Knight And Angels: the Treatment of “Sir Galahad” in the Work of Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and William Morris.

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William Morris’s dedication of his first book of poems, The Defence of Guenevere “to my friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Painter” in 1858 was not simply an act of friendship and admiration. Rather it signalled the close relation between verse and the visual arts in this second phase of the movement known as Pre-Raphaelitism, and especially in the circle which Morris formed part of in the latter 1850s, a circle remarkable for its density of literary-pictorial cross-fertilisation and exchange, a type of artistic collaboration that has been fairly rare in English cultural history.

This paper aims to show that this can best be understood in terms of collective endeavour and creative exchange, rather than in terms of individual innovation and influence, notwithstanding the strong ideological context of romantic individualism, artistic “originality” and personal genius within which the works were produced and received. The production and exchange of motifs was not a matter of serial influence but of a shared artistic “field” and system of mutual encouragement.

To plunge directly into the middle of a longer analysis, I have selected verbal and visual treatments of the theme “Sir Galahad” by Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and William Morris, a theme presenting endeavours to bring together Christian piety and chivalric romance within artistic modes that challenged prevailing forms of representation.

The treatments were initially prompted by Tennyson’s poem Sir Galahad, first published in 1842. In January 1855 Edward Moxon commissioned Rossetti (among others) to produce woodblock illustrations for a new edition of Tennyson’s early Poems. It is likely that Elizabeth Siddal began her composition of “Sir Galahad” [Ill.1] sometime during the succeeding months; Rossetti hoped to persuade Moxon (and Tennyson) to employ her talents as illustrator and, whether or not this was ever a serious possibility, she certainly worked at least six subjects from Tennyson’s early poems in a manner that suggests aspirations to illustrate. Siddal’s four sketches for “Sir Galahad” show a kneeling knight before a crucifix, attended by one or two angels, and are variously identified as “Holy Grail?” or “Sir Galahad”.

They illustrate a conflation of stanza 3 (Galahad at a “secret shrine”) with stanza 4 (“angels bear the holy Grail”) of Tennyson’s poem, in which Sir Galahad epitomises the heroic power of the “maiden knight” whose virginity defeats all evil foes:

14
My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure.

Elizabeth Siddal was away from Britain from September 1855 to May 1856, during which time Rossetti met Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris — “the nicest young fellows in — Dreamland”4 as he described them. Some two years previously, Burne-Jones had projected a quasi-monastic community. “I have set my heart on founding a Brotherhood”, he told a friend. “Learn Sir Galahad by heart. He is to be patron saint of our order”.5 In September 1855 Morris and Burne-Jones bought a copy of Southey’s handsome 1817 edition of Malory’s Morte d’Arthur, relishing its more archaic, tougher and less sentimental version of medieval chivalry than that presented by Tennyson. A few weeks later, Browning’s Men and Women was published – notable in this context for the sombre “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” of which Morris wrote, “In my own heart I think I love this poem the best of all”.6 Malory and Browning became the keynote books of the season.

When introduced to Burne-Jones, Rossetti “asked much about Morris, one or two of whose poems he knew already”.7 The first issue in January 1856 of the Oxford & Cambridge Magazine published by Morris, Burne-Jones and others contained an early poem by Morris, together with a favourable notice of Rossetti’s work by Burne-Jones, which Rossetti described as “the most gratifying thing by far that ever happened to me”.8 Despite claiming in January 1856 to “have given up poetry as a pursuit of my own”,9 later in the year Rossetti contributed three poems of his own to the Oxford & Cambridge Magazine, which he recognised as a spiritual successor to the PRB’s Germ of 1850. One of these was ‘The Staff and Scrip’, in which the Pilgrim hero exchanges his religious accoutrements for a knight’s sword and shield, to enter the worldly fray and die freeing his Lady’s lands from evil oppression and tyranny – a Galahad-like theme in which religious piety and sexual romance combine and triumph.10

Morris began 1856 as an apprentice architect in Oxford while continuing to write, but by the middle of the year he was yielding to Rossetti’s persuasion that “If any man has any poetry in him, he should paint”11 and by August he and Burne-Jones were sharing rooms in London12, from where the latter wrote that Morris “will be a painter; he works hard, is prepared to wait 20 years …” but also that “he has written several poems exceedingly dramatic – the Brownings, I hear, have spoken very highly of one that was read to them”. He continued: “Rossetti thinks one called ‘Rapunzel’ is equal to Tennyson: he [i.e. Rossetti] is now illuminating ‘Guendolen’ for Georgie”.13

Guendolen is the true name of the damsel in “Rapunzel”:

Gold or gems she did not wear

But her yellow rippled hair

Like a veil, hid Guendolen!

and the Prince’s song from which this quotation comes was first printed in the July issue of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine.14

An image of ‘Guendolen in the Witch-Tower with Prince Sebald below kissing her long golden hair’ was, according to Marillier and Mackail, one of the subjects painted by Rossetti on the back of two of the massive armchairs “such as Barbarossa might have sat in”, designed by Morris for the studio apartment he shared with Burne-Jones. The other subject was “The Arming of a Knight from the Christmas Mystery of ‘Sir Galahad’”.15

Neither of these subjects is listed in Virginia Surtees’s Catalogue Raisonné of Rossetti’s
work and the whereabouts of the chairs, if they still exist, remains unknown. However, Surtees does list and illustrate “Sir Galahad and an Angel”, [III.2] an ink sketch whose polygonal shape relates to that of a chairback. Although there identified as a satire on the relation between Oxford University and the architect of the Union Benjamin Woodward (the chairs date from 1856, the year before the high-spirited Oxford Union mural painting enterprise), this is unmistakeably an illustration to Morris’s poem, showing an angel girding Galahad with a sword and kissing him on the brow. (The composition actually telescopes the action of the poem, which has three angels and four ladies appearing to arm Galahad with sword, spurs, hauberk, helmet and surcoat).

All this indicates that Morris’s “Sir Galahad A Christmas Mystery” was written by the late summer of 1856. In May, Elizabeth Siddal had returned to London, taking rooms in Weymouth Street. Although Morris’s poem and Siddal’s sketches share several motifs, and it is possible that he saw her composition at this date, a direct link is unlikely, because there is no positive evidence that Rossetti introduced his supposed fiancée to his new friends and the negative evidence is strong. Both however present an unequivocally religious theme – the holy knight – which derives both from Tennyson’s verse and (especially in Morris’s account of Galahad’s vision of Christ “sitting on the altar as a throne”) also from Malory’s Book xvii, as well as from William Dyce’s presentation of “The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company” to illustrate Religion in his sequence of Victorian virtues in Arthurian scenes on the walls of the new Palace of Westminster in London.

Less than twelve months before, Morris had finally abandoned his intention of taking holy orders, and “Sir Galahad” contains a strong Christian message within a chivalric setting. His comment that “Tennyson’s Sir Galahad is a rather mild youth” was recalled by his friend Richard Dixon, who was ordained a few months later, but in fact Morris’s Knight is a surprisingly mild hero when compared with those of the other poems in this first volume, where, as Mark Girouard has observed, “with the exception of two poems on Galahad their themes are sex and violence”. Moreover, although E.P. Thompson has described Morris’s poem as “a declaration of war against Tennyson’s Galahad and all he symbolises”, Morris’s characterisation of Galahad also stresses his piety and purity.

The knight’s initial depression and doubts as to the benefits of his “poor chaste body” and “dismal, unfriended” quest are dispelled by Christ, graphically explaining how Lancelot’s sinful embraces “half throttle” him, and exhorting Galahad to follow his holy mission.

Until at last you come to Me to sing
In Heaven always, and to walk around
The garden where I am.

The vision of the Sangreal is promised but not vouchsafed in the poem, which substitutes the appearance of four “holy ladies” and three angels, who proceed to gird Galahad with the arms of righteousness in a scene of chaste but also passionate physicality; this is introduced by details of his quest drawn from the mysterious fragments of romance collated by Malory such as the wondrous ship wherein “The spindles of King Solomon are laid.” Thereafter, Galahad greets his companion knights with cheery words, and their response contrasts his exalted state with shame and death at “the court”, where “everywhere The knights come foil’d from the great quest … In vain they struggle for the
vision fair."
The "mildness" of Tennyson's youth would seem to lie largely in his lack of doubt or conflict, and his curate-like manner of expression:
I never felt the kiss of love,
    Nor maiden's hand in mine.
More bounteous aspects on me beam,
    Me mightier transports move and thrill
So keep I fair through faith and prayer
    A virgin heart in work and will.

The central religious element in the versions of "Sir Galahad" by both Siddal and Morris, in my view, is an image of faith surrounded by gloom, appropriate to the age of the 1850s when simple piety of Tennyson's kind — in which the artists were also nurtured — was assailed both by doctrinal doubts and by the evident inability of religion to combat the evils and sufferings of Victorian Britain.

It should be noted here that, at this date, the majority of Rossetti's works were also
concerned with religious or spiritual themes, and his chivalric subjects were as yet very few. In 1855-7 his pictures included: the “Nativity”, the “Annunciation”, “The Passover in the Holy Family”, “Mary Nazarene”, “Mary Magdalene”, “Fra Pace”, etc. He relinquished such pious themes more gradually than Morris did, and one of his favourite chivalric romance subjects remained the Damsel of the Sanct Grael, a quasi-angel.

The interaction between poetry and painting, and the conscious sharing and exchange of motifs between artists, is well illustrated by the link between Rossetti’s chairback design of “Sir Galahad and the Angel” and Morris’s poem. It also demonstrates that in this respect, Rossetti was not always the leader – as is generally asserted when Morris’s verse is discussed. Rossetti was generous with his admiration for the younger men’s work. At the end of 1856 he wrote to William Allingham from Bath (where he joined Siddal) saying that Morris’s “Chapel in Lyonesse”22 – which also features Sir Galahad and was published in the September issue of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine – was “glorious”. He added that Morris “has been writing at all for little more than a year now, I believe, and has already enough poetry for a big book”.

By now Morris had given up architecture in order to become a painter, but his literary work was more successful. “To one of my watercolours called The Blue Closet”, reported Rossetti, “he has written a stunning poem.” The exchange of ideas in different media was distinctly reciprocal. Rossetti also told Allingham of “the intensely medieval furniture … tables and chairs like incubi and succubi”, which Morris had commissioned, saying “He and I have painted the back of a chair with figures and inscriptions in gules and vert and azure” which would seem to refer to the Guendolen and Galahad subjects as joint enterprises, although it is most likely that Rossetti was responsible for the figures and Morris for the inscriptions.23

In Bath Rossetti completed his commission for Moxon, his five designs being with the engravers. These included one of St Cecilia with an Angel (from “The Palace of Art”) for which Rossetti “availed himself of a design by Miss Siddal”, as Marillier and William Rossetti correctly insisted.24 The same applied in a lesser degree, I would argue, to his woodcut for Sir Galahad [Ill.3], which incorporates aspects of her imaginative conception, as well perhaps as echoes of Morris’s poem. The design – later reproduced in watercolour almost unchanged in composition as “Sir Galahad at the Ruined Chapel”(1859)25 – shows the knight in a rustic shrine blessing himself with holy water before an altar below which are four female figures identified by the artist as angels (not “girls” as Surtees and others claim)26 who, unseen by Galahad, are ringing the “shrill bell” that sounds in both poems. Their presence in the chapel appears a direct borrowing from Morris’s ladies and angels27 and the intense light issuing from the altar perhaps also derives from Morris’s vision of Christ.

I would like to think that while at Bath Elizabeth Siddal resumed her own version of “Sir Galahad” [Ill.1], revising the composition as a watercolour (there being now no possibility of it being an illustration) and imaginatively if somewhat eerily further combined stanzas 3 and 4 from Tennyson, by placing Galahad in the “magic bark” – from which he sees three Grail-bearing angels “with folded feet, in stoles of white”, sailing “on sleeping wings” – within a ruined and flooded chapel, with half-submerged chivalric effigies, their stone fingers and toes sticking up through the water. (This somehow seems faintly to echo Morris’s allusion to “melted snow” on Galahad’s “steel-shoes”, but I would not like to hazard which image came first). Siddal’s knight drops his
hands from his eyes, and this gesture together with her two angels and the bell in an aperture over the door may be a response to, or a source for, Morris’s lines:

And when I look’d again, the holy place
Was empty; but right so the bell again
Came to the chapel door, there entered

Two angels first, in white, without a stain …

According to its inscription — “EES inv. EES & DGE del.” — the watercolour of “Sir Galahad or The Quest of the Grail” was designed by Siddal and executed jointly by herself and Rossetti. It is dated “circa 1855” by John Nicoll and “circa 1855-7” by Alastair Grieve; its inscription may indicate that some time elapsed between conception and completion, as I suggest. Marillier described this as “a very typical instance of her richness in invention” — by which he presumably meant the strange image of the skiff floating through the ruined chapel — and “also of the way in which Rossetti used to help her”.

I have argued elsewhere for the idea of a more equal artistic partnership between Siddal and Rossetti; and here I want to extend this to include Morris — and indeed also Burne-Jones, who shared equally in the group’s common enthusiasms and activities and himself produced a version of “Sir Galahad” in 1858, (Ill. 4) echoing Morris’ poem. The “robustly romantic choice of subject and facility with imaginary medievalism” attributed by John Nicoll to Siddal was a common feature of this whole Pre-Raphaelite circle, and the quest to disentangle priorities and identify “who was first” is not so much vain as misguided. The achievement was clearly collective.

Stylistically, too, poem and paintings share the same features, similar abrupt awkwardnesses, unfamiliar perspectives, unexplained elements and puzzles — the disconcerting formal qualities of naivety so unlike Tennyson’s smooth fluidities. It is, unusually, possible with these works to discuss the visual and verbal aesthetics within the same vocabulary of reference and response, which indirectly reflects the exchange of style and content between art forms.

Finally, the subject illuminates the moral and religious concerns of this Pre-Raphaelite circle in the late 1850s — inspired by the Christian figure of the holy knight in pursuit of spiritual perfection but also, increasingly, conscious of the places piety did not reach, particularly the powerful attractions of sex and violence, or love and war. Within a few months, “Before the Battle” would become the group’s current, collective theme: a knot of inter-related verbal and visual treatments clusters round this image too, lending itself to similar explication; as also does the “Woeful Victory” idea. For a few years, this intensive literary-pictorial cross-referencing and mutual exchanged continued the distinctive feature of this corner of cultural history known as Pre-Raphaelitism.

NOTES


1 DGR to WA 23.1.1855: “the other day Moxon called on me, wanting to do some of the blocks for the new Tennyson”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Letters to William Allingham ed. G.B. Hill (1897), p. 97. Another of the illustrators, J.C. Horsley, dated his commission from the day “at the end of 1855 or early in 1856” when poet and
publisher paid him a visit (see G.S. Layard, *Tennyson and his Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators* (1894), p. 6), but the period December 1854-January 1855 is most likely.

2 In March 1855 DGR wrote to Thomas Woolner, then visiting the Tennysons, “and they, hearing that several of Miss Siddal’s designs were from Tennyson, and being told about Ruskin [who had just offered EES his patronage] wished her exceedingly to join in the illustrated edition; also Mrs T wrote immediately to Moxon about it, declaring that she would rather pay for Miss S’s designs herself than not have them in the book” (DGR to WA, 18.3.1855, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Letters to William Allingham*, (1897, p. 111) In addition to Sir Galahad, Siddal’s Tennyson designs include “Lady Clare”, “Morte d’Arthur”, “St Cecilia”, “St Agnes’ Eve”, and “Jeptha’s Daughter” (for “A Dream of Fair Women”). Sketches and studies for these subjects are known even where the drawings themselves are lost from a photographic portfolio of EES’s work compiled by DGR after her death; a complete copy is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

3 See p. 15 in Fitzwilliam portfolio; the same sketches are also reproduced on pp. 10-11 of another copy of the portfolio in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.


9 DGR to WA 8.1.1856, ibid, p. 155.
10 cf. Sir Galahad in Malory Bk xiii, Ch 15, liberating the Castle of Maidens from its wicked overlords “The Staff and Scrip” was first published in the December 1856 issue of the *Oxford & Cambridge Magazine*. According to his brother DGR “found the story of this poem in the *Gesta Romanorum*, and schemed out the poem in September 1849”, although “its actual composition seems to me to have been somewhat later, perhaps towards 1853” (*The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. W.M. Rossetti (1886), I, 289). In my view the poem may well have been written in 1856 as a direct result of DGR’s encounter with WM, EBJ and Malory; it is similar in mood and handling to WM’s “Riding Together”, first published in the *Oxford & Cambridge Magazine* in May 1856, and was published six months later.
12 First in Upper Gordon St, then from November in Red Lion Square.
13 EBJ in August 1856, quoted in Mackail, I, 108; “Georgie” was Georgiana Macdonald, to whom EBJ had recently become engaged.
14 Where it bore the title “Hands”. Altogether WM published six poems in the *Magazine*, and eight stories; DGR admired “those capital tales” but thought WM’s longer poems “really better than the tales” (DGR to WA 18.1.1856, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Letters to William Allingham*, p. 192).
15 H.C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. An Illustrated Memorial of His Life and Art* (1899), p. 89, which states: “These chairs are now in the possession of a member of the Morris family and, so far as I know, they have never been mentioned in a list of Rossetti’s work before”. In Marillier’s chronological list of DGR’s works, these items (no. 70, p. 239) are dated “c. 1857” and described as “GUENDOLEN IN THE WITCH-TOWER: A KNIGHT ARMING from the Christmas Mystery of ‘Sir Galahad’ (OIL) Two panels on chairs, illustrating poems by WM, done for the latter at 17 Red Lion Square. Present owner unknown”. See also Mackail, 114: “On the
backs of two of the large heavy chairs [DGR] also painted subjects from WM’s own poems; these panels, one representing Guendolen in the witch-tower and the Prince below kissing her long golden hair, and the other the arming of a knight, from the Christmas Mystery of “Sir Galahad”, are also extant.


17 There are no contemporary references or reminiscences from WM, EBJ or GBJ meeting EES until July 1860, after her marriage to DGR. From mid-1857 to mid-1860 EES was either away from London or estranged from DGR and thus unlikely to have met the others. If she was introduced earlier, between May 1856, when she returned from Nice, and mid-summer 1857, when the men began the Oxford Union murals, the most plausible date is the early summer of 1857, when she was an exhibitor at the Pre-Raphaelite show mounted in Russell Place under Madox Brown’s direction; but this was well after WM’s work was composed.

18 “Religion” was executed 1849-51 and is illustrated in Mark Girouard, The Return to Camelot (1981), p1. 119. The other qualities depicted by Dyce comprised Mercy, Hospitality, Generosity, Courtesy, Fidelity and Courage.

19 Quoted in Mackail, i, 45.


25 Birmingham City Art Gallery no. 4’92; see Surtees, 1971, no. 115.

26 DGR to FMB, January 1857, stating that on the first proof “the angels are black as D—is”; The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti ed. Doughty and Wahl (1965), I, 316. William Sharp, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, (1882), p. 112, described them as “unseen nuns”. The mistake is repeated by Deborah Cherry in William Morris and the Middle Ages, ed. Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris, (Manchester, 1984), catalogue entry no. 112, 164.

27 In the watercolour version, the design of the angel’s crossed baldric is copied from that worn by the angel in the “chairback” sketch of “Sir Galahad and an Angel”, which argues for identity of inspiration.

28 As was stated by Marillier, William Rossetti and the editors of the Collected Works of John Ruskin (to whom the painting belonged), notwithstanding its exhibition in 1897 as the work of DGR – see Marillier, p. 57.

29 John Nicoll, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1975, pl.5; Alastair Grieve, in The Pre-Raphaelites (Tate Gallery 1984), no. 217.

30 Marillier, p. 57.

31 Fogg Art Museum, Harvard.

32 Nicoll, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, p. 77.

Acknowledgements for illustrations to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; the Birmingham City Art Gallery; and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard.