

A PRE-RAPHAELITE SHIBBOLETH: JOSEPH

There is something odd about Ford Madox Brown's "Jacob and Joseph's Coat," of which one of the four extant versions is reproduced here.¹ The Dalziel Brothers first commissioned Brown to treat Jacob and Joseph in an etching for their Bible Gallery, 1863; subsequently, Brown did replicas in oils (1866), in watercolors (1867), and again in oils (1871). In describing the painting when it was exhibited in Indianapolis in 1964, the catalogist noted the singularity of the scene itself:

The painting shows the comparatively rare instance of a Pre-Raphaelite painter treating a traditional religious subject; however, the composition appears to owe nothing to earlier renditions of the Biblical story. It is, in fact, rather original.²

The oddness of the painting, however, does not lie in the originality of the scene depicted but in the fact that a study for the scene was made by Brown a full eight years before the Dalziels commissioned the 1863 etching and, in fact, one year before Brown ever met the famous publishers in 1856: the pencil sketch, now in the City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, is signed and dated "F.M.B. 1855."

The understandable reaction to this anachronism has been to imply that there must be a mistake; accordingly, the description of the pencil sketch in the catalogue for the 1964 Ford Madox Brown exhibition in Liverpool reads in part, "A sketch used for an illustration to Dalziels' Bible Gallery. It seems likely actually to date from c. 1863 when the artist was making his design for the engraving."³

Nevertheless, the pencil study is clearly dated 1855, and it is the purpose of this paper to suggest that this early date points to quite another possibility for the genesis of the Joseph topic; the sketch may well be another instance of the power which Charles Wells's poetic drama Joseph and His Brethren (1824) held for the Pre-Raphaelites, notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Between 1849 and the late 1860's Rossetti tried with unflagging efforts to find a publisher for a new edition of Wells's long poem. During that period Rossetti felt that illustrations for the poetic drama would help in the sales, and since Madox Brown was Rossetti's lifelong and closest friend, it is quite likely that Brown actually tinkered with one such illustration; in fact, this "rather original" Biblical scene appears to be an illustration for Act I, Scene vi of Wells's closet drama. When the Wells revival failed to materialize, Madox Brown would naturally use for the Dalziel work commissioned in 1863 the study that he had been working on for Rossetti in 1855.⁴