

Quest, Love and Leisure in the Walled Garden: The *Roman de la Rose* and Edward Burne-Jones

Background notes

Ruth Smith – 18 November 2015



Edward Burne-Jones, *Romaunt of the Rose: The Heart of the Rose*, 1901, wool and silk tapestry on cotton warp, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, (tapestry's chalk and pencil design exists from 1881).



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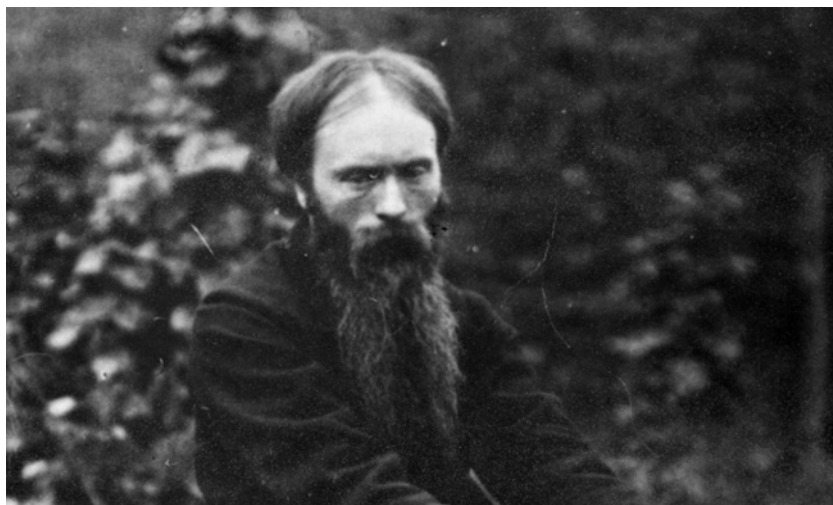
Edward Burne-Jones

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones was born in 1833 in Birmingham. In 1852 he enrolled at Oxford University where he met William Morris. Both were intending to work for the church but as their friendship deepened they discovered their intense love of art and architecture. Together they explored the Oxfordshire countryside, drawing the landscape and churches. In 1853 Burne-Jones began to read John Ruskin and discussed with Morris his references to Pre-Raphaelitism, and later that summer saw for the first time Pre-Raphaelite paintings in the collection of Thomas Combe. Around this time, Burne-Jones also discovered the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was to inspire him more than any artist in the early years of his career. On a visit to northern France in 1855 with Morris, Burne-Jones announced his intention to become an artist. From 1856 Burne-Jones joined Rossetti's studio and from 1857-8 the two worked together on a scheme of murals for the debating chamber of the new Oxford Union building. This venture bonded the artists and ideas emerged about how Pre-Raphaelitism might adapt to romantic and historically remote subjects. This experience led to the second phase of Pre-Raphaelitism. By the late 1850s Burne-Jones was a recognised figure in London art circles. Ruskin began to take an interest, saying of him 'the most wonderful of all the Pre-Raphaelites in redundance of delicate and pathetic fancy.'

In 1860 Burne-Jones married Georgiana Macdonald (1840-1920). In 1861 they had a son, Philip, and in 1865, a daughter, Margaret. In 1861 Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was set up. Burne-Jones did a large amount of design work for the firm. Now, in addition to painting, he was designing stained glass windows and tapestries, becoming a central figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement.

As the 1860s drew to an end, Burne-Jones's mood darkened. Since 1867 he had been having an affair with the sculptor Maria Zambaco, which came to a disastrous end in the early 1870s with her attempted suicide and his mental breakdown. Ruskin and Burne-Jones's relationship also disintegrated around this time. Nevertheless during the 1880s Burne-Jones became perhaps the most widely admired British painter of his generation. He died in 1898 at home.

For the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, Burne-Jones, along with the rest of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, had fallen dreadfully out of fashion. Towards the later part of the century Victorian art became more popular and more seriously acknowledged.



Edward Burne-Jones, Hulton Archive/Getty Images

***Roman de la Rose* and Harley 4425**

The text of *Roman de la Rose* was begun around 1220 by Guillaume de Lorris and continued by Jean de Meun between 1269-1278. It was a hugely popular text in the Middle Ages which was copied repeatedly and was widely disseminated. Geoffrey Chaucer also made a translation, by which Burne-Jones came to read the poem. Elements situate it within the tradition of the courtly love-lyric, but its cruder aspects, mainly in de Meun's section, relate it to the style of early troubadour poetry. It is unclear whether de Lorris's section was left complete or unfinished. De Lorris makes a clear attempt to situate his text within the tradition of treatises on the theory of love and quotes the fourth-century Latin author Macrobius. The lesson 'in which the whole art of love is contained' is communicated in the form of a dream, a frequently used device in Latin literature. It allegorically describes the progress of a love affair where a male lover dreams he rises from his bed, goes for a walk and discovers a walled garden. As he explores inside, he encounters a beautiful rosebud. While he gazes at it, the God of Love shoots him and takes him hostage. The quest hereafter is to reach the rosebud with which he has fallen desperately in love.

The *Roman de la Rose*, Harley 4425, now in the British Library, was Burne-Jones's favourite manuscript at the British Museum. This richly decorated Netherlandish manuscript was made between 1490-1500 for Engelbert II, Count of Nassau and Vianden and the text was copied from a printed edition from Lyon, probably around 1487. Its rich ornamentation appealed to the eclectic medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Furthermore, due to the rise in medieval studies, it was of high importance to Victorian historians and antiquarians.



The Garden of Pleasure, in *Roman de la Rose*, Harley 4425, British Library, f. 12v, Netherlands, 1490-1500.

Medievalism

The Medieval Revival was a phenomenon that grew from the mid-eighteenth century. It flourished throughout the nineteenth century, and resonated well into the twentieth, shaping the way those living in England came to imagine their history and conceive their identity. It existed in two particular threads: the impulse of recovery by historians and antiquarians, and the imaginative eclecticism of artists and writers. The medieval era represented a golden age untouched by the industrial revolution and capitalism. This was particularly attractive to the artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement. For example, the medieval craftsman saw his work from start to finish, rather than the modern production line model where workers are distanced from the products they make. Due to this longing for times past, artists referred to romantic ideas of the Middle Ages in their work and in their lives. Medievalism manifested in the aesthetics of their works, (in the formal, romantic, and symbolic) but also in their processes and techniques. For Burne-Jones, amongst this heightened interest in the medieval era, *Roman de la Rose* inspired him aesthetically, but the romance of the allegorical poetry also resonated with him. We can also see how he looked to works like *Roman de la Rose* for subject matter in which he might explore his own predicament, state of mind or fantasies.



Augustus Pugin, *Contrasts: or a parallel between the noble edifices of the middle ages, and the corresponding buildings of the present day; shewing the present decay of taste*, (Edinburgh, 1898), p. 131.

Here Pugin compares a town in 1840 to its 1440 self. Bellowing chimneys replace the church spires along the horizon. A building in the style of a neoclassical temple has been added to the older church in the foreground. A prison is also included in the 1840 depiction, suggesting that as society's taste has disintegrated, so has its morality.

Space for Notes:

The Quest of Merry May

Inside Garden Walls

The Battle: Morality and Moment

The Dream Picture

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