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TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

THE BALLAD TRADITION IN ELIZABETH SIDDAL'S
LITERARY AND ARTISTIC WORKS.

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the ballad influence in the poetry and paintings of Elizabeth Siddal. To conduct this task, I have chosen four of her poems – “Fragment of a Ballad”, “Love and Hate”, “At Last”, “Worn Out” – and two of her best-known pictures – *Clerk Saunders* and *Eve of St. Agnes*. The aim of this research is to demonstrate that Siddal drew inspiration from ballad writers such as Walter Scott, John Keats and Alfred Tennyson to subvert their subjects and work with them from a feminine perspective. Both her poems and her paintings have been analyzed to show how the artist interpreted those ballads written by her predecessors to offer her own version and a possible answer to the issues presented from a feminine point of view. Finally, this paper proves that Elizabeth Siddal has taken the ballad genre and adapted it to show her discomfort with Victorian standards.

Keywords: Elizabeth Siddal, Victorian poetry, ballads, pre-raphaelite art, female gaze, nineteenth-century.

Resumen: Este trabajo de fin de grado analiza la influencia de la balada en la poesía y la pintura de Elizabeth Siddal. Para desempeñar esta tarea, he elegido cuatro de sus poemas – “Fragment of a Ballad”, “At Last”, “Love and Hate”, “Worn Out” – y dos de sus cuadros más conocidos – *Clerk Saunders* y *Eve of St. Agnes*. El objetivo de esta investigación es demostrar que Siddal se inspiró en autores como Walter Scott, John Keats y Alfred Tennyson para subvertir sus temas y trabajar con ellos desde una perspectiva femenina. Tanto los poemas como las pinturas se han analizado para mostrar cómo la autora interpretó esas baladas escritas por sus antecesores ofreciendo su propia versión e incluso una respuesta a las problemáticas planteadas desde un punto de vista femenino. Por último, este trabajo demuestra que Elizabeth Siddal ha tomado el género de la balada y lo ha adaptado para expresar su malestar con las normas sociales victorianas.

Palabras clave: Elizabeth Siddal, poesía victoriana, balada, pintura pre-rafaelista, perspectiva femenina, siglo diecinueve.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of various artists that was active from 1848 to almost the end of the nineteenth century. The Brotherhood was founded in London by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt as a protest against the “artificial and mannered approach to painting taught at London’s Royal Academy of Arts” (Roe, 2014). Most of these artists were painters who focused on medieval subjects and female beauty when creating their artworks. Their inspiration came mainly from other sources of visual art and literature.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall was introduced to the group, according to Jan Marsh, by Walter Deverell in 1849 after he found her working in a millinery shop. The painter was looking for a model to portray as Viola in his *Twelfth Night* (1850), role that Elizabeth would take. Later she would sit for John Millais’s *Ophelia* (1852), the representation she is best known for. After two years of working as a model for the group, in 1852 her relationship with Gabriel Rossetti became exclusive, having her sitting only for him. During their time together, Rossetti acted as a master and taught her how to write poetry and how to draw. Nine years after their romance began, in 1860 they got married. A year into their marriage, Elizabeth gave birth to a stillborn daughter, and in 1862 she died after an intake of laudanum in what was regarded as an “accidental death” (Fyfe 2014, 17).

Her interest for the arts was not new, for biographers have stated when she was a little girl, she became acquainted with a verse of Tennyson that was written in paper used to wrap butter (Marsh 1985, 22). Under the teaching of Rossetti, Siddall earned the patronage of John Ruskin, an important art critic of the time who decided to support the PRB (Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), and offered a salary of £150 yearly for all her drafts and compositions. Her poetry was posthumously collected and published altogether by her brother-in-law William Michael Rossetti, who had the following opinion on the female artist’s work:

She had much facility of invention and composition, with eminent purity of feeling, dignified simplicity, and grace; little mastery of form, whether in the human figure or in drapery and other materials; a right intention in colouring, though neither rich nor deep (1903, 278).

Marsh documents that she was born as Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall, name given after her mother, from a humble family (1985, 18-19). Because her origins and her social

class were different from those of Rossetti's, the male painter-poet suggested her to drop an "l" from her surname to give it a more refined look. Even with a small act like this one, Rossetti started taking control over Elizabeth to the extent that nowadays it is barely possible to narrate Siddall's story without mentioning her husband. Pollock and Cherry discuss that the change on the spelling of her surname functions as a "sign of the genius of Dante Gabriel Rossetti" (1984, 209), thus reducing her as one of his productions and making her lose her name and identity. For this reason, in this paper I have decided to use her real surname.

She proved to be more than a creation of Rossetti's. Siddall wrote sixteen full poems and some fragments, and composed roughly a hundred drawings, watercolours, and paintings. Following the Pre-Raphaelite practice, most of her artistical works are based on literary representations, and some of them have been read as autobiographical by the scholarship.

Despite their turbulent relationship, Rossetti was a constant supporter of her artistical production. In fact, the first mention of Siddall's poetry was by Rossetti, when he copied six of her poems to be included in Christina Rossetti's volume *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (1866) (Marsh 1989, 199). Elizabeth was also admired by the decadent poet Algernon C. Swinburne, who in a letter to William M. Rossetti wrote:

I never knew so brilliant and appreciative a woman – so quick to see and so keen to enjoy that rare and delightful fusion of wit, humour, character-painting, and dramatic poetry – poetry subdued to dramatic effect – which is only less wonderful and delightful than the highest works of genius. She was a wonderful as well as a most lovable creature. (Rossetti 1903, 288).

Furthermore, Siddall was the only female artist that participated in the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition that took place in London in 1857. It is important to mention that this was also the first exhibition dedicated entirely to the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. Here she exhibited *We are Seven*, *The Haunted Tree*, and *Clerk Saunders*, her self-portrait and some drawings from Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning.

The aim of this research is to analyse Elizabeth Siddall's poems and drawings in order to explain how ballads influenced all her artistic creation. To conduct this analysis, four out of her sixteen poems – "Love and Hate", "Fragment of a Ballad", "At Last", "Worn Out" – and two of her drawings – *Clerk Saunders* and-, *Eve of St.*

Agnes – will be analysed. I will try to prove that Siddall has not only taken the ballad form and subject to revisit and subvert these subjects, but by analysing the form and content I also intend to demonstrate Siddall's skill and talent, treating her as an independent artist and not as Rossetti's pupil.

In the original drafts, most of these poems are unnamed and undated, but for this paper I am using the titles that William M. Rossetti gave them when he published them. I will analyse Siddall's original compositions, contained in Serena Trowbridge's *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall*, because it is known that in the moment of publication Rossetti did some changes – or perhaps mistakes of interpretation -, altering the original form and wording of the poems. Although the poems were originally unnamed, I will take the titles given by Rossetti for an easier identification.

As I have mentioned before, many of the Pre-Raphaelite works were based on literary representations, drawing their inspiration mainly from William Shakespeare's repertoire, and ballad poetry. Although the ballad was revived during the eighteenth century, it lost prestige during the Victorian period because it was associated with sentimentality, and was it then, in the nineteenth century, when the ballad gained the musical connotation we attribute to it nowadays, thus losing a part of its literary importance. The ballad is a poem that tells a story, its form is simple – four-line stanzas that follow an ABCB rhyme scheme -, what makes it easy to imitate. This is the basic structure, although it admits variations in rhyme, mostly on account of the use of lengthier stanzas. In its origins, folk ballads were transmitted orally, and they were useful to remember myths and important stories because they usually had a refrain, a stanza that gets repeated all along the poem. Later, with the invention of the printing press and the possibility of transmitting the ballads in a written form, the subject matter expanded. They were not only about love or adventures any more, now they could tell everyday stories.

The Pre-Raphaelites founders were responsible for the illustration of a Tennyson's compilation published by Edward Moxon. By the time this volume was in the making, Siddall and Rossetti were already together, so this event became a great opportunity for Elizabeth to interact with Tennyson's poetry in depth. Elaine Shefer explains that although Siddall was not familiar with this poem, she decided to illustrate *The Lady*

of *Shalott* in 1853 (1988, 24). Constance Hassett writes that “The Minstrelsy ballads’ structure provides the deeply formal motivation” (450), thus introducing the influence that Walter Scott had in Siddall’s verse. She also states that in the writing of “Love and Hate”, Siddall was influenced by Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1997, 448).

For this reason, I am going to explore briefly the main characteristics of their poetry, extracting the key features that are relevant in Siddall’s own writing, providing a commentary of those specific poems that influence the poetess-painter the most. After this introduction of the topic, I will first explain Scott’s, Keats’s and Tennyson’s ballads, analysing the content of the poems Siddall uses. Secondly, I will turn my attention to Siddall’s own verses, analysing their form and their content to look at how she has subverted the subjects of those poems that inspired her. As has been mentioned, it is difficult not to find biographical elements in her poetry, and to ignore them would not reflect a faithful analysis. This will lead me to explain the key events that she lived that may have also influenced the composition of the poems and her choice of source. In the second part of the study, I will analyse her drawings, focusing mainly on what is being represented. When examining the images, I will explain what stanzas she has decided to portray and why, again turning to the ballads written by Scott, Keats and Tennyson.

To conclude this paper, I will shortly summarize the common elements and the evident inspiration she drew from the ballads, as well as I will point out the changes she made to make the ballad her own vehicle of expression.

2. INFLUENCES

2.1 Walter Scott

Walter Scott (1771-1832) was a Scottish poet and novelist. Scott was important for the revival of the ballad because he participated actively in a traditional oral culture, as at the same time he was taking written literature back to the oral. As a child, he used to listen and learn stories of the Scottish Border, which were influential in his later narrative poems and historical novels.

Although his fame lies mostly on his historical novels, we cannot miss his poetic contributions. By the mid-1790s Scott started showing interest in German Romanticism, Gothic writing and Scottish Border ballads. This led to the publication of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in 1802. This book is an anthology of Border ballads, containing historical, romantic and imitations of the ancient ballad. I want to clarify that these are not Scott's original compositions, nor did he ever claim them as his own, but rather he did research and recollection of the original texts in his labour as an antiquarian to put them together in the *Minstrelsy* volume, as well as some editing of the texts for them to reach the public in an easier way. Wollstadt (2002, 296) explains that:

Though on the surface these ballad narratives seem to describe women who are either pathetic victims or heartless hussies, many can be seen as addressing issues of female power. These narratives not only deal with a woman's lack of control over her own life, but they demonstrate by example ways of circumventing that lack.

“Clerk Saunders” is one of the ballads pertaining to the romantic ballads group. It is written in thirty-three quatrains, all of them with an ABCB rhyme pattern. In it, Clerk Saunders and Margaret walk through a garden while he is trying to persuade her into sleeping with him before their marriage. They are caught by Margaret's brothers, who meditate what to do. Taking the initiative, the youngest brother kills Clerk Saunders and Margaret finds him dead the following morning. They do bury him, and his ghost appears at her window requesting her to liberate him from his promise. In return she demands a kiss, but he counterargues that it would kill her. In the end, she does free him. This is an example of a ballad dealing with a pathetic victim (Margaret). In “The Gay Goshawk” a squire sends his lover a letter by a goshawk. The letter says that he has already sent many letters and will die for love. The lover asks her father for his blessings, but he refuses because he does not want

her to marry a squire. She has a sudden request, that when she dies, she be buried in Scotland. Her father accepts to this demand. With this new “permission”, she takes a sleeping potion to fake her death and as per request she is taken to Scotland, where she finally reunites with her squire/lover. This poem serves to exemplify the type of control women were under and shows how this woman is able to gain that control over her life.

2.2 John Keats

John Keats (1795-1821) was an English Romantic poet whose life was perhaps as troubled as Siddall’s. Looking into his biography one cannot help but realize how similar both stories are, and how the poetess’s experiences resonate greatly with those of Keats. To name a few of these affinities, I would like to stress that both Siddall and Keats had an early death, preceded by a life that was much affected by the people they fell in love with. It can be said that both artists were driven to their decay by the illnesses they suffered, in Keats’s case, tuberculosis, and in Siddall’s, consumption; and the one they shared, depression. Taking into account these biographical similarities, it is not surprising to find common themes and tones in their compositions.

Keats’s poetry is characterised for its sensual imagery, meaning that the entirety of our senses gets involved when reading his poems; and medievalism, a feature that can be appreciated in his early poems, in which we can perceive a subtle Spenserian influence. He developed the idea of negative capability, defined by himself in a letter he sent to his brother George on the 22nd of December 1817 as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 1817, 46). Hebron explains that for Keats this term is a way of expressing “a willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that.” (Hebron 2014). From his “Ode to a Grecian Urn” (1819), we can deduce that for him, imagination is what he values the most in his poetry, as well as beauty and truth. The last two lines of the poem read “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” These lines have been interpreted in multiple ways, but the most popular interpretations see them as 1) an anticipation of the Aesthetic movement, 2) the greatness of the power of truth, that makes everything

beautiful, and 3) an ironic joke (Austin 2013, 124-125). Keats was also gifted for letter writing, being these pieces now a record of utmost importance when reading his works.

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1819) is a poem that has generally been read as autobiographical. By the time of its composition, Keats knew that his poor health would not allow him to marry Fanny Brawne, the love of his life. For this reason, the poem is interpreted in terms of illness, unrequited love and the impossibility of being with the one we love. However, Williams discusses that this poem was written like most of his poetry to cope with and metabolise his depressive anxiety (1966, 77). The author believes that this poem is the result of the effects tuberculosis had in Keats’s poetry, as it reflects faithfully the poet’s physical and mental state by the time of its writing (1966, 70).

In these readings, the lady is seen as a “sorceress without gratitude, without goodness, without pity and without remorse” (Williams 1966, 63). But modern feminist analyses of the poem suggest that “the woman does not exist except as a fantasy in which man would find his own completion” (Swann 1988, 84). This means that Keats uses the image of woman to reassert masculinity, to make the knight become part of the group he originally belongs to. Swann argues that the lady gets nothing from this encounter, unlike the knight, who gets taken care of (1988, 88).

2.3 Alfred Tennyson

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) was a British poet, and he also did write some plays, though they were not as successful as his poetry. Tennyson was the Poet Laureate during much of Queen Victoria’s reign. He came from a middle-class family, yet he was able to enter Trinity College, Cambridge. At Cambridge, Tennyson was awarded the Chancellor’s Gold Medal for “Timbuktu”, and he published his first solo collection. The poet had to abandon his studies because his father died, what made him go back to his rectory. His second publication, which included “The Lady of Shalott” saw the light in 1833, although it received heavy criticism and pushed Tennyson not to publish anything for ten years. He published again in 1842, and this time the two-volume book was better received and appraised.

Alfred Tennyson was, like Keats and Siddall, affected by depression, which is reflected in his poetry. There is a sense of melancholy and loss in his verses. His motifs range from tragic death, as portrayed in “The Lady of Shalott” to the depiction of the Matter of Britain, with particular interest in the Arthurian legend, which can be seen in *Idylls of the King*.

“The Lady of Shalott” is a poem that leaves room to multiple interpretations. One of them is the “artistical” reading. The lady is the artist, who is under constant threat from the outer world. Another reading, the feminist reading, interpret this poem as an awakening of the lady’s sexuality. The Pre-Raphaelites chose to paint from this poem on various occasions. Of these, Hunt’s painting and John W. Waterhouse’s are the most famous ones.

During his life, Tennyson showed a profound religious spirit. The poet did not particularly like the Church as an institution as he did not condone prosecutions and similar acts. Inspired by Keats, Tennyson wrote his own version of “St. Agnes Eve”, a poem written in three stanzas of twelve lines each. The first stanza opens with a depiction of the scenery: a convent with a snowy roof. It continues with the speaker professing their wishes to join God in Heaven. In the second stanza the speaker introduces the image of the lamb, which is commonly associated with innocence and purity, and is also the symbol given to St. Agnes, further relating the content of the poem to the feast. Here too the speaker addresses herself as God’s bride. The last stanza consists on her imagination of the gates of Heaven and makes emphasis on the only thing the speaker wants: to finally reunite with God.

Here Tennyson shows the female who is devoted to the Lord, unlike Keats who shows the female as devoted to her earthly love. Neither of their poems have a conclusive ending, but following the Christian tradition both authors employ, it is likely that the nun will be rewarded for her piety while Madeline will be punished for breaking the rules.

3. ELIZABETH SIDDAL'S LITERARY WORKS

Siddall is best known for having been one of the models who sat for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and this is a part of her biography which, as Trowbridge states, has obscured the existence of her poetry although it was included in some Victorian anthologies (2018, 7).

The biographer Lucinda Hawksley maintains that the female artist started writing poetry in an attempt to write great ballads that could be compared to those of Tennyson and Scott. Hawksley writes that Siddall began writing during her pregnancy, and even links the poem "At Last" with this event (2004, 173), but the drafts that were lately found and put together demonstrate that all the poems were undated.

The drafts that were found include sixteen full poems and some fragments, as well as a few letters she sent that were recovered. As Trowbridge explains, "the poems do not seem to have gained credibility in critical works on nineteenth-century literature. Partly this is due to Siddall's mythologised, idolised status" (2018, 13), thus admitting that the main reason for the lack of recognition of her poetry lies in the biographical factors that characterised the poetess. Stefania Arcara further supports this idea asserting that her works were read as the writing of a depressed woman with poetical tendencies rather than talent (2014, 108). The poems often show a negative view of relationships and use medieval imagery, reason why Trowbridge argues that "it is possible that some of these poems were intended to accompany her artwork" (2018, 14). Rhonda Brock-Servais adds that "although her themes are common to the entire Pre-Raphaelite movement, they become unique because of the strength of the female voice" (2000, 364).

I have chosen "Fragment of a Ballad", "At Last", "Love and Hate", and "Worn Out" as they serve to illustrate how Elizabeth Siddall has been influenced by the ballad and how she takes the narratives of folk ballads and literary ballads to express from a very personal point of view, almost confessional, her experiences as a Victorian female.

3.1 “Fragment of a Ballad”

“Fragment of a Ballad” is a poem made of six quatrains. The rhythmical pattern is loose and irregular, with lines varying from eight to twelve syllables. There are no punctuation marks, but it is visible that each stanza is composed by two sentences. The rhythm of this poem is descendent or trochaic. In spite of its title, the poem does not have a ballad structure, in which the rhymes, as has been explained, follow an ABCB pattern; the stanzas rhyme in couplets, except for the last stanza, which contains two illegible words in the third line that difficult the analysis of the poem and break the regularity present in the rest of the poem.

In the poem, the speaker begins explaining how her lover has returned “unsummoned”, when he is not needed anymore nor called for. The two last lines of the first stanza may reveal disinterest, as she was more focused on the natural sounds around her than in what the lover was telling her. The second stanza explains that he was ready to make-up for his absence and relieves the pains of waiting, but yet again the speaker is unphased and barely able to reply back. However, in the third stanza the speaker seems to feel bad about her own feelings and coolness for not being able to appreciate anymore the love she is being given. In the fourth stanza her attention shifts again from the lover to her surroundings, which are covered by autumnal leaves. The fifth stanza presents the idea of death, both directly and indirectly. First, the weather changes and it is now cold, commonly symbolizing stillness, inactivity, and death; and second, the speaker expresses that she is subject to a “living death”. In the last stanza the speaker recognizes that the lover is actually the only one that knows about her feelings and is there for her, but this could be a sign of psychological manipulation.

Scholarship has read this as a narrative of a failed rescue. Jill Ehnenn states that Siddal has a “tendency to depict women in unique moments of internal struggle” (2014, 252). Ehnenn believes that this poem serves to explore how waiting is a burdensome work assigned exclusively to women (2014, 256). Women are expected to be patient, and to be happy with the place they occupy in the domestic sphere. Following Penelope’s example, women have the task of waiting for the husband. Women have to care for the house and the children while the husband is outside, either working or spending their leisure time. In the poem, the speaker is expressionless not

because of modesty, but because she has loved so laboriously, painfully and unrequitedly that now she is exhausted (Ehenn 2014, 256). This speaker is not only tired of waiting, but she is also exhausted for the intensity of her own past feelings, and she has grown tired of the expectations upon her. It reads:

How sounded my words so still and slow
 To the great strong heart that loved me so
 Who came to save from pain and wrong
 and comfort me with a love so strong
 (Siddall, "Fragment of a Ballad" 9-12)

For Marsh, these lines mean that "the speaker is beyond speak as well as hearing" because her lips are shut (1989, 211). By arguing that the prince has "arrived too late" (1989, 211), Marsh is taking the speaker as a hopeless case: nothing can be done to save her at this point. She also raises the question of the identity of the lover, arguing that he could be a human being who feels strong emotions, Christ coming to alleviate and take the weight she is carrying (symbolized by the cross), or Death itself finally coming to stop the pain and welcome her in its embrace (Marsh 1989, 211).

Hassett suggests that "a woman's dying is a richly symbolic way to explore life's betrayals, losses, or paralyzing ambiguities" (1997, 455). Considering Siddall's own biography and romance, it is striking to read how the poem foresees her ending. Rossetti and she had been having dinner with Swinburne, and on their way back home, they had an argument and Rossetti left the house (Marsh 1988, 73). He was about two hours outside, and when he came back Siddall had already passed. As the poem's lover, Rossetti came back when he wanted to, not when Siddall needed his attention and company. And as in the poem, Rossetti came back when it was too late.

Ballads usually have a beginning or presentation, and an ending or resolution. This poem seems to be narrated as a remembrance of the speaker, and the way it ends is not conclusive. The reader does not get to know whether this narrator accepted the lover's coming back or she rejected him and showed resistance.

Taking into consideration "Clerk Saunders", we can establish some similarities as well as differences in the narratives: Siddall's speaker feels like she is experiencing a living death and we can say so of May Margaret when she discovers that her lover has been murdered. May Margaret, like Siddall's speaker, is not expecting the return of her lover, although she is surprised when his ghost appears in front of her.

However, Clerk Saunders comes back with a last request – to get her troth in order to be able to pass to the afterlife, whereas Siddall’s male reappears to ease her pain – “And he came ready to take and bear / The cross I had carried for many a year” (Siddall, “Fragment of a Ballad” 5-6). Another difference is that May Margaret does accept and helps Clerk Saunders, but Siddall’s speaking voice is cool and resented towards her lover.

As I explained before, “Clerk Saunders” is a poem with a powerless and pathetic victim, but here we can see that Siddall gives her speaker the power to choose whether to accept her lover or reject him.

3.2 “At Last”

This poem is characteristic for being composed in ballad quatrains, maintaining the rhyme and the feet distribution. In ballads, the first and third lines contain four metrical feet, while the second and fourth lines contain only three metrical feet. Siddall’s lyric does follow this structure with few exceptions. The rhyme is masculine and the rhythm in this case is iambic. There are no punctuation marks either in this poem, but it can be recognised that each stanza is made of two sentences.

This ballad deals with feminine death and motherhood. In this case there is not an apparent romantic relationship, but it speaks of the bond shared by mother and child. In the first stanza the narrator asks her mother to open the window so she can fully see the scenery from her deathbed, and in the next stanza she goes on to ask her mother to take care of her own son the same way she did care for her. The third stanza is the opening for the ritual which will ensure the speaker’s safety after death. From the fourth to the sixth stanza the narrator provides a detailed description of the ritual that must take place, and in the seventh stanza she tells her mother that she will cry, but she must tell that when she died, she was happy. In the last stanza she asks her mother to take her to the cemetery when the night has come.

It is not known when this poem was written, so it cannot be directly linked to Siddall’s own loss. We get to know that the son is young, but we cannot tell if he is a new-born. If he was, this poem could be read as the sad reality women had to face when giving birth. In many cases, to give birth to a baby was to risk one’s own life, either by excessive bleeding after the labour or by an infection. After giving birth, the

female speaker is seemingly weakened and she knows she will not survive, that is why she asks her own mother to take care of the baby in her place. This is clearly seen in the stanza number seven, when it says “Tell I died of my great love / And my dying heart was gay” (Siddal, “At Last” 27-28). The female speaker went through the whole process even aware of the risks because the love for the unborn baby was greater than her self-love, and after she gives birth, she is happy that the baby survived (because in many cases both mother and baby perished).

As Trowbridge explains (70-71), the poem is severely influenced by other ballads, among which we can highlight Tennyson’s “The May Queen”. Tennyson’s poem deals mainly with the annual tradition of crowning the queen of May. This is a celebration of the May Day holiday, which takes place on May 1 and marks the beginning of summer season. The imagery of the poem is vivid, and it tells of the recollection of different flowers for the tiara of the queen, although it gets gloomy in some verses like “He thought I was a ghost, mother, for I was all in white” as if anticipating the future events of the poem. The poem is made of three parts, the first one speaks of the May Day, the second part switches to New Year’s Eve and advances in time for the speaker refers to the holiday of “last May”, and a third part which serves as a conclusion to the poem. In this poem, the speaker too tells her mother what to do when her death comes. Although Siddal’s speaker seems closer to death, Tennyson’s speaker sees signs in her surroundings that indicate her moment is close to come too. At the end of the poem these signs seem to only get stronger, as if anticipating that her death will be the very end of the poem. What Siddal takes is the request, the daughter’s voice asking her mother to take care of her passing to the afterlife. Siddal does add the presence of the speaker’s child, emphasizing the importance of motherhood in the poem.

3.3 “Love and Hate”

“Love and Hate” has five stanzas of four lines each. These lines follow the ballad structure as they have ABCB masculine rhyme and their rhythm is marked by having four feet in the first and third lines, and three feet in the second and fourth lines. Only two lines are punctuated, and only three out of five stanzas are numbered. As in her other compositions, each stanza is composed by two distinct sentences. The

capitalization of the first word appears to be aleatory, not all the ‘ere’ are capitalized, and the words that are not capitalized do not appear in the same place (in the stanzas).

The poem has an angry tone. It begins with the speaker dismissing her lover and telling him not to even speak or look at her, threatening him with a divine vengeance. In the second stanza she asserts that nature will turn wild before she lets him stay, and in the following one she asks him not to kneel before her when his feelings are not sincere because this time he is not fooling her. The fourth stanza gets stronger and the female speaker expresses her feelings of hatred, while in the last stanza she directly blames the lover for the way she feels now. She is now passive, inactive, she does not sing joyfully and she does not pray either, claiming that he took her life away, her energy and her positivity. The lover is poisonous and has corrupted her.

Marsh (1989, 209) defends that this poem speaks of betrayal, a betrayal that “is corrosive”, as show the two last lines of the lyrics. Marsh further explains that Siddall provides no narrative explanation or justification, the feelings rendered in the verses are stronger because of the simplicity of the composition and “the blend of literary language with fierce and unexpected imagery” (1989, 209). She speculates, in *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity*, that this poem might have been written after Siddall and Rossetti broke their engagement in 1858 (1987, 139).

As the poem remains undated, Hassett (1997, 447) explains that considering Rossetti as the muse for the poem is a choice made by the critics to try and give it a chronological position among the other compositions. The fact that the poems were not explicitly dated by the author reveals that she did not intend to publish them, she wrote only for herself. Her ownership of volumes of Scott’s, Keats’s and Tennyson’s poetry shows that Siddall was concerned with this literary medium. This also lets us know of her “appreciation of the structure of the folk ballad” (Hassett 1997, 448).

To discuss the influence of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, I will take the last stanza of the poem, which reads as follows:

And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
 Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
 And no birds sing.
 (Keats, 45-48)

Keats's speaker is self-pitying himself for how the action has turned out, whereas Siddall's speaker actively responds to her lover's return saying that she wishes for no more of it, and no more of him. If we link Keats's and Siddall's speakers, we can see the poems as a dialogue between them. Keats's female is idealized at first, and as the poem advances, she *is* the vampiric lover, she tricks the male, takes him to her cave, utilizes him, and then finally abandons him in the cold, all by himself. There is something intriguing about her eyes, they are "wild". This can mean that they are full of passion and serve as a reflection of her inner world and her emotions, or it could be taken as a warning for the speaker. In Siddall's poem, the female has a strong will and is powerful from the beginning, as she does not let the lover try to fool her again. Whenever he tries to speak, she shuts him down. She confesses that the root of this new hatred towards him is the result of the great love she felt before. In this conversation, Keats's speaker is indirectly blaming the female for abandoning him, but Siddall's female is defending herself and her decision of not taking him back.

Siddall takes "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" narrative and turns it in a way that it is now her speaker who is given a voice, she is given the opportunity to defend herself against the accusations of betrayal and abandonment.

3.4 "Worn Out"

This poem follows Siddall's already adopted ballad structure. It is five stanzas long and each of them constitutes a different quatrain. These quatrains have ABCB masculine rhyme, and the rhythm is established by the alternation of lines with four and three metrical feet. In this case the rhythm is iambic. There is also a lack of punctuation present in this poem.

At first sight, it appears as a more tender poem than the ones that have been discussed until now. In this poem, the speaker is not rejecting her lover. The poem opens with the following lines:

Thy strong arms are around me love
 My hand is on thy breast
 Low words of comfort come from thee
 Yet my soul is not at rest

("Worn Out", Siddall, *My Ladys Soul*, p. 86, 1-4)

This first stanza is a clear statement about how the speaker feels: although both lovers are in a comfortable position and they seem to be in the middle of an affectionate situation, the female does not fully feel alright. She is insecure, as the second stanza shows, and she does feel like she is not good enough for her lover because she is broken. She also feels bad because she has loved so much in the past that she is unable to love now, she is worried that the past experiences may get repeated and she gets hurt again. She offers what she has: a tired heart, exhausted eyes (from crying most likely) and a mouth that does not smile. In the end she expresses that she wants him to keep wrapping her in his arms, only to leave the following morning.

Marsh (1989, 212) points out the ironic distance that can be perceived; it is striking to read how although they are physically in the same space, in a loving embrace, she feels insecure and guilty for not being able to reciprocate his feelings, which distance them.

Trowbridge comments on how evident the subversion of the expected ballad forms is. She defends that this is an anti-love poem because “Lines 13-15 list the attributes most often commented on in love poems (heart, eyes, mouth) but undermine the classic tropes of love poetry to indicate a poem that is rejecting traditional love” (2018, 87-88).

Hassett (1997, 463) believes that the speaker, by sleeping, is choosing retreat. She sees this poem as “a protest against her own sexual desire, against love as a violation of the self” (1997, 463). The strength of her lover’s embrace is not soothing but suffocating.

I will discuss the chosen imagery of the bird. As explained by Elaine Shefer (1985, 437), Walter Deverell portrayed Siddall at least twice as a bird in the cage, a metaphor of her relationship with Rossetti. In this poem, Siddall chooses to portray the speaker as a bird too, but this time the trope is changed. The bird, although weak, with its last energies, chooses to leave, it is conscious of the damage such a relationship would have for it, reinforcing Hassett’s idea of retreatment.

4. ELIZABETH SIDDAL'S PICTORIAL WORKS

Siddall was the face for various Pre-Raphaelite paintings, especially on the years that followed the Brotherhood's foundation. From 1852 onwards, she would sit only for Rossetti. The time they spent together as model and painter also served for their romance to begin and develop, and for her growth as an artist too. Under the teaching of Rossetti, Siddall composed about a hundred of pictorial works and earned Ruskin's patronage. Following the Pre-Raphaelite practice, most of her illustrations were inspired by the poetry that was popular at the time, such as Tennyson's. The majority of her drawings that are publicly known remained as studies and sketches for possible watercolours, but only a few of this set of illustrations were transferred to a canvas.

Whereas we as readers can extract or identify autobiographical elements in her poetry, it is not possible to do so with her pictorial work. Siddall stayed faithful to the imagery she decided to portray, therefore not transporting any personal feeling or experience to the canvas. However, by painting scenes drawn from literature, Elizabeth Siddall – and other Pre-Raphaelite female artists – wanted to assert her independence and her own professional identity (Taylor 2011-12, 55). Taylor adds that

In painting the women's woman [...] the artist is in some measure portraying herself, not the interminable Other of the male artist. As a result, the numerous and varied female figures were presented with a great deal less lubriciousness and more understanding and sympathy than in comparable images from male artists (2011-12, 55).

Although the meaning of this is that women were painting from their own experiences and adapting the popular tropes to an image that would reflect the reality they lived, it also points out that in doing so, women were also looking to be freed from the male gaze.

I will now analyse her drawings *Clerk Saunders* and *Eve of St. Agnes*, using the ballads that inspired them as background and basis of the analysis.



Elizabeth Siddall, *Clerk Saunders*, 1857, watercolour, bodycolour, coloured chalks, on paper, laid on a stretcher. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

4.1 *Clerk Saunders*

According to its signature, *Clerk Saunders* was finished in the year 1857. It is the portrayal of one of the scenes in the Border ballad “Clerk Saunders”, recorded by Walter Scott in *Minstrelsy*.

The ballad of *Clerk Saunders* narrates the story of May Margaret and Clerk Saunders. One day the lovers are taking a walk in a garden and the male suggests that they should go to bed together. May Margaret, who is afraid of her brothers’ reaction, reasons that they should wait until marriage to do so. However, she comes up with a plan to be able to share a bed with him – she uses his sword to lift the doorknob and blindfolds herself, that way no one can say she has let him in or has seen him. While they sleep, her brothers arrive and look at them. The eldest brother wants to murder Clerk Saunders, but five of them speak in his favour. When they are arguing, the youngest brother takes the initiative and kills Clerk Saunders. May Margaret does not find out he has been assassinated until the following morning. Her father prepares the burial and tries to comfort her, to which she snaps and says that she will never be comforted. After the funeral, the ghost of Clerk Saunders appears to May Margaret claiming her troth back. She begs for a kiss, but he says she could die, and she asks about the afterlife of women who die in childbirth. Clerk Saunders becomes impatient claiming that the birds are chirping, and she gives him her troth sticking it on a wand which she passes through the window. He is thankful and walks away, with her following his steps until she loses sight of him in the forest. The poem ends with Margaret asking if she can join in his bed, but Clerk Saunders replies that there is no place for her in his cold, damp grave.

Siddall’s picture *Clerk Saunders* (1857) is a representation of the ballad’s ninth stanza, which reads as follows:

Up she has tain a bright long wand,
 And she has straked her troth thereon;
 She has given it him out at the shot-window,
 Wi many a sad sigh and heavy groan.
 (“Clerk Saunders”, 33-36)

The painting shows May Margaret encountering the ghost of Clerk Saunders and handing to him the wand with her troth. Margaret’s figure appears kissing the wand as if expressing her fidelity with that gesture. Both Margaret and Clerk Saunders are

pale figures, which is striking since it is a scene of the living confronting the dead (Cherry 2012, 183). But the painting is also full-on symbolism. In the right side of the painting, next to the male protagonist, there is an hourglass, which can mean that one's time is running out. In the poem, Clerk Saunders is constantly reminding and rushing Margaret because he is a ghost and he will be in danger when the sun comes out, therefore emphasizing this sense of lack of time.

Ehnenn discusses that "Siddall's painting [...] seems to foreshadow the unhappy ending that befalls the woman who loves too much" (2014, 267). She went further and said that the picture shows how the female space has been violated "by a force [...] that threatens women's autonomy and sense of self" (2014, 267). In her essay, the author uses both the poem and the painting to argue how both works contribute and exemplify the trope of "blind love".

Siddall's original sketch, as Marsh points out, lost naïveté but gained depth, layers and colour when it was made into a watercolour (1989, 180). The bright colours of the picture, the greens, blues and purples, are characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite first works, as also are the way in which the characters are represented.

Marsh documents that both Rossetti and Siddall were interested and attracted to the Border ballads, and according to Rossetti both of them were working on the illustrations for an edition of the Old Scottish Ballads that William Allingham was preparing for Routledge. "Clerk Saunders" appears to be Rossetti's favourite ballad, so most likely he was the one that introduced Siddall this particular piece (1989, 179).

Going a step further and taking into account biographical aspects, it is noticeable that Margaret is represented as a red hair, which can be seen as a self-portrait. If that was the case, Siddall could once again be voicing out her personal experiences and how she viewed her relationship with Rossetti. Margaret's and Clerk Saunders' relationship is a draining one, she loves him too much and he takes advantage of that, knowing that she will not be able to deny him what he wants (to be freed). Siddall's and Rossetti's relationship was long and troubled too, ultimately leading her to death.



Elizabeth Siddall, *Eve of St. Agnes*, 1850, gouache on paper. © Wightwick Manor, West Midlands.

4.2 *Eve of St. Agnes*

St Agnes was a Roman virgin and martyr during the early 4th century. She is a patron saint of virgins, girls and chastity. Agnes had many suitors of high rank that were unhappy with her religiosity and accused her in front of the authorities as a follower of Christianity. She was condemned to be dragged naked through the streets to a brothel. While she was receiving this punishment, a man turned a lascivious look at her and fell to the ground struck with blindness and later death. Agnes prayed for him and he revived, which caused her release. After this incident, her trial began and she was sentenced to death. One version holds that she was executed by the sword. Another version says that she was bound to a stake which would not burn, or when it did, the flames departed from Agnes' body, reason why an officer took his sword and cut her head. This version also adds that her hair started growing to cover her naked body from the gaze of the multitude.

Since the Middle Ages, St Agnes has been depicted with flowing long hair and a lamb, which also serves as a symbol of purity and innocence. What we have in Siddall's watercolour (and previous sketches) however, is a nun looking out the window during the St. Eve feast. As the engraving which figures in the back of the painting says, it was made under the supervision of Rossetti. Unlike many other Pre-Raphaelite representations, it was inspired by Tennyson's poem rather than Keats'. I consider worth mentioning that Tennyson on his own side was inspired by Keats, so this picture is a representation of a re-interpretation, not like *Clerk Saunders*, which was drawn from the original text in the traditional ballad.

It may be due to the fact that Keats' is a more sensual poem, it allows multiple readings and therefore, multiple representations, many of which are rendered in Jack Stillinger's book *Reading "The Eve of St Agnes"*. Keats takes the Christian myth and writes a poem about a girl, Madeline, who in the eve of St. Agnes wants to leave her family's party and go to sleep because there is a tradition that if young girls follow a set of rules they will dream with their future husband during that night. Madeline does actually have a boyfriend, Porphyro, who is a blood enemy of her own family. He sneaks into her castle that night in hopes that they can run away together and marry. In the end it is not clear what happens to them after they escape. As I have mentioned, the poem is rich in imagery, which made it easy for the Pre-Raphaelites to use it as the main source for various paintings.

Although Tennyson was inspired by Keats, taking the imagery of the snowy scenery and making a trace of the entire first stanza, he stood within the religious and more pious part of the tradition. Tennyson's poem is much shorter – composed by 3 stanzas with twelve lines each – and it focuses on the nun's fervent religiousness. For the nun, her husband is God, and she is talking to Heaven in hopes that he listens to her desires of joining him soon, and also expressing her vows.

Siddall's choice of source is not surprising if we take into consideration that Tennyson was the poet that fascinated her the most out of all the authors that she had the chance to explore. Her picture can be interpreted not only as a literal representation of the poem, but also as showing how the Victorian gendered spheres worked. Nuns are subject to live in seclusion in monasteries, suggesting the same idea as the Victorian feminine private sphere, whereas the outside world represents the masculine public sphere. The nun in her painting, as Tennyson's speaking voice, is a woman devoting her life to Christ. She is looking at the sky through the window, while we can see an opening to the chapel, where we find the altar and a crucifix. In the year of its composition, imagery of nuns was popular but controversial, and this painting falls into the Pre-Raphaelite mode which had devotion to Christ as an admirable representation of femininity.

In short, Tennyson's poem offers a narrative and a new field on which to explore Victorian gender spheres, which Siddall chooses to represent faithfully in order to take to the extreme what was expected of women during the period.

Siddall does not intend to represent a higher being or a woman who is superior to others, she portrays Tennyson's nun as a representation of the ideal Victorian femininity, the woman who is pious and devoted to God. In contrast with Keats' Madeline, who chooses earthly love and runs away with her lover, Tennyson's and later Siddall's nun is the one whose priority is her faith.

5. CONCLUSION

After the analysis of Siddall's poetry and pictorial works, it can be concluded that the ballad tradition has influenced her production as a whole. At first sight it is easy to identify the subject of her paintings because they are drawn directly from poetic sources. Siddall employed and adapted the ballad to portray what was most important for her, the role of women in her society. *Clerk Saunders* offers a woman who after having shown devotion to her lover, is abandoned by him. *Eve of St. Agnes*, on the other hand, shows the woman waiting to finally join her lover, but it also serves as subtle criticism of the Victorian gendered spheres. Siddall chose these images to show contraposed femininities, both of them love too much, but one is devoted to Christ while the other one prioritises her lover and his well-being. Where the nun is passive and waits for her moment to come, May Margaret surrenders to her beloved and faces her tragic fate: to be left alone with her intense feelings. In both pieces what is common is the painful feeling of loneliness.

Since her poetic composition is scarcer and has been less discussed, it is more challenging to point out which parts she has taken from the folk culture, but as the analyses have proven, the content of her own poetry can be intrinsically linked to that of Scott's, Keats' and Tennyson's poems. The structure for her poems is simple, she keeps the traditional rhyme scheme of folk ballads, thus serving as a strategy to link and introduce her own balladry in the popular tradition. "Fragment of a Ballad" takes the imagery of the Border ballad "Sir Patrick Spens" and it can also be discussed and compared to "Clerk Saunders"; "At Last" serves as a reminiscence of Tennyson's "The May Queen"; "Love and Hate" gives us the female responsive voice to Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"; and "Worn Out" is a poem that goes against folk ballad conventions.

Scott presents the issue of female power, Keats uses the female figure to reassert the masculinity of his male speaker, and Tennyson encloses and confines the female figure in her own sphere. Siddall takes them as reference and strategically, using the folk ballad structure, gives a voice to Tennyson's secluded female, argues and defends herself against Keats' accuser speaker, and shows that Scott's May Margaret could have had another choice rather than fulfilling what was expected from her.

In her own personal way, Siddall has taken the ballad genre and adapted it to show her discomfort with Victorian standards and to give voice to the inner world of a woman who feels too much and has to face the consequences of her strong emotions.

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