

THE WOMAN AT THE WINDOW IN VICTORIAN ART AND
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AS THE SUBJECT OF MILLAIS'S MARIANA

The use of the window as an iconographical motif is frequent enough in the history of art. In seventeenth century Dutch painting, the woman at the window has erotic meaning; for example, in Abraham Snaphaen's Girl with Mousetrap, various motifs -- the candle under the empty bird cage, the tipped over jar, and the sign "room for rent" -- suggest that the woman is attempting to lure a male into her "mousetrap."¹ Among the Romantic painters of the nineteenth century, the woman at the window expressed the more abstract notion of man's ambivalent relationship to nature: his wish to approach it in order to achieve a harmonious rapport with it, and his simultaneous retreat from it in awareness of its greatness.²

For the Victorians, the woman at the window became a pervasive theme, again assuming new implications. From the 1850s through the late 1890s there are hundreds of paintings containing this motif. Rossetti's depiction of Elizabeth at Hastings (1854), John C. Horsley's The Soldier's Farewell (1853, Plate 1), William M. Egley's A Corner of Her Home (1860, Plate 2), George E. Hicks's The Last Rose of Summer (1866, Plate 3), Sir James D. Linton's Waiting (ca. 1865, Plate 4), and Alfred W. Elmore's Lost in Thought (1850s, Plate 5) are samples of the type of art that filled both Victorian exhibition halls and family magazines.³ In all these works, the window reinforces the bird cage motif. In effect, the women are every bit as much prisoners as are "Signor John Baptist" and "Monsieur Rigaud" as depicted by Dickens in Little Dorrit and illustrated by "Phiz" (Plate 6). The iconographical motif of the window, with its bird cage implications, found great favor in an age that viewed women as passive pets.

Unlike its Romantic counterpart, the Victorian window, even when open, did not offer freedom. Protected and sheltered from the 'outside world', the woman usually either awaits her destiny or dreamily recalls an experience that may hold a future hope. Abraham Solomon's A Sketch From Memory (1851, Plate 7) is a typical example of the latter theme. It is interesting to compare Solomon's rather bland painting with a Pre-Raphaelite painting of the same date and ostensibly the same theme -- Millais's Mariana (Plate 8). The sentiment in Mariana is "utter dearth and life-weariness; no hope for the future, no present stay. A day is past and nothing more; for the morrow will bring her no nearer to the goal."⁴ The contortions of Mariana's body, the unhappiness on her face