

Take me to the River: Sophie Anderson and Elaine of Astolat

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ABSTRACT

Sophie Gengembre Anderson (1823–1903) is not a painter of considerable critical acclaim; her work has been largely disregarded by art history and criticism, charged on the often-fatal count of sentimentality and lumped in with the kinds of ‘kitsch’ art rejected by modernism and its descendants. Despite this, her work continues to sell – at multi-million-dollar auctions and printed on cheap paraphernalia. Anderson’s appeal at these very different cultural echelons is testament to her technical effectiveness and to the enduring quality of her particular brand of Victorian mawkishness, and though her many paintings of children may never quite find purchase amidst the innovations and revelations of art in the recent century, these qualities do lend themselves to a deeply sympathetic mode of historical and literary painting. Anderson’s large, Tennyson-inspired literary depiction of Elaine of Astolat signalled her desire to enter the aggressively male-dominated space of historical and literary art and offers a valuable new perspective on a story and a character which has been so often – even obsessively – depicted by men. *Elaine*, which sits high above the entryway to Liverpool’s Walker Art Gallery, was one of the first such paintings by a woman to be purchased with public funds, and it represents a valuable entry-point for critique – both of the Victorian art establishment and of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Anderson’s artistic choices betray a profound sympathy for Elaine of Astolat and serve to highlight the pathos of a character who has seen her story and her character distorted from its inception.

KEYWORDS: Anderson, art, Tennyson, Elaine, Shalott

One of Sophie Gengembre Anderson’s largest works, *Elaine* (Figure 1) was the first painting by a woman to be purchased with public funds for Liverpool’s Walker Art Gallery. Bought in 1871, the painting is still displayed there today as an example of Victorian ‘High Art’ amidst Pre-Raphaelites and classical revivalists like Edward Poynter, whose sanguine, apocalyptic testament to soldierly duty *Faithful Unto Death* lives in the same room. The Walker was not the only institution to open its walls to women with an Anderson acquisition; *The Song* was purchased by Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1866, with bequests to Birmingham, Leicester and Walsall establishing a presence for her work in the Midlands around the *fin de siècle*.¹ Nevertheless, as of 2022 a visitor to the Walker might easily miss Anderson’s painting, teetering directly above the entrance to the galleries, moments before the museum’s more prestigious and recently updated collections. This is by no means an indictment of the Walker,

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¹ Kate Nichols, ‘In Depth: Sophie Anderson, a cosmopolitan Victorian Artist in the Midlands’, Midlands Art Papers, 1 <<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/lcahm/departments/historyofart/research/projects/map/includes/issue1/8-in-depth-sophie-anderson.aspx>> [accessed 5 January 2022].



Figure 1. Sophie Gengembre Anderson, *Elaine*, 1870, oil on canvas, 184.4 x 240.7cm, Walker Art Gallery.

which displays several artworks by prominent women artists including other Victorians. Rather, Anderson's less-than-prominent placement is a testament to her comparatively marginal place in the history of painting, even Victorian painting.

Despite being amongst the first of the Victorian women painters to find a place in the nation's municipal galleries, critical and cultural engagement with Anderson's work has since stagnated, stymied by a critical disdain for Victorian art and near-fatally charged with the cardinal sin of sentimentalism, an accusation exacerbated by the overall character of her output as an artist and by her womanhood.² Anderson's literary and historical paintings, though sparse, demonstrate nuanced and deeply sympathetic responses to womanhood and personal agency. *Elaine* is one such work, wherein the artist's compositional choices facilitate a more complex reading of its ekphrastic partner: Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'Lancelot and Elaine'. Nicola Bown has argued that sentimentality should be central to our appreciation of Victorian art, understood as a timeless drawing-together of people, a 'collapsing' of the distance between reader and viewer, text and image, and 'the past worlds of thought, emotion, people, and things she or he inhabited'.³ By observing the differences between Anderson's painting and those of her contemporaries, considering insightful modern literary criticism of its subject matter, and by thinking about the challenges and contradictions facing women artists of the period, it is possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of *Elaine* as a character as well as Anderson's work.

² Nichols, 'In Depth'.

³ Nicola Bown, 'Introduction: Crying Over Little Nell', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long 19th Century*, 4 (2007), 1–12 (p. 3) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.453>>.

1. ANDERSON AND THE VICTORIAN ART WORLD

Anderson was one of hundreds of women exhibiting their paintings in Britain's industrial cities in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and amongst those few who exhibited at the Royal Academy.⁴ Though able to exhibit at the Academy, women were debarred from membership and its concomitant benefits: annual prizes for students and Academicians alike and the priceless networking opportunities afforded to members. Such advantages are far from immaterial, as the structure of British art and the pathways to earning a substantial living from one's painting were deeply tied at this time to the kinds of fame such advantages were designed to facilitate.⁵ In this way British painting was lingering in the past, stumbling in the face of an advancing future. Queen Victoria's reign may have been a period of substantial social change with marriage, property and access to education for women coming under significant scrutiny, but public art education was far from the vanguard. Though women were allowed to study at RA schools as of 1860, it was not until 1893 – after significant public campaigning – that women were allowed anywhere near a life-drawing class, and even then, the subject was partially draped. The consequent lack of anatomical experience in women's draughtsmanship was one of the main objections women encountered from critics, and the link between the figure-drawing issues women faced and their preclusion from nude classes did not go unnoticed by contemporaries.⁶ When women like Anderson and Evelyn Pickering did produce nudes, male and female, their works were 'scrutinized as betrayals of their own sex' which bought into their own subordination.⁷ Women's entry into classical art was thus stymied on multiple axes: criticized for perceived technical deficiencies and condemned – where technical mastery was clear – for their choice of subject matter. Where technical deficiency nor salaciousness would suffice, a woman could simply be 'dismissed as vainglorious for her presumption in attempting the "highest" subject matter and its concomitantly resonant tradition.'⁸ Whitney Chadwick thus describes how women's 'work is situated at the intersection between the growing demand or increased education and employment for women, the artistic conservatism of British painting at the time, and the social ideology of separate spheres.'⁹

The Slade School of Art, by comparison, was founded in 1871 and allowed both male and female students to study from life. Accession to the Royal Academy as an Academician was only allowed to women in 1922 shortly before the Equal Franchise Act, and women who joined the few painting societies which allowed their membership found their work sequestered under the marginal category of 'Women's Art', treated as gifted amateurs rather than professional painters.¹⁰ Even the category of 'amateur' painter, when taken literally to mean one who does not paint explicitly for financial reward, was applied differently to men than to women during this period. Men who painted for painting's sake such as Lord Frederic Leighton saw their pursuit celebrated as a noble enterprise, free from the base influence of financial necessity. Women, by contrast, were merely the kind of amateur who was not – educated or

⁴ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 177.

⁵ Jan Marsh, 'Art, Ambition and Sisterhood in the 1850's', in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 33–48 (p. 34).

⁶ Sara M. Dodd, 'Art Education for Women in the 1860's: a Decade of Debate', in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 187–200 (p. 187).

⁷ Colleen Denney, *At the Temple of Art: The Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-1890* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp. 141–42.

⁸ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, 'A View of One's Own: Female Artists and the Nude', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 1 (2000), 65–78 (p. 67) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2000.11432654>>.

⁹ Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, p. 177.

¹⁰ Nichols, 'In Depth'.

otherwise – expected to participate in the market economy of art.¹¹ Contemporary opposition to the formal, professional education of women – in art or otherwise – was substantial, invidious and relentless. Sara Dodd gives a brief but telling account of the kinds of responses moves towards educational equality received:

At the time that [John] Ruskin was writing, the outrage expressed in various articles and books at any thought of equality of education or professional training on a par with men can best be exemplified by purportedly medical articles in *The Lancet* on the unsuitability of women's physiology for such tasks¹²

Dodd refers here to Ruskin's notorious lecture 'Of Queen's Gardens', wherein the writer is at pains to explain that the intellect of women 'is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision'.¹³

Structural inequalities in artistic training extended beyond the public institution. Women's training was fragmented and prohibitively costly, with prospective artists forced to zig-zag between expensive private schools, personal tuition by established artists, foreign atelier programmes and the various interruptions of domestic duties.¹⁴ What we know of Anderson's (at this time Sophia Gengembre) own training, though it began in France and continued later in America, is nevertheless exemplary of the times; born in Paris in 1823 and subsequently shunted to the French countryside, her first encounter with an active painter was in 1840, when a travelling portraitist set up shop in her village. Allowed to purchase and observe the painting of two portraits – of younger children, a theme which would follow her throughout her career – this would be the only instruction she would receive until 1843, when a letter arrived from friends in Paris inviting her to stay with them for a year and undertake professional training.¹⁵ The studio of Charles de Steuben (Steubin, in Clayton's account) was selected to be the site of Anderson's education, but de Steuben left for Russia almost immediately upon Anderson's arrival, promising repeatedly to return. He never did. Anderson's education was thus limited to 'the example and conversation of other girls, like herself students in the atelier'.¹⁶ The 1848 revolutions saw Anderson move, along with her family, to America. Here she married English artist Walter Anderson, from whom she took the name Anderson and who was, by contemporary account, an artist inferior to Sophie herself.¹⁷ She also continued her practice as a portraitist, genre painter and illustrator, providing illustrations for Henry Howe's *Historical Collections of the Great West* and working as a chromolithographer.¹⁸ The Andersons returned to England in 1854, with Sophie exhibiting and selling paintings in London and Liverpool. This was the opening salvo of a decades-long, trans-Atlantic career for

¹¹ Maria Quirk, *Women, Art and Money in Late Victorian and Edwardian England: The Hustle and the Scramble* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 2.

¹² Dodd, 'Art Education for Women', p. 191.

¹³ John Ruskin, 'Of Queen's Gardens', in *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. by Deborah Epstein Nord (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 77.

¹⁴ Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 54.

¹⁵ Ellen Clayton, *English Female Artists* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), p. 8.

¹⁶ Clayton, *English Female Artists*, p. 8.

¹⁷ William Mercer, 'Sophie Anderson', *Notes and Queries*, s11-X.246, (1919), 214 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/nq/s11-X.246.214a>>.

¹⁸ Charlotte Yeldham, 'Sophie Anderson', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/57068>>.

Anderson, which would see her work exhibited from New York's National Academy of Design to the Royal Hibernian in Dublin.

Though *Elaine* is different from most of her other work – and it is in this difference that this essay finds its approach – to dismiss the rest of her oeuvre out-of-hand on the count of sentimentality or ideological servility would be a disservice to the artist and would perhaps implicitly admit some of the historical assumptions about the content and quality of women's painting. What is important, here, is the intersection between Anderson's position as a woman painting during the Victorian period, trading in the cultural capital of the Pre-Raphaelite era and a tradition which 'worked effortlessly against the credibility of women artists' and the story of Elaine of Astolat herself.¹⁹ The quality of Anderson's work was recognized in her own time, though this recognition was often exemplary of archaic contemporary attitudes. The 1870 Royal Academy exhibition of *Elaine* met with approbation in the *London Illustrated News*:

Among the lady artists Mrs. Anderson specially distinguishes herself by the large picture of the dead Elaine laid on the funeral barge steered by the dumb servitor—a very able work, on a scale seldom attempted by female artists, yet revealing no trace of weakness or technical immaturity.²⁰

Anderson's work is given respect not just for its ambition, but for its ambition *as a woman's painting*. This kind of commendation, well-meaning or otherwise, condescends rather than critiques. Ambition – regardless of its source – is almost always secondary to training. Jan Marsh notes the sad story of Edith Courtauld, whose ambition, passion, and wealth were insufficient to overcome an absence of professional guidance:

At fifteen, she had a picture at the RA and a purpose-built studio of her own, but no tuition (the great Landseer, when consulted, advised against formal instruction), so that for the next four years she made repeated 'splendid beginnings on enormous canvases – all eight or ten feet long – working madly, or passing despairing hours crouched on the floor in a corner, face turned towards the wall, weeping tears of anguish and mortification' owing to the unbridgeable gap between ambition and execution.²¹

Such stories of wealthy young women with talent and drive, who nevertheless find themselves frustrated by social and ideological injunction, proliferate throughout this period, playing out repeatedly in Ellen Clayton's *English Female Artists*: one of startlingly few sources available to those studying Anderson's work.²²

Kate Nichols cites Anderson's comparative lack of political activity as one of the reasons her work enjoys sparse modern engagement; this and the conservative content of her work make a comparatively unattractive proposition for modern approaches.²³ Anderson is not listed amongst those women, like Barbara Bodichon and Anna Howitt, who undertook the public

¹⁹ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Woman and Men in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 10.

²⁰ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *London Illustrated News*, 28 May 1870, 512–64 (p. 562), in *Gale Primary Sources* [accessed 4 February 2022].

²¹ Marsh, 'Art, Ambition and Sisterhood', p. 43.

²² Nichols, 'In Depth'.

²³ Nichols, 'In Depth'.

struggle for women's professional education.²⁴ Nevertheless, where there was a space given over to women's painting Anderson could be seen exhibiting; London's Grosvenor Gallery, established by Sir Coutts Lindsay in 1877, differentiated itself from the Royal Academy both by its comparatively democratic exhibition practices and its openness to women's art, particularly those who had been ignored or 'skied' by the Academy.²⁵ Anderson exhibited here along with many of her most well-known contemporaries. Participating in nine exhibitions at the Grosvenor, part of her success was her choice of subject matter: neo-Classical art of the kind 'usually restricted to male geniuses.'²⁶ Elaine falls neatly into this category. Susan Casteras counts Anderson as amongst those 'key women contributors' who worked in and around the continuing Pre-Raphaelite tradition and who benefited from the Grosvenor's inherent championing of woman artists.²⁷ Despite the obstacles facing them, women from varied social and economic backgrounds found themselves associated with art during this period; it would be a mistake, however, to assume that Anderson was among those early feminists who agitated actively for women's education and equality.²⁸ Cohesion should not be assumed, nor should solidarity be mistaken for homogeneity. As Deborah Cherry suggests: 'Women artists have differed profoundly in their alliances and interests; within the same social formation women artists occupied sharply contradictory positions, which are not reducible to a single or monolithic version of femininity.'²⁹

2. SENTIMENTALITY AND THE ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

It is possible to see how the charge of sentimentality, to this day an 'unarguable condemnation' could be levelled at Anderson's work; dozens of paintings of bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked children do not offer much ground for hard-nosed, avant-garde analysis.³⁰ Paintings like *No Walk Today*, sold to a private collection in 2008 for over a million pounds, seem perfect targets for the sort of modernist criticism which labels them a decadent, inauthentic facsimile of folk culture, and the feelings they evoke as 'trumpety gewgaws, feelings on the cheap.'³¹ Here is what Clement Greenberg would call the 'bad, up-to-date old' of idealistic and classical realism, but the continued commercial interest in this painting is testament to a narrative depth and observational distance which both offer nuances of meaning beyond the shallow 'sentimental' invitation to identify with, or feel a generalized human sympathy towards, the subject.³²

The notion that 'sentimental' work cannot be taken seriously, or cannot at least be met on its own terms, is based on several suppositions which – though often compelling – fail to properly assess its aesthetic qualities. Critics of the time voiced disdain at the choice of Elaine as a choice of subject; the March 1968 edition of *The Art-Journal* lamenting in its review of a Society of Female Artists exhibition: 'Poor "Elaine," is she yet, season after season, to suffer

²⁴ Cherry, *Painting Women*, p. 52.

²⁵ Quirk, *Women, Art and Money*, p. 132.

²⁶ Denney, *At the Temple of Art*, p. 130.

²⁷ Susan P. Casteras, 'Burne-Jones and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle at the Palace of the Aesthetes', in *The Grosvenor Gallery: A Palace of Art in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 75–92 (p. 86).

²⁸ Clarissa C. Orr, 'Introduction: Women in the Victorian Art World', in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1–32 (p. 1).

²⁹ Cherry, *Painting Women*, p. 55.

³⁰ Nicola Bown, 'Tender Beauty: Victorian Painting and the Problem of Sentimentality', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16 (2011), 214–25 (p. 215) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2011.589678>>.

³¹ Bown, 'Tender Beauty', p. 217.

³² Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 13.

more at the hands of tyros? Female artists seem to have a weakness for this ready-made sentiment. In kindness the painters shall be nameless who have desecrated the Laureate's verse', an astounding display of contemporary hypocrisy considering the number of male artists portraying the same figure.³³ The modern view, that sentimental works are merely a kind of ideological output, is one which Nicola Bown disputes: 'Sentimental works of art are not simply pictured ideological scenarios, messages given visual form', she argues, 'on the contrary, they are works of art that have been considered beautiful, and their beauty is a kind that invites us to shed a tear or to nurse tender feelings'.³⁴ The vast majority of Sophie Anderson's paintings may invite us to look fondly upon their subjects, but *Elaine* invites us to think. Ideological or otherwise, Anderson's sympathetic intentions are a powerful force when her gaze is levelled at Elaine.

Elaine is one of only two paintings by the artist to feature in Lionel Lambourne's mammoth catalogue of the era *Victorian Painting*. Lambourne describes Anderson as a versatile painter and is intrigued by the choice of subject matter, as the sleeping or drowning woman was generally 'a compulsive theme for male painters in the Victorian era'.³⁵ Though uncommon, *Elaine* is not unique amongst Anderson's paintings, and similarities can be found on a number of counts; her half-metre tall orientalist portrait *Scheherazade* (Figure 2) depicts the female storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the subject is treated differently than in the majority of her paintings of children – her glance is pensive, considered and knowing, lit softly and enigmatically rather than awash with natural sunlight. The closest Anderson comes to this approach in the rest of her work is the undated *Far Away Thoughts*, a portrait of a thoughtful, brown-eyed child before a broadly painted, sketch-like background reminiscent of the more well-known *Neapolitan Child*. The child, like the storyteller, wears elaborate golden earrings and in *Scheherazade* that impressionistic background, somewhat uncharacteristic of Anderson's work, has faded to a solid, warm umber – foregrounding the subject whilst complementing the warmth of her eyes and the sheen of her jewellery. The extent to which women participated in or rubbed up against colonial and imperial discourses with their work represents one area where the complexity of the female position in Victorian art shows itself; if the charge of obeisance to Victorian ideals is to be levied at Sophie Anderson, then here is one place where it may be tested.³⁶

Anderson's painting was as much a business move as an expression of personal artistic or political desire, as Tennyson had contributed to an explosive proliferation of artistic Arthuriana, with many artworks overlapping in theming and composition.³⁷ In a 'conservative calculation', Roger Simpson estimates that by 1917 'at least two hundred and one artistic works had taken the Lady of Shalott or her cognate form, Elaine of Astolat, as subject', 60 of which – like Anderson's – show both the heroine and her boat.³⁸ Anderson continued her foray into the decidedly male world of large historical paintings 10 years after the purchase of *Elaine* with *The Song* (Figure 3), a two-metre-high depiction of classically draped young women sat, in the fading evening light, in a copse. One girl plays the lyre whilst her

³³ 'Society of Female Artists', *The Art-Journal*, (1868), 46 <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009437823>>.

³⁴ Bown, 'Tender Beauty', p. 215.

³⁵ Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), p. 319.

³⁶ Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, p. 199.

³⁷ Constance W. Hassett and James Richardson, 'Looking at Elaine: Keats, Tennyson, and the Directions of the Poetic Gaze', in *Arthurian Women*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 287–306 (p. 287).

³⁸ Roger Simpson, 'George Pinwell's "The Lady of Shalott"', *Arthuriana*, 26 (2016), 40–53 (p. 42) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43855517>>.



Figure 2. Sophie Gengembre Anderson, *Scheherazade*, undated, oil on canvas, 50 x 41 cm. The New Art Gallery Walsall.

companions listen intently. Such literary paintings were, for professional women artists, a potential ‘back door into the higher ranks of the genres’ and the lucrative opportunities these esteemed cultural echelons provided.³⁹

Though a number have since disappeared, evidence remains of an extended campaign of classical painting undertaken by Anderson during this period, including pieces which – like *The Song* – differ from contemporary historical works in their indifference to actual literary or historical events. Rather than dealing with explicitly mythological or moral themes, Anderson depicts an ‘exclusively female world of cultural production and appreciation in a vaguely classical setting’; on this basis Nichols offers a reading of *The Song* which frees itself from the moral expectations of feminine respectability, instead reading the painting on its own terms and situating it within the larger, broadly feminist context of paintings by women of significant literary-historical figures.⁴⁰ This perspective serves as counterpoint to Pamela Gerrish Nunn’s analysis of Anderson’s 1885 painting *In the Studio* – a work which, despite its virtuosity, nevertheless ‘harmonizes perfectly with the traditional male image of sexually available model and spiritually available muse.’⁴¹ Nunn points out that women were quite

³⁹ Pamela G. Nunn, ‘Between Strong-Mindedness and Sentimentality: Women’s Literary Painting,’ *Victorian Poetry*, 33 (1995), 425–47 (p. 426) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002330>>.

⁴⁰ Nichols, ‘In Depth’.

⁴¹ Nunn, *Problem Pictures*, p. 15.



Figure 3. Sophie Gengembre Anderson, *The Song*, 1881, oil on canvas, 145 x 200.5cm. Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

capable of producing ‘reactionary and conventional images of themselves’ from an ambition to prove themselves to the ‘still sceptical audience’ of the period: a challenge of entering a creative practice so enmeshed with the male gaze.⁴² However, Nunn is quick to point out, as others have, that homogenous analysis of women’s art – either as a set or in an individual’s oeuvre – is itself an ideologically patriarchal manoeuvre.⁴³ As such, it is possible to concede to Nunn’s reading without precluding the possibility that Anderson, elsewhere, demonstrated a sensibility other than that of ‘false consciousness or pragmatism’, and Nichols’ work with *The Song* is a valuable piece of that puzzle.⁴⁴

Anderson’s sensible and compassionate reading in *Elaine* is not just different to that of her male counterparts: it differs from those of other women. Saying that Anderson is capable of such a portrayal simply because she is a woman promotes the same reductive attitude which gave birth to ‘women’s painting’ as a separate category. Studying women’s art in this way invites contradiction and flirts with hypocrisy; it becomes necessary to understand the importance of the woman artist’s experience without reducing her or her work to the sum total of that experience. As Wendy Lesser says in the opening lines of *His Other Half*: gender both does and does not matter.⁴⁵ Gendered critique plays an important role in this sort of work but allowing it to become the ‘sole determining factor’⁴⁶ robs women of their artistic inheritance and dilutes their agency; Sophie Anderson did not just produce this image of Elaine because

⁴² Nunn, *Problem Pictures*, p. 15.

⁴³ Nunn, *Problem Pictures*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Nunn, *Problem Pictures*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Wendy Lesser, *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁴⁶ Lesser, *His Other Half*, p. 3.

she was a woman, she produced it because she was *Sophie Anderson*. The nature of her sentimentality, however, and of her womanhood in its historical and artistic context, absolutely contribute to our understanding of it and does offer useful entry-points for direct comparison with other painters of the same or similar subjects.

3. LANCELOT AND THE LADIES ELAINE

John Atkinson Grimshaw's 1875 painting *The Lady of Shalott* (Figure 4) comes close to Anderson's depiction in its theming and execution. Grimshaw's painting also keeps – in its own way – some of the mythic qualities we will see shortly in Toby Rosenthal's 1874 work. Both of these works emerged much later than Anderson's. Atkinson's haunting, greenish riverscape is a Stygian nightmare, a visitation from the underworld: its murky, crepuscular quality informs the tension between the lady and her destination. It is easy to imagine the horror of Camelot's comfortable nobles as this dark omen emerges from the mist with its sombre, ivory-white cargo. The glaring similarities between the two Elaine characters are descriptive of the way Arthurian legends entered the British canon, and their artistic depictions are in turn representative of the way these stories then dominated the Victorian cultural landscape. If Anderson was trying to access the wealth of the Victorian monied and middle classes with *Elaine*, she was entering hotly contested territory; her contemporaries were producing Arthurian art *en masse*, including members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and – later – the Hogarth Club.⁴⁷ This makes sense in the context of the Pre-Raphaelite ethos: myth endures, always acquiring fresh potency and contemporary relevance.⁴⁸

Even where writers and artists rejected Tennyson's retellings, the characters and narratives of Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* offered ample material to satiate the wave of medievalism



Figure 4. John Atkinson Grimshaw, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1875, oil on canvas, 61 x 91.4cm, Yale Center for British Art.

⁴⁷ Muriel Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), p. 238.

⁴⁸ Lambourne, *Victorian Painting*, p. 231.

breaking in the nineteenth century. Elaine of Astolat and the Lady of Shalott were the crowning jewels of this Arthurian excess, with at least 80 recorded versions of the subjects being produced before World War I.⁴⁹ The considerable overlap between the two figures stems from Tennyson's literary choices and sources. 'The Lady of Shalott', Tennyson's poem about a cursed and tower-bound maiden who eventually sacrifices her life for a glance at Lancelot, was published in 1834, a full two-and-a-half decades before 'Elaine' (later 'Lancelot and Elaine') would emerge as part of the *Idylls of the King*. It was not until after the publication of 'The Lady of Shalott' that Tennyson would realize that the character, which he had come across as *La Donna Di Scalotta* in an 1804 edition of *Cento Novelle Antiche*, was in fact the Lady Elaine of *Le Morte D'Arthur*.⁵⁰ It is by this accident of history that Elaine, Lady of Shalott and Elaine, Lady of Astolat have become historically and artistically conflated.

Ann Howey takes this conflation and argues for the existence of a single Lady/Elaine text, understood as the sum of this historical and artistic interrelation but reducible, where necessary, to its constituent parts. The 'iconic feature' of each narrative, the death which follows from an unrequited love and results in the transit of their bodies by boat to Camelot, makes identification of such a single cultural 'text' possible. Tennyson's 'canonical articulation' of both stories equally makes it possible to establish narrative and its artistic representations as sites of conflict between social realities and historical constructions of gender.⁵¹ Representations of both women draw on these common cultural themes of the Victorian period: at the time there was a widespread 'inter-association of water, women, and drowning'.⁵² There are, as Elizabeth Prettejohn observes, linkages between Tennyson's poem and the myth of Proserpina, a weaver who undertakes a journey to the underworld: connections which carry into the paintings drawing from Tennyson's text. John Grimshaw's painting might be of the Lady of Shalott, but it still represents the same themes and ideas in much similar contexts, and thus represents one such iteration of the larger Lady/Elaine text, so contrasts and comparisons with depictions of Elaine remain useful.

Elaine's death is a crystallizing point in the *Idylls of the King*, an off-beat in the narrative swoop of Lancelot and Guinevere which manifests many of the contradictions in Lancelot's nature, foreshadows the ruination of his love and exposes the structural fragility of the Arthurian world. The Lady/Elaine narrative is self-propelling by its nature; the presentation of the corpse is a site of response from characters, narratives and artists. Art responds to story, which in turn responds to art. Virginie Greene describes this ebb and flow of iteration and response as the passage by which the *Demoiselle d'Escalot* arrives from the thirteenth century.⁵³ Its characters are complex, at once perceptive and ignorant, innocent and sinful, youthful and decrepit, and their mistakes and machinations culminate in an unassailable intervention; Elaine of Astolat's body floats inexorably towards Camelot, scheduled to interrupt Lancelot and Guinevere as their love falters and stumbles in the face of her absolute wilfulness and paradoxical powerlessness.

⁴⁹ Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, p. 218.

⁵⁰ Hasset and Richardson, 'Looking at Elaine', p. 287.

⁵¹ Ann F. Howey, *Afterlives of the Lady of Shalott and Elaine of Astolat* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 2.

⁵² Peter Trippi, 'John William Waterhouse: A Biographical Overview', in *J. W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite*, ed. by Peter Trippi (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), pp. 15–22 (p. 17).

⁵³ Virginie Greene, 'How the Demoiselle d'Escalot Became a Picture', *Arthuriana*, 12 (2002), 31–48 (p. 43) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870446>>.

Tennyson tinkered with his Arthurian cycle until as late as 1891.⁵⁴ First published under the title 'Elaine' in his original 1859 *Idylls*, Tennyson changed the title to 'Lancelot and Elaine' alongside the publication of his 'Holy Grail' sequence and its addition to the *Idylls* in 1869 and 1870 respectively. Sophie Anderson's *Elaine* was first exhibited in 1870 at the 102nd RA exhibition, where a contemporary critic called it 'effective' but declared that 'the subject has become trite'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the quality of her image made her one of the 'relatively few women who saw their paintings become acquisitions at the large municipal museums', having been priced at £420 at the Liverpool Autumn Exhibition and purchased for the Walker.⁵⁶ As such, the gallery now lists the source of Anderson's interpretation as the 1859 *Idylls*.⁵⁷ The timeline of events favours this, as Anderson will have already been working on her painting whilst Tennyson was working on his revisions, and Elaine was already a ubiquitous artistic subject. As such, the following extracts are taken from the 1859 edition.

'Lancelot and Elaine' is a painterly poem, filled with picturesque descriptive passages where time seems half-frozen and the scenes are framed as if themselves affixed to a canvas.⁵⁸ The moment of Elaine's arrival at Camelot is – literally – framed by a window, through which Lancelot glances after Guinevere tosses away his gift of diamonds:

Then while Sir Lancelot leant, in half disgust
At love, life, all things, on the window ledge,
Close underneath his eyes, and right across
Where these had fallen, slowly past the barge
Whereon the lily maid of Astolat
Lay smiling, like a star in blackest night.⁵⁹

Here Elaine is a star, a stationary point of fidelity gleaming – not unlike the discarded diamonds over which her barge sails – in a moment of darkness. Her light, like that of the stars, reaches us from afar. It is both motionless and transitional, the narrative literally flowing towards and crystallizing into a singular, distinct image. William Buckler describes this same effect occurring in the moments after Lancelot's joust:

This pattern of crisp pictorial suspension and quick re-immersion in the narrative flow seems to be consciously counterpointed to the hard, indestructible solidity both of the immortal diamond and of the ornate mausoleum in which Elaine is entombed and thus to engender an awareness about the appropriate relationship of art to life.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Debra N. Mancoff, *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend Through Victorian Eyes* (New York, NY: H. N. Abrams), p. 51.

⁵⁵ 'The Royal Academy, One Hundred and Second Exhibition', *Art Journal* (1870), 161–72 (p. 168) <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000071454>>.

⁵⁶ 'Sophie Anderson', in *Dictionary of Women Artists: Vol. 1*, ed. by Delia Gaze (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 186–87 (p. 87).

⁵⁷ National Museums Liverpool, *Elaine* (2023), <<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/elaine>> [accessed 5 January 2022].

⁵⁸ William Buckler, *Man and His Myths: Tennyson's Idylls of the King in Critical Context* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1984), p. 114.

⁵⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1859), p. 212. Future references to pages in this edition are parenthesized in-text.

⁶⁰ Buckler, *Man and His Myths*, p. 115.

The narrative gathers around moments such as these, where the presence of the diamond, glittering and immutable, acts as an anchor point for the story's imagery, allowing the reader's pictorial imagination to coalesce in its most aesthetic moments. Half redemption, half accusation, Elaine's final voyage, letter to Lancelot and Guinevere clutched in her dead hands, at once acquits and condemns them and the entire Arthurian court. Freed from the charge of romantic treachery he is instead indicted as a fool, unaware or unwilling to truly confront Elaine's feelings, or to understand the environment which bred them.

There are worse crimes, however, than foolishness. Lancelot rightly rebuffs Elaine on account of his age – 'yield your flower of life / To one more fitly yours, not thrice your age' (p. 196) – and of his established love for Guinevere. Debra Mancoff sites Victorian sympathies for the character here, at Elaine's transition between child- and adulthood: 'When Elaine tries to make her dreams come true, she transgresses the sanctuary of her girlhood and suffers for not knowing her place as a woman,' and wants for the influence of a mother to guide her through her experience of love.⁶¹ According to Mancoff, however, these sympathies ran across the strictly gendered lines in line with Victorian social ideology and the strict, elaborate courting etiquette which defined young women's engagements: men wanted to rescue Elaine, whilst women wanted to mother her.⁶² Each implies a relinquishing of her own agency, wall-papering over her own voice with the mournful tone which, as we shall see shortly, Arthur himself takes.

Even Lancelot's final act of disdain, his refusal to wave goodbye as he rides away from Astolat, is performed at her father's behest, and Lancelot comes to regret the combination of action and inaction which defines his failure:

Tho', had I dreamt the damsel would have died,
I might have put my wits to some rough use,
And help'd her from herself. (p. 215)

Lancelot's culpability – and there is culpability – in the death of Elaine is defined by negligence rather than by villainy, selfishness, or a lack of chivalry. It is, in fact, largely due to the chivalrous qualities he demonstrates and the destabilization of those virtues by his adulterous love of Guinevere, that he inadvertently expedites Elaine's obsession and thus her death. It is this same Guinevere who, once Elaine's body arrives and her letter read aloud, questions Lancelot's actions: 'Ye might at least have done her so much grace, Fair lord, as would have help'd her from her death' (p. 215). She is quickly silenced, however, failing to meet Lancelot's gaze when he assures her confidently that nothing but marriage and romance would have satisfied Elaine.

Lancelot is, as we and he know, both less and more than the sum of his myths, but his preoccupation with status and its mendacities blinds him to the awful absoluteness of Elaine's desire. The extent to which Lancelot has allowed his own fame and stature to dominate the world around him, and his inability to shake off its consequences, is something which Elaine's death forces him to question:

For what am I? What profits me my name
Of greatest knight? I fought for it, and have it:

⁶¹ Mancoff, *The Return of King Arthur*, p. 80.

⁶² Mancoff, *The Return of King Arthur*, p. 80.

Pleasure to have it, none; to lose it, pain;
 Now grown a part of me: but what use in it?
 To make men worse by making my sin known?
 Or sin seem less, the sinner seeming great? (p. 221)

Even in the light of these failures, however, Elaine's untimely death cannot necessarily be blamed exclusively – or, even mostly – on him. That very attribution of blame, perhaps more appropriately responsibility, to anyone other than Elaine is to deny her will, and make the very mistake as Lancelot.

The poem's narrative introduces us at first to 'Elaine the fair, Elaine the lovable' (p. 147) and sticks diligently to these descriptors; its characters, however, quickly describe her as wilful (p. 205). This 'wilfulness', along with a perceptive eye and keen imagination, quickly becomes her defining trait. In the portentous moment of Elaine's departure to the wounded Lancelot's bedside, it is this obstinacy – and her father's responsibility for it in raising her so – on which she relies and to which she appeals:

'Father, you call me wilful, and the fault
 Is yours who let me have my will, and now,
 Sweet father, will you let me lose my wits?'
 'Nay,' said he, 'surely.' 'Wherefore, let me hence,'
 She answered, 'and find our dear Lavaine (p. 186)

The Lord of Astolat, in full knowledge of Lancelot's elevated status and privy to the open secret of his love for Guinevere, nevertheless allows Elaine to ride to Lancelot's aid. The pretence of worry over her brother Lavaine is tried and quickly abandoned, wherefore Elaine astutely appeals to her father's sense of duty in returning the diamond to its rightful winner. Her father's final words, wherein he hints at Guinevere's place in Lancelot's heart, speak to this interesting conflict between his paternal responsibility for Elaine and his tacit support and development of her powerful agency:

And sure I think this fruit is hung too high
 For any mouth to gape for save a queen's –
 Nay, I mean nothing: so then, get you gone,
 Being so very wilful you must go.' (p. 187)

He *almost* tells Elaine the truth but relents. In this moment he seems to understand her in a way that Lancelot cannot: that to suppress or ignore her desires means death, negation, nonexistence. But rather than face the possibility of her awakening and confront her with the adult truth of Lancelot's entanglement with Guinevere, he sends her away. Having raised an astute, perceptive daughter with a wilful temperament, he nevertheless denies her a final, most important lesson. This mistake – this momentary weakness – is fatal. Here the contradictions and repressions of the Arthurian story meet a flowering awareness and, failing to treat her with due respect, force her in to a final communicative gambit: death.

4. OSTENTATION AND THE SENTIMENTAL: ANDERSON'S NARRATIVE

The ascription of outright blame for Elaine's death to anyone but Elaine herself seems at best a misunderstanding of her character, at worst a denial of the possibility of her autonomy. Where

absolute blame can be attributed it is structural and fragmented, extant only in the cracks between personal will and the rigid definitions and possibilities of the feudal, hyper-chivalrous Arthurian system. These issues are fractal and recursive, repeating themselves all the way up the feudal chain – where Elaine is prohibited from loving Lancelot by virtue of his elevated position and love for Guinevere, so too is Lancelot withheld from the object of his love by their mutual responsibility to, and love for Arthur. The extent to which Elaine's final decision – the rendering of her body downstream to Camelot – can be read as a denouncement, this denouncement should be read structurally: at the level of narrative rather than merely of character, as there is not quite sufficient malice – justified or otherwise – in Elaine's choice to define her death as an act of spite. Quite the opposite; in denying her father's accusations about Lancelot and Guinevere, Elaine forces a cynical reading of her funereal moments to take a structural, thematic approach: she was, quite literally, too good for this world.

There is, however, some slippage which occurs here: 'Never yet / Was noble man but made ignoble talk' (p. 204) says Elaine when her father tells her of Lancelot's infidelity with the Queen. Shortly afterwards, however, she dictates her final letter 'For Lancelot and the Queen and all the world'. Whether she will admit it or not, Elaine knows whom Lancelot really loves; she asks that her deathbed and funeral barge be decked out 'like the Queen's / For richness, and me also like the Queen / in all I have of rich' (p. 205). Though they never meet in life, the story is as much a conversation between Elaine and Guinevere as it is anything to do with Lancelot. Flatly comparing the two women as different 'versions' of womanhood would, however, be reductive, and rob both women of their agency as beings contesting and understanding their desires. When she floats her body down the river, the letter Elaine bears addresses Guinevere directly, showing grace in defeat and tacitly acknowledging that which she has, so far, refused to admit:

And therefore to our Lady Guinevere,
And to all other ladies, I make moan:
Pray for my soul, and yield me burial. (p. 214)

No mistake should be made here: Elaine's death is a message. To Lancelot, to Guinevere, to a world which has refused to meet her on her own terms. By acceding to her father's wishes and refusing to bid her farewell, Lancelot forces Elaine's hand: 'to take one's life', as Margaret Higonnet puts it, 'is to force others to read one's death.'⁶³ Elaine does not arrive at Camelot empty-handed: she carries a letter which both professes naivety and demonstrates awareness: imposes meaning and invites ignorance. Nina Auerbach calls Elaine one of Guinevere's 'subversive avatars . . . the purity of whose passion for Lancelot exposes his essential dishonesty, making of her a death's-head portending the fall of the kingdom.'⁶⁴ Higonnet points to Madame Butterfly's sword and Livy's account of the death of Lucretia to demonstrate how suicide narratives often carry such physical signifiers of meaning, 'explanatory texts' which serve to distinguish them from other women and to limit textual ambiguity.⁶⁵

⁶³ Margaret Higonnet, 'Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide', in *The Female Body in Western Cultures*, ed. by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 68–83 (p. 68).

⁶⁴ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 137.

⁶⁵ Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 69.

Harry Berger calls this relationship between bodies and meaning ‘detextualization’; the semantic autonomy of texts or meanings is inhibited by proximity to their ‘merely human source.’⁶⁶ Berger’s definition forms part of a larger working critique of the abstraction of textual meaning from the ‘order of the body’ and the subsequent hyper-proliferation of meaning in textual cultures, and Elisabeth Bronfen astutely applies its precepts to the figure of the dead woman: ‘The corpse’, she argues, ‘is the example *par excellence* for a transmission of meaning through a medium that is an extension of the body, at first sight most unequivocal in its message.’⁶⁷ Bronfen eloquently describes the relationship between Elaine’s letter and the body:

In her letter she expresses in the order of the text what the corpse already signifies in the order of the body – that she comes to take a last farewell from him who would not take farewell of her, that her love for Lancelot had no return; was self-reflexive, like a message refused by its addressee and turned back to the sender.⁶⁸

Elaine has come to *take* her farewell, and to offer a final realization in the face of the total negation of her selfhood by the narrative’s near-constant definitions and descriptions. Evidence of her awareness seeps in through the gaps in her otherwise naïve narrative; the corpse, both in its physicality and in its finality, works to both anchor and deliver her intended meanings. These implications are amplified by the content and context of her final requests: to bedeck the boat with wealth, to give her body guardianship of the letter, and to row her towards Camelot with only a muted servant as company.

In Rosenthal’s painting (Figure 5), Elaine’s deathbed is intricately carved from white stone with a glittering golden headpiece, the bow of the boat embellished with a statuette of an angel bearing the divine gift of a crown: Elaine is every bit the fallen queen in transit. Where Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale’s illustration maintains the eternal high summer of the Pre-Raphaelites, Rosenthal clouds over the *Idylls*; here the trip into Camelot is a journey into death and shadow, her arrival an ominous portent both disrupting and intruding into the Arthurian world. A sea bird works a lonely flight overhead; its destination the shadowy banks of the rivermouth. The rowman seems more a Charon than a servant – the painting is a transition into death, away from the fading light and into the mouth of something sinister and obliterative. Whilst the external focalization of the image is the bright image of Elaine, the internal gaze is onward, into the darkness towards which the ferryman drives.⁶⁹ This is odd, considering the glittering city which is her destination, where both the object of her love and the his diamonds sit in sunlight, but fitting considering the end which awaits her there.

Arthur graces Elaine with a regal funeral: ‘not as one unknown / Nor meanly, but with gorgeous obsequies / And mass, and rolling music, like a queen’ (p. 217). This seems at first glance like a natural continuation and fulfilment of her own desires, but Elaine’s final resting place, for all its stately splendour, is ‘Low in the dust of half-forgotten kings’; her entombment establishes and solidifies in stone and ritual her place in the unmoving hierarchy of the Arthurian system. For Páraic Finnerty the poem’s preoccupation with fame, particularly in the figures of Lancelot and Arthur, recounts and reproduces a ‘brand’ of knightliness, ‘demarking a hierarchy of eminence in which an individual’s fame is ceated or increased according to his

⁶⁶ Harry Berger, ‘Bodies and Texts’, *Representations*, 17 (1987), 144–66 (p. 152) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3043796>>.

⁶⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 152–53.

⁶⁸ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 153.

⁶⁹ Howey, *Afterlives*, p. 155.



Figure 5. Toby Rosenthal, *Elaine*, 1874, oil on canvas, 97.9 x 158.8cm, Art Institute of Chicago.

or her proximity to a more famous person.' In doing so, argues Finnerty, it 'evokes aspects of Victorian celebrity culture', a culture which we have already seen dictating the fortunes of artists – particularly women whose position is more precarious than their male counterparts.⁷⁰

Though Arthur tries to commemorate Elaine, he is hopelessly short of the full picture, and that commemoration can only result in a sad farce:

And let the story of her dolorous voyage
For all true hearts be blazon'd on her tomb
In letters gold and azure! (p. 217)

Arthur, blind to Lancelot and Guinevere's love, does not fully understand the implications of that 'dolorous voyage', so the mausoleum to which he confines her is a shallow approximation of its message and its power. By giving Elaine all of the queenly attributes she asked for, the narrative performs a final betrayal of her almost-unconscious but utterly autonomous desire: she is reduced to a lily-maid whose death serves only to reinforce the Arthurian chivalric system – stripped of the wilfulness she had in life. This misappropriation, by Arthur and the narrative, demonstrates an interesting conceptual gap between the detextualizing effects of the human corpse and the communicative impulse inherent to this kind of textual suicide; 'because it poses a hermeneutic task, forcing the survivors to read this death', says Bronfen, 'the corpse is immediately reinscribed in textuality, replaced by messages abstracted from the body, by narratives and gravestones.' The female corpse hovers uncomfortably between the manifestation of its bodily autonomy and the appropriation of its meanings for narrative or structural effects.⁷¹ Higonnet links the act of suicide with the 'problem of women's identity as separate from, yet potentially part of society' and identifies the proliferation of women's suicide narratives in the nineteenth century as a crystallization of bourgeois individualism's

⁷⁰ Páraic Finnerty, "'Much Honour and Much Fame Were Lost': *Idylls of the King* and Camelot's Celebrity Circle', in *Victorian Celebrity Culture and Tennyson's Circle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 191–233 (p. 192).

⁷¹ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 152.

inherent conflicts.⁷² The women of the Arthurian tradition are ambivalently defined, often serving only as counterpoint to the more rigidly defined male archetypes, ancillary to the main characters.⁷³ Elaine is separate from the Arthurian main but her death, whilst deeply personal, is also structural and representative, and this is demonstrated by the way her survivors 'seek to recuperate Elaine's corpse into the stability of symbolic representation.'⁷⁴ Arthur takes Elaine's death narrative and inscribes it anew, in blue-and-gold filigree lettering, on an elaborate mausoleum, thus textualizing and transforming her actions in a way which fundamentally misapprehends her character, and the character of his closest companions.

Once the ceremony and pageantry ends, Arthur and the narrative both turn their attention to Lancelot. Arthur bemoans his knight's stubbornness, and professes his inability to understand it:

Thou couldst have loved this maiden, shaped, it seems
By God for thee alone, and from her face,
If one may judge the living by the dead,
Delicately pure and marvellously fair,
Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man,
Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons
Born to the glory of thy name and fame, (pp. 218–19)

In a narrative where even Guinevere, for all her depth and narrative importance, plays a subsidiary role to Lancelot, Elaine did not stand a chance. Arthurian women, Maureen Fries tells us, play two roles: the wife-hero and the virgin.⁷⁵ Elaine, having died a virgin, is not mourned as a loss in her own right, but as the loss of the wife-hero she could have been.

When she gets around to painting *Elaine*, Sophie Anderson gives this lily-maid a far less ostentatious farewell; though her body is still draped with a golden sheet it is a more comfortable-looking and comparatively rustic one, appropriately sized and naturally placed. Rather than the restrained, mummified wrapping of Rosenthal's painting, Anderson's Elaine has her beautiful blanket hastily tucked under the forearms, just above the waist: placed gently, even lovingly, but far from ornately. Rosenthal and Brickdale give us an Elaine enveloped by ritual and wealth, and in this way accept – as Arthur did – that which Elaine claims to, but can never implicitly accept herself: her place in the Arthurian world, its moral inviolability and the subsequent marginality of her own desire. Anderson's scene is simpler, far more modest, and therein lies its power as an agent of pathos; here Elaine's embroidered blanket is not just beautiful – it is the *most beautiful thing she owns*. If Elaine arrives at Camelot like a Cleopatra then she arrives as Arthur and his whole kingdom wish to see her: a noble and fitting partner for the equally noble if obstinately unwilling Lancelot. This is not Elaine. She and Lancelot are not equals: he does not even really *see* her. Anderson's humbler painting, complete with a somewhat worn and faded Astolat banner at the stern of the boat, offers a richer and more complex view of the hierarchical relationships in the story, emphasizing the structural impossibility of her desire. It also fits the narrative more effectively; Lancelot offers Elaine wealth and land in the event that she marries a poor man, and Arthur feels compelled to see her

⁷² Higonet, 'Speaking Silences', p. 72.

⁷³ Maureen Fries, 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes', in *Arthurian Women*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 59–76 (p. 61).

⁷⁴ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 155.

⁷⁵ Fries, 'Female Heroes', p. 65.

buried richly and worshipfully: motivations which make less sense if Elaine arrives ensconced in gold and gossamer.

John William Waterhouse's 1888 painting *The Lady of Shallot*, part of a tripartite sequence on Tennyson's poem which comprised Waterhouse's first foray into Pre-Raphaelitism, gives the viewer more of what they would expect from a Victorian Arthuriana painting.⁷⁶ The work's unwavering fidelity to nature, its flickering candles, crucifix and stuttering lantern, not to mention its – admittedly masterful – use of a flat, rainfall colour palette betray the 'extraordinary precision of accessory detail' characteristic of nineteenth-century evocations of Elaine.⁷⁷ The journey of the body is an interstitial space whose boundaries are the moments of death and of discovery. For this reason, Muriel Whitaker argues that paintings which depict this death-voyage lack a psychological drama of their own, and thus landscaping instead provides justification for the choice of subject matter.⁷⁸ The addition of candles by Waterhouse was one such effort to 'complete' the composition, the Lady purportedly using them to perform some devotional function. These choices, and the assumptions which underlie them, reinforce Whitaker's assertion that the psychological drama of such scenes has already been spent: the Lady is already dead. Waterhouse's unfailing naturalism, the sheer consistency of his visual worlds, led contemporaries to accuse him of demystifying the 'weird' myths which were so often their subject matter.⁷⁹ This claim, whilst compelling, is perhaps overly reductive. Where there is not necessarily drama in the theatrical or immediate sense, there is definitely *tension*, and this tension is itself dramatic. The death-scene is also a female assertion of embodiment, and the sort of tinkering employed by Waterhouse and other painters, in Virginie Greene's words, 'underlines the impossibility of representing what the Demoiselle d'Escalot stands for: a woman.'⁸⁰

Anderson's painting offers few such embellishments; its landscape, whilst natural and detailed, is far from the faithful realism we see in Waterhouse's painting. The only significant additions are the Astolat banner, the carved dragon's-head prow and the mourning, muted figure of the servant boatman. Here the oarsman isn't a stoic, stygian ferryman but fulfils more closely his role as silent foil, conveying the mourning of the Astolat family but – by virtue his muteness – not overriding Elaine's intended and embodied messaging. This oarsman is one of exceptionally few, perhaps even the only man to feature in Anderson's oeuvre. She was a painter of women and children, and this is where we should assume her sympathies can be found; the oarsman, whilst mourning, serves to inflect our thoughts about Elaine, not to distract. The apparent despair of the oarsman, who takes a moment away from rowing to bury his head in his hands, is a fairly heavy-handed indication of Anderson's intended reading: we are to mourn, as he does, the loss of something beautiful. The Christian symbolism remains, but only as a subtle relief of a cross carved into the stern. Elaine herself shines brilliantly: more brilliantly than in her other representations, and here a high, desaturating light makes a marble statue of her corpse, prefiguring her eventual entombment and emphasizing the purity symbolized by the ever-present and closely clutched lily. The sheer solidity of Elaine as a figure compared to the oarsman, whose skin tones and clothing effectively render him a part of the background, foregrounds her both literally and in the painting's narrative. Our attention, and

⁷⁶ Trippi, 'John William Waterhouse', p. 17.

⁷⁷ Greene, 'How the Demoiselle d'Escalot Became a Picture', p. 43.

⁷⁸ Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, p. 218.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Waterhouse's Imagination', in *J. W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite*, ed. by Peter Trippi (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), pp. 23–26 (p. 23).

⁸⁰ Greene, 'How the Demoiselle d'Escalot Became a Picture', p. 44.

our sympathies, are directed her way, and almost all other elements simply supplement the painting's overwhelming pathos. In this way Anderson achieves in broad daylight that which painters like Grimshaw and Rosenthal tried to draw from the darkness.

Despite contemporary characterizations of Anderson as a fundamentally conservative – even prudish – artist whose work merely rejected vice and celebrated virtue, it is possible for a vision of Elaine to emerge from her art which is more cynical, more aware and more artistically effective than her celebrated contemporaries.⁸¹ Anderson's sentimentality may have limited the scope and type of her critical reception – may, even, have limited her artistic output – but in the case of *Elaine* that sentimentality allows her to treat the subject with a pathos, an understanding, and a critical temperament which more closely matches that of the modern viewer and reader.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁸¹ Nichols, 'In Depth'.