CHAPTER 8

Artists' acquaintance with English literature.—Their adaptation of subjects from older art: the toilet of Venus, alchemist, Cymon and Iphigenia, Sigismunda, Endymion, etc.—The Westminster Palace frescoes.—The tension between artistic tradition and the "spirit" of the literary subject.

Strong though the nineteenth-century interest in English literature as a source of subjects for painting was, it owed relatively little to the literary cultivation of contemporary artists. With the possible exception of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pope and Reynolds had no successors who bridged the gap between the sister arts as sturdily as they had done from their opposite directions. No poet after Pope (see Part Three, below) had as many different links with painting, nor did any painter after Reynolds have as many links with literature. Reynolds, in fact, was, according to some presumably extempore verses written at the Bedford coffee-house, Covent Garden, in 1777, "th' APELLES of our modern Days," who "Shines forth superior, tho in different ways; / Has of two Arts attain'd the lawrel'd Heights; / Paints with a Pen, and with a Pencil Writes!"¹ The allusion was to his widely admired Royal Academy Discourses, the best claim he had to be considered a man of letters. But in addition to this and other published works, he left behind 2,000 manuscript pages of essays, as well as notes of various kinds he compiled for his friends, Dr. Johnson and the Shakespeare editors Malone and Steevens, among others. His closest friendships were with writers, not artists. Boswell, who dedicated his Life of Johnson to him, recorded that at his table were to be found "a greater group of literary men, than at any other." These included Sheridan and Goldsmith, who respectively dedicated The School for Scandal and The Deserted Village to him. The son of a book-loving parson and schoolmaster who was a former scholar of Corpus Christi College and fellow of Balliol, Reynolds was probably the most widely read of all native-born British artists;* his writings abound in references to Latin and French authors as well as to Shakespeare, Jonson, Bacon, Milton, the Augustan wits, and the best writers of his own time.

*Fuseli's acquaintance with literature was even broader, but of course he was Swiss by birth and education.
In contrast, there was Gainsborough: "I believe I shall remain an igno­rant fellow to the end of my days," he wrote the Earl of Dartmouth in 1771, "because I never could have patience to read Poetical impos­sibilities, the very food of a Painter; especially if he intends to be KNIGHTED in this land of Roast Beef, so well do serious people love froth." His friend, the Exeter cathedral organist and composer William Jackson, said that "Gainsborough avoided the company of literary men—who were his aversion[,] he was better pleased to give than to receive information . . . so far from writing he scarcely ever read a book—but, for a letter to an intimate friend, he had few equals, and no superior." It is certainly true that in his letters he employs a lively, unbuttoned style with no trace of illiteracy—proof, perhaps, that sometimes one can acquire the knack of writing decent prose without the benefit of book learning.

Then there was Romney. "Mr. Romney," said Lord Thurlow, the lord chancellor, to the artist one day in a celebrated put-down, "before you paint Shakespeare, I advise you to read him"; and the artist's own biog­rapher William Hayley questioned whether he "ever read, without inter­ruption, two acts of the dramas that he most cordially admired." It was notorious that George Morland detested reading, even to the point of snatching newspapers from friends who tried to read in his presence. This report has survived to the present day, but its origin in one of the four scandalous biographies of Morland published within three years of his death casts some doubt on its accuracy. It was easy enough, in such accounts of what was claimed to have been a dissolute, wastrel life, to improve the cautionary message by adding the charge that besides having been a debt-ridden alcoholic, Morland was also devoid of literary in­terests. As has been recently pointed out, "a closer study of his work reveals . . . a surprisingly wide acquaintance with contemporary artistic theories and literature." The lawgivers of British art at the time recommended that artists be readers of poetry in the normal routine of their occupation. In his seventh discourse, Reynolds declared that "every man whose business is description, ought to be tolerably conversant with the poets, in some language or other; that he may imbibe a poetical spirit, and enlarge his stock of ideas." Another Academy lecturer, John Opie, whose biographer said he possessed "a thorough knowledge of the works of Milton, Shakespeare, Dryden, Gray, Cowper, Butler's Hudibras, Burke and Johnson," agreed that "drinking deep of the Pierian spring" had "the most direct tendency to exercise, warm, invigorate, and enrich the imagination, and excite noble and daring conceptions." Wordsworth told Sir George Beaumont that the minor artist George Arnald, who exhibited half a dozen pictures from Gray, Shakespeare, and Milton between 1797 and 1813, "would have been a better Painter, if his Genius had led him to read more in the early part of his life. . . . I do not think it possible to excel in landscape painting without a strong tincture of the Poetic Spirit." Beaumont in turn told his twenty-two-year-old protégé David Wilkie in 1807: "You can never read Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser too much. Some of our best novelists, as Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett, are also worthy of your attention. Don Quixote I particularly recommend: let him lie upon your table, and read a chapter when you are fatigued with your work; it will refresh and improve your mind." This counsel was based on the pre-
vailing idea that the imagination can be fed and inspiration deliberately sought from without—in this case, from literature. By reading poetry, the artist, especially the landscapist, can put himself in the mood to paint, priming the pump, as it were.

Haydon, who pawned his studies of the Elgin marbles rather than part with his beloved books, subscribed to this notion of poetry as a stimulus to creativity in paint. It is implicit in an entry in his journal for 10 June 1839: "... In the evening walked up into my book-room. There they were, silent, yet teeming with thoughts, bursting with sublimity. Milton—Satan and all his rebel host filled my mind. Shakespeare—Hamlet, Lear, Falstaff, Cordelia, Imogen, Macbeth and Puck crowded my imagination. I walked about in ecstasy, but read nothing; dwelt on what I had read, and was content."12

John Constable, ten years older, was not as well read, but the record of the books he owned from the family collection, his allusions to writers in letters, and his use of poetic quotations as mottoes for several paintings, together suggest a catholic taste: Akenside, Bacon, Beaumont and Fletcher, Bloomfield, Boswell, Bunyan, Butler, Crabbe, Dryden, Falconer, Goldsmith, Gray, Johnson, Milton, Miss Mitford (whose Our Village he disliked), Shakespeare, Charlotte Smith, Smollett, Thomson.13 He not only quoted Wordsworth, whom he knew through their common friend Beaumont, but wrote a sonnet to him beginning "Thou second Milton!"14 (Evidently he was willing in the long run to overlook Wordsworth's habit of doling out free advice to painters. Farington recorded in 1807 that Constable "was offended with Wordsworth who offered to propose subjects to Him to paint, & gave Him to understand that when He could not think of subjects as well as paint them He wd. come to Him.")15 He considered "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" the greatest modern poem and was an admirer of Cowper; but he was impervious to the glamor of Byron, commenting, on hearing of the poet's death, that "the deadly slime of his touch still remains."16

Turner's knowledge of poetry, though much discussed in recent years, seems to have been considerably smaller than Constable's.17 Its range can be inferred from the titles of some of his paintings and the quotations that accompanied them to the exhibition walls: Thomson, from whose The Seasons he got the idea for his Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, 1840), Pope, Churchill, Shakespeare (The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet), Spenser, and Byron. Mark Akenside's The Pleasures of the Imagination particularly attracted him, and in his lectures as the Royal Academy's professor of perspective, he introduced poetry by Akenside as well as by Milton and Thomson. But in the slender volume of his collected letters, there is scarcely a single allusion to anything he had read.18

Neither Haydon nor Constable nor Turner, however, was a literary painter, and the complaint of Allan or Peter Cunningham (it is not clear which was writing) in 1842 applied with special force, ironically, to the growing company of artists who mediated between literature and painting: "Our artists in general are the most unread of all descriptions or classes of men of genius. . . . An artist's yearly quantity of reading seems to extend over the Academy catalogue, and the cut out passage he attempts to illustrate."19 This was an exaggeration, of course, but it had a hard kernel of truth. Young men in the "superior ranks" of society, where literary cultivation was most to be expected, seldom aspired to a career in

*The list of paintings on literary subjects that Haydon began but did not finish is larger than the list of those he completed—evidence that his absorption in English literature was deeper than the roster of finished paintings suggests. Between 1823 and his death in 1846, he made some progress on at least fourteen pictures from Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Milton, and Byron. His 1845 project of a representation of "Byron musing on a distant view of Harrow" constituted a variation on the theme of "Napoleon musing at St. Helena" (and elsewhere) that he had used for no fewer than twenty-three pictures to that time.

†In fairness to Wordsworth, it might be added that, according to John Opie's widow, the artist "said of Wordsworth that he talked on art more sensibly and more like an artist than any one he had met in the profession" (A. M. W. Stirling, The Richmond Papers [London, 1926], p. 39).
art, which had neither social prestige nor substantial promise of monetary rewards except as these were achieved by a few particularly talented or popular painters in each generation. At mid-century, about one-third of the Academicians were "sons of artisans or tradesmen; another third were sons of artists or architects, likewise moving upward, step by step, from the strata of men who took cash payment from their customers." The "industrious apprentice" artist J. J. Ridley, in Thackeray's *The Newcomes*, was the son of a valet-butler. He possessed the talent and the dedication that his friend and fellow artist Clive Newcome lacked. Better-educated, better-read men, such as Clive, were discouraged from becoming artists, leaving the field more or less open to men like Ridley, in whom, despite their well-earned success (as Thackeray saw it), an extensive knowledge of books could not be expected."

"Their history," said Cunningham, "they get from pictures, and their poetry from off the stage. Talk of Mary Queen of Scots to an artist, and the chief events he remembers in her reign are Rizzio's murder, Knox's admonition, and her escape from Lochleven; and these they know through Opie, Allan, and Sir David Wilkie." Instead of reading literary sources with fresh eyes, painters consulted painters. And understandably so, because during the impressionable years in which their artistic interests were forming, the pictures in the books they read were as much of an inspiration as the texts themselves. William Bell Scott and his brother David were the sons of an engraver-painter in Edinburgh. In his *Autobiographical Notes*, William says little about the books they only read, but stresses the influence upon him and his brother of the many illustrated volumes in their home: histories and travel books, "Bible pictures from old or modern English painters," books published in numbers and sold by colporteurs, and most of all, "the portfolios and books of prints, the illustrated British poets and novelists. . . . In winter evenings our school-books were gladly thrown aside for a united and thoroughly-enjoyed examination of a large number of well-thumbed volumes of illustrations to Bell's and Cook's little editions of English poets and dramatists, Boydell's larger pictures from Shakespeare, and such performances of the generation passing or past." The boys' artistic sensibilities, in other words, were attuned to existing pictorial rather than verbal representations of a literary subject; and this was probably true of many literary painters.

W. P. Frith, who used narrative literature as the sustaining subject matter of his earlier career, before the surpassing fame of *Derby Day*, *The Railway Station*, and *Ramsgate Sands*, was well grounded in fiction. When very young, he recalled, he "revelled in works of imagination—the novels of G. P. R. James, the romances of Mrs. Radcliffe, and, above and before all, the works of Scott and Cooper." As a rising artist, however, he read "in books suggestive of subjects for pictures—Sterne, Goldsmith, Molière, Cervantes, and the 'Spectator' taking the lead of all others." And Shakespeare, of course, who "inspired me with terror as well as admiration." But, Frith continued, in an admission sufficiently rare among painters of literary subjects, "I have never meddled with Shakespeare without regretting my temerity, for though I have painted several pictures from different plays, I cannot recall one that will add to my reputation."*

*As is true also of English writers who grew up in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially if in "humble circumstances," the lists of books that artists read in childhood and youth are so similar, from person to person, as to be somewhat suspect. Unquestionably some classics, like the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and a few revered eighteenth-century poets, notably Thomson, were more widely available and admired than most literature, but there must have been more variation than is suggested by the near uniformity of the lists given by early biographers. These lists therefore must probably be looked upon as more emblematic than literally true. In the case of painters, biographers may sometimes have inferred their reading from the literary sources they used for their pictures. Thus the assertion that the deformed, sickly Manchester artist Henry Liverseege, son of a joiner-mechanic, was "well conversant with the works of Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, *Don Quixote*, and *Huśibras*" (George Richardson, *The Works of Henry Liverseege, with a Memoir* [London, 1875], pp. 11–12) may be only a natural deduction from the fact that most of his pictures were derived from those works. But with such painters, largely imitative, a little learning could have gone a long way.

†Scott's readers were so numerous among artists as to call for a separate list. See Part Three, below, under Scott.
1, most of the prizes for the best historical paintings produced in the Royal Academy school between 1772 and 1799 were given for literary subjects. When Wilkie was a student at the Trustees' Academy in Edinburgh in 1800–1801, the set subject for his class was any scene from *Macbeth*. Wilkie chose to depict a relatively unhackneyed one, "Macduff's castle, with Lady Macduff defending her little son from the murderers." The prize, however, went to a pupil who painted the equally untouched murder of Banquo in the forest.24

It is remarkable, in fact, how many Victorian artists' oeuvres were initiated with pictures from English literature, even though some of them went on to other specialities. One more version of Sterne's dead ass was the subject of Edward M. Ward's first submission to the Royal Academy when he was nineteen. It was rejected, allegedly for lack of space.25 Two years later (1837), the seventeen-year-old John Tenniel had better luck: his picture from Scott's *The Fortunes of Nigel*, *Captain Peppercull Interceding for Nigel with Duke Hildebrand*, was hung on the same walls. The future doyen of the late Victorian academic school, Frederic Leighton, began (1849–50) with paintings from *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Charles West Cope took the subject of *Iachimo Stealing Imogen's Jewels* while a student at the Royal Academy, "a very poor performance" as he admitted in his *Reminiscences*.26 Henry Stacy Marks's first exhibited painting, rejected by the British Institution but, in a reversal of the usual traffic, hung at the Royal Academy in 1853, was of *Dogberry Examining Conrad and Borachio*.27

Not surprisingly, it is in the Pre-Raphaelite circle that we find the broadest scope of literary experience recorded.28 William Michael Rossetti wrote that as small children he and his brother knew not only the Bible and Shakespeare but the poems and some of the novels of Scott, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Gay's Fables*, and, a little later, Byron and the *Iliad*. Later Byron was succeeded by Shelley, and Shelley in turn by Keats, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett, and the temporarily famous "spasmodic" poet Philip Bailey, who were themselves succeeded by Browning. "There were also a large number of romances . . . such as Scott, Bulwer, Dickens, Maturin, Thackeray."29 At the moment the original Pre-Raphaelites were stirring a flutter in the establishment dovecot, Burne-Jones, who with William Morris had the best formal education of any nineteenth-century artist, was still at King Edward's School, Birmingham. To the early acquaintance with Shakespeare, Byron, Coleridge, and Scott that was more or less customary in his reasonably well educated social class, he was adding knowledge of Dickens (later Thackeray as well), Keats, and Tennyson, the last, apparently, from the copy in the school library.30 The great event while at Oxford was his discovery, with Morris, of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (see Part Three, below).

Almost without exception, the Pre-Raphaelite artists commenced their careers with subjects derived from English literature. Among Dante Gabriel Rossetti's juvenilia were subjects from Shakespeare and Scott. At the age of twelve, John Everett Millais painted a scene from *Peveril of the Peak* (pl. 131).31 Holman Hunt, while working for a short time in Richard Cobden's London office, decorated the walls with scenes from Dickens and Shakespeare.32 And Morris's first picture (1857?) was a scene from *Le Morte Darthur: How Sir Tristram, After His Illness in the Garden of King Mark's Palace, was Recognised by the Dog he had Given to Iseult*.

But it was James Smetham, the minor painter befriended by both
John Everett Millais, *Scene from “Peveril of the Peak”* (1841) (Fotherby Magazine Collection). Pictorial evidence of a precocious artist’s knowledge of books, this ambitious painting, of the conventicle scene in Scott’s novel (chap. 43), was created when Millais was twelve years old. It was not exhibited until his retrospective at the Royal Academy in 1898.

James Smetham, *Imogen and the Shepherds* (ca. 1858–68) (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery). One of the few surviving paintings by this disciple of the Pre-Raphaelites, who had the keenest appetite for books of any Victorian artist. The subject is from Cymbeline, 4. 2; like Dawe (pl. 100), Smetham sacrifices the plot for pictorial effect by dispensing with Imogen’s disguise as the comely boy “Fidele.” Instead, he gives her the pose associated with the Sleeping Beauty (pl. 76).

Rossetti and Ruskin, who, of all Victorian artists, had, if not the widest acquaintance with books, the deepest affection for them. Indeed, the contesting claims of poetry and art within his sensitive soul, already permeated with religious fervor, may well have contributed to the insanity that darkened his last twelve years. Rossetti’s excepted, his letters are the most engaging, and at the same time the most revealing, of any that come down to us from the painters of his time. They contain many notes on his current reading: Boswell, Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, Arnold, Disraeli, Browning, Carlyle, Trollope, George Eliot, Keats, and Tennyson, a copy of whose 1842 collection he bought and prized next only to the Bible. Seemingly alone among the artists of the day, Smetham read the Brontë novels as they were published, and in his letters commented at length on *Wuthering Heights.*
Some of the subjects chosen by artists who sought to turn to account their and their patrons' knowledge of English literature had established themselves in European painting—some even in the art of classical antiquity—long before they were given fresh expression by English poets. The lingering mystique of history painting impelled a number of artists to deliberately choose from English literature, as their predecessors had done, "elevated" themes that would enable them to pay graphic homage to, if not equal, the Old Masters. Smirke, for example, took from Parnell's "The Hermit" the subject of the angel justifying Providence in order to emulate Rembrandt. When Leslie attempted his first painting, he chose the subject of Timon of Athens so that he could portray a nude figure in the manner of Michelangelo. (This initial choice did not accurately foreshadow his eventual preferences: his chief models during his prosperous years were to be Hogarth and the Dutch school typified by De Hooch.)

Old Masters' versions of the classical stories that made their way into English poetry were familiar to art lovers through widely circulated engravings as well as numerous paintings owned by collectors. Dr. Gustav F. Waagen, the German art historian and museum director who toured Britain's private galleries in 1835 and 1850, saw no fewer than eight versions, by Rubens, Giorgione, Domenichino, and Schiavone among others, of a familiar classical subject, the Judgment of Paris, later to be domesticated by pictures from Tennyson's treatment of the story in his poem "Oenone." These included prototypes of the best-known English painting of the story, William Etty's (pl. 134), whose lineage the artist's biographer traces beyond Flaxman's series of designs from Homer (1793) to Rubens, Raphael, Mengs, and Poussin. Waagen also mentions at least three Old Master versions of the expulsion of Adam and Eve, a subject painted, as from Milton, by Fuseli, Martin, and several other artists. In Waagen's time too, English collections contained a profusion of paintings

133. Ford Madox Brown, Haidee and Don Juan (1873) (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery). One of several versions of a subject from Don Juan (canto 2) that Brown originally painted as an illustration for Moxon's edition of Byron. The reminiscence of a pieta is perhaps uncomfortably obvious, involving as it does a dramatic shift of characters, from the Mother of God to the seventeen-year-old daughter of a former Greek fisherman who has struck it rich in smuggling and piracy, and from Christ (taken from the cross) to the profligate and irreverent Don Juan (saved by an oar).
of Cleopatra, especially the scene of her death: many copies of Guido Reni's, as well as treatments by Rubens, Mengs (widely known through engravings), Gerard de Lairesse, Tiepolo, Cagnacci, De Bray, Van Mieris, Vermeer, Van Orley, Claude Lorrain, Poussin, and Jan Steen. More than most such subjects, pictures of Cleopatra seem to have been customarily offered and judged as fresh treatments of an artistic theme rather than as illustrations of literature.

It was inevitable, therefore, that people with some knowledge of art should approach newly painted illustrations of some English subjects with eyes already accustomed to earlier treatments of similar, if not identical, themes. They were equipped with a kind of stereoscopic vision, half literary, half artistic. Paintings of Belinda's toilet in *The Rape of the Lock*, for example, reminded experienced picture-gazers of innumerable paintings of Venus and other beauties admiring themselves in mirrors: Titian, Velázquez, Rubens, Boucher, Carracci, Giorgione, and Watteau, among others, had contributed to this fleshly anthology, as had painters of the seventeenth-century Dutch school such as Terborch (*A Lady at Her Toilet*), who had toned down the eroticism and made the moral theme of *vanitas* more acceptable to their pious clients. It was probably the bourgeois Dutch tradition rather than the Italian and French that lay behind the versions of the theme taken from English sources: *Kenilworth* (Amy Robsart and her maid Janet Foster), the *Spectator* (Clarinda's toilet), Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (Dolly Varden's), Eliot's *Adam Bede* (Hetty Sorrel's), and Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd*, the source of Wilkie's *The Cottage Toilette* (pl. 135).

Pictures of the boar hunt in *Quentin Durward* invited comparison with paintings by Rubens, Snyders, Jan Fyt, and Albano. Pictures of the apothecary and his laboratory in *Romeo and Juliet* were, in effect, literary adaptations of a subject repeated by many Dutch and Flemish painters—the alchemist (sometimes identified as an apothecary) as depicted by Van Ostade, Van Mieris, Brueghel, and Jan Steen. Because the type was so familiar a subject in earlier painting, it is unlikely that Ben Jonson's play was alluded to in any English examples besides those that were displayed.
with an explicit reference to it. For a similar reason, paintings of interiors cluttered with an assortment of still-life junk, often titled *An Old Curiosity Shop*, had no substantial relation to Dickens’s novel; they simply repeated another favorite subject in old genre art.

Some of these subjects not only belonged to a long pictorial tradition but had entered English literature from an earlier European literary source. The artists’ choice—whether to associate a new treatment with its artistic lineage, its European literary source, or its best-known English version—seems to have followed no particular pattern. All but one of the dozen recorded English paintings of the Boccaccian tale of Sigismunda and the heart of Guiscardo made specific reference to Dryden’s treatment in his *Fables*. On the other hand, only nine of the twenty recorded paintings of another subject Dryden took from Boccaccio, Cymon and Iphigenia, were displayed with a reference to Dryden or, for that matter, to Boccaccio. Their antecedents, including pictures by Rubens and Lely (whose *Cymon and Iphigenia*, also known as *Diana with Nymphs*, predated Dryden’s *Fables* by some sixty years), were deemed to be artistic, and only incidentally literary.

This was true also of paintings of Endymion, notwithstanding the myth’s primary association, in English minds, with Keats. Of sixteen recorded pictures, only half bore an attribution to his poem, and none to the treatments of Endymion by other poets, from Fletcher (*The Faithful Shepherdess*) to several of Keats’s contemporaries and followers. But the myth had come down through such painters as Carpaccio, Poussin, Tintoretto, Carracci, and Rubens; engravings of the pictures by the latter two were available to Keats, as well as of one by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy.

Paintings of Hero and Leander are an especially noteworthy case in point, since they included Etty’s *The Parting of Hero and Leander* (pl. 139) and its companion, *Hero and Leander* (‘’Hero having thrown herself from

135. David Wilkie, *The Cottage Toilette* (RA 1824) (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees, the Wallace Collection, London). A recurrent subject in older art transplanted to rural Scotland. The rustic figures and setting are a reasonably far cry from those found in treatments of the toilet-table-and-mirror theme in Italian, French, and Dutch painting, and the central figure has little except vanity in common with the courtesans of Giorgione, Titian, and others or with the respectable, relatively un-erotic bourgeois women seen at their mirrors in Dutch genre portraits. This picture illustrates lines in Allan Ramsay’s ballad opera *The Gentle Shepherd*, act 5, scene 2:

*While Peggy laces up her bosom fair,*
*Wi’ a blew snood Jenny binds up her hair;*  
*Glaud by his morning ingle takes a beek,*  
*The rising sun shines motty thro’ the reek,*  
*A pipe his mouth; the lasses please his e’en,*  
*And now and then his joke maun intervene.  
*Wilkie had painted another scene from The Gentle Shepherd* the year before (pl. 291).

136. William Fettes Douglas, *The Alchemist* (Royal Scottish Academy 1857) (Victoria & Albert Museum, Crown Copyright). Alchemists and other practitioners of pseudo-science were a specialty of Douglas, as they were of Teniers and Thomas van Wyck. Sometimes such figures were given a literary reference, as to Ben Jonson or *Romeo and Juliet*, but Douglas did not attribute this scene to any source, unless the ghostly presence of one or more figures in the elaborate curtain implies some arcane reference.
Groups of figures outside inns were familiar subjects in seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. This nineteenth-century British example, by an artist who was for twenty years Wilkie's assistant, is based on a scene outside the Cat and Fiddle inn in Scott's *Peveril of the Peak* (chap. 21): "The horses of both guests were brought forth; and they mounted, in order to depart in company. The host and hostess stood in the doorway to see them depart. The landlord proffered a stirrup-cup to the elder guest, while the landlady offered Peveril a glass from her own peculiar bottle. For this purpose, she mounted on the horse-block, with a flask and glass in hand; so that it was easy for the departing guest, although on horseback, to return the courtesy in the most approved manner, namely, by throwing his arm over the landlady's shoulder, and saluting her at parting."

Etty, probably the most eclectic English artist of his generation, derived the subject of his *Cleopatra's Arrival in Cilicia*, also known as *The Triumph of Cleopatra* (pl. 140), from Plutarch, the source Shakespeare used, and its style was a mingling of Titian, Rubens, and contemporary French painters. He chose bacchanalian scenes from poetry—*The Marriage Festival Previous to the Deluge* (Paradise Lost, bk. 11) (pl. 274) and the one in *Comus*—for the sake of imitating Titian and Poussin. In such a manner, pictures
with a rich double heritage were equivalent to poems like Keats's, in which echoes of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Boccaccio were assimilated into new creations. The reminiscences of previous art found in the new painting were analogous to the stylistic and imagistic echoes in a poem, and when both the painting and the poem it represented contained such mingled elements, the total response of a well-read connoisseur, in theory at least, must have been complicated indeed.

Apart from a few individual paintings, not much attempt has been made as yet to identify the iconographic borrowings of nineteenth-century British art, and this is not the place to attempt anything of the sort. One such motif frequently seen in literary paintings, however, has been pointed out by more than one critic: the placement of a female model at an open window, or sometimes on a balcony, from which she gazes with whatever feelings the painter wished to ascribe to her. Artists from Rembrandt downward—notably his pupil Gerrit Dou, whose specialty it was—had portrayed women in this setting, as exemplars of wistful loneliness, amorous hope, or simple reverie. Turner's *Merchant of Venice* painting, *Shylock: “Jessica, Shut the Window, I Pray”* (RA 1830), was the most celebrated (and abused) painting of the kind in this period, followed perhaps by William Dyce's *Jessica* (or *The Signal*) (RA 1843). Some woman-in-window compositions were taken directly from a literary text; Alfred Chalon's *Rebecca*, for example, engraved for *Heath's Gallery* in 1836, bore a quotation from *Ivanhoe*: “... The single window [of her cell] opened...” 138. Sir Edward James Poynter, *Diana and Endymion* (1901) (City Art Gallery, Manchester). This painting probably alludes primarily to the Diana-Endymion story in its legendary form, as well as, by inference, to its previous treatments by Old Masters, but few persons viewing it in 1901 would have failed to associate it also with Keats's poem.

139. William Etty, *The Parting of Hero and Leander* (RA 1827) (Tate Gallery, London). One of Etty's many realizations of classical myth, this painting was exhibited without reference to the most famous English treatment of the Hero and Leander story by Christopher Marlowe. Leigh Hunt's version (1819) would have restored the tale to the consciousness of the people who saw Etty's picture, and the picture, in turn, would have added interest to Thomas Hood's version, published only months after the Academy show (August 1827) and dedicated to Coleridge, and to Tennyson's version, published three years later.
William Etty, Cleopatra’s Arrival in Cilicia (The Triumph of Cleopatra) (RA 1821) (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight). This was the picture that made Etty famous overnight, because of its audacious eclecticism. Although Shakespeare does not mention the episode, it is described in Etty-like splendor in his source, Plutarch’s life of Mark Antony; and the painting, once seen, must have colored the imagination of anyone who read the play thereafter. One wonders what effect, if any, the painting had on Clarkson Stanfield’s sets for Macready’s spectacular production of Antony and Cleopatra in 1833. The actor-manager was an admirer of Etty, whom he first met in a carriage traveling from Naples to Rome the year after the painting was exhibited.

Upon an embattled space. . . . “(It would be a profitable line of research to discover how many iconographic cues of this sort occur in Scott’s novels and other fiction and poetry of the time—and how many the novelists and poets, for their part, derived from pictures.) The suggestion of a votive niche in the framing of such a composition helped convey the ideal of woman as a sanctified creature, the equivalent in art of Coventry Patmore’s The Angel in the House. In a reversal of the motif, also handed down from seventeenth-century European art, several painters, such as Millais in his well-known picture from Tennyson’s “Mariana in the Moated Grange” (RA 1851), portrayed the model from the back, from a vantage point inside the room.

Iconographic “pilferings”, as unsympathetic critics termed them—Blake called them outright “thievery”—were faithful to the academic tradition, and indeed were, as Horace Walpole pointed out, sanctioned in the sister art of literature; “a quotation from a great author, with a novel application of the sense, has always been allowed to be an instance of parts and taste; and may have more merit than the original.” Walpole was here defending the practice and principle of Reynolds, who urged painters to acquire their stylistic language from Van Dyck, Michelangelo, Raphael, Poussin, and other masters. Reynolds’s own fancy pictures were full of small “quotations”—postures, expressions, and accessories borrowed from earlier mythological, religious, and allegorical pictures. Hogarth and Fuseli, as recent scholars have shown, owed extensive iconographic debts to their predecessors. Fuseli’s ghostly hand could sometimes be seen in the extravagant fairy paintings of the 1840s (see chapter 5, above), and Reynolds’s was constantly detected elsewhere. Once in a while, an artist’s servile imitation of his model was so blatant as to totally discredit the picture; both the Times and the Literary Gazette in
1836 condemned William Hilton's painting of Hotspur for its near travesty of Reynolds's *Infant Hercules*.

Sometimes the new offering survived the comparison. The *Art Journal* in 1870, for instance, declared that John Pettie's *Touchstone and Audrey* "might almost have been painted by Rubens or Millais"—the latter comparison being not as backhanded a compliment as one might think, because Millais's reputation by that time had been cleansed of its early Pre-Raphaelite association. But oftener than not, such measurements by previous standards were not calculated to enhance the painter's reputation. As the same journal remarked of a picture of *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* in 1853, "Every essay of this kind comes into disadvantageous comparison with versions of similar subjects by Michael Angelo and Rubens"—and even, it might have added, by Fuseli.

In striving to match the "high excellencies" of inherited art, ambitious painters ran the danger, by no means always avoided, of falsifying a subject from English literature, which came to hand already endowed by its author with a spirit—its "Englishness," to borrow Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's useful word—that was inharmonious with the very nature and quality of high art: a conflict of two irreconcilable ways of looking at, and interpreting, experience. The true spirit and intentions of the literary source were misrepresented when inappropriate elements of treatment were brought into the interpretation from revered graphic sources. And so the artist was caught in a dilemma between the inherited need for allegiance to academic principles and the demonstrable and seemingly inexhaustible popularity of illustrative art—and both of these, in turn, militated against original expression. This handicap was intensified by the double vision that critics brought to his newest canvas. On the one hand, they looked at it with eyes that compared it—as the artist in his vanity intended—to the productions of the great masters that its style, if not its theme, recalled. On the other, they saw it in terms of the already existent literary story, a second kind of product originating outside the artist's mind.

The 1840s witnessed two last-ditch efforts to elicit high art from British brushes. One was a seriocomic affair, the topic of lively discussion for no more than a season or two—the Prince Consort's scheme to decorate the summer pavilion at Buckingham Palace, which, because it involved only Milton (and, very peripherally, Scott), is more conveniently described in Part Three. The other was a much more elaborate and protracted state enterprise in aid of art, which kept the potentialities of the grand history picture in the public consciousness for a number of years, until lack of progress and the sheer tiresome antiquatedness of the notion spelled the end of all such aspiration.

As Charles Barry's new Houses of Parliament rose in Westminster, replacing the ancient buildings that had burned in 1834 as Turner and Constable painted the spectacular scene, their spacious walls offered an opportunity to artists in fresco such as Britain had never before witnessed, or at least sought to take advantage of, apart from the unrealized project to decorate St. Paul's Cathedral in the 1760s. Now, at last, an art that had endowed the walls of Renaissance palaces and churches with some of the supreme productions of the Old Masters was to have its chance in London, as Parliament determined that the decoration of the
Palace of Westminster was to be placed in the hands of native artists selected through a series of competitions. The subjects were to be drawn from British history or from the works of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton—a good indication of the prestige that English literary themes had by then acquired.

There were forebodings that the new challenge would produce a still larger surfeit of hackneyed subjects. "What numbers of Unas and lambs shall we have from Spenser," one of the Cunninghams wrote in Fraser's Magazine; "of Satan summoning his legions; of Hamlet with the skull in his hand; and all the often-recurring subjects of every London exhibition." And so it proved. Of the 141 chalk and charcoal cartoons submitted in the first competition (1843), twelve were from Shakespeare, eleven from Spenser, and forty from Milton, and among these were many old chestnuts. Several subjects from poetry and drama won prizes: William Frost's Una and the Sibyls, Frank Howard's Una Coming to Seek the Assistance of Gloriana, E. V. Rippingile's Una and the Red Cross Knight Led by Mercy to the Hospital of the Seven Virtues, F. R. Pickersgill's The Death of King Lear, Sir William Ross's The Angel Raphael Discoursing with Adam, F. P. Stephanoff's The Brothers Releasing the Lady from the Enchanted Chair (Comus), and J. G. Waller's The Brothers Driving Out Comus and His Rabble. Except for the money they got, painters of scenes from Comus had wasted their time and talent, because Thomas Babington Macaulay, sitting as an M.P. from Edinburgh, declared that "no subject could be selected to illustrate Milton which was not taken from Paradise Lost." This also disqualified J. C. Horsley's combined picture of L'Allegro and Il Penseroso (pl. 279), which the Prince acquired for the royal collection.

In the second competition (1844), a number of literary pieces were singled out for special mention in the press: Ford Madox Brown's Adam and Eve ("an illustration of Milton after the manner of Cruikshank," said an unkind writer in the New Monthly Magazine), William Salter's scene from The Tempest, Edward Armitage's Ophelia, and James Bridges's Milton Dictating to His Daughters. Thanks to parliamentary and bureaucratic shilly-shallying, however, competition succeeded competition while the Westminster walls remained blank. In 1847, the project acquired new impetus when William Dyce suggested to the Prince Consort that instead of using the Nibelungenlied for the paintings in the Queen’s Robing Room, as had been the plan, "a suitably patriotic alternative" was available in stories from Arthurian legend. The Prince liked the idea, and Dyce, who, alone among the contestants, had had experience in fresco, set to work. The first scheme, to treat the legend historically, ran afoul of the awkward fact that the most impressive part of the story, the tragic ending, lacked some of the principal characters, and moreover involved, as Dyce put it, certain incidents "which, if they are not undesirable for representation under any circumstances, are at least scarcely appropriate in such an apartment." Consequently, Dyce evaded Lancelot and Guinevere by shifting to the allegorical mode, portraying Generosity as "Arthur, Unhorsed, Spared by the Victor," Religion as "The Vision of Sir Galahad and His Companions," Mercy as "Sir Gawaine Swearing to be Merciful," and Hospitality as "Sir Tristram Admitted to the Round Table." Dyce died in 1864, one of the several victims of this quixotic project, and Courtesy and Fidelity were never painted.

Meanwhile, poetic subjects were decided upon for the Upper Waiting
Hall of the House of Lords. Between 1852 and 1854, the walls acquired J. R. Herbert's *King Lear Disinheriting Cordelia* (pl. 141), Horsey's *Satan Touched by Ithuriel's Spear*, John Tenniel's *St. Cecilia* (from Dryden), Armitage's *Personification of the Thames and of the English Rivers* (from Pope's *Windsor Forest*), the same artist's *The Death of Marmion*, C. W. Cope's *The Death of Lara*, and G. F. Watts's *The Triumph of the Red Cross Knight*. But these frescoes decayed so quickly that as early as 1868 they required wholesale rehabilitation, which had to be repeated at intervals throughout the next century. They survive only as monochrome shadows of the brilliantly colored scenes they once were, sad monuments to British artists' inability to work in a medium that had proved so successful in sunnier and drier climates.

Graham Reynolds doubtless expresses the universal modern opinion of the Westminster decorations when he says that "it is impossible to contemplate [them] without boredom verging on despair." As one of the more notable fiascos of an era when elaborate projects for the public weal were more often dreamed up than brought to a triumphant conclusion, this one was doubly anachronistic. It sought to resuscitate an ideal of art that had long outlived its attraction and was, in any event, demonstrably ill suited to the English artistic temper; and it sought as well to dignify a kind of subject art, derived from native literature, for which justification was scarcely needed by the mid-forties.

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