

PRE- RAPHAELITES PAINTING SHAKESPEARE’S WOMEN

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Abstract: Iconic signs such as paintings, engravings or book illustrations come into existence as a result of visual attempts at redefining the literary text to which they refer. Although they belong to a different medium, they are always conditioned and influenced by the original literary work. English painting displays a series of famous images which explicitly have their roots in literary texts. While the works of Shakespeare, Keats and Tennyson seem to determine a special connection with painting, Shakespeare’s plays are the source of one of the most inspiring subjects of the Pre-Raphaelite painters: women.

Key words: literary text, Pre-Raphaelites, Shakespeare, visual image, women

Literary texts and iconic signs such as paintings, engravings and book illustrations resemble each other in that they both display appearance as reality and have as a common source the concept of beauty. While sharing aesthetic values, literature and visual arts apply them to their medium differently.

A literary text usually borrows for a visual image, more specifically for a painting, a certain theme or moment that is going to represent the ground for a transposition resulting in a so-called “literary art”. The communication that occurs between such a transposition and its viewer expands along the particular language of visual creation and also invites the viewer to read the literary counterpart. A connection to the original is accordingly established, implying a decoding of both painting and text that may result in a complete and rejoicing appreciation of the visual art work.

The reverse of *ekphrasis*, the visual “reading” of a literary text, makes the painter a mediator between the verbal and the visual code. A visual image comes into existence

in response to a verbal stimulus; it is, to a wider or narrower extent, dictated by the original, although the transposition into another medium may be freely executed.

Painters have to face and settle the rather important issue of what to transfer from the chosen text to the image they are going to forge. They may sometimes purposely leave aside certain aspects of the literary text or raise questions without providing answers; they may, as well, make use of details that are not included in the verbal code they are transposing or even refer to moments which are only implied by the text.

During the nineteenth century the relationship between literature and art was quite close, determining certain critics to state that a dramatist is the person responsible for making good pictures; painters were quite often regarded as artists who possessed the skills required in order to render the “dramatic potential of a poet’s imagined picture”, as Martin Meisel (1983:69) remarks.

Other critics viewed the complementary character of literary works and paintings as residing in their capacity of interpreting and explaining each other. It was widely admitted that analyses of literary masterpieces had to consider artists’ interpretations of them as well.

A wide range of paintings with their roots in literature and widely known owing to exhibitions, illustrations and engravings is to be found in the 19th century British art. The literary works of Keats, Tennyson, Milton, and Shakespeare seem to possess a special connection with visual art.

According to Richard Altick (1985:255), “pictures from Shakespeare accounted for about one fifth - some 2,300 - of the total number of literary paintings recorded between 1760 and 1900”; the figure takes into account only the paintings of British artists, whose exquisite art works are preserved by museums world-wide.

The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood resorted to poetry from their beginnings and Shakespeare’s plays were the source of one of the most inspiring subjects of the Pre-Raphaelite painters: women. They expressed their belief that women are capable of healing and guiding men and strove to raise women to a high social condition. The result was the painting of a particular typology of women displaying several characteristics that include beautiful faces, large eyes, long necks, and long hair.

Despite such prominence given to a woman's face, the Pre-Raphaelites seem to have attributed to the women they painted various roles which do not appear to heighten the characters but rather cause them to be lacking in nuances and dynamics. The roles include virgins, 'femmes fatales', prostitutes, old maids and victims and may be connected to the Victorian environment and system of values and the fact that the authors of such role-building were men. Accordingly, while on the one hand they idealised women, trying to invest them with the higher state they deserved, on the other, the static poses of these women were the expression of the social milieu of the century which displayed a passive woman as the domestic axis of a household. Women could thus subsequently be perceived as merely decorating a man's life and home.

Certain feminine characters of Shakespeare's plays sharing common traits such as youth, beauty, and artlessness particularly attracted the Pre-Raphaelite painters. These were Ophelia, Juliet, and Miranda, who seemed to match the pattern of the painters' ideas about romantic love. Besides living ultimate love experiences and being the recipients of older men's will and determination, they may be perceived as symbols of female fragility and missed opportunities. And, during a period when the institution of marriage was shifting from a foundation based upon social category and wealth towards a union that tended to require sexual and romantic feelings, Shakespearean models allowed the Pre-Raphaelites to engage in constructing their feminine ideal.

Although relying upon common interest and romantic participation, the union between a man and a woman was seen, during the Victorian period, as immanently threatened by death. That "pairing of love and death with youth and beauty springs from the choice of Shakespearean heroines and the elegiac quality of many contemporary paintings", as Michael Benton and Sally Butcher (1998:53-66) consider.

The Pre-Raphaelites attempted to paint evocative and complete visual images that were connected with the literary texts but that also represented an imaginative broadening of those texts and even "reinventions" of the images which the text indirectly contains.

Pre-Raphaelites' transpositions of literary subjects seem to open a whole problematic field that involves at least two issues: the one regards the manner in which a literary text is transposed by different painters, while the other has in view the group of paintings an artist creates through handling the same literary text.

Such serial paintings are related both to their literary sources and to each other, the artists creating a visual art which does not confine itself to a single painting. As far as the means by which they deepen complexity and significance are concerned, one may notice that despite manipulating time owing to their different ways of expanding the original text, they preserve the connections with their source. An all-inclusive significance of both serial paintings and literary text may spring out, requiring the viewer's participation in unveiling it through engaging with both the visual art works and their verbal conditioning.

Usually, the paintings of such series are not painted one after another during a short period of time and accordingly they not only display interconnections but also become related to other paintings belonging to different artists transposing the same literary source. The associated text seems to be heightened by serial paintings that are sometimes considered to create visual narratives that explore the realm of the links between literature and visual art.

Various members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – Sir John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti - as well as their followers who displayed the characteristics of aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism such as John W. Waterhouse - painted images of Shakespeare's Ophelia which showed their perception both of love and of feminine victimisation. And indeed, Ophelia, the victim driven mad by a triple mischance - the rejection her lover had shown her, the absence of her brother and the death of her father – became an iconic sign of the typology of women they created.

Millais carried out thorough documentation when constructing his *Ophelia*, spending almost four months in order to depict the background on the banks of the River Hogsmill in Surrey. Furthermore he brought the painting to London and inserted the portrait of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, embodying Shakespeare's heroine, into the canvas.

Elizabeth Siddal was a model, poet and artist herself; even her early death matched the Shakespearean character she depicted. From this starting point Millais is considered to have recreated Ophelia in terms of the Pre-Raphaelites' muse.

The episode displayed cannot be seen onstage as it only exists in the lines that describe Ophelia's death:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook

That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
 Of crow – flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
 That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
 But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.
 There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
 Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
 When down her weedy trophies and herself
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
 And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
 Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
 As one incapable of her own distress,
 Or like a creature native and indued
 Unto that element. But long it could not be
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death. (*Hamlet*, act 4, scene 7, lines 167 – 184)



Ophelia by Millais

The painting develops according to an impressive visual register, exhibiting a detailed depiction of nature, of the flora of the riverbank, and of the river. A willow grows “aslant” the stream, its branches mingle with a nettle, and a robin is seen on another branch. The flowers shown floating on the river, the dog roses on the bank, the flower by Ophelia’s cheek, a pink rose by the hem of her dress, loosestrife in the painting’s upper right corner, violets around Ophelia’s neck might possess certain meanings connected with chastity and death. Millais also paints flowers that Shakespeare did not mention in the script which may show his interest in the “language of flowers”,

according to which each flower carries a symbolic meaning: the red poppy, the forget-me-nots linked with sleep and death.

Certain critics consider that the painting is an image of “woman-as-flower”, implying a fragile and passive feminine character that represents a nodal and perennial iconic image of Pre-Raphaelite painting.

Millais’ *Ophelia* shows the young woman drowning, with her palms upturned as if she is embracing death. The range of colours displayed by nature, the flowers on the heroine’s dress, the emptiness of her facial traits and her unaware eyes translate the overwhelming presence of a natural element that is going to absorb the human element.

It is considered that the painting’s impressive impact is rooted in its main contrasting registers: on the one hand, the flowers conveying the sense of nature as a living presence, and, on the other, the young woman who is drowning and who resembles, due to her open arms and upwards gaze, traditional portrayals of saints or martyrs.

Although Millais’ *Ophelia* is said to have more particularly expressed the artist’s vision of “Victorian womanhood” instead of accurately transposing Shakespeare’s character, it is an outstanding nineteenth-century work of “literary painting”. While the play shows a lunatic woman evolving towards her death through a succession of events composing a dynamic framing, Millais’ minute natural details, his heroine’s exterior “cleanliness” and inner serenity are the evidence of a motionless, almost static scene.

In contrast with Millais’ portrayal of a woman perceived as possessing the capacity of a “complete surrender”, the paintings of victimised women by Dante Gabriel Rossetti seem to involve the painter’s chivalric spirit when confronted with a woman’s degradation. During the late years of his life he painted several portraits of Ophelia which shift from “pity for the victim towards Hamlet’s despair under the crushing femme fatale”, as David Sonstroem (1970:42) has noticed. His first version of “*Hamlet and Ophelia*” was painted between 1854 and 1858 while the second one was accomplished in 1866, and despite the ten-year gap between the two paintings they both depict Hamlet as a tortured human being and Ophelia as an innocent woman rejecting him. There is yet another painting dealing with the already-mentioned character: *The First Madness of Ophelia* shows a mad, pitiable, yet frightening woman, and Rossetti might have been

thinking of the later part of Shakespeare's scene where Ophelia first shows her madness, when she recites the names of the plants.



Ophelia and Hamlet by Rossetti
(1854 – 1858)



Ophelia and Hamlet by Rossetti
(1866)



The First Madness of Ophelia by Rossetti
(1864)

Although John W. Waterhouse did not belong to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but to aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism, he too painted three versions of *Ophelia* showing her in different stages before her death: the first portrait, dating from 1889, displays a woman with gazing eyes whose hair is loose and whose dress bears the mark of negligence, lying in a field. The character seems to be integrated within the surrounding natural landscape, with flowers in her hands and hair, and the distant expression of her gaze makes her thoughts impenetrable. The background, containing a stream in the distance, does not reveal the heroine's identity if the viewer is not familiar with the subject.



Ophelia by Waterhouse (1889)

The second version of *Ophelia*, painted in 1894, shows her sitting on a log, before a lily pond, much closer to the water than in the first version, during the last moments that precede her death. Her lap and hair are adorned with flowers as in the first painting of the series; the dress she wears now is a sophisticated one, contrasting with the landscape. And again, as her eyes stare into the water, she displays the same distant look that has already appeared in the first painting.



Ophelia by Waterhouse (1894)



Ophelia by Waterhouse (1910)

In 1910 Waterhouse painted his third version of *Ophelia* which is perceived as representing the climax of his serial paintings of her. While still maintaining the flower adornment and her hair “pattern”, the woman now stands in the foreground and occupies the pictorial space. Unlike her previous appearances, the heroine is not a girl anymore but a mature Ophelia who is determined to drown herself as she gazes at the viewer.

Waterhouse's serial paintings are considered to represent "progressive moments" of Ophelia's path towards death from the young woman lying in a field to the subject coming closer to the water and, finally, to the mature woman who puts an end to the circle of her destiny.

The Pre-Raphaelites - belonging to the Brotherhood or part of aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism – painting Shakespeare's women faced and settled an issue of extreme importance that occurs when transposing literary texts into paintings: they either abandoned certain aspects of the literary text or made use of details that were not included in the verbal code they were transposing or even referred to moments which were only implied by the text.

The particular typology of women they painted, conditioned and influenced by the original literary works, yet imaginatively broadening them or reinventing indirectly contained text images, developed into famous images of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal woman. During a period when the institution of marriage was tending to require sexual and romantic feelings, Shakespeare's heroines allowed the Pre-Raphaelites to engage in constructing new feminine characters, with Ophelia – a victim driven mad by a triple mischance – becoming an iconic sign of the typology they created.

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