

José María Mesa Villar. 2014. *Women in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Arthurian Renditions (1854-1867)*. Bern: Peter Lang. 482 pp. ISBN: 978-3-0343-1298-1.

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This book, the twelfth of the series *Spanish Perspectives on English and American Literature, Communication and Culture*, is a revision of the author's doctoral thesis, defended in 2010 in the University of Jaén: *Gazing into the Past: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Arthurian Renditions and their Female Types (1854-1867)*.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) was considered by the pre-eminent Victorian-era critics Ruskin and Pater to be "the period's central artistic presence" (McGann 2000, 2). Today he is the best-known member of the short-lived Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) (1848-1953), an artistic movement frequently associated with Arthurian-inspired art, although the original paintings of the three founding members did not draw from those sources, but rather wanted to revolutionise the British art world by going back to naturalistic, colourful, heartfelt and detail-oriented aesthetic drawing from the Quattrocento (Doughty 1949, 70). The Arthurian association stems from the enthralling nature of many paintings by J. W. Waterhouse (1849-1917) and other late nineteenth-century artists heavily influenced by late PRB aestheticism, understood through the mirror of Rossetti and his pupils, the already Post-Pre-Raphaelites Morris and Burne-Jones. As Mesa Villar recalls (26), during the nineteenth-century Medieval Revival there was a conscious effort to make Arthurian lore the Great English Epic in the search for the roots of Englishness. It was in that cultural climate that passionate Arthurian re-creator Alfred Tennyson was made Poet Laureate in 1850. When assessing Rossettian sources, Mesa Villar acknowledges the importance of Tennyson's (among other artists') Victorian re-interpretation of Thomas Malory's vision in *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) as his primal source.

The book is well organised into three main parts corresponding to three female types identified by the author in the Arthurian legend and that I am, succinctly, going to refer to as the temptress-adulteress, the enchantress and the damsel-in-distress. The author's approach is straightforward and consistent throughout the study. Each section begins by contextualising the specific episode of the legend that Rossetti was using in each of his visual works, sometimes contrasting different sources, before analysing

them. Perhaps excessive attention is paid to densely re-narrating those episodes. The symbology of the drawings is carefully explained and re-interpreted by Mesa Villar in light of Rossetti's biographical facts and Victorian ideology. The author believes that, in his Arthurian renditions, Rossetti transcended the role of illustrator and used the well-known episodes to represent his own artistic and spiritual concerns, especially the struggle between flesh and spirit. Therefore these Arthurian renditions constitute a fundamental bridge to his later, better-known double works: a written (poetic) and visual (painting) exploration of the same theme, i.e., *The Blessed Damozel* (1856-1878).

Mesa Villar's first section (41-160) addresses love triangles in the legend in tune with the evolution of the social assessment of adultery and the traditional role of woman as temptress. The first four chapters focus on Guinevere. Mesa Villar retells her story drawing from different sources and emphasizing that the ever-changing understanding of the character is revealing of equally changeable cultural ideologies. For example, Chrétien de Troyes introduced the sympathetic love affair with Launcelot, ingrained in the French culture of *fin'amor* that Malory transformed into the more chaste Middle English *trew love*, depicting her as a victim of her circumstances. Mesa Villar suggests that Rossetti's interest in Guinevere is linked to his obsession with the conflict of body and spirit later developed in the double works. It may also reflect the artist's personal experiences and his relationship with his muse Jane Burden (betrothed to his collaborator Morris) or the divorce of art critic John Ruskin, who had commissioned the first watercolour in the series, *Arthur's Tomb* (1855). Ruskin's wife had left him for his protégée, another Pre-Raphaelite, John Millais. The watercolour represents a reticent Guinevere resisting Launcelot's amorous advances over the dead body of her husband. Rossetti modified Malory's scene, moving the setting to Glastonbury where the king was buried to give prominence to Arthur's casket, which functions figuratively and physically as a reminiscence of the obstacle between the lovers. His second watercolour, *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber* (1857), shows the lovers hiding while Arthur's knights try to break into the room to uncover their adultery. Guinevere (bearing Burden's features) seems again repentant while Launcelot appears aggressively furious at the intrusion. The third watercolour, *Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael* (1857, unfinished, study for the Oxford Union murals), depicts a despondent Launcelot, sitting near a well, unable to see the mystic damsel facing him and holding the Grail (with the features of Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti's fiancée) because Guinevere's body is between them. According to Mesa Villar (113), this configuration illustrates how carnal lust prevents men from achieving spiritual salvation, and, in biographical terms, how Burden's flesh tempted Rossetti more than Siddal's intellectual appeal. Mesa Villar emphasizes common visual elements between the three watercolours, including figures, colours and recurring floral motifs, concluding that Rossetti wanted to stress male sexual weakness in opposition to female superior moral standing (or at least aloofness), ultimately presenting a sympathetic view of women. The last two chapters of this section are about the Celtic legend of Tristram and Iseult that first

inspired the introduction of Launcelot and Guinevere's love affair in the Arthurian canon. The watercolour *Sir Tristram and La Belle Yseult Drinking the Love Potion* (1867, design for William Morris's stained glass) presents the couple drinking a love philtre guarded by Cupid. The exculpatory element of magic alleviates the guilt of their adulterous relationship and presents therefore a murkier moral message than the other watercolours.

The second section (161-282) deals with enchantresses. The first two chapters focus on Morgan le Fay, emphasizing her ultimate role taking Arthur's corpse to the otherworld. This scene is portrayed in the sketch *King Arthur and the Weeping Queens* (1856-1857) included in Moxon's illustrated edition of Tennyson (1857). Mesa Villar stresses the overwhelming effect of the many Siddal-faced figures that symbolize Rossetti's interest in representing women as intermediaries between the sensible and the intelligible. The next chapters systematically address the recurrence of the damsel of the Grail in Rossetti's works, always bearing Siddal's face. For example, the watercolour *The Damsel of the Sanc Grael* (1857), that was later transformed into the well-known oil canvas *The Lady of the Sanc Grael* (1874). Another example is the sketch *The Attainment of the Sanc Grael* (1857), later refashioned in *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Greal; But Sir Percival's Sister Died by the Way* (1864). Tennyson's poem *Sir Galahad* (1842) serves as inspiration for the watercolour *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (1855), executed in collaboration with Elizabeth Siddal, as well as for the sketch *Sir Galahad and an Angel* (1857) and the finished watercolour *Sir Galahad and the Ruined Chapel* (1859), in which the tension of body and spirit is resolved in what Mesa Villar calls "the unsexing of the Grail hero" (270). The maiden's unreadable face in both the earlier and later works underpins Rossetti's lifelong fascination with mysterious, suggestive images of females, whose role as mystical threshold contrasts with men's struggle to access the spiritual realm.

In the book's third section (283-432), Mesa Villar explores the role of women as inciters of conflicts, ingrained in a Medieval (and Victorian) paternalistic attitude that rejoices in female defenselessness. The first chapter focuses on *The Death of Breuze sans Pitié* (1857-1865), a Mallorian scene in which two knights fight for custody of a damsel. The second chapter is concerned with Keat's ballad *La belle dame sans merci* (1820) and Rossetti's unfinished sketch of the same title (1855). Mesa Villar highlights Rossetti's attraction to the idea of unleashed female sexuality overpowering masculinity. Chapters three, four and five delve into the Lady of Shalott's legend, drawing on Rossetti's engraving for Moxon's Tennyson, *Launcelot and the Lady of Shalott* (1856-1857), in which Launcelot again symbolizes masculine faults. The sixth chapter is devoted to the six drawings of the legend of Saint George executed by Rossetti for the stained glass designs of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (1862-1863). Although the theme can be ascribed to the Christian chivalry fashion of the late Middle Ages that was tainted with Arthurian motifs, there is no clear justification for the introduction of these works into a study of Arthurian renditions.

The last pages of this final section fairly hastily analyse the role of Elizabeth Siddal in Rossetti's career. I believe that this point should have been addressed at length at the beginning of the book and more frequently throughout, not only referring to her passive role as model but also to her active influence as an artist in her own right whose drawings were frequently Arthurian (see Lewis and Lasner 1978) and, due to Ruskin's interest in them, may have sparked Rossetti's wish to proceed in that direction. Although the topic of Siddal and Rossetti's mutual influence in the 1850s has been the center of much academic debate recently, Mesa Villar only acknowledges this in passing and does not tackle the question of how Rossetti's Arthurian works, being "so like a parody of Siddal's technical deficiencies in drawing" (Surtees 1991, 72), were sometimes attributed to her, just as her own advanced designs were to Rossetti. Not only has Siddal historically been "denied the credit for her own achievement" but she has also been "sometimes blamed for Rossetti's failures" (Marsh and Gerrish Nunn 1989, 70-73). By minimizing references to her work, Mesa Villar departs from the approach taken by most recent studies of Rossetti, which tend to emphasize his wife's role as an artist in her own right (Matson 2010, 187; Marsh, 1989; Cherry and Pollock 1984). Indeed, although the object of Mesa Villar's study is the representation of women, the author's method fails to render women as active subjects, but rather merely as "background, malleable pretexts," to paraphrase his own assessment of Victorian paternalistic chivalry (295). Furthermore, and given the book's theme, this essay lacks insight into feminist methodologies for art criticism, even insofar as to simply explain why the author is not using them. To my view, considering the clearly gendered canvas of Pre-Raphaelitism, any text discussing the period must mandatorily address issues of essentialist female representation and objectification in the perpetuation of gender hierarchization (Pollock [1988] 2008, 13). And all the more so when, as in this case, medieval imagery is re-analysed with the purpose of highlighting a specific view of womanhood befitting Victorian morals suggesting, additionally, the possibility of a subversive motivation instigated by Rossetti's own renditions.

The text ultimately stands as an interesting analysis of a seldom studied phase of Rossetti's career, providing ample commentary on the painter's take on the Arthurian sources. Therefore the text is valuable not only to Rossetti scholars and Victorianists but also to those interested in Malory, Tennyson, Keats and Arthurian literature in general. The author has succeeded in selecting an innovative topic of study within a classical field and his brave tackling of interdisciplinary themes is commendable. It is also noteworthy as the only Spanish thesis about Rossetti in recent decades (according to online theses databases). The only related thesis found in databases is Julia Doménech's *Imágenes femeninas tennysonianas en la Pintura Prerrafaelita, un trasfondo mítico* (1997), and her later book *La belleza pétrea y la belleza líquida. El sujeto femenino en la poesía y las artes victorianas* (2010). However, neither of these works have been referenced by Mesa Villar, suggesting that it may be necessary to reinforce intercommunication between specialists of different fields in Spain.

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