"She Has a Lovely Face": Performative Female Death and the Lady of Shalott

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“SHE HAS A LOVELY FACE”:
PERFORMATIVE FEMALE DEATH AND THE LADY OF SHALOTT

A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors

by

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Introduction:

A Repelling Attraction

One cold mid-March afternoon last year, I gave a presentation about Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” in Dr. Scott Dimovitz’s class. I memorized two stanzas from the third part of the poem, and sung them afterwards for days. After the presentation, my best friend Jennie and I went back to my house, where we customarily sat on the floor and talked before our next classes. In an incredibly academic fashion, I said something like, “Gosh, Jennie, women are always floating around in water and drowning and such in literature.” Jennie shot off the floor and began speaking excitedly: “Yeah! Like Ophelia and Viola and The Lady of Shalott!” and I added, “Or like that girl in the music video for If I Die Young!”

We stared at each other, thinking, for a few seconds, and then began to discuss the evolution of the floating, drowning woman in literary history. We began to see this image everywhere, and when I would introduce the topic to various friends, everyone would add another work or incident featuring drowned or floating woman: Hopkins’ “Wreck of the Deutschland,” Virginia Woolf’s actual death, Caddy’s floating in the branch before Quentin’s attempted murder-suicide in The Sound and the Fury, the massive amount of Victorian artwork depicting women in various stages of floating or drowning. It is an image the spans centuries; even today, women float and drown in music videos and photographs in Flickr groups. In the end, what stood out to me about these depictions is that people seem to identify these images, often showing death as beautiful.
This thesis began when I asked: Why does this image exist at all? Why does this image recur? How does it fit in the Victorian zeitgeist and how did it translate to the contemporary one? My own family had a near-drowning experience when I was a teenager and dying this way did not seem like a beautiful or romantic experience. I actually hate water. This hatred began on a midsummer day in the mountains of Colorado, where my family lived. We went camping every weekend we could, canoeing through mountain lake waters for hours. On one such excursion when I was 13 years old, we happened to be in the middle of Jefferson Lake, a massive crater lake with freezing waters from the continual mountain runoff. At this moment, wind started to blow and the waves around us began to rise, rocking our little red canoe furiously. My father could not paddle the canoe in a straight line any longer, and we began to drift to the side. Just as he yelled, “It’s going to be okay!” a wave came roaring at us and our canoe tipped over. My eight-year-old sister was trapped under the canoe, my little dachshund sunk, and my mother and sister were swept away by the current. My father had the presence of mind to realize my sister was under the canoe, and she saved the dog by accidentally grabbing its leash in her flailing and pulling it up from where it had sunk ten feet. Soon, we all had hypothermia. Swimming to shore, I almost drowned because the dog kept climbing on my head, and I could not see because my glasses were wet.

Once we got to shore, some random backpackers helped us out of the water and then left to get our canoe. My sister blacked out and my dog was unresponsive. With my half-drowned parents thus preoccupied, I took it upon myself to stumble the three miles back to the parking lot by myself, falling down hills and becoming a solid gravel-covered
bleeding mess. I got there and found help, but I thought my family had died. In short, help was sent back out and we all survived, but near-drowning is not a pleasant thing to endure. I think it would not be a peaceful death, but one in which thoughts run rampant while lungs fight for air. Now, I cannot stand to even be on a boat in the water. Water is deadly, and I do not understand why the Lady would want to die on it, or why depictions of her look so peaceful.

During my first Honors seminar at Regis, we read *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf; she committed suicide by walking into a river. For me, her final action is a tragic performance of “beautiful” female death because of how her death is currently portrayed in fictional works like *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham. Perhaps the notion of lovely female watery death has festered and grown in a collective unconscience from Ophelia to Woolf, and still continues. Indeed, the second-to-last line from Woolf’s suicide note to her husband embodies something that I feel the Lady of Shalott could have told Lancelot: “If anybody could have saved me it would have been you.” But they could not be saved, and both the deeply depressed Woolf and the Lady, half-sick of shadows, acted outside of the realm of male intervention and faced the waves. Now I find myself treading in their wakes, facing the waves of their words.

What, then, is the meaning of the Lady of Shalott’s death? She does not drown, but she dies on the water. *Why does she choose the water for a medium on which to perform death?* Why does she get in a boat instead of floating down the river, Ophelia-like? Why, after being rocked by waves and dying from a mysterious curse, can Lancelot still look at her face and pronounce it lovely? Her choice of the boat, to not die directly in the water,
caused me to focus my thesis on the Lady of Shalott, not Ophelia. Because the Lady chooses to die in such a way where she can be observed, the death seems staged and performative. It is this decision to get in the boat and sing until she died that, for me, makes the death a performative one.

In my analysis of the Lady’s death, the factors of the gaze, audience, and embodiment become key. Audiences for this female floating death exist, and with audiences come considerations of staging, blocking, script, setting, lighting, and so forth, for the actress. The repetition of this style of death in text and photography, from Victorian to modern times, serves to further particular female gender roles—not only is the beautiful woman captured as art, but this woman embodies a role cast on her by males.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will first outline the key theoretical concepts that form the basis for my inquiry. I will then move on to engage the text of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” in light of these concepts, asking in what ways her death is a performance. In the second chapter, I move on to analyze pictorial representations of the Lady herself, starting with the artwork of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and Elizabeth Siddal. Modern depictions of her death, or of women in the style of her death, will then be analyzed; the image of her “beautiful” death seems embedded in modern consciousness. Finally, the fourth chapter considers my own performance of this death, detailing how I created the performance, the performance itself, and my analysis of that performance. In order for me to fully embody the beautiful dying female role, it was necessary for me to stage this performance.
In the end, the initial image of a floating woman inspires me; I read *Hamlet* when I was 16, and dreamed of playing Ophelia. I can still picture the scene how I first visualized it: a stream, a cold English stream running in a meadow, with flowers dangling over the banks. Ophelia floats down, her dress becoming more and more waterlogged, her hair spreading, mingling with the drooping flowers. This image drew my sixteen-year-old self towards *Hamlet*, and I had previously not liked Shakespeare. Now, the image is disturbing and horrific; I wish Ophelia would get up and walk out of the stream. At the same time, an element of beauty remains—flowers, a flowing dress, floating hair. What is it about this image that is so attracting and repelling? Why does the Lady of Shalott choose to die in the boat, otherwise retaining the same image with these flowers and flowing dress and hair? This thesis is my attempt to understand these long-pondered questions.

Lastly, I owe thanks to many. Virginia Woolf had the Bloomsbury group. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. C.S. Lewis had the Inklings. I have Jennie Babcock, Dr. Daryl Palmer, and the rest of the English department at Regis University, as well as Dr. Janna Goodwin. My thesis would never have been more than a half-conceptualized thought without them.
Chapter One

“She Has a Lovely Face”:

The Lady of Shalott, Her Textual Audience, and Her Author

“The death, then, of a beautiful woman is unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” –Edgar Allen Poe

The Female as a Textual Question: Theoretical Considerations

Because I argue that the Lady performs her own death, and that her gender informs this performance, I must begin by defining both gender and performance, and situate these two elements in their Victorian context. In this thesis, I borrow Judith Butler’s definition of gender, which makes gender synonymous with performance. Rebecca Stern identifies Butler’s definition:

In Gender Trouble Butler argues that gender is not a natural quantity that simply inhabits biologically sexed bodies, but rather ‘is an identity tenuously constituted over time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.’

(424)

How one performs, and the repetition of this performance, informs one’s gender. Gender is thus impossible to analyze without consideration of performance—namely, how one performs gender in a given context, and how performance changes given different contexts. With performance comes considerations of blocking and audience—how the action is performed and for what reason, and the issue of who views the performance.
The question of audience is especially key for this thesis. R. Keith Sawyer discusses audiences in a modern context: “Our everyday talk is spoken for an audience…In creating conversations, our audience is a silent collaborator, and their influence can always be seen in our words” (73). Audiences can be physically present (those present during a communicative act, whether directly engaged in the communication or overhearing it) as well as abstract (these include God, the dead, or invisible audiences). Freud’s theory of tranference can inform how people perform for invisible audiences: “Tranference occurs in a conversation when you start reliving interaction patterns from a past relationship” (Sawyer 89). If a woman’s ex-boyfriend was a dominant, controlling man, the woman may transfer how she acted towards him to her next boyfriend. Memories of past relationships can be invisible audiences (90).

I wish to enlarge Sawyer’s concept of audience to include talk and non-verbal forms of communication. One’s audiences can also determine the actions one takes in a given situation. If one acts in regard to the audience, one determines what one does before any action is taken. If my professor is present in a classroom, I would carefully determine not to raise complaint about an assignment to the person next to me. I decide to not communicate, and also probably to sit up straighter and look ready to learn, simply because the professor is present. I essentially embody the role of the “good student,” directing myself in that moment. I want to place the consideration of audience in more performative terms, and call all action created for an audience “blocking.” I use the Random House Dictionary’s definition of blocking: “to plan or work out the movement of performers in a play, pageant, etc” (“Blocking.”). This term implies specific
premeditated movement for a certain purpose; blocking arises from the role being performed (I block the role of the “good student” because I am playing that role in the first place, based on my own concept of what a good student is). All physical and communicative acts, then, are potentially performative. I do draw a distinction between blocking actions and embodying a role: the former deals with pre-meditated physical actions, while the latter suggests that the person performing a specific role is giving tangible form to an idea of the role. I embody the role of “good student” insofar as I take on what I perceive to the characteristics of a good student; how others perceive this role and react to it influence my performance and how I embody the character.

Audiences hold power over the performer for another reason: audiences possess a gaze. Foucault’s concept of the power-possessing gaze informs my approach to audiences. Biddy Martin, discussing the implications of Foucault’s works for feminists, writes:

Woman, as a category of meaning, and women have been subject to the gaze, the interventions and the control of medical, psychoanalytic and aesthetic experts who do the work of limiting and regulating what it means to be a woman in line with the exigencies of their own discursive fields and legitimating truths. (14)

The gaze here is synonymous with control, and those who possess the gaze project what it means to be female, or the feminine “role,” onto women. The discourse and truths held by the gaze-possessors, or the audience, “limit” and “regulate” this role. Thus, the audience through the gaze has power to dictate how the actor/actress in a situation performs. Who is present for a given act is significant, and the views and truths
ideologically upheld by this audience impact the actress. Victorian male audiences, for
instance, held certain expectations and truths that they upheld through the gaze.

In order to understand the discourse and truths held by these Victorian audiences,
then, historical context and views towards performance must be examined. What was the
role of the Victorian female? If repetition of performance informs one’s gender,
considering how the Victorian females were repetitively portrayed in artwork and text
could shed light on the female role. Indeed, the female role raises questions asked by men
both contemporarily and for the Victorians:

If women have been marginal in the constitution of meaning and power in
western culture, the question of woman has been central, crucial to the discourse
of man, situated as she is within the literary text…and social texts of all kinds as
the riddle, the problem to be solved, the question to be answered. (Martin 13)

Women here are practically a system, their bodies a text to be worked out and solved by
men. For the Victorians, male artists and writers saw females systematically, reducing
them in order to erase the ambiguity that both males and females feared. Historian
Marjorie Morgan states about the Victorian era, “At a time when traditional political,
social, and economic authorities and theories were being questioned…ambiguity in any
form was particularly alarming because it greatly exacerbated the sense of insecurity”
(qtd. in Stern 434). This thesis will analyze the Lady of Shalott in terms of this fear,
questioning to what extent the Lady typifies the male attempt to reduce ambiguity about
the female. This first chapter will discuss the text of “The Lady of Shalott” in terms of the
gaze and audience in the poem. The latter part of the chapter will focus on Tennyson as a male author and how his views of water could influence how the water in the text is read.

“The Lady of Shalott”: Textual Analysis

“The Lady of Shalott” tells the story of a Lady imprisoned in a tower by a “curse” that will come upon her if she leaves. The Lady can only view the world through reflections in a mirror. She works at her loom all day until Lancelot rides by, at which point she looks directly at him and notes that the curse came upon her. Leaving her tower, she finds a boat and, singing a song, drifts down to Camelot while she slowly dies. Lancelot gazes at her in the end, pronouncing her face “lovely.” This is told in four parts, each of which contains a theme: the first part details the Lady’s natural surroundings; the second discusses what the Lady does in her tower; the third describes Lancelot’s arrival and the Lady’s choice to leave the mirror and her loom; and the fourth shows the Lady’s floating and death.

For the content of the poem, Tennyson drew from the Arthurian legend of Elaine of Astolat, who fell in unrequited love with Lancelot, and died only after ordering her body to be floated down the river towards Camelot (Stevenson 236). However, Tennyson adds multiple elements to the story: “…He did not completely adopt the story of Elaine as it was to be found in Malory…and the Italian novella of La Damigello di Scalot, which was presumably its more immediate source, had no tower, tapestry, mirror, or curse” (Stevenson 236). Tennyson added these things and must have had a reason for doing so.

The poetic structure of the 1842 version of “The Lady of Shalott” evokes the cresting of a wave. The poem’s first two parts each have four stanzas, the third part contains five
stanzas, and the last part has six stanzas, suggesting a narrative building. The poem, with its larger last part, leaves the reader on the crest of a wave. Each stanza is nine lines long, and contains four lines in either iambic or trochaic tetrameter followed by one line in iambic hexameter, followed by three lines again in either iambic or trochaic tetrameter, followed by one line in iambic hexameter. The poem’s meter thus flows, wave-like, between longer and shorter lines.

The first part of the poem establishes the setting for the Lady’s performance of death through vivid mimetic description. The sixth line describes how “up and down the people go/ Gazing where the lilies blow” (6-7) on the road that runs to Camelot, the same road that runs through a field by the Lady’s tower. The tower itself is on an island in the river, setting the Lady apart and making her tower subject to the “gazing” of the people. The first stanza, then, establishes the existence of the gaze. The imagery and diction of the first part also creates a feeling of action; the nature and everything in it moves linearly, whether to Camelot or around the isle. The Lady, by contrast, sits embowered in the tower, completely motionless, not engaging directly with the real world. The setting establishes the binary of motion versus immobility, presenting the tension in which the Lady exists.

In the fourth stanza, the Lady’s vocal performance serves as an interpretive tool for her audience. The poem’s speaker asks, “But who hath seen her wave her hand?” (24), establishing that the Lady stands apart from the gaze. No one has seen her, but the reapers “hear a song that echoes cheerly” (30). She performs for the audience of those in hearing, but she cannot directly see her audience and they cannot see her at all (at least according
to the poem’s speaker). However, these reapers, presumably male, “whisper / ‘Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott” (35-36). The reapers, characterizing the Lady as a “fairy,” give her a character and perhaps even an appearance without ever laying eyes on her. Tennyson used the word “fairy” in his 1864 poem “Alymer’s Field” in a way that means “Resembling a fairy, fairy-like; delicate, finely formed or woven” (“Fairy.”). I would apply the same definition to this context; “fairy Lady” evokes an image of a slender, flitting creature. Thus, the reapers describe the Lady, who is a weaver, as woven herself, a work of art already. The men interpret her performance and make the unknown being in the tower into a dainty mythical creature.

The poem’s second part introduces the curse, the rest of the Lady’s audience, and her work. The Lady:

weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot. (38-42)

What is the subject of her web? She weaves images of the outside world that she sees in her mirror, turning funerals or young lovers strolling in the lane into art. For the Lady and the reapers, a turning of the actual into a work of art is a mutual impulse. Neither the reapers nor the Lady have directly seen what they wish to represent, and they mold the unknown into more easily accessible and manageable art.

The Lady is an artist sequestered by a whisper, and if she stops producing art to gaze
directly at the city below, a curse will impact her in some way. The whisper tells her how to avoid the ambiguous curse, and in doing so, curses her to remain at the loom, unseen and unseeing. While she exists as an audience for others, those others presumably do not know she can watch them, and she has no power as an audience. She is a mute observer of those who pass by her tower.

The Lady is also introduced to traits of females through her observation. The poem’s speaker notes that she sees “the red cloaks of market girls” (53); “a troop of damsels glad” (55); and the “two lovers lately wed” (70), one of which would be a female. The Lady does not see the market girls but rather their cloaks, defining them through their clothing. The damsels are “glad,” happy on the road in the presence of other females in their “troop.” They are not unhappy, not care-worn, presumably not working. The two lovers bring what it is to love into the view of the Lady, maybe even physical love. Additionally, all these women exist in a state of community, not individualized but part of a whole. Even though the Lady can only observe these images of females through the mirror, she still knows she is female and thus, in Butler’s terms, may constitute her gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” once she has an audience that can see her. As of now, however, she still remains in the tower, observing what it is like to be female.

While the Lady presumably “delights” in always weaving, she still expresses an awareness of her own incomplete existence. Positioning herself further in the tension between mobility and immobility, she states: “‘I am half sick of shadows,’ said / The Lady of Shalott” (71-72). Not fully sick of the shadows, or the images of life she sees that the mirror mediates, she appears neither completely content with her lifestyle nor willing
to do anything to change it. Stevenson, however, sees the Lady as content to create her art in her tower:

At the beginning of the poem she is perfectly happy with her artificial, lifeless creations. When she catches a first glimpse of real emotion, even in the mirror (the young lovers) she suddenly begins to rebel, crying out, "I am half sick of shadows!" As soon as emotion touches her personally through her interest in Lancelot, she defies the curse, and enjoys her brief hour of genuine life, even though she knows it will be her last (237).

Stevenson states that seeing “real emotion” was the cause of the Lady’s declaration of half-sickness. In this view, emotion was the driving force that influenced her to eventually leave the tower. However, nothing in the poem implies that these young lovers were the first the Lady had ever seen, and influenced her in this moment to see real emotion for the first time; she had previously been observing people on the road for an unspecified amount of time. I suggest that it was not just emotion that drove the Lady from her tower—it was her eventual internalization of the female role she had been observing. Her lack appears evident for the speaker—“she hath no loyal knight and true” (62)—and after observing that women either walked collectively or were half of a pair of lovers, she acted to fill the lack. The woman’s role she had observed was one in which women were defined by those around them—in other words, their audience. The Lady saw not one market girl with others around her, but a group of market girls. Her acknowledgement of half-sickness suggests awareness of her lack and the odd state of her individuality, and this propelled her to begin to perform a public role in leaving her
The poem’s third part introduces Lancelot. Lancelot rides with a red-cross knight kneeling on his shield. This is a reference to Spencer’s *Faerie Queen* and the resulting image of the perfect gentlemen, pledging fealty to a lady. Lancelot rides physically close to her tower, a “bow-shot from her bower-eaves,” and “flash’d into the crystal mirror” (46). As he travels thus, he sings; this song is performed for no known audience, because it is unknown whether he knows the Lady can hear him, or if he even knows of her existence. Even his armor draws attention to himself—“his armour rung / Beside remote Shalott” (89-90). His performance draws the Lady out of her stasis; after he sings “tirra lira, by the river” the Lady “left the web” and looks directly at him without the mirror. His performance is key to attracting her, to propelling her to make the final step in turning from the mirror. His song is not a shadow; she can hear it directly.

The Lady deduces that the curse comes upon her by what happens next; the mirror cracks and the web “floated wide” (114). These two physical happenings are the only clues that a curse has descended. Oddly, there has been little scholarship exploring what the curse may actually be. Flavia Alaya views the curse as that which causes the Lady to leave her life as isolated artist and to feel emotion: “The Lady of Shalott might well have said for the first time, ‘I have felt.’ At this point in the poem, the curse is indeed come upon the Lady of Shalott, and all such ladies who are surrogates for the artist” (284). Alaya’s view echoes Stevenson’s in that emotion is key in driving the Lady out of her tower; the Lady as an artist finally engaged in the real world now has a real basis for her work. I would add that, in Lancelot, the Lady finds an audience for which she wants to
perform, to become like the “young lovers” she longingly watches. The curse, then, is that which awakens the Lady to the role she must play to properly engage with society.

Indeed, in the last part of the poem, the Lady immediately reenacts the role of a female—that of exposing herself to the male. The Lady, after crying out that the curse has come upon her, leaves the tower and approaches the water:

In the stormy east-wind straining,

The pale yellow woods were waning,

The broad stream in his banks complaining,

Heavily the low sky raining

Over tower’d Camelot. (118-122)

The endstopping at the end of each line suggests choppiness in the landscape—gone are the linear features of nature and movement found in the first part, with people moving up and down and the stream always flowing down. The line describing the rain is enjambed, implying a rush of rain over Camelot; little about this scene is peaceful. The “broad stream” is also engendered to be male, complaining in “his banks.” Finally, “The broad stream [bears] her far away” in the second stanza. The initial action the Lady takes after leaving the tower is to approach what is metaphorically male—the stream, vocal, upset, broad, with the capacity to take her far away towards the actual male. She immediately seeks a male audience, putting her body in the boat and being swept away.

The fact she waits until nightfall to stage her death suggests that she views the act of floating to Camelot as a performative one. The Lady waits until night to get in the boat, but not to prepare the set for her death. When she sees Lancelot and turns, sunlight
glances off Lancelot’s brow in “the blue unclouded weather.” However, it is not until
“the closing of the day” she lies in the boat. Before nightfall, however, she finds the boat
and writes her role on it, preparing the set for the performance (“The Lady of Shalott” is
not a name but an identity informing her of gender and location, forever tying her to
Shalott). She drew this performance from observation of actual funerals, for she saw
“often thro’ the silent nights / A funeral, with plumes and lights / And music” (67-68). By
waiting until night to get into the boat, the Lady reenacts the funerals she has seen,
suggesting also she is aware of her own impending death. She even provides her own
music by singing her “last song” (143), which is a “carol.”

Her song, however, goes beyond simply reenacting what she has seen before—it is a
song sung for an audience. According to the OED, a carol in this context is “A song or
hymn of religious joy” (“Carol.”). As “her blood was frozen slowly” (147), she sings a
song with a religious theme that contains joy. She now considers God, traditionally
gendered as male, as her audience as well—carols and hymns are sung for an audience of
the divine. The Lady performs her death for males and for God. The song itself seems to
contain power; a new unspecified audience, “they,” hears “a carol, mournful, holy, /
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly, / Till her blood was frozen slowly” (145-147). “They”
cannot know her blood is frozen slowly; to me, it is almost like the song brings about the
freezing of the blood, as if the Lady uses the song as a spell that casts death. Whatever
the song’s power, she still sings for an audience of the divine.

Unlike Ophelia, the Lady does not float anywhere in the actual water or drown; she
chooses to get in the boat to perform her death. The act of placing her body in the boat
signifies she means to be seen. If she drowns like Ophelia, her body could be lost. She
knows the river runs to Camelot, and she thus knows that getting in the boat will take her
to Camelot where Lancelot rode. As an actress blocking her death, she intends to move t
her audience.

The Lady’s costume and appearance for her death-performance are also choices that
communicate meaning. For her costume, she meets the river as a bride would meet a
groom, appareled in “snowy white.” Leaves fall over her body in the boat, and her white
dress floats in the breeze, loosely falling “to left and right” (136). Her costume appears
freer than she, and although her garb typifies her as a bride, the falling dress and her
description itself becomes problematic for the Victorian male.

Unframed: The Lady’s Textual Restriction and Freedom

The Lady’s general appearance, so vital to understanding why she performs as she
does for her audience, will be discussed in this section. Oddly, Tennyson never describes
the Lady in the beginning of the poem. This is a stark contrast to another of Tennyson’s
works, the Arthurian poem “Elaine and Lancelot,” the story that inspired “The Lady of
Shalott.” This poem begins with a description that leaves no doubt about the lady’s
beautiful appearance: “Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable, Elaine, the lily maid of
Astolat” (1-2). The readers of “The Lady of Shalott” are provided no such description of
the title character; in fact, every character appearing in the poem from Lancelot with his
“coal-black curls” to the “long-haired page in crimson clad” are given some sort of
physical description, except the Lady herself. The only glimpse we have of her body
comes when she is “lying, robed in snowy white” in the boat, on the water, before her death.

The Lady with limited physical description cannot be easily visualized; Helena Michie states that Victorian novelists often gave their heroines, such as Middlemarch’s Dorothea, a frame through description. The frame attempts to capture the woman, to distance her physical, sexual body from the viewer (103). I would broaden Michie’s discussion, arguing that the same descriptive framing occurs in Victorian poetry as well. Because the reader only glimpses the Lady’s physical being once, her body seems a safe, controlled space; her physicality cannot be seen and thus remains unacknowledged, leaving her pure. At the same time, these descriptive omissions free the Lady from any sort of physical frame. What if she is not dressed modestly? What if she has short hair? She, with no audience and no description, is free to appear as she wishes, and therefore allows (indeed, even tempts) the reader to imagine her body. Tennyson, however, does again evoke the frame in the description of her “snowy white” dress; she appears as a bride, pure and acceptable. Free from description in her tower, the Lady is subject to males (both the author and Lancelot) the instant she steps into society via the male medium of water. These males harness her physicality and thus her potential sexuality.

An Aesthetically Pleasing Corpse Body

Thus we arrive at the question that began this thesis. Why is the death of a beautiful woman considered beautiful? That question stands for both the Victorian era and for our own time.

“The Lady of Shalott” ends with Lancelot and his words. After the Lady floats into
Camelot, “a gleaming shape,” all the knights cross themselves in fear. Lancelot, however, “mused a little space; / He said, ‘She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott” (169-71). He considers the same audience of God that she did, but only after he notes her loveliness. The Lady’s performance of death has succeeded in garnering for her body the audience of a particular male—something about her caused Lancelot to muse apart from the other knights. As an actress, she succeeded in pleasing her audience for an instant, even in death. The boat was a good choice to keep her body whole and lovely and separate from the potentially competing male force of the water.

However, naming the Lady as an actress contains contextual implications that are interesting to consider in light of Lancelot. Davis, examining the portrayal of women in Victorian erotica, states, “It seems that the content of Victorian erotica verifies in a fictive (and, therefore, for readers, a real) sense that the actress was inseparable from the whore and synonymous with sex…” (296). Of course, to say that Lancelot sees the Lady as an actress is too large an interpretive leap, but I think Davis’s words have something interesting to contribute about bodies being presented. On stage, the actress exposes herself to the gaze of the male, and the Victorians considered those who did this to be automatically sexualized. Similarly, the Lady appears on the stage of her boat, completely exposed to the male gaze. Interestingly, Lancelot says nothing about her body, only her face, and avoids sexualizing her.

Tennyson, through Lancelot’s words, removes the sexual suggestion of peering at the prone female body by considering only her face and the audience of God. The description of her face serves as yet another frame to make her body a non-threatening space for
males; her face must be lovely, because in that loveliness lies a safe romanticism of the female. She is never a corpse, never gruesome, but gentle in death as she ought to have been for her male audiences in life.

**Tennyson and the “The Lady of Shalott”: Death Idealized**

Tennyson’s watery life serves as an important frame for reading “The Lady of Shalott.” Tennyson, born in 1809, held the title of Poet Laureate from 1850-1892, and received great critical acclaim for his later poetical works. His early life, however, was fraught with difficulty. Tennyson’s father was a bitter alcoholic, and Tennyson used poetry as an escape (Fredeman). He went to college at Cambridge in 1827, where he met Arthur Henry Hallam, with whom he became incredibly close. In 1832, his *Poems* which included “The Lady of Shalott,” was published, only to receive harsh critical reviews. The next ten years of his life were fraught with difficulty and heartache. In 1831, Tennyson’s father died, leaving the family without any large means of support. In 1833, Hallam died unexpectedly, plunging Tennyson into a realm of terrible grief. Tennyson’s sister Emily, who was engaged to Hallam, became ill, and Tennyson vowed not to publish any poetry:

The combination of the deaths of his father and his best friend, the brutal reviews of his poems, his conviction that both he and his family were in desperate poverty, his feelings of isolation in the depths of the country, and his ill-concealed fears that he might become a victim of epilepsy, madness, alcohol, and drugs, as others in his family had, or even that he might die like Hallam, was more than enough to upset the always fragile balance of Tennyson's emotions. ‘I suffered what seemed
to me to shatter all my life so that I desired to die rather than to live,’ he said of that period. (Fredeman)

Here, Tennyson seems scared of a sort of family curse that bequeathed him illness, bringing to mind the Lady of Shalott’s own conviction of an invisible curse which shatters her life. Tennyson began to seek treatment for his malaise at hydrotherapy hospitals, which used water to treat pain, and continued to do so until 1848. Despite this desire to die, Tennyson continued to revise his poems and write new ones. In this period, he significantly revised “The Lady of Shalott,” and this revised version was published in 1842, his first publication in ten years. According to Joyce Green, this poem was one of the five “predominately unpopular” poems in the original 1832 collection that Tennyson decided to revise (678), implying the poem held significance to him, at least causing him to re-approach the poem.

The 1833 version of “The Lady of Shalott,” published in the same year as Hallam’s death (and written before his death), shows a harsher characterization of water than is found in the later version. Only when Lancelot rides by does The Lady look directly at the world, after which the curse befalls her. She goes to the river, lies in a boat, and floats to her death. Tennyson references sailors in this version of the poem:

As when to sailors while they roam,
By creeks and outfalls far from home,
Rising and dropping with the foam,
From dying swans wild warblings come,
Blown shoreward; so to Camelot
Still as the boathead wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her chanting her deathsong,

The Lady of Shalott. (The Camelot Project, 145-153)

He compares the boat’s movement with that of sailors “rising and dropping” on the water, and also with the “wild warblings” of the dying swans. The endstopping of the first four lines imply a ceasing of smooth motion which completely halts with the caesura in the fifth line; this line and the next, however, have no endstopping, allowing the boat to drift in peace for an instant until the audience (“they”) is introduced. She sings, she performs, and she is heard despite the energetic water. Nevertheless, this version of the poem goes on to detail the death of the Lady; her “smooth face sharpened slowly”; she is “a pale, pale corpse” and “deadcold.” The Lady undergoes a definite change from smoothness to sharpness. The water does not kill the Lady; she dies on the water, but the curse kills her. In the end, though, the water is still an energetic medium for death.¹

Tennyson removed the details describing the rising and dropping water, the soldier, and the description of death in the 1842 version. The stanza quoted above becomes:

Lying, robed in snowy white

That loosely flew to left and right--

¹ Also, this water is much different than the filthy reality of the Thames at the time. The Thames, for instance, was so contaminated that it constantly stunk for miles on either side of London (Schneer 145). Bodies pulled from the Thames after a ship collision in 1878 were discolored from the river: “…the dresses of women pulled from the river turned in color from blue to violet…watermen noticed that bloated bodies were rising from the depths of the river faster than usual…the recovered bodies were coated in slime” (156-157). This is completely different than Camelot’s clean river and the Lady’s body that Lancelot declares “lovely.”
The leaves upon her falling light--
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott. (136-144)

The lack of and different endstopping in the first four lines alone shows the marked
difference; the dashes provide a feeling of continuation, not of rising and falling. She
floats smoothly through noises, and there are no dying swans with wild warbling.
Something has happened to the water, and it is tamer, more constricted. The audience at
the end still hears the Lady’s song, but the song itself is now a “last song,” not a
“deathsong.” Her very performance changes; the song, while still containing finality, is
not tinted with death. She is no longer a corpse, but a standard of safe loveliness. The
result of these changes is a softer, more beautiful image of the Lady, again one that is
non-threatening to males.

I find these changes to be odd for Tennyson. Sometime between 1833 and 1842, after
he had endured the heartache of Hallam’s death, Tennyson revised his poem to contain
fewer references to rough waters and wild warblings. The fewer references to death
suggest a reformulation of female death on part of Tennyson, or perhaps an effort on the
part of the poet (ever concerned with receiving positive criticism) to make the poem more
popular, tapping into the Victorian zeitgeist of the angelic housed female, soft in life and
death. The reason for these changes is discussed in the next chapter, along with artistic representations of the Lady.

In 1848, six years after his revision of “The Lady of Shalott” and one year before the completion of In Memoriam, his elegy to Hallam, Tennyson arrived at the sea in the West Country of England. Tennyson’s grandson Charles recounts this journey in a biography of his grandfather. Upon reaching his lodging, Tennyson “cried out immediately to the girl who let him in, ‘Where is the sea? Show me the sea’” (227). After the girl opened the back door for him, Tennyson rushed outside and fell six feet down a wall. He felt drawn to water at the expense of his own safety. Later in the same journey, he encountered a parson who was a poet. The parson told Tennyson stories of the cruel sea, which would destroy wrecked sailors: “So cruel is that shore that after a wreck [the parson] would send a man with a basket to collect the gobbets of flesh cut from the bodies…by the sharp rocks against which the waves battered them” (229). Water as a violent destroyer, an entity rendering that which was human into blotches of mass, indeed appears in In Memoriam: “O mother, praying God will save / Thy sailor,—while thy head is bow’d/ His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud/ Drops in his vast and wandering grave” (VI). In the prior stanza, a father prays for a soldier, killed by a gunshot presumably on land; the mother here prays for the sailor, already identifying the female concern with that which is on the water. Water becomes a limitless grave, something that cannot provide certainty or stability even in death. The sailor “drops” into the water, implying an unceremonious burial; no audience for the death exists, no one can see the body in the hammock-shroud. The sailor is simply lost after death. Furthermore, the sea has taken this life even as the
mother invokes God, establishing tension between religious power and nature. The use of water as a medium through which to describe his loss shows Tennyson’s enduring fascination with the sea and with water, which had the power to destroy life.

In 1850, *In Memoriam* was published, and Tennyson married two weeks later. In 1853, he moved to a house on the Isle of Wight with a view of the sea; he had two sons, Lionel and Hallam (“Alfred Tennyson”). Lionel died in 1886 during a passage from India to England and was buried at sea. Tennyson’s experience with the sea and water went beyond poetic imagery to affect him in life.

At the end of his life, Tennyson seems to have used death-on-the-water formulation as a metaphor for his own death. Three years before he died, he composed “Crossing the Bar,” which he requested to always be printed last in any collection of his works (Lombardi par. 3). The poem’s first and last stanzas discuss the speaker’s floating on water in a boat towards an audience of “my Pilot,” and his floating away occurs at “twilight and evening bell” (line 9). The Lady’s method of death appears to be Tennyson’s idealized version of his own death in which there “may be no sadness of farewell” (line 11). His request for the poem to be placed at the end of his works suggests that he viewed it as the culmination, the last word in a lifetime of writing. For the Lady and Tennyson, it appears that death blocked on a boat is an ideal way to propel themselves to a new audience—Tennyson to God, the Lady to a man.
Chapter Two
Capturing the Image of Female Performative Death:
From the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to Flickr

“It's May 3rd and I've found my favourite photo in the world.”

-Virginia Fenneltea, a Flickr user, commenting on “Ophelia,”
a 2008 photo of a girl drowned facedown in a bathtub,
surrounded by flowers

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

The members of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) shared Tennyson’s fascination
with the image of death on the water. All three of the founding members of the PRB
(Dante Rossetti, Millais, and Hunt) portrayed the Lady in their artwork. The pre-
Raphaelite movement began in 1848 (just six years after Tennyson’s revision of “The
Lady of Shalott” was published) with a group of artists who wanted to “create a visual
language for fresh and unusual ways of representing the material world” (Bullen 1). This
raises multiple questions. How was the Lady part of this visual language? Next, how did
these men portray the Lady through their artistic gaze? What audiences do they give her?
In what costumes does she appear? In this chapter, I explore the depictions of the Lady in
her boat, which is the height of her performance of death, by two members of the PRB. I
will then expand the discussion to analyze modern-day representations, exploring how
these images have and have not changed from the Victorian period.
The image was popular amongst the PRB because of her romantic Arthurian appeal, hearkening back to a time when women were subjects of chivalry and courtly love. Shefer states that depicting “The Lady of Shalott” was common in the PRB because they “concerned themselves with woman-as-victim” (28). Their captivation with the Lady, however, also tapped into the classic Victorian male fear of the unframed woman: “The Pre-Raphaelite reframing of fictional women as paintings is, perhaps, an analogue to this fictively embedded framing process; the obsessive need to illustrate Victorian poems, including, of course, their own, is in itself an act of capture” (Michie 108). Simply by portraying the Lady in their art, they were capturing her. Their art visually describes the largely non-described Lady, and much like the director of a play with few stage directions, they had to make certain choices about her appearance and actions. To answer how a Victorian male would capture Tennyson’s potentially dangerous Lady, it is only logical to turn to their artwork.

In his wood engraving on paper, Dante Gabriel Rossetti chose to represent the moment in which Lancelot looks down at the deceased Lady. Lancelot, an expression of cool examination on his face, looms over her, leaning on a rail. Swans gather in the background, and men swarm over Lancelot’s head, trying to look at the body. The Lady’s face is turned away from him, half-shadowed. Her eyes remain obscured in the shadow; they could be open or closed, and unlike the poem, the viewer has no idea what she sees. In Rossetti’s pen and ink study for the engraving, the Lady’s eyes appear closed, and her face is vague, unlike Lancelot’s. Rossetti removed these definitely closed eyes in the final version; whether or not the Lady still gazes at the viewer after death is unknown. The
viewer of the work becomes an audience to this moment of death; each viewer casts his or her gaze on the Lady. This work most represents the gaze—the Lady is seen on all sides.

Fig. 1. *The Lady of Shalott* (1857). Wood engraving by Dalziel brothers after Rossetti’s design.
Fig. 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, study for Moxon Tennyson plate (1857).

Pen and ink on paper.

The Lady’s appearance in the wood engraving shows Rossetti’s interpretation of her performative death. Her features are heavy and her hair appears thick and coarse; a cloak envelops her, obscuring her body and any curves. Light and dark play in this carving; unlike the poem, the Lady’s bride-appearance is not apparent and no white dress can be seen. Rossetti re-appropriates the Lady, removing femininity and making her body a safe
space. However, with this appearance comes a suggestion of uncertainty as well; if she is not a pure bride, the image of a spotless woman, what is she? One could imagine that Lancelot ponders this as he gazes down at her.

Fig. 3. John Everett Millais, The Lady of Shalott (1854).
Millais’ sketch of the Lady connects her with his painting of Ophelia, suggesting he drew a similarity between death by drowning and floating. Millais sketched the Lady on the river only two years after he completed his famous painting of Ophelia. He never completed an actual painting of the Lady of Shalott, however. The depictions of the two women appear to be mirror images of each other, Ophelia floating right and the Lady floating left. Both are lying on their backs, heads facing the sky, eyes half-open, arms outstretched. The Lady’s hair dangles in the water; Ophelia’s hair floats around her. Two main differences besides the background appearance (the Lady has swans in her setting) are that the Lady floats in a boat, which in itself almost disappears in shadow. The Lady’s dress here is white and thus bride-like, but its outline is vague; it is difficult to distinguish
where her neck and skin end and the dress begins. Millais’ sketch, in which the Lady’s hair and hand dangles in the water, also makes the Lady vulnerable to the water. This vulnerability does not exist in most other paintings of her or the poem itself. The sketch also identifies the Lady with the same imagery as Ophelia, opening a parallel between the two that exists today. Millais reinterpreted the Lady into Ophelia. Floating and drowning become connected. Indeed, why do the other artists (and Tennyson, in the first place) keep the Lady from the water?

Both of these representations serve to capture the Lady and give her varying audiences; an audience of men and nature (swans), an audience of a potential male riding in the background, and an audience of nature. Captured by engendered water or the male gaze, the Lady becomes securely held by masculinity. However, the Lady’s lack of femininity in Rosetti’s carving and the curve-revealing dress of Millais’ sketch suggest the Lady in her boat had two different bodies. She has a freer body, open to complete observation, while in nature; in the presence of Lancelot, she is cloaked and shadowed, her femininity under control. However, in both these paintings, her physical body is framed through the brush or pen of a male. What changes when a woman depicts the Lady?

A black-and-white drawing of the Lady by Elizabeth Siddal, who was a model for and wife of Rossetti, serves to give the Lady a simple frame; Siddal’s own experiences inform us the constant framing of Victorian women. Rossetti taught Siddal painting, and the two married in 1860. In 1854, a year after Siddal drew The Lady of Shalott, ” Dante “praise[d] her drawings as the ‘most poetical of all possible designs’” (qtd. in Shefer 23).
The man who drew the deceased Lady subjected to Lancelot’s gaze viewed Siddal’s less elaborate drawings as “poetical,” suggesting he linked her art with the same beautiful qualities as verse. The art of the woman could not stand as art in itself; it had to be textualized and poetic. At any rate, however, Rossetti valued her work, although the PRB did not consider her one of their members.

If there was any Victorian woman who understood what it was like to float in water, it was Siddal. Siddal served as the model for Millais’ painting of Ophelia, sitting in a bathtub of water that Millais forgot to heat because he was so engrossed in his work. Siddal fell severely ill but recovered (Curnow). Siddal, who became Ophelia, chose to paint the Lady dry in her tower. This choice is completely different than Rossetti’s, who depicted her in the boat. In Siddal’s drawing, the Lady sits at her loom, wearing a simple white dress, dark hair pulled back from her shoulders. Behind her, a chest of drawers stands with one of its drawers opened; a large crucifix sits on the chest. In front of the Lady, the mirror hangs, cracked, with Lancelot reflected in it; Lancelot too appears simply, a knight riding on a horse, not brandishing a sword. Out the window the broad river runs, surrounded by trees, safely distant from the Lady.

Her audience seems to be Christ hanging on the crucifix, not the knight in the mirror; her position in the middle of the two images suggests a conflict, a turning from religion to the man outside the window. Her body also appears de-emphasized in its curve-concealing dress; the Lady’s shoes are not even visible. In Siddal’s portrayal, the Lady’s decision to look at Lancelot becomes the focal point; the female gaze dominates. This Lady is perhaps the most dangerous yet; she is allowed agency to look and turn away
from an audience of God. This is not the ornately cloaked, regal figure of Rossetti’s work, or the passive body of Millais’ floating Lady. This image appears to depict a moment of decision; the Lady simply looks out the window towards Lancelot. It is as if she always could have turned her head and looked; she just chose this moment to do so, and she has not even realized that, with the cracked mirror, everything is changing.

Fig. 5. Elizabeth Siddal, *The Lady of Shalott* (1853), pen, black ink, sepia ink, and pencil drawing

Other critics see Siddal’s Lady as a woman trapped between art and life, or a passive woman only minimally reacting to what occurs outside the home. Shefer states, “Her Lady remains securely seated, her look but a glance, her work at the loom only slightly interrupted. She is woman as object: The Lady of Shalott is she who is seen rather than she who sees” (26). I suggest that the Lady possesses a gaze she casts onto the male. She
does not have the closed, shadowed eyes of Rossetti’s and Millais’ depictions. She looks, and she looks calmly and curiously. She maintains dignity while looking at the male. When represented by a female, the image of the Lady becomes less ornate, less strikingly beautiful, and more every-day.

Thus, for the Pre-Raphaelite men, the Lady embodies a dangerous paradox. She is almost bride-like but not white; passive yet with eyes necessarily shut to control her gaze. Her body—masked, seen, controlled, and unknown—serves as a liminal space. As such, her performance of death allows her to present this body to the world, becoming an audience and an actress. The male force of the water, however, always tempers her performance. Her boat keeps her from directly contacting this force; she is compelled forward by the male, but not immersed. Millais’ drawing muddies this, with the Lady’s hair dangling in the water, Ophelia-like. This muddying continued, and continues today, until the Lady becomes immersed in the water, as will be discussed in the last section of this chapter. What must be remembered is that the story always ends the same: the Lady dies, forever ending her performativity, erasing her from a dangerous liminal position. While she lives, she must be beautiful to be safe in the gaze of men.

**The 21st Century Floating, Drowning Lady: Flickr Images**

Thus far, we have explored the image of the floating, dying Lady in the Victorian context. We have seen that depicting her death as beautiful was a way for the Victorian male to turn the female into art that framed her safely. This section of the chapter will explore how the image has translated into the 21st century, responses and misconceptions about this image, and why the image of performative female death is still largely
considered beautiful. I will analyze Flickr photos and a popular music video, exploring how the Lady’s qualities have changed or remained the same from the time the PRB and Siddal depicted her. The Lady’s image, still incredibly popular, provides insight into how females and males still repetitively perform gender roles.

Multiple images of the Lady of Shalott exist on the online photo-sharing website, Flickr. A quick search for “Lady of Shalott” returns 594 results, although a look at these results reveals a general confusion about what, or who, the Lady of Shalott actually is. A 2010 image entitled *Imagine… the Lady of Shalott* simply shows a river flowing next to a stone wall in England; the user who posted the image included her own synopsis of the story in the caption to give the picture meaning. The image of an English river is linked to the Lady, and this linking also appears to make the image more popular. It has 332 views and 97 comments, some of which include, “Just dreamy, so beautiful....” from the user sirinusunshine; “Superlative photograph and perfectly suited to the poem” from the user Pachelbel Canon; and “an important work, rich, full of fairy mood...I like this pale tones and the melanchonic poetry...” from paololongo48. From this, I conclude that if the reader knows a beautiful lady either floated or is going to float down the river to her death, the image becomes a “dreamy,” “beautiful,” “important,” “superlative” one, not just a slightly blurry image of a river. The Lady as a photographic context transforms the photo.

Although multiple photographs of various women in boats exist that photographers tag as “The Lady of Shalott,” confusion exists on Flickr between the images of the Lady and Ophelia. A photograph by user gywnethcolleen, a photographer from New Hampshire,
shows a woman in a white dress half-submerged and floating in a river, and it is entitled, “lady of shalott.” In it, the Lady appears to be in a blissful state, a small smile playing around her face, her head raised as if enjoying the light on her face, the air, and the water. She also is wearing some sort of veil that drifts around her head, making her look like a bride who has decided to float to happily to her wedding. The water, black yet peaceful, makes her dress spread gracefully, the dress’s long sleeves trailing along. However, the image is clearly not true to the story itself; obviously, there is no boat. The Lady here appears synonymous with Millais’ Ophelia. The model clearly performs in this photograph—the flower placement on her chest and her facial expression take any

Fig. 6. gywnethcolleen, “lady of shalott,” (2007). Used with permission.

Few responders to the incredibly popular photo noted the confusion between the two
images of the Lady and Ophelia. The photo has 11,092 views as of March 2012 and has been “favorited” 124 times. Flickr named the photo one of the most “interesting” photos of the week in 2007. Out of 84 comments, only five users commented that this image reminded them of Ophelia; these five users all also commented that they thought the image “beautiful,” “lovely” (two of them said this), “awesome,” and “really ‘da bomb’” (adamjffstorey; berenice-nosferatu; CountryDreaming; rosegwithoutathorn84; Sherry*). This implies that the synthesis of these two images can occur and not detract from the beauty or quality of the photo itself. The images of the Lady and Ophelia merge into each other seamlessly, even though the boat that separates the Lady from the water is so crucial to the actual poem and her performance of death. In this modern image, then, the Lady is put into the medium of water, changing her performance significantly. Because the water in the poem is engendered as male, the Lady here makes contact with the male; if viewers did not know this, however, the Lady still appears to be dressed for the audience of a male due to her bridal dress and veil. Lady’s floating in the water also gives the photo a more disturbing edge, because she will drown, not die of the curse. This image almost allows a viewer to be deluded—surely the half-smiling Lady is not dying; she is just floating down a river in a dress. The absurdity of the image strikes me, but even I think it beautiful. The Lady could actually be dead in this photo; her foot looks gray and corpse-like, but her face still looks animated. At the very least, if she is the Lady or Ophelia, she is dying. Beauty in death and dying still exists, and it exists similarly for both Ophelia and the Lady; all morbidity is denied.

This synthesis of the two women on Flickr occurs more often in the work of female
photographers. In a search for recent “Lady of Shalott” images on Flickr, I quickly located eight photos that portray the Lady submerged in water, including the one discussed above. Female photographers took all but one of these eight photos, and six of these females were college students according to their profiles. Two of these female college students chose to photograph their renditions of the Lady in a bathtub, completely submerged. One of these females, username sopranosflight, titled her photograph “Drowning Flower.” The 2010 picture shows the photographer lying at the bottom of a bathtub, face completely submerged, wearing a leopard-print bandeau and holding a pink gerbera daisy. Her hair spreads around her and her eyes are closed. The photographer explains the photo in the caption:

I’ve always been obsessed with The Lady of Shalott, and this is kind of my retelling of that. Whenever I get upset, I always sink to the bottom of the tub and hear the silence of my own thoughts and the beat of my heart. More morbidly, this looks like the perfect, beautiful virgin suicide, with the girl arrayed prettily in the tub and the outside world reflected on the water under which she sinks.

(“Drowning Flower.”)

The photographer used her personal experience in staging this photo. In the first two sentences, the Lady’s story has turned from one of death to one of discovering individual space and connecting with her body. Although contained in the space of the bathtub, the photographer is able to engage with herself; she is away from all society, impervious under the water. She removes the modesty and suggestions of white-dress purity that come with the PRB’s depictions of the Lady; her animal-print bandeau suggests. She is a
body in water, exposed to the gaze of all, yet able to maintain a separate, individual world. However, the title of the work equates the Lady with a flower, making her seem a delicate, beautiful, inanimate object. Remarkably, sopranosflight’s retelling of the story is continuous—“Whenever [she] get[s] upset, [she] always” submerges in water. She has incorporated the narrative of the poem into her daily life, and consistently uses the performative image of a drowning woman as a coping mechanism. This implies that she has reformulated the image for herself from one of tragic death to one that facilitates daily living. She is, in essence, performing a story in order to live.

Then, the photographer removes the image from containing her self-actualization, and connects the photo with “the perfect, virgin suicide” in which the girl appears beautiful after dying in the water. She does state that the image is a morbid one, however, but its beauty still appears undeniable for her. She turns herself into her own version of the Lady, one that allows exploration of her self and her thoughts while still being appealing to an audience due to representing beautiful female death. Not ignoring the morbidity of the image, she nevertheless still sees the beauty in it, and combines herself with Ophelia and the Lady.
One male user who comments on sopranosflight’s photo possesses a desire to emulate the circumstances in the photo. Yusufkidwal commented, “lovely concept. i’d love to try this out sometime.” Whether he means posing a bathtub himself or placing a model in the bathtub and photographing her, a male finds the concept “lovely” and wishes to take similar photos. However, on the whole, female users appear to take more photographs of the Lady drowning and post them on Flickr.

Interestingly, I can only find a few photos of a man submerged in water in the context of drowning. If one types “Man Drowning” into the general Flickr search bar, in the first five pages of search results, there is one photo of a man, wearing a soaked white robe, upright in the water. It is called “man drowning” and was taken by a male photographer; it has all of eight views (Stead). There is also a staged photo of a man drowning a woman. If “Woman Drowning” is entered into the search bar, the first pages are filled with women floating or submerged in various positions in swamps, bathtubs, swimming
pools, lakes, and rivers. On Flickr, drowning appears to still be a predominately female way of staging death, and a death that is appropriate for photography.

At least one male photographer portrays the Lady submerged as well; French photographer Olivier Ramonteu posted three photos from his “Le lac des cygnes” (Swan Lake) photo shoot (drawing a further swan/Lady comparison). The shoot, which he states was inspired by “The Lady of Shalott” (Ramonteu par. 2), features a girl in a white dress standing, not floating or completely submerged, in a lake. She wears a large light-colored flower that pulls back on side of her hair. Ramonteu’s photo, which consists of two photos connected, is titled “When I was a ghost.” It features the Lady standing waist deep in the lake; in the first photo, she looks down. In the second, she looks towards the camera, but Ramonteu edited the photo to make it blurry; the viewer cannot quite see the Lady’s eyes or tell if she looks directly at the camera. The Lady possesses a gaze that can confront the viewer, but cannot completely use her gaze due to the male photographer’s editing. The non-existence of her body and gaze is also suggested by the title—she was ethereal. A similarly staged photo, entitled “The Lady of Shalott,” by female Flickr user CorrynGoldschmidt, shows the Lady standing or floating upright in water. She is submerged to her neck, but she looks directly at the camera; her lips are slightly parted as if about to say something, and she looks searchingly at the viewer. Much like Siddal’s drawing of the Lady, this Lady is allowed to cast her gaze fully and simply. Differences still exist between the portrayals of the Lady by males and females, then.

Lastly, because of the synthesis between the Lady and Ophelia commonly employed and accepted by Flickr users, the gigantic amount of pictures depicting Ophelia must be
mentioned. In depictions where Ophelia drowns, she appears just like the submerged Lady that was explored above. The Flickr group “~ O p h e l i a ~” contains 293 members and 882 photos of Ophelia in stages of her death. The other largest group, “Ophelias,” contains 165 photos (“Ophelias.”). Most of these photos in both groups show Ophelia either about to drown, drowning, or drowned; it is as if she never previously existed, but is entirely defined as a character through her drowning. The hundreds of drowning photos suggest a fascination with the death of Ophelia and the Lady; the deaths must be staged, captured, seen, and explored.

**Tennyson, Beautiful Death, and Resurrection in “If I Die Young”**

For months last year, The Band Perry’s 2010 song “If I Die Young” was my favorite song. Then, this summer, when I lost my friend Christopher and his family in a car accident, the song’s meaning entirely changed for me. The song, sung by a woman who gives directions about what to do if she dies young, is heartrending; dying young is a terrible reality. Before I had this experience, however, I thought it was simply a beautiful song and music video. Many others must hold a similar opinion; the music video, as of Mar. 17, has 51,779,787 views (The Band Perry). The song peaked at #1 on both the Billboard US County Songs and US Adult Contemporary Songs lists (“Chart History: ‘If I Die Young.’”). The death of a beautiful young person, especially a female, is not only romanticized in contemporary music but is also an extraordinarily popular subject.

The song’s music video is equally beautiful and confusing. The video opens with the lead female vocalist, the sister of other band members, singing the chorus: “If I die young, / bury me in satin, / lay me down on a bed of roses. / Sink me in the river / at
dawn / send me away with the words of a love song” (The Band Perry). Clearly, the dress (satin), flowers, and water all evoke the same imagery as “The Lady of Shalott.” Much like Tennyson’s Elaine, however, the woman blocks her funeral before her death; she speaks hypothetically, what would happen “if” she died young. Oddly, the music video shows the woman actually dying and coming back to life. Furthermore, there is no named cause of death; there is no curse. She simply dies young. First, her two brothers carry a boat to the water while she walks confidently in front of them. Then, she lies in the boat, a chest with flowers on it at her feet, while her brothers hand her a book of Tennyson’s poems. They then push her out into the water, and the camera angle makes it appear that she is floating in the boat; during this, she sings the line “the sharp knife of a short life.” The second stanza shows the virginal female singer falling in love with a man before her death—the lyrics note she has “never known the lovin’ of a man / but it sure felt nice while he was holdin’ my hand”—and then returns to a shot of her floating in the boat. When she is not singing in the boat, her eyes are closed, making her appear much like gwynethcolleen’s image of the Lady, only with a boat—she is beautiful, in a light-colored dress, calmly floating and not suffering. This suggests a common removal of morbidity—the audience knows from the Lady’s face she is performing.

Then, the boat begins to fill with water, and the singer gasps and sits up; this is replayed quickly three times, giving the scene a feel of resurrection. When the water touches her, it is as if she realizes she did not want to be sunk “in the river at dawn.” After she sits up, her man, her brothers, and her mother (which appeared during the first stanza) all look behind them and move as if they are going to check on the woman. The
screen fades away and shows a shot of her man reaching his hands out towards the camera; then a quick shot of the floating Tennyson poetry book; then a shot of her mother reaching out her hands. Her brothers find her, and the three rejoin their mother and the singer’s man back at their house. The video ends with a close-up of book pages, showing the first four stanzas of “The Lady of Shalott.” This end shot makes it clear that the music video creator, or the band itself, intended the music video to be linked with the poem.

This video portrays what the Flickr images did—a woman who experiences dying beautifully without actually dying. This woman, unlike the Lady, has a family context; the instant she sits up, those close to her know she is alive. She also has encountered males, and her brothers help her block her death and run to her when she is alive once more. Indeed, the music video would be more morbid but more accurate to the lyrics if she did not resurrect. The song’s final stanza suggests death: “So put on your best, boys / and I’ll wear my pearls. / What I never did is done” (The Band Perry). In the music video, the context is changed so that what she “never did” was die; in the lyrics and the song, it sounds like she dies and plans to wear pearls at her own funeral. The music video’s creator took the beautiful imagery from the Lady’s story but removed the morbidity and the Lady’s performance of death—the “death” is a purely staged, romantic affair, with her brothers in charge of props. The viewer sees beautiful death, but not dying.

All the media analyzed thus far has shown a modern fascination with a beautiful female dying or nearly dying, a fascination that was also seen in the Victorian period. This fascination is problematic in that these images continue to romanticize the female
death on the water. Flickr users have even taken away the Lady’s boat, the object she chooses to on which to perform her death. Yet, I cannot vilify those who photograph the Lady (and Ophelia) in her death; I had the same performative desire myself, a wish to emulate the image to see what it would be like. I also think many of the photographs depicting the death of these women are beautiful. Kucich, speaking of the reason for Victorian fascination with death as seen in Dickens’ works, states:

In fact, Dickens’ undisguised fascination with death reflects an entire social climate, for the Victorians made the etiquette of mourning and burial into an elaborate catechism. They invented cemeteries, mourning stores, and burial clubs; they staged theatrical public funerals, often graced with mutes and glass hearses…(59)

The Lady, a product of this period of death-fascination, continues to enthrall modern audiences with her death. Flickr photographers place the Lady in the “glass hearse” and glass coffin that is a photo, and post her body for all to see and wonder. Barriers are removed, and we are free to explore death and its beauty. Kucich concludes, “Such a [notion that death is a central reference point for such textual drama] may also convey a deeper sense of what it means to assert fully our humanity” (70). Although Kuchich only discusses death in terms of literature, I believe his argument applies to current photography and other media forms. Exploration of death may actually be a way to explore life and what it means to be human.

Since the beginning of my freshman year, Dr. Thomas Bowie has quoted Joan Didion: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” We each share our unique narratives and
listen to others’, making meaning out of these narratives. In telling a story, we find community, resolution, or even more questions. After this examination of performative female death—in which “The Lady of Shalott” and each Flickr image tells a story—I believe that we perform stories in order to live. Through embodying someone else’s mindset, taking on a different physical appearance, or saying words that were written by another, we explore our stories to the fullest. We can go beyond the telling of the story and live it out, like the Flickr user sopranosflight who “always” sinks to the bottom of the tub when she is upset. Performance can help us access new parts of ourselves and of our stories—it is expressing physically what otherwise might be inexpressible through words alone.

What I think must be more closely critiqued, then, is the unequal representation of death between males and females. If we investigate what it means to live by exploring what it looks like to die, then males ought to be represented in these discoveries. Why do males not die by drowning in various media images? Perhaps it is because the images surrounding the Lady—flowers, white dress, flowing hair—are “traditionally” feminine, part of the stylized repetition we internalize to perform gender. It is problematic if women are subjected to fake standards of beauty (reality tells us that drowning death is oftentimes not beautiful, but grotesque2), especially if men raised in a hegemonic society, excluded from adding these beautiful acts to their repertoire, impose these standards. This imposing of standards, then, is what I aim to explore in my own performance of “beautiful” death.

2 For a fitting literary example, see Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance and its final drowning scene.
“The controversy arose when [Ellen Terry] explained her intention to wear a black dress during [Ophelia’s] mad-scene. Though Irving only questioned her innocently that afternoon—‘They generally wear white, don't they?’--the next afternoon, a horrified advisor of Irving's who had witnessed the discussion said to Ellen, ‘My God! Madam, there must be only one black figure in this play, and that's Hamlet!’” – Howland

“I did feel a fool. What a blundering donkey I had been to not see it before!...The incident, whether Henry was right or not, led me to see that, although I knew more of art and archaeology in dress than he did, he had a finer sense of what was right for the scene...”

--Ellen Terry, commenting in her autobiography about the previous scene

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3 A “drowning” Ellen Terry (a renowned Victorian actress) is the subject of Freshwater, the short play by Virginia Woolf (who drowned herself) that also features Tennyson.
In Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne and her classmates study Tennyson’s poems, including “Lancelot and Elaine.” This poem, part of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, features Elaine of Astolat, who planned the staging of her own funeral, and who was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. The thirteen-year-old Anne concludes: “…the fair lily maid [Elaine] and Lancelot and Guinevere and King Arthur had become very real people to them, and Anne was devoured by secret regret that she had not been born in Camelot. Those days, she said, were so much more romantic than the present” (Montgomery). Anne does not think of Elaine’s death as tragic, but beautiful, something to be emulated. She immediately devises a plan to perform Elaine’s death scene; climbing into a boat, she lies with her “still, white little face under the flickering shadows of the birches” (Montgomery). Much like in the music video “If I Die Young,” the boat soon sinks, ruining her romantic dreams; still, Anne demonstrates that the romanticized image of a dead woman in a boat is a performative one. Oddly enough, although she performs Elaine’s death in the book, the popular 1985 television movie adaptation portrayed Anne as enacting the Lady of Shalott’s death. In this scene, she combines the fifth, the sixteenth, and the seventeenth stanzas, making them become:

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot. [Fifth stanza]
And at the closing of the day
The broad stream bore her far away, [Sixteenth stanza]
And as the boat-head wound along
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott. [Seventeenth stanza] (FilmPoems)

Here is a modern condensing of the romantic imagery of the poem; the script’s author thought these lines were the most important for Anne. The male is entirely removed—the Lady’s curse, her work, the stream, the boat, and the performance of her song come to the foreground.

Similarly, in my performance, I had to choose which elements of the image are important to me, and in this I differ from the 1985 Anne of Green Gables adaptation. The male presence seems vital to me for reasons apparent from the first chapters of the thesis. In this chapter, I will discuss why I am performing the Lady, identify and explain the reformulations I am making to her story, and detail the process of rehearsal and performance. After I stage the performance, I will analyze it after including its original one-sheet and score, as well as photographs. This performance importantly made me consider my own role as a female, and how I repetitively perform my own gender.

Through this performance, I hoped to create a space through which to embody and reformulate the beautiful Victorian female and her death. This is not only a personal journey, however; I wanted to impact the audience as well. A 1999 report by Americans for the Arts, exploring the role of art in civic dialogue, states:

The unique power of art lies in its ability to create indelible images; transcend rational thinking and intellectual process to elicit a more emotional and visceral
response; transport the viewer or listener beyond one’s personal circumstances; portray simultaneously the personal and universal in the human condition; promote empathy for others’ circumstances; and validate or alter one’s perception of self.” (23)

It is this last function that I wished to explore the most, questioning the female self in its performativity, and raising questions about who the female performs for. Performance can also engage issues of gender roles; the very process of creating the performance has opened my eyes to multiple issues about which I could facilitate dialogue. If performing death can help inform what it means to live, then as many people ought to be involved in each stage of the performance as possible.

Through the performance, I also wanted to explore my curiosity. Much like Anne Shirley, an urge to perform this scene rose in me after I read “The Lady of Shalott.” What would it be like to float down a river, holding flowers, wearing a flowing white dress? The beauty of the image still remained present in my mind, but the male gaze tainted it. What would it be like to place myself under this element, and open myself to discovery and possibility through movement and acting? By performing the Lady, I can embody her in a modern context, and explore her character, motivations, and feelings.

From earliest conception of the performance, I knew the piece would have to be performed outdoors in public. In her tower, the Lady of Shalott is surrounded by public, curious gazes but remains shielded from them; only when she comes out of the tower after the curse comes upon her can she actually expose herself to gazes. By exposing myself (as the Lady) to public gazes before I actually get in the boat and become cursed, I
follow in the footsteps of Elizabeth Siddal, who depicted the Lady in her tower. She and I both imagine the unseen, non-described Lady. However, if the Lady had gazes observing her in her tower, would her performative choices have been different? If gazes of others do influence the behavior of those receiving the gaze, I suggest that she may have performed differently for a different audience. Thus, not only will I expose the Lady to the public gazes of students and faculty on the quad, but also to two other characters within the piece: the female scholar, and the male artist.

Friendship, particularly between females, is a vital theme of my performance. My own relationships with friends have been vital throughout the thesis process; I would probably not even be talking about this particular topic without my best friend Jennie and our collaborative conversations. Before I began planning the performance, Jennie, Dr. Janna Goodwin, and Dr. Palmer, and I met and discussed this element of friendship. Last semester, I asked Dr. Goodwin, Associate Professor of Communication at Regis, to help direct the performance. Dr. Goodwin, herself an actress, improv coach, director, and writer, has worked extensively on performance pieces, including comedy sketches, which raise questions of social justice. I, along with Jennie, have worked closely with Dr. Goodwin for the campus improv and sketch comedy group OutRegis!. Dr. Daryl Palmer is a scholar of performativity and Shakespeare, and the four of us combined made a group that was rich with ideas. This conversation with the three of them provided me with the framework through which to view friendship. The coffee meeting itself was essential in the performance process because it helped me take a step back from my own work to see how others viewed it; subsequently, I felt reenergized. Community and friendship were
vital elements in this process.

In the last few semesters, I have also begun to realize the significance of female friends within texts. In Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” for instance, two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, live seemingly outside society, apart from male gazes. Lizzie saves Laura, who appears as a swan immediately before she turns her gaze on the goblin males:

Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch

When its last restraint is gone. (81-86)

She is like a “rush-imbedded swan,” which implies her surroundings firmly trap her, recalling the same imagery of the boat-trapped swans during swan-upping. Here, however, she is both the swan and the vessel after it is loosed, the vessel still only being free to travel in the bounds of the river. She becomes like the very thing on which the Lady of Shalott chooses to perform her death, the boat that separates her from the male force of the water. I suggest that this boat simile lends Lizzie a measure of power—she is partly submerged in water, able to negotiate the male medium of that water. By the poem’s end, she indeed negotiates the “water” and is saved from the male gaze of the goblins, but only with the help of her sister Lizzie.

The imagery Christina Rossetti uses to describe Laura is practically a synthesis of the images (swan, boat) found in Tennyson’s 1833 version of “The Lady of Shalott,” as well
as the 1842 version (Laura has a “gleaming neck” and the Lady is “a gleaming shape”).

Laura, however, is not bound to the boat, not destined to float completely into the
goblins’ presence and gazes forever. Through the offering of her own body to male
goblins, Lizzie exposes herself to the gaze of males and suffers to bring Laura the juices
she craves. A woman fallen under the curse of the goblins can be saved through the help
of a sister-friend.

Lack of friendship is significant even in Shakespeare; at least one woman with no
feminine confidants is subject to drowning. Gertrude, when asked to talk with Ophelia
after the latter has gone mad, states “I will not speak with [Ophelia]” (4.5.1). By
Gertrude’s withholding of communication, Ophelia loses the chance to engage with a
female, and soon after, she drowns. Similarly, The Lady of Shalott has no such female
friend in her life. The entrance of such a friend, or even a female intervening force, might
radically alter the end of her story, and I want to discover the ramifications of friendship
for the Lady through my performance.

The next element of the performance, the white dress, was one of the first things I
considered. I considered placing the Lady in a dress that was not white, but she is “lying,
robed in snowy white.” The Lady will not begin the performance in the white dress, but
will wear it after the male imposes it on her. I want to use the whiteness of dress to
demonstrate the same tensions seen in the PRB art versions—in my performance, the
Lady will wear a white dress with different clothing underneath, raising questions of the
extent that clothing marks identity. Anne Hollander states, “The act of dressing is a kind
of performance based on a text provided by a myth of appearance” (477). The myth of
appearance I want to explore is the standard of Victorian beauty—the myth of the pale, beautiful woman. If dressing is a performance, my putting on of the white dress is a performance within a performance. Also, gender and the act of dressing appear connected. Gender itself (recall Butler’s definition) is a performance based on discourse and “truths,” communicated through the “stylized repetition of acts.” I argue that gender and dressing are both based on myths of appearance, and therefore the costume the Lady chooses is a deliberate performative act on her part.

The dress itself raises logistical questions. Over the summer, Jennie and her mother Julie bought me a Victorian white dress they found at a thrift store. I tried it on, and it was extremely constricting, with lace coming to the bottom of my chin and what seems like hundreds of buttons down the back. It practically takes three people to help put on the dress. This caused me to wonder how the Lady, alone in her tower, managed to dress herself in snowy white before going outside to the boat. With no one present to help dress her, she would have been limited to simpler gowns. Also, the first dress definitely restricts movement, and it is difficult to raise my arms above my head in it. In the beginning of January at a thrift store, I found a flowing white dress that was simpler (and also cheap, because I have no budget). Although this dress only has a few buttons, I still need assistance getting it on. In rehearsal for the performance, Dr. Goodwin and I decided that illustrating the complicated matter of dressing would be both humorous and meaningful. The complicated, complex nature of gender is reflected in my putting on of the dress—much as the Lady would have dressing become a stylized act, it becomes more complicated.
The set of the performance was perhaps the most difficult part of the performance to arrange. Thinking about the essential elements of the Lady’s image, my mind conjures flowers, a white dress, and a boat. Initially, then, I thought that a boat was vital for the performance, and asked all my friends, relatives, and contacts to borrow a boat, to no avail. I placed a “wanted” ad on Craigslist, and was offered everything from a 16-foot motorized fishing boat to several kayaks, but no suitable, romantic-looking boats. I abandoned the boat idea, and talking with Dr. Goodwin, we decided that a bench with some oars would suffice.

On Feb. 10, the next day after that decision, I ran into one of my good friends, Will Fulton, a fellow Regis Honors student. I told him my plan to construct a bench, and he asked what happened to the idea of using a boat. I told him of the various pitfalls I had encountered, and he eagerly started drawing plans to build a boat. He then offered to help me build one in his garage. The next day, we journeyed to Home Depot and bought four sheets of plywood and several long boards. The day after that, we started boat-building at 9:30 a.m. and worked until 3 p.m., measuring, sawing, drilling, and nailing. I am a visual learner, so Will had to create a 3-D model out of paper for every step of the boat construction, because I did not understand his verbal explanations. We built the boat so it would exactly fit out my car’s back window; the final product was 3’ by 5’, with its prow extending 2’. The building process took us about thirteen hours over a period of three bitterly cold days. The process of building made me more aware of the community I had found at Regis; Will, by spearheading construction of the boat, did one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me, and embodied the spirit of the Honors community.
Building the boat opened my eyes to my learning style and personal performative acts. Before this experience, I had not realized how much of a visual learner I am, which is perhaps why I am attracted to the visual arts as a way to explore issues. Secondly, it made me ponder how I perform my own gender. In a spare hour I had at night, I made brownies for the boat-building occasion, tying my identity back to domesticity. Also, Will naturally took over much of the boat-building process, carrying the heavier boards and doing most of the sawing and drilling because I had never learned how. I kept protesting the dimensions of the boat, wanting to make it smaller and thus more manageable, but Will in the end determined how big the boat was to be, having worked out the measurements. By the end of the process, we jokingly concluded that I should title the photo album on Facebook, “Building a Boat: or, Why I Should Have Just Listened to Will the Entire Time.” This made me aware of two things: first, that when I need assistance for building
or fixing things, I normally seek out the help of males and do not try to do things myself; and secondly, during the building, I could have taken a more active role at times, but instead just walked around the garage acting confused. I consistently kept performing my view of femininity that I was raised with, namely that a girl ought to seek help from males and also be more experienced in the domestic realm. Will in no way is at fault for this; I simply performed in the way I learned according the “rules” I have internalized. This realization has put me on the path to thinking about the roles I perform and why I perform them, and this thinking will be continued throughout the performance.

Out of the boat-building process sprang an unintended meaning. When I brought the boat home and painted it dark brown (much like the boat in John William Waterhouse’s painting), the boat looked much like a coffin. The boat has a square back and straight sides with a flat bottom, and most people who have been at my house ask why I have a coffin in the front yard. I think the dual role of this boat is brilliant; in fact, the boat’s coffin-like structure inspired the latter half of the performance, in which the Lady drowns in text. In Tennyson’s poem, the boat does indeed become a receptacle for her body, and this can be explored in the boat itself.

White dress and boat aside, the casting process was difficult. Jennie Babcock readily volunteered to play the role of the modern female scholar, and because she has a performance background and is my friend in real life, she was perfect for the role. The role of the male, however, was more difficult to cast. If there was a time I ever ardently wished that Regis had a theatre program with eager actors, it was now. I did not know if casting a member of the improv troupe would be appropriate, because the men in the
group usually maintain humorous personas and are known on campus as having such (interestingly, I was considering the audience of the performance before the performance was even cast). This performance had to be serious, though. I initially cast a fellow from a Shakespeare performance class I was taking, but he was too busy to commit to the project. Finally, I cast Jennie’s boyfriend Nick Persichetti, because he was not averse to playing to role, and it was easier to coordinate rehearsals with him. After working with him, I definitely think Nick was a fabulous person for the role. Many people are comfortable with eye contact, but in the first rehearsal, we were able to hold eye contact for a minute, really seeing each other, without smiling.

Rehearsals for the piece were a process of discovery. Dr. Goodwin advised me to not plan the exact beats in the performance before the rehearsal, which was nearly impossible for me due to my love of planning, and I wrote a good deal of the performance up anyway. However, once in rehearsal, I saw how the Lady’s actions and reactions would have to be discovered. For instance, I thought it would be dramatic to have the Lady drop her mirror when she sees the male artist, but in rehearsal Dr. Goodwin pointed out that there was no reason for her to drop the mirror that was clear to the viewer. The dropping of the mirror morphed into the Lady trying to hide behind the mirror until the artist takes it, which in the end contains more impact, as will be seen in my later analysis of the performance. Rehearsals, then, placed me in a space of discovery that I have only experienced with improv, collaborating with Dr. Goodwin, Nick, and Jennie to create a piece that explores the main themes of “The Lady of Shalott.” Rehearsals were perhaps the most impactful part of the entire thesis experience for me, besides building the boat.
and actually performing. In rehearsals, I became the Lady, and thought what she might be thinking, did what she might do in this different context. I experienced what it was like to discover how I ought to block my own death in the piece, and much like the entire performance, it gave me chills.

Fig. 9. Dress rehearsal in the field house, Mar. 12. Nick explores how to hold the camera.

Rehearsals

Between February 23 and March 12, the three performers met with Dr. Goodwin for rehearsal three times. At the first rehearsal, we began to discover just how the Lady uses the mirror, boat, and dress, and also explored how the Photographer fit in the
performance. At the original coffee meeting, we discussed the idea of a male artist appearing in the performance, performing the role of someone like Rossetti. After my analysis of the Flickr images, this idea involved into a male photographer, a man who frames images through a camera lens and is concerned with the female as a beautiful work of art. In rehearsal, then, we pondered the crucial images that needed to exist in the piece, and the appearance of these images began to emerge out of our improvised movement. We also discussed how the boat should appear, and Dr. Goodwin thought it would be interesting to have the boat floating on text, so the group agreed that sheets of text under the boat would add to the image. Nick, Jennie, and I began to rethink the ways we moved in the piece—I thought the Lady would take halting steps, but this looked clearly staged, so I reformulated the movement into broad, definite steps at Dr. Goodwin’s suggestion. In this way, I began to embody the Lady, and feel what it was like to move in her body. At the same time, moving in this way was unfamiliar and I was only doing it because of my audience—Dr. Goodwin—and so this process immersed me into what it was like to actually become a work of art, limiting my own impulses and moving aesthetically.

The actions of the feminist scholar were not discovered until the second rehearsal, at which Dr. Goodwin also worked more with me regarding movement and figuring out the next logical thing my character would do in the scene. It was also at this rehearsal that Dr. Goodwin introduced the concept of sheets from actual boats in the boat. During Spring Break, Nick, Jennie, and I were able to meet in my living room to rehearse once, in which we discovered that instead of actually reenacting drowning in the text at the end,
the Lady should pull the sheets over her head. This demonstrates first how the Lady wishes to hide herself from the gazes around her and secondly how she feels driven to do this as a result of being beautiful and abandoned in a boat. Lastly, it made sense in the scene because she was cold and alone.

The last rehearsal with Dr. Goodwin, which was technically the dress rehearsal, was the final step in the exploratory process. We discovered how the piece transitioned into the ending, with the Photographer finishing his work of art and making the water rise to complete his scene. All four of us were at the rehearsal from 5:45-7:45, and then Nick, Jennie, and I stayed and rehearsed until 8:30. After that, I rehearsed my own parts—namely, turning around with the mirror, making noises, and failing to put the dress on—a few times in the weeks before the performance. The night before the performance, I rehearsed in my backyard in the grass, so I could feel what it was like to be outside, like the Lady actually was.

Besides the boat and dress, the props and costumes needed for the performance became apparent as we rehearsed. The need for a mirror became obvious; we originally started the first rehearsal using my roommate’s purple modern-looking mirror, and it detracted from the scene. After looking for an antique-looking mirror, I finally found a lovely one at the thrift store over spring break. I also acquired the fabric for the under-the-boat text at JoAnn fabrics; I found an older book about engraving at the thrift store, and tore out its pages and stapled them together. Jennie found a 1916 Brownie camera at the antique store by Regis, and before the performance I bought white flowers and leggings. That was the extent of props that we used. For costuming, I already had the
dress from the thrift store, and Nick and Jennie had their outfits already. Besides the
dress, I, as the Lady before she sees the Photographer, wore a tan camisole and white
leggings. Originally, I was going to wear some sort of bloomers, but the dress was
difficult enough to pull on while wearing thinner leggings.

Nick, as the Photographer, wore a white button-down shirt with suspenders, a
newsboy hat, tan pants, and black shoes, and carried a green messenger bag with the
flowers and hair flower inside. He also carried the camera. His character evoked both an
early-20th century male style as well as a current artistic hipster style; also, his character
was never given a name, but just called the Photographer, completely tying his
character’s identity to his craft. Jennie, as Gloria the feminist scholar (the name
originated in rehearsals after Dr. Goodwin remembered that a woman named Gloria was
a 1970s feminist, but was unable to remember her last name [Steinem]), wore a blue
button-down shirt, a pencil skirt, and glasses; she also wore her hair up. In a way,
Jennie’s character reflected myself—the scholar watching events unfold and silently
writing about them, only to intervene at the last moment (if the performance itself is an
intervention).

At the last dress rehearsal, we collectively concluded that the only sound throughout
the performance ought to be the singing of “If I Die Young” and also small noises I made
while putting on the dress. By singing the lyrics to the song, the Scholar brings the
characters on stage and watches them interact while she hums and sings—but, at the
point when the Lady steps towards the Photographer after she first sees him, the scholar
stops singing. The characters have begun to internalize the lyrics and perform their
gender roles themselves—the Lady as a passive object of art who, in the end, tries to hide and is helped, and the Photographer who unthinkingly makes her into art.
Drowned in Text: Performance One-Sheet

CHARACTERS

THE LADY OF SHALOTT

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

THE SCHOLAR

TIME

Early afternoon, about 1pm, so there are not large shadows (the lady is half-sick of them).

PLACE

The campus quad, in the center between the two sidewalks. A weathered boat sits in the middle.

PROPS

Boat; blue fabric with “If I Die Young” lyrics and “The Lady of Shalott” written on it to go under the boat; vintage hand-held mirror; messenger bag with white flowers and hair flower in it; three blankets for the bottom of the boat; three pillows for the boat; a vintage camera; sheets of text (book pages stapled together) rolled in the boat prow.
“Drowned in Text” Score

The boat sits in the Regis quad, on top of fabric sheets of text. The white dress lies over the boat, with book sheets of text folded in the prow. The Gloria, the feminist Scholar, sits in a chair at a space from which she can observe, wearing glasses and holding a small notebook for taking field notes. The photographer wanders outside the set, taking photographs of nature.

The scholar begins to sing “If I Die Young”:

“If I die young, bury me in satin
Lay me down on a bed of roses
Sink me in the river at dawn
Send me away with the words of a love song.”

At “roses,” the Lady enters, looking at the ground through her mirror. She stops northeast of the scholar and continues to play at looking at the ground. Then, catching her reflection she looks at herself in the mirror—first, holding it down, the to the side, then up, then close, then kissing her reflection, then smiling. She then catches an audience member in the background and looks at them.

The Scholar resumes singing:

“And I’ll be wearing white, when I come into your kingdom
I'm as green as the ring on my little cold finger,
I've never known the lovin' of a man
But it sure felt nice when he was holdin' my hand,
There's a boy here in town, says he'll love me forever,
Who would have thought forever could be severed by
The sharp knife of a short life, well,
I've had just enough time.”

At “boy,” the Photographer enters, looking at the lady. At “knife,” the Lady sees the photographer in the mirror. After a beat, she turns and looks at him. They maintain eye contact for at least 45 seconds. She takes a step towards the photograph, and he defensively steps back and holds up the camera. The Scholar begins to sing again. The Lady holds out her mirror to defend herself, resumes a defensive position on one knee, and then looks up to check what he is doing. When she looks up, he quickly crosses over and takes the mirror that she holds out, dropping it in the boat. He backs away and takes a photograph, then goes to her other side and takes a photograph; during this, she tries to hide her head.

The Photographer pushes the Lady’s shoulder and she falls down.

The Scholar stops singing.
The Photographer puts the dress that is draped over the boat over her body. After a beat, the Lady feels around and discovers the dress. The artist moves to the other side of her and the boat. The Lady holds the dress up and he slightly nods his approval. Beginning to make frustrated noises, the Lady puts the dress over her head and swims in the fabric. That not working, she puts the sleeves on her arms, the rest of the dress dangling. She looks at the artist and the scholar for approval. The artist doesn’t respond, and the scholar mutters, “Oh, God.” The Lady unzips the dress and puts a foot through, then the other, and then, with great effort, hoists the dress up around her hips. Finally getting the dress up, she puts her arms through the sleeves and, turning towards the artist, yells, “Ta-da!” With his finger, he motions for her to turn around. She turns around and he makes a “zip” sound to indicate the dress should be zipped.

The Lady, making more frustrated sounds, fumbles with the zipper. Finally getting it most of the way up, she holds up her skirt in triumph, presenting herself to the artist. He crosses over and finishes zipping the dress. He fastens the neck collar and she gasps for breathe. He ties the dress while she puts a finger between the collar and her neck so she can breathe. He snatches the finger away, and she gasps again and breathes heavily.

The Scholar begins to sing.

The Photographer removes a white hair flower from his bag and pins it in the Lady’s hair. The Lady stands, curious and expectantly. The artist takes the bouquet of flowers from the bag and puts it in her hands. Standing back and surveying his work, he wipes his hands together and motions for the water to rise. The scholar stops singing. The artist crosses to the side of the scholar and observes through the camera.

The water rises suddenly, and the Lady finds her skirts wet. Lifting them increasingly frantically, she turns once and wades to the boat, jumping. Thrown about, she sees the mirror in the boat and uses it as an oar. Looking around, she notices she cannot see anything; the shore is far away and she is in the middle of a lake. She drops the oar and sways with the boat. Realizing she is alone and cold, she reaches for the sheet of text at her feet and covers herself halfway. Lying still for a minute, she pulls the sheet of text over her head, and lies still for a minute.

The Scholar has been sitting on the edge of her chair since the Lady got in the boat, and after a beat, goes to the boat and gazes in. She pulls the sheet of text off the Lady as the Lady gasps and sits up. They lock gazes for 45 seconds. The scholar goes to the boat’s prow and gathers the sheets of text, and the Lady gets out of the boat.

All three performers gather by the boat and bow four times, once in each direction.
The Performance

Fig. 10. Beginning the performance: The feminist scholar sings while the Lady looks
in the mirror. Note the distracted audience in the background—someone started pressure-washing the sidewalk.

The performance took place on March 15 at 12:10 in the quad; at this time, students would be walking between classes. The performance meant to be a guerilla performance, but I ended up notifying English, Communication, and Honors faculty members, as well as created a Facebook group for friends who wanted to see the performance. I had also gotten permission from Janae Nelson from Physical Plant to bring the boat onto the quad. The weather for the performance was beautiful, although performing outdoors always has challenges that come with it; someone began pressure-washing the sidewalk at practically the same moment Jennie started to sing. Thankfully, Dr. Hicks ran and asked the man to stop. As for the audience, there appeared to be about 30-40 people watching the performance, plus those who observed it while walking by.

Fig. 11. The Lady, after she notices the Photographer and looks directly at him
Immediately in the performance, I completely took on the character, and did not notice the pressure washing or even the audience. After the performance, when I was viewing the photos, I was surprised to see certain people in the audience because I had had no idea they were there, even though they were feet away from me. My world became limited to the “stage” area—between the boat and the chair, between the gazes of the feminist scholar and the photographer. I was truly embodying the character of the Lady in that moment. The other two performers also experienced this. “I forgot that there were even people watching us,” stated Nick after the performance. “It was like it was just us” (Persichetti). We all engaged with each other on intense levels. When, at the beginning of the piece, Nick and I maintained eye contact for more than forty seconds, I saw him, but I was seeing him as the Photographer from the perspective of the Lady. I felt bewildered—who is this person, and why is he pointing a camera at me? I felt the sharpest genuine emotion in that moment, in the moment when I got in the boat and covered myself with text, and when Jennie and I maintained eye contact at the end of the piece.
Throughout the piece, the Photographer had the purpose of forming the Lady into the artistic, “perfect, virgin suicide” that Flickr user sopranosflight mentioned in her portrayal of the Lady. He blocks her death; besides taking an initial step towards him before he takes her mirror, her way of seeing, she simply does reacts to his wants. Before he spotted the Lady, he was walking around photographing nature. His noticing of her sprang from artistic interest; he made her into art because she was there and because, with his help, she could become the perfect model for beautiful death. His gaze directs her as to what to do—when she held up the dress, he just nodded slightly, showing approval in his eyes. He is uncritical of his own methods, but he should not be vilified for staging the Lady in a manner that society-imposed gender roles maintain is allowable. She can be in
a white dress, dying in a boat, beautiful; if he were in the boat, the image would completely change. He must use a model.

Fig. 13. The Lady cannot figure out how to put on the dress

One of the most interesting moments of the performance occurred when I, as the Lady, began my attempt to put on the dress. When I did not put my head through both layers of the dress, and got caught in it, the audience audibly and visibly began to murmur and squirm. After the performance, at least five of my friends told me they were worried that I meant to put the dress on correctly the first time and messed up. Sara, an English major who observed the performance, told me she almost yelled out, “Go through the liner!” I found this fascinating; if I had actually messed up, my face as a
performer might be damaged, and this would have been uncomfortable for the audience. The audience, then, wanted me to put *the dress on correctly*, and normal human error was unallowable. Like the artist, the audience had preconceived expectations of what the image ought to look like—the dress seamlessly slipping over my head. The scholar laughing at me, and the small noises I made as I continued to get the dress on, mediated this uncomfortable part and made the audience realize I actually meant to fail at dressing.

![Fig. 14. Gloria, the feminist scholar, looks on in amusement and disbelief](image-url)
Fig. 15. The Photographer puts the finishing touches on his creation

The moment the Lady got in the boat was a crucial one. The Photographer steps back after making the water rise, no longer immediately and physically directing her actions. The Lady gets in the boat out of necessity—in a dress that would weigh her down, holding flowers, the boat is the best option. Once in the boat, the “curse” that came upon her was a realization of what she was expected to do—the Photographer made her
beautiful so she would get in the boat and perform death, and he could get the perfect image. However, she pulls the text over herself, completely covering her body from the Photographer’s gaze. He, and the feminist scholar, only saw the words that metaphorically drown her—the Lady becomes entirely a textual product, much as the Photographer made her body a text of beauty.

Fig. 16. The Lady, alone in the boat, begins to pull the text over herself.
Fig. 17. The feminist scholar pulls the Lady from the text and the two exchange gazes.
The moment depicted in Fig. 19 is the turning point of the performance—the scholar breaks out from her point of observation and intervenes, pulling the Lady from under the text. Their long gaze suggests a connection; a directorial male gaze has been replaced with a collaborative female one. At the same time, the feminist scholar was the one who put the whole performance into motion—singing the lyrics to “If I Die Young,” imagining the beautiful death. Like in the music video of the song, the floating woman resurrects, but in my version she comes alive because she has direct aid. At the end of the performance, both the characters of the Lady and the scholar go away changed; the Lady hands the text to the scholar to fold, and leaves the coffin-boat.
Fig. 18. The set after the performance.
Something potentially problematic about the performance is that, without context, passersby would have no idea what they were seeing. They might be able to identify the general image of the Lady once she was in the boat, but otherwise, the audience may have wondered how I was interpreting the text. I had several people approach me after the performance and tell me that it was beautiful, but they did not know how to interpret what they were seeing. On one hand, while this left viewers confused for the time being, they felt compelled to ask me about the performance. The ambiguity of what was occurring stimulated curiosity that resulted in conversation. What I would love to do is to stage the performance again for a set audience, and then gather the audience at the end
and hold a dialogue about what they thought they were seeing and the beauty of the performance.

The Lady’s performative audience of the Photographer and the scholar within the performance, as well as the outside audience of students, faculty, and other bystanders, helped me explore the concept of the gaze. As the performer, I allowed myself to be influenced by the Photographer’s gaze; at the end, I felt empowered as Jennie pulled me from the boat and directed her gaze towards me. The outside audience gaze, while not having much power during the actual performance while I was acting, influenced me in the casting process and after the performance. In the video, I observe random people walking by and watching; in the photos, it appears there is at least one person laughing in the background during a serious part. Whether or not this fellow was laughing at the performance, it still made me wonder for an instant—was this performance ridiculous?

After the previous analysis, I wholeheartedly conclude that the performance was incredibly meaningful for me. However, the audience still had the power to put doubt in my mind. The audience with its powerful gaze exists for me just as it existed for the Lady of Shalott, and its comments, oddly enough, echo Lancelot’s. On Facebook, my roommate posted a photo of the moment when I stand in the boat in the white dress, and some of the comments on this photo include: “Beautiful,” “so beautiful,” “stunning,” and “I have a beautiful roommate.” In the end, I am pronounced lovely, and this is gratifying—if the performance itself was odd, at least I looked good doing it. The Lady of Shalott (in the poem) and I both performed our way to loveliness. If I were to continue to explore this image, I would re-do the performance and look unkempt, and trash the
white dress in the process of the performance.

The performance did allow me to explore the implications of the gaze, and analyze how I perform my gender. It allowed me to place the Lady in a setting that acknowledged the powerful male influence over her. I asked myself what it means to look at another, and I discovered that the gaze can be damaging or empowering. I had to actually drown in the text to realize how much I drown in the repetitive performance of my gender, assuming it is part and parcel of my identity when it is just something for which I block, stage, and costume myself. Few experiences in my undergraduate career have been as meaningful as this one. We perform stories in order to live; the performance of the Lady made her story become my own, reformulated into my own context, questioning my notions of beauty and what it means to be female.

Bibliography


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