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25

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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.

Criteri di valutazione e metodo di referaggio. I criteri di valutazione delle proposte adottati dalla collana si basano sulla revisione anonima di pari (blind peer review) secondo una linea editoriale che s'impegna ad affidare il lavoro di referaggio, di volta in volta, a due studiosi indipendenti — italiani e non — che, per il ruolo svolto nella comunità scientifica ed accademica internazionale, sono in grado di garantire la qualità delle pubblicazioni.

Classificazione Decimale Dewey

— 823.809353 (23.) NARRATIVA INGLESE, 1837-1899 su donne

Thema

— Soggetto: F. Narrativa

— Qualificatori: 1DDU. Regno Unito, Gran Bretagna

ELEONORA SASSO

VICTORIAN DOMINATRICES REVISITED

WOMEN OF ARCAINE POWER
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FICTION





ISBN
979-12-218-2823-8

PRIMA EDIZIONE
ROMA 24 LUGLIO 2026

A mia madre, autentico esempio di forza, saggezza e fiera indipendenza. A lei devo la libertà del mio cammino e la costante ispirazione che ha orientato questo viaggio tra gli archetipi del femminile.

I found in dreams a place of wind and flowers,
Full of sweet trees and colour of glad grass,
In midst whereof there was
A lady clothed like summer with sweet hours.
Her beauty, fervent as a fiery moon,
Made my blood burn and swoon
Like a flame rained upon.

A.C. SWINBURNE, *A Ballad of Life*

CONTENTS

11	<i>Acknowledgements</i>
15	<i>Introduction</i>
23	CHAPTER I Romance and Mediaevalism in Charlotte Brontë's <i>Jane Eyre</i> 1.1. Jane Eyre as a Courtly Dominatrix, 23 – 1.2. «while sunset is thus at meeting with moonrise»: Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester in the Mediaeval Garden of Love, 36 – 1.3. Figures of Descent in Jane Eyre, 46.
57	CHAPTER II Dominatrix Witches in William Morris's Fantastic Romances 2.1. Morris's Ladyship and the Hegelian Phenomenology of the Spirit, 57 – 2.2. Evil Mistresses of Arcane Power in Morris's Prose Romances, 67 – 2.3. «I will be a servant of servants»: Servant-Women and Sexual Thralldom, 71.
77	CHAPTER III Women of Archaeo-Astronomical Power in Thomas Hardy's <i>The Woodlanders</i> 3.1 The Perils of Observation, 77 – 3.2. «a sylph-like, greenish-white creature»: Woodhen and the Worshipper of the Sun, 80 – 3.3 Moon and Sun Goddesses as Dominatrices of the Universe, 87.

95	CHAPTER IV Mistresses of Metamorphosis in Vernon Lee's <i>Hauntings</i> 4.1. «a tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide»: Vernon Lee's <i>femmes bestiales</i> , 95 – 4.2. The Scorpion Woman: Spurious Ghost or Melodramatic Shape?, 99 – 4.3 Dionea's Serpentine Smile, 103 – 4.4 The Enchantment of Alice, the Siren in “Oke of Okehurst; or The Phantom Lover”, 108 – 4.5 Oriana as the Snake Lady, 113.
119	CHAPTER V Domestic Dominas in Ford Madox Ford's House of Observation 5.1 Ladies of Fire: The Intimacy and Luxury of Domestic Space, 119 – 5.2 Elixirs of Love and Reveries of Desire, 126 – 5.3 «as thin as substance of the air»: Suave Women and Im- ages of Ascent and Sublimation, 132 – 5.4 The Primitiveness of the Sexual Fight, 137.
149	BIBLIOGRAPHY
167	INDEX

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This revised edition features several key updates. In addition to correcting minor errata from the original text, the bibliography has been extensively updated to reflect recent scholarship. I have also taken the opportunity to expand certain sections, incorporating new insights that have emerged since the initial publication. I am grateful for the opportunity to revisit this work and offer a more refined and expanded version to the readers.

I was first attracted to the figure of the dominatrix when I saw the Anthony Frederick Sandys portrait of Morgan Le Fay 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" under the supervision of Prof. Francesco Marroni, 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 AHRC conference on *Recasting the Past* at the University of Exeter in 2011, at the ESSE 2012 Conference at Bogazici University (Istanbul), as well as at the XXVI

AIA Conference, held at the University of Parma in 2013. 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, 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.

My gratitude also goes to the organisers and participants of various other conferences, whose feedback and insights helped shape the core arguments of this volume. In particular, I would like to express my warmest thanks to Giuseppe Balirano, President of the Association of English Studies in Italy (AIA), for his unwavering support, intellectual generosity, and for fostering such a vibrant and stimulating scholarly environment.

I am equally indebted to Marcello Giovanelli for his invaluable insights, academic support, and for the illuminating discussions that greatly enriched my perspective during the development of this project.

I would like to thank those careful readers who have commented scrupulously on draft chapters: Roger Ebbatson, 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 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 Mariaconcetta Costantini, the research director of the L&GEND research group, for her ever encouragement and generous interest in my gender studies. I would also like to thank Ugo Perolino, the Head of my Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, for supporting my cultural activities with enthusiasm. I have also benefited from the advice and support of my Department colleagues 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.
W. MORRIS, "Atalanta's Race"

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 herself».¹ Behind this feminist manifesto, there lies an overt attack against logocentrism which is inextricably connected to phallogentrism. 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,

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

² Ivi, p. 888.

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 feminine

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 D. WYNN, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2010.

role. The corset,⁷ garters, stockings, and gloves are popular accessories in the representation and attire of dominatrices, whose body language exploit the erotic connotation of fetish objects.

The Victorian dominatrix emerges from this study not as a mere villainess, but as a “Nomadic Subject”⁸ who navigates the boundaries between the human, the divine, and the bestial. By redefining the terms of the critical debate through a multifaceted approach that includes cognitive poetics, mediaevalism, Hegelian Phenomenology, archaeoastronomy, aesthetic symbolism, and literary impressionism, *Victorian Dominatrices Revisited* constructs a new genealogy of female agency. These women—from Brontë’s Jane to Ford’s Queen Ismara—incarnate a “monstrous-feminine”⁹ that is essential for transcendence, proving that even within the heart of the nineteenth-century establishment, the Medusa was already laughing, unbowed and unassailable.

The “Medusa Effect” identified in this study serves as a direct challenge to the traditional male gaze. As Laura Mulvey noted in her seminal work on visual pleasure,¹⁰ the female figure in patriarchal culture often stands for the threat of castration, which is neutralised by turning her into a fetish or a passive object. However, the Victorian dominatrix refuses this neutralisation. She occupies the space of the monstrous-feminine to represent the female

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.

⁸ R. BRAIDOTTI, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

⁹ B. CREED, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 1993.

¹⁰ L. MULVEY, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, XVI, 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

as a source of dread who actively paralyses the male observer. By embracing the attributes of the dominatrix, the Victorian woman moves from being the bearer of meaning to being the maker of meaning, forcing the male subject to confront his own vulnerabilities.

Victorian Dominatrices Revisited 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 mediaeval romance. The chronotopes of the castle and the garden activate mediaeval reveries which may be interpreted as 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