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Speaking (out) of Silence: The burden of womanhood in Christina Rossetti's "Monna Innominata" and William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere"

by *Dominique Iannone**

Abstract

An era punctuated by contradictions and uncertainty, the Middle Ages represented a powerful looking glass for the flawed and highly duplicitous Victorian society. Deeply unhappy with the cultural and aesthetic chaos resulting from the Industrial Revolution, it was not uncommon for Victorian writers to use medievalism as a means to oppose the belief systems characterising their time. The main concern of the essay resides in the ideological and thematic similarities in the medievalist poetry of two Victorian authors: Christina Rossetti and William Morris. Despite them being barely acquainted, the poets established a literary dialogue revolving around the dichotomy silence/sound and made use of analogous strategies to resist the unjust confines and limitations enforced on women by nineteenth-century gender politics. The paper aims to show how the burden of womanhood – a condition endured by Rossetti in life *and* in art – prevented the poetess from overtly voicing criticism of the patriarchal literary tradition. If William Morris, through his "Defence of Guenevere", openly questioned conventions and succeeded in articulating female desire, Rossetti, as it is shown by her "Monna Innominata", found herself tangled in the cultural attitudes of her time and had to mask what she was articulating. Through the voices of their medieval heroines, which can still be heard today, both writers engaged in acts of critical ventriloquy to overturn female passivity and to violate the code of feminine behaviour.

Keywords: Victorian Medievalism, Gender, Morris, Rossetti, The Defence of Guenevere, Monna Innominata, Women's writing.

Introduction

For the voice is inseparable from the person to whom it belongs.
The voice which charms one generation is inaccessible to the next.

Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies*, 1885

In his *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993), Jacques Derrida resorts to the literary spectre par excellence, the ghost of old King Hamlet, with a view to illustrating the haunting of history, the traces of the past which, besides questioning the present, also and most importantly, solicit a

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revision of the past itself. As he fathoms the effectivity and the presence of the spectre and wonders about the opposition between “to be” and “not to be”, the author dwells upon the logic of hauntology¹ and the idea of the revenant which he describes as *both* “a dead man who comes back” *and* “a ghost whose expected return repeats itself” (Derrida, 2006, p. 10). The revenant, a liminal presence which hovers between presence and absence, is necessarily out of time and defined by repetition, by its comings and goings because “it begins by coming back” again and again. Calling for a new narrative, not only does the revenant’s haunting of the living destabilise boundaries, it also enables a reinterpretation, a reimagining of the past. Echoes of Derrida’s hauntology are to be found in the introduction to David Matthews’s *Medievalism: A Critical History* (2015). In it, the author describes the spectres of the Middle Ages, whose “ghostly memories shadow modernity” (Matthews, 2015, p. 1), as “unquiet” and entrusts medievalism studies with the task of hunting these revenants. While it is difficult to pinpoint what has elicited the post-medieval curiosity towards this time, most scholars agree that its origin resides in the very nature of the Middle Ages and, more precisely, in its ability to bestow to whoever decides to recuperate the medieval a certain power to cross temporalities (and therefore to move between them), to negotiate borders, to observe the medieval and its afterlife (Prendergast & Trigg, 2018, p. 24). The Middle Ages belong to the past but they also and most importantly belong to the present for they are constantly being re-made. In essence, what lies at the core of medievalism is the understanding of the past as still alive and still with us, as a reservoir of possibilities for the future. The re-evocation and revision of the medieval past as carried out by medievalist literature is aimed precisely at exploring those possibilities while disclosing information (or/and offering a social and political commentary) on the time and the place in which it has been produced (D’Arcens, 2016, p. 6). The contradictory and elastic nature of the Middle Ages allows both the progressive and conservative political ideologies to express their positions: the medieval past can be looked upon with regret or with relief, it may be inevitably interwoven with obscurity and violence but it may also represent, as in the case of most Victorian writers, a “dream of order”. Although the spirit of the Middle Ages was felt most vigorously by Romantic writers, this paper sees Victorian medievalism (and its revisions) as its main topic for it is precisely during the age of Victoria that it came to represent a powerful looking glass, a reflection of the duplicity and uncertainty which tainted Victorian society.

I

A Window to the Past: Victorian Medievalism

A widespread feeling amongst the Victorians was the understanding of their time as “history-in-the-making” (Lepine, 2020, p. 472) and what is most fascinating about Victorian poetry is, unquestionably, its relationship with both the literary and historical past. History was ubiquitous in Victorian cultural and intellectual life: not only could

it be found in museums and chronicles, it could also be felt in the art, architecture and literature of the period. Although the Victorians were not the first to turn to the past for a “poetic authenticity lacking in the present time”, it was during the age of Victoria that the use of the past became “more self-consciously theorized” and therefore distinct from earlier forms of historicism (Fraser, 2006, p. 115). Viewing history as a continuum, Victorian writers never failed to be mindful about the significance of past events which were, without exception, put in relation with the most pressing concerns of the present. Nonetheless, far from being idyllic, the Victorian return to the past was fraught with internal tensions and ambiguities. In *The Order of Things* (1996) Michel Foucault maintains that the historicist turn characterising the age of Victoria could be an expression of the so-called “dehistoricization of man” which was strongly felt by the Victorians. According to such a view, Victorian intellectuals, finding themselves “emptied of history”, resuscitated the past so as to regain access to their “threatened historicity” (Fraser, 2006, p. 117). Far from being a mere expression of nostalgia, the Victorian revisitation of the past was a crucially important cultural process that saw a number of strategic uses of history which, as a result, came to be perceived and accepted as a provider of moral lessons and as political guidance.

If the idea of being pushed out of history was particularly distressing for Victorian men who, as a consequence, felt pressured to find strategies to re-enter it, Victorian women writers had long known the feeling of being omitted from history. In her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf maintains that women's problematic identity stems from the absence of a touchstone, of a female ancestry which could place itself in clear opposition to the canonised dominance of male writers. Some years earlier, a notable female poet had made the same point. Elizabeth Barrett Browning memorably complained: “I look everywhere for Grandmothers and see none”. According to Christina Crosby, the absence of female ancestors is partially due to the fact that, in the nineteenth century, history is produced “as man's truth” enabling man to “know himself in history, find his origin there and project his end” (David, 1987, p. 102). By contrast, she argues that women stand outside of history therefore remaining “intrinsically unhistorical”. Coupled with an unwritten cultural code which counselled them to silence, the absence of female precursors was also responsible for women's complex relation with language: Victorian women writers soon found themselves deeply entangled in unspeakability. Their perilously uncertain voice and the need to mask what they were articulating made their attempts to shake masculine literary history from its roots all the more complicated and yet necessary to enter history and regain an identity (Billone, 2007, p. 5). Nevertheless, no matter how different their experiences may have been, Victorian men and women were animated by the same desire, that of leaving a trace of their passage, of keeping an open dialogue with their descendants who, exactly like them, may need to go back if they wish to move forward.

Throughout the nineteenth century the Middle Ages were, together with Ancient Greece and the Renaissance, the most popular touchstone in the writings of both male and female authors². If, for some writers, the Middle Ages were synonymous with social

stability and cultural unity, if, for others, they signified a characteristic Englishness (Fraser, 2006, p. 117), Victorian medievalism was first and foremost a reaction against Utilitarianism (and, more broadly, against the eighteenth-century cult of reason), a way of speaking out against the social, moral and aesthetic chaos created by the Industrial Revolution. The rejection of the prevailing neoclassical architectural values of balance, symmetry, and order was of equal importance for the development of a medievalist discourse. Besides being extremely vocal about the need for a dismantling of neoclassical values, John Ruskin was also one of the first art critics to voice his hate of the mechanization of the modern age as it “blunted the imaginations and stifled the souls of contemporary workmen” (Fraser 2006: 118). In order to criticise the contemporary industrial practice and its utilitarian theory, Ruskin often contrasted them with ideals drawn from the Middle Ages. The medieval past and its architecture were perceived by the critic as living proof of an healthy and organic society which was necessarily antithetical to the one he saw around him. His work represented an invaluable contribution to Medievalism and proved extremely influential: his opposition to industrialisation and his ideas about the sacredness of human work were to heavily influence the work of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Following Ruskin, the Brotherhood moved away from the Royal Academy’s canon (whose accepted model had, for generations, been Raphael) and put forward a different approach: their watchword “Back to Nature” explained their ideological stance and exemplified the collective desire to paint from an observed nature thus rejecting purified and idealised forms. Their fondness for the simplicity and mysticism of the Middle Ages is not to be intended exclusively as a cry against the “tasteless art of Raphael”: their return to a time when spiritual values were held high concealed a specific intent, that of awakening the contemporary world to the destruction of individual creativity brought on by industrialisation and mechanisation.

More than any other movement in British art, the Brotherhood, by effectively rearranging the Middle Ages, managed to create “a new artistic world, deeply and paradoxically concerned with modernity and the pressing concerns of their Victorian generation” (Alexander, 2017, p. 88). While the Brotherhood’s natural propensity for the interlacing of the old and the new found expression in the fine arts, the Pre-Raphaelites’ return to the past was also enacted by means of literature. It is no coincidence that from the 1840s until the turn of the twentieth century, the Pre-Raphaelite imagination revolved around three medieval figures: Dante, Chaucer and Arthur. The fil rouge which ran between Pre-Raphaelitism and Victorian medievalist poetry was to inaugurate an alteration to fundamental cultural values ranging from politics to gender roles. Used as ideological operations to support a vast array of political, social and cultural institutions, medieval ideals the likes of chivalry, gallantry, selflessness and manliness were everywhere embedded in Victorian literature and denoted “particular belief systems and modes of conduct” shared and upheld by middle and upper-class culture (Harrison 2020: 561). The main concern of the following sections will reside in the dynamics resulting from one of the aforementioned operations – the workings of

gender in the poetry of Victorian masculinities and femininities – so as to uncover the strategies employed by Victorian authors to serve or, conversely, to oppose the accepted systems of value and belief characterising their time.

2

Uncertain Boundaries: Masculinity and Femininity in the Age of Victoria

It was during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the medievalist discourse saw its peak: thanks to a combination of elements, medievalism became a strong “site of power” thus managing to ensure the acceptance, power and dominance of the values attributed to the medieval world. Paradoxical as it may seem, the consolidation of the medievalist discourse was partially due to the entrance of women writers in the literary scene and to the feminization of culture brought about by the Romantic focus on feelings and introspection. In point of fact, the problematic gendering of poethood, the interrelation of poetic voice, effeminacy and weakness resulting from the Romantic supremacy of sensibility were inherited by Victorian male writers. Perceiving this romantic heritage as a menace to their masculinity, the circumvention of the accusations of effeminacy came to represent, for them, a most compelling need. Wishing to clarify their relation to the expression of feelings and emotion, Victorian male writers envisaged a number of different solutions. Despite their strategies being various, the vast majority of Victorian male writers, following their Romantic predecessors, openly identified themselves with the figure of the knight (and therefore with the paradigm of medieval masculinity) as an embodiment of chivalry and manliness or, conversely, adopted the “effeminizing strain” of the so-called “troubadourian project”, where the construction of masculine identity is inevitably interwoven with the appropriation of the female sexual object³. As a matter of fact, although the troubadour’s canso seems to rest with the figure of a silent lady to whom the poem is addressed, his poem is first and foremost a “symbol of virility, a sign of masculine prowess” (Fay, 2001, p. 75). However, while these two strategies satisfied the needs of those writers who were looking for a firmer masculine identity, one should not overlook the ideological and cultural effects that the embracing of such a project entailed. Howard Bloch’s *Medieval Misogyny* proves invaluable not only for the understanding of the role misogyny and sexuality play in the silencing and absenting of women in medieval texts but also for the uncovering of the repercussions that this literary absence engenders. Bloch maintains that the lady, who is designated by the troubadour as *the* source of inspiration for his poetry, cannot be said to exist for she never speaks, she remains unseen and silent at all times (Bloch, 1991, p. 155). Deprived of the right to speak, the troubadour’s beloved is turned, to all intents and purposes, into a metaphor and comes to represent the basis of poetic composition. Being aware of the problematic interrelation between gender and genre and wishing to express themselves without censure, Victorian women writers started to write from the troubadourian

beloved's place to subvert the set rules (and roles) of male medievalism, to give silenced ladies a voice of their own, to put forward criticism against that "modernized code of chivalry" which encouraged an ideal of female passivity.

Be that as it may, during the age of Victoria "manliness" and "womanliness" became highly unstable terms, apparently contrasting but "constantly threatening to collapse into each other" (Saville, 2002, p. 527). As mentioned above, while he was expected to express deep feelings and to explore private states of consciousness, the Victorian male poet was also called upon by literary critics to represent "paradigms of heroism" thus finding himself in an ambiguous cultural space. A crucial role in the construction of the Victorian ideal of manliness and womanliness was also played by the so-called "ideology of separate spheres" for men and women which, interestingly enough, often availed itself of strikingly Arthurian terms: the ideal Victorian gentleman had to be a "chivalrous man", he had to be brave, independent, loyal to friends and leaders (Girouard, 1981, p. 62), while his feminine counterpart had to be meek, submitted to authority and innate maternal instincts and therefore confined to the private or domestic sphere. Despite it being almost unanimously embraced, the ideology often led to marginalization: men who did not display virtues the likes of leadership and heroism came to be seen as "girlish" and "effeminate", women who did not conform to the ideal of female domesticity were considered anomalies at best and insane at worst. Shifts in social paradigms and a certain evolution of the gendered discourse of work, combined with the rise of consumerism, further complicated issues of class and gender roles, namely for women writers⁴. Women who were publicly vocal were necessarily unchaste for they claimed access to an "authority presumed to be masculine". As a result, women's right to speak in public became both "gendered and sexualised" (Distiller 2008: 25). On the whole, the nineteenth century was a time punctuated by a multiplicity of contradictions: if a considerable number of women began to write, if women writers gradually gained more visibility, they also had to face growing hostilities and widespread prejudices. While the title of poetess earned praise, it also indicated an expectation of "working within defined moral and cultural limits" (Felluga, 2015, p. 187). Wishing to oppose a poetic tradition that generally assumed that the speakers were male, thus bringing to light the unjust gender confines characterising Victorian culture, it was not uncommon for the Victorian poetess to use medievalism as an empowering means of expression especially since poetry, of all literary forms, depends most on "rules and conventions mediated through tradition" (David 1987: 102).

While the desire to enlighten the reader on the social injustices falling on women and the wish to give silenced ladies a voice of their own were most strongly felt by Victorian women writers, they were by no means exclusive to them. As a matter of fact, if most Victorian poets encouraged domesticity and passiveness by embracing the masculine codes of courtly love, the ideological effects of other Victorian medievalists and their dissident masculinities, William Morris's for instance, are to be found at the opposite end of the spectrum. Since both writers, despite of *or* by reason of their gender showed a genuine appreciation of the psychological depth of female experience

and articulated, or went as far as manipulating, female language in roughly the same manner, the focus of the following section will be on Christina Rossetti's rewriting of the sonnet tradition from the troubadourian beloved's place and on Guenevere's defence of herself in William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere".

3

**William Morris and Christina Rossetti:
Articulating Female Voicelessness**

Trésor, proie, jeu et risque, muse, guide, juge, médiatrice, miroir,
la femme est l'Autre dans lequel le sujet se dépasse sans être limité,
qui s'oppose à lui sans le nier ; elle est l'Autre qui se laisse annexer
sans cesser d'être l'Autre. Et par là elle est si nécessaire à la joie de
l'homme et à son triomphe qu'on peut dire que si elle n'existait
pas les hommes l'auraient inventée. Ils l'ont inventée. Mais elle
existe aussi sans leur invention.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949

When William Michael Rossetti first set out to describe the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's primary aims in a sketch, he indicated the necessity of "sympathising with what is direct and serious and heartfelt" as one of the main concerns which brought the members of the group together. While, at first, this shared necessity might be understood as an extension of the simple directness of the Brotherhood's approach, behind Rossetti's assertion there lies a hidden language of political action aimed at innovating Victorian culture by "resisting binaries and embracing diversity, hybridity and multimodality" (Witcher & Kahrman Huseby, 2020, p. 1). The widespread unawareness of his ideologically subversive statement is partially due to the fact that, despite the Pre-Raphaelites openly acknowledging their desire for destabilization, the political objectives of their members still fail to attract notice and consequently remain vastly underexplored. Although the Brotherhood lacked a manifesto and despite their modes of creating being entirely different, one cannot help but notice how its members all engaged in and responded to the political life of their time and shared the aspiration to break apart from tradition by creating something new. What lied at the heart of literary Pre-Raphaelitism was precisely the collaboration and the circulation of ideas between its representatives who, albeit in divergent ways and degrees, exerted a certain influence on one other.

The signs of cross influence in Pre-Raphaelite poetry have been extensively explored by scholars who, nonetheless, by choosing the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers *or* Sisters (as if the two were mutually exclusive) as the subject of their inquiry show a tendency to ignore the inherent collaborative nature of the circle⁵. Having noticed a marked absence of studies concerning the stylistic, thematic and ideological similarities in the medievalist writings of Christina Rossetti and William Morris, the aim of this section

will reside in the uncovering of the strategies the two authors implemented to engage in nineteenth-century gender politics and to depict the typically Victorian conflict between morality, faith and desire.

When it comes to Christina Rossetti's contribution to literary Pre-Raphaelitism and her position in a circle consisting of seven brothers⁶, one cannot help but wonder how the poetess perceived herself and how she coped with that characteristic inbetweenness, deeply embedded in her identity, resulting from an internal (and inherently feminine) collision between culturally imposed discretion and literary ambition. The reasons accounting for her liminality are to be found in the simultaneous sense of belonging and estrangement she felt when confronted both with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and with what came to be known as the Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood⁷. With respect to the former, from its very inception in 1848, the Brotherhood – as its name suggested – defined itself in terms of “masculine affinity” based on “exclusive homo-sociocultural practices” (Spinozzi & Bizzotto, 2012, p. 75) which ruled out any form of collaboration with women artists. While she was denied access to the Brotherhood, Christina was not part of the Sisterhood either for, although she occasionally posed for Dante Gabriel, the idea of modelling, and the assumption of the female role which came with the embracing of such an activity, inevitably clashed with her wish to pursue a literary career. The poetess ultimately refused to align herself with the PR Sisters (who were too unlike her when it came to education, morality and religious values) also and most importantly because being one of them would have meant her exclusion from the artists (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 125). In essence, Rossetti inhabited a liminal space, one where she was “always caught between prominence and marginality” (Spinozzi & Bizzotto, 2012, p. 80) and therefore wholly alienated. Since her association with the circle represented a menace to her propriety, she made sure that her interactions with the Brotherhood were conducted with the utmost discretion. The self-centredness resulting from her will to emerge as a poet necessarily conflicted with the strongholds of Victorian femininity – self-denial and modesty – and prevented her from directly engaging with the group. Be that as it may, the very impossibility of attending the Brotherhood's meetings encouraged the poetess to find new ways to elude the risk of breaching the code of modesty. What Rossetti found most congenial to her situation was the possibility of acting in absentia: she engaged in the aesthetic discussions at home with her brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, and sent them letters through which she intervened in the theoretical and editorial matters of the Brotherhood. In short, she successfully availed herself of her brothers who assumed the role of mediator thus allowing her, albeit in an indirect manner, to express her views and to give her contribution to the congregation's artistic endeavours. Nonetheless, her brothers' mediation did not come without costs for they both encouraged *and* monitored her involvement with the circle thus significantly affecting her authorial identity. As evidenced, during the Victorian Era the publishing industry was characterised by subtle workings of surveillance and control which made Victorian women writers reliant on men who were fully compliant with the hegemonic patriarchy. The poetess

had to conform to what was regarded as “specifically feminine” and to categories which were understood as “self-evident” and “unproblematical” (Armstrong, 1993, p. 316). While this, on the one hand, allowed women to write with a sense of belonging to a particular group, on the other, the adoption of an effective mode (which could be pious, simple or conventional) reduced women poetry to a type. Since women had almost exclusively been regarded as “the desired object of the gaze, not the desiring, speaking subject”, when they did write poetry themselves, it was assumed that love should be its theme (Ehnenn 2015: 213). However, given that women were not perceived as sexually desiring subjects, their writing should centre on objects of desexualised love the likes of God, children and (chastely) their husbands. Being unmarried, Rossetti knew that she was blocked by convention from speaking about sexual love and that she had to conform to nineteenth-century sex-gender norms presuming female passionlessness. It is perhaps for this reason that, although the Victorians regarded the feminine voice as being rich in melody but lacking intellectual substance⁸ and believed poetry to be a “mode” for women, not an occupation, Rossetti was granted a respected place in Victorian literature. Unlike her only woman rival, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose voice thundered like that of a man, Rossetti did not seek to “stray outside the territory allotted to women” (Jones, 1991, p. 231). Nonetheless, there is a doubleness to her poems which the Victorians often failed to see. Behind their simple surface, which seems to be perfectly in line with Victorian conventions, there lies a form of subversive, though hidden, feminism which opposes the shared perception of Rossetti as being less counter-cultural than other Pre-Raphaelite poets. In point of fact, even if her status as an unpartnered woman further contributed to her marginalisation as a female writer, it also encouraged Rossetti to claim the freedom of the unmarried woman to express her sexuality. The author’s duplicity – a direct result of her situation as an unpartnered female poet documenting the cultural dilemma of women – becomes apparent when looking at her treatment of female sexuality in “The Goblin Market” and in “Monna Innominata: a Sonnet of Sonnets” (1880) with the author moving from erotic outspokenness to devotional reticence. If in the former, published in 1862, Rossetti articulates female desire through Lizzie and Laura’s sexual appetite, through their “clasping arms and cautioning lips”, their “tingling cheeks and finger tips”; in the latter, written approximatively twenty years later⁹, the speaking subject protects herself from the dangers of female desire by renouncing earthly love and by embracing faith: “I love, as you would have me, God the most” (sonnet 6, l. 2), “I commend you back to Him / Whose love your love’s capacity can fill” (Rossetti, 2012, p. 455) (sonnet 13, ll. 13-14).

Her devotional turn is to be found at the root of an inner conflict between Rossetti’s wish to reverse a tradition where female identity is only defined in relation to male identity and her propensity to conform to the symbolic systems and cultural attitudes of her time. It is perhaps for this reason that she felt pressured to mask her criticism of the patriarchal literary tradition. The strategies employed by Rossetti to covertly question, investigate and use conventions for unexpected purposes have often been referred to by critics as a “mask” – this is precisely the purpose that her *Monna Innominata*, a mask

aimed at concealing the author's true intent, serves – as an “aesthetic of the secret” and ultimately as the expression of a “poetry of endurance”. Despite the terms being various, they all describe a particular *posture d'auteur* which refuses objectification and is aimed at showing where conventions are most painful not by breaking them but, instead, by following their logic. As a result, far from being “sweet sound without sense”, her poetry becomes an expression of feminine subjectivity “through its very capacity to conceal as well as to reveal” (Armstrong, 1993, p. 325) thus managing to conciliate binary opposites: transgression and boundary, struggle and limit, silence and song. Considered a summa of her work, revolving around a play of revealing and concealing, of assuredness and reticence, “Winter: My Secret” is exemplary of Rossetti's expressive mode of femininity. A direct result of the patriarchal literary tradition and the self-divisions it forces on the female poet, the secret is used by the author to simultaneously mask and reveal her power, to reveal how women live and write, how they mask secret lives and turn “their true faces to the wall” (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 135): “You want to hear it? well / Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell” (Rossetti, 2008, p. 80).

The convergence and juxtaposition of incongruities as found in her literary depiction of female characters is also the core of William Morris's poetry. Just like Rossetti, who successfully availed herself of her *Monna Innominata* to resist the contemporary tendency to standardise and generalise women, William Morris used his writing as a means to show how, far from being unidimensional, women are in fact an aggregation of benign and destructive qualities which cannot be reduced to a type or a category. What is more, both writers have often been described by critics as being Romantic for the adoption of themes the likes of loss, female grief, imprisonment, for the interrelation of *eros* and *thanatos* and lastly for a shared feeling of alienation which becomes the most distinctive feature of their poetry. When it comes to William Morris, both his revolutionary politics and his imaginative literature are to be intended as an expression of his alienation:

There is an air of despair in Morris's poetry as if he is in exile from his own time and place, as if poetry itself were a reduced thing – and that despair is always half of the story; the other half is what possibilities (even heroic possibilities) nevertheless remain (Skoblow, 2012, p. 197).

The historical imagination and, by extension, the medieval past are by no means used by the poet as shelters: Morris used them for the uncovering of the “possibilities that remain” which are believed to play a crucially important role in the shaping of the present *and* the future. His medievalism is not to be understood as a form of antiquarianism but, instead, as a powerful weapon in the fight against industrialization as well as a means by which overcoming alienation. Although the poet himself often described his work as the “embodiment of dreams in one form or another”, by imagining a different social order and therefore an alternative scale of priorities, Morris actively questioned the order in which he lived and revolted against the “impoverished relationships of his society” (Wilmer, 2013, p. 475). When it comes to his connection with the Pre-

Raphaelite Brotherhood, while the author wholeheartedly embraced its aesthetic and ideological stances (as well as its hatred of industrialization), he distinguished himself for his proto-feminist attitudes. In point of fact, if the other members of the congregation did not hold strong views on the contemporary status of women, Morris contributed to nineteenth-century socialist feminist thought and made use of his literary imagination to picture the future socialist woman, freed from gender conventions and their limitations¹⁰. Deemed the Pre-Raphaelite book of verse par excellence for its attempt at translating in words the Pre-Raphaelite graphic arts, the ekphrastic poems which make up *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) appropriate the dramatic monologue and the voices of a variety of female personalities with a view to undercutting “the conservative, patriarchal ideology typically identified with the medievalist discourse” (Harrison, 2007, p. 251). Just like Pre-Raphaelite paintings, William Morris’s medievalist writings are invariably imbued with psychological intensity and vigorous displays of emotions arising from painful situations and social tensions. In his *Defence*, the bodily, material world becomes a vivid reflection of the splitting of the feminine self, torn between the wish to resist female subordination and the pressure to conform to it. The heroines who inhabit his medievalised space share that characteristic inbetweenness of Rossetti’s Monna Innominata and fall under Julia Kristeva’s conception of the “abject” as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and is therefore confined to the “unlivable” or “uninhabitable” zones of social life (Burlinson, 1999, p. 293). In this connection it is worth stressing that Morris’s *Defence* shook Victorian society to its roots precisely for its erotic intensity and powerful evocations of passionate and unhappy women: his portrayals of confined, alienated, dependent women were so sharp that they posed some questions. Did the author mean the women in his poetry to mirror the most destructive conventions of Victorian patriarchy? Or did he actually want to provide, through them, a defence of female passion and sexuality? (Boos, 1985, p. 181). A revelation of the strategies available to nineteenth-century women who wished to reject the social attitudes which constrained them, his poems indeed provide a defence of female desire and proved of crucial importance for the construction of a less stereotypical portrayal of female characters. In light of the foregoing, there is no denying that Christina Rossetti and William Morris (who, following William Michael Rossetti’s account, were barely “acquainted”) trespassed the barriers of Victorian morality and gave sound to women’s silence by exploring the “gendered and sexualised terrain of the aesthetic” and by establishing a literary dialogue revolving around the music of voicelessness (Riede, 2007, p. 317). This is precisely the starting point of both “Monna Innominata” and “The Defence of Guenevere” whose voices ironically speak the unspeakable into existence.

Christina Rossetti successfully reimagined the sonnet cycle in a woman’s voice through the creation of the fourteen sonnets making up her “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets”. A site of private utterance and reflection with an affinity for reticence, the sonnet allowed Rossetti to satisfy an inward necessity, to articulate a dialectical self-confrontation – made possible precisely by her mask, her Monna

Innominata – revolving around love, renunciation and spiritual vision. Understood by many as being too biographical to be art, as an expression of a “typically feminine overflowing of emotion”, the sequence was in fact motivated by the poetess’ wish to appropriate the courtly love tradition. As a matter of fact, the poetess directly challenges the objectification and idealization of the troubadour’s beloved in the preface to her sonnet sequence: “Had such a lady spoken for herself”, Rossetti writes, “the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified”. The motivation behind her project is therefore openly explained by Rossetti herself who maintains that that “bevy of unnamed ladies” might well have shared their lover’s “poetic aptitude” but were never given the opportunity to speak for themselves. However, like any feminist methodology aimed at giving a voice to the silent, her revisionary rewriting of the sonnet cycle brings with itself “an impossible double bind”:

[If] on the one hand, in the logic of recovery, literary voices that have been silenced within the representational scheme need to be recovered in order to understand their contextual positions and to interrogate the construction of canonicity that marginalised them in the first place, on the other, the result is to project a voice onto what has culturally become the voiceless: an act of critical ventriloquy which overturns, yet leaves in place, the methodological binary voice / silence upon which the literary canon is constructed (Billone, 2007, p. 7).

Rossetti’s “Monna Innominata” which ironically ends in “silence of love that cannot sing again” sees the coexistence of two different states of being – one characterised by reticence, the other by outspokenness – which relentlessly separate and conjoin throughout the sequence. Her poetry’s double attraction to muteness and sound is emblematic of the paradox of her career and of her situation as a woman writing in the male poetic tradition – that she became famous “for speaking of silence and oblivion” (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 147):

Rossetti requests that dead, unremembered women sing. She renders her request unanswerable; but at the same time she answers it by blessing these women with the very music that they will always be denied [...] This divided identity appropriates every kind of subjectivity, undercutting everyone’s ability to speak at the same time that it forces each individual to sing and sing the desire for his or her own unattainable music (Billone, 2007, p. 112).

The desire to sing her impossible song, coupled with the ability of taking power from female powerlessness, encouraged the poetess to defy the gendered discourse of Petrarchism (where the speaking, and therefore active, subject is male by structural definition) and to reinvent the conventions of feminine representation. Through her mimicry of the male tradition, Christina Rossetti articulated and dealt with the self-division imposed on her by the male dominance of the literary canon: if in Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse* the silent object, Laura, disappears behind language and is ultimately used as the “scalpel used by the poet to dissect his own self”, Rossetti’s alter ego effectively manages to subvert the set roles of courtly love through her very act

of female composition (Van Remoortel, 2006, p. 250). In a society in which women were inexorably seen as “something that means, never the originator of meaning”, Rossetti managed to make her voice heard (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 139). While he knew that the male poet could empathise with, but could not possibly share, the suffering resulting from the burden of womanhood – a condition endured by the female poet in life *and* in art – William Morris still granted Guenevere the opportunity of voicing her defence. Morris appropriated and manipulated the dramatic monologue form to produce a poem which is not his defence of Guenevere, but rather Guenevere’s defence of herself: the author wanted the focus of his poem to be *her* perspective and *her* version of the events, a viewpoint unexplored by other authors. In point of fact, while Morris’s heroine retains her dignity of queen consort and refuses to be silenced, Lord Alfred Tennyson’s Guenevere is trapped in domestic ideology and stripped of her title. As it is shown by Arthur relying on Guenevere for the creation of his heroic vision, in Tennyson’s medievalised world women’s performance of femininity ensures and legitimizes men’s performance of masculinity and the creation of a better world. Since gender complementarity represents the core of his Camelot, the queen’s opposition to patriarchy does not simply undermine King Arthur’s heroic masculinity, it threatens the entire social order. In short, if, on the one hand, Tennyson deplores, on the other Morris seeks to understand the crimes of his heroine and wishes to enlighten his reader on the threats posed to women by their socially dependent status.

Out of the eleven poems (many of which are dramatic monologues) included in William Morris’s first book of poetry *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, four gravitate towards Arthurian themes. Often described as an “epiphanic poem” aimed at awakening the reader to the unjust gender confines enforced by cultural discourses, “The Defence of Guenevere” falls into the Arthurian category. Beginning in medias res, the title poem revolves around queen Guenevere who, minutes before being burned at the stake, is given the opportunity to deliver a witty and passionate monologue. From the very outset, the reader is confronted with a medieval lady who is clever and brave, features which are usually denied to the heroines of romances. Knowing that “they would have her speak”, Guenevere proceeds to talk with her “head lifted up”: her voice, low at first, grows “full loud and shrill”. Despite her monologue seeing an alternation of sound and silence (as readers we are told that the moment her eyes fill with tears, her voice invariably “sinks”) the queen never fails to stay upright and never shrinks. In a typically Pre-Raphaelite manner, where words fail, bodies speak: we can see her breast rise as she threatens the knights to drown them in their blood, we gaze upon the beauty of her burning cheeks. If Morris’s ekphrastic poem is opened by the passionate twisting of Guenevere’s body and its heavily eroticised aura, the incipit of Rossetti’s sequence is imbued with the speaker’s grief over something that appears to be lost but can hopefully be retrieved: “My hope hangs waning, waxing, like a moon / Between the heavenly days on which we meet” (sonnet I, ll. 11-12). Seeing unhappiness as *the* condition of Petrarchan love, Christina Rossetti chose loss, pain and yearning as the main themes of her sequence

thus bringing to the sonnet form “the voice of a woman’s suffering as had never before been written” (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 139). Nonetheless, the insistence placed on the speaker’s grief and her movements from hope to silence are not to be discarded as a mere expression of the typically Petrarchan oscillations and doubts. In Rossetti’s “complexly gendered dance between incoherence and clarity” (Billone 2007: 159) silence is inextricably intertwined with grief, with the unspeakable sadness over the impossibility of enjoying the same literary stature afforded to her male counterparts. The typical Petrarchan elements – used by Rossetti to articulate in words the problems that haunted and troubled her – are therefore promptly denied to her speaker. While in courtly love poetry spring is inherently associated with feelings of happiness, with rebirth and love, in the second sonnet of her sequence the trees, much like the Monna Innominata who has been abandoned by youth and beauty, “would not blossom yet for many a May” (sonnet 2, l. 8). It is interesting to note that spring is invoked in roughly the same manner by Guenevere who uses it as a mirror of her grief: bought by “Arthur’s great name and little love” (Morris, 1997, p. 24) (*The Defence*, l. 83) and therefore deeply unhappy with her failed marriage, the heroine, grown careless of most things, wonders “Do I not know now a day in Spring?” (*The Defence*, l. 104). Torn between hope and despair, between spiritual and earthly love, both speakers resort to dreams¹¹ and memories¹² for only there can they find solace from their alienation and be reunited with the sole condition of their song – their beloved:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for
you:
Or come not yet, for it is over then,
And long it is before you come again,
So far between my pleasures are and few.
[...]
Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang
When life was sweet because you called them
sweet?
(Christina Rossetti, “Monna Innominata”
sonnet I, ll. 1-4/ 13-14)

So dear
To me in everything, come here to-night,
Or else the hours will pass most dull and
drear;
If you come not, I fear this time I might
Get thinking over much of times gone by,
When I was young and green hope was in
sight:
For no man cares now to know why I sigh;
And no man comes to sing me pleasant songs.
(William Morris, “The Defence” ll. 250-258)

Both speakers unceasingly address their lovers and identify them as the only means to achieve happiness but, even so, their reliance on them is just apparent. While both Guenevere and the Monna Innominata maintain that life is meaningless without the beloved – thus mimicking the male tradition – they also suggest that only women know the true meaning of renunciation, only women experience the total abdication of self and the desire to break away from it. What is more, given that it is usually the male speaking subject who urges his absent female beloved to come back, by addressing their

lovers both speakers reverse tradition and replace female absence with female presence, desire, and authorship (Moore, 2011, p. 492). The insistence placed on the male beloved acts as a screen for a hidden, yet fierce, counter-cultural force: through their subversive voices of change, both Guenevere and the Monna Innominata are creating songs of liberation which, being necessarily out of step with the present, often take the form of memory or dream (Herbert, 1996, p. 319).

Nonetheless, the revolutionary impulse which nourishes their shared opposition to conventions sees moments of intense tenacity *and* of extreme reticence. If, at first, the Monna Innominata illustrates how women's silence can turn into poetic speech by claiming a stake in her lover's poetry (which she helped to produce since he used his imagination to construct an ideal image of her) and by assimilating the male into her female persona, she soon relapses into the gender roles that the sonnet tradition presupposes. Her wish to break the codes of feminine behaviour is manifest in her admiration of Queen Esther – the biblical heroine who used her feminine power to save her people – who “spread abroad her beauty for a snare / Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake” (sonnet 8, ll. 6-7). Nonetheless, Rossetti's alter ego soon discovers that her frailty prevents her from following Esther's example and ultimately leaves her poetic aspiration to a higher authority – God – who contains her ambition (as well as her earthly passion) and protects her from the dangers of female sexuality: “If I could trust mine own self with your fate / Shall I not rather trust it in God's hand?” (sonnet 13, ll. 1-2). She ultimately goes back to her true role, the one she had embraced (just to resist it later) in sonnet 5: “To love you much and yet to love you more [...] Since woman is the helpmeet made for man” (sonnet 5, ll. 12-14). As Natasha Distiller rightly notes, the poetess is negotiating her right to be a speaking Petrarchan lover who is also female and who is “both desiring and honourable, a very tricky proposition in the Petrarchan Symbolic” (Distiller, 2008, p. 130). The Monna Innominata, fearing that her desire will lead to her damnation (a distress that no male Petrarchan poet could possibly know), asks God to authorise her voice with his love: not only does the religious frame contain her desire, it also makes it safe to talk back.

If Guenevere's attempt to resolve the discrepancies between self and society appears to be characterised by a similar degree of contradiction, Morris's heroine ultimately succeeds where Rossetti's alter ego fails: she musters the courage to follow Esther's example. As Karen Herbert promptly observes, the queen's language in the “Defence” is highly unstable, it only “seems” a simple matter (Herbert, 1996, p. 319): even her refusal to tell more and to speak another word conceals a deeper and revolutionary intent. While the heroine's seemingly fragmented narrative displays a vast array of incoherences, her speech is in fact a powerful performance wittingly constructed by the heroine to win her audience's sympathy. By exploiting the construction of certain gender roles¹³ – beauty¹⁴, weakness and devotion to God for instance – Morris's heroine manages to avoid execution and to overturn her position as a fallen woman, something which is all the more surprising as she never denies her sin but, instead, talks about her sexuality in an extremely detailed manner:

But shortly listen – In that garden fair
 Came Lancelot walking; this is true, the kiss
 Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
 I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,
 When both our mouths went wandering in one way,
 And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
 Our hands being left behind strained far away.
 (The Defence, ll. 132-138)

Through Guenevere's passionate speech, William Morris effectively adapted medieval legend to provide his reader with an examination of Victorian anxieties about gender and the law. Paradoxically enough, in "The Defence" it is Guenevere's attempt to be dutiful and her sexual loyalty that lead to her damnation while her sexual energies enable personal fulfilment and psychological health. In the conflict between carnal and spiritual love, the queen embraces the omnipotence of earthly love thus placing herself beyond morality and supplementing Christian values with erotic ones. As Carole Silver rightly notes, our sympathy remains with Guenevere and her great but guilty love and "the passion in whose name she has transgressed remains more important than her transgression" (Silver, 1969, p. 702).

Although both Morris and Rossetti present the reader with the reflections of a self split between the possibility of singing and the dangers of articulating sound, the poetess' Monna Innominata suffers an entirely different fate: the "hypnotic murmurs of a mind talking to itself" (Triggs, 1989, p. 13) are resolved in the renunciation of earthly love. Rossetti's silent lady shares Guenevere's desire to violate the code of feminine behaviour but finds herself in the impossibility of doing so. By renouncing her lover and her laurel, the speaker loses the poetic subjectivity "brought into being by the need to speak of her love for him, to him" (Distiller, 2008, p. 132): all that remains for her is God's superiority and her faith in a better life to come. If by the end of the sequence there appears to be a circling back to the first sonnet, where the speaker reminisced about the sweet songs she sang, the return is only apparent for, as opposed to the opening sonnet, the closing one uses silence as its last strategy and bids farewell to the possibility of singing: "The silence of a heart which sang its songs [...] Silence of love that cannot sing again" (sonnet 14, ll. 12-14). Ironically enough, not only does that very love which "knows not a dividing sea" separate the lady from her lover, it also overwhelms the speaker, who is left drowning in the unspeakable. Margaret Homans aptly summarises the difficulties Rossetti had to face in her attempt to reverse centuries of literary tradition by asserting that, in the end, "tradition writes her perhaps as much as she rewrites tradition" (Homans, 1985, p. 574).

In essence, if Morris's heroine gradually acquires awareness of what society expects of her (thus overtly rejecting the role her accusers want her to play) and goes as far as manipulating female language to deceive her audience, Rossetti's silent lady cannot muster the courage to break free, to turn from silenced muse to creator of her own

destiny. Although it has been stressed how the poetess' religious beliefs often conflicted with her feminist inclinations and prevented her from completely breaking away from the Victorian ideal of womanhood, the fate suffered by the Monna Innominata does not solely arise from the poetess' faith. Perfectly aware of the potential consequences of overt criticism (especially when put forward by women), wishing to preserve her propriety *and* to respect her faith, Rossetti articulated and handled female language with great caution¹⁵. Nevertheless, unlike her Monna Innominata – who allowed her unrecorded memories to slip away – the poetess skilfully etched her unattainable music, which – just like that of the ghosts of the Medieval past – can still be heard today, on our memory. Both Guenevere's thundering voice and the silent echoes of Rossetti's absence are living proof of how women cannot, and yet continue to, relentlessly sing the unsteadiness of their voice.

Notes

1. A Neologism coined by Jacques Derrida consisting of the blending of Haunting and Ontology. The term refers to the return or persistence of the elements of the past which come back in the present time.

2. In her *Women Writers and Nineteenth-century Medievalism*, Clare Saunders maintains that it was Sharon Turner's Anglo-Saxon researches that helped change the perception of the Middle Ages as "barbarous and uncultured". Saunders holds that Turner's positive portrayal of the Middle Ages proved particularly beneficial for female medievalism since the immersion in the medieval past was seen as a "ladylike" pursuit and allowed them to comment on a vast array of contemporary issues, notably war and gender roles.

3. Examples of the first tendency are to be found in the writings of Walter Scott, William Wordsworth and Lord Byron whose literary productions play with masculine tropes, revolve around the idea of knighthood and emphasize the Arthurian aspect of Romantic medievalism. The medievalist poems of John Keats, who identified himself with the medieval figure of the Occitan troubadour, are, instead, an example of the second tendency since they take root in the "effeminizing strain" of the Provençal song.

4. In particular, men's misogynistic criticism of women led to the emergence of the so-called attacks "ad feminam" which reflected a harsh reality for women writers: their ideas as authors were not given any consideration, the pivotal aspect of the criticism they were addressed resided in their very womanhood.

5. An example of this tendency is to be found in Mary Benner's *Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Circle* (1988) for nowhere in the volume can information about the Pre-Raphaelite Sisters be found. Even the most notable female members of the Pre-Raphaelite school, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, are only mentioned in relation to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

6. The first wave of Pre-Raphaelitism included Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens, Thomas Woolner and William Michael Rossetti while later members of the circle included John William Waterhouse, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris.

7. The term is used to designate the set of women (whose main occupation was modelling) who, both from a biographical and artistic perspective, were important for the Pre-Raphaelite circle. The group includes Emma Brown, Elizabeth Siddall, Annie Miller, Fanny Cornforth, Jane Morris and Georgiana Burne-Jones. In her *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, Jan Marsh maintains that Christina Rossetti should not be defined simply as "one of the Pre-Raphaelite women" for her life and work deserve attention in their own right.

8. In his Memoir, William Michael Rossetti commented on Christina Rossetti's habits of composition which are described as being "entirely of the casual and spontaneous kind": "if something came into her head which she found suggestive of verse, she put it into verse. It came to her (I take it) very easily, without her meditating a possible subject".

9. It is interesting to note that the tone of her poetry becomes progressively more devotional after her rejection of the marriage proposal put forward by Thomas Cayley (a linguist known for his translations of

Dante who was particularly close to her brother Dante Gabriel) in 1866. Although she supposedly fell in love with Cayley, Rossetti could not marry him on grounds of religious faith since he was an agnostic. Her dedication to Anglo-Catholicism was also the result of Rossetti's poor health and of her having to suffer through considerable hardship, the death of her brother Dante in 1882 and that of her mother four years later for instance.

10. His sensitivity to the feminist cause also resulted from him having witnessed his sister's fate as a Victorian unpartnered woman: Henrietta was a strong-minded woman who, just like Christina Rossetti, was confined to her home, was deprived of the opportunity to pursue further education and spent her life caring after their mother.

11. The third sonnet of Rossetti's sequence moves within the semantic field of dreams and immerses the reader in an oneiric atmosphere. The speaker affirms "Only in a dream we are at one" thus reinforcing the feeling of something lost that may be retrieved.

12. While speaking, Guenevere finds herself reminiscing about her time with Lancelot which she remembers in an extremely detailed manner: "No minute of that wild day ever slips / From out my memory; I hear thrushes sing, / And wheresoever I may be, straightaway / Thoughts of it all come up with most fresh sting".

13. Guenevere makes use of the commonplace association of women with unregulated feelings – tears and heartbeats for instance – in her favour, to deceive her audience: "God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie. / Being such a lady could I weep all these tears / If this were true?"

14. She addresses her accusers – the knights that are supposed to protect her – and says: "With all this wickedness; say no rash word / Against me, being so beautiful".

15. The nature of Rossetti's language was best traced by Dolores Rosenblum who defined it as a way to reinforce limits, to deliberately demarcate the ineffable, as "that which not only never can be said but never has been said".

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