The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

The Pre-Raphaelites and the Victorian Novel

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley in volume one of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1863) exhibits a curious amalgamation of high and popular culture and exemplifies the Victorian novelists’ reliance on Pre-Raphaelite visual art to engage their readers in complex ways. On this occasion the narrator at once endorses and repudiates Pre-Raphaelite art, in the process gaining common ground with both its advocates and detractors. The exquisite appeal of Braddon’s Pre-Raphaelite portrait is intensified by its sharp contrast with mainstream art ornamenting the antechamber leading to Lady Audley’s boudoir, where her recently painted, full-length portrait still stands on the easel. Looking at notable and valuable masterpieces by artists such as Philips Wouvermans, Nicolas Poussin, and Salvator Rosa, Robert Audley nods his head and, addressing his friend George Talboys, remarks with boredom, “there are our friend’s eternal white horses . . . ha—hum.” But when he first looks at Lady Audley’s portrait, he is transfixed by its splendor, exclaiming to George, “it’s an extraordinary picture.” No doubt by then the reader is anxious to “see” the portrait that has attracted the unperturbed bachelor’s attention.

Yes; the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. . . . No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth that hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. . . .

Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in this strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace. Indeed,
the crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, the glowing colours of each accessory of the minutely-painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one. (70–71)

Like Robert, George is struck by the portrait though he does not acknowledge the reason to either Robert or Alicia. Yet the reader knows at this point that George has recognized his former wife. Emotional intensity, one of the characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite art, not only pervades this picture but also consumes its immediate viewers, Robert and George, and in turn the reader. By 1861, when *Lady Audley’s Secret* first appeared in the magazine *Robin Goodfellow*, Braddon’s readers could have imaginatively matched this portrait to an array of Pre-Raphaelite femmes fatales—Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Bocca Baciata* (1859) and Edward Burne-Jones’s *Sidonia von Bork* (1860) (the most notorious)—that they had seen in galleries or in engraved reproductions in illustrated magazines or papers. In drawing this intertextual portrait, the narrator establishes a common ground with the reader, grounding the fictional in the real, the sensational in the actual. The attention to the nuances of details, each hair painted with “every glimmer of gold,” the unorthodox treatment of light and shadow, their interplay captured in her hair rather than harmoniously distributed throughout the entire portrait, the brilliance of coloring in the features of her face, the pouting lips (which caused an outrage when Rossetti exhibited *La Bocca Baciata*), her beautiful yet fiendish expression, the minute details in the objects of the background, all salient features of Pre-Raphaelite art, outraged or delighted contemporary reviewers.² Replete with signifiers, Lady Audley’s Pre-Raphaelite portrait adumbrates future events. For example, the crimson dress with folds “that looked like flames” foreshadows her later attempt at setting on fire the hotel where Robert stays when she discovers that he suspects her of being instrumental in George Talboys’s disappearance.

In the same scene, when Robert avers, his initial enthusiasm having subsided, “But I don’t like the portrait; there’s something odd about it,” Alicia, his cousin and Lady Audley’s stepdaughter, brings up yet another salient feature of Pre-Raphaelite art, the depiction of idiosyncratic expression congruent with the subject’s psychology:³ “‘I’ve a strange fancy on that point, I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes.’” (73). While Alicia alludes to the Pre-Raphaelites’ preference for the depiction of expression over beauty, she affirms the readers’ aware-
The Pre-Raphaelites and the Victorian Novel

ness of the plot and knowledge of Pre-Raphaelite art. In the process readers are invited to collaborate with the writer by contributing their own knowledge to the construction of the narrative. Yet such invitation is not an attempt simply to establish a rapport with the reader on aesthetic grounds but also to involve the reader in sociopolitical constructions of gender. Lady Audley’s infantile face, which proves irresistible to everyone, for example, is representative of the Victorian culture’s worship of the child-woman, the Angel in the House who in Braddon’s case turns into a self-aggrandizing “fiend.” As the narrator identifies and distances herself from Lady Audley’s Pre-Raphaelite portrait, she both conceals and reveals contemporary anxieties over Pre-Raphaelite transgressions of gender constructs.

By no means can we overlook the paradoxical perspective governing Lady Audley’s Pre-Raphaelite portrait. By extending her power beyond the traditional domestic constraints, the narrator seems to empower her, yet at the same time to weaken her by casting her as a stereotype, a femme fatale, “a beautiful fiend.” And though undoubtedly modern, the portrait, we are told, exudes an aura of “quaint medieval monstrosities.” In this respect, then, this portrait is also representative of the paradoxical perspectives embodied in Pre-Raphaelite art from the very beginning of the movement in 1848 till the end, in the early 1900s. Such seemingly incongruous concepts as revivalism and modernity, realism and sensationalism, “perverse ugliness” and excessive beauty, eroticism and spiritualism, scientific accuracy and symbolism generated vituperative responses in the early years. Victorian spectators, particularly of early Pre-Raphaelite exhibits, were often repulsed, perplexed, and unsettled by the fears and anxieties the unorthodox Pre-Raphaelite vision disclosed. Transgressing aesthetic, social, and gender boundaries, the Pre-Raphaelite avant-garde gaze revealed hitherto unexplored perspectives as, for instance, unconventional beauty in conventional ugliness, feminine fragility in masculinity, and masculine strength in conventional femininity.4

Lady Audley’s striking portrait captures contradictory perspectives, adding richness and complexity to the novel, extending its narrative boundaries, and involving the reader in its fictional construction. Certainly this sort of complexity was also appealing to famous novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, subjects of this work. A letter to Edward Bulwer-Lytton reveals yet another reason for Braddon’s redrawing of Pre-Raphaelite art in her novels: “I have learned to look at everything in a mercantile sense, and write solely for the circulating library reader whose palette [sic for palate] requires strong meat, and is not very particular as to the quality. . . . Now your kind interest arouses an ambition which was . . . utterly dead. . . . I
want to be artistic and to please you. I want to be sensational, and to please Mudie’s subscribers. . . . Can the sensational be elevated by art, and redeemed from all its coarseness?” Other novelists as well as reviewers would have agreed that the connection of the novel with the visual arts would enrich and elevate it. On several occasions in her bestseller Lady Audley’s Secret, Braddon did not hesitate to make conspicuously clear the connection between the sensation novel and Pre-Raphaelite art. By contrast, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, and Thomas Hardy preferred subtle and inconspicuous allusions to the Pre-Raphaelites, complicating even further the intertextual and contextual connections in which they engaged their readers. Pre-Raphaelite art, which Braddon explicitly addresses in Lady Audley’s Secret, is intricately embedded in the subtext of these writers’ novels. This chapter explores the most significant affinities Victorian novelists shared with the Pre-Raphaelites and the predominant reasons that compelled them to redraw Pre-Raphaelite paintings in their novels.

The Pre-Raphaelite Revolution

Three decades after the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood caused a maelstrom in Victorian society, Oscar Wilde, with characteristic wit and verve, described its important role in British culture: “The Pre-Raphaelites were a number of young poets and painters who banded together in London . . . to revolutionize English poetry and painting. They had three things which the English public never forgive—youth, power and enthusiasm. . . . Their detractors blinded the public, but simply confirmed the artists in their convictions. To disagree with three-fourths of all England on all points is one of the first elements of sanity. . . . This Pre-Raphaelite revolution was not only of ideas, but of creations.” Twice in this brief passage Oscar Wilde emphasizes the revolutionary spirit of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the adverse criticism it generated. The Pre-Raphaelites’ repudiation of the aesthetic principles of the Royal Academy, on which mainstream British art was founded, caused an uproar, virtually alienating them from mainstream art circles and reviewers in the early years of the movement. In these early hostile reviews, as we shall see, we detect cultural biases Victorian novelists also repudiated and thus identified early with the Pre-Raphaelites.

Founded in 1848 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was spurred by a youthful rebellious spirit against the established aesthetics of the Royal Academy. Anthony Harrison presents a brief overview of the political chaos in the continent in 1848, the year the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
was formed: “Revolutionary activity had rocked Sicily in January, Paris in late February, Germany and Italy in March. The fall of Austria’s once powerful chancellor, Clemens Metternich, on March 13 had signaled political disintegration. In April hostilities had erupted between Germany and Poland. At the same time, Russia had prepared for war to preserve its hold on Poland.”9 With the depression of the 1830s and the Chartist riots of 1842, the stability of the British system was also threatened. As Poulson observes, “the late 1830s and the 1840s were years of instability and discontent and middle-class fear of the mob.”10 At a turbulent time when revolutions raged in Europe, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood initiated a revolution in British culture with far-ranging effects. As such they were seen as a subversive, conspiratorial group, perhaps involved in yet another political upheaval, and were assailed by contemporary critics.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt were determined to infuse youthful vitality and novelty into contemporary art, which, they believed, had been stifled by the prevailing conventions of the Royal Academy, beginning with Raphael’s successors and established by the eighteenth-century renowned artist and first president of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds.11 From the very beginning the Pre-Raphaelites rebelled against Sir Joshua Reynolds’s idealism, discussed in his highly acclaimed Discourses on Art. In the third discourse Reynolds encourages prospective artists to idealize, universalize, and generalize when painting portraits or landscapes: “[G]reat perfection and beauty,” he declares, “are not to be sought in the heavens but upon the earth. . . . All the objects which are exhibited to our view by nature, upon close examination will be found to have their blemishes and defects.” However, it was the artist’s responsibility, according to Reynolds, to depict “Ideal Beauty,” that is, to remove the perceived flaws of a composition; the great artist “corrects nature by herself—her imperfect state by her more perfect.” Ideal beauty, Reynolds taught, could be achieved through summary finish, which the Pre-Raphaelites labeled “slosh” and nicknamed the great master, Sir Sloshua.12 To Reynolds’s concept of ideal beauty the Pre-Raphaelites countered their aim “to sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote.”13 Instead of “ideal beauty,” they expressed the idiosyncratic uniqueness of their subjects; instead of idealized permanence, they attempted to capture realistic change. For this reason, instead of excluding “particularities,” they accurately displayed minute details—even “blemishes.” Their “uncompromising egalitarianism,” that is, a painstaking attention to every single object in their pictures, further distinguishes their paintings from those of the old
Plate 1. John Everett Millais, Christ in the Carpenter’s Shop (Christ in the House of His Parents), 1849–1850. Oil on canvas, 34 x 55in (86.4 x 139.7 cm), Tate Gallery. Reproduced by permission.
masters and their contemporaries as well (Prettejohn 186). Thus Pre-Raphaelite techniques from the very beginning were inextricably bound with sociopolitical concerns.

Indeed, Millais’s revolutionary representation of the Holy Family in *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849–1850) (plate 1) became a target in the critical battleground between idealism and realism. Derogatory reviews of this painting reflect contemporary concerns and apprehensions that the Pre-Raphaelite revolution involved not only a resistance to established aesthetic precepts but also the repudiation of social and gender hierarchies as well. In this respect, then, the goals of the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorian novelists, who often questioned established class and gender boundaries, dovetailed. It is worth briefly considering the techniques of this early painting, for they are paradigmatic of the revolutionary changes the Pre-Raphaelites sought to implement and in turn the Victorian novelists frequently adopted.

To begin with, Millais’s painting violated all precepts of art that Sir Joshua Reynolds established in his *Discourses*, particularly his injunction in the fourth discourse to young artists to draw divine figures with “great nobleness” and “dignity” and to follow a hierarchical subordination of less to more important parts in their artistic compositions. Instead of the “ideal perfection,” which Raphael employed in his representations of the Holy Family and Reynolds upheld as laudatory representations to be emulated, Millais relied on intricate realism in his representation of the Virgin and child, choosing for their models ordinary people of the lowest classes. Instead of representing Mary in a conventionally graceful pose, he depicted her in a hitherto inconceivable position, kneeling as the Christ child kisses her on the cheek and Joseph leans over them inspecting the child’s injured hand. Millais’s picture combines scientific accuracy with symbolic realism. The objects in the painting in all their details, captured in naturalistic accuracy, can be interpreted both literally and symbolically. The wood and nails in Millais’s painting, for instance, remind us of Christ’s death on the cross, “elaborating on the idea by showing Christ as having cut himself on a nail and spilt a drop down on to his foot. St. John is shown bringing a bowl of water to bathe the wound, which acts as a kind of attribute identifying him as the Baptist.” The sheep in the background stand for the Christian flock; the dove on the ladder, for the Holy Spirit (Warner in Parris, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 78).

Instead of an artificial arrangement of light and shadow, with the central figures in the light, the subsidiary figures and objects in the shadow, as Reynolds would have dictated, the sunlight through the open windows illuminates figures and objects equally, during a fleeting moment that will change the minute the Christ child moves, the Virgin stands up, or
Joseph puts aside the piece of wood on which he is working. Though biblical characters, these figures appear quite modern. Yet the modern aspect of the picture appears incongruous to the archaic style of the picture, that is, the flat perspective, its lack of depth, the awkward poses. Millais, however, chose such a style deliberately in order to emphasize expressiveness and to distinguish his painting from contemporary genre paintings. In this respect the painting displays yet another salient paradox of Pre-Raphaelite art: historicism and modernity or revivalism and realism (Barringer 10).

Considering the sociopolitical context and the threat the establishment saw in the purportedly subversive paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, it is not surprising that mainstream reviewers responded vehemently, choosing Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents* as their target. Millais’s stark realism and egalitarian treatment of his subject raised fears and anxieties in upper- and middle-class viewers, who sought in artistic representations confirmation of the hierarchical social structure they endorsed. The *Times* articulates such anxieties in a scathing commentary: “Mr. Millais’s principal picture . . . is, to speak plainly, revolting. The attempt to associate the Holy Family with the meanest details of a carpenter’s shop, with no conceivable omission of misery, of dirt, and even disease, all finished with the same loathsome minuteness, is disgusting.” The *Athenaeum* echoes the outrage: “Mr. Millais . . . has been most successful . . . in giving to the higher forms, characters and meanings a circumstantial Art-language from which we recoil with loathing and disgust. There are many to whom his work will seem a pictorial blasphemy.”

Other reviews, also permeated with pathological terms, interweave objections to new aesthetic principles with transgressions of gender boundaries. Ralph Wornum of the *Art Journal*, for example, beginning with hostile comments against the representation of the Holy Family as common people, continues with remarks on gender: “The physical ideal alone can harmonize with the spiritual ideal: in *Art*, whatever it may be in *Nature* in its present condition, the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body; lofty sentiment and physical baseness are essentially antagonistic; even in the lowest sinks of poverty in the world, the purest mind will shine transcendent.” Wornum’s categorical statements, “the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body” and “sentiment and physical baseness are essentially antagonistic” reveal hierarchical gender and class biases that exclude a majority of people from the privileges enjoyed by the selected few who meet contemporary standards of beauty. Likewise the critic of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* denigrates the Pre-Raphaelites for their proclivity for representations of ugliness and “diseased aspects. . . . Ricketty children, emaciation and deformity
constitute their chief stock in trade." Referring to Millais’s picture, he continues, “we can hardly imagine anything more ugly, graceless, and unpleasant.” Both of these critics employ pathological terms not just to describe Pre-Raphaelite violations of traditional aesthetic standards but also to interconnect aesthetics with transgressions of conventional gender boundaries.

Charles Dickens amplifies the censure of these critics in his notorious “Old Lamps for New Ones,” published in his journal Household Words, where he disparages the Pre-Raphaelites in general for their retrogressive techniques and Millais’s Christ in the House of His Parents in particular for transgressions of the established conventions associated with the representation of the Holy Family, especially for a conspicuous and offensive lack of “ideal beauty.” William Michael Rossetti recorded in the P.R.B. Journal that Dickens’s “attack on Millais has been most virulent and audacious” (Fredeman 70). Clearly the fundamental premise of Dickens’s argument is related to the Pre-Raphaelites’ egalitarian methodology, their refusal, that is, to abide by the hierarchical standards of an artistic composition canonized by Sir Joshua Reynolds. If the Holy Family stands at the top of the hierarchy, as Dickens and most reviewers believed, it should not be connected with its lowest rungs, the urban poor. Paradoxically, such vehement protest came from the champion of the underprivileged and the dispossessed. “In the foreground of that carpenter’s shop,” Dickens points out, “is a hideous wry necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed-gown; who appears to have received a poke in the hand, from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter, and to be holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman, so horrible in her ugliness, that . . . she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest ginshop in England.” Like other contemporary critics, Dickens here interweaves objections to aesthetic standards with violations of established class and gender categories. As Tim Barringer has already asserted, “gender and class are the chosen terms of Dickens’s attack: the Christ child is not sufficiently manly; the Virgin is too vulgar in her physiognomy, too coarse in comparison with the sweet features of the Raphaelesque Madonna. Her hardened face appears working class” (40).

The belligerent critical reception of Christ in the House of His Parents illustrates the Pre-Raphaelites’ blow against artistic, class, and gender hierarchies. Religious figures lack the dignity and grandeur of the aristocratic physiognomy traditionally representing the Holy Family, which by extension endorsed and justified the social hierarchy. Whether it be in the background or in the foreground, every object and figure receives equal attention; thus in political terms a democratic perspective replaces
a traditionally hierarchical one. In this respect the Pre-Raphaelites were attuned to contemporary sociopolitical and legislative changes moving England from a stratified nation to an increasingly democratic one. The most revolutionary techniques that characterize the Pre-Raphaelite revolt against the Royal Academy then disclosed their commitment not just to aesthetic but also to social reform as well—an egalitarian society accepting of unconventional gender constructs. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Victorian novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy advocated social reform, particularly the acceptance of a wider range of gender roles.

**Pre-Raphaelite Perceptual, Psychological, and Poetic Realism**

Like the Pre-Raphaelites, who rejected idealistic representations sanctioned by the Royal Academy, Victorian realist novelists often castigated ideal representations as distorted views of life and truth. Idealism, realist novelists believed, deviated from the novel’s most crucial goal, that is, to extend the readers’ sympathies and thus accomplish much-needed social reform. For the Victorian novelists as well as the Pre-Raphaelite artists, especially in their early years, realism was the philosophical foundation and the most significant achievement of their art. George Eliot, a pioneer and leader of literary realism, was, like other Victorian novelists, preoccupied with realistic representation and on numerous occasions in her essays, notebooks, and novels defined realism in terms of truth and morality. Her well-known statement on Dutch painting in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* has often been quoted as the quintessential statement on realism. Though referring to Dutch art, it is entirely possible, I believe, that Eliot is describing the realism of Pre-Raphaelite art, which resisted and repudiated the idealistic principles of the Royal Academy, expressed in Reynolds’s discourses on art.

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one’s best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. . . . It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. . . . I turn without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner. . . . “Foh!” says my idealistic friend, “what vulgar details! What good is there in taking all these paints to give an exact likeness of old women and clowns? What a low phase of
life!—clumsy, ugly people.” . . . Therefore let Art always remind us of them [common, coarse people]; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them.21

In these remarks Eliot captures contemporary debates on idealism versus realism. Contemporary reviewers of Pre-Raphaelite art, as we have seen, were embroiled in such debates, condemning Pre-Raphaelite paintings for their lack of idealism. Indeed, Eliot’s defense of realism resonates with the comments of early hostile reviewers of Pre-Raphaelite paintings who defined their scrupulous realism as a perverse tendency to represent “ugliness.” Simultaneously, her association of realism with truth resembles that of Ruskin’s defense of the Pre-Raphaelite art in terms of truth—”truth to nature” is his most famous motto. As early as 1852 Eliot had noted the Pre-Raphaelites’ contribution to art in a letter to John Chapman: “I have noticed the advertisement of the British Quarterly this morning. . . . They have one subject of which I am jealous—”Pre-Raphaelitism in Painting and Literature.”22

In his discussion of Eliot’s realism, specifically its emphasis on the representation of the ordinary, George Levine explains that in her view “representing the world adequately means representing its very ordinariness, and the moral project of realism is—in resistance to conventional art—to dramatize the value of the ordinary.”23 This resistance to idealism, which Eliot recognizes as the moral basis of realism in the earlier passage, was also the most significant force that propelled Pre-Raphaelite art. Representations of “clumsy and ugly people,” associated with those of the lower classes, though relevant to Dutch painting, are also recurrent subjects in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, often denigrated by mainstream reviewers. Since the Pre-Raphaelite controversy was still raging in 1859, when Adam Bede was first published, it is entirely possible that Eliot did not want to be identified with a controversial group at a critical time in her career. Hence, she articulated some Pre-Raphaelite principles in terms of the already established and accepted Dutch art.

Eliot’s tendency to reconfigure Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her novels is evident even in her first work, Adam Bede, which opens with “The Workshop,” a carpenter’s and builder’s, Mr. Jonathan Burge’s, shop, where we see “the slanting sunbeams [that] shone through the transparent shavings.” When the narrator focuses on Adam Bede, who works there as a carpenter, we are made aware of “the sleeve rolled up above the elbow,” showing “an arm that was likely to win the prize for feats of strength” (5–6). It is very likely that this scene, focusing on Adam’s muscular arm
below the rolled-up sleeve and on the wood shavings, is a narrative reconfiguration of Millais's controversial *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Though Millais had his father sit for Joseph, he chose a carpenter to pose for his body in order to accurately represent his arm (revealed below his sleeve).²⁴

Eliot's focus on the “transparent shavings” also recalls Millais's attention to the accurate representation of the wood shavings, which became the focus of ridicule by contemporary reviewers. When discussing this painting, Ruskin notes that derisive critics came to call it *The Carpenter's Shop*.²⁵ No doubt Eliot’s workshop partakes of the qualities of *The Carpenter's Shop* and shares Millais's qualities of symbolic realism. Though it is impossible to ascertain whether Eliot had seen the painting by the time she wrote *Adam Bede*, we know through her numerous references in her letters to the *Times* and the *Athenaeum* that she was aware of the controversy the painting had raised. Even if Eliot herself had not seen the painting, she would have been able to reconstruct it through the extensive and detailed descriptions of the reviewers or of friends who had seen it.

Throughout her career George Eliot, like other Victorian novelists, was deeply preoccupied with new modes of realistic representation. Even before the writing of her fiction, as a contributor to and editor of the influential journal *Westminster Review*, George Eliot in several of her reviews emphasized realism and identified it with the artist's most crucial, moral obligation. In her review of Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl's works on social history, “The Natural History of German Life,” published in *Westminster Review* in 1856, for example, she extols Riehl’s realistic representation of common people and elaborates on the artist’s moral obligation to the truthful representation of reality:

> Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions—about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it is serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one.²⁶

It is interesting to note here, as on various occasions in her prose and fiction, that Eliot elides the distinction between painting and prose, blending visual and verbal boundaries: Riehl “paints the life of the peo-
ple." Thus it was inevitable that novelists like her, who were interested in the “visually” realistic representation of life, would adopt innovative, Pre-Raphaelite approaches to the representation of realism. In the earlier passage she moves swiftly through the social hierarchy and focuses on the lower classes aligning realism with the representation of the common people, a goal also depicted in early Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents*, which repudiates hierarchies by representing divine figures as common people.

Earlier that year Eliot had also published in *Westminster Review* her review of John Ruskin’s third volume of *Modern Painters*, in which she upheld realism as the most important concept Ruskin conveyed: “The truth of infinite value that he teaches is realism—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality.” As we have already seen, she reiterates these remarks in her defense of realism in *Adam Bede*. Ruskin’s allusions to the Pre-Raphaelites and their truthful representation of reality would also have been of interest to her.

Ruskin’s writings were of interest to critics, literary and pictorial artists alike. As George Eliot observed in her review of the third volume of *Modern Painters*, “every one who cares about nature, or poetry, or the story of human development—every one who has a tinge of literature, or philosophy, will find something that is for him.” Ruskin’s authority could not be ignored. All the novelists included in this study had read *Modern Painters*, published in five volumes from 1843 to 1860, and highly esteemed Ruskin’s theories on aesthetics and realism. In the process of seeking out his theories, novelists discovered his exaltation of the Pre-Raphaelites. Thus Ruskin validated the shared goals of realist novelists and Pre-Raphaelite painters.

Ruskin articulated his initial support of the Pre-Raphaelites in two letters to *The Times*, on May 13 and May 25, 1851, in which he emphasizes the innovative means through which the Pre-Raphaelites achieved realistic representation. No doubt his letters attracted the attention of those Victorian novelists already stirred by his own work and by the controversy these young artists had generated. In his review of Collins’s *Convent Thoughts* and Hunt’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Ruskin calls attention to details hitherto overlooked by artists, praising Collins for his accurate and minute representation of the *Alisma Plantago* and Hunt for his depiction of “the trodden grass and broken fungi” in the foreground of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which registers “the momentary struggle of Proteus and Sylvia just past” (*Works* 12:321, 325). Even in later reviews Ruskin attributed the Pre-Raphaelites’ exquisite appeal to naturalism. In a letter
Plate 2. William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World*, 1851–1853. Oil on canvas, over panel, arched top, 49 1/2 x 23 1/8 in (125.5 x 59.8 cm), Warden and Fellows of Keble College, Oxford. Reproduced by permission.
to the *Times* on May 5, 1854, where he effusively praises Hunt’s *Light of the World*, (1851–1853) (plate 2) at a time when most critics denigrated it, he underscored Hunt’s sensitive and accurate representation of nature and took this painting as an occasion to distinguish the realistic representation of genuine Pre-Raphaelite painting from its spurious imitators:

The true work represents all objects exactly as they would appear in nature in the position and at the distances which the arrangement of the picture supposes. The false work represents them with all their details, as if seen through a microscope. Examine closely the ivy on the door in Mr. Hunt’s picture, and there will not be found in it a single clear outline. All is the most exquisite mystery of colour; becoming reality at its due distance. In like manner examine the small gems on the robe of the figure. Not one will be made out in form, and yet there is not one of all those minute points of green colour, but it has two or three distinctly varied shades of green in it, giving it mysterious value and lustre. (*Works* 12:331)

Unlike the Pre-Raphaelites, whose work displays an acute sensitivity to and deep awareness of the hues and gradations of color in different kinds of light, the Pre-Raphaelite imitators, Ruskin points out, are impervious to nature’s infinite variation, representing instead “the most minute leaves and other objects with sharp outlines, but with no variety of colour, and with none of the concealment, none of the infinity of nature” (ibid. 12:331–32).

Yet Ruskin does not extol Pre-Raphaelite naturalism and realism for its own sake but instead demonstrates its connection to psychological realism. Referring to *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* (1850–1851), for instance, Ruskin declares that he is astonished by “its marvelous truth in detail and splendour in colour.” He continues: “[N]or is its general conception less deserving of praise: the action of Valentine, his arm thrown round Sylvia, and his hand clasping hers at the same instant as she falls at his feet, is most faithful and beautiful, nor less so the contending of doubt and distress with awakening hope in the half-shadowed, half-sunlit countenance of Julia” (*Works* 12:324–25). Touching upon the exquisite representation of minute details, a point contemporary reviewers had vehemently denounced, Ruskin demonstrates its significance not only in depicting reality but also in revealing the psychological complexity of the emotions of the figures portrayed. Valentine’s and Sylvia’s clasping of hands, after her rescue from Proteus, captures an emotionally charged scene; Julia’s “half-shadowed, half-sunlit” face in the background depicts her conflicted feelings of “doubt and distress with awakening hope” for Proteus, her wayward lover.
Plate 3. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853–1854. Oil on canvas, arched top, 30 x 22 in (76.2 x 55.9 cm), Tate Gallery. Reproduced by permission.
In his review of William Holman Hunt’s *Awakening Conscience* (1853–1854) (plate 3) Ruskin further elaborates on the Pre-Raphaelites’ ability to express psychological realism through visual signifiers. Countering the contemporary critics’ objections to the plethora of objects in *The Awakening Conscience*, which they saw as insignificant distractions that call attention away from the two figures in the painting, Ruskin declares the importance of the distinctness and sharpness of each object in capturing the intensity of the emotion the depicted woman experiences at the moment of revelation of her fall from innocence: “Nothing is more notable than the way in which even the most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of a mind which has been fevered by violent and distressful excitement. They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart” (*Works* 12:334). No one would doubt Ruskin’s assertion that intense emotion at times of psychological turmoil governs and dictates perception. Thus Ruskin once again, in this case indirectly, links Pre-Raphaelite art to the realist novel, whose fundamental concerns are naturalism and symbolic and psychological realism. On another occasion, in the third volume of *Modern Painters*, when discussing once again the psychological depth and narrative complexity of this painting, he specifically connects *The Awakening Conscience* to the novel, declaring that it takes “its proper position beside literature” (ibid. 5:127).

Recent critics have discussed what Ruskin had early observed in his interpretations of paintings such as *The Awakening Conscience* and *The Light of the World*, that is, the correspondence between the Pre-Raphaelite painters’ sharp and minute representation of objects and the intensity of the emotions their subjects, and by extension their viewers, experience. The expression of powerful feelings in Pre-Raphaelite art, Richard Stein asserts, “is not merely a means but an end in itself; the emotional impact of their pictures is part of their meaning and not simply an accidental side-effect. It is precisely this intensity that marks the revolutionary character of Pre-Raphaelite iconography.” Carol Christ, on the other hand, points out that the “excessive clarity and brilliance” of the sharp and minute details pervading Pre-Raphaelite art capture “the emotional attitude of most of the subjects” and thus intensify the emotional response of the viewers. These intricate details characteristic of Pre-Raphaelite realism, according to Christ, were arduous attempts to express the “invisible areas of human emotion.” In this respect Pre-Raphaelite art is not merely realistic, Christ contends, but expressionistic as well: “The Pre-Raphaelites were seeking expressionistic art to portray strong states of emotion, and by an accident of history they wound up seeking it through
naturalism." In the process, they discovered "a new center in the subjective perception of each individual."35

Chris Brooks, on the other hand, interprets these details in terms of the new modes of perception through which the Pre-Raphaelites interpreted the world. Arranged without a predetermined structural hierarchy, which would otherwise guide the perception and the interpretation of the viewers, details in the foreground and the background compel viewers to see the world from a completely different perspective, noticing details that were hitherto concealed from established habits of perception. Thus the Pre-Raphaelites, Brooks demonstrates, "challenge our conventions of perceptual organisation and, by extension, the existential and metaphysical structuring we derive from that organisation."36

No doubt the Pre-Raphaelites’ innovative approaches to realistic representation made them irresistible to Victorian novelists. I have mentioned here but the most significant: the interweaving of scientific accuracy with symbolic realism, the construction of new modes of perception, the expression of "invisible areas of emotion," the depiction of psychological realism through visual signifiers, all primary concerns to the realist as well as to sensationalist novelists. Apart from these innovative techniques for realistic representation, Pre-Raphaelite art offered yet another unique appeal to Victorian novelists: its association with poetry, a genre considered superior to the novel. Vibrant, intense Pre-Raphaelite representations of scenes in Keats’s and Tennyson’s poetry cannot be separated from their verbal expressions. Hunt’s or Waterhouse’s life-sized paintings of The Lady of Shalott, for instance, will always loom between the lines of Tennyson’s eponymous poem, governing the readers’ imagination.

From the very beginning, then, the Pre-Raphaelites extended visual and verbal boundaries and became known as poetical painters. In this respect the Victorian novelists’ association with them became enticing, for, through evocations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, they could elevate their genre through its association with poetry. As Kate Flint has recently observed, in the Victorian period “there was an enduring belief that a novel was a lesser form of composition than poetry, and this added to the degree to which, if only by implication, a relatively low aesthetic value was placed on narrative art in ‘high’ cultural circles. In the eyes of its detractors, particularly in the earlier decades of the Victorian period, the novel was no more than an entertainment, more likely to engage the imagination than the moral or speculative faculties” (The Victorians and the Visual Imagination 200).

Ruskin’s categorical declaration in “Of Queens’ Gardens” is characteristic of the belief in the low status of the novel in the literary hierarchy.
Even the best novel, Ruskin contends, may pose a risk “if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act” (Works 18:129). In contrast to the novel, poetry was associated with “the most energetic and harmonious activity of all the powers of the human mind,” as Matthew Arnold stated in his 1857 inaugural lecture as professor of poetry at Oxford. It is, therefore, “to the poetical literature of an age that we must, in general, look for the most adequate interpretation of that age.” Sarah Stickney also voiced the contemporary bias in favor of poetry in her declaration, “‘Art of the highest order is necessarily associated with poetry.’”

The fusion of poetry with painting, the Pre-Raphaelites believed, was one of their highest achievements that distinguished their art from other contemporary painting and elevated it beyond any other. Hunt, for instance, often associates Pre-Raphaelite art with poetry, at times distinguishing it from that of its “dull imitators who were destitute of poetic discrimination.” However, Hunt’s definition of poetic painting does not merely include their choice of subjects from poetry; instead, he also connects it to the Pre-Raphaelites’ ability to capture the beauty of nature in the fleeting moments of the ever-changing light. Unlike most contemporary painters, on one occasion Hunt declares, “we saw that in Nature contours are found, and lost, and what in one point is trenchant, in another melts its form into dazzling light or untraceable gloom; that there is infinite delight to the mind in playing upon the changes between one extreme characteristic and another. . . . Adherents to our reform in the true spirit . . . have proved that poetry in painting is not destroyed by the close pursuit of Nature’s beauty” (Pre-Raphaelitism 2:400). Thus Hunt, in just one statement, interweaves the principles of Pre-Raphaelite art with those of the realist novel: realism, naturalism, truth, poetical expression, and reform.

On numerous occasions Ruskin also emphasizes the poetic quality of Pre-Raphaelite art. In the third volume of Modern Painters, for instance, he distinguishes the Pre-Raphaelites from old masters such as Horace Vernet, Jacques-Louis David, or Domenico Tintoret for their ability to represent “‘noble grounds for noble emotions’” and recognizes them as “poetical painters,” not just for seeking inspiration in poetry and for depicting and generating intense emotions, often associated with poetry, but also for “becoming poets in themselves in the entire sense, and inventing the story as they painted it” (Works 5:127). The Pre-Raphaelite poetical paintings then offered Victorian novelists multifarious ways through which they could elevate the novel in the cultural and literary hierarchy, endowing it with poetical complexity and sophistication.
As we have seen, the Pre-Raphaelites offered Victorian novelists innovative ways to represent perceptual, psychological, and poetical realism. Simultaneously, their intertextual works, most memorably expressed in Rossetti’s striking works, offered multifarious ways to translate images into words, the visual into the verbal.38 In the process of inviting their readers to redraw Pre-Raphaelite paintings they had once seen or often saw, Victorian novelists engaged them not only in contemporary debates on aesthetics but in gender politics as well. Indeed, narrative reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite visual, gendered boundaries enclosed and disclosed societal contradictions that revealed alternative constructions of gender. Unlike most contemporary painters, the Pre-Raphaelites often moved beyond the restrictive boundaries of conventional representations, depicting a wider range of gender roles, offering Victorian novelists more choices, subjects, and challenges. The representation of the unconventional gender roles depicted in Pre-Raphaelite paintings coincided with legislative movements to ameliorate women’s social and legal status and to redress hitherto legalized gender inequities, issues that often became the Victorian novelists’ primary topics. An understanding of contemporary resistance to Pre-Raphaelite gender constructs may further illuminate the reasons Victorian novelists chose to reconfigure Pre-Raphaelite representations of gender, especially those of women.

**Pre-Raphaelite Gender Constructs**

In response to contemporary reviewers’ belligerence against the Pre-Raphaelites’ purported inclination to represent ugliness, F. G. Stephens points out their allegiance to fourteenth-century Italian painters, who, like the Pre-Raphaelites, captured in their paintings accurate representations of feeling and expression to the exclusion of conventional representations of beauty “from which all life has evaporated.”39 Indeed, Stephens’s poignant example of a painting by an unknown Florentine artist, which depicts the Virgin with the Savior in her lap, convincingly illustrates one of the most significant aims of the Pre-Raphaelite artists: their representation of idiosyncratic feeling and expression rather than conventional beauty. What is unique about this painting, Stephens emphasizes, is the fact that the Virgin “is old (a most touching point); lamenting aloud, clutches passionately the heavy-weighted body on her knees; her mouth is open. Altogether it is one of the most powerful appeals possible to be conceived; for there are few but will consider this identification with humanity to be of more effect than any refined . . . treatment of the same subject by later artists” (60). Disregarding nature
and truth, later artists, F. G. Stephens points out, continued to represent the Virgin young even though Jesus was an adult.

Most critics, however, disregarded such justifications; instead, they continued to denigrate Pre-Raphaelite representations of gender as violations of established notions of beauty. In reading such reviews we may better understand the means by which Pre-Raphaelite artists undermined conventional gender constructs. John Eagles's “Fine Arts and the Public Taste in 1853” serves as a typical example of reviewers who upbraided Pre-Raphaelites for their transgressions of conventional gender boundaries. Of particular interest is Eagles's review of John Everett Millais’s *Order of Release*, 1746 (1852–1853) (plate 4) depicting a woman rescuing her husband, a Jacobite imprisoned by the English, when she secures his release. Her ambiguous expression, Malcolm Warner suggests, may indicate that she has “paid the price of her virtue” (Parris, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 108).

Eagles's objections to *The Order of Release*, as well as those to *The Proscribed Royalist* (1852–1853), disclose the conventional characteristics of traditional femininity and masculinity that the Pre-Raphaelites defied in their own representations of gender. Had he commissioned the artist to paint this subject, Eagles points out, he would have asked him to represent the woman exhibiting all of the conventional feminine qualities. Her face would have been pale, “as if one who had been long watching in weary sadness—let the joy even be tearful in the eye and quivering in the mouth . . . and let her be lovely, tender, and such a one as would make the release to the man a happiness indeed.” Unfortunately, the critic notes, Millais transgresses conventional standards of femininity: “Her face, instead of being lovely, is plain to a degree. . . . [F]ar from pale, [it] is blotched with red, and the shadows stippled in with bilious brownish green” (100).

Consequently, the representation of the man, according to Eagles, also violates traditional values of masculinity, for he leans his head on his wife’s shoulder (like the baby on her opposite shoulder), seeking protection and solace in a woman. Such reversal of gender constructs, he protests, is repulsive to men abiding by traditional standards of masculinity. One of his friends, Eagles claims, was appalled by such a flagrant violation of gender constructs in the painting to the extent of declaring, “I would rather remain in prison all my life, or even be hanged, than go out of prison to live with that woman” (100). Above all, besides the physical characteristics of the couple and their situations, which defy convention, it becomes apparent that this critic berates Millais for a flagrant reversal of gender roles—a woman rescuing a man.

Precisely for such a reversal, the same critic scoffs at Millais’s *Proscribed Royalist*, 1651, representing a woman rescuing a cavalier from persecution.
Plate 4. John Everett Millais, *The Order of Release*, 1746, 1852–1853. Oil on canvas, arched top, $40\frac{1}{2}$ x 29 in (102.9 x 73.7 cm), Tate Gallery. Reproduced by permission.
by hiding him in an oak tree (101). The falsity of the incident, he contends, is apparent in the ignoble representation of gender constructs. Known for their valor, the chief quality of masculinity, cavaliers, he argues, would never have escaped in a tree to eschew danger. “Would you not rather see the great hardiness of a man,” he poses the rhetorical question, “that should make him step out with the dignity of a man and say, ‘here I am, do your worst,’ than the portrayed cowardice of a two-legged vermin in a hole?” (101). Painters of all times, “Raphaelites and pre-Raphaelites,” he proclaims, “never forgot that men were men, and should be represented with proper manly actions, and not creeping through fear, like reptiles, into holes” (ibid.). By the same reasoning, following rather than defying traditional representations of men and women, only conventionally beautiful women ought to be subjects of paintings, unlike the woman in the Proscribed Royalist, who, according to this critic, “would have been as well if she had used a face-lotion, to have got rid of those yellow and brown little stippleles, that some bilious people have in reality, and the pre-Raphaelites love to perpetuate in pictures” (ibid.).

Critics, however, were not unanimous in their disapproval of Pre-Raphaelite gender representations. David Masson of the British Quarterly Review, for instance, defends the Pre-Raphaelites’ innovations in art by comparing them to those of Wordsworth’s in literature, in particular his “truth to nature” and his choice of common people for his subjects. After summarizing the critics’ objections to the Pre-Raphaelites’ gender representations, he focuses on those characteristics that critics often saw as deviant choices:

First of all, then, there was universally noted in the earlier works of the Pre-Raphaelites, a kind of contempt for all pre-established ideas of beauty. It even seemed as if, in their resolution to copy literally the forms of Nature, they took pleasure in seeking out such forms as would be called ugly or mean. Thus, instead of giving us figures with those fine conventional heads and regular oval faces and gracefully-formed hands and feet, which we like to see in albums, they appeared to take delight in figures with heads phrenologically clumsy, faces strongly marked and irregular, and very pronounced ankles and knuckles. . . . Are there no beautiful faces, or fingers or feet in Nature, say the fair critics; that clever young men should paint things like those; or have the poor young men been really so unfortunate in their life-series of feminine visions?

In this passage, as well as elsewhere in his long article, Masson justifies the Pre-Raphaelites’ disregard for “the conventional ideas of beauty” as a deliberate choice consistent with their goal to accurately represent reality:
But what we desire specially to note at present is, that this tendency towards forms not conventionally agreeable, which has been found fault with in the Pre-Raphaelites was . . . inevitable on their part; and was, in fact, a necessary consequence of their zeal in carrying out their favourite principle of attention to actual truth” (203–4). Thus, like Ruskin, Masson justifies the Pre-Raphaelites’ purported eccentricity in their representations of gender in terms of their desire to represent reality truthfully. The same reviewer observes what hostile critics of Pre-Raphaelite representations of gender had disregarded: “[I]n painting the human figure, their notion was that they should not follow any conventional idea of corporeal beauty, but should take some actual man or woman, and reproduce his or her features with the smallest possible deviation consistent with the purpose of the picture” (200). Thus as early as 1852 critics like Masson had begun to recognize the wider range of gender roles that the Pre-Raphaelites initiated in British culture.

Nevertheless, other critics persisted in abiding by stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity. In 1856, for instance, when the outrage over the Pre-Raphaelites’ unorthodox representation of gender constructs had somewhat subsided, some critics still questioned it. “Why should all the forms be so odd, quaint, and repulsive?” the critic of the Eclectic Review rhetorically asks in reference to Hunt’s Claudio and Isabella (1850–1853). He continues, “Was it needful that Isabella should be commonplace in countenance, and uncouth in general appearance?” And “was it imperatively necessary . . . that Claudio should he high shouldered, wooden in frame and his countenance revoltingly ugly?”

The Athenaeum had also focused on the lack of idealization in this painting when it was first exhibited in 1853, attacking Claudio as “a vulgar lout” and arguing that “Isabella . . . never could have inspired the passion of Angelo. If Mr. Hunt will not give us beauty, at least let him refrain from idealizing vulgarity.” Such reviews reveal Victorian anxieties over the subversion of traditional gender constructs to the extent that they overlook the psychological complexity, as in this case, of the moral dilemmas the paintings depict. The aforementioned critic, for instance, disregards Isabella’s anguish over the decision she must make: She can either compromise her virtue and have her brother released from prison or refuse and thus let him be executed. Instead, he berates Hunt for his antagonism to traditional gender constructs. Once again as in the case of The Order of Release or The Proscribed Royalist, in this painting a woman must rescue a man, thus reversing conventional gender roles.

Though keenly aware of the male/female, spectator/spectacle, subject/object patriarchal binaries that the hegemonic dynamics of the gaze dictated, the Pre-Raphaelites frequently destabilized the accepted gender
binaries of Victorian society, challenging the traditional dynamics of the
gaze by dissenting from the dominant tradition. In the process, they com-
pelled their viewers to question established gendered boundaries and con-
sciously or subconsciously collaborate in their extension. In this respect,
Pre-Raphaelite paintings anticipate modern theorists' preoccupation with
the gendered implications of the gaze. Because the gaze is not simply an
act of vision but also an ideological arena that encloses and dramatizes
power relations, feminist writers of art history (Berger, Nochlin), film the-
ory (Mulvey, Kaplan), and fiction (Cixous, Bauer, and Newman) have
examined its gendered ramifications and implications. Elsewhere I have
examined these implications in major Victorian novels. Victorian Eros is
inseparable from the politics of the gaze, for encounters between male and
female characters unfold through the dynamics of the gaze, regulated by
the laws of the dominant tradition. Almost invariably, such dynamics des-
ignate the male as a spectator and the female as a spectacle, creating bina-
ries of active/passive and subject/object. Women writers, however, like
Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, as we shall see, destabilized in their
novels the binaries of patriarchal ideology.

Pre-Raphaelite paintings also represented the destabilization of con-
ventional gender hierarchy registered in the dynamics of the gaze. Often
pictorial representations of narratives, such paintings extended not only
visual and verbal borders but gender boundaries as well. Hunt’s Claudio and
Isabella, for instance, defuses the traditional dynamics of the gaze as
Claudio, imprisoned for fathering a child out of wedlock, shrinks under
Isabella’s virtuous gaze. Inspired by Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure,
the painting represents Isabella in her brother’s prison cell after he has
informed her that he will not be executed if she yields to the sexual
advances of the ruler of Vienna; she in turn has declared her determina-
tion to remain virtuous. The following lines were inscribed in the frame
of the painting: “Claudio. Death is a fearful thing. Isabella. And shamed
life a hateful.” Though the painting seems an explicit illustration of this
quotation from the play, Hunt complicates the viewer's interpretation
through his symbolic realism, casting Isabella in the sunlight and Claudio
in the shadow, the red ribbon on the lute alluding to Claudio’s passion,
the apple blossom on the floor signifying Isabella’s chastity threatened by
her brother’s willingness to sacrifice it to save his own life. Unlike the
stereotypical, self-effacing and self-abnegating Victorian Angel in the
House, Isabella asserts her subjectivity by refusing to compromise her own
values to save her brother’s life. Her gaze is neither stereotypically erotic
nor manipulating but reproachful and compassionate. She is Claudio’s
superior, but she neither gloats nor luxuriates in her superiority; instead
she is saddened by their tormenting predicament.
In yet another painting, *The Hireling Shepherd*, Hunt moves beyond the traditional dynamics of the gaze that cast man as the subject and woman as the object of his desire. Though replete with visual biblical signifiers, the painting was mainly criticized for its explicit eroticism and the woman’s unabashed sexuality. David Masson, for instance, though he praises the painting for its naturalism as one of the best in the exhibition, “a fine breezy English landscape, on a pleasant summer’s day . . . yellow fields in the distance, with rows of trees and swallows . . . flying in the meadows,” he regards the truthful representation of the shepherd and the shepherdess as “too harsh for the popular taste,” protesting its blatant realism and its lack of subtlety and sophistication: “There is certainly no attempt at poetry here; for a fellow more capable than the shepherd of drinking a great quantity of beer, or a more sunburnt slut than the shepherdess, we never saw in a picture” (216). Representation of gender and class once again becomes the primary focus of his response to the painting.

In spite of the critics’ negative comments, Hunt was evidently proud of the realism and naturalism he was able to capture in this painting, as his remarks in a letter reveal: “not Dresden china bergers, but a real shepherd, and a real shepherdess, and a landscape in full sunlight, with all the colour of luscious summer, without the faintest fear of the precedents of any landscape painter who rendered Nature before.”

What distinguishes this painting from contemporary genre paintings, besides the points Hunt mentions here, is also the untraditional representation of gender: Both parties are represented as equals, intimately enjoying sensuous pleasure. As Pretejohn has already noted, this “scene of rustic lovemaking . . . where the poses, interlocking in a broad triangle across the picture surface, make both partners seem equally active” (214).

Such representation certainly undermined the contemporary double standard, according to which only man could be sexually aggressive and enjoy sexual pleasure. Uninhibited by conventional morality, the woman unabashedly looks at her lover directly; in turn her lover, by no means intimidated, meets her gaze. Considering the double sexual standard of the period, this picture is atypical in registering unconventional sexual equality. Indeed, as Susan Casteras has already convincingly demonstrated, “inappropriate differentiation of the sexes was another subtext of contemporary vituperative responses. The PRB set up their own standards of what was suitable for the depiction of men and women, to some degree turning on its head Walker’s of ‘minor beauty’ for females (all prettiness and delicacy) and ‘major beauty’ for males (to suggest grandeur, nobility, and power). To the Pre-Raphaelites, both sexes were capable of exemplifying physical hideousness or sublimity.”

Although, like the Pre-Raphaelites, art reviewers were disconcerted by
prevalent representations of "sentimental prettiness," they were nevertheless unwilling to accept the Pre-Raphaelite representation of gender constructs that threatened the eradication of conventional concepts of beauty: "But God forbid that we should thus readily renounce all faith in the truly beautiful," the critic of the Eclectic Review protests. "Thus it is ever the primal province and prerogative of art in manifesting to the world a high, pure, and transcendent beauty." This critic is representative of contemporary belief that beauty was truth and "truth plus beauty is Art."47

Recent critics such as Jan Marsh and Joseph Kestner have contested the belligerent contemporary responses to the Pre-Raphaelites' representations of gender, claiming that the Pre-Raphaelites inscribed more conventional gender constructs—representing man as "the gallant knight" or "the valiant soldier" and women as "fallen Magdalen," "stunners," or "sorceresses."48 Other critics, however, such as Susan Casteras and Julie Codell, persuasively explain the Pre-Raphaelites' subversive role.49 In "Pre-Raphaelite Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty," Casteras argues that "Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti all engineered their own self-conscious transformations of conventional norms of beauty, in the process stripping art of what they saw as its pretensions and substituting a new vocabulary of face and figure" (32). If we consider that the Pre-Raphaelites deliberately chose to create what contemporary critics saw as "grotesque" and "ugly" representations of gender constructs in a culture that upheld the belief that "the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body," we may then realize the extent of their remarkable contribution to the extension of gendered boundaries. A brief overview of some domestic genre paintings, as we shall see, demonstrates the Pre-Raphaelites' deliberate resistance to traditional representations of gender.

As late as 1865, John Ruskin celebrated the notion of the separate spheres, predominant in Victorian culture and society in the by now well-known "Of Queens' Gardens," published in Sesame and Lilies:

We are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in speaking of the 'superiority' of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give. Now their separate characters are briefly these. The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest. . . . But woman's power is not for rule, not for battle—and her
intelllect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. . . . Her great function is Praise. . . . This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace: the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. (Works 18:121–22)

In images of gardens and homes, through positive negations and contradictions Ruskin defines a woman’s exclusion from power, unequivocally supporting the separate spheres doctrine. Years earlier, Tennyson had explicitly confirmed the binary division of masculinity and femininity in an often-quoted verse in The Princess (1847):

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and Woman to obey;
All else confusion. (11.437–41)50

These short, terse lines express the binary gender division as unarguably absolute; the distinction between masculinity and femininity is clear, definite, and sharply differentiated. Years later, when women were steadily gaining social and legal equality through legislative measures such as the Divorce Act of 1857 and the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870, 1874, and 1882, Tennyson still exalted domesticity and the woman’s role in maintaining stability at home and the nation, believing that “upon the sacredness of home life . . . the stability and greatness of a nation largely depend.”51

Both Ruskin and Tennyson sought in the evocation of the past the confirmation of the vanishing ideal of the separate spheres, which advocated and maintained gender roles within rigidly conventional boundaries, by then daily threatened by social movements and legal measures slowly and gradually promoting gender equality and equity. The distinct boundaries between femininity and masculinity were also inscribed in contemporary domestic genre paintings. Images of women enclosed within the walls of domestic bliss proliferated each year in the Royal Academy exhibits; such images conspicuously resisted slow, contemporary advances toward gender equality. Even a brief overview of the domestic genre of sentimental paintings reveals that these pictures endorsed the patriarchal morality of the burgeoning middle classes and the new patrons of art, the rising industrial magnates, who preferred paintings readily intelligible upholding their own values, as, for instance, that of the separate spheres and the sanctity of the domestic sphere.

In Pre-Raphaelitism William Holman Hunt gives us a clear view of the artificiality of pictorial conventions that prevailed in contemporary repre-
sentations of gender in domestic genre paintings, conventions that the Pre-Raphaelite artists detested and attempted to eradicate through their unorthodox representations: “Knights were frowning and staring as none but hired supernumeraries could stare; the pious had virtuous tears on their reverential cheeks; innkeepers were ever round and red-faced; peasants had complexions of dainty pink; shepherdesses were facsimiled from Dresden-china toys; homely couples were ever reading a Family Bible to a circle of most exemplary children; all alike from king to plebeian were arrayed in clothes fresh from the bandbox. With this artificiality, the drawing was often of a pattern that left anatomy and the science of perspective but poorly demonstrated” (1:51). A cursory glance at domestic genre paintings of the period confirms Hunt’s remarks and discloses the conventional restrictions imposed upon representations of gender.

Charles Cope’s Life Well Spent (1862) was perhaps one of the paintings Hunt had in mind when he referred to homely images of parents and exemplary children. The mother in the picture surrounded by immaculately and fashionably dressed children is listening to the lessons of her two boys while she herself remains busy sewing. To her right is a picture of Christ, and on the table the Bible and prayer books consecrate the sanctity of the domestic sphere. Likewise William Nicol’s Quiet (1860), depicting an affectionate mother reading to her child, who is nestling her head on her shoulder, exalts motherhood and harmonious domesticity.

George Elgar Hicks’s triptych Woman’s Mission (1863) clearly abides by the prevalent sentimentalization of femininity and masculinity, firmly inscribing a woman’s role as a caretaker within the boundaries of the domestic sphere. The first picture of the series called Woman’s Mission: Guide to Childhood shows a young mother leading a child in a wooded path. As Lynda Nead has already pointed out in her extensive interpretation of this triptych, the mother is here depicted as both a physical and spiritual guide to childhood “as she pushes aside the brambles in her son’s path (with its Christian connotations of the path of life) and bends over the child, her arms encircling him protectively.” The central picture, called Woman’s Mission: Companion of Manhood, shows the woman in her role as a wife comforting her husband, who is grief stricken after reading a black-edged letter he is holding in his hand. As the woman depicts respectable femininity, so does the husband represent conventionally ideal masculinity, for although exceedingly saddened he shields his face with his hand concealing his tears, thus containing his grief in the presence of his supportive wife. A modern perspective of the picture would probably construe the wife as a burden rather than a support to her grieving husband, for she leans on him, who in turn tilts to the left supporting himself against the wall, seeming rather uncomfortable. In the last picture,
titled Woman’s Mission: Comfort of Old Age, the same woman lovingly offers a glass of water to her ailing aged father. A mother, a wife, and a daughter, the restrictive roles of a Victorian woman’s life are visually framed in this popular trilogy.

It is by no means the case that Pre-Raphaelites eschewed representations of domesticity, but their pictures of this subject were consciously and entirely unconventional, devoid of the sentimental overtones of contemporary genre paintings, as Hunt mentions in the earlier statement. Millais’s Mariana (1850–1851) (plate 5), it could be argued, casts Tennyson’s eponymous character in a conventionally feminine predicament, that of the jilted lover who relentlessly awaits her lover, pining his absence and wishing for her death. But the painting captures Mariana in the most original, unprecedented pose, wearily stretching over her embroidery and at the same time unwittingly exhibiting her feminine sexuality, which the tightly fitting, strikingly blue dress and the belt around her hips reveal. The picture conveys a sense of spontaneity and transience, but the meaning or resolution of the scene remains ambiguous and inconclusive.

Most often, Pre-Raphaelites also removed the walls, the physical boundaries of domesticity, setting domestic scenes outdoors in the bright sunlight with figures often surrounded by stunningly beautiful landscapes. Millais’s Spring (1856–1859) is a startling example of unorthodox domesticity representing young women celebrating springtime by enjoying a meal outdoors, sitting on the luscious grass under an apple tree bursting with blossoms. Each woman is captured in a completely different pose, some of them caught in profile, others awkwardly rather than elegantly posed, overall the picture conveying the aura of arrested motion. The flowers of the apple tree in the background, as well as those on the girl’s hair in the foreground, painted in the soft hues of white and pink of apple blossoms in springtime, reveal intense, sensitive, and imaginative realism that appeals to the viewers’ senses and draws them into the scene. What seems at first glance a harmoniously idyllic picture is suddenly disrupted by the gaze of the woman on the right who looks directly, yet enigmatically, at the viewer, thus transgressing the boundaries of respectable femininity. Behind her and her basket of flowers a scythe, leaning against a short wall and practically over her, conveys an ominous tone that undermines the idyllic atmosphere of the entire composition and perturbs the viewer’s pleasure. Sharply opposing feelings beset the viewer as the eye moves from figure to figure in the picture and attempts to make sense of it. In this painting, as is the case in quite a few other Pre-Raphaelite paintings, domesticity and transgression, polarized and irreconcilable Victorian opposites overlap, eliding the line that differentiates and defines them. In the process of unraveling the ambiguity, unintelligibility, and tension such elision creates,
Plate 5. John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1850–1851. Oil on canvas, arched top, $34\frac{3}{4} \times 21\frac{1}{2}$ in (87.6 x 54.6 cm), Makins Collection. Reproduced by permission.
spectators of Pre-Raphaelite paintings willingly or unwittingly do their part of art’s labor, their collaboration with the artist, thus entering consciously or unconsciously into what E. H. Gombrich calls “the magic circle of creation.”

Ambiguity and indeterminacy govern Millais’s later paintings that are devoid of a narrative content, as, for instance, *Autumn Leaves* (1855–1856), which hauntingly evokes the transient, fragile time between light and darkness as the sun sets in the background and illuminates the sky with luscious oranges and reds. In the foreground four young girls burn a pile of orange and yellow and red leaves evoking an evanescent world. Once again Millais depicts a world of soft and fragile femininity but liberates it from domestic boundaries by neither defining it within the domestic sphere nor juxtaposing it with conventional masculinity. An underlying tension also dominates Millais’s exquisite *Vale of Rest* (1858–1859), a unique representation of two nuns digging a grave in the late evening. As in *Spring* and *Autumn Leaves*, rather than endorsing the doctrine of separate spheres, Millais here creates a matriarchal world untouched by the Law of the Father. Hard manual work, traditionally associated with masculinity, is undertaken by two women, two nuns, whose unusual task acquires an ominous, inscrutable quality in the mysterious, haunting hues of the twilight.

The direct gaze of the nun on the right engages the reader in the threat of mortality their task conveys. Once again, as in the previous pictures, the viewer may walk away without completely grasping the meaning of this painting, which remains unsettled, indistinct, indeterminate. Thus the demarcation between masculinity and femininity, sharp and distinct in domestic genre paintings, in Pre-Raphaelite paintings often became blurred, unsettling the spectator, raising questions rather than offering answers to life’s perplexities.

*The Indeterminacy of Pre-Raphaelite Representations of the Fallen*

In their attempts to challenge their spectators to new ways of seeing, Pre-Raphaelite artists also involved them in unorthodox ways of considering social issues pertaining to representations of gender constructs. Like their contemporary counterparts, the Pre-Raphaelites also dealt with the highly controversial issue of the “fallen” woman. As several art historians and cultural critics have already noted, the representation of the fallen woman preoccupied artists, novelists, poets, and social critics more so than did her polar opposite, the respectable, middle-class paragon.
Representations of this subject coincided with contemporary studies and investigations of prostitution, which exposed it as an epidemic that should be controlled for moral, social, and health reasons. Various social historians have already explained the fascination with the subject of the fallen woman in terms of the other, the illicit, and the forbidding yet fascinating identification everyone experiences with those who dare transgress entrenched gendered boundaries. Other critics have interpreted the fallen-woman phenomenon as a response to the rising rate of prostitution that threatened the cult of domesticity with its erotic appeal and simultaneous threat of disease.

Through representations of the illegitimate, the illicit, and the unconventional, the Pre-Raphaelites often captured the public fear of the other. As in their depiction of various representations of gender, the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of the motif of the fallen woman differed substantially from its representation in domestic genre paintings. An early, dramatically sentimental example of this motif is evident in the domestic genre painting of Richard Redgrave’s *Outcast* (1851), in which an outraged, merciless father forces his daughter, holding a baby in her arms, out of her home into a snowy night, while the other family members, powerless to intercede, beseech him for mercy. Both masculinity and femininity are here represented and asserted in a stereotypical, dramatic fashion. As the legal arbiter of the Law of the Father, the paterfamilias in this scene does not allow emotions to sway his judgment in penalizing his daughter for her transgression of moral boundaries. Only anger at the violation of respectable morality spurs his action, but anger is traditionally acknowledged as a masculine and therefore legitimate emotion. His daughter, on the other hand, hitherto secluded in the domestic sphere, dependent on the socioeconomic privilege of the father for her subsistence, is destined to perish the moment she enters the public sphere, which provides no shelter for her but exposes her to a pernicious existence often leading to death. Most likely that would be the interpretation the Victorian viewer would have reached. Though the painting has been seen as an attempt to encourage change by placing before the viewer a scene of “heart-wrenching cruelty,” nevertheless it inscribes the power dynamics entrenched in Victorian society.

As Lynda Nead has already demonstrated, during the 1850s and 1860s the proliferation of visual images and narrative accounts of adultery in Victorian culture coincided with the heated debates over the divorce and the control of contagious diseases legislature in the parliament and in the press. The divorce act initiated in 1854 and passed in 1857 allowed husbands, not wives, to divorce their spouses for adultery. In order to obtain a divorce a woman was required to prove her husband guilty of bigamy, cruelty, desertion, rape, or incest. Lord Chancellor Cranworth, sponsor of
the 1857 legislation, unequivocally endorsed the double standard the act legalized: “A wife might, without any loss of caste, and possibly with reference to the interests of her children, or even of her husband, condone an act of adultery on the part of her husband; but a husband could not condone a similar act on the part of a wife. . . . [T]he adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife.”

August Egg’s Past and Present, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858, may be seen as a visual response to contemporary debates on adultery, pivoting on the double sexual standard. Initially without a title, the painting was exhibited with the following passage: “August the 4th. Have just heard that B—has been dead more than a fortnight, so his poor children have now lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been!”

Sternly encasing its didactic message in a journalistic style—and therefore a potentially realistic occurrence—this long, descriptive passage, at once a threat and a warning, anchors the painting within the immediate, contemporary social context. The husband, situated in a middle-class home, occupies the focal point of the central picture, where he looks at his prostrate wife repulsively, soon after his sudden arrival from a journey and his interception of a letter to her lover.

The Athenæum describes the husband’s anger in sensational terms and applauds his reaction as a justifiable response to the wife’s putatively abhorrent transgression: “He has screamed it forth,—throwing her shame like a dash of burning vitriol full in her spotted face. Poor sinful creature! It has felled her like a blow from a murderer’s club.” His wife lies on the floor, her clasped hands pointing to the door through which she is destined to depart. In the right panel, the children, now adults, reside in a “poor squalid London room,” one of them looking out of the open window at the same moon at which the mother is gazing while the younger sister kneels and prays for her lost mother, “even though the very breath of hell be already hot round her cheek.” To the left of the painting was a panel depicting the mother under “the dark gravevault shadow of an Adelphi arch,—last refuge of the homeless sin, vice and beggary of London: the thin, starved legs of a bastard child—perhaps dead at her breast—protrude from her rags. She, too, is looking at the moon, full in its royal brightness.”

Such relentless, sacrosanct self-righteousness tinged with sensational perversity reveals the moral rigidity of the Law of the Father and the forbidding ideological boundaries of the era.

Unlike Redgrave’s and Egg’s representations of fallen women castigated as outcasts, those of the Pre-Raphaelites most often undermined the
rigid standards of Victorian morality; in fact, rather than providing answers, they raised questions perplexing Victorian and modern art critics alike. Ford Madox Brown’s *Take Your Son, Sir!* (1851–1892) is a case in point; its controversial nature partly explains why the painting was never finished or exhibited. A woman in white stands in full length holding a naked baby in front of her as if she had just given birth. The mirror in the background, reflecting the father’s figure, appears like a halo over her head. Thus the painting juxtaposes and at the same time deconstructs opposing ideas—Madonna and the fallen woman. At times interpreted as a full-length portrait of Brown’s wife, Emma, this painting resists such facile interpretation by its simultaneously triumphant and defiant title. Though in white, the color traditionally associated with virginal figures, the woman in the painting has been construed as a kept woman showing her illegitimate son to her illicit lover. For Nina Auerbach, for instance, the woman “seems to have gained power over size and scale, reducing the cur who impregnated her along with the viewer to a diminutive figure in the mirror” (163).

Such a reading is definite and conclusive, but if we consider Brown’s references to his wife, Emma, and his son Arthur in connection with the origin and the development of the painting that remained unfinished, we may surmise that its meaning is ambiguous rather than explicit. As Barringer comments, “Is this, then, an icon of the sacredness of motherhood, or a Hogarthian satire on prostitution and the birth of illegitimate children in Victorian England?” (100). Unlike the prescriptive and didactically conclusive meaning contemporary genre paintings conveyed, Brown’s painting, like other Pre-Raphaelite paintings, is characteristically inconclusive and indeterminate, engaging the viewer in the construction of its elusive meaning and in the process implicating the spectator in the woman’s condition.

At first glance, Rossetti’s unfinished *Found* (1854) (plate 6) seems but an affirmation of traditional gender roles, middle-class values and the rigid morality of the genre paintings representing transgressive women. On January 30, 1855, in a letter to Holman Hunt, Rossetti describes the narrative content of the painting, explaining that he had designed it before Hunt had painted his *Awakening Conscience*. Apparently depicting another theme of rescue, casting the man and the woman in traditional roles, the one as the rescuer, the other as the lost victim, the painting seems to confirm conventional gender roles. Dressed in a white tunic, the drover towers over the fallen woman, who is dressed in a white dress full of roses, emblems of her passion and sexuality. Yet *Found* has been the subject of controversy eliciting numerous contradictory responses. Lynn Nead, for instance, though she highlights the social contradictions the
Plate 6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found*, 1854. Oil on canvas, 36 x 31\(\frac{1}{2}\) in (91.4 x 80 cm), Delaware Art Museum. Reproduced by permission.
painting evokes, offers a highly conclusive reading of the picture, seeing it as a sharp juxtaposition of city versus country through visual contrasts: The garish, vulgar appearance of the prostitute is juxtaposed with the simple rustic garb of the country drover. Yet, if we consider Jenny, the verbal equivalent of Found, Alicia Faxon suggests, we may see that Rossetti “was quite aware that for every fallen woman there must be a fallen man.”

Rossetti’s identification with the plight of the fallen woman is incisively apparent in an often-quoted statement he made in a letter to Ford Madox Brown in 1873, in which he compares himself to a prostitute: “I have often said that to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned.” F. G. Stephens’s reading of the painting reveals yet another facet of its complexity. “The brightening dawn symbolizes,” he points out, “peace (with forgiveness) on earth.” If we take this point into consideration, we may concede that the meaning of the painting is not conclusive. J. B. Bullen emphasizes the complexity and indeterminacy of Found, interpreting it as a representation of “the problematic nature of the relationship between the honourable male and the sexually experienced female . . . concentrated in the entwined hands which fill the center of focus.” Unlike the woman in Hunt’s Awakening Conscience, Bullen points out, the woman in Found does not spring to accept the offer of that salvation. . . . In the painting the woman turns away, perhaps in shame, perhaps in rejection, fearing to meet the young man’s gaze” (The Pre-Raphaelite Body).

Millais also blurred the established limits of conventional morality by interweaving transgression and respectability in his representations of fallen women as, for instance, in the watercolor The Seamstress, which he painted as an illustration to “The Iceberg,” a story by J. Stewart Harrison published in Once a Week in October 1860. The narrator recalls tracking down a lost love seduced by an immoral lover. In the watercolor Millais transcribes the text into a visual image of domesticity and respectability, depicting a woman in a clean room dressed in a simple and elegant dress, her hair braided neatly and forming a coronet around her head. Thus Millais, instead of depicting a fallen woman in the conventionally sordid surroundings of a public street, situates her in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, his illustration exposes the plight of the seamstress, a few years earlier depicted in Richard Redgrave’s memorable painting The Sempstress (1846), an issue debated in contemporary magazines, newspapers, and novels, as for instance, Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth.

Like Millais and Rossetti, Holman Hunt undermined contemporary, melodramatic representations of fallen women, preferring the representa-
tion of moments of revelation to moments of degradation often represented by his contemporaries. The perplexing meaning of his much-debated *Awakening Conscience* (1854) has been the subject of controversy among Victorian and modern critics. In *Women, Art, and Power* Linda Nochlin reads this painting as a pendant to Rossetti’s *Found*; the two paintings, in her view, represent “opposing visions of a single moral issue: rising versus falling, salvation versus damnation, Christian optimism versus Christian or crypto-Christian despair” (67). However, as we have already seen, *Found* does not necessarily represent “damnation.” Depicting an intimate scene between a man and a woman in a parlor, as they are both singing while the man is playing the piano, the woman in *The Awakening Conscience* rises to the revelation of her transgression when the tune her lover is playing triggers a childhood memory. Unlike paintings like *Past and Present* and the *Outcast*, representations of female transgression that were readily interpreted, *The Awakening Conscience* perplexed spectators and critics alike. The *Athenaeum*, for instance, claimed that “innocent and unenlightened spectators suppose it to represent a quarrel between a brother and a Sister.”67 “People gaze at it in a blank wonder, and leave it hopelessly,” Ruskin remarks in his letter to the *Times* on May 25, 1854, in which he felt compelled to interpret the painting. At first Ruskin melodramatically draws the viewer’s (and reader’s) attention to the intense expression in “the countenance of the lost girl, rent from its beauty into sudden horror; the lips half open, indistinct in their purple quivering . . . the eyes filled with the fearful light of futurity, and with tears of ancient days” (Works 12:334). He further justifies the plethora of visual signifiers abounding in the painting by relating them to the woman’s situation and her inexorable future predicament.68 Such interpretation, however, was contrary to Hunt’s treatment of the subject. In reference to Egg’s *Past and Present*, for instance, he had stated, “it is by no means a matter of course that when a woman sins she should die in misery.”69 Recent critics such as Kate Flint and Julie Codell also emphasize the hopeful outcome of the woman’s circumstances.70

Ascribing a didactic message to this painting, Ruskin overlooks its physical configuration. Though “fallen,” the woman towers over her lover, who is apparently unaware of her psychological state. Her inexplicable and unfathomable gaze registers her detachment from her lover and the spectator alike; she is self-contained and inscrutable. In her white dress, as she rises above her lover, she becomes morally superior to him, whose reclining pose in relation to her stance, as well as to her epiphany, registers him as a “fallen man.” By contrast the configuration in either Redgrave’s *Outcast* or in Egg’s *Past and Present* privileges the man who rises above the condemned woman, casting him in the role of the relent-
less arbiter of her “disgrace” and therefore as her moral superior. Though fallen, the woman in *The Awakening Conscience* is represented in childlike innocence as she reaches a revelation through the memories evoked by the song “Oft in the Stilly Night” her lover plays on the piano. Explaining this epiphanic moment, Hunt states that the woman escapes “from her gilded cage with a startled holy resolve, while her shallow companion still sings on, ignorantly intensifying her repentant purpose” (*Pre-Raphaelitism* 2:430). Moreover, whereas the inexorable fate of the women in the aforementioned paintings is a foregone conclusion, that of the woman in *The Awakening Conscience* is open ended and indeterminate. Moral ambiguity rather than rigid morality and psychologically complex individuals rather than the types of domestic genre paintings govern *The Awakening Conscience* as well as numerous other Pre-Raphaelite paintings representing the fallen woman motif.

By reconfiguring Pre-Raphaelite paintings into narrative scenes or portraits, Victorian novelists created in their novels “an imaginative world where the fictional and the real world came together” (Byerly 121). The Pre-Raphaelites, as we have seen, offered the Victorian novelists new ways of representing realism. Minute details in their paintings convey the intense emotions of their subjects or express “invisible areas of emotion” and by extension compel viewers to experience unique emotions and sympathize with unconventional subjects and situations. The Pre-Raphaelites’ “uncompromising egalitarianism” compelled contemporary viewers to see the world from new, unconventional perspectives. Thus Pre-Raphaelite naturalism was interwoven with psychological realism, which promoted the depiction of individuals rather than stereotypes. Furthermore, the Pre-Raphaelites offered Victorian novelists images that flagrantly or subtly defied established class boundaries. That defiance in turn involved and attracted wider audiences including not only people of the upper and middle classes, who frequented art exhibitions, but the lower ones as well. As we have seen, the Pre-Raphaelites often chose ordinary people to represent divine figures, thus dramatizing “the value of the ordinary”—a crucial element of realism. In this respect the Pre-Raphaelites were attuned to contemporary sociopolitical changes moving England from a hierarchical society to a democratic one. Pre-Raphaelite challenges to contemporary ideology were not limited to class but involved gender boundaries as well. Representing unconventional beauty in conventional ugliness, feminine fragility in masculinity, and masculine strength in femininity, the Pre-Raphaelites extended gender roles and offered the Victorian novelists innovative ways of depicting controversial gender issues. In their depictions of the gaze, for instance, the Pre-Raphaelites undermined gender hierarchy and portrayed men and women...
as equals. Subtly interweaving depictions of prostitution and illegitimacy, two of the most contentious Victorian subjects, with conventional symbols of divinity, the Pre-Raphaelites dared apotheosize the stigmatized and the ostracized, once again offering Victorian novelists implicit yet powerful ways of fighting social inequities and broadening their audiences.

Reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite Paintings in the Victorian Novel

In a letter to William Allingham, dated January 23, 1855, Rossetti describes his approach to his illustrations of the Moxon Tennyson, giving us a glimpse into the dynamics of the translation of the pictorial into the verbal: “The other day Moxon called on me, wanting me to do some of the blocks for the new Tennyson... I have not begun even designing for them yet, but fancy I shall try the Vision of Sin, and Palace of Art, etc.,—those where one can allegorize on one’s own hook on the subject of the poem, without killing, for oneself and everyone, a distinct idea of the poet’s. This, I fancy, is always the upshot of illustrated editions” (Doughty, Letters 1:239). Rossetti’s own interpretation of Tennyson’s “Palace of Art” captured in his illustrations, St. Cecilia and King Arthur and the Weeping Queens, differed from the poet’s to such an extent that Tennyson himself could not see the connection. According to William Michael Rossetti “he had to give up the problem of what it had to do with his verses” (Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1:190).

Art historians responding to Rossetti’s art and poetry, his “double work of art,” have offered different perspectives on the relation between Rossetti’s verbal and visual portraits. Ainsworth, for instance, discusses the symbiotic relationship between Rossetti’s poetry and painting, pointing out that, through the poems that accompanied his pictures, Rossetti often provided the reader with an opportunity “for active participation in the narrative sequence of the work of art, and facilitated the viewer’s entry into the imaginary world of the picture” (4). His verbal portraits, she notes, extend the picture’s space beyond its plane by describing past or future events. Quite often in his sonnets to his paintings, he explored the psychological meaning of the subject of a painting. Thus by extending spatial and temporal boundaries, Rossetti guided the viewer’s interpretation, engaging the viewer/spectator in a multifaceted rather than a monolithic experience (Ainsworth 3–7).

Like Rossetti, in their reconfigurations of the visual into the verbal, Victorian novelists, when redrawing Pre-Raphaelite paintings in their narratives, delved into the subject’s psychology and engaged the reader’s
imagination in visualizing and identifying with the subject of representation. When choosing to translate a Pre-Raphaelite painting into a verbal portrait, scene, or situation, Victorian novelists did not merely describe the original but, like Rossetti, also chose to “allegorize” on their own hook. In the gaps between the translation of the visual into the verbal, novelists engaged in contemporary debates over representations of gender, subverting conventional gender constructs, extending established boundaries. As they reframed the visual within the textual, in the impalpable and intangible reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings into narrative images, Victorian novelists invited their readers’ imagination to once again reframe their own interpretations of Pre-Raphaelite art. In this process, like Rossetti, Victorian novelists often extended the limits of the visual and attempted to represent the complexity or multiplicity of experience.

For Ruskin the representation of the multiplicity of experience in narrative involved the evocation of the pictorial and the poetical. “Historical or merely narrative art,” he declares in “Of Greatness of Style” in the third volume of Modern Painters, “is never great art until the poetical or imaginative power touches it” (Works 5:65). In the same section he goes on to offer Hunt’s Light of the World as an example of a “great poetical picture,” which represents the most important traits of greatness, a “high subject,” “the love of beauty,” “the grasp of truth,” and “the poetical power” (ibid. 5:65–66). For Ruskin, what defines greatness in art is “the number of faculties it exercises and addresses” (ibid. 5:66). Even though “high” subjects were not always the choices of Victorian novelists, nevertheless, by redrawing Pre-Raphaelite or poetical art within their novels they could address several of their readers’ faculties, including and primarily the imagination. For Ruskin the artist should not merely “address and awaken” but also “guide the imagination; and there is no safe guidance but that of simple concurrence with fact” (ibid. 5:179). As we have already seen, Ruskin lauded Pre-Raphaelite art for its fidelity to nature, which he identified with psychological and poetical realism. By evoking Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Victorian novelists engaged their readers in multifarious experiences, but the stimulation and guidance of their readers’ imagination often included ideological issues removed from Ruskin’s aesthetics.

In Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative, Peter Brooks remarks that realism, the “dominant nineteenth-century tradition” “insistently makes the visual the master relation to the world, for the very premise of realism is that one cannot understand human beings outside the context of the things that surround them, and knowing those things is a matter of viewing them, detailing them, and describing the concrete
milieux in which men and women enact their destinies. To know, in realism, is to see, and to represent is to describe” (88). More recently, Nancy Armstrong in *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* also notes that the study of literary realism through the ages has involved the exploration of visual representation (3). Interestingly enough, she sees 1848 (the year when the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed) as the year “when realism was just coming into its own” (5). Referring to critics such as Ian Watt, Harry Levin, George Levine, Elizabeth Ermarth, D. A. Miller, Naomi Schor, and Michael Fried, she notes their agreement on the realist “novel’s use of painterly technique, perspective, detail, spectacle, or simply an abundance of visual description served to create, enlarge, revise, or update the reality shared by Victorian readers. Indeed, today many of us would hold the very kind of description we associate with realism at least partly responsible for changing the terms in which readers imagined their relation to the real” (6). Through evocations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Victorian novelists shaped their readers’ “relation to the real” by challenging their conventional notions of class and gender.

By redrawing Pre-Raphaelite paintings in their novels, Victorian novelists enabled their readers to see not just figuratively but literally as well. Even if their readers could not visit art exhibits, they could see widely circulated engravings of Pre-Raphaelite paintings either as separately sold copies or in illustrated papers such as the *London Illustrated News*, the *Athenaeum*, and even *Punch*. Reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in the realist novel integrated the visual with the verbal; thus the fictional concretely partook of the visual world the readers could see in their quotidian lives. The reader then could more readily enter the fictional world and accept its premises. Certainly, it could be argued, the interweaving of the visual with the verbal in the novel could be accomplished through the evocation of the visual arts, not just the Pre-Raphaelites. Nevertheless, the Pre-Raphaelites, as we have seen, offered the novelists new ways of perceiving, feeling, and representing reality. Most importantly, some of the fervid controversies that Pre-Raphaelite paintings generated involved new representations of gender. Taking such Pre-Raphaelite representations as their point of departure, Victorian novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot extended Pre-Raphaelite gendered boundaries even further, as we shall see in the following chapters.

In these impalpable and intangible reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings into narrative texts, as Victorian novelists reframed the visual within the verbal, they engaged their readers’ perception and imagination, often compelling them to question their own interpretations of representations of gender in Pre-Raphaelite art. Thus the reconfigurations of Pre-
Raphaelite paintings into narrative scenes and portraits in the Victorian novel were most often governed by the laws of gender rather than those of genre. Victorian novelists were not merely interested in extending the fictional boundaries of their narratives but were also involved in delivering Pre-Raphaelite pictorial subjects from silence. In his discussion of ekphrasis, Hefferman reminds us of its root meaning, “speaking out” or “telling in full.” The meaning of ekphrasis, he suggests, is bound to its function, for “besides representational friction and the turning of fixed forms into narrative, ekphrasis entails prosopopeia, or the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object. Ekphrasis speaks not only about works of art but also to and for them. In so doing, it stages—within the theater of language itself—a revolution of the image against the word.” Narrative reconfigurations of paintings, according to Hefferman, mobilize static visual representations and animate them by breaking their inherent silence. Hefferman’s assertion is relevant to the Victorian novel. Through subtle and implicit ekphrasis, Victorian novelists did not merely speak about Pre-Raphaelite paintings but also gave voice to the subjects of these paintings.

George Eliot speaks about ekphrasis indirectly in Middlemarch, privileging the verbal over the visual for its power to represent a subject more accurately and more truthfully and, somewhat paradoxically, for enabling us to hear a person’s voice. To Naumann’s insistence to paint Dorothea’s portrait, Will Ladislaw protests by pointing out the limitations of painting in accurately representing an exceptional woman like Dorothea: “And what is a portrait of a woman? Your painting and Plastik are poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them. Language is a finer medium.” But Naumann rightly undercuts Will’s objection with the remark, “Yes, for those who can’t paint.” Yet Ladislaw persists in his defense of language over painting as a superior mode of representation: “Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection . . . As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is a difference in their very breathing: they change from moment to moment.—This woman whom you have just seen, for example, how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her.” Rather than maintaining the boundaries between the verbal and the visual, Eliot conflates them here in Will’s claim that “language gives you a fuller image.” She further complicates matters by contrasting imagination with perception and presenting the former as a superior way of seeing: “[T]he true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with insistent imperfection.” For Eliot language, not painting, is the most
realistic representation, for unlike painting, which is static, language in her view is dynamic and multidimensional. As Will contends, language represents an individual more fully, for it can express her voice. Though Eliot does not address the Pre-Raphaelites specifically, this exchange between two artists, appropriately so, a painter, Naumann, and a poet, Will, may be seen as a description of the dynamics involved in the transformation of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in the Victorian novel.

Like George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, and Thomas Hardy, through their narrative reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite subjects, often empowered them by endowing them with a voice that their visual representations had denied to them. That voice in turn invariably involved contemporary debates over representations of gender, constantly evolving and transformed by social movements and legal measures. By evoking Pre-Raphaelite paintings, these novelists, as we shall see, grounded their novels intertextually and contextually in reality.