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Université de Lorraine, ERUDI, Master Mondes Anglophones
UE 703 – Littérature

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Subject:

To what extent is a knowledge of mediaeval (notably Middle English) literature relevant to "modern" literature (from the 19th century onwards), or else to our "modern" civilisation? You may handle this topic from various points of view (forms, genres, themes, language, culture in general).

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CONTENTS :

I. ESSAY

The revival of interest in medieval history and art started in the mid-18th century and widely spread throughout Europe, as did the Romantic movement which promoted it in various arts, together with the national sentiments which began to flourish in each country -- politicians seeking in the past some glorious symbols to make up a continuous and powerful image of their country/nation, deeply rooted in history. By the middle of the 19th century, all arts (architecture, literature, painting, and even music) had been affected by this revival, as I will outline in the first part of this essay. Then, I will illustrate the influence of medieval literature in "modern" European culture with two examples. First, among the legendary heroes who "have grown from medieval literary subjects to universal symbols, transcending any particular culture and becoming applicable to any age"[1], the most popular is King Arthur, whose legend has fed the imaginations of generations of artists for more than eight centuries. Second, as the ballad is a literary form which has travelled from the early Middle Ages to 20th century poetry and song, I will summary its evolution through the centuries, and focus on Keats's ballad 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.

The most obvious examples of the long-lasting heritage of medieval art are found in architecture (Gothic cathedrals such as Notre-Dame in Paris or the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in France, or Canterbury Cathedral in England[2]) and in religious paintings and artefacts. Thus, it is no wonder that the Gothic Revival started as **an architectural movement** in the late 1740s in England, then gained momentum and expanded in the first half of the 19th century, with serious and learned admirers of the neo-Gothic styles such as A. W. N. Pugin, whose most notable project was the Houses of Parliament[3] in London (1836-1852), and John Ruskin (*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849, and *The Stones of Venice*, 1853). They sought to revive medieval Gothic architecture, intending to complement or even supersede the neoclassical styles prevalent at the time[4]. One of the reasons to do so, sparked by the general Romantic revolution, was the literary interest in medieval times that produced Gothic tales and romances. By setting their stories in medieval times, authors such as Sir Walter Scott (whose novel

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[1] Christopher Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, p. 127
[2] See Annex p. 10
[3] See Annex p. 10
[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Revival_architecture

Ivanhoe[5] boosted the Gothic Revival in both Britain and America), Goethe and Schiller in Germany, and Victor Hugo in France, helped to create a sense of nostalgia and a taste for that period.[6] Throughout Western Europe, Romantic artists found in literature the dramatic intensity, the powerful sensations, and the intense emotions they were seeking and which echoed in their own art. Ary Scheffer or Charles-Barthélémy Durupt, for example, were inspired by contemporary poets, such as Shiller or Byron, who drew their narratives from medieval history or legends[7]. If what was later called in French history of painting "the Troubadour style", started at the very beginning of the 19th century, with female painters such as Élisabeth Lorimier[8] (1775-1854) or Pauline Auzou[9] (1775-1853), the acme of the revival of medievalism in British history of painting was to be reached by the Pre-Raphaelites, from the creation of the Brotherhood in 1848 to the end of the 19th century with Burne Jones' "medieval fantasy"[10]. The PRB drew their inspiration directly from the New Testament, medieval or Renaissance authors such as Dante or Shakespeare, or from 19th century poets such as John Keats, Alfred Tennyson, and William Morris, who reinterpreted medieval stories or legends in their works. Among these myths, King Arthur's has been the most famous and international, being abundantly narrated and reinterpreted throughout eight centuries and many countries, from the early Arthurian stories composed between 1200 and 1600, through the "Victorian Arthuriana" produced in 19th-century Britain[11], up to 20th century films such as Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* (1965), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) or John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981).

According to Christopher Snyder, whose fascinating book *Exploring the World of King Arthur* covers the main aspects of the Arthurian legend, if no contemporary chroniclers took notice of the *warrior* Arthur during the fifth and sixth centuries, bards and poets lined up to sing the praises of the *king* Arthur in the twelve and thirteen centuries. Under the patronage of the Plantagenet king Henry II (1154-89), Wace wrote *Roman de Brut*, a fiction drawing his inspiration from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and moving Arthur closer to the world of courtly romance. Wace's work had a great impact on Chrétien de Troyes,

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[5] See Annex p. 11
[6] https://www.britannica.com/art/Gothic-Revival
[7] See Annex, p. 12
[8] Her painting, « Jeanne de Navarre » received the golden medal at a Royal exhibition in 1806 and was bought by the French Empress Joséphine in 1807.
https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henriette_Lorimier#/media/Fichier:Jeanne_de_Navarre_1806.jpg
[9] See Annex p. 13
[10] See Annex, p. 14
[11] See Annex, p. 15

the French poet whose literary output included five Arthurian romances, written between 1170 and 1191 in octosyllabic lines of rhymed verse. These romances also found an important echo in German medieval literature, with, for instance, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal* and Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, written during the thirteenth century, which respectively inspired Richard Wagner's operas *Parzifal* in 1882 and *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865.

In Great-Britain, Layamon translated Wace's *Roman de Brut* in English alliterative verse between 1199 and 1225. His work, *Brut*, is "nearly twice as long as its French model, and substitutes descriptions of Dark Age brutality for the latter's talk of love and chivalry"[12]. Later, c.1400, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written by an anonymous northwest Midland poet in alliterative stanzas of irregular length, and in a dialect that is sometimes difficult to interpret[13], was one of the true masterpieces of medieval verse romance. *Sir Gawain* and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (late 14th century) are part of a general revival of alliteration in English poetry. *Morte Arthure* furthers this homage to Old English verse by using archaic terms and epic themes. Another poem, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* derives from the French romance *Mort Artu* and put an emphasis on different scenes and characters than *Morte Arthure*. All these works made their way into the masterpiece which marks the culmination of English chivalric romance, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, published in 1485 by Caxton, and divided into eight tales and twenty-one books[14]. Malory's achievement lies in having gathered the previous, diverse Arthurian traditions "in one great prose epic that would be responsible for the way all succeeding centuries viewed the story of Arthur"[15]. For example, the scenario of Boorman's film *Excalibur* was based on Malory's work.

British royalty has shown an enthusiasm for Arthur from the middle of the 12th century onwards. For instance, Henry VIII, during a state visit of his rival Charles V at Winchester Castle, showed him "its great round table, newly repainted in Tudor green and gold and now bearing the image of an enthroned Arthur with Henry's visage.[16]" Later, in 1581, English tournaments were officially revived to celebrate, annually, Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne, and in Spenser's *Fairy Queene* (1590-96), Prince Arthur was portrayed as Elizabeth's consort. In the 19th century, "the Hanoverian Victoria (r. 1837-1901) was, even more than Elizabeth I, an imperial monarch in need of connection with Britain's illustrious past, and she willingly

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[12] Christopher Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, p. 89
[13] 703-Literature class, Chapter 12: 'Arthurian Romance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'
[14] 703-Literature class, Chapter 13: 'Prose narrative: Thomas Malory *LE MORTE DARTHUR*'
[15] Christopher Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, p. 124
[16] Ibid, p. 133. See also Annex p. 16

allowed the Arthurian mythology of her day to add to her mystique.[17] (…) British writers dug up the medieval knight and reinvented him as a modern gentleman."[18] From 1859 to 1891, Alfred Tennyson composed and edited twelve Arthurian poems, published collectively as *Idylls of the King*. His verse epic was framed with a dedication to Prince Albert and an epilogue 'To the Queen'. The popularity of both Tennyson's poems and the many new editions of Malory created a market for Arthurian illustration, but the most spectacular impact of Arthur on the visual arts is found in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, as already seen in the previous paragraph. For example, Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' inspired at least two painters of the PRB, W.H. Hunt and J.W. Waterhouse[19]. William Morris (1834-1896), one of the most influential artists and thinkers of his time – and an interior designer whose work generated the Arts and Craft Movement in England and deeply influenced the Art Nouveau movement in France and continental Europe – also wrote a collection of poetry called 'The Defence of Guenevere and other poems' (1858). In the first group of poems, Queen Guenevere[20], accused of adultery – a crime punishable by death – "defends herself, to an accusing Gawain, with the assertiveness of a modern heroine."[21] The ancient setting permitted Morris to discuss issues of love and sexual desire with a forthrightness uncommon in Victorian literature[22], and "this modernization of the legend marked a trend in Arthurian literature that would recur for the next hundred years."[23] If the Arthurian legend was widely spread through poetry and prose from early medieval literature to various forms of art in the 19th and 20th centuries, I would like to focus now on a specific literary form, the ballad, to explore how it evolved from the medieval French "ballade" to the Romantic literary ballads.

The **ballade** is one of several *formes fixes* in French lyric poetry and song, usually consisting of three eight-line stanzas followed by a quatrain (envoy/envoi) and in its purest form, is found only in France – in the songs of the troubadours and trouvères – and in England. Some fine examples of ballades can be found in the works of Alain Chartier (1392-1433) and

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[17] See Annex p. 17
[18] Ibid, p. 137
[19] See Annex pp. 18-19
[20] See Annex p. 20
[21] Christopher Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, p. 143
[22] https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Defence-of-Guenevere
[23] Christopher Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, p. 143

Charles, Duke d'Orléans (1394-1465), then the form became less popular in the 15th century but was to reappear spasmodically in the work of later poets as a conscious archaism.[24]

A **ballad** is a short narrative folk song, which could be passed down orally from one generation to the next, among unlettered people. As it tells a story on a theme popular with the common people of a particular culture or place, the ballad has played a critical role in the creation and maintenance of distinct national cultures. Its distinctive style crystallized in Europe in the late Middle Ages. In England, Minstrel also wrote ballads which sometimes affected the manner of folk songs, but they rather were poems in praise of the noble houses who employed them, or works of propaganda, as the older Robin Hood ballads glorify the virtues of the yeomanry. Minstrel ballads were meant to be recited rather than sung.[25]

In England, the Harley Manuscript (early 14th century) is the earliest manuscript containing a group of English secular lyrics[26], among which were found some ballades. Then, with the Printing Revolution (from the end of the 15th century) there are printed ballads that suggest a rich tradition of popular music, be it on cheap broadsides or in the collections gathered by Samuel Pepys[27] and Robert Harley as soon as the 17th century. During the 18th century, a new discovery and appreciation of folk poetry among social elite started in England (Joseph Addison, Thomas Percy) and in Germany (Johan Gottfried von Herder). Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a collection of English and Scottish traditional ballads, published in 1765, inspired Sir Walter Scott who published his own collection of Scottish ballads, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802). Scott and Robert Burns also wrote literary ballads, the former in English ('The Lay of the Last Minstrel', 1805) and the latter in Scots. This ballad revival "had great impact and provided the English Romantic poets with an alternative to outworn Neoclassical models as a source of inspiration."[28] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were attracted to the simple and natural style of these folk ballads, and in the preface to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explained that his aim "in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men."[29] At the same time in Germany, Goethe cooperated with Schiller on a series of ballads[30], some of which were later

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[24] https://www.britannica.com/art/ballade and 703-Literature class, chapter 9 'Love poetry: from the Harley lyrics'

[25] https://www.britannica.com/art/ballad and 703-Literature class, chapter 15 'Balladry: A Gest of Robyn Hode'

[26] 703-Literature class, chapter 9 'Love poetry : from the Harley lyrics'

[27] https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/pepys

[28] https://www.britannica.com/art/ballad-revival#ref211164

[29] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802*, pp 96-97

[30] https://journals.openedition.org/rgi/1024

set to music by Schubert, or inspired painters such as Ary Scheffer, as seen in the first part of this essay. The literary ballad, which belongs in the history of poetry rather than balladry, is a form which continued to be used by later poets, from John Keats to Oscar Wilde ('The Ballad of Reading Gaol', 1897)[31] and Thomas Hardy ('During Wind and Rain', 1917).[32]

Among these literary ballads, Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci, A Ballad'[33] (1819) is an interesting example of mixing the form of a folk ballad (rhymed quatrains, abcb) with medieval theme and setting: a lovesick knight tells how he met a beautiful "faery's child" in a meadow and became enthralled. The poet took the title from a ballade by the French poet Alain Chartier, 'La Belle Dame Sans Mercy' (1424), which is also referred to in 'The Eve of St Agnes'[34] (l. 292), another poem by Keats set in a medieval and dreamlike atmosphere. It is thus no wonder that both poems held a particular attraction for the Pre-Raphaelites[35], with "their exquisite rendering of gothic details and architectural elements. (…) Stained-glass windows, hidden vaults over lonely alleys, magnificent spurs, and sinister woods provide the background for sad knights and frightened ladies."[36]

In his notes to the poem[37], John Barnard remarks that literary echoes abound in 'La Belle Dame', reaching from Alain Chartier to Elizabethan poets like Spencer and Burton, up to Keats's contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, in a short lecture presented by Keats House in June 2020[38] – to mark 200 years since the publication of 'La Belle Dame' – Dr Tess Somervell (University of Leeds) demonstrated that the poem was also inspired by Keats's favourite poets from the 18th century, Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) and James Thomson (1700-1748), who both wrote faux-medieval poems. Somervell underlines some verbal echoes between 'La Belle Dame', Chatterton's 'Excelente Balade of Charitie' and Thomson's 'The Castle of Indolence', as well as two other features shared by the three poems: their autumnal setting, and a portrait of their author. She concludes that Keats was not just taking inspiration from medieval and Spenserian faux-medieval poetry, he was also taking inspiration from **18th century imitations** of medieval and Spenserian poetry. According to her, 'La Belle Dame' contains all these layers of imitation and inspiration, and it is through these layers that the poem asks its questions about poetic identity, poetic legacy, and poetic labour.

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[31] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45495/the-ballad-of-reading-gaol
[32] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52314/during-wind-and-rain
[33] John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 334-336
[34] Ibid, pp. 312-324
[35] See Annex p. 21
[36] https://victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/bottai1.html; see also Annex p.
[37] John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 661-664
[38] https://www.ourcitytogether.london/do/la-belle-dame-sans-merci

New artistic creations often arise from imitation and inspiration of previous works of art, and medieval literature has supplied the imaginations of European and American generations of singers, poets, writers, painters and artists in general with myths and legends, which have continually been reinterpreted and adapted in new works of art, evolving with the creation of new media. Ancient folk ballads, through their oral transmission, have been subject to constant variation in both text and tune, but the new versions of ballads that arise as the cumulative variations are no less authentic than their antecedents, as Thomas Malory's version of the Arthurian legends is no less authentic than each of the sources which were blended in it. Thus, the heritage of medieval literature is still relevant and visible, like some golden threads woven in the fabric of our modern culture, as the gems of Gothic architecture are still relevant and visible parts of our contemporary urban landscape. However, as the original texts from medieval literature are written in Middle English, they are only accessible to a few scholars specialized in this language, thus literature students or enthusiasts need a translation of these texts in contemporary English to understand them, such as David Wright's translation of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

RESOURCES

Keats, John. *The Complete Poems*, edited by John Barnard, 3rd edition; St Ives (GB): Penguin Books Ltd, 2006

Snyder, Christopher. *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, London (UK): Thames & Hudson Limited, 2000.

Wordsworth, William and Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1802*, edited by Fiona Stafford, St Ives (GB): Oxford University Press, 2013.
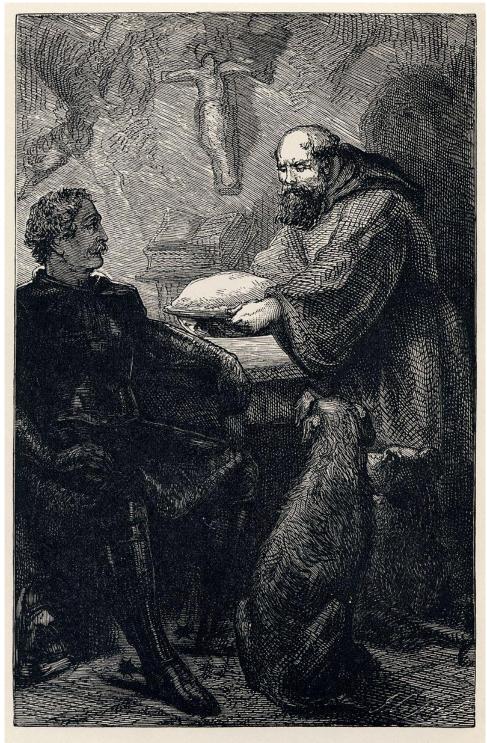
ANNEX

Canterbury's Cathedral, https://www.canterbury-cathedral.org/whats-on/news/2020/03/04/build-your-own-cathedral/

The Palace of Westminster, designed by Charles Barry & Augustus Pugin, 1836-1852
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_Revival_architecture#/media/File:Westminster_palace.jpg

LE NOIR FAINEANT IN THE HERMIT'S CELL

Out of the recesses of a dark closet, into which this aperture gave admittance, the hermit brought a large pasty, baked in a pewter platter of unusual dimensions.—PAGE 171.

Ivanhoe (1819), by Sir Walter Scott (1771 – 1832)

Ary Scheffer (1795-1858), "Le Larmoyeur" (1836), inspired by one of Schiller's ballads – bought by the Musée de la Vie Romantique, Paris, in 2017: https://drouot.com/l/7827101

Charles- Barthélémy Durupt (1804-1838) « Manfred et l'Esprit », 1831, inspired by Lord Byron's *Manfred*, 1817. The painter has staged this scene in a neo-gothic interior, which was fashionable at that time.
https://museevieromantique.paris.fr/fr/les-collections/beaux-arts/manfred-et-l%E2%80%99esprit-d%E2%80%99apr%C3%A8s-lord-byron

Painting in the Troubadour style: Pauline Auzou, « Noves et Alix de Provence » (1816)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pauline_Auzou_-_Nov%C3%A8s_et_Alix_de_Provence_(1816).jpg
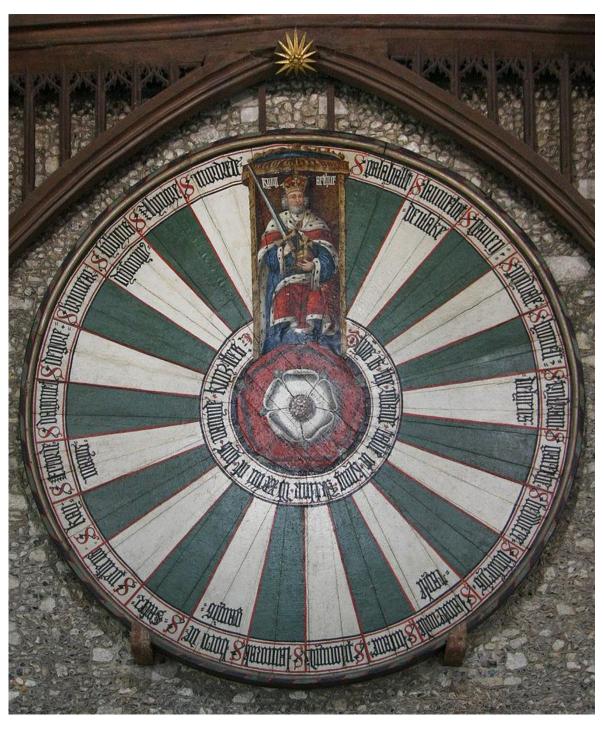
Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898), 'The Knight's Farewell', 1858
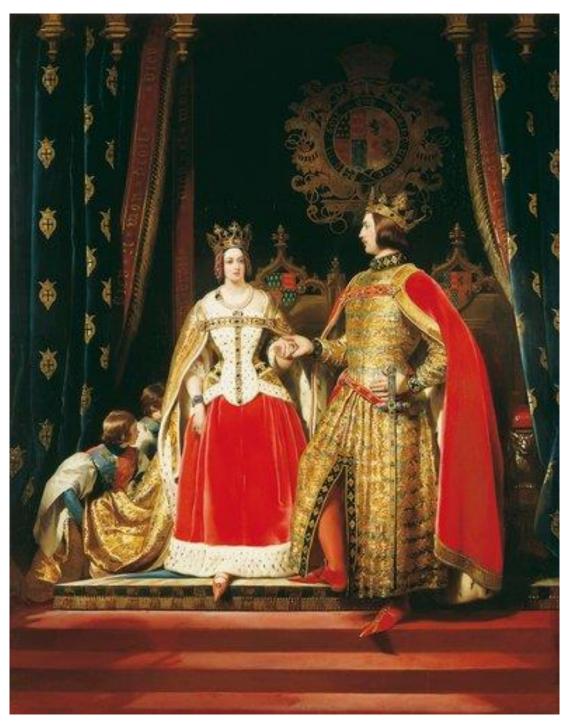https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Burne-Jones_The_Knights_Farewell.jpg

Burne-Jones, Edward (1833–1898), The Briar Wood –
https://www.akg-images.fr/archive/The-Briar-Rose--The-Briar-Wood-2UMDHURTG0VS.html

"Classical, Celtic, Christian and medieval elements come together in Victorian Arthuriana: 'The Knights of the Round Table Summoned to the Quest by the Strange Damsel', tapestry by Morris & Company (c. 1890). Figures by Edward Burne-Jones, chairs and other accessories designed by William Morris" (Christopher Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur*, p. 11). https://www.meisterdrucke.fr/fine-art-prints/Edward-Burne-Jones/832458/Quest-for-the-Holy-Graal-Tapestries,-Panel-1,-Knights-of-the-Round-Table-Summon-to-the-Quest-by-the-Strange-Damsel,-1898-1899.html

The Round Table at Winchester Castle
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Winchester_RoundTable.jpg?uselang=fr

Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-73), *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at the Bal Costumé of 12 May 1842* (1842-46)
"Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, dressed as Edward III and his consort Queen Philippa of Hainault (…) stand on a raised dais beneath a Gothic canopy decorated with a purple velvet cloth of estate (…) The costumes (…) were specifically intended to give work to the declining Spitalfields silk industry."
https://www.rct.uk/collection/404540/queen-victoria-and-prince-albert-at-the-bal-costume-of-12-may-1842

John William Waterhouse - The Lady of Shalott (1888)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lady_of_Shalott_(painting)#/media/File:John_William_Waterhouse_-_The_Lady_of_Shalott_-_Google_Art_Project_edit.jpg

William Holman Hunt, The Lady of Shalott, c. 1888–1905,

William Morris, *Queen Guenevere* (1858); Alternative title: *La Belle Iseult*
https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/morris-la-belle-iseult-n04999

John William Waterhouse - La Belle Dame sans Merci (1893)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_William_Waterhouse_-
_La_Belle_Dame_sans_Merci_(1893).jpg