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The Ambiguous Graveyard: Religious Sympathy and Erotic Desire in Sir John Everett Millais's *The Vale of Rest*

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THE AMBIGUOUS GRAVEYARD: RELIGIOUS SYMPATHY AND EROTIC
DESIRE IN SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS'S *THE VALE OF REST*.

by

Greg W. Spangler

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THE AMBIGUOUS GRAVEYARD: RELIGIOUS SYMPATHY AND EROTIC
DESIRE IN SIR JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS'S *THE VALE OF REST*.

Greg W. Spangler, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisor: Wendy Katz

The Vale of Rest, 1859, despite or because of its oddities—two nuns digging a grave—was in its own day understood as a touchstone for Sir John Everett Millais and his career. Its critical reception in 1859 was hostile, with charges of “ugliness,” but by 1897, it was hanging in the Tate museum. Scholars and biographers have accordingly seen it as a turning point in Millais’s abandonment of Pre-Raphaelite realism for a more aestheticized and bourgeois style. The subject of nuns has led other scholars to investigate Millais’s sympathies with the Oxford Movement, the midcentury effort to reform the Anglican church and bring it closer to Catholicism, to understand how *The Vale of Rest*’s initial rejection and ultimate acceptance might fit into Victorian attitudes toward religion.

It is the goal of this project to bridge the gap between what is commonly understood about this painting and a historical, biographical, and political context that supply the work with a less ambiguous narrative. Millais’s biography, his place within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the public’s reaction to the Oxford Movement, and the suspicion of private burial under new reform laws together illuminate this painting’s place in British history while simultaneously creating a curious duality. The engagement with realism and symbolism, masculinity and femininity, and ultimately religious sympathy and erotic desire destabilizes the seemingly conventional reading of this work

as a *memento mori*. What this research concludes is that the painting's elusiveness, created by the tension between its contemporaneity and its symbolism, continues to be the most important signifier of its meaning. Its ambiguity meant it could satisfy Millais's own psyche, Pre-Raphaelite challenges to social reform, and finally 'modern' demand for art that penetrated beyond appearances.

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The Vale of Rest, 1859, (fig. 1) despite or because of its oddities—two nuns digging a grave—was in its own day understood as a touchstone for Sir John Everett Millais and his career. Its critical reception in 1859 was hostile, with familiar charges of “ugliness,” but by 1897, it was hanging in the Tate museum. Scholars and biographers have accordingly seen it as a turning point in Millais’s abandonment of Pre-Raphaelite realism for a more aestheticized and bourgeois style. The subject of nuns has led other scholars to investigate Millais’s sympathies with the Oxford Movement, the midcentury effort to reform the Anglican church and bring it closer to Catholicism, to understand how *The Vale of Rest*’s initial rejection and ultimate acceptance might fit into Victorian attitudes toward religion. Finally, scholars have considered it as a portrayal of women that, despite the women’s presumed piety, violates the Victorian decorum for genteel womanhood by treating them as erotic objects and active workers.

Millais often joined spiritual ideals and sexual desire in his paintings of women, in a formation typical of Victorian masculinity. What makes this painting peculiar is its connection of these themes to burial and the cemetery, a composition that will recur in later paintings like *The Old Garden* of 1888 (fig. 15), albeit missing exactly what made *The Vale of Rest* controversial, the nuns. In the 1850s, England was in the midst of enacting a series of Burial Acts, the majority starting in 1852 and ending in 1864 that radically transformed burial. These acts, which made public burial the national norm, put an end to private graveyards of all kinds, and cast the private burial grounds associated with Catholicism as places of secrecy that threatened to undermine modern progress. Millais’s portrayal of the enclosed, private cemetery in *The Vale of Rest*, where women

work unsupervised by the state, thus does indicate a conservative strain in his thinking, but it also offers a locale in which hidden sexuality might emerge.

It is the goal of this project to bridge the gap between what is commonly understood about this painting and a historical, biographical, and political context that will supply the work with a less ambiguous narrative. Millais's biography, his place within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the public's reaction to the Oxford Movement, and the suspicion of private burial under new reform laws together illuminate this painting's place in British history while simultaneously creating a curious duality. The work's engagement with realism and symbolism, masculinity and femininity, and ultimately religious sympathy and erotic desire destabilizes its seemingly conventional reading as a *memento mori*. What this research concludes is that the painting's elusiveness, created by the tension between its contemporaneity and its symbolism, continues to be the most important signifier of its meaning. Its ambiguity meant it could satisfy Millais's own psyche, Pre-Raphaelite challenges to social reform, and finally 'modern' demand for art that penetrated beyond appearances.

The scene in *The Vale of Rest* is of two nuns in a walled graveyard. One nun sits pensively on a tombstone while the second shovels earth out of an open grave in apparent preparation for a burial. A stone fence surrounds the field, over which the silhouettes of approximately ten trees dominate the upper half of the composition, further secluding the women in their private world. In a wide gap between the poplars and oaks, directly above the working nun's head, is a single bell tower protruding into a vibrantly colored sunset. A low-lying purple cloud hangs just above the bell tower. The nuns are symmetrically arranged below the clearly defined horizon line formed by the fence. As if on a string,

nine seemingly blank gravestones hang in the space between them. Behind these markers the recession into space is suggested by two flights of steps in front of and behind the seated nun, creating two small, bare strips of lawn. The effect of the setting sun evenly lights the composition and bathes the carefully articulated scene in a strange, cool light.

The seated nun is wearing a formal religious ensemble. She is young and her face is idealized. Light glows on her white wimple and coif, as well as on the side of her face, constituting the brightest element of the painting. Her head is turned toward the viewer while her body, which is lost within the fabric of her habit, is turned toward the other woman and the open grave. Her eyes are directed at the audience and her expression is complex. Her gaze is commanding. She seems to ponder some divine and mysterious knowledge that eludes the viewer. Her hands lie on her lap with fingers crossed. A rosary, attached to her belt, hangs from underneath her left sleeve. A large, plain cross settles within the folds of her habit and a relatively large skull dangles just above it. She is composed, though seated upon a headstone that appears to be resting on another rectangular structure, perhaps a wooden casket. Two wreaths of tansy lean against it. Millais's presentation of her performs a variety of functions in contrast to her companion. Framed by the clearly defined wreaths, the rhododendron bush, and the straight and narrow flight of steps, she is armored in piety. Her form is a *memento mori*, a reminder that religious salvation not only promises everlasting life, but peace in the face of death. Her presence also indicates that salvation requires a measured amount of sincere discipline.

The seated nun's companion, a novice, is knee-deep in the grave she is digging. Her body is facing the viewer, but her gaze is toward the ground. Her body is caught in the middle of the motion of shoveling earth from the grave. A pickaxe lies to her side, its metal point rising out of the grave. Her grey wimple, in contrast to the seated nun's softened, whiter wimple, is thrust back, as if it were hair blown by strong wind. There is a sharp contrast between the lighter tones of her wimple and the structure of the rest of her garments, with a slit opened from her left arm to the base of her neck. Her exposed forearms present us with a display of strong veins and muscle hard at work. She appears close in age to her companion, and though both women are youthful, her greater vigor is emphasized by her exposed forearms and agile strength.

The viewer has a complicated position in relation to the two figures in this painting. Although the seated nun's gaze may reflect a sort of contentment, it can also appear as if she has looked over her shoulder at the sound of our approach, questioning our presence in the midst of such a private moment—the preparation of a burial in a private churchyard. We view the two women from an angle close to eye-level, although this position is complicated by the foreground. In the bottom of the composition, Millais hints at the end of the grave with small tufts of grass, leaving the viewer vulnerable to fall into the grave being dug.

The sensory engagement of this piece further contributes to its unsettled, uncertain mood. The bell tower in the background tolls the passing hours, but its mournful chords also announce a death. This, combined with the louder sound of earth falling on earth and the heavy breath of one woman working, creates a bizarre arrangement or rhythm. The two sounds seem part and parcel of the odd juxtaposition of

the highly articulated figures and the absence of a clear narrative; whose burial, and its significance, is not indicated. This elusiveness is more surprising given the relatively explicit narratives and less moody style of Millais's early career.

Millais' youngest son recorded the origin story for this painting in his two-volume biography of his father.¹ According to Millais's wife, Effie, while meandering over a hill near Loch Awe in Scotland on their 1855 honeymoon, the couple's coachman told them that the ruins of a monastery was located on a nearby island. Effie then muses for an extended passage on times "before the Reformation had torn down, with bigoted zeal, all that was beautiful from antiquity, or sacred from the piety or remorse of the founders of old ecclesiastical buildings in this country."² She continues with a description of how she and John envisioned white-robed nuns singing in boats, inspired by the beauty in nature surrounding them. It was during this experience that Millais declared he would someday paint a picture of nuns, and *The Vale of Rest*, despite its rather less cheerful theme, is the

¹ John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1900), 2 volumes, vol. I, 329. The landscape in the painting is based on George and Sophia Gray's garden in the neighborhood of Bowerswell in Perth, Scotland. The grave and tombstones were painted in nearby Kinnoull churchyard, Perth. John Guille Millais records the words of his mother as she describes the evening the painting was begun: "...and one night this autumn, being greatly impressed with the beauty of the sunset (it was the end of October), he rushed for a large canvas, and began at once upon it..."

² Millais, *Life and Letters*, vol. I, 328-329. "It had long been Millais' intention to paint a picture with nuns in it, the idea first occurring to him on our wedding tour in 1855. On descending the hill by Loch Awe, from Inverary, he was extremely struck with its beauty, and the coachman told us that on one of the islands there were ruins of a monastery. We imagined to ourselves the beauty of the picturesque features of the Roman Catholic religion, and transported ourselves, in idea, back to the times before the Reformation had torn down, with bigoted zeal, all that was beautiful from antiquity, or sacred from the piety or remorse of the founders of old ecclesiastical buildings in this country. The abbots boated and fished in the loch, the vesper bell pealed from the 'Ave Maria' at sundown, and the organ notes of the Virgin's hymn were carried by the water and transformed into a sweeter melody, caught up on the hillside and dying away in the blue air. We pictured, too, white-robed nuns in boats, singing on the water in the quiet summer evenings, and chanting holy songs, inspired by the loveliness of the world around them..."

first such painting he exclusively dedicated to the subject.³ Whether as instinctively pious, in harmony with nature, or associated with death, this romantic view of the medieval world and of women seems in some ways in accord with Pre-Raphaelite subjects such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849) or William Holman Hunt's *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1848). But in the years after 1855, Millais was moving toward a more aestheticized style and away from the tenets of the Pre-Raphaelites.

The Pre-Raphaelites, who formed their "brotherhood" in 1848, looked to the models of medieval and early Renaissance artists as a way to revolt against the stylistic expectations of the Royal Academy, especially the influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792).⁴ Their minute attention to detail and obsession with nature denoted sincerity and morality in contrast to the more conventional idealizations of academic painting. It was this interest in recording nature with overwhelming precision that prompted much of their negative reception. However, John Ruskin, the famous Victorian writer and art critic, eventually supported the Brotherhood's goals, including the medieval (pre-Raphael) lens through which many of their artworks were conceived. Ruskin himself was deeply involved with the Gothic revival at the time.

³ Malcolm Warner, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, (London: The Tate Gallery, 1984), 176. "The title of [*The Vale of Rest*] and the line 'Where the weary find repose' which accompanied it in the R.A. exhibition catalogue in 1859 are taken from the English version of the Mendelssohn part-song 'Ruhetal' from *Sechs Lieder*, Opus 59, No. 5. Millais wrote to Effie on 7 April 1859: 'I heard William [his brother] singing it and said it just went with the picture, whereupon he mentioned the name and words, which are equally suitable.'"

⁴ The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in September of 1848 at Millais's parents' house in London. The founding members were William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Millais. Later, William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens, and Thomas Woolner joined the Brotherhood.

The rhododendron, the tansy, and the climbing ivy in *The Vale of Rest* are examples of Pre-Raphaelite sharp articulation of form. The treatment of religious subject matter—the matter-of-fact quality of two nuns digging a grave—illustrates the way in which Pre-Raphaelites re-imagined symbolic imagery and Biblical narratives in prosaic and even contemporary terms.⁵ There is no ghastly representation of death, as even the tombstones are stripped bare of typical medieval reminders of mortality, which are assigned instead to the less threatening ornament on the rosary; even the effect of the sunset could be considered pleasant. The absence of a clear moral story, however, beyond the simple *memento mori*, literally and metaphorically foregrounds the women's contrasting types and roles, pointing interpretation instead toward Pre-Raphaelite ideals of womanhood.

The critical reception of *The Vale of Rest* in 1859 was hostile, and particularly focused on Millais's depiction of the nuns and their deviation from conventional ideals of femininity, not to mention the unsettlingly pleasant landscape. Showing women performing manual labor would not have fit the Victorian notion of the "angel in the home." Ruskin, Millais's former champion, wrote that, "I have no doubt the beholder is considerably offended at first sight of this picture...why *so* frightful? Is it not because it is so nearly beautiful? —Because the dark green field, and windless trees, and purple sky

⁵ While Millais's letters do not specifically refer to Gustave Courbet or French Realism, Elizabeth Prettejohn points to the political environment of 1848 as a link between the Brotherhood and artists like Courbet, whose *Burial at Ornans* of 1849-50 has parallel realist tendencies. Prettejohn, Elizabeth Prettejohn, *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 117, 239. Millais did know the artists James Tissot and James McNeill Whistler, both of whom could have transmitted information about French Realism generally and Courbet more specifically, but those contacts came later. An extension of this study might be able to identify if French salon criticism was published in English journals in the years around 1850.

might be so lovely to persons unconcerned about their graves?”⁶ Ruskin continues, “Or is it that the faces are so ugly? You would have liked them better to be fair faces, such as would grace a drawing-room...”⁷ Other critics joined him. *Punch* magazine characterized 1859 as the year “Mr. Millais gave forth those terrible nuns in the graveyard.”⁸ *The Athenaeum* described the ugliness of the seated nun and their disappointment in Millais’s showing as: “not that her red skull of a face and staring, coarse, black eyes are pleasing...they are as hard and painful as those of some of Hogarth’s viragoes.”⁹ Other reviews include *The Times*: “for vigour of action and truth of light nothing can surpass the sturdy sister who wields the spade; the other, who sits by, lost in thought, simply ugly

⁶ John Ruskin, *Ruskin on Pictures: Academy Notes* (London: George Allen, 156, Charing Cross Road, 1902), 212.

⁷ Ruskin, *Notes*, 213-14. The entire passage: “Or is it that the faces are so ugly? You would have liked them better to be fair faces, such as would grace a drawing-room; and the grave to be dug in prettier ground—under a rose-bush or willow, and in turf set with violets—nothing like a bone visible as one threw the mould out. So, it would have been a sweet piece of convent sentiment. I am afraid that it is a good deal more like real convent sentiment as it is. Death—confessed for king before his time asserts, so far as I have seen, some authority over such places; either unperceived, and then the worst, in drowsy unquickeness of the soul; or felt and terrible, pouring out his white ashes upon the heart—ashes that burn with cold. If you think what the kind of persons who have strength of conviction enough to give up the world might have done for the world had they *not* given it up; and how the King of Terror must rejoice when he wins for himself another soul that might have gone forth to calm the earth, and folds his wide white wings over it for ever (He also gathering his children together); and how those white sarcophagi, towered and belfried, each with his companies of living dead, gleam still so multitudinous among the mountain pyramids of the fairest countries of the earth—places of silence for their sweet voices; places of binding for their faithfulest hands; places of fading for their mightiest intelligences; -- you may, perhaps, feel also that so great wrong cannot be lovely in the near aspect of it; and that if this very day, at evening, we were allowed to see what the last clouds of twilight glow upon in some convent garden of the Apennines, we might leave the place with some such horror as this picture will leave upon us; not all of it noble horror, but in some sort repulsive and ignoble.”

⁸ [Unsigned Preface], “Preface,” *Punch magazine*, (June 25, 1859), p. iii. This reads as follows: “Year Mr. Millais came out with those terrible nuns in the graveyard.”

⁹ [Unsigned Review], “Fine Arts: Royal Academy,” *The Athenaeum*, no. 1644, April 30, 1859. Especially, “Mr. Millais has caught admirably the awkwardness and weakness of the woman using the unaccustomed spade, and has thrown a fine ascetic meditateness over the face of the seated nun,—not that her red skull of a face and staring, coarse, black eyes are pleasing,—far from it, they are as hard and painful as those of some of Hogarth’s viragoes, and stand out in rather a ghastly fashion from the grave black and white frame of the nun’s or Beguine’s hood and robe.”

and coarse. Her face tells us nothing.”¹⁰ A critic from *Fraser’s Magazine* defended Millais against Ruskin’s criticism, but pointed to apparent laziness in effort writing “those dark poplars cutting sharp against the evening sky, are undoubtedly good, but we had them before in ‘Autumn Leaves;’ for in the present state of Mr. Millais’s mind it is easier to re-serve an old effect than to invent a new one.”¹¹

For the critics, it seems that the consensus is that *The Vale of Rest* depicts an unsightly nun who haunts a bizarre, yet somehow pleasing landscape and a working woman, both awkward and vigorous, who has thrown her life away—she literally stands in her hypothetical grave. This criticism demonstrates that the nuns and their actions were crucial to the painting’s reception. In fact, while Ruskin may call the figure of the seated nun ugly, he goes on to recite a drawn-out anecdote comparing the women’s personal actions—that of joining a convent—to Death itself, thus expressing his anti-Catholic

¹⁰ [Unsigned Review], *The Times*, “The Royal Academy Exhibition,” 23294 (April 30, 1859): 10. “No more impressive or powerful landscape-painting has been seen since Giorgione. True, Mr. Millais’ picture is chill and gray; it represents the garb of the convent and the gloom of the graveyard, where the Venetian would have given us warm sun and gay garments, the glad riot or voluptuous rest of the revel; but Mr. Millais has placed his grim homily upon the canvass as perfectly as the Venetian, and he has done this in spite of most unnecessary ugliness in the personages of his action. For vigour of action and truth of light nothing can surpass the sturdy sister who wields the spade; the other, who sits by, lost in thought, simply ugly and coarse. Her face tells us nothing. The sentiment of the picture is all in the landscape. The interest falls off, instead of rising, as we pass from the scene to the figures. This is surely inverting the genuine order of expression. Where figures are introduced as prominently as in this picture, they ought both to command the eye and to satisfy the imagination of the spectator. Mr. Millais’s nun may attract the eye, but it is only to repel it.”

¹¹ [Unsigned Review], “The Exhibitions of 1859,” *Fraser’s Magazine*, 59 (June 1859): 670-671. In defense of Millais: “In his [Ruskin’s] aesthetic ukase for this year he accuses people of objecting to the ‘Vale of Rest,’ because the faces in it are not ‘drawing-room faces,’ and because the grave is not ‘under a rose-bush or willow, and in turf set with violets—nothing like a bone visible as one threw the mould out.’” This seems to us simply childish. Of the thousands who have looked at this picture, we venture to say not one person ever thought of raising such an objection. But his chief quarrel is on the score of the two water-colour exhibitions, for though he directs his wrath at the painters, it is clear he is talking at the public that admires them.”

sentiments. When the critic from the *Athenaeum* similarly brings attention to the seated nun's "red skull" and "black eyes" and then exclaims that she is comparable to one of Hogarth's viragoes, one suspects gender anxiety at work. These two women, working independently in their private world, have power and control over their bodies. Separated from the confines of the roles of the good mother and wife, they possess the potential to be hostile to a male intruder. *Punch* never does explain what it is that makes the nuns so terrible; rather it is assumed that the reader already knows.

In this context it is worth noting that Millais, like Rossetti and Hunt, had complex relationships with models, who in addition to being featured in pictorial dramas about female chastity, often became their wives. Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal, for example, was a sitter for not only Rossetti, but most famously for Millais's *Ophelia* (1852). Annie Miller, Hunt's model for *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) was for a time his fiancé. His first wife Fanny Waugh sat for the figure of Isabella in *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1868). Rossetti, in his earliest PRB painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849), used his mother for the model of St. Anne and his sister Christina for Mary, explicitly tying them to a tradition of Catholic iconography. Rossetti was close to his mother and sister, who were interested in the Anglo-Catholic church and often worshiped at Christ's Church in London where a disciple of Edward Pusey, a leader of the Oxford Movement, led their congregation.¹² Rossetti's later depictions of women include more symbolic representations of goddesses and allegories. For these models Rossetti still turned to his wife Elizabeth Siddal, as well as Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris. Cornforth and Morris, both working-class women, soon became romantically and artistically involved in

¹² Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle: 1848-1871* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 241. Reverend William Dodsworth was the vicar.

relationships with Rossetti, Hunt, and the second-generation Pre-Raphaelite artists Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris.

For scholars like Tim Barringer, *The Vale of Rest* points to a critical turning point in Millais's oeuvre, a shift from the narrative and hyper-detailed style of the PRB to compositions more focused on rendering mood and sentiment.¹³ Millais's first major biographer, Marion H. Spielmann, also identifies *The Vale of Rest* as a crucial step in Millais's "maturity" as an artist, as well as his widening social and political sympathies as well as his interests in portraiture.¹⁴ Rachel Barnes and others concur that the painting expresses the artist's interest in mood, here a "melancholy theme, focusing on the transience of life."¹⁵ Certainly the many familiar symbols of death in *The Vale of Rest*, including the skull on the rosary, the open grave, the wreaths of tansy, the bell tower, and the coffin-like cloud low in the sky (often characterized as a Scottish omen of an approaching death) indicate an allegory of mortality. But in conflict with a symbolic reading are the clearly articulated figures and the landscape they occupy, holdovers of his earlier style.

¹³ Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 148-149.

¹⁴ Marion Henry Spielmann, *Millais and His Works, With Special Reference to the Exhibition at the Royal Academy, 1898* (London: Pallas Athene, reprint, 2007), 27-29: "Not till 1859, when the 'Vale of Rest' appeared, did Millais forswear the tenets of the Brotherhood; or, as he called it, 'emerge from his artistic puberty.'" It is to be noted—as has already been suggested—that when, with the independence characteristic of his vigorous temperament, he cast off the influence of his great companions in art, Millais became, generally speaking, less of the poet and the thinker, and more of the painter and technician. But his sympathies, like his art, widened out, his range broadened in harmony with his more comprehensive interest in life; and what he lost for a time, if not altogether, in pure passion, he gained in scope. Ruskin roundly denounced his defection, which to him amounted to artistic apostasy; but Millais went calmly on amid the growing applause—for which in truth, in spite of all its sweetness, he cared not overmuch—and took the praise much as he had taken the blame that had been his portion heretofore. He had conquered his public with a concession, and was fast becoming its painter-hero."

¹⁵ Rachel Barnes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and their World* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 59.

Scholars account for Millais's shift in style and for the contradictory impulses toward realism and symbolism operating in this painting by tying them to his spiritual beliefs. Susan Casteras comments that, "Digging one's own grave as Millais depicts it might thus be understood as a form of achieving spiritual union with Christ."¹⁶ Eva Péteri states that "*The Blind Girl* (1854-6), *Autumn Leaves* (1855-6), and *The Vale of Rest* (1858) are in the strict sense not religious works at all, they do not even have a direct contact with a narrative, nevertheless, their sentiment and spirituality convey emotions and thoughts which were strongly associated by Millais with religion."¹⁷ Péteri's claim is supported by a frequently quoted letter Millais wrote in regard to painting *Autumn Leaves* (fig. 2). In *Autumn Leaves* four young girls surround a smoking pile of variously colored foliage in a darkened landscape. Two girls look out at the viewer; one holds a basket while another tips its contents onto the growing pile of leaves. The youngest holds an apple as she stares meditatively at something beyond the picture plane. Millais wrote to F. G. Stephens, a former Pre-Raphaelite and an art critic who had sympathetically reviewed *Autumn Leaves*, about wanting to include a passage from Psalms with the painting. Millais says, "I have always felt insulted when people have regarded the picture

¹⁶ Susan Casteras, "Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1981): 178.

¹⁷ Éva Péteri, *Victorian Approaches to Religion as Reflected in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003) 114. *The Blind Girl* of 1854-56 (fig. 3) also shows Millais's increasing use of symbolism to convey religious sentiment. The painting depicts two young girls seated on the side of a road in front of a cornfield. The blind girl, whose eyes are closed, wears a note around her neck that reads, "pity the blind." Her sister sits on her lap and gazes back at a double rainbow in the distance sky. The double rainbow and the butterfly that rests on the blind girl's shoulder symbolically suggest a blessing from God.

as a simple little domestic episode...as I intended the picture to awaken by its solemnity the deepest religious reflection.”¹⁸

As Péteri indicates, it is difficult to discern Millais’s specific religious beliefs, as he was not a church-goer nor did he leave documents of his religious convictions. His son and biographer glosses his lack of formalized religion by saying that, “though he seldom went to church, his whole being was permeated by a sense of ‘the Divinity that stirs within us.’”¹⁹ That Millais was sympathetic to religion generally and Catholicism especially, at least by 1848, is clear from his correspondence with Thomas Combe, the Catholic patron of his dear friend Charles Collins’s *Convent Thoughts* (fig. 4), in which he salutes Combe with the phrase “Dear Early Christian.” Albert Boime regards this as “a clue to his [Combe’s] Anglo-Catholic status and to Millais’s own early attraction to High Church principles.”²⁰ The scholarly consensus then is that Millais’s scenes of nuns are meant to evoke an ideal rather than sectarian spirituality, one that implicitly critiques contemporary society and its materialist, worldly obsessions.

Since Millais was not a Tractarian or catechism-citing Anglican, one of the issues *The Vale of Rest* uniquely foregrounds in its focus on nuns—and death—is the presence

¹⁸ Ellen Harding, *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 114.

¹⁹ J. G. Millais, *Life and Letters*, vol. II, 312: “Happy for him that at such a time he could face the future unmoved by any sense of fear; for though he seldom went to church, his whole being was permeated by a sense of ‘the Divinity that stirs within us.’ Christianity was with him no mere profession, but a living force by which his actions were habitually controlled; and so in the consolations of religion he found all the help he needed to enable him to bear up bravely and without a murmur even in the darkest hours of his life...He had often talked of them (Biblical scenes) with his friend the Rev. Armstrong Hall, minister of St. John’s Church, Perth—a man of culture and refinement...”

²⁰ Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle: 1848-1871*, 245. John Guille Millais includes an extensive number of letters between his father and Mr. and Mrs. Combe. The letters begin on November 13, 1850, and documentation ends with a letter to Mrs. Combe dated December 26, 1853.

and absence of Catholic sympathies, sentiments that would shift and intensify to varying degrees throughout his career. *The Vale of Rest* is neither the first nor the last time that Millais depicted images of nuns. These renderings begin sympathetically, often in drawings that were either personal or not intended to be publicly exhibited. In 1849 he completed a drawing titled *The Disentombment of Queen Matilda* (fig. 5), which depicts a crowd of nuns watching in horror as Calvinists violate the tomb of Matilda of Flanders in 1562. Millais probably did this drawing soon after viewing engravings of the Camposanto frescoes at Pisa, which were presented to the PRB at their founding meeting in September of 1848.²¹ Carlo Lasinio's 1812 engravings of the 14th-century frescoes depict a number of canonical religious scenes, all rendered in precise, stiff compositions. According to Péteri, this drawing of nuns at a tomb "shows again how little did Millais at first heed the strong, current feeling of anti-Catholicism...his sympathies were obviously with the shocked and praying Catholic nuns, who are likened to Christ, the saints, and the martyrs..."²²

The next work showing a nun is a detailed ink drawing of *St. Agnes' Eve* (fig. 6). This drawing is based on Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1837 poem "St. Agnes' Eve" that opens with the lines:

Deep on the convent-roof the snows
Are sparkling to the moon:
My breath to heaven like vapour goes:
May my soul follow soon!²³

²¹ Liana Cheney, *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 57. These were lent to Millais by a neighbor named Ayrton.

²² Péteri, *Victorian Approaches to Religion as Reflected in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 38.

²³ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "St. Agnes' Eve," *Poetry Archive*, 2002, http://www.poetry-archive.com/t/st_agnes_eve.html.

The main figure, a nun, looks out of an arched, medieval window onto a moonlit, snow-covered courtyard. A small altar with the figure of the crucified Christ is located in the lower right of the composition. The nun's breath is seen passing through the open window as it dissipates into the night air. The narrative owes to the story of the thirteen-year old Christian martyr, Agnes of Rome, and the rituals on the eve of her feast day, January 20th, in which girls had the chance to see their future husbands in their dreams. Millais also used this subject in an 1857 wood engraving, as well as the later painting *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1863).²⁴

Malcolm Warner points out that the nun in the drawing longs for the “consummation of her spiritual marriage with Christ in death.”²⁵ Overt sexuality is common in visual depictions of *St. Agnes*, but has a specific weight when understood in the context of the drawing's creation—and apparent model. The drawing was based on a sketch Millais had made of Effie during the infamous trip Millais took with the Ruskins to Glenfinlas in the summer of 1853. In 1854, Millais gave the drawing to Effie who later wrote to her mother that “the Saint's face looking out on the snow with the mouth opened and dying-looking is exactly like Millais' –which however, fortunately, has not struck John who said the only part of the picture he didn't like was the face which was ugly but that Millais had touched it and it was better, but it strikes me very much.”²⁶ The fact that Effie notices Millais's likeness within the drawing is illuminating. Millais may have

²⁴ This theme was popular among the Pre-Raphaelites. Millais used Tennyson's later version of it, even though the initial, more popular conception is found in John Keats's 1819 poem “The Eve of St. Agnes.”

²⁵ Warner, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 268.

²⁶ Mary Lutyens, *Millais and the Ruskins*, (London: Murray, 1967) 148. The letter was dated March 2, 1854.

consciously or unconsciously positioned himself in the role of the longing, devoted nun, waiting hopelessly for the then married Effie.

In contrast to *Matilda*, *St. Agnes' Eve* is stylistically more complete. The nuns in *Matilda* are vaguely defined by their contours and only their facial expressions are given attention in terms of modeling. Their forms speak directly to Lasinio's engravings. The subject matter in *Matilda* is also explicitly historical, whereas the subject matter in *St. Agnes' Eve* is deeply internal. Millais instills the nuns in both of these drawings with a strong sense of psychological presence; however, in *St. Agnes' Eve*, this presence has a more nuanced, personal meaning—perhaps stemming from his own desires to be with Effie after courting her secretly on a trip to Scotland under the invitation of her husband.²⁷

Later, in 1861, Millais illustrated social reformer Harriet Martineau's story "Sister Anna's Probation" in a series of five pictures for the literary journal *Once a Week*.²⁸ Martineau details the love story of Anna, who unwillingly joins a convent, and her lover, Captain Fletcher, who rescues her from an "unnatural life." Of the five illustrations, only two depict nuns. The first occurs in the second image (fig. 7). Two nuns are busy at a writing table copying manuscripts, while a third, Anna, turns away from the table and

²⁷ Millais met John Ruskin shortly after his showing of *Christ in the House of His Parents*. In the summer of 1853, Ruskin invited Millais to join himself and Effie on a trip to Glenfinlas in Scotland where Millais painted a number of works, but more importantly found a romantic interested in Effie that was reciprocated. For more on this trip see *Effie* by Suzanne Cooper.

²⁸ The dates of the five illustrations are as follows: March 15, 1862; March 22, 1862; March 29, 1862; April 5, 1862; and April 12, 1862. *Once a Week*, published by Bradbury and Evans, was known for its innovative illustrators, Holman Hunt among them. Linda Hughes remarks that *Once a Week*, for the first time, paired original poems with original woodcut engravings. Hughes argues that the magazine's use of illustrations significantly influenced (or altered) the contextual meanings of the poems—and ultimately resulted from male desire. Linda Hughes, "Inventing Poetry and Pictorialism in *Once a Week*: A Magazine of Visual Effects," *Victorian Poetry* 48 (2010), 1.

stares dreamily at the other side of the room. The fourth image (fig. 8) shows Anna and another postulant contemplating the outside world. The last image (fig. 9) of the series is the most telling—Anna and Captain Fletcher are seen sitting together in the forest, his arm wrapped around her as she lovingly grasps his hand. His sword is resting next to his side while they both pensively read a book.

Compared to *St. Agnes Eve*, Millais's style in the illustrations is sketchy; his cross-hatchings for shadows are rapid and roughly articulated, perhaps a sign of looming publication deadlines. Millais's intention has clearly departed from his previous two nun drawings. For the first time Millais introduces a man into a work depicting nuns. He places this man, Captain Fletcher, in the role of the hero—rescuer of the woman who has had the misfortune of becoming a nun. While the previous two ink drawings of Matilda and Agnes were never meant to be publicly displayed, this series was clearly prepared for an audience ready to criticize the convent life.

The Vale of Rest accordingly must be considered within the context of the Oxford Movement. On July 14, 1833, John Keble, a churchman and poet, gave a sermon titled “National Apostasy” at St. Mary's, Oxford. It was this sermon that served as the catalyst for the beginning of what is called the Oxford Movement, sometimes referred to as Tractarianism. Keble had taken a strong interest in Parliament's plan to remove a number of the Anglican Church of Ireland's bishoprics and archbishoprics. To him this signaled a call to arms to protect the power that the Christian religion had traditionally exerted over government. When Parliament began meddling in the Church's jurisdiction, it threatened to destabilize not only the Church of Ireland's authority, but the Church of England's authority, as well.

Joining forces with Keble were John Henry Newman, an Oxford priest, and Edward Bouverie Pusey, a clergyman and professor at Christ Church, and together they composed what would become a series of ninety publications on the important doctrines of the Church of England titled *Tracts for the Times*. Among these doctrines was the importance of Apostolic Succession, which would re-establish the authority of the Church of England as a direct descendant of the church established by the Apostles. Glenn Everett and George P. Landow remark on the initial enthusiasm the movement gave its followers: “the Victorians who abhorred the atheism of the Utilitarians and the agnosticism of the scientists, were put off by the enthusiasm of the Evangelicals, found the Broad Church too latitudinarian to have any meaning left to its doctrine, and yet could not stomach going over to Rome, found these High Church Anglicans a perfect conservative solution.”²⁹

The movement’s emphasis on liturgical and sacramental issues, as well as its interest in seeking recognition that Anglicanism was indeed a branch of Catholicism and not Protestantism, did not remain un-scrutinized. To say that controversies developed would be an understatement. Newman, Keble, and Pusey were attacked by latitudinarians within the University of Oxford and by bishops of the church. As the movement developed, successor or minor movements, such as Ritualism, Puseyism, and Anglo-Catholicism formed, further fragmenting what was left of the initial movement’s foundation. The movement’s end is most commonly dated to the conversion of Newman to Roman Catholicism in 1845.

²⁹ Glenn Everett and George P. Landow, “High Church: Tractarianism,” *The Victorian Web*, 1988, <http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/tractarian1.html>.

Of interest here though is Edward Pusey's later reestablishment of male and female monasticism within Anglicanism. Because of the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, a milestone for Catholic Emancipation, Catholic convents were allowed reinstatement for the first time since the Reformation, when the Tudors had put into law several legislative acts banning Catholic conventual practices. Pusey in turn decided to create similar institutions. On March 26, 1845, the first sisterhood in the Church of England since the Reformation was established. It was known as the Park Village Sisterhood and had a mandate with the following goals: visiting the poor in their homes; visiting hospitals, workhouses, or prisons; feeding, clothing, and instructing destitute children; and assisting in burying the dead.³⁰ Anglican convent life provided much needed aid to the poor, specifically during the cholera epidemics of 1849 and 1866. These sisterhoods had strong incentives to attract women, offering an alternative to spinsterhood, the ability to have a certain amount of freedom over their work, and time for spiritual devotions. Because of the re-emergence of both Catholic and Anglican convents at nearly the same time, it is difficult to be certain to which denomination the nuns in *The Vale of Rest* belong.³¹

As these monastic communities grew they attracted criticism, including a semi-hysterical reaction from the largely Protestant English public. Susan Mumm states that

³⁰ Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain*, (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 3, 6. By 1858 there were 17 established Anglican Sisterhoods and by 1886, there were 53. These numbers do not include the communities whose date of establishment remains unknown, 209-212. Mumm estimates that by 1900, more than 10,000 full-time women workers worked within convent walls..

³¹ However, two strong pieces of evidence point to the nuns as Anglican. The first is that the Anglican Diocese of St. Andrews, Dunkeld, and Dunblane, had been established in Perth, Scotland since 1842, and this is the location in which Millais painted his nuns; the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dunkeld was not restored until 1878. Second, the Catholic rosary traditionally ends with a crucifix, while in *The Vale of Rest*, the cross remains bare, an indication of an Anglican rosary. Finally, the women's habits resemble those of Anna in Martineau's story, which was set amid an Anglican sisterhood.

there were eight popular arguments against these organizations: “the ‘family argument’; accusations of Romanism; attacks based on presumed female incapacity for self-government; the complaint that sisterhoods gave women a public face; accusations that ladies were doing the work of servants; disapproval of their financial affairs; anger at their refusal to subject themselves to church order; and a fear that sisterhoods were stripping social life of its best women.”³² Furthermore, John Tosh explains how revived doctrines could foster opposition to gendered separate spheres: “one of the reasons why the revival of confession by the Tractarians (or Oxford Movement) aroused such hostility among Evangelicals is that it was seen to undermine the spiritual authority of the household head...in practice the husband’s sacred authority was balanced by his wife’s high moral status which rested...on the recently enhanced prestige of motherhood.”³³ This threat to masculine authority parallels the most frequent critique of nuns, expressed during the 1850s and 1860s when Millais was working on *The Vale of Rest*: the “family argument.” Because nuns apparently rejected women’s traditional household responsibilities, especially their role as mothers, sisterhoods had the potential to become a broad disruption of Victorian social expectations.

While Millais created paintings with other subjects associated with Catholicism, his particular interest in nuns and his ability to produce favorable, or at least ambiguous, views of them seems to derive from his own construction of female and male sexuality. Millais was not the only Victorian to imagine an ideal of piety and devotion in chaste female form. Boime comments that “the closeted, dreamy, virginal, self-sacrificing

³² Mumm, *Stolen Daughters*, 173.

³³ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 37.

female clearly appealed to one side of the Victorian male sensibility, but its erotic implications could be smuggled in among the religious allusions.”³⁴ Furthermore, Paul Barlow makes a strong connection between Millais’s *Spring* or *Apple Blossoms* (fig. 10) and *The Vale of Rest*, both of which were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1859. Both show women apart from men, with an emphasis on their physicality, thus giving the male viewer the opportunity to observe their more open sexuality.

Spring depicts eight modern young women in an apple orchard. Of the eight, only one looks younger than twelve years of age. They are separated from the expanse of the blossoming trees by a low stone wall, crowding the group in the foreground. These young women surround a basin of what appears to be buttermilk, while one of them stands to the left of the group and pours the liquid into bowls for her companions. All except one of the girls are well dressed and idly stare at their surroundings or each other, unaware of the audience’s observation. The oddity of this work is constituted in the figure opposite that of the authoritative standing server. She lies sprawled on the ground, knees open and arms thrown apart. She seductively pulls a blade of grass through her teeth while making eye contact with the viewer. Her gaze is a direct parallel to that of the seated nun in *Vale of Rest*, but with the opposite connotation—the latter evoking the spiritual, the former the sexual. What is odd here is that Millais includes a scythe suspended directly above the eroticized girl, disrupting the sensual reading of her form, as well as the pleasantness of the party. The presence of the scythe suggests a reading of the figure as a *femme fatale*, aimed at pitfalls of vanity and amorousness; sharp implements also surrounded the silhouetted figure of the digging nun.

³⁴ Boime, *A Social History of Modern Art*, vol. 4, 245.

The reception of *Spring* was much harsher than that of *The Vale of Rest*. For instance, in *Fraser's Magazine's* review of both paintings, the reviewer says of *Spring*: “Admitting that something may be said for 15 [*The Vale of Rest*], what can be said for 298 [*Spring*]? Nothing, except that its exhibition as a work of art is a deliberate insult to the public.”³⁵ Ruskin compares the work to an illustration of “some modern Dante...an Inferno for English society.”³⁶ Reviews from *The Times* and *The Athenaeum* complain of technical errors and call Millais to return to his earlier style and former glory.³⁷ Even his wife Effie had a profoundly negative word to add: “This picture, whatever its future may be, I consider the most unfortunate of Millais’ pictures.”³⁸ The grounds of offense for this painting remain elusive to a modern audience. Where some reviewers defended *The Vale of Rest*, few if any could stand behind the apparent atrocity that was *Spring*. Millais’s unattended girls and their placement within an elusive narrative may have triggered uneasiness in its contemporary audience.

Barlow observes that the two paintings have often been seen as a pair, “the one depicting budding new life and sexual fertility, the other prospective death and

³⁵ [Unsigned Review], “The Exhibitions of 1859,” *Fraser's Magazine*, 59 (June 1859): 671.

³⁶ John Ruskin, *Academy Notes*, vol. II, 215-216. “But it is a phenomenon, so far as I know, unparalleled hitherto in art history, that any workman capable of so much should rest content with so little...the scrabbled remnant of a scornfully abandoned aim...And in this present picture, the unsightliness of some of the faces, and the preternatural grimness of others, with the fierce colour and angular masses of the flowers above, force upon me a strange impression, which I cannot shake off—that this is an illustration of the song of some modern Dante, who, at the first entrance of an Inferno for English society, and found, carpeted with ghostly grass, a field of penance for young ladies, where girl-blossoms, who had been vainly gay, or treacherously amiable, were condemned to recline in reprobation under red hot apple blossom, and sip scalding milk out of a poisoned porringer.”

³⁷ [Unsigned Review], “The Royal Academy Exhibition.” *The Times*, 23294 (April 30, 1859): 10. “Mr. Millais has already given us the measure of his weakness as well as his strength...we can only shrug our shoulders, and admit that all gifts are not given to all, and that the heights of powerful achievement are not incompatible with the lowest depths of failure.”

³⁸ J. G. Millais, *Life and Letters*, vol. I, 323.

celibacy.”³⁹ Although *The Vale of Rest* may appear desexualized when viewed as a pendant to *Spring*, the erotic undercurrents alluded to by Boime are also present in Millais’s portrayal of young nuns. Millais gives them a charged sexuality through their clothing. Helena Michie argues that clothing, and the body hidden within, creates coded images of women in Pre-Raphaelite art: “as the sexuality of the body is displaced onto the figure, the body itself, elusive and allusive, titillates by its absence.”⁴⁰ As the working novice’s figure becomes unveiled, with her rolled up sleeves and exposed forearms, the seated nun remains a titillating mystery, her body lost in the fabric of her habit. As a pair, *Spring* and *The Vale of Rest* both retain an underlying sexuality, but the former is more explicit.

The Vale of Rest’s internal tension between the laborious and devout in a religious context evokes “the familiar characteristics of Martha and Mary, representatives of Work and Faith, as depicted by Velázquez and other artists.”⁴¹ It also evokes the traditional symbol of Mary’s virginity as an enclosed garden. The nuns occupy a space of heightened religious symbolism; however, an enclosed cemetery rather than a garden points to the Protestant Victorian conviction that their virginal beauty is destined to be wasted in this lifetime. These women, rather than giving their hand in marriage to a suitable husband, have symbolically become brides of Christ, thus refusing the Victorian

³⁹ Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005), 89. “*Spring*’s principal companion in the 1859 exhibition was *The Vale of Rest*, a depiction of a cemetery at twilight. The two paintings have often been seen as a pair—the one depicting budding new life and sexual fertility, the other prospective death and celibacy. Both are set in gardens and are the same size and shape, with similar compositions. Here the two young nuns digging a convent grave occupy the foreground while the background recedes in ambiguous planes similar to *Spring*, culminating in the silhouetted trees against the yellowing clouds.”

⁴⁰ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 123.

⁴¹ Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past*, 89-90.

ideal of chaste motherhood. Yet Millais gives the women sexual allure in part by the very absence of a male stand-in, husband or priest—giving a male viewer or the artist himself the opportunity to theoretically intervene.⁴²

Susan Casteras identifies the erotic element in Millais's religious painting as coming from "rescued nun syndrome." This, according to Casteras, occurs in paintings of nuns in which quasi-courtship imagery "sets up a more overt rivalry between the spirit and the flesh, Christ and a mortal as contenders for woman's love."⁴³ Casteras observes the syndrome at work in Millais's 1861 illustration for Martineau's "Sister Anna's Probation." When Anna is depicted as a nun she is often portrayed as distracted, longing for the outside world. Anna's lover, Captain Henry Fletcher, is portrayed in two out of the five illustrations and, in both, has whisked Anna away from the convent, the last illustration representing his victory in taking her hand in marriage. In a religious painting with similarly anti-Catholic sentiments, Millais's *The Escape of a Heretic, 1559* (fig. 11), a young woman about to burn at the stake during the Spanish Inquisition is rescued by a young man disguised as her confessor.⁴⁴ Boime extends this rescue fantasy to Millais's pictures of women generally, including those in which the absence of a male rescuer

⁴² Boime, *A Social History of Modern Art*, vol. 4, 279. Although writing about the early stages of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Boime makes a compelling statement concerning women: "All of the women associated with the Pre-Raphaelites in their period of formation were in fact daughters of lower-middle-class and working-class families who were cast into the role of dependents by men uncomfortable with sexual knowledge and emotional intimacy." Boime continues in regards to Millais's *Ophelia*, "Although Millais's sexual fantasy may seem to border on necrophilia, it is possible that in his close-up and obsessive concentration on the spot he imagined himself to be Ophelia's potential rescuer."

⁴³ Casteras, "Nuns and Novices," 179. Later examples of this tension specifically tied to convent life can be seen in Arthur Hacker's *The Cloister or the World* (1896) and George Hall Neale's *Christ or the World?* (1892).

⁴⁴ Interestingly, the rosary with which the priest is gagged in this painting is the same rosary Millais places in the hands of the seated nun in *The Vale of Rest*. Malcolm Warner points out this prop belonged to a Lowes Dickinson.

permits the male artist to take his place. To Boime, Millais saw himself as a knight who in his art might steal the holy woman back to a ‘natural’ Victorian life. This reading also applies to *The Vale of Rest*, where the viewer, though under the minatory gaze of the seated nun, might feel invited to fantasize about the youthful woman swaying temptingly in front of him.

That Millais constructed himself as a heroic rescuer of women, bringing them out of confinement by religion or social convention to a “natural” femininity that included sexual subordination to men, is buttressed by biographical evidence. Millais’s wife Effie served as his model multiple times—his painting *The Order of Release* (fig. 12) includes her portrait, for example—and it may be that the woman digging the grave in *The Vale of Rest* again represented her for Millais. Perhaps not coincidentally, Effie is buried in Kinnoull churchyard in Perth, the same setting depicted in the painting. The history of Millais’s courtship of Effie also involves a “rescue.” Effie Gray’s father was a wealthy businessman in law and banking, who sent his eldest daughter to school in London.⁴⁵ Effie subsequently blossomed into an educated, flirtatious socialite. Her social success was only crowned by marriage to John Ruskin in 1848. Their marriage, however, was annulled in what has become a famous anecdote of Victorian sexuality generally; conditioned by classical statues, Ruskin—who praised women as queens—was horrified by and rejected female sexuality in the flesh.⁴⁶ Millais, by marrying Effie, may have indeed seen himself as a rescuer.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Effie was the eldest of fifteen children, many of whom died young.

⁴⁶ Suzanne Fagence Cooper, *Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 126-127.

⁴⁷ Cooper, *Effie*, 6. It is through Effie’s correspondence, especially with her parents, that we learn about her miserable marriage with Ruskin. However, Millais’s letters also aid in the

This famous love triangle parallels that which a typical Victorian male would have encountered in the fantasied quest to rescue a nun from her “chaste” marriage to Christ in favor of a more “natural” one.⁴⁸ Millais’s own sexual interest in a particular type of woman—strong in character, but still in enough jeopardy to require a heroic rescuer—gave him the ability to infuse his art with a degree of fervor that seems to emerge in his erotic depiction of nuns and women apart from men. John Tosh points out that “domesticity was difficult to square with the traditional association of masculinity with heroism and adventure.”⁴⁹ In *The Vale of Rest*, Millais positioned himself as redeemer of the domestic sphere for women by suggesting, through the eroticism of the woman digging, the masculine viewer’s ability to return her to it. At the same time, the implied role of rescuer maintains masculine freedom from the constraints of the female-dominated home.

In this context, the Millais’ son offers an intriguing account of Effie’s response to *The Vale of Rest*. Millais was having difficulty painting the digging nun and had spent every day for seven weeks attempting to get her right. J. G. Millais says that, “I have heard my mother say she never had such a time in her life as when my father was painting that woman.”⁵⁰ Ultimately, Effie and her mother stole the painting and hid it in the wine cellar. If Millais found submissive, victimized and chaste women to be erotic,

understanding of the situation: “By Christmas, Everett had decided that he should warn Effie’s mother about ‘the wretchedness of her position’. Writing to her on 19 December 1853, he complained of John’s selfishness and the way he constantly pointed out his wife’s shortcomings. In his haste to catch the post that night Everett let something slip: he knew why Effie was so unhappy. She had already told him the secret of her failed marriage.”

⁴⁸ For further discussion of the latter, consult Susan Casteras’s “Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists’ Portrayal of Nuns and Novices,” *Victorian Studies* 24 (1981):157-184.

⁴⁹ John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 6.

⁵⁰ J. G. Millais, *Life and Letters*, vol. I, 331.

then reconciling this vision with his actual and not very submissive wife—who had a mother to help monitor male actions—might indeed have been difficult.

Millais is not alone in smuggling sexuality into religious paintings of women. Jan Marsh has argued that William Holman Hunt's *Claudio and Isabella* (fig. 13) and Charles Collins's *Convent Thoughts* are two examples in which the sexuality of the virtuous women is expressed figuratively and biographically.⁵¹ *Claudio and Isabella* depicts a scene from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1623) in which Claudio asks his religious sister to sacrifice her virginity to save his life. In Hunt's painting, Isabella is seen brightly lit, nurturing the troubled emotional state of her brother. Her body, though not physically emphasized, is an object of desire in the narrative, and made more titillating by the viewer's knowledge of Isabella's fate—her eventual marriage to the Duke. This knowledge permits the viewer to imagine Isabella's body beyond her habit.

Collins's painting shows a young nun in an enclosed garden contemplating a passionflower. Collins, a good friend of Millais, knew the Pre-Raphaelites well, especially Rossetti's younger sister Maria, whom he had desired to court. Marsh states, "but, 'being disappointed in an affair of the heart'—this may refer to Maria's rejection—Collins altered his conception [of the painting, originally showing a young woman tending a flower garden] to that of a contemplative nun."⁵² This shift in subject demonstrates Collins's defeat in rescuing his love from Christ. Furthermore, Boime maintains of this later conception that "the High Church references gloss the original theme of romantic love, perhaps seen in the detail of the erect lilies pointing in the

⁵¹ Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987): 34. Note also that the same habit was used for both *Convent Thoughts* and Hunt's *Claudio and Isabella*.

⁵² Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 34.

direction of the nun's body."⁵³ Millais seems to have shared these ideas: that religious and social conventions hedged in women's sexuality, and that it was part of male privilege to rescue women for a life more in accord with nature and more under masculine control.

Where Hunt and Collins presented their nuns in flattering light or enveloped amongst thriving flowers, Millais in contrast, left his less genteel women in a cold, darkening graveyard. In response to the criticism of the seated nun's ugliness or coarseness (the ways in which she did not resemble the victims in other Pre-Raphaelite paintings), Millais returned to the painting in 1862 to repaint her face.⁵⁴ Figure 14, a final drawing Millais did of the composition for *The Vale of Rest*, demonstrates that Millais revised the work to make the seated nun more beautiful, more idealized. He manipulated his original painting to not only make her a more tempting object in need of rescue, but also to give her appearance more appeal for a presumably male purchaser.⁵⁵ But he was not successful. The painting was exhibited in 1862 in Paris, but remained unsold in his studio, with a price tag of £600. It was finally purchased by E. T. White on behalf of Sir Henry Tate, a wealthy sugar merchant who is best known for establishing the National Gallery of British Art (today known as Tate Britain), in 1886 for £3,150.⁵⁶ The twenty-

⁵³ Boime, *A Social History of Modern Art*, vol. 4, 245.

⁵⁴ Malcolm Warner, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1984), 176. Warner points out that "After the exhibition, Millais had his brother bring it back up to Perth for him to retouch the face of the nun on the right, making it 'a little prettier', using a Mrs Paton as his model...in 1862 he changed the same face again. J. G. Millais states that 'he had the picture in his studio for a week, and repainted the head from a Miss Lane.'"

⁵⁵ Warner, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 176. It should be pointed out that Millais used three models for the seated nun, but the identity of the first remains elusive.

⁵⁶ J.G. Millais, *Life and Letters*, vol. II, 470. *The Vale of Rest* was subsequently exhibited at the Paris International Exhibition of 1862, the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1887, and the Birmingham Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition of 1891. Paul Barlow notes that when *The Vale of Rest*

seven years between the painting's first exhibition and its sale leaves room for various speculations about how Victorian preferences in art changed toward the symbolic or relaxed anti-Catholic tendencies in the wake of the decline of the Oxford Movement.

In 1858, when he painted *The Vale of Rest*, Millais was increasingly concerned with selling paintings to support his growing family.⁵⁷ Spielmann wrote that after or despite Ruskin's denouncements of Millais's works in the 1850s, Millais "went calmly on amid the growing applause...he had conquered his public with a concession, and was fast becoming its painter-hero."⁵⁸ Millais had been awarded the status of Associate Professor at the Royal Academy in 1853, and was quickly climbing its bureaucratic ladder; he altered his style to accommodate the doctrines the Pre-Raphaelites had rebelled against. This desire may have contributed to Millais's move after *The Vale of Rest* away from overt religious subject matter and particularly Catholic subjects. As Boime explains: "Millais's innate conservatism and desire to reach a broad audience, however, could not allow for extended engagement with the contentious political and religious issues of the day."⁵⁹ The dominance of portrait commissions throughout Millais's work of the 1860's and 1870's is a further indicator of his concentration on sales.

His later works, described as his "moody" Scottish landscapes, represent a shift in style perhaps also meant to cater to broader Victorian taste. This style is evident in *The Old Garden* of 1888 (fig. 15), which shares a similar composition with *The Vale of Rest*. The use of orthogonal lines and the placement of the horizon are almost identical in both

was shown in Paris, it "was considered similar to the work of Millais's near-namesake Jean-Francois Millet, its twilight mix of manual labour with rural Catholic religiosity being readily identified with Millet's characteristic subjects."

⁵⁷ Millais and Effie had eight children, three by the time *The Vale of Rest* was painted.

⁵⁸ Spielmann, *Millais and His Works*, 27-29.

⁵⁹ Boime, *A Social History of Modern Art*, vol. 4, 273.

works; however, Millais eliminated figures from his later landscapes and to a great extent, sexuality.⁶⁰ Millais's biographer Spielmann, presumably thinking of this restful landscape, said that *The Old Garden* "is a work of quiet power and poetry, dependent for its effect upon that pathos which was the sentiment in Millais which corresponded to passion in Rossetti."⁶¹ By the 1880s, it would appear that Millais had converted sexual passion into a more innocuous sentiment—an attitude that appealed to his audience.

However, in 1886, Millais painted a nun for the last time. As a precaution, he contextualized his subject within the safe haven of history painting, specifically the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.⁶² It is this contextualization that shielded Millais from the criticism he received earlier due to the absence of a specific narrative to direct the viewer's judgments. *Mercy: St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572* (fig. 16) depicts the opposite side of a story Millais had previously portrayed in his 1852 painting *A Huguenot on St. Bartholomew's Day*. In *A Huguenot*, a staunch Protestant refuses to accept the white badge of Roman Catholicism, prepared to die for his faith, but in doing so, dooms his love affair with the woman he embraces.⁶³ In *Mercy*, Millais shows the compassion of a

⁶⁰ Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005), 97. Barlow makes a striking comparison between *The Old Garden's* compositional structure and that of *The Vale of Rest*: "the composition recedes in intersecting planes, as in *The Vale of Rest*. As in the earlier painting, the complex angles of the hedges are flattened along the pictorial surface. The hedge enclosing the garden cuts dramatically into the composition, but the line of light reflecting from its top is almost parallel to the frame, just as the conjoined hedges at the right angles in the corner form an almost straight line, the very slightly varied by points of light and shadow."

⁶¹ Spielmann, *Millais and His Works*, 142.

⁶² This massacre occurred in Paris on August 24, 1572, when Catholics slaughtered thousands of Protestants (Huguenots) during the French Wars of Religion.

⁶³ Rebecca Virag, "Mercy: St Bartholomew's Day, 1572," *Tate Britain*, 2002, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-mercy-st-bartholomews-day-1572-n01510/text-summary>. "Millais's painting follows closely the requirements laid down prior to the massacre by the 'Order of the Duke of Guise', that Catholics had to follow: 'When the clock of the Palais de Justice shall sound upon the great bell at daybreak, then each good Catholic must bind a strip of

Catholic nun for the fate of the Protestants. The erect and powerful figure of an ornately dressed man stands with his sword ready. A Friar summons him to kill from an open doorway as a nun throws herself between the Catholic's legs and silently pleads with him to stop.

Sexuality in *Mercy* is charged by the erotic position of the nun's body between the man's legs, as well as the placement of her arms as she simultaneously clutches and is clutched by her companion. The nun becomes the object of sympathy in this work because she is a woman who embodies for Millais a universal, compassionate nature; her Catholicism becomes understated in the light of her womanly virtue. The nobleman and friar, on the other hand, are read as villains, corrupted by their religious fervor. The more explicit nature of this painting's eroticism and the woman's appeal perhaps came into conflict with its equally anti-Catholic message.⁶⁴ It, like *The Vale of Rest* was not received well; furthermore, Millais himself wrote to the artist Briton Rivière that "I have done the picture...I am sometimes happy over it, but oftener wretched."⁶⁵ While attempting to combine the historical, narrative style expected at the Royal Academy with the figure of a nun resembling those in his earlier work, Millais may have found that the combination of religion and erotic desire was no longer effective. His own sense of this work as "wretched" further suggests his discomfort with revisiting the contentious political and religious issues of the earlier period.

white linen round his arm, and place a fair white cross in his cap'. This 'Order' was printed in the Royal Academy catalogue to accompany Millais's *A Huguenot*...when it was exhibited there in 1852."

⁶⁴ Virag, "Mercy: St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572." Virag states "When [*Mercy*] was shown at the Royal Academy in 1887, one critic declared that 'Sir John Millais disappoints expectations' and that his figures offered 'little else but meaningless violence of gesture' (*Magazine of Art*, 1887, 272)."

⁶⁵ J. G. Millais, *Life and Letters*, vol. II, 196.

In the thirty years between Millais's romantic vision of nuns boating on a Scottish lake and his vision of them prostrate begging for mercy, anti-Catholicism had become increasingly legally marginalized, but it remained virulent among certain Protestant groups.⁶⁶ The language of authors like Walter Walsh, writing in opposition to the Oxford Movement and its influence in the 1890s, with its emphasis on convent secrecy and possible monstrosities, reflects the hysterical note of convent foes throughout the century. Walsh's peculiar interest in "secret burials" seems particularly relevant. Walsh was an anti-Catholic author who published a sensational history of the Oxford Movement in 1897, filled with scathing accusations about events occurring in the High Church.⁶⁷ Walsh reported exaggerated instances of abuse by priests and mother superiors in chapters with titles such as "Shameful tyranny over the Sisters" and "Are Ritualistic Convents Jails?" He gave credence to accounts of the horrors that supposedly took place behind convent walls, written by ex-nuns, doctors, reverends, and those "helped" by the nuns. In chapter six of his *Secret History*, titled "Private Burial Grounds in Ritualistic Convents," Walsh made claims that would have been familiar to more mainstream burial reformers:

The very existence of such burial grounds within Convent walls would, at any time, facilitate the commission of crime. In Roman Catholic Convents, it is well known, illegitimate infants, and even the Sisters themselves, have been murdered, and secretly buried...several of the nuns

⁶⁶John S. Reed, *Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 238-256. In his chapter titled "The Attempt to 'Put Down Ritualism'," Reed summarizes this opposition; for example, "By the 1880s the leaders of the Evangelical party were treating Anglo-Catholics less as enemies than as competitors..."

⁶⁷Walter Walsh, *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1899), vi-xxxiv. In his preface to this the fifth edition (the first edition was published in 1899), Walsh makes it clear that if his work initially enjoyed popularity, this was soon replaced with criticism that he felt the need to address, by publishing and responding to critical letters and journal reviews.

are buried within those walls, though whether their deaths were properly registered or not is more than I can say...Depend upon it, once the people of England realize that such secret burial-places do exist, their just indignation will not be removed until they are closed for ever.⁶⁸

Walsh's reflections on the unseen and largely imaginary events behind convent walls may have been enjoyed by Protestant and other readers looking for convent tales of abuse; this genre had been in existence since early in the century. In reality the sisterhoods had become more accepted due to their contributions to society—the public had witnessed their visible charitable acts. But Walsh disparages even these acts by ending this chapter on Ritualistic Sisterhoods with a quote by Archbishop Richard Whately from an 1863 address Whately gave to his parishioners titled *Cautions for the Times*:

Bold and persevering assertions often gain credence with the thoughtless; and thus it has come to be believed by many, in some cases which have lately made much noise in the world, that in such and such districts the poor were left wholly unthought of til these Sisterhoods arose; the truth being the very reverse: *twenty times as much* was being done for the poor, and in a more judicious and efficient way, by persons who were content to go about their labour of love quietly, without blowing a trumpet before them, or wearing any fantastic uniform.⁶⁹

Walsh revisited and re-ignited fears that had originally emerged in the 1850s, with the initial appearance and growth of the Anglican sisterhoods. Perhaps surprisingly, many of those fears of secrecy and hidden crimes revolved around just the subject of *The Vale of Rest*: private burial. Charles Newdigate Newdegate, a conservative, anti-Catholic politician at mid-century, for example, shared many of Walsh's sentiments toward convents. In 1864, Newdegate requested that the House of Commons investigate these institutions based on fear that nuns were subjected to unimaginable crimes. In the

⁶⁸ Walsh, *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement*, 192.

⁶⁹ Walsh, *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement*, 201.

transcript of his speech Newdegate is quoted as desiring to “extend the legitimate legal protection of the civil power of this Protestant country to the inmates of the convents within it.”⁷⁰ While making his case to the House of Commons in 1865, he used the apparent confession of a Catholic ex-nun from Colwich:

That statement was, and it stands in the affidavits, that the greatest severities were practised in that Convent,—that she had seen nuns imprisoned—that she had known them to be kept short of food,—that she had seen one nun forced into this underground cell,—that to the best of her belief she never came out alive,—that she attended the service at her funeral, and saw her consigned to the grave in the Convent burying-ground. Now, this evidence is corroborated by a large part of the evidence given of the twenty-seven witnesses who were examined upon the subject. It was proved that there were more burials within the precincts of the Convent than appeared in the register of deaths.⁷¹

Newdegate and Walsh both assumed that what is secret or hidden from the regulation of the public and especially the government, is criminal—going so far as to pair murder with secret, or unregistered burials. After the House of Common’s investigation into Newdegate’s accusations revealed nothing, his reputation and this type of accusation was largely discredited.⁷² Bigots like Walsh used the issue of burial and the convent system’s fabricated resistance to regulation to support their larger claims and attacks generally on the Oxford Movement and Catholics.

What made burial a “living” issue was the initial enactment by Parliament of The Burial Acts in 1852, which were amended in 1853, 1854, 1855, 1857, 1859, 1860, 1862, 1871, 1880, 1881 and finally in 1885. The acts brought regulation of burial, formerly not

⁷⁰ Charles Newdegate, *Monastic and Conventual Institutions: A Speech Delivered in the House of Commons by C. N. Newdegate, M.P., on the 3rd of March, 1865: With the Correspondence* (Edinburgh: John Lindsay, 1866), ii.

⁷¹ Newdegate, *Monastic and Conventual Institutions*, 35.

⁷² Only 79 members voted for Newdegate’s initial amendment and 106 against.

under the control of the government, to the forefront of reform discussions, with the majority of the acts being passed during the years just before Millais painted *The Vale of Rest*. Even as late as the 1830s, private burial was not an uncommon practice for both Protestants and Catholics. Reformers claimed that the problem with such unregulated burial grounds was their threat to public health, something neither Newdegate nor Walsh mention in any detail. Diminishing space within century-old churchyards, rapid population growth (the population of London more than doubled between 1801 and 1851, from just fewer than one million to 2,360,000), and cholera outbreaks (the two deadliest in 1832 and 1849) prompted sanitary reformers like Edwin Chadwick to launch a full-scale investigation of burial practices.⁷³ In his *Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843), Chadwick called for new systems of national interment regulation and inspection that included the reporting of death, the reporting of burial, as well as overarching stipulations to where one could be buried. The Burial Acts of the 1850s saw that many of these regulations were brought to fruition.⁷⁴

The opening of secular garden cemeteries, like Kensal Green in 1832, highlights another noteworthy shift in burial practices, important to the study of *The Vale of Rest* because of the way in which they fueled suspicion of church graveyards as a relic of an

⁷³ Mary Elizabeth Holtz, "Down Among the Dead: Edwin Chadwick's Burial Reform Discourses in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29 (2001): 21.

⁷⁴ Those include the Burial Act of 1852, Burial Act of 1853, Burial Grounds (Scotland) Act of 1855, Burial Act of 1855, Burial Act of 1857, Burial Act of 1859, Registration of Burials Act of 1864, Burial Laws Amendment Act of 1880, and the Disused Burial Grounds Act of 1884.

unhygienic past.⁷⁵ The separation of burial grounds from churches made it possible for reformers to argue that the dead body was a source of disease rather than part of sacred ground. Fear of poisonous miasma from overcrowded graveyards propelled the upper and middle classes toward new, non-sectarian or “rural” cemeteries on the outskirts of cities. According to Julie Rugg, as secularized funerals became the norm, “the Church’s virtual monopoly on provision for the dead had been irredeemably shattered.”⁷⁶ Private burial grounds of convents and monasteries, therefore, began to take on a new, suspicious meaning, as sites for bones and physical bodies rather than sentimental mourning. Out of the public’s gaze and further away still from Chadwick’s reform, the unregulated burial grounds of churches became the target for dramatic speculations, as seen in Walsh and Newdegate. Eventually, convents joined the rest of the nation in accepting burial regulation and registration by 1864.

Millais, though not active himself in any reform movements beyond his role in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was aware of the cholera outbreaks and more generally the spirit of reform in England. His work touches on contemporary social issues such as the threat of conflagrations in dense urban centers in paintings like *The Rescue* (1855), in which a heroic fireman dashes down the stairs of a burning London flat with three children in his arms. His ever growing sense of British nationalism was paired with an interest in topical events, as seen in *Peace Concluded* or *The Return from the Crimea*

⁷⁵ Note the transition in use of terms from *graveyard*, which implies an older place of burial associated with a church and *cemetery*, a nineteenth-century invention that emerged with the rise of secular burial grounds.

⁷⁶ Julie Rugg, “From Reason to Regulation: 1760-1850,” in *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, ed. Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 221.

(1856) in which a recovering officer has returned home from the Crimean War.⁷⁷

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that *The Vale of Rest*'s unframed support measures roughly six feet by three feet and a-half—the exact dimensions Chadwick stipulates for the proper dimensions of an adult grave.⁷⁸

The Vale of Rest itself represents a burial practice increasingly physically and psychologically opposed to progressive movements in contemporary society during the late 1850s. Millais does not condemn such seeming backwardness. The lack of a claustrophobic crowding of tombstones and the overall airiness of the space, with ample room for expansion, suggests that this graveyard has not changed since pre-Reformation days. Rugg points out that “the Gothic Revival looked back to an idealized medieval period, when spirituality was expressed in all aspects of civic life, and when the population showed a natural veneration for the Church.”⁷⁹ This veneration was quickly being lost in mid-nineteenth century Victorian culture amongst the expanding fields of science, medicine, and industry. Similarly, and to the dismay of the Oxford Movement, the mostly secular government was increasing its influence over the Church, in part by regulating burials and other forms of registration that had traditionally been done by the local parish. By painting such a “healthy” landscape, Millais retains the Pre-Raphaelite veneration for the medieval—a trait noted in the press’s favorable reception of the countryside’s “effects.”

⁷⁷ Boime, *A Social History of Modern Art*, vol. 4, 286-291.

⁷⁸ Edwin Chadwick, *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1843), 209. Section IV. —*Of the Grave-diggers* reads as follows: “Every grave must be six feet deep, three feet and a-half wide, and seven feet long for an adult.”

⁷⁹ Rugg, “From Reason to Regulation,” 226.

By creating an implicit comparison between the religious community of women in *The Vale of Rest* and the modern, more commercialized and sentimentalized funeral in a secular rural cemetery, Millais seems to offer a critique of contemporary materialism. This criticism, however, is unclear and even partially lost due to the strikingly real presence of the nuns and all-too physical presence of the open grave, a hole that the viewer could easily tumble into. In comparison to a work like Henry Alexander Bowler's *The Doubt: 'Can these Dry Bones Live?'* (fig. 17), a painting that was better received than *The Vale of Rest*, the message Millais seems to return to of the fear of physical death may have struck his audience as jarring. Both *Spring* and *The Vale of Rest* fairly explicitly foreground *vanitas* and *memento mori* motifs, absent the aspects of comfort and reassurance that *The Doubt* gives its viewers. In *The Doubt*, a modern woman is shown leaning on a carved tombstone that reads "Resurgam" which translated means "I shall rise again." In front of the marker a patch of dirt has been disturbed and the viewer sees bones and a skull emerging from the earth.⁸⁰ Bones seem to mix with the dirt in *The Vale of Rest*, too, but in Bowler's painting they are countered by a blue butterfly that rests on the skull, a symbol of resurrection and hope in life after death. The painting was intended to be an illustration for Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, "depicting the struggle and ultimate triumph of faith over doubt concerning traditional Christian beliefs about life after death."⁸¹ The resemblance of Bowler's main motif to popular mourning imagery found in needlework, watercolors, miniatures and other objects associated with genteel women's mourning practices and performance of sentiment would have further

⁸⁰ Sophie Gilmartin, *Ancestry and Narrative in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Blood Relations from Edgeworth to Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 209.

⁸¹ Rugg, "From Reason to Regulation," 227.

secured its optimistic answer to the question posed. It is likely that Millais's ambiguous graveyard paired with his eroticized nuns would have been read much differently than the clear meaning found in the hope for resurrection in the misnamed *The Doubt*.

The Vale of Rest can be read at face-value as narrative-less. But the contrast between the two women may itself imply a progress—from weary digging to rest, from body to spirit, from more upright phallic masculinity (reinforced by the bell tower behind the standing nun as well as the long-handled tools around her) to more feminine passivity, from desire to self-censorship—and that progress is contained within a setting that counters the narrative of London reformers. The nuns engaged in what viewers would have easily seen as a private burial, outside the scope of public or government intervention and control, activate a quality of mystery (if not the sensationalism it took on in the hands of anti-Catholics) and this resistance to openness in both the women and the painting helps explain the initial critical hostility. Millais once again demonstrated his ability to resurrect, with gravity, a subject that the anxious contemporary art world was uncertain of how or whether to fully appreciate.

But by the 1880s, when the controversies were not so much about the Burial Acts as about the expanded role of government in regulating what had been “private” life had to a great extent died down, Millais's painting was re-appraised. Late in life, Millais said he considered *The Vale of Rest* his favorite painting among his own work, “that by which, he said, he set the most store.”⁸² In retrospect, Millais may have seen that this *memento mori* was his response to the novel situation of prosperity as an artist and a family man. It

⁸² Spielmann, *Millais and His Works*, 74. Spielmann's quote is the only account of Millais claiming *The Vale of Rest* as his favorite work. He does not cite a specific date for the claim.

encapsulated his desire to be a heroic rescuer of his very own damsel locked in a chaste marriage, while simultaneously expressing humility. He may well have envisioned Effie digging in the grave, turning and stepping out of her confinement into his arms in Scotland. The anecdote his son tells of the painting's connection to his honeymoon helps it function as a private story for Millais, its meaning hidden away from his critics and the public.

Millais's first biographer, writing not long after the painting's installation in the newly built Tate Gallery, agreed with Millais's estimation of the painting: "This picture I have always felt to be one of the greatest and most impressive ever painted in England; one in which the sentiment is not mawkish, nor the tragedy melodramatic—a picture to look at with hushed voice and bowed head; in which the execution is not overwhelmed by the story; in which the story is emphasized by the composition; and in which the composition is worthy of the handling."⁸³ At the end of Millais's career, Spielmann easily found narrative meaning in *The Vale of Rest*—that of the contemplation of death, a simple *memento mori*. His description and rationale for praise, however, may disguise other motives.

Colin Trodd writes that "for Spielmann, editor of the *Magazine of Art*, modern Academicians are successful to the extent they recognise the symbiosis of art and commerce, painting and advertising."⁸⁴ In the 1890s, when Spielmann, as well as J. G.

⁸³ Spielmann, *Millais and His Works*, 74. Tate Britain, then known as the National Gallery of British Art, was opened in 1897, the year after Millais's death, in order to house Henry Tate's collection, of which *The Vale of Rest* was a part, that he gifted to the nation in 1889.

⁸⁴ Colin Trodd, "Academic Cultures," in *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Denis and Trodd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 187. Furthermore, Trodd states "this approach, emphasizing the commercial nature of art within modern society, locates

Millais were reflecting upon the career of the recently appointed President of the Royal Academy, their comments and situation paralleled the changing paradigm of the institution itself.⁸⁵ The Royal Academy was undergoing a transformation during the second half of the nineteenth century. A Royal Commission was established in 1863 to investigate its authority and usefulness to the public, an inquiry that brought into question the fundamental utility of art. The Royal Academy had to a considerable extent become a corporation, with artists tailoring and advertising their work to its market.⁸⁶

As President of the Royal Academy, the greater art world began viewing Millais and his works as desirable commodities, their worth influenced by his soaring reputation. As pictorial character and personal style became visual sensationalism in the eyes of the public, the value of his earlier paintings was reconsidered.⁸⁷ Thus, the ugly offending picture of 1859, with its implicit social criticism and startling portrayal of religious women, by 1886 became a sign of the artist's profundity and skill at capturing mood. *The Vale of Rest*, though condemned in its early existence, was redeemed, even resurrected, by a public that desired to mark the accomplishments of their nation's beloved artist. Rather than confirming the seeming clarity of the picture's interpretation at the end of the century, or trying to replace that moralizing meaning with an alternate or more comprehensive one, this thesis instead aims to restore the context that gave Millais's art at midcentury its essential ambiguity.

artistic value in a realm that separates art from the pedagogical regimes of individual pleasure and social improvement with which it is associated in both academic and aestheticist discourses."

⁸⁵ Millais became President of the Royal Academy the year of his death, 1896.

⁸⁶ Colin Trodd, "The Authority of Art: Cultural Criticism and the Idea of the Royal Academy in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Art History* 20 (1997), 15. "The 'error' of the RA is that it sees identity through status, so that artistic personality becomes the pursuit of the emblems which confirm the authority of business and trade as a form of advertising for the Academy itself."

⁸⁷ Trodd, "Academic Cultures," 183.



Figure 1. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Vale of Rest: Where the Weary Find Repose*, 1858-59, oil on canvas, 40½ x 68 inches, Tate Britain.



Figure 2. Sir John Everett Millais, *Autumn Leaves*, 1855-56, oil on canvas, City Art Galleries, Manchester.



Figure 3. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Blind Girl*, 1856, oil on canvas, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Figure 4. Charles Collins, *Convent Thoughts*, 1851, oil on canvas, Ashmolean Museum.

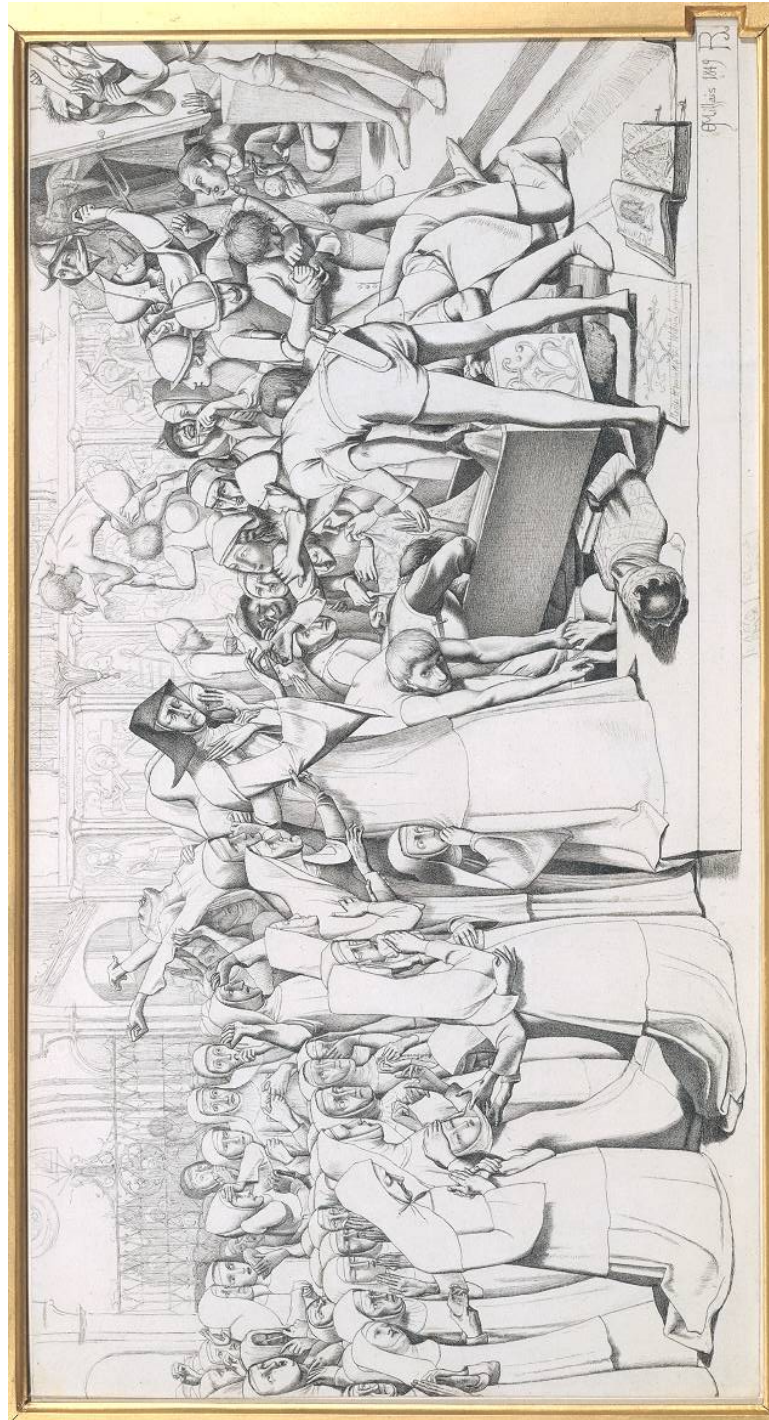


Figure 5. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Disentombment of Queen Matilda*, 1849, ink on paper, Tate Britain.



Figure 6. Sir John Everett Millais, *St Agnes Eve*, 1854, pen and sepia ink with green wash, Private Collection.



Figure 7. Sir John Everett Millais, "Sister Anna's Probation [2 of 5]," 1861, 5"0 x 4"1.

Image courtesy of the Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration. Available via:
<http://www.dmvi.org.uk/listview.php?type=advanced&workTitle=359&offset=0&refOffset=0&refView=listview>.



Figure 8. Sir John Everett Millais, "Sister Anna's Probation [4 of 5]," 1862, 5"0 x 4"1.

Image courtesy of the Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration. Available via:
<http://www.dmvi.org.uk/listview.php?type=advanced&workTitle=359&offset=0&refOffset=0&refView=listview>.



Figure 9. Sir John Everett Millais, "Sister Anna's Probation [5 of 5]," 1862, 4"16 x 5"0.

Image courtesy of the Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration. Available via: <http://www.dmvi.org.uk/listview.php?type=advanced&workTitle=359&offset=0&refOffset=0&refView=listview>.



Figure 10. Sir John Everett Millais, *Apple Blossoms (Spring)*, 1856-59, oil on canvas, Lady Lever Art Gallery.



Figure 11. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Escape of a Heretic*, 1859, 1857, oil on canvas, Museo de Arte de Ponce.



Figure 12. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Order of Release*, 1852-3, oil on canvas, Tate Britain.

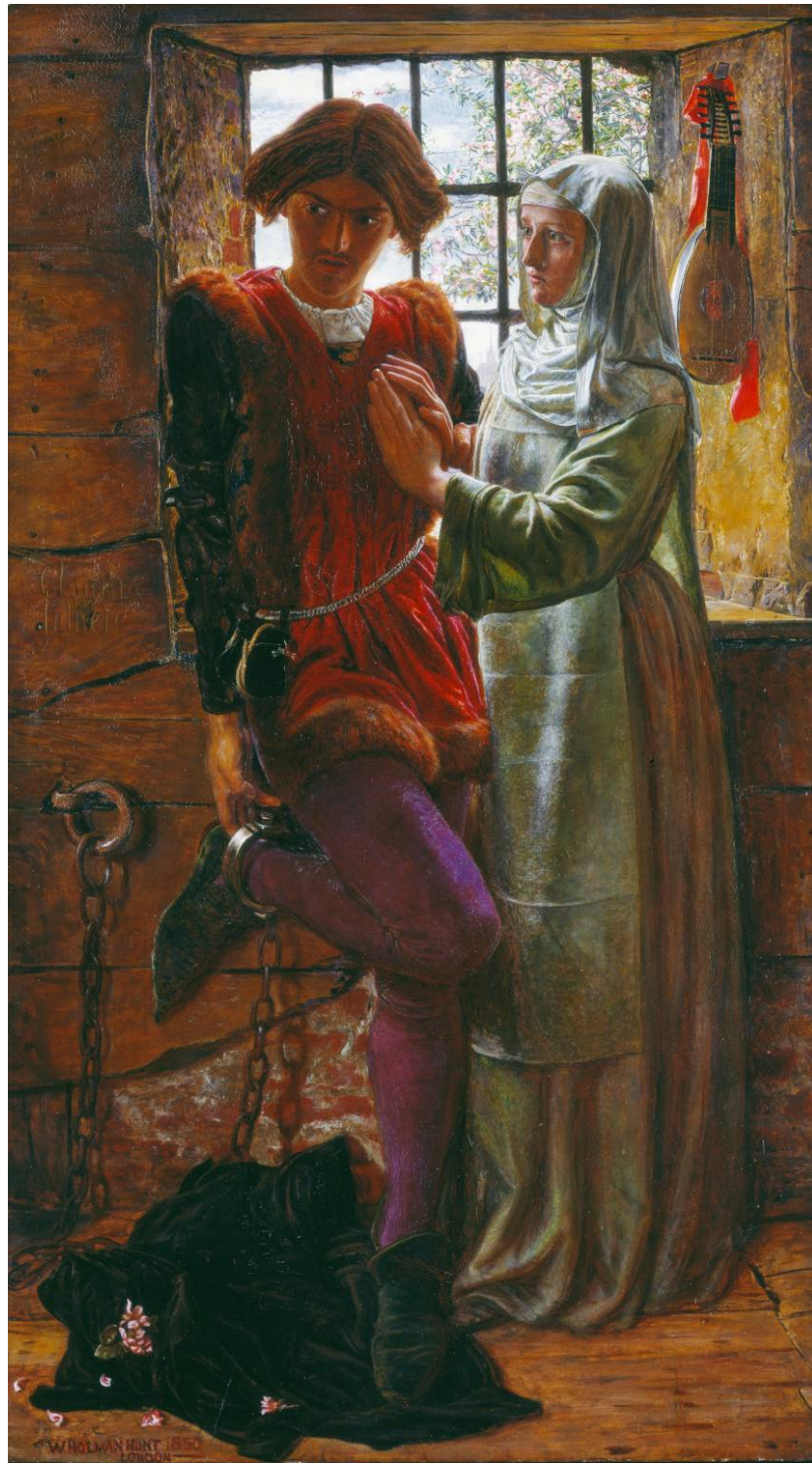


Figure 13. William Holman Hunt, *Claudio and Isabella*, 1850, oil on canvas, Tate Britain.



Figure 14. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Vale of Rest—Finished Study*, 1858, pen and brush ink, touched with white, on paper, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Figure 15. Sir John Everett Millais, *The Old Garden*, 1888, oil on canvas, Private Collection.



Figure 16. Sir John Everett Millais, *Mercy: St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572*, 1886, oil on canvas, Tate Britain.



Figure 17. Henry Alexander Bowler, *The Doubt: "Can these Dry Bones Live?"* 1855, oil on canvas, Tate Britain.

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