Tennyson's Lady of Shalott in Pre-Raphaelite Art: Exonerated Artist or Fallen Woman

Allyson McMahon Bourke

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-eybx-jm55
TENNYSON'S LADY OF SHALOTT IN PRE-RAPHAELITE ART:
EXONERATED ARTIST OR FALLEN WOMAN

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Allyson McMahon Bourke
1996
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

[Signature]
Author

Approved, October 1996

[Terry L. Meyers]
Terry L. Meyers

[Nancy L. Gray]
Nancy L. Gray

[Thomas L. Heacox]
Thomas L. Heacox
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure


5. Elizabeth Siddall, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1853, pen and pencil, Private Collection.


ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore how Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott,” a poem rich in artistic and cultural implications, lent itself to various interpretations by Pre-Raphaelite artists throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.

The relationship between art and life and the appropriate role for women in society were two of the aesthetic and philosophical questions plaguing the Victorians. The abundance in Pre-Raphaelite art of windows (barriers between illusion and reality, art and nature), and birds (a system of symbols for women’s behavior) show the Victorian preoccupation with these two issues. Tennyson’s poetic heroine, The Lady of Shalott, as an artist and as a woman, provided a forum in which to address both matters simultaneously.

This paper will first establish by close reading of “The Lady of Shalott,” the poet’s attitude toward the tale. Then the paper will survey ten portraits of The Lady of Shalott and several related compositions. By explaining each artist’s use of iconography, including birds, windows, candles, and crucifixes, this paper will “read” each depiction to determine the artist’s stance toward The Lady of Shalott.

Artists such as Elizabeth Siddall, William Maw Egley, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John William Waterhouse, who identified with The Lady as a fellow artist, exonerated her, as did her creator, Tennyson. In the works of artists such as Sidney Harold Meteyard and William Holman Hunt, who upheld the belief that women are the spiritual centers of the home, The Lady of Shalott appears not as an artist, but as a woman, wanton and sinful.

The paper will conclude that with so many pictorial variations, The Lady of Shalott’s identity remains unfixed, as remains the identity of every human.
TENNYSON’S LADY OF SHALOTT IN PRE-RAPHAELITE ART:
EXONERATED ARTIST OR FALLEN WOMAN
Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetic heroine, The Lady of Shalott, captured the imagination of her nineteenth-century audience because she stood at the confluence of several strands of Victorian thought. One issue plaguing the Victorians involved determining the best source of artistic inspiration. Although Tennyson debated the question in several poems, he ultimately valued direct contact with Nature and with fellow humans over an artist's ivory-tower isolation from the world. The Pre-Raphaelites, younger contemporaries of the Victorian poet, also sought direct communion with Nature, but they doubted that their art would ever equal the reality of experience.

At the same time that the Victorians were seeking to define the role of the artist, the nineteenth-century mind was also struggling with another riddle—the appropriate role for women in society. Victorians believed in predestined love and celebrated women who would sacrifice social position or pride to secure that love (Houghton 373). Romance tales such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" captivated the Victorians. Meanwhile, social conventions dictated that women remain passive and occupy the interior sphere of the home with submission and quiet acquiescence. In Tennyson's poem "The Princess," the king voices this traditional Victorian stance:
Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey. (5:437-40)

However, in writing the poem “The Lady of Shalott,” Tennyson underemphasized “the woman question” and regarded his heroine first and foremost as an artist. Some Pre-Raphaelites, such as Elizabeth Siddall, William Maw Egley, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John William Waterhouse also sympathized with her tale and identified with her as a fellow artist grappling with the relationship between art and life. To other artists, such as Sidney Harold Meteyard and William Holman Hunt, The Lady’s sex barred any feeling of compassion. The conflict between duty and desire superseded that of art and life; her failure was not as an artist but as a homemaker. The Lady of Shalott appeared frequently on Pre-Raphaelite canvases because artists exploring the relationship between art and life admired her choice, while artists investigating women’s proper role could imbue Tennyson’s heroine with more incriminating allegorical significance. Surveying several artistic depictions of The Lady of Shalott reveals two trends depending on whether the artist regarded her as a fellow artist or as a woman: portrayals vary from sympathetic elegies in paint to images of a Victorian Eve, fallen and unredeemable.

As Edgar F. Shannon Jr. explains, “by the time [Tennyson] left Cambridge, [he] was fully responsive to the fresh impetus of the great Romantics” (212). Tennyson endorsed the Romantic notion that art does
not have to be the second-rate imitation of reality. He believed an artist could contact Nature directly, and he respected the characters in his poems who attempted this communion with what he deemed Truth. To symbolize the tremendous transformation of turning from illusion toward reality, Tennyson often framed incidents of Truth in his poems with either figurative or literal portals. John R. Reed explains, "Part of Tennyson's portal image involves a movement through an archway into another dimension... to some form of [Romantic] discovery" (221). For example, in Tennyson's poem "The Mystic," the visionary glimpses a beautiful landscape set between the two gates of life—birth and death (32-5). However, Tennyson employs more highly refined portal imagery in the poem "In Memoriam A. H. H." Here the narrator finally establishes contact with his deceased friend Arthur Henry Hallam through the doorway of Hallam's home. The hand Hallam offers through the door is not airy or imagined; rather the narrator notes its "pressure" (119:12). Through the portal the abstract becomes real. The human intimacy of "In Memoriam" makes the connection with Truth in the elegy more powerful than in "The Mystic." Tennyson encouraged direct contact with Nature as a way of seeking Truth, but intimate relationships with human beings yielded an even stronger relationship with Nature as a whole because to Tennyson, as to his Romantic predecessors, to be in harmony with one was to be in harmony with the other. When Tennyson insisted one could achieve Truth only by
moving through the portals of illusion into experience, he was referring
both to the experience of Nature and to the experience of fellowship with
mankind. An artist could improve his or her work by communing with
Nature, but to Tennyson, a life rich with experiences shared with people in
Nature was the only "Godlike life" (Memoir 1:85).

Like Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites also envisioned "a return to the
simplicity of Nature," but according to Martin Meisel, they worried that
their art would inevitably be a poor substitute for Nature proper (340).
Meisel goes on to argue that the Pre-Raphaelites themselves were "Half Sick
of Shadows" and doubted the purpose of their own vocation (309). They
wondered why they should produce art at all since it inevitably pales in
comparison with the actual object portrayed. William Holman Hunt and
Dante Gabriel Rossetti begrudgingly admitted "that a man's work [is] the
reflex of the living image in his own mind of the idea treated, and not the
icy double of the facts themselves" (Hunt "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood"
740).

This realization plagued the Pre-Raphaelites, and they toyed with it
on canvas after canvas. In Rossetti's painting The Girlhood of Mary Virgin,
Mary busily embroiders an image of the white lily an angel holds before her,
but Mary's version remains inferior to the angel's blossom (see Figure 1).
On cloth, the lily's shape is necessarily limp; it hangs over the edge of
Mary's work table, while the real lily stands tall and erect. In thread, the
Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1848-9, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.
green of the stem and the white of the blossom are pale compared to the bright colors of the actual flower. (Of course, from viewer's stance, the flower which serves as Mary's model is a painted flower, making Mary's woven flower twice removed from reality.) Rossetti's message is that art is not alive. To live a full life and to satisfy one's spirit require direct communion with Nature. Art will never equal life, but Mary's embroidery would improve if she could pass through the portals of experience and venture into the world her father occupies beyond the window.

Sir John Everett Millais's painting *Mariana*, based on Tennyson's poem of the same name, further explores the relationship between art and life (see Figure 2). Outside Mariana's window, Nature is free, bright, and wild, but inside her chambers, the atmosphere is artificial and claustrophobic. The schematic wallpaper, depicting entwining vines and leaves, is a futile attempt to control nature by putting it on display. Mariana has risen from her needlepoint table to stretch after long hours of cramped and tedious work. Leaves she has gathered from outdoors serve as models for the images she weaves, but once inside, the leaves have become dry and brittle. Like Rossetti, Millais believed the proper place for Nature is outdoors, not in art. Furthermore, art never equals real life experience. Mariana's grief over her lost lover is more real and noteworthy than the art she creates.
Figure 2. John Everett Millais. *Mariana*, 1851, oil on canvas. The Makins Collection.
Similarly, in Hunt's painting *The Awakened Conscience*, the clarity and health of Nature seen through the window via the mirror contrast sharply with the claustrophobic clutter of the artificial ornaments inside, such as the piano, the wallpaper, and the woman's shawl (see Figure 3). Art critic John Ruskin referred to this clutter as the room's "fatal newness" ("Letter to The Times"). In fact, viewing the innocence and natural beauty of the outdoors causes this prostitute to experience a spiritual "awakening." In this painting, Hunt's lesson, like Tennyson's, Rossetti's, and Millais's, is that art 'is inadequate' as a substitute for life' (Meisel 328) and that God's Truth is best found in Nature, not art.

Although Tennyson admitted that "Poetry is like shot-silk with many glancing colors . . . Every reader must find his own interpretation," he held clear opinions on the moral of his poem "The Lady of Shalott" (Memoir 2:127). In several other poems, including "The Kraken," "The Lotus Eaters," and "The Palace of Art," Tennyson ponders the same question: Should one remain aloof for the sake of art or should one sacrifice art to function in the real world? In each case he draws the same conclusion: he advocates action. In "The Kraken," for example, creativity only festers when it is unexposed. Desire for the real world spurs The Kraken to abandon his watery world, and "Then once by man and angels to be seen, / In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die" (14-5). In "The Palace of Art" the soul lives in isolation surrounded by fine art until "Deep dread and loathing of her solitude / Fell
Figure 3. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakened Conscience*, 1853-4, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.
on her” (229-30). The soul determines to leave her illusionary palace and vows to return only in the company of others. Tennyson commented, “This poem is the embodiment of my own belief that the Godlike life is with man and for man” (Memoir 1:85). In “The Lotus Eaters,” Tennyson sympathizes with the temptation to leave the “climbing wave” of life behind (95) and to dwell for eternity in lazy dreams and illusions, but Ulysses’ men, each in self-absorbed revelry, will never attain “the Godlike life.”

Like the island of the Lotus Eaters, the island of Shalott should be escaped. Tennyson describes The Lady of Shalott’s utter solitude:

But who hath seen her wave her hand?  
Or at the casement seen her stand?  
Or is she known in all the land,  
The Lady of Shalott? (24-7)

Shannon explains that her “song that echoes cheerly” (30) is “shallow and reveals the narrowness of her emotional range--a crucial limitation of the art portrayed here” (212). Furthermore, her art has no telos and no purpose other than to ward off the mysterious curse:

She knows not what the curse may be,  
And so she weaveth steadily,  
And little other care hath she,  
The Lady of Shalott. (42-5)

Shannon insists that in these descriptions of her art, Tennyson reveals approval for human commitment rather than self-absorbed detachment and for expressive over mimetic art. . . . Tennyson celebrates the mystery of life and death, the reality of spirit, and the necessity of love in human experience. (208)
In no respect did Tennyson view his Lady of Shalott as a fallen woman. Of the poem’s romance, the poet sympathizes: “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” (Memoir 1:117). By looking upon the world outside her window, The Lady of Shalott takes action for the first time—a role traditionally performed by men. (For the purposes of this paper, looking is associated with the male only because it is active, and women, as traditional objects of beauty, are normally looked upon. Though The Lady’s specific action involves visual perception, her actions should not be confused with the critically defined “male gaze” in which men transform women to satisfy their own eroticism.)

Tennyson, however, did not consider her actions to be transgressive simply because they cross a gender line. Instead, he celebrated The Lady of Shalott for taking action. The Lady’s gaze out the window at Lancelot is not without sexual feelings, but neither is it overridden by them (as a critically-defined “male gaze” would be). For example, though Lancelot sings “Tirra Lirra” (107), a tune with sexual connotations from William Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale (Autolycus announces that the lark’s “tirra lirra” is an appropriate “summer song for me and my aunts / While we lie tumbling in the hay” [4.3.11-12]), Tennyson also draws attention to the fact that The Lady is a singer herself. Significantly, she does not leave her loom after observing
the flashy Lancelot in her mirror but immediately after hearing him sing. In fact, Lancelot’s approach has been as much of a musical concert as a visual spectacle:

The bridle bells rang merrily
As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazoned baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
Beside remote Shalott. (85-90)

Even his armour rings. Shannon insists it is not sight but “hearing, the sense that engages the self with the world,” that has the greatest impact on The Lady’s impulse to leave the loom (216). Perhaps Lancelot appeals to her not for sexual reasons but because he is a fellow artist in whom she hopes to find a kindred spirit.

Even in his visual representation of Lancelot, Tennyson considers Lancelot The Lady’s “sainted rescuer,” not “an irresponsible gallant” (Shannon 214). First, Tennyson’s Lancelot does not carry a sword, a traditional phallic symbol and an instrument of war. Instead, like an angel, he carries an instrument of music, a silver bugle. Tennyson adds to the ethereal imagery by noting that Lancelot is bathed in golden light, and he rides a horse whose

... gemmy bridle glittered free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy. (82-4)

Lancelot also approaches Camelot like “Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
/... over still Shalott” (98-9). He represents action, not violence, to The
Lady's "still" and stagnating world. Significantly, Tennyson reports that Lancelot "flashed into the crystal mirror" (106). Shannon notes that "the verb 'flashed' here carries a significance similar to that in the climax of 'In Memoriam' (95:36), where the living soul of Hallam 'flashed'" on the narrator (215). Like an unconscious herald from heaven, Lancelot invites The Lady to join in the pageantry of life. Producing art in her tower has been a stagnating activity. Hearing and seeing Lancelot incites The Lady of Shalott to see with her inward eye; she glimpses "the Godlike life" for the first time.

Several of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, however, interpreted the poem as allegorizing dysfunctional sexual roles. They believed that the poem's setting, which emphasizes The Lady's isolation, does not win sympathy for her but illustrates the appropriate division of spheres between Victorian women and men. Tennyson contrasts the "Long fields of barley and of rye, / That clothe the wold and meet the sky" (2-3) with the indeterminate "space of flowers" (16) on "the silent isle [that] imbowers / The Lady of Shalott" (17-8). Tennyson writes that "up and down [the road] the people go / Gazing where the lilies blow" on her island (6-7). Although people implies neither sex in particular, these people play the active (and thus masculine) role of gazing, while the passive Lady of Shalott can only be looked upon (Plasa 256). (Again, the people's gaze should not be confused with the "male
gaze,” a look of more highly sexual intent. Their role is masculine only because they take action, in sharp contrast with The Lady who remains passive at the beginning of the poem.)

According to most Victorians, gender relations should remain separate in this fashion. Rapid modernization in Victorian England contributed to problems such as prostitution, religious skepticism, urban turmoil, harsh working conditions, and alcoholism. These developments “motivated a renewed emphasis on home and family that enforced the separation between men’s work and women’s work” (Norton Anthology 1902). The Victorians believed a woman possessed “a special nature peculiarly fit for her domestic role” (Norton Anthology 1904). She should serve as “the guiding light to her husband, the means by which his very soul could be saved” (Nelson 7). Active involvement with the outside world would not only spoil a woman’s gentle spirit but might jeopardize the health of the family and the social system as a whole. Therefore, though Tennyson meant his Lady to represent the plight of the artist, her solitary condition simultaneously resembled “the Victorian image of the ideal woman: virginal, embowered, spiritual and mysterious, dedicated to her womanly tasks” (Nelson 7). Plasa explains that while The Lady is in her tower, the Victorian woman is in her proper place: rightfully, when The Lady “made three paces through the room” (110), she only ran into another wall (250). He believes the central action of the poem “concerns the Lady’s
attempted performance of a crossing from private / ‘feminine’ to public / ‘masculine’” (250). She has thrown social order into chaos. Her death comes as fit punishment; at the end of the poem she lies “robbed in snowy white” (136)—still virginal, passive again. Order is restored. Interpreted in this way by many Pre-Raphaelite artists,

the story held a powerful fascination for the painters, whose obsession with the theme suggests a powerful urge to maintain the Lady's curse and retain masculine control, in art as it could not always be secured in life.

(Marsh *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* 9)

The Victorian and Pre-Raphaelites frequently employed two symbols—windows and birds—when depicting women in art. In Rossetti’s painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, the window serves to explore not only the relationship between art and life but the appropriate role for women (see Figure 1). Both “threshold” and “barrier,” the window, “through which the spectator can see Mary’s father pruning a grape vine, brings the confinement of interior space into immediate contrast with the vastness of the outside world” (Nelson 7). Not even the Mother of God dares to step beyond the window. Her place is indoors, receiving her mother’s tutelage in the art of needlework. Similarly, in *Mariana*, the window serves as a reminder that the woman’s role is to prepare the home for the husband’s return (see Figure 2). In Tennyson’s poem, Mariana’s husband never returns, and she wails in her grief, “I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead” (11-2). Millais’s Mariana looks “aweary” of her art, but she does not succumb to
despair. Instead she entertains herself with her needlework and remains patient, as women should remain at all times.

Of course, the Victorians were not the first to explore the deficiency of an artificial existence. According to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of *The Republic*, humans are victims of their own illusions. Chained to a wall with a fire burning brightly behind them, humans can only see the flame’s shadows that appear on the wall. Rarely can humans release themselves from these sensory illusions to view reality proper. However, Victorian women were further removed from reality than Plato’s imagined victims because of their forced seclusion indoors. A woman could never glimpse reality because a pane of glass always stood between her and the outdoors. The Lady of Shalott resides at an even further remove than Mary Virgin or Mariana, for she does not weave scenes from her own experience, nor does she witness others’ experiences; rather she “weave[s] the mirror’s magic sights” (65). Clyde de L. Ryals characterizes her vision as “the shadow of a shadow” (73), and Gerhard Joseph notes that her vision of Lancelot is in fact a “third-order reflection” (“Victorian Weaving” 8); it reaches her mirror only after bouncing first “From the bank and from the river” (105). Plato urges humans to turn from the shadows on the wall and face reality, but The Lady of Shalott has two shadowy films to conquer. Her world is one of ungrounded representation. In Derridean terms, neither words nor images ever become fixed for her. Instead, her song “echoes cheerly” (30), and
images reflect "within a perpetual maze, a Derridean mise en abyme" (Joseph "Victorian Weaving" 8).

With its complex relationship to windows and mirrors, "The Lady of Shalott" proved to be "a rich source of pictorial inspiration" (Nelson 6). Through her, artists could address either the conflict of art and life or the importance of women's interior sphere. The symbol of the window equally served both The Lady's supporters and her critics.

Birds also functioned as symbols with a double meaning in nineteenth-century art. Artists frequently portrayed women feeding birds, coddling them, or cooing to them. Elaine Shefer explains the significance:

The intimate relationship between the two represents the idea that a bird will love its owner, submit to its cage, and accept its food if it is treated well—that is, if it is petted and kissed. The caged bird, happily receiving the attention of its owner, is thus symbolic of the woman's acceptance of her position: a pet that is nourished and adored. (84-5)

Birds in panicked flight carried their own connotations in Victorian pictorial language; as Susan P. Casteras explains, "Stronger sexual allusions existed in the unfettered bird, the fleeing bird being typically emblematic of the pursuit of love and the pending loss of virginity" (60). Proper Victorian ladies did not pursue anything, much less sex.

*The Pet* by Pre-Raphaelite Walter Deverell is representative of woman and bird iconography at the time (see Figure 4). This woman either kisses her bird or offers him a seed from her mouth. Like a caged bird, this woman exists to receive the "male gaze," to be a sexual object for men. She
Figure 4. Walter Deverell, *The Pet*, 1852-3, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.
is poised, her back is arched, her body is on display. Windows make another important appearance in this painting. Half in light, half in shadow (but not yet half sick), the woman stands at a glass threshold, but this portal does not open onto Truth. It leads into a manicured garden the woman may explore. However, the garden provides only the illusion of freedom, for it is enclosed by high brick walls (evident to the far left). Other birds in the painting contribute to this illusion of freedom. A small sparrow in the garden path behind the woman chooses not to fly away, as does the pigeon sitting on top of his cage just inside the garden. As Shefer explains, “From either contentment and/or submission, they select the home ground” (84). By equating birds with women, *The Pet* implies that women, like birds, prefer lives of acquiescence. However, Deverell undercuts the common equation between women and birds with a caption accompanying the canvas which reads: “But after all, it is only questionable kindness to make a pet of a creature so essentially volatile” (Casteras 59). Casteras notes the “delicious uncertainty” about whether the canary or the woman “qualifies as the pet” (59).

The Lady of Shalott invited comparison with birds. Like a bird “taught by convention to ‘sing a sweet song’” (Shefer 82), she has been conditioned by the curse to “weaveth steadily” (43), and later when she flees her confines, she resembles a bird in disobedient revolt. Although Tennyson made no reference in his poem to The Lady of Shalott keeping
birds as pets, nearly every artist who drew her also drew birds at her side. Examining how the artist depicts the bird can reveal the artist’s attitude toward The Lady’s actions.

Elizabeth Siddall, for example, who identified with The Lady of Shalott as a fellow artist, painted her with “a perched bird that is her companion” (Shefer 98-9). Siddall herself was not free: she was emotionally tied to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in a stifling and traumatic marriage that eventually ended in her suicide. Though Ruskin normally employed women only as copyists (explaining that women should only “make pretty little things” [Ruskin “Sesame and Lilies”16]), he paid Siddall a yearly salary of 150 pounds for her art, no matter what she produced. And Siddall was the only woman invited to display her art at the 1857 Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition (Taylor 32). However, Siddall’s art was meant primarily to entertain her family and close friends and was not ordinarily prepared for outside markets. Like The Lady of Shalott, Siddall remained a hidden artist; her art had little purpose and was not considered serious work. In fact, with language reminiscent of “The Lady of Shalott,” one critic writes, “She seems to have had no original creative power: she was as the moon to [Rossetti’s] sun, merely reflecting his light” (Gere 14). Siddall’s primary roles remained as model and as muse; her identity as a talented artist was of minimal importance to the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers who painted her.
In fact, Siddall’s identity as an individual was also of minimal importance to the Brothers. Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollack explain that the change of spelling of Siddall’s surname to *Siddal* reflects a robbing of her identity. Various accounts retell the story of Deverell’s “discovering” Elizabeth Siddall in a milliner’s shop. The word *discovering* implies that Siddall, like the Americas, did not exist before Deverell spotted her. As Siddall was transformed from a working-class girl into a beautiful face that inspired great art, her name was transformed into a sign. *Siddall* is the name of an historical woman; *Siddal* represents the creative energy tapped from her by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As Cherry and Pollack explain, the family name *Siddall* was soon forgotten, and “she became Lizzie, Liz, Guggums, Guggum, Gug, The Sid, Miss Sid, Miss Siddal, [or] Ida” (95). (Ruskin bestowed the latter name upon her “in honor of Tennyson’s aggressively feminist misanthropist” [Taylor 34].)

Siddall adopted these pet names and much pet imagery for herself. She even identifies herself as a pet bird in several of her poems, lamenting,

For I am but a startled thing
Nor can I ever be
Aught save a bird whose broken wing
Must fly away from thee. (“Worn Out” 5-8)

Despite the desire to escape imprisonment, a bird with a broken wing cannot fly anywhere, so Siddall surrenders to her plight. Caged and envious of The Lady of Shalott’s escape, Siddall found in Tennyson’s heroine a kindred spirit.
In her rendering of the subject, Siddall focuses on the temptation of casting a glance out the window, but she also depicts the consequences of those actions (see Figure 5). The sharp, angry pen strokes indicate the madness resulting from solitary confinement, yet the wild mass of the loom’s broken threads contrast with the calmness of The Lady herself. In fact, she remains in her seat, while Tennyson’s lines dictate that “She left the web, she left the loom, / She made three paces through the room” (109-10).

Siddall portrays better than any other artist Tennyson’s line, “Four gray walls, and four gray towers” (15). Elizabeth Nelson comments that Siddall’s Lady resembles an industrial worker more than a princess (10). Perhaps Siddall herself felt this industrial stiffness as she created art. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood exacerbated Siddall’s feeling of self-consciousness about her family background and vocation. As Cherry explains, “In moving from millinery to modeling and then to the practice of art she risked her respectability” (84): millinery was not a highly honorable trade, modeling was akin to prostitution, and for a woman to produce her own art was to disregard her reputation altogether (Cherry 84).

Furthermore, some dispute still exists over whether Siddall was a dressmaker or a milliner and over whether her father was a cutler, an ironmonger, a watchmaker, or an optician (Marsh Legend 42-4). As Siddall became more involved in the group, the Pre-Raphaelites changed their reports on these occupations to suggest a higher social status for their newly
Figure 5. Elizabeth Siddall, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1853, pen and pencil, Private Collection.
discovered muse. They also took pains to convince outsiders “that Miss Siddal was inherently ladylike despite the deficiencies of her background” (Marsh *Legend* 43). Siddall, then, was a woman carefully watched. Jan Marsh explains that “in terms both of class and gender Lizzie was at a disadvantage” as an artist (*Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* 45). Siddall’s depiction of The Lady of Shalott reflects this lack of self-assurance; as her Lady weaves, she peeks over her shoulder with guilt and shame.

Siddall’s *Lady of Shalott* also yields a sense that as this Lady toils in a dark factory, she remains alienated from her work. Tennyson hints at the infinity of her project with lines such as “There she weaves by night and day” (37) and “so she weaveth steadily” (43). The Lady’s motive for production does not come from within; rather she weaves because “She has heard a whisper say, / A curse is on her” (39-40). The Lady’s art is not her own. She produces the tapestry under threat of some unknown curse. Siddall also must have felt that her art was not her own; after all, she produced art at Rossetti and Ruskin’s commands. Siddall hints at this lack of purpose in her *Lady of Shalott*. A finished tapestry hangs on the wall behind The Lady, but with no one with whom to share her accomplishment, finishing one tapestry only signals the need to begin another. The Lady, then, serves as an example of “estranged labor” (Joseph “Victorian Weaving” 8); she foreshadows the future fate of “the reaper weary [from] / Piling sheaves in uplands airy” (33-4). As industrialization spread
throughout England and machines replaced manual labor, this reaper, too, would become increasingly alienated from his work.

A good Victorian homemaker as well as an industrious textile laborer, Siddall's Lady of Shalott does not leave her loom at the significant moment of temptation. She sits at attention to one side of the loom, but one hand remains at the loom holding a weaving shuttle. With this detail Siddall insists this Lady is not a wanton woman. In fact, The Lady's looking at Lancelot is not a "gaze" with erotic overtones, but a mere tilting of her head toward the window. As Shefer describes, she looks as though she is only "attempting to catch what might have been some noise outside, as though eavesdropping on the exterior world rather than being affected by it in any way" (99). Also, to emphasize that The Lady's looking out the window was inevitable for an artist and not the fault of a wanton sex drive, Siddall places The Lady's crucifix in front of the open window. How could she not look out the window during daily devotions? Siddall's inclusion of the crucifix may also have a second meaning as Beverly Taylor suggests: "With this invention Siddal subtly calls to mind religious prohibitions operating in both medieval and Victorian eras to thwart the female desire aroused by Lancelot" (33). However, Siddall more clearly de-emphasizes the sexual aspect in favor of the artistic aspect of the poem by drawing a stationary bird atop the loom. It does not fly away as it would if The Lady were defying her role as a caged woman. Siddall sympathizes with The
Lady, but as a woman who never escaped her own cage, Siddall remains within the confines of conservative Victorian values in her drawing. Siddall's Lady is innocent, but her innocence results partly because her act of seeing is more passive than active and because she remains at the loom like a dutiful Victorian woman (Shefer 101).

In great contrast to Siddall's depiction of an industrial worker, William Maw Egley's Lady of Shalott is a noble princess (see Figure 6). In fact, Egley's oil painting was denounced by critics as "an ill specimen . . . of flagrant Pre-Raphaelitism" for its "antiquarian accumulation of stage props" (Marsh Pre-Raphaelite Women conclusion). The Lady's tower room contains ornate furniture and luxurious heavy draperies, and The Lady wears a jeweled dress. Debra N. Mancoff explains that the richly appointed room, the "heavy sway of the Lady's hip," and "most obviously, the meticulously rendered leaded windows" (176) prove the influence of Millais's Mariana upon Egley (see Figure 2). As in Mariana, this painting draws sharp contrast between the splendor of the outside world and the artificiality of an artist's cloistered life. Beyond the adorned windows, Camelot appears in its natural beauty, and the "reapers, reaping early" work together in communion at the river's edge (28). Meanwhile The Lady suffers in isolation, her artwork stagnating in an already claustrophobic room. Egley exposes the human side of this princess. Art has filled her room, but it has left her life void of meaning. Understandably, she desires
Figure 6. William Maw Egley, The Lady of Shalott, 1858, oil on canvas, City Museum, Sheffield.
contact and communication with the outside world. She holds her hands to
her heart in a traditional gesture of love, but Egley draws particular
attention to the awe in The Lady’s eyes upon first witnessing Nature, for as
Tennyson writes, The Lady of Shalott glimpses Nature before she sees
Lancelot:

She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
    She looked down to Camelot. (111-3)

Significantly, it is a water-lily that blooms before The Lady’s eyes. The
lilies had symbolized The Lady’s artistic powers as they “Bl[ew] / Round an
island there below” (7-8), but now they blossom for the first time; looking
out the window heightens The Lady’s creativity. She has conquered the first
of the two shadows separating her from the people along the road to “many-
towered Camelot” (5). Now only a window separates her from reality.
Egley’s princess will fulfill her heart’s wishes and achieve full artistic vision
in a moment—when she abandons the “silent isle” altogether (17).

Egley also builds sympathy for The Lady of Shalott by focusing on the
poem’s brief moment of temptation. Siddall empathized with The Lady of
Shalott, but nonetheless she shows the loom in disarray. Tennyson had
hoped that illustrators would choose to depict only The Lady’s moment of
temptation, not the grim aftermath (Shefer 99). Egley allows The Lady of
Shalott a moment of peace and disregards what the future will hold for her.
The mirror shows no cracks, and the loom’s threads remain in place. By
focusing on The Lady’s yearning for experience, Egley’s painting encourages understanding of her impulse and forgiveness of her. Egley’s Lady represents one of the two ideals of a Victorian woman--she is willing to die for love.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s wood engraving of The Lady of Shalott, which appeared in the 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson’s poems, is the only portrayal of the Lady’s reception in Camelot after her death (see Figure 7). Rossetti focuses on the concluding lines of the poem in which Lancelot sighs:

...‘She has a lovely face;  
God in his mercy lend her grace,  
The Lady of Shalott.’ (169-71)

Lancelot’s seemingly dismissive reaction to the Lady disturbs many critics. However, Lancelot cannot feel kinship toward her as a singer because she has died before floating within his hearing:

For ere she reached upon the tide  
The first house by the water-side,  
Singing in her song she died,  
The Lady of Shalott. (150-3)

Ignorant of his role in her fate, Lancelot makes the understandable comment about her fair looks. Furthermore, critics ought not to overlook Lancelot’s concluding line in which he prays to God to give her grace. He feels that she deserves redemption, regardless of what her history may be. Rossetti was fascinated by Lancelot’s response to The Lady of Shalott, so he engraves Lancelot leaning over The Lady’s body in wonderment. Lancelot is
Figure 7. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1857, wood engraving on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
no "vain dandy who shrugs off the pitiable Lady" in this depiction (Fogelman 24). Rather, Rossetti reveals the knight's deep concern for her and the real communion between them, despite her death. The candles around her head add to his reverence of her. Lancelot does carry a sword, but any sexual connotations are countered by the swans, symbols of love and purity, that float gently on the river. Rossetti honors the maiden in her death, and Lancelot is a hero for freeing her from the world of illusions. He is not an "agent of sin" as William Holman Hunt will portray him, and she is not a fallen woman but a tragic heroine (Fogelman 24).

Focusing on the tragedy of the scene and unwilling to fault The Lady for her decisions, Rossetti de-emphasizes The Lady's sexuality in his wood engraving. First, the swans stay at The Lady's side. If Rossetti disapproved of The Lady's yearning for experience, the swans would fly away in revolt to symbolize The Lady's unleashed sexual desire. Also, Rossetti dresses Lancelot richly but leaves The Lady's body undefined. The heavy cloak that she has pulled around her shoulders like a shroud conceals her feminine curves. The very captor of Elizabeth Siddall allows The Lady of Shalott to die as an artist. Finally, Rossetti provides several details that build sympathy for The Lady. Tennyson writes that she "loosed the chain" (133) on the island of Shalott to float down the river toward Camelot, but Rossetti shows her boat rechained to the wharf at Camelot. Her head appears sheltered under the prow of the boat, and her face lies half in shadow, ironic for a
woman who declared herself "half sick of shadows" (71). Even in death The Lady of Shalott is imprisoned. She deserved, therefore, her brief communion with Nature as she floated toward Camelot; it was her only moment of freedom.

Though Lancelot reveres the Lady, not all witnesses of her death are sympathetic toward her. Tennyson writes:

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
Dead-pale between the houses high,
    Silent into Camelot.
Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
    The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
    And they crossed themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot. (154-67)

These members of high society regard The Lady with apprehension and cross themselves to avoid contagion of the curse. The aristocracy’s reaction to The Lady would have been of particular concern to Tennyson. Most Victorian poets, such as Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas Hardy, feared society had become too modern to appreciate fine culture. These poets worried not only about their own vocation as poets, but about the ultimate welfare of a society alienated from the arts. In Tennyson’s poem and in Rossetti’s wood engraving, the “Knight and burgher, lord and dame”
have left their “houses high” (157) to examine the newcomer. She arrives in silent death. The reapers could hear “a carol, mournful, holy, / Chanted loudly, chanted lowly” (145-6) because, as workers of the land, they are still in close contact with Nature, and The Lady’s song arises out of her first-time communion with Nature proper. However, the noblemen, who represent the change in Victorian England from a rural economy to “entrepreneurial powers” (Joseph “Victorian Weaving” 8) and from culture to anarchy (Arnold 2164), are unable to appreciate either Nature or art. As the Victorian poets feared would happen to their own art, The Lady of Shalott’s song has no place in modern society. The nobleman in Rossetti’s engraving peers over Lancelot’s shoulder to glimpse the specter-woman. To Tennyson and Rossetti’s horror, he has no natural or artistic affinities toward her at all; only morbid curiosity drives him to look at the corpse.

Focusing on The Lady’s achievement of harmony between nature and art, the Victorian painter John William Waterhouse produced in 1888 a heart-breaking oil portrait of Tennyson’s heroine (see Figure 8). Waterhouse shared with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood an interest in the theme of unrequited love and regarded Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott with particular affection. In this painting, The Lady, with chain in hand, has freed herself from her island prison and is about to embark on her journey downstream to Camelot. Tennyson does not direct that The Lady carries with her the fruit of her life’s work, but in Waterhouse’s painting, she has
Figure 8. John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.
carried the tapestry to the riverside and draped it across the boat. The tapestry's gay colors contrast sharply with the drab hues of Nature around her. This detail does not imply that art improves on nature as Ryals asserts (75). Rather, Nature grieves with The Lady that her exposure to life must be so short. Tennyson writes:

```
In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
   Over towered Camelot. (118-22)
```

The stream complains of her death and the sky drops its tears. Waterhouse likewise emphasizes how gently Nature treats The Lady. The painting as a whole has a very soft tone. Tennyson wrote that "The leaves upon her [are] falling light" (138), so in Waterhouse's painting, a leaf falls gently on her lap, symbolizing not a fall from grace but the autumn of her life. The birds in the lower left corner of the canvas are uncaged, and free to fly, yet they glide along the boat beside The Lady, remaining her companions until death.

Waterhouse remains faithful to Tennyson's lines in other respects: The Lady is dressed "in snowy white" (136) and "round about the prow she wrote / The Lady of Shalott" (125-6). The Lacanian importance of naming one's self as an attempt to establish identity adds to the modern appreciation of this poem. As Jacques Lacan explains, the first step a child takes toward maturity is differentiating between his or her own identity and that of the
mother (64-6). After the mirror stage, a child realizes that every object and person has a name which must be pronounced to have his or her desires met. The Lady of Shalott desires to experience the world’s pains and pleasures firsthand. Her escape from the tower marks her first step toward maturation, and like all humans, she only seeks to own her own name (Hartman 107). Weary of a life of ungrounded Derridean representation, The Lady writes her name on the prow of the boat in an attempt to fix her identity for the first time. Writing her name symbolizes the human necessity to “break away from a metonymic relationship with her parent, the land of Shalott” (Colley 374). Acknowledging The Lady’s need to designate herself with a name also leads to a better understanding of the meaning of the curse placed upon her. With naming and maturation comes death. As Ann C. Colley explains, “To name is to experience closure. It is as Claude Levi Strauss writes, ‘as far as one can go’” (375). Considered in these terms, the curse is not mysterious at all. It is the same curse to which all humans are subject—life will end in death. The Lady has chosen human status over immortality, and death is the inevitable final stage in life.

Though choosing life brings The Lady closer to death, Tennyson and Waterhouse carefully indicate that the choice also brings her closer to God. For example, Waterhouse exonerates his maiden by his remarkable painting of her spellbound eyes, which call to mind the following lines of the poem:

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
"Mischance" implies that The Lady laments how quickly her death approaches, not that she regrets her decision. In fact, as Shannon explains, "Her 'glassy countenance,' fixed, smooth, lustrous, is indicative of her metamorphosis--she moves from sight to insight" (218). Shannon also notes that Tennyson, who could induce self-hypnosis, regarded trances as a trustworthy path to "visionary discernment" (218). The Lady's eyes fill with awe as she absorbs Nature's wonders for the first time. In Waterhouse's painting, The Lady, Nature, and the viewer all share in her sorrow that her exposure to the world will end so soon. She is innocent, merely tired of shadows.

Also, The Lady's last creative act is "a carol, mournful, holy" (145). Most critics focus on the sadness of her tune, as though The Lady regrets her actions, but Shannon rightfully focuses on the words carol and holy. Her song is "a hymn of joy and praise, which is traditionally associated with the birth of Christ--the representation of hope and eternal life" (Shannon 220-1). She creates art from Nature proper, not shadows, and dies an artist, "singing her last song" (143). She has achieved "the Godlike life." Her song is "mournful" only because this artist, with her pot belly and sorrowful eyes, has only until she reaches Camelot to do a life's worth of living.
Waterhouse also depicted Tennyson's heroine at her moment of disillusion in his painting entitled "I Am Half Sick of Shadows," Said The Lady of Shalott (see Figure 9). The Lady has already witnessed life's pains and has chosen to stay at her loom, for Tennyson writes:

But in her web she still delights  
To weave the mirror's magic sights,  
For often through the silent nights  
A funeral with plumes and lights  
And music, went to Camelot. (64-8)

Instead, Waterhouse captures the lines that Hallam Tennyson claimed were "the key to this tale of magic symbolism" (Memoir 1:116):

Or when the moon was overhead,  
Came two young lovers lately wed;  
'I am half sick of shadows,' said  
The Lady of Shalott. (69-72)

Funerals may have enticed The Lady to appreciate her shadowy realm, but glimpsing the two lovers through the magic mirror incites her envy of real life experiences.

Significantly, Tennyson writes that she is "Half sick of shadows" (emphasis added). As Ryals explains, "Having for so long lived as a sensually absorbed spirit, she is incapable of making an unqualified assertion about the nature of external reality or of her own existence" (74). This Lady has been regarded as a "fairy" (35) for so long, she now doubts her human status. Regarding herself as half fairy, half human, she is unsure which realm--illusion or reality--is superior. Though she is curious to learn more about the realm of reality, she only half believes that she can even
Figure 9. John William Waterhouse, "I am Half Sick of Shadows, Said The Lady of Shalott, 1915, oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Ontario.
participate in the outside world at all. Understanding this uncertainty may explain The Lady's subsequent glance out the window. The Lady is willing to accept the possible consequence of death in exchange for the unlikely chance of making human contact.

Waterhouse emphasizes The Lady's uncertainty and innocence in this painting. She is an artist whose art, created in alienation from real life experience, exhausts her. With hands clasped behind her head and her back arched, The Lady, like Millais's Mariana (see Figure 2), stretches after long hours at the loom. Though her tapestry is woven in brightly colored thread (Waterhouse was known for his use of bright colors), the images she weaves lack the emotion she observes in her mirror. Again, art is a poor substitute for life. In fact, Waterhouse paints the two lovers flanked by marble columns which serve as a visual portal. The Lady only needs to turn her head and peer through this portal to experience the "flash" of life. Finally, like Egley's Lady of Shalott (see Figure 6), Waterhouse's Lady yearns for love but with a childlike innocence of experience. She remains facing the loom: only her eyes fall to the left toward the mirror, and they have not yet dared turn to the right toward the window. Waterhouse's Lady is not a licentious woman. She is an artist who deserves the experience of life.

While Waterhouse's opinion—that The Lady deserved contact with the world—was equally held by most Pre-Raphaelites, some artists, such as Sidney Harold Meteyard and William Holman Hunt, vehemently disagreed,
as their artistic portrayals of Tennyson's poem show. Meteyard's oil painting
of The Lady of Shalott, for example, differs drastically in tone to
Waterhouse's affectionate painting of a fellow artist at her loom. Also
entitled "I Am Half Sick of Shadows," Said The Lady of Shalott, Meteyard's
painting focuses on the same moment of disillusion as Waterhouse depicts,
but it encourages a remarkably different opinion of The Lady (see Figure 10).
Meteyard's Lady is a sinful woman, the Victorian archetype of Eve. She
reclines on lush purple pillows surrounded by dark purple drapes and leans
her full figure toward her "mirror blue" (60). Her blue dress reveals more
than it conceals, and Meteyard even taints the white lilies with a purplish
hue. Personified licentiousness, The Lady swoons in satin luxury and is too
"lost in erotic reverie" to work on the tapestry (Nelson 9). The fingers of her
right hand toy idly with a strand of thread, and with her eyes half closed and
her bare white neck exposed, she is deep in sexual fantasy. Her staring at the
lovers is at once active and passive, for while she gazes at them, the viewer
gazes at her body. This woman wants the male gaze on her body. She sins
by taking too active a role herself.

In Meteyard's painting, then, the sin has already taken place. The
Lady has not yet turned her head to the right to look out the window, but
she has already fallen. To Meteyard, to think a sexual thought is as sinful as
committing the act. His version of the mirror contributes to the case against
her. In Waterhouse's painting of the same title, The Lady's mirror reveals
realistic images of the lovers and of Camelot--a stone bridge, green lawns, and high castle turrets (see Figure 9). In Meteyard's painting, in contrast, the mirror does not reflect reality at all. With no landscape behind them, the two lovers appear as figments of The Lady's erotic imagination. Nelson explains that the mirror "reflects the Lady's thoughts rather than cause[s] them" (9). The sapphire disc on the wall is less a mirror than a crystal ball on which appears The Lady's deepest desires. Meteyard obviously did not regard The Lady of Shalott as an innocent artist but as a desiring female and as an instigator of sin.

The Lady of Shalott also actively instigates sin in another of Meteyard's works of art (see Figure 11). Meteyard uses as an epigraph the same lines Waterhouse calls to mind in painting The Lady floating down the river in a trance (see Figure 8). Meteyard's choice of verse is ironic, however, for unlike Waterhouse's spellbound and innocent Lady, Meteyard's Lady appears fully responsible for her actions. She glances nervously to the left and slithers away from the castle like Eve hiding from God after eating the forbidden fruit. Nelson comments, "Meteyard's scene puts one in mind of a fallen woman, a woman running away to a clandestine meeting with a lover" (12).

Like Meteyard, William Holman Hunt could not see The Lady of Shalott as anything but a fallen woman. However, he did not portray all women as doomed because of their sex. For example, The Awakened
Figure 11. Sidney Harold Meteyard, *The Lady of Shalott*, date not available, gouache, Private Collection.
Conscience was criticized at its exhibition because of its compassionate treatment toward its unlikely subject—a prostitute (see Figure 3). This woman has fallen into her vocation like a bird “that has flown into the wrong window” (Shefer 175). In addition to the mirror on the wall revealing an open window, Hunt includes other signs around the room to contrast the health of Nature with the sickness of this woman’s artificial cage. On the piano, a gilded female figurine, part of a gilded clock, is imprisoned under a glass dome. Sheet music to Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears” has fallen abandoned on the floor (in the song, The Princess recalls “the days that are no more” [“The Princess” 4:25]). Upon noticing Nature outdoors and being reminded of her youthful innocence, Hunt’s kept woman drops her needlework and rises from her seat in spiritual revelation. Hunt explained that the moral of the painting was to show “how the still small voice [of Christ] speaks to a human soul in the turmoil of life” (Hunt Pre-Raphaelitism 1:347). A symbol of the prostitute’s salvation, a bird in the lower left escapes a cat. Hunt does not condemn the bird for its flight; after all, the cat, like the woman’s oblivious companion, has become distracted.

Similarities (and important differences) abound between The Awakened Conscience and the earliest known depiction of The Lady of Shalott, Hunt’s 1850 Melbourne drawing (see Figure 12). Samuel Wagstaff made the following comparison:
Figure 12. William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1850, pen and ink, Art Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
The Lady in *The Awakened Conscience*, also with long hair, steps forward as in the Melbourne drawing. The position of her left arm, the line made by the right side of her body and the girdle about her middle are virtually copied from the early Lady of Shalott drawing. . . . there is a reverse parallel in that the suddenly regenerated 'fallen woman' of *The Awakened Conscience* looks up and out from her unhealthy interior surroundings, just in time, to the purity of Spring outdoors (her salvation) while our Lady looks down and back again to her safe interior, too late, from the forbidden window and the outdoor world which is her downfall. (14)

To Tennyson, the best art was created in the real world, in Nature, and in fellowship with other people. To Hunt, the member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood renowned for his religious paintings, the only good art was art inspired by faith in God. The kept woman in *The Awakened Conscience* wins Hunt's compassion because she modifies her life to serve God.

Though her needlework, a sign of domesticity, slips to the floor, the woman rises to receive God's grace. The Lady of Shalott also abandons her needlework, but to Hunt, her sin is that in doing so, she surrenders to lust and turns her back on God.

Hunt does not recognize the similarities, but in *The Awakened Conscience* and his Lady of Shalott depictions, the mirrors function in the same way. In both cases, the mirrors carry Narcissistic significance. The room the prostitute occupies features two mirrors. Prostitutes exist as physical and visual objects for men, so presumably this kept woman has spent much of her time in front of a mirror beautifying herself. Similarly, The Lady of Shalott's whole life has revolved around the magic mirror on the wall. Tennyson writes:
And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear. (46-8)

"All the year," all the time, this mirror provides The Lady's only link with the real world, and it is a twice distorted link. Even The Lady's art is Narcissistic in that her own creation is her only reality. As the ancient myths of Pygmalion and Narcissus prove, self-absorption is deadly. Undoubtedly, the prostitute rescues herself by escaping her Narcissistic world of mirrors and turning her focus toward God. Hunt does not recognize The Lady's turn from her mirror to the window as a similar indication of growth. With her glance toward reality, she frees herself from Narcissism, "self-absorption, and solipsism" (Joseph "The Echo and the Mirror" 409). She never meets her "loyal knight and true" (62), but she shares her song with the reapers among "The willowy hills and fields" (142). Hunt could not recognize this movement from Narcissistic illusion to reality as growth. He could only see a woman who chose to honor her lust over her Lord.

Representative of Hunt's attitude toward The Lady of Shalott, the Melbourne drawing abandons the issue of illusion and reality altogether. Hunt believed the poem was really about the conflict between "Duty and Happiness, Spirit and Flesh" (Meisel 335). As in Meteyard's The Lady of Shalott, Hunt's Lady resembles Eve. She holds up her hand to "ward off" the curse, but regret comes too late (Nelson 11). She has denied the "divine
gift of reflective imagination” and now she pays the penalty (Kultermann 388). George P. Landow explains that Hunt interpreted the tale as a parable of the danger of an artist abandoning his devotion to morality and religion, but to Hunt, Tennyson’s artist is even more reproachable because she is female, and females bear a particular duty to Christ (483). In a last moralizing twist, Hunt draws Lancelot riding away from the Lady. One cannot imagine the ending of Tennyson’s poem, when Lancelot blesses her, ever coming true for this fallen woman. Her love is unrequited; her attempts have been futile.

Hunt continues to moralize in his famous 1857 wood engraving for the Moxon Tennyson edition (see Figure 13). This engraving depicts The Lady at the moment when she turns to assess the damage of her sin. Hunt decorates her room with an image of the crucified Christ on the wall to emphasize her failing as a daughter of God. Christ was born into this world and was crucified in recompense for Eve’s sin. Now The Lady of Shalott, a second Eve, has sinned against her Savior. Landow explains that with the addition of this religious imagery, Hunt “obviously goes far beyond the original poem” (483). Hunt knew that Tennyson believed “an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text” (Hunt Pre-Raphaelitism 2:125), so Wagstaff chides Hunt for subverting the “non-moralistic” poem “into a Victorian sermon on the ‘sinfulness of dereliction of duty’” (12-3). Tennyson despised Hunt’s drawing when it appeared in the
Moxon edition. He considered the tangle of thread around her legs overly dramatic. As Peggy A. Fogelman observes, "Hunt's Lady of Shalott seems to obscure or even prevent the future" (23). If the Melbourne drawing prevents The Lady from encountering Lancelot because he rides away from her, this engraving prevents her from escaping the castle at all: "It hardly seems likely that, immobilized in a maelstrom of thread, she will be able to do so," Fogelman concludes (23). Tennyson also objected to Hunt's portrayal of her hair and protested, "Why did you make...her hair wildly tossed about as if by a tornado?" Hunt defended himself: "I had only half a page on which to convey the impression of weird fate, whereas you use about fifteen pages to give expression to the complete idea" (Hunt *Pre-Raphaelitism* 2:124-5). However, given Hunt's conservative views toward women, he more likely portrayed the thread and the hair in such wild manners to emphasize her wantonness. An educated and religious man, Hunt was certainly familiar with John Milton's description of Eve's hair in *Paradise Lost*: "Her unadorned golden tresses [she] wore / Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved" (4:305-6). Women with bad reputations seem to sport sloppy hairdos.

Hunt worked on an oil painting of this same subject from 1886 to 1905 (see Figure 14). The religious imagery becomes more marked; he replaces the crucified Christ with two scenes--the Virgin and Child on the left and Hercules on the right. Both images emphasize the importance of duty: the
Figure 14. William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1886-1905, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.
Virgin accepts her duty as the Mother of God with grace, while Hercules accepts his seven labors with strength. Also, the image of Hercules reminds [The Lady] of the consequences of neglecting her duty since he was able to steal the golden apples and complete his labor only because the guardian daughters of Erebus neglected their duty and fell asleep. (Neuringer 64)

Furthermore, Hercules is the common prefiguration of Christ, so in Hercules Hunt found a moral antithesis to The Lady of Shalott. Hercules chose virtue over vice, while The Lady of Shalott chooses vice over virtue.

Hunt also comments on the sanctity of The Lady's vocation as God's artist by painting her without shoes. Jan Van Eyke's painting The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami influenced Hunt tremendously (the shoes in the two paintings are almost identical), and there, barefootedness symbolizes the sanctity of the wedding chamber (see Figure 15). These two newlyweds will consummate their marriage in the presence of God. Hunt believed that all art should glorify God; his Lady's barefootedness implies "her chamber is a sacred place, and she creates her art as a holy endeavor" (Neuringer 64).

Behind The Lady's head, a frieze of cherubs also reminds her of her female duties. An angel on the right steps with her foot upon a red serpent--just as Eve should have done. The frieze as a whole depicts the music of the spheres and indicates the social harmony that results when women observe social boundaries and serve God as they should.
Figure 15. Jan Van Eyck, *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami*, 1434, oil on panel, National Gallery, London.
Hunt also doubles the religious imagery in the room by utilizing the mirror. The Holy Grail appears twice in the painting—once in the tapestry, and again in the mirror's reflection of the tapestry. No matter where The Lady looks, Hunt reminds her of her Christian duty. Other details in the tapestry foreshadow The Lady's fall into sin. The details are difficult to distinguish, but Hunt wrote of his intentions:

In executing her design on the tapestry she records not the external incidents of common lives, but the present condition of King Arthur's Court, with its opposing influences of good and evil. It may be seen he is represented on his double throne, the Queen is not there, and he is saddened by her default; but he is still supported on his right and on his left by Christian virtues.

(Hunt "The Lady of Shalott" 4-5)

Guinevere, of course, has left the divine King Arthur's side for a rendezvous with Lancelot, just as The Lady of Shalott has left God's grace in search of the same knight. Both women are traitors to God (Kultermann 388).

To illustrate the consequences of her fall, Hunt embellishes Tennyson's lines which read:

Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror cracked from side to side;  
'The curse is come upon me,' cried  
The Lady of Shalott. (114-7)

The painting teems with rich iconographic significance. Irises litter the floor: her purity is now stained. The doves, which have symbolized The Lady's docile acceptance of her role, fly away violently to escape the chaos.
she has caused by leaving her female workplace. As The Lady stares at the silver lamp, "The moment is particularly terrifying because the extinguished lights indicate to her that God has fled the room" (Neuringer 67).

Hunt also embellishes the description of Lancelot. Miriam Neuringer objects:

In Tennyson's poem Lancelot does not wield a sword. As he rides by the Lady's tower, he sings. Thus Tennyson makes him a kindred artist, not unlike the Lady. But in the painting Lancelot aggressively waves his sword, thus revealing himself as an instrument of destruction. (68)

Lancelot makes a second appearance in the painting: The Lady has already woven his image in the lower left of her tapestry. Because Lancelot is a traitor to God, her portrait is not flattering, as Hunt explains: "... the Lady has already pictured the brilliant, but idle and vain-glorious Sir Lancelot, who brings [to King Arthur] no offering but lip-service, kissing his finger tips" ("Lady of Shalott" 4-5). In Hunt's opinion, that The Lady chooses to abandon her domestic and artistic duties for Lancelot proves not only that she is a fallen woman but that she is a bad judge of character. A woman should not abandon her spiritual duty for any man, but Lancelot was a particularly bad choice.

As though not even conscious of the mixed symbols he was sending, Hunt hints in this oil painting of the inevitability of The Lady's glance out the window. First, he paints a window over the magic mirror, and the two blue skies differ tremendously. The sky proper is brilliant and bright; it
seems to "flash" upon The Lady of Shalott, as though her epiphany is inevitable. Like Siddall’s Lady of Shalott (see Figure 5), how could Hunt’s Lady help from lifting her head toward the window over the loom? How could she then resist the brilliance compared to the muted hues of her mirror? Also, like the mirror in Waterhouse’s “I Am Half Sick of Shadows,” Said The Lady of Shalott (see Figure 9), Hunt’s mirror reveals a figure between two marble columns, but Hunt does not realize the benefits of venturing through these portals. Finally, Hunt consulted Tennyson’s poem “The Palace of Art” for ideas on objects to include in The Lady’s room (Neuringer 66), but he ignores the poem’s ending in which the protagonist of that poem goes mad in solitude and vows to enter the luxurious palace again only with companions.

Hunt’s overlooking these hints in his own painting indicates that The Lady of Shalott, despite her gender, was above all an artist and that her fall was inevitable. Tennyson would have been pleased with these details if he had lived to see the painting’s exhibition. Of course, art does not have to mirror its literary source. After all, Tennyson himself loathed art as imitation. However, he was bothered by the artists who saw her as a fallen woman and not as an artist deserving respect for her brave decision to enter reality through the portals of experience. Ruskin wrote the following words of comfort to Tennyson:

... many of the plates are very noble things, though not, it seems to me, illustrations of your poems.
I believe, in fact, that good pictures never can be; they are always another poem, subordinate but wholly different from the poet's conception, and serve chiefly to show the reader how variously the same verses may affect various minds. 

(The Works 36:265)

As a prisoner in a tower of art, The Lady of Shalott lived a life of ungrounded representation. Tired of relying on the ceaseless reflection of images and the endless echo of sounds for her reality, she leaves her mirror, names herself, and accepts death as the consequence in an attempt to fix her identity for the first time. However, the wide variety of pictorial interpretations of her shows that what the Lady of Shalott finally is remains unfixed. To Tennyson she was an exonerated artist with a human identity at the end of the poem. According to Derridean theory, however, because words are in constant fluctuating freeplay, no one word or phrase can ever encompass the depth of an idea, much less a person's identity (Derrida 967). Naming is as close as humans can come to fixing one's identity, but all names ultimately fail as true "identity phrase[s]" (Hartman 94). Therefore, the name The Lady of Shalott, itself a human construct, an illusion, necessarily fails to denote the true Lady of Shalott. Like names, artistic depictions also fail to denote true identity: among the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations of her, no two portraits create the same impression of her and no one portrait is adequate. Siddall draws a dutiful Victorian textile worker, Egley paints a princess. Rossetti engraves a shapeless spirit, Waterhouse paints a restless weaver and an innocent artist singing a hymn in praise of
Nature. Meteyard's Ladies are a mischievous whore and a woman lost in sexual fantasy. Hunt's Ladies all despair that they have abandoned their female duties and have sinned against God; now they reap the consequences. With so many different representations, The Lady of Shalott "becomes in death what she was without knowing it in life: a floating signifier" (Hartman 107). As long as the debate continues over whether The Lady of Shalott represents an artist searching for art's best source or a woman neglecting her duties, her quest for a fixed identity will go unfulfilled, but that is the great human condition.
WORKS CITED


---. *The Lady of Shalott.* Private Collection. Fig. 7 in "Tennyson and the Ladies of Shalott" by Elizabeth Nelson in *Ladies of Shalott: A Victorian Masterpiece and Its Contexts.* Providence: Department of Art, Brown University, 1985.


VITA

Allyson McMahon Bourke