

THE MISSING *ALISMA*: RUSKIN'S BOTANICAL ERROR

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It is easy to imagine how encouraged and cheered the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood felt when someone well known and respected gave them support in view of the often cruel vilification which had been their lot hitherto.

On 13 May 1851 John Ruskin wrote to the editor of *The Times* about the pictures by the Brethren and their friends currently being exhibited at the Royal Academy. Part of his letter, referring to Charles Collins's *Convent Thoughts* (fig. 1), reads:

I have no particular respect for Mr. Collins' lady in white, because her sympathies are limited by a dead wall, or divided between a goldfish and a tadpole--(the latter Mr. Collins may, perhaps, permit me to suggest *en passant*, as he is already half a frog, is rather too small for his age). But I happen to have a special acquaintance with the water plant *Alisma Plantago*, among which the said goldfish are swimming; and as I never saw it so thoroughly or so well drawn, I must take leave to remonstrate with you, when you say sweepingly that these men "*sacrifice truth as well as feeling to eccentricity.*" For as a mere botanical study of the Water Lily and *Alisma*, as well as of the common lily and several other garden flowers, this picture would be invaluable to me, and I heartily wish it were mine.

This letter has been frequently referred to because it was a turning point in the lives of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. The following examples will serve as illustrations. This appeared in *Punch* on 17 May 1851:

Our dear and promising young friends, the Pre-Raphaelites, deserve especial commendation for the courage with which they have dared to tell some most disagreeable truths on their canvasses of this year. MR. RUSKIN was quite right in taking up the cudgels against the *Times* on this matter. The pictures of the P.R.B. *are* true, and that's the worst of them. Nothing can be more wonderful than the truth of COLLINS'S representation of the "*Alisma Plantago*" except the unattractiveness of the demure lady, whose botanical pursuits he has recorded under the name of CONVENT THOUGHTS.

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