

‘HERSELF A PSYCHE’:  
FEMININE IDENTITIES IN THE ART OF  
JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE

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One of the first pictorial essays on romantic love in the *oeuvre* of the British painter (and, later, Royal Academician) John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) is his 1875 painting *Whispered Words* (fig. 1, now known only through an engraving). Its theme, and the recurring motif of the nubile maiden, which is present in many of Waterhouse’s earliest works, eventually coalesce, in the artist’s mature imagery, into a more general and at the same time less explicitly narrative theme of searching prayer. The theme is usually introduced through the depiction of a female figure in solitary prayer; a rarer corollary theme focuses on a male figure who assumes a position of reverence toward the female. Such figures become the foci of a great many of Waterhouse’s paintings after 1890. They are not often associated explicitly with the act of religious prayer, but they and the images of which they are the key elements all share some characteristics which make their essential theme clear. *Whispered Words*, though an early effort by the artist, nevertheless offers us a clue about the relevance of this theme in much of his later work.

The gaze of these figures does not address the spectator, as do their counterparts in the art of Rossetti and some early pictures by Millais. Their disregard, as it were, of the observer effectively repositions Waterhouse in relation to Lacan’s construct of the “small object *a*” (65-112), a term which may be seen as referring to the unstable point of conjunction between a perception of the real and an apprehension of the symbol, or to “an object that both causes desire and also intervenes in all human acts to produce discontinuities in them” (Ragland-Sullivan 1). Waterhouse’s feminine object, therefore, does not support Nancy Locke’s extension of Lacan’s construct, wherein the spectator may, as in Manet’s *Olympia* or Courbet’s *Two Women*, be seeking not so much to gaze at the figure as to be gazed at by her. Neither does she wittingly present herself as what John Berger has called “the surveyed,” an identity which presupposes the female object’s cognizance of, assent to, and internalized conflation of the hinged roles of male observer and female object (46). Rather, the role of Waterhouse’s diffident feminine protagonists, which remains more or less unchanged across three decades