FLOATING DOWN BEYOND CAMELOT:
THE LADY OF SHALOTT AND THE AUDIO-VISUAL IMAGINATION

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Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” provided the perfect nourishment for a Victorian reading public fascinated by tragic stories of damsels in distress, particularly if the setting was medieval and King Arthur made an appearance. The story of the fair Lady, cursed to die after disobeying the mysterious command that forced her to weave in her tapestry the images reflected in her mirror without looking directly at Camelot, captivated the imagination of contemporary artists, including members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although it ceased to be a favoured subject matter for painters after the First World War, the appeal of the Lady never died. Her story keeps inspiring writers, musicians and filmmakers; quotations from the poem are used in books, sometimes providing a novel its title, in songs and films. My purpose in the pages that follow is to look at the journey travelled by the Lady from a 13th-century Tuscan novella to a 21st-century TV series, using my own encounter(s) with her as narrative thread. It is a modest but heart-felt attempt to thank María Luisa Dañobeitia Fernández for having fanned my passion for literature and sharing with me her knowledge about virtually everything for almost two decades.

INTRODUCTION: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Whenever I am writing on my computer at home, as is the case now, all I have to do is lift my eyes from the screen to be greeted by a framed print of John William Waterhouse’s Lady of Shalott. The original painting, finished in 1888, is one of the many pictorial interpretations of Tennyson’s poem and the first by Waterhouse, who painted three different canvases, each corresponding to a distinct moment in the poem. The print in front of me is possibly the most popular of the three. Sitting in her boat, the Lady is holding in her hand the chain which tied the vessel to the pier, letting it go so that the boat can float down the river, whilst opening her mouth in what seems to be the beginning of her dying song. The light wind that blows her long, red hair has extinguished all but one of
the three candles placed on the prow, next to a crucifix, as if anticipating her imminent death. No matter how often I stare at it, it never fails to move me.

There are innumerable replicas of this painting in different formats spread all over the world. Since my first encounter with Waterhouse’s Lady at the Tate in 1993, I have seen her not only in art books, postcards and posters, but also on mouse-pads, mugs, notebooks, fridge-magnets and, needless to say, countless internet sites. It is always the same Lady, with the same sorrowful face, the same white gown and long, red hair; and yet each reproduction is different, not just in the inevitable slight changes in colour, but also in the way each of them interacts with its particular environment and with the personal narrative of its beholders.

My very own print is over a sofa that is in my study mostly for my cats’ benefit. On some occasions, all four of them are sleeping on it, sometimes there is only one (or two, or three), and others it is empty; the cats move, change position, leave, and come back again. Human members of the family are also allowed to sit or lie on the sofa, usually sharing it with its righteous feline owners. Irrespective of what is going on below her, outside the margins of her frame, the Lady remains immutable. As in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “[s]he cannot fade”, forever starting her song, forever loosening her hold on the chain, forever beginning to die whilst not quite doing so; frozen in time, yet forever speaking to the viewer. Indeed, far from ending in death before she reached Camelot, the Lady’s journey continues. Having travelled from Scalot to Shalott via Astolat, she still appeals to different imaginations, moves into sundry genres, generates multiple interpretations. She keeps floating down beyond Camelot.
I first met the Lady of Shalott not in Tennyson’s ballad but in Loreena McKennitt’s magnificent musical rendition of the poem. The album in which the song is included, *The Visit*, was released in 1991. I was then in my fourth year at university and taking my first course in English Literature, but no poem by Tennyson was part of the syllabus. I was incredibly moved by the song and, having read in the booklet included in the CD the name of the author of the lyrics, I took the second volume of my *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, hoping to find it. There it was: “ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809-1892)”, on page 1092; “The Lady of Shalott”, on page 1100. I still remember the thrill of the moment, the watery eyes that made it difficult to read the poem and, then as now, McKennitt’s song accompanying my reading. I have never been able to read the poem without listening to her song in my mind. A couple of years later, in the autumn of 1993, I visited the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) for the first time, looking for “the Lady”. Not having seen any reproduction, it was an extraordinary experience. Overwhelmed by its beauty and pathos, I stood looking at the painting for I don’t know how long, completely enthralled, once again moved to tears and, inevitably, listening to McKennitt’s song in my mind.

Twenty years have passed since my first encounter with the Lady of Shalott, and in the course of this time, I have always kept an eye on her. Although not my field of expertise, I developed a passion for the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers and for Victorian narrative painting in general. All this started with Loreena McKennitt’s song, one of the many prints left by the Lady on a long journey that is recorded as having started in an anonymous 13th-century Tuscan *novella*.

“WHO IS THIS? AND WHAT IS HERE?” FROM SCALOT TO SHALOTT

When Tennyson wrote the first version of “The Lady of Shalott” in 1832 he was only twenty-three years old, not yet as well versed in medieval scholarship and Arthurian lore as he would become later in life. In 1842, he published a revised version of the poem, which has remained the definitive one, and some years later went back to the story of the Lady’s unrequited love for Lancelot in the episode “Lancelot and Elaine” of his *Idylls of the King*, the cycle of Arthurian legends which he published between 1856 and 1885. In January 1868, Tennyson connected his Lady of Shalott to Malory’s Maid of Astolat when he told F.J. Furnivall:

I met the story first in some Italian *novella* […] the Lady Of Shalott is evidently the Elaine of the *Morte D’Arthur*, but I do not think I had ever heard of the latter when I wrote the former. […] I doubt whether I should ever have put it in that shape if I had been then aware of the Maid of Astolat. (Quoted in Hodder 1989:62)

The source Tennyson referred to turned out to be a story included in a collection of medieval Tuscan *novelle* known as *Il Novellino: “Novella LXXI*
‘Qui conta come la damigella di Scalot morì per amore di Lancialotto del Lac’” (Potwin 1902:237). The poet’s statement regarding the source of his story remains interestingly vague and makes one wonder about his sincerity. It may very well be the case that the Italian story was more present in his mind, but it is almost certain that Tennyson must have read Malory in his childhood, since one of the 1816 editions of the Morte D’Arthur was in his father’s library, to which the young Tennyson had free access. According to Hodder (op.cit.:63), this elusiveness may not necessarily mean that Tennyson was lying, but it does display “a reluctance to be seen as too thoroughly under the influence of a source”.

Be it as it may, after reading the Italian novella and Malory’s account of the tragic story of the fair maid of Astolat, one has to agree with L.S. Potwin in that “Tennyson’s poem deviates as much from this novella as from Malory” (op. cit.: 238); he took whatever he pleased from both sources while composing a story of his own, including the magic element of the curse, the web and the mirror. Like any other text, Tennyson’s ballad constructs itself, following Foucault, “only on the basis of a complex field of discourse […]. [I]t is caught up in a system of references […] it is a node within a network” (1972:23; quoted in Harrison 2002: 260). Malory and the anonymous author(s) of Il Novellino worked on a story of unrequited love, while Tennyson chose to focus on the Lady’s cursed isolation and the weariness this state brought upon her.

In 1970, Flavia M. Alaya summarised as follows the different interpretations “The Lady of Shalott” had been subjected to:

Treated as one of Tennyson’s psychological cryptograms, it has been construed as an equivocal statement of the paradox of desire and denial (what the Lady wants she cannot get) or desire and death (what the Lady wants is taken from her by death). Treated as a companion piece to other early Tennyson poems allied in theme – “The Hesperides,” “The Lotos-Eaters,” and “The Palace of Art,” in particular – it is usually read as an expression of the unresolved dialectic assumed to be characteristic of the early Tennyson, artistic detachment vs. social responsibility. (Alaya 1970:273)

Whereas Potwin had summarised the story as “a new version of the old theme of Dying for Love” (op. cit.:239), feminist critics ¹ establish a clear link between the situation of the Lady and the condition of women living in Victorian England, while others, such as Hodder, consider some of those readings “literal-minded and facetious” (1989:72, referring to Henderson (1978)) and argue that “the persona of the Lady allegorizes Tennyson’s own existence as an artist” (op. cit.:73). Jeffers (2001:60) brings together the implications that the Lady’s gender and her role as artist may bear on the interpretation of the poem. For him, it is necessary to see the Lady as an artist

who is not simply a stand-in for Tennyson, the poet, manifesting his feelings of effeminization and marginalization, but who is specifically a woman artist. She shares some of the advantages and disadvantages a man artist had in Tennyson’s time to contend with, but she has advantages and disadvantages peculiar to her sex, too. 2

Furthermore, the reader versed in mythology will not fail to notice the Lady’s particular craft, which connects her to famous mythological female weavers, such as the doomed Arachne or the powerful Nordic and Germanic goddesses, becoming even more meaningful in the context of the Arts and Crafts Movement, when weaving became an esteemed art in its own right. Weaving tapestries on a hand-loom had been one of [William] Morris’s passionate projects while running his furnishing and decorative arts company, Morris & Co. (Stevens 2008:72)

Given that weaving was a very important symbol for the Pre-Raphaelites (ibid.) it should come as no surprise that the story of the Lady of Shalott became a favourite subject matter for their paintings.

“SHE LOOKED DOWN TO CAMELOT”: FROM WORD TO IMAGE

Much to his chagrin, Tennyson was one of the most illustrated poets in the Victorian period, only surpassed by Longfellow (Kooistra 2002:394). Of his poems, “Mariana” and “The Lady of Shalott” were the most frequently illustrated. According to Jeffers (2002:205), there were at least 35 recorded versions of each poem, while Kooistra elevates the number of illustrations of “The Lady of Shalott” to 50, “a particularly good example of a poem with multiple illustrators” (op.cit.:401) and, consequently, with multiple visual interpretations.

The Moxon edition of Tennyson’s poems (1857) contains two illustrations for “The Lady of Shalott”, a headpiece by William Holman Hunt and a tailpiece by D.G. Rossetti. Tennyson’s wife had recommended Elizabeth Siddall as illustrator, but Moxon rejected her sketch (Hodder 1989:79-80). The selected plates provided two different readings of the poem, Holman Hunt’s being rather moralistic in its presentation of the Lady as a “fallen woman”, with her Medusa-like hair and the religious symbols included in the plate. Following Kooistra (2002:403-404):

The reader is offered the option of receiving the poem as a general spiritual allegory showing the inevitable downfall of those who follow an earthly rather than a spiritual path in life; or as a specific social allegory expressing anxiety

about unlicensed female sexuality. The two readings are not, of course, incompatible.

In contrast, the tailpiece by D.G. Rossetti gives prominence to Lancelot, who looks down at the dead Lady, unaware that he has been the cause of her demise. They are physically together but separated by death, which renders their union impossible while elevating the Lady to a different level. For Kooistra:

Rossetti’s illustration thus responds to the scopic and sexual themes of a text concerned with desire and its limits. His image makes the Lady herself – rather than Hunt’s crucified Christ – the icon and spiritual centre of the poem. (op. cit.:404)

Tennyson expressed his dissatisfaction with both illustrations, but particularly with Holman Hunt’s reading of the poem, arguing that “[a]n illustrator ought never add anything to what he finds in the text” (quoted in Bolen 2004:13). Ruskin replied to Tennyson’s complaints in a letter containing a very accurate statement about the relationship established between a poem and its illustrations, one that is applicable in our days to the ongoing debate concerning film adaptations of literary works. For Ruskin, good pictures could never be just illustrations of a poem:

they are always another poem, subordinate but wholly different from the poet’s conception, and serve chiefly to show the reader how variously the same verses may affect various minds. (Quoted in Jeffers 2002:232)

Holman Hunt had chosen to illustrate the climactic moment of the poem, when the curse falls upon the Lady, whereas Rossetti selected the ending. Many other painters favoured these two events, while some preferred to portray the Lady at her loom. Of the latter group, Sidney Harold Meteyard and John William Waterhouse concentrated on portraying the Lady’s weariness, presenting her taking a rest from her work, reclining on her chair (much more languidly in the case of Meteyard’s), and looking at the couple of lovers reflected in her mirror. Both Meteyard and Waterhouse entitled their versions of 1913 and 1916, respectively, “I am Half-Sick of Shadows”, Said the Lady of Shalott.

Waterhouse had worked on yet another version of the story, choosing the climax of the poem for The Lady of Shalott Looking at Lancelot (1894). On this occasion, Waterhouse captures the instant in which the Lady turns her back on the mirror, which reflects Lancelot’s helmet, and looks directly at the viewer, positioned where the window should be, while the thread traps her legs, making it difficult for her to advance towards the window and the viewer. Thus, Waterhouse depicted three key moments of the poem: the Lady at her loom

3. An extensive collection of paintings on the topic of the Lady of Shalott can be found at The Lady of Shalott in Art (<http://www.angelfire.com/me2/camelot/shalottArt6.html>).
(1916), the Lady looking at Lancelot (1894), and the Lady in her boat (1888), telling the story backwards, if we look at the dates of composition of each painting. The three of them, together with Holman Hunt’s canvas of 1886-1905 and George Henry Boughton’s *The Road to Camelot* (1901) are acknowledged as the visual sources of inspiration for the film *The Lady of Shalott*, an audiovisual rendering of Tennyson’s poem released in 2009. However, the choice of actress, red-haired Victoria Rigby (below in a scene from the film), hints at Waterhouse’s earliest painting as the first source of inspiration.

The 1888 painting is possibly the most easily recognisable portrait of the Lady. Its popularity has been recently used to provide a visual comment on the issues raised in the film *V for Vendetta* (2007). As I have argued somewhere else (Carretero González 2010:214), in a movie which uses the mask and the mirror as tropes to reinforce the pervasive contrast between appearances and reality in a totalitarian state, Waterhouse’s painting, kept protected with many other works of art by the terrorist/hero V in his aptly named Shadow Gallery, speaks volumes without uttering a single word. The painting also anticipates V’s ending, since challenging reality, as the Lady did, brings about the protagonist’s death. And yet, just as the Lady before dying saw “the water lily bloom [...] the helmet and the plume”, preferable to the shadows offered by the mirror, V succeeded in shaking his fellow citizen off the half-dead existence they had unwittingly chosen in exchange for safety.
“THEY HEARD HER SINGING HER LAST SONG”: FROM VERSE TO MUSIC

Just as “The Lady of Shalott” became a fruitful source of inspiration for painters, some of its lines have been used as titles for books, quotes within stories, or have inspired parallel narratives with an alternative ending. The poem has not failed to captivate some musicians’ imagination. As early as 1917, when he was only 19, Olivier Messiaen composed his first work, a piece for piano entitled *La dame de Shalott*. It remains unpublished, and the composer regarded it as “a very childish piece” (“Messiaen: A short biography”). Yet, it is interesting to know that his very first attempt at composing was inspired by Tennyson’s poem. I knew of Messiaen’s composition only after an internet search which led me to other works, including a reference to Shalott in the song “Left me a fool”, by the Indigo Girls, and in “If I die Young”, by The Band Perry. For my purposes here, I just want to comment briefly on two artists whose work is much more than a musical rendition of Tennyson’s poem. Loreena McKennitt’s “The Lady of Shalott” and Emilie Autumn’s “Shalott” provide two very interesting cases of refractive intertextuality, in the sense intended by Onega and Gutleben:

We have applied the visual metaphor to designate a double process involving the ways in which a text exploits and integrates both the reflections of a previous text and the new light shed on the original work by its rewriting. In contrast to the often studied notions of parody or intertextuality, which usually concentrate on the result of the interaction between a text and its hypotext(s), refraction involves the assumption of a dialectic relationship between the canonical and the postmodernist texts, affecting the result as well as the source, the new text as well as the old one, the modern product as well as the original prototype. (Onega and Gutleben 2004:7)

Born in Manitoba, Canada, in 1957, Loreena McKennitt’s music is the result of her fascination by the Celts and their history and of her constant exploration of the “rich, ancient *tapestry* of sounds and rhythms and stories [my italics]” (“Loreena McKennitt introduces herself”) woven together by common threads discernible in folk music, legends and literature. As she explains in the documentary *No Journey’s End* (2004), while studying Spanish medieval literature, McKennitt was intrigued by the way Arthurian legends could have been influenced by poetry coming from the North of Africa via Spain through the Moorish community. In composing “The Lady of Shalott” she was paying tribute not only to Tennyson, but also to these southern influences on Arthurian legends. McKennitt’s live performances are a delight for the senses, a sort of neo-medieval musical celebration. Even her looks, with her long red hair and long skirts contribute to the performance, making her a perfect model for a Lady

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of Shalott, the web substituted by a Celtic harp. As I said at the opening of this essay, her rendering of Tennyson’s words have shapen the way I experience any contact with the Lady of Shalott, in any of the many adopted formats.

Just as Loreena McKennitt draws her inspiration mostly from folklore and the medieval period, Emilie Autumn (Los Angeles, 1979) looks back on the Victorian era for her songwriting. Although she best describes her music as “glam rock”, Autumn is also happy with the term “Victoriandustrial” (Ohanesian 2009), as her music is inspired by Victorian themes and the locomotive sounds of the Industrial Revolution. The album Opheliac, in which the song “Shalott” is included, revolves around the Victorian fascination with tragic heroines, like Shakespeare’s Ophelia or the ubiquitous Lady of Shalott. In “Shalott”, Autumn refuses to make the Lady the passive victim of the mysterious curse, and transforms her into a woman who, “half-sick of shadows”, decides to confront her fate and bravely meet her death, rather than wait for it to come while she leads an already half-dead existence, choosing the open air, rather than her stifling prison, as her grave. Before dying, the Lady even sarcastically acknowledges her upcoming immortality when she realises that “some drama queen is gonna write a song for me”. Autumn’s Lady does not die singing but anticipating that Autumn herself will be the author and performer of her song.

CONCLUSION: THE JOURNEY NEVER ENDS

My most recent encounter with another textual reference to the Lady of Shalott happened in the course of writing this essay. After almost a month had gone by since I had received the fifth series of the TV drama Lewis (a spin-off from the Inspector Morse TV series) I decided that it was time to open the box and watch the first episode, “Old, Unhappy, Far Off Things”. I could hardly believe my ears when, in the last minute of the film, DS Hathaway, Lewis’s extremely intelligent and learned assistant, quoted from Tennyson’s poem: “Out flew the web and floated wide”. Lewis recognises the line but wonders what brought it to Hathaway’s mind. “A pure and virtuous maiden cursed to fall in love and die half-mad for the want of it” is Hathaway’s reply, thus explaining the reasons that led the murderer in this episode to kill her lover and, years later, immolate herself.

As I type the finishing words in this essay, I cannot help but wonder what shape my new encounter with the Lady will take. I wonder, too, how many people will be looking right now at Waterhouse’s painting, either in her room at the Tate or in any of the formats chosen to reproduce her. I have visited her on quite a few occasions since our first encounter in 1993. Although time must be leaving an imprint on her that my untrained eyes fail to see, I have changed in a way the Lady cannot.

Life has also changed at home since I started writing this essay. Just a few days before the submission deadline expired, a new kitten decided to share his life with ours, and is now a fully-fledged member of the family who has already
spent some time on the sofa below “the Lady”. For the moment, however, he prefers to contribute to this essay by following me around with my computer, typing on the keyboard or lying on my books. Life goes on around the dying Lady, and yet I know better than to think she will ever die. She cannot fade, there is no end to the Lady’s journey; or, as Bilbo would word it, her road “goes ever on an on”.

REFERENCES


