

REVISITING JAMES COLLINSON'S REPRESENTATION OF SAINT ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY

Éva Péteri

*Seeing the crucifix and the crown of thorns
Prostrating herself, to the ground she falls.
Taking much to heart the Saviour's pains
Onto the ground her golden crown she lays.*
– István Túri, *Saint Elizabeth of the Arpad Dynasty* (1932)¹

In the midst of the religious controversies of the 1830s and 1840s, the life and character of St. Elizabeth of Hungary attracted much attention. At the time when the Oxford Movement was seen by many as a threat to the basically Protestant nature of the Church of England and when the growing popularity of Catholicism inflamed fierce debates, the legend of the Catholic saint was a delicate issue. It inspired writers of very different attitudes and convictions, like the Catholic Charles Montalembert and the firm Anglican, Charles Kingsley. Montalembert's long account of the life of St. Elizabeth, *The Life of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, Duchess of Thuringia*, was first published in French in 1836, and translated into English as soon as 1839.² Kingsley's verse-play – *The Saint's Tragedy* – was published in 1848 and was intended as a direct counterpoint to Montalembert's approach and presentation. Under the circumstances, depicting St. Elizabeth of Hungary in the late 1840s and early '50s inevitably entailed a suggestion of engagement, whether intentional or not. Emphasizing the extent of the "Pre-Raphaelite Brothers' involvement in contemporary religious and social problems," Alastair Grieve points out that Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais, as well as James Collinson, were working on pictures depicting scenes of the life of St. Elizabeth in the early 1850s (Grieve, "A Notice" 290). But whereas Rossetti's *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary kneeling at a prie-dieu with her Companions Isentrudis and Guta*³ and Millais's *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary washing the feet of Pilgrims* were never executed in oil, Collinson's study was made into a painting that is now in the possession of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and is known as *The*