Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art

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In 1911, Dorothy Canfield’s short story “The Westerner” appeared in Scribner’s Magazine.\(^1\) The story describes the chauvinism of Joanna, a young lady from Kansas who, when sent East to attend college, tries to convince her friends that eastern notions of the West are misconceptions. “You think all Western men are long-haired cowpunchers!” she cries to her Maine-born roommate. “Let me tell you that they are not, but a great deal better-dressed, and more up-to-date and—and cultivated than these silly Eastern boys!” She takes her crusade to Hillsboro, Vermont, where she informs her elderly cousins that there is no difference at all between Kansas and Vermont except that Kansas is sophisticated and advanced and modern while Vermont is provincial, narrow, and behind the times. To her surprise, her cousins tell her, “We know about the West. A Westerner lives here and has for years—a man from Nebraska.”\(^2\)

In vain she tries to deny the accounts of the Nebraskan’s tales of broncobusting, cattle branding, and cowpunching that make their simple lives seem commonplace. As Joanna attempts to convince them of the hard-won sophistication of Kansas City, the “Nebraskan” appears on the scene, shown in H. C. Wall’s illustration riding a horse and dressed in chaps, Spurs, ten-gallon hat, and neckerchief (fig. 1). Speaking with a pronounced Yankee twang, he invites Joanna to visit his ranch, adding, “T’aint much to look at compared to the payrayra (he pronounced prairie as Joanna had heard ‘old settlers’ in Kansas say the word), but we’d be almighty glad to see you.”\(^3\)

Determined to expose the man as an imposter, Joanna visits his tiny Vermont farm. After showing her the house, the old man takes her to a partitioned room in the barn, telling her that she is the first person he has ever allowed to enter. There, beside a rough bunk and a small cook stove, is a wall covered with pictures of western scenes.

They were of all sorts, rough line drawings cut from newspapers, colored illustrations...
from the magazines, but they all represented Western scenes, the sort of Western scene that Joanna was always repudiating in her descriptions of her Kansas home—cattle stampedes, cow-punchers, Indians, sod-houses, lines of prairie schooners making their way through the sage-brush, cow-boys galloping along over vast sunlit plains where nothing broke the perfect circle of the sky-line.

As she takes in the array of pictures, the man adds, "You see, my being out there such a short time—t'was only three months from start to finish—I was afraid I'd forget about it some." He explains that despite his passion for Nebraska he put aside his dreams of making something of himself and a life in the West for his wife, a delicate woman whom he rescued from the rigors of pioneer life. Joanna returns home with a new understanding of the depth of one easterner's love for her region as well as his deeper love for his wife.

There is an underlying theme in Canfield's story: the prevailing eastern stereotypes of western life at the turn of the century. As she indicates, these stereotypes were projected in illustrated articles and stories published in the popular press. Despite the reality of western progress, the old Vermonter could maintain his nostalgic image of a place he had visited forty years earlier with the help of pictures cut from magazines. Although those pictures struck the young lady from Kansas as false, they were typical of the imagery that promoted the myth of the West for the eastern public. On that wall in the barn there might have been scenes like Percy Ivory's Knight Errant of the Plains (fig. 2), which appeared on the cover of Harper's Weekly in 1909; or his Madonna of the Prairie, published as a halftone engraving by H. C. Merrill in the same year; or N. C. Wyeth's broncobuster from the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1903; or even Frank Schoonover's Hopalong Takes Command, published in 1905 in Outing Magazine.
At the turn of the century, when artists and writers began to search for a vocabulary to set western heroes and heroines apart from the general public, they frequently turned to terminology derived from medieval England. Western adventurers were often equated with medieval knights, not only in paintings like Ivory’s *Knight Errant of the Plains* but also in written accounts like one that appeared in *Scribner’s* in 1901 entitled “A Section Hand on the Union Pacific Railway.” As the writer stops in Nebraska he recounts,

That evening, in a village inn, while the rain poured without, I sat cheek by jowl with a Knight Templar who had just returned from a convention of his order in Denver. It was not the meeting that inspired him; it was the mountains. Raised on the prairie, he had never seen even hills before, and the sight of the earth rising from a plain until it touched high heaven was like giving his mind the sense of a new dimension.

He adds that the band of “knights errant and ladies fair” climbed Pike’s Peak, a task compared to a struggling saint’s “steep ascent of heaven.” Even the most prosaic objects evoked similar medieval imagery from writers, as in Beatrice Hanscom’s poem “In Quiet Ways,” which describes “long rows of milk-pans that shone as bright as armor worn by parfit knight or bold crusader.”

Why was this imagery of England’s remote past applied to the American experience with such enthusiasm? One explanation may stem from the problem of defining heroes in a democratic society based on equality. To differentiate special individuals from the general population, artists and writers borrowed hierarchical structures from the English monarchy, so that Buck Taylor was “king” of the cowboys; the Virginian was a “noble” young cowboy; Deadwood Dick was the “Black Prince” of the Black Hills; and, more recently, John Wayne was the “Duke.” The direct line of figurative descent from the heroes of Anglo-Saxon history to the cowboys of the plains had been firmly traced by Owen Wister in 1895 in his essay “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” published in *Harper’s Magazine*. As Wister observed, the Anglo-Saxon heritage was evident “from the tournament at Camelot to the round-up at Abilene,” adding, “No doubt Sir Launcelot bore himself with a grace and breeding of which our unpolished fellow of the cattle trail has only the latent possibility; but in personal daring and in skill as to the horse, the knight and the cowboy are nothing but the same Saxon of different environments.”

Frederic Remington’s illustrations for Wister’s essay also made this point. In *The Last Cavalier* Remington showed a cowboy riding beside a ghostly cavalcade featuring mounted knights in armor, thus linking the cowboy to his Arthurian ancestors. Wister developed this imagery further in *The Virginian*, in which the cowboy hero is a modern Launcelot in leather armor, who, when he rescues Molly Wood (who comes to the West from Bennington, Vermont), is “her unrewarded knight.”

Wister’s and Remington’s impressions of the West set the stage for other eastern artists and writers to apply their assumptions about medieval adventure and chivalry to the western experience. Behind Wister’s and Remington’s general equation of the West with Camelot, there seems to have been at least one specific source for the popular parallels between the knights and madonnas of English medieval art and literature and the vocabulary of American hero-worship. This was the influence of the art of the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood on the American imagination at the turn of the century. Although the presentation of the western hero and heroine in the guise of their medieval counterparts is a complex phenomenon stemming from a variety of sources, Pre-Raphaelite art played an important role in the ways some American illustrators pictured the West.

In 1848, a group of English artists and writers banded together under the name “Pre-Raphaelite” to support their belief that true inspiration could be found only in nature and in the art of the Middle Ages and the early
Renaissance. Following the painter Ford Madox Brown, who advised the brotherhood although he never joined it himself, and the writer John Ruskin, artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais in particular turned their attention to medieval and religious subjects. Often they attempted to make religious themes more meaningful by placing them in ordinary settings, as Rossetti did in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and as Millais did in *Christ in the House of his Parents*. Moreover, they turned to subjects that took them far from modern industrial England, illustrating Tennyson's Arthurian poem, *The Idylls of the King* (fig. 3), and devising their own quasi-medieval subjects, as Rossetti did in *The Wedding of Saint George and Princess Sabra*. In most cases, the male characters in their paintings and drawings were chivalrous heroes who, like Saint George, rescued damsels in distress, while the women were either sacred virgins and madonnas or evil femmes fatales. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood exerted a strong influence on English art throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, and their many followers maintained the Brotherhood's interest in idealized images of knights and ladies.

At the turn of the century, American artists were introduced to a Yankee variant of Pre-Raphaelitism through the writings and illustrations of Howard Pyle. Pyle had fallen under the spell of the English artists by studying their works in reproductions and by examining the large collection of Pre-Raphaelite drawings and paintings owned by the wealthy industrialist Samuel Bancroft and exhibited in Pyle's hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. The influence of the English artists upon Pyle was strong, and through many illustrated stories and books he popularized their romanticized views of medieval life for Americans. Known for such illustrated tales as *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, published in 1883, and *The Story of King Arthur and his Knights*, which appeared in 1903, Pyle elaborated upon the subjects of the Pre-Raphaelite artists as well as their styles of illustration. The flat composition, dense pen stroke, and shallow perspective in pictures such as *Two Knights do Battle before Camilard* (fig. 4) demonstrate Pyle's debt to Pre-Raphaelite illustrations.

Not only was Pyle one of the most famous American illustrators at the turn of the century, he was also an influential teacher. The Howard Pyle School of Art in Wilmington was a mecca for aspiring illustrators. Begun in 1900, the school offered free instruction to talented young artists who had already mastered the rudiments of drawing and composition. Admission to the school was highly competitive; in 1903 only three new students were chosen from almost three hundred applicants. In Pyle's classes in facial expression, students learned the importance of accuracy of expressions; in daily composition classes, they were encouraged to use their imaginations to invent their own subjects. It was not enough for a pupil to produce an interesting composition; he was expected to express his inner thoughts and feelings about a subject in order to convey the message behind a picture. To make an imaginary scene as realistic as possible, Pyle urged his students to project themselves into the setting. In this way, even a subject unfamiliar to the artist could be made to seem real to the viewer.

In his classes Pyle followed his Pre-Raphaelite predecessors' emphasis on fidelity to actual appearances as well as richness of the imagination by urging students to amass collections of studio props to give their illustrations authenticity, a directive his young pupils enthusiastically followed. In addition to collecting the usual trunkloads of costumes from various countries and historical periods, those students interested in western subjects, such as Ivory, Wyeth, and Schoonover, found themselves acquiring such items as guns, saddles, chaps, wagon wheels, and even buffalo robes to give their pictures the ring of truth. They frequently photographed themselves or models dressed in their paraphernalia to be used for "memory aides," as Pyle called them. This side of illustration appealed to most of the young artists, and dressing up to recreate historical eras became a favorite activity. In one of their
FIG. 5. P. V. E. Ivory, It’s You or Me Bill, oil on canvas, 1917. Ivory-Greene Collection.
most elaborate costume parties, Pyle and his students produced a medieval evening, complete with a banquet for knights and ladies and culminating in a wild night of sword battles and jousting.13

Although western themes held little interest for Pyle, he found that many of his young students were as fascinated with the Great Plains as he had been with Sherwood Forest and Camelot. Luckily Pyle’s teaching methods were broad enough for his students to apply his ideas about the romance of knights and ladies to their own nostalgic scenes of an enchanted land west of the Mississippi where knights in buckskin rescued ladies from prairie perils. While Pyle did not expect his students to share his own interest in Pre-Raphaelite subjects, he did not hesitate to urge them to study works by Pre-Raphaelite painters. For example, he advised Ivory to study art by Rossetti, Millais, and Brown, thus narrowing the gap between the American heroes of the wilderness and their chivalrous ancestors in European art and literature.14

Even though the locale changed, Pyle students’ heroes and heroines maintained a particular Pre-Raphaelite flavor. This is especially apparent in works featuring prairie knights and madonnas.

For instance, in the hands of Pyle’s students, the jousting knights seen in Pyle’s Arthurian illustrations reappeared in the guise of cowboy heroes. In Ivory’s It’s You or Me Bill (fig. 5), an illustration to B. M. Bowers’s “The Lone Rider,” a story about the Texas Rangers, the modern knights in chaps fight it out atop a racing train spouting a swirling curve of smoke. (Ironically, at the turn of the century trains were romanticized as “winged steeds” in a caption to an illustration of a train, as “the dangerous steed” in a story in which a woman drives a train, and even as Pegasus himself in a tale about a train ride through Oklahoma.15) Other Pyle students depicted similar battles between the forces of good and evil. N. C. Wyeth, whose illustrations for medieval classics such as The Black Arrow were favored by children throughout the early years of the century, had little difficulty applying his medievalizing mode, seen in It hung upon the thorn and there he blew three deadly notes (fig. 6) of 1917, to western scenes, as in Fight on the Plains (fig. 7). Later, Pyle’s pupil Frank Schoonover could move with equal facility from subjects like Ivanhoe to scenes like Tex and Patches, a design for a Colt firearms poster published in 1926.

In addition to battle scenes, illustrations of cowboy knights also focused on the theme of the damsel in distress, another western subject with its roots in Pre-Raphaelite imagery. Especially popular with Pre-Raphaelite artists were scenes in which men rescue women from a variety of perils, such as William Holman Hunt’s Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus, painted in 1851, or the design of Walter Crane, a second-generation Pre-Raphaelite artist, for a plate decorated with Saint George killing the dragon to rescue the princess Sabra. Such imagery subsequently appealed to Pyle, and in turn it appealed to his students.

We have already seen an instance of the migration of this theme to an American setting in Canfield’s story “The Westerner,” when the young adventurer puts aside his dreams of settling in Nebraska to rescue his future wife from her distress as an unwilling pioneer. It was also a popular theme for illustrators. In W. H. D. Koerner’s pictures that accompanied Hal G. Evarts’s story, “The Shaggy Legion,” published in 1929, the woman in The Terrified Girl Looked into Savage Faces in Which She Could Read No Mercy is freed by her eques­trian hero. That Koerner could have been led to such imagery by his early acquaintance with Pre-Raphaelite art in Wilmington is evident from notes that he took during his tenure as a student at Pyle’s school. Koerner observed in his class notes, “One way to get a spiritual feeling in a certain figure is to keep everything softer in the figures than in other parts of the picture and let light radiate away from it.”16

The interest in spirituality was common to most Pre-Raphaelite painters, especially to Rossetti and the young Millais. Later Koerner cited specific European painters whom Pyle directed his students to study: “Millea [Millais] and Joseph Iseral [Israels]. Also the man who
FIG. 6. N. C. Wyeth, It hung upon the thorn and there he blew three deadly notes, *from The Boy's King Arthur, oil on canvas, 1917*. Private collection, photograph courtesy of the Brandywine River Museum.
painted Joan Arch (probably Jules Bastien-Lepage, whose combined Pre-Raphaelite and Impressionist Joan of Arc is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Chivalry was not limited to human knights and ladies. Koerner’s close friend and former studio-mate, Ivory, even applied it to horses in his painting *Oh Give Them a Fighting Chance, Replied Homer. He Would Have Been Safe If He Hadn’t Come Back After His Woman*, illustrating a scene from Honore Willsie’s story, “The Pinto Stallion,” published in 1921. In Ivory’s illustration of Willsie’s text, it is clear that equine chivalry also appealed to artists and writers.

In Pre-Raphaelite images such as Rossetti’s *The Wedding of Saint George and Princess Sabra*, the result of chivalry was often marriage. Some of Pyle’s students continued this tradition in illustrations like *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, by Bertha Corson Day, published in 1902 to accompany Pyle’s sister Katharine’s book *Where the Wind Blows*. Marriage themes also soon found their way to western illustrations by Pyle’s proteges. Matrimony was sometimes only implied by engagement proposals, as in Koerner’s illustration, published in 1922 for Emerson Hough’s “The Covered Wagon,” captioned *Molly! He Broke Out. Listen to Me! Do You Want the Engagement Broken? Do You Want to be Released?*; or in Ivory’s picture *You are Going To Marry Me—Someday. That’s What I Think of You!* included in Charles Alden Seltzer’s 1918 novel *Firebrand Trevison*. Moreover, prairie weddings also entered popular...
imagery, as in N. C. Wyeth’s covered wagon wedding scene in which the preacher rides beside the wagon at breakneck speed, entitled *I Hereby Pronounce Yuh Man and Wife!*, illustrating Edward S. Moffat’s story “The Misadventures of Cassidy,” published in 1908.

From rescue and marriage of the damsel in distress, it was only a short step to the prairie madonna theme. Images of madonnas were common Pre-Raphaelite subjects, not only in traditional presentations like Rossetti’s *The Seed of David* altarpiece, but also in veiled forms such as the emigrant woman in Brown’s *The Last of England*, who holds her tiny infant’s hand as she and her husband depart. With her bonnet-lining and bonnet circling her face like a halo, the woman in Brown’s painting seems to represent the modern madonna whose flight is not to Egypt but to Australia or America. Although many of Pyle’s students produced variations on this theme by showing mothers with children, Brown’s motif of the modern madonna especially appealed to illustrators of the women of the prairie.

Ivory was one of the first of the Pyle students to use the prairie madonna theme as a subject. In 1909, the H. C. Merrill publishing company used his painting *Madonna of the Prairies* as the subject of a halftone engraving, and later as a calendar illustration. Two years later Ivory illustrated Maude Radford Warren’s story “A Woman Pioneer,” published in *Saturday Evening Post*, which also featured idealized scenes of women and wagons, imagery that led to a later painting by Ivory that again capitalized on the prairie madonna subject.

Pictures like Ivory’s were a far cry from illustrations produced during the second half of the nineteenth century that showed a more realistic view of life on the plains, such as J. C. Blard’s *A Family Encampment*, published in 1867 in Albert D. Richardson’s *Beyond the Mississippi*. Nevertheless Ivory’s idealization of the pioneer woman captured the imagination of his fellow illustrators. When in 1922 Koerner produced his version of the prairie madonna subject as an illustration for Emerson Hough’s “The Covered Wagon” (fig. 8), he was building on his former studio-mate’s example as well as on Brown’s prototypical modern madonna. As in Brown’s painting, Ivory’s and Koerner’s illustrations emphasize the exalted status of women as childbearers. This attitude was common in popular literature of the time, where wilderness women were idealized as lovers or mothers. Indeed, in “The Westerner,” Canfield makes a point of telling the reader that the old man and the wife he released from prairie life to take back to Vermont have not had children. In other stories and songs this point is made more openly, as mothers are sentimentalized as the ultimate heroines of the West. Even when this association was not overtly made, as in Schoonover’s painting of a woman doing laundry in front of a sod house, *Silently He Rode On*, published in *Country Gentleman* in 1926, the inference of the role of women as nurturers and helpmates is evident.

Of the various myths of the West, the myth of the frontier hero and heroine has traditionally been one of the most appealing to the American imagination. While in the nineteenth century the western hero was frequently a specific person whose deeds had granted him hero status, by the early twentieth century, heroes were more often generalized types rather than historical persons. This change suited the illustrators of popular eastern magazines who could rely upon their imaginations to formulate their pictures of the knights and ladies of the prairies. Setting the stage for the western heroes of radio, film, and television were the illustrators active during the first quarter of the twentieth century, who combined the heritage of romantic knights and ladies as they were portrayed by Pre-Raphaelite artists with their own visions of romantic American heroes and heroines.

When we examine our frontier heritage with attention to the emphasis that has been placed on idealization, the importance of Pre-Raphaelite precedents is clear. Not only has our vocabulary of hero definition been dependent upon what Theodore Roosevelt called “the reproduction here on this continent of essentially the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained
in medieval England," but more precisely it has been dependent upon the Pre-Raphaelite restatement of those conditions. Looking back on the popular art and literature that dealt with the plains, it is not surprising that it was dependent upon European antecedents; most of the popular magazines of the first quarter of this century followed patterns established in Europe. Illustrations by European artists and stories about life outside of the United States were often featured.

Just as the literature of the frontier and cattle kingdom was often produced by eastern writers who attached a certain glamour to their subjects, so the popular early twentieth-century visual imagery of the plains was often produced by artists working in the East for eastern magazines. Indeed, one editor of a magazine that featured western stories went so far as to remark that "a great many of these authors are legitimate descendants of the tellers of sagas and of the troubadours." Like the writers, the illustrators also imbued their subjects with the glow of an era of sagas and troubadours, in keeping with the Pre-Raphaelite approach to illustration popularized by Pyle and his followers. Their paintings and drawings codified the image of the American western hero and heroine as the heirs and heiresses to a rich imaginative tradition formed in nineteenth-century Britain by the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 160.
4. Ibid., pp. 162–63.
7. For further elaboration on the theme of the cowboy monarch, see William W. Savage, Jr., The Cowboy Hero (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979).
10. Further insight into Pre-Raphaelite veiled symbolism can be found in George P. Landow, Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
12. In Ivory's collection, for instance, there were buffalo hides, western clothing, a complete Mexican leather cowboy suit, bandoleros, bonnets, and a wide assortment of guns and rifles.
17. Ibid.
18. See, for example, Charles Seltzer's novel Firebrand Trevison (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1918), in which the action revolves around a woman who is threatened by an evil man and saved by an honest one, whom she marries.
21. Ibid., p. 468.