

CRACKED MIRRORS AND PETRIFYING VISION: NEGOTIATING FEMININITY AS  
SPECTACLE WITHIN THE VICTORIAN CULTURAL SPHERE

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Taking as its basis the longstanding alignment of men with an active, eroticised gaze and women with visual spectacle within Western culture, this thesis demonstrates the prevalence of this model during the Victorian era, adopting an interdisciplinary approach so as to convey the varied means by which the gendering of vision was propagated and encouraged. Chapter One provides an overview of gender and visual politics in the Victorian age, subsequently analysing a selection of texts that highlight this gendered dichotomy of vision. Chapter Two focuses on the theoretical and developmental underpinnings of this dichotomy, drawing upon both Freudian and object relations theory. Chapters Three and Four centre on women's poetic responses to this imbalance, beginning by discussing texts that convey awareness and discontent before moving on to examine more complex portrayals of psychological trauma. Chapter Five unites these interdisciplinary threads to explore women's attempts to break away from their status as objects of vision, referring to poetic and artistic texts as well as women's real life experiences. The thesis concludes that, though women were not wholly oppressed, they were subject to significant strictures; principally, the enduring, pervasive presence of an objectifying mode of vision aligned with the male.

‘Eyes’ (1896)

EYES, what are they? Coloured glass,  
Where reflections come and pass.

Open windows – by them sit.  
Beauty, Learning, Love, and Wit.

Searching cross-examiners;  
Comfort’s holy ministers.

Starry silences of soul,  
Music past the lips’ control.

Fountains of unearthly light;  
Prisons of the infinite. (Coleridge, 1954, ll. 1-10)

‘Doubt’ (1896)

The Sun’s rays smote me till they masked the Sun;  
The Light itself was by the light undone;  
The day was filled with terrors and affright. (Coleridge, 1954, ll. 6-8)

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## INTRODUCTION

What a terrifying reflection it is, by the way, that nearly all our deep love for women who are not our kindred depends – at any rate, in the first instance – upon their personal appearance. If we lost them, and found them again dreadful to look on, though otherwise they were the very same, should we still love them? (Haggard, [1887] 1991, 261 n1)

Though relegated to a footnote in H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1877), the above quote effectively strips back the veils – and flowery description – often applied to women in artistic and literary texts to reveal the stark reality that can underlie such lyricising. This is by no means a sporadic mindset but has permeated Western culture to the extent that judging women upon qualities of youth and beauty (rather than 'masculine' traits such as wisdom and intellect) has become naturalised. As the above quote also indicates, this is a matter informed by visual relations: a woman's value has conventionally depended upon the visual pleasure that she provides to male onlookers, regardless of whether she herself wishes to be judged on these grounds. This association of women with visual spectacle and men with visual agency is not limited to a particular historical setting. However, exploring this model within the context of the Victorian era is fruitful given that this age entailed a strong interest in vision and prevalence of visual material in numerous areas, along with a reliance upon either / or binaries that often operated along gendered lines.

As Shires (2009, 26) summarises, the nineteenth century saw 'a dramatic change from a pre-Revolutionary, eighteenth-century mindset to Victorian sensibilities, a change that is psychological, cultural, social, scientific, and aesthetic.' Accordingly, vision came to the forefront of multiple cultural avenues, with scientists expressing considerable interest in the ocular faculty. Darwin's treatise on sexual selection, in particular, exerted considerable influence in and beyond the scientific community, endorsing a model wherein women were

assessed on the basis of their decorative attributes while men were positioned as spectators and subjected to no such stipulations. That the nineteenth century was a time of numerous advancements in photography and printing also helped enable the proliferation of visual imagery, while the rise of consumerism and mass production in the latter half of the century amplified the conception of women as objects. This was not, however, solely a time of technological progress and consumerism, for artistic and poetic texts continued to possess an eminent cultural status and were, in fact, liable to benefit from increased standing in contrast to the mass produced material from which they seemingly offered respite.

While seeming to constitute discrete cultural spheres or to exist in a competing relationship, consumer culture and 'loftier' artistic and literary texts often shared a reliance upon the association of women with eroticised visual spectacle. One objective of this study is therefore to demonstrate that Victorian art and poetry did not exist in a vacuum discrete from mass production and consumer culture: though there were attempts to keep such arenas separate (chiefly, to preserve the status of classical art), critics have discussed Victorian poets' engagement with post-industrialism (Armstrong, 1993, 3-4) and observed that 'bourgeois capitalism restructures social and political life in such a manner that art and society appear related and yet somehow unrelated' (Psomiades, 2000, 29). This thesis will consequently underscore the presence of similar modes of viewing within these cultural realms, noting also the ways in which mythological and historical themes could intersect with contemporary modes of representation.<sup>1</sup>

The interdisciplinarity of this thesis naturally means that not every topic of relevance can be discussed in detail, yet many of these topics (optical technology, for example) have been

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<sup>1</sup> Of the characteristics of Pre-Raphaelitism, for example, William Bell Scott (1892, cited by Smith, 1992, 39) remarked, '[h]istory, genre, medievalism...were allowable as subject, but the execution was to be like the binocular representations of leaves that the stereoscope was beginning to show.'



examined by numerous scholars. This thesis instead seeks to convey the prevalence of the model that it describes, and, on this note, scholars have emphasised that Victorian visual culture consisted of a web of ‘complex inter-relationships’ (Smith, 1992, 42), with Shires (2009, 17) citing the nineteenth century as a time of ‘well-documented interchanges among the sister arts and new technologies.’<sup>2</sup> The following chapters will consequently detail the manifestation of this gendered mode of viewing within Victorian culture and explore its psychological effects, also reflecting on women’s attempts to forsake their status as visual objects and potentially exercise their own visual faculty: a desire that has often proven difficult to realise.

As Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 17) state, one cannot explore the impact that cultural imagery has had upon women without first understanding such imagery; in other words, one must ‘dissect in order to murder.’ That women have been regarded as objects of visual pleasure while men have been aligned with spectatorship is a longstanding norm within Western culture, and the first chapter of thesis will illustrate the various arenas within which this dichotomy found expression in the Victorian era, referring to scientific theory, consumer culture and advances in visual technology. Given that this dichotomy was so prevalent, attempting to document the multitude of texts in which it is evidenced would be redundant and beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, this opening chapter will outline some key motifs and themes often found in such texts. It will then provide more detailed discussion of a selection of texts, including several poems by Robert Browning, that effectively dramatise this gendered model of visual relations.

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<sup>2</sup> Elaborating on such interchanges, Shires (2009, 17) summarises that ‘[p]hotographers “illustrated” poems; poets wrote about painters and paintings; painters drew heavily on literature for their subject matter and composed poems to be displayed with their paintings; prose writers incorporated new visual literacies into their thematics and form.’ Similarly, Losano (2008, 5) observes that Victorian writers ‘regularly celebrated the connection between writing and painting’.

Having established Victorian conventions regarding gender and visibility, Chapter Two will delve into the theoretical underpinnings of this model and binary thinking more generally. Such thinking was characteristic of the Victorian era and entailed a tendency to propagate divisions based upon gender, not only dividing women into different ‘types’ but aligning men and women with mutually exclusive sets of characteristics. That such binaries were both pervasive and mutually reinforcing consequently helped foster the sense that women’s subordinate status was ‘natural’ or otherwise inevitable, creating a network of power relations that was all the more effective and insidious as a result. This chapter will consequently explore binary thinking in more detail, drawing upon Freudian theory (itself reliant upon dualistic thinking) so as to examine possible ways in which binaries have come to be divided along male / female lines.

The association of men with activity and women with passivity is of critical interest for the purposes of this thesis, as unequal vision relations are dependent upon such a split. This chapter will consequently point to the implications of Freudian theory for gender and visibility, with particular reference to Freud’s account of the termination of the Oedipus complex. Within this developmental framework, the experience of the male and the female infant diverges following realisation (on both sides) that the female is ‘castrated’; hence, the female comes to signify ‘lack’. This is not to impute that the Freudian model presents a factual account of development, permeated as it is with a sense of inevitability whereby the female is doomed to regression and passivity. Nevertheless, it is of interest in delineating a model of how male / female binaries may be cultivated. This chapter will consequently extend the relevance of this framework to gender and visibility, referring to Laura Mulvey’s ([1975] 1989) influential account of the way in which notions of presence / lack and activity / passivity have fed into a gendered model of spectatorship.

Though ‘the male gaze’ has become a hackneyed term within academia, this thesis is predicated upon its continuing applicability. It should be noted that Mulvey’s discussion is centred on narrative cinema, yet, as will become apparent, a similar template can be found within various mediums and time periods. This is not to say that this concept should be applied carelessly, nor does this thesis posit vision as inherently objectifying: one cannot simply speak of ‘vision’ or ‘sight’ but must take into account how vision is employed in any given situation. This thesis thus departs from the desire on the part of some feminist scholars (particularly from the French school) to exhort the value of other faculties – notably, touch – in contrast to the sense of sight, instead recognising the beneficial aspects of vision while emphasising that vision has often been employed in an objectifying manner that operates along gendered lines.

Freudian theory provides a basis for theorising gendered spectatorship from a developmental perspective. However, this chapter will also discuss binary thinking from an object relations standpoint, referring to D. W. Winnicott’s ([1967] 1991) study of the mother’s ‘mirroring’ role in early infancy and emphasising the distinction between empathetic looking and the sense that one is being looked *at*. This analysis will highlight the usefulness of such a model in considering how objectifying vision may arise and be propagated, subsequently exploring the relevance of gender to this arrangement. Here, the chapter will draw upon various theorists – notably, Nancy Chodorow – who have argued that development can be influenced not only by whether the infant is male or female but whether they are of the same sex as the mother. So, while activity / passivity is clearly an influential binary, object relations theory helps underscore the relevance of distance / proximity (again, coded masculine / feminine) in breeding inequality. This chapter will ultimately outline a gendered pathway of development that, though not unwavering, has been prominent within Western culture, the Victorian era

the benevolent eyes of the stars. Analysis of Brontë's poem will thus consider possible conceptions of a more fluid, egalitarian mode of looking and relating but, ultimately, will reiterate the difficulty in realising such a state in a context wherein male / female inequality has been so entrenched.

The psychological element touched upon in these works becomes explicit in the poems discussed in Chapter Four, these poems expressing not only discontent but complex psychological trauma. Building upon the cultural and psychoanalytic themes of the foregoing chapters, Chapter Four will begin by discussing the cyclical relationship that existed in the Victorian era between attempts to impose order and the eruption of disorder, including the undermining of the eye's authority. This would seem to offer potential in eroding rigid, hierarchical models of viewing, yet, not only did disorder impress the need to restore order, the potentially troubling or confusing aspects of vision are evoked via a range of female-authored poems that convey acute psychological effects and perceptual distortions.

This chapter will consequently outline psychological mechanisms of splitting, projection and doubling prior to analysing several poems concerning female speakers who experience a troubled relationship to their mirror image (or comparable form of reflection). Mary Coleridge's 'The Other Side of a Mirror' (1882) is especially rich in interpretive potential on account of its cryptic nature and strong visual imagery, while Augusta Webster produced several poetic works that combine psychological study and overt feminist social criticism, with 'Faded' ([1870] 1893) being especially pertinent. In view of Klein's ([1963] 1988, 300) contention that the urge to split coexists with an urge towards reintegration, this chapter will ultimately address the question of whether reintegration with one's mirror image is possible and desirable, emphasising those social strictures that render psychological healing improbable.

being no exception. It will then consider the ramifications of women's association with proximity, including the excessive closeness that women may feel in relation to their own image and to cultural images of femininity, with men alone being encouraged to achieve the distance upon which vision is predicated.

While women have been encouraged to internalise cultural strictures, Chapter Three will analyse poems that indicate awareness of, and discontent with, the judging of women upon transient qualities of youth and beauty. Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856) makes this theme explicit, referring to an artist's obsessive renderings of a female subject who has been effectively drained of life via this 'vampirism'. Such a depiction naturally gains added applicability given Dante Gabriel Rossetti's prolific depictions of sensualised female beauty as well as Christina Rossetti's attempts to forge her own artistic career. More specifically, it would seem that Rossetti's poem was based upon the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal. However, though remembered primarily in this capacity, Siddal was a poet and artist in her own right, with the poetic piece 'The Lust of the Eyes' (c. 1855-1857) focusing upon a male narrator who values his 'beloved' purely on account of her beauty and whose professions of love will evaporate when this beauty fades.

Subsequent to discussion of Siddal's dual roles of muse and artist / poet, this chapter will turn to Eliza Cook's 'Song of the Ugly Maiden' (1845), which focuses on a female speaker's sense of pain and loneliness at feeling that she lacks the feminine beauty upon which society places such heavy emphasis. Cook therefore highlights the psychological consequences of this scenario and also touches upon the idea that there are different types of looking: the gaze may be objectifying but the speaker longs for a more empathetic form of looking. This theme is made explicit in Emily Brontë's 'Stars' (1845), which contrasts the sun's harsh glare with

Further to the awareness and trauma that women have expressed in relation to cultural strictures, the final chapter of this thesis will explore literary and real life instances wherein women have attempted to engage directly with the world and exercise visual agency. This chapter will begin by analysing Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' ([1832] 1842) in terms of the title character's attempt to leave behind her hitherto solipsistic life (in which she is permitted to view the outside world only via a mirror) by exercising direct visual agency: an act that, in accordance with cultural codes of masculinity and femininity, must be nullified through the restoration of patriarchal conventions, including the rendering of the Lady as an object of vision. The first half of this chapter will conclude by discussing some of the artistic treatments that this poem inspired during the Victorian era, the Pre-Raphaelite movement in particular displaying 'a rich and interesting development of Tennyson's concerns' (Christ, 1987, 396).

'The Lady of Shalott' therefore dramatises the themes at the heart of this thesis, yet, given the prevalence of gendered codes of visibility, it is fitting to also consider women's real life attempts to refuse their status as visual objects and potentially exercise their own visual agency. Establishing that women were increasingly present in the public sphere in the latter half of the century, this chapter will discuss women's experiences within this landscape, with particular reference to discourses of street harassment. While recognising the opportunities that the city presented for women, this chapter will demonstrate that there were persistent difficulties that prevented the female from occupying a role akin to that of the male urban rambler (or, *flâneur*). The chapter will conclude by analysing Emily Mary Osborn's painting *Nameless and Friendless* (1857), which, as 'one of the few publicly exhibited pictures by women to address urban space at mid-century' (Cherry, 2003, 90), helps underscore the gendered dynamics of vision discussed throughout this thesis.

While it would be incorrect to assume that the objectifying male gaze is all-powerful, then, this thesis contends that one should not dismiss the existence and effects of objectification, for to do so would be to maintain and naturalise this mode of looking. Highlighting the commonalities between superficially differing texts and social arenas is also useful in demonstrating the prevalence of that model of visual relations outlined here, and this is one of the key aims of this study: to illustrate that a mode of viewing analogous to the ‘male gaze’ was manifest on numerous levels during the Victorian era. This thesis will make direct links between Victorian and present day life on occasion, but this commonality is implicit throughout the ensuing chapters, becoming particularly evident in relation to the issue of street harassment and to unequal standards applied to men and women in relation to the ageing process.

This thesis will therefore look back to the Victorian era as a time that, while by no means ‘the same’ as the present day, reveals some clear – and unfortunate – continuities. It will also establish that women have not merely been accepting of or oblivious to this gendering of vision but have experienced psychological and practical difficulties. Similarly, the very fact that objectification can masquerade as flattery and has long been regarded as commonplace is all the more reason to denaturalise such accepted wisdom: as Bowers (1990, 217) states, one of the key tasks for feminist scholars ‘is to expose the depth and profundity of these images in the Western psyche and discover how to reconstruct images of women that represent their complexity and power’. This thesis will consequently explore this issue from a cultural and psychoanalytic perspective, emphasising that, while vision is not inherently objectifying, a particular mode of objectifying vision has been exerted considerable influence within Victorian culture, with women’s own responses demonstrating the consequences of being judged upon such criteria.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The interrelationship between gender and visual relations has been a consistent topic of academic interest and debate since the early 1970s, with feminist scholars having paid significant critical attention to that longstanding template in Western culture wherein women have been – and continue to be – constructed as objects of vision in both artistic / literary texts and wider society. Attempts to theorise, question and challenge this scenario have been undertaken from various stances, with Freudian and object relations theory having proven especially relevant to this topic. Scholars have consequently explored the gendering of vision on a social and historical level as well as in relation to literary and artistic texts, and this review will detail some of the key studies and theorists to engage with this area. The review will begin by focusing upon theoretical issues, exploring the origins of binary thinking and subsequently considering the ways in which such thinking has cultivated a gendered model of spectatorship. It will also discuss the differing levels of merit afforded to the sensory faculties within Western culture and, likewise, by academic theorists, some of whom have expressed a denigrating stance towards vision while others have sought to delineate different types of vision.

The review will then discuss some of those scholars and works that have applied such theoretical frameworks to artistic and literary texts. It will also cite works that explore visuality and Victorian culture, highlighting contextual issues and providing an overview of attitudes towards gender and visuality during this time. Here, the review will discuss texts focused on those modernising imperatives that reshaped the Victorian landscape (on both a practical and discursive level) during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and will consider the implications of such changes for women. In particular, feminist scholars have engaged in considerable debate with regard to women's occupation of the public landscape,



thus meriting an overview of key areas of discussion. The review will then turn to a range of female-authored poetic works that demonstrate women's awareness of and discontent with those unequal standards of judgement typically applied to men and women. Some of these works express not only social concerns but psychological dissonance, and, this being the case, the review will discuss theoretical texts focused on processes of splitting and doubling. The review will conclude by suggesting further research, with particular regard to interdisciplinary scholarship, continued analysis of lesser-known female poets, and possibilities for non-objectifying modes of looking and relating.

### **Theories of Gender and Vision: Psychoanalysis**

As noted above, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a thriving interest in visual relations on the part of feminist scholars. Freudian theory has often been pivotal to such discussion, for, while Freud did not formulate a model of gendered spectatorship, he detailed a model of how dichotomies of presence / lack and activity / passivity arise and come to operate along a male / female divide. According to Freud (*SE* 19: 173-182; 248-258), male and female infants start out believing themselves to be of a like; however, the boy's observation that the female is 'castrated' instigates fears regarding his own potential castration, thus prompting him to shift away from feminine identification and align himself with the father. The girl, meanwhile, instantly recognises her own castrated status in comparison to the male. The Freudian model therefore provides a basis for the emergence of male / female inequality – including the association of men with looking and the positioning of women as objects of vision – and entails instant visual recognition of presence / absence. Drawing out the implicit significance of the visual in Freudian theory, Benson (1994)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benson (1994, 113) also notes that Freud insisted on sole ownership of the gaze in analytic sessions: a strategy that Benson likens to Perseus snatching the eye that the Graiae pass amongst themselves and

observes that the overwhelming sight of the female genitals leads to the child evolving a story to explain what he has seen; again, deflecting attention from the power of the image and, potentially, the glare of the mother, with Bowers (1990, 219) suggesting that focusing upon lack allowed Freud to ‘deflect attention from the compelling, frightening presence of Medusa’s eyes that are watching with all the force of a powerful subjectivity.’

Though Freudian theory has been influential, critics have suggested that the notion of the female as castrated conceals a fear of female *difference*.<sup>4</sup> Freud’s model is also steeped in a sense of inevitability and lack of contextualisation, and this is a criticism often directed towards psychoanalytic theory: as Zoonen (1994, 92) notes, psychoanalysis has been censured for its apparent ahistoricism and powerless perspective, the possibility of change becoming hard to envisage when identity formation is seen to take place so early on.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, scholars have highlighted psychoanalytic theory as a fitting tool with which to examine various types of cultural texts. Christ (1987, 399-400), for instance, sees Victorian poetry and psychoanalysis as ‘both having an erotic center that cannot be recognized for itself, whose

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thereby usurping the power of the gaze. Benson further notes that Freud’s experience of mental paralysis upon observing a particular artwork led him to advise the shifting of attention to minor details of an image so as to break such a spell.

<sup>4</sup> While the Freudian model regards the male’s fear as being instigated by the sight of the castrated mother, Benson (1994, 104; 112) emphasises that such fear is based on seeing *something* (the female genitals). Further to this theme, theorists have suggested that the threat associated with the female may in some instances be based on the perception of the mother as actively castrating. In her discussion of the woman as femme castratrice, Creed (1994, 110-111) focuses on the active threat of the ‘vagina dentata’ and cites the fanged serpents of the Medusa’s hair as a prime example of this motif. See also Neumann (1963, 168-169), R  heim (1952, 362) Schneider (1976, 88-9), Slater (1968, 17-20) and Thelewit (1987, 241). For more on female difference as distinct from lack, see Heath (1978) and Lurie (1980).

<sup>5</sup> Heath (1978), for instance, argues that psychoanalysis fails in relation to history, with sexuality engaging with social relations of production, sexes and classes. Pollock (1977) also states that psychoanalysis is deficient when used in isolation, as it is insufficiently historical and does not engage with issues relating to ideology and capitalism, while Kaplan (1983, 327, n45) suggests that psychoanalytic film theory might perhaps be enhanced by empirical studies (though she notes that one must be careful of mixing discourses that work on different levels). Schneider (1976, 77n4) makes a similar argument, stating that there is no discipline that cannot benefit from other systems and that psychoanalytic theory can illuminate historical problems, though Brooks (1994, 111) posits that some symbolic formations (such as the experience of oneness with the mother’s body and subsequent severance from it) *do* appear to have universal significance.

deflections organize all other aspects of imaginative life.’<sup>6</sup> Freud’s account of infant development, meanwhile, remains useful in providing a psychoanalytic foundation for the prevalence of binary thinking within Western culture, with de Lauretis (1984, 165) observing that, despite its inadequacies, it ‘account[s] for the continual existence and the functioning of patriarchy as a structure of subjectivity’.

Scholars have consequently detailed the implications of Freud’s model in terms of visual politics, the concept of the ‘male gaze’ having come to the fore in film theory with the publication of Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ ([1975] 1989). Here, Mulvey employed Freudian theory in an attempt to theorise that longstanding scenario whereby a female character is positioned as an object; specifically, an object that invites a scopophilic gaze on the part of the (male) spectator and the male protagonist. Ultimately, Mulvey saw this ‘to-be-looked-at’ quality as stemming from Freud’s emphasis on the female as defined by ‘lack’; hence the woman is consigned to the role of bearer of meaning and object of ‘the male gaze’. Scholars have, however, questioned Mulvey’s framework, with de Lauretis (1984, 60) pointing out that it is of interest due to ‘the very limits it has posed and allowed to be tested.’ On this note, one must be careful not to unwittingly reinforce a conception of the gaze as all-powerful. Modleski (1988, 9) suggests that Mulvey made this template seem monolithic, while Wilson (1992, 102) concurs that the ‘male gaze’ has functioned as a ‘theoretical Medusa’s head’ that reinforces the ideology it was meant to deconstruct. That this model has been applied to numerous subject areas (rather than solely narrative cinema) is an important point, and one must recognise that certain aspects of

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<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have also drawn links between psychoanalysis and literature, Brooks (1987) suggesting that the persistence of psychoanalytic approaches to literature indicates our conviction that the structure of literature is somehow akin to that of the mind. Both Brooks (1994, 108) and Gold (1961, 112) also cite Freud’s acknowledgement of how close poets and philosophers had come to the fundamental truths of psychoanalysis, while Wright (2009, 119) observes that psychoanalysis and poetry both concern ‘the deepest springs of human life and struggle with the same constraints of language’.

Mulvey's theory cannot necessarily be transposed to other mediums. Still, this review will go on to show that scholars *have* made effective use of this framework in relation to various texts and contexts, demonstrating its continued usefulness.

As various scholars have observed, one situation for which Mulvey's original theory does not account is that of the female spectator,<sup>7</sup> though Mulvey later addressed this subject in 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' ([1981] 1989). Here, Mulvey argued that the female may find herself either out of key with the pleasures on offer or identify with the male protagonist, the latter being facilitated by a capacity for trans-sex identification harking back to the girl's early masculine, or 'bisexual', phase of development (again, utilising Freud's template).<sup>8</sup> However, while seeing trans-sex identification as second nature, Mulvey adds that the female spectator's occupation of a masculine position is always uneasy and at cross purposes, torn between 'the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity' (30).<sup>9</sup> A possible underlying cause for this has also been outlined by object relations theorists and has important bearing upon the development of dichotomised thought, shifting focus from Freudian notions of possession / lack and activity / passivity to a developmental model that fosters an association of men with distance and women with proximity – a division that feeds into a gendered model of spectatorship.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Arbuthnot and Seneca (1982) and Gamman and Marshment (1988, 4-5).

<sup>8</sup> Freud contended that the male leaves this 'bisexuality' behind following the termination of his Oedipus complex whereas the girl is more liable to retain this capacity. However, Freud construed this in negative terms, emphasising the female's tendency to linger in this infantile position and fail to progress along a firm developmental pathway (see *SE* 7: 219-221; *SE* 19: 253; *SE* 22: 112-135).

<sup>9</sup> Doane (1982, 81) also suggests that women are more flexible than men in terms of sexual mobility, deeming the appeal of trans-sex identification understandable in the sense that, in cultural terms, occupying a male position may well seem preferable when the alternative appears so disagreeable.

## **Object Relations: Distance / Proximity**

While Freudian theory has frequently been employed in relation to gender and spectatorship, it is pertinent to consider how visual relations and their gendered implications have been theorised beyond issues surrounding perceived castration. The subject of mirroring is especially significant here, immediately evoking Lacan's ([1966] 2006, 75-81 (78; 80)) theorisation of the 'mirror stage' of development wherein the infant identifies with an idealised self-image.<sup>10</sup> Lacan is not, however, the only theorist to have discussed the importance of mirroring. In a pioneering study of visual relating in infancy, D. W. Winnicott ([1967] 1991) focused upon a pivotal stage in early development wherein the infant looks to the mother in the hope that she will mirror back the desired response. Lacan's and Winnicott's models both emphasise an individual's self-image as being shaped by a perceived other, yet Winnicott focuses on an empathetic relationship with a 'good enough' mother, ideally leading to relaxed self-realisation. Lacan's mirror stage, conversely, is based upon false recognition and, as Wright (1991, 15) states, seems to present the (m)other as a figure by whom one is led into a maze of false reflections. Winnicott's main focus, however, is on the doubts and fears that an infant may experience with regard to the continuing provision of assurance.<sup>11</sup> Winnicott subsequently considers the consequences of the mother failing to supply the desired response, instead reflecting her own mood or the rigidity of her defences. On this note, Winnicott suggests that the continuation of such a scenario may lead to the child

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<sup>10</sup> Benson (1994, 101) underscores the distinction between Freud's and Lacan's theories of development, stating that Freud's model centres on genital difference whereas the central drama of the visual field for Lacan is centred on the image of the child's own body.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Winnicott suggests that, when boys and girls in their secondary narcissism look in order to see beauty and fall in love, there is already evidence of doubts as to the mother's continued love, and that the man who falls in love with beauty differs from the man who loves a woman and feels that she is beautiful.

growing up confused by what the mirror has to offer, potentially leading to neuroses (as demonstrated by Winnicott's case studies).

Elaborating upon Winnicott's theories, Kenneth Wright (1991) highlights the lack of attention to the face within psychoanalytic theory and emphasises the importance of visual relations in the interaction between mother and baby. Wright placed greater emphasis of attunement more generally in his later work (2009), referring to the 'silver mirror' of the mother's mind and the mother's attuning forms as providing rich ground for preverbal symbol formation. Still, he maintains that visual relations play a key role in the formation of self-consciousness and highlights the dislocation and trauma that can result from insufficient mirroring or distance that has been put in place prematurely,<sup>12</sup> contrasting 'ontological fear' with 'relaxed self-realisation' (1991, 85). Particularly relevant is Wright's later emphasis on 'good enough' mothering, or lack thereof, as affecting other areas. Wright (2009) suggests, for example, that metaphorical language draws on symbolic forms (a developmental achievement that depends on maternal provision) and that art and poetry allow one to create a relationship with the medium that is akin to the mother-infant relationship. Indeed, Wright states that, though a surrogate for the mother's face, the medium is more reliable in that the artist can modify its surface.

While largely concurring with Winnicott's account, Wright departs from Winnicott to an extent by arguing that the experience of separation as absence is necessary for the growth of consciousness, while Winnicott implies that experiencing this space of separation can be largely avoided if mothering is 'good enough'. Another way in which Wright departs from

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<sup>12</sup> Wright stresses, however, that this is not necessarily an all or nothing scenario, with the average infant receiving a range of views every day and integrating some more easily than others.

Winnicott is by focusing on the mother not only as distracted or rigid<sup>13</sup> but placing greater emphasis on a Sartrean concept of being looked at by a fearful Other. Though recognising the other's look as a necessary component of socialisation, Sartre (1956) focused upon the horror of feeling that one is the object of another's gaze, outlining a paranoid scenario wherein looking becomes associated with a constant power struggle as to who 'owns' the gaze.<sup>14</sup> These theorists do not, however, examine the potential relevance of gender to such arrangements, though the very fact that such theories apply to both sexes suggests that objectification can be traumatic for the female too. Certainly, Winnicott's account suggests that a woman's relationship to mirroring is more complex than admiring herself in a mirror as a consequence of innate vanity,<sup>15</sup> with adverse mirroring inviting consideration in relation to those literary texts that portray a troubled relationship of gazer to mirror image.

While the aforementioned works do not engage with issues relating to gender, feminist scholars have argued that male and female experiences of closeness / distance may not be equivalent. Notably, Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) and Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989) have considered the implications of a gendered division of childcare arrangements and, furthermore, of whether the child is of the same sex as the mother. Their principal contention is that disparities between male and female experiences of early development (as has been largely encouraged within Western culture) have led to a division whereby women develop

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<sup>13</sup> Wright (1991, 14) notes that Winnicott touches upon yet 'does not really explore the idea...that the fixed face of the unresponsive mother could equally be experienced as a reflection, but a distorting one'.

<sup>14</sup> As Wright (1991, 33) observes, there is an imbalance between Sartre's formal recognition of an essential movement from subjectivity and objectivity (and back) and the negative emotional consequences that he associates with this process.

<sup>15</sup> Winnicott ([1967] 1991, 113-116) refers, for example, to a female patient who lacked a characteristic typically associated with women in that she had no interest in the face and had experienced no adolescent period of self-examination (though she was drawn to a portrait of Winnicott due to its lines harking back to the rigidity of her mother's and nurse's faces). Another patient, meanwhile, recounted feeling rehabilitated after having applied makeup: a feeling that Winnicott sees as indicative not simply of vanity but of a desire for approval (here, via the mirror), with the average girl studying her face so as to reassure herself that the mother-image is there.

stronger relational tendencies and an alignment with proximity (on account of being of the same sex as the mother). The male, meanwhile, is encouraged to achieve and maintain distance from the mother, with theorists having pointed to regulation, containment and infantilisation of women as mechanisms utilised for this purpose.<sup>16</sup> This model therefore formulates a gendered division of proximity and distance, the male striving for detachment and the refutation of femininity<sup>17</sup> while the female is encouraged to maintain a close sense of connection. Some theorists, including Rich (1977, 220), Simms (2003, 63) and Yeagher (1989, 204), have focused upon the positive aspects of such relationality, countering Freud's negative construal of the female's continuing pre-Oedipal attachment.<sup>18</sup> Also, while acknowledging that Chodorow sometimes seems to blame mothers for cultivating dependency in their daughters, Johnson (1988, 106) suggests that 'her work begins to move toward a more positive view of women's relationality and women's mothering.' Chodorow's own conclusion is that, not only would it be beneficial for individuals of both sexes to be engaged in childrearing but that, by engaging with other women as well as her mother, the female would be more likely to achieve a balance between proximity and distance,<sup>19</sup> while children of both sexes would be less inclined to harbour notions of the mother's omnipotence or expectations of female self-sacrifice (218).

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<sup>16</sup> See Stockard and Johnson (1979, 283) for a brief summary of some key works centred on this subject.

<sup>17</sup> Commenting upon this refutation of femininity, Benjamin (1980, 159) adds that such a mindset is influenced by the Oedipal triad in which the son fiercely renounces the mother in an attempt to gain the father's recognition.

<sup>18</sup> While his later work acknowledged the strength and persistence of the girl's pre-Oedipal phase, Freud did not attribute to it any value, his belief being that 'it marks the woman out as...unfinished, apt for regression' (Heath, 1978, 75). His comments on subsequent development were no more optimistic, Freud's (*SE* 14: 315) conclusion being that 'the embitterment of so many daughters against their mother derives, ultimately, from the reproach against her of having brought them into the world as women'.

<sup>19</sup> Chodorow (1989, 65) points to cultural contexts (ranging from working class East London to locales such as Atjeh and Java) wherein the female infant typically experiences greater interaction with 'women who, in addition to their child-care responsibilities, have a valued role and recognized spheres of legitimate control.' Chodorow (62) elaborates that, within such a context, a mother 'is not invested in keeping her daughter from individuating...She has other ongoing contacts and relationships that help fulfil her psychological and social needs. In addition, the people surrounding a mother...provid[e] a daughter with alternative models for personal identification'.



While the aforementioned theorists consider object relations in terms of gender, they do not focus their attention upon visual relations; hence it may be useful to consider such theories alongside Winnicott's comments on mirroring, these two approaches potentially complementing one another. Still, while not focusing specifically on visual relations, scholars have drawn out the implications of Chodorow's model with regard to objectification, with Johnson (1988, 107) referring to this unequal model of development as preceding later forms of dominance and objectification. Particularly relevant is Benjamin's observation that the female's presence is necessary in order to provide recognition, meaning that she cannot be extinguished yet her subjectivity must be contained – a scenario also evidenced in artistic and literary texts. Again, Benjamin draws on the notion of gradual differentiation, pointing to the value of the preoedipal period in developing the recognition that will later assist in regarding others in a non-objectifying manner. Here, Benjamin distinguishes between true and false differentiation: a distinction that finds a parallel in Guntrip's (1961) contrast between mature and immature dependence<sup>20</sup> and Gilligan's (1993) contrast between an ethics of rights and justice and an ethics of responsibility and care. Benjamin (1988, 12) summarises, however, that developmental and cultural arrangements have largely discouraged true differentiation, entailing as it does a 'necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition' that can be difficult to tolerate.

Object relations theory has therefore been useful in outlining the possible origins and development of a gendered dichotomy that can result in objectification of the female.

However, it can also be criticised for taking a sweeping, denigrating view of mothering.

Benjamin (1988, 78) states, for instance, that 'the fact of women's mothering not only

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<sup>20</sup> Drawing upon this distinction, Chodorow (1989, 61-62) aligns mature dependence with social contexts in which the mother-daughter relationship is mediated. Immature dependence, meanwhile, is more likely to arise where such mediation is absent or deficient, potentially leading to 'loss of self in overwhelming responsibility for and connection to others' (58).

explains masculine sadism, it also reveals a “fault line” in female development that leads to masochism’. Taking issue with Benjamin’s account, Weir (1992) argues that it equates separation and autonomy with domination and focuses upon affectivity rather than recognising the importance of rationality and cognition. Likewise, Johnson (1988, 90) suggests that Benjamin tends to regard rationality, individualism and instrumentalism as ‘bad’, adding that women have sought to engage with the ‘the rational, instrumental world.’ It is therefore important to recognise the value of elements such as rationality and individuality for *both* sexes, and to recognise the likelihood of women finding themselves torn between a developmental model of proximity (and its corollaries) and a drive towards individuation.

One of Weir’s main arguments is that one should not automatically equate internalisation of the other’s view with domination, emphasising that internalisation helps cultivate self-development and socialisation, enabling a move from drive-governed behaviour to the ability to engage in a social environment. Weir makes some salient points here, highlighting that the internalisation of social roles and norms fosters an ability ‘to relate particulars to universals, and hence to appeal to principles for critical reflection’ (152). Furthermore, Weir affirms Freud’s conception of internalisation (namely, internalisation of the Father) as mediation, and as crucial to the constitution of oneself. Weir is indeed correct in stating the need to recognise the self as socially mediated and internalisation of the other’s perspective as not inherently ‘bad’. However, she does not address the question of what it means when the perspectives that one is internalising are of an objectifying nature; not merely in the sense of seeing the other as distinct, but seeing the other as an object and, moreover, an object of vision.

That distance and proximity have traditionally been subject to a gendered divide is also significant insofar as this relates to a similarly gendered hierarchy of the senses. Distance, as

associated with the male, is a prerequisite for looking, which is thus likewise coded male and, as Classen (1993) and Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) have demonstrated, has been afforded a largely pre-eminent status within Western culture. Irigaray (1985, 31) makes a relevant point in contending that distance can encourage one to perceive another person as being open to possession, adding that nearness should not be taken to mean appropriation of the other. However, while there is validity in Irigaray's argument (in that objectification is predicated on distance), distance is not *synonymous* with objectification, with the aforementioned theorists having demonstrated the importance of both sexes being able to achieve a degree of distance and differentiation. Wright (1991, 141) states that an essential distance from the object must be maintained in order for thought to be possible and, elaborating upon this theme (2009), points out that distance disallows appropriation and enables the capacity for symbol formation.

Further to the importance of distance, Sherrington (1906, cited by Crary, 1999, 351) distinguished between 'distance' and 'immediate' receptors, pointing to vision as the primary 'distance receptor' and a vital part of the evolution of survival mechanisms. More recently, Jay (1993, 314-15) has affirmed the necessity of being able 'to see the world from the perspectives of others, yet avoiding total participation and confusion', and this is a topic that Rane Willerslev (2007) has elaborated upon, emphasising that removal of distance would result in an undifferentiated state that may have a mythical appeal but from which humans have made great effort to estrange themselves (39). Highlighting the importance of vision in achieving a balance between distance and proximity, Willerslev cites as an example a tribe of Siberian elk hunters, contrasting the hunter's ability to move between perspectives with the

elk's absorption in its illusory self-image.<sup>21</sup> From this standpoint, distance is associated with conscious thought and action, without which the world would be a blur; indeed, Willerslev notes that, where the hunter mimics the animal, the hunter can sometimes fall victim to this mimesis and effectively transform into the animal. Willerslev therefore highlights the need for reflexivity and self-awareness, citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory and its emphasis on distance as enabling recognition of oneself as a being that 'simultaneously sees and is seen' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 162).<sup>22</sup> Also engaging with Merleau-Ponty's work (here, from a feminist perspective), Andrews (2006) emphasises the pre-existing nature of intersubjectivity, suggesting that intersubjectivity is not something that must be arrived at but rather something existent, the challenge being to keep it alive and operational.

Along with the need to achieve a balance between distance and proximity, scholars have discussed the possibility of a mutual gaze. Returning to the notion of smiling interaction between mother and child, Wright (1991) acknowledges that some may regard this as a mythical past, yet argues that everyday lives tend not to be a constant fight for emotional survival, with Martin Buber (1937) having specified that, while there are many relationships defined by objective roles and qualities ('I-It' relationships), these are repeatedly transcended in intersubjective, reciprocal moments ('I-Thou' relationships). Similarly, while Benjamin (1988) explores relationships of domination, she also considers the possibility of mutual

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<sup>21</sup> As Willerslev (2007, 37) elaborates, 'the success of the seducer rests on his ability to create an image of the seduced – which, however, is *not* an exact image of how she experiences herself, but rather an ideal representation...Seduction is in this sense inherently narcissistic.'

<sup>22</sup> Willerslev also draws attention to the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's thinking. Specifically, he discusses the way in which Merleau-Ponty originally emphasised vision as being sharply focused and pushing objectification further than any other sense yet later considered vision's capacity to transcend the dichotomy of figure and ground, exploring the intensifying effects associated with latent visibility (in the form of shadows and reflections, for example). Particularly interesting is Merleau-Ponty's contention that perception is non-objectifying; rather, objectification occurs if one renounces the embeddedness of perception and 'both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking' (1962, 361).

relationships that do not operate along dichotomous lines. Regarding the possibility of mutual recognition and true differentiation, Benjamin suggests that upholding male rationality and control is a strain, thus meaning that rejection is at least conceivable. Benjamin therefore concludes that mutual recognition is possible and may indeed be desirable, but that the prevalence of false differentiation and splitting of impulses is not surprising within a culture that privileges polarity over recognition.

A key point raised by these discussions of intersubjectivity is the need to consider how vision is used in a given situation, with Wright (1991) distinguishing between egocentric goal-seeking behaviour and organising vision within which all elements in the field can be related. Wright (72) likens this distinction to that of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive stages of development outlined by Melanie Klein ([1946] 1988), the psychological splitting of the former stage ideally giving way to a capacity for integration whereby the infant recognises that the attacked object and the loved object are one and the same (that is, the mother).<sup>23</sup> Wright elaborates that the second mode of relating entails understanding the object within its own network of relationships rather than seeing it as existing solely for one's own gratification. Bryson (1983, 93) also distinguishes between the gaze and the glance, the former being aligned with vigilance and masterfulness while the latter indicates a more 'subversive, random, disorderly' mode of vision. Some feminist theorists, however, have regarded sight less favourably. Luce Irigaray (1978, 50, cited by Pollock, 1988, 50; 1985, 25-26) argues that the eminence afforded to sight has led to the impoverishment and denigration of bodily relations, the eye signalling objectification and mastery. Irigaray is correct in noting

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<sup>23</sup> Wright (1991, 35) likens the 'good mother' to Athena and the 'bad mother' to Medusa yet stresses that the real mother most likely contains elements of both. Likewise, scholars have often posited that mythological characters can be seen to embody aspects of the same being. See Bowers (1990, 223; 232-234), Dumoulié (1995, 781), Maxwell (2008, 110-13), McGann (1972, 23), Róheim (1952, 352) and Wilk (2000, 26-27, 59-61, 241).

the necessity of challenging the domination of the specular, yet to denigrate the visual faculty and create a reordered hierarchy encourages continued division and stereotyping, despite Irigaray's own emphasis on fluidity and multiplicity. Also, while Irigaray focuses on the depth and vitality of women's sensual responses, the body can be thought of in terms of the equation woman = body and can easily lead to essentialism (though Irigaray is careful to avoid defining a female being).

To dismiss or condemn vision consequently encourages (albeit not always deliberately) the continuing association of men with sight and women with visual spectacle. On this note, Wilson (2001, 89 n4) affirms that feminist critiques of vision are simplistic and part of a new problem rather than a solution. Likewise, while detailing the denigration of vision by numerous theorists, Jay (1993, 590) suggests that it is perhaps 'time to begin probing the costs as well as benefits of the anti-ocular counter-enlightenment' (196); not so as to reinstate the 'nobility' of sight but to elucidate the repercussions of its denigration. For his part, Jay calls for a 'polyscopic' (152) narrative of the eye so as to lessen the danger of becoming 'trapped in an evil empire of the gaze, fixated in a single mirror stage of development, or frozen by the medusan, ontologizing look of the other' (151). It should also be noted that, despite favouring of touch over vision, Irigaray recognises the specular as 'one of the irreducible dimensions of the speaking animal' (1985, 154) and employs the metaphors of the flat mirror and the curved or concave mirror in relation to women's cultural and representational status. Specifically, Irigaray contrasts the motif of the reflecting female beloved or 'flat mirror' (who provides the gazer with an idealised self-image in a manner comparable to the mirror stage) with the curved / concave mirror that disturbs this reflection and asserts the female's subjectivity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> White (1987, cited by Jay, 1988, 10) similarly distinguishes between flat and concave mirrors (here, with reference to perspectivalism in art), contrasting 'artificial perspective in which the mirror held up to nature is flat' with 'synthetic perspective' in which that mirror is presumed to be concave. Likewise, with regard

Such metaphors are therefore useful in moving beyond a gendered dichotomy of sight / touch so as to consider differing modes of representation and specularity.

In addition to distinguishing between different facets and usages of vision, theorists have highlighted the need to recognise the senses as interrelated. Merleau-Ponty (1962, 228-29) employed the term 'synaesthesia' to describe the cooperation of the senses, with Sobchak (1992, 77-78) affirming that the senses should not be regarded in discrete, hierarchical terms. Daryl Ogden (2005, 10) also contends that individuals should be able to engage in multisensory experience rather than being associated with mutually exclusive traits on the basis of sex, going on to examine female vision and its suppression within various 'scientific' and literary texts. Similarly, Wright (1991; 2009) deems both carnal and visual knowledge important in human development, touch serving to establish what is real while vision clarifies and organises.<sup>25</sup> Wright contends that neither sense is 'perfect', with touch being immediate and tangible but poorly defined, and vision potentially showing something that might or might not be real.<sup>26</sup> That some feminist theorists should have sought to focus upon other senses is understandable, yet it is preferable to regard vision alongside other senses and to consider how it is used within particular contexts.

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to Buci-Glucksmann's (1984; 1986b) studies on the baroque, Jay (1988, 17) refers to the metaphor of the baroque as a mirror that holds up to nature a concave mirror as opposed to a flat reflecting glass, the former's apparent 'distortion' revealing 'the conventional rather than natural quality of "normal" specularity'.

<sup>25</sup> Wright (1991, 82) further notes the pervasiveness of visual metaphors in relation to mental processes, as indicated by expressions such as 'mind's eye' and 'seeing' what someone means. See Jay (1993, 1-2) for further examples.

<sup>26</sup> Wright (1991, 64) discusses congenital blindness as part of his argument here, underscoring the difficulty that the blind subject has in forming a conception of objects without the mediation of vision. Likewise, Wright notes that, if the tactile underpinning of vision is deficient, vision is not then a sufficient means of 'keeping in touch'.

## Gendered Spectatorship in Art and Literature: Critical Approaches

As noted earlier, scholars have explored the presence of a gendered model of spectatorship within various types of cultural texts. Though reluctant to employ the term ‘the male gaze’, Sutphin (2000, 21 n1) avers that female characters in literature are typically looked at and judged by male characters. Accordingly, theorists have pointed to the usefulness of feminist film theory in discussing issues relating to gender and visibility in art and literature. Ehnenn’s (2005) study of Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*, for example, argues that this poetry collection prefigures and shares a key objective with modern feminist film critics, with Ehnenn focusing on strategies that the poets use in order to resist the male gaze. Chapman (1996), meanwhile, suggests that the *tableaux vivant* anticipates cinema in several ways, both employing a visual discourse dependent on observation and interpretation of gestures – especially those of women – as well as aesthetic and technical codes that constitute an ideology. Newman’s (1990) study of gender, narration and gaze in Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* also draws upon the work of feminist film theorists, as does Harper’s (2000) discussion of the motif of veiling within Emily Dickinson’s poetry.<sup>27</sup> It should be emphasised that these studies are not ahistorical in their approach: Harper considers Dickinson’s motif of veiling as a subversive use of a nineteenth century trope, while Ehnenn pays significant attention to the historical and social milieu in which Field lived and worked. Likewise, Chapman provides a detailed account of *tableaux vivant* manuals and the role that these texts played within nineteenth century society. In general, then, these studies combine attentiveness to context with relevant theories drawn from feminist film theory.

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<sup>27</sup> Harper (2000) notes, for instance, that her argument that the veil can function as a site of agency was influenced by Judith Mayne’s (1990) discussion of the screen as a site of agency for female directors. However, she also recognises that theories of female spectatorship and identity are often marred by a continued association of agency and desire with masculinity (23).



The aforementioned articles take an interdisciplinary approach and this is true of other scholars working in the field of visual studies, with Losano (2008, 4-5) referring to the prevalence of recent 'word and image studies' and de Lauretis (1984) seeing feminism as interrogating semiotic and film theory as well as psychoanalysis and anthropology. Friedberg (1993), for instance, argues that, though social formations of modernity were increasingly mediated through images, the 'virtual gaze' that took shape in this context was initially restricted to the public sphere (in painterly views and theatrical experiences, or in the arcade, department store, diorama or panorama) before saturating the private sphere (most obviously, with the advent of television). She also posits that the shop window succeeded the mirror as a site of identity construction before gradually displaced by the cinema screen (66). In making such connections, Friedberg recalls John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which highlights the longstanding division of looking within Western art and culture whereby men look and women are looked at. Though Berger does not engage with theoretical frameworks to a significant extent, he expresses a consistent indictment of elitism and capitalism in relation to art and demonstrates that the ways in which people look are affected by persistent cultural mores. Berger's comparison of classical oil paintings and modern advertising, in particular, reveals striking similarities with regard to their depictions of women, demonstrating a correspondence between 'high' and 'low' culture texts.

One of Berger's most notable contentions is that women see themselves being looked at and are encouraged to internalise a spectator's point-of-view, transforming themselves into objects of vision. This argument inevitably brings to mind Michel Foucault's (1977) analogy of the panopticon wherein individuals are conscious that they are being watched and consequently

police their own behaviour.<sup>28</sup> Foucault did not discuss the gendered implications of this model, yet numerous scholars have employed Foucauldian theory so as to explicate that form of cultural coercion whereby women are impelled to turn themselves into objects of vision (Bartky, 2003, 25-45; Bordo, 1999; Devereaux, 1995, 130; Doane, Mellencamp and Williams, 1984, 14; Wolf, 1990). According to Friedberg (1993, 212-13, n19), it was around 1983 that this shift towards Foucault got underway, with de Lauretis (1984, 84-85) and Kaplan (1983, 3) remarking upon an increasing interest in Foucault's work. More generally, feminist theorists have emphasised the ingrained, constraining nature of cultural mores. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity has been especially significant in this regard, with performativity being distinct from performance.<sup>29</sup> Other theorists, meanwhile, have stressed the masochistic nature of women's internalisation and acceptance of objectification (Kaplan, 1983, 316; Irigaray, 1985, 25; Nochlin, 1988, 33). This is not to say that women wholly internalise cultural expectations, for, as this review will demonstrate, female-authored texts have demonstrated a clear awareness of and dissatisfaction with cultural structures. What is pertinent to establish, however, is the preliminary idea of femininity as something culturally determined and reproduced.

The sustained presence of particular motifs and cultural categories has also been noted within the field of Victorian studies. Auerbach (1981, 283) and Ussher (1992, 268) have remarked upon the continued existence of some of those labels applied to women during the Victorian era (such as 'sex object' and the angel / whore dichotomy), while Walkowitz (1998, 20) and

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault's theoretical framework was based upon the panopticon device invented by Jeremy Bentham (1791), which was intended to serve a function of enclosure and unseen – yet perceived – surveillance within institutional environments.

<sup>29</sup> Clarifying the distinction between performance and performativity, Butler (1993, 95) writes that the latter 'is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance...performativity cannot be understood outside of...a regularized and constrained repetition of norms.'

Stein (2003, 320) point out that Victorian genres and discourses continue to inform cultural and political practices. Scholars have, moreover, suggested that the prevalence of classical and mythological themes in Victorian art and poetry<sup>30</sup> could be seen as a response in part to the dislocations of modernity. Nead (2000) refers to the desire for ‘a slower and more containable world of high art’ (151) in contrast to the ‘meaningless spectacles’ (152) of the urban environment, while Maxwell (2002, 512) observes that ‘[a]n interest in mythic images...dislodges a single-minded emphasis on the concrete world, which can be replaced by a repertoire of symbolic images and figures.’ Friedberg (1993, 188-189) also observes that late nineteenth century revival styles and museology encouraged a return to the past, and that such nostalgia may have sought to provide reassurance in the face of the perceived threat of the modern. She notes, however, that nostalgia can contain antifeminist impulses as part of an agenda to restore a prefeminist movement,<sup>31</sup> thus raising the possibility that this abundance of classical motifs (particularly those reaffirming female submissiveness) might have been, in part, a response to social transformations and fears regarding their perceived consequences.

Further to Berger’s demonstration of the parallels existing between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural texts, Lynda Nead (1990) details the differing attitudes expressed throughout 1970s debates on high culture (notably, the female nude) and the pornographic, with some critics and historians striving to maintain a clear distinction and others seeking to implicate art in the social definition of sexuality. Nead points to Berger as an example of the latter but argues that he and other theorists are held back by certain assumptions. In Berger’s case, Nead counters the assumption that paintings of women are outside ideology when the model is engaged in a personal relationship with the painter, arguing that this presumes private

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<sup>30</sup> The legitimising function of mythological and historical settings has frequently been noted. See Berger (1972), Danahay (1994, 44), Nochlin (1972, 10-11) and Sutphin (1998, 376; 2000a, 526).

<sup>31</sup> See Doane and Hedges (1987).

relationships to exist outside the domain of power.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Nead shares Berger's interdisciplinary approach, arguing that pornography (for example) needs to be examined in relation to other forms of cultural production rather than being seen as a unified category.

One of the formative studies to address the distinct roles afforded to men and women within the artistic sphere (both as subjects and spectators) was Linda Nochlin's 'Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art' (1972). That Nochlin's essay is one of the earlier works on this subject is indicated by its observation that 'it is surprising how little serious attention has been paid to the specifically erotic implications of art works by scholars and critics' (9), as well as Vogel's (1976, 379) statement that Nochlin's essay 'might fall into the small but growing category of feminist art writing.' Writing in 1999, Nochlin acknowledges that some of her early work may seem obvious now but adds that, at the time, discussions of the sexual politics of paintings were not self evident and the concept of the gaze (as relating to the representation of women) had not been articulated. Looking back to her early seminar topics, she notes that many of these topics have continued to interest feminist art historians and critics, such subjects including the nude, advertising, women in Pre-Raphaelite painting and Victorian literature, and woman as angel and devil in nineteenth-century art. Nochlin (1999, 7-10; 14-15; 20) also notes that she favours a *bricolage* approach incorporating (amongst other methodologies) psychoanalysis and film theory. This was initially due in part to the newness of the discipline, which necessitated such an assemblage. However, Nochlin

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<sup>32</sup> Another point of concern for Nead relates to Berger's approach to non-European art: Berger refers to examples of such art (in which both sexes are depicted in active roles) so as to highlight that, while a certain mode of representation may be ingrained, it is not universal but culturally specific. Nead does not criticise Berger on these grounds but suggests that the contrast that he presents between frank Oriental representations of sex and the repressed sexuality of Western bourgeois art perpetuates a mythology of primitivism.

has continued to employ this approach<sup>33</sup> while stressing the unifying political and ethical concern of her project; that is, women and their representation (1999, 15-16).

Returning to Nochlin's 1972 essay, this piece is useful in underscoring some core issues regarding gender and representation. Nochlin points out that erotic imagery is not controlled simply by personal fantasy, and cites the nineteenth century (when older motifs were transformed by new needs and motivations) as the period in which the social basis of this myth stands out most clearly. Nochlin also emphasises that 'erotic' almost invariably means 'erotic-for-men' (9), underscoring the one-sidedness of this artistic and cultural archetype. Notoriously, she discusses the typical association of fruit with female sexuality and then imagines what it would mean to apply a similar association to men, concluding that the result is not the same because there is not the same tradition of depicting men in this way. Pollock (1977, 137) and Vogel (1976, 384) deem this comparison a failure, with Vogel arguing that the ludicrousness of Nochlin's male nude prevents it from being a 'true, biting parallel'. Still, while this is so, Nochlin's aim is readily apparent.<sup>34</sup>

Another pioneering figure in this field is Griselda Pollock, whose 1977 article 'What's Wrong with "Images of Women"?' reflected upon studies undertaken in the early seventies.

Pollock's focus is on the persistent difficulties that have arisen out of attempts to address the topic of 'Images of Women', her argument being that confusion has arisen due to the common misconception of regarding images as 'good' or 'bad' ('bad' meaning distorted) reflections

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<sup>33</sup> Nochlin (1988, 146-147) suggests, for example, that the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" expands beyond a single field 'to embrace history and the social science, or even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the outset, can challenge the assumption that the traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry are still adequate to deal with the meaningful questions of our time'.

<sup>34</sup> Nochlin's (1972, 15) concluding comments in this essay noted signs of change and posited that women's growing power is bound to revolutionise representation. However, while academic study of these issues has increased since this article was published, the manner in which men and women are represented has not changed significantly.

of reality, and that one must instead focus on the notion of woman as signifier in an ideological discourse. Like Berger and Nochlin, Pollock highlights the interconnecting ideology of high art and popular prints, arguing that cultural studies needs to focus on reintegration rather than falsely privileging mass forms over what is often their source material. She is also wary of feminist attempts to reclaim imagery (celebratory images of the female body, for example), reaffirming that this tactic can consolidate what it seeks to undermine.

The main focus of Pollock's article is on male / female reversals in visual texts. Presenting examples of such reversals, Pollock suggests that this strategy can bring to light that which would typically go unnoticed, with a male counterpart to a naked female in a print advertisement making strange the original image so that meanings become less automatic. Yet Pollock demonstrates that male and female variants of images typically deal in different sets of signs, pointing to an image of a man depicted in the manner of a Hellenistic statue: the subject is active, self-contained and does not invite ownership and possession, thus supporting the observation made by academics such as Mulvey ([1975] 1989) and Zoonen (1994, 97) that, within art and popular culture, the male body is rarely displayed in a manner akin to that of the female.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Pollock notes that advertisements featuring men have to work harder to sell products whereas those featuring women can exploit an existing link between women and commodities. Lastly, she stresses the difficulties that women have faced in terms of self-expression within this context. Referring to a self-portrait in which a painter depicts herself unclothed, Pollock underlines the tension existing between two traditions, the standard

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<sup>35</sup> Further to Mulvey's ([1975] 1989, 20) remark that the male body 'cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification', Dyer ([1982] 1992) details some of the methods employed so as to negate objectification in relation to images of male actors, sportsmen and pin-ups. These include the use of 'masculine' signifiers such as active poses, taut muscles, phallic imagery and hard or disinterested expressions. As Doane (1982, 77) points out, moreover, that those instances of role reversal that *do* exist can be seen as exceptions that prove the rule.

image of the female nude being undercut by the (female) artist's self-possession and the artist's statement being hampered by the image's associations with nature (reiterating the longstanding alignment of women with nature and men with culture).<sup>36</sup>

### **Gender and Visuality in Victorian Culture**

While the above theorists have often turned their attention to Victorian artwork, there exists a wide body of scholarship devoted to the study of Victorian literary and artistic texts, as well as to the increasingly visual nature of the Victorian landscape and widespread interest in vision during this time. Such research flourished throughout the late twentieth century and beyond, with principal areas including advancements in photographic and printing technology, scientific theory, the rise of consumer culture, and the renovation of the public landscape. However, as Christ and Jordan (1995, xiii) state, the Victorians exhibited an interest in the conflict between objective and subjective models of perception. This highlights an overriding emphasis that re-emerges in studies of the Victorian era; namely, the ambivalent nature of the cultural sphere during this time. This ambivalence existed on numerous levels, with scholars having emphasised a push-and-pull between competing concepts such as order / disorder and mystery / legibility. Likewise, the power of the eye and the association of visibility with clarity could not nullify those more ambivalent and woolly aspects of vision.

Exploring vision and visuality within this context, scholars have often adopted an interdisciplinary approach. As well as emphasising the linkages – and tensions – existing between different modes of visual output, Smith (1989, 97) argues that art criticism has often shied away from engaging in 'radically intertextual discourse.' However, some scholarship has demonstrated a move in this direction: seeking to produce a comprehensive account of the

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<sup>36</sup> This nature / culture division has been discussed by a range of theorists, the most notable being Claude Levi-Strauss and Simone de Beauvoir. For a useful summary, see Ortner (1972).

Victorian visual imagination, Christ and Jordan (1995) assembled a collection of essays on topics such as photographic veracity, the representation of the visual in literary texts, the relationship between illustrator and novelist and the question of how optical devices relate to the visual imagination. Regarding this multifaceted approach, Christ and Jordan (xxii) cite the usefulness of psychoanalysis, film theory and feminism, and, likewise, observe the use of literary theory by practitioners of the 'new art history'. Having established these methodologies and interests, Christ and Jordan summarise critical approaches to the Victorian visual imagination and cite two standard accounts that feature in scholarship: a trajectory of realist representation leading to photography, and, by contrast, an increasingly subjective vision leading to modernism. However, in keeping with the ambivalence associated with the Victorian era, Christ and Jordan (xxi) stress that the Victorians were interested in the conflict between these paradigms.

Another subject that Christ and Jordan discuss is the relationship between photography and other types of visual depiction, affirming that, while photography in some ways signalled a break from earlier Victorian visual culture, it entailed continued tension between objective and subjective vision. A prominent figure in this field is Lindsay Smith, whose work focuses on the interrelationship between painting and other optical devices and imagery during the Victorian era, particularly between photography and Pre-Raphaelitism. In contrast to the longstanding alignment of Pre-Raphaelitism with photographic exactitude, Smith (1989; 1995) argues that the relationship between the two should not be construed merely in terms of painters seeking photographic accuracy. She consequently posits stereoscopy as paralleling the problematisation of depth of field sometimes found in Pre-Raphaelite art. Also, while observing the influence of photography in terms of a literalising of the metaphoric, Smith (1992) suggests that, paradoxically, the effect of this was to muddy supposed binaries of



visible / invisible and imitative / symbolic.<sup>37</sup> She therefore explores salient interconnections between painting and photography while refraining from conflating these mediums. She observes, however, that the differences between these mediums *have* often been elided on account of photography catering to the public's preference for those subjects to which they had grown accustomed through fine art (1998, 21). So, again, the prevalence of similar motifs across different mediums is apparent.

Further to her interest in depth of field, it is noticeable that some of the photographers that Smith quotes as seeking to challenge notions of 'legitimate focus' are female. Elaborating upon this, Smith (1998) points to examples of constructedness and manipulation of focus in images produced by female photographers, as well as the negative critical response with which some such photographs were received – responses that she sees as playing upon the pre-eminence afforded to 'masculine' traits of mastery, pragmatism and rationality, and fostering a 'male gaze' based on geometric authority. Smith consequently suggests that refusal to produce sharp focus can challenge the dominance of perceptual mastery.<sup>38</sup> Of particular interest are Smith's (2000) comments on colour photography. Referring to early experimentation with colour, Smith emphasises that this was followed by a period in which black and white photography became naturalised. Smith subsequently points to the problematic nature of the reintroduction of colour in the twentieth century, commenting that once something has been suppressed for a significant period it is difficult to reclaim. Regarding this suppression, Smith notes that colour was seen as supplementary and excessive, restoring also the shock or unease inherent in the doubling capacity of photographic portraiture. On this note, such comments invite consideration in relation to the work of

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<sup>37</sup> In one example, Smith cites Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (1854-6) as radical in its depiction of a real goat, arguing that the painting operates in a circular manner whereby the literal and metaphorical coexist.

<sup>38</sup> Smith (1998, 30) also incorporates psychoanalysis into this reading, aligning the notion of being 'out of focus' with fears regarding castration.

feminist theorists, including Kristeva's treatise on abjection (1982) and Irigaray's (1985, 30; 207) comments on the cultural alignment of women with aberrance and excess, with Irigaray endorsing fluidity and multiplicity; that is, the coexistence and mingling of colours.

Like Smith, Kate Flint is a prominent scholar within the field of Victorian visual studies, her wide-ranging approach being apt given the pervasive interest in matters relating to the visual during this time. Discussing such areas at length, Flint (2000) summarises new optical devices and the frenzy of images created by mass production and consumer culture, along with the exaltation of the visual faculty in popular scientific writing. Flint also discusses projects of categorisation and aims of uncovering and making visible that which had previously been hidden, emphasising that such aims constituted part of an attempt to create legibility within a time of rapid urban change. However, Flint stresses the ambivalence that surrounded visual culture, referring to fears about what one may find when attempting to bring the unseen to the surface, as well as a desire for stability amidst the visual flurry and rapid changes taking place throughout the Victorian landscape. Flint subsequently discusses the problematisation of vision whereby imperatives of legibility were undercut, citing an increased awareness of the eye's inadequacies and of subjective vision. Flint also notes that technology intended to provide veracity could have converse results; notably, photography could be unsettling and create uncanny effects.

In *The Finer Optic* (1975), Carol Christ contended that Victorian poets such as Browning and Tennyson can be distinguished from their Romantic predecessors due to their focus on minute visual details and the faithful recording of a single moment of individual experience (as opposed to seeing such details as symbolising universal imaginative experience). However, scholars have also observed that Victorian poetry in some cases shares with Romanticism an interest in visionary experience. Reaffirming the ambivalence associated with the Victorian

age, Flint (2000) focuses upon this era as a time in which a drive towards visibility coexisted with the legacy of the visionary imagination (hence the trope of blindness as a catalyst for inner illumination). Outlining the diverse connotations of elements such as the horizon, light, blood and dust, Flint highlights the Victorians' fascination with the interplay between the seen and unseen, supporting the conception of this era as a time of competing imperatives.

Catherine Maxwell (2002) likewise states that, contrary to many scholars' tendency to associate the Victorian era with scepticism and materialism, the Romantic visionary imagination remained alive and well. In fact, she suggests that the late Victorian period saw a significant reaction against materialism. So, while she discusses Victorian commentators who sought objective standards of truth, she emphasises that there were also those who believed that the goal of poetry was to record one's own responses.

Maxwell subsequently elucidates the relevance of gender to this form of subjective response, observing that visionary Romanticism finds a characteristic form in 'the human face and form' (2008, 6) – typically, those of the woman. She goes on to discuss this motif in Victorian poetry, focusing upon the male narrator's projection of his desires onto an imagined female, the recreative power of imaginative vision prevailing over optical sight. Maxwell (102) also comments upon the association of death with refinement and purification, referring to Blanchot's (1989, 256-258) suggestion that the aesthetic image can be likened to the corpse in subsuming the original object's value and signification. Maxwell sees this as a continuation of the idealisation that occurs in mirroring (including that of art) and consequently refers to the gendered nature of this scenario, the corpse / image often coded female. By highlighting the female's reflective function, Maxwell thus evokes the Irigarayan 'flat mirror', illustrating its applicability to artistic and literary texts (specifically, the poetic motif of the reflecting beloved).

While countless Victorian texts focus on the physical beauty and to-be-looked-at-ness of their female characters, Robert Browning's dramatic monologues are of particular interest. Typically, these poems are narrated by a male speaker who seeks possession of a beautiful voiceless woman: a theme evidenced in texts such as 'Evelyn Hope' (1855), 'Mesmerism' (1855), 'My Last Duchess' (1842) and 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836), the latter two poems seeing objectification being taken to the extreme and the male seeking to literally kill the female into art. This is a theme that scholars have commented upon, with Christ (1987) having examined gender and visibility in relation to Browning and Tennyson, focusing upon gendered power relations as manifested through visual relations. In particular, Christ sees these poets as associating the poetical with the feminine, pointing to the male's attempts to usurp the female's power – in some cases via an unauthorized gaze – so as to generate his art. Christ consequently argues that Tennyson and Browning convey such conflict regarding the power of the look, adding that, in Browning's case, the male typically wins this struggle in a manner whereby art itself is implicated in the murderous gaze. However, she also observes that incorporating such power can create fears regarding feminisation (and castration), meaning that the male has to consciously avoid this outcome. Likewise, looking at the female carries the risk that the female will look back. Christ therefore discusses tactics intended to combat these possibilities, yet, citing feminine identification as a means of avoiding the direct gaze at the woman (and its concurrent dangers), reiterates those fears surrounding feminisation.

In addition to depictions of women being looked upon, numerous paintings have played on women's association with vanity, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1868) and John William Waterhouse's *Vanity* (1910) being key examples. Theorists have suggested, however, that such paintings should not be taken at face value. Commenting upon Burne-

Jones's *The Mirror of Venus* (1877), Flint (2000, 237) suggests that the mirror's surface may constitute a barrier between a woman's image and her interiority. Berger (1972, 51) also argues that such images were intended to impel women to treat themselves as objects of sight, and, furthermore, served to divert attention from the male painter's scopophilia. Danahay (1994) likewise notes the artistic convention whereby women are represented as self-involved, pointing out that male self-regard would be considered effeminate – hence the projection of these and other unwanted tendencies onto the female. Scott (1994), meanwhile, examines the motif of the captive female in terms of projection – specifically, its role in allowing the artist or poet to displace his besieged condition onto the female – while Gilbert and Gubar (1989, 163) argue that, when the chasm of romanticism opened culture up to revolutionary, anti-rational forces (associated with nature and the imagination), this led to male artists feeling threatened by 'the feminine' in themselves.<sup>39</sup>

Maxwell (2008, 193-94) notes the mechanism of projection within literary texts, yet highlights the failure or refusal of the female to serve as mirror image (143). Addressing this subject, Danahay (1994) emphasises the threat that non-compliance carries both in terms of jeopardising the imaginative unity of the male subject and potentially leading to the threat of the *femme fatale*. As to why the poet's endeavour frequently results in non-compliance, Danahay argues that, while the poet may seek to represent 'his own', he must pass through secondary media such as mirrors and texts. Miller (1984) also recognises such non-compliance (or, subversive mirroring), arguing that the absence or indifference of the female counterpart is a figure for something missing in the speaker's self. Miller likens this to a

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<sup>39</sup> Nead (1995) observes that the process of artistic creation can be seen as feminine in some respects (potentially being associated with 'feminine' emotion rather than 'masculine' rationality), hence the artist's attempts to assert mastery over both the model and his creativity via the metaphor of phallic triumph over the feminine canvas. Nead emphasises, however, that the potential for femininity remains at the core of artistic masculinity.

‘mirror stage’ that results in absence rather than the discovery of oneself, the speaker / gazer being faced with a gulf akin to an encounter with the Medusa. The scenario outlined by Miller also evokes another Lacanian concept: the gaze as *objet a*. In contrast to the typical association of the ‘gaze’ with piercing, objectifying vision, Lacan defined the object gaze as diffuse and pre-existent, positioned on the side of that which is looked at rather than something possessed by the viewer.<sup>40</sup> Lacan therefore explored the gaze as a phenomenon removed from unequal power relations and ownership, positing it instead as something that destabilises and eludes vision. The object gaze is consequently helpful in suggesting the potential to undermine and evade the ‘look’, with Wiesenenthal (2001) having explored this concept to strong effect in relation to Christina Rossetti’s poetry.

Regarding the possibility of evasion on the part of the female, Stephen Kern (1996) argues that the male gaze is not omnipotent and that there are spheres wherein female subjectivity plays an important role. He thus points to situations in which men fall passive to their natural impulse while women make self-conscious decisions, relating this to examples of women looking away from the gazes of male characters in nineteenth century art and literature. He elaborates that artwork tends to show men as being inclined to give in to the natural instinct while women are in a position where they decide how to respond – a position reflected in their eyes, which convey a more varied range of emotions. Kern therefore highlights the complexity of women’s responses and the empowering aspects of women being placed in a decision-making role, challenging notions of female irrationality and hysteria. Likewise,

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<sup>40</sup> Lacan (1978, 88-89) elucidated this type of gaze reference to the distorted skull motif that destabilises Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533). As another example, Lacan recounted observing the glint of a sardine can floating in the sea and feeling that the can ‘was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated’ (1978, 95). Of this, Jay (1993, 365) elaborates that Lacan felt himself ‘in the center of a conflictual visual field, at once the eye looking at the can and the screen in an impersonal field of pure monstrosity.’ Likewise, Melville (1989, 20) states that the gaze is ‘outside... there, in the glinting of light off the sardine can. This gaze belongs not to the (small o) other but to the Other – language, world, the fact of a movement of signification beyond human meaning.’

Kern disputes the notion that women inherently lacked those desires associated with the male, emphasising the relevance of upbringing and cultural mores.

Poetic and artistic texts have thus frequently exhibited a gendered dichotomy of spectatorship, and numerous scholars have examined the psychology underlying this template. However, this dichotomy was not limited to works of art and fiction. Examining the association of men with looking and women with passivity, theorists have argued that Charles Darwin's discourse of sexual selection played a major role in legitimising this template. Notable figures in this sphere include Richards (1988), Russett (1989), Tuana (1988) and Ogden (2005), all of whom have focused upon the ways in which social context shaped and legitimised scientific ideas in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, such theorists have remarked upon the tendency on the part of many scientists to neglect the influence of social and cultural factors in fostering differences between the sexes, and to make sweeping assertions based on limited or negligible evidence. Ogden's (2005) approach is especially relevant given that it forms part of his wider exploration of gender and visual politics within literature and culture. Notably, Ogden cites examples of frank literary depictions of female lust from pre-nineteenth century works, yet emphasises that such portrayals were overtaken by the themes of domestic surveillance and sexual selection. Aiming to recover the female spectator, Ogden consequently examines and de-naturalises various discourses that have traditionally placed women in a passive position.

Particularly interesting is Ogden's critique of Charles and Erasmus Darwin. Detailing the latter's notion of male imaginative power as playing a major role in reproduction, Ogden cites one of Darwin's case studies concerning a landowner whose mind had been occupied with the image of a young woman after whom he lusted, and whose offspring were said to bear physical similarities to this woman – apparently as a consequence of the power of the male

generative imagination. Ogden highlights the oppressiveness and inequality of this theorisation with regard to the landowner's wife and the object of his lust, both of whom are rendered powerless. Not only this, Ogden points out contradictions in Darwin's logic. For example, Darwin's lauding of male imaginative power does not tally with his contention that the imaginative faculties are lower faculties than (male) intellect. Ogden effectively criticises Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection in a similar manner, noting that it is not an apt comparison to liken *physiological* characteristics of animals (such as the peacock's plumage) to *artificial* decoration undertaken by women. He also brings to light nineteenth century challenges to Darwin by feminist evolutionary thinkers such as Eliza Burt Gamble – challenges that made little cultural impact but demonstrate that Darwin's theory was not universally accepted.

## **Modernisation and Visual Culture**

In addition to those texts that focus upon Victorian art and culture, scholars have also examined visuality with regard to modernisation. Though not focused specifically on the nineteenth century, Martin Jay (1988) outlined three principal scopic regimes<sup>41</sup> associated with modernity, emphasising that the dominant model of Cartesian perspectivalism was destabilised by other regimes such as the art of describing and the baroque: regimes that emphasised subjective, corporeal response.<sup>42</sup> As Jay recognises, these regimes cannot be regarded as encapsulating those visual subcultures extant throughout 'the lengthy and loosely defined epoch we call modernity' (4). Still, Jay provides an overview of the key models of visuality associated with an era one may broadly term 'the modern', with Mirzoeff (1999, 44)

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<sup>41</sup> This term was coined by Christian Metz (1975).

<sup>42</sup> More specifically, Jay (1993, 154-155) cites Impressionism as the key point at which perspectivalism began to be radically challenged, noting the ephemerality of the glance as indicating an awareness of the corporeal subjectivity of vision.



affirming that ‘no one way of seeing is ever wholly accepted in a particular historical moment.’ Jay also points out that, despite the aforementioned destabilisation of vision, perspectivalism offered a particular appeal within modernity, being regarded as complicit with the modern world’s ‘fundamentally bourgeois ethic’ (1988, 9) and mathematical order, commodification and exchange, in which art became available for selling. Jay therefore echoes Berger’s (1972) comments on the commodification of art and further demonstrates the ambivalence associated with modernity.

Academic discussion regarding modernisation and visual culture has often centred on mechanisation, consumerism and urban renewal. However, in some cases, such scholarship has expressed a critical stance, with Jay (1993) observing that the proliferation of the visual reached a crisis point in the late nineteenth century, resulting in a backlash. De Certeau (1984, xxi), for instance, contends that ‘[o]ur society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown’. Guy Debord was a notable critic in this arena, coining the term ‘the society of the spectacle’ ([1967] 1994) to describe a landscape in which social relations are mediated by images and representation replaces authentic life. Of course, Debord’s account was focused upon a twentieth century context and, as Crary (1989) emphasises, one must recognise its historical specificity.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, this environment can be seen in part as an extension of nineteenth century imperatives relating to the production and circulation of goods and imagery within industrialised society. Other theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard ([1981] 1994; 1983) and Daniel Boorstin ([1961] 1992) have also turned their attention to this environment, focusing

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<sup>43</sup> Crary (1999, 73-74) rightly notes that Debord’s concept is often interpreted in a simplistic manner as merely indicating a highly visual environment or as a synonym for capitalist consumerism, when one should take into account that spectacle also relates to a separation and management of people within the modern environment (in the interests of ensuring attention and productivity; particularly on the part of workers). Consequently, Crary emphasises the spectacle as being ‘inseparable from a larger organization of perceptual consumption’ (1989, 102).

upon a process of simulation whereby production and reproduction, as well as visual spectacle, cultivate an environment consisting of simulacra that is nevertheless seen to constitute reality. Again, these theorists focus on the twentieth century (a time of significant expansion in terms of media and public relations), yet there is validity in considering the ways in which this cultural landscape was foregrounded in the Victorian era. On this note, Friedberg (1993) points to parallels between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggesting that the ‘visual phantasms’ (55) offered by the diorama and panorama are early illustrations of commodity experience, and that the visual became commodified via the shop display, tourist experiences and cinema.

One of the most frequently cited works on visual culture and modernity is Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* (1992), which Parsons (2000, 1 n1) deems ‘the paradigmatic discussion’ of observation and visual culture within this context.<sup>44</sup> For Jay (1993, 150), perspectivalism was subject to ‘acceleration and interrogation’ towards the end of the century, with scholarship having tended to locate a substantial cultural shift in the late nineteenth century (signalled by modern art). However, Crary asserts that it was the earlier part of the nineteenth century that saw such a shift, the paradigm of the camera obscura giving way to notions of subjective corporeal vision – notions that could be applied not only to the individual as autonomous producer of their own visual experience but to a physiological observer subject to regulation in the manner described by Foucault (1977). Crary thus emphasises both emancipation and discipline, positioning this juxtaposition within a context of industrialisation, serial production and vast amounts of new imagery.

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<sup>44</sup> While focusing upon a nineteenth century context, Crary (2001) suggests that it would be useful to chart the changing relationship of attention to various systems and institutions over time, and to identify meaningful continuities between the nineteenth century and the present.

Discussing the disintegration of unitary perspective, Crary points to the kaleidoscope as illustrating conflicting attitudes towards modernity, this device serving as a metaphor for a shifting arrangement of subjectivity but also visual trickery. Friedberg (1993) shares Crary's interest in the history of the 'observer' as a combination of various forces, yet places greater emphasis on continuity, suggesting that aspects of the camera obscura (specifically the projection of light and a darkened, self-contained environment) can be seen in post-eighteenth century devices such as the panorama, diorama and cinema. Friedberg also notes that Crary does not seek to probe the gendered implications of supposedly neutral theories. In particular, Crary (104 n16) quotes Goethe's (1810, 22) 'telling' account of the afterimage of an attractive woman created by the attentive male heterosexual eye (suggesting the same visual potency as that posited by Erasmus Darwin), but does not elaborate on this. Friedberg (1993, 32), however, stresses that what is 'telling' is the inseparability of male heterosexual desire from subjective vision in Goethe's account.

Having discussed the aforementioned shift towards corporeal vision, Crary elaborated upon this subject in *Suspensions of Perception* (2001). Again, one of Crary's key points is that locating perception in the body resulted in attempts to manage attention (particularly in an industrial environment), but that attention could also easily veer into distraction and reverie. Crary's overall focus is therefore on a context wherein one is 'caught between the subjective dislocations of modernization and imperatives for institutional discipline' (36).<sup>45</sup> Crary also

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<sup>45</sup> Regarding Manet's *In the Conservatory* (1879), for example, Crary sees its 'overcompensating finish' (90) as an attempt to reconsolidate that cohesive visual field that Manet had already played a part in disassembling, thus demonstrating modernity's contradictory tendencies. He contrasts this work with Manet's *Before the Mirror* (1876), which features a visual field wherein both the woman's gaze towards herself and the spectator's supposedly voyeuristic gaze are dispersed. Interestingly, Crary refers to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming-woman' to account for the mobile, plural qualities of works such as *Before the Mirror*, stating that 'man is the molar entity par excellence, whereas becomings are molecular' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 292, cited by Crary, 2001, 110 n63) – a theorisation that can be compared to Irigaray's association of the feminine with fluidity and multiplicity. Crary concludes that inertness reflects the 'petrifying gaze of a new consumer-observer' (117), while immersion in superficiality is a consequence

discusses the anonymity and exchangeability associated with modernity and consumption, within which the commodity's specific identity is inconsequential (a stance likewise applicable to the commodification of women). Ultimately, Crary emphasises the ambivalence associated with a modernity that enabled a malleable visual space yet subjected that same visual space to standardisation.

### **Vision and Urban Space**

Further to the abovementioned discussions of modernisation, another area that has attracted scholarly attention is metropolitan life and urban expansion in the mid-late nineteenth century, with discourses of public visibility, gender and conduct being particularly significant. One important text is Lynda Nead's *Victorian Babylon* (2000), which focuses on upheavals that took place in London during the 1860s and early 1870s. Nead weaves together various interrelated subjects to create a strong sense of both the physical changes that the urban landscape underwent during this period and the ways in which this landscape reflected social issues and concerns. The book is replete with examples, but Nead's overall focus is on the ambivalence and heterogeneity of the city, which entailed a disjunction between, on the one hand, modernising projects, growing consumer culture and ideals of circulation and order, and, on the other, destruction, disorder and uncanniness. Nead also highlights the importance of spectacle, with images saturating the city and metropolitan life being experienced on a primarily visual level.

Nead's study discusses gendered relations of looking within the city, taking its cue from a letter featured in *The Times* (1862) in which an angry father claimed that his daughter had been subjected to a cowardly assault while walking the streets. Nead discusses the various

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of failure to locate anything constant or substantial. Still, Crary emphasises that the sensory body continues to search for ways out of binding arrangements.

responses to this letter, but her general argument is that, despite expressing differing opinions, these letters demonstrate that women *did* walk the London streets and that social identities were more diverse than 'pure' and fallen'. Judith Walkowitz (1998) similarly demonstrates the varied attitudes to women in the urban landscape, referring to another course of newspaper correspondence regarding women's vulnerability to 'male pests'. Walkowitz notes the obvious misogyny of some of the male responses but also suggests that some of the male respondents' references to informal courtship practices are pertinent in highlighting that street conduct is not a cut-and-dried issue. Regarding female responses, meanwhile, Walkowitz states that the language of melodrama sometimes used in such responses can serve as an important means of expression but that its emphasis on victimised womanhood is limiting and sometimes entails a distinction between 'decent' and 'disorderly' women.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, Walkowitz highlights the need to recognise the variety (and conflict) of meanings pertaining to social encounters, suggesting that feminist critics have sometimes underplayed such plurality.

Though focusing on nineteenth century Paris, Susan Buck-Morss's (1986) study of the urban sphere has wider relevance, with Buck-Morss affirming that the images constructed by capitalism traverse national boundaries. Emphasising the tendency for the female to serve as a cipher onto which the male projects his fears and desires, this essay echoes Berger's (1972) sentiments with regard to capitalist consumer culture, which Buck-Morss regards as central in creating a climate in which women are regarded as mass produced 'things'. Likewise, Buck-Morss discusses the ways by which women have been compelled to transform themselves into objects: arguing that capitalism creates a false image of liberation in allowing women the

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<sup>46</sup> Walkowitz (1998, 12) affirms that, while the narrative of melodrama that some women employed in these pages provided a language of expression, it could be infused with class prejudice, emphasising the rights of 'decent' women and tending to place some women beyond the realm of female sympathy and community.

‘freedom’ of being sexual objects, she suggests that playing with dolls provides the ground for learning reified social relations. In an extended study, Buck-Morss (1989, 99-101) points out that women’s organic productivity may be threatening to capitalist society by way of its contrast to mechanical productivity. However, she states that women have been subject to the ‘cult of the new’ whereby they are expected to exert continuous effort in order to exemplify a paralysed state of contemporaneity. Buck-Morss therefore refers to notions of sterility in which organic qualities and the capacity for change and variation become alienated, with the woman who aligns herself with ‘newness’ being encouraged to struggle against natural decay and repress her own productive power.

One of the key urban figures to have attracted critical attention since the 1980s is the *flâneur*. Originating in the eighteenth century, the term *flâneur* has been most commonly associated with Walter Benjamin’s critical writings on Charles Baudelaire, serving as a descriptor for a male urban Rambler endowed with a free-ranging aesthetic gaze.<sup>47</sup> Detailing this figure, Deborah Epstein Nord (1995) discusses the *flâneur* as represented by various nineteenth century writers and emphasises that men’s association with the public sphere and lack of association with self as spectacle combined to ensure that men were able to traverse the city unimpeded. Further to this, Nord distinguishes the *flâneur* from the female ‘streetwalker’, the former possessing a ‘penetrating gaze’ (1) and the latter serving as a projection of the spectator’s anxieties or as a symbol of decay and corruption. Deborah Parsons (2000) also provides a useful summary of the shifting definitions of the *flâneur*, drawing a distinction

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<sup>47</sup> Though existent prior to the Victorian era, Parsons (2000, 72) notes that the *flâneur* shifted post-Romanticism from the rural to the urban environment. It should also be noted that the *flâneur* was not an exclusively Parisian figure, with London also being shaped by modernity; albeit in a more ‘equivocal and piecemeal’ (Nead, 2000, 6) manner. London and Parisian contexts could differ in some respects of course, with Parsons (2000, 20) distinguishing the ‘more shadowy figure’ of the London observer from the artists that frequented Parisian cafes. As scholars have noted, though, modernity and capitalism are ultimately transnational phenomena (see Buck-Morss, 1986, 132; Parsons, 2000, 31).

between the Baudelairean *flâneur* (a rootless figure analogous to the passante or ragpicker) and the Benjaminian *flâneur* associated with masculine authority and surveillance: a distinction that, as Parsons observes, has often been overlooked.

Within her discussion of modernity, gender and urban space, Parsons (2000, 222) notes that woman has traditionally been seen to embody the city itself (as that which is there to be conquered). However, in her discussion of Baudelaire's urban poetry, Parsons observes that the narrators in question sometimes experience a disturbing encounter with a woman who, though arguably a muse, is also a mirror of the narrator (in terms of anonymity and freedom). This raises an important point in that theorists have debated the question of whether women could conceivably take on a role akin to that of the *flâneur*. As Stein (2003, 320) notes, major works on modernity and the city have displayed increasing interest in the notion of a *flâneuse*, with Parsons (2000, 39) observing that critical interest in the *flâneur* has provided a focal point of feminist critiques of hegemonic modernism. Distinguishing between different types of *flâneur*, Parsons focuses on the variability and destabilisation of this figure, subsequently suggesting that this also has a bearing on the notion of the *flâneuse*. Her conclusion (following analysis of various literary texts) is that the *flâneuse* exists but is akin to the passante or ragpicker rather than the authoritative bourgeois observer often assumed to be the sole or standard incarnation of the *flâneur*.

Parsons is therefore critical of the assumption that the city was an unequivocally male space in which women were repressed or marginal presences. Ultimately, Parsons suggests that, as the Benjaminian *flâneur* retreated from the streets (once the arcades were destroyed) to inhabit a place of scopic authority (the 'man at the window'), he took on a position of static detachment at the time when women were entering the city. That is not to say that Parsons discounts those difficulties facing women in the urban environment: she notes the possibility

of physical intimidation, objectification and harassment, and highlights the potentially bleak consequences of women being positioned as objects of transient desire. However, she suggests that the elusiveness and ambiguity of the urban walker in women's fiction indicates the ability of the *flâneuse* to 'walk away' from the male observer's gaze.<sup>48</sup>

Griselda Pollock (1988) is another scholar to have addressed women's engagement with the urban sphere. She studies this topic in relation to female impressionist painters located in Paris, concluding that women were restricted in terms of locations that were socially permissible for them to frequent, and that paintings by female artists endorse the domestic sphere as a site of modernity. Janet Wolff (1985) similarly states that women have been left out of the study of modernity because such study focuses on the public sphere, yet Elizabeth Wilson (1992) challenges Wolff's claim that women had been virtually consigned to the home by the end of the century, pointing to evidence that this was when women were emerging into the urban space. Wilson agrees that the female *flâneur* is unfeasible, but argues that the *flâneur* never really existed but embodied the fragmentary nature of the urban experience and its disintegrative effects on the male identity, the heroism for *both* sexes being in surviving this disorienting space. Parsons (2000, 40-41) concurs that Wolff and Pollock exclude women from the 'modern' due to their exclusive focus on the domestic world, adding that Wolff's interpretation of women's social presence as that of commodified objects ignores the link between the bourgeois female and the leisure that flânerie requires. Her main criticism, though, is that these theorists fail to recognise the *flâneur* as not just a historical figure but a critical metaphor, their focus on bourgeois women as confined to private realms neglecting the possibility of a female aesthetic perspective that can be seen as a form of flânerie (5).

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<sup>48</sup> Evoking Kern's (1996) comments on Victorian artwork, Parsons also refers to texts in which the female evades or refuses to acknowledge the desiring gaze (or else challenges the male onlooker's attempted objectification by looking back defiantly).



Concurring that *flânerie* can operate along perceptual lines, Friedberg (1993) describes a 'virtual gaze'. However, like Parsons, she also details women's practical experiences in the nineteenth century city, arguing that Wolff's conclusion that there cannot be a *flâneuse* is a consequence of her focusing on a modernity largely identified with work and politics. Taking up this theme, Erika Rappaport (2000) draws on historical documentation to demonstrate women's increased presence in London's West End during the latter half of the nineteenth century, this presence being fostered by public amenities such as clubs, tea shops and, especially, the department store. Discussing the rise of consumer culture, Rappaport suggests that it was within this context that women were able (and encouraged) to engage in the activity of shopping. She does not see women as brainwashed by consumerism but focuses on the pleasure and freedom that they found in this context. However, she acknowledges the competing discourses that surrounded women and shopping culture, referring to notions of impropriety as well as hostility on the part of husbands (in some instances, even resulting in court cases).

Women's association with shopping activities forms a key element of Walkowitz's (2000, 1-7) discussion of Victorian London. Walkowitz charts London's transformation into a Parisian style 'pleasure capital', with the retail revolution opening shopping up to a larger segment of middle-class women. Yet Walkowitz emphasises that, not only did shopping reinforce women's public role as visible indicators of their families' wealth, it exposed them to new dangers and assumptions, with many observers fearing that immersion in the sensuous world of consumption would render women subject to the seduction of men and sales promotion, as well as their own impulses. Walkowitz also emphasises the ambivalence surrounding the female shopper, pointing out that fashion pages encouraged consumer appetite while other columns advocated rational shopping. Ultimately, Walkowitz emphasises that the association

of shopping with marketable, sexualised femininity seemed to entitle men to harass women who wished to experience the freedom of the city.

Like Walkowitz, Parsons (2000, 46) notes that female consumers were often regarded in disparaging terms. However, she refers to the ambivalence associated with the department store as depicted in various texts, noting that the store could provide a feast for the consuming gaze, respite from the domestic sphere and an opportunity to exercise authority, but that the consuming gaze was itself dominated by the institution of the store. Parsons thus summarises the opportunities and potential drawbacks of shopping culture, but concludes that the shopper commanded a significant degree of economic and visual power and that 'the very existence of the department store presumed a female gaze and sensory response' (48). Elaborating on this, Friedberg (1993) suggests that the rise of the department store (along with packaged tourism and protocinematic entertainment) provided women with a 'semipublic space' and new forms of social mobility. Friedberg does not unreservedly proclaim shopping as a form of empowerment: she notes that new freedoms of lifestyle and 'choice' were available, but that women were also addressed in ways that played on entrenched constructions of gender. Friedberg thus emphasises the ambivalence of women's association with shopping yet asserts that it is in this arena that one is to find the *flâneuse*, with focus shifting from women as objects on display to women's gaze *at* the shop window.

Ultimately, Nead (2000) argues that correspondence regarding street harassment articulated confusion regarding identity and behaviour in mid-Victorian public spaces. She concludes that cultural historians should move away from monolithic conceptions of the male gaze and towards a model that regards identity as fluid and urban space as productive of identities and social relations. She also refers to correspondence by nineteenth century women who experienced a degree of exhilaration in the public sphere (74-79) and, expanding upon this,

Nord (1995) discusses the lives and texts of various female writers and social investigators in order to demonstrate that there *are* both real-life and fictional examples of women attempting to take on the role of urban observer. However, Nord adds that such attempts were fraught with contradictions and obstacles, and often required the use of subterfuge. Nord also focuses on the emergence in the late nineteenth century of a loose-knit community of young, single, educated women who strove to lead independent urban lives. However, while these women achieved some success, Nord states that some were not able to overcome the physical and psychological difficulties of self-sufficient urban living.

Walker (2000; 2006) has also explored women's experiences of London in latter half of the nineteenth century, focusing on the suffragist activities of women living and working in the city. Walker makes a particularly relevant point in noting that some women used their homes as political bases and networking hubs, thus demonstrating that one cannot simply posit a binary between a domestic sphere and a public sphere of work and politics. Instead, Walker focuses on a public-private hybrid while emphasising that women also exercised a presence in the wider city.<sup>49</sup> Like Nord, however, Walker (2000, 299) acknowledges that the positions that women took up 'remained deeply contested and within certain boundaries'.

### **Female-Authored Texts**

In addition to women's practical experiences in the Victorian landscape, female-authored poetry has been effective in demonstrating women's awareness of, and responses to, gender inequality – including dichotomised visual relations. As Gilbert and Gubar (2000) have discussed, female writers in the Victorian era were conscious of the challenges facing women

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<sup>49</sup> Walker (2006, 189) refers, for instance, to 'doorstepping' as a particularly transgressive act, involving as it did women confronting politicians on their doorsteps and thus violating the boundaries of 'masculine' space and authority.

who attempted the pen, with women having traditionally been seen as blank slates<sup>50</sup> and muses. However, the latter half of the twentieth century saw the recovery of various female poets by scholars such as Angela Leighton, Isobel Armstrong and Dorothy Mermin. So, while it is possible that women might have internalised cultural mores to a certain extent, there exist various texts that testify to women's awareness of their social positioning and the psychological effects that this awareness could produce.

A preliminary point to be recognised is that various nineteenth century female poets indicate an awareness of and dissatisfaction with cultural standards of femininity. Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856), for instance, serves as an incisive comment on the male artist's obsessive focus on an idealised female image and corresponding neglect of the real woman. Texts such as Eliza Cook's 'Ballad of the Ugly Maiden' (1845), Elizabeth Siddal's 'Lust of the Eyes' (c. 1855-1857) and Emily Brontë's 'Stars' (1845) likewise express an interest in such subject matter. Rossetti's and Siddal's poems indicate a clear awareness of the injustice and inequality of women being valued for their visual attributes and the pleasure that they provide to a male gazer. They are, moreover, all the more relevant given that both Rossetti and Siddal occupied dual roles as not only models for their Pre-Raphaelite colleagues but artists in their own right. Cook's poem, meanwhile, focuses upon the pain and despair that can result from living in a culture in which beauty is a woman's currency and finding oneself utterly lacking in this regard. Finally, Brontë's poem gains an added element of interest in the contrast that it draws between objectifying vision and a more empathetic, mutual form of gazing,<sup>51</sup> the latter evoking the Winnicottian ideal of empathetic mirroring.

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<sup>50</sup> For more on this motif see Nead (1995).

<sup>51</sup> Further to the themes of gender and visual politics within this poem, Newman explores Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) from a similar perspective, stating that, though this novel depicts both the

In addition to awareness and despondency, female-authored poems have also conveyed the more complex psychological consequences that can arise from a split between social expectations and one's sense of self. Such poems draw upon psychoanalytic themes of splitting, projection and doubling, these mechanisms having been discussed by Freud throughout his career and detailed from an object relations perspective by Melanie Klein ([1946] 1988), who contended that, during early development (the 'paranoid-schizoid' phase), the child has not yet developed the ability to tolerate 'bad' and 'good' in the same person and employs this mechanism of splitting so as to separate the two. Drawing upon Winnicott ([1960] 1965), Wright (2009, 100) has also affirmed that if words are pressed on the infant they can lead to splitting of the self into a compliant verbal self (false self) and a preverbal self (true self) that remains hidden. In such poems, the mirror motif is employed not as a shorthand for vanity but to convey psychological division. In this respect, these poems also evoke Freud's account of 'the uncanny', which Freud ([1919] 2003) defined as a feeling of fear that also contains a dim sense of familiarity and ambivalence as to a person's / object's status.<sup>52</sup> Freud consequently posited psychological splitting as one aspect of the uncanny, adding to this the related concept of doubling.

Freud's comments on doubling were influenced by Otto Rank's ([1941] 1958; [1914] 1971) research, which presented anthropological data relating to beliefs held by ancient and primitive peoples regarding one's shadow or mirror image. Rank refers, to example, to the belief of the inhabitants of Fiji that people possess two souls, the 'good' soul coinciding with

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scopophilic, voyeuristic 'male gaze' and the female usurpation of this gaze, it also suggests the possibility of a mutual gaze that does not operate along hierarchical lines.

<sup>52</sup> Freud ([1905] 2003, 151) cites the female genitals as one of the key sources of such a sensation, and this example is particularly acute in the sense that it locates the source of dread as *seeing* something (or, in Freud's terms, seeing *nothing*) and suggests a primal linking of uncanniness with the female. Nevertheless, uncanniness can emerge in various guises and is, ultimately, based upon a mix of disjunction and familiarity.

one's reflection and the 'bad' embodied by the shadow. This serves to demonstrate that the double can potentially be reassuring or troubling, and Jung's discussion of the shadow explores similar terrain. For Jung, the shadow may serve as a manifestation of various aspects of one's subconscious, representing the 'dark side' of one's being yet also expressing qualities of creativity, energy and passion. The 'dark side' may therefore represent 'the true spirit of life' (1965, 235) yet nevertheless signifies aspects of oneself that can be difficult to acknowledge. Jung therefore indicates that facing one's shadow is a subjective experience but that conflicting desires are likely at stake in one way or another.

Theorists and cultural historians have positioned women's sense of alienation within a wider problematisation of identity during the Victorian period, which they partly attribute to a variety of new optical devices and effects that provoked both excitement and anxieties regarding the stability of identity. Nead (2008), for example, summarises some of the main optical developments of this era and their effects upon widely-held notions of identity and validity, emphasising a growing awareness of the transience and unreliability of the image.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Showalter (1990) and Warner (2002) point to technologies of reproduction as helping destabilise the notion of unified identity. Smith (2000) also discusses the association of the photograph with theories of mirrors and shadows (both established motifs of doubling), photography not only coinciding with the prevalence of psychoanalytic theory but intersecting with such discourses by generating changes in attitudes to self-depiction and prompting metaphysical questions.<sup>54</sup> Smith consequently summarises that the double was a persistent

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<sup>53</sup> Nead (2008) argues that such concerns became central in the late nineteenth century, with people becoming increasingly aware of the transience and unreliability of the image. Consequently, the still photograph (regarded as an adequate form of identification in 1870) was no longer seen as dependable by 1900.

<sup>54</sup> Barthes (1981, 12, cited by Smith, 2000, 98) refers to the 'profound madness of Photography...that faint uneasiness which seizes me what I look at "myself"', with Smith consequently remarking upon attempts made to suppress the duality and psychological intensity lying at the heart of photographic representation.

motif but was redefined in the mid to late years of the century, the development of photography being not only concurrent with the prevalence of the double in fiction and psychoanalytic theory but intersecting with such discourses.

The split identity and the motif of doubling are common themes within Victorian works but take on an extra dimension when one considers the constrictive roles by which women were defined during this time and which demonised female independence, creativity and sexuality. Such fragmentation can consequently be considered in relation to female-authored mirror poems, with Augusta Webster having produced various poems that combine social criticism with emotional turmoil, including 'A Castaway' (1870), 'By the Looking-Glass' (1866) and, especially, 'Faded' ([1870] 1893): an acute depiction of a woman plagued by the hopelessness that she associates with the ageing process, ageing here being a gendered phenomenon.

Webster is therefore effective in combining feminist social criticism with an emphasis on psychological trauma, and Mary Coleridge's 'The Other Side of a Mirror' (1882) brings such psychological dissonance to the fore, depicting a speaker who looks into her mirror only to find herself confronted with a stark image of a woman whom she does not recognise, while also experiencing a tentative sense of identification.

### **Further Research**

As some of the texts discussed throughout this review have demonstrated, interdisciplinary study can be employed to successful effect and has been subject to growing interest from the late twentieth century onwards. Nevertheless, there remains ample room for studies that seek to test boundaries and examine connections between superficially dissimilar modes of representation. There is also validity in exploring the application of theoretical frameworks across disciplines, as demonstrated by those studies that have considered feminist film theory

in relation to literary and artistic texts. So, in addition to those more traditional literary approaches, there is ample room for future studies that endeavour to convey the ways in which particular modes of representation and other cultural mores can pervade a given context. The implicit links that this thesis has drawn between Victorian and present day culture also invite elaboration, for study of topics such as street harassment and ageing as a gendered phenomenon highlights striking continuities. Likewise, artistic and literary texts can reveal a gendered alignment of gazes that pre-empt the delineation of such a model within film studies.

The study of previously overlooked poets such as Augusta Webster is another ongoing project: though rediscovery of such poets has led to increased recognition since the late twentieth century, there remains call for further analysis. More specifically, the psychological themes and social commentary of poems such as those produced by Webster can be effective in demonstrating not only women's awareness of and objection to such matters but the potentially traumatic effects that unequal standards of judgement and dichotomised viewing relations can induce. That Webster expresses particularly staunch views in this respect, as well as an acute sense of their emotional impact, highlights the merit of exploring both her work and that of other female writers from this period. Bringing such work to light is particularly beneficial given that the naturalisation of gendered modes of viewing and gender inequality more generally has been so insistent and extensive. In other words, there is always validity in striving to critique and denaturalise this template, with intensive analysis of theoretical models also being useful in examining how artificial binaries may arise.

There is also call for further studies of those texts in which female characters seek, successfully or otherwise, to elude or challenge their positioning as objects of vision; that is, branching out from the issue of objectification and its psychological effects to explore those



mechanisms that women have employed in an attempt at resistance. Lastly, it would be beneficial to explore texts that seek to explore modes of vision and relating that do not operate along objectifying, hierarchical lines. Such texts are of interest in that they reiterate the distressing effects and sense of desolation that can be induced not only by objectification but by the lack of a desired alternative. Not only this, they help demonstrate that vision is not innately objectifying, embodying those aims discussed by object relations theorists of attaining a more balanced, egalitarian mode of relating. As scholars have observed, such a state has often proven an ideal rather than a reality, especially given the ingrained nature of binary thinking and cultural institutions that maintain hierarchical relations (typically privileging the male). Still, studying intersubjective theory and female-authored poetry helps underscore that there *is* a conceivable alternative that, furthermore, does not entail role reversal or dismissal of vision in its entirety.

## **CHAPTER 1: GENDER AND VISUALITY WITHIN VICTORIAN CULTURE**

While vision is not inherently oppressive, it can be – and has been – employed in ways that are not always benign. As Phelan (1993, 6) summarises, ‘it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession.’ It is therefore vital to consider oppressive forms of vision in more detail, particularly in terms of their operation along male / female lines. Within Western culture, certainly, there has long existed a predominant binary whereby visual agency has been aligned with men while women have been positioned as objects of vision, and this consequently opens up an array of theoretical and practical issues. Taking as its basis the idea that studying oppressive and limiting categories ‘might help us to imagine what it might mean to think beyond them’ (Psomiades, 2000, 43), this chapter will provide an overview of visuality within the context of Victorian culture, highlighting the gendered biases of scientific theory (including physiognomy and Darwinian theory) and the exaltation of sight as a quintessentially masculine sense. This chapter will also discuss the prevalence of visual material and mechanisms during this time, referring to technological advances that enabled the proliferation and disposability of print material. The rise of consumer culture is of additional relevance in this regard, for the longstanding tendency to regard women as objects becomes explicit when considered in light of commodification. However, given that classical art and literature retained their cultural standing during the Victorian era, this chapter will also study a selection of artistic and literary texts (including several poems by Robert Browning) that dramatise this gendered model of vision. This chapter will therefore highlight recurring motifs evidenced throughout the Victorian cultural arena, demonstrating the widespread presence of that template wherein the female is positioned as an object of eroticised spectacle.

Vision and visuality were key topics of research throughout the Victorian era, with a great deal of scientific interest being invested into the functioning – and power – of the human eye. Popular scientific writing played a central role in this regard, frequently emphasising ‘the miraculous properties of vision’ (Flint, 2000, 26) and the eye’s capacity to convey numerous mental and physiological conditions. By the same token, the human body was itself regarded in visual terms via the science of physiognomy, which held that a person’s nature could be determined by their outward appearance – a stance that reiterated the power of the viewing eye and subjected the body to ‘semioticization’ (Brooks, 1993, 25). That is not to say that this faculty was afforded absolute supremacy, yet it is nevertheless vital to recognise the perceived importance of visibility and legibility in the Victorian era, as well as the ways in which gender fed into visual relations. This gendered structuring of vision is of particular importance, for, while scientific theory exalted the visual faculty, the male was afforded ‘the sovereign status of seer’ (Bartky, 1990, 68) in contrast to the female’s assigned role as object of vision.

Scientific theory thus exerted considerable influence in shaping this gendering of vision during this era, one contention being that differences between the sexes manifested themselves through the eye – an approach illustrated by Joseph Turnley’s *The Language of the Eye: The Importance and Dignity of the Eye as Indicative of General Character, Female Beauty, and Manly Genius* (1856). As befitting its title, this text propagates largely conventional notions of male / female traits, exalting the ethereality and whimsicality of the female in contrast to the rationality and resolution of the male. Accordingly, Turnley specifies that ‘the eye of the man is most firm; woman’s the most flexible...man’s surveys and observes; woman’s glances’ (52). Though simplistic and deterministic, this statement raises a relevant point in its recognition that there are different *types* of looking and, indeed, the glance can sometimes be expressive of dynamism and elusiveness. However, this does not

alter the stereotypical, prescriptive nature of these descriptions, with Turnley contrasting woman's gentle, joyous, light eyes<sup>55</sup> with the darker, serious eyes of the male. To glance can, moreover, be indicative of timidity, suggesting women's awareness of the impropriety associated with an active gaze on the part of the female. The problematics of female visual agency will be explored throughout this thesis but, suffice to say, an active gaze is associated with 'masculine' qualities such as power, authority, and sexual desire. For the female to exercise such a gaze would consequently be regarded as unseemly, particularly given the emphasis placed on female modesty and deference during the Victorian age. As such, the glance may in some contexts suggest a furtiveness that stands in contrast to the unbridled gaze allotted to the male.

While scientific material helped legitimise a dichotomised model of visual relations, Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection is notable for its lasting influence in this area, having shaped dominant Victorian constructions of science, gender and sexuality (Richards, 1997, 136). Before considering this model in more detail, it is worth noting that a comparable outlook had previously been disseminated by Erasmus Darwin, who associated males with potent visionary power and argued that the traits and appearance of human offspring could be shaped by the mental image that the father envisioned during conception.<sup>56</sup> To theorise reproduction in this manner reiterates the extent to which male vision (both literal and imaginative) has been lauded while women have been left in a passive position, and Darwin was not alone in such a theorisation. Quite the contrary, there existed a prevalent tendency

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<sup>55</sup> Williams (2002, 66 n4) observes that light eyes have frequently been associated with virginal heroines and regarded as 'transparent, unfocused, easy to penetrate, incapable of penetration'. This is in contrast to dark eyes, which suggest visual potency and have been associated with the *femme fatale*.

<sup>56</sup> A striking example of this hypothesis is provided by Darwin's account of a case in which a landowner's daughter supposedly bore a strong resemblance to a young woman with whom he had been infatuated around the time of conception. See Ogden (2005, 73-115 (79)) for further insight into this case and Darwin's theory more generally.

for scientific material to interpret reproduction as a process whereby the active power of the male shaped the formless matter of the female ‘seed’ (evoking the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea).<sup>57</sup> This interpretation had been largely discredited by the end of the nineteenth century, as had Erasmus Darwin’s theory. However, the same cannot be said of the younger Darwin’s model of sexual selection, which continues to be cited as evidence of the ‘naturalness’ of that cultural template wherein a desiring gaze is afforded to the male while women are valued for traits of youth and beauty.

Hinging upon a contrast between human sexual selection and the behaviour of animals, Charles Darwin’s core argument was that human females have largely not regarded decorative, aesthetic qualities as a factor in their choice of a mate, while human males have selected mates precisely on such grounds. Darwin was, however, writing from the perspective of a heterosexual male living in a patriarchal Western context, and, as Ogden (2005, 117-178) demonstrates, his theories are beset with inconsistencies. For example, Darwin associates men with intellectual rather than perceptive faculties yet emphasises men as those who exercise perception in choosing a mate. Also, despite having noted that ‘[a] girl sees a handsome man...admires his appearance and says she will marry him’ (Darwin, 1903, 2: 63), Darwin largely dismisses indications of a female selecting along these lines (presumably preferring to regard such notions as aberrant). As Ogden (2005, 125-126) points out, moreover, Darwin’s contention that women have become more beautiful as a result of evolution loses credibility due to Darwin’s references to *culturally specific ornamentation* rather than secondary sexual characteristics. Indeed, this is indicative of a wider disparity

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<sup>57</sup> Gilbert and Gubar (1989, 32) summarise this gendered model of reproduction and further remark that ‘this corollary notion that the chief creature man has generated is woman has a long and complex history. From Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men’ (2000, 12). For more on the gendered biases of reproductive theory see Tuana (1988) and Russett (1989).

whereby women have been associated with nature yet expected to employ *cultural* tools so as to meet *cultural* expectations.

Rather than proving that this gendered dichotomy of looking is innate, then, Darwin's theory reveals the cultural biases of what Darwin posits as natural and disinterested. Such bias went largely unexplored until the twentieth century yet had not gone unnoticed prior to this, with various scientific theorists (including feminist thinkers)<sup>58</sup> having pointed to the pitfalls in Darwin's thinking and offered alternative conceptualisations. Eliza Burt Gamble (1894, 70), for example, asserted that women's style of dress did not express 'their natural ideas of taste and harmony' but the extent to which women's 'controlling agency' had been surrendered.<sup>59</sup> Of course, one cannot assume that alternative theories provide factual 'remedies', yet the motivations behind such critiques are often readily apparent while those of accepted scientific models more often remained concealed. Moreover, such challenges to Darwinism garnered little attention while Darwin's own model has enjoyed a position of cultural prominence.<sup>60</sup> It is therefore imperative to recognise the assumptions and biases inherent in Darwin's theory of sexual selection, as this is one of the principal models upon which inequality rests.

In addition to scientific accounts of ocularity, the Victorian era was a time that saw a widespread interest in visuality and prevalence of visual material. As Comolli (1980, 122) observes, the latter half of the century became 'a sort of frenzy of the visible' in which visual

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<sup>58</sup> As Richards (1997, 136) points out, not all feminists disputed the notion of biological and evolutionary difference but contested the belief that women's mental differences should be seen as inferior. Still, this stance 'had a dangerous tendency to reinforce traditional stereotypes and cater to the drawing of biological limits to feminine potentiality' (137).

<sup>59</sup> Gamble (1894, cited by Ogden, 2005, 128-132) in fact suggested that women originally controlled sexual selection (with colour blindness indicative of the susceptibility of male vision to weakness and disorder) but that this agency was wrested away from them, leaving humanity vulnerable to man's animalistic urges.

<sup>60</sup> Hubbard (1990, 93) specifies that women lacked the professional status and scientific experience that Darwin possessed – unsurprisingly, given that they did not have equal accesses to education, travel and practical engagement with world affairs. Moreover, the work they *did* produce was scarcely acknowledged by professionals and has largely been disregarded.

stimuli became increasingly plentiful as a result of optical inventions and advancements. To discuss such advancements in detail would be to cover well-trodden ground, yet there is no doubt that an interest in visuality pervaded numerous arenas, with the popularity of forms of entertainment such as the diorama and panorama testifying to the public's appetite for spectacle. The thriving success of museums and exhibitions during this time was similarly dependent upon such visual appeal, while optical toys such as the kaleidoscope brought this fascination into the domestic sphere. Such visual appeal was also a key aspect of the similarly thriving travel industry,<sup>61</sup> not only in terms of the sights that greeted tourists but the promotional material that was pivotal in establishing the excitement of such locales. Moreover, even material that did not contain actual images often made prominent use of visual imagery, as evidenced by the prevalence of optical motifs in both poetry and psychoanalytic theory and interpretation (a burgeoning field in the later years of the century). In fact, as Jay (1993, 150) demonstrates, the abundance of 'scopic regimes' in play by the end of the century ultimately led to 'a palpable loss of confidence in the hitherto "noblest of the senses"' (58). Even so, the Victorian era was marked by a drive towards the visual, with Jay (1988, 3) elsewhere noting that the visual 'has been dominant in modern Western culture in a wide variety of ways' and that vision remains 'the master sense of the modern era.'

While the visual nature of the Victorian landscape manifested itself in various arenas, advancements in photography and printing processes were vital in cultivating this explosion of visuality. Following the production of the world's first photograph (by Nicéphore Niépce) in 1826, the nineteenth century saw numerous photographic developments such that, by the 1880s, photographic technology had become widely accessible and affordable.<sup>62</sup> Photography

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<sup>61</sup> For more on nineteenth century tourism and spectatorship, see Vye (2004).

<sup>62</sup> To discuss these advancements in detail is beyond the parameters of this thesis, but key innovations include the advent of the calotype process (1841), which enabled the production of multiple copies of an

thus had a significant impact upon Victorian culture, this being an age that facilitated the ability to produce – and reproduce – photographic material that offered realistic results with a minimum of time and expense. However, photography did not merely constitute a new form of practical technology but fostered substantial debate whereby it was variously considered ‘as a technology of seeing and visualizing; as a means of mechanical reproduction; and as a relation of the visible to the invisible’ (Smith, 1992, 42).

Though photography could be used for experimental purposes and create uncanny effects, by dint of its capacity to capture and preserve an image it also seemed to promise ‘an enhanced role for ocular proof’ (Flint, 2000, 30)<sup>63</sup> and has often been linked with surveillance. Hence, while it indicated a move away from the eye’s perceived power towards a greater emphasis on mechanical processes, it can be seen to have maintained the cultural status afforded to ocularity (albeit with the onus now on an artificial eye). This also formed part of a wider project of order, classification and control that was taking place during the latter half of the century: a project that entailed significant renovation of the urban landscape and the gathering and cataloguing of information (via mapping, archiving and urban planning),<sup>64</sup> the imperative being to transform that which was hidden, chaotic or mysterious into something ‘visible, legible, and governable’ (Seltzer, 1992, 95). So, in the same way that the human body was

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image, and the wet collodion (or ‘wet plate’) process in 1851, which was reasonably inexpensive and offered high quality results. Other notable advancements during the latter half of the century include the production of the first reproducible colour photograph, the invention of the single lens reflex camera, the mass production of dry photographic plates and the use of a half-tone engraving process in the production of newspaper photographs in the 1880s.

<sup>63</sup> Shires (2009, 126) contrasts photography’s fantastic aspects with its increasing association with ‘discourses of verisimilitude’: an association whereby photography came to be valued for its ‘truth-function’. Further to this, Seiberling and Bloore (1986, 18) argue that the 1850s were marked by substantial improvements in photographic technology (producing more consistent, enduring, realistic results) but that such advancements were due to experimentation on the part of amateur photographers; hence, when the technology came to be used to achieve exact technical goals, the enthusiasm of many of these photographers waned.

<sup>64</sup> Nead (2000) provides a comprehensive survey of the modernising imperatives of mid-late Victorian London, including an overview of mapping and classification projects.



subject to semioticisation and classification, the wider landscape was also subject to a perceived need for visibility and legibility, with urban regeneration projects entailing rapid excavation and renewal. As will be seen later, there was a sense of anxiety associated with such processes due to uncertainty as to what might lie beneath 'the veil'. The line between order and disorder could also be precarious, yet the latter half of the century nevertheless entailed a pervading drive towards visibility, demonstrating the obsession with visuality and visual 'evidence' that scholars have frequently cited as characteristic of modernity (Leppert, 2004, 19).

In addition to meeting desires for visibility and legibility, photography can also be positioned within the climate of industrialisation and consumerism that was likewise taking shape in the later years of the century and that entailed 'the cult of images, the secularization/sublimation of bodies, their ephemeral nature and reproducibility' (Buci-Glucksmann, 1986a, 221). As noted above, photographic advancements did not only enable realistic results but made the production and reproduction of images cheaper and easier, and this, along with innovations in printing technology, enabled the proliferation of disposable visual material.<sup>65</sup> Such material thus contributed to (and was itself the product of) a 'phantasmagoria of capitalist culture' (Benjamin, 1999, 8), cultivating an environment that relied upon visual stimuli and mass production, exchangeability and ownership. This, in turn, encouraged 'not so much a way of being as a way of seeing – a way best characterized as visually acquisitive' (Agnew, 1983, 73). The aforementioned popularity of overseas travel, for instance, did not always signal merely the desire for new sights and experiences but could also entail an appetite to master and possess. This appetite is epitomised by processes of colonisation, with Comolli (1980,

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<sup>65</sup> In an essay entitled 'The New Art of Printing', Gore (1844) underscored the emerging prominence of visual material and, referring to the capacity of the visual to rapidly transmit information and ideas, stated, '[w]e are not *told*, but *shown* how the word is wagging. . . . All the world is now instructed by symbols' (47).

122-123) noting that, via a geographical expansion of the field of the visible and representable, ‘the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriable’.

While colonialism provides a prime example of the acquisitiveness that characterised the Victorian era, a similar emphasis on ownership was prominent on home ground; particularly given the rise of consumer culture. However, the very fact that goods were mass produced meant that they lacked the rarefied status of objects such as the antique or painting, thus altering the nature of ownership. Though open to personalisation following purchase, such goods nevertheless lacked the uniqueness and rarity of the antique, with mass production inspiring a more compulsive amassing of objects.<sup>66</sup> This also meant that such objects were not subject to a perceived need for preservation (on the basis of being exceptional or irreplaceable) but became part of a cycle of exchangeability, disposability and replaceability, creating a ‘proliferation of signs according to demand’ (Baudrillard, 1983, 85). This explosion of signs subsequently gave rise to an environment wherein an original object was liable to become subsumed by copy after copy, resulting in a sea of simulacra. What emerges from such a milieu is a dehumanising tendency and loss of authenticity and charm, resulting in a world in which ‘the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by...the sense of having’ (Marx, 1975, 352).

The increasingly rapid pace of the Victorian cultural landscape consequently entailed the mass circulation of objects and images, yet this was also an environment marked by competing aims. Frequently remarking upon the ambivalence of the mid-late Victorian

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<sup>66</sup> As Miller (1987) emphasises, one must recognise the process of consumption as potentially transforming the alienable into the inalienable via the practice of making objects one’s own. Even so, Miller remains cognisant that ‘[t]his is not, of course, a description of all consumption or a realizable aim of all the participants in the modern economy’ (192) and that alienation ‘describes an actual condition in modern life and is a further example of that reification which defines the unhappy consciousness’ (204).

landscape, scholars have painted an image of a precarious chiaroscuro world that encompassed order, renovation and the sheen of consumerism, yet also ruin, disorder and confusion.<sup>67</sup> This brings us back to issues of legibility and classification, for, while modernity and industrialisation were predicated upon orderliness, this was undercut by the heterogeneity, frenzied pace and exhilaration of the increasingly cosmopolitan environment. These latter aspects could, however, be overwhelming, creating a counter desire for ‘safety in a world of changing values’ (Flint, 2000, 235). Attempts to blur boundaries and explore varying subjectivities were thus liable to trigger imperatives of containment. This applied not only to the public space but to the individual, as evidenced by physiognomy and the perceived need to classify the population into reassuring ‘types’ (Nead, 2000, 70).<sup>68</sup>

Further to efforts to impose order and legibility, the potential delights and dangers of the increasingly heterogeneous Victorian city also evoked fears that one may be tempted towards transgression,<sup>69</sup> these fears mobilising defence mechanisms such as imagining oneself or one’s object of desire turned to stone (Wilson, 1992, 109-110).<sup>70</sup> However, the conjecture that one may defend oneself against the city by imagining oneself *or one’s object of desire* turned to stone is relevant in that, most often, it is the female who is ‘petrified’. Indeed, while Walter Benjamin’s (1999, 23) likening of the face of modernity to the gaze of the Medusa is apt, it is the woman who is most often on the receiving end of a petrifying gaze, in much the

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<sup>67</sup> Jervis (1998, 6) refers to modernity as ‘a rich tapestry of transient impressions, bright lights and advertising hoardings, the pleasures and dangers of city life, the instant temptations of consumer excess, and the fashion and foibles of “street culture”.’ For a detailed and wide-ranging account of the ambivalence associated with the urban environment in the mid to late nineteenth century see Nead (2000).

<sup>68</sup> The interrelationship of order and disorder within this context is discussed at length by Crary (1999).

<sup>69</sup> For a review of the dangers (real and imagined) of the Victorian city see Walkowitz (1992) and Nead (2000).

<sup>70</sup> From a psychoanalytic stance, such an interpretation recalls Freud’s (*SE* 18: 273-274) contention that the male may find reassurance in the idea of being petrified given the stiffening effect that petrification entails (the body here being analogous with the phallus). The archetypal trigger for such a scenario is the sight of the ‘castrated’ female genitals, with petrification signalling protection against this fearful image. It should, however, be noted that theorists such as Coriat (1941) and Flugel (1924) have interpreted petrification in the more conventional sense as a metaphor for fear-stricken paralysation.

same way that it is the Medusa – not Perseus – who is ultimately petrified. It is, moreover, the female who has typically been cast as mute, frozen object within classical art and poetry. For the woman to be turned to stone may therefore kill two birds with one stone: it defuses fears regarding one's own transgression while helping to neutralise any perceived transgression on the part of the female, reinforcing the linking of women with passivity, objectification and the myth of eternal youth and beauty.<sup>71</sup> This has consequently perpetuated the sense that this is women's 'natural' and desired role, with the suppression of women's subjectivity having resulted in a void wherein dolls occupy the space where women's vision should be (Forrester, 1986, 35).

To equate women with dolls is, sadly, an apt analogy given the extent to which women have been regarded as mere playthings and encouraged to embody a state of perpetual infancy rather than undergoing any process of maturation (organic or intellectual). Consumer culture adds an extra dimension to this metaphor in that, as Simmel ([1900] 1978) emphasised, it was not only consumer goods that were subject to interchangeability and objectification but also human relationships and sexuality. Accordingly, those objectifying tendencies directed at women not only found a parallel in consumer culture but were made explicit by consumer culture. Such a landscape thus highlights the association of women with consumer goods displayed before the consumer's gaze, yet it was not only goods that were on show in such an environment, with stores often utilising mannequins as part of their window displays.<sup>72</sup> To draw a parallel between women and mannequins is again apt in this context, as the modernising processes in effect from the mid century onwards enabled the development of the

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<sup>71</sup> As Irigaray (1985, 134) summarises, woman's own gestures are 'often paralyzed' and she 'can "appear" and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely, men.'

<sup>72</sup> Glass-fronted window displays had been around since the 1700s but became ubiquitous within the modern city and grew increasingly elaborate in accordance with the competitiveness of this consumer environment and its reliance upon immediate visual appeal.

city as a shopping district wherein mannequins embodied a commodified state of blank visuality. It is important to state that, in one respect, such displays also invited a female gaze, with shopping culture providing women with a degree of public engagement that they had hitherto been denied. The opportunities and difficulties associated with women's public presence will be returned to later in this thesis, but, what is important to establish at the outset is that gendered divisions were still very much present, as was the perceived need to prevent female transgression and maintain boundaries.

As a metaphor for women's position within consumer culture, the mannequin raises a further point of interest in that it is fundamentally unchanging yet appears in ever-changing guises. In this respect, the mannequin is illustrative of a paradox facing real women: though women have often been subject to a cultural ideal that privileges unchanging (or, petrified) youth and beauty, thinking in terms of the link between women and commodities places women within a culture of exchangeability and transience. From this perspective, women are valued on a superficial level for a fleeting period before being discarded (and most likely replaced): as Parsons (2000, 27) aptly summarises, they are 'objects of fleeting desire as much as other urban commodities, left as rubbish in the gutter when no longer wanted'. There would thus appear to be two contrasting approaches here – to be frozen or discarded – yet both can, theoretically, go hand in hand in that women are expected to display *unchanging* qualities of *youth and newness*. This is, of course, oxymoronic: art and literature can create a fantasised image of eternally youthful femininity, as can the mannequin; however, to live in a 'biological rigor mortis of eternal youth' (Buck-Morss, 1989, 99) is impossible for actual women (though this has not prevented women from being encouraged to strive towards this ideal). For the purposes of this thesis, what is especially notable is that the two approaches both place heavy emphasis on women's surface attributes, seeking to either preserve these attributes or discard

the commodity that no longer possesses. Organic change has no place in either approach,<sup>73</sup> both of which treat women predominantly as objects of vision. And, ultimately, both are defined by male desires: to be aligned with petrification or disposal is, after all, hardly something that women have cause to embrace.

Commodification is, then, a critical process to take into account when examining cultural conceptions of gender in the Victorian era, for it encouraged a mindset wherein women were *themselves* regarded as commodities. As Irigaray (1985, 180) states, such a cultural milieu results in the division of the woman-commodity ‘into two irreconcilable “bodies”: her “natural” body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values.’ The psychological dissonance that such a division can induce will be examined later in this thesis, but the notion of the body as a commodity is, first and foremost, an enabling factor with regard to the objectification of women. Viewed as a commodified object and denied her own subjectivity, the woman can be seen as an allegory for the modern in that the social meaning furnished upon her body is analogous to that of the ‘commodity-body’ (Buci-Glucksmann, 1986a, 228), representing loss of naturalness, meaning and aura,<sup>74</sup> followed by aesthetic reconstruction within commodified culture.

The Victorian cultural landscape was therefore a space in which processes of commodification had significant ramifications, including the continued emphasis on women as objects of vision (here underscored by the equation of women with consumer goods). That

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<sup>73</sup> This desire to maintain a state of permanence and prevent signs of change or disruption brings to mind the denigration and fear of mutation as described by Warner (2002). One example of such a stance is evident in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which, in contrast to Pagan beliefs, depicts metamorphosis as perverse; hence heaven is seen as unchanging while in hell ‘everything combines and recombines’ (36). Most important is the difference in attitudes towards outward changes: the Catholic doctrine involves the transformation of substance but not appearance. In Pagan metamorphosis, conversely, it is outward appearances that change while the spirit remains the same: ‘it inverts the wonder, profanely’ (39).

<sup>74</sup> See Benjamin ([1936] 2008, 7).

this was a highly visual landscape also meant the proliferation of images *of* women, with female faces and bodies being omnipresent in the form of photography and poster art (Walkowitz, 1998, 14-15). Considering photography in light of modernity and consumer culture thus underscores the transient nature of some of the visual material produced within this context, with the aforementioned advancements in photographic technology (and printing processes) meaning that photographs became cheaper and easier to produce and reproduce. Within this context, the photograph existed not only as a discrete object but as part of the replication and dissemination of visual material throughout the cultural landscape. Transience was therefore a defining characteristic of such material, the ease and inexpensiveness of reproduction rendering it easily disposable and corresponding with wider imperatives towards increased speed, productivity and newness. Consequently, one can regard the fleeting value afforded to women as finding a parallel in the similarly fleeting worth of mass produced visual material, the disposability of images taking women's transient 'worth' to its natural conclusion.

Like the artwork, however, photography itself carries an inherent paradox of transience *and* permanence. It offers a means of preservation, yet what is being preserved is a fleeting moment. Given this commonality between photography and artwork, it is worth considering the relationship between these mediums in more detail, particularly given the co-existence and interrelationship of classical artwork and mass produced material during this period. Indeed, it is notable that this was an era marked by not only modernising imperatives and technological innovations but the continued prominence of high art and poetry. There are, of course, notable differences between these mediums: as Smith (1992, 45) observes, for instance, where a painting and a staged photograph depict the same event, the photograph suggests the possibility that what is depicted is real – even if we are aware that this is

probably not the case. Another clear difference between mass produced imagery and classical art is their divergent cultural status, the former lacking the cachet afforded to the latter.

Indeed, as Psomiades (2000, 28; 34) observes, the growth of industrialisation and consumerism during the nineteenth century led to a corresponding value placed upon poetic and artistic works, such works being posed in contrast to the wealth of goods and imagery available for mass consumption.<sup>75</sup>

The proliferation of cheaply produced, disposable material could therefore instigate a counter desire for the preservation and prestige of high art, again highlighting ambivalence towards the modern environment. Furthermore, the distinction between mass produced material and higher cultural texts has sometimes been deliberately emphasised so as to maintain the latter's rarefied image and, as will be seen shortly, to legitimise subject matter that might otherwise be seen as gratuitous or unseemly. However, despite such attempts, photography and artistic production cannot be regarded as wholly discrete. Smith (1992), for instance, points to the literalising of the metaphoric within painted images as being suggestive of the influence of photography. Artwork and photography were also intertwined in the sense that art itself was subject to photographic reproduction, becoming detached from its context and available for buying and selling. The reproduction of artworks could in one respect blur the perceived line between 'high' and 'lower' cultural texts and, in those cases where the reproduced artwork depicts the female form, underscore the parallel between the commodification of art and the commodification of women. In terms of the original artwork, though, the effects of reproducibility can be of a converse nature. That is, while reproduction can be seen to detract from the image's uniqueness, the painting itself may gain enhanced status because it *is* the

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<sup>75</sup> Psomiades (2000, 28) here cites Marxist critic Raymond Williams ([1958] 1983, 36), who sees this doctrine as emphasising 'the embodiment in art of certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying.'



original – a mindset encouraged via a type of mystification that exalts the sacredness of the original artwork yet is, ultimately, based upon the painting's monetary value and status.<sup>76</sup>

While the artwork is an object that can be bought and owned, its uniqueness has imbued it with respectability and cultural standing: qualities that have sometimes been called upon to legitimise voyeuristic and sexualised depictions of female subjects. In actuality, however, photography and classical art have often exploited the same archetypes when it comes to images of women.<sup>77</sup> That is not to say that they always function identically. As Berger (1972, 142) points out, a painting tends to consolidate the owner's sense of worth and social standing whereas publicity appeals to aspiration. However, as Berger also emphasises, both are based upon the perceived importance of ownership. What mass produced images did was enable a much wider dissemination of such imagery, expanding the longstanding depiction of women as objects of visual pleasure. And this relates to one of the founding conjectures of this thesis, which is that there exists a gendered politics of vision that is not confined to 'high' or 'low' culture, nor a specific medium,<sup>78</sup> but encompasses scientific theory, consumerism and all manner of cultural texts.

## **Gendered Spectatorship in Victorian Art and Literature**

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<sup>76</sup> Berger (1972, 23) summarises this process as follows:

The bogus religiosity which now surrounds original works of art...has become the substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible...It is the final empty claim for the continuing values of an oligarchic, undemocratic culture. If the image is no longer unique and exclusive, the art object, the thing, must be made mysteriously so.

<sup>77</sup> Nochlin (1972) points to the association of fruit with female sexuality as one such motif. For further examples of analogous imagery and poses in these different mediums, see Berger (1972).

<sup>78</sup> Shires (2009, 126) makes a relevant observation here in noting that art photography was pictorialist in its invocation of painting and the influence that it drew from Pre-Raphaelitism (especially in terms of fidelity to detail). As Shires makes clear, that is not to say that art photography was always in tune with this artistic movement. Nevertheless, drawing such a parallel highlights the embeddedness of artwork within the same Victorian milieu as photography (be this art photography or otherwise).

The gendering of vision was therefore prevalent not only in mass produced photographic material but art and literature during the Victorian period, and, as such, it is worth considering some of the key motifs present across such texts. In terms of Victorian artwork, even a cursory survey reveals the dominance of that template wherein the female is positioned as an object of vision, with Cherry (1993, 118) commenting that, within the aesthetic field of vision, visual pleasure became ‘characterised by an excess of unseeing female faces, female bodies swathed in or divested of drapery, female figures doing very little other than *looking* beautiful.’ One common motif was that of the female captive who is often shown naked and chained, her imprisonment portrayed in a sexualised light. John-Everett Millais’ *The Knight Errant* (1870) presents this theme within a medieval context, yet most prolific are depictions of Andromeda in her captive status prior to being rescued by Perseus. Perhaps best known are Edward Burne-Jones’s *The Rock of Doom* (c. 1885-1888) and *The Doom Fulfilled* (1888) but similar treatments were produced by a range of Victorian artists including Gustave Doré (1869), William Etty (c. 1835-40; c. 1840a, c. 1840b), Charles Napier Kennedy (1890), Frederic Leighton (1891) and Edward John Poynter (1869). Such paintings are highly conventional in that they exemplify passivity as a quintessentially feminine attribute, and this can serve a twofold function. Most obviously, it suppresses any possibility of transgression on the part of the female and alleviates male fears in this regard, with Scott (1994a, para. 16) emphasising Andromeda’s archetypal status:

Naked and chained to a rock, she presents the image of an ideal doll that Perseus may caress and fondle in safety; for she is at once immediate, beautiful, and *harnessed*. She offers no threat, bound as she is, but exists as...an object straight out of Perseus's most vivid fantasies of female bondage and submission. Since masculine and feminine roles have been at last

realigned--Andromeda is now...static, paralyzed--Perseus can claim her and reestablish a degree of comforting patriarchy.<sup>79</sup>

To depict the female as a helpless object of vision consequently serves the function of containment, evoking a Sartrean view of self-other relations wherein one's 'constant concern' is with ensuring that the Other remains in an objectified state (Sartre, 1956, 297). Not only this, the motif can provide a means by which the male artist (or poet) can displace or shield himself against 'feminine' feelings of weakness and passivity, and, more specifically, objectification and entrapment. For a man to occupy such a role would, after all, be culturally undesirable, with the male artist being liable to feel threatened by 'the feminine' within himself (Christ, 1987; Gilbert and Gubar, 1989, 163; Nead, 1995). As such, the cipher-like status of the female in Victorian art and poetry provides the male with a blank slate onto which he may inscribe not only his desires (and anxieties) but those characteristics that he cannot accept in himself.

Another form of contrasting imagery evident in the aforementioned paintings is the opposition of nature and culture, the former being aligned with the female and the latter with the male. As noted earlier, this contrast has long held a prominent position within Western culture and, inevitably, has entailed a correlation between women and corporeality. This division is present in depictions of Perseus and Andromeda, as indicated by the positioning of Andromeda's nude body within the tumultuous landscape (and the contrast between aforesaid nudity and Perseus's enclosure within his suit of armour). Such paintings can consequently be seen to represent the triumph of culture over the unruly forces of nature, with Perseus embodying active, virile masculinity. It is worth remembering, however, that this may be another case of projection, here potentially as a result of man's 'ambivalent feelings about his

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<sup>79</sup> For further discussion of these themes see Scott (1994b) and Smith (1996).

own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death' (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 34). In any case, Andromeda's naked presence is central to these paintings and is utilised for the purpose of erotic visual spectacle, the cultural status afforded to 'high art' being augmented by the use of a mythological context. Consequently, such paintings are able to take full advantage of Andromeda's fleshly presence while deflecting accusations of salaciousness and voyeurism.

While images of captive women provide one artistic pretext for scopophilic gazing, further motifs have served a similar function. One interrelated motif worth mentioning is that of the sleeping or otherwise oblivious woman, epitomised by images such as Frederic Leighton's *Flaming June* (1895) and Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *In the Tepidarium* (1881). These two paintings differ in that Alma-Tadema opts for an overtly sensual approach whereas Leighton's painting is imbued with a more ethereal quality and depicts its subject fully clothed.

However, both invite a voyeuristic gaze on the part of the viewer and play upon the supine passivity of the depicted female subjects. That the subjects are female is critical: as art historians and scholars have observed, it has long been commonplace to present women asleep or in languid poses, in comparison with men, who are more often presented as fully-conscious and alert. Moreover, where male characters *are* shown asleep they are typically presented fully clothed and not intended to invite that form of voyeuristic spectatorship that often defines images of the female.<sup>80</sup> This is a crucial point, for such depictions are indicative of a wider cultural standard wherein objectification is routine when directed at women yet taboo when directed at men. As Nochlin (1972, 11) remarks, the idea of an image of languid male youths painted by an octogenarian female painter immediately strikes one as incongruous within a Western cultural context, particularly during an era in which women

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<sup>80</sup> See Nochlin (1999, 135-144) and Scott (1994b).

were not expected to even think such thoughts. To depict female characters in an eroticised state of slumber consequently provides an opportunity to reaffirm established roles, with the woman's unconscious state not only inviting a voyeuristic gaze but meaning that the woman herself cannot display any supposedly transgressive behaviour. Likewise, it is deemed not only acceptable but desirable for the female to exhibit those 'feminine' traits associated with slumber (such as passivity and helplessness), while the male is encouraged to disavow such traits in himself.<sup>81</sup> This being the case, depictions of slumbering women may serve as further defense against potential feminisation.

Given the popularity of the motif of the sleeping female, it is not surprising that the Victorian period also saw an artistic beautification of the prematurely deceased, tragic – yet beautiful – woman, as epitomised by John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852). This motif became a mainstay of art and poetry<sup>82</sup> and was indicative of the Victorian tendency to regard femininity as all that stood in contrast to earthbound 'masculine' traits such as logic, strength and superior public standing, with the depicted female (like the artwork) embodying 'objectified otherness, removal from the flux of life, participation in a higher order of existence' (Chadwick, 1986, 15). There is a seeming incongruity here in that, as mentioned previously, women have in some respects been associated with earthliness, nature and corporeality. Woman's social position is thus ironic in that she exemplifies both corporeality *and* ethereality and, in the former instance, is denied ownership of the very thing by which she is defined. But this in itself demonstrates the extent to which the female has functioned as a

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<sup>81</sup> Discussing Frederic Leighton, Barringer and Prettejohn (1999, xv) point out that 'virtually all of the stock charges against Leighton, past or present, involve a quality gendered feminine in implicit opposition to some more masculine one', with critics having regarded both his artistic style and his character as being effeminate. For more on Leighton and 'masculine' artistic identity within the Victorian age, see Stephenson (1999).

<sup>82</sup> For an extensive study of the interrelationship between femininity, death and artistic representation, see Bronfen (1992).

cipher, shifting between roles in accordance with social dictums. And this raises a significant point: one of the overriding themes that emerges in Victorian art and literature is the tendency to divide women into seemingly divergent ‘types’, the most obvious being the angel / monster dichotomy (and its offshoots).<sup>83</sup> Anxieties surrounding the feminine are self-evident in works that exploit the ‘monster’ archetype, yet more relevant to this thesis is the oppressiveness of *idealised* images. Indeed, one should not assume that denigration and idealisation are distinct, for the glorification of femininity has often involved a denial of women’s own subjectivity and the privileging of women for the pleasure – including visual pleasure – that they provide rather than for who they *are*.

While depictions of languorous women entail implicit voyeurism, there are also numerous instances of unsanctioned looking within mythological, historical and biblical texts, ranging from Actaeon’s inadvertent sight of the bathing Diana to the conscious voyeurism exemplified in the tale of Susanna and the elders. Consequently, nineteenth century artists produced a range of paintings in which voyeurism was made overt via the inclusion of a male character (or characters) shown spying upon the unsuspecting female, suggesting a shared gaze between not only the male painter and viewer but also this third, depicted character. In such paintings, the presence of a male character (or characters) thus forms part of a triumvirate, this scenario being played out in Arnold Böcklin’s *Sleeping Diana Watched by Two Fauns* (1877) and *Sleeping Nymph Spied on by Two Fauns* (1884), Frederic Leighton’s *Cymon and Iphigenia* (1884) and, perhaps most acutely, William Etty’s 1830 painting *Candaules, King of Lydia, Shews his Wife by Stealth to Gyges, One of his Ministers, as She*

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<sup>83</sup> As Ortnor (1972) notes, though, while these contrasting symbols may seem emblematic of ‘radically divergent and even polarized ideas’ (26) they can ‘transform into one another in rather magical ways: the whore, it seems, can be redeemed to sainthood more easily than the faithful housewife’ (27). Likewise, a statue that seems to depict a tranquil woman may, when looked at from behind, reveal ‘sores, ulcers, worms and all manner of pestilence’ (Lederer, 1968, 37).

*Goes to Bed* (fig. 1.1). Though poised at the beginning of the Victorian age, this painting is of interest in that it is based upon a narrative in which the act of voyeurism plays a pivotal role. The scenario, described in Herodotus's *The Histories* (c. 440 BC), centres on a plot conceived of by Candaules (King of ancient Lydia). Fuelled by boastfulness regarding his wife's beauty, the King instructs his favourite bodyguard, Gyges, to hide behind a door and spy upon the Queen as she undresses. However, while Gyges carries out this plan, the Queen notices him leaving the room. Recognising her husband's instigating role, she orders Gyges to kill the King or meet his own demise. Opting for the former, Gyges carries out his task in a manner recalling his earlier voyeuristic act, hiding behind the door before stabbing the sleeping King.

What is especially noticeable here is that the narrative from which Etty's work is taken involves the *punishment* of voyeurism: the King's plan is foiled when the intended object of the gaze notices and takes umbrage at being placed into a role to which she has not consented. As Robinson (2007, 159) summarises, the myth's original theme 'was that women should no longer be regarded as chattels but as possessing personal rights which had to be respected and which they were entitled to enforce'. Inevitably, though, by presenting an isolated image the painting is unable to convey the narrative's various plot points, instead freezing the action to present a particular scene; here, the shared gaze at the naked Queen. That is not to say that there is anything intrinsically wrong with this, especially given that this is a crucial scene upon which the rest of the narrative hinges. However, when taken in isolation (and especially

if the viewer is not aware of the wider narrative), the Queen's subjectivity and her punishment of the voyeuristic gaze disappear and all one sees is two men spying upon a naked woman.<sup>84</sup>

Though the voyeuristic gaze has been a mainstay of numerous cultural texts, Etty's painting makes this theme explicit and provoked an outcry on account of its fleshly quality and 'objectionable subject' (Gilchrist, 1855, 285). Taking an aesthetic standpoint enabled some commentators to praise the painting's formal qualities, with Frederic Leighton expressing enthusiasm about Etty's skill. Nevertheless, Leighton apparently added, 'I could not bear it on my wall' (cited by Barrington, 1906, 1: 216). Similarly, William Makepeace Thackeray (1877, 129) deemed Etty's figures '*too much* drawn...His colour, indeed, is sublime...but his taste!' One review even chose to ignore the painting, recognising that it had drawn praise for its 'exquisite colouring' but stating, 'the subject is so offensive that we pass it over' (*La Belle Assemblée*, 1830, 273).<sup>85</sup> The reaction to Etty's use of colour is worth noting, for, while some critics were approving of this aspect of his work (contrasting it with his unsavoury subject matter), others felt that vibrant colour enhanced the painting's salacious tone and that form should take precedence over colour.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Etty's work lacked the sanction of age that elevated works by the old masters, thus meaning that 'those who saw no objection to cover

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<sup>84</sup> The acuteness of this theme is evidenced by the use of the term 'candaulism', defined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his influential *Psychopathia Sexualis* ([1886] 1965), to categorise the act or fantasy wherein a man displays a female partner, or pictures of her, to others for voyeuristic purposes.

<sup>85</sup> Such a reaction was not isolated to this painting: having evaluated Etty's artwork at an 1837 exhibition, the *Spectator's* critic (cited by Gilchrist, 1855, 62) deemed *The Sirens and Ulysses* (1837) a 'disgusting combination of voluptuousness and loathsome putridity – glowing in colour and wonderful in execution, but conceived in the worst possible taste'.

<sup>86</sup> This approach emphasised the controlling influence of form over the sensual elements of a painting. As Smith (1996, 88) explains:

Colour had been a controversial element of British painting ever since Reynolds [the first President of the Royal Academy] had denounced Venetian painting for its sensuality...in the 1860s there was a revival of interest in the sensuous properties of Venetian colour by writers as diverse as Pater and Ruskin. The residual influence of Reynolds's argument, however, was significant enough for classically minded artists such as Leighton to elevate draughtsmanship above colour, partly to repudiate charges of sensuality.



their walls with such subjects as “Lot and his Daughters,” “David and Bathsheba,” or “Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar,” ...could not tolerate the nude from a native painter’ (Redgrave, 1866, 210).<sup>87</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that the depiction of an unclothed woman was not itself the issue, for the nude had been popular and respected since the Renaissance.<sup>88</sup> Rather, Etty’s painting was perceived as overtly fleshly and lacking the purity of ‘high art’. The explicit voyeurism of *Candaules* is also relevant precisely because it *is* explicit. Unlike depictions of Perseus and Andromeda, Etty’s painting does not romanticise or shroud this characteristic. Of course, voyeurism has often been an implicit component of artwork, while the depiction of male characters spying upon women ‘has always been a favourite subject of artists and writers and arises from natural male curiosity and the determination of women to guard their secrets’ (Robinson, 2007, 159). The scenario that Etty depicts is more obviously immoral, however, in that it involves a King carrying out an underhanded plot to display his naked wife for another man’s gaze – by Victorian standards of decorum in particular, such undisguised subject matter would have been inappropriate. This would then explain why there should have been an outcry against this painting, for it otherwise contains those very elements that would seem to ensure its popularity. In this case, however, the painting’s lasciviousness and voyeurism proved too close for comfort.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> For Etty’s part, he sought to counter the Puritanical notion of the body as ‘mere filthy flesh’ (Robinson, 2007, 159), yet his work was seen as too ‘gross and literal’ in contrast to the ‘exquisite idealities’ of the old masters (*The Times*, 1835, 5).

<sup>88</sup> Harvey (1994) also states that, though ‘[d]uring the eighteenth century, and for some hundreds of years previously, it had not been customary for lovers or even married couples to see each other naked’ (21), from around 1800, the ‘contemplation of female nakedness became, if not more respectable, a little more normal’ (24).

<sup>89</sup> Not that this prevented the painting from finding a purchaser: it was bought by collector Robert Vernon who presented it to the National Gallery in 1847 (see Farr, 1958, 140; Hamlyn, 1993, 44-45).

By depicting a male gazer, or gazers, paintings such as Etty's underscore the shared gaze that can exist between featured characters and real life viewers of an artwork. Still, even when a male voyeur is not featured, the presence of such a character can sometimes be felt lurking beyond the confines of the image. This brings us to an archetypal instance of voyeurism: the forbidden gaze exercised by the 'Peeping Tom' upon the Lady Godiva as she rode naked through the supposedly empty streets of Coventry. According to legend, the Lady in question undertook this task on the understanding that, should she complete it successfully, her husband would rescind his steep taxation of the city's residents. There was, however, the proviso that no one should look upon her in her naked state. This being established, the Lady proceeded to ride through the city streets in a scene depicted in James Collier's *Lady Godiva* (c. 1898, fig. 1.2). Portraying the Lady with downcast eyes and her hair clasped to her breast, the painting evokes Tennyson's 'Godiva' (1842) and its similar emphasis on the Lady's self-consciousness:

Then she rode forth, clothed on with chastity:  
The deep air listened round her as she rode,  
And all the low wind hardly breathed for fear.  
The little wide-mouthed heads upon the spout  
Had cunning eyes to see: the barking cur  
Made her cheek flame: her palfrey's footfall shot  
Light horrors through her pulses: the blind walls  
Were full of chinks and holes; and overhead  
Fantastic gables, crowding, stared (Tennyson, 1969, ll. 53-61).

From both the poem and the painting, one gets a palpable sense of the subject's sensitivity to her surrounding environment. The slightest noise unsettles her, as do architectural features that induce a sense of being watched. Consequently, the Lady experiences those feelings that Sartre (1956, 257-258) associated with the intuition that one is the object of another's gaze: a

feeling that does not require the visible presence of a gazer but can be induced by sounds (such as rustling leaves) or the sense that someone is hiding in the shadows.

While the Lady Godiva experiences such a state of self-consciousness, the intuition that someone is lurking in the shadows proves correct in this case, for it is during her return journey that the Lady is (unbeknownst to her) spied upon by a tailor – the infamous ‘Peeping Tom’ – who watches her from a hole in his shutters and is subsequently struck blind.

Tennyson describes this episode as follows:

And one low churl, compact of thankless earth,  
.....  
Boring a little auger-hole in fear,  
Peeped – but his eyes, before they had their will,  
Were shrivelled into darkness in his head,  
And dropt before him. So the Powers, who wait  
On noble deeds, cancelled a sense misused (66-72).

Both the painting and the poem thus appear sympathetic towards the Lady, Tennyson reproaching the ‘low churl’ who dared look upon her and Collier conveying her desire to preserve her modesty. However, the painting’s romanticised treatment also enables it to avoid the stigma attached to a more overtly salacious work, for, despite its seeming empathy, the painting invites viewers to look at a naked woman. In this respect it is paradoxical, in that the same figure that the painter seems to regard in an empathetic light is made the object of the very gaze that is the source of her unease. The viewer of the painting thus occupies the same position as the ‘Peeping Tom’, and it is therefore fitting that there is no evidence of this character in the painting. His presence is implicit, but the viewer effectively takes this role. In theory, this could be seen as a means of forcing the viewer to recognise their own status as a voyeur, yet the isolation of a particular narrative moment lessens its impact somewhat: though the viewer is likely to be aware of the ‘Peeping Tom’ and his fate, the absence of this

aspect of the story means that the viewer is not forced to recognise the punishment enacted upon the voyeur. As with Etty's *Candaules*, then, one is left with an image that is not merely *about* voyeurism but *invites* voyeurism.

The positioning of women as objects of erotic spectacle is, then, a prominent theme in Victorian artwork, and this is no less the case in poetic texts from this era. Again, poetic exaltation of female youth and beauty is so ubiquitous that to catalogue such texts would not be constructive. More useful is an examination of a selection of texts that dramatise this scenario, with several of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues being particularly effective. Rather than merely adding to the body of poetry centred on the worship of women's superficial attributes, Browning takes a deliberate approach to the material<sup>90</sup> and, particularly, to the exploration of self-other relations. Broadly speaking, such texts include standard lyricising over female beauty yet draw out the more sinister aspects that can arise from this scenario, probing the mentality that underlies objectifying imperatives. The key theme running through these texts is that of a male narrator who seeks to impose his will upon a voiceless female<sup>91</sup> who is 'metaphorically killed by the process of being made into an allegorical figure, an object of art, of her husband's property, or else literally killed by a death sentence punishing "unfeminine" behaviour, especially the usurpation of the male gaze' (Chapman, 1996, 31). In the case of 'Evelyn Hope' (1855), the female character in question is already dead, this being a monologue narrated from the perspective of a man looking upon

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<sup>90</sup> Maxwell (1993, 989) notes that Browning's propensity to explore this theme 'raises the question of whether Browning exposes or colludes with this identification.' However, paraphrasing Knoepfmacher (1984), Maxwell emphasises that Browning takes a de-idealising approach and 'ironizes the Romantic epipsyche in his poetry, revealing the extent to which woman as other is narcissistically conceived as a prop, extension, or guarantor of male identity.'

<sup>91</sup> Karlin (1989, 70-71) points out that the dramatic monologue is particularly suited to depicting scenarios in which a character attempts to impose their will on a voiceless other, though adding that 'Browning's preoccupation with power and the will...is inscribed in the very form of the dramatic monologue, irrespective of whether the speaker is engaged in an open, palpable display of power' (71).

a recently deceased sixteen year old girl. Frequently, readings of this poem have focused on themes of optimism and transcendence:

It is a beautiful expression of love purely spiritual, to be realised in its fullness after death...The thought is noble, the expression of it simple, fine, and clear. It is, moreover, close to truth – there are hundreds of men who live quietly in love of that kind, and die in its embrace. (Brooke, 1903, 255)

While the final sentence of this statement may be close to the truth, the loftiness and purity that is supposedly at the heart of the poem is questionable. The narrator's musings are, for one thing, highly presumptuous, as is made clear when the narrator asks:

And just because I was thrice as old,  
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,  
Each was naught to each, must I be told?  
We were fellow mortals, naught beside? (Browning, 2007, vol. 3, ll. 21-24)

This question is rhetorical, for the narrator's prevailing conviction is that he and his object of desire are destined to be together, despite his acknowledgement that 'Perhaps she had scarcely heard my name' (10). Indeed, the narrator holds to his belief that 'the time will come' (33) when they will be together, and his tone throughout the poem is one of romanticism as he awaits this 'destiny'. Yet, addressing his intended, he assures her, 'I claim you' (28) and 'Ere the time be come for taking you' (32). His professions of love are therefore indicative of the desire to possess, and, aptly, the young woman is a mute object of vision. This is established at the poem's outset, whereupon the narrator introduces her as 'Beautiful Evelyn Hope' (1) and bids his imagined listener / reader, 'Sit and watch by her side an hour' (2). However, the poem creates the impression that the narrator is not really addressing a listener or reader – his nominal addresses add to his already grandiose notions of authority and unfounded sense of familiarity with regard to this young woman. Encouraging others to 'sit and watch' therefore seems intended to create the impression that she is his property, and that it is his place to grant

others the right to look upon her. Consequently, the young woman is described via typical Petrarchan imagery, the narrator lyricising over her 'sweet white brow' (16) and 'red young mouth' (52). That the narrator concludes by instructing his beloved 'So, hush' (53) is clearly ironic. Likewise, by addressing the young woman directly and referring to 'our secret' (55), the narrator creates the false impression that the two share a confidence when, really, his professions of love are one-sided.

While 'Evelyn Hope' contains sinister undertones, Browning produced several dramatic monologues that are pronounced in this respect. 'Mesmerism' (1855) is one such example, dramatising a form of power that Karlin (1989, 66) suggests might constitute 'the hidden agenda of all dramatic monologists'. The power in question concerns the ability to create and give form to an object or image according to one's own will, the narrator employing his mesmeric powers in order to summon an unnamed woman, 'compelling her by occult power to "inform the shape" he has imagined with her living physical presence' (Karlin, 1989, 73). It should be noted that mesmerism was a popular form of public entertainment at the time,<sup>92</sup> with Elizabeth Barrett Browning having expressed a particular interest in this practice. This being the case, Browning was attentive to such subject matter, though his own rationalism meant that he did not subscribe to its claims of legitimacy. His disavowal did not, however, preclude Browning from exploring this territory in his poetry, here in the form of a scenario that plays up the unnerving aspects of mesmerism and the gendered power relations that this process could entail. The act of mesmerism is in this case not, however, intended for 'the amusement of the idle rich' (Boas, 1930, 179), nor is the mesmerist a professional practitioner; rather the poem focuses on an overtly sinister scenario, the speaker seeking to

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<sup>92</sup> Public exhibitions of mesmerism, along with séances and other such attractions, provide another instance of the Victorian interest in visual spectacle. As Karlin (1989, 66) notes, '[t]he "play" of mesmerism is also fascinating to watch: it has a voyeuristic side, akin to that of drama.'

control a woman who has not consented to engage in such proceedings.<sup>93</sup> The gothic nature of the poem's subject matter may again have been influenced by Barrett Browning's attitude towards mesmerism. On the one hand, Barrett Browning saw her relationship with Browning as entailing a romanticised form of mesmerism,<sup>94</sup> with Chapman (1998, 311) suggesting that Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* conveys a 'fluid and interactive mesmeric relationship'. Indeed, there is nothing to say that mesmerism *has* to operate in a manner reliant upon unequal power relations, for, as with the psychoanalytic process of transference, the roles of mesmerist and patient can become transposable and the process of an egalitarian nature. Nevertheless, mesmerism could have troubling connotations, as Barrett Browning recognised:

I have an *indisposition* towards this magnetism, & shrink from the idea of subjecting my *will* as an individual, to the will of another, – of merging my identity (in some way which makes my blood creep to think of) in the identity of another' (Kelley and Lewis, 1991, 9: 160).

Barrett Browning also recounted instances in which her real life experiences of mesmeric practices had been a source of anxiety, referring to 'boney fingers seeming to "touch the stops" of a whole soul's harmonies' (Kintner, 1969, 1: 117) and a mesmerist's capacity to

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<sup>93</sup> There were, however, cases where professional mesmerists also took advantage of their position. One anonymous mesmerist testified:

[T]o be placed opposite a young and lovely female, who has subjected herself to the process for the purpose of effecting a cure of some nervous affection or otherwise, to look into her gentle eyes, soft and beaming with confidence and trust, is singularly entrancing...you look intently upon the pupils of her eyes, which as the power becomes more and more visible in her person, evince the tenderest regard, until they close in dreamy and as it were spiritual affection.—Then is her mind all your own...Your will then becomes not only as law to her, but it is the greatest happiness to her to execute your smallest wish...Self is entirely swallowed up in the earnest regard that actuates the subject (*The Confessions of a Magnetiser*, 1845, 9-10).

<sup>94</sup> Despite earlier expressing fears regarding Browning's supposed psychic power over her, Barrett Browning later stated that this power had drawn her 'back into life' (Kintner, 1969, 2: 680). Browning refuted this mystical persona, yet nevertheless conceived of their relationship in terms of telepathic closeness (Boas, 1930, 180).

‘mesmerize me with looking at me almost, if I did not get out of the way, – I object to subjecting myself to this power’ (Landis and Freeman, 1958, 201).

Of chief importance to this thesis are those scenarios in which mesmerism involves unequal power relations between a male mesmerist and female subject.<sup>95</sup> As with other binaries, this division was commonplace albeit not always unbending. In terms of literary depictions, for instance, there exist various texts in which the female subject undermines or escapes the mesmerist’s attempts at mastery.<sup>96</sup> Browning’s poem, however, does not depict such a scenario nor does it diffuse the aforementioned fears, instead playing upon these fears by focusing upon a mesmerist’s overpowering of his female subject. Particularly striking are the narrator’s references to having taken control of the woman ‘from head to foot’ (Browning, 2007, vol. 3, l. 32), leaving his subject ‘Breathing and mute, / Passive and yet aware, / In the grasp of my steady stare’ (33-35). Unlike Evelyn Hope, this woman is alive yet remains mute and passive. In fact, this adds to the sinister effect in that the woman *is* aware yet exists in a state of enforced passivity. It is notable here that, while the two characters are not within each other’s field of vision, the magnetiser is able to control the woman via his concentrated powers of visual imagination, echoing the claims of Erasmus Darwin. His gaze is therefore

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<sup>95</sup> While women also practiced mesmerism, they were not necessarily judged on the same criteria. Following his attendance in the mid-1870s of a séance led by female mesmerist Miss Chandos, the Reverend Charles Maurice Davies (cited by Owen, 2004, 124) confessed to having been nervous prior to this, as ‘lady mediums and mesmerisers are so apt to run to eighteen stone, or be old and frumpish’.

However, he recounted that in this case he was ‘agreeably surprised’ to find ‘a very pretty young lady’.

<sup>96</sup> Exploring this subject in relation to literary texts and Freud’s case studies, Auerbach (1981, 284) emphasises the mesmerist’s (or analyst’s) reliance upon his female subject and contends:

[W]omen are invaded by the hyperconscious and culturally fraught male/master/monster. But when we actually read *Trilby*, *Dracula*, or *Studies on Hysteria*, what strikes us is the kinds of powers that are granted to the women: the victim of paralysis possesses seemingly infinite capacities of regenerative being that turn on her triumphant mesmerizer and paralyze him.

Even so, in her discussion of Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria* Auerbach acknowledges that, while Dora may have escaped her mesmerist, she is remembered and defined predominantly via Freud’s writings.



portrayed as penetrating, controlling and driven by the desire to conquer and possess, the intensity and rhythm of his endeavour being reflected in the poem's terse, urgent lines.

The obsessional nature of the speaker's aim is also conveyed via repetition of the line 'Have and hold, then and there' (31, 36) followed by a similar reference to 'Having and holding' (41). Some of the mesmerist's statements – such as 'All her body and soul / That completes my Whole' (37-38) and 'I imprint her fast / On the void at last' (42-43) – could, in other circumstances, be seen to carry a romantic sentiment.<sup>97</sup> However, the narrator expresses no genuine affection towards the woman but desires her solely for his own ends, as indicated by phrases such as 'In the grasp of my steady stare' (35) and 'In the clutch of my steady ken' (40). Moreover, the 'void' filled by the subject can be interpreted not merely in terms of emptiness or desolation on the speaker's part but as referring to the shape that the mesmerist impels the woman to inhabit – a procedure that he likens to the calotype process (45). However, while the mesmerist's actions may superficially bring the image to 'life', this comes at the expense of the *real* woman's free will and agency. In this poem, then, the calotype 'materializes the speaker's unhealthy desire for absolute and eternal possession of another' (Groth, 2003, 137), effectively trapping the woman within the image.

That the narrator speaks of the woman answering him 'glance for glance' (55) does not convey a truly mutual gaze nor an active response on the woman's part, for she serves the function of the 'flat mirror' (Irigaray, 1985, 14): the voiceless, sightless female beloved who serves only to reflect the male gazer's desire. Especially notable is the narrator's avowal that 'through all and each / Of the veils I reach / To her soul' (47-49). A popular Victorian motif, the veil was typically used as a trope for seduction and / or as a metaphor for fear and

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<sup>97</sup> As Karlin (1989, 73) observes, '[l]ike many of the poems of *Men and Women*... "Mesmerism" recalls some of the topics and language of the courtship correspondence... there are a number of passages in which Browning and EBB allude to the power of the imagination to conjure up the presence of the beloved.'

excitement regarding the unknown. However, the veil could also be utilised for protective means, serving as a method of concealment and as an attempted shield against infringement – including infringement of a visual nature. It is this function to which Browning alludes, yet here it does not serve its intended function, for the narrator declares that he will defeat these veils. His unwavering focus is reiterated by his affirmation that he remains ‘Steadfast and still the same / On my object bent’ (61-62), with the term ‘object’ referring to both the narrator’s aim and the woman herself. Moreover, the narrator’s determination pays off, as the woman flees her home (the narrator having induced feelings of suffocation) and advances towards her mesmeriser. The narrator depicts the woman as possessing ‘a still composed strong mind’ (89) but, again, this is misleading. While the woman is unswerving, this is because the mesmeriser has exercised full control over her being, such that she is now ‘wound in the toils I weave’ (70). The same applies to his descriptions of the woman as becoming increasingly energised, the speaker asking (rhetorically) ‘have I drawn or no / Life to that lip?’ (101-102). The woman might appear invigorated, yet this is fallacious. As references to the woman as being ‘blind with sight’ (85) and bearing ‘wide blind eyes uplift’ (94) suggest, her autonomy has been extinguished.

The poem’s conclusion sees the woman merge with the spectral image that the narrator has created, prompting the mesmerist to pronounce that ‘the shadow and she are one’ (125). The shadow is another potent metaphor, and its complexities will be discussed later in this thesis. Here, however, merging with the shadow indicates the extinction of autonomy, the woman now inhabiting the image created by the mesmerist.<sup>98</sup> The narrator repeatedly calls attention to his supposed achievement, instructing the reader to look upon the image that he has

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<sup>98</sup> In his own life, Browning (Kintner, 1969, 1: 538) was keen to emphasise to Elizabeth Barrett Browning that he had never regarded her in such a manner, assuring her ‘that it is no shadowy image of you and *not* you, which having attached myself to in the first instance, I afterward compelled my fancy to see reproduced...in you, the dearest real *you* I am blessed with.’

brought into being. However, whether he has truly realised his intentions is uncertain. As Karlin (1989, 75) observes, 'there is no realization, only representation...It is this totalizing force of imagination which the poem so successfully projects'. Taking such a stance dissipates the narrator's 'triumph' somewhat, for it casts into doubt the narrator's claims of authority. Furthermore, it is possible that the narrator's account is idealistic or delusional – the reader cannot, after all, see that which the narrator entreats them to witness when he declares:

See, on either side,  
Her two arms divide  
Till the heart betwixt makes sign,  
Take me, for I am thine! (112-115)

Within the monologue's internal world, however, there is a sense of finality about the ending in that the woman's free will has seemingly been vanquished and she now inhabits the image, the mesmerist having fulfilled 'perhaps the profoundest of all male sexual fantasies...total possession of a female "other,"' (Karlin, 1989, 74). It is not until the final two stanzas that he acknowledges the immorality of his impulses, yet such recognition comes too late, the poem concluding with the narrator admitting his culpability and accepting whatever penalties will ensue, telling himself that he need not 'squander guilt' (132), for, ultimately, 'require Thou wilt / At my hand its price one day! / What the price is, who can say?' (133-135).<sup>99</sup>

The aforementioned poems are therefore driven by a narrator's obsessive need to exert control over a female object of desire, and this is a theme that Browning explores in 'My Last Duchess' (1842) and 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836), both of which typify the desire to contain '[t]he formless matter of the female body...within boundaries, conventions and poses' (Nead, 1992, 11). The latter poem (and most likely the former, too), takes these themes to what

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<sup>99</sup> As Karlin (1989, 73) also comments, '[t]he question is not a rhetorical one, though it is unanswerable.'

could be seen as their logical conclusion. That is, literally killing the female beloved, with objectification and acquisitiveness being taken to their extreme and attesting to the ‘extreme efforts of containment’ (Doane, 1982, 84) that can arise in response to perceived or feared transgression. The narrative of this monologue centres on the narrator’s concerns regarding his beloved’s inability to fully give herself to him, her reluctance being due to ‘vainer ties’ (Browning, 1991, vol. 1, l. 24) from which she has not the will to sever herself. The precise circumstances of this situation are, however, less significant than the events that occur in the poem’s second half. Following Porphyria’s return home one storm-wracked night, the narrator looks up at her eyes and feels ‘Proud – very proud – at last I knew / Porphyria worshipped me’ (32-33). Having apparently found the confirmation that he has sought, the narrator cannot bear to let the moment pass, for ‘That moment she was mine,—mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good’ (36-37). As with the previously discussed poems, one again gets a sense of the narrator’s desire to keep his beloved in a subordinate position wherein he can be assured of his own authority and, moreover, experience self-affirmation via her reflecting eyes. What becomes most apparent here, though, is the obsessive desire not only for possession but preservation, and this becomes the driving force of the poem. Seeking to retain his moment of euphoria, the narrator scrambles with his thoughts prior to arriving upon and enacting a resolution:

all her hair  
 In one long yellow string I wound  
 Three times her little throat around,  
 And strangled her. (38-41)

The bluntness of this description is arresting, and the narrator’s assurance that ‘No pain felt she— / I am quite sure she felt no pain’ (41-42) carries little weight, especially given that one has only the narrator’s word to go upon (his frank, lucid descriptions contrasting markedly

with his extreme behaviour). Petrarchan imagery takes hold as the poem nears its end but in a particularly sinister context, as the narrator describes the endearing flush of the deceased woman's cheek (apparently indicative of her 'eternal' passion). He describes her eyes likewise: 'As a shut bud that holds a bee / I warily oped her lids—again / Laughed the blue eyes without a stain' (43-45). Whatever he feared upon seeing when beholding her eyes is therefore not present; instead, he perceives 'laughing' blue eyes. Such descriptions are, of course, ironic and provide further evidence of the narrator's mental state, yet genuine expressivity is not the narrator's concern. With his beloved's subjectivity and variability no longer a problem, he now feels reassured.

As with 'Evelyn Hope', 'Porphyria's Lover' demonstrates the artistic appeal that derives from linking femininity with death, not only via the archetype of woman as angel (or consumptive) but, more pertinently here, in the sense of preservation and purification. In artistic terms, especially, death does not always signify decay but has been linked with refinement. As Maxwell (2008, 99) points out, death does not only intensify (by point of contrast) the perception of beauty as a sign of life but 'has the potential to stop beauty temporarily and increase its loveliness by refining it of its subjection to everyday necessity.'<sup>100</sup> Certainly, this is the thinking of the narrators of these dramatic monologues, in which the object – in this case, the corpse – takes the place of the living woman, enabling the narrator to continue his appreciation of the woman's appearance while purifying her of all organic qualities.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Regarding the desired association of women with lifelessness, a palpable irony emerges in that, as Lederer (1968, 42) points out, 'where nothing is lifelike, nothing speaks of death.' Devoid of signs of mortality and ageing, the woman does not appear alive – yet it is this lifeless visage that helps protect against the fear of death.

<sup>101</sup> Blanchot (1989, 256-258) argues that the image and the corpse both attain a quality of refinement on a conceptual level and transcend the status of the mortal being. The image-corpse 'is a reflection becoming master of the life it reflects' and is akin to the tool that, when damaged, 'becomes its image...the tool, no longer disappearing into its use, *appears*. This appearance of the object is that of resemblance and

The speaker of 'Porphyria's Lover' is therefore driven by a desire to preserve the woman as she appears at a particular moment (bringing to mind the process of embalment) and to purify her of those aspects he finds undesirable. The following lines are especially revealing: 'I propped her head up as before, / Only, this time *my* shoulder bore / Her head' (49-51). Earlier in the poem, the narrator had recounted Porphyria laying her shoulder bare 'And, stooping, made my cheek lie there' (19). Furthermore, this position entailed looking 'up at her eyes' (31). That the situation has now been reversed indicates that the male has assumed a position of power while the woman embodies the ultimate state of passivity. This imbalance is heightened via the use of diminutive terms: in addition to 'her little throat' (40), the narrator refers to her 'smiling rosy little head' (52) – description that evokes a child or a doll. One could draw a parallel here with that popular form of Victorian entertainment the *tableau vivant*, though 'vivant' is hardly apt in this instance. Yet the *tableau vivant* did not only present its female characters in a mute, frozen state but also portrayed scenes of suffering and death, whether this be fantasies of consumptive virginity or the beheading of defiant heroines.<sup>102</sup> Browning's depiction of a scene involving a *literally* deceased woman could consequently be seen as a more extreme version of this archetype, the narrator positioning the woman's lifeless body according to his desires.

Though less lurid than 'Porphyria's Lover', 'My Last Duchess' (1842) covers similar themes; notably, the narrator's desire to preserve a female character within a form (in this case, a portrait) that allows him to exert control. The narrator's opening reference to his 'last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive' (Browning, 1991, vol. 2, ll. 1-2) begins the poem on a provocative note, as, in addition to 'last' being synonymous with

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reflection: the object's double' (258). Consequently, the corpse is 'the dear living person, but all the same it is more than he...the appearance of the original never perceived until now' (257-258).

<sup>102</sup> For a more detailed discussion of gender and the *tableaux vivant* see Chapman (1996).

‘previous’ (and giving the impression of an ongoing sequence), the expression ‘as if she were alive’ suggests that the painting is not only lifelike but that its subject may no longer be alive – an impression that the rest of the poem encourages. When the narrator refers to the ‘piece’ (3), he can be seen as referring not only to the painting but to the depicted subject, this term suggesting objectification (as well as sexual denigration). This harks back to the points made earlier in this chapter about art and ownership, in that the Duke relishes ownership of the unique work of art due to the status that it provides, likewise claiming ownership of and control over the depicted image. On this note, Losano (2008, 10) suggests that ‘ekphrasis seems always to slide inexorably into violent appropriation’, while Berger (1972, 83) affirms that to put a thing on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in one’s house. Both statements are applicable here in that the Duke now ‘owns’ the painted woman, his desire for control being evidenced when he addresses a group of acquaintances and asks, ‘Will’t please you sit and look at her?’ (5). Bringing to mind the narrator of ‘Evelyn Hope’, the Duke bids his acquaintances to look upon the painted Duchess. However, he emphasises that they must turn to him in order to do so, for ‘none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I’ (9-10).

Referring to the depicted subject, the Duke remarks upon ‘The depth and passion of its earnest glance’ (8): a comment that gains increased relevance (and irony) as the poem progresses, for it transpires that the Duchess’s subjectivity – and visual agency – was the source of his displeasure. Informing his listeners that ‘‘twas not / Her husband’s presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek’ (13-15) one infers adultery, yet, as the poem progresses, this becomes less certain. The Duke laments, for instance, that his former wife experienced joy at an array of sights and experiences, from ‘The dropping of the daylight in the West’ (26) to ‘The bough of cherries some officious fool / Broke in the orchard for her’

(27-28). His anger seems instead to be based partly upon jealousy and egotism, as evidenced by his complaint that the Duchess thanked others ‘as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift’ (32-34). That is not to say that adultery is not a possibility, for it could be that the Duke’s annoyance over superficial matters masks underlying concerns. Nevertheless, one gains the impression that the Duke was aggrieved in a more general sense by his wife’s vivacity and sociability along with her lack of discernment failure to suitably exalt her husband.<sup>103</sup>

One of the Duke’s most notable complaints is that his former wife ‘liked whate’er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere’ (23-24). So, in addition to the Duchess’s general inquisitiveness, one gets the sense that the Duke was ‘tortured by the promiscuity of visual appearance and the freedom of the gaze’ (Christ, 1987, 397). The Duke’s comments may, of course, be hyperbolic and informed by his own paranoia, yet it would seem that the Duchess exercised visual agency of some sort – if she had been merely a passive object of vision, then her husband would not have had cause to feel aggrieved. However, as noted earlier, there are different types of looking, and the impression that the reader gains from this poem is that the Duchess’s eyes were independent, alert, inquisitive and eager. This last point is particularly suggestive, as the Duke intimates that one of the sources of his displeasure was the Duchess’s (potentially eroticised) gaze and the relish that she seemed to take in sensuous pleasure.<sup>104</sup>

The notion of an eroticised female gaze is, in cultural terms, especially troubling, for, as noted earlier, it is a cultural dictate that women – not men – are to be positioned as objects of erotic

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<sup>103</sup> When questioned as to the Duke’s reason for describing his former wife as so easily pleased, Browning (cited by Brockington, 1914, 316) replied: ‘As an excuse – mainly to himself – for taking revenge on one who had unwittingly wounded his absurdly pretentious vanity, by failing to recognise his superiority in even the most trifling matters’.

<sup>104</sup> Hawlin (2002, 160) notes that the poem’s imagery carries an air of eroticism, with the portrait being ‘full of pinkish hues’ and the Duchess herself likewise being ‘associated with the erotically charged colour of red: in the sunset, the cherries, and the ‘blush’’.



delectation. Such a gaze has thus been largely associated with men, with Kern (1996, 78) noting that, though women were depicted as spectators in Victorian art, the idea of a desiring female gaze remained taboo. Indeed, this taboo has been such that the term ‘erotic for men’ is tautologous, for ‘[t]here really *is* no erotic art in the nineteenth century which does not involve the image of women, and precious little before or after’ (Nochlin, 1972, 9).<sup>105</sup>

In the case of Browning’s poem, one cannot say whether the Duchess’s gaze was as erotically charged as the narrator seems to perceive, yet one gets the impression that the Duchess was attuned to sensuous pleasure and that her gaze was dynamic and curious. In fact, it is the wide-ranging and indiscriminate nature of the Duchess’s gaze that seems to be the foremost cause of the Duke’s ire, for it appears egregious and beyond classification. As Tucker Jr. (1980, 179) observes, ‘[the Duchess’s] joy has been wildly disproportionate to any cause of joy in her external circumstances; it has been its own independent cause.’ It is vital to recognise here that this curious, wandering gaze is not akin to the ‘male gaze’ – the only clear example of petrification in this poem is, after all, that which is directed at the woman.

However, as archetypes such as Pandora and Psyche dramatise, a curious, desiring gaze may itself be deemed transgressive.<sup>106</sup> It is also important to recognise that the flexible, peripatetic gaze is not just distinct from the stereotypical male gaze but, potentially, possesses the capacity to *elude* such a gaze. Indeed, it is closer to the ‘glance’, defined by Bryson (1983, 94) as ‘a furtive or sideways look whose attention is always elsewhere, which shifts to conceal its own existence, and which is capable of carrying unofficial, *sub rosa* messages of

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<sup>105</sup> Discussing this suppression of women’s visual agency, Bowers (1990, 218) likewise concludes that ‘[t]he history of women’s images in Western culture is the history of an attempt to defuse the power of female eros.’

<sup>106</sup> Harrison (1903, 283-284) notes that Pandora was originally worshipped as the Earth-goddess in primitive matriarchal Greece, but that Hesiod later refashioned this figure, reflecting a shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in Greek culture.

hostility, collusion, rebellion, and lust'.<sup>107</sup> And this indicates another reason for the Duke's displeasure: by exercising her visual faculty the Duchess evades the Duke's control, robbing *his* gaze of authority and refusing to bestow upon him the deference he desires. In doing so, she demonstrates the precariousness that underlies both the mirror stage and later attempts to create a self-affirming image (here via the reflecting female beloved).

The Duchess's perceived failure therefore exists on various levels, as she has insisted upon exercising her own gaze and failed to inhabit her culturally allotted role.<sup>108</sup> However, it is apparent that such unruliness ultimately brought about counteraction on the part of the Duke, who 'gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together' (45-46). The impression that the portrait's subject is now deceased gains credence here in that one surmises that the Duke most likely ordered her execution,<sup>109</sup> with the reiteration 'There she stands / As if alive' (46-47) increasing this suspicion. One of the poem's principal themes, then, is that the Duke has not been able to control the living woman and has consequently focused his attention on controlling the image instead. As Christ (1987, 397) states, by painting the Duchess's look, 'the Duke can secure and privilege his own looking. The Duke's criminality has disquieting implications for art, for a portraiture that seems to prolong and sanctify the gaze murders in order to create its privileged sight.' Some scholars have, however, questioned the extent to which the Duke is successful in this endeavour, suggesting that the Duchess's 'earnest glance'

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<sup>107</sup> The Duchess can also be considered in relation to the Lacanian object gaze wherein '[i]n our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes...is always to some degree eluded' (Lacan, 1978, 73). Wiesenthal (2001, 397), for example, highlights the elusive potential of the object gaze with reference to the figure who does not return the look but looks *past* or *through* the viewer.

<sup>108</sup> The Duke notes that he *could* have attempted to educate his wife in 'proper' conduct but never did so, for 'Even had you skill / In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will / Quite clear to such an one' (35-37) there 'would be some stooping; and I choose / Never to stoop' (42-43). That the Duke professes not to have such skill seems disingenuous yet his refusal to 'stoop' is more credible given the disdain that defines his reminiscences. Whether he would have been successful in any such attempt is, however, another matter.

<sup>109</sup> Browning (cited by Corson, 1899, viii) stated that this was his intended meaning, though he also posited that the Duke 'might have had her shut up in a convent'.

and ‘faint / Half-flush’ represent a continuation of the Duchess’s subjectivity and endow the painting with an energy that the Duke can neither pinpoint nor control (Maxwell, 1993, 995).<sup>110</sup> From this perspective, the painting continues to evade the Duke’s efforts at containment, adding a subversive element to the poem. Indeed, while many of his dramatic monologues depict a male’s ‘triumph’ over a female subject, Browning on occasion highlighted the successful exercise of elusiveness and resistance on the part of the female.<sup>111</sup> In the case of ‘My Last Duchess’, the Duke is at pains to emphasise his control over the painting, yet such control can be seen as equivocal. The Duchess may no longer be present but her image potentially remains imbued with those qualities that had troubled the Duke. Paraphrasing Hochberg (1991), Hawlin (2002, 160) states:

The Duchess is not the passive victim of the Duke’s male gaze. She stares out of the painting...she outstares the Duke, as it were. The Duke, sensing the extent to which the portrait displays the otherness of female sexuality and desire, has to veil it with a curtain.<sup>112</sup>

The Duke’s confident persona can therefore be seen as steeped in bravado, and this is evidenced at the poem’s conclusion whereupon the Duke turns away from the portrait as he prepares to meet his next potential wife, again referring to his ‘object’ (53). Making his way downstairs, he draws his company’s attention to a statue of Neptune ‘Taming a sea-horse’ (55), this statue seeming to symbolise the Duke’s triumph over his former wife. The Duchess

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<sup>110</sup> Heffernan (1996, 273) contends that the image preserves the Duchess’s ‘glance of inscrutable joy, her challenge to his possessive authority, her refusal to accept his demand that she smile only for him.’ Similarly, Tucker Jr. (1980, 179) states that the Duke ‘knows that the Duchess’s face figures some meaning forth, but he knows too that he cannot say what that meaning is.’

<sup>111</sup> For an example see Browning’s 1855 poem ‘Women and Roses’ (2007, vol. 3), which focuses on a male narrator’s attempts to impress his desire upon three groups of women (representing the past, present and future) only for them to evade his attentions.

<sup>112</sup> On a similar note, Hochberg (1991, 80) points to the poem’s references to positionality (particularly sitting and standing) as emblematic of the characters’ power status, noting that the Duke seeks to exert his authority by dictating the physical actions of his present acquaintances. Hochberg emphasises, however, that the Duchess is also twice described as standing (in lines 4 and 46), thus helping ‘to thematize the erotic strength of the Duchess as well as the poem’s central paradox of the intersection of power with seeming powerlessness.’

would therefore appear to be rendered yet another ‘decorative and decorous Galatea with whom every ruler would like to grace his parlor’ (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 41). However, Tucker Jr. (1980, 180) stresses that one should not take this assertion of power and aloof connoisseurship at face value, for the Duke ‘is nowhere more human and nowhere more worthy of suspicion than as he reaches thus for godlike, repressive power’. It is indeed the case that the Duke seeks to paper over his insufficiencies and anxieties. In fact, Maxwell (1993, 994) goes so far as to see the poem as symbolic of Galatea’s revenge: ‘a confrontation in which the dead returns to challenge the living’. However, the poem is perhaps more judiciously regarded in terms of equivocal rather than unmitigated triumph, for, ultimately, the flesh-and-blood woman has still been subsumed by the painting. The Duke, meanwhile, conceals his anxieties by taking full advantage of the control that he exerts over the portrait (and the art objects with which he surrounds himself). While his project might not be fully successful, the Duke’s desire to effect such an outcome is beyond question, and in this respect the poem provides a further example of such a scenario; again, presented in extreme form.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DIVISION:**

### **BINARIES OF GENDER AND VISION**

As established in chapter one, visual agency has long been deemed the province of the male within Western culture, with women being regarded as objects of vision. Exploring this scenario within a Victorian context, in particular, brings to light a variety of cultural factors that have perpetuated this template. One factor is the marked tendency towards binary thinking and categorisation during this time, as evidenced by notions of separate spheres and the classification of women in either / or terms (such as the angel / monster binary and its variations). The question remains, however, as to how binary thinking arises and feeds into a gendered model of spectatorship. Freudian theory is useful in this respect, as it provides a basis for some of the most prominent gendered dichotomies within Western culture.

However, approaching the topic from an object relations stance is valuable in exploring self-other relations as played out in everyday life. The mother-child relationship is fundamental in this respect, and this chapter will examine not only the generalised problems that can arise from deficiency in this arena but how this relationship can foster differing modes of relating informed by one's sex. This is not to impute that the mother is always the sole caregiver, nor that male and female development always follows two distinct, set pathways. However, there has long existed a standard model of childrearing within Western culture, and particularly during the Victorian era with its emphasis on clearly defined male / female roles. So, while there has been increasing divergence from this template, for the purposes of this chapter it is necessary to outline a standard model of development so as to gain a greater understanding of how gendered binaries may have arisen and been propagated.

In its delineation of binary thinking and its gendered dimensions, Freudian psychoanalysis offers one basis for that dichotomised mode of vision that has been so pervasive in Western culture. Briefly, Freudian theory posits that in early infancy the girl believes the boy and herself to be alike yet subsequently observes that she and her mother do not possess a penis, this observation prompting recognition of herself (and women in general) as being ‘castrated’. For the boy, meanwhile, observing that the mother is ‘castrated’ serves to terminate the Oedipus complex, for the boy’s desire for his mother is superseded by the fear that this will incite the father’s wrath, potentially leading to his *own* castration.<sup>113</sup> This model is deceptively clear-cut, with various problematic issues presenting themselves. Chiefly, there is the question of to what extent the girl’s earlier ‘bisexual’ period and female Oedipus complex are overcome, with Freud himself suggesting that female development is particularly arduous and liable to remain incomplete.<sup>114</sup> There is also cause to question whether the male always perceives female difference merely in terms of ‘lack’, and this relates to an inherent paradox: while the male’s anxiety supposedly stems from his observation of the female’s ‘lack’, it is this same lack that enables the woman to be positioned as a non-threatening object of visual pleasure. From this perspective, the female’s ‘lack’ is comforting, for it diffuses any possibility of transgression. As such, it may be that anxieties regarding lack conceal a real fear of female *difference*.<sup>115</sup> Horney’s (1932, 349-350) reference to the man’s desire to ‘objectify’ his dread of the woman is consequently apt in that, while Horney is alluding to the tendency to objectify the dread itself (displacing it to the woman and claiming that *she* is malignant), it is this same dread that can lead to objectification *of* the woman.

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<sup>113</sup> For a more detailed account of this model see Freud (*SE* 19: 173-182; 248-258)

<sup>114</sup> See Freud (*SE* 7: 219-221; *SE* 19: 253; *SE* 21: 225-243; *SE* 22: 112-135).

<sup>115</sup> Horney (1932, 351) makes an interesting conjecture in suggesting that ‘the essence of the phallic impulses proper...is a desire to *penetrate*’, in which case the boy is likely to seek a *complementary* organ. For Horney (356), then, the dread associated with the female arises from the boy’s feeling that his penis is too small for the mother’s vagina. The desire to penetrate consequently merges with frustration and anger, meaning that the mother’s genital becomes a source of dread (258).

Whether or not one regards the female's supposed lack as a *genuine* source of anxiety, Freud's model has substantial implications in terms of visual relations, feeding into a gendered model of spectatorship. Coining the term 'the male gaze', Mulvey ([1975] 1989), outlined a prominent template within mainstream narrative cinema whereby the gazes of the male protagonist, the camera and the presumed male spectator combine in a shared gaze at a 'to-be-looked-at' (19) female character, this unequal arrangement being based on Freudian notions of presence / lack and resulting in the woman being positioned 'as bearer, not maker, of meaning' (15). Inevitably there are aspects of this model that are not necessarily applicable across all mediums, but the fundamental arrangement that Mulvey outlines has manifested itself in numerous arenas and texts – one only has to look to an image such as Etty's *Candaules* to perceive such a tripartite gaze in operation. Of course, the gaze does not always manifest itself from these three perspectives, yet the crux of the Freudian model – that the female's perceived lack relegates her to passivity and object status – provides the key psychoanalytic rationale for the male viewer / female viewed binary that has been so prevalent within Western culture, not least during the Victorian era.

The gendered binary of presence / lack therefore results in a similar split between activity and passivity, and this has major implications in terms of designated male / female roles. As Brooks (2006, 32) observes, this alignment of active traits with masculinity has enabled the propagation of binaries that might otherwise potentially be eroded, with one inevitable consequence of this setup being the prevalence and perceived normality of the association of men with looking and women with being looked at. That is not to say that these roles are completely unbending, for one cannot state that women simply do not look. However, for a female to exercise visual agency is fraught with problems, as is the corresponding notion of the male as object of vision. This is due to various factors, one being the association of

activity and passivity not squarely with men and women but, in the first instance, with masculinity and femininity. What this means is that it is possible for women to look, but to do so places them in a ‘masculine’ position – indeed, this is one reason *why* it is problematic.<sup>116</sup> Where women express traits such as ambition, independence and so on the Freudian model thus conceives of this in terms of masculinity and regression. Likewise, it is culturally aberrant for a male to exhibit ‘feminine’ traits. It is therefore vital to keep in mind those constraints that foster notions of (im)proper male / female traits, and contribute to that template wherein men are positioned as bearers of the gaze and women its recipients.

When examining the roots of this gendered binary of vision, then, activity and passivity emerge as pivotal factors. However, they also exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship with other binaries that ‘privilege the signifier masculine as a positivised, if always phantasmatic term, while rendering feminine...a negated, cipher-like other’ (Pollock, 2006, 6). As Dolar (1991, 6) observes, for instance, a similarly gendered split between interiority and exteriority has found expression in a host of classical divisions such as mind / body, spirit / matter, essence / appearance and subject / object: divisions that work to align women with surface qualities and ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. It is, moreover, notable that Freudian psychoanalysis itself hinges upon gendered dualisms,<sup>117</sup> such dualisms including presence / lack, activity / passivity and distance / proximity (all aligned masculine / feminine).

There are two key points that need to be recognised here: that looking is predicated upon a degree of distance, and that the ability to think in terms of distance is associated with the male. It is important to state that this does not refer merely to the actual or perceived distance

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<sup>116</sup> See Doane (1982) and Mulvey ([1981] 1989, 29-38) for more on the problematical aspects of this scenario.

<sup>117</sup> Observing Freud’s propensity for dualistic explanations, Thurschwell (2009, 77) states that, though such explanations were intended to simplify the number of terms with which he worked, Freud ‘often found himself adding yet another term to his dualistic concepts instead.’



between oneself and one's surroundings but the extent to which one feels attached to something or someone, and the ability that one possesses to move away (again, in a psychological sense) sufficiently in order to gain the distance required for looking. That this ability should be associated with the male again has a conceptual basis in psychoanalysis, with Freud (*SE* 19: 252) positing that the boy, after having seen his mother naked, 'disavows what he has seen'. The female, meanwhile, also has an immediate impression of what she has seen; notably, the boy's penis, which is 'strikingly visible and of large proportions'. For her, however, this impression remains (particularly given that she does not possess the castration fears that motivate the male). Again, whether the troubling nature of this sight is due to the female 'castrated' status is open to debate, yet, in Freud's model, the male alone possesses the ability to step back from what he has seen. There is, in fact, an element of irony in that the girl, like the boy, initially *looks*. However, this 'masculine' look results in realisation of her 'lack', thus prompting a move away from active looking.

While Freudian psychoanalysis is useful in delineating binaries of activity / passivity and distance / proximity, it is also useful to consider the emergence of such binaries from an object relations stance with reference to the child's everyday relationship with the mother. This approach is beneficial in that it defines an important distinction between empathetic and objectifying modes of relating (or not relating, as the case may be): a distinction aligned with proximity and distance, respectively, and informed to a significant extent by visual relations. A key model in this regard is D. W. Winnicott's ([1967] 1971) discussion of 'mirroring' between mother and baby, which distinguishes between empathetic looking and the sense of the mother as rigid or distracted. An important point to keep in mind is that to be looked upon is not inherently troubling – indeed, the look of the other plays a constructive role within the process of socialisation. However, the mother's look does not always provide plenitude and

reassurance, prompting one to ask '[w]hy and when does the look of the Other bring about a collapse of the subjective self into the objective image that the look provides?' (Wright, 1991, 34). For Winnicott, this is a case of the mother's seeming lack of empathy and attentiveness, yet Wright (1991) shifts focus to the notion of an objectifying gaze wherein one feels as though one were being looked at by a Gorgon-like Other with 'terrifying eyes' (27). In this instance, one enters the traumatic territory that preoccupied Jean Paul Sartre: that feeling of being looked *at* by an Other, thus inducing a sense of oneself as a 'degraded, fixed, and dependent being' (Sartre, 1956, 288).

There are, then, different possibilities that can emerge in one's earliest experiences of (non)relating: pleasurable, mutual interaction is the ideal, while anxiety can arise from the sense that one is being looked at with a cold, objectifying gaze or else not being granted sufficient visual attention. That is not to say that early mothering need be perfect. Rather, the issue is of 'good enough' mothering and the extent to which the child is able to cope with the introduction of outside views. In Winnicott's terms, 'good enough' early experience and gradual mediation can help the infant cope with differentiation, yet the question remains as to what extent early experience truly can prepare one for entry into a setting in which visual relations can be far from empathetic. It might be that deficiency in the mother-infant relationship can lead to a heightened awareness of being looked *at*, yet the cultural reality in which one is positioned can weigh down regardless. Consequently, 'good enough' mothering may be powerless to prevent the disquiet that can arise when one feels oneself the object of a gaze that 'objectifies, limits and alienates' (Seppänen, 2006, 72).

While the abovementioned theories provide a fruitful basis for discussion, it is noticeable that they do not examine the potential significance of gender. It is true that anyone can be looked at in an objectifying manner. Nevertheless, there are certain groups and individuals who are

likely to experience this more consistently than others, and it is readily apparent that women have most commonly been recipients of that form of objectification based upon scopophilic desire. Not that this is discrete from other types of objectification: while it contains a sexualising element, it can create the same sense of anxiety, embarrassment and subordination that defines objectification more generally. In fact, to *not* make a distinction between males and females is to recognise the disturbing feelings that an objectifying gaze can produce in individuals of *both* sexes. However, given that it is women who are typically on the receiving end of this type of objectification, one cannot simply posit a gender neutral model of development. The question is, then, of how inequality may arise. On the one hand, it would appear that an early bond with the mother can initially protect the child to some degree but that this lessens as the child integrates into the world. From this perspective, gender imbalances come into focus in that the move away from the mother-infant relationship entails positioning oneself in the world as it is. However, this poses the question of *why* the world is as it is, and it is crucial to recognise that, while the mother-infant relationship may provide a cocoon in one sense, primary caregiving can itself inform and be informed by cultural context.

Gender is relevant in this respect on account of that cultural norm whereby the primary caregiver has typically been female, this arrangement being cited by theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein as having played a key role in shaping gendered imbalances and neuroses. Most obviously, aligning caregiving specifically with the female helps perpetuate dichotomous notions of male and female roles and traits (such as the association of women with nurturance and the domestic sphere) and can potentially foster problems on a psychological level in that the mother is responsible for meeting the child's needs yet is inevitably not always perfect in this respect, thus potentially leading the child to

view her as ‘capricious, sometimes actively malevolent’ (Dinnerstein, 1976, 95). Perfect mothering would not, however, guarantee against hostility, for the mother’s prominence and the child’s dependence upon her can produce anxieties regarding maternal omnipotence. This vacillating stance can consequently induce a process wherein the maternal object becomes ‘split in the conventional patriarchal mind in order to counter maternal power’ (Benjamin, 2002, 41). Processes of splitting will be discussed further in Chapter Four but, in terms of the infant’s perception of the mother, it is apparent that this can be subject to the same type of division as that which finds expression in polarised images of femininity (such division being especially prominent in the Victorian age).

For the mother to play such a prominent role in infancy can therefore lead not just to affection but to psychological responses founded upon fear and aggression, and this is true of infants of both sexes. However, there is another factor that needs to be considered here, and that is whether or not the female caregiver is of the same sex as the child. This is a significant point, for psychologists have argued that being of the same sex encourages continuing identification between the mother and female infant, whereas the male is likely to grow up with a greater sense of distinction and detachment. Chodorow (1978; 1989) has been a particularly influential thinker on this subject, emphasising the embeddedness that arises from the mother-daughter relationship. The boy, meanwhile, also initially relates to the mother in this manner yet must give up his initial feminine identification if he is to develop along heterosexual lines:<sup>118</sup> a disidentification that the mother assists by perceiving the son in a manner based upon object choice and dissimilarity. This, in Chodorow’s view, has fostered distinct modes

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<sup>118</sup> Stoller (1975) places particular emphasis on the male’s struggle to overcome feminine identification, arguing that men’s gender identity ‘carries with it the urge to regress to an original oneness with mother’ (294). Because of this, many characteristics associated with masculinity (such as misogyny, lack of tenderness, preoccupation with independence) can be informed by the fear of returning to this symbiotic state.

of relating, with female subjectivity being ‘founded on relation and connection, with flexible...ego boundaries’ (1989, 57) and male subjectivity on distance and detachment. This then generates a situation in which girls experience continuity with mother as less threatening and ‘can return to pre-Oedipal relating such as empathic, emotional resonance, without feeling that their ego is threatened. Boys by contrast have to...move more quickly into the Oedipal position where object choice is split from identification’ (Benjamin, 2002, 39-40). This contrast thus provides a basis for those gendered binaries that have permeated Western thought, enabling a mode of masculine (non)relating based upon detached objectivity.

When considering the origins of the distance / proximity binary, then, it is helpful to examine the divergence of the boy’s and girl’s relationship to the mother. For the girl, identification with the mother may be mediated by the father (whom she is to also make her primary object choice as per the Freudian model).<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, the transfer of her affections to the father is tentative and there remains a fundamental continuity in the mother-daughter attachment. The boy, however, is expected to shift identification to the father so as to gain the *detachment and distance* upon which heterosexual object choice is predicated, and this can lead to ongoing identity problems and fear of dependency (Johnson, 1988, 83). So, while Freud posited the boy’s Oedipal resolution as a clean break, Chodorow highlights the consequences of this disengagement; specifically, the male’s refutation of the feminine in himself and in wider society, and his attempts to control and objectify the female. Indeed, the ramifications of this difference permeate out into and are informed by wider culture, for continuing identification between mother and daughter can foster female role learning and the linking of

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<sup>119</sup> Chodorow (1989, 64) comments, however, that, the girl’s ‘identification with and idealization of her father may be at the expense of her positive sense of feminine self.’ It may also be that the father is not wholly effective in aiding individuation. As Johnson (1988, 104) observes, fathers may ‘help boys and girls extricate themselves from infantile dependency, but...at the price of encouraging dependency on themselves in their daughters.’

women with domesticity and familial relations. The standard male course of development, by contrast, fosters a mindset that encourages greater engagement in spheres beyond the domestic setting. The boy is thus encouraged to relate to the world in accordance with more abstract criteria (aided by identification with the typically more remote figure of the father)<sup>120</sup> and, crucially, tends to relate not only in a more mediated manner but ‘more consistently to the mediating categories and forms than the persons or objects themselves’ (Ortner, 1972, 22).<sup>121</sup>

Further to male’s shift away from identification with the maternal figure, theorists such as Benjamin (1980, 167) and Johnson (1988, 77) have emphasised that the devaluation of women is fostered by institutions that, though sometimes appearing genderless, exhibit controlling, objectifying tendencies and endorse male dominance. While relationality amongst females is established *within* the mother-daughter relationship, for males it is *separation from* the mother that enables male bonding, with male peer group associations standing as ‘developmental precursors of male dominance and indirectly of males’ sex objectification of women’ (Johnson, 1988, 107). Such dominance can then find expression in cultural institutions in which male authority holds sway, and this again provides a defensive gesture against a feared plunge back into a powerless feminised state, the male’s detachment from the mother being buttressed by the enticements of masculinity (its superior social position and alignment with culture).<sup>122</sup> Consequently, such a contrasting relationship with

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<sup>120</sup> As Hartley (1959) observes, the more abstract status of the father and other adult male figures encourages this negatory identification in that masculinity appears, in the first instance, as something non-feminine.

<sup>121</sup> Ortner (1972, 17-19) elaborates on the way in which domestic unity is opposed to or subsumed by the social entity, concluding that women’s association with the domestic sphere not only reinforces their alignment with nature but leads to further divisions, the family representing ‘lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to...higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns.’ (18)

<sup>122</sup> Stockard and Johnson (1979) maintain that ‘it is important not to remain “stuck” at the level of male and female motivation, but to examine the institutional arrangements that reproduce these motives’ (209);

the mother is unlikely to be of help in eroding ingrained male / female cultural roles, for the beneficial aspects of closeness and distance are overridden by an either / or division that can be fostered and reproduced within both the family setting and cultural institutions.

The repudiation of the feminine can thus have considerable impact on numerous levels, the most relevant to this thesis being the way in which this template has fed into a gendered politics of vision, with the developmental pathway associated with the male encouraging a mindset tending towards objectification of the (m)other. The active / passive binary re-emerges here in that this developmental standard has resulted in women being valued for 'being' and men for 'doing', the latter being informed by the male's insecurity and consequent need to prove himself (Chodorow, 1989, 44; Horney, 1932, 359<sup>123</sup>; Klein, 1975, 249-250). For the female, however, being valued for 'being' suggests not merely passivity and stagnation but being defined by one's corporeality and surface attributes. Ultimately, this developmental template can result in a power struggle in which the male's insecurity compels him to control and objectify the female so as to diffuse her feared power and assert his masculinity. As Benjamin (1980) outlines, the desire to master and objectify is a primitive psychological mechanism that allows the dominant party to avoid feelings of aloneness and lack of recognition while avoiding falling back into a dreaded state of dependency. Taking into account the association of men with detachment and women with closeness, as well as those anxieties that the male is liable to feel in regard to the mother, it is predictable that this template should have developed into a scenario wherein mastery becomes associated with

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namely, those societal arrangements that 'provide the most effective and concrete support for masculine identity... defining masculinity as superior, giving the highest prestige to the things males do'. See also Chodorow (1989, 51), Johnson (1988, 83) and Nochlin (1988, 152).

<sup>123</sup> Horney (1932) highlights the consequences of this insecurity, stating that 'the ever-precarious self-respect of the "average man" causes him over and over again to choose a feminine type which is infantile, non-maternal and hysterical' (360). Likewise, the male's need to prove himself results in the aim 'to have "possessed" many women, and the most beautiful and most sought-after women' (359).

masculinity. Likewise, Sartrean fears surrounding ownership of the gaze are liable to combine with anxieties surrounding the female, leading to the suppression of female visual agency and the propagation of an objectifying ‘male gaze’.<sup>124</sup>

While the shift away from the mother can lead to denigration of the ‘feminine’, it is not differentiation itself that is at issue but the type and extremity of differentiation: as Benjamin (1980) observes, there is a difference between seeing the other as separate and seeing her as a subject. This is a question of ‘true’ and ‘false’ differentiation, the latter being deficient, superficial and entailing unequal power relations. This is as opposed to *true* differentiation, which is a more nuanced process that involves maintaining a balance wherein one is able to recognise the other as an individual without effacing oneself. This form of differentiation is not necessarily easy to achieve, however, for it entails maintaining a tension between contradictory impulses such as self-assertion and recognition of the other, and individualism and connectedness. To deny the other’s subjectivity can therefore lead to a dynamic that plays into well-established gendered roles and strengthens the association of mastery and false differentiation with the male. Johnson (1988, 86) makes a salient point here in suggesting that the tendency to think in terms of hierarchies such as ‘independent-dependent, subject-object, penetrator-penetrated, and so forth...can easily lead men (and women) to define relational virtues, such as openness to the perspectives and needs of others, as “weakness.”’ Rather than relating to the woman as a person, then, the male who has developed such a mindset sees her as an Other and a subordinate, with this gendered division between empathy and detachment – or, closeness and distance – sustaining a structure wherein women are habitually on the receiving end of an objectifying gaze.

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<sup>124</sup> As Bowers (1990, 220) summarises, ‘[p]atriarchal males have had to make Medusa – and by extension, all women – the object of the male gaze as a protection against being objectified themselves by Medusa’s female gaze.’



Further to the abovementioned tendency towards hierarchism, it is clear that these various either / or, superior / inferior pairings are often intertwined. In terms of the association of women with proximity and men with distance, this has not only entailed a denigration of the former but a hierarchical stance towards the sensory faculties. The ranking of these faculties within Western culture has not, as Classen (1993, 3) notes, been constant, yet examining the social meanings associated with the senses confirms that there is a standard ranking, the topmost position being occupied by sight. Given the association of women with closeness, along with the subordinate cultural status afforded to women, it would seem inevitable that the senses should have also come to be demarcated along gendered lines, and this is indeed the case. Observing the devaluation of the sense of smell from the Enlightenment onwards, Classen, Howes and Synnott (1994) detail the feminisation (and further denigration) of this sense in the nineteenth century. Inevitably, then, sight ‘became associated with men, who – as explorers, scientists, politicians or industrialists – were perceived as discovering and dominating the world through their keen gaze’ (84), while the non-visual senses were seen to belong ‘to the female homemaker’ (Classen, 1993, 31). It is therefore apparent that the female has long served as a depository for the ‘lesser’ senses while sight has been aligned with the male.<sup>125</sup> That sight depends upon distance is crucial here, for, while neither factor is inherently objectifying, they combine to provide a basis without which objectification could not operate.

### **Women, Proximity and Enclosure**

The association of men with distance and women with proximity has therefore played a major role in creating an imbalanced model of relating that assigns visual agency to the male and

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<sup>125</sup> As Metz (1975, 60) observes, ‘[i]t is no accident that the main socially acceptable arts are based on the senses at a distance, and that those which depend on the senses of contact are often regarded as “minor” arts (=culinary arts, art of perfumes, etc.).’

enables an objectifying gaze. This, however, raises the issue of how women's association with proximity (and relationality) has impacted upon how women are depicted and encouraged to view themselves. While closeness and relationality can be desirable, the gendered disparity whereby these qualities have come to be associated with women and placed in contrast to distance has had considerable implications for women. For one thing, being linked with relationality has meant that, in most societies, women 'are *defined* relationally (as someone's wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law; even a nun becomes the Bride of Christ)' (Chodorow, 1989, 57). Rather than merely having connotations of empathy and kinship, relationality can thus end up reinforcing the notion that men exist as individuals while women are defined by what they represent *to* the individual – a discrepancy that maintains women's status as providers of scopophilic pleasure.

For women themselves, it is not the case that involvement is necessarily problematic. Rather, the issue is of overinvolvement and excessive closeness, and, despite her references to the universality of the developmental template that she describes,<sup>126</sup> Chodorow (1989, 62) suggests that such overinvolvement is most likely to arise within a Western middle-class context due to lack of mediation within the mother-infant relationship. This mediating function consequently highlights that relationality and dependency are not the same, the goal being to retain a capacity for closeness *and* the ability to make sufficient self / other distinctions. If this outcome is not reached, then one is liable to feel 'a sense of inescapable embeddedness in relationships to others' (Chodorow, 1989, 58), and this can entail a heavy emotional burden. It is therefore vital to recognise that closeness does not always signify a pleasurable, nurturing relationship but can entail a psychological attachment that can be

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<sup>126</sup> Chodorow (1989, 46) states that she relies upon 'psychoanalytic and social-psychological accounts based almost entirely on highly industrialized Western society' but that '[b]ecause aspects of family structure are discussed that are universal...it is worth considering the theory as a general model.'

inhibiting. The core issue, then, is of what happens when women experience or are encouraged to experience excessive closeness, not only towards other individuals but to cultural images of femininity and to their *own* self-image.

Regarding the ways in which women relate to other women, as well as to images of women, the notions of female relationality discussed above are of particular significance. On the one hand, it is important to recognise that women's capacity for relationality can have favourable implications, particularly in a culture wherein women have long been encouraged to compete against one another in order to meet expectations of youth and beauty.<sup>127</sup> It is also beneficial in that it departs from Freud's downbeat construal of continued pre-Oedipal attachment and emphasis on the daughter's hostile feelings towards the similarly-castrated mother. In fact, it is now the boy who must initially define himself as *not*-mother (Chodorow, 1989, 109).

Nevertheless, if closeness becomes excessive or is posited in contrast to distance as part of a gendered path of development, then stereotypical notions of male / female traits are bound to continue. A solipsistic mother-daughter relationship can, furthermore, lead to the daughter feeling that her desire for individuation is being stifled, cultivating hostility and feelings of infantile rage that can manifest themselves 'in distrust and disrespect toward other women, and indirectly by offering ourselves up to male vindictiveness' (Dinnerstein, 1976, 174).

To focus upon female relationality can have significant implications when applied to women's responses to cultural images of femininity, for women's supposedly identificatory outlook has helped foster the pervasive notion that women derive pleasure from looking at other women. This hypothesis would thus explain why it is that women have so often been presented with glamorised and sexualised images of other women. In fact, there is an element

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<sup>127</sup> As Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 38) acknowledge, 'female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy...the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other.' See Miller (1958) for discussion of such rivalry and hostility as manifested within psychoanalytic case studies.

of irony here in that this is one instance where women have been permitted to look, and, moreover, at sexualised imagery. However, the object of this look must also be female, for, as Mulvey ([1975] 1989, 20) comments, '[a]ccording to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification.' So, while it is possible that differing male / female development might enable a greater capacity for same sex identification, it is vital to recognise that this outcome is not 'natural' or inevitable. Also, even where women *do* possess relational tendencies, this does not necessarily assure identificatory feelings towards cultural images nor that women necessarily gain pleasure from looking at them, with women themselves having questioned this arrangement.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, notions of female closeness and identification have been nothing if not convenient when it comes to justifying the proliferation of sexualised images of women. Still, the impact of this model is substantial, for it demarcates the scope of the visual field afforded to the female and maintains the association of women with visual spectacle.

For women themselves, then, presumptions and expectations regarding feminine identification have sometimes been experienced as oppressive, and this is no less the case when it comes to one's own body. This form of closeness is again something that various feminist theorists have been keen to embrace, and there are beneficial aspects to this approach. Chiefly, it seeks to move away from notions of the female as inferior or lacking and to encourage women to reclaim their own bodies, counterbalancing that persistent cultural trope whereby women are defined by their corporeality as it exists *in the eyes of the other*. It also seeks to combat the cultural privileging of distance and sight by embracing those 'lesser' senses typically associated with women, and Luce Irigaray has been particularly emphatic in

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<sup>128</sup> Rutledge Shields and Heineken (2002, 76-77) present quotes from women voicing their annoyance at material that is ostensibly aimed at a female audience yet nevertheless seems to position women as objects of erotic spectacle.

this respect, rightly deploring not only the privileging of the visible and the faculty of sight but woman's consignment to passivity within this scopic economy – an economy wherein 'she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation' (1985, 26). However Irigaray's counter-proposition involves a disavowal of the visual, her contention being that women's pleasure is derived 'more from touching than from looking' (25-26). To reappraise that which has been denigrated is creditable, yet if this entails the continued association of closeness specifically with women and / or the vilification of distance and sight then this is limiting and counterproductive. Doane ([1988] 1991, 37) summarises this hazard and specifies an important distinction:

To embrace and affirm the definition of femininity as closeness, immediacy, or proximity-to-self is to accept one's own disempowerment in the cultural arena, to accept the idea that women are outside of language. To investigate this idea as an idea, with a certain cultural effectivity, is another matter.

There is, then, a fine line to be treaded here, and, regardless of one's intentions, this approach can ultimately strengthen the more superficial notion of woman as body. This consequently encourages various stereotypes such as the notion that women are prone to excessive emotionality or are defined by their reproductive capacity: a mindset that was especially prominent during the Victorian era.<sup>129</sup> Likewise, to associate women with the body can reinforce (albeit not necessarily intentionally) the association of women with sex – not in the

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<sup>129</sup> Ortner (1972) emphasises that the procreative functions specific to females encourage an association of women with nature and with social contexts deemed closer to nature (notably, the domestic sphere). Ortner also recognises that the female *is* in some respects a cultural agent: even within a domestic context, women play a key role in shaping an infant's socialisation. Nevertheless, women remain aligned with nature and seen as 'lower on the scale of transcendence' (16) while men are associated with 'finer and higher aspects of human thought' (19) such as art and religion.

sense of a woman's *own* sexuality, for that would be culturally coded as improper,<sup>130</sup> but as sexual objects to be displayed for the male viewer's pleasure.

To associate women with closeness and the body can therefore play a significant role in shaping cultural definitions of and depictions of femininity. Moreover, such associations can have a dramatic effect on how a woman relates to both her own body and representations of the female body, one crucial factor being the developmental norm wherein the male has the possibility of displacing the first object of desire (the mother) while the female must *become* that object. Consequently, there is for the woman 'a certain over-presence of the image – she *is* the image' and this means that she is liable to experience her body in terms of an 'overwhelming presence-to-itself' (Doane, [1988] 1991, 22). Closeness can therefore become excessive, and specularity is paramount here in that the woman is not associated with the distance necessary for looking outwards but rather with a self-directed form of specularity, enclosed in a room of mirrors wherein she is 'a cinema for the man and for herself' (Heath, 1978, 76).

This sense of closeness to oneself and one's own image bears further consideration here, in that emphasising this relationship can feed into a prominent stereotype that associates women with narcissism. And this is the difficulty that plagues attempts at reclamation: 'a point of resistance...is also a point of oppression and something of the accepted imaginary comes back' (Heath, 1978, 76). Given women's association with closeness and specularity, narcissism has come to be regarded as an innate female trait. Indeed, there exists a strong Western cultural tradition that has portrayed women as essentially narcissistic and pressurised

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<sup>130</sup> Discussing this disparity, Nead (1988, 6) affirms that sexuality is organised via 'a code of sexual mores which condones sexual activity in men as a sign of "masculinity" whilst condemning it in women as a sign of deviant or pathological behaviour.' Similarly, Bowers (1990, 217) notes that '[f]emale eros...has undergone continuous assault from the male gaze'.

women to develop such a stance towards themselves. In this respect narcissism involves the internalisation of both cultural notions of femininity and the male gaze, cultivating a continuous state of self-surveillance. As Foucault observed, in such a situation the use of force is not necessary, and power itself is diffuse. Hence, 'there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer' (Foucault, 1977, 155).

While Foucault pointed to the proliferation of this model in a range of contexts, he did not discuss its implications with regard to gender. Nevertheless, his statement that 'visibility is a trap' (1977, 200) invites a consideration of the particular ways in which women experience such visibility, and, in fact, feminist theory predates Foucault here, with Mary Wollstonecraft (1792 77-81) having epitomised not only the constraints placed upon women but the way in which women are taught to survey and modify themselves:

To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles...Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.<sup>131</sup>

Modern-day theorists have continued to make such observations, emphasising the continuance of this arrangement. Particularly notable is Berger's (1972, 47) discussion of an internalised 'male gaze':

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<sup>131</sup> The Victorians' exaltation of the angelic / consumptive woman feeds into this model, for, as Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 25) observe, 'the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty...obliged "genteel" women to "kill" themselves...into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead.'

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 survey of woman herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into...an object of vision.

This scenario posits the woman as both gazer and gazed upon, yet the former role is hardly indicative of expansive, outward-looking vision. Rather, the female's gaze is directed towards herself and shaped by cultural specifications. The woman is therefore not only looking at herself but looking at herself through the eyes of a 'panoptical male connoisseur' (Bartky, 1990, 72), 'femininity' being a cultural production. Likewise, as the above quotes demonstrate, it is not a mere aesthetic choice, for cultural strictures impel the production of femininity as a performative act. On this note, Buck-Morss (1986, 124-26) points out that girls are encouraged to turn themselves into dolls, with capitalism creating an artificial sense of liberation by allowing women the 'freedom' to exist as sexual objects – an insidious cultural myth that persists to this day. Approaching this topic from an object relations perspective also bears out such a contention, for women have been encouraged (on both a developmental and cultural level) to relinquish traits of autonomy and activity and 'accept objectification and control in order to flee separation' (Benjamin, 1980, 167). This is not to say that this is always a smooth, successful procedure, for women have expressed awareness and discontent in this regard, as well as more intense psychological unrest. Also, even when women have striven to meet cultural requirements, self-surveillance can be a laborious process driven by the understanding 'that it is necessary to *become* a woman, a "normal" one at that, whereas a man is a man from the outset' (Irigaray, 1985, 126). What is important to recognise, however, is that the self-regard that this process encourages is presented as 'natural' and has often been treated with an air of condescension, as though it were an



endearing 'female trait'. In reality, however, it is a construct intended to produce a state of self-surveillance such that women are less likely to question social arrangements.

As Ortner (1972, 15) notes, for a woman to accept her devaluation highlights an element of irony in that, by adopting such a stance, the woman is taking 'culture's point of view.' That women have adopted a position in accordance with cultural norms thus demonstrates that women *are* part of culture, yet, in this instance, being part of culture is hardly cause for celebration. The same goes for the means by which women seek to attain this culturally desired image: as noted earlier, women are aligned with nature yet have been expected to employ artificial methods of modification and adornment. This paradox further demonstrates that, the more one examines such dichotomies, the more their contradictions emerge. Nevertheless, cultural expectations have encouraged women to regard themselves as objects of desire and to strive to realise this ideal, with social 'worth' being dependent upon success in this arena. It is, after all, up to the King to decide who is 'fairest of all'. Likewise, it is Paris who occupies the role of judge in the archetypal Greek beauty contest. That this brand of social value is superficial and transient is part of the tragedy of this scenario, yet the association of women with 'to-be-looked-at-ness' has prevailed. The gendered dichotomy of vision cannot operate properly unless both sides exist in secure opposition, and this security has been fostered by the contention that each party has fallen into its natural role and that this dichotomy is right and natural for women, as 'evidenced' by female narcissism and the satisfaction that women derive from being objects of vision. Consequently, women have been encouraged to regard themselves as objects in the eyes of others and objects *for* the eyes of others.

A key point of interest regarding narcissism is that it can serve as another strategy of containment, seeking to keep the female engaged in self-absorption so that she is, in effect, as

tethered as Andromeda. Such containment can serve as a preventive strategy against, amongst other things, the feared gaze of the (m)other, bringing to mind those defensive mechanisms employed by Perseus against the Medusa's supposedly paralysing gaze.<sup>132</sup> Notions of self-absorption thus provide a further means by which anxieties regarding female transgression can be diffused, for the woman cannot present any threat while absorbed in her own image. As Heath (1978, 92) summarises, '[i]f the woman looks...castration is in the air, the Medusa head is not far off', thus meaning that the woman must remain absorbed in 'seeing herself seeing herself'. The most common motif through which this has been represented is that of the woman looking at herself in a mirror (or other reflective surface), and this was certainly the case within the Victorian era. Indeed, the popularity of this motif provides a further instance of the wider interest in visuality during this time. That is not to say that the mirror motif was always utilised for such purposes, and Chapter Four will demonstrate that mirroring can have far more complex associations. In terms of cultural definitions of femininity, however, the mirror has not been associated with depth and introspection but with surface, and has long been a key component in processes of self-surveillance and beautification. As Irigaray emphasises, 'beauty is always considered a *garment* ultimately designed to attract the other into the self...We look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit' (1996, 477). Taking a similar stance to Irigaray, Nead (1992, 11) notes that the profusion of cultural images of femininity can have a dramatic effect on women's sense of identity: the woman 'is framed – experiences herself as image – by the edges of the mirror and then judges the boundaries of her form and carries out any necessary self-regulation'. The likening of the

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<sup>132</sup> Benson (1994) discusses various defensive mechanisms against becoming overwhelmed by such a gaze, including multiplication (as in tableaux and sequential photography), deflection (focusing on a statue's finger rather than its eyes, for example) and channelling bafflement into intellectual inquiry.

mirror to the picture frame is especially apposite, for this underlines the extent to which women have been enclosed within boundaries, not only rendering the female an image for the eyes of others but impelling her to regard *herself* as an image. Within this context, the mirror functions as a tool in which the female gazer sees herself as part of a culturally-defined category – a concept emblematised by Burne-Jones's *The Mirror of Venus* (1877, fig. 2.1) and its 'multiplication of similarly styled, similarly featured women...an excess of generic femininity' (Flint, 2000, 238).<sup>133</sup> Focusing upon the painting's depiction of Venus's maidens bound together by self-absorption (via their entranced gaze at the reflective surface of a pool), Flint (236) notes that the fact that one woman is *not* looking at the water but up towards Venus subsequently creates the impression that Venus is 'attempting to...re-enclose her in this self-regarding world.' Being impelled to conform to an image may not always have the desired effect, for, as Flint (154) also observes, drawing attention to surface qualities can potentially lead to the viewer *questioning* the inviolability of this surface. Still, this does not negate the rigidity and oppressiveness of groupings that entail a membership that is not merely voluntary. This being the case, women have in common a difficulty in stepping outside of this allotted space in which they are not allowed to forget that they are, above all, part of the category 'woman'. And, again, this is less often the case with men:

A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an "individual." Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex or color, have no such luxury. (Friedman, 1988, 39)

Beautification processes and other 'feminine' traits are therefore fostered by cultural pressures and, as will become increasingly clear, have in some cases led to dissent. Nevertheless,

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<sup>133</sup> Wood (1981, 119) also emphasises the generic quality of the image, referring to its 'minimum of narrative or historical content...the title is Venus, but the picture could equally have been given a vague allegorical title.'

vanity has long been presented as an innate feminine quality, with the standard association of women with the mirror epitomising this formula. John William Waterhouse's *Vanity* (1910) makes this association marked, as does Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1868, fig. 2.2). Regarding the latter painting, one must take into account that it serves as a counterpart to Rossetti's corresponding poem 'Lilith' (1870),<sup>134</sup> which focuses on the malevolence of its title character (portrayed within Judaic myth as the first wife of Adam and as both seductress and murderess). When coupled with this corresponding sonnet, the painting consequently becomes contextualised in a way that would not be the case were it viewed without such complementary material<sup>135</sup> or background knowledge of the character. There is, after all, no direct evidence of the title character's power or malevolence in the image (which merely seems to depict an attractive woman gazing at herself in her mirror).

Given the self-containment and indifference that Lilith seems to personify within this image, some critics have argued that the painting emphasises Lilith's independence and aligns her with the New Woman, presenting 'an unanswerable challenge to the male psyche' (Bullen, 1998, 147-148).<sup>136</sup> Binias (2006) also persuasively argues that Rossetti's sonnet can itself be seen not as an instruction for interpreting the painting but a subjective response on the part of the speaker-spectator whose interpretation is shaped by his own anxieties regarding the independent female – hence the transformation of the woman in the painting into the demonic woman of the sonnet. Consequently, Binias sees the pairing of the sonnet and painting as constituting 'a critique of the discriminatory, moralising ideology of the destructive, demonic

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<sup>134</sup> Later retitled 'Body's Beauty' (1881).

<sup>135</sup> This association is encouraged by the inclusion of the sonnet on the painting's frame and stands out all the more when contrasted with another of Rossetti's painting-sonnet duos: *Sibylla Palmifera* (1868) and its accompanying sonnet of the same name (1870) (later renamed 'Soul's Beauty' [1881]), both of which centre on a more sacred, awe-inspiring type of beauty as opposed to the superficial, sensual beauty of the Lilith texts. These two sonnet-painting duos thus stand in contrast and, accordingly, were featured side-by-side in Algernon Swinburne's *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition* (1868).

<sup>136</sup> See Allen (1984, 292-293) for more on this subject.

woman.’ Both readings thus go beyond interpreting the visual image of Lilith as a dangerous seductress (as encouraged by the sonnet), focusing instead on her status as a self-contained figure who catalyses the curiosity and anxiety of the male observer-sonneteer. Still, while these are certainly pertinent appraisals, the image also plays on conventional notions of female narcissism and, in this respect, presents Lilith as yet another beautiful young woman engaged in her beauty routine. One potential reason for this is that a woman occupied in such a way cannot be a threat, in which case the image may serve the purpose of containment. A further possibility concerns the act of projection. As discussed earlier in this thesis, women have often been regarded as little more than ciphers and repositories for the male’s own unwanted tendencies, and this is particularly the case when it comes to ‘effeminate’ traits such as vanity and narcissism.<sup>137</sup> It may therefore be that the narcissism depicted within such scenes relates as much to the producers of these images as to women themselves.

Even if projection is not at issue in the case of *Lady Lilith*, depicting women in this manner can also serve a related function of deflection in that it not only compels women to treat themselves as objects of sight but can divert attention away from the male painter’s scopophilia (Berger, 1972, 51). Of course, the ‘male gaze’ has become so naturalised that such subterfuge hardly seems necessary, yet, were a painting to be regarded as merely an exercise in scopophilic pleasure, this would threaten the painter’s credibility and would not be conducive to the refinement associated with high art. To depict a woman absorbed in her reflection can therefore serve a useful function, the mirror’s reflective surface potentially reflecting the male’s own desires and anxieties. In fact, the woman *herself* serves as a mirror

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<sup>137</sup> That such traits should have become linked with women is ironic given that Narcissus was male. As Danahay (1994) notes, though, Narcissus was not depicted in nineteenth century art as frequently as one might imagine, this myth being less popular than that of Pygmalion. Rather than being distinct, however, the Narcissus myth became intertwined with that of Pygmalion and Galatea, the latter myth allowing painters to displace narcissism onto the mouldable woman.

in this respect; specifically, the flat mirror defined by Irigaray (1985, 154). As noted in the previous chapter, female characters have frequently served a reflective function, existing in accordance with a male's desires and providing him with an idealised self-image. The association of women with the mirror is therefore apt in this regard, the irony being that women have been associated with self-reflection in a superficial, literal sense, yet discouraged from engaging in *genuine* self-reflection and subjective thought.

### **CHAPTER 3: FEAST OR FAMINE: WOMEN'S POETRY AND THE ILLS OF GENDERED SPECTATORSHIP**

While academic discussion on the gendering of visual relations came to the fore in the latter part of the twentieth century, this is not an issue that went unnoticed in the nineteenth century, with Mrs E. M. King (President of the Rational Dress Society) having noted that '[w]omen always feel themselves in the position of being looked at rather than looking,' whereas 'the reverse is the case with men' (King, 1882, 13, cited by Walkowitz, 2010, 443). This observation provides an apt starting point for discussion of women's responses to this form of inequality, for it indicates that this dichotomy was something of which women themselves were conscious. That women were far from oblivious is further demonstrated by a range of female-authored poetic texts that explore this theme, such texts ranging from deliberate, politicised commentary to acute psychological treatments. Some of the more psychologically dense works will be examined in Chapter Four, yet, firstly, it is pertinent to consider a selection of texts that comment on the injustice of this gendered disparity, with Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856) and Elizabeth Siddal's 'The Lust of the Eyes' (c. 1855-1857) providing examples of such poetic responses. These two poems gain added relevance in relation to the lives and careers of their authors, and this chapter will therefore discuss both the poems themselves and the context of their production. It will subsequently focus on the emotional consequences that can arise from the valuing of women on the basis of their aesthetic attributes, with Eliza Cook's 'Song of the Ugly Maiden' (1845) focusing on the plight of a woman who bemoans her lack of such feminine charms. It will conclude with discussion of Emily Brontë's 'Stars' (1845), which highlights visual relations by contrasting

the benevolent overseeing gaze of the starlit sky with the harsh, objectifying gaze symbolised by the sun.

Of the abovementioned poems, the best-known is Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio', which reflects upon a male artist's rendering of his female subject(s) and hinges upon the observation that the artist's numerous depictions are all founded upon the same idealised image, regardless of any superficial variety. The template to which Rossetti refers is hardly limited to a particular artist or school but ties in with the standard positioning of women as objects to be looked upon and represented via a male gazer-artist. However, one must also recognise the context within which this poem was written; not merely its cultural context but in terms of Rossetti's own life, with the artist referenced in this poem inevitably bringing to mind Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sensual, stylised depictions of female beauty. Not only this, it is widely accepted that the relationship portrayed within this poem is based upon Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his model (and, later, wife) Elizabeth Siddal.<sup>138</sup> The poem's allusions to this relationship will be discussed shortly, as will Siddal's own life and work. Firstly, however, it is worth considering Christina Rossetti's take on themes of gender and visibility given her status as both sister to one of the preeminent members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and poet in her own right. This dual role is a relevant factor when discussing Rossetti's poetry, as it is reflective of the problematic nature of authorial ownership and independence on the part of the female writer. Spaise (1997) argues for example, that William Rossetti's editing of his sister's poetry after her death was at least partially informed by his desire to create an edited image of *her*, changing the tone of some of the poems or else suppressing them so as to create an idealised construct of the perfect Victorian woman.

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<sup>138</sup> William Michael Rossetti (1904, 480) considered this to be the case, noting that '[t]he reference is apparently to our brother's studio, and to his constantly-repeated heads of the lady whom he afterwards married, Miss Siddal.'



Likewise, other family members attempted to mold her temperament and work, particularly in order to subdue her passionate, sometimes tempestuous disposition. This was successful to an extent, yet, as she grew more secure in her artistry and her poems gained recognition, Rossetti became more assured of her work and values. That is not to say that her work is of a trenchant nature, yet some of her poems express a clear interest in matters of gender and ideology, with 'In an Artist's Studio' being a prime example.

The poem establishes its central theme at the outset, commenting of the artist's work, 'One face looks out from all his canvasses / One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans' (Collins and Rundle, 1999, ll. 1-2). Rossetti makes such an observation despite the seeming variety of female characters depicted, including a queen, an angel and a 'nameless girl' (5-7), yet this is the poem's central theme: whatever form the character takes, each is defined squarely by the artist's desires. Moreover, these roles evoke stereotypical images of womanhood and are all, at their core, similar – a queen, an angel and a nameless young girl may appear to inhabit different milieus but they all conform to conventional Victorian notions of femininity, with the 'nameless' status of the young girl being a particularly apt emblem of women's cipher-like status.<sup>139</sup> Apparent plurality is therefore deceptive, with Rossetti's reference to each canvas bearing 'The same one meaning, neither more nor less' (8) conveying a dull predictability. The aforementioned editing of Rossetti's work and character is also apposite

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<sup>139</sup> Auerbach (1981, 281) notes that the Victorian woman was a 'much-loved, much-feared, and much-lied about creature', this apparent variability being exemplified by a notorious passage in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) in which the title character describes a posthumous portrait of her mother:

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,  
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,  
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,  
A still Medusa with mild milky brows (2008, 1. 154-157).

As Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 18) and Ortner (1972, 26-27) note, however, such seeming variety is misleading, for these symbols are indicative of the female's position as cipher and are similarly informed by cultural desires and anxieties.

in this respect, in that, like the woman of the painting, Rossetti was subject to an idealising treatment that did not fully reflect the real woman behind the 'canvas'.

The poem's visual motifs are especially potent in the following lines: 'We found her hidden just behind those screens, / That mirror gave back all her loveliness' (3-4). Screens highlight the setting of the artist's studio and refer to a partition behind which the painting had been placed prior to this rediscovery. However, the painting is *itself* a screen in a dual sense, and it is important to note here that a screen is something that can both conceal and display (the latter being exemplified by the cinema screen). In the case of this poem, these seemingly converse functions combine in that the painting conceals the real woman while displaying an idealised image, pre-empting those illusions that would later play out across a cinematic surface. Here, the poem cannot help but evoke the scenario depicted in 'My Last Duchess', the painting taking the place of the real woman while the male (whether this be the painter or owner of the artwork) controls the image and how it is received.

This theme is also suggested in one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnets, 'The Portrait' (1870), in which an artist / speaker avows that he will convey his beloved's inner self in painted form yet concludes by stating 'Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note / That in all years... / They that would look on her must come to me' (1901, ll. 12-14). On the one hand, the artist expresses a desire to delve beneath the Lady's surface qualities to convey 'The very sky and sea-line of her soul' (8), yet, having completed the painting, he triumphs in his success in producing a visual manifestation of the Lady over which he retains control. There is consequently a sense of the artist regarding the painting – and its subject – in a manner that can be seen as protective in one respect yet also possessive and controlling. Likewise, the artist praises his singular ability in depicting the Lady's 'true' nature, such that the real woman becomes secondary to the image. Christina Rossetti's poem, however, suggests a

rectification of such a scenario, with the statement ‘We found her hidden just behind those screens’ gesturing towards recovery of the real woman. To whom ‘we’ refers is not specified yet helps imbue the poem with an empathetic tone,<sup>140</sup> which is especially fitting given that Rossetti had herself modelled for several of her brother’s paintings. This approach consequently goes some way to readdressing the balance, approaching the artist’s subject from a humanising perspective.

While this poem does not refer to any actual mirrors, the concept of mirroring plays a vital role. In one sense the painting can be conceived of as a reflection of the model, yet it is clear that this is a distorted reflection informed by the artist’s vision. That the mirror-painting ‘gave back all her loveliness’ is of particular note, as the phrase ‘gave back’ has a dual meaning. Conventionally, it suggests the mirror’s function in reflecting the gazer’s own image, yet this is clearly not applicable here, for Rossetti’s focus is not on a woman gazing into a mirror but rather on the woman being falsely mirrored via a male gazer’s own desire. That is not to say that women’s own direct relationship with the mirror cannot also be fraught or distorted, and examples of such distortion will be discussed shortly. What is important to remember, however, is that these factors are not mutually exclusive. The preliminary subject of concern may be the idealised image cultivated by the male gazer, but it is apparent that, when one feels oneself defined from the outside by an image to which one cannot relate, this can have profound effects on one’s own subjectivity. Rossetti’s reference to mirroring is thus ironic in that the mirror does *not* reflect the woman’s image back to herself. However, it is significant that the term is not ‘reflect back’ but ‘gave back’, the latter phrase intimating the restoration of a quality that the woman apparently used to possess – at least within the eyes of the male gazer. Consequently, one returns to the desire to preserve female youth and beauty,

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<sup>140</sup> Critics have observed the theme of sisterhood in Rossetti’s poetry, with Gilbert (1992, 2) observing Rossetti’s tendency to focus on female sympathy and depict men as ‘absent, weak or threatening’.

creating an unchanging image while the real woman ages behind the screen – out of sight and out of mind – in a converse but more conventional scenario to that depicted in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

The real woman and her painted image are therefore at the whim of the male artist.

Superficially, the depicted subject 'looks out', yet this is hardly indicative of subjectivity or an active gaze, for it is again always the same face and eyes that look out, both of which are shaped by the artist's desire. Never complaining, the woman 'with true kind eyes looks back on him / Fair as the moon and joyful as the light' (10-11), despite him 'feeding' on her face 'day and night' (9). This description of the artist highlights the vampiric, obsessive nature of his relations with his subject, his desire to 'feed' upon her evoking women's status within capitalist culture as goods to be consumed. It also contrasts her gentleness and understanding with his voraciousness, but the woman's apparently limitless patience and contentment is again inaccurate, for it does not convey the despondency of the real woman. The artist depicts her 'Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim; / Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright' (12-13). This melancholic waiting potentially refers to the extended period during which Elizabeth Siddal awaited marriage to Dante Gabriel Rossetti<sup>141</sup> but, more generally, these lines have an elegiac quality that suggests that the woman's current sorrow (which the artist either ignores or fails to notice) has taken the place of a former hopefulness. They also employ repetitive language that harks back to the poem's opening references to 'One face' and 'One selfsame figure', with the final three lines (12-14) repeating the word 'not' four times. This repetition reaches its apex in the poem's final two lines, which both begin 'Not as she is, but [...]' (13-14) and recapitulate the poem's key theme: that the male

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<sup>141</sup> Rossetti and Siddal married in 1860, seven years after their engagement and two years before Siddal's death, with friends (including John Ruskin) entreating Rossetti to honour his commitment on account of Siddal's increasingly serious health problems and laudanum addiction.

artist sees the woman 'Not as she is, but as she fills his dream' (14). Consequently, the poem serves as 'a powerful reminder of how transcendent feminine representations may serve both to mask and to mark historical women's metaphoric and actual absence' (Lootens, 1996, 71).

Given that Rossetti's poem would appear to have been based, at least in part, upon the relationship between her brother and Elizabeth Siddal, it is prudent to consider in more detail both this relationship and Siddal's own response to her role as artistic muse. Having been 'discovered' by Walter H. Deverell,<sup>142</sup> Siddal was for a time the model of choice for several members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, one of her best-known roles being that of the drowned title character of John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852).<sup>143</sup> Embodying tragic beauty and ethereality, Siddal's association with Ophelia is particularly apt in that Siddal was to herself become associated with a legend surrounding her own posthumous appearance. Upon Siddal's death of a laudanum overdose aged thirty-two, Rossetti included in her coffin a manuscript of his poetry but became increasingly preoccupied with retrieving the poems, eventually ordered his agent, Charles Augustus Howell, to exhume the coffin. Having done so, Howell remarked upon how well-preserved the corpse was and, famously, on how Siddal's hair had continued to grow to such an extent that it nearly filled her coffin.

Regardless of its veracity, that this fable should have caught the public imagination is hardly surprising given the symbolic meaning with which women's hair was invested during the

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<sup>142</sup> While accounts differ as to how Deverell came to know of Siddal, the standard version of events places Deverell's first encounter with Siddal as taking place in either late 1849 or early 1850 during which time Siddal was working as a milliner's assistant. Observing her stately form and 'dazzling copper' hair (Hunt, 1905, 1: 139), Deverell believed that Siddal would be the perfect choice to model for Viola in his artistic rendering of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. As Cherry and Pollock (1984, 207) note, however, to 'discover' carries connotations of imperialism and colonialism, foreshadowing the extent to which Siddal would become defined in terms of her symbolic function and relation to her male peers.

<sup>143</sup> Siddal's experience of posing for this painting transpired to be onerous, involving Siddal lying in a bath of water that had turned cold (the lamp placed underneath having gone out). Echoing the scenario dramatised in 'In an Artist's Studio', Millais was too engaged in his work to notice what had happened, while Siddal did not voice any complaint. The arrangement culminated in Siddal contracting a severe cold and Siddal's father charging Millais for the resultant medical expenses.

Victorian era, particularly amongst the Pre-Raphaelites. Indeed, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was known for his fascination with women's hair in both art and life, this fascination extending to Siddal's own red-gold locks.<sup>144</sup> The question remains, however, as to how one is interpret Siddal's posthumous mane. For Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 27), Siddal's hair symbolises 'the earthliness that no woman could entirely renounce' and 'leaps like a metaphor for monstrous female sexual energies from the literal and figurative coffins in which her artist-husband enclosed her.'<sup>145</sup> From this perspective, then, Siddal's hair represents an energy that eludes her male peers and their attempts to mould Siddal in accordance with their own needs. However, while this is an apposite reading, one can also regard the myth of Siddal's hair as an extension of the image that the PRB cultivated of Siddal during her life. In death as in life Siddal was not only defined by her male peers but came to be associated predominantly with this fabled aesthetic feature (and her role as muse more generally). Consequently, Siddal is remembered in terms of her symbolic function and her physical attributes, reaffirming her status as an image of pre-Raphaelite beauty as opposed to a real woman and artist.

In both life and death, then, Siddal was defined to a significant extent by her appearance and her depiction by male viewers. Regarding Siddal's 'discovery', for instance, Cherry and Pollock (1984, 213) note that William Michael Rossetti's account of the event 'is amplified with a lengthy passage of apparent description' focused upon Siddal's physical attributes.

Not only this, gendered power dynamics (the standard dichotomies of dominance /

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<sup>144</sup> Rossetti's preoccupation with women's hair was frequently noted by his associates and by Rossetti himself (see Ofek, 2009, 80). Rossetti was also known for popularising red hair via his artwork, with William Michael Rossetti (1895, 1: 171) noting that Siddal's hair 'was what many people call red hair, and abuse under that name – but the colour, when not rank and flagrant, happens to be much admired by Dante Rossetti'. Red hair consequently became to be especially favoured by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, as evidenced by Hobson's (1989, 77) reference to a comedic nineteenth century song (by British Royal Academy member Henry Stacy Marks) that focused on the 'P.R.B.' and ended with the stipulation, 'she must have *red* hair.'

<sup>145</sup> Referring to Rossetti's exaltation at receiving a lock of Siddal's hair in 1852, Ofek (2009, 80-81) contends that even this lock ultimately evaded any illusions of containment and control on Rossetti's part, transforming 'into a disquieting relic' (81) following Siddal's death.

subordination, activity / passivity and viewer / viewed) are ‘secured by constructing a series of related values for the term “Siddal” which congeal around visual appearance and physical condition. Passivity is the dominant trope; beauty renders those so designated an object of another’s desiring gaze’ (209).<sup>146</sup> From this perspective, Siddal is allotted the role of passive beauty whose existence as a sentient, flesh-and-blood woman is subsumed by her symbolic function and status as object of vision. Such a tendency was characteristic of the PRB, yet it was Dante Gabriel Rossetti for whom Siddal became most significant on account of the relationship that ensued between the two on a personal and artistic level. Serving as a major source of inspiration during the heyday of Rossetti’s artistic and poetic success, Siddal was the subject of numerous paintings and sketches to such an extent that Ford Maddox Brown (1855, cited in Mégroz, 1929, 54) commented, ‘it is like a monomania with him.’ Yet, despite his idolisation of Siddal, Rossetti also engaged in affairs with other women, and became enamoured with Jane Burden, who was later to marry his colleague William Morris. Burden, moreover, had also served as a model for the Pre-Raphaelites, who were always on the lookout for the latest ‘stunner’ (Maxwell, 2008, 42). There is, then, a sense of transience regarding the role of female muse, with the emergence of new models resulting in the male artists’ waning interest towards those models that they had previously exalted. Thus, while the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood regarded itself in lofty terms (emphasising creativity and spirituality, and depicting scenes from medieval romance, Greek mythology and Shakespeare), its attitude towards its female muses evokes a consumerist mindset.

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<sup>146</sup> Elizabeth’s original surname was Siddall but was changed to ‘Siddal’ in Rossetti’s paintings and writing. Regarding such alterations, Cherry and Pollock (1984, 208) comment that ‘[a]lthough it was a characteristic habit among members of this cultural fraction to use pet names for each other, the variety of those used for Elizabeth Siddall indicate...the refashioning which this working-class woman underwent’. Consequently, though it remains the standard spelling, Cherry and Pollock regard the name ‘Siddal’ as a construct that signifies beauty, passivity and melancholic frailty.

Though remembered chiefly as a tragic Pre-Raphaelite muse, it should be emphasised that Siddal was an artist and poet in her own right.<sup>147</sup> Having loved poetry from a young age (her interest apparently triggered by a newspaper scrap featuring a poem by Tennyson), Siddal decided to pursue an artistic career with encouragement and financial support from several cohorts, including her husband and John Ruskin. It was not the case, therefore, that Siddal's male colleagues sought to suppress her endeavours. However, Rossetti and Ruskin were not only supporters but tutors and, according to Shefer (1988, 24), 'Siddal reacted strongly against the intrusion into her life and fought against Ruskin's payments, claiming they were charity'.<sup>148</sup> Ultimately, then, Siddal's reputation as an artist was overshadowed by her association with the PRB, the female artist being 'bound into a relative secondary position by the double frame of the patriarchal discourses of art history and their celebration of heroic individual creativity' (Cherry and Pollock, 1984, 210).<sup>149</sup>

While Siddal's artistry was supplanted by her role as protégé to (and supposed lesser of) her male peers, it would be erroneous to assume that Siddal's work was moulded entirely by her male contemporaries or was a mere echo of their work. Regarding her 1854 self-portrait, for example, one is struck by the realism of its portrayal<sup>150</sup> in contrast to the sensual,

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<sup>147</sup> For a summary of Siddal's artistic career and some of her key works, see Vigue (2002, 203-208).

<sup>148</sup> Cherry also (1993, 189) points out that, even when Siddal modelled for female artists, she was looked upon as 'an object of philanthropic concern' rather than a fellow artist – namely, on account of her working-class origins.

<sup>149</sup> Gere (1973, 140) writes the following of Siddal: 'Under Rossetti's influence she made drawings and wrote verses, but she seems to have had no original creative power: she was as the moon to his sun, merely reflecting his light.' On a wider level, Nochlin (1988, 168) also notes that female artists were almost always 'either daughters of artist fathers, or...had a close personal connection with a stronger or more dominant male'.

<sup>150</sup> As Cherry and Pollock (1984, 214) observe, Pre-Raphaelite memoirs feature contradictory accounts of Siddal's appearance. For the most part, Siddal is portrayed as a slender, tragic beauty, yet Marsh (1985, 26) states that she was not initially recognised for her beauty, with Byrne (2011, 96) affirming, 'she had bright red hair and freckles, both of which were considered ugly at this time. Her appearance was...striking and unusual rather than pleasing to the eye'. Some of Siddal's contemporaries also referred to her unconventional appearance: William Michael Rossetti (1895, 171) noted her 'somewhat uncommon features' and 'unsparkling eyes', and deemed her 'not physically beautiful enough' to represent Viola in Deverell's *Twelfth Night* (cited by Marsh, 1989, 161). William Allingham (1907, 144), meanwhile,



romanticised depictions produced by Siddal's male colleagues, bearing out Cherry's (1993, 189) contention that Siddal 'resisted her transformation by the aesthetic and the philanthropic gaze.' Such simplicity and directness is evident throughout Siddal's output and, on this note, one might speculate as to whether Siddal possessed the skill or capacity to realise more intricate, polished works, particularly within a context in which such achievements were associated predominantly with men.<sup>151</sup> However, Siddal achieved a respectable degree of success in her artistic pursuits, her work being featured alongside that of esteemed peers such as Millais, Holman Hunt and Madox Brown at an exhibition held at Russell Place in 1857. Siddal also secured the sale of one of her watercolours at this exhibition and subsequently spent time studying at the School of Art in Sheffield. Indeed, though she is popularly seen to emblemise consumptive beauty, Siddal was apparently ambitious and forthright when it came to her artistic career, bearing out Nochlin's (1988, 17) contention that women have only succeeded in the art world by possessing 'a good strong streak of rebellion' and 'adopting, however covertly, the "masculine" attributes of singlemindedness, concentration, tenaciousness, and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake'. Discussing this conspicuous lack of diffidence, Marsh (1995, 44) notes that Siddal 'showed no awe when her work was bought by the premier critic of the day',<sup>152</sup> while Ruskin (1855, cited by Leon, 1949, 219) described her as 'wilful' and 'sickly headstrong.' It seems, moreover, that this proactive approach was characteristic of Siddal:

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recalled, '[h]er pale face, abundant red hair and long thin limbs were strange and affecting – never beautiful in my eyes.'

<sup>151</sup> Such a mindset is emblematised by the exclusion of women from the Royal Academy throughout the century (and from its schools until 1860), despite two of the founding members having been women. For more on the difficulties facing female artists during this time see Cherry (1993).

<sup>152</sup> Commenting on this lack of diffidence, William Michael Rossetti (1895, 171) noted that Siddal possessed an air of 'disdainful reserve'. Furthermore, Marsh (1995, 44) suggests that her 'class position as daughter of an upwardly mobile cutler and retailer, who nevertheless had to earn her own living as dressmaker/milliner, protected Siddal from some of the inhibitions of bourgeois femininity'.

She displayed ambition and initiative in showing her untutored designs to Mr Deverell, and was even bolder in taking the opportunity provided by modelling to gain access to the studio, which was the only way forward for a woman without money for private lessons. It may be that her aspirations were as much social as artistic, but in her circumstances marriage to a fellow artist was virtually the only means of securing a professional career. (Marsh, 1995, 44)

Siddal would therefore appear to have possessed a pragmatic approach towards her career and this paid off to an extent, though lack of finances meant that some of her work was necessarily in pencil or ink (prior to Ruskin financing her purchase of painting materials in 1855). Siddal's work consequently displays a consistent, understated style that has drawn favourable reactions from critics and contemporaries. Regarding her drawings, for instance, Gaunt (1966, 64) deems them 'as genuine in their spirit as much more highly finished and competent works of Pre-Raphaelite art'.<sup>153</sup> It should be noted here that Siddal was the only female artist represented at the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition held at London's Tate Gallery in 1984. Her work was, moreover, included within the 2012-2013 Tate Exhibition,<sup>154</sup> one of the aims of which was to bring to light a previously neglected Pre-Raphaelite sisterhood (via the inclusion of works by Julia Margaret Cameron, Rosa Brett and Jane and May Morris). Still, some regarded this inclusion with scepticism, one review calling it 'a creditable, if slightly vogueish, move' and adding:

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<sup>153</sup> Ruskin likened the style of Siddal's drawings to that of medieval art (Marsh, 1991, 22), while Swinburne (1962, 94) stated that 'Gabriel's influence and example [were] not more perceptible than her own independence and freshness of inspiration.' More recently, Vigue (2002) has argued that, once completed, Siddal's works 'had imaginative and evocative force' (203) and manage 'to reflect the personality of the protagonists with a few lines' (204).

<sup>154</sup> The largest exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite work since 1984, this exhibition comprised around 180 works and was intended to be more inclusive than its predecessor. Featuring not only paintings and drawings but sculpture, photography, furniture and textiles, it thus echoed the Pre-Raphaelites' own belief in unity of the arts. It was also designed to be more thematic and politically charged than the 1984 exhibit, encouraging viewers to consider the displayed works in relation to their social, political and economic context, and proposing that the Pre-Raphaelites can be seen as constituting Britain's first modern art movement.

Most works were dabbings by sisters or mistresses and add little to our understanding of the movement. The Pre-Raph attitude to women was more *Pygmalion* than progressive: with a fondness for grooming working-class girls as models, lovers and, if they were really lucky, wives.’ (Smart, 2012)<sup>155</sup>

While there has been a move towards recovering the works of female Pre-Raphaelite artists, then, Siddal ultimately ‘failed to acquire the high degree of technical skill required for success in the Victorian art world’ (Marsh, 1995, 45) and has been largely defined by her relationship to Rossetti and her role as artistic muse.

In addition to her endeavours as an artist, Siddal pursued a poetic career that offers further insight into the person behind the muse. Again, her work is heartfelt and unfussy, often expressing feelings of dejection and disaffection.<sup>156</sup> Most crucial to this thesis is Siddal’s poetic response to the hefty cultural emphasis placed upon female youth and beauty, as expressed most acutely in ‘The Lust of the Eyes’. Rather than featuring a female speaker’s lament, however, Siddal’s poem employs a male narrator so as to create an incisive portrait of a man’s superficial affection for his ‘beloved’. Taking the reader into his confidence in a conspiratorial manner, the narrator reveals that his supposed love is based purely on the woman’s ephemeral qualities of youth and beauty. Presumably the woman herself is unaware that this is the case, and one senses that she faces an unpleasant realisation. This contrast is evident from the poem’s outset, the speaker stating:

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<sup>155</sup> Another review referred to the exhibition as featuring the standard offering of Pre-Raphaelite art, ‘varying only in the increased dose of Lizzie Siddall (whose trivial work only weakened and enfeebled [the movement])’ (Sewell, 2012).

<sup>156</sup> Siddal herself experienced bouts of depression throughout her life (particularly following the stillbirth of her child), along with chronic health problems and a growing reliance on laudanum. Regarding Siddal’s health problems, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (July 23 1854, cited in Rossetti, 1965, 1: 209) remarked:

I wish, and she wishes, that something should be done by her to make a beginning, and set her mind a little at ease about her pursuit of art; and we both think that this... would be likely to have a good effect on her health.

I care not for my Lady's soul  
    Though I worship before her smile;  
I care not where be my Lady's goal  
    When her beauty shall lose its wile. (Collins and Rundle, 1999, ll. 1-4)

While such a mindset is implicit in many poetic tributes to female beauty, Siddal's poem is notable for the narrator's frankness as he states that he worships his Lady's beauty but does not truly love her, for, if she should lose her dazzling, youthful visage (as is inevitable) she would be nothing to him. The poem's second stanza makes the narrator's position explicit:

Low sit I down at my Lady's feet  
    Gazing through her wild eyes  
Smiling to think how my love will fleet  
    When their starlike beauty dies. (5-8)

This stanza also touches upon the balance of power within this relationship. That the narrator sits at his lady's feet suggests the deference associated with courtly romance and evokes the similar gesture made by the narrator of 'Porphyria's Lover'. However, in the same way that Browning's narrator later exerts his authority (placing the dead woman in a yielding position), the narrator here relishes the knowledge that it is he who has the last say in the relationship. It is also noticeable that the woman's eyes are objects to be looked at and to reflect the gazer's own thoughts. Though 'wild', the narrator gazes through them and has no interest in any expressivity that they may express – as with the narrators discussed in Chapter One, he does not regard his Lady's eyes as windows to the soul (with which, as he states in the first line, he is unconcerned) but sees them merely in terms of their 'starlike beauty'.

As the poem progresses the narrator continues to emphasise his lack of interest in his Lady's character, including whether she 'pray / To our Father which is in Heaven' (9-10), while his own vanity is further indicated when he adds 'But for joy my heart's quick pulses play / for to

me her love is given' (11-12). That the woman loves him gratifies his ego, yet, as he states in the final stanza:

Then who shall close my Lady's eyes  
And who shall fold her hands?  
Will any hearken if she cries  
Up to the unknown lands?' (13-16)

The crux of the matter is that the narrator's 'love' is hollow and transient, and the poem concludes by highlighting the tragedy wherein a narrator lavishes his beloved with praise yet will have moved on long before her eyes are closed for the final time. Siddal's poem thus carries a downcast tone, but, in addition to this sadness, Siddal comments upon the injustice of such a scenario. That Siddal employs a male narrator does not constitute a denial of the woman's own subjectivity nor of her own authorship. Quite the contrary, Siddal uses male narration to expose (and condemn) the narrator's artifice and hypocrisy. The poem therefore expresses a critical stance that gains added relevance when juxtaposed not only with male-authored poetry but with Siddal's role as model and muse. Of course, one cannot assume that the poem is autobiographical, yet it indicates Siddal's awareness of the transience and inequity that can be associated with the role of female muse, gesturing towards Siddal's own possible concerns regarding such matters.

While Siddal employs a male speaker in order to make her incisive critique, Eliza Cook's 'Song of the Ugly Maiden' focuses on a female speaker's own pain in order to create a sympathetic portrait of a woman who is hyperaware of the importance of aesthetic beauty and of her own absence of charms in this arena. Cook's compassionate treatment is indicative of her sympathy towards social outcasts and those who are subjugated in one way or another,

with such an outlook being evidenced throughout her poetic work.<sup>157</sup> Arguing for the importance of the arts and the poetic spirit in encouraging human sympathy, Cook became known for her simple, earnest poetic style. She was not merely a sentimentalist though, and, while living in London, attracted attention on account of her forthright political views and ‘unconventional, unfeminine dress’ (Robinson, 2003, 74). She also penned articles for various popular (in some cases, radical) publications and founded her own weekly periodical, *Eliza Cook's Journal* (1849-1954), which expressed her belief in self-improvement via education and increased opportunities for women and the working classes.<sup>158</sup> However, while Cook’s poetry has continued to appear in anthologies, it has not attracted a significant degree of critical attention and thus merits further consideration, particularly with regard to its empathetic and politicised themes.

‘The Song of the Ugly Maiden’ is most relevant to this thesis as it conveys Cook’s awareness of the rigid, oppressive standards of judgement that have pervaded Western culture, and her sympathetic regard for those who feel themselves outsiders. The specific theme of this poem is the necessity of possessing conventional feminine charms (most obviously, youth and beauty) if one is to hope to gain affection and social worth. Serving as an apt counterpart to Siddal’s poem, Cook’s female narrator spends the poem’s seven stanzas lamenting her dearth of such charms, and makes clear at the outset that visual relations are of major relevance to her emotional state, for she knows that she has ‘no beauty for the sight’ (Collins and Rundle, 1999, l. 3). Clearly well-acquainted with the conventions of courtly romance, the speaker

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<sup>157</sup> This approach is also indicative of Cook’s belief (expressed in the 1849 essay ‘People Who Do Not Like Poetry’) that it is not sufficient to regard the world solely from a pragmatic, ascetic perspective, for to think in such terms entails a coldness wherein, Cook states, one can ‘see nothing in the attachment between a poor man and his cur dog’ (cited in Robinson, 2003, 78).

<sup>158</sup> Cook was herself predominantly self-taught and wrote poetry from an early age, publishing her first volume aged seventeen.

remarks upon men's exaltation of women's beauty and subsequently poses the following rhetorical question:

But will they worship woman's worth  
Unblent with woman's charms?  
No! ah, no! 'tis little they prize  
Crookbacked forms and rayless eyes. (11-14)

Here, the speaker is clearly conscious of the mindset held by male narrators such as that of Siddal's poem, and expresses her awareness that praise, no matter how lofty, is dependent upon a woman's superficial charms. Her reference to 'rayless eyes' marks another instance of the copious mentions of eyes in these poetic texts, and in this case suggesting that the speaker lacks those dazzling, enchanting eyes required in order to secure male attention. This might seem incongruous if one were to interpret the eye's 'rays' as indicative of an intense, penetrating form of vision (which clearly would not be prized by potential suitors), yet it is apparent that it is not such vision to which the speaker aspires. It is, moreover, not women's eyes in themselves that are culturally troubling, for male speakers often discuss them in glowing terms. Rather, it is a question of whether these eyes are reflective, beautiful objects or the source of a powerful, inquisitive or desiring gaze. For a woman to exhibit such powers would constitute a contravention of patriarchal law, yet to conceive of a woman's eyes as beautiful objects carries no such threat.

As this poem progresses, however, Cook's speaker gives a clearer sense of what eyes represent to *her*. Contrasting her 'dull orbs' (59) with the 'light and laughing eye' (35) of another woman, the speaker implies that the joy that such a woman experiences as a result of her beauty subsequently radiates from her entire being, including her eyes. Here, the speaker evokes those Victorian scientific texts that attribute to the eye the capacity to encapsulate a wide array of characteristics. In contrast to the speaker of Siddal's poem, who expressly

states that he does not care for his lady's soul, Cook's female speaker holds a romanticised notion of the eyes as windows to the soul. Cook's sympathetic approach is especially evident here, as the narrator dreams of experiencing the joy that she perceives as radiating from other women's eyes. It would therefore seem that she wishes not merely for eyes that are superficially enticing but for the happiness that will subsequently manifest itself via her eyes.

Having established the importance of beauty to a woman's social worth, the speaker continues to list in blunt terms her own features in an inversion of the praise heaped upon women's individual features in male-authored poetry. In contrast to golden locks and sensuous ruby lips, the speaker laments, 'My locks are thin and dry; / my teeth wear not the rich pearl tinge, / Nor my lips the henna dye' (20-22). Clearly, the speaker is more than aware of conventional feminine traits and the poetic description typically employed to describe them, and finds herself barren in this regard. She has also learnt to gauge herself via the gazes (or absence thereof) of men, prompting the lament:

The wooer's praise and doting gaze  
Have never yet been mine.  
Where'er I go all eyes will shun  
The loveless mien of the Ugly one. (25-28)

This touches upon the problematic issue of social invisibility. On the one hand, to be disregarded can potentially afford one a degree of freedom, and this can be appealing in a culture wherein women have been consistently positioned as objects to be looked at. However, to not be looked at whatsoever can be equally distressing, and this is the case for Cook's narrator. The key issue here is of the all-or-nothing nature of these scenarios, for, in the same way that visual relations have long been divided along gendered lines, there exists another cultural binary wherein women have been liable to experience excessive visual attention or, conversely, find themselves disregarded. The former option is frequently



assumed to be desirable, yet to presume that women necessarily covet any and all attention would be a gross overstatement. Again, one must ask what sorts of gazes are at play in a given situation. In terms of Cook's speaker, her despair at being neglected should not necessarily be taken to mean that she desires abundant visual attention. Rather, one perceives that what she really seeks is mutual love, for she expresses a wish for the love and happiness that she believes will imbue her with the luminosity she has hitherto lacked. This wish continues to be felt throughout the poem, as the speaker witnesses the apparent merriment of those around her, including their courtship rituals:

He leads another out!  
She has a light and laughing eye,  
Like sunshine playing about.  
The wise man scanneth calmly round,  
But his gaze stops not with me (34-38).

In addition to contrasting her own eyes with those of other women, the speaker here reiterates her desire to be looked upon but, again, imagines a male admirer regarding his intended with a 'tender glance' (42) – not an objectifying gaze.

As the poem progresses, the speaker continues to observe and compare herself unfavourably with other women, who she sees as possessing traits such as 'a curving lip of pride, / And a forehead white and sleek' (45-46). She also notes that a 'grey-haired veteran, young with wine' (47) passes her by when seeking a dance partner, this observation restating her loneliness. Not only this, her remark underscores the unequal standards of judgement applied to men and women: one gets the impression that the older man is given free rein in choosing which (potentially younger) woman he wishes to dance with, while a woman is dependent upon youth and beauty to secure her social worth. As for the speaker of this poem, her age is unspecified. She refers to her 'scarred' (51), 'seared' (60) skin but also indicates that she has

been cursed from birth with an absence of feminine charms, her 'ugliness' being akin to 'the stamp on Cain' (56). It is therefore difficult to ascertain from what stage in life she is speaking, but the crux of the poem remains the same in any case, with the speaker lamenting that her appearance does not reflect her 'young and warm' (66) soul. The narrator thus makes further reference to the soul that the male narrator of Siddal's poem deems insignificant, emphasising the tragedy of her plight.

Though the speaker devotes much of the poem to bemoaning her loneliness and lack of social worth, it is apparent that she does not see herself as merely invisible, for she also describes the 'thoughtless jeers' (57) of others, of which she comments, 'As though I had fashioned my own dull orbs, / And chosen my own seared skin' (59-60). She consequently continues to bemoan her lack of feminine traits, with her repeated use of Petrarchan imagery evoking conventional poetic descriptions of the female beloved 'Whose tresses shade, with curl or braid, / Cheeks soft and round as the rose.' (73-74) Yet the narrator, now speaking as though directly addressing a man, cannot help but ask, 'But is it well that thou shouldst spurn / The one GOD chose to blight?' (77-78) In addressing a hypothetical male, the speaker's tone becomes all the more imploring, the poem providing her with an imaginary means of address. That she sees herself as blighted by God also highlights the extent to which she feels cursed by her 'ugliness', her narration providing an outlet for her feelings of sadness and injustice.

As she muses on her life, the narrator appears to feel increasing despair, and this is partially indicated via repetition. The poem's first two stanzas begin with the speaker bewailing 'Oh!' (1,15) before outlining her plight, and this motif recurs more frequently as the poem draws to a close, occurring at the beginning of every other line (79, 81, 83) towards the end of the penultimate stanza (plus a further two times at lines 91 and 97 in the final stanza). Each of these three usages is followed by the word 'why', as the narrator asks why she must be

mocked and derided, and why no one is able to look past her visage. Her despondency reaches its zenith in the final stanza when she states that it would have been better if she had never been born, for she stands ‘Like a weed among the corn, – / The black rock in the wide, blue sea – / The snake in the jungle green’ (88-90). However, her state differs from that of the weed, rock or snake in that it is one of despair, ‘For those who behold me in their path / Not only shun, but mock’ (95-96). So, again, what would be painful enough (being shunned) is even worse, as she feels that she is being treated with derision. Cook concludes with a rhyming couplet, the narrator referring to her image as a source of ‘desolate pain’ (97) and reiterating her reference to ‘the stamp on Cain’ (98). The poem therefore emphasises the constant burden that weighs upon the narrator, with Cook presenting a sympathetic portrait of a speaker for whom identity is defined by ‘the world’s approval and disapproval’ (Leighton, 1992, 188); in this case, the latter.

While Cook’s poem touches upon the distinction between a ‘tender glance’ and less benevolent forms of vision, Emily Brontë’s ‘Stars’ (1845) devotes itself to this theme, focusing upon a speaker for whom the starlit sky provides solace and respite from the daytime world.<sup>159</sup> Here, Brontë draws a particularly stark parallel between the sun and the stars: musing upon this distinction, the speaker recognises that the sun restores the earth to joy yet cherishes the tranquillity of the night sky and its connotations of empathy and connectedness. The stars are consequently described as soothing and enriching the speaker, who addresses them directly: ‘I was at peace, and drank your beams / As they were life to me’ (Brontë, 1992, 9-10). The sun, meanwhile does not provide warmth but is a blazing force that returns each day to interrupt this calmness and purity. Again addressing the stars, the speaker laments that

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<sup>159</sup> This was not Brontë’s only poetic expression of such a sentiment: ‘How Clear she Shines’ (1846) likewise contrasts the benevolence and respite of the night time world with the ‘Grim world’ (Brontë, 1992, l. 10) doomed to return the next day, referring to ‘straining eyes’ (26) looking towards the stars and imagining worlds in which life is not marked by pain, hopelessness and death.

the sun should ‘scorch with fire, the tranquil cheek, / Where your cool radiance fell’ (19-20). That the speaker refers to the ‘desert sky’ (4) of daylight hours furthers the impression of harshness and excessive heat, as well as the barrenness that the speaker feels when the stars no longer fill the sky with their reassuring presence. Terms such as ‘blood-red’ (21), ‘fierce’ (22), ‘struck’ (22) and ‘arrow-straight’ (21) effectively convey the sun’s stark, towering presence, but perhaps most noticeable is the gendering of the sun as male via the terms ‘his’ (22) and ‘him’ (26). Not only quintessentially masculine, the sun exerts a glowering, patriarchal presence. The stars, meanwhile, are not specifically gendered yet are described in benevolent, feminised terms and beat in time with the speaker’s heart, conveying a sense of unity.

Commenting on the contrast between sun and stars in this poem, Styler (2010, 59 n55) argues the former can be seen to symbolise conventional faith in contrast to the psychic energy that the speaker draws from the latter<sup>160</sup> – an interpretation encouraged by the speaker’s affirmation (in relation to the stars), ‘I blessed that watch divine’ (8). Other critics, meanwhile, have focused upon that archetypal contrast between the everyday world and the higher state of creative vision associated with the poetic spirit. Peeck-O’Toole (1988), for instance, sees the stars and the sun as symbolising visionary and non-visionary experience, respectively, but emphasises the necessarily cyclical relationship between the two. Similarly, Neufeldt (1973, 16-19) sees this poem as indicative of Brontë’s desire to find comfort in the sanctuary provided by the imaginary world and return to a state of childhood innocence while also recognising that visions are ‘delusory if not firmly grounded in the world of practical reality’ (19). ‘Stars’ is therefore a text permeated by ambivalence, for the speaker views

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<sup>160</sup> Foster (2000, 73) relates this contrast to Brontë’s own life, suggesting that the sun represents her father’s view of God as an all-seeing, unforgiving arbiter of morality while the stars represent ‘her desire for a female pantheistic vision’.

earthbound existence as inhospitable yet recognises that, while one can periodically retreat into an imaginary world, one must also ‘come to terms with the cruel reality of broad daylight’ (Neufeldt, 1973, 19). Broadly speaking, then, the poem hinges upon the theme of idealism versus reality, yet what is especially noteworthy is that this scenario is depicted in gendered terms. Whether one conceives of the poem as manifesting a split between orthodox religion and non-orthodox spirituality or the literal and the visionary, this split is ultimately coded masculine / feminine.

Further to the association of the stars with visionary or otherwise ‘higher’ experience, Brontë’s poem describes the stars in terms of their infiniteness whereby they follow one another throughout ‘boundless regions’ (14). Such connotations are, of course, archetypal, evoking a sense of the awe-inducing vastness of space. However, in this instance the stars are not depicted solely as majestic or ethereal, for the speaker describes them in terms that focus upon their empathetic, tender qualities. Constituting a source of life, they are not construed as scattered, self-contained bodies but as ‘one sweet influence, near and far’ (15) that ‘Thrilled through, and proved us one!’ (16). Most crucial for the purposes of this thesis are the poem’s references to visual relations, for Brontë draws a contrast between the harsh vision that holds sway during the daytime and the benevolent form of vision that emerges in the form of stars, the speaker (addressing the latter) wistfully recounting, ‘your glorious eyes / Were gazing down in mine’ (5-6). What is also significant here is that the poem does not portray vision as an inherently objectifying, patriarchal sense. The speaker’s relationship to the stars is of an intersubjective nature but it is not defined by stifling closeness nor does it preclude the visual faculty. In fact, both the sun and the stars can be interpreted as eyes, the difference being that the glistening orbs of the night sky represent a non-objectifying form of vision in contrast to the scorching gaze of the sun.

As noted earlier, the gendering of the sun is made explicit via the use of the masculine pronoun, the oppressiveness of this gaze being made explicit when the speaker states, 'My lids closed down, yet through their veil, / I saw him, blazing, still' (25-26). Likewise, turning to the pillow proves no escape, for 'the pillow glowed / And glowed both roof and floor'. The speaker's room is therefore presented as a stifling prison wherein the only means of solace is awaiting the stars' return. Given the association of femininity with relationality, one could posit the stars as emblematising a more feminised gaze. As Peeck-O'Toole (1988, 49) notes, the references to the stars' nurturance and the speaker's drinking from their beams is suggestive of maternal qualities. Similarly, Foster (2000, 73) specifies a gendered divide wherein the speaker 'drinks (or feasts on) the gazes of feminine beings' but ultimately cannot escape 'the destructive gaze of the male deity.' However, one should not assume that the speaker's relationship to the stars represents an exclusively female connection – for one thing, while one infers that the speaker is female, one cannot confirm this to be the case given that the speaker's sex is not specified. Even if the speaker is female, though, this does not mean that her connection with the stars constitutes an exclusively female bond. Rather, the stars can be seen to embody a mode of relating, and looking, that is imbued with more empathetic (and thus more 'feminine') qualities than that brand of objectifying vision that has come to be associated with the masculine. So, again, 'Stars' symbolises the distinction between these differing modes of engagement, empathetic relations being the ideal yet being interrupted by vision of a more oppressive, objectifying type.

How one is to interpret the cycle of day and night depicted in the poem is therefore dependent on the metaphorical function that one assigns to these phases. For Peeck-O'Toole (1988, 46; 49; 52-53) daytime is, as the speaker grudgingly recognises, a necessary state, for visionary experience gains its meaningfulness by contrast. In terms of empathetic / objectifying

relating, however, the poem takes on further meaning in that it is suggestive not solely of visionary insight but a more benevolent gaze, evoking Winnicott's ([1967] 1971) distinction between empathetic mirroring and mirroring that is deficient or of a stark, objectifying nature. The speaker therefore suffers through the day, clinging to the knowledge that the night will return to provide respite 'from the hostile light, / That does not warm, but burn' (43-44).

Brontë's poem is thus effective in conveying one of the primary contentions of this thesis: that, rather than propagating a hierarchical approach to the senses, it is prudent to distinguish between different modes of vision. For the speaker, visual relations within the everyday world are largely of a harsh, objectifying nature, and it would therefore seem fitting that Brontë should have desired to 'create an inner world from which she could exclude the people and society she found so distasteful' (Neufeldt, 1973, 17). The sun does not always have such connotations though. The warmth and rejuvenation of the sun's rays is, after all, a perennially popular trope, while Benjamin (1988, 22) likens recognition to the sunlight that catalyses photosynthesis. Still, though vision is not inherently objectifying, the reality is that vision can often operate along such lines. 'Stars' is therefore poignant in its speaker's wish to live in a world where such objectification is not routine and, in this respect, the poem's cycle of day and night takes on bleak connotations, the dawning of the sun signalling the onset of harsh, objectifying visual relations.

This poem consequently portrays the human world as devoid of empathy and intersubjectivity, with daylight signalling a return to 'the materialistic world and the activities of inhumane, materialistic man' (17). As Neufeldt (1973, 16-17) states, though, Brontë's own compassion (whether this be in relation to wounded animals or to human beings) suggested a desire not to eschew human relations but for a sphere in which such relations are not of an objectifying nature. This being the case, the speaker concludes by beseeching the stars to

counteract the harsh gaze of the sun, longing for them to ‘Let me sleep through his blinding reign, / And only wake with you!’ (47-48). That the speaker refers to the sun as ‘blinding’ is also suggestive in that the harsh glare of the sun would appear to cancel out or punish the speaker’s own visual faculty. The speaker, however, does not seek to ‘own’ an all-powerful gaze; rather, the poem contrasts this type of gaze with a more compassionate form of visual engagement. As Wright (1991, 33) suggests, ‘[w]hy does objectivity, the Other’s view, have to annihilate the subject?...Why never two subjectivities together?’ The tragedy for Brontë’s speaker is that such an experience can seemingly only be found in a realm beyond that of the human world, with this poem dramatising a mode of objectification that has been all too prevalent within Western culture.



## **CHAPTER 4: 'SHADE OF A SHADOW': MIRRORING AND IDENTITY IN THE POEMS OF MARY COLERIDGE AND AUGUSTA WEBSTER**

While it is clear that women were conscious of and affected by rigid cultural definitions of femininity, it is also vital to recognise the psychological conflict that could arise from such oppressiveness. As this chapter will demonstrate, the works of female Victorian writers include stark examples of the complex and disturbing effects that may occur as a result of a clash between cultural strictures and one's own sense of self. In particular, it is vital to recognise that a woman's subjectivity can be affected by her consciousness of herself as an object of vision. This chapter will consequently examine salient works by Augusta Webster and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, both poets employing the mirror motif not only as a means of conveying discontent but as a catalyst for exploring the problematics of identity. However, it is first important to consider psychological fragmentation with reference to various changes and developments that undermined the association of the visual with authenticity, clarity and legibility during this time period. The popularisation of psychoanalysis in the later years of the nineteenth century is also relevant here, having expounded a range of psychological processes (namely, splitting, projection and doubling) dramatised in the poems under discussion. As such, this chapter will summarise the ambivalence associated with visuality during the Victorian era and will provide an overview of those psychoanalytic concepts that find expression in literary motifs of mirroring and doubling. It will then explore the operation of these themes in the works of the aforementioned poets, focusing upon the significance of cultural definitions of femininity in fostering psychological dissonance.

### **Destabilising Vision**

As discussed in Chapter One, the Victorian era was a time in which categorisation, visibility and legibility came to be seen as key imperatives, largely in response to those destabilisations and disturbances occurring during this time.<sup>161</sup> These competing poles consequently manifested themselves on numerous levels, fostering a cultural environment steeped in dualism: Buci-Glucksmann (1986a), for instance, distinguishes modernity as progress from the ‘catastrophic’ modernity that involves fragmentation and destruction, and it is evident that such opposing approaches were in operation throughout the mid-late nineteenth century. Certainly, the Victorian city was a pluralistic, contested space, with the rapid restructuring of the metropolis both above and below ground, increased speed of movement (new modes of public transport, for example) and a plethora of visual stimuli creating an environment that could be seen as exhilarating and progressive yet also overwhelming. Most relevant to this thesis, however, is the manifestation of such ambivalence in attitudes towards visuality and identity. Physiognomy, for instance, became subject to distrust as its inadequacies grew increasingly apparent. While scientists had proliferated the notion that one could gain adequate impressions of an individual based on their appearance, Flint (2000, 15-19; 30-31) points out that successful disguises and cases of misreading had eroded such confidence, as had a growing recognition of the inadequacy of the eye (optical instruments having shown the limits of the human eye’s power and scope). Such reservations were not, moreover, limited to the appraisal of others, with Flint (3) citing a tradesman’s claim that ‘people don’t know their own faces’ – a contention that suggests the problematisation of identity on a deeper level.

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<sup>161</sup> Shires (2009, 25) emphasises such destabilisation as a distinguishing feature of the period, remarking upon the fusions and separations between subject and object that interested the Romantics and suggesting that ‘the Victorians confronted an inherited reality in which relations became even more difficult, not just relations between human beings, but relations to God and to a meaningful universe in which every creature, every “I,” had a (formerly) special place.’

Further to this decreased faith in physiognomy, other visual models were disputed as the century progressed. While Cartesian perspectivalism (epitomised by the camera obscura) had long been the dominant perceptual model within Western culture, it was not only challenged throughout the nineteenth century but was inherently problematic in that, as Jay (1988, 10-11) observes, it was subject to an internal divide between ‘synthetic’ and ‘artificial’ camps and, also, between its aim of disinterested spectatorship and the realities of subjective vision. The notion of a disembodied, ahistorical subject consequently came under increasing scrutiny, and, within the scientific sphere, research demonstrated an increased awareness of and interest in subjective, corporeal response.<sup>162</sup> The emphasis on visibility and legibility during the Victorian era therefore coincided with an interest in subjective, potentially indistinct experiences of vision and, on this note, Flint (2000, 147) cites Dickens’ ([1846] 1998, 73-74) contention that moments of visionary intensity entail confusion of perception and imagination, and true and false memory – a fluctuating response evidenced in some of the poetic texts that will be discussed in this chapter.

While the Victorian period is known as a time of technological innovation, modernisation and categorisation, this same era also entailed the destabilisation of established modes of viewing and an interest in alternative possibilities, including inward forms of vision. One of the main tropes through which this idea was expressed was that of inward illumination resulting from outward blindness, with Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* serving as a paradigmatic example. Similarly, the Tiresias myth (as treated by Tennyson in 1885) underscores the wisdom that can result from loss of outward sight. As Crary (1999) emphasises, however, it would be an overstatement to subscribe wholly to the Romantic notion of the individual as autonomous

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<sup>162</sup> Crary (1992) provides an in depth account of this cultural shift, though it should be noted that he is critical of the tendency to see this in terms of a late nineteenth century rupture (in the form of modernism), instead citing the 1820s as the juncture at which focus began to shift towards the viewing subject and the physiology of vision.

producer of their own visual experience – as noted in Chapter One, concerns regarding inattention in the increasingly industrialised and frenetic Victorian landscape instigated counter attempts to enforce order. By the same token, however, these attempts were not always successful and could have the opposite effect to that intended, creating a cyclical relationship between orderliness and subjective dislocations. Likewise, questions about the limitations of sight were ongoing, with relations between the seen and unseen being subject to considerable tension.

It is therefore evident that, for the Victorians, visuality was not just a question of legibility, nor of new optical devices and stimuli: it also carried more ambivalent connotations that highlighted subjective response and unsettled the reliability of seeing. Further to this ambivalence, it is useful to consider Crary's (1992, 113-116) references to the kaleidoscope, as this device emblematises such competing imperatives. The creator of the kaleidoscope, Sir David Brewster, conceived of his invention in terms of efficiency and productivity, emphasising its symmetrical properties and seeing it 'as a mechanical means for the reformation of art according to an industrial paradigm' (Crary, 1992, 116). However, the kaleidoscope took on contrary associations, suggesting the trickery that could be achieved via mirrors or else a shifting, multiple arrangement of subjectivity.<sup>163</sup> Most relevant to this chapter are those ways in which order and symmetry can be undercut by disorder and multiplicity, and whether the latter qualities are indicative of mere trickery or the destabilisation of unified, linear perspective. On this note, it is important to recognise that destabilisation, even if unsettling, is not necessarily the same as psychological fragmentation

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<sup>163</sup> As Crary (1999) notes, this metaphor was frequently employed by nineteenth century theorists and researchers; most famously Baudelaire (1972, 400), but also scientific researchers. In his account of the nervous system, for instance, Sherrington (1906, 233) writes, '[a]s a tap to a kaleidoscope, so a new stimulus that strikes the receptive surface causes in the central organ a shift of functional pattern at various synapses'. Similarly, James ([1890] 1950, 246) describes the brain as akin to 'a kaleidoscope revolving at a uniform rate'.

resulting from oppressive social strictures: as Miller (1987, 209) suggests, '[i]f the modern personality...keeps afloat several possible characters...this may be a positive response to a necessarily contradictory world.' This being the case, one should not assume that the idea of cohesive, unified identity is the only alternative to fragmentation. Rather, it is prudent to distinguish the potentially fluid and multifaceted aspects of identity from socially induced turmoil.

In addition to the kaleidoscope, photography was another arena in which ambivalence came to the fore in the Victorian age, this being a time in which questions regarding photography 'were affirmed, were denied, and were affirmed again' (Schwarz, 1987, 90). While one of the functions of photography was to provide visual evidence, photography also proved unsettling on account of its potential to destabilise notions of unified, unambiguous identity via processes of replication, doubling and (in some cases) spectrality. Here, photography bears consideration alongside psychoanalysis, which was a burgeoning field in the later years of the century. The reproducibility and potential ghostliness associated with photography, for example, highlighted concepts of doubling and uncanniness, with Freud's treatise on 'the uncanny' emphasising this sensation as being induced by something that is ambiguous in status but not entirely foreign. That visuality can play a key role in fostering uncanniness is, moreover, made explicit by Freud's (2003, 162) reminiscence of having experienced an uncanny response upon seeing a reflection in a mirror, initially failing to recognise this reflection as his own. This is an apt example, in that it underlines themes that come into play in a range of Victorian literary texts, including the ambiguous relationship that one may experience in relation to one's mirror image.

### **Mechanisms of Splitting and Doubling**

The Victorian era was therefore a time in which visual legibility and the concept of unified identity were subject to increasing problematisation, fostering the exploration of this terrain within literary texts. Given the psychological emphasis of such texts, it is prudent to foreground analysis with an overview of those psychical processes that can result in a sense of disjunction regarding one's identity. The process of splitting is fundamental in this respect and was discussed by Freud throughout his career, though, as Brook (1989) observes, Freud's distinction between different types of splitting often goes unacknowledged. The main type of splitting that Freud outlined is that of the ego. This refers to the holding of contradictory attitudes towards a single object, with Freud (*SE* 21: 149-157; *SE* 23: 271-278) citing fetishism as a prime example on account of it involving acknowledgment and denial. However, Freud was also interested in the splitting off of psychic groupings, in which a range of psychic matter is isolated from the main portion of one's psyche (*SE* 23: 77-78). Brook adds that this is demonstrative of a lack of cohesion within consciousness itself, noting that the split-off material is not lost to consciousness but not wholly integrated, thus carrying the possibility of re-emergence. This is a topic that will be returned to later in this chapter but, prior to this, there is a final type of splitting that requires consideration: the splitting of representations. Though Freud acknowledged this mechanism, it has been elaborated on to a greater extent by object relations theorists. Most notably, Klein ([1946] 1988) deemed this type of splitting characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid phase of development whereby an infant can only conceive of a person or object as this *or* that. In this instance, then, splitting allows good and bad to stay separate before the infant moves into the depressive position and develops the capacity to recognise varying traits as aspects of the same object.

The splitting of representations can therefore be seen as symptomatic of the paranoid-schizoid phase, yet, in the same way as development involves recognising coexistent traits in a single

object, it is important to recognise that the different types of splitting are themselves not mutually exclusive.<sup>164</sup> When the infant splits the object into good and bad, for example, this also indicates a splitting of their own attitudes. That is not to say that these different types of splitting should be conflated, yet it remains the case that these mechanisms can feed into one another. As part of his discussion of E.T.A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman' (1816), for example, Freud ([1905] 2003, 160) notes that the father-*imago* is split by the child's ambivalent feelings, so that the father takes on two guises in the eyes of the child, one threatening to blind him while the other pleads for his sight.<sup>165</sup> Clearly contradictory attitudes are at play here, but these result in the father-*imago* itself being divided. In addition, it is important to emphasise that splitting does not always apply to other objects or psychic material. Much as the splitting of representations results in (for example) the good and bad mother, there can also be splitting of one's sense of self and attitudes towards oneself, thus resulting in *a split image of oneself*.

The main topic of interest for the purposes of this chapter is the splitting of one's attitudes towards oneself and the manifestation of this split via the motif of the double. This entails a process of projection whereby the mind not only splits off 'bad' from 'good' but projects this unwanted matter onto another figure, ostensibly in an attempt to gain control (though, as literary depictions suggest, it is more often a lack of control that one experiences in such situations). Splitting and projection therefore provide a foundation for the emergence of the double, and, while Freud discussed the concept, his reading was influenced by that of fellow psychoanalyst Otto Rank ([1941] 1958; [1914] 1971). In his in-depth study of this motif, Rank contends that, though often regarded as disturbing, the double originally served as an

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<sup>164</sup> As Brook (1989) points out, Freud himself spoke of splitting of the self and splitting of objects together and recognised that both involve the splitting of a representation (a commonality often neglected today).

<sup>165</sup> Freud ([1905] 2003, 31) notes that examples of splitting can often be found in literature, the writer potentially splitting up their ego and personifying the conflicting currents in several characters; likewise characters can be 'sharply divided into good and bad, in spite of the rich variety of characters we encounter in real life'.

attempt to assuage fears about death and the annihilation of the ego – hence the notion of an immortal soul. However, the double has itself been subject to division in that it has come to signify the opposite of this spiritualised meaning. As Freud ([1905] 2003, 142) notes, the reassuring double is reflective of ‘the primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and primitive man, and when this phase is surmounted...the “double”...becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.’<sup>166</sup> To examine the historical trajectory of the double would be beyond the scope of this thesis, but the double’s capacity to signify oppositional elements highlights its ambivalence: one may feel a sense of recognition towards the double yet also dissociation or unease, and vestiges of the double’s origins can add to this uncanniness.

As remarked upon earlier, photography is a process that exemplifies ambivalence.

Paraphrasing Barthes (1981, 12-13), Smith (2000, 98) notes that the naturalisation of photography ‘facilitates a repression of the psychological intensity...that constitutes its origins’, these origins being glimpsed in the photograph’s link to doubling, duplication and theories of shadows and mirrors. There are, indeed, significant links between photography and the concept of the double, for, while a photographic image of oneself invites recognition, it also involves a sense that one is looking at an image of oneself as though it were an Other. The concept of doubling thus was not dependent upon ghostly, phantasmagoric effects. Such effects could certainly foster feelings of uncanniness, yet the proliferation of images within the context of capitalist modernity did not only create a highly visual environment but, as noted in Chapter One, itself entailed copying and duplication. This is not to impute that the double is a specifically Victorian phenomenon, for this motif found expression among ancient and primitive populations. Nevertheless, Živković (2000) highlights a ‘massive shift in ideas

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<sup>166</sup> Jung (*CW*, 6: 425-426, para. 708) employs the term ‘enantiodromia’ to describe the process whereby the profusion of a particular force or element results in a ‘powerful counterposition’. For further discussion of inversion in relation to the motif of the double, see Rank ([1941] 1958, 75-76) and Živković (2000).



of order' (124) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which entailed increased scepticism – including loss of faith in supernaturalism – and the problematisation of the relationship of self to the world such that the double came to symbolise a confrontation with one's own 'heart of darkness' (125). The proliferation of this motif in Victorian literature is therefore apt, with Smith (2000, 99) noting that the later years of the nineteenth century are often regarded as the heyday of the fictional double.<sup>167</sup>

While the double can take on various forms, there remains the question of how one is to respond to this figure. Williams (2002, 63-64) argues, for instance, that facing an apparent monster can be fear-inducing but can also induce a strange affinity on the part of the female, who recognises it as sharing her position as 'different' and as spectacle. Certainly, the double is often presented as troubling or monstrous within Victorian fiction, yet in such cases one could question whether the double *is* monstrous or is, in fact, emblematic of an aspect (or aspects) of an individual's consciousness that they have felt compelled to cast out or suppress. The double can therefore embody internal conflict, particularly in a Western cultural context wherein the concept of unified, coherent self has held sway. Not that such plurality has always been frowned upon: multiplicity (and mutation) has been seen in a positive light in some cultures, with Živković (2000, 123) contrasting pagan beliefs in the plurality of the Sacred with the modern, rational mind's attempts to resolve this inconsistency. Nevertheless, from the late eighteenth century onwards the double came to express fears regarding lack of integration, resulting in a counter emphasis on unified identity. Despite attempts to impose legibility, though, the Victorian period was marked by fears (and fascination) regarding what

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<sup>167</sup> Dolar (1991) also points out that one can determine an eruption of the uncanny as emerging alongside industrialism and scientific rationality; hence the popularity of Gothic fiction in a time when one would expect notions of ghosts, vampires and so on to be obsolete. For Dolar, this is due to the uncanny no longer occupying the sacred, socially sanctioned territory that it had done in premodern societies and instead becoming unplaceable – indeed, itself becoming uncanny. Consequently, '[w]hat seems to be a leftover is actually a product of modernity, its counterpart' (7).

lay beneath the surface. The double could consequently emerge as a by-product of this milieu, representing the return of the repressed – sometimes twisted into an image of horror yet also possessing liberating potential.<sup>168</sup> Still, while the double can involve an individual being confronted with that which they have hitherto suppressed, it can also manifest those negative psychological consequences liable to result from oppressive cultural models; in particular, the ‘chaos of metaphors’ surrounding the feminine (Buci-Glucksmann, 1986a, 223). In either case, the double can play a key role in exploring psychological issues and fostering introspection, particularly when taking the form of the gazer’s own image.

Freud’s encounter with the mirror demonstrates the key role that visual relations can play in fostering an uncanny effect, highlighting the significance of mirroring with regard to the shaping – or problematising – of one’s identity. The Lacanian ‘mirror stage’ is clearly relevant here, yet female-authored mirror poems often explore a more unsettling relationship to one’s reflection, with none of the poems under discussion in this chapter depicting an idealised self-image. Some *do* present a false image, but distorted in a way that is disturbing or disheartening. Consequently, such poems convey a situation that bears greater similarity to the feelings of fragmentation and lack of coordination that *generate* the mirror stage.

Likewise, the lack of (or partial) connection between these speakers and their mirror images evokes the more adversarial relationship between gazer and ‘mirror’ that precedes false recognition and identification. Illusionary wholeness is evidently not present in such situations, and identification has not arisen or is limited.

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<sup>168</sup> Dolar (1991, 13) argues that ‘the double is always the figure of *jouissance*’, while Warner (2002, 165) similarly posits that, though the double typifies a threat to one’s personality, it also expresses aspirations towards polymorphous perversity. It is worth noting that Irigaray (1985, 31; 139-140) holds a less favourable view of this infantile stage. For her, polymorphous perversity operates in an economy of sameness rather than multiplicity, seeing the little girl as starting out much the same as the little boy and therefore positioning the masculine as the prescriptive model. Still, one senses that it is mainly semantics at issue, as the concept of polymorphous perversity is often employed in order to indicate that same plurality and fluidity upon which Irigaray places such emphasis.

Given their disquieting effects, the mirror images in these poems clearly do not serve a role akin to the empathetic mother described by object relations theorists such as Winnicott, with insufficient mirroring being liable to result in ongoing fears regarding the provision of assurance – a mindset summarised by one of Winnicott’s ([1967] 1971, 116) patients, who stated, ‘[w]ouldn’t it be awful if the child looked into the mirror and saw nothing!’ Such an absence serves as an apt dramatisation of inadequate relating in infancy, for, if the mother-mirror has been primarily absent, then it follows that the mirror would represent a void. However, as Winnicott acknowledges, the mother is not necessarily *absent* but can be experienced as reflecting her own mood or rigidity. This scenario carries greater applicability with regard to the poems under consideration in this chapter, all of which concern speakers who experience a troubled a problematic relationship with the mirror – not in the sense of being confronted with *nothing* (although nothingness can be interpreted metaphorically) but with something disturbing or uncanny.

This still leaves the question, however, of what particular problems women are likely to experience with regard to mirroring. On this note, Irigaray (1985, 117) echoes Winnicott’s (female) patient by asking ‘*what happens if the mirror provides nothing to see?*’ yet goes on to emphasise the relevance of gender to this scenario. Specifically, she believes that women may find themselves facing a void due to the parameters of the mirror image being culturally determined according to masculine terms. In this case, absence can be a consequence of the inability to position oneself within established models. However, while this may account for the mirror’s failure to provide a reflection, it is also necessary to consider those instances in which the mirror is felt as troubling in other ways. In terms of Winnicott’s theory, at its most basic level it shows that a woman’s relationship to mirroring can be more complex than mere vanity, and this is made explicit in the poems that will be discussed in this chapter. The

mirrors in question reflect images that typically bear some relation to the gazer but are not reassuring or gratifying, instead invoking anxiety or despondency.

While Winnicott's account of mirroring provides a basis for considering problems that can later arise in this area, Wright's (1991, 39-51) case studies are significant in highlighting the psychological disturbance that can be expressed via the mirror. The specific emphasis of these studies is on patients who had internalised the mother's condemnatory gaze and learnt to monitor themselves in order to prevent the eruption of the behaviour that had raised the mother's ire. That is, they had come to regard their self as Other, the subjective self becoming 'petrified'<sup>169</sup> as a result of their attempts to present a false image of unification. Wright does not discuss the possible gendered dimensions of this scenario, yet it is fitting to consider this form of internalisation in relation not only to self-surveillance (which is founded upon splitting) but to the psychological conflict that this can cause, particularly given Wright's (43; 51) references to a patient who felt herself to be in two positions at once, predominantly looking at herself from the outside.

### **The Problematics of Identity in Victorian Literature**

Given the ambivalence associated with the Victorian age, it is no surprise that numerous texts from this period provide acute depictions of splitting and doubling. On the one hand, this climate was conducive to destabilisation and experimentation, offering increased opportunities for the testing of boundaries.<sup>170</sup> However, one should not assume that this

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<sup>169</sup> Laing (1960, 46) employs this term as part of his discussion of ontological insecurity and depersonalisation, referring to 'the sense of feeling that one is a thing, a rock or automaton, rather than a person'.

<sup>170</sup> Shires (2009, 17) summarises this cultural environment:

During a time of increasing cultural debates about vision, realism, and the status of representation, artists across disciplines experimented freshly with optical clarity and obfuscation, and with double and multiple points of view...such formal innovations not

constituted a time of newfound freedom, for, as emphasised in previous chapters, the Victorian era also entailed rigid notions of male / female roles. Texts from this period were therefore liable to explore the psychological turmoil that can result from cultural strictures, with female writers having produced a range of literary texts focused upon the disjunction between social constructions of gender and one's own sense of self. Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 1882 poem 'The Other Side of a Mirror' explores such terrain particularly effectively, though, like Elizabeth Siddal, Coleridge is remembered partly on account of her association with a preeminent male poet (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to whom Mary was great-grandniece). However, while she never achieved the status of her forbear, Coleridge has received increased critical attention in recent years, her best-known works possessing an oblique, uncanny timbre that echoes the elder Coleridge's poetry.<sup>171</sup>

Given the enigmatic quality of her work and her propensity for formal experimentation, critics have raised the question of whether Coleridge can and should be classified as an aesthetic poet. Certainly, some of Coleridge's own comments convey a belief in the validity of art for art's sake,<sup>172</sup> while her poetic work features a combination of otherworldliness, lyrical indeterminacy and contextlessness<sup>173</sup> that can be seen as indicative of 'an uncanny haunted aestheticism' (Chapman, 2007, 160). The term 'haunted' is, however, suggestive in that

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only introduced new ways of beholding "reality" but also affected the way their beholders saw and knew themselves.

<sup>171</sup> Mary Coleridge (1910, 11) commented, 'I have no fairy godmother; but lay claim to a fairy great-great uncle, which is perhaps the reason that I am condemned to wander restlessly around the Gates of Fairyland'. Regarding the uncanny themes within Mary Coleridge's work, Newbolt (1908, xii) affirms that 'there were times when she entered very deep shadows filled with strange shapes, that may move a timid soul or two to ask if it be safe to follow her.' Similarly, Sichel (1910, 33) notes that Coleridge 'was fond...of powerful or strange effects'.

<sup>172</sup> Coleridge (1910, 276) reminisced of '[l]ooking into the flurry white heart of an oleander' and experiencing 'rapture at its uselessness'. More generally, Coleridge (1900, 26) expressed the belief that '[a]s...there are exquisite moments when life is life alone, so now and again poets forget to be anything else.'

<sup>173</sup> Befitting this contextlessness, Sichel (1910, 1) states that Coleridge 'seemed to belong to eternity rather than to time'.

Coleridge's poetry at times seems 'haunted by an awareness of...the capacity of art to mean something beyond its enclosed system of reference' (McGowan, 2003, 588). Accordingly, commentators have suggested that, though one should not uncritically regard Coleridge's poems as representative of their author's real-life character (which was, by all accounts, largely sanguine), one should not neglect the intensity of feeling that they convey nor assume that such intensity is a mere artistic conceit, with poetry providing a 'medium through which to sound depths that might otherwise have remained unexplored' (Jackson, 1996, 61).<sup>174</sup>

The extent to which Coleridge sought to engage in artistic experimentation for its own sake thus remains open to question, and, indeed, the opacity and variability of Coleridge's work struggles against categorisation. In a general sense, scholars have underlined the ambiguity of many of Coleridge's poems, suggesting that Coleridge at times appears 'exhilarated by the notion that life was a fight, in which joy and pain and the human spirit were forever engaged' (Jackson, 1996, 53).<sup>175</sup> Such an observation is affirmed by an overview of Coleridge's work, much of which employs vivid yet cryptic imagery rich in interpretive potential.<sup>176</sup> It is 'The Other Side of a Mirror' that is most pertinent to this thesis, however, on account of its exploration of the problematics of gender and identity, including the pivotal role that specularity can play in this arena. Focusing upon a woman's troubled relationship to the image reflected in her mirror, this poem has proven attractive to feminist criticism. Notably,

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<sup>174</sup> While known for her social finesse, Coleridge had been a 'shy and troubled child' (Jackson, 1996, 42), recounting that she 'should like to think of another child—merrier—not so much afraid of the dark' (Coleridge, 1900, 201).

<sup>175</sup> Robert Bridges (1907, 599) observed 'warring principles' within Coleridge, which Jackson (1996, 44) paraphrases as 'sanguinity, humour and a lighthearted enjoyment of life, but also a fear of melancholy, a spirituality and humility, and a strong, even tyrannous, intellectual imagination.' Similarly, Henry Newbolt (cited by M. Newbolt, 1942, 97) remarked that Coleridge's mind 'was as sudden and changeful as the flight of a moth by lantern-light'.

<sup>176</sup> Whistler (1954, 22) comments that any clues that Coleridge's poetry gives to her life 'are cryptic, unsatisfying, haunting – scattered leaves'. That Coleridge's poems were not intended for a wide audience means that they could seem 'overly private at times' though 'allowing us to overhear a very individual mind at work, often warring with itself, often troubled, but refreshingly, confusedly human' (Jackson, 1996, 46).

Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 15-16; 76-77) cited it as reflective of not just the difficulties facing women attempting authorship but the consequences of the rigid, black-and-white roles with which women were associated during this time. For Gilbert and Gubar, then, the poem entails a journey towards self-recognition whereby the speaker comes to recognise herself and the reflected woman as one, finally recuperating an authentic, female selfhood that has hitherto been buried amidst cultural images and constraints.

While Gilbert and Gubar focus on self-reclamation, Robbins (2000, 163) sees any identification with the mirror image as misrecognition and suggests that, whether monstrous or benign, the image does not have ‘anything much to do with a “real” female identity.’ This reading therefore emphasises the notion of one’s reflection being shaped wholly by cultural categories, the mirror image inevitably being another ‘mask’. This interpretation is certainly plausible, with the poem’s cryptic nature along with the dramatic (potentially ‘monstrous’) appearance of the mirror image enabling one to conclude that the speaker is dealing with culturally-shaped imagery. As the poem progresses, however, it seems that the female gazer perceives something that is not necessarily a mask but an image that inspires a degree of hushed, troubled recognition. Even so, this does not mean that the speaker embraces the image in an act of self-affirmation. Indeed, in a theoretically dense analysis, Battersby (1996) challenges this interpretation by focusing on the ways in which the poem problematises the concept of identity, arguing that Coleridge was not primarily interested in owning her ‘female self’ but sought to *renounce* her sexuality – a point attested to by the connotations of her pseudonym, Anodos.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Chapman (2007, 150) points out that Coleridge’s first choice for a pseudonym had been ‘Vespertilio’ in reference to a type of bat: a creature that, befitting the ambivalence of Coleridge’s poetry, ‘lives a double life, in the day and night.’ However, Coleridge dispensed with this idea upon finding that a 1895 poetry

While Coleridge's use of a pseudonym was ostensibly informed by the desire to separate herself from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's legacy, this particular pseudonym was inspired by the wandering, elusive hero of George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858). For McGowran (2003, 585), 'the "negative" function of the pseudonym (the extent to which it masks identity) is offset by the evocation of the creative possibilities afforded by this new style.' Battersby (1996), however, sees this pseudonym as indicative of Coleridge's failed attempt to construct her authorial self by adopting and reversing the persona of the hero of MacDonald's novel. The key to this failure, Battersby argues, is that androgyny was only open to the male. As tends to be the case in (post) Romanticism, the male genius could retain his maleness while encompassing bisexual characteristics, while the female was de-sexed by her 'masculinity'. However, given that MacDonald's female characters are ciphers, Coleridge found herself similarly unable to identify with the 'white mirror-princess' (259). It should be noted, though, that *Anodos* carries an alternate meaning. As Battersby (265-267) points out, it also refers to the all-female Thesmophoria of ancient Greece and, in this respect, reflects Coleridge's (seemingly paradoxical) refusal to disown her sense of being distinctively female.<sup>178</sup> This might lead one to believe that her pseudonym was suggestive of a desire to embrace a female self, yet such an inference is undermined by Whistler's (1954, 50) remark that '[n]o one so feminine can ever have longed more to be a man.' Gender and identity are thus highly variable concepts for Coleridge but this in itself is a key point, for Coleridge (1910, 221) stated that one would be a 'fool' to believe in the concept of personal identity and attested to being 'a different person every twelve hours. I go to bed as feminine as Ophelia...I get up the next morning, almost as masculine as Falstaff'. 'Anodos' is therefore

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collection by Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Mariott Watson) had been entitled *Vespertilio and Other Poems*.

<sup>178</sup> Coleridge (1910, 233-234) at times appeared emphatic on this point, contending that '[i]f we do not retain sex I don't see how we can retain identity....it is of the very essence of our nature'.



emblematic of the complexity and indeterminacy of Coleridge's poetry,<sup>179</sup> 'The Other Side of a Mirror' proving a case in point.

'The Other Side of a Mirror' is a poem that is rich in provocative imagery yet begins in an unassuming manner. Recounting, 'I sat before my glass one day' (Coleridge, 1954, l. 1), the speaker refers to a routine activity and conveys a sense of predictability that can be seen to enhance (by point of contrast) the poem's more disquieting and forceful imagery.<sup>180</sup> The undermining of this predictability is signalled when the speaker finds that, upon looking in the mirror, she has 'conjured up a vision bare, / Unlike the aspects glad and gay, / That erst were found reflected there' (2-4). 'Conjure' has mystical connotations and is evocative of the wider Victorian interest in supernaturalism and phantasmagoric effects, as well as the ambiguous and fantastical elements of Coleridge's own work. Nevertheless, a sense of starkness is also evident: 'bare' can suggest emptiness, but the emphasis in this poem seems less on a void as on an image stripped of embellishment and confronted head on. The first two stanzas continue this theme, recounting that the woman's 'hair stood back on either side / A face bereft of loveliness' (7-8). Clearly, this is not a typical picture of feminine vanity, with such forthright imagery also standing in contrast to both the female beloved and the *femme fatale*. Coleridge suggests, however, that the image with which the speaker is confronted may have been present – albeit not visible – prior to this encounter: 'It had no envy now to hide / What once no man on earth could guess' (9-10). Throughout the poem

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<sup>179</sup> Affirming this indeterminacy, Sichel (1910) adds that Coleridge 'worshipped vitality and a strong consciousness, the forces she longed for and missed in herself' (30) and barely distinguished her friends' existences from her own, such that what may seem her most personal work gives 'a false impression of wishes and sufferings she never had' (31). More recently, Chapman (2007, 157) has noted that Coleridge's erasure of boundaries 'invites inhabitation by an other'. For more on this theme, see Baker (2010).

<sup>180</sup> This juxtaposition illustrates Freud's ([1905] 2003, 156-157) remark that literature can increase uncanniness by situating effects in a real-life setting in which they would be impossible or highly unlikely. On a similar note, Chapman (2007, 137) states that it is often the case that 'a prosaic vision leads to ironic reversals and inversions' within Coleridge's poetry.

Coleridge does not specify what it is that no one could guess, but the poem suggests that the speaker has suppressed certain components of her character, and that these components have now risen to the surface via the mirror.<sup>181</sup> The term ‘envy’ is enigmatic yet significant, for it is this that has hitherto upheld the speaker’s outward persona but now ceased to do so, suggesting that ‘envy’ has served as a holding mechanism. Coleridge’s use of the term ‘envy’ thus seems to indicate the necessity that the speaker formerly perceived of hiding her innermost character and maintaining a veneer of respectability and compliance – a ‘mask’ now seemingly compromised.

That the speaker’s distress is described as ‘hard’ adds to the severe tone of these stanzas, yet the vision is not merely a frank, pared down image but ‘a woman, wild / With more than womanly despair’ (5-6). The reference to the woman as ‘wild’ is particularly evocative as it aligns the reflected image with the fearsome tribal women featured in Coleridge’s ‘The White Women’ (1900). While the mirror motif does not feature in this later poem, the act of looking is again significant in that the poem concludes with a male onlooker being struck dead upon gazing at the women of the title. To consider ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’ in relation to this poem consequently reaffirms the potency that the female speaker has hitherto kept in check, evoking a possible ‘wild zone’ (Showalter, 1981, 2000) that cannot be quelled by dominant, masculine culture. The follow-up line of ‘more than womanly despair’ adds to this image, indicating that the poem concerns something that is more intense than delicate ‘womanly’ emotion and exceeds the confines of standard definitions. It is also notable that the second stanza ends with two celestial motifs that are undercut: the ‘aureole’ of the mirror image is ‘thorny’ (11), while the despair that it conveys is ‘unsanctified’ (12), emphasising that the mirror image is removed from (or a subversion of) the Victorian ideal of ethereal femininity.

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<sup>181</sup> Discussing such tension within women’s writing, Showalter (1981, 201; 2004) observes that this can create a ‘double-voiced discourse’ in which a ‘muted’ plot emerges and contests the orthodox plot.

Depicting a figure not only stripped of accoutrements but wild and potentially ambivalent, the poem continues to employ imagery of this nature, reinforcing Gilbert and Gubar's reading of the mirror image as dramatising those feelings and impulses that are all the more intense because society insists they be suppressed. Indeed, the figure in the mirror appears potentially monstrous, and one could therefore regard the speaker as having internalised the belief that any aspects of herself that are not culturally sanctioned must be deviant. As Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 77) summarise, the speaker sees 'the monster she fears she really is rather than the angel she has pretended to be', suggesting that she struggles to think outside the binaries so prominent in patriarchal culture. However, the monster is not simply an antagonist but, as noted earlier, can provoke a sense of uncanny recognition.<sup>182</sup> Further to this, the monstrous nature of the image may be indicative not merely of internalisation (the speaker coming to regard herself as grotesque) but rather the speaker's own despair and rage – traits that could be seen to perpetuate the linking of women with irrationality yet can be more judiciously viewed as 'the subversive impulses every woman feels when she contemplates the "deep-rooted" evils of patriarchy' (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 77).<sup>183</sup>

Following these introductory stanzas, Coleridge brings the poem's gendered aspects to the fore in stanza three. That the woman has 'no voice to speak her dread' (18) would seem to indicate the cultural suppression of women's voices and the difficulty in finding a language with which to express oneself. Such a predicament evokes Irigaray's (1985, 189) argument that, as a result of the continuing privileging of male-defined norms in Western society,

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<sup>182</sup> Bowers (1990) notes that female writers have sometimes identified with the Medusa, not only embracing female creativity in the manner endorsed by Cixous (1976) but, in some cases, also embracing the Medusa as a symbol of 'anger, darkness, and power' (234).

<sup>183</sup> Živković (2000, 127) emphasises that the emergence of a monstrous or peculiar double can be seen to reveal 'a tragic truth' of western civilization: 'a reluctance to give in to a desire for something other, which can only be experienced in its "devouring" and horrific aspect, yet apprehending this other as the only alternative to a hostile, patriarchal, capitalist order.'

women may no longer feel that they know themselves or what they want, 'suffering from drives without any possible representatives or representations.'<sup>184</sup> This, in turn, calls to mind Freud's infamous question (cited by Jones, 1955, 2: 421) 'What does a woman want?', but suggests that, not only may such a question be disingenuous (in that women's own desire has traditionally been suppressed or vilified) but that women themselves may not know what they want, and, even if they do, feel that they have no adequate means of expression. There is also a range of highly suggestive phrases employed in this stanza, with no sound emerging from the woman even though 'Her lips were open' (13), these 'parted lines of red' (14) being unable to say anything of 'the hideous wound' (15) that 'In silence and in secret bled' (16). In the space of a few lines, then, three provocative motifs are introduced: bleeding (notably, of a 'hideous wound'), parted lips and the colour red.

As befitting the thematic content of Coleridge's work, blood is itself ambiguous. As Flint (2000, 106-107) summarises, it represents circulation and life yet also pollution, violence and shedding of waste. In this instance, loss of blood clearly has a further association with the female as part of the menstrual process – a point made explicit by Coleridge's reference to the woman's bleeding wound. That the bleeding occurs silently and secretly reinforces this association by hinting at cultural taboos regarding menstruation, the term 'hideous' being suggestive of primal fears surrounding the female organ. It is also perhaps indicative of internalisation on the part of the gazer, in that she could be seen to regard this image of female specificity as aberrant. This is certainly probable and would fit in the poem's vacillating tone, with Battersby (1996, 261) noting that Coleridge blocks traditional models of spiritual transcendence yet retains a horror of the flesh. Still, the mirror image is not solely one of horror, for its covert bleeding also suggests unspoken pain and suppression. The image is

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<sup>184</sup> As Nochlin (1972, 11) summarises, '[t]hose who have no country have no language. Women have no imagery available...with which to express their particular viewpoint.'

therefore not a mere monster but a woman who is muted and left to ‘bleed’ in silence, and this reiterates the varying connotations of blood. Bleeding suggests pain and the ebbing away of one’s life force yet blood also signifies one’s status as a living, subjective being – a being potentially surging with unvoiced anger that here finds expression via bleeding (seemingly the woman’s only means of self-expression). Moreover, Kristeva (1982, 53-54; 69-71; 78; 96; 103) points to blood as an instance of the abject in that, when shed, lost or shared, it becomes that which disturbs boundaries and order. Bleeding can therefore be symbolic of not only waste but the traversal of boundaries, these characteristics being emblematic of Coleridge’s vacillation towards the concept of identity.

Further to the motif of bleeding, Coleridge’s reference to the colour red adds to the vivid imagery of this stanza by evoking sensations of passion, anger and danger.<sup>185</sup> Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 15) consequently interpret such references as indicative of the speaker’s suppressed rage, and, on this note, it is interesting to consider Alice Meynell’s comments on the colour red in her essay ‘The Colour of Life’ ([1896] 1914). Analysing the implications of this colour, Meynell concludes:

Red is the colour of violence, or of life broken open, edited, and published. Or if red is indeed the colour of life, it is so only on condition that it is not seen. Once fully visible, red is the colour of life violated (171).

Here, Meynell takes on an explicitly feminist stance in commenting upon the hypocrisy whereby women were denied political rights and a public voice under the Revolution yet

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<sup>185</sup> Perception of colour was considered in relation to the wider cultural interest in physiological response during this time. As Crary (1999, 166-167) details, research emphasised organic responsiveness as imbuing colours with their richness and suggested that red was not perceptible by peripheral vision but possessed strong ‘dynamogenic value’ (James, [1890] 1950, 379-381), such that one’s ‘entire body sees red’ (Féré, [1887] 1900, 152).

gladly granted public death, their blood being exposed for all to see.<sup>186</sup> It is important to emphasise that Meynell does not denigrate the colour red. Rather, she points to the disparity whereby woman's living 'blood' (emblematic of selfhood and voice) is something of which 'the violent world has professed to be delicate and ashamed' yet there have been no qualms about making this blood visible – in the same way that women have been made superficially visible – when detached from its life source. The crux of Meynell's argument is therefore that when red (blood) is made visible as a result of violation, it cannot be seen as the colour of life. Consequently, Meynell reiterates the varying implications of blood, referring to its capacity to represent subjectivity and fluidity while also being associated with violence, loss and notions of female transgression – themes that all come into play throughout Coleridge's poem.

Like Meynell, Battersby (1996) remarks upon the severity of the colour red, focusing on red as that which sets the woman in Coleridge's mirror apart from the pale love-objects of male-authored poetry. In keeping with the opening stanza's reference to the woman as 'wild', Battersby argues that these mentions of blood and the colour red paint an image of woman as 'a lover herself...vengeful, bleeding, wounded' (260). The colour red therefore appears as something that cannot be contained within the confines of what one may deem a monochrome world and that may consequently be seen as excessive and transgressive. A related point of interest here concerns the way in which colour photography was conceptualised during the nineteenth century. As Smith (2000, 108) details, experimentations in colour during the early years of the century were followed by a 'complex and strategic naturalisation of black and white' (108) for a relatively short but significant period, meaning that the reappearance of

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<sup>186</sup> The public death that Meynell ([1896] 1914, 714) discusses is the beheading of Olympe de Gouges, author of *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* (1791) – a woman who, it was felt, should have 'blushed' for her political views to be seen or heard, but whose blood was exposed via public execution with no such sanctions. Meynell thus counterpoises metaphorical and literal blood in order to highlight the grimly ironic 'involvement' that de Gouges ultimately experienced in public political life.

colour was met with resistance and seen as excessive – a scenario analogous to the positioning of women on the margins of dominant ideology (Irigaray, 1985, 30). The redness featured in Coleridge's poem can therefore be similarly regarded as something that has been repressed and potentially turned into an image of horror (or at least aberrance).

Taken in conjunction with the references to blood, then, the use of the colour red in this poem underscores that the woman in the mirror can be reconciled with neither pale love object nor androgyne (the latter being negated not only by the aforementioned difficulties regarding female androgyny but by the gendered connotations of Coleridge's imagery). That is not to say, however, that such references to bleeding and the colour red are necessarily indicative of an essential female subject-position. Again, much as Coleridge seemingly alternated between a sense of being 'sexed to her very soul' (Battersby, 1996, 268) and a nomadic stance towards identity, the bleeding and redness to which this poem refers carry varying significations. Certainly, Coleridge emphasises the association of bleeding with the female body, yet focusing upon the circulatory aspects of blood suggests not merely an affirmation of a 'female self' but the bleeding of identity into otherness: an indistinct, variable subject position rather than an essentialist appeal to 'nature'. On this note, the colour red can be seen as not merely adding to the vivid imagery of the poem but itself being liable to bleed, for, as with any colour (though gaining added relevance given its link with blood), it can sometimes become dissipated and potentially mingle with other colours. Thus, rather than being a self-contained emblem of female specificity, the speaker's reference to (red) bleeding suggests fluidity and variability of identity.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> This mindset is evident in Irigaray's (1985, 207) contention that '[y]ou don't become red by losing your candid whiteness. You are white because you have remained close to blood. White and red at once, we give birth to all the colors'. Others have also argued along these lines: Meynell ([1896] 1914, 171) states that the true colour of life is that of the skin, which is 'mingled...white, but less white than milk...red, but

Adding to the potent imagery of this stanza, Coleridge's references to 'open', 'parted' lips bring to mind Irigaray's (1985, 24) emphasis on the female genitalia as lips that are constantly touching in a manner whereby that which is touched cannot be distinguished from that which touches. Rather than being defined in terms of two lips, then, Irigaray emphasises that woman is neither one nor two but multiple and impossible to pin down, though women 'haven't been taught, nor allowed, to express multiplicity' (210) – hence the inability to speak. Indeed, one of the themes that Coleridge explores throughout her work is 'the need for voice itself and for the words that will allow the writer to express the self—the woman—for whom the everyday words of speech and prose have proved so disappointing' (Jackson, 1996, 60).<sup>188</sup> That the lips in Coleridge's poem are 'parted' underscores this incapacity, for it dramatises that the woman wishes to speak but cannot. Approaching this reference from an Irigarayan perspective is even more evocative, suggesting that the mirror image cannot speak because these lips have been divided. It consequently recalls the division of black and white (or red and white), as well as those social dichotomies that have led to the suppression and devaluation of multiplicity and fluidity.<sup>189</sup>

Following on from the silent woe and acutely female pain of the fourth stanza, the fifth stanza deals with a mix of despondency and rage. The speaker's eyes express 'The dying flame of life's desire' and a sense of lost hope, yet this stanza also contains numerous terms that express a much fiercer sentiment, with the term 'lurid' suggesting the anger and power that can be expressed via women's eyes (again, bringing to mind Coleridge's 'The White

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less red than sunset or dawn.' Similarly, in their discussion of the Snow White fairytale, Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 41) point to the half red / half white apple as symbolising the Queen's ambiguous relationship to her stepdaughter, who is both her opposite and her self (the apple's red half representing assertiveness and sexual energy; the white half passivity).

<sup>188</sup> Jackson (1996, 48-49) adds that, while Coleridge was known for her conversational skills and capacity for intellectual communication, she was less at ease when expressing her innermost emotions.

<sup>189</sup> Irigaray (1985 169) notes that the pleasure of fluidity is chiefly associated with the oral stage, which then gives way to the pleasure of the 'solid' (in the anal stage). Consequently, fluidity, multiplicity and changeability have been maligned, as evidenced by the prevailing of solid mechanics over fluid mechanics.



Women').<sup>190</sup> A flurry of terms such as 'leaping fire' (22), 'fierce revenge' (23) and 'strength' (24) increase this impression, as well as deepening the connotations of anger and passion suggested by the previous stanza's references to the colour red.<sup>191</sup> On a structural level, this stanza entails a to and fro between despondency and ferocity on a line by line basis whereby contrasting terms such as 'lurid' (19), 'dying' (20), 'gone' (21) and 'kindled' (22) occur in quick succession. Such back and forth movement is, from this perspective, suggestive of the variability with which Coleridge is associated. However, this stanza is not merely an exercise in textual variation but carries greater significance in terms of characterisation, specifying that the 'dying flame' that has resulted from loss of hope is now rekindled, leading to the woman in the mirror becoming maddened and vengeful, seemingly experiencing a surge of energy that 'could not change or tire' (24).

The poem's penultimate stanza consequently establishes a tone of resurgence and forcefulness that one might imagine to be solidified in the poem's conclusion. As it transpires, however, the variability of language in this penultimate stanza proves to be apt in that the speaker's subsequent comments do not maintain or embrace this forceful quality. In fact, the final stanza seems to undercut any previous assertion of agency, indicating the speaker's uneven emotional state and ambivalent reaction to the mirror image. Here, the speaker refers to the image as 'Shade of a shadow' (25), the shadow here being something distant and opaque.

That the speaker sees the image as a shadow *of* a shadow underscores this impression, bringing to mind the dissipation of originality associated with simulation (the shadow here

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<sup>190</sup> Such ocular potency is also aptly demonstrated in a journal entry made by Edith Cooper (one half of the female duo who produced poetry as 'Michael Field') in which she directs her anger at a male acquaintance, Bernard Berenson, following his humiliation of one of her friends: describing this anger in strikingly visual terms, Cooper recounts summoning the 'power of magnetic anger and cat-like brightness' to her eyes as she casts her contemptuous gaze upon Berenson (cited by Ehnenn, 2005, 137 n29).

<sup>191</sup> Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 77) emphasise this aspect of the poem, referring to the figure in the mirror as emerging 'bloody, envious, enraged' from a silence with which neither speaker nor poet can continue to comply.

being analogous to a copy of a copy) and adding to the already hazy nature of the image. This expression therefore creates a sense of cloudiness and confusion. Indeed one gets the impression that, much like the difficulty in reclaiming colour following a significant period of monochrome, to uncover what has been cast out or suppressed is not easy given that it has perhaps become dissipated or inhibited over time. The speaker subsequently voices her wish to look upon a clear ‘crystal surface’ (26), indicating her difficulty in dealing with what the image in the mirror conveys. Her unease is confirmed when she wills the vision to ‘Pass – as the fairer visions pass’ (27), with this line suggesting a tone of bitterness and the notion that, if nothing good lasts, then let that which is disturbing pass too.

As noted earlier, critical discussion of this poem has hinged upon the question of to what extent the speaker achieves recognition and acceptance of her mirror image. Such discussion has placed particular emphasis on the poem’s final line wherein the speaker refers to looking upon the image and whispering “I am she!” (30). For Gilbert and Gubar this refrain indicates the speaker’s embracement of her authorial selfhood, the double’s function here being to ‘act epiphanically to unveil you to the world – and to yourself’ (Warner, 2002, 164). Battersby (1996, 260), however, maintains that the speaker never manages to mark out a stable subject position, adding that “‘I am she!’...is refused – whilst also given a position of finality which means that it is not simply negated.’ Indeed, it is vital to consider this line within the context of the final stanza. On the one hand, ‘I am she!’ constitutes the final words of the poem and creates the impression of a declaration that sees the speaker suddenly recognise herself in the mirror, whether this be in terms of reclamation or shock and perhaps horror. Still, while this moment concludes the poem with a flourish, in chronological terms it does not represent the speaker’s final thoughts. Rather, these thoughts are those of the stanza’s *preceding* lines, with the speaker willing the vision to pass *after* having briefly acknowledged “I am she!”. The

final line's exclamation mark is, moreover, undercut somewhat due to the speaker voicing it in a 'whisper' (30), suggesting a hesitant reaction. On this note, Dolar (1991, 6) stresses that to recognise oneself in the mirror instigates 'a split: I cannot recognize myself and be one with myself...The double is the same as me plus the object *a*, that invisible part of being added to my image.' The vivid imagery featured in this poem certainly lends itself to such a reading, yet the intensity and rawness of the image does not evoke pleasurable recognition but rather anxiety stemming from the fear of 'gaining...a too-close presence of the object' (Dolar, 1991, 13). This being the case, the final stanza sees the speaker acknowledge that the image is in some sense herself but dismiss it as 'the ghost of a distracted hour' (29).

While 'The Other Side of the Mirror' provides an enigmatic exploration of gender and specularity, Augusta Webster produced a range of poems that combine this psychological tenor with social critique. Webster first came to critical attention as one of the poets included in Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992), which focused on works that could not be pinned down to that 'highly moralised...sensitivity' (3) associated with women's poetry. This is certainly the case with regard to Webster, who concerns herself 'with real, live women...whose lives are determined by the solid facts and prejudices of contemporary society' (164).<sup>192</sup> Webster's work is notable for giving a voice to female characters that have typically been muted or vilified, including not only mythological characters such as Circe and Medea but also those women who feel themselves to be on the outskirts of Victorian society. On this note, Leighton (1992, 173) emphasises that Webster's poetry is 'more concerned with opinions, facts and ideologies than with...introspective

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<sup>192</sup> Others have made similar observations: Mermin (1993, 79) describes Webster's work as 'forceful and erudite' and sharing with Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti an interest in employing the dramatic monologue as a means of defying social conventions and expectations of 'feminine unpretentiousness'. Moreover, Rossetti (1908, 175) herself referred to Webster as 'the most formidable' woman poet of whom she knew.

fantasies’<sup>193</sup> and, indeed, Webster’s social concerns are readily apparent. However, Webster concerns herself equally with the psychological effects of social inequality, her speakers’ sometimes strident views being accompanied by emotional disturbance. Consequently, Webster’s poetry is pervaded by recognition that ‘there is no standpoint for cultural critique outside of human society’ and that, as a result, ‘ideological conflict and inconsistencies inevitably arise’ (Houston, 2007, para. 18). The key point of concern here is the interrelationship of the social and the personal, with some of Webster’s strongest works focusing upon ‘the nature of womanhood, its mystique, its clichés, its self-reflections and self-divisions’ (Leighton, 1992, 185). Webster’s use of the dramatic monologue adds to this effect, fostering introspection and internal conflict.<sup>194</sup> Accordingly, the poems under discussion here are deft explorations of the difficulties that can arise when an individual feels disparity between what *they* feel they are and what society would have them be, with Webster paying particular attention to cultural ideals of youth and beauty.

Following this retrieval of Webster as an important nineteenth century poet, Webster’s poetry attracted renewed critical interest and was published in collected form for the first time since 1895 in *Portraits and Other Poems* (2000). In her introduction to this collection, Sutphin (2000b, 14) remarks that ‘even Webster’s strongest poetry is now largely unknown’, and this is true to an extent. Certain poems have attracted more attention than others, yet there remains much scope for extended critical analysis of Webster’s work and its themes of ‘[s]elf-

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<sup>193</sup> Leighton (1992, 183) emphasises that Webster’s poetry is not an outpouring of emotion. Rather, its emotional content is constituted by the voice that Webster bestows to her speakers, this voice being motivated, in turn, by Webster’s social concerns. Webster was also conscious of the constructed aspects of poetry, referring to the misplaced tendency on the part of some readers to ‘despise a man as a hypocrite because, after having written and printed, “I am the bridegroom of Despair,” ...he goes out to dinners and behaves like anybody else’ (Webster, 2000, 369).

<sup>194</sup> Shires (2009, 18) sees the dramatic monologue as being particularly effective in this regard, remarking upon its capacity to ‘challenge the Cartesian dualism of self and other...Reconciliation, wholeness, and transcendence are replaced by a process of exchange in which one perspective is tested, altered, or replaced by another.’

consciousness, self-exposure, and women's double place as subject and as object in art' (Mermin, 1993, 80). The best known of Webster's poems is 'A Castaway' (1870), which is notable for its social commentary on Victorian discourses of prostitution: a topic that, as Sutphin (2000a, 526) notes, was 'intimately concerned with women' yet 'not generally accepted as a woman's subject.' Challenging this orthodoxy, the poem is told from the perspective of a prostitute, Eulalie,<sup>195</sup> to whom Webster confers a voice typically lacking in male-authored works. Reading her old diary, the narrator wonders, 'did *I* write it? Was I this good girl'? (Webster, 2000, l. 7)<sup>196</sup> Here, Webster highlights a major theme of several of her poems, employing the motif of a woman looking at an image of herself, or former self, upon which she proceeds to ruminate.<sup>197</sup> The diary therefore enables 'a process of reflective inquiry' whereby 'Eulalie analyzes language and tries out different explanatory narratives for her experience' (Houston, 2007, para. 15). As she sees her younger self conveyed via the diary, the speaker experiences a sense of disconnection that prompts her to state that 'now it seems a jest to talk of me / As if I could be one with her, of me / Who am...me' (24-26). The speaker here draws a distinction between her former self and her current self, yet 'Who am...me' is an indefinite phrase, the ellipsis suggesting hesitation on the speaker's part as she struggles to define herself and, one senses, purposely resists 'the usual dehumanizing oversimplifications' (Mermin, 1993, 80) often found in male-authored literature:

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<sup>195</sup> Houston (2007, para. 9) summarises the connotations of this name:

Eulalie...plays on popular associations of French culture with overt female sexuality, but also invokes Saint Eulalia...In literary terms, the name simultaneously acknowledges the lonely figure of the poetess in Letitia Landon's "A History of the Lyre," worn out from manufacturing feminine emotions...and the idealized object of male desire in Edgar Allen Poe's "Eulalie," whose beauty so unsettles the speaker that he awkwardly keeps revising his attempts to describe her.

<sup>196</sup> All further citations from Webster's poetry are taken from this source.

<sup>197</sup> As Sutphin (2000b, 15) comments, '[s]ince Webster's dramatic poems often do not include a listener, they could perhaps be classified as interior monologues. However, the speakers do seem to be speaking aloud, as if to an audience.' Consequently, Webster's techniques 'evoke a conversation – as if the speaker were indeed talking – with another character or the reader' (24).

And what is that? My looking-glass  
Answers it passably; a woman sure,  
No fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools,  
A woman with a ripe and smiling lip. (26-29)

It is particularly significant that the speaker's musings are also fostered by the looking-glass. Regarding her image in the mirror, the speaker does not observe the monster that others may brand her on account of her 'immorality'. In fact, she refers to herself as one whom 'none dare call not beautiful, / Not womanly in every woman's grace' (32-33). However, she does not merely embrace her reflection's feminine attributes but displays a keen awareness of the cultural context within which she is positioned. The following passage is especially evocative:

Aye, let me feed upon my beauty thus,  
Be glad in it like painters when they see  
At last the face they dreamed but could not find  
Look from their canvas on them, triumph in it,  
The dearest thing I have. Why, 'tis my all' (34-38)

Her reference to 'feeding' upon beauty brings to mind Christina Rossetti's 'In an Artist's Studio', though in this case the speaker is referring to *self*-cannibalisation. The speaker here appears to exhort herself to gain the same satisfaction from her beauty as the painter gains from the picture on his canvas. However, one senses a critical (potentially satirical) tone to these comments, for it does not seem that the speaker merely accepts and endorses the truism that her beauty is her 'all' but rather recognises this as a cultural construction. Nevertheless, she is conscious that she cannot simply step outside the cultural landscape in which she is positioned.<sup>198</sup> As is typically the case with these dramatic monologues, then, one is conscious

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<sup>198</sup> Sutphin (2000a, 523-524) observes the speaker's social awareness in this regard:

[Eulalie] literally feeds upon her own beauty because it attracts men who will support her...she is dependent on an oppressively gendered economic system, and because she

that the speaker is not simply paranoid – there are real cultural factors at stake, of which these speakers are cognisant and that have fostered the psychological unrest that is palpable throughout these poems.

Continuing to mediate upon these themes, Eulalie notes that her beauty is ‘my own curse at once and tool / To snare men’s souls, (I know what the good say / Of beauty in such creatures)’ (40-42). She is therefore aware that physical beauty is a trait that can be used deliberately and manipulatively, her reference to ensnarement evoking the *femme fatale*.

Webster consequently touches upon a range of timeworn motifs pertaining to female beauty, highlighting that, whether seductress or muse, women have consistently been defined by their attractiveness to male viewers / consumers. For the speaker’s part, it is indeed the case that she utilises her charms for occupational means and, in this respect, Webster prefigures Joan Riviere’s (1929) comments on the ‘masquerade’, which is defined as the exaggeration of ‘femininity’ for strategic purposes. However, while this strategic approach can be helpful in moving away from the sometimes stifling association of femininity with closeness (instead conceiving of femininity as a construct), playing up one’s femininity is liable to reinforce stereotypical notions of ‘female traits’. As Doane (1982, 82) summarises, moreover, ‘that we can speak of a woman as “using” her sex or “using” her body for particular gains is highly significant – it is not that a man cannot use his body in this way but that he doesn’t have to.’ Indeed, the resentment and psychological variability that the speaker displays throughout this poem indicate that she does not simply revel in her ‘success.’ Critics may have differed on

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seems to be devouring her face, the possibility of “disappearance” threatens. Certainly, this is a threat of which Eulalie is aware; with the passing of her beauty she will be “nothing” (l. 180).

the extent to which Eulalie rebuffs cultural stereotypes,<sup>199</sup> yet the speaker's critical voice indicates that she has not simply absorbed the gendered inequality and labels of her cultural environment.

While Eulalie displays a critical voice throughout the poem, this voice is tempered with moments of despondency and self-doubt, as indicated when she comments on her beauty, 'is it not this / That makes me feel myself a woman still, / With still some little pride, some little —' (42-44). The speaker cuts off here, noting that pride is hardly possible for a 'wanton' woman like herself. Such instability and shifts in tone are indicative of an internal struggle wherein social critique becomes bound up with self critique, bringing about the speaker's 'compelling and contradictory claims' (Houston, 2007, para. 14). As Sutphin (2000b, 20) summarises:

[Webster] makes her fallen woman able to analyze her own situation...she struggles in her own mind with the very doctrines that oppress her. Her ability to reflect, summarize opposing views, and argue for less conventional perceptions is telling precisely because she is caught up in the discourses so much of her monologue refutes.<sup>200</sup>

This section of the poem betrays insecurity and psychological conflict in that, for all her criticism and manipulation of 'beauty', the speaker voices the possibility that it is her beauty that makes her feel a woman still. That she cuts off mid sentence is significant, as this is a motif employed in several of Webster's poems in order to indicate disruption of the speaker's

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<sup>199</sup> Mermin (1993, 80) argues that Eulalie rejects 'the tawdry glamorization with which artists depict women like herself, and also their smug condemnation'. However, while largely agreeing with Mermin's reading, Sutphin (2000a, 524) suggests that 'Eulalie challenges, rather than outright rejects, hegemonic constructions...and that is what makes her monologue so complex and compelling.'

<sup>200</sup> Further discussing this ambivalence, Sutphin (2000a) emphasises that the poem is not indicative of the speaker's self-acceptance, for it is clear that 'her image of herself has been infected by the association of prostitution with moral and physical decay' (520). Consequently, if Eulalie rises above the victim stereotype, it is 'in a highly equivocal way' (523).



thoughts, as well as the difficulty in finding the words with which to express one's feelings.<sup>201</sup> The speaker's acerbic comments are therefore accompanied by a sense of despair and turmoil. Regarding the topic of youth, for instance, the speaker laments that one is 'taught its absence by harsh careless looks, / To live forgotten, solitary, old — / The cruellest word that ever woman learns' (177-179). This touches upon a theme that Webster explores in detail elsewhere (as will be discussed shortly), here serving as one facet of the speaker's despair. This despair reaches its peak when the speaker's barbed comments give in to a sense of hopelessness, emphasised by repetition: 'No help, / No help, no help' (438-439). She concludes that, once one is stuck in quicksand, there is nothing left but to sink – a characteristically downbeat outcome. As with some of Webster's other poems, however, these thoughts are halted when another person finally arrives, jolting the speaker out of her introspection and creating a contrast between the banality of her surroundings and the intensity of her thoughts.

While 'A Castaway' employs the looking glass motif, 'By the Looking-Glass' (1866) places it front and centre and, as with Webster's other poems, concerns a speaker for whom social judgement and derision are of paramount concern. Acutely aware of cultural expectations regarding female youth and beauty, the speaker conveys the same sentiment as Eliza Cook's 'ugly maiden' in that she finds herself severely lacking in this regard. The poem begins by juxtaposing the introspection of a solitary speaker with the wearying 'glitter and din' of polite society, with its 'voices that prate / To a ballroom tune for the fashion's sake' (3-4).<sup>202</sup> The

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<sup>201</sup> Evoking Irigaray's (1985, 189) comments on the difficulties associated with language and self-expression, Armstrong (1993, 374) observes that Webster 'works through intensely analytical psychological exploration which discloses contradictions in the construction of feminine subjectivity. She is fascinated by those areas where we have no language, or where language cannot exist in any richness, because of social constraints.'

<sup>202</sup> References to the hollowness of social conventions are characteristic of Webster. The essay 'Saint Opportune', for instance, enumerates the dull minutiae involved in a wife's dinner preparations (Webster,

speaker subsequently wonders what – if anything – lies beneath the ‘Light and laughters’ (5); that is, whether others experience similar feelings to those she proceeds to reveal. It quickly becomes apparent that these feelings do not merely relate to weariness with social niceties but to what it means to be a woman within this milieu. Stating that ‘the right of a woman is being fair, / And her heart must starve if she miss that dower’ (13-14), the speaker grieves over the hollowness of her life, which she attributes to her lack of feminine charms. The term ‘starve’ serves as a parallel to the ‘feeding’ to which the speaker of ‘A Castaway’ referred, indicating a mindset in which a woman’s beauty is her key form of sustenance. Similarly, the term ‘dower’ is suggestive of the importance of marriage for the typical Victorian woman<sup>203</sup> and the speaker’s recognition that youth and beauty are key deciding factors in this arena.

That the speaker asks how a plain woman such as herself should ‘purchase the look and the smile’ (15) underlines this sense of courtship as a transaction in which beauty is a woman’s key asset. Moreover, it is clear that this pensive state is an ongoing preoccupation, as indicated by the lines, ‘Once more, as I learn by heart every line / In the pitiless mirror, night by night’ (18-19). As with ‘A Castaway’, however, the speaker’s thoughts are not solely of

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1879, 210). ‘Tired’ (1870), meanwhile, is a poem concerning a male speaker who has married a woman from a lower class and introduced her to ‘polite’ society, the irony being that he chose her because she was a ‘violet’ rather than a ‘rose’ (Webster, 2000, l. 70). Consequently, the speaker chides himself for encouraging his wife to bow down to ‘Queen Bugaboo’ (137); that is, society, with its emphasis on ‘proper’ roles and traits. Such a sentiment has a broad applicability, but Webster also comments on women’s social roles, deriding the round of ‘treadmill ceremonies, mimic tasks, / We make our women's lives’ (369-360) and the demand that women engage in ‘petty actress parts’ (367).

<sup>203</sup> This emphasis on marriage was driven by the ideology of the home (the female being positioned as guardian of the domestic sphere) and the dearth of opportunities available to women outside of marriage. Typically lacking the education afforded to the male, women were expected to rely upon the financial security provided by a husband, with Kent (1999, 250) summarising that ‘[b]arred by law and custom from entering trades and professions by which they could support themselves, and restricted in the possession of property, women had only one means of livelihood, that of marriage.’ Crucially, time was of the essence when it came to securing a marriage, and, by her late teens, a woman was expected to acquire a husband within the space of around five years or else be branded a ‘spinster’ at a relatively young age. For more on marriage in the Victorian age, see Foster (1985), Perkin (1989), Phegley (2012), Shanley (1989) and Vicinus (1973).

despair or self-hatred but also disconnection. This is made explicit by the speaker's reaction to her mirror image:

Let me try to think it is not my own.  
Come, stranger with features something like mine,  
Let me place close by you the tell-tale light;  
Can I find in you now some charm unknown,  
Only one softening grace? (20-24)

That she refers to the image as 'stranger with features something like mine' creates an uncanny quality typical of such mirror poems, as she does not regard the image as an alien figure. There *is* a sense of recognition, yet, in this case, the speaker wants to regard the figure as a stranger so as to tell herself that this image is not her own.

Despite attempting to disown her image, the speaker admits the futility of this endeavour, bemoaning that 'the sense of myself is ever strong' (53). This is a powerful statement in that it portrays one's self as something that must be suppressed, with the speaker's longing 'Oh! to forget me a while, / Feeling myself but as one in the throng' (49-50) emphasising her desire to lose herself in a crowd and forget – if only temporarily – the self-image she so abhors. In this respect Webster echoes Emily Dickinson, who suggested in the 1862 poem 'One need not be a chamber – to be Haunted' that encountering an 'External Ghost' (Dickinson, 1976, l. 6) may be preferable to an unarmed encounter with one's own self. Dickinson's twist on this gothic theme therefore focuses upon a sense of conflict between one's conscious being and the spectre(s) lurking beneath, such that 'Ourself behind ourself, concealed – / Should startle most' (13-14).<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Dickinson returned to such subject matter in other poems, with the speaker of 'Me from Myself-to banish-' ([1863] 1976) deploring her self for 'assaulting' her to such an extent that the only seeming option is a fatalistic abdication of consciousness. Similarly, 'I am afraid to own a Body-' (1865) refers to one's

Dickinson's notion of being 'haunted' by oneself therefore suggests a troubled state echoing that of Webster's speaker and rendering invisibility an appealing prospect. As Dickinson wrote in the poem 'I'm nobody!' (1861), to be unseen can be liberatory, the speaker reflecting, 'How dreary to be somebody! / How public' (1976, ll. 5-6).<sup>205</sup> Here invisibility provides relief from unwanted public attention, yet invisibility can also be problematic. For one thing, one is loath to speak of empowerment when the wish for invisibility is due to self-consciousness and low self-esteem (as in 'By the Looking-Glass'). Moreover, there is ambivalence at the heart of this wish on the part of Webster's speaker, in that her despondency appears to be in part *due to* invisibility. One senses her sadness and bitterness at feeling that life has passed her by, yet she clearly believes that, when she *is* recognised, it is to be looked upon with derision. Given that this is – as far as the speaker is concerned – the case, then obscurity appears preferable. The speaker therefore resigns to 'hide in myself as is best' (72), the state of invisibility offering some comfort and respite:

But I--yes flicker pale light,  
 Fade into darkness and hide it away,  
 The poor dull face that looks out from the glass,  
 Oh wearily wearily back to me! (209-212)

This sentiment, with its repetition of the word 'wearily', indicates that the speaker is drained by her routine of gazing into the mirror and trying to reconcile her image with that of desirable, conventional femininity. As Leighton (1992, 187) observes, the poem is characterised not by a rejection of the mirror's evidence but acknowledgement that it

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self (both body and soul) as a source of fear and a hefty burden: 'Profound – precarious property – / Possession, not optional' (1976, ll. 3-4) placed 'Upon an unsuspecting Heir' (6).

<sup>205</sup> Harper (2000) also discusses Dickinson's poetic use of veiling as a means of controlling the extent to which she is seen, whether this be via the adoption of a child persona or in the compact form of her poetry. However, Harper stresses that such a project is fraught with potential difficulties and contradictions, juxtaposing Dickinson's project of invisibility with her inability to suppress the poetic voice that would expose her.

constitutes a 'pervasive blight on a girl's life' and that identity ultimately 'belongs in the world's eyes.' That the image fades into darkness is therefore a blessing for the speaker, as she may now lose herself 'in the peace of the night' (216). She consequently wishes for 'self and this sadness of self leave me free' (215), 'self' being a constant burden from which unconsciousness is the only respite.

Given the speaker's poor self-image and variable emotional state, it is not surprising that when she comments upon her musings it is to refer to her 'wild thoughts' (213) straying 'Weakly, selfishly' (214). The speaker therefore berates both her lack of beauty and her 'weakness' in allowing herself to brood over this lack. However, she cannot keep these thoughts at bay, and whenever she allows herself to entertain the possibility that she is not so 'plain' she curbs this mode of thinking: 'Oh idle! oh folly! look, / There, looking back from the glass, is my fate' (41-42). One is also conscious that the speaker talks as though her life has passed her by yet refers to herself as 'a woman and young' (160) and wishes that she could lose herself in the youthful reverie befitting her age. Again, though, this is an aspect of the poem's tragedy, for the speaker knows the trajectory that her life is bound to follow given her lack of beauty. Ultimately, she expresses her negative self-image most intensely when she cries out, 'Alas! it is I, I, I, / Ungainly, common' (25-26). This exclamation clearly bears a similarity to the 'I am she' of 'The Other Side of a Mirror', though they differ in some ways. Coleridge's speaker whispers a quiet acknowledgement of recognition, while also casting aside this recognition and avoiding alignment with any subject position. Webster's speaker, meanwhile, experiences a sharp sense of recognition that she tries to avoid but that continually returns. Webster's poem thus tells of similar psychological conflict to that of Coleridge yet conveys a stronger sense of social context and of a speaker trying – and failing – to shield herself from the cold light of day.

Webster's speaker is, then, hyper-conscious of the cultural ideal to which she fails to conform, at one point asking (rhetorically), 'What fancy could lend her the angel's wings?' (44)

Especially evident is her awareness of how colossal this cultural emphasis on female beauty can seem, and, in this respect, the speaker's recognition of cultural reality could be seen as pragmatic. For example, she is dismissive of those who suggest that not being fair is "Such a trifling thing." / And "Goodness may be where beauty is not" (90-91). Likewise, she argues against the notion that 'a woman's grace / Is only strong o'er a man's light mood' (204-205) as 'Even the hearts of the nearest incline / With a gentler thought to the lovely face, / And the winning eyes that entreat' (206-208). This might perhaps be an overstatement as it becomes increasingly clear that the speaker is beset with insecurities, but there nevertheless appears to be an element of realism in her account. Indeed, as Leighton (1992, 187) observes, Webster's poetry remains 'ruthlessly socialised...even while it protests against the superficial conventions of that socialization'. Not that this makes the speaker's pain any less acute, particularly when she refers to the 'poisonful sting' (93) and 'shame' (94) that darken her 'woman's lot' (94). Webster again evokes the notion of 'feeding' upon beauty here, the speaker stating, 'He had not fed, as I feed / On beauty, till beauty itself must seem / Me, my own, a part and essence of me' (33-35). Professing to 'have partly a painter's skill' (31), the speaker cannot deceive herself of her plainness. In other words, it is *she* who must live with a constant awareness of the apparent omnipresence of beauty and to try to position herself within such a context, prompting her to lament, 'Why! how am I plain? / I feel as if this were almost a dream / From which I should waken' (36-38).

Further to the variability of her thoughts, the speaker muses over the love that she feels has never been a possibility for her due to her plainness, recalling a man whom she had believed might have returned her affections but who ultimately married her sister. Again, she

repeatedly wonders what could have been but chides herself: ‘Hush, *that* was wrong to have dreamed’ (112). At one point she tells herself that she is better off for this absence, as she has been spared the experience of loving as one ‘whose life has gone out / Into another's for evermore’ (114-115) and ‘Loving him on to the end’ (121) despite ‘Knowing him less than the love I gave’ (124).<sup>206</sup> Nevertheless, the speaker acknowledges, ‘Would not my heart have leaped to his will, / If he had not changed?—’ (138-139). Once again, the speaker stops herself: ‘How, *changed* do I say? / Was I not mocked with an idle thought, / Dreaming and dreaming so foolishly still?’ (139-141) A similar vacillation is evident in her response to her sister’s happiness. She denies envying such happiness yet admits fearing that she grows bitter, commenting, ‘*my* age will be lone’ (79). It is also significant that she refers to fantasies of courtly love, having once imagined ‘the voice of praise / And the beauty's triumph in courtly scenes’ (101-102). Webster thus critiques the fantasy of the quest romance and the likelihood of women fixing themselves upon an ideal that can be far-removed from reality. As Leighton (1992, 187) observes, ‘there is no Byronic hero to recognise the plain girl’s emotional depths’ nor does Webster provide fairytale endings:

Sleeping beauties, in her works, are only ordinary girls who are waiting, while appearing not to wait, hoping while appearing not to hope. Their sleep is a figure, not for poetic dreams, but for the hypocrisy and resulting mental paralysis of trying to do and think two contradictory things at once; for being both dedicated sexual objects and innocently blank sexual subjects. (Leighton, 1992, 171)<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Webster here calls to mind Barrett Browning’s ‘A Man’s Requirements’ ([1850] 1890), with its depiction of a relationship wherein the male desires complete devotion on the part of his wife while he himself cannot, or will not, make half the commitment. For a comparable treatment this theme, see Robert Browning’s ‘In a Year’ ([1855] 2007, vol. 3).

<sup>207</sup> Addressing this subject in essay form, Webster (1879, 231) commented that ‘the position of our multitude of fresh unpremeditating girls with no particular office in life except to be marriageable may be likened to that of the spell-bound princess’. For a poetic equivalent see Barrett Browning’s ‘The Romance of the Swan’s Nest’ ([1844] 1890), which criticises this preoccupation with courtly love due to it

Further to her references to her sister, the speaker at one point expresses her wish for her sister to remain by her side, as ‘I love her so deep in my heart / And worship her beauty as he might do’ (186-187). Rather than the rivalry that one might expect, the speaker not only talks of her love for her sister but also of worshipping her sister’s beauty. Such a statement might seem surprising given the speaker’s despair over her own plainness, but it can be taken to suggest the speaker’s determination to eke out some joy in a world wherein female youth and beauty are so exalted. That is, if she cannot possess such beauty herself, she can translate her love for her sister into adulation of her sister’s beauty. From a developmental perspective, moreover, her stance harks back to that relational mindset wherein the mother-daughter relationship encourages a mode of relating based upon proximity. The relationship between the speaker and her sister can be interpreted in this light yet takes on an added dimension given the speaker’s desire to worship her sister’s beauty. This is a crucial point in that, as also noted earlier, theorists have posited that women are able to enjoy looking at other women on account of this relational sensibility. This conjecture has proven useful in justifying the profusion of glamorised imagery of women throughout Western culture, yet Webster’s speaker seemingly *has* developed such a mindset, relationality here becoming merged with the ‘beauty myth’ (Wolf, 1990) and resulting not in envy but an admiring gaze.

The speaker of ‘By the Looking-Glass’ thus combines social awareness and criticism with internalisation and palpable despair. At one point she states, ‘I am not so weak / Though I *am* a woman and young’ (159-160), yet her tone throughout the poem betrays moments of emotional fragility – not due to ‘innate’ female weakness but on account of the constant burden that she carries. It is, however, unclear whether the thoughts and reactions that the speaker ascribes to others *are* their thoughts or rather those that the speaker assumes they

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potentially leading to women becoming caught up in a fantasy, their lives passing them by as they dream of a scenario that may not come to pass.



must be thinking. She recalls, for instance, someone commenting that “she is not so plain” (127), yet she could not believe his judgement. Likewise, when attending a dance, she ‘knew’ that everyone was thinking her ‘ugly’. One gets a sense here of self-devaluation whereby the speaker sees ‘in all eyes the bitter truth, / And I fancy scorning in every speech / And mocking in every smile’ (54-56). There thus seems to be a paranoid element to the speaker’s mode of thinking and it may be that she is overemphasising others’ disparagement (as the term ‘fancy’ suggests). However, this is itself a relevant point in that the pervasiveness of social expectations can result in women becoming hyperaware to the extent that they may imagine revulsion on the part of others, or feel revulsion towards themselves. Webster’s speaker consequently ‘remains hurt, touchy and self-conscious, imagining scorn in every smile and mockery in every look of kindness’ (Leighton, 1992, 187). It is thus not the mirror that presents a distorted vision. Rather, the mirror catalyses the speaker’s introspection, with the reflection being indicative of the speaker’s self-image – a self-image moulded by cultural factors.

While the aforementioned poems express a keen sense of despair and psychological unrest, it is with ‘Faded’ ([1870] 1893) that such themes reach their apex. In this poem, we again see a lone speaker temporarily detached from the bustle of daily life, the twilight hour of ‘leaden dusk’ (12)<sup>208</sup> prompting introspection as the speaker looks at an image of herself. In this case, we are not told through what medium this image appears: one may assume that it is a mirror, but we will see later that this is not the case. As with ‘By the Looking-Glass’, the speaker broods over the disparity between cultural images of femininity and her own self, though the poem also shares the caustic tone and overt feminist critique of ‘A Castaway’. However, it is

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<sup>208</sup> This reference to ‘leaden dusk’ aligns the speaker with that of Coleridge’s ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’ who similarly ‘lives in the twilight’ (Battersby, 1996, 252). In addition, this indistinct period of ‘dusk’ suggests a blurring whereby ‘[d]ay and night are mingled in our gazes...Our bodies’ (Irigaray, 1985, 217).

in its emphasis on the cultural link between youth and beauty that 'Faded' gains its potency, its focus being squarely on that brand of hypocrisy whereby women's social value is dependent upon perceived desirability – this desirability being based upon youth and beauty as opposed to traits such as wisdom, intellect and experience.

As with the other poems under discussion, the speaker's musings are catalysed by an image that is ostensibly of herself but from which she feels disconnected. Temporality is a key issue here in that the image is that of the speaker's younger self. Thus, in the same way that the speaker of 'A Castaway' struggles to reconcile her world-weary self with the girl of her diary, 'Faded' concerns the speaker's pained relationship to this manifestation of herself as a young woman. She also relates to the image largely as though it were another person – a younger woman whom she looks upon bitterly. The speaker therefore regards the image as a separate individual to an extent yet also states, 'face who wast myself. / Talk with me, with this later drearier self' (7-8). So, while the speaker conveys a sense disconnection from the image, she ultimately recognises it as her younger self. Likewise, she states (addressing the image), 'Oftenest I dare not see thee' (9), but adds that she cannot help but think upon this image when there are 'none at hand to note' (14) those 'duller eyes through envious tears' (13) that reply to her younger self. The speaker consequently refers to her former and current selves as two sides of the same coin, if only for this brief period, adding that 'we too a little time are one, / Elder and girl, the blossoming and the sere, / One blended, dateless, woman for an hour' (17-19). Of this union, Leighton (1992, 188) comments:

[It] has the furtive intensity almost of a love encounter. The old maid steals a meeting with her lost girlhood...It is only when alone, and free from the world's scorn, that she can become one with her own history...and thus escape the divisive categories of being young or old, beautiful or faded, marriageable or old-maidish; categories which mean, in effect, being either something or nothing.

This connection, however, does not merely constitute a reassuring bond, for the speaker regards her depicted self as unsympathetic. Indeed, the speaker states, ‘thou mock’st me in the untender noon’ (16) and later refers to the image as ‘Poor imaged mock’ (130). ‘Mock’ carries a double meaning in that it suggests not only that the image is mocking her but that the image itself is an imitation – a comment, perhaps, on the falseness of cultural images of femininity, or the speaker’s sense that this image is not a true representation. Nevertheless, the speaker struggles to dismiss the image as false, as she remains conscious that it does in some sense depict her younger self.

In its emphasis on the oppressiveness of cultural mores, ‘Faded’ conveys much the same tone as the other poems discussed in this chapter. What sets it apart, however, is its emphasis on the cultural hypocrisy whereby ageing carries few negative connotations for men – in fact, it can suggest desirable ‘masculine’ traits – but is seen in overwhelmingly negative terms when applied to females. The speaker refers, for instance, to the injustice of women being not only discarded but discarded so soon, and condemns the judgment of those men that foster this mindset. Social criticism comes to the fore here, the speaker questioning whether such men could bear that which they direct towards women:

Men jeer us clinging, clinging pitiably,  
To that themselves account whole all for us:  
Aye, but what man of them could bear, as we must,  
To live life’s worth a stinted dozen years. (46-49)

She further resents the notion that one should be apathetic towards or even welcome one’s lack of social worth, as though women should simply ‘give ruin welcome, blaze our fact / Of nothingness — “good friends, perceive I am old; / Pray laugh and leave me.”’ (70-72).

Webster’s focus is therefore on ageing as a gendered phenomenon, for the issue at stake is not

of being elderly or debilitated but of women being cast aside when they still feel young. Of this, the speaker laments:

And the loss comes so soon; and ere we know:  
We have so many many after years,  
To use away (the unmarried ones at least)  
In only withering leisurely. (42-45)

Further to this, the speaker remarks upon how ‘strange’ (101) a woman’s life is if she misses ‘a woman’s destiny and sole hope’ (102), referring to ‘The wife’s dear service with its round of tasks / And sweet humilities and glad fatigues, / And anxious joy of mothers (103-105)’. As with ‘By the Looking-Glass’, then, the speaker’s concern is of what awaits those to whom ‘life’ does not arrive. In this respect, Webster evokes Tennyson’s ‘Mariana in the South’ ([1832] 1842), which provides a comparable portrayal of a woman’s introspection (here, as she waits in vain for her lover’s return) and repeated lament that she is doomed “to be all alone, / To live forgotten, and love forlorn.” (Tennyson, 1969, ll. 11-12; 23-24; 95-96). Indeed, Tennyson’s poem utilises similar motifs to those employed by Webster, with Mariana’s introspection being heightened by gazing into a mirror and looking over old letters ‘breathing of her worth’ (62) and creating a sense of disparity between her former life and her current loneliness. Consequently, Mariana imagines a figure passing by her door and stating “But now thy beauty flows away, / So be alone for evermore.” (67-68). One thus gets a sense of time slipping away as the woman looks into ‘the liquid mirror’ (31),<sup>209</sup> with such themes coming to the fore in ‘Faded’ and leading to the speaker’s conclusion that a life of nothingness is the lot of ‘the woman old’ (129). ‘Old’ is, of course, an indistinct concept, yet

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<sup>209</sup> This concern with one’s beauty and the loss thereof is further suggested by Waterhouse’s 1897 treatment of the poem, which depicts Mariana with her chin tilted upwards and her hands clasped to the sides of her face as she studies her reflection in the mirror.

define a 'cut-off' age is immaterial, for women may be seen as 'old' or 'getting old' long before they themselves feel that this is the case.

Having established the inequity of cultural definitions of ageing, Webster stresses the emotional impact that can result from feeling that one's life is 'fragmented into sexually defined mirror-phases' (Leighton, 1992, 189). The despondency of this scenario is made particularly evident when the speaker states, 'Myself has faded from me; I am old' (36) and elaborates:

'Tis pity for a woman to be old.  
Youth going lessens us of more than youth:  
We lose the very instinct of our lives —  
Song-birds left voiceless, diswinged flies of the air. (38-41)

Here, the speaker conveys how crippling this sense of ageing can be, as it can feel like the loss of 'the very instinct' of one's life.<sup>210</sup> The speaker consequently begrudges the image to the extent that it seems as though it were another woman who possesses 'womanhood's lost right to meet pleased eyes / And please by being happy' (132-133). Herself 'forgotten', the speaker notes the admiring responses a youthful appearance begets, and feels tormented by the sight of her former self, stating 'Fie, cruel face! / Too comely, thou. Thy round curves shame my cheeks' (23-24). Webster subsequently employs Petrarchan imagery as she notes the various metaphors relating to youthful femininity, such as 'satiny brow' (26), 'gloss of almond-bloom in the March sun' (25) and 'smooth magnolia petals warmly white' (27). The seasons, in particular, serve their standard function as metaphors for ageing, summer seeming 'to grow more summer, till, one day, / The first dead leaves are falling' (34-35). The speaker

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<sup>210</sup> Rank ([1914] 1971, 18) notes that the fear of growing old can constitute 'one of the deepest problems of the self' and cites several examples of literary texts wherein the mirror plays a role in establishing such fear. Ferdinand Raimund's *The King of the Alps and the Misanthropist* (1828), for example, involves a legend that looking at the King will make one forty years older. Consequently, the appearance of the King's image in a mirror prompts a young servant to shut her eyes so as to preserve her youth.

therefore uses such imagery to contrast her current and former selves, her former self's youthful bloom differing markedly from her 'tale of fretted lines' (28) and the sunshine in her younger self's hair showing her own 'spent russets deader' (30). Especially noticeable is the contrast between 'warmly white' petals (27) and 'hardened reds' (26), this division emphasising the schism that the speaker perceives between her younger / current selves, as well as the bitterness that she has accrued throughout the years and her perceived lack of 'feminine' attributes.

As with 'By the Looking-Glass', then, the speaker sees her image as an enemy that forces her to confront that which she would rather suppress. However, in this case the speaker *did* once possess the youth and beauty that society so values. It is for this reason that she resents the image, stating that it is 'bitter to learn, / Of what I cease to be' (22-23). Still, like the speakers of the other poems under discussion, she feels powerless:

Why, if we try to cheat the merciless world  
That bids us grow old meekly and to the hour,  
.....  
And, being old, be nothing (51-54).

A sense of futility is apparent when the speaker states that to attempt circumvention or defiance is to 'toil in vain' (56) like a 'shipwrecked swimmer' (57) who 'perishing will not perish' (59). That one rallies against what one knows to be futile constitutes an understandable yet valueless attempt 'To gain some futile hour from certainty' (67), and this is no less the case with regard to ageing, which can be delayed but cannot be avoided:

We women, if we linger, if, maybe,  
We use our petty melancholy arts  
And are still women some filched year or two—  
Still women and not ghosts, not lifeless husks,  
Spent memories that slink through the world and breathe,

As if they lived, and yet they know they are dead. (74-79)

The reference to 'petty melancholy arts' is an example of the disdain towards frivolous social niceties that the speakers of these poems frequently express, and suggests the futility of women employing such 'skills' to linger for an extra year or two. However, Webster presents a lose-lose situation, in that to no longer be a woman is to be a ghost: not yet dead yet not existing in the eyes of society. On this note, the speaker refers to a dream in which she envisioned herself as a ghost, situated alongside her dead body and disturbed by others' inability to perceive her presence. Likening the dream to her daily experience, the speaker laments, 'Lost and alone, I haunt our world to-day' (100). The poem is therefore based upon the speaker's recognition that a woman's cultural status is, ultimately, 'a simple matter of the fresh or faded appearance of her face' (Leighton, 1992, 189). Consequently, the speaker remains conscious of the social model wherein older women are disparaged as though they are 'fools' (72) that 'sin, / Abjectly, past all pardon, past all pity' (72-73), with Webster's use of the term 'abjectly' indicating something cast out of the social order and condemned to remain unseen. The speaker's 'death' is thus 'no posthumously poetic death...but the social death of a being who has forfeited all use and relevance' (Leighton, 1992, 188).

The speaker's woe is especially acute because the image of her younger self seems to taunt her with the knowledge that 'All in thee / That's likest me to-day is proof the more / Of my to-day's unlikeness' (30-32). The juxtaposition of 'likest' and 'unlikeness' adds to the poem's uncanny tone, and the speaker's recognition that the image *is* in some sense 'likest' herself only serves to make her more aware of that which she no longer possesses: 'Thou hast a being still; but what am I? / A shadow and an echo' (137-138). The shadow and the echo are classic examples of doubling, with Rank ([1914] 1971, 8) suggesting that the shadow appears to the ego as its likeness and is reassuring in this respect, its immateriality aligning it with the

primitive concept of the double as a symbol of the immortal soul. For Webster's speaker, however, the shadow signals her feelings of hopelessness – an impression solidified by references to women such as herself as 'Spent memories' (78) and 'Irretrievable bankrupts' (69). What is notable here is that the speaker feels *herself* to be a copy, and, more specifically, a faded copy lacking the vitality of the original. Additionally, the speaker's description of women such as herself as 'bankrupts' underlines the economic register within which these poems operate, the speaker's current 'bankruptcy' contrasting with her 'Rich' (3) younger self. It is, however, also worth taking into account Jung's (*CW* 9.2: 8-10) emphasis on the shadow as a 'disassociated subpersonality...relegated to a twilight zone in the personal unconscious' (Stevens, 1990, 43). For this subpersonality to make its presence known can be troubling for the individual, and this is a relevant point because, while the shadow represents social worthlessness for Webster's speaker, the poem also concerns the problematics of identity. So, in addition to the speaker's use of the term 'shadow', the poem enables a reading wherein the relationship between the speaker and her image is itself symptomatic of the shadow – here, in the Jungian sense.

As Webster's poem draws to its conclusion, the speaker directs attention to the cyclical nature of the ageing process and its social ramifications, pointing to a connection with both this image and women in general – a connection based on a grim sense of commonality. Addressing her younger self, the speaker states, 'Time's thy tyrant too' (139), the young face catching up with the old as part of a cycle wherein women are lauded for youth and beauty before being cast aside. Webster employs several analogies to illustrate this process, noting, for instance, that some other face will bloom in place of that which no longer possesses the freshness of youth, in the same way that 'a newer rose, alike as roses are, / Makes us the self-same sweet as yesterday's' (144-145). Webster therefore evokes a consumerist mindset



wherein women are akin to replaceable objects within a continuous stream of 'newness'. Hence, 'we have our succession, woman to woman, / And so no smiles are missed, there being enough' (149-150).

Towards the end of the poem, Webster finally reveals that the speaker's younger image takes the form of a painted portrait, the speaker stating, 'Tis out of guess whose the vague counterfeit / That on the canvas has past memory / Smiled peering through the dirt-crust' (154-156). This adds an extra layer of meaning to the poem, for the speaker has not conjured up the image but is looking upon a material object. Of course, this raises the question of who painted the image and to what extent it *does* present an accurate depiction, with the speaker's references to 'round curves' (124), 'satiny brow' (26) and 'almond-bloom' (25) suggesting the possibility of an idealised treatment. If this is so, then this would affirm the sense that the portrait is a 'mock'. However, one gets the impression that any inaccuracy did not trouble the speaker previously. In addition, it may be that the speaker's hyperawareness of her own 'faded' status heightens the image's feminine attributes. Most tellingly, the speaker feels some form of connection (albeit troubled) with the image and experiences a profound emotional reaction in looking upon it, indicating that her reaction is more complex than sheer alienation or a reaction to the painter's artistic choices.

It becomes increasingly clear, therefore, that the painting can serve a similar function to the mirror image, catalysing the speaker's rumination and evoking both alienation and recognition. Nevertheless, the speaker does not lose sight of the medium to which she refers, her envy being largely based upon the contrast between the human life cycle and the timelessness of the art object. However, she notes that even the portrait will not remain pristine *forever*:

Yes; after me thou'lt years and years be thus,  
Be young, be fair, be, dumb unconscious toy,  
Beloved for youth and fairness; but at the end  
Age and decay for thee too. (157-160)

This statement can be seen as evidence of the speaker's attempt to comfort herself with the knowledge that the image that she so envies will not be spared the outcome that she has suffered. Thus, despite the tone of resentment throughout, the speaker ultimately emphasises the connection that she shares with the image:

Sooner or later we are one again:  
Both shall have had our fate ... decay, neglect,  
Loneliness, and then die and never a one  
In the busy world the poorer for our loss. (165)

As with Webster's other poems, 'Faded' concludes with the speaker suddenly emerging from her brooding, stating that it is 'Time to have been long since / In the merry drawing-room with its lights and talk' (167-168) and noting 'my young sisters' music. Hark! That's sweet /.../ Filling my stillness here' (169-171). That the speaker has sisters is only mentioned at the poem's conclusion but raises a suggestive point: the music soothes the speaker's troubled mindset, yet one cannot help but wonder whether the speaker's younger sisters will develop this same mindset given the cycle that the poem describes.

While poems of mirroring and doubling can vary in many respects, an overriding question that such poems raise is whether reintegration is possible and desirable. Commenting upon female-authored works that concern themselves with disease, Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 57) suggest that such works 'emphasize the effort with which health and wholeness were won from...despair and fragmentations'.<sup>211</sup> However, it is often the case that wholeness is not

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<sup>211</sup> Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 53) elaborate that conditions such as anorexia, agoraphobia and hysteria 'did and do strike a disproportionate number of women' – not due to biological essentialism but because women

achieved. A cursory reading of Coleridge's poem might suggest that the speaker ultimately embraces her mirror image, but a more detailed reading shows that, if anything, she shies away from reintegration. Webster's poems, meanwhile, give the impression of an ongoing cycle. As Leighton (1992, 186) summarises:

The mirror...gives Webster a figure for the social and ideological frames which trap women in conventional, incompatible pictures, but from which she also refuses to offer any introspective escape...The self is thus presented as essentially a creature mirrored in the looking-glass of society, and Webster's poems do not try to break that glass; they only set it at different angles.

In none of these poems does one get a strong sense of reintegration, yet this prompts one to ask whether reintegration *would* be ideal or whether there are alternative ways in which one may conceive of identity and subjectivity. Certainly, Irigaray's emphasis on resisting not only division but also unitary identity suggests that the notion of seamless reconciliation with one's mirror image may be too neat and simplistic. However, reconciliation does not necessarily have to mean privileging 'the one' in the manner that Irigaray criticises, for one could see reconciliation as a chance for the individual to accept the various facets of their personality – including those that are not socially sanctioned. Such a concept evokes Jung's (CW 12: 19, para. 22) emphasis on the self as 'paradoxical in that it represents in every respect thesis and antithesis, and at the same time synthesis.' From this perspective, duality arises due to an artificial separation of elements, with the monstrous double representing the

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are surrounded by 'images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations both to disease and to dis-ease' (57). It is therefore no surprise that this environment informed women's literary output, with Gilbert and Gubar concluding that 'the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature...the great artistic achievements of nineteenth-century novelists and poets...are often both literally and figuratively concerned with disease' (57). For more on this subject see Showalter (1985; 1990).

sectioning off of ‘evil’ from ‘good’. For Jung, then, individuation entails recognising and accepting one’s ‘shadow’, this recognition being part of a lifelong process.<sup>212</sup>

Given the importance of the mirror to several of these poems, one cannot discuss the issue of the gazer’s relationship to the image without considering the mirror’s metaphoric function, particularly when it comes to the question of reintegration. In one sense, the mirror could be seen as a barrier that separates the gazer from their self, in which case smashing the mirror could be seen as an act of liberation. As Irigaray (1985, 208) contends, after all, exuberance and turbulence are disallowed in such a regime, as they will ‘smash...the mirror’. To shatter the mirror is in this sense the ultimate riposte to the longstanding association of women with narcissism, representing a refusal of the ‘mirror madness’ (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 34) in which women are expected to engage. As such, the broken mirror goes beyond the curved or concave mirror that ‘disconcert[s] the staging of representation according to *exclusively* “masculine” parameters’ (Irigaray, 1985, 68) and suggests an emphatic rejection of the ‘flat mirror’ within which women have been ensnared.

In texts such as ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’, then, a hypothetical smashing of the mirror could suggest the removal of the barrier that has arisen between speaker and self. However, this is perhaps too simplistic – in fact, one could suggest that the *remains* of the mirror may be more apt. One could voice a note of concern here, in that shattering the mirror could be seen to embrace destruction and chaos, as well as the dissolution of identity. However, if this mirror is emblematic of oppression, its shattered remains would be indicative of the destruction of such oppression rather than the gazer’s identity. Also, even if one interprets the mirror’s shattered remains as symbolising the gazer’s identity, this does not necessarily mean

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<sup>212</sup> Jung employs the term *complexio oppositorum* (CW, 6: 460, para. 790) to describe this interaction of converse elements and the recognition and acceptance of such elements within one’s selfhood.

extinction or chaos but rather multiplicity. That is not to say that the (shattered) mirror is the only viable metaphor for such an outlook though, with the kaleidoscope also serving as an apt paradigm given its nomadic approach to vision and '[o]cular-eccentricity' (Jay, 1993, 152). Multiplicity and inconsistency are thus not analogous with chaos but rather interrogate the concept of the self as a coherent whole, expressing the desire for 'all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in western society over the last two centuries' (Živković, 2000, 127). Ultimately then, whether one thinks in terms of reintegration with one's mirror image or the shattering of the mirror, the overriding theme is of recognising and accepting diversity within oneself, and distinguishing such diversity from self division or fragmentation arising from cultural forces.<sup>213</sup> Even so, to be confronted with that which has previously been suppressed is not just a simple matter of self-affirmation, for accepting such multiplicity can be difficult within a context that privileges cohesive identity and places heavy emphasis on adherence to sex-specific traits.

While one should not assume that female poets utilise motifs in identical ways,<sup>214</sup> considering the work of poets such as Webster and Coleridge suggests the recurrence of themes such as the use of the mirror (or an analogous device) as a catalyst for introspection, and a sense of disjunction between the image and oneself. Of course, such issues are not limited to women, yet they gain particular relevance given the longstanding association of women with narcissism – an association these poems problematise. Conveying 'uniquely female feelings of fragmentation' (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 78), these poems emphasise that women do not always simply internalise cultural norms and remodel themselves accordingly, nor does

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<sup>213</sup> Reiterating the importance of maintaining a balance of elements, Jung states that '[a]nyone who perceives his shadow and his light simultaneously sees himself from two sides and thus gets in the middle' (CW 10: 463, para. 872).

<sup>214</sup> Irigaray (1985, 14) cautions against defining a 'female voice', emphasising that 'What is...?' is the question to which the feminine does not allow itself to submit.

looking at oneself in the mirror constitute an innate feminine trait. Consequently, Battersby (1996, 269) suggests:

The twistings and turnings of the female subject who tries (and fails) to fit her mind and her body either side of the self/other divide does not mark the end of all subject-positions. Instead, it opens up the possibility of thinking subjectivity...in terms that do not make women either excessive or lacking.

From this perspective, failing to occupy a set subject position can be construed as moving beyond set categories, affirming Benjamin's (1980, 161) contention that 'the most intense sense of selfhood involves contradictory feelings.' On a more pragmatic level, however, one must keep in mind that the desirability of multiplicity, fluidity and so on is hampered by a context that seeks to quell any such indeterminacy while, in a seeming paradox, *causing* psychological fragmentation by categorising of women as objects whose 'worth' is based upon fleeting, superficial qualities of youth and beauty.

## **CHAPTER 5: FROM SHALOTT TO SHOP FLOOR: THE PROBLEMATICS OF LOOKING**

Though the association of women with ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ and men with spectatorship has held an enduring place within Western culture, women have expressed awareness and dissatisfaction in this regard, exploring the injustice of this cultural arrangement as well as its psychological impact. That this is the case raises the question of what happens when women attempt to break free from their allotted status to engage in active, outward-looking vision (as opposed to the insularity associated with the mirror). On this note, one must recognise that women’s visual agency was subject to much contention and regulation during this time, with the increased presence of women in the public sphere having catalysed ‘profound debates over landscape as a site and sight for women’ (Cherry, 1993, 118). Such debates come to the fore in Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (1842), and the ensuing chapter will consequently explore this poem (and some of its artistic counterparts), underscoring both the title character’s attempt to forsake her assigned role and the retaliatory action incurred by this transgression. Keeping in mind that ‘even poetry which appears to be remote from political issues is in fact involved in the political life of its society’ (Sinfield, 1986, 11), this analysis will go beyond the poem’s Arthurian setting and mystical tenor to consider its engagement with Victorian codes of conduct. Branching out from this, the second part of this chapter will explore women’s experiences of visibility within the Victorian social landscape. While the public space became more amenable to women as the century progressed, there remained substantial strictures and anxieties that limited women’s traversal of the city and entailed dichotomised visual relations (along with other gendered inequalities). This chapter will consequently explore the main practical and psychological issues relating to women’s

presence in the public sphere, referring to discourses of street harassment and those codes of conduct that prevented women from taking on a role akin to that of the male urban Rambler. In summary of these themes, it will analyse Emily Mary Osborn's painting *Nameless and Friendless* (1857), which explores similar terrain to 'The Lady of Shalott' yet transposes its action to a contemporary setting, highlighting the opportunities and difficulties facing women in the public sphere.

### **'The Lady of Shalott'**

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the mirror was not only a popular motif in Victorian texts but could carry gendered associations, drawing upon concepts of female narcissism and insularity. Nonetheless, women have often become caught up in a tension between these parameters and their own desire for individuation. Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' ([1832] 1842)<sup>215</sup> is particularly effective in its treatment of this scenario, though in this case the title character is not captivated by her *own* reflection. Loosely based on Arthurian legend, the poem instead concerns an embowered woman who is permitted to view the outside world only via a mirror on account of a vague curse. However, having caught sight of Lancelot in her mirror, the Lady feels impelled to exercise a direct gaze – an act that is to be her undoing. The poem therefore operates on one level as a tragic tale of thwarted romance yet is a 'profoundly equivocal' (Plasa, 1992, 248) text, the political content of which 'lies in those areas – desire, subject formation, gender – formerly thought to lie outside of politics' (Psomiades, 2000, 32). Indeed, while its mysterious character and setting suggest a realm distinct from Victorian society, it is also a product of its time. Duality is again relevant

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<sup>215</sup> Originally published in 1832, the poem was reworked by Tennyson and republished in this form in 1842. However, while some of Tennyson's changes amount to slight variations, there are also some notable differences between these two editions. The following discussion will therefore refer primarily to the 1842 text while underscoring significant amendments; particularly with regard to the poems' respective concluding stanzas.



here in that, though the poem does not utilise the motif of the double, it is steeped in psychological tension relating to competing poles of insularity and public presence (or invisibility / visibility).<sup>216</sup> Still, while scholars typically concur that the poem concerns internal tension, they have reached varying conclusions as to how this tension plays out.

One of the most common interpretations of this poem focuses upon the Lady's embowered condition as a metaphor for the artist's relationship with the world, focusing on the removal of oneself from material reality in order to engage in the isolation of artistic activity (here emblematised by the weaving with which the Lady is continually occupied). From one perspective this isolation serves as 'an enabling condition of imaginative activity' (McSweeney, 2007, 49), the Lady's fateful entry into the outside world symbolising 'the maladjustment of the aesthetic spirit to the conditions of ordinary living' (Buckley, 1960, 49). From this viewpoint, then, the poem upholds the notion that art and life are ultimately irreconcilable.<sup>217</sup> However, as various critics have emphasised, one can interpret the Lady's embowered state as enabling *mimetic* art, for it is only when the Lady ventures outside this insular environment that she is able to achieve creative expression.<sup>218</sup> That scholars have interpreted the Lady's artistic seclusion as enabling / hindering her artistry highlights the ambivalence associated with the poem, with aesthetic activity being 'shaped by the Lady's separation from the outside world both in that this separation is a necessary condition of

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<sup>216</sup> Armstrong (1993) cites such doubleness as central to Victorian poetry. For an extended account of this internal tension see Johnson (1963).

<sup>217</sup> Thomson (1986, 44) summarises Tennyson's poem as representing 'the dilemma of the introspective artist, condemned to a life of shadows, and risking destruction if he turns to reality', while Houghton and Stange (1959, 16) likewise state that '[o]nce the artist attempts to lead the life of ordinary men his poetic gift, it would seem, dies.' For further comments on this irreconcilability see Christ (1987, 388), Hartman (1981, 96) and Kissane (1970, 45-6).

<sup>218</sup> See Alaya (1970), Culler (1977), Gray (2009) and Shannon (1981). As Joseph (1978, 85) states, though, it is debatable whether mimesis is even possible. Indeed, Joseph refers to Victorian doubts regarding the viability of mimetic art and suggests that Tennyson's poem 'may be said to offer a parable for the epistemological dilemma of the age'. Similarly, Chadwick (1986) emphasises that the artist can never achieve an immediate relation between emotion and sensation, for other forms of 'reflection' or representation inevitably intervene.

production, and in that all of her activities aim at bridging the gap' (Psomiades, 2000, 28).

Accordingly, scholars have suggested that Tennyson explores conflicting attitudes towards privacy and social involvement and, likewise, art and life, including 'the wish not to face reality and the wish to face it, the impulse toward life and the impulse toward death' (Ricks, 1989, 76).

Embowerment can therefore serve as a metaphor for artistic isolation but can also indicate imprisonment and stagnation,<sup>219</sup> and the poem in this sense represents the archetypal dilemma of whether one is to remain subsumed within a false, hollow existence or strive to escape from this world of mirrors. Given its emphasis on the problematical relationship between separate spheres and insularity / engagement, the poem is reflective of its Victorian context of production and, in this respect, it is fitting that its central character is female – especially given the importance of the mirror motif. The poem consequently draws upon the association of women with enclosed space (ultimately, that of the domestic sphere),<sup>220</sup> employing the motif of the embowered maiden. The Lady can also be seen as a metaphor for the artist rather than purely a cloistered woman, but this in itself is apt given the artist's alignment with the private sphere rather than the wider world of social and economic activity, with Prettejohn (2000, 231) remarking that '[t]he artist, in this kind of allegory, is always gendered feminine, as one who passively observes'. As noted earlier, moreover, the potentially 'feminine' qualities associated with male artists / poets and their work was an ongoing issue, as

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<sup>219</sup> As one contemporary review noted, Tennyson's poem can be seen to emblemise 'the emptiness of the life of fancy, however rich and brilliant, the utter satiety which compels any true imaginative nature to break through the spell which entrances it in an unreal world' (Hutton, 1888, 363).

<sup>220</sup> Chadwick (1986, 17) observes that 'it is Tennyson's own social order...that makes autonomy and privacy fundamental conditions of femininity and of art...the Lady's isolation and gender define Shalott as a private, domestic domain'. Likewise, Barringer (1999, 142) states that the poem 'replicates in a medieval setting the Victorian ideology of separate spheres...woman's work is inside the home, while active work in the outside world remains a male preserve.'

exemplified by Victorian debates on the perceived ‘feminisation’ of literature (Tennyson often being cited as a prime offender).<sup>221</sup>

In addition to its dramatised portrayal of separate spheres, the poem concerns the suppression and punishment of female subjectivity, providing an acute picture of ‘the ideological/psychological oppression of mid-Victorian women and, in particular, the crisis of subjectivity experienced by women forbidden to “look beyond the mirror”’ (Pearce, 1991, 72). This reference to ‘looking beyond the mirror’ is especially significant, for this poem hinges taps into the increasingly visual nature of the Victorian landscape. On this note, McKelvy (2007, para. 26) remarks that ‘Tennyson stands out in his early willingness to give to the visual itself a new cultural centrality. Living in a world of images...was the visual context that increasingly defined commerce, aesthetics, and, of course, politics.’ More specifically, the poem highlights the gaze as a socially structured – and gendered – phenomenon, the Lady being permitted to view life solely via her mirror. The Lady’s worldview is thus limited in both a literal and symbolic sense, her suppression and subsequent transgression being informed by notions of visual (im)propriety. Consequently, Plasa (1992, 255) points to the discourse of the gaze as a key component of the poem and ‘[o]ne of the most significant ways in which “The Lady of Shalott” manifests its politically self-divided stance toward...patriarchal ideology’.

Referring to the Lady’s abode as ‘Four gray walls, and four gray towers’ (Tennyson, 1969, l. 15) situated on a ‘silent isle’ (17), the poem begins by establishing a bounded place of stagnation that stands in contrast to the movement of not only the natural landscape – wherein ‘aspens quiver’ (10) and ‘breezes dusk and shiver’ (11) – but its human populace. The

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<sup>221</sup> Concurring that Tennyson ‘often identifies the poetical with the feminine’ (386), Christ (1987) provides further commentary on this identification in the work of both Tennyson and Browning.

outside world is here associated with activity and progress as people go ‘up and down’ (6) the road leading to Camelot and barges and shallops travel along the river. The only sign of the Lady’s existence is her song, which echoes at morning and night, heard solely by reapers<sup>222</sup> who whisper of “the fairy” (35) that is the Lady of Shalott. Consequently, one senses that the Lady is akin to a ghost, her vaporous tune echoing at the most desolate parts of the day. Indeed, it is notable that the Lady is at this juncture unseen and, rather than being positioned as an object of vision, would thus seem to be spared the difficulties associated with public visibility.<sup>223</sup> However, her plight is that she is also denied any of those possibilities associated with engagement with the outside world. This being the case, it is apt that there is no ‘direct’ contact between the Lady of Shalott and the reader, with the Lady being defined from the outside and remaining indistinct throughout the first part of the poem.<sup>224</sup>

While the Lady remains voiceless, the second part of the poem provides a more detailed picture of her daily life, which (as one may expect) is defined by routine. She is occupied with weaving ‘by night and day / A magic web with colours gay’ (37-38), yet the vividness of the web is not informed by any direct knowledge of the outside world, for the Lady knows of

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<sup>222</sup> Armstrong (1993, 84-85) and McKelvy (2007) highlight the significance of the reapers and the Lady’s comparable act of weaving in terms of the social and historical context in which the poem was produced; specifically, the increasing mechanisation of labor. McKelvy (2007, para. 8) notes, for example, that in Britain textile manufacturing was ‘the first large-scale industry...to be completely transformed by automated machinery. By the early 1830s, the power-loom and the steam-press had become established...they could highlight conflicts between humans and machines but were also the subject of a celebratory rhetoric’. Tennyson’s poem can therefore be seen to tap into ambivalence regarding such developments.

<sup>223</sup> Christ (1987, 390-391) observes that Tennyson’s early poems often replace their subjects with the landscape, disguising the poet’s own gaze at the subject via euphemism. Plasa (1992, 256) consequently argues that, though the Lady of Shalott is not subject to direct visual attention, the gaze is organised along gendered lines from the outset via symbolism: the object of the gaze is the Lady’s residence, ‘where the lilies blow.... / The island of Shalott’ (7-9). Also, the image of ‘Four gray walls, and four gray towers’ (15) that ‘Overlook a space of flowers’ (16) is suggestive of phallic surveillance, though, as Plasa adds, to ‘overlook’ can also mean to fail to recognise, thus initiating a dialectic of imprisonment and elusion.

<sup>224</sup> Despite the atmosphere of stagnation created in these initial stanzas, the poem’s narrative trajectory is hinted at via the rhyming structure of the opening stanza. Referring to ‘The Lady of Shalott’ as a ‘fated and, in a sense, a suicidal poem’, Shaw (1976, 65) points out that the opening stanza features rhyme words that decrease in number from four (‘lie’, ‘rye’, ‘sky’, ‘by’ [1-4]) to three (‘go’, ‘blow’, ‘below’ [6-8]) to two (‘Camelot’, ‘Shalott’ [5; 9]).

this world only via a mirror ‘That hangs before her all the year’ (47) and reflects merely ‘Shadows’ (48).<sup>225</sup> In a practical sense, it was standard for weavers to employ mirrors so as to view the depicted scene as it would ultimately appear to the viewer. Tennyson, however, paints a more dramatic scenario wherein the Lady must view the world via a mirror due to vague whisperings of a curse that is to befall her should she ‘look down to Camelot’ (41). The Lady consequently spends her days crafting her vibrant web and, in a sense, this activity can be seen as indicative of the Lady’s artistry, providing her with a creative outlet and respite from her drab surroundings. However, the term ‘web’ also suggests entrapment, while the fact that the Lady sees only ‘shadows’ gestures towards the insufficiency of her mimetic routine.<sup>226</sup> As Colley (1985) emphasises, she sees life only in fragments, for the images in her mirror ‘do not flow into one another’ (371) but create a worldview ‘dominated by separateness and without promise of continuity and wholeness’ (370).

Continuing to describe the array of individuals that pass by the isle on their way to Camelot, the poem underscores the Lady’s separation from the outside world. The Lady’s own response to her enclosure has nonetheless seemingly been one of contentment, for she ‘still delights / To weave the mirror’s magic sights’ (64-65). However, Tennyson’s original (1832) version of the poem highlights the monotony of her routine by noting that she ‘lives with little joy or fear’ (46) and, accordingly, the Lady’s discontentment begins to come to the fore in both versions of the poem. As Glancy (2002, 26) summarises, the shadows that populate her

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<sup>225</sup> In his analysis of the poem, Shannon (1981, 210) points to Plato’s analysis of the varying measures of reality in the objects of man’s knowledge, with shadows (or images) being at the bottom of the scale of truth. Likewise, Plato deems the perception of shadows to be the lesser of the soul’s four faculties (in contrast to reason, which is afforded topmost position).

<sup>226</sup> Joseph (1978, 85) observes that in the 1832 poem the mirror serves a practical, mimetic function, being described as ‘a mirror clear, / Reflecting towered Camelot’ (49-50). In the 1842 version, however, this now reads: ‘And moving through a mirror clear / That hangs before her all the year, / Shadows of the world appear’ (46-48). Consequently, the mirror takes on a symbolic role and conveys Victorian doubts regarding mimetic art, with mimesis seeming to offer a remedy to the excesses of Romantic expressionism yet being complicated by ‘severe cognitive doubt’ (Joseph, 1978, 85) as to what was ‘out there’ and whether it could be captured.

mirror 'are brightly colored, unlike the muted blues and grays of the tower...At first the lady seems content with her solitary artistic life, but when she sees a bride and groom go by she begins to realize what she is missing'. That this realisation is instigated by the sight of a bride and groom is, as will be seen shortly, prophetic. However, that she also sees a funeral party is equally prophetic, intimating that love and death are doomed to be intertwined for the Lady. Even so, it is clear that the Lady has grown weary of her lot, prompting her to lament (in one of the few lines that she speaks in the poem) that she is "half-sick of shadows" (71).

Regarding the images reflected in the Lady's mirror, Plasa (1992, 252) raises an interesting possibility by suggesting that these 'magic sights' can be seen 'as the mesmeric products of ideology' rather than as snippets of an authentic outside world. From this perspective, the declaration 'I am half sick of shadows' potentially suggests the Lady's exasperation with this raft of ideologically-shaped imagery, in which case the reflection of the bride and groom constitutes yet another illusion. The linking of marriage with death can consequently be interpreted not merely in terms of the Lady's tragic fate or the human life cycle but as a 'demystification of the institution of marriage' (Plasa (1992, 252)).<sup>227</sup> As will be seen later, there is indeed something to be said for the illusory nature of these images, giving one grounds to question whether reality matches up to those images that inspire the Lady to enter the outside world – as Armstrong (1993, 83) points out, these images may even be 'constructs of the Lady's mind'. From the Lady's own perspective, though, it would seem that her desire is less to eschew these images than to experience first-hand what they represent.

The catalyst required in order to end the Lady's monotony arrives when the mirror one day reveals Sir Lancelot riding down to Camelot, with Tennyson building anticipation of this

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<sup>227</sup> Plasa (1992, 252-253) does not, however, contend that the poem wholly denigrates marriage. Emphasising its ambivalence, she interprets it as see-sawing between stances, itself 'cracked from side to side' (260).

moment by devoting four stanzas to description of Lancelot's magnificent appearance and disrupting the poem's otherwise repetitive idiom. Whereas the fifth line of all other stanzas culminates with the word 'Camelot', the first stanza of part three substitutes the word 'Lancelot' (77). Following Tennyson's lengthy description, the Lady herself becomes aware of Lancelot's presence when 'From the bank and from the river / He flash'd into the crystal mirror' (105-106). The use of the term 'flash'd' is notable for it suggests something instant and visceral, as though the ennui of the Lady's existence is ruptured by this striking image. It is also evocative of an intensity of light, which Colley (1985, 371-372) considers in relation to the piecemeal quality of the Lady's field of vision as Lancelot cuts through the landscape:

Lancelot's brightness when coupled with the sun's brilliance...seems paradoxically both to expand and fill the gaps of his passage...for an instant the collective aura overwhelms all boundaries and divisions: "The helmet and the helmet-father / Burned like one burning flame together" (ll. 93-94)...Now continuity and wholeness seem as possible as the promise of eternal faithfulness depicted on Lancelot's shield.

Some critics have remarked upon the sexual connotations of this moment,<sup>228</sup> the dazzling, phallic description of Lancelot supporting such a reading. That Lancelot's shield features an image of a knight kneeling before his Lady is also significant in marking it (and its bearer) out as a symbol of courtly romance. This is not the only meaning of this image, though, for it also evokes the Red Cross Knight of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590), instilling it with connotations of virtue and holiness. Similarly, Lancelot's own dazzling manifestation potentially suggests a spiritual or mystical experience, with Alaya (1970, 284) stating that Lancelot's image 'throws back...an inspiring and all-unifying light' and gestures towards both

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<sup>228</sup> Packer (1964, 7) contends that when her mirror reflects a series of knights in pairs the Lady 'thinks of them immediately in terms of their sexual relationships', with Lancelot himself being a 'virility symbol'. Similarly, Christ (1987, 388) refers to Lancelot as 'the object of erotic desire', while Armstrong (1993) states that '[t]he powerful sexuality of Lancelot...brings the culminating sense of lack' (85) and that 'this is a poem of longing for sexual love, change and transformation, which is denied change' (83).

‘cosmic love and human sympathy’ (286).<sup>229</sup> The flashing of Lancelot’s reflection from the bank *and* the river multiplies the effect, creating a kaleidoscopic image. However, as discussed previously, the kaleidoscope can have connotations of shifting, fluid subjectivity but also trickery and mere visual spectacle by dint of its ‘exclusively recreational function, its somewhat arbitrary production of endlessly different symmetries’ (Smith, 1989, 98).

Accordingly, some critics have suggested that this manifold effect marks Lancelot out as ‘pure representation: a man of mirrors, a signifier as hollow as the song he sings’ (Tucker, 1988, 112) and results in the Lady being ‘caught within a perceptual maze in which the putative original image of Lancelot bounces endlessly and without grounding...a simulacrum multiplying variety in a wilderness of mirrors’ (Joseph, 1992, 107).<sup>230</sup>

While timeless in some respects, ‘The Lady of Shalott’ is also reflective of the acutely visual nature of the Victorian cultural landscape and the varying connotations of such an environment. As detailed in the previous chapters, the increasing presence of the visual within Victorian life evoked competing discourses of veracity and destabilisation. The increasing presence of the visual was, moreover, reflective of the growth of mass production and consumer culture. In this context, the use of the visual was not intended to fulfil any scientific purposes or aims of permanence but instead hinged upon transient surface appeal. To interpret Lancelot (and the other mirror images) as simulacrum is in keeping with such a context, implying that, unbeknownst to her, the Lady has become entranced by a dazzling but hollow image. The key point here is the liability for an image / copy to be misperceived as

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<sup>229</sup> Shannon (1981, 215) also interprets Lancelot in this manner, referring to his presence as reaching the Lady ‘through time as well as space in an almost blinding intensity of light’ and suggesting an ‘instantaneous conjunction of spirits with each other and with love...both human and divine.’

<sup>230</sup> Joseph (1978, 85) comments that ‘the visual confusion of having to contend with both a second *and* a third degree distortion of primary image...finally turns her towards the world’, the mirror’s (theoretically infinite) reflective capabilities creating ‘a perceptual abyss’ (Joseph, 1985, 409). Other critics have also noted this visual confusion: see Armstrong (1993, 86) and McKelvy (2007, para. 18).



authentic and original, with Lancelot potentially representing ‘a new visual economy in which the distinction between the real and the merely represented has been challenged under...new powers of representation and replication’ (McKelvy, 2007, para. 20).<sup>231</sup> One therefore cannot assume that Lancelot represents reality, for the poem undermines the false / real dichotomy upon which it initially appears to rest, suggesting that, while Lancelot and Camelot might seem to stand in contrast to the Lady’s ‘world of shadows’, their world may likewise be shadowy ‘but in a far more brilliant and dangerous way’ (Gray, 2009, 52).

It would appear, then, that Lancelot is not necessarily destined to precipitate a desired encounter with the ‘real’ world and that, though he and his world are enticing, he may be merely ‘the bearer of another representation’ (Psomiades, 2000, 37).<sup>232</sup> Nevertheless, the striking, manifold quality of Lancelot’s image has a dramatic effect, the Lady’s subsequent actions being described as follows:

She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces through the room,  
She saw the water-lily bloom,  
She saw the helmet and the plume,  
She looked down to Camelot. (109-113)

Rather than deliberating over the threat of the curse, the Lady acts immediately, as though the sight of Lancelot has had an instantaneous effect upon her. At this juncture, the Lady casts aside all warnings and breaks away from her routine of weaving and world of ‘shadows’ so as

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<sup>231</sup> McKelvy (2007), in particular, highlights the importance of looking beyond the poem’s ‘flowery reputation’ (para. 17) to recognise the cultural and historical conditions of its production, emphasising that Tennyson reflects an environment increasingly shaped by industrialisation and mass produced images. Consequently, one can see Lancelot as reflective of ‘this emergent come-hither economy of desire as it spoke to the wandering eyes of Victorian consumers’ (para. 16).

<sup>232</sup> As Gray (2009, 49) specifies, to note the Lady’s error in fixating upon Lancelot ‘is not to disparage Lancelot himself...But if the Lady’s hope in breaking away from her loom is to escape the companionship of mere images...Lancelot is precisely the wrong choice’. Likewise, Colley (1985, 372) sees the promise seemingly offered by Lancelot as illusory on account of Lancelot’s isolated presence and continuing ‘creation of spaces between images’.

to look directly at Lancelot and the wider world.<sup>233</sup> While the Lady has hitherto been presented as an indistinct figure, this stanza sees her shift to a newfound experience of agency. As Shannon (1981, 216) observes, the repetition of ‘she saw’ emphasises ‘the necessity in both life and art of direct apprehension; and through asserting this new and unimpeded means of perception, the Lady evinces a determination to live fully and to face death if necessary.’ The Lady had, of course, relied upon her visual faculty for her weaving, yet her sights were mediated. Now, however, the Lady exercises a newly unmediated gaze, highlighted by the repetition of ‘She saw’ and the variation ‘She looked’. Consequently, ‘the Lady enters the position of the desiring subject and enacts – at the scopic level – the crossing from “feminine” to “masculine” gender positions originally figured in the projected foray from Shalott to Camelot’ (Plasa, 1992, 258).

The act of turning away from the mirror thus indicates an attempt to move away from a solipsistic existence so as to experience life first hand. However, as Evans (2010, 34) points out, looking outwards can serve not only as a source of creative inspiration but as a catalyst for women’s fall from respectability. This is certainly the case for the Lady of Shalott, whose visual transgression instigates the curse, the onset of which is signalled in highly visual form: ‘Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror cracked from side to side’ (114-115). These lines are especially striking in that they employ two popular Victorian motifs – weaving and the mirror – to potent effect, creating an image that not only lends itself to artistic treatment but represents a crucial point in the poem. If one regards the Lady as representative of the artist, then the mirror and the web can at this juncture be seen as ‘metaphors for the creative

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<sup>233</sup> In his own comments on the poem, Tennyson (cited by Hallam Tennyson, 1897, 1: 117) affirmed that ‘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’. Subsequent interpretations of the poem have problematised this stated meaning, but the Lady’s feelings and actions do seem to be driven by the desire that Tennyson describes.

imagination which has been shattered by the intrusion of direct experience' (Johnson, 1963, 9). Reaffirming the paradox surrounding artistic activity, entering the real world can be interpreted as both an escape from a world of shadows and the destruction of those conditions that enable imaginative activity.

In addition to their artistic significance, the mirror and weaving are also gendered motifs. Taking a Freudian stance, Rowlinson (1994, 76) sees the Lady's weaving as a means of resistance against the gaze and, also, of concealing her own castration, creating a barrier that is perforated by Lancelot's phallic presence. However, from another perspective, the unravelling of the thread symbolises both the Lady's departure from conceptions of female lack (the threads signalling a release of energy) and the onset of the curse that acts to punish such presumptions. As Prettejohn (2000, 231) observes, then, '[s]exual potency for the male artist is an analogue for creative power...for the female artist sexuality is seemingly at odds with the ability to make art.' That is not to say that the feelings induced by Lancelot are purely sexual. However, given the cultural alignment of the gaze and sexual desire with the male, the notion of the Lady exercising a gaze – an eroticised gaze, at that – enables one to interpret the Lady's transgression and the onset of the curse in relation to cultural strictures pertaining to male / female conduct.

The mirror motif also plays a pivotal role in Tennyson's poem, though the mirror here reflects the outside world rather than the gazer. In this respect the poem differs from Tennyson's own 'Mariana in the South' ([1832] 1842) which is otherwise comparable in its portrayal of an isolated woman who spends her days embowered within drab surroundings. Gazing at her reflection forms part of Mariana's introspective routine whereas 'The Lady of Shalott' utilises the mirror to view the outside world. Nevertheless, the mirror remains an indicator of insularity whereby the Lady is forbidden from exercising a direct gaze – indeed, that she does

not see herself in the mirror is, in this context, suggestive of her lack of access to her own subjectivity and desires. When the Lady defies these stipulations, the unravelling of the web and cracking of the mirror signal the Lady's rejection of these feminine symbols. However, this imagery serves as an equally resolute indication of the curse's onset.

The tragedy at the heart of the poem, then, is that leaving this domain of shadows – and exercising an active gaze – can only result in the Lady's death. The curse having now struck, the landscape becomes ominous:

In the stormy east-wind straining,  
The pale-yellow woods were waning, pursue  
The broad stream in his banks complaining,  
Heavily the low sky raining (118-121)

That the Lady cries "The curse is come upon me" indicates her alarm when the mirror cracks and her weaving unravels. Indeed, though her awareness of the curse is clear from the outset and one could interpret her response as an exercise in wilfulness,<sup>234</sup> one senses that the Lady's initial transgression was driven not so much by a conscious desire to defy the curse as by the entrancement induced by Lancelot and by feelings of such intensity as to override all thoughts of the curse. The Lady is thus startled by the curse's dramatic onset yet with no way back 'becomes resolute and prophetic' (Shannon, 1981, 217), her actions taking on an air of determination. Having caught 'a first glimpse of real emotion' the Lady 'begins to rebel...and enjoys her brief first hour of genuine life' (Stevenson, 1960, 130). Rather than spend her final moments within this enclosed space, the Lady subsequently departs from the tower and finds a nearby boat upon which she carves 'The Lady of Shalott', signalling a shift from the

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<sup>234</sup> Gray (2009, 46) emphasises the Lady's deliberateness in pursuing this course of action, focusing on Tennyson's 'equation of artistic creation with a compulsion to pursue what is worse...to know what one approves and admires; and yet...to watch oneself do worse'.

Lady's status as a wraithlike figure to one who seeks to take ownership of her (formerly arbitrary) moniker.<sup>235</sup>

At this point, a significant distinction emerges between the original and revised versions of the poem, the original featuring extended description of not just the Lady's regal bearing but her steadfast gaze. Referring to 'her zone in sight' (129), 'wide eyes fixed' (131) and 'steady, stony glance' (136) – later changed to 'down the river's dim expanse' (127) – as she looks towards Camelot, this earlier version accentuates the Lady's gaze and creates a somewhat stronger mental image of her as a character. In both versions, though, the Lady displays the same resolution, loosening the boat's chains (again, clearly a symbolic act) and turning away from her past to engage in 'a metaphoric relationship with her surroundings and herself' (Colley, 1985, 372).<sup>236</sup> Robed in white and flanked by the landscape (now described in benevolent terms), the Lady appears 'Like some bold seër in a trance / Seeing all his own mischance / With a glassy countenance' (128-130). The term 'bold' had previously been used to describe Lancelot (77), and this, along with the likening of the Lady to a male figure (indicated by the use of the term 'his') suggests that the Lady is not merely a victim. Though the curse has been irrevocably set in motion, she appears resolved and 'at once clairvoyant and helpless' (Gray, 2009, 47), with terms such as 'seër' and 'glassy countenance' giving credence to the notion that the Lady's journey may be of a transcendental nature or, in artistic terms, the journey from mimesis to poetic insight. In terms of visibility, however, such a

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<sup>235</sup> Hartman (1981, 110) affirms that '[t]he most art can do, as a mirror of language, is...to expose the desire to own one's own name...in the form of...the signatory act each poem aspires to be.' As Colley (1985, 375) points out, however, this act of naming can also be seen as a paradoxical means by which the Lady seeks to 'separate herself from a world ironically enslaved to naming objects' in much the same way as Tennyson entered a state of trance by 'thinking intently of his own name' (Tyndall, cited by Hallam Tennyson, 2: 473-474).

<sup>236</sup> Colley (1985, 372) adds that the Lady differs from Lancelot in her relationship to her surroundings, for 'she moves into the spaces between the fields and the people and fills them with her form: her name and her body.'

countenance could be seen to reinstitute the shattered mirror while denying the Lady her own gaze: to look with eyes of glass is, after all, ‘not to see at all’ (Plasa, 1992, 258).<sup>237</sup>

As the Lady approaches her destination she proceeds to sing ‘a carol, mournful, holy’ (145). Though it is her final refrain, her song can be seen to signify her move into a world in which ‘[e]choes swell to full sounds; the fairy name takes on form’ (Colley, 1985, 372). As Armstrong (1993, 86) observes, though, ‘[i]t is not clear whether her new song is a song of triumph or defeat’ and, indeed, the poem continues along ambiguous lines, leading one to question the extent to which the Lady achieves – or retains – this state of actualisation. That the curse is taking effect at this point is indicated by references to the Lady’s blood freezing and her eyes becoming ‘darken’d wholly’ (147-148), the latter reference creating the impression that the Lady’s gaze and consciousness are becoming clouded over. However, ambiguity arises as to how to interpret this final journey. As noted earlier, critics have often interpreted the poem as signalling the irreconcilability of artistry with reality, yet other readings have focused upon the aspiration to move from mimetic to expressive art. From this perspective, the poem’s final moments suggest such a journey, with the Lady’s darkening eyes potentially indicating the dawning of imaginative vision. Consequently, Shannon (1981, 219) contends that these final moments see the Lady reach the peak of her creativity before moving into the realm of the eternal. Thus, ‘the love aroused by a physical face and form (Lancelot’s) leads through intellectual and spiritual beauty to the divine’. However, Christ (1987, 388) reaches a less lofty conclusion, arguing that darkening eyes do not symbolise a

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<sup>237</sup> McKelvy (2007, para. 21) makes a similar analogy, likening the Lady’s mirror-like qualities to the ‘Crystal Palace’ that served as emblem of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Plasa (1992) raises an interesting point in adding that this mirroring function ‘might be said to possess the capacity for inducing in the “masculine” gaze a certain self-consciousness as to its own strategies, a recognition...that the way in which men traditionally view women is critically discrepant from how women see themselves’ (258-259). Still, were this to be the case (and this is debatable), the Lady’s eyes do not retain this function long enough to find out.

higher state of visionary insight and creativity but signify that the Lady is dying into art, not merely singing a song but *becoming* a song.

To interpret the Lady's death in terms of transcendence, then, counterbalances the seemingly catastrophic onset of the curse and is a pertinent reading, especially given Tennyson's affirmative comments on spiritualism and transcendentalism.<sup>238</sup> Nevertheless, if one focuses on the Lady's desire to achieve a fuller earthbound existence then her death represents 'the failure to develop a merely potential existence into an actual one' (Shaw, 1976, 63).

Likewise, if the Lady embodies the dilemma of how the artist is to become socially integrated without compromising their artistic vision, the poem does not seem to offer any solution.<sup>239</sup> It is also prudent here to reiterate that direct vision is what is at stake, for the Lady was initially aligned with distance and sight: qualities typically associated with a masculine subject position. Again, though, the Lady received her sights in a mediated manner that is not akin to the unfettered gaze associated with the male. The reflected sight of Lancelot consequently prompts the Lady to exercise her visual agency without mediation, but to move into such a position is culturally coded as improper.

The visual faculty is therefore of pivotal importance within Tennyson's poem, yet, in addition to distinguishing between direct and indirect vision, one must be wary of amputating sight from the other sensory faculties. The Lady is, after all, stirred also by Lancelot's joyful

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<sup>238</sup> Tennyson (cited by Hallam Tennyson, 1897, 2: 90) remarked that 'there are moments when the flesh is nothing to me...you never, never can convince me that the *I* is not an eternal Reality, and that the Spiritual is not the true and real part of me.' He also testified to having frequently experienced a 'kind of waking trance' wherein individuality seemed to 'fade away into boundless being...the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction but the only true life' (cited by Hallam Tennyson, 1897, 1: 320). For more on Tennyson and transcendence, see Hood (2000) and Shaw (1967).

<sup>239</sup> Packer (1964, 8) argues along these lines, stating that 'the poem is not at all convinced that this kind of human experience may be acquired without destroying the creative capacity of the artist.'

song,<sup>240</sup> with hearing being ‘the sense that engages the self with the world’ (Shannon, 1981, 216). A union of the senses would seem to be the ideal here, yet this is negated by the curse. There is no middle-ground for the Lady and no possibility of achieving a full sensory experience in mortal life. To exercise direct vision can only result in the Lady’s death, the term ‘curse’ being highly suggestive of punishment – here, on account of the Lady having ‘dared to seek the substantiation of her identity in a space which is reserved for the male’ (Pearce, 1991, 73). Ultimately, then, the Lady experiences visual agency only briefly, prior to reaching Camelot – and Lancelot.

As noted earlier, the two versions of this poem differ in a significant manner as they draw to a close, diverging in the final two stanzas. In the penultimate stanza of each version, the deceased woman is described as no longer possessing any subjectivity, but the earlier version describes her more bluntly as deceased, beginning three consecutive lines with the terms ‘A pale, pale corpse’ (165), ‘Deadcold’ (166) and ‘Dead’ (167). The revision, meanwhile, describes her as ‘Silent’ (158) and ‘A gleaming shape’ (156). Such revisions create a greater sense of vagueness and soften some of the poem’s ‘hard edges and stark contrasts’ (Gray, 2009, 51) yet evoke the image of the Lady’s body less as a deceased human being than as an intriguing, beautiful object. This distinction comes to fruition in the final stanza, in which the people of Camelot look upon the boat’s deceased occupant. In the original version, the Lady has not only carved her name onto the boat but bears a parchment that reads:

*“The web was woven curiously  
The charm is broken utterly,  
Draw near and fear not – this is I,  
The Lady of Shalott.”* (177-180)

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<sup>240</sup> Referencing Autolycus’ song in *The Winter’s Tale* 4.3, Lancelot’s refrain of ‘Tirra lirra’ (107) is significant not due to it carrying a specific meaning but on account of its joyful, melodic quality (akin to that of the skylark) and role in inducing those feelings with which the Lady has hitherto been unacquainted



John Stuart Mill (1835, 413) saw this as a ‘lame and impotent conclusion’ and more recent critics have reached similar conclusions. Alaya (1970, 286), for instance, interprets the Lady’s life as having been symbolic of that of the egocentric artist and, from this perspective, the parchment’s self-centred words imply the continuation of such egotism. Moreover, Alaya argues that the Lady’s arrival almost seems intended ‘as an act of defiance, to frighten the court and to puzzle’, her message ‘too cryptic to convey its intention’ (285). It is indeed the case that the 1832 poem carries a colder tone of wariness and intrigue in contrast to the seemingly more sympathetic approach of the revision. If, however, one regards the Lady’s former life in terms of stagnation and suppression rather than egotism, one can interpret the parchment in a more favourable light. As previously noted, the Lady speaks few lines of dialogue in either poem, but her message at least allows her one final moment of self-expression as she declares ‘this is I’. In the later version, however, there is no inscription. Instead, Lancelot looks upon the Lady’s corpse and remarks, “She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott.” (169-171).

One could see the ending of the 1842 poem as duly tragic in that the Lady has gained the affection of the man that had instigated her desire but at the cost of her life. However, it is significant that the Lady is not afforded any final words in this version. The inscription of her name can be seen as an act of declaration as in the earlier poem, yet this is undermined by the poem’s ending, with Lancelot’s comment on the Lady’s physical beauty standing in stark contrast to the posthumous self-assertion of the 1832 poem. While the Lady’s act of inscription may have been an attempt to take control of her identity, any such aims do not come to fruition.<sup>241</sup> Also, if the Lady has been an artist in life, the poem ends with her body

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<sup>241</sup> Armstrong (1993, 86) avers that the Lady ultimately ‘places herself in a pre-given hierarchy’. Likewise, while focusing on the Lady’s paradoxical attempt to transcend the world of representation, Colley (1985,

as an artwork, underscoring the dual roles that the Lady occupies in this poem. Chadwick (1986, 26) summarises this predicament:

[T]he work of producing art is subsumed by the artwork as product. And this process of artistic objectification is wholly bound up with the process of becoming public...Dying into objectivity, the Lady's whole attention is fixed on the public realm of "towered Camelot."

The poem can consequently be seen to undermine the concept of the supposedly autonomous artwork, the Lady not only serving a dual role of artist / artwork but emblematising the process whereby the artwork 'turns out to exist wholly for others, to lose in the process of public consumption the heterocosmic autonomy it claims for itself' (Chadwick, 1986, 26). As an artist, the Lady has taken an active role and potentially moved towards a newfound degree of expressiveness. She can also be seen as making the transition from a solipsistic relationship to her art to admitting this artwork into the wider world (Alaya, 1970, 285). However, this dual role culminates in the Lady's status as artist being subsumed by her status as artwork. Ultimately then, the artwork *does* come into public view but so does the Lady – as the quintessential feminine object of art.

While the Lady may interpret her predicament in terms of a split between a hollow mimetic world and the 'real world' of Camelot, any such idealism would seem to be misplaced. In a sense though, Camelot *does* reflect reality – a reality increasingly steeped in images and wherein notions of 'authenticity' prove illusory. What the Lady finds is thus not a move from solipsism to human contact and 'authentic' experience but something that is, sadly, an apt reflection of women's social status. The poem's concluding irony is therefore that the Lady's fate is reflective of reality as it *really* is: a world of ideological constructs and mediation, and

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278) concludes that the Lady fails in her endeavour, for Tennyson 'cannot push the poem into a "Nameless" state.'

in which social relations do not always operate along egalitarian lines. The Lady's departure from her realm of shadows remains understandable, yet her 'curse' is that she has become caught up 'in the vicious circle of a desire for illusions of her own making' and 'given her heart to an image nothing...can rival' (Tucker, 1988, 114). The Lady's final journey therefore sees her enter into a world of images, the tragedy being that these images now include the woman herself.

The 1842 poem therefore does not only deny the Lady the consciousness that would enable her to recognise and respond to Lancelot but turns her into the archetypal mute, beautiful object of vision. That the last words are spoken by Lancelot is pivotal in creating such an effect, for he now occupies the role of both gazer and speaker and, as McKelvy (2007, para. 16) notes, takes over the reapers' interpretative role (this interpretation now being based on the Lady's physical form).<sup>242</sup> *What* Lancelot says is also relevant. On the one hand, Lancelot describes the Lady in seemingly kindly terms, with Shannon (1981, 222) referring to his 'fitting benediction' as expressing 'genuine concern for the Lady and her spiritual welfare'. Alaya (1970, 286-287) also contends that Lancelot's 'chivalrous appraisal' is apt in that '[b]eauty is what she had sought in her own chamber, privately, indifferent...Beauty, albeit her own...has [now] been recognized by all and graciously expressed by this one cognoscente.' Such critics consequently focus on Lancelot's words as a suitable conclusion to the Lady's journey, the affirmative timbre of this interpretation being summarised by Packer (1964, 6):

Dead or alive she manages to reach Camelot and gain recognition from the great knight...her end is doubly triumphant: Lancelot muses on [the Lady's]

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<sup>242</sup> Some critics have taken a more favourable view of Lancelot's interpretive role. Notably, Alaya (1970, 286) contends that it is appropriate for the poem to conclude with Lancelot's comment if one interprets the poem as symbolising a move from egocentric artistry to recognition of the other. If one focuses on her former suppression, however, the poem's ending seems to negate the Lady's act of naming, suggesting the difficulty or impossibility of claiming a social identity.

beauty...and she makes her impression upon the world of Camelot, which stops all its busy activities to gaze upon and speculate about her identity.

In this respect, the 1842 poem seems imbued with a humanistic, meditative tone and Lancelot's comment as being 'as sensitively reflective as could be expected' (Gray, 2009, 56) given the cryptic nature of this unknown figure.<sup>243</sup> As Alaya (1970, 285) points out, the removal of the parchment can also be seen to foster a more direct, humanised form of contact between herself and Lancelot, while the reference to Lancelot reflecting 'a little space' (168) raises the possibility of regarding the woman other than via standard patriarchal definitions. Again, though, this is not to be, for Lancelot 'evidently does not reflect long enough' and offers a blessing 'no better than a disguised version of the curse' (Plasa, 1992, 259).

In admiring the Lady's posthumous form and noting her 'lovely face', Lancelot ultimately recalls 'a museum-goer's casual comment on a painting after a momentary glance' (Chadwick, 1986, 25).<sup>244</sup> Of course, the Lady is also presented as an object in the 1832 poem via the blunt description of her dead form, but the latter poem is striking in its own way. The gendered aspects of the Lady's objectification are therefore more palpable in the revision, but, in both poems, the core theme is the same. By rejecting her socially prescribed role and exercising an active gaze, the Lady has committed an act of transgression that, in cultural and psychoanalytic terms, must be nullified and its perpetrator punished, this punishment being an enforced state of passivity and objectification. The Lady is consequently rendered akin to that

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<sup>243</sup> Gray (2009, 56) supports this contention with reference to an unpublished poem, 'Little bosom not yet cold' (1851), that Tennyson wrote following this stillbirth of his son, suggesting that, like Lancelot, 'Tennyson finds himself in the unexpected position of addressing a stranger who is not wholly a stranger, whom he encounters...when it is too late...He praises the child's appearance—the only aspect of the stranger to which he has access'. Likewise, Psomiades (2000, 37) acknowledges the comment may seem inadequate but suggests that it is more sensitive than some of the other conceivable responses that Lancelot could have articulated to this 'mysterious decorative object'.

<sup>244</sup> McKelvy (2007, para. 21) employs a similar analogy, likening the Lady's dead body to an exhibition 'designed to draw a spectacular crowd...her "fairy" character is naturalized into...her possession of a "lovely face" (169).'

Victorian ideal of passive, tragic female beauty, depicted as a deceased figure who is robed in white and is ‘submissive and virginal, desired not desiring’ (Plasa, 1992, 259).<sup>245</sup> The poem’s previous references to marriage and death also reach their fruition here, though their connotations are open to question. As noted earlier, Plasa (1992, 259-260) suggests that this relationship takes the form of conflation, marriage being equivalent to self-annihilation. Still, the poem can be read in a more tragic light whereby any hope of union is thwarted, the Lady instead becoming a bride of death. The irony is that, while secluded in her tower, the Lady was free of such objectification, for ‘who hath seen her wave her hand? / Or at the casement seen her stand?’ (24-25). She was, however, also denied her own active gaze and engagement with the world.

In the end, then, the Lady is trapped in an impossible situation whereby she can effect her desire to be seen only via ‘a self-mortification in which she changes from subject to object’ (Christ, 1987, 388). Her plight thus highlights the dilemma regarding (in)visibility that occupied some of the female poets discussed in the previous chapters. While ostensibly an Arthurian character, the Lady of Shalott embodies those difficulties that women have faced – and continue to face – within the public sphere, especially in a Western consumerist context. In particular, her story highlights the impasse wherein a woman may want to engage with the wider world yet struggle to avoid attempts to put her ‘back in her place’ as an object of vision. In this respect, the Lady’s embowered state could be seen to offer a degree of ease, as embarking upon a public existence entails entering ‘the fray of the “real” world, the battle

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<sup>245</sup> The 1832 poem describes the Lady as being clad in more elaborate attire, referring to her ‘crown of pearl’ and ‘blinding diamond’. For Alaya (1970, 285), her earlier appearance ‘excite[s] awe (as opposed to affection)’ and suggests ‘a strangely vainglorious exhibitionism’. Indeed, the Lady’s appearance is more ostentatious and regal, and, whether or not this was the Lady’s (and Tennyson’s) intention, the original conclusion carries a more aloof tone. By the same token, however, the bluntness and aloofness of this version, as well as the Lady’s regal bearing, can be seen to endow the Lady with a more commanding presence.

zones of women and men in society' (Barzilai, 2000, 238). But such a state also entails loneliness and disassociation, prompting the Lady to break from her solipsistic routine and, in so doing, seal her fate. Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 43) summarise the tragic inevitability of this scenario:

The Lady of Shalott must weave her story because she is imprisoned in a tower as adamant as any glass coffin, doomed to escape only through the self-annihilating madness of romantic love...and her last work of art is her own dead body.

### Artistic Interpretations

Given the rich imagery and popular Victorian motifs featured in Tennyson's poem, it is no surprise that numerous artists were inspired to produce a stream of 'relentless and varied reiterations' (Israel, 1999, 65) of the poem's key moments. Later paintings by Sidney Harold Meteyard and John William Waterhouse sought to convey the Lady's ennui in works entitled *"I am half-sick of shadows," said The Lady of Shalott* (in 1913 and 1915, respectively), but, prior to this, artists produced a variety of works depicting the Lady's transgression and its aftermath. The best known of these is Waterhouse's 1888 treatment, *The Lady of Shalott* (fig. 5.1), which focuses on the Lady as she begins her journey along the river towards Camelot. This painting was most recently featured as part of a 2009 Waterhouse Exhibition at the Royal Academy (the first major UK showing of Waterhouse's work since the late 1970s)<sup>246</sup> and

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<sup>246</sup> The exhibition's title, 'J.W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite', reflects tensions regarding the categorisation of Waterhouse's work. Waterhouse occupies a later time period than the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (he was born in 1849: the same year that the PRB delivered their manifesto) and the curators of this exhibition argue that his work unites Romantic subject matter with French naturalism and, later, symbolism, while also engaging with contemporary issues (including the New Woman question). The 2012-2013 Pre-Raphaelite exhibition at the Tate Gallery deliberately omitted Waterhouse, yet the curators of the 2009 Waterhouse exhibition emphasise that Waterhouse shared some of the Pre-Raphaelites' motifs and literary interests while drawing inspiration and techniques from other areas. Consequently, they favour the term 'modern Pre-Raphaelite' as reflecting this mixture, recognizing the Pre-Raphaelite aspects of Waterhouse's work while specifying that Waterhouse's interests and techniques were up to date in other respects. For more on this subject, see Barringer, Rosenfeld and Smith (2012).

portrays the Lady as an ethereal, heavy-lidded figure robed in white and imbued with prophetic vision in her final moments. Further to this theme, other artists have focused upon the Lady's posthumous entry into Camelot. In his illustration for Tennyson's *Poems* (1857), for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti depicted Lancelot looking upon the Lady's deceased form as in the ending of the 1842 poem (fig. 5.2). John Everett Millais, meanwhile, produced a drawing of the Lady's body floating along the river, her boat flanked by swans while her lifeless arms hang from either side, her face cast heavenwards as her hair trails in the water (1854, fig. 5.3). The similarity between this drawing and Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) is self-evident, yet Millais' drawing also bears a striking similarity to another painting: Arthur Hughes's *The Lady of Shalott* (1873, fig. 5.4), which portrays the Lady in a virtually identical manner and, again, emphasises her lifeless state.

It should be noted here that this was not Hughes's first treatment of Tennyson's poem, this painting being preceded by *The Lady of Shalott (study)* (c. 1860, fig. 5.5). However, belying its title, this sketch is not a prototype for the painting but portrays a different scene in the tale. Specifically, it shows the Lady setting forth towards Camelot in the boat upon which she has inscribed her name, pushing back the branches of the trees on the river bank as she looks towards her destination. The sketch and painting consequently present the Lady before and after her death, the swan motif binding these otherwise disparate artistic treatments.<sup>247</sup> In the painting, the prominence of one of these swans emphasises the Lady's pallid beauty, yet the subject's fully-exposed face possesses a stark blankness in contrast to the vitality and subjectivity depicted in the sketch. Accordingly, the Lady's name is no longer visible, possibly obscured by her waterfall of hair or re-imagined to be on the other side of the boat.

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<sup>247</sup> While the study depicts several swans in the background as the Lady sets off towards her destination, in the painting they trail behind the boat, suggesting that they have followed the Lady along the river.

Either way, the engraving so prominent in the sketch is imperceptible in the painting and Hughes's treatments form an arresting contrast.

The Lady of Shalott's journey towards Camelot thus proved a popular subject for Victorian artists, yet the Lady's transgression and its immediate aftermath were also subject to artistic treatment during this period. Most relevant to this thesis is Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott [looking at Lancelot]* (1894a, fig. 5.6), which not only depicts the Lady with dark hair (in contrast to the fair-haired figure of Waterhouse's 1888 treatment)<sup>248</sup> but dispenses with the ethereal quality of Waterhouse's earlier painting to focus on the Lady's inquisitive gaze as she turns away from the mirror to look at Lancelot. The outside world is not directly visible to the viewer and is, in fact, positioned *on the side of* the viewer, the Lady peering forward as though looking out towards the painting's spectator. What is striking about this image is its frankness, and it contrasts with Waterhouse's more ornate 1888 rendering in that it is set in the dark surroundings of the room in which the Lady has hitherto spent her days weaving. Whereas the Lady was situated amidst the wider landscape in the earlier painting, she takes up much of the central space of the 1894 painting and gains an element of authority. Particularly evident is the difference in appearance between the characters in these two paintings. The 1888 Lady appears otherworldly with her long, rippling hair and flowing white dress, as well as her trancelike expression. The Lady in the 1894 version, meanwhile, is presented in a direct, understated manner: her style of dress is less ethereal, her brown hair is tucked away and her expression is alert and inquisitive.

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<sup>248</sup> While the Lady's differing hair colour sets these paintings apart on a superficial level, Trippi (2003, 126) suggests: 'Perpetuating an academic tradition, Waterhouse transcended [his female models'] particularities to create his own idealised, instantly recognisable type of female beauty, varied primarily by hair colour'. The differences between these two versions of the Lady of Shalott go beyond this particular factor, but it is indeed the case that hair colour serves as an instant means of visual differentiation.



Comparing Waterhouse's 1888 and 1894 treatments, one can regard the earlier painting as highlighting the Lady's unfettered state after having cast away the shackles of her captivity, the natural landscape furthering this effect. The Lady's hair is particularly significant given that loose hair carried connotations of impiety and disorderliness in the Victorian era,<sup>249</sup> prompting conduct guides to emphasise the need to 'reduce the hair to well-ordered obedience' (Yonge, 1877, cited by Barzilai, 2000, 243). The Lady's hair in the 1888 painting therefore contrasts with the neatness of the 1894 depiction, the latter seeming to emphasise the Lady's respectability as she remains within her tower. Certainly, the Lady's hair in the 1888 version could be seen to create an undercurrent of sexual frisson, with Prettejohn (2000, 229) remarking that the painting entails 'a curious combination of the childlike and the erotic...an uncomfortable closeness between the suggestion of adolescent sexual awakening and the overtones of death'. This is not, however, only a matter of the Lady's own sexuality but also aligns the Lady with alluring femininity, whereas the 1894 version presents the Lady in a less provocative manner. Her gaze might suggest awakening sexuality, but she herself is not presented in a manner that invites an eroticised gaze. As the Lady peers outwards her eyes are wide and intent and her posture is one of curiosity, yet one also perceives an element of tentativeness or furtiveness.<sup>250</sup> In this case such a mindset is linked to the curse, yet the curse serves as a metaphor and signifies the transgressive nature of a curious, desiring gaze on the part of the female.<sup>251</sup>

Waterhouse's 1894 painting is therefore arresting and unusual in that it focuses squarely on the woman's gaze. However, the thread of the weaving constitutes another prominent visual

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<sup>249</sup> Gitter (1984, 938) notes that 'the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display'. For more on the symbolism of women's hair see Ofek (2009).

<sup>250</sup> Regarding the Lady's pose, Poulson (1996, 180) states that 'Waterhouse creates a more immediate and intimate effect; his Lady looks out urgently at the spectator like a hunted animal at bay.'

<sup>251</sup> A comparable scenario is also presented in Waterhouse's *Pandora* (1896), *Psyche Opening the Golden Box* (c. 1904) and *Psyche Entering Cupid's Garden* (c. 1903).

detail. Shown wrapped around the Lady's legs, the thread strives to contain the supposed threat that emanates from the female's active gaze and keep the Lady tethered to her domestic duties<sup>252</sup> – as Walker (2000, 298) states, after all, this was an era in which 'social stability, the good order of society, and even human happiness were perceived to be dependent on women's presence in the home.' William Holman Hunt's vibrant *The Lady of Shalott* (c. 1886-1905, fig. 5.7) also employs this motif to strong effect, though, in this case, some of the threads are shown swirling through the air in a manner that evokes Tennyson's description of the chaos that arises when the curse strikes. That Hunt depicted a segment of the thread wrapped around the Lady prompted Tennyson (cited by Hunt, 1914, 2: 95) to enquire as to why Hunt had chosen to show the web wound 'round and round her like the threads of a cocoon.'<sup>253</sup> Despite not being referenced in Tennyson's poem, however, this motif effectively conveys those forces that seek to prevent and subsequently punish the Lady's disobedience.

While Waterhouse and Hunt both take artistic license with their source material, what is notable about Hunt's approach is his emphasis on removing the ambiguity that he saw Tennyson as encouraging and replacing it with the 'eternal truth' (1914, 2: 401) he perceived to be at the heart of the poem. As to the nature of this meaning, the painting's symbolism and Hunt's own comments point towards the archetype of the 'fallen' woman who eschews her duties. Indeed, Hunt interpreted the line 'I am half sick of shadows' as indication that the

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<sup>252</sup> This element was not present in Waterhouse's (1894b) study for this painting, which merely depicts an inquisitive young woman. The addition of this motif makes the Lady's confinement more prominent and emphasises the tension between her own visual agency and the stipulation that she remain in her allotted role.

<sup>253</sup> Hunt (1913, 2: 95) replied that, unlike Tennyson, he did not have 'about fifteen pages' in which to detail the poem's 'impression of weird fate', though in his detailed catalogue entry for the painting Hunt (1914, 2: 401-403) took advantage of the opportunity to elaborate. Tennyson (cited by Hunt, 1913, 2: 95), however, maintained that 'an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text' and remained puzzled and displeased by Hunt's additions.

Lady has spurned her ‘duty to her spiritual self’ (1914, 2: 402).<sup>254</sup> Such an interpretation is further encouraged via Hunt’s depiction of two artworks flanking the Lady’s mirror, one of which depicts the Madonna and Child and the other Hercules’ triumph over the serpent in the garden of the Hesperides. Hunt therefore creates a contrast between such dutiful / valorous behaviour and the Lady’s surrender to temptation. Moreover, the vivid, exotic style of the Lady’s appearance and the scene as a whole may serve as a form of visual shorthand, with Nead (1988, 173) noting that loss of virtue can be easily signified by ‘the transformation...from natural simplicity to showy detail’. The Lady’s hair is again relevant here, for, like the threads of the weaving, it ‘vibrates with libidinous energy...like a vigorous brood of snakes’ (Barzilai, 2000, 242).

Hunt’s painting consequently takes on an element of ambiguity, its chaotic visual style contrasting with its stern morality. Gitter (1984, 939) suggests, for example, that ‘the Lady of Shalott, swirling, spiderlike...is either frenziedly weaving her web or fighting to get free of it.’ The thread thus creates an effective contrast between energy and entrapment, suggesting a tension between the curse – and Hunt’s own moral project – and the Lady’s rebellious desires. As Pearce (1991) emphasises, the Lady ‘is speaking her anger, frustration and outrage to us at the same time that she is, in Hunt’s moral schema, enacting her punishment’ (79). Still, while the painting gains a note of ambivalence due to its vibrancy, this does not alter Hunt’s alignment of the Lady’s gaze with immorality, the implication being that a woman need not engage in illicit sexual behaviour to be classed as ‘fallen’ nor even set foot in the outside world – to exercise a gaze, particularly a desiring gaze, is cause enough. The image of Hercules adds to this effect, in that Hercules’s gaze appears directed towards the Lady, as

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<sup>254</sup> Hunt’s first illustration of this scene (1850) focuses on this sense of spiritual duty rather than the transgression of the later version and suggests an element of internal struggle, depicting the Lady with her hair straight and neat, her eyes downcast and one of her arms held out as though in resistance (see Leng, 1991, 319-320).

though re-imposing the Law on the Father. Punishing her gaze via his own, Hercules can be positioned as part of a shared gaze that Hunt encourages between himself, this depicted male character and the painting's presumed spectators (rather like the triadic gaze outlined by Laura Mulvey but with a greater emphasis on moral condemnation). Indeed, despite his emphasis on morality, Hunt (1905, 1: 257) stated that viewers should not be precluded from looking at an artwork 'for its delectability — as indeed a picture should always first be regarded.' 'Delectability' is an apt term, for, despite condemning her gaze, the painting presents the Lady as 'part of the gorgeous, excessive spectacle...to be looked at and enjoyed by the male viewer' (Barringer, 1999, 144).<sup>255</sup>

The Lady of Shalott was, then, a popular subject among the Pre-Raphaelites, Hunt's depiction being especially vivid. However, it is appropriate to consider one of the earliest artistic counterparts to Tennyson's poem: Elizabeth Siddal's *The Lady of Shalott at her Loom* (1853, fig. 5.8). Though depicting the same scene as Hunt, this drawing conforms to the simplicity associated with Siddal's artistic style,<sup>256</sup> conveying the bland asceticism and loneliness of the Lady's existence and the moment of agency wherein she decides to turn away from her loom. Likewise, the Lady is depicted clad in a simple, modest dress with her hair tied back – a stark contrast with Hunt's depiction. Siddal's approach therefore displays a characteristic sincerity and minimalism as opposed to ostentation or romanticism, prompting Cherry (1993, 190) to remark that '[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.'

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<sup>255</sup> As Prettejohn (2000, 227) observes, 'Hunt lets the spectator gaze at the woman, but does not represent the woman in the act of looking, still less in the act of looking at Lancelot.'

<sup>256</sup> Indeed, when both works were featured at the 2012-2013 Pre-Raphaelite exhibition at the Tate Gallery, one article noted that this presented a 'rare chance to compare Siddal's gawky, tender pen and ink drawing *The Lady of Shalott* with Holman Hunt's much larger, higher-voltage, more hysterical oil painting of this favourite Victorian subject' (MacCarthy, 2012).

In contrast to the mayhem of Hunt's depiction and the passivity of some of the other aforementioned treatments, Siddal shows the Lady still engaged in artistic activity. Shefer (1988, 27), however, suggests that the Lady's posture 'reveals a great deal about being a young female artist in Victorian England...She looks to see if anyone is watching...she dares not move from the loom; she appears timid and worried'. One therefore gets a sense of internal tension on the Lady's part, but, as with Tennyson's poem, this can be interpreted in two ways. If one regards the weaving as symbolic of the Lady's artistry, then this suggests the furtiveness and self-consciousness linked with the Victorian woman attempting to take on the role of artist. However, the Lady's weaving can also be seen as a gendered task to which the Lady is tethered, this interpretation gaining credence when one takes into account that the Lady is engaged in *mimetic* art<sup>257</sup> and confined to the domestic sphere. Turning her head away from the weaving, the Lady thus appears torn between adherence to moral and social strictures and her desire for direct engagement and visual agency (and perhaps non-mimetic art). That Siddal includes a crucifix atop a cupboard beneath the Lady's window endows the image with a religious theme yet, while this suggests an internal struggle with religion, one does not infer moral condemnation but rather sympathy towards the Lady's plight.

Considered in relation to Tennyson's poem, the tragedy is that, ultimately, the Lady's death does not seem to achieve anything (at least on an earthbound level). Lancelot 'remains ignorant of his own role' and one is left with a sense of the 'pointlessness of the woman's self-sacrifice in a world where the patriarchal order remains intact' (Prettejohn, 2000, 228). Such a conclusion is, moreover, dramatised by the contrast between Siddal's treatment of the poem and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's engraving, the latter depicting the Lady in a manner akin

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<sup>257</sup> The Lady's mimetic task can also be seen to reflect Ruskin's conception of women artists 'primarily as copyists' (Shefer, 1988, 27).

to that of Snow White, thus rendering her '[a]n "it," a possession...an idealized image' – in short, 'patriarchy's ideal woman' (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 41).<sup>258</sup>

### **Women, Visibility and the Public Sphere**

While 'The Lady of Shalott' is based upon Arthurian legend and proved popular with pre-Raphaelite painters, the Lady's dilemma prefigures similar issues facing women in the nineteenth century, highlighting the difficulties associated with women's entry into the public landscape. The first point to recognise here is that, though the Victorian era is often associated with a rigid public / domestic division, women were not simply confined to the home. In fact, as Wilson (1992) argues, the latter half of the century was exactly when women were emerging into the public sphere. What is most important to keep in mind is the heterogeneous nature of the urban landscape. As pleasure capital and business district, the city underwent significant, swift renovations intended to increase circulation of pedestrian traffic and public transport. The growth of consumer culture meant that the city was a hub of production, exchange and consumption, and this fostered a diverse makeup of shoppers and workers, turning the metropolis into a 'contested, over-represented terrain' (Goody, 2006, 464) that entailed the 'discursive production of urban space and urban identity' (Stein, 2003, 321).

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<sup>258</sup> Cherry (1993, 190) also remarks on the contrast between Rossetti's and Siddall's treatments of this subject, observing:

In Rossetti's illustration...woman is constituted as cursed, helpless, dying. Rich textures of fabric and drawing delineate the sensuous curves of the feminine body, and the fairness of the iconic face is presented for the pleasure of the masculine gaze. By contrast, Elizabeth Siddall pictures a cool, airy and spacious workroom with evidence of past labour.

Given women's occupation of the urban sphere, it is vital to consider the nature of this public presence, the key question being to what extent gender continued to be a shaping factor in social arrangements. The aforementioned 'urban male stroller' requires further discussion here, for this evokes the figure of the *flâneur*, typically defined as a male who wanders and observes the city streets while himself remaining anonymous. In male-authored texts, those women that the *flâneur* encounters often serve as ciphers, representing the male speaker's desires and anxieties. However, it is also necessary to explore women's own experiences, including the question of whether a woman could conceivably adopt a similar role to that of the *flâneur*. That this might be possible is suggested by the increasing amenability of the public sphere to women, as the expansion of shopping culture (fostered by the increasing presence of arcades and department stores<sup>259</sup>), along with the more general rejuvenation of the city space, was geared towards making the public sphere more accessible and appealing. Women were therefore increasing present in the urban landscape, with Hetherington and Valman (2010, 15) summarising, '[s]hopping, reporting, campaigning, visiting clubs, museums or music halls, engaging in philanthropic and other work, women's active presence...challenges the centrality of the urban male stroller in discourses of modernity.'

As the above quote indicates, shopping culture does not wholly define Victorian women's engagement with the city, with Walker (2000; 2006) having likewise emphasized the presence of both working-class and middle-class women within the public sphere. Class could of course play a key determining role here: working-class women were present in capacities such as servants, barmaids, entertainers and prostitutes, while middle-class women worked in

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<sup>259</sup> As Friedberg (1993, 77) summarises, '[t]he department store...emerged as a corollary to the dramatic changes in urban retailing between 1840 and 1870. As a consequence of the mass production of standardized goods, singly-owned, craft-oriented shops were displaced by *magasin de nouveautés*.' The grand magasins of Paris were the first buildings of this nature but other countries soon set about the formation of their own department stores. See Rappaport (2001) for a detailed account of department store within the context of Victorian London.

capacities such as writers, philanthropists, and proprietors of shops. In particular, Walker has demonstrated that from 1850-1900 London was a hub of feminist and suffragist activity, with independent middle-class women living and working in the city. There are two key points here, the first being that many of these women set up their homes as political bases and thus blurred the distinction between public and private spheres. This, in particular, is important in helping move beyond binary thinking and loosening the association of private space with domesticity. The home instead becomes a hybrid between the public and private, in much the same way as women's clubs provided private space *within* the public sphere. Still, women's political engagement wasn't limited to the home, for positioning themselves within the city also afforded women convenient access to the city and enabled building projects and the cultivation of 'consciously and energetically made...international contacts and transcultural connections' (Walker, 2000, 176).<sup>260</sup>

That women were engaged in the public sphere during this time is also borne out by first-hand accounts attesting to the exhilaration and autonomy associated with the urban landscape,<sup>261</sup> while female poets likewise produced a range of works centred on, or informed by, traversal and description of the city space. Vadillo (2005), for instance, focuses on the engagement of several London-based female poets (Alice Meynell, Michael Field, Amy Levy and Graham R. Tomson) with the city in the late nineteenth century, shifting focus from walking (to which,

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<sup>260</sup> Walker (2006) emphasizes that 'suffragists' local political and material practices...can only be fully assessed and understood historically when situated within the global spaces of nation, empire, and international networks' (174), pointing to examples of transcultural connections among suffragist campaigners. She also notes that imperialism and colonisation exerted a presence not only in the colonies but on home ground, with suffragists 'cloak[ing] their demands for suffrage in the respectability of establishment ideology and imagery, and thus signall[ing] their claims to the public arena and enfranchisement of women through the language of empire and governance' (188). In other words, women not only fostered international connections but, in some instances, engaged with imperialist discourses and dominant ideology to suit their own ends.

<sup>261</sup> Nead (2000, 74-79) refers, for instance, to a selection of letters (dated from around 1840-1858) written by a young woman, Amelia Roper, that not only indicate that women were present in the city and used public transport but that such experience could be one of independence, intrigue and excitement.



Vadillo notes, current scholarship has hitherto given primacy) to mechanical modes of transportation such as the omnibus and underground system. Providing a history of transport in the Victorian era, Vadillo points to the ways in which modes of transport courted female customers and describes the usage of such transport by the aforementioned poets. Further to this, Vadillo considers how the use of public transport shaped these women's aesthetic responses. positing the idea of an 'urban aestheticism' that was cultivated by mobile perception of the city and emblematised modernity and the modern poet. She therefore focuses on modes of transport as optical devices,<sup>262</sup> adding that, whereas male passengers travelled 'to enjoy the metropolis but also to look at women', female passengers were more interested in the 'democratising possibilities' (36) of mass transport.

While there is considerable evidence that women traversed the public landscape, the extent to which literary works reflect actual experience can sometimes be open to question. Discussing the urban poetry of Amy Levy, for example, Parsons (2000, 88) suggests that Levy's poems may constitute imaginative pieces as opposed to renderings of Levy's own experience.<sup>263</sup> There is, however, nothing to say that male-authored descriptions of urban rambling could not also be elaborated, and Buck-Morss (1986, 128-129) makes a relevant point here in observing that the captivating accounts of much literature in this genre belie the sense of urban alienation that the *flâneur* was liable to experience. The urban space was, after all, an ambiguous, contested terrain, and the frenzied pace and spectacle of capitalist culture could be felt as overwhelming. Accordingly, theorists have noted the paradoxes associated with the

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<sup>262</sup> Engaging with Jonathan Crary's (1992) study of perception in the nineteenth century, Vadillo (2005, 33) suggests that it is no mere coincidence that Crary 'situates the appearance of a new observer in or around the 1820s, the decade in which omnibuses appeared in the metropolis'.

<sup>263</sup> Discussing women's partial engagement in city life, Nord (1995, 181-206) situates Levy as part of a loose-knit community of young, educated female writers and social investigators who lived and worked in London during the 1880s. While giving due attention to the independence that such women experienced, Nord highlights the difficulties associated with self-sufficient urban living and the breakdown of this community due to various factors; notably, Levy committing suicide aged twenty-seven.

*flâneur*, examples being the desire for both quietness and dynamism, and seclusion from the mass while also wanting to be a part of it (van Nes and My Nguyen, 2009). In fact, the *flâneur* could potentially feel threatened by this complex, overwhelming space, and this consequently challenges the more common template of the city and the woman (the two being conflated) as blank slates to be endowed with meaning. Now it is the *flâneur* upon whom the city inscribes itself, leading Wilson (1992, 109) to conclude that the *flâneur* embodies the fragmentary urban experience and its disintegrative effects on masculine identity.

While the *flâneur* has become a widely recognised as a quintessential urban figure, it is prudent to consider what exactly is meant by ‘the *flâneur*’. As previously mentioned, this term is typically used to describe a self-assured male urban observer, yet Parsons (2000, 3-6; 10; 19; 188-9) distinguishes the Benjaminian *flâneur* (linked with bourgeois power and surveillance) from the nomadic Baudelairean *flâneur*. She adds that the former may have been present during the Enlightenment<sup>264</sup> but that the chaotic milieu of the nineteenth century was conducive to the second type of *flâneur*. This distinction is relevant when considering women’s position within the urban landscape, for, while a female counterpart to the Benjaminian *flâneur* is improbable, the idea of a roaming outsider of ambiguous status seems more tenable. In fact, one could suggest that the destabilisation of the urban sphere was particularly beneficial for women in that it opened up opportunities that were previously unavailable – there was, after all, no authority to erode in terms of women’s public presence. And this is another relevant point: even if the *flâneur* *did* experience a sense of authority, this could be precarious. In a Parisian context, for instance, the stability of the *flâneur*’s position was disrupted by the demise of the arcades, thus prompting a move to stationary surveillance

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<sup>264</sup> Parsons (2000, 19) refers here to a piece featured in *The Spectator* (1711), written from the perspective of the authoritative male observer, in which woman is said to have ‘no Existence but when she is looked upon’.

via the window (Parsons, 2000, 34-36; 225). This may have enabled the *flâneur* to experience a continuing sense of authority and overseeing gaze, yet it also positioned him as a static observer – not an urban Rambler.

For Parsons (2000, 41), then, *flânerie* is less about a specific urban figure than it is ‘a conceptual metaphor for urban observation and walking that extends to the present day’.<sup>265</sup> Conceptualising *flânerie* in this manner consequently imbues it with attributes that are not only apt within the context of modern society but tie in with much feminist theory, including the Irigarayan desire to embrace multiplicity and fluidity. The concept of the *flâneuse* therefore involves a fluid, kinetic relationship with the city and suggests the potential for the female to evade the onlooker’s gaze.<sup>266</sup> As such, Nead (2000, 73) concludes that cultural historians should move towards ‘a more open and fluid model of looking and walking in urban space’, with the urban space playing an active role in the construction of identities and social relations.

It is, then, important to recognise that the *flâneur* was not a monolithic figure, nor were Victorian women wholly oppressed. Nevertheless, one must be cautious of over-estimating women’s freedom in the public landscape or of merely reversing existing binaries. The most obvious conclusion to take from the dislocations associated with the city is that nobody had any authority. However, it would be incorrect to assume that destabilisation resulted in identical experiences of rambling, for, as will be demonstrated, various sanctions limited women’s freedom in ways that were not applicable to the male. Also, while the Benjaminian *flâneur* may have been adversely affected in some respects, that he retained *scopic* authority is

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<sup>265</sup> Friedberg (1993) argues along similar lines, associating *flânerie* less with literal travel than with a mobile gaze that, ultimately, merged with a virtual gaze via pre-cinematic forms of entertainment.

<sup>266</sup> As Parsons (2000, 62-67; 229) notes, to walk can mean to *walk away*, with literary texts often depicting the *flâneuse* as eluding the male onlooker’s attempts to fix and control (attempts that are, moreover, incompatible with the fleeting nature of modernity.)

telling. On the one hand, when one removes the element of urban roaming from the *flâneur*, he is no longer a *flâneur* but a detached visual observer. The problem with this shift, though, is that it retains an association of this figure with the male gaze, as that is all that is left. So, while he may lose out in some respects and the female benefit in others (his static position contrasting with her dynamic engagement), the *flâneur*'s retreat would seem to reinforce the association of men with distanced looking.

Another key point of consideration here is that the bourgeois male observer is not representative of the male populace of the city in its entirety. As will be seen shortly, street harassment was a contentious issue during the Victorian era and was perpetrated by individuals who were not necessarily bourgeois *flâneurs* but who similarly traversed the city streets while exercising a roving gaze. Also, while the female can be theorised as having been able to walk away from this figure, to walk away from some of the characters populating the streets could be more difficult in reality than in literature, fostering a mindset hardly conducive to *flânerie*. Consequently, while the *flâneur* is a relevant subject of discussion, it is necessary to also take account of the practical difficulties associated with public life, with the heterogeneity of this environment opening up the possibility of undesirable encounters. This being the case, Nochlin (2006, 173) suggests that 'the *flâneuse* – an urban woman, free, confident, in charge of her life, striding or strolling down the avenues, an observer and constructor of public life' was either a rarity or an impossibility.

The notion that women enjoyed unbridled freedom in the public sphere is, then, fanciful, especially given that women today continue to complain of feeling vulnerable in public places. By the same token, however, women's experiences within the public sphere do not constitute a scenario wherein women were either fully-fledged *flâneuses* or victims. As Wilson (1992, 103) observes, it is more accurately a question of where one lays emphasis

with regard to the dangers and the opportunities facing women. That women benefited from increased opportunities in some areas shows that the public sphere was not solely a 'male space', yet women's increased presence in the city should not be taken to mean that women were granted the same freedom to look as their male counterparts, nor that they were free from being looked *at*. On the one hand, characterising *flânerie* in terms of fluidity and adaptability suggests the possibility of a more dynamic, peripatetic gaze, meaning that, in theory, the female could experience visual engagement with the city. However, while women *did* sometimes exercise visual agency within this landscape, both their visual agency and their movement were limited. A further issue that needs to be addressed here is to what extent walking can be equated with observing, for, even if women were walkers, one could question to what extent they were observers. In other words, rambling alone does not make a *flâneur*, with Nead (2000, 68) pointing out that the *flâneur* is an observer – not necessarily an authoritative panoramic observer, but an observer nonetheless. It is therefore necessary to explore in more detail those power dynamics that inhibited women from experiencing the public space in a manner equivalent to that of the male.

As the urban populace became increasingly diverse, the potential for chance contact with strangers became a constant possibility (Nead, 2000, 70) and meant that women were liable to find themselves subject to unwanted encounters. Accordingly, Judith R. Walkowitz (1998) explores a revealing debate that played out in the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* during 1887, in which female readers complained of being plagued with unsolicited attention when out in public while male 'pests' defended their behaviour. While recognising the 'misogynistic populism' (19) of the male correspondents, Walkowitz notes that some of these correspondents raise a valid point in highlighting modes of conduct based on tacit understanding between the individuals concerned: a "middle ground" of open yet licit

sexuality' (15). Feminist interpretations, meanwhile, sometimes dealt in melodrama and stereotypes,<sup>267</sup> failing to recognise plurality of meaning. Indeed, such plurality is critical to take into account, for the heterogeneity of the public sphere meant that gendered relations of looking were destabilised in some contexts. Thus, while Simmel ([1900] 1978) saw women as less able to engage in casual relationships (as opposed to relationships entailing a close emotional bond), one cannot presume that women were never willing participants in the social dynamics of the urban environment.<sup>268</sup>

The increasingly diverse nature of the metropolis therefore fostered modes of engagement that did not conform to perceived categories of social conduct. It is, however, vital to return to the fact that visual relations were not always mutual or gender-neutral, with discourses of street harassment highlighting the lack of parity between men's and women's experiences.

Regarding the debate featured in the *PMG*, some of the male respondents argued that 'following' and 'hesitation' were tactics that they employed in order to display their intentions and that such tactics could be mistaken for persecution by those not 'in the know'. However, while women may in some cases have been knowing participants in such courtship rituals, one could question whether they were always as 'knowing' as these correspondents

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<sup>267</sup> For example, Walkowitz (1998, 11-12) refers to the feminist and social purity activist Laura Ormiston Chant, who 'is able to pick up the narrative of sexual danger and elaborate it as a fully developed feminist political melodrama, complete with rapid action, role reversals, and impersonation and disguise' (12). Moreover, Chant 'introduces a set of stereotyped characters, that is, privileged villains, passive female victims and a crusading heroine – in the person of herself' (12).

<sup>268</sup> Bech (1998) employs the term 'citysex' to describe those informal modes of relating fostered by the urban environment, with Nead (2000) providing an apt example. Discussing the London entertainment venue Cremorne Pleasure Gardens, Nead emphasises that people went there 'to look and to be looked at, to dance and to pose, to touch and to flirt' (121). Nead also refers to the cover for a piece of sheet music entitled depicting a man and woman looking over their shoulders while dancing the quadrille (a dance that involved switching partners) and exchanging a glance. Consequently, Nead suggests that this dance 'encodes the fleeting moment of the street encounter, the flirtatious exchange of looks with a stranger' (122).

maintain<sup>269</sup> and, likewise, whether they necessarily coveted such attention. In terms of the male respondents, however, it is noticeable that they emphasise the city as a place of free visual exchange and disparage any objections as evidence of naïveté. It may be that there *was* an element of naïveté among some individuals who were not familiar with city life, yet, ultimately, one gets the sense that such denigration could be used as an excuse whereby anyone who questioned the ethics of certain street conduct was branded ‘out of touch’ and living in some backwoods ‘where nobody looks at anybody’ (cited by Nead, 2000, 66).

In addition to those responses that evoke mutual awareness, the aforementioned debate also featured male responses that served a blatantly self-serving, hypocritical agenda. One correspondent, for example, argued that unless one locks women up as ‘in the East’ then ‘there is nothing [left] but to leave men perfectly free to gaze at and even follow women’ (cited by Walkowitz, 1998, 14). Here, the correspondent appeals to patriotic values of liberty yet neglects to consider women’s liberty to traverse the city without being gazed at and accosted. Walkowitz consequently refers to the issue of streetwalking as ‘a test case of English urban freedom and the right to privacy in public’ (17), emphasising competing claims as men asserted their freedom to gaze at women while women claimed their right to navigate the city free from unwanted attention. This latter wish constitutes one of the paradoxes of women’s place within the public sphere, for the bustling city space suggests the possibility of being lost in the crowd and offers an appealing prospect in a cultural context wherein women are so strongly aligned with visual spectacle.<sup>270</sup> By the same token, however, the very fact that women *are* so aligned with spectacle can hamper any project of invisibility. As noted in

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<sup>269</sup> Walkowitz (1998, 19) refers here to research suggesting an intergenerational silence and general disavowal of feminine sexuality in working class communities – a lacunae that stood in contrast to media messages of sexual glamour.

<sup>270</sup> Discussing the Victorian rational dress movement, for example, Walkowitz (2010, 433) refers to the desire (expressed by female members) to eschew decorative accoutrements in favour of ‘a fully-draped, female body that would move through the crowd unobserved.’

Chapter Four, invisibility can also be an ambivalent issue in that, while potentially liberating, it can carry more downbeat connotations – particularly if an individual sees it as their sole means of respite.

When considering the problematics of female visibility, it is therefore clear that women have often struggled to exercise control over how their image is received. As noted earlier, disguise was one method by which physiognomy was undermined during the Victorian era, and this bears further consideration here given that women in some cases adopted disguises in an attempt to achieve public anonymity.<sup>271</sup> Such attempts could be successful yet also problematic, with accounts having suggested that the disguises women employed as social investigators (when investigating issues such as female vagrancy) could result in an increased sense of vulnerability and difficulties maintaining detachment.<sup>272</sup> Disguise was not only utilised for the purposes of social investigation, either, with Victorian newspapers having reported various instances in which women were discovered to have been living and working as men.<sup>273</sup> Still, while disguise could provide a sense of freedom and anonymity, as well as access to occupations that would otherwise be untenable, it confirms the disheartening reality wherein women feel that they can only experience freedom via subterfuge.

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<sup>271</sup> One is here reminded of Lacan's (1978, 99; 107) discussion of the way in which individuals consciously present themselves in a particular way depending upon a given environment: as opposed to the more reactive responses of animals, the human 'isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask' (107).

<sup>272</sup> As Nord (1995, 115-135) details, Flora Tristan is one example of a woman who struggled to regard the city in this manner, seeing 'her idealized self' (129) in an imprisoned mother and her 'debased double' (116) in the prostitute. This difficulty in maintaining detachment is also illustrated by the endeavours of social purity activist Laura Ormiston Chant, who embarked upon a project to expose the corruption and debauchery occurring in London's West End. As Walkowitz (2010) discusses, Chant sought to blend into the crowd while retaining a sense of self-possession yet ultimately showed herself to be 'engaged with geopolitical alignments, imperialism and kinaesthetic fantasies' (430).

<sup>273</sup> One such woman had occupied the roles of barman, ship's steward, light porter and errand boy. See 'Cross-Dressing' (n.d.) for more on this and similar cases.



Ultimately then, this type of disguise can be seen to accommodate ‘the supremacy, the primacy of the male subject’ (Nord, 1991, 373) and, in this respect, relates to transvestism in a metaphorical sense. On the one hand, being able to step into the shoes of the male suggests a flexibility that can seem appealing when contrasted with rigid definitions of ‘femininity’. However, not only can the woman find herself subject to a tension between competing poles of masculinity and femininity,<sup>274</sup> there is a difference between fluidity and the sense that one has to shift to a masculine position because the only other position is so undesirable. Doane (1982, 81) aptly sums up the despondency of this scenario: ‘The idea seems to be this: it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position.’ The oppositional relationship between visibility / invisibility is therefore a thorny matter as regards women’s presence in the public sphere, and, though women could in some cases successfully employ disguises, this was not always the case. Either way, feeling that one’s only hope of experiencing freedom is via disguise is hardly a positive statement on women’s position within the social landscape.

Returning to the ongoing correspondence discussed by Walkowitz, one female correspondent noted that she herself had experienced no trouble in this environment and, in fact, found it a place where one could live ‘in peace, freedom and safety, annoyed by no gossip...and free to act as independently as in a desert’ (1998, 11). That only one correspondent expressed such a sentiment is, however, suggestive.<sup>275</sup> Not only this, the responses of some of the ‘male pests’ carry a noticeably presumptuous tone, epitomised by the assertion that ‘[t]here is nothing which tens, hundreds of thousands of girls more desire than to be addressed by unknown men

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<sup>274</sup> For more on the problems associated with trans-sex identification, see Mulvey ([1981] 1989).

<sup>275</sup> One could counter that those women who had not experienced harassment would be less likely to reply to these columns, and, of course, it is inevitable that women should differ in the extent to which they feel conscious of this issue. Nevertheless, comparing the views expressed by the male and female correspondents indicates a clash between the former’s wish to enjoy the public sphere without receiving unwanted attention and the latter’s assertion of their right to look at and accost women.

in the street' (16). This statement is expressed as though it were a fact yet it is significant that such conjectures feature men speaking on behalf of women, clearly feeling that they have adequate authority to comment on what 'hundreds of thousands' of women want.

Further to the practice of looking at and following women, photographic technology could in some cases exacerbate this scenario, with the availability and affordability of hand-held cameras in the later years of the century allowing individuals to engage in their own photographic pursuits.<sup>276</sup> Such cameras were consequently employed not merely for amateur photography but more surreptitious endeavours, and, as cameras became increasingly portable, it was possible to disguise them as all manner of objects, including parcels, watches, books and walking sticks. Though originally employed by the police, these 'detective cameras' quickly became popular with the public and instigated 'a new mania in the form of "snap shot fiends," mostly men, who took candid photographs of unsuspecting citizens, often vulnerable women' (Walkowitz, 1998, 15).<sup>277</sup> The detective camera therefore contributed to the proliferation of images of women and to the continued positioning of women as objects of visual spectacle. Consequently, the term 'detective camera' can be seen as an apt descriptor, for 'in taking someone's picture, these cameras...also took possession of the subject's identity and took authority over the presentation of the self' (Christ and Jordan, 1995, 147).

Women's experience of independence and freedom in the city could therefore be compromised by unwanted attention, and this was not simply a matter of identifying particular locales or times of day to be avoided. As Nochlin (2006, 173) notes, the

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<sup>276</sup> Photographic film was a key development in the 1880s, culminating in the production (by George Eastman in 1888) of a camera that was accessible to the average buyer.

<sup>277</sup> Having become widespread, this practice drew criticism and counteraction, with a 'Vigilante Association' being formed in England for the purpose of the 'thrashing of cads with cameras who go about in seaside places taking snapshots of ladies emerging from the deep' (*Weekly Times and Echo*, 1893, cited by Christ and Jordan, 1995, 147).

respectable woman's place in the public sphere was 'highly circumscribed by custom, by the rules of propriety, by the sexual danger that lurked in the streets and the civic arena if she should venture into it unprotected.' That is not to say that sexual danger lurked around every corner, yet there *were* genuine perils – not just physical violence but intimidation, harassment and the anxiety of feeling that one is being watched or followed. It is also apparent that harassment was not an issue exclusive to a particular class or 'type' of woman, with the increasingly diverse makeup of the city making it harder to distinguish with certainty 'who was who' and leading to frequent cases of mistaken identity.<sup>278</sup> Still, mistaken identity was by no means a prerequisite for unwanted attention, with responses to street harassment debates demonstrating that such encounters were often *not* the result of confusion.

Despite the increasing heterogeneity of the Victorian city, there remained various conventions regarding where women could and could not go. Shopping areas, in particular, enabled some women to experience a sense of autonomy and control, allowing them to move away from their typical role as objects within consumer culture in order to become consumers themselves.<sup>279</sup> On the one hand, shopping could perpetuate a woman's traditional function as a symbol of her family's wealth and status (linking women with visual display), yet Friedberg (1993, 58) points to instances in which women expressed vociferous views regarding their 'right to buy' without a husband's approval. One should not, therefore, underestimate the independence that women associated with this pursuit, nor the capacity of shopping culture to endow women with economic and visual power, with shopping emerging as an 'urban leisure activity, akin to sight-seeing' (Rappaport, 2000, 14). Even so, there is a thin line between woman as consumer and woman as consumer object, and this is indicated by the

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<sup>278</sup> Such uncertainty is highlighted by a lithograph (cited by Nead, 2000, 64) depicting a woman being accosted by a clergyman who has mistaken her for a prostitute only for her to inform him that she is waiting for a bus.

<sup>279</sup> See Rappaport (2000) for a detailed study of women and shopping culture within Victorian London.

objectification and ridicule of the female shopper, with shopping being associated with 'marketable, sexualized femininity' (Walkowitz, 1998, 7).<sup>280</sup> Consequently, those women who might have enjoyed a degree of freedom or empowerment continued to be regarded as sexualised objects, as well as targets of crude, derisive humour.<sup>281</sup>

Another problematic aspect of the association of women with shopping was its liability to reinforce existing stereotypes. For one thing, it was feared that women would become overwhelmed by the sensuous pleasures of the consumer environment (as well as their own reflection in the shop window), furthering the conception of female desire as something needing to be kept in check. Ironically, heightened response to visual stimuli has been chiefly associated with men, yet cultural codes distinguished this 'natural' male response from 'transgressive' female responses. Notions of male rationality also fostered the impression that men were fully able to exercise self-control while women were liable to fall into a state of reverie or over-excitement.<sup>282</sup> Nevertheless, it remains the case that women exercised a degree of choice, independence and visual freedom within this environment, the department store and shopping culture constituting an arena within which women could enjoy a sense of empowerment that they may not have experienced otherwise. This, however, raises a further point in that one gets a sense of women being implicitly confined to particular domains. Indeed, this continues to be a contentious subject today, with women resenting the sense that

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<sup>280</sup> As Evans (2010, 28-31) notes, this sexualisation extended beyond customers, with the 'shopgirl' raising fears that being engaged in a job that involved selling things would suggest sexual availability.

<sup>281</sup> Freud ([1905] 2002, 95) also observed the objectification that could underlie this brand of sexual humour, the recipient being impelled to visualise the acts or body parts being described and feel conscious that the harasser is also visualising them.

<sup>282</sup> Women were, for example, seen as particularly susceptible to experiencing overly sensual responses to colour, composition and so on, with Nead (2000, 187) referring to the notion that '[i]t is while women stand, absorbed and captivated by the visual image, that they are at their most vulnerable and suggestible...they empathise with the object concerned to the degree that they are able to absorb its emotions and drives' (187). This consequently reiterated the notion that women should not look, the pretext being that they were too weak-minded to handle their responses (for more on this topic, see Nead, 2000, 186-189).

they should have to avoid certain areas or modify their travel routes or manner of dress in order to try to avoid unwanted attention.<sup>283</sup>

Further to the perceived need to modify one's behaviour or appearance, one should be aware of the importance of clothing to the debate featured in the *PMG*. Some of the women featured in these pages express their exasperation at being subjected to harassment despite their conservative style of dress, while the 'pests' assert that such women were dressed more provocatively than they claim. The latter remarks are, of course, suggestive of boorish attitude whereby any woman who is subjected to harassment must have solicited it, as well as a hypocritical outlook whereby the male correspondents question women's truthfulness and motives while asserting the validity of their own behaviour. On this note, conduct books were intended to school women in the means of avoiding such unwanted attention, with readers being advised to dress and conduct themselves in a demure manner, lowering their eyes in modesty and deference and avoiding public loitering<sup>284</sup> – advice that is hardly conducive to the rambling associated with the *flâneur*. As Evans (2010, 36) points out, moreover, the onus here is on what the female body does *not* do, such as not eliciting reactions and, if one is recognised, remaining impervious.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> See Walkowitz (1998, 20-21) for more on present-day experiences of street harassment.

<sup>284</sup> This ties in with modern-day research into gendered public behaviour: Bartky (1990, 68-69) discusses women's tendency to be more constricted in their posture and movement in contrast to men, who tend to expand into the available space and be more freely tactile in their associations with the opposite sex. Likewise, women are expected to maintain more reserved, deferent facial expressions. Such stipulations are also underscored in a 1971 feminist 'consciousness-raising' piece that summarises the everyday requirements and vulnerabilities associated with 'femininity':

[P]ay attention at all times to keeping your knees pressed tightly together...Pay a lot of attention to your clothing...Every time a man walks past you, avert your eyes and make your face expressionless...It's a way to avoid at least some of the encounters we've all had with strange men who decided we looked available' (Willamette Bridge Liberation News Service, 1971, cited in Bordo, 1999, 246).

<sup>285</sup> Chapman (1996, 31) points out that *tableau vivant* manuals adopted a similar stance and instructed female players to cast their eyes downwards so as to signify modesty (though they are permitted to look

Such advice therefore encourages women to exist in a constant state of self-surveillance that is liable to breed an oppressive sense of self-consciousness. Also, while it could be seen as pragmatic in advising women on how to deal with unwanted attention, it often suggests a deferral of responsibility. In terms of clothing, for instance, conduct books make the naive assumption that if a woman dresses and behaves ‘modestly’ then she will not have any problems – any unwanted advances ‘must’ be the result of failure or transgression on her part. Even some female responses to street harassment debates shared this outlook: regarding the debate featured in *The Times* during 1862, Nead (2000, 63) notes that one female respondent agreed that the males concerned were ‘despicable idlers’ yet maintained that if girls would insist on wearing loud clothing then what did they expect? As with male replies, there is a presumptuousness to this response in that there is nothing to say that the young woman in question had been dressed in such a way (her father replied to affirm that she had been dressed in ‘plain mourning’). This does not mean that there could not have been bias or falsification on both sides, yet it remains evident that, if a woman reported being accosted, the typical response was that it was at least partially through some fault of her own.

The notion that women were inevitably to blame for any such unwanted encounters is epitomised by a comment made by anatomist E. Ray Lankester, who stated that, if women ‘really do wish to be left alone,’ they should dress ‘plain and unappetizing and avoid the haunts of men’ (1887, cited by Walkowitz, 1998, 5). The remarks of the women featured in the letter pages, however, reflect the very real difficulty in avoiding unwanted attention, and the simple fact that dressing modestly does not shield one from the gazes and remarks of others. Lankester’s comments also imply that women should constantly keep in mind where they should and should not go if they do not wish to risk unwanted attention, yet, while there

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upwards when pleading for God’s intervention), the female’s gaze being associated with transgression and necessitating punishment.

were – and are – areas and venues that one recognises as male-dominated, there remains the question as to what extent the city space can be deemed ‘male territory’. Is one to include the city streets within this category? Likewise, entertainment districts and venues? One of the key aspects of the later Victorian era was, after all, urban heterogeneity, and it is therefore simplistic to assume that women could easily avoid unwanted attention by staying away from a small number of easily definable ‘male haunts’.

While the public space was subject to a degree of segregation, the mixed populace of the streets and entertainment venues bears further discussion, for discourses of street harassment have demonstrated that such spaces could be highly contested. It is therefore vital to explore in more detail the various gazes that existed in the public sphere during this time, including the extent to which they intersected. In general terms, it would be an exaggeration to say that women were not permitted to look during the Victorian era. In fact, Kern’s (1996, 76-78) analysis of nineteenth century art shows that ‘women are often depicted actively looking at all sorts of things, more intriguingly and more imaginatively, if not more intently, than men whose gazes are repeatedly pinned on women.’ Women’s increasing presence in the public sphere could likewise entail a degree of visual agency, with scholars having noted an ‘emergent culture of female spectatorship in...the modern city’ (Chadwick, 2002, 241-242). The consumer gaze was one mode of spectatorship that opened up to Victorian women, yet the heterogeneous urban landscape also invited a range of dynamic interchanges. Here, Nead (2000) cites Holywell Street (a narrow, Elizabethan lane that was home to purveyors of obscene works) as one such space, this being an area frequented by a diverse array of passers-by – including women, who could be found ‘walking, talking, shopping, looking in windows, brushing up against obscenity and respectability and forcing a constant renegotiation of modern identities’ (182). It is evident, moreover, that the flirtatious behaviour that sometimes

took place within the urban sphere involved a degree of ocular agency on the part of the female, with women being (at least in some instances) actively engaged in the relay of gazes and encounters that went on in the streets and other popular social venues during this time.

It would therefore be naive to assume that Victorian women simply did not look and that they were never participants in those visual exchanges that existed in the Victorian urban landscape. Even so, it is imperative not to overestimate women's visual freedom. Regarding the artwork produced during this period, for instance, Cherry (1993, 118) states that '[t]he visual representation of women looking produced definitions of the appropriate targets of a feminine gaze. Women's pictures depict middle-class women looking at women and occasionally at men of their own family circle.' Furthermore, while pointing to the diversity of women's gazes in nineteenth century art, Kern (1996, 78) acknowledges that women were 'just not shown actively looking at men with clear erotic purposes'.<sup>286</sup> Within the art world, then, looking was not forbidden to women but remained heavily circumscribed, and the same is true of women's participation in the visual dynamics of the city. On this note, one must recognise the anxieties raised by women's increased public presence during this time, with Holywell Street having been criticised not merely for its obscene material but because of its potential effects upon women. As Nead (2000, 184) elaborates:

The display of visual images alone was believed to entrap women and induce in them a vulnerable state of reverie, but when these images took on the mantle of obscenity, then the dreams might create sexually entranced women in the middle of the metropolis.

This consequently provided further motivation for conduct guides to urge women not to look and dawdle, building on concerns regarding women's supposed weakness and lack of self-

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<sup>286</sup> That this has not always been the case has been demonstrated by Ogden (2005), who references several pre-nineteenth century texts that feature surprisingly frank depictions of female lust. He emphasises, however, that such depictions had disappeared by the Victorian era. Likewise, Cherry (1993, 118) affirms that women's active looking was only allowable via 'the philanthropic, domestic and metropolitan gaze'.



control. Modesty was another key factor here, for, '[a] downcast gaze was considered a sign of feminine modesty...while a direct glance at a male stranger would be construed as an indicator of sexual deviancy' (Cherry, 1993, 118). Indeed, though women *did* participate in the visual relations at entertainment venues and public spaces of the time, this participation often took the form of 'furtive glances' (Nead, 2000, 65) that are hardly akin to the blatant gazes of some of the city's male inhabitants, nor the 'male gaze' as featured in countless cultural texts. One should consequently avoid assuming that an increased public presence endowed women with newfound visual freedom, for, in the same way that women's presence within the public sphere was not unbounded, etiquette guides included strict stipulations regarding comportment and facial expressions – including women's eyes.<sup>287</sup> The male, by contrast, was subject to no such stipulations, the politics of the gaze ultimately being focused 'not on respectable women secretly enjoying transgressive commodities in the shop windows of a secluded street...but in the frankly sexualised stares of men' (Cherry, 2003, 93).

### *Nameless and Friendless*

As stated earlier in this thesis, one of the functions of presenting women as objects of vision has been to prevent women from engaging in outward-directed vision. Evoking anxiety on a psychoanalytic and cultural level, the notion of an unrestrained female gaze can serve as a motive for containment via those texts that entail the suppression or punishment of the female or the trope of female narcissism. However, women's increased public presence merits discussion of the difficulties associated with visual agency in this heterogeneous environment. 'The Lady of Shalott' demonstrates that to break out of the male spectator / female spectacle template is not simply a question of awareness or wilfulness, and Emily Mary Osborn's 1857

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<sup>287</sup> As Goody (2006, 462) notes, women were walkers rather than voyeurs, with conduct books taking it as given that women may be out in public but still setting out firm guidelines regarding visual conduct.

painting *Nameless and Friendless* (fig. 5.9) is similarly emblematic, here utilising the contemporary setting of an art dealer's shop. Further to the parallels that Tennyson's poem suggests between the Lady and the artist, Osborn's painting focuses on a female artist. In doing so, it highlights the tensions that can arise between the role of artist and the role of artistic object, the woman finding herself forced into the latter role.

In Osborn's painting, we are presented with an image of a young woman who is visiting an art dealer in an attempt to secure a sale. The woman's demeanour is, however, far from confident, and the painting includes a range of signifiers from which we can infer the conditions that have prompted this visit. Most obviously, the woman is clad in black and is likely to be in a state of mourning, while the absence of a wedding ring suggests that she is an orphan (a reading that the painting's title further encourages). Further to this, we assume that the young boy by whom she is accompanied is likely to be her brother, and that her visit to the dealer is driven by financial hardship. If we take into account the woman's cloak and rain-soaked umbrella, as well as the inclement weather depicted in the exterior of this scene, we gather that the woman has potentially made a long and arduous journey to visit the dealer. The painting consequently gives the impression that the woman's visit is based on necessity rather than desire and ambition, and Osborn's depiction creates a strong aura of nervousness, vulnerability and dejection. The woman's black ensemble certainly plays a role in this respect but her expression and stance are also crucial, her pallid face – and her eyes – cast downwards while she nervously pulls at a piece of string.

Given that women were increasingly present in the public sphere during the Victorian era, it would be simplistic to see this scene as merely flagging up the awkwardness or shock resulting from a woman daring to venture outside the home. Indeed, the principal female figure is not the only woman featured in this scene, for Osborn also depicts a woman

departing the shop. This woman is likewise accompanied by a young male chaperone yet is dressed in finery and seemingly about to enter a carriage. This woman is likely to be a customer (the young boy carrying her purchases), with her clothing signalling her status as a member of the bourgeoisie. By contrast, the main female figure is not engaging in leisure pursuits but attempting to sell her work. It is at this point that the topic of respectability comes into focus, for the woman is encroaching on conventionally 'masculine' terrain by entering an art dealer's shop with the aim of securing a sale. However, while she has been traversing the public sphere (as was necessary for an artist), her nervousness and despondency detract from any sense of empowerment. The painting as a whole consequently highlights that the heterogeneous population of the city brought about a sense of unease regarding the undermining or muddying of established male and female roles.

Keeping in mind the association of women with modesty and domesticity (and the corresponding association of men with work, finance and politics), we can see that the central character in Osborn's painting is engaging in a potentially transgressive act. This goes beyond the standard categorisation of women as pure or fallen, though such polarisation is suggested within the painting: the woman departing the shop exemplifies respectable femininity while two male customers are looking at an image of a ballerina whose bare arms and legs carry sexual connotations. As will be seen presently, the male customers also play a key role in the visual politics of this painting. When it comes to the central female figure, however, Osborn 'introduces a third figuration of femininity, the middle-class working woman who could not easily be categorised in terms of either polarity and whose respectability, the basis of her class identity and her sexuality, is at risk' (Cherry, 1993, 79). So, again, we are presented with an image that troubles clear-cut definitions, and, in doing so,

reflects the social destabilisations and resultant anxieties that were occurring around the mid-nineteenth century.

While the woman in this scene may be engaging in a 'transgressive' act, her actions are based on necessity rather than ambitiousness. This is a key point in that it tempers the painting's potential transgressiveness by employing a prolific 'type' featured in literature and paintings of the time: the 'distressed gentlewoman'. As Cherry (1993, 78-80) has observed, the motif of the wronged and dejected woman is a running theme in Osborn's work, *Nameless and Friendless* being a case in point. By depicting the woman in a state of mourning and visibly nervous, Osborn helps offset the blatant indecency that could otherwise have been attributed to the painting. This particular mode of depiction can therefore be seen as strategic, evoking mid-Victorian debates about women's roles – and women's rights. Indeed, it was in the 1850s that women began partaking in organized campaigning for equal rights in relation to employment and education, while legislative reforms relating to marriage and divorce were also instigated during this time. The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, for example, not only made the process of divorce less burdensome but restored the property rights of female divorcees. One should not imagine that such legislation always placed men and women on equal footing however, for, while the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 allowed men to file for divorce on the grounds of adultery, it did not allow women the same right. Likewise, only the husband was permitted to claim damages against a third party.<sup>288</sup> 1857 was also notable in that the Married Women's Property Act – which would have allowed women to retain ownership of all earnings and property gained after marriage – failed to pass. It was not until 1870 that this Act finally came into being, and it would take a

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<sup>288</sup> In contrast to the male, females seeking divorce had to prove not only the occurrence of adultery but further evidence in the form of desertion for at least two years or, alternatively, factors such as abuse, incest or bigamy. This remained the case until 1923 when the grounds for divorce became the same for both men and women.

renewal of this legislation in 1882 to allow women to keep all goods and property attained before and during marriage. So, while the 1850s was a time of increasing change and heterogeneity, it would be wrong to see this purely as a time of progression, for topics relating to women's rights and independence were subject to considerable contention.

Osborn thus makes palpable the tensions surrounding respectable roles and activities for women during this time, yet most interesting for the purposes of this thesis are the visual relations depicted within this painting – in particular, the alignment of gazes between the painting's characters and the relevance of gender to this arrangement. One important individual is the art dealer himself, who looks disparagingly at the woman's painting and occupies a position of power upon which the woman's success depends. The woman's unease is apparent, for all she can do is await the dealer's verdict (which we can already predict based on the dealer's expression and the painting's title). That she is standing is noticeable, with an empty chair to the right of the painting suggesting that she has not been offered a seat. The chair featured on the opposite side of the painting, meanwhile, is occupied by a man holding the aforementioned print of a ballerina. He is accompanied by a male companion who stands next to him, leaning forwards in a way that suggests that both men have hitherto been engaged at looking at this picture and enjoying its scopophilic pleasures. However, this shared gaze has been diverted to a new object: the nervous young woman attempting to sell her painting.

Stance and expression are especially relevant here, the occupant of the chair being seated in a relaxed position while angling his head to the right as he casts his eyes backwards towards the nervous woman. His companion, meanwhile, continues to lean forward (the same stance that he had occupied while gazing at the ballerina) yet his gaze is directed upwards towards the real woman. His gaze is all the more striking given that it is coupled with his lurching pose

and downturned head. This mix of posture and expression draws attention to his eye line, for it is specifically his *eyes* that are directed at the woman. Moreover, this combination of stance and gaze has the result of making him appear a predatory figure. His seated companion, meanwhile, has not shifted his position to a significant extent but has merely angled his head in the woman's direction in a manner that suggests that she has 'caught his eye'. Neither man is positioned in a manner whereby his gaze is naturally angled in the woman's direction. Rather, both have interrupted their gaze at the picture to cast their gaze at the woman. That they are *not* standing and looking at her directly lends a more sinister feeling to the scene and evokes the feelings of self-consciousness that, as previously discussed, women have attested to feeling in the public sphere.

The scene consequently echoes the earlier example of the Lady Godiva, for, while the male onlookers are included in Osborn's painting, we are made conscious that these men do not need to stand and glare at the woman – in fact, we do not know for sure whether the woman is aware that she is being looked at. All the same, we gather the woman's overall feelings of self-consciousness at occupying a masculine domain and knowing that she is subject to scrutiny. Consequently, Osborn's painting conveys the Sartrean notion of *feeling* oneself to be subject to another's gaze, emphasising that this is sufficient to create a sense of unease. The male characters in the painting are, of course, subject to no such unease, with the two customers appearing relaxed and at home in this space. It is also noticeable that the other male figures pictured in this scene are engaged in looking at or working on something: the woman's younger brother looks at the dealer directly, the dealer looks at the woman's painting, a man outside the shop looks at one of the prints featured in the window, while a couple of other shop workers busy themselves with work. All this activity has the result of making the woman's state of helplessness doubly evident. Her posture (with her shoulder

curled inwards) suggests a vain attempt to shield herself from the dealer's assessment but, ultimately, there is nothing for her to do but stand with her eyes cast downwards in a gesture of modesty while she is forced into the role of visual spectacle. She certainly cannot look directly at the dealer or other customers, for her respectability has been compromised enough already. Moreover, given that returning the gaze 'confirms the viewer's right to look and appraise' (Pollock, 1988, 75), looking back could itself potentially be misinterpreted as an invitation rather than an act of defiance or censure.

The female artist shares a similarity with the ballerina depicted in the artistic print in that both work within the creative arts yet have been transformed into objects of vision. As noted earlier, the ballerina is depicted with bare limbs and, placed in contrast to the departing female customer, suggests prominent binaries of respectable / fallen, modesty / immodesty and so on. The sexual connotations of this image are all the more apparent given that the ballerina has attracted the keen attention of the two male patrons whose gaze has now shifted to the female artist: a shift that has the effect of transferring the scopophilic gaze – and the sexualisation of the object – to this woman. One effect of this is to reiterate the predictability of the male gaze, which is, as usual, focused on a female object, thus highlighting 'the impoverished visual predilections of men' (Kern, 1996, 78). The gazes of the male characters also make it particularly noticeable that the woman does *not* look. Osborn's painting consequently highlights the hypocrisy of this scenario, for there are no stipulations against the male customers gazing at the woman. *Their* respectability is not at risk, after all, and the woman is left in a powerless position.

By depicting a scene in which a female artist is reconceived as an artistic object, *Nameless and Friendless* covers similar thematic terrain as the *Lady of Shalott*, the principal characters in both works being denied the right to look while ultimately being defined by their 'to-be-

looked-at-ness'. This, of course, relates to contemporary debates regarding the role of the female artist. In the same way that women were increasingly present in the public sphere, the role of artist was not simply denied to women. In fact, this was seen as one of the more respectable vocations for the 'fairer sex', with many women producing and exhibiting works of art.<sup>289</sup> Emily Mary Osborn was one such woman, with *Nameless and Friendless* having been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1857 and the International Exhibition in 1862. Indeed, like Elizabeth Siddal, Osborn took a proactive approach to her career, partaking in evening classes and private lessons as well as studying and working in a gallery. Osborn consequently became one of the most successful female artists of the Victorian era, this success (including the sale of *The Governess* to Queen Victoria following its exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1860) enabling her to set up her own studio. Even so, female artists were not afforded the same freedom and respect as their male counterparts. One notable disparity is that women were denied access to life drawing classes, and, thus, to what was seen as the ultimate phase of training for those seeking a career as a great artist.<sup>290</sup> Female artists were also prohibited from studying in the Royal Academy schools until 1860 and could, in some cases, be subject to familial conflict and administrative opposition regarding their entrance into and progression within formal art education (and, as Cherry [2003, 87] points out, entrance required parental permission).

Another obstacle facing female artists was the prevailing idea that only certain types of artistic output such as still life or portraiture were respectable for women. This was fortuitous in the sense that the rise of the bourgeoisie by the middle of the century led to a call for more

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<sup>289</sup> As Losano (2008, 2) points out, Census figures indicate that 'the number of women who chose to officially call themselves professional female artists doubled between 1851 and 1871; the number steadily increased as the century wore on.'

<sup>290</sup> Nochlin (1988, 158) specifies that this was a period in which study of the nude 'was essential to the training of every young artist, to the production of any work with pretensions to grandeur, and to the very essence of History Painting, generally accepted as the highest category of art.'



modest genre pieces rather than the epic paintings favoured by the aristocracy.<sup>291</sup> Not only this, the concept of the artist as a lone genius set apart from society began to lose sway, with Losano (2008, 20-21) pointing out that, though the idea of the Byronic hero lived on via the Pre-Raphaelites, public perception moved towards a greater emphasis on the artist as socially engaged and working for the public good. This shift consequently benefitted female artists, for the ‘individual genius’ trope had always been quintessentially masculine whereas the notion of the artist as moral and domestic opened up this role.<sup>292</sup> Still, there was a sense that only certain types of artistic output were appropriate and achievable for women, with ambitions of grandeur being seen as unfeminine. It was fine for women to dabble in the arts but to strive for excellence was another matter. As Cherry (2003, 75) summarises, ‘[w]omen’s entry into the profession of fine art was highly contested – discursively, institutionally and spatially.’ Accordingly, though we cannot see the details of the painting that the dealer is inspecting in Osborn’s painting, we perceive that it is a more ‘modest’ form of artistic output rather than a large, grandiose work.

While Osborn enjoyed a successful artistic career, *Nameless and Friendless* shows her awareness of the difficulties facing female artists. Osborn’s interest in such matters is further demonstrated by her own association with ‘The Ladies of Langham Place’ circle which, spearheaded by Barbara Bodichon,<sup>293</sup> convened on a regular basis throughout the 1850s and emerged as one of Britain’s first organised campaigns for women’s rights. It is also notable that 1857 was not only when *Nameless and Friendless* was first exhibited but was the year in

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<sup>291</sup> See Nochlin (1988, 170-171) for more on this subject.

<sup>292</sup> Regarding female writers’ depictions of the woman artist, for example, Losano (2008, 7) observes that the artist’s outsider status is typically ‘materially and socially instantiated, rather than emotionally depicted...Artist-heroines are generally too busy trying to make a living to indulge in expressions of artistic angst.’

<sup>293</sup> Bodichon was particularly active in championing women’s rights during the 1850s, having published her *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* in 1854 and set up the *English Women’s Journal* in 1858. Like Emily Mary Osborn, Bodichon was also a successful artist whose work was exhibited at such venues as the Royal Academy and the Salon.

which the Society of Female Artists was founded – precisely because of the difficulties that women faced when exhibiting and selling their output. There is thus a paradox in that art was one of the professions that was more amenable to women yet was nevertheless liable to encroach on masculine terrain and was subject to the same male / female divisions that operated in wider society. As Nochlin (1988) has stressed, the concept of the artist as an innate genius has had the effect of making the historical absence of any great women artists seem to result from women's lack of any such a quality when, really, this disparity is due to 'the very nature of our institutional structures themselves and the view of reality which they impose' (152).<sup>294</sup> Women may not have been confined to the home, but their artistic endeavours and attempts at independence were subject to strictures that were not applicable to the male – particularly in relation to notions of modesty, delicacy and respectability.<sup>295</sup>

The issue of paramount interest here is the tension between vision and visibility. As noted throughout the preceding chapters, women have often found invisibility a preferable option in a world in which recognition has all too often been on a superficial level and entailed unwanted attention. However, in their drive for equality and recognition, women have also at times insisted on visibility. To be invisible can, after all, lead to an 'out of sight, out of mind' scenario that is hardly conducive to women's attempts to gain recognition.<sup>296</sup> Suffrage

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<sup>294</sup> Discussing the trope of the individual (male) genius, Nochlin (1988, 155) elaborates:

[T]he apparently miraculous, nondetermined, and asocial nature of artistic achievement; this semi-religious conception of the artist's role is elevated to hagiography in the nineteenth century, when art historians, critics, and, not least, some of the artists themselves tended to elevate the making of art into a substitute religion, the last bulwark of higher values in a materialistic world.

Also see Casteras (1992, 209).

<sup>295</sup> On this note, Cherry (2003, 87) points out that the Female School of Art (founded in 1842) was based at The Strand from 1848 to 1852: a location that proved contentious due to its proximity to the notorious Holywell Street.

<sup>296</sup> Responding to the assertion that real power lies in 'remaining unmarked' (Phelan, 1993, 6), Cheng (2002, 246) cautions that it can be hard to distinguish invisibility as a tactic from that 'subliminal policy of

campaigning is one of the most obviously examples of this insistence on visibility, but female artists also employed similar tactics. Cherry (2003, 87) states, for instance, that the later 1840s and 50s saw aspiring female artists invading the spaces and lectures of the Royal Academy, challenging their exclusion from this sphere by exerting their physical presence. Still, visibility can and has been problematic for women in that it has all too often led not to political recognition and equality but to the positioning of women as objects of vision. As Phelan (1993, 10) notes, after all, the assumption that greater visibility equals greater power is erroneous, for if this were so ‘then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture.’ A similar paradox is evidenced by the tensions to which female artists have been subject. The role of artist entails the *creation* of images, yet women have typically been aligned with the image itself. This consequently produces a cultural tension that is unique to women, for men have not been associated with visual spectacle in this way. Certainly, this was the case during the time period in which Osborn completed her painting, with Cherry (1993, 81) remarking that ‘[c]ultural practices and discourses in the 1850s increasingly categorised women as...a target for aesthetic pleasure as much as a figure of moral inspiration.’

*Nameless and Friendless* thus bears witness to the difficulties that women have faced in negotiating gendered spectatorship within the public sphere, its focus on the female artist adding a further element of interest by highlighting the transformation of the producer of art into a work of art. Ultimately, though, the scenario that Osborn depicts is by no means limited to artists but underscores the tensions discussed earlier in this chapter. In the same way that women complained of unwanted attention when traversing the public sphere, the

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invisibility administered by the dominant culture to absent its “abnormal” members’. Cheng consequently suggests that, though being ‘over-visualized but mostly muted’ (247) can be disempowering, ultimately ‘presence...offers more possibility than absence (246)’.

central female figure in this painting is positioned as the object of a sexualising, objectifying gaze that she cannot counteract if she wishes to retain her respectability. So, while the public sphere became more amenable to women as the century progressed, the space that Osborn depicts is not gender-neutral. This consequently reaffirms that, while men have typically had the luxury of not having to think about their sex on a daily basis, women have constantly been reminded that they are, first and foremost, part of the cultural category 'woman'. By linking the picture of the ballerina with the real-life woman, Osborn underlines the way in which living and breathing women become transformed into images. Unlike the static image, however, real women have experienced unease, despondency and distress at occupying such a position. Osborn's painting consequently highlights the difficulties that women have experienced in extricating themselves from their association with visual spectacle, pointing to 'the serious meaning of the fact that social spaces are policed by men's watching of women' (Pollock, 1988, 76).

Women's engagement with the public sphere was therefore limited, and, though one should not underestimate the sense of freedom and autonomy that some women experienced, this does not alter the restrictions placed on where women could go and the activities in which they were permitted to engage, nor women's fears regarding unwanted attention. Such issues presented not only practical but emotional difficulties,<sup>297</sup> and this is the nature of a heterogeneous environment that can bestow freedom yet also lead to unsolicited encounters. Herein lies the problem, for, while women were increasingly present in the public sphere, the longstanding association of women with spectacle persisted. What accounts of street harassment make clear is that women did not enjoy any and all attention, nor revel in being

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<sup>297</sup> As Nord (1991, 373) points out, 'female subjectivity, especially and acutely in the realm of public space, has no choice but to begin with woman's status as object.' This does not mean that women necessarily internalise this image, but it is important to recognise the terms by which women were defined and the impact that these terms had upon women themselves.

made to feel that their primary role was that of an object of visual spectacle. *Nameless and Friendless* constitutes a deliberate comment upon gendered relations of looking, dramatising the equivocalness of women's public presence and emphasising that, though women were increasingly present in the city, they continued to be defined by their specified role as visual spectacle (Chadwick, 2002, 242).

## CONCLUSION

Studying visual politics within Victorian culture demonstrates that a mode of vision comparable to that of the 'male gaze' pervaded numerous social arenas, as well as artistic and literary texts, during this time. That is not to say that such a gaze was monolithic, yet the association of women with spectacle prevailed. Women's status as consumers, for example, could not prevent women from being regarded as analogous to consumer goods themselves. Likewise, the exaltation and exploitation of female youth and beauty was omnipresent within art and literature, as were dichotomised notions of male and female characteristics. The positioning of women as objects of vision was helped along by scientific theory, consumerism and advancements in optical technology, the Victorian landscape being increasingly steeped in visual imagery. Studying such topics thus demonstrates that a mode of looking analogous to the 'male gaze' was manifest in numerous areas of Victorian culture.

In addition to the aforementioned cultural factors, binary thinking has been explicated by psychoanalytic theory, with Freud's account of the culmination of the Oedipus complex being pivotal in this regard. This study has not, however, proposed that Freudian theory provides a factual account of male / female development – for one thing, it may be that anxiety regarding the female is based on difference rather than lack. Even so, the ramifications for women are the same in either case, and Freud's conception of the female as inclined to linger in a bitter, regressive state is hardly to be embraced, nor is the sense of inevitability that pervades this model. Freudian theory remains relevant, however, in that it defines a mindset that has proven influential within Western culture and led to the association of men with activity and women with passivity, this division having fostered an alignment of men with spectatorship and women with 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

In addition to activity and passivity, this thesis has emphasised that distance and proximity constitute another binary conventionally divided along male / female lines. Object relations theory has been especially useful in explicating the genesis of this division, its key emphasis being upon the importance of early relating – particularly empathetic mirroring – in shaping development. As well as the fundamental relevance of such relating in early infancy, developmental and cultural norms have encouraged the privileging / denigration of certain traits in men and in women. This has been harmful, however, because it applies rigid, limiting stipulations that are not necessarily in accord with one's own sense of subjectivity and that, by dint of the superior social status afforded to masculinity (and its repudiation of the feminine), have fostered a polarised cultural arrangement that has had significant consequences in terms of gender and spectatorship.

This thesis has, then, been dedicated to the ongoing task of examining and denaturalising this gendered binary of looking and the valuing of women for superficial traits. Darwinian theory, for example, still holds a prominent cultural status today, thus indicating the continuing need to highlight the bias of such theories and to attempt to erode their 'factual' status. Similarly, given that the gendering of visual relations is not innate, it is important to explore how it may have arisen and to highlight its constructedness, for it is only by considering how this model has developed that one can conceive of any possibility of change. As Nochlin (1988, 150) emphasises:

The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education – education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals.

This thesis has consequently summarised critical points relating to Victorian visual culture while also examining particular texts and social issues in more detail, the intention being to

provide the reader with a sense of the context under discussion while also engaging with a selection of core texts and theories.

One of the main issues addressed in this thesis is how Victorian women responded to the gendered dichotomy of vision outlined in the opening chapters. On the one hand, women have been encouraged to internalise cultural definitions of femininity and to mould themselves accordingly, yet this thesis has shown that women have often found themselves subject to tension between cultural expectations and their own sense of self. Female-authored poems demonstrate that women have questioned and criticised this brand of inequality, but, unfortunately, recognising such inequality does not free oneself from cultural expectations. This then carries the possibility of a schism emerging between cultural expectations and one's own sense of self, and various female-authored poetic texts have conveyed the distressing consequences that can arise from such conflict. However, these texts also indicate that psychological healing is not merely a question of self-acceptance, for there remain real social pressures that the individual cannot simply disregard. What is important to keep in mind is that this is not a matter of unified identity versus fragmentation. The distinction is, rather, between the complexities of subjecthood and those distressing psychological effects induced by social factors.

While highlighting the prevalence of an objectifying mode of viewing directed at women, one of the principal conjectures of this thesis has been that one should not merely dismiss or denigrate the visual faculty. Though it is understandable that feminist scholars should have sought to redress the balance whereby other senses have been denigrated in favour of the 'masculine' sense of sight, the distance upon which vision is predicated is necessary in some instances. Indeed, as this thesis has shown, both excessive closeness and excessive distance can be harmful and propagate inequality, a preferable goal being for both sexes to develop a



more balanced relationship between the two. This thesis has therefore striven not merely to reverse binaries or reorder an existing hierarchy but to explore possibilities for a mode of relating that incorporates the visual faculty while avoiding the rigid self-containment and absence of relationality that paves the way for objectification.

In addition to examining gendered binaries of vision and their effects, then, this thesis has contemplated potential modes of vision and relating that emphasise intersubjectivity: a mode of relatedness culturally coded as feminine but ideally less stifling than the sense of oppressive closeness encouraged in women. Ultimately, the ideal is to move beyond a gendered binary of dependency and abstraction, developing the capacity to recognise and respect the other as an individual: a scenario in which one is able to move back and forth between standpoints without becoming part of an undifferentiated state. Regrettably, though, this study has suggested that the widespread achievement of such a state has remained improbable, especially given the superior cultural standing afforded to the male (thus making a more balanced arrangement less desirable to some parties than to others). This does not mean that women have been entirely subjugated, for ‘even in a man’s world [woman] is still a person, and...a generator of signs’ (Lévi-Strauss, [1949] 1969, 496). Still, as Osborn’s *Nameless and Friendless* and women’s experiences of the public sphere show, escaping the association of women with ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ has proven impracticable – regardless of women’s own desire for such an outcome.

Ultimately then, while one may theorise more egalitarian relations and while literary texts may express a longing for a gaze that ‘warms’ not ‘burns’, the gendering of visual relations has been ingrained within Western culture, finding acute expression within the Victorian cultural sphere. Studying female-authored poetry helps effect recognition of the constructedness of this gendered arrangement of vision, demonstrating that women were

cognisant of and dissatisfied with the disparate qualities valued in men and women. Not only this, such texts can effectively convey the psychological turmoil that this disparity can induce. This is an area that would benefit from further study, for it is not just rich in interpretative potential but undermines the supposed naturalness and ‘rightness’ of this template, showing that women do not necessarily gain pleasure and self-worth from being positioned as objects of vision. Quite the opposite, being valued upon transient, shallow qualities can be distressing, and this is something of which female poets have been conscious. This being the case, study of such texts is valuable on both political and empathetic grounds.

## APPENDIX



**Fig 1.1**

William Etty, *Candaules, King of Lydia, Shews his Wife by Stealth to Gyges, One of his Ministers, as She Goes to Bed*, 1830. Oil on canvas.



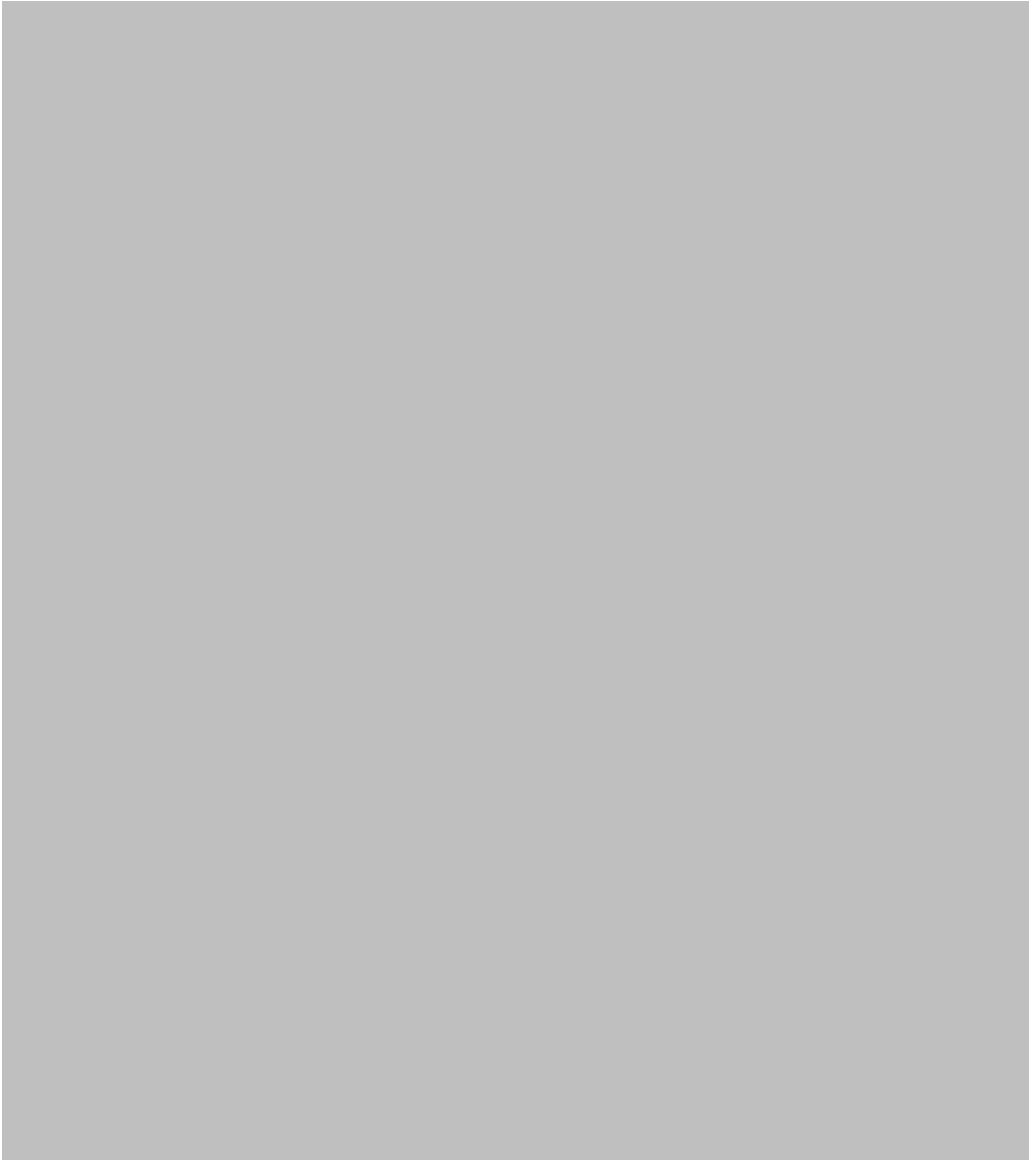
**Fig 1.2**

James Collier, *Lady Godiva*, c. 1898. Oil on canvas.



**Fig 2.1**

Edward Burne-Jones, *The Mirror of Venus*, 1877. Oil on canvas.



**Fig 2.2**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1868. Oil on canvas.



**Fig 5.1**

John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888. Oil on canvas.



**Fig 5.2**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1857. Wood engraving on paper.





**Fig 5.3**

John Everett Millais, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1854. Pen, brown ink and wash on paper.



**Fig 5.4**

Arthur Hughes, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1873. Oil on canvas.



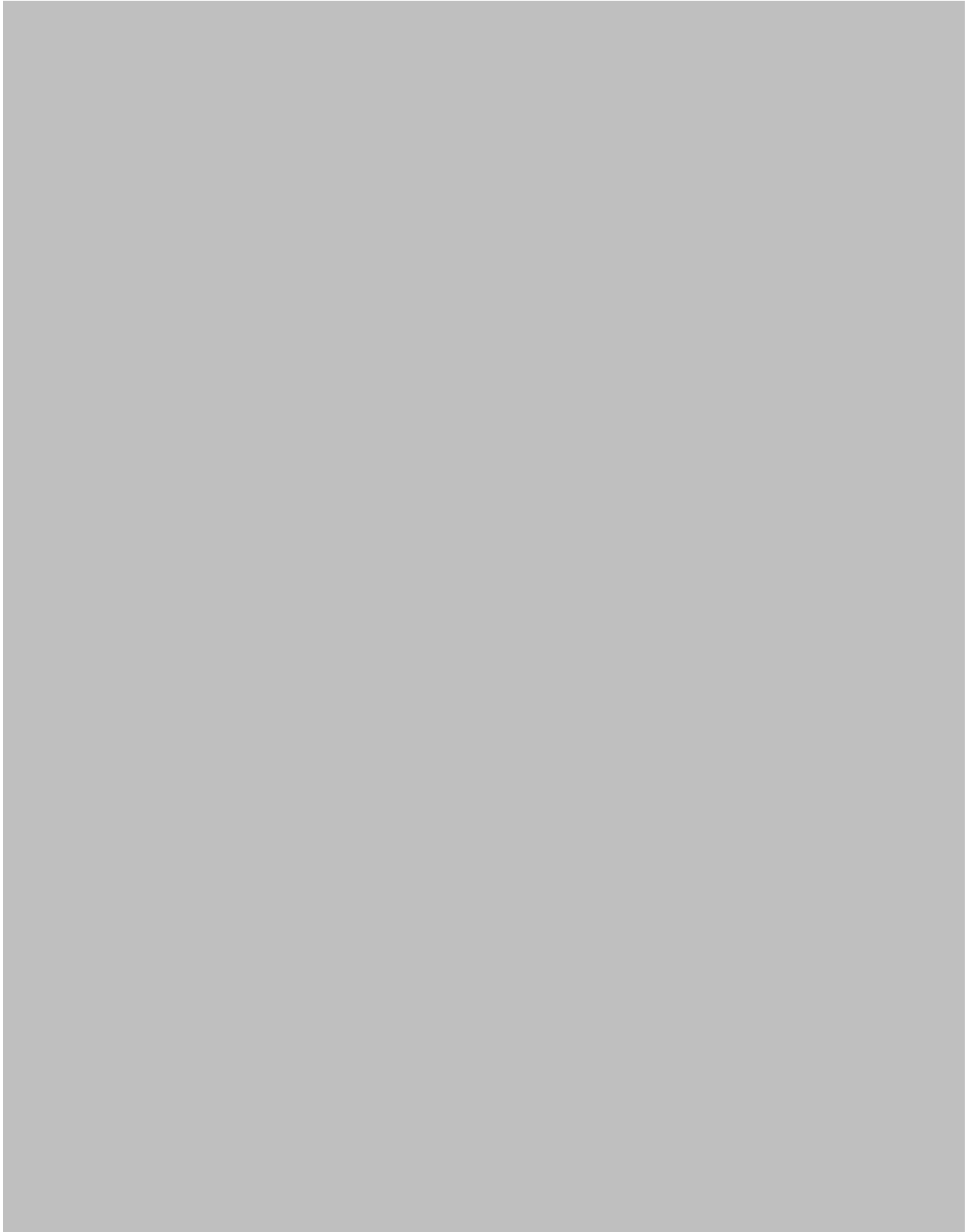
**Fig 5.5**

Arthur Hughes, *The Lady of Shalott (study)*, c. 1860. Oil on board.



**Fig 5.6**

John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott [looking at Lancelot]*, 1894. Oil on canvas.



**Fig 5.7**

William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, c. 1886-1905. Oil on canvas.



**Fig 5.8**

Elizabeth Siddal, *The Lady of Shalott at her Loom*, 1853. Pen, black ink, sepia ink and pencil on paper.



**Fig 5.9**

Emily Mary Osborn, *Nameless and Friendless*, 1857. Oil on canvas.

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