

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.3 (WINTER 2006)

Reconfiguring Pictures: Pre-Raphaelite Images in the Victorian Novel

The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries. Sophia Andres. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. xxvii + 208 pp.

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<1> The Pre-Raphaelite artists' ready embrace of poetry and painting as sister arts expressed itself in various ways in their work. Not only did they seek in literature viable subject matter for their visual art, but they also frequently rendered their own creations in dual form, in both word and image. Their visual art, moreover, with its close attention to minute detail and symbolic import has, from its beginnings, invited reading as much as viewing. As the title of the book implies, in *Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries*, Sophia Andres carries this invitation to read Pre-Raphaelite visual art into the dominant literary genre of the Victorian period, the novel form. Andres states in the "Introduction" that the novelists whom she discusses did not rely "merely on ekphrasis," the rendering of visual art into words, but rather "reconfigured" Pre-Raphaelite pictures, altering them and expanding their meanings in the transition from visual to verbal art (xvii). By locating and examining these reconfigurations of well-known Pre-Raphaelite paintings in the Victorian novel, Andres explores how this particular intersection of word and image engages "in contemporary debates on cultural and sociopolitical issues," including "aesthetics, class and gender" (xviii).

<2> The relation between the visual arts and literature, as it pertains to the Victorian novel, is not a new subject, but critical studies of the novel's relation to Pre-Raphaelite painting have so far been limited to individual works or brief treatments in broader studies. Andres' study changes that. She examines four of the "most prolific Victorian novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy," alongside the work of four of the "most prominent Pre-Raphaelite artists, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Edward Burne-Jones" (xxvi-xxvii). Andres' approach is by and large to concentrate on one or two novels for each writer: Gaskell's *Ruth* and *North and South*, Collins's *The Woman in White*, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. But she nonetheless displays a commanding knowledge of the broader output of writers and artists alike including the scholarly and critical contexts for their work. At times, she favors specific pairings for her chosen novels (*Jude* with Burne-Jones, for instance), but she generally allows her associations for each novel to rove freely among the work of the selected Pre-Raphaelite artists.

<3> Andres' analyses grow out of each novel's engagement with Pre-Raphaelite painting. The Pre-Raphaelites' unconventional treatment of conventional subjects has always elicited contradictory interpretations that range from seeing their work as challenging the status quo to endorsing it. Andres argues that the novelists recognize this dual potential and choose to fulfill the challenge. In her discussion of *Ruth*, for example, Andres sees in Gaskell's presentation of conventional, idealized feminine beauty a critique of the social conditions that allow the victimization of innocence. Detailing Gaskell's careful evocation of Millais' *Ophelia* in the presentation of Ruth, Andres goes on to suggest that in Ruth's rejection of suicide and her activities of rescuing and nursing, Gaskell transforms the painting's "silent figure of passive femininity" (61) into her novel's active resistance to female stereotypes. In turning to *The Woman in White*, Andres traces the influence on Collins's narrative technique of the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of light and shade which, she suggests, encouraged his practice of blending realism and sensationalism. Such painterly techniques, says Andres, offered Collins a means to reveal what traditional ways of seeing concealed, showing how conventional modes of perception align with conventional notions of gender.

<4> In the study's most ambitious chapter, Andres argues that the influence of Pre-Raphaelite art takes a new turn in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. In addition to providing the narrative



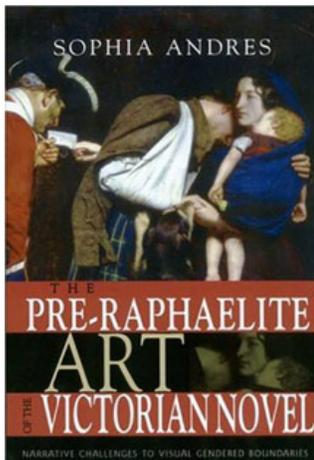
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strategies and sources for earlier works such as *Middlemarch*, Pre-Raphaelite painting influenced *Daniel Deronda* by extending Eliot's interest in the relationship between art, literature and historical understanding. Eliot's reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite classical goddesses in her presentation of Gwendolen turn narrative strategy into a strong social critique of both patriarchal and colonialist ideologies. According to Andres, by investing Gwendolen with qualities of bewitchery that Eliot associates with both Pre-Raphaelite art and contemporary explorers' accounts of Africa, *Daniel Deronda* identifies domestic space with the colonial realm—both sources of threatening, unknowable powers that require control. For Eliot, women and the colonized are both “shaped by the historical necessity that propels the underprivileged and unauthorized to acquire and wield power” (103). Andres sees in Gwendolen's slow recognition of her own colonialist bent toward material and emotional supremacy Eliot's affirmation of her character's spiritual growth and her capacity to refigure herself through an understanding of the other within the self. While not dismissing *Deronda*'s influence, Andres' reading seems to provide Gwendolen with greater autonomy over her own growth. With Hardy, Andres focuses on the second phase of Pre-Raphaelite painting that began in the late 1860s and shifted away from realism toward aestheticism. She sees Hardy drawing on Burne-Jones' androgynous figures in his depiction of Sue as the “new woman,” suggesting that Hardy attempts to place Sue and Jude in a Burne-Jones type of distant, stylized world as an experiment in destabilizing gender boundaries—an experiment which Hardy realizes must inevitably fail.

<5> The Pre-Raphaelites were well known in their own time to both the middle and upper classes. From the margins of the Victorian art world, they moved to its center in part through the controversies surrounding the reception of their art. Despite the rebellious spirit, their artworks spoke to some central tendencies of the age, such as the burgeoning interest in psychological realism. As Andres points out, Pre-Raphaelite artists and Victorian novelists shared similar aesthetic and sociopolitical interests. She nonetheless takes pains to establish carefully, through letters, diaries, dates of exhibitions, and other records, each writer's knowledge of and relationship to the Pre-Raphaelite artists and their work. Her thoroughness attests to the high caliber of her scholarship, but at times it becomes something of a distraction. She has a need to link her literary analysis to the author's direct knowledge of a particular Pre-Raphaelite work, even when she cannot concretely confirm the connection, or when her dates do not exactly line up. The repetition of tentative phrases such as, “it is entirely possible,” by way of adducing such links seems, at times, strained. To grant greater authority to the sites of intersection between a particular Pre-Raphaelite painting and a specific Victorian novel that her suggestive interpretations locate would not undermine her scholarship.

<6> Andres provides lucid and illuminating interpretations of the Pre-Raphaelite presence in the work of all four authors, especially as inflected by the artists' commentaries on contemporary gender constructs. Wilkie Collins knew the Pre-Raphaelites and their art the most intimately: he enjoyed close friendships with Millais and Hunt and his brother, Charley Collins, was a Pre-Raphaelite artist. Yet oddly enough, the grounds of connection that Andres lays down between Collins' narrative technique and the Pre-Raphaelite use of light and shade seem the least convincing. For instance, Andres writes about Anne Catherick's sudden appearance to Hartright early in *The Woman in White*: “Anyone familiar with William Holman Hunt's popular painting *Light of the World*, ‘the most famous of all Victorian religious images,’ would have no difficulty seeing that Collins's woman in white, a ghostly figure silhouetted in the moonlight, her hand raised, pointing toward London, evokes Hunt's famous painting.” The possibility that Collins transforms Hunt's representation of Christ, the “ultimate patriarchal figure,” into “the image of a destitute woman – the other” (79) is highly suggestive, but Anne Catherick's appearance might just as readily remind readers of other potentially destitute Victorian women. Charles Dickens's *Lady Dedlock*, for instance, is also shaded in lights and darks and invested with ghostly qualities. Whether as influence or point of intersection, Dickens' depiction from *Bleak House* seems a more likely candidate for Andres' confident surmise.

<7> The chapter on Gaskell is, perhaps, the most successful. Both the connections and the readings are convincing and insightful. Andres' discussion of Gaskell's reconfiguring of Millais' *Ophelia* and *Mariana* is particularly effective demonstrating how Gaskell not only deliberately aligns her narrative with the Pre-Raphaelite painting but also subverts it. Though she discusses two novels, Andres' focus on Gaskell's methods and intents remains particularly sharp, and her readings confirm Gaskell's commitment to a strong articulation of social justice issues.

<8> Sixteen plates of well-known Pre-Raphaelite paintings are included in the book, a helpful reference for following Andres' interpretations. A welcome inclusion would have been the

Mariana of the female Pre-Raphaelite artist, Marie Spartali Stillman which Andres discusses in the Gaskell chapter and elsewhere. Andres notes how Stillman's rendering offers liberating possibilities for Mariana whereas those of Millais and Rossetti confine her in the domestic space. Andres recognizes in this difference "a subject worth further exploration" (164). So, too, one might add, is her recognition of the alignment between the female Pre-Raphaelite artists and their female counterparts in novel-writing.

<9> Despite some forced connections, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel* is a fine study. Andres' confidence in the capacity of art and literature to illuminate each other pays off. While her emphasis is on interpreting the novels, the assumptions she makes about the paintings effectively extend the cultural context for her analysis about the nineteenth century's gender constructs. She sees that Pre-Raphaelite artists and Victorian novelists were concerned with the sociopolitical limitations placed on women's gender roles, and that both recognized the intense anxiety elicited by artistic transgressions of the boundaries around those roles. She argues, however, that the novelists went further than their counterparts in the visual arts, for "through their pictorial reconfigurations, narratives obtained a realistic foundation and thus more readily engaged their readers in . . . questions over circumscribed conventional gender roles . . . alternatives and possibilities (at the time unavailable in the readers' actual lives), and . . . the desire for change" (161-62). In her conclusion, Andres acknowledges a difference between her two male and two female novelists. She writes: "whereas male writers like Collins and Hardy, through their narrative reconfigurations of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, quite often emphasized limitations for women, Eliot and Gaskell frequently explored possibilities" (164). Nonetheless, she questions Gaskell's decision to silence Ruth through death "after her defiant stance against traditional gender boundaries" (66) as strongly as she does Hardy's subversion of Sue's androgyny, with its exchange of feminist potential for the conventional feminine behavior of her time. Andres also recognizes triumphs, however slight, in both Collins's and Eliot's treatment of gender concerns: she endorses previous readings that the marriage between the poor but independent Hartright and Laura, the heiress, at the end of *The Woman in White* augurs the beginnings of a new social order that welcomes greater gender equality than any available to earlier generations. With respect to *Daniel Deronda*, Andres concludes: "Though somewhat subdued and dispirited, Gwendolen is still a powerful figure by the end of the novel; the irresolution with which the novel ends, regarding Gwendolen's life, leaves room for speculation" (164). So, for that matter, does Andres' wide-ranging study, which provides astute critical readings of specific novels and paintings as well as broader insights into the Victorian age.