WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S EKPHRASTIC APPROACHES OF SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: During the nineteenth century, the relationships between literature and visual art were quite close and painters were often regarded as artists who possessed the skills required in order to render the "dramatic potential of a poet's imagined picture" (Meisel, 1983: 69). Not only literature and painting have come to be understood as capable to interpret one another, but, important literary works seemed to be lacking in plenitude, in the case when they failed to observe their visual art analogues. The Pre-Raphaelite painters relied strongly on narrative sources for their pictures, drawings, and engravings, and Shakespeare, whom they considered the supreme master of word art, provided them an almost inexhaustible source for their varied interests. According to Adrian Poole (2004: 59), "... the Pre-Raphaelites produced more than sixty illustrations from Shakespeare. In general they sought situations of emotional and psychological complexity in both comedies and tragedies, though mainly the latter." Apart from their Shakespeare-inspired works, focusing on a single character, usually a woman, the Pre-Raphaelites also produced a series of paintings that render groups of characters, relying upon specific scenes in Shakespeare's plays. Such is the case of William Holman Hunt's paintings inspired by Measure for Measure, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and King Lear.

Keywords: reversed ekphrasis, Pre-Raphaelite painters, Shakespeare, literary sources, visual target texts.

William Holman Hunt's *Claudio and Isabella* (1850-3) is a conversion of act III, scene 1, from Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*, a quotation of which accompanied the visual art work on the occasion of its display at the Royal Academy, in 1853:

"*Isab*. What says my brother?
Claud. Death is a fearful thing.
Isab. An shamed life a hateful.
Claud. Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction… ;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The penedent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!
The weariest and the most loathed worldly life,
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment

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Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death."
Isab. Alas, alas!"

(Shakespeare: *Measure for Measure*, act III, scene 1: 1863)

The art critics reviewing the painting in 1853 had divergent opinions upon Hunt's treating of the subject: *The Examiner*, for instance, valued the painter's representation of Isabella, while dismissing the manner Claudio had been portrayed and asserting that the character "whose fear of death is represented by a look and posture of imbecile lunacy, is a distressing and exaggerated feature of the scene. If it is to be supposed that Claudio expressed, in such a way of Mr. Hunt depicts it, his distress of mind, it is a thing that we had much rather suppose than see deliberately painted." (1853: 6)



1. William Holman Hunt, *Claudio and Isabella*, 1850, Tate, London, United Kingdom

The comment from the *Builder* (1853: 289-90) considers that the painting "…has much to recommend it to notice, though the Claudio be not a little like an ungraceful marionette with a badly fitting wig. It tells the story and has much sentiment: the girl's hands are excellently good."

When analysing the conversion stage of the process of reversed ekphrasis, owing to which Shakespeare's text was turned into the visual target text, I consider that it occurs through the level of reframing, which allows an identification of the literary source that does not require the viewers' possession of any remarkable skills.

Moreover, the frame of the picture, containing the following lines from the play: "Claudio. *Death is a fearful thing.* Isabella. *And shamed life is hateful*", appears as a statement expressed by the painter with regard both to the scene he chose to represent – the salvation of Claudio's life, on condition of his sister's sacrificing her virginity to Angelo, the deputy to the duke – and to the exact moment of the previously mentioned scene: Isabella laying her hands on her brother' s chest (as if physically touching his heart), denoting both concern and pray, and Claudio avoiding her eyes, while feeling the shackles on his leg.

According to Timothy Hilton (1976: 85-6), Hunt who "assumed the role of the great moralist" showed singular goals "in the renewed interest in Shakespeare illustration that was characteristic of the group as a whole" and "attempted a dramatization, through Shakespeare, of certain types of moral problems" being mostly interested in scenes that evidenced a "strong sense of sin and sexual guilt."

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The double assertion of the references in the source text is substantiated both in the visual elements, which construct the temporal and spatial designing of the painting, and in the characters' representation and rendering of detail that are simultaneously infused with pictoriality, owing to the specific use of colour, accuracy of detail, or brushstroke technique.

Accordingly, the two characters are centrally positioned, with Isabella standing, in the daylight, dressed in an unadorned white costume of the order of St. Clare, pictured in accordance to the details in the play. As she stands near the window, her face profiles on the exterior landscape, which includes a sunbathed apple tree in bloom and a church in the distance (which is assumed to have been painted by Hunt from the Lollard prison, at Lambert Palace), considered an allusion to Christian duty.

In total contrast with his sister, Claudio's body, dressed in purple, crimson, and black, is captured in a contorted pose, leaning to the wall, in a posture that may suggest the dramatic fight of his inner being, also betrayed by his intense, impassionate, and yet savage, gaze, that he turns away both from Isabella and from the exterior light. His clumsy appearance and his mouth slightly opened show the character on the verge of asking his sister to give away her virginity in exchange of his life. While his right hand touches his leg shackles, maybe in an involuntary gesture of getting rid of them, Isabella's hands are placed upon his heart, suggesting concern. Down on his black coat, the few scattered apple blossoms may be a hint to Isabella's sacrifice. The names Claudio and Juliet are carved, on the left side, above the ring fastening his chain, as a possible reminder of Claudio's present critical situation, while a lute, possibly connected with Juliet, is placed on the right upper side, behind Isabella and near the prison window.

In the opinion of Adrian Poole (2004: 63), the scene in the painting differs from the play where "the scene will shortly explode into recrimination, shame, and mistrust. Yet in the painting there is hope, embodied in Isabella's forceful hands and steady posture no less than in her habit of faith. There is at least ambivalence in the lute with red ribbons hanging on the wall. This may point back to the sensual pleasures Claudio has enjoyed, but it may also look ahead to the song associated with Mariana at the turning-point of the play. Above all there is an even-handedness to the painting's sympathy for what this moment means to both brother and sister, an impartiality that rebukes the tendency of many readings to disparage he religious conviction in favour of his creaturely passion and weakness."

A close observation of the painting emphasizes the extraordinary rigor of the painter's brushstrokes, which show, for instance, the slightest fur detail of Claudio's coat, the smallest imprint on the wood walls and floor, or the tiniest texture of Isabella's gown. All these details are an evidence of the Pre-Raphaelite realism, but they finally result in a cohesive, yet alert, whole that unify brushstrokes, colour, light, and shadow. Light does not only come from the window, it reverberates on the wall near the window and behind Isabella, on her hands, and even on Claudio's right foot shackle and the fur of his garment. Hunt's 'truth-to-nature' also accounts for his use of colour, documenting the extreme range of nuances displayed by the wood, fur, or Isabella's attire.

William Holman Hunt's *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus* (1850-1) was inspired by act V, scene 4 of Shakespeare's play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and was first exhibited at the Royal Academy, in 1851.

According to the art historians, the original frame of the picture contained on its left side the following lines extracted from scene 4:

"*Val*. Now I dare not say
I have one friend alive; thou would'st disprove me
Who should be trusted now, when one's right hand

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I've … perjured to the bosom? Proteus.
I am sorry I must never trust thee more
But count the world a stranger for thy sake",
Meanwhile, on the right side of the original frame, the next lines could be read:
"*Pro*. My shame and guilt confound me
Forgive me, Valentine: if hearty sorrow
Be a sufficient ransom for offence,
I tender' t here; I do as truly suffer
As e'er I did commit."

(www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/op137.rap.html)

William Holman Hunt's conversion is grounded on a vibrant moment in the play: Proteus, who threatens Sylvia, is denunciated by his friend Valentine, who prevents the rape, while Julia, disguised as a boy, watches the entire development:

"*Pro*. I'll force thee yield to my desire.
Val. Ruffian, let go that rude uncivil touch,
Thou friend of an ill fashion!"

It is worth mentioning that, at a moment when most of the epoch's critics failed to perceive the innovatory technique of the Pre-Raphaelite painting, Ruskin emphasized its extraordinary capacity of having laid the "foundations of a school of art nobler than the world has seen for 300 years" and, addressing the readers of London *Times* (1851: 8-9), asserted the following with regard to Hunt's painting:

"The most painful of these defects is unhappily also the most prominent – the commonness of feature in many of the principle figures. In Mr. Hunt's "Valentine defending Sylvia", this is, indeed, almost the only fault. Further examination of this picture has even raised the estimate I had previously formed of the marvelous truth in detail and splendor; nor is the general conception less deserving of praise; the actions 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 the contending of doubt and distress with awakening hope in the half-shadowed, half-sunlit countenance of Julia. Nay, even the momentary struggle of Proteus with Sylvia, just past, is indicated by the trodden grass and broken fungi of the foreground."

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2. William Holman Hunt, *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*, 1851, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, United Kingdom

The conversion of the literary source text occurs owing to reframing, which involves a target visual text that allows the uncomplicated grasping of the source text. Further, the substantiation of the conversion and the attributing of pictoriality results in a particular designing of the characters and technical elements.

The scene transposed from *The Two Gentleman from Verona* has Valentine as a focal character, with Proteus kneeled and rubbing his wounded neck, while asking for forgiveness, Sylvia kneeled too, and Julia, dressed as a young male, witnessing the development, while touching the ring received from Proteus. Sylvia's father, the Duke of Valentine, is represented approaching from the background, prefiguring the scene that puts an end to the play.

The moment of reconciliation is no less deprived of tension, which is poignantly expressed through the manner the characters direct their eyes and pose their hands. Accordingly, none of them watches towards the viewer: Valentine's eyes focus on Proteus, expressing severe respectability, Proteus's furtive glance is charged with remorse; Sylvia vaguely fixes the ground in relief, and Julia's look is apparently absent, as she dares hoping, while still doubting. The male characters show both their hands: with his right hand Valentine holds Sylvia's in a protective and reassuring gesture and covers with his left hand Proteus's right hand (perhaps, as a sign of pardon) that this one barely dares raising toward his friend. The left hand of Proteus, touching his injured neck, may be interpreted as a sign of remorse and degraded manliness. Sylvia's inner tension may be inferred from her right hand (the only visible one) firmly holding the hand of her beloved, while Julia's hands betray incertitude as she touches the ring from Proteus.

The work shows the Pre-Raphaelite technique at its best, experimenting plein-air painting and employing pure and intense colours and exquisite naturalistic details of the natural environment (painted in Sevenoaks - Kent, at Knole House, whose 1,000-acre park provided Hunt with the opportunity to draw the forest scenery he looked for as a scene setting for *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*) and the characters' clothing (in order to draw Valentine's costume and his armoured leg and hand, he relied on Camille Bonnard's *Costumes Historiques*); he painted the human figures indoors, in his studio, having his friends posing for them.

When Hunt's painting entitled *The Hireling Shepherd* was exhibited at the Royal Academy (in 1852), it was accompanied by four lines (sung by Edgar, appearing as madman Tom), from act III, scene 6 of Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

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"Sleepeth or waketh thou, jolly shepherd?
Thy sheep be in the corn;
And for one blast of the manikin mouth,
Thy sheep shall take no harm."

(Shakespeare: *King Lear*, act III, scene 6: 2014)

It has been asserted that, without the mentioning of the above lines, the picture would have completely puzzled a viewer who, although aware of the connection with the literary text, nonetheless, might have attempted in vain at finding its precise source in Shakespeare's plays. Meanwhile, for a viewer not knowing that *The Hireling Shepherd* has filiations with *King Lear*, it seems almost impossible to grasp the associations operated by the painter between the play and his picture, in the absence of any clue that might uncover them.



3. William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, United Kingdom

In a 1897 letter, which evidences the painter's reading of the literary source text, Hunt, who is acknowledged to have been a devoted Christian, explained that the painting has to be interpreted in allegorical terms that may further allow an interpretation targeting a subject of interest in the nineteenth-century Britain, namely the opposition between the various factions belonging to the Church of England: "Shakespeare's song represents a Shepherd who is neglecting his real duty of guarding the sheep; instead of using his voice in truthfully performing his duty, he is suing his 'minnikin mouth' in some idle way. He was a type thus of other muddle headed pastors who instead of performing their services to their flock - which is in constant peril – discuss vain questions of no value to any human soul. My fool has found a death's head moth, and this fills his little mind with forebodings of evil, and he takes it to an equally sage counselor for her opinion. She scorns

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his anxiety from ignorance rather than profundity, but only the more distracts his faithfulness. While she feeds her lamb with sour apples, his sheep have burst bounds and got into the corn." (Macmillan, 1972: 188)

In the opinion of Herbert L. Sussman (1979: 89), "Edgar's song calls up in Hunt a personal response, a vision of moral conflict that exists in the life of all men." Moreover, he adds, the title of the painting represents an "available allusion to Christ's parable of the Hireling Shepherd …"

Speculations are made with regard to the title's source of inspiration that might have been drawn from the *Gospel of St. John* (Chapter 10), where Jesus uses the following parable: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." (1998: 32)

The *Art Journal* (1852: 165-176), in its review of the exhibition at the Royal Academy, had the following comment upon painting no. 592, *The Hireling Shepherd*:

"… The shepherd having caught a death's head moth is showing it to a maiden: both figures are seated on the grass. The scene is a meadow with trees, bounded on one side by a field of ripe corn, and on the other by a field just reaped; but moral sentiment – although the profession of the picture – is altogether superseded by an overweening desire for eccentric distinction. A column might be devoted to consideration of the work, but we abstain from analysis and comparisons…"

In the *British Quarterly Review* (1952: 197-220), Hunt's painting is acknowledged as representative for Pre-Raphaelitism, owing to its "quality of minute truth of detail" and "the audacity with which he has selected stich a veritable pair of country labourers for the principal figures. 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. … he has something of the rigid reflective realism of Thackeray, without anything of Thackeray's bitter social humour; and as the man to whom this constituent of Pre-Raphaelitism was originally most native, it is natural that he should carry it farthest."

On the contrary, the *Athenaeum* (1852: 581-3) displays a most virulent commentary when reviewing *The Hireling Shepherd* and compares Hunt with Swift in his enjoyment of the 'repulsive': "These rustics are of the coarsest breed, - ill favoured, ill fed, ill washed. Not to dwell on cutaneous and other minutiae, - they are literal transcripts of stout, sunburnt, out-of-door labourers. Their faces, bursting with a plethora of health, and a trifle too flushed and rubicund, suggest their over-attention to the beer or cider keg on the boor's back. … Downright literal truth is followed bout in every accessory; each sedge, moss, and weed – each sheep – each tree, pollard or pruned – each crop, beans or corn – is faithfully imitated."

In terms of the literary source text's conversion, the picture involves the level of destabilisation, owing to the fact that the source text is scarcely recognizable within the visual target text, as shown in my introductory paragraphs to *The Hireling Shepherd*.

While the connection with Shakespeare's play may only be perceived by informed viewers and allows an interpretation of the "hireling shepherd" as a substitute of King Lear (who, like the character in the target text, proved to be incapable of properly exerting his duties), the visual text can also be approached, by an unaware audience, in terms of a picturesque countryside love scene.

The substantiation of the conversion comprises the deciphering of the visual elements denoting the overall designing of the painting, its characters, as well as the manner pictoriality managed to turn the target text into a work of art, owing to a fortunate process of reversed ekphrasis. The image has a striking effect of uneasiness, which appears to be engendered by the antithetic representation

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of the human element (the shepherd and the shepherdess) and the vegetal and animal world. The characters are apparently engaged in a presumptive love affair, yet, the scenery betrays a hidden message of profound disturbance: the death's head moth, spreading a feeling of decay throughout the picture, the leafless tree behind the couple, implying inappropriate circumstances, the sheep in the cornfield departing from the others, unnoticed by its shepherd, the lamb, which is feeding on unripe apples that might harm it.

It is also worth mentioning the meaning of the word 'hireling' (a paid servant), which, as Hunt asserted, represents the Church involved in things of the world and neglecting its flock. Another religious connotation may be attributed to the posture of the human characters, whose right arms form a cross.

The painter designed *The Hireling Shepherd* in accordance with the Pre-Raphaelite fundamentals: it has exceptional clarity and brilliance, its colours are poignant, and it displays a wide range of details. The background was painted by Hunt at Ewell, where Millais also worked for the landscape of *Ophelia*, and, received the artist's thorough attention, made visible in the accuracy of both the nature and human representations. The painter's complex visual realism also involves his treatment of the sunlight and shadow that accounts for the tensed overall atmosphere translating the imminence of a further collapse.

William Holman Hunt's reversed-ekphrasis conversions of Shakespearian texts appear to possess a pictorial identity of their own, equal to the literariness of their literary source texts, and not only complete a gap, but operate a double action: they expand the meaning of the literary source, either through extracting a theme or through focusing upon a particular moment from the narrative, which, ultimately, widens or makes more specific an idea in the source text, and they also attach new meanings to the literary source text.

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