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The Rise and Fall of the “Clerks”: British Art History, 1950–1970

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Is the Painting a Grave?: John Everett Millais and the Queer Refusals of Victorian Art

Article by **Ariel Kline**
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Abstract
How is queer eroticism figured in artworks that might also deny it? This article attends to John Everett Millais's ambivalent proximity to lesbian desire through an analysis of *The Vale of Rest* (1859) and other works. It concludes that death is the thematic device by which Millais both cultivates and eschews queer eroticism. And, in the convent, death's relationship to celibacy draws parallels with queer theory's emphasis on death, promiscuity, and asceticism.

Introduction

It is, at first, the tangle of gazes that distinguishes William Powell Frith's *Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881* (1883) as a work about looking (fig. 1). But this crowd also seems to anticipate its own status as a painting, an affinity with the surrounding canvases that makes Frith's people seem plucked from between their golden frames. Their straight backs and wandering gazes also mimic the flat, upright mass of paintings whose framed subjects seem, in turn, to echo the room's teeming throng of draped fabrics and starched shirts. At the exhibition, John Everett Millais's portrait of the recently deceased former prime minister Benjamin Disraeli was placed on a separate screen that, in Frith's work, blocks most of the arched entryway to Gallery III.[1] Disraeli almost mingles with the crowd, his casual presence an added breach of the already tenuous divide between person and painting.

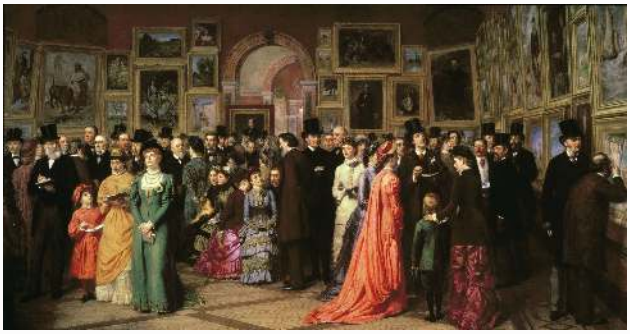

Figure 1

William Powell Frith, *Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881*, 1883, oil on canvas, 60 × 114 cm. Private collection. Digital image courtesy of Pope Family Trust / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved)...

On the right wall of Frith's *Private View* is yet another work that performs this playful continuity. Praised in its time as "an exceptionally beautiful picture", Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Sappho* features the ancient poet and her school sitting before the relaxed poet Alcaeus, with Sappho herself leaning forward and listening to his music (fig. 2).[2] One critic saw not the male Alcaeus but "a girl of Arabesque appearance" playing the lute "by the Scythian shore".[3] The scene, continues this voice, "is one of exquisite *abandon*".[4] Behind Sappho, another woman stares not at the musical performance but at the woman beside her who watches it—her heavily lidded eyes have landed calmly upon this close companion (fig. 3). The creaseless brow, the pursed lips, the hands that twist into a tense knot that mimics the folds of her copious garment: these are the markers of quiet yearning, the signs that aesthetic pleasure begets desire in Alma-Tadema's painting.[5] Alcaeus's audience is absorbed, whether in the musical performance, each other, or the landscape beyond the marble proscenium. The work, as yet another voice remarked, "transports us at once to ancient Greece, its poetic life and its glorious sunshine".[6]

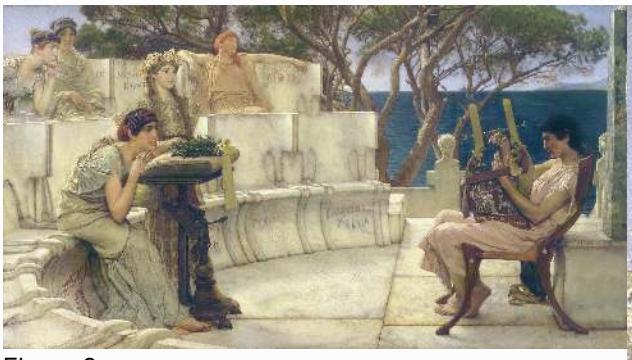

Figure 2

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Sappho*, 1881, oil on canvas, 66 × 122 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.159)... Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

Figure 3

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Sappho* (detail), 1881, oil on canvas, 66 × 122 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (37.159)... Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved)...

Frith did not intend to endorse such aimless indulgences in his *Private View*—quite the opposite. The artist insisted in his *Autobiography and Reminiscences* that his painting represented a critique of figures such as Oscar Wilde, a "self-elected critic in matters of taste".[7] Referring to Wilde as "a well-known apostle of the beautiful", Frith proceeds to renounce not only Wilde but also the patrons mesmerized by his performance, the "herd of eager worshippers surrounding him" on the right side of Frith's *Private View*. Taking "some picture on the Academy walls for his text", Wilde appears unfazed by the men in this room who clearly disapprove of his approach, such as the author George Augustus Sala, the artist Henry Stacy Marks, or the Archbishop of York in his top hat at the painting's center.[8] On the painting's far left stands "a family of pure aesthetes absorbed in affected study of the pictures"—more of Wilde's worshippers, as Frith implies. With her sunflower, the woman in the green dress shows her allegiance to the aesthetic movement, while the woman next to her, in loud orange, quietly thumbs her catalog.[9] Frith compares them to the man to their immediate left, the novelist Anthony Trollope, pictured in the act of writing. His "homely figure", according to Frith, provides "a striking contrast to the eccentric forms near him".[10] Frith's *Private View* thus condemns the themes of Alma-Tadema's *Sappho*: a scene of "exquisite *abandon*" in which "affected study" seems to abound.

In this article, I am also interested in the "affected study" of pictures. However, I focus not on Wilde—nor on Frith—but rather on Millais, who stands at the extreme right, at the threshold of Alma-Tadema's *Sappho*. Millais stands alongside Sappho's own profile to look at Alma-Tadema's painting, his exhibition catalog hanging loosely by his side, his place in it preserved by a gloved index finger. His is not the myopic gaze of the unnamed connoisseur to his immediate right—not the intense, penetrating stare of the expert or the seasoned critic.[11] No, Millais stands, disarmed, before *Sappho* while the connoisseur hunches to see its minutiae. The artist's

eyebrows are sympathetically creased, and his mouth is turned slightly downward at its edge as he looks both with and at Sappho and her school. Caught between Wilde and Sala on one side, and Sappho on the other, Millais's body yields what is perhaps the aggregate ambivalence—even the queerness—of Frith's picture.

In many ways, it would be easier to focus on Wilde's queer intervention in Frith's *Private View*. Wilde's aestheticism was inextricable from his sexuality and, as Dustin Friedman argues, queer aesthetes like Wilde articulated an "erotic negativity" through which they ascribed value to homoeroticism "not despite but *because*" they lived "in a culture where such feelings [were] condemned".[12] The medicalization of homosexuality in the latter half of the nineteenth century has led theorists, following Michel Foucault, to trace the passage of queerness from a set of sexual practices to an identity.[13] Yet theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick caution against reducing queer histories to a politics of identity when the binary of homo- and heterosexual was nuanced and often illusory—even for figures like Wilde.[14] In light of this, I see the generative possibility of figuring queerness through the preposition "beside": a relational prospect that elides identity and eschews historical teleology, theorized in Victorian studies by Natalie Prizel.[15]

In this article, then, I attend not to queer or gay self-identification but to the prospect of Millais's sustained encounter with lesbian desire across the middle and later parts of his artistic career.[16] And I begin at the end, with *Sappho* in 1881—which Millais stands quite literally "beside"—to suggest that his presence alongside this representation within a representation indicates how we might read an artist's affinity with queerness through their body in relation to painting, in addition to visual analyses of paintings themselves. I attend to Millais's ambivalent proximity to lesbian desire through one picture, *The Vale of Rest* (fig. 4), but consider several of Millais's paintings in pursuit of their queer potential. I conceive of queerness as an erotic intimacy that often travels beyond and around the sexual, an intimacy that is evaded but ever present in some of Millais's key works.[17] And *The Vale of Rest*, I argue, is the threshold at which our own knowledge about this erotic intimacy is both registered and denied.

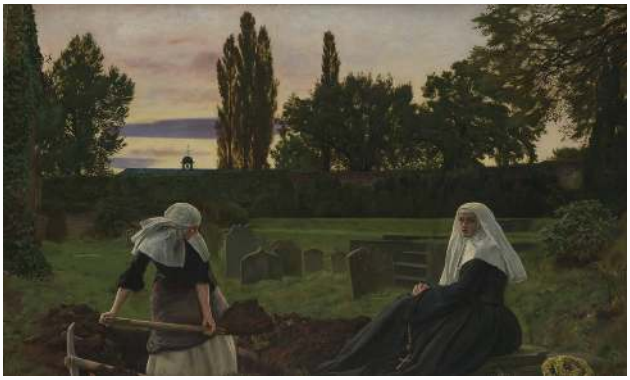

Figure 4

John Everett Millais, *The Vale of Rest*, 1858–9, oil on canvas, 102.9 × 172.7 cm. Tate (N01507)… Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0)…

The Vale of Rest

The reviews came in swarms—columns of vitriol at first in the London press and then repeated around Britain in the early days of May 1859. This was "the year Mr. Millais came out with

those terrible nuns in the graveyard", as *Punch* announced in an annual summary.[18] That *The Vale of Rest* had "shocked the Art world" of 1859 is not too grand a claim.[19] It had, at least, startled it. And it was not for any obviously radical reason that critics could justify their disgust for what they called an "unforgivably ugly" picture.[20] Millais's work was a simple essay in landscape and figure, if anything a digression from the aesthetics of his more contentious Pre-Raphaelite past—already a ubiquitous style by this point in the late 1850s.[21] Two nuns, one perhaps a novice and the other more advanced in her commitments to God (fig. 4).[22] One is half in profile, her head following the awkward line of her twisting body. She braces to shift a clod of earth toward a pile outside the grave she is digging and in which she stands. Her companion at the right is turned toward us, clutching a rosary embellished with a skull, her reticent pose breached only by a stunning, insistent stare.

Had Rosa Matilda *seen* Millais's *Vale of Rest*? This was the first question her new admirer had asked at a tea party in Somers Town. Didn't she think, he continued, that "the nuns were ugly?" A risky declaration for an initial encounter, but Mr. Strothers—the narrator in a short story published the year after Millais exhibited "those terrible nuns"—enquired anyway.[23] "I knew I was safe in saying this", he confesses, because, of course, "I'd heard the remark made so often". It was firstly the rightmost nun's unbearable ugliness that annoyed Millais's critics. It is one thing to paint a woman's eyes boring out of an otherwise peaceful picture, but could she not have been pleasanter to look at? To them, she was "ugly and coarse" for her large eyes, gaunt cheeks, "shaggy eyebrows", and misshapen jaw.[24] Otherwise, she was inhuman, with a face like a "death's head skull", sometimes "fleshless" with "goggle eyes and bony cheeks".[25] Critics from the *Morning Post* speculated about the artist's motive for "disfiguring his canvas with such a creature", concluding that the whole painting was "outrageously, unforgivably ugly".[26]

"Do you remember Millais's *Vale of Rest*?" a young artist asks his readers. This narrator of "The Two Sisters of Cologne", a short story published in 1867, shuddered when he first saw the painting some years earlier. In the story, he is trapped, sedated, and completely at the mercy of two eerie sisters who are lodging him for a single evening. Just outside his window, the artist can make out the shapes of two women digging a grave—a grave meant for him. He shuddered, recalling so vividly the "masculine energy" of the digging sister as his eyes met *The Vale of Rest* several years after his tale took place.[27] Some viewers of the painting seemed equally as frightened when they described that laboring nun "masculine" or "stalwart", a woman "digging the grave so lustily", with "her arms straining every vein and nerve".[28] There she stood, knee deep in the grave, "busily and vigorously enlarging it".[29] Sinewy, muscular, masculine, lusty.[30] Critics complained that both nuns seemed "fitted to win heaven by physical assault", such that one questioned "if, indeed, they have been really painted from women".[31] These were no ordinary nuns. "Masculine-featured and stern looking", sometimes "strapping" or "robust"—the nuns' ugliness was frequently expressed in gendered terms.[32]

Critics also followed this censure with unusual demands. It was firstly the picture's ugliness, but mostly its impenetrability, that frustrated these viewers—perhaps even more than its aesthetic shortcomings. Specifically, it was the nearest nun's expression: her "mask-like face" and "large, wandering eyes" betrayed "a vacant mind", looking "in the most unconcerned manner possible out of the picture at the spectator".[33] The nun was criticized most of all, that is, for failing to see, inform, or otherwise connect with her onlookers. Viewers felt forgotten, or perhaps left out. The writer of an 1878 catalog on Millais relates that *The Vale of Rest* shows "a Sister of Charity, who has been gazing at another sister, but has turned toward the spectator as if to see who was approaching".[34] Our presence is an interruption of cloistered convent life, or else a bewildering,

alien aspect of an already puzzling picture. Another reviewer protested: "her face tells us nothing". The nuns, they continued, ought to "satisfy the imagination of the spectator". Instead, the nun's face "attract[s] the eye", but "only to repel it".[35]

What might it mean for a spectator's imagination to be "satisfied" in this context? Perhaps neither Millais nor his critics really knew. The artist, despairing over his "bewildered" audiences, wrote glumly that reviewers had displayed "a total want of confidence" in the work and its related painting from the same year, *Spring* (fig. 5). "The profession [of art]", he wrote, "is more hideous than ever in my eyes".[36] Millais was despondent: the artist had labored over *The Vale of Rest*, his favorite painting, more assiduously than he had over any other to date.[37] "Although there can be no doubt that my works are much less open than usual", he wrote to his father as the reviews poured in, "There is nothing absolutely ugly, as is said in the pictures this year, & the drawing is nearly irreproachable, but", Millais realized, "where there is an ambiguity (as must always be) it is seized upon to destroy all the beauties".[38] While he recognized that narrative ambiguities fueled the critical vitriol toward his 1859 paintings, Millais proceeded to alter the nun's face with the features of a different model, perhaps hoping to stem accusations of her "ugliness". Yet, as the artist knew, changing her face would not have solved critics' frustrated desires for clarity—for satisfaction. No, there was something else about the painting that left its harshest reviewers demanding answers. Like these critics, we find ourselves making demands on *The Vale of Rest*, demands that it solicits but does not satisfy. The most compelling part of this dynamic is not the promise of answers but, rather, our unrequited demand for them—which the picture itself encourages.

For most scholars, both *Spring* and *The Vale of Rest* represent the natural rhythms of life and death. In the former, "fertile" young women picnic before an apple orchard, its blossoms burgeoning in a mesmeric mass of light pink petals.[39] In the latter, two nuns attend a grave in a picture that embodies the visual equivalent of hushed tones.[40] There is no clear narrative in either work.[41] Paul Barlow has, however, discerned an edifying continuity between the two paintings: *Spring* passes into *The Vale of Rest* in a "meditation on the palpable rhythms of human life".[42] For others, nature is a metaphor for the young girls' passing beauty.[43] *Spring* is lush, young, and sexual, replete with a "milky substance" that the girls are sharing—perhaps a symbol of their budding fertility.[44] *The Vale* is sterner, older, and apparently less sexualized—these are, after all, two nuns before the silhouette of a bell tower, walled into an old graveyard, digging a new grave.[45]

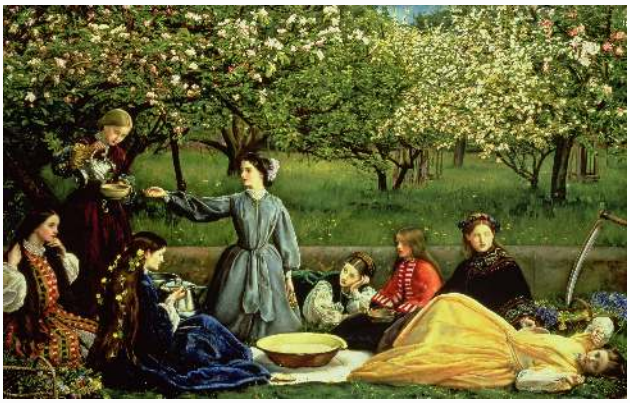

Figure 5

John Everett Millais, *Spring (Apple Blossoms)*, 1859, oil on canvas, 113 × 176.3 cm. Lady Lever Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool (LL 3624… Digital image courtesy of National Museums Liverpool / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

But, in nineteenth-century Britain, the idea of the nun belonged to a world of rich, if controversial, sexual fantasies. She existed outside the confines of marriage and lived, confined, among women.[46] She was ostensibly chaste, but could be corrupted, or else "rescued", from the convent.[47] The growing number of women who became Catholic nuns in mid-nineteenth-century England instigated public claims of wrongful imprisonment, and the church's detractors likened the nun's place in the "Convent Prison" to her grave.[48] And yet the abbey's secluded walls were also a source of titillating enigma in the nineteenth-century imaginary.[49] The convent was a grave, albeit a sexy one. This dichotomy also generated two types of fictive nuns, one older and depraved, the other younger, artless, and at risk of sexual corruption in an environment teeming with desire.[50] Rumor and intrigue were bolstered by the increasing number of Roman Catholic convents in Britain during the second half of the century.[51] Pornography proliferated, wherein nuns were "concubines or lesbians or both".[52] In an oration against Catholicism in Kennington Park in 1854, the former monk Alessandro Gavazzi spoke of nuns as Eve, sent by the devil pope to "tempt the British people".[53]

The Victorian "cultural obsession" with "the pleasures of death" also resonates in this context.[54] Kate Thomas reveals that lesbian associations with the spectral, with an erotics of the grave, and with the ecstasy of the body's destruction proliferate in late Victorian literature and culture. She traces the bodily intimacies of queer texts featuring the grave—a space for "dusty, haptic business" and a "private place" for "lesbian embrace".[55] Following an aestheticist emphasis on the sensuality of death and the afterlife, late Victorian writers such as Amy Levy found in the grave a homoerotic prospect. Wilde once characterized artistic life as "a long and lovely suicide", and his long-time interlocutor, Walter Pater, maintained a "fascination with the disappearing subject", bolstering his politics of "camouflage" and "deferral".[56] The myth that Queen Victoria never criminalized lesbianism because she "refused to believe that women would do such things" is credible only because lesbian existence was often absorbed seamlessly within the Victorian social order: at times perfectly visible and at other times thriving in its ostensible invisibility.[57] Much important work has been done to excavate lesbian desire in these circumstances and, in it, metaphors of the spectral abound.[58] Visibility (or invisibility), seclusion, and death haunt both

the convent and its attendant queer eroticism. If the convent was a charged space in the nineteenth-century homoerotic imaginary, so was the grave.

Why, then, should *The Vale of Rest* be chaste? A nun's existence was a "living burial" to a culture that saw her seclusion as "a waste, unhealthy and unnatural", and so, some scholars claim, *The Vale of Rest* might represent a critique of convent life along these lines.[59] The nuns in this painting are, as Jan Marsh has suggested, "'lost' to the everyday world" or, more pointedly, "to the men they might have wed".[60] To others, *The Vale of Rest* is a more subdued, if ambiguous, meditation that questions the value of celibacy, or else an affirmation of the virtues of "virginal timelessness" within the bond of marriage.[61] Perhaps the painting was even "too desexualized" for its disappointed reviewers.[62] Death looms above and around the women, from the supposedly coffin-shaped cloud in the sky to their very presence in an enclosed graveyard, possibly foreshadowing "an early death" for both women.[63] And "digging one's own grave" could be "a form of achieving spiritual union with Christ"—for Susan Casteras, not an erotic pursuit.[64] Amid what appears to be a meditation on mortality, chastity, and religious commitment, there is little space for sexuality. Maybe this is, indeed, what distressed the most vocal critics of Millais's solemn picture: *The Vale of Rest* is devoid of sex.

Maybe. Maybe the picture is stolid and sexless, its erotic touch muted by a firmer brush with a decidedly chaste death. Never mind the hands loosely clasped, the lips slightly parted, the skirt full and round as its owner carelessly lets it slope toward the grave edge. Or the novice sister, called "stalwart" for her arms: "masculine" and "bare", which "so lustily" handle the shovel.[65] Never mind, too, the sinews of her forearms, strained in effort, or the blush of her face, or the shine of her sweat. There is something so deliciously odd, so rudely enticing about white linen in dirt. There she is, immersed in the grave, tunneling her way out of the picture's lower limits—almost determined to soon be out of sight. Contrast this with her companion, whose inscrutable stare dares us to see something that cannot—that could never—be seen. We are pulled in two interpretive directions by these two women: on the one hand, we are pushed away and, on the other, we are drawn forward.

This intense directionality is also erotic. The figure-eight torrent of energy between these women's gazes and bodies is palpable, each twisted against the other as though determined not to meet. Somehow, though, this tension resolves to a whisper in their tranquil setting on opposite sides of the canvas. Indeed, perhaps the only remnants of physical touch are the twin wreaths propped against the two stacked tombstones, their yellowness amplified in the flushed hues of the receding sunset. They recline together against the stone, petals open and puffed, with the bulk of their bloom blended in textural union. Two wreaths, two tombstones, two women, and one visible grave. Rather than indicating the end of sexuality, death is here its harbinger.

Seeing Suzanne, or Queer Methodologies

It was on their honeymoon that two lovers conjured a picture of nuns in ecstasy. As Effie Gray and Millais descended a hill by the placid waters of Loch Awe in Inveraray, Scotland, they embarked on a fantasy about its monastic ruins. "We transported ourselves", Effie recalls, to a time "before the Reformation" had ruined the beautiful remnants of antiquity. Solemn organ notes were "carried by the water and transformed into a sweeter melody, caught up on the hillside and dying away in the blue air". In their reverie, the newlyweds also imagined "white-robed nuns in boats, singing on the water in the quiet summer evenings, and chanting holy songs, inspired by the loveliness of the world around them".[66] Three years later, Millais took up his brush to paint a sunset rapidly deteriorating before his eyes. Maybe, in this moment, he saw what

he and Effie imagined the nuns seeing—the world's loveliness—and began to paint it, working "like lightning" to preserve the sky's fleeting streaks of purple and gold.[67]

Millais rendered *The Vale of Rest* in the autumn of 1858, mostly from the family's yard just outside the front door. The poplar and oak trees, the shrubs, the sunset, even the corner of the house—transformed into a chapel—all were taken from the Gray family home, Bowerswell, in Perth, Scotland. The artist then wandered to the nearby Kinnoull churchyard to paint the tombstones and the grave. By this time, the crisp autumn weather was threatening winter, and his days outdoors were growing colder. Millais persuaded a sexton to dig him a fresh grave before turning his attention to the tombstones. As Millais's son tells it, the artist was amused when he garnered an audience of "two queer old bachelors who", locally, "went by the names of 'Sin' and 'Misery'".[68] The men "watched him intently as he painted away day by day" and, believing that Millais made his living by painting graves, they brought him wine and cake each session without fail and consoled him for what they believed to be a very dreary job.[69]

Millais fought every day for seven weeks, painting and repainting the laboring nun shoveling dirt. Effie said that "she never had such a time in her life as when [her husband] was painting that woman". Each time he tried, "the figure was worse than ever", and Millais was apparently driven "to the verge of insanity".[70] Effie and her mother, Sophia, plotted to steal the painting and, one day, they did. They stowed it in a locked wine cellar, smiling to themselves, refusing to yield the work until they felt Millais was ready.[71] Two allied women, stealing away two female figures, and transfiguring the painting as they lay it to ferment among the wine. Wine begets drunkenness, which loosens lips and tongues—an indulgence concealed by the double-cloistering of the nuns in their private cellar and then in their walled convent graveyard. And then there were Sin and Misery, on whose cake and wine Millais subsisted during those cold November graveside sessions.[72] Informed by fancy, embellished with humor, and relayed at second hand by Effie and their son, the circumstances of this picture's creation form a strange legacy that opens onto something much richer than the dwindling of sex between *Spring* and its ostensibly celibate sister.[73] This is the queer eroticism of Millais's picture: the coy allusion to gay love as sinful bachelorhood; the cool, dark air of the wine cellar; the ready-made sexual implications of the convent—these things exist in *The Vale of Rest*. But the painting will never admit them.

"I will tell you what is the matter", confessed a tearful Denis Diderot to his concerned friend. "I am breaking my heart over a story I am telling myself".[74] The author's admission probably refers to the abject depths of his protagonist's story: a young nun forced to take the veil, tortured by her sisters, and further punished for her attempts to escape. But Diderot's broken heart also captures a familiar feeling to those who write queer art histories. It is a struggle of naming and retracting, an urge to surface facts that have never been—and can never be—factual.[75] Diderot was lamenting the task of writing his epistolary novel, *La religieuse* or *The Nun* (1796), a fictive memoir that summarizes this process of epistemic disquiet. The young protagonist Suzanne has sex with her mother superior on multiple occasions. Or does she? Their pleasure is sanitized in Suzanne's descriptions so that the young nun retains her abiding innocence:

> *On waking, I questioned myself on what had happened between the Superior and me, and looked into myself. On further examination I thought I half-perceived. But my notions were so vague, foolish, and ridiculous that I put them right away from me, and I finally came to the conclusion that it was perhaps an illness to which she was subject; and then I thought that perhaps this illness was catching.*[76]

An illness, says Suzanne. Indeed, in the throes of pleasure, the superior had gone "as pale as death". Her eyes closed, "all her body stiffened violently", and "she seemed to me to die" or else "to expire with a deep sigh". If the superior was "as though dead", then Suzanne was "as though about to die", and the two remained "a considerable time" in this "singular condition".[77] In Suzanne's extended descriptions of these encounters, we are asked to believe that death is virtually indistinguishable from sex. Death is the veil through which Suzanne both grasps and evades sexual knowledge.

And she evades it well. In an essay that tarries with Suzanne's "obstinate sexual incomprehension", Sedgwick identifies the rhetoric that fuels the "illusionistic force" of the young nun's narrative.[78] Though she actively refuses to name or admit her lesbian desire throughout the novel—both to herself and to the reader—the act of reading ignites the interplay between sexual knowledge and the different types of ignorance required to deny it. Ignorances are multiple, "produced by and correspond[ing] to particular knowledges" and "regimes of truth". In our scramble to name Suzanne's sexuality, we are thwarted by her, "actively repelling sexual 'knowledge'", looped into the slipstream of guessing, naming, and imagining the kind of "knowing" that the nun refuses.[79]

To read Diderot's novel, we must abandon our readerly desire to reify sexuality, as the only thing between Suzanne and sexual knowledge is her own refusal to know. We are, as Sedgwick argues, forced to linger with Suzanne—a "doggy, fascinated lingering"—at the evasive threshold between the sexual and the nonsexual. Her refusal begets a series of descriptions that are themselves seductive, in which Suzanne repels sexual knowledge so *lustily*.[80] "The delineation of 'the sexual'", writes Sedgwick of Diderot's *Nun*, is thus achieved "by a process that resembles gravestone-rubbing". The reader rubs their crayon back and forth, leaving only the "lines of absent or excised matter"—traces of the tombstone that bears the information we so crave.[81] Sedgwick's metaphor takes us from sex to the grave, to the terrain of shovels and soil and something either buried or exhumed.[82] But, if we are meant to tarry in the nun's sexual ignorance, we should extend this pause before we excavate any further. How should "We 'Other Victorians'" speak of sex between sisters, and how can we pursue rubbing over digging?[83] How is lesbian eroticism *figured* in works that might otherwise deny it? Indeed, sexuality in *The Vale of Rest* hangs in the balance of hints: the illusion of a privacy recently interrupted; the eyes that dwell on the source of this intrusion; the wreaths and tombstones; and the rapturous proximity to death that, rather than ruining the erotic content of this picture, subtly suggests it.[84]

These details elicit a truth-seeking behavior whose intellectual metaphor is digging, a pursuit invited by the very activity of *The Vale of Rest*'s central subject matter. There is an eroticism in the deferred existence of sexual truth, a sensuality that attends the keeping of a secret.[85] Yet, rather than disinter the sexual content of Millais's painting, we might choose to linger on the ground, above the grave. We might choose to see the "erotics of art" that Susan Sontag once extoled in her extended critique of "the modern style of interpretation". This style, she wrote, "excavates, and as it excavates, it destroys". It "digs 'behind' the text" to seek a subtext that yields its truth.[86] Queer thinkers have taken aspects of this critique to heart, urging the eroticism of the surface as a guiding model for queer reading practices.[87] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, for example, convincingly argue that reading and interpretation—so often equated—might be prized apart.[88] The practice of "surface reading", then, amends our interpretive impulses.

How might we delay the passage between observing and interpreting, and how might we find in this delay a kind of seduction? How should we write art history in a state of "doggy, fascinated

lingering"?[89] Part of the answer entails seeing *The Vale of Rest* as an erotic threshold at which different knowledges might be registered and pursued, but also denied.[90] Millais has, for example, painted the ivy-covered convent walls to the left and above his nuns' heads and, indeed, above our own line of vision—walls that indicate this event is not meant to be seen, much less interpreted.[91] Millais's tombstones are also eerily blank, indicating their age or, perhaps, that we are positioned behind most of the graveyard, a kind of unsettling backstage view inside the already restricted convent. Given that the stairs leading away from this area are before us (and perhaps therefore not behind us), our presence seems an even more uncanny detail in Millais's painting. In other words, its most haunting feature is us.

"Enough!" one critic exclaimed. *The Vale of Rest* is not for prolonged contemplation. "It might cause a susceptible female to become melancholy mad, were it continually to meet her eyes with its intense naturalness and vivid reality". A work "so nearly beautiful" in its capacity to terrify, one that threatens to send its feminine viewers "melancholy mad": mad with—or for—the sheer morbidity of a nun "digging her own grave".[92] Maybe, too, it was the way the grave juts out of the work's frame, so that taking a step closer to the seated nun means risking a tumble into the invisible fissure of dirt before her.[93] And, no matter how we arrived in this graveyard (which is still a mysterious event), all our exit paths remain blocked by everything in *The Vale of Rest*'s crowded foreground, including the grave. Our arrival, then, and our potential exit are both uncertain. While interpretively Millais's painting repels its viewers, visually it seduces them. *The Vale of Rest* thus suggests and evades its sexual content, soliciting the frustration and pleasure of our own interpretive frottage. Like Suzanne, Millais's evasion is itself so forcefully claimed that it becomes seductive, potent, head-spinning. Yet this work has one final interpretive refusal that doubles as its central erotic bid: the presence of death, which deceptively signals its chaste religiosity even as it promises an erotic program that is discernible in Millais's work. Much like Suzanne, in this work and, indeed, in some of Millais's other convent pictures, death is the thematic device by which Millais both cultivates and eschews eroticism.

Death and the Convent

Both *The Vale of Rest* and its seductive, if also morbid, sister painting, *Spring*, herald a shift in Millais's painting that began in the late 1850s. As Jason Rosenfeld argues, both works signal a move away from the then widely appreciated Pre-Raphaelitism and toward the aestheticist tendencies that would interest Millais throughout the next decade of his career.[94] This was an aesthetic shift, yes, but it was also, as Rosenfeld notes, an interpretive one. The themes in both *Spring* and *The Vale of Rest* are "more layered, more convoluted, and made more demands on the spectator" than Millais's previous work.[95] While aestheticism embraced the indulgent imprecisions that attend the "art for art's sake" remit, Pre-Raphaelitism remained committed to detail and lucidity in both form and narrative.[96] In Millais's aestheticist experiments, the artist loosened his devotion to both visual and narrative clarity.

Perhaps, however, *The Vale of Rest*'s subject matter directly recalls not only Millais's honeymoon but also his earlier Pre-Raphaelite associations. Charles Allston Collins's *Convent Thoughts* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1851, an event that launched John Ruskin's defense of Pre-Raphaelite art (fig. 6).[97] Ruskin offered high praise for Collins's attention to detail, specifically in his careful depiction of "the water plant *Alisma Plantago*".[98] This aesthetic honesty was matched by what Tim Barringer calls "a careful and informed decoding" that works like Collins's elicit.[99] The novice nun in *Convent Thoughts*, for example, is surrounded by lilies that broadly symbolize her connection to the Virgin Mary.[100] Evergreen and honeysuckle show

"constancy", while the passionflower in her hand was named for the Passion of Christ.[101] The work cultivates a careful reading whose reward is affective engagement.[102] For Millais, *Convent Thoughts* was the first in a series of nun works leading up to *The Vale of Rest*. Indeed, Millais designed its frame and, apparently, conceived of the entire composition—as Collins wrote to Holman Hunt, "the idea and treatment" were both suggested by Millais himself.[103]

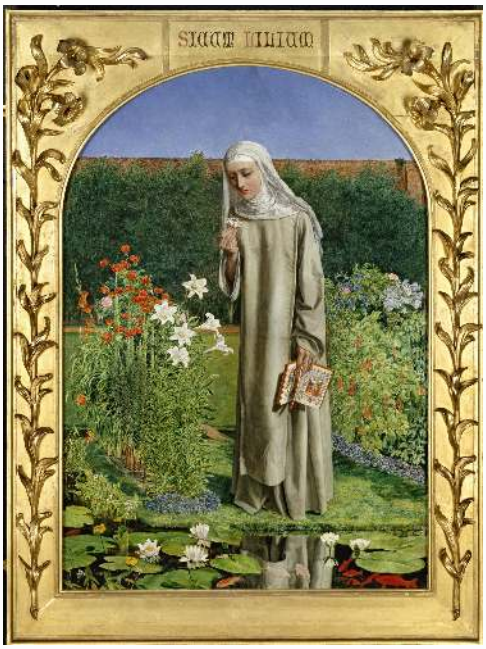

Figure 6

Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts*, 1850–51, oil on canvas, 84 × 59 cm. The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (WA1894.10)… Digital image courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

In contrast with *The Vale of Rest*, however, Collins made the Christian symbolism of *Convent Thoughts* as lucid as the pool of water beneath its contemplative nun. But there is an added artistic metaphor embedded in this nun's distraction: her prayer book hangs limply in her left hand as she observes the passionflower that has captured her admiration. Elizabeth Prettejohn has argued that the nun's gaze on the flower evokes truth to nature, while the prayer book emphasizes the Pre-Raphaelite belief in the superlative honesty of medieval art. Both are key tenets of the movement into which Collins was never fully accepted, despite Millais's nomination to become a member of the Brotherhood. Prettejohn writes that the tension between these Pre-Raphaelite ideals is an aspect of this painting's symbolic world, a metaphor for artistic creation that sits alongside the work's religious significance.[104] Perhaps this duality also sketches some competing tendencies between looking and reading, or rather between aesthetic indulgence on the one hand and dutiful historicism on the other.

These years of the early 1850s also marked the beginning of Millais's affections for Effie Gray, who had been married to the artist's patron, Ruskin, since 1848. During the dissolution of Effie's marriage in the early months of 1854, Ruskin encouraged Millais to send a drawing of *St. Agnes's Eve* (fig. 7), one of Millais's early depictions of a convent.[105] Elaine Shefer speculates that this nun was meant to symbolize Effie, who was with Ruskin "a virgin locked in a cage", like a nun shut up in a convent.[106]

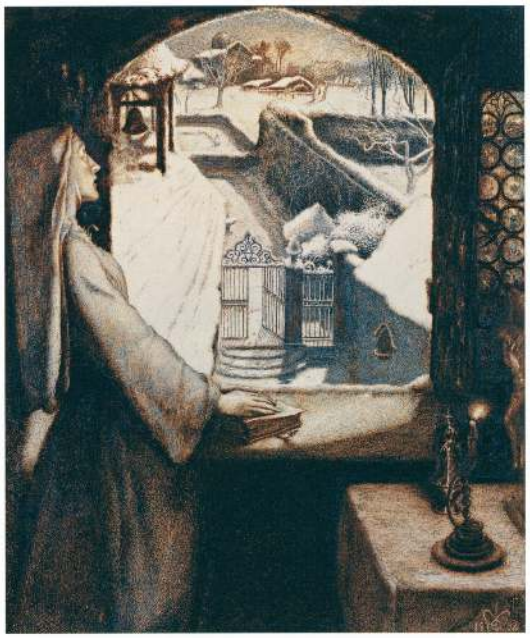

Figure 7

John Everett Millais, *St. Agnes's Eve*, 1854, pen and sepia ink and green wash. Private collection… Digital image courtesy of .

But when in 1854 Effie laid eyes on the nun in *St. Agnes's Eve*, she saw not herself but the artist who drew it. She knew it was him—even with her mouth "opened and dying-looking", the nun's face was "exactly like Millais'".[107] This nun leans backwards in sublime revelation, so that her body barely obscures the snowy vista beyond the arched window. Outside, in the sleet and frost, the bell tips as it tolls. The sky, hardly present above the landscape in all its dramatic perspective, is awash with a blue–brown gradient. Framed by the arched window, everything outside is overwhelmed by a whiteness that spills onto the nun's face and body in an otherwise darkened room. In *St. Agnes's Eve*, the 1837 Alfred Lord Tennyson poem from which Millais's picture takes its subject, the narrating nun exclaims:

> *Deep on the convent-roof the snows*
> *Are sparkling to the moon:*
> *My breath to heaven like vapour goes;*
> *May my soul follow soon!*[108]

"I think I see Millais reading the poem to me", Effie wrote to her mother, excited by the prospect. Tennyson's St. Agnes is inspired by the year's first blanket of snow to declare her yearning for heaven. There, she will finally become united with Christ as his bride, washed of earthly sin. Carol Jacobi has described the sexual significance of this subject: the eve before the death of St. Agnes, 20 January, "became associated with maiden rituals aimed at conjuring a vision of a husband".[109] Perhaps this erotics underpins Millais's picture, at once a self-portrait and a gesture of desire that required the veil of metaphor to express. Effie was still married to Ruskin, and thankful that her husband did not see any trace of Millais's countenance in the nun. The idea had "fortunately not struck John [Ruskin]", whose sole complaint was that this nun was "ugly".[110] My interest here is not only in the queer eroticism of this ambiguously gendered self-portrait.[111] It is also in Millais's continued fascination with the erotics of death in the convent, manifest here

in the curve of the nun's back, the white of her eye, and the turn of her mouth, "opened and dying-looking". In *St. Agnes's Eve*, death means ascension to heaven, union with Christ, and union with a lover, Effie, who in all the confusion becomes the impossible object of desire for Millais-as-nun—made sapphic in this self-portrait. Later, when Millais contributed another illustration of the subject to a collection of Tennyson poems, he had his nun touching a frosty window ledge and breathing a warm exhalation into the open evening air (fig. 8). A sprig of mist flows up from her mouth, delineating the frigid outdoors—perhaps, too, the coldness of death—from her own pining, vital body. Climbing up a spiral staircase, looking up into the sky, seeing the remnants of her breath rising against the night, Millais's nun in this illustration enacts the impending ascension of her soul. For the nuns in these earlier Millais works, desire and death are wedded not only by a marriage to Christ, but also by their proximity to these wintery thresholds. Their embodied rapture is enhanced in the frigid outdoor air, the starry heavens, and the feeling of a breath that escapes the body like the soul.

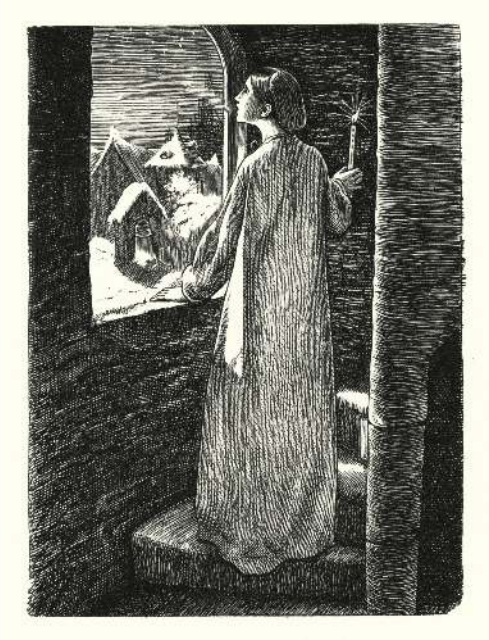

Figure 8

Dalziel Brothers after John Everett Millais, *Illustration for St. Agnes' Eve*, 1857, engraving, in Alfred Lord Tennyson, Poems (London, 1857)... Digital image courtesy of Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved)...

Millais titled *The Vale of Rest* after a dirge from the German Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn, called "Ruhetal":

When in the last rays of evening
Golden hills of clouds ascend,
And manifest like the Alps,
I often ask tearfully:
Between them, where lies
My longed-for vale of rest?[112]

To want death, to ask "tearfully" for a final respite so charged with longing—the song unfolds the interplay between desire and death that was initiated in Millais's drawings of St. Agnes. Like

these other convent imaginings, *The Vale of Rest* is a picture whose erotics are bound with its morbidity in an imagined speaker's "longed-for" death. The song, like the painting, is, as Millais's subtitle announced in the Royal Academy's catalog of 1859, "where the weary find repose".[113]

Repose from what? Ruskin's reading of *The Vale of Rest* is telling. It is colored by the critic's own anti-Catholic views on convents: places where death always looms, where women are kept away from a world they might have otherwise helped to nurture. Millais's picture, Ruskin claims, was frightening to critics because it was "so nearly beautiful"—or, it would be beautiful to "persons unconcerned about their deaths".[114] Death in the convent, Ruskin claims, comes as a "drowsy unquickening of the soul", or else as something "felt and terrible, pouring out his white ashes upon the heart". For Ruskin, life within convent walls is comparable to death itself: they are "places of silence" for the nuns' "sweet voices; places of binding for their faithfullest hands", and "places of fading for their mightiest intelligence".[115] Here the critic obliquely mourns that the women of convents will never share their talents with the world—or with the families they should create and raise. The convent's special kind of death, then, is a relinquishment: of society, of family, of self.

Following on the work of Simon Watney, Leo Bersani called the "gay man's rectum" a grave "in which the masculine ideal … of proud subjectivity" was "buried". Writing during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s, Bersani argued that "male homosexuality" reveals the sexual "as a risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self", and, as such, "it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis".[116] While his argument refers specifically to the context in which it originated, Bersani also outlines the "startling resemblance" between contemporaneous discourse about gay men and nineteenth-century attitudes toward female sex workers. Steeped in fears about syphilis and contamination, "Victorian representations of prostitutes" betray these women's "profound or original guilt" of sexual promiscuity, according to Bersani.[117] Promiscuity is the "*sign of infection*" rather than the risk of it, and it is in this context of infection that sex is reinforced as self-annihilation. Here sexuality culminates in an ecstatic self-erasure that is ultimately ascetic.

If the rectum is where "the masculine ideal" is buried, then might the convent be a space in which the nineteenth-century feminine ideal is similarly interred? Ruskin taunts viewers who might have wanted to see the kinds of "fair faces" that "would grace a drawing-room" in Millais's *Vale of Rest*. Perhaps the grave should have been "dug in prettier ground" with flowers, a "sweet piece of convent sentiment". But, Ruskin contends, Millais's painting realizes a truer "convent sentiment", in which death prevails. Ruskin asks his reader to imagine what "the kind of persons who have strength of conviction enough to give up the world" might "have done for the world had they not given it up". Imagine, too, he urges, "how the King of Terror must rejoice when he wins for himself another soul that might have gone forth to calm the earth". Convents, "those white sarcophagi—towered and belfried", each hold the "living dead".[118] And their inhabitants—nuns—are dead because they are silent, bound, and useless to a world in which they would otherwise have been most useful.[119]

For Millais, the nineteenth-century convent promised an ecstatic, even erotic, proximity to death that Ruskin's writing almost registers—a head turned back in ecstasy, a deep exhale, a grave into which a novice nun threatens to disappear. Ruskin sees in Millais's *Vale of Rest* the nuns' multiple disavowals: of self, of society, of life. For Bersani the sexual itself entails "*losing sight* of the self", and for that it is "a mode of ascesis", ecstatically claimed. Millais's nuns are often pictured in such a mode, in dogged pursuit of death, yielding an erotics derived in this instance

not from promiscuity but from their own ecstatic performance of celibacy. Like Suzanne, whose "obstinate sexual incomprehension" produces an erotic program of deferral and withdrawal, Millais's nuns engage in an erotic self-relinquishment in which death and sex are delectably blended.

The above interpretation leads me not to the specific sexuality or sex acts implicit in Millais's *Vale of Rest*, but rather to Millais himself, standing between Wilde and Sappho in Frith's *Private View at the Royal Academy*. Nearly thirty years after he sent Effie *St. Agnes's Eve*, and long after he painted *The Vale of Rest*, a graying Millais softly doubles Sappho along the fringe of Frith's silent crowd. His brow is furrowed, and the corners of his mouth are absentmindedly curled before the poet and her school as his index finger preserves his place in the RA's exhibition catalog. The Millais in Frith's painting echoes not only Sappho but also the nun of *Convent Thoughts*, whose contemplation of the passionflower is a reprieve from the prayer book in which her place is saved by an index and middle finger. This space between looking and reading is a queer prospect, and an imperative to pause and linger with Millais as he lingers with Sappho. It is also an injunction to see the queer potential of other members of the Royal Academy beyond the question of their queer identity. And it is a challenge to cultivate queer histories by attending not only to queerness, but also to its refusals—to be named, to be read, to be seen.[120]

Acknowledgements

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About the author

Ariel Kline is a PhD candidate at Princeton University. Her dissertation is titled *Of Monsters and Mirrors: Art and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*.

Footnotes

1. Catherine Roach, *Pictures within Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2016), 175.
2. "London Correspondence", *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 1 April 1881, 6. Today the work is often referenced as *Sappho and Alcaeus*, but the RA catalog of 1881 lists it as *Sappho*. "Sappho", *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts. MDCCCLXXXI. The One Hundred and Thirteenth* (London, 1881), no. 269, p. 14.
3. "Royal Academy Exhibition", *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 9 May 1881, 5.
4. Originally in *Aberdeen Press*, repeated in "The Royal Academy Exhibition", *Supplement to the Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 13 May 1881, 3 (italics original).

5. For Sappho's association with lesbianism in the Victorian period, see Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 94–95; Denise A. Whalen, "Sappho in the Closet", in *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 236.
6. "Royal Academy Exhibition", *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1881, 426.
7. William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1888), 441.
8. Frith, *My Autobiography*, 441–42. See also Anne Anderson, "Private Views: William Powell Frith, Harry Furniss and Oscar Wilde", in *William Powell Frith: The People's Painter*, ed. Richard Green and Jane Sellars (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2019), 100.
9. Anderson, "Private Views", 102.
10. Frith, *My Autobiography*, 441.
11. Anderson refers to this "myopic connoisseur" in "Private Views", 101.
12. Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 4. Wilde, in particular, subscribed to an evasiveness of the self that, if "abandoned entirely", enables the queer subject to enact "upon himself the violent social homophobia that erotic negativity is supposed to transform and transcend". Friedman, *Before Queer Theory*, 90.
13. Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 2; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 9.
14. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 9, 161–66. Sodomy was technically punishable by death until 1861. While throughout the century men could be prosecuted and imprisoned for various sex acts, the legality of sex acts is not at issue here, nor is sex between men. Gay identity is—and was—a different matter. David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
15. Natalie Prizel, "Beside Women: Charles Dickens, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Reparative Lesbian Literary History", *GLQ* 24, nos. 2–3 (2018): 270–71.
16. This kind of work is also deeply indebted to the work of David J. Getsy, especially his *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). Judith Butler's questioning of the "I" in relation to lesbianism yields a productive destabilization of identity that is useful here. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination", in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307–20.
17. Here I draw on Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson's notion of "athwart", which, rather than "against", signals that queerness is not formed in opposition to the normative but in wayward movements around it. Wiegman and Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions". *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1–25. Sara Ahmed emphasizes "orientation", offering a similarly directional emphasis in which queerness need not refer to the explicitly sexual or a given sexual orientation, but rather to an embodied, moving notion of the sexual. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
18. "Preface", *Punch* 36 (25 June 1859), 3.

19. John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais, President of the Royal Academy*, vol. 1 (London: Methuen and Co., 1899), 333. "The crowds this year", wrote one observer, "surround Mr. Millais's 'Spring' and 'Vale of Rest'", among other works. "The Lounger at the Clubs", *Illustrated Times*, 7 May 1859, 298.
20. "The Royal Academy", *Morning Post*, 4 May 1859, 3.
21. Jason Rosenfeld, *John Everett Millais* (London: Phaidon Press, 2012), 105. Observed also in "Which Are the Most Popular Pictures? II. In the Tate Gallery", *Strand* 29, no. 13 (1905): 101.
22. The scene was interpreted this way in the nineteenth century. "The Vale of Rest", *Review of Reviews* (London) 11 (1895): 548; "The Royal Academy: Ninety-First Exhibition", *Dublin University Magazine* 54 (1859): 240.
23. M.K. Braddon, "Captain Thomas", *Welcome Guest* 2, no. 28 (1860): 472.
24. "The Royal Academy Exhibition—First Notice", *Evening Mail*, 2 May 1859, 1; "The Royal Academy", *Morning Post*, 2 May 1859, 6.
25. "London Exhibitions—Conflict of the Schools", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (1859): 133; "Notes on the Royal Academy", *Supplement to the Birmingham Journal*, 21 May 1859, 2.
26. "The Royal Academy", *Morning Post*, 2 May, 6; "The Royal Academy", *Morning Post*, 4 May, 3. Some liked the landscape: "The Royal Academy Exhibition", *Evening Mail*; "Notes on the Royal Academy", *Supplement to the Birmingham Journal*, 2. Other critics liked the painting: "Exhibition of the Royal Academy", *Annual Register of World Events*, 1859, 57; "Mr. Millais's New Pictures", *Jersey Independent and Daily Telegraph*, 5 May 1859.
27. "The Two Sisters of Cologne", *All the Year Round* 17 (1867): 94.
28. "Fine Arts", *Atlas*, 7 May 1859, 13.
29. "The Royal Academy", *Dublin University Magazine*, 240.
30. "The Royal Academy", *Era*, 22 May 1859, 5 ("sinews").
31. "London Exhibitions", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 133; "Notes on the Royal Academy", *Supplement to the Birmingham Journal*, 2.
32. "Exhibition of the Royal Academy", *Cork Daily Reporter*, 19 July 1859 ("masculine-featured"); "The Royal Academy Exhibition", *Illustrated London News*, 7 May 1859, 442 ("strapping"); "London Exhibitions", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 133 ("robust").
33. "London Exhibitions", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 133 ("mask-like face").
34. *The Millais Gallery* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1878), 31.
35. "The Royal Academy Exhibition", *Evening Mail*, 2 May 1859, 1.
36. This passage may also refer to the other work he exhibited that year, *The Love of James I of Scotland*. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 339.
37. Malcolm Warner, "The Vale of Rest", in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery), no. 100, p. 175; Millais, *Life and Letters*, 11.
38. John Everett Millais to John William Millais, 3 May 1859, Millais Papers, The Morgan Library, Millais Papers, MA.1485 D.17 (underscoring original).
39. Paul Barlow, "John Everett Millais (1829–1896)", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 145. See also Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (London: Routledge, 2005), 89.
40. "A picture to look at with hushed voice and bowed head", as Marion Spielmann, Millais's first monographist, describes it. Spielmann, *Millais and His Works* (London: William Blackwood,

1898), 31.

41. Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 250; Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 108. Both paintings have also been related to *Autumn Leaves*.
42. Barlow, "Millais", 145. Rosenfeld convincingly argues that both works are "thematically linked" without imposing an edifying or temporal reading on either. Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 106–9.
43. Roger Bowdler, "Ars Longa, Vita Brevis: Life, Death, and John Everett Millais", in *John Everett Millais: Beyond the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, ed. Debra N. Mancoff (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 214. For nature as metaphor, see Debra Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2003), 28.
44. Barlow, "Millais", 145. For the girls' fertility, see also Elaine Shefer, "The Nun and the Convent in Pre-Raphaelite Art", *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 6, no. 2 (1986): 73.
45. Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 40; Bowdler, "Ars Longa, Vita Brevis", 215.
46. Marcia R. Pointon, "Histories of Matrimony: J.E. Millais", in *Pre-Raphaelites Reviewed*, ed. Marcia R. Pointon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 114–15.
47. Susan P. Casteras, "Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artist's Portrayal of Nuns and Novices", *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1981): 178. See also Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2005. Peschier notes Henry Drummond, *A Plea for the Rights and Liberties of Religious Women Imprisoned for Life under the Power of Priests* (London: T. Bosworth, 1851).
48. Samuel Day Phillips, *Life in a Convent* (London: A. Hall and Co., 1848), 23–24. See Gloria McAdam, "Willing Women and the Rise of Convents in Nineteenth-Century England", *Women's History Review* 8, no. 3 (1999): 427; Casteras, "Virgin Vows", 164, 170.
49. Casteras, "Virgin Vows", 176.
50. Peschier, *Anti-Catholic Discourses*, 80–81.
51. Susan O'Brien, "Terra Incognita: The Nun in Nineteenth-Century England", *Past & Present* 121 (November 1988): 111. Prettejohn elaborates how specific religious imagery morphed into a "more generalised" spirituality in paintings by the end of the 1850s. Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 248–49. See also McAdam, "Willing Women", 411–41.
52. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 63. See also Judith Farr, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37; Frederic S. Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
53. Peschier, *Anti-Catholic Discourses*, 80–81.
54. Kate Thomas, "Lesbian Postmortem at the Fin de Siècle", in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 124; Regina Barreca, "Introduction: Coming and Going in Victorian Literature", in *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, ed. Regina Barreca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 2.
55. Thomas, "Lesbian Postmortem", 128, 133.
56. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 59–62; Thomas, "Lesbian Postmortem", 125.
57. Caroline Derry, *Lesbianism and the Criminal Law: Three Centuries of Legal Regulation in England and Wales* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–2. The issue of lesbian visibility is complex and varies historically depending on many different factors. Sharon Marcus,

Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13. It is also possible to dwell too much on this issue, as Thomas warns. Thomas, "Lesbian Postmortem", 132. For more on nineteenth-century lesbianism, see Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

58. Thomas, "Lesbian Postmortem", 125.
59. Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 40; Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 162. See also Rosemary Mitchell, "Sir Isumbras at the Ford: A Portrait of the Young Artist Becoming an Old Knight", in *Masculinity and the Other*, ed. Heather Ellis and Jessica Meyer (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 313. Reina Lewis argues that *The Vale of Rest* "managed to be sufficiently gloomy about convent life to avoid charges of popery". Lewis, "Gender, Genre and Nation: Henriette Brown, the Making of a Woman Orientalist Artist", in *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, ed. Reina Lewis (London: Routledge, 1996), 91–92.
60. Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 40.
61. Marcia Pointon, "Histories of Matrimony", 114–15; Mitchell, "Sir Isumbras at the Ford", 313. On the picture's celibacy, see Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past*, 89. Shefer invokes the "waste" of these women. Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women*, 161; see also Casteras, "Virgin Vows", 175–76. Herbert Sussman articulates the "pleasurable *frisson* evoked by the image of the imprisoned female". Sussman, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the 'Mood of the Cloister'", *Browning Institute Studies* 8 (1980): 50.
62. Casteras, "Virgin Vows", 176.
63. The coffin cloud apparently refers to a "Scottish legend", but I struggle to see it in the painting. "The Royal Academy: Ninety-First Exhibition", *National Magazine* 5 (1859): 109.
64. Casteras, "Virgin Vows", 178. See also Jason Rosenfeld, "The Vale of Rest: 'Where the Weary Find Repose'", in *Millais*, ed. Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 138.
65. "Notes on the Royal Academy", *Supplement to the Birmingham Journal*, 2; "Fine Arts", *Atlas*, 13. This echoes Timothy Barringer's analysis of Ford Madox Brown's Work (1852–1865), in which "'lusty manhood' dominates the scene". Taking his cue from Judith Butler, Barringer argues that work "is one of the principal activities through which 'the substantive effect of gender' is produced". Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 21, 29.
66. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 328–29.
67. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 329.
68. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 329–30. Homosexuality is suggested not by the word "queer" but by "bachelor". Sedgwick gives a description of the bachelor in Victorian novels as innuendo for gay men. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 188–90. See also Katherine V. Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel, 1850–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33.
69. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 330–31.
70. As characterized by their son, John Guille Millais. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 331.
71. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 331. "The situation at last became comic—Millais furious, the conspirators placid, smiling, but firm, and the model immovable".
72. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 329–30.
73. Barlow, *Time Present*, 89; Casteras, "Virgin Vows", 176; Mitchell, "Sir Isumbras", 313.

74. Quoted in P.N. Furbank, "Introduction", in Denis Diderot, *Memoirs of a Nun*, trans. Francis Birrell (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), xii.
75. Michael Sappol grapples with these issues in relation to the work of Joseph Maclise. Drawing on Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sappol crucially unfolds how Maclise—a contemporary of Millais—rendered anatomical illustrations that were sensual and potentially queer. Sappol, "Mr Joseph Maclise and the Epistemology of the Anatomical Closet", *British Art Studies* 20 (July 2021). DOI:10.17658/issn.2058–5462/issue-20/msappol.
76. Diderot, *Memoirs of a Nun*, 152.
77. Diderot, *Memoirs of a Nun*, 149.
78. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 28.
79. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 29, 45.
80. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 44, 38.
81. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 46. See also Sharon Marcus, "Comparative Sapphism", in *The Literary Channel: The International Invention of the Novel*, ed. Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 255–61.
82. Tom Lubbock, "Great Works", *Independent*, 29 August 2008.
83. This turn of phrase from Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 4. Foucault took this term from Steven Marcus's work on the "underside" of Victorian culture in *The Other Victorians*.
84. The interruption in *The Millais Gallery*, 31.
85. See literature on secrecy theory, such as Leila Silvana May, *Secrecy and Disclosure in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2016).
86. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 6. See also Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 6.
87. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is about You", in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37. For the problem of queerness and its relation to history, see Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, "Queering History", *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1608–17; Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies", *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39.
88. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction", *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.
89. Natalie Prizel's recent work expertly attends to surface looking. Prizel, "Finding the Irish Girl: Race, Displacement, and the Aesthetic Promise of Portraiture", *Literature Compass* 18, no. 6 (2021): 1–26. This article is a contribution to existing literature on queer Victorian studies in art history, exemplified in the work of Jason Edwards, Michael Hatt, Andrew Stephenson, Jongwoo Jeremy Kim, and others. However, each of these studies is focused on masculinity and gay or queer male identity. None is focused on lesbianism, feminine or female queerness, or how these intersect with masculinity or male identity. Edwards, "'Anxious Flirtations': Homoeroticism, Art and Aestheticism in Late-Victorian Britain", *Visual Culture in Britain* 8, no. 1 (2007): 1–14; Edwards, "The Lessons of Leighton House: Aesthetics, Politics, Erotics", in *Rethinking the Interior, c.1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, ed. Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (London: Ashgate, 2011), 85–110; Hatt, "Space, Surface, Self: Homosexuality and the Aesthetic Interior", *Visual Culture in Britain* 8, no. 1 (2007): 105–28; Stephenson, "Precarious Poses: The Problem of Artistic Visibility and Its Homosocial Performances in Late-Nineteenth-Century London", *Visual Culture in Britain*

8, no. 1 (2007): 73–103; Kim, *Painted Men in Britain, 1868–1918* (London: Routledge, 2012).

90. The tension between disclosure and refusal is a lively debate in queer theory. It has interpretive and social implications, both of which interest me here. Robert L. Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory", *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 822; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
91. Rosenfeld writes that the walls, the nun's heads, the hedge, and the church roof all "serve to organize the picture". Rosenfeld, "The Vale of Rest", 138.
92. John Ruskin, *Mr. Ruskin's Notes on Some of the Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy, No. 5—1859* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1859), 8; "Literature and Fine Arts", *Dover Telegraph*, 4 June 1859, 2.
93. Warner, "The Vale of Rest", 175. See also Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 250.
94. Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 108–9; Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 34–35.
95. Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 109.
96. Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 8. Barringer comments not on aestheticism but on Pre-Raphaelitism.
97. Although it is not crucial for my argument here, it has been suggested that Collins was gay. He was married to Kate Dickens, and Jane R. Cohen and Jane Marjorie Rabb write that Charles Dickens was unhappy with his daughter's marriage because "he may have guessed, if not known, that his prospective son-in-law was either a homosexual or impotent or both". Cohen and Rabb, *Charles Dickens and His Original Illustrators* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 211.
98. John Ruskin, *Arrows of the Chase: Being a Collection of Scattered Letters Published Chiefly in Daily Newspapers* (Philadelphia: Reuwee, Wattley and Walsh, 1891), 68–69. See also Elizabeth Deas, "The Missing *Alisma*: Ruskin's Botanical Error", *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 10 (2001): 4–13.
99. Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 8.
100. Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 12.
101. Shefer, "The Nun and the Convent", 70; Anne Neale, "Considering the Lilies: Symbolism and Revelation in 'Convent Thoughts' (1851) by Charles Allston Collins", *British Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (2010): 96.
102. Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 12.
103. Collins to Holman Hunt, 22 April 1856, Huntington Library, California, HH 1. See also Neale, "Considering the Lilies", 93.
104. Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 63. See also Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 12; Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 61. Collins's depiction of convent life also stoked British uneasiness about the Catholic Church. Max F. Schulz, *Paradise Preserved: Recreations of Eden in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 254.
105. Shefer, "The Nun and the Convent", 71. Shefer speculates that the move was deliberate: Ruskin was trying to prove a relationship between Effie and Millais.
106. Shefer notes St Agnes was never a nun. Shefer, "The Nun and the Convent", 72.

107. Euphemia Millais née Gray, letter to Mrs. Gray, 2 March 1854, in Mary Lutyens, *Millais & the Ruskins* (London: John Murray, 1967), 148. See also Carol Jacobi, "Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk: Millais and the Synthetic Subject", Tate Papers 18 (2012). https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/18/sugar-salt-and-curdled-milk-millais-and-the-synthetic-subject.
108. Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), 226.
109. Jacobi, "Millais and the Synthetic Subject".
110. Jacobi, "Millais and the Synthetic Subject".
111. Jacobi's article was crucial for my thinking on Millais. Yet my argument here is less about Millais's gender, and more about his association of convents, sexuality, and death. Jacobi, "Millais and the Synthetic Subject". For a reading of the artist's ambiguous relationship to gender in their own work, see Sarah Betzer, "The Artist as Lover: Rereading Ingres's *Raphael and the Fornarina*", *Oxford Art Journal* 38, no. 3 (2015): 313–41.
112. "Wenn im letzten Abendstrahl gold'ne Wolkenberge steigen, / gold'ne Wolkenberge steigen und wie Alpen sich erzeigen, / frag ich oft mit Thränen: / liegt wohl zwischen jenen / mein ersehntes Ruhethal?" Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 108. I am grateful to Carlos Kong for his guidance with this translation.
113. Millais, *Life and Letters*, 336.
114. Ruskin, *Notes*, 9.
115. Ruskin, *Notes*, 10.
116. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 222.
117. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", 211.
118. Ruskin, *Notes*, 10.
119. Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis". See again Edelman: he writes of the separation between queerness and the "reproductive futurism" of its normative counterpart, seeing the queer death drive as the "negativity opposed to every form of social viability". Edelman, *No Future*, 2, 9.
120. Lynne Huffer modifies the antisocial thesis with a feminist ethics of connection. Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). I stage these debates—antisociality and a queer relational ethics—together to reflect on antisociality, resistant historical subjects, and the grave. Stephen Best thinks similar themes alongside questions of belonging and race. Best, *None Like Us*, 11. See also Prizel, "Beside Women", 272–75, 276.

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