

**“New Made of Flower Leaves”: Nature, Evolution and Female
Education in Edward Robert Hughes’s**

The Princess out of School

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Fig. 1. Edward Robert Hughes, *The Princess out of School*, 1901.
Gouache and watercolour, 52 x 95.3 cm (sheet).
National Gallery of Victoria.

In 1901 the trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, on the advice of the Council of the Royal Academy, acquired a large watercolour in an impressive gold frame from the current summer exhibition of the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours in London (Fig.1).¹ This choice reflects the high regard for this medium at the time, and enthusiasm for its potential on such a large scale, befitting its export to Melbourne.² Already, a reviewer of the exhibition had declared that “It occupies what may be regarded as the place of honour in the gallery, and it is a tribute to the intelligence of the hanging committee that it is so well placed.”³

¹ I am indebted to Victoria Osborne’s “A British Symbolist in Pre-Raphaelite Circles: Edward Robert Hughes RWS (1851-1914),” M. Phil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 2009, and for her generous assistance in relation to the exhibition *Enchanted Dreams: The Pre-Raphaelite Art of E. R. Hughes*, curated by Victoria Osborne, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2015. I also wish to thank Alison Inglis, Ted Gott, Deirdre Coleman, Cathy Leahy and Meg Tasker for their unstinting support and advice. For an image of Hughes’s painting in its frame, see National Gallery of Victoria website: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/27350/>

² Kim Sloan (ed.), *Places of the Mind: British Watercolour Landscapes 1850-1950*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2017.

³ Anonymous reviewer, “Old Water Colours,” *Literature*, Vol. 185, 4 May 1901, p. 371, cited by Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

The work depicts a young woman, reclining alone on a grassy verge. Rather than sleeping, she raises her shoulders and head, depicted in striking profile, stretching forward to examine the teeming natural scene that surrounds her. Trees form a filigree back-drop, an abundance of flowers grow and entwine about her and a stream runs beneath. She appears to be immersed in this verdant sward of green and gold, and at ease amongst its fertile texture. Cloaking most of her figure is an embellished robe of russet red and old gold, overlaid by her hair which streams down in rippling curls and eddies of auburn. Under this double mantle, a white muslin dress trimmed on the sleeves with lemon ribbons is just visible, and, thrown to one side into the grass at her feet, a green hat trimmed with white ermine.

Often regarded merely as a gifted technician of appealing surfaces and memorable images, Hughes was, however, deeply connected with some of the most forward-thinking artists, writers, and intellectuals of both earlier and current generations. *The Princess out of School*, with its heavy weight of literary reference, deserves attention to the way in which Hughes has rendered an apparently conventional scene of a woman in an idyllic natural setting. What is the status, agency and role of this figure and of nature in this work? Several critics have debated the newly-found, if unstable, agency of Pre-Raphaelite female protagonists.⁴ Analysis of the cultural context for Hughes's work reveals an unusually close consonance with its literary sources, whereby the princess, too, is endowed with burgeoning power. Her beauty is no mere aestheticism and by choosing to immerse herself in nature, she evolves her own therapeutic purpose that links her with future generations.

Hughes's composition has an expansive heritage of visual precursors. Several are found in a series of works by his uncle and teacher, the Pre-Raphaelite painter and illustrator, Arthur Hughes, with whom he lived and studied in the 1860s. The strength of ties between them is apparent in the engaging portrait inscribed "E. R. Hughes at two and a half years old/ Painted by his uncle Arthur Hughes" (Fig. 2).⁵ Beyond this filial connection the youthful Hughes was to learn a range of visual vocabularies from his mentor. In particular, the elder Hughes favoured deploying figures in horizontal compositions, filling out the pictorial space in a way reminiscent of early Italian decorative schemes such as those found on *cassone* panels. *The Princess* compares closely with several of these, starting with one of the earliest, *The Young Poet* (Fig. 3), in which the reclining figure is centre-stage in an arched lunette design.



Fig. 2. Arthur Hughes, *Edward Robert Hughes as a Child*, 1853-54. Oil on canvas, 56.8 x 29.2 cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

⁴ See, for example, Barringer's discussion of Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott*, c. 1888-1905, on which Hughes worked. Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, eds., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, London, Tate Britain, 2013, p. 224.

⁵ Leonard Roberts, *Arthur Hughes. His Life and Works. A Catalogue Raisonné*, Suffolk, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd, 1997, p. 129.



Fig. 3. Arthur Hughes, *The Young Poet*, 1848-49.
Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 91.4 cm.
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.
Image: Wikimedia Commons.

In both composition and melancholy resonance, this work invokes Joseph Wright of Derby's well known portrait of *Sir Brooke Boothby*, itself informed by a tradition that dates back to Hilliard, depicting figures of sensibility reclining in a contrived but empathetic natural setting.⁶ Edward Hughes's figure is a notably female descendant of these meditating figures; one in which the relationship with nature has evolved from mood-enhancing backdrop for a gentleman scholar to a nurturing environment that is actively experienced by a woman.

Amongst other examples from Arthur Hughes,⁷ the closest precedent for the NGV watercolour is *The Rift within the Lute* of 1861-62 (Fig. 4) with a title taken from lines in Tennyson's poem "Merlin and Vivien" that meditate on the loss of faith in love:

It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all."⁸

Swathed in a plush purple cloak over a blue-green dress, the young woman reclines beside a woodland stream. The focus is on her melancholy lament, expressed in her wistful face as she



Fig. 4. Arthur Hughes, *The Rift within the Lute*, 1861-62. Oil on canvas, 52 x 92 cm.
Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery. Tullie House.

⁶ Frederick Cummings, "Boothby, Rousseau and the Romantic Malady," *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 110, No. 789, 1968, pp. 659-67.

⁷ Demonstrating the importance of his protagonist's identification with nature, is Hughes's narrative picture *Home From the Sea* (Ashmolean, 1862), in which the grieving boy lies face down on the grass. He also envisaged nature with a nurturing or leisurely role in his images of a child cradled in undergrowth in *The Woodman's Child*, Tate Britain, 1860, and of a woman lying on a river-bank, with fishing line and basket, reading the popular "The Compleat Angler," priv. coll. c. 1884.

⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Merlin and Vivien," in *Idylls of the King*, in *Poems of Tennyson 1830-1870*, London, Oxford University Press, 1912, p. 595.

rests her head on her hands beside a lute, with a bunch of bluebells symbolising constancy laid across the strings.⁹ Stretched the full length of the picture space and surrounded by foliage without a horizon line, this painting with its literary source appears to closely anticipate Edward Hughes's work. *The Princess out of School*, however, evades a specific narrative, domestic or historical context. The lack of explicit meaning was recognised at the time of its first exhibition. Admiring the "rich, harmonious and well balanced" colour-scheme, critics concluded that "We are simply content to admire Mr. Hughes's picture."¹⁰

Yet what can be made of the bipartite title, given in a handwritten label on the back of the painting? "'The Princess out of School': under her favourite bower's quiet shade. On her own couch, new made of flower leaves"? The second part, a quotation from Book I of John Keats's *Endymion*, first published in 1818, accompanied the work when it was exhibited at the Royal Watercolour Society in London in 1901.¹¹ This may be an example of the tendency abhorred by a contemporary critic who wrote that an earlier work by Hughes demonstrated "the common English excess of literature over art; enormous pains taken to tell a story which is entirely unintelligible unless one has the key."¹² Certainly, the invention of visual images that seek to evoke or illustrate literary ideas was widespread in the late nineteenth century, at times in ways that were obscure, intentionally vague or unstable.¹³ Arthur Hughes could change the meaning of a composition at will, as in, for example, *The Rift within the Lute*, which appears to have developed out of a different Tennysonian subject, that of *Enid and Geraint* (c. 1859).¹⁴ Referring to this work in a letter, Hughes playfully discusses its potential, quoting from both Tennyson and Keats as catalysts in the proliferation of his ideas.¹⁵ He also made his own version of Keats's *Endymion*, (1868-70) (Fig. 5) that only had an indirect relation to the original. Referring to "My picture in Bibby's collection, called 'Endymion,'" he wrote, "it is from Keats—that is, does not illustrate any actual scene but grew out of it somehow . . . A nymph of Diana is supposed to be lying pillowed on a hind, Endymion breaking through the trees beyond a pool."¹⁶

⁹ For bluebells (*campanula*) see John Ingram, *Flora Symbolica or, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers*, Frederick Warne and Co., London, 1869, p. 123. *Campanula* (I will ever be constant). For *The Rift within the Lute* see Robin Gibson, "Arthur Hughes: Arthurian and Related Subjects of the Early 1860s," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 112, No. 808, July 1970, pp. 455-56.

¹⁰ Anonymous reviewer, *Literature*, 4 May 1901, correspondence of Victoria Osborne to Cathy Leahy, NGV files, 28 June 2011.

¹¹ Laurie Benson, *Medieval Moderns: The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 2015, p. 38.

¹² Anonymous reviewer, "The Society of Painters in Water Colours," *The Athenaeum*, 3522, 27 April 1895, p. 542, cited by Osborne, p. 26.

¹³ Pamela M. Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity: the British Problem Picture 1895-1914*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003.

¹⁴ Likewise, Arthur Hughes's *The Long Engagement*, 1853-55 and c. 1858-59, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, initially planned as a single figure scene from Shakespeare's *As you like It*, was re-devised as a two-figure composition of, in Hughes's words, "modern lovers" (Letter to H. Allingham 16 September 1911). See Roberts, pp. 126-29.

¹⁵ Letter to Pauline, Lady Trevelyan, Dec. 1861, Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

¹⁶ Roberts, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-74.



Fig. 5. Arthur Hughes, *Endymion*, 1868-70. Oil on canvas, 76 x 106.5 cm. Unlocated. Image: Wikiart.

Does *The Princess* share this intentional ambiguity or does it have a more significant relationship with Keats's poem, as well as its more obvious allusion to Tennyson's *The Princess*? Had Hughes formulated the visual image first, and attached the lines from "Endymion" as an enhancement afterwards, or did he intend to directly interpret the poem? In these lines Peona, sister of the shepherd Endymion, who is troubled by his love for the moon goddess Cynthia, places him to rest

Under her favourite bower's quiet shade,
On her own couch, new made of flower leaves

(*Endymion*, Book I, lines 433-35)

This arbour is where

she used to bring
Her playmates, with their needle broidery,
And minstrel memories of times gone by. (lines 433-35)

This scene from Keats's poem is thus brimming with the potential for quintessential Pre-Raphaelite themes of introversion and renewal, with "minstrel memories" that set a haunting nostalgic tone being overcome by an experience of nature that brings new life. Hughes invokes both, with a new emphasis on the active role of the female figure. Rather than resting passively on her "couch" of "flower leaves," she seeks out, peruses and moves amongst her botanically resplendent retreat.

Hughes's response to Keats's words continued the Pre-Raphaelites' deep commitment to this poet. In 1848, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt had drawn up a list of "Immortals" in which Keats ranked highly, distinguished by two stars, one down from Shakespeare and one more than, amongst others, Tennyson.¹⁷ While Keats's literary debut in 1817 had received mixed and, at times, bewildered responses, his reputation gradually rose throughout the nineteenth century, with the attention of the Pre-Raphaelites playing a central role in this ascendancy. Keats had been an important model and touchstone at the founding of

¹⁷ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, London and New York, Macmillan, 1906, Vol. 1, p. 159.

the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, bringing Rossetti and Holman Hunt together when the latter's depiction of Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1848. As Hunt proudly wrote:

Rossetti came up to me, repeating with emphasis his praise, and loudly declaring that my picture of "the Eve of St. Agnes" was the best in the collection. Probably the fact that the subject was taken from Keats made him the more unrestrained, for I think no one had ever before painted any subject from this little-known poet.¹⁸

Poems by Keats took their place alongside those of Shakespeare, Dante and Tennyson, as the most frequent choice for the subject of Pre-Raphaelite works.¹⁹ For the poet-painter Rossetti, Keats was a crucial exemplar, especially because of the heightened visual dimension of his poetry. He declared to William Morris: the "next Keats can only be a painter."²⁰ With similar reverence, Oscar Wilde emphasised his importance as an image-maker, praising him in his 1881 poem "The Grave of Keats": "O poet-painter of our English land!"²¹ This commitment to the sympathetic correspondence of word and image continued in the work of the next generation of late Pre-Raphaelites, including Edward Hughes. Besides *The Princess*, a major part of his *oeuvre* makes reference to literary texts, including the two best known works, *Night with her Train of Stars* (1912) (Fig. 15) and *What's that in the hollow?* (c. 1895) (Fig. 13), both illustrating specific poems, as discussed below.

Yet what is the relationship between Keats's lines and the first part of the title, *The Princess out of School*, that was established at the time of the initial exhibition of the work? Amongst the many depictions of princesses represented in contemporary art and literature, including fairy tales, the connection with "school" is seen in one prominent example: *The Princess, a Medley*, a verse-novel by Alfred Tennyson, first published by Edward Moxon in 1847. In this long, complex work, Tennyson combined multiple themes and time zones, and the main narrative is related by several external voices. A group of young men and women gather on a summer evening, taking turns to tell the story of Princess Ida, who rejects the life that has been prescribed for her and retreats to a castle in the woods to found a university for women where men are forbidden. The prince to whom she was betrothed in infancy, enters the university with two male friends, disguised as women students. They are discovered and flee, and fight a battle for the princess's hand. The prince is wounded but nursed back to health by the princess who eventually returns his love and is persuaded that they can have a harmonious marriage. With the musical cadences of its "intercalary poems" interspersed throughout the narrative, *The Princess* provided a number of popular subjects for illustration by a range of artists. John Everett Millais referred to *The Princess*, in particular, the verses "Tears idle tears," in a letter to Holman Hunt while he was working on *Autumn Leaves* (1855-56),

¹⁸ Hunt explains that he found his copy of Keats "in book-bins labelled 'this lot 4d.'" Hunt, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 105-06. At this time Rossetti, Hunt and Millais read Richard Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of Keats*, Edward Moxon, London, published in 1848, and Rossetti proposed that they all illustrate scenes from Keats's "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" as members of the newly formed Cyclographic Society, precursor of the PRB. Hunt writes that "Millais had now become as ardent admirer of Keats as myself, and we soon resolved to begin a series of illustrations ... of the magnificent poem of Isabella." Hunt, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 103-04.

¹⁹ These included Arthur Hughes's major work *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. See Robyn Cooper, "Arthur Hughes's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and the Femme Fatale," *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, Council of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, no. 27, 1986, n. p.

²⁰ Hunt, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 105-07.

²¹ Oscar Wilde, *Poems*, Boston, Robert Brothers, 1881, No. 36, "The Grave of Keats."



Fig. 6. Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Princess*, 1875. Albumen silver print, 31.5 x 25.3 cm. Getty Centre. Image: Getty Centre.

indicating that he intended his painting to evoke a comparable reflection on the passing of time, on “the days that are no more.”²² The photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, also reinterpreted “Tears idle tears” and two other poems from *The Princess* with theatrical and musical enactments that evoked the mythic past (Fig. 6).²³ Yet neither addressed the issues underlying the main narrative of Tennyson’s poem.

It is significant that the poem was initially called “The New University,” a response, in part, to the founding of Queen’s College, London, Britain’s first college for women, in 1847, where two of Tennyson’s friends were part-time professors.²⁴ Despite concluding with a seeming reassertion of conventional gender roles, the poem makes a remarkable exploration of feminist issues, with a complexity only partially masked by the comic-heroic tone of the writing. Tennyson probes the conditions for female intellectual life and maintains the heroic dignity of his protagonist Princess Ida, despite surrounding her with cross-dressed, love-struck men gate-crashing the academy.

Tennyson also calls on the current Darwinian debate to mock academic learning and conflates the case for women’s education with questions about evolution and the power of nature.²⁵ Even though the poem’s often rapturous celebration of nature demonstrates the influence of Keats, it also indicates Tennyson’s awareness of the latest scientific enquiries.²⁶ As Princess Ida speculates:

“There sinks the nebulous star we call the Sun
If that hypothesis of theirs be sound”

(*The Princess* Part IV, lines 1-2)²⁷

While there is no precise moment when the princess is “out of school,” the entire poem is a meditation on the freedom and determining power of nature as opposed to the highly

²² Malcolm Warner, “John Everett Millais’s *Autumn Leaves*: ‘a picture full of beauty and without subject,’” in Leslie Parris, ed., *PreRaphaelite Papers*, London, The Tate Gallery, 1984, p. 131.

²³ Cameron made three images derived from *The Princess*: two of women performing the intercalary songs “O Hark!” and “Tears, Idle Tears,” and one depicting Princess Ida with her three women associates holding books.

²⁴ Both Tennyson and Ruskin signed the “Memorial respecting Need of Place of Higher Education for Girls” presented by Emily Davies and the London Headmistresses Association to the Schools Enquiry Submission in 1867. Emily Davies, *The Higher Education of Women*, ed. Janet Howarth, London, Hambledon Press, 1988, Notes to the Text, p. 187, n. 3.

²⁵ Rebecca Stott, “Tennyson’s Drift: Evolution in *The Princess*,” in *Darwin, Tennyson and Their Readers: Explorations in Victorian Literature and Science*, ed. Valerie Purton, London, Anthem, 2013.

²⁶ Virginia Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians*, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 2008, Chapter 3, “Tennyson’s Fairy Tale of Science,” p. 66.

²⁷ Alfred Tennyson, *Poems of Tennyson 1830-1870*, London and NY, Oxford University Press, 1912, p. 299.

structured learning of an academy. Experiencing nature directly is a repeated leitmotif throughout, epitomized by observations made on a geological field trip:

And up we came to where the river sloped
To plunge in cataract, shattering on black blocks
A breadth of thunder. O'er it shook the woods,
And danced the colour, and, below, stuck out
The bones of some vast bulk that lived and roared
Before man was. (Part III, lines 273-78)

Tennyson continues with Princess Ida predicting her own distinctly female version of this evolutionary pattern:

She gazed awhile and said,
“As these rude bones to us, are we to her
That will be.” (Part III, lines 273-78)

That Hughes's princess is escaping “school” in favour of nature is confirmed above all by the hat, abandoned at her feet and prominent in the foreground. Rather than a crown, she has been wearing a small soft pill-box with up-turned folds, a distinctively scholar's cap (though trimmed with ermine to indicate her royal status). Fashionable in the nineteenth century also as a smoking or lounging cap, its origins were in the similarly shaped “biretta” given at the conferring of degrees in medieval universities. Hughes's princess has taken off her hat and lets her hair fall freely down her back, where it mingles with the brocade of her robe and beyond that with the tapestry-like pattern of flowers and plant tendrils of her grassy bank. She rejects the human constraints of learning for Keats's bower of natural delights in which she is both immersed and free. A preparatory drawing (Fig. 7) shows that the plants, flowers, tree trunks and stream were all part of the initial idea.



Fig. 7. Edward Robert Hughes, *The Princess out of School*, c. 1901. Preparatory drawing, pencil, pen and black ink on paper 26 x 42.5 cm, private collection. Image: Author.

Above all, Hughes's Princess is distinguished by her curiosity. Rather than the vulnerable passivity of J. W. Waterhouse's *Ophelia* (1889) (Fig. 8), she actively searches and observes the myriad of entwined plants around her.



Fig. 8. J. W. Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1889. Oil on canvas 100.3 x 62.2 cm. Collection Lord Lloyd-Webber. Image: Wikipedia Commons.

The topicality, humour and strong narrative of Tennyson's *The Princess* appealed to W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan who transformed it, with additional burlesque elements, into their comic operetta *Princess Ida, or Castle Adamant*, first performed at the Savoy Theatre in London in 1884.²⁸ Gilbert had earlier written a musical farce, *The Princess* (1870), based on Tennyson's poem, that responded to the continuingly controversial subject of women's higher education, with Girton College, Cambridge, the first university-level women's college in Britain having just been established in 1869. An illustration of this production for the *London News* depicts the important role played by the castle-university's location in a wild wood (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. D. H. Friston, Scene from "The Princess" at the Olympic Theatre, *The Illustrated London News*, January 1870, p. 121. Image: Wikipedia Commons.

The operetta drew much of its dialogue from this precedent and played up the potential for humour around the issues of women's education, the contest of the sexes and Darwinian theory. W. S. Gilbert's drawing (Fig. 10) illustrates a song about an ape who falls in love with a "high born" lady, making the "Darwinian" point that "Man, sprung from an Ape, is Ape at heart."

²⁸ While not performed again in London until 1919, there were numerous revivals of *Princess Ida* in the late 1890s and early twentieth century as part of the D'Oyly Carte touring repertory.



Fig. 10. W. S. Gilbert (Bab) “A lady fair of lineage high,” illustration, *Princess Ida*, W. S. Gilbert, *Songs of a Savoyard*, London, George Routledge and Sons, 1890, p. 51. Image: The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive.

[Web link.](#)



Fig. 11. Alice Mary Havers, *Princess Ida*, illustration for printed programme original production, Savoy Theatre, 1884. 15.9 x 12.6 cm. John Sands Collection. Image: The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive. [Web link.](#)

Costumes and set designs for *Princess Ida* relished the medievalism of the setting, as evidenced in an illustration for the opera programme by Alice Mary Havers (Fig. 11) depicting Ida standing centre-stage in an arched frame on the lawns by a river in the grounds of her university. One of her students lies on the grass attentively listening, stretched out with her robe forming a decorative mantle and wearing a scholar's cap.

There is a striking similarity between this figure and that in Hughes's watercolour, as if Princess Ida has abandoned leadership in favour of learning from nature itself. The robe and hat of Hughes's figure closely resemble other programme illustrations and photographs of performances (Fig. 12). Hughes would have known of *Princess Ida* and this poster for the first performance, especially given his activities as an illustrator and may, indeed, have known Alice Havers who contributed an illustration to one of Charles Dodgson's (Lewis Carroll) publications.²⁹ Hughes also had a lively interest in the theatre and participated in *Beauty's awakening, a masque of winter and of spring*, performed at the Guildhall, London, 1899, appearing as the personification of St. Louis in the “Pageant of Fair Cities.”³⁰

²⁹ *Sylvie and Bruno*, first published in 1889. See Charlie Lovett, *Lewis Carroll Among His Books: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Private Library of Charles L. Dodgson*, Jefferson, N. C., McFarland, 2005.

³⁰ “Beauty's awakening, a masque of winter and of spring. Presented by members of the Art Workers Guild,” *The Studio*, Summer Number, 1899.



Fig. 12. Jessie Bond as Melissa in original production of *Princess Ida*, photograph, dimensions unknown, 1884. Image: The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive. [Web link](#).

Surprisingly, *Princess Ida* was not a runaway success, as observed by the actress Jessie Bond (Fig. 12) in her autobiography, with an explanation that reveals the widespread debate caused by its underlying issues:

Gilbert here refers to my part in “Princess Ida,” which succeeded “Iolanthe” on January 5th, 1884, and opened as brilliantly as all the others, though it failed to grip the public as they had done ... The subject also was less widely interesting than that of the other operas, or it may have been rather too domestically poignant in those early suffragette days, when not only the nation at large but private households and families were bitterly divided on the question, and the latent antagonisms of sex showed themselves in ugly forms. Perhaps Gilbert did not treat the subject lightly enough; to him, no doubt, as to everyone else, it lay a little too deep for jesting.³¹

Hughes’s choice of *The Princess* could hardly have avoided awareness of these “poignant” aspects. It is most likely that, while aware of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, he drew directly from the original poem with its deeper exploratory approach. As John Killham explains “No less than seventeen editions appeared in England in the thirty years after publication ... Editions with explanatory matter appeared in 1892, 1896, 1904 (two), 1905 ... For over sixty years, *The Princess* was a really popular poem.”³²

Hughes’s appreciation of Tennyson’s work and its feminist and Darwinian themes is assured by his strong ties with literary circles of several generations. Besides the social contacts of his

³¹ Jessie Bond, *The Life and Reminiscences of Jessie Bond, the Old Savoyard as Told by Herself to Ethel Macgeorge*, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1930, Chapter 7. <https://gsarchive.net/books/bond/007.html>

³² John Killham, *Tennyson and The Princess: Reflections of an Age*, London, Athlone Press, University of London, 1958, pp. 5-6.

uncle, which included Charles Dodgson and John Ruskin,³³ he was close to George MacDonald, the writer of novels and children's stories that combined myth, fantasy and a distinctive form of Christian idealism in a way sympathetic to his own concerns.³⁴

MacDonald asked Tennyson to support his candidature for the Edinburgh Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in 1865.³⁵ Hughes's uncle had a long association with MacDonald as a book illustrator,³⁶ and in 1886 Edward Hughes drew his portrait, published with his obituary in 1905.³⁷ Edward Hughes was engaged to MacDonald's daughter Mary for four years before she died in 1878, aged 25. It is indicative of the liveliness of this artistic milieu, with its special interest in fantasy, symbolism and the interaction of word and image, that, as a child, Mary MacDonald received letters from Charles Dodgson and featured in his photographs.³⁸

Hughes's literary interests were also evident in the commission for illustrations of the bizarre and bawdy folk tales by the early sixteenth-century writer Giovanni Francesco Straparola, in their first English translation by William George Waters, in 1894.³⁹ One of these, "The Demon Transporting Isabella to Ortodosio," would be transformed from the book illustration of a fable into a spectacular large scale work as *A Dream Idyll*, 1902.⁴⁰ Likewise Hughes radically reinvented Christina Rossetti's poem "Amor Mundi," specifically the lines

³³ Dodgson commissioned Arthur Hughes's *Lady of the Lilacs*, 1863. See Diane Waggoner, *Lewis Carroll's Photography and Modern Childhood*, Princeton University Press, 2020, p. 102. Edward Hughes made a portrait sketch of Ruskin on 24 April 1888. James S. Dearden, *John Ruskin: A Life in Pictures*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 194.

³⁴ MacDonald's best-known work, the children's fantasy novel *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and its sequel *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), that combine fairy tale, symbolism and idealistic meaning, are potential sources for Hughes's *The Princess out of School*, yet there are no direct correlations to Hughes's scene or title.

³⁵ Rachel E. Johnson, "The Tennyson Connection: Fragments from MacDonald's Correspondence on Particular Occasions," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, 1984, Vol. 3, Article 3.

³⁶ See Roberts, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-30, 37 and pp. 255-63, 272, 277-82.

³⁷ Published in *The Sphere: An Illustrated Newspaper for the Home*, Vol. 22, Sept. 1905, p. 273.

³⁸ For Dodgson's photograph of Mary MacDonald aged 9 or 10, see Allen Staley et al, *The Post-Pre-Raphaelite Print*, New York, Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 1995, pp. 140-41. It was to George MacDonald that Dodgson brought his draft of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, 1862-64, and whose encouragement led to its expansion and publication. For the creative interaction between these two writers see John Docherty, *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship*, Lewiston, E. Mellen Press, c. 1995. It is tempting to see in Hughes's *The Princess out of School* a renewed version of Lewis Carroll's heroine, distinguished by her curiosity, willing submission to experience and rejection of normative pedagogy, re-enacting the first moments of Alice's adventures as she muses in a state of incipient boredom on a riverbank.

³⁹ Victoria Kirkham, "The First English Translator of Straparola, Masuccio, and Ser Giovanni: William George Waters in his Victorian World," *ARNOVIT (Archivio Novellistico Italiano)*, 2016, I, pp. 114-63. It is possible that one of Straparola's *Nights* was a model for Hughes's watercolour, especially as one of Hughes's illustrations, "The Princess Lucretia and her Joyous Company Assembled for the Entertainments," depicts the Princess in Renaissance robe and scholar's cap reading from a book to surrounding guests. Yet no aspect of the story involves her venturing into nature or any issue with education that would relate to the title.

⁴⁰ "The Demon Transporting Isabella to Ortodosio," *The Nights of Straparola*, 1894, London, Lawrence and Bullen, Vol. II, facing p. 46. Burne-Jones gave his view of these works in 1898: "Edward Hughes has done another of those Italian Story Books and has had more fun. But as for the stories I don't care for them." M. Lago, ed., *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations 1895-1898 Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, London, John Murray, 1982, p. 172.

‘Oh, what’s that in the hollow, so pale I quake to follow?’
 ‘Oh, that’s a thin dead body which waits the eternal term.’ (lines 15-16)

His version, titled *Oh, what’s that in the hollow?* (1893) (Fig. 13), differs dramatically from the one approved by Rossetti herself, designed by Frederick Sandys, another Pre-Raphaelite associate, who focused on the narrative of the carousing couple pursuing worldly pleasures and failing to see the prostrate body of a dead woman lying beneath them.⁴¹ Hughes, by contrast, concentrates on the face, hands and open eyes of the dead man who is overtaken by nature’s own processes of growth and decay. The Christian moralism has been replaced with a confronting study of the effects of nature and the cycle of life.



Fig. 13. Edward Robert Hughes, *Oh, what’s that in the hollow?* 1893. Watercolour on paper, 63.2 x 93.3 cm. Royal Watercolour Society. Image: Wikiart.

The way Hughes transformed the literary influences underlying his works reflects wider aesthetic tendencies that shifted pictorial imagery away from narrative compositions to more abstract or poetic allegorical conceptions. *Oh, what’s that in the hollow?* evokes both the imagery and the self-enclosed stillness of Burne-Jones’s *Briar Wood* from the *Briar Rose* series (1885-90) that depicts the sleeping soldiers imprisoned by entwined roses and thorns. Hughes, however, has cropped the composition to concentrate on face and hands and given an almost botanical focus to the briar.⁴² This hypnotic, disturbing work also compares with the inscrutable dream-like paintings of Burne-Jones’s friend and admirer, the Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff,⁴³ who had created two works titled after poems by Christina Rossetti in 1891, four years before Hughes’s *Oh, what’s that in the hollow?* was similarly inspired.⁴⁴

Unexpectedly, *The Princess out of School* has elements in common with this fallen figure, whose beautiful pale face, sunk in the entwined rose canes amid dancing butterflies, decomposes into the natural world, while she appears to emerge out of it, from a bed of green

⁴¹ Frederick Sandys’s illustration to Christina Rossetti’s poem “Amor Mundi,” published in the *Shilling Magazine*, June 1865, p. 193.

⁴² Hughes’s enthusiasm for the works of Burne-Jones, in particular his series *The Days of Creation*, is reflected in comments made by Irene MacDonald, the sister of his fiancée Mary, about a visit to the Burne-Jones studio “to see the pictures I know Ted is telling Mary about the one the Creation ... Oh! it is so wonderful.” Letter 30 July 1876, quoted in Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 63. The mutual respect between Burne-Jones and Hughes was evident in an exchange of letters about drawing in red chalk, Osborne, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57. On physiognomic grounds it is possible that *What’s that in the Hollow?* is a self-portrait.

⁴³ Hughes saw Khnopff’s work at London exhibitions and shows at the New Gallery 1892, Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ *Who shall deliver me?*, private collection, 1891, and *I lock my door upon myself*, Munich, Neue Pinakothek, 1891.

and gold leaves (Fig. 14). Against the cold dark foil of a shocking *memento mori*, she is a glowing procreative celebration of life and growth. The effect is distinctly Symbolist, deliberately suppressing narrative detail and replacing it with a simplified composition overlaid with a continuous interweaving of colouristic detail.⁴⁵ Like his later works that would envisage times of day, nature and the seasons as states of mind, Hughes's depiction of *The Princess* takes on a metaphysical, transfiguring significance. These states are expressed through colours and texture that emulate weaving and embroidery: human handicrafts, central to the Pre-Raphaelite movement, that evoke the processes of nature. Repeated and subtly modulated drifts of colour draw the fabric of the painting together, enmeshing the figure into its surroundings, highlighting the abstract effects of the work as art, and anticipating the Symbolism of his later paintings.⁴⁶



Fig. 14. Edward Robert Hughes, *The Princess out of School*, 1901. Gouache and watercolour, 52 x 95.3 cm (sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, detail of Fig. 1.

Underlying the invention of this abstracted field is Hughes's highly developed technique in watercolour, that conveyed a glowing depth through the varied resolution of focus from precise observation to soft atmospheric effects. Hughes's technical ability in all mediums, testified by his participation in finishing work on no less than William Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* and *The Lady of Shalott*,⁴⁷ was also apparent in his much-lauded drawings in black or red chalk and silverpoint. Hughes's ability to expand the range and impact of techniques usually reserved for small works resulted in highly finished large-scale works enriched with complex layers of colour and detail that were able to carry powerful significance. These aesthetic qualities were apparent to contemporaries. When first exhibited in 1901, the earliest reviewers of *The Princess* highlighted the interweaving of colours in the unified yet varied visual field of the painting that effectively integrated the figure into the grassy verge. A writer for *The Sketch* commended the picture for "the rich colour-scheme of

⁴⁵ See Osborne's discussion of Hughes as a Symbolist, Osborne, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3, pp. 59-89. She suggests that Hughes's development of a more abstract aesthetic may "have been partially a response to the negative press that his historical and literary watercolours often received" (p. 27).

⁴⁶ This aesthetic produced the distinctive dominantly blue palette in a number of Hughes's later major exhibition watercolours. In *Wings of the Morning* (c. 1905, Private collection, UK), the blues and pinks of the birds that animate Morning's arrival are woven in layers into the clouds, feathers and hair that stream across the picture space in a way comparable to the burnished golds and greens that spread throughout *The Princess*.

⁴⁷ Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt. A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, Vol. 1, pp. 271-74 and pp. 289-92.

the costume that harmonises well with the surrounding foliage.”⁴⁸ The *Morning Post* praised its “rich harmony of hue ... Her unbound locks are of brown, with a golden sheen, whose tint is repeated closely in the delicate pattern that variegates the red of her dress, and in a less direct way amid the leaves and herbage around.”⁴⁹ These critics were enthused by Hughes’s ability to use watercolour to create vivid, embroidered effects that were repeated and interwoven across grass, flower, leaves, dress and hair.

The re-imagining of the human experience of nature was one of the deepest aspects of Tennyson’s debt to Keats and is central to both Tennyson’s *Princess* and Keats’s passage from *Endymion*. Both use the imagery of weaving and embroidery to convey the richness of colour and plant growth essential to their themes.⁵⁰ While resting on their archaeological expedition, Tennyson’s Princess Ida directs her entourage and the Prince to enter an opulent, decorated tent for shelter, filled with sumptuous colour, fruit and flowers:

“There leaning deep in broidered down we sank
Our elbows. On a tripod in the midst:
A fragrant flame rose, and before us glowed
Fruit, blossom, viand, amber wine, and gold.”

(*The Princess*, Part IV, lines 14-17)

Likewise, Keats’s Peona ensures Endymion’s rest and recovery in the midst of nature’s bounty where she brought her friends “with their needle broidery”:

So she was gently glad to see him laid
Under her favourite bower's quiet shade,
On her own couch, new made of flower leaves,
Dried carefully on the cooler side of sheaves
When last the sun his autumn tresses shook,
And the tann'd harvesters rich armfuls took

(“Endymion,” Book I, lines 436-41)

These powerful sensuous experiences of nature have a therapeutic dimension in both poems. While Tennyson’s poem emphasised nature’s fearful power, it also provided the source for his vision of a harmonious union of the sexes and of the diversity required for evolutionary growth. For Keats’s Peona, her feminine bower was a place of sanctuary and regeneration for the troubled Endymion. Seeing him laid in her bower she watches over him as he sleeps:

Thus, in the bower,
Endymion was calm’d to life again.
Opening his eyelids with a healthier brain

(Book I, lines 463-65)

⁴⁸ Anonymous reviewer, *The Sketch*, 8 May, 1901, correspondence of Victoria Osborne to Cathy Leahy, NGV files, 28 June 2011.

⁴⁹ Anonymous reviewer, *Morning Post*, 29 May 1901, correspondence of Victoria Osborne to Cathy Leahy, NGV files, 28 June 2011.

⁵⁰ For poetry as weaving, tapestry and textile, and its cultural and economic contexts see Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol, *Poetics of Luxury in the Nineteenth Century: Keats, Tennyson, and Hopkins*, Aldershot and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2011. See also Gerhard Joseph, *Tennyson and the Text: the Weaver’s Shuttle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

A therapeutic vision is characteristic of many of Hughes's works, in particular, the well-known *Night with her train of Stars*, 1912 (Fig. 15), which, while untitled when exhibited at the Royal Watercolour Society in 1912, was accompanied in the catalogue by the last two lines of the second stanza of a poem by W. E. Henley, "In Memoriam: Margaritae Sorori":

Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun,
Closing his benediction,
Sinks, and the darkening air
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night—
Night with her train of stars
And her great gift of sleep. (15-16)⁵¹



Fig. 15. Edward Robert Hughes, *Night with her train of Stars*, 1912. Watercolour, bodycolour with gold medium on paper, 127 x 76.2 cm. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, 1912. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Currently we can only surmise Hughes's views on evolution and women's higher education, yet his expansive cultural circles ensured his familiarity with a wide range of attempts to address the challenges, often conflicting, posed by Darwinism and female emancipation.⁵² His very choice of Tennyson's controversial and popular poem for the title of this work destined for exhibition indicates his awareness of their continuing importance. It is notable that a reference to evolution appears in relation to Arthur Hughes's portrait of him as a child (Fig. 2). The catalogue entry for an exhibition held at the French Gallery, London, in 1855 quotes the line "A closer link betwixt us and the crowning race,"⁵³ from Tennyson's *In*

⁵¹ Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 86, n. 76.

⁵² For the relationship between Darwin's ideas and nineteenth-century artists see Diana Donald and Jane Munro eds., *Endless Forms. Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, especially David Bindman, "Mankind after Darwin and Nineteenth-century Art," pp. 143-65. Bindman writes in relation to G. F. Watts that "his desire to reconcile a vision of a benign and all-powerful Creator with a belief in evolution was a conventional position in late 19th c England" (p. 161). See also Patricia Mainardi's review in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, Autumn 2009, including her comments on the "extremely problematic ... identification of women with birds and flowers" and the need for historical and critical assessment of Darwinian attitudes.

⁵³ Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

Memoriam. This poem was written in memory of Tennyson's beloved friend Arthur Hallam, and attempted to reconcile new scientific knowledge, a view of nature as "red in tooth and claw" (Canto 56), with a benevolent God through a transcendent vision of evolution, with Hallam as the link to an improved future. Edward Hughes owned this work from 1911 until his death in 1914.⁵⁴

Like the poets before him, Hughes also imagines a therapeutic gift in *The Princess out of School*: the fertile, flowered, grassy verge, a tribute to nature's diversity.⁵⁵ In *Endymion*, Peona describes:

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth ...

(Book I, lines 4-7)

Hughes has transcribed Keats's healing aesthetic of organic plenitude while evoking Tennyson's vision for female growth as part of the wider evolution of the species. "Out of school," his Princess has set aside the strictures of the academy in favour of the lessons of nature, as she takes on the role of Peona and becomes herself part of the season's riches, partly camouflaged and partly emerging from the undergrowth. She takes off her hat of institutional learning and shakes loose her auburn hair, like the "autumn tresses" of Keats's sun. Hughes's audacious combination of ideas from the nineteenth century's two most visually expressive poets creates a dynamic role for this young woman, "new made of flower leaves," who rediscovers nature as a place of both evolution and regeneration.

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ This visual field may be compared with Darwin's "tangled bank," a dense tapestry of interwoven "endless forms." See C. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, London, John Murray, 1872, p. 429. Hughes's aesthetic, when it involved embedding the figure in its environment, may be related to the "camouflage" techniques of animals as discussed by Diana Donald and Jan Eric Olsen, "Art and the 'Entangled Bank': Colour and Beauty out of the 'War with Nature,'" in Donald and Munro, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-17.

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