

## PATER AND THE “LAWS” OF VICTORIAN ICONOGRAPHY

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From Wellington and Victoria to “Bubbles,” Lady Audley, and Jack the Ripper, it was an era in which larger-than-life figures enjoyed a new kind of celebrity, for good or for ill, in the public marketplace of ideas and emotional connections. How significant is Walter Pater to studies of nineteenth-century iconography? Pater could be a poster boy for the complex, surcharged politics of Victorian icon-making and breaking. Unexpected fame in select aesthetic circles after the publication of *The Renaissance* (1873) was matched by the vociferous antagonism with which some religious leaders denounced book and author. He was the Oxford don as “diaphanous”<sup>1</sup> cultural presence – admired by students and acolytes, indirectly parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan, but variously detested by Benjamin Jowett and John Ruskin. After the Wilde trials in 1895, both the projects to reposition Pater’s reputation (the work of his sisters and the biographer they chose) and to sully it (the subsequent homophobic response of several male Modernists) were noteworthy.<sup>2</sup> Yet, since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and the emergence of gay and queer studies, Pater’s significance has been restored and multiplied.

Biographical considerations, however, are only part of the story. As this essay demonstrates, Pater’s art criticism and fiction adumbrate the “qualities,” “characteristics,” and historical disposition of iconic figures. “The qualities of the great masters in art or literature,” he observes in “The Poetry of Michelangelo,”

the combination of those qualities, the laws by which they moderate, support, relieve each other, are not peculiar to them; but most often typical standards, or revealing instances of the laws by which certain aesthetic effects are produced.... [W]hen once we have succeeded in defining their combination, we have acquired a standard or measure which helps us to put in its right place many a vagrant genius, many an unclassified talent. (*Renaissance* 76)

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