

“Let Us Reason Together”: The Promotion of (Women’s) Shared, Embodied
Knowledge in Eliza Sharples’s *The Isis*

I approached my Curran-funded research project with the hopes of definitively determining a support network among Eliza Sharples, visionary and enigmatic editor of the radical weekly London political paper *The Isis*, and her distant cousins, Ellen and Rolinda Sharples, professional women painters living in Bristol. The three women espoused similar ideas about women’s rights to education and participation in the public sphere, and I had found—in what published material was available—an “Eliza Sharples” mentioned occasionally in relation to Ellen and Rolinda, with no comment as to whom this mysterious personage might be. A January 2018 visit to the archive in Bristol where the Sharples Family Papers is housed strongly suggested that the “Eliza Sharples” mentioned occasionally in the family’s papers was a decade older than Eliza Sharples of *The Isis*, despite otherwise sharing an uncanny number of similarities. Though my spirits were somewhat dampened upon learning that my theory of a connection between these forward-thinking cousins could not be substantiated, I turned my sights to a March 2018 research trip to The Huntington Library, in San Marino, California, where the largest collection of Richard Carlile’s papers is kept. During my week at The Huntington, I was able to transcribe all correspondences and other documents relating to Eliza Sharples, and while the overarching focus of my project remains the same—to discover more about Eliza Sharples’s “exceptional” contribution to periodical history, women’s history, and the intersection of the two—the lens through which I approach this focus shifted after my trip to The Huntington. Fortunately, the papers pertaining to Eliza within The Huntington’s Carlile collection offer much useful information through and alongside which to view her editorship of *The Isis*, and I was particularly struck by her attention to the linkage of the (woman’s) body and the acquirement of knowledge, both the primacy of the senses in determining truth and the necessity of that body’s access to spaces where truth can be tested and knowledge produced and controlled. Sharples’s implicit argument, expressed to her female readers in *The Isis* and embodied through her public lecture performances at The Rotunda, was that to reason more fully and “establish...equality with man,” women must “participate in publicity” in order expand “the scope of [her] observation” (iv). She uses her platform as both a public lecturer and a periodical editor to establish herself as an example to her female readers, and she invites her readers into an intellectual support network, coaxing, “let us reason together” (4).¹

A core motivation of my initially-articulated research project was to examine Eliza Sharples on her own merits, drawing her out from the shadow of her common-law husband Richard Carlile. This element of my project remains in tact, and a particularly emotive letter penned by Sharples to Carlile indicates an intellectual divergence between the two on the role of the body in determining truth. Eliza criticizes Carlile’s physically detached rationality, distinguishing his “philosophy”

¹ *The Isis. A London weekly publication, ed. by a lady*. V. 1; Feb. 11-Dec. 15, 1832. (Bound, digitized volume available online through Hathitrust.)

from her “science” and declaring her chosen system of truth-seeking—an embodied system of reasoning—to be superior.²

I am currently examining Eliza’s published sentiments in *The Isis* alongside her more privately-documented letters to Carlile and hope to better flesh out her distinction between what she sees as Carlile’s (and perhaps a more masculine) isolated and disembodied “philosophical” system of reasoning and the shared, embodied “scientific” system of reasoning that she values and promotes in her periodical; I anticipate that my findings will have gendered implications. Upon completion of my inquiry, I intend to propose to present my findings in a paper at the 2019 RSVP Conference, as well as submitting my findings in the form of an article for consideration in *Victorian Periodicals Review*.

² The Huntington Library, Box 3, RC 45: Eliza Sharples to Richard Carlile. (c. 1832).