

*Ladies of Shalott: A Victorian Masterpiece and Its Contexts*, Brown University, Art Department, 1985. Price not quoted.

I understand that a few people left the Brown University exhibit entitled *Ladies of Shalott: A Victorian Masterpiece and Its Contexts* (23 February - 23 March, 1985) disappointed. They complained that the exhibit was "a bit thin" and that gaps left by the absence of some major works seemed to have been filled with pieces displaying only marginal relevance and, perhaps, facile accessibility. For instance, the inclusion of Millais's "Leisure Hours" and "Margaret D'Anjou" and Beardsley's drawings seem only to be justified by the generous subtitle, "A Victorian Masterpiece and Its Contexts." However, if one were to take time to read the informative and profusely illustrated catalogue compiled by the graduate students of Brown University, one would not necessarily sense the spaces visible through a mere viewing of the displayed work. The catalogue opens with ten essays concerning everything from the artistic renditions of Tennyson's well-known poem to a discussion of the Pre-Raphaelite influence on Art Nouveau and European design (an essay which, of course, helps justify the Beardsley portion of the exhibit). Among the essays, I was particularly struck by Timothy R. Rodgers's "The Development of William Holman Hunt's *Lady of Shalott*" which traces the evolution of Hunt's preparatory sketches. The essay gives the viewer not only a sense of the piece's composition but also an understanding of its intricate symbolism. Also interesting are Marc Rolink's comments on the "dynamic dialogue" between the formal qualities of the art of the Renaissance and the second generation Pre-Raphaelitism in Hunt's painting. Many of the other essays have informative moments. For instance, Rebecca R. Green's essay which reveals a few of the precise medieval sources for the Pre-Raphaelite paintings and Miriam Neuringer's

piece on the history of the purchase of Hunt's "Lady of Shalott" (in the Appendix) all add to the particularity of one's knowledge. Occasionally, as I was reading the essays, I wished that the editor had removed some of the repeated materials and that the writers had not felt so compelled to spend time explicating their material. In one instance, especially, an essay ended where it probably should have begun: When the piece on the various drawings of "The Lady of Shalott" concluded with a quotation from Ruskin, the essay drew closer to what needs to be subtly discussed and to a concern lacking in most of the essays. I would have liked to have seen the following lines from Ruskin taken more seriously and addressed:

*Many of the plates are very noble things, though not, it seems to me, illustrations of your [Tennyson] poems. I believe, in fact, that good pictures never can be; they are always another poem, subordinate but wholly different from the poet's conception, and serve chiefly to show the reader how variously the same verses may affect various minds." (Ruskin, 36: 265)*

The second half of the catalogue fully describes each piece used in the exhibit. One of the most interesting among these is the modest and pious rendition of the Lady of Shalott by Elizabeth Siddal.

It is apparent that care and delight went into the exhibit, and it is even more apparent that although one tries hard to tie down the Pre-Raphaelites, there is difficulty. The exhibit reveals their protean shapes which in the end elude one and make any attempt to display the Pre-Raphaelites and their "context" a hard task (unless one has the resources of the Tate Gallery). There will always be the complaint, "It was a bit thin."

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