

Robert Browning's "Saul": Pre-Raphaelite Painting in Verse

Robert Browning's relationships with major Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters have been well-documented.¹ The Pre-Raphaelites—most especially Rossetti—were among the earliest admirers of Browning's work. DGR campaigned with fervor to advance Browning's reputation by persuading many of his friends, including John Ruskin, to familiarize themselves with this difficult poet. Browning socialized with Rossetti and Ruskin and, for a time, corresponded regularly with both. His relationship with Ruskin, in particular, lasted a good many years, from their first meeting in the autumn of 1852 until their last in the spring of 1888.² His associations with other Pre-Raphaelites such as William Morris, whose early poems he admired, and John Everett Millais, who befriended Browning's son Pen and encouraged him to pursue a career as an artist, were more casual and short-lived.

Although Browning himself figured as the subject of a well-known portrait by Rossetti (figure 1), his poems did not inspire many Pre-Raphaelite pictures. Still, some were painted, among them a watercolor based on "The Laboratory" and an oil entitled "Hist, Said Kate the Queen" based on the Jules and Phene section of *Pippa Passes*—both by Rossetti—and Burne-Jones's painting of the meeting of the lovers described in Browning's "Love Among the Ruins" (figures 2, 3, and 4).

While Browning's genius was widely proclaimed by the Pre-Raphaelites, Burne-Jones calling him "the greatest poet alive,"³ Browning was not so outspoken or enthusiastic in his responses to *their* work. We know that after Elizabeth's death when Browning was again living in London, he did attend the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition of 1862 and in the following year visited Rossetti at his studios. Yet his assessments of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, including the ones based on his own poems, are not known. His reaction to the poetry produced within the Pre-Raphaelite circle was more open, but certainly not

altogether positive. He criticized Morris for not devoting himself exclusively to poetry; he expressed distress at what he judged to be Swinburne's immorality; he was cool or non-committal in his comments on Rossetti's poems.⁴

Given Browning's lukewarm response to Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting, it seems rather ironic that John Ruskin would—in a February 1856 letter—award Browning a measure of his highest praise by labeling him a Pre-Raphaelite.⁵ Yet Ruskin was not the only one of Browning's contemporaries to recognize affinities between the poems Browning wrote—especially in the first half of his career—and Pre-Raphaelite art. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had detected such similarities almost a decade earlier. Commenting on the attitude of his brother to Browning's poetry around the year 1847, William Michael wrote, "Confronted with Browning, all else seemed pale and in neutral tint. Here were passion, observation, aspiration, medievalism, the dramatic perception of character, act, and incident."⁶ The traits specified are ones frequently ascribed to Pre-Raphaelite painting and help to explain why D. G. Rossetti, who would later incorporate these very qualities in his own paintings, would so much admire Browning's poems. In fact, William goes so far as to say, "... if at this date [D. G.] Rossetti had been accomplished in the art of painting, he would have carried out in that art very much the same range of subject and treatment which he found in Browning's poetry. . . ."⁷

To test the extent of the similarities between Browning's earlier poems and Pre-Raphaelite paintings, I have chosen "Saul," a poem ultimately published in *Men and Women* (1855). While not one of Browning's best poems, "Saul" is, nevertheless, a poem the author himself liked well enough to revise and expand and to print in several collections of his works. Browning originally wrote "Saul" in nine sections of varying lengths. It was first published in *Dramatic Romances*