

ANOTHER GERM FOR "THE AUTHOR OF BELTRAFFIO":
 JAMES, PATER AND BOTTICELLI'S MADONNAS

In "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884), Henry James's Pre-Raphaelite story, Pre-Raphaelite icons are blended with Pater's ideas; the latter are mirrored in the writings of a novelist, Mark Ambient, who is committed to art-for-art's sake. A young devotee and admirer of this school of writing sees the walls of the novelist's home "muffled in creepers that appeared to [him] to have been copied from a masterpiece of one of the Pre Raphaelites" for that "was the way many things struck [him] at that time in England; as if they were reproductions of something that existed primarily in art or literature."¹ Creepers muffled walls in many Pre-Raphaelite pictures (April Love, The Long Engagement, The Light of the World). The two writers go for a walk in a landscape that seems deliberately to conjure up Ford Madox Brown's An English Autumn Afternoon. Ambient's sister had "a general idea that she made up very well as a Rossetti" (319) and her poses and clothes seem to be taken from such pictures as Rossetti's La Pia de' Tolomei, (Fig. I), especially in those passages where she is described as having "long, lean, but not ungraceful arms locked together in an archaic manner on her knees" (318). This imitation James criticises, and the story involves the harm an aesthetic attitude can create when carried into a life situation.

Yet more insistent than the Pre-Raphaelite associations are the Pater implications. Certain elements of the story would not be there if James had not been steeped in Studies in the History of the Renaissance; in this instance, especially, in Pater's essay on Botticelli. It is from James's following the lead of Pater's essay when visiting the Pitti Palace ten years before this story was written that a new germ for the story becomes apparent as soon as we review the earlier essay.

The germ usually given for "The Author of Beltraffio" can be found in James's Notebooks for March 26, 1884. He has just heard a story about John Addington Symonds, a writer committed to the love of art for art's sake. To "crown his unhappiness, poor S.'s wife was in no sort of sympathy with what he wrote." That is the story's starting point, for James continues, "Le drame pourrait s'engager -- si drame il y a -- over the education of their child" who either becomes "a lout and ignoramus . . . or else . . . dies a victim to . . . the heavy pressure of his parents. If it were not too gruesome, the mother might be supposed to sacrifice him rather than let him fall under the influence of the father She makes up her mind secretly, that it is better he should die; she determines not to save him." In the tale