

*Friendship and Loss in the Victorian Portrait:  
May Sartoris by Frederic Leighton* By Malcolm  
Warner

New Haven; London; Fort Worth: Yale University Press and the  
Kimbell Art Museum, 2009. (ISBN: 978-0-300-12135-3). 80pp.

Victoria Helen Irvine (University of Glasgow)

The centenary of the eminent Victorian artist Frederic Leighton was celebrated in 1996 and in the time that has passed since only two significant publications dedicated to Leighton and his oeuvre have been produced. Thus Malcolm Warner's book, *Friendship and Loss in the Victorian Portrait: May Sartoris by Frederic Leighton*, is a welcome addition to Leighton scholarship. Warner focuses on Leighton's earlier artistic career and friendships, an area of Leighton scholarship that has been relatively neglected. Additionally the choice to examine a case study of one of Leighton's child models Mary (May) Sartoris (albeit through bourgeois connections) is a positive step, particularly as Leighton's use of models has only been briefly addressed, primarily by Alison Smith in her essay 'Nature Transformed: Leighton, the Nude and the Model' in *Frederic Leighton: antiquity, Renaissance, modernity* (1999), edited by Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn. As current Deputy Director of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and having previously published on Victorian art, Warner wrote this volume as part of the Kimbell Masterpiece Series. The aim of providing new research on significant works in the collection, combined with its short length, makes this volume accessible to the general public and specialists.

Warner adopts a largely biographical approach in examining the friendship between Leighton and his friend, the retired opera

singer Adelaide Sartoris and her family. He traces the evolution of the portrait by Leighton, *May Sartoris* (c.1860) – May being Adelaide’s daughter – and suggests that the finished portrait is reflective of Adelaide’s personal circumstances; that the portrait fits into the wider canon of British child portraiture and Victorian symbolism of the period. Much of the book is devoted to the personal history of Adelaide and her descendants, so it feels appropriate that the volume opens with the Sartoris family tree. Designed with the wider art historical readership in mind, and limited in length for this reason, the biographical details are not supplemented with recent scholarship or theoretical framework. Citing the standard contemporary Leighton sources (like Mrs Russell Barrington), Warner acknowledges his debt to heavyweight scholars such as Leighton biographers, Leonée and Richard Ormond and fashion historian, Aileen Ribeiro. Additionally the author presents new research regarding the Sartoris family history, offering excerpts of little-known literature by Adelaide Sartoris (p. 44) and her sister, Frances Anne (Fanny) Kemble (p. 37), and high quality colour illustrations accompany the text.

The portrait of *May Sartoris*, although the subject of this volume, only constitutes one chapter and the other three respectively trace the interwoven lives of the Sartoris family and Leighton, and the acquisition of the portrait by Kay Kimbell for the gallery. Chapter one, ‘Adelaide and Fay’, recounts the brief biographies of Leighton and Adelaide, peppered with anecdotal quotes. Warner largely focuses on their shared artistic social circle by briefly touching on Aestheticism (p. 9), and choosing to incorporate drawings and paintings of the Sartoris family. By highlighting less well-known aspects of Leighton’s oeuvre and discussing their art historical precedent (p. 18), Warner demonstrates the intimate terms in which

they were all acquainted.

By referring to Adelaide's sense of dissatisfaction in leaving the stage and marrying "steady Edward" Sartoris (p. 2), Warner suggests in chapter two, 'An English Portrait', that the painting was shaped by "Adelaide and the sense of loss that pervaded her outlook on life" (p. 39). Decidedly canonised by Warner within the tradition of English fancy portraiture popularised by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Lawrence (p. 29), larger philosophical and aesthetic issues are also touched upon but remain undeveloped within the limited scope of this volume. For example, Warner mentions John Everett Millais *Autumn Leaves* (1855-56), but is unable to move beyond references to 'youth and innocence' (p. 34) which would have developed deeper correlations between Leighton's and Millais' symbolism.

The next chapter, 'Later Lives', focuses on the fate of Adelaide, Leighton and the rest of the Sartoris family. Warner again slips into biographical mode as he parallels Leighton's rise in the art world with Adelaide's death and May's successful marriage. The reference to Leighton's type of Aestheticism seems overly simplistic and generalised, given the complexity of the movement, as Warner states that:

He offered the people of industrial Britain an escape to ancient Greece as a world of Mediterranean beauty, health, abundance, and sunshine. (p. 54).

Again less well-known works of Leighton belonging in private collections (likely the Sartoris family) are reproduced in full colour, and it is satisfying for the reader to end the chapter with a reference to the lives of Adelaide's grandchildren.

Appropriately, the concluding chapter traces the provenance of *May Sartoris*. Most clearly aimed at the Kimbell museum-goer, here Warner delves into the Kimbell Archives and discusses the

foundation of the Kimbell Art Museum, and the collecting patterns of Kay Kimbell and his wife which were predominantly British 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century portraiture. Kimbell longed for a 'Pinkie' to add to his collection (referring to *Sarah Goodin Barrett Moulton: "Pinkie"* (1794) by Thomas Lawrence) and Warner suggests that *May Sartoris* fulfilled the brief, simultaneously placing the painting again in the canon of great English portraiture, and also assuming that this elevation was both Leighton and Kimbell's wish.

Throughout, Warner successfully presents a brief history of the Sartoris family. Although at times the thesis is uneven and not entirely successful in devoting more time to the Sartoris' than Leighton or criticism of his art. But the inclusion of lesser known Leightons', and the particular focus on portraiture, is a welcome addition to international Victorian art historical scholarship which is lacking on both fronts. Perhaps the volume would have benefited from a wider context for Leighton's child friendships by referencing different social groups (for example, Leighton's child friends Connie Gilchrist or Dorothy Dene came from lower class backgrounds), and thus would have allowed Warner to better explore his notion of Victorian child sentimentality. Ultimately, reference to secondary sources would better support Malcolm Warner's arguments, but as the volume is limited in length (and thus scope), it provides an important taster into the world of Victorian art and friendships.

### **Bibliography:**

- Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (editors). 1999. *Frederic Leighton: antiquity, Renaissance, modernity*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Mrs Russell Barrington. 1906. *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton* (2 v.), London: George Allen.

*The Kelvingrove Review*

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/thekelvingroverevuew/>