

### **Edward Burne-Jones's two versions of *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women***

A salient point of the Victorian artist Edward Burne-Jones's oeuvre was his obsession with the medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer, whose works such as *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Legend of Good Women* provided abundance of themes the artist depicted in a wide range of media including stained glass. The latter poem Burne-Jones illustrated for John Ruskin in the form of embroidery panels in 1863, although the endeavour was never completed and the unused projects later inspired the two gouache paintings in question.<sup>1</sup> According to Malcolm Bell, 'a number of designs were drawn from Chaucer's "Dream of Good Women," some of which belong to Mr. Ruskin, while some were afterwards worked out in glass by Mr. Morris.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in Burne-Jones's biographies, Chaucer's 'Legend' and 'Dream' seem to be used interchangeably and point to the peculiar nature of the poem which stemmed from Chaucer's supposed vision of being scorned by Cupid, the god of love, for having written primarily about females that are villains. As a result, *The Legend of Good Women* was created to portray, in turn, male betrayals of such heroines of antiquity as Cleopatra, Lucretia and Ariadne. By illustrating the introduction of *The Legend of Good Women*, Burne-Jones captured the moment of inspiration coming down on Chaucer; an insight into his creative process. The artist's renderings of the tale's origin have not been thoroughly researched to date which results in the repetition of certain errors. The two versions of *Chaucer's Dream* were produced in 1865 (Pl 1) and 1871 (Pl 2). Both gouaches are signed in the lower left corner, although only the earlier one is additionally dated. It is an important and sometimes overlooked detail – for instance, in the online catalogue of the Birmingham Art Gallery a photogravure of the second version (Pl 3) is described as depicting 'a watercolour' that 'dates from 1865-67', which is clearly an error.

As both paintings remain in private collections and there are no high quality reproductions available, visual analysis is restricted to the imperfect resources.<sup>3</sup> Still, it can be deduced that

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Wood, *Burne-Jones: The Life and Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898)* (London: Phoenix Illustrated, 1998), 35, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Bell, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones: A Record and Review* (London and New York: George Bell and Sons, 1901), 34.

<sup>3</sup> In the reproduction of the 1865 version the fountain is slightly cropped out, however it is virtually identical in both paintings.

the two versions slightly vary in details. In the one of 1871 Chaucer is no longer just gently leaning his back on the fountain; his whole body is now dynamically turned toward it. His robes are longer and heavier, and he wears a different type of hat. The main alteration seems to take place in the background, as the stone wall overlooking the wooded landscape is replaced by a distant procession of figures. While the earlier version is dominated by green tones with red and orange accents, the colour palette of the second one can only be speculated since there are no extant colour reproductions of it. A brief description in a book on Burne-Jones of 1895, however, reveals that the figure of Cupid is dressed in red and blue, whereas the woman accompanying him is wearing a green dress.<sup>4</sup> The tall poppy flower between Chaucer and Cupid in both versions is an emphatic reference to the slumbering – and visionary – state of the poet, whereas the circular fountain at its centre encompasses a figure whose theme features in Burne-Jones's *The Wheel of Fortune* (1875-1883).

Among Burne-Jones's studies for *The Legend of Good Women* later utilised in *Chaucer's Dream* the drawing of *Amor and Alcestis* (Pl 4) is very vividly referenced by the two gouaches. In the paintings, however, both the figures and the draperies lack the original lightness, while the original wooden fence is replaced with a stone wall in the earlier version, and entirely removed from the second one. To the fact that Burne-Jones was constantly implementing alterations to his primary ideas points also the study of youthful Chaucer slumbering by the fountain (Pl 5), in the gouaches significantly matured. Even the pose captured in this drawing remained unchanged only in the first painting, in the second one already having shifted its dynamic.

A compositional and stylistic affinity can be observed between *Chaucer's Dream* and one of Frederic Leighton's illustrations for George Eliot's *Romola – At the Well* (Pl 6), preceding the former by two years and dated to the same year Burne-Jones was preparing the embroidery panels for Ruskin on the theme of *The Legend of Good Women*. *Chaucer's Dream* might have been modelled on Leighton's illustration for *Romola* despite Burne-Jones's claims that he 'never could care for his work'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Burne-Jones certainly recognised Leighton as an illustrator, as in 1885 he was even considering him as a potential artist to illustrate Robert Louis

---

<sup>4</sup> Bell, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations 1895-1898 Preserved By His Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, ed. Mary Lago (London: John Murray, 1982), 119.

Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*.<sup>6</sup> What is more, the model for the figure of Chaucer appears to be the Italian Alessandro di Marco, who also posed for Leighton as early as the 1850s.<sup>7</sup>

Both *Chaucer's Dream* and *At the Well* in the monumental treatment of figures and heavy draperies recall not only John Everett Millais's illustrations of the early 1860s,<sup>8</sup> but also Raphael's cartoons for the Sistine chapel tapestries (Pl 7),<sup>9</sup> which most likely were the main compositional and stylistic source for all compositions. Oliver Garnett has also recognised another possible inspiration for both style and composition of *Chaucer's Dream* – Raphael's *The Vision of a Knight* (Pl 8), acquired by the National Gallery in 1847<sup>10</sup> and which especially thematically suits Burne-Jones's gouaches.

Leighton's context for *Chaucer's Dream* is important not only for its production, but also for its afterlife. The artist, who in 1878 became President of the Royal Academy, owned the earlier version of 1865. It is not without significance that Leighton's lavish studio house at Holland Park Road in London was heavily publicised already during his lifetime and a focal point of his varied collections were paintings presented to him by fellow artists, ranging from Albert Moore to John Singer Sargent, displayed in the Silk Room – the final addition to the house. Opened in 1895, less than a year before Leighton's death, this 'picture gallery' had its debut during an annual musical soirée which took place in the artist's studio, overlooking the prominent display wall. Leighton's own popularity indeed extended to his collection – as Anne Anderson has observed, he 'possessed important works of art and his ownership bestowed a valuable cachet.'

---

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places 1852-1912* (London: Edward Arnold, 1921), 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> See Scott Thomas Buckle, 'Is this the face of Alessandro di Marco? The forgotten features of a well-known Italian model,' *British Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (2012): 67-75.

<sup>8</sup> Leonée and Richard Ormond point to such similarities between Leighton's and Millais' illustrations: Leonée and Richard Ormond, *Lord Leighton* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 59.

<sup>9</sup> In the nineteenth century, the cartoons were often copied by art students in London, and in 1865 Queen Victoria sent them on loan to the South Kensington Museum (now Victoria and Albert Museum): 'The Raphael Cartoons,' Victoria and Albert Museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/raphael-cartoons/> (accessed July 4, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Garnett, 'The Letters and Collection of William Graham – Pre-Raphaelite Patron and Pre-Raphael Collector,' *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 62 (2000), 166.

This resulted in the purchase of many items after his death by fellow artists,<sup>11</sup> with *Chaucer's Dream* reaching a price unexpectedly high for a non-oil (£249).<sup>12</sup>

The way in which the picture entered Leighton's collection remains unclear. His early biographers listed *Chaucer's Dream* among the works presented to him by fellow artists,<sup>13</sup> whereas Barbara Bryant has stated that he bought it along with two other drawings by Burne-Jones in 1865.<sup>14</sup> A similar version has been accepted by Leonée and Richard Ormond, who have added that 'a study of a woman seated in a landscape' by Burne-Jones was purchased in the previous year.<sup>15</sup> The elusive presence of *Chaucer's Dream* within Leighton's collections and house seems to do with the academician's institutional affinity and his presidential function which was a priority even within his own home. Leighton's clear tributes to the Academy repeated across his studio house were justified also by the publicity his interiors received, both in the press and during frequent parties and events attended by prominent guests. The Silk Room display was especially dominated by the works of Royal Academicians, with the centre occupied by John Everett Millais, Lawrence Alma-Tadema and George Frederic Watts. Indeed, perhaps it was the controversy surrounding Burne-Jones's resignation from the Academy (a source of Leighton's 'pain and distress'<sup>16</sup>) that led its President to exclude *Chaucer's Dream* from the public rooms of his house. Shortly after Leighton's death the gouache was reported to hang in his modest bedroom on the wall opposite the fireplace, accompanied mainly by photographs of Renaissance masterpieces.<sup>17</sup> Leighton's early biographers, however, place *Chaucer's Dream* in the Silk Room,<sup>18</sup> which is rather unlikely given the photograph taken in 1895. Still, it is plausible that the picture was simply relocated at some point.

---

<sup>11</sup> Anne Anderson, 'Lost Treasures, Lost Histories, Lost Memories: Reconstructing the Interiors of Lord Frederic Leighton's Studio-House,' *Interiors* 2, no. 1 (2011), 84.

<sup>12</sup> Alice Corkran, *Frederic Leighton* (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), 231.

<sup>13</sup> George Aitchison, 'Picture Gallery, 2, Holland Park-Road,' *The Builder* 9 (1895), 336; Corkran, *Frederic Leighton*, 173; Ernest Rhys, *Fredric Lord Leighton* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 91; George C. Williamson, *Frederic Lord Leighton* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1902), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Bryant, 'An Artist Collects: Leighton as a Collector of Paintings and Drawings,' in *Closer to Home: The Restoration of Leighton House and Catalogue of the Reopening Displays 2010*, ed. Daniel Robbins (London: The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2010), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ormond, *Lord Leighton*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 369.

<sup>17</sup> A. G. T., 'The Late Lord Leighton's Bedroom,' *The Art Journal* (Dec 1896), 364.

<sup>18</sup> Corkran, *Frederic Leighton*, 173; Rhys, *Frederic Lord Leighton*, 91; Williamson, *Frederic Lord Leighton*, 44.

Leighton's assemblage was not the only representative and renowned collection which encompassed a version of *Chaucer's Dream*. The later gouache belonged to William Graham, a Glaswegian politician, businessman, and Pre-Raphaelite patron. Already in September of 1870, Graham was writing to Burne-Jones about, what he then called, the 'Vision of fair Women', for which he was to pay 100 pounds. It is certain that the work was Graham's commission, not simply a purchase of an already existing work, since he was describing how Burne-Jones was working 'con amore' on the project. Then, in a letter dated to January 1871, Graham expressed his joy to hear that Burne-Jones was near completing the 'Chaucer's dream picture'.<sup>19</sup> Although there is no direct evidence, it is possible that Graham saw the original gouache at Leighton's and subsequently ordered an identical picture to be made for him.



Pl. 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women*, signed and dated 1865, gouache, 29 x 39.5 cm. Private collection. Source: [http://www.artnet.com/artists/edward-burne-jones/chaucers-dream-of-good-women-U\\_VSNEzmqX1iz6uOcjYCA2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/edward-burne-jones/chaucers-dream-of-good-women-U_VSNEzmqX1iz6uOcjYCA2) (accessed February 12, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Garnett, 'The Letters and Collection of William Graham', 253.





Pl. 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women*, signed, 1871, watercolour and gouache, 45.7 x 60.9 cm. Private collection. Source: Oliver Garnett, 'The Letters and Collection of William Graham – Pre-Raphaelite Patron and Pre-Raphael Collector,' *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 62 (2000): 145-343.



Pl. 3. Berlin Photographic Company after Edward Burne-Jones, *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women*, photogravure on paper, 1900, 24 x 29.8 cm. © Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Source: <http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1900P24> (accessed July 4, 2018).





Pl. 4. Edward Burne-Jones, *Amor and Alcestis*, stained glass design for *Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*, 1864, pencil, pen and brown wash on toned paper, 46.5 x 49 cm. © Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Source: <http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1904P520> (accessed 4 July, 2018).





Pl. 5. Edward Burne-Jones, study for *Chaucer's Dream of Good Women*, chalk, 21.6 x 19 cm. Private collection. Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/edward-burne-jones/study-for-chaucers-dream-of-good-women-ZG5bRUXskn2VkG8aKjX0g2> (accessed 4 July, 2018).



Pl. 6. Joseph Swain after Frederic Leighton, *At the Well*, 1863. Wood engraving, 10.3 x 15.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Source: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/30407/> (accessed January 10, 2019).



Pl. 7. Raphael, *Christ's Charge to Peter*, 1515-1516. Gouache on paper mounted onto canvas 34 x 53 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Source: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1069360/christs-charge-to-peter-matthew-cartoon-for-a-raphael/> (accessed January 12, 2019).





Pl. 8. Raphael, *Vision of a Knight*, c. 1504. Oil on poplar, 17.1 x 17.3 cm. National Gallery, London. Source: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/raphael-an-allegory-vision-of-a-knight> (accessed January 12, 2019).