# THE POLITICS OF PRE-RAPHAELITISM

I first heard the term "Pre-Raphaelite" in a college class on metaphysical poetry fifteen years ago. The comparison was, of course, intended unfavorably, and from what I could gather, the term meant "phonily archaic, fussy, silly."[1] When I finally studied the Pre-Raphaelites themselves, in graduate school, they were presented as an interesting phenomenon, but not worthy of the high critical seriousness afforded those in the Victorian mainstream, defined apparently by the so-called "sages": the Pre-Raphaelites, I was told, had turned their backs on the harsh realities of the age in order to play hide-and-seek in the Palace of Art. Morris was given some attention in the waning of the '60's -- but more for his Socialism than his art. Then the feminists picked them up, but started in on Ruskin, a pathetically easy mark, and declared Pre-Raphaelitism a Great Leap Backward in its revival of the "Lady" of courtly love and its tendency to make all women look the same -- or, worse, dead.

I review these class notes because all of us reading this journal are caught up in the midst of an important critical revaluation of Pre-Raphaelitism. From the raised eyebrows of my professors and fellow-graduate students (and outright rolled eyeballs of those in art history) of ten years ago, when I announced it as my specialty, I have gloated to see Pre-Raphaelitism given the imprimatur of the British Art Center at Yale and the Victorian Division of the M. L. A., not to mention the various art establishments of Europe. (The British never lost their soft spot.) This new esteem, however, seems to have succeeded only in making the same old readings of Pre-Raphaelitism critically legitimate: we now admire them in spite of the fact that they were out of the Victorian mainstream or politically backward. Take, for example, the most recent work in my own little corner of the field (the women of the Pre-Raphaelite movement), Anthea Callen's Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement:

> Many women in the Morris circle, including Jane Burden herself, were from working-class backgrounds, who found themselves taken up by this group of intellectuals and aesthetes for their sultry beauty and earthy sensuality. However, the Victorian code of morals, here overcast with strains of mediaeval chivalry, meant that any direct sensual relationship was abandoned for a distant pedestalisation of these women. It was evident that sex and marriage were incompatible. . . . Against this barrage of Victorian and quasi-mediaeval, Pre-Raphaelite views of her role, women like Jane Burden must have found it extremely difficult to maintain a balanced, realistic