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A Spiteful Eruption in Green and Gold: James McNeill Whistler's *The Gold Scab* as an
Anti-Portrait

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

In 1879, James McNeill Whistler created *The Gold Scab*, a painting depicting Frederick R. Leyland, his former friend and patron, as an anthropomorphized peacock sitting atop a white house in front of a piano covered with bags of gold. *The Gold Scab*, has been described as a self-portrait, a satirical portrait, a “Japanese grotesquerie,” and a monumental caricature. Regardless of what one categorizes it as, the work is an unsatisfactory misfit that deviates from the conventions of these genres. By analyzing how *The Gold Scab* borrows from the genres of portraiture and caricature yet deviates from the conventions and intentions of these genres, this paper situates *The Gold Scab* within a larger movement, away from the rigidity of the genre of portraiture in the nineteenth century. In my examination of *The Gold Scab* through the lens of anti-portraiture, a framework that deprioritizes likeness as the defining convention of portraiture and instead prioritizes consideration of the artist’s intentions, it becomes clear that *The Gold Scab* is not a misfit; rather, it serves as a more than satisfactory example of the shift in ideological discourse regarding likeness and portraiture taking place in the nineteenth century.

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This one is for you.

A Spiteful Eruption in Green and Gold: Whistler's *The Gold Scab* and the Instability of Genre in Nineteenth-Century Art

"Whom the Gods wish to make ridiculous, they furnish with a frill!"

- James McNeill Whistler, Letter to F. R. Leyland (1877)¹

James McNeill Whistler (1834 – 1903) undoubtedly owes much of the success of his career as an artist in London to the patronage of the “Liverpool Medici,” Frederick Richard Leyland. Whistler had befriended the entire Leyland family and received numerous commissions from Leyland, many of which are Whistler’s most critically well-received works. In 1877, their relationship soured after Leyland refused to pay Whistler for unsolicited decorative work in the dining room (*The Peacock Room*) of his London home, 49 Princes Gate. Whistler blamed Leyland and his refusal to pay for the unbidden aspects of *The Peacock Room* for his financial ruin and subsequent bankruptcy. Once Whistler was declared unable to pay the fees of his bankruptcy, creditors were allowed access to his home and studio, ‘The White House’, to assess and purchase items that would go toward absolving his debt. Leyland was amongst these creditors. In the years after Whistler’s bankruptcy, Whistler took many public and private shots at the integrity and reputation of Leyland, as evidenced in the epigraph above and in his painting, *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre* (Figure 1).

Since the work’s creation and original exhibition, *The Gold Scab* has confused viewers and scholars alike. Specifically, there has been no agreement about how to define or categorize the work. *The Gold Scab* and its accompanying sketches have previously been identified as a

¹ James McNeill Whistler, July 22, 1877, MS Whistler L134, The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, London, UK

self- portrait², a satirical portrait³, a “Japanese grotesquerie”⁴ and a monumental caricature.⁵

Upon closer analysis, these categorizations all fail to capture the complex narrative within and intention behind *The Gold Scab*. While *The Gold Scab* certainly draws inspiration and borrows visual strategies from these genres, it evades seamless categorization because it deviates from the conventions of each genre, thus presenting itself as an unsatisfactory portrait and an unsatisfactory caricature. To reconcile the disparate categories and genres which have been previously applied to *The Gold Scab*, I argue that the most accurate genre to place the work in is that of anti-portraiture.

An anti-portrait is defined as “a portrait that resists or disrupts the received art-historical conventions of its genre.”⁶ While this seems paradoxical, the goal of acknowledging a work as an anti-portrait is less about categorizing it based on likeness and instead, foregrounding the action and effect of the work to ask new questions. Rather than what does a portrait look like, anti-portraiture asks what a portrait can do. The framework of anti-portraiture deprioritizes

² James McNeill Whistler, *Sketches of "The Gold Scab"* 1900. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91729523/>. Accessed March 24, 2023. The sketches of *The Gold Scab* in the E. R. & J. Pennell Collection of the Library of Congress in Washington DC were previously misidentified as “a self-portrait of Whistler as a peacock playing the piano” and was corrected based on its similarity to *The Gold Scab*. The catalogue raisonné of Whistler’s drawings, pastels, and watercolors compiled by Margaret MacDonald suggests that these sketches were likely a memory sketch completed by Whistler around 1900. The butterfly signature included at the top of the left-hand sketch has been dated to approximately twenty years after the creation of *The Gold Scab*; however, MacDonald suggest that the sketch may have contributed to the painting’s reappearance on the market.

³ Margaret F. MacDonald, Grischka Petri, *James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings, A Catalogue Raisonné*, University of Glasgow, 2020, <https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/display/?mid=y208&xml=sub>. Accessed February, 2023. In the online catalogue raisonné entry for *The Gold Scab*, Margaret Macdonald identified the work as “a satirical portrait of Whistler’s Liverpool patron Frederick Richards Leyland (1832 -1892), in which Leyland’s money and his addiction to frilled shirts are the subject of especial derision.”

⁴ Glasgow Evening Post, “Some Whistler Pictures,” January 25, 1893. The British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001965/18930123/057/0004>. Accessed November 23rd, 2022.

⁵ Kirk Savage, “‘A Forcible Piece of Weird Decoration’: Whistler and ‘*The Gold Scab*.’” *Smithsonian Studies in American art* 4, no. 2 (1990): 41. Savage describes *The Gold Scab* as “a monumental caricature thrusting its angry story at us in bold tones of green and yellow and a hard graphic style.”

⁶ Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber, *Anti-Portraiture: Challenging the Limits of the Portrait* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

resemblance, and when applied to *The Gold Scab*, destabilizes David Peters Corbett's definition of the goals and conventions of the genre of nineteenth-century portraiture as "a genre in which the relationship of visual representation to the objects it claims to describe is clearly evident. [...] Its fundamental claim is to relate 'a physiognomic likeness...to the identity of the...person depicted.'" ⁷ When applying the framework of anti-portraiture to *The Gold Scab* as a nineteenth-century work, it aligns the work with the larger historical movement spurred by the advent of photography that sought to move away from likeness and instead foreground the artist's stylistic approach and interpretation. In this way, *The Gold Scab* becomes less divorced from its contemporaries because it shares in these ideological goals.

Whistler remains one of the most studied artists in the discourse of modern American art. Art historian and director of the Whistler Paintings Project, Margaret F. MacDonald has curated an extensive catalogue raisonné of Whistler's paintings, etchings, and correspondence which compiles not only these materials but also the mass of relevant scholarship on said material. ⁸ It is evident from the slim listing of bibliographic information under *The Gold Scab*'s entry in the catalogue raisonné that the work has received a comparatively minute amount of treatment from critics and scholars. Kirk Savage has provided the most extensive treatment of this work, situating the painting within the discourse of Whistler's reputation. ⁹ Linda Merrill discusses *The Gold Scab* within the context of *The Peacock Room*, the initial work that accounted for the

⁷ David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848-1914*, Refiguring Modernism (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004). 144.

⁸ Margaret MacDonald and Grischka Petri, James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings, A Catalogue Raisonné <https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/display/?mid=y208&xml=sub>.

⁹ Savage, "'A Forcible Piece of Weird Decoration'" 41 - 51. Savage examines how *The Gold Scab* departed from Whistler's usual "elegant and obscure" portraiture and how the work was critically received and the problems it presents to Whistler's passionate supporters and its subsequent collectors with its inversion of his usual technique and aesthetics. Savage's article remains the only text that focuses on *The Gold Scab* alone.

intense rift between Whistler and Leyland.¹⁰ *The Gold Scab* received minor mention by David Park Curry for its influence on later satirical caricatures featured in the publication *Punch* magazine.¹¹ My analysis of *The Gold Scab* provides much needed investigation into several mysterious and understudied aspects of the work. By putting the oft ignored *The Gold Scab* in conversation with not only Whistler's own works but the genre of nineteenth-century portraiture, this analysis makes clear that while *The Gold Scab* seems to be an outlier or outcast that does not represent art of its time, it serves as an indispensable tool to better understand the discourse surrounding the genre of portraiture at the transition between the late nineteenth-century to the early twentieth century.

To understand the complex deviations from the genres of portraiture and caricature, it is important to first analyze the work's visual content. James McNeill Whistler's *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre* is an oil on canvas painting that measures approximately fifty-five inches by seventy-three and a half inches without its frame. The painting depicts a hybrid creature meant to be Frederick R. Leyland, part man and part peacock, sitting in front of a piano with scaled hands outstretched upon the keys. Instead of a standard piano bench, Whistler paints Leyland sitting atop a rectangular white house with a pointed grey and green roof. Leyland's legs are covered in green scales, punctuated with the occasional dull gold scale. His right foot resembles the clawed foot of a peacock with three toes pointed forward and one toe that faces backward. A golden shoe buckle covers the top of the grotesque foot, a reference to Whistler's first portrait of Leyland who was known to wear lush gold-buckled shoes. Leyland's scaly

¹⁰ Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (Washington, D.C: Freer Gallery of Art, 1998). 287 – 291. Merrill's text provides the most detailed and impressive account of the events before, during, and after the completion of *The Peacock Room*. Merrill discusses *The Gold Scab* as a continuation of *The Peacock Room*.

¹¹ David Park Curry, *James McNeill Whistler: Uneasy Pieces* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2004). 254-255.

scalloped feather pattern continues up his body to form his black trouser shorts and green-blue shirt. Two tufts of ruffled white fabric peak out of the scaled sleeves of his shirt while a frilly white-collar juts off the center of his chest. A feathered tail hangs off Leyland's back and drapes over the front of the white house where he sits. His head has a blue crest that runs from his forehead down to the back of his neck. The figure's face is painted in a yellow-based flesh color with animated eyebrows and tongue sticking out from beneath a stylized pointy black beard and mustache. The figure's eyes are crossed as he turns his head to the viewer. Atop the piano, there are blue-green and gold pouches and an open sheet of music with the words "The Gold Scab. Eruption in Frilthy Lucre" on the right side of the sheet. The letters 'F', 'R', and 'L' in the word 'frilthy' are enlarged and capitalized, referencing Frederick R. Leyland's initials. The left side leaf of the sheet music bears a single note on the five-line staff, an f sharp.¹² The f sharp on the left side of the sheet and the letters 'S', 'F', and 'L' on the right side of the sheet are also adorned with frills of their own, mirroring the frilly collar depicted on the chest of the figure. Above the piano, Whistler's signature butterfly is painted in black with its long-barbed tail pointing its stinger tip at the back of Leyland's neck, a detail that Whistler had never included on a painting before.¹³

There is no debate that *The Gold Scab* is a rich and striking image even without its viewer understanding the feud between Whistler and his former patron, Leyland. However, to understand why *The Gold Scab* deviates not only from the visual art historical conventions of its time but also the contextual art historical conventions, the history of Whistler and Leyland's

¹² Tim Barringer, "Art, Music, and the Emotions in the Aesthetic Movement," 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 2016, no. 23 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.784>. 19. Barringer notes "F for Frederick and the sharp signifying Leyland's business practices and his refusal to pay Whistler the two thousand pounds he demanded for the peacock room."

¹³ MacDonald and Petri, James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings, A Catalogue Raison né.

friendship and falling-out must be outlined. When *The Gold Scab* is interpreted within the historical context of the events of *The Peacock Room* and the subsequent feud in mind, it becomes clear that Whistler's artistic choices and intentions convey a much more serious and personal meaning than the comical and grotesque portrait presents at first glance.

Whistler and Leyland's relationship began simply as that of an artist and their patron. Frederick R. Leyland, a Liverpool ship merchant and patron to Pre-Raphaelites like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, met Whistler in the mid-1860s. By the late 1860s, Leyland would become Whistler's primary patron, commissioning some of Whistler's most acclaimed and important works.¹⁴ When Leyland invited Whistler and his mother, Anna Whistler, to enjoy the autumn season at his home, Speke Hall, in September of 1869, the lines of the relationship of artist and patron began to blur. When some of the Leyland children fell ill with scarlet fever, Anna Whistler provided care and nursed them through their illness, forever endearing the Whistler family to the Leyland family in a more intimate way.¹⁵ During Whistler's first stay at his home, Leyland had likely hoped that the visit would revitalize Whistler's state of mind so he could finish his commission of *The Three Girls* which was several months belated; however, Leyland likely gave Whistler permission to set aside *The Three Girls* and when he invited the artist back to his home the following year, Whistler was commissioned to work solely on "a life-size full length portrait of Mr. Leyland his host."¹⁶ While Whistler did eventually complete the portrait of Leyland in 1874, *The Three Girls* was never completed but this commission represents a larger

¹⁴ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 14. Leyland also commissioned several portraits of his family members, of which only his own portrait and the portrait of his wife would be completed.

¹⁵ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 122.

¹⁶ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 122.

trend of Leyland providing generous time, money, and resources for Whistler's works despite not receiving finished products of most of the commissions.

Despite his generous attitude toward Whistler, Leyland had begun to develop a reputation for moodiness and haughtiness. In 1872, this side to Leyland's character publicly emerged after he made a scandalous business deal with his former partners.¹⁷ With his business reputation spiraling downward, his behavior toward his friends and family also changed. In 1873, Leyland had a falling out with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, another artist with whom he developed a friendship, over the commission of *La Ghirlandata*. Another rift occurred shortly after when Leyland's son, Freddie (Frederick D. Leyland), wanted to leave school, resulting in "a devil of a row." Freddie, who had also grown close to Whistler through their time spent together at Speke Hall, wrote to Whistler stating that he not been in contact with his parents for three weeks.¹⁸ During this time, Whistler and Leyland's working relationship and friendship continued without much upset.

Leyland and Whistler continued their friendship and working relationship during this time of great despair in Leyland's personal life. Leyland commissioned more portraits of his family from Whistler, including *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Frances Leyland (1871-1877)* and several unfinished portraits of the Leyland children. Frances Leyland and Whistler grew especially close during the times in which Leyland was away for work. The two frequented several theaters and operas in London and confided personal matters to each

¹⁷ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 129. Leyland had arranged to take over the Bibby firm, his kind employers who "saved him from the gutter and demanded that they sell him the business or deal with him as a competitor." This behavior was largely criticized by his peers and acquaintances.

¹⁸ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 130. Merrill suggests that a potential explanation for the shift in color of the background in *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Frederick R. Leyland* was this period of strife that Leyland went through in his personal life that caused his demeanor to change.

other.¹⁹ Aside from Whistler's close relationship to both Leyland and Mrs. Leyland, Whistler also grew close with Lizzie Dawson, Mrs. Leyland's youngest sister. In 1872 at Rossetti's home, Whistler announced that he had asked Lizzie Dawson to marry him in Leyland's presence.²⁰ While Whistler and Lizzie Dawson never married, it shows the intimate relationship between Whistler and the Leyland family.

Throughout the mid-1870s, Leyland continued to support Whistler not only through financial means but also through lending him "the comforts of family life" as Whistler continued to spend much time at the Leyland residence, Speke Hall.²¹ Leyland was pleased to see that Whistler's time at his home was well spent as he resumed work on the major commission, *The Three Girls*. While Whistler worked to complete *The Three Girls*, Leyland was preparing to move into his new home in London, 49 Prince's Gate, where a prominent space in the dining room had been reserved for Whistler's works.²²

49 Prince's Gate represented Leyland's desire to showcase both his success as a Liverpool businessman as well as the sumptuous collection of Chinese and Japanese art and objects he had been acquiring over the previous decade. Leyland oversaw extensive renovations for his new home with the hopes of making it "the most artistic dwelling in the Metropolis." A Liverpool historian commented, "whether he achieved that ambition or not, it is certain that at one time his residence No. 49 Prince's Gate was the most talked-of dwelling in the Capitol."²³

¹⁹ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 133. Merrill notes that this type of romantic friendship between "Victorian artists and sympathetic married women were neither unusual nor improper." There is no evidence that points to their friendship being a problem for Leyland himself; Frances even went as far as to call their friendship a necessity as "One had to have a man when one went out in London."

²⁰ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 133-134.

²¹ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 138.

²² Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 145. *The Three Girls* was reserved a spot in the dining room opposite *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey: La Princesse des Pays de la Porcelaine*.

²³ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 156.

Certainly, one of the draws of Prince's Gate was Whistler's *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey – La Princesse des Pays de la Porcelaine*, the lone painting securely in Leyland's possession; an anecdote that Leyland would later confront Whistler about when the feud between artist and patron/friend peaked.²⁴ Leyland had commissioned *La Princesse* to hang as the central picture in the renovated dining room of 49 Prince's Gate. It was the events of the renovation of the center of the house, the dining room that would become known as *The Peacock Room*, that would rocket the Leyland home into infamy.

The Peacock Room was the site where Leyland and Whistler's working relationship and friendship would disintegrate. The commission for the renovation and interior décor of *The Peacock Room* was originally given to the Victorian architect, Thomas Jeckyll (1827 – 1881). Jeckyll was tasked to create a setting for Leyland's extensive collection of Chinese blue and white porcelain.²⁵ The original design for the interior of *The Peacock Room* featured golden gilt leather wall décor that feature a red, blue, and white floral motif, pendant ceiling lamps, and a splash of blue tiling surrounding the fireplace to highlight the blue and white porcelain that would be displayed on the built-in shelving. During the process of this renovation, Jeckyll looked to Leyland and Whistler to provide insight regarding certain elements of the room. As Jeckyll's health deteriorated and his progress on the renovation came to a halt, Leyland looked for alternatives to complete the room's design.²⁶ Whether or not Leyland ever explicitly handed over the responsibilities to finish the room to Whistler or if Whistler involved himself without clear

²⁴ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 187. For more information on *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey: La Princesse des Pays de la Porcelaine* and how *La Princesse* was a precursor for the tensions between Whistler and Leyland, see pages 173 – 187.

²⁵ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 189.

²⁶ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 206 – 207. Leyland had initially resolved to commission Morris & Co. to complete the room's design; however, Whistler stepped in to take the project on, leaving Morris & Co. out of the project almost entirely.

invitation remains ambiguous. Regardless of how Whistler came to be more involved in this project, it was intended that he continue to carry out Jeckyll's design plan.²⁷

When Whistler took over the project, the decoration was for the most part complete. Both Whistler and Leyland considered the project to be "a very slight affair and the work of comparatively a few days." There was no formal "business contract" for the remaining work of the project; however, Leyland and Whistler agreed to five hundred pounds as payment for the remaining work.²⁸ Whistler had also already received his payment for the completed *La Princesse* and the never-completed *The Three Girls*.

Despite the agreement between Whistler and Leyland that the project was near completion and that Whistler's task was solely to complete what Jeckyll had not finished, Whistler began to make larger changes to the room. Whistler's initiative to make these larger changes was first inspired by his assessment that Jeckyll's original design which included red floral motifs "hurt the harmony of his picture," *La Princesse*.²⁹ Leyland had allowed for these efforts with the understanding that the changes were rather minute and would allow for greater cohesion and harmony in the room. However, Whistler's changes did not stop there.

Among the robust changes that Whistler made to Jeckyll's original designs, the continuation and elevation of the scale-like "wave pattern" was central to Whistler's misunderstanding of Leyland's kindness. The wave pattern was already included by Jeckyll on the leaded glass of the door; Leyland might have even sanctioned Whistler's highlighting of this element as he thought it would further unify the aesthetic of the room. However, Whistler

²⁷ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 207.

²⁸ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 210.

²⁹ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 211.

transformed the seemingly innocuous wave pattern through adding blue and gold colored detailing to the enclosed glass which mimicked the patterns of a peacock's plume feathers.³⁰ It is in this detail where Whistler's new vision for *The Peacock Room* came to fruition.

In Leyland's absence, Whistler installed his painting and made numerous pleas to his patron through letters for a larger allowance that would permit him to make even more changes to aspects of the room that he felt disagreed or clashed with his painting. The reality of these changes was much grander than he had led on in his correspondence to Leyland. Upon receiving these requests, Leyland responded to Whistler:

I can only repeat what I told you the other day that I cannot consent to the amount you spoke of - £2000. – and I do not think you should have involved me in such a large expenditure without previously telling me of it. [...] I am sorry there should be such an unpleasant correspondence between us; but I do think you are to blame for not letting me know before developing into an elaborate scheme of decoration what was intended to be a very slight affair and the work of comparatively a few days.³¹

After continued correspondence, Leyland made few concessions to Whistler's demands. Leyland offered Whistler £1000 instead of Whistler's demand of £2000. Whistler interpreted Leyland's refusal to pay him in full for his work as an indication of Leyland's greed and arrogance rather than a fair stand against an artist taking advantage of his patron's wealth and commission. Another compromise was reached as Leyland permitted Whistler to continue decorating the room with Leyland telling the artist "The work had progressed so far that I had no choice but to complete it."³² Whistler was given until the Leyland family returned to London at the start of the next season.

³⁰ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 212.

³¹ Frederick Richards Leyland, October 21, 1876, MS Whistler L106, The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, London, UK

³² Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 231.

With the sum settled and a compromise met, Whistler continued his work on *The Peacock Room*. Whistler's final touches to *The Peacock Room* "would illustrate his own interpretation of events."³³ Whistler transformed the meaning of the initial peacock motif which was designed to harmoniously reconcile his painting with the room's overall design. Instead of striving for harmony, Whistler chose to emphasize discord; specifically, he chose to highlight the discord that resulted from the previous contention between he and his patron regarding *The Peacock Room*.

On the south wall of the dining room, Whistler designed a mural he referred to as *Art and Money; or the Story of the Room*³⁴ (Figure 2). Before this, the peacock imagery was purely decorative; however, this mural represents Whistler's first attempt at allegory as he imbued the mural of two male peacocks fighting with a both a broader and more personal significance. The "poor peacock" on the lower left of the mural does not proudly display its plumage and its posture "conveys disdain for the fury" of its counterpart, the "rich peacock."³⁵ The "rich peacock" takes an aggressive stance, with its wings raised, its mouth agape, and its magnificent plume on display. The body of the "rich peacock" features embedded silver coins, some of

³³ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 233.

³⁴ James McNeill Whistler, July 18th / 25th, 1877, MS Whistler L133, The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, London, UK. In a letter draft to Leyland's Wife, Frances, Whistler writes, "Dear Mrs L – May I beg that you will if you see fit you will [sic] show this note openly to the family – [...] Theatrical in your threat – Ridiculous in your rage – Fuming in your frill, I refer you to the Cartoon opposite you at dinner, known to all London as 'L'art et l'Argent' [Art and Money] or the Story of the Room." The title of *L'art et L'argent* (Art and Money) seems to be the title either invented by or accepted by Whistler for the mural. However, in Linda Merrill's *The Peacock Room*, she states in a footnote on page 374 that a different title, *The Rich Peacock and The Poor Peacock*, was later given to the work by Whistler's friend and patron, Algernon Bertram Freeman Mitford. This title was also seemingly proliferated through E. R. and J. Pennell's text, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler* (1908). In the sixth edition of this text published in 1919, they write, "One, standing amid flying feathers and fold, clutches in his claws a pile of coins; the other spreads his wings in angry but triumphant defiance: 'the Rich Peacock and the Poor Peacock,' Whistler said, symbolizing the relations between patron and artist. *The Rich Peacock and The Poor Peacock* is also the title that Margaret MacDonald lists the work as in the catalogue raisonné.

³⁵ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 344.

which have fallen from its body and litter the floor around its feet. While at first glance, the mural seems to be an allegory of vanity and commentary on class, it becomes clear that these two peacocks also represent the artist and his former friend. Initially, the aggressive and protesting peacock was taken to represent Whistler and his reputation for antagonism while the more passive peacock was taken to represent Leyland.³⁶ However, upon closer inspection, small clues to the identities of the peacocks reveal Whistler's true intentions. The "poor peacock" has a stiff silver feather at the crest of its head, a reference to Whistler's signature tuft of white hair. The "rich peacock" is depicted with scraggly silver feathers at its throat, referencing Leyland's love for frilly collared shirts. While Whistler did make the effort to add these identifying elements, the identities of the peacocks remained concealed or obscured to most of Whistler's contemporaries.³⁷ However, for those who were in the know about the falling out between Whistler and Leyland, these small details effectively convey the identities of the two birds and forever immortalize their feud.

Whistler's falling out with Leyland in 1877 after the completion of *The Peacock Room* was not the only publicized spat, he involved himself in. On July 21, 1877, news of Whistler's impending lawsuit against art critic John Ruskin and his infamous critique of Whistler's works displayed at the Grosvenor Gallery was published in *Fors Clavigera*.³⁸ In 1878, Whistler had officially engaged in an extensive legal battle with Ruskin, over libelous comments about Whistler's work. Although Whistler technically received a verdict in his favor, "The plaintiff's triumph was tarnished, however, by the assessment of damages at one farthing---a quarter of a

³⁶ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 344.

³⁷ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 344.

³⁸ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 274. After visiting the Grosvenor Gallery in July, Ruskin published a review of Whistler's works, writing "I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now: but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

penny--- when the cost to Whistler of Ruskin's libel had been assessed in the statement of claim at one thousand pounds."³⁹ While Whistler was victorious in court, the one farthing in damages he was awarded as compensation could not ease the financial burden of having to pay his own costs for the litigation. It was the Whistler v. Ruskin trial which caused Whistler to fall into financial ruin; despite this, in the following years, Whistler maintained that it was Leyland's refusal to pay him the additional £2000 which most significantly contributed to his subsequent bankruptcy. However, since Whistler was victorious in this instance, he does not draw as much attention to the financial consequences of this legal battle as he does to Leyland's financial slight.

While Whistler's grudge against Ruskin had seemingly been settled in a victorious yet ruinous court case, his rancor toward Leyland after the events of *The Peacock Room* had no such civil resolution in his favor. His projection of responsibility for his financial ruin and his unresolved grievances against Leyland became the spiteful fire from which *The Gold Scab* was born. Whistler declared bankruptcy on May 7, 1879, and his home and studio, the White House became the site of the liquidation of his assets. Leyland was listed as one of the numerous creditors who would be entitled to repayment.⁴⁰ In a letter to Leyland, Whistler conveys his feelings of betrayal after learning that Leyland would be involved in his liquidation:

I hear you have been sitting like an old hen upon my case and hatching scorpions that have only wriggled in your hand and made you the ridicule of the Committee! What will you – it is your fate and you could not have done otherwise- But how charmingly characteristic of your own meanness – that for vengeance you should have waited these years and having pocketed the horsewhip like the true counting house rat should now turn

³⁹ Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Whistler v. Ruskin* (Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1992.) 203.

⁴⁰ The London Bankruptcy Court, May 7, 1879, FGA Whistler 304, Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of the Estate of Charles Lang Freer.

up when you think the moment of the register has arrived to worry and work with accounts and punish with your pen the [sic] who laughs and has always laughed at your pompous rage and impotent spleen –⁴¹

The language Whistler used illuminates his view of Leyland as a crushing force in his life, which Whistler transposed into image in *The Gold Scab*.

Whistler produced *The Gold Scab* with the intention of displaying in the White House for his creditors as they came to appraise and purchase his works and belongings. Whistler designed the work to replace the one work that he knew Leyland would be looking for, the unfinished *The Three Girls*; he went as far as to place *The Gold Scab* into the frame he designed with specifically for *The Three Girls*.⁴² Much like the fighting peacock mural *Art and Money* in *The Peacock Room*, *The Gold Scab*'s imagery was vague enough that to those who were unfamiliar with the events of *The Peacock Room* and the feud between the two men, it appeared to be a comical and grotesque image; however, for those who were in the know, it was clear that the work was meant to lampoon Whistler's former patron as it carried over the iconography Whistler had developed to represent Leyland in the *Art and Money* mural.

While in its original exhibition for the creditors of Whistler's estate, *The Gold Scab*'s significance relied on intimate knowledge of Whistler and Leyland's relationship, it's significance would later be realized and disseminated in reviews of later exhibitions. In the December 19, 1879 edition of the *Heywood Advertiser*, the reviewer writes, "Annibale Caracci is dead; but James McNeill Whistler is very much alive. He has painted a big picture of a former "patron," representing him at full length as a demon, with peacock scales, hooked claws, and a ruffled shirt, seated at a piano and playing a nocturne – 'The Gold Scab.' For a seat he has the

⁴¹ James McNeill Whistler, May/June, 1879, MS Whistler L134, The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, London, UK.

⁴² Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 288.

famous “White House” at Chelsea. Money-bags are heaped around and other emblems are not wanting to point the moral and adorn the tale of this diabolical personage. This pleasing example of satirical art is at present in a celebrated sale-room, with the Grosvenor Gallery ‘Bold Girl.’ And will be offered to the liberal competition of an enlightened public some of these days.”⁴³ In the January 25, 1893 edition of the Glasgow Evening Post, a review of an exhibition which featured *The Gold Scab* states, “Admirers of Whistler should not lose the opportunity of seeing them, for they include the distinguished portrait entitled ‘The Fur Jacket’ with its daring and successful scheme of colour; ‘La Dame Aubrodequin Juana’ (otherwise Lady Archibald Campbell), ‘La Princess du Pays de Porcelaine,’ and ‘The Gold Scab,’ that extraordinary Japanese grotesquerie in which the artist caricatured Mr. Leyland, his patron. The ‘Gold Scab’ suggests a nightmare, consequent on too much lobster salad, but it is wonderfully clever.”⁴⁴ Another response to a later exhibition at the Goupil Gallery in 1900 from March 21, 1900 edition of The Globe writes, “[...] Mr. Whistler’s famous pictorial lampoon on one of his patrons, the ‘Arrangement in Green and Gold,’ [...] With these as the most prominent features, the exhibition includes scarcely anything that is not admirable in some way and it is as a whole worthy of high praise.”⁴⁵ Each of these reviews correctly identify Leyland as the subject of the work; this was not based in its likeness, rather it spread word of mouth through the reputation of the work. These press writings reveal that the true meaning and significance of *The Gold Scab* was worthy of expression to the wider public, making Whistler’s private prank accessible to all those who

⁴³ Heywood Advertiser. “What The ‘World’ Says: Notes by ‘Atlas’,” December 19, 1879. The British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002441/18791219/023/0002>. Accessed November 23rd, 2022.

⁴⁴ Glasgow Evening Post, “Some Whistler Pictures,” January 25, 1893. The British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001965/18930123/057/0004>. Accessed November 23rd, 2022.

⁴⁵ The Globe, “The Goupil Gallery,” March 21, 1900. The British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001112/19000321/188/0010>. Accessed November 23rd, 2022.

enjoyed in the drama of his antagonistic behavior. Whistler and Leyland's friendship and feud lives on through Whistler's interpretation of the events in *The Gold Scab*.



The Gold Scab presents viewers with several problems which stand in the way of understanding its formal elements and contextual meanings. A central issue which has plagued the work lay in the difficulty of categorizing it within a singular genre. While Whistler himself called the work “The ‘Gold Scab.’ Eruption in FRiLTHY Lucre” or just “Gold Scab,” the work also went by several other titles including “A Satirical Painting of a Gentleman styled ‘The Creditor’” and “Arrangement in Green and Gold.” The title “Arrangement in Green and Gold” is particularly relevant as an ‘arrangement’ was most used to denote Whistler’s portraiture.⁴⁶ The disagreement regarding what to call *The Gold Scab* both in name and genre highlights that the work is unsatisfactory in adhering to the conventions of any of the genres to which it’s been aligned.

Whistler’s *The Gold Scab* makes a stark departure from the conventions of nineteenth-century painted portraiture. David Peters Corbett defines nineteenth-century portraiture as “a genre in which the relationship of visual representation to the objects it claims to describe is clearly evident. [...] Its fundamental claim is to relate ‘a physiognomic likeness...to the identity of the...person depicted.’”⁴⁷ Corbett also specifies that within the late 19th century, a portrait’s aim was to reveal the dualism of access and elusiveness of identity offered by the sitter through a “social or egotistical mask.” that mediates an anxiety that one feels about being seen or “self-

⁴⁶ The term “arrangement” in the titles of Whistler’s paintings is not exclusive to portraiture; however, portraits constitute the majority of “arrangements.”

⁴⁷ Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint*. 144.

exposure.”⁴⁸ Through Corbett’s definition, two key goals of nineteenth-century portraiture are made clear: physiognomic likeness and the mediation of identity through the artist’s interpretation.

While Corbett has provided a clear and concise definition of the conventions and aims of nineteenth-century portraiture, portraiture as a genre has a long history that merits brief discussion. In his text, *Portraiture*, Richard Brilliant discusses both the history and theory of portraiture that sheds light on the way in which the genre has transformed throughout time. Of particular potency for this analysis is Brilliant’s discussion of the role of likeness or resemblance in the genre. Brilliant writes “The degree of likeness required of a portrait may vary greatly, affected by changing views about what constitutes ‘resemblance’ and whether it can ever be measured on an objective basis.”⁴⁹ This sentiment highlights the inherent impact of the ideological conception of likeness upon the genre. The ideological conception of identity and resemblance of the nineteenth-century was greatly impacted by physiognomy, which Brilliant denotes as “the pseudo-science of face-reading, [...] it asserted a belief that the signs of a person’s character were manifested in the face and that with the proper method of analysis one could learn to read those signs from them know the character of the person actually addressed or portrait.”⁵⁰ Corbett has rightly identified this ideological concern as greatly influencing the aim of the genre in the nineteenth-century; however, his definition also extends to include the artist’s role in the intervention upon the subject’s identity and resemblance through their artistic interpretation. The artist of the nineteenth-century, especially portrait artists, were faced with

⁴⁸ Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint*. 144.

⁴⁹ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture*. London: Reaktion, 1991.

⁵⁰ Brilliant, *Portraiture*.

cultural, economic, and technological change that invited them to experiment with what it means to capture likeness through means other than just physiognomic resemblance.

The key goals of the genre of nineteenth-century portraiture were necessarily clarified in the face of technological developments of the early nineteenth-century. Specifically, the advent of photography required artists to interrogate and refine their conception of not only portraiture but of identity in the nineteenth-century. From its beginnings in the early 1800s, photography had a tenuous relationship with painting. Photography both offered itself as a useful tool for painters to capture a reference moment that circumvented the need for sitters to pose uncomfortably for hours on end during multiple sessions and as a competitor in capturing one's likeness with an accuracy largely unattainable to most artists.⁵¹ This fragile relationship between the two media was subject to much debate and discourse about the status of photography and painting as art. The aesthetic principles of painting which had once been unspoken were now made explicit for writers and artists to understand what was at stake with the creation and popularization of photography.⁵² The effects that photography had on the medium of painting is a part of a larger discourse in which media historians have found that old and new media do not simply replace or follow each other in succession without interaction; rather, they transform or "emulate and reconfigure one another."⁵³

To capture one's likeness in a painting had previously been considered one of the greatest marks of achievement and skill for a portrait artist. However, as the mimetic power of photography became realized, artists reevaluated the role of mimesis in portraiture. No longer

⁵¹ Jan Von Brevern, "Two or Three Things Photography Did to Painting," in *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century* (University Park, PANAMA: Penn State University Press, 2018), 105.

⁵² Von Brevern, "Two or Three Things Photography Did to Painting," 105.

⁵³ Von Brevern, "Two or Three Things Photography Did to Painting," 106.

looking for ways to compete with the mechanically reproduced likeness possible in the photographic image, artists instead turned their attention away from exact likeness as perceived by the eye and toward the artist's own unique conception of the sitter.⁵⁴ In "An American Prelude to the Abstract Portrait," Dorinda Evans writes, "In effect, public appreciation of the mechanized camera helped to spur an increased emphasis on what the traditional artist, working with hand tools, could supply that was dissimilar and unrelated to external nature. Rather than a strict copy of something seen, the portrait was a creation "radiant with the charm of man's spirit." This creation which favored the spirit over the external form of the sitter increased the appeal of a 'heightened pictorial quality' and originality.⁵⁵ While photography invited painters to explore more expressionistic and painterly approaches to portraiture, the other goal, physiognomic likeness, is not wholly lost. These goals continued to guide the works of not only Whistler's contemporaries like John Singer Sargent⁵⁶ and George Frederick Watts⁵⁷ but also Whistler himself.

⁵⁴ Dorinda Evans, "An American Prelude to the Abstract Painting," in *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today* (New Haven and London: Bowdoin College Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2016).

⁵⁵ Evans, "An American Prelude to the Abstract Painting." 11.

⁵⁶ For example, John Singer Sargent's oil portrait of French gynecologist and art collector, Dr. Pozzi, entitled *Dr. Pozzi at Home* (1881), combines these two goals by depicting the sitter with great clarity and physiognomic likeness in the areas where the doctor's flesh is exposed (face and hands) with a more painterly approach to the clothing and background. The attention paid to reproducing a physiognomic likeness is made evident when compared to a contemporaneous photograph of Dr. Pozzi by Paul Nadar. While Sargent and Nadar's works are two different mediums, the likeness of Dr. Pozzi is similar enough in both that a viewer would not have trouble making connections between the two. This comparison also speaks Corbett's definition of the goals of nineteenth century portraiture as it uses a painterly style to mediate the sitter's identity.

⁵⁷ George Frederick Watts similarly combines these goals in his portrait of fellow artist, Edward Burne-Jones, in his 1870 oil portrait entitled *Portrait of Sir Edward Burne-Jones*. Watts paint's Burne-Jones' face in great naturalistic detail, his glowing skin and red beard contrasting against his brooding dark coat and the blackened red background. The naturalistic rendering of Burne-Jones' face contrasted against the deep color of the background creates a sense of disembodiment that centers the sitter's likeness. This likeness is the core aspect that communicates exterior and interior identity. To mediate Burne-Jones' identity in his work, he denies any symbolic references to his career as an artist. Watts' portrait of Burne-Jones succeeds in this aim appearing capable of movement despite the stillness of his demeanor and pose. Watts' paints his sitter with such naturalism and likeness that his liveliness could not be denied.

Whistler created several portraits which aligned with the goals and conventions of nineteenth-century painted portraiture. Most relevant to this study is Whistler's portrait of Leyland, *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Frederick R. Leyland* (Figure 3). In 1873, before the infamous falling out between he and his patron, Whistler painted an oil on canvas portrait of Leyland. Whistler paints Leyland standing, his right leg tipping forward with all his weight balancing on the back left leg in a casual contrapposto. The painter depicts Leyland with his right hand on his hip, his left arm draped with a grey coat. Whistler shows Leyland in his usual beard and frilly white collar, looking straight out to the viewer with a stern and present gaze. Leyland's face is painted in a soft focus, yet his likeness is clear and sharp. As this work bears the title of an 'Arrangement', Whistler emphasizes the harmony of the black, grey, and flesh tones by using softened brush strokes to muddy the distinction between Leyland's figure and the dark background he stands in front of.⁵⁸ In Whistler's use of his signature harmonious color and painterly approach, he mediates Leyland's identity through his personal style without interfering with creating a strong resemblance. Whistler is obviously concerned with representing Leyland's accessible yet elusive identity as Whistler understands him and how Leyland wants to be seen.

It is precisely because Whistler typically follows the goals and conventions of the late nineteenth-century that *The Gold Scab* disrupts the conventions of European portraiture and becomes problematized within his body of work. Moving away from the naturalistic yet slightly idealized traditions of the genre of portraiture at the time, *The Gold Scab* does not make any grand attempt at the accurate likeness in its caricaturistic abstraction of Leyland. Instead, the work relies on symbolic and metaphorical representations that reference the style, personality,

⁵⁸ Many of Whistler's works are named after musical compositional terms: arrangement, nocturne, and symphonies. These terms specifically are meant to elicit the viewers' attention to the use of harmonious color.

and life of Leyland. In its abstraction of likeness, graphic style, and use of symbolic references to convey the sitter's identity, *The Gold Scab* presents itself as a problematic and unsatisfactory portrait.

Whistler utilizes three specific symbolic details to convey who Leyland is: Leyland's anthropomorphic transformation into a peacock, Whistler's 'The White House' as the piano bench Leyland sits on, and finally, the sheet music atop the piano. These three symbols are deeply colored by the context of Whistler and Leyland's fraught and broken relationship. Whistler creates his own version of Leyland that is made visible through these symbols that cannot present Leyland in a light divorced from Whistler's personal grudge.

The first and most striking symbolic strategy that Whistler uses is Leyland's grotesque anthropomorphic transformation into a piano playing peacock-man. Whistler's depiction of transformation effectively obstructs the viewer's ability to associate any physiognomic likeness with the subject's physical appearance. Whistler chooses to represent Leyland through this transformation because of the peacock's significance and connotation in popular culture. Whistler's choice also directly references the discrepancy between he and Leyland over *The Peacock Room*, picking up where he left off by exaggerating the iconography he began developing in the *Art and Money* mural.

In late-nineteenth-century London, the peacock was recognized as a multi-valent symbol. On one hand, the image of the peacock symbolized luxury, exoticism, and "the period's prioritization of the beautiful above all else."⁵⁹ This interpretation of the peacock's symbolism is connected to Western interest and romanticization of Japanese art and objects which often used

⁵⁹ Ellen E Roberts, "The Japanesque Peacock: A Cross-Cultural Sign," in *Strut: The Peacock and Beauty in Art*, ed. Bartholomew Bland and Laura L. Vookles (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 2014), pp. 83-96, 85.

peacocks in this light.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the peacock also symbolizes vain masculine pride and arrogance.⁶¹ It is the latter symbolism that Whistler taps into in his rendering of Leyland in *The Gold Scab*. By subverting the peacock's association with beauty through his monstrous depiction of Leyland, he asks the viewer to acknowledge his view of Leyland as a greedy and arrogant man. Whether or not Leyland was truly a greedy or arrogant man cannot be surmised from Whistler's accounts alone. However, Whistler's public attacks on Leyland's character made sure that this incarnation of Leyland would be recognized as such. The infamy of this event and *The Peacock Room* itself ensures that not only is Leyland recognizable through the symbolism of the peacock in *The Gold Scab*, but that Whistler himself is also symbolically conjured as a victim of Leyland's greed.

Much like the "old hen" upon his case, his depiction of the grotesque peacock atop the White House refers to Leyland's involvement in Whistler's financial ruin. The overt symbolism of this motif might have been obvious enough to its contemporary viewers. However, Whistler's bankruptcy court proceedings were made publicly available, and his boisterous persona assured that there was public knowledge and interest in the events of and following *The Peacock Room*. Whistler's visual association of Leyland as a peacock atop his home was therefore an effective strategy to evoke Leyland without an actual resemblance. Leyland's scaled tail obscures part of the face of the house, making the two symbols (tail and house) inseparable in their meaning. As Leyland roosts atop the White House, Whistler again invites his viewer to participate in identification and association through symbolism rather than likeness, deviating from one of the central goals of nineteenth-century portraiture. Yet, in making this association between his home

⁶⁰ Ellen E Roberts, "The Japanesque Peacock." 85.

⁶¹ Ellen E Roberts, "The Japanesque Peacock." 53-68, 56.

and Leyland, Whistler does not allow for an interpretation of Leyland without referring to himself.

As if the symbolism of the grotesque peacock roosting upon Whistler's house was not enough, Whistler adds even more spiteful venom to *The Gold Scab*. Both Leyland and Whistler shared an interest in music. Whistler himself did not play an instrument and his interest in music relates to his inclination toward harmony. His interest in music became the basis of which he titled many of his works. Leyland, on the other hand, was an amateur pianist. Leyland was said to have practiced every day and achieved a laudable proficiency with the instrument.⁶² Whistler could not comprehend Leyland's "unflagging" dedication to the task of mastering piano playing in the face of his repeated failure to do so.⁶³ To the average viewer of the time, this more private symbolism would be the least obvious as a reference to Leyland himself. However, when examined in context of Whistler's personal relationship and knowledge of this aspect of his patron's life, its spiteful nature is revealed. Whistler uses the sheet of music as an opportunity to make a textual reference to Leyland. Whistler emphasizes his initials in the title of the piece. He also combines the words "frilly" and "filthy" to create "frilthy" in the title of the musical piece. Whistler even adorns the musical note on the left page with Leyland's signature frills. By poking fun at Leyland's personal pastimes and passions, Whistler shows himself to be the barbed-tailed butterfly that floats above the scene, ready to sting and prick his victim with his venomous will.

The symbolism that Whistler chose to mediate Leyland's identity through is represented in a graphic and linear style. This graphic and linear style is yet another deviation from the soft and painterly stylistic conventions of nineteenth-century painted portraiture. Rather than using

⁶² Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 116.

⁶³ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 116.

variations of shade and color to create depth and perspective, Whistler instead relies on the direction of lines to imply perspective. In comparison to the soft, almost sfumato-esque painterly style of Whistler's *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of F. R. Leyland*, *The Gold Scab*'s lack of blending and shading asks the viewer to recall a different genre entirely, that of the cartoon caricature.

The Gold Scab refuses seamless categorization as a portrait. The conventions and goals of nineteenth-century portraiture are turned on their head in *The Gold Scab*. Instead of creating a physiognomic likeness of Leyland, Whistler chose to mediate Leyland's identity through his own interpretation, using the symbolism of the peacock, the White House, and the sheet music. Whistler's choice forsakes the "fundamental claim" of nineteenth-century portraiture, "a physiognomic likeness...to the identity of the...person depicted."⁶⁴ In forsaking this claim, Whistler's *The Gold Scab* is an anti-portrait that disrupts the conventions of its time. By choosing to deviate away from the painterly style of nineteenth-century portraiture which he and his peers typically produced, Whistler borrows conventions from other genres, muddying the viewer's ability to decipher what exactly they are looking at.

The intentions behind *The Gold Scab* also represent a deviation from the traditions and conventions of nineteenth-century art. Nineteenth-century painted portraiture was most frequently created for two reasons: it was either commissioned by a patron to add to their collections and show of their wealth and worldliness or it was created as a show of the artist's ability and skill in not only reproducing an affecting physiognomic likeness but also their personal painterly style which would often be shown in galleries or salons. Whistler's first

⁶⁴ Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint*. 144.

portrait of Leyland, *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Frederick R. Leyland*, shows that Whistler frequently worked with these reasons in mind. Leyland commissioned the painting and Whistler created a work that not only looks like Leyland but also demonstrates Whistler's unique predilection toward a harmonious and painterly style. In contrast, *The Gold Scab* does not show off the usual technical prowess and painterly style of Whistler's works. Nor was it directly commissioned by a patron for a private collection. Whistler created the work as a prank, designed specifically to hang in the White House in a one-time spiteful exhibition for Leyland and the other creditors set to visit after his bankruptcy in 1879.⁶⁵ Despite not being directly or intentionally commissioned by Leyland, Whistler found ways that made Leyland foot the bill. *The Gold Scab* was sized to the exact specifications of the frame that Whistler had made for Leyland's unfinished commission, *The Three Girls*.⁶⁶ Whistler certainly did not want the prank to come at his own financial expense, so it is not unreasonable to assume that other left-over materials, like the canvas and paint itself, were left over from unfinished Leyland commissions and *The Peacock Room*. By repurposing these materials for his spiteful project without Leyland's knowledge (or consent), Whistler makes Leyland the paradoxical patron of *The Gold Scab*.

Whistler's unusual and spiteful intentions behind *The Gold Scab* invite us to consider a new secondary definition of anti-portraiture. *The Gold Scab* adheres to the primary definition as "a portrait that resists or disrupts the received art-historical conventions of its genre."⁶⁷ The 'anti' of anti-portrait in its primary definition speaks to 'anti' as being of the same kind but situated opposite. An anti-portrait is still a portrait but, in its deviation, is at odds with the genre. While not explicitly stated in this definition, anti-portraiture's application to more modern and

⁶⁵ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 288

⁶⁶ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*. 288.

⁶⁷ Johnstone and Imber, *Anti-Portraiture*.

contemporary projects focus on the visual conventions and how they capture identity. However, *The Gold Scab* also deviates from the contextual art historical conventions of its time and genre by refusing the typical intention behind the creation of nineteenth-century portraiture. A secondary definition of anti-portraiture could be constructed to encompass this deviation from intention by instead placing emphasis on ‘anti’ as opposing or hostile to. *The Gold Scab* is an anti-portrait in the way that Whistler positions it as anti-Leyland. The painting is anti-Leyland in likeness and intention. Whistler intended *The Gold Scab* to embarrass Leyland by conflating him with avarice, vanity, and oppression as he sits upon Whistler’s home. This additional definition of anti-portraiture allows for the incorporation of works of caricature, satire, and spite more explicitly within its boundaries. Portraiture has long aimed to capture the sitter at their best: in their best fashion, with their best possessions, and with their most admirable or distinguishable qualities. In this, the more comical modes of portraiture have been pushed to the periphery of the genre. In *The Gold Scab*, Whistler depicts Leyland at his worst. By understanding *The Gold Scab* as an anti-portrait that encompasses both definitions in that both resists the artistic and contextual norms of the genre of nineteenth-century portraiture, the boundaries of categorization are challenged in a way that highlights the porousness of the very conception of genre.

The problems of genre of *The Gold Scab* do not stop with the category of portraiture. The graphic and linear style of *The Gold Scab* which presents problems for its categorization as a painted portrait of the nineteenth-century instead invites viewers to consider other genres in which the work might fit. Specifically, it invokes certain conventions of the genre of caricature. Caricature could perhaps be considered a sub-genre of portraiture; however, it is important to understand caricature can operate both as a sub-genre of portraiture and a distinct genre with a its own characteristic visual styles, medium, and intentions.

Rooted in the Italian words, *carico* (“to load”) and *caricare* (“to exaggerate”), caricature initially referred to a type of “exaggerated portrait drawing.”⁶⁸ After the advent of printing made publishing a viable enterprise, caricatures which had once been made largely for “personal amusement and private circulation” began to be commercial productions.⁶⁹ This move from private circulation to mass-publication also marked a change in the central medium of caricature, moving from singular hand drawn images to more easily mass produced lithograph prints. Much like painted portraiture which had its own conventions taught in academies, caricature too had its own conventions. Pamphlets and books like *Rules for Drawing Caricaturas: With an Essay on Comic Painting* (1788) by Francis Grose and *Principles of Caricatures* (1762) by Mary Darly use both text and image examples to expand upon the ideal conventions of the genre.⁷⁰ *In Infinite Jest: Caricature from Leonardo to Levine*, the conventions of the genre are defined to include “exaggeration and agglomeration of faces and bodies, the depiction of people as animals and objects, and the display of caricatural figures in processions.”⁷¹ When coupled with the artistic conventions of print, specifically its bold and linear graphic style, these conventions help their creators convey their humorous and satirical intent.

Whistler was a voracious consumer of anything and everything published which mentioned he and his work. One does not need to look further than his great manifesto, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, to understand his obsession with his reception in the press. *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* was published in 1890 and includes a collection of unfavorable written reviews of Whistler’s works, his biting responses, a transcription of his “Ten O’Clock

⁶⁸ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011). 4.

⁶⁹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Infinite Jest*. 11.

⁷⁰ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Infinite Jest*. 9.

⁷¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Infinite Jest*. 20.

Lecture,” and an annotated version of his court battle with art critic, John Ruskin. In his response to a review of his etchings of Venice published in *The World* on December 8, 1880, Whistler writes “Look to it, Atlas. Be severe with your man. Tell him his ‘job’ should be ‘neatly done.’ I could cut my own throat better; and if need be, in case of his dismissal, I offer my services.”⁷² This response makes clear that Whistler saw himself as a skilled enough wordsmith to replace the very critics he oft despised. Due to his frequent penned correspondence in the London press, he gained an appreciable reputation as satirist. His reputation as a satirist is confirmed in his collection of press clippings which includes *Birmingham Weekly Post*’s comment that “he assailed his enemies – the critics; he speared like a Soudanese, and so brilliant arrows of scorn and satire flashed through the white hall till after eleven o’clock” and *Punch*’s comment that he “delivered many well-aimed thrusts with the keen rapier of epigrammatic satire.”⁷³ Despite his reputation, he was not known to transpose this wit to his painting. He often amused himself with satirical pen drawings in his personal notebooks; however, he was never considered a caricaturist as these works were never publicly published.

Whistler’s personal caricatures very much adhere to the conventions of caricature in the late nineteenth-century. In fact, he created several caricatures of F. R. Leyland in the same year that he completed *The Gold Scab*, so the genre was fresh in his mind. One caricature of Leyland features him with his iconic frilled shirt peeking out from behind the lapels of his inky-black suit and his fancy buckled shoes (Figure 4). His body is exaggeratedly gaunt, his fingers spiderlike, and his face simplified to dots and lines. His pointed beard and mustache are the defining features of his face. Much like the caricatures published in the London press, the drawing is

⁷² James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967) 51.

⁷³ Lee Glazer et al., eds., *James McNeill Whistler in Context: Essays from the Whistler Centenary Symposium University of Glasgow*, 2003, vol. 2, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers New Series (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2008.) 153.

accompanied with a short phrase that emphasizes the satirical intent. Beneath Leyland's figure reads: "'F.R.L.' frill – of Liverpool begins to be uncertain about the White House!' Although the facial features are kept simple, they still convey a sense of wariness which the caption of the image brings to light. Another caricature of Leyland features him in the same costume, his frilled suit and fancy buckle shoes, but you can see the tail of his coat behind him as he stands with his hands in his pockets (Figure 5). His eyebrows are furrowed which gives the viewer a sense of Leyland's perceived miserly nature. The caption of the image reads: "It occurs to "F.R.L. frill – that he will keep an eye on the assets of the White House." Based on the captions of these images and their references to Leyland's growing disdain or attitude toward Whistler, they were likely created before *The Gold Scab* and served as one reference for how he would depict Leyland's face in the painting.

Whistler not only took inspiration or encouragement from his own "preliminary" caricature work; he perhaps also saw the influence of his original coin-scaled peacock from the Peacock room in the London press publications he so devoutly followed and fought with and felt encouraged to further it in a caricaturistic style. Published in the May 12, 1877, edition of *Punch*, a cartoon by cartoonist Edward Linley Sambourne titled "Welcome, Little Stranger! Or, The R.A. Cock of the Walk and the Bond Street Bird of (Art) Paradise" depicts two anthropomorphized birds meant to illustrate the growing rivalry between the more conservative Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery, the newer and more welcoming home for artists of the Aestheticism movement whose work was not always accepted by the R.A (Figure 6). On the left, a small creature adorned with a top hat, paintbrushes at the collar of his coat, and a tail plume decorated with the words "The Grosvenor Art Paradise." Two tail wisps with medallions at their tips feature the names of former Royal Academy (R.A.) artists who have taken refuge at

the Grosvenor Gallery, Burne-Jones, Watts, and Whistler. The freshly hatched bird floats over the cracked eggshells from which it just emerged as well as a check for 120,000 pounds signed by Sir Coutts Lindsay, the founder of the Grosvenor Gallery. On the right side, a peacock with the head of looks down upon the newcomer, wearing a crown symbolizing the academy's royal patronage. The peacock proudly presents its plume, its train feathers featuring portraits of the R.A. artists, including Whistler. The sinuous neck of the bird transitions into the body where outer feathers are replaced with one-piece shillings. This caricature references the peacock's association with male pride, vanity, greed, and opulence. These are the very same attributes of the symbolism of the peacock that Whistler associates with Leyland after their falling out.

Sambourne's caricature was published after *The Peacock Room*'s completion but before *The Gold Scab* which positions it as a transitional image that bridges the gap between the more abstract allegory of the coin-scaled peacock of the *Art and Money* mural of the Peacock room and the more realized caricaturistic coin-scaled Leyland of *The Gold Scab*. Linda Merrill does discuss how this caricature recalls the imagery of the *Art and Money* mural of *The Peacock Room*;⁷⁴ however, considering that not only was Whistler an avid consumer of *Punch* but he also had personal correspondence with Sambourne, it is very likely that the inspiration was reciprocal. On December 1, 1878, less than one year before *The Gold Scab*'s display in the White House, Sambourne sent Whistler a letter expressing his hope that Whistler would not take great offense to a caricature he completed on the topic of the Whistler and Ruskin court case.⁷⁵ The caricature, "An Appeal to the Law," features both Whistler and Ruskin as anthropomorphic birds with human heads (Figure 7). Whistler replied to Sambourne only two days later, writing

⁷⁴ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, 274.

⁷⁵ Edward Linley Sambourne, December 1, 1878, MS Whistler S11, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, Special Collections, Glasgow University Library, London, UK.

“My dear Sambourne – I know I shall be only charmed as I always am by your work – and if I am myself its subject, I shall only be flattered in addition.”⁷⁶ The two artists’ correspondence confirms that Whistler is not only familiar with Sambourne’s work, but also a fan. Sambourne transforms the allegory and iconography that Whistler devised in *The Peacock Room* by making the feuding figures not just mere birds, but birds with identifiable human heads, thus rendering them more easily recognizable for the viewer. It seems that Whistler appreciated the effectiveness of this change and chose to borrow this technique to produce a fruitful spite-filled depiction of Leyland in *The Gold Scab*.

The convention of “the depiction of people as animals and objects” is especially relevant to Whistler’s *The Gold Scab* as it is the key convention of the genre which he does adhere to. This convention “creates shorthand analogies that offer the viewer a quick visual understanding of a character or situation without the need for words.”⁷⁷ When Whistler first dabbled with conflating Leyland with an animal, it was done using a more covert mechanism, allegory. Whistler takes this conflation to the extreme when he no longer uses the peacock as a stand-in for Leyland and instead literally merges the bird and Leyland into a singular hybrid and grotesque beast.

Whistler’s *The Gold Scab* is an unsatisfactory caricature in several ways. His ability to create caricatures that align with the conventions of the genre at the time is clear through his caricatures of Leyland. He was obviously a fan of the genre and had regular correspondence with several figures at *Punch*, including Sambourne. The unsatisfactory nature of *The Gold Scab* is not in what it depicts as it aligns with the traditional subject matter of the genre; rather, the

⁷⁶ James McNeill Whistler, December 3, 1878, Manuscript Division, Pennell-Whistler Collection, PWC 2/51/1, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., USA.

⁷⁷ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Infinite Jest*. 21.

unsatisfactory nature of the work is in its deviation from the materials and form of caricature. *The Gold Scab* elevates the satirical subject matter of the genre of caricature, traditionally a paper medium printed for mass consumption in publications, to a monumental size and new painted and framed medium. *The Gold Scab* maintains the flatness and bold linear style of caricature in certain areas of the painting, like Leyland's face and the bags of money atop the piano. However, the introduction of colored paint gives the work a more defined sense of perspective and atmospheric environment than is possible within the pen and paper genre of caricature. *The Gold Scab* also includes clear and legible written text on the sheet music atop the piano, an unusual addition and deviation from Whistler's other works which feature people at the piano. This inclusion of text on the sheet music which has entered the narrative of the scene also acts as a caption which most caricatures, especially in *Punch*, had to accompany their images. Whistler's *The Gold Scab* very clearly borrows from the genre of caricature, yet the deviations made from the traditional conventions of the genre make placing the work within the genre ultimately unsatisfying.

To conclude, the problems caused by *The Gold Scab*'s deviation from convention and Whistler's own personal artistic approach that I have outlined in my work have had real effect on the display of the painting. Essentially divorced from the rest of Whistler's works due to its uncharacteristic discord and lack of his signature painterly style, *The Gold Scab* struggled to find a permanent home. Most of Whistler's works reside in institutions across the east coast of the United States or in the UK. The work most connected to *The Gold Scab*, *The Peacock Room*, was moved from 49 Princes Gate in London to the US by Charles Lang Freer, and now permanently resides in one of the Smithsonian Institution art museums, the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. *The Gold Scab* passed through several hands, rarely being exhibited until it

was gifted to the California Palace of the Legion of Honor through the Patrons of Art and Music by Alma de Bretteville Spreckels's estate. Almost three thousand miles away from its kin, *The Gold Scab* is now on permanent display at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, California as one of the few Whistlers on the West Coast. In its current location, *The Gold Scab* is surrounded by genre scenes depicting people, mostly women, playing instruments either dressed in Chinese and Japanese clothing or surrounded by Chinese and Japanese objects.⁷⁸ While these works do share themes with *The Gold Scab*, the spiteful and ugly effect of *The Gold Scab* gets lost in its association with the beautiful and delicate aesthetics of the surrounding works. It appears that in both distance and style, *The Gold Scab* is outcasted and separated from the rest of Whistler's works.

Further scholarship and technical analysis could provide critical insight into *The Gold Scab*'s relationship to the rest of Whistler's work. A chemical analysis of the paint used for *The Gold Scab* and a comparison to the paint used in *The Peacock Room* could reveal how Whistler intended to keep the issues of *The Peacock Room* alive in *The Gold Scab*. If the paint is a match, *The Gold Scab* does not simply refer to the imagery of *The Peacock Room*, it is a part of *The Peacock Room*. Furthermore, an x-ray analysis of *The Gold Scab* could reveal more about MacDonald's observation that "The caricature was probably painted over another painting, traces of which can be seen, complicating the textures and patterns on the surface. The background is smudged and something has been rubbed out underneath."⁷⁹ Knowing that Whistler's intended the image to be spiteful in both its portrayal of Leyland and in its repurposing of materials like

⁷⁸ Two works which exemplify the theme of the wall on which *The Gold Scab* hangs are *Scene from "The Mikado," with Louise Paullin* (1886) by Henry Alexander (1860-1894) and *Moment Musicale* (1883) by Charles Frederic Ulrich (1858 – 1908).

⁷⁹ MacDonald and Petri, James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings, A Catalogue Raisonné.

the frame designed specifically for *The Three Girls*, it would not be farfetched to imagine that underneath the blue-green paint is the remnants of the lost *The Three Girls*. Regardless of if paints match or the incomplete *The Three Girls* lies beneath the surface of *The Gold Scab*, the results of a technical analysis would provide indispensable insight into the process and intention behind the work.

The Gold Scab and its deviations from the conventions of the genres of portraiture and caricature invites us to consider that the work was distinctly ahead of its time. The concern with breaking away from representation and resemblance is generally traced back to the early twentieth century and the rise of abstraction.⁸⁰ However, *The Gold Scab* asks us to consider that this inclination to represent someone with a concern for affect rather than resemblance begins to take roots much earlier. As a painter working in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century, Whistler's relationship to likeness was fundamentally challenged by the advent of photography. His contemporaries were similarly affected; however, it is in Whistler's *The Gold Scab* in which this response taken to a grotesque extreme. By understanding *The Gold Scab* as an anti-portrait that is in many ways ahead of its time, we are invited to call into question other earlier works that have resisted seamless categorization to re-evaluate the ways in which we discuss, understand, and categorize the works.

The Gold Scab was born of a unique set of circumstances that allowed Whistler to defy the conventions of genre of his time. While most portraiture aimed to flatter the sitter or impress the viewer, *The Gold Scab* confronts the viewer with spite and resentment. When most caricatures lampooned their subjects in mass-produced etching prints, *The Gold Scab*

⁸⁰ Johnstone and Imber, *Anti-Portraiture*.

monumentalized the satirical intent in a colorful larger-than-life painting. *The Gold Scab*'s refusal of many of the conventions of the genre of portraiture in the nineteenth-century allows for the application of the more nuanced category of the anti-portrait. *The Gold Scab* as anti-portrait provides much needed reprieve from the rigid constraints of genre which can prevent us from understanding the complex web of actors and intentions which constitute a portrait. When we ask what *The Gold Scab* looks like, we are met with an amalgamation of conventions. When we ask what *The Gold Scab* does, we become aware of the ways in which Whistler combines these conventions and how their mixing makes meaning. By understanding *The Gold Scab* as an anti-portrait, we are forced to confront how despite its grotesque and graphic visage, *The Gold Scab* captures more than just an abstracted and symbolic likeness of Leyland; it captures the likeness of a moment where a patron becomes a creditor, a friend becomes an enemy, and respect turns to spite.

Figure Index

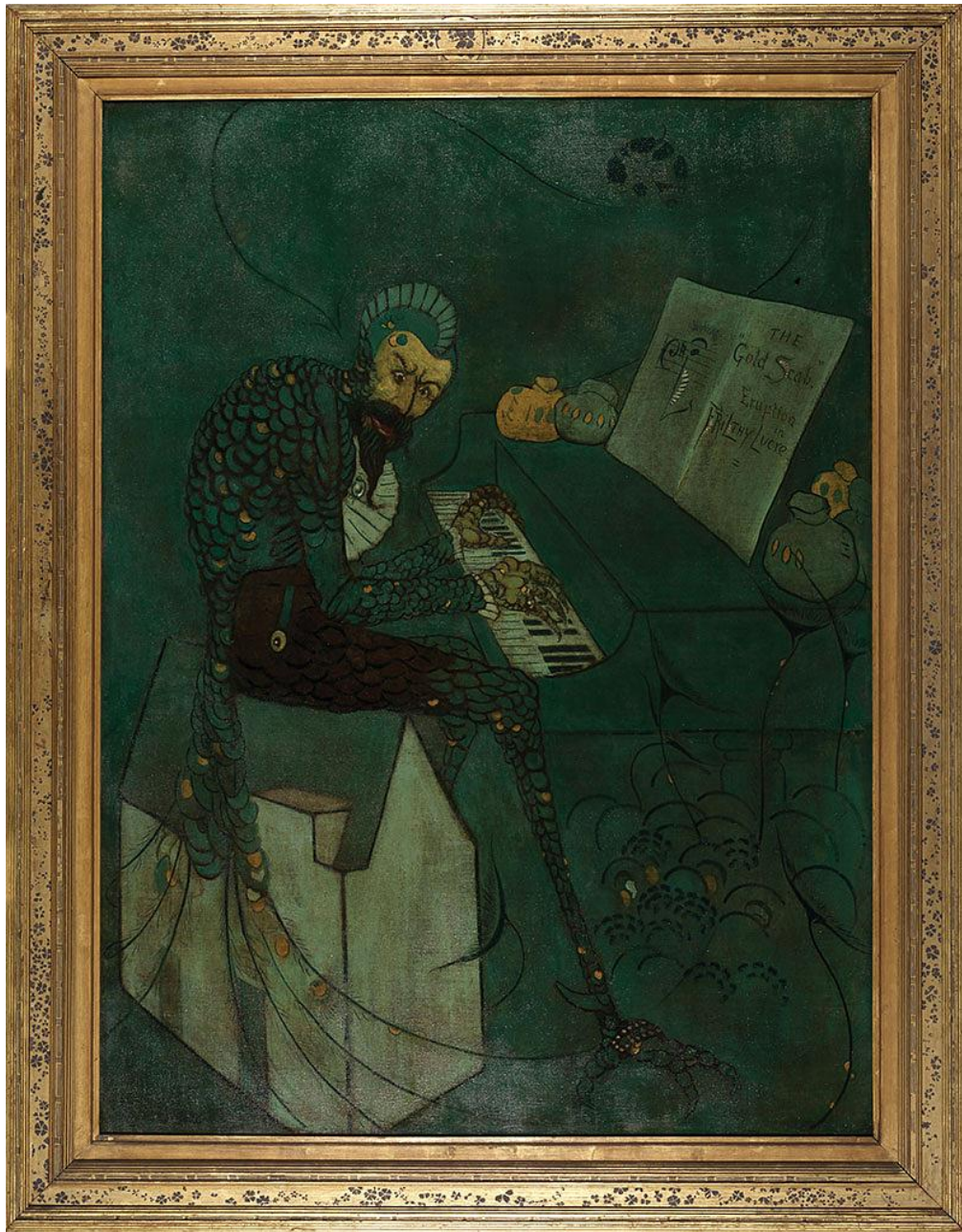


Figure 1. James McNeill Whistler, *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre*, 1879, Oil on Canvas, 55 in x 73.5 inches, de Young Museum, San Francisco, California, USA.



Figure 2. James McNeill Whistler, *Art and Money* mural in *The Peacock Room in Blue and White*, oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, and wood, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., USA.



Figure 3. James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of F. R. Leyland*, 1870-1873, oil on canvas, 192.8 cm x 91.9 cm, Collection, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Figure 4. James McNeill Whistler, *Caricature of F. R. Leyland*, 1879, pen and dark brown/black ink on paper, 192.8 cm x 91.9 cm, The Hunterian, University of Glasgow.



Figure 5. James McNeill Whistler, *'F. R. L.' Frill - of Liverpool begins to be uncertain about the White House*, 1879, pen and dark brown ink on paper, 6 15/16 in x 4 5/16 in, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Figure 6. Edward Linley Sambourne, *Welcome, Little Stranger! Or, The R.A. Cock of The Walk and the Bond Street Bird of (Art) Paradise*, May 12th, 1877, published in *Punch*.

• WHISKEY - VEASYS : RYSKIN •



AN APPEAL TO THE LAW.

NAUGHTY CRUSTY, TO USE BAD LANGUAGE! SILLY PAINTER, TO GO TO LAW ABOUT IT!

FRIENDS AT A DISTANCE.

Being the brief Record of a few Winter-seasonable Visits to certain Country Houses.

VISIT THE FIEST.—CHAPTER IV.

The Surprise—A Party—Recognition—Description—Catalogue—Oldest of Old Counties—The Beauty—Introduction—Mauvais quart d'heure—Etiquette—More Solemnity—Dinner in State.

I HAD expected JOSSLYN DYKE to be alone, and, to my utter astonishment, find myself suddenly thrust in, as it were, on a comparatively large party, that, apparently, hadn't in the least expected me to be added to their number.

The rapidity with which I have been let in, and the door closed behind me, seems something like a practical joke on the part of the Phantom Butler.

Nobody takes the slightest notice of me, except two or three Ladies, who look round as much as to say, "What's this?" and after an in-

spection so brief as scarcely to interrupt their conversation for a second, they seem to say, "Oh, is that all—well, as we were saying," and they resume their talk. Awkward.

My host is engaged with a tall, elderly, crusty-looking Gentleman by the fire-place. The Crusty Gentleman has taken up the usual peculiarly Englishman's attitude in front of the fire, so as to render himself more crusty than ever. He is doing himself to a turn—(Happy Thought.—Doing himself a good turn. Charity begins at home, i.e. at your own fireside)—sometimes with great impartiality presenting a side view to the fire, and sometimes turning right round while conversing with JOSSLYN DYKE, so that, in time, the Crusty Old Gentleman will be thoroughly done through. Whatever the engrossing subject may be, JOSSLYN is saying, "it is," and the Crusty one is "begging his pardon, and assuring him that it isn't."

I only see one face I know. It belongs to a man whom I meet, occasionally, once in two years, but as JOSSLYN is evidently not going to introduce me to anybody, and as, without this ceremony, I can't address anyone, even about the weather, without being considered

Figure 7. Edward Linley Sambourne, *An Appeal to the Law*, December 1st, 1878, published in *Punch*.

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