Beatrice Resurrected: A Scholarly Edition
Of Julia Margaret Cameron's Beatrice

Avnee Paranjape
ENGL 349
Dr. Susan Johnston
March 18, 2013
INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to not be immediately taken by the enigmatic, pensive gaze of Julia Margaret Cameron’s subject in her 1866 photograph Beatrice. Her downcast eyes, loose hair, and startling intimacy with the viewer, so uncharacteristic for a Victorian photograph, immediately call to our minds questions of not only the turmoil of this forlorn girl on the cusp of womanhood, but of her identity and her seemingly-anachronistic place in Victorian art. We need not be familiar with the history of its tragic subject to be moved: “Cameron’s Beatrice is both a photograph of emotion and one that encourages a strong emotional response in the viewer. Whether one knows the story of Beatrice Cenci or not, this photograph of a beautiful young woman elicits strong emotions from the viewer: pity, sadness, concern” (Vallone 202). Though we are “free to react to Beatrice” (Rose 20) in a formalist manner, examining the interplay of light and shadow and the composition of the image independently of context, we are drawn to Beatrice primarily by the involuntary provocation of numerous emotions. We must wonder, then, who is this Beatrice Cenci, and why does she touch us so?
Modern scholars suggest multiple avenues through which Julia Margaret Cameron may have first made the acquaintance of Beatrice Cenci. The story of the historical Beatrice plays like a Shakespearean tragedy: the young daughter of an Italian nobleman, Beatrice was incestuously abused by her father for years before she resolved to plotting his murder with her brothers and stepmother, only to be tortured until her family confessed. She, along with almost her entire family, was executed on September 1, 1599. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that Beatrice entered 19th century English consciousness through the publication of a poetic drama, Percy Shelley’s 1819 play “The Cenci”, based on Beatrice’s trials and sufferings. Though not performed until 1886, after Cameron’s death, there were numerous reprints in the Victorian period, thus provoking the subsequent popularity of the figure Beatrice for Victorian artists.

Though no documentation confirming this relationship is extant, it is possible that Cameron was familiar with Shelley’s play, as her photographic subjects reflect her extensive familiarity with English literature, including Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Shakespeare and Milton. American sculptor Harriet Hosmer also channeled her artistic talents into a widely-admired manifestation of Beatrice, which was displayed at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1857. As a miniature of Cameron’s daughter was on display in the same exhibition, Cameron would no doubt have seen Hosmer’s arresting sculpture, which depicts Beatrice in her prison cell prior to her execution, quietly contemplating the rosary lying across her palm.

However, perhaps the most direct inspiration for Cameron’s piece was the portrait of Beatrice Cenci then attributed to Guido Reni. Cameron’s Beatrice visually recalls what was believed to be the work of the Italian Old Master, with its side-lit perspective and a Middle-Eastern-style shawl wrapped loosely around the subject’s head. Shelley’s drama revived artistic interest in the painting, which was then reproduced by the Arundel Society, an organization
distributed high-quality prints of Italian watercolours, tracings, and frescoes from the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries with the use of chromolithography. Cameron is listed as a subscriber to the Arundel Society in the two existing subscriber logs from 1859 and 1866, the latter date being the year in which Cameron made her first studies of Beatrice Cenci. The association between Cameron’s Beatrice and the painting is so strong that in the 1990 exhibition, “Whisper of the Muse: The World of Julia Margaret Cameron”, the print of Beatrice was displayed alongside The Engraving After Reni, a coloured stipple engraving done by L. Lagoux in 1794 based on the portrait that inspired Cameron.

Cameron was certainly taken by Beatrice’s scandalous and tragic tale—she returned to the subject no less than nine times over the course of her photographic career, taking these nine photographs over the space of four years with three separate sittings and two different models. The photograph in question depicts May Prinsep, one of Cameron’s nieces and favorite models, as the condemned and contemplative Beatrice. May was a mere thirteen years of age at the time of her portrayal of the twenty-two-year-old Beatrice, in keeping with Cameron’s tendency to select models significantly younger than the subjects they represent, perhaps in this case to elicit the pity of her viewer¹. May, the daughter of Charles Robert Prinsep, was orphaned at the age of eleven and subsequently adopted by Cameron’s brother-in-law, and frequently spent her holidays at the Cameron estate on the Isle of Wight. Immediately, Cameron’s discerning eye recognized in her a classical beauty that she saw as distinctly Italian, as indicated by her use of May as the model for Beatrice as well as The Neapolitan, and many others of her works. Another photograph from the set of Beatrice photographs from which this piece is drawn is copyrighted March 23, 1866, with the inscription on the rear indicating that the sitting occurred at Cameron’s estate at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight.
Tracing the exhibition history of any particular photograph from her 1866 sitting with May Prinsep is problematic, as all three photographs from that set were named *Beatrice* and appear as such in the catalogues and wall labels of exhibitions. However, what we do know is that one of these three photographs, all very compositionally similar, was first exhibited on June 7, 1866 at the Exhibition Soirée of the Photographic Society of London. This exhibition featured only two of Cameron’s photographs amongst numerous other works, with a study of the head of a little boy, ambiguously titled *No. 6*, accompanying *Beatrice*.

The next recorded exhibition of Cameron’s *Beatrice* photographs was two years later, in 1868. Cameron placed around 235 of her photographs in a solo exhibition at the German Gallery in London from January to February of 1868. This showing, which served as Cameron’s major “coming-out” to the photographic and artistic society, seemingly featured four Beatrice portraits: *Beatrice with Eyes Open* and *Beatrice with Eyes Closed* in the “Fancy Subjects” section, and *Beatrice, Eyes Down* and *Beatrice, Eyes Open* in the “Series of Twelve Life-Sized Heads of Fancy Subjects” section². Volume VII of The Art-Journal reviewed this exhibition, saying, “some of the heads are wonderfully fine as those of the Poet Laureate, H. Taylor, Herschel…and others; and not less impressive in another way are—Beatrice…and; but the collection is very numerous, and of such an exhibition it is not a little to say that it does not contain one mediocre photograph” (“Minor Topics of the Month” 58). The Photographic News, however, was less laudatory: “Not even the distinguished character of some of the heads serves…to redeem the result of willfully imperfect photography from being altogether repulsive” (qtd. in Gernsheim 65). However, the photographic press had long been an opponent of Cameron’s as a result of her rebellious style that eschewed Victorian photographic conventions, and their chiding voices were overwhelmed by the enthusiastic adulation of the non-photographic press, finally giving
Cameron deserved recognition four years after her photographic debut. The reviewer for The Standard, for example, recognized immediately both Cameron’s exalted aesthetic inspiration and her artistic motives, commenting that some of her pieces “remind you of that oft-cited painter Rembrandt: a strong light falls full on the face, the shadows around, while dark, possess a transparency which the eye can penetrate. With little regard for details, Mrs. Cameron secures force of expression. The extremities may be large and distorted, half the sitter subdued, lost in gloom, and the hair hang meaningless, providing the picture has power” (qtd. in Gernsheim 65). This evocative description could easily refer to any of Cameron’s Beatrice studies. The Morning Post went to far as to say that Cameron’s photographs “have stronger character and more poetic sentiment than are commonly to be found even in the choicest specimens of...portraiture” (qtd. in Gernsheim 66). Finally beginning to win over the public, Cameron went on to organize many well-received solo exhibitions, as well as earn approbation from her peers and critics.

The Beatrice portraits reappear in numerous later exhibitions of Cameron’s work, though the existence of Cameron’s later, similarly-titled works further complicates the association of the references in records to any specific photograph. A photograph entitled Beatrice Cenci, among nine other Cameron photographs, is listed in the records of the Fifteenth Annual Exhibition of the Photographic Society, which was displayed from November 8th to 30th, 1870, at the Conduit Street Gallery. The name Beatrice Cenci is not inscribed on any of Cameron’s original prints of her Beatrice studies; therefore, we can only speculate on which photograph this record refers to. In 1872, five Cameron photographs, including a porcelain reproduction of Beatrice Cenci in a carved frame, were displayed at the London International Exhibition, running from April to September. The ambiguity of the name listed again prevents us from discerning which of Cameron’s Beatrice photographs was reproduced in porcelain.
The next recorded public appearance of Beatrice comes after Cameron’s 1879 death in an exhibition housed by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1939, where seventeen of Cameron’s prints including Beatrice were included in “Early Photographs to Commemorate the Centenary of Photography, 1839-1939”. Beatrice later appeared along with five other Cameron photographs in “People and Places: British Painting, 1550-1900”, a 1995 exhibition that toured through five Japanese cities. These same six photographs then returned to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1996, where they were exhibited in “The Pre-Raphaelites and Early British Photography”. At the time of writing, prints of this particular photograph are housed at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, where it is not currently on display, the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television in Bradford, England, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it is not currently on display, and The George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, among numerous other collections.

Cameron titled her piece simply Beatrice, thus isolating her subject from the notoriety associated with her father’s name and treating her as a story unto herself, unlike other appropriators such as Shelley who saw Beatrice as inextricably linked to her father’s crime. Cameron captures Beatrice in a solitary moment, providing to the viewer only the sorrow, resolution, and foreboding anticipation of her subject. She trusts her models’ eyes to tell Beatrice’s tortured story and reveal the psychological complexities of a woman, near girl, conflicted by her orchestration of her father’s murder and the necessity for justice for herself and self-liberation. Judging by the subject’s aura of somber resignation, we can presume that Cameron has chosen to capture Beatrice after her death sentence and prior to her execution. According to Vallone, “the downcast glance of the model’s large, light eyes, her tumbled hair,
and her sweetly melancholy expression perfectly capture the legend of the condemned Beatrice's resignation and moral innocence, yet emphasize her sensuality as well" (Vallone 200).

Despite the youth of the model, this assertion of Cameron’s suggestion of sensuality and languor is shared by many as characteristic of Cameron’s work. Jack claims that Cameron’s photograph *Call, I follow, I follow, let me die!* “makes explicit what the Beatrice portraits only hint at: a fascination with the relationship between nascent female eroticism and death” (Jack 198). The imminence of the death of this young figure exuding innocence and purity as well as sexual knowledge further shocks the informed viewer. Loose hair and its inherent sensuality in the Victorian imagination play a primary role in Beatrice’s sexualization. Cameron wraps a turban loosely around Beatrice’s head, suggesting to MacKay that Cameron “reintroduce[s] the weight and dimension of the covered hair she was apparently trying to obscure” (MacKay 31). If, as MacKay states, “loose hair can symbolize female sexuality, [then] Cameron shows us how it can be muted, self-contained even in its abundance, curiously both assertive and non-confrontational” (32). Despite Beatrice’s radiation of purity, beneath lies a restrained sexuality, as symbolized by the loose turban.

Beatrice is perhaps far more complex a figure than we imagined—rather than simply a naïve victim, we are reminded of her sin that arose from greater sin, and recognize the profundity of her internal conflict. Her lack of eye contact with the camera, as well as the shadow around the subject’s eyes, which would ordinarily have allowed us to peer into her conflicted soul, further unsettles the viewer and adds to the sense of ambiguity. She does not invite her observers in to seek their sympathy nor does she stare defiantly out at them, suggesting both shame and renunciation. Beatrice merely exists in her quiet moment of calm contemplation, asking and
expecting nothing from the viewer—if she is aware of their presence, it means little to her, as the
imminence of her inevitable death lingers over the scene. Both Beatrice and the viewer are
powerless in the face of looming fate, leaving us entranced, horrified, and heartbroken.

1. Her other model for Beatrice, Kate Keown, was only ten years old at the time of the sitting. As both of
these models were virgins, it has been suggested that Cameron attempts to capture a prenuptial innocence
and purity that was tainted in the most repulsive manner conceivable, thus further stirring her audience’s
sympathies.

2. While four Beatrice photographs are listed in the records, only three photographs of May Prinsep as
Beatrice were known to exist in 1868, as Cameron’s later Beatrice studies were all photographed in 1870.
Therefore, we can presume that two of these entries duplicate each other, possibly Beatrice with Eyes Open
and Beatrice, Eyes Open.

3. It is possible, however, that Beatrice Cenci refers to one of Cameron’s earlier Beatrice studies, as the
photographs from both 1870 sittings featuring Beatrice as a subject are inscribed A Study of the Cenci or
some similar variant.

4. Also known as the National Media Museum.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The reproduction of any historical artifact poses to the editor numerous issues in representation and reception, and photography, as straightforward as it may seem, is no exception. In the case of Julia Margaret Cameron’s *Beatrice*, the identification of an “authoritative” print is limited by the inscriptions Cameron provided on the original prints of the photograph. According to Wolf, “even the title (and sometimes date) differs from print to print, making it difficult to establish the facts about many of Cameron’s photographs” (Wolf 214). We know she made at least two prints of *Beatrice* in the year the sitting was done, 1866, as she regularly inscribed at least two prints per glass negative herself. One of these prints was presented in an album on September 8, 1867 to Cameron’s close friend, Sir John Herschel, and eventually came into the possession of the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television in Bradford, West Yorkshire, England. This print measures 33.2 by 26.7 cm, and is an albumen silver print from a wet-collodion glass negative, inscribed with the date and the title *Beatrice* on the back. However, Cox and Ford choose to reproduce another 1866 print in their collection, another albumen print measuring 33.8 cm by 26.3 cm located at the J. Paul Getty Museum. The rear side of this print is inscribed with the location of the sitting (Freshwater), the year, and the
title. It also bears a Colnaghi blindstamp, indicating that it was a print distributed by Colnaghi's, with whom Cameron had arranged the sale of prints of her photographs. Other scholars, such as Weaver and Gernsheim, choose to reproduce later prints of the same negative, which are dated 1870 in their inscription.

Aside from the rear inscriptions and minute differences in size, the fronts of the prints themselves are essentially identical. The prints do, however, each have their own unique blemishes, which result from Cameron's disregard for technical perfection and absolute refusal to retouch any of her photographs—she even occasionally inscribed her prints “untouched”. She would print plates even if the sitter had moved or if the plate was dropped and cracked, as long as the “spiritual quality” (Gernsheim 70) of the piece was intact. Blemishes could arise from the wet-collodion process, which involved pouring the emulsion evenly onto a glass plate and allowing it to set, which provided the opportunity for dust and dirt particles to catch in the emulsion and as a result appear on the final print. However, these blemishes arise not from artistic intent, but what some consider Cameron's somewhat misguided allegiance to authenticity. Any differences between prints of Beatrice do not contribute to artistic value, and occur merely accidentally as consequences of the photographic printing process.

The print selected for reproduction in this edition comes from the Herschel album and is housed in the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television. As a print presumably from 1866, we can guess that it was one of the first, if not the first print of the negative to be made, though there is no way of knowing for certain which print was the original print. The accessibility of the print for reproduction plays a role in its selection—the Getty Museum print is currently not on display and is kept in the archives of the museum, and is only reproduced in the
J. Paul Getty Museum publication and in small size in the Cox and Ford collection, whereas the Herschel album print is preferred by many editors, including Wolf. Though minor differences exist between the two 1866 prints in terms of printing blemishes, it has been determined that these are not significant in terms of artistic relevance. For the sake of logistics, the photograph has been produced smaller than its original size, which would have measured approximately 13 inches by 10 inches. The colour of the photograph is inevitably different from how it would have appeared to its original audience, as the deterioration of the albumen paper over time results in an image that is far less "reddish" than it would have initially appeared. Nonetheless, the essential elements of the photograph remain—Beatrice is as engaging as ever, beckoning us to peer into her conflicted psyche.

1. The variations in measurement come from Cameron's use of large glass plates measuring 12 by 15 inches, which would result in a print that Cameron would need to trim by hand to the desired size.

2. The collodion emulsion was made of gun-cotton dissolved in ether, an explosive prepared by soaking cotton in acid. It was used to spread photographic chemicals evenly and thinly over glass, creating a smooth, even surface. Potassium cyanide, a toxic chemical, was used in the removal of excess developer after the process was complete. The development of this process in 1838, though messy, volatile, and time-consuming, made photography more accessible to amateurs like Cameron.

3. Though Cameron did, like many photographers, dye her prints in more appealing colours, there is no evidence that she did so until 1867, after the printing of this copy of Beatrice. In the existing record, she appears to have used a compound then known as sulphocyanide of ammonium.
One thing more, my child,
For thine one sake be constant to the love
Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
Tho' wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
Lived ever so holy and unstained. And tho'
Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name
Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow
For men to point at as they pass, do thou
Forbear, and never think a thought unkind
Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves.
So mayest thou die as I do; fear and pain
Being subdued. Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!

— "The Cenci" by Percy Shelley
APPENDIX A

A Brief Biography of Julia Margaret Cameron

Those who knew Julia Margaret Cameron during her lifetime could hardly call her ordinary in any sense of the word. Born in Calcutta on June 11, 1815, the daughter of James Pattie, and East India Company official, and Adeline de l’Etang, a daughter of French aristocrats, Julia Margaret Cameron was educated at the home of her grandparents in Versailles. There, she took lessons in subjects ranging from dancing to music to conversation, and became fluent in German, French and Italian. During a serendipitous vacation at the Cape, Julia Margaret met two of the most influential men in her life—her future husband, her senior by twenty years, and Sir John Herschel, a brilliant astronomer who would become her close friend and photographic mentor. Her friendship with Herschel began her interest in photography long before she stepped behind the camera herself. With an education as varied and as cultivated as hers, it was little surprise that, upon Cameron’s return to India after marrying Charles Hay Cameron in 1838, she became well-known as a witty conversationalist and charismatic, vivacious hostess. Second only to the wife of the Governor-General of India, the young Mrs. Cameron was at the head of British colonial society.

After Charles retired in 1848, the Camerons relocated to England, where they took up residence in Kent. Over the next twelve years, the family moved to several different homes in London, before finally settling in an estate at Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight that Cameron named Dimbola after the family’s coffee plantation in Ceylon. Through the duration of their marriage, the Camerons had six children, adopted three orphaned relatives, and in the 1860s took
into their care the two orphaned granddaughters of Cameron’s sister. In addition to these eleven children, in the late 1850s Cameron took over the care and education of Mary Ryan, an Irish beggar girl who later became one of Cameron’s maids and one of her favorite models. After his retirement, Charles was largely bedridden and incapacitated, leaving the bulk of the financial and domestic management to Cameron, including the care of these twelve children. Despite the aid she received from servants, nannies and governesses, this was an immense responsibility, and Cameron not only ran the household very effectively but also found the time to entertain “an incredible number” (Gernsheim 21) of guests.

Moving away from India had not diminished the Camerons’ social life; rather, it enhanced it. Each of her homes, including Sheen Lodge and Ashburton Cottage in London as well as Dimbola, were gathering places for eminent men of the day, including John Herschel, W.M. Thackeray, Alfred Tennyson, George Frederick Watts, Henry Taylor, and Thomas Carlyle. She even received the entire Darwin family at Dimbola in 1868. The influence of these numerous intelligent men weighed heavily on Cameron—she corresponded with them often and later photographed many of them in her “great heads” series, which some biographers have equated to a religious experience for Cameron in her hero-worship of male intellect. Somehow, she found the time to write an average of 300 letters her month in addition to her household duties. Her surviving letters demonstrate that she was prone to copious, exuberant description, much to the irritation of Henry Taylor. An extremely affectionate individual, she frequently gave gifts to the Tennysons and the Taylors, as the families were heavily involved in each other’s lives. A particular anecdote involving the Poet-Laureate reveals both Cameron’s colourful personality and her closeness with Tennyson. During a smallpox outbreak on the Isle of Wight, Tennyson refused to be vaccinated. As soon as Cameron got word of this, she marched over to Tennyson’s
next-door house with a doctor, insisting that he be vaccinated. When the Poet-Laureate locked himself in his upstairs study, Cameron stood at the bottom of the steps, shouting, “You’re a coward, Alfred, a coward!” (Gernsheim 25) until Tennyson finally relented and sheepishly submitted to the vaccination.

Her photographic career began in 1863 upon the marriage of her daughter, when her daughter and her new son-in-law gifted Cameron with a camera. Initially, she believed it would help her educate her young son in the sciences, but soon discovered the artistic possibilities of the practice of photography. She enthusiastically launched herself into this new hobby, converting the coalhouse into a darkroom and the chicken house into her studio. Photography soon became her primary focus, and her once strictly ordered household fell awry as she kept her maids occupied as her models for hours at a time, entirely oblivious of the hour. Her treatment of her models was brusque, impatient and persistent, and the length of her exposures—between three and seven minutes—made it a trying process. Wilfrid Ward described it as “torture” (Gernsheim 30), calling himself a “martyr” (30). Her fearsome appearance, with chemically stained hands and a harsh, husky voice, would often scare her child models. As one recalled, “no wonder those old photographs of us...look anxious and wistful” (30). Even when the prince of Prussia sat for her, she ignored his rank, shouting at him repeatedly to open his eyes wider. When a print was finished, the entire household was summoned to observe it. She was also strongly supported by Charles, and eagerly ran to show him every new glass, as she recounts in her posthumously published autobiography, *Annals of My Glass House*: “This habit of running into the dining room with my wet pictures has stained such an immense quality of table linen with nitrate of silver indelible stains that I should have been banished from any less indulgent household” (Weaver 155-156).
Julia Margaret's debut showing came just four months after what she called her “first success” (Howard 8), indicating her confidence in her own art. Though poorly received due to her unconventional style, she was undaunted and continued to show her work at numerous exhibitions, eventually winning over the photographic community and receiving numerous accolades and awards both in Britain and abroad. Her soft-focus, large-head, creatively-lit style gained popularity with the public first, followed by the larger artistic community. She was a prolific photographer, producing over 500 photographs within two years and four months of receiving her first camera, and an estimated total of 3000 to 4000 prints in her entire photographic career. This provided her with ample photographs to gift her friends and associates and to exhibit publicly; her first solo exhibition took place in 1865, followed by another in 1866. In 1874, Tennyson asked her to illustrate his “Idylls of the King”, which was Julia Margaret’s last major photographic project, spanning nine months from September to May.

The following year, the Camerons moved from their home in Freshwater to Ceylon in order to manage the coffee, later tea, plantation. Julia Margaret found little artistic inspiration in India, capturing relatively few photographs of local villagers while she was there. She returned to England only briefly for a month-long visit in 1878. The following January, she was taken ill and bedridden for several weeks. Julia Margaret Cameron passed on the 26th of January, 1879, in Kalutara, Ceylon. Her last word, as she gazed through her window at the night sky, was “beautiful” (Howard 10).
APPENDIX B

Beatrice Cenci and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination

Patricide, incest, justice and courage—Beatrice Cenci’s tragic and scandalous story is one that captures the public imagination even hundreds of years after its occurrence. Even in her lifetime, Beatrice Cenci was a figure that attracted the public eye. As the beautiful daughter of Francesco Cenci, one of the wealthiest and most influential aristocrats of 16th century Rome, Beatrice immediately won public admiration due to not only her remarkable beauty, but her noble bearing and goodness of spirit. During her trial for patricide, the atrocity of the abuses committed against her by her father only further aroused public sympathy. She was admired for courage and conviction, refusing to plead guilty even when she was subjected to numerous tortures, including the near-dislocation of her shoulders. Despite public opinion, Beatrice was condemned to death by the pope, and large-scale public mourning occurred after her execution. People were crushed under the throng that rushed to mourn over her decapitated body, and flowers were piled in towering heaps on the streets of Rome as Beatrice was borne to her final resting place. In both life and death, Beatrice was remarkably compelling.

The provenance of the portrait that revived interest in Beatrice is shrouded in mystery. Its exact age, the artist, and even the subject have been widely debated. The identification of the artist as Guido Reni comes from a copy of the original which attributes it to Reni. However, as this is the sole piece of evidence on which the identification rests, this assertion has frequently been challenged. In fact, it is possible that the portrait does not depict Beatrice at all—the young woman in the picture is more likely an unnamed sibyl. Nevertheless, the portrait inspired numerous reproductions, which helped maintain the popularity of Beatrice’s story.
Percy Shelley first encountered Beatrice through this portrait, which entranced him as soon as he saw it in late April 1819. He wrote about Beatrice extensively in his journal, seeing her innate purity and grace manifested through her physical beauty: “There is a fixed and pale composure upon her features...The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched; the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed...Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness swell together without destroying one another” (qtd. in Jack 49-50).

Public opinion of Shelley was dwindling at the time, and he may have perhaps identified with the wrongly condemned young woman. Shortly afterwards, on May 11, 1819, he visited the Cenci Palace, and was moved by the ruins of Beatrice’s once-grand dwellings. As he expressed in his journal, he felt that the tragedy of Beatrice’s story transcended time and place, and became fixated on it. Keeping a small copy of the portrait on his table in his room at Via Sestina, Shelley wrote the poetic drama “The Cenci” through the spring and summer of 1819, which was subsequently published with the Reni portrait serving as the frontispiece.

In Shelley’s drama, Francesco Cenci is portrayed as entirely morally bankrupt, relentlessly seeking complete control in order to satisfy his desires. Beatrice, on the other hand, is a strong character reluctantly driven to fighting evil with evil. She transforms from a pitiable, meek victim to a resolute conspirator committed to justice. At the conclusion of the play, which ends just before Beatrice is led to her execution, she is a tragic victim resigned to her fate, but unshakably convicted in her morals, considering murder an act that ultimately did good. “The Cenci” is an examination of violence, hypocrisy and evil in human name. As no one is there to teach Beatrice about love and peace, “the absolute control of mind and body of the religiously hypocritical society in which she finds herself successfully corrupts her” (Jack 85).
Unfortunately, much to Shelley’s shock and dismay, the play was very poorly received by critics and theatre companies, and would not be performed until long after his death.

Percy Shelley was not the only nineteenth century author who found inspiration in Beatrice. Herman Melville was also moved by the “Reni” portrait, owning a copy himself and placing it in a critical role in his last novel, *Pierre*. He once described it as “the sweetest, most touching, but most awful of all feminine heads” (qtd. in Wolf 59) At the climax of his novel, a reproduction of the portrait unexpectedly appears, casting light on the themes of incest, guilt and violence that run through her story and are paralleled in that of the protagonist. He, like Shelley, greatly misjudged the reception of his work after the success of *Moby Dick*, and *Pierre* was a failure. Henri Marie Beyle, known as Stendhal, also wrote about Beatrice’s portrait and later anonymously published a story entitled “Les Cenci” based on a manuscript dated September 14, 1599. Instead of focusing on Beatrice as other authors had done, he instead chose to focus on Francesco’s attempts to corrupt Beatrice in both body and soul. However, his version—only thinly veiling the author’s fascination with sadism and transgression—was not well-received by the public. Far more appealing to a wide public audience was Alexandre Dumas’ account, which was included in a collection of stories called *Celebrated Crimes* published in 1839.

Artistic interest in Beatrice exploded thirty years after Shelley’s death, when a group of British and American artists and thinkers in Florence both encountered and produced their own versions of Beatrice. This eclectic group included writer Walker Savage Landor, the Brownings, the Trollopes, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Hosmer. All of them had seen the portrait, and many appropriated her image into their own work. Landor, for example, created a series of tableaux based on Beatrice’s story entitled *Five Scenes* which skirted over her incestuous abuse.
Robert Browning’s poem, “The Ring and the Book” appears to be indirectly inspired by Beatrice, as it shares a similar narrative of condemnation. In addition, the protagonist of The Marble Faun, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s last major work, is compared to Beatrice. Charles Dickens, in his Pictures from Italy, devotes a whole page to describing Beatrice’s portrait, and later visited the palace on the same trip. To Dickens, it was “a picture almost impossible to be forgotten” (qtd. in Wolf 59). Victorian contemporaries of Dickens were attracted to Beatrice’s story because it allowed them to safely explore the domain of the private and intimate and discuss power, authority and justice.

Harriet Hosmer, the American sculptor, also resurrected Beatrice though her art. A letter written to her patron after her completion of the sculpture in 1857 indicates that she was not nearly as invested in Beatrice’s success as Shelley and Melville were: “I hope...that the critics will deal leniently with her. As mothers say, Beatrice has her good points and she has her faults” (qtd. in Jack 155). Despite Hosmer’s apprehensions, her Beatrice was very well-received, and the artist even more so, as a result. Hosmer’s skillful hand had created a figure that profoundly touched the hearts of those who saw her; contemporaries noted how the cold stone seemed to breathe with life and emotion as they looked at it. A frequent sculptor of women victimized by sexual predators, Hosmer depicted Beatrice as a tragic victim contemplating her impending execution. She lies silently on her narrow prison bed, examining a rosary spread across her fingers. Exuding youth and innocence, Beatrice hardly seems capable of conspiring to kill.

It is unclear which of these representations of Beatrice compelled Julia Margaret Cameron to produce at least nine photographs with the young Italian noblewoman as the subject. Visual similarity, as well as awareness of Cameron’s extensive influence by Italian Old Masters,
prompts us to presume that she was directly inspired by the portrait attributed to Reni. However, the emotional power of Hosmer’s Beatrice is undeniable, and Cameron would likely have seen it during its exhibition in London at the same gallery in which a miniature of her daughter was also being shown. Whatever the influence, Cameron’s fascination with Beatrice put into public consciousness a whole new genre of artistic appropriation of the figure. Beatrice was both tragic and inspiring, as she took an active stand against her abuse and eventually accepted responsibility for the murder. According to Wolf, this “made her both dangerous and noble, an alluring combination of traits with which to tell a moral tale” (Wolf 60). To Victorians, Beatrice’s story allowed for contemplation of moral questions detached from the restrained reality of Victorian society and within the protected realm of art, allowing Beatrice herself to survive for centuries.
APPENDIX C

The Cenci in Art: Visual Contexts for Cameron’s *Beatrice*

APPENDIX D

The Rebellious Photographic Aesthetic of Julia Margaret Cameron

When we examine in a modern context examples of Julia Margaret Cameron’s work, such as *Beatrice*, we are struck by the modernity of her style. Unlike most Victorian photography, many of Cameron’s pieces would not be out of place in modern photographic art. But Cameron was from the start of her artistic ventures a highly unconventional photographer. Beginning her photographic career at the age of forty-eight, Cameron was hardly a young woman by Victorian standards, nor was she particularly well-educated in conventional photographic techniques. However, armed with numerous photographic instruments and an unshakable confidence, Cameron boldly launched herself into this newly discovered artistic outlet, ignoring accepted practices and forging a unique aesthetic that left an indelible impression on the history of Victorian portraiture.

Cameron’s intent was clear from the start: “I longed to arrest all beauty that came before me” (Weaver 155). Her technique was haphazard and unspecific, as indicated when she recalls how “when focusing and coming to something which to [her] eye, was very beautiful, [she] stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus which all other photographers insist upon” (155). Eschewing technical perfection, complete focus and evenly-lit frames, Cameron preferred to capture primarily beauty through her blurred and side-lit images, partially obscuring certain facets of her subject while brilliantly illuminating others, both literally and metaphorically. The pursuit of beauty, a key facet of the Cameron aesthetic, may have developed as a result of the influence of her husband. Charles Hay Cameron’s philosophies on beauty and art are outlined in a piece entitled “An Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful”. To
Charles, works of art are “effects of human feelings” (C. Cameron 14); the purpose of art is to not only translate the emotions of the subject, but also to provoke awe of the artistic genius of the creator. Therefore, he refuses to consider realistic imitation, or trompe d’oeil, true art because the focus of the observer is brought solely to the skill of the artist rather than the feelings associated with the piece. When examined in the context of his wife’s photographic aesthetic, one can easily recognize in this assertion the roots of Cameron’s tendency to obscure detail. Her style focuses on the ideal—instead of seeing everything in full, sharp detail, she sought out beauty alone, hoping to elicit strong emotions from her audience.

When observing one of Cameron’s loose-haired, sensual and beautiful subjects, the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood immediately come to mind. This is not an unreasonable association to make—though the Brotherhood was formed years prior to Cameron’s introduction to photography, her ultimate pursuit of beauty infused her work with a Pre-Raphaelite spirit. Though Cameron does not draw attention to the minute details of her image as painters in the Brotherhood took pains to do, her fixation on female beauty suggests that the notion of the Pre-Raphaelite Goddess is the primary focus of her work featuring female models. Cox and Ford agree, saying that Cameron’s “target when photographing women was Beauty, a quest pursued in the Victorian world with almost religious fervor” (Cox & Ford 175). The members of the Brotherhood certainly had a tendency to turn their subject into an exalted figure of adoration, obscuring any notions of humanity or “ugly” realism. Bartram paints a vivid picture of the painters as “falling over each other to prostrate themselves...[they] could barely focus on their idols. Intelligence and talent lay hidden” (Bartram 138). He accuses Cameron of reducing her female models to a flat character and to their physical appearance, as “the women droop. There is little sense of a rounded personality” (141). The notion of the “drooping female” as beautiful
echoes a statement found in Charles Hay Cameron’s essay: “Every thing...which droops...has a sorrowful and beautiful expression. Hence it is, that the painters when they would fill the mind with images of grief, not only dispose the heads and limbs of their figures as their grief would dispose them, but take care that the hair and the drapery shall also droop” (C. Cameron 29). Therefore, can we assume that Cameron’s models are nothing more than objectified Pre-Raphaelite goddesses?

While Cameron’s male portraits, the “great heads” in particular, were inspired by her “reverence for male intellect” (Wolf 24), her portraits of females allowed her the greatest range of creative expression. They probe human nature and associate women with complex emotions of melancholy, desire, and defiance. Cameron offers to the Victorian viewer many models of the feminine. Her subjects range from mythological figures and Roman goddesses to historical figures and Madonnas. She aims to portray the struggle and the strength inherent in female figures, as her models “do not smile. Their poses embody sorrow, resignation, composure, solemnity, and love, determined love, love which will have a hard time of it” (Rose 17). Though Cameron infrequently photographed the Victorian woman in the domestic genre, far more common are her enigmatic, sensual, and emotive heroines. Hair takes a major role in conveying this sensuality. To MacKay, “female hair...takes on a life or personality of its own in the service of conveying a transpersonal tension. Hair in the panoply of Cameron’s portraits is both weightless and heavy, highlighted and dark, free and bound, ordered and chaotic” (MacKay 31). Female hair, as a symbol of female sexuality, is often wild and unbound in Cameron’s pieces, suggesting an unmitigated female sexual power. Her subjects, though strikingly beautiful, are certainly not “drooping” or submissive. Howard agrees, saying that Cameron’s portraits of women “illustrate their independence, strength and sensuousness...It is difficult to see any signs
of submission of portraits of Julia Jackson, Alice Liddell, Mary Hillier and May Prinsep who face the camera with a challenging and knowing eye” (Howard 11). To the Victorian viewer, this direct and forceful confrontation by a female presence would certainly have been jarring.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the first years of her career, Cameron was widely criticized by her contemporaries. At her debut showing in May of 1864, only four months after her “first success”, The Photographic News said that “as one of the special charms of photography consists in the completeness, detail and finish, we can scarcely commend work in which the aim appears to have been to avoid these qualities” (qtd. in Gernsheim 62). Clearly, Cameron’s unique style did not easily win her allies in the greater photographic community. The Photographic Journal was even more sharply critical of her work when she displayed it in the annual exhibition of the Photographic Society of Scotland: “In these pictures all that is good in photography has been neglected, and the shortcomings of the art are prominently exhibited...we are sorry to have to speak thus severely on the works of a lady, but we feel compelled to do so in the interests of the art” (qtd. in Gernsheim 62). Cameron was unruffled by their criticism, saying in a letter dated 1864 to her mentor, Sir John Herschel: “What is focus and who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus - My aspirations are to ennoble photography and to secure [it] for...[the] uses of High Art by combining the real and ideal and sacrificing nothing of truth by all possible devotion to poetry & beauty” (J.M. Cameron). The issue of hard detail vs. soft focus led to conflict between Cameron and fellow photographer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who called some of her photographs “merely hideous” (qtd. in Weaver 138). Despite being accused of carelessness and lack of technical mastery, Cameron carried on in her distinctive style, determinedly submitting her work to international photography competitions and exhibitions.
By 1868, when Cameron had her first major individual exhibition, the photographic press parroted the same criticisms as always, but the wider media was enthralled by her aesthetic. The Standard notes that "the portraits are...remarkable for force and tenderness of expression and a classical effectiveness never attained in photographs before" (qtd. in Gernsheim 65), while The Court Circular recognizes in her the vestiges of the Italian Old Masters: "Raffaelle, [and] Correggio... have been the painters of children par excellence; and what they did with the brush Mrs. Cameron has done with the camera" (qtd. in Gernsheim 65). The Art-Journal also saw in Cameron’s work the influence of these exalted painters in her use of light and shadow, saying that "the visitor is occasionally reminded of Caravaggio, Tintoretto, Giorgione, Velasquez, and others of the princes of their Art" ("Minor Topics of the Month" 58). The Morning Post goes as far as to say that "Mrs. Cameron’s photographs...are unquestionably to be ranked among the very best of her class" (qtd. in Gernsheim 66). Though some critics remained, it was clear that Julia Margaret Cameron could no longer be belittled—she was now a formidable artistic force who had, despite all opposition, defended her unique aesthetic.

Beauty remains as a primary focus in Cameron’s work, but it does not define her female subjects—they epitomize strength, defiance, and independence. Drawing influence from Pre-Raphaelite notions of beauty and Italian Renaissance uses of light and shadow, along with subjects rooted in mythology, history and literature, Cameron created a distinctive style that inspired modern photographic habits. Gone are the glaringly-lit, perfectly-focused images of Victorian photography today. Cameron’s use of uneven focus and creatively lit space is echoed by 21st century photography, demonstrating why her aesthetic resonates so strongly with a modern audience. To adequately describe Cameron’s art, we may turn the words of Cameron herself, as she articulated in her 1875 poem, “On a Portrait”: “Genius and love have each
fulfilled their part, / And both unite with force and equal grace, / Whilst all that we love best in
classic art / Is stamped for ever on the immortal face” (J.M. Cameron, 21-24). Indeed, genius and
love are united in Cameron’s work, resurrecting for a modern audience not only the long-dead
models, but a breathless admiration for the photographic craft.
APPENDIX E

Picturing Beatrice: Julia Margaret Cameron’s Beatrice Portraits

These two photographs come from the March 23, 1866 sitting Cameron did with May Prinsep as Beatrice Cenci. The subject of this work also comes from this sitting, and all photographs from the sitting are inscribed with the title Beatrice.


These photographs come from Cameron’s second sitting featuring Beatrice Cenci, this time with 10-year-old Kate Keown playing the role of Beatrice. This sitting occurred in May of 1868, and both photographs are copyrighted June 2, 1868. The composition of these images strongly recalls Cameron’s earlier sitting with May Prinsep as well as the Reni portrait.


These photographs come from Cameron’s final sitting with May Prinsep as Beatrice, which occurred in October of 1870. Though two more prints were made at this sitting, they are not reproduced here. One is a mirror image of image (E), according to Cox and Ford, while the whereabouts of the fourth image are unknown.


WORKS CONSULTED


<http://archive.org/details/twoessaysonsubli00came>


“Letter from G.F. Watts to Julia Margaret Cameron, undated, assessing her recent photographs.” National Portrait Gallery. 7 March 2013.

“Letter from Julia Margaret Cameron to Sir John Herschel, dated 31 December 1864, discussing her aspirations as a photographer” National Portrait Gallery. 7 March 2013.


<http://muse.jhu.edu.libproxy.uregina.ca:2048/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v029/29.2vallone.html>

