

« For the Briar Rose » by Morris and Burne-Jones: Interlacing and Intertextuality

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Edward Burne-Jones's series of four paintings entitled "The Briar Rose" is paired with William Morris's poem, each quatrain depicting a locus of the picture. Thus, theme and frame are mirrored – hence my choice of the term "interlacing", which draws a link between the paintings and the poem, thus enabling us to witness possible transfers.¹ Indeed, "interlacing" is an architectural term that refers to the design formed by abstract, geometric, foliated or animal motifs. If one considers that a text (from the Latin verb "*texere*" which means "to weave") is any visual, graphic, musical or even choreographic material, then, the parallel between Morris's and Burne-Jones's treatment of the well-known fairy tale is all the more relevant, since the paintings can be admired in Lord Faringdon's music room. The notion of interlacing is thus a bridge that will help us explore the concept of "intertextuality". According to Julia Kristeva, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva 37): here, the series and the poem "For the Briar Rose" are inspired by Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" published in *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals* (1697). In filigree, Kristeva's architectural metaphor is an invitation to make a rapprochement between the poet's design (that is to say, his purpose) and the painter's design (his drawing).

"For the Briar Rose" was published in Morris's last collection of poems, *Poems by the Way* (1890) (*P W*). It is the second poem of what the critic David Latham calls the "Verses for Pictures section".² As the name of the section indicates, each poem is associated to paintings or tapestries. For instance in "The Woodpecker Tapestry", the verses at the top and at the bottom frame the representation of the bird in the tree, as though those very verses represented curtains revealing a stage setting (*Full-Color*

Patterns and Designs, 40). Furthermore, the situation of “For the Briar Rose” within the collection is gravid with meaning: indeed, it is preceded by a quatrain devoted to the Night in the poem entitled “Verse for Pictures”, and we know “The Briar Rose” is a tale where the characters fall in a deep slumber...

I am Night: I bring again
Hope of Pleasure, rest from pain:
Thoughts unsaid ‘twixt Life and Death
My fruitful silence quickeneth. (*P W*, 112)

That last quatrain is the prelude to the Briar Rose’s sleep, as though its presence created a pause in the series of poems. Besides, “For the Briar Rose” is followed by the “Tapestry poems” as if the princess’s awakening precisely precipitated the creation of new poems.

Through the notion of interlacing, I will explore the intertextual links between Morris’s poem and Burne-Jones’s paintings, and see to what extent their works can be seen as adaptations or rewritings. Then, I will analyse the theatricalization of space in both treatments of the tale.

Intertextuality

“Intertextuality” is only a small branch of the more inclusive term called “transtextuality” defined by Gérard Genette. “Transtextuality” defines the tight or loose relationships between texts. He then divides the concept into sub-denominations such as “intertextuality”, “paratextuality”, “metatextuality”, “hypertextuality” and “architextuality”.

I will first confront the notions of “intertextuality” and “metatextuality”. I prefer Kristeva’s definition of “intertextuality” as “a mosaic of quotations” because Morris himself envisaged art as a form of recycling; for instance, *Poems by the Way* is the fusion between old and new poems that had not been published during his prolific career: the collection can stand for his literary testimony. Burne-Jones’s approach is similar for the series of paintings occupied him nearly thirty years. Therefore, their fruitful collaboration can be seen as the maturation of their pictorial and poetical techniques.

Morris and Burne-Jones drew their inspiration from two main sources, this is why the frontiers between “intertextuality” and “metatextuality” are so difficult to trace. Indeed, “metatextuality” can be defined by the comment a text gives on the act of writing itself. If we analyse the different versions of the tale given by Perrault, Grimm, Morris and Burne-Jones, we realize that embeddings are at the core of the tale. For instance, if we take a look at the English titles given for the tale, Perrault’s version is entitled “Sleeping Beauty” whereas Grimm’s version is entitled “For the Briar Rose” (translation by Margaret Taylor in 1884). It is no accident if Morris and Burne-Jones favoured Grimm’s version: the association between the wild Nature and the princess’s body is a central motif in Burne-Jones’s final picture, which represents the end of the prince’s quest. Besides, Perrault and Grimm have different versions of the tale. In Perrault, “Sleeping Beauty” confronts her mother-in-law, an ogress. On the contrary, Grimm favours a happy ending with the marriage between the Prince and the Briar Rose.

The *mise en abyme* derives from the concept of “metatextuality” and it seems that Perrault’s version itself was sustained by other writings. For example, at the end of his tale, Perrault inserts a Moral, which is a direct inheritance of La Fontaine’s *Fables* published in 1668. If we come back to the comparison between Morris’s poem and Burne-Jones’s paintings, we can suppose that the moral (the verse part of the tale) is written by Morris, whereas the prose part of Perrault’s tale is illustrated by the paintings as if each painting were a pictural comment on Morris’s quatrains... or Morris’s quatrains are narrative comments on the paintings. Burne-Jones’s paintings can be regarded as narrative paintings in the extent to which the series narrates a story clearly recognizable by the spectator. We could even go as far as to associate Burne-Jones’s paintings to history paintings for in French, the noun “histoire” both refers to the account of past events (“History”) or to the “story” of fictitious events. Furthermore, history painting is characterized by narrative or allegorical subjects inspired by Antiquity, the *Bible* or fables. That double nature of the text (both as material and as genre) is shown by the binary rhythm

Morris resorts to all along his poem, as if the words themselves reflected the duplication between poems and paintings. We can also notice the presence of a mirror near the princess, or of bright floors that reflect the bodies. For instance, the names of the places are composed of two nouns: “The Briarwood”, “The Council Room”, “The Garden Court”, and “The Rosebower”. We can also notice the frequent association between the adjective and the noun (“fateful slumber”, “fated hand”, “slumberous curse”, “restless shuttle”, “hoarded love” or “sleeping world”), or the omnipresence of the coordination conjunction “and”, that links two nouns (“peril and increase”) or two verbs (“floats and flows”). Similarly, the preposition “of” plays the role of a relay between two nouns as in “the tangle of the rose”, “the threat of war”, “the hope of peace” or “the maiden pleasance of the land”. It thus seems to me that this omnipresence of the binary rhythm is not a mere chance but on the contrary, partakes of a specific writing strategy that reflects the double nature of Morris’s and Burne-Jones’s works.

I will now tackle the concept of “hypertextuality” which hinges on the fusion between the past and present of writing. “Hypertextuality” is defined by the link between a text (the “hypertext”) and a previous text (the “hypotext”). Morris and Burne-Jones’s version was enriched by Perrault’s and Grimm’s approaches. However, Perrault was himself inspired by the medieval novel entitled *Perceforest* (1300-1350) that evolves around the motif of the Greek Fates (*tria fata*) who embody human destiny with such attributes as the spindle and the distaff. They are represented as three old weavers who spin the thread of life, thus fixing Man’s lot. In *Perceforest*, a banquet is organized after the birth of Zellandine but as the mother forgets to put a knife in Themis’s place, the goddess takes her revenge and condemns the girl to prick her finger on the splinter of a linen thread, which will plunge her into a deep slumber. The spun-out metaphor of tapestry is logical in a tale where spindles and distaffs are precisely forbidden by the princess’s father. In Morris’s poem, Fate is personified and associated to the weaving loom thanks to the /t/ and /s/ alliterative consonants: “When fate shall take her chain away” and “The restless shuttle lieth still”. The

passage from the horizontality of writing and the verticality of the painting can thus be compared to the weaving loom where the threads intersect on the weft and warp threads of the tapestry. Hypertextuality goes further than the intersecting between different planes of action: it also provides the reader with a contrast between the past and present of writing. Perrault shows that dimension in a quite burlesque way when the story-teller narrates the princess's awakening:

The princess was already fully dressed, and in most magnificent style. As he helped her to rise, the prince refrained from telling her that her clothes, with the straight collar which she wore, were like those to which his grandmother had been accustomed. And in truth, they in no way detracted from her beauty.³

Likewise, Burne-Jones's series is characterized by an impression of atemporality: the characters are wrapped in antique draperies while the Prince and the King seem to come straight from Arthurian legends. Lastly, we should not forget that the paintings can be seen in a typical Victorian music room: therefore, space and time intermingle. That blurring between space and time can also be found in Tennyson's poem entitled "Day Dream" (1842), a probable source of inspiration both for Morris and Burne-Jones. Tennyson's poem is not divided into space units but into narrative sequences: "Prologue", "The Sleeping Palace", "The Sleeping Beauty", "The Arrival", "The Revival", "The Departure", "Moral", "L'Envoi" and "Epilogue". Besides, the King painted by Burne-Jones strangely resembles the one engraved by John Everett Millais in 1857 to illustrate Tennyson's poem.⁴

"Architextuality" is shaped by the reader's generic expectations: in other words, a work of art is conceived and perceived differently depending on the period. Architextuality thus changes the way visual representation is treated. We cannot fully understand Burne-Jones's painting without knowing that the artist belonged to the Pre-Raphaelites who were attracted by medieval and antique sources. We'll now compare the treatment of the tale by the French illustrator Gustave Doré and Burne-Jones. Doré's engravings are part of a Romantic corpus for the artist illustrated

Coleridge's *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* and Lord Byron's *Œuvres complètes de Lord Byron*.⁵ This can explain the vision he gives of the tale. For instance, his engravings exploit chiaroscuro contrasts: therefore, effects of depth are created without the use of colours. Moreover, the artist seems to develop the idea of a rite of passage for the Prince, when he stages him in the middle of a foliated arch that has the shape of a Gothic cathedral (Perrault 230). In Shakespeare, the passage through the green world is an essential dimension that enables the personae to reach conscience. In another illustration, Doré situates the tale in an identifiable setting since the costumes represented date from the first half of the 16th century (Perrault 230). As for the building that forms the backdrop of that second illustration, it can be compared to the Law Courts of Rouen in France that date from the 17th century. The last image showing the end of the Prince's quest is treated in chiaroscuro effects, and the interior décor recalls the Neo-Gothic taste that was fashionable at the time of the publication of those illustrations.

Burne-Jones chooses a more static vision of the ensemble. In Doré, the prince is in perpetual motion until he discovers the Princess. On the contrary in Burne-Jones, the spectator's gaze is guided by the entanglement of Nature and the bodies converging towards the sleeping Princess. This association between Man and Nature is connoted with a mystical aspect, all the more so as the association between those themes can be found in the 15th and 16th century religious paintings, where Nature is represented with botanical precision. Morris had been particularly impressed by Van Eyck's altarpiece he admired in St Bavo's Church (Ghent). This altarpiece is composed of twenty-four scenes painted on both sides of the panels. *The Adoration of the Lamb* scene is the most fertile in naturalistic details: characters, plants, flowers and architectural elements are depicted with a remarkable exactness (Baker 38-39). Similarly, Burne-Jones later added to his first series of four initial paintings ten other paintings strictly adorned with vegetal motifs, so that the ensemble forms a continuous frieze around the music room. We can also notice a strange similitude between the gold trellis painted by Burne-Jones in "The Council Room" and the

“Trellis design” made by Morris and Webb in 1862. This motif aimed at decorating wallpapers can also be found in medieval paintings (Baker 46-47). Thus, the presence of exuberant foliage in Burne-Jones, Morris and medieval painting draws a link between Nature, architecture and religion. Indeed, in *The Stones of Venice* (1854) and more specifically in the section entitled “*On the Nature of Gothic Architecture*”, the art critic John Ruskin underlines that the representation of Nature in architecture should conform to the divine will; he thus advises the use of an architectural motif composed of flowers and leaves, what he calls a “foliated architecture”:

That sentence of Genesis, “I have given thee every green herb for meat” [...] has a profound symbolical as well as a literal meaning. It is not merely the nourishment of the body, but the food of the soul, that is intended [...]. Most of us do not need fine scenery [...]. But trees, and fields, and flowers, were made for all, and are necessary for all [...]; the goodly building is then most glorious when it is sculptured into the likeness of the leaves of Paradise [...]. (Ruskin 202)

The link between Nature and religion will help us to establish a parallel between the composition of the paintings, the poem and theatre.

A theatricalization of space?

The association between Burne-Jones’s paintings and Morris’s poem leads to a theatricalization of space. The series “For the Briar Rose” invites the spectator/reader to explore a unique space and time dimension where the *mise en abyme* is the main device. He thus has access to three spaces:

- The space of the Victorian music room
- The locus represented on the canvas
- The poetic space created by the quatrains

I will first confront the notions of “monstration” and “ekphrasis”. Indeed, everything seems to direct the spectator’s gaze to a reading of the paintings in relationship with the quatrains. This is why I use the term “monstration”, from the Latin verb *monstrare*

which means “to show” and, by extension, “to advise”. Grammatically speaking, adjectives or demonstrative pronouns are used to attract the reader’s attention; for example in Morris’s poem, one can notice the omnipresence of the deictic “the” which reinforces the association between the visual and the scriptural. Indeed, the titles of the quatrains precisely refer to the locus depicted on the canvas. The omnipresence of the definite article can also be understood as a cultural anaphora, the storyline of “The Briar Rose” being familiar to every reader.

Another device allows that fusion between painting and language: “ekphrasis”. Ekphrasis consists in describing an object as if it were present: therefore, there is an integration between the verbal space and the represented/seen space. This aspect is clearly shown by the use of the simple present which sounds atemporal (“floats”, “flows”, “knoweth”, “lies”) as if the actions described in the poems were re-enacted every time a reader discovers the quatrains. Besides, if we refer to the very etymology of the noun *ekphrasis* (from the Greek *ekphrazein* which means “to fully explain”), we can discover parallels between that device and the theatrical discourse, which is characterized by its double nature: indeed, the theatre is both a dramatic text (a written play) and a multiplicity of representations according to the audience’s mood, the stage director and the time the play is performed. Likewise, Burne-Jones’s paintings and Morris’s poem are mutually enriched through their comparison.

Several elements can enable us to compare the poem and the paintings with a stage setting and to do so, we can go back to the very roots of theatre. Morality plays sign the beginnings of English theatre in the 15th century. These plays with a didactic purport were often performed in churches and staged allegories of Good and Evil. In the poem, we come across the performative verb “smite” (“And smite this sleeping world awake”). This verb has Biblical connotations since it can be found in the *Old Testament*. Furthermore, Fate is personified thanks to the paregmenon, that is to say, the juxtaposition of derived terms: “fateful” (adjective), “fated”, “fate”. The didactic purport of the poem/paintings can be

envisaged through the prism of the fable (*fabula*). Etymologically speaking, the fable is the cloth that serves as the frame in Greek theatre. Later, the fable directly referred to the very content of the play (the plot). Finally, the term ended up designating a tale in verse or prose accompanied by a moral (as in La Fontaine or Perrault). In Burne-Jones's painting, we can notice the presence of a blue cloth that reminds one of a stage curtain. Likewise, the stage where the princess is represented is slightly elevated, as if it created a clear separation between the spectators and the actors of the painting. The paintings themselves are staged, since they are framed and presented by Morris's quatrains.

“For the Briar Rose” goes beyond the poetic and pictorial frames by linking different forms of art. The very situation of the paintings in a Victorian music room is an invitation for the spectator to abolish the frontiers between time, space and art, the foliated motifs of the pianos echoing the flowery setting of the series. The best example of the adaptation between literature and stage is the ballet Tchaikovsky adapted from the tale; it was first performed in 1890, the year Burne-Jones finished his series and the printing year of Morris's *Poems by the Way*. The ballet thus makes interlacing and entrechats coexist the time of the performance... for the audience's pleasure.

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2 From the introduction by David Latham to William Morris’s *Poems by the Way*.

3 From <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/perrault01.html>, consulted 7 June 2009.

4 From <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/millais/16.html>, consulted 7 June 2009.

5 *La Chanson du vieux marin* (Paris, Hachette, 1877) and *Œuvres Complètes de Lord Byron* (Paris, J. Bry, 1853) were illustrated by Charles Mettais, Etienne Bocourt and Gustave Doré.