

Adapting Elaine:

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" and Feminist Young Adult Novels

One of the hallmarks of young adult literature is its focus on adolescent protagonists who struggle to reconcile what they want with what they are supposed to want. Indeed, some of the most enduring works of young adult literature, from L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (2006) to Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), place their young characters at a crossroads between cultural convention and individual desire. Foundational scholarship in the field of young adult fiction has suggested a recurring conflict in novels for young readers in which a protagonist finds himself or herself directly at odds with social expectations (McCallum, 1999; Trites, 2004). Furthermore, critics such as Trites (1997), Wilkie-Stibbs (2003), and Mallan (2009) have noted that many of these works concern an adolescent search for identity that is complicated by issues of gender politics, in which a protagonist's grappling with conventional notions of masculinity and/or femininity is fundamental to a completed coming of age. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites (1997) argues that this kind of novel "demonstrate[s] characters 'turning inward' in 'a search for identity' because some form of environmental pressure has made them aware that they are not upholding socially sanctioned gender roles" (p. 2). In turn, these novels can become cathartic for adolescent readers, who may be facing similar struggles in the throes of real-life adolescence.

Relying on the definition of a feminist novel established by Elaine Showalter (1977), Trites (1997) defines a "feminist children's novel" as one "in

which the main character is empowered regardless of gender," or a novel in which "the child's sex does not provide a permanent obstacle to her/his development. Although s/he will likely experience some gender-related conflicts, s/he ultimately triumphs over them" (p. 4). Though many novels fit this description, two bestselling young adult novels distinguish their adolescent female protagonists' search for identity as inspired by the legends of Arthurian literature. Meg Cabot's *Avalon High* (2006) and Libba Bray's *A Great and Terrible Beauty* (2003) each reference the Arthurian legend of the Lady of Shalott—specifically the version that was retold and adapted by Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his 1842 poem "The Lady of Shalott." Both novels use the characters, language, and symbolism from Tennyson's poem to provide their heroines—and by extension, their adolescent readers—with a template through which they can understand, examine, and potentially reject the social codes that attempt to determine their behavior. In capitalizing on the ways in which Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" enhanced and adapted the traditional Arthurian legend for a Victorian audience, Cabot and Bray access what Ann Howey (2007) calls the "constellation of association and meanings" (pp. 89–92) connected to the Lady of Shalott in the medieval and Victorian texts, many of which are distinctly feminist by Trites's definition.

In this article, I will argue that in drawing inspiration specifically from Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," Cabot's and Bray's novels develop their feminism through the framework of a Victorian narrative that is more thematically complex and more politically

charged than any earlier, medieval version of the Lady of Shalott legend. Specifically, Cabot's and Bray's novels reflect the impact of feminist criticism of Tennyson's poem found in the works of Victorian scholars Nina Auerbach (e.g., *The Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, 1982) and the team of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (e.g., *Madwoman in the Attic*, 1984). This foundational work identifies in Tennyson's adaptation of the Lady of Shalott a dualistic and subversive set of alternatives that is not present in the medieval sources: her status as both a docile, passive figure who is "powerless in the face of the male" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 618) and, simultaneously, as an icon of deviant and potentially powerful feminine desire. To identify the ways in which Cabot's and Bray's novels revise the Lady of Shalott narrative and embrace this subversion of traditional gender roles, I will first examine the Lady of Shalott narrative in medieval Arthurian literature and in Tennyson's poem, focusing on how Tennyson's enhancements to the tale transformed the Lady of Shalott into an iconic image of Victorian femininity. I will then demonstrate how Cabot and Bray employ revisionist strategies to adapt the gender politics of Tennyson's poem for a 21st-century young adult readership, creating heroines who reject the passive qualities of the Lady of Shalott in favor of a more autonomous alternative and who, in doing so, model for adolescent readers a search for identity that results in self-identification and empowerment.

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" in Cabot and Bray

As Lupack (2011) notes, Tennyson's Arthurian legends were a ubiquitous presence in the works of literature for young people in the 19th century (pp. 99–100), and even today, there are many works published for young adult readers that concern Arthurian characters, and many in particular that include the Lady of Shalott. (See Howey [2007] and Lupack [2011] for a list of literature, artwork, and popular culture artifacts that feature the Lady of Shalott.) I have chosen to focus my analysis on *Avalon High* and *A Great and Terrible Beauty* for two reasons. First, in both of these works, Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" serves a central role in the structure of the novels and in the narratives themselves. Each novel features excerpts

from "The Lady of Shalott" as epigraphs—in Cabot's novel, a stanza of the poem introduces each chapter, and in Bray's, four key stanzas are excerpted before the opening chapter and then reappear at key points in the narrative. Each novel also links its heroine directly to the Lady of Shalott and utilizes the language and imagery from Arthurian legend and from Tennyson's poem to establish how the Lady of Shalott serves as a touchstone for each protagonist and her peer group.

Second, these novels are singular in their use of the Lady of Shalott in this way; although other Arthurian adaptations feature her as a character, Cabot's and Bray's novels are unique in their close association between their respective heroines' searches for identity and the fate of the Lady of Shalott. (It is perhaps important to note that another novelist for young readers, L. M. Montgomery, used the figure of the Lady of Shalott in a brief episode in *Anne of Green Gables*. The chapter titled "An Unfortunate Lily Maid" features Anne reenacting the Lady's fateful voyage. However, *Anne of Green Gables* is differentiated from Cabot's and Bray's novels in that the poem does not inform the structure or narrative of the entire work. Howey [2007] provides a detailed analysis of the use of Tennyson's poem in Montgomery's novel.)

Cabot's *Avalon High* (2006) retells the legend of the Lady of Shalott and the fall of Camelot as set in a modern-day Maryland high school. Narrated by Ellie Harrison (named after Elaine, the Lady of Shalott), the novel describes Ellie's burgeoning feelings for Will, a popular and handsome classmate who resembles the mythical King Arthur, and her unnerving sense that she has encountered Will and his friends Lance and Jennifer in a former life. When Will is threatened by a murder plot, Ellie enters the confrontation determined to help, despite her seemingly unassailable ties to the passive Lady of Shalott.

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Bray's *A Great and Terrible Beauty* (2003) adapts the Elaine narrative in more subtle ways; rather than retelling the legend, Bray sets the novel in Victorian England circa 1895, when Tennyson's poem was still well-known and widely referenced. *A Great and Terrible Beauty* begins with the mysterious death of Gem-

ma's mother, after which Gemma is sent to finishing school in London.

Soon, Gemma is plagued by psychic visions that lead to her discovery of her mother's involvement with an Order of ancient, powerful sorceresses.

Bray frequently surrounds Gemma and her friends with imagery of water, mirrors, and boats to demonstrate the parallels between the Lady of Shalott's curse and Gemma's

own developing magical powers.

In adapting the legend of the Lady of Shalott as it appears in both Arthurian romance and in Tennyson's poem, each novel accomplishes what Arthurian scholar Mary Frances Zambreno (2010) describes as filling in the gaps of Arthurian legend—taking advantage of the “piecemeal” structure of the Arthurian canon to narrate the gaps that “may be filled in by other stories, new stories, and perspectives omitted from or slighted in the original narrative” (p. 119). Additionally, both Cabot and Bray seek to fill in these gaps with perspectives that directly counter the medieval and Victorian texts' repression of feminine voices, accomplishing what Trites defines as a necessary feat for feminist young adult novels: “The presence of traditionally depicted females could be used to serve as part of the revision, for it is only against the passive female, the silent female, the objectified female, that the feminist protagonist's achievements can be fully understood” (p. 6). By narrating these gaps in a way that reinterprets the potential agency in a figure that is traditionally silent, passive, and objectified, both novels revise the legend of the Lady of Shalott as a distinctly feminist, adolescent tale about feminine desire and a young woman's ability to choose her own fate. Moreover, both authors locate in the Lady of Sha-

lott the ordeals of a young woman in crisis and adapt the legend so that it suits one of the primary purposes of contemporary young adult literature: giving voice to the singular adolescent experience for modern adolescent readers.

The Lady of Shalott in Arthurian Literature

Although the Lady of Shalott has been covered extensively by criticism in the fields of medieval studies, Victorian poetry, women's and gender studies, and art history, there is little critical consideration that I can locate of her appropriation in literature for young adults, excepting those works cited here. Still, before analyzing the ways in which Cabot and Bray adapt Tennyson's poem, it is important to trace the historical tradition of the Lady of Shalott in Tennyson's sources—the major works of Arthurian literature. The earliest accounts of King Arthur and his knights can be traced back to the 12th century, but the most monumental incarnations appear in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (ca. 1469–1470). Malory developed the legends into a more cohesive narrative, and his work served as inspiration for most of the modern adaptations with which contemporary readers are familiar.

The Lady of Shalott does not figure in the earliest Arthurian narratives, but she does appear in some form in all of the most significant works, usually referred to as Elaine, the Maiden of Astolat. Each account tells a similar story: during one of his quests to prove his chivalry, Lancelot passes through Astolat, and Elaine falls in love with him. Because of his affair with Guinevere, Lancelot rejects Elaine. Wrought by unrequited love, Elaine sets off in a boat and floats downriver toward Camelot, where Arthur and Lancelot discover her lifeless body and a note that describes her passionate love and her tragic death. In these accounts, the character of Elaine serves primarily as a plot device or a counter-narrative to the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. In not choosing the honorable, available Elaine, but rather the dishonorable, adulterous Guinevere, Lancelot demonstrates that he has lost his honor and betrayed his oath to Arthur. The corruption of Arthur's best knight soon contributes to the fall of Camelot and its chivalric order. In each of these tales, the arrival of Elaine's

body on the shores of Camelot serves as a foreboding symbol of the death and sorrow that will soon follow.

Given this tradition of the Lady of Shalott as a symbol of ominous but passive unrequited love, it is significant that Cabot and Bray specifically reference the first version of Elaine's story that takes exception to this tale. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1842) deviates sharply from the earlier Elaine narratives. Much of the basic plot remains, but Tennyson reconfigures the Lady of Shalott as a tapestry artist, locked in a tower on an island and subjected to a deadly curse. The Lady is forced to weave into her tapestry only what she can see of Camelot from a view twice removed—in a mirror's reflection of a window behind her back. In a fit of discontent, the Lady declares that she is "half sick" (line 71) of seeing only "shadows of the world" (line 48), and when Lancelot's armor flashes in her mirror, she leaves her work to watch him. This brings the curse upon her; her loom splinters, her mirror cracks, and so she leaves the tower, writes her name on a boat, and floats downriver to Camelot. Here the plot aligns with the earlier versions: her body floats ashore, and Lancelot finds her and muses on her "lovely face" (line 169).

Immediately striking about Tennyson's poem are the ways in which the meaning of the tale (and the significance of the Lady) are complicated by his added and enhanced details. Other than basic plot points, all of the poem's most significant features, including the mirror, the curse, the tapestry, and the island, have little relation to any previous version of the Elaine narrative (Potwin, 1902). Because of these distinctions, Tennyson's version of the Lady of Shalott became an instant success among his Victorian contemporaries and inspired countless art objects and popular culture references in succeeding years (see Howey, 2007). Tennyson's revisions reinvigorated the Elaine legend, and suddenly the Lady of Shalott became not the harbinger of doom and destruction that she was in medieval Arthurian legend, but rather a symbol of failed artistry, tragic beauty, and feminine willpower.

Among the many interpretations of Tennyson's poem that followed its publication are two central themes that are most relevant to Cabot's and Bray's novels. First, much of the 19th-century obsession with Elaine centered on Tennyson's characterization of her as an artist, one who moves from private, isolated observer to public performer throughout the course

of the poem (Psomiades, 1992, p. 33). This transition is marked by a notable shift in her relationship to artistry: Elaine can only weave her work while looking in a mirror reflection, locked in her tower, twice removed from reality. Once the Lady abandons her work—and abandons it for what seems to be sexual desire—she is no longer an artist but instead an art object (Plasa, 1992, pp. 251–252; Psomiades, 1992, p. 34). She writes her name on the boat (lines 125–126) and decorates herself with a "snowy white" robe (line 136), creating something like a virginal, bridal tableau (Plasa, 1992, p. 259), so that by the time she arrives at the shores of Camelot, she has become subject to her audience's interpretation of her performance, as indicated by Lancelot's final, objectifying comment (Psomiades, 1992, p. 36).

Thus, Tennyson's poem recasts Elaine, either as a female artist who in the end is objectified in death by the man she loves or, arguably, as an artist who chooses to objectify herself rather than be at the mercy of a repressive curse. In this way, as Plasa (1992) argues, Tennyson represents a significant divide between art and art object that is coded in terms of gender. In referencing this particular version of Elaine's tale, then, Cabot's and Bray's novels are drawing on the myriad associations between the Lady of Shalott and the capability of women to produce and create in an autonomous setting. Tennyson's poem paints an image of an artist whose fatal flaw is her inability to reconcile her artistry with her participation in the social codes of her environment. Cabot and Bray relocate this conflict as a young heroine's struggle to reconcile the life she wants to build for herself using her own capabilities with the societal strictures that attempt to stifle her efforts.

Also significant in Tennyson's version of the Elaine legend is its complex investigation of Victorian sexual politics and gender roles. Critics have long since noted that Tennyson's poem "accurately

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replicates the gender conventions informing Victorian society" (Plasa, 1992, p. 249), but feminist scholars

have further identified in iconic Victorian figures such as the Lady of Shalott the imaginative creations of a culture that feared women even as it sought to control them. In *The Woman and the Demon*, Auerbach (1982) argues that Victorian images of angelic, corpse-like women were fueled by cultural fears of unregulated female desire. Docile figures such as the Lady of Shalott, contained in her tower or in death on her boat, implicitly condemn her opposite: the "demonic," deviant women whose passionate, unsanctioned desires defy

repression (pp. 9–15). In this way, Auerbach (1982) locates in these "powerful images of oppression" certain subversive "images of barely suppressed power" (p. 188).

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar (1984) locate this dichotomy in Tennyson's poem: ". . . the Lady's uniform of snow [white robes] suggests the suicidal passivity implicit in Victorian femininity," and yet, like other significant feminine icons in Victorian literature, she is "suffering from unrequited love and from the overwhelming rage that inevitably accompanies the lover's rejection" (pp. 618–619). The presence of both devotion and rage in the figure of the Lady of Shalott implies a potentially explosive combination. In presenting a version of Elaine that is coded with these contradictory images of femininity, Tennyson overturns the traditional, medieval portrait of the Lady of Shalott as simply a figure of passive, tragic devotion and presents her in a Victorian context as something like a feminist icon, discontent with her oppressed state and seeking some kind of autonomous alternative. Thus, in responding specifically to Tennyson's Elaine, Cabot and Bray are bringing into the conversation of their novels a serious examination of the Lady's feminist potential and her associations with socially sanctioned codes of conduct.

The Lady of Shalott in Cabot's *Avalon High*

Both Cabot's and Bray's novels begin their engagement with Tennyson's poem by critiquing the social codes and sexual politics of Tennyson's Victorian culture and his medieval source texts. *Avalon High* accomplishes this by modernizing the Elaine narrative. By retelling the mythical fall of Camelot through the lives of adolescent characters in a modern-day high school, Cabot recreates the social codes inherent in the original texts to reveal the practices and behaviors that still make up an expected code of conduct for adolescent girls today. Ellie's practical, often sarcastic, critiques of these medieval social codes and their contemporary legacies allow Cabot to offer her readers a heroine who makes decisions that are effective specifically because Ellie chooses to do what she needs to do rather than what she is told or expected to do.

Early in the novel, Cabot establishes this distinction through Ellie's obvious antipathy toward the Lady of Shalott. One of the first things Ellie's narration reveals is that she has little respect for her namesake; she tells readers that Tennyson's poem is "very lame" (p. 38) and that "*no way* am I the reincarnation of a dope like Elaine" (p. 192). Ellie's first-person narration presents Elaine as a questionable model for Cabot's adolescent readers, primarily because of her passivity and her lack of identity beyond her unrequited love. As Ellie puts it, "It's not exactly cool to be named after someone who killed herself over a guy" (p. 7). Ellie's narration also serves to inform young adult readers about medieval culture, specifically about its oppressive social codes and Ellie's distaste for them:

Most people have this really messed up idea about what things were like in the Middle Age. . . . You know, women floating around in pointy hats and pretty dresses saying "thee" and "thou," and knights thundering up to save the day. But [. . .] things weren't like that at all. . . . The women were all oppressed and had to marry people they didn't even like and everybody blamed them for every little thing that went wrong. I mean, look at Guinevere. Everyone thinks it's all her fault Camelot doesn't exist anymore. I'm so sure. (p. 10)

By introducing readers to these misconceptions about medieval society and implying that Arthurian legends unfairly place blame on pivotal female characters, Cabot signals to her readers the novel's revisionist and feminist strategies. Ellie's doubt about tradi-

tional interpretations of the fall of Camelot indicates how Cabot is pursuing Zambreno's (2010) "gaps" in Arthurian literature by narrating an omitted perspective from the legend. In this retelling, Cabot seeks to correct the kind of omissions in the original narrative that lead to assumptions about Guinevere's guilt and Elaine's lack of control over her own fate. *Avalon High* revises the fall of Camelot by highlighting the productive contributions that Ellie chooses to make in direct rebellion against the antiquated models offered by traditional incarnations of Guinevere and Elaine.

In addition to distinguishing herself from Elaine of Astolat, Ellie further characterizes herself as a feminist heroine by distinguishing herself from her female peers. Ellie describes Nancy, her best friend, as a "romantic optimist," and then adds that she, Ellie, is "not that way. You know, the *Oh my God, he looked at me, I can barely breathe* type" (p. 27). Ellie also rejects the model of Jennifer, a popular cheerleader who represents Guinevere: "I'm not ugly, or anything, but I'm no Jennifer Gold. I mean, she's one of those *Oh, I'm so little and helpless, please rescue me, you big strong man* types of girls" (p. 34). In each of these descriptors, Ellie identifies in Nancy and Jennifer many of the qualities associated with the Lady of Shalott and with antiquated notions of acceptable femininity: passivity, speechlessness, and subservience to male authority. In contrast, Ellie asserts that she is "the daughter of educators" (p. 193) and "the practical one" (p. 27), indicating that she takes pride in her intelligence, self-sufficiency, and practicality.

Ellie also disregards concerns about how her deviance from social standards appears to others. Though her mother frequently reminds her to maintain the family's "image," Ellie regularly flouts rules because maintaining an image would interrupt whatever it is that Ellie is trying to accomplish (pp. 13, 245, 276). When Ellie admits to her growing feelings for Will, her friend Nancy advises her not to "[joke] around with boys" because "boys don't develop romantic feelings for girls who goof around like stand-up comics" (p. 42). Her mother's and Nancy's advice suggests a suppression of individuality that recalls the ideal femininity of Tennyson's Victorian culture; Cabot argues that this remains a lingering expectation for modern adolescent girls like Ellie. Ellie rejects Nancy's advice, and when Ellie describes later in the novel "how I made [Will] laugh over the plate of steaming hot crab

dip we shared" (p. 169), readers understand that Ellie's decision to embrace her humor and individualism has directly impacted the romantic relationship that blossoms between her and Will. Thus, in the figure of the Lady of Shalott, Cabot identifies a series of qualities and social expectations for her female characters that Ellie must process as part of her search for identity. By rejecting a conflation of her identity with that of the Lady of Shalott, and by rejecting the social expectations espoused by her mother and her peers, Ellie identifies herself first as *not* that "type" of girl and eventually as her own individual self.

Once these social codes have been established, Cabot's novel resolves its primary conflict (and Ellie's own search for identity) by rejecting and subverting the model of the Lady of Shalott and the passive, submissive qualities that she represents. When Will is threatened by his stepbrother, Marco, Ellie seeks advice from her English teacher, Mr. Morton, a member of an ancient society that protects reincarnations of Arthur. Mr. Morton discourages Ellie from intervening because, as he claims, she is powerless to stop Marco:

"Only those in Arthur's closest circle can put an end to the dark side's reign, in any case," [said Mr. Morton]. "So . . ." [Ellie responds], "Who, then? Lance? Jennifer?" "Certainly," he said. "Either of them. Just not . . . well. You." I gave him a dirty look. "Because Elaine of Astolat never even met King Arthur historically, is that it?" "I told you that you were better off not knowing," Mr. Morton reminded me in a sad voice. (p. 213)

Ellie's "dirty look" is a reaction to Mr. Morton's assumption that because she shares a name with Elaine of Astolat, she also shares Elaine's identifying features: passivity and ineffectiveness. In response, Ellie again declares her independence from the model presented by Elaine and effectively breaks the connection that Mr. Morton has attempted to build: "There

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was nothing *Elaine of Astolat* could do here. But that was fine, because I wasn't Elaine of Astolat, no matter what [they] might think. And there was plenty Elaine Harrison could do" (p. 262). At this point, Ellie's rejection of Elaine is no longer just a matter of distaste, but also a key step in Ellie's search for identity. Ellie must cast off Elaine as a model of behavior, not only because she is "very lame" (p. 38) and "a dope" (p.

192), but also because her traditional incarnation is a model that offers few outlets for action, autonomy, and individual desire.

Once she has rejected Elaine and claimed her own identity, Ellie is able to take part in the events at the end of the novel in a productive and empowering way. In the final confrontation between Will and Marco, Ellie serves as

the weapon bearer, offering Will a medieval sword (one of her father's relics) with which to defend himself. When she and Will have Marco cornered, Ellie notes that Marco "[glares] at me with eyes filled not only with malice, as before, but also with something I'd never seen in them before . . . Fear" (p. 269). In transitioning away from the model of Elaine, Ellie has crossed the boundary from a threat that Marco can identify to one that he cannot. In Auerbach's (1982) terms, by discarding her sanctioned identity as Elaine of Astolat, Ellie has shifted from a "powerful image of oppression" to an "image of barely suppressed power" (p. 188). In effect, she has accessed the subversive, deviant alternative as read in Tennyson's poem by feminist critics—that is, the Lady as a cultural image representing the fears of a patriarchal society. Ellie ultimately promotes what she feels is the real message of Arthurian legend: the idea that "an individual—not an army; not a god; not a superhero; just a regular Joe—can permanently alter the course of world events" (p. 79). In her creative solutions to Marco's threats, Ellie adopts this notion of an innovative individual as her new model of behavior. In demonstrating that an individual—regardless of gender—can affect change in his or her environment, Cabot creates a more empowered, autonomous alternative to

traditional interpretations of the Lady of Shalott and to traditional notions of what adolescent girls can and should be able to accomplish.

Cabot ends the novel with one final point about identity and its determining factors. Mr. Morton finally concedes that he was wrong to conflate Ellie with the Lady of Shalott, because he "ought to have seen that [she was] someone far, far more important" (p. 276). To Ellie's surprise, he suggests that Ellie is the reincarnation of the Lady of the Lake, another female figure in Arthurian literature, often credited for bestowing Arthur with a powerful sword. Ellie responds to this declaration with the same disavowal that she previously reserved for the Lady of Shalott: "I'm *not* the Lady of the Lake" (p. 287). It is significant that in the final pages of the novel, Ellie must once again define herself as *not* what those around her have determined that she must be. Even after she has proven her abilities, Ellie must continue to reject antiquated models of femininity in favor of her own self. In this way, Cabot defines Trites's adolescent, feminine "search for identity" as the struggle to define oneself—instead of being defined by others—in an environment that continually threatens to undermine that goal.

The Lady of Shalott in Bray's *A Great and Terrible Beauty*

Bray's novel similarly articulates her main characters' search for identity through their responses to the model of the Lady of Shalott. Because of its 19th-century setting, *A Great and Terrible Beauty* (2003) engages much more specifically with Victorian sexual politics. Through Gemma's first-person narration, Bray creates an immediate tension between what Gemma and her friends want to do and what they are supposed to do according to the expectations of middle- and upper-class Victorian society. In an early scene, Gemma and her brother Tom discuss what kind of lady she is expected to become at finishing school. Referencing actress Lily Trimble, Tom remarks, "What sort of way is that for a woman to live, without a solid home, husband, and children? Running about like she's her own lord and master. She'll certainly never be accepted in society as a proper lady" (p. 27). Then he explains what qualities *do* make for a proper lady: "A man wants a woman who will make life easy for him. She should be attractive, well groomed, knowledgeable in

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music, painting, and running a house, but above all, she should keep his name above scandal and never call attention to herself” (p. 27). Following his description of the “fallen” Lily Trimble, Tom’s description of ideal womanhood becomes a corrective, instructing Gemma in the behaviors that she should avoid and the ones for which she should strive.

Bray’s descriptions have all the markings of ideal Victorian femininity; as Auerbach (1982) explains, “all clean-minded Victorians knew [that] a normal, and thus a good woman, was an angel, submerging herself in family, existing only as daughter, wife, and mother” (p. 4). In contrast, Tom’s description of Lily Trimble represents the paradigmatic fallen woman, who embodies the presumed consequence of becoming both “experienced and tragic” (Auerbach, 1982, p. 63). This threat is repeated throughout the novel: Gemma is warned repeatedly against doing anything that might call her chastity into question, and she is encouraged to pursue activities that promote her marriageability. Like Cabot’s novel, then, Bray’s novel also establishes a dichotomy of acceptable and unacceptable femininity that governs the heroine’s behavior; Gemma’s conflict lies in her ambivalence about adopting a predetermined pattern of behavior that prevents her from acquiring any real autonomy.

After establishing the social codes with which Gemma must grapple, Bray then links these qualities of “good” and “bad” femininity to the image of the Lady of Shalott. For example, after a visit from her family, during which Gemma feels powerless and unacknowledged, she remarks, “We’re all looking glasses, we girls, existing only to reflect their images back to them as they’d like to be seen. Hollow vessels of girls to be rinsed of our own ambitions, wants, and opinions, just waiting to be filled with the cool, tepid water of gracious compliance” (p. 305). In the imagery of looking-glass mirrors, reflections, hollow vessels, and cool water, Bray employs the symbolism of Tennyson’s poem and creates a parallel between what is expected from Gemma to maintain her family’s image and the fate of the Lady of Shalott. For Gemma to behave in a way that is docile, passive, and submissive, Bray implies, would be tantamount to reliving the Lady’s decision to passively accept her fate and float to her death.

Bray further develops this parallel in a scene during Gemma’s art class. While discussing an illustration

of Tennyson’s poem, the art teacher, Miss Moore, argues that “the lady dies not because she leaves the tower for the outside world, but because she lets herself float through the world, pulled by the current after a dream” (p. 102). In this interpretation, Miss Moore suggests that the Lady of Shalott’s sin was not being cursed, an act that she could not control, but was rather in choosing to be pulled by the current rather than controlling her own course. Thus, Miss Moore offers her protégées two feminine types: one who allows herself to float along the stream of cultural convention, and one who chooses to pursue her own path.¹ By linking the social codes that oppress Gemma to the curse that threatens the Lady of Shalott, Bray accesses Tennyson’s complex portrait of feminine passivity and performance and adapts Victorian social codes so that they are no longer presented in gendered terms (i.e., passive equals female and active equals male) but rather as human choices between acting or being acted upon.

Once established, this choice as represented by the Lady of Shalott becomes the paradigm through which Gemma and her friends—specifically, her classmate Pippa—complete their search for identity. Although Gemma’s narration indicates that she is suspicious of the Lady of Shalott as a model of behavior, her friend Pippa is much more conventional. In assessing the Lady of Shalott’s fate, Pippa exclaims, “She dies for love . . . She can’t live without him. It’s terribly romantic” (p. 101). Pippa admires Elaine’s self-sacrifice and finds her tale attractive because it reflects the kind of romantic relationship Pippa herself desires. Pippa’s reality is much bleaker. She is engaged to “the clumsy, charmless Mr. Bumble” (p. 148) and suffers from epilepsy, a condition that, were it known publicly, would ruin her chances of marrying (p. 190). Pippa embraces the romantic idealism of Tennyson’s poem as an escape from the reality of her situation, and for Bray’s readers, Pippa serves a role similar to that of Nancy or Jennifer in Cabot’s novel: she is Gemma’s peer, but the choices of the two characters reflect fundamental opposites. In choosing to “be pulled after a dream” (p. 102) rather than to challenge convention, Pippa’s contrasting stance highlights the individual willpower that drives Gemma.

This distinction becomes paramount when the girls use Gemma’s powers to enter the magical realms, a purgatorial “world between worlds” where “all

things are possible” (p. 254). There, Pippa recreates herself into an idealized, romanticized Lady of Shalott; she conjures a boat and a chivalrous knight who bears a striking resemblance to Lancelot. Pippa takes refuge in this imaginary relationship, but after several failed attempts to cancel her real-life engagement, Pippa

Gemma now . . . understands to defy that standard is to become not a forlorn, “fallen” woman, but rather an unregulated, willful, and sexualized woman who is powerful enough to be feared.

demands Gemma’s help. Gemma’s magical efforts awaken a monstrous wraith, and when the monster strikes, Pippa’s knight abandons her. Pippa escapes onto “a large boat, a bier, onto the river, where the wind has pushed her out into the wide deep of it” (p. 384). The specification of the boat as a bier, a type of boat used for medieval funeral services, links this scene directly to the Lady of Shalott’s funereal voyage to Camelot.

Although it began as play-acting, Pippa’s decision to model her behavior after the Lady of Shalott has now reached its fullest consequence, and so her reenactment of the Lady’s death is almost inevitable. Despite Gemma’s pleadings, Pippa refuses to return to the real world, because she cannot face becoming “Mrs. Bartleby Bumble” or choose to be “a fighter,” like Gemma (p. 395). Aided by her knight, Pippa “lets [the boat] carry her across the river.” In the same instant, in the real world, Pippa’s body convulses and then dies (p. 396). Thus, in characterizing Pippa’s choice to “be carried” rather than to “fight,” Bray indicates that for Pippa, the Lady of Shalott represents a decision to give up, to let go, to escape the unbearable real world for a more acceptable—but illusory—alternative.

In contrast to Pippa’s “powerful image of oppression,” Gemma becomes the novel’s triumphant and subversive “image of barely suppressed power” (Auerbach, 1982, p. 188). Gemma’s experiments with her magical abilities soon lead to explorations of her sexuality. For example, Gemma is both attracted to and hindered by Kartik, her guardian from the Rakshana, a brotherhood “stretching to the time of . . . Arthur” (Bray, p. 121). Kartik demands that Gemma repress her visions and ignore her powers, because the

Rakshana holds the power of the realms and has “no intention of giving it back” (p. 121). Gemma refuses, and the ensuing tension between them becomes not only sexualized, but also coded with the same power dynamic that exists in Tennyson’s poem.

Relying on an interpretation of the Lady’s “movement from [the tower of] Shalott to Camelot” as a “deregulation of patriarchal gender codes” (Plasa, 1992, p. 251), Bray pinpoints the dislocation of patriarchal power in her novel at the intersection of Gemma’s developing magical powers and her burgeoning sexuality.² When Gemma and her friends enter the gypsy camp where Kartik is staying, they prevent Kartik from realizing their real purpose (seeking information about the Order of sorceresses) by pretending that they want to seduce him and the other gypsy men. As they approach the camp, Gemma notes, “I don’t yet know what power feels like. But this is surely what it looks like, and I think I’m beginning to understand why those ancient women had to hide in caves. Why our parents and teachers and suitors want us to behave properly and predictably. It’s not that they want to protect us; it’s that they fear us” (p. 207). Gemma’s identification of fear as the cause of social sanctions directly echoes the feminist critiques of “The Lady of Shalott”—although she recognizes what makes a proper, “angelic” woman, Gemma now also understands to defy that standard is to become not a forlorn, “fallen” woman, but rather an unregulated, willful, and sexualized woman who is powerful enough to be feared.

The significance of this choice is communicated in the final act as Gemma faces not only the monstrous wraith, but also her own ambivalence about what kind of woman she wants to become. To further link Gemma’s decision to that of the Lady of Shalott, Bray recreates the curse’s strike on the Lady’s tower. When Gemma attempts to acquire the power of the ancient runes, she notes that “the sky opens up in a churning sea of dark clouds” (p. 383), mimicking Tennyson’s “stormy east-wind straining” and heavy “low sky raining” (lines 118, 121). Further, Bray adapts the iconic floating imagery of the Lady of Shalott to articulate Gemma’s struggle when the wraith engulfs her and tries to steal her magic. Under the wraith’s possession, Gemma is overwhelmed by the temptation to be joined with the creature: “I’m weary with choice. It makes me heavy. So heavy I could sleep forever. Let [the evil sorceress] Circe win. Abandon my family

and friends. Float downstream” (p. 391). In this final moment of choice, Gemma returns to the language of Tennyson’s poem and Miss Moore’s interpretation and acknowledges the relief she would feel by simply allowing herself to be “pulled by the current” (p. 102).

However, having witnessed Pippa’s escape on the boat, Gemma decides to fight the creature, and she does so through the kind of self-identification that also allowed Ellie to actively contribute to her fate: “It would be so very easy to escape into the safety of those illusions and hold fast there. But I won’t. I want to try to make room for what is real . . . [And] what is most real is that I am Gemma Doyle” (p. 394). By declaring her own identity, Gemma also declares her rejection of the submissive femininity as represented by Pippa, the medieval Lady of Shalott, and the Victorian “angel of the house” model that defines her culture. In embracing an unregulated alternative to these models, Gemma chooses to pursue autonomy in both the magical realms and in the real world. For her readers, Bray demonstrates that the adolescent search for identity is often one of subversion, requiring young women not only to question the demands placed on their behavior, but also to harness some kind of authority and autonomy that allows them to govern themselves.

Suggestions for Teaching

There are multiple ways in which teachers could incorporate these texts and their important themes into the classroom. Consider the following options:

To offer students a broader survey of revisionist strategies that challenge the familiar stories we tell and retell as a culture, include *Avalon High* and/or *A Great and Terrible Beauty* in a unit on other feminist fairy tale and folklore adaptations. Possible readings might include (as they are age appropriate): *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (2010), edited by Kate Bernheimer and Gregory Maguire; *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold* (2000), by Francesca Lia Block; *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), by Angela Carter; and/or *Ella Enchanted* (1997), by Gail Carson Levine. Direct students to compare and contrast the adaptations with the traditional tales. Discuss the difference between telling one’s own story and having one’s story told by someone else. Lead students to brainstorm about why these distinctions

are significant and how many of these adaptations fill in the gaps of the traditional narratives in ways that empower and give voice to female characters.

To introduce students to the practice of feminist literary criticism, incorporate discussions of gender into other class readings. Direct students to consider the presence or absence of female voices in the works under discussion and how these choices impact the author’s larger thematic concerns. Highlight the ways in which masculine and/or feminine identities are constructed in the work, and compare and contrast the ways in which various characters respond to these identity conflicts. Many classic works of young adult literature suit these discussions well, including, for example, *Little Women* (1868/2009), by Louisa May Alcott; *Peter Pan* (1911/2004), by J. M. Barrie; *A Little Princess* (1905/2002), by Frances Hodgson Burnett; and *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), by J. D. Salinger.

To help students further link the discussions of antiquated gender roles and social codes to their lingering legacies in modern culture today, assign a research project in which students compare and contrast the lives of young men and women in Victorian society with their own lives. Discuss briefly all of the important changes that have occurred in western society since 1895 (for example, voting rights for women; child labor laws; equal employment laws; the Civil Rights Movement; etc.). Ask students to research these same opportunities as they are or are not afforded to young men and women in other cultures around the world today. Introduce discussions about marriage rights, access to education, contemporary forms of slavery, and basic privileges like voting and driving. As a class, examine how the forms of oppression that Ellie and Gemma faced still exist for many young men and women around the world today and how others are fighting to solve these problems.

Conclusion

Overall, the significance of these novels and their analysis of Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” lies in their methods of communicating to young adult readers the social codes and sexual politics inherent in myths, legends, and cultural imagination. Both novels discussed here accomplish this by encouraging young adult readers to examine the demands that are placed on their behavior in their own cultural environment

and to measure them against their own goals and ambitions. For adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, identifying with characters like Ellie Harrison and Gemma Doyle can be revolutionary at a time when the pressure of social expectations can be nearly overwhelming. Bringing change to their social environments, even in small ways, can have a major impact on their development into productive, contributive members of a more egalitarian world.

Endnotes

1. Although in this novel Miss Moore is an instigator of Gemma's individuality, later in the series she becomes Gemma's most dangerous enemy and the one that Gemma must defeat in order to retain her powers. This complicates Gemma's decision to embrace Miss Moore's advice, as autonomy has clearly corrupted Miss Moore and changed her into a force of evil. Thus, Bray's theory of choice is complex: it provides young women with the ability to determine their own fate, but it also makes them responsible for however they decide to use their autonomy.
2. In a 2003 interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Libba Bray said: "A lot of the initial idea [for the novel] stemmed from emerging female sexuality and how threatening that is to the girls themselves and to the world at large. . . . We're comfortable with women in certain roles but not comfortable with women expressing anger or fully accepting their power. The most daring question a woman can ask is, 'What do I want?'" (Brown, 2003, p. 31).

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