3. H. F. Chorley, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*

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According to L. A. Marchand, *The Athenaeum. A Mirror of Victorian Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1941), p. 192, the reviewer was H. F. Chorley (1808–72), of whom we are told 'he mirrored . . . truly the average opinion of the readers of the journal' (p. 193).

Disposed, as we are, to recognize all who cultivate poetry honestly, whatever be the style;—and admitting that Mr. Morris may be counted among that choir,—we must call attention to his book of Pre-Raphaelite minstrelsy as to a curiosity which shows how far affectation may mislead an earnest man towards the fog-land of Art. Of course, in rejoinder, we may be reminded how Wordsworth was misunderstood, how Keats was misprized, when they set forth on their original paths. We shall once more be invited to accept, wrapped round with some delicate rose-leaf of sophistry, or locked up in some casket of curious device, the fallacy that—

Naught is everything, and everything is naught.
—What matter? Truth is the same, poetry undying, from all time and in all ages,—but masquing is not truth, and the galvanism of old legend is not poetry. The justice of what has been said could be proved from every page of this provoking volume, to the satisfaction of the most enthusiastic lover of our Laureate’s ‘Lady of Shalott.’ That strange dream, which, however beautiful, quaint, and touching it be, quivers on the furthest verge of Dream-land to which sane Fancy can penetrate, has been ‘the point of departure’ for Mr. Morris. While we were looking, a day or two since, at Mr. Egley’s skilful, minute, yet barely intelligible, presentment of that magical ballad—something of sympathy, something of sadness, something of wonder, came over us, in consideration of time wasted and effort ill bestowed. This, however, the Pre-Raphaelite poets, apparently, do not perceive; otherwise, we should never have been bidden to look on so astounding a picture as Mr. Morris’s ‘Rapunzel.’ How to express or make the subject of this clear, is not an easy task. The tale is one of enchantment. There is a Prince who is haunted by some mysterious desire. There is an enchanted damsel, whose ‘web’ (those familiar with ‘The Lady of Shalott’ will understand us) is her head of hair. This ‘fair one of the golden locks’ is under the power of wicked creatures. So much explained, let the Prince speak:—

[quotes from ‘Rapunzel’, ending with the Prince’s song]

If it would please God to make you sing again,
I think that I might very sweetly die,
My soul somehow reach heaven in joyous pain,
My heavy body on the beech-nuts lie.

Now I remember; what a most strange year,
Most strange and awful, in the beechen wood
I have pass’d now; I still have a faint fear
It is a kind of dream not understood.

I have seen no one in this wood except
The witch and her; have heard no human tones,
But when the witches’ revelry has crept
Between the very jointing of my bones.

Ah! I know now; I could not go away,
But needs must stop to hear her sing that song
She always sings at dawning of the day.
I am not happy here, for I am strong,
And every morning I do whet my sword,
Yet Rapunzel still weeps within the tower,
And still God ties me down to the green sward,
Because I cannot see the gold stair floating lower.

The italics are ours—Were we to continue the legend, stranger mixtures of fantasy on stilts and commonplace lying flat than even the above could be shown; but such show would become painful, not profitable. Let us only repeat that the ‘Lady of Shalott’s’ loom was not a Jacquard machine, into which, by cost and patience, a few more perforated cards could be introduced, and her web, and its patterns and devices be thereby complicated. Mr. Morris gives us a Manchester mystery; not a real vision—stark, staring nonsense; not inspiration.

Has enough been shown concerning this volume—or are we still open to the charge of having made extracts in an ex parte spirit,—of having worried the author on some weak point, the defence of which he would give up when in a lucid interval? To anticipate such objection, let us offer a complete ballad; and one of the best, to our thinking, in the book:

[quotes ‘The Sailing of the Sword’]

Mystical and pathetic the above looks, no doubt, as every picture quaint in detail but possessing no real meaning, may be made to look. But it is virtually as thin and theatrical as the veriest Arcadian or Della-Cruscan idyl, in which ‘Cynthia wept by the urn which enclosed the ashes of her Adonis’—the Cynthia dressed in the impracticable Greek tunic, the urn well chiselled by sculptor,—neither Cynthia, nor Adonis, nor tunic, nor urn, having one touch of nature. Greek academical platitude is weak—Gothic traditional platitude is stiff:—both untrue—neither strong. The Gothic is now in the ascendant. Shall we shortly arrive at Chinese mysteries?—at the legend of the Willow Pattern?—at the principle of the Pagoda?—at the ‘nay,’ which shall protest against barbarism, obesity, and cowardice being attributed to Yeh? Such things may be; but the sooner that such possibility is made clear to those who meditate verses, the better will it be for poetry; which belongs neither to Basilica, Cathedral, Mosque, Italian dome, nor Indian wigwam, but to air and sunshine, and hope and grief, shed down alike on the just and the unjust—on Raphael and on the Pre-Raphaelites.

1 Referring to the group of sentimental poets satirized by William Gifford in the Baviad (1791).