

Thomas Woolner  
Pre-Raphaelite Prospector:  
A Record of His Early Phase.

Thomas Woolner was born on December 17, 1825 in Suffolk, "the son of a letter sorter in the Post Office," William Michael Rossetti tells us.<sup>1</sup> His early childhood was singularly uninteresting, as his daughter readily admits in her disappointing biography.<sup>2</sup> She tells a few anecdotes about Woolner, regarding pet insects escaping in the middle of the night and his love of butterflies, and concludes that "Woolner was a great lover and observer of nature, as are most true artists and poets."<sup>3</sup>

When Woolner was thirteen, he was sent to Behnes the painter to study. Not much is known of this artist, not even his first name. He died soon after Woolner became his pupil, and William Behnes, his brother, a well-known sculptor, took young Thomas under his tutelage. Woolner stayed with Behnes for six years, and in later years he carved for him.

Behnes' last years were sad, as he suffered from serious financial difficulties, which caused him in 1861 to declare bankruptcy. He was forced to move into miserable lodgings, and one night was found in a gutter with threepence in his pocket. Behnes was taken to the nearby Middlesex Hospital, where he died on January 3, 1864 at an unknown age.<sup>4</sup> There is no record of Woolner's having contact with Behnes from the mid-1840's on.

At Behnes' suggestion Woolner entered the Royal Academy Schools on December 16, 1842, the day before he was to turn seventeen. Because of his diligence, he was able to submit the following year a model group of "Eleanor sucking the poison from Prince Edward's wound" to the Royal Academy.

In 1844 the Athenaeum noted Woolner's "Death of Boadicea," the British Queen who died in 62 A.D. after leading an unsuccessful revolt against the Romans. "In mentioning Mr. Henning's 'Boadicea' we should not have forgotten the good word due to Mr. Thomas Woolner's 'Death of Boadicea' (154). This like Mr. Henning's, is a fine group. The dying queen mastered by the anguish of the hour, lies like a royal martyr in the arms that sustain her. There is a great force of hand here; suffering, moral and physical, are [sic] powerfully expressed. The treatment is highly dramatic and the language of its drama is pure sculpture."<sup>5</sup>