

King's College

## FREDERIC LEIGHTON AND THE POETS

he British painter Frederic Leighton was born in Scarborough in Yorkshire in the North of England in December 1830. His father was a doctor, and the family lived for a time in London where Frederic attended University College School. He showed a talent for drawing from an early age, and took inspiration from the travels through Germany, Switzerland and Italy which his father organised. On his first visit to Rome, Frederic and his sister Alexandra took lessons in Latin from a priest, and he was given art lessons. The boy drew the sights of Rome and remained fascinated by the models standing in the Piazza di Spagna, all hoping to find work. During their travels, Leighton's father, an amateur philosopher, directed him towards the books of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, while also introducing his son to the work of his own favourite poet, George Gordon Lord Byron. His father probably had a part to play in the young Leighton's appreciation of Thomas Percy's collection of Reliques of Ancient Poetry, an anthology of late medieval poetry and traditional ballads, first published in 1765.

On later journeys the family travelled to Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt and then, in the winter of 1845-1846, they were back in Italy, where Leighton, now aged fifteen to sixteen, enrolled as a student at the Academy in Florence, before returning to Frankfurt in the following summer. Here, in Frankfurt, he received his most important training as an art student at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut. The Städel helped

to promote his knowledge of literature, directing him towards the works of Dante Alighieri, William Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich Heine and the Italian poets of the Renaissance. Later, he would talk of "the atmosphere of Faust and the Niebelungen Lied [...] in which, as a German student, I lived for many years." He would tell of his liking, in his early days as a painter, for the work of the Italian fourteenth century writer, Giovanni Boccaccio, "partly by the example of my master Steinle, for whom I had, and have retained, a great reverence, and who was fervently medieval. For a long time, I treated none but subjects from the Italian Middle Ages – going to history, Dante, Boccaccio, and preferring in Shakespeare the Italian plays." It is significant, and another indication of the breadth of his reading, that, a few years later, Leighton sent a German translation of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer to Edward Steinle, as a thank you for his teaching and as an introduction to a poet whom Leighton himself admired.

In 1850, he met another student, Count Enrico Gamba from Piedmont. They became great friends, and their teacher, Steinle, drew them together. Partly under Gamba's influence, Leighton became increasingly interested in Italian art and literature. The most important painting of his Frankfurt period, *The Death of Brunelleschi*, of 1852, now in Leighton House in London, takes the great Florentine architect of the 15<sup>th</sup> century as its subject.

In August 1852, Leighton, then twenty one, set out for Rome, the leading training ground in Europe for artists. As he neared Italy, he wrote "Italy rises before my mind. Sunny Italy! [...] I am about again to tread the soil of that beloved country, the daydream of long years is to become a reality. I am enraptured!" He met Gamba in Verona, and they travelled on through Venice and Florence. In Venice Leighton particularly remembered Shakespeare and *The Merchant of Venice*: "you think of Shakespeare's exquisite verses on what he never saw but with the eye of his boundless fancy; you are sitting with Jessica and Lorenzo (that is his name, I think) on a bank of violets."

On 19 November 1852 they reached Rome, a hive of foreign art students. Initially, the city, which he had not seen since childhood, disappointed Leighton. "First, I expected to find an *atmosphere* of high art

<sup>1]</sup> Joseph COMYNS CARR, Some Eminent Victorians, Duckworth, London 1908, p. 98.

<sup>2]</sup> J. COMYNS CARR, op. cit., pp. 97-98.

<sup>3]</sup> Emilia Russell BARRINGTON, *The Life and Letters of Frederic Leighton*, 2 vols, George Allen, London 1906, vol. I, p. 62.

<sup>4]</sup> E. R. BARRINGTON, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 79-80.

[...] in this I have been completely disappointed; of the numberless artists here, scarcely any can call themselves historical painters, and Gamba and I. who hoped for emulation, are thrown completely on ourselves."5 He could only find a small studio in the Via della Purificazione. near Palazzo Barberini. His evesight was troubling him, and he knew very few people. "I suffer with my eyes [...] my wings are clipped [...] I feel as if blighted", he wrote in early 1853, in a letter to his former master, Edward Steinle. The winter weather did not help.

Things began to improve when he made friends and started going to parties. He would breakfast, with other artists, at the Caffè Greco and the Trattoria Lepre. One friend, probably Hamilton Aidé, remarked that, while most artists were shy, Leighton's "evenings were passed in the best society." The crucial change in Leighton's mood came in February 1853, when he was twenty-two, and met the former opera singer, Adelaide Sartoris, who sang under her maiden name, Adelaide Kemble, and her husband, Edward Sartoris. Adelaide Kemble had gained fame for her performance in the title role of Vincenzo Bellini's Norma. She gave up her theatrical career on marriage but continued to sing at social events.

This was the start of a deep and long lasting friendship. In the first seven weeks after their meeting Leighton saw the couple at least three times a week and dined with them "en famille four times". 8 Lord Fordwich, later Lord Cowper, said that Leighton "is inseparable from Mrs Sartoris (without scandal)". Adelaide Sartoris's sister, the actress Fanny Kemble, was also in Rome with them in the winter of 1853 and Leighton particularly enjoyed hearing her read from Shakespeare's plays. Among other friends were the Laing family, whom Leighton already knew, and with whose daughter, Isabel, he toured the city.

Leighton met the young Italian artist Giovanni Costa, soon to be an intimate friend, at the artists' festival in May 1853, when a donkey kicked over a beehive. Costa went to rescue the small donkey which could not escape from the bees, but, as he reports: "a young man with fair, curly hair, dressed in velvet, who, slipping on gloves and tying a handkerchief over his face, ran to liberate the poor

Ibid. p. 96.

Ibid. pp. 130-132.

One who knew him well, "The Times", 28 January 1896, p. 7.

E. R. BARRINGTON, op. cit., vol. I, p. 124.

<sup>[</sup>Katrine Cecilia] COUNTESS COWPER, Earl Cowper K. G. A Memoir (privately printed, 1913), p. 54.



little beast. I started to do the same, but less resolutely, having no gloves; so I met him as he came back, and congratulated him, asking him his name. And in this way I first made the acquaintance of Frederick Leighton." <sup>10</sup>

The second artist whom Leighton encountered in Rome was an English landscapist of thirty four, George Mason. Both Mason and Costa had been involved with the republicans in the revolutions of 1848-1849.

Leighton spent the latter part of the summer of 1853 in Germany, before travelling on to Vienna for treatment to his eyes. From there, he went to Venice and Florence, before coming back to Rome in January 1854. He took a studio in the Via Felice and worked on his painting of *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence* (fig. 81). This had been on his easel in the previous summer and he now returned to work on it as well as beginning a new picture, *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet* (now in the Agnes Scott College in Decatur). Juliet was one of Fanny Kemble's most admired roles, and her recitations from the play may have been an inspiration to him.

The subject of the Cimabue painting comes from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* and shows the artist's *Rucellai Madonna* being carried from Cimabue's house to the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. At the center of the composition are the figures of Cimabue and his pupil Giotto, and, at the far right, with his back to us watching the procession, is Dante. Leighton had collected material for the painting during his time in Florence in the winter of 1853-1854.

Among the guests at Adelaide Sartoris's celebrated receptions and picnics, were the poets Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, soon to become good friends of the young painter. Adelaide Sartoris recited several Browning poems at one of these parties. Leighton found Browning "a never-failing fountain of quaint stories and funny sayings". <sup>11</sup> Browning took to the young artist, while Elizabeth initially viewed him as a member of a smart, and superficial, circle.

During his time in Rome, the Brownings invited Leighton, with an American sculptress, Harriet Hosmer, for a weekend holiday in the hill town of Albano, south-east of Rome. The group devised stories about the ruins which they passed on their way. The Brownings described

<sup>10]</sup> Giovanni COSTA, Notes on Lord Leighton, "Cornhill", vol. LXXV, March 1897, p. 374.

<sup>11]</sup> E. R. BARRINGTON, op. cit. vol. I, p. 146.

the difficulties facing poets as they worked with words, while Harriet Hosmer spoke about the "rigid substances of bronze and marble". Leighton explained the problems in art of "distribution of color, foreshortening, and the like". <sup>12</sup> Leighton escaped the summer heat of 1854 by going to Bagni di Lucca before returning to work in Rome all winter.

Leighton returned to London for the opening of the 1855 Royal Academy exhibition, where his paintings, and *Cimabue's Madonna* in particular, scored a triumph (fig. 81). It was purchased by Queen Victoria and remains in the Royal Collection (currently on loan to the National Gallery, London).

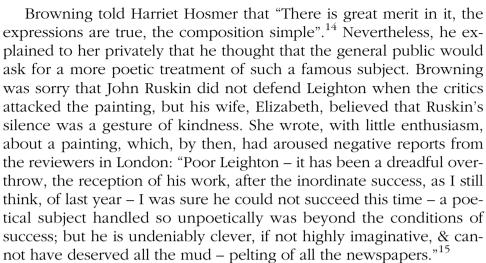
After a spell of two years in Italy, Leighton moved to Paris in the autumn of 1855. He told Edward Steinle: "My stay in Italy will always remain a charming memory to me; a beautiful, irrecoverable time; the young, careless, independent time! I have also made some friends here who will always be dear to me, and to whom I particularly attribute my attachment to Rome." <sup>13</sup>

His friendship with the Brownings must have been one of those in his mind. We know that the poets admired *Cimabue* which, like two of Robert Browning's most famous poems, *Fra Lippo Lippi* and *Andrea del Sarto*, draws on the same history of Italian painting, by the Renaissance author and painter, Georgio Vasari. The approach of the poet and the painter was not the same, however. Browning responded to the life story of the artists, while Leighton became absorbed by his own aesthetic creation. Friend as he was to so many painters and poets, Browning must have been fully aware of the parallels between the two arts.

The Brownings were also in Paris in the winter of 1855-1856. Browning, who had greatly admired *Cimabue's Madonna*, took his son, Pen, to see Leighton's painting of Orpheus rescuing Eurydice from Hades, *The Triumph of Music*, *Orpheus by the Power of his Art, Redeems his Wife from Hades*, which was exhibited in the 1856 Royal Academy exhibition. (untraced, sketch in Leighton House) Pen, then six years old, was inspired to write a short poem about the picture. Leighton asked for a copy to send to his mother.

<sup>12]</sup> Harriet HOSMER, Letters and Memories, ed. Cornelia CARR, Moffat Yard and Co., New York 1913, p. 109.

<sup>13]</sup> E. R. BARRINGTON, op. cit. vol. I, p. 191.



Robert Browning admired two smaller paintings by Leighton which reflect the artist's residence in Paris and which were also exhibited in 1856. In January 1856, Browning wrote to Harriet Hosmer, telling her: "He has a capital Pan enjoying himself in a dell, from a superb Italian model here, (the perfection of a man,) and a Venus, very clever too; and designs for perhaps a dozen delicious pagan figures; a sudden taste that has possessed him". When these paintings, both sensuous nudes, were shown at the Royal Manchester Institution in 1856, they were accompanied by a quotation from John Keats' poem *Endymion*:

"[...] O thou, to whom

Broad-leaved fig-trees even now foredoom

Their ripen'd fruitage [...]". 17

The paintings then travelled to America, in an exhibition of contemporary British art organized by William Michael Rossetti, but were removed on the west coast, after being seen as an offence to public decency.

Leighton remained in Paris, with breaks elsewhere, between 1855 and 1858. While there he painted a number of works with literary

<sup>14]</sup> H. HOSMER, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>15]</sup> The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her Sister Arabella, ed. Scott LEWIS, Wedgestone Press, Winfield, Kansas 2002, vol. II, p. 235.

<sup>16]</sup> H. HOSMER, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>17]</sup> John KEATS, Endymion: A Poetic Romance, in: Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats, introduction by Edward Hirsch, noted by Jim Pollock, Modern Library, New York 2001, p. 70 (251-253).

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subjects. The Fisherman and the Syren - from a Ballad by Goethe, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858, shows the Syren pulling the young man into the water where he drowns. Leighton accompanied the painting with a translation of the final lines of Goethe's poem The Fischerman: "Half drew she him, Half sunk he in, And never more was seen". 18

Both Leighton and the Brownings were in Rome for the winter of 1858-1859 (fig. 82), and in a letter of 8<sup>th</sup> December, to her sister, Henrietta, Elizabeth reported that "Robert is to submit to Mr Leighton – but this is a secret". 19 In fact, Leighton did indeed draw Browning, on March 28<sup>th</sup> 1859, and Elizabeth described it as "an exquisite pencil drawing". 20 He also drew Elizabeth herself.

After his return to England, Leighton drew another Pan, as an illustration for one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems A Musical Instrument, published in the Cornbill Magazine for July 1860. This Pan is less human, and older, than the god of the earlier oil painting, displaying furry legs and the "hoofs of a goat", as Elizabeth Browning describes it. His hair is set in ringlets and, as described in the poem, he plays a reed pipe he has just made on the riverbank.

"This is the way,' laughed the great god Pan, (Laughed while he sat by the river!) 'The only way since gods began To make sweet music they could succeed.' Then, dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed, He blew in power by the river."<sup>21</sup>

After Elizabeth's death in 1861, Browning approached Leighton to design his wife's tomb in the Protestant Cemetery in Florence. Leighton agreed, although he was not in Florence to supervise the work. A friend of Browning, Henry Cottrell, critical of Leighton's design, wanted to make changes. Leighton responded to what Cottrell had done in 1864, telling Browning that the "execution was impudently

<sup>18]</sup> Johann Wolfgang GOETHE, The Fisherman, 1779, trans. Edgar A. Bowring, 1853. Accessible online: https://germanstories.vcu.edu/goethe/fischer\_e.html.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Letters to her Sister, 1846-1859, eds. Leonard Huxley, John Murray, London 1929, p. 301.

<sup>20]</sup> The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to ber Sister Arabella, op. cit., vol. II, p. 401.

Elizabeth BARRETT BROWNIG, A Musical Instrument, in: The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory, eds Thomas J. COLLINS & Vivienne J. RUNDLE, Broadview Press, Peterborough 2005, p. 81.



bad". <sup>22</sup> Browning sided with the artist and the elegant neo-renaissance tomb, with the sarcophagus standing on six pillars, as designed by Leighton, is there in the Protestant Cemetery in Florence today.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice (fig. 83), was once again the subject of a painting by Leighton in 1864, on this occasion accompanied in the catalogue by a Browning poem. This was originally published in prose, as *A Fragment*, but the poet eventually gave it the title *Orpheus to Eurydice*.

"But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow! Let them once more absorb me! One look now Will lap me round for ever, not to pass Out of its light, though darkness lie beyond: Hold me but safe again within the bond Of one immortal look! All woe that was, Forgotten, and all terror that may be Defied, – no past is mine, no future: look at me!"<sup>23</sup>

The painting is now in the artist's former home, in Leighton House in Kensington.

In *Balaustion's Adventure* of 1871, a version of the myth of Alcestis, Browning wrote a short passage praising another painting by Leighton, *Hercules wrestling with Death for the body of Alcestis*, (now in the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut). This, as Browning notes, is a highly dramatic picture. Hercules, seen from behind on the right, fights with the almost hidden figure of Death, surrounded by grieving mourners:

"I know, too, a great Kaunian painter, strong As Herakles, though rosy with a robe Of grace that softens down the sinewy strength, And he has made a picture of it all."

Browning ends this passage in the poem on a high note of praise:

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<sup>22]</sup> Letters of Robert Browning, eds. Thomas J. Wise and Thurman L. Hood, John Murray, London 1933, p. 80.

<sup>23]</sup> The title of this poem is also given as Orpheus and Eurydice in some references. Robert Browning, *Orpheus to Eurydice*. Accessible online: https://www.telelib.com/authors/B/BrowningRobert/verse/dramatispersonae/eurydiceorpheus.html#foot1

"[...] I pronounce that piece Worthy to set up in our Poikilé!"24

We know that Browning, who had studied sculpture with William Wetmore Story in Rome, often modelled pieces in Leighton's studio while the artist was working on the picture, and that they went together to a performance of an opera on the same subject, Christophe Willibald von Gluck's Alceste, in 1871. It is clear from Leighton's original thank you letter to Browning, written after receiving a copy of the poem, that he had not yet read the whole poem. When he did, he wrote again, on 16 August 1871, to say: "Last night I finished it & saw in the last lines what, if Vanity does not deceive me is a description of my poor picture. I should like to say something – but not a platitude. I shall say simply and sincerely "Thank you". I know the value of the pen which has painted over again, and bettered in repainting, my insufficient work - and of the page in which you have given it a lasting home and an added dignity." 25

Browning said of Leighton's Wedded, shown at the Royal Academy in 1882 (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney), that "I find a poetry in that man's work I can find in no other". <sup>26</sup> In the painting a couple stands clasped together under an archway against a background taken from the famous amphitheatre of Taormina in Sicily.

A few years later, in 1887, Browning wrote a poem for a painting by Leighton which was given the poem's first line, Yellow and Pale as Ribened Corn, as a title. This untraced work was a portrait of Lena Dene, one of the sisters of the artist's favorite model, Dorothy Dene. The poem was printed in the Academy catalogue.

[Picture of a little girl with golden hair and pale blue eyes]

"Yellow and pale as ripened corn Which Autumn's kiss frees - grain from sheath, -Such was her hair, while her eyes beneath Showed Spring's faint violets freshly born."27

<sup>24]</sup> Robert Browning, Balaustion's Adventure, 1871, p. 2672-2675, 2696-1697. Accessible online: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Balaustion%27s\_Adventure/V

Frederic Leighton, letter to Robert Browning, 16 August 1871, Armstrong-Browning Library, Baylor University, Texas, L2 - 117.

<sup>26]</sup> E. R. Barrington, op. cit., vol. II, p. 29.

Robert Browning, [Picture of a little girl with golden hair and pale blue eyes], Quoted after: Ernest RYHS, Frederic Lord Leighton: Late President of the Royal Academy of Arts, George Bell & Sons, London 1900, p. 129.

Browning sent the poem anonymously to Leighton, who realized the identity of the sender from the envelope.

Browning suggested other subjects to Leighton. In 1870 he recommended an idea from the *Odyssey* Book Four, describing how Menelaus and three companions held down Proteus, the old man of the sea, to ensure their escape. Leighton never carried it out. He was, above all, a compositionalist, responding to a subject aesthetically rather than concentrating on the narrative. He told Browning, "I have misgivings pictorially, about the men huddled, if *sufficiently*, in the skins of the beasts – but it is full of elements & I will hang it, for the present, gratefully in my memory which you have more than once helped to furnish." <sup>28</sup> Browning also suggested another subject from Homer, the killing of the Trojan Thyrsis by Turnus. Leighton told him "I often think of the Thyrsis subject which is so grand and to which I shall one day embolden myself – it is *borribly* difficult". <sup>29</sup>

Leighton, then President of the Royal Academy, was among the pallbearers at Browning's funeral in Westminster Abbey in 1891, and, in the same year, Leighton's sister, Alexandra Sutherland Orr, published a biography of the poet.

Although Greek literature and legends are features of Leighton's work, he does not show any great enthusiasm for Latin literature, apart from his painting *Acme and Septimius* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), painted in the late 1860s, and illustrating a sonnet by Catullus (fig. 84).

Towards the end of Leighton's life, he painted his sensuous, colourrich picture of *The Garden of the Hesperides* (fig. 84), exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1892 and now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight. The three daughters of the evening god Hesperus are shown languorously guarding the sacred apples given to the earth by the goddess Hera. The art critic Frederic George Stephens records Leighton saying that the subject had been inspired by a passage from *Comus*, a 17<sup>th</sup> century poem by John Milton.<sup>30</sup> In the poem, the Attendant Spirit speaks of his return to "happy climes" and to

<sup>28]</sup> Leonée and Richard ORMOND, Lord Leighton, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1975, p. 77.

<sup>29]</sup> L. and R. ORMOND, op. cit. p. 77.

<sup>30]</sup> Frederic, Lord Leighton: Eminent Victorian Artist, eds. Stephen JONES, Christopher NEWALL, Leonée ORMOND, Richard ORMOND, Benedict READ, Royal Academy of Arts, London 1996, p. 232.

"the liquid ayr All amid the Gardens fair Of Hesperus and his daughters three That sing about the golden tree."31

We know that John Milton was one of Leighton's favourite poets. and that his earlier painting Samson and Delilah (untraced) of 1858 took its subject from Milton's Samson Agonistes. Milton's Comus, dating from 1634, was a pastoral performance, presented at Ludlow Castle, describing the pagan god Comus' unsuccessful attempt to capture a woman.

The Polish painter Henryk Siemiradzki was thirteen years younger than Leighton, so they would not have met in Rome, and it is not clear whether they did in fact ever meet. There are, however, certain parallels between them in their choice of subjects. Both painted glamorous women from literature and legends, often against landscape backgrounds, or set before the sea. Both painted the courtesan Phryne, the mistress of the Greek sculptor Praxiteles. In an untraced painting, Phryne at Eleusis, shown at the Royal Academy in 1882, Leighton painted Phryne nude against the background of sea and archway, with a distant landscape behind her. In 1889, Siemiradzki painted Phryne at the Festival of Poseidon in Eleusis.

Among Leighton's later Italian-inspired paintings is Cymon and Iphigenia of 1884, a subject taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, reminding us of his early enthusiasm for the author. Here the innocent Cymon is seen transfixed on discovering the sleeping form of Iphigenia in a woodland background, with the setting sun glimpsed behind. Again, there is a parallel here with Siemiradzki's liking for background sea views in his paintings. Leighton's picture captured the public imagination, and he regarded it as one of his finest works.

In a memoir of Leighton, published in 1906, Edgcumbe Staley notes that "In Boccaccio's rendering of the story springtime is the season; Leighton has chosen the late summer". Leighton himself felt that the painting of Cymon and Iphigenia, now in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, represented "both my Art and my style [...] better than anything else I have done". 32

<sup>31]</sup> John Milton, A MASK Presented At LUDLOW-Castle, 1634, in: John Milton, Complete Shorter POEMS ED. STELLA P. REVARD, WILEY-BLACKWELL, OXFORD 2009, P. 119.

Edgcumbe STALEY, Lord Leighton of Stretton, Walter Scott, Charles Scribner's, London - New York, 1906, p. 127.

This is indicative of Leighton's later approach to the literary subject and represents his final position. Another statement of this, making clear some differences in his approach from that of either the Pre-Raphaelites in Britain or the Nazarenes in Germany, is outlined in a much earlier letter written to Steinle in December 1867. Leighton was responding to his former master's suggestion that they work together on an illustrated volume of Shakespeare's plays.

"I cannot agree about a complete illustration of the Shakespearian plays, those masterpieces already in existence as exhaustively finished works of art; it seems to me that in literature only those subjects lend themselves to pictorial representation which stand in the written word more as suggestion. Subjects perhaps which are provided in the Bible or in mythology and tradition in great variety, or are not already generally in possession of the minds of the spectators of living plays (e.g. the Greek Tragedies). It is for the most part a struggle with the incomparable, already existing complete – which is quite intimidating to my capabilities." <sup>33</sup>

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81. Frederic Leighton, Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence, 1855, oil on canvas, 231.7 × 520.9 cm, Royal Collection, on loan to the National Gallery, London. Photo in public domain.



82. Frederic Leighton, Robert Browning, 1859, pencil on paper, reproduced as the frontispiece to Life and Letters of Robert Browning, Bell, London 1891. Photo in public domain.

83. Frederic Leighton, Orpheus and Eurydice, 1864, oil on canvas, 127 × 109.3 cm, Leighton House, London. Photo in public domain.



84. Frederic Leighton, The Garden of the Hesperides, 1892, oil on canvas, 169.5 cm, circular, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight. Photo in public domain.