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## Edward Burne-Jones and Nineteenth-Century Fear of Women

Joseph Kestner

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### Abstract

The painter Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1888) reveals in his art a preoccupation with a key manifestation of nineteenth-century culture, misogyny. This fear of women derives from several experiences, particularly his affair with Maria Zambaco during the late 1860s and early 1870s. His early stories and his association with Rossetti indicate tendencies that later were manifest in a narcissistic hatred of women that is most obvious in his *Perseus* cycle and in his paintings of women as *femmes fatales* such as the mermaid and Nimuë. The sesquicentennial of his birth is an appropriate time to reconsider his life vis-à-vis this cultural manifestation.

JOSEPH KESTNER

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Women in Victorian painting constitute a range of figures typifying the social conscience, sentimentality, and anxiety of the period. Such images include the woman as guardian of hearth and home (Millais, *The Order of Release*, 1746, 1853), woman as suffering worker (Redgrave, *The Sempstress*, 1844), and woman as fallen victim (Hunt, *The Astonishing Conscience*, 1853).<sup>1</sup> As the century advanced, these images could become more specialized, as in the presentation of the nun or the enchantress. Charles Collins' *Convent Thoughts* (1851) and Millais' *The Vale of Rest* (1859) represent one aspect of this direction. The threatening female appeared in such embodiments as Sandys' *Vivien* (1863).<sup>2</sup> If some of these images represent concern for the condition of women, others embody fears that were expressed socially, for example, in the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s or the exclusion of women from higher education.<sup>3</sup> Graham Hough comments in *The Last Romantics* that these cultural phenomena were evident from mid-century:

Any full treatment of the culture of the period would have to explain the lavish and eccentric display of erotic symbolism that made its appearance on both sides of the Channel after the middle of the century—the obsession with various illicit alliances between love, pain, and death; the femme fatale or the vampire; homosexuality, male and female; hermaphroditism, and all the rest of it. No doubt some of the mythological embodiments of these states of mind, notably the conception of women as some sort of mysterious fatality, were . . . personifications of forces and ideas buried deep in the human psyche.<sup>4</sup>



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