Waterhouse Transfigured

Reinterpreting the Paintings of John William Waterhouse through History, Performance and Costume

Exhibition and Performance
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EXHIBITION CATALOGUE
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Introduction

“Waterhouse Transfigured” is a visual and performative homage to the work of Victorian painter John William Waterhouse (1849-1917). Highlighting five paintings from Waterhouse’s body of work, “Waterhouse Transfigured” gives these images not only three dimensions, but discusses their place in history and gives these “old tales new skins” (Donoghue 1). Blending theatrical sets and costumes with monologues based on literary texts as well as historical analysis, “Waterhouse Transfigured” endeavors to create a new way of viewing and experiencing artwork, one that thrives upon encountering the artwork as a live performance. The following pages serve as a documentary of the exhibition, featuring excerpts from the exhibition’s text, both spoken and printed, as well as images of the public’s interaction with “Waterhouse Transfigured.”

Waterhouse’s paintings have enjoyed an ongoing popularity, beginning during his lifetime and continuing through to today. His work exerts a very human appeal—instead of gruesome monsters, we are presented with warm-blooded, sensitive women, “with their own youth and their inimitable combination of modesty and sexuality imbued with the painter’s own creative imagination” (Hobson 9). In all of his paintings, Waterhouse shows us “the moment in the story at which everything stands still for our contemplation” (Hobson 9).
The Magic Circle

"...I don’t have a name. I don’t need a name. What would I do with a name? I’m the Witch. The one in your dreams. In your nightmares..."
Out of all the paintings highlighted here, The Magic Circle is the only one whose subject matter is not derived directly from the literary canon. The viewer is left to create a story for this figure in his or her own mind. But isn’t this always what happens when a story is re-told, re-interpreted, or ‘transfigured’?

This painting was chosen to serve as an introduction to this exhibition precisely because it has no story, and thus could possibly be every story. In the same way that old characters are given new forms and meanings based on the attitudes of the times they are being re-formed in, so each of the stories included here are given new voices. In the words of Judith Yarnall, “Stories also have stories” (1).
The witch figure is casting a circle in which she will undoubtedly perform her magic. The cypress tree and rough cliffs visible in the background give the painting an exotic, if undefined, locale. The witch is accompanied by several crows, birds often associated with the occult, and in Celtic mythology, associated with the Morrigan, Celtic goddess of war. Instead of a condemnation of the occult, like other images of witch figures like Sandys’ rendition of Morgan le Fay, Waterhouse gives his witch a concentrated, intriguing expression. The Greek-warrior-like figure visible at the hem of her dress is here re-interpreted as an image of Athena, Greek goddess of war.
'I am half-sick of shadows,'

said the Lady of Shalott

Laura Amaya Becvar as The Lady of Shalott

"...My fingers are tired of weaving false hopes,
weaving myself into the life I long to have. My
neck is strained from tiny stitches..."
Out of all of the female characters that peopled the Victorian imagination, perhaps none of them was as fascinating as the Lady of Shalott. Tennyson’s poem tells the story of a young woman cursed to live a solitary life locked in a tower downriver from the Camelot of Arthurian legend. She sat at her loom and wove the scenes she saw in her magic mirror, for she must never look through her window at Camelot. Witnessing the happiness of the people she saw in her mirror, and especially the sight of Sir Lancelot, caused her to eventually bring the curse upon herself as she gazed outside her window. The poem then describes her setting off down the river in a boat and breathing her last as she entered Camelot, and the poem ends with Sir Lancelot admiring her tragic, dead beauty.

That Tennyson gives the reader much more information about the isolated setting than about the Lady herself contributes to the tragic mystery of the poem. As Kelly states:

How shapely the original is! How its shape is lovelier than its logic if that could be. (It can’t be). How the shapely waist of the poem pinches the middle of the story until we lose what really happened, and are left only with her loneliness. I mean loneliness. Loneliness. Loveliness. Loneliness. How did she die? Of her own beauty? Is that the ‘curse’ Tennyson speaks of, a fated perfection of line and color, ominous as Psyche’s beauty? (ii)

The literary origin of the Lady of Shalott lies in the story of Elaine of Astolat who died of a broken heart over Sir Lancelot, but it is Tennyson’s Lady who captured the Victorian imagination through her domestic, contemplative life, her fateful enclosure in her gray tower, and her eventual tragic death. Critics and artists usually emphasize two key themes in the poem: “the embowered lady isolated from life and love and the conflict between the artist’s own sensual vision and his need to experience life directly” (Nelson 4).
This painting is Waterhouse’s third and final portrayal of the tragic Lady. He chose to paint what is said to be the key moment in the poem, when the Lady first expresses a dissatisfaction with the only life she knows. The “shadows of the world” which she sees are only that—by not participating in the world, the Lady is prevented from understanding the world outside her window. The motifs on the Lady’s dress (a small departure from the original painting) portray scenes of knights and ladies, but they make no more sense than they would to the Lady herself.

The Lady of Shalott was a popular subject for Victorian painters. Unlike another well-known version of this subject by William Holman Hunt, Waterhouse’s portrayal is of a more “natural, realistically constructed space” (Landow 171). Placing the figure towards the left, away from the central mirror, emphasizes the contrast between the light and airy image in the mirror and the dark interior space.
Ophelia’s mind went wandering. You’d wondered where she’d gone. Through secret doors, down corridors, she wanders them all alone...
Ophelia is arguably one of Shakespeare’s most interesting heroines. She is a very good example of the tragic female character—unable to cope with the events surrounding her, she goes mad, and eventually drowns. As related in Hamlet, Ophelia is daughter to Polonius, advisor to Claudius, the new King of Denmark. Towards the beginning of the play, Ophelia is instructed by Polonius to resist Hamlet’s increasing romantic attentions. Ophelia’s place in Hamlet’s affection is manipulated by a paranoid Claudius in order to grasp Hamlet’s motives, prompting Hamlet to reject Ophelia when he senses her betrayal. Hamlet accidentally stabs Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius as he eavesdrops on a conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude, his mother. This event proves to be too much for Ophelia’s unraveling sanity, and after her famous ‘mad scene,’ a description of her drowning in a nearby river is related to the audience by Gertrude.
Shakespeare’s Hamlet has been interpreted and re-interpreted in performance since it was first written. Discourse and debate over Hamlet’s real or feigned madness, the possible incestuous relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude, and multiple other elements of the plot have colored this play’s performance history. Treatment of Ophelia’s character is no different. According to Showalter, “portrayal of Ophelia’s madness has often reflected and influenced changing views of madwomen in society at large” (para. in Hapgood 39). But beyond the social implications of Ophelia’s insanity, there lies the fascination with her in the Romantic imagination. Auerbach lists the various reasons for this fascination:

Ophelia’s ‘mermaidlike’ suspension between natural growth and living death, the details of botany and the incantations of art, the pathos of sanity and the florid triumph of madness, aligned her with other compelling hybrid women—the water nixies, Undines, mermaids, lamias, and serpent women who haunted Victorian dreams of a new dispensation (238).
Waterhouse’s portrayal of Ophelia, the second of his career, shows her in the anguished throes of madness. Her eventual death by drowning is alluded to by the river in the background and by her handfuls of flowers she was said to be collecting when she slipped into the murky water. Compared to Waterhouse’s earlier version of the same subject, this painting is much more tense and foreboding. The bright blue and red fabric of Ophelia’s dress contrasts sharply with the subdued greens of vegetation and the almost black water of the river. The lion motif at the hem of her dress alludes to Ophelia’s status in the Danish court. True to his typical choice of dramatic moment, Waterhouse painted not the shocking moment of death like his predecessor Millais, but rather a less violent but equally stirring moment in the narrative.
Circe Invidiosa

Rebekah Pipolo as Circe Invidiosa

“I lift the oiled hair at my nape.
Prismatic, the robe sighs
from my back. None of it’s real--
my ripe lips, breasts mapped
with green veins: hocus pocus--
sawdust and wax.
Beautiful sawdust. Beautiful wax...”
Consistent with his choice of story to tell in The Metamorphoses, Ovid's tale of Circe, Scylla, and Glaucus, represented by this painting, is a tale of transformation, gruesome and nefarious. Glaucus, a merman, happened upon Scylla, a human woman, as she was walking by the ocean, and he fell in love with her. Hoping to elicit her sympathy, Glaucus told Scylla his own story of magic transformation into his fishy form, but Scylla was repulsed by his supernatural appearance and fled from him. Glaucus sought out Circe, renowned for her sorcery, in order to ask her to mix him a love-charm to win Scylla's affections. But Circe had designs on Glaucus herself, and after being rejected by him, instead mixed a noxious poison for Scylla and poured it into the sea-cove where she usually bathed. When Scylla stepped into the water, her legs were transformed into horrible barking dogs, and Scylla became a monster.
Circe’s character has been one of the most fascinating from Greek mythology because of her tendency to transform. From her inception into the literary canon in Homer’s Odyssey, literary perceptions and attitudes towards Circe have varied widely, from woman to sorceress to goddess, tempting femme fatale to disillusioned wise woman.

Especially during the Romantic era, Circe represented all that was dangerously fascinating about the female sex. Various artists emphasized different aspects of her character—her sorcery, her sexuality—but she is always given power through these characteristics. This provides an interesting counterpoint when contrasted with this time period’s obsession with the virtuous and angelic wife and mother. Circe seems to stand as the polar opposite of this, yet she was still a compelling painter’s subject, and not quite always to serve as a negative example.

Circe Invidiosa, the second time Waterhouse painted the sorceress, does not show the most vivid image from the Glaucus/Scylla tale, Scylla’s monstrous transformation. Yet again, Waterhouse chose to paint a dramatic moment that shows the figure locked in their motivating emotion rather than a gruesome event from the narrative. The viewer cannot escape Circe’s powerful gaze as she pours the green poison, the very embodiment of her envy, into the sea. She is less supernatural and more human than many other portrayals, but the intensity of her gaze and the way that she stands on the back of a sea-serpent reminds the viewer of her otherworldly associations. The envy she is experiencing is emphasized by the heavy use of the color green in the painting, traditionally associated with envy.
"How I long to feel your lips against mine, but alas, our parents forbid it. There is nothing to do but to want and to wait..."
Thisbe's story is one of tragic love. Ovid, in The Metamorphoses, relates that she was desperately in love with Pyramus, the son of the neighboring family, but their parents had forbade them to marry. Pyramus and Thisbe discovered a crack in the mutual wall between their two houses, and thus were still able to share their affection despite their parent's prohibitions. They eventually planned a tryst outside the city under a mulberry tree beside a famous tomb. Thisbe arrived to the spot early and happened upon a lioness just after a kill. Fleeing, Thisbe dropped her veil, which the lioness picked up in her bloody jaws. Then Pyramus arrived, and seeing the lioness with Thisbe's bloody veil, he thought that Thisbe was the lioness' victim. Anguished at the thought of living without his love, Pyramus stabbed himself. Thisbe came out from her hiding-place, and seeing her dead lover, stabbed herself with his sword. Their blood was said to spurt so forcefully that it stained the white berries of the mulberry tree dark purple, which is why they are that color today.
Unlike all the other stories featured here, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe lies somewhere between the serious and the comic. The sexual innuendo provided by the hole in the wall and Pyramus’ sword, as well as the description of the lovers’ blood spraying so high it stained berries on a tree emphasize the comic overtones of the story, which has colored later re-tellings of this tale by authors like Gongora and Shakespeare.

However, Waterhouse’s rendition of the Pyramus and Thisbe tale steers away from the comic leanings of this story. He depicts Thisbe listening at the wall, perhaps to Pyramus’ suggestion that they meet outside the city. The lotus motifs on Thisbe’s dress and the floor tiling give the painting “an Assyrian flavor” (Brookhampton 32). Waterhouse’s decision to paint from this story can be traced to the theme of unrequited, tragic love. And he again chose to paint a moment not of action, but of tension and decision, still crucial to the story.
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