

THE ARTIST AS SKEPTIC:
JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS'S *FERDINAND LURED BY ARIEL*

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In May 1850, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and James Collinson were the first artists to submit paintings to a Royal Academy Exhibition as members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Despite their lionization in later years, the fledgling Pre-Raphaelites fared terribly with reviewers on that occasion. Their attack on Millais, who exhibited two paintings, was “most virulent and audacious” according to William Michael Rossetti (*P.R.B.* 70). Among the critics’ strongest disparagements were those heaped upon Millais’s *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*, based on Act 1, Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (fig. 1). A London *Times* review bemoaned the painting’s incongruity with an ideal Ariel and Ferdinand: “We do not want to see Ariel and the spirits of the Enchanted Isle in the attitudes and shapes of green goblins, or the gallant Ferdinand twisted like a posture-maker by Albert Durer” (“Exhibition” 5). Meanwhile, *The Athenaeum* scorned the painting as “senseless in the conception, a scene built on the contrivances of the stage manager, but with very bad success” (“Royal Academy” 591). *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* also failed to find favour with William Wethered, the art dealer who had planned to purchase it. As William Michael Rossetti understatedly explained, Wethered “expressed some doubts about the greenness of his fairies, and wished to have them more sylph-like” (*P.R.B.* 42).

The critics’ vitriol and Wethered’s perplexity certainly reflect how unprepared most audiences were for the Pre-Raphaelites. But even later, when critics began to appreciate the Pre-Raphaelites’ purposeful innovations, *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel* never experienced the redemption enjoyed by other early Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Perhaps this is because *Christ in the House of His Parents* – exhibited alongside *Ferdinand* in 1850 – clearly adheres to the symbolic, emblematic,