

RE-READING THE LADY OF SHALOTT

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ABSTRACT

Tennyson's poem is a clear site of the ideological divide that existed between the Victorian patriarchy and women. They had a gendered and class view of the separate spheres and functions of both the sexes. In choosing to sail alone on a boat like a sailor, the Lady tries to appropriate 'penetration' into the male world disregarding the doctrines of religion and medical world that helped generously to aid gender identity. The Lady, in contrast to Tennyson's construct, refuses to be contained and tries to reverse the divide so much prevalent in her time.

KEYWORDS: Shalott, Reading

INTRODUCTION

Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class* in 1845 records with tremendous insight the sub-human existence of the working-class population. However, in the same treatise he also observes that the hearth belonged only to women as the factory to men, and that the employment of women in the factory "unsexes the man and takes from the woman all the womanliness" (Engels: 1845: 162). If the roles were to be reversed, the women would become breadwinners while the men would be "condemned to domesticity" (Engels: 1845: 162). His silence on the condition of the female sex is the point of departure of my argument. My paper attempts to seek if there exists a subversive relationship between Victorian patriarchy and women. Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott* (1842) will be discussed as a site where such forces come into play. Through the analysis of the poem, I will try to depict how the Victorian women appropriated, "colonised" and resisted the ideological and cultural divide so prevalent in their times. My efforts in the paper would be to prove that the inability of the lady of Shalott to enter the male world of Camelot does not diminish her capacity to defy the identity imposed on her by the male Poet Laureate of his time. I will divide the paper into three sections. The first section deals with the existence of the Lady as a pure, chaste and morally superior woman, the symbolic Victorian ideal unaffected by the new emerging classes and spaces. In the second section, I would show how the social reality gave rise to new spaces which would confirm or deny an independent existence of the females. In the third and last section, I would conclude and present my understanding of the text.

The lady of Shalott's domestic bliss is untouched by the ugly reality of social-ills and class conflicts. Her tamed existence can still not fathom the dangers posed by the masses. The dirt, filth, disorder, noise, fumes from the squalid slums still haven't invaded her domestic idyll. The Lady, with her weaving, lives a predictably satisfied, secured and safe life untouched by the changes outside.

- But who hath seen her wave her hand?
- Or at the casement seen her stand?

- Or is she known in all the land,
- The lady of Shalott?
- (Tennyson,1842)

She lives her life with “little care”. Her domestic idyll remains unscathed, and she unseen. The “four gray walls, and four gray towers” still “overlook a space of flowers”. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson in “On the Parapets of Privacy” accord to the wall a symbolic significance that separates and shields the home from the street. The Lady’s normative existence and a sheltered life is reflective of the most of the middle-class girls who were not educated to pursue ‘gainful employment’. Women were seen as domestic creatures whose lives revolved around their family and home while men were associated with the public sphere, the world of commerce, business and politics.

The idealisation of the domestic virtue in the females was boosted by a number of family magazines available to the public in the 1840s and 1850s. A number of periodicals like the *Family Herald* (1842-1839) and the *London Journal* (1845-1912) and the more ‘genteel’ publications like Dickens’ *Household Words* (1850-9) and *Eliza Cook’s Journal* (1849-54) flooded the market. These periodicals bolstered the idealised domestic Idyll with the ‘angel in the house’ as an unwavering constant. The home was to provide a sanctuary for men from the exhaustive world of business while for women it was their only life they knew. Ruskin advocates the idea of a domesticated woman who is sweet and enters into no contest and therefore protects herself from all dangers and temptations.

The blissful life of the Lady comes to an abrupt end when the outside forces invade the wall and infect her. The mirror breaks, and she sees herself clearly. She finds herself ready to threaten the fixities of the gender boundaries when she inscribes her name on a boat and sails finally into the public masculine world though it is by no means easily achievable.

Here I come to the second section of my paper which explores the existence of new social spaces. I have borrowed Anne Digby’s idea of ‘borderland’ who defines it as “a semi detached area between public and private”(Digby:1992:196). This borderland was an in-between space between the domestic private sphere and the public world. The Victorians were acquainted with the term ‘borderland’, used for insanity. The mental state acquired moral flavour under the English writer James Cowles Prichard, who in 1835 diagnosed moral insanity. According to him, the characteristics included “eccentricity of conduct, singular, and absurd habits, propensity to perform the common actions of life in a different way from that usually practiced” (as quoted in Digby:1992:197). Such an explanation was compelling particularly against the non-conforming women. Anne Digby points out, “Those who were perceived as rebelling against conservatively drawn gender boundaries might find that others saw them as inhabiting a psychiatric borderland” (Digby:1992:198). My argument takes off from this point. I would argue that the ‘borderland’ sometimes filtered the seamless entry into the impregnable phallic public sphere though it was by no means definite.

Science came to aid gender construct. The psychiatric diagnoses made it impossible for women to question their boundaries. T. B. Hyslop, the senior physician at Bethlem Royal Hospital in 1905 stated that

The removal of woman from her natural sphere of domesticity to that of mental labour not only renders her less fit to maintain the virility of the race, but it renders her prone to degenerate, and initiate a downward tendency which gathers impetus in her progeny... The departure of woman from her natural sphere to an artificial one involves a brain struggle

which is deleterious to the virility of the race... It has very direct bearings upon the increase of nervous instability. In fact, the higher women strive to hold the torch of intellect, the dimmer the rays of light for the vision of their progeny (Digby: 1992: 197).

The fear and stigma throttled their feminist aspirations, if any. Therefore, they found for themselves performative roles within the acceptable social borderland. They participated in the 1830s and 1840s in the Chartist movement and the Contagious Diseases Acts. Initially the complexities inherent in the Victorian values did not make it a radical space which could pose a fundamental challenge to a male public sphere. The philanthropic activity was one such sphere. The charity work necessitated women to work in the community relying on their personal ties and interaction. By 1894, women could become parish councillors. Mrs. Barker, the female chair of a parish council urged women to stand as parish councillors because “a polluted well, an overcrowded cottage, a barrier across a footpath, are too trivial for men to make a stir about... but... these trifles if looked into will reveal further reflects to remedy” (as quoted in Digby:1992:203). Women had appropriated the borderlands, but failed to subvert the binaries of the sphere avoiding any threat or challenge to male hegemony because they were using “familiar feminine skills in an extended, but not separate, area from their domestic territory” (Digby: 1992: 210). Women remained largely invisibilized. It was the issue of female suffrage that would upset the natural gender roles. Their “moral purity would be contaminated by entry to a public, national politics” (Digby: 1992: 211). It was understood that “only men had the rational, unemotional approach that affairs of state demanded” (Digby: 1992: 211) in addition to the physical strength that was needed to govern the empire or wage war.

Now I come to the final section of my paper. The Lady sails through the social and gender borderland in a boat with her name on it but cannot penetrate the male public world of opportunity, money, and identity without embracing death.

For ere she reached upon the tide, the first house by the waterside, singing in her song she died,

- The Lady of Shalott.
- (Tennyson, 1842)

While the social borderland was definitely non-threatening to the public world, it nevertheless gave opportunity to women to confer new identities upon themselves. Middle class women altered and redefined the public space, gradually to their advantage. The Lady does not die in ignominy rather her death liberates her from the stifling relationship with the land of her captive existence thereby creating new identity for herself. She lives in her death. Thus Tennyson’s poem celebrates the anonymous lady’s existence - thereby inviting a relook at the relationship of patriarchy and women’s subversion of it. Her refusal to live on with the curse and deny herself the security of marriage - the only acceptable destiny for the middle-class girl, can no longer contain her within the patriarchal confines. It becomes apparent that she will literally and symbolically sail for a new space where she will write her own destiny.

CONCLUSIONS

A cursory reading of the poem is suggestive of a wasted death of a lonely female in isolation. Perhaps it acts as a warning sign to such women who aspire to some adventure. But my paper suggests that the Lady does not die in ignominy. She is able to liberate herself from the stifling relationship with the land of her captive existence. Hence, creating a new identity for herself and thereby paving the way for others too. She dies to live forever

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