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PRE-RAPHAELITE ART AND THE EXPLORATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Abstract: After the Tate Gallery 1984 exhibition, a significant part of the writings regarding the Pre-Raphaelites focused on gender and sexuality. Modern viewers appear not to feel compelled anymore to agree with the dominant or traditional interpretation of the works of art; on the contrary, they are permitted to set forth new meanings that regard the works and to experiment their own practices of interpretation. And, in the case when such premises are taken into consideration, Pre-Raphaelite painting can be reinterpreted while neglecting the patriarchal ideologies of their time. In the early 1850s, a series of paintings made by certain members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood conveyed the painters' interest both in male and in female sexuality. Later, by the 1860s, Pre-Raphaelites' erotic explorations of human physical beauty determined the abandoning of complex narratives in favour of representations of single figures that allow the viewers to focus almost entirely on the figure's psychology.

Keywords: Pre-Raphaelite art, gender, sexuality, approach, reinterpretation, meaning.

The Tate Gallery exhibition of 1984 determined a shift in the interpretation of Pre-Raphaelite art: the content of the works was connected with issues specific to the time of their making. The new approach, known as 'the social history of art', was explored mainly by Anglo-American art history beginning with the past decades of the twentieth century and is considered to suit to the interpretation of Pre-Raphaelite art due to certain reasons: the works' own references to issues of their time or the large amount of data regarding the Victorian period – newspapers, books, reports on religion, science, labour conditions and relations, prostitution, etc.

The new type of analysis was different from the previous, biographical interpretations of Pre-Raphaelitism which primarily focused on the lives of the artists and the making of their art and relied on archival sources. Yet, the two modes of interpretation may be seen as sharing, at least, the elements that regard the relation between artistic work and the circumstances of its creation as well as the large amount of information discovered.

After the Tate Gallery 1984 exhibition, a significant part of the writings regarding the Pre-Raphaelites focused on gender and sexuality. A simplified approach of Victorian Age seemed to give priority to those attitudes towards women that considered them either as virtuous or as 'devilish temptresses', a categorization that did not allow a varied range of individual identities, but which regarded women as unable of self-determination and of mastering their own lives. Yet, new evidence has shown that the Victorian period proved, in fact, to be questioning the very issues of sexuality and gender to a much larger extent than the previous periods.

Art history, too, asserts now that the male members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood supported the aspirations of the women artists belonging and associated with their group (accordingly, William Michael Rossetti valued the work of the women artists of the period in his critical writing) and that they were also open to concepts like women's equality (Burne-Jones, for instance, supported his wife when she decided to candidate for a

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parish council). Consequently, it seemed that the Pre-Raphaelite male painters, unlike most of the nineteenth-century artists, did not purposely appeal to 'patriarchal' ideological patterns for their art.

Moreover, according to Lynne Pearce, paintings and literary productions allow reinterpretations that may contradict the prevailing opinions about them or the intentions of their authors; such 'against-the-grain' (a term employed by the German theorist Walter Benjamin in order to characterize historical interpretations that fail to observe the point of view of the ruling classes) interpretations emphasize the perceptions of the modern viewer or reader and leave aside the historical conditioning of the work's making. Consequently, modern viewers should no more feel compelled to agree with the dominant or traditional interpretation of the works of art; on the contrary, they are permitted to set forth new meanings that regard the works and to experiment their own practices of interpretation. And, in the case when such premises are taken into consideration, Pre-Raphaelite painting can be reinterpreted while neglecting the patriarchal ideologies of their time.



D.G. Rossetti - *Found*

In the early 1850s, a series of paintings made by certain members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood conveyed the painters' interest both in male and in female sexuality. Pictures like *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* (1851) – that focused on the virtuous and vicious male sexuality, with Proteus, the fallen man, and Valentine, the 'upright' man – and *Claudio and Isabella* (1853) by Hunt, or D.G. Rossetti's *Found* (1853) explore sexual morality and display relationships between characters sharing moral conflicts. In the opinion of twenty-first century theorists, the purpose of such paintings had not been the exposure of the Victorian attitude toward sexual morality and they also had not set forth firm conclusions; instead they seem to explore a wide range of issues connected with opposite-sex and same-sex relationships (such is the case, for example, of Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* where loyalty of same-sex friendship relates with established sexual pairings and sexual morality or of D.G. Rossetti's *Found* where male innocence encounters female sexual experience).

In order to render such intricate subjects the Pre-Raphaelites drew complex pictorial compositions that were compared with their literary counterparts of the nineteenth century. Yet, their approach seem to differ from the procedure employed by novels due to the fact that they do not possess the means of explaining complex moral implications and of depicting chronological sequences of events. Further considerations upon the Pre-Raphaelites' compositions assert the idea that the viewers become aware of the moral complexity of the depicted scenes through the effort they are required to make in order to extract a coherent narrative out of the juxtaposition of figures while the use of bright colours and minute details appear to convey a sense of tensed situations.



W. H. Hunt – *The Awakening of the Conscience*

It has also been mentioned that various Pre-Raphaelite works of the early 1850s exhibit a 'network of

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interrelationships' exploring sexual morality in historical or modern environments. Accordingly, art historian Linda Nochlin has attempted at establishing a connection between Hunt's *The Awakening of the Conscience* - where the emphasis is on the moral awakening of a modern-time woman who looks toward the light from the window - and D.G. Rossetti's drawing *Hesterna Rosa* - 1853 - where one of the two women hides her face in shame rather than gazing at the light as Hunt's character does. Moreover, the two couples in Rossetti's drawing remind the two pairs in Hunt's painting.

Pre-Raphaelite paintings exploring moral sexuality have also been related to the nineteenth-century debates on such a subject-matter. According to W. R. Greg's frequently cited article on 'Prostitution', published in 1850, in the *Westminster Review*, Victorian society implied a single polarized sexuality between active male and passive female partners. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, twenty-first century critics have shown that Pre-Raphaelite paintings seem to explore a wider range of sexualities that may also include: 'autoeroticism' (for example, Millais' *Mariana*), Virgin's sexuality (D.G. Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*) or 'rustic lovemaking' (Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd*).



D.G. Rossetti - *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*



W. H. Hunt - *The Hireling Shepherd*

In the same context of intricate possible relationships, Ford Madox Brown's painting entitled *Take Your Son, Sir!* – 1851 and 1856-7, (unfinished), shifts the traditional manner of representing a mother and child - in 'mutual absorption' - and engages a sense of immediacy between the viewer and the characters. The scene may be interpreted either in the context of immorality revealing the sexual sin of the mother or as a celebration of lawful parenthood that unveils the bond connecting mother, baby, and father (who is reflected in the mirror behind the mother's head).

In 1853, Millais made a series of drawings that centred on happy and unhappy marriages - *Married for Money*, *Married for Love*, and *Married for Rank* – and in 1854 he drew another pen and brown ink work known as *Retribution* where he resorted to the characters' hands in order to display the dramatic relationships among the characters. The women in the drawing settle interconnections between them, between them and the children, and between them and the man through their hands which acquire an active part in the scene. On the contrary, the man's hands are not visible – he had put them in his pockets – and he bent his head in a gesture of shame and passivity, explicitly having put aside 'sexual virtue'.

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Millais's 'fallen man' is considered to have as an opposite Sir Galahad - the 'virgin knight' who appeared in drawings made by D.G. Rossetti (*Sir Galahad and the Ruined Chapel* – 1859) and Burne-Jones (*Sir Galahad* – 1858) towards the end of the 1850s, suggesting the Pre-Raphaelites' interest in the knight's renunciation of the love of women.



Henry Wallis - *Chatterton*

Although the Pre-Raphaelite painters were known as heterosexual and even homophobic, art historians have also noticed the 'homoeroticism' of certain of their paintings and consider that the manner male and female bodies are rendered by their art is not 'sexless'. Pre-Raphaelite painting shows both robust male types (as in Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*) and beautiful male figures that appear in religious (Brown's *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*) and non-religious contexts (Wallis's *Chatterton*).

F. M. Brown – *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*



Pre-Raphaelite paintings exploring sexuality are considered to have resorted to various manners of conveying their meaning to the viewers. While, for example, Brown's *Take your Son, Sir* involves a direct engagement between viewer and characters, after the 1850s, there is a change of the manner their paintings address to the viewers, mainly owing to D.G. Rossetti's paintings of women. Later, by the 1860s, issues of sexual morality were replaced by erotic explorations of human physical beauty, circumstances that determined the abandoning of complex narratives and the representation of single figures (J.R.S. Stanhope's *Thoughts of the Past* – 1858-9) that allow the viewers to focus almost entirely on the figure's psychology.

Further analyses referring to Pre-Raphaelite art (J.B. Bullen, 1998) have outlined two distinct women types to be found in their paintings: the 'fallen woman' and the 'sexualized woman'. The first type is always represented as part of a narrative that exploits the 'fall' from sexual respectability (for instance, the narrative of Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*); on the contrary, the representation of the second type does not imply the narrative context and seems not to be possess a strong sense of moral judgment (as in the case of D.G. Rossetti's *Fazio's Mistress*). Such pictures are representations of sexuality that appear to engage the viewer erotically with the scene and, as art historians noticed, they did not exclusively display female figures. Accordingly, Simeon Solomon, who came closer to Pre-Raphaelite circles at the end of the 1850s, reinterpreted the eroticized female figure and made pictorial representations of beautiful men (*Bacchus* – 1867) that can be read as sensuous figures and not as characters in a narrative situation. Victorian critics have also noticed the dreamy, unfocussed expression of the female or male figures in these pictures of erotic engagement that was seen as expressing erotic availability to the viewer (the expression appears in both Rossetti's *Fazio's Mistress* and in Solomon's *Bacchus*).

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S. Solomon - *Bacchus*

Simeon Solomon also produced paintings that approached homosexual themes – in 1873, he was convicted for homosexual activities – which although were not exhibited in public, found a wide audience owing to photographic reproductions (the watercolour *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mitylene* - 1864). Pre-Raphaelite theorists have nonetheless stressed that Solomon's homoerotic works should not be perceived as separated from the paintings of his heterosexual Pre-Raphaelite friends. Owing to the collaborative practices developed by the artists gravitating around D.G. Rossetti in the 1860s, Solomon's works on homosexuality emerged from the same milieu as the eroticized figures of Rossetti or the androgynous male figures of Burne-Jones.

While in the early 1850s, a series of paintings made by members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood conveyed the painters' interest both in male and in female sexuality, by the 1860s, the Pre-Raphaelites began their erotic explorations of human physical beauty, circumstances that resulted in the abandoning of complex narratives and the representation of single female and male figures; nonetheless, both the earlier approach, which appear not to demand the implication of the viewer, and the subsequent one, that was noticed as erotically engaging the viewers, are considered to be definitely and genuinely Pre-Raphaelite.

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