

## PATER'S PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR AS A YOUNG GIRL

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Much Victorian fiction and critical writing now familiar in book form made its first appearance in print in the periodical press. Walter Pater's work provides a singular example of this form of publishing since all but one of his books were compilations of journal articles. Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters," for example, first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in October 1885 and was subsequently republished in 1887 as the first of the four portraits in *Imaginary Portraits*.

Pater declared that *Imaginary Portraits* was his favourite among his own books (Wright 2: 95) and it remains one of his best-regarded works. In his entry on Pater in *The Dictionary of Art* Richard Wollheim nominates the "Prince of Court Painters" as Pater's "finest piece of art criticism" as well as "the most successful of the *Imaginary Portraits*" (257). It is also unique in Pater's *oeuvre* as the only work in which he adopts a female authorial persona or, indeed, a first-person narrator throughout. It is also rare as a piece in which a real female (as opposed to, say, Pater's construction of Mona Lisa) plays a major role: all the subjects of his stories and essays, though obviously not the authors of all the books he reviewed, were male. "A Prince of Court Painters," in fact, represents a significant but hitherto unrecognised shift in Pater's stated aesthetic position, and his use of a cross-gender authorial persona was a crucial strategy in mediating his changing views on art and morality.

Although some Victorian women writers used masculine *noms de plume* in order to be taken seriously or for other reasons (George Eliot and the Bells, for example), it was quite rare for a male author in Victorian England to adopt a female authorial persona. This persona does not refer to a pseudonym or *nom de plume* or a deliberately fudged identity such as occasionally utilised by men writing erotica or for women's magazines, but to the narrator's identity in the text of a story told in the first person where there is no intention to deceive and the actual author's name indicative of gender is not concealed. A modern Australian example of the practice is *Rowena's Field* by Nicholas Jose, while the best-known Victorian instance is *Bleak House*, the only time Dickens used a female first-person narrator in a full-length novel. There were some short pieces including Dickens's two Mrs Lirriper stories and George Meredith's "The Friend of an Engaged Couple," but few Victorian male authors attempted to sustain the device throughout a novel. No doubt there are other less-well-known examples, but it is safe to say it was far from a common practice.

Unlike Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters," *Bleak House* is not generally regarded as one of its author's greatest successes. Although, as Ifor Evans points out, it is "the most conscious and deeply planned novel in Dickens's whole work" (246), many commentators, including John Forster (in an unsigned review in the *Examiner*, 8 October 1853), have disliked Esther's self-conscious unconsciousness. Michael and Mollie Hardwick in *The Charles Dickens Encyclopedia* consider this use of "a woman as a first-person narrator, a device not wholly successful because of the mock-modesty

with which Esther Summerson surrounds herself" (19). They attribute the shortcomings of the work specifically to the male novelist's inability to be convincing in articulating a female voice and even less convincing in adopting a female character.

In the twentieth century homosexual men have sometimes claimed an affinity with feminism, a claim which strikes some heterosexual men as odd. (It might have struck Pater as odd too, given his mockery of George Eliot's efforts to create male characters [Levy 114]). If this claim to affinity is to be given any credence, it would follow that a homosexually inclined man (like Pater) might have a better chance of convincingly adopting a female authorial persona than a heterosexual man (like Dickens). In any event, Pater made the attempt in a "A Prince of Court Painters," thus providing an opportunity to observe how that piece derives its character and qualities from his use of this device.

Many of Pater's writings reveal his homosexual orientation in their descriptions of beautiful and talented young men. However, the artist-hero's youthful beauty is decidedly less emphasised in "A Prince of Court Painters" than in many other comparable pieces. The focus is much more on an attempt to identify the distinctive qualities of Watteau's art precisely in accordance with Pater's critical program as stated in his 1873 "Preface" to *The Renaissance*. The gender of the narrator is not immediately revealed or declared emphatically in "A Prince of Court Painters" but rather sneaks up on the reader. It becomes quickly apparent that the narrator lives a contemplative, private existence, but the first indirect implication of femininity comes only after five pages of the "old French journal" with a quick reference to the practice of embroidery (*Imaginary Portraits* 9). It is not until pages twenty four to twenty seven that the gender of the narrator is made explicit, although by then there have been innumerable passages which accord far more with a Victorian (or indeed modern) reader's assumptions about a girl rather than a boy. It is equally clear by this stage that the narrator is intelligent, discriminating, literate, aesthetically aware, sensitive, and far from naive. Nonetheless at least one commentator seems to have misread or forgotten the narrator's gender: George Bourne (pseudonym of George Sturt, 1863-1927) referred to "the Diarist who wrote Watteau" et al. as "men of the refined and contemplative habit which one attributes to Pater himself" (Seiler 192):

The text of "A Prince of Court Painters" includes many expressions of resignation and regret over the limitations of the narrator's range of activities and travels in which the issue of her gender is implicit, but there is really only one point at which she makes it a factor in her opinions and it is the key statement of an aesthetic philosophy in the piece: There was a light, a poetry, in those persons and things themselves, close at hand *we* had not seen. He has enabled us to see it: we are so much the better-off thereby, and I, for one, the better. The world he sets before us so engagingly has its care for purity, its cleanly preferences, in what one is to *see* in the outsides of things — and there is something, a sign, a memento, at the least, of what makes life really valuable, in that. There, is my simple notion, wholly

womanly perhaps, but which I may hold by, of the purpose of the arts." (32-33)

This is nothing less than an aesthetic credo, or justification for art, comparable to the early ones which earned Pater his dubious reputation, but with a moral component. It is entirely consistent with the understanding of Watteau's art elaborated throughout the text. Whereas Pater's 1869 essay on Leonardo delights in the brilliant sins of the Renaissance and links these to a disturbing quality in his art, "A Prince of Court Painters" posits Watteau's artistic identity as deriving from his aloofness and distrust of the sophisticated world of Paris and the royal court.

These two emphases are interesting as both affirm continuities: the italicisation of *we* is reminiscent of *me* in the "Preface" to *The Renaissance* (viii), while that of *see* reinforces the idea that the sensual and physical is the sole channel of understanding. The argument here is a big step back from the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* which asserts that art gives "nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (239) and that "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (236). According to "A Prince of Court Painters," however, art actually makes you better and wiser; or to be specific, it makes the narrator better. The use of "perhaps" in the admission that this credo is "wholly womanly perhaps" is significant for it implies and permits the alternative, "or perhaps not." "A Prince of Court Painters" is too well handled, its narrator too intelligent, and its critical insights too perceptive for us to believe that Pater is slyly trivialising a functional moralistic view of art—presenting a "straw man" aesthetic only suitable for women and children. So why did he use a young girl as his mouthpiece to present his aesthetic position of 1885?

An interesting minor point which links to several of Pater's best-known characterisation of female images occurs in a description of a painting which provides an indication of the narrator's taste:

Yet I like far better than any of these pictures of Rubens a work of that old Dutch master, Peter Porbus, which hangs . . . in our church at home. The patron saints, simple, and standing firmly on either side, present two homely old people to Our Lady enthroned in the midst, with the look and attitude of one for whom, amid her 'glories' (depicted in dim little circular pictures, set in the openings of a chaplet of pale flowers around her) all feelings are over, except a great pitifulness. (*Imaginary Portraits* 15)

The parallel is to "Mona Lisa" (1873) and even more to the world-weary "Madonnas of Botticelli" whose "morality is all sympathy" (*The Renaissance* 56).<sup>1</sup> What is striking in

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<sup>1</sup> Also see paper by Dolan from the "Painted Women" symposium at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery 29 August 1998; publication pending from University of Western Australia.

this context is that Pater has assigned his "decadent" taste to a young woman of the early eighteenth century which may have been one reason why—as we will see—the voice of his persona was not entirely convincing for the contemporaneous reviewer Eleanor Catherine Price.

For the last hundred-odd years "A Prince of Court Painters" has been known from its inclusion in *Imaginary Portraits*. No reader of the book would believe for even a moment that "A Prince of Court Painters" really consists of "Extracts from an Old French Journal" as its subtitle pretends. The fictitiousness of its framing may not have been quite as instantly obvious to its first readers in October 1885 when it made its first appearance in an issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*. Here Pater's name appears only at the end of the article which leads the issue from the front page. The index for the bound copy of several issues is more explicit: "Court Painters, A Prince of. By WALTER PATER" (upper case in the original). This is worth noting because many of Pater's articles and reviews were unsigned on their first appearance in journals and in some cases many years passed before they found their way, usually after modification but sometimes posthumously, into books confessedly "by Walter Pater."

*Imaginary Portraits* including "A Prince of Court Painters" attracted the attention of reviewers, both male and female, including George E. Woodbury, Arthur Symons, Selwyn Image (an anonymous contributor to the *Oxford Magazine*) and Oscar Wilde who wrote an unsigned review of *Imaginary Portraits* in the *Pall Mall Gazette* 11 June 1887. Wilde considered *Imaginary Portraits* a "singularly attractive book" (Seiler 164) but found Pater's account of Watteau as presented by the female diarist "perhaps a little too fanciful, and the description of him as one who was 'always a seeker after something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all,'"<sup>2</sup> seems to us more applicable to him who saw Mona Lisa sitting among the rocks than to the gay and debonair *peintre des fêtes galantes*" (163).

Inevitably we must wonder what women thought of Pater's effort to write as one of their sex. In Victorian times literature seems to have been reviewed by women in the journals more often than visual art. *Imaginary Portraits* was the subject of two unsigned reviews whose female authors have been identified as Eleanor Price, and Lady Dilke (née Emelia Frances Strong). During her first marriage to Mark Pattison, an Oxford friend of Pater's who once commented on the latter surrounding himself with effeminate youths (Levy 100), Dilke had written a critical review of Pater's *Renaissance*. In 1879 Pater himself had praised Dilke in *The Renaissance of Art in France*. In the *Athenaeum* of 25 June 1887 Dilke anonymously praised *Imaginary Portraits* concentrating on interpreting it as a batch of "presentments of Mr Pater's self, now masquerading delicately in the flowered sacque of Watteau's girl-friend now greedily gallant in the joy of life as Denys" (Seiler 166). The hint of a sneer in her use of transvestite imagery when referring to Pater's authorial persona in "A Prince of Court Painters" is not balanced by any specific praise for that piece. Dilke commended the

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<sup>2</sup> Levy uses this quote, which concludes "A Prince of Court Painters," as the keynote in his excellent biographical study of Pater.

book for its psychological insights, but the mocking image of the moustachioed Pater as an eighteenth-century rustic drag queen undermines the overall seriousness of the review.

In her review of *Imaginary Portraits* for the *Spectator* 16 July 1887, novelist Eleanor Catherine Price describes “A Prince of Court Painters” as a “beautiful sketch which to us has more charm, though perhaps less power, than any other in the book” (168). After examining it at length, she considers the credibility of Pater’s female authorial persona: “one almost feels like a barbarian in suggesting that no Frenchwoman of 1717 would have been capable of it” and quotes a descriptive passage considered by many readers to be a prediction of revolution (169). To Price the intellectual maturity or penetration of the writing is high—too high for its purported author.

Pater, who took pains to make his journal convincing, clearly thought a “Frenchwoman of 1717 would have been capable of it.” “A Prince of Court Painters” is not carelessly written. It is polished and considered piece, notwithstanding the mistake concerning the date of *Manon Lescaut* which was half-rationalised by a footnote in the second edition of *Imaginary Portraits*.<sup>3</sup> If we accept this we cannot hold that Pater is trivialising the personal but decidedly moralistic (and “wholly womanly perhaps”) aesthetic he advances through the girl’s journal. If Pater was setting out to trivialise the aesthetic proposed by his narrator he would surely have made her silly and unattractive. But he did nothing of the sort. Furthermore, although Pater’s fictional characters are always versions of himself, in “A Prince of Court Painters” he more closely associates himself with the narrator by making her a namesake and a putative ancestor or relative: she is identifiable as a sister of Jean-Baptiste Pater, Watteau’s only pupil. This is another way in which “A Prince of Court Painters” is unique—it is the only work in which Walter introduces people who share his surname.

Pater’s major declaration of having moved to an aesthetic more moralistic than that of *The Renaissance* is generally identified as occurring at the end of his major essay of 1889, “Style,” in which he distinguished between good and great art on the basis that the latter works to “the increase of men’s happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truth about ourselves and our relation to the world as may ennoble and fortify us” (*Appreciations* 38). To Levy, among others, this statement of 1888 reveals “unexpectedly moral overtones” (180). However, the view of art Pater puts forward through his youthful female diarist persona in “A Prince of Court Painters” is an unmistakable, albeit tentative move in that direction, and when recognised renders “Style” less unexpected. Pater’s tentative aesthetic and ethical shift in “A Prince of Court Painters” deserves to be better known, but apparently has not previously been recognised.

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<sup>3</sup> To have removed the passages relating to *Manon Lescaut* once the error was recognised would have left a serious gap in the story and in the portrait of the narrator even more than in the account of Watteau. The point is that the *Manon Lescaut* reference establishes that the narrator (who mediates Pater’s views) is literate, up-to-date, mature and unprudish although apparently not sexually experienced.

This scenario also suggests a reason why the allegedly occasionally misogynistic Pater went against his own (and indeed almost everyone else's) practice and chose to mediate his views through a female narrator, someone intelligent and close to him in some ways (for example, by name) but also distinctly different in significant ways. It seems that the use of this persona was a mechanism that enabled him to make a move in the direction he wanted to go, to advance a view—to test the water, or fly a kite, as they say—without having to be fully accountable for it or appearing fully committed to it four years before “coming out” as a moralist in “Style.”

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