



Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies Vol. 2 (2023)

“The Lady of Shalott” as a Metaphor for Class Relations under Capitalism

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Abstract: “The Lady of Shalott”, written by Lord Tennyson, tells the story of a lady cursed to work in her tower, leaving which would, and eventually does, cause her death. However, characterisations and imageries present in the poem also evoke more social implications, implications which would be contemporary of Tennyson despite the poem’s setting. Accordingly, this article argues that Lord Tennyson, in his “The Lady of Shalott”, provides a metaphor for the class relations that exist under capitalism. By drawing from the Marxian understanding of society and societal relations, the study explicates how this poem can also be understood as a “mirror” of the Victorian society. In this sense, the Lady comes to metaphorise the working class, Shalott the socio-material conditions of the working class, Lancelot the bourgeoisie and Camelot the socio-material conditions of the bourgeoisie. It is also important to note that this study does not argue that Lord Tennyson was even aware of any Marxist idea, rather, his understanding of societal relations coincided with that of Marxism.

Keywords: The Lady of Shalott, Marxism, Class Relations, Victorian Society, Dialectics

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Art works, whether implicitly or explicitly, carry traces of what is social in them: Even the most surrealist or seemingly personal pieces of art, as extensions of individuals, are still political—hence the famous argument of the political movements from the 60s and 70s: “the personal is political”. In this sense, although metaphorised, it is possible to find the residues of the dominant mode of production in Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1832/1842)¹, precisely because, as Marx in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*² (1859) states, “[t]he mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness” (ii). From such a standpoint, this study argues that “The Lady of Shalott”, even though it is a romance and has a feudal setting, also coincides with the Marxian understanding of classes, namely the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, under capitalism by examining the characterisations and imageries presented in the poem. Accordingly, this article first explores the Lady and her social position, then Lancelot and his social position, then the spaces given in the poem, Shalott and Camelot,

¹ The poem has two versions: the first one, published in 1832, and the later one, published in 1842. While differences are minimal, especially in terms of the story told in the poem, as the canonical version is the 1842 one, this study discusses the version published in 1842.

² This work will be referred to as *Critique* throughout this study.



and their implications as socio-economic spheres, and lastly the dialectical relations established in the oppositions between the Lady and Lancelot, and Shalott and Camelot.

Studies on “The Lady of Shalott” show that the poem has been analysed through several perspectives. In their “A Blessing and a Curse: The Poetics of Privacy in Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’”, Joseph Chadwick explores how “[t]hrough [the Lady’s] femininity, the poem calls into question the relations between the ‘aesthetic spirit’ and ‘ordinary living,’ that is, between art and the social world” (16) by explicating the relation between the same isolation imposed on the “feminine” and the artistic by the society as presented in the poem while Carl Plasa, in “‘Cracked from Side to Side’: Sexual Politics in ‘The Lady of Shalott’”, argues that the poem takes an ambivalent position as it “appears to validate patriarchal structures by mapping the gaze/object relation in terms of an opposition between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ it also subversively exposes the ideologically constructed nature of the ‘feminine,’ thereby circumscribing the claims for mastery – both erotic and epistemological – which men make over women” (256). Edgar F. Shannon Jr., on the other hand, argues that the poem “discloses no ambivalence” because it “explores parabolically the quality of poetry derived from two opposing postulates and advocates expression rather than imitation as the essential impetus for art” as it offers a synthesis of life and art, and “Platonic-Christian intimations of immortality and the unity of the world of spirit afford the way out of the seemingly ironic trap” in the poem (223). Different from such analyses, this article employs a Marxian perspective to suggest that the poem, through metaphors, showcases the socio-economic relationship between the workers and the bourgeoisie. However, this does not mean or imply that Tennyson was even aware of Marx or any kind of Marxist or socialistic views in his understanding of the societal relations but only that the relationships constructed in the poem coincide with such views.

The first mentioning of the eponymous character, the Lady of Shalott, is in the second part of the poem, where she is characterised as a person who has to work in a tower that she cannot leave because she is cursed (Tennyson 37-40). Her situation parallels that of a worker described by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1932): “For as soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood” (53). The metaphoric curse that the Lady suffers, thus, creates a similarity between, or even a metaphor for, the working class: Neither can “escape”, the Lady from the tower and the worker from the exclusive sphere of activity forced upon them, otherwise they are cursed to die, or they risk losing their livelihoods which is equal to dying under capitalism. Additionally, that she has “no loyal knight” (Tennyson 62) reinforces her situation as a worker, for, despite being a “lady”, she is “propertyless”, or has no knights that serve her in this context, just as how the worker has no property: “On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that [...] the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes the property-owners and the propertyless workers” (Marx 1988, 69)(emphasis original). Furthermore, at no point of the poem is the Lady given a name, which shows that she is, just like the workers, nothing but a property, a machine, a commodity: “[T]he worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production” (69).

Throughout the poem, she is defined by either her position in the society, that is, her being a “lady”, and where she belongs, that is, the island of Shalott or the work she does, that is, weaving, and therefore, she exists “first, as a *worker*; and, second, as a *physical subject*. The extremity of this bondage is that it is only as a *worker* that he continues to maintain himself as a *physical subject*, and that it is only as a *physical subject* that he is a *worker*” (Marx 1988, 73)(emphasis original). She is never named or “defined” in any way, except at the very end of the poem where she is described as having a lovely face (Tennyson 169). The only sign of her existence is her song heard by “the reaper weary” (33). The fact that she is almost never seen physically by others and that she is always identified with and defined by the place, Shalott, where she works, thus, support the idea that she is first a worker and second a physical subject, as seen in the following lines:

By the margin, willow-veiled,
 Slide the heavy barges trailed
 By slow horses; and unhailed
 The shallop flitteth silken-sailed
 Skimming down to Camelot;
 But who hath seen her wave her hand?
 Or at the casement seen her stand?
 Or is she known in all the land,
 The Lady of Shalott? (Tennyson 19-27)

An aspect of the work of the Lady that coincides with the working conditions of the proletariat is the reason as to why she works. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, who “still has needs to satisfy, and must therefore perform useful labours of various kinds” and for whom “[n]ecessity itself compels him to divide his time with precision between his different functions” of labour (Marx 1992, 169-70), the necessity that compels the Lady to work is not of natural kind but a curse whose origin the Lady “knows not” (Tennyson 42). The tower – in its similarity to a factory, on which the study will expand later – and the curse, rather than the physical needs, that necessitates her work differentiate her conditions from that of the lone labourer Robinson Crusoe, whose reasons for labouring come from his physical needs. In this sense, unlike most readings where “[t]his poem [...] has often been read as yet another allegory of artistic autonomy” (Chadwick 15), this article takes the Lady as both an artist and a labourer. As such, the study does not differentiate between the artist and the labourer - for both are still subjected to the same economic conditions where they have to, in one way or the other, sell their labour-power - as Marx also does not:

The great mass of so-called “higher grade” workers – such as state officials, military people, *artists*, doctors, priests, judges, lawyers, etc. – some of whom are not only not productive but in essence destructive, but who know how to appropriate to themselves a very great part of the “material” wealth partly through the sale of their “immaterial” commodities and partly by forcibly imposing the latter on other people—found it not at all pleasant to be relegated *economically* [emphasis original] to the same class as clowns and menial servants and to appear merely as people partaking in the consumption, parasites on the actual producers (or rather agents of production). This was a peculiar profanation precisely of those functions which had hitherto been surrounded with a halo and had enjoyed superstitious veneration. (1969, 174-5)(emphasis mine)

Another similarity between the conditions of the Lady and of the proletariat is the mirror in the poem, whose workings is alike to the concept of ideology in a Marxist sense. The mirror serves two purposes in the poem: That it allows the Lady to weave, which corresponds to the use of mirrors by weavers, and that the Lady can see the outside, real world only through the mirror (Tennyson 46-50). Just as how the Lady can continue to weave only through the mirror, only through ideology the base – people’s relation to the means of production – is maintained, which subsequently means that ideology is an apparatus that helps ensure the existing class structure, in which the proletariat, the Lady in the context of the poem, has to work while the bourgeoisie exploits. In this sense, the Lady cannot continue to weave without the mirror, both literally and metaphorically, since such a mirrorless-ness would prevent her weaving and result in the collapse of the capitalist relations of production. Moreover, she can perceive the world only through the mirror, or through ideology, which distorts what she sees, à la a *camera obscura*. The Lady only sees “shadows of the world” (Tennyson 49), as if she is in a *camera obscura* and as if the mirror is the small hole through which the distorted, or inverted and reversed, scene or image projected:

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., and precisely men conditioned by the mode of production of their material life, by their material intercourse and its further development in the social and political structure. Consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das*

bewusste Sein], and the being of men is their actual life-process. [...] in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura* [...]. (Marx and Engels 1998, 42)(emphasis original)

It is also important to consider the cracking of the mirror. The curse is that when she stops working “[t]o look down to Camelot” (Tennyson 41), she dies, and this is indicated by the cracking of the mirror:

She left the web, she left the loom,
 She made three paces thro’ the room,
 She saw the water-lily bloom,
 She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She look’d down to Camelot.
 Out flew the web and floated wide;
 The mirror crack’d from side to side;
 “The curse is come upon me,” cried
 The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson 109-117)

As we have taken the mirror as the ideology in its Marxian sense, which obscures the nature of the class-relations, looking at Camelot means seeing the exploitative nature of the class-relations and thus gaining class consciousness, which, in turn, means the crackling of the mirror, or ideology, as its affect of false consciousness is lifted.

The reason as to why the Lady stops working, however, is as intriguing. Just before leaving her work, the Lady “is half sick of shadows” (Tennyson 71) and sees, through the mirror, Lancelot “[a]s he rode down to Camelot” (Tennyson 104). We may be inclined to think for two reasons that the Lady leaves her tower because of her romantic feelings: before she expresses that she is “half sick of shadows”, she sees “two young lovers lately wed” (70), which signifies that she is indeed sick of shadows and wants to have a similar relationship; and right before she leaves her tower, Lancelot appears in her mirror, which would signify that she has fallen in love with Lancelot. However, there are no other indications regarding the Lady’s feeling—Lancelot is introduced and described in the poem for thirty-one lines, and almost all of his description in these lines leans heavily on his wealth with his “mighty silver bugle” and “[t]hick-jewell’d [...] saddle-leather” (Tennyson 88, 92). Because Lancelot takes the centre stage solely with his wealth, it is not love but the wealth gap that becomes the breaking point for the Lady. Bearing in mind the scene where she sees the young couple that causes her to realise that she is sick of shadows, the curse (which can be taken as capitalism in this perspective), and the mirror (as ideology) with it, prevents her even from experiencing love whereas Lancelot, constantly described as a wealthy knight, is free to roam the land as he wishes. Together with first looking down to Camelot and then seeing Lancelot comes the realisation of her own class-position. As such, her “social existence” – which is, in this case, comprised of her differences in her economic status from those of Camelot and Lancelot – is what “determines [her] consciousness” (Marx 1992, ii).

The death of the Lady at the end of the poem has also two significant points, alike to the mirror: That she dies because she stops working; that she works until she literally dies. Her “wretchedness” is indeed “in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of [her] production” (Marx 1988, 69), for despite her work, whose magnitude we presume to encompass her life as there are no other indications or details regarding her life that do not involve her work, the curse is never lifted, and she is never allowed to leave her tower and eventually dies for doing so. Under capitalism, not working means death for the worker, as their only means of sustaining their own lives, or of surviving, is to sell their labour-power – the Lady too, as a worker, similarly has to work because of the “curse” - to the bourgeoisie who, unlike the worker, does not have the necessity to work in order to survive. As such, the Lady’s leaving the tower is a poeticization, or dramatization, of her becoming unemployed since it causes her to die:

But the putting of labour-power into action, i.e., the work, is the active expression of the labourer's own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. His life-activity, therefore, is but a means of securing his own existence. He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labour itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another. (Marx 2006, 19)

The other point about her death, that is, that she works until she dies, becomes more meaningful when one considers where she dies:

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
 Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
 Till her blood was frozen slowly,
 And her eyes were darkened wholly,
 Turned to towered Camelot.
 For ere she reached upon the tide
 The first house by the waterside,
 Singing in her song she died,
 The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson 145-153)

Here, we see that she dies when she reaches "the first house", which, in the context of class relations, signifies that despite working until the moment she dies, she still cannot reach Camelot, which is where Lancelot, the metaphor for the bourgeoisie, resides, thus making Camelot the metaphor for the "realm" or conditions of the bourgeoisie³. In other words, the Lady, or the worker, cannot become a bourgeois regardless of how much they work.

Lancelot, on the other hand, is characterised as the almost exact opposite of the Lady: He is given a name, described richly as a rich person, and, as a man, his characterisation raises questions regarding the power-relations between genders and shows his position in society, which is of a higher position compared to the Lady:

The gemmy bridle glittered free,
 Like to some branch of stars we see
 Hung in the golden Galaxy.
 The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot;
 And from his blazoned baldrick slung
 A mighty silver bugle hung,
 And as he rode his armour rung,
 Beside remote Shalott.
 All in the blue unclouded weather
 Thick-jewelled shone the saddle leather,
 The helmet and the helmet-feather
 Burned like one burning flame together,
 As he rode down to Camelot; (Tennyson 82-95)

Not only are there no such long descriptions of the Lady, the supposed focal point of the poem, but Lancelot is also heard singing (107-8), unlike the Lady whose songs are only relayed to the reader through other people. Physically as well there is no description of the Lady, while Lancelot, aside from his armour and ornaments, is described to have "coal-black curls" (103). However, at the very end, Lancelot defines and describes the Lady as having a lovely face (169), which coincides with the idea how he belongs to "[t]he class which has the means of

³ How Camelot, as the metaphor for the living conditions of the bourgeoisie, is juxtaposed with Shalott is explained later in this study.

material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it” (Marx and Engels 1998, 67). Accordingly, Lancelot, as a metaphor for the bourgeoisie, controls the mental images, so to speak, of the people—in this case, the mental images of people regarding the Lady, who has never been seen but only heard “Like a Poet hidden / In the light of thought / Singing hymns unbidden” (Shelley 36-8). Therefore, Lancelot, not only as a mere inhabitant of Camelot but also as a person who describes the Lady, displays his socio-economic position’s superiority over that of the Lady.

When it comes to the spaces in the poem, namely Camelot and Shalott, the juxtaposition between them is the very first imagery painted in the poem. That Shalott is an island already signifies an estrangement which is constantly supported by how the action, or the movement, is towards Camelot, only passing by Shalott:

And through the field the road runs by
 To many-towered Camelot;
 [...]
 Through the wave that runs forever
 By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot
 [...]
 And the *silent* isle imbowers
 The Lady of Shalott.
 [...]
 A funeral, with plumes and lights
 And music, *went to* Camelot (Tennyson 4-68)(emphasis mine)

This flow towards Camelot also resembles the flow of surplus-value, which is the value that the worker creates in the process of production, towards the bourgeoisie when the product is sold, as Marx explains in the first volume of *Capital*: “The rate of surplus-value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of labour-power by capital, or of the worker by the capitalist” (326). In addition to the surplus-value, the movement passing by Shalott and towards Camelot also displays the estrangement of the Lady, which is already suggested with the imagery of an island. The movement, from this perspective, shows how “the more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself” (Marx 1982, 13) because the Lady, as the worker who has expended her whole life in work, becomes powerless in the face of her work imposed on her by the curse; her work, as the (only) defining quality of her life, defines and determines her so much so that she is not able to survive, she ceases to exist quite literally when she stops working or becomes unemployed. As a result, she does not belong to herself so much that she is defined, described by another person, Lancelot.

Another contrasting point between Shalott and Camelot is the tower(s). While Shalott has only one tower in which the Lady is cursed to work, Camelot is constantly described as “towered” or “many-towered” (Tennyson 5, 32, 59). Towers, in this case, represent what Marx calls the means of production, and in the Victorian context, it is possible to interpret them as factories or factory chimneys, which is also intertwined with the Lady’s position as a worker and constant working. Moreover, residents of Camelot are people of high position, and Camelot is a city of luxury with its “high houses” and “garden walls”, which makes it a metaphor for the space in which the bourgeoisie, with all their luxury, lives:

Under tower and balcony,
 By garden wall and gallery,
 A gleaming shape she floated by,
 Dead-pale between the houses high,
 [...]

Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame (Tennyson 154-160)

An additional aspect of the poem that furthers this analysis is the dialectical fashion in which the Lady and Lancelot, and Shalott and Camelot are given, that is, they are not only contrasted but also interwoven in this romance world which, in the poem, comes into being only by the co-existence of these contradictory spaces. For instance, there are no individual stanzas dedicated to either Shalott or Camelot, to either the Lady or Lancelot. Instead, all the stanzas have nine lines; the fifth lines of almost all the stanzas end with “Camelot” whereas the ninth lines with “Shalott”, which creates an interwovenness, interconnectedness, and inseparableness between them. As explained until this point in the study, Camelot and Shalott, and the Lady and Lancelot are always in opposition, contradiction, yet the society, or the poem itself in this case, cannot exist without both and thus is comprised of both. This is again in line with the Marxian understanding of societies:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. *Free man and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another*, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx and Engels 1988, 209)(emphasis mine)

From this perspective, Lancelot, as a concept (of bourgeoisie), is dependent on the Lady, as a concept (of proletariat), because their individual social positions, or rather, the individual classes for which they are metaphors would not exist ontologically without each other. At the end of the poem too Lancelot, as an individual bourgeois, defines the Lady, and his position and existence as the “definer” would not exist without the Lady—thus, the Lady’s existence becomes a part of Lancelot and defines him. Similarly, the Lady would not leave her work without seeing Lancelot, which means that the Lady as the worker who stops working and is thus cursed, is only the Lady as such because of Lancelot’s existence. They are, as aforementioned, opposing, contradictory people, yet they need each other to exist, they constitute each other as they are in the poem.

Shalott and Camelot too are always constituted by and in relation to each other. Even the action or description that seems to be specific to Shalott or Camelot is still given in such a way that it is connected to the other one. Even this stanza, for instance, begins with people going to Camelot, yet, almost suddenly, some of them appear in the mirror, who, in turn, remind the Lady of how she has no loyal knights:

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair’d page in crimson clad,
Goes by to tower’d Camelot;
And sometimes thro’ the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson 55-63)

The almost stream-of-consciousness-like transition from people going to Camelot to people appearing in the mirror connects Shalott and Camelot in an unusual way: Shalott and Camelot are connected ontologically with this transition as Shalott, here metonymically referred to with the Lady and the mirror, comes into being in this stanza in relation to Camelot. In a previous stanza, Camelot as well comes into being, or exists, in relation to Shalott, this time “[t]hrough the wave that runs for ever”:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver

Thro' the wave that runs for ever
 By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot.
 Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
 Overlook a space of flowers,
 And the silent isle imbowers
 The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson 10-8)

In conclusion, this study examines Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" by looking at how it represents the capitalist society metaphorically. The Lady represents the worker as she is confined to her workplace, that is, the tower, and can only survive if she keeps working. The worker too does not have the luxury of not working, as their survival depends on it. The work that the Lady does, weaving, is also important when the era in which the poem was written is taken into consideration, as the textile industry was thriving at that time. Lancelot, on the other hand, with his description and position, represents the bourgeoisie who resides in Camelot. In this sense, Camelot, as painted richer, more lively, more towered than the island, represents the material conditions of the bourgeoisie whereas the island represents, with its estrangement from Camelot, the material conditions of the proletariat. Additionally, both the Lady and Lancelot, and Shalott and Camelot are always characterised in relation to each other so much so that each item of the pair constitute the other item in the same pair, which is alike to how the proletariat and the bourgeoisie not only constitute each other but each exists because the other one exists. However, it is once again important to state that this study does not claim or argue that Lord Tennyson had read or was even aware of Marx or any kind of Marxist idea. Rather, the point is that Lord Tennyson, as an artist, represented the society of his times, which coincides with Marx's analyses of class-relations in capitalism.

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