TENNYSON’S LADY OF SHALOTT AND PRE-RAPHAELITE RENDERINGS: STATEMENT AND COUNTER-STATEMENT

THOMAS L. JEFFERS
Marquette University

Who is this? and what is here?” Reading the Lady of Shalott’s name “round the prow” of her boat isn’t enough for the denizens of Camelot at the end of Alfred Tennyson’s best early poem, published first in 1832 and then revised for a volume in 1842. The sight of her corpse, inexplicably floated “Dead-pale between the houses high,” naturally sobers the revelers in the palace and prompts the knights to cross “themselves for fear,” before Lancelot commends her “lovely face” and prays God mercifully to “lend her grace.” Reading her name, and resting content with this mysterious and yet benedictory ending, has rarely been enough for Tennyson’s readers, either. I for instance have in another place liked to imagine that, following the Lady’s proper burial, some “damsels” would enter her deserted studio, discover her hung tapestries there and throughout the house, and mount a show that would be an immediate success and, long-term, provide inspiration for people, women and men alike, who might want to become artists too. More, they would become artists with a wider range than she was ever granted.¹

This scenario is admittedly fantastical, but the fact is that “The Lady of Shalott” is rife with implications about the vocation of the artist and the prospects, specifically, for any woman who wants that vocation for her own. Within 20 years of its first publication, Tennyson’s poem had such an “aesthetical” impact on the Brotherhood that misleadingly called itself Pre-Raphaelite. I say “misleadingly” because, as the mercurial but always suggestive John Ruskin explained, their principles were “neither pre- nor post-Raphaelite, but everlasting,” insofar as they endeavored to paint “what they see in nature, without reference to conventional or established rules” (47). It was the “archaic honesty” of the painters who had preceded Raphael, not their archaic style, that Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, William Holman Hunt, and, a generation later, J.W. Waterhouse found appealing. The Lady of Shalott was for them at once the woman and the artist, and therefore implicitly a woman artist who might have needed, and demanded, the training, the life

experience, and the market opportunities enjoyed by men artists. When painting her story, they were not “illustrating” the poem. As Ruskin remarked in a letter, “good pictures never can be [illustrations]; they are always another poem, subordinate but wholly different from the poet’s conception, and serve chiefly to show the reader how variously the same verses may affect various minds” (quoted in Nelson 15-16). What we can ask of such derivative “poems,” then, is whether, in Harold Bloom’s terms, they are strong or weak “misreadings” of their precursor poem, the one Tennyson created. Technical qualities apart – they are of primary importance, needless to say – the stronger misreading will I think be the one that is ethically and psychologically the more elaborate and committed.

One of the earliest Shalottian works from the Pre-Raphaelite circle came, fortuitously but for present purposes significantly, not from a “Brother” but from a “Sister” – Rossetti’s model, mistress, and later wife, Elizabeth Siddal. Rossetti, like the rest of the Brothers, knew Tennyson’s poems from bound volumes. Elizabeth, however, had lacked their educational opportunities and therefore, according to one story, had had to discover the poems on a piece of paper used to wrap a pound of butter (Gaunt 63). After little more than a year of drawing practice, she in December 1853 produced The Lady of Shalott (fig. 1).

Brown and Rossetti exaggerated her “genius” as poet as well as painter – it had flared up, as anyone’s might, under her then Platonic lover’s influence – but we can see, here and in her other drawings and watercolors, a genuine talent. Her rendering of the weaver is the only Pre-Raphaelite image to show correctly the probable medieval technique, with a high-warp loom, similar to those shown on antique Greek vases, and with a mirror that allows the Lady, without getting out of her seat, to see (a) her model, to wit the scene out her window, and (b) the right side of her tapestry. (A weaver works from the “wrong,” i.e. the reverse side.) The crucifix placed on the chest by the window, as Alicia Faxon suggests, may symbolize the sacrifice of the artist – her claims upon romantic love, and ultimately her very life – for the sake of artistic creation (78-79).

The famous Moxon edition, which Ruskin’s letter referred to, was conceived in 1854, when Edward Moxon, Tennyson’s publisher, called on Rossetti. The idea was to produce engravings for the then-dated 1842 edition of Poems. Rossetti wrote to William Allingham (23 Jan. 1855) that “[t]he artists already engaged are Millais, Hunt, Landseer, Stanfield, Maclise, Creswick, Mulready, and Horsley. The right names would have been Millais, Hunt, Madox Brown, Hughes, a certain lady [Siddal], and myself.” The five engravings Rossetti contributed – two for
“The Palace of Art,” one for “Shalott” (which he begged from Hunt, who had planned to do two), and one each for “Mariana in the South” and “Sir Galahad” – were all on medieval subjects, in which, as he said, one could “allegorize on one’s own hook … without killing, for oneself and everyone, a distinct idea of the poet’s.” “On one’s own hook” meant creating one’s own “poem” – and doing so on one’s own time and at one’s own price: Rossetti bilked Moxon for 30 pounds per print while everyone else got 25, and his tardy delivery of the drawings meant that the Tennyson came out months overdue. Hence the rumor that “Rossetti killed Moxon” when the latter died soon after his book appeared in 1857. While Tennyson’s sources were the Italian novella Donna di Scalotta and possibly Thomas Malory’s Morte D’Arthuir, Rossetti went to the British Museum and found a Lancelot du Lac dating from about 1316-20, which contained a miniature showing Lancelot leaning over the body of “la damoisele de Scalot.” This was the source for Rossetti’s end-piece illustration for “The Lady of Shalott” (fig. 2).

The water and swans in the background and the crowd of on-lookers squeezed along the top of the piece (this is a typically over-populated Pre-Raphaelite composition) come from other miniatures in the manuscript.
His Lancelot, Ms. Faxon suggests, may have had a personal significance, in so far as he “is shown gazing at the dead Lady of Shalott, just as Rossetti would gaze at beauty, especially feminine beauty, and transform it into art” – a remark that makes one realize that the woman artist must in a life class be able to gaze at the male model if she is to create a convincing picture. Such beauty – hers or his – should be eternalized. The Moxon Tennyson was in any case a disappointment, financially and artistically, and precisely because of what Rossetti complained of – the mix of stunning illustrations by Pre-Raphaelite worthies like himself,
Hunt, and John Everett Millais, with banalities by Landseer, Mulready, and Creswick, who didn’t truly understand the spirit of Tennyson’s medievalism. The addition of Siddal, especially – Mrs. Tennyson had asked Moxon to include her, but to no avail – would have enlivened the edition (Faxon 92-93, 100).

Even before Siddal’s drawing, Hunt had sketched several Shalottian subjects in 1850 (see his Pre-Raphaelitism 1.99-100), the same year Millais began his Mariana. They may have intended to show their Tennysonian paintings at the next Royal Academy exhibition, but at that time Hunt didn’t get beyond sketching. He used one drawing as the basis for his contribution to the Moxon edition, after splitting the commission for “Shalott” with Rossetti. The engraving (fig. 3) shows the Lady standing in her loom tangled in threads, while in the mirror behind her Lancelot is reflected riding away, unlike all other pictures of the poem, which show him riding past in profile.

Tennyson asked Hunt why he’d shown the Lady “with her hair wildly tossed about as if by a tornado” and was told “that I had wished to convey the idea of the threatened fatality by reversing the ordinary peace of the room and of the lady herself,” such that she and the spectator alike could understand that “the catastrophe had come.” This, or the motif of the web wound “round her like the threads of a cocoon,” were liberties the painter had to take if in a single image he was to convey as much as the poet had conveyed in so many pages of text. Feeling protective of his text, Tennyson refused to sympathize with Hunt’s point, insisting that “the illustrator should always adhere to the words of the poet!” – period (Hunt 1.124-25). For other reasons too, one shouldn’t look to Tennyson for sensitivity to the visual arts. Though he didn’t have anything against the pictures in Florence, he soon left the town because he could get no English tobacco, and when he visited Millais’ studio he was struck only by the drawing of Charles Dickens on his deathbed: “That is a most extraordinary drawing. It is exactly like myself” (Gaunt 188).

But to return to Hunt. His The Awakening Conscience (1852) (fig. 4), now at the Tate, was inspired partly by Dickens’s story of Little Emily in David Copperfield, and serves as a useful foil, thematically and technically, to his Shalottian pictures.

The woman has “fallen” some time ago but, in her moral awakening, is rising from her keeper’s lap to a reformed life. In The Lady of Shalott, by contrast, the woman is caught at the moment of her fall, and her curse is such that, even if her conscience were to awaken, there’s no rising, no practical turn-around, possible – though, Hunt would quickly add, an awakened and contrite soul would have its reward in heaven. In The
Awakened Conscience the woman looks to the world beyond her window, and away from her mirror, while her embroidery skeins unravel on the floor – an emblem suggesting not that anything’s wrong with textile arts, obviously, but that the woman’s life has been unraveling. Repentant, she’s on the verge of picking up the pieces and starting over as, again, her Shalottian sister won’t be able to.

When Hunt returned to the Shalottian subject in 1886, he created a canvas of extraordinary size (fig. 5) that is now in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford.
The moral allegory still centers on the calamity of yielding to the devil’s own world and flesh: the textile artist, like any other, has the duty of staying chaste inside her studio and ignoring come-ons from people like the playboy-knight of the Round Table. Hunt was
Figure 5. William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*. Oil on canvas, 74.125 × 57.625 cm. © Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford CT, The Ellen Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.
Thomas L. Jeffers

conscemed not merely with concupiscence, that perennially troubling subject for puritans, but also with impurities inside the art world, especially those shimmering daubs he beheld at exhibits of the new Impressionist painters. What was impure was their soft-focus rendering, of course, but worse their subjects – factories, railway stations, cafés, urban renewal projects, street walkers and their Johns – that seemed passively to replicate the uglified, degrading industrial world. The Pre-Raphaelites had indeed wanted true-to-nature replication, but in practice “things as they are” were too hideous to replicate. The only way to make them comely was to replicate truly “things as they were” – or as Dante, Malory, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, and Tennyson said they had been. Study biblical or medieval subjects properly and, the Pre-Raphaelites thought, one would discover the kindly light that could lead people out of the Victorian darkness.

In spite of Ruskin’s long lectures about how, in this reformist spirit, to appreciate Pre-Raphaelite paintings, it’s doubtful that many of the people who bought them understood. They were often the newly rich industrialists, their engineers, and lawyers in cities such as London, Manchester, and Birmingham, whose public galleries now contain so many of the Brotherhood’s great works. What the newly-rich paid for was a pictorial respite from Coketown noise, pollution, and labor agitation. Forget about the “criticism of life” a Pre-Raphaelite portrayal of a medieval subject might offer: the Miniver Cheevy upper middle class, to recall E.A. Robinson’s poem, just wanted men in “iron clothing” assailing each other while fair women looked on.

All of which told Hunt that the artist simply had to do better work. The preferred Pre-Raphaelite subjects remained valid: one only had to present them so powerfully that spectators would contemplate not dreamy escape but ethical engagement. If the “archaic honesty” of painters before Raphael was what mattered, then, Hunt soon came to believe, their honest religious convictions could not be demythologized away. Climates of opinion changed, of course, but essential Christianity didn’t change. Let Carlyle rail as he would against The Light of the World – how dare Hunt try to depict a credible Christ, when even Dürer could not do it (Hunt, Pre-Raphaelitism 1.355-60)? His kingly, priestly Christ had moved poor people all over the earth to pony up the cost of engraved copies, which they mounted, shrine-like, in their homes. Rossetti could treat a New Testament subject as he’d treat one from Dante or Malory: all such books were for him a series of poems and stories of secular pertinence, and that was enough. Not for Hunt. He regarded the New Testament, the inconsistently agnostic if not atheist Ruskin remarked, as
“not merely a Reality, not merely the greatest of Realities, but the only Reality” (159). Let the ostensible subject be what it may – a shepherd putting moves on a shepherdess, a woman rising from a man’s lap, a moribund goat by a salt lake – the underlying message was kerygmatic, just as in the expressly religious _The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple, The Shadow of Death_, or _The Triumph of the Innocents_. The Bible often seems Hunt’s only book, even when he’s reading Tennyson.

Among the Pre-Raphaelite painter’s first obligations, Hunt maintained, were fidelity of drawing, which in _The Lady of Shalott_’s accuracy of line, modeling, texture, and perspective is superb enough to have pleased Ruskin, had he lived to see it finished; and verity of color, which in value and tint is quite matchless. The drawing, Hunt and Ruskin agreed, is what “realizes” a subject; the color, far more than conception, expression, and grouping, is what “purifies,” “elevates,” and “ennobles” it. If we look very closely at Hunt’s _The Lady of Shalott_, we’ll notice how drawing and coloring together produce the illusion of reality. Critics have been wrong to call the method microscopic or atomistic, though that is what we sadly get in the surrealist _Scapegoat_: here are no finicky brush-strokes, but details defined “by modulated color combinations.” The Lady’s hair isn’t painted strand by strand, nor are the peacock feathers of her blouse, yet both, I agree with Timothy Rodgers, appear sharply delineated (58). In brief, Hunt anticipated the adjustments our eyes make as we view his painting from five or ten feet away. Without these painterly excellences, the earnest moral message the artist intends would remain, as in the standard-issue adolescent love poem, just so much intensity of feeling.

We know something of Hunt’s color method from his memoir, _Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood_, which is worth quoting at length:

> On the morning for the painting, with fresh white (from which all superfluous oil has been extracted by means of absorbent paper, and to which again a small drop of varnish has been added) spread a further coat very evenly with a palette knife over the part for the day’s work, of such consistency that the drawing should faintly show through. In some cases the thickened white may be applied to the forms needing brilliancy with a brush, by the aid of rectified spirits. Over this wet ground, the colour (transparent and semi-transparent) should be laid with light sable brushes, and the touches must be made so tenderly that the ground below should not be worked
up, yet so far enticed to blend with the superimposed tints as to correct the qualities of thinness and staininess, which over a dry ground transparent colours used would inevitably exhibit.

That is, the overpainted glaze will blend with the wet white ground just enough to make them adhere to one another, as against a watercolor-like wash over a dry white ground. “Painting of this kind cannot be retouched except with an entire loss of luminosity. Millais proposed that we should keep this as a precious secret to ourselves” (1.276-77). The “secret” method rejected the “brown-tree” formula, whereby a painting would be harmonized through a single dominant color, usually Old-Master gold, in favor of the vivid greens, reds, yellows, and blues the Pre-Raphaelites actually saw under the sun. Their delicate overpainting on a wet white background, a painstaking procedure to which, after the first decade of Pre-Raphaelite rebellion, only Hunt remained constant, led to a great deal of scraping out and starting over, for to correct color, tone, or outline on dry paint would sacrifice luminosity. The wet white had to shine through the glazes – bake together with them, so to speak, as in pottery – and when it did, one got what Quentin Bell calls “the effect of a jewel or a stained glass window . . . an aperture in the wall, through which the sun streams in” (35). That is assuredly the effect of The Lady of Shalott’s dominant greens (for volumes), reds (for edges), and blues (for highlights or backgrounds) – colors favored by the Gothic or medieval painters the Brotherhood revered.

Given this careful coloring method, in any event, we may begin to understand why in his strict Pre-Raphaelite phase even the facile Millais brought no more than two pictures to the yearly Academy exhibition, and Hunt barely one; and why the immense Lady of Shalott, even if he had done little else, would have taken him more than a year to finish. As it was, he worked at it on and off for nearly 16 years, substantially completing it by 1890 and, his eyesight failing, finishing it in 1905 with assistance from Edward Hughes, who, according to Mr. Rodgers, executed the Lady’s right foot, the top of the silver lamp, the fallen irises, and a few other minor details, all with emblematic significance (58). When it was exhibited in 1905 he seemed to be offering final Pre-Raphaelite challenges to: (a) both the Leighton- and Millais-dominated Royal Academy of the Victorian Age, which, given Millais’ need to support his family and the art-buying public’s preference for Cherry Ripe or Bubbles over his Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces such as Ophelia or Autumn Leaves, Hunt could forgive while yet condemning; (b) Wilson Steer’s
experiments in Impressionism, which dated from the 1880s, when Hunt began his *Lady*, and which savored of the Parisian “orgy of abandoned models dancing naked”; (c) James McNeill Whistler’s aestheticism, which Algernon Swinburne defined as “an exclusive worship of things formally beautiful” (quoted in Bell 74); and (4) Walter Sickert’s “Camden Town” revelations of urban shabbiness (1905-14), which were just getting underway. Perhaps the only thing Hunt had in common with Steer, Whistler, and Sickert was their rejection of the Academy’s penchant for flattering portraits, comic or tender incidents, high imperial pageantry, or the transposing of blood-lust and voyeurism into archaeologically distant scenes of Greece and Rome. But this shared distaste of anti-establishment rebellions half-a-century apart was insufficient ground for sympathy, at least as far as the founding Pre-Raphaelite Brother, who came to love Berlin and Jerusalem more than Paris or London, was concerned.

As to the moral that Hunt’s technically adept *Lady of Shalott* communicates, we apprehend it sensually – by marking the material objects and actions his drawing and coloring suggest. He wrote a pamphlet for the work’s showing in 1905, a crib going well beyond whatever hints the Tennysonian title provides. Here, as with a large number of Hunt’s “program” paintings, we need to “know the story” if we’re to get beyond our initial, simple awe at his illusionist brushwork. This is not a Whistlerian *Symphony* or *Nocturne*, those aestheticist reactions against Academic paintings centered on history, literature, or popular sentiment, and against the Pre-Raphaelite paintings “with a message.” A moral message, as we’ve seen, was part of Hunt’s plan, and he thought Whistler and Co. wrong not just because they couldn’t draw very well (a charge Whistler acknowledged) but because they tendered no message of any sort, moral or otherwise (a charge Whistler construed as a compliment: like Gustave Flaubert, only with more chances for success, he wanted his art to be about “nothing”). Just as Hunt’s *The Scapegoat* will seem to us merely a very sickly goat, “so charged with the awful” that Henry James was glad to have seen it “in company,” but not altogether “like” the goats we may really have seen, and one awkwardly placed smack in the middle of the canvas so as to resemble, Ruskin noted, a sign for an inn – unless we note the reference to the story of the scapegoating ritual in Leviticus 16:22; or just as his *Strayed Sheep* (*Our English Coasts*) will seem just that, unless we catch the allusion to “We all like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 43:6), and know about the 1850-52 fears of Roman Catholic aggression that animated some of Ruskin’s sillier writing; so also *The Lady of Shalott* will seem to some of us a picture of a woman in a wind-tunnel, and to others a picture of a bad day in a yarn shop, with some guy in armor glimpsed.
out the window – unless we know both Tennyson’s poem and Hunt’s peculiar symbology.

I’ve questioned people going, fairly clueless, through the museum in Hartford: it’s obvious that the painting has to be decoded, and Hunt accordingly provided the keys. Of course the code is arbitrary: as the Athenaeum magazine merrily said about Hunt’s salt = sin, sea = sorrow equations for The Scapegoat, “these fancies [in William Gaunt’s paraphrase] might be spun from anything, from an old wall, a centaur’s beard or a green duck pool” (80). The Athenaeum’s obtuse amusement exemplifies a problem that William Rossetti understood in his “The Externals of Sacred Art”: the middle-class audience for pictures was interested in “Facts and Figures” not Facts and the Figurative, the nonspiritual busyness of the day completing the divorce from a Catholic iconographic tradition that the Protestant Reformation had begun. William’s advice to the painter was to forget typology and “hold to the direct fact,” which in the long run most painters would do, but not Hunt. Hunt wanted to revivify typology (or, more broadly, symbology) and, like Van Eyck, Memling, Van der Weyden, Gerard David and others whose work he had seen with Gabriel Rossetti on a trip to the Continent in 1849, hold to the direct fact. That is to say, he wanted to maintain the connection between painting and literature that those sister arts had enjoyed since Giotto. His great risk, of course, was that by insisting that the literary sister be biblical, he might someday find that the Jewish and Christian truths the Bible conveys, and the great code giving type and antitype their forceful coherence, had in the minds of most people become non-numinous myths, important but finally no more eternally valid than those that underlay Norse or Hindu culture – at which point his paintings would have to survive more on their specifically formal strengths. That, however, was a problem for a later day. Immediately, he simply had to make his symbolic code’s purpose internally consistent, reflecting a system of abstract ideas, whether about the Atonement or about the responsibility of the artist, that the decoding audience could apprehend concretely. Like William Hogarth, he would forward his code by inscribing texts on his pictures’ frames, usually omitted in reproductions, or by including allusive, symbolically-charged objects, and yet more inscriptions or labels, within the pictures themselves. When these prompts proved inadequate – there was abundant critical misprision around The Light of the World, The Awakening Conscience, and The Scapegoat – he began, as George Landow has shown, to couple his paintings with pamphlets that were half commentary, half manifesto (44). He wanted to be understood, and he handled his theological and aesthetic ideas with amateurish zest,
if not with school-worthy authority. His ideas’ complexity, sophistication, or even validity doesn’t, at the end of the day, much matter; what he brushed onto canvas does.

A “stormy east-wind,” Hunt wrote of *The Lady of Shalott*, is hissing through the chamber, producing a tree-branchy effect on the Lady’s hair and scaring away the peace-loving doves that had settled by her as she worked. If she’s going to throw her life away, she’ll be throwing her work away too. Thus her actual web unravels, and she herself, poor moth, is caught in the “threads,” metaphorically, of the passion-spider’s web. She herself is, in any event, a believably material presence, however backlit, in a reversal of academic convention, for the sake of dimming her “falling” body. Her hair, given that she’s facing into a preternatural wind, is quite as vivid as that fanned into motion on the head of any model in a fashion photo. Her face, seen in downward profile, is molded like that of an Athena, a caryatid, or a stela figure — this last analogy combining strength with grief over her impending death. A noble head, in any event, atop strong neck, shoulders, and arms: she’s a *working* artist, and the almost impossibly awkward twist of her left arm, bent round in an attempt to free herself from a strand of yarn, suggests a formidable triceps. Like the Gabriels, Marys, Christs, and saints of Pre-Raphaelite Christian paintings, the lords and ladies of their Arthurian paintings are what Ruskin called “real persons in a solid world — not . . . personifications in a vaporescent one” (164). The vaporescent is what many readers of Tennyson’s poem had enveloped the Lady in. They had the excuse, perhaps, that the poet’s music had entranced them into that state, but Hunt was determined to snap them out of it. Quite possibly, too, he was implying a corrective to Rossetti’s and, say, Burne-Jones’s morally anemic medievalizing. Their “fleshly school,” to adapt Robert Buchanan’s inaccurately titillating label for the Pre-Raphaelite poets, may offer us, according to our taste, attractively red-lipped and luxuriantly coiffed Astartes or Proserpines, or classically draped, languidly refined Sleeping Beauties or Musicians on the Golden Stairs. Hunt’s Lady would be lovely also, but he would place her, morally, with the severe piety of a German Nazarene.

What has she been embroidering? Her tapestry is structured into sections, visible to either side of her, just as the painting as a whole is structured into sections, subsections, and zones that, like the type and the antitype (the figure and the prefigured) in biblical exegesis, are meant to rhyme with one another quite as complexly as those we find in a Northern Renaissance painting. The Lady hasn’t embroidered a naïve, direct copy of the passing figures and unchanging backdrop she
might see out her window. Like an artist with a lively imagination – the artist I would argue the Lady in the poem wants to become – she has arranged whatever figures have unwittingly modeled for her into (on the right) a representation of virtuous Sir Galahad offering his King the Holy Grail, engraved and illuminated on his shield; and (on the left) the not-so-virtuous Lancelot kissing his fingers, an allusion to his adultery with Guinevere, which occasions the King’s downfall. To the back of the tapestry are (on the right) figures of Truth and Justice, which Galahad and Arthur fight for, and (on the left) one of Charity, which, we may infer, should towards Lancelot and Guinevere be mixed with Justice. The convex mirror, which like windows and doors in many Pre-Raphaelite paintings opens up what would otherwise be a flat arrangement of people and things against a wall, reflects Lancelot himself, preceded by trumpeters warning people to clear the road, while he brandishes his sword – just in case they don’t clear the road fast enough. The sky is paler in the mirror’s reflection than it is out the window above, but (notwithstanding Neuringer 66) that seems to me less an indication of Hunt’s doubts about mimesis – obviously “mirroring” isn’t all an artist must do – than an effect of aerial perspective: the window opens onto a higher sky.

Consider some details from the bizarre Victorian-style interior decoration, which in their inter-referential way enrich or, for the impatient spectator, overload this painting. As Malcolm Warner (to whom parts of this paragraph are indebted) points out, owls and sphinxes ornament, at top and bottom respectively, the silver lamp to the right, implying the triumph of the light of aesthetic wisdom over mystery and fear – a triumph now jeopardized by the Lady’s succumbing to temptation. The wind has blown the light out. There are two oval panels sharing the zone bisected by the mirror and, a bit off-center, the Lady’s upper torso – an arrangement that ties her to the ovals’ commentary. The one on the right depicts Hercules performing the eleventh of his twelve labors, viz. picking the golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides, a feat possible only after he’s slain the guardian serpent Ladon, and only while the Hesperides themselves, the daughters of evening, sleep beneath the tree. The hero’s halo marks him as a pagan “type” of Christ, who on the cross conquers the serpent Sin – though we might notice a probably unintended ambiguity contained in this myth, since Hercules’ good apple-picking is actually evil apple-stealing, from which sentries might take warning not to fall asleep. At any rate, this sacred aura sends us to the oval on the left, showing the Blessed Virgin praying over the infant Christ, the so-called Virgin of Humility, the virtue from which all other
virtues stem; she like Hercules is an exemplar of duty and a thematic foil to the Lady of Shalott, a virgin unblussing herself by abandoning her duty. To help us see that these moral fables have universal relevance, Hunt portrayed the music of the spheres above the two oval panels, and designed the posts of her improbable loom to signify (left to right) the elements of water (jets and waves topped by a scallop shell), earth (leaves and vines topped by something very like a cabbage), and air (rays of the sun and knotted, billowing clouds). The element of fire is presumably represented by its absence: the blown-out flame of the lamp of wisdom. On the floor around the posts are carved scenes of universal evolutionary struggle: on the left, sea creatures devouring one another (reminding us of Tennyson’s “dragons that tare each other in their prime” in the evolution lyrics of In Memoriam); in the center, men wrestling one another and a lion fighting a bull; and on the right, a sickle and a sword, the tools of peace and war. Hunt also designed a grandiose frame, like an Italian Renaissance altarpiece, that is itself a spare allegory on Pandora’s box, which, after the calamity punishing Prometheus for the theft of fire, still contained Hope (quite possibly delusive Hope, for the word is ambiguous in Hesiod, but that’s by the way). We are to “hope,” one supposes, that artists will heed the lesson of the Lady of Shalott and keep their thumbs in their palettes, though again there’s a probably unintended ambiguity, since foolish Pandora errs just as disastrously as the Lady of Shalott (Warner 97-98).  

John William Waterhouse did three paintings on this subject. The first, The Lady of Shalott (1888) (fig. 6), now at the Tate, is marked by the freshness of the plein-air techniques associated with the French naturalists, and abandons the femme fatale witchery of Hunt’s treatment, which he would have known from the Moxon print, in favor of a sorrowful maiden in virginal white, her boat floated on the still water.

The plein-air style offers an illusion of reality – a truth to nature – that can be quite as convincing as Hunt’s Pre-Raphaelite style. Look especially at the grasses on the distant shore, the lilies in the foreground, and the Lady’s hair, all treated with an impressionistic spontaneity that, by introducing a blur of motion into the picture – or simply a sense of semi-focused fore- and background, leaving the Lady and her boat in the fully-focused middle-ground – persuades us like a hand-held, as against tripod-mounted, camera. Sufficiently sharp, in any case, are her name written on the prow, the gray walls of her castle behind the stairs on the left, the water lilies in the left foreground: each a detail from the poem. Though more restrained than Hunt, Waterhouse has added his own emblematic touches. The Lady sits on a pink robe decorated with
roundels, doubtless of her own weaving, portraying the life at Camelot that she has been allowed only to imagine – a damsel riding before the walls, four knights abreast and mounted on caparisoned horses. Of the three candles near the prow, only one remains lit, suggesting that she hasn’t long to live. The crucifix, which she gazes on in her last hour and which is a probably adventitious repetition of a motif in Siddal’s drawing, tells us she’s pious and, perhaps, a martyr. A martyr to what? In Siddal, with her sketchy nun-like Lady, we think of martyrdom for art. In Waterhouse, with the Lady’s flowing hair, full red lips, and toothsome figure emphasized by the low-slung belt and snug bodice à la Rossetti’s Beata Beatrix, we think of martyrdom to sexual repression. One may remember Edgar Allan Poe’s remark in “The Poetic Principle” “that (how or why we know not) [a] certain taint of sadness [not ‘pain’ or ‘sorrow’ exactly] is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty” (82), a sentiment that produced many nineteenth-century paintings of dead or dying beautiful women, no few of them Tennysonian heroines such as the Lady of Shalott or Elaine. Part of the turn-on, as Elizabeth Nelson maintains, was the necrophiliac
sensuality suggested by a dead or dying woman’s “recumbent body” (15), plus the related, and decadent, Romantic associations linking beauty and death – beauty made more precious because it is mortal. Nothing here of Hunt’s alarmed denunciation of the Lady’s betrayal of her artistic vocation; instead, a to me more facile, wistful regret that she never had a lover. In any case, she has looked upon Lancelot and now must die for it.

Waterhouse’s later Lady of Shalott (1894) (fig. 7), now in Leeds, is a work for which he made many preliminary studies and sketches, intent evidently on not replicating the structure or points of Hunt’s Moxon print.

Waterhouse’s painting is patently the superior “illustration” of Tennyson’s text, though in Ruskin’s sense it’s a minor “poem” too. Hunt had placed the Lady within an embroidery frame no more than a foot above the floor, and, with no place to sit, she must have been painfully on her way to scoliosis. Inside the frame, moreover, Hunt’s Lady could never make the called-for three paces across the room, and she in any event ought to be looking either at the mirror or better, since at this moment she’s bidding the mirror farewell, directly out to Lancelot-Camelot. Waterhouse catches the critical point when “The curse is come upon me, cried / The Lady of Shalott”: her rising body, momentarily stayed by the golden threads wrapped round her knees, is disturbingly like a taut bow. Her deftly foreshortened bosom accentuates the centrally-placed rounded zone of her abdomen and hips, the clasped curves of which repeat the shapes of the roundels on her warp, the back of her chair, the tiled floor, the balls of yarn, and of course the circular mirror behind all. Dangerous femme fatale or no, she’s certainly determined, as she stares (and, it seems, will shortly spring) right at the viewer. No more Rossetti or Hunt women whose bodies are wrapped in the folds of their gowns, or Burne-Jones women whose flesh, when exposed, seems, as people have said, like cold soap: their sexual life must be inferred through their faces. Waterhouse has indeed abandoned his own wispy, death-loving, white-shrouded maiden on the river – perhaps the Lady by that stage of her story, when the season has changed from summer to autumn, has suffered etiolation – and has painted her in the more robust condition she’s in at the crisis. We see a woman who could conceivably run a studio and have a man; who could find satisfaction in work and in love. Is Waterhouse’s (and our) gaze at her prurient? Not if prurience involves an insistence on her purity, which is about to be violated. Violation implies violence, and here there is I think only frank acceptance of the body and its desires, with none of Hunt’s dismayed and elaborate moral messaging.
Figure 7. John William Waterhouse, *Lady of Shalott*, 1894. 56” × 34”. © Leeds Museum and Galleries (City Art Gallery).
Figure 8. John William Waterhouse. “I am Half Sick of Shadows,” said the Lady of Shalott (The Lady of Shalott, Part II). 1915. Oil on canvas, 100.3 × 73.7 cm. © Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Waterhouse’s final painting of the Lady, in 1915, titled with a quotation from the poem – “I am Half Sick of Shadows” Said the Lady of Shalott (fig. 8) – is now in Toronto. His model, as Anthony Hobson
notices, is the same, carrying her added 20 years with enviable grace and, in the context of the poem, an excusable languor.

The painter, we realize, has moved steadily backward in the narrative – from the death voyage of 1888, to the critical looking-to-Camelot of 1894, to this “Half-Sick of Shadows” half-epiphany, occasioned by her seeing the newlyweds, which takes on a seize-the-day urgency because, in the poem, it follows her having seen a funeral (Hobson 52-53, 109). No evidence of funerals here, and no anticipation of her own death. But how startlingly dominant is her scarlet dress, the color being repeated in the woven design, on the roofs of a well-elaborated Camelot, in the balls at her feet, and in the yarn at the bottom of her wool-winder and coiled about the post of her loom. Gone is the virginal, bridal, deathly white of the earlier two paintings: it’s as though passion has begun by incarnadining her dress and by rouging her lips and cheeks. How astonishing, at any rate, that Waterhouse was still being literary and medieval a year into the Great War, by which time even the elderly John Singer Sargent, the Edwardian Van Dyke, would soon be painting the terrifying Gassed (1918) for the Imperial War Museum.

After the War no significant paintings of the Lady of Shalott or any other Tennysonian subjects came forth, and a serious revaluation of the poetry itself, led by T.S. Eliot and Harold Nicolson, soon got underway. What’s concerned me here is the custody battle fought by the Pre-Raphaelite artists over one of the best of Tennyson’s poems, and the implied relevance of their ideas about how we define the artist’s responsibilities, how we educate and promote women artists, and how any artist’s sexual and broadly material desires can or can’t be factored into the work of the studio. Poets and novelists as well as critics have, with the Lady of Shalott in mind, returned to these issues again and again. If I’ve confined myself to the visual reimaginings of Siddal, Rossetti, Hunt, and Waterhouse – theirs being the strongest misreadings of the many done up to 1900 (see note 12) – it’s because these artists took up the challenge of picturing the woman artist as Tennyson had done, while effectually “moralizing,” in Rossetti’s phrase once more, “on [their] own hook.” The combination of skillful picturing, even in Siddal, and penetrating moralizing makes these works significant, not as mere shapely commentaries on Tennyson, but as what Kenneth Burke might have called a series of fully realized counter-statements. Statement and counter-statement: poem and pictures continue to caress and snap at one another.
See Jeffers, “Nice Threads: Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott as Artist.”

Of course Rossetti did not cut his own blocks. That was the job of the Dalziel Brothers, who justly complained that Rossetti didn’t understand the wood-engraver’s constraints within a stark black and white medium. He never did learn to draw for the engravers, who as they slaved away at their copying work naturally complained about his and other artists’ finicky concern for a sixteenth-of-an-inch this way or that. The revolution effected by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones’s Kelmscott Chaucer, incited by productions like Moxon’s, centered upon the engraver: he was no longer to be the villein cutting and scraping for the artist lord; he would himself be the artist, executing his own, simpler design. Drudgery still, but drudgery self-chosen.

Tennyson in 1868: “I met the story first in some Italian novelle: but the web, mirror, island, etc., were my own. Indeed I doubt whether I should ever have put it in that shape if I had been then aware of the Maid of Astolat in Mort Arthur [sic].” He may have seen Thomas Roscoe’s 1825 translation of Malory. “The Lady of Shalott,” he later added, “is evidently the Elaine of the Morte d’Arthur [see his own ‘Lancelot and Elaine’], but I do not think that I had ever heard of the latter when I wrote the former. Shalott was a softer sound than ‘Scalott’” (Ricks 19).

Color was nothing less than sacred to Ruskin, connoting not so much gaiety as solemnity, the pensiveness that a soberly religious view of the world ought to stimulate. The great religious painters, “The Bellinis, Francias, Peruginos painted in crimson, and blue, and gold,” whereas the less seriously religious “Caraccis, Guidos, and Rembrandts [painted] in brown and grey. The builders of our great cathedrals veiled their casements and wrapped their pillars with one robe of purple splendour [good]. The builders of the luxurious Renaissance left their palaces filled only with cold white light, and in the paleness of their native stone [bad]” (Ruskin 58).

To his credit, Millais recognized his own sell-out tragedy. The Grosvenor Gallery’s 1886 retrospective of his work relegated his Pre-Raphaelite paintings to a small room and put his little girls in mob caps in the big rooms. Lady Constance Leslie met Millais on stairs, going out with tears in his eyes. “‘Ah, my dear Lady Constance,’ he is reported to have said, ‘you see me unmanned. In looking at my earliest pictures I have been overcome with chagrin that I so far failed in my maturity to fulfil the forecast of my youth’” (Gaunt 199).

It was perhaps odd for the commercial novelist Marie Corelli to declare herself scandalized when Pears Soap bought the right to use Bubbles in its advertisements, but Millais soon reassured her that the
arrangement gave the company some cachet and the artist a new public service to perform. We may smile à la Lytton Strachey at these special pleadings, but the fact is that the Victorian art world was quite as Darwinian in its struggles for survival as was the world of industry or politics. No wonder the Pre-Raphaelites’ audience thought their paintings an invitation to escape into a world of dreams; no wonder that, quixotically, Morris felt he had to change the terms on which the struggle would proceed. Both Hunt’s Lady of Shalott and Tennyson’s can seem worlds away from such economic considerations, but they continue to matter, and one isn’t being entirely impertinent to bring them up – not least because the socialist attempts to engineer a world that would remove artificial obstacles to fulfillment for female as well as for male artists, which of course Morris and many early feminists promoted, have failed. The job must be done by democratic societies: equal opportunity for artistic education, and access to patrons and markets.

I discover myself echoing the Guardian critic who in 1906 called the Lady’s tapestry a “spider’s web, circled about, as if she had been caught in her own toils” (cited in Rodgers 51). To regard the Lady as a spider implies that both Hunt and his critic share a male fear of being trapped by a femme fatale, and that some of our worry needs to extend to Lancelot. As I’ve implied, that is fair enough: if one party in this duo gives way to sexual passion, then the other party is going to be tempted to do the same.

The weaving Lady may very likely allude to Arachne, the mightily accomplished but only human (and humbly born) artist who hubristically challenges the envious Athena to an artistic contest. Arachne’s tapestry depicts various male gods’, but especially Zeus’, lascivious indiscretions. Athena is upset on two counts – she’s beaten qua artist, and she’s humiliated, qua deity, to belong to the same crew as Zeus and the rest – and so in sheer pique she shreds Arachne’s tapestries and turns her into a spider. Apollo doesn’t appreciate competition in his art forms, either, but the Arachne myth’s warning to female artists is especially dire: all the more reason, it seems to me, for Tennyson to have presented his medieval-Victorian avatar of Arachne so sympathetically, and for the male Pre-Raphaelite painters to have worried themselves about how the woman, if she is to be an artist, ought to comport herself.

See George P. Landow’s William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism for a thorough treatment of the painter’s Tintoretto- and Ruskin-inspired technique for legitimating, on moral as well as scientific grounds, his hypnotically detailed realism, and for unifying thematically what would otherwise be a clutter of object-filled sections (16). Mr. Landow scants The Lady of Shalott, where Hunt’s iconography is not exclusively typological, in favor of Hunt’s earlier, specifically Christian works.
Ruskin’s way of describing this compositional move, in *Modern Painters* II, seems especially apropos of *The Lady of Shalott*: “the painter of interiors feels like a caged bird, unless he can throw a window open, or set the door ajar” (quoted in Landow 84).

Hunt used this device of a mirror looking back to the space occupied by the viewer in *The Awakening Conscience*, too, and it’s a device familiar to us in paintings such as Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait*, in which the convex mirror on the wall behind the newlyweds images two visitors who have just come in, one representing us (as it were), the other representing Van Eyck. The *Arnolfini* painting in any event contains in the lower left the bride’s removed pattens, and these are quoted in Hunt’s *The Lady of Shalott* in the lower right – the idea in both cases being that this, the wedding chamber or the artist’s studio, is sacred ground.

The finished painting marks the third set of oval plaques Hunt designed. In the Moxon engraving we see Christ on the cross and Christ Pantocrator; in the oil sketch, now in Manchester, we again see Christ crucified but now matched with Him in Gethsemane, the struggle between his divine and human nature paralleling that between the Lady as artist and the Lady as sexually desiring human being.

Before leaving Hunt altogether, I think it touching to ponder this other-worldly painter, on Wilkie Collins’s suggestion, turning to Dickens for advice about securing adequate remuneration for the six years (1854-60) devoted to *The Finding of Christ in the Temple*. It may have been strange that a Pre-Raphaelite should turn to the great novelist who had once condemned Millais’ *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850) as “mean, repulsive and revolting,” but that was in the past. Dickens knew how to turn a penny, and William Gaunt tells the story splendidly:

“The sources of revenue were: a shilling a head for visitors to the gallery exhibition, say 20 or 30 pounds a day; subscriptions for an engraving of the work at 3, 5 and 8 pounds each; and of course the sale of the picture itself: Hunt explained that Mr. Gambrart had told him he could not, of course, expect payment adequate to the time he had taken; that he should be satisfied with the prestige he would gain. Dickens appeared to be familiar with this argument – ‘We inspired workers for the public entertainment,’ he said ironically, ‘ought to think of nothing so much as the duty of putting money into publishers’ pockets, but we are a low-minded set.’

He gave it as his verdict that Hunt ought to have the 5,500 guineas he required, but that the business man should be given time; that he should pay 1,500 pounds down, another 1,000 pounds in six months and the remainder at intervals over two or three years.
Hunt thanked him profusely. He forgot only one thing: to ask Dickens to see the picture; and Dickens never asked to see it.” (120-21)

Dickens was barely more perceptive about paintings than the Poet Laureate, but both great writers understood that the artist had to put bread on the table – an obvious consideration for the woman artist whom I’ve argued the poet has identified with (see note 1). The high-end mark was set by Millais, who by the late 1860s was bagging 30,000 to 40,000 pounds a year – compared to a first-rate surgeon’s 15,000 or a barrister’s 25,000 pounds (Gaunt 185). That puts Virginia Woolf’s pre-inflationary desideratum of a modest 500 pounds-a-year into perspective.

Notably by Edward Robert Hughes, William A. Breakspeare, John La Farge, John Atkinson Grimshaw, Sidney Harold Meteyard, and Arthur Hughes. These were by no means the only painters to mention. Leaving the Elaine subject aside, between 1852 and 1859 seven interpretations of “The Lady of Shalott” were painted, the first by James Smetham, and others by Henry Darvall, Robert Scott Lauder, and William Maw Egley. Down to 1900 “The Lady” and “Mariana” were each represented “by at least thirty-five recorded versions,” and reviewers soon got bored with the hackneyed subject (Altick 450-51). What I’ve tried to do is single out the very few treatments still worthy of critical respect.

Works Cited


255


