

ANOTHER CAUSE
FOR THE “FLESHLY SCHOOL” CONTROVERSY:
BUCHANAN VERSUS ELLIS

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The “Fleshly School” controversy can only be called an overdetermined affair, involving a series of attitudes and events that had, as Christopher Murray puts it, “a certain terrible inevitability”:

Swinburne’s prickly sense of honour and his provocations to the bourgeois found their answer in Buchanan’s dogged fearlessness and sturdy Philistinism; Rossetti’s incipient paranoia was matched by Buchanan’s own extreme sensitivity to criticism...; and Colvin’s ‘impertinence’ surely found Buchanan’s ‘intemperance.’ (213-14)

Indeed, the conflict began with a clash in print (and perhaps in person) between Robert Buchanan and Swinburne over *Poems and Ballads* in 1866, and acquired a momentum that would sustain it over the next six years, culminating in the *Fleshly School* pamphlet and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s mental breakdown in 1872. Murray and John A. Cassidy have admirably explicated the various stages of the controversy; yet to their histories I would like to add one additional, previously unnoticed episode which surely helped to whet Buchanan’s blade against Rossetti and Swinburne: legal action taken by Frederick Startridge Ellis against Robert Buchanan in the late 1860s for nonpayment of a debt. Although he was primarily a bookseller, Ellis was publishing the works of both Rossetti and Swinburne by 1870, and became well known as a friend and supporter of Pre-Raphaelite circle. Attacking Rossetti’s *Poems* (1870) in “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” Buchanan could exact revenge on Ellis by condemning Rossetti and the whole school to which he belonged.

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 11 (Spring 2002)