

Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Literature before Aestheticism by Stephen Cheeke. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016. 256 pp. ISBN 9780198757207. £60.00.

From Norman Vance's *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (1985) to Donald E. Hall's edited volume *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (2006) and Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism* (1998), the Pre-Raphaelite, aestheticist, and decadent preoccupation with religion and theology is well documented. As Stephen Cheeke notes, "the idea of an aesthetic substitution for religious forms of thought and feeling has long been recognized and debated as a key phenomenon during the period." Cheeke reinforces this observation by placing his monograph alongside numerous others: "it joins an already vast and still growing body of literature on secularization in the nineteenth century, by looking at the relationship between literature and religious art before the advent of Aestheticism." Given this wealth of material, a question arises: what new insights and what original perspectives can Cheeke's current study, *Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Literature before Aestheticism*, offer?

Cheeke answers this question in the opening of his book:

This book is a study of one small part of the general human question: it is focused upon the ways in which four writers about art in the nineteenth century (John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Walter Pater) engaged with the Christian content of their subjects, and in Pater's case, how Christianity was placed in dialogue with the virtues of classical sculpture.... The present study will return to two related phenomena: the sin of idolatry, and the poetics of transfiguration.

By placing these dual phenomena at the forefront of his analysis, Cheeke provides new explorations of "the possibility of belief, the danger of idolatrous imagination, the risks and raptures of conversion, the problem of evil, and the promise of transfiguration as the raising of mimetic naturalism to see the ordinary anew." Much of the insight and pleasure of this study is derived from its solid and thorough research drawn from an array of interdisciplinary sources. Accompanying Cheeke's textual materials are an array of illustrations and pictures, including Raphael's *Transfiguration* (c.1519-20), Andrea di Bonaiuto's *The Triumph of Catholic Doctrine, personified in St. Thomas Aquinas* (c.1365), Titian's *Le Concert Champêtre* (c.1510), and Rembrandt's *The Supper of Emmaus* (1648). Cheeke's analysis and readings present a much needed and nuanced interpretation of the complex relationships between art and religion in the nineteenth century.