

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Notes on Millais' Use of Subjects from
the Opera, 1851-4.

In October 1851, at Worcester Park Farm in Surrey, Millais was painting a background for a scene illustrative of the line from Tennyson's "Circumstance": "Two lovers whispering by an orchard wall". Holman Hunt, who was also staying at the farm, objected to Millais that such subjects were merely voyeuristic unless invested with some moral significance. He suggested the conflict of Love and Duty as a suitable theme: the lovers could belong to opposing factions, during, for instance, the Wars of the Roses. Millais was convinced, and while considering possible subjects of this kind remembered the lovers Raoul and Valentine in Meyerbeer's opera Les Huguenots.¹

This work had been performed by the Royal Italian Opera every season since 1848.² One of Millais' early patrons, William Hugh Fenn, held a post at Covent Garden and often obtained free admission for him. According to Fenn's son, Millais was particularly fond of Les Huguenots and had once exclaimed after seeing a performance: "I should love to paint that scene; it would be fine -- the white badge business, I mean..."³

The white badge was the scarf which Catholics wore to identify themselves during the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day. In Act V, Scene 2 of Les Huguenots, Valentine, who is Catholic, tries in vain to persuade Raoul to deny his Protestant faith and wear the scarf. This is the highly charged moment depicted by Millais in A Huguenot (figure X).⁴ In the climax to the opera, Valentine embraces Protestantism, the couple marry and both are killed in the massacre.

The year 1851 was a time of religious paranoia in England over the "papal aggression" and Catholic sympathies had, to Millais' discomfort, been read into certain of his recent works.⁵ For this reason, the obviously Protestant character of the Huguenot subject probably made it especially attractive to him.

Shortly after sending in A Huguenot for the Royal Academy Exhibition, Millais received a commission for a painting from Lewis Pocock, Secretary of the Art Union of London. The first subject contemplated was the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet.⁶ This was soon abandoned, however, in favour of The Proscribed Royalist, 1651 (figure XI). Millais had considered a Civil War setting for his two