



Fig. 1. William De Morgan. *Galleon in Full Sail*. c.1888, dish with red lustre decoration, 14 inches; private collection.

A KELMSCOTT PLAY

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Musings from the editor's desk.

Everything about W.B. Yeats's *The Shadowy Waters* (1900) is Pre-Raphaelite. First is the book's binding, with its Celtic-style lettering hyphenated horizontally across the top of its tall, slim spine. Still more distinctive is the decorative flower on the front cover, a gold-tooled blossom on navy-blue cloth. This golden rose in the upper-right corner is frayed beyond its full bloom, with one tear-shaped petal having dropped off toward the lower-left corner. Framed by this symbolic artwork is a play I remember first reading about in an essay by T.S. Eliot, who described the young Yeats as an accomplished poet of the Pre-Raphaelite school: "The play, *The Shadowy Waters*, seems to me one of the most perfect expressions of the vague and enchanted beauty of that school" (256). The scene of the play is a ship with a crew of pirates plotting the death of their leader, Forgael, who is dissatisfied with the material spoils of plunder, bored by both "gold and women taken in war" (28). With his magical harp, he can control his cut-throat crew, and when they plunder a ship wherein "nearer to the sail / A woman lies among embroideries" like a queen (24), his harp casts its spell over this femme fatale so that *she* falls in love with *him*. But Forgael resists the "froth" of mortal love on earth (53), determined to sail westward to the end of the world.

If I were a schoolboy eager for a sequel to *Treasure Island* I would be as disappointed as Eliot was with what Yeats makes of his dramatic premise: "Yet it strikes me – this may be an impertinence on my part – as the western seas desecrated through the back window of a house in Kensington, an Irish myth for the Kelmscott Press, and when I try to visualize the speakers in the play, they have the great dim, dreamy eyes of the knights and ladies of Burne-Jones" (256). Indeed, such artifice is what makes this play about pirates so characteristically Pre-Raphaelite. As Walter Pater reminds us in *The Renaissance*, the

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 17 (Spring 2008)

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literary grotesque is central to Pre-Raphaelite art and literature: “Everywhere there is an unbroken system of correspondences” (29), with “grotesque emblems” (38) that overcome the boundaries of “rigidly defined opposites” (17) through the “picturesque union of contrasts” (31), the “strange interfusion of sweetness and strength” (62), the “interfusion of the extremes of beauty and terror” (67). To visualize this Pre-Raphaelite interest in the jarring juxtaposition of incongruities known as the grotesque, I draw on the metaphor of the attics, cellars, and closets of Camelot: concrete images of the real in unexpected juxtaposition with the ideal. I continually caution students not to be misled by the oft-quoted generalizations equating the Pre-Raphaelites with a Ruskinian naturalism, reminding them instead that Pre-Raphaelite art is epitomized by its paradoxical presentation of a literary subject in a naturalistic setting with a decorative style. The stage direction of Yeats’s *Shadowy Waters* describes the setting as looking less like a rogue ship of pirates than like a De Morgan ceramic of a galley in full sail (fig. 1); of Yeats’s several versions of the play, each revision increases the beauty of the ship bathed in dark shades of blues and greens with some glimmer of “a little copper here and there” (*Variorum* 317). This is the dreamworld of myth and romance, but with the copper lustre of a ceramic marking the precious fragility of the Decadent end of the Pre-Raphaelite world.

Pre-Raphaelite plays like Wilde’s *Salome* and Yeats’s *Shadowy Waters* are seldom performed because they forsake dramatic action for enchanting poetry and colourful pageantry, resembling poetry recitations, painted frescoes, and woven tapestries more than they do the conventional dramas of western culture. Yeats has indeed framed his pirates within the illustrated borders of a Kelmscott romance, where the design of the page and the power of the incantation are more important than the clarity of the argument. As Yeats maintained, “the plot of the play has, however, no definite old story for its foundation, but was woven to a very great extent out of certain visionary experiences” (*Variorum* 1284). Expressed as visionary poetry, the play reminds me of the mesmerizing logic of the ghazal genre practised by Robert Bly: with the slain souls of a rival crew ascending as a flock of birds, the spiritually adrift Forgael observes that “we are nearly / A quarter of the heavens from our right way” (27).

The play thus unfolds as a series of descriptive images: a single oar raised aloft leaves a ship adrift amid the winds and waters of the mutable world; cascading over a stream of water where the world ends are the archetypal apple blossoms shaken off their fiery boughs by the flight of a kingfisher; nets of seductive hair and heavenly stars are woven together to entangle us all within the heart’s desire for love. Such images typify the power of Pre-Raphaelite art, which lies not in a mimetic verisimilitude, but rather in the enchantment of decorative artifice. *The Shadowy Waters* is a Kelmscott play because it

provides that same Pre-Raphaelite enchantment of decorative artifice we experience when we hear sung as a song the trance-like refrain of a ballad and when we see hung on a wall the jewel-like silk of a tapestry.

Dramatic conflict emerges not from the action but from the pattern of imagery: the winds and waters contrasted with the holy woods and mountain peaks, the nets of hair and heavenly stars contrasted with the apple blossoms and streams at the ends of the earth, the ascents of birds and the souls of the dead that “wake to their desire” (21) contrasted with Forgael’s order to “bend lower” for the choreography of a deadly ambush (24) and his climactic submission to “bend lower” beneath the tresses of his partner’s hair (57). As the curtain closes with the twilight imagery of Dectora’s enshrouding hair, we anticipate the couple awakening to a new dawn wherein the intensity of love will approximate the eternity of the immortal gods. Forgael’s resistance to Dectora and his power over her suggest that Yeats is exploring the myth of the femme fatale and overcoming the fear of the myth itself. His series of images turns the myth from the concrete image to an abstract ideal: concrete images of a lover risking death for love and thereby consumed by consummation are replaced by abstract notions of turning the idle dream of immortality into a committed marriage to intensity.

Yeats is moving in the opposite direction of Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the ballad that Morris, according to Laurence Housman, “declared ... to have been the germ from which all the poetry of the [Pre-Raphaelite] group sprang” (19). While Keats exploits the misogynist image as a means of visualizing the ideal that leaves us dissatisfied with reality, Yeats moves from the abstract ideal to a concrete image that promises the possibility of resolution. Forgael permits Dectora to sever the rope that binds their ship with the ship of his crew, not to drift away in love but to share his quest with a partner. Such hope should be tempered, however, by the curious stage direction introducing Forgael’s last line: “(*The harp begins to murmur to itself*): The harp-strings have begun to cry out to the eagles” (57). The theatre audience must rely on Forgael’s interpretation, whereas the reader recognizes that the omniscient stage direction denies Forgael’s affirmation, the play thus ending with the dramatic irony of Forgael’s self-deception.

Yeats is staging a dramatic enactment of Wilde’s abstract metaphor rather than Keats’s concrete metaphor for the femme fatale. One may be filled, Wilde tells us in “The Critic as Artist,” “with that ΕΡΩΣ ΤΩΝ ΑΔΥΑΤΩΝ, that *amour de l’impossible*, which falls like a madness on many who think they live securely and out of reach of harm, so that they sicken suddenly with the poison of unlimited desire, and, in the infinite pursuit of what they may not obtain, grow faint and swoon or stumble.” Wilde explains that the Greek and French phrases for such passion are epitomized in English by a single word: beauty. “Beauty is the symbol of symbols.... When it shows itself, it shows us the

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whole fiery-coloured world” (264). Yeats repeatedly echoes Keats’s ballad, Morris’s *Roots of the Mountains*, and Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon*, and will in turn be echoed by Eliot’s human voices in “Prufrock,” but it is the fiery and smouldering world of Pater and Wilde – their gem-like flames about to burn out – that Yeats is staging.

This Decadent phase of Pre-Raphaelite literature is clearly delineated when we compare Yeats’s dramatic poetry with Morris’s poetic prose. Embracing what Eliot resists, Yeats loved the prose of Morris’s Kelmescott romances as “the most beautiful language I had ever read – fitt[ing] the journey to woods and wells beyond the world” (“Cuchulain” 4). But while Morris managed to balance the literary, the naturalistic, and the decorative, Yeats dismissed the naturalistic element in favour of the literary and ornamental with the determined intention of making his art overly sophisticated and intrusively artificial. Morris’s language conveys the spring-like innocence of romance, transporting us to the heroic ideal; Yeats’s language conveys the wintry melancholy of his world-weary audience, thereby distancing the heroic dream from our mundane world. Yeats creates a deliberate, self-consciously aesthetic literature as a haunted text, here haunted by the distance of ironic disaffection between the golden realm of art and the brazen reality of our lives, leaving the golden realm reduced to the artifice of a painted sail on a ceramic that offers unsustainable glimpses of some glimmer of “copper here and there.” The Pre-Raphaelite visionaries considered the culture of art more vital than the nature of life, the golden realm of the cosmos we envision more vital than the brazen reality of the chaos we experience. But their *fin de siècle* descendants, haunted by the abyss between the worlds of the poetic and the prosaic, stared with fixation at the artifice of a Kelmescott Press book, the fragility of a painted ceramic, and the imminent decay of even the gold-embossed image of a rose blossom.

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