

Ludicrous or lucid? Medieval costumes and royal politics in mid-nineteenth century Britain

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Abstract: This paper explores the motivation and impact of the use of medieval imagery on the notion of nineteenth century queenship by examination of Sir Edward Landseer's painting, the 1842 *Bal Costumé portrait*, and a 1867 group statue '*The Parting*,' by William Theed. The painting presents Victoria and Albert in formal thirteenth-century costume, the memorial statue portrays the couple dressed in ninth-century Anglo-Saxon clothing. This paper explains how what may initially appear to be ludicrous anachronistic representations of the royal couple can be explained as a lucid attempt to manipulation the symbolic image of Victoria as a wife, mother and head of state. This paper also explores how the use of chivalric medieval iconography, particularly of a Germanic nature, bolstered the position of Prince Albert as consort and husband.

The two artefacts discussed here are Sir Edward Landseer's (1802-73) *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert*, 1842, oil on canvas, known as the *Bal Costumé portrait*, which presents the royal couple in formal thirteen-century court dress and, *The Parting*, 1867, in marble by William Theed (1804-91), which shows Victoria and Albert in ninth-century Anglo-Saxon clothing.

This paper explores the use of what, at first glance, might appear to be anachronistic and ludicrous medieval imagery on the Victorian concept of queenship. It highlights how Victoria and her advisors used medieval motifs to address contemporary concerns in a manner that helped mould public perceptions of the monarchy, and in particular reframe Albert's role and relationship to his wife, and confirm Victoria's triple role as head of state, wife and mother.

The medieval revival of the early to mid-nineteenth century led by Romantic Medievalists such as Scott and Pugin and then Ruskin and Morris, heavily influenced public taste in Britain for the greater part of the century. Much of its art and literature reflected a sense of loss for a pre-industrial society with a coherent system of beliefs and became a retrospective and reactionary search for solace, inspiration and ideals.¹ Taking the two artefacts as case studies, it will be argued that the traditional interpretations of the attractions of medievalism can be recast in a different, though complementary light, whereby the medieval past was used not to present a critique of contemporary society or to challenge existing structures of power, but contrarily to bolster, enhance and justify existing structures as part of the long historical tradition of the British Isles. It is this desire to revive the remembrance of the splendour of the past and the wish not to let die some of the nobler traditions of past centuries that the two case studies will examine in more detail.

¹ See Alice Chandler, *A dream of order – the medieval ideal in nineteenth-century English literature*, (London: Routledge and Paul, 1971), Introduction and Chapter 1.



Figure 1: Sir Edwin Henry Landseer, *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert*, 1842 (Supplied by Royal Collection Trust / © HM Queen Elizabeth II 2012)

The painting *Queen Victoria and Prince Albert* (Figure 1) presents a famous image of the fancy-dress costume ball held at Buckingham Palace on May 12, 1842.² The painting is a relatively modest 143cm tall and 111.6 cm wide and was commissioned by Victoria for a fee of £420.³ It is currently located at the Royal Collection at Windsor, though was originally displayed in the ball-room at Buckingham Palace where the ball was held. It is, therefore, an example of public art of sorts, albeit for a rarefied strata of society who were able to view it from one of the public rooms inside the Royal Palace. Landseer was one of Victoria and Albert's favoured court artists and they offered him substantial patronage.⁴

The painting depicts the 1842 ball which combined lavish entertainment with sumptuous historical costume, themed around a staged meeting between the courts of Anne of Brittany and Edward III. The ball was held ostensibly in aid of the ailing Spitalfields silk industry. Landseer has painted Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in the Throne Room standing beneath a specially designed Gothic canopy decorated with purple velvet hangings. Two chairs of state are visible behind the figures and above their heads on the cloth of honour is emblazoned the coat-of-arms of Edward III, combining French and English quarterings. It was from this alcove that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert greeted over 2,000 guests. Members of the Royal Household were expected to appear in costumes dating in style from the reign of Edward III, although guests, whilst encouraged to wear complementary costumes could dress as they would for any formal ball.

² In addition to the 1842 ball two further fancy-dress celebrations were held at Buckingham Palace by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, each in a different style. The second ball, on 6 June 1845, was in early Georgian dress and the third, on 13 June 1851, in the style of the Restoration.

³ Approximately £34,000 in 2012 purchasing power equivalence.

⁴ Barry St-John Neville provides a quote from the Queen's journals where Victoria highlighted her passion for collecting Landseer's work: 'I possess 39 oil paintings of his [Landseer], 16 chalk drawings, two frescos and many sketches'. St-John Neville, *Life at the court of Queen Victoria, 1861-1901*, (Exeter: Webb & Bower, 1984), p. 89.

The Queen's costume was designed under the supervision of a leading expert on historical dress, dramatist and herald in the College of Arms, James Planché's influential *History of British Costume*, (1834), and was inspired by medieval examples recorded in sculptures and manuscript illuminations.⁵ The design of Prince Albert's costume owed much to the funeral effigy of Edward III in Westminster Abbey. The Queen is depicted wearing a skirt of velvet, a surcoat of blue and gold brocade, with flowers of woven silver and brilliants over a gold background that was woven at Spitalfields. Her hair is shown folded forward in a style described as *a la Clovis* and surmounted by a gold crown. The Prince wears a velvet cloak over his surcoat both studded with precious stones and royal insignia. He also wears a crown and jewelled state sword. The distinctive pointed shoes and high crowns worn by the royal couple were similarly characteristic of the fourteenth century. Victoria and Albert stand in front of two elaborate Gothic chairs beneath a canopy which bears the Plantagenet arms emblazoned in silver. Two page boys attend the queen and are shown smoothing out her robes. The ball was part of a long royal tradition of masques as noted by *The Illustrated London News* who commented that 'Masques have been in all ages the recreation of Courts. The name brings with it reminiscences of romance, history, and poetry'.⁶ The historical period chosen as the motif of the ball is significant in that it identifies Victoria and Albert with the great age of English chivalry. Remarkably, although Landseer took great care to represent the occasion as accurately as possible this painting is not itself an allegory but an accurate depiction of a real event staged for allegorical purposes.⁷

Like the earlier Eglinton Tournament,⁸ the ball was one of the more ostentatious expressions of the medieval revival and whilst the royal couple loved dressing up and playacting they were also inspired by the patriotism and paternalism of medieval monarchy.⁹ The painting was completed in August 1846 when it went on public display in the ballroom at Buckingham Palace.¹⁰ The painting's commissioning represents a remarkable about-turn by Victoria who had noted in her diary in September 1839, about the 'folly' of the Eglinton pageant.¹¹ Yet less than three years later the Queen gave a medieval themed ball at Buckingham Palace. This change was probably due to the arrival in her life of Albert whom she married in February 1840.

The Prince had been bought up in an atmosphere of German Romanticism and took the concept of chivalry very seriously and firmly believed in the application of the code of

⁵A particularly significant source was the costumes worn on tomb effigies of Philippa of Hainault and Blanche de la Tour in Westminster Abbey.

⁶*The Illustrated London News*, 14 May, 1842, p. 7.

⁷Despite Landseer's efforts to ensure historical accuracy an acidic comment from the Royal Collection's online catalogue notes that 'Queen Victoria's silhouette, created through tightly laced stays and multiple petticoats, betrays the fashions of her own era. Equally anachronistically, Prince Albert is shown wearing the jewelled Sword of Offering made by Rundells for George IV's coronation in 1821.' <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404540/queen-victoria-and-prince-albert-at-the-bal-costume-of-12-may-1842>.

⁸A pageant staged at Eglinton Park, Ayrshire, in August 1839 which included a lavish re-enactment of medieval games and ceremonies. Attended by over 100,000 spectators over a three day programme it involved 150 knights and their retinues engaging in jousting, tilting, banqueting and finishing with a medieval costume ball.

⁹Queen Victoria mentions the picture in her journal in June 1842 where she notes that she sat for Landseer 'for the picture of us in our costumes, which is becoming quite beautiful'.

¹⁰It is interesting to note that the cost and extravagance of the ball was subject to some subtle criticism in the parts of the press who saw it as inappropriately lavish at a time of widespread economic hardship. The comments of the *Illustrated London News* reported read as more of an indictment than a recommendation, when he writes: '[...] never did sovereign and Prime Minister coincide in their measures more happily [...] the latter taxes us to relieve the commonality; our gracious and lovely sovereign [...] amercies her nobles through their pleasures, and the gay magnates spend over £100,000 to revive languishing trade! This is the healthful ingredient which lies at the bottom of the overflowing cup of pleasure. This is one of the wholesome conditions by which affluence and rank should preserve their distinction amongst us'. Source, *Illustrated London News*, 14. May, 1842, p.8.

¹¹Mark Girouard, *The return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 112.

chivalry to nineteenth century gentleman.¹² It was Albert's influence that led to so much time and effort being spent not only on the ball itself but also in capturing the moment in the formal portrait. While the notion of chivalry in the Victorian age was a far cry from the concept as had existed in the Middle Ages, of a noble lady being honoured and served above all others by the ideal knight, but it admirably served Victoria's propaganda purposes. Victoria's awareness of the political effect of this link to chivalry is demonstrated by her meticulous preparations for the *Bal Costumé* event itself and also by her very hands-on involvement in the design and development of the portrait.¹³ By role playing the monarch (Edward III) and consort (Queen Philippa) - in whose reign the sun of English chivalry reached its meridian - Victoria was suggesting that her reign would be another golden age reminiscent of her forbear Elizabeth I.¹⁴ Edward was the epitome of chivalry, founder of the Order of the Garter, Philippa represented queenly strength and justice, famously begging her husband for mercy for the burghers of Calais, as payment for safeguarding the kingdom against the Scots in his absence. This representation of Albert as the epitome of an English chivalric knight was to continue throughout his life and to be emphasised even more so after his death.¹⁵

It is enlightening to study not only the historical accuracy of the representation but the composition of the portrait and the associated image that this has been designed to project. The queen takes centre stage with three people in attendance to her – the white ermine of her cloak drawing the eye to her importance and dominance. Albert is positioned deferentially lower with his foot a step below hers, his knee bent, his hand chivalrously supporting hers, and his figure turning toward her. He is shown taller by almost a head, and peculiarly his face is much larger than hers, too much to be accounted for by perspective alone, since their feet are nearly side by side. By such subtle placing the portrait reverses the relationship of consort and queen and the prince no longer seems subservient to Victoria. One commentator has even gone so far as to claim that 'Albert holds his lady's hand, honouring yet ruling her'.¹⁶ This in part reflects the cultural paradox that Victoria faced as representative of both queen and also as a mother and wife. Margaret Homans neatly summarises this dilemma when she states that Victoria resembled England's other paradigm of queenly greatness, Elizabeth I, 'in finding a solution to the anomaly of female rule in being understood as the nation's wife'.¹⁷ The use of medieval imagery and the composition of the portrait both linked Victoria and Albert to a grand historical narrative and tradition but also found a way to assert that her monarchy would allay fears of female rule. It also served to present Albert in a highly positive and traditional manner which balanced his subservient royal status with the traditional expectations that the husband would dominate.

Victoria was, therefore, a highly visible public symbol of national identity and values as well as representing the ideal role of wife and mother. This caused some tension in presenting the couple, because as queen, Victoria was ranked higher than her husband and

¹²ibid, p. 115.

¹³Richard Ormond notes that the 'royal couple certainly took more than proprietorial interest in Landseer's pictures of themselves, especially works such as the *Bal Costumé*, and he often felt hemmed in by their demands.' See, R. Ormond, *Sir Edwin Landseer*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 149

¹⁴The chivalric imagery and underlying associations were not lost on contemporary commentators and *The Times* went as far as to describe the fancy dress ball as 'a scene of such brilliancy and magnificence that since the days of Charles II [...] there has been nothing at all comparable to it in all the entertainments given at the British Court. [...] it is a day long past since the chivalry of England have appeared in what might not inaptly be termed the costume of their race'. Source, *The Times*, 14 May 1842, col 3, p. 6 . 3.

¹⁵Most famously in a miniature for Victoria's birthday in 1844 and in his armoured cenotaph effigy in the Prince Albert Memorial Chapel, Windsor commissioned by the Queen in 1864.

¹⁶Homans, *Royal representations : Queen Victoria and British culture, 1837-1876*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 22.

¹⁷ ibid p. 4.

there was a need to rebalance the public image so that Albert's status as husband, rather than consort, could be better compared to the middle class expectations of what a functioning marriage epitomized. Indeed, the marble sculpture (Figure 2) to be explored uses the images and dress of the early medieval period in order to portray Victoria in the role of subservient and adoring wife.



Figure 2: *The Parting* plaster copy of marble original by William Theed (image by the author).

On 20th May 1867 at Windsor Castle Victoria unveiled William Theed's memorial statue of herself and Albert in Anglo-Saxon costume: a statue that portrays the Queen's devotion and reverence toward the departed Prince. The sculpture was apparently prompted by the desire of Victoria, the Crown Princess of Prussia, and the Queen's eldest daughter, to symbolise the historic ties between the German and English people from Anglo-Saxon times to the marriage of the Royal couple.

The commissioning of the statue¹⁸ was part of the royal family's transformation of private grief into a public national project to commemorate the Queen's lost husband.¹⁹ Memorials to Albert were erected in over forty five towns along with the construction not

¹⁸ Like Landseer, institutional patronage played an important part in the sculptor's livelihood. Theed benefited from the patronage not only of the Royal Family but of the Commissioners, under the chairmanship of Prince Albert, responsible for the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament during the 1850s. See, Benedict Read *Victorian Sculpture*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 120.

¹⁹ It was not unusual for statues of the Royal family to be shown in historical costume. For example Emil Wolff produced a sculpture of Prince Albert in 1844 for Osborne House where he was dressed in Roman attire. John Gibson showed Victoria (also at Osborne) in 1849 in a toga as a Roman in classical costume. Representations of Victoria and Albert in early medieval dress are limited to the creation by Theed.

only of the Royal Albert Hall but the nearby Albert Memorial as the centre pieces in the commemoration.²⁰

Known officially as *The Parting* the life size sculpture (Figure 2) was unveiled for public display at Windsor but soon moved to its current position inside the main entrance to the Frogmore Mausoleum where both Albert, and 41 years later, Victoria were entombed. Frogmore is rarely open to visitors and so the piece, in contrast to the *Bal Costumé portrait*, can be regarded as a private celebration of the couple's relationship²¹. Interestingly, the statue sits very incongruously within the Italianate Romanesque setting of the Frogmore Mausoleum. The building is in the form of a Greek cross with the walls lined with granite and Portland stone and the roof covered with Australian copper. The interior decoration is in the style of Albert's favourite painter, the Renaissance painter Raphael, and is an example of Victoriana at its most opulent.²² All-in-all a very peculiar setting in which to find a pair of Anglo-Saxon lovers.²³



Figure 3. Detail of *The Parting* (image by the author)

²⁰ So great was the drive to memorialize the Prince that Charles Dickens told a friend that he sought an 'inaccessible cave' to escape from the plethora of commemorations. Source, Charles Dickens to John Leech, quoted in Darby & Smith, 1983, p.102.

²¹ There is no doubt about the importance that Victoria placed on the composition and contents of the mausoleum. In her journals Victoria often referred to the numerous trips she made to Frogmore and she frequently took picnics there. Her Journal entry for 18th December, 1862, states 'Everyone entered [the Mausoleum], each carrying a wreath.... We were all overcome when we knelt round the beloved tomb.... We gazed on the great beauty and peace of the beautiful statue. What a comfort it will be to have that near me'. Quoted in St-John Neville, *Life at the court of Queen Victoria, 1861-1901*, (Exeter: Webb & Bower, 1984), p. 55.

²² Description taken from *Frogmore: The House and Gardens and The Royal Mausoleum*, the official guide, (London: Royal Collection, 1997), p. 40-7.

²³ Note the photographs shown here (Figures 2 and 3) are of the plaster copy taken from the marble original which is on display at the National Portrait Gallery, London.

The statue shows the couple as high-status Anglo-Saxons on a beach where presumably Albert is about to board a ship to travel overseas (Figure 3). His sword has been dropped on the beach next to a starfish and scallop shell²⁴ and he gestures away from the couple in the direction of his journey. The couple hold hands and have each other's initials woven into the edges of their tunics and each have the other's name engraved on an arm-band. Victoria, wearing a crown to show her regal status, looks adoringly and longingly into his eyes with her right arm draped informally around his left shoulder. Around the plinth of the original in The Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore is inscribed the words 'Allured to brighter worlds, and led the way' taken from Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* (1770). This verse is not present on the copy at The National Portrait Gallery.²⁵

The art historian, Sir Roy Strong has observed that because the Anglo-Saxons were after all German it is perhaps no wonder that Theed should have chosen in 1867 to depict Albert and Victoria in "an astounding tableau that could as easily be relabelled 'Alfred the Great and his Queen' so interchangeable had they become".²⁶

This representation of Victoria was both fuelled and fed from a popular impulse in the mid-nineteenth century to locate the very essence of Englishness in Anglo-Saxon roots.²⁷ Theed has reconceived the royal couple as Anglo-Saxons with Victoria as consort and Albert the king. Theed shows Victoria as the clinging wife rather than stalwart monarch, an image that resonates with other iconic depictions of the royal family as 'embodying the bourgeois ideals of family life'.²⁸ This depiction of the couple contrasts with the far more formal and regal representation shown in the *Bal Costumé portrait* and reflects the fact that the statue was conceived and executed after Albert's death and with the more private setting of the mausoleum in mind. As such perhaps it reflects Victoria's more personal view of the nature of the relationship between herself and her husband than formal protocol would otherwise allow.

This sculpture directly links Victoria and Albert into the main stream popular historiography of England and reflects contemporary beliefs as to why Britain had not been swept up by the wave of mid-century European liberal revolutions. The monarch was seen as a critical bastion against revolution and excessive liberal reform. Theed's statue reflects Victoria's wish to reach back beyond her most obvious royal predecessor, Elizabeth, to establish her claim to be in the great tradition of English monarchy and to create a connection

²⁴ Interestingly the scallop shell was a well-known medieval symbol for a pilgrim so this perhaps indicates that the journey on which Albert is about to depart had quasi-religious significance for Victoria as it marked his journey from life to death. The starfish was a symbol of Christ or Christianity as its five legs were said to echo the five points of the pentangle and protect against evil.

²⁵ The quote in context from 'The Deserted Village', lines 163 – 176, is: 'Thus to relieve the wretched was his pride, | And e'en his failings lean'd to Virtue's side; | But in his duty prompt at every call, | He watch'd and wept, he pray'd and felt, for all, | And, as a bird each fond endearment tries | To tempt its new-fledg'd offspring to the skies, | He tried each art, reprov'd each dull delay, | Allured to brighter worlds, a led the way.'

²⁶ Roy Strong, *Painting the past: British History and the Victorian Painter*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p. 44.

²⁷ Alfred's reign was often seen by nineteenth century historians (for example, Tory historian Sharon Turner's, *The history of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest period to the Norman conquest*, 1828) as an ideal ruler who used his power to impose order on the turbulence of society. Whig historians such as Macaulay also idealised the early Medieval period as a time of great progress with the Saxon freeman as the inspiring force of English history that led via Magna Charta to the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. See, Alice Chandler, *A dream of order – the medieval ideal in nineteenth-century English literature*, (London: Routledge and Paul, 1971), p.88.

²⁸ Roy Strong, *Painting the past: British History and the Victorian Painter*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p. 44. Interestingly an alternative interpretation of the Saxon portrayal might see Victoria the 'victim queen' in need of chivalric defence in the same way as Mary Queen of Scots or Lady Jane Grey were viewed by the Victorians. Artists cast these independent and politically active women as ideal Victorian gentlewomen to suit contemporary perceptions of positive femininity. 'The gender constructions of chivalry, as presented in the revival of medievalism and the gender spheres of dominant ideology, inform nineteenth-century ideas of queenship'. Source, Clare Saunders, *Women writers and nineteenth century medievalism*, (London: Palgrave, 2009). P. 104. However this arrangement was reciprocal, and Victoria was using images of medievalism to support and develop her own position, just as Caroline of Brunswick had incited chivalric support earlier in the century in her struggle for recognition as queen.

between a heroic past and the present. At some deep psychological level the Queen in a number of her art commissions, in addition to the two which are discussed here, was attempting to help society understand the Victorian present through the lens of the past, and thereby better understand the concept of Englishness as rooted firmly in the Royal family and in the continuities and traditions of English history.²⁹

A further reason why Victoria and her advisors used medieval motifs to bolster the monarchy was the position of Prince Albert. Lytton Strachey in his 1921 biography of Queen Victoria identified concerns about the corruption of Englishness presented by the Queen's choice of husband: 'What was immediately and distressingly striking about Albert's face and figure and whole demeanour was his un-English look'.³⁰ Elizabeth Langland claims that contemporaneous anxieties about the royal family's national allegiance find expression in journals like *Punch*, who adopted a xenophobic stance of 'anti-Albertism'.³¹ For Victoria and her advisors this meant that that Albert's image required careful manipulation to make him more acceptable to English society. Victoria was determined to link Albert with English interests and sought to use historical settings to 'reconfigure the Queen and her Consort as Anglo-Saxons and as guarantors of ancient British liberties in the manner of Alfred the Great linking to the joint heritage of the English and German nations'.³²

Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich have argued that whilst Victoria had little political power in decisions about matters of state (though she had influence) her power was largely ideological. Victoria was central to the ideological and cultural signifying systems of her age and Victoria reflected back to her subjects their own values to reassure them about the comprehensibility of their lived reality.³³ The representations of the monarchy with its attendant medieval iconography provided by Victoria was an effective strategy both for handling the public relations problem posed by female rule in a male dominated society and, perhaps, more importantly, for bolstering England's transition to parliamentary democracy, post the 1832 Reform Act, and the embedding of an constitutional monarchy as a key institution.

Accepting the limitations of the evidence, an argument can be sketched, from these two works of art, that, just as the early modern cult of Gloriana manipulated medieval chivalric ideals to augment support for Elizabeth 1, and inspired a surge of Elizabethan medievalist works of art and literature, so Victoria similarly developed her image as central to the whole cultural movement of Victorian Medievalism. By this manipulation of image Victoria strengthened the concept of the monarch as symbolic parent for the nation and used the concept of queenship to project her role as both iconic mother of the nation and head of state of what was then the greatest power on the planet.

By employing medieval images Victoria and her advisors aligned the institutions of the monarch with that of the middle class family. Her family role was that of the perfect wife to her beloved husband, Prince Albert. As queen she might be sovereign, but as wife she was happily subjugated and an exemplary 'everywoman' to and for her subjects and her presentation in images of the ninth and fourteenth century served to lucidly rather than ludicrously reinforce this representation. Romantic Medievalists had employed Medieval

²⁹ Regretfully enquires at the Royal Archives in Windsor indicate that there are no surviving documents relating to the commissioning of Theed's work so the exact nature of the discussions between the sculpture and his surviving subject are lost to us.

³⁰ Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921), p.154.

³¹ Elizabeth Langland, 'Nation and nationality: Queen Victoria in the developing narrative of Englishness', in eds., Homans and Munich, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 15.

³² *ibid*, p. 15.

³³ M. Homans and A. Munich, eds., *Remaking Queen Victoria*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 5.

models as a critique of contemporary society to challenge existing structures of power. Victoria deployed the same iconography and historical linkages contrarily to bolster and justify existing power and authority structures at a time of huge political, economic and social change. It is fascinating that two such different groups used the same historical idiom to refer to the past and to justify very different interests, agendas, aspirations and perspectives on society. Though the desired outcomes were different there was a shared motive for medieval historicism; the disquiet shared by both Romantics and conformists at the dislocation of the social fabric caused by changed economic relationship through industrialisation.

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