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“Smite this Sleeping World Awake”: Edward Burne-Jones and *The Legend of the Briar Rose*

ANDREA WOLK RAGER

In 1894, Victorian art critic Cosmo Monkhouse described Edward Burne-Jones as “the arch-dreamer of the nineteenth century” (147). Over the succeeding years, this characterization of the artist has persisted, but its connotation has shifted from high praise to dismissive denigration. Due in large part to an artistic practice that privileged the decorative and the fantastical, Burne-Jones has been consistently marginalized within art historical scholarship as merely escapist and nostalgic. Of all his vast oeuvre, it is Burne-Jones’s monumental painted series *The Legend of the Briar Rose* (1870–95) that has been most frequently identified as the epitome of this putative tendency to withdraw from the horrors of modernity into a hallucinatory realm of sleep, dreams, and legends. Based upon the traditional fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, this series is comprised chiefly of four approximately four- by seven-foot canvases, *The Briar Wood* (1870–90, fig. 1), *The Council Chamber* (1870–90, fig. 2), *The Garden Court* (1870–90, fig. 3), and *The Rose Bower* (1870–90, fig. 4). Hailed upon their debut in London in the spring of 1890 as “the pictures of the century” (Clifford 48), the critical opinion of the *Briar Rose* series quickly declined alongside Burne-Jones’s reputation throughout the course of the twentieth century. By 1933, the *Briar Rose* series was seen to represent synecdochically the artist’s work as a whole, which in turn was rather begrudgingly described as a burdensome national heritage. In his introduction to the Tate’s monographical exhibition commemorating the centenary of Burne-Jones’s birth, William Rothenstein declared,

ABSTRACT: Challenging entrenched preconceptions about the supposed escapism and conservatism of Edward Burne-Jones’s art, this paper seeks to establish his monumental painted series, *The Legend of the Briar Rose*, as a fundamentally radical and confrontational work. Critics have long viewed it as an endorsement of sleepy stasis, antithetical to the political activism espoused by his friend William Morris. By unraveling the intertwining themes of the series—the transformative dream vision, artistic labor, the decorative mode, and social egalitarianism—the *Briar Rose* series is revealed instead to be a dramatization of the struggle for personal, social, artistic, and even environmental awakening.

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Fig. 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Legend of the Briar Rose: The Briar Wood*, 1870-90, oil on canvas. The Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, England.

to say “Burne-Jones” is to be so transported; to enter a world of faery, a dim, still refuge where maidens of a haunting loveliness . . . sleep, hemmed in by thick briars, with knights slumbering at their feet. . . . It is small matter if few to-day care to enter this enchanted country. For it is ours, a national possession, whose wicket we may pass through when we wish. (4)

In 1998, another centenary exhibition (this time held in honor of the artist’s death) brought the work of Burne-Jones to the walls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Musée d’Orsay, to the chagrin of many. Once again, the *Briar Rose* series seemed to provoke the greatest critical



Fig. 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Legend of the Briar Rose: The Council Chamber*, 1870-90, oil on canvas. The Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, England.



Fig. 3. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Legend of the Briar Rose: The Garden Court*, 1870-90, oil on canvas. The Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, England.

ire, despite being represented in the exhibition only through a partial assemblage of early or alternate versions.¹ In a particularly resentful review for *The Sunday Times*, Frank Whitford described Burne-Jones's paintings as "visions of a fantasyland in which maidens palely loiter, [and] princesses sleep among brambles for a thousand years," amounting in the end to "nothing more than a collection of fancy-dress pageants" (1). Whitford continued his invective by declaring Burne-Jones's work to be



Fig. 4. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Legend of the Briar Rose: The Rose Bower*, 1870-90, oil on canvas. The Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, England.

on par with New Age kitsch, insinuating that his paintings could only "appeal to those interested in the weirder aspects of alternative culture, in which fable, legend, myth, religious belief and superstition are all equally valid, all somehow the same" (3). Whitford's overtly anachronistic assessment of Burne-Jones's work stands as an indictment not of the artist but of the reviewer himself, who appears incapable of adopting a Victorian period eye. For the postmodern viewer, inured by the ubiquity of such pop-culture icons as Walt Disney's 1959 animated film *Sleeping Beauty*, the ability to perceive the radical import of the *Briar Rose* series has been all but lost.

This paper will challenge such received interpretations of Burne-Jones's work and of the *Briar Rose* series in particular. It is my contention that Burne-Jones deployed the fantastical dream as an epiphanic visionary mode, creating a liminal space from which to reflect back on the ills of the modern world rather than retreat from them. With the *Briar Rose* series, Burne-Jones sought to dramatize the struggle for personal, social, artistic, and even environmental awakening, rather than reveling in the contentment of sleepy stasis. The chivalric knight who stands at the far edge of the first canvas in resigned determination must do what others have attempted and failed before him: break through the ensnaring briar and the lure of untroubled sedation to revive the body of beauty and reanimate the world.

Like many of Burne-Jones's compositions, the *Briar Rose* series had its roots in the early years of the artist's career. The first appearance of the theme occurs in a fanciful set of nine ceramic tiles, which he designed and executed in collaboration with Lucy Faulkner between 1862 and 1865. The tiles, which depict the tale in its entirety from the birth of the princess to her awakening and subsequent joyous marriage to the valiant prince, bear relatively little resemblance to the later painted series, with one key exception. When Burne-Jones took up the subject again in a set of paintings commissioned by William Graham in 1869, he retained the tiles' central image depicting the knight appearing at the edge of the briar thicket. Rather than trace the unfolding temporal narrative, Burne-Jones drastically pared down his interpretation to its most resonant scene, unfolding the moment of the knight's arrival in a simultaneous procession across three small canvases, incorporating scenes of the king asleep in his council chamber and the princess lying in her bower.

Owing to the artist's tendency to stop and start work on his various projects, it is difficult to trace the exact chronological develop-

ment of the several versions of the series, nor is there space within the confines of this paper to explore the fascinating shifts in style, composition, and iconography that occurred over its long gestation. In essence, immediately upon completion of the first small-scale set of paintings for Graham in 1873, Burne-Jones began work on a larger series of oils, an undertaking which would span nearly two decades and spread over four primary, monumental panels. Completed in 1890, this definitive iteration of the *Briar Rose* series was exhibited in its own dedicated gallery at Agnew & Sons during the spring of that year. Burne-Jones stipulated as part of any sale that the paintings were also to be shown in Whitechapel during the annual free Easter exhibition sponsored by Toynbee Hall. Founded by clergyman and reformer Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta, Toynbee Hall was an Oxford Settlement House aimed at educating the poor within this most destitute and crime-ridden of London districts. That Burne-Jones, a regular contributor to the Whitechapel exhibitions, demanded the *Briar Rose* be made available in such a venue is important to bear in mind when considering the social implications of the series. As a testament to the appeal of this work to a diverse nineteenth-century audience, Burne-Jones's *Legend of the Briar Rose* was greeted with large crowds and general acclaim in both public exhibitions.

Subsequently purchased by Alexander Henderson, later Lord Faringdon, the paintings were installed in a dedicated room at Buscot Park, not two miles across the rural Oxfordshire countryside from William Morris's Kelmscott Manor. Like many of the major commissions of Morris & Co., this sale represented a compromise for the artist. The *Briar Rose* series would forever be sequestered within a private country home; however, this permanent setting afforded Burne-Jones the opportunity to transform the four canvases into a continuous decorative frieze (fig. 5). Burne-Jones designed a further set of ten intervening atmospheric painted panels and a custom frame to tie them all together across an expanse of three walls, thereby enveloping the viewer within an all-encompassing material vision. Beginning on the far left with the determined figure of the knight, the viewer's eyes are drawn along the arcs and twists of the briars, following his fated path ever deeper into the slumbering palace, through the great hall where the scribe lies at the feet of the king, past the women asleep at the loom, and, at last, to the figure of beauty, the sleeping princess in her ornately ornamented chamber.

Inspired by a simple children's fairy tale, *The Legend of the Briar Rose* proved to be one of Burne-Jones's greatest artistic endeavors. But



Fig. 5. *The Legend of the Briar Rose* as installed in the saloon at Buscot Park, 1870-95. The Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, England.

what seriousness of purpose could emerge from such a source? An early influence upon Burne-Jones may have been Alfred Tennyson's 1842 poem "The Day-Dream," a mature retelling of the legend which elevates the simple story of Sleeping Beauty to a subject suitable for high literary artistry. Tennyson's sensuous and richly detailed descriptions openly invoke the pictorial, with the princess appearing as "a perfect form in perfect rest" (III.24). But, while Tennyson offers an important precedent, Burne-Jones's interpretation of the story far exceeds this single poetic source. Throughout his career, Burne-Jones repeatedly sought to employ traditional folklore and mythological symbols to increase the legibility of his work and it is within this context that the *Briar Rose* series must be interpreted. According to John Ruskin, Burne-Jones was a painter of the mythic school, in possession of a command "over the entire range of both Northern and Greek Mythology," and capable of synthesizing these various legends into a harmonic unity, ennobling his art through the symbolical expression of timeless truths (292). Indeed, it could be argued that Burne-Jones's work was akin to the writings of Victorian scholars of comparative mythology, such as Andrew Lang and Friedrich Max Müller. In the late nineteenth century, it was widely argued that fairy tales, rooted in rural beliefs and the rites of childhood, conveyed a certain primitive innocence and moral clarity. Mining both the story of "Rose-Bud" from the collected fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and "The Sleeping Beauty"

from Charles Perrault, Burne-Jones sought primal themes that could speak to any audience, from the working classes to the privileged classes, from the urban poor to the rural peasant, from youth to old age: the long-awaited child cursed by the hubris of her elders, the spinning wheel and the inescapability of fate, the hero embarking upon his quest, and above all, the possibility of reawakening that which has long lain dormant.

And yet, if we are to assess the relationship between text and image in Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose*, another version of the "Sleeping Beauty" legend must also be considered. Included in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition, and later inscribed prominently on the frames designed by Burne-Jones, is an 1890 poem by Morris titled, appropriately, "For the Briar Rose." Morris's verses provide a dynamic dialogue with *The Legend of the Briar Rose*, rendering manifest the radical, even socialist, themes contained within Burne-Jones's imagery and countering any perceived lethargy with a rousing and defiant tone:

The Briarwood.

The fateful slumber floats and flows
About the tangle of the rose;
But lo! the fated hand and heart
To rend the slumberous curse apart!

The Council Room.

The threat of war, the hope of peace,
The Kingdom's peril and increase
Sleep on, and bide the latter day,
When fate shall take her chain away.

The Garden Court.

The maiden pleasance of the land
Knoweth no stir of voice or hand,
No cup the sleeping waters fill,
The restless shuttle lieth still.

The Rosebower.

Here lies the hoarded love, the key
To all the treasure that shall be;
Come fated hand the gift to take,
And smite this sleeping world awake.

In spite of Burne-Jones's pointed integration of this text into the decorative program of the *Briar Rose* series, many scholars have dismissed its relevance, excising Morris's words from their consideration of the paintings under the assumption that the poet was forcibly projecting his political views onto Burne-Jones's escapist reverie. Such erroneous assessments

stem from the widely held misconception of Burne-Jones's political ideals. Often elided in discussions of his artistic career, Burne-Jones's political stance has overwhelmingly been framed by his disavowal of Morris's socialist activism. While Morris's turn toward public agitation was responsible for the only major divergence between these lifelong friends and collaborators, their schism was unequivocally one of methods, not beliefs.² As Burne-Jones's wife, Georgiana, incisively observed, "they only parted company about the means to be employed for one and the same end" (Burne-Jones 97).

In their earliest days, Morris and Burne-Jones had resolved together that they would enact change in the world through art. When Morris turned to socialist activism, Burne-Jones supported his radical stance, but he strongly disapproved of what he perceived as the pointless struggle and ineffectual bureaucracy associated with political groups and committees. At this critical juncture, Burne-Jones chose instead to commit with fresh vigor to his mission of challenging Victorian society through painting and craft. According to Georgiana Burne-Jones, herself a socialist agitator, her husband was not betraying Morris, but holding fast to his own calling: "Morris was growing more and more restless and disturbed in mind by the conditions of modern life, and his conscience was dragging him towards some definite work for its amendment, while Edward held that it was always a mistake, if not a wrong thing, for a man to swerve from the exercise of his own special gift, or seek another way of helping the world" (96-97). His disapproval of Morris lay not with his radical beliefs, but with what Burne-Jones saw as Morris's denial of his true vocation and his abandonment of a project that had, up until this point, been carried out together.

The collaboration of text and image within *The Legend of the Briar Rose* could thus be interpreted as an acknowledgement of and return to their shared life of art, Morris's words serving to enrich Burne-Jones's vision. Taken together, the series vividly expresses both men's most deeply held ideals: the need to liberate the Victorian era from the devastation of the nineteenth century through the revival of artistic handicraft and pleasurable labor, the return to an intimate appreciation of the beauty of nature, and the realization of true social fellowship and equality. Thus the *Briar Rose* series is not a static, hazy daydream, but the unfolding of a quest, propelled forward by the restless motion of the ever arching, rhythmic waves of the briars. As we follow the knight on his journey, we pass through allegorical represen-

tations of the masculine domain of war and politics, before encountering the feminine sphere of the arts and, at last, beauty and love personified. The knight's engagement with each of these symbolic realms remains ambiguous; unlike the fairy tale, Burne-Jones's depiction of the *Briar Rose* calls for prolonged and careful consideration to decipher its exhortation to modernity.

The ability to perceive this radical stance seems to have been obscured throughout much of the twentieth century. By contrast, the confrontational and revelatory qualities of the paintings were noted by a number of contemporary critics. For example, in 1904, Fortunée de Lisle identified the knight as a "type of the thinker, the reformer, the man who has an ideal before him, and is awake and free, while those around him lie dreaming old dreams, shackled by the ties and conventions of the centuries" (137). For his part, French critic Robert de la Sizeranne marveled not only at the work itself, but also at the seriousness of the crowds that gathered at Agnew's to view the *Briar Rose*, observing that visitors dedicated an hour or more to quiet contemplation of the work, "allowing [the paintings] gradually to diffuse the subtle atmosphere of their influence, waiting, as it were, till the picture has delivered its message, and then carefully carrying away the new revelation it has vouchsafed" (516). Performing an analogous role to the sleeping figures arrayed across the four canvases, viewers immersed themselves within a vivid dream vision from which they were intended to wake with fresh eyes and a galvanized mind.

This theme of dreaming as a privileged state, but not a permanent one, was a central tenet shared by Burne-Jones and Morris that arose from their study of the literary tradition of the medieval dream vision. From the beginning of their careers, both men were influenced by a number of medieval texts that employ the dream vision conceit, including the French courtly poem *Roman de la Rose*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women*, as well as Francesco Colonna's later Italian text, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. The prevalence of the dream within Burne-Jones's work has long been acknowledged, largely to the artist's detriment. And yet, Morris also adopted the mode of the dream vision for his two most strongly political works of literary fiction, the socialist utopian novels *A Dream of John Ball* (1886) and *News from Nowhere* (1890), the latter written and published perhaps not coincidentally in the same year that Burne-Jones completed the *Briar Rose* series. Morris employed the

dream lens not to provide a de-politicized and detached stance but as a means of actively challenging the nineteenth century, of reflecting the world back upon itself within a new ideological framework. It is not for the sake of lingering within a fantastical reverie that we are shown these dream worlds; instead, their beauty is intended to strengthen our resolve to transform our waking reality.³

At the start of this paper, I argued for the crucial importance of upending our perception of Burne-Jones as the escapist dreamer. Informed by the same medieval tradition that inspired Morris, Burne-Jones likewise culled a provocative power from the dream mode. That Burne-Jones actively drew upon this potent trope of the transformative dream state is boldly asserted within the *Briar Rose* series not only by the valorous figure of the knight who vigilantly observes the unfolding vision before him, but also by the secondary figure of the scribe who lies at the feet of the king in the second panel, *The Council Chamber*. Swathed in deep blue drapery, his head perched upright upon his hand in the pose of a romantic poet, the pages of a manuscript still open before him, this figure supersedes that of the hunched and ancient king in commanding the attention of the viewer. Despite being trapped in a slumbering state along with the many prone courtiers around him, the scribe appears to be engaged in cerebral activity. Within Burne-Jones's own work, this figure finds a crucial referent, namely, that of the sleeping Chaucer in the artist's designs for a series of works based upon the dream vision tale, *The Legend of Good Women*.⁴ The reclining scribe thus embodies the principle of the revelatory dream and, as an imposing presence within the second panel of the *Briar Rose* series, echoes the exhortation offered earlier by the knight. While the prince summons the viewer to join him upon his heroic quest, the scribe evokes a more contemplative reception of this epiphanic vision. The scribe seemingly suggests that while all may sleep, the dreamer alone will wake from this cursed time with the knowledge to create the world anew.

As a secondary figure in the symbolic program of the *Briar Rose* series, the scribe functions as an intellectual, masculine counterpart to the chivalric knight. The princess, a paragon of love and beauty, is similarly complemented by a supporting character, the weaving woman. Seated at the far right of the *Garden Court* and draped in a vibrant shade of rose, the enchanted maiden asleep at her loom draws the viewer's eye. In a disturbing moment of suspended animation, her hand stretches out as if eager to begin her work again, but in the words

of Morris's poem, "the restless shuttle lieth still." Paired with the sundial-like spindle on the left of the image, her loom is faithful to the prominent place of spinning within the traditional "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale. However, the compositional weight accorded to this final figure as the guardian to beauty's chamber holds further implications. The image of the weaving woman is mythologically potent, traditionally associated with the life- and death-dealing Fates. The concept of fate, of awaiting the appointed hour, represents a fundamental force not only within the schema of the *Briar Rose* series, but also within the broader scope of Burne-Jones's career. Whereas Morris came to believe that social change and revolution were imminent events that could be quickened through political agitation, Burne-Jones felt that the uprising was still many years away. Accordingly, the knight in *The Briar Wood* is destined to succeed not necessarily because he is more courageous than those who have fallen before him, but because he has arrived at the fated moment. And yet, Burne-Jones did not turn away from the crisis at hand, but set himself to work for the betterment of future generations. When the time came, such enduring works as *The Legend of the Briar Rose* would survive as an artistic exemplar to guide the awakening from out of the darkness of the Victorian age.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the weaving woman personifies the act of artistic labor, emphasizing not only the lost practice of craft in daily life, but also the status of the *Briar Rose* series as itself a work of decorative art. Just as the threads are woven together upon her loom to form the lush green Morrisian cloth which supports her slumped figure, so too do the curving vines of the thorny and flowered briar unite the canvases into a patterned whole, transformed into pure artistic gesture, exemplifying the indexical trace of artistic labor and the freedom of decorative rhythm. The paintings take on the quality of a tapestry, tied together not only by the repetition of the briar, but also by the minute realization of each equally privileged fictive material. By foregrounding the decorative qualities of his monumental painted series, Burne-Jones further radicalized its import, rendering its very surface a declaration of egalitarianism and fellowship. The weaver at her loom thus establishes the impending awakening as one in which art, nature, and social fellowship will exist in mutual harmony as the interwoven parts of a seamless whole.

Only with such an understanding of the series in mind can we understand the power it had for contemporary viewers. For example,

writing in 1891, scientist and author Grant Allen described the *Briar Rose* series as the highest visual embodiment of the Celtic spirit, an ethnographic temperament he credited with not only an artistic proclivity for the decorative, but also for the promotion of political radicalism and a demand for "free land, free speech, human equality, and human brotherhood" (272). Rendering evident the allegorical themes of social, political, and artistic awakening in the *Briar Rose*, Allen writes: "The Celt in Britain, like Mr. Burne-Jones's enchanted princess, has lain silent for ages in an enforced long sleep; but the spirit of the century, pushing aside the weeds and briars of privilege and caste, has set free the sleeper at last, as with a blast from its horn, and to-day the Celt awakes again to fresh and vigorous life" (267).

This paper should not be understood as an exhaustive reading of the multivalent interpretive possibilities found within this richly nuanced work. Rather, I hope that I have demonstrated the radical ideological nature of Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose* series and the work's concurrent demand for absorptive engagement and careful consideration. Only those who are trapped in a somnolent state themselves could dismiss *The Legend of the Briar Rose* as merely idle and escapist.

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NOTES

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¹The *Briar Rose* series progressed through several iterations over the course of Burne-Jones's career. The first series, often called the small set, was begun in 1869 for patron William Graham and completed in 1873. The set consists of three canvases, *The Briar Wood*, *The Council Chamber*, and *The Rose Bower*, and all are now in the collection of the Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico. The definitive series of four large canvases, *The Legend of the Briar Rose*, installed in Buscot Park in 1895 and part of the Faringdon Collection, was dated collectively by the artist as 1870 to 1890. However, while he began four canvases in 1874 for this large set, all were abandoned and subsequently begun anew, with the exception of the first canvas, *The Briar Wood*. The three abandoned canvases were taken up again following the completion of *The Legend of the Briar Rose* in 1890 and finished for sale. Of this third and incomplete set, *The Council Chamber* (1872-92) is now in the collection of the Delaware Art Museum, *The Garden Court* is now in the collection of

the Bristol Museums and Art Gallery, and *The Rose Bower* is now at the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin. In addition, there are numerous surviving preparatory works, including most notably a series of large gouache and chalk studies for the female figures in *The Garden Court* in the collection of the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

²Elizabeth Prettejohn has also recently advocated for this reassessment of the nature of the supposed political schism between Burne-Jones and Morris, as well as asserting Burne-Jones's radicalism (248-53).

³For a further exploration of the central importance of the dream trope to Morris's socialist utopian fiction and political thought, see Thompson 674-75, 694; and Holzman 115.

⁴For example, see the cartoon *Chaucer Asleep* (1864) in the collection of the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and the corresponding stained glass panel *Chaucer Asleep* (1864) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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