

Made in Italy:

75

*Roddam Spencer Stanhope's Patience on a Monument,
Smiling at Grief*

Patience on a Monument, Smiling at
Grief by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope
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JOHN RODDAM SPENCER Stanhope (1829-1908), an English painter domiciled in Italy, was an almost life-long Italophile.¹ In this article I am going to discuss one of his paintings, *Patience on a Monument, Smiling at Grief* (first exhibited in 1884) – which was ‘made in Italy’ and which features an identifiable Italian setting – in the context of an on-going cultural interaction between England and Italy.

A chronic asthmatic, Stanhope could not tolerate the fogs of the English winter, exacerbated as they were by the galloping atmospheric pollution that Ruskin called the ‘Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’. He is known to have wintered in Florence every year from 1864, bought a villa on Bellosguardo (Villa ’lo Strozzi, which is still standing, then known as Villa Nuti) in 1873, and emigrated permanently in 1880, but I believe he may first have been in Florence as early as 1846. There is a signature in the membership book of the subscription library for visitors to the city, the Gabinetto Scientifico-Letterario di GP Vieusseux, against the date 18 April for that year that looks like ‘BS Stanhope’.² Stanhope tended to drop his first given name. His family called him ‘Roddy’. A hand-written ‘R’ could easily be mistaken for a ‘B’ and the coincidence of initials and surname is striking. If Stanhope were indeed in Italy, perhaps as a convalescent, it would account for the long, unexplained gap between his leaving school and going up to Oxford. Furthermore, if he had been exposed to the art of Florence at the impressionable age of seventeen, it might help to explain his interest in a career as an artist, which started to manifest itself at around this time. It might also explain his commitment, during almost the whole of his career, to a style originating in the Florentine quattrocento.

Stanhope graduated from Oxford in 1850. After overcoming some family scepticism (“some very natural objections to his throwing himself away by taking to painting had been seriously made and quietly withdrawn at home” according to the lightly fictionalised portrait of him as ‘Charlie Cawthorne’ by his brother-in-law Richard St John Tyrwhitt),³ he entered into an informal apprenticeship to the painter GF Watts. He thus became a junior member of the circle around Sara Prinsep’s famous salon at Little Holland House, and in the autumn of 1853 went with Watts and Henry Prinsep (Sara’s eldest son) on a long trip through France and northern Italy. They travelled to Paris and by train to Chalons, by riverboat down the Saône and the Loire to Avignon, by train again to Marseilles, to Genoa, to Leghorn, stayed at Pisa and at Florence, and went thence to Bologna, Padua and Venice.⁴ They stopped in Padua again on the way back to look at the Giotto’s in the cathedral. The following year he returned to Italy on his own. On 19 June 1854, on the boat train from London, he met John Leland Maquay jnr and stayed in the same hotel in Paris.⁵ The following morning Mr Maquay found that Stanhope had already breakfasted and gone out, and went for the Lyons train by himself. We can assume that Stanhope, who had told his new friend that he was going to Florence “to study painting”, spent a few days in Paris visiting galleries and studios. He caught up with Maquay at Marseilles on the 25th and went with him by train to Florence (via Leghorn) and accepted his invitation to stay a few days at his house till he found lodgings of his own. According to Maquay’s diaries, Stanhope was his regular companion

over the next two months (often with Maquay's son George, who would join Stanhope on the Sites Committee for the reconstruction of Holy Trinity Church in Florence forty years later) on expeditions to the races, to the Cascine, to the circus, and to Madame Nencini's weekly party. They also attended religious services together on several occasions. On this same trip Stanhope visited Rome, and was there for the carnival, but was back in Florence in time to celebrate New Year. And though I have no evidence of his having been in Italy again until his health forced him there in 1864, (he subscribed to Gabinetto Vieusseux again on 21 November 1864, giving his address as the pension on Lung' Arno Nuovo run by Mrs Kensal),⁶ I think it more than likely that there must have been unrecorded visits during the intervening decade.

Patience on a Monument, Smiling at Grief is certainly one of Stanhope's loveliest paintings, showing off his skills as a designer and colourist at their very best. It represents two women wearing classical draperies, in an Italian formal garden. They are seated on a stepped marble structure, perhaps a sculptural plinth. Perhaps, indeed, we are intended to understand them as an animated sculpture. There are other statues, standing figures on taller plinths, in the middle distance. Both figures face into the picture. The one on the right, seated higher than her companion, rests her chin on her right hand and looks down at her, a slight, sad smile on her lips. She has been painted from a very beautiful model. An almost transparent white silk scarf covers her blonde hair, and she is wearing a blue cloak over a red tunic and a white shift, which are the Virgin Mary's colours.⁷ Perhaps she is intended, implicitly or explicitly, as a *Mater Dolorosa*. The other woman is crouched on the lower step, covering her eyes with her left hand. Her right hand hangs loose, and there are roses spilled around her feet, which, presumably, she has dropped. They seem to be in a garden, not a cemetery, but perhaps she was on her way to place flowers on a grave. She is dressed in black and blue, the colours of mourning, grief and pain, the colours of bruising.

The compositional structure of the painting is exciting. The viewpoint is low, between the levels of the heads of the seated and of the crouching woman. In the far distance, dark, towering pines close the view. We can only glimpse a patch of sky. The middle distance, too, is almost completely obscured by a yew hedge, square to the picture plane, which covers the right-hand three-quarters of the painting's width. Above it we can see the background pines and the tops of two statues, a female nude and a male with a sheep over his shoulders. (Perhaps this is the shepherd in the parable coming back rejoicing with the lost sheep, and is intended as a gloss on the relationship between the figures in the foreground). In the upper left-hand side of the painting, where we can see beyond the lateral yew hedge, there is another hedge at right angles, plunging into the picture plane, with a row of statues in front of it. The ones we can see are a female nude with her hands behind her head, a bearded, cloaked male with a staff, and a draped female. There are roses growing around the base of the statues. Stanhope's representation of space and his use of perspective are non-naturalistic, perhaps – in a reference to the early renaissance paintings that he loved – deliberately anachronistic, and faintly theatrical.

The arrangement of the figures is masterly, static but dynamic. The lower figure (shall we accept for the moment that the painting is allegorical and call her Grief?) is folded tightly into the whole lower left-hand quarter of the picture, in a squashed 'S' shape bisected by the vertical of her hanging right arm. The other figure, Patience, takes up the whole right-hand side of the picture, making a springier 'Z' shape, formed by her head and torso, thighs, and lower leg, and supported by the verticals supplied by her fore-arms (her chin on her right hand, her elbow on her knee, the heel of her left hand resting on the marble base). The beautifully worked-out swirls of drapery elaborate this structure. The character of Stanhope's drapery falls somewhere between the monumental folds of Burne-Jones's and the life-of-its-own weightlessness of Leighton's. There is a horizontal corkscrew of blue drapery running from the small of Grief's back, through Patience's left hand and onto the picture edge, echoed by the waves of Grief's long brown hair.

The painting's colour harmonies are exquisite. In 1896 his friend Edward Burne-Jones insisted that Stanhope's colour "was beyond any the finest in Europe",⁸ and on this showing the extravagant-sounding claim makes sense. The contrasts between the vibrant pinks and reds of Patience's tunic with the dull greens of the hedges, lawns and background cypresses, and between the blues and blacks of the women's cloaks with their flesh-tones and the whites and pearl-colours of their shifts (working on opposite diagonals) are perfectly judged. If all art "constantly aspires towards the condition of music",⁹ as the theorist of Aestheticism Walter Pater suggested in *The School of Giorgione* a few years before Stanhope painted his picture, then here Stanhope fulfils that aspiration in a masterpiece of Aesthetic painting. There is indeed something Venetian in Stanhope's colour scheme and something of the 'Giorgionesque', as Pater put it, in the character of *Patience on a Monument*.

Stanhope's title comes from Act II, scene 4 of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night: or, What You Will*. Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, has just asserted that women cannot love as men can. Viola, who is in love with him and who, disguised as a boy, is acting as his page, replies.

Vio. Ay, but I know, —
Duke. What dost thou know?
Vio. Too well what love women to men may owe:
 In faith, they are as true of heart as we.
 My father had a daughter lov'd a man,
 As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
 I should your lordship.
Duke. And what's her history?
Vio. A blank, my lord: She never told her love,
 But let concealment, like a worm i'the bud,
 Feed on her damask cheek: she pin'd in thought;
 And, with a green and yellow melancholy,
 She sat like patience on a monument,
 Smiling at grief. Was this not love, indeed?

We men may say more, swear more: but, indeed,
Our shows are more than will; for still we prove
Much in our vows, but little in our love.

Stanhope does not paint the scene from the play (as Walter Deverell did in his *Twelfth Night*, exhibited at the National Institution in 1850), but illustrates (or borrows) Shakespeare's metaphor. I wonder whether he had had the subject in mind for a long time. In 1851, in *The Art Journal*, there appeared an article by John Ballantyne criticising the Pre-Raphaelites, in which the following passage occurs.

Let us first speak of the sentiment of their pictures, so talked of by their admirers. Sentiment, both in writing and painting, must be pure and untainted by affectation: perhaps there is no line so difficult to draw, – it trembles between mawkishness and sublimity. Shakespeare is the great master to whose works we must look for examples; unadulterated as they are by any attempt at ostentation or anxiety; for instance, we might refer to his few lines commencing thus –¹⁰

And the author goes on to quote from the passage reproduced above, remarking afterwards that no painting “can surpass, or even come up with, such a combination of touching imagery”. Stanhope could very well have read this and resolved one day to prove the writer wrong. That he knew his Shakespeare is confirmed by a letter he wrote from London at about this time.

I have seen nothing of the Prinseps lately. I have none the less got on very happily with the assistance of gentle Will Shakespeare, whom I read regularly at breakfast and dinner, when I find it act as a first-rate digestive pill. Indeed, when I get to the grand parts, I flourish my bread and butter, and ladle the gravy about in a manner that would take your breath away.¹¹

I wonder too whether the oblique reference to Shakespeare's “green and yellow melancholy” may be an Aesthetic Movement joke. Stanhope was a regular exhibitor at the Grosvenor Gallery, and *Patience on a Monument* was first shown there in 1884. Gilbert and Sullivan's hit comic opera *Patience* (note the coincidence of the titles) of 1881 satirised the movement and included the famous line “I'm a greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery, foot-in-the-grave young man”. Stanhope is known to have had a very droll sense of humour. “[W]ho can forget Mr. Stanhope's laugh who had once heard it?” asked Georgiana Burne-Jones, whose houseguests the Stanhopes were during 1865, after their return from their first winter in Italy, while they were looking for somewhere to live. “He remained a boy at heart so long as I knew him”.¹² It seems quite plausible to me that Stanhope, who had four paintings (including his Botticelli-influenced masterpiece *Love and the Maiden*) in the opening exhibition at the Grosvenor in 1877, but whose career, unlike those of his friends Burne-Jones and Watts, had not taken wing as a result, might have chosen, simultaneously, to rise to

Ballantyne's thirty-year-old challenge and to quietly give the movement that had failed to recognise him as a leader. That he successfully met that challenge, I believe, will go without saying when we look at the painting. The in-joke, if it is there, offers us an insight into the personality of the painter but does not one whit undercut the emotional force of his picture. The combination of sadness, compassion, strength, and energy in repose with which the face and figure of Patience are imbued is a major achievement.

At the time of Stanhope's memorial exhibition, held at the Carfax Gallery in 1909, the year after his death, *Patience on a Monument* belonged to Joseph Dixon. By 1916, when her *A Painter of Dreams* was published,¹³ it had passed into the hands of Anna Stirling, the painter's niece, who later exhibited it to the public, beside paintings and sculptures by her sister Evelyn De Morgan, at her home in London, Old Battersea House. After her death the collection was cared for by the De Morgan Foundation, who loaned some of it, including *Patience on a Monument*, to the National Trust. Until the Foundation took the painting back and sold it in 2001,¹⁴ it was on display in the drawing room at Cragside in Northumberland. There is a brief note about it in the guidebook to the house.

The garden depicted is that of the Villa Palmieri near Florence where the Tales of the Decameron were told. The figure of Patience was a portrait of the famously beautiful Greek model and painter Marie Spartali, who was much painted by Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Whistler.¹⁵

This seems to be a summary of Mrs Stirling's note for the painting in her guide to the collection at Old Battersea House,¹⁶ which makes the same assertions, and in which the author recalls that Marie Spartali "came when she was 81 and stood beside the picture, and she had scarcely changed in appearance". Marie Spartali (1843-1927) "will perhaps always be best remembered as a Pre-Raphaelite model" as a Sotheby's cataloguer remarked, "one of the small group of women whose faces shaped the British notion of beauty".¹⁷ She was certainly in Florence while Stanhope was painting *Patience on a Monument*, with her American husband William James Stillman: according to David Elliott, they were there from April 1878 until October 1883.¹⁸

Villa Palmieri has long been recognised as one of the sites described in *The Decameron*. Edward Hutton admits that the tale tellers themselves are not memorable.

But if these young and fair protagonists soon pass from our remembrance in the infinitely vivid and living stories they tell, the setting, the background of that plague-stricken and deserted city, the beauty and languorous peace of those delicious gardens in which we listen, always remain with us, so much so that tradition has identified the two palaces which are the *milieu* of the whole *Decameron* with two of those villas, the glory of the Florentine contado.¹⁹

The first of these is Poggio Gherardo, which stands above the road to Settignano, about two miles from the Porta alla Croce.

But Poggio Gherardo is not the only palace of the *Decameron*. At the close of the second day, Madonna Neifile being crowned queen, proposed that they should visit a new place “if we would avoid visitors”, and indeed she had a spot in her mind. She led them “westward by an unfrequented lane to a beautiful and splendid palace” which tradition assures us is the Villa Palmieri. This villa, standing as it does on the lower Fiesolan slope, certainly accords with Boccaccio’s description “on a low eminence somewhat from the plain”.²⁰

That Stanhope chose to paint his picture in the garden described by Boccaccio in *The Decameron* is of central importance to my argument. I want to do more than discuss a painting ‘made in Italy’ after 1880. I want to suggest that *Patience on a Monument* is part of an uninterrupted spiral of cultural interaction, a ‘continuity of admiration’ to use TS Eliot’s good phrase,²¹ between England and Italy. The conference for which this article was originally written as a paper was held at Vallombrosa because Elizabeth Barrett Browning came there, which she did partly because Milton had done so before her. Many of the sites of Italian literary and artistic history are holy ground to students of English art and literature. One cannot traverse the streets of Florence without treading in the footsteps of some immortal. John Stuart Mill suggested, in his review of George Grote’s *History of Greece*, that

The true ancestors of the European nations... are not those from whose blood they are sprung, but those from whom they derive the richest portion of their inheritance. The battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the battle of Hastings. If the issue of that day had been different, the Britons and the Saxons might still have been wandering in the woods.²²

A similar claim might be advanced for the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, “the three great writers who open the literature of the modern world”.²³ Giorgio Vasari is the father of all art historians. British aestheticism is inconceivable without the influence of Botticelli. The plot for Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, where Stanhope got his title, came from an Italian comedy, *Gl’Ingannati* (‘The Deceived’), written and first performed by a sixteenth century literary society, Gl’Intronati di Siena (‘The Academy of the Thunderstruck’ from Siena).²⁴ *The Decameron* itself is a source for *Cymbeline*. San’ Giovanni Gualberto, the ‘merciful knight’ of Burne-Jones’s picture,²⁵ was the founder of Vallombrosa.²⁶ Nor was the traffic all one way. There is a carved and painted crucifixion by an anonymous English artist in Santa Maria Novella, the *Croce della Cappella della Pura*,²⁷ a magnificent work of art, which gives a tantalising glimpse of what English medieval artists at the dawn of the renaissance were capable of. So little of this art survived the iconoclasts of the reformation that it’s hard now to conceive of 13th century England ‘sending coals to Newcastle’ and exporting artists to Florence.

I gave a hint earlier of my doubt that *Patience on a Monument* was a merely allegorical painting. Allegory, a narrative form in which human figures stand for, or embody, something else (such as ‘Patience’ or ‘Grief’) was rather old-fashioned when Stanhope was working. I think that, wanting to employ Shakespeare’s image, as Ballantyne had challenged the Pre-Raphaelites to do, to express sentiment without tipping over into mawkishness, Stanhope used allegory as a veil for something more personal. Alexander William Lindsay, twenty-fifth Earl of Crawford and eighth Earl of Balcarres (1812–1880), author of *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* (1847), bought Villa Palmieri in 1873,²⁸ the same year that Stanhope acquired Villa Nuti. It is impossible to believe that an art-struck teenager, such as we know Stanhope to have been, will not have read Lindsay’s book. We know that he had access to Alexis-François Rio’s *De la Poésie Chrétienne* (1836, translated into English in 1845 by Ambrose Lisle Phillips) in the library at school,²⁹ and Rio’s book had been influential on Lindsay.³⁰ It is even harder to believe (though I have yet to find the evidence) that the two Englishmen, from the same class and with a shared passion for Italian art, will not quickly have become acquainted in the small world of the expatriate community in Florence. However, by the time Stanhope made his painting Lindsay was dead (he died at Villa Palmieri on 13 December 1880) and the villa was the home of his widow, the Dowager Countess (Sir Coutts Lindsay’s sister Margaret, known as Minnie). Vicary Gibbs remembered that she was “beautiful in face and mind, and never wearied of doing acts of kindness”.³¹ It is my belief that *Patience on a Monument*, with its reference to the strength of women’s love for men, was intended as a tribute to Lord Lindsay and his grieving widow and that this was why it was painted in her garden.³²

Simon Poë is an independent scholar, and is writing a book on Roddam Spencer Stanhope. He has published a number of scholarly articles and is a regular reviewer for *Apollo* and *The British Art Journal*. He lives in Yorkshire.

ENDNOTES

1. A version of this article was given as a paper to the conference ‘*Our Italians’: Anglo-Italian Relationships 1845-1865*, organised by The Browning Society, 28 September – 2 October 2005, at the Abbey and Foresteria in Vallombrosa, Italy.
2. I am grateful to Simonetta Berbeglia for this information.
3. Richard St. John Tyrwhitt, (1875) *Our Sketching Club: Letters and Studies on Landscape Art* (London, Macmillan and Co, 1886), 8. See also Simon Poë, ‘Richard St. John Tyrwhitt’s “Our Sketching Club”’, in Paul Hardwick and Martin Hewitt, eds, *The Pre-Raphaelite Ideal, Leeds Centre Working Papers in Victorian Studies 7*, (Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2004), 60–75.
4. Mary Seton Watts, *The Annals of an Artist’s Life* (3 volumes, New York, Hodder & Stoughton), I, 143–4.
5. According to entries in Maquay’s diaries, which are held in the library of the British Institute in Florence. I am grateful to Alyson Price for these references.
6. Once more, I am grateful to Simonetta Berbeglia for this information.
7. According to Anna Jameson (1848) “[b]lue ... expressed heaven, the firmament, truth, constancy, fidelity. Christ and the Virgin wear the red tunic and the blue mantle, as signifying heavenly love and heavenly truth”. *Sacred and Legendary Art* (2 volumes, London, Longmans, Green and Co, third edition, 1857), I, 36. According to Marina Warner (1976) “[a]s a sky

- goddess, Mary's colour is blue. Her starry mantle is a figure of the sky ... as late as 1649, Francisco Pacheco in his *Art of Painting* still laid down that she should wear a blue cloak. Blue is the colour of space and light and eternity, of the sea and the sky". *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., Vintage Books, 1983), xxiv, xxv.
8. Mary Lago, ed, *Burne-Jones Talking: his conversations 1895-1898 preserved by his studio assistant Thomas Rooke* (London, John Murray, 1982), 76.
 9. Walter Pater (1873), The School of Giorgione, in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London, Macmillan and Co, Library Edn, 1910), 135.
 10. J[ohn] B[allantyne], 'The PreRaffaelites', in *The Art Journal*, 13, 1 July 1851, 185-6.
 11. AMW Stirling, *A Painter of Dreams and other Biographical Studies* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1916), 309-10.
 12. *Ibid*, 333-4.
 13. *Ibid*. See the caption to the illustration facing page 336.
 14. Christie's, *Important British and Irish Art, Including Works from The De Morgan Foundation* (sale catalogue, Christie's London, 2001), 56-9.
 15. Andrew Saint and Sheila Pettit (1979), revised by Hugh Dixon, *Tour of the House, in Cragside, Northumberland* (London, The National Trust, 1992), 43-70, 67.
 16. AMW Stirling, *Pictures and Statuary by Evelyn De Morgan at Old Battersea House* (London, privately printed, c1958), 30-1. I am grateful to Judy Oberhausen for her help in locating this information.
 17. Sotheby's, *Important British Pictures*, (sale catalogue, Sotheby's London, 1 July 2004), lot 22, Rossetti's study of Marie Spartali for *Dante's Dream*.
 18. Personal communication, 9 December 2004. David Elliot is about to publish a biography of Marie Stillman. I am grateful for his help.
 19. Edward Hutton, Introduction, in *The Decameron* (2 volumes, London, JM Dent, Everyman's Library, 1930), I, x. I am grateful to Alyson Price and Margherita Ciacci whose advice guided me to this source.
 20. *Ibid*, I, xi.
 21. TS Eliot, Introduction, in Joseph Chiari, *Symbolisme from Poe to Mallarmé: the Growth of a Myth* (1956), v.
 22. John Stuart Mill, Grote's History of Greece, in *The Edinburgh Review*, LXXXIV, 1846, 343-377, 343.
 23. Edward Hutton, *Giovanni Boccaccio: a biographical study* (London, John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1910), xi.
 24. Bruce Penman, ed and trans, 'The Deceived', in *Five Italian Renaissance Comedies* (London, Penguin Classics, 1978), 193-278.
 25. Studies for whose background Burne-Jones made during a visit to Stanhope's house at Cobham in Surrey during 1863.
 26. Edmund G Gardner, *The Story of Florence* (London, JM Dent & Co, 1900), 13.
 27. Angelo Tartuferi & Mario Scalini, *L'arte a Firenze nell'età di Dante* (Florence, Giunti, 2004), 150.
 28. I am grateful to Ron Lindsay for this information.
 29. I am grateful to Rusty McLean, the Archivist and Librarian at Rugby School, for confirming this for me.
 30. See Hugh Brigstocke, *Lord Lindsay and the 'Sketches of the History of Christian Art'* (Manchester, The John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1981), 28.
 31. Vicary Gibbs, ed, *The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, Extant, Extinct or Dormant* (new edn, London, The St Catherine Press, 1913), III, 525.
 32. It would not have been the first such tribute Stanhope had paid in paint. See 'Penelope and Her Suitors: Women, War, and Widowhood in a Pre-Raphaelite Painting', in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, New Series 11, Spring 2002, 68-79, where I argue that Stanhope's *Penelope* (1864) fulfils a similar memorial function.

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