Walter Pater

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OLIVIA SHAKESPEAR’S “Beauty’s Hour” (1896), the only prose work by a female published in the aggressively heterosexual1 magazine the Savoy, is intermixed with Paterian motifs and gestures, from the shaping of her aesthetics to arguments for female subjectivity released from a masculine economy of desire. This essay discusses Shakespear’s novella, subtitled “A Phantasy,” in terms of its contributions to fin-de-siècle aesthetic and decadent discourse. The first section reviews Shakespear’s literary circle and the latter’s relationship to Pater, with Yeats identified as the mediating figure. Part two establishes the Paterian elements informing “Beauty’s Hour,” particularly the construction of the feminine objet d’art and the quest for an “authentic” self.

I

Paterian aesthetics were familiar to Shakespear through close relationships with her cousin, the poet Lionel Johnson, and her friend and lover William Butler Yeats, both members of the Rhymers’ Club, which occasionally discussed Pater’s works.2 Concentric within Shakespear’s literary circle were the contributors to the two decadent “illustrated” journals—the Yellow Book (1894–1897), notorious from its first issue to its last, and the provocative Savoy (eight issues, 1896), established in the wake of the Wilde trials. The Savoy provided a forum for the dissemination of aesthetic and decadent ideas (predominantly through male discourse) under the aegis of Arthur Symons, literary editor, and Aubrey Beardsley, art editor. Yeats contributed works in prose and poetry on folklore, the occult, and mysticism using various noms de plume; in the final issue of the periodical Symons attempted to revitalize Pater’s reputation two years after his death.3

The Yellow Book, however, provided an initial catalyst for change in the arts in its prospectus. The editors explicitly expressed their desire to distin-
guish themselves from “the bad old traditions of periodical literature . . . and provide . . . a beautiful . . . piece of bookmaking.” It was at the inaugural dinner for the *Yellow Book*, in April 1894, that Shakespear first met Yeats. The two were lovers from 1894 to 1896, and remained friends until Shakespear’s death in 1938. From their earliest correspondence, Yeats assumed the role of critic and mentor. Four months after the *Yellow Book* launch, he wrote to Shakespear suggesting modifications to “Beauty’s Hour,” then in manuscript, reminiscent of his own current literary interests. In his letter of 6 August 1894, he commented on the development of Dr. Trefusis, a Faustian figure: “I think you have chosen wisely in making Dr. Trefusis read the mystics, rather than the purely magical books I suggested.” In his *Memoirs*, Yeats seconded Wilde’s remark that Pater’s *Renaissance* is a “golden book . . . the very flower of decadence.” To signify Pater’s continuing importance to literary culture, Yeats transposed a portion of the “Mona Lisa” passage into *vers libre* and placed it first in the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which he edited. As intermediary, Yeats conjoins Pater and Shakespear through his interests in the occult, folklore, “old mythologies,” and the “ceremonies” of beauty. Yeats acknowledges Pater’s guiding intertextual presence in several places—his *Memoirs*, letters, and in the *Autobiographies*, specifically the chapter on “The Tragic Generation”: “Pater made us learned. . . . Perhaps it was because of Pater’s influence that we, with an affectation of learning, claimed the whole past of literature for our authority.” When commenting on his prose work of 1899, Yeats admits, “Villiers de l’Isle-Adam had shaped whatever in my *Rosa Alchemica* Pater had not shaped.”

In one of his early volumes of published poetry, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, Yeats utilizes Paterian ideas and the elusive Sphinx-like images with which they are expressed. His recurrent theme of unrequited love magnified through the “desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death” are also detectable in Shakespear’s novella. Shakespear’s Mary Gower longs for physical beauty and aesthetic gratification through artifice, music, and romance, but the flux of life and its momentary pleasures are eclipsed by the forfeiture of beauty and imminent death before a mirror. “Beauty’s Hour” expands Pater’s idea of “the desire for beauty” by offering a concrete example of an individual realizing her dream of perfection: Mary Gower magically wills herself to become her *alter ego*, Mary Hatherley. But the consummation of her desire is ultimately insufficient; at the narrative’s denouement Mary Hatherley metaphorically “dies” only to be displaced by Gower’s beautifully idealized truth and goodness.

As the personal and intellectual relationship between Shakespear and Yeats matured, a shared interest in Pater’s writings undoubtedly influenced the development of their respective works. As Yeats notes in his *Memoirs*: “At Dulwich Gallery she taught me to care for Watteau—she too was of Pater’s
school.” This remark is significant for two reasons: it again associates Shake-
peare and Yeats with Pater, but it also provides evidence that both were well-
versed in Pater’s canon, including *Imaginary Portraits*. Yeats is referring to
the 1896 Dulwich exhibition of paintings by French artist Jean-Antoine
Watteau, whose canvases offer a poetical escape into an enchanted, seem-
ingly ahistorical world.12 Yet Watteau’s fictional *milieu* is also infused with a
deep melancholy and an anguished sensibility—aspects that inform Pater’s
portrait of Watteau, “A Prince of Court Painters,” as it is refracted through
the “Old French Journal” of Marie-Marguerite Pater.13 Her final impres-
sion of Watteau articulates his search for the ideal: “He was always a seeker
after something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at
all” (*IP* 35). Marie-Marguerite’s imaginative detachment allows her to enter
into Watteau’s mind, and then reinterpret her own reality with a measure of
balance. She appreciates the *fêtes galantes* created by Watteau, but with in-
sight and irony she remarks on the underlying tone of his art: “the storm is al-
ways brooding through the mossy splendour of the trees, above those
sundried glades of lawns” (*IP* 32). Although Watteau sought to create an
ideal, a fusion of inner and outer reality, his prevailing melancholia pre-
vented transformation in his own daily life. Nevertheless he attempted to af-
ford his viewers “a refuge into a world slightly better—better conceived or
better finished—than the real one” (*IP* 219). Shakespear also tries to create
an ideal; her protagonist in “Beauty’s Hour” wills the fusion of subjective
and objective experience. Mary Gower’s vision, however, becomes embod-
ied in the perfection of feminized beauty—a gendered, masculinist con-
struct. Her quest for transfiguration culminates in a new understanding of
the insignificance of artifice for one’s own happiness. Ultimately, she relin-
quishes the physical beauty celebrated in Watteau’s canvases as much as she
refuses the subjugated life of Pater’s Marie-Marguerite.

II

Paterian elements in “Beauty’s Hour” are conveyed through the experi-
ence of the sensual pleasures of beauty yoked to an inescapable sense of im-
minent loss. The concluding lines of Pater’s essay on “Aesthetic Poetry”
underpin the plot of Shakespear’s story: “the desire of beauty quickened by
the sense of death.” Shakespear’s veneration of art is manifested in Mary
Gower’s desire to be a beautiful woman, an object of pleasure, all the while
oblivious to the underlying pain: “Given beauty, or even personal fascina-
tion, which so often persuades one that it is beauty, I could have held my own
against the world.”14 Mary Gower becomes a creator by refashioning her self
into her *alter ego*, Mary Hatherley, who is an artist by day and a “professional
beauty”15 by night. Through her metamorphosis, however, she encounters
disillusionment in the face of the ideal—that which is constructed by the
power of the artist’s own mind, out of experience.
Marie-Marguerite Pater is intensely creative in the pages of her journal. On one level, the portrait which emerges is that of Watteau; in actuality, however, Marie-Marguerite’s subjectivity is expressed and explored. When she observes “that discontent with himself” (IP 27), she is, through projection, revealing her own. Shakespear, I would argue, was particularly attentive to this strategy. Marie-Marguerite’s remarks about Watteau’s internal unrest, “Alas! How little peace have his great successes given him; how little of that quietude of mind, without which, methinks, one fails in true dignity of character” (IP 40), could stand as a motto for Mary Gower, dissatisfied with her metamorphosis as Mary Hatherley. At the outset of Shakespear’s text, Mary Gower is very much akin to Marie-Marguerite Pater: both twenty-eight years old, observers of life overwhelmed by a pervasive sense of ennui, but profoundly restless. “I find a certain immobility of disposition in me,” Marie-Marguerite declares, “to quicken or interfere with which is like physical pain” (IP 28). Paradoxically feeling “tame and ambitious,” she finds the rural ambience of Valenciennes stifling, and expresses her sense of spiritual paralysis through the image of a confined bird:

“How in the world could one help a small bird which had flown into the church but could find no way out again. I suspect it will remain there, fluttering round and round distractedly, far up into the arched roof, till it dies exhausted...—human life may be like that too!” (IP 15).

Like Marie-Marguerite, Mary Gower passes her life as a spectator. She feels doomed to occupy this inferior position not through choice, but as an outcome of a diminished economic status and a sense of unattractiveness. The two Harman sisters, who request that she take notes at their ball, reinforce her role: “‘It will be such fun talking it over afterwards. Onlookers always see most of the game, you know.’” But Mary momentarily shakes off her passivity, replying, “‘[H]as it ever struck you that onlookers would sometimes like to be in the game, instead of outside it?’” Only later does she agree to act as the impersonal spectator: “‘I’ve been constituted the girls’ special reporter to-morrow night....I am to observe the faces and the flirtations....It will be the next best thing to dancing.’”

Shakespear opens up possibilities for the female observer by unsettling the fixity of gendered spectator positions. Typically, male figures enjoy the dominant subject position, reducing females to their objects of desire or pleasure. Mary Gower, however, exercises a “female gaze.” With this crucial narrative gesture Shakespear enables her to function as both subject and object, all the while focusing on the gaps and contradictions produced by hegemonic patriarchal power relations.

The exploration of a “female gaze” is further elaborated through Mary Gower’s desire to become more like the physical ideal expressed in her description of her rival, the beautiful Bella Sturgis. Mary visualizes her “with
her perfect face . . . [but] incapable of loving.” Later she remarks, “I looked at her with a more critical eye than usual: she had a great air of languid distinction; everything about her was perfect; from the pose of her head to the intonation of her voice. She rarely looked at me.” Visually and linguistically, Mary as spectator represents Bella Sturgis as a work of art. Yet the “perfect” Bella (whose name means the beautiful in Italian) intermittently stares back like a wan Botticelli figure as translated by Pater. Mary Gower sees the face of Bella Sturgis as an object lesson in the masculine fantasy of feminine perfection. Yet when gazing at Bella Mary identifies the possibilities of transformation. Bella’s acknowledgement of Mary’s gaze inspires her to explore her own otherness, as embodied in Mary Hatherley. Importantly, Shakespear’s narrative presents not only a female object of desire, but a desiring female subject. The bittersweet pleasures of spectatorship become part of the conversion which Mary Gower experiences in seeing Betty Harmon as a Romney portrait and gazing at Bella Sturgis as an objet d’art. In both instances Mary looks to and at the work of art—an exploration of otherness which is finally consummated through her metamorphosis in the mirror. At that moment, the mirror image stares back, completing the search for an alternate self, and the realization of art. Shakespear as see-er approaches the aestheticism of Walter Pater through the awakening of the senses and the imagination to the possibilities of the ideal.

Pater contends in the “Leonardo da Vinci” essay that La Gioconda is a kind “into which the soul, with all its maladies has passed” (Ren/H 98), an image that conflates portraiture with broader philosophical ideas while defying the destructive forces of nature by producing an inimitable work of art. Symbolically, she represents the unity of culture and the realm of art as an “image of perfection and permanent substitute for transitory life.” She is also another example of the genre of female portraits, by men, in which a beautiful young woman’s image expresses the triumph of art and artist—“a synecdoche for the beauty of painting itself.” Mona Lisa possesses an “unfathomable smile” that concretizes the “fabric of [Leonardo’s] dreams” present “incorporally” in his spirit and released onto the materiality of the canvas.

Just as Pater’s La Gioconda contains and subsumes gender-specific binaries, Shakespear’s Mary Gower magically changes herself into the antithetical Mary Hatherley. Mary Gower regards her transformation as a miracle: “an effort of the will had conquered the power of my material conditions, and I controlled them; my body fitted my soul at last.” In effect, she becomes the subject/agent that generates her other self as the beautiful Mary Hatherley. Consequently, she becomes the object of her own gaze. Through her act of will and godlike artistry she re-produces herself as a femme fatale reminiscent of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa. Shakespear is not satis-
fied with just one confounding event, however. The desirable Mary Hather-
ley then subverts gender stereotypes, empowers herself, through her work as
an artist. As Clara Harman remarks of her, “‘She paints all day through;
works quite hard, as though she had to do it.’”25 Her act of conjuring is again
suggestive of Pater’s Leonardo, who seems, more than any other artist, to
“reflect ideas and views and some scheme of the world within . . . some un-
sanctified and secret wisdom. . . . He learned the art of going deep . . . the
power of an intimate presence of things . . . and was smitten with the love of
the impossible” (Ren/H 78, 82). Similarly, Mary Gower is a creator, a
Leonardo-esque “diver in deep seas” of the imagination, alchemy, and mys-
ticism. Like Leonardo’s clairvoyants, Mary Gower “is aware of the subtler
forces of nature,” and “feel[s] powers at work in the common air unfelt by
others” (Ren/H 91). Nearly in a swoon she says, “I only shook my head; and
fell to looking into my own eyes again with a yearning, stronger than it had
ever been before, rising like a passion into my face.”26 Through Mary’s
metaphorphosis, the patriarchal object has been transformed into a com-
plex, sensible, beautiful subject.

Mary Gower’s ritual for transformation, a procedure cited in the works of
Cornelius Agrippa,27 is made available to her in the library of Dr. Trefusis.
These late Renaissance volumes on the occult, alchemy, and magic further
link Shakespeare’s narrative and Pater’s essay on Leonardo, in which the art-
ist fashions “a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit,
little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite pas-
sions . . . portraiture . . . attest[ing to] the presence of mimes and flute play-
ners” (Ren/H 98). Sensitive to “a deep mysticity” (MS 194), Mary Gower also
enters a preternatural world, familiar to Agrippa’s readers, through a cere-
mony with a Magic Mirror: “The Ego must unfold from within. . . . The
mind should be composed. . . . Gaze . . . into [the mirror]. . . . At first glance a
milky film will appear—a sort of white, cloudy appearance—which is the
manifestation of forces. . . . The veil of Isis is about to rise.”28 The idea of a
veil is suggested by Mary Gower when she experiences “the sensation of be-
ing in darkness, in thick cloud; from which [she] emerged with [her]
beauty.”29 This life-altering “moment of being” before the mirror fore-
grounds what Iser terms Pater’s “emphasis on glorification . . . the distinctive
mark of ritual that freezes the transfiguration of human life.”30 In an inver-
sion of the New Testament event,31 Mary Gower’s glorification as Mary
Hatherley is the result of a human becoming an object of worship as the em-
bodiment of beauty and a source of aesthetic pleasure.

Once transmogrified as an objet d’art, Mary Gower taunts Gerald Har-
man about his reverence for beauty: “‘You fall in love with a girl’s beautiful
face—it’s not the first time you’ve done it; you endow her with all sorts of
qualities; you make her an idol; the whole thing only means that your aes-
thetic sense is gratified.”

Shakespear is subverting a masculinized ideal feminine, according to which the passive object does not create, is not empowered, and is not productive. Mary Gower realizes that “beauty drew [Gerald Harman] like a magnet,” and he guarantees that “to be sure, the face is enough.” The presumed entitlement of Harman’s gaze is challenged obliquely by Gower’s alter ego, the stunning Mary Hatherley. Paradoxically, she is the passive, beautiful object, akin to Leonardo’s Lady Lisa, and a doubly active agent, the alchemist participating in occult rituals and the visual artist. In Paterian dream-like state, Mary Gower explores the effects of idolizing beauty after her own mysterious conjurations: “The golden key [beauty] that opened hearts led me to strange places. . . . The key unlocked no sanctuary at all, with all altar-lights and incense burning, waiting for the one divinity that was to fill its empty shrine.” Gradually Gower realizes that the “one divinity,” female beauty, should not be worshipped, thus posing an ideological and aesthetic challenge to patriarchal Victorian culture.

Mary Gower’s insights raise the issues of desire and sexual difference, her own narcissism, and Pater’s aesthetic interests (largely framed and informed by a homoerotic sensibility). Fleetingly, Mary Gower finds completion in the mirror, gazing and experiencing life as her other self. Ambiguously, throughout “Beauty’s Hour” the objects of Mary’s “female gaze” are other women—Bella Sturgis with her “perfect face” and Betty Harman with the “face of a Romney.” Counter to the heterosexual male gaze, Pater’s suggestively encodes homoerotic desires in the “worship of the [male] body” first adumbrated in the “Winckelmann” essay (1867). Pater refers to the Elgin Marbles housed at the British Museum to concretize this “worship”: “one might choose perhaps from the ‘beautiful multitude’ of the Panathenaic frieze, that line of youths on horseback, with their level glances, their proud, patient lips, their chastened reins, their whole bodies in exquisite service” (Ren/H 174). In effect, Pater challenges his readers to respond to Winckelmann’s appreciation of beautiful male youths while outlining a network of sexual-aesthetic connections which would be given full exposure by the close of the century. Although desiring differently, both Shakespear and Pater embrace a need for the gratification of an aesthetic sensibility expressed in “the care for physical beauty” and “the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (Ren/H xxi).

Throughout Shakespear’s narrative, Mary Gower is aware of the attendant pleasure and pain that a longing for beauty invokes. Sadly she realizes that even Dr. Trefusis, a long-time family friend, was a “worshipper of beauty.” When he does not recognize the transfigured Mary, she feels the ambiguity of a collapsed identity, and insists: “I am Mary; but I have got into another body’ . . . I noticed also another look, when his eyes met mine, a look
that was almost devout.” Her sense of being, affirmed by a Paterian notion of the fusion of body and soul, is undermined by Dr. Trefusis’s admission that he “would do anything for a pretty woman.”

Mary Gower briefly pursues physical beauty as an ideal; her “manifestation” as Mary Hatherley produces a seemingly integrated identity, confirmed when she pronounces that, “My body fitted my soul at last.” At that moment, she misleads herself into believing that an absolute blending of “outward and inward,” the material and the spiritual, has occurred. In fact, she wants to be another Florian Deleal, of “The Child in the House,” who takes from his childhood the knowledge of “Sensibility—the desire of physical beauty—a strange biblical awe, which made any reference to the unseen act on him like solemn music” (*MS* 195). Florian understands that his body perfectly houses its chief inhabitant, the soul, a notion that Pater amplifies in *Marius the Epicurean*: “The house [exists] for the orderly soul. . . . [B]uilding and adorning the parts of a many-roomed abode for herself, only an expansion of the body. . . . [B]etween outward and inward, [there is] no longer any distinction at all. . . ; and the body. . . is but a process, an expansion, of the soul” (*ME* 2: 92, 93). For Pater, however, only male figures enjoy this expansive, all-encompassing state; female figures are more likely to be featured as “Leda or Pomona, as Modesty or Vanity” (*Ren/H* 97). In Shakespeare’s narrative, there is “no longer any distinction at all” between body and soul *after* Mary Gower decides to shed the persona of Mary Hatherley and the artifice of physical beauty as the last step in her pilgrimage towards integration and authenticity. Only then, with a newly expansive subjectivity, is she satisfied.

Almost a century later, feminist film critic Lucy Bland took the body/soul debate one step further, suggesting an alternative yet also stereotypical paradigm for women: “The contradictory representation of woman as on the one hand moral and virtuous, on the other, ‘animal,’ was possible through a splitting of woman into three, rather than the usual Cartesian duality of mind and body: woman’s spirituality (her morality) was pure and ethereal, but continually risked being overpowered by the animal instinct of reproduction, which ruled her body and her mind.” A triadic figure of femininity was certainly encoded in Aesthetic and Symbolist art. Shakespeare’s text does not confine itself to traditional binaries: body/soul, Hatherley/Gower. Instead, the observant Mary Gower delineates three classifications of physical beauty for women, but as defined and required by masculine desire within a heterosexual script: “Women grouped themselves into three distinct types; which were almost primitive in their lack of complexity. The beauty; the woman whose claims to beauty are not universally acknowledged; and the plain woman.” As the passage continues,
The beauty . . . had a certainty of pleasing . . . and secret moments of scorn . . . a scorn of that lust of the eye which held her beauty too dear . . . The woman with disputable claims . . . was too much affected by the opinion of others . . . her attitude towards the world being one of mingled depreciation and assertion. As for the plain woman, had I not stood hand in hand with her outside the gates of Paradise all my life.[43]

Shakespeare’s categorizations, predicated upon anti-feminist standards, are remarkably similar to the typologies informing the Symbolist paintings of Edward Munch, from his *Frieze of Life* series.[44] The *Woman in Three Stages* (1895), also known as the *Sphinx*[45] (see Fig. 1) depicts three major phases of a woman’s life in terms of the physical changes from youth to maturity to old age (paralleling processive mental and spiritual states of innocence, experience, and final reconciliation). Shakespeare would have been familiar with Munch’s work through Symbolist periodicals in Paris—*Mercure de France* (1890)[46] and *Revue Blanche* (1891)[47]—and in Berlin’s *Pan* (1891), founded by the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe (publisher of eight intaglio prints by Munch). Shakespeare’s taxonomy of female beauty corresponds to Munch’s idol of immaturity, experience, and erotic knowledge. Both Shakespeare and Munch forge links back to Pater’s texts—from Shakespeare’s Mary Hatherley to Munch’s Maturity, and finally to Pater’s *La Gioconda*. The latter both represents and subverts the dichotomous woman—virgin / *femme fatale*, nature / artifice, and sacred / profane. Lady Lisa fulfills Leonardo’s desire, and Pater’s, with her uncommon “beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh” (*Ren/H* 98). Through surface *sfumato* Leonardo blurs the distinctions between regenerative idea and ageless mysticism reminiscent of the earlier painting, *The Virgin with Child and Saint Anne*. Lady Lisa’s “air of weariness and ennui” enables Leonardo to reconcile his “struggle between reason . . . and the desire of beauty . . . through transmutation of ideas into images” (*Ren/H* 88). Although Greek goddesses or “beautiful women of antiquity” would have been “troubled,” Pater suggests, “by this beauty . . . [who in ] outward form [expresses] the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age . . . the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias” (*Ren/H* 98–99), *Mona Lisa* is Leonardo’s “ideal lady, embodied and beheld at last” (*Ren/H* 97).

The categories of beauty summarized by Mary Gower also form a hierarchy arranged in chronological sequence: youth, maturity, and old age mirroring the passages of life from innocence to experience and then redemption. In the end, Mary Gower redeems herself by going against late-Victorian gender norms, and masculine standards, by choosing not to have her beauty “wrought . . . upon the flesh” (*Ren/H* 98). In Munch’s oeuvre, female figures invite interpretation as youth, maturity, and old age, or alternatively, the virgin, the whore, and the nun. In other words, a female is always defined in terms of her sexual experiences with a man: prior to, during, and
in the absence of. For Shakespear, however, “the beauty” is characterized by
a lust for life and the experience of maturity, while the “disputable” beauty,
uncertain in her self-definition, suggests the unformed identity of youth.
The “plain” woman, possibly a nun, stands outside the “gates of Para-
dise”—or does she?

The pursuit of an ideal through beauty and art is a recurring trope in Pa-
ter’s writings, the foundation of his aestheticism. In “Feuillet’s ‘La Morte,’”
he suggests that art can afford “a refuge into a world slightly better—better
conceived, or better finished—than the real one” (Ap 219). Mary Gower
takes “refuge” in Mary Hatherley, but only to find this alternative insuffi-
cient. According to Pater, Watteau’s paintings cast an unreal and imaginary
light upon the scenes of life while at the same time revealing its innermost es-
sence. Watteau “has enabled us to see it,” Marie-Marguerite Pater observes,
and thus “we are so much better-off thereby. . . . The world he sets before us
so engagingly has its care for purity, its cleanly preferences, in what one is to
see—in the outsides of things” (IP 32). As Mary Hatherley, Gower gains a
new perspective “outside”; her experiences teach her “what makes life really
valuable” (IP 33). Like Pater, her fictional works translate aesthetic con-
cerns into ethical and subjective domains; unlike Pater, she develops a femi-
nist “sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity”
(Ren/H 189). In “Beauty’s Hour,” Mary Gower chooses life over artifice;
through a costly personal empowerment, she achieves a new kind of
“breadth, centrality, with blitheness and repose” (Ren/H 181). It is not
enough for Mary Gower to live vicariously as a physically beautiful woman,
whatever advantages such a situation may bestow. Hatherley’s face and body
entrap her in a male economy of desire in which her greater, truer subjectiv-
ity is devalued. Gower learns, as did Plato’s Socrates in the Phaedrus, to use
physical beauty as a means to a better end. Rather than being content as a
latter-day Gioconda, Mary Gower wants to be her own diaphanous self, in
which body and soul are satisfactorily united.

Lesley Higgins’s insightful article “But Who is ‘She’?” analyzes the role of
creativity and female agency in Pater’s writings. In “The Prince of Court
Painters,” she suggests, Marie-Marguerite Pater is overwhelmed with ennui;
she “wants nothing more than to live fulfilled by and for others. In chroni-
cling Watteau’s life, she encounters and writes her own. Ironically she be-
comes a creative person . . . but never recognizes herself in such a productive
role.”48 In contrast, Shakespear’s Mary Gower transforms herself into an
artist and a work of art through her own act of will. Reconstructing herself as
the “beauty” and the culture worker, she has the opportunity to explore her
own otherness. Akin to Watteau’s contemporary, the highly successful pastel
artist and portrait painter Rosalba Carriera, Mary Gower creates her own
portrait, a live study in the person of Mary Hatherley. She does so using a dy-
namic of mirror imaging reminiscent of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Life as Mary Hatherley offers one kind of temporary integration for Gower, yet she realizes that, as Hatherley, she is primarily an object of desire, an *objet d’art* for Gerald Harman. A life in the service of artifice, erotic and otherwise, does not prove fulfilling. Unlike the figures captured in Carriera’s pastels, all “surface elegance and sensation,” Mary Gower desires to explore the inner reaches of personality for meaning and affirmation. After the mystical encounter with her Other, exploring her own capacity for creativity and life lived as art, Mary Gower chooses peace and self-reconciliation. In doing so, to paraphrase Pater, she attains a new kind of non-eroticized, feminist beauty with a “condition of strangeness”; it is “a beauty born of unlikely elements, by a profound alchemy, by a difficult initiation” and is characterized by “ultimate grace” (Ap 260). Gower undermines patriarchal conventions of the *l’idéal féminin* within a male economy of desire by taking a stance emphasizing personal integrity and depth of self. With “Beauty’s Hour,” Shakespeare provides an important bridge between Aesthetic and Decadent fiction and the New Woman novel.
Figure 1 Edvard Munch, *Woman II*, 1895
Drypoint and line etching. Munch Museum, Oslo