

CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Sir,

I would like to make the following comments in relation to Elain Shefer's article on "The Woman at the Window in Victorian Art" (Volume IV/1).

The a priori assumption that Christina is directly represented in Millais's "Mariana" may well be true (or at least it may be a defensible interpretation) but it isn't proved in this article. Indeed, everything seems to flow from the assertion that "Millais had a specific woman in mind, the poetess Christina Rossetti. The painting is . . . a statement about Christina", rather than leading up to or demonstrating this claim. There is virtually nothing about what Millais had in mind, even if there are some interesting parallels with what Christina was thinking and feeling.

Shefer's argument is also flawed by some incorrect reading of the painting's iconography, the most serious of which is the identification of the flower in the stained glass window as a 'wilted lily', which is said to symbolize Mariana/Christina's 'deflowering'. In fact this flower is a snowdrop, symbolic in Victorian convention of consolation, and is plainly recognizable as such even to those who no longer understand the language of flowers.

Furthermore, while not wanting to quarrel with the interpretation of Mariana's pose as expressing sensuous frustration, it should also be pointed out that it is also a stretching position characteristic of women who have been seated at an embroidery frame. This may be lost on present day spectators, but was brought vividly home to those of us who helped on the "Daisy" embroidery for the recent William Morris exhibition held in London. After an hour or so of stitching, everybody was seen to get up and stretch their backs in a manner identical to Mariana's! This primary meaning of the figure's pose should not be overlooked -- in fact it makes the sensuousness less crude and more interesting.

I think it might be altogether better to suggest that Millais was unconsciously representing Christina.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Jan Marsh BA DPhil