

## For Sale in London, Paris and Babylon: Edwin Long's *The Babylonian Marriage Market*

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Those crowded around the painting jostled each other for a better look; the critics were unanimously enthusiastic and laudatory: there was no doubt that Edwin Longsden Long's large historical painting, *The Babylonian Marriage Market* was the 'sensation picture' at the Royal Academy summer exhibition of 1875. But, by 1875, 'sensation' was a very tired word: Victorians knew so well the thrills of the 'sensation fiction' of the 1860s by writers such as Wilkie Collins, Mrs Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. The 'penny dreadful' newspapers were crammed with sensational railway accidents, murders, divorces, violence and scandal. The *St. James' Gazette* reported that, 'the sensation of a London season was the appearance of a new ballerina', and each year brought a new ballerina, or book., composer, writer or divorcee who was duly designated the sensation of the season. By 1875 Victorian Britons had felt so many and such varied sensations that a certain numbness may have set in. Nevertheless, the crowd which gathered around Long's painting, and saw itself reflected in the ancient crowd depicted there, were experiencing and understanding sensation in a fresh and exciting way: they were evidently 'feeling' something other than the trodden toes and elbowings of an Academy crowd.

Edwin Longsden Long took two years to complete *The Babylonian Marriage Market*. When young, he had been rejected as a student from the Royal Academy schools, and as he got older had repeatedly failed to be entered into the hallowed club of 'Associates of the Royal Academy', although he had exhibited there since 1855. Now, in his mid-forties, this painting turned his career around. It was enormously popular, ecstatically praised, rumoured to have been commissioned for one of the highest prices ever paid to a living artist, and was the key to his gaining the rank of Associate of the Royal Academy the following year. A number of factors contributed to the fact that Long's 'sensation picture' touched a nerve for those who came to see it. William Michael Rossetti gave a contemporary's assessment of what those factors were in his article in the *Academy* of May 1875: 'richness and archaeology, scenic drama and amusement, much beauty and some grotesque by-play, antique fact and modern innuendo'. An approach to the painting today might see less of the 'amusement' in the scene depicted, but as John Christian has remarked, many critics of the time thought the portrayal of the ancient marriage market 'singularly amusing'. Certainly however, a closer investigation of the painting's success can be provided by considering a few of Rossetti's criteria: the importance of archaeological excavation to the painting's approach and appeal; the 'scenic drama' of the women who are staged and displayed, and the mixture of 'antique fact and modern innuendo', which refers to some acknowledgement by Victorian viewers that their society promoted its own marriage market. Indeed, most Victorian viewers would have admitted, however ruefully or jocosely, that the Royal Academy exhibition opening at which they were viewing *The Babylonian Marriage Market*, heralded in the season of the British 'marriage market': the London 'season' was a period of social gathering in which many matches were brokered.

Long took his subject from the first book of the *Histories* of Herodotus, and the Royal Academy catalogue of the exhibition quoted from George C. Swayne's 1870 book on the fifth century B.C. Greek historian, explaining the custom of the Babylonian marriage market. Herodotus had described how every year the girls of marriageable age were put up for auction, in the order of most attractive to least. Swayne gives his account of Herodotus:

The greatest beauty was put up first, and knocked down to the highest bidder; then the next in order of comeliness – and so on to the damsel who was equidistant between beauty and plainness, who was given away gratis. Then the least plain was put up, and knocked down to the gallant who would marry her for the smallest consideration, - and so on until even the plainest was got rid of to some cynical worthy who decidedly preferred lucre to looks... The Babylonian marriage market might perhaps be advantageously adopted in some modern countries where marriage is still made a commercial matter. It at least possesses the merit of honesty and openness, and tends to a fair distribution of the gifts of fortune.

The passage gives ample evidence of the jocular tone which characterized the contemporary response to the depiction of the marriage market in Long's painting. Swayne winks and nudges at his reader about those 'modern countries' which might benefit from the system, but with a couple of important exceptions, critics kept silent over the possibility of a comparison between practices in Babylon and London.

It was the writer and diplomat Austen Henry Layard who was largely responsible for the fever of interest in ancient Assyria and Babylon. In 1849 he returned to England after several years of wandering and archaeological excavation. His excavations at Kuyunjik and Nimrud were the focus of his book, *Nimrud and Its Remains*, which, as Henrietta McCall of the British Museum writes, was 'probably the only archaeological work to become an instant bestseller. It was the publishing sensation of the year...'. In 1849 Layard set out for a second expedition, to further his investigations into the ruins of Babylon and the mounds of southern Mesopotamia. Irving Finkel, also of the British Museum, writes, that in 'selecting what usually proved to be the most fertile parts of the *tells* (mounds) which covered the ancient capitals, they came upon the massive architecture of palaces and temples'. Back in England there was huge excitement over Layard's work, kept very much alive by his despatching to London 'many cases of antiquities to the Trustees of the British Museum in London', the foundation of the museum's splendid collection of Assyrian and Babylonian artefacts (Finkel). Crowds flocked to the Museum to see the massive sculptures, delicate friezes and stelae. The excitement over the sheer scale of some of these artefacts, and the feat of bringing them successfully from the Near East is conveyed in an illustration from the *Illustrated London News* (28 February 1852) which depicts the huge sculpture of a winged bull being trundled up the steps and through the great classical columns of the British Museum's entrance. A Nineveh Court opened at the Crystal Palace, and panoramas, plays and ceramics were inspired by this fever of interest in Ancient Mesopotamia.

Long's painting was the focus of an exhibition in 2004-5 at Leighton House Museum in London, a collaboration between that museum, Royal Holloway and the British Museum. Irving Finkel and Henrietta McCall from the Department of the Near East at the British Museum brought together artefacts from the museum's collection which,

juxtaposed with the painting, revealed just how closely Long had studied the Assyrian artefacts there. Essays by Mary Cowling, Irving Finkel and Henrietta McCall for the exhibition catalogue (*The Price of Beauty*, 2004) from which I have taken much of the above information, offer fascinating insights into Long's engagement with ancient Assyria and Babylon, the actual excavations, and the Victorian fashion for all things Mesopotamian. His painting was remarkable, even in this period which emphasised the importance of historical accuracy, for his meticulous research and rendering of detail. Long also made considerable efforts to depict the varieties of racial and cultural 'types' (as they would have been thought of in this period) from that part of the world. He had travelled widely in Africa and Spain, and travelled to Egypt and Syria in 1874 in the middle of his work on *The Babylonian Marriage Market*, painting and sketching numerous studies from life of the men and women he observed there.

'Mesopotamian fever' was the latest craze for the ancient past of many that had influenced fashion, architecture and literature since the late eighteenth century. Henrietta McCall writes that 'the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been characterized by archaeological rediscovery, from the classical ruins of Greece to Napoleon's scholarly record of the monumental sites of Egypt, with minor excursions into Etruscan revival and the glories of ancient Pompeii.' Excavations at Pompeii had inspired stage design and costume, as well as Wedgwood pottery, and the so-called 'toga histories' of the novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton, especially his best-seller, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Victorians seemed to want to recreate, in the spirit of historical accuracy, how people lived in the distant past – their everyday activities as well as their important rituals, festivals or battles. The Great Exhibition of 1851 revealed how the British at mid-century believed in and relied upon their ability to record, categorize and understand different cultures and peoples from across the empire, based in this case upon a display of their material culture, their products of manufacture. Under one glass roof, a giant's display cabinet of specimens and curiosities, the products of numerous nations and cultures were exhibited. This confident project of categorization and assessment is similar to that which was driven by the Victorian need to rediscover and recreate the ancient past. As L.P. Hartley has so famously written, 'the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there'; the nineteenth-century preoccupation with the customs and artefacts of the ancient past, as with those of the tribes and peoples of their own century, was founded upon a fascination with difference, with the alien, combined with a compelling need to categorize, and therefore make that difference more knowable and less threatening. It is no coincidence that the same glass roof which displayed the modern marvels of the Great Exhibition in 1851, also covered the 'ancient' spectacle of the Nineveh Court three years later, when the Crystal Palace was moved to Sydenham.

The general consensus about most of these alien products and customs, whether of the past or of a foreign country, was that they were interestingly uncivilized, sometimes abhorrent, and certainly unBritish. But this attitude of superiority was very occasionally punctured by a note of cultural comparison, especially in the nineteenth-century novel. The Hindu ritual of sati, or the immolation of the widow upon her husband's funeral pyre, was a favourite topic in the periodical press, and almost always reviled as 'barbarous'. But many nineteenth-century novelists, such as Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte and Trollope, began to compare sati to the fate of the English widow in her heavy mourning, or even to the English bride who married

against her will, 'immolated' upon the altar of title or wealth. Closer to the subject of Long's painting, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* resists Mr. Rochester's lavish expenditure on dresses for his future bride by furiously informing him that she will not be one of a 'seraglio': 'if you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay; and lay out in extensive slave purchases some of that spare cash...'

While such cultural comparisons occur frequently in the writings of some of the most popular and respected Victorian novelists, critics writing of *The Babylonian Marriage Market* remained taciturn about any comparison with the modern English marriage market. William Rossetti referred quietly to the painting's 'modern innuendo', but most critics praised the painting's historical accuracy, technical triumph, and its 'tact' in dealing with a rather tricky subject. They avoided, or perhaps did not see, any comparison with English rituals.

Two critics who did make a blatantly direct comparison between the ancient Babylonian custom and that of the London 'season' hailed from rather opposite sides of the Victorian cultural and intellectual spectrum: the very serious Mr. John Ruskin, and the acerbic, but not very serious, Mr Punch. Each in his way was daringly unafraid to puncture the (glass) bubble of British self-satisfaction and superiority which had been symbolized by the Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace.

Ruskin had much praise for Long's painting: it was 'good throughout and unobtrusively powerful' he wrote in his *Academy Notes* for 1875. He thought it 'a painting of great merit, and well deserving purchase by the Anthropological Society'. But Ruskin was not, by this suggestion, simply remarking upon the 'Oriental' detail, and the 'varieties of characters in the heads' displayed in the different Babylonian 'types'. He wrote later in the essay of the anthropological merits of the work: 'As a piece of anthropology, it is the natural and very wonderful product of a century occupied in carnal and mechanical science... a specific piece of the natural history of our own century.' This 'carnal and mechanical science' is more than the 'science' of categorizing racial types and personalities by their physical attributes (standard practice in the early days of the Anthropological Society); it is also the carnal science of finding suitably wealthy marriage partners in the English marriage market. Ruskin made this absolutely clear later in his essay on Long's painting: 'as the most beautiful and marvellous maidens were announced for literal sale by auction in Assyria, are not also the souls of our most beautiful and marvellous maidens announced annually for sale by auction in Paris and London, in a spiritual manner, for the spiritual advantage of a position in society?'. The narrator of Anthony Trollope's novel, *Framley Parsonage* (1861) confides to the reader: 'That girls should not marry for money we are all agreed. A lady who can sell herself for a title or an estate, for an income or a set of family diamonds... makes hardly more of herself than the poor wretch of her own sex who earns her bread in the lowest state of degradation.' The links made here (and in Ruskin's comments on the painting) between being 'sold' in the marriage market, ancient or modern, or sold on the street as a prostitute, were for the most part too indelicate and difficult to address directly.

This was hardly the case for Mr. Punch, who revelled in indelicacy. *Punch* magazine produced each year a 'Mr Punch's Pocket Book', a yearly diary for *Punch* readers. The diary always included a fold-out coloured frontispiece of some comic scene, and the one chosen for 1876 was a parody of the previous year's 'sensation picture'.

Long's painting at the hands of Mr Punch becomes 'The Modern Babylonian Marriage Market', and depicts an English scene in which the Assyrian frieze of lions and trees which forms the backdrop of Long's painting becomes a huge window looking out onto the horses and their riders on 'The Row'. This is Rotten Row in Hyde Park, where ladies and gentleman paraded in carriages and on horseback during the Season, partly to see and be seen by society, and hopefully by potential marriage partners. While Long was praised by the *Saturday Review* of 1875 for the 'refined delicacy' with which he had managed 'a somewhat difficult and doubtful subject', Mr Punch threw tact and delicacy to the winds. As in Long's painting, the most beautiful maiden in Mr Punch's has her back turned to the viewers of the painting. She is being unveiled, or in this case disrobed, by a dumpy old lady in deep mourning. (**To see the *Punch* version, courtesy of the Libraries and Arts Services of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, click here**). The old lady, who is the girl's mother, advises her to bend over towards her bidders to expose more cleavage: 'Bend your figure a little more dear', the cartoon's speech bubble reads, as Mr Punch in the guise of the auctioneer, knocks down 'this superb creature' to the highest bidder, a bewhiskered and very elderly lord. The fat old lady in mourning who is displaying her daughter's charms bears a striking resemblance to *Punch* cartoon images of Queen Victoria. By 1875 Victoria had brokered marriages for several of her children to the royal lines of Prussia, Denmark, Schleswig-Holstein, Hesse-Darmstadt, and, the year before, to the only daughter of Czar Alexander II. *Punch* could hardly be expected to refrain from parodying that great and anxious Victorian mother and match-maker.

Mothers, generally, were seen as the main force behind the marriage market. An article in *The Ladies' Treasury* (1 February 1868) throws mock sympathy at the Victorian mother:

The angels themselves might regard the spectacle of one who is a good woman at bottom (though over-fertile, perhaps), stuck up like a scarecrow against the wall of a crowded ball-room from ten p.m. till four a.m., with compassionate pity. She sits there like a Turkey merchant with her merchandise about her.

The 1851 census had revealed that women outnumbered men in Britain. This disparity was due largely to factors such as war, work in India, and emigration to the colonies. The statistics were worried over, especially in the periodical press, right through the nineteenth century. One etiquette book sighed that brides were 'two-a-penny', and, as Laura Gardner points out, an article in *The Ladies' Treasury* declared that 'enough men for all the women there certainly are not; and a great anxiety naturally prevails in the maternal bosoms to give their daughters as good a chance as their neighbours.'

This state of affairs, in which young girls were suspected of, or expected to, look out for a marriage partner, was commented upon by the Victorian novelist and journalist Margaret Oliphant in her review of *The Babylonian Marriage Market*:

if the spectator gazes around him after he has looked at the picture, he will see another picture scarcely less attractive in the curious glances of the living faces that crowd about. We should not wonder if the young women, flower of English youth, who gather around with a curiosity not unmixed with personal

feelings, found something like a revelation in the picture. One sees them glance at each other with a half smile, half blush, sometimes with subdued awe or indignation. 'Is that how they think of us, these men, though they dare not look it?' the girls ask themselves. The artist may congratulate himself that he has taught something to one or two, as well as gratified a great many, by his picture.

Oliphant has noticed that the painting is tantalizing in its mirroring effects. The girl in the left foreground holds up a mirror to view herself before she ascends the selling platform, but really the whole painting acts as a mirror, reflecting the viewer back to him or herself. As viewers of the painting, our gaze is drawn at first to the back of the woman on display, as she draws away her veil for the Babylonian men, and our own curious gaze is reflected in that of those men. The crowd which views the painting is reflected in the crowd bidding for the woman in the painting, and both crowds are focussed on the central woman onstage.

When Margaret Oliphant turns from Long's painting to the 'living faces that crowd about it', she sees young women responding to it with glances, 'half smiles' and 'half blushes'. Their response is visceral; it is felt and communicated through the body to those who are crowded close to them. *The Babylonian Marriage Market* was the sensation picture of 1875, and part of Long's success lay in the fact that he was able to refresh this clichéd and tired phrase by taking it back to an earlier and original meaning; that is, 'sensation' as a thrill felt through the senses and communicable to those around. Dickens, for example, wrote in *Pickwick Papers* that, 'a slight sensation one individual body to another. But the seminal moment of 'sensation' in the Victorian period occurs in Wilkie Collins's sensation novel of 1860, *The Woman in White*. Early in the novel, a young man walks across Hampstead Heath towards London in the early hours of the morning, deep in his own meandering thoughts. They are interrupted: 'in one moment, every drop of my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me'. The thrill of this touch is communicated from the woman's hand as she touches the man, and from him to the pulse of every reader of Collins's novel. Although Long's painting does not depict such an arresting and mysterious moment, it nevertheless communicated a nervous energy which was obviously felt by the crowd that Oliphant observes. The bodies of the girls in the painting are all touching, forming an unbroken line along which passes the sensation of backstage nerves, and in some cases fear and anxiety; they will soon be on display. Three girls in the line stare directly out at the viewer: the gaze of one is imploring; another, knowing, and another, defiant, but all communicate to the viewer a consciousness of how he or she may be implicated in the painting's scene. The viewer is returning the gaze, and considering the theme and plan of the painting, that gaze cannot help but be voyeuristic. Such a consciousness, and the sexual and nervous tension it could invoke, underlined the sensations produced by this sensation picture. If we are to believe Margaret Oliphant's observations at the time, these sensations were passed from one body to another among the men and women who crowded close together at the 1875 Academy show, as they entered the marriage market of another London season.

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