

Nineteenth Century
PROSE



The Pre-Raphaelite "pack of satyrs" in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

James R. Aubrey

In the prologue to his 1986 book *A Maggot*, John Fowles announces, "What follows may seem like a historical novel; but it is not" (n. pag.). The book may not be based on historical events, but Fowles has gone to considerable lengths to make it "seem" historical, narrating an eighteenth-century story by means of supposed court transcripts and archaic language, even inserting between chapters some facsimile pages excerpted from actual issues of *The Gentleman's Magazine* from 1736. At the end of *A Maggot*, Fowles invites readers to imagine that the novel's central female character went on to become the historical mother of Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers. In a similar way, chapter-by-chapter epigraphs in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* add a sense of documentary realism to that novel, a nineteenth-century story whose ending invites readers to imagine that Sarah Woodruff, the title character, has become one of the historical "stunners" adopted as models by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (or PRB) (Wood 26).

The similarities make *The French Lieutenant's Woman* also seem like a historical novel, though it is not. The book does, however, draw on historical material, and whether readers recognize that fact will affect how they respond when they read it—particularly if a reader is well described by either of the labels "general reader" or "elite reader," based on a relatively low or high level of historical awareness. Surely most of Fowles's many readers possess only general knowledge about the nineteenth century; elite readers, on the other hand, those who know something about the Victorian figures introduced as characters, can hear additional, historical resonances and will respond differently to the novel.

Readers of either group will feel drawn into Fowles's fictional world in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and any consistent historical knowledge they bring to the novel will reinforce the illusion that the 1867-69 world is real. Fowles is playing on such inclination to believe when, late in Chapter 60, the narrator reveals that Sarah has been speaking with Christina Rossetti (357). Up to that point he has teased readers with hints about the various members of the household at 16 Cheyne Walk—the actual address in Chelsea of Tudor House, where Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the arts lived between 1862 and 1871 (see cover photo). One of the characters is meant to be identified as Ruskin, suggests Linda Hutcheon, and another is "likely Swinburne" (92). Hutcheon

further notes a resemblance between Sarah and Jane Burden [Morris], whereas Nan Miller is more struck with Sarah's resemblance to Christina Rossetti (68). Although general readers would not recognize such historical connections, details in Chapter 60 enable elite readers to respond differently as they recognize these—and other—Victorian originals of Fowles's characters.

The way the novel reveals and withholds information seems designed to strengthen reader identification with Charles, the protagonist who, like a reader, only gradually realizes whose house he is visiting when he calls for Sarah after a two-year search and a woman opens the door:

The maid was a slim young creature, wide-eyed, and without the customary lace cap. In fact, had she not worn an apron, he would not have known how to address her.

"Your name, if you please?"

He noted the absence of the "sir"; perhaps she was not a maid; her accent was far superior to a maid's. He handed her his card.

"Pray tell her I have come a long way to go see her."

She unashamedly read the card. She was not a maid. (345)

Along with Charles, readers have to revise their assumptions as they become aware that Sarah's housemates are unusual; elite readers, however, will be guessing at their identities.

As he enters the house, Charles observes "a man some six or seven years older" than his own 34 years (16):

He held a pen in his hand. Charles removed his hat and spoke from the threshold. . . . There was something slightly distasteful in the man's intent though very brief appraisal of Charles; a faintly Jewish air about him, a certain careless ostentation in the clothes; a touch of the young Disraeli. (345)

From the numerous paintings in the house, Charles at first infers that the man with the pen must be a wealthy art collector of paintings by "the notorious artist whose monogram was to be seen on several of them"; he later realizes that the house is owned not by a collector of paintings but by the artist himself, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose monogram Charles recognizes (346, 349). In a subsequent conversation between Charles and Sarah, Fowles teases readers with clues about the inhabitants, starting with Rossetti (but not naming him):

"He shares this house with his brother." Then she added the name of another person who lived there, as if to imply that Charles's scarcely concealed fears were, under this evidence of population, groundless. But the name she added was the one most calculated to make any respectable Victorian of the late 1860's stiffen with disapproval. The

horror evoked by his poetry had been publicly expressed by John Morley, one of those worthies born to be spokesmen (i.e., empty facades) for their age. Charles remembered the quintessential phrase of his condemnation: "the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs." And the master of the house himself! Had he not heard that he took opium? A vision of some orgiastic *menage a quatre*—*a cinq* if one counted the girl who had shown him up—rose in his mind. (349)

This imagined *menage* consists, then, of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his brother William Rossetti, Sarah, "the girl who had shown him up" (probably another of the PRB's models), and the unnamed "libidinous laureate" condemned by John Morley. Although Fowles never explicitly identifies this poet, the diatribe Charles remembers can be found in *The Saturday Review* for August 4, 1866, as Morley prepares to wrap up a hostile review of Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* with this observation about its writer:

If he is not in his best mood he is in his worst—a mood of schoolboy lustfulness. The bottomless pit encompasses us on one side, and stews and bagnios on the other. He is either the vindictive and scornful apostle of a crushing iron-shod despair, or else he is the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs. (147)

Since Swinburne did live with Rossetti at Tudor House off and on between 1862 and 1864 (Gosse 93), Fowles apparently intends for elite readers to suppose that Swinburne is the other person whom Sarah has identified to Charles, who counts him as the fifth resident. This Swinburne character must also be the man downstairs with pen, for although there are visitors in the house, one of whom Charles apparently recognizes as Ruskin, the man with the pen behaves like an occupant of the house rather than as a visitor when he instructs the girl, "Take him up, my dear" (346). Also, as the man with the pen Swinburne would be the subject of the "idly heard gossip" which Charles remembers about "the one he had seen downstairs" (348). Indeed, Swinburne's notoriously wild behavior—including nude, drunken scenes and ungovernable rages—led one neighbor occasionally to intervene at Tudor House "to quiet the 'pandemonium'" (Doughty 311). Despite the fact that the historical Swinburne left 16 Cheyne Walk some five years before 1869, when Charles's fictional visit takes place, Fowles evidently wants elite readers to imagine that Charles has interrupted Swinburne at work.

A seeming problem with the identification is a pair of details which do not fit the biographical Swinburne: the "faintly Jewish air" about the man with the pen the first time Charles sees him, and his age, "some six or seven years older than Charles" (345). Swinburne was reared an Anglo-Catholic (Gosse 9), so the first detail, the "Jewish air," is inconsistent in a portrait Fowles evidently wishes readers to recognize as Swinburne. One explanation is that Fowles wishes also to emphasize the notoriety of the group and includes this anachronistic detail because it would

remind elite readers of a particular scandal which touched the later PRB. Simeon Solomon, a Jew befriended by the Pre-Raphaelites, whose art had expressed his interests in lesbianism and in Jewish ritual in the 1860s, in 1873 was arrested for homosexual offenses and subsequently was shunned by his former friends, including Swinburne (Wood 133). The second detail, the age of the man with the pen—40 or 41 to Charles's 34—does not describe either Swinburne or Solomon, who would have been 32 and 29, respectively, when Charles calls in 1869. There was, however, another writer—another "man with a pen"—who lived with Rossetti in Tudor House until Rossetti could no longer tolerate his irritating behavior: novelist George Meredith, who would have been 40 in 1869 (Doughty 311). What Fowles seems to have done, then, is to create a composite of the most famous—or infamous—writers of the PRB as a means of drawing readers with some knowledge of the period into an intellectual labyrinth of fact and fiction.

There may be no "true" identifications at the center of the labyrinth. The central character of Sarah is clearly meant to be enigmatic, and to think of her as a specific one of the PRB's models, such as Elizabeth Siddal or Alexa Wilding, would be to diminish Sarah's status as an embodiment of mystery. "Who is Sarah?" the narrator asks at the end of Chapter 12. "Out of what shadows does she come?" (80). Readers are meant to wonder, not to find an answer, any more than they can be expected to identify the origins of a gamma ray which causes a random mutation—a role the epigraph to the final chapter suggests that Sarah has played for Charles, who seems to have evolved from a Victorian gentleman to a more authentic species (361). It is to keep Sarah's origin inscrutable that Fowles associates her with so many females from so many traditions; a list would include Eve (59), Laura (75), Maud (80), Emma Bovary (100), Mary (113), Calypso (117), Guinevere (188), Jezebel (195), Tess (216), and Dido (275). Surely, too, Fowles has in mind the story of Sleeping Beauty when Charles observes Sarah sleeping—or pricking her finger—in the Undercliff (61, 146). By having Dr. Grogan cite the case study of Marie de Morrell, Fowles suggests that Sarah may be neurotic (186); but Grogan's hypothesis is more likely just another partial explanation, scientific but hardly better than the villagers' labelings of Sarah as "poor Tragedy," the typical fallen woman, or "the French Loot'n't's Hoer" (13, 73). Elite readers may recognize that Sarah is a composite of literary figures and that the man with the pen is a composite of historical figures, but this kind of incomplete identification enhances rather than diminishes a sense of her mystery and further draws such readers into the intellectual depths of a literary labyrinth.

The reader's task is to construct a way out of Fowles's labyrinth. Fowles's gradual revelations and elliptical details put all readers through the same process of incremental learning and vaguely-felt apprehension that Charles experiences. General readers may choose an ending and thereby evolve from unconsciously manipulated, passive readers of illusionistic novels into emancipated readers who contribute to the construction of narrative. Elite readers evolve in this way, too, but they also experience the book as "not a historical novel." These readers can sense

both the familiarity and the strangeness of the not-quite-historical figures behind the seemingly present, fictional characters and are thus led by Fowles to sense the permeability of boundaries between fiction and history, between present and past, between what one reads and who one is.

Metropolitan State College of Denver

Works Cited

- Doughty, Oswald. *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London: Muller, 1949.
- Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. 1969. New York: NAL, 1970.
- . *A Maggot*. 1985. New York: NAL, 1986.
- Gosse, Edmund. *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. New York: Macmillan, 1917.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "The 'Real World(s)' of Fiction: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *English Studies in Canada* 4.1 (1978): 81-94.
- Miller, Nan. "Christina Rossetti and Sarah Woodruff: Two Remedies for a Divided Self." *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 3.1 (1982): 68-77.
- Morley, John. "Mr. Swinburne's New Poems." Rev. of *Poems and Ballads*, by Algernon Charles Swinburne. *The Saturday Review* 4 August 1866: 145-47.
- Wood, Christopher. *The Pre-Raphaelites*. New York: Viking, 1981.