The ‘Anxious Dream’: Julia Margaret Cameron’s Gothic Perspective

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The ‘anxious dream’ referred to in the title of this essay is taken from the first stanza of Julia Margaret Cameron’s translation of Gottfried August Bürger’s Leonora in which the eponymous heroine waits for her lover, William, to return from the wars:

Leonora from an anxious dream  
Starts up at break of day:  
‘My William, art thou false or slain?  
Oh! William, why delay?’

Weaver 1984, 146

The first line of the poem, with its allusion to nightmare, anticipates the horrific narrative which will follow and foreshadows Leonora’s own grim fate. Thus, when William fails to return with the other knights, the young woman succumbs to despair and ignores the stoical Christian reasoning offered by her mother,

‘Be calm, my child, forget thy woe,  
And think of God and heaven;  
God, thy Redeemer, hath to thee  
Himself for bridegroom given.’

‘Oh! mother, mother, what is heaven?  
Oh! mother, what is hell?  
To be with William, that’s my heaven;  
Without him, that’s my hell.

‘Come death! come death! I loathe my life;
All hope is in death’s gloom.  
My William’s gone, what’s left on earth?  
Would I were in his tomb!'

(Weaver 1984, 148)

Yet, at sunset, William does return for Leonora and carries her off on his horse to their nuptial bed of ‘Six boards and two short planks ... still, cool, and small’ (Weaver 1984, 149). While the reader immediately recognizes that William is a ghost and that he intends to take Leonora to the grave with him, she remains stubbornly ignorant of her plight, repeatedly inquiring why he persists in referring to ‘the dead’, and only realizing her danger when he is revealed to her in his true form:

Now see! Now see! Where is the night?  
What is this horrid ghastly sight?  
All shivering falls the warrior’s steel,  
A skeleton from head to heel! 

(Weaver, 1984, 151)

As the grotesque figure of death looms over Leonora the horse vanishes into a yawning pit, the earth ‘groans’ and ghosts whirl about the prostrate maiden singing,

‘Endure! endure! though break the heart,  
Yet judge not God’s decree.  
Thy body from thy soul both part,  
Oh! may God pardon thee!’ 

(Weaver, 1984, 151)

This translation is one of the few extant literary works by Cameron, who is after all best-known for her photography, but it clearly attests to her interest in gothic traditions and demonstrates her familiarity with the common currency of that genre – nightmares (literal and figurative), ghosts, horror, tombs, perverse love, sex and death.

Cameron’s translation of the Bürger poem was published as a handsome volume lavishly illustrated by Danial Maclise; Leonora languishes in various poses throughout the text, while evil demons, snake-like vines and grinning skulls shift and leer about her passive form. Today readers of the poem are often surprised to discover that Julia Cameron did not provide the illustrations herself, but it is important to remember that the