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Women in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Arthurian Renditions (1854-1867)

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Introduction

Rossettian Arthurianism and the Medieval Revival

Casting a glance into the past sometimes responds to the need for a return to the hearth of the familiar. In the course of this attempt to decipher the sights and sounds kindled in the embers of memory, the flaming shadow of time burns anew before the eyes of observers, thus helping them to follow the traces of their own selves. Such a move sometimes derives from a conscious attempt to reconstruct what they knew – or else thought – they were; some other times, it stems from the aim of building a safe shelter from the unpleasant face of reality. Quite often, though, a sudden stimulus, either unexpected or not fully anticipated, allows an antique blaze to emerge from seemingly burnt-out coals, so that the mind becomes deeply captured by its renewed magnitude. These observations lead us to formulate two main questions: on the one hand, is it not by means of this look into the mirror of ages that the past manages to uphold a dialogue with the present to keep moulding the future? On the other, does this whole process usually emerge from what individuals believe themselves to have been, or does it not entail setting their eyes upon others, and, what is more, undertaking a journey across an ocean of decades and centuries afar?

Indeed, the impulse that invites many to set their thoughts upon such a trail does not rest exclusively on the columns of a single human being: the splendour of past civilizations, the social customs of a given time, the durable charisma of a specific personage, a chapter of catastrophe set in collective memory, an effort to reconstruct what others may consider mere vestiges... all these examples relate to a common eagerness to know about others, and also about the ways in which this information interacts with personal experience. This commonly implies recovering, renaming, rethinking, or re-imagining something not completely (or not really) ours, but still adding more meaning to our present situation. While some tend to look down on

the past or to scorn the remains of what they believe completely dispensable, others cling to revitalized memory (and its effects upon the present) as to their only source of righteousness, stability and comfort. Similarly, at times, 'past' and 'present' struggle against each other, as if set in a tough generational clash, or else engage together in a well-measured dance where neither of them can be understood alone, but within that specific bond, like a well-matched couple.

The present volume has emerged from a similar process of exploration, this time with the additional requirement of opening a double perspective upon the past in order to develop a sound approach to the Arthurian renditions that the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti executed between 1854 and 1867. Our main purpose has been to compose a consistent analysis of the contents, types and iconography associated with them. Special emphasis has been placed on the female referents in such scenes, the interaction maintained with their male counterparts, and the implications derived from that dynamics. Both diachronic and synchronic aspects have been considered to gain further insight into the dialogue between the visual and literary samples under study. In the forthcoming sections we will also focus on the most prominent topics, characters motivations and conflicts in the literary sources which served as inspiration for the aforementioned visual works. The corresponding chapters devoted to the analysis of those texts are aimed at providing readers with enough information and points of reference to fully grasp how the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet viewed and reinterpreted the main events in the legend of Camelot. Additionally, one cannot overlook the fact that those renditions were executed at a precise historical period: this of course demands taking into account extra variables of a social, political, historical, ideological and cultural kind. A substantial part of this book concentrates on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) in order to gauge how Rossetti perceived, reinterpreted and portrayed its key thematic axes and female characters. Likewise, several chapters will be devoted to his approaches to three poems by Lord Alfred Tennyson (*The Lady of Shalott*, *Sir Galahad* and *The Palace of Art*). This will enable us not only to see how the legend of Camelot was addressed from two different perspectives, but also to examine the manner in which Rossetti often

combined and applied bits from both to his own view of the Arthurian experience. Together with this, and owing to the painter-poet's eclectic take on chivalric matters and romantic rescue, our focus will later be expanded into a reduced selection of non-Arthurian works (post medieval versions of the story of Saint George and the dragon plus John Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci*) which will nevertheless provide welcome instances of contrast, complementation and variation with regard to his treatment of the female characters and main topics from the Camelot legend. All this will allow us to highlight the adjustability, durability and protean value of this literary material. At the same time, we would like to render Rossetti's Arthurian renditions as a non-derivative selection of visual works, as part of a personal quest for the ideal.

Notably determined by his indecision between painting and poetry, or rather by his dissatisfaction with having to choose between the two in professional terms, the correlation between the textual and the visual in Rossetti reached its summit within the dialectics of beauty running through his double works between 1860 and 1882. But there, even without the intention of leaving aside the twinning ties bound to 'expression' and 'representation' that stitch their components together, the viewer and the critic cannot understand such link either in strict Horacian (*ut pictura poesis*) or Simonidean (*ut poesis pictura*) terms.¹ Although the textual may precede the visual, or the other way round, the interdisciplinary bond that characterizes these double works sprung from the mind of a single author bestows a special value upon them: such creations may be viewed as parallel manifestations of the same inspirational flash, and also as part of a multi-perspectivist affiliation² to the idea of beauty in terms of 'form' and 'content'. The verbal and visual 'halves' thus integrated do not pursue offering a strict reflection of each other, but joining forces to bring us closer to the sublime experience of contact with the transcendent.

1 See Praz 1974: 18, 58.

2 See McGann 2000: 106, 110.