Trinity University
Digital Commons @ Trinity

Art and Art History Honors Theses | Art and Art History Department

4-19-2013

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and the Medieval Woman

Erin Frisch
Trinity University, erin.m.frisch@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/art_honors

 Part of the Art and Design Commons

Recommended Citation
Frisch, Erin, "Pre-Raphaelite Painting and the Medieval Woman" (2013). *Art and Art History Honors Theses*. 1.
http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/art_honors/1

This Thesis open access is brought to you for free and open access by the Art and Art History Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Art History Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and the Medieval Woman
Erin Frisch

A departmental honors thesis submitted to the
Department of Art and Art History at Trinity University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

April 19, 2013

_____	_____
Douglas Brine	Patricia Simonite
Thesis Advisor	Department Chair

_____
Associate Vice President For Academic Affairs,
Curriculum and Student Issues

Student Copyright Declaration: the author has selected the following copyright provision (select only one):

[x] This thesis is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which allows some noncommercial copying and distribution of the thesis, given proper attribution. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

[ ] This thesis is protected under the provisions of U.S. Code Title 17. Any copying of this work other than "fair use" (17 USC 107) is prohibited without the copyright holder's permission.

[ ] Other:

Distribution options for digital thesis:

[x] Open Access (full-text discoverable via search engines)

[ ] Restricted to campus viewing only (allow access only on the Trinity University campus via digitalcommons.trinity.edu)

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude foremost to my primary thesis advisor, Dr. Douglas Brine for his insight, patience, and generosity as I undertook this project. Thank you also to my secondary thesis advisor Dr. Michael Schreyach for his valued input.

I am indebted to the selection committee of Mach Research Fellowship, a fellowship provided for senior undergraduate research at Trinity University. With the provided funds, I visited the largest exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite works in last thirty years both in London (*Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant Garde*) and Washington D.C. (*Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design*). In Washington, I also attended a two-day symposium which allowed me to see animated discussion about the Pre-Raphaelites from many authors whose work I use extensively in my thesis. In addition, I am grateful for the fascinating resurgence of Pre-Raphaelite scholarship in this and recent years.

I extend my thanks to the Art and Art History Department of Trinity University for their encouragement in this endeavor. Also, thank you to family and friends for supporting me through my research.

Pre-Raphaelite Painting and the Medieval Woman
Erin Frisch

Introduction

This thesis examines the intersection of medievalism and Victorian ideals of womanhood. Case studies of three Pre-Raphaelite works, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Figure 1, 1849-50), *Mariana* by Sir John Everett Millais (Figure 2, 1850-1), and *Ophelia* by Millais (Figure 3, 1851-2), chart the specific use of medievalism employed in each work and connect it to a broader nineteenth-century context. Each painting demonstrates the ways in which the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) used medievalism to both deny and perpetuate Victorian social and artistic conventions. Within this denial or acceptance, gender comes into play. Although medievalism and gender have a prominent role in any analysis of Pre-Raphaelite work, no previous research so closely examines how medievalism shapes the gender dynamics within Pre-Raphaelite painting. In an era known for sexual self-consciousness and rigid gendered lines, issues of masculinity and femininity inevitably interact within Pre-Raphaelite works; a very clear gendered dynamic occurs within Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Speaking in general terms, the PRB was composed of a group of male painters who often took a Romantic[1] interest in the unknowable woman whose sexuality represented the irrational which the Romantics valued over rational thought. [2] For this reason, the PRB used their paintings to explore femininity. The Pre-

[1] R. R. Agrawal, *The Medieval Revival and Its Influence On The Romantic Movement* (New Delhi: Shatiki Malik Abhinav Publications, 1990), 1-3. Eighteenth-century Romanticism found its roots valuing the medieval over the rationalism of classicism and the Enlightenment; it was a precursor to Gothic revival of the nineteenth-century. The two share similar goals and dynamics. In the eighteenth century, there was already anxiety about modern developments (urban sprawl, population growth, industrialization) that resulted in longing for a revival of a distant past and privileging the exotic.

[2] Women did play a role in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, such as Elizabeth Siddal and Christina Rossetti. Much Pre-Raphaelite research is criticized for omitting their influence. I hope that my consideration of how a female

Raphaelites expressed fascination with female sexuality, beauty, and madness. Speaking specifically of Millais's iconic *Ophelia,* Kimberley Rhodes states that Millais used the female subject "much as the Romantics did: to fulfill aesthetic needs and address the complexities and attractions of femininity in all its guises."[3] Archetypal women fill Pre-Raphaelite paintings—in the examples within of this thesis, the Virgin Mary and two of Shakespeare's heroines—who offer case studies of women in states of psychological turmoil. The depiction of their stories facilitated the Pre-Raphaelites in creating a prescriptive doctrine of how these women should be viewed. Ultimately, the amalgamation of the gendered commentaries within these works guide the female viewer in modeling her behavior, and the presence of medievalism only clarifies these messages. Despite the Pre-Raphaelites' conception of their movement as a rebellion, the ways in which their paintings confirm traditional gendered norms contrasts with the technical innovations made by the Brotherhood. Ironically, the primitive works that helped them execute a "new" art that rejected pervading conventions of the High Renaissance also supplied these artists with female tropes which their imaginations (and the prevalent historical inaccuracies of the time) only made more exaggerated. This thesis explores the contradictory interaction between the progressive aims of the PRB (for both their paintings' technique and content) and its affirmation of the rigid definitions of womanhood of Victorian England. Ultimately, their work, as represented by these case studies, severely limits the acceptable behavior of women and affirms patriarchal control over their sexuality.

…

---

viewer would respond to Pre-Raphaelite painting will contribute to incorporating women into the discourse. Determining where they fit within the framework of this thesis is a subject for further inquiry. For an examination of the ways nineteenth-century female authors utilized medievalism in their work to address politics and sexuality see Clare Broome Saunders' *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism.* A similar project concerning Pre-Raphaelite women could be fruitful.

[3] Kimberley Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death", In *John Everett Millais: Beyond the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Studies in British Art 7,* ed. Debra N. Mancoff (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 55.

In nineteenth-century England, a period in which so-called primitive art, generally, was looked down upon, the Pre-Raphaelites emerged as a Brotherhood that championed the primitive[4] and strove to depart from the academic tradition of painting rooted in the High Italian Renaissance; to this end, the young British painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt, joined together in 1848. Their rebellion was largely a reaction against the tradition of historical painting represented by the Royal Academy, which they perceived to be unimaginative and artificial.[5] Through their Brotherhood, they wanted to restore conviction to British art.[6] They isolated European painting before the era of Raphael as the style of art that needed to be adopted in order to accomplish this revitalization. This thesis focuses upon the early stage of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, spanning 1849-52, when religious and literary subjects were the primary subject matter for the PRB.

The revivalism of the Pre-Raphaelites represents a small part of a broader Gothic revival within England. In the early nineteenth century, the Palace of Westminster was being rebuilt in the Gothic style.[7] Critics and art historians, such as George Darley (*Athenaeum*, staff critic, 1858-8), John Ruskin (*Modern Painters,* 1846), and Sir Charles Eastlake (*Materials for a History of Oil Painting*, 1847) published works praising art which predated the High Renaissance. London's National Gallery began adding "primitive" works to its collection.[8] Sir Walter Scott published the chivalric novel *Ivanhoe* in 1820, more or less inventing the genre of the historical novel, and poets such as John Keats, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Gerard Manly

---

[4] Primitive refers to medieval art and art of the early Italian Renaissance within this thesis. The desire to look to the primitive (art far from the artist geographically, culturally, or temporally) for artistic innovation exists across art historical periods in many incarnations, of which Cubism seems the most prominent example.
[5] Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 7.
[6] Quentin Bell, *A new and noble school: the Pre-Raphaelites*, (London : Macdonald, 1982), 7-8.
[7] Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xix. Alexander provides a detailed account of Revialism in England, extending into the twentieth century.
[8] Jane Langley, "Pre-Raphaelites or ante-Dürerites?" *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 137 Issue 1109 (August 1995): 503; Jenny Graham, "English Tastes and the Pre-Raphaelites" in *Inventing van Eyck: the remaking of an artist for the modern age* (New York: Berg, 2007), 92.

Hopkins composed verse about medieval subjects.[9] Shakespeare was attaining a level of bardolatry that anticipated his eminent reputation today.[10] And the Arts and Crafts Movement, which furthered the idea of craftsmanship by promoting a cohesive program of decorative arts in the home, would soon emerge. The foundational years of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood succeed Augustus Pugin's *Contrasts* (1836)—which argued for a return to the medieval aesthetics, faith, and social structures—and precede William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890)—which presented a utopian, socialist model of a revival of craftsmanship. The second wave of Pre-Raphaelites, including Edward Burne-Jones and Rossetti, worked closely with William Morris and Walter Crane, playing an active role in the Arts and Crafts Movement.[11] One goal of this this thesis is pinpointing the particular type of medievalism practiced by the core founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Medieval and early Renaissance art provided a model for the Pre-Raphaelite endeavor. They rejected Neoclassicism to argue that "primitive" works should be held as exemplary of high art over the works of the High Renaissance, reversing the canon.[12] They selected subject-matter with high moral stakes and psychological tension, often from religious and literary sources. Many of the principles that the Royal Academy, the main venue for art in the nineteenth century, operated under frustrated the Pre-Raphaelites. The Royal Academy followed ideals of the High Renaissance, creating art with idealized subject-matter and employing methods of *chiaroscuro* to establish hierarchies of importance within a painting. These techniques helped the artists create images pleasing to the eye, which the Brotherhood felt severely limited the progression of art in England. The PRB also rejected visible brushstrokes, opting for extreme clarity achieved through

---

[9] Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England*, 50, 105, 193.
[10] Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare : a cultural history, from the Restoration to the present* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 167.
[11] Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England*, 72.
[12] Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England*, 134-5.

smooth manipulation of paint in their own work. [13] In fact, the Pre-Raphaelites labeled academic art "slosh", nicknaming Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, "Sir Sloshua" due to the soft brush strokes and the thick brown glaze he applied to the canvas.[14] Artists who studied in the Academy (including John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt) were taught to privilege the art of antiquity and High Renaissance. Joshua Reynolds held Raphael, Michelangelo, and their Roman inspiration as the correct models for artists.[15] On the mode of teaching used at the Royal Academy, Reynolds states in his *Discourses*, a series of publications he wrote as Academy president:

> I would chiefly recommend that an implicit obedience to the rules of art, as established by the great masters, should be exacted from the *young* students. That those models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism.[16]

Students were to accept established models of high art and prevented from straying from the set program. However, despite Reynolds' written emphasis on models of the High Renaissance and his assertion that history painting depicting narratives from classical mythology or ancient history was the highest of all genres, both his work and the work in the Academy contradicted these claims, consisting largely of portraiture, landscape, and genre scenes.[17] These strict Academy parameters forced unconventional artists who fell outside of its strict mode of creation

---

[13] Alison Smith, "Medium and Method in Pre-Raphaelite Painting" in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), 18. Recent scholarship has linked the high clarity of Pre-Raphaelite technique to daguerreotypes or developing photography of the mid to late nineteenth century. For more information see *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens* exhibition catalogue by Waggoner et. al. Also, for an in-depth study of the PRB's methods see Joyce Townsend's *Pre-Raphaelite Techniques*.

[14] Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 37.

[15] Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses*, ed. Robert R. Wark, (London: Yale University Press, 1975), 15.

[16] Reynolds, *Discourses*, 17.

[17] Martin Postle, "'Patriarchs, Prophets, and Paviours': Reynolds as a History Painter. 1770-1773," *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 121.
Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35.
Both Postle and Prettejohn examine this contradiction in further depth.

to seek an alternative.[18] Many twentieth-century critics have felt that nineteenth-century Academic painting was trite and unimaginative; the Pre-Raphaelites agreed.[19] Their shared frustration with the Academy was instrumental in the foundation of the P.R.B.[20]

Despite their retrospective vision, the Brotherhood simultaneously sought a "new" art. They used the new, vibrant colors available due to modern innovations in paint. They created sharp all-over clarity in their minutely detailed paintings, emulating this same focus on detail that appears in early Netherlandish painting, exemplified by the *Arnolfini Portrait*, acquired by the National Gallery in 1842 (Figure 4).[21] However, their art did not seek to mimic the techniques of the works they emulated. Instead, they embraced modern execution while clinging to ancient subject-matter. This distinction is best demonstrated by another brotherhood that predated the PRB, the Nazarenes. They were a German alliance of Romantic painters who also wished to revive "primitive" work in reaction against Neoclassicism. Founded in 1801, the Nazarenes attempted to mimic the artistic style of medieval and early Renaissance painters (Figure 5). Even today, some find their particularly skilled examples are difficult to discriminate from authentic early Renaissance works.[22] In contrast, a Pre-Raphaelite painting could never be mistaken for an original medieval or early Renaissance work. The colors are too vibrant, the surface of the painting too smooth, and their works include elements of Victorian dress and objects (even when trying to evoke medieval scenes). The Pre-Raphaelites were not trying to mimic primitive art; they recontextualized it, using modern artistic techniques, in order to make the content (whether

[18]Baringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 18-9. Rossetti even chose to show certain works outside of the Academy to avoid the panelists who he feared would reject his work.
[19] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 35.
[20] Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 37.
[21] Graham, "English Tastes and the Pre-Raphaelites", 112. Alison Smith, "Medium and Method in Pre-Raphaelite Painting" in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), 18. For more information see Jenny Graham's chapter on van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites.
[22] Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 23-4. The Nazarenes even adopted medieval dress and lived in an underused convent together. Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was aware of Nazarenes' work, there is little evidence to suggest that they consciously modeled their movement after them.

moral, literary, or religious) of primitive art relevant to an industrialized, modern world as the case studies of this thesis will demonstrate.[23]

Although their paintings could not be accomplished without close observation and they did follow the advice made by their patron and famous nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin in *Modern Painters*: to paint nature "rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing", their work cannot be labeled as realism. [24] Their work certainly differs from contemporary French realism also developing in the nineteenth century.[25] Although the Pre-Raphaelites painted from nature, their work also contains fanciful embellishment. Their images are unrelenting in their clarity, like a photograph but with impossibly bright colors and sharp contours. Pre-Raphaelite paintings surpass the reality to which they maintained such fidelity. To that point, the PRB rejected the Albertian notion that paintings should modify observed life to make them pleasing to the eye, but that is not to say that their work excludes idealization. The Brotherhood just infused their own type of idealism with realistic poses and obsessively detailed rendering. The intense clarity and heightened reality they maintain in their images reflects the moral urgency of their message. They wanted to jolt the modern world awake with visually demanding images—to challenge their audience with artistic language different from the contemporary nineteenth-century works with which their audience was familiar.

Already, a core term of this thesis, medievalism, has been complicated by the varied inspiration of the Pre-Raphaelites. For the PRB the medieval is broadly defined. Art of the Early Italian Renaissance, Northern Renaissance, and Middle Ages all galvanized the PRB. However,

---

[23] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 19.
[24] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (New York: J. Wiley, 1860-62), 423.
[25] William Michael Rossetti (Dante Gabriel Rossetti's brother) actually drew out the distinction between the French realism as represented by Courbet and the "realism" of the Pre-Raphaelites. He called Courbet's realism "the roughest of the rough" and the PRB's "the most exquisite of the elaborated" which implies it is not always true to observation but also serves artistic imagination. Quoted in Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Art", *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (New York: Cambridge University Press 2010), 199.

modern art historical distinctions between different periods collapse into one generalized notion of medieval for the PRB. During the nineteenth century, art historians used the word "primitive" to refer to the period of time which followed antiquity but came before the High Renaissance.[26] For the Pre-Raphaelites, therefore, the primitive represented a distant past that posed an alternative to the Neoclassicism emphasized by the Royal Academy.

Additionally, the Pre-Raphaelites did not solely use authentically medieval sources to inspire their art. The variety of figures who they admired in their list of Immortals—a document created by Rossetti and Hunt, signed by seven Pre-Raphaelite members, and later published in *The Germ*—shows their range of influences (Figure 6).[27] Drawing the contrast between two authors, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and William Shakespeare clarifies this varied inspiration. On one hand, Tennyson was a contemporary writer who, like the PRB, used medieval subjects and themes in his work. Much of his work falls in line with the abundant medievalising literature created by various nineteenth-century British authors. On the other hand, Shakespeare wrote in the early modern period, but set his plays in the Middle Ages or the early Renaissance. Despite their differing time periods, both authors were medievalist sources of inspiration to the PRB. For the Brotherhood, medievalist sources did not have to be authentically medieval, but they did need to reflect upon medieval themes. To that point, Medievalism is not about accurate depiction of history. It uses the Medieval as inspiration which is then transformed through imaginative interpretation. And it is the artists' selective use of medieval elements, and their distortion of these elements, that is speaks to the artists' larger goals and the societal forces that shape their work.

---

[26] Barringer *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 34-9.
[27] "The Pre-Raphaelite List of Immortals." *Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 277-8.

As charted in this thesis, the Pre-Raphaelites depicted medievalising elements in complex and paradoxical ways. For example, much of the impetus for evoking this era was its reputation for craftsmanship (a cause that would later define the Arts and Crafts Movement). The signature of PRB appearing on a stool in Millais' *Isabella* (the first painting exhibited with the initials, (Figure 7 a) and Millais' signature in *Mariana* replicates a craftsman's mark (Figure 7 b). Yet, as Rosika Parker has demonstrated, pervading ideas about medieval craftsmanship (specifically embroidery) in the Victorian era were largely mistaken, with entire history books making false claims.[28] Also, the deep-seated morality and earnest labor that the Pre-Raphaelites ascribed to the Middle Ages seems to arise from the generalized notions and distortions inherent to medievalism. Nevertheless, the way that these inaccuracies manifest themselves in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites points to their artistic goals and the larger societal forces that influenced their paintings. A key part of medievalism, as Michael Alexander articulates, is the element of imagination employed when adopting medieval motifs and themes, which the Pre-Raphaelites had in spades.[29] The Pre-Raphaelites themselves stated that they wanted to create earnest, truthful paintings, yet they took great artistic license in portraying medieval subjects. This investigation of the Pre-Raphaelite's medievalism will explore the origin of these discrepancies and the reasons why the Pre-Raphaelites did not find them troubling. Their interpretation of the Medieval, whether accurate or inaccurate, is inevitably self-reflective.

…

This has been an especially opportune year to undertake this thesis because the largest exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite works in thirty years appeared in London at Tate Britain in Fall

[28] Rosika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), 17.
[29] Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England*, xxii.

2012 and in Washington D.C. at the National Gallery in Spring 2013. Both exhibitions asked its audience to reconsider the work of the Pre-Raphaelites as modern art, despite its differences from the better-known, progressive French art of the nineteenth century that developed at the same time. The London exhibition (*Pre-Raphaelite Painting and the Victorian Avant-Garde*) went so far as to label the movement as avant-garde. (Pairing "avant-garde" with "Victorian" was quite a provacative thing to do.) In the Washington D.C. exhibition, the language of Pre-Raphaelite innovation became much less emphatic, but the claim remained: that the PRB was modern, deviating from established conventions to engage with the contemporary world.[30] Although the question of the modernity of the Brotherhood does not play a large role in this thesis, the undertaking of this research emerged from an impetus similar to that of the exhibition organizers (Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith): to study a marginalized group of artists and to affirm the value of their work in terms of their rich thematic programs and the ways they reflected Victorian society.

A fundamental contradiction exists between the progressive aims of the Brotherhood and their affirmation of contemporary gendered norms in their work. Using the past to transcend their own time, they hoped to say something profoundly new. But, as these case studies show, they could not escape the constraints of their time, particularly within the domain of gender. Women characterized by rigidly defined gender roles fill their paintings. Some are beauties meant to be consumed by the male gaze, some typify the chaste ideal womanhood, whereas others are faced with the repercussions of transgressing their bounds. In all of these cases, the Brotherhood constructs prescriptive paintings about ideal femininity. The very medieval inspiration they used to challenge artistic convention also served as the source for these romantic images of

[30] Tim Barringer and Jason Rosenfeld, "Victorian Avant-Garde" in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), 9.

womanhood. Although their rhetoric spoke of an invigorated artistic movement that could leave outdated modes behind, the Brotherhood could not transcend the confining notions of gender—female confinement indoors, separate spheres, and repressed sexuality. These very dynamics play out within their paintings and affirm patriarchal control over women.

Much of Pre-Raphaelite work aligns with what the contemporary world finds unsettling about the concepts of gender in the Victorian era. More generally, the practice of idealization of women within these works follows many troubling conventions of viewing women found in the tradition of art.[31] In the case studies of this thesis, the Pre-Raphaelites confirm the limited mobility of women, disdain women who challenge gendered norms, symbolically control female sexuality, and pictorialize the threat of the madwoman after she transgresses her feminine role. Through the course of these paintings, unpacking the particular medievalising elements in conjunction to the gendered implications of the paintings reveals how the Brotherhood coupled the medieval with a contemplation of femininity in order to perpetuate the caustic gendered ideals of the Victorian era.

[31] For a brief overview of these issues see John Berger, "from *Ways of Seeing*", *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, (New York: Routledge, 2005): 37-39.

Chapter 1: Ideal Girlhood
***Ecce Ancilla Domini!* by D. G. Rossetti**

That picture of mine was a symbol of female excellence, the Virgin being taken as its highest type. It was not her Childhood but her Girlhood.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti[32]

Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* from 1849-50 (Figure 1).[33] The Latin title of the work, "Behold the Handmaid of the Lord", appears in the gospels as Mary's response to the Archangel Gabriel once she was told she would carry the son of God.[34] Rossetti constructs an image with narrow focus, limited palette, and careful details. Mary sits almost cowering on a bed, and Gabriel levitates before her, having just revealed the miraculous news. As the title instructs the viewer, Rossetti uses this work in order to study Mary closely as she is faced with the unthinkable. Conceived as a diptych (although the second panel was never painted), Rossetti asked his devout sister Christina Rossetti to pose for Mary, and his brother posed for Gabriel. It was meant to accompany Rossetti's previous work, *The Girlhood of Mary the Virgin* (Figure 8, Tate, 1848-9) as part of a thoughtful representation of the Virgin's life.[35] However, Rossetti's work shocked contemporary critics with its Catholic undertones and overt handling of its subject.[36] For instance, *The Examiner* deemed it: "A provokingly clever

[32] Quoted in Ciaran Cronin, *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Antony Harrison, and Alison Chapman, (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 308.
[33] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[34] "And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her" (Luke 1.38).
[35] The work was the first to be publicly exhibited with the P.R.B. initials. See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 and 24 (entries by Alison Smith).
[36] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith). Bell identifies 1850 as the year when the public discovered the PRB and expressed an outpouring of negative response. He attributes this partly to the anti-papal sentiment of the time. The existence of a secret brotherhood raised suspicion, and the Pre-Raphaelites also indicated High Church sympathies in many of their works. Bell, *A New and Noble School: The Pre-Raphaelites*, 70.

monstrosity in which the lean meagerness of the early painters is imitated as closely as if it were their excellence, and not their defect."[37]

Ecce was first exhibited at the National Institution of Fine Arts at the Portland Gallery, Langham Place in 1850.[38] The work encapsulates much of what a nineteenth-century audience found shocking about the Pre-Raphaelite movement: figures placed in realistic poses and painted from observation (ignoring academic traditions emphasizing beauty), with pervasive clarity and detail throughout the canvas, and intense psychological realism. In fact, the barrage of negative criticism which followed its exhibition devastated Rossetti, causing him to turn to more literary subject matter that allowed him artistic license without such a firestorm from critics. Nevertheless, the Irish Pre-Raphaelite patron Francis McCracken purchased the painting in 1853, although he did express concern about the way its controversial religiosity could reflect negatively upon him.[39]

This chapter examines the image of ideal womanhood that Rossetti constructs within *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, and how Rossetti interweaves innovative and traditional elements. He carefully infuses modernity into the Annunciation through psychological intensity and heightened atmosphere; yet, he carefully includes iconography of medieval and early Italian painting. Rossetti asserts that the Virgin, who was a prominent model for women to emulate in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, is still relevant to a Victorian audience. It is in his reference of "primitive" Annunciations that his medievalism manifests. His series of paintings depicting the Virgin establishes the trajectory of her life, beginning with her education in piety and craft, continuing through a young adulthood of chastity, and ending in death in a never-completed

[37] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

work.[40] However, Rossetti's image of ideal womanhood counteracts his endeavor to recalibrate the Annunciation in a novel, startling way. He ultimately confines the woman within the home, asks her to maintain her virginal state, and emphasizes her sexuality only in its capacity to bear children as prescribed within the Christian tradition—all of which falls into line with the prevalent and oppressive Victorian notions of gender.

…

Rossetti crops *Ecce* tightly around the central figures, in a nearly photographic way. The viewer's standpoint is low to the ground, creating a dramatically receding space. Gabriel appears before Mary, wearing a flowing white gown, flapping open on the side (in a way that must have startled a Victorian audience). He extends this left hand in blessing. In the other, he holds a lily stalk with three white blossoms. Yellow flames emanate from his feet, as he hovers over the ground; the flames reflect on the tiled white floor. A white dove flutters above Gabriel's hand. The viewer sees his face in profile, cast in shadow. He maintains a solemn expression with his eyes downcast as be blesses Mary. Both Gabriel and Mary have gold halos of metallic paint that glint when seen in person. Mary cowers, and her sack-like dress pools around her undeveloped body. Thin individual strands of her red hair cling to her arms and collar of her dress. She has a very pale complexion, apart from her richly pink lips, and her unseeing eyes are sunken into her face. Her skin seems clammy. A window appears on the far wall containing a light blue sky and single tree; it frames Gabriel's upper body and halo. Taking up significant space in this work, the symbolically white walls, evoking Mary's innocence, limit the color palette of the work, enabling Rossetti to selectively emphasize different elements.

Rossetti's painting oscillates between modern reinterpretation and the traditional imagery of the Annunciation, creating interesting contradictions. First, I will address the medievalist

[40] Ibid.

elements of this work. Some may argue that this work is not medievalist: It seems to occur in the setting of the biblical Holy Land, not Europe of the Middle Ages. Yet, because the representation of the Virgin reached its zenith during the medieval and Renaissance period, establishing the visual tradition upon which many subsequent works were based, this painting may be deemed medievalist. In fact, Rossetti utilizes a unique blend of early Italian and Netherlandish elements within *Ecce* that typifies the blending of periods innate to medievalism, and Rossetti's inclusion of modern elements is the culminating signifier of medievalism. Setting up the particular ways that Rossetti employs medievalism (exploring "primitive" works he may be referencing, traditional iconography he chooses to use, and Rossetti's personal connections to "primitive" art) and then identifying modern elements will set the stage to incorporate gender into the reading of *Ecce*.

Although the work would never be mistaken for an early Renaissance fresco, *Ecce* is a unique work for the Brotherhood because it tries to mimic "primitive" techniques.[41] Rossetti's muted color palette evokes a fresco punctuated with rich primary colors: red symbolic of the purity of the Virgin, blue for her eventual nobility as the Queen of heaven, and gold representing divine status.[42] His painting also maintains a two-dimensional flatness. Rossetti's technique is more in line with the practices of the Nazarenes than the PRB. This is, however, a temporary period in Rossetti's artistic career; few of his subsequent images mimic works of the past in their execution. But his painting is not wholly rooted in early Italian technique. Rossetti paints figures from observation—Mary, in particular, is placed in a naturalistic pose and lacks the idealized beauty seen in most primitive Annunciations. Also, the exaggerated perspective recalls the

[41] As previously mentioned, the PRB predominantly chose to pair modern techniques with medievalist subject-matter.
[42] Barringer *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 44. See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).

recessive space of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, which the Pre-Raphaelites saw in the London National Gallery (it was purchased in 1842) and greatly admired, even adopting the circular mirror as a symbol (Figure 4).[43] The thin lines of the tiles in *Ecce* mimic van Eyck's floorboards. Also, both paintings present a male and female figure, with the male holding his hand in blessing (although Rossetti mistakenly depicts Gabriel's left hand raised which is probably result of Rossetti's repainting following the work's initial exhibition).[44]

Other than the *Arnolfini Portrait*, it is difficult to piece together what "primitive" paintings Rossetti had seen (either in person or reproduction). Although of Italian parentage, Rossetti never traveled to Italy.[45] Nevertheless, in common with most nineteenth-century artists, Rossetti would have primarily experienced art from the past by means of engraved reproductions. The comparison of *Ecce*'s simplicity and asceticism with Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in Cell 3 in the Convento di San Marco (Figure 9) is valid, since Fra Angelico appeared on the Pre-Raphaelite list of Immortals (Figure 6). Also, both Rossetti and William Holman Hunt responded quite strongly to Fra Angelico's *The Coronation of the Virgin*, after seeing it in the Louvre in 1848, Hunt later writing that it was "of peerless grace and sweetness in the eyes of us both" (Figure 10).[46] On the same trip, Hunt and Rossetti toured through Paris, Brussels, Ghent, and Bruges; although, they only recorded a limited number of the works they saw.[47] Rossetti also had an affinity for early Netherlanders like Hans Memling and van Eyck

---

[43] Graham, "English Tastes and the Pre-Raphaelites", 112. For more information see Jenny Graham's chapter on van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites.
[44] Bell, *Pre-Raphaelites: A New and Noble School*, 107.
[45] Russel Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 1.
[46] Quoted in Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 38. See *The Pre-Raphaelites and Italy. Burlington*, exh. cat. (Burlington VT: Ashmolean, 2010), cat 6 and 7. Cécile Maisonneuve and Dominique Thiébaut, "The Coronation of the Virgin," *Louvre*, accessed March 1 2013. http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/coronation-virgin
Rossetti even completed a sketch of Fra Angelico in 1853. In it, he paints as a monk reads scripture to him. The additional significance of this work is discussed later.
[47] John Nicoll, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 51.

whose work he would have seen abroad in Bruges;[48] Rossetti deemed their work "miraculous…most stupendous."[49] These various examples provide a general sense of what the Rossetti valued in primitive art and points of comparison between Rossetti and authentic primitive painting. The highly detailed paintings of the van Eyck and Memling, in both their minute detail and layering of patterns within interior spaces are stylistically closer to the work of Millais or Hunt than Rossetti. It is possible that Rossetti's lack of technical ability (being self-taught) prevented him from imitating this style. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Rossetti betrays the influence of both Northern and Italian Renaissance painting within *Ecce*.

The proportion and subject of *Ecce* evoke the wing panels of early Netherlandish polyptychs, like Memling's *Floreins Triptych*, which Rossetti would have seen in the St. John's Hospital in Bruges (Figure 11).[50] In fact, as we know from the writings of his brother William Michael Rossetti, D. G. Rossetti originally meant the work to be the first panel of a diptych, accounting for the painting's narrow size. The second panel would have represented the Virgin's death, but it was never completed.[51] Rossetti includes iconographic symbols familiar from both Northern and Italian Renaissance painting: The conventional symbol of the lily, representative of the Virgin, is found on Mary's red cloth with embroidery and in Gabriel's hands, and a white dove flutters above Gabriel's hand, emblematic of the Holy Spirit. A metal sconce with curving lines above the screen emits a thin yellow flame, symbolizing the presence of God. The interplay between artificial light and natural light is also present in this work, a contrast commonly explored in in early Netherlandish paintings such as Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (Figure 4). However, in departure from Early Netherlandish painting, Rossetti includes metallic halos on

[48] Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 38. Langley, "Pre-Raphaelites or ante-Dürerites?" 503. Graham, "English Tastes and the Pre-Raphaelites," 92.
[49] Quoted in Nicoll, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 51.
[50] Dirk De Vos, Hans Memling: the Complete Works (Ghent : Ludion Press, 1994), 160.
[51] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).

Mary and Gabriel, painted in metallic paint, closest in style to those of Fra Angelico (see Figure 9).[52] Despite the receding perspective of *Ecce,* the scene is relatively flattened within the room. The flat traditional halos contrast starkly with the realism of the depicted figures. Rossetti's painting shares the white-walled asceticism of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. The very carefully modeled folds of the fabric and the individualized hairs recall the technique of van Eyck and Memling (Figure 4, 11 and 12). Rossetti was very committed to working from observation (although lack of technique may not make this apparent). Rossetti pays minimal attention to the bodies of Gabriel and Mary beneath their clothes, in an archaic style very different from highly modeled bodies of antiquity and the High Renaissance.

I would like to emphasize one final element of Rossetti's painting and the primitive Annunciations because it plays a significant role within this thesis—the window looking onto trees and a blue sky. Rossetti evokes the medieval and Renaissance Annunciation scenes that often include windows looking onto a garden. This garden is termed the *hortus conclusus*, which translates to the enclosed garden, in a reference to Mary's virginity. Its grass can be seen in Fra Angelico's painting, to the left where Joseph stands (Figure 9).[53] Because Christ is miraculously conceived with Mary's virginity intact, the image of a walled garden came to symbolize the Virgin conception of Christ. She is impregnated by the Holy Spirit. The contained garden represents her womb, untouched by sin.[54] Although Rossetti's window departs from the tradition (with no enclosure and no garden to be seen, only trees), his inclusion of the window taps into this tradition. He may not have been completely aware of the significance of the *hortus*

[52] The thin areas on the outer edge of Gabriel's halo reveal the brushstrokes of the paint, meaning it is not applied gold leaf.
[53] Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) 123-4.
[54] Ibid.

conclusus, but its symbolic significance aligns with Rossetti's commentary on womanhood, as is elaborated later.

One dimension in which Rossetti differs from the examples of early Renaissance and early Netherlandish painting is that he does not root the narrative in a contemporary setting. Mary does not wear clothing of the nineteenth century or the garb of the fifteenth century or earlier. Instead, Rossetti creates a biblical setting, which, in part, opposes his endeavor to evoke the historical tradition of panel painting. Rossetti could construct a more overt reference to medieval and early Renaissance polyptychs by rooting the setting in the time of the art he emulates. However, committed to infusing this traditional imagery with realism, he presents the image in a setting evocative of the Holy Land. The bare walls are covered in stucco, and as we can see through the window, they are very thick, suggesting the location of ancient Nazareth. The meager furniture also places the setting in the biblical past. Mary sits upon a simple bedframe and mattress. Composed of wood, the frame contains a small decorative pointed arch. Midway along the left side of the bed, the viewer can see the frayed woven mat. Behind the bed stands a small screen of draped blue cloth; its fabric bunches along the left side in particularized folds.

Rossetti also emphasizes the heat of Israel in the painting. William Michael Rossetti's account of the painting in his diary of the Pre-Raphaelites emphasizes this point: "The Virgin is to be in bed, but without any bedclothes on, an arrangement which may be justified in consideration of the hot climate..."[55] Indeed, Mary wears simple undergarments, a white sheath dress with holes for the arms that bunches at her neck. This detail of the climate, which many other artists omit in their Annunciation scenes, demonstrates Rossetti's careful planning and

[55] Quoted *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).

insight into his painting, revealing an almost obsessive study of his subject. And, of course, the heat adds to the thematic tension which Rossetti works to establish.

On one level, Rossetti's consideration of the setting of the scene represents his desire for historical accuracy, functioning in the same way as the frayed cot or distinctive walls—rooting the work in a historical context. He desires to present the scene as it was reported in the Gospels. Gabriel approaches this seemingly unextraordinary woman, unsuspecting of what will be asked of her, in an ascetically meager room to deliver monumental news. On another level, Rossetti's close attention to setting also serves a narrative purpose. The existing heat of the setting, a detail absent from earlier depictions, would be increased to a suffocating level by the flames below Gabriel's feet, adding to Mary's discomfort. We see evidence of the heat's physical effect on Mary; the wiry strands of red hair (an oddly Eyckian detail that Rossetti created using individual strokes) stick to her arm, suggesting her perspiration. The tightly enclosed white walls of the room cropped closely around Mary evoke a cell, suggesting that Gabriel's announcement that she will bear the son of God is an inescapable burden from which she cannot escape. In this, it recalls the monastic setting of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (Figure 9). The twofold functioning of the setting in this work illustrates the strange combination of realism coupled with dramatic devices. The setting of Nazareth purports to historical accuracy that makes the scene more realistic to the viewer, but it also supplies Rossetti with sources for narrative manipulation, emphasizing Mary's discomfort and the monumentality of the moment. By combining these two modes, Rossetti creates an unnerving painting that simultaneously communicates the reality of this religious event yet hints at its supernatural magnitude.

Beyond Mary's ascetic lifestyle, her cell-like room suggests that she cannot defer her religious duty, despite how much she may wish. Rossetti imagines her initial reaction of angst

and fear. Further heightening the intensity of the scene, Rossetti chooses an innovative perspective for this work. The line of the bed shoots back from the foreground in order to draw the viewer into the painting. The slightly inconsistent recession of space induces a sort of vertigo, heightening the instability.[56] Due to the lack of distracting detail, the viewer cannot escape the burden of the psychological intensity. The viewer's eye moves from Mary, who is framed by the blue hanging fabric, to the intense red of the lily embroidery to Gabriel, whose head is framed by the blue sky outside the window, to the lily stalk resting in his hand. Rossetti particularly emphasizes the lilies. The intense gaze of Mary directs the viewer's attention there, and the various lines that intersect the stem (Gabriel's hands, Mary's body, and the draped screen) form the most complex part of the painting. These symbolic lilies captivate both the Virgin and the viewer.

…

The religious tensions of the nineteenth century and the beliefs of Rossetti, himself, shed further light on *Ecce*. Early on, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood focused on religious themes, striving to promote the moral capacity of art. The Pre-Raphaelite's early patrons, John Ruskin and Thomas Combe, also believed in art's capacity to promote virtue. They often depicted pious women, the Virgin Mary, or women committing to religious devotion to avoid sin.[57] Victorian England was Anglican, so the iconography of saints in the Catholic tradition was rediscovered through study of early Italian and Northern Renaissance art rather than enduring religious practice. The depiction of these religious figures was viewed by many as papist for its treatment of religious themes. Thomas Combe, the Pre-Raphaelite patron, in fact, was a part of the Oxford

[56] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[57] Jan Marsh. *Pre-Raphaelite women: images of femininity in Pre-Raphaelite art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 31.

Movement that sought to restore Catholic traditions to the Anglican church.[58] The controversial presence of the Catholicism within *Ecce* specifically is best illustrated by the alterations made by its ultimate buyer. Francis McCracken, an Irish Pre-Raphaelite patron, bought the work in 1853. He altered the title to *The Annunciation* and replaced the frame, removing the Latin mottoes and adding English inscriptions. William Michael Rossetti accounts that McCracken did so to prevent being charged with "popery."[59] When it came back into his possession in 1874, Rossetti replaced the inscribed frame for a simpler one without text to make the work slightly less didactic in its religious message.[60]

Although Rossetti came from an Italian family, he was not Catholic but agnostic. His desire to depict the Annunciation seems to stem more from the tradition of Italian painting than religious motivations. His father, Gabriele Rossetti, was exiled from Naples due to his political activity, and he began teaching Italian at King's College in London, where Dante Gabriel was born in 1828. [61] Both English and Italian were spoken in the home. Rossetti was fluent in Italian, but he would never set foot in Italy. Rossetti's mother Frances (Polidori) Rossetti and two sisters, Maria and Christina were devout members of the evangelical branch of the Church of England.[62] His brother William Michael Rossetti explains Rossetti's own relationship to Christianity:

> "In religion he was mainly a free-thinker, strongly anti-papal and anti-sacerdotal, but not inclined, in a Protestant country, to abjure the faith of his fathers. He never attended any place of worship. Spite of his free-thinking, he had the deepest respect for the moral and spiritual aspects of the Christian religion…"[63]

---

[58] Marsh. *Pre-Raphaelite women: images of femininity in Pre-Raphaelite art*, 31.
[59] William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir* (Vol. 1), *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, IATH, accessed March 12 2013. http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/pr5246.a43.rad.html. See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[60] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[61] Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1. Nicoll, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 20.
[62] Nicoll, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 20.
[63] Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir* (Vol. 1).

Gaging from William Michael's account, Rossetti maintained a reverential esteem for the Christian tradition, even though his views were distinctly anti-Catholic. Rossetti's brother Michael Gabriel Rossetti and sister Christina Rossetti both posed for *Ecce,* although several models also posed for both figures in its various stages.[64] Furthermore, Christina and their mother Frances posed for the preceding work *The Girlhood of Mary the Virgin* (Figure 8). The women of the Rossetti family were extremely devout. Maria joined an Anglican convent, and Christina wrote many religious poems as one of the most eminent poets of the nineteenth-century.[65] In placing his mother in the role of St. Anne—the mother who would raise the woman to bear the son of God—and his sister as Mary—a woman with the fortitude to bear such hardship—Rossetti reveals an all-encompassing and deeply personal connection to his subject. His choice demonstrates his intensely passionate relationship with his work, true to the Pre-Raphaelite tendency.

Ecce emerges from a deep contemplation of the life of the Virgin, in both Rossetti's painting and his poetry. *The Girlhood of Mary the Virgin* a young Mary learning embroidery from her mother (Figure 8).The first of Rossetti's two sonnets, written in 1849 to accompany *The Girlhood* and inscribed on its frame, bears relevance for *Ecce*.[66] It describes the virtue of Mary, her education as a young girl, and her reaction to the Annunciation:

> This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
> God's Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she
> Dwelt young in Nazareth of Galilee.
> Unto God's will she brought devout respect,
> Profound simplicity of intellect,
> And supreme patience. From her mother's knee
> Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
> Strong in grave peace; in pity circumspect.

[64] For Mary, Rossetti also employed a model named Miss Love for her red hair.
Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Plate 2.
[65] Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1.
[66] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 24 (entry by Alison Smith).

> So held she through her girlhood; as it were
> An angel-watered lily, that near God
> Grows, and is quiet. Till one dawn, at home,
> She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
> At all,—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;
> Because the fulness of the time was come.[67]

The text of this poem establishes the growth of Mary from her girlhood into a woman ready to fulfill God's calling. The first eleven lines chart her virtuous education, cultivated by her mother's teachings and her personal piety. In the final lines, Rossetti describes her reaction being told she will bear the son of God, awed by the burden she must carry. The phrase "She woke in her white bed" reveals that Rossetti had begun to envision *Ecce* as early as November 1949 when he wrote this poem.[68] It seems Rossetti intended to create a cycle of paintings that followed the life of Mary, her journey from girlhood to Madonna, ending in her death. Returning to Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin*, the predella depicts a series of events in the life of the Virgin, much like Rossetti's painting, although the predella addresses the end of the life of the Virgin. Rossetti's endeavor to construct a life-long portrait of the Virgin in a series of paintings reflects the Marian cycles that were a mainstay of early Renaissance art (Figure 10). Rossetti planned various paintings of the Virgin, ranging from her girlhood to her death, which was never completed. He had a sweeping, revitalized vision of her life, and his manner of presenting it in a series of works recalls this Renaissance tradition. This is a subtle example of how deeply the Brotherhood's knowledge of medievalist works influenced their paintings. Presenting this trajectory only makes the life of the Virgin more poignant for the viewer.

…

[67] Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti, *The complete poetical works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (Nabu Press, 2010), 281.
[68] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 24 (entry by Alison Smith).

Truly, Rossetti creates the most striking deviation from the tradition of medieval and Renaissance panel painting in the psychological focus on Mary's disturbed reaction to the news that she will bear the son of God. Mary is the consuming element of the work for the viewer, due to her intense reaction and the visual detail Rossetti includes.[69] Rossetti emphasizes her innocence by giving Mary an adolescent body, swallowed in her robe. The care paid to the folds of the robe around her feet and neck holds the viewer's attention. Her awkwardly foreshortened forearm (drawing attention to Rossetti's inexperience as a draughtsman) braces her small frame. Her rigidly curled body is slightly protective, as though she wishes to shy away from the task asked of her. She appears almost sickly, with large sunken eyes. Only the slightest flush of her cheeks and pink lips add color to her pale skin. She unseeingly stares at the lily in Gabriel's hand, the object that represents her fate administered by God. Within that stare, the viewer can imagine that she realizes what that the lily will come to symbolize—the great task which she is called to do and her role in bringing the savior into the world. Yet, as Rossetti's poem suggests, she will accept her task and dutifully carry it out.

Rossetti recasts the scene of the Annunciation to consider the initial horror of learning not only that she must bear the great burden of bringing the son of God into the world but also the physical reality of impregnation by the Holy Spirit. Mary cowers in a protective manner, curling her legs and hunching her back. She leans against the wall to stabilize herself and shies away from Gabriel, supported by her slightly misshapen arm. Varied critical responses have commented upon the sexualized content of this scene. Alison Smith believes that the painting captures the moment of conception due to Gabriel pointing the stalk of lilies at the Virgin's womb and Mary's intense emotional reaction. To add to her point, a fold in Mary's robe over her

[69] Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 44; See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).

womb even continues the line of the lily stalk. Smith writes that Mary is "shown waking from a dream she can barely comprehend and drawing up her legs as if recoiling from a sexual advance."[70] To characterize this painting as akin to a sexual violation seems too extreme. Mary's unseeing gaze does not indicate physical fear of her body but, instead, realization of the magnitude of her task and its physical manifestation. She stares consumed by the lily in Gabriel's hand as though contemplating its symbolic representation of what she will become. As Smith points out, one of the buds on the stalk has not yet bloomed, indicating Mary's current immaturity and eventual actualization of her role.[71] Mary recoils in reaction to the knowledge of her pregnancy, and although Rossetti makes the Mary's virginity and holy impregnation prevalent in the painting, the work is not as hyper-sexualized as Smith suggests.

Both the awkwardness of the rendering of the bodies in this work coupled with the unsettling dynamic between the male and female figures create a complex commentary on gender and sexuality within this work. The bodies beneath the robes seem corporeal and insubstantial with only the arms and legs having weight. Also, the poses of the figures are unexaggerated and highly realistic. The asymmetry of the two gazes of the figures adds to the reality of the scene and removes attention from Gabriel, enabling the viewer to focus on the psychology of Mary. Being told that she will be forced to carry the son of God, Mary is utterly vulnerable. She can only resist by averting her gaze, but she physically has already been impregnated by the Holy Spirit. In contrast to the intensely felt presence of Mary, Gabriel is almost a nonentity in this work, his face obscured. With his back to the viewer, he functions almost as an observer, not an active agent in the scene. Gabriel is an absent-present male within the work. In fact, because Gabriel is so downplayed in this painting, the viewer may not initially

[70] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[71] Ibid.

the slit in his robe, exposing his skin, that runs up his body. Lisa Tickner argues that Gabriel appears as a masculine threat in this image, muscular and naked under his robe. This argument furthers the argument that the painting depicts a disturbing sexual violation.[72] But the figure of Gabriel does not look overtly masculine but effeminate, as he appears in the tradition of Annunciation paintings. He is representative of the male force that has miraculously impregnated her, but he is not a sexual threat in this image.

Mary's chastity rests at the crux of this narrative of divine conception, reinforced by her youthful body and the pervasive symbolic white. She is impregnated by the (male) power of God for the purpose of sanctified procreation, bearing his son. She responds dutifully to this male order to bear a child. Mary is a female figure defined by her virginity. The Victorian interest in the chaste woman makes her a model of behavior. The adolescent appearance of Mary in *Ecce* coincides with the archetypal Victorian conception of the desexualized angel of the house, a woman who remained in the home, had a "woman's touch" as she completed domestic tasks, was physically fragile, and in a constant state of self-sacrifice;[73] the painting asks women to remain in this state of perpetual innocence.

In this painting, Rossetti reinstates the Virgin as the ideal woman for the Victorian audience. Not only does this commentary stem from her virginity, but Rossetti also uses his series of paintings to construct a program of female education. In the *Girlhood of Mary the Virgin*, Mary learns embroidery from her mother, St. Anne, as a small angel looks on and Joachim trims vines in the background (Figure 8). St. Anne prepares Mary for womanhood and the imminent task which Gabriel will ask of her. Shared features connect it with *Ecce*: the dove of the Holy Spirit, the embroidery table with red fabric draped over it, and the growing lilies.

---

[72] Lisa Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (London : Tate, 2003), 15.

[73] Talia Schaffer, "A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 38 No. 1, (Spring, 2000): 50. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004291.

Rossetti's own words shed further light on what he hoped *The Girlhood* to communicate to his viewer. Of *The Girlhood*, Rossetti said "That picture of mine was a symbol of female excellence, the Virgin being taken as its highest type. It was not her *Childhood* but her *Girlhood*."[74] Here, Rossetti makes explicit his desire for Mary to be the model of femininity. Her education cultivated the virtuosity and moral character required for the trial asked of her. This idea is further enforced by the use of his family members for models. Rossetti's use of his mother and sister make Rossetti's argument highly personal; his mother skillfully raised Christina to an ideal of woman, herself. His implication is that with the proper upbringing and guidance, the Victorian woman can hold the same virtuous qualities as the Virgin Mary.

The final element that encapsulates Rossetti's model for the education of girlhood is the presence of Mary's embroidery. St. Anne teaches her the art of stitching in *The Girlhood*, and the very same embroidery, now completed, rests at the forefront of the image in *Ecce*. Mary's finished embroidery indicates that she has completed the preparation of her girlhood and may accept the task asked of her.[75] In the nineteenth century, interest in embroidery renewed, spawned by the study of medieval embroidery. It was seen as an innately feminine craft.[76] Images of iconic women embroidering, such as Queen Matilda, William the Conqueror's wife who was believed to have stitched the Bayeux Tapestry, ennobled the practice.[77] The image of Mary functions in the same manner, using an example of a monumental woman and depicting her sewing to glorify the feminine role. However, her image confirms domesticity, despite the great strength of the Virgin Mary. Within *The Girlhood*, gendered division of labor occurs, the

[74] A Companion to Victorian Poetry, Ciaran Cronin, 308.
[75] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 87 (entry by Alison Smith).
[76] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 17.
[77] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 17, 23.

man outdoors cutting vines with the women seated indoors sewing or reading.[78] Here, this painting confirms deeply entrenched Victorian ideals of womanhood.

Ecce Ancilla Domini! confirms these feminine roles prescribed to women in the nineteenth century, in which chastity and goodness are the ruling virtues. Inspired by the early Renaissance works that also uplifted Mary as an exemplar for women to follow, Rossetti provides the Virgin with the status of being the eternal model of femininity. Through education, a woman can aspire to Mary by participating in domestic crafts, remaining within the home, and responding dutifully to what male figures ask of her. The Virgin Mary is a woman of great strength, but her strength is confined to the traditional roles of womanhood. So much about Rossetti's image shocked a Victorian audience, and, frankly, his work still appears highly unusual today. Beneath this veneer of innovation are rigid gender roles that confirm the Victorian status-quo. Here occurs a slippage between the progressive aims of the Brotherhood and deeply entrenched patriarchal views about the place of women in society. Clearly, this constricting concept of womanhood is deeply seated because it is rooted in medievalist iconography. In the moment of the painting, Mary appears shocked by her impregnation. However, as seen in Rossetti's poem and the New Testament, she accepts her womanly duty.

[78] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 38.

Chapter 2: Feminine Pastime, Containment, and the Garden
Mariana by John Everett Millais

"…the needle alone supplied an unceasing source of amusement…"

C. H. Hartshorne, 1848[79]

In *Mariana*, John Everett Millais constructs a compelling study of a woman caught in the stillness of a placid moment in an interior rich with ornament (Figure 2). He began the work in London, and took it with him to Oxford in June of 1850, staying with Pre-Raphaelite patron Thomas Combe.[80] The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1851. For his subject, Millais chose a heroine from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure,* a play which examines courtship, marriage, and sexuality. The work does not follow typical Elizabethan categories, containing some comedic elements, yet it is infused with contemplation of darker human elements, like a tragedy. Classification of the play has long been debated among critics.[81] In addition to being well versed in the complex relationships in Shakespeare's play, Millais also utilizes a poem of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate under Queen Victoria who used medieval themes in his poetry. Tennyson's "Mariana", written in 1830, isolates her character in a moment that does not appear in Shakespeare's text but occurs off stage, as she waits to return to civilization, exiled to a moated grange by her lover.

Millais uses *Mariana* to comment upon the place of women within the home: how they occupy their time, their relationship to the outdoors, and the implications of their confinement upon their sexuality. In addressing these themes, the painting *Convent Thoughts* painted by

---

[79] Quoted in Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 24.
[80] Alastair Grieve, "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church," *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 111 No. 794 (May 1969): 295.
[81] Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, "Introduction" in *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare (Boston: Beford/St. Martin's, 2004), 1.

Charles Allston Collins will also be taken into consideration (Figure 14, The Ashmolean Museum, 1850-1). It was painted under the guidance of Millais while both were staying Oxford. Collins was not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but his painting certainly evokes Pre-Raphaelite medievalism in its iconography and themes.[82] Collins uses a medievalising lens to depict a female nun confined within a *hortus conclusus*, holding a Book of Hours. Within both works, we see how the imaginative interpretation of the Medieval helped both artists articulate Victorian ideas of gender. Similarly, both artists utilize religious and literary sources to explore the relationship between past and present.

In spite of the simplicity of subject in both images, Millais and Collins construct layered commentary about female chastity which transcends their individual works, allowing us to consider their separate programs together. The concept of the *hortus conclusus*, explored in both works, liberates the female mind at the cost of social confinement. The paintings remind the woman of male control over her sexuality by placing her in exile. Their paintings confirm the need to control female sexuality, examine the way chastity is shaped by a woman's surroundings, and advocate the assertion of male power to shape her environment. Consequently, the purpose of the *hortus conclusus* corresponds with the very core of Victorian ideals about women's place in society—residing indoors, performing some type of domestic task, and remaining eternally chaste.[83] The initial focus of this chapter will be a detailed examination of the subject-matter of Millais' *Mariana* and its medievalist sources before moving on to include discussion of its relation to *Convent Thoughts* and, finally, an in-depth discussion of gender.

…

[82] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 88 (entry by Alison Smith).
[83] This description follows the concept of the angel of the house, explored further later.

In *Mariana*, a woman rises from a velvet stool, arching her back and tilting her head in a stretch, as though she has been sitting for hours. She stands in a Gothic interior, natural sunlight filtered through stained-glass windows. This painting is startlingly different from *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* whose barren walls are here replaced with nature-inspired ornament rendered in acute detail. The monumentality of the moment of Rossetti's Annunciation contrasts with the quietude of Millais' scene. Yet, we again see an isolated female figure, in this case, lost in her thoughts—submerged in the psychology of the moment. Painstaking detail spans the painting, from the strands of Mariana's hair (like the Virgin's hair in Rossetti's *Ecce*) to the worn grain of the wooden floor.

Both Tennyson and Millais derive their subject from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, written in the early modern period but set in sixteenth-century Vienna. In the course of the play, Mariana's fiancé Angelo, temporarily deputizing for the Duke of Vienna, abandons her after the loss of her dowry in a shipwreck. Angelo orders that she must live in a "moated grange", as Shakespeare terms it, isolated from him for five years. The time away does not quell Mariana's love for Angelo, and she waits for him. The play takes a more sinister turn when Angelo asks Mariana's sister Isabella, who is about to enter a nunnery, to have sex with him in order to free her brother Claudio from captivity. Mariana takes Isabella's place in disguise. Ultimately, Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna, reveals the schemes that have been underway (he has been present in disguise as a friar). Mariana and Angelo agree to marry, and Isabella ambiguously assents to marry the Duke; her silence is taken as acceptance.

Both Tennyson and Millais isolate the scene of Mariana's exile. Shakespeare's primary line addressing her absence is spoken by the Duke in Act I Scene 3: "I will presently to Saint

Luke's: there, at the moated grange, resides this dejected Mariana."[84] Tennyson's poem expands on this by elaborating upon Shakespeare's setting, distinguishing through linguistic imagery. There, Mariana waits to be reunited with Angelo. Tennyson enumerates the rustic setting, how Mariana passes her days, and her despondency. Millais uses Shakespeare's text and Tennyson's poem to create an unseen moment, plausible within the framework of the original story. Evidence of his painting's literary influence seems like a source of pride for Millais. Millais quoted Tennyson's refrain in the Royal Academy 1851 Exhibition Catalogue: [85]

> She only said, 'My life is dreary-
> He cometh not!' she said;
> She said, 'I am aweary-
> I would that I were dead!'[86]

The Pre-Raphaelites held great esteem for authors, as demonstrated in their List of Immortals in which both Shakespeare and Tennyson appear along with other literary heroes (Figure 5). Millais' efforts reflect the length to which the Pre-Raphaelites would go to pay tribute to the authors who inspired their work.[87]

Mariana holds a subdued power in its simplicity that opens up Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* for in-depth contemplation of the psychology of a single character in a domestic setting. Unlike Rossetti's *Ecce*, Millais does not choose to portray a moment of action or an emotional scene between two characters. The force of this image lies in its subtlety and the stillness which, in its ambiguity, provides more room for interpretation than a more clearly-defined, dramatic scene of the play. Interestingly, the painting could, in fact, stand on its own as a study of a woman in a medievalising interior; only the title explicitly identifies its source.

---

[84] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *The Arden Shakespeare complete works* ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 3.1.262-4.
[85] See in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 35 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld).
[86] Quoted in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 35 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld).
[87] Shakespeare had wide-ranging influence in Victorian England, which is elaborated in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Because the work is so rich in mood and visual detail, *Mariana* does function independently of its source on several levels, but the background of *Measure for Measure* as well as Tennyson's poem enhances the subtlety of its content, creating a more complete and meaningful message.

Moving to Millais' portrayal of Mariana, she wears a luxurious velvet dress of a rich deep blue tone, with small ruffles of a lace collar at her neck. The high neckline and simplicity of her dress owes more to contemporary Victorian fashion than to the dress of the Middle Ages. Yet, a low-slung belt covered in jewels, highly evocative of medieval adornment, emphasizes her curving body. The size of her hips appears exaggerated, seeming to follow the Victorian taste for thin waists and the pronounced curve of the posterior caused by a bustle. Her hair is parted down the middle in a nineteenth-century style, with the back seeming slightly unkempt, suggesting long restless hours in her chamber (compare to Figure 15, discussed below). She rests her hands in the small of her back, drawing attention to the smallness of her waist. A ring appears on her left ring-finger, perhaps a remnant of the engagement that Angelo called off after the loss of her dowry.

Mariana's pose, her back arched in a moment of stretching is one familiar to any viewer, the pose one undertaken by many. Millais does not choose a dramatic, action-oriented pose but, instead, opts for one that is highly realistic with which the viewer can empathize. The pose is foreign to the academic tradition of painting. It is far from the idealizing *contrapposto* or typically graceful stances of beautiful women depicted in art since the Renaissance. *The Poor Teacher* by Richard Redgrave, a Royal Academy member who sympathized with the plight of destitute women, demonstrates the pose typical of this era when depicting a Victorian woman in a private moment (Figure 15, 1843). Even though the teacher is alone in her classroom, her upright posture and elegantly placed hands suggest a pervasive adherence to decorum, fitting in

with Victorian standards of how a woman should comport herself. Mariana's pose counteracts these requirements. Yet, that is not to say that Mariana's pose is a wholly realistic portrayal of a woman in the midst of a stretch. The shape of her body conforms to Victorian taste, suggesting some idealization that the natural pose masks. Her position is pleasing to the eye, emphasizing her womanly body as she pauses from her work, presumably thinking of her beloved.

It is her frankness with her body and denial of decorum that makes Mariana's pose a naturalistic expression of sexuality.[88] In stretching, the fabric is pulled tightly across her body, and the sheen of the velvet makes the viewer wish to touch the fabric. Her low-slung belt emphasizes her pelvis and bottom.[89] Also, the role of the viewer as a voyeur, encouraged to closely examine an unknowing woman, heightens the sexual tension of this painting. Mariana is unaware of the male gaze that takes pleasure in her body. Millais acknowledges female sexuality in this images, which is a large departure from the Victorian conventions of ascribing women with a child-like innocence.[90] Yet, Millais has so carefully constructed and contained her sexuality that his male presence in regulating this sexuality is still felt in the image.

Although there is undeniable beauty in her stance, the portrayal of Mariana's face is unidealized. The tilted three-quarter view of her face is uncommonly represented in art. An almost unflattering shadow appears below her jaw, casting her neck in shadow that does not quite follow the other patterns of light in the room. The viewer's gaze rests on her shadowed eyes, the bone of her brow, and protruding nose. The beauty present in her face comes from the fact that she seems like a real woman whose appearance has not been manipulated based on artistic principles. (Although Millais does idealize this image in various ways, he does so in a

---

[88] Quoted in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 35 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld).
[89] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 12.
[90] *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 35 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld). Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 12.

novel way to which Victorian audiences would not be accustomed.) Based on the image alone, her tranquil expression seems purely an expression of boredom with no further subtext to be read from the face alone. Considering the Shakespearean context, she may be thinking about her lover Angelo, but Millais does not make this evident from her vacant expression. Nevertheless, Mariana possesses an unmistakable beauty. Millais's meticulous rendering promotes the careful study of this woman. The stillness of the scene enables the eye to languish on her, taking in the beauty of the moment as she stretches.

Millais uses *Mariana*'s setting to construct an argument for natural ornamentation within an interior. Bright light emanates from the windows onto Mariana's workspace. Rectangular floral embroidery rests on the table, made up of vivid bright green and ochre foliage flecked with white, pale yellow, pale blue, bright red and red-violet flowers, altogether more evocative of one of William Morris' textiles than embroidery completed in the Middle Ages (Figure 16). These vibrant greens can also be found outside the window, in the tangled foliage and wall beyond, suggesting that Mariana gains inspiration from the natural world beyond her chamber. Further emphasizing the link between nature and Mariana's craft, actual fallen leaves, the same hue as the work, rest on the fabric, melding the natural with the manufactured.

Close examination of the embroidered cloth reveals that Millais provides evidence that Mariana stopped in the midst of her sewing. Barely discernible, a needle stands upright before Mariana, and blue thread, same in color as nearby flowers, trails off the side of the table (Figure 17). Similarly, a small pin is embedded on the corner of the table, where the thin draped white fabric meets the embroidery. The white fabric, whether a part of the embroidery (perhaps a lining) or a table cloth, gracefully cascades with masterful rendering of light and shade amid the folds and creases. Millais surely must have been familiar with embroidery practices in order to

attain such accuracy in his rendering. In Mariana's needlework, she is able to artistically reproduce the natural world she observes through her window. Only the shadow of the natural leaves separates the natural from the artificial embroidery (Figure 17). And despite Marina's suggested tedium within Tennyson's narrative, Millais shows the gloriously vibrant embroidery which results. Since Millais could only create a work as highly realistic as *Mariana* through his own detailed observation of the world, he symbolically bestows his own artistic doctrine upon Mariana.

Millais's image articulates a distinctly Victorian interest in his portrait of the medieval woman embroidering, as discussed in the previous chapter. Revival of medieval embroidery was accompanied by historically inaccurate emphasis on the essentially feminine quality of the craft, a claim more in keeping with contemporary conceptions of gender than with the historical fact.[91] In 1848, C. H. Hartshorne wrote the first book solely about medieval embroidery, *English Medieval Embroidery*, which helped solidify misconceptions about medieval divisions of labor, men toiling and women stitching. More significantly, he codified the circulating notion of the medieval noblewoman embroidering:[92]

> Shut up in her lofty chamber. With massive walls of a castle or immured in the restricted walls of a convent, the needle alone supplied an unceasing source of amusement; with this she might enliven her tedious hours, and depicting the heroic deeds of her absent lord, as it were visibly hastening his return; or on the other hand, softened by the influence of pious contemplation, she might use this pliant instrument to bring vividly before her mind the mysteries of that faith to which she clung.[93]

Fleshing out this popular image, Hartshorne constructs a highly romanticized portrait of the medieval woman filled with clichés of intense religious devotion, containment within thick stone walls, and longing for the absent male hero. The implied expectations for the Victorian woman

[91] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 17.
[92] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 23-24.
[93] Quoted in Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 24.

are unmistakable. As Parker characterizes them, "In a passage which is an amalgamation of fantasy and research, Hartshorne transforms the medieval noblewoman into a blueprint for the middle-class Victorian wife: pious, secluded, faithful and dutiful."[94] The image presents embroidery as a compensation for male absence and the only solace for a woman imprisoned indoors. The notable difference between Hartshorne's passage and Millais's painting is the fact that Mariana has put down her needle, from boredom, frustration, and desire for her missing beloved. The sexuality expressed within her stretched body can only be contained by the enclosed interior, the Gothic stone walls, and tamed by the practice of embroidery.[95] Yet the fact that she turns away from her embroidery shows that Millais acknowledges the toll of this role upon the woman. He acknowledges her isolation and longing to be elsewhere.

After the initial focus upon the woman and her workspace, the eye wanders aimlessly over the rich detail of the setting, the weathered planks enlivened by the play of light and shadow. Several leaves rest on the floor, and a mouse sits in the bottom right corner of the frame. The mouse is mentioned explicitly by Tennyson, along with the image of an aged building:

> All day within the dreamy house,
> The doors upon their hinges creak'd;
> The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
> Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd,
> Or from the crevice peered about.
> Old faces glimmer'd thro' the doors,
> Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
> Old voices called her from without.
> She only said, "My life is dreary,
> He cometh not," she said;
> She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead!"[96]

---

[94] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 24.
[95] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 25.
[96] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Mariana" in *Alfred Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*, ed. Aidan Day (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 9.

Millais uses several of the indications of disrepair explicitly from Tennyson's poem; in contrast, Shakespeare only alludes to the setting's age by terming Mariana's locale a "moated grange" which implies it is a medieval building. Moss grows on the thick stone walls outside the window, mentioned by Tennyson: "About a stone-cast from the wall / A sluice with blacken'd waters slept, / And o'er it many, round and small, / The cluster'd marish-mosses crept."[97] However, Millais' interior is not falling apart at the seams. Elizabeth Prettejohn has argued that the deteriorating room emphasizes the uncertainty of Mariana's fate as a woman in exile and dire threat of Victorian spinsterhood, but had Millais wished to construct a decrepit room, he could have done so much more emphatically.[98] Instead, he aims for a Gothic interior, aged but filled with lavish objects. Interestingly many of these objects, however, seem Victorian, blending with the medieval.

As is the case with many Pre-Raphaelite paintings, parallels can be drawn between *Mariana* and van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, recently put on view in the National Gallery (Figure 9). In both images, light streams in from a window on the left side of the painting, and a bed similar to the red Arnolfini bed sits at the back of *Mariana* in shadows to the right (Figure 18). However, on a stylistic level, both works demand much of the viewer.[99] The sharp clarity and rendering of minute detail require engrossed attention from the viewer. Also, both paintings are filled with specific, highly lavish objects that reward careful looking. For *Mariana*, close examination reveals additional medievalising objects. For instance, in the shadowed background of Millais' painting, a small triptych altarpiece, a small crucifix, silver vessels holding flowers, a hanging candle votive, and a partially-covered stained glass window appear; they suggest that

[97] Tennyson, "Mariana", 9.
[98] Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 9.
[99] Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 9. Prettejohn further explains the demands Mariana makes upon the viewer and their broad implications for the work of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Mariana has recently been praying. These objects have Catholic resonances, and would have seemed very archaic to a Victorian audience. They seem relatively authentic to the medieval. In contrast, the orange velvet stool Millais includes is distinctly Victorian. The motif on the wallpaper recalls the designs of Pugin and the precursors of the Arts and Crafts movement. The unique blend between past and present objects complicates this image and allows Millais to construct his own unique commentary. Elements of *Mariana*, like the stained glass window, have not yet been addressed, but before doing so we should turn to Collins' *Convent Thoughts* in order to discuss the larger implications of these two paintings.

…

In autumn of 1850 Millais and Collins stayed with the Combe family where they worked on *Mariana* and *Convent Thoughts*.[100] Collins was not a member of the PRB, but as a man who sympathized with the High Church, he shared the same interest in medieval traditions of the Church as the Brotherhood. [101] Thomas Combe was the printer to the University of Oxford from 1838 until 1872, and both he and his wife Martha Combe were patrons of Pre-Raphaelites. Thomas Combe encouraged religious revivalism within painting, in part, because Combe played an active role in Oxford Movement, which sought to infuse ritual traditions of Catholicism into the Anglican Church. Combe endowed the highly ritualistic church of St. Paul in Oxford, and he edited papers on the history and symbolism of church fonts. Millais, who lived with Combe on different occasions, called him "the Early Christian" due to his interest in the early church. In fact, a sermon Millais heard in Oxford inspired his controversial *Christ in the House of His Father* (Figure 17).

---

[100] Alestair Greive "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church," 295.

[101] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 88 (entry by Alison Smith). Grieve, "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church," 295.

Convent Thoughts depicts a nun standing in a high-walled enclosed garden (Figure 18). Meticulously rendered flowers and bushes surround her, notably the lily. Their detailed depiction reveals Millais' influence, anticipating *Ophelia* (Figure 3). A pond at her feet reflects her grey habit amid the lily pads. Loosely draped clothing falls to the ground, and a white veil rest on her head. The nun does not have the glowing youth of Mariana, with her pale skin just beginning to wrinkle on her face and hands. She bends her neck to examine a passion flower, emblematic of the crucifixion (Figure 20).[102] In the other hand, she holds an illuminated Book of Hours (Figure 21). The missal is believed to be based upon one from the late fifteenth-century in Sir John Soane's Museum.[103] The painting and frame mirrors the illuminated page of the Virgin Mary, a solitary woman surrounded by a decorative border of the frame.[104]

Like in Millais' *Mariana*, a solitary woman is contained in a narrowly cropped image, but her enclosure is a garden, not an interior. Both Collins' and Millais' painting considers the female subject within an environment of isolation. Mariana embroiders, allowing her to be contemplative and create something despite the tedium of her exile. The nun reads a holy book of prayer; in the garden she can contemplate her religious duty and the glory of God's natural world. It seems that the time in Oxford and ideas shared between Collins, Millais, and Combe helped these two artists construct similar thematic messages that draw upon the medievalism within traditions of the church, specifically, about female sexuality framed around the concept of *hortus conclusus* which the nun stands in and Mariana looks out to through the window.

Because it features in both works, it is worth considering the gendered resonances of the *hortus conclusus*. As Jacqueline Labbe articulates, the garden does confine a woman to solitude, hemming her in, but it also provides her the opportunity to liberate her mind by contemplating

---

[102] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 88 (entry by Alison Smith).
[103] Harrison and Newall, *The Pre-Raphaelites of Italy*, 16.
[104] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 88 (entry by Alison Smith).

the beauty of the cultivated garden. The freedom of mind is dependent upon isolation.[105] In Collins' image, the garden functions like a cloister; the beauty of the garden affirms her religious calling and the glory of God. For Mariana, the garden inspires her embroidery and gives her work to do as she contemplates both the garden she sees and the rich interior of the room.

The feminine is often linked to the natural (such as in the term Mother Nature). Giving birth represents the most intimate interaction with nature, which, of course, men can never know. Due to this threat, female sexuality is often paired with wild nature—uncontrolled, mysterious, and unknowable. The contained garden, however, modifies this wildness, providing women with a controlled environment where they can interact with nature without the danger of unleashing their sexuality. Within the Christian tradition, the garden is both the signifier of chastity and the place of original sin (caused by the temptation of a woman). As discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of an enclosed garden originates with the Virgin's *hortus conclusus* which symbolizes her untouched womb. The redemptive force of the Virgin within Christianity sanctifies the garden as the environment where women can be contemplative without being carried away by their inherently sexual nature.

Collins incorporates a holistic system of imagery reflecting on the Virgin Mary and female chastity. The nun in *Convent Thoughts* holds her book open to two pages in the illuminated manuscript. One is clearly the crucifixion, whereas the other is less clear. Smith argues that the second page depicts the Annunciation, fitting in with the program of lilies in the painting (Figure 21 b). However, the female figure is kneeled praying in the position of a donor image, and Gabriel is nowhere to be seen. However, so many other icons of the Virgin are present in this image, that the page of the female figure does not significantly alter the reading of

[105] Jacqueline Labbe. "Cultivating One's Understanding: the Garden and the Bower," *Romantic Visualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 66. See her chapter for a thorough examination of the role of the garden in female education and behavior within Romantic literature.

Convent Thoughts. Lilies grow prominently beside the nun, and Collins also includes them on the frame of the painting, adding layers of its symbolism through the piece. Furthermore, the Latin inscription at the top of the frame "Sicut lilium" is taken from the Song of Solomon: "As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters."[106] In this passage, Christ speaks about the church ("my love"). Collins' use of this quotation adds another dimension to the use of the lily in this work. The lily represents both the Virgin (and by extension the nun) and the church. Further blurring the distinction between the nun and the church, the high walls of *hortus conclusis* symbolize her virginity and the untouched Virgin.

An accompanying inscription included in the Royal Academy catalog was taken from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood / To undergo such maiden pilgrimage." These words are spoken by Theseus speaks Hermia after her father has brought her to him in Scene I Act 1:

> For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,
> To live a barren sister all your life,
> Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
> Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood
> To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;
> But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd
> Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn
> Grows, lives, and dies, in single blessedness.[107]

In short, Hermia refuses to marry her betrothed because she loves another. Theseus orders her to obey her father's wishes or be sent to a nunnery; he speaks of the virtue of this "maiden pilgrimage." With so many references to virginity, Collins leaves no question as to female chastity and piety, as modeled by the Virgin Mary, being the subject of his painting.

---

[106] See *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 88 (entry by Alison Smith). Solomon 2.2.

[107] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.171-8.

Mariana also includes Marian imagery within the stained glass window. Millais painted the stained glass from observation in Oxford, at the Merton College Chapel which dates back to the thirteenth century.[108] All windows contain the distinctive gothic pointed arch. In the two left panes, Gabriel and Mary are depicted in the Annunciation, against a red, blue and white checkered background. To the right, the window contains some thin decorative iron work in the transparent portion of the window and the crest of a knight's helmet with an arm raised holing a lance. A scroll containing the text "In coelo quies", or "In heaven there is rest", appears behind the raised arm, discussed further later. A gold colored shield contains the image of a snow drop. The presence of the Annunciation scene before Mariana emphasizes the already present sexual undertones of *Measure for Measure*. Virginity and consummation play a troubling role within the play, which the stained glass highlights. (In fact, *Convent Thoughts* could be seen to depict the life of Mariana's sister Isabella, had she not married the Duke at the end of the play and gone to the nunnery.) The virginity of Mary coupled with Mariana's longing emphasizes her distance from her lover, and his imposed regulation of her sexuality.[109]

Despite the many similarities between *Convent Thoughts* and *Mariana*, the way they employ medievalism to construct gendered commentary differs greatly. Herbert Sussman articulates this difference in the duality he identifies within the Gothic revival. The Gothic took on a highly religious fervor in the nineteenth century, thanks largely to Augustus Pugin and John Ruskin. The "mood of the cloister", a term coined by Walter Pater, a contemporary nineteenth-century writer, was the pervading mode of medievalism, emphasizing labor, divine connection to

[108] Alestair, "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church," 295. In addition, the view outdoors may have been painted from inside the Combe home, and triptych altar also probably came from their home.
[109] Barringer *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 44.

God, and psychological order.[110] The previous Romantic notion of the Gothic, however, was rooted largely in the "non-rational, the non-civilized, and the mysterious."[111] As is often the case with dualities, they are not mutually exclusive and both coexist within the work of Millais and Collins. *Convent Thoughts* utilizes a sacramental medievalism, emphasizing piety and female virginity. (Sussman identifies sexualized medievalism within *Convent Thoughts*, but I disagree with his reading. He reads the flower in the nun's hand as symbolic of her sexual longing, but this interpretation does not fit with the deeply pious program Collins utilizes throughout the image.)[112] *Mariana* taps into the Romantic emphasis on female longing, the mystery of female sexuality, confined within a Gothic interior. In her solitude, she can contemplate her embroidery or the outside world beyond the window, but her isolation influences her psychology. In isolation she is driven to a heightened sense of longing. As Sussman characterizes the mental state that often accompanies Romantic isolation in the Gothic cloister, "the mind in extreme states that move beyond the edge of rationality."[113] Millais hints that Mariana may be going mad from the tedium of her existence in the motto on the stained-glass window which translates to "In heaven there is rest." She cannot exist in confinement indefinitely and may long for death to escape if she cannot be reunited with Angelo. Also, his engraving for the Moxon *Tennyson's Collected Poems* reveals a more romantic image in which Mariana hunches over in tears and the walls of the room seem to close in on her (Figure 21, 1857). Mariana has not moved into the realm of madness, but the emphasis on her sexuality in both this painting and *Measure for Measure* suggests that her sexual longing is beyond the bounds of what was considered permissible for a woman in the Victorian era.

---

[110] Herbert Sussman, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the Mood of the Cloister," *Browning Institute Studies*, Vol. 8 (1980): 45, 47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057684.
[111] Sussman, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the Mood of the Cloister," 45
[112] Sussman, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the Mood of the Cloister," 49.
[113] Sussman, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the Mood of the Cloister," 47.

Another element of both of these paintings is the pleasure a male derives in seeing a woman in an enclosed space (claustrophilia), which seems especially relevant to two images painted by men that promote close scrutiny of these isolated female figures.[114] Whether in the Gothic chamber or the enclosed garden, these environments confine women's sexuality and mobility. In Mariana's case, she is placed within the moated grange by a man. For the nun, nuns are often spoken about as brides of Christ. In both cases, an absent male figure holds power over their sexualities, whether by the choice of the women or not. The highly romanticized settings of these paintings heightens the pleasure gained in seeing these confined women. Both the interior and the garden teem with visual detail that heightens their beauty.

Particularly in the interior, natural motifs occur throughout. Millais constructs a sort of artificial *hortus conclusus* within the Gothic interior through decorative reproduction of the natural world. Jason Rosenfeld describes the natural ornament that pervades the room as a sort of confinement in which "nature is controlled and rendered artificial."[115] But I see this room as a manifesto on the need for natural ornamentation within interiors in order to cultivate enriching environments that nourish the soul, predating the coming Arts and Crafts Movement which would argue the same. Millais unquestionably valued the ability of artistic reproduction to recreate the natural world, creating an image of beauty as demonstrated in his *Ophelia*. It is not the interior that harms Mariana but the expectation of chastity and her own lack of agency in being able to act on it. Because Victoain women too had limited control over their own lives and often had to defer to men, Millais acknowledges that these gendered standards can be quite damaging, but he presents no alternative. He romanticizes the woman in her captivity, allowing his viewer to also gain pleasure from it.

---

[114] Sussman"The Pre-Raphaelites and the Mood of the Cloister," 48.
[115] Quoted in *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 35 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld).

The two images of women in these paintings are highly familiar tropes, a nun in the cloister and a medieval woman embroidering. However, these artists transcend the cliché by infusing their work with complex symbolism and gendered commentary (Millais more so than Collins). However, the fact that both artist chose to depict such narrow views of women reveals the prevalent of the idea of chastity and limited mobility within Victorian England. These paintings confirm the long-standing tradition of patriarchal control, which fed into the gendered norm of the time. The image of the angel of the house, a woman who performs domestic crafts, remains indoors, and upholds girlish innocence throughout womanhood corresponds to the many facets that accompany *hortus conclusus* Millais suggests that female sexuality deos in fact stem beyond the confined female role of the nineteenth-century, but, like the passive Mariana, he does not take it to fruition in his image.

Chapter 3: Transgression of the Madwoman
***Ophelia* by John Everett Millais**

Every Pre-Raphaelite landscape background is painted to the last touch, in the open air, from the thing itself. Every Pre-Raphaelite figure, however studied in expression, is a true portrait of a living person.

John Ruskin, 1853[116]

Millais painted *Ophelia* in 1851-2, creating the background from observation of the bank of the Hogsmill River in Surrey, from July 1851 to October 1851. He painted his model, Elizabeth Siddal, in December of 1851 in his London studio, and the work was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1852.[117] In the image, Ophelia lies drifting in a stream, surrounded by tangles of vegetation. Vibrant flowers cascade over her dress with lacey silver embroidery. Surrounded by verdant foliage, she opens her mouth in song as life begins to leave her already rigid body. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, she is driven to madness after rejection by Hamlet and the murder of her father. While picking wild flowers, the branch of the willow she sits upon snaps, and she plunges to her death. In depicting the death of Ophelia, which like *Mariana*, occurs off-stage, Millais worked to reinvigorate the image of the heroine who was widely painted in the nineteenth century.[118] Millais charges his work with emotional intensity by depicting a real woman, observed from life, floating in the water. This complex image challenges many of the Victorian perspectives on Shakespeare and academic painting. Millais' meticulous inclusion of natural detail orients his work as a meditation on transience in death. Yet, *Ophelia* enforces many Victorian ideals of womanhood and madness disturbing to a modern audience. Despite the

[116] See Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 69 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld).
[117] Ibid.
[118] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death," 43.

undeniable beauty of *Ophelia* and the striking wealth of natural detail, the work still connotes a portentous warning to young women who deviate from traditional ideals of womanhood.

Critics[119] often frame Millais' *Ophelia* as a departure from academic conventions of painting: Millais paints from close observation of nature; he gives all elements of his work equal weight instead of highlighting the central figure; and he creates an intense psychological portrait rooted in realism. Despite the array of innovative elements within Millais' *Ophelia*, his Shakespearean subject-matter was quite common for the nineteenth century. This chapter highlights the painting's Shakespearean influences and his nineteenth-century reception, an approach not as present in the existing Pre-Raphaelite literature. Victorians helped cement Shakespeare's reputation as a literary genius, very much like the admiration he is given today.[120] As Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1841: "Shakespeare is the chief of all Poets hitherto; the greatest intellect who, in our recorded world, has left record of himself in the way to literature."[121] His genius was widely accepted—no longer the subject of debate.[122] From the inception of the Royal Academy in 1768, the estimates of the number of paintings exhibited annually with Shakespearean themes ranges from about five to ten. That number doubled in 1830. In the 1840s and 1850s, twenty paintings appeared each year, on average. Shakespeare continued to play a large role in nineteenth-century art until the invading force of French realism at the end of the century.[123] In addition to garnering great attention from scholars and artists, Shakespeare seeped into Victorian daily life. Many considered his works as helpful insights into human nature.[124]

---

[119] Such as Jason Rosenfeld and Elizabeth Prettejohn.
[120] Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history, from the Restoration to the present* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 167.
[121] Thomas Carlyle, "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History", Volume 5 of *The Works of Thomas Carlyle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103.
[122] Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history, from the Restoration to the present*, 167.
[123] John Christian. "Shakespeare in Victorian Art", *Shakespeare in Art* by Jane Martineau, et al. (New York: Merell, 2003), 217, 221.
[124] Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history, from the Restoration to the present*, 168-9.

Also, Shakespeare played in elemental role in medieval revivalism. The inspired stories of anguish, loyalty, love, and loss seemed to belong to a distant past, much more meaningful than the materialism of the nineteenth century.[125]

The Pre-Raphaelites often included Shakespeare's plays in their subject-matter. All of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers painted multiple episodes from Shakespeare. Many of their contemporaries' images of Shakespearean subjects waned on the side of absurdity, depicting the mystical plays of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with fervent imagination. One such example is Sir Joseph Nöel Paton's *The Quarrel and Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* (1847) which teems with fanciful images of minute fairies and other mystical creatures, frolicking among the sleeping humans (Figure 22). Critics deemed Paton "fairy mad", but Queen Victorian favored his work, making him her Limner for Scotland.[126] The Pre-Raphaelites reacted against this very triviality afforded to Shakespeare's works. They looked for subjects rich in morality with emotional intensity and held Shakespeare in high esteem for the depth of his plays.[127]

In exploring Millais' *Ophelia*, articulating not only what Millais intended to achieve but also what he was reacting against will draw out the underlying tensions within this work. The figure of Ophelia in particular was widely popular in nineteenth-century painting. In fact, two images of Ophelia were present in the 1852 Royal Academy Exhibition—Millais's and Arthur Hugh's *Ophelia* (Figure 23). Hughes presents a pale, girlish Ophelia seated on the trunk of a willow tree, sprinkling flowers into the water. Ophelia was typically depicted sitting on a willow branch in Victorian art, not submerged as in Millais' painting, the artists relying on the audience's knowledge of her imminent death. Hugh's scene appears as a fantasy, with a

[125] Gail Marshall, *Shakespeare and Victorian Women* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2.
[126] Christian. "Shakespeare in Victorian Art," 220.
[127] Ibid.

generalized natural setting and a fairy-like Ophelia. Also, the pale girl perched above the stream contrasts with Millais' imagining of a womanly Ophelia. Opposition between these two imaginings of Ophelia represents larger contradictions that Victorian audiences found within the character.[128] The small girl appears to be a victim in the narrative, not a woman driven into madness by her own sexuality, as in Millais' work.

It is important to note Millais' commitment to the text of *Hamlet* and Ophelia's place within the text. Within the play, Ophelia loves Hamlet, but her brother Laertes and father Polonius warn against marrying him, due to his inability to marry whomever he desires and questioning the sincerity of his love. After mistaking Hamlet's madness (caused by his belief that Claudius, his mother and queen's new husband, murdered his father the King) for love of Ophelia, Polonius and Claudius eavesdrop on a conversation between Ophelia and Hamlet. In it, Hamlet denies loving Ophelia and repeatedly urges her "Get thee to a nunnery."[129] Witnessing his harsh, unbalanced words that confirm his madness, Ophelia despairs at the ruined mind she once loved. Hamlet kills Polonius's father, and Ophelia later appears, having also gone mad due to grief as the other characters surmise. Not long afterward, Ophelia drowns off stage. The audience learns of her death from Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. It is from this passage which Millais paints, appearing in in Act IV, Scene 7. Gertrude relays the death of Ophelia:

> There is a willow grows askant in a brook
> That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
> There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang an envious silver broke,
> When down her weedy trophies and herself

[128] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death,'" 45.
[129] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *The Arden Shakespeare complete works* edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 324. 3.1.120.

> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
> And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
> Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and indued
> Unto that element. But long it could not be
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death.[130]

The gravediggers who prepare Ophelia's grave contend that she committed suicide, meaning she should not receive proper burial. When a cleric suggests suicide, Laertes expresses outrage and jumps into her grave. Hamlet joins him, each contending that he loved Ophelia the most. An emotional burial for all, Gertrude sprinkles flowers on her grave. Ophelia is not mentioned again in the play.

Millais painted numerous works addressing Shakespearean themes, attesting to his esteem for Shakespeare. Millais' choice of scene suggests an intimate knowledge of *Hamlet*. As in his painting *Mariana*, Millais picks up where Shakespeare left off, elaborating an underdeveloped moment in the play, unseen by the audience, yet filled with deep psychological anguish. Also, close point-by-point comparison of Gertrude's monologue with Millais' painting demonstrates his fidelity to Shakespeare's text, down to the very flowers (Figure 24). Millais paints the "crow-flowers" (Figure 24a), "nettles" (Figure 24b), "daisies" (Figure 24c), and "long purples" (Figure 24d) all mentioned by Queen Gertrude, among other plants mentioned by Shakespeare in the text.[131] Even the willow appears (Figure 24e). Millais quoted a portion of Gertrude's speech in *Ophelia's* 1852 Royal Academy Catalogue entry (Act 4, Scene 7, Lines 173-183).[132] As in *Mariana*, inclusion of the passage in the catalogue highlights Millais'

---

[130] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 310. 4.7.166-183.
[131] *Tate, "Millais's Ophelia," Tate, accessed February 10, 2013.*
[132] See Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 69 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld).

commitment to the text of Shakespeare and emphasizes the link between literature and the visual arts which the Pre-Raphaelites so celebrated.

In addition to fidelity to the text of Shakespeare, Millais presents a startlingly life-like rendition of Ophelia and the nature teeming around her watery grave. Such meticulous rendering warrants an equally meticulous description. Ophelia floats submerged in water, her bent arms placed at her side, hands outstretched above the water's surface (Figure 3). Both her white dress and hair billow under the water. The paleness of her skin suggests that she will soon die. Hazel eyes are half closed, her countenance contains a suppressed energy, mouth open as though she inhales a final breath (Figure 25a); yet, her passive body floating in the stream gives no sign that she clings to life. The withering cascades of lace-like embroidery on her dress, made limp with water, shimmer as though embellished; however, the shimmering is extinguished once the dress is submerged underwater, paralleling Ophelia's own death (Figure 25b). Multicolored flowers surround her body: red poppies, yellow dandelions, purple irises, white daisies and pink roses. A wreath of violets loop around her neck, and a pink bloom on its stem rests in her hair (Figure 25a). Perhaps previously clutched in her hand or draped around her head in a crown, the flowers now float from her body, paralleling of her own life slipping away. The beauty of her glittering gown, of the blooming rose floating in the water, and, above all, her own existence is transient.

The verdurous foliage surrounding Ophelia only emphasizes her own temporality. Flourishing plants make up the majority of the image. In the foreground, cattails emerge from the water. Reeds and roots wrap around them, just under the surface of the water. Smaller leaved plants emerge from the bottom of the picture plane, sporting small budding white flowers (Figure 25c). Floating green duckweed runs parallel to Ophelia, small white flowers with yellow centers emerging.

In the background of the painting, the tangles of brush make many of the plants indistinguishable from each other. Nevertheless, Millais uses particularized detail, depicting each individual leaf and twig from careful observation. In the upper-left corner of the painting, a red-breasted robin perches on branch. His beak is open, paralleling Ophelia who sings her final song as she floats in the stream. He will continue her song, after her death. Around the bird, the roots of the upturned willow tree protrude and intermingle with the surrounding foliage. Amid these plants, a tangle of brush and cobwebs sit (Figure 25d). Moving right, the trunk of the tree is covered in textured bark. A bush harboring bright white flowers with yellow centers helps conceals the receding trunk. Placed just above the skirt of Ophelia's dress, skimming the water, the white flowers also anchor the viewer's attention toward the figure. On the upper right of the image, purple loosestrife flowers extend upward and small blue forget-me-nots grow on the bank (Figure 25e). Just below in the water, another clump of duckweed grows, assorted colored flowers suspended in it.

Although the plant life does not extend over Ophelia, it functions as a canopy, framing the scene. The rounded upper corners of the painting and cropping of the image further emphasize this contained effect, which is almost coffin-like. The teeming abundance of nature only calls into contrast Ophelia's impending death. Ophelia is surrounded by the vibrancy of a living world of which she will no longer be a part. The verdant green that dominates the majority of the painting contrasts with the dark water in which she floats and the paleness of her skin. The work is bathed in an all-over light; the only shadows appear in the brush and in the submerged water. The proximity of Ophelia to the natural evokes the cyclical nature of decay and growth.

Tied to the astonishing display of natural detail within *Ophelia* are the conditions and techniques Millais used to create the work, which profoundly speak to the Pre-Raphaelite

mission. Also, the majority of modern acclaim of this painting revolves around its truth to nature, so it shall be briefly addressed here. Millais painted the background of *Ophelia* outdoors in Ewell, Surrey beginning in June. There he worked alongside follow Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt who was painting the background for *The Good Hireling Shepherd* (Figure 26).[133] They painted for eleven hours a day, Monday through Saturday, from June 1851 to mid-October 1851.[134] Stories of Millais' struggle with the natural have been greatly romanticized within the legacy of the Pre-Raphaelites but are rooted in his letter to Mrs. Martha Combe, wife of Thomas Combe mentioned in the previous chapter, in a letter from July 2, 1851:

> My martyrdom is more trying than any I have hitherto experienced. The flies of Surrey are more muscular, and have a still greater propensity for probing human flesh… I sit tailor-fashion under an umbrella throwing a shadow scarcely larger than a halfpenny for eleven hours, with a child's mug within reach to satisfy my thirst from the running stream beside me… [I] am also in danger of being blown by the wind into the water, and becoming intimate with the feelings of Ophelia when that lady sank to muddy death, together with the (less likely) total disappearance, through the voracity of the flies. There are two swans who not a little add to my misery by persisting in watching me from the exact spot I wish to paint…Certainly the painting of a picture under such circumstances would be a greater punishment to a murderer than hanging.[135]

Millais' dramatic retelling of his hardships, regardless of its hyperbole, indicates the importance of working from nature for the Pre-Raphaelites. And these myths do more than simply support the Pre-Raphaelites' claims to observe from nature; they demonstrate that the painters were thoroughly engaged with nature, physiologically experiencing it. Their paintings, therefore, become material expressions of this intimate encounter.[136] Through his close observation, Millais painted vegetation recognizably from Surrey, not native to Denmark where *Hamlet* occurs.[137] In

---

[133] The differing use of a setting taken from nature between the two works of Millais and Hunt could be a subject for further inquiry.
[134] *Tate*, *"Millais's Ophelia."*
[135] John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (New York: Frederic E. Stokes Company, 1899), 119. (July 2, 1851.)
[136] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 172.
[137] Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 64.

this departure from Shakespeare's narrative, Millais differs from Rossetti's more archaeological approach to depicting the setting of the Annunciation in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*.

Millais returned to London in December with a completed background (with several other works underway between October and September), leaving a section unpainted for the figure of Ophelia to be completed in the studio. Elizabeth Siddal, the daughter of a cutlery-maker, and an artist in her own right, posed for Millais in a bathtub in his Gower Street studio, in order to accurately depict Ophelia's drowning.[138] Millais' insistence on painting *Ophelia* from observation highlights the Pre-Raphaelite adherence to detailed rendering of objects.

Millais' choice to first paint his background and to then proceed to the central figure marks an inversion of Victorian techniques of painting. Typical practice of the time was to paint the primary figure and then add the less important background images. Also, an account from Hunt further informs us of the ways Millais subverted established techniques. Hunt describes looking at Millais' canvas as he painted the background vegetation of *Ophelia*, "The effect of his first square of work on his canvas was enchanting," suggesting that he worked in sections instead of working broadly across the canvas. This also opposed the academic tradition of placing the whole of a work above the detail of its individual parts.[139] Although Sir Joshua Reynolds, founder of the Royal Academy, acknowledged the usefulness of detail, he moderated its use by stating, "if there be any thing in Art which requires particular nicety of discernment, it is the disposition of these minute circumstantial parts."[140] Millais fills every inch of his canvas with the same sharp detail, emphasizing no element more than another. In creating this work, Millais

---

[138] John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais,* 144. See Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 69 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld). A model and muse shared by the Pre-Raphaelites, Siddal married Rossetti after ten years of tempestuous engagement, due to Rossetti's infidelity. Siddal painted and wrote poetry. She famously came down with illness after extended posing in the bathtub for *Ophelia*, and her father asked Millais to foot the bill..

[139] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 156.

[140] Quoted in Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 172.

practiced the Pre-Raphaelites focus upon particularizing individual elements and giving each area of a painting equal attention.[141]

Most astonishing about Millais' portrayal of the verdant growth surrounding the stream is not simply the overwhelming amount of brush nor the sullied waters in which Ophelia floats. Millais portrays a highly specific undergrowth—each stalk of a reed, each floating flower depicted through careful observation.[142] The plants of Pre-Raphaelite paintings are not examples or types but individual specimens found in nature.[143] Jason Rosenfeld compares Ophelia to "diorama in a museum display," following the nineteenth-century interest in natural history.[144] The Pre-Raphaelite desire to depict the truth of nature recalls John Ruskin's famous passage at the end of the first volume of *Modern Painters*: "They should go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember in her instruction, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing."[145] He later repeated this mantra in an 1851 pamphlet on Pre-Raphaelitism. Within this framework, the artist must rely on the beauty of nature and not alter it in his depiction. An examination of *Ophelia* (1842) by Richard Redgrave demonstrates how thoroughly Ruskin's mantra contradicted Academy-sanctioned techniques.[146] In the work, Ophelia sits on a thick willow branch above the stream (Figure 27). Although Redgrave renders the bough and plants upon it with detail and small brushstrokes, the nature of the painting has clearly been manipulated for the scene in order to best fit the pictorial space. And unlike Millais' work, the

---

[141] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 156.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 171-2.
[144] See Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde, exh. cat. (London: Tate: 2012), cat. 69 (entry by Jason Rosenfeld). Rosenfeld explains that natural history provided recreational pastimes to Victorians. "Naturalists, terraria and aquarium owners, fern collectors and amateur botanists on local societies that were a hallmark of accessible science in the period" (69).
[145] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 423.
[146] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death," 48.

foliage in the far background blurs into a generalized canopy. Instead of "selecting nothing, scorning nothing," Redgrave follows the advice stipulated by Joshua Reynolds: using detail sparingly and appropriately.

Millais's image is not, however, wholly realistic. One lapse in Millais' realistic image is the presence of certain flowers. Millais painted some of them after leaving Surrey, bought from Covent Garden.[147] Victorian critics noticed that not all of the flowers bloomed together in the same season. (Alfred, Lord Tennyson particularly disliked the presence of daffodils.)[148] Although this discrepancy in the flowers may seem to contradict the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to realism, the Brotherhood upheld a very particular variation on realism. As Elizabeth Prettejohn articulates, they wished for each individual element to hold its own reality, not the holistic reality of a scene. Compromising that essential truth of an object in any way had to be avoided.[149] This desire to find the truth of objects, not adhere to a holistic truth, parallels the Pre-Raphaelite's brand of medievalism. They did not seek to create paintings purely based on accurate depiction of the past, but attempted, instead, to use the truth of medieval objects and themes in order to serve a broader purpose, whether promoting sympathy in the viewer or communicating a moral message.

In the case of the vibrant flowers littering the image, Millais uses them to construct a symbolic commentary on his work. The flowers traditionally appear in Ophelia's narrative, the vestiges of the garlands she was constructing moments before drowning. They undeniably represent a loss of innocence. And the contrast between silver floral embroidery and the living flowers blur the line between the living and that which is dead. But, for a Victorian audience, each flower contains a particular meaning through symbolism. The flower symbolism of

[147] *Tate, "Millais's Ophelia."*
[148] *Tate, "Millais's Ophelia."*
[149] Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 172.

Shakespeare was still well-known by Victorians. The crow flowers represent ingratitude or childishness (Figure 24a); the weeping willow symbolizes forsaken love (Figure 24b); the nettles represent pain (Figure 24c); daisies symbolize innocence (Figure 24d). A pink rose appears on Ophelia's dress and in her hair, carrying a variety of associations: youth, beauty, and love.[150] The violets looped around her neck are mentioned in the play, symbolizing both chastity and a youthful death. Ophelia states in Act IV Scene V "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say he made a good end."[151] Other flowers added by Millais carry additional meaning. The poppy symbolizes sleep and death. The forget-me-not represents remembrance. And the fritillary in the lower right corner symbolizes sorrow.[152] Millais subverts the realism of only including flowers which would bloom together in order to add another layer of symbolic meaning to his work, which would have been readily understood by its audience.

…

Apart from the title, flower symbolism, and plant life referencing Shakespeare, what is medieval about this painting? The dress Ophelia wears is the only other opportunity to mark the period. Millais recounts buying the dress in a letter, again, to Mrs. Combe:

> "To-day I have purchased a really splendid lady's ancient dress—all flowered over in silver embroidery—and I am going to paint it for 'Ophelia.' You may imagine it is something rather good when I tell you it cost me, old and dirty as it is, four pounds."[153]

Millais notably christens his dress as "ancient", not distinctly medieval but in a more general sense evocative of the past. Its all-over embroidery, three-quarter sleeves, and close cropping at

[150] *Tate, "Millais's Ophelia."*
[151] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.5.181-3.
[152] Barringer *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 64.
[153] John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais,* 152. Millais must have thought very highly of the dress, paying the modern equivalent of 250 pounds for it. *Tate, "Millais's Ophelia."*

the neck allow it to appeal to the Victorian sense of fashion. Like his dress for *Mariana*, it is not authentically medieval. As noted in the previous chapter, Millais's brand of medievalism follows a similar philosophy of evoking the tone of a period with less concern as to the consistency of objects within the image. In this painting, the dress is the only "medieval" object of the work. It is the sole artifact that places his Ophelia in the distant past of medieval Denmark, yet does not even do so effectively. Primarily the title gives the work its context. Why does Millais construct such a thin veneer of historical setting? It seems that Millais wishes to bring Ophelia out from the past, into his contemporary world. He promotes identification with her. With the faintly Victorian dress coupled with the vegetation not native to Denmark but to Surrey, Millais asks the audience to contemplate the death of Ophelia, not as a legendary figure but as a contemporary. His practice is like paintings of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance that placed biblical scenes in contemporary clothing and setting. Millais similarly brings Ophelia's plight into the present. Doing so both reinvigorates the emotionality of the scene and highlights the timelessness of female madness.

Returning to the significance of Shakespeare for the Victorian audience, the place of Shakespeare's heroines and Ophelia's standing among them may clarify both what Millais opposes in his image and what he perpetuates. The idea of the Victorian female identifying with the Shakespeare's heroines was not new. Women were encouraged to read Shakespeare in order to model themselves after his heroines. Kathleen Knox, wrote an essay "On the Study of Shakespeare for Girls" in 1895 in which she stated that in this period of women gaining greater independence, they should look to the great heroines of Shakespeare for guidance:[154]

> "in this age of feminine eagerness and prominence, when everything in life, literature and science is being attempted by women, and often—as must infallibly be the case at the beginning of every great movement—with woeful lack of judgment, it will be well to

[154] Marshall, *Shakespeare and Victorian Women*, 1-2.

> have such a standard of sanity, moderation, and harmony as is presented us by Shakespeare's world, where the men, even, fail when they are immoderate, violent, or unbalanced in character or aim."[155]

Her essential argument is that as women move forward, they should look to Shakespeare for a guide for decorum and morality. For this purpose, Knox wishes every woman to read Shakespeare's greatest works.[156] She identifies a moral fortitude in the heroines, not carried on by the men.

John Ruskin articulated a similar feeling. In his essay "Lilies of Queen's Gardens", based on a lecture given in 1868 in Manchester. He makes the generalized claim: "Note broadly in the outset, Shakespeare has no heroes;—he has only heroines"[157]. The book-length publication of the two lectures, *Sesame and Lilies*, was Ruskin's most popular book in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; it was a bestseller in England, a fixture of in the middle-class home, and often given to young girls as gifts.[158] It provided moral instruction for the realms of private life: the relationship between men and women, the role of art and literature in the home, and combatting the materialism which so many Victorians saw as the plague of their age.[159] In it, Ruskin emphatically praises Shakespearean women: "The catastrophe of every play is caused always by the folly or fault of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a woman, and, failing that, there is none."[160] Similarly, a Victorian genre of publications focused on the female characters of Shakespeare; books included an illustration of his various heroines and accompanying passages from the plays, placing Shakespeare's women as models of

---

[155] Quoted in Marshall, *Shakespeare and Victorian Women*, 2.
[156] Marshall, *Shakespeare and Victorian Women,* 2.
[157] John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 70.
[158] Deborah Epstein Nord, Introduction, *Sesame and Lilies* by John Ruskin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xvi.
[159] Deborah Epstein Nord, Introduction, *Sesame and Lilies* by John Ruskin, xiv.
[160] John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 71.

behavior (Figure 28). The books were often highly trivializing, and William Holman Hunt, himself, disparaged them.[161] Undoubtedly, they were a part of what Millais reacted against.

But where does Ophelia stand within the general Victorian praise of Shakespeare's women? For the answer, we return to Ruskin's *Sesame and Liles*. He notably omits Ophelia from his list of great heroines. He later addresses her character: "Observe, further, among all the principal figures in Shakespeare's plays, there is only one weak woman—Ophelia; and it is because she fails Hamlet at the critical moment, and is not, and cannot in her nature be, a guide to him when he needs her most, that all the bitter catastrophe follows."[162] Ruskin identifies her major flaw as her inability to support her male counterpart, Hamlet. This passage articulates the expectation that a Victorian woman, as an angel of the house, cultivate a supportive, nurturing environment for her husband. A collection of essays so widely read by the Victorian public must have cemented these negative feelings toward Ophelia.

In order to further pinpoint Victorian feeling about Ophelia, we must next consider Victorian attitudes toward insanity. The Romantics adopted the image of the madwoman as a cult symbol, often her insanity heightened by her beautiful appearance. The insanity of the madwoman confirmed ideas of female irrationality (in contrast to male reason) that was often seen as originating from an inscrutable and untamed sexuality. Ophelia rests at the center of the Victorian conception of madwomen.[163] Initially within the play, Ophelia maintains traditional female roles. The daughter of Polonius and sister to Laertes, she is governed by male familial authority and always looking to them for approval. She is also the rejected lover of Hamlet. These gendered roles, however, degenerate into the trope of the madwoman which culminates in

[161] Christian. "Shakespeare in Victorian Art," 220.
[162] John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 72.
[163] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 10.

an ambiguous suicide.[164] On the stage, her lovesick madness contrasts Hamlet's metaphysical crisis. Within productions, she typically wears a white dress, a symbol of her purity in past sanity, with garlands draped in her loosely hanging hair. The hair in particular symbolized lack of decorum and sensuality. Rooted in Renaissance iconography, even the loose flowers falling to the water symbolize a deflowering. Contrasting readings of the play highlighted the gendered anxieties surrounding Ophelia. Some chose to read Ophelia as a victim, leading to censorship of some of her bawdy lines and sexual songs.[165] The Romantics, however, saw Ophelia's descent into madness as an emotional spectacle. She became a muse for many artists of the nineteenth-century, including, famously, Eugene Delacroix who created sexualized drawings and paintings of her (Figure 29).[166]

Even though Millais vividly portrays romantic fascination with the unraveling of a young woman into madness and even suicide, the painting still reads as a cautionary tale. Millais reorients the prevalent trivializing books about Shakespeare's heroines, and *Ophelia* supplies a much more harrowing alternative to these books. But the issue of identification is still present (Figure 29). Millais makes Ophelia's madness much more explicit in his image than the in Shakespearean heroine books and contemporary paintings of Ophelia. Her "muddy death" is more easily imagined by the viewer that in these other works. The male force who has driven Ophelia to madness is absent from the image. It is Hamlet who has sent her to the brink of sanity, yet Millais does not use his painting to implicate him nor the societal pressures that also contributed to her madness. Instead, Millais presents Ophelia romanticized in her insanity and on display for the viewer to consider.

---

[164] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death, 43-44.
[165] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death," 43. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 10-11.
[166] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 11.

Ophelia is a woman who has overstepped her bounds. She loves a man who has roughly denied her and gone mad. Her inability to compose herself suggests the corruption of her girlish innocence by a sexual desire she cannot control. She leaves the confines of the home to roam outdoors, adorning herself with garlands of flowers in the image of a woman transgressing her traditional role. Despite the innovations Millais incorporated into his painting, he presents an Ophelia who is ultimately punished for her violation. He promotes careful contemplation of Ophelia's anguish, carefully rendering the painful expression of Ophelia's final moments and promoting pathos from the viewer by placing the scene in Victorian England through the dress and setting. Due to the lack of narrative content within the painting, the depicted woman could be any woman giving herself over to death after violating the norms of society.

Unlike the Virgin Mary and Mariana who remain indoors, the garden seen just beyond the window, Ophelia ventured out of her sphere, into the open air. But we see the dire ramification of the transgression. As she drifts in the stream, the flowers which float away from her represent both loss of innocence and the life ebbing from her. The very vibrancy of the natural world surrounding her only highlights her own transience within it. And now she is to be swallowed up by it. The teeming riverbank will be her grave. Millais' *Ophelia* embodies a complex meditation on the transience of beauty in the face of mortality and the anguish of madness, so strong that one must escape it.

Conclusion

In the revivalist spirit, the Pre-Raphaelites formed a Brotherhood committed to communal artistic endeavor in the model of medieval craftsmen hoping to revive English art. They looked to primitive work to supply the subject-matter that they would then couple with modern technique to create a new form of painting. In choosing their medievalist subjects, they sought ways to reinterpret them, bringing them into their own time while referencing the past. They did this by infusing old narratives with heightened psychology, depicting obscure parts of time-old stories, and incorporating contemporary objects and dress into their paintings. The Pre-Raphaelites were also fascinated by female beauty, sexuality, and madness. Following in the footsteps of their Romantic predecessors, they used medievalism to contemplate the unknowable woman.

Through the medievalism of their paintings, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood constructed a patriarchal framework that severely limited the place of women. While the PRB did reject academic tradition in their technique, the content of their work was not as progressive as they had envisioned. They hoped to restore morality to British art, but this morality, as it related to women, was rooted in prescribing a constricted ideal of womanhood. The Pre-Raphaelites often isolated a single woman on their canvases, granting the viewer permission to closely scrutinize her and, by extension, perpetuating many harmful practices of representing women within the history of art—objectifying her, highlighting an absent, dominating male presence, and constructing a mysterious image of female sexuality. In these case studies, each of the women are overcome with psychological distress, and in that turmoil, they are on display for the viewer. Despite the isolation of the woman, the Pre-Raphaelites also highlighted the male who has either

placed the woman in isolation (as in the case of *Mariana*), encouraged her to remove herself from sin (as in the convent and the *hortus conclusus*), or driven her to madness (as seen in *Ophelia*).

The primitive works from which the Pre-Raphaelites sought innovation provided harmful archetypes of women that aligned with the rigid definition of womanhood in nineteenth-century England. In the case of this thesis, we see the chaste virgin, the damsel confined to her chamber, and the drowning madwoman. The iconic images of these women originate in their depiction in primitive art (the Virgin Mary) or medievalist sources (Mariana and Ophelia). The Pre-Raphaelites elaborated upon their initial inspiration, and their depictions were tempered by their imaginative reinterpretation of the medieval and prevalent historical inaccuracies of the nineteenth century. In elaboration, the Pre-Raphaelites made the elements of these works that corresponded to Victorian ideals of gender more pronounced. By the same token, the fact that these portraits of femininity with such troubling implications originate in art of the Middle Ages or early Renaissance shows that their deeply seated messages exist across history.

The prevailing images that span this thesis are the *hortus conclusus*, the ultimate symbol of virginity, and the garden. By tracking the various ways they appear through the case studies, it is clear that historically espoused ideals about the contained garden and the positive effects it was meant to provide women heavily parallels Victorian ideals of womanhood. The garden is a place where a woman can commune with nature, while still being confined to her sphere of the home. She can gain a liberated mind, but only by sacrificing her social connection and, often, her sexuality. The religious elements of Gothic revivalism point to the sacral undertones of much of the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites. The religious was, however, often coupled with Romantic, Gothic fascination with female sexuality and madness. Despite the Pre-Raphaelite

interest in the madwoman, Millais reveals the horrific repercussions of a woman who transgresses her prescribed bounds, as the *Ophelia* case study shows. As seen in the work of Rossetti and Millais, The ideal woman stays indoors. She does not venture beyond the garden.

Bibliography

Agrawal, R. R. *The Medieval Revival and Its Influence On The Romantic Movement*. New Delhi: Shatiki Malik Abhinav Publications, 1990.

Alexander, Michael. *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in Modern England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Ash, Russel. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

Barringer, Tim. *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Barringer, Tim, J. Rosenfeld, and A. Smith. *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant Garde*. London: Tate, 2012.

Barringer, Tim and Michaela Giebelhausen. *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites-Text, Context, Subtext*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009.

Bell, Quentin. *A New and Noble School: the Pre-Raphaelites*. London: Macdonald, 1982.

Berger, John. "from *Ways of Seeing*", *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. ed. Amelia Jones. New York: Routledge, 2005, 37-39.

Carlyle, Thomas. "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History". Volume 5 of *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Christian, John. "Shakespeare in Victorian Art". *Shakespeare in Art* by Jane Martineau, et al. New York: Merell, 2003, 217-221.

Ciaran Cronin. *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. ed. Richard Cronin, Antony Harrison, and Alison Chapman. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007.

Graham, Jenny. "English Tastes and the Pre-Raphaelites" in *Inventing van Eyck: the remaking of an artist for the modern age*. New York: Berg, 2007.

Grieve, Alastair. "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church," *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 111 No. 794 (May 1969): 294-95.

Harrison, Colin and Christopher Newall. *The Pre-Raphaelites and Italy.* Burlington, VT: Ashmolean, 2010.

Hunt, William Holman. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.* New York, Macmillan Co., 1905-06.

Kamps, Ivo and Karen Raber. "Introduction" in *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare. Boston: Beford/St. Martin's, 2004. 1-16.

Labbe, Jacqueline. "Cultivating One's Understanding: the Garden and the Bower." *Romantic Visualities*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Langley, Jane. "Pre-Raphaelites or ante-Dürerites?" *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 137 Issue 1109 (August 1995): 501-508. http://www.jstor.org/stable/886533.

Maisonneuve, Cécile and Dominique Thiébaut. "The Coronation of the Virgin." *Louvre*. Accessed March 1 2013. http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/coronation-virgin.

Marsh, Jan. *Pre-Raphaelite women: images of femininity in Pre-Raphaelite art*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.

Marshall, Gail. *Shakespeare and Victorian Women*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Millais, John Guille. The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais. New Yourk: Frederic E. Stokes Company, 1899. Google ebook. http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Life_and_Letters_of_Sir_John_Everett.html?id=ykuWQgRvoeAC.

Nicoll, John. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

Parker, Rosika. *The Subversive Stitch*. London: The Women's Press, 1984.

Postle, Martin. "'Patriarchs, Prophets, and Paviours': Reynolds as a History Painter 1770-1773." In *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures*, 121-160. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Prettejohn, Elizabeth. *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Prettejohn, Elizabeth, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Reynolds, Joshua. *Discourses*. ed. Robert R. Wark. London: Yale University Press, 1975.

Rhodes, Kimberley. "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death'". In *John Everett Millais: Beyond the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Studies in British Art 7*. ed. Debra N. Mancoff. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Rosenfeld, Jason. *John Everett Millais*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2012.

Ross, Leslie. *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.

Rossetti, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti. *The complete poetical works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Nabu Press, 2010.

Rossetti, William Michael. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir* (Vol. 1). *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. ed. Jerome J. McGann. IATH. Accessed March 12 2013. http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/pr5246.a43.rad.html

Ruskin, John. *Modern Painters*. New York: J. Wiley, 1860-62.

Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies* edited by Deborah Epstein Nord. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Saunders, Clare Broome. *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism. New York: Pelgrave, 2009.*

Schaffer, Talia, "A Tethered Angel: The Martyrology of Alice Meynell". *Victorian Poetry,* Vol. 38 No. 1, (Spring, 2000): 49-61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004291.

Shakespeare, William. *The Arden Shakespeare complete works* edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan. Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Tate. "Millais's Ophelia." Tate. Accessed February 10, 2013.

Taylor, Gary. *Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history, from the Restoration to the present*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "Mariana" in *Alfred Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*. ed. Aidan Day. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Tickner, Lisa. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London : Tate, 2003.

Townsend, Joyce. *Pre-Raphaelite Painting Techniques*. London, Tate Gallery, 2004.

Waggoner, Diane, Tim Barringer, Joanne Lukitsh, Jennifer L. Roberts, Britt Salvesen. *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British photography and painting, 1848-1875*. Washington D.C.: National Gallery, 2010.

De Vos, Dirk. *Hans Memling: the complete works*. Ghent : Ludion Press, 1994.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, London, Tate, 1849-50

Figure 2. John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, London, Tate, 1850-1

Figure 3. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, London, Tate, 1851-2

Figure 4. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, London, National Gallery, 1434

Figure 5. Johann Friedrich Overbeck, *The Painter Franz Pforr*, Berlin, Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen, 1810

The Pre-Raphaelite ‘List of Immortals’

We, the undersigned, declare that the following list of Immortals constitutes the whole of our Creed, and that there exists no other Immortality than what is centered in their names and in the names of their contemporaries, in whom this list is reflected:-

Jesus Christ ****
The Author of Job ***
Isaiah
Homer **
Pheidas
Early Gothic Architects
Cavalier Pugliesi
Dante **
Boccaccio *
Rienzi
Ghiberti
Chaucer **
Fra Angelico *
Leonardo da Vinci **
Spenser
Hogarth
Flaxman
Hilton
Goethe **
Kosciusko
Byron
Wordsworth
Keats **
Shelley **

Haydon
Cervantes
Joan of Arc
Mrs. Browning *
Patmore *

Raphael *
Michel Angelo
Early British Balladists
Giovanni Bellini
Giorgioni [sic]
Titan
Tintoetto
Poussin
Alfred **
Shakespeare ***
Milton
Cromwell
Hampden
Bacon
Newton
Landor **
Thackeray **
Poe
Hood
Longfellow *
Emerson
Washington **
Leigh Hunt
Author of *Stories after Nature* *
[Charles Jeremiah Wells]
Wilkie
Columbus
Browning **
Tennyson *

Figure 6. Pre-Raphaelite List of Immortals

Figure 7. a) John Everett Millais, *Isabella*, Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, 1849 and Detail of Stool
b) John Everett Millais, Detail of Millais' signature on *Mariana*, London, Tate, 1850-1

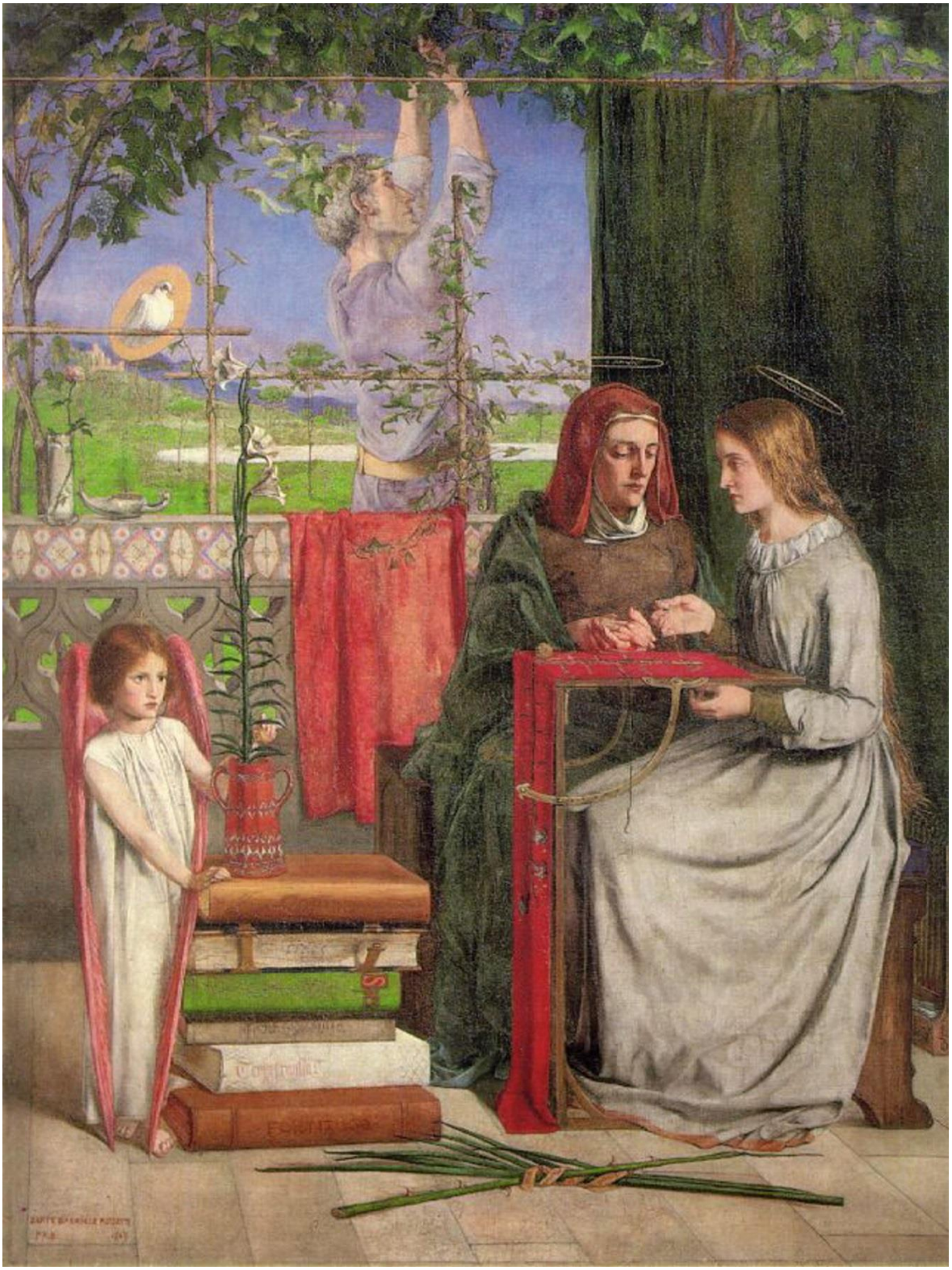


Figure 8. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary the Virgin*, London, Tate, 1848-9

Figure 9. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation* in Cell 3, Florence, Convento di San Marco, 1438-40

Figure 10. *The Coronation of the Virgin*, Fra Angelico, Paris, Louvre, 1430-32

Figure 11. Hans Memling, *Triptych of Jan Floreins*, Bruges, Memling Museum, Saint John's Hospital, 1479

Figure 12. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Detail *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, London, Tate, 1849-50

Figure 13. Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts*, Oxford, The Ashmolean Museum, 1850-1

Figure 14. Richard Redgrave, *The Poor Teacher*, Gateshead, Shipley Art Gallery, 1843

Figure 15. William Morris, Corncockle furnishing fabric, London, Victoria and Albert, 1883

Figure 16. John Everett Millais, Embroidery Detail *Mariana*, London, Tate, 1850-1

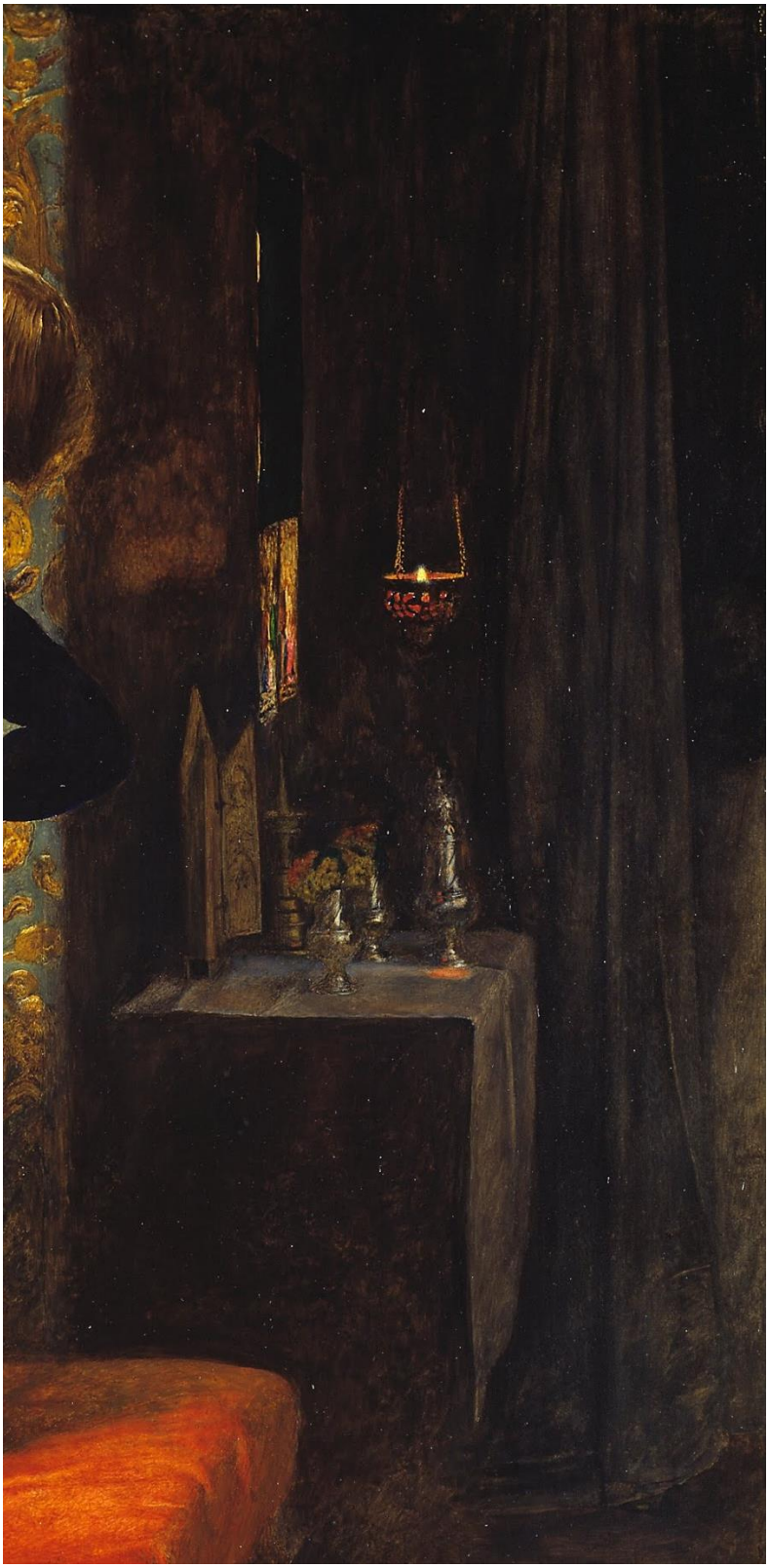
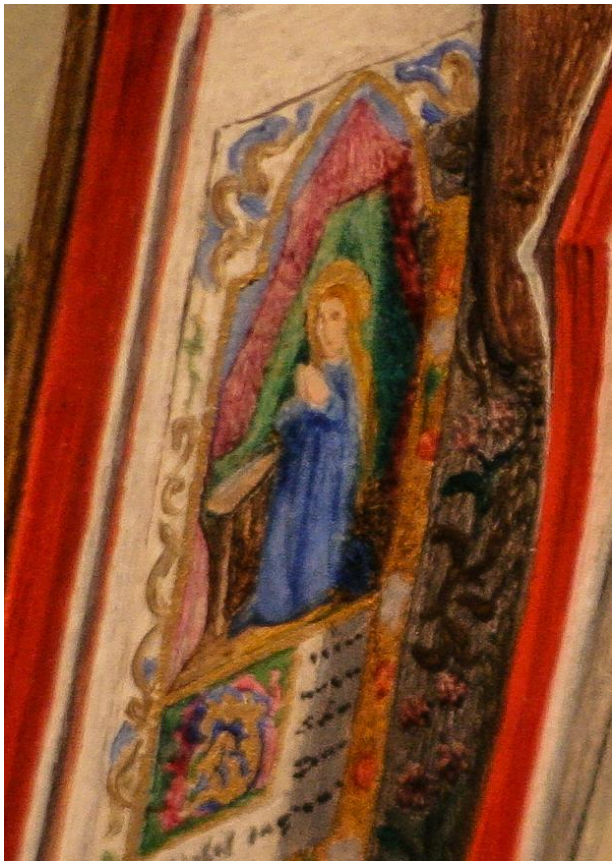


Figure 17. John Everett Millais, Bed and Altar Detail *Mariana*, London, Tate, 1850-1

Figure 18. Millais, *Christ in the House of His Father*, London, Tate, 1849-50

Figure 19. Charles Allston Collins, Flower Detail of *Convent Thoughts*, Oxford, The Ashmolean Museum, 1850-1

a)



b)

Figure 20. Charles Allston Collins, Manuscript Detail of *Convent Thoughts*, Oxford, The Ashmolean Museum, 1850-1

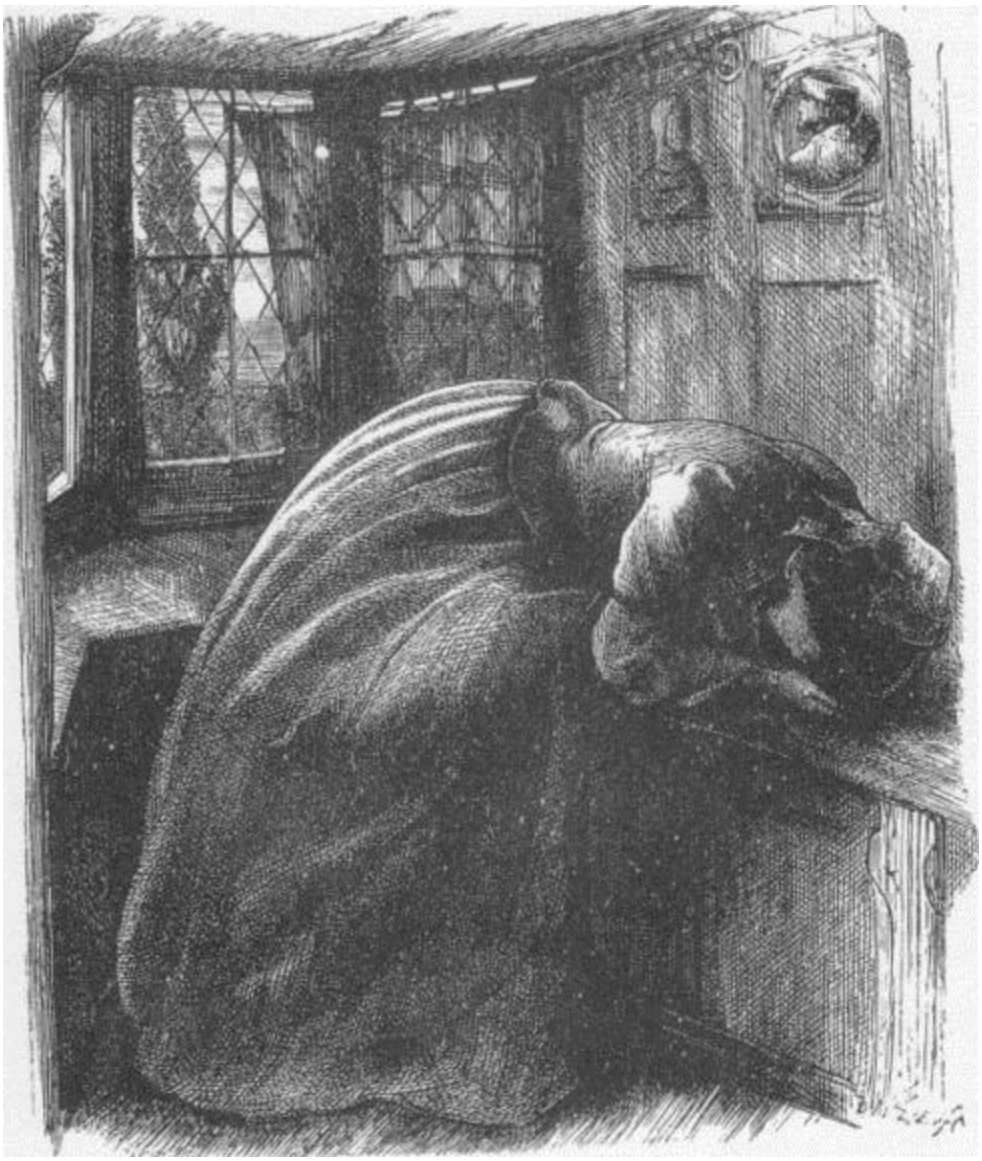


Figure 21. John Everett Millais, Mariana Etching, *Tennyson's Collected Poems*, Edward Moxon 1857

Figure 22. Sir Joseph Nöel Paton, *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania*, Endinburgh, National Gallery School of Scotland, 1847

Figure 23. Arthur Hughes, *Ophelia*, Manchester, Manchester City Art Galleries, 1852

a) Crow-flowers

b) Nettles

c) Daisies

d) Long Purples or Purple Loosestrife

e) Willow

Figure 24. John Everett Millais, Details of flowers *Ophelia*, London, Tate, 1851-2

Figure 25. John Everett Millais, Details of *Ophelia*, London, Tate, 1851-2

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

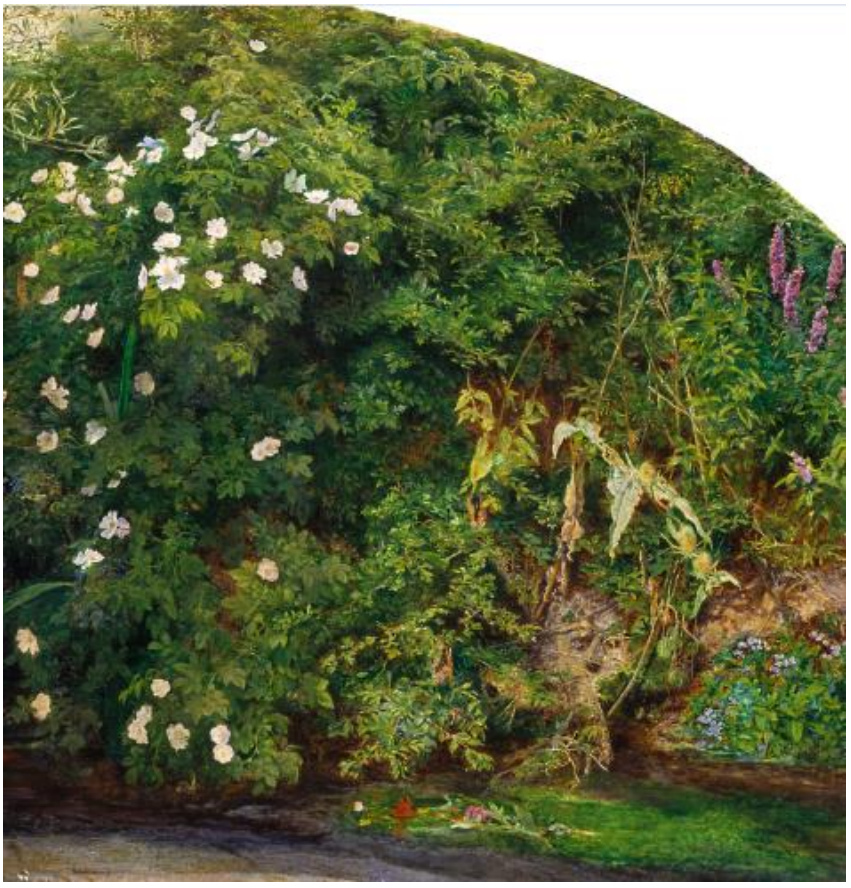
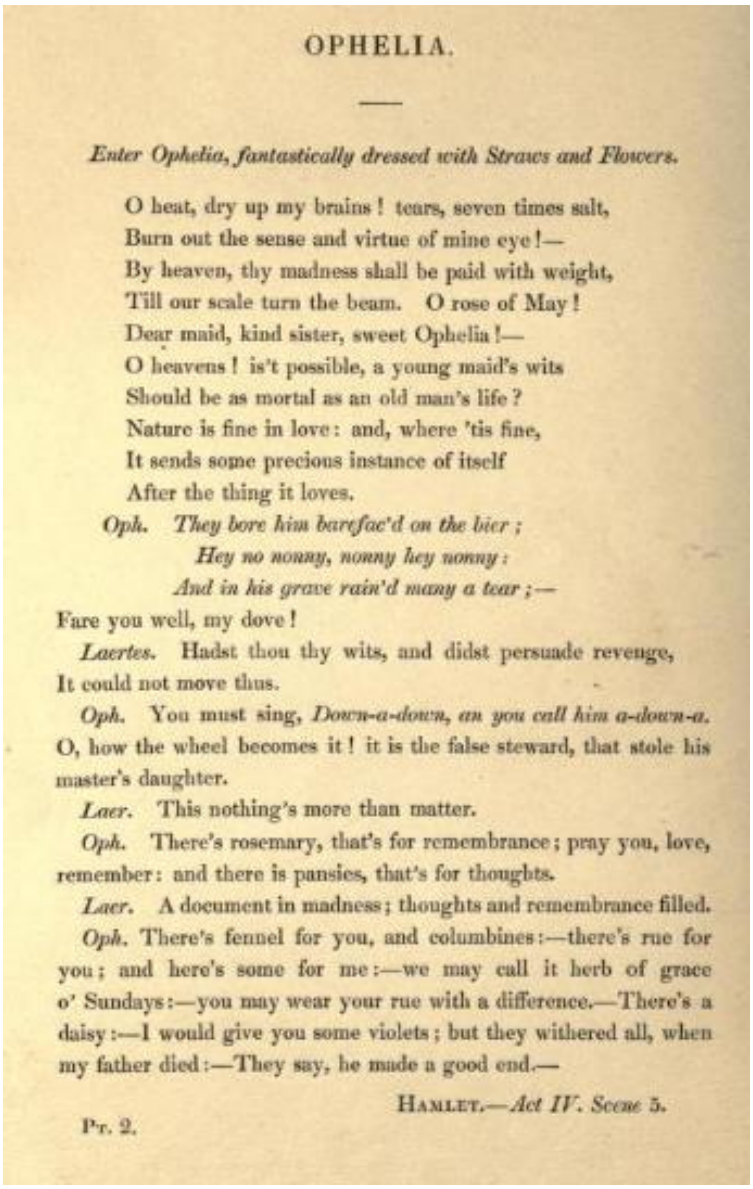


Figure 26. William Holman Hunt, *The Good Hireling Shepherd*, Manchester, Manchester City Art Gallery, 1851

Figure 27. Richard Redgrave, *Ophelia*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1842



OPHELIA.

Enter Ophelia, fantastically dressed with Straws and Flowers.

O heat, dry up my brains! tears, seven times salt,
Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!—
By heaven, thy madness shall be paid with weight,
Till our scale turn the beam. O rose of May!
Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!—
O heavens! is't possible, a young maid's wits
Should be as mortal as an old man's life?
Nature is fine in love: and, where 'tis fine,
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves.

Oph. *They bore him barefac'd on the bier;*
Hey no nonny, nonny hey nonny:
And in his grave rain'd many a tear;—
Fare you well, my dove!

Laertes. Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge,
It could not move thus.

Oph. You must sing, *Down-a-down, an you call him a-down-a.* O, how the wheel becomes it! it is the false steward, that stole his master's daughter.

Laer. This nothing's more than matter.

Oph. There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember: and there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

Laer. A document in madness; thoughts and remembrance filled.

Oph. There's fennel for you, and columbines:—there's rue for you; and here's some for me:—we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays:—you may wear your rue with a difference.—There's a daisy:—I would give you some violets; but they withered all, when my father died:—They say, he made a good end.—

HAMLET.—*Act IV. Scene 5.*

Pt. 2.

Figure 28. "Ophelia" page 272 and 275, *The Shakespeare Gallery: Containing the Principle Female Characters in the Plays of the Great Poet* by Charles Heath

Figure 29. Various Images of Ophelia by Delacroix

a) Eugene Delacroix, *Death of Ophelia*, Louvre, Paris, 1853

b) Eugene Delacroix, *Death of Ophelia*, Munich, Neue Pinakothek, 1838

c) Eugene Delacroix, *Ophelia's Song*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1834