

PRE-RAPHAELITE MARTYRDOMS

Ernest Fontana

Discomfort with the traditional Catholic portrayal of saintly martyrdom was particularly strong during the decade preceding the reestablishment of an official Catholic episcopal presence in England in 1850, what the recent Catholic convert Newman¹ referred to as a “Second Spring.” Many of these traditional Catholic artistic representations of martyrdom involve the portrayal of nude martyrs such as the female St. Agatha and the males St. Hippolytus, St. Laurence, and, most famously, St. Sebastian, whose portrayal as a nude male transfixed by arrows was scrupulously avoided by Victorian painters, though he “remained a popular subject among [their] colleagues elsewhere in Europe” (Kaye 281). Classical myths, such as that of Prometheus were preferred as subjects for male nudes by English painters like William Etty (Kaye 278). Nevertheless, Pre-Raphaelite painters did execute portrayals of martyrdom as did the Pre-Raphaelite poets Swinburne and Christina Rossetti. My focus in this article is to demonstrate the revisionary quality of these Pre-Raphaelite projects, which introduce new genres of martyrdom art. The three I shall treat are representations of non-Roman Protestant martyrdom, representations of political and/or economic martyrdom, and representations of martyrdom for the sake of art or aesthetic martyrdoms.

William Holman Hunt’s *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids* (fig. 1) was painted at the height of the controversy over the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England and though not a portrayal of an actual martyrdom, it represents the rescue of a Christian missionary from certain martyrdom as suggested by the capture of a Christian priest by a mob of Druids in the background. Hunt chose this subject to compete for the Royal Academy’s 1849 gold medal contest “which required the illustration of An Act of Mercy” (Staley 11). George Landow analyzes the four scriptural texts inscribed on the frame of the painting, most