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## Edward Burne-Jones and The Legend of Fair Rosamund

Among the numerous Victorian paintings acquired by the Yale Center for British Art in the past decade is Edward Burne-Jones's *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor* (fig. 1), a watercolour of mixed media heightened with gold and laid on a stretcher. It is signed with the artist's monogram and dated 1861. Before this relatively small painting was acquired by the Center in 1980, it belonged to T. E. Plint and thereafter to James Leathart (and his descendants), both men important Victorian industrialists who were patrons of Burne-Jones.

Even before he met the Pre-Raphaelites, Burne-Jones was fascinated by the legend of Fair Rosamund, having gone alone on a pilgrimage to her grave in Godstow in 1854. His letter to his father about his visit underscores the state of near rapture he experienced there: "I came back in a delirium of joy, the land was so enchanted with bright colours, blue and purple in the sky, shot over with a dust of golden shower . . . and in my mind pictures of the old days, the abbey, river bank, hawking parties and all the pageantry of the golden age—it made me feel so wild and mad I wanted to throw stones in the water to break the dream. I never remember having such unutterable ecstasy."<sup>1</sup>

At Oxford Burne-Jones found friends like William Morris to share his passion for the past and for themes from works such as Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Within about a year or so of his trip to Godstow, Burne-Jones became acquainted with the Pre-Raphaelites, having seen various of their paintings and having read *The Germ*. Dante Gabriel Rossetti began tutoring Burne-Jones in 1855, and the impact of Rossettian medieval

themes, angular figures, and densely packed, mysterious spaces was soon manifested in Burne-Jones's drawings and paintings. While Rossetti himself treated the theme in *Fair Rosamund* (fig. 2), also in 1861, his image is quite different from his protégé's and instead emphasizes the closeup, single female format which had surfaced in Rossetti's art in the late 1850s, in *The Blue Bower* and *Bocca Baciata* of 1859, for example. This temptress is also golden-haired, but she is alone and her expression dreamy, almost as if she were in a hypnotic state. She waits in her bower amid symbolic roses, holding in one hand a string that her lover (and the spectator) can follow through the maze. Her name can be literally translated as "rose for the world," but some of her contemporaries preferred to call her "rose of unchastity" (or *rosamundi*), and both these aspects seem to be conveyed by Rossetti's beautiful siren.<sup>2</sup>

Given his acknowledged enthusiasm for the tale of Rosamund, it is not surprising that the theme interested Burne-Jones throughout his career and that he integrated this subject into other pictorial representations of legend and romantic intrigue. Rosamund Clifford, the daughter of a knight, was an actual person who became the mistress of Henry II in the late twelfth century. The monarch publicly acknowledged this liaison despite his prior marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine.<sup>3</sup> Eleanor was convicted of conspiracy in 1173 and spent eight years in prison; Rosamund died of natural causes in a convent at Godstow in 1176, although subsequent lore romanticized her fate. By the middle of the fourteenth century the walls surrounding Woodstock prompted a legend that there was