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Fig. 1. Lucius Hitchcock, illustration to "The Beldonald Holbein."
James’s “The Beldonald Holbein” and Rollins’ “A Burne-Jones Head”: A Surprising Parallel

by ADELINE R. TINTNER

A Burne-Jones Head is a short story written by an obscure American writer, Clara Sherwood Rollins. It relates the social rise and fall of a young woman who greatly resembles the type of beauty invented by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, the English Pre-Raphaelite painter. With that distinction she is launched into society by the favorite beau of a social leader who sponsors the “Burne-Jones head” in her circle only to expel her when she becomes jealous of her success. The young woman is shipped back to the American provinces from whence she came as if she were a painting. The society that first embraces and then rejects her refers to her in the terminology of a masterpiece of portraiture, for the metaphor embraces the whole story.

Henry James also wrote a story with a similar title, “The Beldonald Holbein,” in which there is a similar identification of a woman with a portrait of a master. She too is brought into a social circle by a lady who then ejects the “Holbein” out of jealousy and ships her back to America. There is the same recourse to the terminology of painting by which the author presents his heroine who differs from the Rollins heroine only so far as she is old and not considered a conventional beauty until an artist’s eye recognises her “type.”

One might ordinarily assume that the author of “A Burne-Jones Head” used “The Beldonald Holbein” as a model, until a glance at the copyright date shows quite clearly that the Rollins story was published in 1894, seven years before the James story. The resemblances are so close as to seem to be not a matter of accident. We are forced to conclude from the evidence gained from an analysis of both stories that the fifty-seven year old James seems to have been influenced by a story written by a twenty year old girl of limited production and even more limited reputation.

That James should use other pieces of fiction as models for his own stories is now a matter of accepted fact. He himself tells us in his preface to “The Author of Beltraffio (New York Edition), a volume which includes a number of short stories, that his own “Paste” was based on “La Parure” by Guy de Maupassant. He tells how he had “the ingenious thought of transposing the terms of one of Guy de Maupassant’s admirable contes. . . . It seemed harmless sport simply to turn that situation
round—to shift, in other words, the ground of the horrid mistake, mak­
ing this a matter not of a false treasure supposed to be true and precious, but of a real treasure supposed to be false and hollow.” What is impor­
tant for the investigator of James’s narrative technique is the last part of his sentence, “though a new little ‘drama,’ a new setting for my pearls—
and as different as possible from the other [last phrase my italics]—had
of course withal to be found.”’’ The author of this article has shown how
James, by dropping clues to the reader within his fiction, has “redone” many stories written by others.3 He indicated this habit in letters to his
friends, in which he refers to his constant desire to redo the fiction of
others if it “interests me at all.”

However, although Clara Rollins was young and apparently without
reputation, her precocious gifts must not be underestimated. Born in St.
Louis in 1874, she later moved to Boston and wrote poems, articles, and
short stories that show a sophisticated wit. She had written Three Pieces
for Amateurs under her maiden name of Clara Harriet Sherwood. Her
stories appeared in magazines and in 1894 were collected in “A Burne-
Jones Head and Other Sketches.” In 1897 appeared another group,
Threads of Life, and after that it is difficult to find further information
about her. The channel by which Mrs. Rollins’ story probably reached
James was through their publisher, Lovell, Coryell and Company, a
subsidiary of the United States Book Company, whose agent in London
was Woolcott Ballestier, both friend and agent of James’s before his
untimely death in 1891. James wrote a preface to Ballestier’s posthumous book, The Average Woman, 1892, also published by the
United States Book Company. In 1891 James wrote prefaces to two col­
clections of stories by Rudyard Kipling (who married Ballestier’s sister)
also published by Lovell, Coryell and Company. Therefore, it is likely
that in 1894 the publishers sent James, now one of their authors, a copy
of Mrs. Rollins’ book, perhaps even for his critical comments. Since
James never mentioned the book, this, of course, is conjecture.

However, the resemblance between the basic situations in both the
Rollins story and the James story is striking enough to warrant the sup­
position that James had read “A Burne-Jones Head” and in his charac­
teristic fashion, challenged perhaps by the obvious “ladies journal”

2. Adeline R. Tintner, “‘The Old Things’: Balzac’s Le Carré de Tours and James’s The Snares of
Poynton,” Nineteenth Century Fiction, XXVI, 4 (March 1972), 436-455; “The Influence of Balzac’s
L’Envers de l’Histoire Contemporaine on James’s The Great Good Place,” Studies in Short Fiction,
4, 4 (Fall 1972), 343–351; “Balzac’s ‘Madame Firmino’ and James’s The Ambassadors,” Comparative
Literature, XXV, 2 (Spring 1973), 128–135; “Keats and James and The Princess Casamassima,” Nine­
teenth Century Fiction, XXVIII, 2 (September 1973), 179–193; “Octave Feuillet, La Petite Contesse,
(October 1974), pp. 267–276; “Henry James’s Decadent Novel: The Bostonians and Balzac’s ‘La Fille
aux Yeux d’or,’” Comparative Literature (in press); “Henry James’s Marble Faun: ‘Impressions of a
quality of the story, spritely and literate though it is, "redid" by improving upon what was for him its interesting structure. What, no doubt, interested him in "A Burne-Jones Head" was the jealousy felt by a society woman when a man she likes pays more attention to an "intruder" woman of great beauty, identified with a famous painter's type. For that reason the society woman is moved to make the rival a social outcast in her set, ending in her banishment from the locale.

The mechanics of the basic plot in the short story by Clara Rollins was attached by James to a real life situation, told to him by Maud Howe in May 1899 about her mother Julia Ward Howe who had enjoyed, at the age of seventy-five, a succès de beauté in Rome while visiting her daughter, because the artists in the American set saw her as a Holbein portrait. The function of the heroine in James's story is exactly that of the "Burne-Jones Head." She is imported to embellish her patron's social career, but banished when she outshines her.

In Clara Rollins' story, Mrs. Rogers, the "Burne-Jones head," takes singing lessons from a Signor Padronti, in whose studio she meets Peyton who launches her at a dinner-party. Mrs. Tillbury, the social leader in love with him, "raved over her, claimed her for her own, placed the Tillbury arms upon her, and christened her a 'Burne-Jones'." "And thus it was that the Burne-Jones head, after being approved at the private view was exhibited to the world—that is, to Mrs. Tillbury's world" (B, p. 26).

Her downfall takes place because as an admired masterpiece of Burne-Jones's art she "was almost too much of a success to please Mrs. Tillbury. She liked to have her taste approved, but Peyton had always been at her elbow more or less. Now it was decidedly less. . . . However, she concealed all feeling of discontent beneath her most fascinating smile" (B, p. 30). At the opening of an operetta in which "The Burne-Jones was to sing the leading part," the invited guests gossip about Peyton's relations with her and her failure to produce her husband for the concert. The conclusion of the story is "that the Burne-Jones head is turned" (B, p. 35). Peyton not only overhears this gossip but he realizes that "the Burne-Jones" does so too. Wounded and disillusioned with society, she returns to her provincial home with her husband. "So the Burne-Jones went back into the rustic frame where she belonged. And the little world that had admired and criticized and gossiped forgot all about her." Peyton consoles himself with a real Burne-Jones head which he buys in Paris "which Padronti insists resembles his lost pupil" (B, p. 49).

II

Let us look at James's story published seven years later. The basic anecdote of the aged Julia Ward Howe's success as a Holbein portrait,

4. Clara Sherwood Rollins, A Burne-Jones Head and Other Sketches (New York: Lovell, Coryell, 1894), p. 25. Further references to this story are indicated by the letter B.
“Her coming out . . . at the end of her long, arduous life and having a wonderful unexpected final moment—at 78! of being thought the most picturesque, striking, lovely old (wrinkled and marked ‘Holbein’, etc. that ever was)’’ is maintained as the core of the story which first appeared in Harper’s Magazine for October, 1901. The success of James’s heroine, Mrs. Brash, depended entirely upon her looking old and stylized, yet completely within the tradition of German Renaissance portraiture. Mrs. Rollins’ heroine, conforming to the romantic requirements of a “ladies”’ magazine of the period, is rescued from a romantic escapade injurious to her reputation. James’s superior irony resides in his use of the paradox of an old, not a young, woman becoming a beauty because of her resemblance of a work of art. In his story, James focuses on the vanity of Lady Beldonald who uses her fifty-seven year old relative as a foil for her own conventional beauty. Since the artist by whom she herself wishes to be painted prefers Mrs. Brash, Lady Beldonald sends her back to America.

Although James has made an entirely different, much richer and immeasurably better story out of the original structure, we continue to find parallel bits of plot. The heroes of both stories discover the lady-into-painting through another friend. In James’s story, the painter’s friend, Paul Outreau, like Mrs. Tillbury, names the painting that the heroine has, metaphorically, turned into. “She’s the greatest of all Holbeins” and a “Holbein head” . . . “c’est une tête à faire.” Another correspondence occurs when Lady Beldonald wants to be painted to achieve social success, and she pretends to love her elderly rival and “faced the music of Mrs. Brash’s success.” She “never attempted to hide or to betray her” (p. 303). In the parallel story, Mrs. Tillbury also “concealed all feeling of discontent beneath her most fascinating smile” (B, p. 30). Mrs. Brash herself refuses to be painted because she was aware of how Lady Beldonald felt, just as Mrs. Rogers knows, by having overheard the conversation about her at the concert, how nasty and jealous everyone is of her success.

Moreover, James seems to have paraphrased two sentences from the Rollins story. The first, “And thus it was that the Burne-Jones head, after having been approved at the private view, was exhibited to the world” (B, p. 26), becomes elaborately amplified in James’s story. There “dropped into my memory a rich little gallery of pictures. . . . I see Mrs. Brash . . . practically enthroned and surrounded and more or less mobbed; see the hurrying and the nudging and the pressing and the staring; see the people ‘making up’ and introduced, and catch the word when they have had their turn; hear it above all, the great one—‘Ah yes, the


famous Holbein!' ” (pp. 301-302). The rich embroidery of the language and the images does not conceal the fact that the Rollins sentence is the foundation on which this colorful construction may have been built.

The second sentence in the Rollins story that James reworks mentions that the Burne-Jones head always wore either “a white gown . . . which she had evolved” (B, p. 25) or a black one. In like manner Mrs. Brash, in James’s story, “had developed her admirable dress . . . always either black or white.” As the painter-narrator of James’s story has made a woman into a work of art, “She was, in short, just what we had made of her, a Holbein for a great museum. . . . The world—I speak of course mainly of the art world—flocked to see it” (p. 298), so Mrs. Tillbury, in the Rollins story, the taste-former of her group, has made a young woman into a work of art which she regrets since it threatens her with the loss of her own admirer.

James concludes his story with the same image as Clara Rollins does. The nasty gossips at the musicale concluded that “The Burne-Jones head is turned.” The “masterpiece,” knowing that people think she is Peyton’s mistress “went back into the rustic frame where she belonged. And the little world that had admired and criticized and gossiped forgot all about her” (B, p. 49).

“I know nothing of her original conditions,” the painter-narrator in “The Beldonald Holbein” tells us, “save that for her to have gone back to them was clearly to have stepped out of her frame” (p. 306). But not surviving like the Burne-Jones his Holbein is crushed. Instead of her “head being turned,” the picture actually “turns” its face to the wall.” “It wasn’t—the American city—a market for Holbeins, and what had occurred was that the poor old picture, banished from its museum and refreshed by the rise of no new movement to hang it, was capable of the miracle of a silent revolution, of itself turning, in its dire dishonour, its face to the wall” (p. 306). Poor Mrs. Brash, the rejected and de-acquisitioned picture, went out “like a snuffed candle.” In retribution the painter will take his revenge on Lady Beldonald by painting her as she really is, not as she wants to be.

The end of “the Holbein,” therefore, is different from that of “the Burne-Jones head.” The latter, surviving but forgotten by all, now concentrates on her baby. The Holbein, on the other hand, “stood, without the intervention of the ghost of a critic, till they happened to pull it around again and find it mere dead paint” (p. 306). The narrator-painter in the James story refers to Mrs. Brash as if she had indeed been a real painting, a thing and not a person. “Well, it [italics mine] had had . . . its season of fame, its name on a thousand tongues and printed in capitals in the catalogue” (p. 306). “The Burne-Jones head” regains her place as an actual person, since Peyton buys a Burne-Jones painting to replace the living one. In fact, the Burne-Jones figure which serves as a frontispiece for the book might be considered by the reader as Mrs.
Fig. 2. Sir Edward Burne-Jones, picture used as illustration to "A Burne-Jones Head."
Rogers’ replacement, while the original resumes her life as a mother and wife on an Iowan farm. What is a metaphor in Mrs. Rollins’ story becomes a reality in James’s, in which a person is totally transformed into an analogue. The incisive painter-narrator in “The Beldonald Holbein” gives the story its final irony by suggesting he will do the portrait of Lady Beldonald without flattery. The cruel image James uses gives the reader some idea of what his portrait will reveal: Since “she will have the real thing—oh well, hang it, she shall!” A box of sardines “is only ‘old’ after it has been opened. Lady Beldonald never has yet been—but I’m going to do it” (p. 290).

III

In 1894, the stylish painter of beauties was Burne-Jones, and Oscar Wilde wrote that women were now beginning to look like his figures. Henner, too, produced women whose features could be found in pretty young contemporaries. Mrs. Rollins mentions Henner as another painter who would “have delighted in her [the heroine’s] copper hair and warm flesh tints” (B, p. 7). This ideal of youthful beauty that could be appreciated only by the trained eye of the artist is probably what held James’s interest when he read the Rollins story, although in his own tale he uses a type that is caviar to the general. “I don’t say your friend,” the narrator tells Lady Beldonald, “is a person to make the men turn round in Regent Street” (p. 293). What appeals to the painter in the story is that he had never “before seen that degree and that special sort of personal success come to a woman for the first time so late in life” (p. 296).

After Mrs. Brash is “shipped” back to America, she is totally transformed into a painting. She is referred to as “the masterpiece we had for three or four months been living with” which had made us “feel its presence as a luminous lesson and a daily need.” It “had been the gem of our collection” and we “found what a blank it left on the wall” (p. 304). In James’s vision, the metaphor has become the reality; it exhibits the transformation of a rhetorical analogue into a material entity. What happens to Mrs. Brash is that she dies, not as a person but as a work of art, for “it turns its face to the wall” and becomes “mere dead paint.”

Referred to as an it and not a she, it exhibits through paradoxical irony another extension of the high value art had over life for James, a value appearing more and more in his work after The Tragic Muse (1890). It occurs in great concentration in the group of stories about artists written around the turn of the century of which “The Beldonald Holbein” is one. The combination of the paradoxical lady-into-painting, with comic
exaggeration which becomes savage when involved with the silliness of the art-loving social world, might give away James’s desire around this time to contradict Wilde’s judgement of him in *Intentions*: “Mr Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty.” In “The Beldonald Holbein,” James gives the lie to Wilde’s “crack.”

In 1902, James’s friend, Mrs. Cadwallader Jones, had sent to him for his opinion a couple of volumes of short stories by a young, then fairly unknown writer, Edith Wharton. James’s reaction, as he wrote to Mrs. Jones, was to want to do over at least one of the stories which had interested him. “If a work of imagination, of fiction, interests me at all (and very few, alas, do!) I always want to write it over in my own way, handle the subject from my own sense of it. *That* I always find a pleasure in.” He continues, “But I can’t speak more highly for any book, or at least for my interest in any. I take liberties with the greatest.”

James could find something to redo his way in Shakespeare, in Edith Wharton, or even in Clara Sherwood Rollins. A clever but typical lady’s magazine story like “A Burne-Jones Head” probably intrigued him by the atmosphere instantly established on its first page. We here reprint the opening lines:

Mrs. Tillbury called her a Burne-Jones Head, and Mrs. Tillbury was a woman who possessed a vast knowledge of art in general and the world in particular.

She gave dinners for her protégé, to which she invited the indolent dilettante Bohemian New York circle of which she was perhaps the centre. And as the Burne-Jones head was attached to a very beautiful body the men raved over her. Women thought her stupid, but she became the fashion all the same, for she was a novelty and her voice was wonderfully sweet. (B, p. 7)

The tone is that in which James pitched his own clever story.

New York City

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