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antae, Vol. 3, No. 3. (Dec., 2016), 268-285

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antae

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Transgression or Breaking with Tradition: Reading Millais, Rossetti, and Beardsley

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From their initiation as an art movement in the mid-1840s, the Pre-Raphaelites rooted themselves within the notion of rebelling against Victorian art traditions by drawing upon the stylistic tools of pre-Renaissance art. Similarly, Aubrey Beardsley's short career in the fin de siècle was oriented within his departure from Victorian-accepted artistic norms and framed his work within Japanese- as well as Gothic-inspired style. This movement, bearing apparent similarity between rebellious art in mid-Victorian era and its counterpart in the Victorian fin de siècle, makes it all the more surprising that it has not been the subject of a thorough analysis, if discussed previously at all. I argue in the present paper that, in spite of their different styles, Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti on one hand, and Aubrey Beardsley on the other, were similar in their rebelliousness by attempting to break away from Victorian art traditions. Furthermore, by drawing on Carol Jacobi's 'Salt, Sugar and Curdled Milk', I argue that there is an added element to the comparison which goes beyond the apparent rebellious transgression and further assimilates two stylistically different but similarly rebellious modes of art.

In a section titled 'We "Other Victorians"' in his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault delineates the stark shift in society's outlook on sexuality from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century:

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a certain frankness was still common, it would seem. Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit. Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene, and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century. It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies hung about amid laughter of adults: it was a period when bodies "made a display of themselves".

But twilight soon fell upon this bright day, followed by the monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule.¹

I argue here that the Pre-Raphaelites, namely Millais and Rossetti, as well as the fin de siècle Beardsley, aimed to challenge such sexual as well as religious prudence, albeit in different styles, through a variety of artistic transgressions.

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by P. Rabinow (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 292.

Aubrey Beardsley's *The Climax* (1894)

Aubrey Beardsley's *The Climax* (1894) is one of his illustrations of the English edition of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. Beardsley's unclassifiable style is considered by some critics as Japanese grotesque, by others as a late development of the aesthetic movement. Beardsley himself, however, has never put himself under any category and the majority of his critics view him as a category of his own.² In his letters, we get glimpses of Beardsley's development of his style: 'I struck out a new style and method of work which was founded on Japanese art but quite original in the main'.³ At another point he calls it 'grotesque',⁴ he also refers to it as 'Japonesque'.⁵ It is obvious that his art was influenced by Japanese woodblock artists to which he was exposed through exhibitions in London and via various late nineteenth-century publications.⁶ *The Climax* is one of the masterpieces of his unique black-and-white grotesque style. Challenging the new woman stereotype of a studious, unattractive female, *The Climax* depicts a euphoric and sexually elated Salomé, holding onto John the Baptist's bleeding head, her reward for performing the erotic dance for Herod. Behind her, black and white clouds seem



Figure 1: *The Climax* (1894)

to dominate the atmosphere as though to reflect her disturbingly erotic thoughts and the passionate kiss she has just pressed on the prophet's dead lips. Her perverted triumph over the

² See, for instance, J. M. B., 'A New English Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley', *Modern Art*, 1(4), (1893).

³ Aubrey Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good (London: Cassell, 1971), pp. 33-34.

⁴ Beardsley, p. 34.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ L. G. Zatlin, 'Aubrey Beardsley's "Japanese" Grotesques', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 25(1), (1997), 87-108, p. 89.

prophet's virtue is reflected in the grim expression on her face, which resonates her words in the same scene in the play, 'Ah! J'ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan, j'ai baisé ta bouche'.⁷

The Lily, traditionally a female symbol of purity and virginity, and which we will encounter again later in Rossetti, is present here—albeit in an unnaturally erect form. Positioned directly underneath Salome's sexually-aroused head, the lily is pollenating in three erect directions. This stresses both that art is above nature and the aesthetic 'art for art's sake' motif, as well as evidencing a transgression against the holy trinity. When compared to John the Baptist's curved blood from which the lily has sprung, the lily becomes an androgynous symbol which contributes to the overall androgynous atmosphere in the drawing and in the whole series of the *Salomé* illustrations. In addition, present underneath Salomé's legs is another lily in the process of sprouting out of the pool of Iokanaan's blood. The two lilies together appear as if they are two points of Salomé's sexual-levitation, enabling her somehow to be poised in the air with sexual euphoria, itself represented in the black and white clouds in the corner of the drawing behind Salomé's figure. Adding to the disturbing and sacrilegious nature of the drawing is the mirroring of Iokanaan's and Salomé's features and hair as they face each other: one dead versus one living, open eyes versus shut eyes, white coils versus black, the helpless saint versus the powerful sinner.

Looking at *The Dancer's Reward*, which precedes *The Climax* in the series of illustrations, the euphoric black and white clouds are still on Salomé's hair, while the head of John the Baptist is now the one sprouting black coils of hair, reminiscent of the Medusa figure. The prophet's head is also placed at the centre of a one-legged table, making it complete the shape of a phallic symbol, which is parallel to both the disturbingly straight droops of blood as well as the angular figure of Salomé. The sandals in the background indicate that Salomé is grotesquely standing in Iokanaan's blood while staring into his dead face, which disturbingly mirrors hers. In both *The Dancer's Reward* and *The Climax*, as well as the rest of his illustrations of *Salomé*, Beardsley is rebelling against Victorian norms and traditions by depicting scenes which transgress against sexual and religious rules as well as gender norms. This is something I shall explore in Millais and Rossetti, my selected representatives of the mid-Victorian Pre-Raphaelites. Moreover, Beardsley's illustrations are a form of transgression against the traditional relationship between author and illustrator. Matthew Sturgis, a historian of the fin de siècle, asserts: 'Indeed, Beardsley's prosecution of the whole *Salomé* commission became an act of subversion upon Wilde and his play, subtly unbalancing the traditional relationship between text and illustration to such an extent that [...] it seemed to have been entirely reversed'.⁸ This is true to a large extent, since Wilde himself was not happy with Beardsley's reinterpretation of his (Wilde's) theatrical interpretation of the Biblical story, nor was he happy that 'Beardsley had stolen the show'.⁹

Beardsley, like Beerbohm and, indeed, every other young avant-gardist worth his absinthe, had been intoxicated by the jewelled horrors of the play, by its decadent admixture of eroticism and sin. He was impressed too, no doubt, by the controversy and publicity that it generated. Beardsley saw an

⁷ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*. [Kindle DX e-book]. (USA: Project Gutenberg, 1998).

⁸ Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Pallas Athene, 1995), p. 150.

⁹ Sturgis, p. 153.

opportunity to ally himself to both art and fame: with the naked courage of concealed ambition he chose to draw a picture in his newest 'Japanese' style, illustrating the lurid climax of the play when Salome presses the lips of John the Baptist's head against her own and he submitted it for inclusion in *The Studio*.¹⁰ On Beardsley's style, Sturgis writes: 'Beardsley's pictorial language had achieved a truly decadent heterogeneity; besides the Japonic and Pre-Raphaelite borrowings, it was now spiced with medical technicalities, pornographic slang, Renaissance appropriations, daring neologies, and touches of eighteenth-century French.' His 'figures were drawn out (beyond even the elongations of Burne-Jones) and smoothed down to a disconcerting androgyny. These oddly sexless bodies were then given faces that spoke of untold depravity'. Beardsley was an androgynous figure himself: 'Elongated and androgynous himself, he was readily confused with own degenerate pictures. It was a confusion that the press was delighted to make, the public happy to accept'.¹¹ Such confusion may have had elements of truth in it. In a letter to a friend, Beardsley emphatically expressed in androgynous terms his wish to adopt a girl: 'I certainly mean to adopt some nice little girl who would at once satisfy my maternal, amatory and educational instincts'.¹²

The public confusion between Beardsley and his figures, regardless of whether it was justified or not, helped turn the artist and his work into the epitome of *fin de siècle* art and the ultimate representation of decadence and moral degeneration, as much as if not alongside, Oscar Wilde in literature:

Very rapidly he [Beardsley] became the embodiment of "the decadent *fin de siècle*". He shared the position with Wilde, but he was in many ways a more satisfactory symbol than the author of *Salomé*. Wilde had already appeared as the human embodiment of 1880s "decadence", was new, diseased and curious in form – and, like the century, he was hastening towards his end.¹³

Dying at the youthful age of twenty-five out of tuberculosis, Beardsley's embodiment of the era has stood the test of time. He is the artist of the *fin de siècle*.

John Everett Millais' *Mariana* (1850-1851)

The second figure I examine here is John Everett Millais' *Mariana* (1850-1851). Millais was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite art movement and *Mariana*, like the rest of his paintings, integrates a great deal of the characteristics of this particular school of art. The Pre-Raphaelites tried to break away from the established dogma of the Royal Academy of Art, and, influenced by Ruskin's ideas, sought inspiration from a pre-Renaissance world and a pre-Raphael art, when painting was more natural, less refined, more brightly-coloured and rich with intense feelings.¹⁴ Like many other Pre-Raphaelite paintings, *Mariana* is inspired by a medieval story that has been the subject of great works of literature, including Tennyson's

¹⁰ Sturgis, p. 149

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 153-6.

¹² Beardsley, p. 116.

¹³ Sturgis, p. 154.

¹⁴ Julian Treuherz, *Victorian Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1993), p. 82.

poem of the same name and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.¹⁵ In stark contrast with the mid-Victorian theme of female helplessness, featured in works such as the *The Sempstress* (1846), *The Seamstress* (1850), and *Found Drowned* (1848-50), Mariana is depicted here in a beautiful blue dress which reflects her sadness in the loss of her lover, and contrasts with the confident expression of sexual-longing in her posture. The fashionably Victorian, neatly-cluttered shelf juxtaposes with the scattered leaves within and without the room, which make the room seem as though it is merging with the wild autumn outside the windows, intensifying Mariana's sexual frustration.

In her ground breaking paper, 'Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk', Carol Jacobi explores the running erotic symbolism in Millais' work. She argues that Millais' particularly phallic imagery is far less coincidental or post-Freudian than one might think, but rather an intentional conscious intrusion by Millais upon his works for a particular type of mid-Victorian audience. One of the first images she examines is 'the phallic shadow projecting from the groin of the foreground figure in *Lorenzo and Isabella* 1848-9' and the "unmistakenly phallic" horizontal leg in the same painting'.¹⁶ Jacobi asserts that 'the "penis rather better" banded about by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as the secret meaning of their initials'. The phallic image is represented in Millais' paintings through incense censers and salt cellars, and these are often informed by spilt salt and/or caster sugar. 'Where the spilt salt implies bitterness and incontinence, the upright sugar caster suggests containment, swelling and sweetness.' This is something which Jacobi refers to as 'only hints of a serious sexual poetry in Millais's work'.¹⁷ Drawing on Jacobi's scholarship, I will now turn to such sexual imagery in *Mariana* (1850-1851).

The incense censer is present here, albeit in a dark corner on a shelf, and above it a burning oil lamp dangles from the ceiling. Together they are phallic and female symbols which, due to their assigned locations, cannot reach each other. This gives another dimension to Mariana's story, who is depicted in Tennyson's poem as forsaken by her lover for not having a dowry. As Sophia Andres highlights, 'when the painting was first exhibited in 1851',¹⁸ it was accompanied by these lines from Tennyson's poem:

She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said:
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!' (9-12)

¹⁵ M. Kelly, 'Mariana and Angelo or Mary and the Angel', *The Victorian Web* (27 September 2004), <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/millais/paintings/kelly3.html>> [accessed, 11 April 2014].

¹⁶ C. Jacobi, 'Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk: Millais and the Synthetic Subject', *Tate Papers*, 18, (2012), <<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/sugar-salt-and-curdled-milk-millais-and-synthetic-subject>> [accessed, 10 Feb. 2014].

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Andres, Sophia, 'Gendered Incongruities in the Silenced Voice of Pre-Raphaelite Paintings: A. S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia"', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 43(1), (2010), 141-164, p. 145.

Millais' *Mariana* has not been rejected like Salomé, but financial and social circumstances would not allow for Mariana and her lover to be united. They are socially and financially apart but they are also united in their burning desire and their mutual longing for one another.

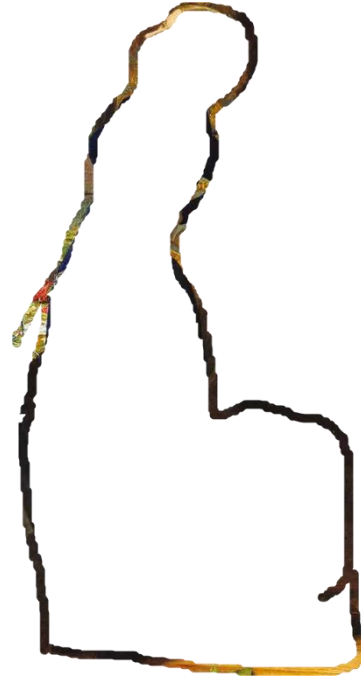
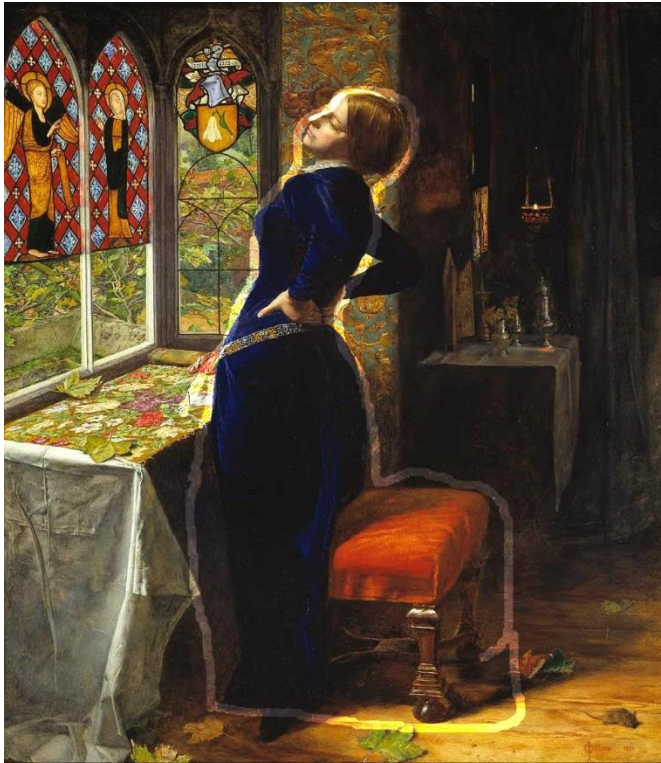


Figure 2: *Mariana* (1850), with a traced outline of Mariana's figure added by the author

In fact, if one looks closely enough, Mariana herself looms like a phallic symbol in a sexually charged posture, and the fiery amber stool beneath her acts as an inflamed scrotum, in conjunction with Mariana's head and slightly darker hair tone. The contrast between the blue dress/phallus and the amber/red stool/scrotum further disturbs as well as asserts the image. As in Beardsley's illustrations of Salomé, androgyny is an important motif in *Mariana*. She is both an aroused woman and an erect phallus, the erect phallus is also a feminine dress, the inanimate stool is also an inflamed scrotum, the orange is flaming as well as earthly, the blue is phallic as well as divine. I have traced the figure of Mariana and extracted it in the figures accompanying the text to demonstrate this. In addition, blue pigments were traditionally reserved for depictions of the Virgin Mary, particularly during the Middle Ages from which the Pre-Raphaelites stylistically draw on, because they were very expensive and hence deemed as pigments to be reserved for the holy by the Catholic Church. In this sense, Mariana is almost shrouded like a Virgin Mary figure which highly contributes to the transgressive quality of the painting, playing on the gnostic theme of the desertion of Mary by God, itself a third layer of the theme of mutually unfulfilled longing: the oil lamp and the censer, Mariana and her lover, the Virgin Mary and God. In addition, Millais provides further clues on this. We encounter, for instance, a fourth and separate scene running on the stained glass window panes which features the Annunciation in its traditional form between Gabriel and Mary, and a similar scene is also hinted at in the dark corner of the room. Thus we

encounter the transgressive disturbance of the holy scene thrice: first by the symbolism of the oil lamp and the censer opposite it, secondly by the triple play on Mariana's figure as a Virgin Mary, as a phallic symbol and as an aroused female figure in a sexually-charged posture, and thirdly by the stained-glass scene in the window and the duplication of Mary in the painted figure and the figure of Mariana herself. Furthermore, the real leaves on the table which are disguised among Mariana's sewn ones further disturb boundaries between the external and internal spaces and add to the multitudinous layers of the painting. As I highlight in another paper, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, John Ruskin asserts nature is the highest form of art being the creation of God:

Ruskin instructs artists and architects; look 'to Nature for instruction respecting form [...] look to her also to learn the management of color'.¹⁹ Thus art becomes important through the divinity of nature, but nature on the other hand is not important in itself. It is only important as the great art of the greatest artist who has to be venerated by 'acknowledging the grace of God's permission' and imitating His art.²⁰

Hence the stray leaves work as both an erotic transgression symbolising Mariana's sexual frustration as well as a gnostic transgression against the sanctity of the holy. John Everett Millais has thus created a painting based on a carefully constructed series of juxtapositions: human versus holy, desire versus divine, Mary versus God, Mariana versus her lover, the female versus the phallic, the interior versus the exterior, art versus nature, and image versus text.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Annunciation* (1850)

Whereas Millais and Beardsley were inspired by the literary works of Oscar Wilde and Alfred Tennyson, Rossetti wrote his own poetry to inform, as well as to draw on, his paintings. As Julian Treuherz explains, Rossetti 'often made paintings and poems designed to go together as "double" works of art'.²¹ Nevertheless, like Millais' and Beardsley's, the dual theme of sexual transgression and desanctification of the holy runs in Rossetti's rebellious oeuvre. *The Annunciation* (1850) is the second of his oil paintings to be displayed in the National Gallery after launching the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It varies widely from traditional Renaissance depictions of the annunciation scene, and instead comes across as rather minimalistic, especially when compared to Renaissance paintings of the same theme by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Jan Van Eyck. Apart from the aureoles on top of the heads of Mary and Gabriel, as well as the flame at Gabriel's feet, the figures seem very ordinary and lack the beauty and lustre which is often associated with divinity. The room itself is lacking in ornamentation in the typical Victorian sense, and reflects a sense of poverty as well as sophisticated simplicity. The blue hanging, a symbol of the Virgin Mary and her heavenliness, and the red shawl which traditionally represents the blood of Christ, are

¹⁹ J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. (New York, NY: Noonday Press, 1961), p. 118.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 151, as quoted in Haythem Bastawy, 'Oscar Wilde: A Victorian Sage in a Modern Age', *antae*, 2(2), (June 2015), 114-133, p. 118.

²¹ Julian Treuherz, 'The Most Startling Original Living', in Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn and Edin Becker, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), pp. 11-50, p. 15.

the main decorations of the room. The rest of the room is mainly in white, and its tones at first sight appear as a symbol of purity and virginity complementing the white lily, indicating that this is the holy sanctity of Mary's bedroom.²²



Figure 3 (left): *The Annunciation* (1849-50)



Figure 4 (above): *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-9)

The simplicity of the room allows the viewer to directly notice the unusual hints left by Rossetti in the painting. The first of which is how disturbed Mary looks. She seems as though she has just been awakened from her sleep and is terrified. At first glance, some viewers may construe that Rossetti is trying here to show a Mary who is reflecting on the prospects of a life taken away from her by being ordered to carry the child of God. Part of this is certainly evident in the painting, but there is more to it than that. Upon a closer look, Mary's absent gaze is fixed upon the lily which Gabriel is holding. The stem of the lily seems to be directed toward Mary. If the lily is a symbol of virginity, and it's the stem of the lily rather than the lily itself that is pointing toward Mary, then this is a disturbing indication that Gabriel has plucked Mary's virginity. There are several pieces of evidence in the painting to support my incriminating reading of Rossetti's Gabriel. First, Gabriel is depicted in an androgynous form combining the masculine with the feminine in his figure, like Salomé and Mariana. Second, he does not have wings here, which adds to his human demeanour. Third, his feet are

²² The Lily was used as a symbol of female purity and virginity also by Dante's sister, Christina. I discuss this in "Locked together in one nest": The Limitless Polysemy of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, in *Imagining the Victorians: Leeds Working Papers in Victorian Studies*, Vol. 15 (Leeds: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies & Leeds Trinity University, 2016), pp. 80-89.

surrounded by flames, giving him both an ability to poise in the air as well as a suggestion of desire which is complemented by the fourth factor: his gown, which is slit open from top to bottom on the side facing the viewer, and perhaps the other one as well. Fifth, there is no door in the scene, only a big wide open window behind Gabriel, adding to his intrusive aura. Sixth, the tree outside the window also indicates the possibility that it has been used by Gabriel to climb into Mary's room. In addition to the above, there are two more hints left by Rossetti in the room: the unlit lamp and the red shawl. The lamp is a female symbol—like the one we encountered in Millais—which, being unlit, indicates that the desire is only on the side of erect-figured and flame-footed Gabriel. The red shawl, as a traditional symbol for the blood of Christ, is here disturbed by the image of the inverted lily on it, which indicates Mary's loss of virginity like the lily in Gabriel's hand, leading to the assumption that the blood here is only Mary's, pouring down from the lilies onto the floor.

Furthermore, *The Annunciation* (1850) is not a stand-alone painting. It was painted by Rossetti as part of a trio, or an artistic trinity. Its predecessor, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849), depicts what seems to be a serene scene in Mary's adolescence. Its vibrancy of colour and flood of sunlight exude a sense of happiness and innocence as opposed to the eerie minimalism of *The Annunciation*. In contrast with the adult sensual Gabriel of the second painting, in the first Gabriel is a child. Nevertheless, there is a sinister expression on his face and his left hand is discreetly fondling the lily, which is still in its vase/vessel at this stage. The third painting was going to be based on a scene from the final stage of the life of Mary on earth, but unfortunately was not executed, perhaps due to the harsh criticism *The Annunciation* was met with. Considering the three paintings in one context as one story—including the theme of the unexecuted third painting—provides the viewer with the three stages of Mary's life from Rossetti's point of view: a scene of her adolescence while being carefully instructed to weave by her mother, the scene of her violation by Gabriel and/or God, and the scene of the finality of her – earthly - life. In the beginning she was being prepared for her role as a vessel, she was then violated, and then her day-to-day life interrupted and taken away.

On another level, the trinity of Gabriel, Mary and God, the non-present sender of the messenger, disturb the sanctity of the holy trinity itself. In addition, they also echo a similar trinity in Rossetti's life which included Rossetti himself, Jane Morris and William Morris. Rossetti was infatuated by Jane Morris, the wife of his friend, for a long period of his career, resulting in featuring her in a lot of his work. In his sonnet XLIII, 'Lost on Both Sides', is a clear description between the three personas and their duplicates: Gabriel, God and Mary, and Rossetti, Morris and Jane.

As when two men have loved a woman well,
Each hating each, through Love's and Death's deceit;
Since not for either this stark marriage-sheet
And the long pauses of this wedding bell;
Yet o'er her grave the night and day dispel

At last their feud forlorn, with cold and heat;
 Nor other than dear friends to death may fleet
 The two lives left that most of her can tell:
 So separate hopes, which in a soul had wooed
 The one same Peace, strove with each other long,
 And Peace before their faces perished since:
 So through that soul, in restless brotherhood,
 They roam together now, and wind among
 Its bye-streets, knocking at the dusty inns.²³

'Rossetti's Obsession - Images of Jane Morris', an exhibition which took place in 2014 at the Cartwright Hall in Bradford, was dedicated to the sheer volume of Rossetti's work which featured Jane Morris. The echoing of Rossetti's life in the Mary paintings or vice versa may thus have been intentional or subconscious. Our reading becomes even more plausible when we observe the fact that Rossetti's middle name, which used to be his first before he changed it, is Gabriel. Further echoes are also apparent in his poetry, since, according to Rossetti, 'the reciprocity between word and image was a means of enlarging both'.²⁴ To illustrate this reciprocity and to further endorse my reading of Rossetti's *Mary* paintings, I will here draw on five more of Rossetti's *Poems* (1870), each of which tells part of the story: 'Love's Nocturn', 'Ave', 'Supreme Surrender', 'Sleepless Dreams', and his best suited poem for the purpose, 'First Love Remembered'.

In 'Love's Nocturn', we encounter a description of Gabriel floating down in a different 'image' or 'phantom' to a Mary deep in 'slumber':

Master, from thy shadowkind
 Call my body's phantom now:
 Bid it bear its face declin'd
 Till its flight her slumbers find,
 And her brow
 Feel its presence bow like wind.²⁵

In 'Ave', there is an emphasis on Mary's holiness, albeit with a controversial allusion to a physical relation with the 'Holy Ghost'. Rossetti's pre-occupation with Mary's death is also reflected in line 9.

Being a daughter borne to God,

²³ Rossetti, 'Sonnet XLIII: Lost on Both Sides', p. 128.

²⁴ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems and Translations 1850-1870*, ed. by Oswald Doughty (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 15. All of Rossetti's poems referenced are taken from this edition.

²⁵ Rossetti, 'Love's Nocturn', pp. 6-7.

Mother of Christ from stall to rood,
And wife unto the Holy Ghost:-
Oh when our need is uttermost,
Think that to such as death may strike
Thou once wert sister sisterlike!²⁶

‘Supreme Surrender’ is split into two stanzas, being one of Rossetti’s sonnets. The first stanza depicts a sleeping Mary from the point of view of Gabriel. He is referring to Mary as ‘My Lady’, already asserting his intention at possessing her. He also envies himself being the only ‘man’ in the room, which is perhaps his second ‘image’ or form which is mentioned in ‘Love’s Nocturn’.

To all the spirits of Love that wander by
Along his love-sown harvest-field of sleep
My Lady lies apparent; and the deep
Calls to the deep; and no man sees but I.²⁷

Sleepless Dreams is unique in being the only poem which could be taken to be a depiction of the situation from Mary’s point of view. She refers to her virginity in terms such as ‘bride’ and ‘girdling golden bar’, reflecting her awareness of a supernatural presence in the room by mentioning ‘wings’ fanning her ‘pillow smooth’ and also of a personified sleep which is in the room treading ‘softly’ and gazing at her ‘from far’.

Girt in dark growths, yet glimmering with one star,
O night desirous as the nights of youth!
Why should my heart within thy spell, forsooth,
Now beat, as the bride’s finger-pulses are
Quickened within the girdling golden bar?
What wings are these that fan my pillow smooth?
And why does Sleep, waved back by Joy and Ruth,
Tread softly round and gaze at me from far?²⁸

‘First Love Remembered’ is a brilliant depiction of the scene of the painting in accordance with my above analysis, hence I quote it here in full:

Peace in her chamber, wheresoe’er
It be, a holy place:

²⁶ Rossetti, ‘Ave’, p. 23

²⁷ Rossetti, ‘Sonnet VI: Supreme Surrender’, p. 110.

²⁸ Rossetti, ‘Sonnet XIX: Sleepless Dreams’, p. 116.

The thought still brings my soul such grace
 As morning meadows wear.
 Whether it still be small and light,
 A maid's who dreams alone,
 As from her orchard-gate the moon
 Its ceiling showed at night:
 Or whether, in a shadow dense
 As nuptial hymns invoke,
 Innocent maidenhood awoke
 To married innocence:
 There still the thanks unheard await
 The unconscious gift bequeathed:
 For there my soul this hour has breathed
 An air inviolate.²⁹

Rossetti's *The Annunciation* (1850) humanises both the Virgin Mary and Gabriel, and perhaps the whole Trinity. Depicted in a quasi-classical cycle of desire and love, the trinity seem to behave like the ancient gods of antiquity. Although Gabriel and the Virgin's stark human appearance does not give away the whole message which is scattered around the painting in coded images, the transgressive quality of the painting is piercing and potent. In the next section, however, I shall establish how Millais' and Rossetti's subtlety of coded messages reached the peak of open and unabashed transgression in Beardsley.

From Mid-Victorian Pre-Raphaelitism to Fin de Siècle Decadence

J.B. Bullen explains how '[t]he Publication of Swinburne's "indecent" *Poems and Ballads* in 1866 was followed by Rossetti's *Poems* (1870) to produce the notorious "Fleshly School of Poetry"', and, in turn, 'in 1873 Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* created its own succes de scandale'.³⁰ The 'Fleshly School of Poetry' was part of, as well as supplementary to, what was perceived as the 'Fleshly School of Art', which emphasised the aesthetic and the sensual in disregard to norms of narrative frameworks and moral overtones. Ironically, and in an older phase of artistic radicalism, the artist who first inscribed the initials of the Brotherhood on his work in 1848 was leading the way again to a late and slightly different phase of Pre-Raphaelitism; at this stage, Rossetti pioneered figures and heads of suggestive, though unusual, features in rich colours and in maximum proximity to the viewer.

²⁹ Rossetti, 'Song II: First Love Remembered', p. 133.

³⁰ Bullen, J. B., *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 149.

His disciples, the new Pre-Raphaelites he created, both followed in his footsteps as well as evolved them. Simeon Solomon, one of Rossetti's followers, depicted similar figures and heads, albeit on a more androgynous scale. His two paintings of Bacchus (1867 and 1868) are good examples of his style of sensuous androgyny. Such quality of his work was most appreciated by his like-minded contemporaries: 'Simeon Solomon's figures, said Swinburne, have "a supersexual beauty, in which the lineaments of woman and of man seem blended as the lines of the sky, and landscape melt in burning mist of heat and light"''.³¹ A more important disciple of Rossetti's, pertinent to my argument here, is Edward Burne-Jones, an artist who linked the old with the new. 'Burne-Jones has too often been written off as a hopeless escapist', Tim Barringer elaborates, 'an inhabitant of what Rossetti called "Dreamland", but his work is far more subtle and multi-dimensional than this implies'.³² His 'illusion of pictorial space and the bold colours are a natural development from Rossetti's watercolours of the 1850s'.³³ In a way, Burne-Jones was also a Pre-Raphaelite return from musical analogy to an art that combines the narrative with the aesthetic. Whereas Rossetti started depicting rich aesthetic images of beautiful maidens implying the harmony of pictorial and acoustic pleasures, as in his *The Blue Bower* (1865) and *Veronica Veronese* (1872), Burne-Jones returned to depicting scenes from pre-Renaissance legends, as in *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874) and *The Doom Fulfilled* (1876). Nevertheless, in spite of his Pre-Raphaelite training and its influence on his work, Burne-Jones was a let-down with Pre-Raphaelite values, at once a development of Pre-Raphaelitism and a departure from it. 'The sheer refinement of Burne-Jones's rarefied world is achieved at the loss of that radical energy and vitality which characterised Pre-Raphaelitism at its finest'.³⁴

Bullen goes on to remark, 'In retrospect we can see that the original spirit of Pre-Raphaelitism had been transformed into something which was called 'Aestheticism', but the public at large still called it 'Pre-Raphaelitism' and the new term did not come into current usage until about 1877'.³⁵ Such seeds of Aestheticism came to fruition in Beardsley's Fin-de-Siècle decadent style. Himself a disciple of Burne-Jones, he took Aestheticism to a new level which has become emblematic of the new age of modernity or what his fin de siècle audience referred to as degeneration. Burne-Jones, as the link between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism, had a great influence on Beardsley. In a letter to a friend, young Beardsley expresses his excitement at the opportunity to show his work to his figure of influence: 'I shall be going to see Burne-Jones soon, and I am anxious of course to show him as much new sketching as I can'.³⁶ This exciting 'meeting with Burne-Jones' at a very early stage of Beardsley's career when he was still 'continuing his humdrum existence as a clerk', led to 'his joining the Westminster School of Art, where for about a year he attended evening classes' which became the only 'formal training' he had.³⁷

³¹ Bullen, p. 192.

³² Barringer, Tim, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Reading the Image* (London: Orion House, 1998), p. 160.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 164.

³⁵ Bullen, p. 150.

³⁶ Beardsley, p. 30.

³⁷ Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good, 'Editorial', *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Cassell, 1971), pp. 1-6, p. 5.

Beardsley gives a superb account of his encounter with Burne-Jones in another letter to A. W. King, his previous mentor at school and current friend:

Yesterday I and my sister went to see the Studio of Burne-Jones, as I had heard that admittance might be gained to see the pictures by sending in one's visiting card. When we arrived however we were told that Studio had not been open for some years and that we could not see Mr Burne-Jones without a special appointment. So we left somewhat disconsolately.

I had hardly turned the corner when I heard a quick step behind me, and a voice which said, 'Pray come back, I couldn't think of letting you go away without seeing the pictures, after a journey on a hot day like this'. The voice was that of Burne-Jones, who escorted us back to his house and took us into the studio, showing and explaining everything. His kindness was wonderful as we were perfect strangers, he not even knowing our names.

By the merest chance I happened to have some of my best drawings with me, and I asked him to look at them and give me his opinion.

I can tell you it was an exciting moment when he first opened my portfolio and looked at the first drawings: *Saint Veronica on the Evening of Good Friday*, *Dante at the Court of Don Grande della Scala*.

After he had examined them for a few minutes he exclaimed, 'There is no doubt about your gift, one day you will most assuredly paint very great and beautiful pictures'.

[...] 'I *seldom or never* advise anyone to take up art as a profession, but in *your case I can do nothing else*'.³⁸

Burne-Jones' advice and words of encouragement continued in their future meetings, and Beardsley took it all in, regarding his mentor as 'the greatest living artist in Europe'.³⁹ There is no room in my argument for a full study of Burne-Jones' work, but what I have mentioned on him so far suffices to demonstrate his being the connection of the Mid-Victorian rebelliousness in art with its fin de siècle counterpart.

Whereas 'Pre-Raphaelitism's abiding concern with the art of the past grew out of the medievalism of the Romantic movement',⁴⁰ fin de siècle decadence sprang out of late-Pre-Raphaelite's Aestheticism. Along with Rossetti's late Pre-Raphaelitism, Burne-Jones, though not often drawn into critical debate, forms the missing link between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aesthetic Decadence.

Transgressive Motives

A fellow founder of the early Pre-Raphaelitism, William Holman Hunt, 'was incensed by what he saw as Rossetti's challenge to the moral aims of art [...]: "I see Rossetti is advocating as a principal the mere gratification of the eye if any passion at all – the animal passion to be the aim of art"'.⁴¹ Rossetti's development of a late Pre-Raphaelitism was thus

³⁸ Beardsley, pp. 21-22.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁰ Barringer, p. 21.

⁴¹ Barringer, pp. 148-49.

not welcomed by the early apostles of Pre-Raphaelitism, perceiving it as something entirely different from what the Brotherhood was set to achieve. Barringer remarks:

To remove the narrative constraints which direct aesthetic pleasure to morally acceptable ends, a central tenet of the early Pre-Raphaelitism of Hunt, Brown and even Millais, is to condone a kind of moral chaos. An art without a controlling narrative offers an unmoralised optical pleasure to the viewer: in Hunt's eyes, it celebrates unrestrained sexuality on the part of both men and women. This is an inversion of the promotion of circumscribed, respectable sexual behaviour attempted by the narrative modern-life paintings.⁴²

In her discussion of the Pre-Raphaelite rebellion against Mid-Victorian artistic norms, Susan Casteras sheds light on some of the hostile criticism that the early Pre-Raphaelites were met with. She explains:

Millais's Mariana [...] was censured for portraying what the Art Journal described as 'only an ill-complexioned lady straining herself into an ungraceful attitude'. Not only was her face considered insufficiently handsome for high art, but her stretching yawn was too informal and unladylike for some tastes. In the same periodical throughout the 1850s, related objections recurred.⁴³

It is clear that, in spite of the hostility, what was observed in the painting was only the surface layer of transgression. The deeper, more aggressive rebelliousness against gender norms in the painting as we discussed earlier is not mentioned, most likely passing unrecognised. Nevertheless, the Pre-Raphaelite statement of rebellion was felt and, to a large extent, was taken as a threat. 'This threat constituted a breach of etiquette, not just in art but in life, an affront to the established norms of behaviour and good society. Fine art was not supposed to undermine the status quo'.⁴⁴ The status quo, whether in Mid-Victorian fine art or social standards, was one already quite stale: a situation of stone-set stereotypes, frozen-in-time gender roles, a culture of over-emphasised expectations of masculinity and an unquestioned environment of strict religious dogma and Victorian religiosity. A contemporary journal, *The Athenaeum*, 'complained in 1846 that painters':

Go on, year after year, dealing out conventionalities – the long simpering faces, long and narrow necks, Lilliputian wrists and hands, compressed busts, small waists, swelling trains, and impossible feet - exhausting their stores of white satin and coloured ribbon [...]. Such, then, is the degraded state to which has descended a class of representation once practised in this country by a Vandyke, a Reynolds, and a Lawrence.⁴⁵

In addition, the 'Pre-Raphaelites also challenged stereotypes of femininity by seizing upon individual traits which had been over-idealized in a certain type of portraiture'.⁴⁶ One of the main traits of femininity they subverted in their art is purity, whether in the form of innocent maidenhood, or the Virgin Mary as discussed through Millais and Rossetti earlier. This purity

⁴² Barringer, p. 149

⁴³ Susan P. Casteras, 'Pre-Raphaelite Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 55(1), (1992), 13-35, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Casteras, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Casteras, p. 28.

whether of virginity or chastity was classed in Victorian mercantile matrimonial terms as the woman's 'most precious "commodity"' and her one 'chance for respect' within society.⁴⁷ The same also applies to Beardsley's *Salomé*, whose grotesque and conspicuous expression of desire transgresses against accepted Victorian traits of femininity. In so doing, moreover, it challenges the standards of Victorian masculinity and disturbing the boundaries of gender roles, albeit less subtly than Millais' *Mariana* and Rossetti's *Mary*. Bullen asserts: 'What we seem to be witnessing here in the fashion for androgyny is a cultural reaction against "masculinity": a reaction against a set of values which privileged the active, the material, and the reasonable at the expense of the non-material, and the intuitive'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Pre-Raphaelite transgressions were sometimes less challenging and less subtle, only expressing a Victorian sexual code or perhaps exposing it for personal reasons. As William Holman Hunt narrates in his *Pre-Raphaelitism*:

Once on my going to Millais' house, he was away, but his parents were at home. The father talked about the Academy school, and of the treatment Johnnie had formerly experienced there. "Being so very young," he said, "Johnnie became the sport of some of the rough elder students, and he came home at times complaining and bearing marks of their coarse behaviour. They lifted him up above their heads and twirled him about, affecting to be acrobats. One brutal fellow, H- (you must know him), carried the child up a ladder that happened to be in the school, encouraged the more by the poor little fellow's cries; and once he held him up by the ankles and marched with him head downwards around the school, his hair sweeping the ground. What could I do? It would not have done to make a scandal of it, but I told Johnnie to invite this burly fellow here to give advice in some design in hand. When he came I received him in friendly manner, and soon spoke of Johnnie's fragile form, saying that some elder students in the Academy were thoughtless about the delicacy of the young boy, that I felt sure he was a good, sensible fellow, but that some young men were without reflection and needed to be opposed, and that I would trust him always to protect Johnnie and save him from such horseplay. After that Johnnie was left unmolested, and we had every reason to rejoice in the effect of my appeal to H-'s better feelings." This restraint, however, was of transient or partial value, for the man had at bottom a cruel nature. Millais with true instinct, although not at the time admitting to himself the reason, painted him in the "Isabella" picture as the brother cracking the nut, and at the same time kicking the dog.⁴⁹

The erect leg kicking the dog and the nut cracker are both, as discussed previously, incestuous phallic symbols, one expressing his desire for his sister and the other his active act of masturbation. In Victorian eyes, masturbation was the worst act of pleasure, 'cursed alike by both God and man'; furthermore, '[i]t was "unnatural" in that it had no function in the reproductive cycle; it was anti-social in that its pleasures were not reciprocal ones, and it was narcissistic in that its object was pure self-pleasure'.⁵⁰ In addition, Hunt's recollection also serves to point out that the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Millais, may have been challenging the conventions of the Academy due to the personal vendetta for their bad experiences during their student years. Nevertheless, 'the first principle of Pre-Raphaelitism was to eschew all

⁴⁷ Casteras, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Bullen, p. 192.

⁴⁹ Hunt, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Bullen, p. 210.

that was conventional in contemporary art'.⁵¹ With art being the mirror of society, the Pre-Raphaelites eschewed in addition a great deal of the conventions of Victorian society in their way. Their challenges, subtle in their profundity, were perhaps not recognised in totality until now, but such transgressions may have paved the way eventually for the fin de siècle Aestheticism and its blunter and more conspicuous rebelliousness.

Conclusion

Hunt's words, in the preface to *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1905), apply themselves well to Pre-Raphaelitism as well as Beardsley's decadence, and express brilliantly the rebelliousness of youth against the stagnancy of old norms.

With Stothard, Constable, and Wilkie dead, Etty past account, and Turner's glorious career at an end, no effort of elders could affect the imminent prospect. We young men had no disposition to lay our spring-like lives at the feet of such fatality. If the open road ended in an impassable waste, we had to make a new way; it might be to push through the forest darkness, to root out venomous undergrowth, to substitute wholesome stock, grafting these with shoots, to ripen hereafter for the refreshment of travellers overcome by their toilsome march. It is by seeking out the teaching of the secret revealing years that the young can justify their usurpation of the seats of their fathers.⁵²

It could be argued that Millais' and Rossetti's early Pre-Raphaelitism must have been more mutinous and challenging to the Mid-Victorian viewer due to the intense conservative nature of British society at the time, albeit too subtle for the average Mid-Victorian to notice or to be too concerned. Beardsley's fin de siècle decadence should not be underestimated, however, as it was rather avant-garde in its breaking away with the conventions of art and morality in the late Victorian era, and its explicit perverse sexuality must have been even more shocking then, since it continues to be disturbing today.

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⁵¹ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Vol. I (London: Macmillan & Co., 1905), p. 125.

⁵² Hunt, p. xii.

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