

Two Female Images by A. Tennyson: Biblical Keys and Interpretation Facets (the Pre-Raphaelites, K. Balmont, I. Bunin)

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The article examines two female images by A. Tennyson, the Lady of Shalott and Godiva from the eponymous poems, through the prism of biblical and iconographic allusions. The former (Shalott) alludes to the plot and iconography of The Annunciation, the latter (Godiva)—to the motifs of The Old Testament and The Apocalypse. Picturesque paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites, among which were a number of those related to these Tennyson plots, provide even more reassurance with regard to the significance of biblical plots and iconographic canons in the specified Tennyson's works. Sufferings, fatalism, sensuousness, antinomicity, picturesqueness—all this made the Tennyson female images magnetic to Russian Modernist writers, the images which were in harmony with the spirit of the turn of the twentieth century. K. Balmont and I. Bunin in their translations of the Tennyson's poems made their own interpretations of the images of the Lady of Shalott and Godiva, accentuating (and even adding) details and nuances of meanings important for symbolist aesthetics.

Keywords: literature and visual arts / English poetry / Tennyson, Alfred / female characters / Lady Shalott / Lady Godiva / iconography / biblical allusions / Pre-Raphaelites / Russian translations / Balmont, Konstantin / Bunin, Ivan Aleksejevič

Russian literature was always open to the world's influence, but at certain times certain cultures became of increasing interest. The turn of the twentieth century was one of such periods, termed the Silver Age. Distinctive features were the West European cultural realities, literary movements, motifs and images chosen by Russian writers – in the first place by symbolists – to transmit to Russian ground. For example, the aesthetics of the Pre-Raphaelites with their cult of the archaic, close attention to the Middle Ages, to mythology, their aspiration for the synthesis of the arts, their intimate relationship with romanticism, proved to be in exceptional consonance with the symbolists' quest.

The Pre-Raphaelites' work is, in turn, inseparable from the poetry of their elder contemporary, Alfred Lord Tennyson, who captivated Russian minds in the Silver Age on the back of the increasing popularity of Rossetti, Hunt, Millais, Waterhouse. They not only admired Tennyson's poetry but also created a number of paintings inspired by his verses and poems. Tennyson was translated in Russia already during his lifetime (from 1859) but at the turn of the twentieth century he became exceptionally famous thanks to the natural harmony between many of his subjects and motifs and the Silver Age values. The Lady of Shalott and Lady Godiva, two female images in Tennyson's poetry, are the most recognizable for the Russian reader.

At a cursory glance the two characters have little in common. Godiva's story stems from mediaeval chronicles concerned with real, historical individuals – Earl Leofric and his wife; the story of Godiva's legendary naked horse-ride through Coventry (a condition imposed by her husband to lower the citizens' taxes) is most likely fictitious, but it was formed early and developed with time (Donoghue).

The plot of the poem "The Lady of Shalott" concerns a lady doomed to weave to the end of her days and observe the outside world only through a mirror; when she breaks her prohibition by looking directly at handsome Lancelot through her window the curse comes inexorably upon her. Tennyson might seem to have used the Arthurian plot here (which he later reconstructed in his "Idylls of the King"), but on closer inspection it becomes clear that "The Lady of Shalott" story bears little resemblance to the plot-prototype about the unrequited love of Elaine of Astolat for Lancelot (as will be shown later, the Tennyson story is not at all about unrequited love). Besides there is not much similarity between the Tennyson plot and another possible original source – the thirteenth century Italian novella *La Donna di Scalotta* (Potwin 238). In fact it is the author's individuality that prevails in the poem.

It is seemingly the singularity of the authorial interpretation of already existing images that conditioned their deep-seated, not instantly noticeable, affinity in the Tennyson works. Both plots arise from fictitious (*The Lady of Shalott*) or semi-fictitious (*Godiva*) times and events. Both characters are impelled to go beyond the bounds of everyday reality (each has its own), making, at the same time, a great sacrifice. For *Godiva*, it is her modesty, chastity; for the *Lady of Shalott*, it is life itself. In both cases a heroine's path plays an important role in the plots. The common element in these paths is the duality, the ambivalence of their perception. Figuratively, it is possible to highlight two viewpoints: the one "from outside," the other "from inside." Seen from the first viewpoint—"from outside"—the stories' pictures appear aesthetically attractive and even seductively sensual. The "from inside" perspective is accessible only to the heroines; this viewpoint is tragic, connected with the realization of a special, life-changing mission. Mysticism, mythopoetics, fatalism, sensuousness, antinomies, picturesqueness—all these rendered the images magnetic to Russian Modernist writers.

Before embarking on a review of the translations by Balmont and Bunin it is worth paying attention to a significant subtext of Tennyson's works, a subtext to which the Pre-Raphaelites responded with interest, and with which the Russian poets entered into a dialogue. This is about a fanciful composition of mythological, legendary and biblical allusions in the texts.

In "*The Lady of Shalott*" such allusions emerge from the specificity of the setting right from the beginning. The depicted scenery is manifestly endless; it breaks the boundaries into Creation:

Long fields of barley and of rye,
That *clothe the wold and meet the sky* (Tennyson, *Poems*, vol. 1, 1842 77)

There are two static and isolated spots in this space: the island of *Shalott* (natural isolation) and *Camelot* castle (artificial isolation). Both island and castle are multivalent symbols in the mythology and legends of different peoples. The island most often carries a positive connotation (paradise, a refuge for the blessed, shelter from the chaos). It is on an island that Tennyson places the heroine's residence, described as:

Four gray *walls*, and four gray *towers*,
Overlook a space of *flowers* (78)

As for Christian symbolism the tower was robustly associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages. This association goes back to Solomon's "Song of Songs":

Thy neck is like the tower of ivory (*American Standard Version*, Song of Sol. 7.4)

Examples can be found in The Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary ("Mystical rose, / *Tower* of David, / *Tower* of ivory, / House of gold"; *The Racolta* 158) as well as in *hortus conclusus*-type iconographic paintings. The same is true for flowers (this symbolism will be looked at later). The castle is an ambiguous symbol that could be associated with a dwelling, fortress, temple and a town. The latter was often depicted as a castle in Christian iconography, but meanings could differ (on the one hand, the Heavenly Jerusalem, and on the other, the fall of Babylon). The two locations are connected by a river. This is another multivalent symbol; let us recall the river Lethe in Greek Mythology, the river of oblivion, the apocalyptic river of life. Tennyson focuses attention on the direction of the river—from the island to Camelot. This and other mentioned scenery details seem to anticipate upcoming events and provide symbolic "keys" from them.

In addition, there are some conspicuous floral symbols related to the Lady herself. For example, the image of the willow continually accompanies the heroine:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver (Tennyson, *Poems*, vol. 1, 1842 77)

By the margin, *willow*-veil'd (78)

And as the boat-head wound along
The *willowy* hills and fields among (85)

The willow is traditionally associated with sorrow, death, separation:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

Upon the *willows* in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps. (Ps. 137)

Shakespeare's Desdemona singing a sorrowful song about a willow is a more recent allusion:

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green *willow*;

Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing *willow, willow, willow* (Shakespeare 254)

The willow accentuates the exclusiveness of a heroine, her mysteriousness, her moon-like, twilight nature, but also anticipates a sorrowful course of events.

Another floral symbol is the lilies that bloom around the island:
Gazing where the *lilies* blow
Round an island there below,
The island of Shalott. (Tennyson, *Poems, vol. 1, 1842* 77)

As the heroine leaves her work and looks at the outside world not through the mirror, but directly out of the window, the first thing she sees is the *lily*:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom (83)

Then she sees “the helmet and the plume” (83) of Lancelot. The situation “a lady sees a lily and a handsome youth” alludes to an evangelical event – The Annunciation (or Lady Day) – and first of all to its visual perception through iconography which was influenced to a great extent by Apocrypha and legends. According to the Apocrypha, the Virgin Mary was to *weave* a new veil for the Jerusalem Temple. It was exactly when she was weaving that the Archangel Gabriel saw her as shown, for instance, on many Byzantine images starting from the twelfth century (the Blessed Virgin Mary depicted with a reddish purple thread in her hands while listening to the Archangel Gabriel is a recognizable image).

A certain symbolic tradition of positioning figures, depicting interiors, relating internal and external spaces, was established in religious painting. Thus, the Annunciation scene is placed as a rule in a small enclosed room with a window (another variant is a fenced-in space with an obligatory tree). Outside the window (or the fence) there will be a river, a tree (or trees), some buildings and often a castle – see, for example, paintings by Domenico Beccafumi, Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Rogier van der Weyden. One can notice how similar these elements on the paintings to Tennyson’s features. His earlier version of the poem—that appeared in 1833—contains even more details relating to Annunciation iconography. For instance:

The little isle is all inrailed
With a *rose-fence*, and overtrailed
With *roses*: by the marge unhailed (Tennyson, *Poems*, 1833 10)

The rose is a traditional symbol of Our Lady and the theme “Madonna in the rose garden” is among the most popular in religious painting. Or two more examples:

A pearlgarland winds her head:
She leaneth on a velvet *bed*,
Fully royally apparellèd,
The Lady of Shalott (10)

The pearl headdress is a multivalent symbol accentuating the mythopoetic side of the image: the pearl is linked to femininity, the waters and the moon (one can recall *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli, where Venus emerges from the shell as a pearl) and, again, to Our Lady (for example, the pearl headdress rests on the Virgin Mary’s head in the artwork by Hubert and Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece*, by Quentin Matsys *The Virgin and Child with Angels*, in a number of paintings of Madonna by Carlo Crivelli). The image of a bed in the Virgin Mary’s room where the Archangel Gabriel sees her is also no less traditional than the rose.

When looking at the Pre-Raphaelites’ illustrations, one can notice that there is an interior with mirror (almost indistinguishable from a window) and scenery. As one would expect, the motif of weaving is also present – see, for example, *The Lady of Shalott* by William Holman Hunt or *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows, Said the Lady of Shalott* by John William Waterhouse. Certain details were even accentuated by the Pre-Raphaelites. It is the reddish purple color of the thread that dominates in the paintings of Hunt and Waterhouse (Tennyson refers only to “colours gay”). In fact in *The Lady of Shalott* by Waterhouse (1894) the reddish purple thread in the Lady’s hands is in the center of the painting what evokes the most direct visual associations with one of the canons of Annunciation iconography. Some other details related to the Annunciation’s and Virgin Mary’s symbolism (and missing in the Tennyson poem) were even added by the artists. A sort of fence/ enclosure in front of the lady in the Hunt picture brings to mind an enclosure in the religious paintings of “hortus conclusus”—see, for example, *The Little Garden of Paradise* by Upper Rhenish Master. Among other examples are the cherubim’s wings and the red/blue color of the Lady’s clothes directly associating with the color of the

Virgin Mary's garments. But perhaps it is John Melhuish Strudwick who went furthest in narrowing the distance between the image of the Lady of Shalott and the Virgin Mary – the portrait, interior and, of course, a lily on the floor speak for themselves (see his painting *Elaine, The Lady of Shalott*).

When for the first time the Lady looks at the outside world (to be more accurate, at Lancelot) not through the mirror the curse comes into force. We would risk suggesting that from this point on the Annunciation symbolism changes to Christ symbolism. The curse manifests itself in the following lines:

Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side (Tennyson, *Poems, vol. 1, 1842* 83)

Let us compare it with:

And behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom (Matt. 27.51)

Following this, the Lady meets her doom with resignation and the only thing she does is leave her predestined enclosed space to reveal herself to people. The first edition of the poem (1833) is illustrative in this context – it is in this version that people find a parchment in the hand of the already deceased lady, on which is written:

“The web was woven curiously
The charm is broken utterly,
Draw near and *fear not – this is I,*
The Lady of Shalott.” (Tennyson, *Poems, 1833* 19)

Let us recall that there were words of love to Lancelot on the parchment of the departed Elaine of Astolat. Here we see something completely different. The Lady notifies people that by her death “the charm is broken utterly” (broken, not executed!) and asks them not to fear. Curiously, these lines are open to ambivalent interpretations—the breakage of the charm might relate not only to the Lady but also to all people. The latter becomes plausible also because of another evangelical analogy:

...Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. (Matt. 14.27)

In other words this story is not about a woman's love for a man, but about a sacrificial atonement, about a virtuous example of going beyond the bounds of external conditionality (though at a high price).

So, from this perspective the meaning of the mysterious Tennyson plot is revealed through biblical and iconographic allusions.

Balмонт puts more emphasis on the mystic, “magic” component in which the symbolists were keenly interested. First of all, the title is changed, now it is “The Fairy Shalott.” The name of the location transforms into the name of the lady. And “the Lady” herself becomes “the Fairy.” Here is a small, but illustrative deviation from the original:

TENNYSON	BALMONT
Some bearded meteor, trailing light, Moves over still Shalott.	Как в этот миг сверкал простор Пред стихнувшей Шалот. ¹
(Tennyson, <i>Poems</i> , vol. 1, 1842 82)	[<i>Over calmed Shalott</i>] (Balмонт 143)

The feminine Russian inflection -ей makes it evident that “Shalott” is female and therefore in this context a woman.

And it is not the only example. The expressions “печалилась Шалот” (*Shalott experienced sadness*) (Balмонт 142) and “воскликнула Шалот” (*Shalott exclaimed*) (143) unequivocally prove Balмонт’s translational liberty. Tennyson’s point is different—his heroine is in fact depicted as an *object* of magic charms and not as their *possessor*.

Here is another minor, but semantically illustrative, translator’s deviation:

TENNYSON	BALMONT
She saw the water-lily bloom, She saw the helmet and the plume, She look’d down to Camelot.	В окно увидел жадный взор Кунавы [<i>globeflowers</i>], шлем [<i>helmet</i>], коня [<i>horse</i>], простор [<i>the vast</i>], Вдали зубчатый Камелот. ²
(Tennyson, <i>Poems</i> , vol. 1, 1842 83)	(Balмонт 143)

As one can see, Balмонт calls “the water-lily” “the globeflower.” Such an appellation will lead the Russian reader away from the iconographic “lily” to the literary (“The Snow Maiden” by Ostrovsky) and – further on – mythological sphere. Besides, the expanded enumeration (globeflowers, helmet, horse, open space) distorts Tennyson’s meaningful focus.

Balмонт’s translation is more laconic than Tennyson’s original. For example, the description of Lancelot is stripped of grand “cosmic” images like “branch of stars,” “golden Galaxy,” “starry clusters bright.” However there is one thing that Balмонт accentuates. It is a dream motif, the motif that was important for the symbolists. In the translation it is present even where Tennyson does not have it. The number of examples for such a relatively short text is quite impressive:

TENNYSON

And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers “’Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott.”

(Tennyson, *Poems, vol. 1, 1842* 79)

And moving thro’ a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
(79–80)

Or when the moon was overhead,

Came two young lovers lately wed
(81)

Like some bold seer in a trance
(84)

And her eyes were darken’d wholly,
Turn’d to tower’d Camelot
(85)

BALMONT

И жнец усталый, при луне,
Снопы вздымая к вышине,
Тихонько шепчет, **как во сне**: –
[*Whispers quietly, as if in a dream*: –]
“Волшебница Шалот!”³
(Balmont 141)

Лишь видит в зеркало она
Виденья мира, **тени сна**⁴ [...
shadows of a dream]
(141)

Когда же, лунных снов полна, [*When
full of moon dreams*,]
Чета влюблённых шла, нежна⁵
(142)

И, как провидец, в блеске сна,⁶ [...
in the splendor of a dream] (144)

И вот затмился взор очей,
Глядя на сонный Камелот.⁷
[*Looking at dream-girt Camelot*.]
(144)

¹ Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “As the vast glared at this instant / Over calmed Shalott.”

² Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “The gaze saw in the window / The globe-flowers, the helmet, the horse, the vast, / Far away toothed Camelot.”

³ Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “And by the moon the reaper weary, / Raising sheaves high into the air / Whispers quietly, as if in a dream / ‘The fairy Shalott!’”

⁴ Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “She sees in the mirror nothing but / Visions of the world, shadows of a dream.”

⁵ Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “When full of moon dreams, / A loving couple walked, in tenderness.”

⁶ Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “And as a seer in the splendor of a dream.”

⁷ Literal (non-poetic) English translation of the whole extract: “And her eyes were darkened, / Looking at dream-girt Camelot.”

It is rather obvious that details related to mysticism and the coexistence-contraposition of two worlds—the sensuous and the ultramundane—were the highest priority for the Symbolist Balmont.

Let us turn now to the translation of *Godiva* by Bunin. The name of the heroine could serve as a starting point for an analysis of the poem. According to Daniel Donoghue in his book *Lady Godiva: A Literary History of the Legend*, the Old English form of the name (Godgifu) fell out of fashion in the twelfth century (Donoghue 3); the name *Godiva* was finally fixed in the fifteenth century and, seemingly, at the same time a folk etymological variant (*Goode Eve*) appeared (3). Not only phonetic resemblance but also *Godiva*'s nudity gave grounds for associating her with the Foremother of humanity. But as for the epithet “good”: as is known the Fall divided the lives of the first people, Adam and Eve, into two parts: to the extent that originally their nudity was sinless and virtuous, after the Fall everything changed. The violation of God's commandment had far-reaching repercussions too—not only our first parents but also all humanity found themselves in a tragic situation. However it was Eve who disobeyed first. So what is *Godiva* like? We would risk suggesting that again we deal with an allusion to the biblical story.

“*Goode Eve*” or *Godiva* shows absolute humility facing the hardship that befell her. It is worth recalling here the two viewpoints: the one “from outside” and the other “from inside.” On the one hand, *Godiva*'s nudity is not at all sinless as the action takes place not in the pastures of Heaven; moreover, she is sensual and tempting for a gaze “from outside.” It is worth noting that *Godiva* becomes a sort of seductive object consciously. Besides, some picturesque details allude to a biblical context, namely to the image of the whore of Babylon from the Apocalypse, who is described as sitting upon a “scarlet coloured beast” (Rev. 17.3) and arrayed “in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold” (Rev. 17.4) Let us compare: the palfrey *Godiva* rides is “trapt / In purple blazon'd with armorial gold” (Tennyson, *Poems*, vol. 2, 1842 114) (John Collier's *Lady Godiva* is of assistance for visual perception of this similarity). On the other hand *Godiva* is “closed on with chastity” (114) and the inner essence of her ride is self-sacrifice and self-overcoming.

The ambivalence is also present in her loose hair—“And shower'd the rippled ringlets to her knee” (114)—which, paradoxically though justifiably in her situation, is seen not as a sign of dissoluteness (in Russian: “loose”—“распущенный”; “dissoluteness”—“распущенность”), but, on the contrary, as a sign of modesty (in Russian “modesty” [скромность] and “cover” [скрывать] are cognates).

Godiva goes along a path opposite to that of Eve. If Eve is chaste at first and after the Fall, infected by sin, passes this “deadly virus” to all future generations, Godiva, the other way round, moves from darkness (certainly, not the darkness of sin, but that of fear of the role she took on). On her path Godiva symbolically moves away from the power of the dark side. Depicting architectural elements “watching” Godiva, Tennyson mentions such lifeless creatures as:

The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the spout
Had cunning eyes to see... (114)

These are gargoyles, architectural details resembling some demonic characters; their symbolism is undoubtedly important. Eventually Godiva reaches light, as is conveyed to us in a picturesquely symbolical form:

Not less thro' all bore up, till, last, she saw
The white-flower'd elder-thicket from the field
Gleam thro' the Gothic archway in the wall.
Then she rode back... (115)

In the end Godiva appears crowned, which can be perceived rather as the attainment of moral excellence than the strengthening of her social status.

So Godiva makes her symbolic way from the fear of disgrace to light and the removal of an intolerable burden from people's shoulders, thus, becoming Good Eve or Anti-Eve (because Eve's way is the ontological opposite: she, on the contrary, puts an intolerable burden on people).

In fact, the very name Eve is not featured in the Tennyson poem and the phonetic resemblance of the names is not played with. Therefore the use of the name Eve in the translation by Bunin draws attention:

TENNYSON
Then she rode forth, clothed on with chastity... (115)

BUNIN
На нем она пустилась в путь – **как Ева**, [*She rode the horse forth – as Eve,*]
Как гений целомудрия... [*As chastity's angel...*] (Bunin 127)

Alluding to the biblical story, Bunin does not put an emphasis on the difference between Godiva's and Eve's paths; the name Eve goes alongside the “chastity's angel.” That is to say, Bunin's Godiva is analogized with Eve before the Fall. The second expression is another translational

liberty of the poet and is actually a very vivid image. For the Russian reader, it naturally evokes the association with Pushkin's "beauty's angel pure and clear." In other words, having been transferred to a "different culture" the image acquires national recognizability. But conversely, the image of gargoyles, including both a picturesque level (medieval architecture) and a symbolic one (biblical subtext) was not accentuated. So instead of "The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the spout / Had cunning eyes to see" (Tennyson, *Poems*, vol. 2, 1842 114) Bunin has "Разинув пасть, лукаво вслед за нею / Косился желоб" (*With jaws agape and squinting eyes the spout slyly watched her go*) (Bunin 127). This image is not fully transparent for the Russian reader (due to pragmatics – the difference between Russian and West European architecture).

So, the female images created by Tennyson incorporate a multitude of traditions and allusions, having interpreted biblical stories in a particular but recognizable way, having fancifully combined the past and the contemporary, the historical and the fictitious, the ethical and the aesthetic. And having been "illuminated" by the Pre-Raphaelites' paintings they became especially attractive to Russian Modernists. That is why the choice of Balmont and Bunin was in no way accidental. The poems may seem to have been translated close to the original ... then, it is all the more interesting to spot not immediately conspicuous discrepancies that offer an opportunity to muse anew on the uniqueness of each epoch, differences and similarities of national cultures and individual writing styles.

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Dve ženski podobi A. Tennysona: biblijski ključ in vidiki interpretacije (predrafaeliti, K. Balmont, I. Bunin)

Ključne besede: literatura in likovna umetnost / angleška poezija / Tennyson, Alfred / ženski liki / Gospa z gradu Shalott / Godiva / ikonografija / biblijske aluzije / prerafaeliti / prevodi v ruščino / Balmont, Konstantin / Bunin, Ivan Aleksejevič

Prispevek preučuje dve ženski podobi A. Tennysona, in sicer Lady Shalott in Godivo iz istoimenskih pesmi, skozi prizmo biblijskih in ikonografskih aluzij. Prva (Shalott) aludira na zgodbo in ikonografijo Marijinega oznanjenja, druga (Godiva) pa na motive iz stare zaveze in Razodetja. Slikovita dela prerafaelitov, med katerimi se mnoga sklicujejo na Tennysonove motive, dodatno potrjujejo pomen biblijskih zgodb in ikonografskih kanonov v omenjenih Tennysonovih delih. Trpljenje, fatalizem, čutnost, antinomija, slikovitost – zaradi vseh teh lastnosti so bile Tennysonove podobe žensk, ki so zelo privlačile ruske modernistične pisce, v harmoniji z duhom časa na prehodu iz devetnajstega v dvajseto stoletje. K. Balmont in I. Bunin sta v svojih prevodih Tennysonovih pesmi po svoje interpretirala podobe Lady Shalott in Godive, tako da sta poudarjala (celo dodajala) podrobnosti in pomenske odtenke, pomembne za simbolistično estetiko.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article
UDK 821.111.09-1Tennyson A.