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Inside the Venusberg: Myth and the Queer Aesthetic Interior 1860-1900

Dr Sally-Anne Huxtable,

Paper Proposal,

University Research Conference

This paper examines some of the ways in which British Aesthetic artists and writers adopted and adapted the medieval myth of Venus and Tannhäuser in the second half of the nineteenth century. It will explore the ways in which the realm of the Venusberg (Venus's subterranean realm) is reconfigured as a specifically Aesthetic interior, an imaginative space through which various cultural and personal concerns can be expressed. In the Aestheticism of the second half of the nineteenth century the myth of Venus and Tannhäuser becomes part of a set of artistic and queer codes which might allude to any number of forbidden passions, acts and ideas for both artists and audiences alike. Not only a cipher for queer sexualities, it also served as a multi-layered set of signs and symbols for other forms of queer anti-establishment discourse such as feminism, the questioning of gender roles, paganism, anti-clericalism and atheism. In particular this paper will focus on Edward Burne-Jones's painting *Laus Veneris* (1873-1875) but will also consider Algernon Swinburne's related and controversial poetic version of the same name (1866) and Aubrey Beardsley's unfinished satirical and pornographic reworking of the myth *Under the Hill or The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (1896).

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