

MARIANA MIRRORING PENELOPE:
A CASE FOR CLASSICAL INFLUENCE IN A
PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTING

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Stories can transcend their original source and medium. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* inspired Alfred Tennyson's "Mariana." In turn, John Everett Millais drew from these works when he painted *Mariana* in 1851. Although Millais's titular figure is drawn from literature, Mariana's overall characterization matches that of an ancient archetypal woman who waits. A visual and literary analysis reveals that Millais's *Mariana*, although primarily inspired by English literature, parallels Homer's Penelope from the *Odyssey*.

Before seeing Millais's *Mariana* as a descendant of Penelope, it is important to catalogue the artist's representation of Mariana, her environment, and the subjects explored in the poem. In the upper left-hand corner of the painting, Millais inserts a set of three casement windows that was not mentioned in Tennyson's poem. Inspired by the Chapel of Merton College in Oxford, the window directly in front of Mariana contains a scene of the Annunciation, while the pane adjacent to her includes a Latin text that translates as "in heaven there is rest" (Leng 63-74). These windows overlook a natural landscape largely composed of overgrown poplar foliage from the tree Tennyson described in his poem. Millais uses shadows to create an abandoned and dusty effect in his portrayal of a table that supports a religious setting, as suggested by the triptych and votive candle. A white curtain hangs against the wall, scattered green and orange poplar leaves and a red cushioned seat on dark wooden legs rest on an old wooden floor, and a stray, brown mouse appears in the corner of the painting just above the artist's signature. Millais also includes a table with a white tablecloth. Resting on top of the table is a sample of needlework, substantially long, as the right side of the table supports a rolled-up portion of the needlework. More scattered leaves sit on top of it. The centre of the painting presents Mariana. She is dressed in blue, and rises from her cushioned seat to stretch. Her head is tilted back, and both of her hands support her back. She wears what appears to be a wedding ring on her left hand.¹