

BURNE-JONES'S *BRIAR ROSE*: NEW CONTEXTS

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Edward Burne-Jones, *The Rose Bower*, final panel of the 1890 *Briar Rose* series, Buscot Park. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire.

Abstract

This article discusses *The Briar Rose* (1863/64–1895), Burne-Jones's series of pictures inspired by the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*, in relation to the work of John Ruskin. Although Burne-Jones's personal and intellectual friendship with Ruskin is well documented, there are, with three or four exceptions, no art-historical references to Ruskin in Burne-Jones's work after 1875. My approach is justified by the evidence of material, some unpublished and some not addressed previously, which points to Burne-Jones's continuous dialogue with Ruskin as a friend and critic, in an experimental space where Ruskin's presence was continuously acknowledged, even after the onset of his mental illness. In this context, I propose to show that among the literary sources

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feeding into *The Briar Rose* we can count Ruskin's appreciation of Jacopo della Quercia's tomb of Ilaria di Caretto and Carpaccio's *Dream of St Ursula*. Burne-Jones's response to these two sources informs the changes he makes to *The Briar Rose* from one version to another, departing further away from his initial source of inspiration, to construct a surprisingly modern artistic statement.

Burne-Jones worked on *The Briar Rose* between 1863–64 and 1895, producing four series and many related preparatory drawings and pictures not included in the series. The series virtually span his entire artistic career and are crucial in understanding Burne-Jones's path to artistic maturity. *The Briar Rose* provides, on the one hand, a relatively consistent framework for tracing the changes and developments in Burne-Jones's visual vocabulary; on the other hand, it highlights the inquiries he made into the nature of his art, in the course of exploring the story of Sleeping Beauty. Considered representative of Burne-Jones's work, although never ground-breaking, *The Briar Rose* has been discussed in various contexts – Pre-Raphaelite, Romantic, Aesthetic and Symbolist ideologies and visual idioms, and the poetry of Tennyson and Morris, for example – but little has been said about its relation to the work of John Ruskin. In fact, Ruskin hardly figures in any art-historical reference to Burne-Jones's work after 1875, with the exception of his commission for a *Rape of Proserpine*, a shield for the Guild of St George, the May Queen Whitelands Cross and stained glass designs for the windows of Whitelands Chapel. Given the close personal and intellectual friendship of Ruskin and Burne-Jones, I propose to consider *The Briar Rose* in relation to Ruskin's work, and investigate the extent to which the series reflects Burne-Jones's dialogue with Ruskin as a friend and critic.

Burne-Jones benefited from Ruskin's patronage from the beginning of his career. Ruskin introduced him to Italian art. 'You must let me give you all kind of drawings for years to come when they happen to be pretty, so I shall feel comforted',¹ Burne-Jones wrote to Ruskin in 1862 from Venice, where he was furthering his artistic education under the guidance and at the expense of his friend. 'The look of the pictures', he continued, 'has done me good; I feel that I could paint so much better already. [...] You shall have drawing after drawing when I get home – original drawings, not copies'.² Burne-Jones's turn of phrase indicates his gratitude to Ruskin for showing him the art of Italy. But it also betrays a forcefulness of intent – 'you *must* let me give' and 'you *shall* have' – which suggests, beside

¹ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1912), I, p. 245; subsequently cited as GBJ followed by volume and page number.

² Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Edward Burne-Jones archives, letter dated June 1862, Venice; subsequently cited as FMC.

Burne-Jones's early confidence in his painterly abilities, his sense that a permanent rapport with Ruskin is vital for his art. In his promise of pretty drawings, Burne-Jones is as generous as he is selfish. 'I shall feel comforted', he writes, implying not his wish to please Ruskin, but his determination that his best work should engage with Ruskinian thought. Although Burne-Jones, as indeed Ruskin, was prone to exaggerations, his promise endured,³ despite the challenge of rifts over the art of past and present times, and Ruskin's intellectual decline after the mid-1880s.

Burne-Jones constantly acknowledged Ruskin's formative role, even though he admitted freely to painting against Ruskin's advice. Lady Burne-Jones recalls that, at the beginning of the 1870s, 'Ruskin was distressed by Edward's plan of work, which did not include the kind of [nature] study he considered essential'.⁴ In the spring of 1883, shortly before Ruskin was going to lecture about the artist's work in Oxford, Burne-Jones writes to him nonchalantly:

When will you come? [...] Shall you say I do all I ought not to do, and won't be guided, and am obstinate and nasty, and tiresome. I am working very hard to get two pictures done for Spring [at the Grosvenor] – one is *The Wheel of Fortune*, you won't like it – one is six little boobies sitting in a seat that I call *The Hours* – you will like it perhaps a little bit.⁵

Burne-Jones's letter is playful but nonetheless truthful and symptomatic of his relations with Ruskin. He wished for Ruskin's praise but did not pursue it. And even more than praise he wished for Ruskin's participation, real or virtual, in his artistic experience. Burne-Jones's departure from Ruskin's teaching and his occasional defiance are doubled by an unusual attraction between these two very different men, united by their understanding of creativity. Ruskin was concerned with historic and cultural cycles; he preached – and hoped mankind would take notice – on the beauty of goodness and natural truth, and the value of morality. Burne-Jones thought on a lesser scale, indulging his atemporal visions and aiming for jewel-like beauty. The point where their beliefs coincide is the revelatory nature of the artistic

³ There are several unpublished letters (FMC), mostly dating from the late 1870s and 1880s, which suggest Burne-Jones's need to refer his work to Ruskin, either jokingly or otherwise. Many of these letters were penned when meeting face to face was impossible, so Ruskin was technically unable to see any work. This points to Burne-Jones's conflicted attitude about the ground where he wanted to engage with Ruskin, but is unambiguous about his wish to do so. In May 1886, for instance, Burne-Jones writes: 'I have been writing incessantly to you, in a spiritual sense. [...] I often indite letters to thee when I work, and you are more and more in my life as time goes on'.

⁴ GBJ, II, pp. 17–18.

⁵ FMC, letter dated 14 March 1883.

image. For Ruskin, good art expressed, with the pre-linguistic immediacy of the visual, the moral principle at the heart of the natural world. Ruskin observed nature closely, convinced that understanding the seen would help him visualize the unseen articulations of the world; his visions evolve, accordingly, in natural terms. These visible manifestations of the unseen,⁶ which Ruskin made his life's work to reveal, interpret, or facilitate, were to him as much a part of reality as any natural element or phenomenon. Burne-Jones, on the other hand, fed his imagination with stories and pictures, chosen for the uplifting aesthetic experience they induced. Like Ruskin, he believed in the artist's calling to serve humanity; but, unlike him, Burne-Jones primarily sought to show the world beauty, of which he conceived as the gateway to divinity.⁷ Although his visions are often illogical and mysterious, and rooted in his own imagination, unlike Ruskin's, who saw art as divine inspiration, Burne-Jones inhabits them with the same ease and conviction as if they had been real. In a larger sense, the things Burne-Jones and Ruskin saw with their mind's eye and recorded as an image, or interpreted in an image produced by someone else, were, to their belief, an important part of reality – the path to aesthetic or moral grace. But whereas Ruskin appreciated most in an image its organic nature, reflecting life itself,⁸ Burne-Jones was more concerned with the idea of beauty and its particular manifestations.

Ruskin and Burne-Jones's belief in the autonomous life of the artistic image, granted to it by its revelatory nature, is the reason for their extraordinary bond. There is overwhelming evidence that Burne-Jones's early work engages with Ruskin at personal and artistic level. Past and present critical opinions recognize Ruskin's tremendous influence in shaping the first half of Burne-Jones's career. I will argue here that Burne-Jones's dialogue with Ruskin continued well beyond this point, generating an experimental space where Ruskin's presence was continuously acknowledged.

In the 1860s, Ruskin became interested in Greek mythology. He was particularly attracted to the myth of Persephone, which he continued to

⁶ Ruskin explains in *Praeterita* how his life-long habits of thought can be traced back to the religious instruction his mother gave him in his childhood: 'her unquestioning evangelical faith in the literal truth of the Bible placed me as soon as I could conceive or talk, in the presence of an unseen world'. *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–12), vol. 35, p. 128; subsequently cited as *WJR* followed by volume and page number.

⁷ Writing to Frances Horner, with whom he corresponded extensively during the last two decades of his life, often elaborating on issues regarding his art, Burne-Jones confesses that 'the highest thing I know [is] beauty. And when imagination is added thereto, we are close on the secret of all things, the hidden recesses of God' (FMC, 1891).

⁸ 'The teaching of Art, as I understand it, is the teaching of all things', claimed Ruskin in the April 1877 issue of *Fors Clavigera*.

interpret highly imaginatively to the end of his creative life. He referred to the goddess of vegetation and the underworld by her Latin name, Proserpine, and associated with her the young Irish woman with whom he fell in love, Rose La Touche. Ruskin's fascination with Proserpine, at times driven to obsession, awoke Burne-Jones's interest. As well as following closely Ruskin's work on myth, he liked to consult obscure sources on ancient tales about mythological figures. Lady Burne-Jones records a little note Burne-Jones sent to Charles Eliot Norton, also a close friend of Ruskin's. The note draws Norton's attention to the new *Records of the Past*, 'a series of thin, cheap books published by Samuel Bagster & Co [...], translations of cuneiform and hieroglyph'. Burne-Jones explains that

there is a descent of Ishtar, which is Aphrodite, into Persephone country, too beautiful – made long before the Greeks knew of her. An old world, and so beautiful, isn't it?⁹

Burne-Jones's comment betrays not only familiarity with Ruskin's work on myth, but genuine interest in his thinking, which confirms that the foundation of their friendship was as strong personally as it was intellectually. Ruskin had argued in *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866) that Neith, Athena, and the Holy Spirit were personifications of the same governing principle, and that the images relating to these mythological figures bear the condensed wisdom of the Egyptian, Greek, and Christian civilizations according to their respective understanding of the life-giving spiritual principle. Burne-Jones's attention is drawn in 1875, the year of Rose's death, by the similarities between the Egyptian and Greek mythological figures for love and death. He is attracted by 'beautiful' scenarios involving the regeneration of love through contact with death, the very thing Ruskin was hoping to achieve in his difficult relationship with Rose. In the context of Ruskin and Burne-Jones's shared interest in the cycles of death and regeneration governed by the figure of Proserpine, I also propose to re-examine the symbolism of sleep in *The Briar Rose*.

Of the contemporary *Briar Rose* exegetes, Bill Waters associates the motif of sleep in the series with Burne-Jones's 'own withdrawal from contemporary problems. In his last works', Waters believes, 'sleep, symbolising escape, occurs repeatedly, reaching its zenith in *Arthur in Avalon*'.¹⁰ Laurence des Cars¹¹ interprets the Princess's continued sleep as Burne-Jones's rejection of

⁹ GBJ, II, p. 53, letter dated 1875.

¹⁰ Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973), pp. 151–53.

¹¹ Curator at Musée d'Orsay, Paris; author of *The Pre-Raphaelites: Romance and Realism* (2000).

the conventions of narrative, and links the ‘hypnotic abandon’ of sleep with the ‘inward gaze’ favoured by French and Belgian Symbolists.¹² Like Tim Hilton,¹³ Colin Cruise discusses Burne-Jones’s preoccupation with sleep as a sign of ‘internality and longing’. But whereas Hilton considers Burne-Jones’s disengagement from the social and historical regressive, Cruise argues that, caught in the suspended time of sleep and mythology, Burne-Jones’s ‘pictorial narratives’ locate the modern in their ‘self-consciousness and impassivity’.¹⁴ To these interpretations of the significance of sleep in *The Briar Rose*, my argument adds the fact that, while Symbolist visual idioms no doubt influenced him, Burne-Jones’s romantic imagination was also touched by Ruskin’s agony over Rose, narrated through the myth of Proserpine.¹⁵ In his discussion of Burne-Jones’s Symbolist affinities, Stephen Wildman argues that the Englishman was not really a Symbolist at heart and could not share in the excesses of the European movement.¹⁶ Wildman cites ‘artistic temperament, Ruskin’s insistence on “grace and tranquillity” and the narrative instinct that never deserted him’ as the traits placing Burne-Jones outside the Symbolist main stream.¹⁷ It is this latent instinct which directed Burne-Jones to respond to Ruskin’s narrative of love developing, in turn, mythological, artistic, religious, and cosmic proportions. Burne-Jones’s response is twofold: first, as des Cars notices, it subverts the narrative subject of *The Briar Rose* by leaving out the awakening scene; second, I will argue, it creates a subterranean narrative of engagement with Ruskin’s emotional and aesthetic difficulties. The successive changes Burne-Jones made to *The Briar Rose* in response to Ruskin’s impasse also helped the artist to clarify his own position on the relation between imagination and reality. In *The Briar Rose*, Burne-Jones both acknowledges Ruskin’s legacy and abandons it, moving towards the twentieth century. It is important to remember, though, that Burne-Jones’s resulting aesthetic statement is one of reaction, and that Ruskin’s merit in it is significant for problematizing the issues which Burne-Jones explores in *The Briar Rose*.

An essential aspect of Burne-Jones’s dialogue with Ruskin through *The Briar Rose* series is the fact that the dialogue took place *in absentia*. There is

¹² S. Wildman and J. Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), pp. 35–37; subsequently cited as MMA followed by page number.

¹³ Tim Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 189–202.

¹⁴ Colin Cruise, “Sick-sad Dreams”: *Burne-Jones and Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010), pp. 121–40 (p. 130).

¹⁵ Ruskin associated Rose La Touche with Proserpine and St Ursula, and imagined himself involved in various scenarios relating to these figures.

¹⁶ MMA, p. 203.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

no record of Ruskin seeing any of the *Briar Rose* pictures, and it is most likely he never did.¹⁸ I propose to show that, metaphorically speaking, *The Briar Rose* is part of those promised 'pretty' 'drawing after drawing' and that, in producing the series, Burne-Jones was thinking primarily of *his* comfort – the clarification of his aesthetic position. The implications of considering *The Briar Rose* as Burne-Jones's direct engagement with Ruskin's aesthetics are far-reaching: in this light, the series is transformed from a remarkable but personal triumph for the artist into a turning point in British nineteenth-century art.

Burne-Jones designed the first series¹⁹ based on *Sleeping Beauty* in 1863–64. This is a set of nine tiles which follows the tale closely, showing scenes from the sleeping palace, the prince in the briar wood, and later kissing the princess awake and claiming her as his bride. The central panel foreshadows the 1869 large-scale canvas, *The Prince Entering the Briar Wood*,²⁰ compositionally not much different from the tile, but significantly more sophisticated in style. *The Prince* marks a shift in Burne-Jones's interest, from narrative scenes to a more symbolic focus on sleep and flowering briars. The arching briar branches are present in all subsequent work inspired by *Sleeping Beauty*, at once symbolic motifs and decorative pattern. In 1871, Burne-Jones painted a small watercolour of the sleeping princess.²¹ Unlike the tile version, this picture shows the princess reclining on a stylized bed flanked by briars, asleep, on her own. The prince is missing and so is the climax of the story, the awakening scene. In all subsequent versions of *The Rose Bower*, Burne-Jones avoids all reference to the prince kissing the princess awake. The symbolism of the pictures gradually shifts from reawakening to life and fulfilled love to a more personal idiom, informed by different concerns: artistic privilege, arrested time, eternal beauty, and unperturbed maidenhood, with all its implications of unnaturalness and sterility.

Between 1871 and 1873 Burne-Jones painted the 'small' *Briar Rose* oil series²² for his friend and patron William Graham. There are three finished panels in the series, *The Briar Wood*, *The Council Chamber*, and *The Rose Bower*. *The Briar Wood* is a reworking of the 1869 *Prince*. Although the canvas is populated with sleeping figures and huge flowering briar branches, the mood is of

¹⁸ Ruskin visited William Graham's country house in or before 1878 and saw Burne-Jones paintings in the same room as a print of the tomb of Ilaria di Caretto; had he seen *The Briar Rose* in Graham's London house, he would have most probably commented on the similarities between the princess and *Ilaria*. By the time the 1890 series was exhibited at Agnew's, Ruskin's mental faculties had broken down.

¹⁹ V&A, London; made for the house of watercolourist Myles Birket Foster.

²⁰ Unfinished, oil on canvas, Houghton Hall Collection.

²¹ *Sleeping Beauty*, Manchester City Art Gallery.

²² Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico.

unease. The Prince appears to stand at the edge of a vortex traced by the contorted bodies and branches suggesting a circular movement and threatening to absorb him into their stagnant trap. *The Council Chamber* is radically different from the tile version: the much older, white-bearded king is asleep on a throne which both shelters and dwarfs him. His courtiers have fallen to the floor of a room in danger of being taken over by the briars. To the side of the throne Burne-Jones painted a poppy, menacing symbol of sleep and death. The lines of the throne canopy, the courtiers' bodies, the folds of background drapery and the briar branches suggest a self-perpetuating circularity locking out any external intervention and possibility of restoration to life. *The Rose Bower* is compositionally an enlarged version of the 1871 *Sleeping Beauty* to which Burne-Jones added three maids asleep at the foot of the bed. The most interesting change is the position of the princess on her bed: slightly closer to a relaxed sleep than the previous princess, she begins the gradual sinking into deeper sleep that following versions of *The Rose Bower* will bring to complete rest. The sleeping beauties of later years, including the one Burne-Jones painted in 1886–88 from his daughter Margaret,²³ are oblivious of the prince, safe and forever beautiful and unclaimed in their protective bower. The compositional lines of the 1873 *Rose Bower* avoid the sense of excluding circularity in *The Briar Wood* and *The Council Chamber*. Conceived along horizontals and half-circles, the last picture of the series suggests the need for the vertical of the prince. But although the princess is set in an open, nearly vulnerable space, where the prince is not threatened by the treacherous vortices of bodies and briar stems, she is facing away from the briar wood, the prince and the world, fast asleep. Among the dead and the sleeping who populate the canvases, the princess alone is given a position concurrent with her state. Stretched and shrouded on her bed, she is different from the unsuccessful knights and princes whose contorted bodies were exhausted in the fruitless quest. She is also different from the courtiers and maids overcome by magic at their work, as sleep does not appear to have interfered with her daily routine or caught her unawares. In this *Rose Bower* – and its subsequent versions – the princess appears withdrawn into sleep rather than overcome by it, as if her suspended life were not the effect, but the cause of the spell.

Burne-Jones's 'work-record'²⁴ mentions the completion of the 'small' *Briar Rose* in 1873: 'finished' he wrote, '[...] for [William] Graham'. An entry from 1875 reads 'worked at the [...] rooms in the large *Briar Rose* story', which implies that by that time he had already begun another series. But Burne-Jones does not mention *The Briar Rose* again until 1884, when

²³ *The Sleeping Beauty*, gouache on canvas, private collection, London.

²⁴ FMC, autograph.

he 'took up again [...] the subject'. In 1890, he finished, after many studies and changes of heart, the 'large' *Briar Rose* series: *The Briar Wood*, *The Garden Court*, *The Council Chamber*, and *The Rose Bower*.²⁵ Although it is difficult to say exactly when and for how long Burne-Jones was physically working on the series over the fifteen years it took him to complete it, there are plenty of reasons to believe that *The Briar Rose* was continuously in his thoughts. Between 1874–75 and 1895 Burne-Jones's work continued to relate in various ways to the story of the *Sleeping Beauty* and his version of it, *The Briar Rose*, which gradually gained layer upon layer of private significance beyond the awakening to love.

The 1890 *Briar Wood* version is larger in size and darker in palette than the 1873 one; in it, the roses have lost the blush from their petals and the prince looks gloomier. Although in full armour, the prince's stance suggests meditation rather than action. In the tale, the prince is supposed to cut his way through the briars, in his relentless quest for the princess. While the 1873 prince is eager and energetic, his 1890 replacement is puzzlingly static.

The 1873 *Council Chamber* is certainly recognizable in the 1890 version, which has in the meantime acquired a grander and more sophisticated feel. The tones have paled and gained a silvery brilliance, which takes its cue from the king's cape on the left and a silver-shrouded figure on the right. The throne has changed from the plain wooden canopied chair to an imposing and at the same time ominous space, where the seat is covered with a cloth of expensive-looking sheen and the four posters supporting an unseen canopy fence the king in. The king is wearing his crown as opposed to the simple cloth cap of the previous version and the poppy has changed into an hourglass. Burne-Jones's commentary on sleep is more chilling, as the frozen hourglass is an unforgiving mechanism, devoid of the romantic connotations of sweet poison carried by the poppy. Another change from the 1873 version is the treatment of the floor. In both *The Council Chamber* and *The Garden Court* of the 1890 series, the floor is unnaturally polished. Like a mirror, it reflects the world of the enchanted, sleeping castle back to itself, signalling self-containment and stagnation. The two other panels, *The Briar Wood* and *The Rose Bower*, are, in contrast, spared their own imprisoning reflection, only to locate the source of their stasis in the choices the central figures make rather than in circumstances outside their control. The courtiers and servants appear thus under the spell of the wicked fairies, whereas the prince and princess seem to have colluded with them.

The Garden Court, showing servant girls asleep at the well and at the loom, does not have a counterpart in the 1873 series. John Christian points

²⁵ Buscot Park, Oxfordshire.

out in his essay on ‘*The Briar Rose Series*’²⁶ that there is a note in Burne-Jones’s work record dating from 1872, preceding the 1873 note about his finishing the ‘small’ series. This note mentions ‘4 pictures of Sleeping Beauty – painted in oil for Graham’²⁷ and shows that Burne-Jones’s intention had been to distil the narrative tile sequence of nine scenes into four symbolic moments of the *Sleeping Beauty* story. But although there are some sketches of girls asleep²⁸ together with a highly finished drawing of *The Garden Court*²⁹ dating from the 1870s, only three panels were finally painted for William Graham by 1873. The merits of the 1890 *Garden Court* reside, of course, in its own gracefulness and its position as the third panel in the sequence,³⁰ perfectly complementing the other three to give a sense of progressive peacefulness, from *The Briar Wood* and its agitated canvas to the relaxed lines of *The Rose Bower*. But it also makes clear Burne-Jones’s uninterrupted preoccupation with *The Sleeping Beauty* over a considerable period and his attitude to *The Briar Rose* as quasi-permanent ‘work in progress’.

The Rose Bower in its 1890 version is more peaceful than the one of 1873, and also much sharper in detail and decoration. The tangled hair and amorphous shroud-cum-dress draping the princess’s body are replaced with tidy hair and a clearly drawn body-defining dress, partially covered with a piece of cloth of the same colour, arranged to fall neatly in folds. The key note of the picture is in fact ‘arrangement’: Burne-Jones shows us a princess too perfectly stretched out for sleep and too prettily turning her face away from the briar wood, otherworldly at peace, with not a trace left of the feverishness of tossing and turning suggested in 1873. The roses, too, have changed, and no longer hang huge and ominous over the girls dressed in white and pink to mimic their petals. The 1890 flowers are much smaller and merrier, and decorative rather foreboding; the sense of kinship between rose and princess, suggested in 1873 by the curve of her slightly twisted body, is absent in 1890, as the princess’s body is closer to describing the non-organic horizontals of the bed and the wall hangings rather than the

²⁶ John Christian, ‘*The Briar Rose Series*’, in *Edward Burne-Jones: The Earthly Paradise* (Stuttgart: Stuttgart Staatsgalerie, 2010), pp. 137–55 (p. 140); subsequently cited as EP followed by page number; ‘*The Briar Rose Series*’ is the first full-length essay discussing the series from an art-historical perspective.

²⁷ FMC, autograph.

²⁸ Studies for *The Briar Rose*, pencil, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 1870 (see EP, p. 146).

²⁹ Edward Burne-Jones, *The Garden Court*, graphite, watercolour, highlighted, private collection (see EP, p. 143).

³⁰ The pictures were installed on the walls of the saloon at Buscot Park following Burne-Jones’s directions, and linked, frieze-like fashion, by intermediary panels depicting briars; there can be no confusion about the order of the four main pictures.

curves of the living briar. The 1890 palette is considerably more luminous, which adds a celebratory note to *The Rose Bower* and distances it further from the hint of darkness and disquiet in its previous version.

Burne-Jones produced the last of *The Briar Rose* pictures between 1892 and 1895: *The Council Chamber* (1892),³¹ *The Garden Court* (1893),³² and *The Rose Bower* (1894–95).³³ Compositionally they are closer to the 1873 series, while the colour scheme reflects Burne-Jones's preference for a more austere palette towards the mid-1890s. These last pictures were designed starting with 1874 and abandoned around 1884–85,³⁴ when Burne-Jones decided to redesign the last three panels of the 1890 series,³⁵ after finishing *The Briar Wood*. By 1892, though, Burne-Jones had returned to the abandoned designs to complete them. This explains why the last series has only three pictures, *The Briar Wood* having been included in the 1890 series. The reduced palette and pared down ornament of the final series makes the pictures less circumstantial and enhances their symbolic value; abstracts of the 'large' series, the last three panels of *The Briar Rose* have the remote air of final, measured statement, signalling the end of the story retelling cycle, the winding down of a painter's career and the drawing close of a century.

Of the four series, only the 'large' one was exhibited.³⁶ Shown at Agnew's in 1890, it was enormously popular and instantly recognized as quite an achievement. *The Times* records that 'thousands of the most cultivated people in London hastened to see, and passionately admire, the painter's masterpiece'.³⁷ In the catalogue to the 1998 centenary Burne-Jones exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Stephen Wildman refers to the four 'definitive' *Briar Rose* paintings as the zenith of Burne-Jones's career.³⁸ Martin Harrison and Bill Waters's 1973 monograph presents the 1890 *Briar Rose* as the culmination of Burne-Jones's mature

³¹ Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, USA.

³² Bristol Museums and Art Gallery.

³³ Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.

³⁴ See EP.

³⁵ FMC, autograph: '1855: began another of the *Briar Rose* pictures – the fourth with the Princess asleep'; '1887: re-drew all the figures of the sleeping girls in the third picture of the sleeping palace'; '1888: re-drew and designed the sleeping King, the second of the *Briar Rose* pictures'.

³⁶ The tiles and small oils were commissions, and the last three pictures sold separately as they were finished, despite Burne-Jones's objections that the series should not be broken up.

³⁷ *The Times* (18 June, 1898), p. 13.

³⁸ MMA, p. 314.

style.³⁹ Tim Hilton, although a less favourable critic, also singles out *The Briar Rose*, placing the series among Burne-Jones's most remarkable achievements.⁴⁰ The series were reunited for the *Earthly Paradise* exhibition in Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, and Kunstmuseum, Bern in 2010. John Christian contributed to the catalogue an essay-length study of *The Briar Rose*, the first of this breadth and depth focusing on the series. A critique of the series, he claims, must acknowledge the complexity of the artist. 'The work of Burne-Jones', Christian writes,

is so rich in cultural reference that it is impossible to do critical judgment to a picture without discussing it at length. [...] Burne-Jones was an artist whose career unfolded within ever-expanding circles. [...] This means that there will often be a telling comparison with what a friend or associate was painting, designing, writing or simply doing. [...] Being an intensely literary artist, he is the perfect art-historian's artist.⁴¹

Christian highlights here two crucial points about Burne-Jones's work: its intense literariness and the ever-expanding circles of interest which the artist allowed to feed into his productions. These characteristics, juxtaposed with the idea of Burne-Jones as 'the perfect art-historian's artist', are suggesting an avenue which, because of the very nature of his interest and training, Christian leaves unexplored. Burne-Jones's 'literariness', in the sense of literary sources of inspiration, has provided art historians with valuable material, which has extended our appreciation of *The Briar Rose* from an art-historical perspective. But Burne-Jones's particular kind of literariness operates both inside and outside the scope of art-historical analyses. The complementary discursive meaning – by which I do not mean the narrative charge of the subject, but the artist's narrated aesthetic argument – that *The Briar Rose* carries must also be explored for a fuller critical judgment of the pictures. This narrative of engagement with Ruskin, at both emotional and aesthetic levels, is defined⁴² in part by Burne-Jones's response to Ruskin's appreciation of della Quercia's tomb of Ilaria di Caretto and Carpaccio's *Dream of St Ursula*. His response informs the changes he makes to *The Briar Rose* from

³⁹ Harrison and Waters, *Burne-Jones*, p. 153; 'effective use of linear rhythms, draughtsmanship and controlled design and colour', Bill Waters explains, become primary means of expression of the pictorial idea.

⁴⁰ Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 196.

⁴¹ EP, p. 137.

⁴² There are many other strands which contribute to the shaping of *The Briar Rose* as a response to Ruskin's emotional and aesthetic dilemmas, such as Burne-Jones's exploration of sleep, vegetation, and the myth of Proserpine, and the friends' humorous exchanges and love of game scenarios, which established a virtual 'play' space between them where ideas could be easily tried out.

one version to another, departing further away from his initial source of inspiration, the tale of the *Sleeping Beauty*, to construct a surprisingly modern artistic statement.

Burne-Jones encountered fifteenth-century Ilaria in *Modern Painters* II in the early 1850s, when, as an undergraduate, he began to read Ruskin seriously.⁴³ 'In the Cathedral of Lucca', writes Ruskin,

near the entrance-door of the north transept, there is a monument by Jacopo della Quercia to Ilaria di Caretto, the wife of Paolo Guinigi. I name it not as more beautiful or perfect than other examples of the same period; but as furnishing an instance of the exact and right mean between the rigidity and rudeness of the earlier monumental effigies, and the morbid imitation of life, sleep, or death. (*WōJR* 4.122)

Ruskin keeps referring to this sculpture to the end of his career as 'the most beautiful extant marble-work of the middle ages' (*WōJR* 4.347). In 1873 the image of Ilaria resurfaces in the lecture he gave at Oxford in November and published a year later,⁴⁴ accompanied by his drawing of Ilaria's head. In the lecture Ruskin raises *Ilaria* to the absolute of sculpture:

This statue of the lady of Caretto is the only piece of monumental work I know in the world which unites in perfect and errorless balance the softest mysteries of emotion with the implacable severities of science. [...] Yet observe I do not praise it to you as a supremely wonderful thing at all, but only as a supremely right one. [...] Quercia [...] has given humanity in its perfectness, accepting the glory of death; beside it he will put the lower creature in its obedience, watching the mystery of death. He has put Ilaria's dog at her feet, which rest upon him. [...] But this dog of Quercia's is living; he lays his paws on the outer fold of his mistress's dress [and] lies utterly quiet under her feet [...] His head only is turned to watch the face: Will she not wake, then? (*WōJR* 23.222–23)

Ruskin values *Ilaria* for its 'supremely right' balance between effigy and imitation of sleep, between 'the mysteries of emotion' and 'the severities of science'. By this he means that della Quercia has managed to represent Ilaria in that particular state which is the essence of humanity, transcendence. She does not look like a piece of carved marble, nor is she a young woman

⁴³ In 1853, Burne-Jones quoted in correspondence passages from *Modern Painters* I (1843); he was aware of the criticism Ruskin received in *The Quarterly for The Stones of Venice* (vols II and III, 1853), and read aloud with Morris *The Edinburgh Lectures* (1854); in 1856 he reviewed *Modern Painters* III in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. It is unlikely that he had not also read *Modern Painters* II (1846).

⁴⁴ Lecture V, 'Quercia' in *The Aesthetic and Mathematic Schools of Art in Florence*, *WōJR* 23.221–36.

sleeping. She is shown in 'the glory of death', with the knowledge that she will belong to a different realm when she next awakes. The sculptor's skill, according to Ruskin, lies in having differentiated between two orders of existence: Ilaria's, the virtuous dead passing into immortality, and 'the lower creature's', 'watching the mystery of death'.

As I have shown earlier, the 1873 *Rose Bower* is different in mood from the subsequent sleeping princesses of 1886–88 and 1890. The princess in the earlier version looks agitated in her sleep, the folds of her dress testify to her tossing and turning, her hair is in disorder and her left arm takes, uncomfortably, the weight of her upper body. But in the later versions the mood is profoundly peaceful as the princess stretches weightlessly under the perfect folds of her clothes. Her totally relaxed position gives a sense of permanence and contrasts with the fallen-asleep look of the maids at the foot of the bed, who will wake up once the spell is broken. Like della Quercia, Burne-Jones depicts here two different orders of creatures: those who will eventually come back to life, and the princess, suspended in sleep. 'Will she not wake, then?', the question Ilaria's faithful dog asks mutely, is also well fitted for the lips of the sleeping courtiers and maids. Ruskin's Ilaria can only wake, through her faith, on the other side of death, to her immortal life. But to her dog, she will remain forever sleeping. Burne-Jones's princesses should, according to the legend, 'arise' for the prince like Solomon's beloved at his call, to fulfil the mythical union of lovers and renew the cycle of life. But Burne-Jones has shown his princess sunken in a different kind of sleep, able no more than Ilaria to return to ordinary life. Judging from the changes Burne-Jones made to *The Briar Rose* after 1873, we can safely infer, even without hard evidence of when exactly he read the relevant passages, that he was aware of Ruskin's appraisal of *Ilaria*. The assumption is strengthened by two factors: the importance *Ilaria* commanded in the pantheon of Ruskin's favourite works of art and the fact that *The Rose Bower* is both thematically and compositionally related to it.

In his 1878 'Three Colours of Pre-Raphaelitism', Ruskin again used the example of *Ilaria* to make a point about 'rightness' and beauty in the 'religious schools in painting'. The piece appeared in two consecutive numbers of the *Nineteenth Century* (November and December 1878) in the form of an undelivered Oxford lecture, suggested to Ruskin by a visit to William Graham's country house. 'I was lately staying in a country house', begins Ruskin,

in which, opposite each other at the sides of the drawing-room window, were two pictures, [...] Rossetti's *Annunciation*, and Millais' *Blind Girl*; while, at the corner of the chimney-piece in the same room, there was a little drawing of a Marriage-dance, by Edward Burne-Jones. And in my bedroom, at one

side of my bed, there was a photograph of the tomb of Ilaria di Caretto⁴⁵ at Lucca. (*W&JR* 34.147)

Burne-Jones, a constant reader⁴⁶ of Ruskin, had reasons beyond his regard for his friend and mentor to be interested in 'The Three Colours'. William Graham was his patron, owned the 'small' *Briar Rose*, and, like Rossetti, was a dear friend. Millais was moved by similar innovatory energies; and his own work was being publicly appraised, together with the other two artists', and pitched against classics such as Giotto, Fra Angelico, Luini, Botticelli, Carpaccio, and della Quercia. The context of Ruskin's references to *Ilaria* can only have heightened Burne-Jones's perception of them. Considering the new directions in Burne-Jones's approach to the myth of awakening to life and love, crystallized a decade later in the 1886–88 *Sleeping Beauty*, it becomes clear that Ruskin's interpretation of *Ilaria* informed the changes to *The Briar Rose* after 1873. The *Sleeping Beauty* and later *Rose Bower* versions respond closely, point by point, to Ruskin's interpretation of della Quercia:

Ilaria yet sleeps; the time is not yet come for her to be awakened out of sleep.⁴⁷ [...] And [...] in the marble we may see that the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth: yet as visibly a sleep that shall know no ending until the last day break, and the last shadow flee away; until then, she 'shall not return.' Her hands are laid on her breast – not praying – she has no need to pray now. She wears her dress of every day, clasped at her throat, girdled at her waist, the hem of it drooping over her feet. No disturbance of its folds by pain of sickness, no binding, no shrouding of her sweet form, in death more than in life. [...] The rippled gathering of [the] close mantle droops to the belt, then sweeps to her feet, straight as drifting snow. And at her feet her dog lies watching her; the mystery of his mortal life joined, by love, to her immortal one. [...] And primarily, from this sculpture, you are to learn what a Master is. [...] You are to note that with all the certain rightness of its material fact, this sculpture still is the Sculpture of a Dream. Ilaria is dressed as she was in life. But she never lay so on her pillow! nor so, in her grave. Those straight folds, straightly laid as a snowdrift, are impossible; known by the Master to be

⁴⁵ In her article on della Quercia, Helen Geddes notes that The Arundel Society published photographs of the tomb in 1878 (Helen Geddes, 'Iacopo della Quercia scultore Sanese: Late Medieval or Early Renaissance Artist?', *Renaissance Studies*, 21.2 (2007), 185–217 (p. 201, n. 41).

⁴⁶ Burne-Jones's awareness of Ruskin's writings is implicit in his work and in their correspondence; apart from this, there is a letter from 1887 where Burne-Jones is explicit about his reading habits: 'I have just read the [latest] Preterita [part] – it has been in the house all week, and it's the first time in my life that this has happened that I haven't instantly read [...] a new book of thine, and it means that I am very down this winter [...]. But it picked me up brightly' (FMC).

⁴⁷ John xi.11.

so – chiselled with a hand as steady as an iron beam, and as true as a ray of light – in defiance of your law of Gravity to the Earth. *That* law prevailed on her shroud, and prevails on her dust: but not on herself, nor on the Vision of her. (*WōJR* 34.170–72)

There is no basis for claiming that Burne-Jones painted his sleeping beauties in a darker kind of sleep, waiting for the awakening of the righteous. But he did, though, paint them in a different, shrewder, if not darker, trance, where ‘the severities of science’ do not apply to the fall of their garments. The princess’s dress, like *Ilaria*’s, keeps ‘straight as drifting snow’. Like *Ilaria*’s dog, the maids by the bedside are alive; they are painted fallen under a spell, not into a curious kind of sleep, and their slumped bodies do not defy ‘our law of Gravity’, as the princess’s does. Burne-Jones painted, to paraphrase Ruskin, a picture of a dream; according to Ruskin’s criteria his vision shows him, next to della Quercia, a true master. What remains to ascertain is the nature of Burne-Jones’s vision and the meaning of his princess’s sleep. When Ruskin believed of *Ilaria* that ‘the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth’ and ‘the time is not yet come for her to be awakened out of sleep’, he was referring to her afterlife. Burne-Jones’s princess, too, sleeps an unnatural, transcendental sleep. She is neither dead nor alive, having passed into the wakeless sleep of the aesthetic ideal, frozen in time, once the prince is kept from her bower. Ruskin’s and Burne-Jones’s fascination with, and conflicting interpretations of, another sleeping princess, *Ursula*, as depicted in Carpaccio’s *Dream of St Ursula*, strengthens the position of *The Briar Rose* as a comment on *Ilaria*’s transcendence. Together with *Ilaria*, *St Ursula* compounds a frame against which *The Briar Rose* takes shape as Burne-Jones’s modern artistic statement.

The Dream of St Ursula shares compositional outlines with *Ilaria* and *The Rose Bower*, and clearly presents itself as another source for *The Briar Rose*. Burne-Jones knew Carpaccio first hand and admired him well before Ruskin did. But *The Dream of St Ursula* had a double impact on Burne-Jones, impressing him as both a picture and its interpretation by Ruskin.

In 1859, Burne-Jones toured Northern Italy at Ruskin’s suggestion. He made copious sketches during the tour, of street scenes, buildings, and pictures by Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Mantegna, Benozzo Gozzoli, Carpaccio, Signorelli, and Orcagna.⁴⁸ He was especially interested in Carpaccio, who, according to Bill Waters, became one of his ‘first loves; in this [Burne-Jones] was ahead of his time, for Carpaccio was not extensively admired until

⁴⁸ FMC, sketchbook.

later'.⁴⁹ Ten years later Ruskin also found himself under Carpaccio's spell, and acknowledged the eye Burne-Jones had for discovering greatness.

My dearest Ned, – There's nothing here like Carpaccio! There's a little bit of humble-pie for you! Well, the fact was, I had never once looked at him [...]. But this Carpaccio is a new world to me; only you have no right to be so fond of him, for he is merely what you would have been if you had been born here, and rightly trained from the beginning – and one shouldn't like oneself so much.⁵⁰

Composing his August 1872 *Fors* letter in Venice, Ruskin recalled his first encounter with *The Dream of St Ursula* three years before. Using the example of Carpaccio's representation of St Ursula, he elaborates on the internal and external signs of blessedness. Even with her eyes closed, Ursula sees clearly in her dream and accepts readily the call of her duty – to become a martyr for faith. In her understanding and acceptance, peacefully asleep in her bed, she epitomizes the state of benediction. In contrast with Ursula, Ruskin describes two bored American girls he met on a train traveling from Venice to Verona, who remained oblivious of the natural beauty and spiritual richness of the area. Pulling the blinds of their carriage, they read dog-eared French novels, and 'writhed and tossed' among the cushions; they completed the journey, notes Ruskin, 'with sealed eyes and tormented limbs' (*W&JR* 27.346). Compared with the restless and thoughtless girls, Ursula's repose and her shelves full of books are intended to suggest noble determination and active search for knowledge. 'In the year 1869, just before leaving Venice', writes Ruskin,

I had been carefully looking at a picture by Victor Carpaccio, representing the dream of a young princess. [...] Carpaccio [...] explain[ed] to us [...] the kind of life she leads by painting her little bedroom in the light of dawn, so that you can see everything in it. [...] [The] windows [...] are filled at the top with small round panes of glass; but beneath, are open to the blue morning sky; and in the one at the back of the room are set two beautiful white Greek vases with a plant in each. [...] Beneath [...] the walls are covered with green cloth; but above, are bare and white. [...] On the table are a book set up at a slope fittest for reading, and an hour-glass. [...] The bed is a broad four-poster [...]. The princess's shield is at the head of it, and the feet are raised entirely above the floor of the room, on a dais. [...] At the door of the room an angel enters [...]. So dreams the princess, with blessed eyes, that need no earthly dawn. [...] But the lovely characteristic of all is the evident delight of her continual life. Royal power over herself, and happiness

⁴⁹ Harrison and Waters, *Burne-Jones*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ *W&JR* 4.356n; Ruskin to Burne-Jones, 13 May, Venice.

in her flowers, [...] her sleeping, and waking, [...] her dreams, her earth, her heaven. (*W&JR* 27.342–45)

At the time of this description, Burne-Jones was working on the ‘small’ *Briar Rose*, and there are marked similarities between *The Rose Bower* and *The Dream of St Ursula*. It is difficult to decide to what extent Burne-Jones was inspired by his first-hand experience of Carpaccio and how his experience balances with Ruskin’s interpretation. However, the correspondences which can be established between *The Rose Bower* and *The Dream of St Ursula* indicate that Burne-Jones was familiar with Ruskin’s interpretation and engaged with it closely. In the 1873 *Rose Bower*, the cloth which stands in for the wall is similarly green, and the princess’s bed is raised on a dais, like Ursula’s. The shield over Ursula’s head is replicated in the folds of drapery hanging above the princess. Starting with 1873 the prince is absent from the rose bower, but the awakening scene presented in sixth tile of the earlier version betrays some resemblance to Carpaccio, in the angular treatment of the room and the presence of the male figure. The prince in the tile version is leaning awkwardly over the bed to wake the princess up. In contrast, the angel is elegantly poised at the door, communicating with Ursula without waking her. In the tile version, the prince restores the princess to life and love, while the angel manifests his presence to deny Ursula both life and love in their earthly meaning. In the 1873 *Rose Bower*, the menacing vertical – prince or angel of death – has been eliminated. As if taking Ruskin at his word when he wrote to him that he could have been another Carpaccio, Burne-Jones gives his own version of the maiden asleep: his princess is denied both the agency for dreams and for waking to her previous life. Ursula has her dream, wakes up, and accepts she must die; the princess remains shrouded in her dreamless sleep. In Ruskin’s interpretation, Ursula’s eyes ‘need no earthly dawn’ because she is already, with her dream of martyrdom, contemplating immortality. The angel, at one end of the room and on the edge of the canvas, and Burne-Jones’s meditative prince, barely entering the wood and also barely in the picture, are agents of change. The angel brings Ursula rejoicing in ‘her continual life’, ‘her sleeping and waking’, ‘her dreams, her earth, her heaven’ – the fulfilment of both earthly and spiritual life. The prince, who could introduce the princess to love, never gets the chance to do so as Burne-Jones stops him before he reaches the princess, and she is left, literally, to ‘her happiness in her flowers’. Ruskin sees in Carpaccio a painting of a transition; Burne-Jones paints suspended time, his princess a captive at multiple levels.

The position the 1873 *Rose Bower* occupies in relation to Ruskin’s interpretation of Carpaccio is of interest because it reflects the beginning of Burne-Jones’s departure from Ruskin’s teaching. As I showed earlier,

Ruskin's interest lay in images of an organic nature, encompassing the very dynamics of life; *St Ursula* appeals to him because the sleeping princess symbolizes both death and renewal, sorrow and rejoicing. In contrast with the dull American girls, she is also an educated educator conveying a moral lesson through spiritual enlightenment, and thus a figure not only for Rose La Touche, but also for Ruskin himself, in his self-appointed role of presiding over the education of the eye of an entire generation. Unlike *St Ursula*, the image Burne-Jones presents is characterized by stasis. The princess frozen in time gives the artist symbolic charge over youth and beauty. As she remains forever sleeping in her inaccessible bower, she is the delight and triumph of the aesthetic eye; her unlikely permanence accentuates her imaginary nature and distinguishes her from Ursula, whom Ruskin understands as a natural principle.

Burne-Jones's indebtedness to *The Dream of St Ursula* is even more conspicuous in the Buscot Park *Rose Bower* finished in 1890. The reds and greens, greyish white, and 'earthly dawn' blue recall Carpaccio's tones. The windows at the top of the picture allude to the angular and orderly lines of Carpaccio's composition, and so do the rectangular jewellery box at the foot of the bed, the dais, and the bed itself. Burne-Jones's dialogue with Carpaccio extends further to the incense burner and the shield, outlined more clearly than in the 1873 version, above the princess's head. To the 1890 version, Burne-Jones even adds a crown by the side of the bed, which invites comparison with Ursula's crown at the foot of her bed. Clearly, both princesses are marked for royal duty, but while Ursula's crown sits, austere, heavy, and thorn-like, ready to be worn at daybreak with a sense of duty unflinching in the face of impending martyrdom, the crown Burne-Jones fashions for his princess is a fanciful jewel, taken over by briar roses. The princess's room, cut off from the world and on the point of being invaded by threatening briar branches, feels strangely cosier and safer than Ursula's room, despite its tidiness and God's messenger on the doorstep. With all doors open,⁵¹ Ursula is exposed to love and life, and must go through them with 'her hair [...] tied with a narrow riband, and divided into two wreaths, which encircle her head like a double crown' and 'the white

⁵¹ Ruskin discusses at length the legend of St Ursula and Carpaccio's *Dream of St Ursula* in the November 1876 *Fors*. 'He comes to her, "in the clear light of morning"; the Angel of Death. You see it is written in the legend that she had shut close the doors of her chamber. They have opened as the angel enters, – not one only, but all in the room, – all in the house. He enters by one at the foot of her bed; but beyond it is another – open into the passage; out of that another into some luminous hall or street. All the window-shutters are wide open; they are made dark that you may notice them, – nay, all the press doors are open! No treasure bars shall hold, where *this* angel enters' (*W&JR* 28.745).

nightgown hid[ing] the arm raised on the pillow, down to the wrist' (*WōJR* 27.334). Ursula appears to have sought protection in her self-possession, her double crown of subdued hair and the purity of her white sleeve on her arm; yet, the angel brings her the terrible news of death in the delicate form of the palm leaf, announcing her fall like 'the fairest stalk of corn in harvest' (*WōJR* 28.743) for the renewal of the faith, as Burne-Jones would have read in the November 1876 *Fors* from Venice. Compared with Ursula, Burne-Jones's princess remains safe against all odds in her bower, loose-haired, bare-armed, and care-free. Her maids are unknowing and asleep, as undisturbed as she is, while the briar branches enclose the bower, threatening not her peace, but the life of all intruders. The frail palm from the hand of the standing angel imposes on Ursula, at daybreak, the urgency of action, as she must awake and advise her father and her suitor, and set the course for the fate of the eleven thousand virgins and for her own martyrdom. The vigorous briars guard and adorn the princess in her atemporal and unnaturally blank sleep, at a dawn far removed from the bower, inaccessible through the thicket, irrelevant and entirely undesired. Burne-Jones's princess has turned away from the world, unlike Ursula who faces the angel in her sleep and lies 'as if she were thinking' (*WōJR* 27.334) of a reality beyond her room and the canvas.

Burne-Jones's engagement with Carpaccio acquires a layer of acute significance in the context of Ruskin's work in Venice in the autumn and winter of 1876. Ruskin travelled to Venice in August 1876 in the hope of preparing a revised and enlarged edition of *The Stones of Venice*. Instead, he started studying Carpaccio's paintings in the Accademia⁵² and worked on a reduced-size copy of *The Dream of St Ursula* from September until February 1877. In the *Fors* of November 1876, Ruskin assimilates the legend of the saint with

a Nature myth, in which Ursula is the Bud of flowers, enclosed in its rough or hairy calyx, and her husband, Æther – the air of spring. She opens into lovely life with 'eleven' thousand other flowers – their fading is their sudden martyrdom. (*WōJR* 28.733)

In other words, Ruskin claims that the moral tale of the saint who is martyred for the renewal of her faith, having chosen, out of necessity, to marry and to convert her husband and her husband's people, is paralleled in the natural world by the opening and fading of flowers, through the unravelling of the bud by the spring air. Ruskin envisages Ursula's marriage as a kind of physical death compensated for by the ensuing spiritual

⁵² Ruskin's interest in Carpaccio culminated, art-historically, with the guide to Carpaccio's pictures in the *Accademia*.

fruit.⁵³ Seen as a 'nature myth', Ursula's fate translates into the annual cycle of vegetation renewal and harvest, triggered by the consummation of the union with her husband. Ursula is herself sacrificed, Ruskin writes, 'like the fairest stalk of corn'. Starting with 1876–77, St Ursula becomes, for Ruskin, another facet of the myth of Proserpine, with whom he had associated Rose since the 1860s. He makes this clear, very publicly, in February 1880 in *Fors*, confessing that 'I myself am in the habit of thinking of the Greek Persephone, the Latin Proserpina, and the Gothic St. Ursula, as of the same living spirit' (*WōJR* 29.385). But comparing Ursula with a stalk of corn in 1876 implicitly identifies her with Proserpine,⁵⁴ and therefore with Rose. Incidentally, Ruskin's only surviving letter to Rose,⁵⁵ although predating his fascination with the darker side of Proserpine, is conceived around the image of growing corn, whose goodness is only found in crushing it under the millstone. This hints to a motif which Ruskin was to develop extensively after Rose's death, namely that renewal and rebirth come through destruction and grief.⁵⁶ By January 1877, following an intense experience of copying and interpreting Carpaccio's *St Ursula*, Ruskin believed that Rose was speaking to him through the saint. The episode⁵⁷ marks a revival of his faith in the afterlife and a re-energizing of his work.

It is not clear whether Burne-Jones followed these developments in Ruskin's private mythology in real time, or was ever aware that Rose's pet name was 'Bouton'.⁵⁸ But it is certain that, in December 1876, both Ruskin's friendship and the Venice Carpaccios were in his thoughts, as Ruskin wrote to him from Venice:

My darling Ned,

[...] Your letter is very precious to me. [...] The great joy [...] was the glimpse of hope of seeing you here in spring. It will soon be here; a few

⁵³ In *Modern Painters* V (1860), Ruskin writes that 'the main function of the flower is accomplished only in its death' (*WōJR* 7.474). In 1874, he explains the causality linking flower and fruit: 'The flower exists for its own sake, not for the fruit's sake. The production of the fruit is an added honour to it – it is a granted consolation to us for its death' (*WōJR* 25.249–50, *Proserpina*, 'The Flower').

⁵⁴ In Greek mythology, corn is associated with both Demeter and Persephone, often perceived as two facets of the same principle; for Ruskin and Greek representations of Demeter and Persephone/Kora, see Alan Davis, 'Ruskin and Persephone Revisited: The Goddess, the Maiden and the Bud', *Ruskin Review and Bulletin*, 4.2 (2008), 4–19.

⁵⁵ 1861; *WōJR* 36.369–71.

⁵⁶ Davis, 'Ruskin and Persephone Revisited', p. 7.

⁵⁷ Ruskin recorded the experience in *Christmas Story*, a sequence of letters to Joan Severn between 24 December 1876 and 3 January 1877.

⁵⁸ Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 321.

more dark days, and we shall be counting the gain of minutes in the grey of dawn, and I expect to be here far into the spring. I have scarcely begun my work yet on the old Stones, having been entirely taken up with St. Ursula and trying my strength in old sketching, and I think we should have a fine little time again if you could come. I expect by then to be able to get the death of St. Ursula done, and we would mourn over her together, and then come away home, over the hills, quietly.

Ever your loving Oldie. (*W&JR* 24.xxxviii)

Ruskin had gone to Venice hoping to immerse himself in work and find solace in it. But Venice only renewed his sorrow over Rose, without curbing his desire for her. Ruskin wished for Burne-Jones's company because the painter was both a lover of Carpaccio and a friend who could understand the emotional difficulties spring would present for him, by association with Rose's death and the myth of Proserpine. Coming 'away home over the hills, quietly' suggests Ruskin's hope for the endurance and wisdom of the hills⁵⁹ which, gained in Burne-Jones's company and through artistic experience, might help him make sense of his loss. Burne-Jones would have been deeply touched.

There are many unanswered questions about the connections Burne-Jones made among Proserpine, St Ursula, his *Sleeping Beauties*, Ruskin's suffering over Rose, and his own vision of youth and beauty. His treatment of the agency of fate reveals one possible and very interesting such connection, pointing to a different direction from Ruskin's train of thought. In the second tile of the 1864 *Sleeping Beauty*, Burne-Jones shows the wicked fairies who predict Beauty's long sleep being thrown out of the palace. The third tile depicts the prophecy of the princess's sleep fulfilled, despite the king's precautions. The prince waking the princess up embodies, together with the old deaf woman, the agency of the fairies, who in the legend rule over the lives of men. The angel who visits Ursula in her sleep makes explicit the meaning of the hairy mantle with which Ursula was born, singling her out for martyrdom. Ursula's actions lead to the fulfilment of her prophesied fate which controls her, according to Ruskin, with the implacability of the natural law presiding over the blossoming and fading of flowers. In subsequent versions of *The Briar Rose*, Burne-Jones removes the agent of fate from the princess's chamber and she continues to sleep undisturbed, her royal duty to marry unheeded. Since Burne-Jones admired Carpaccio well before Ruskin, the changes in his rendition of *The Briar Rose* from the 1864 tile version to the 1873 'small' oils may be owing to his shrewd commentary on *St Ursula*, or simply to a change of heart dictated by

⁵⁹ Job 15.7.

reasons unconnected with either Carpaccio or Ruskin. It is the change in the appearance of the prince in *The Briar Wood* from 1873 to 1890 that suggests most strongly a connection with Ruskin's interpretation of Carpaccio. The prince would bring awakening, marriage, and consummation, his role being similar to that of the Angel of Death in *The Dream of St Ursula*. This may explain why the 1890 prince is dark, ghostly, and considerably older than his predecessors. He is also much taller, his head and feet having overgrown the canvas, as if to suggest a figure larger than life, contained and represented with difficulty. 'Instead of battling his way into the wood [and] struggling with unruly briars', the prince 'seems to float effortlessly, as if carried in a state of trance on a wave of destiny'.⁶⁰ The finished picture is very different from what it looked like 'at an earlier stage of development', John Christian explains, 'probably when it was laid aside in the mid-1870s. At this point it was clearly little more than a blown-up version of the design established in the "small" series'.⁶¹ The changes in both composition and colouring – the 1890 *Prince* is much more sombre than earlier versions – are consistent with a change in the prince's perceived nature and symbolism. Unlike the unfinished prince, hacking with his sword at briars which bar his way, the final figure is inactive, as if overcome by a dilemma: to wake the princess and bestow on her love, marriage, consummation and death, or to let her forever keep her maidenly beauty and remain suspended in time, an archetype of youth rather than a princess following her royal path.

Between 1873 and 1890 *The Rose Bower* gained, besides maturity, sophistication of style and a lighter palette, a profound sense of peace. The 1890 princess looks impossible to wake from her serene sleep, which neither prince nor angel can disturb. Burne-Jones had been drawn by Ruskin's letter from Venice into his distress over the fate of St Ursula/Rose. Towards the end of 1875, in *Proserpina*, Ruskin lamented his loss:

Now I must go out and see and think [...] what becomes of all these fallen blossoms, and where my own mountain Cora⁶² hides herself in winter; and where her sweet body is laid in its death. (*W&JR* 25.371)

And in February 1876 Ruskin mourned Rose's passing in a letter to Susan Beever⁶³: 'My whole mind is set on finding whether there is a country where the flowers do not fade. Else there is no spring for me' (*W&JR* 37.193). The letter articulates a line of thought with which Burne-Jones was familiar from reading and corresponding with Ruskin. It is also possible that

⁶⁰ EP, p. 146.

⁶¹ EP, p. 146.

⁶² Alternative name for young Proserpine.

⁶³ Ruskin's neighbour at Brantwood and a keen amateur botanist.

the artist experienced in 1876–77 or shortly after a state of uncanny empathy with his friend, as he had done once before in 1863–64, when he designed for him *The Legend of Good Women*, to counter his suicidal thoughts over Rose's illness. The 1890 *Rose Bower* is, in the context of Ruskin's agony over *St Ursula* and Burne-Jones's guilt for not visiting him in his need, in the spring of 1877, the 'country where the flowers do not fade'. If the prince – ghostly, passive and remote – cannot reach the princess, she will not love, marry and die, becoming a sort of Ursula suspended in the state of bud, who does not open and does not go to seed. In the 1890 *Rose Bower*, Ruskin would have beheld a vision of Rose forever young and beautiful, a true flower existing 'for its own sake' (*WōJR* 25.249), in its glory of 'purity, serenity and radiance' (*WōJR* 25.250). The crown claimed by briars in bloom emphasizes beauty and delight⁶⁴ over the royal duty to marry and is consistent with Ruskin's belief, expressed in *Proserpina*, that 'the flower is the end of the seed, – not the seed of the flower' (*WōJR* 25.250).

The 1890 *Rose Bower* may be a special kind of St Ursula who does not marry and does not die, a hopeful glimpse of the country where the flowers do not fade (*WōJR* 37.193), but Ruskin could never have liked it. It is perhaps just as well he did not see it finished and exhibited.⁶⁵ Ruskin thought of St Ursula in terms of natural fact and to him she was the embodiment of the annual vegetation cycle. By breaking this cycle, Burne-Jones creates a counter-natural space which goes against Ruskin's lifetime work. *The Rose Bower* is a picture no longer based on natural law; it is a commentary on it, though, and it shows an artist able to manipulate natural law, change or annul it, and legislate independently for the artistic space. Instead of contemplating the transience of life, and mourning the fading of beauty, Burne-Jones chooses to intervene in the natural cycle. *The Briar Rose* does not reveal, as Ruskin wished for good pictures to do, the glory of God's creation in the natural world. The series opens a different, man-made world, where God is usurped by the artist, a maker in his own right.

The student of Burne-Jones's work, urges John Christian, must be keenly aware of his indebtedness to both literary and visual sources. Christian values literary sources as a 'specific form of external reference' whose importance is also felt in their 'visual or art-historical counterpart in the earlier works of art – classical, Byzantine, medieval or Renaissance – that had such a

⁶⁴ *WōJR* 25.249; Ruskin discusses the 'real significances of the flower' as honour, order, purity, and delight.

⁶⁵ By the time *The Briar Rose* was completed, in 1890, Ruskin's intellectual powers had irretrievably declined.

profound impact on [Burne-Jones's] stylistic development'.⁶⁶ *Ilaria* and *St Ursula* are two such sources, complete with the literary counterpart of Ruskin's appreciation and, through that, with the narrative of Ruskin's complicated emotional and aesthetic quest. Burne-Jones responded because he identified with Ruskin's belief in the inherent truth and relevance to life of a good work of art. When, at the beginning of his career, Burne-Jones talks about the comfort of giving Ruskin drawings 'when they happen to be pretty', he means, beside gratitude, the comfort of sharing the same ideal. As he gradually embraces an aesthetic rather than moral or natural ideal, so changes *The Briar Rose*. The series document Burne-Jones's trials to express a truth in opposition to his great friend and mentor, and dearer than friendship and the disciple's love for his master: the artist's plea to free art from the representational and sever its links with reality. At a time when the art world was obsessed with naturalist Pre-Raphaelite and Impressionist expressions, *The Briar Rose* points towards an independent alternative aesthetic space free from natural reference and, acknowledging but departing from Ruskin, to a modernity he could not envisage.

⁶⁶ EP, p. 135.