

A “WORLD OF ITS OWN CREATION”: PRE-RAPHAELITE POETRY AND THE NEW PARADIGM FOR ART¹

David Latham

A medieval musician dressed in a yellow and orange streaked coif and kirtle is strumming her lute while appearing to arise from the flames of pure paint that ignites the whole canvas on fire. Eight pairs of glowing red wings wave over the eight haloed heads of angels at a funeral, their red wings spread like a clutter of pennons held aloft by a troop of soldiers. A maiden garbed in a royal-blue gown rises from her bright-orange ottoman to stretch sensually before the holy figures of an Annunciation scene depicted in her stained-glass window, the blue and orange jarring each other as boldly as two lone field-stripes of a Mark Rothko canvas.

We all recognize Pre-Raphaelite paintings when we see them. But how do we recognize Pre-Raphaelite poems? The question is difficult to answer because there is much misleading criticism that begins with the Pre-Raphaelites themselves. William Michael Rossetti gave the journal that formalized their manifesto an unfortunate name: *The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature, and Art*, as if nature was their focus. The initial target of their rebellion was the academic rules for students at the Royal Academy of Art, rules derived from Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1768-90). By 1768, Reynolds's premise was already an old one: Alexander Pope had argued in his neoclassical *Essay on Criticism* (1711) that the “first follow nature” rule should be modified simply to a short-cut “follow Homer” rule – Homer having already followed nature so well that subsequent poets need only study Homer to learn the best literary conventions of poetry. For Reynolds, the model for learning the best rules of painting was Raphael. Though his eighteenth-century contemporary – Thomas Gainsborough – was the first to disprove these rules, by showing in his *Blue Boy* (1770) that blue is not an inappropriate colour for the foreground of a composition, the Royal Academy adopted the *Discourses* as the paradigm of art for its students. By the 1840s, a few bold young Victorians rejected Reynolds's neoclassical rules much the way that students today resent an outdated textbook. Laurence Housman, a late Pre-Raphaelite illustrator, explains with memorable analogies how his Pre-Raphaelite colleagues were rebelling against “the mummy-chamber of