

THE ILLUSTRATED *ENOCH ARDEN* AND VICTORIAN VISUAL CULTURE

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“Because things seen are mightier than things heard.”
– Tennyson, *Enoch Arden*

The three months between December 1865 and March 1866 are of great interest to students of Victorian visual culture, for in this winter-quarter three separate but related commodities were made available to middle-class consumers. Each was enabled by the technologies of photography and wood-engraving and each raised questions, informed by contemporary reproduction discourses, about the value of originals versus repetitions and the power of the material and the visual to shape lived experience, manipulate responses, and direct choices. These textual and commercial events are a promotional article in an illustrated periodical, a Christmas gift-book, and an art exhibition. The central event framed by the periodical advertisement and the gallery spectacle, and the one this essay will focus on, is the publication of Tennyson’s most popular poem, *Enoch Arden*, with illustrations by Arthur Hughes.

As many critics have observed, *Enoch Arden* invokes the visual at every level from poetic methodology to thematic concerns.¹ Gerhard Joseph goes so far as to argue that *Enoch Arden*’s series of pictorial tableaux not only illustrate “the poem’s emphatically visual aesthetic,” but also enact “the aesthetic principle of the Tennyson idyll more generally: ‘things seen are mightier than things heard’ (l. 762)”² (68). However, with the single, significant exception of Patrick Scott, no critic has examined *Enoch Arden* as a visual object in its own right: that is, as a material book with physical pictures on printed pages that occupied space in Victorian culture. In his influential article, “Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden*: A Victorian Best-Seller,” Scott refers to Arthur Hughes’s illustrations in the gift book published by Moxon as “in a sense the ‘official’ version” because it was brought out in the poet’s lifetime by his own publisher. Furthermore, he suggests that Tennyson “may have kept in mind while planning the poem that his text should be able to be meaningfully illustrated” (19).

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