

## A KELMSCOTT PLAY

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*Musings from the editor's desk.*

Everything about W.B. Yeats's *The Shadowy Waters* (1900) is Pre-Raphaelite. First is the book's binding, with its Celtic-style lettering hyphenated horizontally across the top of its tall, slim spine. Still more distinctive is the decorative flower on the front cover, a gold-tooled blossom on navy-blue cloth. This golden rose in the upper-right corner is frayed beyond its full bloom, with one tear-shaped petal having dropped off toward the lower-left corner. Framed by this symbolic artwork is a play I remember first reading about in an essay by T.S. Eliot, who described the young Yeats as an accomplished poet of the Pre-Raphaelite school: "The play, *The Shadowy Waters*, seems to me one of the most perfect expressions of the vague and enchanted beauty of that school" (256). The scene of the play is a ship with a crew of pirates plotting the death of their leader, Forgael, who is dissatisfied with the material spoils of plunder, bored by both "gold and women taken in war" (28). With his magical harp, he can control his cut-throat crew, and when they plunder a ship wherein "nearer to the sail / A woman lies among embroideries" like a queen (24), his harp casts its spell over this femme fatale so that *she* falls in love with *him*. But Forgael resists the "froth" of mortal love on earth (53), determined to sail westward to the end of the world.

If I were a schoolboy eager for a sequel to *Treasure Island* I would be as disappointed as Eliot was with what Yeats makes of his dramatic premise: "Yet it strikes me – this may be an impertinence on my part – as the western seas descried through the back window of a house in Kensington, an Irish myth for the Kelmscott Press, and when I try to visualize the speakers in the play, they have the great dim, dreamy eyes of the knights and ladies of Burne-Jones" (256). Indeed, such artifice is what makes this play about pirates so characteristically Pre-Raphaelite. As Walter Pater reminds us in *The Renaissance*, the

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