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# **Before and Beyond the Glass: Women and Their Mirrors in the Literature and Art of Nineteenth- century Britain**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university. No part of this thesis has been published elsewhere.

## THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the interplay between reflective objects (mirrors, mirror-like surfaces, but also representational media such as painted portraits) and female figures in nineteenth-century British literature and visual art. The theme of the woman with or at the mirror is a persistent presence in art and literature throughout the nineteenth century, as in Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' and its pictorial interpretations, Pre-Raphaelite and Neo-Pre-Raphaelite depictions of 'woman with / at the mirror'. This interplay is here considered as a significant cultural phenomenon. The thesis argues that an engagement with its expressions can help us understand the aesthetic and social means of negotiating female identity in this period. The overall argument is that the various interpretations of the 'woman / reflective object' juxtaposition throughout the nineteenth-century self-consciously use the reflective objects as a means of engaging with a traditional dichotomous understanding of femininity and of questioning its validity. In the period under scrutiny, the mirror appears as a symbol of the knowledge and development of feminine identity, as it alternately reveals or conceals the self and/or reflects the world to which the self is tied. Additionally, the mirror often creates an intimate space for femininity, opening up to the woman, but guarding against the intrusion of an external viewer by refracting his or her gaze. These readings are made in light of the historical importance of the mirror as a household object, especially in considering its role within the female sphere. What emerges from the consistent juxtaposition between women and mirrors in nineteenth-century British imagination is the beginning of a cultural dialogue about notions of womanhood: female figures are shown increasingly not just as 'either/or' entities (angels or demons, Magdalens or Madonnas), but potentially as 'both/and' (both angel and demon, virgin and whore).

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## INTRODUCTION: THE COMPANY OF MIRRORS

Time and again in European cultures women have been shown in the company of mirrors. Throughout the ages, this iconography has borne various culturally and historically determined valences, as symbols of vanity, tools of feminine magic, or as portals to a strange world. Mirrors in particular and reflective surfaces (such as bodies of water) in general are intuitively linked with the concept of identity, with recognising and scrutinising the self, with separating one's self from others' and from its surroundings, and with the ongoing creation of self-image. Its relationship with women, specifically, is interesting in the context of how femininity has been construed and constructed throughout the ages. In the literature and visual art of nineteenth-century Britain, the conjunction between women and mirrors is particularly prominent to the detriment of the 'man at the mirror' image, which appears much more rarely. Across genres and media, female figures are in this period closely associated with mirrors or mirror proxies, from Alfred Tennyson's famous poem 'The Lady of Shalott' and its numerous contemporary pictorial adaptations (William Holman Hunt's, Sidney Meteyard's, and later John William Waterhouse's being the best known) to the literary and pictorial works of the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle. Although there are few representations of men at the mirror, where they do occur the face they encounter in the mirror is often still a woman's face, as in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's short Gothic story 'The Face in the Glass' (1880), or the mirror acts as a way of access into a mythological Christian otherworld, as in George MacDonald's novel *Lilith* (1895).

The association between mirrors and women is partly rooted in the traditional iconography of the woman at the mirror, representing the allegorical figure of Vanity, from the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance period. Herbert Grabes analyses these

early associations between female figures and mirrors in visual and print culture in *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*. According to him, the image of the woman holding, or ‘before’, the mirror is employed in seventeenth-century texts especially as a moralising, religious signifier, symbolising the Christian sin of vanity. He also comments at large on the figurative use of the term ‘mirror’ in the period to designate popular guidebooks perpetuating social norms and ethical values.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Miller, in *On Reflection*, argues that the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme as it appears in Renaissance allegorical paintings bears two completely opposite meanings – on the one hand that of ‘vanity’, also noted by Graces, and on the other that of ‘purity’ or of ‘prudence’ – which are only distinguishable from one another through reading the symbolic contexts in which this thematic duo is placed.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding this tradition, by the time the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme began to be employed in nineteenth-century works of literature and art its meaning had shifted completely. No longer used simply as an allegory of one of the capital sins, or as a symbol of Marian purity according to Christian tradition, it became a way of exploring the complexities of femininity itself.

The question here arises of how one might define such a fluid concept as ‘femininity’. The concept defies a rigid, static definition, as what one understands in thinking of ‘femininity’ shifts more or less drastically depending on the historical, social, and political context in which the term is used, as well as on individual perceptions which are problematic to map and reconcile. Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder have shown that Victorian conceptions of

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the ‘mirror’ as a literary genre in the Renaissance, see Einar Már Jónsson, *Le miroir: naissance d'un genre littéraire* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998). See especially the section titled ‘Self-regard’, pp 156-175.

femininity demonstrated ‘[c]onflicting opinions and competing mythologies [...] within the public debate’ on the topic, with ‘those who defended “woman’s place” and those who sympathized with women’s rights [being] often far more closely linked than [previous scholarship] had suspected’.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, a working definition of ‘femininity’ may be achieved by focusing the historical and geographical context of this concept. In this thesis ‘femininity’ is to be understood as a series of sanctioned ideals (with a number of local variations) within nineteenth-century ideology and culture, an ideal that comprised all those characteristics that supposedly constituted a woman as ‘woman’, whether these ideal characteristics were related to her appearance or demeanour, at home or elsewhere. These ideal characteristics generally related to the ideas of an innate maternal instinct, domestic (household-related) competence, sensibility, self-containment (of strong emotions), and a triumph of *agape* over *eros*. These ideas are also extrapolated from Helsinger, Lauterbach Sheets, and Veeder’s findings. In the first tome of their comprehensive work, they outline the particular myths about women that they consistently found in the literature and social discourse of the Victorian era. They identify three main and one subordinate template of femininity; the three main templates are all related and they display similar core characteristics:

Among such myths [about women] we have found four which are especially pervasive. First, the familiar Angel in the House [...] Her nature is loving and self-sacrificing; her responsibilities, domestic and maternal. [...] Second, the model of complete equality - women as equal contracting partners with men,

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, ‘Introduction’, in *The Woman Question: Defining Voices, 1837-1883*, vol. I of Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, vols. I- III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp xiii-xiv.

legally, sexually, and economically free agents in both domestic and professional matters. Though this model had some famous and articulate advocates – Mill, William Thompson, George Drysdale, Susan B. Anthony – it was so disconcertingly radical and so much at odds with the widespread interest in woman’s “special” nature and duties that it seems to have played a smaller role in the public debate than two other competitors to the angelic ideal. One of these might be called the Angel out of the House. [...] The Angel out of the House did not challenge the leadership of men, but she did define her own distinctive tasks, ministering to the needs of the world at large through philanthropy or social service. [...] Finally, there is a radical version of the angelic ideal which combines a belief in woman’s distinctive nature with claims for a leadership role in the world - a female saviour leading the way to a fuller humanity and ushering in a new era of community and love. [...] One or more of these three related but competing myths of woman underlie most of the arguments brought forward in the Woman Question [in the Victorian era].<sup>4</sup>

Referring to this basic definition, my thesis will explore how the ‘woman at the mirror’ image was used to subvert this ideal of womanhood by contrasting it with a very personal, individual feminine, sometimes concealed from the external gaze of the reader or viewer by the female figure’s mirror.

The works analysed here often refer to a dualistic aspect of femininity – angel / demon – which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argued was subservient to the way in which men viewed woman’s role in society. Referring to women writers – though the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp xiv-xv.

point implicitly extends to definitions of femininity more broadly – Gilbert and Gubar wrote that they ‘must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for [them]’.<sup>5</sup> Although this dichotomy cannot easily be escaped in the literature and art of nineteenth-century Britain, in this thesis I will argue that authors and artists were beginning to spot the cracks in this strict division. Gilbert and Gubar proposed that Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works centred on Elizabeth Siddall, she appears ‘as a witch or monster, a magical creature of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel’.<sup>6</sup> Although analysing all of Rossetti’s works featuring female figures is beyond the scope of this thesis, I will argue that, where his works show the female figure accompanied by a mirror, this is done in a spirit of unease regarding outright mythologisation (and this plays out most clearly in the painting *Lady Lilith*, and the poem ‘The Portrait’).

In their works, the authors and artists featured here often seemed to employ the angel / demon dichotomy in relationship to female figures only to challenge it, writing and painting their female figures as both angels and corruptors at the same time. In doing this, they create an alternative, individual feminine that defies simplistic compartmentalisation. The thesis will explore how this alternative individual feminine evades definition precisely because it is intimate, therefore inaccessible to the external viewer, and therefore non-assessable. The intimacy between the woman and her mirror which creates this hermetic feminine selfhood also creates a sense of unique agency for the female figure, and this will be one of my main arguments made. This thesis will also explore the interplay between reflective objects and female figures in nineteenth-

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<sup>5</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp 27-28.

century British literature and visual art. These ‘reflected objects’ will be taken to be mainly mirrors and mirror-like surfaces, such as bodies of water, but also representational media such as portraits. Whilst portraits do not necessarily intuitively qualify as ‘reflective objects’, precisely because their aim is not to reflect, but to represent and to preserve an absent subject / object, there are several correspondences between the mirror image and the painted image, as will shortly be discussed, which qualify the portrait as an occasional substitute for the mirror, albeit, as we shall see, with different effects. Additionally, mirrors and portraits are sometimes used together to contrasting effects (as in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ and ‘A Portrait’, and Christina Rossetti’s ‘In an Artist’s Studio’) for the purpose of addressing the issue of ‘female identity’.

### **The State of the Literature**

Although it has previously been noticed, the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme in nineteenth-century British culture has not been duly explored as a significant phenomenon. One work that deals with the woman-mirror conjunction in Anglophone literature explicitly and on an extensive scale is Jenijoy La Belle’s *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*. Its scope, however, is too broad in terms of time frame and geography to be convincingly cohesive, looking at a very wide range of works, from George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* to Sylvia Plath’s poetry and Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*. La Belle contents herself with following a theme across countries and centuries, without pausing to consider to any great extent how the theme may have shifted in different cultures and at different times, and how it may have been moulded by the different social contexts in which it was expressed. She assumes the view that in all these vastly different works, ‘[t]he mirror claims for itself a voice, a separate identity, and a power

over the woman who looks into it'.<sup>7</sup> Whilst I do not entirely disagree with La Belle on this point, I do argue that in nineteenth-century British art and literature, the mirror does not merely restrict and oppress the woman, but rather allows her to acquire a measure of agency in a world which otherwise aims to dictate her movements (good examples of this are Alfred Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' and several of its contemporary pictorial interpretations). La Belle also alleges that the mirror's 'power [over the woman] comes from an irreducible honesty, the truthfulness of outline' that it provides.<sup>8</sup> The point of the mirror's 'truthfulness' is indeed made time and again in nineteenth-century art and print culture. However, I argue that it is precisely this truthfulness that often empowers the women featured in the works of art under scrutiny, since it releases them from the tight corset of artificial norms imposed onto them by society. Finally, La Belle admits that, despite her broad scope, she has chosen not to analyse one of the most obvious nineteenth-century works featuring association between a female figure and a mirror, namely Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* because, she writes, '[a]lthough Carroll offers us a mirror, he does not provide the other crucial element – a female looking into it and thinking about how she looks and who she is'.<sup>9</sup> But the fact that an active meditation on identity is omitted in *Through the Looking-Glass* does not disqualify the novel from being considered in the light of the 'woman at the mirror' paradigm. Beyond Alice's mantelpiece mirror lies a world that allows her to explore and negotiate issues of identity. What complicates the issue, however – and this is also the reason why I have chosen to save this novel for a future project – is the fact that, by comparison with all the other works explored there, the central female figure featured

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<sup>7</sup> Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

in *Through the Looking-Glass* is not an adult woman, not even a very young woman, but still a little girl, which brings a whole new dimension to the discussion of the theme, which deserves a separate space all its own. Another work which Jenijoy La Belle ignores, presumably also because it does not feature a woman scrutinising her own reflection in the mirror, is Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'. By contrast, I have chosen to look at this work and its pictorial adaptations extensively in this thesis, since the Lady's relationship with the mirror is no less linked to the issue of identity and to that of female agency for the lack of an explicit self-scrutiny.

Other feminist theorists have addressed the issue of the relationship between the woman and the mirror in nineteenth-century British art in more roundabout ways, their concern being with tropes of feminine identity more generally. For instance, Helena Michie links the problem of female identity within the more restricted time frame of the Victorian era specifically to that of representations of the female body, arguing that 'the representation of the female body is [...] a historically aggravated instance of the violent and marked separation of signifier and signified'.<sup>10</sup> She employs the image of the mirror more in a figurative rather than literal sense, as an aid in assessing how an ideal (or counter-ideal) was inscribed upon representations of the female body in the Victorian era. In this sense, she also uses the image of the frame (again figuratively) to think about ways in which female bodies were 'restricted' and 'cropped' in representation, and how this relates to the conceptual gap she identifies between the female subject / object and its signifiers. She relates her feminist reading, in part, to Nina Auerbach's, as it is articulated in *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Auerbach is also concerned with the problem of the feminine ideal and counter-ideal in Victorian Britain,

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<sup>10</sup> Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 8.



and she identifies a quintessentially mythical paradigm upon which, she argues, these notions are modelled. She also argues that, despite its apparent rigidity and potential in reinforcing gender biases, this scheme, in fact, challenges the status quo, thereby becoming empowering for women. The feminist model outlined by Auerbach and later adapted by Michie is useful in informing my reading of the works under scrutiny, but must be altered to accommodate the specific issue with which this thesis is concerned, and which they address only in passing, that is, the significance of the ‘woman at the mirror’ image in nineteenth-century literature and art.

As for the mirror itself, it has been the subject of fewer studies of any kind than one might expect. It is the subject of some works of art history and cultural history, but these are few and far between. Jurgis Baltrušaitis’s *Anamorphic Art* deals only with the history of this optical toy, and his *Le Miroir: essai sur une légende scientifique – Révélations, science-fiction et fallacies* is a very ambitious foray into the symbolic history of the mirror, which, although fascinating, constitutes more of a philosophical meditation upon the topic than an actual historical study. Serge Roche’s study *Mirrors* tends to focus more on the history and development of the mirrors’ frames and fixtures, rather than on that of the objects themselves, although it offers a helpful overview of their economic importance and the practices of manufacture throughout the centuries and across Europe. Benjamin Goldberg’s *The Mirror and Man* aims to ‘[present] the biography of the mirror’, mapping its technical development and social importance from antiquity and all the way into the future, imagining its possible scientific uses on and off the planetary orbit.<sup>11</sup> *World Mirrors, 1650-1900* by Graham Child is somewhat similar to Roche’s study, in that it places a greater emphasis on the evolution of the mirror’s frame as an aesthetic object than on the development and importance of the

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Goldberg, *The Mirror and Man* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), p. xi.

mirror itself. *Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* by Mark Pendergrast is a broad work of cultural history, which yet manages to encompass only certain aspects related to the mirror in each historical period of the Western culture. When describing the importance of the mirror in the nineteenth century, for instance, he chooses to focus on its scientific uses almost exclusively, without providing many hints about its evolution as a household object. A good recent history of the mirror is Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's *The Mirror: A History*, which takes pains to map the mirror's journey as a domestic object, referring, by turns, to the technicalities of its fabrication throughout the ages, its economic value, its general availability, and its cultural importance. A more specialised study, Arnaud Maillet's *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, offers a detailed overview of the Claude mirror as a landscape painter's tool, and a reflective object with magical connotations from the eighteenth century onwards in Western culture. Finally, Isobel Armstrong's recent study, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880*, while very rich in content, deals with the importance of the mirror in nineteenth-century Britain only momentarily, and touches upon the 'woman at the mirror' issue only in passing.

In order to set the scene for an extensive analysis of the theme I have identified, I will offer below a brief overview of the context in which it emerges, the theoretical tools which I will use in addressing it, and the role of the portrait 'as a reflective object' within it. To this aim, I first will describe the historical trajectory of the mirror as an object in general, and as a household item in particular, from the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Then I will present the theoretical concepts which I will employ in my analysis of the works under scrutiny, and the specifics of my engagement with them. Finally, after a brief overview of the relationship between the

mirror and the portrait in their association with the female figure, I will more thoroughly describe the argument of my thesis before embarking on a journey of literary and artistic exploration.

### **Mirrors as Women's Tools in the Nineteenth Century**

Mirrors, in themselves, are not peculiar to modern times. Human-made mirrors have existed since prehistoric times, in the form of finely polished stone, and later metal, as Mark Pendergrast discusses in *Mirror Mirror*.<sup>12</sup> What differs from age to age is the source material from which mirrors are created, the manufacturing methods, their overall availability to the population and, to an extent, their cultural and social purposes. Throughout the eighteenth century, mirrors had mostly been luxury items; this was due to the effort and large expenses that their making required, and also to the fact that the silvering process at that time posed great threats to the workers' health.<sup>13</sup> Serge Roche, in his overview of mirror making throughout history, observes that '[t]he two methods of manufacture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were those of blown glass and cast glass', both of which, before the industrial period, were painstaking processes which required much skill and concentration.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, since glass was not always produced in the same location – or close to the places – where the mirrors were to be made, they had to be transported from one remote workshop to another; intuitively enough, as Sabine Melchior-Bonnet notes, they 'incurred great risk and breakage was

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<sup>12</sup> See chapter one, 'The Mirror of the Soul', especially the section 'The Ka in the Mirror'.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the dire context in which workers laboured for the production of mirrors, see Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. Katharine H. Jewett (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), chapter two, 'The Royal Glass and Mirror Company', especially pp 66-68.

<sup>14</sup> Serge Roche, *Mirrors*, trans. by Colin Duckworth (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 1957), p. 12. On glassmaking see chapter three, 'Europe, 17th and 18th Centuries', especially section two, 'Techniques', pp 12-13.

common', which means that fair amounts of money were probably wasted on these failed journeys alone.<sup>15</sup> Later, in order for it '[to] be transformed into a mirror,' Melchior-Bonnet explains, 'cooled glass had to undergo a mechanical process in two stages: polishing and buffing', which, again, was a difficult and time-consuming process in itself, requiring the work of hundreds or even up to a thousand men.<sup>16</sup> The mirror-making process concluded with the silvering of the worked glass, that is, the creation of a dark back, which would effectively render the sheet of glass into a highly reflective surface. In the eighteenth century this was done using mercury and, as Mark Pendergrast notes in *Mirror Mirror*, '[mirror-making industry] workers [were] suffering from weakness, irritability, tremors, and delirium associated with mercury erethism'.<sup>17</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, in turn, emphasises other downsides of using mercury in the silvering process: 'Aside from the toxic fumes it produced, this silvering process allowed for only a very fragile layer of silver, susceptible to humidity and hardly durable. Moreover, a darkness lingered in the tain [...] and did not offer the clarity [of modern-day mirrors]'.<sup>18</sup> These issues largely persisted during the first half of the nineteenth century, although some advances were made, first by German chemist Justus von Liebig, and then by English chemist Thomas Drayton. The former discovered, in 1835, an aldehyde-based

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<sup>15</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 61. In part one, 'The Origin of the Mirror', p. 61, Melchior-Bonnet cites the following anecdote about unsuccessful transports of sheets of glass from Paris to the faubourg Saint-Antoine: 'Once, out of a load of seventy-two sheets of glass, only twelve arrived intact!'

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 61. In part one, 'The Origin of the Mirror', p. 61, she explains the polishing process thus:

For the polishing process, a sheet of glass was attached to a stone table, then a second sheet was set on top of it with wet sand spread in the gap between them. For several days, men rubbed the two pieces of glass back and forth on top of each other. [...] "Six hundred men work at it daily," wrote one visitor to the factory in 1698, "and it is hoped that we will soon have enough work for a thousand. [...] The noise is most unbearable."

<sup>17</sup> Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p.182.

<sup>18</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 62. For more on the silvering process at this time, see again 'The Origin of the Mirror', especially p. 62.

process that would allow for a non-toxic production of silver. Liebig did attempt to popularise this within the mirror-making industry, but his efforts did not prove to be commercially viable during his lifetime.<sup>19</sup> The latter patented his own non-toxic silvering method in 1843, but this was primarily used for other purposes rather than that of mirror-making.<sup>20</sup> According to Roche, it was around '1857 [that] the Frenchman François Petit-Jean made practicable the method invented by Liebig for tinning glass with silver', though Brock argues that it did not become widespread until much later.<sup>21</sup> However, as Melchior-Bonnet points out, there were other 'changes that modernized the mirror and glass industry in the nineteenth century [and these primarily] came about in the realms of polishing and buffing, when the paddle wheel allowed for the mechanization of some forms of manual labor'.<sup>22</sup>

Another transformative element for the mirror-making industry was its gradual mechanisation from the 1860s onwards, which rendered the whole process safer and more efficient. 'Gradually certain manual tasks disappeared. Mechanical cranes replaced men for transferring the vessels to the ovens, pouring out their contents onto the tables, and for rolling and laminating. Savings were made in time and quality', writes Melchior- Bonnet.<sup>23</sup> She also points out that 'British mirrors remained more

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<sup>19</sup> William H. Brock, *Justus von Liebig: The Chemical Gatekeeper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp 136-139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> Roche, *Mirrors*, p. 30. Then Brock, *Justus von Liebig*, p. 139: 'Ironically, [only] after Liebig's death [in 1873] and when he could not benefit financially, safety legislation concerning the industrial use of mercury in most countries forced the reconstruction of the entire industry and promoted the adoption of versions of his process.'

<sup>22</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

expensive than French ones for quite some time', the industry being apparently not quite as well developed in the former compared to the latter.<sup>24</sup>

Up until the nineteenth century, mirrors are recorded as being often used for decorative purposes, arousing the interest of ornamentalists, who start developing ever more creative frames and manners of encasing the mirrors, as Serge Roche and Graham Child both note.<sup>25</sup> Melchior-Bonnet also remarks upon this aspect, writing that '[t]he mirror was often embedded in furniture, decorating writing cases or desks, the compartments of wardrobes, centerpieces, corner cupboards, and candelabra holders', but that it was also 'an obviously indispensable complement to grooming and shaving'.<sup>26</sup> This is when dressing tables – the main element of which was the mirror – become adopted as a household item.<sup>27</sup> The eighteenth century was the period when mirror rooms or halls became popular with the upper classes, the most famous example of this probably being the mirror hall at Versailles, to which Roche also alludes in his work, but Melchior-Bonnet recalls other notable cases, too.<sup>28</sup> The room of mirrors functioned, perhaps, as an example of the 'space-opening', 'light-enhancing' mirror brought to the extreme, allowing owners and guests to enjoy the sight of their tastefully decorated homes, of the bucolic views just outside their windows, and of themselves, multiplied to infinity. In this same context, overmantel mirrors – of the kind through

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Roche, *Mirrors*, pp 14, 16: 'Ornamentalists were now becoming more and more interested in the mirror, and made innumerable designs for frames, particularly in gilt carved wood.' Graham Child discusses in-depth many examples of ornamental mirrors in the eighteenth century; see especially pp 67-145 in the chapter 'England'.

<sup>26</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., chapter three, 'From Luxury to Necessity', p. 80: 'They [mirrors affixed to chests used for the ladies' daily grooming routines] progressively become true furniture with drawers and inclining mirrors, called *coiffeuses* (dressing tables) or *poudreuses* (powder tables) and beautifully decorated with marquetry.'

<sup>28</sup> See Roche, *Mirrors*, chapter four, 'Mirror Galleries and Mirror Rooms', and Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, chapter three, 'From Luxury to Necessity', especially pp 70-72.

which, later on, Lewis Carroll's Alice will pass in *Through the Looking-Glass* – were also invented and became popular.<sup>29</sup> 'Women', Melchior-Bonnet asserts, came to '[cover] their salons, sleeping alcoves, offices, ceilings, stairwells, wardrobes, and other furniture with [mirrors]'.<sup>30</sup> The second half of the eighteenth century favoured the development of the cabinet de toilette, an inner sanctum where the lady of the house might spend time admiring and grooming herself, in front of 'at least three mirrors, mounted as low as possible so that people could see themselves from head to toe', as Melchior-Bonnet notes.<sup>31</sup> The mirror-dominated cabinet de toilette, or dressing-room, she adds, developed fully only in the nineteenth century, which was perhaps due, among other reasons, to the popularisation of Liebig and Drayton's safer and more cost-effective silvering techniques, which enhanced the production of mirrors and thus allowed them to become more widely accessible.<sup>32</sup> This happened in the wake of another invention from 'the end of the eighteenth century, [that of] the psyché, or free-standing-mirror' which, Melchior-Bonnet adds, developed and became more popular during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Serge Roche mentions that 'towards the close of the [eighteenth] century it [the dressing mirror] lost its drawers

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<sup>29</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 82: 'Overmantel mirrors (*trumeaux de glace*) could also mean mirrors placed between two windows, up to six and a half feet in width, sometimes composed of two or three small mirrors fit together, and sometimes of a single large pane, encased in a frame of painted wood, and sometimes decorated with pilasters or other motifs.'

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 80. The *cabinet de toilette* is referred to as 'what today might be called the bathroom'.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp 80-81. Also, entry for 'mirror', *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015) <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/385037/mirror>>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 85: 'The *psyché*, a sort of two-meter high dressing mirror without a table or a drawer, flanked by two sconces for lighting, enjoyed all sorts of improvements over the years, such as side mirrors and small panels. Around 1810, the *psyché* came to be known as a piece in which the central pane of mirror could pivot around a horizontal axis to modify the angle of vision. It soon became an indispensable beauty aid during the Empire and the Restoration.'

and became larger, taking then the name of cheval-glass or horse dressing-table'.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the terms *psyché* and *cheval-glass* seem to be more or less interchangeable, referring largely to a mirror of sizeable proportions, which was able to accommodate the reflection of a person's full body; the particulars of this type of mirror changed and evolved several times throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> The invention and development of the *psyché* and/or *cheval-glass* facilitate, in Isobel Armstrong's words, 'a new experience' in the nineteenth century, that of perceiving 'the full-length image of the body'.<sup>36</sup>

Nineteenth-century British society was preoccupied with mirrors and their various scientific or entertainment-related applications. In the 1820s, the mirror curtain at the Coburg Theatre (inaugurated in 1818 and renamed 'The Victoria' in 1833), made a sensation, as Isobel Armstrong shows in *Victorian Glassworlds*.<sup>37</sup> According to Jane Moody, 'a spectacular mirror curtain' was commissioned for the Coburg, and it 'consisted of sixty-three plates of glass in a gold frame'; this mirror, she contends, was apparently well-loved by the general audience, who took great pleasure in the erasure of 'the boundary between the consumer and the object of consumption, allowing the

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<sup>34</sup> Roche, *Mirrors*, p. 20. About the etymology of the name, he adds: 'The use of the word 'horse' is explained in an English dictionary by the four feet of the mirror; an American dictionary prefers the view that the mirror was large enough for a horse to see himself [sic] in it!' (20)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., chapter six, 'The Nineteenth Century', p. 29: 'The English cheval-glass was adapted to French neo-classicism, and resulted in the "psyche" during the Empire period. Percier designed the "psyche toilet- set"'. See also the entry for 'cheval glass', *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015) <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/109836/cheval-glass>>

<sup>36</sup> See chapter five, 'Reflections, Translucency, Aura, and Trace', the section 'Reflective Glass Space: Looking On', p. 96.

<sup>37</sup> For more on the history of 'The Coburg' see E. Beresford Chancellor, *The Pleasure Haunts of London – during Four Centuries* (London: Constable, 1925), pp 114-116. For Armstrong's discussion of the mirror curtain, see *Victorian Glassworlds*, chapter five, 'Reflections, Translucency, Aura, and Trace', pp 98-99.



spectators to become the subject of their own spectacle'.<sup>38</sup> In addition to mirrors used in novel and creative ways in the entertainment sector, they were also employed extensively in science, especially in astronomy, as Mark Pendergrast discusses at large in his cultural history, *Mirror Mirror*. It is in the nineteenth century that telescopes were developed more thoroughly, thanks to the work of such scientists as William Herschel and his son, John Herschel, who improved the reflecting telescope (using curved mirrors).<sup>39</sup> Occasionally, the idea of 'mirror' took unexpected turns in the sciences, especially when coupled with poetical and philosophical nuances. In 1877, artist and amateur astronomer John Brett put forth the hypothesis that the planet Venus could be, essentially, a giant mirror, having 'a burnished reflective surface' as well as 'a translucent envelope of great density'.<sup>40</sup> This, to Brett, is an especially tantalising idea because it suggests the possibility of witnessing Earth reflected in Venus's catoptric surface: 'At the next transit [of Venus] it would be worth while for some one with a good telescope and a Dawes-diaphragm to look at the centre of Venus's [original emphasis] disk for the reflected image of the Earth. If the envelope of the planet has great refractive power, I think it not improbable that it might be seen as a minute nebulous speck of light'.<sup>41</sup>

Uniting entertainment and science, the Crystal Palace, home to the Great Exhibition of 1851, was a great feat of crystal- and glasswork, and it housed, amongst

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp 152, 154.

<sup>39</sup> Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror*, chapter seven, 'Grasping the Universe', especially pp 170-176.

<sup>40</sup> John Brett, 'The Specular Reflection Hypothesis, and its bearing on the Transit of Venus', *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 37 (January 1877), p. 126.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127. For a more in-depth analysis of the contemporary cultural and philosophical implications of Brett's theory, see James Mussel, 'Specular Reflections: John Brett and the Mirror of Venus', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 17 (2013).

its numerous exhibitions, a ‘Foreign Glass Manufactures Court’, filled, in the words of Samuel Phillips, with ‘magnificent specimens [...] from Bohemia and Bavaria, and while they display the many purposes to which glass may be applied, they at the same time exemplify the deserved fame which [...] the Bohemian and Bavarian manufacturers have long since gained for them’.<sup>42</sup> It is safe to assume that in this ‘Glass Manufactures Court’ a fair number of mirrors would have been exhibited, though some of the other Courts would probably also have shown mirrors where appropriate. In *Victorian Glassworlds*, Isobel Armstrong provides a detailed discussion of a ‘Grand Boudoir Glass’ (bronze mirror encased in a porcelain frame) made in Birmingham and exhibited at the Crystal Palace which, she asserts, was commented on extensively in *Reynolds’s Weekly Newspaper*, G.W.M. Reynolds’s publication.<sup>43</sup> The mirror was remarkable as much for its size – Armstrong asserts that it ‘was clearly monumental (though the Catalogue does not state its dimensions)’ – as for the intricate artistic design of its frame.<sup>44</sup> The arrangement of the frame in itself makes for a subject worthy of perusal in this thesis; the two nymphs (female by definition), with their backs turned to the viewer and their naked torsos ‘unseen, and but for the mirror unseeable, by the spectator’, as Armstrong aptly puts it, are an appropriate illustration of the ‘woman at the mirror’ problem in the nineteenth century: what is their significance, how would a

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Phillips, *Guide to the Crystal Palace and Park: Facsimile Edition of 1856 Official Guide* (London: Euston Grove, 2008), p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, chapter nine, ‘Glass under Glass: Glassworld Fictions’, pp 234-239.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234. She later adds:

The mirror’s iconography suggests the ‘encounter’ that belongs to Grotesque experience: two white porcelain nymphs, seated on either side of the huge, dark bronze frame, paired with one another and with their reflections, peer inwards in a state of reverie. Each Naiad or nymph is cushioned sideways on a lotus, water lily, or *nymphaeas* [...] The porcelain figures are lapped in minimal drapery and in the wreathed, interlaced scroll of the border. (p. 235)

contemporary viewer have ‘read’ them?<sup>45</sup> According to Armstrong, ‘[i]nserted into the secret privacy of gazing reflection and what becomes quadruple acts of looking between the four nymphs [counting the reflected doubles], the onlooker is [...] aware of the limits of gazing’, with the viewer’s ‘gaze mediated by the nymphs, theirs by [the viewer], as [the viewer] intervene[s] between body and reflection’.<sup>46</sup> The question of the gaze and of who – if anyone – is empowered by the mirror is, as we shall see, a central one in nineteenth-century Britain.

British periodicals provide plenty of proof when it comes to showing how important mirrors were to British society even in the first half of the nineteenth century, mainly, though not exclusively, as luxury items of décor. An item from an issue of *The Morning Post and Gazetteer* from as early as 1801 explains in humorous vein how ‘[t]he article of the first necessity in a milliner’s shop is the Looking Glass’; ladies, as it is alleged love to admire themselves in the mirror, and a favourable impression of their own persons is bound to render them more inclined to buying. ‘It is, therefore,’ the author of the article impresses upon the readers, ‘of the last importance to the milliners to have a faithful glass, or, if possible, a flattering one’.<sup>47</sup> In another issue of the same publication, a kind of *nécessaire* brought from India and ‘exhibited in the fashionable

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>47</sup> Item no. CCVI, ‘The Looking Glass’ subsection of *The Morning Post and Gazetteer* (London, England), Tuesday, January 06, 1801, Issue 1008. ‘The article of the first necessity in a milliner’s shop is the Looking Glass. It is the first object which an *elegante* perceives on her entrance. Before she looks at the caps, she is sure to take a peep at those features which they are made to adorn, and this *coup d’oeil* generally decides whether she will purchase or not.’ And:

[...] if her image in the glass smiles agreeably, looks killingly, sighs languishingly, appears divinely, the first hat that will cover her head will be charming, beautiful, delicious. [...] It is, therefore, of the last importance to the milliners to have a faithful glass, or, if possible, a flattering one. Another article, no less essential, is a portable mirror, which, placed behind, may, with the assistance of her former, give the fair one a complete view of her entire person; for it is not sufficient to be handsome only on one side.

circles, and much admired' is praised extensively. The author of this note makes a point of mentioning the encased mirror: 'In the inside is a mirror, with all the necessary apparatus attached to its use'.<sup>48</sup> In an issue of *The Morning Post* from 1804 an overmantel mirror from a manor house in Cumberland is praised: 'Over the chimney is a mirror ten feet high, in a rich gilt frame, supported by double columns with Corinthian capitals, and surmounted by a rich carved Vitruvian scroll'.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in a piece of local interest from *The Ipswich Journal* (October 1808) the author lingers on the new mirror that has been installed to adorn the Assembly Rooms: 'The New Assembly Rooms [...] have been greatly embellished since last year, particularly by a very large mirror placed at the top of the room'.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, an issue of *The Morning Post* from April 1809 applauds the decorative skills of a high society lady, especially 'a mirror, forming the back ground, of vast dimensions, [which] reflected every opposite object, and by assistance of other glasses, multiplied it *ad infinitum*'.<sup>51</sup> An earlier issue of the same journal reports a burglary in which the thieves 'carried away undiscovered several large mirrors, and other valuable portable articles'.<sup>52</sup> Finally, the 'Wright versus Wardle' case haunted the pages of the British press in 1809; dealing with the financial misunderstandings arisen between a gentleman (Colonel Wardle) and his 'lady friend' (Mrs Wright), the key moment in the trials was linked to an episode in which a large

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<sup>48</sup> Item no. CCXLV, 'A Lady's Jewel' subsection, in *The Morning Post and Gazetteer* (London, England), Friday, March 06, 1801, Issue 10137.

<sup>49</sup> In an item titled 'Brayton House, in Cumberland', under the 'Fashionable World' section of *The Morning Post* (London, England), Tuesday, November 13, 1804, Issue 11266.

<sup>50</sup> The item 'Ipswich, Oct. 22' in *The Ipswich Journal* (Ipswich, England), Saturday, October 22, 1808, Issue 3930.

<sup>51</sup> The Marchioness of Hertford's Assembly', in *The Morning Post* (London, England), Friday, April 28, 1809, Issue 11934.

<sup>52</sup> 'A Daring Instance of Housebreaking', in *The Morning Post* (London, England), Saturday, August 27, 1808, Issue 11725.

(and presumably expensive) mirror had been brought to Mrs Wardle's house and then sent back to the manufacturer.<sup>53</sup> These are but a few telling examples that confirm the importance of mirrors – as luxury household items or as expensive decorative pieces – to the social conscience of early nineteenth-century Britain.

In what concerns the importance of the mirror to women in particular, even a cursory look at women's magazines of the second half of the nineteenth century proves a rising interest in mirrors as objects, in their history, in mirror-fashions across the continent, and the newest mirror gadgets on offer. In an essay titled 'Chapter on Pigments, Patches, &c' published in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* of 1853-1854, whose general editor was S. O. Beeton, husband of the now well-known Mrs Beeton, a Mrs White wrote, as an introduction to her section on the historical importance of the mirror, that: 'we must not forget that most important appendage of the toilet, ancient and modern, and which at one period was absolutely a part of dress - the mirror'.<sup>54</sup> The author goes on to cite various Egyptian and Greek-Roman mirrors seen at the British Museum, demonstrating a deep fascination with the evolution of the mirror through the ages.<sup>55</sup> The same preoccupation with the history of the mirror and the toilette is displayed in succeeding issues of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, such as volume four from 1855-1856 where, in a section titled 'Toilette of a Roman

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<sup>53</sup> For articles reviewing the details of this case and commenting on its settlement, see: *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (Oxford, England), Saturday, July 8, 1809, Issue 2932; *The Examiner* (London, England), Sunday, July 9, 1809, Issue 80; *The Aberdeen Journal* (Aberdeen, Scotland), Wednesday, July 12, 1809, Issue 3209; *The Daily Mercury* (Derby, England), Thursday, July 13, 1809, Issue 4025; *The Hull Packet and Original Weekly Commercial, Literary and General Advertiser* (Hull, England), Tuesday, July 18, 1809, Issue 1175; *The Examiner* (London, England), Sunday, November 26, 1809, Issue 100; *The Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Tuesday, December 12, 1809, Issue 12664; *The Morning Post* (London, England), Tuesday, December 12, 1809, Issue 12129; *The Aberdeen Journal* (Aberdeen, Scotland), Wednesday, December 20, 1809, Issue 3232; *The Examiner* (London, England), Sunday, December 24, 1809, Issue 104. In the last paper cited there are three separate pieces related to the development of the case.

<sup>54</sup> 'Chapter on Pigments, Patches, &c', in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 1853-1854, p. 388.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 388-389.

Lady', there is an extensive description of Roman mirrors, and of their use by the various social classes.<sup>56</sup> An advert from the 1857-1858 issue of the same magazine (Fig. 1) praised an 'indispensable toilet mirror', in effect a double-mirror, showing the woman's reflection both from the back and the front. 'The mirror enables a Lady to dress her back and front hair with perfect ease and comfort. It reflects the entire figure, and is one of the most useful and elegant requisites for a Dressing-room', the advert boasted.<sup>57</sup>

With the already-mentioned rise in popularity of the cabinets de toilette in the nineteenth-century home, a more peculiarly feminine dimension is added to the social and cultural development of the mirror in the second half of the nineteenth century across Western Europe. The cabinet de toilette aims to be a 'hall of mirrors', albeit on a smaller, more intimate scale, as the Comtesse de Gencé (1872-1951), author of several turn-of-the-century lifestyle works aimed especially at women, repeatedly emphasises in one of her guidebooks, *Le cabinet de toilette d'une honnête femme* [The dressing-room of an honest woman]. She advises women that:

There are never too many looking-glasses in a dressing-room.

Never place your looking-glasses and your mirrors at random. Becoming beautiful, it is a little like learning to behave well: it is necessary to know oneself well. And, in order to know oneself well, one must see oneself well.

One must see oneself from head to toe, in all senses. This exigency of the female aesthetic naturally calls for the necessity, in our little laboratory, of [having] a great mirror, either mobile or affixed to the wall.

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<sup>56</sup> 'Toilette of a Roman Lady', in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 1855-1856, p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 1857-1858, p. 262.

The great looking-glass with three panels would be the ideal [mirror], but one can be contented with a fixed mirror, or even with the mirror wardrobe [...]

The other looking-glasses are arranged according to convenience, and ingeniously enough to allow for a complete examination, from the front, in profile, or from the back, of our entire person, or at least of our head.

One must always have within reach hand mirrors or psychés.<sup>58</sup>

In this lifestyle guide centred on the dressing-room, something emerges that can easily be thought of as ‘a cult of the mirror’ emerges. In fact, the Comtesse de Gencé herself refers to the compulsion to constantly observe one’s own reflection as ‘this type of cult without which marital happiness does not exist’.<sup>59</sup> This is a catoptrical Panopticon, at the centre of which is the woman, surveying herself from all possible angles. This is an idea immediately traceable in Pre-Raphaelite art, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s rough sketch for a painting of ‘Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views’ (1863) as a prototypical example. The image of the woman surrounded by mirrors is also indirectly prefigured in William Holman Hunt’s painting of *The Lady of Shalott* (c.

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<sup>58</sup> My own translation of the original passage in French from *Le cabinet de toilette d’une honnête femme*, pp 15-16:

Il n’y a jamais trop de glaces dans un cabinet de toilette.

Ne placez pas au hasard vos glaces et vos miroirs. Pour être belles, c’est un peu comme pour bien se porter: il faut bien se connaître. Et, pour se bien connaître, il faut bien se voir.

Il faut se voir de la tête aux pieds, dans tous les sens. Cette exigence de l’esthétique féminine impose naturellement dans notre petit laboratoire, la nécessité d’une grande glace, mobile ou fixée à la muraille.

La grande glace à trois faces serait l’idéal, mais on peut se contenter d’une glace fixe ou même de l’armoire à glace [...]

Les autres glaces sont disposées selon les commodités, et assez ingénieusement pour permettre l’examen complet, de face, de profil ou de dos, de toute notre personne, ou tout au moins de notre tête.

Il faut toujours avoir à sa portée des glaces à main et de psychés.

<sup>59</sup> My own translation of the French original, p. 2: ‘cette sorte de culte sans lequel le bonheur conjugal n’existe pas’.

1886-1905), where a repeated mirror in a circular pattern is suggested by the oval murals flanking the round looking-glass on the wall, and in Edward Burne-Jones's *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor* (1862), which features a round mirror framed by several smaller mirrors. It is alluded to more directly in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's depiction of female figures framed by mirrors in parallel planes (as in *Lady Lilith* and *Risen at Dawn*), though it is even more clearly figured in Christina Rossetti's 'A Royal Princess': 'All my walls are lost in mirrors, whereupon I trace/ Self to right hand, self to left hand, self in every place,/ Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face'.<sup>60</sup>

Aside from the idea of constant and obligatory self-scrutiny, another very important aspect suggested by the necessity of a mirror-bedecked dressing-room is its role as a domestic, entirely feminine sanctum sanctorum. The catoptric cabinet de toilette is essentially a private, women-only place, a 'sanctuary' wherein the lady of the house may – indeed, must – survey herself at length, without the intrusion of an external eye:

One can never repeat often enough that the dressing-room is an inviolable shelter. It is, in a way, the confessional of beauty, where we receive all the reproaches and all the advice of the mirror, [...] and from which we must always emerge beautiful, fresh, youthful, and seductive.

A witty woman compared the dressing-room to the artist's lodge. That parallel is more ingenious and pretty than precise. Into this lodge of beauty, no privileged [person] has the right to penetrate. Even the husband should be ashamed of himself [were he to enter].<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'A Royal Princess', in *Poems and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ll 10-12.

<sup>61</sup> My own translation of the French original, p. 48:



Remarkable here is the use of terms of a religious and hospitality turn – ‘shelter’ (*asile*), ‘confessional’ (*confessionnal*), ‘lodge’ (*loge*) – to describe the function of the dressing-room; these terms suggest not simply a practical use for the multiple mirror, but also a deeper, more meaningful dimension to this catoptric ‘sanctum’, wherein no foreign eye ‘has the right to penetrate’.<sup>62</sup> If, for whatever reason, the cabinet de toilette must occasionally be shared with someone else, then the guide advises:

Be therefore alone, madam, during the hours you consecrate to repairing your beauty. If you are in the habit of employing, for your coiffure, the service of a foreign hand, do not be contented with the appraisal of your hairdresser or [that] of your dresser. Once her work is done, see to it that she retires and leaves you into the confidence of the mirror.<sup>63</sup>

The emphasis on the intimacy that the cabinet de toilette is supposed to provide, and the continued reference to the company of the mirror as an act of confidentiality between this reflective object and the female subject both suggest the fact that the dressing-room as a room of mirrors transcends its status as a space for personal

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On ne répètera jamais assez que le cabinet de toilette est un asile inviolable. C’est, en quelque sorte, le confessionnal de la beauté, où nous recevons tous les reproches et tous les conseils du miroir, [...] et d’où nous devons sortir toujours belles, fraîches, jeunes, et séduisantes.

Une femme spirituelle a comparé le cabinet de toilette à la loge de l’artiste. Ce rapprochement est plus ingénieux et plus joli qu’exact. Dans cette loge de la beauté, aucun privilège n’a le droit de pénétrer. Le mari lui-même en est honni.

<sup>62</sup> de Gencé, *Le cabinet de toilette d’une honnête femme*, p. 48.

<sup>63</sup> My own translation of the French original, p. 49: ‘Soyez donc seule, madame, pendant les heures que vous consacrez à la réfection de votre beauté. Si vous avez l’habitude d’employer, pour votre coiffure, les services d’une main étrangère, ne vous contentez pas de l’appréciation de votre coiffeuse ou de votre habilleuse. Sa fonction terminée, faites en sorte qu’elle se retire et vous laisse en confidence avec le miroir.’

grooming and instead becomes a place where woman (and one woman alone, at that) is the sole mistress. It functions as a point of surveillance of the female body, a chamber wherein the woman-artist may create her public self, but also a 'confessional' in which the woman may own up to all her flaws and qualities without fear of being judged or misled in her views of herself by an external spectator. The catoptric cabinet de toilette, therefore, can be described as a sacred place wherein femininity can unfold and then regroup as needed. Central to the dynamic of this intimate woman-only space is the gaze and, what is more, an act of 'self-surveillance'. 'The multiple looking-glasses are marvellous instruments which allow us to be our own spectators, in all the senses, or whichever way we may evolve', explains the Comtesse de Gencé.<sup>64</sup>

### **Theoretical Compass**

As described in the ladies' guidebooks of that era, the mirror or the mirror room provides a space for the woman to unfold in, and create her identity in intimacy, far from the obtrusive gaze of an external viewer. This can be a type of intrusive, objectifying scopophilia, of the kind that Laura Mulvey identifies in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in which she puts forth the idea of an all-pervasive 'male gaze' which 'projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly'.<sup>65</sup> This kind of scopophilia presupposes that, even as the woman looks at herself in the mirror, what she searches for there is an imagined projection of the self, complicit with certain

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<sup>64</sup> My own translation of the French original, p. 50: 'Les glaces multiples sont de merveilleux instruments qui nous permettent d'être spectatrices de nous-mêmes, dans tous les sens ou quelles que soient nos évolutions.'

<sup>65</sup> Republished as chapter three of Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 19.

social expectations of femininity. John Berger also expresses a view compatible with Mulvey's idea in *Ways of Seeing*, where he notes:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. [...] this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.<sup>66</sup>

In this model, when the socially acceptable image of the woman is not found, it must be created, with the woman-subject taking on a 'male gaze' in order to accomplish this. In Berger's view, since women are conditioned to 'watch themselves being looked at' and are therefore obliged to contain this constant surveillance, they must become the implicitly male watcher and turn his imagined gaze upon themselves in an attempt to assume control over their public appearance, or persona.<sup>67</sup> The concept of 'male gaze', as coined by Mulvey, is based on a presupposed 'traditional exhibitionist role [of] women [which entails that they] are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their

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<sup>66</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 47. See especially chapter three, which deals with the idea of woman as a 'sight' in art. About the woman's act of interiorising a male-specific gaze in order to assume some measure of control over it:

Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. That part of a woman's self which is the surveyor treats the part which is the surveyed so as to demonstrate to others how her whole self would like to be treated. And this exemplary treatment of herself by herself constitutes presence. (p. 46)

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* [original emphasis] and *women appear* [original emphasis]. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (p. 47)

appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* [original emphasis]'.<sup>68</sup> Yet nineteenth-century literary and visual works extensively using the 'woman-and-mirror' theme often contradict the assumption that the woman-gazer directs or should direct a specifically male gaze upon her reflected double.

The resistance to an assimilation of the male gaze is present especially in the woman-mirror conjunction as it is rendered in the literature and art of the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> While the idea of an artificially built femininity responsive to extraneous pressures and values is present in nineteenth-century culture, that is not the whole story, either in lifestyle 'manuals' such as *Le cabinet*, or in such works as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings, the 'Lady of Shalott' mythopoeia, or Christina Rossetti's poetry. As well as creating the possibility of self-fragmentation, and of a restrictive act of disciplinary self-surveillance, the mirror in the nineteenth century can also offer a private space which is inaccessible to an external viewer, a space that frustrates any attempt at intrusion. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, the mirror turned away from the viewer suggests a dimension of femininity that remains impervious to the male gaze, despite the apparent compliant objectification of the painting's female

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<sup>68</sup> Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> The idea of self-surveillance in front of the mirror(s) is extremely prominent in such period lifestyle guidebooks as *Le cabinet de toilette d'une honnête femme*, and the doubling (or even multiple fracture) of the female self into 'private' and 'public' comes with it. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray have spoken of a public female identity that is built rather than innate, and which is heavily influenced by social expectations. In *The Second Sex* – trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), p. 295 – de Beauvoir famously argues that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', as familial and social norms gradually impress on the growing (female) child the alleged norms of femininity. As for Irigaray – in *Questions* (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke), in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 136 – she speaks of 'femininity' as a 'masquerade', which she defines a process through which 'a woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into the *masquerade of femininity* [original emphasis]', which is based on her forced assimilation of 'a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can 'appear' and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men'. While this is generally a realistic assessment of the woman's position within society throughout history, it sometimes obscures the possibility of a reverse, that is, of an intimate space where femininity – free of external projections – can assert and express itself.

protagonist. In Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', the mirror fulfills, alongside other roles, that of a space through which to watch the world rather than the self, a magical speculum wherein quasi-mystical 'shadows' are conjured, and through which independence and integrity are negotiated.

This paradigm of an empowering reflective object is possible because of the mirror's potential to 'create' a space that opens up beyond, as it were, the existing physical space of a room. In pragmatic terms, thinking of the mirror in the historical context of interior décor, it helps create the illusion of 'extended' or 'enlarged' width. This, according to Melchior-Bonnet, was a rather popular aesthetic approach in interior design in the 1800s, when, '[u]ltimately, mirrors conquered urban interiors because they offered what such places lacked most – space: "They brighten up and seem to enlarge small rooms," [as] one observer noted in 1870'.<sup>70</sup> However, beyond this obvious function, the virtual space created by mirrors through reflection also acts as a locus of identity. The mirror has the potential both to verify identity by replicating the reflected subject, and to alienate the self by setting it into an unverifiable virtual dimension. It is from the tension between these two competing perspectives that the significance of the 'woman at the mirror' theme in nineteenth-century literature and art is born. This tension is explored most significantly in poems like Christina Rossetti's 'A Royal Princess', where the mirrors surrounding the female figure replicate her body ad infinitum: 'Self to right hand, self to left hand, self in every place,/ Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face'.<sup>71</sup> This tension is resolved – perhaps counter-intuitively but no less strongly – in the strong bond created between mirror and woman. Whilst the mirror can help imprison and isolate the woman (I will trace this tendency in Tennyson's

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<sup>70</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, pp 96-97.

<sup>71</sup> Rossetti, 'A Royal Princess', ll 11-12.

‘Lady of Shalott’) by replicating the person at a superficial level, without actually providing companionship, it is also the woman’s closest ally, after the manner of the magic looking-glass in ‘Snow White’. In ‘A Royal Princess’, when ‘a mirror showed [the princess she] look[ed] old and haggard in the face’, while the image is unpleasant, and at first sight suggestive of a strained relationship between the princess and the mirror, it is, in fact, the mark of complicity between the two: the mirror facilitates the princess’s ‘enlightenment’ and thereby provides the option of her emancipation from a male-led world within which she is voiceless, and does not fit.<sup>72</sup> Regardless of the possibly destructive outcome – ‘I, if I perish, perish’ – following the princess’s choice, the mirror remains a tool of empowerment.<sup>73</sup>

Miranda Anderson argues that ‘the mirror is a cognitive artefact that demonstrates the unstable boundaries between the inner and the outer realms of the subject’, that is to say, a reflective tool that defines the subject as something that can be both a construct, thereby separating an ‘inner, private self’ from an ‘outer, public self’, and a non-construct, thereby representing the subject as a unitary / unified self in private as well as in public.<sup>74</sup> It is precisely the mirror’s function as a doubling agent that allows it to facilitate a sense of authenticity in relationship to the female figure in nineteenth-century works. Melchior-Bonnet’s notes that ‘the mirror offers an enigmatic and divergent way of knowing’ because of its dual physical and virtual nature.<sup>75</sup> This ‘divergence’, nonetheless, lends itself well to explorations of the feminine, and to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., l. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Christina Rossetti, ‘A Royal Princess’, ll 104, 105, 108.

<sup>74</sup> Miranda Anderson, ‘Early Modern Mirrors’, in *The Book of the Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Collection Exploring the Cultural Story of the Mirror*, ed. by Miranda Anderson (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 107.

<sup>75</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 102.

contesting the idea that women must use the mirror solely in order to develop their public, or social, persona. Miranda Anderson comments on '[t]he physical properties of a mirror', arguing that they:

relate to the figurative properties of a metaphor, which is based on notions of transfer: an image of the beholder is transferred onto a reflection, which is at once analogous to and yet different from the observing self, playing with the co-existence of similitude and dissimilitude, and the mental formation of each other by the original and the image.<sup>76</sup>

Consequently, she writes, '[t]he complexity of the mirror as a literary motif arises from the liminal space which it inhabits, being neither entirely subject or entirely object', as a 'potentially revelatory of the interior world of the self and yet conversely figures the objectified self within the external world'.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, both these aspects are explored in the 'woman at the mirror' paradigm of nineteenth-century art, although it is its potential as a tool, or facilitator, of female agency that this thesis is predominantly concerned with, a model which emerges, at least in part, from the cultural and economic importance of the mirror as an object in the nineteenth century, and from its prevalent function in the domestic world of the woman.

### **Correspondences and Divergences between Portraits and Reflected Images**

Subordinate to the mirror, another object works its way into the 'woman at the mirror' theme, and that is the painted portrait, with which the female figure is often confronted,

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<sup>76</sup> Anderson, 'Early Modern Mirrors', p 70.

<sup>77</sup> Anderson, 'Chaucer and the Subject of the Mirror', in *The Book of the Mirror*, p 70.

especially in the literary texts of nineteenth-century Britain. Parallels between the mirror reflection and the painted portrait have been a central question within critical art history. In the study *The Self-Aware Image*, for instance, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță explores the semiotic differences and correspondences between the two, focusing his discussion on the following question: to what extent is the reflected image an ‘image’ in the same way in which the painted image is an ‘image’? ‘If the mirror is an “image” only as long as someone (or something) is standing in front of it, the *painted image* [original emphasis]’, he proposes, ‘continues to “reflect” even if the object of this reflection has for some time been “elsewhere”’.<sup>78</sup> Citing and analysing passages from *La Logique de Port-Royal*, Stoichiță assesses paintings (and implicitly the painted portrait) as a ‘sign’, objects in which the subject is depicted and signified in its absence. By contrast, he argues that ‘[t]he image in the mirror is [...] “a natural sign”’, because ‘it *does not take the place* of the thing signified [...] but *represents* it by reflecting it’ (original emphases).<sup>79</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet also notes similar correspondences between the mirror image and the portrait, in that ‘the mirror shares, with the art of painting, an emphasis on the worth of the image, resemblance, and simulation, all of which are intertwined with the theme of looking at one’s self’.<sup>80</sup> These aspects of resemblance and differentiation pose several problems related to the construction of identity effected through the portrait image versus the mirror image, in general, and to the relationship between the woman and the portrait (of woman), in particular, assuming that the portrait here acts as a mirror by proxy, and the painted image as a (distorted)

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<sup>78</sup> Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. by Anne-Marie Glasheen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 197.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>80</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 3.



reflection. The problems posed related to the construction of identity have to do with who gets to dictate the parameters of that identity (in the case of the painted portrait this may be the commissioner, the painter, or the sitter), and with its endurance or transformation through time.

In her cultural-historical work *Portraiture*, Shearer West cites ‘C.S. Peirce’s semiotic theory of the icon, the index, and the symbol’ in relation to the portrait to argue its peculiar tripartite nature, writing that ‘it resembles the object of representation (icon), it refers to the act of sitting (index), and it contains gestures, expressions, and props that can be read with knowledge of social and cultural convention (symbol)’.<sup>81</sup> This mimetic / interpersonal / symbolic nature of the portrait defines it as a reflective object operating a strict codified language in order to suggest an identity negotiated, as it were, between the sitter and the painter. This implies the problematic nature of that identity, which emerges as a social product, dependent on the gaze of the painter and the implied gazes of the viewers. The mirror, on the other hand, as the most straightforwardly reflective object, raises a different set of questions concerning the apprehension and construction of identity. The mirror image does not require a codified language in order to suggest an identity, and there is also no need of an intermediary in order to create the reflected image. As Miranda Anderson notes in ‘Early Modern Mirror’, ‘the subject can be understood to use the external tool of the mirror to offload aspects of itself onto the visual form it views in the mirror, at the same time as it internalizes the reflection as itself’.<sup>82</sup> Whilst the portrait limits the ‘accuracy’ of the act of reflection because of its intermediary nature, the mirror surface is a place of direct reflection and unmediated construction or deconstruction of identity. In short, the portrait captures a static image

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<sup>81</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, ‘Early Modern Mirrors’, p. 106.

which exists independently of the subject (sitter), whilst the mirror can only display an image for as long as the subject (gazer) is in front of it, and whereas the mirror reflection is an unmediated presentation of the subject, the portrait is, by contrast, a mediated representation thereof. I take it, therefore, that the portrait is a 'reflective object' only inasmuch as it gives back to the gazer (most often female in the context of this thesis) a resemblance, a 'likeness' of herself. Unlike the mirror image, however, this resemblance is more problematic, because it is always dependent on the vision of the painter who created the portrait, and sometimes on that of the commissioner (when different from the sitter). The portrait appears, in nineteenth-century culture and especially in literature, as a problematic locus of female identity (Edgeworth's *Belinda*, Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti's poetry), often disturbing in nature (the Rossettis' poetry), which women can never fully control.<sup>83</sup> In other words, the portrait, as opposed to the mirror, is the true object of Foucauldian 'discipline', since the image of the (female) sitter is controlled, regulated, and modified by an extraneous hand (that of the painter, most often male) in such a way that it will be made to fit either a social or a personal ideal not necessarily (and indeed, most often not at all) inherent to the sitter herself.

Kamilla Elliott argues in her *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction* that certain '[c]ontinuties between portraits and identity were reinforced [throughout the eighteenth century] by a pervasive rhetoric that figured persons as portraits and personified portraits and by ideologies that deemed persons to inhere in their portraits'.<sup>84</sup> Thus, she maintains, there was a cultural practice in eighteenth-century Britain that allowed the

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<sup>83</sup> Unless they are themselves the painters, painting their self-portraits, but this is not the case in the works under scrutiny in this thesis.

<sup>84</sup> Kamilla Elliott, *Portraiture and British Gothic Fiction: The Rise of Picture Identification, 1764-1835* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 3.

identity of the sitters to be mainly expressed through and conditioned by either their specific representation within a portrait, or their (explicitly physical and implicitly moral) likeness to an ancestor's portrait. 'In aristocratic ideology,' she points out, 'progeny and portraits forge parallel chains of imaged identities; sons are made in the images of their fathers as portraits are made in the images of their sitters'.<sup>85</sup> Following this line of reasoning further, Elliott goes on to show that female figures in the period were often represented as automatically 'inheriting' a certain set of predetermined values handed down from generation to generation on a progressive matriarchal spiral by coming into direct contact with the portraits (miniatures etc.) of their maternal ancestors. '[D]aughters and portraits serve as parallel, imaged afterlives of matriarchs,' she argues, 'reinforcing matriarchal identities and their alignment with bourgeois agendas'.<sup>86</sup> Thus, '[t]he maternal image unfolds from mothers to daughters and miniature portraits, creating interpenetrating resemblances that shore up female power in social contexts that disempower them'.<sup>87</sup> Though Elliott makes her argument specifically about British Gothic novels, her points are applicable to other period novels as well, as this thesis will show, as literary texts of the period were written in dialogue with contemporary cultural ideas and aesthetic norms.

The theme of the portrait as an object in the literature of the nineteenth century is extensively based on its social importance and its formal evolution from the eighteenth century onwards. As Joanna Woodall notes, '[t]he eighteenth century was in some respect the apogee of portraiture in England', considering the quantity and variety

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

of portraits produced in the period.<sup>88</sup> Miniature portraiture in particular was on the rise as an industry, with such pocket-size portraits increasingly in demand. Daphne Foscett documents this increase in popularity in *British Portrait Miniatures*, noting that:

Throughout the whole of the eighteenth century there was a growing demand for portrait miniatures and [...] there was an increasing number of artists all working hard to produce the vast number of portraits required to satisfy their patrons. Owing to the great growth of the population and the increase in wealth, many who had hitherto been quite unable to afford articles of artistic merit now found themselves in a position to move into more spacious surroundings and to become collectors in one field or another. The fact that miniatures are so personal, being painted primarily to be worn, or to be carried about by their owners, meant that they had a great appeal to all classes of society and the many artists who sought patrons had no difficulty in obtaining them.<sup>89</sup>

Eighteenth-century Britain thus became, also due to an aggregate of social, economic and political factors – ripe for the development of, as Joanna Woodall terms it, a ‘vigorous portrait culture’, as Joanna Woodall terms it.<sup>90</sup> The conceptual premises of this strong ‘portrait culture’ were in themselves fairly rigorous, as the role of portraits was to express and strengthen social status and identity as much as anything else. Art critics and historians all stress the importance of familial / social hierarchy to the

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<sup>88</sup> Daphne Foscett, *British Portrait Miniatures: A History* (Feltham: Spring Books, 1968), p. 128.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>90</sup> Woodall, ‘Introduction’, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 5.

devising of portraits, which had to express the sitters' various moral virtues and physical qualities.<sup>91</sup> According to Angela Rosenthal, '[r]ather than a reproduction [original emphasis] of a pre-existing self, the portrait [in the eighteenth century] is [...] the production [original emphasis] of sitter and artist, and of the relation between them determined by mobile factors such as class, race, age, and gender'.<sup>92</sup> This type of interaction resulted in an aesthetic ideology wherein the sitter was often idealised, since a flawless physique would more readily suggest the moral qualities of the sitter to the viewer.<sup>93</sup>

This idealising approach, however, although widely spread, was not unproblematic. In describing the aesthetic philosophy of portraiture in eighteenth-century Britain, Andreas Beyer, points out in *Portraits: A History* that 'English painting of the eighteenth century [...] came to be dominated by [...] [t]he rivalry between Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough', a rivalry which, he argues, also exemplified the clash between two competing stances on portraiture.<sup>94</sup> Beyer notes that the existence of these contemporaneous and competing philosophies gave birth to a certain polarisation of portrait painting ideology in this period, which 'revolved around the question [...] of whether the quality of the painting lies in communicating likeness or establishing character'.<sup>95</sup> According to him, 'Reynolds based his work on his classicist perspective

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<sup>91</sup> As above, as well as Kathleen Nicholson, 'The Ideology of Feminine 'Virtue': The Vestal Virgin in French Eighteenth-Century Allegorical Portraiture'; Angela Rosenthal, 'She's Got the Look! Eighteenth-century Female Portrait Painters and the Psychology of a Potentially "Dangerous Employment"'. All in Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture*.

<sup>92</sup> Rosenthal, 'She's Got the Look!', p. 148.

<sup>93</sup> See: Joanna Woodall, 'Introduction: Facing the Subject'; Kathleen Nicholson, 'The Ideology of Feminine "Virtue"'; Rosenthal, 'She's Got the Look!'. All from Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture*.

<sup>94</sup> Andreas Beyer, *Portraits: A History*, trans. by Steven Lindberg (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), p. 252.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*.

and the physiognomic theories of his time' following Caspar Lavater's school of thought, whereas 'Gainsborough [...] had no belief in the notion of a correspondence between outside and inside' as, according to Beyer, '[t]he effectiveness of physiognomy and pathognomy [...] would seem to be called into question by the distinctive accuracy of [his] portraits, which his contemporaries praised for their quality of "breathing life"'.<sup>96</sup> This polarisation of portraiture is perhaps best understood as what Shearer West describes as 'a continuum between the specificity of likeness and the generality of type, showing specific and distinctive aspects of the sitter as well as the more generic qualities valued in the sitter's milieu'.<sup>97</sup> There is a subtle negotiation between the expression of individual and social identity, with the latter probably being the more prevalent aspect of the portrait. Even in discussing Gainsborough's preference for lifelikeness over expression of character, Beyer is still keen to note that 'even in [his] work the equation of individuals with their social positions remains intact, and the appearance of his models is tied to their social status'.<sup>98</sup> It appears then that central to eighteenth-century portraiture was an understanding that the image of the sitter had, amongst other uses, also a symbolic social function. West notes that 'even portraits that had an ostensibly private function [...] are usually intended to be viewed and responded to by a group of individuals rather than a single person', and are therefore constructed at least in part as emblematic objects to which the viewer might relate in a meaningful way.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, West also rightly observes that 'likeness is not a stable concept', but a fluid one, dependent on social and historical context, since '[w]hat might be

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp 252, 255.

<sup>97</sup> West, *Portraiture*, p. 21.

<sup>98</sup> Beyer, *Portraits*, p. 255.

<sup>99</sup> West, *Portraiture*, p. 43.

considered a ‘faithful’ reproduction of features relates to aesthetic conventions and social expectations of a particular time and place’.<sup>100</sup> ‘Although portraits convey a likeness of an individual,’ West adds, ‘they also can demonstrate the imagination of the artist, the perceived social role of the sitter, and the qualities of the sitter that raise him or her above the occasion of the moment’, thus ‘becom[ing] less about likeness and more about the typical, the conventional or the ideal’.<sup>101</sup>

The view West offers here is also supported by period texts which discuss the importance of expressing ‘likeness’ in a portrait versus that of using it to express a particular kind of symbolism, related to how the sitter should be viewed in a social framework. Eighteenth-century writer Horace Walpole, for instance, emphasised the compulsory nature of idealisation in contemporary British ‘portrait culture’ in his quasi-historical work, *Anecdotes of Painting in England*.<sup>102</sup> He acidly denounced the blunt realism of eighteenth-century (Swiss-French) miniaturist Jean-Étienne Liotard, scorning his alleged ‘lack of imagination’ and ‘artistic genius’.<sup>103</sup> Whilst Walpole’s language in passing value judgements about paintings is ambiguous enough to pose difficulty in understanding exactly what makes a ‘good’ portrait in his view – since

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>102</sup> Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England* vol. III (London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey & Co., 1888).

<sup>103</sup> He wrote about the artist and his portrait-miniatures that:

His likenesses were as exact as possible, and too like to please those who sat to him [...] Devoid of imagination, and one would think of memory, he could render nothing but what he saw before his eyes. Freckles, marks of the small-pox, every thing found its place; not so much from fidelity, as because he could not conceive the absence of anything that appeared to him. Truth prevailed in all his works, grace in very few or none. (pp 27-28).

These he compares to Rococo painter Rosalba Carriera’s portrait miniatures, of which he notes that they ‘have much more genius’ because, although less ‘faithful to a likeness’, they feature ‘air and the softness of flesh’ (p.28). This, in turn, makes an interesting contrast to Shearer West’s modern reflection on the subject of Liotard’s portraits, of which he asserts that ‘the soft tones of the pastel could mimic the texture of flesh and enhance the immediacy of the portrait image’ (p. 60).

terms such as ‘grace’, ‘air’, and ‘genius’ can be almost impossible to define – it nonetheless attests to an appreciation of more subtle codification of the painted visage rather than the pure rendering of ‘likeness’. He associated Liotard’s extensive preoccupation with accuracy / realism in portraiture with a lack of virtuosity on his part, as, in Walpole’s view, he ostensibly failed to represent the most important features of the sitter: the unseen ones, the ones that would validate the sitter’s social standing. There is a certain fixation here with idealising the sitter’s physical appearance, or emphasising certain aspects of her/his image in order to suggest her or his internal qualities. This may be explained by what Shearer West identifies as the biographical importance of portraiture, which links to the idea of the social and historical value of the individual portrait. In order to back this argument, West goes on to cite Johnathan Richardson’s eighteenth- century critical work on visual art, *Two Discourses – I. An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism as it Related to Painting, II. An Argument in Behalf of the Science of a Connoisseur*, which argued that ‘[a] Portrait is a sort of General History of the Life of the Person it represents, not only to Him who is acquainted with it, but also to Many others, who upon Occasion of seeing it are frequently told, of what is most Material concerning Them, or their General Character at least’.<sup>104</sup> This idea feeds into Elliott’s perspective that portraits in general have an implicit educational importance and serve prescriptive as much as (or perhaps even more than) descriptive purposes, and that women’s portraits in particular symbolically frame the lives of the women themselves, determining social roles and expectations on a top-to-bottom matriarchal generational scale in a patriarchal and oppressive context.

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<sup>104</sup> West, *Portraiture*, p. 150.



In short, then, both the mirror and the portrait seem to function as reflective objects and are active elements within the larger theme of the ‘woman at the mirror’, in different though complementing ways. It is apparent, from the historical material addressed so far, that the mirror and the portrait, as objects, have a more or less parallel evolution in the British society and culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As an imperfect reflective object, the portrait of the woman in nineteenth-century literature faces the female sitter with the problem of negotiating her selfhood in a world driven by the all-appropriating male gaze. The portrait embodies the struggle to represent the identity of the female figure (as in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘On Mary’s Portrait’), oscillating between an ideal of femininity, and the ever-elusive selfhood of the sitter. This tension is suggested by the representing the portrait alongside – or comparing the two, to stress the competition between reflection and representation. Thus, it is successfully used to counterbalance the role of the mirror within the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme, and the two objects are poised against each other in a cultural dialogue at the centre of which is the question of femininity: where the portrait – idealising and normative – replaces or obstructs the female figure, the mirror allows for a more complex, less restrictive exploration of what the female figure is defined by.

### **Preliminary Questions and Answers Regarding the ‘Woman at the Mirror’ Theme**

The questions to be asked here are both of a historical and of a theoretical nature. The main preliminary historical question is why women are so often associated with mirrors in the aesthetic culture of nineteenth-century Britain. The answer lies in the brief general historical overview provided above, which will be explored further and in greater detail in the following chapters, in relation to the primary works under scrutiny. First, I will argue that the ‘woman at the mirror’ image is part of a longstanding tradition that

has its roots in the Christian allegory of the Renaissance period, and this was re-examined and re-appropriated by writers and artists in nineteenth-century Britain. Secondly, the association between women and mirrors in this period is due to the increased number of mirrors (themselves of increased quality and clarity) available in the nineteenth century, which were installed primarily in such parts of the household generally presided over by women, such as the bed-chamber, the boudoir, and the cabinet de toilette. This final point especially lends legitimacy to the presupposition that the image of a woman looking into her mirror, or that of a woman surrounded by mirrors, would have been prevalent in the nineteenth-century collective consciousness.

The theoretical questions to be asked are, firstly, ‘what does the association of women and mirrors convey in literature and art of this period?’, and secondly, ‘what is the effect of replacing, under certain circumstances, the mirror with the portrait on the theme under scrutiny?’ The answers to these two questions are necessarily nuanced and demand a great degree of circumspection. Essentially, I will argue that, in the literature and visual art of nineteenth-century Britain, the mirror appears most often as a symbol of knowing and developing a female identity, as it alternately reveals or conceals the self, and/or as it reflects the world to which the self is tied. Additionally, I will argue that the mirror often creates an intimate space – virtual or otherwise – for femininity, opening up to the woman, but guarding against the intrusion of an external viewer by refracting his or her gaze. The intimacy thus established between woman and mirror in the works under scrutiny has the effect of granting the woman a sense of agency, even when it comes at great personal cost for her. Within this scheme, when the portrait substitutes the mirror, it acts as a warped reflection of the female figure, problematising the social and individual ideal of femininity as represented by the portrait.

This thesis will be split into four main analytic chapters (that is, excluding the present introduction and the final conclusions), each dealing with a case study. The first chapter, “‘Shadows of the World’: The Woman and Mirror-reflections in ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and Its Pictorial Representations’, will examine the function of the mirror in relationship with the female figure in Alfred Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (1832 and 1842) and in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visual interpretations of the same theme, namely: Henry Darvall’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1848- 1851), Elizabeth Siddall’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1853), William Holman Hunt’s famous painting of the same title (c. 1886-1905), John William Waterhouse’s *The Lady of Shalott (Looking at Lancelot)* (1894) and *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* (1915), and Sidney Harold Meteyard’s *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* (1913). This chapter will argue that the mirror acts alternately as a self-appropriation and a self-alienation device, which, however, is in every case the ‘prime mover’ which facilitates the female figure’s choice of emancipation.

The second chapter, titled ‘The Optical Triangle: Women between Mirrors in Pre-Raphaelite Art’, will examine the implications of the mirror-woman-mirror triangle in the art and writings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelites, centred primarily on Rossetti’s plan for a picture of ‘Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views’ (1863), his *Lady Lilith* (1864-1868) and *Risen at Dawn* (1865-c.1880), as well as Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘A Royal Princess’ (1866). It will be argued that this triangle alienates the viewer and creates a hermetic space (that invites and yet problematises interpretation) for an essentially unknowable (because intimate and self-contained) female identity.

The third chapter, “‘A Thing Much to Wonder On’: The Portrait as Mirror in the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century’ will examine the relationship between female figures and the ‘feminine ideal’ as it is presented or represented to them through the

medium of reflective objects (portraits, mirrors, pools of water) in Pre-Raphaelite and Neo-Pre-Raphaelite works of art (poetry and painting). Some of the works addressed in this chapter will be Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'On Mary's Portrait' (1847) and 'The Portrait' (1881), as well as Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856). This chapter will argue that portraits problematise the idea of an ideal of femininity (imagined primarily by men), and that women and this ideal may not be able to coexist.

Finally, the conclusion will offer a short overview of another realm towards which the 'woman at the mirror' leads the way: that of photography, and its role in shaping the definition of femininity from the late nineteenth century onwards. The photograph – set at the intersection of reflection and representation – may offer an interesting resolution to the tension between mirror and portrait, though this topic will only be introduced, as the gateway to further study.

**‘SHADOWS OF THE WORLD’: THE WOMAN AND MIRROR-  
REFLECTIONS IN ‘THE LADY OF SHALOTT’ AND ITS PICTORIAL  
REPRESENTATIONS**

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the relationship between women and mirrors is laid out in a new light by Alfred Tennyson, with ‘The Lady of Shalott’, first written in 1832 and published in 1833 (*Poems*), and then again in 1842 in a heavily edited version which has since become canonical. The poem was so influential that it inspired the creation of more than fifty-four works of visual art (not counting book illustrations) in the last half of the nineteenth and through to the beginning of the twentieth century, as critics have noted.<sup>105</sup> Its rich thematic impact on the world of visual art, as well as the fact that the ‘woman at the mirror’ image is an emphatic motif in other poems by Tennyson, such as ‘Mariana in the South’ and even ‘In Memoriam A.H.H.’, make the Lady of Shalott and her mirror an excellent starting point for this discussion.

In my reading, the appeal of Tennyson’s poem lies precisely in the complex relationship between the Lady and her mirror, and in the ambiguous message that the work transmits to the reader as she or he strives to understand the Lady’s significance and solve the mystery of her curse. Since the poem revolves around the bond between a woman, and a mirror, it is arguably focused on questions of identity. However, the mirror in the poem is never explicitly said to give back the reflection of the Lady herself, but that of an outside world to which she has no direct access. This makes the relationship between the Lady and her mirror a peculiar one: at first sight, there is no iteration of identity through reflection, and the objects that appear in the mirror are not

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<sup>105</sup> Christine Poulson, ‘Death and the Maiden: The Lady of Shalott and the Pre-Raphaelites’, in *Re-framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. by Ellen Harding (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 173.

an image of the female gazer. Moreover, the mirror itself plays an ambivalent role: it is the only link the Lady is allowed to have with the outside world, thereby both limiting her access to this world and enabling her to experience it through optical reflection. To substantiate these preliminary observations, this chapter will examine the function of the mirror in Tennyson's poem and in relevant pictorial representations of 'The Lady of Shalott' from the period.

The Lady of Shalott paintings analysed in this chapter belong to a period that stretches from the late 1840s (the earliest painting considered is Henry Darvall's, executed between 1848 and 1851) to the 1910s (the latest painting considered is John William Waterhouse's 'I Am Half-sick of Shadows', painted in 1915). While it is not my general intention that this study should cross into the twentieth century, the reason why I consider some works from the 1910s in the same context as earlier paintings is that these works often defy a strict timeline. The most influential painting of the Lady of Shalott from the period, the famous work by William Holman Hunt, was developed over about 48 years, starting with the prototype for the Moxon Tennyson illustration (1857), which evolved into the painting that is more widely known today. The final version of the painting was begun in about 1886 and finished in 1905, thus bridging the two centuries, although it is clearly and strongly rooted in the former. Some of the early twentieth-century works analysed in this chapter, such as Waterhouse's, demonstrate an engagement with Holman Hunt's own pictorial representations of the Lady of Shalott, so they are considered in light of that link, as an extension of late nineteenth-century imagination. Moreover, Waterhouse's later (early twentieth-century) representations of this theme are a development of his earlier (late nineteenth-century) representations of the same, and so it seems natural and coherent that they should be taken as a whole.

This chapter will consider whether and to what extent the mirror inhibits or empowers the female figure in this and other poems by Tennyson, as well as in a number of paintings or drawings inspired by the 'Lady of Shalott'. Additionally, it will address the question of what correspondences can be traced between reflected images and female identity in a context where the mirror-gazer is not necessarily replicated as mirror- reflection.

### **The Lady's Arthurian Heritage**

To address these issues, it is first necessary to offer an overview of the possible sources by which Tennyson may have been inspired in creating 'The Lady of Shalott', and more specifically in imagining her co-dependency on the mirror. A brief look at these sources will help shed some light on the complexity of the figure of the Lady of Shalott and on the polyvalence of her mirror.

First, and perhaps most cited as a source, there is the Arthurian legend of the Lady of Astolat who, hurt by her unrequited love for Sir Lancelot, dies, and her dead body is delivered to him in Camelot on a boat. There are three versions of this Arthurian tale: a thirteenth-century Italian rendition from the collection *Il Novellino*, a French version featured in the thirteenth-century 'Mort Artu' of the Lancelot-Grail cycle, and Thomas Malory's version, which is a reinterpretation of the French story, in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (fifteenth century).<sup>106</sup> Whether Tennyson was aware of this story at the time when he wrote his poem has been the subject of much debate. George O. Marshall Jr. reports Tennyson's denial of having been familiar with the tale to begin with, even as

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<sup>106</sup> 'The Death of Arthur', in *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* vol. IV, ed. by Norris J. Lacy (London and New York: Garland Publications, 1995); *Il Novellino*, ed. by Alberto Conte (Roma: Salerno, 2001); Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* vol. II, 3rd edition, ed. by Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

he admits to an uncanny similarity between the two female protagonists: ‘The Lady of Shalott is evidently the Elaine of the *Morte d’Arthur*, but I do not think that I had ever heard of the latter when I wrote the former’, Tennyson said.<sup>107</sup> In addition to this, however, Marshall also cites a letter that:

F.J. Furnivall wrote to W.M. Rossetti on January 17, 1868 [and which gives] Tennyson’s own account of his acquaintance with the subject: “I met the story first in some Italian *novelle*: but the web, mirror, island, etc., were my own. Indeed, I doubt whether I should ever have put it in that shape if I had been then aware of the Maid of Astolat in *Mort Arthur* [sic].”<sup>108</sup>

Here all manner of fine differences between the various versions of the story could be interjected, and a discussion could be had on which rendition Tennyson was likely to have known (or to have known first). In fact, Marshall goes on to give a short rendering of precisely that. ‘F.T. Palgrave, who knew Tennyson well, said in his notes to the poem that it was suggested by an Italian romance upon the Donna di Scalotta, which differs from the Celtic tradition in placing Camelot near the sea. J. Churton Collins suggests that this source referred to by Palgrave was Novella LXXXI, printed at Milan in 1804’, he writes.<sup>109</sup>

Tennyson’s affirmation, as reported by Furnivall, that he would have written the poem differently had he been aware of the story beforehand is well supported by the fact that later, in 1859, he published ‘Lancelot and Elaine’ (as part of *Idylls of the King*),

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<sup>107</sup> George O. Marshall Jr., *A Tennyson Handbook* (New York: Twayne, 1963), p. 59.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*.



which follows more closely and much more evidently Malory's rendition of the Arthurian story. Whether or not Tennyson did (consciously or unconsciously) model his Lady of Shalott on the Arthurian Elaine of Astolat, the Lady in the poem is presented more as an emblematic fairy-tale figure than as a flesh-and-bone woman, as I shall later discuss more in detail. Identified through her domain (Shalott), without a name of her own, and without much to ground her in reality, she is in fact much more fluid as a figure than even Malory's Elaine, who at least benefits from a proper name. Nonetheless, Malory's Elaine, like the Lady of Shalott, is shown to inhabit a remote and self-sufficient environment, 'the castel of Blyaunte that stood in an ilonde beclosed envyrowne wyth a fayre watir depe and layrge'.<sup>110</sup> Unlike the lonesome Lady of Shalott, however, Malory's Elaine lives there with Lancelot and 'twenty knyghtes and [...] her twenty ladyes'.<sup>111</sup>

Parallels between the Elaine of the 1859 poem ('Lancelot and Elaine') and Tennyson's earlier creation, the Lady of Shalott, can also easily be traced. Like the Lady of Shalott, Elaine's figure in the opening of the poem is shown 'high in her chamber up a tower', in an initial remoteness and isolation very much in line with the Lady's.<sup>112</sup> Elaine does not have a mirror, but for a while she preserves 'the sacred shield of Lancelot' which refracts 'morning's earliest ray', thus 'awa[king] her with the gleam'.<sup>113</sup> Both of Tennyson's female figures, then, depart from the Elaine of Arthurian legend in two main ways: first, they are the protagonists (in *La Morte d'Arthur*, the story

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<sup>110</sup> *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* vol. II, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. by Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 827.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>112</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'Lancelot and Elaine', in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London & Harlow: Longmans, 1969), 13.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, ll 4-6.

revolves less around Elaine than around the goals and desires of the men that surround her, such as Lancelot and her father King Pellès); and they interact with reflective or refractive objects in significant ways.

### **The Desolation of Tennyson's Mirrors**

The germ-idea for the mirror in 'The Lady of Shalott' may have come to Tennyson from two different stories which employ mirrors (or optical tools) as plot devices to compelling effect. In a letter to his aunt Elizabeth Russell, dated April 18, 1828, Tennyson casually mentions characters and situations from the *Arabian Nights*: 'I wish to Heaven I had Prince Houssain's fairy carpet [...] nay, I would even take up with his brother Aboul-something's glass for the mere pleasure of a peep'.<sup>114</sup> The 'glass' mentioned here refers, as Lang and Shannon observe, to the magical telescope of Prince Ali from 'The Story of Prince Ahmed and the Fairy Paribanou' of the *Arabian Nights*, which Tennyson would have read in the version collected by Andrew Lang.<sup>115</sup> In the story, this is 'an ivory telescope of about a foot in length and the thickness of a man's thumb' consisting of a 'pipe [...] furnished with a glass at both ends and [...] by looking through one of them you see whatever object you wish to behold'.<sup>116</sup> Lang and Shannon note that 'The Lady of Shalott' 'may have been' influenced by this story, and it does not seem improbable that Tennyson would have taken a liking to this part of 'The Story of Prince Ahmed', considering that he lived in an age of rapid technological advancement, when the telescope, specifically, was being improved upon at a steady

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<sup>114</sup> *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson: 1821-1850*, vol. I ed. By Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, Note 2, p. 22.

<sup>116</sup> 'Prince Ahmed and the Fairy Paribanou', in *Arabian Nights*, collected and ed. by Andrew Lang (London: Longmans, 1951), pp 65-66.

pace.<sup>117</sup> The fact that he suffered from myopia may also support the view that he must have taken a particular interest in all things optical, telescopes included.<sup>118</sup> The telescope in ‘The Story of Prince Ahmed’, however, through its system of – implicitly – mirrors, does not just bring closer objects within the gazer’s enlarged field of vision, but also objects far beyond his horizon, anything or anyone he may wish to behold.

A similar situation is featured in Sir Walter Scott’s short story ‘My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror’, first published in the annual *The Keepsake* for 1829. This story was apparently much appreciated by Tennyson, and his son Hallam cites Francis Turner Palgrave on this matter in his Memoir of his father: ‘Sir W. Scott’s short tale, *My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror* (how little known!), he once spoke of as the first of all ghost or magical stories’.<sup>119</sup> Andrew Lang also refers to this in his bibliography of Tennyson.<sup>120</sup>

Although there is no direct evidence that Tennyson thought of ‘My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror’ as inspiration for ‘The Lady of Shalott’, the correspondence in the approach to the theme of the woman at the mirror in the two works is noticeable almost immediately. Walter Scott’s story tackles, in fact, not one, but two mirrors, and in both cases they are closely related to female figures. The first mirror is that of the frame story, set in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and it belongs to elderly Aunt Margaret, who reports a belief in signs and portents, which gives her ‘a [mild]

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<sup>117</sup> Lang and Shannon, *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, note 2, p. 22. For a detailed discussion of advancements in optical technology in the Victorian period, see Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror* pp 170-176.

<sup>118</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Tennyson’s near-sightedness and his poetic devices, see Gerhard Joseph, ‘Tennyson’s Optics: The Eagle’s Gaze’, *PMLA*, 92.3 (May 1977), pp 420-428.

<sup>119</sup> Hallam Tennyson, ‘Personal Reflections by F.T. Palgrave (Including Some Criticisms by Tennyson); 1849-1892’ in *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* vol. II (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 505.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Lang, *Alfred Tennyson* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901), p. 223.

feeling of supernatural awe'.<sup>121</sup> This feeling, Aunt Margaret explains to her nephew (the character- narrator) is accompanied by a series of 'symptoms', one of which is 'a desire to avoid looking into a mirror, when you are alone in your chamber for the evening'.<sup>122</sup> In her speech, she refers explicitly and exclusively to what she terms 'female imagination' when 'in due temperature to enjoy a ghost story'.<sup>123</sup>

Aunt Margaret introduces the idea of the mirror as a magical object, to which women are particularly sensitive. The relationship between female figures and mirrors is redefined: the mirror not only reveals to them the present physical truth of their own bodies, whether or not they want to see it, but it also reveals a metaphysical truth, foretelling their upcoming death, or giving them news of some misfortune. The nephew's rejoinder to Aunt Margaret – 'That last symptom, dear aunt, of shunning the mirror, seems likely to be a rare occurrence amongst the fair sex' – is aimed at grounding the mirror and its female scryer into a more immediate domestic reality.<sup>124</sup> However, even in this context, the aunt points out a more complicated relationship between women and their reflected images: 'All women consult the looking-glass with anxiety before they go into company;' she retorts, 'but when they return home the mirror has not the same charm. The die has been cast [...]'.<sup>125</sup> This is not, however, just about the frivolity of checking one's appearance, of regulating one's image by use of the mirror: Aunt Margaret invokes 'the mysteries of the dressing-table', suggesting that a woman's

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<sup>121</sup> Walter Scott, 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror', in *The Two Drovers and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 273.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

toilette is a sanctuary of femininity, wherein the secret rites of self-grooming are performed.<sup>126</sup>

Faithful to the notion that what happens in a *chambre de toilette* must not be disclosed, least of all to men, aunt Margaret does not reveal to her nephew anything of the ‘mysteries’ she mentions to him. What she does disclose, however, is a dread that the mirror might, under certain conditions, act like the opposite of Ali’s ‘glass’ and show her, rather than her heart’s desire, her greatest fears: ‘I myself [...] do not like to see the blank black front of a large mirror in a room dimly lighted, and where the reflection of the candle seems rather to lose itself in the deep obscurity of the glass, than to be reflected back again into the apartment’.<sup>127</sup> The image of a dark mirror leads us back to the mirror-making technologies of the eighteenth century, which were imperfect and caused ‘a darkness [to linger] in the tain’, as Sabine Melchior-Bonnet notes.<sup>128</sup> The idea of a dark mirror, though, is also highly reminiscent of dark scrying surfaces reportedly used by witches and sorcerers in their magical practices. Indeed, Scott must have seen the notorious John Dee’s black mirror at the British Museum, since he gives an account of it in *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*.<sup>129</sup> In Scott’s story, a mirror in a chamber at night becomes an object full of necromantic potential: ‘That space of inky darkness seems to be a field for fancy to play her revels in’, insists Aunt Margaret, and in the mirror may be conjured ‘other features to meet us, instead of the reflection of our own’.<sup>130</sup> In Scott’s story, the domestic mirror becomes an object of black magic

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>128</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 62.

<sup>129</sup> Scott, ‘Aunt Margaret’s Mirror’, p. 274.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibidem*.

‘in particular times and places’, i.e. implicitly at moments of high emotional intensity and in sanctuary-like spaces, of which a woman’s *chambre de toilette* is one.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, Aunt Margaret evokes the story of her ancestress Lady Forester who, some two centuries before, had had precisely such an experience with a mirror. Gone to consult a quack ‘Doctor’ about the fate of her missing husband, she was taken to an isolated room and placed in front of ‘a very tall and broad mirror, [...] illumined by [...] lighted torches, [...] [a] polished and sable space’.<sup>132</sup> This ‘polished and sable space’ seems to be nothing other than an enlarged version of Dr Dee’s obsidian mirror, as it shows the lady scenes from an entirely different space (and quite possibly time): ‘as if [the mirror] had self-contained scenery of its own, objects began to appear within it, at first in a disorderly, indistinct, and miscellaneous manner, like form arranging itself out of chaos; at length, in distinct and defined shape and symmetry’.<sup>133</sup> A link can easily be established here between reflection and representation, as the reflection in Scott’s mirror offers the ‘appearance of a real scene, existing within the mirror, as if represented in a picture, save that the figures were movable instead of being stationary’.<sup>134</sup> By erasing the distinction between representation and reflection, the magic mirror anticipates the framed moving images of the cinema. The images it shows foretell and engender disaster, as it reveals Lady Forester’s deceitful husband being chased away in shame, which will eventually lead to the Lady’s untimely death.

The theme of the mirror as a harbinger of disaster seems to have been one in which Tennyson was highly invested. In part six of ‘In Memoriam’ (written between

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

1833 and 1850), Tennyson refers at one point to the tragic impossibility of foreseeing a loved one's death, which is specifically linked to the woman-mirror relationship. He imagines the 'parable' of the young woman preparing for her lover's much-awaited call, ignorant of the fact that, even as she is eagerly waiting for him, he is dying:

For now her father's chimney glows  
In expectation of a guest;  
And thinking "this will please him best,"  
She takes a riband or a rose;

For he will see them on tonight;  
And with the thought her colour burns;  
And, having left the glass, she turns  
Once more to set a ringlet right;

And even when she turned, the curse  
Had fallen, and her future Lord  
Was drowned in passing through the ford,  
Or killed in falling from his horse.<sup>135</sup>

The language and imagery used here are virtually identical to those of the 1832 version of 'The Lady of Shalott', from the rose with which the young woman adorns herself,

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<sup>135</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'In Memoriam', in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London & Harlow: Longmans, 1969), ll 29-40.

which is reminiscent of the roses of the Lady's 'isle', to the image of the mirror, the gesture of the woman 'turning' and the concomitant 'falling of the curse'.

Like the Lady, this young woman is also shown at her 'glass', though she does so in order to check her appearance, desirous to please her lover – 'thinking "this will please him best" [...] For he will see them on tonight' – and consequently this mirror, unlike the Lady's, serves common utilitarian purposes. Furthermore, unlike the Lady, the woman in this passage appears to be turning back to the mirror rather than away from it – 'having left the glass, she turns/ Once more to set a ringlet right' – and here there is no sense of her actions in any way triggering 'the curse', whose effects come across as something predestined and which cannot be avoided or in any way put off. 'The curse' here is implicitly the unpredictability of death, in this case the death of a loved one. Unlike the Lady's curse, however, which is supposedly directly dependent on her actions, the outcome of this 'spell' cannot be prevented; it is independent of external factors. 'And even when she turned, the curse/ Had fallen', the poem says, the past perfect suggesting that the effect of the curse had already been enacted, and is not dependent on the woman's actions. There is no factual evidence as to when part six of 'In Memoriam' was composed, but the very strong linguistic and thematic similarities with 'The Lady of Shalott' seem to suggest that both were conceived in the same period, and that both may have been influenced by Walter Scott's tale of mystery.

Other notable correspondences with 'The Lady of Shalott' across Tennyson's work occur in 'Mariana' (1830) and 'Mariana in the South' (first written in 1831, first published in 1833). Like the Lady, Mariana inhabits a remote, isolated space, set apart by a 'lonely isolated grange'.<sup>136</sup> To this is also added the significant mention of shadows

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<sup>136</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'Mariana', in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London & Harlow: Longmans, 1969), ll 8.



that populate Mariana's secluded world, which prompt a comparison with the 'shadows' revealed by the Lady's mirror:

And ever when the moon was low,  
And the shrill winds were up and away,  
In the white curtain, to and fro,  
She saw the gusty shadow sway.  
But when the moon was very low,  
And wild winds bound within their cell,  
The shadow of the poplar fell  
Upon her bed, across her brow.<sup>137</sup>

Yet more correspondences are detectable between 'The Lady of Shalott' and 'Mariana in the South', as the shadow imagery occurs again: 'With one black shadow at its feet'.<sup>138</sup> Mariana, in similar fashion to the Lady in her sarcophagus-like boat, sings melancholy 'carols' ('as her carol sadder grew').<sup>139</sup> The female figure of 'Mariana in the South' also agonises over the tantalising, spectral image of her absent lover, reminiscent both of the shadows in the Lady's mirror, and of the refractive body of Lancelot: the line 'An image seemed to pass the door' occurs twice, in quick succession.<sup>140</sup> Finally, the figure of Mariana also interacts with a mirror, albeit for different reasons than the Lady does: 'And on the liquid mirror glowed/ The clear

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., ll 49-56.

<sup>138</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'Mariana in the South', in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London & Harlow: Longmans, 1969), l. 1.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., l. 13.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., ll 65, 74.

perfection of her face./ ‘Is this the form,’ she made her moan,/ ‘That won his praises night and morn?’’.<sup>141</sup> The mirror here only fuels Mariana’s unanswerable questions and reinforces her isolation and imprisonment; it is not turned outwards, upon the world, like the Lady’s glass, and offers no new knowledge, or intimations of a way out, at any cost. The use of the epithet ‘liquid mirror’ suggests the glass has a fluid quality, like the sea mentioned only a few lines earlier (‘Into deep orange o’er the sea’), or like the river that no longer flows through the ‘empty river-bed’.<sup>142</sup> This association between the mirror and a body of water also suggests that the mirror reinforces her isolation and reminds her of the desolation of the sea that fails to bring her lover back. The ‘clear perfection’ of Mariana’s face is also reminiscent of the Lady’s ‘glassy countenance’ at the end of the poem, and it suggests that the emphasis is placed not on her beauty, but on a sense of transformation of the female figure into a reflective or refractive object as, in isolation, she experiences death-in-life.

The fact that Tennyson used the imagery and language of isolation, specularity, fluidity, and spectrality in relationship to female figures repeatedly across several poems conceived and/or written during what seems to have been the same period (1830s-1840s) demonstrates his commitment to the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme, with which he experimented time and again. Nevertheless, ‘The Lady of Shalott’ employs all these elements and this theme in a way that effectively foregrounds their complexity much more than his other works, as will be seen.

A number of conceptual similarities can be observed between the ideas presented in Scott’s ‘My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror’ and the setting and outline of Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’, as well as that of the other poems mentioned

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., ll 31-34.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., ll 31, 26, 6.

previously. The idea of the female figure placed in an isolated space with the valences of a sanctuary recurs in Tennyson's poems, and it does so with particular emphasis in 'The Lady of Shalott'. This allows for a transformation and augmentation of the 'mysteries of the dressing- table', as Scott put it in his story, in the Lady's relationship with her mirror, which seems to fuse the magical telescope of Prince Ali and Lady Forester's occult mirror. The Lady's mirror gives back 'shadows of the world', reflections of a space entirely inaccessible to the Lady, as I shall later discuss. Moreover, separated to all intents and purposes from the subjects it reflects, the Lady's mirror is also in essence a 'moving picture', in this case of Camelot and its inhabitants.

A further link between Tennyson's poem and Scott's story can be traced in their use of voice in relation to (more precisely, in disjunction with) the mirror. In 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror', the quack Doctor gives an injunction of silence which, if not heeded, will result in the interruption of the charm and perhaps more serious injuries to the gazer. Indeed, when Lady Forester is startled and 'utter[s] an imperfect exclamation [...] the whole scene [in the mirror] stirred and seemed to separate'.<sup>143</sup> The occurrence is likened to 'the dispersion of the reflection offered by a deep and calm pool, when a stone is suddenly cast into it, and the shadows become dissipated and broken'.<sup>144</sup> Not only is there a linguistic correspondence between Scott's tale and Tennyson's poem in the interchangeability of 'shadows' and 'reflections'; the idea of sound and sight as mutually disruptive phenomena, too, occurs in 'The Lady of Shalott'. Lancelot's utterance of the broken ditty coincides with the Lady turning away from the mirror, and the Lady herself is known to the people of Camelot only by sound (thanks to her singing)

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<sup>143</sup> Scott, 'Aunt Margaret's Mirror', p. 297.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibidem*.

but never, until the very end, by sight. When, finally, the inhabitants of Camelot get to see the Lady, she has been rendered mute by death.

Many linguistic correspondences occur between the epigraph of Walter Scott's tale and 'The Lady of Shalott'. The epigraph, although assigned to an anonymous author, may in fact have been written by Scott himself, as Graham Tulloch contends.<sup>145</sup> The emphasis on the substance / shadow dichotomy in those verses – 'Substance seems shadow, shadow substance seems' – is echoed not only in Tennyson's preoccupation with 'shadows' as evidenced in 'The Lady of Shalott', but also in his later description of the Lady's passage from the confines of her tower and into the outside world. In his *Memoir of his father*, Hallam Tennyson cites an interpretation of the poem once given by Alfred: 'The new born love for something, for some one in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities'.<sup>146</sup> It seems, then, that Tennyson had in mind a similar dual structure in his construction of 'The Lady of Shalott', as I shall further discuss in the following section.

### **The Lady of Shalott's Specular World**

Both versions of 'The Lady of Shalott' begin by outlining the Lady's status as an isolated figure, and one that is partially dispossessed of agency as a punishment for a mysterious trespass – perhaps following suit from Eve's original sin – apparently embedded in the fabric of her very existence.<sup>147</sup> The space which the Lady inhabits is not only a remote and secluded place – an island sealed off by a river, a more efficient

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<sup>145</sup> See his note to the epigraph, *The Two Drovers and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 404: 'these lines are probably by Scott: he often composed chapter mottoes [...] when unable to think of a suitable quotation'.

<sup>146</sup> Arthur Hallam, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 117.

<sup>147</sup> In discussing 'The Lady of Shalott' I will refer both to the final, 1842 version of Tennyson's poem, and to the earlier 1832 text where relevant, bringing into focus the shifts, transformations, and erasures that occurred from one rendition to the other. I will specify whenever I refer to the 1832 text.

type of ‘moated grange’ than the one depicted in Tennyson’s earlier poem, ‘Mariana’ – but also a liminal area. From the very first stanza, its ambiguous, even otherworldly position is suggested through a stand-alone and therefore uncertain adverb of place, ‘below’ (‘Round an island there below’) which marks Shalott as ‘far away’, though neither here nor there.<sup>148</sup> This is the ground of fairy-tales or legends, like Hades of Greek mythology, or the Celtic Annwn, both of which are underworlds, vaguely situated somewhere ‘below’ the known, natural world. This marks Shalott as a place that is both somewhat familiar and somewhat strange, allowing for the supernatural and the unexplained, and governed by weird laws. The more in-depth description of the island itself in the second stanza also supports this view: ‘Four gray walls, and four gray towers,/ Overlook a space of flowers,/ And the silent isle imbowers/ The Lady of Shalott’.<sup>149</sup> The significance of the verb ‘imbowers’ as suggestive of containment or imprisonment has been discussed many times over, but that of her immediate environment less so.<sup>150</sup> The sense of claustrophobia indicated by the dark, oblong enclosure (‘[f]our gray walls’, ‘four gray towers’) seems to suggest not only a cell or a prison, but also a tomb, and the heavy repetition ‘[f]our gray [...], four gray’ creates the illusion of a furtive glimpse at a body buried alive.<sup>151</sup> This is counterbalanced by the ‘space of flowers’, the epithet ‘silent isle’ and, in the 1832 version of the poem, the abundance of apparently overgrown roses: ‘The little isle is all inrailed/ With a rose-

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<sup>148</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, l. 8.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., ll 15-18.

<sup>150</sup> For a discussion on the significance of this verb in the context of Tennyson’s poem see, for instance, the ‘Introduction’ by Jennifer Gribble to *The Lady of Shalott in the Victorian Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1983), especially the sections ‘The Lady’ and ‘The Room’, or Thomas L. Jeffers’s article, ‘Nice Threads: Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott as Artist’, in *Yale Review*, 89.

<sup>151</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, l. 15.

fence, and overtrailed/ With roses: by the marge unhailed'.<sup>152</sup> These references to silence and flowers blooming untended are reminiscent of the peaceful atmosphere of an old graveyard, itself a liminal space negotiating the relationships between the living and the deceased, between things of this world and matters of the other world, and where plants have taken over in time and nothing may perturb the tranquil sleep of the dead. These lines were substituted in the 1842 text with: 'By the margin, willow-veiled,/ Slide the heavy barges trailed/ By slow horses; and unhailed'.<sup>153</sup> While the flowers are no longer present, here the weeping willows, 'heavy barges', and 'slow horses' denote a similar funereal atmosphere.

It should also be observed, in reference to the island's position previously indicated as 'there below', that generic 'underworlds' are usually places inhabited by the spirits of the dead.<sup>154</sup> Later on in the poem the island is twice referred to as 'remote Shalott', and once as 'still Shalott', thus reinforcing the idea of combined distance and stasis.<sup>155</sup>

Not only does the lady inhabit a liminal space akin either to graveyards or to underworlds, but she is a liminal being herself, known outside Shalott only as a disembodied voice, 'chanting cheerly,/ Like an angel' in the 1832 version of the poem, or described by 'the reaper weary' as 'the fairy/ Lady of Shalott' in the 1842 version.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, the image of the reapers themselves also recalls echoes of death and cyclicity.

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<sup>152</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott' (1842), l. 16, 17, and 'Lady of Shalott' (1832), ll 19-21.

<sup>153</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', l. 81, 91, 99.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 7.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, ll 81, 91, 99.

<sup>156</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott' (1832), ll 30-31, and 'Lady of Shalott' (1842), l. 33, ll 35-36.

In *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, Herbert F. Tucker proposes an interpretation of the poem where the Lady of Shalott is both an emanation of the place she inhabits and at odds with it.<sup>157</sup> According to him, ‘the Lady is a *genius loci*, [...] incarnate in the landscape, affirmed “in all the land”’, and this proposition is also supported by the fact that she is never given a name of her own, being referred to only by the name of the place she inhabits, as ‘the Lady of Shalott’.<sup>158</sup> However, Tucker rightly adds, ‘[a]t the same time, [...] her status in the fairy world jars with the workaday world, as the cheerfulness of her untiring song sets her apart’.<sup>159</sup> Inhabitant of an ‘other’ place, the Lady is herself an intangible ‘other’: the Lady’s depiction as ‘fairy’ or ‘angel’, or even purely as ‘song’ brought in the first instance to the inhabitants of Camelot by the wind or as a distant echo almost serves to de-gender her, giving her a quasi-androgynous status.<sup>160</sup> An ambiguous inhabitant of a liminal space, the Lady can thus establish her identity only by referring to three coordinates: the mysterious curse regulating her existence, the mirror that is her only palpable link to the outside world, and the tapestry that she weaves ad infinitum.

The first element, the curse, is not particularly revealing on its own; it is unexplained and of an unusual nature: ‘She has heard a whisper say/ A curse is on her if she stay/ To look down to Camelot./ She knows not what the curse may be’.<sup>161</sup> The origins of this curse are as mysterious as its effects, and all that is known to the Lady is

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<sup>157</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp 101-102.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>160</sup> For an in-depth discussion of voice and echoing as a necessary pair to reflexivity in ‘The Lady of Shalott’, see the chapter ‘The Mirror and the Echo *En Abyme* in Victorian Poetry’ in Gerhard Joseph, *Tennyson and the Text: The Weaver’s Shuttle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>161</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’ (1842), ll 39-42.

what she may not do, 'stay/ To look down on Camelot'.<sup>162</sup> Thus she is made into a working automaton that is only allowed to gaze outside her abode through the intermediary lens of her mirror. The earlier, 1832 text of the poem gives lines 39-42 as: 'A curse is on her, if she stay/ Her weaving, either night or day,/ To look down to Camelot./ She knows not what the curse may be'. This makes the injunction for productive action even more emphatic; respite or reverie is something that the Lady may not indulge in.

The Lady is in stasis as much as she is in transition; limited and rooted in habit by the curse, which seems to indicate that she is a victim of predestination, she is also understood to be young (or at least unformed, due to her extreme isolation), *en route* to achieving maturity or 'womanhood'. This is also suggested by her nagging erotic drive, indicated by her frustrated contemplation of unattainable love: 'She hath no loyal knight and true'.<sup>163</sup> This is what gives the Lady her transitory status, as she is pictured in the course of deciding her identity and her relationship with the world she is made to inhabit. In this context, the mirror to which she is compelled to refer becomes a multi-dimensional time-space scrying object, into which the female gazer can conjure her most intimate desires and fears, and through which she can negotiate her relationship with both. The mirror ultimately allows the Lady to create (or en-gender) her self, not by showing her reflection, but by showing her the world 'there where it is not', namely in the claustrophobic confines of the tower, so that she may at least perceive it if she cannot fully experience it. On the other hand, the mirror also becomes the ultimate tool of surveillance; not, as in a regular *chambre de toilette*, of self-surveillance, but of a sort

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<sup>162</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 40-41.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., l. 62.



of transcendental Big Brother-like entity: as long as the mirror remains whole, it means that the Lady has not done anything to trigger the curse.

Besides providing a virtual space that serves both to help ‘weave’ the Lady’s identity and to limit it, the mirror also foregrounds the tension between (traditional) feminine passivity and active feminine agency which is inherent to the poem. In *The Claude Glass*, a study of the functions and significance of convex mirrors in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century painting, Arnaud Maillet notes that ‘while the reflection in the mirror involves a certain passivity, [...] it can be an aid for the artist in the production of an artwork understood as an active reduction [of the scenery] to be held in the hand’.<sup>164</sup> When gazing into such a mirror with the purpose of ‘capturing’ a fragment of landscape in order to reproduce it artistically, Maillet adds, ‘the painter must direct the gaze and deliver it from the randomness that would render it uncontrollable’.<sup>165</sup> In other words, the mirror, rather than being allowed to simply reflect a passive image, must be actively controlled by the artist so that it yields the best possible image, the most aesthetically pleasing. Tennyson’s Lady, too, uses her mirror for artistic purposes: to weave images of the world that is inaccessible through her other than via optical reflection. The question arises, then, whether she allows the mirror to ‘dictate’ her subjects, reproducing any and all reflections the mirror might reveal to her, or whether the Lady is her own, as well as the mirror’s active mistress, all the time judging, choosing and perhaps conjuring her own subjects in the glass.

An answer to this question may be found in the fact that the mirror appears to shift constantly (in colour and clarity) throughout the poem. These shifts are tied to the

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<sup>164</sup> Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2009), p. 86.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Lady's evolution from the beginning to the end of the poem. 'Before her hangs a mirror clear,/ Reflecting towered Camelot', says the 1832 text of the poem, which was then changed in 1842 to 'And moving through a mirror clear/ [...] Shadows of the world appear'.<sup>166</sup> The introduction of the switch from 'reflection' to 'shadow' in the later version serves to emphasise that the Lady not only inhabits a world of shadows (or a shadow-world) in the shape of Shalott, but that she herself is only a shadow; insubstantial outside of Shalott, she is inessential within Shalott, too. In *A Short History of the Shadow* Victor Stoichiță has argued, working his way from Platonic thought to Lacanian psychoanalysis, that 'the shadow preceded the specular reflection' in terms of defining identities, and also that 'the mirror stage involves primarily the identification of the I, whereas the shadow stage involves mainly the identification of the other [original emphasis]'.<sup>167</sup> Thus, in her mirror the Lady sees, in Platonic fashion, imperfect – because ghostly – renditions of the world, but this (re)definition of the reflections in her mirror as 'shadows' implies that she herself may be, in her mirror, an 'other', a ghostly apparition, further alienated from herself. Confronted with 'shadows' by her mirror, trapped in a place set between worlds, the Lady is presented as an immaterial, chimerical being. When she utters what has since become perhaps the most famous line of Tennyson's poem – 'I am half sick of shadows' – her words are doubly tragic, because they express her grief at what is essentially her own lack of substance.<sup>168</sup>

The question remains of what kind of mirror the Lady refers to, and what her relationship with it is. The mirror, as portrayed in Tennyson's poem, can be read as

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<sup>166</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott' (1832), ll 49-50, and 'Lady of Shalott' (1842), l. 46, 48.

<sup>167</sup> Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *A Short History of the Shadow*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 23, 31.

<sup>168</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', l. 71.

having at least two functions: one reading would be, as Gerhard Joseph proposes, that the Lady's mirror is purely utilitarian, aiding her in her weaving; another is that it is a potentially supernatural, or perhaps divinatory object, as suggested by the phrase 'the mirror's magic sights' and by the overall otherworldliness of Shalott.<sup>169</sup> Described, in turns, through epithets such as the 'mirror clear', 'the mirror blue' and 'the crystal mirror', the Lady's glass seems to metamorphose in accordance to the Lady's needs and emotions. It is 'clear' when the lady is about her weaving and studies the world so as to replicate or interpret it in her art.<sup>170</sup> Later, it becomes 'blue' when it conjures up images of the people of Camelot, all of them either in groups or pairs, or else seeking companionship. As Tucker compellingly argues:

In part II [of the poem] the Lady beholds a series of human figures who are variously bound to each other [...] or who, if solitary, are bound by their occupations [...] to the social fabric that the Lady's solitary weaving can but mimic. Furthermore, these human figures are connected to the common life, by [...] the bonds of the affections. Although such affections in Tennyson get a rather telegraphic treatment restricted to the 'surly village-churls' and the 'damsels glad,' against the reserve of the narrator and the affective anesthesia of the Lady these brief epithets suffice to suggest a spectrum of emotion that the Lady notably lacks.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Joseph, 'The Mirror and the Echo *En Abyrne*', p. 103; Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', l. 65.

<sup>170</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 46, 60, 106.

<sup>171</sup> Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*. p. 107.

The situation thus outlined in the poem suggests that it is not necessarily a man the Lady craves, but companionship, real touch and interaction, the only thing which would offer the sort of self-validation the Lady needs in order to annul her insubstantiality. The mirror here becomes 'blue', seemingly picking up on the Lady's own sadness or melancholy, suggested by 'She hath no loyal knight and true' – implying passive regret – and the Lady's own active utterance of 'I am half sick of shadows'.<sup>172</sup> Already this divergent assertion marks a development of the Lady's figure: no longer an automaton unquestioningly obeying the prescription of the curse, she voices her emotions for the first time. It is not, therefore, a sacrificial urge, or a quasi-masochistic, 'natural' need to give in to a man, to be ruled and consumed by him, as Bram Dijkstra asserts in *Idols of Perversity*, that ultimately determines the Lady's choice to break free of the tower, but a compulsion to gain substance through social interaction; in her 'mirror blue' everything comes in pairs: 'The knights come riding two and two'.<sup>173</sup> Here is also where the Lady's conundrum – and, implicitly, that of the mirror – lies: her secluded bower, Shalott, her uninterrupted weaving ('And so she weaveth steadily'), and even the mirror, showing her the world she cannot touch, all indicate a manner of self-sufficiency which not only eradicates trouble and worry ('And little other care hath she') but also means that she already has everything she needs.<sup>174</sup> Nevertheless, as has already been shown, the Lady's insubstantiality – and also that of the limited and liminal space she inhabits – is constantly reflected by the mirror, thus urging her to seek substance in the hitherto intangible world outside. Projected onto this virtual space, the Lady's fear of and/or

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<sup>172</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 62, 71.

<sup>173</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 11; Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', l. 61.

<sup>174</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 43, 44.

frustration with insubstantiality and her implicit desire to break free of the liminal space she inhabits to transform potential into existence are translated into the ‘blue’ tint of the mirror, symbolic of the Lady’s melancholy.

The link between the colour blue and the idea of melancholy can be traced to Goethe’s lengthy and disputed treatise on the *Theory of Colours*, first published in 1810. In his treatise, Goethe wrote of the colour blue that: ‘This colour has a peculiar and almost indescribable effect on the eye. As a hue it is powerful, but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. Its appearance, then, is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose’.<sup>175</sup> Set at the point of tension ‘between excitement and repose’, blue seems to be, in Goethe’s worldview, the colour that stimulates that fever of the spirit which is melancholy. In fact, Goethe also writes more explicitly that ‘[t]he appearance of objects seen through a blue glass is gloomy and melancholy’, and it is this idea that has trickled into Tennyson’s poem under the guise of the ‘mirror blue’.<sup>176</sup> As Leonée Ormond writes in *Alfred Tennyson: A Literary Life*, Tennyson was a great admirer of Goethe’s work and he, in fact, ‘owned Charles Eastlake’s translation [of Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*] of 1840’, so he would have had first-hand knowledge of his concepts.<sup>177</sup>

The last textual metamorphosis of the Lady’s glass, when it becomes ‘crystal’, significantly reveals Sir Lancelot to the Lady – not a face, nor a man, but (one is tempted to say) a ‘Frankenstein-type’ being, put together out of a myriad of empty signifiers: a sparkly shield, a ‘gemmy bridle’, a ‘blazoned baldric’, a ‘mighty silver bugle’, ringing

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<sup>175</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. by Charles Lock Eastlake (London: M.I.T. Press, 1970), pp 310-311.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>177</sup> Leonée Ormond, *Alfred Tennyson: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 57.

armour, '[t]hick-jewelled [...] saddle leather', a feathered helmet, a disembodied 'broad clear brow' and 'coal black curls', the obligatory 'war-horse' and, finally, a meaningless song ('Tirralirra').<sup>178</sup> As Tucker demonstrates, this Lancelot is little more than 'a mirage confectioned out of bits and trappings', not a knight of flesh and blood, but 'pure representation: a man of mirrors'.<sup>179</sup> The mirror in its shiny crystal avatar reveals to the Lady a figure that is as devoid of substance as the Lady herself; and if the Lady has not stopped her weaving to look out of the window so far, she does so now for a puzzle of gleaming objects rather than for any one of the live people she has seen in her mirror up until now.

Tucker's straightforward and credible explanation for this is that, '[i]f what the Lady has habitually loved in the past is a beautiful irrelevance,' i.e. the 'shadows' and 'reflections' in her mirror, 'that is what will continue to move her, no matter what she resolves to the contrary'.<sup>180</sup> What Lancelot 'the icon', 'the idol' awakens in the Lady is perhaps desire – sexual, aesthetic, or of a social nature – but perhaps also recognition; after all, Lancelot and the Lady are creatures of a kind, at least to the world of 'reapers', merry 'damsels' and shepherds that parade every day round and about Shalott: they are both myths, intangible ideals, or maybe fearsome 'otherworldly' creatures, floating voices singing cheery songs empty of content but pleasing to hear.

Just as the Lady is an emanation of Shalott, conditioned by the island to which she is confined, so too the figure she glimpses in her mirror is an emanation of Camelot, or perhaps a projection of all of Camelot's ideals onto a single man. The one difference between them is essentially that the Lady is a passive principle relegated to a deathlike

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<sup>178</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 78-80, l. 82, 87, 88, 89, 92, 93, 100, 103, 101, 107.

<sup>179</sup> Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, p.112.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

world of stasis, while Lancelot is an active principle connected to a lively, dynamic place. They are – literally and figuratively – reverse images of each other. Although this ‘lopsided twin’ of the Lady is what causes her to finally choose to look out of the window, when she does turn, she notably looks not at him, but at various parts which make up the world that she has hitherto seen only reflected: ‘She saw the water-lily bloom,/ She saw the helmet and the plume,/ She looked down to Camelot’.<sup>181</sup> The Lady’s gaze encompasses a number of synecdochal images – ‘the water-lily’, ‘the helmet’, ‘the plume’ – which, like a perception puzzle, seem to quickly fall into place and reveal what the Lady had been looking for in the first place: Camelot. As she turns to look, her mirror ‘crack[s] from side to side’, pre-empting the Lady’s slow but sure death and allowing her to understand that her actions have triggered the curse: “‘The curse is come upon me,” cried/ The Lady of Shalott’.<sup>182</sup> This ultimate correspondence between the female figure and her mirror suggests that the two, in fact, reflect each other.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the Lady and her mirror, even if so far it has been carefully disguised under textual ambiguities: the mirror helps the Lady in her work, reflects her emotions, shows her what she wants to see (although by doing so it only further alienates the Lady from herself) and is destroyed when the Lady is about to die. The connection between the Lady and the mirror, therefore, is visceral; the mirror, here, is no mere utilitarian object of reflection, but stands as the correspondent of the Lady herself. In many ways, the mirror and the Lady are one and the same, though not in the sense proposed by Dijkstra for nineteenth-century art – that any one woman is merely the mirror image of every other woman, in a long thread of repetitive female

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<sup>181</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, ll 111-113.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., ll 115-117.

figures that originates in the Platonic ideal Woman.<sup>183</sup> In Tennyson's poem, rather, the Lady and her mirror both reflect the space into which they are placed both literally and figuratively: the mirror because it is an object which by definition takes on, as it were, the lookers' faces, and the Lady because she is compelled to remain 'faceless', generic and insubstantial by the curse and by her seclusion.

Finally, it should be noted that the Lady's life is governed not only by her own mirror, but by mirrors in general. Mirror-imagery is not confined, in the poem, to the Lady's fabled glass alone. Other images suggesting reflection and femininity are also recalled, such as the river – to which the reader's attention is repeatedly drawn, both in the 1832 version of the text and in the 1842 revision – and the moon ('And by the moon the reaper weary', 'Or when the moon was overhead'), or even Lancelot's shiny shield ('A red-cross knight for ever kneeled/ To a lady in his shield,/ That sparkled on the yellow field').<sup>184</sup> Notably, apart from being an anonymous reflective object as any water surface is, the river, as Victor Stoichiță and Anna Maria Coderch explain in *Goya: The Last Carnival*, also 'marks a linear and unidirectional temporality [...] which is the circular and dynamic symbol of the eternal return of the same'.<sup>185</sup> Tennyson offers, therefore, in conjunction with the more foregrounded elements of his poem – the enigmatic curse, the remote, solitary position of the island of Shalott, the mirror, the loom, and the Lady herself – two additional symbols of cyclicity and reflection.

This causes the Lady to be caught not only in a symbiotic relationship with her mirror, but also between two – and if we are to also count Lancelot's shield, then three

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<sup>183</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, pp 132-133.

<sup>184</sup> Images of the river are featured in lines 1, 12, 32, 47, 105, 120 of the 1832 'Lady of Shalott', and lines 1, 11, 51, 105, 107, 120, 127 of the 1842 version. In the 1842 poem, images of the moon appear in lines 33 and 69, and Lancelot's shield is mentioned in lines 78-80.

<sup>185</sup> Victor Stoichiță, Anna Maria Coderch, *Goya: The Last Carnival*, trans. by Anne-Marie Glasheen (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), pp 77-78.



– other reflective objects that are represented as being, in relation to the Lady, distant and intangible. They are, nonetheless, indisputable centres of attraction to her, and they manifest themselves as such either directly or indirectly. Lancelot’s ‘sparkling’ shield depicts (a run-of-the-mill medieval knight kneeling to his lady), but also reflects (perhaps the Lady’s desire for a ‘loyal knight and true’, perhaps Lancelot’s legendary and illicit affection for Queen Guinevere) and refracts (the Lady’s gaze, the rays of the sun).<sup>186</sup> This reflexive / refractive piece – along with the other reflective / refractive pieces of his armour – makes up the ideal or, in Tucker’s words, ‘an image, an eidolon’, the icon-Lancelot who lures the Lady away from her constant weaving.<sup>187</sup>

In the same way, the moon, though not explicitly a point of attraction for the Lady, nevertheless exerts its tidal pull, traditionally associated with female cycles. Always positioned at the centre of a line, always stressed within the iambic foot, the noun ‘moon’ – ‘And by the moon’, ‘Or when the moon’ – though used only twice within the whole poem, is made to stand out, thus creating the latent impression that the Lady and the nocturnal luminary are in a way gravitating around each other.<sup>188</sup> Moreover, as Jules Cashford shows, ‘[t]he Moon’s affinity with water was such that Moon and water were often interchangeable’ in European folklore.<sup>189</sup> The complementary symbolism of moon and water sheds further light on the dynamics of reflective imagery in ‘The Lady of Shalott’: the river that connects Camelot and Shalott features (explicitly or implicitly) in almost every stanza, thereby suggesting that, as with the moon, there is a direct link

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<sup>186</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, l. 62.

<sup>187</sup> Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, p. 111.

<sup>188</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, ll 33, 69.

<sup>189</sup> Jules Cashford, *The Moon: Myth and Image* (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2003), p. 83.

between it and the fate of the Lady; it is also the last mirror-like space onto which she flings her (dying) self once the curse has been triggered.

Dijkstra – in discussing Symbolist art, though his idea also sheds light on the current context – argues that in order ‘[t]o prevent loss of self she [Woman] had to reassure herself continually of her existence by looking in that natural mirror – the source of her being, as it were, the water from which, like Venus, she had come and to which, like Ophelia, she was destined to return’.<sup>190</sup> It would seem that Tennyson pre-empted the Symbolist understanding of the mirror / woman / water link, since his depiction of the Lady of Shalott in her final moments shows her undergoing a curious transformation, from ‘fairy Lady’ to specular corpse, as she travels down the winding river at night: ‘at the closing of the day’, ‘Through the noises of the night’.<sup>191</sup>

If in the 1832 version, as she is floating in her boat down to Camelot, she is only adorned with reflective objects (‘A cloudwhite crown of pearl’, ‘one blinding diamond bright’) and merely looking on in a way that suggests an unseeing gaze (‘Her wide eyes fixed on Camelot’) and seems finally at peace with her fate and condition (‘with folded arms serenely [...] stood’), in the highly revised 1842 version her appearance is altered so that she herself undeniably becomes the glass.<sup>192</sup> In the final text of the poem, she is described to be ‘Like some bold seër in a trance,/ Seeing all his own mischance’, her gaze turned – perhaps for the first time – inwards, and that one very potent noun, ‘seër’, suggests not only the final revelation at the moment of death, and not just that the Lady may be, in her innate link to natural and artificial mirrors, a clairvoyant or prophet, but that she is at this point the reflective surface, the symbolic eye or lens that takes in the

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<sup>190</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 132.

<sup>191</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, ll 132, 139.

<sup>192</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’ (1832), l. 126, 129, 130, ll 132-133.

world, all at once.<sup>193</sup> Also in the 1842 variant, the Lady gains ‘a glassy countenance’, which is as much suggestive of her dying state as it is of her body’s textual metamorphosis into a ‘mirror’ of the world she inhabits.<sup>194</sup>

Her final moments, paradoxically, both give the Lady what she wanted – a more direct, self-validating interaction with the world – and take it away from her as she slips into death, becoming the ultimate object as a corpse floating into Camelot, unable now to reach out to other people. She becomes, at last, ‘[a] gleaming shape’, a reflective / refractive object that quizzically represents the curious world which condemned her to her tragic fate, while rejecting any kind of logical interpretation from the inhabitants of Camelot.<sup>195</sup> If one is to read the Lady of Shalott’s ultimate divergent gesture, that of turning away from the mirror and thus causing it to break, as a suicide, an act that allows her to attempt to ‘give birth’ to her own identity, this might also explain the failure in ‘reading’ her dead body on the part of the inhabitants of Camelot. As Margaret Higonnet argues in ‘Speaking Silences: Women’s Suicide’:

Suicide [...] is both fetish and taboo. A symbolic gesture, it is doubly so for women who inscribe on their own bodies cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation. In the nineteenth century, women’s suicide becomes a cultural obsession. [...] To take one’s life is to force others to read one’s death [...] In the case of suicide the hermeneutic task is particularly elusive. [...] Women’s

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<sup>193</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, ll 128-129.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., l. 130.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., l. 156.

voluntary deaths are even more difficult to read than men's because women's very autonomy is in question and their intentions are therefore opaque.<sup>196</sup>

In turning away from the mirror and positioning herself in the boat (that has become a funereal barge and which echoes 'the heavy barges' from the beginning of the 1842 text), the Lady eases herself into death, but as an attempt to affirm her identity, her quiddity. At the very end of the poem, the initial, 1832 version, depicts the Lady trying to communicate this affirmation, post-mortem, to the people whose 'shadows' she had spied through her mirror:

They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,  
Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire and guest.  
There lay a parchment on her breast,  
That puzzled more than all the rest,  
The wellfed wits at Camelot.  
'The web was woven curiously  
The charm is broken utterly,  
Draw near and fear not – this is I,  
The Lady of Shalott.'<sup>197</sup>

The strong affirmation of identity – 'this is I' – inscribed on the parchment, and its more toned-down version in the text of 1842, in the form of a signature 'round the prow' of

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<sup>196</sup> Margaret Higonnet, 'Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide', in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 68.

<sup>197</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott' (1832), ll 163-171.

the boat, attest to the Lady's struggle to become material.<sup>198</sup> As Margaret Higonnet shows, '[i]n order to limit the ambiguity of the act [of suicide], many suicides are doubled by explanatory texts [...] [since] action becomes yet requires language'.<sup>199</sup> The Lady of Shalott attempts to define herself by leaving written proof of her identity, but at the same time this written proof points to her dead body, which centralises and grounds the fragments that make up who she is (voice, legend, tapestry).

The ending of the 1832 text also pictures the Lady as an anonymous apparition, despite her efforts of self-affirmation; her letter, instead of clarifying, only 'puzzle[s]' even 'the wellfed wits at Camelot'. This dénouement is completely replaced in 1842 with the scene in which Lancelot apparently measures the Lady's corpse in a superficial manner: 'But Lancelot mused a little space;/ He said, "She has a lovely face;/ God in his mercy lend her grace,/ The Lady of Shalott"'.<sup>200</sup> In this version of the poem, Lancelot, her textual double, explicitly perceives, for the first and last time in the poem, her face. This may well be an indication of Lancelot's shallowness, his inability to perceive anything beyond the Lady's outer appearance; it is, however, also a sort of validation: by receiving, finally, a face – even one that is not shown to the reader – the Lady also receives substance and individuality. His final utterance of her name also suggests a validation of her transition from disembodied voice to material presence. Her mirror, then, by having shown her Lancelot – and her other 'mirrors' too, that take her, or 'pull' her down towards Camelot – ultimately contribute to empower her. First, it asserts her identity, and then it preserves her self-sufficiency on a conceptual level: she

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<sup>198</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott' (1842), l. 125.

<sup>199</sup> Higonnet, 'Spealing Silences', p. 69.

<sup>200</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 168-171.

remains self-sufficient by having become a 'specular corpse', and also obtains substantiality by gaining the ultimate signifier of individuality, a (seen) face.

### **Fairy, Weaver, Seër: Pictorial Incarnations of the Lady of Shalott and Her Mirror**

Throughout Tennyson's poem, then, the Lady of Shalott is represented as a figure both of the natural world and outside it, an alien presence that both enchants (as an ideal, the 'angelic voice', or 'fairy Lady') and causes an ineffable sense of fear (when they see her, 'they [cross] themselves for fear,/ All the knights at Camelot').<sup>201</sup> In her doubly demonic and angelic portrayal, her figure resonates interestingly with perceptions of the *femme fatale* in the nineteenth century. Rebecca Stott describes the *femme fatale* as unmistakably 'always Other [...] always outside, either literally [...] or metaphorically, for [...] she represents chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal'.<sup>202</sup> In effect, she argues, 'the major common feature of the *femme fatale* is that of *positionality* [original emphasis]: she is a multiple sign singularised by her position of Otherness: outside, invading, abnormal, subnormal and so on'.<sup>203</sup> In the same context Stott identifies Woman, as a generic signifier, as 'position[ed] on the frontier' of Victorian culture, and splits her into two archetypal halves: one is '[t]he idealised woman [...] conceived as an inherent part of the inside of the frontier', a protective 'goddess of the social-cultural hearth', and the other 'the woman vilified as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, [...] found on the outside edge of the frontier', the harbinger of chaos, potential destroyer of 'normalcy'.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., ll 166-167.

<sup>202</sup> Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 37.

<sup>203</sup> Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale*, pp 37-38.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibidem*.

The ‘fairy Lady of Shalott’ can be taken to illustrate either one of these types, or through pictorial deconstruction to question them both. This is a rather notorious exchange between Tennyson and Holman Hunt, following the latter’s illustration for the Moxon Tennyson: “‘My dear Hunt,” said Tennyson, [...] “I never said that the young woman’s hair was flying all over the shop.” “No,” said Hunt; but you never said it wasn’t”’.<sup>205</sup> As Holman Hunt pointed out, the poem leaves many unexplored avenues which are full of potential for its visual interpreters.

The Lady’s undecidable essence and her ambiguous relationship with her mirror created many possibilities for Victorian and fin-de-siècle artists to exploit in creating various interpretations of Tennyson’s poem and many, often jarring depictions of the Lady at her glass, the most emblematic of which are: Henry Darvall’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1848-1851), Elizabeth Siddall’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1853), Holman Hunt’s famous painting of the same title (finished 1905), John William Waterhouse’s *The Lady of Shalott (Looking at Lancelot)* (1894) and *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* (1915), and Sidney Harold Meteyard’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1913).<sup>206</sup> This chapter will address these works not in chronological order, but starting from the most famous and widely analysed (Holman Hunt’s) and ending with one of the more overlooked yet just as significant ones (Siddall’s).

Holman Hunt’s iconic *The Lady of Shalott* has several incarnations, starting in 1857 with the preliminary sketches for the Moxon Tennyson illustration (Fig. 2), and

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<sup>205</sup> See George Somes Layard, *Tennyson and His Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators: A Book about a Book* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894), p. 80.

<sup>206</sup> This chapter will not address Waterhouse’s perhaps more famous *The Lady of Shalott* painting (1888), showing her at the moment of her death, because it is not relevant to the current discussion, being based on an altogether different set of themes.

ending in 1905, five years prior to his death, with the final touches of the now famous oil painting (Fig. 3).

His works favour a dramatic depiction of the moment in which the curse is triggered. All of them feature the Lady's weaving at the moment when it starts to unravel, the Lady herself tangled in its stray threads, hair electrified supposedly by the invisible static of the activated curse and looking neither at the mirror (showing a distant Lancelot riding away from Shalott) nor out the window (i.e. to 'meet' the viewer's gaze), but down at the tangled threads.

Already in the early Moxon Tennyson illustration, the Lady's gesture appears to illustrate not her self at the moment when the curse is triggered, but rather her later self from the poem – 'Like some bold seër in a trance,/ Seeing all his own mischance' – as she appears to gain a final and total understanding of her fate.<sup>207</sup> This depiction of the Lady has very convincingly been read as a symbolic moralising representation of either the fallen (or falling) woman at the moment in which she understands that she has made a wrong choice, or as the artist who has betrayed her art seeing the consequence of her deception, or as both at once.<sup>208</sup> These mainstream interpretations seem to support a reading of Holman Hunt's Lady of Shalott as *femme fatale*, following Stott's definition of such a figure as 'mythically rooted [in] and deriv[ing] power from her association with figures such as Cleopatra, Salome, Judith, Helen, mermaids and sirens [...] characterised above all by her effect upon men: a *femme* cannot be *fatale* without a male being present, even where her fatalism is directed upon herself'.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', ll 128-129.

<sup>208</sup> See, for example, the 'Introduction' by Jennifer Gribble to *The Lady of Shalott in the Victorian Novel* for the former interpretation, and Thomas L. Jeffers, 'Tennyson's Lady of Shalott and Pre-Raphaelite Renderings: Statement and Counter-Statement', for the latter.

<sup>209</sup> Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale*, p. viii.



To be sure, in Holman Hunt's painting the armoured silhouette of Lancelot reflected in the Lady's round mirror comes across, as in Tennyson's poem, as the immediate trigger for the Lady's fatal choice, though ultimately the only culpable figure remains the Lady herself: she has neglected her (utterly feminine) duties in order to satisfy a personal desire. Weaving has a long history of being associated with femininity in Western thought, starting with the myth of Arachne and Homer's faithful and astute Penelope. Although in Victorian Britain weaving had become largely industrialized, and most large-scale weaving was performed via machine power, women were often employed as workers in textile factories. One reason for this may have been the fact that 'it took little muscular strength to tend the power-driven machinery, [so] women and children – whose labor was inexpensive – became the principal workers'.<sup>210</sup> Still, the Lady of Shalott's weaving clearly falls under the category of domestic activities, presided by women, as a pursuit passed down through generations of female characters. In early modern Europe, '[t]he images of women working at looms or bent over a needlework frame were didactic images employed to illustrate an ideal of womanhood', as Stacey Shimizu notes.<sup>211</sup> She goes on to add that 'a weaving woman was seen as domestic, silent, submissive and chaste'.<sup>212</sup> Helena Michie makes a similar point in *The Flesh Made Word*, albeit about a 'sister'-endeavour, sewing, which she sees as a means of repressing female sensuality:

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<sup>210</sup> Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (London: Greenwood Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>211</sup> Stacey Shimizu, 'The Pattern of Perfect Womanhood: Feminine Virtue, Pattern Books and the Fiction of the Clothworking Woman', in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500-1800*, ed. by Barbara J. Whitehead (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 76.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibidem*.

Sewing, perhaps the most common feminine occupation, embodies many [...] contradictions [...] While on the surface it is a safe, dainty, and appropriate feminine way of filling up time and hope chests, sewing is also a way of repressing and, therefore, implicitly admitting unlawful and dangerous sexual need.<sup>213</sup>

The Lady of Shalott, whose roots in earlier legend and imagery have been discussed above, fits into this puzzle as a disruptor of this feminine tradition: she puts a stop to her weaving, even knowing that this might endanger her life in mysterious ways.

In the Moxon Tennyson illustration, the Lady's weaving very clearly resembles a large spider's web, linking her unmistakably with Arachne. The fact that the Lady of Shalott is shown at the moment in which her mysterious curse is triggered also suggests an acknowledgment of Arachne's own curse at the hands of Athena. In Holman Hunt's later depictions of the scene – culminating with his famous oil painting – the design of the tapestry that the Lady had been weaving at her loom departs from the spider's web motif and becomes clearly discernible. In this version, the picture shows Sir Galahad returning from his successful quest of the Holy Grail, and presenting this relic to a stately figure, presumably King Arthur. Tim Barringer suggests that '[t]he tapestry now [...] provid[es] a virtuous alternative to the adulterous Lancelot' in the person of Galahad.<sup>214</sup> In the painting, the Lady looks down towards the tapestry, striving to disentangle herself from the threads that constrict her mercilessly.

This seems to be a further indication of the Lady of Shalott's departure from traditional norms of womanhood: not only does she refuse to continue weaving, but she

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<sup>213</sup> Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 41.

<sup>214</sup> Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith, *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 90.

symbolically rejects the virtuous knight in favour of a more dazzling one, in shining armour. Moreover, the fact that, according to some variants of the Arthurian tradition – namely *La quête del Saint Graal* (1225-1230) – Galahad is Lancelot's son with Elaine, not of Astolat, but of Corbenic.<sup>215</sup> Thus, Holman Hunt's painting may suggest a complex parallel between the cycle of forbidden love described in the story of Galahad's conception and that of the Lady's dangerous desire. Another reading may simply be that the loveless and chaste Lady of Shalott identified more, to begin with, with Galahad, whom Tennyson describes, in his poem 'Sir Galahad' (published in *Idylls of the King* in 1842) as someone who 'never felt the kiss of love,/ Nor maiden's hand'.<sup>216</sup> Later, however, she begins to see Lancelot as her symbolic counterpart.

All the ways in which the Lady departs from the domestic, the safe, and the traditionally feminine may lead one to read her character – especially as depicted by Holman Hunt – as not just any woman, but as a femme fatale since, as Karen Hodder writes, her wildly flowing hair as well as her 'exotic costume associates her with a class of enchantresses and sorceresses'.<sup>217</sup> In this case, another consideration must be taken into account, i.e. Stott's view that 'the femme fatale [is] a kind of patterned woven image', a figurative puzzle of 'threads that make up that "fabricated" image'.<sup>218</sup> It can be said, then, that Hunt's painting suggests that the Lady is weaving and unweaving

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<sup>215</sup> *La quête del Saint Graal: roman du XIIIe siècle*, ed. by Albert Pauphilet (Paris: Champion, 1949).

<sup>216</sup> Alfred Tennyson, 'Sir Galahad', ll 19-20.

<sup>217</sup> Karen Hodder, 'The Lady of Shalott in Art and Literature', in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 75.

<sup>218</sup> Karen Hodder, 'The Lady of Shalott in Art and Literature', in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall. In this sense it is also significant, perhaps, that the bright hues of the Lady's dress and tunic in Hunt's painting – the reds, greens and blues – almost exactly match those of her yarn balls and those in her unravelling tapestry. These are all reminiscent of the melancholy blue of the mirror in Tennyson's poem.

herself, that is, her own image in the eye of the viewer.<sup>219</sup> As John Berger observes with regard to the tradition understanding of the ‘condition’ of women in Western culture:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman’s self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.<sup>220</sup>

It is in light of these observations that the depiction and position of the mirror in Holman Hunt’s painting and its relationship with the Lady of Shalott acquire added layers of meaning. Holman Hunt’s mirror retains some of the meanings it had in Tennyson’s poem – it reflects Shalott, it shows the Lady the one image (Lancelot’s) that could make her turn away from her loom, and it is utilitarian, since we see the tapestry reflected in it – but it gains at least one more: that the Lady has neglected to ‘watch herself’. No longer simply facilitating the rediscovery or recreation of identity, Holman Hunt’s mirror becomes a ‘moralising object’, a neglected tool of self-surveillance. It reflects the Lady – subtly, but clearly enough – as well as all the other elements already enumerated. However, it also shows her with her back turned to the mirror, suggesting that she has chosen to stop splitting herself into two, to stop weaving herself into a socially acceptable figure – all in all, that she has stopped looking after her own image, literally and symbolically. In this sense it should also be noted that some of Holman

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<sup>219</sup> Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale*, p. xi.

<sup>220</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 40.

Hunt's oldest sketches – predating his Moxon illustration – show the Lady, though also with her mirror, in different positions compared to his final illustration and the ensuing painting. The sketch dated 1850 (Fig. 4) approaches closely the version we now know, showing the Lady in a standing position, her body facing the viewer and her face turned down, back turned to the mirror and already tangled in yarn, though with hair neatly combed back rather than flowing wildly about her. In two other sketches dated 1856 (Figs 5, 6), she is pictured sitting, or half-kneeling, in a subdued pose, facing her mirror as she weaves, hair neatly gathered into a traditional bun, and in yet other, less developed sketches, again from c. 1856 (Fig. 7), her hair is consistently shown tidily gathered back.

Galia Ofek argues in *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* that 'Victorian ladies had to accept the cultural expectation that hair should not be dishevelled, but rather display the same order, neatness and cultivation which were required of them'.<sup>221</sup> It becomes apparent, then, by comparing Holman Hunt's 1850 sketches with his illustration for the Moxon edition of Tennyson and with his later painting, that he was aware of the cultural implications based on the contrast between neat, carefully restrained hair (signifying 'healthy', 'virtuous' femininity) and disordered hair (indicating an equally 'disordered' female state). The comparison between the preliminary sketches and the final product also corroborate the reading that,

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<sup>221</sup> Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 34. For a more specific discussion of the symbolism of hair in Pre-Raphaelite art see also Liana De Girolami Cheney's essay 'Locks, Tresses, and Manes in Pre-Raphaelite Paintings', in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, ed. by Liana De Girolami Cheney (Lampetere, Dyfed, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 159:

The paradoxical nature of the *femme fatale* – woman in possession of both virginal and demonical powers – is captured by Pre-Raphaelite painters in their representation of hair. The unbounded, long hair in their depictions of Eve, Venus, or Mary Magdalene commonly symbolizes the power of evil, while braiding, removal, or growth of hair attest to the chaste qualities of an individual – Virgin Mary, Minerva, St. Agnes, for example.

as long as the female figure dutifully faces or consults her mirror she is safely contained and subdued, because she is symbolically aware of her place in the social ‘web’ and eager to retain it. Thus, when she decides to turn her back on her mirror she is compromised. In the social fabric, to use Berger’s words again, ‘men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’, not the other way around, as Holman Hunt’s *Lady of Shalott* would have it.<sup>222</sup> A proper lady, that is, is best left to attend to her round mirror, and a good knight to his Round Table.

This interpretation suggested by Holman Hunt’s *The Lady of Shalott* is, nevertheless, a far cry from his earlier painting, *The Awakening Conscience* (1852), which, though it plays with the same set of elements – a woman, a mirror, a man, a suggested window – works towards an entirely different effect (Fig. 8). As Jeffers points out, echoing some earlier readings of the painting, the subject of Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* is a:

woman [who] has “fallen” some time ago but, in her moral awakening, is rising from her keeper’s lap to a reformed life. [...] the woman looks to the world beyond her window, and away from her mirror, while her embroidery skeins unravel on the floor – an emblem suggesting [...] that the woman’s life has been unraveling. Repentant, she’s on the verge of picking up the pieces and starting over as, again, her Shalottian sister won’t be able to.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 41.

<sup>223</sup> Jeffers, ‘Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott* and Pre-Raphaelite Renderings: Statement and Counter-Statement’, pp 235-236. For an example of a similar earlier reading of the painting, see Gribble, *The Lady of Shalott in the Victorian Novel*, pp 2-3: ‘The lady [in *The Awakening Conscience*] who looks towards the world beyond her window, beyond the arms of the man who encloses her within a meticulously detailed Victorian interior, looks away from the mirror that reflects that world, and the skeins of her embroidery lie unravelled at her feet.’

In this painting, all the objects are reversed compared to *The Lady of Shalott*: the man is not outside and distant, but rather inside and very clearly ‘the keeper’ of the young woman, the mirror (of an oblong rather than round shape) is merely decorative, the woman has not been engaged in any ‘proper’ domestic activity (the colourful threads are spread in disarray over the floor), but has instead been entertaining the man, perhaps singing along with him for his amusement. This particular mirror, therefore, is meant rather to reflect the intricate frivolity of the world that surrounds the female figure – the gaudy opulence of a house, the viewer is led to understand, of a kept woman – and her own decorative purpose. Moreover, the implication here is that, as the gilded mirror belongs not to the woman, but to the man who looks after her, so the woman, in her lack of integrity, belongs not to herself, but to her ‘sponsor’. In *The Awakening Conscience*, then, the mirror is less a space where identity is negotiated, though it is definitely and quite emphatically an moralising object.

In contrast to the situation depicted here, the later *Lady of Shalott* images suggest that the young woman is already where she belongs though she chooses to disrupt that initial stability through her actions. In these images the Lady’s mirror, as discussed above, is not merely an ornamental object or parallel signifier, but a ‘facilitator’, opening up a space where the Lady may (and, it would seem Holman Hunt was trying to persuade us, should) construct a proper feminine self, abiding its ‘rightful’ place in the world.

Holman Hunt’s depiction of the ‘Lady of Shalott’ theme most probably left its mark on all the reinterpretations that followed, whether they reinterpreted some of its distinctive elements, or whether they took pains to distance themselves from it. This problematic filiation is perhaps most evident in some of John William Waterhouse’s paintings of the subject, namely *The Lady of Shalott (Looking at Lancelot)* (1894) and

*I Am Half Sick of Shadows* (1915) (Figs 9, 10). The earlier of the two most closely resembles Hunt's painting (or, more accurately, Hunt's illustration for the Moxon Tennyson).<sup>224</sup> I agree with Anthony Hobson that '[i]t is impossible to discuss this picture [*The Lady of Shalott (Looking at Lancelot)*] without taking into consideration Holman Hunt's illustration of the same moment'.<sup>225</sup> Similarly to Holman Hunt's rendition, Waterhouse's painting shows the Lady standing, at the moment when she has decided to turn and look at the knight; the Christian icon hung on the Lady's wall in Waterhouse's painting echoes the tapestry depicting a crucified Jesus in Hunt's illustration, and as in Hunt's image, the Lady is tangled in the loose threads of her abandoned tapestry, having turned her back on a round mirror, while the tiles on the floor are also arranged in circular shapes. Patty Wageman notes that 'the use of circular mirrors, and of circles in general, is a recurrent feature of Waterhouse's scenes', though this imagistic hallmark of the painter cannot be taken simply as a coincidental similarity to Hunt's illustration (and hence to his more famous painting).<sup>226</sup> Hunt's influence on Waterhouse's interpretation cannot be easily dismissed, since the former also makes much of circular shapes in his illustration (note the circular mirror, the circular loom, the oval tapestries hung on the wall). Moreover, Waterhouse's preliminary studies for *The Lady of Shalott (Looking at Lancelot)* betray yet other links to the Moxon illustration. In these preliminary studies, Waterhouse's Lady is depicted with less neat (and clearly long, free flowing) hair than in the final painting which, though far more

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<sup>224</sup> See, for instance, Thomas L. Jeffers, 'Tennyson's Lady of Shalott and Pre-Raphaelite Renderings: Statement and Counter-Statement': 'Waterhouse's *Lady of Shalott* (1894) [...] is a work for which he made many preliminary studies and sketches, intent evidently on not replicating the structure or points of Hunt's Moxon print.' (248)

<sup>225</sup> Anthony Hobson, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London: Phaidon Press, 1989), p. 53.

<sup>226</sup> Patty Wageman, 'Dream or Reality? Waterhouse's Women and Symbolism', in Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Tippi, Robert Upstone, Patty Wageman, *J.W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), p. 54



subdued than that of Hunt's Lady, is still reminiscent of the same cultural implications of unruly hair (Figs 11, 12). Waterhouse's final version, nevertheless, negotiates a depiction of the Lady that is perhaps closer to what Tennyson first had in mind. Her hair is now modestly pulled back, she is wearing a long white dress which traditionally suggests purity, virginity, integrity, consistently with her timeless confinement; she looks very young, though not quite as young as the previous studies portrayed her (in which she has an adolescent's appearance, with a more childlike face and a leaner body).

Waterhouse presents his viewers, then, not with a problematic representation of femininity, but with an ideal: a young woman, implicitly chaste but also very attractive. Unlike Holman Hunt's Lady, Waterhouse's directly faces the viewer, her fixed stare attracting his or her gaze (in spite, or perhaps because of her guarded expression). At the same time, the mirror reflects the back of the Lady's head, the obligatory image of Lancelot just passing by and, quite clearly, the river winding towards Camelot. Here, the woman-mirror relationship is more ambiguous: the mirror does not have a clearly utilitarian purpose (since it does not clearly reflect the Lady's weaving), and there is not much in the painting to suggest that it helps the Lady 'watch herself' and recreate her image according to societal standards, either. The mirror rather entraps the Lady by keeping her in thrall, and the Lady's gesture of placing her right foot so as to suggest stepping out of the tile circle on the floor indicates that she is also breaking free of the mirror's influence. Intrigued by something outside her reach, something she desires (though maybe she is also frightened by nature of her desire), she bypasses the circle and turns to acknowledge it, unaware – since she herself is now an object of voyeuristic interest – that she is now lending herself to another set of appraising eyes.

In his later painting, *I Am Half Sick of Shadows*, Waterhouse objectifies the Lady of Shalott even further: now dressed in bright red, a colour that suggests (matured)

sexual passion, the Lady is seated at her loom next to her mirror which reflects the river winding down to 'towered Camelot', gazing dreamily and longingly at some point in the distance, her body positioned in such a way as to seem on display, placed there solely for the viewer's pleasure. She also seems older, her features more mature, her body plumper and more developed. This contrasts highly with an earlier sketch for this subject, which shows the Lady sitting at her loom and directly facing the mirror with her back mostly turned to the viewer, but is very similar to an earlier painting, *Destiny* (1900), executed on the occasion of the Boer War (Figs 13, 14). *Destiny* shows a young woman, her dark hair neatly tied into a bun, wearing a bright red dress of medieval inspiration, preparing to drink from a cup, while the background reveals a large round mirror reflecting her silhouette and a couple of ships sailing on a vast sea, and behind it a river winding off in the distance. *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* also employs most of these elements: the woman dressed in a red medieval dress, her dark hair combed neatly back, the large round mirror, the winding river, even the black and white chequered tile floor. In both *Destiny* and *I Am Half Sick of Shadows*, the great round mirror reflects predominantly the outside world, and in these reflections there is an emphasis on water: the sea in one, and the much-discussed river in the other. Only one of the mirrors, however (the one in the earlier, allegedly propagandistic, painting) reflects the woman herself, as she is turned away from the glass and suggestively looks at a point in the distance that is inaccessible to the viewer – implicitly the scene reflected in the mirror – as she raises a cup to her lips, perhaps in honour of the departing ships.

It is interesting that Waterhouse chose to represent the central female figure of this painting, possibly 'Britannia', the female personification of the Empire, in a Shalottian posture, paired closely with the mirror, in a context that mostly obscures from view her external surroundings, showing them merely as a reflection. Her celebratory

cup is interesting too, especially because it is reminiscent of two other paintings of Waterhouse's – *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891) and *Circe Invidiosa* (1892) – preceding *Destiny* only by a few years, where predatory women hold variously poisoned cups (of a similar neoclassical design) while seeking to threaten men or to wreak revenge. Personified Britannia is thus placed in a long thematic line of *femmes fatales*.

In her 'bower', this majestic and dignified figure is the mistress, not the prisoner. By doubling the woman and showing her (as it were) turning from herself, the mirror serves to produce a contrast. That is, it severs two planes: that of the domestic sphere, where the woman is forcibly present and also implicitly passive – she blesses, waits and hopes – and that of the public sphere, a plane rendered almost unreal through its projection in the mirror, where the ships sail to war in faraway places, relegating the woman to an unmoving shape in their background.

Another possible effect of the mirror in this painting is to place the female figure (if we read her as 'Britannia') in two places at once. It can be observed that part of what the mirror reflects (the great Globe) appears to be inconsistent with the space in that, to be reflected like that, the Globe should have been placed directly in front of the mirror, and the painting shows no such arrangement. It can also be argued, then, that the mirror is a 'magic mirror' showing an alternate space, where the ships have set on their mission, a space incongruous with the reality uncovered by the open casement behind the woman: a river, winding through a plain, towards hills or mountains in the distance. In this case, the mirror allows the woman / Britannia to be in both places at once: at home, where she ought to be as *mater familias*, and also 'elsewhere', passively overseeing and supporting the ships at sea.

In *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* most of these elements are preserved, but their meanings are reversed to tell a different story. The bright red dress of the Lady –

rendered rather bombastic through the puffed shoulders and the golden belt – highlights the shape of her body, her full breasts, her round hips, thus making it fully accessible to the viewer's gaze, as has been noted above. In this scene, she has stopped weaving, and her lost gaze, as well as her posture, hands clasped at back of her head, suggest languor and melancholy, that ultimate state of torpor which, as Giorgio Agamben shows, identifies with frustrated desire for something that is either unattainable or indefinable.<sup>227</sup> As mentioned before, Dijkstra points out that this state is also associated with 'excessive indulgence in solitary pleasures', thus 'virtually exclud[ing] an invitation to the viewer to become actively involved in the experience of the [figure] portrayed'.<sup>228</sup> In contrast to the 1894 Shalott painting, then, *I Am Half-sick of Shadows* shows the Lady not only eroticised and more passive, but also more self-sufficient. The mirror – which the Lady does not look into, nor fully turn away from – reveals no Lancelot this time, but a lonely couple (referencing the Lady's frustrated and self-reflective eroticism), the image of Camelot in the background, and the Lady's own 'web' and casement in the foreground. The Lady does not appear in the mirror this time around, though she parallels it through her position at the loom and through the direction of her gaze. This parallelism suggests that in this painting the mirror acts primarily as a symbolic double of the female figure. It reveals her preoccupations and desires (weaving, eros, the unreachable outside world), as well as her frigid self-sufficiency: there is no Lancelot figure to suggest that she is longing for male companionship. 'Woman's circularity, her disturbing self-sufficiency, as Dijkstra puts it, are here suggested not by a 'perpetual reinforcement' by looking 'into the glass', but by

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<sup>227</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). See especially chapter one, 'The Noonday Demon'.

<sup>228</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, pp 73-74.

juxtaposing the circular mirror and the 'refractive' woman. In Waterhouse's last painting on the subject, the reflective object emphasises the object of voyeuristic contemplation: the woman lost in thoughts of desire.<sup>229</sup>

Let us turn now to some more obscure, but no less interesting works in their approach to the 'woman at the mirror' theme. One of the earliest pictorial representations inspired by 'The Lady of Shalott', Henry Darvall's painting of the same title (1848-1851) perhaps precedes all the rest (Fig. 15). In Darvall's depiction, the Lady is shown seated at her loom. In her hand, she appears to be holding a red thread which can be followed down to a skein inside a basket set by her high-backed chair. Her seat is placed right beside a tall oval mirror into which she is gazing. The mirror appears to reflect an even taller casement window, a sprig of ivy in the left-hand corner, and the Lady herself in darker, shadowy tones. The mirror reflection shows a large forest in the foreground, a winding river spreading from the foreground into the far distance, hills in the background, and the small, dark mounted figure of a knight in the mid-distance. It is unclear whether the Lady's eyes are following this figure, or whether her gaze is absent. It is logical to read the knight as Sir Lancelot, but by comparison with Tennyson's description of a silhouette all shine and sparkle, to which both the Lady's and the reader's attention are drawn unequivocally, Darvall's obscure miniature knight is easy to miss, close as it is to the edge of the dark, prominent forest.

On the one hand, this arrangement foregrounds the Lady as the sole focal point of the painting. Her gaze, which may or may not be taking in the miniature figure, seems unfocused and dreamy, arguably contemplating more the world within than the one shown in her mirror. In fact, since the pictorial perspective is such that the reflected window seems to be impossibly close to the mirror, an uncanny illusion is created: that

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

on this side of the mirror the Lady is seated on her chair gazing into the glass, but that on the other side her reflection is seated on the window casement, looking away from the window. This effect is, again, suggestive of a gaze directed within rather than without, and in the mirror the Lady is given another existence, placed at the vantage point from which she can see Camelot. What is thus suggested here is either a quest for the feminine self / identity or a meditation on it, with the ambiguity of the Lady's gaze, and the questionable spatial relationship between the mirror and the window reflected in it as its core elements.

On the other hand, the fact that the dark reflection of the knight and the shadowy reflection of the Lady inhabit the same virtual space and that they parallel each other in their insubstantiality and obscurity echoes Tennyson's suggestions that the two are victims of the same kind of synecdochal existence dependent on images and symbols. Notably, just as the Lady is darkly reflected in her mirror, the already reflected knight is reflected once again (and also darkly) in the lugubriously still waters of the river. This emphasises his insubstantiality and strengthens his parallelism with the Lady.

In terms of her relation to the external viewer, although the Lady's figure is foregrounded, and her reflection is exposed to the viewer's gaze, with her well-clad silhouette, the long, flowing dress covering her head-to-toe, and with her neat and proper hair, Darvall's Lady does not suggest sexualisation, unlike Waterhouse's or, as will be discussed shortly, Meteyard's figure. Her posture, too, solemn and dignified, her body and face only shown from the profile, marks unavailability to the scrutiny of the external viewer. If there is any latent eroticism to be identified in Darvall's Lady of Shalott, then it must be of the melancholy kind of which Giorgio Agamben writes in *Stanzas*, a craving for a lost object of desire, although what that object may be remains

as doubtful as the Lady's enigmatic or absent relationship with the distant knight.<sup>230</sup> The forgotten thread and skein suggest the foretelling of the Lady's own 'unravelling'. This theme would later be picked up by Holman Hunt and Waterhouse in their interpretations of Tennyson's poem.

A reading of the Lady as a victim of melancholy – 'the humor whose disorders are liable to produce the most destructive consequences', in Agamben's words – is a tempting one, especially in the light of the poem's events, and the knowledge of the Lady of Shalott's imminent (self-)destruction.<sup>231</sup> This, however, is a questionable reading, too, since, as Londa Schiebinger notes, already 'in the eighteenth century [...] the doctrine of humors, which had long identified women as having a unique physical and moral character, was overturned by modern medicine'.<sup>232</sup> It is more likely, therefore, that Darvall's visual interpretation of the 'Lady of Shalott' suggests a meditation on the quest for an elusive identity, in which the reflected outside world may be nothing more than a symbolic representation of the world inside. In the essay 'The Magic Mirror', published at the end of the nineteenth century, Max Dessoir wrote that 'in the case of magic mirrors the most important factor was the person that saw, and not the instruments of seeing' which meant that '[t]he mirror furnishes no other information than that which we put into it; but it communicates it to our every-day consciousness which knows little or nothing of the recondite processes of our inner life'.<sup>233</sup> Darvall's mirror, then, could be a magical mirror, entirely subordinate to the Lady and responding to her wishes.

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<sup>230</sup> Agamben, *Stanzas*, chapters four and five, 'The Lost Object' and 'The Phantasms of Eros'.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>232</sup> Londa Schiebinger, 'Skeletons in the Closet', in *Feminism and the Body*, ed. by Londa Schiebinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>233</sup> Max Dessoir, 'The Magic Mirror', *The Monist*, 1. 1 (October 1890), p. 90, 96.

It is even conceivable that what Darvall suggests, by painting the Lady turned towards the mirror and her shadow-double apparently turning away from the casement, is that the Lady has renounced – whether willingly or not – the outside world for a cloistered life. Also, the depiction only of the mirror reflection, and not of the window reflected, casts a doubt on the ‘reality’ of the outside world and may, in fact, suggest its illusoriness.

Sidney Harold Meteyard’s take on the subject, *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* (1913) keeps Holman Hunt’s and Waterhouse’s perfectly round mirror and anticipates the plump, well-endowed and mature Lady of Waterhouse’s 1915 painting of the same title (Fig. 16). Meteyard shows a buxom Lady draped in blue, her head turned away from the viewer, her hair tied in an exuberant neoclassical bun and adorned with a jewel. This version of the Lady spells out lavishness, it is calculated to catch the eye and indeed, like Waterhouse’s Lady from 1915, her body is generously spread out for the enjoyment of the viewer. She is seated at her loom, great mirror hung to her left, though she seems neither to be gazing into it, nor to be heeding her work. The Lady – eyes shut, posture relaxed – is either lost in a deep reverie or momentarily overpowered by sleep. In fin-de-siècle and early 1900’s art, sleep is often associated with death – and indeed, both motives are very popular with painters of the period, as Bram Dijkstra and Elisabeth Bronfen have shown – an ingenious ploy to fetishise the Lady’s body, as well as to emphasise her imminent death: the Lady is always, already dead, her choice always already made, Meteyard seems to urge.<sup>234</sup> Moreover, once more the lethargy of the female figure may alert the viewer, as Dijkstra and Lynne Pearce argue, to the female

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<sup>234</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, chapter two, ‘The Cult of Invalidism; Ophelia and Folly; Dead Ladies and the Fetish of Sleep’, and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).



figure's lasciviousness, another fetishising element.<sup>235</sup> Pearce contends that 'the eroticism of the representation is increased by the claustrophobic confines in which the Lady is placed; her very body gives the impression of bursting out of the pictorial space in which it has been contained'.<sup>236</sup> However, in Meteyard's painting this is counterbalanced, at least in part, by the fact that the lower foreground of the image is taken up by a wealth of pale flowers referencing, most likely, the 'space of flowers' mentioned by Tennyson in his poem.

This invasion of the 'outside' – signified by the flowers – of a seemingly 'inside' scene has several immediate effects. Firstly, it disrupts the sense of claustrophobia initially set by the poem, which is preserved in other paintings (Holman Hunt's, Waterhouse's) through perspective and the overbearing circular motifs. Secondly, it reiterates the idea that the Lady's 'bower' is a liminal space, making her at once the inhabitant of an 'inside' studio (of heavy purple curtains and hanging mirrors) and an 'outside' garden, where the flowers grow freely. Lastly, it may suggest the scene of a wake, pre-empting the idea of flowers laid on a coffin to honour the dead.<sup>237</sup>

Perhaps the most perplexing element in Meteyard's painting, however, is the great dark, convex mirror hung next to the Lady's loom, revealing in its black depths two miniaturised figures, a man and a woman, probably the 'two young lovers lately

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<sup>235</sup> Dijkstra, chapter three, 'The Collapsing Woman: Solitary Vice and Restful Detumescence', and Lynne Pearce, *Woman / Image / Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp 83-84: 'the Lady is represented in such a way as to emphasise a wasting/wasted sensuality [...] the subject is seated with her embroidery/weaving in front of her, but is paying little attention to her task. Instead, she gazes dreamingly/wearily/longingly *elsewhere* [original emphasis]'.

<sup>236</sup> Pearce, *Woman / Image / Text*, pp 83-84.

<sup>237</sup> Notably, many paintings of the period representing women who are dead, dying, or 'as dead' show them surrounded by flowers, from John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851) to Edward Burne-Jones' *The Rose Briar* (1890) and John Collier's *The Death of Albine* (1895).

wed' from Tennyson's poem.<sup>238</sup> It is particularly interesting how Meteyard's mirror, unlike any of the ones preceding or succeeding it, is dark rather than clear. One possible explanation for the mirror's unusual hue may be that the painting respects the spirit of the original poem, which places the vision of the two lovers at night, 'when the moon was overhead'.<sup>239</sup> The uncertain mix of luminosity (the flowers and the Lady herself are clearly illuminated and even the reflection in the mirror is unreliable, seemingly depicting night-time and day-time concomitantly) and darkness (the dark tint of the Lady's attire, the dark drapery in the background, the darkened mirror) may nevertheless indicate a sort of perennial twilight in which the Lady, in her Sleeping Beauty-like slumber, is stuck. A more notable interpretation may be that the Lady's glass is no common reflective object, but a veritable artist's tool, a 'Claude mirror' or 'black mirror', 'widespread [in Western Europe] toward the end of the eighteenth century and even more in the nineteenth', as documented by Arnaud Maillet.<sup>240</sup> This type of mirror, according to eighteenth-century author Thomas West, had the following picturesque effect: 'Where the objects are great and near, it removes them to a due distance, and shews them in the soft colours of nature, and in the most regular perspective the eye can perceive, or science demonstrate'.<sup>241</sup> It is not improbable that Meteyard, being the art scholar that he was, had a good knowledge of such a device and chose to represent it in his painting. As Maillet notes, 'Claude mirrors' are commonly 'convex tinted mirror[s]', usually tinted black, which seems to fit the description of the

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<sup>238</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', l. 70.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., l. 69.

<sup>240</sup> Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, p. 27.

<sup>241</sup> Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire* (London: Richardson and Urquhart, 1780), pp 11-12.

Lady's glass.<sup>242</sup> Moreover, as West wrote in his treatise, 'the person using [a 'black mirror'] ought always to turn his back to the object that he views [...] holding it a little to the right or left' in order to capture a better reflection of the objects of interest.<sup>243</sup>

This requirement in the use of a 'black mirror' is also symbolically adequate to the Lady of Shalott's template situation: she needs to face the mirror and turn her back on the world that interests her. If this is indeed an artist's 'black mirror' that, as Maillet puts it, helps to 'remov[e] [...] triviality [and] brings forth an abstraction, that of ideal beauty', then it serves to mark the Lady of Shalott as an artiste, someone who looks at the world through a lens that focuses on beauty only, and who interprets that beauty in her work.<sup>244</sup> Notably, the reflection in the mirror (the couple) does not match the image the Lady was seemingly just weaving in her tapestry (a knight on a horse, anticipating Lancelot) when she fell asleep or became distracted. This suggests that the Lady does not simply represent the reflections in her mirror but is inspired by them to create something else. One might speculate, for instance, that on seeing the lovers, the Lady was induced to meditate on her own erotic possibilities, and thereby moved to capture – on a tapestry, if not in real life – her ideal 'loyal knight and true'.<sup>245</sup> This ideal, however, acquired after spying someone else's erotic pursuits, remains out of the Lady of Shalott's reach. Maillet points out the symbolic link between the 'black mirror' and melancholy: 'Is it not characteristic of the melancholic', he asks, 'to enjoy this paradox, this failure of the gaze? Only the atrabilious disposition has the capacity to enjoy what one knows has lost or will never attain'.<sup>246</sup> The 'black mirror' is a 'failure of the gaze'

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<sup>242</sup> Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, pp 15, 17.

<sup>243</sup> West, *A Guide to the Lakes*, p. 12.

<sup>244</sup> Maillet, *The Claude Glass* p. 143.

<sup>245</sup> Tennyson, 'Lady of Shalott', l. 62.

<sup>246</sup> Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, p. 218.

because it shows an impossibility, an abstracted version of reality, and since the Lady is viscerally linked to this reflective object, she has no choice but to be what it dictates: a melancholy artist, a perhaps not entirely willing voyeur, paradoxically transformed, in Meteyard's painting, into the defenceless object at which another's gaze is directed.

The 'black mirror' of the painting also operates at another connotative level. Apart from the artist's tool, it can also be the implement of the 'occult arts', of sorcery. Maillet observes that, in the wake of Mesmerism, the 'black mirror' acquired a 'bad reputation' as 'a magical and diabolical object' which 'enabled necromancers to conjure and to visualise the souls of the dead'.<sup>247</sup> Perhaps, then, Meteyard proposes not just an artiste but an ensorcelling 'fairy Lady'. This idea is reinforced by Meteyard's choice of placing behind the Lady's figure an ambiguous object, a crystal sphere on a tall stand, also reminiscent of a 'black mirror', which emphasises the suggestion of divinatory pursuits. It also ensures that the Lady is placed between two reflective objects, held in thrall by them. More importantly, the reflection of the young couple shown in the great dark mirror is perhaps the most ambiguous element of the painting: miniaturised, abstracted, at least one of the figures (the woman, quasi-transparent, her skin tinted pronouncedly blue), if not both, has a decidedly spectral quality. It is not unlikely that by showing the lovers reflected in this way Meteyard conflated the two consecutive scenes revealed by the mirror in Tennyson's poem:

For often through the silent nights  
A funeral, with plumes and lights  
And music, went to Camelot:

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., pp 47, 50.

Or when the moon was overhead,  
Came two young lovers lately wed.’<sup>248</sup>

Notably, in this sequence the funeral comes first and the wedding second; it would be interesting, then, to consider the possibility that at least one of the lovers reflected in the mirror is, in fact, a spirit, and the Lady, empowered by her ‘scrying- glass’ and her status of ‘fairy Lady’ trapped between worlds, is thus able to descry them both. Maillet notes that the ‘black mirror’, as a symbolic object, ‘was associated with a supplement of sex and death’, ‘the catalyst of [...] transgressions’.<sup>249</sup> If the Lady sees love conflated with death in her mirror, then that acts as another sign of her inescapable fate: when she pursues her erotic desires, she will inevitably die.

Meteyard’s many-layered *I Am Half Sick of Shadows*, filled with ambiguous elements, allows for many different interpretations, but they all ultimately converge, and the point where they meet is the relationship between the Lady and her mysterious mirror. Meteyard’s painting, unlike any of the ones discussed so far, neither directly shows nor necessarily implies the existence of windows or casements, though it does overwrite boundaries by surrounding the Lady with flowers. Thanks to this, it becomes more poignantly evident that the mirror is the Lady’s only point of contact with the world(s) she inhabits, but also the viewer’s only ‘window’ to the Lady’s dreams and desires. If the mirror shows the Lady an ideal(ised) world she can never touch, then it shows the spectator the reason for the Lady’s lascivious slumber: erotic desire. It also conditions the Lady’s existence: she can ‘know’ only through indirect experience and abstracted, therefore doubly insubstantial, perception. Finally, the mirror dictates who

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<sup>248</sup> Tennyson, ‘Lady of Shalott’, ll 66-70.

<sup>249</sup> Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, p. 74.

and what the Lady is, while she, mute and immobile, has no say in the construction of her own identity: trapped between worlds, an artisan, a conjurer, a voyeur, a target of voyeurism.

To close this discussion of visual interpretations of Tennyson's Lady and her mirror, a leap back in time is necessary, to consider another of the earliest pictorial takes on the subject. This is an 1853 sketch by Elizabeth Siddall, depicting the moment when the Lady is just turning away from her mirror and her loom to look at Lancelot (Fig. 17).

It is known that Elizabeth Siddall was intended to be one of the illustrators for the Moxon Tennyson, along with Holman Hunt and Rossetti, but that her contribution was rejected from the outset by the editors. Thomas L. Jeffers briefly discusses this instance, quoting a letter from D.G. Rossetti to William Allingham.<sup>250</sup> He grossly downplays Siddall's artistic capabilities, however, stating that 'Brown and Rossetti exaggerated her "genius" as poet as well as painter – it had flared up, as anyone's might, under her then Platonic lover's influence'.<sup>251</sup>

Notably, this lone and under-discussed representation of the Lady by a Pre-Raphaelite woman contrasts highly in all aspects with all the other paintings and sketches analysed so far. In Siddall's interpretation, the Lady's 'bower' –although perhaps, as Deborah Cherry argues in *Painting Women*, 'reminiscent of a nun's cell', due in part to the crucifix Siddall added to the scene – does not give the same feeling of claustrophobia as the rooms presented by Holman Hunt and Waterhouse.<sup>252</sup> This is partly due to the abundant lighting in the sketch, creating the impression, as Cherry puts

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<sup>250</sup> Jeffers, 'Tennyson's Lady of Shalott and Pre-Raphaelite Renderings', pp 232-233.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>252</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 190.

it, of 'a cool, airy and spacious workroom'; but another reason is that it rejects the obsessive and constrictive circularity employed by the male painters (Holman Hunt, Waterhouse, Meteyard) and uses, instead, parallel and crossed lines, as well as oblong shapes to create a false elongated perspective.<sup>253</sup> In this manner, the trapezoidal shape of the room gives the impression of a space that opens up to encompass the space inhabited by the viewer beyond the frame, thereby suggesting capaciousness rather than narrowness.

The 'inside' zone of the Lady's room and 'outside' zone of 'someplace else' are delimited by the (also) oblong window, although, half-anticipating Meteyard's ploy of the 'invasive' flowers, the window frame in Siddall's drawing is also partly overrun by a creeper, marking the transition from one space to the next. 'This contrast between interior and exterior,' Cherry writes, 'glimpsed through the apertures, not only carried an ideological separation of the spaces of masculinity and femininity but also constituted art as an activity distanced from the external world'.<sup>254</sup> While this may well be so, and Siddall may have intended to set clear boundaries between binaries (man / woman, sacred / profane, art / nature), many elements within the sketch seem to tell a different story. The climbing plant, for one, attests to nature ignoring artificial limits, and passing from the male-dominated 'outside' into the Lady's inner sanctum, suggesting that the two separate spheres, male and female, artificial and natural, melt into one another in Siddall's sketch. A further rejection of abstract separations is also suggested by the way in which the Lady herself is depicted. As Jason Rosenfeld points out: 'Unlike the elegantly curvaceous pose of the Lady in Hunt's drawing and the artificial dance-like positioning of her arms and hands, Siddall's heroine is seated, erect,

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<sup>253</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>254</sup> *Ibidem.*

working and dressed in a simple robe with an unsexualised body'.<sup>255</sup> Indeed, the waif-like definition of the woman's figure, sinuous though not refusing to represent erotic feminine curves, makes Siddall's Lady of Shalott almost androgynous. Here, thanks to the veiling robe, she looks as sexless as she can possibly look.

This choice of representation is particularly noteworthy because the 'veiling' of female figures in nineteenth-century visual art is generally believed to have had a very different connotation. Joanna de Groot argues that, in the period, 'Oriental societies were frequently characterized by reference to', among other things, 'veiling, and the seclusion of women' which, she later adds, also 'became an image through which gender and sexuality could be defined within European culture'.<sup>256</sup> Thus, images of veiled women in nineteenth-century paintings can often be read as an attempt to exoticise womanhood, while at the same time idealising it and thus rendering it more appealing. Helena Michie shows that, in the Victorian era, '[i]n a series of paintings of fallen women, clothing, its patterns and textures, dominates and at times erases the bodies beneath it', the heavy folds 'draw[ing] the viewer's eye to the fabric and away from the woman herself'.<sup>257</sup> 'Pre-Raphaelite dresses,' she also adds, 'with their power to dwarf the female body, become [...] framing devices'.<sup>258</sup> It can be said, then, that this technique of 'wrapping' female figures is generally used to symbolically conceal and contain female sexuality, whilst at the same time conveying a sense of titillation to the (male) viewer: the covered body 'asks' to be uncovered. Indeed, this seems to be the case in all the paintings of the Lady of Shalott previously discussed in this chapter: in

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<sup>255</sup> In Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, p. 73.

<sup>256</sup> Joanna de Groot, "'Sex" and "Race": The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century', in *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London: Routledge, 1989), pp 104, 106.

<sup>257</sup> Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 77.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibidem*.



Holman Hunt's, Waterhouse's, and Meteyard's paintings, the Lady is pictured heavily wrapped in folds and veils of various medieval or neoclassical designs. In all of them, the insistent covering serves only to stress the Lady's pervasive eroticism, and while, as Michie says, it 'draws the viewer's eye [...] away from the woman', it also delineates the 'erotic tension' of her 'stretched out' body.<sup>259</sup> By comparison, Siddall's 'veiling' of the Lady incites no such voyeuristic response. While the long, plain 'robe' does erase the Lady's sexuality and the specifics of her female body, it also functions as an empowering device: no longer defined by gender, the Lady may freely assume any identity she likes. This also, in a sense, fits the imagery used to describe the Lady in Tennyson's poem: whether 'angel' or 'fairy Lady', the Lady of Shalott is here 'liberated' from sexual contingencies.

As Cherry rightly observes, '[t]he Lady is not offered as a spectacle for the masculine gaze. Seeing, not only seen, she is represented at the moment of her look'.<sup>260</sup> Siddall's Lady looks not with the shocked, unbelieving but unflinching determination of Waterhouse's Lady, but with an expression of interested curiosity. The bird perched atop her loom (also bound to its frame) seems to imitate her movement, just as the two disoriented doves in Holman Hunt's painting mimic their Lady's confusion. As the Lady turns to look at the image that has caught her attention, the curse is triggered and the threads of her web 'explode' in disarray, 'reflecting' the cracks in the breaking mirror. It should be noted that, as Rosenfeld points out, 'Lancelot is visible in the reflection in the mirror, but not in the drawn reality of the landscape seen out of the window. That view of him is the privilege of the Lady alone'.<sup>261</sup> This is the decisive

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>260</sup> Cherry, *Painting Women*, p. 190.

<sup>261</sup> In Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, p. 73.

breakthrough of Siddall's take on the woman-mirror nexus in *The Lady of Shalott*: the view granted by her (oval) mirror and the one revealed by the window do not correspond (or at least not directly), suggesting that the Lady is here the only one who is granted full understanding of and access to the whole scene. In this case, the mirror is the agent of a double split: first, between the gazer in the painting and the gazer at the painting, because their views do not coincide, and secondly, between a closed, infertile world of undeveloped possibilities and that of real, immediate action. In a sense, two symbolic binaries are thus created: woman / mirror – the Lady sees what she wishes yet cannot touch in her glass – and bird / loom – the live representative of nature and the 'dead' representation of nature, its artificial counterpart. Consequently, as the little bird is bound to the loom and seeks to break free of it, so the Lady is bound to her mirror and has only just taken the decisive step to repudiate it. As Berger would say, Siddall's Lady is refusing to 'watch herself' anymore, and has decided to watch for herself instead. Interestingly, by looking away from mirror and towards the window, the Lady is also looking towards the crucifix which, one could infer, she has only been able to perceive reflected in the mirror up until this point. By refusing to remain conditioned by the mirror, the Lady is effectively pulling away from that liminal space she inhabits and moving towards 'shaping herself', even though that might imply embracing, in Christian fashion, her own 'cross', that is, her curse.

By foregrounding the relationship between a female figure and her mirror as one of the most important and intriguing aspects of the poem, Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' opened the way for a new approach to exploring the idea of femininity. Largely thanks to Tennyson, the image of the woman at the mirror becomes separate from the symbolism of vanity, which allegorical works both visual and literary took up in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Separated from the reflection of the woman-

gazer, and associated instead with diversely significant reflections of other objects, the mirror of the female figure is ascribed new valences and fresh potential as a signifier. No longer associated just with shallowness and a woman's need to monitor her beauty, the mirror begins to become a really liminal space, allowing female figures to define themselves in relation to (including against) social and gender-based expectations, and exploring the limits of their control over their lives.

This becomes apparent from the large number of pictorial interpretations that the poem occasioned, so many of which specifically portray the Lady with her mirror. The fact that each of these pictorial representations varies in its approach to the theme bears witness to the emergence of a multifaceted dialogue about notions of femininity. Moreover, the fact that most of them employ traditional, yet opposed understandings of 'femininity' concomitantly (e.g. the domestic angel versus the auto-erotic hedonist in Meteyard's painting), and that some (e.g. Elizabeth Siddall's) seem to fall completely outside such traditional notions, suggests that this cultural dialogue revolves around problematising previous definitions of 'femininity'. More precisely, where common tropes polarised femininity as either domestic, passive, self-sacrificing or as public, active, self-centred, the advent of the 'woman at the mirror' theme generates a space where the conflicting tropes around which femininity is defined can coexist, resulting in more complex understandings of this notion. The following chapter will focus on the creation of this space that allows for a gradual de-polarisation of the concept of 'femininity', showing how mirrors are used in relation to female figures in a way that capitalises on the tension between the traditional tropes.

## **THE OPTICAL TRIANGLE: WOMEN BETWEEN MIRRORS IN PRE- RAPHAELITE ART**

The fact that artists associated with or taking their inspiration from the Pre- Raphaelite circle found Tennyson's poem, 'The Lady of Shalott', so compelling that they reinterpreted its main themes time and again is further evidence of the Pre- Raphaelites' concern with mirrors. Mirrors appear repeatedly in the work of artists variously related to the Brotherhood, and they do so in many forms and to diverse effects, as mirrors belonging to a domestic space, or natural mirrors (usually a pool of water) in an outdoors scene, convex or plain mirrors; the mirrors might define a context by reflecting it, they might suggest a particular identity, or complicate interpretation by refusing reflection. Regardless of form and effect, they are nearly always juxtaposed to a female figure.

In the previous chapter I looked at how the woman / mirror relation peculiar to Tennyson's myth of the Lady of Shalott, in which the female figure uses the mirror to access the outside world, was received and explored in the visual art of the nineteenth century, mostly by Pre-Raphaelites and their associates, or by artists who were influenced by them. In this chapter I turn to look at how artists of the Pre-Raphaelite circle used the woman-mirror configuration to tackle the ever-shifting contemporary notions of femininity, both in paintings or drawings, and in poetic form. More specifically, I will analyse works by Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, William Holman Hunt, John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, and Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, arguing that these artists' uses of the theme tackled questions of virtue versus vice or deviancy, as well as the domestication of (auto-)eroticism. The main questions they asked were what makes a woman 'feminine', and what makes a woman 'desirable': in each case, the use of the mirror goes some way towards providing an answer. Some

of the works under scrutiny adhere, to some extent, to the virgin / whore dichotomy, but most suggest that femininity needs to be understood in ways that transcend simple pairs of opposites.<sup>262</sup>

This chapter will focus on the use of catoptric triangles (or, in some instances, optical frames) in Pre-Raphaelite art and literature, that is, on works that feature a female figure flanked or framed by (usually two, sometimes more) mirrors, or other reflective objects. My argument is that in Pre-Raphaelite art, both literary and visual, the mirror is used in one of four ways, all of them resistant to facile, binary definitions of femininity. The mirror, then, can be: a tool to explore the inner workings of the female self; a 'screen' that creates for the viewer the context in which to 'read' the female figure represented in that work; a barrier to the viewer's gaze, preventing him/her from inferring a monolithic reading of the female figure; a tool for the female figure to confront her contextual limitations and break free from them.

In many instances of Pre-Raphaelite visual art, the conjunction between a woman and a mirror is used to explore and to question the virgin / whore dichotomy, as discussed in the 'Introduction'. This is only possible by consciously inserting the mirror as an ambiguous, puzzling element which can lead to many competing readings of the work. The images of the 'pure' and 'fallen' woman, as J.B. Bullen argues in *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, 'had become important contrasting loci for competing attitudes to sexuality' in the private and public discourse of the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>263</sup> This was largely due to a developing legal and medical concern with

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<sup>262</sup> For an excellent discussion of both the shortcomings and the complexities of the virgin/whore dichotomy in relation to femininity in Victorian art and culture, see Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 3: 'It may be time for feminists to circle back to those "images" of angels and demons, nuns and whores, whom it seemed so easy and so liberating to kill, in order to retrieve a less tangible, but also less restricting, facet of woman's history than the social sciences can encompass.'

<sup>263</sup> J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 3.

prostitution, which culminated with the 1849 Act to protect Women from Fraudulent Practices for Procuring their Defilement and the Contagious Diseases Acts, the first of which was passed in 1864.<sup>264</sup> In an approach that mixes responses to Renaissance visual art culture with subtle responses to the prostitution problem, the Pre-Raphaelite use of the mirror is often set to explore the ever-shifting attitudes to femininity.<sup>265</sup>

I will begin by outlining the main points of reference in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites when it came to the use of mirrors, on the one hand, and to the understanding and representation of female figures in relation to the mirror, on the other. These points of reference are, as we shall shortly see in more detail, Jan van Eyck's iconic use of the mirror in the *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), and the allegorical depictions of femininity in the Renaissance. I will then go on to examine some emblematic Pre-Raphaelite works picturing female figures in relation to a mirror, inquiring into the sources with which they are in dialogue and outlining the links between them and other contemporary works. Pivotal to this chapter will be the analysis of those Pre-Raphaelite works which tackle the authors concern with notions of femininity by depicting a female

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<sup>264</sup> The first purported to protect girls and women from child prostitution and sexual abuse, whilst the second both legalised prostitution, as a practice, and targeted prostitutes as 'objects of consumption' by promoting enforced gynaecological examinations with the stated purpose of separating the women infected with sexually transmitted diseases from those that were, so to speak, 'clean'. For a detailed overview of legal attitudes towards prostitution in Victorian Britain see Trevor Fisher, *Prostitution and the Victorians* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 1997), especially chapters three, 'Legislation and Investigation: the 1849 Act and the Perambulations of William Logan' (pp 20-29), and seven, 'The Contagious Diseases Acts' (pp 80-95). For a representative selection of late nineteenth-century articles and responses to the problem of prostitution, see *Prostitution in the Victorian Age: Debates on the Issue from 19th Century Critical Journals*, ed. Keith Nield (Westmead: Gregg International Publishers, 1973). For an in-depth discussion of the effects of, and reactions to these acts see especially Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>265</sup> For an analysis of how convex mirrors came to symbolise the sin of vanity in Renaissance European painting, see Anthony, F. Janson, 'The Convex Mirror as Vanitas Symbol', *Notes in the History of Art*, vol. 4, nos 2/3 (Winter/Spring 1985), pp 51-54. For a further discussion of different understandings of the role of the woman in Victorian society, and of what attitudes were 'legitimised' and which 'delegitimised' for women at the time, see Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

figure surrounded, or flanked, by mirrors. This variation of the woman-mirror configuration originates in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's concept for a work titled 'Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views' (1863), which I will discuss, alongside his famous painting *Lady Lilith* (begun in 1864 and completed in 1868), and some of his lyrical works connected with the subject of the painting, his drawing *Risen at Dawn* (1865-c. 1880). The discussion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's visual works will be doubled by an analysis of poems that Rossetti wrote to accompany these works, as well as independent poems relevant to the theme, that offer a clearer insight into his artistic imagination. A couple of poems by Christina Rossetti, 'A Royal Princess' (written 1861, published 1866), and 'Venus's Looking-glass' (1875) will also be discussed; they share, with her brother's art, the same imagery of the woman and the mirror, or the female figure surrounded by mirrors, and contrasting these to works (conceived or completed) by Dante Gabriel, like 'Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views' or *Lady Lilith*, affords a more complete understanding of how this configuration is used by the Pre-Raphaelites, in particular. It is also well known that Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti offered each other extensive feedback on their work, and that they often collaborated in producing illustrated collections of poetry, another reason to consider in conjunction the work that they produced during roughly the same period.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> For a detailed discussion on the collaborations between Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, see Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti and Illustration* (Ohio, U.S.: Ohio University Press, 2002), especially Chapter 2, 'Pre-Raphaelite Bookmaking'. Kooistra also notes that Christina Rossetti 'was involved in their [the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's] artistic activities, serving as a model for many of their early paintings and sometimes going to their studios, or to various exhibits, to view their work' (5). In *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1994), Jan Marsh also documents the early exchange of artistic influences and literary feedback and opinions; see especially Chapter 7, 'The PRB', and Chapter 8, 'James and *The Germ*'.

## The Pre-Raphaelites in Dialogue with the Renaissance

The Pre-Raphaelites' preoccupation with mirrors and the various effects they allowed them to create partly stemmed from their engagement with Flemish primitive art, especially Jan van Eyck's famous *Arnolfini Portrait*, which had been acquired by the National Gallery in 1842 and had thus become easily accessible to students of the *beaux arts* (Fig. 18). A long-standing dialogue with van Eyck's style and iconography was also very much in line with the original aims of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, among them 'to sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote'.<sup>267</sup> Alicia Faxon suggests that the *Arnolfini Portrait* made such an impression on the founders of the Brotherhood that Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* echoes its effect, and Tim Barringer puts forth the same view.<sup>268</sup> This is certainly true of many other Pre-Raphaelite works that also visibly cite van Eyck's painting through their employment of the mirror, and of these, I will cite, in this order, Edward Burne-Jones's *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor* (1862), D.G. Rossetti's *Il Dolce Far Niente* (1859-1866, retouched 1874-1875), William Holman Hunt's *Portrait of Fanny Holman Hunt* (1866-1868), J. R. Spencer Stanhope's *Thoughts of the Past* (1858-1859), D.G. Rossetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860), and Ford Madox Brown's *Take Your Son, Sir!* (1851-1856). While these

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<sup>267</sup> William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir*, vol. I (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), p. 137.

<sup>268</sup> See Faxon's essay 'The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as Knights of the Round Table' in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, ed. Liana De Girolami Cheney (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp 53-74: 'The mirror in the rear of the Hunt drawing [of the Lady of Shalott] echoes the circular mirror in the Van Eyck background, its roundels imitation [sic] the ten small medallions of the Passion of Christ around Van Eyck's mirror' (63). See also pp 224-226 of Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, p. 224: 'Hunt's first drawing [of the Lady of Shalott] depicts the lady in a plain chamber with a large, convex mirror, clearly cracked, on the wall. Following Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, where events from the life of Christ are shown in roundels in the frame of a mirror, Hunt added scenes from the rest of the poem illustrating the full narrative'.



works use the mirror to different effects, as outlined earlier, they all employ it as a narrative tool, in response to van Eyck's treatment of the mirror.

As Linda Seidel observes in *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait*, the chief role of the mirror in van Eyck's famous painting is to help define 'the space and nature of the interior' of the room depicted, and 'to define the limits of the painting's narrative space'.<sup>269</sup> Like van Eyck, the Pre-Raphaelites often use the mirror either to create a narrative or to suggest an interpretation; where they innovate from van Eyck is in the centrality accorded to female figures in this respect. The Pre-Raphaelites' treatment of the female figure in relation to the mirror resonates with allegorical representations of the woman at the mirror in Renaissance painting. In this period, the allegory of the woman at the mirror was extremely present, and it was used as a poignant allegory to signify one of two opposing concepts: on the one hand, that of 'vanity' or 'pride', cautioning against the dangers of being caught up in worldly vices and transient pleasures and, on the other hand, that of 'prudence', urging the viewer to 'know oneself', guard against the illusions of this world, and meditate upon the realities of the spirit. Numerous paintings fall under this first category, of which some emblematic examples are: the *Triptych of Earthly Vanity and Divine Salvation* (c. 1485) by Hans Memling, *Woman at Her Toilette* by the School of Fontainebleau (c. 1560), or *A Girl with a Mirror, and Allegory of Profane Love* by Paulus Moreelse (1627).

There is something to be said of the versatile symbolism of the mirror in Renaissance paintings. In *On Reflection*, Jonathan Miller observes that, '[a]s with so many physical objects which acquire emblematic significance, the metaphorical implications of the mirror are not necessarily negative or censorious', meaning that

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<sup>269</sup> Linda Seidel, *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an Icon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp 127-128.

‘[t]he configuration in which the mirror epitomises the vice of Vanity is almost indistinguishable from the one in which it represents the virtue of Prudence and without a subtitle or a legend it is sometimes difficult to tell which is which’.<sup>270</sup> Miller argues that one must rely heavily on context in order to be able to distinguish between one allegorical function of the mirror and another, offering as a compelling example Simon Vouet’s *Allegory of Prudence* (c. 1645), where the loosely robed female figure watching herself reflected in a mirror could easily be mistaken for Venus were it not for the revelatory presence of other symbolic elements, such as the snake signifying wisdom and ‘[t]he figure of time who reveals Truth’ near the woman’s feet (Fig. 19).<sup>271</sup> The mirror, Miller further points out, has also traditionally been used in conjunction with the Virgin Mary to ‘[signify her] immaculate perfection’.<sup>272</sup> At the root of this association stands an expression used in a verse from the *Book of Wisdom*, ‘speculum sine macula’ (meaning ‘mirror without blemish’ or ‘spotless mirror’):

For Wisdom is more noble than any motion,  
 Yea, she passeth and goeth through all things by reason of her pureness.  
 For she is a vapour of the power of God,  
 And an emanation of his all-governing glory, without alloy.  
 For this cause no polluted thing stealeth into her.  
 For she is a reflection of eternal light,  
 And a *spotless mirror* [my emphasis] of the working of God,

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<sup>270</sup> Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

And an image of his goodness.<sup>273</sup>

The 'spotless mirror' image relies on the notion of an ideal absolute, as Miller also observes, conferring it (as a symbol) the connotation of 'unadulterated truth', the all-revelatory medium that allows the viewer to behold reality – physical and even more so spiritual – just as it is. From 'vanity object' conveying the idea of dangerous self-absorption, to signifier of clear judgement and moral flawlessness, Miller argues that this spectrum of significances attached to the image of the mirror in Renaissance art indicates that, traditionally, 'the mirror itself has an equivocal reputation'.<sup>274</sup> But where in Renaissance allegorical art the mirror picks up on only one of these significances at the time, with either negative or positive connotations that are reinforced by the nature of its symbolic context, in the nineteenth century, and especially in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, the mirror – in association with the female figure – loses its monolithic typification. Instead, it can be said that it takes over all these traditional connotations at once, that – if anything – it symbolises the whole spectrum, from 'vanity' to 'speculum sine macula', thus also complicating readings of any representations of women with mirrors.

### **Mirrors and Narratives of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art**

As mentioned before, mirrors in relation to the female figure in Pre-Raphaelite art are, at their basis, either 'interior' mirrors, placed in a domestic or private space, or 'exterior', 'natural' mirrors, placed in an external, natural space. (There is, in fact, a

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<sup>273</sup> *The Book of Wisdom*, ed. by A. T. S. Goodrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapter 7, verses 24-26, pp 196-197.

<sup>274</sup> Miller, *On Reflection*, p. 173.

third kind of mirror, that is associated to a liminal space in-between the two already cited; this can be observed, as we shall later see, in D.G. Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, and it will be discussed in the second half of this chapter.) The former type, mirrors belonging to interior spaces, are used in chiefly three ways in Pre-Raphaelite art: to signify the internal make-up of a female figure (as in *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor*), to explore the development of femininity in a contemporary domestic space (as in *Il Dolce Far Niente* and *A Portrait of Fanny Holman Hunt*), and to tackle the issue of femininity and moral agency (as in *Thoughts of the Past*, *Lucrezia Borgia*, and *Take Your Son, Sir!*).

The first example, Edward Burne-Jones's gouache painting *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor* (1862), depicts the legendary confrontation between Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and Rosamund, the concealed mistress of her husband, Henry II of England, in which, according to tradition, the enraged monarch forces the younger woman to choose how she prefers to die (whether stabbed or poisoned).<sup>275</sup> The painting features, in the background, an ingenious mirror – round and convex – clearly modelled after the one in van Eyck's painting. The depiction of the convex mirror departs from van Eyck's model in that, instead of being framed by roundels picturing scenes of the Passion, his mirror is surrounded by other round, convex mirrors that uncannily reflect different sections of Queen Eleanor's head (Fig. 20). The employment of convex mirrors is in line with the Medieval subject chosen by Burne-Jones, and it is well known that the painter had a particular investment in Medievalism.<sup>276</sup> The convexity of the mirror is

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<sup>275</sup> More on the possible artistic sources for Burne-Jones's painting can be read in Annabel Zettel, 'Belle et Blonde et Colorée: The Early Gouaches', in *Edward Burne-Jones: The Earthly Paradise*, ed. Sean Rainbird & Matthias Frehner, trans. Paul Aston & Bronwen Saunders (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), especially pp 45-48.

<sup>276</sup> I will cite here, as an example, Colin Cruise's nuanced article, "'Sick-sad dreams: Burne-Jones and Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 40, No. 1/2, 'The Arts in Victorian Literature' (2010), pp 121-140. This article also outlines how Medievalism as presented in the art of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood evolved in Burne-Jones' second-generation Pre-Raphaelitism.

also significant in other respects; as Anthony F. Janson argues in ‘The Convex Mirror as Vanitas Symbol’, the ‘vanitas’ allegories of the woman at the mirror in Renaissance art made use of the convex mirror not just because this type of mirror was common at the time, but also because ‘the mirror’s extreme distortions, [...] heighten the viewer’s ambivalence toward visual – and visionary – reality’, thus making this reflective object ideal in suggesting a morally distorted perception of the self and its relationship to the world it inhabits.<sup>277</sup> The distortion of Eleanor’s features by the convex mirror and the segmentation of her head in the dark glass suggest a fragmentation of the Queen’s self and emotion, her loss of composure at confronting her husband’s mistress. In this way, Burne-Jones rewrites the significance of the convex mirror as an object capable of creating not just spatial perspective, but also of reflecting the internal make-up of a female figure.

Burne-Jones’s mirrors from *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor* do belong to an enclosed, private space, but by reflecting only the female figure and nothing else the sense of narrative they create does not suggest how the viewer should ‘read’ her femininity within her surroundings. In this sense, William Holman Hunt’s painting, *Il Dolce far Niente* (conceived and executed between 1859-1866, retouched between 1874- 1875) is worth analysing, with a focus on the use of the evidently Eyckian, round, convex mirror in conjunction with a female figure (Fig. 21). With its use of curly, untamed hair, lush jewellery and fabric, and furniture of Oriental inspiration, *Il Dolce far Niente* has been repeatedly described as a ‘sensual’ painting, despite Hunt’s claims

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<sup>277</sup> Anthony F. Janson, ‘The Convex Mirror as Vanitas Symbol’, *Notes in the History of Art*, vol. 4, No. 2/3 (Winter/Spring 1985), p. 51.

otherwise.<sup>278</sup> In spite of the domestic dimension made manifest in the painting through the conspicuous wedding ring on the woman's left ring finger, and the homely, intimate scene reflected in the mirror, there is also a subtly auto-erotic atmosphere. This is suggested by the richness of expendable commodities featured in the painting, by the woman's tantalisingly contemplative gaze, the open book forgotten face-down on her lap, and by the title itself, roughly translated as 'the sweet idleness'. All of this indicates that the woman-mirror conjunction here amounts to an exploration of the traditional *luxuria / superbia* theme. This conspicuous overlap between elements suggestive of containment and domesticity, on the one hand, and elements of quasi-erotic incontinence on the other hand, both connected through the presence of the mirror, indicates a fusion of the themes of vanity and chastity. In this conception, the mirror brings together two opposing meanings to create a tension in the representation of the female figure: she is both wife and mistress of the household, and self-indulgent coquette. In a reversal of the traditional paradigm that irreconcilably dichotomised these two significations, in *Il Dolce Far Niente* they are allowed to coexist.

Another painting through which Holman Hunt explores the relationship between the female figure and the mirror in a domestic context is his Portrait of Fanny Holman Hunt (1866-1868), a posthumous portrait executed after a photograph of his late first wife (Fig. 22).<sup>279</sup> In the painting, Fanny is shown leaning against the back of what might be an armchair, gazing pensively into the near distance. Behind her, an overmantel mirror reflects the other side of the room in Eyckian manner, though what renders the

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<sup>278</sup> See Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné* vol I (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp 187-189 and Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith, *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, p. 164.

<sup>279</sup> For a more in-depth biographical context to the portrait, see Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt*, vol. I (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp 210-212.

reflection so ‘striking’, as Judith Bronkhurst aptly puts it in *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné*, is that it gives back the reflection of a second mirror hung directly opposite, achieving the effect of an infinite mise-en-abyme. This effect is notable at a formal level, ‘enabl[ing Holman Hunt]’, as Bronkhurst observes, ‘to provide the illusion of depth in cluttered Victorian interiors’.<sup>280</sup> While this, in itself, is no mean feat, besides adding a spatial dimension to the scene depicted the mutually-reflected mirrors also suggest something about the woman who is the focus of the painting: her own spiritual depth, perhaps, and also a sense of immanence, a sense, that is, that the – now departed – wife and mother has left an indelible mark upon the world she used to inhabit. The clear mirror once more rises above any traditional symbolism, and eschews any moral implications, conveying, instead, a sense of the complexity of the female figure’s role and character.

In other Pre-Raphaelite paintings, such as J. R. Spencer Stanhope’s *Thoughts of the Past* (1858-1859), the woman / mirror conjunction set in a private space considers the trajectory of a deviant erotic drive in a woman much more explicitly, as De Girolami Cheney also points out (Fig. 23).<sup>281</sup> However, the threshold between the fallen female figure and one who has in a sense regained her chastity is blurred. The painting shows a young woman in dishabille in a very modest room, frozen in the process of combing her hair, now gazing wistfully in the distance. On a dressing table behind her, among many other scattered objects suggestive of a frivolous lifestyle – coins, a string of beads, a comb, nail scissors, withered flowers – also stands a mirror, facing in the opposite direction to the woman, a handwritten note stuck in a corner of its frame, its glass

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>281</sup> For an overview of the subject represented in *Thoughts of the Past* see ‘Locks, Tresses and Manes in Pre-Raphaelite Paintings’, in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, pp 164-165.

reflecting heavy curtains somewhere on the other side of the room. While all the objects in the painting are symbolic of the woman's 'fallen' state, as art critics have often observed, the mirror is clearly a crucial element in defining the female figure.<sup>282</sup> This becomes apparent when we consider the recurrence of the mirror in an earlier sketch of the work executed in pen and ink, *Study for Thoughts of the Past* (c. 1859), where other objects shown in the final picture were not featured (Fig. 24). The only difference is that in the drawing the woman and the mirror were placed back to back, with the woman gazing upwards and mostly away from the external viewer, and the mirror facing entirely away both from her and from the viewer. By contrast, in the final painting both woman and mirror are rendered more 'accessible', as the woman's face is tilted towards the viewer, and the mirror is positioned so that at least part of its reflection is now visible. This change allows a consolidation of the role of the mirror as an object that suggests the story of the woman's past: the mirror reflects heavy drapery, connoting sensuality, and the note stuck in the mirror frame indicates the existence of illicit correspondence. Nevertheless, in the case of both the drawing and the final painting the general effect of the woman / mirror conjunction is the same: the mirror, facing away from the woman, reflects a past that she is not content with, that she wants to turn away from as she turned away from the mirror. The mirror in *Thoughts of the Past* symbolically doubles the woman's reflections on the life led so far. In this way, the use of the mirror emphasises the way in which the female figure becomes associated with the image of the repentant Magdalene, symbolically regaining her chastity through the gesture of remorse. The images of the virgin and whore are thus embodied by her at the same time.

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<sup>282</sup> For an analysis of the symbolism of all the various objects featured in *Thoughts of the Past* see especially Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, p. 144.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti also explores the moral dimension of femininity with the aid of the mirror, and a telling example in this sense is his watercolour *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860) (Fig. 25).<sup>283</sup> In Rossetti's painting, however, a different kind of 'fallen' woman than the one seen in *Thoughts of the Past* is represented, i.e. a murderess. Rossetti himself described the painting in these terms:

The subject is the poisoning of [Lucrezia Borgia's] first husband Duke Alfonso of Bisceglia. You see him in the mirror, going on crutches, and walked up and down the room by Pope Alexander VI, to settle the dose of poison well into his system. Behind these figures is the bed, as they walk the room, and Lucrezia looks calmly towards them, washing her hands after mixing the poisoned wine and smiling to herself.<sup>284</sup>

Like the mirror from Jan van Eyck's iconic painting, Lucrezia Borgia's mirror offers a sense of narrative, creating a specific context for the female figure at the centre. Notable is also the presence of the canopied bed reflected by the mirror, which is once more suggestive of the domestic space, but also of eroticism. The reflected bed has two significations: firstly, it suggests a private realm, to which, traditionally, belongs a certain category of women, namely mothers, wives, or daughters. The women who belong in this space are typically restrained and subdued. Secondly, the reflected bed also suggests eroticism; this is corroborated by other elements in Rossetti's drawing, such as the long, loose hair of Lucrezia, alongside the presence of the wine and the

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<sup>283</sup> Once more, see Judith Bronkhurst's detailed presentation of the context in which the painting was made, in *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné* vol I, pp 187-188.

<sup>284</sup> In a letter to Charles Augustus Howell, dated 3rd February 1871. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* vol. V, ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), pp 24-25.

orange tree, both of which connote self-indulgence. Two competing understandings of femininity are thus created thanks to the reflection in the mirror: that of subdued and that of liberated femininity. Moreover, the chain of events suggested by the mirror reflection frames Lucrezia as a dangerous kind of woman; this is consolidated by the symbolic act of washing her hands (implicitly of the crime), in a gesture reminiscent of Lady Macbeth or of Pontius Pilate. Once more, however, traditional dichotomies are eschewed in favour of a more complex view of femininity: neither vanity nor chastity is signified here, but rather a more complex view of femininity that emphasises empowerment.

Another much-cited instance of the use of an Eyckian mirror in a way that calls into question the morality of the female figure at the centre of the painting is to be found in Ford Madox Brown's enigmatic *Take Your Son, Sir!* (1851-1856, unfinished) (Fig. 26). Although not, in effect, a member of the original Brotherhood, Ford Madox Brown had close ties with the members and especially with his erstwhile pupil, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. A round, convex mirror in the background of this painting strongly recalls the one featured in the *Arnolfini Portrait* and is used efficiently both to suggest a commentary on the ideal of motherhood (by forming a symbolic halo framing the mother-figure's head) and to provide the narrative of the tableau by reflecting the image of what appears to be the baby's father, extending his arms to receive the child. This intriguing use of the mirror in conjunction with the image of the tired, sickly-looking mother in Brown's painting has given rise to competing interpretations; Susan Casteras calls the effect 'almost bizarre' and qualifies the female figure as 'a modern Magdalen [that] perverts the traditional Virgin and Child convention as she contemptuously offers

her child like some sacrificial object to the grasping father reflected in the mirror'.<sup>285</sup> More recently, Alison Smith has implicitly rejected the suggestion that the narrative indicated by the mirror reflection conveys a confrontation between the man and his mistress, and submits instead a more domestic interpretation, according to which '[the mother] is actually speaking to the father, asking him to hold the boy so they can dress him in a nightshirt'.<sup>286</sup> The painting allows for both interpretations precisely because no additional commentary is offered through other signs and symbols (like the dog signifying loyalty in van Eyck's painting). The title of the painting itself is just as open to interpretation, as the injunction 'Take your son, sir!' can easily cover a range of emotions, from post-partum exhaustion, to resentment towards an illegitimate father, to maternal satisfaction after a difficult birth. The fact that the choice is left entirely to the viewer's discretion in the absence of further pictorial guidelines suggests that scene – to the complexity of which the use of the mirror contributes – inscribes the central mother- figure with contrasting attributes: nurture and rejection, fulfilment and pain, legitimacy and illegitimacy, eroticism and domesticity. The fact that all these attributes are potentially contained within the painting further suggests an unwillingness to commit to any one simple and straightforward view of the nature of motherhood.

### **Women Framed by Mirrors: Inscrutable, Self-sufficient Femininity**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work is emblematic of the Pre-Raphaelites' engagement with the visual culture of the Renaissance, and of their reshaping of the traditional

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<sup>285</sup> Susan Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale Center for British Art, 1982), p. 38. Casteras develops these ideas and offers a more in- depth look at the biographical context in which the picture was painted, in *Images of Victorian Womanhood* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987); see chapter two, 'The Rights and Duties of Englishwomen', pp 31-32.

<sup>286</sup> In Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, p. 91.

connotations of the woman / mirror conjunction. He appears to have been consistently preoccupied with mirrors, perhaps more so than his contemporaries; not just with the mirror as a device, as it is used in the *Arnolfini Portrait* by van Eyck or, as we shall see, by Italian masters whom Rossetti admired, such as Titian and Bellini, but with mirrors in all their forms and possible uses. In his *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle*, the artist Henry Treffry Dunn, who had been a frequent visitor of Dante Gabriel's when he was based at Cheyne Walk, recounts he was struck, upon first being introduced (in June 1863) to Rossetti's home, by the abundance of mirrors lining the walls of the sitting-room:

On gaining admission, I was ushered into one of the prettiest, and one of the most curiously-furnished and old-fashioned sitting-rooms that it had ever been my lot to see. Mirrors of all shapes, sizes and designs, lined the walls, so that whichever way I gazed I saw myself looking at myself. What space remained was occupied by pictures, chiefly old, and all of an interesting character.<sup>287</sup>

The same passion for mirrors was pictorially recorded by Dunn in a drawing dated 1882 (titled *Dante Gabriel Rossetti; Theodore Watts-Dunton*) of Rossetti and Watts-Dunton at 16 Cheyne Walk, picturing the two men seated in a fairly capacious, 'exotically' furnished room, on whose walls is hung an assortment of mirrors and paintings (Fig. 27). When, at a later time, he had occasion to look into Rossetti's bedroom, Dunn noted that '[o]n the other side of [Rossetti's] bed was an old Italian inlaid chest of drawers, which supported a large Venetian mirror in a deeply-carved oak frame'.<sup>288</sup> The presence

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<sup>287</sup> Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle (Cheyne Walk Life)*, ed. Gale Pedrick (London: Elkin Matthews, 1904), pp 17-18.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

of a mirror in the bedroom is by no means surprising, but the preference for a mirror of large proportions and of a particular make and style attests to its value as an aesthetic object that completed the quaint, antique atmosphere of the room, not just a tool for the morning toilette.<sup>289</sup> Moreover, a watercolour by Dunn dated 1872, representing *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Bedroom at Tudor House, 16 Cheyne Walk*, depicts Rossetti's canopied bed reflected in a round convex mirror, recalling Rossetti's similar depictions of reflected beds in *Lucrezia Borgia* and *La Bella Mano*.<sup>290</sup> Dunn's watercolour also suggests the presence of an antique mirror in Rossetti's most intimate space, and it is fair to conclude that it was painted under the influence of Rossetti's interests and sensibilities.

Dunn also reports Rossetti's keen interest in spiritualism, and a short account of a conversation between the two men concerning a magical mirror or scrying-crystal, which had allegedly belonged to the notorious Elizabethan occultist John Dee, demonstrates Rossetti's familiarity and fascination with mirrors as magical objects.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Treffry Dunn describes Rossetti's bedroom in some detail, expressing surprise at its unhealthy – as he judged it – atmosphere and the strange, unsettling décor:

I thought it a most unhealthy place to sleep in. Thick curtains, heavy with crewel work in 17th century designs of fruit and flowers [...], hung closely drawn round an antiquated four-post bedstead. A massive panelled oak mantelpiece reached from the floor to the ceiling, fitted up with numerous shelves and cupboard-like recesses, all filled with a medley of brass *repoussé* dishes, blue china vases filled with peacock feathers, oddly-fashioned early English and foreign candlesticks, Chinese monstrosities in bronze, and various other curiosities, the whole surmounted by an ebony and ivory crucifix. The only modern thing I could see anywhere in the room was a Bryant and May's match box! [...] The gloom of the place made one feel quite depressed and sad. [...] It was no wonder poor Rossetti suffered so much from insomnia! (35-36)

<sup>290</sup> Rossetti's predilection for convex mirrors is also remarked upon in other of his contemporaries' memoirs. For instance, in *A Day with Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, writer May Byron mentions this in the context of Rossetti's passion for acquiring quaint and antique objects: 'with plenty of money flowing in, and no particular necessity involved in the spending of it, he [Rossetti] had suddenly evinced a passion for acquiring old oak, old furniture, old convex mirrors [...]' (14). In May Byron. *A Day with Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), p. 14.

<sup>291</sup> See chapters eight and nine of Treffry Dunn's *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle*, especially pp 62-63, where the scene of the conversation around John Dee's mirror is recorded:

Rossetti's deep interest in mirrors of all kinds came to be reflected in his art – both in the visual and the poetic kind, though particularly in the former – especially in his approach to the woman / mirror conjunction. What is most interesting here, however, is his use of multiple catoptric objects connected to female figures to explore the concept of femininity. Thus, in Rossetti's vision, the mirror is multiplied, framing the female figure and, to a certain extent, 'protecting' her against the viewer's gaze, as witnessed in *Lady Lilith* and *Risen at Dawn*. The creation of this closed space in which the woman scrutinises herself without letting the viewer do so, and in which her image is refracted, has the effect of guarding against simple heraldic associations of the type 'the image of a woman gazing at herself in the mirror signifies vanity'. The subversion of popular dichotomies associated with femininity – virgin / whore, angel / demon, domestic goddess / femme fatale – which results from the challenging composition of these works introduces the idea that the concept of femininity defies a stable definition or a one-sided representation.

The first instance of Dante Gabriel's idea of creating a painting of a female figure framed by mirrors comes from a sketch he made in one of his notebooks around 1863, described as 'Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views' (Fig. 28). An interest in the figure of Venus among the Pre-Raphaelites was, more or less, a given, and it is something that many critics have commented on.<sup>292</sup> As Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Holdys notes in *Soft-Shed Kisses*, Sandro Botticelli's work, and his emblematic *The Birth of Venus*, in particular, was rediscovered by the Pre-Raphaelites

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I recollect on one occasion I had just come from visiting a neighbour – a lady who possessed the original dreaming stone of Dr. Dee which she allowed me to look at. It was a small, unpretentious bit of crystal, but having such a reputation as it had, I felt as though I too must have a look into it. [...] Full of all this mysterious discourse, I went back to Rossetti and told him all. He listened to my narration with the greatest interest.

<sup>292</sup> As an example, see the recent collection *Botticelli Reimagined*, ed. Mark Evans and Stefan Weppelman (London: V&A Publishing, 2016), the section 'The Rediscovery of Botticelli in the Nineteenth Century'.

and their associates and much doted on by them.<sup>293</sup> Once more, the distinctive aspect of Rossetti's concept work is the presence of the mirror and, even more so, that of multiple mirrors. According to William E. Fredeman, the sketch and note came '[w]ith further endorsement by DGR: "(see article on mirrors in Smith)," i.e., Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, a copy of the 1842 edition of which, with woodcuts, DGR owned'.<sup>294</sup> In William Smith's dictionary there is, sure enough, a full entry on 'speculum', which describes all the kinds of mirrors from Antiquity known at the time, their uses, and the materials from which they were manufactured. The entry also cites the Roman poet Claudian in support of the belief that rooms entirely covered in mirrors were, if not common, at least present in ancient Rome:

[Mirrors] were also fastened to the walls sometimes [...], though not generally. Suetonius in his life of Horace speaks of an apartment belonging to that poet, which was lined with mirrors (*speculatum cubiculum*), which expression, however, Lessing considers as contrary to the Latin idiom, and therefore regards the whole passage as a forgery. That there were, however, rooms ornamented in this way, is probable from Claudian's description of the chamber of Venus, which was covered over with mirrors, so that whichever way her eyes turned she could see her own image.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> See Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Holdys, *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), especially pp 242-244.

<sup>294</sup> See William E. Fredeman's comment on Plate 23, in *A Rossetti Cabinet: A Portfolio of Drawings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti Hitherto Unpublished, Unrecorded, or Undocumented Including Studies for Known and Executed Paintings, Original Early Drawings, Portraits and Caricatures, Designs, and Juvenilia*, ed. William E. Fredeman (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Ian Hodgkins & Co., 1991), p. 4.

<sup>295</sup> See the entry for 'speculum', in William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1859), p. 1053.

Claudian's account of the overwhelmingly mirrored chamber of Venus, as reported by Smith in his dictionary, must then have been Dante Gabriel Rossetti's main direct source of inspiration on the subject of 'Venus surrounded by mirrors'. As Jerome McGann aptly puts it, '[a]lthough [Rossetti] never executed that picture, the idea grew luxuriantly around him', so that he went on and painted other pictures, all of women and mirrors, although in such cases he reduced the ambitious setting of multiple surrounding mirrors to just two, thus creating a mirror-woman-mirror triangle, as I will show in the discussion of *Lady Lilith* and *Risen at Dawn* below.<sup>296</sup>

Writing of the concept for 'Venus surrounded by mirrors', McGann argues that '[t]he subject of such a painting would be art itself, and especially pictorial art, where Beauty is reflexively presented in the form of visual images'.<sup>297</sup> This, as we shall later see, is consistent with the Renaissance debate on the 'paragone' with which Rossetti appears to have interacted in paintings such as *Lady Lilith*. However, the idea of depicting a woman at the centre of a room of mirrors, or at least flanked by mirrors, is not merely a pictorial soliloquy on the theme of painting and artistry; it engages, also, with the notion of (self-)surveillance: who or what does the woman watch and why? Also, is the subject of her surveillance available to us external viewers, and how does that affect our reading of the painting? These are all questions that I will address in my discussion below, which is centred on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*.

The first version of *Lady Lilith* was painted between 1864 and 1868 and retouched in 1872-1873 (Fig. 29).<sup>298</sup> The painting is also known under the title of *Body's*

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<sup>296</sup> Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 105.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>298</sup> Further relevant correspondences between the two paintings will be discussed later on in the chapter. Each of the paintings was accompanied by an illustrative sonnet. A.C. Swinburne reviews them both as a contrasting pair in his 1868 Royal Academy exhibition notes.



*Beauty* and was first exhibited as a ‘pair’ to *Sibylla Palmifera*, or *Soul’s Beauty* (1866-1870). The only notable difference between the preliminary and the final version of *Lady Lilith* is that, while the former depicted Lilith in the likeness of Fanny Cornforth, the latter replaced it with that of Alexa Wilding, which was deemed more suitable for the chosen subject by Frederick Leyland, Rossetti’s patron at that time.<sup>299</sup> In most other respects the two works are identical: they depict a seated woman in loose white dishabille, combing her long, unbraided hair while studying her own reflection in a hand mirror. Placed diagonally behind her is a dressing table or a tall chest, on which are placed (from the forefront to the background), a flower, a bottle of perfume or scented oil, and a large framed mirror reflecting an outdoors environment (a garden or a forest). The upper right-hand corner of the painting is smothered in white roses, while in the foreground, on the lower right-hand side, the corner of a table holds a transparent glass vase with a single poppy. It becomes apparent that Lilith, the central figure of the painting, inhabits – similarly to the Lady of Shalott – a liminal space, which belongs at the same time to the interior and to the exterior realms, a space that is concomitantly domestic and alien. The grooming objects (hand mirror, comb, perfume) and the furniture items (chair, dressing table) define this space as a boudoir, an inner sanctum, a closed and intimate environment. However, the flowers that take up most of the upper right-hand corner of the painting and which, as David Peters Corbett points out, inhabit the same plane as the woman, framing her head and shoulders and implicitly extending out of the painting, point to an external space, a ‘savage garden’ that overlaps with, or

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<sup>299</sup> On the reasons for this change of ‘face’, and how it was received by some of Rossetti’s contemporaries, see Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), especially chapter three, ‘Hidden Just Behind Those Screens: Art Objects and Commodities’, pp 94-133. In the same chapter, Psomiades also offers an interesting Marxist reading of *Lady Lilith* as a commodity, considered in the context of its (aesthetic) value and (spatial) positioning as a decorative object in Leyland’s house.

penetrates the boudoir in improbable fashion.<sup>300</sup> They are also in stark contrast with the picked flowers that also feature in the painting, such as the pink foxglove on the dressing table, the white, braided floral crown lying in Lilith's lap, and the large poppy in the glass vase in the foreground. This contrast indicates an interlacing of the untamed natural space, symbolised by the overgrown and tangled white rose briar, and a domestic, 'tamed' dimension, represented by the flowers that have been picked and arranged to suit human needs, the 'natural' turned 'artificial'.

In a letter sent to Thomas Gordon Hake in April 1870, D.G. Rossetti wrote of his painting that '[i]t is called *Lady* [original emphasis] Lilith by rights [...] and represents a modern [original emphasis] Lilith combing out her abundant golden hair & gazing on herself in the glass with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle'.<sup>301</sup> Her ambivalence is produced in the first place by her quality of being both timeless and time-embedded. The figure is Lilith, the first wife of Adam according to certain strands of Hebrew mythology, who, after rebelling against her husband and God's decree, becomes a demonic creature of the night, devourer of children.<sup>302</sup> Rossetti's original source for the figure of Lilith was

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<sup>300</sup> In "'A Soul of the Age:': Rossetti's words and images, 1848-73', in *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites: Text, Context, Subtext*, ed. by Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 94, he writes about 'the flowers filling the picture plane against (rather than behind) Lilith's head'.

<sup>301</sup> In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* vol. IV, ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp 449-450.

<sup>302</sup> See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* vol. I, trans. Henrietta Szold (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp 65-66:

The Divine resolution to bestow a companion on Adam met the wishes of man, who had been overcome by a feeling of isolation when the animals came to him in pairs to be named. To banish his loneliness, Lilith was first given to Adam as wife. Like him she had been created out of the dust of the ground. But she remained with him only a short time, because she insisted upon enjoying full equality with her husband. She derived her rights from their identical origin. With the help of the Ineffable Name, which she pronounced, Lilith flew away from Adam, and vanished in the air. Adam complained before God that the wife He had given him had deserted him, and God sent forth three angels to capture her. They found her in the Red Sea, and they sought to make her go back with the threat that, unless she went, she would lose a hundred of her demon children daily by death. But Lilith preferred this punishment to living with Adam. She takes her revenge by injuring babes—baby boys during the first night of their life, while baby girls are exposed to

a passage in Goethe's *Faust*, the Walpurgisnacht scene in which Mephistopheles describes the figure of Lilith to Faust in very striking imagery as an oversexed woman weaving traps for men out of her luxuriant hair. Virginia M. Allen notes that '[o]n the reverse of the watercolor [of *Lady Lilith*] is a label attached to the frame on which appears a quatrain by the poet Shelley, transcribed in Rossetti's handwriting. It is Shelley's translation of Goethe's Walpurgisnacht scene'.<sup>303</sup> This is probably the translation to which Rossetti had access at the time, but he himself later translated the relevant passage from *Faust* thus: 'Hold thou thy heart against her shining hair,/ If, by thy fate, she spread it once for thee;/ For, when she nets a young man in that snare,/ So twines she him he never may be free'.<sup>304</sup> However, in Rossetti's painting, as its author insists to clarify, she is not only the archaic feminine principle of destruction, relegated to a place outside place and time, but becomes a typically Victorian image of the seductress, placed as she is among an assortment of objects – dressing table, framed mirror, perfume bottle – associated with the nineteenth-century boudoir. Indeed, in his correspondence, he once refers to the painting as his 'Toilet picture', thus bringing it into a familiar, domestic discourse.<sup>305</sup> The female figure represented is not merely 'Lilith' but 'Lady Lilith', the title transporting her from the realm of the purely fantastical into a more socially-and historically-grounded context. Rossetti's Lilith is as much Victorian as she is mythical, and she inhabits the threshold of home / elsewhere,

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her wicked designs until they are twenty days old. The only way to ward off the evil is to attach an amulet bearing the names of her three angel captors to the children, for such had been the agreement between them.

<sup>303</sup> Virginia M. Allen, "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 66, issue 2, 1984, p. 290.

<sup>304</sup> Quoted in Psomiades, *Beauty's Body*, p. 127.

<sup>305</sup> In a letter to his mother from 24th August 1866, collected in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* vol. III, ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), p. 462.

domesticity / wilderness, submissiveness / domination. This is also pointed out by Virginia M. Allen, who notes that: '[t]here are indeed two ideas involved here [...] The painting represents a monumental "modern" woman in a private moment in a private space [...] The sonnet [...] introduces us to mythic Lilith, who may live in any woman, but who seems to exist primarily in the realm of the poet's sexual imagination'.<sup>306</sup>

What makes Lilith's figure even more ambivalent and any meanings one might attach to her presence evanescent, is the fact that she is poised between two mirrors. The triangular structure of *Lady Lilith*, with the female figure poised between two different kinds of mirrors (inward- and outward-facing, respectively), suggests that Lilith herself may have been born from the conflation of two other kinds of Rossettian mirror paintings, each typified by *Fazio's Mistress* (1863-1873), and *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1864), respectively (Figs 30, 31). Both depict women at their toilette in the act – like Lady Lilith – of plaiting or combing their luxuriant hair. But whereas in the former the woman is gazing abstractedly into her toilette mirror, in the latter a large oval ornamental mirror is placed on the wall right behind the woman (who is gazing ostensibly at the viewer), reflecting the other side of a room, where a window or French door opens into a garden. *Fazio's Mistress* was apparently inspired by a poem by Fazio degli Uberti, also translated (or adapted) by Rossetti.<sup>307</sup> The verses, like the subject of the painting, echo the imagery associated with Lilith: 'I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair/ Whereof, to thrall my heart, Love twists a net,/ Using at times a string of pearls for bait'.<sup>308</sup> *Woman Combing Her Hair* was also known as *Fazio's Mistress* for

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<sup>306</sup> Allen, "One Strangling Golden Hair", p. 291.

<sup>307</sup> See Robert Upstone's commentary on *Fazio's Mistress*, pp 98-100, in *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain, 1860-1910*, ed. Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997): 'So similar are the subject and the style of the poem to Rossetti's that it is possible he might have written it himself' (100).

<sup>308</sup> Quoted in *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain, 1860-1910*, p. 99.

a while, so it may be said that its conception stems from the same idea and imagery as the other painting.<sup>309</sup> Here, however, the female figure has shifted her gaze from herself to the viewer, and the mirror reflection offers a sense of ‘openness’ to the scene by reflecting an open space. Both paintings allusively represent a female eroticism freed from any social restraints by appearing in a domestic space, even more so since that domestic space is the woman’s bedroom or boudoir. Whilst social norms, in general, do also apply in the home, the boudoir is an exclusively private space under the control of the woman; as such, it is subject to the same norms only so far as the woman allows it to be, therefore becoming a less restrictive space. But where the first painting emphasises the inward gaze, with the vanity mirror lending a sense of auto-eroticism twined with pensiveness and even slight melancholy to the scene, the second painting invites the viewer in by altering both the direction of the woman’s gaze and the purpose and ‘direction’ of the mirror.

*Lady Lilith* effectively blends these two paintings, not only through Lilith’s similarity (in posture, attitude and (un)dress) to the other two female figures, but also and especially through the combined use of the two kinds of mirrors. Poised roughly between these two reflective surfaces, not precisely between them but forming a triangle with them, Lilith becomes a spectral figure. This peculiar triangulation renders Lilith, if not quite insubstantial (in the manner of Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott*), then at least intangible, a figure caught in an unbreakable catoptric cycle: she projects her own gaze into the hand mirror whilst she eludes the other mirror’s reflection; she is subject to the viewer’s gaze, but also attracts that gaze while frustrating the viewer’s tendency to appropriate or explain precisely by being caught in the frame of the two mirrors. Also,

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<sup>309</sup> See Barbara Bryant’s commentary on *Woman Combing Her Hair*, in *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain, 1860-1910*, p. 138.

while her indisputable materiality – the monumental bulk of her body, the abundant folds of her dress, and the almost tangible shine and texture of her bountiful hair – makes her as ‘un-ghostly’ as possible, her undefinable position suggests her ‘spectrality’. One might even, following an idea proposed by Isak Dinesen / Karen Blixen, associate the invisibility of her legs with the ethereality of the female figure.<sup>310</sup>

The enigmatic quality of the two mirrors contributes to Lilith’s spectral nature: each presents the viewer with difficulties of interpretation, making the central female figure, which is dependent on both, just as difficult to read. Some of the main obstacles in interpreting D.G. Rossetti’s painting arise from the ambiguous reflection given by the large mirror placed on the dressing table in the background. This is primarily because, at first glance, the viewer may be tempted to think of the mirror not as a mirror at all, but rather as a window, opening onto a space beyond Lilith’s chamber/garden; indeed, in his correspondence with his patron Frederick Leyland prior to the sale of the painting, Rossetti described *Lady Lilith* as a picture featuring ‘a landscape seen in the background’, suggesting perhaps a window or a casement opening onto a natural panorama.<sup>311</sup> If one studies the view more attentively, however, one perceives that the framed glass reflects the two candles placed before it, which corrects the initial impression.

What is reflected by the large mirror, though, is incongruous, for several reasons. Firstly, because the green, forest-like space shown in it does not seem to be compatible with the immediate surroundings, offering an improbable perspective, with the trees

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<sup>310</sup> Isak Dinesen, ‘Daguerreotypes’, in *Daguerreotypes and Other Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 25: ‘It will be still more difficult to explain today how the skirt – the long garment – had become such a significant, indeed decisive, symbol of women’s nobility and her legs the one sacrosanct taboo. Women of those days [i.e. late eighteenth, early nineteenth century] were not reticent about displaying their physical charms above the belt. But from the waist to the ground there were mysteries, holy secrets’.

<sup>311</sup> In a letter to Leyland from April 1866, quoted in K.A. Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body*, p. 120.

neither far enough nor near enough to allow us to place this green area in a definite space. Secondly, because the plane reflected in the mirror should coincide with the one inhabited by the viewer, and yet this is not the case: there is no place for the viewer in the reflected space, the viewer's mundane position being incongruous in relation with the idyllic forest. There is, moreover, the question of what the reflected space is, or where it may be. Here, too, there are many possible options to choose from: it may be an outdoors space immediately outside the threshold inhabited by Lilith (although the skewed perspective problematises this possibility); or it may be the Garden of Eden forever lost to her (in which case the mirror becomes a magical object, a 'scrying glass', potentially making Lilith a scryer like the Lady of Shalott); or, as J. Hillis Miller argues in psychoanalytic vein, it may be a rendition of Rossetti's recursive emasculating dreamscape.<sup>312</sup> From a more historicist perspective, David Peters Corbett emphasises the 'referentiality' of the background mirror, contending that it is '[t]he only point of depth within the painting, [as] it looks back into the history of Pre-Raphaelitism, already distant by the 1860s, and cites the large and ornate mirror behind the couple in William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, reinterpreting, reversing or even cancelling

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<sup>312</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Winter, 1991), p. 334: 'The scene in the [background] mirror is in fact the orchard pit'. His argument refers to an allegedly autobiographic work by Rossetti, a poetry-prose diptych - 'The Orchard-pit' (verse) and 'The Orchard Pit' (prose) - which recounts a recurring dream with strange valences. Miller quotes Rossetti's rendition in prose in support of the argument he puts forth:

Men tell me that sleep has many dreams; but all my life I have dreamt one dream alone.

I see a glen whose sides slope upward from the deep bed of a dried-up stream, and either slope is covered with wild apple-trees. In the largest tree, within the fork whence the limbs divide, a fair, golden-haired woman stands and sings, with one white arm stretched along a branch of the tree, and with the other holding forth a bright red apple, as if to some one coming down the slope. Below her feet the trees grow more and more tangled, and stretch from both sides across the deep pit below: and the pit is full of the bodies of men.

They lie in heaps beneath the screen of boughs, with her apples bitten in their hands; and some are no more than ancient bones now, and some seem dead but yesterday. She stands over them in the glen, and sings for ever, and offers her apple still.

Extract above from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Orchard Pit', in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Ellis, 1911), pp 607-608.

its original significance. Corbett asserts that '[t]here is no meaning to the image of nature in the mirror', but rather that 'it is [...] a negation, a refusal of any path out of the picture and into the space which Hunt's earlier picture so forthrightly occupies'.<sup>313</sup> A refusal of a path out of the picture it may be, as well as a nod towards William Holman Hunt's use of the background mirror (which was discussed in more detail in the previous chapter), but the nature cannot be said to be meaningless. Simply, it counterbalances the interiority of the boudoir-like space, and gestures towards the Hebraic Eden that Lilith was thrown out of, creating an undefined space around the female figure.

It is precisely the ambiguity of the mirror that provides it with meaning: acting both as an opening into an improbable space, and, paradoxically, as a reinforcement of the sense of claustrophobia created by the almost uncomfortable proximity of all the elements featured in the picture, the background mirror suggests the inscrutability and intangibility of the woman with whom it is juxtaposed. Moreover, with its enigmatic reflection, it effectively challenges the boundaries of Lady Lilith's domain, but also those of her identity. It is in this that its significance lies: the mirror seems to suggest that, like it, the female figure also defies easy interpretation.

The small mirror Lilith holds in her hand and into which she gazes intently poses challenges of a different order, which render it just as ambiguous a sign. This mirror is placed with its back to the viewer, making its reflection inaccessible to him/her. This inaccessibility of the object of Lilith's projected and absorbed gaze, contrasted with the accessibility of her semi-revealed body and the openness of her posture – she is turned towards the viewer in such a way that he or she can admire almost her entire figure – becomes puzzling. In the letter to Gordon Hake already quoted above, Rossetti wrote

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<sup>313</sup> David Peters Corbett, '“A Soul of the Age:” Rossetti's words and images, 1848-73', in *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites: Text, Context, Subtext*, ed. by Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp 93-94.



that Lilith ‘gaz[es] on herself in the glass with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle’.<sup>314</sup> This short description offered by the author bears closer scrutiny and critics have repeatedly discussed it. David Peters Corbett, for instance, quotes Rossetti’s description and argues that his Lilith is a superficial figure whose sensuality and compelling nature are to be found precisely in her two-dimensionality.<sup>315</sup> His argument is also partly rooted in A.C. Swinburne’s description of Rossetti’s first version of *Lady Lilith* shown at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1868, in which the central female figure is described as a ‘serene and sublime sorceress [for whom] there is no life but of the body; [...] with spirit (if spirit there be) she can dispense’.<sup>316</sup> Citing Swinburne, Corbett advances the following view:

It is Lilith’s superficiality which ‘attracts and subdues.’ Confined to the surface of the mirror, she is confined as well to the body, to appearance rather than to depth [...]. Her version of interiority is self-absorption, repudiation of the world outside the self [...]. Her self-contemplation remains at the level of appearance. Surrounded by exemplars of surface, described in Rossetti’s paint which, pushing hard up to the picture plane, flattens surface, she is contained, poised, but the circuit of her contemplation never goes within.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* vol. IV, ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp 449-450.

<sup>315</sup> Peters Corbett, ‘A Soul of the Age’, p. 93.

<sup>316</sup> William Michael Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), p. 46.

<sup>317</sup> Peters Corbett, ‘A Soul of the Age’, p. 93.

It is apparent, both from the views advanced by Rossetti's contemporaries such as Swinburne and from modern interpretations such as Corbett's, that Lady Lilith's self-absorption, as implied by her fixed gaze and the inaccessibility of her reflection, is an element of frustration. However, her superficiality, as Corbett would have it, is called into question by the very inaccessibility of her reflection; he rightly points out the 'circuit[ousness] of her [self-]contemplation', given by her gaze 'spectrally' returned by the hand mirror. Lilith's interiority, her 'soulfulness' is given by her very physicality.

The necessary interrelatedness of body and soul is a recurrent idea in Rossetti's works. In his 1871 sonnet 'Heart's Hope' he writes: 'Lady, I fain would tell how evermore/ Thy soul I know not from thy body'.<sup>318</sup> Additionally, as Lilith is a quasi-mythical figure, it may well be said that her body and her soul are conflated, her sensuality and corporeality becoming the essence of her spirit. This becomes apparent if the painting is read in conjunction with the sonnet written as a companion piece and exhibited along with it.<sup>319</sup> The sonnet emphasises her transcendence as a mythical and thus emblematic figure: 'And still she sits, young while the earth is old'.<sup>320</sup> By

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<sup>318</sup> In Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: Chiswick Press, 1881), ll 6-7. This image, as Jerome McGann notes in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost* (116-117), appears to have been reworked from a similar one featured in Rossetti's earlier 'Love-Lily', ll 21-24: 'Ah! let not hope be still distraught,/ But find in her its gracious goal,/ Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought/ Nor Love her body from her soul'. 'In Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems and Translations 1850-1870* (London: Humphrey Milford/ Oxford University Press, 1919).

<sup>319</sup> A similar conflation takes place in the sonnet that accompanies *Sibylla Palmifera*, the painting D.G. Rossetti exhibited alongside *Lady Lilith* as a sort of companion-contrasting piece. In *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition*, Swinburne writes that: 'The other picture [i.e. *Sibylla Palmifera*] gives the type opposite to this [i.e. *Lady Lilith*]; a head of serene and spiritual beauty, severe and tender, [...] not like Lilith's [...]; with still and sacred eyes and pure calm lips; an imperial votaress truly, in maiden meditation: yet as true and tangible a woman of mortal mould, as ripe and firm of flesh as her softer and splendid sister' (47). Swinburne notes about the painting the same conflation or interdependence of body and soul which Rossetti also appears to be driving at in his accompanying sonnet. 'This is that Lady Beauty' [9] the sonnet asserts, thereby suggesting that the Sibylla's outward charms are given by her inner beauty, her spiritual prowess: 'Under the arch of Life, where love and death,/ Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw/ Beauty enthroned; [...] her gaze struck awe' [1-3]. Sibylla is, it can be said, the 'flipside' of Lilith, whose inner captivation is implicitly given by her outward sensuality.

<sup>320</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Lady Lilith', in *Poems and Translations 1850-1870 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, together with the Prose Story 'Hand and Soul'* (London: Oxford University Press, 1919), 1.5.

contrasting Lilith's unchanging, vampire-like, unnatural youthfulness to the natural ageing process, it is suggested that she is not subject to the same growth and decay process as the world she inhabits (or haunts), and is therefore differentiated from the average Victorian woman, set apart as an 'idea(l)' rather than an individual. She is 'subtly of herself contemplative', the reader is told: the use of this adverb, 'subtly', to describe Lilith's action warrants closer attention, as its connotations include both a sense of cunning and artfulness, and an idea of elusiveness and covertness.<sup>321</sup> These two connotations seem to be the most appropriate in relation not only to the scene described in the sonnet, but also to what is shown in Rossetti's painting, as they help elucidate and foreground two prominent aspects of Lilith's relationship with her own (hidden) reflection in the hand mirror.

The first aspect is that the intensity and circuitousness of Lilith's gaze are artful, calculated to attract and seduce. This is consistent with another idea expressed in the sonnet: that she 'draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,/ Till heart and body and life are in its hold'.<sup>322</sup> This idea, as I have shown above, is reiterated in Rossetti's letter to Hake. What is suggested, then, is Lilith's skilfulness in attracting and directing the viewer's gaze, with possibly dangerous consequences. This may also have been what Swinburne had in mind when, in his *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition*, he wrote of Lilith that '[s]he is indifferent, equable, magnetic'.<sup>323</sup> Magnetism is here a very appropriate concept to be used in relation to the 'pull' of Lilith's reflected yet inaccessible gaze, especially if we also consider Rossetti's fascination with occultism.

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All subsequent quotations from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's works of poetry, unless otherwise stated, will refer to this edition.

<sup>321</sup> Rossetti, 'Lady Lilith', l. 6.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, ll 7-8.

<sup>323</sup> Swinburne, *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition*, p. 46.

In his *Recollections* Henry Treffry Dunn wrote of Rossetti's interest in occult practices at some length, observing that 'everything that appertained to the mystic had a strange fascination for him' and in particular that '[m]esmerism Rossetti had a reasonable faith in', so much so that he organised at least one séance at his house in Cheyne Walk.<sup>324</sup> It is little wonder then if, as Catherine Maxwell argues in *Second Sight*, 'ideas of magnetism [...] play a significant role in Rossetti's poetic understanding of love and creativity, and [...] this poetic magnetism is inextricably bound up with the figure of woman'.<sup>325</sup> In Rossetti's portrayal of *Lady Lilith*, the idea of magnetism is forcefully suggested if one reads the painting through the triangulation 'external viewer's gaze – Lady Lilith's gaze – reflection of Lilith's gaze'. As with a magnet's poles, the intensity of Lilith's apparently self-centred gaze attracts the viewer, while the inaccessibility of her reflection frustrates him/her, because he/she is unable to appropriate it. Maxwell also remarks upon Lilith's apparently narcissistic self-contemplation and notes that '[t]he narcissistic look or gaze may be both arresting and hypnotic'.<sup>326</sup> She goes on to argue that '[i]n casting its spell, narcissistic beauty in particular has some kind of narcotic component that draws in the viewer, stupefies him, and brings him to a standstill' in much the same way that 'serpents [according to tradition] deprive their prey or victim of the power to escape or resistance by their hypnotic numbing look'.<sup>327</sup> This is certainly true of Rossetti's Lilith, not least because in the context of the larger Rossettian mythos she is in fact depicted as a snake – in fact, as a prelapsarian serpentine

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<sup>324</sup> Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 55, 56. A full account of this is given in chapter eight.

<sup>325</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

creature predating even the enticing snake of the Tree of Wisdom, whom she tempts. In his 1869 poem 'Eden Bower', Rossetti attributes the following words to Lilith as she cajoles the serpent that is to bring about the Fall of Man: 'A snake I was when thou wast my lover', and 'I was the fairest snake in Eden'.<sup>328</sup>

The second connotation of the adverb 'subtly', that of elusiveness or covertness, indicates the virtual unreadability of Lilith's reflected gaze and the indirectness of its reflection. As I have argued above, in the painted rendition of the scene this is conveyed by the fact that her hand mirror is turned in such a way as to occlude its reflection from the viewer. J. Hillis Miller argues that, in fact, Lady Lilith's hand mirror gives back no reflection, or rather, that it reflects 'nothingness', total lack.<sup>329</sup> He suggests that this is true because the ambiguous reflection in the greater mirror acts as a *mise-en-abyme* device that implies the negating bottomlessness of the reflection, which remains inaccessible.<sup>330</sup> The 'unreadable' reflection of the larger mirror, Hillis Miller suggests, metonymically gives back the reflection of Lilith's hand mirror, and also offers a negative reflection of the viewer him-/herself, signifying 'one's own face in the mirror, caught in the eternal moment of crisis as the confrontation of a perpetual loss'.<sup>331</sup> He then goes on to qualify this loss as: 'Loss as such, total and irrevocable. Absence.'<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Rossetti, 'Eden Bower', ll 12, 13. The whole poem is, in fact, laden with serpentine imagery which reflect on Lilith's own reptilian nature. For instance, her children with Adam are, ll 35-36: 'Shapes that coiled in the woods and waters,/ Glittering sons and radiant daughters' [35-36].

<sup>329</sup> Hillis Miller, 'The Mirror's Secret', p. 336: 'Though the back of that mirror is turned toward the spectator, the image in the mirror on the wall tells him what chasm is no doubt pictured there behind the screen of reflected hair.'

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., p. 334: 'What is mirrored in the mirror on the wall is not an interior but an exterior woodland scene, a scene of branches going from left to right matching in reverse Lilith's tresses, which spread from right to left. The branches duplicate themselves in smaller and smaller repetitions out to invisibility in a *mise en abîme*.'

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., p. 338.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibidem*.

Critics like J.B. Bullen, however, have already challenged this problematic view, arguing that ‘loss’ cannot act as an absolute, as a self-sufficient concept, but must be seen in relation to something:

The problem with this view [...] is that human loss cannot exist in isolation but must be predicated upon something. Freudian psychology tells us that it derives from a primal loss, the loss of the breast and the separation of the infant from the mother. [...] In masculine terms it [i.e. ‘loss’] is generated by the threat of female withdrawal and its experience creates a concomitant desire for the female.<sup>333</sup>

Bullen assumes a psychoanalytic perspective to correct Hillis Miller’s – also psychoanalytic – provocative yet unconvincingly grounded reading of Lady Lilith.<sup>334</sup> Whether it be ‘absolute loss’, as Hillis Miller would have it, or ‘loss of something’, as Bullen asserts, the idea that ‘nothingness’ is reflected in Lilith’s hand mirror merely because the obverse is inaccessible to the viewer is problematic, although it suggests the challenging nature of the unseen reflection well enough. It is this elusiveness of the image that is frustrating for the viewer because, though Lilith is submitted to his/her appropriating gaze, she not only dominates the pictorial space (quite literally so, as her body takes up most of it), but also directs and challenges the viewer’s gaze in the way in which she self-sufficiently controls her own without allowing an external observer to interpret her identity.

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<sup>333</sup> J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 124.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., pp 123-124.

Two paintings may have inspired Rossetti to represent his Lilith flanked by mirrors. The first, often cited by critics, is Titian's *Woman with a Mirror* (c.1515), which shows a bare-shouldered woman arranging her long, unbraided hair with the help of two mirrors held by a man positioned diagonally behind her.<sup>335</sup> As in *Lady Lilith*, one mirror is small and its back is turned against the viewer, so its reflection remains inaccessible; the other is large, and its dark reflection shows, unclearly, the woman's back and an oblong patch of diffuse light signifying the obverse of the small mirror held up by the man. As previous critics have pointed out, Rossetti must have seen Titian's painting at the Louvre, on his first visit to Paris in autumn 1849. At any rate, he enthusiastically mentions the painter in a letter to his brother William Michael in the wake of his first visit to that museum.<sup>336</sup> The other painting to which Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* shows a striking similarity is Giovanni Bellini's *Woman with a Mirror* (also dated 1515), which depicts a naked woman also arranging her coiffure with the help of two mirrors: a small one held in her right hand, whose reflection is inaccessible to the viewer, and a larger one hanging on the wall behind the woman, reflecting the back of her head and her left hand (Fig. 32). While there is no clear evidence that Rossetti knew of this particular painting, it is known that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood admired Bellini, as proven by the famous 'list of immortals' that they drew in their early days, cited by William Holman Hunt in his memoir *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, in which Bellini features with one star next to his name.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> See Virginia M. Allen's "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*'.

<sup>336</sup> Letter to William Michael Rossetti, dated Thursday, 4 October 1849: 'We ran hurriedly through the Louvre yesterday for the first time. [...] There is [...] a stunning Francis I by Titian'. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. I, ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), p. 109.

<sup>337</sup> William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* vol. I (London: Macmillan & Co, 1905), pp 158-159.

There are further similarities between Rossetti's and Bellini's paintings alongside the woman/mirrors triangle and the action and pose of the female figure. In his eponymous study of Giovanni Bellini's works Rona Goffen argues that *Woman with a Mirror* has '[s]ight itself [as] a theme', building on the view that it is 'in conversation' with the Renaissance paragone debate.<sup>338</sup> *Lady Lilith*, too, can be understood as a work that revolves mainly around sight, although, rather than demonstrating the superiority of painting, as Bellini does, by centralising the viewer's gaze via simultaneous perspectives of the same object – the female body – it uses the same device (the mirror) to challenge the 'all-encompassing' potential of the gaze. In fact, *Lady Lilith* combines in its background mirror two separate elements of Bellini's painting, the round wall mirror and the large window behind the young woman. Thus, where in *Woman with a Mirror* the two are separate and have separate roles, in *Lady Lilith* the large mirror becomes the 'window-mirror', giving back the reflection of an improbable outside space and becoming both enclosing (by not opening onto an exterior) and revealing (by giving the impression of openness). Moreover, the 'window-mirror' problematises the idea of perspective by blurring the boundaries between the 'inside' space of Lilith's chamber and the 'outside' space within which this chamber is potentially located. Thus, if we take the image reflected in Lilith's 'window-mirror' to be that of the Garden of Eden, then it can be thought of as what Rossetti later called 'Eden Bower', and in this context the use of the noun 'bower' bears further scrutiny. Its varied connotations of 'dwelling', 'idealised dwelling', 'boudoir', or 'arbour' are consistent with the idea that

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<sup>338</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp 252-253:

Bellini's concern with the sense of sight was conscious, perhaps self-conscious, in the way of early sixteenth-century Italian artists preoccupied with the *paragone* [original emphasis], the competitive comparison of the representational arts, painting and sculpture. [...] Simply put, the paragone debate was about this question: Which art form, painting or sculpture, can best achieve the purpose of art, which is to imitate nature? [...] Painters [...] asserted that [...] a picture could present different points of view simultaneously.



the space which Lilith inhabits is at once internal and external, temporal and atemporal, closed and open. It is an ideal, utopian space, which could not exist in reality, and which merges dichotomies into a unitary whole. At the same time, it does exist in the real world as a pictorial space, as a painting rendered on canvas and hung on a gallery wall.

Another close parallel between Rossetti's painting and Bellini's is the posture of the female figure – head slightly tilted to one side, one hand busy with the hair, the other holding up the hand mirror – and, even more strikingly, her position in the pictorial space. Goffen notes that in Bellini's painting '[the] table [on which the female figure sits] propels the woman out of the picture space into our world: she exists both within and in front of the picture plane'.<sup>339</sup> This is also true of *Lady Lilith*, in which the chair plays much the same role (it is not true of Titian's *Woman with a Mirror*, where the table clearly delimits the pictorial space from the real space, relegating the two figures to the former).

The unseen reflection is another element that the two paintings have in common. Goffen, however, downplays the inaccessible reflection from *Woman with a Mirror*, and offers a straightforward interpretation of the whole setting: 'Bellini's picture', she reiterates, 'is about seeing: while we look at the woman and at her mirror reflection, she looks at herself and into the mirror on the wall – into which she gazes indirectly, through the intermediation of her hand mirror [...] we see the back of her head [...] and the lady sees a similar view of herself in her hand mirror, reflecting the reflection'.<sup>340</sup> Such an uncomplicated reading of the 'indirect reflection', which must, according to Goffen, naturally give back – as intuition would indicate – simply the image of the woman as she is arranging her hair, is made possible by the lack of any indication that the figure

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<sup>339</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 255.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibidem*.

may be allegorical or emblematic. By contrast, Rossetti makes use of the same device in conjunction with a clear association of his female figure with a mythological dimension, thereby rendering the unseen reflection more problematic and – as I have argued – open to subtler and more challenging readings of the whole conjuncture.

Finally, though this is perhaps less perceptible at first glance, there is one more parallel between Bellini's and Rossetti's paintings (which does not occur between Rossetti's and Titian's), and that is the inclusion, in both works, of the vase with the flower. Goffen links this element, too, with issues of sight and representation in Bellini's painting, which, he argues,

[...] is the simultaneous and differentiated depiction of different kinds of experiences of seeing, which involve also distinct levels of reality – source and reflection and reflected reflection. Bellini played a variation on this theme with a device familiar from fifteenth-century Flemish painting, [...] and that is the clear glass vase, partially filled with water, set on the windowsill, casting a shadow and allowing us to see through glass and liquid. Bellini confirms both the transparency and the substantiality of the vase and liquid.<sup>341</sup>

In Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* a similar vase makes an appearance – also transparent, although in more symbolic fashion holding a poppy, representing sleep and death. But in contrast with Bellini's use of it, here the object acquires strange connotations, as it appears to suggest that there may be a certain metaphorical correspondence between the central female figure and either the vase holding the flower, or the flower inside the vase.

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., pp 256-257.

Rather than using the motif of the transparent gaze to comment on how sight functions mechanically in painting, Rossetti borrows this device to challenge the spectator's gaze and engage him/her in a complex reading of the female figure by establishing the diagonal background mirror – woman – vase. This axis has various implications: firstly, that the transparent vase with the poppy conceptually 'doubles' Lady Lilith – Lilith herself can be read symbolically as a 'vessel' of forgetting (as symbolised by the poppy), or as a narcotic herself, able to make the viewer forget himself by virtue of her hypnotic aura; secondly, the vase and flower are in dialogue with the reflection given by the great mirror especially if, in the context of the larger Rossettian mythos, that reflection is taken to show the Bower of Eden, as described in his 1869 poem 'Eden Bower', where the choric line repeatedly runs: 'Eden bower's in flower'.<sup>342</sup> This can be taken as a reference to a prelapsarian 'Golden Age' of permanent spring and deathlessness, although it may also refer to Lilith's apparent organic connection to flowers. The latter reading may only be established by connecting 'Eden Bower' with the earlier 'Lilith' sonnet, in which Lilith is associated – as in the painting it accompanies – with the rose and the poppy: 'The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where/ Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent/ And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?'.<sup>343</sup> Here, Lilith is associated with the enticing nature of roses and the narcotic quality of poppies, and is herself rendered implicitly 'floral' by this connection; this is emphasised by the unusual and repetitive juxtaposition of the past participle 'shed' and the nouns 'scent' and 'kisses'. 'Shed', perhaps more familiarly associated with 'petals', is here applied both to fragrance (implicitly the rose's, though not excluding the poppy's), and to the kiss (which in this context can only be that bestowed

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<sup>342</sup> Rossetti, 'Eden Bower', l. 11.

<sup>343</sup> Rossetti, 'Lady Lilith', ll 9-11.

by Lilith upon those she would lure). In the painting this structural correspondence between woman and flower is strengthened by the presence of foxglove on the table/chest behind Lilith, which is placed just in front of the large mirror. Foxglove is a plant with poisonous properties and otherworldly associations, of which Rossetti may have been aware. *English Botany; or, Coloured Figures of British Plants* was published in 1866, and it is plausible that Rossetti could have had access to it. The book discusses the folkloric associations of the foxglove; it is pointed out that the plant has frequent magical and/or morbid connotations.<sup>344</sup> The plant's poisonous quality is also noted, with its effects listed as: 'giddiness, languor, dimness of sight, and other nervous symptoms', as well as 'the depression of the heart's action'.<sup>345</sup> In this light the foxglove plant in Lady Lilith can be said to complete a circle of vegetal symbols (rose – alluring, poppy – languor-inducing, foxglove – potentially deadly) which serves to define the hypnotic essence of the woman herself.

In Lady Lilith Rossetti maps the possible directions of the gaze – the viewer's, as well as Lilith's. There is a triangle of 'vanity tools' – hand mirror / comb / perfume bottle – which suggests a reading of Lilith's main attribute: circular, hypnotising beauty, after the manner of 'Love-Lily' and 'Heart's Hope'. Then, there is the flower triangle – rose / poppy / foxglove – which suggests, as I have argued above, Lilith's potential for

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<sup>344</sup> James Sowerby, John T. Boswell Syme, John Thomas Boswell et al., *English Botany; or, Coloured Figures of British Plants*, 3rd ed., vol. VI (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1866), p. 128:

It happens, moreover, that the name *Folksglove* is a very ancient one, and exists in a list of plants as old as Edward III. The "folks" of our ancestors were the "fairies," and nothing was more likely than that the pretty coloured bells of the plant would be designated "*Folksgloves*," afterwards "Foxglove". In Wales it is still declared to be a favourite lurking-place of the fairies, who are said to occasion the snapping sound made when children, holding one end of the digitalis bell, suddenly strike the other on the hand to hear the clap of fairy thunder, with which the indignant fairy make her escape from her injured retreat. In the South of Scotland it is called "bloody fingers," more northward "deadman's bells;" whilst in Wales it is known as "fairy-folks fingers, or lambs-tongue-leaves."

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

destruction.<sup>346</sup> The most important ‘gaze triangle’, however, is the one that connects Lilith’s gaze to the hand mirror and then to the ‘window-mirror’ in the background: it is primarily around this broken axis that the external viewer’s gaze is compelled to rotate.

Jerome McGann argues that ‘we see in all [of Rossetti’s] pictures, as we see in the Italian primitives he admired, recurrent *moments* of perspective that play alongside moments that develop contradictory perspectives, or moments that refuse perspective altogether. Some of his greatest works – [including] *Lady Lilith* – manipulate linear perspective in systematically contradictory ways’.<sup>347</sup> This is true of ‘perspective’ both in the literal sense and in a metaphorical sense, referring to the viewer’s perspective upon the female body and its accessibility. The mirror – gaze – mirror conjunction gives a sense of entrapment: there is no escaping, and no penetrating this closed circuit. Lilith’s gaze, dreamy, and focused on something inaccessible to the viewer, closes off the female figure herself, negating the apparent accessibility suggested by her attire and by the impression of intimacy and vulnerability of the ‘boudoir scene’. Similarly, the hand mirror’s reflection is barred to the viewer, while the background mirror’s reflection remains mysterious and unreadable. ‘Rossetti’, argues McGann, ‘makes space function as part of an argument about spiritual and aesthetic values’, and the use of the mirror in *Lady Lilith* thwarts any traditional and clear-cut understanding of space.<sup>348</sup> Potentially a nullifier of space, it can threaten with the immediacy of the void

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<sup>346</sup> Interestingly, the crown of white flowers (probably daisies) on Lilith’s lap from the final version of the painting is absent from the initial drawing in which Lilith is modeled after Fanny Cornforth. Whilst it, too, can be linked to Lilith’s organic connection to flowers, as pointed out before, it seems more likely that it is an addition to her loose, bridal-like outfit, emphasising a sense of artificial openness and vulnerability.

<sup>347</sup> McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p. 111.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

– a nothingness with which Hillis Miller believes Lilith’s hand mirror is charged – or with the entrapment of impossible spaces, in which mutually exclusive opposites coexist.

Using the *Lady Lilith* / *Sibylla Palmifera* pictorial pair McGann dismisses a reading of Rossetti’s paintings based on clear dichotomies – ‘a goddess / whore dialectic, or perhaps [...] the more mythic and Blakean Jerusalem / Babylon dichotomy’ (119) – maintaining that, although it might be ‘[u]seful for certain general critical purposes, [it] can also obscure essential features of the actual works’.<sup>349</sup> Instead, he suggests that, while Rossetti’s portraits ‘do not represent moral ideas, [...] they can and do draw moral problems into intellectual presence’.<sup>350</sup> This, indeed, appears to be the case with *Lady Lilith*, which eludes any out-and-out reading, and in so doing problematises the autocracy of the gaze. In its complexly evasive imagery, *Lady Lilith* subverts an easy reading of Lilith as ‘taboo’ or ‘fallen’ femininity, as the oversexed woman pictured in Goethe’s *Faust*, or even the unrepentant murderess of Rossetti’s Lucrezia Borgia. It suggests, instead, a calm self-sufficiency, the consistent mystery of womanhood that does not agree to being defined via monolithic concepts.

There is another work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s that duplicates the structure of *Lady Lilith* in all aspects but one: that is his 1868 chalk drawing of the title *Risen at Dawn*, or *Gretchen Discovering the Jewels* (Fig. 33). Like *Lady Lilith*, this drawing takes its subject from a scene from Goethe’s *Faust*: in this case, the scene in which Gretchen finds in her room a small chest of jewels left behind by Mephistopheles, which she cannot but admire and try on. Similarly to *Lady Lilith*, this drawing features a bare-shouldered female figure forming a similar triangle with two mirrors: one placed in

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibidem*.

front of her and whose reflection is inaccessible to the viewer, and the other hung onto the wall behind her, reflecting a heavy four-poster bed. As in *Lady Lilith*, the same cylindrical vase, holding the same red poppy, makes an appearance, this time behind the female figure, on a shelf under the background mirror. Unlike Lady Lilith, however, Gretchen pays no attention to the toilette mirror in front of her and therefore to her own reflection, appearing instead transfixed by the jewels she has taken out of the small chest for inspection. This is an interesting, and perhaps peculiar choice on the part of Rossetti: as it stands, it is not a meditation on Gretchen's perilous though short-lived descent into vanity, in that she is not shown with the jewels on and admiring herself thus adorned. What comes across here is a sense of wonder and doubt, in what is almost a mimicry of the figure of the postulant nun meditating upon the passion flower in Collins's *Convent Thoughts*.

Rossetti's Gretchen, frozen in the act of considering the purpose and provenance of the mysterious jewels, can be said to contemplate aesthetic beauty, as represented by the string of beads she holds up: are they good or bad, and is it wrong or right to assume ownership of them? The ignored psyché mirror on the table presumably reflects – although here, too, the reflection is hidden from the external viewer – Gretchen's act of holding up the jewels and weighing her options. This tantalisingly occluded reflection might hold the key to the understanding of Gretchen, to rewriting her character (as virgin or as potential whore), but the mirror does not surrender its secret. The other mirror hung on the background wall, with its reflection of the four-poster bed, recalls the very similar mirror reflection from Rossetti's *La Bella Mano*; this glimpse of Gretchen's 'inner sanctum' and the spinning wheel placed to the right of the female figure both convey the sense that this is a domestic, intimate space, and lend Gretchen a Shalottian tinge. The glimpse of the bed may also allude to Gretchen's impending

erotic awakening brought about by her upcoming love affair with Faust. Less cryptic than the optical triangle in *Lady Lilith*, the layout in *Risen at Dawn* nonetheless prompts a similar set of puzzling questions: if vanity is out of the question, since Gretchen does not gaze at herself in the mirror, does not her fascination with the jewels also denote a sense of female frivolity? And what does the tension between an object of industry – the spinning-wheel – and one of idleness – the reflected bed – signify? As with *Lady Lilith*, however, it is in these ambiguities and tensions that lies a hint to an answer: the female figure must be read through all these items, with all their possible significances. There is no easy answer, because the woman, occupying her position between competing mirrors and contrasting household items, defies scrutiny. Like Lilith, captured in a moment of self-sufficient intimacy in the quasi-auto-erotic gesture of appraising the jewels, she does not need or agree to a definitive interpretation.

To close the circle of female figures surrounded by catoptric frames, let us turn once more to a poem by Christina Rossetti, ‘A Royal Princess’, penned in 1866. This poem is an excellent example of how the image of the woman surrounded by mirrors was used in Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and demonstrates that the theme was not confined to the realm of visual art.

‘A Royal Princess’ describes the fate of an unnamed princess, ‘king-descended, decked with jewels, gilded, drest’, whose acute perception of the isolation brought about by her superior social status carries her unhappiness to extreme levels, despite her earthly riches.<sup>351</sup> In lamenting her fortunes she emphatically pronounces that she: ‘Would rather be a peasant with her baby at her breast,/ For all I shine so like the sun, and am purple like the west’.<sup>352</sup> One of the most striking passages of the poem is also

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<sup>351</sup> Rossetti, ‘A Royal Princess’, l. 1.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., ll 2-3.



the reason for its appearance in this chapter: in describing her rooms, the princess says that ‘all my walls are lost in mirrors, whereupon I trace/ Self to right hand, self to left hand, self in every place,/ Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face’.<sup>353</sup> Christina Rossetti’s princess ‘surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views’ at once recalls and subverts her brother’s concept of a mirror-framed Venus. The goddess of love who, in Smith’s dictionary, is implicitly presented as all too content to be able to admire herself whichever way she turns, gains sinister overtones in Christina’s poem. Her catoptric rooms are destabilising, her walls are ‘lost’ in mirrors, presumably transforming her chambers into a disorientating, circus-like labyrinth of mirrors. The self-surveillance implied by these mirrored walls becomes extreme. She can perceive her ‘self in every place’, and there is no escaping the mirrors’ unforgiving reinforcement of that self from which the princess would much rather distance herself: her loneliness (‘self-same solitary figure’) and her self-doubt and lack of direction (‘self-same seeking face’). But while mirrors torture the princess, they also provide a liberating moment of rupture in this poem (as in ‘The Lady of Shalott’): ‘A mirror showed me I look old and haggard in the face;// It showed me that my ladies are all fair to gaze upon,/ Plump, plenteous-haired, to every one love’s secret lore is known,/ They laugh by day, they sleep by night’.<sup>354</sup> As in Tennyson’s poem, here, too, it is a mirror – the poem does not make clear whether it is a literal or figurative one – that shows the princess a glimpse beyond her ‘ivory chair high to sit upon’ where she ‘sit[s] alone’.<sup>355</sup> On the other hand, it also shows her the reality of her own decaying body and spirit –

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., ll 10-12.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., ll 42-45.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., ll 13, 15.

‘old and haggard in the face’ – providing the tipping point of her self-destruction which coincides, as in ‘The Lady of Shalott’, with her self-salvation.

The mirror allows the princess to break the vicious cycle of being trapped in an isolated feminine, domestic world that renders women powerless and miserable; lines 80-81 of the poem suggest the existence of such a cycle and its perpetuation: ‘[...] The king: stand up. Said my father with a smile:/ “Daughter mine, your mother comes to sit with you awhile,/ She’s sad to-day, and who but you her sadness can beguile?”’. The queen’s sadness seems acute and hereditary (in the sense of a diseased and persistent social order), and it becomes apparent that, unless the princess gains a sense of agency, she is condemned to become a flat replica of her mother, and probably of her mother’s mother before her. Finally, it is mirrors again, or at least mirror reflections, possibly given by the mirrors of her chamber, that prompt the princess’s rise to action as they offer glimpses of the bloody revolt taking place at the gates of the castle: ‘There swelled a tumult at the gate, high voices waxing higher;/ A flash of red reflected light lit the cathedral spire;/ I heard a cry for faggots, then I heard a yell for fire’.<sup>356</sup> In the aftermath of this specular and spectral tumult, the princess decides her own fate, possibly with a view to changing the fate of her own land, too:

Nay, this thing will I do, while my mother tarrieth,  
I will take my fine spun gold [...]  
I will take my gold and gems, and rainbow fan and wreath;  
With a ransom in my lap, a king’s ransom in my hand,  
I will go down to this people, will stand face to face, will stand

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., ll 91-93.

Where they curse king, queen, and princess of this cursed land. [...]

I, if I perish, perish; they to-day shall eat and live;

I, if I perish, perish; that's the goal I half conceive:

Once to speak before the world, rend bare my heart and show

The lesson I have learned which is death, is life, to know.

I, if I perish, perish; in the name of God I go.<sup>357</sup>

The Princess's rebellion, tinged with tragic overtones of suicidality will be carried on into some of Rossetti's later work, such as the sonnet sequence of *Monna Innominata* (1881), attesting to her commitment to a poetic discourse of female autonomy and decision-making. While Christina Rossetti's woman surrounded by mirrors is altogether of a different kind from any of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's mirror- framed female figures, she, too, demonstrates (perhaps more acutely than her brother's female characters, or than Tennyson's Lady of Shalott) the complexity and self- sufficiency of femininity. Her princess shifts the focus of her varied mirrors from fragmenting self-surveillance to a surveillance of her environment and circumstances; she turns, as it were, the mirror upon the world that she inhabits and ends this process with an active attempt at trying to heal that world. Her decision, prompted by the mirrors that kept her a prisoner, shatters those very mirrors of unwholesome frivolity.

### **The Female Figure, Reflected**

Finally, as a closing example of how the Pre-Raphaelites reinterpreted traditional approaches to the relationship between the woman and the mirror in visual art, let us

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., ll 97-102, 104-108.

turn to Edward Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus* (1877), which offers a different kind of reflective surface than those witnessed so far, i.e. a natural mirror, as constituted by a pool of still, clear water (Fig. 34). This work distances itself from most of the paintings discussed so far in that, rather than offering – or refusing – a narrative frame to the female figure (or, in this case, figures), it reveals their own, albeit partial, reflections. This painting of Classical inspiration employs the conceit of the water-as-mirror from an erotic perspective that can be construed, at least at a superficial level, as a reworking of the allegory of vanity. *The Mirror of Venus* pictures ten women, nine of whom are kneeling, sitting, or bending down, while one of them – presumably representing Venus – is standing. All of them are gathered in a semicircle around the edge of a pool of still, clear water that gives back their untainted reflections. This painting has been most convincingly read before, as both J. B. Bullen and Fabian Fröhlich have noted, as a kind of allegory of beauty and narcissism, and as emblematic of the general attitude of the artists associated with the Aesthetic Movement.<sup>358</sup> The first person to express this view was Henry James, who described his impressions of *The Mirror of Venus* when it was first exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in London, in 1877:

One of Mr Burne-Jones's contributions to the Grosvenor is a very charming picture entitled 'Venus's Mirror', in which a dozen young girls, in an early Italian landscape, are bending over a lucid pool, set in a flowery lawn, to see what I supposed to be the miraculously embellished image of their faces. Into some such mirror as this the painters and poets of Mr Burne-Jones's turn of mind seem to me

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<sup>358</sup> See J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 161, 164; also Fabian Fröhlich, 'The Mirror of Venus', in Rainbird & Frehner (eds.) *Edward Burne-Jones: The Earthly Paradise*, p. 99.

to be looking; they are crowding round a crystal pool with a flowery margin in a literary landscape, quite like the angular nymphs of the picture I speak of.<sup>359</sup>

The female figures in the painting can be seen as a parallel to Narcissus, multiplied and made more effeminate. This is a natural association due to the obvious common element: a pool of water acting as a perfect, unblemished mirror. Yet *The Mirror of Venus*, however allegorical in style, defies allegory in that the water-mirror is employed to recall both connotations of chastity and of vanity. It is far from just an image in which ‘a dozen women’, as Henry James exaggerated, admire their own beauty in the natural mirror of a calm pool. Some of these female figures do indeed gaze intently upon their own reflections, although their relaxed postures and dreamy, subtly preoccupied expressions (unlike the tense posture of Waterhouse’s Narcissus) do not denote obsessiveness or even auto-erotic intensity. They amount, rather, to what Laurence Des Cars argues is a ‘leitmotiv in the work of Burne-Jones’, i.e. ‘[t]he representation of withdrawal into the self, of the hidden, inner world’.<sup>360</sup> Here, the woman / mirror conjunction hints less to a moralistic interpretation than to an act of self- scrutiny: the female figures appear to be on the brink of deciding how best to form their own, individual femininities.

One of the women in the painting does not gaze down at their reflections, but up, inquiringly, at Venus, which Fröhlich interprets as the moment of ‘realis[ation] that the self-knowledge they have acquired by gazing into the mirror could result in the loss

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<sup>359</sup> Henry James, ‘The Picture Season in London, 1877’, in *The Painter’s Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts*, ed. John L. Sweeney (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 144.

<sup>360</sup> Laurence Des Cars, ‘Edward Burne-Jones and France’, in Stephen Wildman, John Christian et al., *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), pp 35-36.

of their youth and innocence'.<sup>361</sup> Venus herself seems to be gazing abstractedly into the mid-distance, and not down into the water-mirror; her reflection, too, is mostly hidden from view by floating water-lily leaves. The variation in poses and attitudes, as well as the context in which the figures are placed – a sparse, 'clean' landscape that allows the viewer to focus on the characters and their reflections – suggest, in line with Des Cars' understanding of the essence of Burne-Jonesian painting, that the women's act is one of self-discovery, in line with the ancient adage 'know thyself' displayed in the temple of Apollo at Delphi. This classical reading is warranted by Burne-Jones's choice of classical mythology for his subject, and by his stylistic emulation of Botticelli.<sup>362</sup>

A similar stylistic choice and classical sensibility, but expressed in literary form, was exhibited a few years prior by Christina Rossetti in her sonnet, 'Venus's Looking-glass' (1875), and intended to read as a pair to 'Love Lies Bleeding'.<sup>363</sup> This is a striking instance of a reinterpretation of the Renaissance allegories of the woman at the mirror standing for either vanity or chastity; Christina Rossetti subverts this dichotomy in a sophisticated, indirect way, as I shall discuss.

The only part of the sonnet that mentions the mirror explicitly is, in fact, the title, as the text of the poem itself focuses on various sightings of the Roman goddess of love in a setting that Alison Chapman, in *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*, aptly qualifies as a 'claustrophobic pastoral scene'.<sup>364</sup> The poem itself is quite obviously, a lyrical description of various phases of love, and it centres on Venus as an easy-to-identify symbolic figure. Two elements of Christina Rossetti's poem are significant to

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<sup>361</sup> Fröhlich, 'The Mirror of Venus', p. 99. In the 1898 version of the painting, two women, not one, make the gesture of looking up at Venus.

<sup>362</sup> See *Botticelli Reimagined*, ed. Mark Evans and Stefan Weppelman (London: V&A Publishing, 2016).

<sup>363</sup> Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p. 101.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

the discussion at hand, namely the implicit presence of the mirror and the way in which Venus herself is pictured.

The poem focuses on the perspective of an unidentified, first-person persona who ‘documents’ her sightings of Venus; the presence of the looking-glass in the title suggests that these sightings are mediated by the mirror in question, so when the speaker utters ‘I marked’ and ‘I spied’, the implication is that the act of gazing is intermediated, as in ‘The Lady of Shalott’.<sup>365</sup> In this, there are also echoes of Paul’s famous first epistle to the Corinthians: ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known’.<sup>366</sup> Indeed, the image of the dark mirror from the New Testament is one that is recurrent in Christina Rossetti’s poetry; she used it more explicitly, for instance, in ‘Mirrors of Life and Death’ (1877), to mark the beginning of her meditation on the transience of all things: ‘The mystery of Life, the mystery/ Of Death, I see/ Darkly as in a glass’.<sup>367</sup> The suggestion of a mediated scrutinising gaze, on the one hand, and the attribution of this mediating mirror to Venus, on the other hand, has the effect of conflating the Biblical use of the mirror with its one of its traditional readings as a signifier of vanity. This conflation of competing significations also appears in the poem’s depiction of Venus. She is consistent with the classical representation of the goddess of love in the opening lines, where she appears ‘with song and dance and merry laugh’, inclined ‘to sport’; her symbolic animal, the dove, is also mentioned in the seventh line.<sup>368</sup> Yet, Venus is soon enough conflated with Proserpine, the goddess of crops and fertility, also strongly associated with the cycle of

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<sup>365</sup> Rossetti, ‘Venus’s Looking-glass’, ll 1, 12.

<sup>366</sup> Corinthians 1, chapter 13, verse 12, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>367</sup> Rossetti, ‘Mirrors of Life and Death’, ll 1-3.

<sup>368</sup> Rossetti, ‘Venus’s Looking-glass’, ll 2, 4.

life and death, due to her cyclical journey into and out of the Underworld. In 'Venus's Looking-glass', Venus exhibits a similar cyclicity: 'All this I saw in Spring. Through Summer heat/ I saw the lovely Queen of Love no more./ But when flushed Autumn through the woodlands went/ I spied sweet Venus walk amid the wheat'.<sup>369</sup> The association of Venus with Proserpine suggests a complex view of femininity and of female eros, as the aspect of cyclicity and fertility, and that of unselfconscious enjoyment are no longer separated. Thus, the ambivalent connotations of the image of the mirror and the reconfigured profile of Venus, both based on the Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation with earlier allegories, are combined and reconfigured in Christina Rossetti's deceptively straightforward poem.

This chapter has explored instances of the reworking of the mirror / woman conjunction by the Pre-Raphaelites in both visual art and poetry using significant examples from several artists. But there is another kind of reflection addressed in mid-to-late nineteenth-century art and literature that sheds a different light on the woman / mirror conjunction, namely the correspondence between mirrors and painted portraits in relation to female figures. Following the analysis of how the ambiguous potential of the mirror was used in Pre-Raphaelite works to offer a more complex view of femininity, the following chapter will address the questions of how mirror-like the female portrait was in the nineteenth century, and what it accomplishes in the discussions around representations of femininity.

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., ll 9-12.



## **‘A THING MUCH TO WONDER ON’: THE PORTRAIT AS MIRROR IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

A preoccupation with the female portrait stands at the forefront of Pre-Raphaelite art. As Andrea Rose notes, although ‘[t]here were relatively few commissioned portraits for the Pre-Raphaelite brothers during the early, intense stage of the movement from 1848-56’, they nevertheless painted numerous likenesses ‘for love and pleasure; a matter of choice rather than of paid employment’.<sup>370</sup> The art of portrait-painting was, one way or another, central to the Pre-Raphaelites, whether they chose to model their sitters into Biblical, mythical, or symbolic figures, or whether – more rarely – they engaged in more traditional forms of portrait painting.

What made the Pre-Raphaelites stand out from other portrait painters at the time was their departure from Victorian norms of representation, as sanctioned by the Royal Academy. At some of their first exhibitions there, in 1850-1851, they received many mixed reviews, and some, like David Masson’s appraisal in the *British Quarterly Review* of 1852, titled ‘Pre-Raphaelitism in Art and Literature’, highlighted their manifold departure from the norm. ‘There was universally noted in the earlier works of the Pre-Raphaelites, a kind of contempt from all pre-established ideas of beauty,’ Masson wrote.<sup>371</sup> He noted in particular the physical appearance of the models featured in the Pre-Raphaelites’ paintings, as failing to meet contemporary ideals of beauty, and the artists’ nonconformist use of colour:

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<sup>370</sup> Andrea Rose, *Pre-Raphaelite Portraits* (Sparkford, Yeovil, Somerset: The Oxford Illustrated Press, 1981), p. 12.

<sup>371</sup> Quoted in Susan Casteras, ‘Pre-Raphaelite Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 55.1 (Winter 1992), p. 13.

[I]nstead of giving us figures with those fine conventional heads and regular oval faces and gracefully formed hands and feet which we like to see in albums, they appeared to take delight in figures with heads phrenologically clumsy, faces strongly marked and irregular, and very pronounced ankles and knuckles. Their colouring too [...], especially [...] of the human flesh, was not at all pleasant as we had been accustomed to [...]<sup>372</sup>

Such conformist concerns with idealised beauty standards were at the heart of Sir Joshua Reynolds's (1723-1792) understanding of painting in general and of portraiture in particular, and influenced accepted Victorian views of pictorial representation. In *Discourses on Art*, Reynolds put forth the view that 'great ideal perfection and beauty are not to be sought in heaven but upon the earth', although this 'ideal beauty' had to be teased out of imperfection and diversity by the expert eye of the painter.<sup>373</sup> '[T]he power of discovering what is deformed in nature, or, in other words, what is particular and uncommon, can be acquired only by experience', argued Reynolds, 'and the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists [...] in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind', he added.<sup>374</sup> For Reynolds, a good painter must be able to 'correct nature' by comparing and contrasting similar objects and only taking away what is best and most beautiful in each.

This view, brought forward into the nineteenth century by the Royal Academy that Reynolds had founded, was completely rejected by the Pre-Raphaelites, who had a more complex understanding of how things and people should be represented, and did

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>373</sup> Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1891), p. 85.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

not favour the abstract idealisation championed by the Academicians. This atypical understanding of how painting and portraiture should work, which was the basis on which the Pre-Raphaelites built as they developed their individual styles, was further complicated, as we shall see, by their preoccupation with representing the act of portrait-painting and the relationship between the artist and the (typically) female sitter.

The Pre-Raphaelites' complex relationship with realism and idealism, paired with their fascination with the artist-sitter relationship, sometimes gave rise to a curious pairing that allowed them to meditate on these issues, whether in their pictures or in their poems. This pairing is that of the mirror reflection and the painted portrait, which are sometimes compared, or represented side by side, as we shall see. In most cases, the portrait – and reflection – belong to a female sitter. Some works in which this is achieved, and which will be analysed later in this chapter, are: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's short story 'Hand and Soul' (1950, 1959), the poems 'On Mary's Portrait' (1847) and 'The Portrait' (1881), as well as Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856). Alongside these, reference will be made to various drawings and sketches by D.G. Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and Simeon Solomon – all addressing similar parallelisms between the portrait and the mirror reflection, and the relationship between the artist and the female sitter.

The role of this female portrait/female reflection dichotomy is, I will suggest, to explore the intricacies of portrait-painting, emphasising the Pre-Raphaelites' sometimes fraught relationship with it through the prism of what they would like a portrait to achieve versus what a portrait actually achieves. Moreover, it allows them – my main example here is Dante Gabriel Rossetti – to scrutinise their relationship with the female sitter, which is equally complex, struggling to balance idealisation with a more complex representation of the female sitter herself: the Pre-Raphaelites, that is, and Rossetti most

of all, strive to navigate the difficult question of whether a female sitter can be represented as someone other than herself (say, a mythical figure) and still maintain her three-dimensionality.

In the pages that follow, I will first give a necessarily brief overview of the Pre-Raphaelites' difficult and often fluid understanding of 'realism'. This will allow me to proceed to the analysis of the works mentioned above. Finally, I will delve into how this Pre-Raphaelite obsession with female portrait-painting, sometimes mitigated by the comparison between portraits and mirror reflections, was one of the building blocks which nodded to a more balanced artist-female sitter relation.

### **The Pre-Raphaelite Portrait between Fiction and Reality**

William Michael Rossetti outlined the Pre-Raphaelite 'manifesto' in these terms: '1 To have genuine ideas to express; 2 to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; 3 to sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; and 4 and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues'.<sup>375</sup>

The first two points on William Michael's list, the requirement of authenticity and that of verisimilitude, are of particular interest for this chapter, as they will provide an understanding of the Pre-Raphaelites' constant struggle to meet these two ideals which are not, as we shall see, always compatible within the artistic environment of the period in question.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> In *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir* vol. I, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), p. 135.

<sup>376</sup> As hinted at in Masson's 1852 review, some Pre-Raphaelite paintings famously received a number of vicious reactions from their contemporary critics due to their then shocking demythologisation of emblematic characters, chiefly Biblical, through their verisimilar portrayal. For a comprehensive overview of some of the most representative of these reactions, see Malcom Warner's commentary of *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop or Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849-1850) by John Everett Millais

At the same time, in his own memoir, William Holman Hunt explained that ‘verisimilitude’ was not synonymous with absolute faithfulness to reality. Rather, he said, it should be a faithful depiction of an artist’s memory or perception of the object: ‘we [i.e. he and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, with the implication that this extends to the other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood] both agreed that a man’s work must be the reflex of a living image in his own mind, and not the icy double of the facts themselves’.<sup>377</sup> ‘It will be seen’, he then added, ‘that we were never realists [...] art would have ceased to have the slightest interest for us had the object been only to make a representation [...] of a fact in nature’.<sup>378</sup> Holman Hunt thus expressed a more sophisticated view of lifelikeness, wherein the object depicted treads the border between what is actively and vividly recollected by the painter, and its appearance in the real world.

Holman Hunt suggested that the Pre-Raphaelites had distanced themselves not only from the tradition set by Reynolds, but also from the artistic philosophy promoted by his contemporary and rival, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788). In describing the aesthetic clash between the two eighteenth-century portraitists, Andreas Beyer points out that ‘English painting of the eighteenth century [...] came to be dominated by [...] [t]he rivalry between Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough’, a rivalry which, he argues, implicitly also expressed the clash between two competing stances on portraiture.<sup>379</sup> Beyer notes that the existence of these contemporaneous and competing

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(pp 77-79) and Mary Bennett’s commentary of Ford Madox Brown’s *Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet* (1851-1856) (pp 100-101) in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Leslie Parris (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1984).

<sup>377</sup> William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), p. 150.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>379</sup> Andreas Beyer, *Portraits: A History*, trans. by Steven Lindberg (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), p. 252.

philosophies gave birth to a certain polarisation of portrait painting ideology in this period, which ‘revolved around the question [...] of whether the quality of the painting lies in communicating likeness or establishing character’.<sup>380</sup> That is, ‘Reynolds based his work on his classicist perspective and the physiognomic theories of his time’ following Caspar Lavater’s school of thought, whereas ‘Gainsborough [...] had no belief in the notion of a correspondence between outside and inside’ as ‘[t]he effectiveness of physiognomy and pathognomy [...] would seem to be called into question by the distinctive accuracy of [his] portraits, which his contemporaries praised for their quality of “breathing life”’.<sup>381</sup> This polarisation of portraiture is perhaps best understood as what Shearer West describes as ‘a continuum between the specificity of likeness and the generality of type, showing specific and distinctive aspects of the sitter as well as the more generic qualities valued in the sitter’s milieu’.<sup>382</sup> There is a subtle negotiation between the expression of individual and social identity, with the latter probably being the more prevalent aspect of the portrait. Even in discussing Gainsborough’s preference for lifelikeness over expression of character, Beyer still argues that ‘even in [his] work the equation of individuals with their social positions remains intact, and the appearance of his models is tied to their social status’.<sup>383</sup> The idea that the image of the sitter had, amongst other uses, also a symbolic social function was central to eighteenth-century portraiture. Contrastingly, on the basis of Holman Hunt’s remarks on the Pre-Raphaelites’ relationship with realism, it seems that they placed themselves outside the

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<sup>380</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 252, 255.

<sup>382</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>383</sup> Beyer, *Portraits*, p. 255.

spheres of both Reynolds and Gainsborough, seeking often to build on or from reality, rather than either to copy, or to idealise nature.

Not all the contemporaries who judged the Pre-Raphaelites' works, however, saw this purpose in their art. Where William Michael Rossetti and William Holman Hunt both stressed the importance of ingenuity over mimesis in Pre-Raphaelite painting, John Ruskin drew a somewhat different conclusion about the nature of their work on the occasion of his first acquaintance with their art. In his letter to *The Times* from May 13, 1851 he wrote that:

[...] they will draw either what they see, or what they suppose might have been the actual facts of the scene they desire to represent, irrespective of any conventional rules of picture-making; and they have chosen their unfortunate though not inaccurate name because all artists did this before Raphael's time, and after Raphael's time did *not* [original emphasis] this, but sought to paint fair pictures, rather than represent stern faces.<sup>384</sup>

Although the Pre-Raphaelites were indeed committed to 'paint[ing] fair pictures', this 'fairness' – as the 'manifesto' cited by William Michael also suggests – was to them something to be found in and through nature, that is, through realistic representations of their subjects.

In fact, the Pre-Raphaelites' insistence on the Keatsian conceit that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' is consistent with the philosophy that Ruskin himself expressed in *Modern Painters* and in *The Elements of Drawing; in Three Letters to Beginners*, where

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<sup>384</sup> Reproduced in *The Lamp of Beauty: Writings on Art by John Ruskin*, ed. Joan Evans (London: Phaidon Press, 1959), pp 48-49.

he continuously stresses the importance of studying 'Nature' in order to produce a good drawing, and the co-dependence between 'Art' and 'Nature' in learning to appreciate the beautiful and the ineffable in the world:

They [artists] should go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing: believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.<sup>385</sup>

However, in contrast to the Pre-Raphaelites, to Ruskin this indiscriminate rapport with 'Nature' which he encourages in the practice of art has a peculiarly spiritual basis, as he suggested in his preface to *The Elements of Drawing*: 'I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love Nature, than teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw'.<sup>386</sup> For him, in reverse-Platonic fashion, art reveals the even greater beauty of Nature, and an attunement to Nature discloses the ineffable wonder of the divine. Yet where drawing is the tool to the discovery of 'Nature' in Ruskin's eyes, to the Pre-Raphaelites, 'drawing from nature' is simply a tool for the betterment of the artist, allowing him to unleash his full creativity, to build, that is, credible worlds and scenes.<sup>387</sup> In his memoir, Holman Hunt stressed precisely this aspect of the Pre-

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<sup>385</sup> John Ruskin *Modern Painters*, vol. I, 2: 624, ed. and abridged by David Barrie (London: André Deutsch, 1987), p. 178.

<sup>386</sup> John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing; in Three Letters to Beginners* (New York: John Wiley & Son, 1872), p. xi.

<sup>387</sup> For an overview at length of the connection between John Ruskin's philosophy and that of the Pre-Raphaelites, see Robert Hewison, Ian Warrell and Stephen Wildman, *Ruskin, Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000). For an in-depth discussion that compares and contrasts these two philosophies, see Marcia Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-century Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially the 'Introduction' (pp 1-13) and



Raphaelites' misunderstood commitment to the observation of nature: 'In agreeing', he writes, 'to use the utmost elaboration in painting our first pictures, we never meant more than to insist that the practice was essential for training the eye and hand of the young artist'.<sup>388</sup>

This outlook on 'lifelikeness' is what gives Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti and others pause when it comes to conceptualising female portraits, as we shall see. Constantly placed between a desire to achieve a portrait that is as accurate and realistic as a mirror reflection, and also cumulatively depict the 'true essence' of the sitter, these artists meditate on the inevitability of falling short of that goal.

### **Lifelike Portraits in Pre-Raphaelite Thought**

The essential importance of the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to 'drawing from nature', then, is to be able to render their subject lifelike, whatever the nature of this subject may be. This is something that Dante Gabriel Rossetti, too, repeatedly mentions in his art, and is perhaps most visible in the story 'Hand and Soul' (of which there are two versions, one dated 1850, and one 1859), and then again in 'St Agnes of the Intercession' (1850).

In 'Hand and Soul' – which I will use as my example – the narrator documents the initiatory journey of the main character, the painter Chiaro dell'Erma, as he navigates through the artistic world of Renaissance Italy and through his own life, searching for the best approach to art, hoping to attain the skill to create works that are 'lifelike'. In seeing the works of the famous painter Giunta Pisano, Chiaro is described

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chapters one to six: 'Received Opinion', 'John Ruskin', 'Modern Painters II: The Theoretic Faculty', 'Modern Painters II: The Imaginative Faculty', 'Ruskin's *Pre-Raphaelitism*', and 'Pre-Raphaelite Assessment of Ruskin's Influence' (pp 14-57).

<sup>388</sup> Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelites and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, p. 150.

as both sorely disappointed because ‘the forms he saw there [in Pisano’s studio] were *lifeless & incomplete* [my emphasis]’, and exalted in realising that he himself has the potential to paint lifelike pictures: ‘a sudden exultation possessed him as he said within himself, “I am the master of this man”’.<sup>389</sup>

The story expresses a disapproval of ‘cold symbolism and abstract impersonation’ in painting, producing ‘cold and unemphatic [pictures]; bearing marked out upon them [...] the measure of that boundary to which they were made to conform’.<sup>390</sup> These are all expressions of what a picture – and implicitly a portrait – should not be like, though what it should be like is only alluded to at the very end of the narrative, where a small portrait, ostensibly by Chiaro dell’Erma, is described by a contemporary (nineteenth-century) viewer: it depicts ‘the figure of a woman, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, chaste and early in fashion’.<sup>391</sup> The ‘early’ character of this portrait alludes to the Old Masters, which Rossetti so much admired, thus ascribing to this imaginary painting the qualities of Pre-Raphaelite thought and aesthetic. Yet what is particularly relevant about this portrait is that ‘[t]he face & hands in this picture, though wrought with great delicacy, have the appearance of being painted at once, in a single sitting’.<sup>392</sup> The emphasis on the ‘delicacy’ of manner in this passage is reminiscent of Ruskin’s assertion in *The Elements of Drawing* that: ‘All great schools enforce delicacy of drawing and subtlety of sight: and the only rule which I have, as yet, found to be without exception respecting art, is that all great art is delicate’.<sup>393</sup> Ruskin’s notion of ‘delicacy’ in art is to do with the relationship between

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<sup>389</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Hand and Soul* (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1895), p. 7.

<sup>390</sup> Rossetti, *Hand and Soul*, pp 18, 20.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>393</sup> Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing*, p. xi.

form and colour; in his view, nothing in nature appears all sharp, detailed, and in focus all at once. Painting ‘from nature’, that is, does not require reproducing all the small sharp details of the subject being painted as they would be observable through the lens of a microscope. Neither does it, however, mean that one should abstract the subject, discriminating between its various attributes or characteristics. To paint ‘delicately’ is to strike a balance between these two ideals.

This conception can be gathered from various passages both in *The Elements of Drawing* and *Modern Painters*, although it is perhaps mentioned most straightforwardly in the latter, in his critique of photography as an artistic medium and of the contrived and self-conscious ‘ultra-realism’ of some of the Old Masters, such as Albrecht Dürer.<sup>394</sup> It is this notion of ‘delicacy’ or ‘Turnerian mystery’, as it is dubbed by Ruskin in *Modern Painters*, that seems to appeal the most to the Pre-Raphaelites in their approach to art: to represent without physically idealising the subject yet without rendering too many ‘unnecessary’ details which might harm its meaningfulness either. The first-person narrator that comes into the story at the end of ‘Hand and Soul’ says that the most striking characteristic of Chiaro dell’Erma’s impossible picture is its ‘literality’ and indeed, perhaps ‘literal’ is what the Pre-Raphaelites mean when they think of lifelike depictions.

So far, the discussion has concerned mostly the Pre-Raphaelites’ understanding of how art and painting in general should be approached, but within this subject is also encompassed their approach to portraiture more specifically. The Pre-Raphaelites’ *modus operandi* situated their work between novelty and tradition. On the one hand, they found themselves in constant dialogue with traditional theories of portraiture –

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<sup>394</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* vol. IV (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1856), ‘Chapter IV: Of Turnerian Mystery: - First, as Essential’ and ‘Chapter V: Of Turnerian Mystery: - Secondly, Wilful’.

such as Sir Joshua Reynolds's – whose heritage was carried forward by the Royal Academy in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, they also grew progressively more attracted to newly emerging technologies such as the daguerreotype, especially in the second half of their artistic career. It will be seen how, in the works under scrutiny in this chapter, these artists find themselves negotiating two main standpoints regarding portraiture in general, and portraits of women in particular. One of these standpoints is specific to traditional modes of thinking (projecting an idealised, even archetypal image of the sitter) and the other looks forward to turn-of-the-century ideas on the topic (i.e. that the portrait should show as much of the sitter, of her personality and presence, as possible). It is from this tension that the parallelism between mirror and portrait emerges in the works, both literary and visual, of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti struggle in their poems – which are analysed below – with the existing tradition of idealisation in portraiture. As an additional example, early eighteenth-century artist and art critic Jonathan Richardson's then-influential treatise on painting, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, can give us a good idea of how portraiture was traditionally conceived of, what its aims were, and how they might be achieved.<sup>395</sup> Vis-à-vis the skills an artist might learn from even earlier Masters in painting good portraits, Richardson argues: 'What gives the Italians, and Their Masters the Ancients the Preference,' he wrote, 'is, that they have not Servilely follow'd Common Nature, but Rais'd, and Improv'd, or at least have always made the Best Choice of it. This gives a Dignity to a Low Subject [...]'.<sup>396</sup> A certain idealisation of the Old Masters was also inherited by the Pre-Raphaelites, whose now

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<sup>395</sup> Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*; 1725 (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1971).

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 171-172.

often-cited ‘List of Immortals’, reproduced by Holman Hunt in his memoir, stands as primary proof of their continued and self-conscious interaction with the earlier artistic tradition. Richardson’s idea is that painting must aim to promote an elevating ideal that will facilitate in the viewer a reaction akin to that of Aristotelian catharsis. Yet this effect is obtainable via the Neo-Platonic endeavour of ‘form[ing] a Model of Perfection in his Own Mind which is not to be found in Reality’ which is then to be transposed on canvas.<sup>397</sup>

This reversal from imperfect reality to perfect ideal ‘but yet such a one as is Probable, and Rational’, as Richardson put it, is perhaps what Dante Gabriel Rossetti had in mind when, in ‘Hand and Soul’, he commended the representation of the artist’s soul on canvas by giving Chiaro dell’Erma’s lifelike female portrait the caption: ‘Manus Animam pinxit’ [Latin for ‘the Hand paints the Soul’].<sup>398</sup> It is reminiscent, also, of William Holman Hunt’s already-mentioned assertion in his memoir that the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers ‘agreed that a man’s work must be the reflex of a living image in his own mind’.<sup>399</sup> This affirmation alludes to the fact that Pre-Raphaelite art was not just an ongoing dialogue with their precursors’ ideals of portraiture of which Richardson’s are an emblematic example, but also an intimation of the relationship between portraiture and reflection, to which Dante Gabriel Rossetti appeals more straightforwardly in ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ and ‘A Portrait’. The Pre-Raphaelites seem to have been placed at the meeting point of two approaches to art and portraiture, which sometimes complemented each other, and at other times were in tension: idealisation and what Ruskin in *Modern Painters* calls ‘sincerity’: the ‘characteristic of great art that

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., pp 172-173, and Rossetti, *Hand and Soul*, p. 49.

<sup>399</sup> Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelites and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, p. 150.

it includes the largest possibly quantity of Truth in the most perfect possible harmony'.<sup>400</sup> This quandary underlies the tensions in these poems by the Rossettis: how much of a portrait is idealisation and how much is truth, and what the moral value of one approach versus the other is.

Another issue about which the Pre-Raphaelites entered into a significant dialogue with the preceding tradition is the dialectic between the intrinsic characteristics of the subject and their artistic treatment. Richardson insists on the moral and social differences between people that may or may not be the subject of a good portrait:

At Court, and elsewhere amongst People of Condition, one sees another sort of Beings than in the Countrey, or the Remote, and Inferior parts of the Town; and amongst These there are some few that plainly distinguish themselves by their Noble, and Graceful Airs, and manner of Acting. [...] One may conceive an Order Superior to what can any where be found on our Globe; a kind of New World may be form'd in the Imagination, consisting, as This, of People of all Degrees, and Characters; only Heighten's, and Improv'd: A Beautiful Gentile Woman must have her Defects Overlook's, and what is Wanting, to Compleat her Character supply'd: A Brave Man, and one Honestly, and Wisely pursuing his Own Interest, in Conjunction with that of his Countrey, must be imagin'd more Brave, more Wise, more exactly, and inflexibly Honest than any we know, or can hope to see: A Villain must be conceiv'd to have something more Diabolical than is to be found even amongst us; a Gentleman must be more so, and a Peasant have more

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<sup>400</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, ed. & abridged David Barrie (London: Andre Deutsch, 1987), vol. III, part IV, ¶59, p. 301.

of the Gentleman, and so of the rest. With such as These an Artist must People his Pictures.<sup>401</sup>

Richardson essentially advocates the construction of archetypes out of real individuals in portraiture: qualities, he argues, must be self-consciously exaggerated to create an exemplary character; conversely, flaws also can and should be amplified when one wishes to present an anti-hero figure. For Richardson, a portrait must necessarily be symbolic of something if it is to be good, and good portraitist must learn to:

[...] raise the Character: To divest an Unbred Person of his Rusticity, and give him something at least of a Gentleman; to make [...] a Wise Man [appear] to be more Wise, and a Brave Man to be more so, a Modest, Discreet Woman to have an Air something Angelical [...]; and then to add that Joy, or Peace of Mind at least, and in such a manner as is suitable to the several Characters, is absolutely necessary to a good Face-Painter[...]<sup>402</sup>

Ruskin was building on similar eighteenth-century conceptions of portraiture when he wrote, in his discussion of the necessary attributes of a great picture, that ‘the third attribute of the best art is that it compels you to think of the spirit of the creature, and therefore of its face, more than of its body’, adding that ‘the fourth [attribute] is that in the face you shall be led to see only beauty or joy; - never vileness, vice, or pain’.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, pp 173-174.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 185-186.

<sup>403</sup> John Ruskin, *The Lamp of Beauty: Writings on Art* (London: Phaidon Publishers, 1959), p. 118.

There is, nevertheless, a gap between these otherwise similar conceptions of portrait-painting: Richardson perceives an innate discrepancy between individuals of different social and educational backgrounds; in Ruskin, these discrepancies are taken as obsolete. Moreover, as we have seen, Ruskin advocates a reliance on natural traits, thus distancing himself from the older reliance on the artificial ennoblement of the features. The Pre-Raphaelites negotiate their ground between these two poles, hesitating – especially in their representation of female figures – between the monolithic archetype (the kept woman, the *femme fatale*, the Virgin, the angelic young woman) and the more down-to-earth vision of the contemporary woman. This is seen in their choice of ambiguous subjects, their focus on liminal female figures, as is the case with many ‘Lady of Shalott’ paintings, or with Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith* and *Risen at Dawn*, to offer some examples already covered in this work.

Andrea Rose explains this constant hesitation between the representation of female figures as archetypes on the one hand, and as complex identities on the other, by arguing that ‘the Pre-Raphaelites were realigning the old relationship of artist to sitter’, writing that now ‘[p]ainter and [female] model sit as more equal partners, and within this artistic democracy the painter is free to create his own imaginative hierarchies’.<sup>404</sup> She supports this by adding that, where previous portrait painters such as John Reynolds ‘painted his patrons in the dress appropriate to their status, Rossetti can make a queen out of a shop-girl, a goddess out of a stable-groom’s daughter, a deity out of a Cockney trollop’.<sup>405</sup> She is here referring, of course, to Rossetti’s relationship to his various models, from Lizzie Siddall, to Jane Morris, Fanny Cornforth, and Alexa Wilding, all coming from lower-class backgrounds, and whom Rossetti and his associates often

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<sup>404</sup> Rose, *Pre-Raphaelite Portraits*, p. 12.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibidem*.



represented as commanding female figures in fantastical settings. Rose thus refers to the establishment of a 'new contract, [in which] the traditional constituents of aristocracy [...] are cancelled' and where '[w]hat counts is the artist's discrimination'.<sup>406</sup>

The newly-established 'artistic democracy' to which Rose refers is not, however, without its problems, precisely because of the 'imaginative hierarchies' to which often only the artist appears to be entitled to the exclusion of his (female) sitter. The troublesome power relation between artist and model does not, thus, disappear; rather, to varying degrees, it is transferred to the gender- and role-based power struggle between the two. This is the relationship where, at least in appearance, the painter has the active, hence pivotal role in deciding how to manipulate the image of his model on canvas. The Pre-Raphaelites' portraits often erase the distinction between reality (i.e. the real-life model) and fiction by superimposing the sitter's image onto a fanciful role and setting. Thus, while panting Fanny Cornforth or Alexa Wilding as Lady Lilith may obliterate the importance of background and status and promote the female sitter's face as the only relevant element in the constitution of her portrait, this is nevertheless a problematic practice from a different point of view. The obsessive, repetitive use of the same female face in many different portraits (or portrait-like paintings), which Rose notes and which Christina Rossetti alludes to in her sonnet 'In an Artist's Studio' (the 'selfsame figure' of line two), can come to efface the personality behind the spectral repetition: 'Not as she is, but as she fills his dream'.<sup>407</sup> The danger here is that the real woman will be completely obscured by the identity or the set of identities projected onto

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., pp 12-13.

<sup>407</sup> Rose, *Pre-Raphaelite Portraits*, p. 12, and Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio', l. 14.

her canvas double by the artist.<sup>408</sup> Nonetheless, there is an inherent tension between the ideal of capturing the sitter's essence within the portrait, and the artistry of painting the portrait, which is more reliant on the artist's gaze within than without. This tension, as we shall see, is also one of the Pre-Raphaelites' concerns.

### **The Pre-Raphaelites and the Act of Portraying the Female Figure**

The Pre-Raphaelite meditation on the art of painting, and in particular on the art of painting portraits, extends to a number of drawings that feature the act of the portrait-painting. In *Love's Mirror* (1850-1852) and *Giorgione Painting* (1853), for instance, D.G. Rossetti explores the theme, showing the artist or artists at work, and contemplating the relationship between artist and sitter (Figs 35, 36).

*Love's Mirror* depicts a man immersed in the process of teaching a woman how to paint her self-portrait. The woman, seated in front of an easel, gazes intently upon the self-portrait she is painting, her hand guided by the man behind her. To their right is a large mirror reflecting the woman's profile, as well as the man's face, gazing, as it seems, not at the female figure, or at the painting, but at their joint reflection in the mirror. Behind them, two enigmatic female figures appear to be whispering together. Perhaps the most intriguing elements of the drawing are the juxtaposition of the woman, mirror, and portrait, and the mysterious trajectory of the man's gaze; I will begin with the latter.

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<sup>408</sup> The effacement of the real women behind the famous Pre-Raphaelite paintings is in fact what Jan Marsh sets to counteract in her seminal work, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (London: Quartet, 1985), by aiming to dispel the mythical aura surrounding the women closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite men, in grounding their presence in facts instead. Since the publication of her book, other works have also foregrounded the art and lives of Pre-Raphaelite women; see Cherry, *Painting Women*, and Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

The mirror reflection appears, first of all, as a 'double' that 'supplements' the picture being drawn on the canvas. The reflection shows man and woman together, like a two-headed hermaphrodite, the product of mutual affection. The mirror also acts, presumably, as an aiding tool for the painter of the self-portrait, to allow her to capture her own likeness, although, strangely, it is the man who is gazing at the reflection, and not the woman-painter. This suggests a reading of the man's act of guiding the woman in her craft as problematic: in his lover's self-portrait he seeks to insert his own likeness, hence his gazing at his own reflection, rather than at the ostensible subject of the painting. In addition to this, the double reflection of the woman in the mirror and on the canvas suggests a conflation or swapping of the two surfaces: the (self-)portrait becomes a mirror, a static reflection, while the mirror reflection gives back a portrait of the woman as she appears in her relationship with the man. The question foregrounded here is of how accurate each of these reflections is as a portrayal of the woman.

In the case of *Love's Mirror* the relationship between artist and sitter is complicated, not just because the sitter is also an artist herself, but because each of the main characters plays numerous roles: as the male artist is both teacher and lover, and the female artist is student, lover, and model all at the same time. In the picture, the male artist and female artist/sitter collaborate on a painting which is, at the same time, a self- portrait (painted by the woman), and a portrait (executed by the man guiding the woman's efforts). The finite product of their combined labours thus comes to depict what is implicitly the merged image of the two protagonists. It seems that *Love's Mirror* uses the dual presence of the female portrait and the (not just female) mirror reflection precisely to foreground these complications.

Additionally, the presence of the mirror suggests another key idea: that of the struggle to depict the 'likeness'. The use of the mirror in the art of (self-)portrait painting

indicates that the picture does not descend completely from imagination, and that it aims to take reality as its landmark. Yet this, too, is complicated by the insertion of the guiding male artist hand, and the fact that the woman painter/sitter disregards this reflection, perhaps because, symbolically, she knows herself too well to need an external reference. Through all these tensions between real and ideal, artist and sitter, *Love's Mirror* foregrounds them and tacitly acknowledges them as a central issue.

In *Giorgione Painting*, the relationship between artist and model shifts, in featuring a completely passive female model, seated parallel to her portrait-in-progress, and the artist gazing at her intensely, almost ignoring his work. Thus, *Love's Mirror* and *Giorgione Painting* suggest two complementary ways of understanding the process of depicting the female portrait: in the first case, there is collaboration (albeit tinged with the suggestion that the male artist is guiding the process), while in the second case the male artist is absorbed with contemplating his muse almost to the detriment of the portrait. The suggestion here is that the male painter may be captivated by his female model – or maybe, more generally, by the idea of femininity – yet he may fail to engage with her (or it) appropriately, and thus to correctly represent it. This, however, may point to the same fear of failing to capture the '(life)likeness' of the female figure, but also to a self-conscious acknowledgement that the process of painting the perfect portrait is fraught with pitfalls.

Painter Simeon Solomon, who was apprenticed by Rossetti for a while, painted two versions of the same picture (one dated 1861, and the other 1862), titled *The Painter's Pleasaunce*, which common critical opinion deems largely based on Rossetti's *Love's Mirror*, due to the similarities of subject and structure (Figs 37, 38).<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> See, for instance, the entry for *Love's Mirror* in Colin Cruise et al., *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Merrell, 2005), p. 102.

The first (1861) version of *The Painter's Pleasaunce* pictures a man placed in the centre of the painting, seated at his easel in the act of painting what one can imagine is the portrait of the woman seated in front of him (to the left of the painting), although the canvas is not visible to external viewer. Behind him (to the right of the painting) stands an angelic-looking young girl holding a small tray of refreshments. Notable in the context at hand are the various objects lining the walls of the room in which these characters are placed: on the wall behind the seated woman is a portrait (of a figure vaguely female in outline), and in the painting's background, lined up from left to right, are a window (opening onto a green landscape), a religious triptych, and a circular, convex mirror reflecting the other side of the room (only the shape of another window is discernible). The 1862 version of the painting is very similar to the first in its essentials, although there are a few notable differences: the window has been completely replaced by the convex mirror, now enlarged but still reflecting a window on the other side of the room, and the painting on the easel is now visible to the external viewer (it is, indeed, a portrait of the female sitter).

The mirror, ever more prominent in the two *Pleasaunces*, moved ever closer to the female figure (in the second version it partly frames her profile), recalls a large eye or the enlarged lens of a camera. Also, the switch between mirror and window recalls the ambiguity of background mirrors that appear to be windows, as in Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* and Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott*. This serves to emphasise the mirrors' capability to open up virtual spaces that can accommodate fluid understandings of the female figures' environment and identity. That the portrait on the easel is an accurate representation of the woman has become, in Solomon's painting, even more doubtful than in Rossetti's pictures, and the mirror seems to have completely given up on showing the woman's reflection, even when placed right next to her head in the 1862

drawing. These pictures appear to question both the authority and accuracy of painted portraits.

### **What Portraits Mirror in Pre-Raphaelite Poetry**

Two poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's are particularly concerned with the double parallel woman/portrait and portrait/mirror. The first is 'On Mary's Portrait, which I painted six years ago', written in 1847.<sup>410</sup> The second is a heavy reworking of the first, titled 'The Portrait' and published in 1881.<sup>411</sup> Composed between the two, in 1856, Christina Rossetti's sonnet 'In an Artist's Studio' also prominently features the same kind of imagery and it can be read, as I will discuss, as a poetic response to the first and a galvanising source for the second version of Dante Gabriel's poem.<sup>412</sup>

'On Mary's Portrait, which I painted six years ago' is written from the perspective of a male artist and lover who, in the wake of his sweetheart's death, is left only with the portrait he painted of her to meditate on. The opening lines of the poem – 'Why yes: she looks as then she look'd;/ There is not any difference' – refer implicitly to the woman's portrait which, since it is a physical memento, is an item dependent on absence.<sup>413</sup> The correlation thus established between the portrait and the original suggests that the female lover is dead, and the painting recalls an ideal and idealised image of her, from when she was still alive, and in good health and humour, in a 'Golden Age' of love: 'She was even so on that old time/ Which has been here but is gone hence./

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<sup>410</sup> In Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Notebook Pages (Duke Library Note Book II)'. 1847-1848, 1878-1880. MS. Duke University Libraries, Durham, North Carolina

<sup>411</sup> In Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems and Translations 1850-1870* (London: Humphrey Milford/ Oxford University Press, 1919).

<sup>412</sup> In Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>413</sup> Rossetti, 'On Mary's Portrait', ll 1-2.

Gaze hard, and she shall seem to stir; / [...] / And yet the earth is over her'.<sup>414</sup> Here, the spectrality of the portrait is emphasised, with the lifelikeness of fiction challenging the reality of death and vice versa. The portrait-double's nature is problematised: 'It seems to me unnatural/ And a thing much to wonder on,/ As though mine image in the glass/ Should tarry when myself am gone'.<sup>415</sup> The speaker likens the dead woman's lingering artificial double to a mirror reflection that persists even after the reflected subject has gone; the portrait appears almost as an impossibility, an artifice at odds with the laws of nature. In Stoichiță's words, the mirror image is 'a natural sign' which does not replace the thing signified as it can only exist when the signified, i.e. the person, is also present.<sup>416</sup> The portrait, however, is a sign, since in it the sitter is 'signified and figured' in his or her absence implicitly.<sup>417</sup> The 'unnatural' persistence of the portrait image as a reflective image and also as a replacement for the sitter gives rise to unsettling meditations:

While her mere semblance [...]  
Has for its room [...]  
The open sunwarm library  
[...] is she  
In the dark always, choked with clay?<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., ll 3-5, l. 9.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., ll 11-14.

<sup>416</sup> Stoichiță, *A Short History of the Shadow*, p. 184.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>418</sup> Rossetti, 'On Mary's Portrait', ll 15-19.

A disturbing opposition between the portrait ('her semblance') and its original ('she') arises from the irony of the former taking pride of place among the living (in the 'sunwarm library'), while the corpse of the beloved lies buried 'in the dark'. There is even a hint of indirect violence inflicted to the woman through her dead body, imagined as 'choked with clay', trapped and violated as its lifelike artificial double is celebrated.

Further on in the poem, the male speaker reminisces about having shown the portrait he had painted of his sweetheart to her when she was still alive: 'I showed her/ What I had done: and when she saw/ Herself there, opposite herself,/ She marvelled with a kind of awe'.<sup>419</sup> In the confrontation between the woman and her painted double there may be an implication that, as portrait and original may not coexist (since one is meant as a substitute for the other, a marker of absence, of loss), it is the lifelikeness of the portrait which sucks the vitality away from its original. The portrait, however, is not simply a verisimilar copy of the woman; it is, rather, the act of remembrance transubstantiated, the effort to preserve a fleeting moment forever: 'I went/ Full of most noble memories/ Unto my task; and painted her'.<sup>420</sup> These lines suggest that the portrait represents not exactly the sitter herself, but a version of her, sublimated through the filter of the painter's imagination. Thus this effort to immortalise is, in a way, a hubristic action; it means that the painter paints not the woman, but his best impression of her, based on 'most noble memories' rather than immediate reality. In essence, memory (or the woman seen through its filter) replaces actuality, and becomes the iconic image: 'I moved not till the work was grand,/ Whole and complete [...]/ [...] my thought was all expressed'.<sup>421</sup> It is not the woman who is celebrated in the portrait, but the artist's

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., ll 128-131.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., ll 119-121.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., ll 123-125.



‘thought’, his ideal ‘embodied’ and superseding the female figure even perhaps without the painter’s intent.

In her 1856 poem, ‘In An Artist’s Studio’, Christina Rossetti may well have been in dialogue with Dante Gabriel’s ‘On Mary’s Portrait’, and although William Michael thought that the sonnet ought to be read biographically ‘[in] reference [...] to our brother’s studio, and to his constantly repeated heads of the lady whom he afterwards married, Miss Siddal’, Jerome McGann argues that ‘she was referring not to Elizabeth Siddal, [...] but to the idea that Rossetti discovered in her and in many other women, real and imaginary’.<sup>422</sup> While the former reading of the poem is by no means improbable, it does not exclude the latter. The vocabulary and imagery used by Christina in her sonnet – as I will show – seems to recall Dante Gabriel’s own. Moreover, it is not impossible that Christina’s poem may also have encompassed a nod of acknowledgement to a sketch which her brother had drawn some years earlier, in 1849, depicting an artist at work in his studio (Fig. 39). In *A Rossetti Cabinet*, William E. Fredeman describes this sketch as follows:

Probably a self-caricature, [...] depict[ing] a pipe-smoking artist seated in a chair with his feet propped up on either side of an easel on which rests a picture of a woman’s head and torso. Behind the artist (left) appears a female figure, perhaps one of DGR’s sisters; behind the artist (right) is a seated male figure playing the mandolin. A palette is on the floor in the foreground.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan & Co., 1904), p. 40, and McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p. 105

<sup>423</sup> *In A Rossetti Cabinet: A Portfolio of Drawings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti Hitherto Unpublished, Unrecorded, or Undocumented Including Studies for Known and Executed Paintings, Original Early Drawings, Portraits and Caricatures, Designs, and Juvenilia*, ed. by William E. Fredeman (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Ian Hodgkins & Co., 1991), p. 8.

The sketch also seems to have anticipated Dante Gabriel's later drawings, *Love's Mirror, or a Parable of Love*, and *Giorgione Painting*, with both of which it has various thematic similarities (the easel and portrait, the posture of the seated woman, the variously engaged observers). This suggests that the problem of portraying women must have been a recurring preoccupation for him. The caricaturish style of the sketch described by Fredeman hints at self-derision and perhaps insecurity, perhaps a quiet, self-directed criticism focused on the relationship between his role as an artist and his depiction of women's portraits. Christina Rossetti picks up on this concern in 'In an Artist's Studio', giving her own, more serious take on the issue hinted at in her brother's playful sketch.

The opening lines of her poem seem to hint at a slightly different understanding of the portrait than is found in Dante Gabriel's poem above: 'One face looks out from all his canvasses,/ One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans'.<sup>424</sup> These lines point at an obsessive recurrence of the same model, as McGann also observed, but they also suggest an idealising compulsion on the part of the artist. The idea of 'oneness' and 'selfsameness' marks the female figure already quite explicitly as an emblem or ideal. The following two lines echo Dante Gabriel more explicitly, establishing a kind of imagistic dialogue: 'We found her hidden just behind those screens,/ That mirror gave back all her loveliness'.<sup>425</sup> The delimitation between woman and image is here ambiguous, fluid, with the pronoun 'her' referring equivocally both to the implied original model, and to the female figure within the painting. The use of the image of the 'mirror' as a substitute for 'painted canvas' is a decided nod to Dante Gabriel's initial

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<sup>424</sup> Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio', ll 1-2.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., ll 3-4.

comparison between the portrait and the unnaturally persistent reflection. The perceived alienating quality of the portrait, however, is not emphasised as such: at most, due principally to the ambiguous use of the pronoun 'her', it is arguably suggested that, here too, the painting becomes the woman, eventually replacing her. There is a sense, also, that the portrait may be as a mirror held to the memory or idealisation of the sitter.

Additionally, the whole setting delineated in the third and fourth line is ambiguous and places the reader in a problematic position: in the first place, it is difficult to find an intuitive explanation for the use of the inclusive pronoun 'we'. The most plausible reading would be that the pronoun refers to both the speaker/viewer and the reader/viewer as voyeurs, penetrating an enclosed space – the artist's studio – and uncovering a secret, intimate object. If, as is possible, the poem is read as a response to Dante Gabriel's sketch of an artist in his studio, then the 'we' can be taken to refer to the two spectators watching the artist at work; the first-person plural pronoun thus shifts the bird's-eye perspective of the sketch to a more emphatic, intimate viewpoint. In comparison to 'On Mary's Portrait', where the portrait is proudly displayed in an accessible space, albeit within the private sphere, the portrait here is 'hidden [...] behind [...] screens' within the inner sanctum of the painter's private workspace, suggesting an altogether more secretive and intimate relationship between artist and portrait, like an illicit affair. Finally, the last two lines of the sonnet echo the first two lines of Dante Gabriel's poem: 'Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;/ Not as she is, but as she fills his dream'.<sup>426</sup> There is an emphasis here on the ideality and spectrality of the female figure represented in the implicit portrait (or portraits). The suggestion is that it is based on good memories (from times 'when hope shone bright') and imagined,

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid, ll 13-14.

wished- for situations ('as she fills his dream') rather than immediate reality (see the twice- repeated 'not as she is').

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's later reworking of 'On Mary's Portrait', titled 'The Portrait', seems to be not just a dramatic edit of the previous poem, but also part of a dialogue with Christina's 'In an Artist's Studio'. The opening line – 'This is her picture as she was' – is not simply an echo of 'Why yes: she looks as then she look'd', but argues with the idea expressed in the *volta* of Christina's sonnet.<sup>427</sup> Paradoxically, it both supports and contradicts Christina's emphatic 'not as she is': it contradicts it by turning the negation into an affirmation, and yet it confirms it by replacing the present with the past tense. It suggests that the important feature of the portrait is precisely that it contains and preserves the past, rather than reflect the present. Later in the poem, his previous comparison between painted portrait and mirror reflection re-emerges, though perhaps moderately toned down: 'It seems a thing to wonder on,/ As though mine image in the glass/ Should tarry when myself am gone'.<sup>428</sup> The idea of unnaturalness expressed in 'On Mary's Portrait' has been removed, and the concept of miraculousness brought to the fore instead ('a thing to wonder on'). This makes the portrait less unsettling, shifting towards quiet admiration as opposed to reluctant dismissal: the portrait appears as a reflection that literally stains the reflective surface so that it may linger on even when the reflected subject is no longer there. In 'The Portrait', the picture is no longer potentially lifelike in itself, but its lifelikeness comes rather via the obsessive voyeuristic gaze of the viewer/ artist/ lover: 'I gaze until she seems to stir'.<sup>429</sup> The (male) gaze is centralised here, and it becomes the moving force; it is not the painting (or the

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<sup>427</sup> Rossetti, 'The Portrait', l. 1.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., ll 2-4.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., l. 5.

talent or skill of the artist as expressed in the execution of the subject) that tricks the eye, but the eye that fixates onto the portrait and tricks the mind into believing the object is alive.

Another dialogic move – possibly a response to Christina Rossetti – can be traced in the speaker’s description of the portrait of the beloved: ‘In painting her I shrined her face/ Mid mystic trees’.<sup>430</sup> Here, the peculiar verbal choice – ‘shrined’ – could refer to Christina’s ‘hidden’ (‘we found her hidden’), emphasising the sacrality of the image which marks it as an object solely fit for private contemplation. This reading is also supported by the ideas expressed in the previous stanza:

Yet this, of all love’s perfect prize,  
Remains; save what in mournful guise  
Takes counsel with my soul alone, –  
Save what is secret and unknown,  
Below the earth, above the skies.<sup>431</sup>

It is here suggested that the portrait triggers memories of moments of shared intimacy, that it is an ‘incarnation’ of those memories, but that it cannot represent the ‘real’ woman as she is at present, through her dead body (‘below the earth’) and her immortal soul (‘above the skies’), both these aspects of her remaining inaccessible to him. Idealised memory, however, is perfectly transposed into idealised painted projection: ‘A deep dim wood; and there she stands/ As in that wood that day: for so/ Was the still

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., ll 19-20.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., ll 14-18.

movement of her hands/ And such the pure line's gracious flow'.<sup>432</sup> Memories of a particular moment in a particular space ('in that wood that day') are superimposed onto an imaginary space and time, and memories of the real woman become that woman's artificial semblance ('for so [...] the [...] movement of her hands', 'such the [...] gracious flow'). The fact that the woman and her image, reality and fiction, blend into one, makes it difficult at times to understand which of the two the speaker is referring to: 'And passing fair the type must seem,/ Unknown the presence and the dream', he muses, but what exactly he is referring to in mentioning 'the type' is unclear.<sup>433</sup> It could be either the original woman, the 'muse', or the Platonic ideal of woman, the archetype. If it is the former, then the lines can be read as the 'original' appearing 'passing fair' when 'seen' through the 'lens' of the portrait, i.e. when read through the idealisation of memory made tangible. In this case, 'the presence and the dream' may be understood as referring to what was intrinsic to the woman, but this is of a metaphysical nature, and as such cannot easily be transposed into painting. The reference to 'the dream' can also be looked at in reference to Christina Rossetti's 'not as she is, but as she fills his dream', a response, perhaps, countering the idea that the painting is not true to the reality; the painting, this seems to suggest, can and should only be true to the 'reality' perceived by the painter.<sup>434</sup>

If, however, 'type' is taken to mean the latter (i.e. 'the archetype'), then it can be read as being 'passing fair' precisely because it represents an ideal. In this case, 'the presence and the dream' can be read as not just the 'unknown', but the 'unknowable' (because abstract, intangible) source of the portrait. Regardless of which reading is

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., ll 28-31.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., ll 32-33.

<sup>434</sup> Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio', l. 14.

pursued, the tension between the real woman and her painted double remains the same: ‘’Tis she: though of herself, alas!/ Less than her shadow on the grass/ Or than her image in the stream’.<sup>435</sup> The portrait may be a ‘true’ copy of the woman at a superficial level, but ‘she’, ‘herself’ remains lost and untransposable into art; her substance is lost (‘less than [a] shadow’, less than ‘her image in the stream’). A reprisal of the ideas expressed lines 119-121 of ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ then follows: ‘[...] the memories of these things,/ [...] I must make them all my own/ And paint this picture’.<sup>436</sup> Once again, the speaker/painter/lover is shown to appropriate the ideal of the woman, filtered through memory, by transposing it into the portrait.

The final stanza of ‘The Portrait’ is particularly difficult to decode, as it appears to take all the ideas expressed until this point and mix them. ‘Here with her face does memory sit’, says the first line.<sup>437</sup> ‘Her face’ refers implicitly to the painted image, the portrait, but in a way that once more equivocally conflates woman and artificial double through doubly-significant synecdoche / metaphor. There is, again, also the recurrent idea that the portrait recalls memories (‘doth memory sit’), but this is only for a limited time: ‘Meanwhile, and wait the day’s decline’.<sup>438</sup> The adverb ‘meanwhile’ refers to the situation described in the previous stanza, signifying the day the two lovers shall be reunited in Heaven.<sup>439</sup> The second part of this line, mentioning ‘the day’s decline’,

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<sup>435</sup> Rossetti, ‘The Portrait’, ll 34-36.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., ll 55, 58-59.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., l. 100.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., l. 101.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., ll 91-99:

Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears  
The beating heart of Love’s own breast, –  
Where round the secret of all spheres  
All angels lay their wings to rest, –  
How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,  
When, by the new birth borne abroad

could bear both a literal meaning – referring to evening literally, implying an obsessive action of gazing at the portrait and reminiscing, performed routinely until sunset – and a metaphorical one, referring to the ‘evening’ of the speaker’s life, the day of his death, when he shall be reunited with his lover. The gaze is, again, central here, as it is in other parts of the poem: ‘Till other eyes shall look from it’.<sup>440</sup> Here, a transformation is implied (‘other eyes’), though the exact object of this metamorphosis (i.e. the owner of this pair of eyes) is unclear, depending as it does on which reading of the pronoun ‘it’ is preferred: does ‘it’ refer to the ‘face’ in line 100, or to the speaker’s own face? It seems likelier that it is the former, in which case the line could be read as the soul of the deceased woman – the ‘unknown’ or ‘unknowable’ of the previous stanzas – pervading her portrait and gazing back at her lover from it. This would be consistent with the ideas expressed in the following two lines: ‘Eyes of the spirit’s Palestine,/ Even than the old gaze tenderer’.<sup>441</sup> The metaphor of the first line can be read as referring to an ascension to Heaven, to spiritual enlightenment achievable only after death. In the second line the gaze continues to be central, but this time in reverse fashion compared to the idea expressed in line five of the poem: now it is her gaze, transformed and perfected by death, which becomes the ‘prime mover’ of the dying man. ‘The Portrait’ – unlike ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ – ends on a hopeful note: ‘While hopes and aims long lost with her/ Stand round her image side by side’.<sup>442</sup> Here, the ‘hopes and aims’ of the lovers apparently extinguished with the woman’s death are, in fact, renewed through

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Throughout the music of the suns,  
It enters in her soul at once  
And knows the silence there for God!

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., l. 102.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., ll 103-104.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., ll 105-106.



her portrait, which triggers in the artist/lover/viewer the expectation that they will yet be fulfilled in Heaven.<sup>443</sup> Finally, the compatibility of renewed hope with the portrait that ‘compensates’ for the absence of the loved woman is likened to ‘tombs of pilgrims that have died/ About the Holy Sepulchre’ [107-108]. At the end, the portrait is thus confirmed as a sanctified relic of the departed, an icon, which also establishes a correspondence with the idea of the image being ‘shrined’, expressed earlier, in line nineteen. In this poem the ideality of the portrait receives a sacral explanation: like a holy painted image, it is a symbol of an unreachable sanctified person.

### **Power Relations between (Male) Artist and (Female) Model: Shifting Grounds**

The three poems explored thus far all seem to problematise the relationship between the female figure and her portrait, to the extent that the simulacrum comes to replace the woman without, in effect, representing her. The expression of this tense and unbalanced relationship between the female model and her portrait, facilitated – intentionally or not – by the artist foreshadows an idea expressed by writer Violet Paget/ Vernon Lee in an essay first published in 1903, ‘The Blame of Portraits’.<sup>444</sup> Paget warns the reader against idealising what a portrait can achieve, because any representation, she argues, must necessarily fall short of encompassing the fullness of what an individual is or was, their

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<sup>443</sup> Compare to the final lines of ‘On Mary’s Portrait’, ll 140-145:

[...] Time weighteth like lead  
 Upon my soul. Do you not think  
 That when the world shelves to the brink  
 Of that long stream whose waters flow  
 Hence some strange whither, I may now  
 Kneel, and stoop in my mouth, and drink?

This ending is more ambiguous, and the hope of some final gratification uncertain: the question posed to the reader implicitly suggests that the reassurance of a third party is sought for, which contrasts with the more confident, affirmative tone of the final stanza of ‘The Portrait’.

<sup>444</sup> Vernon Lee, ‘The Blame of Portraits’, in *Hortus Vitae* (Edinburgh: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd, 1928).

– to quote Lewis Carroll – ‘muchness’. She writes of the necessity to preserve a loved one’s memory through portraiture and of the trap set therein:

We are the dupes of a very human craving, and one which seems modest in its demands. What! A mere square of painted canvas, a few pencil scratchings, a bare mechanical photograph, something no rarer than a reflection in a mirror! [...] We do not guess that this humble desire for a likeness is one of our most signal cravings after the impossible: an attempt to overcome space and baffle time; to imprison and use at pleasure the most fleeting, intangible, and incommunicable of all mysterious essences, a human personality.<sup>445</sup>

This passage features parallels with Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poems. Paget writes of portraits as being ‘no rarer than a reflection in a mirror’, but unlike Rossetti, she stresses thereby the ‘flat’ quality of the portrait: it can be brought out and looked at time and again, unlike the person it depicts, and yet it fails to deliver the complexity of that person and the pleasure of their company. Like Rossetti, though, she stresses what the portrait cannot capture, the ‘incommunicable [...] human personality’, ‘what [...] [t]akes counsel with [the] soul alone, [...] what is secret and unknown’.<sup>446</sup> Paget argues that the flawed nature of a portrait stems from the biases of the artist, who will project his own experience, tastes, and artistic education onto the painting, thereby necessarily modifying the image of the sitter in a manner peculiar to himself:

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., pp 137-138.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid., p. 138, and Rossetti, ‘The Portrait’, ll 15-17.

[...] a picture, and particularly a fine picture, is always an imperfect likeness. For the image of the sitter on the artist's retina is passed on its way to the canvas through a mind chock full of other images; and is transferred – heaven knows how changed already – by processes of line and curve, of blots of colour, and juxtaposition of light and shade, belonging not merely to the artist himself, but to the artist's whole school.<sup>447</sup>

Moreover, she adds, 'a portrait gives the sitter's temperament merged in the temperament of the painter', that is, the artist is bound to project something of his own personality onto the image of the sitter and this, as we have seen, is something the Pre-Raphaelites advocated – 'a man's work must be the reflex of a living image in his own mind', 'Manus Animam pinxit' – even as they problematised it in some of their drawings and poems.<sup>448</sup> Paget cautions, 'we must beware lest it [the portrait] take, in our memory, the place of the original', which seems to echo Christina Rossetti's equally cautionary repetition, 'not as she is, but [...] not as she is, but [...]' highlighting a similar pitfall.<sup>449</sup>

Part of the discrepancy between who the sitter is and what she is made out to be by the artist can be bridged by a fairer, more egalitarian 'artistic democracy' between painter and model than the one outlined by Andrea Rose. As Harold Rosenberg observes in 'Portraits: A Meditation on Likeness': 'The portraitist [...] has his own vision of the person before him, and his authenticity as an artist and as an individual depends on embodying this image in his picture. Thus, a conflict arises between the

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<sup>447</sup> Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits', pp 139-140.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid., p. 140, and Rossetti, *Hand and Soul*, p. 150, 49.

<sup>449</sup> Lee, 'The Blame of Portraits', p. 143, and Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio', ll 13-14.

portraitist and his subject – not merely the resistance of the material that is experienced in art, but a battle of human wills and imaginations, as in practical affairs’.<sup>450</sup> This is perhaps a contest with no possible satisfying resolution, but there is proof that some effort was made at the time, by both participants, to bridge this gap.

In her memoir *Twenty Years of My Life*, artist Louise Jopling recalls sitting for her portrait to John Everett Millais – of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, he was the one who took on most commissions for portraits – in 1879. She writes: ‘I sat with all the knowledge of a portrait painter. I knew that the better I sat, the sooner the work would be finished, and, also, the better the portrait would be. And so it turned out, for Millais’ portrait of me is considered to be the finest woman portrait he ever painted. He used to laugh, and say, “It takes always two to paint a portrait — the artist and the sitter”’.<sup>451</sup> This is a straightforward commentary on the importance of the relationship between the two that also highlights the self-conscious attitude of the model who does her best to insert her own reading of herself in the portrait. As Kate Flint notes in ‘Portraits of Women: On Display’, ‘She testified, in other words, to her awareness of the degree to which portrait painting can be a form of collaboration, sitters producing through their poses a version of the personalities they wish to see displayed, manipulating their command of contemporary codes of physical appearance’.<sup>452</sup>

However, this collaboration had its limitations: ‘Of course I naturally made my expression as charming as I possibly could [...] An imperceptible smile was on the lips, and in the eyes shone a tender, soft expression’, but this carefully constructed self-image

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<sup>450</sup> Harold Rosenberg, ‘Portraits: A Meditation on Likeness’ in Richard Avedon, *Portraits* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>451</sup> Louise Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life, 1867 to 1887* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd, 1925), p. 140.

<sup>452</sup> Kate Flint, ‘Portraits of Women: On Display’, *Millais: Portraits*, ed. by Peter Funnell, Malcolm Warner, Kate Flint et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 188.

was lost when she ‘forgot to keep on [her] designedly beautiful expression’, caught up in a serious conversation with Millais.<sup>453</sup> This resulted in Millais painting her with ‘a defiant, rather hard’ expression which did not apparently please her quite as much, but which, nevertheless, pleased the public, even inspiring an ekphrastic poem.<sup>454</sup>

The portrait thus emerges as a problematic mirror of the female sitter, offering a mixed reflection of her person, somewhere between the poles of how she perceives herself and how she is perceived by the (male) artist. While the difference between portrait and mirror is sometimes blurred in the works under scrutiny, it nevertheless becomes apparent that, although it has the same potential as the mirror to empower the female figure, the portrait falls short of expectations, as the ‘essence’ of the sitter is either watered down or entirely lost somewhere between the act of the sitting and transposing the image on canvas. This paradigm is transformed, however, by the emergence of photography, which opens up new avenues of exploration for portraiture through the use of lenses and mirrors, and complicated even more by the juxtaposition of women and mirrors in photographs. Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn argue that certain Pre-Raphaelite paintings anticipate or emulate this paradigm shift, comparing it with ‘Lady [Clementina] Hawarden’s contemporary photographs which pose her daughters in fanciful dress before a long mirror’.<sup>455</sup> The relationship between Pre-Raphaelite art and the emerging art of photography, however, as well as the correspondences and contrasts between the uses of the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme in the two types of media, would deserve a study of its own.

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<sup>453</sup> Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life* p. 140.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>455</sup> Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn. *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), p. 121.

## FINAL REMARKS

As the discussion so far has shown, the theme of the woman at the mirror became increasingly popular in the literature and art of nineteenth-century Britain, as the mirror itself became more accessible as an item and the quality of its reflective surface improved. As the mirror became more of a staple household object, so too it became a more popular motif in the arts. This also coincided with the rise of its popularity in various other disciplines in the nineteenth century: the evolution of the telescope, the microscope, and finally photography, at the border between science and art, all relied on the improvement of glass- and mirror-making techniques, and on the availability of the necessary materials. It was also around this time that the convex mirror as a motif in visual art became particularly interesting to artists and art-lovers alike, as exemplified by the acquisition of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* by the National Gallery in 1842. The Eyckian convex mirror became, as we have seen, a favourite motif of the Pre-Raphaelites and their sympathisers, who employed it extensively in their art, exploring its potential both content-wise in terms of symbolism, and stylistically in terms of perspective. Interest in the history of the mirror and of the feminine toilette also grew, and this was a common topic in women's periodicals, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Mirrors' association with female figures in particular, as I have argued, must have been derived from two mutually complementing determinants, a material and a cultural-historical one. The first is the increasing centrality of the mirror to women's bedrooms and boudoirs especially, as these objects became more affordable and of better quality; the second is the preponderance of the mirror as a symbol or a metaphor, either of Vanity or of Prudence, in Renaissance art and literature. Renaissance art

witnessed a revival in popularity in Victorian Britain, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and particularly in Pre-Raphaelite oeuvres, as discussed in chapter four. The re-emergence of the Old Masters as a topic of interest in the artistic world facilitated nineteenth-century artists' engagement with themes that had registered a decrease in popularity during the eighteenth century, of which the 'woman at the mirror' was one. This theme often appears, both in literature and visual art works, in parallel to the subordinate one of the woman faced with her portrait. This poses an interesting contrast in terms of degrees of reflection. Where the mirror is placed in relation to the woman so as to aid exploration of the idea of femininity, the woman's portrait is a less flexible and less faithful representation of the subject. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, the development of the broad theme of the woman at the mirror comes as a response both to these material and cultural determinants, and to constantly shifting understandings of femininity, from the proto-feminist explorations of the early nineteenth century, informed by Romantic-period views about women, all the way to the fin-de-siècle period, when views of femininity gradually become more nuanced. The strength and complexity of the 'woman at the mirror' theme in the literature and visual art of this period suggests the emergence of a new cultural dialogue whose central topic was what femininity was embodied by.

The first chapter focused on the relationship between the woman and her mirror in Alfred Tennyson's 1832 / 1842 poem, and then extended the analysis to various nineteenth-century and fin-de-siècle paintings reinterpreting this situation in Tennyson's poem. I argued that the woman/mirror conjunction in 'The Lady of Shalott' is particularly interesting because of the two simultaneous yet opposite roles that the mirror plays in relation to the Lady: firstly, it constricts the female figure, defining her relationship with the world she inhabits entirely, and tethering her to a problematic

prescribed role; secondly, it concomitantly empowers the Lady by offering her the sort of knowledge to which she would otherwise have no access, and which allows her to make her choice of disregarding the curse and stepping out into the world, despite any consequences she might incur. Pictorial responses to the Lady of Shalott motif also demonstrate that the mirror in relation to the woman becomes a good way of exploring what femininity is, especially questions of female agency. In these cases, the 'woman at the mirror' theme allows for a complex charting of feminine attitudes and poses, many of them challenging traditional understandings of what is woman-like, through the suggestion of such attitudes as absolute self-sufficiency (in Elizabeth Siddall's interpretation), female auto-eroticism (e.g. Sydney Harold Meteyard's *I Am Half Sick of Shadows*), uncontained rebellion towards a prescribed situation (as in Holman Hunt's iconic painting), or an even combination of eroticism and absolute autonomy (as in the paintings of John William Waterhouse). Where they do not suggest particular positions *vis-à-vis* constructions of femininity, they question the solidity of an established feminine identity, or of her fixed position inside the domestic space, as in Henry Darvall's *The Lady of Shalott*, where the mirror is haunted by the Lady's ghostly double, making it look as though she could be at the same time within her domestic space and without, in the world outside her tower.

The use of the 'woman at the mirror' theme in the exploration of the complexities of the concept of femininity is perhaps most significant in its treatment at the hands of artists associated with the Pre-Raphaelite circle. The second chapter dealt with the significance of the theme in the art of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers and, as a more evident case-in point, at the mirror-woman-mirror triangle in the visual works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This chapter showed that the mirror in Pre-Raphaelite art interacts extensively with its Renaissance counterpart, especially from allegorical



paintings, and updates it. It no longer suggests that the conjunction between woman and mirror signifies one particular traditional trope (Vanity, Prudence, or chastity); instead, it mixes and transforms one or more of these valences to suggest a more complex understanding of femininity. William Morris's *La Belle Iseult*, for instance, uses the 'woman at the mirror' theme to complicate understandings of the proud and adulterous woman, and Ford Madox Brown uses the convex mirror in relation to his female figure in *Take Your Son, Sir!* to similarly complicate understandings of motherhood, which, through the use of this Eyckian device, is placed at the intersection of religious virtue and the scandalous possibility of an illicit extra-marital affair. In other paintings, such as *Il Dolce Far Niente* by William Holman Hunt, the mirror placed in conjunction with the woman helps establish a context that suggests a complete conflation between the wife-figure and the lover-figure, marital domesticity and taboo auto-eroticism. In the optical triangle formed by a woman flanked by two mirrors in works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (*Lady Lilith*, *Risen at Dawn*), the role of the 'woman at the mirror' theme in suggesting that femininity eschews binary categorisation becomes particularly obvious. In these instances, what the mirror either reflects or fails to reflect determines the limit of the viewer's ability to 'enter' the space depicted in the picture and define the figure's femininity. Placed between two mirrors that give nothing or very little back to the viewer, the female figure is caught in a closed circuit within a vaguely defined feminine space from which the viewer is essentially excluded, and which renders the woman impenetrable and self-sufficient. At the other end of this spectrum in the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially in Pre-Raphaelite poetry, the sub-theme of the woman and the portrait is once again tackled, and thus a metaphorical arc is formed, mirroring the situations created, for instance, in the fiction of Maria Edgeworth in the first half of the century.

My third chapter dealt with the re-evaluation of the portrait's symbolic potential as a tool for exploring ideas of femininity in the second half of the nineteenth century. This chapter took as its main reference point poems by Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti ('On Mary's Portrait', 'The Portrait', and 'In an Artist's Studio') which invoke both the portrait and the mirror in relation to the female figure, in order to exemplify the contrast in the understandings of femininity prompted by these two motifs. Here, the portrait of the woman acts as a device that facilitates the questioning of a strict idealisation or categorisation of the female figure typical of the Romantic period. In these case studies the female figure is endlessly idealised or mythologised, placed in visual contexts that obliterate her characteristics as a real woman. Time and again, the portrait's 'original' is lost behind the male painter's ideal perception of her, or is buried under the weight of selective memory: on canvas, the woman is the distillation of her painter/lover's best memories of her. These poems thus engage with eighteenth-century ideas of portraiture, while questioning their validity in preserving the identity of the female sitter. This is also done via a subtle comparison between portraiture as representation and the reflected image, with portraits uncannily approaching mirror reflections frozen in time, but falling short in their mission of offering timeless access to the unadulterated essence of the female sitter.

This final idea correlates with another nineteenth-century development, that of photography, which this thesis has not addressed, but which constitutes an opportunity for further study. The beginnings of photography are not quite clearly set, the generally accepted view being that it was invented in France in 1839 by Louis Daguerre, the originator of the daguerreotype, though some historians of photography have given credit to the earlier and less successful attempts of Nicéphore Niépce in the 1820s, when

he took what he called the heliotype.<sup>456</sup> The daguerreotype flourished and its quality developed all the way through the 1840s and 1860s, coexisting also with the calotype, invented in Britain by Henry Fox Talbot a year later than Daguerre's original medium, in 1840.<sup>457</sup> Although photography in its early stages quickly became of public interest, the cumbersome equipment was costly, making for equally costly photographs, and therefore available only to the upper classes.<sup>458</sup> It was, nevertheless, an exceptional tool, used in equal measure for scientific study and documentation, family or individual portraits, erotic indulgence, death and mourning mementos, and a means of communication with the other world.

As Tom Gunning observes in 'Invisible Worlds, Visible Media', '[i]n the middle of the nineteenth century, photography presented a scientific marvel', allowing scholars and amateurs to capture mirror-like images of anything from nature to people.<sup>459</sup> Nineteenth-century photography existed at the threshold between the scientific and historical document, and the artistic endeavour. Notoriously, as Tim Barringer notes in 'An Antidote to Mechanical Poison: John Ruskin, Photography and Early Pre-Raphaelite Painting', Ruskin, although a great lover of the medium who took much pleasure in capturing images of nature and architectural details, 'saw photography as a paradox', as something that 'could [...] produce accurate representations of the natural

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<sup>456</sup> For a more detailed presentation of the early history of photography and the debates around it, see Michel Frizot, 'Light Machines: On the Threshold of Invention', in *The New History of Photography*, ed. by Michel Frizot (Köln: Könemann, 1998).

<sup>457</sup> See Timm Starl, 'A New World of Pictures: The Use and Spread of the Daguerreotype Process', in Frizot (ed.) *New History of Photography*.

<sup>458</sup> Starl, 'A New World of Pictures', p. 33: 'In 1839, the daguerreotype would suddenly offer an incredibly precise and effective image of the world as it had never before been seen. When portraiture became technically feasible, the spread of daguerreotypes, each a unique and expensive object, was subject to market forces and at first was restricted to towns and the well-off middle-classes.' (33)

<sup>459</sup> Tom Gunning, 'Invisible Worlds, Visible Media', in *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840-1900*, ed. Corey Keller (San Francisco, Calif.: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008), p. 55.

world with great speed and clarity’, and yet that could not be an art form, since he understood it ‘as a completely automated process, disparaging the photographer’s labor and expertise’.<sup>460</sup> His was not an isolated view; a similar understanding of photography is suggested in William Henry Fox Talbot’s work of and about photography, *The Pencil of Nature*, published between 1844 and 1846. As Tom Gunning notes, the title alone of this work evokes a sense, on the part of nineteenth-century public, that ‘a photograph presented an image of the world inscribed by light rather than by the hand of man’.<sup>461</sup> A disconnection between the photographer and the result of his or her work was therefore perceived, and it is from this that the view that photography could not constitute an art form resulted. Nevertheless, many photographs – portraits especially – were taken in the second half of the nineteenth century that clearly did not constitute dispassionate, objective captures of a documentable subject. Many photographic portraits – and a particularly apt example are those taken by Charles Dodgson – depict people in an assortment of theatrical costumes and poses that suggest an altogether deeper level of involvement, both on the part of the photographer, and on that of the models.

The discussion on early artistic photography is further complicated by gender issues, considering how popular photography became among women in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. In *Qui a peur des femmes photographes? 1839-1945*, Thomas Galifot argues that this occurred partly because of Queen Victoria’s own interest in this occupation. He writes: ‘The British Isles are [...] the cradle of an

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<sup>460</sup> Tim Barringer, ‘An Antidote to Mechanical Poison: John Ruskin, Photography and Early Pre-Raphaelite Painting’, in Diane Waggoner, Tim Barringer et al., *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875* (Washington, D.C., and Farnham, Surrey: National Gallery of Art with Lund Humphries, 2010), pp 18-19.

<sup>461</sup> Gunning, ‘Invisible Worlds, Visible Media’, p. 56.

unprecedented amateur phenomenon. The practice of photography, judged [to be] even more appropriate for ladies for the fact that it sparks the interest of Queen Victoria, comes to be added to the arsenal of female leisure occupations suitable for the outdoors such as watercolour [painting], astronomy or botany'.<sup>462</sup> When these women photographers begin to photograph other women or themselves – in peculiar outfits and/or poses – they give a new dimension to the cultural dialogue about perimeters of femininity, as they make use of this newly-discovered tool to express themselves artistically both in the private and the public realm. Much has been written, for instance, about the compelling photography of Julia Margaret Cameron, in which the theme of female identity becomes once again a primary consideration, tied in with the use of the new medium.<sup>463</sup>

The development of photography in general and the evolution of women's photography in the second half of nineteenth-century Britain, of course also coexisted with the development of the 'woman at the mirror' theme in literature and art, so it was perhaps inevitable that this theme should surface in photography also. For one thing, there are inevitable associations with Pre-Raphaelite art and sensibility, as demonstrated, for example, by William Downey's photograph of Fanny Cornforth (1863), which shows her leaning languidly against 'a large bedroom mirror [which had been] carried into the garden [of Tudor House, Chelsea, where the picture was taken]'

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<sup>462</sup> Thomas Galifot, Marie Robert, *Qui a peur des femmes photographes? 1839-1935* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay/ Éditions Hazan, 2015), p. 4. My own translation from the French original: 'Les Îles britanniques sont [...] le berceau d'un phénomène amateur sans équivalent. La pratique de la photographie, jugée d'autant plus appropriée pour les dames qu'elle suscite l'enthousiasme de la reine Victoria, vient s'ajouter à l'arsenal de loisirs féminins propices au plein air tels que l'aquarelle, l'astronomie ou la botanique.'

<sup>463</sup> Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work* (New York: Aperture, 1987); Sylvia Wolf et al, *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Also: Joy Melville, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Pioneer Photographer* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2003); Victoria Olsen, *From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron and Victorian Photography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

specifically for this purpose.<sup>464</sup> As Tim Barringer has observed, the picture has fairly obvious ‘overtones of *The Lady of Shalott*’, and the connection between it and the Pre-Raphaelite paintings tackling the theme could yield productive readings. Perhaps even more interesting, however, are photos of women and mirrors staged and taken by women, such as those taken by Lady Clementina Hawarden of her daughters posed in front of or against large mirrors in airy interiors.<sup>465</sup> Looking at the intersection between the ‘woman at the mirror’ theme as presented, respectively, in early photography and in literature and painting would confer a whole new dimension to the present discussion. Additional questions would have to be asked, such as whether the theme conveys the same range of messages in nineteenth-century photography as it does in painting and literature, or how the emerging cultural dialogue on femininity was enriched by the emergence of this theme in photography. This additional dimension would benefit from the future development of a larger cross-disciplinary study which would allow an in-depth analysis of how each of these arts informed each other in light of the theme I have pursued in this thesis. No doubt, this would also offer a more complete panoramic view of the evolution of understandings of ‘femininity’ in nineteenth-century Britain.

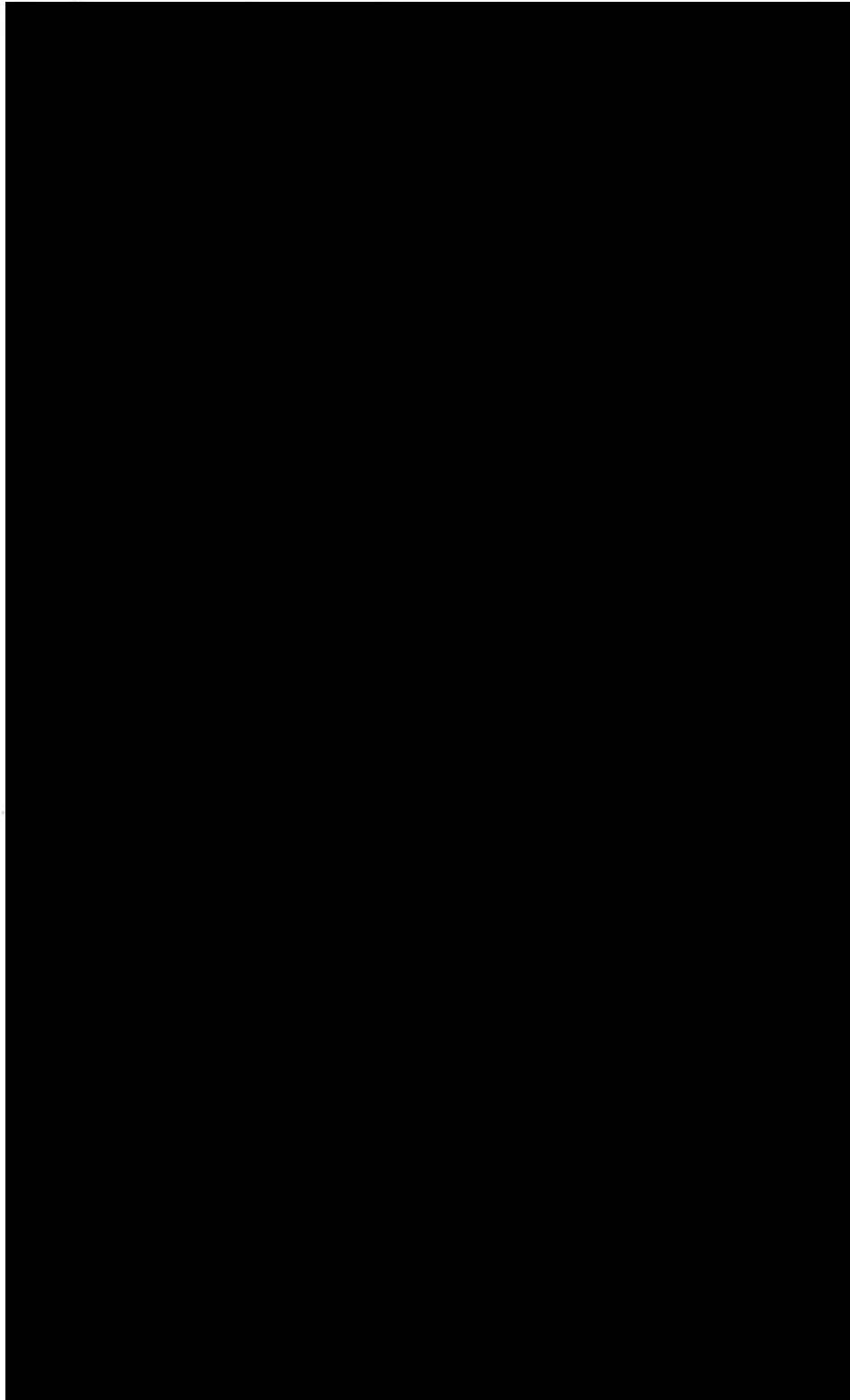
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<sup>464</sup> Barringer et al., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-garde*, p. 168.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibidem*.

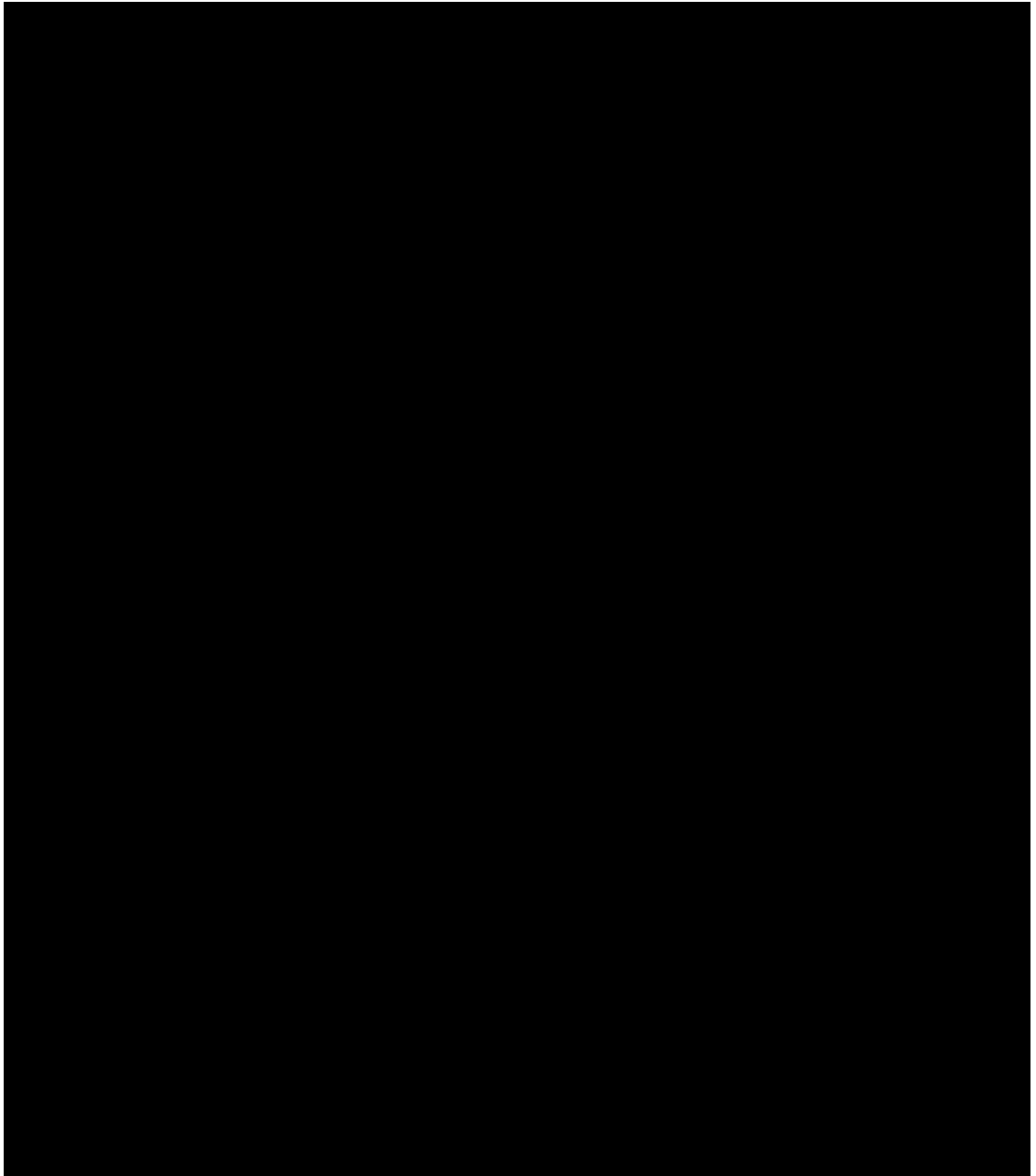
## APPENDIX

Figure 1



*The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* vols. 5-6 (1856-1858), p. 262

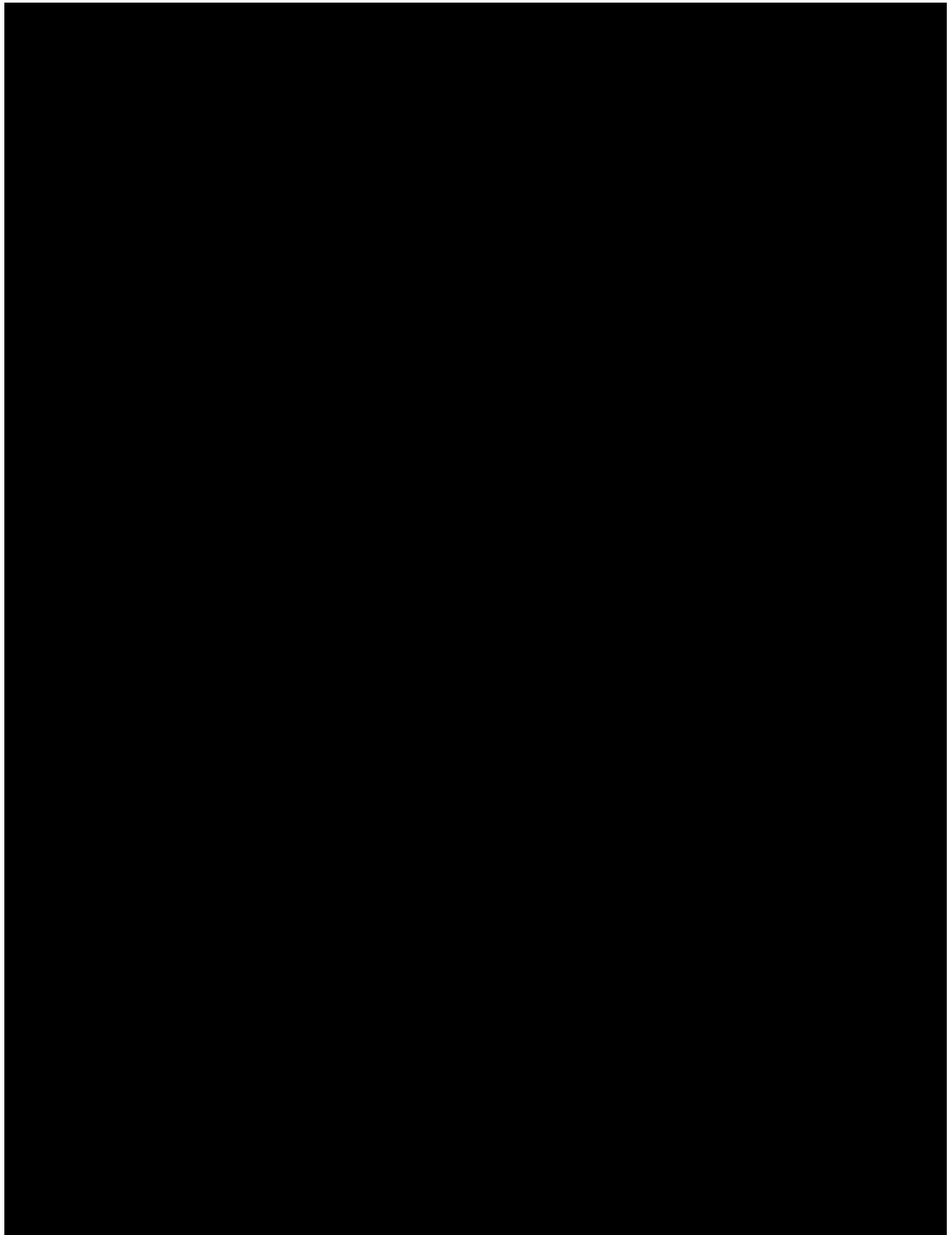
Figure 2



William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1857, engraved by John Thompson British, in Alfred Tennyson, *Poems by Alfred Tennyson, D.C.L., Poet Laureate* (London: Edward Moxon, 1857), wood engraving, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia



Figure 3



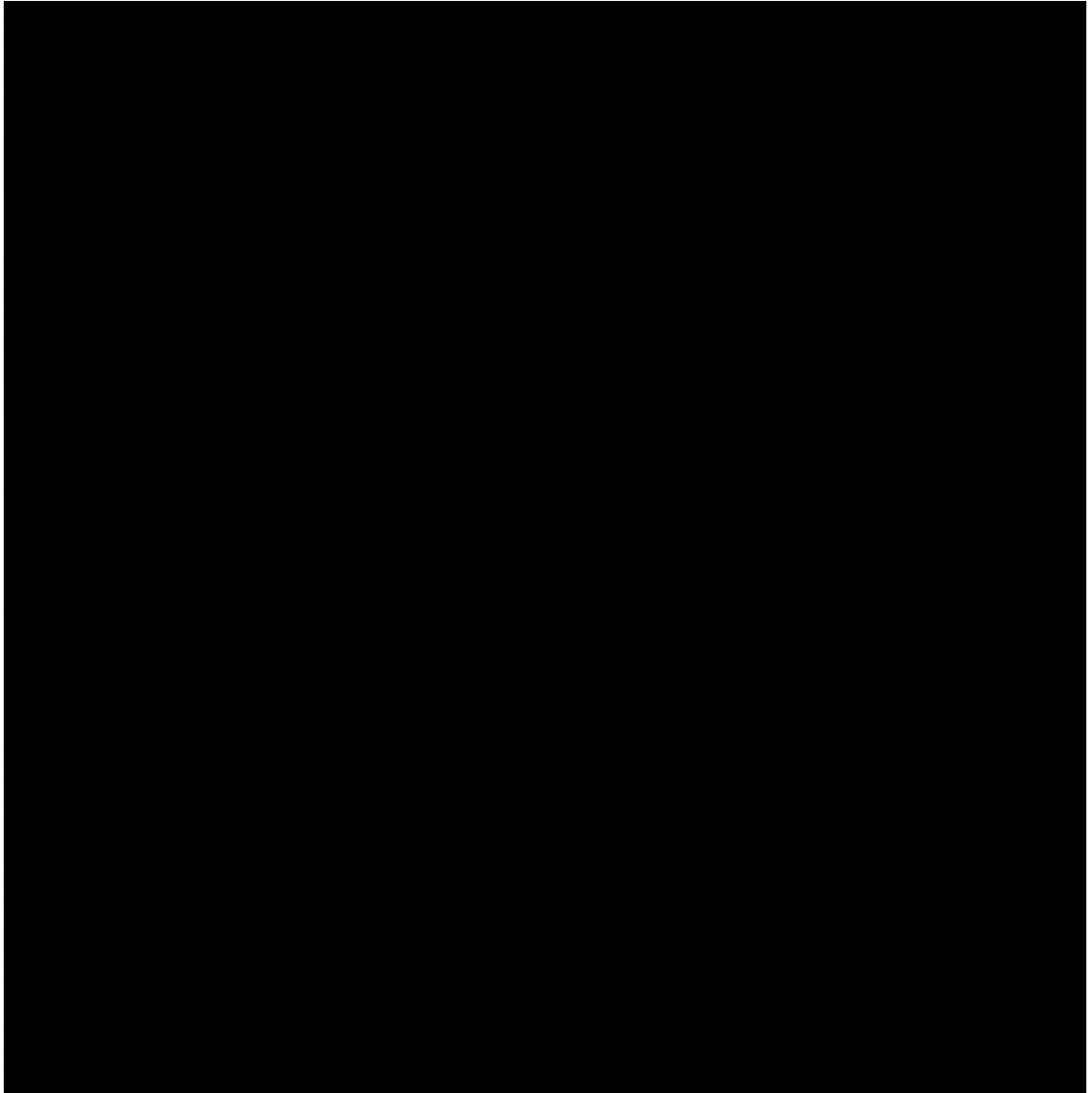
William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*. c. 1886-1905, oil on canvas. Wadsworth  
Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

Figure 4



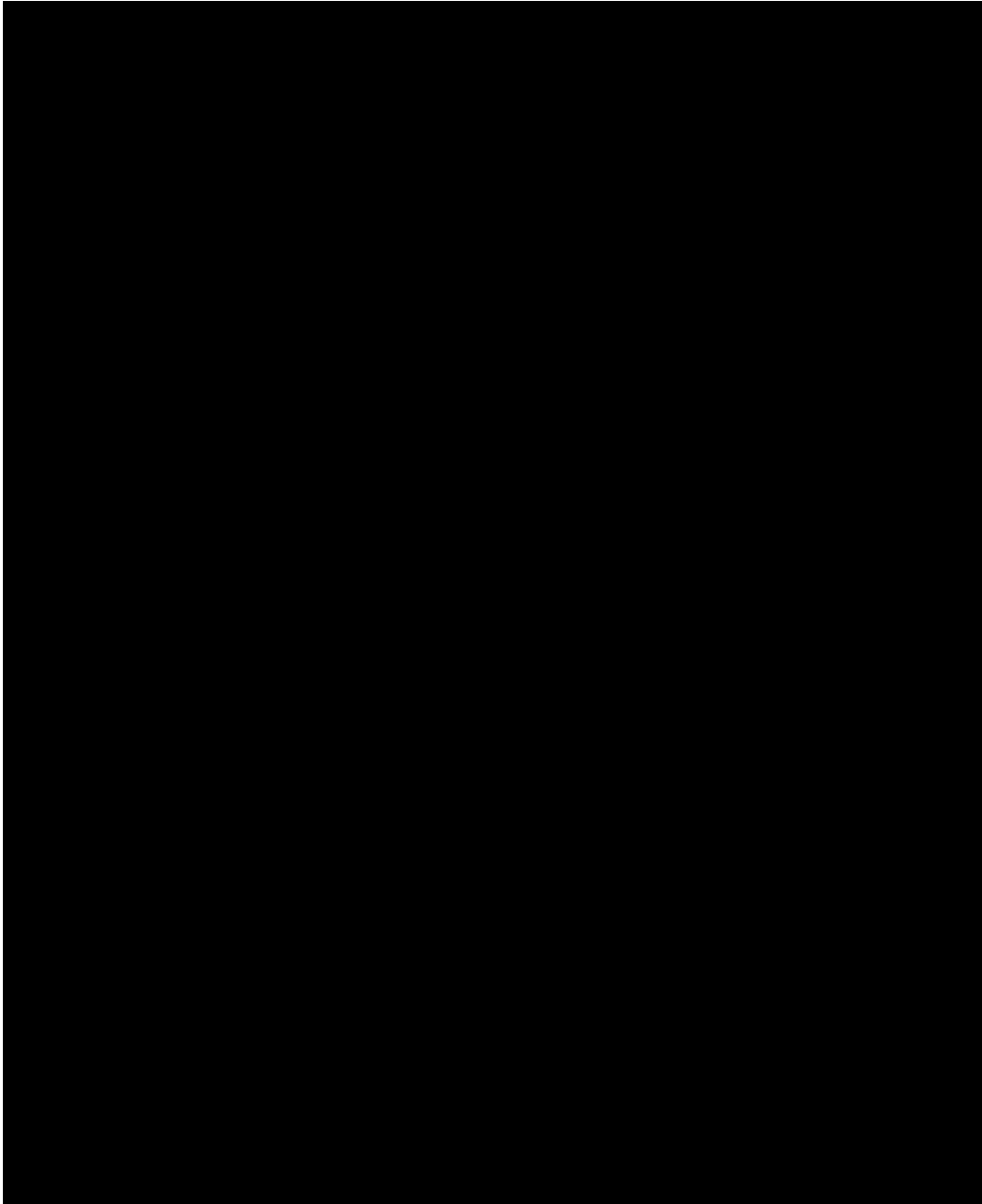
William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1850, pen, Indian and brown ink, and wash,  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

Figure 5



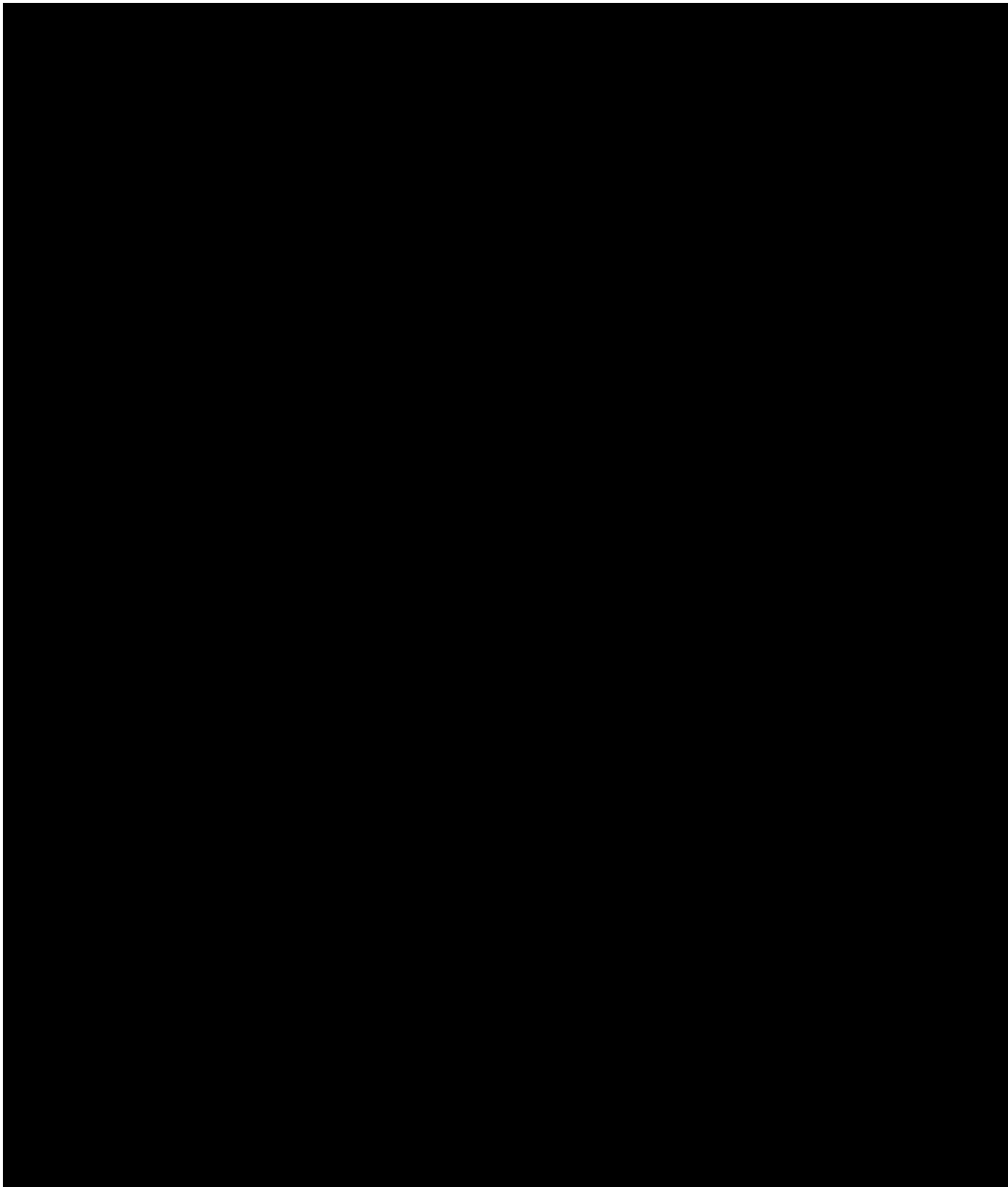
William Holman Hunt, *Study for the headpiece to the 'Lady of Shalott': the Lady weaving, with separate studies for the architecture reflected in the mirror* [detail], c. 1856, pen and brown ink on blue-green paper, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California

Figure 6



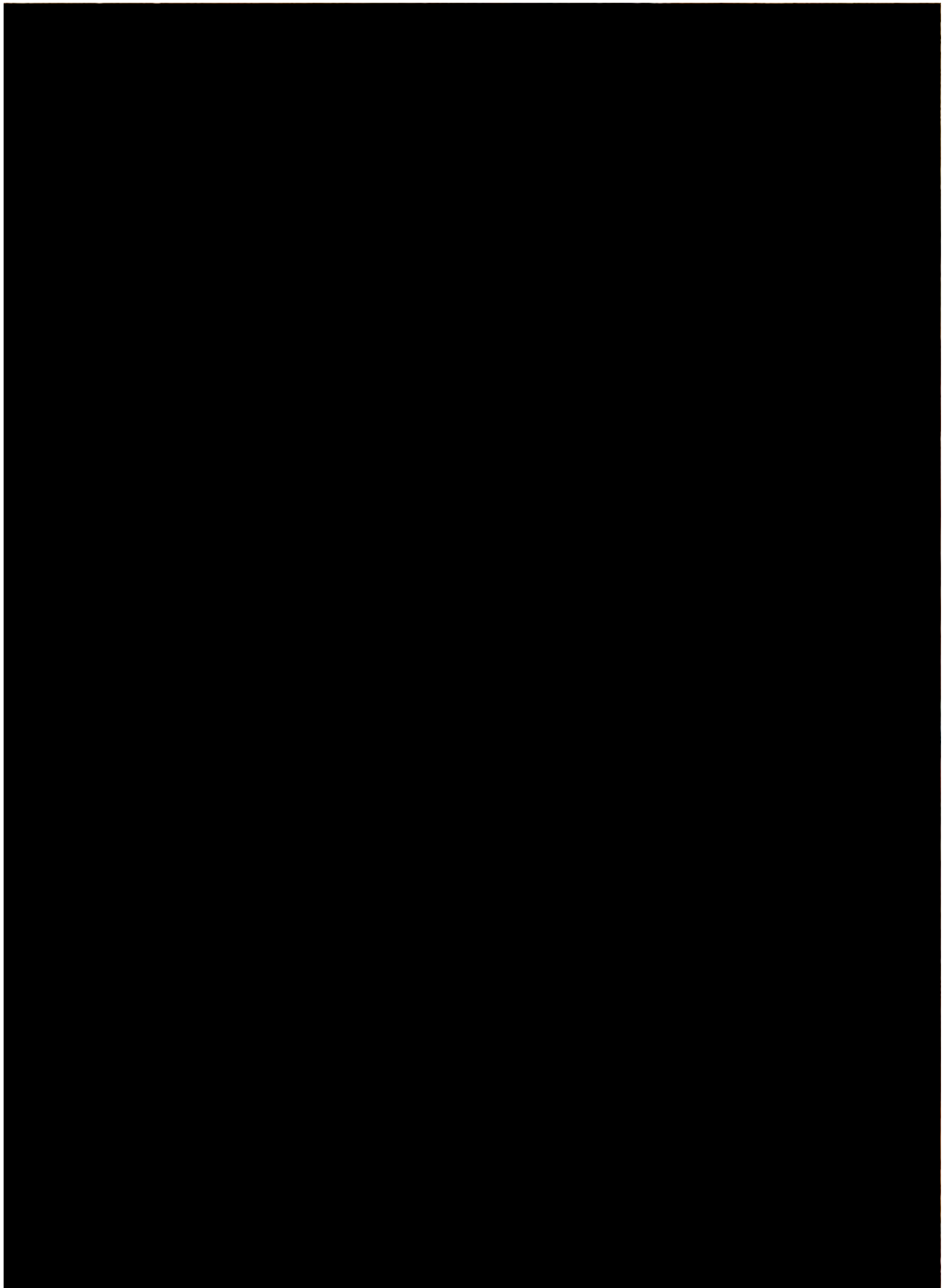
William Holman Hunt, *Study for the headpiece to 'The Lady of Shalott': the Lady, weaving, regards herself in the mirror*, c. 1856, pen and brown ink, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California

Figure 7



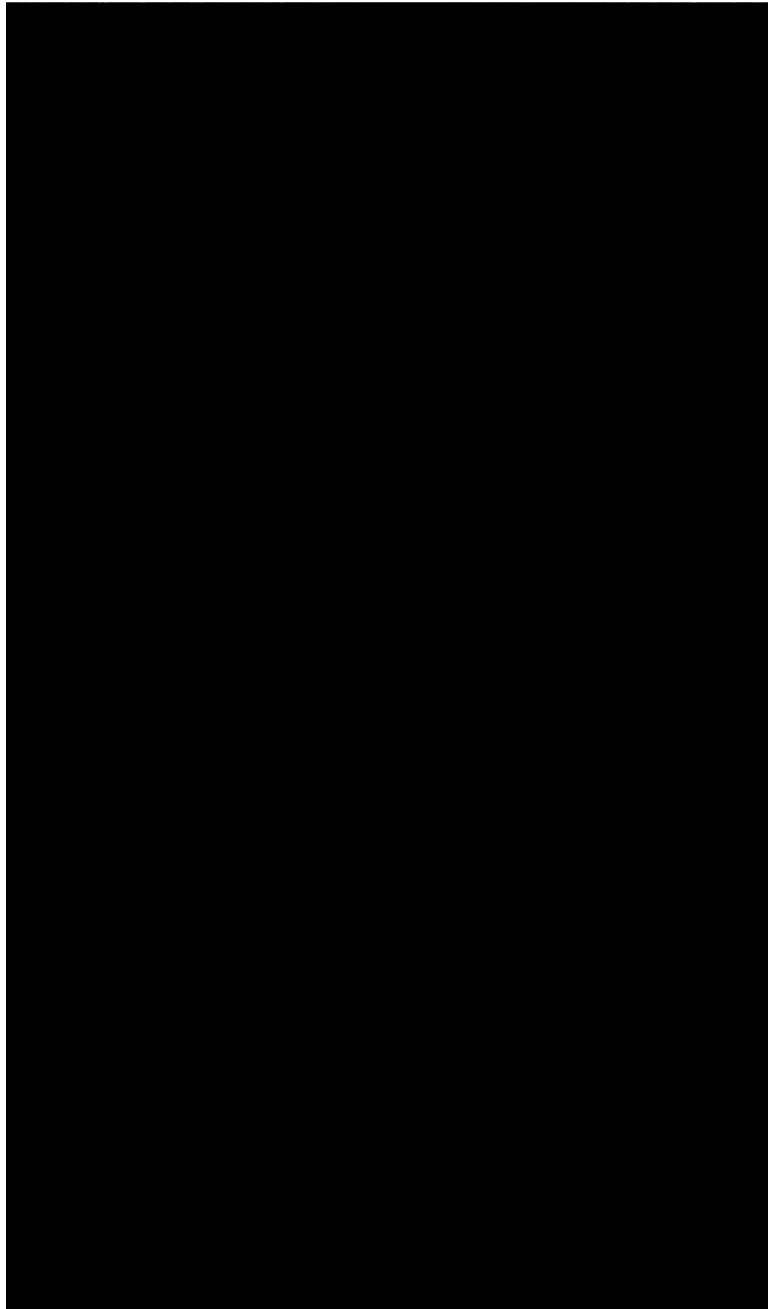
William Holman Hunt, *Studies for the headpiece to 'The Lady of Shalott': the Lady weaving*, c. 1856, pen and brown ink on blue-green paper, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California

Figure 8



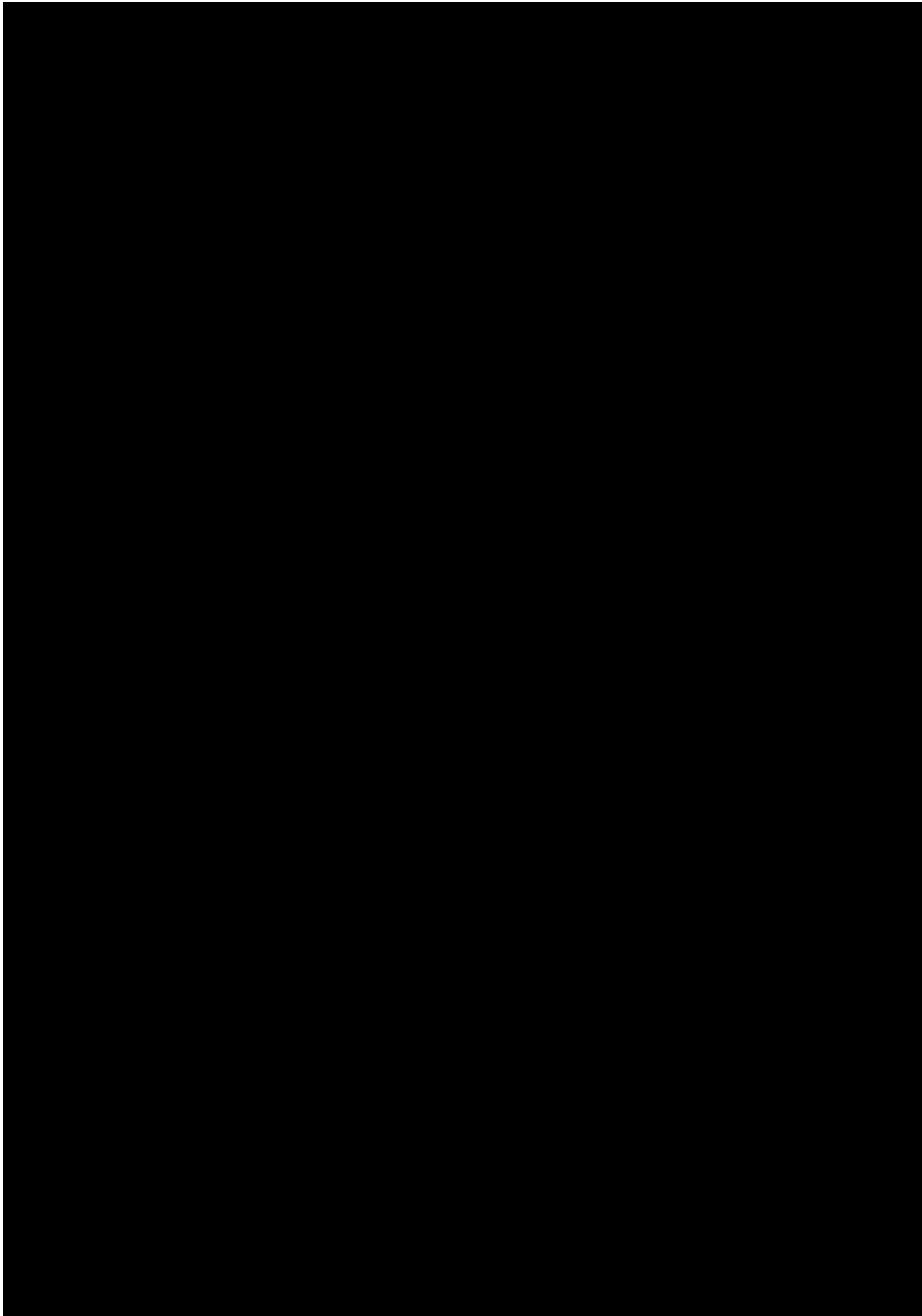
William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853-1854, oil on canvas, Tate,  
London

Figure 9



John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott (Looking at Lancelot)*, 1894, oil on canvas, City Art Gallery, Leeds

Figure 10



John William Waterhouse, *I Am Half Sick of Shadows*, 1915, oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada

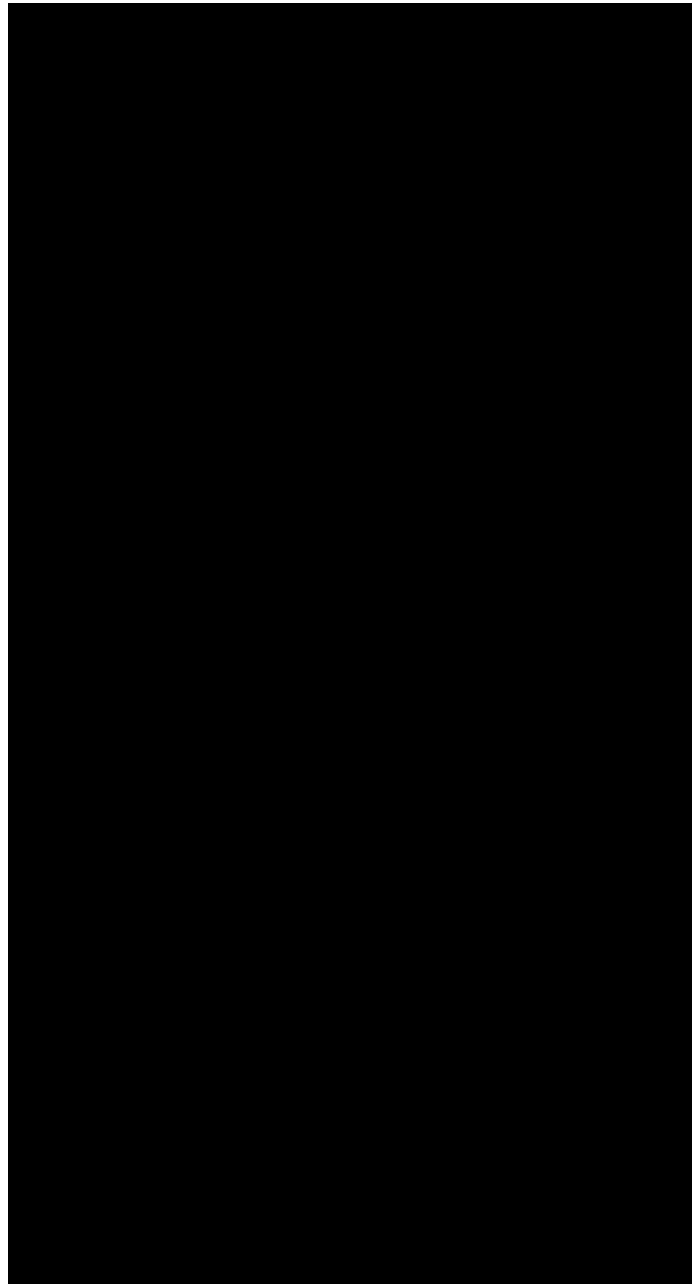


Figure 11



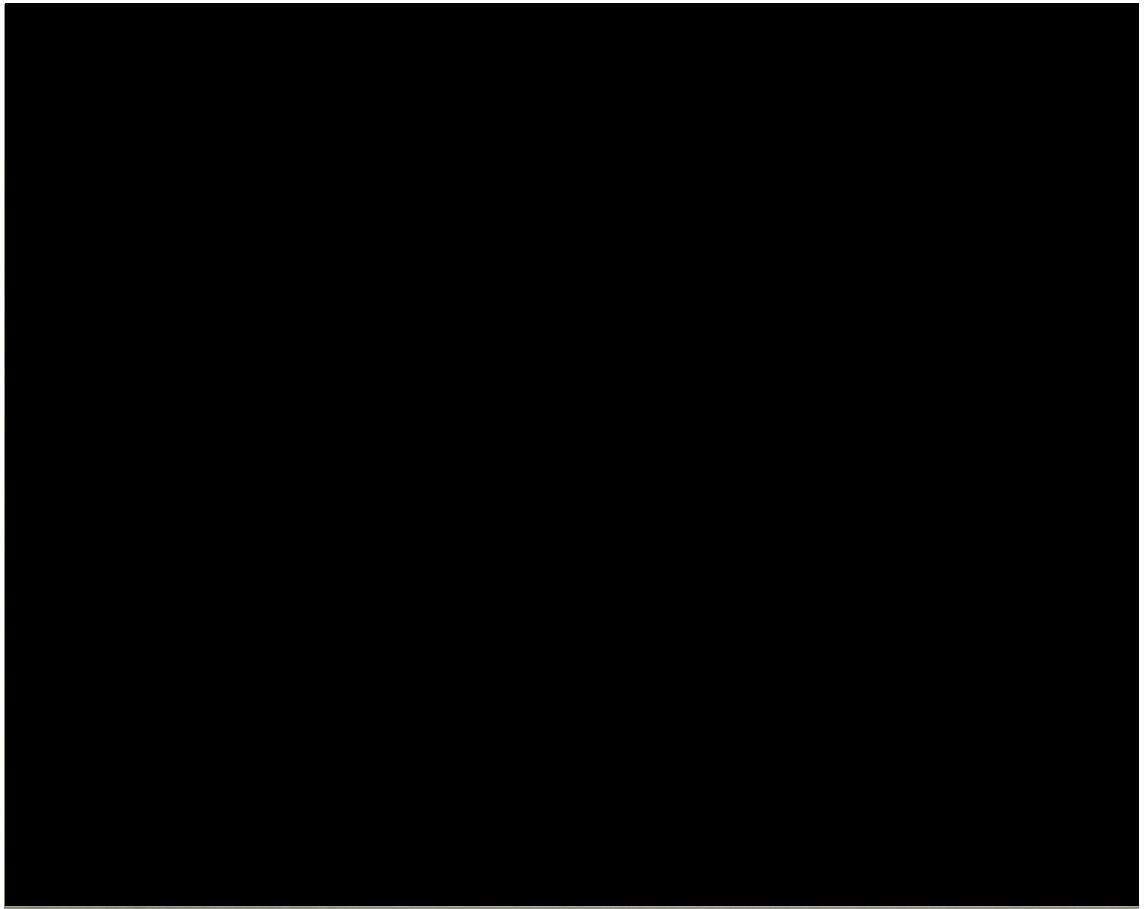
John William Waterhouse, *Study for 'The Lady of Shalott'*, date unknown, oil on canvas,  
private collection

Figure 12



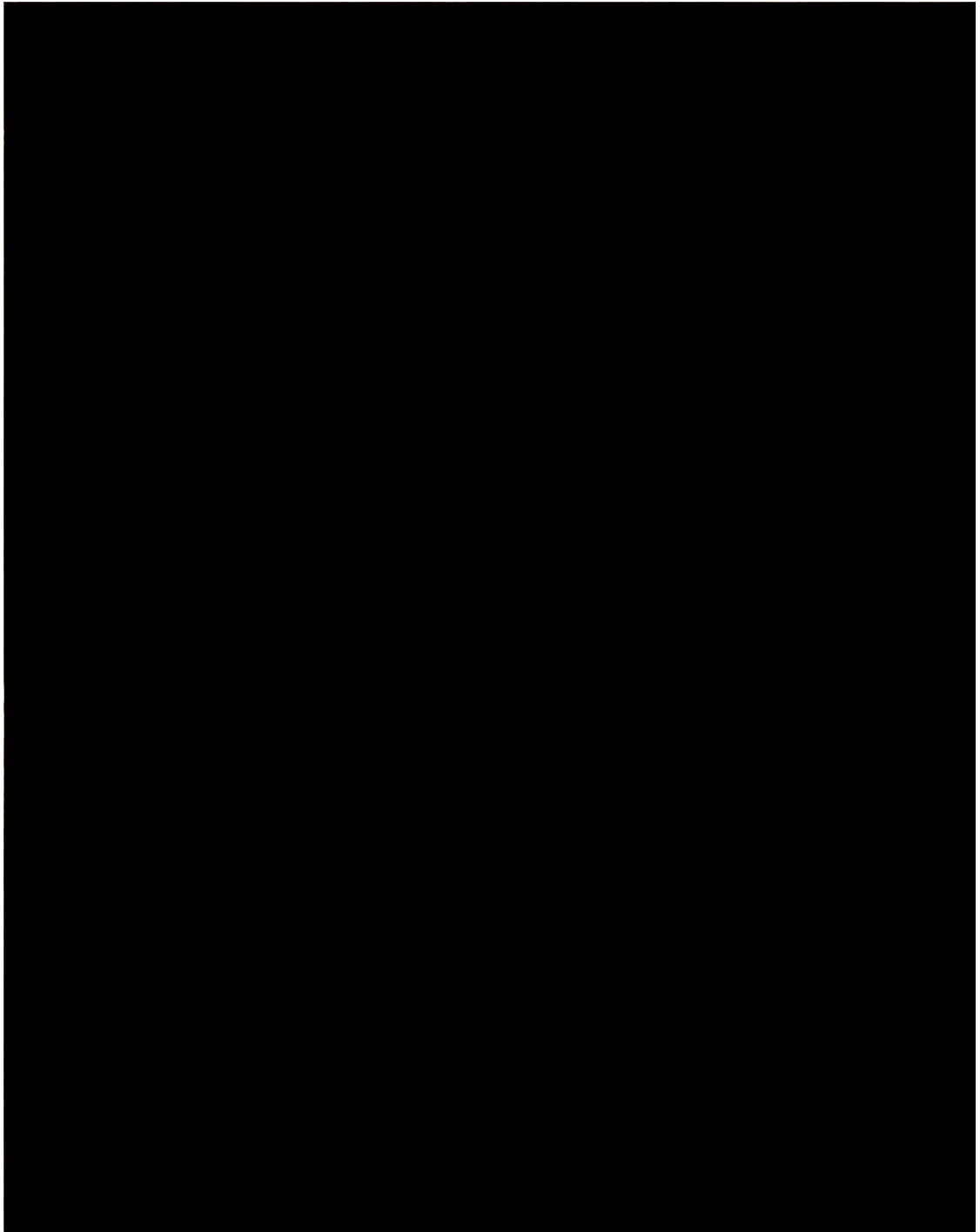
John William Waterhouse, *Study for 'The Lady of Shalott'*, c. 1894, oil on canvas,  
Falmouth Art Gallery

Figure 13



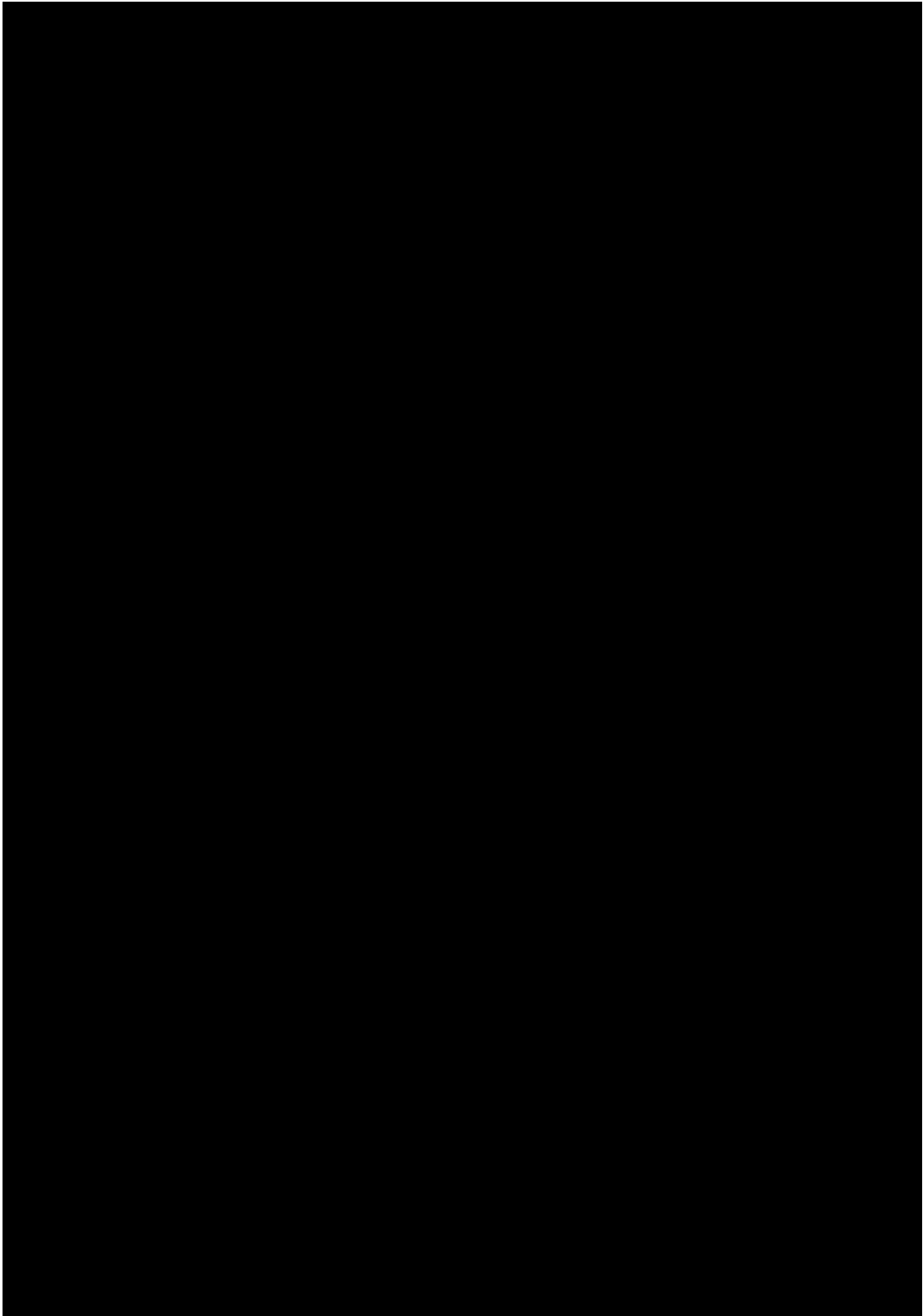
John William Waterhouse, *Study for 'I am half sick of shadows, said the Lady of Shalott'*, date unknown, pen on paper, private collection

Figure 14



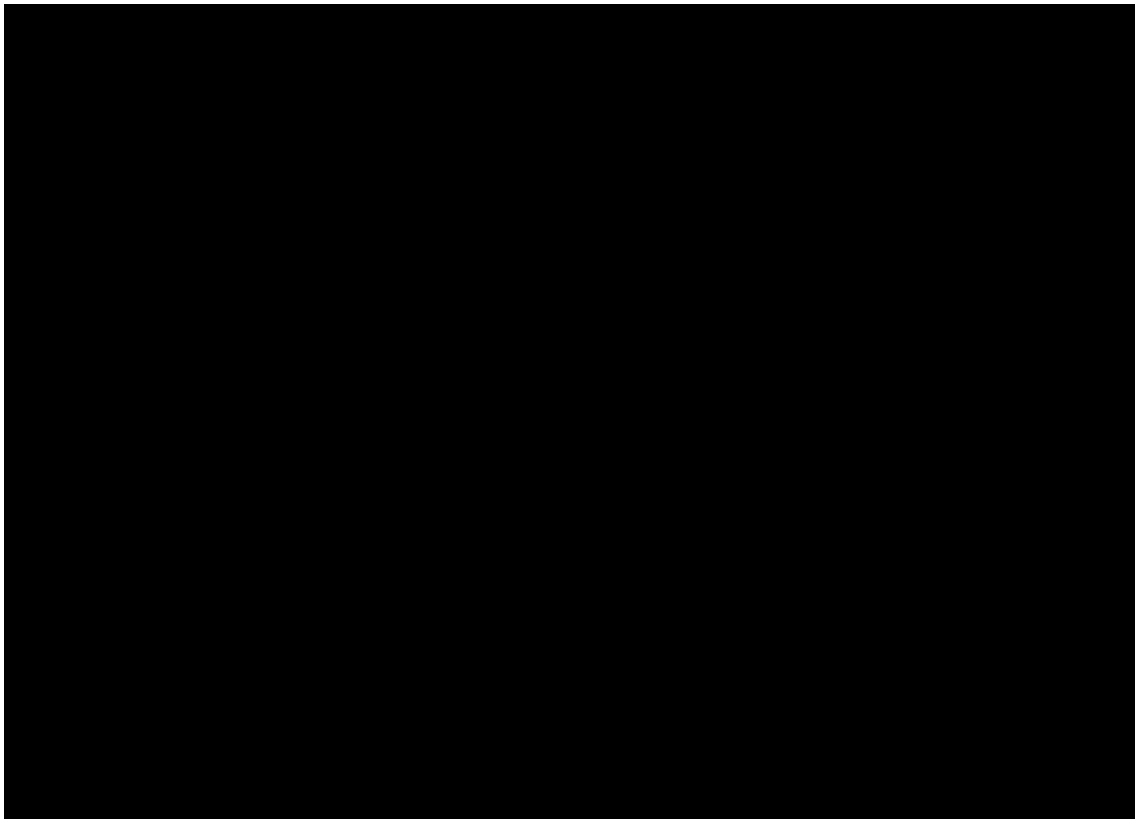
John William Waterhouse, *Destiny*, 1900, oil on canvas, Towneley Hall Art Gallery,  
Burnley

Figure 15



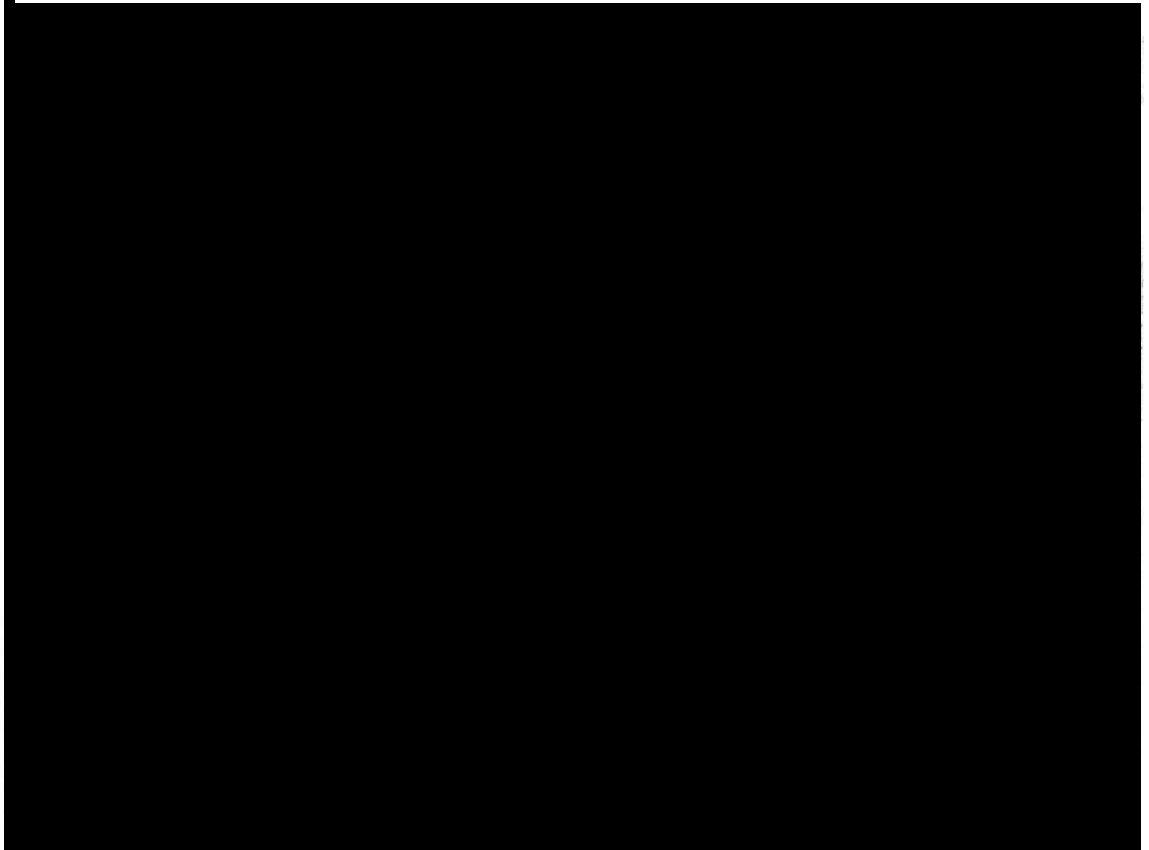
Henry Darvall, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1848-1851, oil on canvas, Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Figure 16



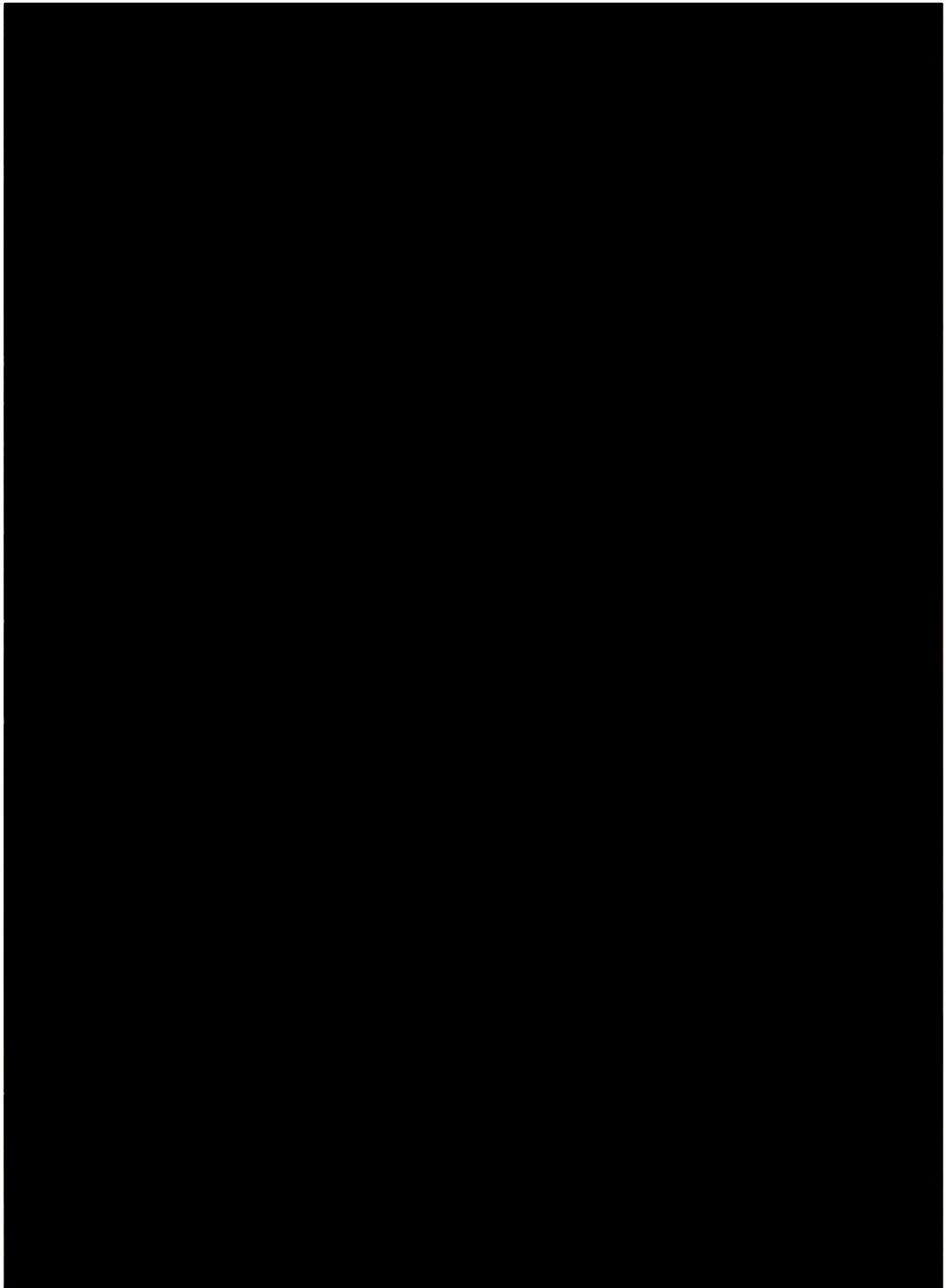
Sidney Harold Meteyard, *I Am Half Sick of Shadows*, 1913, oil on canvas, private collection

Figure 17



Elizabeth Siddall, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1853, pen, ink, and pencil on paper, The Maas Gallery, London

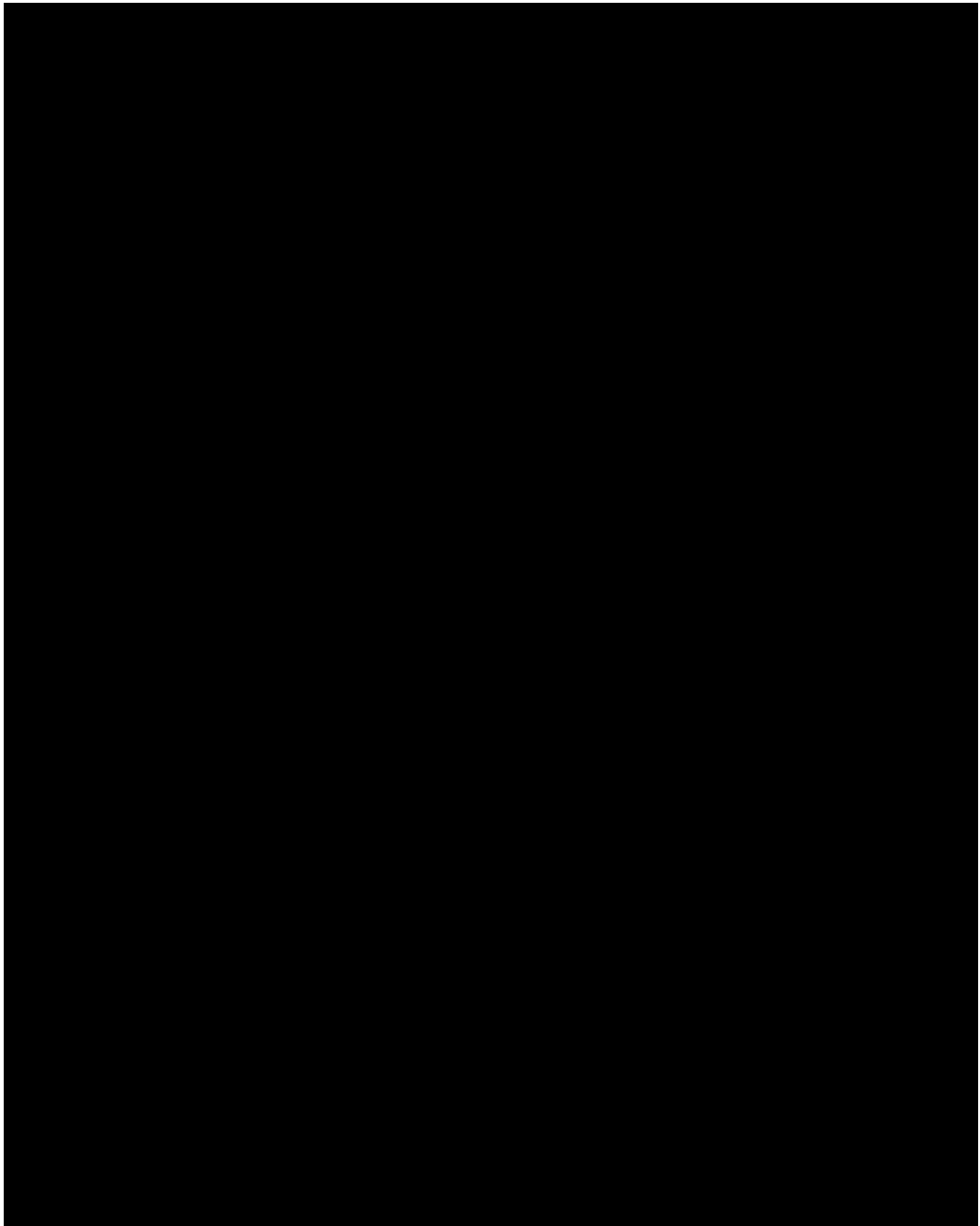
Figure 18



Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, oil on oak, The National Gallery, London

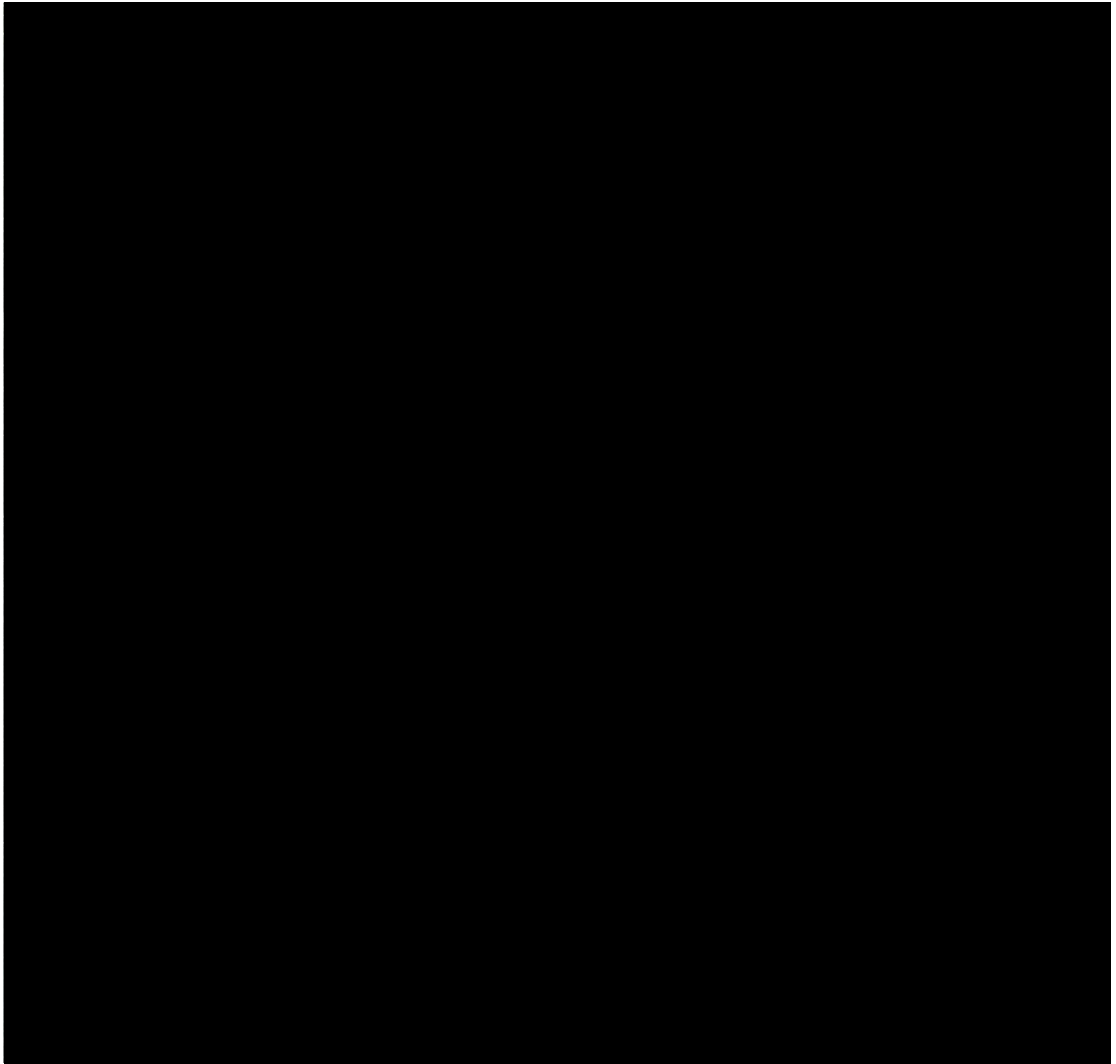


Figure 19



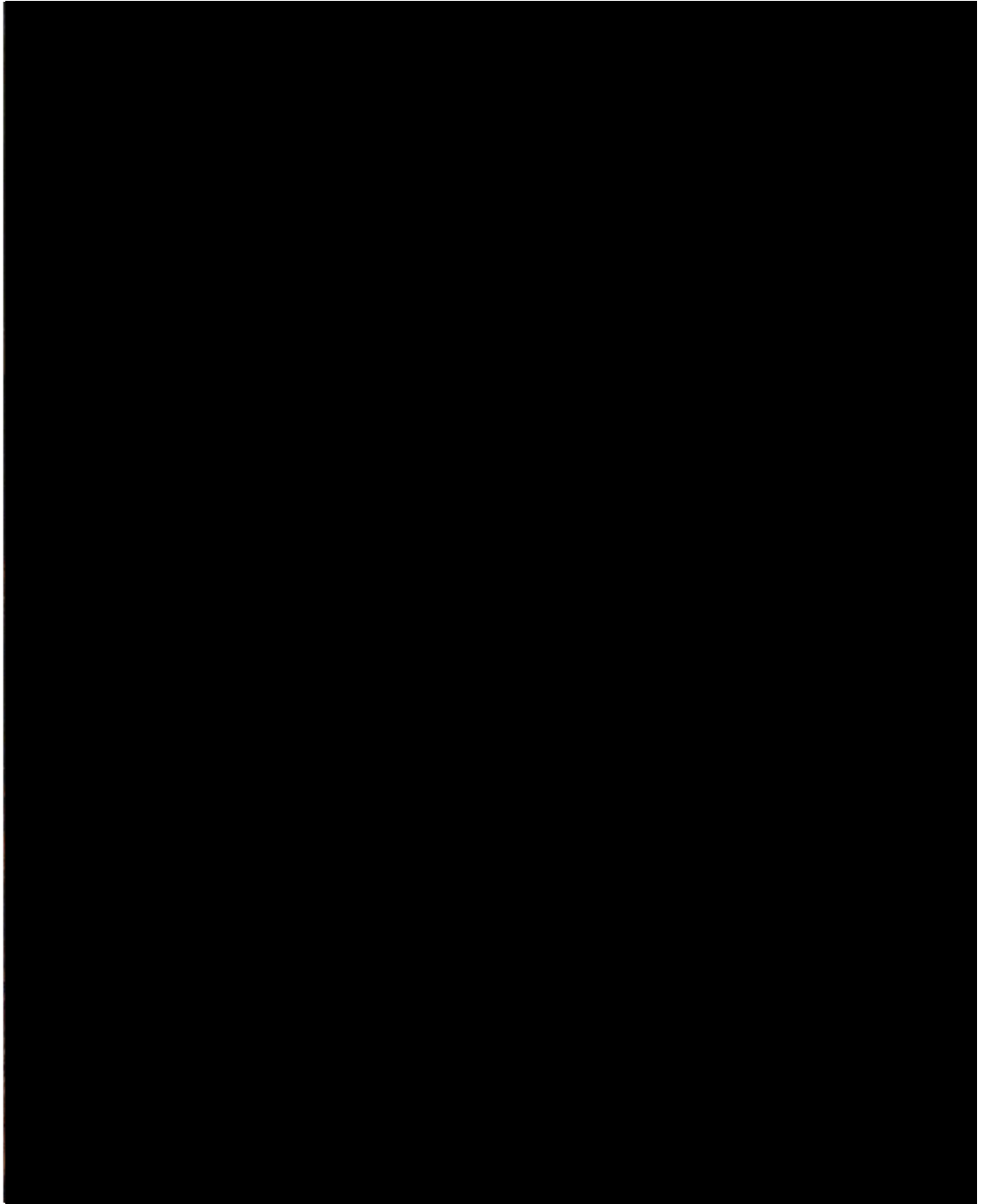
Simon Vouet, *Allegory of Prudence*, c. 1645, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France

Figure 20



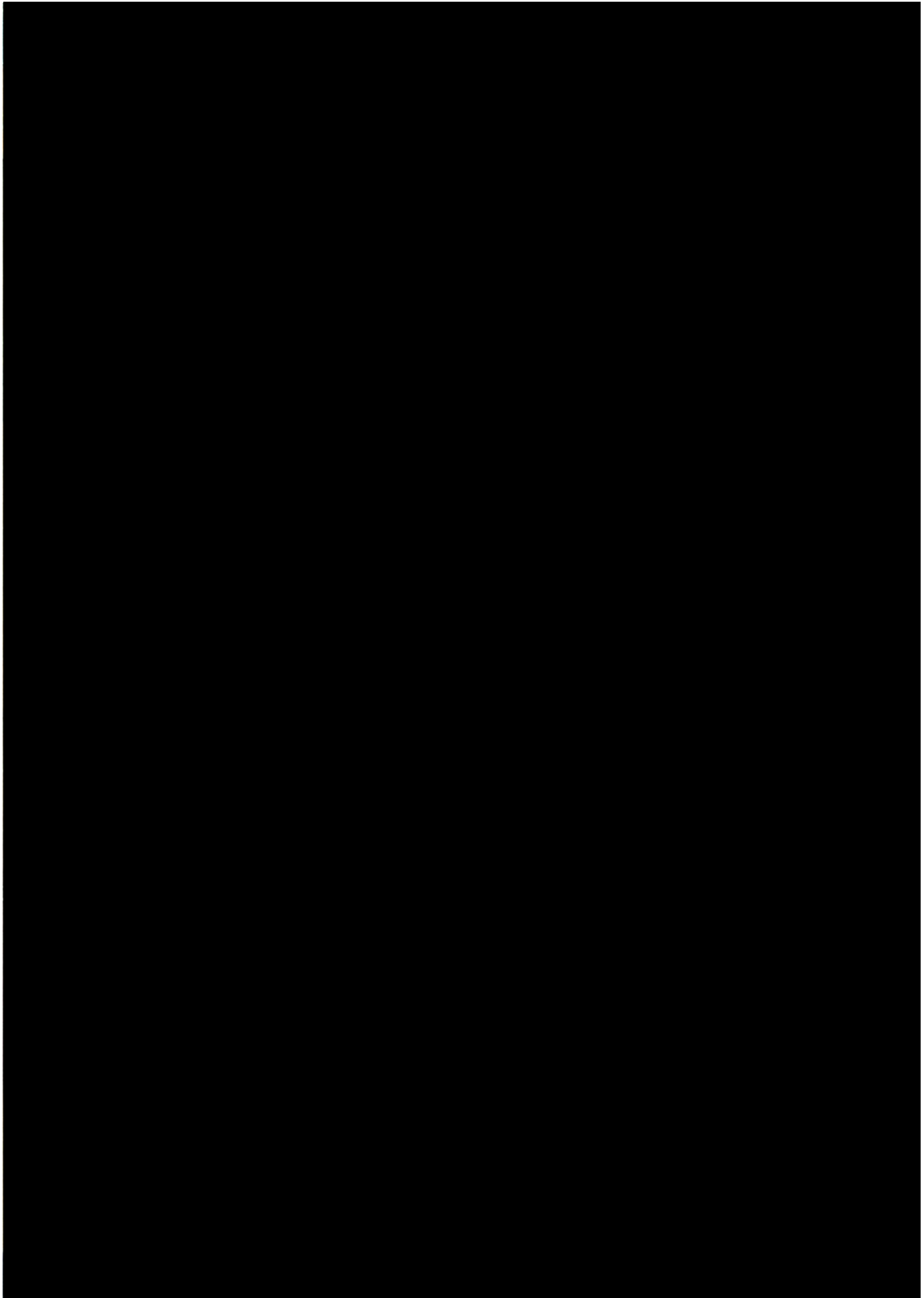
Edward Burne-Jones, *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor*, 1862, ink, watercolour, gouache and gum on paper, Tate, London

Figure 21



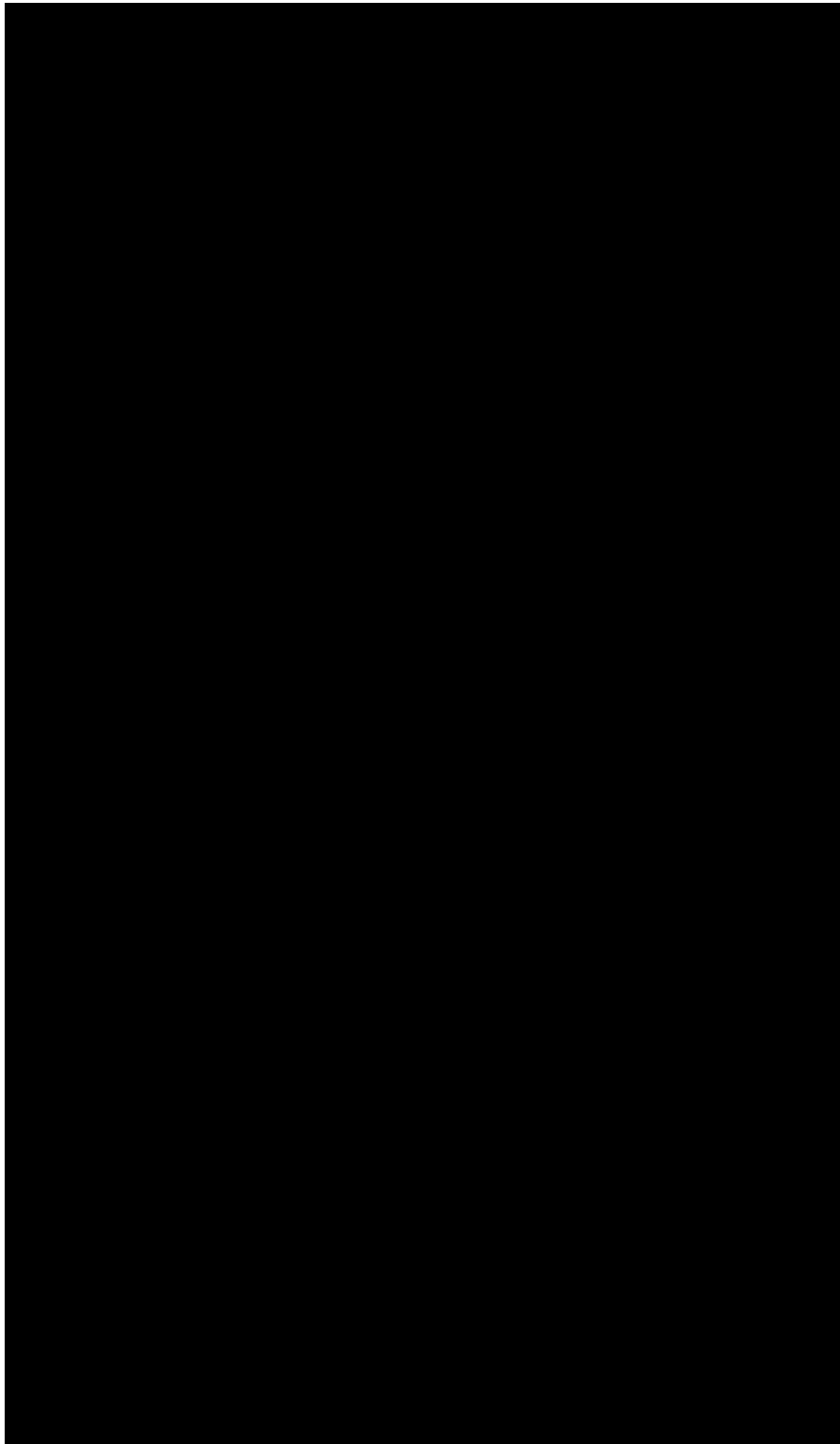
William Holman Hunt, *Il Dolce far Niente*, 1859-1866, 1874-1875, oil on canvas, The Schaeffer Collection, North Carolina

Figure 22



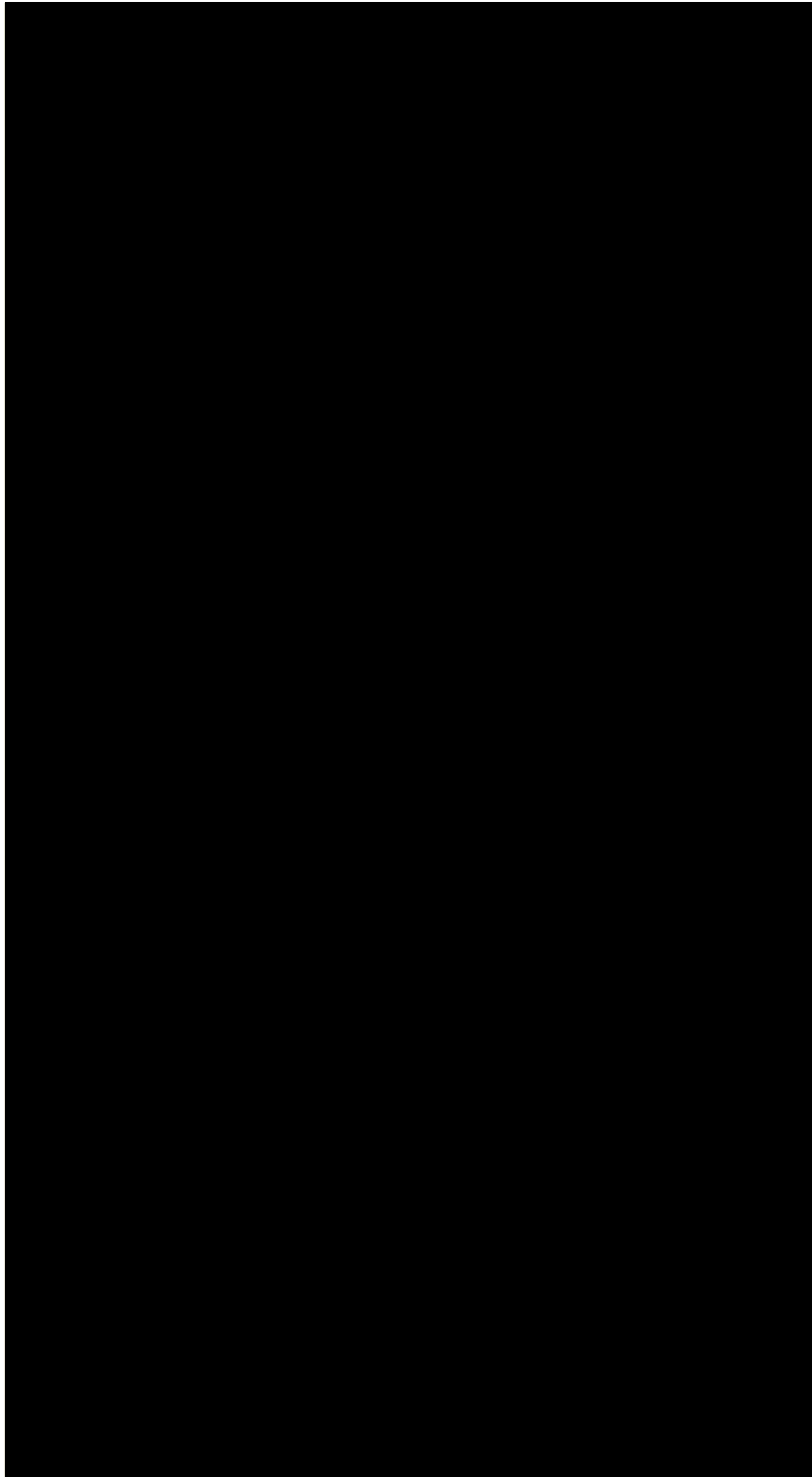
William Holman Hunt, *Portrait of Fanny Holman Hunt*, 1866-1868, oil on canvas,  
private collection

Figure 23



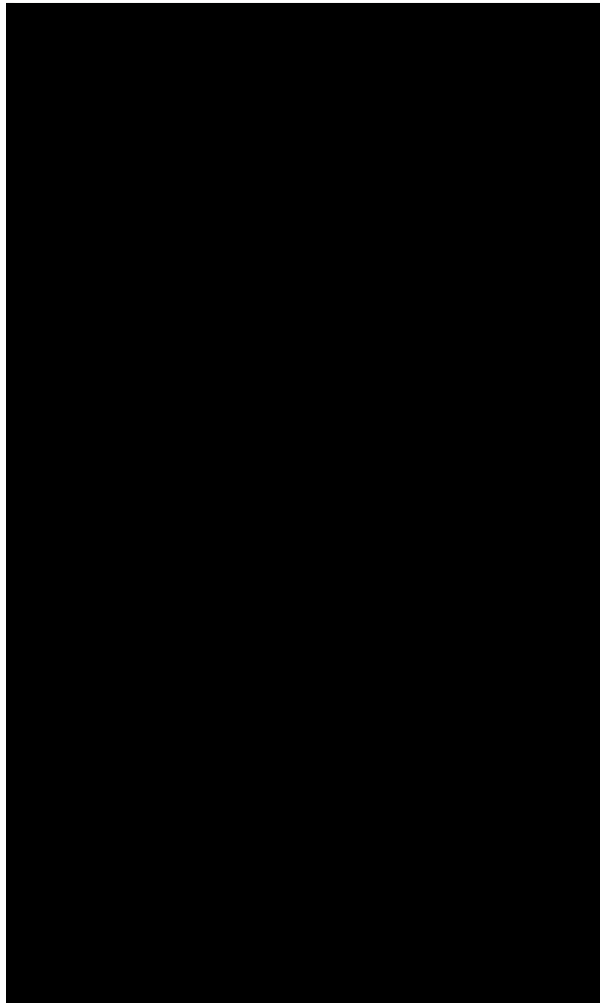
John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, *Thoughts of the Past*, 1858-1859, oil on canvas. Tate,  
London

Figure 24



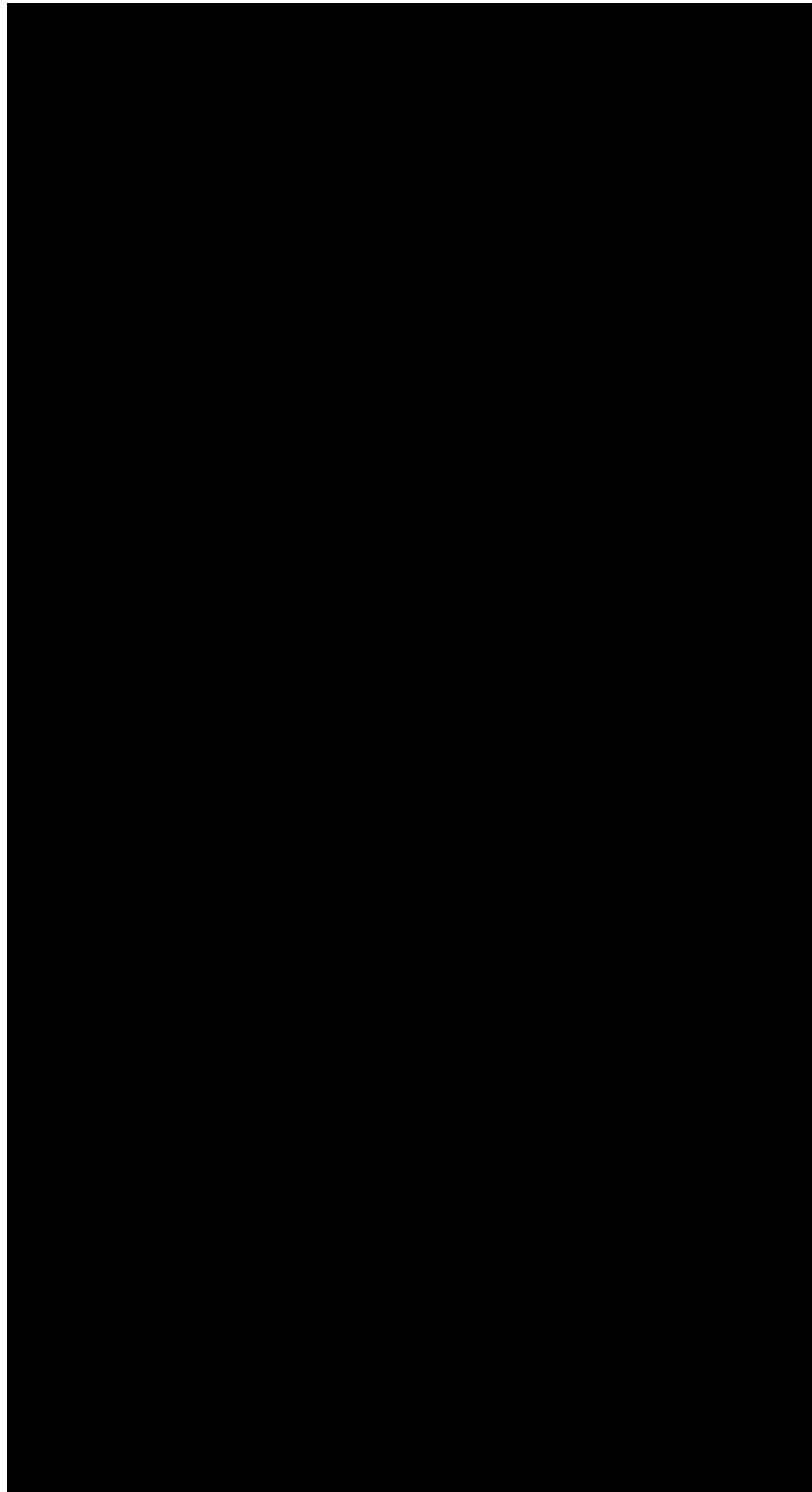
John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, *Study for Thoughts of the Past*, c. 1859, pen and ink on paper, Tate, London

Figure 25



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lucrezia Borgia*, 1860-1861, graphite and watercolour on paper, Tate, London

Figure 26



Ford Madox Brown, *Take Your Son, Sir!*, 1856-1857, oil on canvas, Tate, London

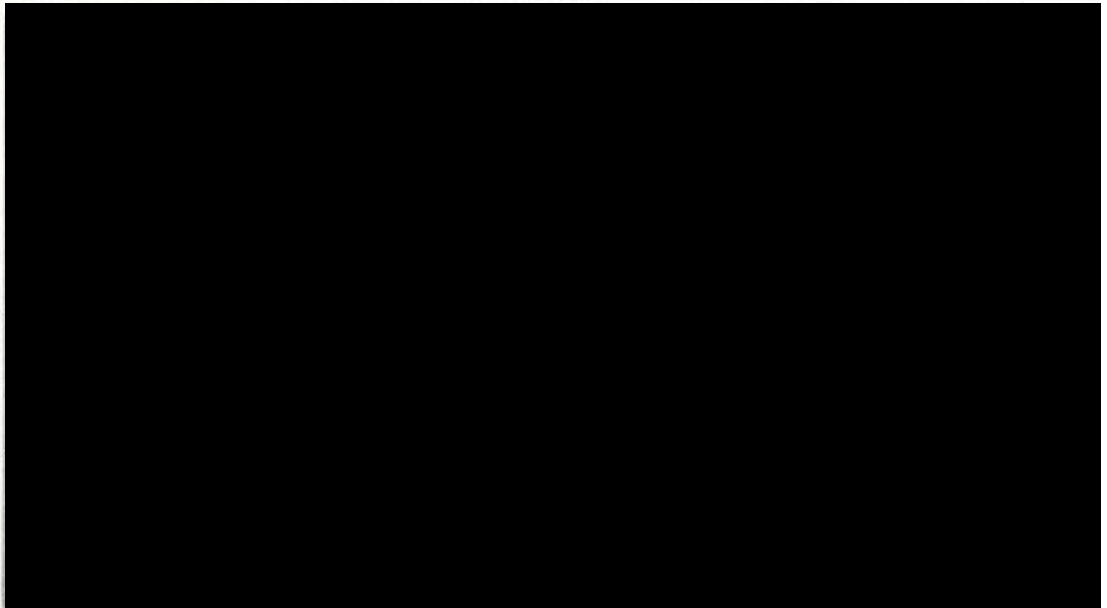


Figure 27



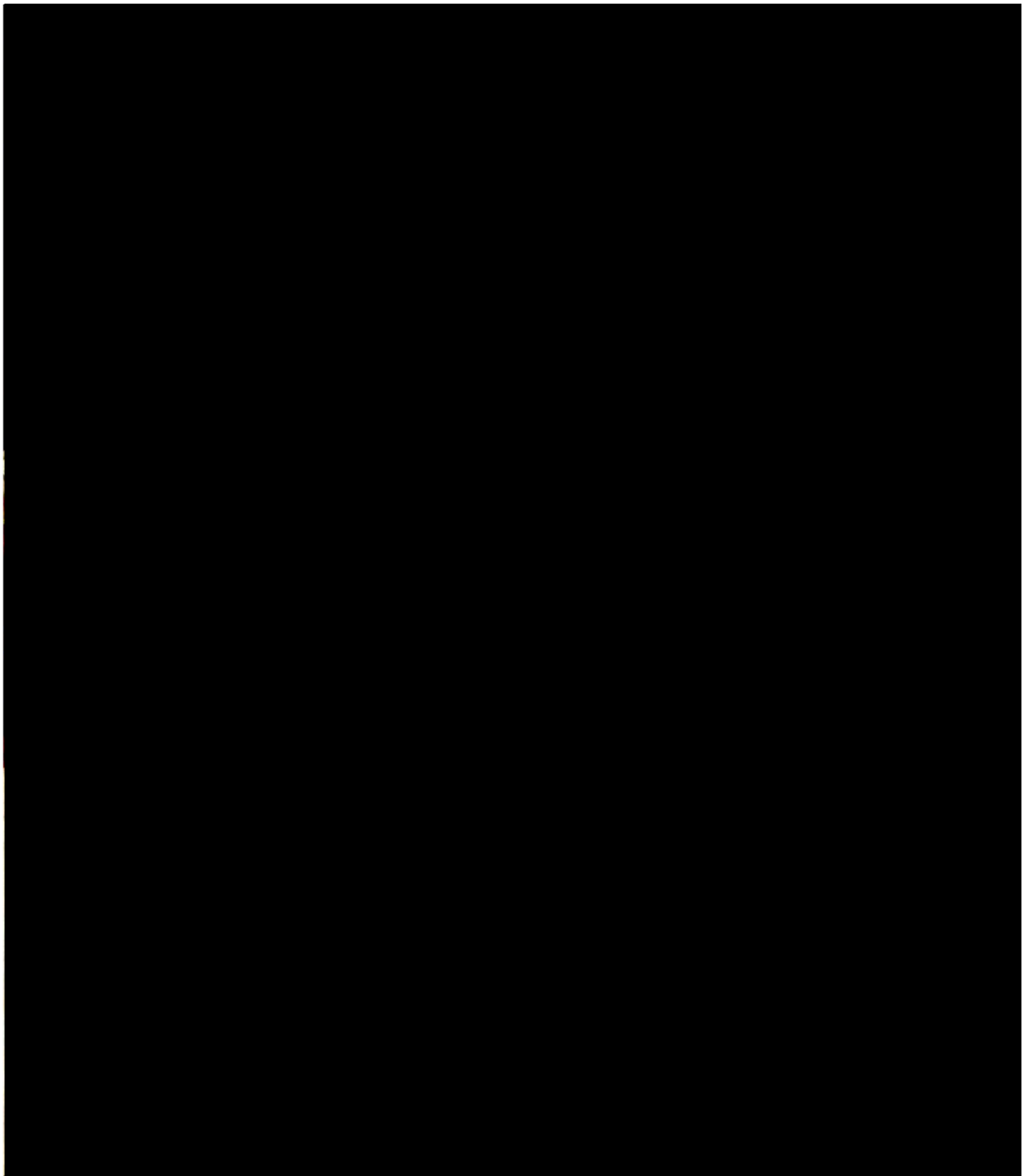
Henry Treffry Dunn, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*; *Theodore Watts-Dunton*, 1882, Gouache and watercolour on paper now on card, National Portrait Gallery, London

Figure 28



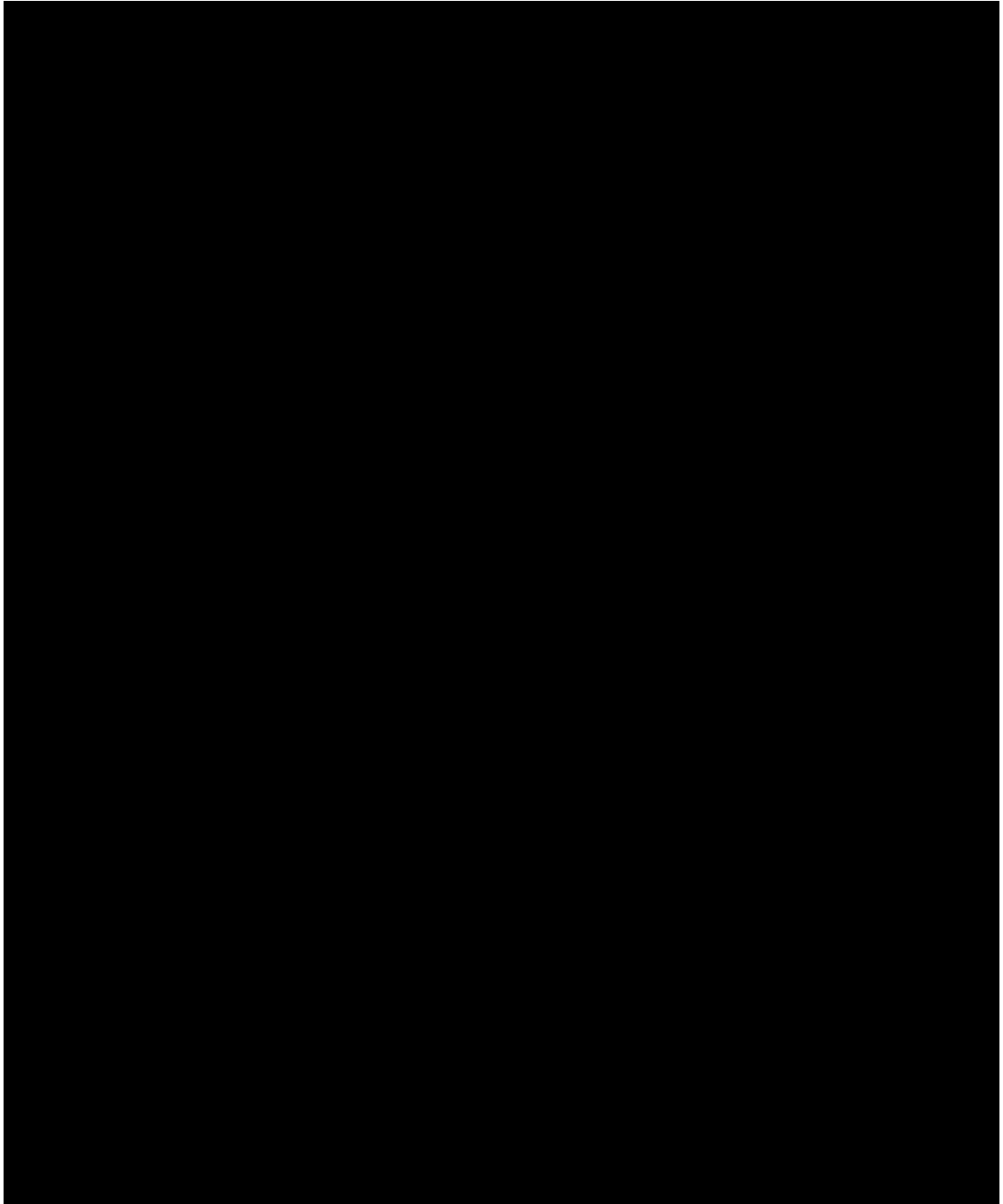
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views',  
c. 1863. Pen and ink on handmade paper, private collection

Figure 29



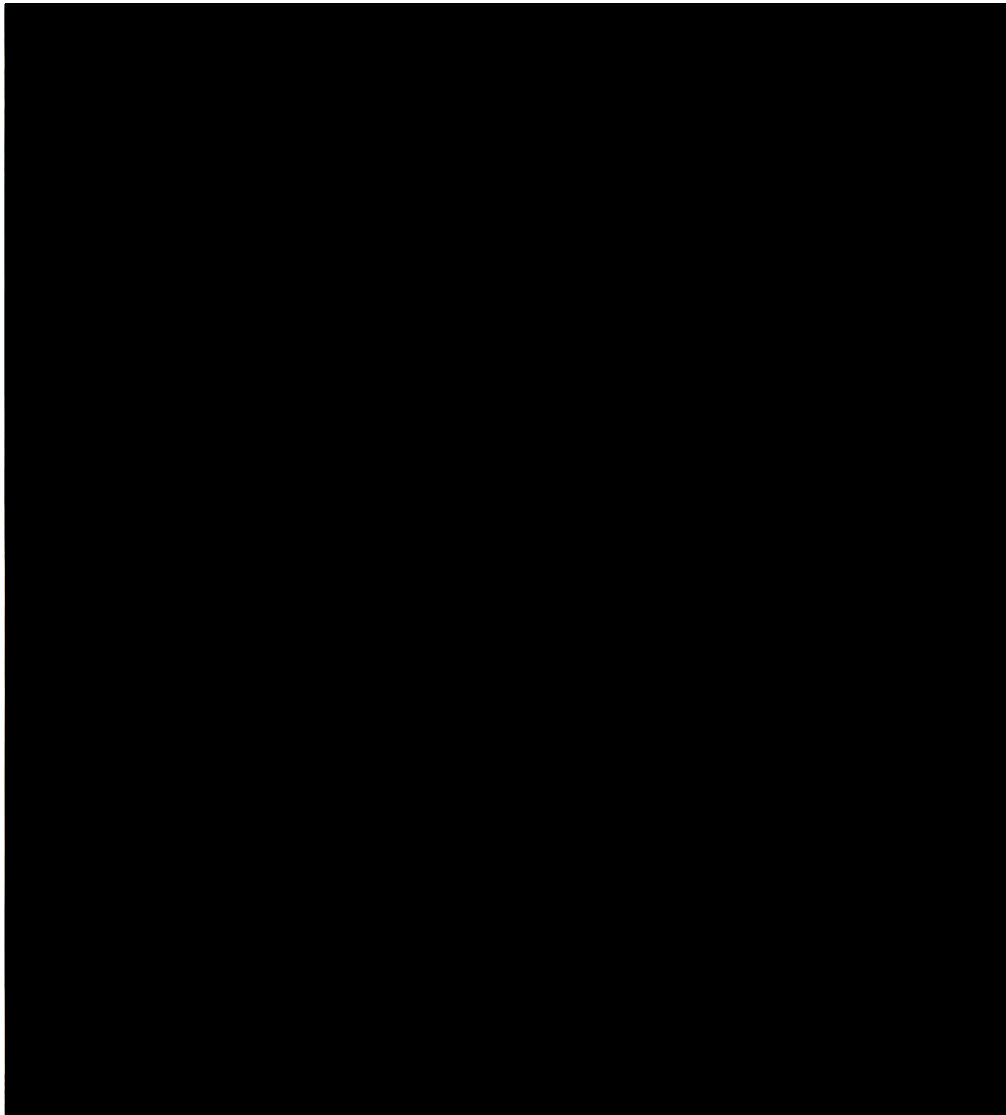
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1866-1868, 1872-1873, oil on canvas, Delaware Art Museum

Figure 30



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Fazio's Mistress (Aurelia)*, 1863-1873, oil paint on mahogany, Tate, London

Figure 31



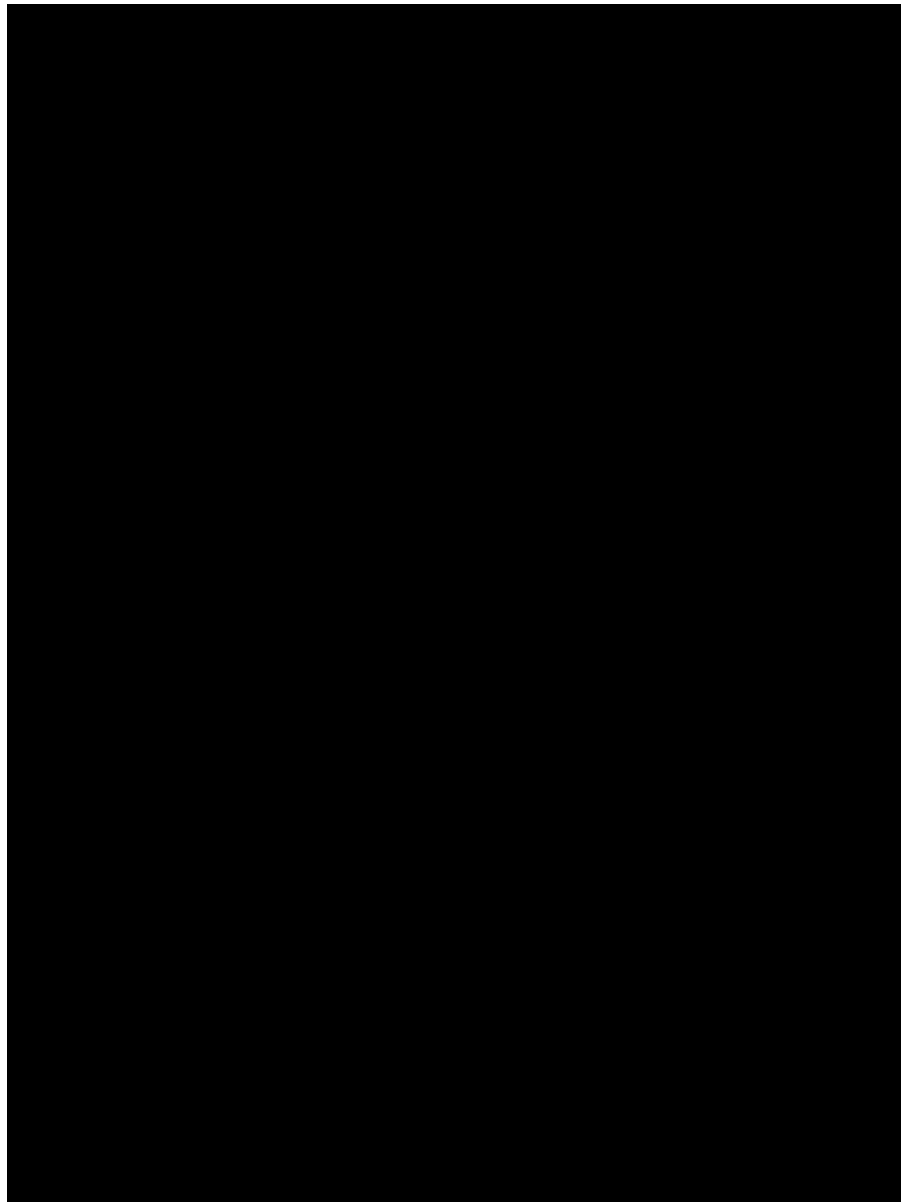
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1864, watercolour, private collection (Mrs. Virginia Surtees)

Figure 32



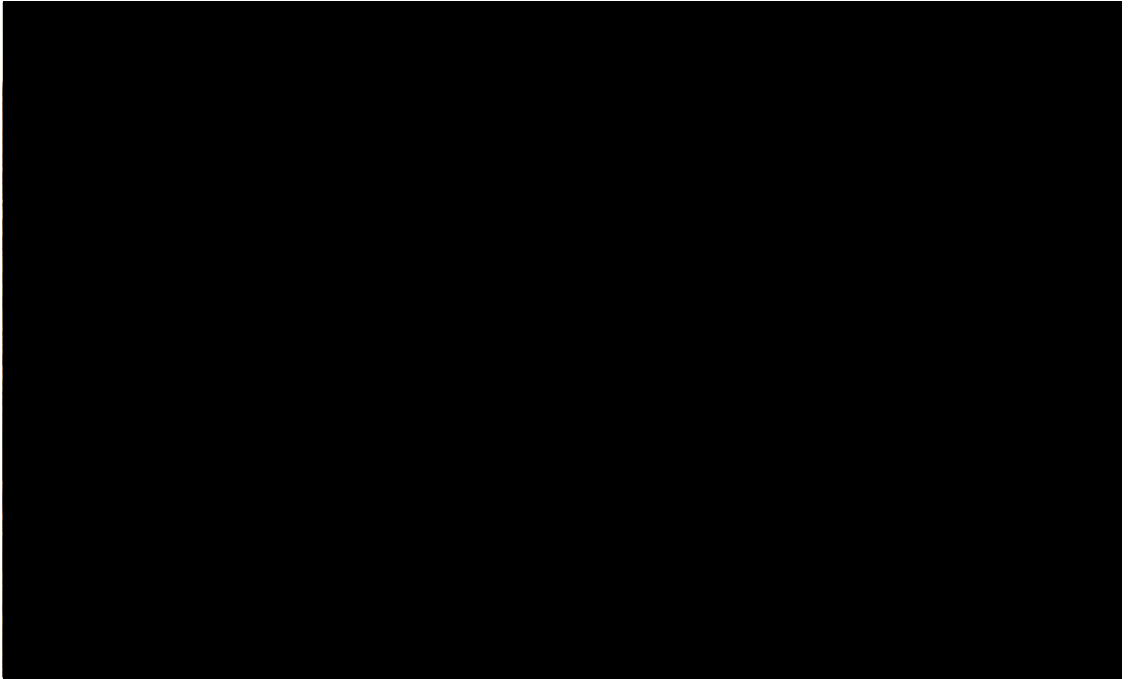
Giovanni Bellini, *Woman with a Mirror*, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum,  
Vienna, Austria

Figure 33



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Risen at Dawn, or Gretchen Discovering the Jewels*, 1868,  
coloured chalks, Tullie House, Carlisle Museum and Art Gallery

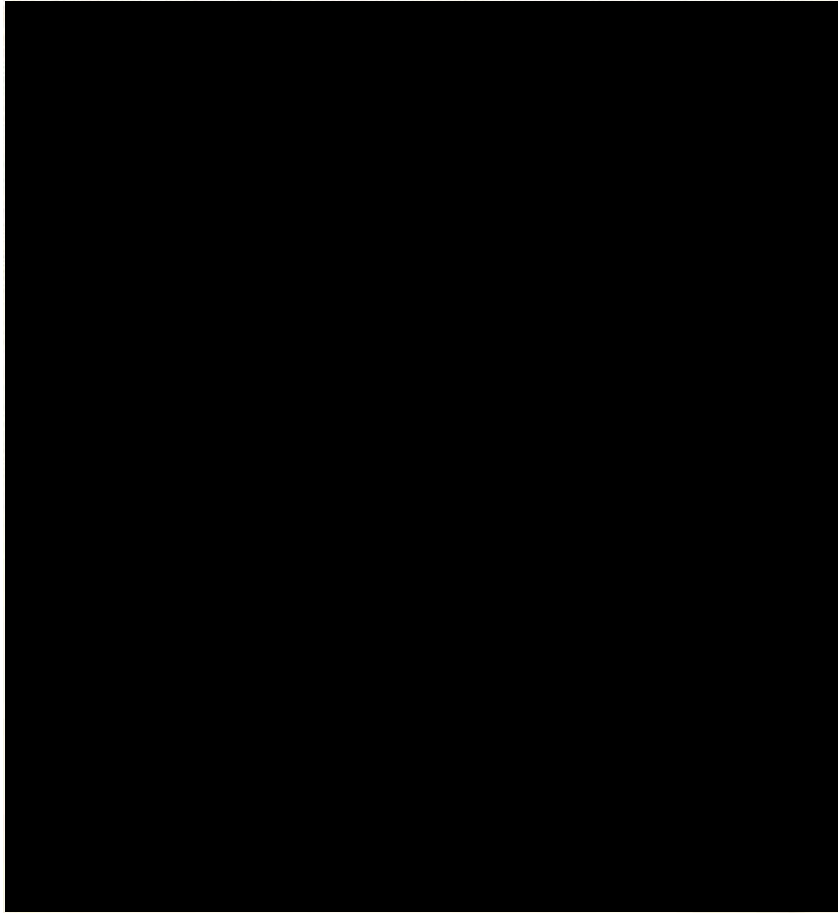
Figure 34



Edward Burne-Jones, *The Mirror of Venus*, 1877, watercolour, Gulbenkian Foundation,  
Lisbon, Portugal

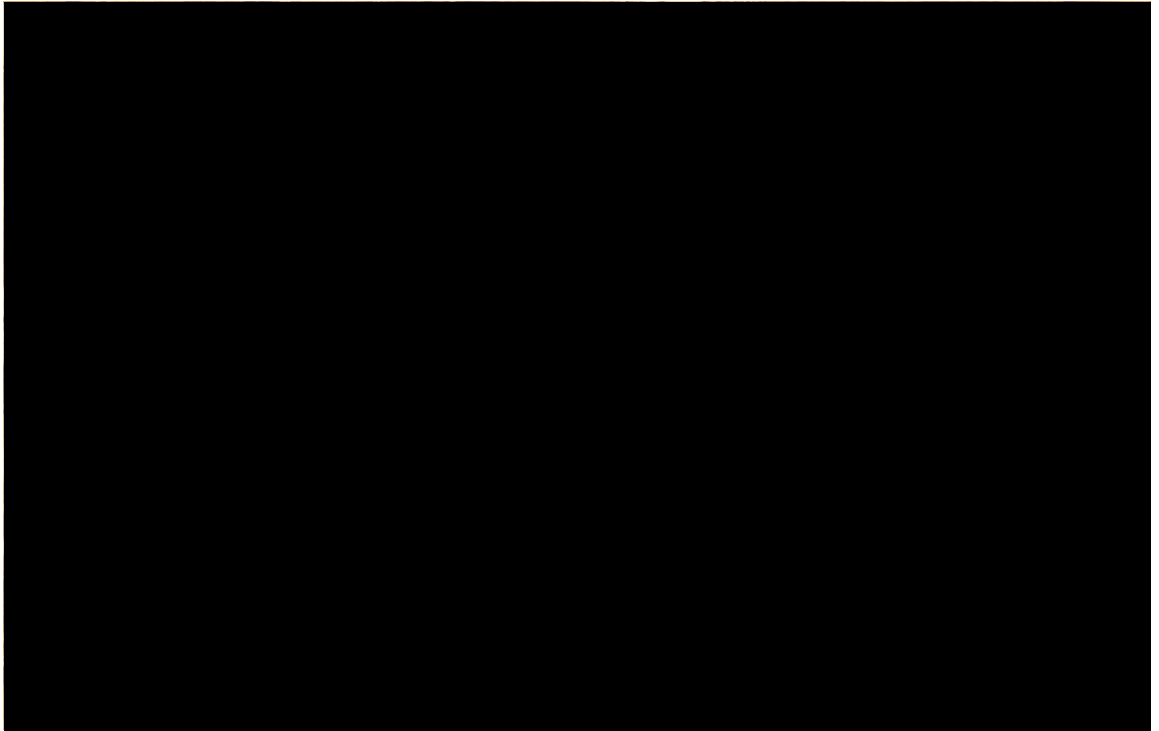


Figure 35



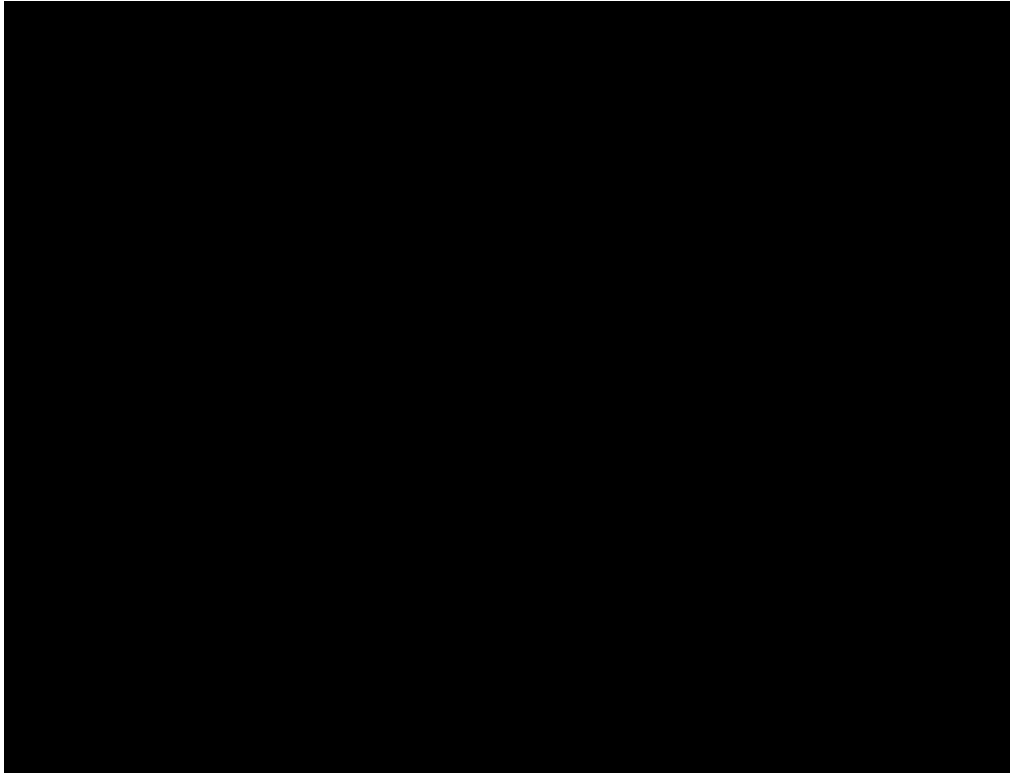
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Love's Mirror, or A Parable of Love*, 1850-1852, black pen and ink over pencil, with ink wash, on paper. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Figure 36



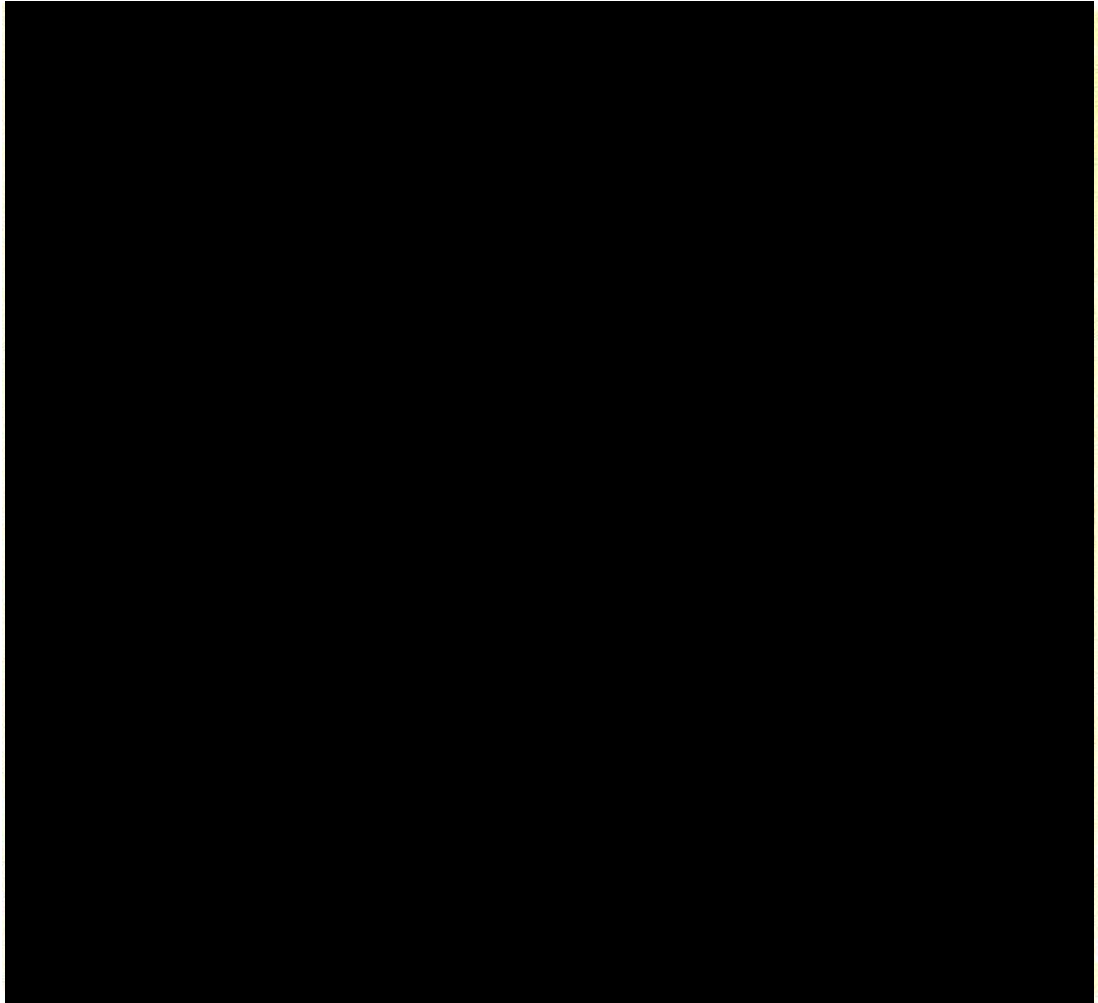
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giorgione Painting*, 1853, pen and white ink with ink wash on paper, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

Figure 37



Simeon Solomon, *The Painter's Pleasaunce*, 1861, watercolour and bodycolour with scratching-out on paper, The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester

Figure 38



Simeon Solomon, *The Painter's Pleasaunce*, c. 1862, watercolour on paper, The British Museum, London

Figure 39



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Artist's Studio*. c. 1849, pen and ink on wove paper, private collection

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