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The Homeric Ladies of Shalott

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Lilah Grace Canevaro

Abstract: This paper argues that the traditional referentiality of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' can be better understood by supplementing the poet's medieval sources, of little more than tangential relevance to the poem, with Homeric influences. It suggests that the Lady is an amalgamation of Homeric women, primarily Andromache and Helen but also Penelope, Circe and Calypso, who fulfil their domestic roles by weaving but who also cross gender boundaries: who express themselves through objects and engage in memorialisation. It shows that Tennyson used layers of resonance to create a character through which he could reflect on issues of poetics, aesthetics, memory and vision, utilising those elements of tradition which were simultaneously timeless and allowed him to comment on his own art and times. Further, it posits that in rewriting 'The Lady of Shalott' in 1842, Tennyson took yet another step away from his medieval sources, and towards Homer. As a final point, this paper suggests that it is this perpetual chain of resonance stretching back from Victorian England through medieval legend to the archaic Greek world which inspired the Pre-Raphaelites to adopt 'The Lady of Shalott' as a favoured subject.

To point out that Lord Alfred Tennyson drew from, engaged with and made heavy use of Homeric epic would be stating the obvious, to put it mildly. Schooled from the age of seven and sent up to Cambridge at eighteen, he received the usual Victorian full-immersion Classical education and 'had his favourite Classics, such as Homer, and Pindar, and Theocritus'.[1] If 'Classics was simply the furniture of the mind for the Victorian upper classes, often somewhat shabby or threadbare furniture, sometimes thrown out on the rag-and-bone cart, but always a recognizable style of decoration, whether homely or grand'[2] – well, Tennyson's upholstery positively gleamed.

Systematic analyses such as Mustard's 1904 *Classical Echoes in Tennyson* or (to skip a century) Markley's 2004 *Stateliest Measures: Tennyson and the Literature of Greece and Rome* make eminently clear how avidly the poet used Greek and Latin sources in his work, and self-evident titles of such poems as 'Achilles over the Trench' or 'The Lotus-Eaters' leave us in no doubt as to Tennyson's Homeric leanings.[3] The poet

[1] H. Tennyson 1897.2:806.

[2] Goldhill 2011:2.

[3] See also Jenkyns in Conin/Chapman/Harrison 2002:229-45.

even debated with Gladstone about how best to translate Homer.[4] The poet's own

son, Hallam, comments on how deeply embedded Homer was in his father's psyche:

> a portable copy of Homer which some friend had given him he had in his
>
> hands on our Cornish journey (1860), and kept sitting down to read as we
>
> wandered over a wild rock-island in the Scillies. We took Homer, however, so
>
> much for granted, that I do not recall many discussions in honour of *Iliad* and
>
> *Odyssey*. It would have seemed like praising 'Monte Rosa'.[5]

However, in spite of the poet's such rampant philhellenism, 'The Lady of

Shalott' (arguably Tennyson's most well-known and widely critiqued poem) has

largely escaped the notice of Classicists, Homerists and scholars of classical

reception alike.[6] Plasa 1992 spots allusions to Shelley and Wordsworth; Turner

1976:62 and Chadwick 1986:24-5 posit exploitation of Platonic doctrine; Cannon 1970

even strays eastward and compares 'The Lady of Shalott' with 'The Arabian Nights'

Tales'. But the real source of the story, I suggest, is much more obvious and, in

educational terms, much closer to home. In this paper I argue that 'The Lady of

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[4] See Hurst 2010:490-1, Joseph 1982.

[5] H. Tennyson 1897.2:841.

[6] Some exceptions: Mustard 1900:153 notes passing resemblances to Virgil *Aeneid* 3.195, Horace *Odes* 1.5.6, *Iliad* 7.63, 21.126, and *Odyssey* 4.402; Allen 1975 suggests the influence of Sappho fr.102; Joseph 1992 and Armstrong 1993:81 see a weaving parallel with Arachne; Gray 2009 compares the Lady with Ovid's Medea, in that both choose what is detrimental to them.

Shalott' is bound up not only with Victorian Medievalism, but also with Classicism.[7] There is, of course, a link between the two: the fact that, by Tennyson's time, Homer was already being medievalised and romanticised. Cowper, for instance, had translated the Homeric epics with Milton in mind; volumes of Homer were illustrated in a medieval style; paintings incorporated elements anachronistic to archaic Greece but in-keeping with Medieval or Romantic periods.[8] The trend continued throughout the 19th century, with Barter and Worsley both translating Homer into Spenserian stanzas, and Newman producing an antiquated *Iliad* full of Anglo-Saxon echoes.[9] Blackie's *Iliad* and Morris' *Odyssey* were also heavily medievalising translations: 'these classical texts are intended to appear as the medievals received them, enacting a transformation of classical epic into 'medieval' romance'.[10] Through this romanticised Homer, Tennyson could easily transpose elements of archaic epic into a medieval setting: there was a pre-existing (and still operating) bridge between the two.

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[7] For an overview of Victorian Medievalism see Harrison in Cronin/Chapman/Harrison 2002:246-61.

[8] Fowler in his introduction to Fowler 2006:1 gives as an example a portrait of Homer by Mattia Preti (1613-99), the atmosphere of which evokes Romanticism, and in which the robes and wreath are distinctly medieval.

[9] For a survey of English translations of Homer, see Steiner in Fowler 2006:363-75.

[10] Waithe 2006:103.

I argue that 'The Lady of Shalott' is based not only on the medieval Italian novella *La Donna di Scalotta* and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, generally acknowledged as sources but just as generally acknowledged as lacking in similarity with Tennyson's poem,[11] but also on Homeric epic. Harrison in Stray 2007 observes that many Victorian writers prefer to engage with epic on a small scale (he sees a more direct connection with Homer in 'The Lotos-Eaters' or 'Ulysses' than in the 'Idylls of the King'): perhaps 'The Lady of Shalott' is one of these instances of intense (if unattributed) engagement. I argue that the Lady is an amalgamation of (at the very least) Homer's Andromache, Helen and Penelope, women who fulfil their domestic roles by weaving but who also cross gender boundaries: who express themselves through objects and engage in memorialisation. Further, I argue that in rewriting 'The Lady of Shalott' in 1842, Tennyson took yet another step away from his medieval sources, and towards Homer. As a final point, I suggest that it is this Homeric resonance which inspired the Pre-Raphaelites to adopt 'The Lady of Shalott' as a favoured subject.

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[11] For early discussions of *La Donna di Scalotta* as a source see Potwin 1902 (including Italian text and translation) and Chambers 1903:227-33. Although Tennyson himself acknowledged this *novella* as a source, he seems to have been more reticent in admitting conscious associations with Malory: 'The Lady of Shalott is evidently the Elaine of the *Morte d'Arthur*, but I do not think that I had ever heard of the latter when I wrote the former' (Tennyson, quoted in Ricks 1987.3:387).

First it is necessary to establish a methodological framework for this analysis. As Mustard 1904 already showed, in 'The Lady of Shalott' Tennyson does not refer explicitly to Homer. He does not use Homeric lines, whether quoting or paraphrasing, nor does he indulge in Homeric name-dropping. In tracing Tennyson's sources for this poem, then, I am working with something rather less tangible. This poses a fundamental methodological question: where does reception end and cultural similarity begin? Certainly, I will address issues which are relevant to far more than Homer. For example the gendered aspect of materiality (women's use of objects: the Lady's weaving, the mirror, and the boat) has been the focus of anthropological studies such as those of Appadurai 1986, Graeber 2001, DeMarrais/Gosden/Renfrew 2004 and van Binsbergen/Geshiere 2005: such studies have shown that the relationship between gender and materiality is configured in similar ways cross-culturally and diachronically. However, I think it is Tennyson's Classical background and his intellectualising, even academic, approach to poetry which give him away. This is no South Slavic epic, no indigenous oral genre which happens to have a cultural configuration comparable to Homer: this is rarefied Victorian poetry. Yes, women may have performed a comparable role also in Victorian society, giving the poem a certain anthropological element of social critique: but it seems to me that a poet like Tennyson, interested in all things archaising, could not help but relate current affairs to the mythic past he knew and loved. Nor is the further Homericising move between 1832 and 1842 accidental: in

the meantime Tennyson had been working on or revising poems with Homeric subject matters, such as 'Oenone', 'The Lotus-Eaters' and 'Ulysses'. As Bush 1969:203 notes of the rewrite of 'Oenone', 'The first version contained some lines of epic breadth and dignity, but others were added in the second, such as those describing the majestic approach of Herè'. Tennyson had immersed himself in epic language and epic concepts (*kleos*, for example, is a prominent theme in 'Ulysses'), so it is hardly surprising that they should rear their heads even more in the second version of 'The Lady of Shalott'.

F.J. Furnivall in a letter to William Rossetti of 1868 quotes Tennyson as saying: 'I met the story first in some Italian *novelle*: but the web, mirror, island, etc., were my own.'[12] A cog in this article, or doth the poet protest too much? That these features were not of Italian origin is clear. That Tennyson appropriates them as his 'own', however, does not mean that he plucked them out of thin air. Again, we are dealing with intangible influences, a hidden thread of implicit reception. Whether or not Tennyson acknowledged the influence of the Classics on this poem, he was working in a tradition stored irrevocably in his armoury of sources through schooling, and woven inexorably into his poetical works.[13]

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[12] Rossetti 1903:341.

[13] Jenkyns in Conin/Chapman/Harrison 2002:229 'Most of the Victorian poets...were educated chiefly in the literature and civilization of Greece and Rome, and we should expect to find these things bred

Tennyson's medieval sources are ultimately of little more than tangential relevance to the poem. In both *La Donna di Scalotta* and *Le Morte d'Arthur*, no mysterious curse befalls the maiden, and no name is written on the boat. Rather, the damsel dies of lovesickness, and her plight is revealed only through a letter (Lancelot already knows her identity, having previously rejected her). Nor does anyone weave.[14] There is no loom, no web, no mirror.[15] In fact, most of what Tennyson focuses on is missing from these tales. And Tennyson moves even further from his supposed medieval sources in the second version of the poem. In the first version, of 1832, the Lady's adornment is emphasised, both in her tower (24-6):

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into their bones.' P.231 'The corpus of Latin and Greek literature formed the stock of a curiosity shop peddling all sorts of different goods.'

[14] Chambers 1903:228 tries to explain away the omission by noting that the web 'is represented in the Idyll of *Lancelot and Elaine* by the case which the lily maid embroiders for the knight's shield (ll. 7-12) – apparently developed from Malory's simple words (xviii, 14) "It is in my chamber, covered with a case"'. This hardly solves the problem: first, 'Lancelot and Elaine' (Ricks 1987.3:422-62) was composed after 'The Lady of Shalott' so can show only a later development of Tennyson's thoughts and, second, in this poem too the medieval sources are lacking. In fact, many of the Homeric themes I trace in this paper can be found also in 'Lancelot and Elaine': for example, Elaine uses an object (the shield) to 'read' Lancelot's story, adopting a role close to that of the poet, yet her perspective is limited and inaccurate – she 'guessed' the story (17), 'Conjecturing where and when' (21), 'so she lived in fantasy' (27). Tennyson's medievalism seems inextricably intertwined with Homeric resonance.

[15] Many scholars (e.g. Rick 1987.1:390) look to Spenser's *Faerie Queene* 3.2 for the mirror.

A pearlgarland winds her head:

She leaneth on a velvet bed,

Fully royally apparellèd,

    The Lady of Shalott.[16]

and as she goes to her death (126^7):

A cloudwhite crown of pearl she dight.

All raimented in snowy white

That loosely flew, (her zone in sight,

Clasped with one blinding diamond bright,)

Similarly in *La Donna di Scalotta* it is the maiden's adornment which is emphasised:

E fosse il suo corpo messo in questo letto vestito di suoi più nobili vestimenti,

e con bella corona in capo ricca di molto oro a di molte ricche pietre preziose,

e con ricca cintura e borsa.

She commanded that her body be laid on this bed, dressed in her most regal

clothes, and with a beautiful crown on her head rich with much gold and with

many rich precious stones, and with a rich girdle and purse.[17]

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[16] All Tennyson text is taken from Ricks 1987. For 'The Lady of Shalott' cf. vol.3:387-95.

[17] The Italian text is taken from Tosi 1825, novella 82. The English translation is my own.

And Elaine in Malory's tale too leaves orders that she be dressed in her finest. In the 1842 version of 'The Lady of Shalott', however, the maiden is no longer dripping with jewels but rather her anonymity is emphasised.

In the 1832 poem the Lady carries a parchment which explains how she met her end (165-71):

> There lay a parchment on her breast,
>
> That puzzled more than all the rest,
>
> > The wellfed wits at Camelot.
>
> *'The web was woven curiously*
>
> *The charm is broken utterly,*
>
> *Draw near and fear not – this is I,*
>
> > *The Lady of Shalott.'*

Just so does Malory's Elaine leave a letter, and the missive of *La Donna di Scalotta* reads:

> A tutti i cavalieri della tavola ritonda manda salute questa damigella di Scalot, siccome alla miglior gente del mondo. E se voi volete sapere perch'io a mio fine sono venuta, si è per lo migliore cavaliere del mondo e per lo più villano, cioè monsignore messer Lancialotto de Lac, che già nol seppi tanto pregare d'amore, ch'elli avesse di me mercede. E così lassa sono morta per bene amare, come voi potete vedere.

To all the knights of the round table this damsel of Shalott wishes health, as to the best men in the world. And if you want to know why I have come to my end, it is for the best knight in the world, and for the most villainous: Sir Lancelot de Lac, whom I knew did not care enough about love to take pity on me. And so I died for loving well, as you can see.

By 1842, however, the parchment has been expunged and only the inscription remains.

So when the ostensible sourcing are lacking, do we attribute the remainder of the content to Tennyson's own ingenuity? Given the atmosphere in which he was writing, saturated as it was with all things Classical, it seems to me that we have another stop to make first. The importance of the loom and the web cannot but bring to mind the Homeric women: Calypso and Circe weaving and singing; Penelope refusing to complete her weaving; Andromache weaving in her naiveté as Hector is killed; and, most relevant to Tennyson's poem, Helen weaving the Trojan war as it unfolds. I also hope to show that the second version of the poem embodies yet another step away from the ostensible medieval sources and towards archaic epic.

Weaving in Homeric epic is an essentially female activity. Hector delineates gender roles and sets up the activity of weaving as a foil for warfare when he commands Andromache:

ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,

ἱστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε

ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι· πόλεμος δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει

Go therefore back to our house, and take up your own work,

the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens

ply their work also; but the men must see to the fighting.[18]

Iliad 6.490-2[19]

Weaving symbolises domestic stability, and thus its interruption can come to mark the disruption of a household. At *Iliad* 6.456 Hector fears that after the fall of Troy Andromache will be taken away to work at another man's loom: that transferral of Andromache and, crucially, her weaving will symbolise the end of Hector's household. Similarly, at *Iliad* 22.448 when Andromache hears lamentation from the walls 'the shuttle dropped from her hand to the ground' (χαμαὶ δέ οἱ ἔκπεσε κερκίς). The dropping of the weaving shuttle signifies impending domestic upheaval: Andromache fears not only for her husband's life but also for her domestic stability. This delicate balance between weaving and its interruption emerges as a key theme also in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'. For as long as the

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[18] Similarly *Odyssey* 21.350-3 (Telemachus and Penelope).

[19] All *Iliad* and *Odyssey* text is taken from the Allen/Monroe OCT editions (1963), all *Iliad* translations are taken from Lattimore 1951, *Odyssey* translations are taken from Fagles 1996 (though line numbers are made to match up with the OCT text).

Lady concentrates on her weaving, safe in the domestic sphere, she keeps the curse at bay and preserves stability (42-5):

> She knows not what the curse may be,
>
> And so she weaveth steadily,
>
> And little other care hath she,
>
> > The Lady of Shalott.

She differs from her Homeric counterpart in that her isolation from family and society means that she does not really have a household to disrupt. Nevertheless, as soon as she leaves her weaving, the domestic system breaks down and the woman within it is doomed (109-17):

> She left the web, she left the loom,
>
> She made three paces through the room,
>
> She saw the water-lily bloom,
>
> She saw the helmet and the plume,
>
> > She looked down to Camelot.
>
> Out flew the web and floated wide;
>
> The mirror cracked from side to side;
>
> 'The curse is come upon me,' cried
>
> > The Lady of Shalott.

In 'The Lady of Shalott', the maiden's movement is emphasised. She not only ceases weaving, but steps away from the activity altogether. Nor does she stop there: her movement continues, until she has left the tower and taken a boat to Camelot. She breaks away from her female role, *and* breaks out of the female space.[20] In Homeric epic, too, the gender divide is physically manifest. In *Iliad* 6 Hector commands Andromache to 'Go therefore back to our house' (the female space), and in *Iliad* 22 Andromache learns of her husband's death while on the battlements, looking out from the female space onto the male. The weaving is done in the inner palace, where the women are secluded in their gendered domain.[21] However, just like the Lady of Shalott, Andromache at times breaks out of the female role and the female space. When she entreats Hector to stay with her and to turn away from the battle at *Iliad* 6.431-4, she advises him in military terms:

ἀλλ' ἄγε νῦν ἐλέαιρε καὶ αὐτοῦ μίμν' ἐπὶ πύργῳ,

μὴ παῖδ' ὀρφανικὸν θήῃς χήρην τε γυναῖκα:

λαὸν δὲ στῆσον παρ' ἐρινεόν, ἔνθα μάλιστα

ἀμβατός ἐστι πόλις καὶ ἐπίδρομον ἔπλετο τεῖχος.

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[20] Plasa 1992:249 (similarly Chadwick 1986:17) makes the point that 'despite the medievalism of the poem, the disposition of social space in 'The Lady of Shalott' accurately replicates...the gender conventions informing Victorian society'. This is certainly true, but it is not the whole story: such gendered divisions of social space can be tracked further back than medieval sources.

[21] Helen *Il.*3.125 ἐν μεγάρωι, Andromache *Il.*22.440 μυχῶι δόμου ὑψηλοῖο.

Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart,

that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow,

but draw your people up by the fig tree, there where the city

is openest to attack, and where the wall may be mounted.

She steps out of her domestic female role into the male martial sphere (in an explicit attempt to draw Hector from the latter to the former), displaying tactical knowledge not expected of her gender, and she does so exactly where the male and female spheres meet: the Scaean gates. As Arthur Katz notes, 'The Scaean gates separate two radically different worlds, and they are the dividing line between city and battlefield':[22] and this is where Hector and Andromache part.

This meeting (and parting) at the Scaean gates not only brings Andromache closer to the male sphere, but also brings Hector close to the female:

αὐτίκ' ἀπὸ κρατὸς κόρυθ' εἵλετο φαίδιμος Ἕκτωρ,

καὶ τὴν μὲν κατέθηκεν ἐπὶ χθονὶ παμφανόωσαν:

and at once glorious Hektor lifted from his head the helmet

and laid it in all its shining upon the ground.

Iliad 6.472-3

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[22] Arthur Katz in Foley 1981:20.

In this moment of poignant tenderness, Hector lays aside his plumed helmet so as not to frighten his son. Arthur Katz 1981:31 notes: 'Since one of [Hector's] principal epithets is *korythaiolos* ("of the shining helmet"), and since it is used of him frequently in VI, the act takes on symbolic importance and marks the moment of Hector's furthest distance from the world of the battlefield'. This symbolic importance of an object is, in Homeric epic, more often a female motif than a male. When women become the focus of Homer's attention the narrative strategy changes to accommodate their limited agency: rather than relating glorious deeds, when the poet turns to the women he offers more static moments of reflection on memory, objects and loss.[23] At such points the story often unfolds through series of objects: for example Andromache with the shuttle and headdress at *Iliad* 22.448-72, or Penelope with the key, bow, doorsill and chests at *Odyssey* 21.5-56. It is therefore significant that Hector's helmet takes on its symbolic resonance precisely when the hero is furthest from the male sphere and closest to the female.

In 'The Lady of Shalott', Lancelot too blurs the gender boundaries (105-8):

From the bank and from the river

He flashed into the crystal mirror,

'Tirra lirra,' by the river

    Sang Sir Lancelot.

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[23] On memory see below.

Here the hero transgresses boundaries in terms not of social but of poetic space. Plasa 1992:254 makes the point that, before this stanza and for the most part afterwards, 'the refrains of the poem are consistently organized in terms of strict gender distinctions'; in these lines, however, the pattern is overturned, as 'it is a reference to Lancelot that appears in the space traditionally allocated to the "feminine"'. Moreover, here he is said to be singing, though from Part I of the poem it has been the *Lady's* song which 'echoes cheerly'. He adopts a female speech act, breaking into the Lady's realm and shattering it: 'Her privacy, constituted by and dependent upon the discourse of masculine, public voices, is instantly dissolved by the intervention of that discourse, by Lancelot's 'Tirra lirra''.[24] It is perhaps no coincidence that 'Lancelot *mused* a little space' (168 my emphasis): as external observer, as the inspiration for the Lady's own tale, he takes on the mantle of Homer's female Muse.[25] But most Homeric are the helmet and the plume (112-13):

> She saw the helmet and the plume,
>
> She looked down to Camelot.

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[24] Chadwick 1986:24.

[25] Gray 2009:54 notes the resonance of 'mused', but writes of Lancelot (specifically in 'Lancelot and Elaine'): 'he would not claim that his speech is inspired' – indeed, he is not the inspired but the inspiration. It is the Lady who is the poet.

As Hector's plumed helmet was used symbolically to mark his proximity to the female sphere, so here Lancelot's acts as the catalyst for the Lady's transgression, the token which draws her eye to the prohibited male space. In both cases, the helmet operates as a liminal object in gendered space.

The symbolic importance of objects is common to both Homeric epic and 'The Lady of Shalott' also in terms of the objects' destruction. In Tennyson's poem, the curse is represented by the breaking of an object: 'The mirror cracked from side to side'. The symbolism is noted by Plasa 1992:258: 'her action not only results in cracking the mirror literally, but also embodies an overturning of that for which the mirror is the figure – the ideological status quo.' We have already seen how Andromache's dropping of the shuttle performs just such a symbolic role. Further, at *Iliad* 22.510-14 Andromache promises the destruction of objects:

> ἀτάρ τοι εἵματ' ἐνὶ μεγάροισι κέονται
>
> λεπτά τε καὶ χαρίεντα τετυγμένα χερσὶ γυναικῶν.
>
> ἀλλ' ἤτοι τάδε πάντα καταφλέξω πυρὶ κηλέῳ
>
> οὐδὲν σοί γ' ὄφελος, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἐγκείσεαι αὐτοῖς,
>
> ἀλλὰ πρὸς Τρώων καὶ Τρωϊάδων κλέος εἶναι.

> though in your house there is clothing laid up
>
> that is fine-textured and pleasant, wrought by the hands of women.
>
> But all of these I will burn up in the fire's blazing,

no use to you, since you will never be laid away in them;

but in your honor, from the men of Troy and the Trojan women.

Andromache's vow to destroy her husband's clothes stands in stark contrast with the domestic stability expressed by her weaving in blissful ignorance, less than one hundred lines earlier. She uses objects, the only thing over which she, as a woman confined to the domestic sphere, has control, to express herself and to contribute in her own way to the action. Just so does the Lady of Shalott use an object to make herself known, to perform an active role in her own story (123-6):

Down she came and found a boat

Beneath a willow left afloat,

And round about the prow she wrote

The Lady of Shalott.

It is the boat which carries her and which bears her name. In this the 1842 version of the poem, the Lady 'found a boat': in the 1832 poem, however, lines 123-4 read:

Outside the isle a shallow boat

Beneath a willow lay afloat.

What is left passive in the former version is made an active pursuit in the latter, emphasising the Lady's agency through her control over objects, on the Homeric model.

Thus far I have considered Tennyson's use of Homeric epic in 'The Lady of Shalott' mainly in terms of the reception of Andromache. This model is particularly useful for understanding the gender relations in the poem, particularly the spatial mapping of gendered domains and the expressing of agency through gendered objects. However, there are still some aspects of the poem which need explaining: the importance of what the Lady weaves, for example. Here I naturally turn to another of Homer's weaving women: Helen. Like Andromache, Helen in *Iliad* 3 is found in the inner palace, weaving patterns into double folded purple garments. But unlike Andromache, she is not weaving flowers, motifs appropriate to the domestic sphere and indicative of naïveté:[26] rather, she weaves the Trojan war.

τὴν δ' εὖρ' ἐν μεγάρῳ: ἣ δὲ μέγαν ἱστὸν ὕφαινε

δίπλακα μαρμαρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους

Τρώων θ' ἱπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,

οὕς ἕθεν εἵνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρηος παλαμάων.

She came on Helen in the chamber; she was weaving a great web,

a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles

of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians,

struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god.

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[26] The poet explicitly comments on this naïveté when he calls her νηπίη (Graziosi/Haubold 2010:30 translate 'poor innocent') at *Il*.22.445.

Helen weaves a μέγαν ἱστόν, the Lady a 'magic web': both are emphasised by their adjectives as they have a wider significance within their respective poems. Helen weaves the events unfolding in the male martial sphere, outside her own realm: like Andromache in her speech at the liminal Scaean gates, she transgresses gender boundaries. She weaves the struggles 'of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armored Achaians' (*Iliad* 3.127 Τρώων θ' ἱπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων), but crucially she does this *before* Iris comes to her and takes her to see the amazing deeds 'of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armored Achaians' (*Iliad* 3.131 Τρώων θ' ἱπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων). The order of events in *Iliad* 3 suggests, and the repetition emphasises, that when Helen weaves 'reality' she does not yet see it.[27] This bears a striking resemblance to the Lady of Shalott's predicament (46-8):

> And moving through a mirror clear
>
> That hangs before her all the year,
>
> Shadows of the world appear.

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[27] The line is made up of formulaic elements, but it is not very common as it appears elsewhere only at *Il.*3.251 and 8.71.

The Lady sees events not through her window, but through a mirror: that tool of the trade which allowed the weaver to see her work in progress,[28] but which reflects the outside world back to her and distorts her view of reality. She 'cannot escape the limitations of her perspective'.[29] The Lady weaves events occurring outside her window, yet her depiction of those events is always one step removed from actuality. Given the epic parallel, it could quite conceivably be a Homeric move that in the second version of 'The Lady of Shalott' the mirror is further emphasised by being shifted from mid-way through its stanza to the beginning of it.

The similarities between Helen and the Lady are manifest even at the poetological level, as both Homeric and Tennysonian scholarship are rife with readings of these respective female characters as foils for the poet. The connection between textile production and poetic creation is embedded already in the Greek ῥαψοδος, rhapsode, derived from ῥάπτειν, 'to sew': the poet stitches words together. And poetological readings go back to the ancient scholia, with one scholiast commenting on Helen's weaving: 'the poet has crafted a worthy model for his own poetic enterprise'.[30] So when Houghton and Stange in 1959 made the observation

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[28] See e.g. Ricks 1987:1.390n46.

[29] Martin 1973:255.

[30] ἀξιόχρεων ἀρχέτυπον ἀνέπλασεν ὁ ποιητὴς τῆς ἰδίας ποιήσεως, ΣΙl.(Erbse)3.126-7. For modern scholarship on the poetic potential of Homeric weaving see e.g. Clader 1976, Snyder 1981, Austin 1994, Roisman 2006, Mueller 2010.

that 'The Lady of Shalott' 'suggests that the artist must remain in aloof detachment, observing life only in the mirror of the imagination, not mixing in it directly', the parallel they were drawing between the weaver and the poet had its roots already in the archaic Greek tradition.[31]

In adopting a role akin to that of the poet, both Helen and the Lady of Shalott ostensibly assume a degree of agency foreign to their gender. By fulfilling their prescribed gender roles, somehow they manage to transcend them. But to a certain extent they also reaffirm them, by resigning themselves to the isolation and detachment both recommended for women within their respective contexts, and common to the poetic ideal. As Roisman 2006:11 comments of Helen: 'Her weaving may be seen as an effort to break through these barriers to being and belonging, but, like poetry, it is a one-way form of communication in which the maker stands apart from the persons addressed.' Just so is the Lady of Shalott necessarily separated from that which she weaves, the curse being 'simply the inescapable condition of the poet's art'.[32] In fact, Tennyson in his poem goes one step further, making the Lady not only isolated but completely divorced from the world around her (52-9):

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[31] Houghton/Stange 1959:16. Such a poetological reading was propagated by e.g. Buckley 1960:49, Culler 1977:46, Shaw 1976:65, Joseph 1992, Wright 2003. E.g. Gray 2009 interprets the Lady's *leaving* of the loom as her becoming an artist: however, on the basis of the Homeric model where weaving itself, not its end, symbolises poetry, this seems to me less convincing.

[32] Culler 1977:46.

And there the surly village-churls,

And the red cloaks of market girls,

    Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,

An abbot on an ambling pad,

Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,

Or long-haired page in crimson clad,

    Goes by to towered Camelot;

Unlike these passers-by, the Lady 'remains outside the cycles of economic and sexual exchange'.[33] The Lady's dissonance with the outside world is emphasised even further in the second version of the poem, where Tennyson adds (24-7):

But who hath seen her wave her hand?

Or at the casement seen her stand?

Or is she known in all the land,

    The Lady of Shalott?

Like Helen in the *teichoscopia* of *Iliad* 3, the Lady observes those below her: unlike Helen, however, her reputation does not precede her.

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[33] Chadwick 1986:17.

In her weaving, Helen depicts the conflicts suffered 'on account of her' (*Iliad* 3.128 οὕς ἕθεν εἵνεκ' ἔπασχον). Her creation therefore stands as a memorial not only to the Trojans and Achaeans who fought in the war, but also to Helen herself, as its catalyst. Similarly, in the *Odyssey* she gives Telemachus a robe she has woven which she explicitly hopes will act as a 'monument to the hands of Helen' (*Odyssey* 15.126 μνῆμ' Ἑλένης χειρῶν). As Mueller 2010:1 points out, 'Helen's is the only garment in either epic to have its commemorative function expressly articulated'.[34] This does not mean that it is the only garment to have a link with memory and memorialisation – we need only think of Penelope drawing out her weaving so as to keep her husband's memory alive, or Arete recognising Odysseus' clothes because she had woven them herself – but it is relevant that only Helen makes the connection explicit. This is another indication of her elevated status in the poem, and her proximity to the poet: she can convey upon herself the *kleos* which epic seeks to perpetuate. Of course, her self-conveyed *kleos* has its limits: it is linked with an object, something which will not survive indefinitely. As Grethlein 2008:35 notes, 'the fragility and ambiguity of material relics and the eternity of the poetic tradition highlight each other in their discrepancy': a woven memorial does not stand the test of time, so for it to be immortalised it must be told about in epic.

The Lady of Shalott, too, pursues her own *kleos* (125-6):

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[34] On the commemorative function of objects in Homeric epic see e.g. Grethlein 2008, Crielaard 2003, Bassi 2005, Hartmann 2010.

And round about the prow she wrote

The Lady of Shalott.

Here we can see another step towards archaic epic between 1832 and 1842: whereas in the first version the Lady wrote her name on the stern, in the second she writes it on the prow. The self-memorialising element is brought to the fore (quite literally), in line with Helen and her explicit pursuit of her own *kleos*. In writing her name, to be read by others, the Lady effectively creates an epigram (albeit a rudimentary one): something which Svenbro 1993:164 describes as 'a machine for producing *kleos*'. Inscribed epigrams 'constitute a kind of literary "site of memory"':[35] the Lady turns the boat into her own *lieu de mémoire*. However, as with Helen's woven memorial, the Lady's epigrammatic monument can neither stand the test of time nor operate independently. It is, once again, a material relic, and as such cannot exist indefinitely. Further, for the written name to fulfil its memorialising function it must be seen and read. Svenbro 1993:44 writes of the Greek epigrammatic tradition: 'in a culture where *kléos* has a fundamental part to play, what is written remains incomplete until such time as it is provided with a voice'.

But Lancelot mused a little space;

He said, 'She has a lovely face;

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[35] Baumbach/Petrovic/Petrovic 2010:10. On *lieu de mémoire* see Nora.

God in his mercy lend her grace,

        The Lady of Shalott.'

In this final stanza of the poem (168-71), Lancelot literally provides the written name with a voice: a scene added in the second version of the poem, as a further archaising move. But as with Helen's self-memorialisation, the final voice – that which will cement the memory for posterity – is that of the poet.

I hope to have shown that 'The Lady of Shalott' is by no means the least Homeric of Tennyson's poems, and that where the medieval sources are lacking, Homeric models (via an already medievalised Homer) can step comfortably into the breach. Whereas both la Donna di Scalotta and Elaine of Astolat are rejected by Lancelot for Guinevere, die from lovesickness and write about it, the Lady of Shalott is divided from the knight by circumstance, dies more from her own curiosity than anything else, and leaves her story a mystery. She is no weak dejected maiden, and has more in common with proactive Homeric women who push the boundaries of their gender roles and seek agency in materiality. Whereas Elaine has her father and brother write her final letter for her, the Lady of Shalott is alone and independent: she is like Helen who has left her family behind in Sparta (*Iliad* 3.139-40), or Andromache who can say to Hector 'you are father to me, and my honoured mother, / you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband' (*Iliad* 6.429-30) – because she has no family structure remaining.

Allusions to archaic Greek epic, implicit and veiled in medievalism as they may be, are woven into the very fabric of the poem. The ways in which the maiden explores gender boundaries by transgressing them, expresses herself through objects, engages in self-memorialisation and epitomises poetic activity – all are ideas we can trace back to Homer. This is not to deny the innovative nature of the poem nor the complexity of the character – indeed, I hope to have shown that Tennyson did not content himself with copying a Homeric woman and transposing her to an Arthurian setting, but rather combined facets of multiple characters. I have shown the parallels with Helen and Andromache, and to a lesser extent Penelope, but we might also add Calypso (*Odyssey* 5) and Circe (*Odyssey* 10): both sing while they weave, a striking combination of poetic creation with textile production which they share with the Lady of Shalott and which suggests proximity to the poet. Tennyson created a complex amalgam, a multi-faceted character through which he could reflect on issues of poetics, aesthetics, memory and vision. He combined medieval sources with Homeric epic, utilising those elements which were both timeless *and* allowed him to comment on his own art and times. I have offered a comparative reading of the motif of weaving, bringing out its timeless relevance to poetry and creation, but because of the multi-valence of the poem this can jog along quite happily alongside readings immersed in contemporary history such as that of

Armstrong 1993:82, which sees behind the motif a backdrop of starving handloom weavers being displaced by new industrial processes.[36]

I hope to have shown that Homeric reception *can* be traced in the Lady of Shalott, despite its opacity of reference, its lack of explicit quotation or citation. This raises a methodological and conceptual issue important for reception studies. How do we detect reception, when the receiver does not flag it up as such? First and foremost we must distinguish, as I endeavoured to do at the beginning of this paper, between reception and cultural similarity. It is not, I would argue, enough to go on a similarities scavenger hunt wherever the wind should take us. We need to be sure that the chain of transmission could exist: that a poet (or author, or artist – the list, of course, goes on) could and did know of the material he is 'accused' of receiving. This is not to deny that the ancient world influenced future society in a myriad of ways, acknowledged or otherwise – but what I would term 'unconscious reception' (an influence that cannot be traced to any sort of specific education or exposure) is not something that interests me here. I am interested in the conscious use of the classical world, a potentiality which must be generated by the user's own knowledge. This does not mean that the poet (or author, or artist) must stick to the script. William Morris argued that if one worked from a source text, there must come a point when

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[36] Such a context certainly made its way into Victorian poetry: see e.g. John Grimshaw's 'The Hand Loom Weavers' Lament'.

the authority was laid aside: 'In this way it would be transfigured, filtered through the consciousness of the recipient and thus remade'.[37] It also does not mean that the poet (etc.) must lead us by the hand through every resonance and echo. Classical reception entails engagement with the ancient world – but it doesn't need a footnote.

It seems to me that it is this subtlety of reference, this perpetual chain of resonance stretching back from Victorian England through medieval legend to the archaic Greek world, that made 'The Lady of Shalott' so appealing to its immediate audiences. The Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood adopted Lord Alfred Tennyson as one of their 'Immortals' already in the late 1840s, drawing up a list at one of their early gatherings.[38] He was given one star, on a level with such notables as Raphael, Boccaccio, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – but he was pipped to the post by none other than Homer himself, awarded two stars (only Christ, Shakespeare and the 'Author of Job' received more). Given such a clear-cut hierarchy, we might expect that the Pre-Raphaelites would gravitate towards the more Homeric of Tennyson's poems – and gravitate, they did. When the three founding members of the brotherhood contributed woodcuts to illustrate Edward Moxon's edition of Tennyson's poetry in 1857, both William Holman Hunt *and* Dante Gabriel Rossetti chose to depict 'The Lady of Shalott'.

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[37] Waithe 2006:105.

[38] Holman Hunt 1905.1:158-60.

Hunt's illustration (Fig.1) focuses on that most Homeric element of the poem: the Lady's weaving. However, he doesn't exactly stick to the story: as Stein 1981:292 comments, 'Here it is Hunt who is allegorizing on his own hook'. The maiden is tangled in her threads, which rise up to meet her wild-flowing hair: she is inextricably linked with her own object. And as the threads wind around her they emphasise the curves of her body, suggesting a sexuality that is destined never to be fulfilled. Tennyson himself was not enamoured of this illustration: he criticised Hunt for depicting a scene which had not been part of his poem.[39] Hunt explained that he wanted to sum up the entire poem in one illustration: and this he certainly did. Hunt walks with the Lady the line between agency and limitation: her determined expression and affiliation with her agent object suggest empowerment, yet the crowded interior setting, the encircling loom and the insidious threads all indicate confinement. 'The artist has become a prisoner of what she formerly controlled'.[40] The Lady takes control of events through her decision to leave the loom, just like Andromache when she burns Hector's clothes or Helen when she weaves the Trojan war: however, Hector is killed, the Trojan war continues regardless – and the Lady sails to her death. Women use objects to contribute in their own way to the action, to

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[39] Layard 1894:41 reports conversations between Tennyson and Hunt. Tennyson complained that he had not specified the details Hunt chose to depict; Hunt replied that he had not precluded them either.

[40] Stein 1981:295.

stand symbolism in lieu of narrative progression: but ultimately the story will plough inexorably on, and they are powerless to stop it. The complexity of the subject and the difficulty of summing it up in one composition so intrigued Hunt that he returned to it in 1905, painting a full-scale version based on this original illustration.

Rossetti chose to depict the final scene of 'The Lady of Shalott' (Fig. 2). Lancelot leans over the Lady as she lies in her boat. The focus is firmly on Lancelot, shifting Tennyson's poem toward a male viewpoint.[41] Rossetti plays with gender, just as I have shown Tennyson and Homer to have done. In this illustration, memorialisation plays a key role. The Lady's face is shadowed by the prow of her boat: the prow which we know to bear her name. She is subordinated to the object which memorialises her. The prow, in turn, is spatially subordinated to Lancelot: the one who will give voice to the name, thus bestowing *kleos* upon the Lady and perpetuating her memory, at least for as long as he himself lives. This too constitutes a gender shift, as preserving the memory of those who have died is in Homer a primarily female role:

Ἕκτορος ἥδε γυνή, ὃς ἀριστεύεσκε μάχεσθαι

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[41] Kooistra in Conin/Chapmen/Harrison 2002:404 'By focusing on Sir Lancelot and his response the artist provides an accessible subject position for the reader of the poem, removed from the action and yet subtly drawn into its charm.'

Τρώων ἱπποδάμων, ὅτε Ἴλιον ἀμφεμάχοντο.

This is the wife of Hektor, he who was ever the bravest fighter

of the Trojans, breakers of horses, in the days when they fought about Ilion.

Iliad 6.460-1

Hector envisages that after his death Andromache will be seen, spoken of, and remembered. However, she is not to be remembered on her own merit but as the wife of Hector, and as such she will act as a vessel for the preservation of his memory. In Rossetti's illustration, it is Lancelot who performs this role. We might go further and say that he is no longer a character in the story, perpetuating memory within the narrative; rather he stands in for the poet or artist himself, immortalising that memory through a medium he makes his own.

Following in the tradition of Hunt and Rossetti, John William Waterhouse was also drawn to 'The Lady of Shalott'. Indeed, out of his nine Tennysonian paintings, three depict this poem. It was his choice of subject matter that is said to have initiated Waterhouse into the Pre-Raphaelite movement: 'The modern construction of Waterhouse as a 'third-generation' Pre-Raphaelite begins, appropriately, with 'The Lady of Shalott' because Tennyson appeared on the 'List of Immortals''.[42] When Waterhouse began the first painting in 1887, Tennyson had been Poet Laureate for 37 years, and 'The Lady of Shalott' had become his most painted

[42] Trippi 2002:88.

poem. It remained fashionable because it continued to be simultaneously timeless and timely: shrouded in myth, archaism and medievalism yet relevant to Victorian life and Pre-Raphaelite ideals.

Waterhouse in particular was drawn to this poem because of his preoccupation with vision: something which comes out clearly in all three paintings. In the 1888 version (Fig. 3), the Lady is about to set out in her boat, sitting atop her tapestry. In 'centring the composition on the Lady's trance-like expression',[43] Waterhouse reflects on the importance in the poem of seeing and being seen.[44] That the Lady sees without being seen epitomises her seclusion ('But who hath seen her wave her hand?'); that she decides to see the real world seals her fate ('She looked down to Camelot'); and that Lancelot should see her is key to the perpetuation of her memory. Similarly, for Andromache to act as a vessel for the preservation of Hector's memory she must be seen, her grief witnessed:

καί ποτέ τις εἴπῃσιν ἰδὼν κατὰ δάκρυ χέουσαν...

and some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you...

Iliad 6.459

Waterhouse had three lines printed in the exhibition catalogue:

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[43] Trippi 2002:87.

[44] On which see e.g. Shannon 1981.

And down the river's dim expanse,

Like some bold seër in a trance, ...

The broad stream bore her far away.

As explicit source for his painting, he chose lines which appeared only in the second version of the poem. Tennyson had gradually focused in on the importance of vision. Perhaps he recognised this as a technique, established already in Homer, for remembering and being remembered. The ancient Greek rhapsodes would use spatial and visual markers to help them keep their recitation consistent and coherent, and to help an audience follow and engage with the narrative by mapping events visually.[45] Though the former element is rendered redundant by Tennyson's use of the written word as opposed to oral performance,[46] the second is surely relevant to any lengthy narrative poem which seeks to be understood and recalled. We have already seen how the Lady of Shalott stands in for the poet: but as spectator of events unfolding around her, she also stands in for the reader.

In the second of his paintings (Fig. 4), completed in 1894, Waterhouse depicted the same moment as Hunt had chosen in 1857. In fact, the composition has much in common with this earlier work (though Hunt's full-scale version was not to

[45] See Clay 2011.

[46] Interestingly, the poem has since been freed from the shackles of writing: Celtic musician Loreena McKennitt in her 1991 album 'The Visit' set 'The Lady of Shalott' to music, casting it into an oral genre once more.

be completed for another decade). The Lady is entangled in her threads, and against a backdrop of geometric and curvilinear forms 'the Lady's body rebels as the only significant diagonal'.[47] The major difference from Hunt's illustration, however, is the Lady's gaze. Whereas in the Moxon engraving she faced to the side, into the composition, in Waterhouse's painting she looks directly at the viewer. Her gaze is intense and penetrating, casting us in multiple roles simultaneously: we see her pain and longing, and so we empathise with her; yet put in her direct line of sight we are part of the outside world she can never know.[48]

In 1912 Waterhouse painted 'Penelope and the Suitors' (Fig.6). Though ostensibly a shift in subject matter, the resemblance this work bears to the earlier two discussed suggests that Waterhouse recognised the affinity between the two women. As Trippi 2002:214 notes, 'The bright weather contrasts with her confinement, which is reinforced by the cage-like lantern hanging above. Behind Penelope's head is a shrine, like those to which the Lady of Shalott and Mariana pray for rescue, and scattering yarns suggest that she, too, is coming undone.' Though rather more controlled than Waterhouse's 1894 work, the weaving scene suggests another precarious domestic situation. Penelope's confinement is emphasised by her physical surroundings, yet it is not a result of them. Whereas the Lady is imprisoned in her

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[47] Trippi 2002:129.

[48] If we compare the final painting with a preparatory oil sketch, we can see that Waterhouse intensified the gaze.

tower, Penelope's imprisonment is depicted here in terms of vision: 'the heroine is utterly trapped at the centre of a web of converging gazes'.[49] As with Waterhouse's 'Lady' paintings, vision is key: the scene is 'crowded with figures watching Penelope; even the two eyes painted on a suitor's lyre seem to be looking'.[50] In fact, this focus on the onlookers is an artificial construction. As I mentioned earlier, weaving in Homer is done in the inner palace, where the women are secluded: here Waterhouse takes the radical step of opening up the gendered domain.

To return to the Lady of Shalott, Waterhouse's first two paintings of the subject feature the tapestry itself, with its depiction of events unfolding outside the tower. In fact, two of the roundels are repeated from one painting to the next. This is a motif which continues also into his 1916 painting 'I am half sick of shadows, said the Lady of Shalott' (Fig. 5). The artist decided to focus on the product of the Lady's art, following it through all stages of the narrative. We might suppose that he recognised it as this comparative study has shown it to be: an embodiment of domestic stability and gender roles on the one hand, whilst on the other a potentially agent object connoting boundary transgression, memorialisation and proximity to the poet. Wright 2003:289 comments on the tapestry in the first of Waterhouse's paintings: 'When the artist dies her art remains'. Within the poem, this indeed is true. The tapestry outlives the woman who wove it, in the same way that the robe

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[49] Trippi 2002:215.

[50] Trippi 2002:214.

given to Telemachus will be a 'monument to the hands of Helen' (*Odyssey* 15.126). However, even material relics can provide only short-term, imperfect, synchronic memory. This reflection, therefore, has even greater weight in terms of those poetological readings which we can trace from the Iliadic scholia right through to modern Homeric and Tennysonian scholarship. The art of the poet will not only outlive him, but will be the final and definitive stage in the memorialisation of its characters.

The Moxon Tennyson, 1857: illustrations for 'The Lady of Shalott' (images provided by George P.

Landow, http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/whh/6.html and

http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/dgr/8.html).

Fig. 1 (above): William Holman Hunt; Fig. 2 (below): Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Paintings of the Lady of Shalott by J.W. Waterhouse (images taken from Wikipedia).

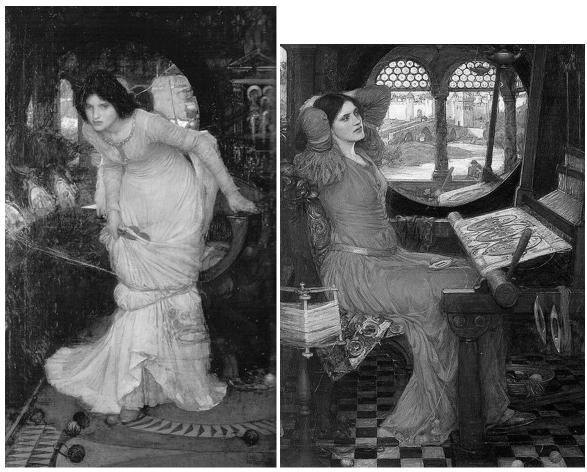Fig. 3 (above): 1888; Fig. 4 (below left): 1894; Fig. 5 (below right): 1916.

Fig.6 'Penelope and the Suitors' by J.W. Waterhouse, 1912 (image taken from Wikipedia)

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