

The Construction of Women from a Gendered Perspective: Pre-Cinematic Victorian Representations and the Male Scopophilic Gaze

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Laura Mulvey suggests that women-as-artwork is traditionally a feature of male perspective, that “[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearances coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (841). The Fallen Woman was the subject of visual and literary representations throughout late nineteenth-century art and literature, and the act of framing, of capturing a moment to represent through the scopophilic male gaze, constructed the Fallen Woman. In attempting to represent the Fallen Woman, to capture her “fallenness” as in literary or artistic contexts to “capture,” to “represent,” male artists in fact “take [her] prisoner”. In framing the Fallen Woman men present a static image that cannot be altered; a fetishistic representation of all fallen women, and all aspects of the Fallen Woman. While she is represented in art, captured by the male gaze, the Fallen Woman cannot re-define herself from a non-male perspective. I argue that representation of the Fallen Woman is an act of male mastery: scopophilic, implicating sexuality in the desire to look at and define the Fallen Woman. I present, also, a case for the importance of the mirror in the self-construction and re-presentation of the Fallen Woman: if the person within the frame is female, then the frame is female and thus the spectator’s gaze is female. Yet this vision of the Fallen Woman cannot be captured or maintained, with the very earliest forms of moving pictures (such as zoetropes) not existing until the 1860s. While the mirror reflects the diversity of the Fallen Woman’s identity, it cannot

be maintained permanently, and thus the male gaze – the framed picture – becomes the only option for viable and visual construction of the Fallen Woman.

In William Holman Hunt's painting, *The Awakening Conscience*, the male painter has attempted to capture, or frame, the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the Fallen Woman. The picture's frame itself was designed by Hunt (Riggs, 'The Awakening Conscience'), and inherently becomes integral to the artistic representation, demonstrating male framing power over woman's passivity in being rendered as art *object*. Not only does the frame capture her and imprison her, but it renders her static: unable to either rise from the man's lap, or sit back down upon it. She is captured—as photography captures a transitory moment—as either sitting upon his lap, and becoming "Fallen," or, as the title suggests, in "a paralysing consciousness of her entrapment has turned her own body into a wedge of fear" (Dijkstra 3) rising from the seat of sexuality. Hunt frames her as either falling or acknowledging she has fallen. With the man's arms round around her hips—and loins—like a cage she is enclosed, statically framed by male sexuality and "fallen" unable to rise up and transcend her representation.

Hunt's capturing of the Fallen Woman in a transitory state is expressive of larger concepts of liminality. The woman in her static in-between position displays her left hand, upon which, despite being covered with rings, the wedding ring finger is exposed un-ringed: she inhabits the liminal space of not-virgin but not-married as needing to have her conscience awoken to her wrongs against cultural norms. The act of framing the Fallen Woman then is an attempt at framing something (and I mean *thing*, because as art she becomes a physical, immutable, object) which falls outside prescriptive female gender norms. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sees the woman's use of a married name as making a "graphic" statement (2443), that is, that it is

the ultimate signifier of her relation to, and perhaps subjugation by, man: as a “Miss” one has one’s father’s name, as a “Mrs” one takes one’s husband’s name. Male desire frames the Fallen Woman, therefore, in an attempt to regain ownership of the indefinable woman that is un-married and un-chaste. Art becomes another form of “graphic” statement so that they might be able to categorise her sexually. The importance put on the delineation of which cultural roles women can assume is seen most clearly in George Elgar Hicks’s triptych, *Woman’s Mission*,¹ which defines woman as “Guide to Childhood,” “Companion to Manhood,” and “Comfort to Old Age,” thus dutiful mother, wife and daughter. In Hunt’s painting Ruskin saw “nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home,” (qtd in Nead, ‘The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting’ 36) and consequently the woman is irrevocably unable to become mother, wife or remain dutiful daughter – she exists in an in-between world of all three. As the woman cannot be defined through the tradition of domestic art, or signification of marital status, men wish to capture and control the Fallen Woman through the power of the frame. Then, constructing the Fallen Woman is a means to regain, or to retain, male power over women and sexual status.

While Hunt’s painting is a clear marker of Mulvey’s traditional role of male patronage, the use of mirrors suggests a hope for the reinvention of the Fallen Woman: she tries to escape the capture of the male artist, the male gaze, and the male’s hands which physically encircle her hips. At first glance, the bird on the floor is captured by the cat in much the same way that the woman is held in place by the man. But in fact the mirror on the far wall reveals an open window and hope of escape for the bird, avoid-

¹ George Elgar Hicks, *Woman’s Mission* (1863). I have been using the paintings as reproduced in black and white in Lynda Nead’s *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell [1988] 1990), centrefold.

ing capture and danger by leaving the scene. Similarly, the Fallen Woman can choose to leave the man, as suggested in her “awakening conscience;” the conscience was there all along, like the escape, but now she sees it. She might be able to leave the confines of the man’s arms; there is a means of escape through the mirror out to “[t]he clean, golden light of virtue, which plays through the fresh and tender leaves of a springtime tree beyond the open window of her lavishly gilded cage, [which] reaches out to her with the promise of wholesome regeneration, of cleansing immersion in the unpolluted world of God’s garden.” (Dijkstra 3) With the position of the mirror as it is it should in fact reflect the spectator (much like it does in Ford Madox Brown’s *Take Your Son, Sir*, which puts the woman in the male gaze, the male spectator reflected in the ironic halo-mirror above her head), but in fact it reflects a world of pre-lapsarian regenerative qualities. It offers hope for the representation of the Fallen Woman as something other than the construction of the male gaze. Like the bird, it offers the Fallen Woman something more fluid than her “lavishly gilded cage” that maintains her “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”. This role of the mirror as offering means of reconstruction for the (Fallen) woman, and the role of mirrors themselves as an essentially female object, will be important for later discussion.

The act of framing-as-art-object, therefore, is an act of construction of the Fallen Woman by men. Men are the traditional patrons and viewers of art, and in “capturing” a quality, or moment, renders the woman static, and unable to alter or redefine the gaze, or the construction of her identity. Women’s “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” is an act of male agency that finds other cultural outlets in the pornographic image or the page-three pin-up. Men construct the Fallen Women through their mastery and demand scrutiny of the Fallen Woman as *fallen*, as inhabiting a liminal space that framing can and will eventually control. It is important now, however, to discuss how the

regenerative-redefining power of the mirror can be used simultaneously with the power of the portrait.

A reader of sensation fiction may be said “to “spectate,” rather than to identify with female suffering” (Pykett 80) and “one of the important criteria for Victorian reviewers in judging fiction was the writer’s ability to create faithful “portraits.” The medium of language should compose a “visual” image of the character....” (Onslow 450) The invitation was for Victorian writers to write/paint a literary portrait, consequently something which should be viewed-observed—rather than read. Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* is in itself an invitation to spectate: the title offers a frame in which to place the literary portrait of Lady Audley: her secret. The construction of the Fallen Woman preoccupies itself with the “picturesqueness and attractiveness of women’s wrongs.” (Pykett 61) Yet as a female artist – and not the director of the male gaze – Braddon in fact begins to question the accuracy of representation through portraiture/painting. In questioning the “treatment of the female model in the eye of the male viewer, [she] expose[s] and implicitly question[s] the male creation of women’s role.” (Onslow 461-2) In deconstructing the characterisation of the Fallen Woman, Braddon suggests new modes of re-presentation, as well as signifying the difficulty of overhauling the power of the static, and male, frame.

Robert Audley invokes the “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” of Lady Audley—the Fallen Woman of the novel—by confessing that, “I want to see this fair-haired paragon, my new aunt” (Braddon 50-51) and it is Robert’s scopophilia that leads to the scrutiny and discovery of Lady Audley’s true identity. Framing the Fallen Woman as a thing to be looked at demands scrutiny and analysis of the construction of the Fallen Woman and what it means to be “fallen,” Lady Audley is the object of the male gaze, the sub-

ject of the literary portrait, and the subject of a portrait within the text. Lady Audley is “doomed to be endlessly observed and investigated.” (Auger 9) The genre of the novel, and the literary preoccupation with male detection, invokes Lady Audley as an enigmatic object that must be unravelled and deconstructed.

The genre of detective fiction demands acts of scrutiny or looking into, of going beyond the surface. The male gaze of Robert and George is seen to be so powerful and penetrative that they employ covert means of entering Lady Audley’s chamber in order to view her unfinished portrait. This can be read as particularly sexual when one considers a similarly penetrative act in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

My Lord, as I was sewing in my chamber

Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbrac’d,

No hat upon his head, his stockings foul’d,

Ungarter’d, and down-gyved to his ankle

[...]he comes before me. (II.i., 88-95)

In the case of Ophelia, Hamlet comes before her in a state of undress prepared, it is assumed, for sex. Ophelia as a thing at which to be looked by the Victorian male gaze is a trope consistent with Victorian art, Ophelia having been depicted by many painters of the Fallen Woman.² The desire to see Lady Audley is matched to the desire to see Ophelia, and the men’s penetration of the room matched to Hamlet’s ea-

² I make especial reference here to John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-2), who as a painter and founder of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood would have been affiliated with William Holman Hunt, and been preoccupied with similar framings and renderings of (Fallen) women. Millais’s painting can be found here: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/ophelias>> [Accessed May 2011].

gerness for sex: her picture is covered intimately as though it were a naked body. They remove the baize that covers her unfinished painting, disrobing the body of Lady Audley, and George stares at it “with the candlestick grasped in his strong right hand, and his left arm hanging loosely at his side” (Braddon 71) in an almost masturbatory gesture. The male gaze is important in constructing the Fallen Woman, and because paintings require spectators, means that a scopophilic sexual pleasure can be accessed, meaning the Fallen Woman is constructed as sexual/art object of the male gaze.

It is at this point that George Talboys realises that Lucy Audley is in fact his presumed-dead wife, Helen Talboys. Yet for Robert he sees something “odd,” something which Alicia qualifies as “another expression [...] not to be perceived by common eyes” (Braddon 71) and when Auger notes how John Ruskin defined the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic as conveying truth over beauty (Auger 7) (and considering Braddon’s qualification of the portrait as Pre-Raphaelite) the reader/spectator comes to expect the uncovering of a truth. Robert as an amateur detective is on the same quest for truth and cannot understand the disparity—it is “odd” —between Lady Audley, person and painting. If the portrait is “truth,” as merely an abstract noun, then the male perspective of women as the static art/sex object should convey a universal and unequivocal truth. However, as will be later discussed, woman, and the Fallen Woman in particular, has a more multifarious personality than merely the caption or framing of a painting; this is the oddness Robert Audley sees.

To continue from *Awakening Conscience*, where William Holman Hunt is implicated in the act of simultaneously representing and framing, the potential of mirrors in feminine re-presentation is suggested in the novel. At the sight of Lady Audley in her

boudoir the narrator suggests that had Hunt “peeped into the pretty boudoir, I think the picture would have been photographed upon his brain to be reproduced by-and-by upon a bishop’s half-length for the glorification of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood.” (Braddon 295) The idea of photography invokes the male act of “capturing” a moment—photography literally captures light through its lens to create instantaneous representation - while Braddon writes how the many looking-glasses of the room “multiplied my lady’s image” (Braddon 295) Suggesting an endless chance for framing and re-framing. The frame of photography of a man’s mind seizes only the one myopic image of the woman, whereas Lady Audley produces many different images or perspectives of woman. Lady Audley’s many identities and proliferation of names read as a way of constructing the Fallen Woman from multifarious perspectives: there is not just one frame, and the subject is the viewer, the non-male gaze. Lady Audley’s reincarnations as Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham and Lucy Audley subvert the permanent capturing and framing implicit in Sedgwick’s argument: that the use of a title, or the taking of one’s husband’s name, is a fixed and representative sexual identity. They subvert the notion of male ownership, or male construction, of the Fallen Woman.

The “great looking-glasses that stretch from ceiling to the floor” (Braddon 27) of Lady Audley’s room provide the female, rather than the male, gaze to construct and redefine the Fallen Woman. It is an entire reflective landscape through which she can fashion herself. In Lacanian theory the mirror serves the self in its creation of identity:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to that term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to

this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*. (442)

The process of identification with the figure in the mirror, at least in psychoanalytic thought is a means of constructing identity. For Lady Audley as the Fallen Woman, her identity is constructed as and by the person she sees in the mirror. Bram Dijkstra supports this in her exposition of the mirror as signifying feminine qualities. For her the mirror is an extension of female identity:

She existed in and for what she mirrored, and unless she mirrored the world of man, she mirrored brute nature, the world of woman, herself. Thus, paradoxically, as long as woman lived among women, she lived alone, completely self-contained. She mirrored other women and other women mirrored her. Her purity was her self-containment, her inviolate sex the mirror of her existence, barren though that existence might be. Yet as long as woman existed apart from man, she existed as Woman... (132)

This ties in with Lacan's view of the mirror as an extension of the self, as a means of identification with parts of the self. Lady Audley with her many identities has mirrors that multiply her images innumerable in the face of being captured by the male gaze. (Braddon 295) She generates a female homosocial community where she mirrors Woman (that is, her various representations in the mirrors), and where she evades the scopophilic male gaze. Self-containment and thus self-representation and self-fashioning is ensured by the ability to look into the mirror: her many selves can be contained, and presented simultaneously, unlike in her portrait rendered by the male gaze, which due to its three-quarter or full-length character exhibits the woman's one

body to any viewer. This inability to present these many selves as anything other than static fragments exposes Victorian fetishism. (Felber 471-3)

Fetishism “is clearly associated with a person without being one” and fragments the nature of the self; moreover, the “fetishist behaves as though it actually were these other objects...” (Rycroft 57). In portraying a Fallen Woman in a painting you capture her, you render her statically (even in movement, in *Awakening Conscience*), resulting in a fragmented perception. In representing her as framed, as an object transcendent of time, you detach it from the body, become fixated on the synecdoche, and it becomes a fetishized representation of woman standing in for women. The male gaze is linked to the fetishization of the (Fallen) female body. In a painting it is only possible to see that snapshot, that moment of stasis, while a mirror, reflecting the ever-changing ever-moving spectator, frames a fluid and self-contained, self-sustaining and self-fashioning multifarious, self. Felber notes that “the mirror resembles the portrait, but it presents a potentially fluctuating image and the possibility of growth or change. In the mirror, Lucy could be a subject with some measure of control over her representation.” (Felber 481-2) This measure of control is over her body and its representations in the homosocial world of Woman. The agency of spectating and of framing is returned to Woman who is both figure in the frame and figure that is framing. In gazing into the frame the viewer can identify with a different identity like Lady Audley fetishized which is part of herself: the mirror shows the composite personalities that construct her as a Fallen Woman. Unlike fetishism, however, the choice of the one identity does not, and should not, stand in for the whole, which is a person in flux.

Moreover, the mirror, Bram Dijkstra argues, is already inherently feminine as “the moon had come to stand for the essence of everything that was truly feminine in the world” because it exists as a “reflected identity” (Dijkstra 122). The female body has always been associated with the moon, not least in the goddesses of ancient mythologies but also in the identification of the moon as governess of the months, and consequently tied to menstruation and metaphors of menstruation. The moon which reflects light cannot be independent and cannot illuminate itself; it cannot present itself by itself. For that reason, although the mirror depicts the true nature of the Fallen Woman as not merely a fetishized trope or captured moment that synecdochically stands in for the whole identity – because of its nature as a transitory representation that cannot be fixed, and because it depends on the reciprocity of what it must reflect, the mirror cannot stand as a mode of representation for woman without the attachment to an ever-moving woman. At the close of Braddon’s novel, Lady Audley is removed to a *maison de santé* and upon her first take of her new room believed the “glimmering something which adorned the rooms” to be “costly mirrors,” but were in fact “wretched mockeries of burnished tin” (Braddon 389). In removing her mirrors, Robert Audley removes Lady Audley’s ability to view and re-view herself; he shatters Lady Audley’s self and self-perception: there is no self-sustaining mode of representation. Lady Audley has no means to represent or re-present herself, meaning man must. Robert has re-constructed her as the Fallen Woman, as another identity and male-given title, as “Madame Taylor.” (Braddon 390) Lady Audley had chosen her previous identities but now Robert constructs one for her, one that is tied to marital status, as well as perhaps even linked to a sexual depravity (by re-naming her a Madame it perhaps signifies a male conquest—representing instead the “madame” of a brothel who disrupts a female homosocial continuum to feed the male gaze and

sexual acquisition). The chapter is entitled “Buried Alive,” depicting how although Lady Audley is corporeally alive, her autonomy and diverse self is buried; there is decay without the regenerative power and hope of change the mirror offered. This coffin of semi-reflective surfaces brings us back to the “natural mirror” that is water; like Venus who rises from the foam Woman must always return to the water, dying an Ophelia-death. (Dijkstra 132) Lady Audley’s identity and self-presentation born out of the mirror must equally be submerged, by live burial, in the tarnished mirror.

And so, while the mirror offers regeneration and self-representation for the Fallen Woman, the inability to “capture” the ever-moving images of the reflective surface (before the true cinematic age, and before a time of female directors) means that the only way in which Woman, and importantly so, the Fallen Woman, can be represented is through paintings constructed by and for the male scopophilic gaze. The act of framing is an agency which can be harnessed for representation and “[t]he feminist, futuristic potential of women’s self-construction is nevertheless implied” (Felber 485) in mirrors, but the ultimately Victorian technological inability to capture or represent moving images means the production of only static and fetishised representations of the Fallen Woman. Men hold the agency of the frame as the traditional patrons of art, while women have inherent “*to-be-looked-at-ness*.” In looking at themselves they can recreate themselves to themselves, but to represent themselves to public eyes requires the agency of the frame of the male gaze.

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