian Hensel's emphasis on Abraham as the family head with Felix as his successor, constructed to correspond to nineteenth-century patriarchal values, is generally adopted without question.[19]

While Felix's opinion on Fanny's publishing was, at least initially, important to her,[20] modern retellings that maintain Hensel's emphasis on the male members of the Mendelssohn family frequently omit the influences of two other individuals. Wilhelm Hensel, Fanny's husband, encouraged her salon concerts, her composing, and her publishing; he even provided texts for her to set.[21] Wilhelm's positive role, however, is often overlooked in the rush to judgment of Fanny's brother. Marcia Citron states unequivocally that Felix "was the most influential person in her life."[22] Wilhelm, her daily companion, almost disappears from Kamen's narrative, while Fanny continues to long for musical interchange with her distant sibling. In addition, Sebastian Hensel's emphasis on his grandfather Abraham's patriarchal role in *Die Familie Mendelssohn* also overshadows the influence that Lea Mendelssohn brought to the situation in encouraging her daughter. That Lea's role in her children's lives was larger than it is typically portrayed is suggested by a series of letters she wrote on behalf of Felix to the publisher Schlesinger between 1823 and 1834, beginning when he was a teenager and lasting into his adulthood.[23] This hardly supports the transmitted portrait of a family in which women were totally restricted to the domestic sphere. English critic Henry Chorley, who knew the family, wrote: "With such a mother, and such a brother, it was hardly likely that one like Madame Hensel should bury her talents in a napkin, or let them waste."[24] To ignore Lea's involvement in Fanny's life is to adopt unquestioningly Sebastian Hensel's patriarchal construction of his family, an ironic oversight for a critical paradigm rooted in the interrogation of, and resistance to, traditional masculinist perspectives.

Modern publication of Mendelssohn family documents, available without the distorted transmission characteristic of nineteenth-century editing practices, can provide a more complex picture of the issues surrounding both Fanny and Felix. A closer and uncensored reading of Mendelssohn's letter to his mother of 24 June 1837 reveals that he did not "forbid" his sister to do anything.[25] The letter clearly demonstrates that Mendelssohn held a typical nineteenth-century German bourgeois attitude, that Fanny Hensel's priorities should be her roles as wife and mother, but it also suggests that Mendelssohn felt it was not his place to give Fanny advice regarding her decision to publish. Mendelssohn wrote that should Fanny decide to publish, he would *support her* in whatever she undertook. Felix's specific request that his mother not mention his opinion to Fanny or her husband, omitted from the original pub-

[19]For examples of Hensel's emphasis on the father-son relationship, see *Die Familie Mendelssohn*, pp. 113 and 127.

[20]See Fanny's letters to Felix of 30 July 1836 and 28 October 1836 in *The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn*, ed. and trans. Marcia J. Citron (New York: Pendragon, 1987), pp. 207–09 and pp. 214–15.

[21]See Hans-Günter Klein, *Die Kompositionen Fanny Hensels in Autographen und Abschriften aus dem Besitz der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz*, Musikbibliographische Arbeiten 13 (Tutzig: Hans Schneider, 1995), p. 114, for musical manuscripts with texts by Wilhelm Hensel.

[22]Citron, "The Lieder of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel," p. 572.

[23]Rudolf Elvers, "Acht Briefe von Lea Mendelssohn an den Verlag Schlesinger in Berlin," in *Das Problem Mendelssohn*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus, Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts 41 (Regensburg: Bosse, 1974), pp. 47–53.

[24]Henry F. Chorley, "Mendelssohn's Mother and Sister," in W. A. Lampadius, *Life of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, trans. William Leonhard Gage (Boston: O. Ditson, 1865; rpt. Boston: Longwood, 1978), p. 212.

[25]Letter of 24 June 1837, New York Public Library. The letter has been published in part in *The Mendelssohn Companion*, ed. Douglass Seaton (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2001), p. 76, and in its entirety in *The Mendelssohns on Honeymoon: The 1837 Diary of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy Together with Letters to Their Families*, ed. and trans. Peter Ward Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 165–68.

lished version of the letter, reveals him trying hard to stay out of the discussion, not attempting to control his sister's actions. Through her examination of Hensel's manuscripts, Camilla Cai has documented that Felix's letter seems to have had no immediate impact and that Fanny continued to compose piano works into the fall of 1837.[26]

There is nothing in Mendelssohn's letter to indicate a belief in women's inferiority as composers, a belief that was prevalent during the period and long afterwards. Gender did not color Felix's evaluation of his sister's or of any women's compositions. He praised Josephine Lang's compositions and encouraged the efforts of young Emily Moscheles, the daughter of his friend the pianist Ignaz Moscheles. He could also critique women's music if he found it wanting, but he laughed at Joseph Joachim's surprise at Clara Schumann's ability to write a fugato and because Joachim "would not believe that a woman could have composed something so sound and serious."[27] Possessing a highly critical temperament, Mendelssohn nonetheless reserved some of his highest praise for his sister's compositions.[28] In 1829 he wrote to Fanny about her Lieder: "But truly there is music which seems to have distilled the very quintessence of music, as if it were the soul of music itself—such as these songs. By Jesus! I know of nothing better."[29] In 1836 he wrote to Fanny attempting to assuage her self-doubt: "You know how I love all your things and especially those that have grown so close to my heart."[30]

Mendelssohn's belief in women's place in the domestic sphere certainly deserves feminist criticism, but excessive emphasis on this attitude is misplaced, given his remarkable acceptance and encouragement of women's creative abilities. The issue for Mendelssohn was not composition but publishing, and another error of modern interpretations is the assumption that Mendelssohn found publishing an entirely desirable activity. On the contrary, he considered it a necessary evil for the professional composer because it required a continuous production of musical works, even if not always of the highest caliber, rather than their sporadic appearance.[31] Even when she did decide to publish, Fanny Hensel did not view it in the same light, but wrote to her friend Angelica von Woringen that it was an experiment that she could give up if it did not meet with success.

> I'm glad that you, dear Angela, are interested in the publication of my Lieder. I was always afraid of being disparaged by my dearest friends, *since I've expressed myself against it my whole life and right up to the present years*. In addition, I can truthfully say that I let it happen more than made it happen, and it is this in particular that cheers me. . . . If they want more from me, it should act as stimulus to achieve, if possible, more. If the matter comes to an end then, I also won't grieve, for I'm not ambitious, and so I haven't yet had the occasion to regret my decision.[32]

[26]Camilla Cai, preface to Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn), *Songs for Pianoforte, 1836–1837,* Recent Researches in the Music of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries 22 (Madison, Wisc.: A-R Editions, 1994), pp. viii–ix. Cai has suggested that Hensel's failure to publish in 1838 may have been due in part to the death of Adolph Schlesinger, her chief advocate at the Schlesinger publishing firm.

[27]See Mendelssohn's praise of Lang in a letter dated 6 October 1831 in *Reisebriefe von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1832,* ed. Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy (3rd edn. Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1862; rpt. Mainz: Drei Brücken, n.d.), pp. 287–88; his critique of a Lied by an unidentified woman in *Felix Mendelssohn: A Life in Letters,* ed. Rudolf Elvers, trans. Craig Tomlinson (New York: Fromm, 1986), pp. 272–73; and his encouragement of Emily Moscheles in *Aus Moscheles' Leben: Nach Briefen und Tagebüchern,* ed. Charlotte Moscheles, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1872–73), II, 54. Joachim's anecdote is found in *Briefe von und an Joseph Joachim,* ed. Johannes Joachim and Andreas Moser, 3 vols. (Berlin: Julius Bard, 1911–13), II, 79, quoted in Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 228.

[28]Kamen's biography mentions that Felix praised Fanny's music, but never includes any specific quotations, although she relies heavily on quotations from the siblings' correspondence throughout the book.

[29]Letter of 25 August 1829, in *A Life in Letters,* p. 96.

[30]Letter of 30 January 1836, in *Briefe 1833–47,* p. 114: "Wie ich aber alle Deine Sachen lieb habe, und nun gar die, die mir so recht an's Herz gewachsen sind, das weißt Du."

[31]See Johann Christian Lobe, *Fliegende Blätter für die Musik* 1, no. 5 (1855), 280–96; trans. Susan Gillespie as "Conversations with Felix Mendelssohn," in *Mendelssohn and His World,* ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 191.

[32]Letter to Angelica von Woringen, 26 November 1846, quoted in Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel,* p. 352, n. 9 (Citron's trans. modified): "Du, liebe Angelica, Dich für die Herausgabe meiner Lieder interessirst, freut mich, ich hatte eigentlich immer Angst, von meinen liebsten Freunden gemißbilligt zu werden, *da ich mich mein Lebenlang u., bis in meine jetzigen Jahre entgegengesetzt*

As Rudolf Elvers's publication of Mendelssohn's letters to German publishers and Peter Ward Jones's essay on the composer's convoluted dealings with their English counterparts reveal, the numerous aggravations involved in publishing were to be brought on oneself only if necessary.[33] That Felix Mendelssohn left a large percentage of his compositions unpublished, including such major works as the "Reformation" and "Italian" Symphonies, further demonstrates his ambivalence. While modern scholars like Citron identify publishing as a boundary between "amateur" and "professional" and emphasize its importance in establishing a composer's place in the canon, Fanny Hensel appears merely to have seen it as a source of personal motivation.[34]

Paul Mendelssohn's original publication includes only a portion of Felix's letter about Fanny to his mother. The rest of the letter documents his concern with his sister's health. The ongoing poor health of both Fanny and Felix was, as was typical, carefully censored from nineteenth-century publications of their letters, since it was considered too private and inappropriate for the reading public. Modern research by Phyllis Benjamin and Peter Ward Jones has revealed that Fanny had a stillbirth or miscarriage in November of 1832 and again in March of 1837.[35] Mendelssohn's letter to his mother was written during his honeymoon journey; his new wife, Cécile Jeanrenaud, was already pregnant in June of 1837,[36] so it is likely that the physical dangers associated with pregnancy and childbirth would have been especially apparent to him at that time. Mendelssohn's refusal to encourage his sister to publish was partly a desire to save her from any additional stresses that might negatively affect her health, a concern that seems justified, given her early death from stroke at the age of forty-one.

The emphasis on Felix as villain in Fanny's life narrative is at the expense of an understanding of the larger social and cultural context in which this supposed domestic drama took place. Nancy Reich has pointed out that Fanny's inability to have a professional career as a musician was due to her upper-class status as much as her gender.[37] Criticism of Mendelssohn's purportedly sexist refusal to encourage his sister to publish lacks the historical understanding that, for an upper-class nineteenth-century woman, receiving money for musical activities meant compromising her social position, and Fanny's social position was made more precarious by her status as a converted Jew. As late as 1888, an article in the *Musical Times* found it laudable that Fanny Hensel did not undertake a "descent" into the arena of publishing.[38] Reich's research, with its more complex view, is not easily assimilated into a dramatic story of family conflict.[39]

The story of Fanny's "suppression" fre-

ausgesprochen habe. Auch kann ich mit Wahrheit sagen, ich habe es mehr geschehn lassen, als gethan, u. das ist es, was mich eigentlich freut. . . . Wird mehr von mir verlangt, so soll es mir ein Sporn seyn, wo möglich mehr zu leisten, hat die Sache damit ein Ende, so werde ich mich auch nicht grämen, denn ich bin nicht ehrgeizig, u. so habe ich bis jetzt noch nicht Gelegenheit gehabt, meinen Entschluß zu bereuen" (emphasis added).

[33]Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Briefe an deutsche Verleger*, ed. Rudolf Elvers and H. Herzfeld (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968); Peter Ward Jones, "Mendelssohn and His English Publishers," in *Mendelssohn Studies*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 240–55.

[34]Marcia J. Citron, "Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon," *Journal of Musicology* 8 (1990), 106.

[35]Phyllis Benjamin, "A Diary-Album for Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy," *Mendelssohn Studien* 7 (1990), 213. Benjamin believes that Fanny had a stillborn child, probably a girl, on 1 November 1832. See also Mendelssohn's letter to Fanny expressing his concern over her later miscarriage, 14 April 1837 (*The Mendelssohns on Honeymoon*, pp. 138–40), also his letter to his mother-in-law, Elisabeth Jeanrenaud, on 15 April expressing concern (p. 141). Tillard's treatment of Fanny's miscarriage employs an analogy between her stillborn children and "the forcible abortion of her talent" (see pp. 245 and 247). In doing so, she continues Western culture's essentialist association of women with the body.

[36]See Ward Jones, *The Mendelssohns on Honeymoon*, p. 52.

[37]Nancy B. Reich, "The Power of Class: Fanny Hensel," in *Mendelssohn and His World*, pp. 86–99. See also Reich's "Women as Musicians: A Question of Class," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 125–46.

[38]"Fanny Mendelssohn," *Musical Times* 29 (1 June 1888), 341.

[39]Fanny's wealth and privilege are overlooked or downplayed in many biographical accounts; compared to many of her female contemporaries she would appear to be considerably less "oppressed." A common critique of feminism is that it has been primarily an upper- and middle-class movement for white women.

quently simplifies her publishing history and underestimates the degree to which she was known during her lifetime. Although her op. 1 did not appear until 1846, several of her compositions had appeared in print earlier. Her setting of *Ave Maria* was published in England in the *Harmonicon* in 1832, two years after an article praising her musical abilities and describing how she composed "with the freedom of a master."[40] Another song, *Die Schiffende,* was published by Schlesinger in a collection in 1837;[41] after hearing it performed at a concert in Leipzig that year, Felix wrote to Fanny that "I, for my part, give thanks in the name of the public of Leipzig and other places that you published against my wishes."[42] Fanny published a third Lied, *Schloss Liebeneck,* in a collection entitled *Rhein-Sagen und Lieder* in 1839.[43]

The publication that is often taken as the primary evidence of Felix's repression of Fanny's musical voice was the publication of six of her songs in his ops. 8 and 9 in 1827 and 1830.[44] Kamen, like many others, assumes that this was done without Fanny's permission, calling this a "dishonorable act."[45] Many writers exaggerate the story further or stop just short of stating that Felix stole his sister's songs. Charles Gounod's incorrect assertion in his autobiography that Fanny had written many of Felix's *Lieder ohne Worte* was repeated in many later publications about her, adding weight to the story.[46] Tillard emphasizes that there is no evidence to contradict Gounod.[47] The suggestion is that Felix not only silenced his sister but robbed her of her voice, usurping a fame that should have been hers.

The meager available evidence suggests that the inclusion of Fanny's songs along with Felix's was not done at her expense. In a letter to Felix of ca. 22 May 1830, referring to her songs in op. 9, Fanny writes "I shoved them down Schlesinger's throat,"[48] implying an especially active role on her part (and perhaps suggesting the sort of resistance a woman attempting to publish her music might face). Marcia Citron hypothesizes that the situation is more complicated and will be clarified by unavailable Hensel diaries, suggesting that she, like others, believes that Fanny was taken advantage of.[49] Nonetheless Felix himself appears to have been completely forthcoming about Fanny's contributions to ops. 8 and 9. About his visit to Queen Victoria in 1842, when the monarch chose one of Fanny's Lieder to sing for him, Mendelssohn jokingly wrote, "Then I was obliged to confess that *Fanny* had written the song (which I found very hard, but pride must have a fall)."[50]

Additional evidence suggests that a wider public knew about Fanny's authorship of the songs in question. As early as 1830 Thomson reported in the *Harmonicon* that three of Mendelssohn's best songs were actually by his sister.[51] Sebastian Hensel wrote that people believed more of Felix Mendelssohn's published compositions were by Fanny than actually were, and Max Müller maintained that everyone knew which songs were hers, rather than Felix's.[52] To suggest that Felix deliberately "stole" his sister's compositions and denied her authorship also ignores the larger cultural context that made it not uncommon in the early nineteenth century for women writers or composers to publish anonymously or under the designation "by a lady." Even the Mendelssohn siblings' scandal-

[40]"Ave Maria," *Harmonicon* 10, no. 2 (1832), 54–55; J. T. [John Thomson], "Notes of a Musical Tourist," *Harmonicon* 8, no. 1 (3 March 1830), 99.

[41]*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 6 (26 May 1837), 167–68.

[42]Letter of 7 March 1837, Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* 480: "Ich meinesteils bedanke mich im Namen des Publikums zu Leipzig und den anderen Orten, daß Du es gegen meinen Wunsch doch herausgegeben hast."

[43]*Rhein-Sagen und Lieder* (Cologne: J. M. Dunst, 1839), cited in Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel,* p. 356.

[44]These are nos. 2, 3, and 12 in op. 8 (*Heimweh, Italien,* and *Suleika und Hatem*) and nos. 7, 10, and 12 in op. 9 (*Sehnsucht, Verlust,* and *Die Nonne*).

[45]Kamen, *Hidden Music,* pp. 39–40.

[46]Charles Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste* (4th edn. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1896), p. 131.

[47]Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn,* p. 130.

[48]Letter of May 1830, Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel,* p. 100, original German, 436: "Ich habe sie Schlesingern in den Rachen gejagt."

[49]Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon,* p. 99.

[50]Letter to Lea Mendelssohn, 19 July 1842, in Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* p. 650: "Nun mußte ich bekennen, daß Fanny das Lied gemacht hatte (eigentlich kam es mir schwer an, aber Hoffart will Zwang leiden)."

[51]J. T. [John Thomson], "Notes of a Musical Tourist," p. 99.

[52]Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* p. 480; F. Max Müller, *Auld Lang Syne* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 25, rpt. in *Mendelssohn and His World,* pp. 254–55.

ous aunt, Dorothea Schlegel, whose divorce, remarriage, and conversion to Catholicism demonstrated that she was certainly capable of flouting social conventions, had published her novel *Florentin* (1801) not under her own name, but under the reported "editorship" of her husband Friedrich Schlegel.

Fanny Hensel lived, of course, in a male-dominated society. That her talent and her music did not find wider recognition is undeniably unjust. The cultural conditions in which she lived, however, cannot be solely attributed to her brother. Why then, given the evidence, does the story of the suppression of Fanny Hensel persist? Fanny's life story is complicated by both the male models underlying biography as a genre and the resulting difficulties involved in telling women's stories. There is certainly evidence that Fanny was placed in traditional women's narratives: Sebastian Hensel's treatment of her as a "good woman" was echoed in many later writings, and she serves as "muse" to Felix in several mid-nineteenth-century writings.[53] In late-nineteenth-century accounts, Fanny's life story is sometimes a romance; its drama stems from her parents' reluctance to approve her engagement to Wilhelm Hensel, and its resolution occurs with his return from Italy and their marriage. Unlike Sarah Rothenberg's recent interpretation of Fanny's longing to go through the St. Gotthard Pass in 1822 as her frustration with the limits of contemporary gender restrictions, Marianne Kirlew's 1905 account presents this as longing for the man she loves across the Alps in Italy.[54] Such depictions conform to a common story for women, virtue rewarded with marriage, which Solie has described.[55]

Modern biographers have not yet figured out how to tell the story of Fanny Hensel, who, like many important women of her time, led what Jean Strouse has called a "semiprivate" life.[56] Although, according to Dee Garrison, "the feminist biographer realizes that the private life is no less real or important than the public one,"[57] to write the biography of Hensel is to place her in a tradition that has its roots in male lives, and the dramatic narrative of the "great man" is typically derived from his struggles to achieve success in public life. How does one devise a "plot" for a woman who married, had a son, hosted salons in her home and composed music, and died at forty-one? Lacking the material for a typical male narrative and abandoning stereotypical female plots, Fanny Hensel's would-be biographer finds herself at a loss. Here is a woman who was largely happy in her personal life, was wealthy enough to enjoy travel, art, and music, and had sufficient leisure time to produce over four hundred compositions. Where is the "story?" Fanny's musical frustrations, and there are indications that she was sometimes frustrated,[58] must take center stage to give the narrative the required

[53]See, for example, William Rounseville Alger, *The Friendships of Women* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868), pp. 76–77; and Elise Polko, "Versunkene Sterne," in *Musikalische Mährchen, Phantasien und Skizzen* (Leipzig: Barth, 1852), pp. 206–11, trans. Henry Mason as "Sunken Stars," in *New York Musical World* 6 (9 July 1853), 150. Many thanks to Frau Johanna Schrader for graciously locating the original German version of this essay for me.

[54]Sarah Rothenberg, "'Thus Far, but No Farther': Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel's Unfinished Journey," *Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993), 691–92; Marianne Kirlew, *Famous Sisters of Great Men: Henriette Renan, Caroline Herschel, Mary Lamb, Dorothy Wordsworth, Fanny Mendelssohn* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1905), pp. 253–54.

[55]Solie also identifies the "bad girl" biographical model, for women who deliberately and rebelliously defy the social prescriptions for their gender through their artistic pursuits ("Changing the Subject," p. 56). I have not found Fanny Hensel portrayed in this manner in either nineteenth- or twentieth-century literature, in spite of her eventual choice to publish her music.

[56]Jean Strouse, "Semiprivate Lives," in *Studies in Biography,* ed. Daniel Aaron (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 113–29.

[57]Dee Garrison, "Two Roads Taken: Writing the Biography of Mary Heaton Vorse," in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women,* ed. Sara Alpern et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 77.

[58]See, for example, her letter to Karl Klingemann, 15 July 1836, in Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* p. 481, lamenting that her songs are unheard and unknown, adding, "and in the end, even with interest in such things, one loses one's judgment about it, if it is never met by someone else's opinion, someone else's goodwill . . . and that with such complete lack of outside impetus I stay with it, I myself interpret again as a sign of talent" (und man verliert am Ende selbst mit der Lust an solchen Sachen das Urteil darüber, wenn sich nie ein fremdes Urteil, ein fremdes Wohlwollen entgegenstellt . . . daß ich bei so gänzlichem Mangel an Anstoß von außen dabeibleibe, deute ich mir selbst wieder als ein Zeichen von Talent).

drama, and Felix can be conscripted to serve as villain. Tillard writes, "Did he really need to crush her so completely, in order to fulfill his own artistic potential?"[59]

Not only is Felix depicted as the sole reason Fanny did not have a career and the person who "forbade" her to publish her music, but his dramatic function spills over into other aspects of her biography as well. Felix's positive relationships with other women musicians are sometimes portrayed as further betrayal of his sister; Kamen's biography suggests that Fanny was jealous of both Clara Schumann and Jenny Lind,[60] although there is no documentary evidence for such an idea. In Diane Jezic's book on women composers, Felix's lessons in counterpoint for Josephine Lang are decried as encouragement that he would not give his own sister, overlooking Hensel's early training and the fact that she surely did not need her brother's technical assistance on such a rudimentary level.[61] In Kamen's biography, Felix is blamed for the devastating emotional desertion of his sister. Disregarding their voluminous correspondence, Kamen writes that Fanny had "a deep hurt because of the nearly total separation from the 'twin' who had filled her early years."[62]

The story of the suppression of Fanny Hensel has taken hold because it so readily conforms to predetermined biographical models for the life of a "Great Composer," models based in Romantic ideology about male artists. "To be great, in patriarchal culture," writes Booth, "is to resemble the male hero."[63] Fanny Hensel, part of the nineteenth-century Germanic tradition, is biographically similar to the sort of male composer who stands at the core of the canon.[64] Most importantly, the story of her "suppression" fits neatly into a stereotypical biographical narrative of the suffering artistic genius. Beethoven's deafness, Schubert's poverty, and Robert Schumann's madness all qualify them for this story.[65] The father who opposed a male composer's career choice is often a standard biographical feature; Abraham, who wrote to his daughter that music should only be an "ornament" for her, not "the 'ground bass' of your being and doing," fits the role perfectly.[66] Fanny's lack of a public career places her in the same narrative with male artists who suffer from misunderstanding and neglect during their lifetime, only to receive widespread acclaim after their deaths. Her early death gives the tale a tragic pathos and links her to Mozart, Schubert, and numerous male contemporaries. As art historian Linda Nochlin writes, "The artist, in the nineteenth-century Saints' Legend, struggles against the most determined parental and social opposition, suffering the slings and arrows of social opprobrium like any Christian martyr, and ultimately succeeds against all odds—generally, alas, after his death—because from deep within himself radiates that mysterious, holy effulgence: Genius."[67] The story of Fanny's unfortunate fate is actually an

59Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn,* p. 315.

60Kamen, *Hidden Music,* pp. 53–54.

61Diane Peacock Jezic, *Women Composers: The Lost Tradition Found* (New York: Feminist Press of City University of New York, 1988), p. 84.

62Kamen, *Hidden Music,* p. 47.

63Booth, "Biographical Criticism and the 'Great' Woman of Letters," p. 91.

64This similarity extends to the composer's name; though she spent the bulk of her adult life as Fanny "Hensel," her current identity is usually formulated as "Fanny Mendelssohn." Both Tillard's and Kamen's biographies use this name in their titles, and the composer is listed under "Mendelssohn" in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary*. In the current "resurrection" of Fanny Hensel, the name of her famous brother, decried for overshadowing her, ironically continues to dominate. (Hence, the title of this article.)

65Interest in Clara Schumann has increased, in part, because her life featured much suffering, an abusive father, and an unhappy childhood. Susanna Reich's fine children's biography emphasizes this when she writes that for Schumann, music "enabled her to bear the misfortunes of a difficult life." (Susanna Reich, *Clara Schumann: Piano Virtuoso* [New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999], p. 100.) Clara's story, however, more frequently centers on the obstacles she overcame to marry Robert Schumann; in this she conforms more closely to the women's plot that culminates in marriage. The first half of Nancy B. Reich's excellent and well-balanced biography, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman,* the only part of the book structured as a chronological narrative, closes with the death of Robert Schumann and the end of her heroine's marriage. It is almost as if after the marriage plot is exhausted, the book is unable to sustain a conventional narrative structure.

66Letter of 16 July 1820, in Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* p. 124: "Nur Zierde, niemals Grundbaß Deines Seines und Tuns." While the Mendelssohn family has been criticized for its role in Fanny's supposed suppression, it was the Mendelssohn family that produced a woman of such musical capabilities to begin with.

old tale, merely modified by the gender transformation of the central character.

The modern telling and retelling of the suppression of Fanny Hensel represents a "story" in itself—a rescue plot in which modern women rediscover Hensel and somehow "save" her from historical obscurity.[68] Such feminist recovery relies on the assumption that Hensel *was* forgotten, but recent research has uncovered a wide range of published writing about Hensel dating from the years between 1830 and 1920.[69] She is discussed in articles, reviews, biographical dictionaries, publications about women composers, and collective biographies of famous women, and is the subject of one full-length book published in France in 1888.[70] Although the bulk of her music remained unpublished, her biography, transmitted through Sebastian Hensel's *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* received wide circulation.

Moreover, small clues suggest a wider dissemination of the meager body of available published compositions than might otherwise be assumed. Clara Schumann performed two Lieder by Fanny Hensel on a concert in Göttingen in 1855.[71] The pianist Otto Dresel's performance of Hensel's op. 11 Piano Trio in Boston in 1856 met with a laudatory review in *Dwight's Journal of Music,* which claimed that in its "sustained strength, indeed, it exceeds some favorite productions of the brother."[72] A review of a new edition of the *Gartenlieder* in the *Musical Times* in 1879 assumed that "these songs, by Mendelssohn's sister, are *already known* to most lovers of part music."[73] In 1892, when Antonín Dvořák was quoted in the *Boston Post* as saying that women have no creative power, George Chadwick responded, "there is the case of Mendelssohn's sister, who wrote as good a trio as Mendelssohn ever produced."[74] While these indications do not necessarily suggest that Fanny Hensel's music received widespread performances, they do demonstrate that her compositions did not languish in total obscurity and were known in cultivated musical circles.

These publications demonstrate that the current emphasis on Hensel's desire to publish and her limitation to the domestic sphere is not the result of a new feminist understanding of her life; these ideas also found a voice in writings from a hundred years ago. In particular, Florence Fenwick Miller's 1892 essay "A Genius Wasted" expressed outrage about Fanny's predicament more virulent than anything published since. Miller assumed that Fanny's published compositions were her only output and blamed Abraham, Felix, and Wilhelm Hensel for Fanny's restriction to the domestic sphere, writing: "But that a girl should be discouraged, and neglected, and postponed to her brother's interests, brought up with her powers undeveloped, and sent to the grave with them atrophied by disuse, having all her life long had her original gifts distorted to serve the purposes of another—oh that is an intolerable injustice and cruelty!"[75] Both James Parton, writing in *Daughters of Genius* in 1886, and Marianne Kirlew in *Famous Sisters of Great Men* in 1905, recognized that the social climate had changed since Fanny Hensel's lifetime.

[67]Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in her *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 155.

[68]I do not mean to imply that this "rescue" is negative or that research on historical women is not needed. I have engaged in this "rescue" myself in my writing regarding Cécile Jeanrenaud Mendelssohn. See Marian Wilson [Kimber], "Mendelssohn's Wife: Love, Art and Romantic Biography," *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 6 (1992), 1–18. In some sense, this article itself could be construed as a form of "rescue."

[69]See Marian Wilson Kimber, "Zur frühen Wirkungsgeschichte Fanny Hensels," trans. Bettina Brand, in *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Komponieren zwischen Geselligkeitsideal und romantischer Musikästhetik,* pp. 248–62.

[70]E. Sergy (pseud. of Noémie Koenig), *Fanny Mendelssohn: D'après les mémoires de son fils* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1888).

[71]Bethold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Life,* trans. and abridged Grace E. Hadow, 2 vols. (4th edn. London: Macmillan, 1913; rpt. New York: Vienna House, 1972), II, 119.

[72]"Otto Dresel's Soirees," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 8 (1 March 1856), 174.

[73]"Six Four-Part Songs," *Musical Times* 20 (1 March 1879), 159 (emphasis added).

[74]"American Music: Dvořák Thinks Little Has Been Done Here," *Boston Daily Traveler* (10 December 1892), in Robert Winter, *Antonín Dvořák: Symphony No. 9, From the New World* [CD-ROM] (New York: Voyager, 1994). It is not clear where Chadwick encountered Hensel's trio; perhaps it was during the years 1878–79 when he attended the Leipzig Conservatory.

[75]Florence Fenwick Miller, *In Ladies' Company: Six Interesting Women* (London: Ward and Downey, 1892), p. 138.

Kirlew, like Miller, believed that Fanny's abilities were "crippled and confined" by her father's assertion that she must restrict herself to "feminine actions,"[76] though Parton wrote, "Living when she did, and where she did, her cheerful obedience was wise."[77]

The "recovery" of Fanny Hensel depends on her having been "lost" in the first place. Booth has recognized that scholars have built "a collective history for women . . . upon a founding fiction of their past obliteration, adhering to the same gender ideology that dictates women's historical marginalization in the first place,"[78] a situation reflected in the current Hensel "revival." The problem of Hensel reception is not that her life was forgotten, but that current biographical treatment of her life has so little new to offer, merely reworking Sebastian Hensel's portrayal of his mother for contemporary consumption. Sarah Rothenberg's 1993 article, "'Thus Far, but No Farther': Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel's Unfinished Journey,"[79] even takes as its title the same quotation that Parton used a century ago: "But she was a woman, and the traditions of all the past ages, speaking to her with the voice of her father, said: *Thus far, and no farther!*"[80]

It is certainly possible, even given the more complex evidence now available, to continue to reproach Felix Mendelssohn for his failure to urge his sister to publish. Placing blame on Felix is part of a subtext to the story of Fanny's suppression, a subtext that is more often implied than directly articulated, but which sometimes surfaces in the more popular sources. The lament over Fanny's life situation gives way to envisioning an alternative ending to the story, a "what if?" episode. If Felix had behaved differently, if he had encouraged Fanny to publish, if she had published numerous compositions, what then? Nannette Kaplan Solomon writes, "Certainly, a more pro-active role would and could have changed Fanny's ultimate fate."[81] Would Fanny have had "a brilliant career"? Would her music have met with widespread acclaim? This is our wish, even if it sometimes goes unstated. Gloria Steinem's biography of Marilyn Monroe describes an alternative future for her subject, saved from suicide by the women's movement, elderly yet autonomous, and engaged in useful philanthropic work.[82] But to envision an alternative end to Monroe's or to Hensel's life is to create historical impossibilities.

The reviews of the music Fanny did publish that appeared in the *Wiener Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* and the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* demonstrate that, despite her talent, Fanny's gender would always be an issue. While the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* reviewer offers high praise, placing Hensel's Lieder with those of Schubert and Schumann and her brother, he also describes them as the "unaffected expression of a harmless, deeply feeling feminine spirit." He refuses to "apply the scalpel of analytical criticism to these gifts of charming feminine feeling," partly in order not to have to admit to himself that he has "not found a single one which might have had the power to open up to you a new world, to properly excite you."[83] The reviewer of Hensel's op. 1 in the *Neue Zeitschrift* similarly complains: "Our hearts are not moved, for we miss the feeling that originates in the depths of the

[76]Kirlew, *Famous Sisters of Great Men*, pp. 249–50.
[77]James Parton, *Daughters of Genius: A Series of Sketches of Authors, Artists, Reformers, and Heroines, Queens, Princesses, and Women of Society, Women Eccentric and Peculiar* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1886), p. 124. The chapter on Fanny is reprinted in Parton's *Eminent Women: A Series of Sketches of Women Who Have Won Distinction by Their Genius and Achievements as Authors, Artists, Actors, Rulers or within Precincts of the Home* (New York: J. W. Lovell, 1896).
[78]Booth, "Lessons of the Medusa," p. 280. For an example of "feminist recovery" in music, see Susan McClary, "Of Patriarchs . . . and Matriarchs, Too," *Musical Times* 135 (1994), 364–69.
[79]Rothenberg, "'Thus Far, but No Farther'," pp. 689–708.
[80]Parton, *Daughters of Genius*, p. 124.
[81]Nanette Kaplan Solomon, review of *Fanny Mendelssohn* by Fran oise Tillard, *American Music Teacher* 47 (April–May 1998), 113.
[82]Gloria Steinem, *Marilyn* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), esp. "Who Would She Be Now?" pp. 157–80. See also Quilligan, "Rewriting History," pp. 266–67.
[83]*Wiener allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 17 (8 May 1847), 223: "Ausdruck eines harmlosen tieffühlenden, weiblichen Gemüthes . . ."; "Ich will es unterlassen, an diese Spenden eines so liebenswürdigen weiblichen Gemüthes das Secirmesser der analysirenden Kritik anzulegen. . . . Du hast ja . . . doch keinen einzigen gefunden, welcher dir eine neue Welt erschlossen, dich eigenthümlich anzuregen vermocht hätte."

soul."[84] In a later review in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung,* the critic again refuses to be overscrupulous about form, voice-leading, and other matters of technical execution, because the works embody the "ewig Weibliche" (the eternal feminine); the implication seems to be that these "feminine" works would not withstand critical analysis.[85] The review of op. 2 in the *Neue Zeitschrift* says that three of the four Lieder lack "the independent development of ideas."[86] Other reviews are even less complimentary; one notes that Fanny's striving after imitation of a post-Beethovenian style "goes over very frequently to the extreme of the tormented, affected, stilted, unnatural, therefore unmusical."[87] Even the best reviews suggest an emptiness of content in Fanny's music or undercut their praise with a condescending tone toward a female composer. "Had Madame Hensel been a poor man's daughter," wrote Henry Chorley in 1865, "she must have become known to the world . . . as a female pianist of the very highest class."[88] Chorley did not say that Fanny would, however, have been a professional composer. That Fanny Hensel composed at all meant that she far exceeded contemporary expectations for her gender. It would have taken the entire transformation of the culture, not merely the encouragement of her younger brother, to have enabled Fanny Hensel to have a successful professional career. Here is undoubtedly where the real trouble lies, not in the interrelationships of the Mendelssohn family.

Modern retellings of Hensel's life dwell extensively on the deep sense of frustration that Hensel supposedly felt. Tillard's biography contains a chapter about Fanny's adolescence called "Dashed Hopes," and Kamen writes that "her brother's lack of encouragement to publish her music was a terrible blow," and that "the battle within grew more desperate as she grew older."[89] There is some evidence that Hensel was musically frustrated, but her frustration seems to have been less about any inability to have a public career than about the lack of social intercourse with other musicians of her temperament and stature, of hearing good performances of music, and of having good performers for her salon concerts. Certainly, much of this might have been eliminated from her life if she could have had a career. Hensel, however, was as much a product of her time and her culture as her brother; any degree of frustration specifically with being female and confined to the domestic sphere is difficult to document. The mere two or three comments that might be interpreted as such are quoted and requoted, although an express longing to perform publicly or to have her music widely circulated are in no way ongoing themes of Hensel's correspondence.[90] When requesting Felix's support for publishing in 1836, she described herself as ambivalent, a "donkey between two bales of hay," her husband who was for it and Felix who was against it.[91] When Hensel did finally decide to publish, she declared herself "no *femme libre*."[92] It is possible to interpret these comments as stemming from the not untypical defensiveness, the covering of one's tracks[93] common among women of achievement who in some way challenge social mores, but in general the tragic frustration that biographers attribute to Fanny is largely of their own construction.

[84] *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 26 (1 February 1847), 38: "Doch sind wir nicht im Innersten ergriffen, denn wir vermissen die Empfindung, welche aus der Tiefe der Seele quillt."
[85] *Wiener allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 17 (29 May 1847), 259.
[86] *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 26 (11 January 1847), 14: "den selbstständigen Ideengang."
[87] Philokales, *Wiener allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 17 (18 December 1847), 606: "Das Extrem des Gequälten, Gesuchten, Geschraubten, Unnatürlichen daher Unmusikalischen."
[88] Chorley, "Mendelssohn's Mother and Sister," pp. 210–11.
[89] Kamen, *Hidden Music,* pp. 59 and 61.
[90] See Rothenberg, "'Thus Far, but No Farther'," pp. 691–93, for these. Rothenberg bases much of her article on Fanny's 1822 comment that if she had been a boy she would have forged ahead over the St. Gotthard pass into Switzerland, and reads it as a metaphor for Fanny's entire life. Fanny's longing, however, was a literary convention of travel writing, also found in the writings of Goethe and others. Considering that Fanny was happiest during her 1839–40 trip to Italy, I think it is easily possible to read her youthful longing for Italy as simply longing for Italy, not for release from contemporary gender restrictions.
[91] Letter of 22 November 1836, Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel,* p. 222.
[92] Letter of 9 July 1846, ibid., p. 349.
[93] Solie, "Changing the Subject," p. 57.

Some feminist scholars would say that modern writers are giving Fanny the voice she was not able to have due to the cultural restrictions of her time. Tillard writes, "Fanny remained frustrated. . . . Although not really aware of the injustice that had been done her, she was nonetheless its victim,"[94] incongruously claiming for Fanny a frustration due to conditions she did not notice and the expectations of a time not her own. Quilligan describes the differences in feminist writing about past cultural contexts: "Feminist biography does not expect to learn the 'truth' of a character in the old sense of the term, because the 'truth' of the individual belongs to a different ideology."[95] Ruth Perry, biographer of early English feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731), admits that writing of her subject as a feminist is to "reinvent her—with her collaboration and the aid of historical hindsight."[96] The danger is that the goal of feminist biography becomes the creation of a discourse based on what "women might have said."[97] To write a biography based on what Fanny Hensel or what any woman did not say is, at best, problematic. In addition, a look at the writings of other talented German women in the early nineteenth century reveals some women who *were* able to voice their frustrations. For example, the poet Karoline von Günderrode wrote in 1801,

> I often had the unfeminine wish to die a hero's death, to throw myself into the wildness of battle, to die—why was I not born a man! I have no taste for female virtues and female bliss. Only what is wild, great, brilliant attracts me. This is an unhappy, but incorrigible misapprehension of my soul; thus it will and must remain, for I am a woman and have desires like a man, without the strength of a man.[98]

No such tortured comments can be attributed to Fanny Hensel.

The purpose of the act of biographical "rescue" is often less about its subject than about the need to provide role models for living women. As Sharon O'Brien observes, "Biography can give us stories of other women's lives that can help us to invent or reinvent our own."[99] Kathleen Barry's comments on Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton apply equally well to women composers: "Many women have identified with them, likened our struggle to theirs, and have taken courage from their spirited lives."[100] Citron notes that historical women can serve as "foremothers" for aspiring female musicians.[101] The contemporary composer Betsy Jolas's comments on the dust jacket of Tillard's biography are one example: "This excellent book has literally changed my life. I mean my life as a composer and, more precisely in this case, as a *woman* composer. Now at last I understand why there are still so few of us worth mentioning around the world."

What current writers on Hensel often fail to recognize is the act of biographical transference central to their act of rescue; it is *their* frustration with Hensel's life, rather than hers, that they are actually documenting. Many biographers, including feminist biographers, have acknowledged their deep personal identification with their subject. Dee Garrison recognizes that "all scholars to some degree choose their topics in order to enact the main themes of their own lives."[102] Paul Murray Kendall goes further, noting that "any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within it."[103] While a biographer's identification with his or her subject can work toward a more realistic bio-

[94] Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn,* p. 226.
[95] Quilligan, "Rewriting History," p. 268.
[96] Quoted in Quilligan, "Rewriting History," p. 283.
[97] *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives,* ed. Personal Narratives Group (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 286.
[98] Karoline von Günderrode to Gunda Brentano, 29 August 1801, in *Karoline von Günderrode: Der Schatten eines Traumes; Gedichte, Prosa, Briefe, Zeugnisse von Zeitgenossen,* ed. Christa Wolf (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1981), p. 138, quoted and translated in Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 239.

[99] Sharon O'Brien, "Feminist Theory and Literary Biography," in *Contesting the Subject,* p. 128.
[100] Kathleen Barry, "Toward a Theory of Women's Biography: From the Life of Susan B. Anthony," in *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography,* ed. Teresa Iles [The Athene Series] (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), p. 28.
[101] Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon,* p. 226.
[102] Garrison, "Two Roads Taken," p. 68.
[103] Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. x, quoted in the intro. to *The Challenge of Feminist Biography,* p. 10.

graphical portrayal, it also has its dangers. Garrison acknowledges, "The only trouble lies in a self-identification with one's subject that is unexamined and, hence, uncritical of itself"; biographers "may project their own desires on their subjects."[104]

The tone of much contemporary writing about Fanny Hensel reflects a personal identification and a modern woman's wish to save her from her historical situation and cultural context. Victoria Sirota has recalled identifying with Fanny as a mother while researching her dissertation in Berlin.[105] Fran oise Tillard writes: "There is much ground to make up here, yet I am proud to have pointed the way, and it is my hope that I have made people love her."[106] The subtext of much Hensel biography resembles what Virginia Woolf wrote about George Eliot: "I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her . . . and I only wish she had lived nowadays, and so been saved all that nonsense."[107] Although many performers and scholars are dedicated to the publication and performance of Hensel's music, much writing about Hensel, including Tillard's acclaimed biography, is largely not about her music at all. In this it ironically perpetuates the very obscurity of Fanny's music that it seeks to criticize.[108]

Postmodern scholarship goes a step further in challenging the idea that "the past is real and that the truth of it can be recovered through storytelling."[109] Some scholars readily admit they do not intend to attempt to deliver the "real" biographical subject to their reader, as deconstruction works well for a feminist story. "Quite simply," writes O'Brien, "we make everything up."[110] Fay Weldon writes: "Better, if the biographer has a glimmer of the single thin consistent thread that runs through a life, to give up fact and take to fiction."[111]

If feminist biography and women's history as a whole are to have any validity, they must not abandon a historical method that believes in evidence and replace it with fiction. This commitment sometimes means telling a story that we wish was different. While it might be more satisfying from a traditional feminist perspective to tell a story in which Fanny Hensel is deeply tormented by her desire for a professional career as a musician, the actual evidence for such torment is slim. Sara Alpern has written: "As a feminist, there were times when I wanted the story to come out differently. As a historian I had to tell what I found."[112] All biographers are, to some degree, subjective—it is simply unavoidable—but a biographer is ultimately "an artist under oath"[113] and must be true to the historical record as much as possible. Theorists such as Barthes and Foucault assert that there is no way to write biography without doing some fundamental violence to one's subject; as we have seen, such violence is a result of using predetermined paradigms, models into which an individual's life is poured, thus reshaping it in accordance with the model.

[104]Garrison, "Two Roads Taken," p. 68; ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick, intro. *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write about Their Work on Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

[105]Victoria Sirota, "Rediscovering of Fanny Hensel-Mendelssohn" in *Kontrapunkt* 1998, Furore Verlag Edition 864, pp. 122*f.*, online at www.klassik.com/de/magazine/people/hensel/sirota.htm, accessed 13 December 2000.

[106]Tillard, *Fanny Mendelsssohn*, p. 339; see also Gloria Kamen's description of her "search" for Hensel in "Finding Fanny," *Book Links* 8 (May 1999), 18–19.

[107]*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–80), II, 321–22, quoted in Booth, "Biographical Criticism and the 'Great' Woman of Letters," p. 93.

[108]For scholarship that deals more specifically with Hensel's music, see, for example, Camilla Cai, "Fanny Hensel's 'Songs for Pianoforte' of 1836–37: Stylistic Interaction with Felix Mendelssohn," *Journal of Musicological Research* 14 (1994), 55–76; Annegret Huber, "In welcher Form soll man Fanny Hensels 'Choleramusik' aufführen?" *Mendelssohn Studien* 10 (1997), 227–45; *Fanny Hensel, geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Das Werk*, ed. Martina Helmig (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1997); and *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Komponieren zwischen Geselligkeitsideal und romantischer Musikästhetik*.

[109]Gordon S. Wood, "Star Spangled History," *New York Review of Books* (12 August 1982), 8, quoted in O'Brien, "Feminist Theory and Literary Biography," p. 123.

[110]O'Brien, "Feminist Theory and Literary Biography," p. 131.

[111]Fay Weldon, *Rebecca West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 20, quoted by Teresa Iles, conclusion to *All Sides of the Subject*, p. 162.

[112]Sara Alpern, "In Search of Freda Kirchwey: From Identification to Separation," in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, p. 172.

[113]Garrison, "Two Roads Taken," p. 67.

Instead, it is the biographical models that must be rethought. William Epstein writes,

> If an oppositional agenda is going to make a *difference* (and what else is it supposed to do?), if the emergence into cultural consciousness of those who have been repressed by their race, gender, class, sexuality, etc., is going to disrupt and (some day, somehow) help to change the social, economic, political, and cultural relations that have induced such repression, then the "disciplinary technology" into which the interpretive "violence of order is transmitted" must be disrupted.[114]

Epstein points out that "the discursive practices of biographical recognition are powerful agencies of cultural coercion historically aligned with dominant structures of authority. They cannot be simply and harmlessly appropriated."[115]

Biographical narratives that either attempt to make Fanny Hensel's life conform to models used for male composers or to promote her as a suppressed feminist hero are both highly problematic. As Epstein notes, although biography is "the instrument by which cultural outlaws (. . . among whom we might list the heroines of a new feminist discourse . . .) can emerge into social consciousness and thereby assert their difference, it is also the means through which they can be co-opted by a discursive formation that stresses the 'original' sameness of all biographical subjects."[116] This cooption can mean, as we have seen, devising a plot for a female subject so that she will fit preconceived male models. As a nineteenth-century upper-class German woman, Fanny, however, was unable to transcend the suffering genius stereotype and achieve the public success possible for a male subject. The tale of Fanny transmitted through *Die Familie Mendelssohn,* in which she either submits to or is repressed by the wills of her relatives, relies on nineteenth-century gender stereotypes that "minimized the scope of, or even the possibility of, female agency, thereby complicating the task of presenting women as historical actors."[117]

Fanny is also "coopted" when she functions only as a symbol of the suppression of women within the dominant patriarchal culture, which finds personification in her oppressive brother. Her story ceases to be the story of an individual artist and is instead "the story of many women of the past whose abilities and talents were restricted due to the beliefs and practices of the times they lived in," as a reviewer of Kamen's biography described it.[118] To write a biography of a female artist with the assumption that "each woman's story is molded by a pattern, more or less the same pattern"[119] only reinscribes the essentialist gender division that feminist biography supposedly seeks to critique. Quilligan has written: "In exhuming a persistent pattern in the lives of particular women, and thereby proving that culture is stronger than the individual . . . feminist biography is positioned at an ideological crossroads that is perilous to its character as biography . . . it seems that this privileged [male] position of individuality is to be whisked away as a cultural illusion before any woman can become sufficiently autonomous to occupy it."[120] To concentrate largely on Felix's opposition to Fanny's publishing is to weaken Fanny's agency, to portray her as male-dependent; thus she ultimately fails as a feminist role model. Kamen's biography in particular presents a stultifyingly dutiful, deeply unhappy, and perennially passive Fanny. One wonders how such a woman could command our interest. She merely deserves our pity, and she is certainly no fitting

[114]William H. Epstein, "(Post)Modern Lives: Abducting the Biographical Subject," in *Contesting the Subject,* p. 229.
[115]Ibid.
[116]Ibid., pp. 226–27.

[117]Rohan Maitzen, "'This Feminine Preserve': Historical Biographies by Victorian Women," *Victorian Studies* 38 (1995), 380.
[118]Beth A. Lawry, review of *Hidden Music: The Life of Fanny Mendelssohn* by Gloria Kamen, family.go.com/Features/family_1998_01/pitt/pitt18book/pitt18book.html, accessed 13 December 2000.
[119]Quilligan, "Rewriting History," p. 261.
[120]Ibid. Solie has made a similar point in her article on "Feminism" in the *New Grove Dictionary,* 2nd edn., vol. 8, p. 665: "Postmodernism's positing of an unstable and fragmented subjectivity seems to many to put into question the category 'women' in a way that would disable feminist work, and to make inaccessible the notions of authority and intention that are central to the historical interpretation of women's productivity."

role model for our daughters. Nonetheless, as Nina Auerbach has contended, "positions of victimization do not consign one to powerlessness."[121] That Fanny did begin to publish, and presumably would have continued to do so, demonstrates that she was capable of acting and was able to overcome some of the cultural obstacles in her way.

The danger of telling *only* the story of repression is that feminist biography will not serve as a force for the recovery of women into history, but rather a continual documentation of their failures. Fanny Hensel was arguably one of the best-trained, talented, and prolific female composers of her time; she produced excellent Lieder and piano music, a fine piano trio, and a large body of compositions. She was influential in the musical lives of her brother and of Charles Gounod. Fanny had, by contemporary accounts, a strong character; her letters reveal a formidable intellect, a sometimes brutally sarcastic sense of humor, and an intolerance for people and ideas she found not to her liking. The year after her death, Sarah Austin described her as "a woman of strong sense, strong feeling, unbending probity; cordial, sincere, and constant in her attachments; but she did not lay herself out to please indifferent persons. . . . She was too proud, independent, and upright, for the smallest affectation." She was, for Austin, someone who "commanded my respect."[122] It does not do justice to Hensel or her music to portray her only as a woman who did not publish, and who, "if her father and younger brother had not deliberately suppressed her talents . . . might have been a composer in the same league as Felix."[123] It should be possible to write a feminist biography of Fanny Hensel that recognizes the cultural forces that we now find unjust without portraying her life as a failure, as Tillard portrays it when she writes, "Fanny . . . did not really tackle life head on, did not complete her life's work, and never reached her full potential."[124] Alice James's dying request of her brother seems applicable here: do not depict me as what I might have been.[125]

Thus, the story of Fanny's "suppression" is neither accurate, new, nor feminist in its origins or construction. The difficulties encountered in telling the story of Hensel's life reveal a need for a feminist biography that balances an understanding of larger cultural constraints with recognition of individual female agency. Centering Hensel's biography on her brother's comments rather than on her eventual publication of her music both denies her the power she did have in life and oversimplifies the historical situation for women composers, replacing the manifold issues surrounding gender and class with a single male villain. Adoption of either traditional male or feminist models for a nineteenth-century female composer's biography creates a story that centers on a woman's failure to achieve public success, a story that does more to undermine the "recovery" of historical women composers than it does to critique the patriarchal conditions in which they lived.

[121]Cited in Quilligan, "Rewriting History," p. 271.

[122]Mrs. [Sarah] Austin, "Recollections of Felix Mendelssohn," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 37 (April 1848), 427–28.

[123]F. Warren O'Reilly, review of *Fanny Mendelssohn* by Fran oise Tillard in *American Record Guide* 59 (1996), 282.

[124]Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn,* p. 14. For an example of a successful feminist biography of a female composer who might have been portrayed merely as oppressed by her domestic situation and unable to meet her full potential, see Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[125]Letter to William James, 30 July 1891, in *The Death and Letters of Alice James,* ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), p. 187: "Pray don't think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else."

Appendix

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy to Lea Mendelssohn Bartholdy

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Frankfurt, letter excerpt from 24 June 1837 (New York Public Library):

You write to me about Fanny's new pieces and tell me I ought to persuade her and provide her the opportunity to publish them. You praise her new compositions to me, and that is really not necessary, in that I look forward to them very much, and regard them as beautiful and excellent; for I do know from whom they come. Also I hope I need not say a word [about the fact] that, as soon as she herself decides to publish something, I will, as much as I can, provide the opportunity for this and take all the trouble from her, thereby sparing her from it. But *persuade* her to publish something I cannot, for it is against my view and conviction. We have spoken much about this earlier, and I am still of the same opinion—I consider publication to be something serious (at least it ought to be that) and believe that one should only do it if one wants to present oneself and continue one's whole life as an author. For this a series of works is required, one after the other; one or two alone is only an annoyance to the public, or it becomes a so-called vanity publication [literally, "a manuscript for friends"], which I also do not like.

And Fanny, as I know her, has neither desire nor vocation for authorship; in addition, she is too much a wife, as is right, brings up her Sebastian and takes care of her house, and thinks neither of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music, except when this first vocation is fulfilled. Having [something] printed would only intrude into this, and I just cannot reconcile myself to that. I will not persuade her to do this, forgive me. But don't show these words either to Fanny or to Hensel, who would take it very badly from me or surely misunderstand—better that nothing at all be said of this. If Fanny, on her own initiative, or for Hensel's sake, decides on it, I am, as I said, ready to be as helpful to her as I am able, but to urge [her] on to something that I do not consider right, this I cannot do.

Please write to me again whether these big social gatherings that Fanny gives and the music-making in them do not take their toll on her. I have always become very exhausted by this, and since Fanny, too, often suffers from weak nerves, as I do, I really think she must be very careful of herself in this regard. And will it not do at all for her to go to the seaside resort? It is such a splendid cure, so decisively invigorating, that I would like it very, very much if she did it; and if I could part so soon after marrying Cecile, she can certainly, after many years of marriage, be apart from her husband for a short time.—You write that it is not necessary, but if it did her good and really invigorated and refreshed her, it would indeed be worth the sacrifice. Oh, please advise her to do it, dear Mother, and I will write a few lines to her myself and pester her about it.