

Modernizing Medieval Tropes of Femininity: Post-Darwinian Theology, Victorian Feminism and George Frederic Watts' Madonnas, Magdalenes, and Eves

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Despite a recent revival of interest in Victorian art, particularly in the Pre-Raphaelites and Frederick Leighton, scholarship on the painter and sculptor George Frederic Watts (1817-1904) has been limited largely to biographies or catalog entries, and analysis of the ideological implications of his art remains sparse.¹ This essay addresses his efforts to modernize medieval representations of “femininity” within a post-Darwinian framework, focusing on his reconceptualizations of three standard medieval tropes: the Madonna (mother), the Magdalene (prostitute), and Eve (who is both the mother of humanity *and* a *femme fatale*). Following Terry Eagleton, who identifies literary texts as ideological sites of cultural construction where fragmented or conflicting economic or social experiences are integrated into an ordered, consistent whole, and Louis Althusser, who defines ideology as the “imaginary relationship of an individual to their (sic) real conditions of existence” (162), I treat Watts’ modernized representations of Madonnas, Magdalenes, and Eves as *visual* texts that use a traditional medieval mythic theological language to embody an ideological vision of a natural and inviolable order. I argue that, while their use of traditional medieval allegorical language attempts to conceal an ideological gap between an ideal division of class and gender roles and the realities of the modern capitalist market place, their conservative demeanor has deflected critical attention from more complex and radical readings that emerge when these images are repositioned within the frameworks of his post-Darwinian theology and feminist sympathies.

Like many intellectuals in his era, Watts broke with the religion of his childhood. Although he was raised as an evangelical, in response to influences such as Robert Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) and Charles Darwin’s *On The Origin of Species* (1859), he embarked upon a lifelong quest to create an art that could reconcile his unabated spiritual longings with the tenets of modern science. Although he was convinced that traditional theology was outmoded, he mourned the loss of religious moral sanction that had provided an ethical basis for social interaction and cultural expression.² For nearly forty years, from the late sixties until his death in 1904, he worked on a series of paintings called “The House of Life,” which sought to recast Michelangelo’s Catholic view of the moral history of humanity on the Sistine Ceiling in scientifically-compatible, post-Darwinian terms. The series, which presented human history as a divinely-ordained progression leading toward spiritual perfection through the evolutionary development of

conscience,³ was intended to provide the masses with images of positive moral ideals that would encourage social cohesion and elevate the nation. Watts' representations of the Madonna, the Magdalene, and Eve must be understood as part of this broader program of theological and cultural renegotiation.

Interpreters of Watts' art, who have not taken his theological agenda into account, have interpreted the iconography of his modernized Madonnas, Magdalenes, and Eves through the lens of binary stereotypes of gender roles that define femininity in terms of rigid opposition to masculinity, thus misunderstanding them. In this familiar binary scheme, the public realm of government, culture, and commerce is identified as a masculine space, thereby naturalizing male control over political and economic activities, while the private realm of the family is linked to femininity. Woman is invested with the primary responsibility for upholding morality through her domestic role as wife and mother (the ideal of the "angel in the house"), and her elevation and purity renders her unsuited for participation in a public sphere dominated by capitalist, self-oriented aggression (see Cominos and Barker-Benfield . Wilfred Blunt, Bram Dijkstra, and Joseph Kestner read Watts' images of women as reflections of this restrictive stereotype of femininity, describing them as static and passive images that confirm conventional patriarchal presumptions about the essentialist, unchanging nature of woman. Moreover, they contend that they were motivated primarily by his personal fear of female power (Blunt 57, 154; Dijkstra 17-18; Kestner 13 .⁴ However, as Jeffrey Weeks and Mary Poovey have demonstrated, Victorian gender ideology was neither as monolithic nor as absolute as it has sometimes been portrayed. Rather, it was a specifically middle-class fabrication that was always contested and continuously under construction (Weeks 23 and Poovey 3 . This Foucauldian critical model, which looks at texts (visual and otherwise as arguments within a discourse about cultural renegotiation, permits acknowledgment of the complexities and contradictions of Watts' modernized Madonnas, Magdalenes, and Eves, and encourages ideological (as opposed to merely biographical analysis of their iconography.

The assertion that Watts' Madonnas, Magdalenes, and Eves were motivated primarily by his personal fear of female power is a misleading (and largely undocumented speculative description of his psychological relationships to the women in his life that ignores the fact that, unlike most Victorian patriarchs, Watts was a feminist. His closest friendships were with powerfully intellectual women who challenged the conventional stereotypes of passive, domesticated femininity,⁵ and he openly supported the feminist causes of his era: equal education for women, the anti-corset movement, women's participation in sports and other physical activities,

the revival of home embroidery as a source of income for lower-class women, and the integration of women into the “masculine” realm of the public arena.⁶ These sympathies are vividly conveyed in his portrait of John Stuart Mill (1873), which portrays the Liberal feminist author of *The Subjection of Women* (1869) as a visionary Victorian sage. Indeed, Watts’ sympathies for feminist causes sometimes strained his otherwise close relationships with more conservative fellow artists, such as Frederick Leighton, his long-time friend, neighbor, and the President of the Royal Academy, or the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones. Tensions between Watts and these two colleagues came to a head over this issue in 1889, when Leighton asked him to sign an artists’ petition against the extension of suffrage to women, which was published in *The Nineteenth Century* magazine, and he refused (Watts II 145-146). The iconography of Watts’ Madonnas, Magdalenes, and Eves reveals unanticipated ideological links between his post-Darwinian theology and his unorthodox feminism. It is time to examine it more closely.

Modernizing the Madonna: Envisioning a Post-Darwinian Altruistic Mother

Throughout his career, Watts painted multiple variations on the theme of a modernized, post-Darwinian Madonna. These images, a sampling of which will be considered here, have generally been interpreted as simplistic reflections of traditional Victorian stereotypes of femininity. *Charity*, a painting that Watts reworked continuously over several decades from 1865-1895, depicts a powerful, full-bodied maternal figure in a dark mantle and flowing robes who embraces her children with gentle strength before a backdrop of spiraling floral forms. The motif of the maternal figure who embraces her children protectively appears again in a later painting called *The Spirit of Christianity*, (1872-79), which differs from *Charity* primarily in that the more disembodied figure of Christianity floats abstractly in an ethereal realm, while the corporeal figure of Charity is grounded firmly on the earth. Dijkstra describes them as representations of “the married woman’s role in life, which was deemed especially appropriate because women and children formed, as it were, an inevitable continuity.” Positioning them in the ideological context of Michelet’s assertions that “the truly virtuous wife was, after all, as innocent as a child,” and that “from the cradle, woman is mother, and longs for maternity” (Michelet 82), he reads them as confirmations of the notion that woman’s fondest desire was to be surrounded by children, and achieving this desire was “a single indication of her Madonna-like purity and docility,” concluding that they encouraged women to be gentle and patient and functioned to keep them “in line at a time when the excesses

of the earlier generation of isolators had already driven many women to organize in opposition to the joys of glorious subordination” (18 . However, when they are repositioned within the framework of his scientific theology, their signification is dramatically altered.

Watts’ favorite Biblical scripture was Corinthians 1:13, Saint Paul’s proclamation that the essence of Christianity lay in faith, hope, and especially love (or charity rather than in ritual, doctrine, or dogma (Barrington 153 . The passage provided the foundation for a Victorian religion of altruistic love that was a pervasive force in Victorian literature. Auguste Comte’s *System of Positive Polity* (1851-54, trans. 1875-77) was a pivotal text in this genre. Comte established a Religion of Humanity in which women were urged to renunciate wealth and exempted from work away from home, making them “Priestesses of Humanity in the family circle...” (60-61 . He created rituals for a new rational religion in which the major cult object was a personification of Humanity as a Great Goddess with a child on her lap, an image of maternal affection that symbolized the idea that the system of human relationships should be held together by Love and inspire “common social affections” and “aspirations toward willing cooperation” (IV 30 .⁷ Altruistic love was also celebrated in popular treatises like John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) and Henry Drummond’s *The Greatest Thing in the World* (1890) . Ruskin declared that charity (selfless work for the common good) was the greatest of virtues, and Drummond identified conscience as the inward aid of God and described morality as the end point of a natural progression that would ultimately carry humanity toward a divine state of perfection. When Watts’ modernized Madonnas are reinserted within this discourse on natural theology, their function as emblems for a post-Darwinian vision of woman as the dynamic agent of Humanity’s evolutionary spiritual transformation is recovered.

The maternal protagonist in Watts’ *Charity* is shown as a nurturing maternal mountain of tenderness who protects her children unselfishly, without distinction according to their faith or creed, guiding them gently toward maturity, and awaking them to their spiritual destinies. Indeed, Hugh Macmillan, a contemporary critic who was familiar with Watts’ evolutionary theology, described the painting as a proclamation that “the law of Christ is not the natural selection of the strong to extinguish the weak but the supernatural selection of the weak that they may strengthen and save the strong,” asserting that “this is the higher law of love which knows no distinction of creed or race, sex or circumstances; according to which the best endowed stoop to help the least favored of fortune” (209-210) . Watts’ figure of Christianity in *The Spirit of Christianity* is represented as a non-dogmatic, altruistic religion of charitable, motherly sympathy. Along with Charity, she is the model for the figure of Evolution

in a painting called *Evolution* (1902-04), which Watts was working on at the time of his death. The iconography of this image provides additional clarification about Watts' thinking with regard to the meaning of his modernized Madonnas. As with Charity and Christianity, he represents Evolution as a maternal figure embracing her children. Seated before a landscape of sea, mountains, and clouds, she fixes her gaze on a distant goal that lies beyond the perimeters of human vision. The painting is a post-Darwinian reinterpretation of medieval Last Judgment scenes: the children on Evolution's left (the goats struggle and battle one another, while those on the right (the sheep aid each other and look toward their mother for direction. They are poised on the threshold of cosmic transformation through the power of altruistic love. The figure of Evolution is preparing to rise and move toward the horizon. When she does, the ignorant children on her left will be condemned to the limitations of their materialistic hell, while the enlightened children on the right will be carried along. Although, like all of Watts' modernized Madonnas, the painting evokes an aura of occult mystery that is distinctly alien to Comte's analytical positivism, and it was clearly not intended to function as a literal Comtean altar piece, it is nevertheless a distant echo of the French philosopher's vision of Humanity as a Great Goddess with a child on her lap.

Unconditional maternal love not only provided the Victorian model for envisioning common social affections and cooperation, it was also the paradigm for feminist social action within the public arena, and Watt's modernized Madonnas are also inflected with this feminist signification. The allegory of Charity was frequently used as a metaphor for the altruism of early social workers, who, as part of a nascent profession, were often female volunteers from the leisured classes, motivated by religious models of selfless sacrifice. They worked for organizations like the Female Mission to the Fallen, which was established in 1858 to combat the "Great Social Evil" of prostitution. As critics like Alison Smith have noted, "two diametrically opposed images: the Madonna and the Magdalene..." constructed the parameters of Victorian womanhood (7). This symbiotic relationship between interdependent, yet oppositional feminine roles is implicit in Watts' portrait of Mrs. Cavendish-Bendinck and her children (1859), a commissioned representation of maternal virtue that predates his more generalized *Charity*. Mrs. Cavendish-Bendinck's aristocratic husband, who was the parliamentary spokesperson for the brothel lobby, was well-known in London for his liberal patronage of fallen women. Thus, Watts' portrait of his wife was an especially apt embodiment of the ideal upper-class mother whose purity was established by her difference from, yet interdependence upon, the sullied prostitute. The maternal affection and selfless nurturing qualities of the upper-class mother are

the antithesis of the (presumedly) unsentimental, self-oriented mercenary values of the masculine marketplace associated with the prostitute. Even more than property or lineage, the cloistered purity of aristocratic women like Mrs. Cavendish-Bendinck separated them from the pollution of lower-class status. Victorians believed that these upper class women were better suited to social work than their male counterparts because they introduced a more caring and sensitive approach that incorporated the law of love into the ruthlessly competitive public sphere. The grace that upper-class Victorian female social workers acquired as the result of their social station, which elevated them above the defiling demands of marketplace, coupled with their familial connections to male power, enabled them to function as Madonna-like intercessors between their fallen parishoners and the omnipotent patriarchal Fathers.

Like *Mrs. Cavendish-Bendinck*, Watts' portrait of Jeanne Nassau-Senior (1855-56) can also be read as a commentary on the theme of upper-class maternal Charity. Nassau-Senior, one of Watts' most intimate friends, was the daughter-in-law of the prominent conservative economist. As the founder of the "Association for Befriending Young Servants," a home for unwed pregnant women from the lower classes, she became one of the earliest Victorian women to work as a professional social worker when she was appointed inspector of workhouses by the government in 1874. However, because she worked in the public sphere with disreputable women from the under-classes, her peers considered her scandalous and she was ostracized by "proper" society (Chapman 61). In his portrait, Watts mitigated the controversy surrounding his friend by situating her within a domestic setting rather than in the public domain, and by placing flowers and a clear vessel, traditional symbols for the Madonna's purity, in the foreground of the painting. Nevertheless, the painting pays homage to Nassau-Senior's work; she is shown providing the water of life to a thriving potted plant, an allusion to her nurturing role as the caretaker of pregnant young women. While this conflation of feminine nurturing with natural law remains essentialist (as well as classist in its suggestion of an upper-class desire to tame the perceived innate sexual vigor of the poor), Victorian feminists like George Eliot and Florence Nightingale were using similar rationales to argue for the naturalness of extending the nurturing, maternal qualities linked to essentialist notions of femininity beyond the threshold of the home and into the male-dominated public domain as a check on perceived (masculine) amorality (see Jenkins). In *Adam Bede*, for example, Eliot, a much admired acquaintance of Watts (Chapman 76), maintained that "...the mother's yearning, that completest type of the life in another life, which is the essence of real human love," is the true "language of nature" (477). In her treatise *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers After Religious Truth* (1860), Nightingale predicted

that because of her innate capacity for compassion, “woman will be the saviour of her race” (Jenkins 30). When Watts’ modernized Madonnas are recontextualized within the framework of this contemporary feminist discourse, they can be read as feminist arguments for the expansion of women’s roles into the public arena.

Modernizing the Magdalene: Purifying the Fallen Woman

Like Watts’ portrait of Nassau-Senior, his representations of prostitutes also meld binary categories of purity and pollution to resacralize images of women contaminated by their presence in the public sphere. His study for *The Magdalene* was painted in the early sixties at a time when he was in close contact with the Pre-Raphaelites, who, like many artists and writers of the era, were obsessed with fallen women. After 1840, when William Tait, an evangelical physician from Edinburgh, published *Magdalenism: An Inquiry in the Extent, Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution*, it became popular to refer to prostitutes as Magdalenes. Anglican sisterhoods coalesced around the mission of caring for and reforming prostitutes during the fifties, establishing Magdalene homes staffed by philanthropically-minded female volunteers from the leisured classes. Apocryphal Biblical texts describe Mary Magdalene as a former prostitute who became Christ’s leading female disciple. As a symbol of the repentant sinner, she was a potent reminder that Christ himself had forgiven this sin. Watts’ Magdalene lifts her head toward the heavens with a gesture that suggests her aspiration toward purity. Her eyes are closed in prayer-like contemplation and self-examination, and her face is illuminated by a supernatural light that signifies her divine redemption.

Prostitution was epidemic in the Victorian era, in part because women, who were systematically excluded from most well-paying jobs, were often destitute and, thus, vulnerable to exploitation. The movement of large segments of the population from villages to cities frequently resulted in the breakdown of the family, orphanhood, abandonment, widowhood, or other unfortunate circumstances that left women with few options for earning independent livelihoods. Better educated women could become governesses and live in modest comfort, but lower class women, if they could find work at all, were relegated to low-paying positions with exhausting hours, as miners, unskilled factory workers, domestics, clerks, or seamstresses (Tait 26). Many unemployed or underemployed women in exploitative jobs moved to urban centers to find work and were uprooted from the communal security and emotional bonds of their traditional support networks. These women often felt alienated from middle-and upper-class definitions of femininity in terms of domestic purity that were not applicable to the actualities of their

economic or social situations. As E. M. Sigsworth and T. J. Wye note, Victorian opinion on the innate sexuality of women as a contributing factor in prostitution was divided, and surely this factor was variable, but, regardless of individual motivations, the institutionalization of prostitution served an important social function by preserving the virginity of women from the wealthier classes and assuring the paternity of male heirs, while still satisfying the sexual appetites of men. This commodification of female sexuality resulted not only in epidemic prostitution, but also in a high rate of illegitimacy and rampant venereal disease. While the actual numbers are elusive, William Acton estimated that one-twelfth of the unmarried women in England and Wales must have “strayed from the paths of virtue,” and the census figures in 1851 record 42,000 illegitimate children. According to Walter Houghton, police files in 1850 listed 8,000 known prostitutes in London and 50,000 in England and Wales. An equally staggering statistic, published in an 1857 issue the medical journal *The Lancet*, estimated that one in every sixteen women in London was a whore, and that one in sixty houses was a brothel. Thus calculated, there were approximately 80,000 prostitutes and 6,000 brothels.

During the mid-sixties, the Victorian discourse on prostitution intensified, galvanizing around the controversy over the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1865-69. These new laws required the forced examination of suspected prostitutes in an effort to arrest the alarming spread of venereal disease in the armed forces, thereby essentially institutionalizing the practice. In 1886, after several decades of heated debate, the Acts were finally repealed, largely due to the efforts of the Ladies National Association led by Josephine Butler. Butler argued that the Acts not only condoned vice, but that they interfered with the civil liberties of women and violated the feelings of those whose sense of shame is not wholly lost, further “brutalizing even the most abandoned,” while leaving male patrons, the main cause, both of the vice and its dreaded consequences, unpunished (Sigsworth and Wyke 96). Butler’s visible feminist activism on this touchy issue was controversial. She not only audaciously addressed public gatherings of men, she spoke about indelicate topics that were usually forbidden to women from the leisured classes. Watts supported Butler’s cause and in 1894 included her portrait in his Hall of Fame. She subsequently recalled the experience of sitting for Watts in a letter to her son, stating that “he wanted to make me looking into Eternity, looking at something no one else sees, because — he says — I look like that; and he has certainly given that idea. It is not at all pretty, and the jaw and head are strong and gaunt. I don’t think my friends will like it. But then he is not doing it for us, but for posterity; and no doubt it will convey an idea of my hard life work” (*G. F. Watts*:

The Hall of Fame 17 . Watts' forceful representation of Butler's determined demeanor presented a new type of assertive female beauty that unsettled Victorian assumptions about the passivity of femininity.⁸

Because prostitutes worked in the masculine public sphere and often crossed class boundaries through associations with their clients, like feminist activists and female social workers, they constituted categorical anomalies that could not be classified in the normal binary scheme of oppositions. Their condition of liminality endangered traditional Victorian ideology by calling the boundaries of gender and class categories into question, acknowledging their violability, and, thus, revealing their historical construction. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas famously observed that in primal cultures the boundaries of the body are used symbolically to express danger to community boundaries. Undefined, imperfect members of a class who do not fit into clear categories function as "polluting" forces that pose destabilizing threats to the social order and must be reincorporated into the system through rituals that redirect asocial irregularities into recognized social categories (124). Like the ritual purifications that Douglas describes, Watts' paintings of Magdalenes also endeavor to sanctify potentially polluting women who have entered the public sphere by repositioning them within a culturally constructed category of femininity. As his secularized Madonnas purify upper-class social workers who transgress the boundary between private and public charity by entering the workplace, his representations of Magdalenes redeem polluted fallen women by representing them as martyrs. Yet, at the same time, by rendering the distinction between categories of purity and pollution ambiguous, these images expose a gap between ideal bourgeois models of femininity and the actual demands of modern capitalism, thus revealing a crisis in the construction of Victorian gender ideology.

Modernizing Eve: Resacralizing the Female Body

Watts' *She Shall Be Called Woman* (1888-1892, with later reworking) is the first part of a trilogy of large pictures that show the single figure of Eve. Like Watts' modernized Madonnas and Magdalenes, his modernized Eves also blur binary distinctions between purity and pollution and unsettle the essentialist category of femininity; Eve is, after all, simultaneously the mother of humanity, a fallen woman, and a *femme fatale*. In a letter written in 1873, Watts stated his intention that *She Shall Be Called Woman* should represent Eve "in the glory of her innocence," rising upward in an explosion of light and color. He described the second picture in his trilogy as a depiction of her yielding to temptation, and the third as showing her restored to beauty and nobility by remorse

(conscience . Watts, who believed that nudity was “more fit for a gallery than a dwelling house,” planned to donate the series to the nation for public display as part of his larger project on the modernized moral history of humanity, the “House of Life” (Watts I 262 . He intended that all three canvases should be seen together, like “parts of an epic poem,” along with three other multi-figured scenes from Genesis: *The Creation of Eve*, *After the Transgression*, and *The Denunciation of Cain*. However, at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1892, where space was limited, he allowed *She Shall Be Called Woman* to stand for the entire series, and, for similar reasons, it shall do so here as well.

The figure of Eve in *She Shall Be Called Woman* is the embodiment of Mother Nature; she is the Tree of Life, an *axis mundi*. Her feet are grounded in matter at the base of the canvas and her erect body stretches toward the radiant sunlight that falls into the space of the picture from above and illuminates her torso. Watts’ second wife and biographer, Mary, compared Eve’s axial centrality within the painting to a passage in Plato’s *Republic*, which describes “a line of light, straight, as a column extending through the whole heaven through the earth in colour resembling the rainbow, only brighter and purer” (Jowett translation . She recalls that Watts told her he wanted the figure not so much to stand in light as to emit light, and that the upturned face was dark in the midst of light because human intuitions may take the human mind into a region where reason stops, “a dark with excessive light (Milton ” (Watts II 140 . According to Mary, Watts did not envision her as the apotheosis of womanhood but rather an embodiment of the eternal feminine (II 138-139 . Indeed, he declared that she is “not so much, or rather not all, the Eve of Genesis, nor Milton either,” but “an incarnation of the spirit of our time, and a hope for the future. It (sic is intended to suggest the very essence of life—of the spiritual...” (Watts II 140 . Eve’s face tilts longingly upward toward the sunlight, a recurring motif in Watts’ art that symbolizes humanity’s desire for reunion with the “divine intelligence” that dwells within nature and brings order to the cosmos (Watts 1:317 .⁹ Modern commentators on the painting have also stressed its spiritual aspirations. Barbara Bryant observes that Watts left the Biblical origins of the Eve subjects “far behind” as he “developed the idea of a life force, igniting a new set of meanings for the 1890s” (267 , and David Stewart notes that Eve is not simply Adam’s helper, the newly created Biblical Eve, but a powerful modern spiritual Eve who is both the material world and its spiritual emanation (302 .

A close reading of *She Shall be Called Woman* suggests that Watts has represented Eve, the symbol of Humanity’s embodiment in the finite world of time and space, in the process of evolving from her corporeal state to an immaterial condition of transcendent luminosity. A small

white butterfly, symbolic of humanity's transformation from material embeddedness into celestial spiritual energy, floats emblematically in the golden radiance of the upper-left corner of the composition. Clouds, flowers, and birds swirl around Eve's axial figure in a serpentine circular spiral that seems to emanate from within her. Her flowing hair streams outward, merging with an enveloping cloud that bears her upward in defiance of gravity. At points within the composition, the edges of her body dissolve into pure, disembodied light and color. The glowing, luminescent tone of the painting conveys the sacred origin of Eve's life-giving spirit. Her purity and redemption signify the purity and redemption of (feminine) matter.

Watts' Eves, like his Madonnas and Magdalenes, resacralize the polluted (and potentially polluting) female body. Although his modernized allegorical tropes of femininity remain conservative in their essentialist conflation of women with nature and maternity, when they are repositioned within the contemporary debates surrounding post-Darwinian evolutionary theology and Victorian feminism, which link women's maternal roles to an evolutionary progression toward moral knowledge and spiritual transcendence, it is clear that they undermine rather than confirm traditional assumptions about the static essentialism of gender roles. Moreover, they augur unexpected possibilities for female empowerment within the public sphere.

SUNY - Geneseo

NOTES

1. Watts' posthumous reputation has undergone unusually dramatic shifts. At the time of his death, he was one of the most respected artists in Europe, but a few years later, with the advent of Modernism in conjunction with Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist show in 1910, his reputation plummeted and has only somewhat recovered. His art has received extensive treatment in two catalogs: *The Victorian High Renaissance* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1979) and *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910* (Tate Gallery, 1997). There are two biographies: Ronald Chapman's *The Laurel and the Thorn* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949) and Blunt, cited above; but a modern book that addresses Watts' work in a cultural context does not yet exist. Suggestions by various scholars that Watts lacked virility, the quality of masculine dominance that became the hallmark of the modernist artist, may account, at least in part, for his relatively low status in the art historical canon.
2. Mary Watts reports her husband's recollection of his childhood revulsion at the insincere wrath of a preacher in black. In his late years, Watts became a rather vocal critic of doctrinal sectarianism. Mary, who disagreed with his negative views on institutionalized Christianity, describes his position rather tactfully, observing that, although he felt "such great reverence for religion that it was difficult for him to speak about it," he "rebelled against the unreality of ordinary religious teaching" (15-16).
3. While the dimensions and dates of these paintings vary widely, Watts often hung works of varying sizes together, stipulating that they should be seen in relationship to each other, like "parts of an epic poem," and he clearly conceived of them as fragments of a

larger, coherent vision. Reading them as a thematic unit within the Victorian “crisis of faith” debates not only provides insight into their implications for contemporary viewers, it also demonstrates their pivotal significance for the subsequent discourse of Victorian studies. For further discussion of Watts’ theological orientation and its relationships to postmodern concerns, see Board, “Arts Moral Mission” and “Modernizing the Grail Quest.”

4. There is not much solid evidence to work with regarding Watts’ fear of women or lack thereof. Watts’ critics frequently cast aspersions on his virility (Blunt and Kestner , and Kestner states that “Watts’ intellectual abstraction represents an avoidance of human passion: severe sexual repression characterized him throughout his life” (73 . However, as even Blunt must acknowledge, so little is known about his sexual life that it “must always remain a mystery” (25 .
5. Throughout his life, Watts’ closest friends were women. In his youth in Italy, while living with Lord and Lady Holland at the Villa Medici in Careggi outside of Florence, he was close to his patron Lady Holland, as well as to Georgiana Duff Gordon. After his return to England in 1847, when he became a permanent guest at Little Holland House in Kensington, his most intimate friendships were with his hostess, Sarah Prinsep, and her four sisters, especially Virginia Pattle (Lady Somers and Julia Margaret Cameron. Later in life, he was close to a variety of women, including Jeannie Nassau-Senior, Mrs. Russell Barrington, and, of course, his second wife, Mary Tyler, among others. He also had a large following of female pupils who adored him. This pattern of inter-gender friendship was unusual for Victorian patriarchs and can, perhaps, be explained, at least in part, by the early death of his mother, his unhappy childhood, and his unfulfilled adolescent longing for female sympathy.
6. For example, Watts’ adopted daughter, Lilian Macintosh, was allowed to run, uncorseted and unrestrained, just as boys did. He believed that girls should be educated with the same care as male children (Blunt 107 and 210 . He wrote an introduction for a pamphlet supporting Lady Marion Alford’s efforts to make needlework fashionable and provide employment for women in a productive and artistic home industry (Watts II 191-202 .
7. Identifying Woman as the affective sex, Comte confined her to the home, where, in recognition of the altruism of her maternal love for her children and her self-sacrificial support for her husband, she would be worshipped as the most perfect representatives of Humanity (Comte, *Catechisme positiviste* (Paris, 1891, 104-108, cited in McGee 13 . By contrast, Mill, who is other respects admired Comte, was, of course, an advocate for women’s equality in the public sphere, as was Watts.
8. The continued potency of the debate surrounding the question of prostitution is demonstrated by Watts’ reluctance to publicly exhibit another of his images of prostitution, *Found Drowned* (1848-1850 . In this painting, he depicted the unregarded body of a prostitute who has thrown herself off a bridge as it is washed up along the banks of the Thames. She is represented as the destitute victim of ruthless social indifference, whose tranquil face and cruciform pose, illuminated by a halo of light, imply that her spiritual purity remains intact. Watts not only refrained from exhibiting the painting at mid-century when he conceived it, as late as 1881-82, he still considered it too controversial for inclusion in his retrospective exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery (Casteras 22 .
9. Watts’ marble bust of *Clytie* (1867-1878 is a probably the best known example of this motif in his work. Clytie was a nymph who loved the sun god Apollo. When he deserted her, she was turned into a sunflower whose head constantly turns to follow the sun. Watts’ portrait of Ellen Terry (1864 also shows his young wife craning her neck longingly in order to glimpse a revelation that lies beyond the picture frame, and numerous allegorical paintings of Dawn, as well as some of his seated maternal figures with children on their laps, like *Peace and Goodwill* (1888-1900 , show women turning their heads yearningly toward the sun.

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