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‘Sick-sad dreams’: Burne-Jones and Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism

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I remember his telling me some years ago that art was to him an enchanted world, to which Rossetti had given him the key, and in which he had lived ever since. And this is, I think only a slightly exaggerated expression of his point of view. He does rather pride himself on living apart, in this enchanted country, and on refusing to consider himself as belonging to England and the nineteenth century.

(Harry Quilter)¹

Between 1856 and 1858 several projects represented new elements of Pre-Raphaelitism for wider and more diverse audiences. In this highly productive period the Oxford Union murals and William Morris’s volume of poetry *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858) were key works. A shared feature of these projects was their lack of concern for the representation of contemporary life. They were, essentially, representations or evocations of the past, chiefly the Middle Ages or the obscure, mythological time of Arthur and his knights. The illustrated volume of Tennyson published by Moxon in 1857, for which the most controversial illustrations were medievalist in tendency, might also be added to this list of projects. The shift towards a more direct, less diluted medievalism from the more diverse subject matter of earlier Pre-Raphaelite art might usefully be seen as an extension of earlier medieval-inspired enterprises such as the Gothic Revival in architecture or the Houses of Parliament murals in the visual arts, both of which revived the practices of large-scale public works. However, this second wave of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism might be more correctly viewed as a departure from, rather than an extension of, a cultural agenda in which medieval art, architecture and literature were seen as benign and consolatory.

The Moxon Tennyson marks the beginnings of what might be regarded as an intervention in both literature and its publication. The Pre-Raphaelites’ illustrations, with their awkward relationship with the text, their claims upon the reader’s attention, and their presentation of a pictorial experience altogether more jarring than the poetry, were factors both puzzling and disruptive. Morris’s volume of poems, though not illustrated, bore the imprint of Pre-Raphaelite visual culture and promised a literary experience as challenging or unorthodox

¹ Harry Quilter, *Preferences in Art, Life, and Literature* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892), p. 76.

as the movement in painting. Any study of Pre-Raphaelitism must take into account the new, if sometimes uneasy, relationship between literature and visual art, and also, as regards the illustration of books and the pictorial decoration of furniture, walls, and fabrics, the new relationship between design and the other arts. In the book as object, the designed harmony between the literary and the visual was to reach its apogee in the volumes produced by Morris's Kelmscott Press in the last decade of the century.²

Although soon to fade, the Oxford Union murals became for a short time the key example of how contemporary painters might involve themselves in decorative schemes. George Edmund Street held them up as examples for architects and designers in a paper read to the Ecclesiological Society in June 1858. In 'On the Future of Art in England' Street strove to make links between the revivalist Gothic architecture he practised and the art of the Pre-Raphaelites, reflecting on a wider revival of art in Europe. He gave some context in the eighteenth-century revival of interest in medieval legend and literature, and particularly in Arthurian legend, 'the great central romance of the Middle Ages', citing Robert Southey's edition of 'La Morte d'Arthure' of 1817 and the work of the Society of Antiquaries, especially John Carter's writings on medieval antiquities. He also noted the role of Walter Scott in aiding the revival. It was the very recent work of the Pre-Raphaelites, however, that was singled out. Their example in fighting against eclecticism and classicism is described as a 'revolution':

The significance of this state of things for us lies in the fact that the Pre-Raphaelite movement is identical with our own: and that the success of the one aids immensely therefore in the success of the other. Nor, indeed, could our revival have been in any degree complete unless it had borne fruit in every branch of art.³

Critical reviews and newspaper articles reflected the greater public presence of the Pre-Raphaelites and the transmission of their work into forms other than easel painting. For example, *The Times* noted, in a brief news item, that the new debating room at Oxford University was 'rapidly approaching completion', adding that the structure was

from designs of Mr. Woodward, architect of the new Museum [. . .] and will, when the decorations are finished, be a masterpiece of art. Some of the first artists of the pre-Raphaelite school are and have been for some time past engaged in adorning its walls with paintings on subjects from the cycle of Arthurean [*sic*] romance.⁴

The report listed the subjects and noted the artists involved, among them Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, who were making their public debut.

² For a discussion of the interrelation of Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry see Elizabeth Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

³ George Edmund Street, 'On the Future of Art in England', *Ecclesiologist*, 19 (August 1858), 232–40.

⁴ [Anon.] 'The New Debating Room at Oxford', *The Times*, 6 January 1858, p. 7.

The report continued: 'The paintings, owing to the beauty and variety of the colouring, have a most imposing effect.' Rossetti more or less abandoned the project in the months that followed, but not before Coventry Patmore had written in praise of its qualities. He found that the colouring was so brilliant as to make the walls look like the margin of a highly illuminated manuscript. The eye, even when not directed to any of the pictures, is thus pleased with a voluptuous radiance of variegated tints [. . .] if closely looked into, there is scarcely a square inch of all those hundred square feet of colour which has not a half-dozen different tints in it.⁵

While an overview of the critical reception of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth recalling the hostile reviews they received of their first exhibitions at the turn of the 1850s, and throughout much of the rest of the decade. Indeed, these initial opinions defined Pre-Raphaelitism for the public and were to increase, rather than decrease, in vehemence for the remainder of the century. Often these critical opinions are marked by the use of language invoking the influence of early Italian painting and illuminated manuscripts. Paintings by Pre-Raphaelite artists were compared to manuscripts or the works of 'primitive' artists, just as Pre-Raphaelite poetry was compared to Chaucerian or other medieval works. Often, references to the visual arts and literature are confused, as, for instance, in a criticism in the *Quarterly Review* of the Pre-Raphaelite works shown at the 1857 Art Treasures in Manchester. The reference to Chaucer is particularly suggestive:

Whilst endeavouring to labour in the spirit of the old masters, the Pre-Raphaelites appear to have fallen into the grave error of believing that the correct drawing of the human frame is not essential, because it is not to be found in the works of the painters of the fourteenth century. Indeed they seem to think, and would lead the public to think, that its absence forms one of the claims of the old masters to our admiration, as if the fame of Chaucer was to be attributed to the quaintness of his spelling. It is a proof of the genius of those great men, that we almost forget their technical defects, arising from imperfect knowledge, in our sympathy for their earnest endeavours to embody the true and beautiful. When technical defects are the result of affectation or mere carelessness, they are unpardonable.⁶

However, it is the visual qualities of Pre-Raphaelite illustrations, paintings, and frescoes that make them significant. They are not treatises on illuminated manuscripts or Christian art or the Italian Primitives; rather, they are pictorial interventions in the public culture of the time. In that sense these manifestations of Pre-Raphaelitism have a physical presence similar to that of buildings, and were tainted with much of the same kind of controversy that surrounds the

⁵ Coventry Patmore, 'Walls and Wall Painting at Oxford', *Saturday Review*, 4, 26 December 1857, pp. 583–84.

⁶ [Anon.,] 'Review of the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition & related literature', *Quarterly Review*, 102 (July 1857), pp. 165–204 (p. 200).

unveiling of a new building. The Oxford Union murals created a link between painterly and architectural pursuits, while Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* formed another between the visual arts and literature. The *Literary Gazette* made a similar connection in its review of Morris's poems. Though anonymous, this was the work of Richard Garnett, who had reviewed the Moxon Tennyson the year before. It is something of an 'insider' account, remarkable for referring to a history of Morris's links with Rossetti — starting with the Oxford murals — and locating Rossetti's influence in the illustrations to the Moxon Tennyson and the literary contents of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, which Morris founded in 1856.

It might not be easy to find a more striking example of the indestructibility of anything truly beautiful, than the literary resurrection of King Arthur and his Knights, after so many centuries' entombment in the Avalon of forgetfulness. [. . .] The Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters have made the Arthurian cyclus their own, by a treatment no less strange and original than that which has already thrown such novel light on the conceptions of Shakespeare and the scenery of Palestine. Not long since our columns contained a notice of certain fresco illustrations of Arthurian romance attempted at Oxford by painters of this school, who, being for the most part utterly unknown to fame, may be supposed to have been invented on purpose. One of these gentlemen has now enabled us to form some opinion of his qualifications for his task by the publication of the book before us; and we do not hesitate to pronounce, that if he do but wield the brush to half as much purpose as the pen, his must be pictures well worth a long pilgrimage to see.⁷

Garnett also makes a significant, though brief, critique of the shift from a Tennysonian Arthur to a distinctively Pre-Raphaelite one. Reflecting on the difference between the two poets, Tennyson and Morris, he refers to the Moxon Tennyson, finding that both Morris's poems and the Moxon illustrations have an originality that amounts to eccentricity:

Mr. Morris's poems bear exactly the same relation to Tennyson's as Rossetti's illustrations of the laureate to the latter's own conceptions. We observed in noticing these designs that they illustrated anything in the world rather than Tennyson, and have certainly seen no reason to change our opinion. The more we view them, the more penetrated we become with their wonderful beauty [. . .] but also the more impressed with their utter incompatibility with their text.⁸

'The very young, the very morbid, and the very mediaevally minded'

Many of the critical reviews of *The Defence of Guenevere* detected a problem in Morris's poetic enterprise: a confusion over which art is being undertaken — painting or poetry. There was a problem of style too: is the poetry written in the style of a medieval writer, as a pastiche, or in a modern 'voice'? As we shall see,

⁷ [Richard Garnett,] 'The Defence of Guenevere, and other Poems by William Morris', *Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Science, and Art*, 6 March 1858, pp. 226–27 (p. 226).

⁸ 'The Defence of Guenevere', p. 226.

these criticisms have resonances with those of Burne-Jones's paintings. The *Saturday Review* contributor, for example, selected Morris's work from the mass of little volumes produced annually out of the current 'volcano' of poetic production 'partly because he represents [. . .] in one department of art, what has made a very substantial revolution in another of its kingdoms'.⁹ The review continues by presuming a Pre-Raphaelite practice, always doubtful at best but here reduced to an absurdity, of excessive attention to detail at the expense of the overall composition. Further, the poetry is compared to the pictorial art of illumination and then, as a kind of *coup de grâce*, to Millais's much criticized *A Dream of the Past: Sir Isumbras at the Ford*, first shown at the Royal Academy in 1857.

Art has every reason to be grateful to those painters and poets who told us that patient accuracy in details, and a conscientious truthfulness in rendering the facts of the world either of matter or of mind, were the first duties of the artist, whether in letters or on canvas. But when painters think it their duty to work through a microscope, and try to paint every stain on every leaf, as well as every leaf on every tree, they not only forget what art is, but are ignorant of what artistic imitation is. This extravagance is, we think, what Mr. Morris delights in. He works in the patient spirit of the illuminators, but then he is grotesque as well as minute and patient. All his thoughts and figures are represented on a solid plane; he has no notion of distance, or aerial perspective, or gradation of tints; or rather, of malice prepense, he neglects these things. He has abundance of vivid, positive colour, sharp outline, and great richness of word diaper, with a certain stiff, antique, cumbrous embroidery of diction; but it is all cold, artificial, and angular. It is in words, just what Sir Isumbras on the plum-coloured horse was two years ago.¹⁰

References to manuscript illumination and design in these reviews are endemic. The *Saturday Review* implies such an origin for Morris's poems, noting that each of them is as 'hard to decipher as though it were written in black letter. It is crabbed, and involved, and stiff, and broken-backed in metre, but bright, sparkling, distinct, and pictorial in effect.'¹¹ Such comments have their origin in the recent dissemination of literature on medieval illumination and the wider social history of the Middle Ages. By the 1840s several important publications reflected a popular interest in antiquarianism, illustrating the beauties of illuminated manuscripts through the publication of translations of writers such as Dante and Guillaume de Lorris, as well as authoritative texts on medieval literature and history, many of them illustrated with engravings after illuminated manuscripts and some reproduced in colour for the first time. These were to have a strong impact on the Pre-Raphaelites and other painters interested in accurate historical detail. Antiquarians and historians as well as artists were to turn to these illustrations for details of costume, architecture, and furniture and for recorded nuances of social mores and manners. Their more general

⁹ [Anon.,] 'Morris's Defence of Guenevere', *Saturday Review*, 6, 20 November 1858, pp. 506–07 (p. 506).

¹⁰ 'Morris's Defence of Guenevere', p. 507.

¹¹ 'Morris's Defence of Guenevere', p. 507.

importance for readers was assessed in a long overview of illustrated books in the *Quarterly Review* of June 1844, which outlined the history of the revival of interest in medieval books and their illustrations and the uses to which authors had put them. Some of the works reviewed were comparatively recent publications, such as Shaw's *Dresses and Decorations of the Middle Ages* (1842–43) and the four-volume *Paléographie universelle*, an illustrated collection of historical documents, with facsimile woodcuts, maps, and manuscripts, published in Paris in 1842–43. Others were less recent but of importance for the survey, for example the *Monuments des arts du dessin chez les peuples anciens que modernes* (Paris, 1829). The reviewer reflected upon the importance of these precedents for works such as Joseph Strutt's *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (1801). Strutt was described as 'the first who in this country used, to any extent, illuminations as a source whence to "illustrate" the manners and customs, the dresses and sports, of former ages'; his engravings, 'though always coarse, and often inaccurate, have supplied the small learning of many a self-styled antiquary'.¹²

Early nineteenth-century editions of the works of the French chroniclers Froissart and Monstrelet, translated by Thomas Johnes of Hafod and illustrated with engravings after illuminated manuscripts, were also praised. 'Mr. Johnes's books form an epoch in the history of illustration, as they first made apparent to the general reader the beauty to be discerned in manuscripts.'¹³ E. V. Utterson's *Arthur of Little Britain* (1814) followed Johnes in the use of illustrations derived from manuscripts, but such works continued to be in black and white until Shaw's *Illuminated Ornaments* (1833) used chromolithography to attempt to describe the visual sources in anything like their original splendour. The general argument of the review is that modern illustration has not superseded these examples. The reviewer asks a rhetorical question: 'Has any woodcutter excelled Albert Dürer? Have any "Illustrations" to Dante yet appeared which, save Flaxman's outlines, excel those by Botticelli or Baldini in the Florence Dante of 1481?'¹⁴ The work of Dürer's pupil Hans Schäufelein for Pfintzing's allegory *Tewrdanncths* (Nuremberg, 1517) is mentioned, as is the *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili*, one of the most sought after of early printed books, which both Rossetti and Morris possessed. The discussion is particularly relevant to a study of the Pre-Raphaelites because of their involvement in illustration projects such as the Moxon Tennyson, in which Dürer and other artists were

¹² [Anon.] 'Illustrated Books', *Quarterly Review* 74 (June 1844), pp. 167–99 (p. 176). For a discussion of the direct quotation of illuminated manuscripts by Pre-Raphaelites see Julian Treuherz, 'The Pre-Raphaelites and Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts', in *Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, ed. by Leslie Parris (London: Tate Gallery/Allen Lane, 1984), pp. 153–69. For a comprehensive overview and discussion of the range of illuminated manuscripts in facsimile in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as related issues, see Michaela Braesel, 'The Influence of Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts on the Pre-Raphaelites and the Early Poetry of William Morris', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 15.2 (2004), 41–54.

¹³ 'Illustrated Books', p. 188.

¹⁴ 'Illustrated Books', p. 188.

invoked. The Middle Ages presented here are attractive, demotic, and strangely (but perhaps deliberately, given the architectural revival's emphasis of medieval architecture) non-ecclesiological. Generally, this is an unexceptionable, even comforting version of medievalism. In criticism the medievalist references of contemporary painting are seen differently. Rather than pointing to a golden age, the Middle Ages in Burne-Jones's paintings were seen as dangerous or 'morbid'.

Mr. E. B. Jones, contemning real life and eschewing historic fact, still wanders — a Quixote from among his saner brother artists — in the regions of legend, dream, and fable — vide his 'Legend of St. Dorothea', his 'Chaucer's Dream', and two subjects from the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius. Of how easy it is to deal in romantic and poetic themes without revealing the faculty divine, Mr. Jones affords a notable instance, although we freely concede to him a measure of childlike, fantastic, colour-loving fancy which will pass for the true afflatus with the very young, the very morbid, and the very mediaevally minded; with esthetic [*sic*] gentlemen 'educated beyond their understanding'; even with artists and critics who value any sullied, far-off imitation of Venetian colour above nature and genuine fine-art; and with young ladies and curates of Ritualistic proclivities.¹⁵

There is a similar sense of disapproval in a review in *The Times* of an earlier, 1859 exhibition at the Dudley Gallery, London in 1869, indicating that it was neither Burne-Jones nor the Old Watercolour Society that were at fault but an entire direction of contemporary art and artists. The common link is Pre-Raphaelitism. Though looking for 'unhackneyed talent', the reviewer found that such figure drawings as there are belong most of them to the school which, for want of a better term, is often called 'Preraphaelite'; a more descriptive title would be 'Archaic', or 'Mediaeval'. It is a school that affects the past in subject, sentiment, and style, down to such minor matters as labelling and framing; its forms are stiff and angular, its colour tending to the funereal or sickly; its ideal of loveliness seems ugliness to the uninitiated, and the last thing it suggests is relish of healthy life, outdoor nature, or cheerful sunlight.¹⁶

It is hard not to detect a wider disapproval of the decorative schemes of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co., as well as, if somewhat belatedly, the Oxford Union Murals in what follows:

It is the outcome in painting of the influences which breed ritualism in worship, what has been called *Mort d'Arthurism* [*sic*] in poetry, and the worship of Gothic run mad in architecture. It is dear to the taste which installs itself wherever it can in mediaevally devised houses, fitted up with medieval chairs and tables, presses and cupboards, wall-papers, and window hangings, all 'brand new and intensely old'; which feeds its fancy on old pictures and old poetry, its faith on old legend and ceremonial, and would fain, if it dared, dress itself in the garb of the 15th century.¹⁷

¹⁵ [Anon.,] 'Exhibition of the Society of Painters in Water-colours', *Illustrated London News*, 4 May 1867, p. 447.

¹⁶ [Anon.,] 'General Watercolour Exhibition: Dudley Gallery', *The Times*, 15 February 1869, p. 4.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 15 February 1869, p. 4.

The same exhibition was taken to task by the *Illustrated London News*. Listing works by Simeon Solomon, Robert Bateman, and Marie Spartali, all dealing with the subject of love, it observed: ‘Mr Swinburne, we suppose, prompts all this gush of love business’.¹⁸ It was Chaucer who initiated Burne-Jones’s interests in such subjects, and his own experiments in love allegories are often based on Chaucer’s dream poems, in particular those found in *The Legend of Good Women*. Kathryn Lynch has claimed that the title of Chaucer’s poem links it to hagiography, ‘making Chaucer’s collection a contribution to the religion of Love that was a popular fiction of courtly literature’.¹⁹ It was taken up again in the mid-nineteenth century by the most controversial of contemporary young artists.

Chaucer Reading/Chaucer Asleep

Ford Madox Brown’s painting *Chaucer Reading to the Court of Edward the Third* (begun in 1845, redesigned in 1847, exhibited in 1851)²⁰ celebrates not only the literature and language of England but also the nation of England, its Protestant culture, and its independence. The variety of costume, activity, and attitude represents the benign, comforting Middle Ages that prevailed in the popular imagination of the 1840s. The Chaucer depicted by Brown is a Protestant *avant la lettre*, and his place in medieval culture is a disruptive one; for Brown, his existence is a reminder of the independence of English culture from that of Continental Europe. Brown takes pains to show Chaucer in and of a burgeoning English culture represented by a wide range of vivid personalities seated in their very smartest dress in the full sunlight of an English summer’s afternoon. The inclusion of the figure of Froissart taking notes in the foreground indicates Brown’s interest in historical texts as sources for pictures, and his use of books by Shaw and other antiquarians on medieval social history.

A telling contrast with Brown can be found in the title page of Morris’s and Burne-Jones’s collaborative project, the Kelmscott *Chaucer* (1896), in which the poet is depicted reading alone in an enclosed garden. This highly stylized garden is an imitation of the *locus amoenus* or the *hortus conclusus* often depicted in illuminated manuscripts, in which the enclosed space is described by well-established graphic signs: the trellis, the climbing roses, the verges filled with flowers. Their contrasting approaches to Chaucer draw attention to a contradiction that lies at the heart of much Pre-Raphaelite art: whether it is derived from observation or from vision. Further, Brown uses manuscript illustrations for authenticity of

¹⁸ [Anon.,] ‘Fine Arts. General Exhibition of Watercolour Drawings’, *Illustrated London News*, 6 February 1869, p. 134–5 (p. 135).

¹⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Dream Visions and Other Poems*, ed. by Kathryn L. Lynch (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 121.

²⁰ Now in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

costume and accessory, Burne-Jones to recreate atmosphere. Whereas Brown identifies Chaucer and his poetry with nature, Burne-Jones identifies him with dream, vision, and allegory. This disparity stems from substantially different histories of the reception of Chaucer's works and, indeed, different receptions of the various works of Chaucer. Brown follows a line that we can trace back to Dryden, one that sees Chaucer as in all ways the follower of nature. Brown's depiction, with its intimations of Pre-Raphaelite 'truth-to-nature', makes a virtue of natural description as the basis of art while demonstrating his fascination with lived lives, with real people, which he advances in his own art. A parallel might be drawn between Brown's endeavour and that of Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. For Brown and for Burne-Jones, Chaucer is both an emblematic figure and an inspiration, but for quite different reasons.

Brown was painting at a time when the most reliable Chaucer text was that of Thomas Tyrwhitt, whose edition of *The Canterbury Tales* had been published in 1775. The Kelmscott *Chaucer* used W. W. Skeat's scholarly edition of the complete works, whose multi-volume publication cycle had started only two years before. The reputation of Skeat as an expert on Chaucer meant that the Kelmscott edition would be scholarly and contemporary as well as beautiful. Academics had attempted to assemble a reliable edition of Chaucer for about the past hundred years, and contemporary scholarship had yielded not only variorum readings and challenged authorship of specific texts but had restored the early dream-vision poems to their place in the canon. The Kelmscott edition included the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Parliament of Fowles*, as well as *The Romaunt of the Rose*, Chaucer's reworking and translation of the huge poem *Le Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.

The medieval and early Renaissance literary dream tradition includes several works that we might associate with Burne-Jones: the *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili* (1499), the *Roman de la Rose* (1230–c. 1275), the *Livre du cuer* of René d'Anjou (1457), as well as the Chaucer texts. An incident in Cicero's *The Dream of Scipio*, a work associated with several of these texts, was the subject of one of Raphael's most celebrated early paintings, *Allegory: The Knight's Dream* (c. 1504), which depicts the dream of Scipio, who is asked to choose between pleasure and duty. Acquired for the National Gallery in London in 1847, the work provides a possible source for several features of Burne-Jones's allegorical works, not least the preternatural calm of his landscapes, the allegorical female figures, and the sleeping male figure. The allegorical figures are projections from, or intrusions into, the knight's sleeping mind, images encountered in a dream, although — and perhaps this is their appeal for the painter — they are pictorialized and thus brought into a new life of colour, line, and form that convinces the viewer of their palpable reality. Raphael did not invent this motif of the male sleeping figure: it was already familiar in medieval art. One of the most famous of the

illuminated illustrations for René d'Anjou's *Livre du cueur* (fol. 15) anticipates the imagery of the knight as a prone figure in the landscape.

The dream-vision works purported to be accounts of dreams and the conversations and apparitions experienced in them. They were characteristic of the arts of the Middle Ages in their tendency to allegory and their treatment of themes of nature and love. While personal readings were invited, they were neither expected nor demanded. They often repeat, with slight variation, the allegorical encounters contained in works by other poets, for example Ovid. These classical sources were employed by early Renaissance artists such as Botticelli and Mantegna, whose paintings were the subject of new scholarship and connoisseurship between the 1850s and 1870s. The suspension of time that is a striking feature of these medieval literary works is at odds with a Victorian interest in the particularization of images in, for example, the historical reconstructions of Madox Brown. It is in accord, however, with the sense of the intellectual history of the dream allegories that are described and of the timelessness that underlies them. Burne-Jones's knowledge of the past does not lead to its reconstruction in paintings but to an atmospheric reimagining. Indeed, the place or time that he describes may not be historical, but an eternal present in which dramas of longing and desire are being enacted. This pictorial space was to be as controversial as it was successful, and Burne-Jones became both celebrated and vilified in almost equal measure. His use of mythology is often refracted through the lens of the Middle Ages, as viewed by Chaucer, in scholarly, embroidered versions of Ancient Greek or Roman stories. They are, certainly initially, more quaint than elegant. Caught between times that existed in the past and mythological times that never could have existed, these pictorial narratives locate the modern — the time of their making in the latter half of the nineteenth century — in their self-consciousness and impassivity.

These attitudes to pictorial style and the eschewing of overt narrative or specific time (particularly the modern period) reflect, and in some instances help formulate, the advanced literary and critical productions of the time. Poets such as Swinburne and critics such as Pater adopted Aestheticist attitudes to art that posited a new attitude to narrative and subject. Rossetti, too, as both poet and painter, attempted to set new limits on narrative in art. In his paintings he focused on the almost impassive faces of female subjects, which require the closest scrutiny to discern nuances of narrative within the setting of harmonies of colour and extraneous descriptions of accessories and fabrics. In several instances Rossetti, Swinburne, and Morris respond in their poetry to pictures, and, in turn, Burne-Jones, Solomon, and other painters in the extended Pre-Raphaelite circle reflect poetic themes of internality and longing in their works. These are works framed not as responses to the contemporary novel, then the most widely available and most discussed literary genre, but by new poetry and

attendant forms. In Pater the critical form approaches poetry in its attempt to describe the workings of the work of art on both the eye and the spirit.

The iconography of the dream-vision form may have suggested Burne-Jones's approach to the compositions made to illustrate Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* in drawing, watercolour, oil, and stained glass. 'Chaucer Asleep', the first panel in the sequence (see Figure 1), depicts the poet in a manner somewhere between the two versions of Chaucer reading to which I have previously referred. It is followed by a sequence of images starting with Amor leading Alcestis (see Figure 2) and then, in frame after frame, a troupe of noble, long-suffering, and

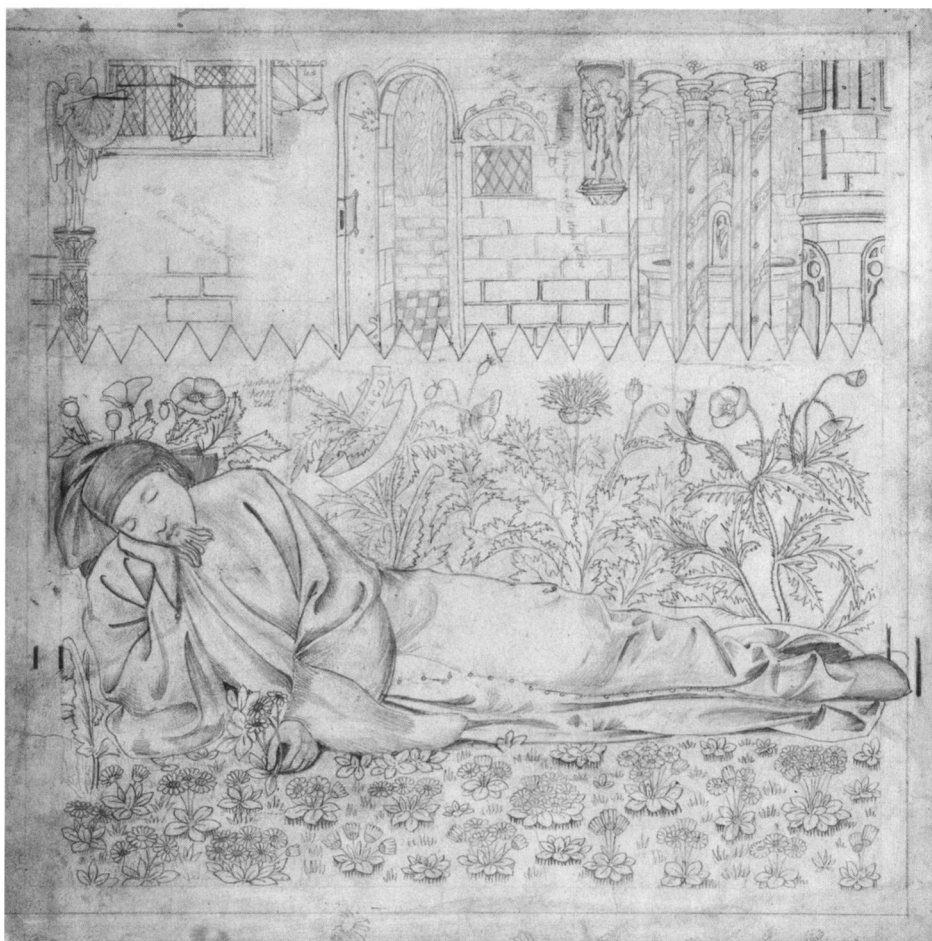


FIGURE 1 'Chaucer Asleep' (1864) by Edward Burne-Jones (pencil drawing), stained-glass design for Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*.

© Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery.

love-crossed ladies who appear in pairs before the poet lying abandoned to his dream. In the gawky and angular figure of Amor, Burne-Jones seems to challenge the overriding sense of gracefulness of the female figures: here, perhaps, is a deliberate ‘making strange’ of the scene, both jarringly modern and mundane. The figure of Love is important for Burne-Jones, who, like Rossetti, had identified with the medieval sensibility of love and made much use of it in his work.

Burne-Jones makes use of the strangely static quality of medieval illumination, in which allegory attempts to unite the pictorial and the literary or, as a further complication, the sculptural. The result is a kind of frozen image that variously appeals to Burne-Jones’s own static and frozen qualities as a designer of pictorial space. His pictures construct some still, sad space of their own, an



FIGURE 2 ‘Amor and Alcestis’ (1864) by Edward Burne-Jones (pencil and ink drawing), stained-glass design for Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women*.

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extreme allegorical stasis. This is identifiable in the earliest of the works drawn under the influence of Rossetti, such as *The Knight's Farewell* (1858, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), it persists in the sequence of designs on the story of the Sleeping Beauty, and lasts until the final subject that preoccupied him up to his death, *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (1881–98, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico). If this motif of sleep symbolizes a nostalgia for a golden age, with medieval Northern Europe standing in for Arcadia, then it is a very sad golden age, one on the brink of tears or even neurosis. Sitting in a pasture, an orchard, or some desacralized *hortus conclusus*, Burne-Jones's characters are no happier — indeed, somehow unhappier — than their nineteenth-century audience in their stuffy drawing rooms. These pictures seek some aesthetic of sadness out of material that could easily have been happy, even jolly, certainly celebratory. They tend towards the state of allegory even when that appears not to be their chief intention; they become images granted to the artist as dreamer. They are standing in for — sometimes just standing 'as' — abstractions. Thus the extended beauty pageant of fair women is also about different virtues and qualities: patience, fidelity, and other noble qualities that might be dreamt of in a fair woman. Burne-Jones treated the subject in several long sequences for a variety of purposes, including a frieze of ceramic tiles and an embroidered hanging, as well as individual panels for stained-glass windows. The artist also produced a watercolour version in which the figures of the dreamers and the 'dreamed' are brought together in a single image. The troupe of heroines is led by Amor towards the sleeping figure of Chaucer, who is separated from the group by an imposing poppy emphasizing the visionary nature of the scene (see Figure 3).

Allegory, Aestheticism, and Decadence

Pictorial allegory is an important yet often overlooked way of thinking of the new subject in the 1860s and 1870s. In its appeal to the visionary it finds its contemporary source in Rossetti, whose identification with Dante's *Vita nuova* enabled the production of a dream vision in one of his first Pre-Raphaelite works, *Dante Drawing an Angel on the First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice* (1849, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery). Chaucer provides a focus for Burne-Jones as Dante did for Rossetti, offering him images of love, desire, truth, and other virtues and abstractions not offered by naturalism. These works of Burne-Jones are less illustrative than Rossetti's, attempting to represent the vision itself rather than the circumstances of its revelation.

These abstractions had been given a fresh impetus for the so-called second generation of Pre-Raphaelite artists by the current reception, connoisseurship, and collecting practices of Renaissance art. A newly problematized art history offered a different view of the relationship between medieval culture and the



FIGURE 3 *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women* (1900), photogravure from an original painting by Edward Burne-Jones. © Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery.

Renaissance. Acquisitions for the National Gallery of works such as Raphael's *Allegory: The Sleeping Knight* (1504, acquired 1847) and Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (c. 1485, acquired 1874) demonstrated the meeting of traditions of medieval allegorical thinking and that of the art of the Renaissance. Burne-Jones was particularly drawn to this overlap between the Christian art of the Middle Ages and the Humanism of the Renaissance, finding rich ambiguities in the presentation of knowledge through allegory, both pictorial and literary. Chaucer's thinking, like much of the poetry in vogue in the second generation of Pre-Raphaelitism, was shaped by pagan culture, French courtly art, and the reception of classical allegories and myths.

One of Burne-Jones's most controversial subject paintings, *Le Chant d'amour*, which exists in various versions,²¹ has ambiguous allegorical tendencies (see Figure 4). It started its life as a design for an allegory of music to be painted on to a piano, and the artist gradually developed the vision of music as a female

²¹ Including one in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (dating from 1865), and another in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1868–77). For a chronology of the various versions see catalogue entries 30 and 84 in Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), pp. 98–100, 212–14.

figure until it became an elaborated vision of music and love, music as love, and ‘the music of love’. The final image, somewhat obsessively repeated in several versions and achieved only after much rehearsing of the individual figures, became a description of visibility too: it represents a chain of looking and being looked at, and looking away and being forbidden to look. Although these figures are looking, it is difficult to discern what they are seeing. The eyes of the female seated at her portative organ stare sadly (in drawings, madly) beyond the spectator, while the shadowed eyes of the knight are looking as much inwards as outwards, suggesting that the woman is a vision, perhaps the product of a dream such as the knight in the René d’Anjou manuscript or Raphael’s allegory of Scipio’s dream. The sense that this is a dream allegory is heightened by examining the landscape that lies behind the figure group, a pasture beyond which are the walls of a city, painted in the manner of the landscapes of miniatures in Books of Hours — the manner that escaped into the landscapes of Perugino and Raphael, which radiate ambiguous light and dreamlike placidity. At the front edge of the picture is a border of tulips and wallflowers,



FIGURE 4 *Le Chant d’amour* (1896), after an original painting by Edward Burne-Jones (reproductive engraving). © Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery.

a band of warm and vivid colour introduced as a type of decorative border found in illuminated manuscripts.

To mistake paintings such as the *Chant d'amour* as simply illustrative of literature would be to misunderstand their visionary quality. Much of Burne-Jones's later work is understandable only if we see it as depicting visions already described or suggested in literature. Thus *Phyllis and Demophoön* (1870, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery) is a vision within Chaucer's *A Dream of Fair Women*, Chaucer's vision itself being a kind of poetic emblem derived from Ovid. Exhibiting the work at the Old Watercolour Society in 1870, the artist inscribed the painting with a quotation from Ovid, '*dic mihi quid feci? nisi non sapienter amavi*' ('Tell me what have I done, except to love unwisely?'). Yet the vision is not only Ovid's but, significantly, one translated by Chaucer. Burne-Jones was to include Phyllis as one of Chaucer's 'fair women' appearing before the poet, taking her place beside Hypermnestra, who holds the symbol of her fatal story, a little tree, in her hand as a martyr would the implement of her death.

In Rossetti's work from the late 1850s onwards we are never far from an allegorized female depiction in which the female body stands in for a variety of abstract qualities, passions, virtues, and sins. In his lectures published as *The Art of England* in 1884 Ruskin dismissed Rossetti as a realist but elevated him in other ways:

Rossetti added to the before accepted systems of colour in painting, one based on the principles of manuscript illumination, which permits his design to rival the most beautiful qualities of painted glass, without losing either the mystery or the dignity of light and shade. And he was, as I believe it is now generally admitted, the chief intellectual force in the establishment of the modern romantic school in England.²²

In the same series of lectures Ruskin described Burne-Jones and G. F. Watts as 'painters of Mythology'. Discussing initially Burne-Jones's *Wheel of Fortune* as demonstrative of the painting of 'symbolic figures to represent only general truths, or abstract ideas',²³ Ruskin developed his idea of the function of this symbolic painting of myth:

These things are told or hinted to you, in the mythic picture, not with the impertinence and narrowness of words, nor in any order compelling a monotonous succession of thought, — but each as you choose or chance to read it, to be rested in, or proceeded with, as you will. (p. 51)

In his description Ruskin suggests that Burne-Jones avoid precise, conclusive, restrictive, or dogmatic readings in order to produce paintings full of ideas:

²² John Ruskin, *The Art of England: Lectures Given in Oxford* (Orpington: George Allen, 1884), p. 5. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

²³ There are various versions of this painting, including one in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (c. 1875–83).

[The modern painter of mythology] is to place, at the service of former imagination, the art which it had not — and to realize for us, with a truth then impossible, the visions described by the wisest of men as embodying their most pious thoughts and their most exalted doctrines: not indeed attempting with any literal exactitude to follow the words of the visionary, for no man can enter literally into the mind of another, neither can any great designer refuse to obey the suggestions of his own: but only bringing the resources of accomplished art to unveil the hidden splendour of old imagination; and showing us that the forms of gods and angels which appeared in fancy to the prophets and saints of antiquity, were indeed more natural and beautiful than the black and red shadows on a Greek vase, or the dogmatic outlines of a Byzantine fresco. (p. 56)

Further, Ruskin notes Burne-Jones's academic achievement, implying that his 'indefatigable scholarship and exhaustless fancy' are a credit to his studies at Oxford and that they have provided him with qualities not possessed by other contemporary artists.

It is impossible for the general public to estimate the quantity of careful and investigatory reading, and the fine tact of literary discrimination, which are signified by the command now possessed by Mr. Burne-Jones over the entire range both of Northern and Greek Mythology [. . .] which have enabled him to harmonize these with the loveliest traditions of Christian legend. Hitherto, there has been adversity between the schools of classic and Christian art, only in part conquered by the most liberal-minded of artists and poets. (p. 57)

We can define the change from the Rossettian to this new 'mythic' painting as a modification of the original programme of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Christian Art revived in the 1840s and 1850s was modified in the 1860s by a kind of 'classical' art that incorporated the 'pagan' classicized elements of the Renaissance and the work of the ancient world. Ruskin's rejection of the dogmatic, his preference here for the suggestive, visionary, and eclectic, sits uneasily with his more dogmatic pronouncements on contemporary painting, its function and practices. However, by this time (1883) Ruskin was negotiating his own relationship with the religious certainties that had been so much a part of his earlier criticism. Those certainties were expressed in dense, typologically loaded, God-haunted language. But following his 'un-conversion' in Turin, such language and such a position were no longer feasible.

The synthetic qualities that Ruskin found in Burne-Jones's practice had been previously identified by Pater in the poetry of William Morris, in an essay in the October 1868 issue of the *Westminster Review* which defined Aesthetic criticism and practice. This piece was later reworked to provide the concluding chapter of the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). In the Preface to that work Pater reflects upon the act of criticism itself:

What is important [. . .] is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some excellent workmen, and some excellent work done. The

question he asks is always:— In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? where was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its taste?²⁴

Here Pater refines the poetic synthesis of classical with medieval which he found in Morris's poetry and which was to provide a starting point for defining the function of aesthetic criticism. He coined the term 'delicate inconsistencies' to describe Morris's synthetic process: 'coming in a poem of Greek subject [they] bring into this white dawn thoughts of the delirious night just over and make one's sense of relief deeper'.²⁵ As Pater was to note, a similar synthesis was detectable in medieval culture; it was detectable in Chaucer too.

Burne-Jones anticipates and perhaps inspires Pater's understanding of the period, the negotiation of 'pagan' and Christian systems of knowledge. Pater's understanding of the Renaissance as a phenomenon that has its roots in medieval Northern Europe, in its reception of ancient stories and the encoding of their message in French lyric, is foreshadowed in the enterprise of Burne-Jones's paintings and their 'indefatigable scholarship', in Ruskin's words. Music and poetry take their places alongside the religion of Christianity in the scenes he depicted, indeed begin to supplant it in importance.

Pater's Aestheticist approach to the new scholarship or the new subject of Aesthetic painting was not widely shared. Antipathy to it might be seen as indicative of philistine and conservative taste in writers such as Harry Quilter, the erstwhile art critic of both *The Spectator* and the *Westminster Gazette*. Quilter traces the change in Pre-Raphaelitism to the Oxford Union murals:

the *new Pre-Raphaelites* — that is the point of the matter, for from the time of these Oxford frescoes — possibly before, but certainly from then — the old idea — the idea that [. . .] was always more honoured in the breach than the observance — passed away entirely.²⁶

Quilter's analysis of Burne-Jones is a veiled attack on Aestheticism, analogous to that of Robert Buchanan on Rossetti in the essay 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871.

Quilter's method is to see the change in Pre-Raphaelitism as somehow malign, the result of a shift in methodology from 'truth to nature' to something more indefinable, 'a method of feeling, a question of sentiment'. The word 'Pre-Raphaelite'

soon grew into use as almost a synonym for medievalism, and is so frequently used today. But it was medievalism with a difference; with the modern spirit added to the ancient form, and with a bias overwhelming and unfortunate towards a view of life which was neither wholesome nor manly.²⁷

²⁴ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. xxi.

²⁵ Walter Pater, 'Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review*, n.s., 34 (October 1868), 300–12 (p. 308).

²⁶ Quilter, *Preferences in Art, Life, and Literature*, p. 74.

²⁷ Quilter, p. 76 (for this and subsequent quotations).

On Burne-Jones particularly, the ‘chief master’ of this new school, Quilter’s opinion was qualified but none the less damning: ‘this very beautiful art is not of a kind which will do the world much good, or upon which any true school can be founded’. He acknowledges the beauty of the paintings and adds:

I almost reverence their achievement. But none the less do I see clearly how fatal is their influence, how perverted their meaning, how vain their accomplishment. I see how little suited is this spirit of sick-sad dreams to the country I love, and the folks who have made England in the old time, and who are making it to-day. And as I look back over the great art of former times, I seek in vain for any painting or sculpture which has based its appeal, or found its beauty in a panegyric of the vanished years, in an endeavour to forget the circumstances, the obligations, and the meaning of the artist’s own generation.

Seeing the paintings as ‘unwholesome’, Quilter found the dependence on love as a particularly ‘undesirable’ element’:

The pictures are morbid, and not less so because the personages shown therein are apt to be epicure — though perhaps we may not rightly term the work *sensual*, it is so uniformly and intensely *sensuous*, that perhaps the baser intention had been less harmful in result.

The critic reflects on the history of the Pre-Raphaelitism that Burne-Jones represents, blaming not Swinburne, whose *Poems and Ballads* of 1866 he recalls, but the painter himself. Swinburne’s poems were ‘only the poetical expression of pre-Raphaelitism as exemplified in Burne-Jones’s pictures’. He is surely right to see the intimate relationship between Swinburne’s poetic vision and Burne-Jones’s painterly one, and to acknowledge the painter, the dedicatee of the first edition of *Poems and Ballads*, as in some sense the originator of Swinburne’s images. Swinburne addressed dream visions of women in the poem ‘Dedication’ (1865), as here, in lines 25–32:

O daughters of dreams and of stories
 That life is not wearied of yet,
 Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores,
 Félise and Yolande and Juliette,
 Shall I find you not still, shall I miss you,
 When sleep, that is true or that seems,
 Comes back to me hopeless to kiss you,
 O daughter of dreams?²⁸

Burne-Jones’s hypnagogic images are themselves fabricated from poetic or mythic stories rather than, strictly, the literature of the past, even from a pre-literate cultural expression of narrative, of dream image. Hence Swinburne’s dedicatory poem that evokes a general concept, shared with Burne-Jones, of poetic image, dream, and sex. It is this shift that Quilter seems to find so objectionable, regretting the passing, as it were, of the high level of naturalism of early Pre-Raphaelitism and the advent of something open to subversion by

²⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 6 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 1, 294.

the idiosyncrasies of imagination and desire. He appears to understand the motive of the work but rejects it as a 'sham'.

Is it not strange, this outcome of the P.R.B. theories of simplicity, earnestness, and fidelity to nature? This queer half-ascetic, half-voluptuous art; occupied with Virgins Holy and otherwise, angels, mermaidens, medieval knights, emblems of night and morning, seedtime and harvest, virtue and vice. Yet throughout every manifestation of its quaint sexless beauty this art of Burne-Jones has throughout splendour and delicacy [. . .] do not let us deceive ourselves: don't let us attempt to call this a pure art or an ennobling one. It is neither: its scent hangs heavy on the moral air as the scent of tuberose in a heated room; the involution of its fancies is morbid and artificial as the twisted robes and strained attitudes of the characters in the pictures. Above all, the outward medievalism of form is a sham; as is the semi-asceticism, and above all the religion. A sham, I mean, not because of the painter's wilful pretence, but because of his imagination, delicate, prodigal, and refined, is nevertheless distorted and unnatural.²⁹

The curator and critic Sidney Colvin outlined a different opinion in his retrospect of the period. He implied that the artist was assailed by two differing hostile critical factions: the philistine critics, like Quilter, and the anti-literary critics of the modernist tendency for whom the formal aspects of a work of art were the only things that should concern the artist. Colvin defended the artist by contextualizing the painting practice of the day, finding Burne-Jones's choice sophisticated. Colvin's description defines Burne-Jones as a Symbolist and rejects the idea that he is simply illustrating his literary sources.

In the days of which I speak, half a century or more ago, almost the only kind of painting in England which possessed true pictorial quality and made its appeal specifically to and through the eye was [. . .] the painting which called up and visualized not every-day appearances of life and nature but themes of poetry and imagination. The stimulus of such themes moved a certain class of artists to the effort, not to 'illustrate' them in any commonplace sense of the word, but to create a corresponding world of forms and colours, 'visions and dreams and symbols', making to the ocular sense a parallel appeal to that which the themes themselves made to the literary sense and imagination.³⁰

In Colvin's summary Burne-Jones's allegories are the only alternatives to nineteenth-century naturalism. Certainly, Burne-Jones was in a curious trap by the end of his career: deriving his themes from respectable literary sources such as Chaucer and Malory, he nonetheless imbued them with a degree of personal feeling, converting them into depictions of sad introspection. They lacked the overt signs of national pride that critics such as Harry Quilter sought. For Burne-Jones, the dream vision was a methodology that lay at the creative centre of his art, neither an affectation nor a sham, but a method of constructing the image in a way that avoided reproducing nature or illustrating his sources. The construction of allegorical imagery allowed him to create from his imagination fed by the sources of European art and literature.

²⁹ Quilter, *Preferences in Art, Life, and Literature*, pp. 76–78.

³⁰ Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places* (London: Edward Arnold, 1921), pp. 50–52.