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The Pre-Raphaelite Art of John Melhuish Strudwick (1849-1937)

John Melhuish Strudwick has been described as a follower of Edward Burne-Jones and John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, in whose studios he had worked. His style also shows the influence of early Pre-Raphaelitism, such as constricted depth and multifarious details. In company with Rossetti, he relied on a few devoted patrons and eschewed popular recognition, although unlike Rossetti, he led an isolated life and even retired as a professional artist thirty years before his death. Since his style and iconography remained almost unaltered during his forty-year career, Strudwick's work is easily recognizable. However, he was not merely a decorative follower of Burne-Jones; his themes were original and his compositions well-considered in both the allegories and aesthetic paintings of his later years. A gradual preoccupation with melancholy subjects reflected his own attitude towards society. Thus, his Pre-Raphaelite style perfectly fits in the Rossetti-tradition, which he carried into the twentieth century.

John Melhuish Strudwick was born on 6 May 1849, the youngest son of Sarah Melhuish and William Strudwick. He married Harriet (Florence) Reed and with their daughter Ethel, lived in Kensington, London, and from 1903, Bedford Park—typical places for middle class artists.¹

The first phase of his artistic career, including his problems at art school, have been described by George Bernard Shaw in the only extant study of the artist.² Apparently, Strudwick found it hard to master the elementary techniques, and therefore to compete for prizes and patrons. Yet, he boldly painted an

oil picture and repeatedly submitted it to the Royal Academy before it was accepted; it was *Songs without Words*, the only Strudwick ever to appear on the walls of the Royal Academy, and bought by Lord Southesk.³ From then on, Strudwick considered himself to be a professional artist. Shortly afterwards he was employed as a studio assistant, first by Stanhope, who around 1880 moved to the Villa Nuptial at Bellosguardo near Florence, and then by his friend Burne-Jones. Each helped him create his own Pre-Raphaelite style admired by a small, devoted circle of patrons, although it never received general or critical attention.

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A typical example of Strudwick's work is *Love's Palace*, painted in 1891-1893 (fig. 1).⁴ The frame has the caption: "Let come what may, for that grim fate decides; / Love rules the day and Love enthroned, decides / G. F. Bodley." These lines were added to the title because Strudwick considered them an excellent expression of the meaning of his pictorial allegory. Bodley's verses were not published until 1899 but he was a friend of Spencer Stanhope and Burne-Jones. Furthermore, the decoration in the picture resembles Bodley's elaborate and polychromatic schemes in his churches. However, Strudwick may have been inspired initially by Philip Bourke Marston's sonnet "Love's Lost Pleasure-House," which was posthumously published in *A Last Harvest* (1891), the year Strudwick commenced the painting: