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“She May Count For Something”: The Pre-Raphaelite Danaë

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On the publication of William Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise* in 1868, *The Saturday Review* congratulates the poet for providing “our wives and daughters” with “a refined, though not diluted, version of those wonderful creations of Greek fancy which the rougher sex alone is permitted.” This same critic “tremble[s] to think of the treatment which Jove’s wooing of Danaë in the brazen tower would have been met with, had the ‘Doom of King Acrisius’ been handled by the author of *Chastelard*.” The critic’s fears of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “error of taste” in adapting this myth were actually well-founded (730). Swinburne had already published “Danaë” in *Once a Week* in December 1867, with suitably scandalous results; Frederick Sandys’ accompanying illustration was withheld by the magazine’s editor because, as Gordon Ray tells us, the artist “refused to cover the genitals of Danaë’s lover” (108).

The myth itself invites sexually explicit interpretation. In the story, when King Acrisius learns of the gods’ prophecy that his daughter Danaë will give birth to his killer, he imprisons her in a brass tower. Jove enters Danaë’s room and impregnates her via a mysterious shower of gold. In some versions, this gold is a bribe offered to Danaë’s guards by her uncle Proteus, who then rapes her. In all versions, Danaë’s son, Perseus, grows up to kill Acrisius. Mary Bly pinpoints the challenges of adapting the story:

The rain of gold presents itself as instantaneous consummation, the body metamorphosed into a sexual weapon. Such a direct focus on a sexual act makes the myth difficult to dramatize or foreground poetically; the image itself is hard to tame. In a sense, the Danaë myth is a perfect metaphor for rape (violation without consent or affection), and it sits uneasily in an amorous context (343).

Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists handle this uncomfortable material in various ways. Swinburne's "Danaë" (1867) and Morris's "The Doom of King Acrisius" (1868), while very different, rewrite the story as a celebration of female sexuality and artistic creativity. Frederick Sandys' illustration of Swinburne's poem enhances the story's erotics, while Edward Burne-Jones's early 1870s pictures, based on Morris's poem, evade them; they concentrate instead on the character's psychology and emotions. For Morris and Swinburne especially, Danaë's discovery of her sexual self is ultimately pleasurable and liberating, rather than morally compromising and dangerous. The Pre-Raphaelite approach is unusual for the era. Building on the movement's earlier explorations of female transgression, such as Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862), it proposes that fallenness is not a permanent condition, redemption is possible, and that men may bear some responsibility for women's "fall."

Surveying Victorian portrayals of Danaë, Pamela Gossin explains that she is frequently punished her for a transgression that is at once sexual and intellectual: "For fallen women, as for Danaë, inappropriate knowledge of one's own body, sexual knowledge, becomes associated with socially unacceptable knowledge of the outside world and the cosmos at large." Common penalties for acquiring this knowledge include "familial rejection, social banishment, exposure, or death. In nineteenth-century literary accounts, women are depicted as paying the price of this fall into knowledge" (72, 73).

Nineteenth-century audiences connected the myth of Danaë with fallenness, and more specifically with prostitution. As Joseph Kestner explains: “Because Zeus [Jove] had intercourse with Danaë in the form of a shower of gold, Danaë is the epitome of sexuality in the era of the Industrial Revolution, of the Carlylean ‘cash nexus’ permeating sexual behavior” (*Mythology and Misogyny* 40). The speaker of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s dramatic monologue “Jenny” demonstrates Kestner’s point. Leaving the titular prostitute’s fee in her hair while she sleeps, her client imagines that when Jenny wakes, she will

... rub your eyes for me, and shake

My gold, in rising, from your hair,

A Danaë for a moment there.

Jenny, my love rang true! for still

Love at first sight is vague, until

That tinkling makes him audible.

(ll. 377 – 382)

The association of contemporary prostitution with classical mythology, ironic here, emphasizes the resounding hollowness of this modern cash exchange. Jenny is only “Danaë for a moment,” and the cynical speaker’s golden shower of material coins ringing on the floor lacks the lasting potency and magic of Jove’s shower of gold. This market-driven transaction will not even result in the birth of an ordinary child, let alone a hero like Perseus. Rossetti’s speaker glibly invokes what Kestner identifies as the Danaë myth’s “archetypal image of prostitution” in the “linkage of semen with coin” (*Mythology and Misogyny* 100). JD Sloan observes that the “powerful image of gold being scattered into Jenny’s hair slides metaphorically into an image of semen being cast upon an unconscious and unresponsive prostitute” (30). Yet even as the speaker mobilizes this mythological comparison to “mock

[Jenny] to the last,” he admits that he does so because he is “Ashamed of my own shame...” (ll. 383, 384). This moment of self-awareness indicates a sneaking Pre-Raphaelite suspicion that in artistic portrayals of entrapped, fallen women, sympathy and exploitation are often two sides of the same “tinkling” coin.

The Pre-Raphaelites’ ambiguous portrayals of Danaë draw on competing interpretative traditions. Karl Kilinski tells us that the Athenians originally focus on the “masculine virility and bravado” of the tale, while later Christian interpreters turn their attention to the figure of Danaë herself, who is portrayed both as a Marian icon of purity and a symbol of female sexual vice. Kilinski notes that some recast the figure as “symbol of cosmic fecundity” and a “Renaissance emblem of purity”: the “*Ovide moralise* essentially equates Danaë with the Virgin Mary,” whereas the Dominican monk Franciscus de Retza draws parallels between Christ’s “divine conception via the Holy Spirit” and “Danaë’s impregnation by Zeus’s golden shower.” Others, however, detect something less savoury in the narrative. Following the example of St Augustine, who sees Danaë’s story as “one in which virtue has been corrupted by gold,” Renaissance writers and artists such as Corregio, Titian and Boccaccio portray Danaë as the epitome of female cunning or “an enticing prostitute,” an interpretation that informs the Victorian treatment of the character as a fallen woman (164).¹

Fallen or not, Danaë’s is an inescapably erotic character. The *Saturday Review* rightly suspects Swinburne will magnify this aspect of her story, but curiously, the reviewer does not seem to notice that Morris’s approach is far from restrained in this respect. Like Rossetti’s “Jenny,” both Morris’s and Swinburne’s poems conflate semen and gold. In Swinburne’s poem, Danaë’s “bosom thrill[s]” to the “three drops of gold” that come ‘sliding through the rafters’ to land “On Danaë’s burning breast” (IV, ll. 7, 6, 5, 6), while Morris’s heroine is “gently...smitten on the breast” by “some bright thing” that “trickle[s] down her shoulder and

her side” to “abide” first “on her limbs a little” and then “upon her feet” (ll. 341, 342, 343, 344, 345). Like Rossetti’s material coins, gold in these poems makes “audible” proto-aesthetic music. In Swinburne’s poem, “thunderous music [shakes] the cell” (IV. l. 4), while Morris’s Danaë hears “a tinkling sound” that presages the shower of gold (l. 338).

That contemporary critics overlook the erotic nature of “The Doom of King Acrisius” is a question of both reputation and style. The controversies stirred by Swinburne’s sexually explicit *Poems and Ballads* 1866 were fresher in the memory than Morris’s previous volume, *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). While that collection irked critics like H.F. Chorley as a work of affected “Pre-Raphaelite minstrelsy,” its poems were not taken to task for their sexual content (427). The narrative mode of Morris’s verse, his respectful, informed treatment of mythology, not to mention the sheer intimidating length of *The Earthly Paradise*, seems to have encouraged critics to overlook its more radical tendencies. As Jane Thomas notes, “Contemporary reviewers praised *The Earthly Paradise* because its classical and medieval nostalgia provided imaginative relief and an escape from their own increasingly materialistic, godless, and sexually challenging age” (70).

Sexual politics aside, Morris and Swinburne themselves see differences in their respective approaches that expose a conflict between Pre-Raphaelite realism and the movement’s emergent aestheticism. Swinburne finds Morris earnest and restrained, while Morris thinks Swinburne too florid and abstract. In August 1882, Morris writes to Georgiana Burne-Jones that he “never could really sympathize with Swinburne’s work” because “it always seemed to me to be founded on literature, not on nature.” Formerly, he argues, “poetry resulting merely from this intense study and love of literature” was sufficiently “worthy and enduring.” Poetry for “these days,” however, should be “rooted deepest in reality” and “quite at first hand.” Morris argues that “there is no room for anything which is

not forced out of a man of deep feeling, because of its innate strength and vision” (qtd in Henderson 239).

Swinburne, on the other hand, complains in a December 1869 letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti that Morris’s “Muse is like Homer’s Trojan women – she drags her robes as she walks; I really think a Muse (when she is neither resting nor flying) ought to tighten her girdle, tuck up her skirts, and step out.” Swinburne “hungers for more force and variety of sound in the verse,” complaining that Morris “purposefully avoided all strenuous emotion or strength of music in thought and word” (qtd in Henderson 105 – 106). Though Swinburne’s critique is based more on form and Morris’s on content, the poets unite in accusing each other of high-minded literal interpretation; the difference in their perspectives indicates an identifiably Pre-Raphaelite disagreement about what constitutes realism. Should poetry be based on nature and “rooted deepest in reality” or can poetry “founded on literature” that prioritizes “force and variety of sound” convey an emotional reality that is just as truthful?

Philip Henderson suggests that the poets are closer to one another than they appear, noting that Morris’s critique of Swinburne’s commitment to literature over life “applies with equal force (as Morris himself realized) to *The Earthly Paradise*” (239). It is not initially obvious how Morris’s revival of a myth involving supernatural insemination by a shower of gold is “rooted in reality.” Yet by focussing on Danaë’s emotions and giving voice to her thoughts both before and after her troubling encounter with Jove, Morris employs psychological realism and demonstrates what Latham and Thomas identify as “a feminist sensitivity that distinguishes him from other Pre-Raphaelites” (14).

Florence Boos has shown how “portraits of strong-willed, tormented, and ‘interesting’ women” in *The Earthly Paradise* develop from Morris’s “portraits of Medea and Circe in *The Life and Death of Jason*” that “embodied newer, more egalitarian forms of poetic sensibility”

(“Medea and Circe” 57). Thomas argues that this sensibility also distinguishes Morris from his Pre-Raphaelite fellows:

The allegiance of many Pre-Raphaelites to the feminist cause was severely compromised by a type of masculine idealization that appeared to reinforce woman’s subservient position as passive muse and spiritual repository of man’s finer instincts. In contrast Morris was acutely sympathetic to many of the aims of the feminist movement, such as the right to engage in creative work, to wear rational dress, and to enjoy a degree of sexual freedom (71).

Indeed, it is a combination of sexual pleasure and creative work that frees Danaë from patriarchal tyranny in “The Doom of King Acrisius.” Without entirely escaping the story’s associations with rape, Morris’s retelling of this myth resists the conventions of the Victorian fallen woman narrative. Already a victim of familial rejection at her story’s outset, the chaste Danaë is rescued from social banishment and spared death, not by guarding or reluctantly sacrificing her virginity, but by joyfully dispensing with it. Daniel Ogden argues that Morris’s poem “may offer a rare Victorian description of a female orgasm” (139), while Boos observes that throughout *The Earthly Paradise* “the magic charm that blunts death and villainy is healthy sexual desire”; it is worth noting that in “The Doom of King Acrisius” this healthy sexual desire is specifically female (‘The Argument,’ 78).

The window in Danaë’s chamber is crucial to this poem’s celebration of her literal and sexual liberation. The tower’s “windows small, barred, turned towards the sea” permit all sorts of transgressive gazing; they allow Danaë and her ladies to look out and the gods to look in (l. 61). A window is the means for Jove’s unconventional entrance into the action (he usually gets in through the ceiling, as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Lempriere’s *Dictionary*, or through the door, as in William Caxton’s *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy*).² A structural and representational challenge to the brazen tower’s phallic thrust, Danaë’s window

draws on and subverts traditional associations of women at windows with deviant sexuality. Instead of framing her as an object to be admired, the window allows Danaë to see: “mostly would she sit / Over against the window, watching ...” (ll. 295 – 296). The imprisoned woman samples freedom through the window as she can “feel the light wind blowing from the sea” and “watch the changing colours of the sky” (ll. 297, 312). In this, Danaë’s window participates in the conflation of looking and feeling typically encouraged by Pre-Raphaelite liminal spaces. That she positions herself both “Over” and “against” the window hints at the paradoxes inherent in thresholds. As Jonathan Hill notes, “Looking out through a window in a wall, the viewer is aware of his or her separation from the world outside, while also feeling immersed within it to some degree. Being both here and there is an experience engendered by all windows...” (21). The window is simultaneously a barrier and a means of escape. It allows Danaë to be both separated and immersed, “Over” and “against,” watcher and watched (by Venus). Unlike the Lady of Shalott, Danaë is permitted to look directly out of the window; her vision is not mediated by mirrors or magic, and she derives pleasure and power from the world outside.

Female empowerment and community, not ordinarily associated with Danaë in the period, is evoked in Morris’s poem by Diana, goddess of the hunt, who is one of his additions to the myth.³ Diana is best-known for turning Acteon into a stag to be hunted down by his own hounds after he inadvertently sees the goddess bathing. Invoking this goddess suggests that Danaë’s outrage is not reserved for captivity alone, but includes male voyeurism. She prays to Diana to make her one of the goddess’s “free maids,” a liberation that is both physical and psychological. The desire to join Diana’s women is particularly telling because they are free from the male gaze: “no man shall ever see” their “limbs unclad” (ll. 215, 210). Danaë admires Diana’s ability to scare men off, praising the “mighty maid from whom the

shepherds flee” in fear “Because they mind how dear Acteon bought / The lovely sight for which he never sought” (ll. 194; 196-197).

This solution to Acrisius’ dilemma is a radical one; instead of accepting her confinement in the tower, she will keep herself “safe from men-folk” by joining Diana’s maidens and learning to fight (l. 192). She asks the goddess not just to guard her, but to transform her into a warrior so that she can protect herself “With girt-up gown, sharp sword upon the thigh, / Full quiver on the back, stout bow in hand.” Imagining her confrontation with her enemies in visual terms, she equates a specifically female martial bravery with a soldier’s undaunted stare, aspiring to “grow strong-limbed in following up the deer, / And meet the lions eyes with little fear” (ll. 202-03, 205-06). This female warrior has a precedent in Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere*, where, as Ingrid Hanson notes, Morris “broadens” a “male fellowship of violence” in order “to include women, showing the ways in which the corporeal imagination rebels against injustice, inequality and inaction.” Even so, Morris’s warrior Danaë, whose “thigh” is displayed by her “girt-up gown,” remains to some extent a victim of the voyeurism she seeks to escape. As Hanson puts it, this sort of Morrissian innovation “is complicated by the uncomfortable erotic gaze of the poems” (62).

It is not Diana (or even Jove, as we might expect) who responds to Danaë’s prayers, but Venus, who is the first to transform her with gold. We are told that Venus has been silently intervening all along to keep “fair and bright” the captive princess’s “body” (l. 170). She performs an act of “grace” to make “the ripples of her [golden] hair” and “the colour in her face” become “brighter,” until, lying on her “golden bed,” Danaë starts to resemble the goddess herself: “You would have thought the Queen herself had come / To meet some love far from her golden home” (ll. 171 – 176; 177 – 78).⁴

Overhearing “the maid complaining bitterly,” Venus approaches the barred window of her tower:

And thence unseen, she saw the maiden lie,
 As on the grass herself she might have lain
 When in the thicket lay Adonis slain;
 For power and joy she smiled thereat, and thought
 “she shall not suffer all this pain for nought.”

(ll. 250 – 254)

Though Venus is “unseen” here, her voyeurism excites empathy rather than sexual desire; Venus decides to help Danaë because she sees herself in the human woman. Remembering what it is like to suffer pain “herself,” Venus decides to help Danaë, taking “joy” in her “power” to intervene.

Venus is like Danaë in another way; she has a powerful “father,” Jove. But whereas Danaë is victimized by Acrisius, Venus is respected and honoured by “the father of both gods and men” (258). She appeals to his vanity when asking for his help, arguing that domestic abuse is as insulting to the gods as human attempts to dodge fate. Venus persuades Jove by explaining that not only should King Acrisius be punished for his hubristic attempt “to ’scape his doom,” but also that “... great dishonour is it unto me / That such a maiden lives so wretchedly” (ll. 267, 269-70). Jove supports and reassures her:

Then said the Thunderer, “Daughter, nowise so
 Shall this be in the end; heed what shall fall,
 And let none think that any brazen wall
 Can let the Gods from doing what shall be.”

(ll. 278 – 281)

Although Danaë is unaware of the gods' machinations, she endorses their violence, saying: "Father, thy blood upon thine own head be / If any solace Venus send to me" (ll. 235 – 236)

In entering the tower via beams of sunlight, Jove exploits the ways in which material architecture (wall) is vulnerable to the immaterial (light). Le Corbusier describes the relationship of window and wall as "A hard and ongoing struggle between conflicting functions: one, the wall, designed to support the house (and it is essential that the wall is as solid as possible); the other, the window, to illuminate the house (yet the window tends to destroy the strength of the wall)" (qtd in Koolhaas 13). Just before Jove's dramatic entrance, Danaë is drawn to this site's transgressive energies:

And towards the window drew, and yet did seem,
 Although her eyes were open, still to dream.
 There on the sill she laid her slender hand,
 And looking seaward, pensive did she stand,
 And seemed as though she waited for the sun

(ll. 323 – 327)

By framing and celebrating the unstable, fluid energy of sea and sky, the window hints at the liquid origins and the structural vulnerability of the tower formed of molten brass. Danaë stands "pensive" at the window, not simply looking at the view, but engaged in serious thought in order to prepare herself for what turns out to be an important transition. Her thinking space is doubly liminal; the window mediates between inside and outside while the sill on which Danaë's hand rests is a threshold between the window and the room. Dreaming with her eyes open, she is anthropologist Victor Turner's classic initiand, entering a suspended state where she is "neither what [s]he has been nor is what [s]he will be" (13).

In Morris's poem, Jove crosses this threshold in the form of light, suffusing her with gold: "And into Danaë's face his glory came / And lit her softly waving hair like flame. / But in his light she held out both her hands" (ll. 331 – 333). These beams behave unexpectedly, growing "yellower" rather than "whiter as their wont is," behaving like water as they fill the tower with 'shining gold' in which she stands "ankle-deep" (ll. 336, 337, 350, 351). As Ribeyrol has shown in her discussion of *Life and Death of Jason*, Morris's portrayal of gold draws on an ancient Greek understanding of the precious metal, not "as a form of currency, but as a pure luxury or votive offering, endowed in both instances with a symbolic as well as aesthetic function" (7). Gold also signifies literary purity for Morris. Boos notices that the narrator of "The Doom of King Acrisius" worries that his modern "additions" to the tale "may have marred its quality: "surely I fear me, midst the ancient gold / Base metal ye will light on here and there . . ." ("Introduction to 'The Doom of King Acrisius.'").

Morris draws further attention to gold's magical properties by emphasizing the liquid, protean form of the golden shower, and by adding white (symbolizing innocence and purity) to his colour-scheme. After experiencing an orgasmic "tremor" that is compared to "summer wind" going "through white water," Danaë lies down "like an ivory image" while "on the gold was spread her golden hair" (ll. 352, 353, 357, 356). This image recalls the sexually vulnerable sisters in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," who are "Like two wands of ivory / Tipped with gold for awful kings" as they lie together "in their curtained bed" (ll. 190-191, 187).

Though Danaë's virginity is lost to an "awful" supernatural king of the gods, her innocence is maintained. Morris's optimistic post-coital heroine evades both the general narrative conventions of the Victorian fallen women and specific Pre-Raphaelite portrayals of the singing, entrapped and tragic female weaver. Jove's exit from the tower does not inspire a weeping, Mariana-like torpor in the face of desertion, but a frenzy of maternal creativity.

After the event she is “found ... singing o’er a web of silk,” that boasts a “warp as white as milk,” her “shuttle” guided by “her arm of snow” (ll. 397, 398, 399).⁵ Looking “like a goddess weaving,” the “glad” Danaë assures her astonished maidens that her “sorrow is o’erpast” and that “no more will I waste my life in tears” (ll. 404, 407, 429, 432). Her purity has not been compromised by her exposure to gold or to sexual experience, but is enhanced by it. As promised, Jove’s golden “light” has brought “Healing for all her great distress and woe” (ll. 333, 335). Like the fallen Laura in “Goblin Market,” whose innocence and golden hair are restored by her sister’s kiss, Danaë has been purified rather than ruined by experience.⁶ Walter Pater is convinced by Danaë’s post-coital purity, noting that “the episode of Danaë and the shower of gold” has “the loveliness of things newly washed with fresh water; and this clarity and chasteness, mere qualities here of an exquisite art, remind one that the effectual preserve of all purity is perfect taste” (89). *The Saturday Review*’s critic also identifies “A thorough purity of thought and language” in this encounter (730).

Morris’s portrayal of Danaë as a sacred mother reclaims a tradition connecting her to the Virgin Mary, a move that looks backwards to the Renaissance and forward to a future where an unmarried, sexually active woman might be considered pure. Jove’s words to Danaë, “sweet child, be glad, and have no fear of me” (l. 368) echo the Angel Gabriel’s reassurance to Mary: “Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God” (Luke 1:30).⁷

Morris’s use of white and gold recalls the colour palette of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (*The Annunciation*, 1849 – 50). The painting portrays a white-robed Virgin Mary on a white bed, shrinking from the Angel Gabriel’s approach. The gold of Mary’s and angel’s aureoles echoes the gold splashed on the floor beneath the white-clad angel and on the flames engulfing his feet. Morris’s retelling of this episode also recalls the colours and the emotional charge of “Mary’s Girlhood: For A Picture,” the sonnet associated with Rossetti’s *Annunciation* picture. The poem describes the Virgin who “one dawn at home

/ ... woke in her white bed, and had no fear / At all, - yet wept till sunshine and felt awed" (ll. 11 – 13).⁸ White and gold (here emblems of innocence and experience) together create a feeling of awe. As Brian Donnelly observes, while Rossetti's treatments of the Annunciation "[borrow] from the discourses of male dominance and appropriation of the woman's body found in narratives of rape," Rossetti ultimately "reveal[s] the mutability and ambivalence inherent in these discourses" through his "uncanny reconfiguration of the narratives of innocence and experience" (31).

Innocence and experience are also reconfigured in Morris's treatment of supernatural procreation, reflecting the ambivalence of an erotic encounter which cannot escape its origins as a narrative of rape, an uneasiness registered in Jove's post-coital injunction, "Fear nothing more that *man* can do to thee" (l. 386, emphasis mine). Yet Morris's Danaë disrupts the gendered power dynamic through her evident sexual pleasure, which in turn enables her escape from her father's tyranny. By the conventions of the fallen woman narrative, which apply to victims of rape as well as consenting women, Danaë should feel ashamed, but Morris, playing on a secondary definition of "brazen" (without shame), repeatedly affirms that female desire fulfilled is not shameful. Danaë's post-coital "flush" is only "*as if* of shame" (l. 348, emphasis mine), and when she blushes with 'shamefast blood," Jove exhorts her to "have no shame, nor hide from thy new love" (ll. 364, 369). While immediately after their encounter, Danaë "hid[es] away her face for dread and shame," she "soon" begins to "tremble[d] more for very love" (ll. 380, 381). Sexual desire overcomes shame, and leads not to a fall, but to freedom and justice, in the form of the son who will kill the tyrannical Acrisius. Unlike the speaker of Rossetti's "Jenny," Morris releases all protagonists. No one here needs to be "Ashamed of ... shame" ("Jenny" l. 384).

Morris's mythical weaver is emphatically not Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, nor is she his passive "Danaë to the stars," who is ready to "be lost in" her lover (ll. 7, 14). Danaë's

escape from the tower by boat results in a new life rather than a martyred death. Set adrift on the sea by Acrisius, a righteous Danaë forcefully reminds Jove of his obligation to her:

“Now of thy promised help am I most fain,
 For on what day can I have greater pain
 Than this wherein to-night my body is,
 And brought thereto by what, but thy sweet kiss?”

(ll. 509 – 512)

Here Danaë argues that Jove must help her, not just because he promised to, but because he is to blame for her predicament. The idea that illegitimate pregnancy and female exile are the consequences of a man’s “sweet kiss” rather than a woman’s transgression is a radical one in the period, recalling earlier Pre-Raphaelite pictures exploring the sexual double-standard, such as Ford Madox Brown’s *Take Your Son, Sir* (c. 1851), John Everett Millais’ *The Woodman’s Daughter* (1851).

Swinburne’s “Danaë” takes things a step further in explicitly connecting female sexual expression to artistic achievement. Like Tennyson’s *Shalott*, she weaves an image of her lover, but Danaë is more of a Pre-Raphaelite aesthete than a Ruskinian naturalist. The source of her picture is her imagination and not the world outside. Instead of representing reality through a glass darkly, Danaë’s “work” illuminates a private fantasy (I. 11). She sleeps “To dream the beauty of thy smile / And only wake[s] again to picture thee” (II. 11-12). In a reversal of the Pygmalion myth, Danaë “pictures” Jove in her loom so intensely that he comes to life. The “one Godhead of the captive’s room” is doubly materialized, first in his transition from Danaë’s imagination to her tapestry and then from her tapestry to “her side” (I. 6, IV. 12).

The window’s assistance in this creative process is both practical and magical, letting in the light that allows Danaë to weave her way to freedom. We see sun and sunset, not

directly through the window, but on Jove's image in the loom. At first he is erotically "touched to life by purpling light" in the afternoon, and then starts to "fade" in the "twilight" (II. 5; III. 1, 7). In a break with pictorial convention, natural light illuminates Jove's body, not Danaë's, revealing "loins and shoulders meet to sway the world" and "massive locks of hair." With his "beard / Like clouds" and "brow, more beautiful than Parian stone" (III. 3, 5-6, 8,9), Jove, not Danaë, is the white "vision fair" here. Swinburne reverses the Pygmalion myth as Danaë's kiss breathes life into her creation: "soft on his lips she breathed her love, / And lit his eyes with lustre of her own" (III. 11-12). In this stanza, Danaë, not the shower of gold, is the light source.

Swinburne shares Pater's and Morris's understanding of gold's symbolic votive function as the golden shower sanctifies Danaë's sexual and artistic awakening. When she looks at the image of Jove she has woven, an autoerotic "passion [stings] the maiden of the tower / And fast she panted for the golden shower" (III. 13 – 14). Golden "rain" starts to fall "Faster and brighter," gaining momentum and volume with Danaë's mounting sexual excitement (IV. 8). As day turns to night, the room is gradually illuminated from within as the shower of gold 'star[s] with light the chamber of the bride" (IV. 9). The poem closes as Jove materializes "at her side," and "Heaven embrac[es] her in the golden shower" (IV. 12, 14).

Where Swinburne's poem inverts the hierarchy of the male gaze, Frederick Sandys' accompanying picture (fig. 1) restores it, illustrating the poem's final stanza where "she stood, with white arm fixed in air, / And head thrown back, and streaming hair" (IV. 1-2). Danaë's standing loom displays a full-length, naked Jove who stares at his creator's voluptuous body, an abandoned thread dangling suggestively from his genitals. Cradling her head in the crook of her raised left arm, Danaë bares her right shoulder and neck, lowering her eyes. Though its portrayal of sexualized male nudity is in some ways radical, the

illustration's gender dynamics are ultimately conventional; the scope of Danaë's activities is reduced to an erotic performance for a divine patriarch. As Kestner notes frankly, "she has virtually had an orgasm in front of the image" (*Mythology and Misogyny* 171). Her partially-closed eyes do not light her creation, as they do in Swinburne's poem ("and lit his eyes with lustre of her own"); Jove does all the looking here. The room's elaborate clutter and prominent female figure recall the Brotherhood's 1850s pictures of Tennyson's "Mariana" and "Lady of Shalott," but Sandys' architecture thoroughly encloses Danaë. No door or window is visible to us; the picture suggests no possibility of escape or interaction with the outside world. Sandys tames Swinburne's vision of creative female autoeroticism by re-establishing Danaë as the entrapped object of the male gaze.

Stopping short of Swinburne's radical reinvention of Danaë as a sexually-awakened artist, Burne-Jones's Danaë pictures instead take their cue from William Morris's poem in depicting Danaë as a "pensive" gazer. Kestner notes that "Unlike many artists before him, Burne-Jones refuses to portray" the "incident" of "the shower of gold." The originality of the painter's choice is undercut, Kestner argues, by Burne-Jones's "avoidance" of the sexual subject matter, demonstrating the painter's "fear of sexuality" ("Edward Burne-Jones" 112). I would like to suggest another possibility. Directly inspired by Morris's contemporary poem, Burne-Jones's resistance to depicting the shower of gold also demonstrates an interest in Danaë's psychology and sympathy for her plight.⁹ Burne-Jones's little-known early treatment of *Danaë In The Brazen Tower*, a 35.9 x 25.4 cm. watercolour, depicts the moment just before Jove's arrival in Morris's poem, where Danaë stands "pensive" at the window, "looking seaward" and awaiting "the sun."¹⁰ Danaë's face is shown in three-quarter profile against the barred window, while her right hand rests on the sill. Her eyes remain in shadow while the golden sunlight that foretells Jove's arrival illuminates her chin and cheek. Although the picture puts the viewer in Jove's place, looking in from outside the window, the

focus on her face demonstrates an unprecedented interest in her Danaë's of view, which Burne-Jones would develop in subsequent pictures of the subject.

In the pictures of the 1870s and 1880s, he would invite viewers to share Danaë's perspective as she watches the construction of the brazen tower through the open door of a walled garden. Again breaking with conventional portrayals of Danaë receiving the golden shower, Burne-Jones's 1872 pictures depict Danaë watching the building works from outside, unaware that the tower will be her prison: "... thither oft would maiden Danaë stray, / And watch its strange walls growing day by day" (ll. 30 – 40).¹¹ In the Fogg version (fig. 2), she stands in profile inside a walled garden, looking through an open door that frames a view of the workmen building the tower.¹² Containing the requisite seminal fountain and enclosed virgin of the *hortus conclusus*, this garden locates Danaë in her Marian context, which removes her from her association with prostitution or sexual transgressiveness. It also recalls the settings of Renaissance pictures of the Annunciation.

Burne-Jones's 1888 version of the picture, *Danaë or The Tower of Brass* (fig. 3) makes the door even more prominent by transforming the 1872's unvarnished wood to studded bronze. This rectangular portal is reinforced by the picture's highly articulated tabernacle frame, suggestive itself of a door. John Christian identifies "the interrelationship between the canvas and the frame" as "one of the most notable features," noting how "the vaguely Roman architecture within the picture" is "echoed in the frame's neo-Renaissance design to create a decorative ensemble" (*Edward Burne-Jones* 267). But Burne-Jones's scheme is more than decorative. The 1888 picture's vertical orientation and large size (231 x 113 cm) mimic the doorway it represents, while the painted doorframe is materialized in the tabernacle's golden plinth, columns and entablature, reframing the picture itself as a threshold. Although the exterior courtyard's paved path is temporarily interrupted by the enclosed garden's threshold, the garden's dirt path picks up its trajectory, turning the

picture's bottom rail into a threshold by trailing off suggestively at its centre (where a viewer might stand). Architecture literally puts viewers in Danaë's place; we are invited to look through the picture frame as the mythological heroine looks through the open doorway.

In doing so, Burne-Jones breaks with the Pre-Raphaelite tradition of presenting pictures as windows. Instead of permitting the viewer to see a female subject through the painter's eyes, he opens a doorway which invites us to share her experience of looking. The significance of this gesture was not lost on contemporary critics who found Danaë a sympathetic figure once they were invited to consider her point of view. Noting that "her face is one of the finest and truest of the painter's designing," Frederic Stephens identifies the "suspicion and a vague alarm [which] trouble her mind as, looking furtively over her shoulder, she sees the workmen toiling and her father and his architect in consultation" (636). The *Times* observes that "across her pensive face there seems to pass the thought that she may count for something in his [Acrisius'] strange design" (qtd in *The New Gallery* 23).

Although the shower of gold is depicted in Burne-Jones's 1888 watercolour, *Danaë*, and a picture for *The Flower Book*, these works continue to enhance Danaë's Marian resonance, eliding the explicitly sexual elements of her story. In both, Danaë is framed in a doorway, but this time she faces the viewer. Gold blotches, suggestive of coins, drift down on her fully-draped, standing figure. Like Morris and Swinburne, Burne-Jones uses a predominantly gold and white colour scheme in his 1888 watercolour to suggest a combination of worldly innocence and mystical experience. Danaë's left hand modestly draws a corner of her long white robe to her neck, while she braces her right hand against the doorframe. Her face is in three-quarter profile and her expression, timid but receptive, is the "doubtful smile" we see in Morris's poem (l. 346). The "Golden Shower" illustration for *The Flower Book* is also interested in Danaë's emotions, showing her "half afeard" and "draw[ing] back a little" (Morris ll. 338, 339). Hooded and draped in black, she shrinks to the

left, her hands hidden in the folds of her clothing. She looks up apprehensively to her right as the gold rains down from the ceiling, reminding viewers of the uneven power relations between god and woman. Like the Virgin Mary in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's in *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, Burne-Jones's Danaë is vulnerable, trapped and ambivalent.

Even as Danaë belongs to a Pre-Raphaelite tradition of enclosed and entrapped women, she is a departure from it. Sandy's illustration, with its sexually explicit content, weird jumble of medieval and Hellenic objects, and representation of Danaë's altered state of erotic rapture is recognizably proto-aesthetic. After its initial suppression in 1867, it was published in 1888's *The Century Guild Hobby Horse*, in the same year that Burne-Jones's *Danaë* or *The Tower of Brass* (fig. 3) was successfully exhibited at the New Gallery. Here, as Stephen Wildman notices, close Pre-Raphaelite attention to natural detail is startlingly juxtaposed with "the jagged rhythms of Danaë's drapery, in which all sense of linear suavity has been jettisoned in favour of an exciting visual dissonance, look[ing] forward to the abstraction and mannerism that characterize the work of the 1890s" (*Edward Burne-Jones* 268).

The proto-aestheticism of Morris's and Swinburne's poems lies in their celebration of a woman artist whose sexuality fires her creativity. In Morris's poem, Danaë is radicalized by her captivity and survives her escape. For Swinburne, she is an experimental artist; more than just "half-sick of shadows," she effects her sexual and creative release by bringing them to life. Unlike *The Lady of Shalott*, Danaë finds great joy and fulfilment in her imagination and artistic practice, while in contrast to Mariana's suicidal refrain, Danaë's steady stream of self-soothing chatter sustains her during her imprisonment and convinces the gods to help.

What Pre-Raphaelite portrayals of Danaë share is an interest, not in reproducing the classical age, but in responding to it. Pater endorses this approach in his 1868 review of Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* for the *Westminster Review*, where he argues that "what is

possible for art” that depicts the classical past is “aspiring to but never actually reaching its way of conceiving life.” This is a realist ambition because “the modern poet or artist” knows he cannot “truly conceive the age” but instead tries to “conceive the element it has contributed to our culture” (87). Modern artists must work from the premise that “The composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us,” even as they explore how “we live and move and have our being in the life of humanity” in the present (86). Consciously treating art as an ongoing act of interpretation, a process of artistic “aspiring” rather than achieving, is at once pragmatic and idealistic.

Pater likens Morris’s poetics to weaving: “this grace of Hellenism relieved against the sorrow of the middle age” creates the effect of “two threads of sentiment” that are “interwoven and contrasted” (88). Pater’s comparison also tugs on the thread that connects Danaë with earlier Pre-Raphaelite portrayals of frustrated, confined women; though she is now classical rather than medieval, this figure can still be understood a stand-in for the Pre-Raphaelite artist. This time, she is more sexually autonomous and artistically independent, finding freedom rather than danger in sex, and creating works from her own imagination rather than from mediated reflections of the outside world.

Treading a familiar fine line between compassion and exploitation, Pre-Raphaelite portrayals of Danaë in the late 1860s and early 1870s develop the trope of confined fallen women they explored in 1850s and early 1860s depictions of *The Lady of Shalott*, *Mariana*, and *Fair Rosamund*. Danaë is a transitional figure who belongs to what Elizabeth Prettejohn has recognized as “a decisive reconfiguration of artistic practice at the end of the 1860s, when the motto “art for art’s sake” briefly served as the rallying-cry for artistic freedom.” Prettejohn is specifically discussing Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of *Medea*, but I would argue that the group’s Danaë pictures and poems belong to this same “dangerous moment...for the artistic projects that would eventually be linked under the rubric

“Aestheticism” (97).¹³ For all that, their proto-aestheticism remains firmly rooted in the real, responding to a specific cultural moment that associates Danaë with the figure of the fallen woman. Through Danaë, Pre-Raphaelite sympathy for the fallen woman in the poetry and art of the 1850s and early 1860s evolves into a distaste for the men who exploit her, a critique of the uneven power relations that produce her fall, and even an endorsement of her sexual autonomy. In considering the ekphrastic relationships of Pre-Raphaelite pictures and poems on Danaë, what is striking is how the movement’s look to the Hellenistic past is, perhaps paradoxically, more modern than its medievalism.

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¹ For a detailed discussion of the interpretations of Danaë over time, see also Daniel Ogden, *Perseus* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

² For more about Morris's sources, see Florence S. Boos, "Introduction to 'The Doom of King Acrisius'," *William Morris Archive* <http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/introduction-kingacrisius>.

³ Boos's notes to *The Earthly Paradise* tell us that "only in Morris's version of this tale does Danaë ... pray to the virgin-goddess Diana" (note 11, p. 273).

⁴ Boos notes that gold is associated here with Venus, whose "golden home" is Cyprus, where Ovid "claimed that golden trees grew" ("The Doom of King Acrisius" note 8, 273).

⁵ This whiteness is in marked contrast to Swinburne's Danaë, who, Shalott-like, weaves Jove's "image" with "colours bright" ("Danaë" l. 3, 4).

⁶ Laura awoke as from a dream,
Laughed in the innocent old way,
Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice;
Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of grey,
Her breath was sweet as May
And light danced in her eyes (ll. 537 – 542).

⁷ Comparisons between the Virgin Mary and Danaë are not uncommon. Marc Shell tells us that "The Danaë story helped Christians, understandably puzzled by the New Testament's admirable annunciation, to answer the question ... of how Mary might have been impregnated" (24).

⁸ This sonnet was originally composed to accompany Rossetti's first exhibited oil painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1850), envisioned as the first painting in an uncompleted triptych whose second panel was to be *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*

⁹ His sympathy is evident in his sketch for an illustrated version of *The Earthly Paradise*, which May Morris remembers as “a touching little drawing of *Danaë* with her babe Perseus in her arms, in a boat on the open sea” (qtd in *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist Dreamer* 267).

¹⁰ This picture was auctioned at Christies in December 2018 <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6184660>. Although the origins and date of this watercolour are uncertain, I am very grateful to (and agree with) Fiona Mann, who suggests a date of 1870 for this picture. Mann tells me that there are records of two watercolour versions of *Danaë*, one for Ruskin (which may or may not have been destroyed), and the Christie’s version which the artist gave to his daughter.

¹¹ These pictures are based on *Danaë and the Brazen Tower*, an 1869-70 pencil study for an illustrated edition of *The Earthly Paradise*.

¹² There are two 1872 oil on panel versions of *Danaë Watching the Building of the Brazen Tower*, one in the Fogg Museum (Cambridge, Mass) and the other in The Ashmolean Museum (Oxford).

¹³ Prettejohn specifically mentions “Rossetti’s paintings of half-length female figures, Morris’s poetry, [and] Swinburne’s and Pater’s criticism” as “crucial elements” here (97).