



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

LAURENCE HOUSMAN (1865-1959)



Rothenstein, William. *Laurence Housman*. 1898. Lithograph. *Liber Juniorum: Six Lithographed Drawings*. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, on loan to the University of Delaware Library, Newark.

Born in 1865 in rural Worcestershire at his father's ancestral home, Perry Hall, Bromsgrove, Laurence Housman was the sixth of seven children. The Housman children were a close-knit group of highly literary, artistic and intellectual siblings whose childhood play included writing sonnets and acting plays of their own composition. Housman's respected eldest brother, Alfred, became the well-known poet and classical scholar, while his beloved sister, Clemence, became a writer, wood-engraver, and feminist. Laurence lived with Clemence most of his life, working with her collaboratively on both artistic projects and

suffrage campaigns. When he died in 1959, Housman had lived long enough after the Second World War to see the inchoate beginnings of the sexual revolution, second-wave feminism, and the gay-rights and peace movements that would dominate the 1960s. For the venerable Victorian suffragist, pacifist, socialist, homosexual, and advocate for sexual freedom and tolerance, this must have seemed like a glimpse into a new dawn.

Laurence Housman had a varied and prolific career over his long life, but one of its most significant aspects was his work as an artist/poet in the tradition of William Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites. His discovery of Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* when he was seventeen was critically important to his career. Thereafter Blake was his model and inspiration;

fittingly, Housman's first publication was *Selections from the Writings of William Blake* (1893), for which he wrote an introductory essay. His artistic education comprised two years at the local art school followed by six years of training in the book arts in London. In 1890 he met Charles Ricketts, who encouraged him to move away from fuzzy chalk drawings to detailed pen-work in the style of the Pre-Raphaelites and the great illustrators of the 1860s. Housman set himself the task of copying, in facsimile, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's illustrations for his sister's narrative poems; eventually, he became the first book-artist to design, decorate, and fully illustrate Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1893) as a stand-alone volume. Although only his second commission, *Goblin Market* remains one of Housman's best book designs as well as one of the most innovative of the fin de siècle. His illustrations for it caught the attention of Sir Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, who introduced him to Aubrey Beardsley, then art editor of *The Yellow Book*. Beardsley secured some of Housman's illustrations for the magazine, and John Lane hired him to join Ricketts as a designer of The Bodley Head's belles lettres series. Housman designed Bodley Head books by John Davidson, Katharine Tynan Hinkson, Clemence Housman, Edith Nesbit, Charles Newton-Robinson and Francis Thompson, as well as his own volume of poems, *Green Arras* (1896). He also designed his own books of illustrated poetry and fairy tales for other publishers.

Although he retained a lifelong interest in the book arts, Housman's eyesight was not strong enough to continue his fine pen-drawings into the twentieth century. In the early years of the century he continued his work as art critic for *The Manchester Guardian*, produced some critically insightful work on the Pre-Raphaelites and wrote more poetry and fiction. His greatest popular success was an anonymous publication, the epistolary novel, *An Englishwoman's Love-Letters*, which was a transatlantic best-seller as long as the public believed it to be a genuine memoir. The income he gained from this gave him the financial stability to enter the risky world of theatre. From 1902 onward, when his first play, *Bethlehem: A Nativity*, was privately produced by Gordon Craig, Housman was involved with the stage, earning the dubious distinction of "most censored playwright in England." Thirty-two of his plays—he wrote over one hundred—were censored for what was deemed inappropriate presentation of religious or royal figures.

Two successes bookend his career as a dramatist. The first, *Prunella*, which he co-wrote with Harley Granville Barker, was a commercial failure when first mounted in 1904, but, by 1916, had become a transatlantic favourite. The second, *Victoria Regina*, a Broadway hit with Helen Hayes in the leading role, was finally played before enthusiastic London houses in 1937, when Edward VIII at long last lifted the ban that had been placed on it.

When Housman died in 1959 he had published eighty of his own books and left a significant legacy of book design for works by fin-de-siècle writers, including an impressive collection of self-illustrated works of poetry and fiction. He had also worked throughout the twentieth century for human rights and social justice. An enthusiastic supporter of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Housman helped form two men's organizations to support the suffrage movement—the Men's League for Women's Suffrage and the Men's Social and Political Union. Housman was a frequent speaker at suffrage rallies in Hyde Park, where his parodic version of Rudyard Kipling's "Tommy this and Tommy that" was declaimed as the popular "Woman this and Woman that." Together with Clemence, Housman founded the Suffrage Atelier, where they produced designs for banners and pamphlets. An advocate for sexual tolerance and sexual freedom, Housman belonged to the secret homosexual society, The Order of Chaeronea, and became a founding member of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology when it was launched in 1914. After Oscar Wilde's release from prison, Housman traveled to Paris to deliver funds collected by friends at the Café Royal. A deeply spiritual man, Housman found the institutional Christian church's stance on war intolerable. At a time of great nationalist and imperialistic feeling, Housman declared himself a pacifist. His anti-war work, coupled with his active campaigning for Indian independence, led to his presiding at a meeting to welcome Mahatma Gandhi to the Round Table Conference on the future of India in 1932. By this time he and Clemence had moved to Street, in Somerset, where they were active participants in community theatre until Clemence's death in 1955. At the time of his own death four years later, Housman regarded himself, with characteristically dramatic flourish, as "the last Victorian."

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra is Professor of English at Ryerson University and Co-Editor of *The Yellow Nineties Online*. She has published books and articles on nineteenth-century visual/verbal relations, illustrated books and periodicals, and publishing history. In spring 2010 she guest edited a special issue of *Victorian Poetry* on poetry and the book arts. Her edition of Housman's *Green Arras* is forthcoming in Rice UP's "Literature by Design" series.

Selected Publications by Housman

The Collected Poems. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1937.

Echo de Paris: A Study from Life. London: Jonathan Cape, 1923.

An Englishwoman's Love Letters. London: John Murray, 1900.

Little Plays of St. Francis. 3 vols. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1935.

Selections from the Writings of William Blake. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893.

The Unexpected Years. London: Jonathan Cape, 1937.

Victoria Regina, A Dramatic Biography. Illustrated by Ernest H. Shepard. London: Jonathan Cape, 1934.

Selected Books Written, Designed, and Illustrated by Housman

All-Fellows: Seven Legends of Lower Redemption with Inserts in Verse. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896.

The Blue Moon. London: John Murray, 1904.

A Farm in Fairyland. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894.

The Field of Clover. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1898.

Green Arras. London: John Lane at The Bodley Head, 1896.

The House of Joy. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895.

The Little Land, with Songs from its Four Rivers. London: Grant Richards, 1899.

Prunella, or Love in a Dutch Garden. With H. Granville Barker. London: A. H Bullen, 1906.

Spikenard: A Book of Devotional Love-poems. London: Grant Richards, 1898.

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Barlow, Jane. *The End of Elfintown*. London: Macmillan, 1894.

Davidson, John. *A Random Itinerary*. London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894.

Hinkson, Katharine Tynan. *Cuckoo Songs*. London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894.

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Housman, Clemence. *The Were-Wolf*. London: John Lane at the Bodley House, 1896.

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