

# The Briar Rose

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Readers of *Poems by the Way*, Morris's last book of poetry and the second product of the Kelmscott Press, published in 1891, know that it contains a group of what David Latham calls 'Picture poems'.<sup>1</sup> These relate to paintings by Burne-Jones and to a number of tapestries designed by Burne-Jones, of which the best-known are 'Flora' and 'Pomona' of 1885. Among these Picture poems there are two which are remarkable in that they deal twice with the same subject: 'For the Briar Rose' and 'Another for the Briar Rose'. All these short poems show that Morris, whose middle-period poetry was often slow-moving and expansive, could at times write with succinct assurance.

The story of the Briar Rose, or Sleeping Beauty, is one of the most popular of fairy stories. It was recorded by Charles Perrault in French in the seventeenth century and by the Brothers Grimm in German during the early nineteenth; it formed the basis of 'The Day-Dream', a poem in nine sections published by Tennyson in 1842, and illustrated by Millais in the Moxon edition in 1857; the two illustrations show, first, a young page overtaken by stupor as he leans to kiss a 'maid-of-honor', and the second the awakening of the court, treated by Millais in a surprisingly comic spirit. The tale is of a Princess who is cursed by an evil god-mother that at fifteen she will pierce her hand with a spindle, and die, but whose doom is changed for the better by another god-mother, who states that she will not die, but will sleep for a hundred years until awakened by a Prince.

The story was clearly one which appealed to Burne-Jones and Morris, and, as Caroline Arscott has recently reminded us, they produced a number of versions of it over some thirty years.<sup>2</sup> The first, in 1864, was a set of nine tiles for an over-mantle in one of the bedrooms of Myles Birket Foster's home, The Hill at Witley. Later, Burne-Jones went on to make paintings on several of the subjects of the tiles, but there is general critical agreement with the judgement put forward by Julian Hartnoll in 1988 that the exhibition of the four large paintings constituting *The Legend of the Briar Rose* in 1890 'marked the climax of Burne-Jones's career . . . expressing his vision more completely than anything he had achieved before'.<sup>3</sup> The paintings were first exhibited at the dealers Thomas Agnew's in London, where they were accompanied by a short pamphlet.<sup>4</sup> This began with an adver-

tisement for the four photogravure reproductions – £31 10/- for artist's proofs of all four, six guineas for prints. (Although the reproductions come out well in Hartnoll's book, they lose immeasurably in the absence of Burne-Jones's expressive coloration, and are necessarily greatly reduced in size.) The pamphlet then gives a succinct and lively summary of the story, in which the Princess appears at one point as 'Thorn-rose'. The account ends with the Princess awakening from her trance: 'and the whole court awoke, and the breath of life was stirred again in all' – taking us beyond the point at which Burne-Jones ends the story. The pamphlet concludes with the four short poems, ascribed to William Morris; the titles, given in Gothic type, are those of the four paintings. At Agnew's, the paintings were purchased by the financier Alexander Henderson for his recently acquired Buscot Park. They were installed there in 1891, with the addition of ten smaller paintings without figures, provided by Burne-Jones to bring the pictures and the room in which they are displayed into a harmonious unity. They can still be seen there, thanks to the National Trust, in this attractive form.

The paintings went on to be exhibited in Liverpool, where Agnew's had a gallery, and then, by arrangement with the philanthropic Canon Barnett, for the benefit of East-Enders, at Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel over Easter 1891. As Hartnoll notes, 'exhibitions of pictures, organised by Canon Barnett, the enlightened Warden, were a regular feature' at the settlement.<sup>5</sup> For this occasion, a new version of the pamphlet was produced, with different typography and entitled *The Legend of the Briar Rose . . . A Memento of the Whitechapel Picture Exhibition, Easter, 1891* – with the last phrase in Gothic type. This pamphlet does not advertise the prints (likely to be too expensive for the people of Whitechapel), but is illustrated in black-and-white with Burne-Jones's study for the third painting, 'The Garden Court'. It gives a fuller (but less engaging) account of the story of the Briar Rose, but stops suddenly with the arrival of the Prince: 'He broke through the hedge, which parted before him and-----'<sup>6</sup>. The next line consists of four asterisks, followed by the comment: 'We can finish the story each for ourselves', but then going on: 'we know how, when the Prince reached the bower of the Briar Rose, "a touch, a kiss, the charm was snapt!"' This is a quotation from the opening of the fourth section, 'The Revival', in Tennyson's poem 'The Day-Dream', although the poet is not named. The poet is then called on to 'add a fifth picture, and end the story for us'; quotations follow from the final part of Tennyson's poem, entitled 'The Departure', as the Prince and Princess ride away together. The final five pages of the pamphlet are devoted to intelligent accounts of each of the 'The Four Pictures'. Each begins with the title and the Morris quatrain, although the poet is not named. 'The Briarwood' concludes that 'The picture is beautiful in harmony of colour; it is noble, dignified and tranquil'. 'The Council Room' notes that the briars are 'the only quick and changing thing in the whole sleep-locked scene. The softened light is much brighter than in the

first picture.’ ‘The Garden Court’ concludes enthusiastically: ‘In this picture the artist is at his perfection. We find here the balance of composition, luminosity, breadth, daring and luxurious colour . . . and the most graceful figures he has ever drawn.’ ‘The Rosebower’ is described in some detail, but the final emphasis is on the evoked mood: ‘The chamber is fitted with an atmosphere of purity and peace, waiting for the touch of love to rouse it into life.’ Caroline Arcscott has remarked that these accounts of the paintings ‘correspond closely to the notice in the *Athenaeum* of April 1890’.<sup>7</sup> It is evident that the organisers of the exhibition wanted to help the viewers to appreciate the qualities of the art that was on display to them. Morris quatrains were retained without the poet’s name, and they were inscribed on the frames below the paintings, in attractive small Roman capitals, before their installation at Buscot. The couplets appear in *Poems by the Way* preceded by the title of each painting.

Few critics have commented on these couplets or their relation to the paintings. Penelope Fitzgerald in 1975 felt that the paintings expressed Burne-Jones’s concern over the growth of his daughter Margaret towards adulthood – she married John Mackail in September 1888: ‘only if we are afraid to lose a daughter shall we understand *Briar Rose*’. This was why the painting did not show the kiss or the awakening. Indeed, Burne-Jones stated that ‘I want to stop with the Princess falling asleep and to tell no more’. Fitzgerald concluded, ‘The picture was finished. The princess in it would never awake.’ However, when it came to the poem, in striking contrast, Fitzgerald thought that in the final line Morris was pointing towards ‘a vaguely socialist future’.<sup>8</sup> Francis Spalding in her *Magnificent Dreams: Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians* in 1978, wrote mainly about the paintings, finding the series at Buscot ‘intensely moody, theatrical and strangely compelling in its suggestion of sleep’. She argued that the series might be interpreted as ‘an allegory of love: the briar rose represents material desire which grows up and chokes the world, while the sleeping beauty represents the spirit of love which is capable of infusing the material world with spiritual life’. She claimed that this interpretation – which strangely offers no role for the Prince – is supported by Morris’s lines for the final scene (though she quotes the couplets inaccurately, substituting ‘live’ for ‘be’ and ‘fatal’ for ‘fated’).<sup>9</sup> Christopher Wood remarks that the Morris poems are ‘rather weak when compared to those of Tennyson’ (there is in fact only one Tennyson poem, though an elaborate one nine sections).<sup>10</sup> David Latham finds the scenario of the poem ‘threatening rather than promising’ by contrast with the preceding poem in *Poems by the Way*, ‘Verses for Pictures’. He adds ‘Where no hand stirs the stillness and no voice breaks the silence, all remain asleep as passive lives with no control. Fate may intervene but is not even anticipated.’<sup>11</sup>

In ‘For the Briar Rose’ Morris keeps closely to the narrative of the paintings. The first quatrain introduces the situation; Burne-Jones shows the Prince in his

armour on the left of the painting, with the bodies of five knights lying, asleep or possibly dead, on the ground in front of him. The briar dominates the area above the recumbent bodies, holding everything in stasis. Overall the coloration is grey and brown, sombre. This is Morris's version:

The Briarwood

The fateful slumber floats and flows  
 About the tangle of the rose;  
 But lo! the fated hand and heart  
 To rend the slumberous curse apart!

Morris begins by conveying the 'slumberous' spirit of the painting in the first two lines, but thereafter suggests a stronger sense of approaching and inevitable – 'fated' – liberation than does the painting; for Morris the Prince is the 'hand and heart' sent by fate to resolve the situation positively. (It is perhaps relevant that in Tennyson's poem there is a reference to the sleepers waiting a hundred years for 'the fated fairy Prince'). The Prince of Burne-Jones has his sword in his hand, and is upright above the figures of the knights lying on the ground, but his sword hangs down and his presence lacks energy; the painting has no equivalent for Morris's exclamation marks.

In the following two poems, responding to Burne-Jones's portrayal of the sleeping court and the equally dormant maidens in the bower, Morris is closer to the spirit of the paintings:

The Council Room

The threat of war, the hope of peace,  
 The Kingdom's peril and increase  
 Sleep on, and bide the latter day  
 When Fate shall take her chain away.

The Garden Court

The maiden pleasance of the land  
 Knoweth no stir of voice or hand,  
 No cup the sleeping waters fill,  
 The restless shuttle lieth still.

Fate is referred to again in 'The Council Room', but there is less sense that the 'chain' of controlling indolence will soon be removed; the 'latter day' seems distant, as in the painting. The same spirit of inactivity pervades 'The Garden Court': the 'maiden pleasance' lacks all activity of voice and hand, the cup

remains unfilled, and the shuttle is denied that 'restlessness' that would mark it as a symbol of creativity for Morris.

In the last painting Burne-Jones shows the Prince approaching the sleeping Princess; in his poem, Morris points towards a future which Burne-Jones closes off from the viewer:

The Rosebower

Here lies the hoarded love, the key  
To all the treasure that shall be;  
Come fated hand the gift to take,  
And smite this sleeping world awake

As in the first stanza, there is a good deal of energy in the final couplet. The idea of the fatedness of what is about to happen is continued from the earlier stanza; it is perhaps odd to see the Sleeping Beauty as a gift awaiting the Prince's hand; but we may think that the culminating emphasis on the 'sleeping world' rather than the young woman bespeaks Morris's social concerns. Perhaps we can discern a Marxist energy in the unexpected verb 'smite' that will link to Fitzgerald's at first sight surprising reference to a 'vaguely socialist future'.

In her biography of her husband, Georgiana Burne-Jones gives a clear account of Morris's provision of poems to accompany his series of paintings, and adds that when these appeared in *Poems by the Way*, there was 'another set, on the same subject but of profounder meaning', where the Briar is 'the tangle of earth's wrong and right.' She then quotes the third stanza, 'Here sleeps the world that would not love.'<sup>12</sup> The only other critic to have commented on the poem, as far as I know, is David Latham, who remarks that it is 'an apostrophe to the rose that seduces us to dream of rest instead of love. He sees in it the beginning of 'a political shift from love to art'.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that Morris found the Briar Rose scenario sufficiently interesting to tackle it again in a way less directly related to the paintings. In the second poem, there are no titles for the individual stanzas; the outline narrative is retained, but without the two central scenes:

'Another for the Briar Rose'

O treacherous scent, O thorny sight,  
O tangle of world's wrong and right,  
What art thou 'gainst my armour's gleam  
But dusky cobwebs of a dream?

Beat down, deep sunk from every gleam  
 Of hope, they lie and dully dream;  
 Men once, but men no more, that Love  
 Their waste defeated hearts should move.

Here sleeps the world that would not love!  
 Let it sleep on, but if He move  
 Their hearts in humble wise to wait  
 On his new-wakened fair estate.

O won at last is never late!  
 Thy silence was the voice of fate;  
 Thy still hands conquered in the strife;  
 Thine eyes were light; thy lips were life.

Here Stanza 1, unlike its predecessor, consists of a question. We are taken close to the Prince's point of view as he encounters the entangled dangers of the world as embodied in the briar, which he experiences as both smell and sight. But he dismisses what he senses as being, by contrast with the vital 'gleam' of his armour, mere 'dusty cobwebs of a dream'. The imagery supports the sense of their lacking reality, but the overall question form takes away the reader's certainty at this point. Stanza 2 scrutinises the knights who lie 'dully' dreaming; they are not dead, but have abandoned hope and sunk into unreality, their manhood forfeited, lost. They are no longer capable of responding to Love, granted a capital letter, by implication the power latent in the situation which might transform it. (We may be reminded of Morris's 1872 poem *Love is Enough*). Stanza 3 opens with an emphatic assertion: the knights represent 'the world that would not love'; they have abandoned idealism to enter an empty dream-world. That world might well 'sleep on' unless – I take that to be the meaning here of 'but' – the power of Love should bring their hearts back to life, to humbly serve 'his new-wakened fair estate', the world restored by the power of Love to its full beauty.

Stanza 4 begins, like its predecessor, with an emphatic single-line statement, but this time it is a positive assertion: if victory is achieved, its belatedness becomes irrelevant. The final three lines all refer to and celebrate an unnamed positive presence. Since we began with the Prince, it would seem that here we encounter the Princess, and so complete the story. Four assertions are made in these three lines, giving a confident sense of finality. The second and third lines evidently refer to the qualities of the Princess when she was asleep – silence and stillness – and assert a positive aspect of them; they were part of her fate, which was eventually to be victorious. The last line offers two brief assertions relating to more positive aspects of the sleeper, her eyes and lips, so that the poem can

culminate in the claim that 'her lips were life'; when touched by the Prince they could restore life to the world. The coming together of the Prince and Princess in this unifying kiss suggests that life itself depends on love's taking the form of shared action, while the past tense shows that the story has come to its inevitable happy end. This gives a note of confidence to the conclusion. Love can and will triumph, but needs to be a shared enterprise. Love may take both personal and social forms, and it is the motivating force for the triumph of life promised at the end of this fine poem, which Georgiana Burne-Jones was right to find 'of profounder meaning' than its tidy predecessor.<sup>14</sup>

An attractive appendix to Burne-Jones's Briar Rose group, which may be seen as analogous to Morris's second poem, is to be found in one of the flower paintings which he produced for his own pleasure in his later years, and gave to Georgiana. It is inscribed 'Wake Dearest', and has the subtitle 'The Sleeping Beauty'. In it, the Knight, or Prince, in dark armour like that in the first and last Briar Rose paintings, is bending tenderly over the recumbent body of the sleeping Rose, who is wearing a green dress and wrapped in a rich blue cover. His approach is respectful, but the Rose has yet to open her eyes. Her head is similar to that in the final Briar Rose painting, for which Margaret Burne-Jones was the model, though there she was wearing a white garment, giving her more prominence in the composition but possibly less vitality. In 'Wake Dearest' the thorns of the rose are less prominent and threatening than in the earlier paintings. According to the Goldmark Gallery's 2007 leaflet *E. Burne-Jones. Flower Prints, 1905*, Burne-Jones began the series in 1882, 'keeping by him a list of beautiful flower names that he had met with'.<sup>15</sup> He painted not the flowers themselves, but the ideas and images suggested to him by the flowers' names. In 1905, after the artist's death, Lady Burne-Jones gave permission for the series to be reproduced in Paris using the pochoir technique; 'Wake Dearest' is No.32 in the series of 38, and, in my view, like Morris's second poem, a very attractive work.

## NOTES

1. David Latham, ed, *William Morris, Poems by the Way*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994, Introduction, p. xvii. The 'Briar Rose' poems appear in this edition on pp. 190 and 191. Subsequently Latham.
2. Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Interlacings*, New York and London: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 109. Afterwards Arscott.
3. Julian Hartnoll, *The Reproductive Engravings after Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones*, London: Julian Hartnoll, 1988, p. 44. Subsequently Hartnoll.
4. *The Legend of 'The Briar Rose'. A Series of Pictures painted by E. Burne-Jones, A.R.A.*, London: Thos. Agnew & Sons, 1890, pp. 5–9. Two of the library

- catalogues referring to this pamphlet attribute this 'descriptive sketch' to E.J. Milliken; see Copac Brief Records, items 4 and 6.
5. Hartnoll, p. 44.
  6. *The Legend of the Briar Rose ... A Memento of the Whitechapel Picture Exhibition, Easter, 1891*, pp. 3–8. Arscott (p. 109) describes this as 'specially devised to make the pictures accessible to the working-class audience who were admitted free'.
  7. Arscott, p. 112. These 'critical passages' appear on pp. 10–12.
  8. Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, 1975, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003, pp. 200, 219, 227, 228.
  9. Frances Spalding, *Magnificent Dreams. Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1978, p. 47.
  10. Christopher Wood, *Burne-Jones*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998, p. 113.
  11. Latham, Introduction, p. xxiv.
  12. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 1904, London: Lund Humphreys, 1993, vol. II, p. 204. Subsequently Burne-Jones.
  13. Latham, Introduction, p. xxiv.
  14. Burne-Jones, vol. II, p. 204.
  15. *E. Burne-Jones. Flower Prints 1905*. Uppingham, Rutland, UK: Goldmark Gallery, 2007, unnumbered, [p. 1].