He, "for ever, kissed my mouth, all quivering": Paolo and Francesca in Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic painting

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada
Université de Rouen Normandie
af.gillardestrada@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3944-9491

Abstract

This article focuses on representations of Paolo and Francesca in Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic painting. In the context of the literary and scholarly revaluation of Dante in the 19th century, numerous painters tackled the theme of the embracing lovers. John Flaxman devised an iconographical model that circulated throughout the century: the lovers are staged in a theatrical composition, kissing chastely, watched by Gianciotto. There is none of the passion Francesca expresses in Canto v. This configuration was emulated by numerous painters, among them French painters, such as M.-P. Coupin de la Couperie and J.A.D. Ingres, and by British artists, like William Dyce. The lovers' kiss becomes central, but female reserve is underlined. The Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti brought a turning-point with his highly sensual treatment of the mutually embracing couple. Several Aesthetic painters took up the theme but sentimentalized it, thus annulling the originally passionate dimension of the story.

Keywords: Paolo and Francesca; Romantic painting; Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic painting.

Riassunto

Questo articolo si concentra sulle rappresentazioni di Paolo e Francesca nella pittura dei movimenti preraffaelliti ed "estetici". Nel contesto della rivalutazione letteraria ed erudita di Dante nel XIX secolo, numerosi pittori affrontarono il tema degli amanti abbracciati. John Flaxman ideò un modello iconografico che circolò per tutto il secolo: gli amanti sono messi in scena in una composizione teatrale, si baciano castamente, osservati da Gianciotto. Non c'è la passione che Francesca esprime nel canto V. Questa configurazione è stata emulata da numerosi pittori, tra cui quelli francesi, come M.-P. Coupin de la Couperie e J.A.D. Ingres, e da artisti inglesi, come William Dyce. Il bacio degli amanti diventa centrale, ma viene sottolineato il riserbo femminile. Il pittore preraffaellita Dante Gabriel Rossetti imprime una svolta con il suo trattamento altamente sensuale della coppia che si abbraccia. Diversi pittori estetici ripresero il tema ma lo sentimentalizzarono, annullando così la dimensione passionale originaria della storia.

Parole chiave: Paolo e Francesca; Pittura romantica;Pittura preraffaellita ed estetica.

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"Quando leggemmo il disïato riso
esser basciato da cotanto amante,
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,
la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.
Galeotto fu'l libro e chi lo scrisse:
quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante."
Dante, *Inferno*, Canto v, 133-138

For when we read of that great lover, how
He kissed the smile which he had longed to win,—
Then he whom nought can sever from me now
For ever, kissed my mouth, all quivering.
A Galahalt was the book, and he that writ:
Upon that day we read no more therein.
D. G. Rossetti, "Francesca da Rimini (Dante)", (1881, p. 294)

Paolo and Francesca, whose story occupies some fifty lines in Canto v of *Inferno* (73-142), came to incarnate the archetype of romantic love in the 19th century. The episode is well-known: Dante is guided by Virgil through the second circle of hell, where the lustful are condemned. He sees two embracing souls buffeted by the wind and wishes to speak to them. Francesca then addresses him and tells him about her violent passion for Paolo Malatesta, her brother-in-law. One day, they read Galehot's tale of the love of Launcelot and Guinevere. As they read the passage when the knight kisses King Arthur's wife, Paolo imprints a kiss on Francesca's mouth. The final words allude to their embrace but also to their murder. For what remains untold is their discovery by Gianciotto, her husband, who stabs them to death. Struck by this testimony, Dante faints down on the ground, out of pity for them, but most of all because he suddenly realizes the potentially dangerous power of literature and poetry: what he understands is that his own literary production too may have a similar influence on the readers. The episode, then, has a function in the *Commedia*: Francesca is condemned to the circle of incontinence because she allowed her carnal desires to triumph over her reason, thereby going against God's design for man and woman; the soul of Beatrice, on the contrary, bathes in the serene light of divine love. Dante contrasts the earthly love of *Inferno* and the spiritual love of *Paradise*.[1]

After a relative eclipse in the early modern period, Dante's works, among which the *Divine Comedy*, were rediscovered at the turn of the 19th century.[2]

1. On the episode in Dante's *Commedia*, see Renzi, 2007.
2. On Dante in 19th-century literature, painting and illustration, see Havely, 2011; on Dante and the *Divine Comedy* in British art and literature from the 18th to the 20th century, see Lehner, 2017.

This started an important vogue for subjects drawn from the *Commedia* in European painting.[3] The story of Paolo and Francesca particularly inspired artists because of its dramatic potential. This was mostly due, as Havely shows (Havely, 2007), to Boccaccio's 1373 commentary on the story: Boccaccio embroiders the episode, focusing on the theatrical and melodramatic dimension of the scene, with the two embracing lovers witnessed by the infuriated husband. This literary interpretation strongly influenced the artistic vogue for the episode, which "provided the most substance for artists drawn to depicting scenes of passion, horror, and fantasy" (Koslow, 1990, p. 133). In the first half of the century, many painters took up the subject of the lovers kissing, thus establishing a pictorial tradition that lasted throughout the century. British artists, too handled the subject. Two modes of representing the two lovers were prominent: the scene in which the lovers embrace and are discovered by Gianciotto in a room or in a garden; and the scene in which the embracing souls drift in hell.

This article focuses on the first subject – that of Francesca and Paolo kissing while reading. It centres on the British artists' take on the theme. These works are inscribed within an already established pictorial tradition initiated by John Flaxman, who set up an iconographical model that was emulated throughout the century. While there is a circulation of the image, which attests to a shared imagery in European painting, the treatment of the kiss reflects different attitudes to the theme of passion as well as to Dante's conception of Francesca and Paolo. The context was also that of a Victorian revaluation of Dante's text by translators and commentators. Rossetti tackled the story of Paolo and Francesca in numerous works, thereby bringing a new treatment to the theme. The subject of passionate or adulterous lovers was indeed a favourite theme of the Pre-Raphaelite artists. Three lesser-known Aesthetic artists, Charles Hallé, Franck Dicksee and Christopher Williams, took up the theme in the late 19th century and drew on Rossetti's representations of the lovers. However, they turned it into a more sentimental subject, which signalled a paradoxical reversal of Aesthetic painting towards Victorian sentimentalism and *genre*. All in all, the works produced by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Rossetti and by these Aesthetic painters diverged both from Dante's text and from pictorial precedents. Dante's story had now become a mere motif.

The reception of Francesca in 19th-century Britain: the making of a legend

Dante's *Inferno* was first translated into English in 1782, and a literary and scholarly vogue for the Italian poet and his works ensued. The most famous

3. For a thorough overview of the theme in 19th-century European painting, see Poppi, 1994.

translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia* published in nineteenth-century was Henry Francis Cary' *Inferno* in 1805 and the *Divina Commedia* in 1814. His translations and scholarly comments played a central role in the Romantic fashion for the Italian poet. Several paintings and sculptures on the subject of Paolo and Francesca exhibited at the Royal Academy or at the British institution throughout the century were accompanied with quotes explicitly drawn from Cary's translations (see Toynbee, 1919). Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats all read Dante in this edition (only Byron, like Rossetti later, knew and wrote Italian fluently).[4] Cary shaped the reception of the text and in particular, the plea to experience sympathy and pity for the lovers. The story, then, became "a romantic tragedy" (Levine, 2002, p. 78). The enthusiasm for Dante's work had more to do with the "Romantic exaltation of passion" than with his "austere theological vision" (Bugliani-Knox, 1997, p. 223). Where Dante condemned the sinful lovers to the buffeting winds of hell, because their earthly love subverted God's design, the British Romantic imagination valorised the lovers. In their literary adaptations or in their scholarly comments, Shelley, Byron, Hunt or Keats construed Francesca as a romantic heroine and downplayed the opposition between passion and morality that had been so central to Dante's vision (see *ibid.*, p. 224). The Romantics "created an utterly unresolvable conflict that qualified Francesca as a tragic heroine" (*ibid.*, p. 80). The lovers, therefore, acquired the aura of tragedy and of the sublime.[5] Such representations had a strong influence on the Victorians' vision of the lovers.

Bugliani-Knox lists twenty-six English translations of the episode between 1836 and 1879 (Bugliani-Knox, 1997, pp. 234-235). These were more or less faithful to Dante's text and prosody. The Victorian scholars who commented on his text did not always reflect Dante's moral outlook on Francesca: many authors expressed "some collusion with, and compassion for, Francesca" – a "tragic heroine who fell victim to passion" (Bugliani-Knox, 1997, p. 231). Carlyle, in his commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1838), acknowledged the theological and religious dimension of Dante's thought but he also saw Francesca as a victim of a passion. He expressed his emotional response to the episode, which to him was endowed with "much stern tragedy" and which contains "beautiful touches of human weakness" (Carlyle, 1892, p. 89). The notion of sin becomes secondary, and the story is meant to elicit pitiful emotions in the recipient.

4. For a study of the importance of Dante and Italian language and culture to the British Romantic poets, see Burwick and Douglass, 2011; Ellis, 1983. On the pre-Romantic and Romantic reception of Dante and the *Divine Comedy*, see Braida, 2004.
5. For a study of Dante's reception in 19th-century Britain, see Milbank, 1998, pp. 150-161; Fraser, 1995, pp. 134-153.

This approach was shared by other translators and essayists. Henry Clark Barlow, a specialist of Italian who devoted his life to the study of Dante, wrote a comment on the episode in which he extolled Francesca's womanly weakness. He even argued that Dante meant in fact to defend her: "In Francesca, Dante has depicted the force of woman's love stronger than death. […] In the short account which she gives of her tragical death, there is a candour, a modesty, a delicacy of sentiment, a shrinking from conscious impropriety, united with an amount of womanly feeling" (Barlow, 1859, p. 17). Barlow eschews Dante's stern condemnation of Francesca's passion and her refusal to take responsibility in her sinful act. Furthermore, he gives an image of the adulterous woman that is highly decorous: Francesca is now a decent and modest woman, and the passion that she expresses in Canto v is now absent. Barlow was a renowned specialist of the poet and his reinterpretation of Dante's Francesca no doubt influenced Victorian writers and artists: between 1850 and his death in 1876, he published numerous books and articles on Dante, art and Italy – at the time when Rossetti, who was the son of a specialist of Dante and a scholar himself, was adopting Dantean subjects in his poems and paintings.

Later in the century, John Addington Symonds re-evaluated Dante's outlook on the lovers. He emphasized Dante's "liberality of judgment" and "his profoundest sympathy" for Paolo and Francesca (Symonds, 1872, p. 146). For Symonds, the tale is one "of pathos and of pity" (*ibid.*, p. 154). This is another example of a shared trend in the Victorian times – the construction of the passionate lovers as worthy of attracting one's pity. This, sometimes, implied that more scandalous themes, such as sensual love, adultery or female desire, should be downplayed.

Paolo and Francesca in Romantic painting: the fortune of a motif

John Flaxman's turn-of-the-century illustrations shaped the European visual imagination of the 19th century. Both he and William Blake[6] contributed to the interest in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Britain, which was concomitant with the rediscovery of Italian primitive painting in Europe. In 1793, Flaxman devised a series of drawings which Thomas Piroli engraved in 1802 for an Italian edition of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, later published in English in 1807.[7] Flaxman was then living in Rome, where he discovered medieval art, notably sculpture. This source of inspiration, which blended with his neoclas-

6. Blake produced 102 illustrations of the *Commedia* between 1824 and 1827.
7. See the Royal Academy website: https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/book/compositions-by-john-flaxman-sculptor-r-a-from-the-divine-poem-of-dante [accessed May 2024].

sicism, imparted a linear and simplified style to his drawings from Dante. In "*The Lovers Surprised (from the Divine Comedy)*", Flaxman devised a composition that was afterwards taken up by many artists who treated the subject.[8] The illustration shows Paolo kissing a rather passive Francesca, watched by a sullen Gianciotto hidden behind a pillar. There are captions in Italian and English: "*La bocca mi baciò tutto tremante* / Eager to realize the story'd bliss, / Trembling he snatch'd the half resented kiss". These lines, however, are not totally faithful to the text, in which the kiss is sought-after more eagerly. Besides, Flaxman describes the two lovers as quite demure: Paolo delicately holds Francesca by the arm and shoulder while bringing his mouth close to her face; Francesca, who holds the open book, coyly looks away. They form a triangular group, as fits the neo-classical manner: an oblique line follows Francesca's right arm and her large gown on the left, which is matched on the right by the slanting line formed by Paolo's cloak and sword; their heads are placed at the apex of the triangle. Paolo's head, arms and legs produce an effect of dynamism: he seems to be moving towards her, while her head and bust get closer to him. Francesca, however, does not wear the smile evoked in Canto v but is rather impassive. What is given is an image of male initiative and female submissiveness.

Many European artists copied Flaxman's triangular composition and dramatic scenography. Henry Fuseli gave the theme an erotic touch: in his *Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Polenta surprised by Gianciotto Malatesta* (c. 1785, oil on canvas, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Zurich), a smiling Francesca seems to respond more visibly to Paolo's embrace. What's more, Paolo has placed his hand on her half-undressed and opulent breasts. This piquant note may be found in J.A. Koch's *Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Polenta surprised by Gianciotto Malatesta* (1805, ink and watercolour on paper, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen): Koch emulates Flaxman's model, with a fervent Paolo and a smiling Francesca, and Gianciotto, like the beholder, acts as a voyeuristic albeit vengeful witness to the scene.

The representation of lovers kissing in a medievalising setting, menaced by an infuriated husband, was a fit subject for the revivalist movement of troubadour painting, whose revival of history painting verged on the anecdotal and the sentimental. The Troubadours also privileged theatrical or dramatic compositions. Marie-Philippe Coupin de la Couperie's oil on canvas *Les Amours funestes de Françoise de Rimini et de Paolo Malatesta* (Napoleonmuseum, Arenenberg), shown at the Salon of 1812, provided an example of that approach. It presents a triangular composition, with the figures placed in the same positions and

8. In a watercolour of 1808 *Paolo and Francesca da Polenta surprised by Gianciotto Malatesta* (Kunsthaus, Zürich, Fuseli shows a dancing couple on ta terrace, watched by Gianciotto.

attitudes as in Flaxman's works. The now ornate décor fits the typically Troubadour style. The French artist diverged from Flaxman's composition by placing Gianciotto on the right, next to a pillar: the figure brings in an ominous – and quite theatrical – dimension to an otherwise sentimental scene. Francesca seems now to be yielding to Paolo's entreaties and the smile on her face suggests her acceptance of his kiss.

J.A.D. Ingres pursued in the same vein with the seven oil paintings and numerous drawings he produced between 1814 and 1850. His various versions of *Paolo and Francesca* all show inspiration from both Flaxman's triangular placing of the figures and Coupin de la Couperie's theatrical positioning of the murderer Gianciotto. In Ingres' works, the husband irrupts from behind a curtain: he thus acts like a voyeur, like the spectator.[9] Coupin de la Couperie and Ingres gave a particular attention to the figures' gestures. In many of Ingres' versions, Francesca's right hand lets the book drop onto the floor while her left hand is placed on her laps; Paolo's hands hold either her neck, her bust or her waist. Francesca wears a discreet smile. Here again, there is none of the eagerness which Francesca describes in her direct address to Dante. The image stages a contrast between female passiveness and male desire.

One painter established a link between these French painters and the British Pre-Raphaelites – William Dyce. A lover of early Renaissance painting, Dyce, like the Nazarenes he admired, adopted an archaising style which exerted a strong influence on the Pre-Raphaelites. Dyce also tackled the theme of the fated lovers in an oil canvas of 1837, *Francesca da Rimini* (National Galleries of Scotland), which he painted while in Rome.[10] The catalogue entry contained an extract from Boccaccio narrating the story of the lovers' idyll and death. Flaxman's and Ingres's compositions were again obvious sources of inspiration, with the now recurrent triangular grouping of the two figures and Paolo's slanting position. Only the setting – a terrace overlooking a typically Renaissance landscape – differs from the previous works.

With his work, Dyce was joining the tradition of artists who depicted the precise moment of the kiss: Paolo embraces Francesca rather chastely while she looks sideways, receiving his kiss with a discreet smile, her hand still placed on the open book. To the right, a lute signals a courtly context. Below the Florentine turret on the left can be seen a hand, which breaks the otherwise carefully constructed composition. This is in fact what remains of the figure of Gianciotto, whom Dyce had originally placed in his composition, but the painter Joseph Noel Paton had the canvas unexplainedly cut in 1881 when it

9. For an analysis of Ingres' works, see Toscano, 2021.
10. On Dyce's painting, see also Havely, 2007.

was acquired by the Royal Scottish Academy after Dyce's death (Harrison and Newall, 2010, p. 44). This is all the more unexplainable as Paton himself actually depicted Gianciotto in his own version of the subject, an oil on canvas of 1851, *The Murder of Paolo and Francesca* (private collection): here, the dramatic composition was unmistakably derived from the model initiated by Flaxman, Coupin de la Couperie and Ingres, except that Gianciotto now stands above the two embracing lovers, with his dagger. By cutting Dyce's canvas, Paton reinforced another direction which the subject was taking: Dyce allowed an important portion of the canvas to remain empty (the nightly sky, lit by the star of Venus and the moon crescent, is allotted half the canvas) so as to concentrate on the scene of sentimental love. The drastic suppression of the figure of the murderer further expunged the narrative dimension: the lovers' kiss and bliss now become the central subject. Moreover, the representation of the couple respects gendered codes and the sense of propriety. Paolo moves toward Francesca, who accepts his kiss rather coyly. The male protagonist's fervour is suggested by his leaning forward towards the female figure. Francesca's gentle smile reflects womanly modesty and a mild acquiescence – move away from the Francesca of the canto.

This new direction became a staple composition in Britain from the mid-century onwards. Later British painters further decontextualized the theme so as to make it universal: what is presented is a romantic scene of love – and no longer of death. The theme of the blissful lovers was clearly a fascinating one for British painters. But apart from Rossetti, most representations attenuated the passionate or the tragic dimension of their love.

It was this theme which George Frederick Watts chose when he was commissioned by his friend Lord Holland to paint a series of mural frescoes for his home, the Villa Careggi, in Rome. One of the frescoes is now entitled *Paolo and Francesca* (1845, fresco, V&A), but it had other titles: *Seated Figures of a Man and a Woman* or *A Youth Embracing a Girl.* It was the first of a series of works which Watts painted on the subject of the doomed lovers, but the only one in which they are shown embracing (the others depict the lovers floating in hell). The work attests to the influence of Romantic painting, which was quite strong in his production of the mid-century. He adheres to the long-established model, notably by taking up a triangular composition. It is clear that Watts saw Flaxman's drawing, as Paolo's legs adopt a quite similar position. The rather simplified treatment of the figures is due to the choice of the medium of the fresco. The figures are, once again, quite restrained: Francesca gently embraces Paolo, a faint smile on her face; Paolo keenly holds her and kisses her cheek. Watts may have chosen the subject because it allowed him to

express his love fantasies: he was indeed in love with an engaged woman at the time (Gould, 2004, p. 64). He, too, chose to extract the figures from any narrative context. They could be perceived as two anonymous lovers – an idea which is backed by the fact that there were other titles to the canvas.

A melancholy tribute to mutual passion: Rossetti's Paolo and Francesca

It was Rossetti's handling of the theme that brought a notable rupture with the tradition inherited from Flaxman. And yet Flaxman was an important source for the Pre-Raphaelites: he was on the list of the "Immortals" drafted by Rossetti, Hunt, Millais and the other founding members of the Brotherhood around 1848 (see W.H. Hunt, 1905, p. 159; Grieve, 1984, pp. 23-24). Their early drawings of the late 1840s and early 1850s were influenced by his outline drawing and his taste for the medieval art of Italy.[11] Rossetti's approach to the story of Paolo and Francesca, however, differed from earlier precedents. He moved away from the theatrical dimension of these canvases, gave the subject a more sensual dimension.

Dante was a favourite literary source for the Pre-Raphaelites, who often represented the historical figure (mostly with Beatrice) and his works.[12] But Rossetti especially revered the Italian poet, whose works he could read in the original language. He changed his name from Gabriel Charles Dante (his father, Gabriele, was an Italian specialist of Dante) to Dante Gabriel, and he translated Dante's poems and produced numerous artworks based either on his works or on his life. Rossetti was also central in shaping the image of Dante as a poet and lover.[13] From the mid-1850s onwards, Rossetti's watercolours, many of which based on Dante's *Inferno*, signalled the transition towards Aestheticism: the taught drawing and meticulous love of detail that typified the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood gave way to a more emotional and sensuous style. Rossetti's works of the period are also characterized by lush effects of colour that indicate the influence of medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Rossetti revived the story of the doomed lovers in a series of pencil or chalk studies and of watercolours. The subject enabled him to link two central sources of inspiration – Dante and the Arthurian romances. Furthermore, these subjects allowed Rossetti to tackle the themes of intense passion or of adulterous love. Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* inspired him with subjects such as the forbidden love

11. On the Pre-Raphaelites and medievalism, see Cheney, 1992.
12. On the Pre-Raphaelites' reception of the Italian poet and, conversely, on their influence on Italian paintings of Dante, see Pieri, 2007.
13. On the representation of the historical figure of Dante and of Dantean subjects in Rossetti's poems and paintings, see McLaughlin, 1998, pp. 22-31; Fraser, 1995, pp. 112-114; Lehner, 2017, pp. 114-149.

of Lancelot and Guinevere, as in *Arthur's Tomb* (1855, British Museum), which depicts the final parting of the former lovers over the king's grave. It is their tale, and in particular, their kiss, which triggers Paolo and Francesca's kiss. Rossetti was fascinated with the theme of illicit or tragic lovers whose passion is stronger than religious strictures or even than the fear of death.

Rossetti's first studies of Paolo and Francesca kissing were painted in 1848, shortly after the completion of his translation of the *Vita Nuova* in 1848. Dante was therefore in his mind at the time.[14] He later wrote a poem based on his translation of the passage, "Francesca da Rimini (Dante)", first published in *The Athenaeum* of 11 January 1879 and then included in his *Poems* of 1881, which attests to the centrality of the subject for him. Rossetti presented their love as stemming from natural impulses: the two lovers are equally responsible for their plight. For them, hell is no world of woe and horror but an aestheticized place.

In his studies and final paintings, Rossetti borrowed from both Flaxman's and Dyce's compositions: the placement and poses of the figures are alike, though reversed. Rossetti's treatment is quite personal: the kiss is more ardent and Francesca responds more frankly to Paolo's embrace. This approach becomes more and more visible as the versions evolved. His sketches show that he tried a number of poses before settling on the final composition (See Surtees, 1971, cat 75A-D). In the first work, a pen and brown ink study of c. 1846-48, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (The National Trust), Francesca holds the book at arms' range, which creates some distance between her and a composed Paolo, whose head is plunged in the shadow; he holds the book and looks at Francesca, who turns the pages intently. The atmosphere is rather solemn, and they do not kiss.

In another study, a pencil drawing of c. 1849, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini (slight sketch for two seated figures)* (The National Trust), the figures' embrace is keener; Paolo's face touches Francesca's, they look at and hold each other intently. One cannot discern the book in this rough drawing. The artist was visibly working on his composition and on the relationship between the figures. But the next studies show that he made a definitive choice as to the position and attitudes of the couple: in a pencil study of c. 1855, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini (study for first compartment)* (private collection), and in a graphite drawing of 1855, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (British Museum), the two lovers now kiss on the mouth unambiguously Thus, Rossetti, here, follows Dante's text closely. Francesca's hands are clasped in Paolo's and the positions

14. Rossetti probably saw a play by the Italian playwright Silvio Pellico, *Francesca da Rimini* (1815), which was produced in London in 1850 (Faxon, 1989, p. 88).

of their arms express their mutual passion. The atmosphere is more sensual. The scene, nonetheless, is tinged with a melancholy dimension: one no longer finds the smile which Francesca describes in Canto v. The closed eyes, especially Francesca's, whose face is turned to the spectator, create a mood of wistfulness. Though a faithful Victorian translator of Dante's text, Rossetti added his own "characteristically melancholy touch" (Bullen, 2012, p. 234) to the episode. The lovers are closed in on themselves and they appear as self-sufficient mirroring figures, which is reinforced by the round shape of the window that encloses them.

This disposition was taken up in the finished watercolours, either autonomously or as a panel in various triptychs – a medieval format used in religious painting which Rossetti characteristically subverts in this profane and scandalous theme. The kissing lovers are placed on the left-hand panel of two triptychs, the version of 1855 (Tate Gallery) and the larger replica of 1862 (Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford). In the central panel, Dante and Virgil look at Paolo and Francesca to the right, who float in hell, surrounded with flames. In 1867 Rossetti, detached the embracing couple in a replica (watercolour and gouache, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). In these works, Rossetti privileges earthly passion over ethereal love. This reflects "a shift away from the idealized, disembodied love of Beatrice towards something more physical and libidinal" (Bullen, 2012, p. 81). Rossetti's treatment of the theme reflects a reverse movement from that which Dante presents in the *Comedy*. He also brought an important addition to the treatment of the subject in painting: Francesca becomes an active agent of her plight and is no longer passively responding to the man.

In these works, Rossetti gave a new direction to the motif of the open book: it no longer falls down but is now a very large illuminated manuscript which lies wide open on their conjoined laps. The motif is more dramatic: it unites them and heightens their passionate gesture while pointing to the impending disaster. Rossetti clearly wanted to emphasize the idea that the lovers have discarded their studies of literature to indulge in their transport. But the book also functions as a palimpsestic motif, especially in the 1862 version: the two lovers are the reverse image of the figures of Lancelot and Guinevere depicted in the illuminated book. In *Inferno*, the lovers kiss when they read the precise passage in which their medieval counterparts kiss. This theme becomes more obvious in Rossetti's final works: he transmuted into his art the metaliterary dimension that characterized Dante's text. But in so doing, Rossetti diverged from Dante's conception of the potentially negative power of literature over

people's acts. The theme of lovers duplicating other lovers depicted in art emphasized the all-important power of art.

Rossetti's interest in medieval lovers was already noted in his time: in a monography published after his death, Esther Wood already notes Rossetti's singular approach to a theme that deals with the struggle between "the spiritual and the physical in man" (Wood, 1894, p. 233) and which turns love into the mode of retribution: "The characteristic idea of making the penalty consist in the involuntary perpetuation of the sin,– the guilty love becoming, as it were, its own sufficient punishment –, belongs, of course, to Dante, but is worked out with singular power in Rossetti's design" (*ibid.*, p. 234). Indeed, the theme of Paolo and Francesca had autobiographical undertones for Rossetti. In most versions, Francesca is modelled on Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti's muse and wife. This was a period when Rossetti, in his works often represented himself and Lizzie as fictive, literary or historical figures – as did Siddal in her watercolours –. Many of these self-portraits of the artist and his muse took the guise of Dante and Beatrice. But Rossetti's Paolo and Francesca probably carried a particular emotional charge: his interest in adulterous couples of medieval literature had a peculiar resonance at a time when he himself was unfaithful to Lizzie. The theme no doubt had a personal meaning to him.

Rossetti's subject triggers a *mise en abyme* that further underlines the power of art. Dante's legendary literary lovers were modelled on historical figures of the 13th century, Francesca da Polenta and Paolo de Rimini: they were fictionalised in literature and turned into icons in art history. The model for Francesca was a real-life person – Elizabeth Siddal. Paolo and Francesca are mirror images of Launcelot and Guinevere and perhaps also reflections of Lizzie and Dante Gabriel. Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism were also characterized by a propensity to emulate other artworks: their canvases were notable for their inter-artistic dimension and the quotations of other iconographical motifs. Rossetti too emulated previous iconographical sources, as in his depictions of Paolo and Francesca: he looked to Flaxman or Dyce and he absorbed other artforms. An illuminated book is depicted in the watercolours, but the works themselves replicate the glowing surface of the mediaeval manuscripts he so admired, such as the *Roman de la Rose.*[15] All in all, Rossetti's Paolo and Francesca may be seen as a tribute to the power of passion but also of art – that is, of painting and literature.

15. On the Pre-Raphaelites and medieval manuscripts, see Treuherz, 1984.

The couple in Aesthetic paintings: the triumph of sentiment

Rossetti played a central role in the late-Victorian vogue for Dantean subjects. Three lesser-known artists who came in the wake of the Aesthetic Movement tackled the subject of the lovers.[16] Influenced by Rossetti and the earlier generation of Aesthetic artists, they aimed at creating imaginative visions of the past. However, with them, the depiction of the passionate kiss becomes a simple motif in scenes that are altogether notable for their sentimentality.

Charles Edward Hallé took up the subject in his oil on canvas *Paolo and Francesca* of 1888 (private collection). Hallé was a portrait painter of French origins who had an academic training. He was also close to Rossetti, Burne-Jones and other painters associated with Aestheticism, notably because he, along with Coutts Lindsay and Joseph Comyns Carr, co-founded the Grosvenor Gallery (1877), the venue where Aesthetic artists exhibited their works. In the following decade, the Aesthetic Movement was mocked in the press and in literature, for example in Gilbert and Sullivan's satirical play *Patience, or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881). Interestingly, a reference to Francesca is used to create a comical effect in Act II: one character, Bunthorne – an Aesthetic poet inspired by Rossetti and A.C. Swinburne who is constantly derided because of his affected manners and his pedantic tastes – sings a famous line: "Francesca di Rimini, miminy piminy". Using her name may suggest that the two lovers were well-known but most of all that they were now strongly associated with Aestheticism.

Hallé's painting was exhibited at the New Gallery in 1888. It was accompanied with a quotation from *Inferno*. Hallé clearly drew on previous versions on the theme: he had been in touch with Ingres in Rome, Dyce's painting was already visible in the Royal Scottish Academy and Rossetti's works had been exhibited after his death in 1882. Hallé had already depicted a single Francesca in a painting that nodded to the Renaissance pictorial tradition of lute players, *Francesca and her Lute* (unknown date, private collection). In *Paolo and Francesca*, the woman looks affectionately at Paolo and responds to his embrace; Paolo kneels next to her, much in the manner of a prince charming dressed in an elaborate eclectic attire. He holds her hand and has placed his other arm around her waist, and she allows him to draw her arm towards him, her other hand placed limply on the chair. The discarded book on the floor becomes a simple motif. Hallé innovates by placing the figures in a park. Despite the typically

16. Several poems were also written at the *fin-de-siècle*: "Paolo and Francesca da Rimini" by Kate McCosh Clark (1894), "Paolo and Francesca" by Richard Le Gallienne (1892) and by Alix Egerton (1903), as well as two plays on the subject, written by Francis Marion Crawford and Stephen Phillips and produced around 1900. See Bugliani-Knox, 1997.

Aesthetic treatment of harmonious colours, the painting is closer to the innumerable maudlin scenes which were so typical of Victorian *genre* painting. It looks like yet another tryst in which the woman is all attention and meekness toward the man. She does smile to him, but her attitude is one of reserve, and she recalls the Victorian stock character of the naïve maiden.

In 1894, Frank Dicksee produced a comparable variation on the subject with his oil painting *Paolo and Francesca* (private collection). Dicksee often relied on sentiment in his idyllic or melancholy scenes. His treatment of Dante's couple follows Hallé's earlier model, except that he adopted the format of the *tondo* so that the composition may focus on the lovers. Paolo and Francesca do kiss but in a rather restrained way. As in Hallé's work, Francesca's attitude is one of devotion and muted affection. She leans against him while he holds her hand, his other arm hugging her close to him; she allows him to kiss her hand, and her limp arm on his lap signals female submission. Her open mouth and eyes may suggest abandon, but it is rather inhibited. The scene depicts a *rendezvous* that preserves propriety. There is none of the heady atmosphere of Rossetti's paintings. The harmony of green and brown and the eclectic setting inscribe the canvas within the Aesthetic Movement. There is a timeless sofa, and the open illuminated book lies on the floor. And yet, unlike more complex Aesthetic artworks, this painting, again, borders on *genre*. The traditional triangular position of the figures is taken up but this romantic scene partakes both of courtly love and of Victorian sentimentalism.

It is precisely this dimension which the art critic F.G. Stephens disliked: he saw in the work "a sort of passion in its design which, remembering what Rossetti and Sir F. Leighton have given us, is by no means satisfactory"; to him, the painting needed "profounder pathos, a deeper sort of art, and more solid qualities to justify its pretentions as a work of thoughtful and genuine purpose" (Stephens, 1895, p. 646). Another critic, Claude Phillips, condemned Dicksee's general "sentimentality", of which *Paolo and Francesca* was paradigmatic: he saw the work as "wholly inadequate as a rendering of this moment of passion's climax in the famous love-tragedy. On a lover so respectful as this Paolo, so remorseful before he has sinned, Francesca's relentless lord need hardly have wreaked his vengeance" (Phillips 449). This comment shows that to Phillips, Dicksee's restraint did not fit the subject of the passionate lovers.

A similar treatment can be found in an oil on canvas by Christopher Williams, *Paolo and Francesca* (1902, Bridgend County Borough Council Collection, Maesteg Town Hall). The influence of Aestheticism and in particular of Frederic Leighton may be seen in the marble bench (also present in Watts' composition), the Michelangelesque figures, the Italianate clothing and the

eclectic neoclassical and orientalising setting, as well as the flamboyant sun in the background, which diffuses a poetical light onto the scene. Once again, the open illuminated book functions as a mere reminder of the story. The *tondo* format is used to focus on the two lovers, who, here, do kiss on the mouth; Francesca's hands hold Paolo's left hand while his right arm is placed around her shoulder. But the embrace is rather stiff and there is none of Rossetti's sensual passion, nor any sense of tragedy.

All in all, these three Aesthetic paintings give an image of a very demure Francesca and neutralize the eroticized charge of the legendary adulterous woman. Francesca here acquires the qualities which Ruskin ascribed to Beatrice:[17] she appears like a model wife, devoted to her male companion and deprived of any sensuality. Visibly, such idealization of the figure pandered to contemporary gendered considerations.

The Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic painters discarded the conventional theatrical composition of earlier painters, who show two lovers dramatically caught in a double act: they are discovered by Gianciotto at the same moment when they become aware of their mutual love. Rossetti and the later Aesthetic painters concentrated instead on the sole moment of the kiss. The latter artists, however, completely sentimentalized the subject. These British painters moved away from Lessing's theory of the pregnant moment as presented in chapter XIV of his *Laocoon* of 1766. Instead of a moment in a narration, with a "before" – the reading of the story of the medieval lovers –, a present – the embrace –, and an "after" – the murder by the enraged husband –, what is shown is a stasis in time, a concentration on the moment of the kiss. Rossetti depicted a pregnant moment that only focused on the lovers' passion. But the later Aesthetic representations of Paolo and Francesca display a suspension in time which is no longer dramatic and melancholy but merely pleasant. The kiss which consigned Francesca and Paolo to the confines of Dante's hell has become pleasurable and seemly. As such, it is a fit object of consumption. The scene joins the plethora of *genre* paintings that catered to the now bourgeois tastes of a particular public. Paolo and Francesca have turned into a formula.

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17. For a study of Beatrice's reception by Ruskin, see Straub.

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