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Whistler’s Peacock Room and the Artist as Magus

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James McNeill Whistler’s *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (Figure 1) has become such a familiar feature of the terrain of Victorian aestheticism that it has often been taken for granted, lost in the reiteration of the scandals that followed in its wake like the trailing tail feathers of Whistler’s own rendering. Instead of reiterating the well-known saga surrounding the creation of the room, this discussion will reflect upon the decoration itself, arguing that it functions as an expression of Whistler’s self-consciously created artistic identity as magus and his ideas about the nature of artistic creation. Nevertheless, it is not only the stories and the history but also the unashamed spectacle of the Peacock Room that obfuscates the debates that the artist used the room to explore—specifically, ideas regarding the role of the artist, the function of art, the relationship between art and nature, and the ancient concept of the artist as magician, an individual who somehow has the power to improve on nature itself.1

It is pertinent here to remember the original proximity of the Peacock Room, at 49 Prince’s Gate, to the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert), home to the Green Dining Room (Figure 2). Created ten years earlier, the Green Dining Room not only launched a thousand Aesthetic green and dadoed interiors but also functioned as a celebration of communal artistic endeavor, a utopian dream of the act of creation as a shared undertaking and a paean to the “green world” of the English countryside. It was a very public space expressing the idealistic manifesto of William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Philip Webb—their shared belief that design could transform people’s lives for the better.2 The similarities between the Green Dining Room and the Peacock Room are undeniable: both were created in South Kensington, both are dining rooms, gorgeous with green-blue

and gold, and both have somehow survived to the present day. It seems likely that Whistler noted this proximity and that the Peacock Room was, in part, created as a response to the artistic ideas expressed in the Green Dining Room. Just as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. used their dining room to display their ideas about art as a communal practice, Whistler saw the opportunity to create his own artistic statement in the shape of a room which, contrary to the vision made manifest in the Green Dining Room, articulated Aestheticism as a very individual form of artistic practice. It is my contention that this work went beyond Whistler’s initial intention to complete and improve on a decorative scheme by Thomas Jeckyll in order to complement his painting *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine* (see Deusner, Figure 2). At some point during the process of its creation, the room became more than a decorative interior. It became a visual representation of the concerns that were particularly troubling Whistler during the 1870s. These were the tensions between the spiritual and material aspects of art—that is, the need for Whistler to reconcile the seemingly constant conflict between the desire for unfettered artistic creativity and the requirement to earn enough money to have shelter and put bread on the table.

To analyze the meaning of the Peacock Room in these terms is, admittedly, resolutely un-Whistlerian. In the *Ten O’Clock* lecture Whistler berates those, particularly John Ruskin, who attempt to unpick and decipher, and then give narrative and ethical import to, every work of art:

For him a picture is more or less a hieroglyph or symbol of a story. Apart from a few technical terms, for the display of which he finds an occasion, the work is considered absolutely from a literary point of view; indeed, from what other can he consider it? And in his essays he deals with it as a novel—a history—or an anecdote. He fails entirely and most naturally to see its excellences, or demerits—artistic—and so degrades Art, by supposing it a method of bringing about a literary climax.³

Despite his claims to the contrary, Whistler’s oeuvre cannot be perceived as inhabiting some beautiful void. Where Whistler does draw on narratives, intellectual ideas, and

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inspirations, he purposely obfuscates these sources, hiding them as a form of artistic secret knowledge. Though he claims that meaning, narrative, and moral conclusions cannot be applied to his art, Whistler’s *L’Art et L’Argent* (or *Art and Money*; Figure 3), a panel that vividly depicts the spat between the artist and his patron Frederick Richards Leyland, as well as his 1879 depiction of Leyland in *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Filthy Lucre* (Figure 4), cannot be brushed aside as amoral, nonnarrative works of art that are nothing but beautiful compositions. Indeed, it must always be remembered that Whistler, like so many of us, often said one thing and did another. In this regard, his work, although profoundly serious, can sometimes be read as purposely mischievous, as his choice of a signature—a flitting, metamorphic butterfly (and later one with a sting in its tail)—constantly reminds us.

Whistler’s art is about the immediacy of aesthetic sensory experience: his aesthetic philosophy, as expressed in the *Ten O’Clock* lecture of 1885, was highly influenced by the articulation of multisensory aesthetic experience in the essays of Walter Pater, such as “Poems by William Morris” (1868), the work that later became the infamous con-
clusion to The Renaissance (1873). There Pater discusses aesthetic experience as individual and isolated: the impressions that sensory forces make on the mind (and, he implies, the body) constitute a unique, personal, and fleeting experience, a “continual vanishing away” that functions as a constant “weaving and unweaving of ourselves.”

Aside from the painting La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine, it is the peacocks, of course, that dominate Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room. Whistler wrote to Leyland’s wife, Frances, in August 1876, “I am nearly blind with sleep and blue peacocks feathers.” Not only does a frenzy of feathers eddy and flow across the surfaces, but directly opposite the entrance to the room are three glorious, real-gold-covered shutters snaked with peacocks, their features picked out with blue green. The central shutter has two birds, their magnificent tails descending its entire length. These two birds are flanked by two slightly shorter shutters, both of which depict single birds, their tails unfurled (Figure 5). Beneath the shorter shutters are blue-green panels decorated with a meandering band of abstracted golden feathers. Emblazoned across the Prussian blue of the south wall, facing La Princesse, are the two glowing and glowering birds of L’Art et L’Argent, with their glinting glass eyes. The bird on the left, depicting Whistler, has the artist’s distinct silver streak in its plumage. The bird on the right, representing Leyland, is feathered with both gold and silver coins spilling to the ground. There are around thirty coins—the price of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Christ. From this we might infer that for a few worthless coins, the artist’s talents have been betrayed. Nevertheless, these fighting birds are exquisitely beautiful, and the luminous peacocks and feathers created by Whistler’s paintbrush transform the room from a domestic space into something seemingly magical.

Peacock feathers became popular among Aesthetes in the nineteenth century because of their orientalist links, their exquisite beauty, and their hint of unconventionality, particularly in a British domestic interior where, folklore has it, peacock feathers are unlucky. In addition, the artist’s depiction of the peacock in the Leyland dining room...
owes a huge debt to Japanese art, particularly the work of Utagawa Hiroshige. Japonisme was, however, probably not the only root of the peacock’s popularity in Aesthetic circles. The fashionable coupling of blue-and-white china with the feathers of the peacock may have originated with Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the 1860s. As his brother William Michael Rossetti recounts, Dante Gabriel kept a peacock on the grounds of his Cheyne Walk residence, Tudor House:

Here, extracted from my Diary for December 1871, is a curious anecdote about the peacock, which may perhaps deserve a moment’s attention: “The deer that Gabriel used to have, now dead, one day saw the peacock making a great display of his train. … The deer followed him about; and, though not displaying any peculiarly marked ill-will, systematically trampled out all his train feathers, one after the other. Shortly after this, Gabriel gave the peacock away.”

Apparently, once its glamour was denuded, Rossetti rescued the tail feathers and placed them in a blue-and-white china vase. Whatever the origin of this Aesthetic fashion, though, peacock feathers and their colors caught on like wildfire in the 1870s and 1880s. This fascination extended to Frederic Leighton’s inclusion of an entire stuffed bird in the Arab Hall of Leighton House, the color of which was echoed in the William De Morgan tiles he commissioned for the walls (and which resurfaces in De Morgan’s work for the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company; see Deusner, Figure 8). Nevertheless, it is worth considering the peacock more deeply, as for centuries its feathers represented the rebirth and fecundity of spring; hence, in the 1868 version of Burne-Jones’s Green Summer (private collection), Jane Burden Morris holds one aloft. As an ancient symbol of eternal life, the peacock feather was appropriated by early practitioners of Christianity as an important symbol of the death and resurrection, both of Christ and true believers; thus, peacock feathers can still be seen on early Christian sarcophagi in the catacombs of Rome. This notion of the peacock as a representation of immortality must have greatly appealed to an artist who hoped to achieve immortality through his art and through the reception and acceptance of his work as that of a genius.

The peacock has numerous mythical connotations as well. One is as a symbol of transformation, as witnessed by a story in the Metamorphoses of Ovid. In the Roman poet’s account, the numerous eyes of the peacock’s tail were those of the monstrous, many-eyed Argus (or “he who sees everything”), who was decapitated by Mercury while attempting to guard Io from a lustful Jove. The eyes were placed on the bird by the goddess Juno, who “spreads them in her peacock’s gaudy tail.” Thus, the peacock also symbolizes the act of seeing and the world of the visual.

The world described in Ovid’s Metamorphoses is one dominated by uncertainty and change rather than moral and social absolutes. Consequently, in the nineteenth century, Ovid’s poem was generally regarded as morally suspect, as it portrays a world fixated on the here and now and offers no consequences for supposedly immoral behavior. Despite the controversial nature of Ovid’s work, many classically educated Victorians in artistic and intellectual circles would have recognized the peacock as a metamorphic creature, one particularly associated with the process of seeing. In the Ovidian story of the tail of the peacock, the trigger for the transformation is desire—in this particular case, that of Zeus for Io. In the tale of the Peacock Room, the trigger for the transformation is also desire—that of Whistler for beauty, for artistic independence, and for the fame and
recognition that would bring him the money to live and work comfortably. In this context, Whistler’s use of the butterfly for his signature was not merely whimsical. The butterfly is the most immediate and easily recognizable symbol of metamorphosis—the insect that transforms itself from a generally unattractive crawling grub into one of the most delicate and gorgeous creatures on earth. In the Peacock Room, Whistler pointedly places the butterflies close to the peacocks, not only to stamp his mark upon the room but perhaps also to suggest some connection between the two creatures.

The notion of metamorphosis may also be linked to the transformative processes of the ancient art of alchemy, as Whistler’s writings and correspondence demonstrate. Forging a link between the products of alchemy and art has a long history in the Western world, and the allusions, allegories, metaphors, and mysteries inherent in alchemy remain an astonishingly rich source of material for artists. In the twentieth century, the artist Joseph Beuys took on the persona of alchemist as part of his self-mythologizing persona as shaman and magus, much as Whistler preached in the *Ten O’Clock*. Rebecca Horn and Sigmar Polke have also explored the relationship between alchemy and art in their practice. For instance, in his *Hermes Trismegistus I–IV* series (Figure 6), Polke examines the direct analogies between the practice of alchemy as symbolized by its mythical Greco-Egyptian founder Hermes Trismegistus and the transformation of pigments, ideas, and influences into art via the conduit of artistic creativity. Whistler’s awareness of this connection relates—crucially—directly to his creation of the Peacock Room, where peacocks become linked to another very specific metamorphic process. In alchemical thought and writings, the transformation of base metal into gold is the most discussed (and ridiculed) of the goals, but equally important are the many stages of material transformation symbolized...
by all manner of colors and creatures. In the vast corpus of alchemical writings, one of the most crucial of these stages is the Cauda Pavonis, “the peacock’s tail” (Figure 7). This stage reveals that the seeker or alchemist is on the right path, indicated by a sudden rush, a flood, of all the colors ever known and more besides. The rapid cycling of gorgeous iridescence could fool the uninitiated into thinking that the goal had been accomplished, but this apparent completion is an illusion, for this stage is merely the midway point in the process of transmutation. It is not only the color of the peacock when it fans its tail and realizes the full glory of its beauty that symbolizes this transformation: in medieval belief, it was popularly thought that the peacock was capable of healing itself by eating its own feces—the literal changing of putrefied matter into goodness. In selecting the colors and the image of the peacock as his central decorative motif, Whistler offers a sparkling self-referential form of iconology. Not only does he allude to the act of artistic creation itself as the material and mental alteration of base materials and ideas into the gold of art, but it seems likely that he had some knowledge of the symbolic meanings of peacocks outlined above and that transformation of the surfaces of the room into a mass of translucent feathers could be an allusion to at least some of these ideas. The Peacock Room thus transmutes from Jeckyll’s Tudoresque interior into an elusive and capricious set of surfaces.

This transformation and the intellectual jump to concepts of alchemy in relation to the Peacock Room—and, more generally, Whistler’s practice as an artist—are articulated in the most celebrated of the texts that he published. In his Ten O’Clock lecture, Whistler explicitly describes his concept of art and artistic practice in terms of the ancient notion of the artist as alchemical magus:

Nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music.

But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful. …

Thus is Nature ever his resource and always at his service, and to him is naught refused.

Through his brain, as through the last alembic, is distilled the refined essence of that thought which began with the Gods, and which they left him to carry out.12

The artist’s mind is the final “alembic” in the metamorphic alchemical process; it is the very site of creative refining, a notion that was already current in Aesthetic circles because of Pater’s employment of similar imagery, and it seems likely that Whistler had read Pater’s work. Indeed, Whistler’s instruction and assertion in the Ten O’Clock lecture, “Listen! There never was an artistic period. There never was an Art-loving nation,” is remarkably similar to Pater’s contention in The Renaissance that to the critic with a true aesthetic sense, “all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal.”13 Likewise, Whistler’s description of the task of the artist as one who refines all experience into art seems to draw heavily upon Pater’s text. In the preface to The Renaissance, Pater utilizes the imagery of material alchemy and the purification of intellectual and artistic matter in relation to his discussion of Wordsworth’s early poetry, celebrating the poet’s “conviction of the existence of certain latent affinities between nature and the human mind, which reciprocally gild the mind and nature with a kind of ‘heavenly alchemy.’”14

Whistler sometimes alludes to alchemy in his correspondence. In a draft of an un-
published letter to Frederick Greenwood, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, of September 1879 or 1880, Whistler uses alchemical terms to criticize an anonymous article that he assumes was written by the art critic Harry (‘Arry) Quilter: “Also the … matter itself is very like what it used to be—and quite untouched by the furnace after all—wherein it is more unyielding than the gold of the refiner.”\(^{15}\) Indeed, the word “refined” in conjunction with Whistler’s art appears time and time again in his correspondence, including an August 1876 letter to Frances Leyland regarding the Peacock Room itself, in which he describes the room as “thoroughly new and most gorgeous though refined.”\(^{16}\) I am not claiming here that Whistler was a practicing alchemist (although it is clear from his ongoing attendance at séances that he was interested in the occult), nor am I positing that the Peacock Room is an allegory of alchemical practice. I am instead offering up the idea that Whistler understood the process of alchemy and therefore used two of its most important symbols—the peacock (transformation) and gold (completion)—to articulate the idea of the artist as the Creator, not just a creator: the artist as alchemist and master of the mutability of matter.

Because of Whistler’s performative persona as the “genius artist” and his associated denials of outside influences upon his art, it is not clear where he first learned of these correlations between art and alchemy. Undoubtedly, interest in alchemy was gaining momentum in Britain at exactly the time that Whistler was creating the Peacock Room. As Alex Owen has written in *The Place of Enchantment*, her study of occultism in Britain around the fin de siècle,

> A few scattered publications on alchemy during the first half of the nineteenth century became a steady if small stream after the 1870s. … Mme. Blavatsky addressed the philosophy of alchemy in “Isis Unveiled” and “The Secret Doctrine,” and several influential Theosophists were interested in the subject. According to Isabelle de Steiger, Miss Atwood (the author of a “mystical” mid-century book on alchemy) bequeathed her father’s valuable alchemical library to the prominent theosophist A. P. Sinnett for use by the members of the Theosophist Society.\(^{17}\)

> It is, however, possible that Whistler encountered alchemy while living in Paris, then a center for the occult, or from Charles Baudelaire, whose poetry displays alchemical knowledge; it might have been through his connection, via Swinburne, to the occultist Edward Bulwer-Lytton.\(^{18}\) He also might have had knowledge of the *Splendor Solis*, one of the Harley manuscripts in the British Library, which were known to members of Whistler’s artistic circles, including Swinburne, Burne-Jones, William Morris, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.\(^{19}\) Certainly, his specific use of the term “alembic” demonstrates at least a passing knowledge of the equipment used in alchemy.

> The idea of the artist as alchemist runs contrary to the Platonic concept of the artist as a base imitator of material reality. In the alchemical process, matter is transubstantiated in a manner normally associated only with the divine; alchemy, particularly when a homunculus is created, actively denies the inimitability of God the Father, or of the gods, as the originator(s) of the breath of life. Whistler joyfully makes explicit the sacrilegious nature of the idea of the artist as godlike creator when he states in the *Ten O’Clock* “that Nature is always right, is an assertion, artistically, as untrue, as it is one whose truth is universally taken for granted. … This would seem, to even the most intelligent, a doctrine almost
blasphemous.” Just as the deity creates form from chaos, so does the alchemist-artist. As Whistler makes clear in his lecture, in shaping form out of the formlessness, the alchemist-artist purposely enters into a rivalry with God or the gods, and the gods themselves will be jealous of the artist. In a Christian culture such as Britain in the 1870s, the idea that the artist rivaled or even surpassed God was not “almost blasphemous”—it was explicitly blasphemous: “Set apart by them to complete their works, he produces that wondrous thing called the masterpiece, which surpasses in perfection all that they have contrived in what is called Nature; and the Gods stand by and marvel, and perceive how far away more beautiful is the Venus of Melos than was their own Eve.”

In alchemy, gold is the spiritual “light” and also, of course, the material metal of human desires and needs. In the gaslit twilight of the Peacock Room, gold is spun across every surface, as if Rumpelstiltskin himself had gone wild one night with the spinning wheel. Whistler was well aware of the many connotations of gold, and his relationship to all of its meanings is complex. In his paintings, and in the frames he also created, he used a multiplicity of golds as artistic pigments of many shades and tones. Likewise, in the Peacock Room, the gold on the walls is what he called “the green gold”—Dutch metal, or imitation gold leaf, that he applied and allowed to oxidize, then coated with clear green varnish to create a subdued, antique effect (Figure 8). The real thing—the almost orange-toned, true gold leaf—is used on the shutters, so that its marvellous effect and that of the glorious peacocks thereon would only be unfurled at night, when the room was transformed into its true purpose—as a dining room.

Whistler did not see gold only as the symbolic artistic outcome of his creative process; its symbolism and value as actual reward for his achievements was of vital importance. Gold embodied society’s recognition of his skill as an artist. In 1863 he won a gold medal for his etchings and was clearly intensely proud of this achievement, for he mentions it in various letters from 1863 and even during the 1878 libel trial against Ruskin. Whistler knew that even if his paintings were often regarded with skepticism during the 1860s and 1870s, his prints would always make money. Part of his wish to earn money from the Peacock Room was simply to be able to pay his debts and to afford to travel to Venice and create prints of the city, which he knew would sell. While he was still painting the room he wrote to his mother, “I have taken up etching again and have found that people still prefer Whistlers to all others—but the stock is not yet in absolute working order so that I must for a while longer stick hard at it—a printing press has been lent to me and soon I trust I shall turn some copper into gold!” It is possible that the allusions to alchemical transformation here are not accidental. The link between the copper plate

used in engraving (and etching) and alchemy is not tenuous; it may well indicate not just Whistler’s understanding of his craft but also a passing knowledge of some of its traditions and mythologies. As his illustrious artistic forebear William Blake knew, the graving tool had sacred and alchemical associations with Hermes Trismegistus, the mythical founder of both alchemy and engraving. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes, “I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.”\(^\text{25}\) Given that Whistler was extremely close to the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne from their first meeting in 1862 until the two men fell out in 1888, it seems highly likely that Whistler had read Swinburne’s book *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868), in which the poet explores *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in some depth and claims this prophetic work to be “the greatest of his books.”\(^\text{26}\) It follows that Whistler may well also have read this work by Blake.

However, gold in its most basic form was, for Whistler, simply the cold hard cash that would enable him to live and to buy materials. It was Leyland’s insulting payment of one thousand pounds, rather than the two thousand golden guineas he had requested for his creation of the Peacock Room, that led to Whistler returning to add *L’Art et L’Argent* to the south wall. The painting explicitly refers to the patron’s materially and symbolically offensive payment for what Whistler saw to be such a momentous work. Whistler had eventually agreed to a payment of one thousand guineas, but Leyland paid him in pounds. Professionals (including artists) were paid in guineas and workmen in pounds, and in making such a gesture Leyland was slighting Whistler’s artistic abilities as well as diminishing his finances.\(^\text{27}\)

Yet Whistler’s concerted efforts to publicize the room and himself were not undertaken simply because he wished to accumulate wealth or to achieve fame for fame’s sake; he seems to have hoped that recognition and acclaim for such a spectacular artistic endeavor would enable him to achieve his full potential as an artist, unfettered by the demands of patrons and debt collectors. Indeed, he made it quite clear that he despised the accumulation of gold for its own sake: “My picture of a ‘Harmony in Grey and Gold’ is an illustration of my meaning. … All that I know is that my combination of grey and gold is the basis of the picture. Now this is precisely what my friends cannot grasp. They say, ‘Why not call it ‘Trotty Veck,” and sell it for a round harmony of golden guineas?’”\(^\text{28}\) As much as Whistler needed gold, he would not compromise his artistic integrity to gain it.

Despite Whistler’s alchemical allusions, the Peacock Room is not simply an illustration of its transformative or magical processes. Rather, Whistler uses the symbols of metamorphosis and alchemy to create a work of art that expresses both the anxieties and the ecstasies inherent in the act of artistry. Thus, the canvas of this room not only displays his immense skill as an artist but also acts as a very public act of mythmaking. Whistler tirelessly publicized the room throughout the time he was working on it, treating Leyland’s dining room as his personal fiefdom, inviting a number of important artistic lions and celebrities of the day, including John Everett Millais, E. W. Godwin, Ellen Terry, Sir Henry and Alan Cole, and Princess Louise. He left dishes of invitation cards in fashionable and artistic establishments such as Liberty & Co. for his press preview of the room on February 9, 1877; he also published a brochure to hand out to all the attendees and invited journalists from numerous publications to view the room in late 1876 and early 1877.\(^\text{29}\)

Whistler not only wished to use the room to establish his reputation as an important artist and to attempt to become the most sought-after designer of Aesthetic
interiors at a time when such a trade was rather lucrative; he also wanted the fantastical stories surrounding the room to elevate it to legendary status, and the journalists obliged. Only the gossip columnist Talon Rouge of Vanity Fair thought the Peacock Room over the top, preferring Thomas Armstrong’s interior at 52 Prince’s Gate. Nevertheless, Talon Rouge fully acknowledged Whistler’s attempt to display the room as a mythic site. Alluding to the diet of John the Baptist in the wilderness, he wrote, “And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and honey” (Matt. 3:4). Talon Rouge remarked that “one could not feed on ordinary meals in such a room. Perhaps locusts and wild honey might be allowed.” Whistler had created a space that would not only articulate his mystical concept of artistic genius as a process of transmutation but also wove a series of constantly metamorphosing myths around it so that each individual observer could fashion, tell, alter, and retell his or her own myths of the Peacock Room. Indeed, for a room that celebrates mutability, it is fitting that the Peacock Room has itself undergone transformation after transformation in the years since its creation.

The room thus functions as an articulation of Whistler’s vision of the artist as magus, a figure whose creative abilities rival, or perhaps surpass, those of the gods themselves. For Whistler, the goal was beauty and eternal fame. Ovid understood that his own soul would live on through the reception of his writings:

The work is finish’d, which nor dreads the rage
Of tempests, fire, or war, or wasting age;
Come, soon or late, death’s undetermin’d day,
This mortal being only can decay;
My nobler part, my fame, shall reach the skies,
And to late times with blooming honours rise:
Whate’er the unbounded Roman power obeys
All climes and nations shall record my praise:
If ’tis allow’d to poets to divine,
One half of round eternity is mine.

Whistler sought that same immortality through the art of this Aesthetic interior.

Notes
1. For more on the myths and stories that surround the room, see Linda Merrill’s authoritative history of the room, The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1998).
3. Whistler, Ten O’Clock, 17.
5. Whistler to Frances Leyland, August 20/31, 1876, GUW 08054.
7. For a rather breathlessly admiring account of the interior of Leighton House, see


10. For more on the unease with which Ovid’s work was generally regarded in the nineteenth century, see Norman Vance, “Ovid and the Nineteenth Century,” in Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 215–41.


12. Whistler, Ten O’Clock, 14, 16.


15. Whistler to Frederick Greenwood, September 18, 1879/80, GUW 04375. Whistler bore a particular grudge against ‘Arry, who became the incumbent of the “White House” after Whistler lost it when he was made bankrupt in May 1879.

16. Whistler to Frances Leyland, August 20/31, 1876, GUW 08058.


18. For an example of alchemy in the writings of Bulwer-Lytton, see Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Zanoni: A Rosicrucian Tale of Alchemy, Immortality, and the Wisdom of the Mystic Masters (Leipzig, 1842). For evidence of Baudelaire’s interest in alchemy, see the poem “Alchimie de la Douloue” (The Alchemy of Suffering) in Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du mal, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1985), 78. In this poem of ca. 1861 (it does not appear in the 1857 version), Baudelaire references the intervention of Hermes Trismegistus in his misery and posits himself as a “reverse Midas,” who turns gold into iron. For a more general discussion of occult and alchemical practices in Paris in the nineteenth century, see Elizabeth K. Menon, “Guilt or Gold: Alchemy and Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Paris,” in Art and Alchemy, ed. Jacob Wamburg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2006), 149–70. In the second half of the nineteenth century, alchemy also experienced something of a surge of interest in America, where Whistler had many contacts even if he did not visit his homeland. In 1857 the professional soldier and occultist scholar Ethan Allen Hitchcock published a study of alchemy and alchemists,