

ORAZIO AND RIZPAH: A BIOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM SOLVED BY CHRISTOPHER MILES

JOHN WORTHEN

In 1979, I was starting to write the notes for the Cambridge edition of *The Lost Girl*, and was soon faced with a problem. The character of Pancrazio Califano in the novel was, it was well known, based on that of the real-life Orazio Cervi, an Italian model who had worked for Hamo Thornycroft, the Scottish painter. Thornycroft's daughter Rosalind had become a good friend of Frieda and D. H. Lawrence; and when Rosalind planned to leave the country when the war ended (she wanted to get away from a messy impending divorce from Godwin Baynes), the idea obviously came up that she should go, with her three children, to live in Italy for a while; and Orazio Cervi had offered her (and her family) accommodation in his house in Picinisco, in central Italy.

Edward Nehls was clever enough to print, in the second volume of his *Composite Biography*, Rosalind Baynes' memoir containing three letters from Orazio to her and her father giving instructions on how to get to his house. The Lawrences however also wanted to go back to Italy; it obviously seemed a good plan for them to go to Picinisco as the advance party, to see what it was like and to report back on how suitable it would be for Rosalind and her children. Orazio had, to be fair, warned Rosalind and her father that the house "is not well furnished"¹, which turned out to be a massive understatement, and he had also given very little idea of just how difficult it was to get to – only that "the foot roads are not very good in the winder [sic] time"².

The Lawrences were anyway determined to get out of England after the war, and the place sounded fascinating. They had met up in Florence after Frieda had visited her mother in Germany, had

travelled down to Rome, and had set out for Picinisco probably on Monday 14 December, getting there in the evening;³ they would leave again on Monday 22nd, unable to stand the conditions and warning Rosalind on no account to go there with her children (the only tub suitable for the children's bath, for example, would be the same tub used for mixing the pigs' swill).

Lawrence did however use his experiences there in the magnificent section of *The Lost Girl* which he wrote the following spring, in which Alvina comes to terms with living in Califano (as Lawrence calls it). And that section also shows that he had had his own long conversations with Orazio Cervi during their week there. One passage tells a story which must be a version of what Orazio told him. In London, back in the 1890s, Orazio had worked as an artists' model, and one of his jobs had been for the famous English painter Lord Frederic Leighton (1830-96). The character Pancrazio tells the story in the novel:

"Leighton—he wasn't Lord Leighton then—he wouldn't have me to sit for him, because my figure was too poor, he didn't like it. He liked fair young men, with plenty of flesh. But once, when he was doing a picture—I don't know if you know it?—It is a crucifixion, with a man on a cross, and—" He described the picture. "No! Well, the model had to be tied hanging on to a wooden cross. And it made you suffer! Ah!" Here the odd, arch, diabolic yellow flare lit up through the stoicism of Pancrazio's eyes. "Because Leighton, he was cruel to his model. He wouldn't let you rest. 'Damn you, you've got to keep still till I've finished with you, you devil,' so he said.—Well, for this man on the cross, he couldn't get a model who would do it for him. They all tried it once, but they would not go again. So they said to him, he must try Califano, because Califano was the only man who would stand it. At last then he sent for me. 'I don't like your damned figure, Califano,' he said to me, 'but nobody will do this if you won't. Now will you do

it?" 'Yes!' I said. 'I will.' So he tied me up on the cross. And he paid me well, so I stood it. Well, he kept me tied up, hanging you know forwards naked on this cross, for four hours. And then it was luncheon. And after luncheon he would tie me again.—Well, I suffered. I suffered so much, that I must lean against the wall to support me to walk home. And in the night I could not sleep, I could cry with the pains in my arms and my ribs, I had no sleep. 'You've said you'd do it, so now you must,' he said to me. 'And I will do it,' I said. And so he tied me up.—This cross, you know, was on a little raised place—I don't know what you call it—"

"A platform," suggested Alvina.

"A platform. Now one day when he came to do something to me, when I was tied up, he slipped back over this platform, and he pulled me, who was tied on the cross, with him. So we all fell down, he with the naked man on top of him, and the heavy cross on top of us both. I could not move, because I was tied. And it was so, with me on top of him, and the heavy cross, that he could not get out. So he had to lie shouting underneath me until someone came to the studio to untie me. No, we were not hurt, because the top of the cross fell so that it did not crush us. 'Now you have had a taste of the cross' I said to him. 'Yes you devil, but I shan't let you off' he said to me."⁴

And Lawrence comments:

It was strange, in the silent winter afternoon, downstairs in the black kitchen, to sit drinking a cup of tea with Pancrazio and hearing these stories of English painters. It was strange to look at the battered figure of Pancrazio, and think how much he had been crucified through the long years in London, for the sake of late Victorian art. It was strangest of all to see through his yellow, often dull, red-rimmed eyes these blithe and well-conditioned painters. Pancrazio looked on them admiringly and contemptuously, as an old, rakish tom-cat might look on such frivolous well-groomed young gentlemen.⁵

*

Back in 1979, it was clearly my job as editor of *The Lost Girl* to identify, to locate and perhaps even to illustrate the painting in which Orazio Cervi had played his part. All I knew about it was that it was a crucifixion; which in turn logically (but unfortunately) led me to conclude that it was a crucifixion scene with Christ and perhaps the two thieves. And I accordingly dug into Leighton's work, and into books about it. Harder then than now, I may say.

But Leighton never seemed to have painted – or at least never seemed to have sold, or exhibited – a crucifixion. It was of course possible (and was indeed my only solution to the problem – assuming that neither Orazio nor Lawrence had made up the story) that he had for some reason not finished such a painting, or was in some way dissatisfied with it. But there the matter rested. My note ran:

There are no extant crucifixions by Leighton, only the record of a sketch he made at the age of 9. 'Rizpah' (exhibited 1893 and now unlocated) shows three crucified male figures, muffled and draped, and tied by legs and arms to wooden crosses; see L. and R. Ormond, *Lord Leighton* (New Haven, 1975), item no. 376. 'Rizpah' may be the picture to which Pancrazio refers, but Frederick Leighton had been Lord Leighton for seven years when he painted it, and Pancrazio says that 'he wasn't Lord Leighton then'. (LG 325:29)

That last detail settled it in my mind that 'Rizpah' was unlikely to have been the painting. But I had still not seen the 'Rizpah' picture which was (as the book I cited told me) "unlocated", and which seemed to me anyway a pretty dubious source. And there matters rested.

*

Enter the resourceful Christopher Miles; a man with a huge interest in Lawrence and also in painting. He took it upon himself to track down Leighton's work. It was now 2007, and resources were available on the internet which made research a good deal easier; but, much more important, Christopher was not constrained by the conviction that he should be looking for a painting of the crucifixion of Christ. And what he found, first, was the breakthrough item; a sketch of three crucified but muffled figures, and a woman, by Leighton, done in 1892. It was called 'Study for "Rizpah" Composition'. Here you will either know your Second Book of Samuel or you won't; I will assume that you won't. Rizpah was a concubine who had two children (Armoni and Mephibosheth) by Saul;⁶ after Saul's death, David handed these two over to the Gibeonites, along with five other grandsons of Saul, to atone for what had been previously done to the Gibeonites:

and they hanged them in the hill before the Lord: and they fell all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest.

And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest, until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night.

And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done.⁷

The subject very much appealed to artists in the nineteenth century, perhaps because it gave them the chance to show an heroic woman in an extremely active role, fighting off – or being prepared to fight off – the birds and beasts of prey attracted to the bodies. There is a considerable number of Rizpah paintings, as a result. There is one by Turner, but – unless you knew what it was about – you wouldn't cotton on to the idea; and you might have trouble seeing what was going on even if you did know what it was about

(Rizpah's sons, having been hung, are apparently laid out on the ground).

Another, a good deal more comprehensible, and a great deal more ludicrous, by Georges Becker (1845-1909), shows 'Rizpah protecting the Bodies of her Sons' (1873). All seven are present, though neatly unsexed; and how she manages to reach up to protect them with her bit of curved stick is *not* clear.

There is a rather disappointing one by Gustav Doré (1832-83), 'Rizpah's kindness towards the Dead' (?1866), but yet another wild and whirling one by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902), born in France, English resident, and responsible for 'Rizpah's kindness towards the Dead', probably dating from the 1880s. The sackcloth has been transformed into a rather nice striped travelling blanket, Rizpah only seems to need a palm frond to keep the birds off, and the sons have been reduced to five.

But there is also the Leighton, which exists in two forms; the sketch ('Study for Rizpah: Composition', c.1892) and the finished painting ('Rizpah', c.1893).⁸ Christopher Miles is certain that Orazio Cervi was the model for the figure on the right hand side, because – especially in the sketch – one can see how thin the body is: "looks like a very thin Pancrazio Califano to me!" he noted to me on a copy of the 'Study' sketch. And that is true. But it seems to me likely that Orazio Cervi probably modelled for all three of the figures, with Leighton drawing him (differently draped) from different angles. The painting itself is even more impressive, but Orazio has put on a bit of weight. It is now to me absolutely clear that this is the painting that Orazio Cervi was talking about, to Lawrence during their extraordinary week in Picinisco; and when he pulled Orazio (complete with cross) down on top of himself, Leighton was probably trying to adjust one of those strange head-mufflings.

So where is the painting now? Christopher has done his best, and tracked it down to the Church of St Peter in Westleigh, North Devon. It was there when the church was added to the list of Listed Buildings in 1965: "Paintings: Christ by Harlow c.1830. 'Rizpah'

by Lord Leighton”. But it’s not there now. According to a more recent note (1999), it has “apparently ... been moved to a more secure location”. And no-one seems to know where.

*

But what about Leighton not being Lord Leighton when he painted it – one of the reasons I doubted if ‘Rizpah’ was correct, back in 1979? Here I have a simple mistake to confess. I was confused between the rank of baronet and the rank of baron. The former is a rank above that of mere knight, but it remains the title of a commoner; a baronet is not permitted to sit in the house of Lords, for example, although a baron is. My favourite literary baronet is Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, whose favourite book is of course the *Baronetage* (I am thinking of *Persuasion*, by Jane Austen). But he is not Lord Walter Elliot; he is not a baron.

In 1878, Frederic Leighton was knighted; in 1886 he was made a baronet. But he was still Sir Frederic Leighton; and thus remained so when painting ‘Rizpah’. He was only created a baron, and raised to the peerage – becoming Lord Leighton of Stretton, in Shropshire – in the New Year’s Honours List of 1896. The patent creating him Lord Leighton was issued on 24 January 1896. Leighton however died the following day, and – as he had no children – his barony expired with him; it apparently holds the record for the shortest existence of a barony in history.

But Orazio – and Lawrence – were right; and I was wrong. Good to set the record straight, even if thirty years late. No-one ever told me about my mistake, which suggests that no peer has ever read the Cambridge *Lost Girl* (or thought it worth ticking me off).

¹ Edward Nehls, *D. H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*. Volume II: 1919-1925 (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1958) 6.

² Nehls 7.

³ Lawrence wrote to a number of friends on Saturday 13 December, from Rome, that he and Frieda would be going on “straight” to Picinisco, “at once” (3L 430-1), and it seems extremely likely that he sent Orazio Cervi a card too, to tell him they would be arriving immediately. Orazio had however warned Rosalind Baynes, about Lawrence’s impending visit, that he would need “at least three days warning so I may be there before him” (Nehls 7). It is therefore unlikely that the Lawrences travelled down on Sunday 14th. DHL wrote to Rosalind Baynes about the place on Tuesday 16th (he would certainly have written to her at once) and also told her about the nearest town, Atina, that “We went yesterday” (3L 432); that was probably on their journey down from Rome, when they would have bought food in Atina.

⁴ LG 325:29—326:24.

⁵ LG 326:34—327:2.

⁶ The Bible, 2 Sam. 3.7, 21.8.

⁷ Ibid., 2 Sam. 21.9-11.

⁸ The sketch, ‘Study for Rizpah: Composition’, c.1892, (<http://www.rbkc.gov.uk/lordleightonsdrawings/ldcollection/drawingrecord.asp?workid=1263>) and the painting ‘Rizpah’, c.1893, (<http://www.rbkc.gov.uk/lordleightonsdrawings/ldcollection/paintingrecord.asp?workid=805>) can be seen by following the respective hyperlinks to the Leighton House Drawings Collection.