

Yoshiko Seki: The Rhetoric of Retelling Old Romances: Medievalist Poetry by Alfred Tennyson and William Morris. EIHŌSHA, Tokyo 2015. 195 + xii pages.

Seki's book is a neat and elegant one, beautifully prepared by the press and author, with an opening chapter that investigates medievalism and its historiography; a preliminary study of the role of the periodical in encouraging, and discouraging, poetry; three organized chapters on Alfred Tennyson, four on William Morris, a short conclusion, a good bibliography, an adequate index (heavy on names, light on concepts, as many indexes are), and two very useful appendices (tables which lay out the chronology of the writing of *Idylls of the King* and the structural chronology for Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*). The book is a hardback with a lovely blue jacket, with the cover design a Kelmscott Press page from 1895 scanned and with the Gothic font reworked. The Morris tracery and flowers of the design form a particularly apposite background for the volume.

The book itself rather goes back to first principles and thinks about the push to the medieval in the Victorian period (both Tennyson and Morris read Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Malory voraciously), and about the antagonism others expressed about the past, an opposition both to medievalism and to poetry. Seki elaborates on the role of poetry in the nineteenth century by considering its representation in the plethora of periodicals that emerged during that period. The comments made by various writers, initially anonymous and later signed (and notably including J.R. Mozley, James Mill, Walter Bagehot, Matthew Arnold, and Alfred Austin), about developing a language of criticism and a sense of the role of poetry: these are the central issues for Seki, played out in reviews, then reviews compiled into books which are themselves reviewed. Most importantly for Seki, this is a period of cultural change and anxiety, and such a period is, she argues, "deeply *unpoetical*" (p. 43). With this lens in mind, she reads through Tennyson's choppy and uncertain publishing history, and writing history, of the *Idylls of the King*. Seki argues that Tennyson's natural bent was medievalist, but that he reworked and rethought his Arthurian materials in order to manage his relationship with the critics in the periodicals. Thus his changing construction of the feminine in the first four idylls and other "lady poems" and the concern with Darwinian theory in the next four idylls suggests, for Seki, a deep concern with responding both to critics and to contemporary intellectual and scientific approaches. She interprets the irony of the idyll of the *Holy Grail* from this perspective, and makes a number of sensitive readings of Tennyson, always based on his interactions with the outside world with evidence from his letters, his own comments in print, or his comments as recounted in the memoir by his son Hallam Tennyson (published in 1897, not the reprinted issue from 1999 that Seki, somewhat oddly, references). At times I wish Seki had delved a bit deeper for her evidence; for example, on p. 84 she just mentions seven different poems in passing, suggesting that they support her thesis about Tennyson's efforts to reconcile his faith with the new scientific developments of the time. Similarly, the argument that Tennyson omitted the sordid history of Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery in favour of blaming them and focusing with a laser intensity on the present could use more evidence (pp. 94-9). The focus on each idyll as a miniature picture brings the issue of genre into play, rightly, for Tennyson, and offers him a way to tell the Arthurian story in the nineteenth century, not as an epic, but as a set of vignettes.

Morris similarly writes out of influences both poetic and medievalist; in 1855, which for Seki is a turning point in Morris's development, Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson both published dramatic monologues, and Morris read Malory's *Morte Arthur* for the first time, later to be a critical influence on his poetry. Seki argues in particular that critics assessing the definition of the dramatic monologue tend to focus either on the "dramatic" or on the "monologue," and that this bifurcated approach is in use by modern critics and by such contemporaries of Morris as Browning himself. Browning, and Morris on his behalf, contended against the periodical critics who did not understand Browning's approach and its profundity. Seki uses Morris's early poem "The Defence of Guenevere" to study this definitional question, and to conclude that Morris wanted to innovate, to avoid the standard notion of characters with whom the audience could sympathize. Thus in his first book of poetry, he produced what Seki calls an "étude on the Arthurian motif" (p. 122). They cannot be described as a unity, both because they are fragmentary and oddly structured, and because each of the four poems is generically distinct. Seki also argues that in these poems Morris, while heavily influenced by the Arthurian works of both Tennyson and Browning, also tries to find his own road of presenting a secular and later spiritual hero in his version of Galahad. In her last two chapters, Seki focuses on *The Earthly Paradise*, noting that Morris in his own time was known first as a poet, and only later for his art and design. This poem, however, was so thoroughly attacked by the modernist critics (F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot, William Empson, to some extent Alfred Austin) that it sealed Morris's fate as a poet too nostalgic and romantic, prone to day-dreams and trivialities. Seki works to recover Morris's approach to romance, situating his conception as partaking in the debate about poetry being promulgated in the periodical literature of the day. The framing poems are self-reflective and mark "the poet's self-consciousness about writing poetry" (p. 151), offering a way to interpret the twenty-four classical and medieval tales told in the body of the work. The past, for Morris, had to be presented as a part of the present, so that the connection of the two would be understood by the audience. The stories, the old romances of Seki's title, are revivified because they are important in the modern era. In the last chapter Seki uses Walter Pater's reviews, initially unsigned and later developed into a book, of the poem as a lens on aestheticism, provoked by his reading of Morris's poetry. The Wanderers and the Elders build a community of story-tellers recounting moments of earthly bliss, but also obsessed by death. Seki uses the tales as a lens to read back into Pater's response to them.

Seki's greatest strength is her tight focus on how both Tennyson and Morris engaged in a very public medievalism, and one which they altered and worried over in the face of the debates over the purpose and appropriate ideals of poetry that was raging in the periodical literature of their time. The debate notably took the form of reviews and criticism, and Seki has provided a careful analysis of the major and minor figures involved, and their influence on the topics addressed and approaches taken by the medievalist poets of the Victorian Age. There is much to be enjoyed in the book.

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