

**Birkbeck BA History of Art,
The Unsettled Subject, Year 4
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**'The Eve of St. Agnes' and Madeline's Journey from
William Holman Hunt's Stage Set to John Everett
Millais's Dream World**

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Keats's poem *Eve of St. Agnes* with its medieval associations and evocative descriptions was an inspiration to the Pre-Raphaelites and I shall consider two depictions, William Holman Hunt's *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1848, 77.5x113 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, see Figure 1) and John Everett Millais's painting of the same name (1863, 118.1x154.9 cm, Royal Collection, see Figure 2).¹ These two paintings span the period of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and while Hunt's ushers in many techniques we associate with the group, Millais's loosely painted version takes a different approach in order to create a mood rather than an accurate depiction.

I shall consider each painting separately in terms of their subject matter and technique, particularly in the way that Madeline is represented and then compare and contrast them to consider the differences between the aims of the Brotherhood and the Aesthetes. I have chosen to consider Madeline partly because her role is central to the poem and partly because the representation of women highlights some interesting aspects of nineteenth century society and the ways in which artists grappled with their representation.

Keats's poem generated a great deal of literary debate following Earl Wasserman's description of it as a profound allegory of the soul's ascent and Jack Stillinger contradicted him with 'The Hoodwinking of Madeline', followed thirty years later with his summary of the fifty-nine interpretations generated by the subsequent debate.² Interpretations include

¹ Hunt's painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy as '*The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro during the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry*', see A. Bowness, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate, 1984), pp. 57-58 and 199-200 for a description of both paintings.

² M. Ringel, The Theme of "Eve of St. Agnes" in the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, *The Victorian Web*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/ringel12.html>, accessed 21st October 2006. Keats's poem is based on a combination of a folk tale associated with the Eve of St. Agnes (20th January) and a prose romance by Boccaccio called *Filocolo*, see H. MacCracken, 'The Source of Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes"', *Modern Philology*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Oct., 1907), pp. 145-152. The poem is in J. Strachan (ed.), *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on the Poems of John Keats* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 119-121. The basic plot concerns a young virgin called Madeline who is seduced by her lover called Porphyro on the Eve of St. Agnes. Porphyro braves the 'barbarian hordes' in the castle, who would kill him on sight, to see Madeline and at the end of the poem they make their escape across the moors. See

Porphyro as villain 'drawn from the myth of the vampire' and Madeline as 'victim of her oppressive family', as 'the passive object of masculine power' and as *femme fatale*. The poem has been seen as an allegory of 'feudalism at the moment of its collapse', as well as 'masturbatory dreaming' and sexual voyeurism with us as voyeur watching another voyeur (Keats), watching another (Porphyro) watching 'a woman who broods voluptuously upon herself'. All these literary interpretations are interesting but an artist interprets through paint and this raises other issues.

The Elastic Sexuality of Hunt's Madeline

Hunt wrote in his autobiography that he had wanted to make a strong moral statement,

*...the story in Keats's Eve of St. Agnes illustrates the sacredness of honest responsible love and the weakness of proud intemperance, and I may practise my new principles to some degree on that subject.*³

Keats revised the poem 'to make more explicit...what happens physically between the two lovers' but his publisher insisted he would only publish the original version.⁴ The reference to sexual intercourse was reduced to 'Into her dream he melted, as the rose/Blendeth its odour with the violet,—/Solution sweet:' but it was still clear that they had had sexual intercourse outside marriage. Elizabeth Prettejohn points out that Victorians saw women at one of two extremes, virgin or whore, and these masculine polarities present women as just passive erotic objects.⁵ Hunt therefore had to find a way to present Madeline so that his moral message of 'honest responsible love' would be accepted by the viewer.

Hunt added this penultimate stanza to the catalogue,

*They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flagon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,*

J. Stillinger, *Reading the 'Eve of St. Agnes': The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³ H. Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1905), p. 85. As Hunt makes clear, although the painting predates the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood it does incorporate his 'new principles'.

⁴ G. Allen 'Romantic verse narrative' in S. Bygrave (ed.), *Romantic Writings: Approaching Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 152.

⁵ E. Prettejohn, see *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 208.

*But his sagacious eye an inmate owns.
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide -
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones -
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.⁶*

As Griselda Pollock points out, Hunt thought the representation of sexuality, for masculine pleasure, required the gaze to be moderated by a narrative which places that pleasure within a moral context.⁷

The Victorian attitude is commonly seen as one of sexual repression but Michael Foucault rejects this simplistic notion and suggests sexual behaviour was organised through mechanisms of definition and regulation.⁸ Lynn Nead adds that,

'Sexuality has been constructed for men and women in terms of difference, the male sexual urge is thought of as active, aggressive and spontaneous whilst female sexuality is defined in relation to the male, it is understood as weak, passive and responsive.'

However, if we look at Madeline in Hunt's painting she exhibits many of the conventions of the male hero.⁹ In a preparatory sketch (Figure 7) the positions are reversed so Hunt has consciously positioned Madeline nearer to the danger. Her expression is alert, she has an active stance (she is shown with her foot raised, mid-step), she is protective and her arm encloses Porphyro not in a maternal way but as the person in control. She is also looking at the dogs that could bark at any moment and bring in the 'hot-blooded lords, whose very dogs would execrations howl against his lineage' and she is putting her hand on his chest possibly to reassure the dogs while she cautions Porphyro by holding back his sword.¹⁰

Porphyro is shown as the counterpoint to Madeline; he looks confused with a large phallic belt and buckle perhaps signifying that he violated Madeline, arguably without her fully conscious consent. Originally Porphyro's cap had a bow on the front which suggests

⁶ J. Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné* (London & New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006), p. 126

⁷ G. Pollock, *Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 130.

⁸ L. Nead, 'The Magdalen in Modern Times: The mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Correspondences. (1984), p. 26.

⁹ I use the term 'hero' rather than 'heroine' as Madeline exhibits the attributes conventionally associated with the masculine term.

¹⁰ A. Till (ed.), *The Complete Poems of John Keats* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 208.

Hunt was playing with his masculine attributes.¹¹ Madeline is shown more full face and exposed than Porphyro and is surrounded by the 'halo' of her hood while his face is mostly in shadow and his expression less composed.¹²

Although the poem is concerned with fantasies of access to the body of Madeline Hunt appears to reject such a reading. Carol Jacobi discusses the idea of using 'gender as a device rather than a definition' as it 'softens the binary model' and so removes the temptation to 'view the image as a problem to be decoded.'¹³ I suggested above that Hunt is blurring the masculine/feminine distinction by giving Madeline the attributes of a male hero and this obscures our reading of her as a fallen woman.¹⁴ The masculine/feminine distinction is further blurred by the purple of her dress reflecting Porphyro's name and suggesting she has absorbed his masculinity and the two have become merged into one.¹⁵ The masculine/feminine gender distinction may therefore have been intentionally confused to avoid a simple lover/fallen woman polarity, leaving us free to read the overall scene as the representation of 'the sacredness of honest responsible love'.

Hunt reinforced this reading by painting 'honestly' from life, although he was restricted by having to work on the painting in the evenings by candlelight. He borrowed the bloodhounds from a friend and James Key, a fellow student, sat for the sleeping page and the hands of Porphyro, and Hunt claimed that even the mistletoe was painted from life.¹⁶

The painting was a success as it was accepted by the Royal Academy and sold for the asking price of £60 to Charles Bridger, a friend of F. G. Stephens.

Millais' Madeline as Erotic Dream

The women in Pre-Raphaelites paintings can be roughly divided into four categories—women as idealised young virgins or wives, such as Rossetti's depictions of the Virgin Mary and

¹¹ Victoria Leanse, conservator at Guildhall Art Gallery in conversation, 13th December 2006.

¹² Close examination of the painting shows that Madeline's hood has been altered to surround her head like a halo.

¹³ C. Jacobi, *Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk: Millais and the Synthetic Subject*, unpublished paper, 2006, p. 13

¹⁴ L. Nochlin, Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 1. (Mar., 1978), pp. 139-153.

¹⁵ The name Porphyro means purple, a colour used for the clothing of nobles and associated with the trade of the Phoenicians, see M. Astour, The Origin of the Terms "Canaan," "Phoenician," and "Purple", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Erich F. Schmidt memorial Issue. Part Two. (Oct., 1965), pp. 346-350.

¹⁶ This information is taken from Hunt's autobiography which has some inaccuracies, the mistletoe is in fact holly and Hunt claims the painting was sold for £70, see Bronkhurst (2006), p. 127-128.

Charles Collins, *Convent Thoughts* (1851, Ashmolean Museum); women as objects of desire such as Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* (1864-70, Tate Gallery); powerless women and women as victims, such as Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-2, Tate Gallery) and *Mariana* (1850-1, The Makins Collection); and powerful women who threaten men, a category that became more popular later but arguably includes Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1864-8, Delaware Art Museum).¹⁷

Hunt's Madeline is an idealised young woman although, as we have seen, her lack of virginity created a problem for Hunt, but Millais's Madeline is an object of desire. This reflects a change in interest between the 1850s and the 1860s.¹⁸ Millais created a powerful woman, a *femme fatale*, although as his wife was the model he had a practical problem to resolve before he could exhibit her in this way.¹⁹

This interpretation of Madeline as an object of desire is the viewer's projection. In the poem Madeline is unaware that she is being spied on by Porphyro and so her disrobing could be seen as innocent. However, she may be undressing for the lover she daydreams about. It is this analysis that creates the masturbatory readings of both Madeline and Porphyro mentioned previously.

As early as 1849, Millais had completed an erotic sketch of Madeline in her chamber with her outer garments fallen from her in a heap on the floor.²⁰ Following his marriage to Euphemia Gray in 1855 he was searching for a commercially successful approach that was less time consuming than his earlier Pre-Raphaelite paintings.²¹ Millais was keen to increase his rate of production and he justified this not as a way to make more money but because 'Lingering over one's work is unhealthy'.²² He tried a number of approaches, such as *Waiting* (1854, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), an 'impressionistic' painting pre-dating impressionism and *The Black Brunswickers* (1859), a commercially successful painting with

¹⁷ 'Women as Subject in Victorian Art—Representations of Women', *The Victorian Web*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/arts2.html>, accessed 19th December 2006.

¹⁸ Prettejohn (2005) explains the change in mood between the 1850s and 1860s. In the 1850s the artist typically presented a complete scene as if we were watching actors on a stage set but by the 1860s there was much more exploration of the erotic, see *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 218.

¹⁹ Millais's painting illustrates stanza 25 in Keats' poem which introduces Porphyro's one-sided 'seduction' of Madeline which leads to her awakening followed by stanza 36 which includes the famous phrase 'Into her dream he melted...'.²⁰

²⁰ M. Pointon, 'Histories of matrimony: J. E. Millais' in M. Pointon (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelites re-viewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 114.

²¹ P. Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p. 55.

²² Barlow (2005), p. 56.

elements of Pre-Raphaelite technique.²³ Then, in 1863, he completed *The Eve of St. Agnes* in just five days and sold the painting to the dealer Gambart for £800.²⁴

Millais used his wife Euphemia (Figure 4) as his model and he painted her at night in a room at Knole House near Sevenoaks. It was criticized by Frederic Stephens as an 'absurdity' because of the 'anachronism' resulting from the conflict with what most assume should be a medieval setting and the Jacobean details of Knole House.²⁵ Stephens's comments show how far Millais had come from the Pre-Raphaelite days when such things mattered. However, despite this and other negative criticism many regarded this as one of Millais's finest paintings and it was described as 'a painter's picture' by Val Prinsep and as 'more like a lovely dream than a thing of this earth' by Philip Calderon.²⁶

The idea of a painting expressing a mood rather than a moral narrative was first explored by Millais's in his *Autumn Leaves* of in 1855-6, a painting that became successful and is said to have influenced Whistler.²⁷ Millais's *The Eve of St. Agnes* was painted as another mood painting of a particular moment in Keats's narrative and Paul Barlow describes the painting as 'an exploration of Whistlerian colourism.'²⁸ On the strength of his success with *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *My First Sermon* that year, Millais was elected Royal Academician and *The Eve of St Agnes* became his most important picture of this and the next few years and was seen as remarkable for the painting of moonlight.

Millais presents Madeline not as a shy, young virgin but as a sexual object for the masculine gaze. In the poem Porphyro is hiding in a closet voyeuristically looking out at Madeline undressing and we are placed in the role of Porphyro as we are also looking at Madeline undressing. Millais shows Madeline with her dress removed and hanging round her 'like a mermaid in sea-weed' with her hair cascading over her shoulders as she loosens her corset. A mermaid however, is not an innocent virgin but a powerful woman described by William Makepeace Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (serialised 1847-48) as 'about no good, and we

²³ Barlow (2005), p. 97.

²⁴ Barlow (2005), p. 102, as Barlow points out this beat Whistler's 200 guineas for two days work on *Nocturne in Black and Gold*.

²⁵ Q. Bell, *A New and Noble School: The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Macdonald, 1982), p. 95-99.

²⁶ Millais (1899), p. 374 and G. Fleming, *John Everett Millais: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1998), p. 204.

²⁷ Barlow (2005), pp. 71-74.

²⁸ Barlow (2005), p. 102-103.

had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims'.²⁹

Madeline's cascading hair also had deep sexual significance as 'in the forties and fifties, hair became something of a Victorian cultural obsession'.³⁰ In one of the legends of St. Agnes she is chained naked to a rock to expose her to the multitudes and so destroy her identity but her hair miraculously grows and hides her and so, as in the secular equivalent, the Goose Girl, it is her hair that is used to assert her identity.³¹ Loose hair also had a darker side for the hair-obsessed Symbolist poets and painters as 'the stylized phallic female—the embodiment of Freud's Medusa' where sexuality is elastic as in Swinburne's boy-maiden Medusa or perverse as in his Lady of Pain who 'takes pleasure from her phallic hair serpents, on whom she performs a sadistically imagined fellatio.'³²

I believe Millais spent the final two days finishing the painting based on the model Miss Ford in order to hide the identity of his wife as model. In his biography, written by his son, we have a drawing of a model (labelled 'Sketch for "Eve of St. Agnes"', undated, see Figure 5).³³ The biography says 'when we got back from Knoles the figure of Madeline had to be altered.' If we examine the sketch, the painting and a photograph of his wife I would suggest that Millais chose a model similar in appearance to his wife but sufficiently different to hide his wife's identity and this implies that he may have been worried about the negative response to this erotic image. Insulting comments made by people that knew Millais also suggest that they did not recognise the model as his wife.³⁴

The Disrupted Narrative Space

Both paintings are concerned with spaces and thresholds and techniques for disrupting the narrative, although for different reasons.

Barlow describes how Hunt draws attention to the usual pictorial conventions for representing space by breaking them and in so doing he lifts the moral tone of the painting

²⁹ W. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), p. 630.

³⁰ E. Gitter, The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 99, No. 5. (Oct., 1984), p. 942.

³¹ Gitter (1984), p. 939.

³² Gitter (1984), p. 952.

³³ J. Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (London: Methuen & Co., 1899), p. 373.

³⁴ "I cannot bear that woman with the gridiron," said Frank Grant (Sir Francis Grant, P.R.A.)...and Tom Taylor said, "Where on earth did you get that scraggy model, Millais?"; Millais (1899), p.373.

to a higher level.³⁵ Barlow compares Hunt's depiction of pictorial space with that used in contemporary paintings such as O'Neil's Keepsake pictures (see Figures 10 and 11). He argues that picture elements such as the foreshortened porter (see Figure 8) disrupt the fictive space and this prevents us entering into the picture as a fantasy world whereas Keepsake paintings encourage us to slip into their fantasy world.

Hunt also uses the attention to surface detail, the bright colours and the disruptive *coulisse* planes, like a stage set, to achieve the same disruption of the fantasy world. These effects therefore stop the viewer at the point of entering into the fantasy by drawing attention to the painting as a painted image and this encourages it to be seen as a moral lesson as well as a narrative.

O'Neil was critical of this didactic moralising and satirised it in a painting of a Pre-Raphaelite painter at work (Figure 12) showing 'a conceited looking young artist...painting with infinite labour'.³⁶

Why should Hunt wish to do this? Barlow argues that the moral climate of the late 1840s was growing tired of the shallow, repetitive work shown at the Royal Academy and Hunt was responding to this by forcing us consider a strong moral statement.³⁷ For example, the porter is adopting the conventional pose for deep thought or dreaming reminding us that the dangers faced by Madeline and Porphyro are just dreams about an imaginary scene from an invented story. Our contemplation of the scene as a stage set telling the tale of two lovers is therefore disrupted by the pictorial elements that remind us that it is a painting but a painting with a purpose—to make a moral statement.

To this extent it can be seen as in the Hogarthian tradition, a clearly painted scene, whose actors are suspended in time at a key moment that highlights a message to those who can interpret it. However, unlike Hogarth, the picture also plays with reality and representation by showing levels of 'reality' contained in separate space entered through a threshold. In the background through a window we have a remote, disconnected scene that contains a flat, medieval tapestry, a picture within the painting, possibly, I believe of the

³⁵ M. Aske, 'Magical Spaces in The Eve of St. Agnes', *Essays in Criticism*, 1981; Vol. XXXI, pp. 196-209 and P. Barlow, 'Pre-Raphaelitism and Post-Raphaelitism: the articulation of fantasy and the problem of pictorial space' in M. Pointon (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelites re-viewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 66.

³⁶ Barlow (1989), p. 68.

³⁷ Barlow (1989), p. 70.

martyrdom of St. Agnes.³⁸ The revellers are more 'real' than the tapestry but they are flattened and distant. In the near space we have three disconnected elements. The man in the chair asleep in the background is in Madeline and Porphyro's space but is in shadow and acts as another guardian of the threshold between us and the revellers.

Barlow speculates that if the porter stands for us, the viewer, then our fantasy about Madeline and Porphyro could be a dream in the mind of the porter, so the porter can be seen to partake in our space while the couple are about to break out of their fantasised space into another space, a new world of nature glimpsed through the door. Hunt did say that in his next painting he wanted to paint outside in the sunshine—it is as if Madeline and Porphyro are representing Hunt's desire to break out into nature.³⁹

We also have a journey through time from the medieval tapestry representing a classical theme to the late medieval castle with classical elements (such as rounded, not Gothic, arches) although with an early medieval baron in his great hall. In the foreground the porter projects into our modern space and the couple hover between their fictive medieval setting and a contemporary moral statement. In the poem the lines following those in the catalogue suddenly switch tense:

*And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.*⁴⁰

It introduces a discontinuity like the discontinuity in the picture between us, the viewer, looking back at events long ago and the fictive space of then current events. The door in the painting and the world 'outside' is the portal to this discontinuity.

There is a strong moral message conveyed by the painting; the feast in the background is consumption on a grand scale balanced against the private 'feast' of love between Madeline and Porphyro. Both are types of intemperance and lead to consequences, the drunken stupor of the porter in the foreground and the flight of the lovers. This is a painting about uncontrolled consumption and its consequences.

³⁸ Close examination of the painting reveals a kneeling woman with what appears to be a Roman soldier behind her.

³⁹ Hunt (1905), p. 91.

⁴⁰ Till (1994), p. 217.

Millais pointed out to Hunt how revolutionary the painting was because of the 'varied form as you see them in Nature. You've made living persons, not tinted effigies.'⁴¹ Hunt's stage set is more than 'waxen effigies', it is a world of ambiguous spaces, disconcerting forms, bright colours and high moral tone. But it is a constructed space with actors whose purpose is to make a moral point. As such it sets the scene for the Pre-Raphaelite developments of the following few years. Fifteen years later a new artistic movement was starting.

Millais painted his *The Eve of St. Agnes* in 1863, the same year Hunt completed his *The Afterglow in Egypt* (Figure 13), also of a single standing woman in reduced light. The difference between the paintings illustrates how far Hunt and Millais had diverged over 15 years. 'The white ground of *The Afterglow* is completely concealed beneath an unbroken "skin" of paint' and it is 'meticulously modelled'.⁴² Millais's painting is not about precision but about feeling, rectangular masses of tone are varied by light, spaces are blurred and the definition of decorative detail is varied continually. It 'Pushes the limits of depiction to the edge of nothingness' and 'Continually threatens to break into meaningless and shapeless smears.'⁴³

Tim Barringer points out 'Whistler's work could hardly be further from the Pre-Raphaelites of the early 1850s' as the 'handling of paint became sketchy and gestural'.⁴⁴ Whistler's *The White Girl* clearly influenced Millais as when it was shown in London in 1862 he is reported to have described it as 'splendid, more like Titian and those other old swells than anything he has seen'.⁴⁵ *The White Girl* was shown later that year at the *Salon des Refusés* in Paris with Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Whistler wrote enthusiastically about Millais's *The Eve of St. Agnes* to Fantin-Latour telling him it was the first time Millais had produced a 'real painting...something completely artistic' that could be admired by the French avant garde.⁴⁶

The critic Philippe Burty noted Millais was looking in a new direction as 'He had seen the paintings of Whistler...the American had brought from Paris a new and freer style, a

⁴¹ Hunt (1905), p. 86.

⁴² C. Jacobi, *William Holman Hunt: Painter, Painting, Paint* (Manchester: Manchester Press, 2006), p. 205

⁴³ Barlow (2005), p. 103.

⁴⁴ T. Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998), p. 165.

⁴⁵ Barlow (2005), p. 102.

⁴⁶ Barlow (2005), p. 55.

different kind of realism and a repertoire of compositional devices which owed more to Japan than to Raphael.’⁴⁷ It was also admired by Verlaine and Rimbaud when shown at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1867, and subsequently it acquired an ‘almost cult-like stature’.⁴⁸ Susan Casteras goes on to point out that ‘the literary appeal to the Symbolist poets was clearly established, along with the suggestive metaphors they created for the hypnotic beauty and power of women.’

In 1862 Swinburne published the first English review of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which Swinburne says the poet’s, and by implication the artist’s, business is not ‘to redeem the age and remould society’.⁴⁹ He delights in the sensual female figure and by 1868 he was writing art cannot be ‘handmaid to religion, exponent of duty’ but the artist must aim at ‘art for art’s sake’. This is clearly a long way from Hunt’s high moral tone.

Millais’s Madeline is a sensual female figure disrobing for Porphyro’s, and our, voyeuristic pleasure but she is also an enigmatic presence, glowing and glinting turquoise, blue and purple in the moonlight.⁵⁰ In the text of the poem associated with the painting Millais intentionally deleted eight lines shown in square brackets below,

*Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline’s fair breast,
[As down she knelt for heaven’s grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest, 220
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem’d a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint*

*Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,]
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Uncclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees: 230*

⁴⁷ Whistler came to London in 1859. Q. Bell, *A New and Noble School: The Pre-Raphælités* (London: Macdonald, 1982), p. 98-99.

⁴⁸ K. Roberts, ‘From P. R. B. to P. R. A.’, *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 109, No. 767 (Feb., 1967), p. 94 and S. Casteras, ‘Symbolists Debts to Pre-Raphaelitism: a Pan-European Phenomenon’ in T. Tobin (ed.), *Worldwide Pre-Raphaelitism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 121.

⁴⁹ E. Pettejohn, *Beauty and Art: 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2005), p. 124.

⁵⁰ At low light levels the human eye only sees black and white but it was an accepted convention that colour could be shown, such as in Hunt’s *The Light of the World*, 1852-3.

*Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.⁵¹*

Millais's editing of the poem suggests he does not want us to see her as 'a splendid angel' 'like a saint' and this implies he is presenting her as an erotic object. Both Millais and Whistler's heroines were criticized as unhealthy and ghostly as critics were disturbed by the combination of eroticism and the suggestion of bodily violation and illness.⁵² Whistler's painting hints at impurity, and both have loosened hair and clothing. Millais' painting consists of abstract colour blocks of turquoise and cream and these recur in the mirror, the door in the corner and the painting above it and the looming bed is painted in a muddy pigment that overwhelms a third of the pictorial space.

Millais presents a loosely painted, ghostly world of dreams about Madeline whose rituals are concerned with her dreams of her future lover within this world of dreams. It is a long way from the bright colours, attention to detail and high moral tone of Hunt's painting.

Conclusion

These apparently different paintings exhibit common features. They both disrupt conventional gender polarities but in different ways, Hunt with his ambiguous female hero and Millais with his ambiguous innocent *femme fatale*. They both break conventional techniques for creating a fictive space, as found in Keepsake paintings, Hunt by his ambiguous spaces, and Millais by his blocks of colour and disruptive colouring.

In the 1850s the Pre-Raphaelites were involved with the big moral issues of the day and presented them in their paintings. These moral issues were widely debated; the first line of Thomas Carlyle's *Chartism* of 1839 was 'A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it.'⁵³ This feeling culminated in the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common in 1848 which Hunt and Millais attended.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Till (1994), p. 212-213

⁵² Barlow (2005), p. 102.

⁵³ A. Shelston, *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Book, 1971).

⁵⁴ D. Goodway, *London Chartism 1838-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2002), p. 74.

By the 1860 the mood had changed, there was a growth in the middle-class and consumer spending and avant garde artists, such as Swinburne were not looking to change or educate the world but to produce beautiful works of art. In 1871 The Times wrote 'if national prosperity be the best antidote to social dangers, we may discover in the evidence of our increasing wealth some hope for relief from that pauperism which is justly regarded as a perilous element in a State.'⁵⁵

Hunt reacted against the popular, sentimental Keepsake paintings of the period and presented a stage set on which his actors presented a clear moral message. The morality was reinforced by the truthfulness implicit in the scientific accuracy of observation and in the story selected to convey the moral message. To further push the moral point home he prevents us from relaxing in an easy figurative space by the use of foreshortening and ambiguity in the spaces. To prevent the moral point from being undermined by voyeurism and immoral thoughts he shows Madeline as a hero figure directing the action.

Millais struggled to find a way to express himself rapidly and in a form that appealed to a wide audience. In 1863 he experimented with family values in *My First Sermon* and with Whistlerian mood painting with *The Eve of St. Agnes* which were both successful in their own way.

We have seen how both the selected narrative and the means of representation were carefully chosen by Hunt and Millais to reflect a cultural trend, first in the late 1840s to penetrate the world visually to find moral lessons and then in the early 1860s to engage with consumerism by producing a product that could be enjoyed purely for its own sake.

(Word count: 3,461, excluding footnotes and quotes)

⁵⁵ *The Times*, The Last Report of the Commissioners of Customs, Sep. 26, 1871; pg. 7; issue27178; col. D.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: William Holman Hunt, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, 1848, Guildhall Art Gallery

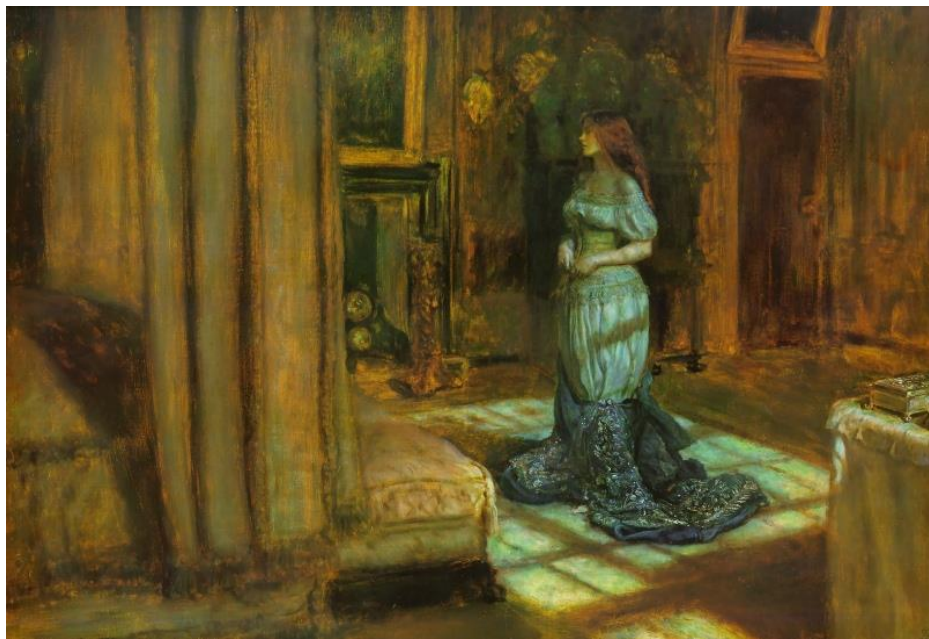


Figure 2: John Everett Millais, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, 1863, Royal Collection



Figure 3: John Everett Millais, *Eve of St. Agnes*, sketch, 1863



Figure 4: Herbert Watkins, *Euphemia ('Effie') Chalmers*, Lady Millais, late 1850s



Figure 5: Comparison of a photograph of Lady Millais, an unknown model (reversed) and the woman in *The Eve of St. Agnes*



Figure 6: William Holman Hunt, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, sketch, 1848-1853



Figure 7: William Holman Hunt, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, sketch, 1848



Figure 8: William Holman Hunt, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, sketch, 1848



Figure 9: James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, 1862, National Gallery of Art, Washington



Figure 10: Henry Nelson O'Neil, title unknown, date unknown



Figure 11: Henry Nelson O'Neil, *Ophelia*, 1874



Figure 12: Henry Nelson O'Neil, *The Pre-Raphaelite*, 1858, Mr. Paul Barlow



Figure 13: William Holman Hunt, *The Afterglow in Egypt*, 1854-63, Southampton City Art Gallery



Figure 14: John Everett Millais, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, ca. 1863, watercolour, height 20.8 cm (paper size), width 27.5 cm (paper size), Victoria & Albert Museum