

Hylas and the Matinée Girl: John William Waterhouse and the Female Gaze

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British painter John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), is best known for paintings of beguiling women, such as *The Lady of Shalott* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Dedicated to the power and vulnerability of the female form, he demonstrated the Victorian predilection for revering and fearing the feminine. Often categorized as a Pre-Raphaelite or a Classical Academy painter, Waterhouse was enamored of femme fatales and tragic damsels, earning him a reputation as a painter of women. Nonetheless, the men in Waterhouse's art warrant scholarly attention and their time is due. Simon Goldhill's article, "The Art of Reception: J.W. Waterhouse and the Painting of Desire in Victorian Britain," recognizes the significance of the male subject in Waterhouse's oeuvre, writing, "His classical pictures in particular show a fascinating engagement with the position of the male subject of desire, which has been largely ignored in the scant discussions of his work."¹ Building on Goldhill's statement, this paper argues that Waterhouse's use of the female gaze objectifies the male and could be read as commentary on the rise of the male body as a spectacle in popular entertainment.

Waterhouse's post-1890 mythological paintings are accepted as forays into the misogynistic views of the era. The *fin-de-siècle* art of the nineteenth-century is inundated with images of female beings whose sexual, mystical powers dominate and destroy the male. Historian Joseph Kestner posits, "Mythological allusion was used further to reinforce or to condemn a certain normal behavior. Negatively, the language of nineteenth-century social discourse invoked classical precedents like the Siren or Aphrodite or Circe to indicate that women's nature has been eternally prone to deviant behavior."² In Waterhouse's canon as well, scholars remark on the misogynistic elements of his work, while others applaud Waterhouse portrayals of powerful women. Throughout his scholarship, the importance of symbolism, occultism, and fears created by the emerging New Woman demonstrate Waterhouse's awareness of contemporary society and artistic trends. Kestner remarks, "Waterhouse during the 1890s explored a variety of classical subjects to define contemporary conditions."³

One trend was the emergence of the female gaze during the late nineteenth century, a gaze which is evident in paintings such as *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1896, *The Awakening of Adonis*, 1900, and *Echo and Narcissus*, 1903 (see Figures 1 and 2). These paintings could be read as commentary on the rise of the male figure as a spectacle and the impact of the female gaze. Specifically, this paper correlates the actions and gaze of the nymphs in *Hylas and the Nymphs* to that of the *matinée* girl. *Matinée* girls, a late nineteenth-century social phenomena, discomfited theater audiences with their freedom and open admiration of actors.

Although Waterhouse's artworks have and do lend themselves to discussions within the realm of queer gaze and theory, it is purposefully avoided because the focus here is the rarely discussed female gaze. The term "female gaze" stems from the "male gaze" of Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which defines mainstream film as, "A world ordered by sexual imbalance, [where] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly."⁴ Mulvey's theory of the gaze has been widely considered by art historians. The female gaze has to do with how women actively look, and the potential objectification of the male. Dianne Sachko Macleod asserts that "Mulvey and other guardians of the gaze, however, reject the possibility of women reversing the relationship and appropriating the gaze for themselves."⁵

Waterhouse's women do appropriate the gaze and objectify the male. In *Hylas and the Nymphs*, seven naiads watch Hylas, described by Rose Sketchley as having, "cold strange eyes of desire," which hold Hylas spellbound, adding sexual tension to mask the moment of Hylas's inevitable drowning.⁶

Youthful Hylas, slightly androgynous with attenuated, sculptural limbs, smooth face, and tousled hair, has, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau stresses, always been an object of desire,

1 Simon Goldhill, "The Art of Reception: J.W. Waterhouse and the Painting of Desire in Victorian Britain," *Ramus* 38 (2008): 143.

2 Joseph Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny: The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 298.

3 Ibid., 297.

4 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Culture*, ed. Scott Mackenzie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 364.

5 Dianne Sachko Macleod, "Pre-Raphaelite Collectors and the Female Gaze," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 5 (1996): 43.

6 R.E.D Sketchley, "The Art of J.W. Waterhouse, R.A." *Art-Journal*, Christmas Number (1909): 23.

remarking, "The image of desire was principally drawn from the ephebic ranks."⁷ Waterhouse's graceful boys evoke the iconic beauty of the classical past with the contemporary twist of the female gaze and the idea of male sexual objectification. It is a switch in the perceived gender roles of voyeurism, illustrating the rising power of the female gaze.

The female gaze on the male body has been overlooked by scholars and is worthy of serious consideration. Solomon-Godeau states that E. Ann Kaplan's question "'Is the gaze male?'" has the unintended consequences of implying that gendered dynamics of looking are reducible to relations of empowered male subject and disempowered female ones."⁸ Waterhouse's works display an empowered female gaze, though not in a positive light. As we look at Waterhouse's mythical paintings of young, beautiful boys, who have no function other than to display their youth and looks, the viewer is confronted with themes of sexual desire and the male as a sex object. Clearly, his female figures are objects of desire for Waterhouse's intended audience. Yet, in *Hylas*, male beauty also incites lust. The boy on display enraptures the female turning him into the object of her fantasy.

The fact that these women enjoy the male form contradicts cultural historian Stephen Kerns' statement that, "In most images of the sexes together, the man's gaze is more sharply focused than the woman's look, but the woman's look reveals equal, if not greater, measure of subjectivity. The woman's eyes are just not as intense in looking at a desirable man, as the man's eyes are intent on looking at a desirable woman."⁹ Kerns' discussion about the eyes of the female in Victorian art helps to demonstrate the uniqueness of Waterhouse. His females do not avert their eyes or behave in the way Kerns argues. The placid, almost confronting stares (particularly the nymphs) in Waterhouse's paintings defy Kerns' description. Waterhouse's later paintings often reject the Victorian mindset that women do not look at men for pleasure.

Waterhouse's paintings, if read as a commentary on the power and rise of the female gaze, are almost subversive. Margaret Walters writes that "Women, with their modesty and delicate sensibilities and higher moral standards, are not interested in looking at the male body—so the nineteenth-century myth ran. Yet, Victorian women did look. This is evidenced by the increase in female attendance at exhibitions, the theater, music halls, and in the proliferation of photographs and other ephemera of popular male figures.

Waterhouse's works are often more psychologically probing than they appear, Kestner remarks, "Nevertheless, as more than one critic recognized, his art is profoundly intellectual and psychological, probing the 'subliminal' to present

the complex resonance of male/female roles."¹⁰ Waterhouse often imbued his paintings, especially those depicting Greek myths, with what Peter Trippi describes as, "a scene of contemplations subtly laced with horror."¹¹ In *Hylas and the Nymphs* our eyes are pleased by the dark greens of the foliage, the stillness of the water, and the physical purity and beauty of both Hylas and the nymphs. Yet, the nymphs are poised to drown Hylas. A macabre darkness, which may hint at social commentary, lurks throughout Waterhouse's works.

Additionally, Waterhouse's male figures, rarely robust or heroic, differ from the masculine progenists of his peers. Anthony Hobson, comparing Waterhouse's heroes to those of Leighton, remarks, "*Hercules Wrestling with Death for the Body of Alcestis* and in the sculptured *Athlete Struggling with a Python* [Leighton's figures] are extraordinarily powerful in their action. Waterhouse's heroes are less active and, it may be said, less formidable. They often fall into watery graves: Hylas, Orpheus, the drowning sailor with the Siren."¹²

These traits go against the perceived Victorian manliness described by Kestner: "Central to the evolution of the male image was the Victorian ideal of manliness, as embracing qualities of physical courage, chivalric ideals, virtuous fortitude with additional connotations of military and patriotic virtue."¹³ Waterhouse's contrast to Victorian "manliness" remained a constant theme. In so many of his paintings, which are laced with fantasy and sexuality, the man loses power to the female. Hobson further questions the virility of Waterhouse's males by noting, "The men are few, and might be described as sex objects if they were not so passive or helpless."¹⁴ Yet, this passivity does not seem to detract from Hylas's visual appeal. The nymphs admire Hylas, and are as arrested by his appearance as he is by theirs. Waterhouse males, who are lovely, pleasurable, and defenseless, take on the usual role of the female in Victorian art, defined by Alison Smith as, "unlike the heroic male nude, female figures are not required to act or think; they just had to give pleasure by virtue of form and color."¹⁵

Kestner notes, that "Waterhouse has presented the image of a seduced male, after years of seduction scenes with the woman as the victim."¹⁶ Helen Lovatt, posits that in the Greek epic, male heroes (like Hylas or Adonis) can, "on occasion become an aesthetic object."¹⁷ Hylas, caught

7 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 144.

8 Ibid., 9.

9 Stephen Kerns, *Eyes of Love: The Gaze in English and French Paintings and Novels, 1840-1900* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 1996), 14.

10 Kestner, *Mythology*, 303.

11 Peter Trippi, *J.W. Waterhouse* (London, UK: Phaidon Press, 2004), 175.

12 Anthony Hobson, *The Art and Life of J.W. Waterhouse, RA, 1849-1917* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 1980), 157.

13 Joseph Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 1995), 3.

14 Hobson, *Art and Life*, 75.

15 Alison Smith, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (New York, NY: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2002), 185.

16 Kestner, *Mythology*, 299.

17 Helen Lovatt, *The Epic Gaze: Vision, Gender and Narrative in Ancient Epic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 265.

in the appropriating gaze of desire, is reduced to a doomed sex object.

Waterhouse plays with gender roles of dominance and desire through the use of a female gaze and differs from his contemporaries. Although Kerns claims that, "the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones and two neo-classical painters Frederick Leighton and John William Waterhouse created a gallery of open-eyed seductresses triumphing over weak-eyed men."¹⁸ It can be argued that only Waterhouse utilized the female gaze as the ultimate tool of power rather than the female body.

For example, in Leighton's *The Fisherman and the Syren* [Siren], 1858, the siren overpowers the fisherman physically (Figure 3). Leighton chooses to portray desire through the physicality of the siren's arching body and not her gaze. We cannot see her eyes and the eyes of the sailor are closed. There is no gaze. There is no open-eyed seductress. The seduction (and destruction) is done physically. The same is true in Edward Burne-Jones's *The Depths of the Sea*, 1885, where a sea nymph carries her prize, a drowned sailor, down to her watery lair. Here, as in Leighton's painting, the female body overwhelms the male. Her gaze directs the viewer to admire her and not the male. This differs from Waterhouse's works in which the female gaze directs the viewer to the male figure and his eventual downfall under her watch, evident in paintings like *Hylas and the Nymphs*.

Hylas and the Nymphs has an established artistic tradition, dating back to ancient mosaics and frescoes found in Rome and Pompeii. It is quite possible that Waterhouse viewed the fresco *Hylas Attacked by Nymphs* during his Roman travels (Figure 4). Through his studies at the Academy, Waterhouse would have been aware of William Etty's *Hylas and the Water Nymphs*, 1833, (Figure 5), and the Neoclassical sculpture by John Gibson, *Hylas Surprised by the Naiads*, 1837. All three contain the basic iconography in an outdoor scene with water, Hylas's ewer, and Hylas's youthful body and the overpowering nymphs. Hylas's fear is visible.

In Waterhouse's painting, a sense of serenity cloaks the scene. Hylas's reaction is unknown, his face turned from the viewer to meet the eyes of the nymphs. Their collective gaze holds Hylas's attention and focuses the audience on their desire. This is what sets Waterhouse's works apart from the others, and makes them unnerving, yet appealing. Waterhouse skews the usual power dynamic of who holds the gaze. We (the audience) are presented with a tableau where all eyes are on the male figure. He is the object of desire, a sexualized male figure.

The sexualizing of the male increased by the close of the century, especially at the theatre, where performers such as Sandow used their physicality as a marketing tool. Eugen Sandow, founder of Physical Culture, performed nearly naked, emulating Greek statuary. His act, like his photographs, relied on the philosophy that if he somehow recreated Greek

art, morality would be assuaged. Maria Wyke observes that Sandow's audiences, "could acknowledge their own sophistication in the act of recognition and admiration of high art."¹⁹ Sandow used the veils of "high art" and "self-improvement" to obscure the flipside of his popularity that involved the display of the male body for visual gratification. Critics Edmund Gosse and Addington Symonds secretly traded his photographs (Figure 6). Michael Hatt, David J. Gesty, and other nineteenth-century scholars, who write extensively on homoeroticism in art and Physical Culture, often include these letters and photographs, but what is rarely discussed is the popularity of these images among women.

Paul Bourget (1852-1935) recollected that in women's bedrooms, "among the golden gewgaws that covered every available countertop, he found images of Eugen Sandow... portrayed in a distinctly un-Victorian state of nudity."²⁰ Michael Deslandes comments that, "The proliferation of images of muscular bodies provided aspiring physical culturists with points of comparison as well as a broad range of erotic (even pornographic) opportunities for women and same-sex desiring men."²¹ Journalist Arthur Symons (1865-1945) debated in the *New Review*: "If the female figure is supposed to be indecent, why is not the male figure indecent also? We are assured that the 'baser passions' of the male part of an audience are likely to be 'inflamed' by the sight of the outline of the female figure. Are the 'baser passions' then of the female audience likely to be inflamed by the sight of the outline of the male figure?"²²

Women and young girls, finding freedom in attending the theater, turned their gaze to handsome actors. David Haldane-Lawrence comments "it was women in the audience who were largely responsible for the deification of the late nineteenth-century leading man. Female adulation of the male actor led to more emphasis being placed on masculine physical appearance than earlier in the century."²³ This led to the rise of the popular actor, or the *matinée* idol, and his follower, the *matinée* girl, who lurked at stage doors.

Through this lens, Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* can be read as a commentary on the presence of the *matinée* girl following Kestner's assertion that, "In a period of political and legal transition for women, classical-subject painting was a conservative, frequently reactionary force in the process of women's gradual change of status."²⁴ The *matinée* girl

19 Maria Wyke, "The Classicizing Rhetoric of Bodybuilding," *Arion: A Journal of the Humanities and the Classics* 4, no. 3 (1997): 51-79.

20 David Chapman, *Adonis: The Male Physique Pin Up 1870-1940* (Surrey, UK: GMP Publishers Ltd., 1989), 1.

21 Michael Deslandes, "The Male Body, Beauty and Aesthetics in Modern British Culture," *History Compass* 8, no. 10 (2010): 1196. Wiley Full Collection, doi:10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00733.x.

22 Arthur Symons, "Living Pictures," *New Review* 11, no. 62-67 (1894): 464.

23 David Haldane-Lawrence, "Masculine Appearances: Male Physicality on the Late-Victorian Stage," *Critical Survey* 20, no. 3 (2008): 50.

24 Kestner, *Mythology*, 3.

18 Kerns, *Eyes of Love*, 173.

represented a new type of audience, one far more interested in the actor than the play. Susan Torrey Barstow comments, "The matinée girl provoked considerable alarm."²⁵ Edward Bok disparagingly states "it is enough to make a man burn with shame and indignation to see hundreds of young girls sitting in the theater...." The *Reporters Nosegay* warns, "There is another species of stage-door habitués, however, possessing far more interest, in the persons of matinée girls."²⁶

Painted in 1896, *Hylas and the Nymphs* captures the social anxiety surrounding these young women. Goldhill's observation about the audience's response to the painting's "tension between the looming sexual violence, and the winsomeness of the girls" correlates with the unease caused by the matinée girl, who as actor Charles Cherry recalls, "regarded [their idol] with reverence and silent awe."²⁷

Like matinée girls, the nymphs gape at Hylas' appearance, timidly offer gifts, and tug at his garment. One contemporary description of the matinée girl could easily describe a Waterhouse nymph: "She is a fascinating creature, this winsome matinée girl; a half-child on the borderland of womanhood, with the charm of both, and the whims and contradictions that make the feminine so irresistible."²⁸ This is what Victorian/Edwardian audiences would have recognized and found intriguing.

A crossover between high art and theater would have been very familiar to Waterhouse's audience. Rosemary Barrow points out, "Significantly, these new entertainments mediated antiquity not from classical sources, but from academic painting. The worlds of theatre and art interacted."²⁹ During this time, *Tableaux Vivants*, also known as Living Pictures or *Poses Plastiques*, recreated popular paintings on stage and were immensely popular. Barrow relates how artists like Leighton and Waterhouse shared a visual dynamic with the theater, writing "Constructions of the classical past in theatre and painting shared specific visual conventions."³⁰

Peter Trippi explores Waterhouse's theatrical themes, noting how *The Magic Circle*, 1886, "exemplifies Waterhouse's growing theatricality."³¹ While Waterhouse's *Circe Indivlosia*, 1892, like John Singer Sargent's portrait of *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, 1889, "feature[s] brilliant hues and

crazed intensity inspired by West End theater."³² It is also possible that Waterhouse's *The Remorse of Nero*, 1878, was influenced by Delacroix's painting of the actor Jean François Talma, in the role of Nero (1852). Waterhouse's relationship to the theater strengthens the idea that Waterhouse may have been painting his reaction to the matinée girl.

A. L. Baldry, Waterhouse's contemporary, comments that Waterhouse was, "certainly not one of those men who turn their backs on the spirit of the time."³³ Scholar Elizabeth Prettejohn asserts, "But his paintings clearly demonstrate that he was alive to the exciting new developments of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century."³⁴ Of course, Waterhouse would not have known or understood the term "female gaze" as we do today, but he would have been cognizant of societal changes, especially women's emancipation. Waterhouse's post-1890s works that focus on Greek myths of male beauty and the scopophilic gaze of the female may be interpreted as commentary of this social issue.

Goldhill's assertion that "Waterhouse's paintings have been underestimated: they explore male desire in a more provocative way than his reputation as a pious, wholesome Victorian suggests" demonstrates the need for more research into Waterhouse's male protagonists.³⁵ His women continue to enchant and beguile, yet by focusing on the men in his works, a new lens for analysis is created, adding another provocative layer to the study of John William Waterhouse.

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25 Susan Torrey Barstow, "'Hedda Is All of Us': Late-Victorian Women at the Matinee," *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 3 (2001): 392.

26 Charles Read Bacon, *The Reporter's Nosegay: Brightest and Best from Philadelphia's Famous Column* (Philadelphia, PA: Nosegay Publishing, 1896).

27 Charles Cherry, "When There Were Matinée Idols," *The Theatre Magazine* 29 (1919): 290.

28 "The Summer Wardrobe of the Matinee Girl," *The Theatre Magazine* 17 (1918): xviii.

29 Rosemary Barrow, "Toga Plays and Tableaux Vivants: Theatre and Painting on London's Late-Victorian and Edwardian Popular Stage," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (May 2010): 209.

30 Ibid., 219.

31 Trippi, *Waterhouse*, 77.

32 Ibid., 117.

33 A.L. Baldry, "J.W. Waterhouse and His Work," *The Studio* 4, no. 1 (1895): 112.

34 Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Waterhouse's Imagination," in *J.W. Waterhouse 1849-1917: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite* (Groningen, AN: BAI Publishers, 2008), 23.

35 Goldhill, "Art of Reception," 183.



Figure 1. John William Waterhouse, *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1896, oil on canvas, 52 x 77.8 inches. Manchester City Art Gallery. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.

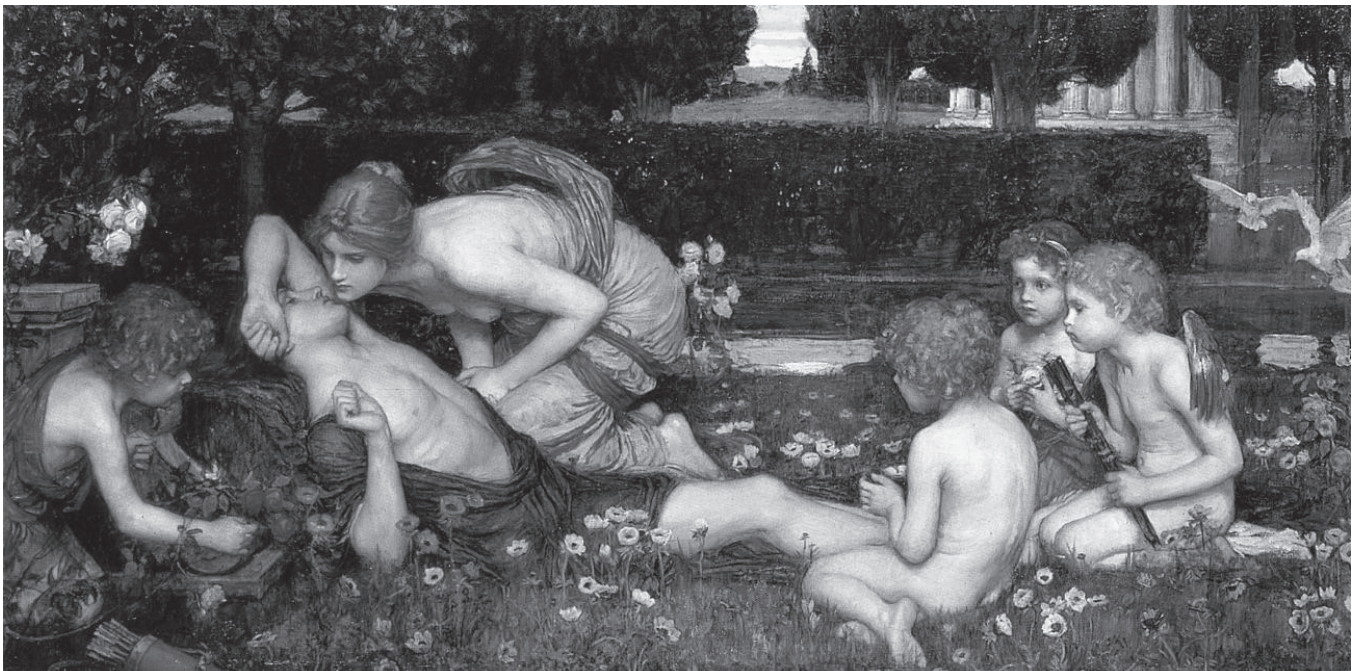


Figure 2. John William Waterhouse, *The Awakening of Adonis*, 1900, oil on canvas, 37.8 x 74 inches. Private Collection. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.



◆Figure 3. Frederic Leighton, *The Fisherman and The Syren*, 1856-58, oil on canvas, 26.1 x 19.2 inches. Bristol City Museum of Art Gallery. Gift from the Honourable Mrs. Charles Lyell (1938). <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.

▼Figure 4. *Hylas Attacked by Nymphs*, early fourth century, inlay, polychrome marble with glass paste and mother-of-pearl. Basilica of Junius Bassus, Esquiline Hill, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome. <http://commons.wikimedia.org>. Attribution: ShareAlike 3.0 unported (CC BY-SA 3.0).





▲ Figure 5. William Etty, *Young Hylas and the Water Nymphs*, 1833, oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 44 inches. Anglesey Abbey, Cambridge. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.



► Figure 6. Andre Van Der Weyde, *Eugen Sandow*, 1888, photograph. <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.