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RIVERRUN

Collana di letteratura e cultura inglese

La collana intende promuovere lo studio della letteratura e della cultura inglese, rivolgendo un'attenzione particolare alle letterature e alle culture anglofone nella loro dimensione innovativa, intese cioè come produzione di testi che parlano di altri mondi, di altre sensibilità artistiche, di altre modalità espressive e conoscitive. Da questo punto di vista, rimane la centralità della lingua e della letteratura inglese *tout court* che si pongono quali termini imprescindibili di un confronto con la tradizione. Mentre la lingua inglese allarga sempre più lo spazio della sua funzionalità nella comunicazione e impone la sua egemonia linguistico-culturale, nel panorama globalizzato del terzo millennio nulla è immobile in un processo in cui non è sempre facile distinguere chi influenza da chi è influenzato – anche in termini culturologici. Di qui il ruolo assunto dal concetto di attraversamento che implica anche fluidità e permeabilità degli spazi culturali. Un *riverrun* che si sostituisce alla dialettica centro/periferia o, se si vuole, alla coppia oppositiva continuità/discontinuità, configurando in tal modo un territorio nuovo per gli studi di anglistica, anche sul piano della ricerca comparativa e interculturale.

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Eleonora Sasso

Victorian Dominatrices

Women of Arcane Power
in Nineteenth-Century Fiction



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ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

www.aracneeditrice.it
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via Raffaele Garofalo, 133/A-B
00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-5335-5

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I edizione: novembre 2012

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Acknowledgements

I was first attracted to the figure of the dominatrix when I saw the Anthony Frederick Sandys portrait of Morgan Le Fay in March 2007 at the Birmingham Art Gallery. I was immediately intrigued by this woman of arcane power whose appearance with her loose hair, abandoned gestures and draped leopard skin suggests a dangerous and bestial female sexuality. Standing there at the Birmingham Art Gallery, surrounded by the Pre-Raphaelites' paintings, the sorceress overwhelmed me with images of powerful mistresses dating back to the Middle Ages. At the time, I was about to start my research on "Victorian Mediaevalism" thanks to a three-year fellowship under the supervision of Prof. Francesco Marroni, Director of the Centre for Victorian and Edwardian Studies at the University of Chieti (Italy), to whom I owe a deep gratitude for his intellectual support and for stimulating my passion for Victorian studies.

The idea of this book then developed in discussions about the femme fatale at the BSLS Conference at the University of Birmingham in 2007, at the AHRC conference on *Recasting the Past* at the University of Exeter in 2011, as well as at the ESSE 2012 Conference at Bogazici University (Istanbul). I am grateful to the community of scholars on women's studies including Florence Boos, Lilla Maria Crisafulli, Maria Di Cenzo, Vita Fortunati, Regenia Gagnier, Ann Heilmann, Coral Ann Howells, Gloria Lauri-Lucente, Jan Marsh, Clara Mucci, Anna Maria Sportelli, Oriana Palusci, Gemma Persico and Biancamaria Rizzardi Perutelli, who inspired me in my research. I am particularly thankful to Oriana Palusci, President of the Italian Association for Canadian Studies (AISC), for offering me invaluable suggestions and for providing intellectual stimulus and enthusiasm for feminist studies.

I would like to thank those careful readers who have commented scrupulously on draft chapters: Roger Ebbatson, Mary

P. Kane, David Latham, and Angela Thirlwell. I must make special mention of Angela Thirlwell who not only read a former draft of the chapter on Ford Madox Ford, helping me with very useful annotations, but also provided practical advice and sensitive support. I am more grateful that I can say to Sandro Jung for his intellectual generosity and for inviting me at the University of Salford in 2009 to deliver a seminar on Thomas Hardy and a masterclass on *Jane Eyre*. Thanks to these formative experiences, I experimented with new approaches to teaching Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. I would also like to thank Roger Ebbatson whose expertise on Thomas Hardy helped me to finalise the third chapter of this book.

A special mention has to be made of Andrea Mariani, President of the Italian Association for North American Studies (AISNA), for his ever encouragement and generous interest in my studies. I would also like to thank Nunzio Zago, Dean of the School of Foreign Languages and Literatures of Ragusa (University of Catania), for supporting my cultural activities with enthusiasm during my first year of research as a Lecturer in English Literature. I have also benefited from the advice and support of my colleagues – Gigliola Nocera, Nadia Minerva, Santo Burgio, Giuseppe Traina, Massimo Sturiale, Sabina Fontana and Fabrizio Impellizzeri – who encouraged me in completing this project.

Like Chiaro Dell'Erma in D.G. Rossetti's "Hand and Soul" who is inspired to paint the portrait of a mystic lady by visiting the Pitti gallery at Florence, I derived stimulus to write about Victorian mistresses from the Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Circe, Medusa, Cleopatra, Medea, Lilith and Morgan Le Fay. I am indebted to the staff at the Birmingham Central Library, the British Library, and the Senate House Library, for dealing efficiently with my numerous requests for periodicals and rare books.

I dedicate this book to my family, especially to my mother who always encouraged and supported me in my quest for knowledge and whose exemplary female figure has continued to inspire me over the years.

Introduction

A maid stood by him like Diana clad /
Too fair for one to look on and be
glad [...] / Her wide gray eyes upon
the goal were set / Calm and unmov'd
as though no soul were near. / But her
foe trembled as a man in fear, / Nor
from her loveliness one moment
turn'd / His anxious face with fierce
desire that burn'd.

– William Morris, “Atalanta’s Race”

From lips not his, and all that strange
hair shed / Across the tissued pillows,
fold on fold, / Innumerable,
incomparable, all gold, / To fire men’s
eyes with wonder, and with love /
Men’s hearts; so shone its flowering
crown above / The brows enwound
with that imperial wreath.

– Algernon Swinburne, *Tristram of
Lyonesse*

In “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Hélène Cixous introduces a new vision of the mythological figure of the Medusa, a beautiful, laughing woman, who rejects any form of masculine castration. As she maintains, «[i]t is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her – by loving her, [...] for getting beyond the Old without delay, [...] as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self»¹. Behind this feminist manifesto,

¹ H. CIXOUS, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, *Signs*, 1, 4 (Summer 1976), p. 878.

there lies an overt attack against logocentrism which is inextricably connected to phallogocentrism. In line with such eminent critics as Susan Sontag, Margaret Atwood, Julia Kristeva, and Barbara Godard, Cixous deconstructs what she calls the “marital-conjugal subjective economy”² in order to facilitate the emergence of an independent feminine identity, a seductive dominant woman who scares Perseus-like men to death: «Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That’s because they need femininity to be associated with death; [...] They need to be afraid of us»³.

Cixous’s article on the historic, mythical, and social situation of women may offer an illuminating framework to investigate the representation of Medusa-like characters in nineteenth-century fiction. Victorian femmes fatales seem to be under the power of the Medusa effect, the «ability to dominate and intimidate others»⁴, which turns them into sexual dominatrices laughing at male vulnerabilities. Apart from the overrated figure of the femme fatale, «the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma»⁵, as epitomised by Tennyson’s Vivien, Rossetti’s Lilith, and Wilde’s Salomé, powerful Victorian women may be easily identified with Cixous’s Medusa.

The Victorian dominatrix is a more recurrent figure than one might expect given that woman is eroticised partly as dominatrix (see for example Lydia Gwilt, Becky Sharp, and Lady Audley) partly as victim (Shirley, Ruth, and Esther Summerson). The female archetype of the strong, dominant, sexualised woman dates back to Victorian times when garments⁶ did play a very significant role in emphasising the

² Ivi, p. 888.

³ Ivi, p. 885.

⁴ J.Sh. BOLEN, *Goddesses in Everywoman: Powerful Archetypes in Women’s Lives*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1984, p. 101.

⁵ M.A. DOANE, *Femmes fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 1

⁶ For an interesting study on the importance of garments in Victorian literature and culture see C. GIORCELLI, *Abito e identità. Ricerche di storia letteraria e culturale*, Palermo, Ila Palma, 2009.

feminine role. The corset⁷, garters, stockings, and gloves are popular accessories in the representation and attire of dominatrices, whose body language exploit the erotic connotation of fetish objects.

Victorian Dominatrices investigates women of arcane power in the novels by Charlotte Brontë, William Morris, Thomas Hardy, Vernon Lee and Ford Madox Ford. This book focuses on a variety of fictional genres (gothic, romance, naturalistic, fantastic, and impressionistic) and situates them in the fields of art, culture and society. The aim of this book is to explore the ways in which Brontë, Morris, Hardy, Lee and Ford represent a new version of the Victorian woman, a woman of social, sexual, arcane power who paved the way for feminist studies.

This book will offer new and original perspectives on the representation of Victorian women in nineteenth-century fiction. By employing a multifaceted approach to literature, and providing new readings of such works as *Jane Eyre*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Woodlanders*, *Hauntings*, and *The Shifting of the Fire*, I intend to put into dialogue mainstream literary productions and redefine the terms of critical debate about the New Woman. Through the close reading of long and short fiction, my study provides the construction of Brontë, Morris, Hardy, Lee, and Ford as unassailable in the representation of Victorian femininity.

In chapter one (“Romance and Mediaevalism in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*”), I investigate *Jane Eyre* as a medieval romance. The chronotopes of the castle and the garden activate mediaeval reveries which may be interpreted as a tangible evidence of Brontë’s interest in mediaevalism. Probably inspired by the *Roman de la Rose*, *Jane Eyre* is imbued with mediaeval tropes, as exemplified by female figures of arcane

⁷ See L. SUMMERS, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*, Oxford, Berg, 2001, as well as B. NEWMAN, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2004.

power who are reminiscent of courtly dominatrices dating back to the Middle Ages.

Chapter two (“Dominatrix Witches in William Morris’s *Fantastic Romances*”) outlines Morris’s evil mistresses as depicted in *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World’s End*, and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* who naturally tend to oppression and cruelty. So great is the role played by the Maid, Birdalone and the servant of the Well that it might seem as if their mighty mistresses are denied any power of affirmation without their “hired hands” and therefore they require the others’ recognition in order to become aware of themselves. The aim of this chapter is to explore women’s progression towards freedom, the evolution of the repressed ego in search of recognition.

Chapter three (“Women of Archaeo-Astronomical Power in Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*”) uses the concept of archeo-astronomy, i.e. the study of astronomy in its archaeological and cultural context, to advance a new reading of *The Woodlanders*. My central purpose will be to re-read *The Woodlanders* as an ethno-astronomical study of ancient societies. I will reflect on the archaeo-astronomical power of such female characters as Grace Melbury, Marty South and Mrs Charmond from a socio-scientific standpoint, and interpret the stellar symbolism as the power on Earth drawn from above. As a sun worshipper, Grace Melbury begins to unlock the secrets of the interplay between cultural imagination and natural observation. Like a neolithic woman, who is intent on observing the optical illusions of the sunrise, Grace reveals her own sun-oriented attitude aimed at searching for the human origins of early myth and culture.

In chapter four (“Mistresses of Metamorphosis in Vernon Lee’s *Hauntings*”), I provide a detailed overview of Vernon Lee’s *femmes bestiales*: Medea, Dionea, Alice, and Oriana. Lee’s use of bestial female figures who lead men to madness is transgressive of Victorian norms of repressed female sexuality and the love-madness convention according to which women are pathetically obsessed with the lovers who have deserted

them. Against the over-reiterated figure of “the madwoman in the attic”, as exemplified by Dickens’s Miss Havisham and Collins’s woman in white, Lee subverts gender roles, challenging literary authorities.

Chapter five (“Domestic Dominae in Ford Madox Ford’s House of Observation”) examines Ford’s such passion-driven characters as Queen Ismara, Queen Eldrida, Nancy, and Valentine, whose sexual excitement burns in verbal metaphor and engages in reveries over a specific object furniture. Subjectness and object-ness are intimately and archetypally intertwined in the aesthetic object, reminder of despair, passion and crime. Ford’s domestic representation of the primitiveness of the sexual fight is imbued with mediaeval references to courtly love romance, as epitomised by Eleanor of Aquitaine, also known as “The Queen of the Courts of Love”.

Apart from Rebecca Stott’s eminent study on *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*⁸ which places the femme fatale in the context of imperialism and criminology, no book-length study exists on such a topic as *Victorian Dominatrices*. Jennifer Hedgecock’s recent book entitled *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat*⁹, though valuable in its Marxist-Feminist analysis of the changing social and economic status of women from the 1860’s through the 1880’s – as depicted in the fiction by Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Honoré de Balzac and W.M. Thackeray – does not take into consideration the figure of the Victorian dominatrix from the multifaceted perspective that I employ here, nor investigate the semantic nuances of the words “mistress”, “lady” and “domina” in such Victorian authors as Charlotte Brontë, William Morris, Thomas Hardy, Vernon Lee and Ford Madox Ford.

⁸ R. STOTT, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian "Femme Fatale": The Kiss of Death*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992.

⁹ J. HEDGECOCK, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat*, Amherst, Cambria Press, 2008.

Starting from the postulate that a dominatrix is a mistress who dominates not only a male partner but may well have female submissives, my study traces back the types of female dominance exerted over Victorian individuals. From mistresses of courtly romance to dominatrix witches who practice sexual thralldom, from women of archaeo-astronomical power to mistresses of metamorphosis and domestic dominae, Charlotte Brontë, Morris, Hardy, Lee and Ford depict Victorian dominatrices as laughing Medusas, able to destabilise patriarchal authorities. Through a comparative textual analysis of long and short fiction materials, this study intends to investigate the femme fatale from a different angle in order to construct the image of the Victorian woman as «the sole vehicle of transcendence in a century thrown open to unorthodox beliefs»¹⁰.

To conclude, all the Victorian dominatrices appearing in the novels by Charlotte Brontë, William Morris, Thomas Hardy, Vernon Lee and Ford Madox Ford – namely *Jane Eyre*, *Bertha Mason*, *Lady Abundance*, *the Mistress*, *the witch-wife*, *Grace Melbury*, *Marty South*, *Mrs Charmond*, *Medea*, *Dionea*, *Alice*, *Oriana*, *Queen Ismara*, *Queen Eldrida*, *Nancy*, and *Valentine* – do incarnate the features of Cixous's Medusa, a female goddess representing female wisdom, creativity and destructive magic. For this mythical figure of the past, present and future everything is possible since the universe is governed by the same physical law – that is the principle of attraction between opposite gender polarities.

¹⁰ N. AUERBACH, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 2. For a thorough study on Victorian women see G. PERSICO, *Criminali, assassine, adulate, degenerate...folli? Rappresentazioni del femminile nel "sensation novel": i testi e il contesto*, Lugano, Lumières internationales, 2008.

Chapter 1

Romance and Mediaevalism in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

1.1. *Jane Eyre* as a Courtly Dominatrix

Jane Eyre has often been labelled as the novel of “the Governess”¹. This definition is echoed in the words of Nancy Armstrong, author of *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, who defined *Jane Eyre* as «the Quintessential expression of Victorian individualism»². According to Virginia Woolf³ Jane's subjective view constitutes a danger to the modern novel while Raymond Williams celebrated this Victorian female character as the voice of modernity⁴. But *Jane Eyre* is first and foremost a Gothic romance, a canonical female Gothic text, whose figures of uncanny power still pervade the modern reader's imagination.

With a fairy-tale dynamics, similar to the narrative structure of *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, *Jane Eyre* appears to be a Gothic romance relying on supernatural horrors, apparently haunted mansions, secret chambers, and bleeding statues, all of which are explained rationally at the close. Charlotte Brontë seems to fuse realism and romance, the ordinary with the extraordinary, rational explanations with mythical and supernatural visions of life.

¹ M. POOVEY, “The Anathematized Race: The Governess and Jane Eyre”, in Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof, eds., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 230-254.

² N. ARMSTRONG, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987.

³ See V. WOOLF, “*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*”, in *The Common Reader*, London, Hogarth Press, 1925, p. 198.

⁴ R. WILLIAMS, *The Long Revolution*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965, p. 53.

Such Gothic peculiarities are well exemplified in three Gothic scenes:

1. The discovery of Bertha, the lunatic in the attic, after the aborted wedding scene;
2. Jane's magical reclamation of an estate/inheritance and kinship with the Rivers family;
3. Jane's mysterious summons to return to Rochester.

Numerous are the Gothic elements characterising these uncanny episodes imbued with ghostly atmospheres (Jane is scared by Bertha's ghostly laugh as well as by a ghost appearing in the red room), mysterious events (the details of Mr Rochester's mysterious past are revealed sporadically and partially throughout the narrative), and mediaeval sceneries (the castle-like setting of Thornfield and its mediaeval garden of love).

But the peculiarity of *Jane Eyre* is to offer a new version of Gothic romance. Brontë modifies many of the conventions of Gothic genre (mystery, terror, haunted houses, supernatural elements and so forth) in order to find new ways to achieve the same end.

Etymologically, the word "eyre", which is an obsolete form standing for air, refers to a kind of mediaeval circuit court⁵ and the proceedings of that court. Charlotte Brontë's interest in mediaevalism is also attested to by her fondness for Walter Scott's fiction. At the age of eighteen, she recommended Scott's poems to Ellen Nussey: «Scott's sweet, wild, romantic poetry can do you no harm nor can Wordsworth... For Fiction – read Scott alone; all novels after his are worthless»⁶. The appreciation of Walter Scott's writings is also exemplified by the similarity between Scott's *Marmion*, the story of a girl walled-up alive for breaking her vow of chastity, and the scene of the red room in which Jane is imprisoned as a punishment of her stubbornness.

⁵ See E.C., BREWER, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 2001, p. 410.

⁶ Ch. BRONTË, letter to Ellen Nussey, 4 July 1834, in *Selected Letters*, eds. Margaret Smith and Janet Gezari, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 5.

The plot of *Jane Eyre* is very similar to Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel. A Poem* (1802), the story of two lovers, Margaret and Henry, who despite overwhelming obstacles, end up together. This reunion is possible only after the pride which contributes to their separation is vanquished. Likewise, the marriage between Jane and Rochester takes place when their pride is no longer an obstacle. Aside from the legal impediment to Jane and Rochester's marriage, pride is a major factor in keeping them apart.

Also very relevant in this sense is Charlotte Brontë's fascination with Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581). In her poem "The Violet" (1830), written at the age of fourteen, Charlotte Brontë mentions him as such he that sang Jerusalem. As reported by Elizabeth Imlay, author of the book *Charlotte Brontë and the Mysteries of Love*, Charlotte Brontë used to read the translation by Edward Fairfax, which was acclaimed as one of the finest English verse translations. One of the most characteristic literary devices in Tasso's poem is the emotional battle experienced by characters between their heart and their duty, and this depiction of love at odds with martial valour or honour is a source of great lyrical passion in *Jane Eyre*.

Thanks to the *Jerusalem Delivered*, the fame of Tasso quickly spread to England. In *Fraser's Magazine* (1832), Tasso was ranked with Shakespeare and Raphael. Edmund Spenser described Tasso as an "excellent orator and poet"⁷ and made use of elements from *Jerusalem Delivered* in *The Faerie Queene*. In the twelfth canto of Book Two, Spenser's enchantress Acrasia is partly modelled on Tasso's Armida and the English poet directly imitated two stanzas from the Italian.

Charlotte Brontë seems to combine mediaeval occultism, as exemplified by Masonic alchemical rituals, with courtly love and chivalry clearly shown in the orchard scene. But Christian mediaevalism, expressed in the battle between Bertha and Jane, is also widely employed along with magical mediaevalism as

⁷ Sir S. LEE, F.S. BOAS, *Elizabethan and Other Essays*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1929, p. 177.

embodied by female monsters, goblins, elves, and the gytrash⁸ figure.

Thornfield Hall is depicted as a mediaeval castle which recalls Bluebeard's horrific mansion: «[the third story was] narrow, low, and dim, [...] and looking [...] like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle»⁹. This place of initiation, as suggested by such an expression as “novice-eyes”¹⁰, recalls Front-de-Bauf's castle in *Ivanhoe*, «where horrible things almost [went] on»¹¹.

But even more interesting is the inter-textual resemblance between Thornfield Hall and the sceneries of love in the *Roman de la Rose*. In this mediaeval French poem, Venus, a Bertha-like character, sets the castle on fire, causing Danger, Jealousy and her companions to flee. Thornfield, which is a home of the past and a shrine of memory, recalls this mediaeval cathartic arena in which the orchard plays a very significant role. Like the orchard of geometrical proportions, a truly Edenic garden, represented in *Roman de la Rose*, the orchard of Thornfield is a magical setting which confirms a highly symbolic content and will contribute in enhancing and throwing light on Charlotte Brontë's mediaevalism. The symbolism and the significance deriving from it will help in understanding the didactic reach and the universal character of Charlotte Brontë's work.

The castle, its rooms, and its environs remind us of past events and ideologies. This is what Bakhtin calls the chronotope of the castle, i.e. the materialisation of time in space since time is objectified in the castle and its furnishings. The chronotope – the castle in the gothic novel – is a discursive unit of space, time and ideology, which implicates a discursive charge. The chronotope is where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. As Bakhtin aptly summarises:

⁸ Jane Eyre initially mistakes both Mr Rochester's black horse Mesrour and his black and white Newfoundland dog for a Gytrash.

⁹ Ch. BRONTË, *Jane Eyre*, eds. Margaret Smith, and Sally Shuttleworth, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 107.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 104.

¹¹ W. SCOTT, *Ivanhoe*, ed. Ian Duncan, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 52.