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Reader, Beware: Images of Victorian Women and Books

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Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 3.1

<1>Gendered connotations to the simple act of a woman perusing (and sometimes just possessing) a book loom in countless Victorian images, with female readers providing modern eyes with a kind of Pandora's box of possible meanings. To some degree, this imagery reflected the struggles and challenges Victorian middle- and upper-class women faced in coping with patriarchal assumptions about their intelligence, learning, knowledge, and independence. The threat posed by women with books and the inherent link with their acquisition of knowledge was expressed, covertly and otherwise, and two well-known examples--Arthur Hughes' 1860 *Aurora Leigh's Dismissal of Rodney* (Tate Gallery) and Edward Burne-Jones' 1873-4 *The Beguiling of Merlin* (Lady Lever Art Gallery)--serve as an introduction to the value of exploring this strand of imagery. The first, based on a poem by Tennyson, depicts the female protagonist Aurora holding in one hand the book she has written. Tennyson's poem clarifies how thoroughly this book and its author have been mocked and criticized by Aurora's suitor, Romney, the figure in the shadows who has dismissed her text, education, and aspirations and, in his disapproval of her actions, literally turns away from her. The book in this instance is symbolic of male denigration of female creativity as well as of Aurora's defiance of Romney's (and thus patriarchal) notions of womanhood.

<2>A much more highly charged, even sinister and malevolent exchange--yet also very much centered upon feminine possession of a book and the "tree of knowledge" it represents--takes place in various Victorian visualizations of the saga of Merlin the magician and Nimue, his female assistant. In Burne-Jones' painting, another struggle between masculine and feminine knowledge and power transpires. Visually, Nimue has completely triumphed over Merlin, who is portrayed as limp, depleted, and collapsed as he regards with fear and suspicion how erect, controlling, and powerful Nimue has become. With her serpentine locks and columnar stance, she literally looks down upon her former mentor as she holds aloft his book of spells and magic. Such triumphant moments of female mastery of the book and the male, however, were infrequent in the annals of Victorian art.

<3>From a visual point of view, locating and analyzing every image of women reading in paintings, print media, magazines, and other publications would be a staggering task, as would enumerating the myriad categories, classes, and situations of readers. Nonetheless, a survey of some of the main types of constructions in "high" culture and fine arts (works by well-known as well as obscure artists, mostly easel paintings, many publicly exhibited at the Royal Academy or elsewhere) serves both to underscore the primary hidden texts, so to speak, and the gendered discourse of women reading that existed in mainstream, middle-class and upper-class art and tastes. It should be pointed out that these selections are only part of a vast, often unstable and problematic, network of images that were repeated almost *ad nauseum* throughout the entire

Victorian period.

<4>Victorian middle- and upper-class women may have had little in common with either Aurora or Nimue, yet they were nevertheless often devoted, even voracious readers, whether to "improve" their minds or for other purposes. But they were typically besieged with counsel on appropriate content, and there were scores of advice books throughout the Victorian era pontificating to female readers about proper conduct, including reading material. Early in this period many sententious passages addressed this subject, e.g., in an 1834 publication entitled *The New Female Instructor or Young Woman's Guide to Domestic Happiness*. Whatever their actual impact on readers, as markers of culture, such guidebooks with their prescriptive rules preserved many of the quintessential fictions of ideal femininity and behavior. As to the appropriate employment of time, the unnamed author of *The New Female Instructor* emphasized in urgent

tones of moral imperative the importance of reading, clearly defining limits as to what constituted suitable and improving material and goals:

To every woman, whether single or married, the habit of regularly allotting to improving books a portion of each day...cannot be too strongly recommended. I use the term *improving* in a large sense, as comprehending all writings which may contribute to her virtue, her usefulness, her instruction and her innocent satisfaction; to her happiness in this world and the next.(1)

However, indiscriminate reading was inadvisable and, predictably enough, the key book recommended for daily reading was the Bible, which made a woman allegedly a better, stronger, "improved" Christian, mother, and wife. In veiled sexual terms, the author remonstrated about how crucial it was for a female reader to resist the temptation of improper or undesirable books so that

...she will not be seduced from an habitual study of the Holy Scriptures....With the time allotted to the regular perusal of the Word of God, and of performances which inculcate the principles and reinforce and illustrate the rules of Christian duty, no other kind of reading ought to be permitted to interfere. At other parts of the day let history, let biography, let poetry, or some of the various branches of elegant and profitable knowledge, pay their tribute of instruction and amusement. But let her studies be confined within the strictest limits of purity.

In terms of potentially "dangerous" books, there was additional protracted and didactic counsel about purity of content:

Let whatever she peruses in her most private hours be such as she need not be ashamed of reading aloud to those whose good opinion she is most anxious to deserve. Let her remember that there is an all-seeing eye, which is ever fixed upon her, even in her closest retirement. Let her not indulge herself in the frequent perusal of writings, however interesting in their nature, however eminent in a literary point of view, which are likely to inflame pride, and to inspire false notions of generosity, of feeling, of spirit, or of any other quality deemed to contribute to excellence of character.(2)

<5>Such literary cautions persisted throughout Queen Victoria's reign, and there were moreover hundreds, probably thousands, of images simultaneously produced that represented women with books or shown in the act of reading. On one level, these perhaps constituted a cultural "all-seeing eye...ever fixed upon her (the Victorian woman)" as imagined by *The New Female Instructor*. Just

what this field of vision "saw" and endorsed as a form of social surveillance is the focus of this essay.

<6>The chief category, for which there are truly innumerable examples, consists of solitary affluent women reading, as in Marie Spartali Stillman's watercolors entitled *Beatrice* (Delaware Art Museum) of 1895-6 or *Love Sonnets* (Delaware Art Museum) dated 1894. In *Beatrice*, Dante's beloved wears historicizing costume and sits half-length at a balcony or window. Her expression is dreamy, and she holds one finger suspended over the text, as if something on the page of the book (positioned at a level just below her breasts) has triggered her reverie and emotions. Floral symbolism adds to potential romantic meanings, with pansies and a trail of petals near the open book, a blossoming sprig in Beatrice's headgear, and hanging flowers above her head. *Love Sonnets*, on the other hand, combines portraiture with a subject picture; it was painted from an Italian model who loved poetry, as did the artist herself.(3) Shown half-length, this young woman seems a contemporary counterpart to Beatrice, in one hand clutching a few flowers near her bosom and in the other a small book up close near her face. Unlike Beatrice, she is suspended in the act of reading rather than daydreaming, although she seems almost intimately transfixed by the text. Her failure to look out may imply she would prefer not to be interrupted, not to have the spell broken by an intruder or viewer.

<7>Countless such seemingly benign, "pretty" representations of women readers proliferated, and it was within the realm of genre painting (many with varying degrees of narrative detail) that the motif especially resonates. It is no accident, for example, that, by comparison, relatively few British oil paintings of the period portray women reading mainstream newspapers (vs. specialized weekly papers for female readers. although popular periodicals and girls' or women's magazines

did illustrate this with varying degrees of frequency). There are exceptions, however, notably when women learn of bad news (usually afflicting their husbands) as a direct result of reading a newspaper. This is the case in Philip Calderon's 1855 "*Lord, Thy Will be Done!*" (Yale Center for British Art), in which a woman of reduced circumstances in a humble home has just read in *The Times* that her husband, a soldier in the Crimea, is among the casualties. Although not a lady in terms of social rank, she displays a noble stoic endurance--and reliance on her nearby copy of the Bible--that signal she too aspires to be an ideal paragon as wife, mother, and, now, widow. A similar subject of a woman discovering her husband's death in the pages of a newspaper is found in Charles Cope's 1875 *News from Sebastapol* (private collection). Even a cleric's family could be susceptible to such disaster or reverses; in the third scene of William Powell Frith's 1880 series *The Race for Wealth--Victims* (Baroda Museum, India), a clergyman's wife registers numbly to news she gains from a newspaper about the investment scam that has ruined their financial security. More often, however, men are shown in Victorian paintings reading newspapers and playing the role of omnipotent patriarch, in charge of gathering and monitoring knowledge of the outside world. Keeping informed about daily news was part of masculine interaction with the business and political worlds, while ladies were inordinately "protected", and--except in unusual circumstances--in the earlier years of the Victorian era especially were not generally encouraged to read beyond the society pages since they might be upset by possibly sordid, scandalous, political, violent, or morbid news. Basically, men read newspapers for facts, necessary data to cope with external reality, while women--outside of religious instruction, artistic and social interests, or self-improvement--are largely shown reading for leisure. However, advice manuals indicated that ladies might read suitable passages aloud from the newspaper or magazines to the family around the hearth, and in reality, many women undoubtedly consumed newspapers (edited or not) in private (a defiant act in some conservative families).(4)

<8>Similarly, genre paintings tended to ensconce women with books in parlors (sometimes outdoors, or in intermediate spaces like conservatories) rather than in libraries, the male sanctuaries or bastions of power preserved in literature as well as art (e.g., representations of the family patriarch's library, a scholar's library, or a lawyer's library). Outside of portraiture (from which the basic conceit of representing learned or powerful men with books derives from long-standing pictorial traditions), men in Victorian genre art were less likely to be shown reading books, particularly novels, partly conveying the impression that they were unaccustomed to pursuing leisure activities or texts.

<9>It is above all the prominence of books as props that women hold, own, or peruse that can be singled out as a dominant motif, encompassing several other obvious classifications. These include salient strands of imagery such as devotional images of women with Bibles or sacred texts; girl readers; girls or women acting out instructional or educational roles; females reading to others; books in the context of courtship or romance; self-improvement themes; consumers of popular literature such as novels, romances, or poetry; and the reader as dreamer, aesthete, dangerous or aberrant being, and New Woman. I will discuss characteristic pictorial examples from all of these categories, along with an analysis of the implications of gender-inflected reading roles and the significance of the physicality of the book generating connotations that range from the erotic to the dangerous.

<10>Women looking at books--why was this such a favorite subject of the period? In Victorian art, one of the explanations lies in how books served as markers and signifiers of femininity and feminine roles, not just convenient props, and thus offer nuanced cues to cultural formations of feminine identity.(5) First of all, although there are certainly numerous paintings representing working-class and peasant female readers, these tend to be somber images mostly of reading the Bible (e.g., in Richard Redgrave's 1843 *Going into Service* [J.B. Speed Museum] or Frank Holl's 1880's *Eventide* [private collection]). Occasionally there was something more frivolous conveyed, as maidservants neglecting their duties in William Hay's 1868 *A Funny Story* (private collection) and in Mrs. Alexander Farmer's 1882 *Reading Punch* (private collection) both smile in response to their reading materials.(6) It is above all the middle-and upper-class female who reigns in art as a main consumer of books and almost a quasi-advertisement for reading itself.

<11>The simple act of reading was quintessentially an overt sign of literacy, a literal and symbolic skill that differentiated the privileged from the lower classes (until the Education Act of 1870 mandated the availability of elementary schooling opportunities for all, and 1880 laws created compulsory education for children ages 7 to 10). For women, reading was moreover a sign of leisure and often dilettantism; as Kate Flint has astutely pointed out, there was a dual-edged aspect to this skill and activity for "reading was a form of consumption and thus

...age aspects and their activity, for... reading was a form of consumption that contributed to the ideology, if not always the practices, which supported the ideal of the middle-class home. Yet it could also be regarded as dangerously useless, a thief of time which might be spent on housewifely duties." (7) Reading was also a source of pleasure, although too much emotional indulgence in literature was deemed inadvisable. In this respect another author, Sally Mitchell, has speculated that "the concept of books as compensation--a source of desired experiences and feelings missing in daily life--is often used to explain reading pleasure." (8)

<12>For the woman reader, reading was its own reward, an escape from everyday reality to one of daydreams; while for the prototypical male viewer of such an image, looking at an attractive, usually passive, inactive female hold a book, particularly an open book, seemed an invasion and an invitation to fantasizing. In many cases, the female reader is shown as preoccupied in varying degrees, in order to maintain the illusion of the spectator gazing upon yet not truly intruding on and unnerving the reader/sitter. Spectatorship of such a vignette constitutes a personal encounter on the brink, a calculated interruption and intrusion into the woman behind the barrier/book.

<13>Just such a moment is represented in Edmund Blair-Leighton's 1900 *Sweets to the Sweet* (private collection), an engraving after a saccharine painting of a swain stopping at a window to peer in longingly at a woman and bring her a bouquet as a love-token. She has conveniently fallen asleep reading, with an open book in her lap, and her dreamy state, vulnerability, and availability are almost palpable. She sleeps with the book, not the man watching her. Like her wide-awake counterparts in art, this lounging female is caught in a private moment; she is outwardly passive, but inwardly her thoughts remain unknown. The open book signifies her accessibility, as if the man or spectator might enter her dreams or life that way. Here and in other pictorial instances, the book paradoxically serves as a woman's protective shield (as when held up by her face or breasts, and here partly to cover her genital area), a means to avoid or hold off penetration of mood or space by a (usually male) voyeur. In some ways such Victorian paintings of solitary women communicate a sense of visual possession, the presence of an "all-seeing eye" and an assumed right by the viewer (and artist) to enter the female's space.

<14>In most of the images discussed in this essay, women perusing non-religious texts are constructed largely as reading for personal and solitary pleasure. One implication is that reading served as a safety valve for their emotions, fantasies, and fears, especially to fuel or incite them. The consuming potential of daydreams for women readers was to shape their needs and desires as well as respond to them. Daydreaming comprises a vital aspect of recreational reading in particular and has been described by Sally Mitchell as "...a voluntary, semi-conscious or mainly conscious, mental story-telling, which is indulged in for the sake of pleasure. Daydreams are pleasurable because they provide expression, release, or simply indulgence for emotions or needs which are not otherwise satisfied, either because of psychological inhibition or because of the social context." (9) In discussing how Victorian novels both gratified and distanced a reader's needs and made them public, this same author furthermore hypothesized that, "Avid absorption in a book combined with a sense of secrecy or a dislike of revealing its contents to someone else suggests that reading is somehow touching repressed fantasies. The fiction is not providing some new and unwholesome information but rather revealing something the reader already knows but is unable or unwilling to bring to consciousness." (10)

<15>Thus, besides serving as a distancing device and a possible safety valve for repressed thoughts or feelings, the book--often held near the female's body--is a symbol of feminine yearning, and the powerful combination of woman plus book (particularly the underlying eroticism of the open book and the book pressed to some body part) seems to transform the act of a female reading into a state of desirability, accessibility, and heightened sexuality. Whatever drama there may be in the text, the book itself engenders drama in the woman and her absorption in this activity.

<16>This sense of desire coupled with reading is typically domesticated within the home setting of a parlor (sometimes a bedroom), a place of middle or upper-class private enclosure with walls and other boundaries that affirm a woman's homebound stature. The idea of enclosure may be somewhat mitigated by the presence of beautiful objects or furnishings, but the aura of the proverbial "gilded cage" and of "house arrest" nonetheless lingers to post-modernist viewers. One classic statement placing the woman within the culturally monitored space of the parlor is John Calcott Horsley's *A Pleasant Corner* 1866 (Royal Academy), which in title alone says it all: this is a cozy vignette with a solitary, attractive young woman (her hair parted a la Madonna) doing something beside needlework, i.e. reading. She is literally marginalized into a handsome corner of the room, where light streams in from one side from a window and an adjacent wallless

the room, where light streams in from one side from a window and an adjacent unit fireplace creates a countervailing void or emptiness.(11) The young lady rather coyly looks up from the book on her lap; like so many females in this strand of imagery, the placement of the book seems significant, subtly emphasizing erogenous zones and creating a subliminally erotic bond between reader and book.

<17>In another hearthside setting, Robert Martineau's 1863 Royal Academy entry entitled *The Last Chapter* (Birmingham City Art Gallery) injects a more volatile element into the passive atmosphere of a lady's book-reading activity, for this is a nocturnal scene, with the young woman not daintily enthroned in a chair but instead trying to capitalize on the last dying embers of light. She kneels by the fireside, not to pray, but rather to read her book. What is she reading and why is she doing this at night? A precise title is not given, but the size and binding--as well as the woman's solitude and the late hour--suggest that she may be trying to finish the last pages of a novel or romance, perhaps one of the popular "sensation novels" of the 1860's with a melodramatic tale or heroine with whom she may identify on some level.(12) Exquisitely attired, the young lady kneels at an angle to the glowing hearth, which casts a strong reddish cast to her dress, earrings, and face, making her seem almost to blush. In a room that is full of ornate pattern that inherently reinforces a sense of culture and taste, she is positioned directly in front of a chaise longue, behind which a piano with sheet music, art on the walls, and a few shelves of books are visible. She is transfixed by personal or leisure reading rather than devotional or educational texts, and viewers are brought up close to witness this scene, seemingly from a low vantage point as if lying on the floor. Here as in many cases, the physicality of the book and how it is clasped or held again proves noteworthy. As with Spartali Stillman's *Love Sonnets*, here too the book is positioned fairly close to the woman's face, slightly above her breasts, and her intense gaze and physical proximity to the pages convey a kind of intimacy or bonding between object and user. Usually the titles and type of bookbinding or cover of the books being read are not detailed, aside from obvious clues of color and size, so there is no easy correspondence between the kind of book (expensive, beautiful, leather-bound) and its reader, but here a "sensation" novel or novelette seems a reasonable assumption given the more unusual perspective accorded the act of what seems like clandestine reading.

<18>As to the dangers of reading sensational material, warnings were often issued by the usual sources. *The New Female Instructor*, e.g., worried about novels and romances that might be "...contaminated by incidents and passages unfit to be presented to the reader...even of the novels which possess high and established reputations, by far the greatest number is totally improper, in consequence of such admixture, to be pursued by the eye of delicacy."(13) Reading too many novels produced dire, corrupting effects: "The appetite becomes too keen to be denied; and in proportion as it is more urgent, grows less nice and select in its fare....devoured with indiscriminate and insatiable avidity. Hence the mind is secretly corrupted. Let it be observed too, that in exact correspondence with the increase of a passion for reading novels, an aversion to reading of a more improving nature will gather strength." Equally injurious was how novel reading might foster a "...susceptibility of impression, and a premature warmth of tender emotions, which...have been known to betray young women into a sudden attachment to persons unworthy of their affections, and thus to hurry them into marriages terminating in unhappiness." (14)

<19>As late as 1898, Mrs. C.E. Humphry concurred with her earlier counterpart, nonetheless aware that the advantages of "...fiction, to those who do not misuse it, is the most delightful recreation, an escape from the material to the airy realms of fantasy." However, the same caveats about the perils of corrupting material remain: "Novel-reading is a considerable factor in flattening and deadening the mind....The mind soon gets clogged with overmuch fiction for food. It should never be allowed to supersede general reading. In this case, it is idleness, nothing more, and tends to the encouragement of that mental indolence which so enslaves the soul."(15)

<20>In the realm of art, the solitary female was frequently depicted in an inert, sedentary position and languishing in a dreamy mood or state of vague reverie. Consciously or not, the book establishes a kind of barrier between the viewer and the reader and reinforces privacy from invasiveness. Overall, a lady holding a book renders herself more unapproachable by creating a physical impediment. Yet this is deceptive, for the inclusion of a book is a detail which also indicates that the woman is not alone; she is, as *The New Female Instructor* opined, being watched in a kind of cultural surveillance symbolized by the painting itself and by the (mostly) male artists who created these canvases.

<21>The imagery of girls reading also preserves some of these same visual motifs and preoccupations. In Adelaide Claxton's ca. 1870s *Wonderland* (Christopher Wood Gallery), e.g., one of the capable Claxton sisters/artists invents another variation on the domestic reading corner glimpsed in Horsley's more sentimentalized viewpoint. While Horsley's image projects a diurnal placidity, *Wonderland* captures an atmosphere of mystery, fantasy, and escapism. Like Martineau's painting, this interior too is a nocturnal scene, as confirmed by the starry night outside and the lone candle quavering in the darkness. The girl, dressed in her nightclothes, contorts herself into a somewhat fetal pose which, while perhaps comfortable to her, is nonetheless not very ladylike or dignified. She too holds her book intently, as if grasping at the edges. The book has energized and stimulated her, perhaps temporarily liberating her from her circumstances, age, and setting. With the rest of the household presumably asleep, this child has stolen away from a warm bed and dared to invade the masculine domain of the library at a very late hour. Presumably she has scoured the library shelves and placed to one side several oversized books (probably with large illustrations) in a high stack--nearly as tall as her seated body. A few titles are legible; one is inscribed "ARABIAN NIGHTS" and the other seems to be "HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN". The child is so engaged by her text that she does not notice the large fallen book below her chair, a hissing and rather ominous black cat a few feet away, or even the phantomic spirit emerging from the smoky candle like a magic genie. Her mind seems very suggestible and her eyes wide open to the power of literature and the imagination--like Alice, she too enters a literary *Wonderland*. This is truly an image that captures the wondrous escapist potential of reading, and perhaps even its forbidden nature, for in this case the child has "broken the rules" more egregiously than Martineau's lady. The girl has slipped away to satiate her appetite for reading in an unsupervised, nighttime setting, possibly reading too late and long and thus risking (at least to Victorian parents) her health and eyesight. Here above all there is a sense of reading as a means to gain entry to other worlds, fantastic and otherwise. The overtness of such an escapist intention is far more overt with this girl protagonist than with an older female. The bond between female reader and book is almost magical: once the book is opened, the reader can become enchanted by the contents and temporarily depart from the real world, much as the child here is oblivious to her surroundings or the passage of time. In a related way, Mary Gow's 1880 *Fairy Tales* (private collection) depicts a young girl seated amid aesthetic surroundings and engrossed in the world of imagination, reading an open book in her lap and perusing (as an engraving of this painting suggests) the story of Cinderella and her "rescue" by Prince Charming. On the floor is one of Walter Crane's colorfully illustrated books, showing a page from "The Frog Prince," a tale of a royal suitor turned into a beast which underscores, like Cinderella, the significance of the theme of transformation by literary legerdemain. In both instances, the rapt girls personify a state of yearning, a desire for fantasy, which ironically prepares them well for later stages of femininity as both readers/consumers and dreamers about romance.

<22>By contrast, scores of artists and images--whether in easel paintings or in illustrations for newspapers, periodicals or magazines geared to female consumers--visualized the more traditional subject of reading of the Bible, often with a woman as the avid reader. Some focused on "cottage piety" with lower-class protagonists, but more frequently females of higher classes were shown in this combination of secular and sacred appeal. James Sant's 1840s *Novice* (Harris Art Gallery, Preston) or Charles W. Cope's ca. 1847 *Maiden Meditation* (Victoria and Albert Museum) are relevant examples, the latter with yet another virginal adolescent intently concentrating on the Bible without any awareness of pending invasion by the viewer, artist, or voyeur into where she is praying and contemplating. It is not clear if there is a specific edition of the Bible being used, or if it is even a King James version, but *The Art Journal* critic in 1847 offered a plausible interpretation: "The work is painted from a passage from *Isaiah*: 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, for he hath clothed me with a robe of righteousness.' The principal figure--a maiden kneeling in the attitude of devotion---is more allusive to prayer than to meditation; 'the robe of righteousness' is about to be cast over her by a retiring figure behind her impersonating the Redeemer."⁽¹⁶⁾ Although the presence of the Redeemer is difficult to see here, the linking of proper reading activities with the "robe of righteousness" or "garments of salvation" is clearly forged. Here as in many cases, the position of the book is often telling; this maiden (and the one in Sant's painting) holds it near her breast, directing her eyes downward at the text and simultaneously creating a modest gaze that averts contact with the viewer.

<23>Similarly, there were more overtly Victorianized versions of this subject, like G.F.Watts' 1867 *Prayer* (Manchester City Gallery) posing May Prinsep as a pious reader, or, a more worldly female in Philip Hermogenes Calderon's 1858 *Devotion* (Guarnisco Art Gallery). Here a nun-like veil and garb yield to colorful attire, a partly covered head, and a distinctly uncovered décolletage. This woman in non-Victorian (possibly Spanish) attire stands at an altar inscribed in

one panel with a scene seemingly from the Virgin Mary's life. The open sacred text is positioned on a lectern not far from the lady's bosom, which is visually prominent not only because of its plunging neckline, but also because of the red bow at its lowest point. Despite the presence of a devotional text, this sort of image could also double as a courtship image or even a pinup in which a pensive woman--either in expectation or disappointment--awaits the arrival of her lover.

<24>Cultural reinforcement of ideal scriptural reading material and reader resounds too in the title and mood of John Everett Millais' 1877 *The Good Resolve* (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), in which a young woman stands poised in front of an open Bible. The book is on a low table, only inches from the folds of her dress and genital area. Her finger points to a passage from the Psalms, a staged moment that has been described as an allusion to "an old Scottish custom of opening the Bible haphazard and resolving to act upon the lines picked out at random."⁽¹⁷⁾ There is nothing haphazard about the subject, however, which places a female in contemporary attire with her hands and face highlighted as she strikes an inspirational pose and attitude. This vignette also qualifies as pictorial propaganda, reminding young women to remain constant to the types of Christian goals outlined in *The New Female Instructor* and many kindred contemporary and later books.

<25>In terms of mixed groups involving reading, once again, often the central figure is a female--mother, governess, or teacher--instructing children or reading to them. Personifications of ideal motherhood appear in William Nicol's 1860 *Quiet* (York City Art Gallery) with a mother tenderly reading to her child and in Charles Cope's 1862 *Prayer Time* (Harris Art Gallery, Preston), with its matriarch gently teaching her children their catechism with a Bible prominently displayed nearby. In other instances, books also serve as background but pivotal objects that nonetheless add dimensional meanings to the underlying narrative; in Richard Redgrave's 1844 *The Governess* (Victoria and Albert Museum), e.g., schoolbooks are among the many objects that orchestrate the poignant aloneness and vulnerability of the poor teacher.

<26>Another "neutral" grouping of the sexes might involve different generations, as grandparents ministering to children or vice versa. This "ministering angel" role is exemplified as a dutiful daughter type reads to an old man in John Everett Millais' 1874 *The North-West Passage: It Might be Done and English Ought to Do It* (Tate Gallery). Whatever other meanings it may generate in terms of colonial or imperialist attitudes concerning Arctic exploration and the notion of conquest, this work also reinforces feminine domestic responsibilities. Surrounded by maritime souvenirs or references (a portrait of Lord Nelson on the wall, a painting of a sea in the Arctic, and an open window with boats sailing by), an aged sailor listens as a young woman sits below him and reads from a book describing recent polar expeditions. There are other objects--books at lower left, a map, and a Union Jack flag--but it is the centrality of the act of reading and the link between generations and sexes that commands visual attention. The young woman's reading is partly an act of kindness or charity. With one hand she clasps the elderly man's hand, forming human contact with him, and with the other she turns the pages of a book, an act which establishes cerebral as well as emotional contact and stirs memories within him and perhaps compassion within her.

<27>In the realm of courtship, the woman who reads was another recurrent trope in Victorian art, but moreso in the context of reading or sending letters (especially love-letters) than books. However, she does appear with a book in many scenes of expectation, awaiting a beau to materialize. One pertinent example is George G. Kilburne's ca. 1880's *Trysting Place* (Walker Art Gallery), which uses the common dramatic/pictorial device of placing the female on a bench under a tree as she waits for her admirer. On her lap is an open book, but it remains unread as the woman looks up and out at the spectator, seemingly a surrogate admirer. Perhaps the book serves a surrogate role in another way, as an admonition for restraint and as a reminder about how, based in part on the novels or romances they read, women might fantasize about men as suitors, proverbial knights in shining armor, rescuers, or even villains. Furthermore, in these forest scenes women seem especially vulnerable, because there are no domestic constraints or chaperones present to interfere with or monitor lovemaking encounters or untoward advances.

<28>While a general setting in nature prevails in countless examples, the middle-class walled garden was another favorite site for courtship, as in Edmund Blair-Leighton's ca. 1890's *Hopes and Fears* (private collection). A young woman walks ahead in a garden lined by flowers on each side; although she holds her open book aloft in front of her chest, she too is not reading it. Instead she hesitates, fully aware of the young man who follows in pursuit of her a few yards behind. In these and myriad other works, there is an implication that the book plays a supportive role in the

narrative. On the one hand, it is an actual thing that is often held close to the woman's heart, breast or lap--or perhaps carried on her person or with other accessories, hidden under a pillow, or shared with other women like a secret. On the other hand, as a specific publication type, it is ambiguous--it may be a novel, romance, or volume of poetry whose very content deals with fictional amorousness. In these paintings and others, the book is therefore both a literal object that not only preoccupies the woman while waiting for her suitor's next move, but also serves as a kind of intimate companion or confidante as well as a source of pleasure or mental stimulation. As such--whether mild distraction or inanimate confidante--it is something which the male admirer must then somehow remove from his beloved in order to supplant it. In other words, the open book must be taken away from her or yielded by her literally and metaphorically, and thus gains even more sexual connotations for its narrative displacement and involvement in the game of love. As has been pointed out by various literary scholars, women read romances to find out more about love, how it felt to love and to suffer the pains of loving.(18) Thus, the combination of woman, longing, and a book proves a heady one, with the book arguably an emblem for wished-for or vicarious sexual behavior, marking the transition from a woman merely reading of romance and a literary lover to engaging with being in love with and responsive to a real man.

<29>On another level, because there is a suggested identification between the female reader and her text, the open book may serve not only as a fantasy but also as a fused sense of self and text that makes the book function somewhat like a mirror. Looking into that "mirror," the reader sees herself through the lens of a fantasy, using the book to fulfil that dream. Thus, onto the book of feminine yearnings can be displaced a mirroring of private feelings that is unconsciously capable of fetishizing the book and its symbolic roles.(19)

<30>The power of an open book to instigate dangerous romance and illicit passion is perhaps best embodied in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1855 watercolor of *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (Tate Gallery). According to an inscription on the original frame, these Dantean lovers, having read of Lancelot and Guinevere's passion, themselves succumb to "love-thrall'd" passion and risk adultery. They were accordingly so affected by the sexualized text that they abandoned caution and propriety and "all trembling kiss'd". Interestingly, the book that usually remains firmly on the lap of the female reader in other contexts here is shown as sharing a space on the upper thighs and knees of both parties. The illuminated book itself has unified the two and visually binds them together, even as it is about to fall from their laps, thereby prefiguring their own downfall. The lovers on the illuminated page are depicted standing, and their mingled pose will be complemented by that on the far right panel of the triptych with Paolo and Francesca locked in an embrace as they float through the second circle Hell in a sperm or teardrop-shaped rain. (The central panel portrays Dante and Virgil looking pityingly on the clinging duo.) However, in the left panel Paolo and Francesca are seated alone together, compressed in a small space or cozy niche analogous to that of many parlor-bound female readers. The lovers mutually participate in an embrace, their torsos partly touching and their hands expressing an extraordinary degree both of push and pull toward one another. Their clothing "comingles" too, and in another version by Rossetti of the composition (Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford), Paolo's foot and leg move even more closely toward and encroach upon Francesca's space; directly beneath them, a full-blown rose--an obvious allusion to full-blown sexuality--lies at their feet. As Flint has noted, one of the submerged meanings of this text concerns how the act of reading has resulted in an operatic tragedy of doomed love.(20) What the pair reads stimulates them to perilous actions, a dangerous consequence for Victorian parents to contemplate, especially for supposedly suggestible female readers and their fantasies. In Dante's *Inferno*, Canto V, Francesca's sin is blatant, for she is married to Sigismondo Malatesta (who ultimately murders the pair), not to her brother-in-law Paolo, and thus their kiss and love affair are adulterous and sinning. Even at the time, John Ruskin, who recommended that his friend Ellen Heaton become a patron of Rossetti, wondered in his letters to her about the propriety of the subject and suggested that this and another drawing be kept "locked up" for private consumption only, as it might be "blamed for its bold--but perfectly true reading of Dante--especially as selected by the painter on a young lady's commission."(21)

<31>While the dropped book in Rossetti's work arguably signals seductive reading material and perhaps its depraved influence, it is only slightly sexualized in comparison with some decidedly erotic 18th-century French depictions of female readers, e.g., Pierre-Antoine Baudouin's ca. 1760 *The Reader* (Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris). In this work, a woman--possibly overexcited by her reading and the absence of her lover--has dropped her book, which as modern author Karen Joy Fowler has described, joins on the floor "...other objects of female pleasure, the lapdog and the lute."(22) Fowler cites Rousseau's reference to "one-handed" reading and how in this painting "the woman's right hand, which has slipped under her skirt as she lies enraptured in her chair

...the woman's right hand, which has slipped under her skirt as she has unfastened in her chair, her bodice undone...." indicates she is fondling herself or masturbating. Aside from perhaps Aubrey Beardsley's graphic "decadent" illustrations for Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in 1896, there are few or no parallels to such a lascivious link with reading in Victorian representations of women.

<32>If the open book could function as an invitation to courtship or romance (or perhaps even transgression), its opposite, a closed tome, could also convey equally potent meanings. The culmination of courtship was typically marriage, but the darker side of male/female relationships involved prostitutes and mistresses, who also surfaced in a significant strand of Victorian imagery. Life in a "velvet cage" is the well-known theme of William Holman Hunt's famous 1854 Royal Academy entry *The Awakening Conscience* (Tate Gallery), in which viewers are given a voyeuristic glimpse into a claustrophobic bourgeois lovenest as a kept woman rises to face a galvanizing crisis of conscience triggered by a song the lovers have been singing. Detail by accumulated detail, this painting moves beyond the mere literalism of objects to metamorphize into a stridently moral and pictorial exemplum. John Ruskin understood many of the complicated multivalences of this painting and analyzed them in his oft-quoted letter to *The Times* of May 1854. In his trenchant explication, Ruskin commented on the "fatal newness" of the rosewood furniture, which in its lack of patina lacked "the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home." He continued to notice "those embossed books, vain and useless--they also new--marked with no happy wearing of beloved leaves...."(23) Such books (more expensive than plain cover editions) that Ruskin mentions remain mostly unidentified, as is usually the case with Victorian subject pictures; however, the one here has been identified by Ruari McLean as a papier-mache bound copy of Noel Humphreys' *The Origins and Progress of the Art of Writing*, first published in 1853.(24) This was a self-improvement book to teach the art of writing, and its inclusion alludes both to art and real life: in the painting, to the male lover's efforts to educate his paramour and to the artist's own efforts to reform and transform the model, Annie Miller (once his fiancée), into a lady. In addition to details such as rapacious birds, plundered corn, a cat preying upon a bird, there are "texts" found in the sheet music of "Oft in the Stilly Night" and Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears." Moreover, Hunt's inclusion of "fatally new" tomes underscores the lack of any spiritual focus in the woman's life. There is no Bible in this "maison damnee", and the unused books form an ironic contrast to the woman who has been "used." Her life is a book written partly by others, symbolically by patriarchal definitions (and exploitations) of womanhood and specifically by the man who keeps her and finds sexual gratification in their clandestine relationship, which society tacitly by pretending not to see it. Instead of the open books with their erotic connotations that figure in so many representations of "pure womanhood" and innocent courtship, the books here are firmly closed, as if this fallen woman's fate is sealed and doomed. The books do not belong on her lap or to be held intimately by her; they are not well-worn "old friends" but rather "new" and useless, relegated to the margins of the composition and her life.

<33>An even more sinister link between reading and the female reader surfaced in the 1880s and 1890s. In an 1897 painting suggestively entitled *Forbidden Books* (private collection, England) by Alexander Rossi, the artist depicts a group of young women who have "trespassed" into a library and are blatantly enjoying its contents. Whether or not the title is original, the image conveys the illicit pleasure and transgressive nature of reading. One pair conspires to read aloud to a third woman on the floor, while another equally absorbed reader sits on the back of a sofa, another less than ladylike pose. In the background two seated women have also abandoned formal poses and longingly gaze at an easel containing a canvas depicting a full-length female nude. Order and decorum are literally overturned and in disarray elsewhere, too; books lie scattered on the floor and may contain sexual content, possibly volumes that Flint has aptly described as "...habitually kept well out of the reach of young women readers, but that, given half a chance, these same young women will fall enthusiastically upon...and become engrossed in their contents....The cultural inference that what they are reading about is sex in its turns sexualizes them, confirming that they do not just possess good looks, but adult knowledge.." The same modern critic wonders why there is such a "sense of solidarity... between the girls themselves,...which diminishes any sense of their vulnerability or accessibility."(25) They are indeed so immersed in their reading, looking at, and freely and unselfconsciously contemplating forbidden subjects, that they fail to notice a woman in black arriving at a curtained threshold, presumably both to eavesdrop and to put an end to their surreptitious activities (rather than to join them). And what have the women done besides enter a library and dared to plumb its contents? As Flint suggests, the group possibly read books with censored or explicit content, sexual or otherwise, and studied the female nude in art, in each case wanting to know more than normative reading materials and experiences have afforded them. Would this scene be imaginable by Victorian artists or have the same effects if replaced with male protagonists infringing upon

"taboo" territory? Or is the viewer supposed to laugh at the female group's secrecy and errant trespass and ponder how their impressionable minds may have been "corrupted," since girls and "young readers" were considered especially susceptible to provocative materials or influence? Significantly, this painting was produced in 1897, well after the emergence of the New Woman in real life and literature; indeed, the fine arts tended to ignore her presence, in contrast to her ascendancy in *Punch* and other periodicals and print media.⁽²⁶⁾ Perhaps there is "solidarity" precisely because these are women of the 1890s, less traditional females who might seek out subversive material and experiences and share their knowledge with other like-minded (if not strong-minded) women. Perhaps they have even become aroused--intellectually or otherwise--by such censored material. Yet at a time when some women were already attending college, earning degrees, and gaining more legal rights and control over their destiny--marital, professional, and otherwise--*Forbidden Books* ultimately seems curiously retardataire and old-fashioned, revealing both an awareness of (and amusement at) how "modern women" have changed during the late Victorian era. Yet perhaps the message also expresses latent wishful thinking about or preference for the conventional English "girl of the period" simplistically canonized by the likes of the notoriously conservative Eliza Lynn Linton.

<34>However, such hints of independence of spirit contrastingly lose any touch of humor or "innocence" in the imagery of the New Woman in the 1890s produced by Aubrey Beardsley. The New Woman rarely appeared in genre paintings, but she was a common subject in periodicals like *Punch* and also appeared in Beardsley's designs for *The Yellow Book* of ca. 1894. In one design, an angular woman in black goes alone at night to a bookshop run by a grotesque old pierrot, possibly an allusion to Elkin Mathews, a partner of the Bodley Head press which published *The Yellow Book*. This woman in her shadowy dress looks more like an aggressive streetwalker who maintains "advanced" ideas about her freedom of movement and choice of reading matter; as has been noted by scholar Brian Reade, "the suggestion contained in the design is that the enterprising young woman who is free to decide what she reads will be interested in just this sort of periodical."⁽²⁷⁾ It is thus quite appropriate that *The Yellow Book*, with its flimsy cover, was a cheap edition, its very cheapness arguably transferred to readers, especially women like this one. In a related design, a trio of pierrots hold up a table of tumbling books, among them traditional titles emblazoned "Shakespeare" and "Dickens" along with more controversial ones such as "The Story of Venus and Tannhauser", *Discords* (by the feminist George Egerton), and *The Yellow Book* itself. Instead of a transgressive nocturnal streetwalker, the woman here is shown here in costume in a library, whose mostly blank shelves perhaps imply that she--not a man--is deciding how to fill them. While reading "beautiful" books (even if they had covert meanings) might be acceptable, procuring or perusing *The Yellow Book* could be branded as a radical, audacious, even taboo act, particularly for a woman. In such images reading functions on one level as a means to gain carnal knowledge. Yet unlike most depictions of the New Woman, Beardsley's do not tend to mock her, but instead convey her covert power to threaten traditional notions of manhood, ladylike respectability, and cultural norms for gender relations. She looks sinister and often androgynous because her choice of reading material has made her less "womanly".

<35>A final image, culled from the realm of popular periodicals rather than either genre paintings or, in Beardsley's case, from avant-garde literature, is a cover illustration for *The Graphic* from 1885 by Arthur Hopkins. Subliminally, it signals late Victorian anxieties about intellectual women. The female graduate, "A Lady B.A. of London University," as the caption indicates, stands in a library with its usual male connotations and symbolizes ultimate female mastery of hitherto male academic territories and awards. Aside from her dress, the woman is not particularly "feminine" in appearance, her plainness reinforced by pince-nez glasses, a pulled-back hairstyle, and rather androgynous features. There are a few books to one side on a table, but perhaps the most gripping object in the entire composition is the skull on the table. While the figure's right hand moves to her neck--touching herself or her gown for unknown reasons--her left one fingers a skull only inches away from her pelvis. Is this an accidental detail or juxtaposition or one meant to convey Victorian fears about the alleged dangers to femininity of too much reading and knowledge? Whatever the conclusion about its meaning by modern viewers, this 1880s image--predating widespread cultural apprehensions of the 1890s--wordlessly communicates how threatening the intellectual woman reader and "deviant" scholar truly were to contemporary audiences.

<36>As these representative images convey, not all the poses, ways to hold a book, or expressions--rapt, wistful, opaque, distracted, self-absorbed, etc.--fit the same pattern or paradigm: in truth, there is no single or unified woman reader or monolithic image in Victorian art. However, there are numerous recurrent motifs and distinctive and collective formations, with

middle-class women cooperating in culturally endorsed fictive constructions of female passivity, eroticism, and unattainability. These pictorial readers seem complaisant in the spectator's fantasy, thanks to the artist's manipulations of the narrative situations. The "confrontation" between viewer and reader is usually mild, but the presence, possession, touching, self-absorption, and watching of this act of reading is charged with eroticism. Books function as consummate symbols of female yearning (i.e., hunger for knowledge or vicarious experience) as well as for leisure (and of woman as a symbol of leisure). If these "props" are removed from these compositions, the subtraction has a dramatic effect upon meaning. Sometimes the female reader tries to hide behind her book as a mask or screen, yet at other times it seems to mirror her feelings. This synthetic bond between woman and book is very powerful, making the interaction between the two and with the spectator almost into a source of extended pleasure. Books are thus not merely props that may interrupt the surfaces of a woman's body: they represent the reader's subjective relationship to that object. Often books draw attention to certain bodily areas and thus effectively generate a displacement of desire. Yet whether open or closed, the agency of the book sustains a crucial dialectic in the submerged narratives of desire and possession that so appealed to Victorian enthusiasts both of the printed word and the painted image.

<37>Books also serve as surrogate companions, in lieu of either men or women, yet offer answers, insight, and comfort as well as escape and stimulation. In most of the images in this essay, reading is projected as a supremely solitary pleasure, not social but very private, a means to search for oneself and knowledge beyond the protective chrysalis of middle-class life. This activity is liberating, freeing a woman from other roles or expectations so that she may retreat into another "zone", hide within the pages, create a barrier, turn away from the gaze of outsiders and be mentally and emotionally transported elsewhere. While some examples like reading the Bible connote ultra-chastity and traditional compliance with codes of femininity, others seem more about the power and independence of being alone and being able to be silent, still, introspective, isolated, and even disconnected in eschewing any acknowledgment of a viewer. Where these mostly middle-class females read--what refuges they select to avoid being monitored--is also significant, whether in nature, a cozy parlor, a bedroom, a darkened corner, or a library. The act of reading, while not in itself radical, communicates that the woman in question has typically moved away from the company of others to indulge in her passion and need for separation. She may look idle, but her mind is not, and she has been spared the busy-ness of embroidery, sewing, or other sanctioned tasks. How she reacts is not always totally legible; some facial expressions are hard to read, perhaps secretive, while others are dreamy, excited, spellbound, dispassionate, or self-absorbed. Knowing how to feign an unreadable expression, however, may have further protected or camouflaged a lady's true feelings and reactions. Even today such privacy is often zealously guarded by readers engrossed in their texts and unwilling to break the spell or to share their innermost thoughts on the words and ideas that move them silently yet inexorably to other levels of understanding or contemplation.

Endnotes

(1)Unnamed author, *The New Female Instructor or Young Woman's Guide to Domestic Happiness* (London: Thomas Kelly, 1834, 1988 reprint), p. 46.(^)

(2)*The New Female Instructor*, p. 47.(^)

(3)According to a description written by the artist and cited in Rowland Elzea, *The Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft, Jr. and Related Pre-Raphaelite Collections* (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1978), p. 170.(^)

(4)The single best source on the woman reader is definitely Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). On newspaper reading, Flint quotes (p. 121) feminist Emily Davies as noting in 1864 that "Newspapers are scarcely to be read by women at all. When the *Times* is offered to a lady, the sheet containing the advertisements, and the Births, Deaths, and Marriages, is considerately selected." On p. 129 Flint cites Vera Brittain's remembrances of her schooltime experiences of only being allowed to read extracts from newspapers: "We were never, of course, allowed to have the papers themselves—our innocent eyes might have strayed from foreign affairs to the evidence being taken by the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce or the Report of the International Paris Conference for the suppression of the White Slave Traffic...." (^)

(5)There is a vast amount of literature on female education, curriculum, and reading materials.

Besides Kate Flint's exceptionally useful and thorough text, the following studies are also insightful: Joan Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980); Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982); Felicity Hunt, ed., *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); and Judith Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).^(^)

(6) On working-class female readers, one modern historian has maintained that "Servants seem to have consumed more fiction than factory girls. Factory and shop workers had more stimulation and companionship servants (especially those in single places) not only craved excitement and romance to fill their lonely hours but also enjoyed the imaginary friends supplied by the letters and advice columns in cheap papers." Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880-1915* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 146.^(^)

(7) Flint, p. 11.^(^)

(8) Mitchell, *The New Girl*, p. 140.^(^)

(9) Sally Mitchell, "Sentiment and Suffering: Women's Recreational Reading in the 1860's," *Victorian Studies* (Autumn 197), v. 21, p. 32.^(^)

(10) Mitchell, *The New Girl*, p. 142.^(^)

(11) On the significance of the fireplace and hearth imagery in Victorian art, see Susan P. Casteras, "The Unsettled Hearth: P.H. Calderon's 'Lord! Thy Will be Done' and the Problematics of Women in Victorian Interiors," in Ellen Harding, *Re-framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays* (London: Scholar Press, 1996, pp. 149-171).^(^)

(12) A very brief description of this work and four other images appears in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 3 and ff.^(^)

(13) *The New Female Instructor*, pp. 47-8.^(^)

(14) *The New Female Instructor*, p. 48.^(^)

(15) Mrs. C.E. Humphry, *A Word to Women* (London: James Bowden, 1898), pp. 133-4.^(^)

(16) As quoted in Ronald Parkinson, *Catalogue of British Oil Paintings 1820-1860* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1990), p. 47.^(^)

(17) Mary Bennett, *Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Circle: The First Generation* (London: Lund Humphries, 1988), p. 153.^(^)

(18) Mitchell, *The New Girl*, p. 141.^(^)

(19) On this subject of reader-protagonists, mirror phases, and Lacanian interpretations, see Carla L. Peterson, *The Determined Reader: Gender and Culture in the Novel from Napoleon to Victoria* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), pp. 29-30.^(^)

(20) See, e.g., Flint, pp. 18 and 22.^(^)

(21) Letters as quoted in Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1828-1882, A Catalogue Raisonné* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), Vol. 1, p.37.^(^)

(22) Karen Joy Fowler, foreword in Stefan Bollman, *Reading Women* (London: Merrell Publishers Ltd., 2006), p. 24.^(^)

(23) May 25, 1854 letter from John Ruskin to *The Times* as cited in Cook and Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1905), v. 12, pp. 334-5.^(^)

(24) Ruari McLean, *Victorian Book Design and Colour Printing* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1963), p. 152.^(^)

(25) Flint, p.253.^(^)

(26)On her striking absence in the fine arts, see, Susan P. Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987), pp. 144-155.(△)

(27)Brian Reade, *Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1978), p. 344.(△)

