‘An Hour before the Day’: the dismembered Book of Hours in Elizabeth Siddal’s *Clerk Saunders*

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**Abstract** In 1855, the Pre-Raphaelite artist-poet Elizabeth Siddal was invited to examine John Ruskin’s collection of medieval manuscripts. Two years later, a manuscript—a Book of Hours, the popular late medieval prayer-book—appeared in Siddal’s painting *Clerk Saunders*. Siddal’s decision to include a Book of Hours in a scene from a medieval ballad encourages us to explore the painting’s creative strategies in new ways. This article examines how *Clerk Saunders* reinterprets the art of such prayer-books, focusing on Siddal’s reworking of the Annunciation. I shall explore the collision between this visual iconography and the language of the ballads from which the subject is taken, and trace how this literary-inspired pictorial dismemberment unsettles the medievalism of other Pre-Raphaelite works. I will demonstrate how Siddal’s disruptive medievalism is illuminated by queer theory; there have been queer readings of ‘Siddal’ the mythologized figure, but I will show how Siddal takes a queering approach to ballads and iconography in her art and poetry. My article will affirm Siddal’s work with the Book of Hours as an important contribution to Pre-Raphaelite medievalism, which speaks to anxieties about the destabilizing power of nineteenth-century creativity, and the tempestuous relationship between words and images across historical periods.

**Keywords** Elizabeth Siddal, Pre-Raphaelite, medievalism, queer theory, iconography, ballads

I. ‘New worlds’

May Margaret kisses a willow wand for her lover Clerk Saunders. Saunders is a revenant, stabbed the day before by Margaret’s brothers, back from his grave to set the couple free from their binding lovers’ vows. The pair enact a ritual separation, where Margaret’s gift of the willow wand releases Saunders from his spectral state. The watercolour *Clerk Saunders*, by Pre-Raphaelite artist and poet Elizabeth Siddal (1829–62) (figure 1), depicts this climactic exchange from the ballad ‘Clerk Saunders’, as retold in novelist and poet Walter Scott’s collection of folk ballads, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–3). The artwork, however, adds a crucial detail not present in this, or any, version of the balladic source material. Clasped shut on the prayer lectern in the bottom right corner, in stark pale binding against a bright blue cloth, beneath the lovers’ attention, is the key to the painting’s wealth of meaning: Margaret’s Book of Hours.

Books of Hours were popular in the late medieval period, a symbol simultaneously of lay piety and social status, of private devotion and extravagant wealth. Like the dainty codex on Margaret’s lectern, they were some of the smallest and slimmest medieval books, though this did not stop them from being lavishly bound and filled with marginalia, painted miniatures, and gold-leaf illumination. The manuscript (and later printed) books contained prayers for each canonical hour of the day, abbreviated from the prayers used in monastic devotion, collectively known as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Hours of the Virgin. Whilst the written content comprised a collection of non-narrative prayers, hymns, psalms, antiphons, and versicles, the images provided a narrative, depicting scenes from the Virgin’s life. The devout medieval layperson could imitate monastic ritual by marking the hours, with concessions of timing to accommodate their lay status; the early hours of Matins and Lauds were kept around dawn, rather than at the starker monastic times of midnight or 2 a.m.

The practice of commissioning, owning, and engaging with a Book of Hours was at once personal and social. The liturgical content was not the work of a single author, and many people contributed to the making of the book: scribes, illuminators, and stationers. Books could be commissioned to mark important social occasions, and simply praying the hours placed each book-owner within a broader devotional community, allowing them to ‘participate in a grand network of spiritual patronage and kinship’. Yet the books were also intensely individual. Critical studies have focused on exploring particular medieval figures through their Books of Hours. Owners could choose their content, add and annotate material, and have themselves painted into the miniatures. Every owner could have a unique, intense relationship with their book’s content, as they prayed and ruminated upon its vivid iconographic images. Images in a Book of Hours were not purely decorative, nor subordinate to the text. Word and image worked together in equal partnership to inspire the owner’s devotion, and signalled their close working relationship through miniatures which included prominent depictions of the Book of Hours itself.

The style of Siddal’s *Clerk Saunders* is consciously medieval—in the angular androgynous figures with their stylized drapery, the small space with its far-reaching window, the
Annunciation is especially significant to the nature of Matins, portraying the Annunciation; the depictions of the Book of Hours appear in the opening miniatures. Most medieval manuscripts were depicted within its own miniatures. This book is strongly reminiscent of the way the Book of Hours was depicted, with costumes and furnishings, and the book on the draped lectern. This book is strongly reminiscent of the way the Book of Hours was depicted, with costumes and furnishings, and the book on the draped lectern. The reverent display and small size, following medieval practice, code Margaret’s book as a Book of Hours—rather than a psalter (which would be larger), a bible (which would be thicker, or have multiple volumes), a breviary, missal, or other sacred book (which a layperson would not own), or a secular book (which would not be kept on a prayer lectern). As the ballad of ‘Clerk Saunders’ tells an ‘ancient’ story, according to its editor Scott, and Siddal depicts a medieval setting in a medieval-inspired artistic style, the book can be identified with confidence.

Though the Book of Hours is open in some medieval miniatures, it was also common practice to depict a closed book, as Siddal does. Closed books occur in the Matins illuminations of three manuscripts in particular: Reid MS 83, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, The Ruskin Hours, in the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Hours of Yolande of Flanders, in the British Library (figure 2). In all three Annunciations, the Virgin holds a closed Book of Hours about the size of Margaret’s, whilst the Hours of Yolande of Flanders also features a similar clasp design.

I have named these three manuscripts and reproduced an image of one because it is likely that Siddal saw at least one, if not all, of them. These three Books of Hours were in the possession of Siddal’s patron, the art critic John Ruskin, between 1855 and 1857, during which time he invited his protégée to come to his house and ‘look at a missal or two’—‘missal’ being a Victorian misnomer for any type of medieval manuscript. More Books of Hours survived into the nineteenth century than any other medieval artefact or type of book, and thrived as collectors’ items. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, popular perception of manuscripts was soured by anti-Catholic sentiment: the satirical magazine Punch published cartoons deriding medieval illumination, and reviews of early Pre-Raphaelite work likened the paintings to manuscript art by way of an insult. The year 1855 marked a turning point in illumination’s public reception, as J. C. Robinson, the curator of what would become the Victoria and Albert Museum, began enthusiastically collecting manuscripts for his museum. Ruskin had been lured into the costly business of manuscript collection even earlier, in 1850 or 1851, by a Book of Hours (Reid MS 83) found ‘at a bookseller’s in a back alley’.

In Praeterita, his autobiography, Ruskin describes his first sight of the ‘little fourteenth century Hours of the Virgin’, praising the book as ‘extremely rich, grotesque, and full of pure colour’. The new worlds which every leaf of this book opened to me, and the joy I had, counting their letters, and unravelling their arabesques as if they had all been of beaten gold,—as many of them indeed were,—cannot be told, […] For truly a well-illuminated missal is a fairy cathedral full of painted windows, bound together to carry in one’s own pocket.

Though very few of Siddal’s personal papers—and nothing autobiographical—survives, there is ample reason to speculate that Books of Hours similarly inspired her with ‘new worlds’ and creative possibilities. After her visits to Ruskin’s house, and following a purposeful trip to ‘sundry colourmen’, Siddal’s art took a new direction, moving from black-and-white drawings and dark oil self-portraits to small colourful watercolours, medieval in style and subject matter.
Figure 2. Jean le Noir, or Bourgot, his daughter, The Annunciation (f. 13v); from The Hours of Yolande of Flanders, c.1353–63. Parchment codex. 113 × 77 mm. London, British Library. © British Library Board, Yates Thompson 27, f. 13v.
Saunders, which had originally been designed as an illustration for a book of ballads (a project which fell through), was reworked as one such watercolour, and acquired the Book of Hours in the process—a detail which does not appear in the earlier sketches.

I explore the consequences of Siddal’s decision to place such a significant object in Clerk Saunders, an object not mentioned in any version of the ballad which served as her subject matter. Just as his first Book of Hours unleashed ‘new worlds’ in Ruskin’s imagination, Margaret’s book brings ‘new worlds’ into the painting. It does so in a manner distinct from many of the significant medieval books belonging to female figures in other Pre-Raphaelite paintings. These books function as open objects with visible pages: the Book of Hours in Charles Collins’s Consent Thoughts (1851), in which the pages ‘marked’ by the nun’s ‘fingers’ provide a visual embodiment of her thoughts, or the splayed pages of Isulc’s intricately rendered psalter in William Morris’s La Belle Iseult (1858), or the book contemplated by Marie Spartali Stillman’s Beatrice (1895), with a black-and-red page design reminiscent of the Kelmscott Press medievalist printing style. But the Book of Hours in Siddal’s painting achieves an unsettling effect by staying shut. The presentation of the book as a Book of Hours allows the painting to be read in relation to Book of Hours conventions, bringing in new implications for the composition and the source ballad, but the closed covers preserve ambiguity about this book’s content, and the distance between the book and its owner is itself a significant positioning to unpack. The refusal to fix down stable content, as I will show, speaks to the painting’s overall methodology, in which stable content is uprooted and specific symbols dismembered. ‘Dismembered’ is an apt word, given that a number of these symbols rely on the removal or distortion of limbs, parts, and members, both human and angelic.

Clerk Saunders enacts strategic destabilizations of the ‘new worlds’ brought in by the Book of Hours. To understand these destabilizations, it is useful to explore them in relation to queer theory. Queer theory and Siddal speak to each other more pertinently than one might initially assume. Queer theorists such as Noreen Giffney embrace the theory’s ability to engage with any possibilities, identities, desires, perceptions, and positions which creatively unsettle or destabilize, in a manner not necessarily restricted to gender or sexuality.

The critic Louise Tondeur treats queerness as ‘that which mismatches, defamiliarises, destabilises, disidentifies, and decentres’. Tondeur even uses Siddal as an example through which to demonstrate a ‘methodology for queer reading’—though it is not Siddal’s work she has in mind, but ‘the cultural phenomenon Elizabeth Siddal’, specifically the myth of Siddal’s hair growing to fill her coffin after her death. Tondeur describes the process of ‘reading queer’ as ‘digging up’ the ‘disruptive influence’ in a text or artwork (or coffin full of hair).

But if ‘Siddal’s unruly hair’ can be an emblem for reading queer, the methodology her myth helped shape should also be brought to bear on her creative work. I will adopt a similar methodology, and read Clerk Saunders queer, and ‘dig up’ the painting’s ‘disruptive influence[s]’—but I will also show how Clerk Saunders is itself a ‘queer reading’. Siddal’s ‘reading’ of her source material, both verbal and visual—the ballad of ‘Clerk Saunders’, and the contents of a Book of Hours—is enacted in the painting, which takes this material only to destabilize and dismember it. This process of queering, as we shall see, allows Clerk Saunders to create an atmosphere in which catastrophes are heightened, stable meanings are broken, and disarticulated certainties gesture towards a frightening future. Though these concerns are entangled in post-Romantic developments, they are not contrasted with a ‘simpler’ medieval past. Instead, the painting’s instability is created through the work’s queering engagement with material past and present: medieval iconography, ballads and ballad variants, and other Pre-Raphaelite works.

With the Book of Hours and the ‘new worlds’ it brings into the painting, Clerk Saunders moves away from the realm of nineteenth-century book illustration in which it was originally conceived, asserting its insidious and disruptive links to its source material in new ways. Though further work could be done on the design’s progress from woodblock to watercolour, thinking of Clerk Saunders purely as Siddal’s painted version of a neglected illustration does not open up its more troublesome implications. Even examining the composition in the context of Pre-Raphaelite illustration, with its focus on symbolic realism, only gets us so far—for the work’s fragmenting approach to iconography, as we shall see, veers away from such methodologies. Clerk Saunders must be read queer in relation to its Book of Hours, if we are to understand how it summons up medieval practices to depict the creative fractures of the post-Romantic world.

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Before exploring how Siddal’s work queers its source material, that source material must be examined in more detail. I have described already the layout, history, and function of the Book of Hours, and now I will survey the ballad of ‘Clerk Saunders’. Ballads such as this one perform ‘ongoing cultural work’, as Jill R. Ehren argues, by being ‘malleable narrative[s] that [are] accepted as having, or perhaps even expected to have, multiple versions’. The building-blocks with which these ‘malleable narrative[s]’ were built and rebuilt—the ‘grammar of balladness’—provide a model of creativity in which idiosyncratic use of pre-existing motifs and ‘shared ways of expression’ let creators assert their individuality, whilst contextualizing that individuality within a creative community of intersecting variant versions. This model of creativity is also a useful one to apply to the Pre-Raphaelite circle, emphasizing shared creative practice, and the way the
artists created groups of paintings built from the same motifs. One such group of paintings will be examined below for its links to Clerk Saunders. First, however, I will explore the ‘grammar of balladness’ in play in the ballad of ‘Clerk Saunders’ to establish a way of thinking about the text(s) that will illuminate discussion of the painting, and the Book of Hours within it.

There is no authoritative text of ‘Clerk Saunders’. A version of the ballad was printed in 1802 in Scott’s Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, though Scott specifies that the ‘tale’ predates him and is ‘very ancient’.25 Siddal encountered the ballad in her 1807 edition of Minstrelsy, according it the honour of cut pages (other ballads remain uncut in her copy to this day) and a pencil mark next to the title on the contents page.26 Yet, as her edition mentions, other versions coexisted: in 1806, antiquarian Robert Jamieson’s collection of Scottish ballads published a different text of ‘Clerk Saunders’, hoping to ‘gratify[ly] the curious antiquary’ with a variation from the Scott version.27 Scott and Jamieson were aware of one another’s projects, but did not share their resources for this ballad. Scott gives his source as ‘Mr [David] Herd’s MSS.’ (the editor of a 1776 ballad collection), whilst Jamieson took his version from the recitation of ‘Mrs Arrott of Aberbrothick’.28 Scott’s and Jamieson’s versions follow a similar storyline—Saunders and Margaret wish to spend the night together, Saunders is murdered by Margaret’s family on this fatal night, Saunders returns to Margaret’s bower as a revenant—but with substantial differences along the way. Siddal’s edition of Minstrelsy does not stop at Scott and Jamieson, but makes reference in the prefatory material and footnotes to five coexisting versions of ‘Clerk Saunders’, and provides quotations from these variant texts.29 By the time of prolific ballad collector Francis James Child’s landmark collection The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, published in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, seven different versions of the ballad were being printed alongside each other.30

The story acquires additional ‘versions’ when the ballad is broken down into its motifs. In the first part of the ballad, Margaret’s relatives (her father, or seven brothers) stab Saunders whilst he lies in bed with her. This moment allows us to date the ballad as at least medieval in origin: a marginal illustration in a manuscript of medieval canon law, now in Lichfield Cathedral, depicts the same motif of a man being stabbed whilst in bed with his lover.31 But some of these motifs also bear a ‘grammatical’ relation to another ballad, ‘Fair Margaret and Sweet William’ (printed in the anthologist David Herd’s 1776 collection), in which the idea of ‘knock[ing] at the ring’ of ‘Margaret’s bower’ and encountering her ‘seven brethren’ is inverted, and the seven brothers usher the lover inside rather than opposing his coming.32 Another ballad, ‘Willie and May Margaret’ (reprinted in 1857 by Francis James Child from Jamieson’s collection), takes the same motif and reshapes it again: Willie the lover ‘tirle[s] at the pin’ of Margaret’s bower, but now Margaret refuses to ‘let him in’, in case her relatives hear him.33 Here is the ‘grammar of balladness’ in action, as motifs are reiterated and reshaped, making each story distinctive whilst asserting its place in a constellation of ballads, all dealing with lovers, families, bowers, and crossing (or not crossing) thresholds.

The situation becomes more complex when we concentrate our attentions on the supernatural moment depicted by Siddal. Both Scott and Jamieson’s versions feature a second part where, having been murdered by Margaret’s relatives, Clerk Saunders returns as a revenant. Jamieson’s version has Saunders returning seven years later, flaunting his worm-eaten corpse under Margaret’s window and warning her that ‘for a’ your meikle pride,/Sae will become o’ thee!’34 In Scott’s version, however, Saunders comes back straight after burial to beg Margaret to perform a ritual to ‘Give [him] [his] faith and troth again’, and thus release them both from their lovers’ vows.35 The ghost sequence from Scott’s version was lifted with a few alterations from a different ballad, ‘Sweet William’s Ghost’, which appears in Herd’s collection.36 Scott refers to his stitching-together of the ballads in his introduction to ‘Clerk Saunders’, observing that ‘The resemblance of the conclusion to the ballad, beginning, “There came a ghost to Margaret’s door [“Sweet William’s Ghost”],” will strike every reader’.37 But ‘Sweet William’s Ghost’ is, in turn, an inverted variation on the broadside ballad ‘William and Margaret’ (also published in Herd’s collection), in which it is Margaret’s ghost rather than William’s who comes into the bedroom to beg back her ‘maid-en-vow’ and ‘troth’.38 The volatile ‘grammar of balladness’, in the form of these mercurial motifs, is at work again.

I have detailed these balladic intersections at length for two reasons. First, I wished to show that Scott’s ‘Clerk Saunders’ does not exist in isolation, and can best be understood as one of many possible storylines within a cluster of ballads. The editorial notes in Siddal’s Minstrelsy furnished her with ample evidence of the ballad’s multivalent existence; access to the libraries of Ruskin and her artist-poet husband Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and discussions with ballad collector William Allingham about illustrating ‘Clerk Saunders’ in one of his publications, could also have deepened her acquaintance with other versions in the ballad’s orbit. Her awareness of Scott’s storyline as one of many potential trajectories, as shall be shown, is also apparent in her treatment of the story within her painting. Second, contextualizing Scott’s take on ‘Clerk Saunders’ allows us to see which of the ‘grammar’ motifs he chooses to incorporate or develop in his text, and how his choices inform Siddal’s decision to include a disruptive Book of Hours in her pictorial retelling.

In all the sequences where the revenant begs for ‘faith and troth’, Margaret initially refuses to give it. In one version
published by Child, she tries to bargain information out of Saunders in exchange for his posthumous release:

Your faith and troth ye sanna get,
Nor will I twain w’th thee,
Tell ye tell me the pleasures o’ Heaven,
And pains of hell how they be.\(^{39}\)

Scott’s Margaret takes a similar approach, but asks a different question:

—Thy faith and troth thou sall na get,
And our true love shall never twin,
Untill ye tell what comes of women,
I wot, who die in strong travelling [childbirth]?\(^{40}\)

Scott’s edit focuses Saunders and Margaret’s exchange on anxieties around pregnancy and labour. Are we to infer that Margaret, in Scott’s version, is pregnant with Saunders’s child, worried that she will not survive the birth, and fearful about what this might mean for her future in this life and the next? Saunders, as a revenant with knowledge of the afterlife—and a revenant reliant on her goodwill—reassures her that such women’s ‘beds are made in the heavens high’, but the price for this answer is dear.\(^{41}\) Once Saunders has fulfilled his part of the bargain, Margaret is obliged to give him what he wants, and hand him an object imbued with her ‘troth’, an action which will separate them forever. In Scott’s ballad, the object is described as a ‘crystal wand’—though Siddal’s painting changes this fragile trinket to a branch of willow, a transformation with pertinent implications which shall be examined below.\(^{42}\)

Introducing a Book of Hours into this version of the story, with its tragic separations and unorthodox pregnancies tangled up in supernatural assurances, heightens the exchange between Margaret and Saunders in unsettling and ominous new ways. As with all medieval revenants, Saunders cannot stay past cock-crow, and Scott’s text specifies the time at which the action takes place: Saunders first appears at Margaret’s window ‘an hour before the day’, and leaves just before dawn.\(^{43}\) During this time, which Siddal’s painting reiterates with its pale sky, Margaret ought to be reading Matins from her Book of Hours. I will explore below the implications of the canonical hour; the visual content of Matins, as section III will show, speaks alaramingly to Margaret’s fears about disastrous childbirth, and is evoked in Clerk Saunders in order to undergo some particularly intense disruption. First, however, I will unpick how the painting queers the ballad itself. We can ‘dig up’ this destabilization of the ‘Clerk Saunders’ story with two questions. If Margaret ought to be reading her prayers at this hour, why is the book on the lectern untouched and shut? And—almost invisible in the alcove above her bed—why is there a second, more battered Book of Hours also present in the picture?

II. ‘Till anes we married be’

In medieval Matins miniatures, there are clear suggestions that the depicted Book of Hours was being read by the Virgin before the Angel Gabriel’s interruption. Either the book lies open, or, if the book is shut, she holds it clasped to her chest, as if prior to the illustrated moment it was open in her hands (as in figure 2). The Pre-Raphaelite prayer-book depictions mentioned above follow a similar principle. The nun in Collins’s Converts Thoughts is holding her book open as if about to return to it, the gaze of Morris’s Iseult dips towards the open psalter on her bedside table, and Spartali Stillman’s ponderous Beatrice keeps her place on the page with her finger. Siddal’s painting, however, disrupts this convention. Though Margaret’s book is coded as a Book of Hours, the depiction of Margaret in relation to her book does not adhere to medieval expectation: the book is shut, but she is nowhere near it, and prior to Saunders’s entrance she was still in bed. The book itself, with its pristine covers, perfect clasps, neat edges, and poised position on the blue cloth, does not appear to have been much opened at all.

To enhance the puzzle of the untouched book, neither Margaret nor Saunders will look anywhere near it. This might not have been so remarkable—they are busy with their ritual—had the painting not introduced an additional detail to draw attention to their snub. On the side of the lectern, a painted angel shows up what the lovers will not do by staring at the book. The fact that this angel guides viewers’ eyes to the Book of Hours emphasizes just how much Margaret and Saunders avoid having their own gazes similarly drawn.

The third clue lurks in the shadows above Margaret’s head, diagonally opposite the book and the angel. In the alcove over Margaret’s bed, there is a second book. It is a similar size to the Book of Hours on the lectern, but its covers are a drab green and faded at the edges, and a rough brushstroke technique has been used to depict loose pages poking out of the top. The second book’s devotional accoutrement—a small wooden crucifix—is not as grand as the decorated lectern. Yet, unlike the lectern book, the painting emphasizes that the second book is battered with use.

The comparison would suggest that the book in the alcove is another, older Book of Hours, and that the lectern book is Margaret’s newest acquisition. Its comparative lavishness and prominent display suggest that she has bought it in recognition of an important occasion. Purchasing a new object—especially a Book of Hours—to embody a significant moment is in keeping with medieval practice. The wealthy might possess several Books of Hours, with different books emblematizing different occasions in their life. Rich medieval women...
would get new Books of Hours as ‘wedding presents’ (such as Yolande of Flanders, who received the book in figure 2 to celebrate her marriage to Philippe de Navarre, Count of Longueville), with illuminations depicting the couple, a practice which continued into the nineteenth century—though the Books of Hours by then were no longer newly made, but personalized with dedications or modern illuminated pages pasted into the medieval book. Margaret is wealthy enough to own multiple Books of Hours; the painting depicts her as living in a castle with fine furnishings, and Siddal’s edition of Minstrelsy includes a footnoted quotation describing the character as ‘a king’s daughter’. Furthermore, Margaret is certainly attentive to how objects can mark rituals: her room is filled with objects associated with the act of prayer (the crucifix, the lectern, the prayer-books), and she knows precisely which item (the willow wand) will give Saunders his ‘troth’ back.

At the start of Scott’s ‘Clerk Saunders’, Margaret and Saunders are engaged. Margaret points out that, instead of angering her family by coming that night, Saunders could simply wait ‘Till anes we married be’ before sleeping with her. Clerk Saunders seizes on this hint of impending marriage, and ‘digs it up’, to use Tondeur’s phrase, by embodying and presenting it in the form of a book. The Book of Hours on the lectern, when taken beside the lovers’ attitude towards it and Margaret’s older book, could be a recent acquisition purchased by the characters to celebrate their engagement or imminent wedding. But in the wake of Saunders’s murder, this new—now useless—book represents a happy future which no longer corresponds to the ballad’s trajectory.

With these implications attached to the lectern book, the painting’s style, appearance, and choices of material take on ironical new meaning. At 28.4 by 18.1 centimetres, Clerk Saunders is a small artwork—far smaller than Convent Thoughts, La Belle Isult, and Beatrice. Siddal’s painting, though pasted onto a board, is done on a piece of paper rather than a canvas, and even the board is only around five millimetres thick. The colour scheme is bright and limited, and executed in watercolours, with body colour giving opacity to the colours, creating an effect reminiscent of the ‘jewel-like colours’ of medieval manuscripts—a strategy Siddal ‘develop[ed]’ alongside Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the mid-1850s for depicting medievalist subjects. Clerk Saunders has been created with an eye to the practicalities of display—it is not as small as an actual Book of Hours page, and the board makes it (slightly) three-dimensional. Yet it nonetheless invokes the look of a medieval miniature, through both its physical appearance and stylistic features. It was nineteenth-century practice—and, notoriously, one of Ruskin’s favourite pastimes—to cut miniatures out of manuscripts and display them like paintings, a tradition into which Clerk Saunders (physically, at least) could blend.

But Siddal’s stylistic invocation here is not solely an example of the medievalist watercolour practice shared with Rossetti. The materiality of Clerk Saunders is entangled with the painting’s subject matter in a very specific way. The fact that Margaret and Saunders are painted as if in a miniature alludes to the practice of depicting a Book of Hours’ owner—or married owners—within the book itself. Personalized portraits were a common feature of Books of Hours, and depictions of the owner occur in both the Ruskin Hours and Yolande of Flanders’s Book of Hours (figure 2, inside the historiated initial), two of the books Siddal would have encountered. Eamon Duffy’s study of Books of Hours describes a double-page miniature in which a book and its owner ‘clim[bd]’ inside the Annunciation, kneeling beside Gabriel and reading the Ave Maria prayer. A thirteenth-century Book of Hours in the British Library actually eschews traditional image cycles in its historiated initials, instead depicting what the book’s owner might be doing at each canonical hour. In the case of the earlier hours, this is getting up to pray, in stark contrast to Margaret’s refusal to do so.

This evocation of the physicality and materiality of a miniature, combined with allusion to a medieval practice which marks Margaret and Saunders as ‘owners’ of a Book of Hours, sharpens the stinging implications of the lectern book. Instead of showing the lectern book’s pages, which might depict and celebrate Margaret and Saunders as a couple, Siddal emulates the relevant techniques to present instead the nightmarish ritual which replaces the imminent wedding, and cuts off the chance of there ever being a wedding. Instead of starting the day with a personalized miniature celebrating their bright future—or even portraying them getting up to mark the hours together—Margaret and Saunders’s post-mortem Matins, as painted by Siddal, focuses on the moment at which all chances of that bright future are curtailed. Parting forever, after all, is an accurate representation of what they are doing ‘an hour before the day’.

The fact that such attention is drawn to this impotent wedding present is a queering act, destabilizing the authority of the ballad source material. In her article on the possibilities of queer theory, Giffney argues for the ‘expos[ure]’ of ‘all norms for the way they define, solidify, and defend their shaky self-identities by excluding those (dissident others) who fail or refuse to conform’—a practice of ‘expos[ure]’ which Clerk Saunders enacts. The potential wedded bliss of Margaret and Saunders—implied only to be truncated—is a ‘dissident other’, in relation to the ballad’s plotline. The prominence of this ‘other’ in the painting unsettles the centrality of Scott’s text. Through the new Book of Hours and the material features which point us towards it, and the concurrent implication that Margaret and Saunders prepared for a different future trajectory from the one they must now enact, the painting refuses to treat the plot of Scott’s ‘Clerk Saunders’ as
authoritative source material. The tragic conclusion is presented as an unexpected catastrophe which has usurped an alternative ending, rather than as a settled inevitability. The Book of Hours on the lectern, off-centre in the painting’s corner, decentres the storyline of Scott’s ballad, presenting that storyline as one of many competing potential narratives.

This queering act speaks to the many variants of ‘Clerk Saunders’ that jostle for coexistence in Siddal’s volume. But it also goes beyond engaging just with coexisting texts. Scott’s ‘Clerk Saunders’ is not made to compete against variant versions of the ballad, but appears check by jowl with a storyline implicitly envisaged by the characters themselves. Margaret and Saunders, through their Book(s) of Hours, become a creative force, albeit a truncated one. The hint in Margaret’s speech, ‘Till anes we married be’, has been elaborated by Siddal’s painting into an object (the new Book of Hours) and a gesture (Margaret’s purchase of this new book to celebrate this occasion). Through this book’s presence, we see the world of the painting from the perspective of its characters, not just as two tragic figures doomed to a fixed ending from the outset, but as active agents filling the room with objects which anticipate a different outcome. Though we do not see the scene through their field of vision in the literal sense, we are directed towards how they see it—what they have put into it, and what they now cannot bear to look at. This character-driven perspective works alongside a shaky omniscience in which past, present, and future collapse into each other: the Book of Hours comes from a past in which there was a different future, one which the present is in the process of destroying. Offering the characters the opportunity to embody their ideal narrative in an object enables Siddal to foster this atmosphere of instability, making viewers aware that the characters’ past choices, future predictions, and pre-emptive assumptions have all been uprooted.

This digression-up of ballad characters’ perspectives to decentre ballad plots, and the resulting creation of an inherently unstable state, are also enacted in Siddal’s poetry. The Book of Hours in Clerk Saunders brings in a perspective similar to the dramatic first-person, focalizing events through and against the characters’ ideas and predictions. In Siddal’s poem ‘O mother open the window wide’ (c.1860, possibly earlier), a first-person speaker tries to control the outcome of a situation—the aftermath of their imminent death—by resorting to a significant object. The narrator speaks from their deathbed, addressing their mother. We do not learn what has led the speaker to the brink of death, but motifs from the ‘grammar of balladness’ (balladic appellations for the characters of ‘O mother’, ‘my young son’, and ‘sweet Robert’, references to folkloric rituals, and the ‘pale kirk grass’ of the graveyard) create the impression of an untold story behind their demise. This untold story, however, is evoked only to be decentred. Instead, the poem aligns itself with its speaker’s faltering attempts to dictate the future through an object, whilst simultaneously undercutting them with poetic form, the written equivalent of Clerk Saunders’s ironic material medievalism. Unnerving destabilizations in line length bring out the uncertainty of the speaker’s ‘if’s and ‘may’s, as they direct their mother towards a familiar significant object:

And mother dear break a willow wand
and if two be even,
Then save it for sweet Roberts sake
and he’ll know my souls in heaven.54

Siddal’s brother-in-law, William Michael Rossetti, editing her poems for posthumous publication, replaces the jarringly short ‘and if two be even’ with ‘And if the sap be even’, to match the metre.55 The very essence of the line, however, is that it does not match. At the precise moment when two ‘even’ parts of a ‘willow wand’ are required to signify the speaker’s place in ‘heaven’, the two lines describing the ‘break’ become joltingly uneven. The narrator’s ascent from death to heaven is problematized and left ambiguous, and the character’s attempt to narrate their future becomes a metric mediation on the impossibility of doing so. Anne Woolley has argued that Siddal’s balladic poems participate in a ‘search for the autonomous self’, and I would suggest that this particular example explores the limitations of this autonomy, depicting the speaker’s failure to actualize their desired trajectory into being.56

But the atmosphere of uncertainty and hopes disappointed that is created by Siddal’s pictorial queering of ‘Clerk Saunders’ is wider-reaching than that fostered by the broken metre of ‘O mother’. Clerk Saunders enact[s] a double disruption, and so far I have only examined half of it. In Clerk Saunders, a ‘willow wand’ and formulaic dismemberment evoke more ominous consequences than one speaker’s doubtful future. The decentring of the ballad plot establishes Clerk Saunders as an unsettling, unstable space. It is, moreover, a space in which the conventions of the Book of Hours are not just evoked, but fragmented. It is time to explore the painting’s most alarming ‘queer reading’, and the implications it has for a world which extends beyond Margaret and Saunders. To do this, we must return to the ‘hour before the day’ at which the action takes place, and the contents of the canonical hour which aligns with it.

III. ‘An hour before the day’
Like the ballad, the Book of Hours has its own ‘grammar’. There are set devotional texts for each canonical hour, and standard pictures to accompany those texts.57 The action of Clerk Saunders, as we have established, takes place ‘an hour before the day’—the layperson’s hour of Matins. The
miniature which traditionally accompanies Matins in the Hours of the Virgin is a depiction of the Annunciation.

The three Books of Hours in Ruskin’s collection all begin with Matins and the Annunciation. Reid MS 89 and the Ruskin Hours are from the earliest stages of Book of Hours production (1280–1300), and incorporate the same recognizable motifs. A Book of Hours is present in both, as is a lily in the centre. A stem-like object is held out by Gabriel towards the Virgin, in these cases a speech-scroll with the opening words of the Ave Maria on it. The haloes of both figures are emphasized by strategic architecture, here the Gothic arches within each historiated initial.

The Hours of Yolande of Flanders are from a later period (c.1353–63), by which time Books of Hours were being made in droves, and Annunciation compositions were becoming even more standardized. In Yolande’s Annunciation miniature (figure 2), the central lilies with their long stems are still present. The architecture emphasizes the haloes once more. The stylized background of the earlier historiated initials has been replaced by a room, featuring a floor-length window through which Gabriel enters. The Book of Hours appears twice: in the Virgin’s hands, and on a cloth-draped lectern in the depiction of Yolande beneath the miniature. The angel kneels to deliver the news, a common variation in Annunciations. There is also the Virgin’s couch—in many Books of Hours, this couch is specified to be a bed, with sheets and bedcurtains as well as the cushions depicted in Yolande’s miniature.

When we reflect that the Annunciation is a dialogue between a woman and the supernatural being that has entered her room, a dialogue which concerns the fate of the woman’s pregnancy (and the consequences of that pregnancy), its significance to Clerk Saunders and Margaret’s fears of ‘strong travailing’ becomes immediately apparent. Siddal’s entangling of Saunders and Margaret’s ritual with the sacred encounter, however, relies not just on the similarity of the premises, but vigorously engages with these medieval Annunciation motifs. The angel on Siddal’s lectern which stars at the book is coded as Gabriel mid-Annunciation by the lily in his hand. Lilies are always present at the Annunciation; in some miniatures, such as that in the famously ornate Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, the lily moves from its central flowerpot into the angel’s hand, and becomes another stem-like object being presented to the Virgin.58 More Annunciation motifs feature in Siddal’s composition. Saunders’s ghost enters Margaret’s room through a floor-length window. Margaret’s furnishings—bed, bed-cur- tains, lectern, Book of Hours—are all Annunciation staples. There is even a vase of flowers, and a stem-like object being passed between the figures.59

But there is something not so straightforward at work here. Clerk Saunders’s allusions to the Annunciation fulfill Tondeur’s queer prerequisites: they ‘mismatch[1], defamiliaris[e], destabi[1], disiden[i], and decentr[e]’. For instance, there is no direct alignment of Margaret with the Virgin and Saunders with Gabriel, or vice versa. Instead, the Virgin’s and Gabriel’s roles and attributes are broken up and distributed between Margaret and Saunders. Though Saunders appears at the window, and though his appearance and posture parallel the Gabriel decorating Margaret’s lectern, this similarity only flags up what Saunders does not have: the lily or the halo (or even angelic wings, as in figure 2). Saunders stands slightly too close to Margaret for the shape of the window to provide him with the halo he lacks. Though he is able to impart heavenly knowledge to Margaret, Saunders is not an angel—his knowledge of the afterlife is borrowed, and ultimately unable to guarantee his beloved an ideal trajectory in the manner of angelic speech. Instead, it is Margaret who kneels to give him the object with the supernatural power to transform his state of being. The object is the willow wand, visually evoking both the long-stemmmed lily and the speech-scroll. Its transformation, from the ‘crystal wand’ of the text to the tree branch in the painting, allows it to gesture towards the sinewy, leaf-studded shapes of the Annunciation motifs without directly reproducing them, creating instead an object which can physically reference these symbols without being bound to their original meaning.

Bringing the Annunciation into Clerk Saunders results in a pictorial dismemberment which reduces the sacred composition to disarticulated bits. Whilst Siddal’s patron Ruskin is famous for cutting miniatures out of manuscripts, Siddal’s painting cuts up the very miniature, trimming Saunders of angelic appendages and twisting the motivation behind Margaret’s upraised arms and powerful gift. The Annunciation—which has stood for centuries with one stable, optimistic meaning—is broken up and placed in a context where it can no longer convey this meaning. Instead, the Annunciation’s promise of a miraculous pregnancy, and the brilliant new epoch that will result from it, is darkly subverted. Margaret and Saunders’s Matins encounter curtains, not enables, their bright future—the willow wand parts them forever—and Margaret is afraid of her pregnancy as an end, not a beginning. The shattered and disarrayed Annunciation motifs are co-opted to depict this moment of fear, uncertainty, and misery, wrenched out of order to tell a very different story from the one they have always retold on the first page of the Hours of the Virgin.

This collision—between Margaret and Saunders’s ominous severance, and the Annunciation in pieces—has further alarming implications. Peering into these fissures will be my work for the final two sections of this article. In the first, I will place Clerk Saunders beside a more contemporaneous Annunciation, a comparison which will unearth fractures in the ‘grammar of balladness’. In the second, the apocalyptic
implications of queering the Annunciation in the context of ‘Clerk Saunders’ will be explored, for the dire predictions they offer the post-Romantic age.

IV. ‘From brightest red to blue’

_Clerk Saunders’s_ queering cuts motifs loose from the stable meaning of a Matins Annunciation. The jumble of dismembered features no longer reiterates the old story of miracle and promise, and becomes embroiled in a tragic moment of curtailment, fear, and uncertainty. The stable meanings binding signifier and signified in the Annunciation—the set significance of the encounter, and the roles, and the exchange of the object—are stripped away, leaving signifiers bare and unstable. _Clerk Saunders_ actively enacts this severance through its queer reading of the composition. The result is a bleaker variation on the break between signifier and signified emblematized in Rossetti’s poem _The Woodspurge_ (1856, printed 1870). In Rossetti’s poem, a grieving speaker stares at the ‘ten weeds’ they sit beside in the hope of finding ‘Wisdom’ relevant to their situation, but concedes in the final stanza that the ‘One thing then learnt’ from their observation is that ‘The woodspurge has a cup of three.’ The eponymous woodspurge asserts only its objectivity, refusing to signify anything more, and the poet can create no ‘Wisdom’ to embellish it. But the disarticulated motifs in _Clerk Saunders_ assert something more precise than the woodspurge’s empty shape: confused, chaotic, or pessimistic implications, far removed from their original associations, and tethered to the disastrous narrative of the ballad. The presence of the Book(s) of Hours ensures that the motifs’ original associations remain in some way ‘present’ in the painting, but the books are shut, and the hidden presence of Matins Annunciations is suggested only to emphasize how much this painting has queered them. Even the ‘objectivity’ of the Annunciation motifs is broken up, as haloes, wings, and lilies are flinted off heads and chipped out of hands, destabilizing the material as well as the meaning.

It is not, moreover, purely medieval depictions of the Annunciation that _Clerk Saunders_ evokes and destabilizes. Siddal’s husband Dante Gabriel Rossetti, seven years prior to the painted _Clerk Saunders_, also sought to reimagine the Annunciation in an unconventional way (figure 3). Rossetti’s painting _Ecce Ancilla Domini_ is unconventional in permitting fear to trouble the exchange, as a muscular Gabriel brandishes a lily at a cowering Virgin. Yet, though the scene is uncomfortable and infused with terror, the arrangement of motifs is ‘correct’ in a way which Siddal’s painting eschews. Gabriel and the Virgin play their roles, albeit with uneasy emotional content. The flower is still recognizably a lily. The angel’s head lines up perfectly with the window for an architectural halo.

Siddal had plenty of opportunities to study _Ecce Ancilla Domini_. The painting remained in Rossetti’s possession until 1853, then came into the public eye again when it was sold at Christie’s on 31 March 1855, just weeks before Ruskin became Siddal’s patron. _Clerk Saunders’s_ references to _Ecce Ancilla Domini_ are also firmly evidenced by comparison of the paintings themselves. _Clerk Saunders_ evokes _Ecce’s_ entire composition only to flip it—almost all of it—into a darkened, distorted mirror-image. Though they now appear on opposite sides, _Clerk Saunders_ refers to the blue bed-curtain, the red-haired woman on the bed in her nightgown, the male figure’s posture and hairstyle, the architectural halo, and the object moving between the figures. The transition between paintings...
is a transformative one: the woman kneels up instead of shrinking back, the object changes hands, the halo is maddeningly off-centred.

There is one motif, however, which does not swap sides. The red embroidery in the bottom-right corner of Rossetti’s painting transforms, in Clerk Saunders, into something both aesthetically similar and drastically different—the Book of Hours, on its blue-clothed lectern. The embroidery also appears in an earlier Rossetti work, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1849). The two works were intended as companion-pieces, and the embroidery links the paintings as a constellation of Virgin images, a motif of Pre-Raphaelite ‘grammar’ in action. Siddal’s lectern, however, extends this constellation not by reproducing the embroidery but by altering it, again in an unsettling manner. The object’s form and meaning are flung open from their original closed circuit. Across Rossetti’s paintings, the embroidery preserved a stable meaning: the industrious Virgin prepares for her sacred purpose by sewing it in Girihood, only for it to stand complete at the bed’s end as that purpose fulfils itself in Ecce. The embroidery’s mutated appearance in Clerk Saunders, however, undermines this stable meaning by drawing Rossetti’s self-contained Virgin group into a creative conversation with Siddal’s painting, turning the object which embodied the Virgin’s neat upward trajectory into the book and lectern which bind the Annunciation to Clerk Saunders and its disruptively tragic tale.

This extended conversation exposes the instability of the ‘grammar of balladness’ as a creative methodology. This strategy for forging links between a group of artists or works (or both) permits a communal form and meaning to be continually stretched and altered. With motifs constantly available for inversion and reshaping, and creative groups liable to acquire disruptive new members, there can be no neat links maintained between signer and signified. This volatile lack of set meaning is as visible in the original ‘grammar of balladness’ as it is in Pre-Raphaelite methodology. In the ‘Clerk Saunders’ constellation of ballads, there will always be a Margaret, a pair of lovers, a bower to be entered, a lurking family, a revenant, a supernatural tussle over faith and troth. There is no way, however, to establish a meaning for each motif that can encompass all the ballads—a motif’s implications and effects change every time it appears. Margaret might aid her lover’s entrance, or not; the family might murder the lover or usher him in; anyone can become the revenant; the faith and troth might be handed back or left unsettled. Neither is there a fixed form for each motif: the man’s name and fortunes change, Margaret’s family might be one father or seven brothers, the revenant may be one day dead or seven years decayed. The context of variant versions will not permit shapes and meanings to settle.

Siddal’s painting was created in a culture which increasingly questioned authoritative voices, struggled with vatic straightforwardness, and worried about the solitude of solitary geniuses—a culture highly receptive to the unfixed, communal balladic approach, as the nineteenth-century preoccupation with reprinting ballads demonstrates. Yet Clerk Saunders does not entirely celebrate this approach. As Siddal’s queer readings of the ballad and the Book of Hours demonstrate, there is considerable scope for a range of coexisting implications in disarticulated motifs—but not all these implications hold hope and promise. Like the variant Margarets in the ballads, who can either let the lover in or lock him out, the motifs evoked in Clerk Saunders—from Rossetti’s embroidery to the Annunciation in pieces—signify something drastically different from their original meaning. The pervasive instability allows the possibilities to grow broader and bleaker, instead of fixing on a bright hopeful trajectory.

Clerk Saunders’s change of colour—turning Rossetti’s red-clothed embroidery into a blue-clothed lectern, and disrupting the closed-circuit optimism of its original meaning—echoes, or possibly prefigures, imagery in Siddal’s undated poem ‘Oh never weep for love that is dead’. The poem presents the ominous consequences of unstable signifiers and signifieds, and uses shifts between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ as a central method for doing so. Siddal, working in the 1850s and early 1860s, was at the heart of what Charlotte Ribeiro calls the ‘chromatic turn’ of the ‘mid-nineteenth century’—a period which, as Hilary Fraser describes, ‘freshly conscious of the experience of colour’, as a result of new developments in colour production and the science of colour perception. This heightened ‘conscious[ness]’ surrounding colour is evident both in the Clerk Saunders/ Ecce Ancilla Domini colour-switch, and in Siddal’s poem, in which colour plays a crucial role, instigating and demonstrating a process of destabilization and collapse. The poem’s opening stanza interrogates the link between instability and curtailment, depicting a hope which has already closed down due to its lack of unchanging foundation. It helps us to understand what might be at stake in Clerk Saunders:

Oh never weep for love that is dead
Since love is seldom true,
But changes his fashion from blue to red,
From brightest red to blue,
And love was born to an early death
And is so seldom true.

Nicholas Gaskill, considering ‘how to read colour’ in nineteenth-century literature, prefers to focus on what the writer ‘did’ with colours than to speculate on what they might mean; ‘because the meanings of individual hues are so fluid, it is easy to find in chromatic imagery a confirmation of what you already know’. Language, in particular, can ‘mak[e] something new of colour experience, prompting hitherto unimagined perceptions’. My reading of this poem accords with Gaskill’s preferred

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methodology, exploring how Siddal uses the colours—and the act of changing colour—to create a particular effect. Here, the switching between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ is showcased for its ability to disrupt solid foundations. A sudden switch between ‘strong or bright colours’ like this, with no ‘harmonious effects’ to smooth the transition, was regarded by Ruskin as inherently possessing this capacity to unsettle and ‘offend’, a disorienting jolt which he sees ‘the old [medieval] illuminators’ as ‘careful’ to avoid in their manuscripts.68 The lack of ‘harmonious effects’ in this stanza, and the proliferation of inharmonious ones, are ‘careful’ in another way, intricately working to display a moment of disruption and its consequences.

Consider the stanza as three couplets bound together by an overarching rhyme scheme: the first two lines pair ‘love that is dead’ with the affirmation of its being ‘seldom true’, the second two lines enact the colour changes, and the final two lines return to death, love, and ‘seldom true’. The first and last couplets are almost copies—but the last couplet is an inexact repetition. ‘Death’ replaces ‘dead’ and jars the rhyme scheme, ‘love’ disappears from the final line, and the logical neatness of ‘Since’ in line two collapses into the vague reiteration of ‘And’. It is as if, with the central axis of the stanza representing a moment of unstable change through the shifting colours, the lines following it struggle to retain their form. This visual, chromatic demonstration of the disruption caused by an unstable centre also gives us the answer to the crucial question of why this ‘love’ is ‘dead’. In the fractured repetition, ‘love that is dead’ becomes ‘love was born to an early death’. What dooms it is the same instability that disrupts the rhyme and repetition, the lurching between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ that prohibits it from achieving a steadiness of form and meaning.

This instability condemns this love, significantly, to be ‘born to an early death’. As with Margaret’s fears of ‘strong travelling’ and the dismembered Annunciation that captures these fears in Clerk Saunders, truncated possibilities and doomed childbirth are once again being entangled with disrupted meanings. But this fixation on failed pregnancies has further ominous resonance, brought in by the Annunciation, which speaks not just to Margaret and Saunders’s dire straits but to an unravelling world beyond them. It is time to consider the broader implications of the painting’s treatment of the Annunciation, mired as it is in unstable shapes, uncontrollable methodologies, and a pervasive sense of disruption. As shall be shown, it is not just Margaret and Saunders’s future being unhinged by their Matins ritual.

V. ‘Comforted will I never be’

Whilst highlighting the frightening instability that arises from a ‘grammar of balladness’ methodology, Clerk Saunders treats the Annunciation composition rather like a ballad, breaking it down into motifs that can be disarticulated, inverted, and made to mean alarmingly different things in their new iteration. But this approach does not just speak to contemporary anxieties about the erosion of established meanings and stable signifiers. As well as depicting a queer reconfiguration of the Annunciation with post-Romantic resonance, the painting also—via the Annunciation—predicts the nature of a post-Romantic creative future.

The Annunciation is a moment with consequences. The interaction between the angel and the Virgin sets the tone for the epoch to follow it. Before the moment was brought into Clerk Saunders, the arrangement represented a bright new future for humankind. The dawning of a new age is also a major preoccupation of many nineteenth-century writers and artists. These mid-Victorian creators were acutely aware that ‘their lives’—and their work—would be ‘shaped by forces and circumstances that had been unknown a generation or two before’, a sudden shift which, as Tom Mole describes, left ‘the past’ estranged and ‘the future’ ‘open and uncertain’.69 Moving towards this ‘uncertain’ future with the signs, symbols, and certainties of the past weakened or increasingly irrelevant fostered an atmosphere of creative instability, as ‘worrying’ to some as it was ‘promising’ to others.68 Ruskin reflects on artistic manifestations of this instability in volume three of Modern Painters, published the year before Clerk Saunders was completed:

[whilst] all the pleasure of the mediaeval was in stability, definiteness, and luminousness, we are expected to rejoice in darkness, and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade; and to expect the utmost satisfaction and instruction from what is [...] difficult to comprehend.59

The idea of ‘lay[ing] the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade’, as ‘Oh never weep for love that is dead’ has shown, is not one which Siddal’s work easily accepts. Nor is hers an isolated view. Despite this ‘expect[ation] of ‘rejoic[ing] in darkness’, the ‘uncertain’ creative era in which she worked was not always regarded as an inherent improvement on the creativity of previous centuries, in the inevitable manner of the post-Annunciation world. There was not even a consensus that the creative work of the new age had substance enough to stand on its own, as something other than the past’s belated and disconnected shadow. Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold adopts language reminiscent of Siddal’s when he figures the post-Romantic age in his poem ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1855) as the unborn product of a botched pregnancy, a ‘world’ that is ‘powerless to be born’, which leaves him ‘nowhere […] to rest [his] head’.69 ‘This loss of any stable position from which to speak’ was informed by and intermingles with the nineteenth century’s ‘loss of a coherent [religious] faith’; in Arnold’s poem ‘Dover Beach’ (c.1851, printed 1867), the ‘withdrawing’ of the ‘sea of faith’ leaves the ‘naked shingles of the world’ unable to
provide ‘certitude’,71 ‘[P]ersonal crises of faith’, the ‘increasing secularisation in society’, and ‘wid[e] report[ing]’ of ‘diverse shades of [religious] opinion’ in the ‘public press’ contributed to and proliferated this sense of instability.72

These contemporary anxieties, both religious and creative, illuminate the consequences of Siddal’s disruptive iconographical reworking. Presenting Margaret and Saunders’s moment of ritual severance through fragments of the Annunciation endows it with the capacity to dictate the nature of an epoch, and the epoch it forecasts is in accord with these ‘worrying’ post-Romantic predications—standing on unstable foundations, and thus doomed to a premature curtailment. Clerk Saunders is an Annunciation for the nineteenth century, in which past certainties and fixed meanings—even and especially Christian ones—have been destabilized and prised apart. The painting suggests that we would be right, like Margaret, to worry about what sort of a creative future can be born—or not born—or born to an early death—from such a moment. Instead of promising a reinvigorated new epoch, Clerk Saunders’s Annunciation hints towards an impending creative apocalypse. The very motif which entangles the painting with the Annunciation—the Book of Hours—is itself an emblem of a future cancelled out, an impotent remnant of Margaret and Saunders’s hopes for an alternative trajectory. Margaret’s Book of Hours, far from being an escapist evocation of an idealized past, allows Clerk Saunders to strip the ‘stability’ and ‘definiteness’ from its medieval iconography and thrust the prayer-book’s contents into a nine-teenth-century hinterland of fragmented meaning.

When Margaret discovers that Saunders has been murdered, her response is to declare that, from now on, ‘comforted will I never be’.73 Her certainties have fallen through, and the future before her is frightening and unstable. Clerk Saunders takes this declaration to new, all-encompassing extremes, ensuring that no comfort can be drawn from its unsettled motifs, competing narratives, ominous future predications, and insidious Books of Hours. Celebrating the queering effect of Siddal’s mythical hair, Louise Tondeur asked: ‘What would happen if one could harness this disruptive force as a way of reading?’74 One possible answer is that a work such as Clerk Saunders would emerge—a work which enacts disruptive readings of medieval stories and seemingly untouchable motifs, exposes the instability of post-Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite creativity, and gestures towards the apocalyptic consequences of its own destabilizing practice.

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NOTES

1—Though Siddal married Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1860, and though her family name was spelt ‘Siddall’, I will use ‘Siddal’ to refer to her because this spelling was how she chose to sign both her work and her copy of Minstrelsy.

2—‘Miniature’ denotes a medieval illustration, rather than referring to size.

3—Catherine Yvard and Catriona Gourlay, ‘Books of Hours’, seminar and handout at The London Rare Books School (2019), 4.

4—Virginia Reinburg, French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400–1600 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

5—Eamon Duffy, Making the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240–1570 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006);

6—Walter Scott, Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: by Sir Walter Scott, Bart., with his introductions, additions, and the editor’s notes, vols 3–4 (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1807), 3: 175. Siddal’s copy, held in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, PB 12-2021.

7—For the manuscript pages not reproduced here, see Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Reid MS 83 (c.1280–1290), f. 22a, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1385306/book-of-hours-use-of-manuscript/ (accessed on 28 September 2019); and J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, MS Ludwig IX 3 [83,ML.99] ‘The Ruskin Hours’ (c.1300), f. 37v. http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/1387/unknown-maker-ruskin-hours-french-about-1300/ (accessed on 28 September 2019).

8—The Hours of Yolande of Flanders was damaged by a flood in 1846, but the colours, compositional details and motifs are still discernible.

9—William Michael Rossetti, Rossetti: Periphlegeton. Papers 1854 to 1862 (London: George Allen, 1899), 79.

10—Rowan Watson, Illuminated Manuscripts and their Makers (London: V&A Publ., 2003), 6.

11—Ibid., 133, 6.

12—Ibid., 133.

13—James S. Dearden, The Library of John Ruskin (Oxford: The Oxford Bibliographical Society, 2012), xx; E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds, The Complete Weeks of John Ruskin: Preraphaelia and Dilecta, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1908), 35: 490.

14—Cook and Wedderburn, Preraphaelia and Dilecta, 35: 490.
which I am also engaged; ibid., 253 considers how a range of Siddal poems, drawings, and paintings situate Siddal’s poetry amidst the work of her creative contemporaries and their mutual concerns.

11- Virginia Surtees, ed., The Diary of Ford Madox Brown (London: Yale University Press, 1981), 133.

12- Dinah Roe, ‘Naturally Artificial: The Pre-Raphaelite Garden Enclosed’, Victorian Poetry 57, no. 1 (2019): 131–53, at 141. Roe’s article offers a fascinating close reading of the Convent Thoughts prayer-book. For the three paintings, see Ashmolean Museum. Oxford, https://www.ashmolean.org/convent-thoughts/ (accessed 26 March 2021); Tate Britain, London, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/morris-la-belle-iscult-no1999 (accessed 26 March 2021); and Delaware Art Museum (via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marie_Spartali_Stillman_-_Beatrice_(1899).jpg (accessed 26 March 2021).

13- Noreen Giffney, ‘Denominizing Queer Theory: More Than (Simply) Lesbian and Gay Studies’, Feminist Theory 5, no. 1 (2004): 73–79, at 74.

14- Louise Tondeur, ‘Elizabeth Siddal’s Hair: A Methodology for Queer Reading’, Women: A Cultural Review 22, no. 4 (2011): 370–86, at 371.

15- Ibid.

16- Ibid., 385. In shifting the focus thus, I am participating in a broader move towards examining Siddal’s creative output rather than centralizing her personal life and the mythology surrounding it. A recent example of this important shift is Anne Woolley, The Poems of Elizabeth Siddal in Context (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), who situates Siddal’s poetry amidst the work of her creative contemporaries and their mutual concerns.

17- Jill R. Ehren, “‘Strong Travelling’: Re-visions of Women’s Subjectivity and Female Labor in the Ballad-work of Elizabeth Siddal’, Victorian Poetry 52, no. 2 (2014): 251–76, at 254. Ehren’s article considers how a range of Siddal poems, drawings, and paintings capitalise on the multiplicity of readings permitted with the[er] palimpsestic poetic form of ballads, an important line of enquiry in which I am also engaged; ibid., 253. But where Ehren examines ‘women’s subjectivity’ as reinscribed through these works, my focus is on the queer function of Clerk Saunders’s medievalism, understood as the disruptive engagement with specific forms, motifs and structures from the medieval art and ballads that constitute the source material.

18- Roger deV. Renwick and Sigrid Rieuwerts, eds, Ballad Mediations: Folk Songs Recovered, Represented, and Reminaged (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006), 64.

19- Scott, ‘Clerk Saunders’, Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175–183, at 175–76.

20- Ibid., 3: 4.

21- Robert Jamieson, ‘Clerk Saunders’, Popular Ballads and Songs, from Tradition, Manuscripts, and Scarce Editions; with Translations of Similar Pieces from the Ancient Danish Language, and A Few Originals by the Editor (London: Cornell University Press, 2016), no. 1, 38; repr. (London: Cornell University Press, 2016), no. 1, 38.

22- Ibid., 3: 180–81.

23- Sandra Hindman and James H. Marrow, eds, Books of Hours Recomended (London: Harvey Miller, 2013). A Book of Hours sold at Sotheby’s in December 2017 has an additional illuminated page commemorating the marriage of the book’s nineteenth-century owner, the Russian princess Isabel Gagarine, https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2017/medieval-manuscripts-continental-books-117407/lot.31.html (accessed 16 September 2019). The provenance of The Hours of Yolande of Flanders is described in the British Library catalogue entry, https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=64249&CollID=75&NStart=7 (accessed 14 January 2021).

24- Scott, Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175; Jamieson, Popular Ballads and Songs, 1: 82.

25- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175; Jamieson, Popular Ballads and Songs, 1: 82.

26- Scott, Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175–79.

27- Francis James Child, English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 5 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1882–98).

28- The illustration is thought by Michelle Brown to depict an incident in the ballad ‘Mattie Groves’, on the grounds that it illustrates a part of the text dealing with adultery. I argue, however, that the allusion could also be to ‘Clerk Saunders’. In ‘Clerk Saunders’, the stabbing happens in the bed, whilst ‘Mattie Groves’ has a dialogue sequence about how the lover gets out of the bed and is given a sword to fight back with before he is killed.

29- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175–79.

30- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175–79.

31- Child, English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 5 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1882–98).

32- David Herd, Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, Heroic Ballads, etc., 2 vols (Edinburgh: James Dickson & Charles Elliot, 1776), 1: 86.

33- Francis James Child, ed., English and Scottish Ballads, 8 vols (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1857–59), 2: 172.

34- Jamieson, Popular Ballads and Songs, 1: 80.

35- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 180. In Scott’s version (and in ‘Sweet William’s Ghost’), the revenant’s motivations for engaging with the living accord with medieval Catholic ideas of revenant behaviour. As the Ministry of the Scottish Border Education Site [http://walterscott.eu/education/ (accessed 23 June, 2019)] observes, Saunders does not return for revenge, but instead needs Margaret’s help to perform a truth-breaking ritual. This ritual is underpinned by the medieval ideas of Purgatory, post-mortem salvation, and the consequences of failing to adhere to the ars morandi (‘art of dying’). Saunders, having died unexpectedly, needs living intervention to fix his chaotic afterlife. Medieval scholar Nancy Caciola could be describing Saunders’s case when she explains how a corpse became a revenant in medieval Europe: ‘to die badly, through violence and while still youthful, was to risk returning’, Clerk Saunders, 3: 175–183, at 180; Nancy Mandeville Caciola, Afterslaves: The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages (London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 351. The revenants in the ‘Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories’ transcribed by M. R. James from a manuscript (c.1400) from Byland Abbey, Yorkshire, all follow this logic, harassing the living into performing rituals to grant them posthumous release, after having died suddenly or without a clean conscience; M. R. James, ‘Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories’, The English Historic Review 37, issue 147 (1922): 413–14. The medieval logic that underpins Saunders’s behaviour, with its blend of Catholic Christianity and ritualistic folklore, strongly suggests medieval origins for the ballad’s ‘ancient’ story.

36- Herd, Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, 1: 76–78.

37- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175.

38- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 175.

39- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 180–81.

40- Ibid., Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 180–81.

41- Ibid., 3: 181.

42- Ibid., 3: 182.

43- Ibid., 3: 180.

44- Sidney Elton and James H. Marrow, eds, Books of Hours Recomended (London: Harvey Miller, 2013). A Book of Hours sold at Sotheby’s in December 2017 has an additional illuminated page commemorating the marriage of the book’s nineteenth-century owner, the Russian princes Isabel Gagarine, https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2017/medieval-manuscripts-continental-books-117407/lot.31.html (accessed 16 September 2019). The provenance of The Hours of Yolande of Flanders is described in the British Library catalogue entry, https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=64249&CollID=75&NStart=7 (accessed 14 January 2021).

45- Ministry of the Scottish Border, 3: 176.

46- Ibid., 3: 177.

47- I am indebted to Amy Marquis and the Fitzwilliam Museum for this information.

48- Elizabeth Prettejohn, The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites (London: Tate Publ., 2000; repr. 2008), 77.

49- Smith, Art, Identity and Devotion, 12.

50- Interpreting the text of the ballad ‘Matty Groves’, a dialogue sequence about how the lover gets out of the bed and is given a sword to fight back with before he is killed.

51- Interpreting the text of the ballad ‘Matty Groves’, a dialogue sequence about how the lover gets out of the bed and is given a sword to fight back with before he is killed.
52– Giuffre, ‘Denominizing Queer Theory’, 75.
53– Serena Trowbridge, ‘O mother open the window wide’, My Ladies Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), 68, 69.
54– Ibid., 68–69.
55– Rossetti, Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism, 242.
56– Woolley, Poems of Elizabeth Siddal in Context, 13.
57– Some medieval scholars have advocated for Books of Hours to be studied for their ‘grammar’. For example, Albert Derolez suggests that the books ought to be ‘grouped’ by their ‘iconographical features’ and engagement with pre-existing motifs, rather than ‘around an artist’; quoted in Hindman and Marrow, Books of Hours Reconsidered, 10.
58– Musée Condé, Chantilly, MS 65 The Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (c.1412–16), f. 26r, Wikimedia Commons (accessed on 28 September 2019).
59– A similar idea was recently explored by Barnaby Nygren, ‘Reading Michelangelo/Michelangelo Reading’, Word & Image 36, no. 3 (2020): 261–83. Nygren also examines how an artist creates through a reinterpretation of Christian iconographical motifs. Siddal’s ‘iconographic innovation’, however, is not seeking to ‘transcend’ its ‘models’ as a demonstration of personal artistic genius, as Nygren argues; ibid., 270. Her underlying ethos in this iconographical reimagining is rather different, as fraught and ominous as the story she depicts.
60– Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Woodspurge’, Poems (London: F. S. Ellis, 1870), 251.
61– Trowbridge, ‘Oh never weep for love that is dead’, My Ladies Soul, 76–79, at 76.
62– Charlotte Rieyrol, ‘The Changing Colours of Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature’, Word & Image 36, no. 1 (2020): 1–6, at 2; Hilary Fraser, ‘Sister Arts: The Life of Colour and the Colour of Life in the Work of Alice Meynell and Elizabeth Butler’, Word & Image 36, no. 1 (2020): 48–63, at 51. These articles are both taken from a special issue of Word & Image exploring ‘the literary and artistic effect of the nineteenth-century “colour revolution”’, a focus which speaks to my work on the purposeful turbulence in Siddal’s use of colour in her art and poetry; Rieyrol, ‘Changing Colours of Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature’, 3.
63– Trowbridge, My Ladies Soul, 76.
64– Nicholas Gaskill, ‘How to Read Colour: Writing, Wallpaper, and the Case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’, Word & Image 36, no. 1 (2020): 7–17, at 8, 16.
65– Ibid., 15.
66– John Ruskin, ‘The General Principles of Colour’, in Cook and Wedderburn, Complete Works of John Ruskin: Lectures on Architecture and Painting, 12 (1904): 509–508, at 506.
67– Tom Mole, What the Victorians Made of Romanticism: Material Artifacts, Cultural Practices, and Reception History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 13.
68– Ibid.
69– John Ruskin, Modern Painters, vol. 3, in Cook and Wedderburn, Complete Works of John Ruskin: Modern Painters Volume III, Containing Part IV, Of Many Things, 39 vols (1904), 5: 317.
70– Lionel Trilling, ed., ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’, The Portable Matthew Arnold (New York: Viking, 1949), 148–155, at 151.
71– Glennis Byron, ‘Dover Beach’, Dramatic Monologue (London: Routledge, 2005), 33; Trilling, Portable Matthew Arnold, 165–167, at 166.
72– Prettejohn, Art of the Pre-Raphaelites, 243. The relationship between Pre-Raphaelite work and the Victorian crisis of faith is a rich field of study. Prettejohn, Art of the Pre-Raphaelites, and Éva Péteri, Victorian Approaches to Religion as Reflected in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2009), consider the impact on Pre-Raphaelite art, whilst Emma Mason, Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Woolley, Poems of Elizabeth Siddal in Context, focus on the implications in the work of their titular poets. The Visual Theology events series is a hub for research in this area, with its 2019 conference ‘Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites: Sacre Conversazioni’ focusing on the subject, https://www.visualtheology.org.uk/vtii/ (accessed 26 March 2021).
73– Scott, Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, 3: 179.
74– Tonduer, ‘Elizabeth Siddal’s Hair’, 385.