

GENDERED PLACES, FEMALE SPACES: COURTSHIP RITUALS AND THE ICONOLOGY OF VICTORIAN TRYSTS

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In the annals of Victorian literature, courtship scenes abound, including innumerable pre-cinematic vignettes with women awaiting suitors at appointed rendezvous spots. One example is found in *Jane Eyre* when Rochester finds the heroine poised at a stile, a memorable sight/site not only embodying a picturesque literary moment but also enshrining a classic trysting spot in nineteenth-century (and especially Victorian) romantic imagery. Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* also featured an illustration by "Phiz" (Hablot K. Browne) with a kindred moment in which "that gentleman next door declares his passion for Mrs. Nickelby" from his perch above a high wall. Moreover, in popular literature there were countless allied examples such as this illustration (Figure 1) probably by George Boughton for an 1864 issue of *Cornhill Magazine*. Here the image conveys the profound embarrassment of a lady fleeing an admirer for, as the text advised, "to be romantically discovered disposed upon a stile, with her lover's letters in her lap, is what no woman not love-sick or a 'little fool' would choose" ("Margaret Denzil's History" 494). The pertinent passage from the novelette reveals that the meeting of the two is accidental, but an analysis of the image and its iconological context reveals that the barrier prop is not. The swain here has discovered the object of his affections lingering at their trysting place and re-reading his *billet-doux*. To be glimpsed at such a private activity was deemed compromising to the lady who accordingly reacts with horror and alacrity, dropping the bundle of letters as he salutes her.

Two decades ago I wrote a doctoral dissertation on the general subject of Victorian courtship imagery, filling more than eleven volumes with hundreds of images. At that time I chronicled how courtship proliferated as an epidemic theme, from images of peasants, the middle and upper classes, and children, to lovers in togas and other historical costume pieces. After poring over thousands of books and images, reading all the etiquette and floral lexicons in the British Library, and scouring the Royal Academy and other key institutional records, I naively thought I would be unlikely to find additional noteworthy images, but in the intervening years I have continually been amazed by the quantity and consistency of images of courting couples in Victorian art, from the high art of paintings to the mass consumption of picture postcards, advertisements, and stereopticon views.

Then as now, the key strands of romantic imagery in the construction of feminine innocence, lovemaking, and even betrayal and loss were invariably staged in a natural setting, particularly within the earthly paradise of the middle-class garden, often with courting wall barriers as salient props. Tableaus of feminine innocence, above all of ladies—Tennysonian "high-born" maidens of sorts—waiting for seen or unseen admirers to materialise at appointed rendezvous places or flowery nooks were extremely common and became virtual hallmarks of period romantic imagery.

These representations of solitary women owed part of their iconographic debt, as I have hypothesised elsewhere, to the visual tradition of the Virgin Mary, whose wall-bounded *hortus conclusus* served as a general prototype for the secularisation of

circumscribed feminine chastity.¹ The legacy of the Mary and medieval gardens and their connotations of feminine purity was a paramount one to the Victorian iconology of garden trysts. As Erwin Panofsky and other scholars have shown, the medieval image of the Virgin relates to passages from the Old Testament, particularly the symbolism of the Bride in the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon (101, 132). This transference of characteristics from the Bride to the Virgin Mary, especially the extended metaphor of the woman's body as a living garden of paradise, is of pivotal significance to the garden *locus*. As one twentieth-century author has explained:

[Solomon's] great canticle of sensuality was interpreted as a paean of praise either to the Mystical Marriage of God with Mary or to the marriage of Christ with his Church. When Claudian's garden sacred to Venus was transferred into a Christian context and "moralised," it was fused with the allegorised Garden of Love in the Song of Solomon. The result was a specifically religious symbol: the Virgin in her *hortus conclusus*, signifying her Immaculate Conception. (Hughes 56)

In contrast to the lost Garden of Eden, Mary embodied an inviolate inner state of the perfect garden: "a garden enclosed . . . a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (Song of Solomon, IV: 12, 13, 15). The Shulamite's untouched sexual treasures are continually described by the exuberant bridegroom in terms of closed or well-fortified architectural entities. In addition, the woman is likened to a wall: "The voice of my beloved! . . . behold, he standeth behind our wall. . . . I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour" (Song of Solomon, II: 8-9 and VII: 10). Ambrosius's ancient treatise on the education of virgins moreover emphasised the moral interpretation of this unique female domain: "There virtue is fenced round with the lofty hedge of spiritual walls, and hides itself from all robbers" (qtd Hirn 447).

The transition from the symbolism of the biblical Bride to the Virgin Mary was readily accomplished through these sacred images of closure, for the similes of sealed fountain, untapped breasts, and enclosed garden function as parallels to Mary's virgin womb, which remained closed before, during, and after the birth of Christ. The Virgin was also emblematised by the *fons signatus*, or sealed fountain, from which three streams of water represent Faith, Hope, and Charity. Moreover, Ezekiel's closed gate or *porta clausa*, which only God could enter, has been interpreted as a prophesy of the Madonna's parthenogenetic and thus inviolate womb (Hirn 448). Thomas A Kempis, in his meditations on *The Incarnation of Christ*, explained the analogy by citing Ezekiel and commenting: "'This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened; and no man shall pass through it; and it shall be shut for the prince.' . . . Mary is the shut gate, who, in conceiving and bearing, remained ever a maiden untouched" (qtd Freeman 135). Similarly, the Virgin was also associated with another form of closure, the *thalamus virginis* or virgin's chamber, a hermetically sealed room or altar of purity. Still another motif signalling her unblemished state linked her with the architectural fortification of a tower, with Mary metonymically perceived as both herself a tower and as immured within such a structure.

1 See Casteras, "Down the Garden Path," especially Chapter II.

Thus, signifiers of enclosure—walled garden, chamber, fountain, gate, and tower—were all used more or less interchangeably to reinforce the doctrine of Immaculate Conception. Entrance by God, the Archangel Gabriel, the Bridegroom, or otherwise implied exposure to a more exalted sphere of existence—indeed, a heavenly paradise. Ultimately, the message to Christian women was their chastity served as a bulwark against false intruders and was its own wall of defence. Architectural inaccessibility thus functioned as a thinly disguised metaphor of the female body, positing it as a self-contained unit of pleasure (and strength) withheld from men until spiritually sanctioned (that is, through holy matrimony).

There is no single source or image among Mariolatry that influenced Victorian art, however, propagation of the idealisation of the Virgin nonetheless pervaded the Victorian consciousness and construction of pure womanhood. Dante Gabriel Rossetti dwelt on some aspects of Mary's life in various paintings, watercolors, and drawings, and later so did Edward Burne-Jones (Casteras, "Garden Path" 75-81). More importantly, however, the bequest to the nineteenth century of the enclosed garden was the identification of this walled space as a symbolic attribute of female purity meant to withstand male invasion or encroachment. This hieroglyph was indelibly absorbed into artistic consciousness and applied particularly to constructions of courtship.

The territory occupied by Mary and saints found partial expression in representations of Victorian novices and nuns, notably Charles Allston Collin's wall-bound *Convent Thoughts* (Ashmolean Museum) of 1851, a subject I have examined in depth in other publications (for example "Virgin Vows" 157-84). But far more often the formative impact was displayed in the secular offspring of the Virgin—young women who guarded their purity as they waited within the safety of their defensive walls for the arrival of a suitor and romance. Extrapolation from Mary to nuns to maidens was easily accomplished through the common denominator of the garden of perpetual chastity, for veneration of the Virgin readily dovetailed with bourgeois beliefs about the need to maintain separation of the sexes and to promote inaccessibility of marriageable females who seemed, at least in the realm of art, to linger *ad nauseum* in their fathers' gardens or in natural preserves.

The convention of a woman tarrying at a wall or fence for amorous purposes also originated in more historically recent times in eighteenth-century images by Francis Wheatley, Henry Singleton, and others. Such prototypes included Henry Bunbury's *Love and Hope* (Figure 2), a print published in 1794. Here a milkmaid with a diaphanously form-revealing skirt is positioned at a stile, with a female companion behind her. The rustic fence or stile stands inexplicably like an unrelated prop without rational integration into its surroundings. This and other barriers function, above all, as essential courting accessories. The women have suspended their activities, presumably to respond to the itinerant labourer or soldier's friendly overtures and to his admiring—even ogling—gaze. The title ultimately confirms what the poses, setting, and presence of the impediment all convey as a total effect: the onset of the initial, most likely innocuous, stages of courtship.

This strand of imagery resurfaced early in the nineteenth century in many Keepsake or "coffee-table" books, among them J. Holmes's *The Country Girl* illustration for an 1829 edition of *The Keepsake*. This image of a milkmaid or country lass anticipating her swain at a stile was—improbably enough—accompanied by a poem by the same title by no less than William Wordsworth: "That lip—a rose-bud from the

thorn,/ I saw, and Fancy sped/ To scenes Arcadian, whispering . . . of bliss that grows without a care.”² More eager females also proliferated, one being in R. Farrier’s *The Waiting Love* (Figure 3) from an 1843 Keepsake-type publication. Here a mob-capped damsel with downward glance waits for her lover to arrive at an open gate (its lock undone) that is guarded by two dogs. Often women were depicted as accompanied by pets, especially dogs, the canine presence suggesting both an additional watchdog of virtue as well as underscoring possible allusions to fidelity.

More aggressive females were occasionally depicted, an unusual example pairing a woman with a stile or gate in an engraving after Alexander Johnston’s *Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad*. The title probably derives from a humorous song of courtship by Robert Burns about a lass’s explicit instructions to her lover on how to contact her without alerting her parents or anyone else (Beaty 12). Perhaps because of the humorous source, the woman here is shown as uncharacteristically brazen, overtly inviting the spectator’s gaze and turning outward as if to confirm any suspicions of a pending amorous interlude.

The presence of the rustic stile or fence was tangible in myriad other images by Royal Academicians as well as lesser-known artists. The gap between the rural stile and the manicured garden as a favourite trysting spot was narrowed and quite literally defined by the erection of a fence or wall, a more solid obstruction that was simultaneously more substantial, impenetrable and imposing than its country cousin. There were countless variations on this barrier, too, with garden bowers and gates serving as the pivotal point of exchange, typically in clandestine meetings while a woman dallied in hope of a romantic idyll. *The Terrace* (a drawing after the original composition, circa 1890) by George Dunlop Leslie is a late example among many images of this type, portraying a woman who acknowledges the spectator’s presence by seemingly flirting with us and thereby suggesting that we are the expected swain.

Besides the religious undertones of the enclosed garden and Ezekiel’s closed gate, there were of course other more contemporaneous associations with this site. Women were supposed to resist temptation and protect their gardens from outside intruders, retaining a reserve of strength and forbearance as well as forming a psychological buttress against unwelcome callers. As John Ruskin described this: “The woman is to be within her gates . . . the centre of order, the balm of distress, and the mirror of beauty; that she also must be without her gates, where order is more difficult, distress more imminent, loveliness more rare” (136). Even more support for the notion of the locked gate of feminine sexuality and power can be found in lines from Alfred Tennyson’s “Maud” of 1855:

Maud has a garden of roses
And lilies fair on a lawn’
There she walks in her state
And attends upon bed and bower,
And thither I climbed at dawn
And stood by her garden-gate; . . .
For I am not invited,

² An engraving of this work accompanied a poem of the same title by Wordsworth in Frederick M. Reynolds’s *The Keepsake* (50-51).

But, with the Sultan's pardon,
 I am as well delighted,
 For I know her own rose-garden,
 And mean to linger in it...
 Come out to your own true lover,
 That your true lover may see
 Your glory also, and render
 All homage to his own darling, . . .
 Come into the garden, Maud,
 I am here at the gate alone
 And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad
 And the musk of the rose is blown.
 (Stanza XXI, iv: 1074 and stanza XXI, I: 1075)

In addition, some authors conveyed not merely erotic but covertly pornographic and semi-obscene allusions to the feminine garden. Courtship manuals, for example, often communicated a palpable degree of voyeurism and lusty longing in their fantasising about the allegorical garden of womanhood—just ripe for plucking. As one 1870 book on this subject opined along these lines:

A gardener is a very lucky man, as he has a variety of the sweetest and choicest specimens to take his pick of. He can have a full-blown open Rose, or a close prim Rose, or a Rose Mary, or a lot of Weeders offering to take the greenness out of his path in life; or he can have a sweet delightful Minnie Annette. (Rowley 221)

While the walled garden was a refuge of thornless virginity for the Virgin and her female attendants, it was definitely the space where the Victorians often staged their own updated dramas of female resistance to male trespass, the latter an inherent outgrowth of the inviolability of this iconographic territory. If we are to believe the clichéd verse, novels, and popular literature of the period, the coming of the suitor to the appointed gate or garden corner marked a crucial psychosexual stage of romance.

The long-desired moment, much dreamt of and even feared, the arrival of the swain at the stile, gate, or door, was a staple in Victorian art. Significantly, however, the male is often not shown actually entering the sacrosanct area but only loitering at the brink, much as in Victorian paintings his manly counterparts seem to halt instinctively at the invisible demarcation of propriety inscribed by the courting wall. This is embodied in such works as Francis Stephanoff's *Love* (from an 1829 edition of *The Keepsake*). The artist disposes rather delicate personages in frothy costumes, and the young man at the gate hesitates before entering the garden, where two young ladies pick flowers and seem blissfully unaware of imminent invasion. Similarly, in Frank Stone's *Bashful Lover*, dating from the 1840s or 50s, the artist also employs the stile motif, placing an anxious swain half stepping onto the plank while his beloved walks nearby, again with a dog and a friend in tow. A younger female companion furtively glances back to report the man's actions to her friend, who betrays no sign of preference or emotion. In such cases males thus clearly act as interlopers, even if they are anticipated by interested parties patiently waiting to be found in their fenced-off or gated territories.

On the other hand, the power of the intruder to generate excitement rather than masked indifference was affirmed in other depictions of walled conquest. In A.B. Walter's *Discovered!* (Figure 4) from a *Keepsake*-type annual of 1854, two young maidens point with obvious agitation at a man who has successfully scaled the garden walls to meet his sweetheart. In most phases of courtship imagery the female face typically consists of a phlegmatic mask of repressed or impenetrable emotions, so that sporadic moments registering surprise, disappointment, or other strong emotions are noteworthy.

Other portrayals enact the crossing of the threshold, for modern viewers perhaps underscoring a pending loss of virginity. Physical contact is often quite tentative and mostly initiated by males. For example, in a circa 1855 engraving of a young sailor meeting his sweetheart at their appointed trysting place, the two seem suspended in a courtly dance. In this accompaniment to a tale of courtship chronicled in Eliza Cook's poem "The Churchyard Stile," a young man, hat deferentially in hand, gazes at a woman openly but does not dare to touch her, while she steadies herself against the stile and tentatively—almost provocatively—walks toward the end of its plank.

In the illustration to Cook's poem and other cases, the male is shown as necessarily getting close to the female in order to assist her over the stile, ostensibly to lift and thereby to make physical contact with her. Typically, the female reaction is shyness, a standardised or prerequisite behavioural reply given prevailing etiquette stipulations concerning the need for feminine passivity.³ There are myriad examples of this somewhat awkward situation fraught with romantic undertones, including an untraced painting by Richard Redgrave of 1864 entitled *Make Up Your Mind*. This was described by *The Athenaeum* as portraying: "a young lady stepping down the rough side of a stone fence, and aided by a youth" ("The Royal Academy Exhibition" 651). Other variations appear in Thomas Faed's 1869 *Too Young to Be Married* (Guildhall Art Gallery), which rephrases the stereotypical situation in a conventional formula. At one side, the stile gate is open and a young man has crossed its boundaries to propose to a milkmaid. She turns away from her petitioner with a characteristic mask of indecision and restraint. An attentive dog, a recurring symbol of faithfulness in many paintings and literature of the period—keenly awaits the outcome, serving both as an anthropomorphised onlooker and as a possible emotional surrogate for the male or even as a surrogate chaperone presence.

Women artists also contributed to this subgenre of courtship over a barrier that inundated the art market. For example, Dora Noyes's *Two at a Stile*, an 1894 Royal Academy entry, attests both to the persistence of this iconological strand and to the seemingly endless appeal of charming rusticity. This is one of many classic full-length interpretations of the main visual courting accessories, with a young man straddling the barrier and from his side looking intently at a woman while she inevitably averts her gaze. Another salient element is the placement of the female in the foreground of the composition, with her admirer partly visible behind the barrier. Here and in scores of

³ On the subject of courting rituals and strictures and the segregation of the sexes, see Casteras, "Down the Garden Path," Chapter I.



Clockwise from left

Figure 1. George Boughton. "At the Stile" for *Cornhill Magazine*, 1864; Figure 2. Henry Bunbury. *Love and Hope*, 1794 print. Author's collection; Figure 3. R. Farrier. *The Waiting Love*, 1843 engraving. Author's collection.



Clockwise from top left
Figure 4. A.B. Walter. *Discovered!*, engraving from the 1854 *Lily of the Valley*; Figure 5. Hubert von Herkomer. Photogravure of *He and She*, original circa 1892; Figure 6. George Dunlop Leslie. *The Wizard's Garden*, 1904. Macdougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand.



Clockwise from top left
Figure 7. Miriam Davis. Sketch after *A Slight Barrier*, original circa 1894; Figure 8. Anonymous. Late Victorian postcard. Author's collection; Figure 9. Walter Dendy Sadler. *The Wrong Side of the Fence*, 1890s. Private collection.

other images, the spectator is thus implicitly placed on the female side, arguably identifying more with her response and psychosexual dilemma.

Very different from such coy alliances is Hubert von Herkomer's *He and She* (Figure 5), also on view at the 1894 Royal Academy. The protagonists remain a milkmaid and a rustic worker, but they are considerably saucier in temperament than their general antecedents or Noyes's decorous couple. The female here has one hand on her hip and does not seem adverse to the man's advances or his protestations of flattery and affection. In contrast with other Victorian images of suitors, however, he appears blatantly lascivious as he leers at her from his side of the fence. A divider still separates the pair into respective male and female zones, but this male is far more demonstrative (actually, what many viewers would consider vulgar) about his personal designs upon his companion (who would herself have been deemed as exhibiting overly familiar behaviour with her admirer).

From the country stile it is only a minor shift to the allied icon of the opening door or rustic portal and the approach of the swain to the hitherto solitary young lady. Alexander Johnston's interpretation of "The Gentle Shepherd" of 1840, for example, was accompanied by the following lines in the Royal Academy exhibition that year: "Last morning I was gay and early out,/ Upon a Dyke I leaned, glow'ring about;/ I saw my Meg linkan o'er the lee./ I saw my Meg, but Meggy saw na me" (qtd Engen 44). This picture slightly alters the typical configuration by placing the young man and his eagerly prancing dog at the stile or dyke, instead of featuring the woman on the waiting side. On the opposite side of the dilapidated rustic barrier the male spies the object of his affection, who predictably chooses not to notice him or to acknowledge his infatuation with her.

The open door was an important variation on the stile and wall and enjoyed considerable popularity, especially towards the end of the century. Frank Stone's son Marcus painted *The Return of the Lover* (or *The Soldier's Return*) in 1889 and exhibited it in 1900, thereby generationally confirming the tenacity of this imagery. There is no doubt here about the pre-eminence of the garden fence or gate as the major entryway to the realm of love. A sleeping lady, perhaps dreaming of her hitherto wandering and absent suitor, is about to be unexpectedly awakened—literally as well as metaphorically—after he reaches her. With both the open portal and rustic stile motifs, there are many instances in which the two components are positioned rather mysteriously isolated in the composition, without functioning as logical extensions of pre-existing architectural structures or projections. Such gratuitous usage of these barriers suggest that they served less as natural outgrowths of outdoor settings and increasingly as standardised yet vital accessories to the language of love.

The seminal image in Victorian courtship pictures in terms of barriers and emotional resonance was decidedly John Everett Millais's *The Huguenot* (private collection), an immensely important and popular work begun in 1851 and exhibited at the 1852 Royal Academy. Hailed as a masterpiece throughout the artist's career (in England, the United States, France, and elsewhere), this painting served as the archetypal Pre-Raphaelite composition for countless imitators and also became as the primary catalyst for Victorian re-invention of the courting barrier motif.⁴ Interestingly, fellow Pre-Raphaelite Holman Hunt had tried to convince Millais not to undertake a

⁴ For detailed analysis of this painting, see Casteras, "John Everett Millais's 'Secret-Looking Garden Wall'."

theme so “hackneyed and wanting in general interest,” recommending instead that he approach a less complex and elevated expression of romantic trial (qtd Millais 136).

Contemporary recycling of Millais’s icon merged the unique intensity of his enamoured partners’ emotions with the conventional paraphernalia and casting of a modest woman (invariably deflecting a direct gaze), an enraptured suitor, and a separating device. Prior to Millais’s radical combination of symbol, narrative incident, and sentiment, the use of the courting barrier was comparatively unexciting and even dull. Millais even altered the formulaic placement of the female alone in the foreground with her male paramour behind a divider; instead, he placed both protagonists in front of a powerful barrier, thereby creating a composition that competed with the separated lovers format as a specimen often imitated by artists during the next fifty years. *The Huguenot* spawned scores of other permutations, some noticeably mediocre, both in over-the-wall and backdrop wall compositions with heterosexual partners. Indeed, by the end of the century *The Huguenot*’s visual legacy had unfortunately become trivialised and vapid, often sadly reduced to almost comic effects.

As is evident even in this sampling of images, the rustic stile, the brick or stone wall, and the wooden fence were all interchangeable barrier components in the courtship rituals which melodramatically unfolded in Victorian paintings and culture. These variations were similarly equivalent in popular literature, to be found, for example, in illustrations with titles like “Trespass” and “No Trespass” (thereby suggesting when love’s boundaries could be overtaken) as well as in cartoons. In the latter category, for instance, there is an 1852 *Punch* image entitled *Over the Stile*, with Mr. Punch himself assisting a pretty woman over a country stile. About twenty years later (1871), *Over the Ring Fence*, a parody accompanied by a mock prothalamion on the marriage of Princess Louise and the Lord of Lorne, included these lines: “then boldly leap, Louise; and lusty Lorne, / Show how a dear loan may be lightly borne.”⁵ The overcoming of barriers in this context once again thinly veils the leap from maidenhood to womanhood and the assumption of a bride’s loss of virginity on her wedding night.

Occasionally the male looming in the background expressed a more sinister mood rather than so-called noble intentions, as in George D. Leslie’s *The Wizard’s Garden* (Figure 6, Macdougall Art Gallery, Christchurch New Zealand), a painting from the 1905 Royal Academy that rephrases the romantic dilemma in an undeniably bizarre and rare manner. The young woman in bright salmon-colored, Renaissance-inspired attire seems both apprehensive and mystified as she faces the spectator. Amid a setting of autumnal bleakness (the foliage is dying, the fallen leaves withered) her necromantic lover emerges from the shadows. This wizard wears black and has a full-face mask, making him appear like an executioner of figure of death at the garden doorway. Along with the detail of some pruning shears (used to cut dead growth), he establishes an unsettling and ominous mood for the setting and the prospects of the couple’s relationship.

In a lighter and domestic vein, Marcus Stone accentuated male aggressiveness somewhat in *The Time of Roses* from the 1878 Royal Academy exhibition. In this rather insipid image, the wall is formidable in height and the beau must strain both to lean over and kiss the lady and to hold her hand. She, however, looks fixedly at the ground in apparent modesty—or perhaps in consternation. Miriam Davis’s 1894 *A Slight Barrier*

⁵ This text appeared as part of several stanzas forming the caption for “Over the Stile.”

(Figure 7, exhibited two years later at the Royal Academy) varies the format only minimally. The male admirer lingers on the outside of a trellised fence while his sweetheart moves toward from among the flowers. She appears to be a kitchen maid looking up from her chores and wagging an admonishing finger at his bold attempts to climb into her space.

As such works suggest, by the 1890s the majority of courting images had degenerated into superficial costume pieces and weak reiterations of the courting barrier, nonetheless reflecting how unchanged and tenacious the motif proved to be, even into the early years of the twentieth century. The idea continued to surface in popular imagery like postcards, such as one inscribed: "How could I suffer love's alarms,/ When I am safe within your arms?" (Figure 8). Here a woman has dropped her defenses (and both partners have dropped their hats) and playfully embraces her suitor over the low wall, their pose perhaps displaying more of the prowess of arm wrestling rather than tenderness.

The tribulation of physical separation glimpsed in so many works, moreover, has undertones of the fate of Pyramus and Thisbe's fate, an Ovidian subject tackled by Edward Burne-Jones and other artists.⁶ The idea was further updated in a curious 1890s painting by Walter Dendy Sadler entitled *The Wrong Side of the Fence* (Figure 9), an unusual work in which the lady's presence is merely hinted at by the inclusion at far left of a feminine hand holding a fan through a break in the hedge. In effect, the woman does not even need to be seen to be admired and for spectators at least is reduced to the fetishised cipher of a gloved presence. One man in particular is depicted as speaking to his Victorian Thisbe from his own side of a labyrinthine garden of love, while nearby a group of all-male sympathisers smiles at their friend's efforts. Although admittedly banal, Sadler's painting suggests the extremes of the motif as well as the literal one-sidedness of this romantic predicament. It offers a rare, if comic, glimpse into the male perspective as contrasted with the woman's side of the dilemma literally foregrounded in most other courting images.

It is furthermore surely no coincidence that so many of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's stunners—from *Regina Cordium* to the nude *Venus Verticordia* of the 1860s—are restrained by barriers (balconies, parapets, or windows) which both hold off suitors and hold back their own powers as a temptress.⁷ While in the majority of images—as in the classic phrasing of courtship in Samuel Colman's *The Tryst*—the physical separation of the heterosexual pair is in complementary accord with mainstream rules concerning courtship (here despite the twilight hour), in some cases it conveys psychosexual implications (combined with heavy doses of male adoration and frustration) underscoring the mutual fears and constraint of both parties on their respective sides.

The wall was intermittently used in other emotional contexts, too, among them representations of lovers' quarrels. This is upheld in Erskine Nicols's *Lovers' Tiff* (ex-Sotheby's Belgravia) of 1859 and Marcus Stone's 1880s (untraced) *Fallen Out and Reconciled*. With the latter pendants, *Fallen Out* stages the temporary rift at a stone wall, while *Reconciled* places the lovers at a stile. The latter rustic component reappears in Edmund Blair-Leighton's lost yet aptly titled 1895 *Barriers*, where the inclusion of this impediment confirms the couple's courting woes. All of these represent romantic

⁶ For additional examples, see Casteras, "Down the Garden Path," Chapter X.

⁷ This idea of embowerment is explored in some detail in Casteras, "Rossetti's Embowered Females," 27-51.

challenges, with female protagonists reflexively looking away from their admirers, not in passive modesty, but rather in disappointment tinged with sadness and even mild anger. An equally wrenching kind of emotional upheaval recycles the wall as a powerful totem of female abandonment in William Quiller Orchardson's 1868 *The Broken Tryst* (Aberdeen Art Gallery) with its female leaning disconsolately against a stile.

Not surprisingly, the barrier recurred sporadically even in some proposal scenes, both with rustic figures—in J.C. Waite's *A Summer Proposal* (private collection) of 1855—and with affluent ones in William Powell Frith's 1877 *The Proposal* (private collection, England). In these circumstances, too, the personages preserve the expected modes of conduct and demeanour, the females shyly lowering their eyes as their admirers gently press their amorous—yet honourable—intentions.⁸ The potent formula of woman, man, and barrier thus varied little, although in time it achieved a certain hybrid sameness and became drained and mawkish, a symbol more of sexual repression and frustration than of expectation and fulfilment. Yet it was also astonishingly stubborn, hanging on through the turn of the century as an aging reminder of Ruskin's 1865 counsel on the subject of female chastity that a woman should maintain "a little wall around her place of Peace" (134).

As is apparent, the most efficacious usage of the courting barrier was with one-to-one, innocuous encounters between the sexes. Part architectural sentinel and prophylactic shield, the barrier safeguarded both parties from extreme behaviour within the mythical sphere of the Victorian garden of love. Partners could obey the unstated but universally understood "rules of the game" and sustain limited intimacy and privacy without outside interference (except that of the spectator). Significantly, the wall that in conventional and "safe" stages of courtship signified the need for restraint on both sides (especially by women) also reappeared in paintings of "distressed" or seduced womanhood. As I have described elsewhere, the wall in "fallen woman" compositions sometimes formed part of a bridge—either a side or an archway underneath the notorious Waterloo Arches, notably in Augustus Egg's finale for *Past and Present* (Tate Gallery) of 1858, Simeon Solomon's 1857 drawing entitled *I Am Starving* (private collection, England), and other examples.⁹ Indeed, the bridge was in real life and art a favoured place where "poor unfortunates" congregated and even leapt to their deaths, a suicidal destiny crystallised in George Cruikshank's famous image of a woman catapulting to her death in *The Drunkard's Daughter* (British Museum). The price of unchastity for women was high and included not only loss of the protective wall of defenses erected by society but also loss of status and often abandonment and destitution in the uncaring city. It is thus particularly ironic that the brick barrier in Rossetti's unfinished circa 1853 *Found* (Delaware Art Museum) positions a "soiled dove" against a wall that functions on multiple levels. The wall is adjacent to a cemetery and thus a deathly warning, yet it also served as an allusion to the tradition of the courting barrier, failed romance, and female vulnerability.

In sum, courtship conventions required a ready audience as well as convenient props, both of which were supplied in Victorian art partly by the appeal of a physical barrier that reinforced societal beliefs concerning the segregation of the sexes and the

⁸ On this strand of imagery, see Casteras, "Down the Garden Path," 337-43.

⁹ On this strand of imagery of prostitution and errant women, see Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood*, 131-43.

need to safeguard female purity. That a garden wall, stile, or wooden fence could sustain such resonant meaning is, moreover, confirmed in a poem entitled "A Wall" by Robert Browning which includes a peroration on the garden wall's romantic associations with a sweetheart who once waited within its confines. Both inhabitant and place have in effect ripened, "And lush and lithe do the creepers clothe/ Yon wall I watch." Moreover, the pulsating power of this canonical nineteenth-century site of gender construction and relationships is evoked in the male persona's memories of how "the old wall throbbed, and its life's excess/Died out and away in the leafy wraps./ Wall upon wall are between us: life/ And song should away from heart to heart!"¹⁰

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¹⁰ See Browning's *Pacchiarotto*, Prologue 5.4-5.