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Author(s): JANICE M. BENARIO

Source: *The Classical Outlook*, Winter 2001, Vol. 78, No. 2 (Winter 2001), pp. 53-57

Published by: American Classical League

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43938417>

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# Sir Edward Burne-Jones: The Perseus Series

JANICE M. BENARIO  
Georgia State University

The 1998 Sir Edward Burne-Jones Centenary Exhibition was shown in three countries: the United States (New York), England (Birmingham), and France (Paris). The large and varied exhibition included the entire Perseus series, a series which is not widely known, nor much discussed. The artist, on the other hand, was internationally known in his lifetime; though his reputation suffered from the strong reaction against Victorian art following World War I, he is now as admired, collected, and studied as ever.

The 10 pictures which tell stories about the Greek hero are not finished oil paintings but are full-scale cartoons in gouache (opaque water color) on paper laid on linen canvas. Nine of the panels measure approximately 60 by 54 inches, the tenth one being somewhat smaller to fit over a doorway. These cartoons now hang permanently in the Southampton City Art Gallery, England. All are in color; reproduced here are four in black and white.

Burne-Jones' life (1833–1898) spans almost the entire Victorian Age; thus he faced the struggle that Victorian artists faced—how to paint lofty, noble, and romantic pictures in an age of steam, railway trains, factories, and slums. Yet his name remains indelibly associated with the romantic escapist atmosphere of late pre-Raphaelism. In his words, “I mean by a picture, a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be, in a light better than any light that ever shone—in a land no one can define or remember, only desire . . .” (Wood 6). He wanted to retell old stories that he believed were true and beautiful for every age (but real in no age).

Edward Coley Burne Jones (he adopted the hyphenated name later) was born in Birmingham, England, on 28 August 1833. As a child he retreated into his own world of imagination, a world of books and of drawing. His early education included a broad background in Greek, Latin, and English literature. For leisure reading he kept available three books: *Corpus Poetarum Latinorum*, *Poetae Scenici Graeci*, and a book of English ballads with engravings. Gradually he became more and more interested in religion and planned to be an ordained clergyman. In 1853 he entered Exeter College, Oxford, and soon met William Morris, who also intended to

enter the Church. Two years later, however, after a walking tour of cathedrals in northern France and a visit to the Louvre, both men decided to leave Oxford and change their careers, Burne-Jones to become a painter, Morris, an architect. But Burne-Jones was not to be limited to painting. His work reflects his extensive and multi-faceted study: marbles of the Parthenon, mosaics of Ravenna, Etruscan vases, Pompeian frescoes, Arab tiles, Oriental embroideries, medieval illuminated manuscripts, works of the Quattrocentisti, and masters of the Renaissance. He became involved with design and decoration, with the result that many of his pictures have their origin in some other medium: stained glass, tapestries, illustrated books, furniture, metals, tiles. Favorite subjects derived from Burne-Jones' religious interests and his classical studies.

The name of Burne-Jones is linked with those of Dante Rossetti, his mentor, and William Morris, his lifelong friend and colleague. In the 1860s, Morris was working on his long poem, *Earthly Paradise*, 24 tales modeled on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The story tells of peoples who, because of the Black Death, left their land in hopes of discovering an Earthly Paradise where there was no sickness, old age, or death. Although they fail in their quest, they settle on an island where the people speak ancient Greek. They celebrate their placid old age by telling two stories each month, one by a Greek, the other by a wanderer. For April, the Greek narrative is “The Doom of Acrisius,” the story of Perseus, grandson of Acrisius, and the executor of his doom.

From the start, it was intended that Burne-Jones should provide the illustrations to make a sumptuous volume. For four years he worked on the project, producing a great many drawings and studies for the planned hundreds of woodcuts to be carved by Morris and his associates. One of his main sources was a fifteenth-century book that both he and Morris much admired, *Hypnerotomachia, the Strife of Love in a Dreame*, first published anonymously by Aldus Manutius in 1499. In form it is a medieval romance, but the author has overlaid it with classical references and allusions, and the celebrated wood-cut illustrations are full of classical buildings and inscriptions.

Because of technical difficulties in the printing process, Morris decided to publish *Earthly Paradise* without illustrations; but the work Burne-Jones put into

it was not wasted. The many designs and drawings he had made were to furnish him with ideas for pictures for the remainder of his life, among them eight of the Perseus series.

In 1875 he received a commission from Arthur Balfour, later to be Prime Minister, who desired a series of pictures for the music room in his London home. The two men easily agreed on the ever popular story of Perseus, a topic which gave Burne-Jones the opportunity to treat two of his favorite themes, the conquest of good over evil and the triumph of beauty. In order to display his paintings properly, he insisted on having the rectangular room completely redecorated according to his design. He quickly planned a sequence of 10 subjects to be positioned around the room with Morris' acanthus-patterned wallpaper as background. The walls and ceiling were to be paneled with light English oak, the windows reglazed to soften the light. Although Burne-Jones worked on the Perseus series for the rest of his life, some 23 years, it was never finished and never hung in Balfour's renovated music room.

Almost immediately Burne-Jones began to plan and study for the series. He spent long hours at the British Museum looking at ancient portrayals of Perseus and Medusa. A letter to his son tells how he and his wife Georgiana worked many evenings designing "a cap for Perseus, hosen, and a sword" (G. Burne-Jones, ii, 61). He made drawings of old armor and designed many pieces himself to remove them from any association with historical time. He studied the faces of both friends and strangers, always looking for the special character and moral qualities he desired for his figures. We know further that he made many drawings in chalk or pencil for every detail, then a sketch of the whole, finally a cartoon in water color the same size as the proposed canvas. He finished in oil only four of the series (2, 8, 9, 10); those four are now in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, Germany. The 10 cartoons, framed and displayed in the artist's garden studio, were widely admired. Sold privately soon after the death of his daughter Margaret (wife of the eminent classical scholar, J.W. Mackail), in 1934 they were purchased by the Southampton City Art Gallery. Today they hang in a room similar to the one that the artist had planned.

The Perseus Series illustrates only the central episodes of the long Argive saga, Perseus' victory over the Gorgon Medusa, and the rescue of his future bride Andromeda. In the upper part of the second panel the artist has painted a Latin precis in superb epigraphical calligraphy, covering the subjects of all 10 cartoons. Sir Richard C. Jebb (1841–1905), one of the most celebrated of Victorian classical scholars, was the author of

these eight lines of dactylic hexameter (see Figure 2; 1: Pallas Athene with her urging spurred Perseus to action and equipped him with arms. 2: The blind sisters of the Gorgons revealed to him the remote home of the nymphs. 3: From there he went with wings on his feet and with his head shrouded in darkness, and, 4 & 5: with his sword he struck the one Gorgon who was subject to death—the others were immortal. 6: Her two sisters arose and pursued him. 7: Next he turned Atlas to stone. 8 & 9: The sea serpent was slain and Andromeda rescued and the comrades of Phineus became lumps of rock. 10: Then Andromeda looked with wonder in a mirror at the dreadful Medusa [translation by Anderson and Cassin, 22]). As originally planned in the Balfour music room, this panel would have served as a focal point for the series.

\* \* \*

### 1. *The Call of Perseus*

The Balfour commission limited Burne-Jones to 10 panels; yet he wished to refer to both the incidents depicted here. Both are in the same picture space in one continuous landscape. Perseus sits on the bank of a stream, naked and dejected, while a heavily draped figure stands over him, sympathetically holding out a

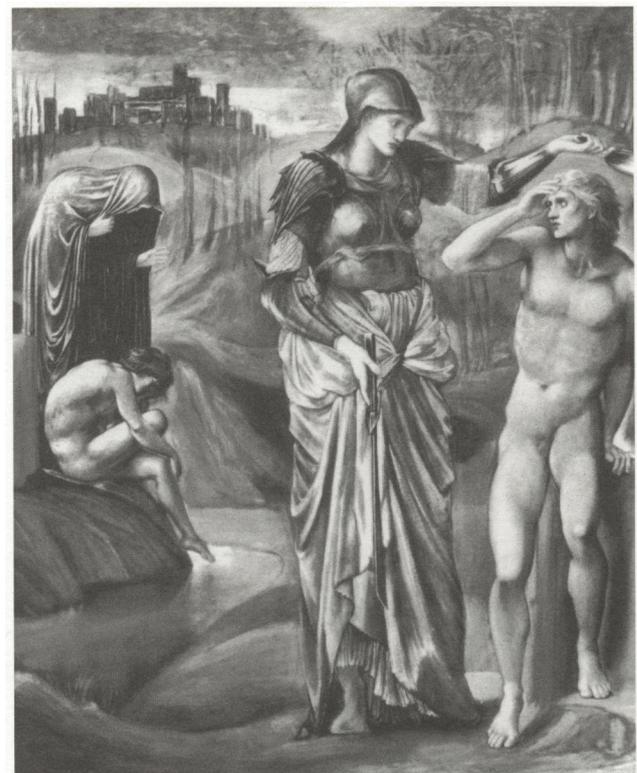


Figure 1. *The Call of Perseus*, c. 1876 (gouache) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Southampton City Art Gallery, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Art Library.

hand. This is Athena who then reveals herself to Perseus' startled eyes in the center of the picture. She knows of Perseus' promise to bring the head of the Gorgon Medusa to Polydectes, King of Seriphos. Angry because Medusa with Poseidon had desecrated one of her temples, she had changed Medusa's hair into snakes; hence she was willing to help Perseus. She advises him about his journey, warns him of Medusa's stony stare, and lends him a sword and a highly polished shield in which he will be able to look at Medusa's reflection. In the painting this shield has become a mirror. Athena, in breastplate and heavy drapery, dominates the panel.

The goddess had instructed Perseus to find some sea nymphs who possessed certain magic objects he would need; only the Graiae knew their location.

## 2. Perseus and the Graiae

In the low wide space remaining below the Latin, the artist describes the rocky barrenness of the Graiae's surroundings not far from where the earth and the sky meet. Perseus sneaks up on the three sisters, traditionally old women from birth, who share one eye and one tooth. The picture shows him at a dramatic moment just about to snatch the eye while it is being passed from one to the other. He will hold it for ransom until he obtains the information he needs. Burne-Jones, however, presents the Graiae as demure young women, clothed in rippling thin draperies, their hands (and those of Perseus also) carefully drawn so that they seem posed yet relaxed.

## 3. Perseus and the Sea Nymphs

Perseus next visited the three benign nymphs who were the guardians of a magic wallet in which to place the Gorgon's head, Hades' helmet of invisibility, and Hermes' winged sandals, all of which they are willing to

lend to Perseus through the intervention of his patroness Athena.

## 4. The Finding of Medusa

When Perseus arrives at the home of the Gorgons, with the aid of his mirror he locates Medusa, the only mortal one of the three. She raises her hands in an attempt to protect herself, while her sisters, recently roused from sleep, crouch under their wings.

## 5. The Death of Medusa I

Unknown to Perseus, Medusa is pregnant with the children of Poseidon, and, when her head is severed, they spring fully grown from her neck, the winged horse, Pegasus, and Chrysaor.

## 6. The Death of Medusa II

The other Gorgons, aware of the disaster that has overtaken their sister, make a desperate attempt to follow and attack Perseus. Aided by Hades' helmet and Hermes' sandals, Perseus disappears into the clouds, as he places Medusa's head, facing away from him, in the pouch.

## 7. Atlas Turned to Stone

On his way back to Seriphos, Perseus passed the giant Atlas holding up the heavens. The picture shows the moment when the giant is turned into stone, as Perseus flies away holding the Gorgon's head high facing the giant.

## 8. The Rock of Doom

Perseus then discovers the beautiful Andromeda chained by one arm to a pillar of rock, as a sacrifice to a sea monster sent by Poseidon, angry at the girl's mother. The hero falls instantly in love and resolves to save her. The cartoon focuses on the moment when

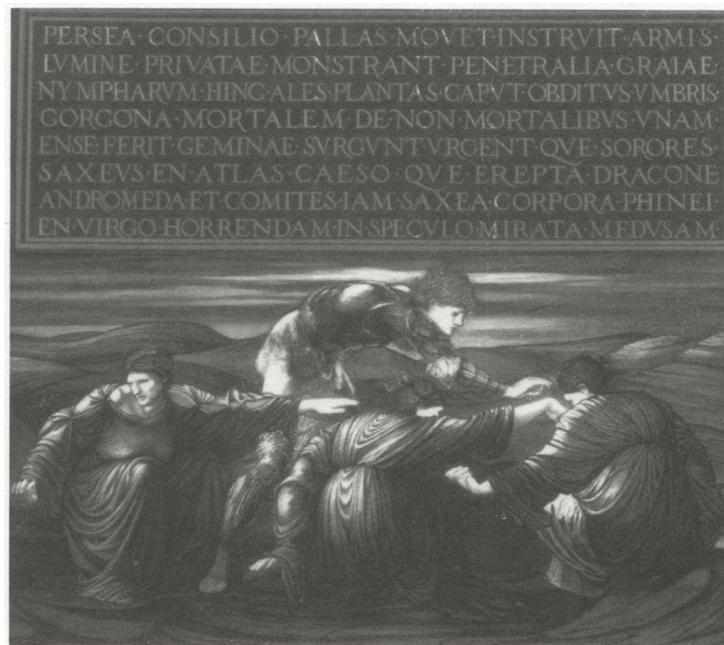


Figure 2. *Perseus and the Graiae*, c. 1876 (gouache) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Southampton City Art Gallery, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Art Library. See translation, p. 54 above.

Perseus removes Hades' helmet so that Andromeda might see him pausing in flight. Andromeda stands in a pose that seems remarkably relaxed and motionless in resignation. Her head is bent demurely while her body appears idealized, white and chaste as a marble statue. Perseus has the proportions of an athlete, yet seems pensive, hesitant, effeminate.

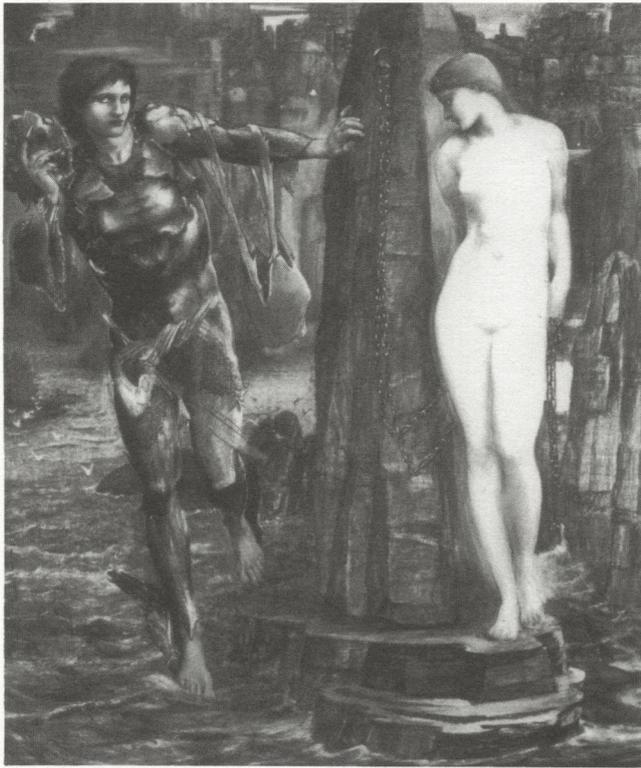


Figure 3. *The Rock of Doom*, c. 1876 (gouache) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Southampton City Art Gallery, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Art Library.

### 9. *The Doom Fulfilled*

Andromeda, a back pose this time, still stands on the rock. The violent struggle between Perseus and the monster fills the rest of the space.

In Burne-Jones' original plans, the subjects of the present panels #8 and #9 were to be combined. Number 9 was then to have been the court of Phineas, as in the Latin precis.

### 10. *The Baleful Head*

The final picture brings together the hero, heroine, and the Gorgon's head. Perseus and Andromeda are together in safety in a luxurious walled garden, quite in contrast to the previous bleak and unearthly settings. Perseus wishes to display his prize, but, of course, only as a reflection. Andromeda, dressed in rich warm colors, bends her lovely profile to see Medusa's head

mirrored in the water, while Perseus, with Medusa's actual head held aloft in the center, clasps Andromeda's hand and fixes his gaze on her bent head. The surface of the picture is highly finished with many details; the figures are balanced and quiet, no wind disturbs the water or shakes leaves from the trees. It presents a true Garden of Eden with the hero triumphant over the Gorgon and rewarded with the beautiful heroine, leaving the viewer feeling hopeful and content.

\* \* \*

Even in an unfinished state, the Perseus Series presents a unique vision of classical myth conveyed with great imagination, almost as if the myth were reenacted by aliens on another planet. One may expect that the 1998 Centenary Exhibition has increased the visibility of the Perseus Series and further enhanced the reputation of Burne-Jones, one of the great English artists of the nineteenth century.

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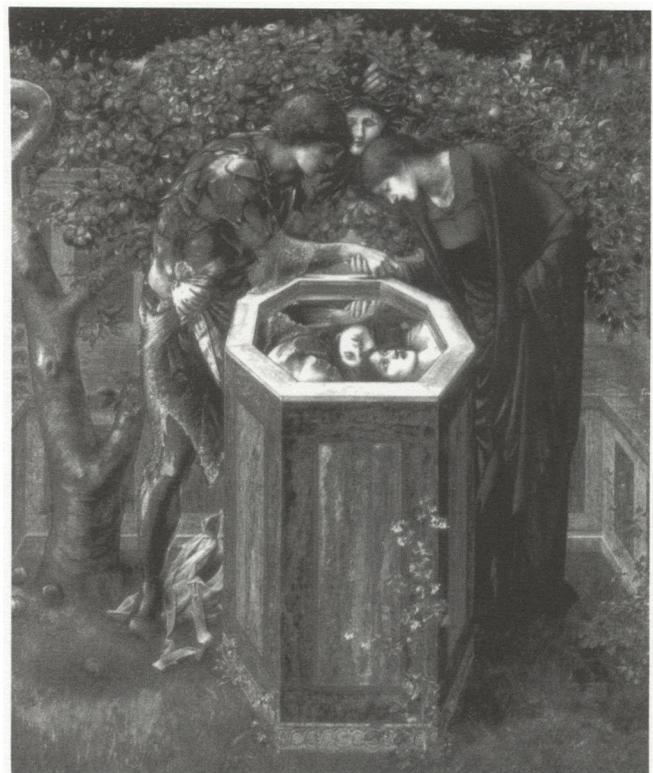


Figure 4. *The Baleful Head*, c. 1876 (gouache) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Southampton City Art Gallery, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Art Library.

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Janice M. Benario is Associate Professor Emerita of Foreign Languages, Georgia State University. She is the recipient of an APA Award for Excellence in Teaching, a CAMWS ovatio, and the Foreign Language Association of Georgia Award for Excellence in Foreign Language Instruction.

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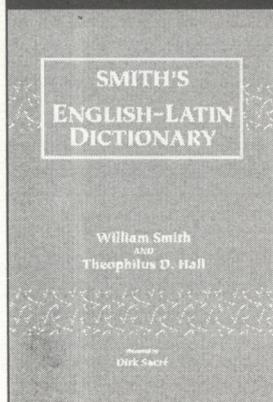
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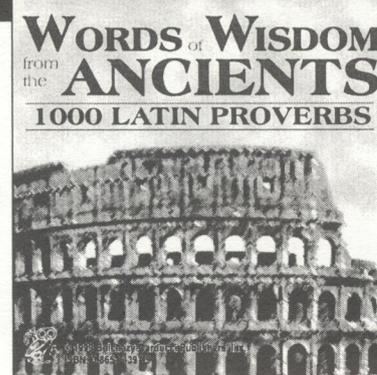
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