

Morris's aesthetic preferences as well, pointing out that '[t]hose who continue to accuse Morris of a musty or romanticised medievalism view both the art of pre-modern times and Morris's relationship to that art very differently than he himself did. Where his critics see a nostalgic entrancement on his part with art objects from the past, Morris saw an art that was not external to the everyday or, as is supposed, elevated above it and trying vainly to enter it' (p. 63).

The Commune was short-lived and murdered in the cradle, but it represents a moment of crisis that was experienced so intensely by its participants that its duration can hardly be measured in crudely quantitative terms, as a matter of mere days and months. Many of the Communards were brutally, savagely slaughtered by the Versaillais soldiers – the 'vile dwarf's stroke', as Morris put it in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, referring to the military machinations of Adolphe Thiers. Their deeds, however, continue to resonate and draw attention from figures as diverse as the political philosopher Alain Badiou and the Yale historian John Merriman. Ross's book can properly be thought of as a continuation of the tradition, or, rather, the set of practices, which it surveys, extending the temporal frame of the Commune by making the political imaginary of its partisans live in the present. It might be worthwhile pausing to consider whether this contrapuntal attitude to the historical past represents a potentially fruitful way to approach Morris in 2015 and beyond. As Ross has so clearly shown, it would certainly be an eminently Morrisian way to approach Morris.

### **Owen Holland**

---

Yoshiko Seki, *The Rhetoric of Retelling Old Romances: Medievalist Poetry by Alfred Tennyson and William Morris* (Tokyo, Japan: Eihōsha, 2015), 198 pp., 2 b&w figures, £22.00 hbk, ISBN 9784269740310.

During the mid-Victorian period there was extensive discussion of recent styles and tendencies in art, architecture and poetry. Why, in an age full of new ideas and technological changes – which cry out for inclusion in the culture of the time – were the Victorians obsessed with setting Gothic against Classical buildings? Or were these merely facades? Why did Pre-Raphaelite art present so many medieval scenes? Why could Dante Gabriel Rossetti never complete his contemporary painting called *Found?* Turning to poetry, why did Arthur Hugh Clough remonstrate so often with Matthew Arnold about the classical subject-matter of his poems? To which Arnold answered, in a letter dated February 1849: '[r]eflect too [...] how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving:— but *unpoetical*.'

---

Usually, as Yoshiko Seki points out in her first main chapter ‘The Function of Poetry’, medievalism was contrasted not with classicism but with the social challenges of the Victorian period. Following Keats, the most important writers turned to the medieval age for the setting of their poems. To help us understand this apparent evasion of duty Seki has provided a straightforward guide to medievalist poetry, and concentrated her arguments around two prominent practitioners – Tennyson and Morris. The first source of inspiration for both poets was the work of Sir Walter Scott, and Seki reminds us that Morris claimed to have read all of Scott before reaching the age of seven. But the second source was Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, of which nineteen editions were published between 1800 and 1900.

Despite this, there were considerable inhibitions about coming out openly as a medievalist. Seki asks us to consider how cautious Tennyson was about publishing one of his most well-known poems, the ‘Morte d’Arthur’. It was written in 1833-34, but Tennyson was wary in case his work should be ridiculed. As Edward Fitzgerald bears witness:

The ‘Morte d’Arthur’ when read to us from manuscript in 1835 had no introduction or epilogue; which was added to anticipate or excuse the ‘faint Homeric echoes’, etc. (as in the ‘Day-Dream’), to *give a reason for telling an old-world tale*.

Therefore, with this rhetorical device, Tennyson set about creating a subterfuge: when it was finally published in 1842 the main text was framed by a description of a holiday scene, actually based upon a real holiday with fellow-students in the Lake District. This both enhances the contemporaneity of the poem and distances its shocking novelty; it ceases to be an epic and becomes a kind of humorous entertainment between friends. In the main part of her book Seki explores the stages through which idea of the ‘Morte d’Arthur’ progressed as it was expanded and developed into the *Idylls of the King* (1859).

On coming to Morris she promises much with her epigraph from May Morris (which has also provided the title of this book):

A Friend was reminding me lately of what we had both heard my father say about the *right way of retelling an old romance*: ‘Read it through’, he said, ‘then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself’.

Seki begins with an excellent analysis of the four Arthurian poems at the beginning of *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). She explains how Morris was both indebted to



---

preoccupation with the inevitability of death' (p. 171). It is a disappointment to find that Seki's book ducks out of discussing the hopes raised in her title by 'old romances', for one had expected some account of how, say, 'The Lovers of Gudrun' is retold, and at least a reference to the prose romances, but these are not considered at all. One final word of praise: it is worth looking at the design of the attractive blue-and-white book-cover: this is based on the title page of the Kelmscott Press edition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Hand and Soul* (1869).

**John Purkis**

---

Joscelyn Godwin, ed., *The Starlight Years: Love & War at Kelmscott Manor 1940-1948* (Stanbridge: Dovecote Press, 2015), 192 pp., 32 colour plates, large format sewn paperback with flaps, £15.00, ISBN 9780992915117.

'[...] he has all sorts of ways so unsympathetic with the sweet simple old place, that I feel his presence there as a kind of slur on it [...]'. So wrote William Morris of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his co-tenant of Kelmscott Manor, as their three-year lease dragged its way through November 1872. What, one wonders, would he have made of Edward and Stephani (née Allfree) Scott Snell, the subjects of *The Starlight Years*, and their tenure there?

Between 1939 and 1962 Oxford University owned the Manor, an out-of-the-way house with antiquated domestic arrangements let and sub-let to a succession of tenants as it quietly decayed around them. The first of these were the Scott Snells, who took possession of this 'most enchanted place on earth' (p. 43) in 1940. They had met five years earlier at the Byam Shaw School of Art, where the sprucely handsome and cultured Edward first exerted his Svengali-like influence over Stephani, aged seventeen and six years his junior; as she was later to recall, she expended great energy in cultivating her unguided tastes and unfinished education to make herself a fit intellectual companion for him: 'De Sade, Beardsley, Wilde, Max Ernst, Corvo, Dali, the Pre-Raphaelites [...] I absorbed them all as if I were working for a degree in decadence' (p. 13). In 1938 she entertained and overcame a moment of indecision as to whether she 'should [...] relinquish Edward into the escapist world into which he had lured me, against natural inclination' (p. 30). The escapist world was Thessyros, where the everlastingly youthful Cupid and Cherry inhabited a realm of sado-eroticism and hyper-sensation described in sentences of adjectival overload.

Thessyros, influenced most notably by Aubrey Beardsley's *Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, evolved into Edward and Stephani's joint creation during the early years of their relationship (and clandestine marriage) when circumstance prevented them