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The Female Body in Frederick Sandys's Paintings, or the Sublimation of Desire

Virginie Thomas

Abstract : This chapter is devoted to six paintings by Frederick Sandys, a British Victorian painter, as follows: *Grace Rose* (1866), *Mrs Mary Elizabeth Barstow* (1867), *Adelaide Mary*, *Mrs Philip Bedingfeld* (1859), *Medea* (1866-68), *Helen of Troy* (1867) and *Vivien* (1863). My theoretical framework mostly relies on *Le Regard du portrait* written by the French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy. I seek to show that Frederick Sandys's paintings are representative of the Victorian period insofar as they set the representation of woman's body and desire into relief. They also raise the issue of male desire beneath the yoke of the Victorian superego: art is thus turned into a way to warn but also to sublimate the erotic drives of the male viewers and of the artist.

As Pascal notes in *Pensées*, “L’homme n’est ni ange ni bête et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l’ange fait la bête” (358) meaning: “Man is neither angel nor beast and the misfortune is that he who wants to make the angel acts the beast”.

The dichotomous opposition coined by Blaise Pascal between the Angel and the Beast is useful in referring to the historical context of Victorian society. Indeed, in that era women were assigned to one of two categories: either the “Angel in the House” – to quote the title of a book by Coventry Patmore; or the whore who enabled men to satisfy their bestial drives outside the asexual bond of marriage.

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*¹, offered a socially and economically-based explanation for this cultural evolution, linking the advent of asexual models – and of the corollary ‘plague’ of prostitution – mainly to the development of

the bourgeoisie from the 18th century onwards, in three main steps that may be roughly summed up as follows: first, it appeared to the emerging bourgeoisie that taking care of their bodies and of their biological filiations distinguished them from the blood of the nobility, “that is in the form of the antiquity of its ancestry and of the value of its alliances” (124). The bourgeoisie then decided to extend their concern with the body to the working classes in order to increase the working capacity of the latter, for “if sex [was] so rigorously repressed, this [was] because it [was] incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative” (6). However, they finally realised that this common concern with the body and sex narrowed the gap between the social strata, making the repression of sex appear as the best way to differentiate them from the working classes:

Somewhat similar to the way in which, at the end of the eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie set its own body and its precious sexuality against the valorous blood of the nobles, at the end of the nineteenth century it sought to redefine the specific character of its sexuality relative to that of others, subjecting it to a thorough differential review, and tracing a dividing line that would set apart and protect its body. (127)

The categorial attempts of Victorian society to imprison the feminine identity within either the category of the angel or of the demon were further reinforced by the Evangelical Revival, whose vision of woman oscillated between the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, the prostitute. Victorian society saw in that dichotomous stamping a way to tame its uneasiness in regard to the woman who, even though she may have been a wife and a mother – the pillar of respectability in the family – was nonetheless a being deeply rooted in the flesh. During the Victorian era a great many painters focused on the representation of the female body, among whom Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys was one of the most inspired artists, on a par with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as we can judge from his vast number of portraits of women.

Frederick Sandys was born in 1829 in Norwich. He was first taught how to draw by his father – who was himself a portraitist – before enrolling to study at the Norwich School of Design. In the 1850s he departed for London. In May 1857 he exhibited a painting entitled *The Nightmare*, which was a parody of a canvas made by John Everett Millais, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Due to this work he attracted the attention of the PRB, which accepted Sandys as one of its members at the beginning of the 1860s. In 1868 one of his most famous paintings, *Medea*, was rejected by the Royal Academy because it was deemed far too shocking for the Victorian audience. Sandys was deeply hurt by this rejection and decided to abandon oil painting and to devote himself exclusively to chalk drawing. In spite of his disappointment with the Royal Academy, he remained a celebrated and inspired artist until the 1880s, when his production started to dwindle and his works became less numerous and of lesser quality than those he had painted before. He died, nearly forgotten by his peers, on 25 June 1904 in London. It was only at the end of the 20th century that his works were brought back to light and celebrated once again, particularly his chalk portraits, the technique at which he most excelled.

Frederick Sandys's approach to women is noteworthy and can be divided into the traditional Manichean typology of the period: "the Angel in the House" confronting the *Femme Fatale*. As a consequence, the question of desire comes to the fore in his works: female desire but also male desire. Paintings were used as a device to protect the painter and the viewers through the representation of perilous sensuality, warning them against women's lethal sexual potential. They were also, paradoxically, used as screens onto which both the painter and the viewers could project their own drives, sublimated in an artistic gesture and thus satisfying their "appetite of the eye".²

The Angel in the House

Sandys painted quite a number of portraits of aristocratic women because this kind of canvas represented the main source of income for the artist. It also enabled him to represent the ideal Angel Woman, the pillar of the Victorian house and family. One example among many others is the portrait entitled *Grace Rose* (1866). The woman's face is remarkable for its fresh complexion. The latter is reinforced by the presence of rosebuds surrounding the figure. Sandys used the classical iconographic device of the female portrait dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries, which consisted in accompanying the model with a plant that evoked her name. Her clear eyes are highlighted by the blue turquoise of her ring, as well as by the ribbon of her dress, and closely associate Grace Rose with the Marian blue colour. The dominant colour of the painting is nonetheless that of her white dress, which reinforces the asexuality of the figure in its purity, and evokes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's definition of white as the symbolic representation of "the suicidal passivity implicit in Victorian femininity".³ Mrs Grace Rose was thus immortalized by Sandys as a personification of the ideal aristocratic wife and perfectly embodies the motto of the Rose Family – "Constant and True", which can be seen in the top right-hand corner of the painting.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from studying the unfinished painting entitled *Mrs Mary Elizabeth Barstow* (1867). Once again the representation of a patron's wife is offered to the viewer. The diaphanous face of the aristocrat, the bluish colour of the skin of her hands and of her ribbons and her wearing a white dress, tend to give her a disembodied essence, evoking the subtle body of the Angel in the House:

At the same time, moreover, the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty – no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman – obliged "genteel" women to "kill" themselves (as Lederer observed) into art objects : slim, pale, passive beings whose "charms" eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead. (25)

This figure, moreover, is represented in the domestic activity of sewing, much as Grace Rose is painted creating a posy. It reminds us that Victorian aristocratic women were trapped in the domestic sphere, as Lord Alfred Tennyson's quote suggests: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth, / Man for the sword and for the needle she".⁴ Leading spokesmen and women of the moral standards of the time also related to the fact that women were denied any existence beyond the domestic realm:

Similarly, John Ruskin affirmed in 1865 that the woman's "power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings" of domesticity. Plainly, both [John Ruskin and Mrs Sarah Ellis] meant that, enshrined within her home, a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband's holy refuge from the blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies a "life of significant action", as well as, in her "contemplative purity", a living *memento* of the otherness of the divine.⁵

The cut roses lying in front of Grace Rose in the discussed painting can thus be seen as a symbolic representation of these women's sapped vitality. Moreover, turning them into objects of representation through their portraits could be perceived as another way to definitively trap them into domesticity and subject them to the painter's as well as to their husband's male authority.

What is noteworthy in the portrait of *Mrs Mary Elizabeth Barstow* and of *Adelaide Mary, Mrs Philip Bedingfeld* (1859) is the predominance of the landscape in the background. Sandys's choice thus heightens the meaning: in the two paintings, the setting used to stage these models of domesticity is of an urban nature, cultivated – in other words domesticated – in the vein of the tradition of the representations of nature preceding the wild beauty of the Romantic Sublime.⁶ The meekness of these women is therefore reinforced by the domesticated nature in the background, with the symbolic

organization of the painting thereby illustrating the dual function of the portrait, as underlined by Louis Marin in *De la Représentation*: to compensate for the absence of the represented object but also to reveal the essence of its presence.⁷ Here, the role of the portrait is to set into relief the ideal essence of the wife whose purity and tamed identity were celebrated by Victorian society, as the crowning of Mrs Philip Bedingfeld with a laurel wreath shows. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the primordial domestic role of the blameless wife, as embodied by Mrs Philip Bedingfeld, should be reinforced through her alignment with the pillar in the background, which turns her pure body into the essential pivot of the painting, symbolising her pivotal role in her couple and family.

Sandys's portraits of aristocratic women thus tend to reassure the viewer by representing angel-women framed by the shape of the canvas but also by the role of the pure mother and wife ascribed to them by society. Nevertheless, many representations of women by Sandys do not fit in this category, displaying instead the alluring but highly lethal body of the *Femme Fatale* in order to assuage the scopophilia of the Victorian viewer.

The Femme Fatale

Sandys made numerous portraits of *Femmes Fatales*, like his contemporaries of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Contrary to Dante Gabriel Rossetti or William Holman Hunt, however, who clearly devoted some of their paintings to the issue of prostitution⁸, Sandys chose to tackle the topic of the depraved female body and desire through the recurrent representation of mythological, desiring, awesome women. His portraits also differ from those of his peers in his approach to the feminine gaze. While the women he painted all have an undeniable sensual and deadly power, in all these portraits Sandys protected the viewer from this maleficent female power by making the latter avert their

gazes, and thus spare the viewer from their enticing, but at the same time objectifying, Gorgonian power. Sandys's masterpiece, as far as the *Femmes Fatales* are concerned, is undoubtedly *Medea* (1866-68). Since the 16th century artists had been greatly inspired by the representation of this witch, but in the 19th century she was only represented as a vampire-like woman. Sandys's representation is in the vein of this latter tradition: Medea is portrayed preparing to avenge herself against the King of Corinth's daughter – for whom Jason had left her. The protagonist's facial expression betrays the suffering and the determination of a woman ready to unleash her destructive power upon her rival; but also upon her own children who were born from her union with Jason. Her lacerating gesture against her own flesh may be seen as a proleptic clue to the future murder of her offspring. In her unfailing determination and thirst for vengeance at all costs, she truly embodies "the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the 'Female Will'".⁹ Death is foreshadowed by her coral necklace, which resembles bloody beads. Many other worrying symbols abound in the painting: in the foreground, witchcraft instruments can be observed – an earthenware dish topped by a salamander; an Egyptian statuette used during funeral rites; a dried stingray; and above all, toads copulating above manuscripts with cabalistic writing. The background of the painting is also replete with negative symbols that appear in the frieze above Medea: cobras, Egyptian gods with animal heads, beetles, owls which are an emblem of darkness but also Lilith's sacred animals. In the golden sky astrological signs can be seen, notably that of Scorpio; and the moon is half-hidden by the figure of a bat, a satanic animal associated with witches. Finally, the tension of the painting is built upon the confrontation between the illustrations in the background that recall Medea's past – her betrayal of her own father, her murder of her brother so that Jason and the Argonauts could steal the Golden Fleece from the dragon and escape – and the devastating future that the protagonist is preparing in the foreground. The character is inexorably trapped

in her destructive feminine identity but, due to the diversion of her gaze, she seems to be offered to that of the viewer, who finds himself exempted from “laying down his gaze”.¹⁰

In *Helen of Troy* (1867), the remarkable portrait of a whimsical girl is presented to the viewer. The image is clearly characterised by her disdainful pout and her dark gaze – in spite of her blue eyes – underlined by her frowning in the tradition of the faces painted by Caravaggio but also typical of Sandys’s *Femmes Fatales*. Helen’s reddish hair creates whirlpools from the movements of her curls. The choice of red hair was almost certainly deliberate because, according to Michel Pastoureau, it is the colour of demons, of hypocrisy, of lying and of betrayal.¹¹ Helen may be considered as Aphrodite’s victim but she is also guilty of betraying Menelaus – leaving him for Paris – and, in so doing, occasioning the Trojan War. Helen’s deadly identity finds an echo in the red colour of her lips, of her coral necklace whose beads evoke blood drops, and of the rose that she wears in her hair. In Antiquity roses had a deadly connotation, since the Feast of Roses was part of the ceremonies linked to the celebration of the dead. Helen displays a carnal beauty, as we can judge from the presence of her naked plump body in the foreground; but nonetheless a nefarious beauty. However, the viewer is once again protected from her bewitching power and from possible objectification by the diversion of her threatening gaze; while Helen herself becomes an object of representation and contemplation. Nevertheless, even though the viewer manages to escape Helen’s gaze, he is not spared the “gaze of the painting”, which can appear in several shapes according to Jean-Luc Nancy: a pearl, a ring, the eye of an animal, a mirror, a nipple, a red mouth....¹² The red spots that predominate either in the shapes of the coral beads, the perfectly round flowers, or the many curls in the young girl’s hair, might thus substitute for Helen’s gaze through the symbolic knowing gaze of the painter in the direction of the desiring viewer.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from another famous portrait by Sandys entitled *Vivien* (1863) and which presents us with Merlin's seductress's noxious beauty. As in Sandys's other paintings of the *Femme Fatale*, the profile of a haughty dark-haired woman is offered to the phallic eye of the viewer, who is granted undeniable visual pleasure while being protected from the objectifying threat of a potential Gorgon. Once again, multifarious red spots predominate in the painting: the lips, the amber necklace and earrings, a poppy, an apple and cabalistic drawings on the woman's shawl. What is noteworthy about this painting is the number of clues intended to warn the viewer against Vivien's perilous identity. The background of the canvas is replete with peacock feathers that surround the figure and symbolize her pride and arrogance.¹³ They can also be linked to the Evil eye, as the drawings on Vivien's shawl belong to the occult sciences. As for the laurel branch that Vivien holds in her hand, it attests to her link with the world of sorcery, in being used in the prophetic rites of Ancient times. It also alludes to Apollo and Daphne's thwarted love¹⁴ and reminds the viewer of Merlin's own thwarted proposals to Vivien. Another ominous symbol is the wild poppy lying on the balustrade in the foreground: this flower is traditionally associated with slumber and evokes the eternal slumber that will befall the unfortunate Merlin because of Vivien's lethal action. Her malevolent power is all the more reinforced by the petals falling beneath her hand, which spares neither the poppy nor the laurel, contrary to the scene in Grace Rose's portrait, in which her gentle hand lifts up intact flowers. The final symbol of Vivien's harmful action is the apple on the balustrade that turns her into a descendant of Eve, the first and most inspiring temptress. As in the two previous canvases, here too Sandys portrayed the profile of this *Femme Fatale* as avoiding the encounter between her gaze and that of the viewer. This petrified Gorgon is offered to the phallic eye of the viewer, who can fulfil his scopophilic drive apparently unmolested: "...Sandys portrayed her as passive as the others; men hold the power of decision whether or not to submit to the

modestly offered temptations”.¹⁵ Nevertheless, even if the viewer succeeds in escaping Vivien’s gaze, he is not spared the “gaze of the painting” because of the great many eyes present in the peacock feathers, which echo and duplicate the missed scopic encounter with Vivien and symbolize the painter’s knowing gaze at the viewer.

The *Femme Fatale*, endowed with a petrifying yet tamed gaze in Sandys’s paintings, consequently appears as an “artistic survival”¹⁶ of the mythological figure of Medusa. The frequent use of coral to adorn his protagonists with jewels, as in the two previously mentioned paintings, offers a clue to that archetypal link. Lucia Impelluso indeed reminds us that, in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid explained that coral was born of the contact between Medusa’s blood and the sea :

Ovid tells that Perseus, after killing Medusa and freeing Andromeda, placed the Gorgon’s head on a layer of seaweed taken from the sea to spare it the rough contact with the hard sand: the freshly cut seaweed soaked up the monster’s blood with their spongy marrow and stiffened. The sea nymphs, noticing this miracle, repeated the action onto several other seaweeds which they threw into the sea like seeds that multiplied. This gave the coral the characteristics of both being flexible under water and of hardening upon contact with air.¹⁷ (my translation)

In a painting entitled *The Pearl* (1860-65), Sandys brought his *Femme Fatale* and Medusa closer together, showing a voluptuous young girl contemplating herself in a mirror. The erotic sensuality of her gesture is undeniable and is underlined by the palette of colours of the painting, which aims at replacing the haptic drive of the viewer with the satisfaction of the eye, as noted by Jacqueline Lichtenstein, who equates the pleasure of colour with the supreme pleasure of the eye.¹⁸ Above all, however, the representation of this woman enables the viewer to turn himself into a Perseus and fully give himself up to his scopic drive, contemplating the girl’s reflection in her

mirror/shield without fearing the objectifying gaze of this petrified Medusa. The white pearl worn by the girl in her left ear may also symbolize, as in the portraits of Helen of Troy and of Vivien, the “gaze of the painting” at the viewer.

Sandys used images of mythological women to convey his vision of an archetypal threatening female body that confronts the male viewers with both the question of female desire and of their own sexual drives. This categorical approach by Sandys can also be seen as another way for the painter to possess and tame woman, while her representation in his portraits may be compared to “... those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her ‘inconstancy’ and – by identifying her with the ‘eternal types’ they have themselves invented – to possess her more thoroughly”.¹⁹

The Fear of the Gorgon

Sandys is notorious for having led a very dissolute life. After leaving his wife in Norwich, he had two tumultuous love affairs in London. He first met Mary Emma Jones, an actress in London, with whom he had a liaison. He then fell under the bewitching spell of Keomi, a gypsy woman. Finally, he returned to Mary Emma Jones, with whom he spent the rest of his life as husband and wife (even though he had never divorced his legal Norwich spouse) and had ten children with her. He used Mary Emma Jones and Keomi as models for his *Femmes Fatales*. Keomi sat for *Medea*, *La Belle Isolde*, *Vivien* and *Judith*. Mary Emma’s thick head of hair charmed and fascinated Sandys both as a man and as a painter. Consequently, she sat for *Mary Magdalene* – conveying the sensuality of this repentant sinner. Sandys also used her in the numerous series of chalk drawings entitled *Proud Maisie* – which inspired the artist no fewer than thirteen times from 1864 to the year of his death in 1904 – as well as in the painting *Love’s Shadow*. In each case he staged his mistress in a semi-bestial attitude, biting

either a posy or a lock of hair; and her gaze reveals a wild and worrying aspect of the female essence.

Sandys's attempt to represent female identity in its most bewildering and threatening dimension may be seen as the painter's attempt to come to terms with and tame both female desire and his own desire for women. Indeed the latter seems to have appeared in Sandys's eyes as a perilous drive, and one that might have led him, like Perseus, to the confrontation with a Gorgonian power reflected in his work of art entitled *Medusa Head* (1875). In this black and red chalk drawing three threatening elements predominate: the thick head of hair surrounding the face and hiding the severed neck; the undulating snakes crowning the head; and, finally, the horrendously petrifying gaze of Medusa. The thick head of hair and the objectifying gaze are leitmotifs in Sandys's paintings and tend to symbolize the potentially destructive sexuality of the *Femme Fatale* that may trap and objectify the unwary male. Even if Sandys chose to protect the viewers from the Gorgonian look of his *Femmes Fatales* by making the latter avert their gazes, they still retain their sexually alluring hair, reminiscent of Medusa's crown of snakes; and they are more often than not represented with the coral necklace (such as adorns Judith, Helen and Medea to quote but a few) that is a clue to these women's castrating power inherited from the Gorgon.

Sandys's fascination with the Medusa figure attests to an undeniable feeling of uneasiness when confronted with a woman and the desire she could experience or arouse. The painter can thus be seen as the perfect spokesman for the *zeitgeist* of the Victorian society to which he belonged. Indeed Victorian men were confronted with a paradox in regard to woman. On the one hand, the woman was expected to embody a model of asexual virtue; while on the other hand, she was seen as the fallible heiress of Eve. To quote Joan Perkin on Victorian women: "There was ambiguity thinking about women, too: though they were lauded as men's conscience and as repositories of virtue,

they were also held to be easily corruptible. Eve, not Adam, had been tempted by the serpent, and this showed that women were innately sinful”.²⁰ Women’s fallibility was made all the more perceptible due to the omnipresence of the figure of Mary Magdalene, both in art and in society, with the Victorian ‘plague’ of prostitution being the logical consequence of the development of these asexual models, as Eric Trugdill underlines: “The prostitute was the enemy of sexual purity. She was also in many ways its product. For Victorian sexual fears and sexual idealism were often counter-productive in effect, creating both a supply of potential customers for the prostitute and also a situation in which she was paradoxically not only the enemy, but the ally, of the purity ideal”.²¹ What characterized the reaction of Victorian males to the representation of woman as a Janus-like figure was their constant tendency to a sense of suspicion regarding woman, and the desire she could arouse, leading them to sexual frustration and guilt: “Love of a noble kind was separate from and superior to sexual desire. Many people thought that sexual intercourse should take place, even within marriage, only for the propagation of the species. This made some men guilty about enjoying sex at all, whether within marriage or with a mistress or prostitute”.²²

Frederick Sandys’s work illustrates Foucault’s assumption that because Victorian society strove to channel desire, it paradoxically succeeded in making it all the more present in speech and in art: “But is sex hidden from us, concealed by a new sense of decency, kept under a bushel by the grim necessities of bourgeois society? On the contrary, it shines forth; it is incandescent. Several centuries ago, it was placed at the center of a formidable *petition to know*”.²³ Art became a way by which to subtly deal with female and male desire in spite of the yoke of the “Victorian Cultural Super-ego”, to quote Freud²⁴: it warned against the threat of an alluring female body but also enabled the male viewers and the artist to assuage their scopophilia in an artistic gesture of sublimation of their erotic drives. Painting women’s portraits was a way for the artist to

tame the female Other; and also his own desire. In the end, however, we may wonder who is subjugated by whom: Sandys by woman? Woman by Sandys? Or perhaps it is the viewer by the painting?

Notes

¹ Foucault (1976).

² Lacan (1973), 102.

³ Gilbert and Gubar (1984), 618.

⁴ Tennyson (1965), 245.

⁵ Gilbert & Gubar (1984), 24.

⁶ Roger (1978), 123.

⁷ Marin (1994), 206.

⁸ For instance, *Found* (1854-1855) by Rossetti staged an encounter between a prostitute and her former lover, whereas *The Awakening of Conscience* (1858) by Hunt aimed at showing the moral revelation of a whore.

⁹ Gilbert & Gubar (1984), 28.

¹⁰ Lacan (1973), 93.

¹¹ Pastoureau (2004), 199.

¹² Nancy (2000), 77.

¹³ Impelluso (2004), 309.

¹⁴ Daphne repelled Apollo's advances before asking her father to turn her into a laurel tree.

¹⁵ Mancoff (1990), 185.

¹⁶ Didi-Huberman (2002), 59.

¹⁷ Impelluso (2004), 354.

¹⁸ Lichtenstein (1999), 181-82.

¹⁹ Gilbert & Gubar (1984), 17.

²⁰ Perkin (1993), 229.

²¹ Trudgill (1976), 119.

²² Perkin (1993), 229.

²³ Foucault (1976), 77-78.

²⁴ Freud (1961), 102.

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