

REVOLUTIONARY DREAMS

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Personalities in Paintings: subjects from literature in nineteenth-century art

by *Matthew Howles*

Scenes from Dante's *Inferno* (a fourteenth-century poem) and Goethe's *Faust* (a nineteenth-century play) often served as inspiration for visual artwork in the nineteenth century.¹ The museum's collection has examples of both. *The Shooting Stars* (1847-49) by Jean-François Millet is based on an episode from the *Inferno*.² *He is Coming* (1874), by Matthijs Maris, depicts a scene from *Faust*.³ These artists and their subject-matter had much in common. Though Millet was French and Maris Dutch, both executed their paintings while working in Paris.⁴ Moreover, Goethe often referenced Dante, because both works of literature involve mortal man's encounters with the evil counterparts of Christianity.⁵ Dante travels through Hell; Faust makes a bet with the devil. Each painting also focuses on tragic female characters and their lovers from the texts. Yet despite these similarities, the artists arguably had very different motives in producing these paintings. Why was this so?

¹ M. Caesar, *Dante: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1989), pp. 43, 50-3, 60; U. Finke (ed.), *French Nineteenth Century Painting and Literature: with special reference to the relevance of literary subject-matter to French painting* (Manchester, 1972), pp. 118-119, 341.

² P. Hughes, *French Art from the Davies Bequest* (Cardiff, 1982), p. 12.

³ H. E. M. Braakhuis and J. van der Vliet, 'Patterns in the Life and Work of Matthijs Maris', trans. M. Hoyle, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 10, no. 3/4 (1978-9), pp. 171-3 and fn. 220 on p.173.

⁴ Hughes, *French Art*, p. 12; R. de Leeuw and others (eds.), *The Hague School: Dutch Masters of the Nineteenth Century*, exhibition catalogue, Paris: Grand Palais, 1983, p. 217.

⁵ W. P. Friederich, *Dante's Fame Abroad 1350-1850: The Influence of Dante Alighieri on the Poets and Scholars of Spain, France, England, Germany, Switzerland and the United States* (Rome, 1950), pp. 443-58.

The Shooting Stars

Millet's painting depicts Francesca da Rimini in Hell. Francesca's husband Gianciotto is said to have killed her and his brother Paolo in a rage after seeing them kiss.⁶ In the *Inferno*, the adulterers are punished by being hurled about in an endless storm.⁷

This fantastical subject-matter is far-removed from the portrayals of contemporary peasant life for which Millet is best known.⁸ Indeed, the museum's collection has such an example made in the same period as *The Shooting Stars*, entitled *The Sower* (1847-48). Millet was therefore experimenting with different techniques and subjects at this time.⁹ It was only after moving to Barbizon in 1849 that he soon abandoned the style of *The Shooting Stars* and came to fully develop the Realism characteristic of *The Sower*.¹⁰ However, during his Parisian years in the 1840s, Millet was poor and generally had to produce works specifically for the art market to support himself.¹¹ Though a private work, *The Shooting Stars* can perhaps be understood as part of this endeavour, for Dante's *Inferno* had started receiving renewed popularity early in the nineteenth century.¹²



Jean-François Millet, *The Shooting Stars*, 1847-9. Oil on board, 18.7 x 34.5 cm. NMW A 2476

⁶ D. Bindman and others (eds.), *Dante Rediscovered: From Blake to Rodin* (Grasmere, Cumbria, 2007), p. 99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸ J. Ingamells, *The Davies Collection of French Art*, (Cardiff, 1967), pp. 39, 48.

⁹ T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851* (London, 1973), pp. 74-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-5; Ingamells, *Davies Collection*, p. 48.

¹¹ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 74; P. Collier, 'Newspaper and myth: migrations of the Romantic image', in P. Collier and R. Lethbridge, (eds.), *Artistic Relations: Literature and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London, 1994), p. 161; M. Pitwood, *Dante and the French Romantics* (Geneva, 1985), pp. 90-1.

He is Coming

Though Maris also depicted a tragic female figure in *He is Coming*, it seems that he chose such subject-matter for more personal reasons than Millet. The woman in the foreground is probably Margareta. She is seduced by Faust, deserted upon pregnancy, found guilty of infanticide, and executed (although ultimately she is granted salvation).¹³ Here Margareta, yet to be totally ruined, acknowledges Faust's approach.

Raised in the Netherlands, Maris was influenced by German Romanticism, which encouraged artists to visualise their feelings and thoughts.¹⁴ This personalised approach to art seems applicable to the painting. Partly derived from Romanticism, Maris longed for a lost state of innocence, arguably like that in which Margareta, in her beautiful, dreamy surroundings, is still wistfully preserved in the painting.¹⁵ Maris primarily blamed this loss on his father, accusing him of driving his sons into a harsh world.¹⁶ Therefore it is possible that Maris identified with Margareta, and maybe even recognised his father in Faust.¹⁷



Matthijs Maris, *He is Coming*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 45.1 x 33.0 cm. NMW A 2469

¹³ K. L. Berghahn, 'Georg Johann Heinrich Faust: The Myth and Its History', in R. Grimm and J. Hermand (eds.), *Our Faust?: Roots and Ramifications of a Modern German Myth* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1987), pp. 16-18.

¹⁴ Braakhuis and van der Vliet, 'Patterns', pp. 150-3, 173.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-3, 173.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Personalities in paintings

Art for Maris was highly emotional in its introspective focus.¹⁸ Although less autobiographical, Millet's painting nevertheless shows an expressive use of colour similar to that of Romantic artists.¹⁹ The pasty colours of the bodies, highlighted with flickers of burning orange, stress the lovers' wretched state.²⁰ Interestingly, while Maris found self-reflection in fantastical scenes, he saw the fullest expression of Millet's personality in his Realist paintings such as *The Sower*.²¹ Perhaps this is one reason why Millet himself found Realism so appealing in the long-run.



Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1847-8. Oil on canvas, 95.3 x 61.3 cm. NMW A 2474

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 152-3.

¹⁹ Collier, 'Newspaper', p. 164.

²⁰ Clark, *Absolute Bourgeois*, pp. 74-5.

²¹ Braakhuis and van der Vliet, 'Patterns', pp. 152-3, 174.

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