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## Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Poetry in Edith Wharton's *The Buccaneers* (1938)

Edith Wharton was a social historian sensitive to the changing tastes in art. In *False Dawn*, a novella which is the first part of the quartet, *Old New York* (1924), she treats ironically the fate of an artistic taste too advanced for the New Yorker of the 1840s (Tintner, 1-8). Young Lewis Raycie is given five thousand dollars by his father to buy, while on a trip to Europe, pictures then highly esteemed in America: "a Domenichino, an Albano, a Carlo Dolci, a Guercino, a Carlo Maratta" (FD, 53). But Lewis meets John Ruskin, who introduces him to his English friends, the painters Holman Hunt, Morris and Rossetti. Through their advice, he buys paintings by the authentic pre-Raphaelite painters, those who painted before Raphael and the High Renaissance—Carpaccio, Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, Giotto and Fra Angelico (rather than Angelica Kauffmann, whom Lewis's father would have preferred). He opens up a gallery in order to earn a living with these advanced paintings he has purchased, but it fails as a commercial venture. Lewis is too early for the public in New York, whose tastes are not up to his. He and his family die in abject poverty. His descendants, who inherit his house accidentally, come upon his collection in the attic and turn these low accepted masterpieces into cash, pearls and Rolls Royces.

In this short novel, the 15th-century Italian painters are touched upon, but the 19th-century English painters they inspired, the Pre-Raphaelites, are not. It is only in Wharton's last and incomplete novel, *The Buccaneers* (1938), that an actual painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the *Bocca Baciata* (*Lips that have been Kissed*), or at least a copy by Rossetti of the original oil painting, is placed in the collection of Sir Helmsley Thwarte.<sup>1</sup> The old gentleman is seen in his shabby but beautiful ancestral home, Honourslove, "retouching a delicately drawn water-colour copy of the little Rossetti *Madonna* above his desk" (BU, 269).

He was a fine copyist and "his water-colour glowed with the deep brilliance of the original picture" (BU, 270). He has promised this copy to Laura Testvalley, the original little governess. He tells his son, Guy, "she's Dante Gabriel's cousin . . . a remarkable woman—one of the few relations the poet is always willing to see. She persuaded him to sell me a first study of the 'Bocca Baciata'" (BU, 270). He is making a watercolor of the little Rossetti *Madonna* "as a way of thanking her" (BU, 269, 270). We note that he is not making a copy of the *Bocca Baciata*, but of a Rossetti *Madonna*, which is a painting invented by Wharton, for Rossetti never seems to have painted a truly iconic madonna. But since the *Bocca Baciata* is mentioned by name, we are able to see that picture when we think of Laura Testvalley.

At the time of Wharton's novel in the 1870s, the famous oil by Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata* (1859; Fig. 1) was actually in the collection of G. P. Boyce, who had commissioned it, and it remained in his collection until July, 1897. Wharton may have seen it close to the time of her writing *The Buccaneers* (1934-37), when it appeared at the Sir James Murray sale at Christie's (29 April 1927, Lot 84) or on 5 March 1935 at the Lord Lawrence of Kingsgate sale, where it was bought by William Randolph Hearst. It is more likely, however, that Wharton saw the picture when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1906 (*Surtees*, I:69). It is a "first study" of this painting that Sir Helmsley buys.

Did Wharton choose this picture, a real one, although it is not the one that Sir Helmsley is copying, because the *Bocca Baciata* would be too intimate and sensual a gift for the little "brown" governess? It seems that she thought the mention of the *Bocca Baciata*, with the image it raises in the reader's eyes, would suggest the essential erotic tie Sir Helmsley feels for the little woman. Virginia Surtees writes that the picture was "condemned at the time by some as 'coarse' and