

REVIEWS

Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature by Lynne Pearce. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. 161 pp. + 8 color illustrations. ISBN 0-8020-5980-5: \$85.00 (cloth); 0-8020-6912-6: \$24.95 (paper).

"This project," as Lynne Pearce refers to her series of readings, arose from her intense reaction to the 1984 Tate Pre-Raphaelite show: "it was not love, but anger, ridicule, frustration, contempt—the defiant joy of having at last *seen through*—that fuelled this project: sent me back to teach courses in which I refused to let students simply *enjoy* Pre-Raphaelite paintings" (ix-x). Such self-proclaimed "crudity of motivation" helps clarify both the strengths and weaknesses of her audacious experiment: to reclaim for twentieth-century feminism the images of women produced by nineteenth-century male artists for what she insists was "exclusively male" consumption (x, 2).

Criticizing earlier feminist art scholars' unwillingness "to break with the conditions of the text's production and consumption in order to assert their 'rights' as readers and viewers" (2), Pearce opens by lucidly outlining the theoretical basis for her reading strategies. Drawing eclectically on contemporary theory and practice, especially Pierre Macherey and recent feminist film criticism, Pearce proposes a theory of "gendered reading" that places the feminist reader/viewer "in a position of unequivocal power" (41).

She applies her method to eight poem-painting combinations. Starting with Rossetti's oil *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-49) and its accompanying double sonnet, she maintains that a feminist viewer "burdened with the knowledge of prefigurative symbolism" cannot "mak[e] for the picture a narrative of her own choosing" unless she "break[s] free" of "such slavish analysis" (33-34). Yet it is precisely this escape that Rossetti forbids; the exegetical poem delimits, dominates. Combined with the sharply focused visual image, it is his attempt at "semiotic 'fixing,'" not only of the picture's symbols but of their translation into the nineteenth-century discourse of female "excellence," dictating passivity and self-abnegation (37). On realizing this, the modern viewer now notices Mary's "servile" stoop, her drab dress, her "fearful" facial expression, and becomes "fearful" herself. She understands that the sonnets "are an obvious attempt to

fix the Virgin in her place and we [sic] in ours" (39).

Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* (c. 1864-70), on the other hand, yields to a feminist reading because her figure "is an 'outline' that has *not* been filled in" (51). On one level, Beatrix is "an image of a woman who has been denied, and is, more importantly, *denying herself*," the counterpart of today's anorexic fashion models (52). But through comparing Rossetti's poems "Dante at Verona" and "On the Vita Nuova of Dante" with the *Vita Nuova* itself, Pearce argues that both poets resolve "the blighting paradox" of female purity and procreation by devoting themselves "to a love that was no love: that could only ever be love-in-death." It then becomes possible to read Beatrix not as "a victim *per se* . . . but [as] a ghostly signifier no man will ever hold"—and as an "expression of [Rossetti's] own impotence" (55-56).

A more detailed correspondence occurs between Tennyson's "Mariana" and Millais's 1851 rendering. Pearce is at her best when simply attending to their "seductive" aural, tactile, and visual appeals that establish Mariana as "a sexual subject," causing both works to "reverberate with libidinal connotations" (65). Mariana embodies "the paradox that denied the middle-class woman sexuality at the same time as it pruriently promoted its existence"; the "gorgeous surfaces of words and image" enable Tennyson and Millais to "flaunt" Mariana's "'secret' without ever naming it" (68).

Another "imprisoned woman," the Lady of Shalott, inspires Pearce's most bravura re-vision. Tennyson's Lady, though she may be read in mythic and psychoanalytic terms, is "a social and historical subject" too, the "propertyless and hence powerless. . . domestic angel condemned forever to a drawing room existence" (74). Holman Hunt's Lady (1886-1905), however, exposes Tennyson's "gaps": she "refuses to be bound" by her "textual/sexual fate," confronting it "with *anger*" (78). The trappings crowding her claustrophobic space actually reveal the conflicting ideologies of Celibacy and Romantic Love in which she is impossibly caught. Thus "a painting ostensibly representing an act of deviance is received by us as an act of defiance" (80).

Perhaps Pearce's most satisfying discussion of a painting is her treatment of Millais's *Lorenzo and Isabella* (1848-49), based on Keats's narrative poem