CHAPTER 5

The taste of the new collectors: moral content valued over execution; taboos (nudity, "disturbing" subjects, political and social comments).—The tyranny of conventional sources and subjects; "standard" authors and "beauties" anthologies; the influence of engravings on popular demand; examples of neglected subjects and authors.

Paintings from literature reached the height of their popularity between 1830 and the 1850s, when as many as one hundred such paintings were hung each year in the London exhibitions alone. It was a sign of things to come that the first three of the annual fifty-pound prizes awarded by the Liverpool Academy (1830–32) went to literary paintings: a scene from The Bride of Lammermoor by Robert Scott Lauder, William Boxall’s Cordelia Receiving an Account of Her Father’s Suffering, and Daniel Maclise’s  Mokanna Unveiling His Features to Zelica, from Moore’s Lalla Rookh.¹

There were other manifestations of the intensified artistic interest in English literature. About 1840, when the long-lived Sketching Club (see chapter 3, above) was entering its last years, a similar coterie of young artists calling themselves “The Clique” gathered for the same purpose. Richard Dadd, W. P. Frith, Edward M. Ward, Henry Nelson O’Neil, John Phillip, Alfred Elmore, and others met weekly to compete in drawing extempore subjects “chiefly literary with a preponderance from Byron and Shakespeare.”² One of the newly founded Art Union’s projects was a competition for outline designs in the manner of John Flaxman or, more recently, the German illustrator of Shakespeare, Moritz Retzsch. Thirty sets of drawings were submitted, including a series from Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound by Joseph Noel Paton, the Chaucerian story of Griselda by John Tenniel, and Comus by F. R. Pickersgill. The winner was H. C. Selous’s Pilgrim’s Progress series. The second contest was won by William Rimer’s illustrations of Thomson’s The Castle of Indolence.³

Both of the large collections of modern British art that were given to the nation in these years included numerous literary pictures, some commissioned by the collectors. There were seventeen in Robert Vernon’s gift of 157 canvases to the National Gallery in 1847 and thirteen in John Sheep-
shanks's collection of 233 that the new South Kensington Museum, later renamed the Victoria and Albert, received in 1857. When Francis Palgrave published in 1869 his album of color reproductions from woodcuts, *Gems of British Art*, no fewer than six of the twenty-four originals, all in the Vernon and Sheepshanks collections, were from English literature.

Far from being a merely incidental variety of subject pictures, paintings on literary themes now were valued by the new public for art as highly as landscapes and genre (into which formal categories many of them fell) and much more so than the Old Masters that had dominated the commerce in painting when noble collectors made up most of the market. Apart from their dislike of the darkened colors of the Old Masters, the new collectors failed to share the mystique, still promoted by the Royal Academy, that had hitherto determined correct English taste in painting. As far as middlebrow literary taste was concerned, the long-drawn-out critical debate over the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns had been decisively settled in favor of the latter. And just as book collectors in the preceding era had ceased to be obsessed with Greek and Roman classics, turning instead to early English and Elizabethan literature, newcomers to the art market were indifferent to the appeal of antiquity and the Renaissance and of epic themes—a fact most readily apparent, on the lowest level, in the absence of high-art (historical, mythological, religious) subjects from the Society of British Artists exhibitions, where the low-budget collector was likely to get most of his paintings.*

Even subjects from Spenser and Milton, and the more heroic kinds of Shakespeare pictures, were in short supply there. As Palgrave, a relatively perceptive observer of the mid-Victorian art scene, commented, "'No demon,' in Pope's phrase, 'whispered to them to have a taste:' nor indeed was it likely that men educated in business, and ignorant of foreign lands, would appreciate very keenly the Carraccis, Guidos, Carlo Marattis, or the restored rubbish of Roman excavations, held up to them by the learned as the great examples of high art, and sole objects of enlightened admiration.'" Few of these men, irrespective of their wealth or social position, had had more than a smattering of classical education, if any at all, and they possessed no formal knowledge of art. "They brought to their judgement of a painting, not Lemprière's classical dictionary and the academic rules, but their own experience."6

These collectors' indifference to the traditional subject matter of high art was compensated for by at least a nodding acquaintance with the English classics. If people with money to spend were to be interested in art at all, pictures from familiar English literature were prominent among the kinds of art they would be interested in. The stories such pictures told were well known, needing no explanation and equipped with private associations that could readily be transferred to the picture. Buyers could always feel comfortable with such art, not least—perhaps most of all—with the most hackneyed subjects.

One more consideration recommended literary paintings to that portion of the public which harbored a residual Puritan suspicion of art in general: literature, with the exception of fiction among the more rigorous Evangelicals and Dissenters, was respectable. A picture from an approved work of literature was, on principle, itself approved. Although the encouragement of morality and proper feelings, however defined, had been the primary function that English critics had generally required of liter-

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*The society's exhibitions were much disparaged; in 1846 *Punch* called them "insufferably bad," and Thackeray referred to them as "deserts." On the other hand, Walter Sickert, from the long perspective of 1928, recalled the society's "position of honourable rivalry with the Royal Academy . . . in the 30s & 40s & 50s & 60s." The most bizarre episode in its long history as "the Suffolk Street gallery" occurred in the 1880s, when it invited James McNeill Whistler, whom the Royal Academy had passed by, to become a member. Before long, he was elected president, a decision everyone soon came to regret. He lasted in the office only until 1888, but before he left, he prepared on behalf of the society a "ceremonious address" to the Queen on the occasion of her golden jubilee that elicited the command that the stunned Society of British Artists might add "Royal" to its title. (Denys Sutton, *Walter Sickert: A Biography* [London, 1976], p. 222; Elizabeth R. Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeil Whistler* [London, 1908], 2:55–74.)
nature ever since the Renaissance, seldom was it more insisted upon than in the early and middle nineteenth century. In 1840 Thackeray extended the doctrine to art:

The best paintings address themselves to the best feelings of it [the heart]; and a great many very clever pictures do not touch it at all. Skill and handling are great parts of a painter’s trade; but heart is the first; this is God’s direct gift to him, and cannot be got in any academy, or under any master. Look about, therefore, for pictures, be they large or small, finished well or ill. Landscapes, portraits, figure-pieces, pen-and-ink sketches, or what not, that contain sentiment and great ideas. He who possesses these will be sure to express them more or less well. Never mind about the manner. He who possesses them not may draw and colour to perfection, and yet be no artist.

This criterion, elevating content over execution, was never more satisfactorily met than when the chosen subject was from “moral” literature. It was the orthodoxy that governed Victorian criticism of literary painting as well as every other kind of subject art.

The whole trend away from the subjects of classical art and literature to those drawn from English sources was epitomized in the fortunes of Thomson’s *The Seasons* as a favorite provider of themes for illustration. In the eighteenth century, many artists found in it attractive subjects for allegorical groups and mythological representations of the progress of the seasons—two categories closely associated with neoclassic art, as the poem itself was with Virgil and the classical tradition of pastoral poetry. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *The Seasons* came to be valued far more as a series of stories illustrating the domestic and social virtues, and the artists altered their perspective and emphasis accordingly. In response to the changing audience and atmosphere, they converted the poem, as they did other English literary works, into a repository of currently dominant moral ideals and “messages” that would win their paintings instant acceptance in the home.

This hospitality to English literature did not mean, however, that every subject from a given work was equally approved for home viewing. Sometimes critics, delivering their dicta without offering reasons, flatly declared that a subject was unfitted for art: Gulliver’s introduction to the Queen of Brobdingnag (1835 [pl. 287]: “utterly at variance with all good feeling”); Lady Macbeth’s deathbed (1838: an example of “one of [Nature’s] most distorted aspects, with which Art . . . has but little concern”); the old man lamenting the death of his ass in Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* (1850: “We lament such subjects, and never could feel gratification in looking upon the glazed eyes and wasted limbs of a creature like this, however ably painted”); Beatrix greeting Henry Esmond (1857 [pl. 169]: “There is nothing attractive in this subject”); Falstaff and his ragged regiment (1867: “We are sorry to see such ability devoted to what all the painter’s humour and invention cannot make a pleasant subject”).

Some comments of this kind no doubt sprang more from individual reviewers’ crotchets than from any broad laws of what constituted paintable subjects. But it certainly can be said that the tastes, ideals, prejudices, mores, and taboos of the nineteenth-century English family dictated criteria far removed from those that determined the kind of art that had been produced for Italian princes and cardinals or German dukes. The violence and bloodshed, the battles and martyrdoms that, for example, characterized much French academic painting had little place on

*Nearly all quotations from contemporary criticism in this book are taken from major general-circulation periodicals, not, as might sometimes be suspected, from religious or didactic publications whose biases were not necessarily shared by the art-loving public at large.*
59 (top). Thomas Stothard, Cleopatra Dissolving the Pearl (Intemperance) (RA 1810) (Tate Gallery, London). A sketch for the mural Stothard painted, 1799–1803, on the Roman staircase of Burghley House, seat of the Marquis of Exeter, joining vast murals painted there by Antonio Verrio in 1694–97. 60 (bottom). William Collins, Sunday Morning (RA 1836) (Tate Gallery, London). A contrast between the old aristocratic taste in art and the new and dominant bourgeois preference. The intemperance theme in Stothard’s painting nominally had a moral aim, but pictorial allegory, even when imposed on a scene from literature, had become so heavily conventional as to be devoid of much force; like the bacchanalian scene it represents, it was an increasingly enfeebled survivor from an older time. The lesson of Collins’s pious genre scene, however, was unmistakable and directly applicable to everyday life. It was exhibited with a motto from George Herbert’s ‘Sunday’: ‘O day most calm, most bright,/The fruit of this, the next world’s bud...’
English walls. The difference between the two schools struck Richard Redgrave forcibly when he visited the 1855 Paris exhibition of loaned art. "Our subjects," he noted in his diary, "are undeniably of a less elevated, and of a lower and more familiar character in England, but they are works a man can live with, and love to look on, obtruding no terrors on his sleeping or waking fancies."  

Few households, of course, required unbroken cheer on the walls; much room was reserved for, among other moods, representations of gentle pathos or melancholy, agreeable sentiments poles removed from revulsion and indispensable to a well-rounded emotional existence. Nor was there any unanimity on the score of sensuousness, which after all is a matter of degree. Modern eyes detect in Victorian paintings much latent eroticism of which contemporaries were serenely unaware. Outright sexuality in art was prohibited in every pure-minded family's home, but in respect to nudes there was considerable variance of opinion. Moral disapproval contended with aesthetic delight, and the scales decisively shifted as the nineteenth century progressed. At the time the Reverend George Tennyson installed in his rectory his collection of "'eathen gods and goddesses wi'out cloàs" (1810), Dorothea Brooke's uncle, in Middlemarch, had already brought home from his travels on the Continent a gentleman's collection of casts and pictures. "To poor Dorothea," wrote George Eliot, suggesting a change of taste that was evident no more than twenty years later, when Dorothea compared her uncle's collection with Casaubon's, "these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities were painfully inexplicable, staring in the midst of her Puritanic conceptions: she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life" (chap. 9).  

Tolerance of the paintings of William Etty, the pre- and early Victorian specialist in the undraped female figure, was a reliable indication of men's character. No doubt there was a touch of professional jealousy in Constable's remark, after seeing Etty's Venus and Cupid at the British Institution in 1830, that "I recollect nothing in the Gallery but some women's bums by Etty R. A."  

Twenty years later, the self-righteous Thomas Uwins, deploring the influence of "railroad speculators, iron mine men, and grinders from Sheffield, &c." on contemporary art, exclaimed, "The voluptuous character of Etty's works suits the degree of moral and mental intelligence of these people, and therefore his success!" But even one of Uwins's own "iron mine men," John Gibbons, had his mild doubts about the propriety of Etty's work. "I fancy, from what I have heard of it," he wrote Frith apropos of a painting that he did not identify, "that it is fitter for the antechamber of a gay young bachelor than the walls of a family man whose head is gray."  

Dickens seized upon an artistic taste that ran to "voluptuousness" as an indicator of morality in his description of the home of the villainous businessman Carker, in Dombey and Son:  

And yet amidst this opulence of comfort, there is something in the general air that is not well. Is it that the carpets and the cushions are too soft and noiseless, so that those who move or repose among them seem to act by stealth? Is it that
the prints and pictures do not commemorate great thoughts or deeds, or render nature in the poetry of landscape, hall, or hut, but are of one voluptuous cast—mere shows of form and colour—and no more? Is it that the books have all their gold outside, and that the titles of the greater part qualify them to be companions of the prints and pictures? (Chap. 22)

Dickens here expresses the close connection between the paintings on the wall and the books on the shelves. The implication in Carker's case, supposing that he favored the canvases of contemporary artists, is that the pictures are Etty's in spirit if not in fact, and that the books are overheated to match: Carker would seem to have had the same tastes that his noble contemporary Richard Monckton Milnes, later Lord Houghton, indulged in his celebrated library and museum of erotica.*

But nudes also could carry, somewhere on their persons, highly respectable credentials. It had long been a commonplace that the unclothed human figure displayed in classical painting, especially Old Master pictures on mythological or even biblical themes, might be looked upon with unembarrassed eyes but the same figure in a modern context could not. Similarly, it was felt that nudity in a painting derived from a respectable source in English literature could not be all that bad. That was why scores of painters, for a century and more, offered their customers studies of the nude (or nearly so) Musidora, from *The Seasons*—the nation's Venus, discovered by an English stream. (See Part Three below, under Thomson.) Her acceptability extended, on the same grounds of literary cachet, to such figures as Spenser's Serena, when she was being rescued by Sir Calepine, and Lady Godiva, who had been painted as a Coventry legend long before Tennyson celebrated her, but whose entrée to domestic walls was facilitated by his poem.† Etty sought opportunities for painting the nude in such impeccable sources as Spenser and Milton (Eve and the bacchanalian figures in *Comus*), and this is one reason why other artists were so partial to these and other poets' treatments of classical myth. Late Victorian academic painters, though they replaced Etty's warm flesh with

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* But only four years earlier, in his description of the art owned by the Lancashire industrialist Millbank in *Coningsby* (1844), the more liberal Benjamin Disraeli had seen no harm in his possessing, among groups of animals by Landseer ("as full of speech and sentiment as if they were designed by Aesop") and "the household humour and homely pathos of Wilkie," "some specimens of Etty worthy of Venice when it was alive" (bk. 4, chap. 4).

† As a subject of art, Lady Godiva was in need of the respectability Tennyson's poem (1842) provided; she then had a somewhat risqué reputation. In 1826, there was a wild rumor that the king wanted to buy for 10,000 guineas (a huge sum that in itself should have discredited the report) a life-size painting of Godiva then on view in a Pall Mall gallery. To encourage patronage, the proprietor seized upon the old show business device of advertising that notwithstanding criticism in the press—which he conceivably could have planted, along with the rumor—the painting could be viewed without embarrassment in mixed company (Whitley [3], pp. 109–10). On Lady Godiva and *tableaux vivants*, see Part Three, under Tennyson.
marble, sometimes took their nudes from the same sources. Edward Poynter, for example, relished the chance to paint nude subsidiary figures (nereids) when he was commissioned to make six designs for a sumptuous edition of Keats’s *Endymion* in 1873.

There was less tolerance of the “disturbing” quality of some literary subjects. As Redgrave said, no fears should be allowed to obtrude on one’s sleeping or waking fancies.* After the time of the illustrations from Gothic fiction and, more important, of Fuseli’s macabre and violent paintings (which, however, had no influence on popular art), the incidence of the horrific, of ghosts and evil spirits, markedly diminished—a strong indication of art’s spreading invasion of the bourgeois home. There were a few exceptions: Macbeth and the witches still were painted in profusion, as were the goblins in Burns’s *Tam o’ Shanter.* But the one subject was hallowed by its association with Shakespeare, and the other was no more disturbing than any supernatural tale told by the Victorian fireside.

Two macabre “Italian” stories were repeatedly painted. One was that of Ginevra, the daughter of the Orsino family, who on her wedding day (some accounts say during Christmas festivities) hid herself in a trunk by way of a prank. The lid closed over her and locked, and fifty years later her skeleton was discovered. The best known treatment at the time was in Samuel Rogers’s poem *Italy* (1822–28), from which at least ten paintings of the story were derived between 1834 and 1854. The other story, actually a pair of cognate ones from the fourth book of Boccaccio’s *Decameron,* was the grisly one centering on an anatomical item and a cruelly interrupted love affair. In the narrative retold by Keats in “Isabella, or, The Pot of Basil,” Isabella’s lover is murdered by her brothers and his body buried in a forest, where Isabella, led by a dream, finds it. She severs the head and places it in a pot of basil as a permanent souvenir; her brothers, noting her abnormal devotion to the pot, steal it and find the head. Isabella, bereft of her lover in any form, dies. From 1840, when the first artistic treatment was shown at the Royal Academy—by Keats’s friend Joseph Severn—to the end of the century, no fewer than a score of paintings from the poem were exhibited. (For Millais’s version, see pi. 334.) In the other Boccaccian narrative, paintings of which were sometimes attributed to Dryden’s version in his *Sigismunda and Guiscardo,* Tancred, prince of Salerno, kills his daughter’s lover Guiscardo and sends his heart (not head) to her in a golden cup; she takes poison and joins Isabella in the shades.

The gruesome aspects of both stories seem to have been discounted. To the Victorians, the sad fates of Ginevra, Isabella, and Sigismunda, irrespective of their circumstances, qualified them to be the subjects of sentimental portraits. The spirit in which they were painted is captured in a critic’s description of H. W. Pickersgill’s painting of Ginevra (RA 1848), this time from Thomas Haynes Bayley’s ballad version: “Her bright look casts no shadow before, as she holds the lid up and bends to step in. Poor thing; it was a hard and dismal fate, and in her white raiment, orange flowers, and beaming countenance, the artist has imparted the glow of painting to its poetic tragedy.”

Though the claims of sentiment might sometimes overrule revulsion, the habit of the age was to avert one’s eyes from unpleasantness. As a writer remarked in 1847, “The end of Art is pleasure; and to dwell habitually on the dark side of humanity is to miss that end.” The “dark side of humanity” presumably included its drinking habits; Burns’s con-

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*Presumably this would include John Martin’s apocalyptic visions. Besides the ones he derived from the Old Testament and Milton, there was The Last Man (pl. 63), which, along with Loutherbourg’s earlier painting of the same name, was related to a recurrent theme in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thought, the vanity of human ambition confronted by the future annihilation of the race. This was the same gloomy idea that lay behind the numerous late-eighteenth-century paintings of ruins. Byron wrote a poem, “Darkness,” suggested by Jean-Baptiste Grünville’s *Le dernier homme.* Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* was published the same year that Martin painted his first version of the subject (1826). Thomas Lovell Beddoes incorporated portions of an unfinished drama on the theme in his *Death’s Jest Book,* and Thomas Campbell, denying he had plagiarized from Byron, produced his own poem “The Last Man,” a quotation from which accompanied Martin’s third painted version. (See A. J. Sambrook, “A Romantic Theme: The Last Man,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* [St. Andrews University] 2 [1965]: 25–33.)
vivial songs were illustrated by conspicuously diluted pictures that contained none of the tankard-emptying abandon one finds in carousal scenes in seventeenth-century Dutch art. In fact, the only drinking scenes from literature that were often portrayed were the Boar's Head Tavern festivities in Henry IV and the "cakes and ale" scene in Twelfth Night, and these were notably toned down. The alcoholic content of Victorian painting was concentrated, instead, in George Cruikshank's pictorial temperance tracts The Bottle and The Drunkard's Children.

Disturbing public issues, which more often than not concerned themselves with the dark side of humanity, were almost totally ignored in 63. John Martin, The Last Man (RA 1850) (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). After visiting the Royal Academy exhibition, Charlotte Bronte wrote her father that Martin's was "a grand, wonderful picture . . . showing the red sun fading out of the sky, and all the soil of the foreground made up of bones and skulls" (The Brontes: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence [The Shakespeare Head Bronte, ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington. Oxford, 1992–98], 3: 116).

64. William Hogarth, Sigismunda Mourning over the Heart of Guiscardo, Her Murder'd Husband (1755; Society of Artists 1766) (Tate Gallery, London). This painting was the first to allude to Dryden's version of the Boccaccian story in his Fables. Persistently anxious to prove his talent in history painting, Hogarth selected the subject in an effort to equal, if not surpass, the celebrated treatment by "Correggio" (actually Francis Furini).
100. John Burnet, *Tam o’ Shanter* (undated) (Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum). This scene from Burns’s poem represents the limit to which nineteenth-century artists went in depicting the social joys of drinking. Better remembered as an engraver, Burnet exhibited at the Royal Academy for fifty-four years (1808–62).

65. Thomas Stothard, *Carousing Scene* (undated) (Victoria & Albert Museum, Crown Copyright). The literary source is not certain. One possibility is *Twelfth Night* (Sir Toby Belch with Maria in the background); a more likely one is *Henry IV* (Falstaff with Dame Quickly, though the other figures bear little resemblance to his drinking companions as portrayed on the stage).

66. Thomas Stothard, *Carousing Scene* (undated) (Victoria & Albert Museum, Crown Copyright). The literary source is not certain. One possibility is *Twelfth Night* (Sir Toby Belch with Maria in the background); a more likely one is *Henry IV* (Falstaff with Dame Quickly, though the other figures bear little resemblance to his drinking companions as portrayed on the stage).

Victorian art except for such political overtones as might be detected in some history paintings and the numerically small group of social realist paintings after mid-century. Unlike the Romantic poets and the leading Victorian social critics (the so-called sages), nineteenth-century artists were almost totally uninterested in the issues represented by what Carlyle called “the condition of England question.” Temperamentally if not ideologically, they were conservative, especially as they worked their way up in society. The Royal Academy exhibitions never were the political arena that the Paris Salon became on occasion.

It is not surprising, then, that forthright social or political comment was never seen, or at least publicly detected, in nineteenth-century literary paintings, despite the heterodox ideas and subversive tendencies so many English literary works contain. There may be political overtones, as has recently been argued, in Turner’s *The Bright Stone of Honour* (Ehrenbreitstein) and the *Tomb of Marceau*, from *Childe Harold* (RA 1835). But overtones only; and the same is true of what was perhaps the closest approach a Victorian literary painting made to explicit political statement, Holman Hunt’s *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of His Young Brother* (RA 1849). Based on Bulwer-Lytton’s novel, which had a topical bearing on the Italian Risorgimento, it was, by the artist’s own admission, a pictorial expression of the liberal feelings roused in him by the fervor that had swept Europe in the previous year. “Like most young men,” Hunt said much later, “I was stirred by the spirit of freedom of the passing revolutionary time. The appeal to Heaven against the tyranny exercised over the poor and helpless seemed well fitted for pictorial treatment. ‘How long, O Lord!’ many bleeding souls were crying at that time.”

In the large and repetitious array of pictures from Burns, there is little hint of the provocatively democratic and irreligious elements that inform such poems as “The Twa Dogs,” “The Jolly Beggars,” and “The Holy Fair,” although all three were painted often enough. (A number of poems
that Burns's first editor, Dr. James Currie, considered unsuitable for public display were suppressed in the edition he published in 1800.) It is safe to say that no Burns pictures even faintly expressed the "Jacobinism" and "infidelity" with which early critics had taxed the poet. When artists took individual vignettes of character and incident from his poems, they consistently drained the subject of its satiric or polemical element, reducing it to mere innocuous genre.

Although Hogarth was admired, it was for the morality of his "progress" stories, not his savage indictment of eighteenth-century social practices. The furthest that artists went in behalf of the "correction of manners" that had been an important aim of writers in the age of Swift and Dr. Johnson was their scenes from Addison's *Spectator* papers, but even these were sometimes relieved of their gentle satire (pl. 90). None of the paintings from *Don Juan* conveyed any hint of the poem's satirical voltage; nearly all, including Ford Madox Brown's (pl. 133), dealt with the romantic story of Don Juan and Haidee. The fairly numerous pictures from Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* (pls. 3, 282, 283) took the farcical situations and left the corrosive once-topical satire behind.

Because no one expected to find social or political criticism in contemporary art, critics seldom went out of their way to look for it. The liberal slant of Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* sometimes prompted it to find a message for the moment, as when Henry Monro's treatment of the familiar subject of Wolsey's disgrace in *Henry VIII* (B1 1814) led to the rather gratuitous observation that the picture should remind spectators of present-day royalty, most particularly the dissolute Prince Regent, in their "sensual, selfish, and time-serving acquiescence to their pleasures and appetites." No such bracing note, however, was sounded by later art critics, who, when they did feel inclined to infer a propagandistic message from a new painting, found one that would sit well with their readers.

Their orientation is well defined by the nature of their responses to three literary paintings exhibited about the time that Hunt's *Rienzi* caused a stir (on Pre-Raphaelite, not political, grounds). Frith's *The Return from Labour* (RA 1846), equipped with a motto from Gray's "Elegy," was greeted as "a cheering domestic vision of rural comfort and happiness, which would get no belief on the floor of the House of Commons," then debating the cause and cure of the prevailing "agricultural distress," including the Irish famine. Frith's picture, the reviewer believed, would strengthen the confidence of those who maintained that all was well with the rural poor.

In violent contrast was a picture entitled *The Streets of London—A Female Dombey* (SBA 1848), which had no connection whatsoever with the new novel whose title it so brazenly echoed. It was a multiple-episode composition in the manner of F. M. Brown's later *Work* and Frith's *The Railway Station and Derby Day*. On Ludgate Hill, a soldier kissed his girl, a policeman beat a child, and selfish pride, in the person of an overdressed woman with a lapdog (the "female Dombey"), refused to succor misery in the form of a pallid beggar girl, while a sailor with his sweetheart on his arm did, in fact, relieve the "distressed female." The artist was chastised for his violation of artistic decorum. "We are sorry to see this performance," said the *Literary Gazette*. "We have enough of the stirring up of discontent in low and sordid literature; and it is painful to see the bad spirit transferred to the painter's art."
The critical response to the third picture, Millais's rendering of Covent­
try Patmore's poem "The Tale of Poor Maud, the Woodman's Daughter" (RA 1851), is remarkable for what it failed to say. The painting was pure
sentimental genre: a well-dressed little boy offering a handful of straw-
berries to the homespun-clad daughter of a woodman. No reviewer
pointed out that in the poem the girl, once she was grown, was seduced by
the grown-up son of wealth, and deserted by him, lost her mind and
murdered their child. The social implications of the ballad-like story were
totally overlooked.

When Richard Redgrave's *The Sempstress* was exhibited at the Royal
Academy in 1844, it bore a quotation from Thomas Hood's "The Song of
the Shirt," which had appeared in *Punch* six months earlier (December
1843). The poem had caused a sensation. Redgrave's painting was an
expression on the highest social level of a sudden wave of sympathy with
downtrodden, ill-paid seamstresses that otherwise found expression in
musical settings of Hood's poem (as well as versified spinoffs), printed
handkerchiefs, dramatizations, and sermons. But the picture disapp­
pointed those who expected it to communicate the burning indignation of
the poem. Here, for once, was a subject that the momentarily aroused
critics decided should not be utterly smothered in sentimentality.
Thackeray, for one, was hard on it. "Mr. Redgrave," he wrote, "has
illustrated every thing except the humour, the manliness, and the bitter-
ness of the song. He has only depicted the tender, good-natured part of
it."23

*The Sempstress* initiated a steady stream of paintings—some twenty are
recorded—depicting shirting, dressmaking, millinery-making wom­
en; and if they did not actually get their titles from lines in the poem
("Work, work, work!" or "Stitch! stitch! stitch!"), they came equipped with
those same words as a motto. Even so unlikely an artist as George F. Watts
took up the subject in 1849, but like virtually all other representations, his
carried no social message whatsoever. It is noteworthy that the other
literary protest of the moment against the horrible conditions in which
women and children worked, Elizabeth Barrett's "Cry of the Children,"
published in a volume of her poems the year after "The Song of the Shirt"
and almost as well known, seems not to have inspired any paintings.

Even had artists possessed more of a social conscience than they did, the
watchdogs of the press, echoing the conservative, don't-rock-the-boat
prejudices of the art exhibitions' clientele, would have made it extremely
risky for them to express their feelings in paint. Where touchy issues were
even dimly involved, it was prudent to avoid them. The fact was that
whatever else pictures from literature were expected to provide, social
commentary was not tolerable except in the blandest possible terms. And
so literary comment on the foolish if not vicious ways of mankind, and of
nineteenth-century English society in particular, was transformed on can­
vas into inoffensive sentimental genre and biteless comedy of manners.

If there was an all but universal consensus regarding the kinds of
pictures that were and were not suitable for home display, in the case of
literary paintings there was no less broad an agreement on the sources to
be drawn from, and, other things (such as domestic acceptability) being
equal, the subjects to be selected. Custom governed the market. But what
had hardened by the Victorian era into mindless habit had originated in
spontaneous fashion, and in the earliest phase of literary painting, down to the end of the eighteenth century, the scope of adaptable subjects was still flexible. While characters and scenes from Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Thomson, and Gray quickly became staples, there was also, as we have seen, a significant representation of immediately contemporary literature, books popular in their own day but now wholly forgotten. At the same time, the choice of subjects was more often affected by personal relationships between artists and patrons than later, when, apart from commissions, it was governed by the demands of the market at large. Romney’s eight or nine “Serena” pictures from Hayley’s poem *The Triumphs of Temper*, which quickly went through fourteen editions after its publication in 1781, are a case in point.  

Hayley was Romney’s patron, and at least one of the pictures, it appears, was painted while Hayley was writing the poem and reading to him his daily production. Eventually the set was used to illustrate the sixth edition of 1788. (It had an additional tie-in with the bestseller list of the period, because Serena was a great reader, and in successive editions of the poem, the identity of the book Romney depicted in her hands was changed in Hayley’s text to reflect the latest demand at the circulating library. In one edition, she was deep in Fanny Burney’s *Evelina*, and in another, in an early novel by Mrs. Opie, wife of the artist John Opie.)

In the nineteenth century, the winnowing process that selected the subjects for literary art was governed by uncannily accurate prescience. The only bestselling books that were repeatedly drawn upon were those of authors whose fame was destined to last: Scott, Byron, Dickens, Tennyson. Those that were the sensation of only a season or two were, in contrast to their predecessors in the late eighteenth century, seldom chosen. The few recorded paintings from obscure, ephemeral books can probably be accounted for by the personal taste or momentary enthusiasm of the artist or, more likely, by that of the buyer, who commissioned the work as a memento of a literary hobby or a sentimental attachment to the book.*

Unfortunately, apart from the relatively few pictures of whose occasion we have a record, it is impossible to distinguish between those that were “bespoke” from the ones that artists produced in the usual manner, on speculation as it were. But it is clear that as the nineteenth century wore on, the former element of adventurousness, responsiveness to immediate literary fashions, even downright eccentricity in choice of subject, diminished; there were decidedly fewer offbeat subjects than before. A few paintings seem to have been edged into the annual exhibitions to advertise a forthcoming book, as were Daniel Maclise’s three illustrations of Bulwer’s *Alice; or, The Mysteries* at the British Institution in 1838. And in the 1880s and 90s, a number of paintings were displayed with the explicit announcement that they were “illustrations” of this or that new novel. But except for these, art did not often reflect the current-book news in the weekly literary papers. Theatrical painting, as long as it held out against the encroachment of photography, was much more *au courant* with its field of interest.

Thus pictures from established authors, and from a limited range of their total repertory of subjects for painting, constituted all but a small proportion of the year’s exhibited offerings. In reviews of exhibitions, especially after mid-century when the great boom in literary art began to

*In the 1850s, for example, Queen Victoria commissioned a series of watercolor sketches to remind her of the Shakespearean plays she had particularly enjoyed at the Princess’ Theatre. These were assembled in an album that is still at Windsor (George Rowell, *Queen Victoria Goes to the Theatre* [London, 1978], pp. 56–57).
wane, the laments over the monotonous repetition of some subjects were so frequent as to be themselves the essence of monotony. "If [one] artist is original by accident," said the Art Journal in 1858, "all the others follow in Indian file. One paints Evangeline,* the Lady of Shalott, or some other conception of equal pungency, when lo! there is a creation of fifty Evangelines and Ladies of Shalott; and so it is with every new vein of thought." The occasional novelty that "took" would soon become a cliché.

Even when painters bothered to look for fresh subjects, they sought them in the same books that had already served them well. Frith's daughter recalled that "Papa used to sit for half an hour after dinner, smoking and generally searching for a 'subject.' The ugliness, he said, of modern dress always appalled him, and he avoided it as long as he could, reading over and over again Goldsmith, Molière, Richardson, and in fact all the old writers, until one joyous day ... he came across the pages of immortal Boz, and made himself happy with 'Dolly Varden' and 'Kate Nickleby,' and I think one or two other characters out of books he loved. But, these completed, he came back to the old writers."

Despite this constant crossing and recrossing of already well gleaned fields, the full pictorial possibilities of a given poem, play, or novel were seldom realized. The incidents that were drawn from it were not necessarily the ones, or the only ones, that were most adapted for graphic representation; they seem merely to have been those that first caught the public fancy. By no means all of the deaths in Shakespeare, or the dramatically effective Shakespearean scenes involving the unmasking of disguised figures, were painted, or all the "discoveries" or rescues in The Faerie Queene, or the numerous confrontations or pathetic episodes in Shakespeare's plays or Scott's romances. Popular though Tristram Shandy was as a subject for anecdotal pictures, it contained many episodes that were seldom if ever depicted. The little incident of Uncle Toby and the fly might be expected to have been to the popular taste (though there might have been some difficulty painting the fly); but it seems never to have been the subject of a picture. The numerous incidents involving the fortifications were never used, apart from the presence of the sentry box in two famous Widow Wadman pictures (pls. 45, 67). Even Slawkenbergius's tale contains a number of passages seemly enough to be acceptable to Victorian buyers who, understandably, would have bridled at any illustration of the obstetrical passages.

Another instance is that of The Vicar of Wakefield, one of the most painted single works of English literature. Artists repeatedly found données in the briefest of passages. Mulready's famous Choosing the Wedding Gown (pl. 304) was based on no more than the novel's first two sentences:

> I was ever of opinion that the honest man who married and brought up a large family did more service than he who continued single and only talked of population. From the moment I had scarce taken orders a year before I began to think seriously of matrimony, and chose my wife as she did her wedding gown, not for a fine glossy surface but such qualities as would wear well.

From a single page in chapter 16, Frith drew three different subjects at one time or another: "He [Squire Thornhill] usually came in the morning, and while my son and I followed our occupations abroad, he sat with the family at home, and amused them by describing the town, with every part of which he was particularly acquainted" (The Squire Describing Some

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*Longfellow and Irving were the only American writers to figure prominently in British art.

69. (below). Augustus Egg, Autolycus (RA 1845) (Guildhall Art Gallery, London). A good example of the manner in which popular artists who drew their subjects from literature imitated one another. The scene is the same: The Winter's Tale, 4. 4, in which the roguish peddler Autolycus hawks ballads (Leslie) and ribbons (Egg) to an enraptured group of stylishly clad shepherds and shepherdesses. For the companion to Leslie's painting, see pl. 242.
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Passages in His Town Life, RA 1844); “The intervals between conversation were employed in teaching my daughters piquet or sometimes in setting my two little ones to box to make them sharp, as he called it” (The Squire Teaching the Young Ladies Piquet and the Boys to Box, pl. 86); “Then the poor woman would sometimes tell the 'Squire, that she thought him and Olivia extremely of a size, and would bid both stand up to see which was tallest” (Measuring Heights, pl. 303). Yet there are several scenes that would appear to have been equally adaptable to painting but were not touched even by Frith: the family’s posing for the “limner” (see chapter 1, above), the vicar overtaking the strolling company, and the two “discovery” scenes, in one of which the actor who plays Horatio in Rowe’s The Fair Penitent turns out to be the vicar’s eldest son, and in the other, Burchell proves to be Sir William Thornhill.

Thomson’s The Seasons, that inexhaustible reservoir of paintings for many decades, contained more hints for pictures than artists ever availed themselves of. A number of “human interest” passages went unused while Celadon and Amelia, Damon and Musidora, and Palemon and Lavinia were painted with oppressive regularity. Fashion dictated the initial choice, and convention preserved it even when outmoded. A picture from The Seasons, apart from landscapes and generalized rural genre, had to be a picture of Celadon and Amelia, Damon and Musidora, or Palemon and Lavinia; that was the way things were at the beginning, and the way things stayed. For this reason, the frequent occurrence of some subjects is less reliable an indication of the active taste of a particular moment than might be supposed. The persistence of these subjects implies inertia and indifference on the part of both artist and buyer—a kind of reflex conservatism—rather than a genuine, lively attachment to the subjects themselves.

This heavy conventionality marked, and to a large degree was dictated by, the nature of the books on the shelves of the rooms where the pictures hung. When first editions of novels were expensive, as they were throughout the century, many families with literary as well as artistic taste could not afford to buy them; in most homes, they were simply on loan from the many circulating libraries in the metropolis and the provinces that preceded and then (after the 1840s) surrendered their clientele to Mudie’s famous “select” lending agency in New Oxford Street. But books that were merely borrowed could not be taken into the bosom of the family, to be reread and referred to in casual conversation for many years thereafter. So far as the interests of art were concerned, most of the significant books that were permanently housed under, or across from, the paintings were English classics or “standard authors”—a dignity Byron and Scott had traded for their earlier distinction of bestsellers by mid-century, and which Tennyson would attain in time. The English classics had a much longer shelf life in the nineteenth century than they were to have in the twentieth; they were by no means as readily displaced by new products of the press. The selection of subjects for pictures assumed a more stable popular taste, less affected by fleeting vogues, as well as a genuine devotion to the writers who had been popular several generations, if not a century or two, earlier. As Ian Jack has correctly observed, “The average reader in the year 1820 was as likely to be reading a book written in the eighteenth century as a book by one of his contemporaries.” Though the literary sympathies of readers a generation later may not have been
quite so likely to reach back to the preceding century, they still were less
touched by the passion for newness that characterizes present-day read­
ers. Literary paintings, in short, reflected a now vanished phenomenon:
the persistence of "our old authors," as they were called, "the rich depos­
its of earlier literature" as Jack describes them—the staples of literary
experience among the commonalty of Victorian readers.

The illustrated eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, Spenser,
and Milton and the reprint series of standard English poets, novelists,
dramatists, and essayists that figure most prominently in the early history
of reprint publishing and book illustration (see chapter 2, above) were
only the best remembered of many such enterprises that often constituted
the profitable backlist of publishers. In the third of a century before the
Victorian era began, there were scores of series conceived in direct imita­
tion of Bell's and Cooke's, some running to scores of volumes and a few to
well over one hundred. Some were issued in weekly, fortnightly, or
monthly parts, in pocket format and at prices as low as sixpence or a
shilling, each with an engraved title page and perhaps a frontispiece.
Others, meant for the well-to-do trade, were luxuriously bound accord­
ing to the taste of the moment. Many were elegantly illustrated and were
priced accordingly.

The standard authors figured on the shelves in another form, in the
many "beauties" anthologies that are traceable ultimately to the kind of
appreciative criticism Addison had popularized in his Spectator papers on
Milton (1712): the singling out of short passages over which one was
encouraged to linger and exclaim "O que c'est beau!" Even earlier, Edward
Bysshe's The Art of English Poesy (1702) contained an assemblage of
quotable excerpts; and throughout the eighteenth century, the teaching
of rhetoric in schools for middle-class boys was assisted by anthologies of
passages to be analyzed, memorized, and/or recited. After the middle of
the century, the presses poured forth books entitled The Beauties of Poetry
Display'd, The Beauties of Shakespeare, The Beauties of the Spectator (or the
Taller or the Rambler), The Beauties of English Poesy (one of Goldsmith's
potboilers), The Beauties of Fielding, The Beauties of Sterne. A number of
these anthologies, including one devoted to Dr. Johnson, were reissued
through the first third of the nineteenth century.

In 1789, the publication of the first of the many editions of the
Tonbridge schoolmaster Vicesimus Knox's Extracts, Elegant, Instructive,
and Entertaining, in Poetry; from the Most Approved Authors (a similar volume
of prose had appeared in 1783) added fresh vigor to the anthology busi­
ess; in 1810, Wordsworth observed that the work was "circulated every
where and in fact constitutes at this day the poetical library of our
Schools." Its popularity led to the adoption of its title as the generic term
for such books. New collections competed for a share of the market as it
was expanded, not only by the spread of popular education but by the
fashion for gift books (see chapter 4, above), which led publishers to
package the literary (textual) beauties in volumes whose formats were
themselves regarded as modestly elegant. Among these anthologies were
Lyrical Gems (1824), Croly's British Poets, or New Elegant Extracts (1828),
Specimens of the Lyrical, Descriptive and Narrative Poets of Great Britain (1828),
The Juvenile Poetic Selector (1829), and so on, down to the most popular and
influential of all such works in Victorian times, Palgrave's Golden Treasury
(1861).
The practice of singling out passages of unusual merit was a common one among reviewers, beginning in the later decades of the eighteenth century. Critical articles were often as much quotation as original text, a scarcely surprising practice when writers were working at space rates. Extracts were a favorite means of filling the unused portions of columns or pages in middle- and working-class periodicals. The custom extended also to the lectures on literary topics delivered from the 1830s onward at the hundreds of mechanics' institutes that served the cause of popular adult education; such platform performances were mainly recitations interspersed with appreciative remarks.

These several entwined conventions in popular literary culture served to focus the eyes of ordinary readers on the shining high spots of poetry and fiction—the "beautiful" image or thought, the striking dash of psychological characterization or natural description, the memorable pointing of a moral—rather than the work's totality. Paintings fulfilled the same purpose. They too, by necessity, captured only fragments of the work. Engravings of literary paintings were scarcely more than elegant extracts in visual form.

The invention of the stereotype at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in addition to being an important technical advance, created a perfect metaphor to symbolize the effect of the engraving process on British art. Recalling the furor that greeted the Pre-Raphaelites' defiance of convention, Holman Hunt wrote that the assumption that "all that British art was required to display" could be seen at the annual exhibitions "was . . . indicated by the avidity with which all well-to-do homes were furnished with engravings of the favourite current pictures" at those showcases. The increasing presence of such engravings in the home, that is, homogenized taste; they and their subjects became so familiar, through day-to-day experience of them, that they became the norm for aesthetic experience and standards. Engravings discouraged whatever adventurousness the art-buying public might otherwise have risked, making it more conservative, less receptive to innovation, and then enforcing its fixed taste upon the painters. If their clients were satisfied with repetitions of the same themes, why should artists whose livelihood depended on their acceptance exert themselves to find fresh subjects?

Such a persistent state of mind probably explains in large part (but not entirely, because some of these anomalies defy rational explanation) why the artistic coverage of English literature, even that portion of the literary heritage which lent itself to visual treatment, was so fragmentary despite its abundance. It was not only that artists confined themselves to a well-worn selection of subjects in the books that they most frequently drew upon; some works they simply ignored, for whatever reason.

One of the most surprising oversights was artists' neglect of Jane Austen's novels. Although she was never widely read in the nineteenth century, she had a steady following in the upper-middle class reading audience as well as genuine, however limited, critical fame. Sir Thomas Lawrence counted her as "one of his most favourite authors," and at least one Victorian painter, George Frederic Watts, was partial to her novels, though admittedly his characteristic mature style was ill adapted to the kind of subjects they suggested. He relied on them, he said, along with Scott's romances, as "the books that he turned to most often when tired or unwell." Jane Austen herself was aware of the resemblance her art bore
to that of the painter. In a letter to her brother Edward, dated 16 December 1816, she asked: “What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety and Glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?” Critics repeatedly compared her art with that of the Dutch school and even (a revelation of the ease with which they could separate technique from content) with that of Hogarth. One could point to numerous episodes in Austen’s novels that were perfectly adapted to be the subjects of conversation pieces, a form of painting still popular in her lifetime, or the parlor-genre pictures that were to become even more popular a generation later. But no artist picked up the hint of the Blackwood’s reviewer of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion (1818) when he predicted that “the time, probably, will return, when we shall take a more permanent delight in those familiar cabinet pictures, than even in the great historical pieces of our more eminent masters.” As the search for suitable “cabinet picture” subjects was pressed, Jane Austen, the accomplished miniaturist-in-prose, was wholly overlooked.*

No pictures were suggested by Lamb’s essays, and only one or two were inspired by Pickwick Papers. Except for Mrs. Radcliffe, few of the numerous Gothic novelists provided subjects, nor did William Beckford’s Vathek (even when Oriental scenes were a staple of the early nineteenth-century exhibitions), or Charles Maturin’s Fuseli-esque Melmoth the Wanderer. There was, to put it mildly, an oversupply of pictures from Scott, but his fellow Scotsman John Galt, whose quiet portrayals of village life north of the Tweed would have qualified him as a source for Wilkie’s genre pictures, was absent from the walls. There were no pictures from Mrs. Gaskell’s novels, although Cranford, for one, would have provided numerous conversation pieces and genre tableaux, and none from Miss Mitford’s Our Village, although a new edition (1835) was illustrated by the landscape artist Charles Baxter, whom the author personally conducted to the sites described. (Our Village did figure indirectly in art, as the source of the story of Tennyson’s poem “Dora,” from which a number of paintings were derived.) There were no pictures from Disraeli, Wilkie Collins, or Trollope, though Millais, to be sure, supplied illustrations for editions of three of Trollope’s novels. Nor, despite the lavish opportunities it afforded to paint scenes in late seventeenth-century Italy in the style of the Renaissance masters, not to say the scores of dramatic moments that occur in the 21,000-line narrative poem, was Browning’s The Ring and the Book ever drawn upon, much as it was discussed and admired when it appeared in 1868–69, one of its first critics declaring that it was “the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare.”

*The mystery is all the more tantalizing because Jane Austen once saw a picture that, on the highest possible authority—her own—might have come out of Pride and Prejudice. After visiting the exhibition of the Society of Painters in Oil and Water Colours in May 1813, five months after the novel was published, she wrote her sister Cassandra, “It is not thought a good collection, but I was very well pleased—particularly (pray tell Fanny) with a small portrait of Mrs. Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of seeing one of her Sister, but there was no Mrs. Darcey. . . . —Mrs. Bingley’s is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features & sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her.” As R. W. Chapman, editor of the letters, commented, to identify Mrs. Bingley’s portrait from the exhibition catalogue “would be indeed a triumph of research” (Jane Austen’s Letters, ed. R. W. Chapman [Oxford, 1932], 2: 309–10, [519]).

It is curious, and not much to their credit, that although Victorian art reviewers were forever deploiring the stubborn appeal of certain hackneyed subjects, they almost never proposed fresh ones. It was left for Thackeray to ask, in his lecture on Steele in The English Humourists, “Could not some painter give an interview between the gallant captain of the gallant captain of Lucas’s, with his hat cocked, and his lace, and his face, too, a trifle tarnished with drink, and that poet, that philosopher, pale, proud, and poor, his friend and monitor of schooldays, of all days?” Although the subject had a triple recommendation—“interviews” were a familiar form of tab-
leau, eighteenth-century settings were in demand for costume pictures, and episodes from literary biography were increasingly popular—apparently no artist undertook a picture of Addison and Steele taking their ease in a coffeehouse.

Readers did slightly better than reviewers in this regard. Thackeray's old college friend Edward FitzGerald, fresh from reading Scott's *A Legend of Montrose*, wrote in 1878, in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton: "What a fine Picture would that make of Evan Dhu's entrance into Tully Veolan Breakfast Hall, with a message from his Chief; he standing erect in his Tartan, while the Baron keeps his State, and pretty Rose at the Table. There is a subject for one of your [American] Artists. Another very pretty one (I thought the other Day) would be that of the child Keats keeping guard with a drawn sword at his sick Mother's Chamber door. Millais might do it over here; but I don't know him." FitzGerald recommended the latter scene, in Monckton Milnes's life of Keats, to his friend the cartoonist Charles Keene, asking him to relay it to Millais. But, if he did receive the suggestion, Millais, who was occupied at the moment with several subjects from Scott, failed to act on it. And, by that much, English literary art is doubtless the poorer.