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Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Romance of Loss

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

by

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Romance of Loss

In the great flowering of the arts which characterized nineteenth century England, Dante Gabriel Rossetti emerges as one of a select few who distinguished themselves in both literary and visual artistic expression. Nowhere is the confluence of these arts more evident than in Rossetti's pairings of poems and pictures. Rossetti began with early artistic pieces to accompany his readings and translations of Dante Alighieri, but his interest eventually flowered into the creation of paired paintings to accompany his own poetry and poems that explicate his art. A single thread binds many of these works: the artist's pursuit of Beauty, perceptible only through the lens of human experience. Consequently, Rossetti's works are often intensely personal even as they explore the universal. Most particularly, he explores the extent to which physical distance and separation may clarify one's grasp of spiritual truth.

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti was born into a family immersed in intellectual pursuits. His father, Gabriele, a political refugee from Italy, was a professor of Italian at King's College, London, who specialized in the works of Dante. Though the child Rossetti cared nothing for his father's Dantean erudition, his father's acquisition of a Giotto portrait and death mask when the boy was only twelve may have piqued his interest.¹ By age sixteen, he had begun to read Dante for himself with life-altering results.² Young Rossetti adopted his father's fondness for the Italian poet to the extent

¹ Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 50.

² Albert Morton Turner, "Rossetti's Reading and his Critical Opinions," *PMLA* 42.12 (Jun. 1927): 467. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/457518>.

that he eventually rearranged his own name and placed Dante first.³ Before the age of forty he had published translations of Dante's *Vita Nuova* and 240 other poems by thirteenth and fourteenth century Italian writers.⁴

Rossetti read widely and studied several languages, notably Italian, French, and German. He preferred the poetry of Keats, the novels of Walter Scott, works of Blake, Coleridge and Chatterton, old ballads, and the poems of Tennyson.⁵ William Holman Hunt later said that Rossetti had a "greater acquaintance with the poetical literature of Europe than any other man."⁶ Beginning around 1847, Rossetti became enthusiastic about the works of Robert Browning. According to his brother William, Rossetti called the author, "the glorious Robert," and Browning's rather obscure poem, *Sordello*, "my Elixir of Life."⁷ Drawn by their mutual interest in poetry, the past, and Italy, Rossetti and both the Brownings became friends, corresponding and visiting when possible.⁸

Because the Rossetti family also included the critic William, poet Christina, and author Maria, their home was the site of lively debate and scholarly interest. William was an ardent diarist, whose journals have been invaluable in their record of the comings and goings of the whole family. He also collected, edited, and published the Rossetti family's correspondence in several volumes. As a poet, critic, and essayist, his writings appeared, among other places, in *The Germ*, a short-lived journal of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Even as children, Rossetti, William, Maria, and Christina found delight in

³ Laurence Des Cars, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Romance and Realism*, trans. Francesca Garvie (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2004), 12.

⁴ Marsh, 530.

⁵ Cecil Y. Lang, "Introduction," *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), xiii.

⁶ Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1928), 34.

⁷ Albert Morton Turner, 482.

⁸ William Michael Rossetti, *Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters* (London: Hurst and Blackett Limited, 1900), 109.

word-play and could recite excerpts from *Richard III* when Rossetti was only seven.⁹ Rossetti's lifelong correspondence with both of his brilliant sisters also shows his willingness to discuss the creative process and to receive suggestions about his work. In a letter dated 1872, Maria passed on the results of her research which showed that the date of "Dante's meeting with Beatrice in the garden of Eden was this: 31st March 1300, being Easter Wednesday."¹⁰ Maria herself was a serious Dante scholar, whose commentary on the *Divine Comedy* drew compliments from Longfellow.¹¹

During Rossetti's formative years, England experienced growing pains in the areas of religion, social policy, and artistic vision. In 1833, Keble's speech on national apostasy spurred the Oxford Movement when he argued that the Church of England must return to its traditional liturgy and rituals.¹² Shortly after, the People's Charter gave birth to the national workers' movement.¹³ Dissatisfaction with working conditions and the poverty of the "Hungry Forties" drew many into a reconsideration of the appropriate role of both government and church in plotting a new direction.¹⁴ The Rossetti family was not untouched by these changes. Maria Rossetti eventually joined the Anglican sisterhood and entered convent life, and Christina broke her engagement to Collison, an early Pre-Raphaelite associate, because she could not reconcile herself to a difference in their religious convictions. For his part, Rossetti became an instructor at the Working Men's College, which was founded to offer education to men who could not study full time or lacked the advantages of a strong educational background. In that era of rich

⁹ Turner, 474.

¹⁰ Lona Mosk Packer, "Maria Francesca to Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Some Unpublished Letters," *PMLA* 79.5 (Dec. 1964), 615. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/46117>.

¹¹ Packer, 614.

¹² Des Cars, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

intellectualism and important debate, Rossetti reached his young adulthood, positioned to immerse himself in the national argument.

Under the influence of Ruskin, Rossetti's "discourse" influenced some of the great talents of the nineteenth century through collaboration, instruction, and example. In volume one of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin says:

Go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.¹⁵

This 1843 publication energized Rossetti and his circle of acquaintances. English art was stagnant and unoriginal, they thought. Ruskin challenged artists to see themselves as naturalists, recreating in their work exactly what they saw in nature. "Nothing can be beautiful which is not true," he wrote.¹⁶

Inspired by this, in September 1848, Rossetti, his brother William, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and three others began meeting to talk about such issues, to sketch each other, and to read each other's writing. They embraced Horace's dictum, *ut pictura poesis*, the idea that poetry and painting are sister arts.¹⁷ Unlike other movements, this group was both literary and graphic; most of the painters wrote poetry, and most of the poets painted.¹⁸ As a result, they were fond of including poems with the pictures themselves.¹⁹ They resolved to call themselves the Pre-Raphaelite

¹⁵ Lawrence Woolf, Roger Garside, Ray Haslam, eds. *The Electronic Edition of John Ruskin's "Modern Painters I,"* (Lancaster University, 2001). Accessed November 12, 2011. <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/ruskin/empi/notes/u016.htm>.

¹⁶ John Nicoll, *Rossetti* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.).

¹⁷ Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970), 50.

¹⁸ James D. Merritt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poem* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1866), 14.

¹⁹ Ormond, 158.

Brotherhood.²⁰ They took their name from their idea that a truer art had existed in the Middle Ages and from their desire to return to that style. By one account, Rossetti disliked Raphael's *Transfiguration* particularly, and he humorously wrote "Spit here" wherever he saw references to Rubens.²¹ In his poem, "To the Young Painters of England, in memory of those before Raphael," he writes about the young artists' enthusiasm as "The hand which after the appointed days / And hours shall give a Future to their Past."²² For these young admirers of the quattrocento, the future truly was a return to the past.

The medieval revivalist trend had begun late in the previous century and been further enhanced by the Oxford Movement as well as the writings of Gothic revivalist Augustus Pugin and Ruskin himself, which urged a return to a freer and more honest style. Until that time the dominant style in nineteenth century English painting had been derived from the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds, which advocates broad brushwork, thick impasto, and mixed or combined colors.²³ The conventional English form was genre painting; there was very little historical art produced.²⁴ Landscapes were dramatically colored for effect, and portraits were generally commissioned portrayals of important or wealthy people. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, out of admiration for the Old Masters, it had also become the custom to coat paintings with bitumen, which never dries and eventually turns dark.²⁵ The PRB, as they signed their work, shocked viewers with their radical diversions from conventional style and subject.

²⁰ Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), 56.

²¹ Des Cars, 16.

²² Jerome McGann, *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/index.html>.

²³ Leonée Ormond, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Old Masters," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36.2 (2006), 155.

²⁴ Des Cars, 14.

²⁵ Hilton, 56.

They not only used brighter colors, but also introduced anonymous models to represent important biblical or literary figures. In fact, among the members of the PRB, the sitter and the artist were more like equals, and the painting did not belong to the sitter when it was completed.²⁶ When they painted nature, they strove for exactness to reality, as Millais did for his *Ophelia* by sitting in the reeds beside a river for days to paint birds' nests and water plants authentically.²⁷

Exhibited in 1849-51, Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and Millais' *Christ in the House of his Parents* elicited strong reactions. Rossetti's portrayal of the Virgin Mary contradicted usual expectations. There is no life of Mary given in the Bible, but she has been traditionally depicted as being educated by her mother, St. Anne, from a book. Rossetti places her in a more realistic context. Since books were not used in biblical times, Rossetti said that "to attempt something more probable and at the same time less commonplace, I have represented the future Mother of Our Lord as occupied in embroidering a lily,—always under the direction of St. Anne."²⁸ *The Times* called Millais' *Christ in the House of his Parents* "revolting," faulted the artist for "associating the holy family with the meanest details of a carpenter's shop," and protested its "loathsome minuteness."²⁹ Their objections originated in the artist's use of living models for the holy family and from the suggestions of poverty. The red-haired child Jesus is thin, and his middle-aged mother's brow is wrinkled with concern for his bleeding hand. The sense of realism is startling, from the relatively contemporary dress and sheen of

²⁶ Hilton, 59.

²⁷ James D. Merritt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poem* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966), 19.

²⁸ Péteri, 21.

²⁹ Des Cars, 32.

perspiration on the workers' skin to Joseph's sunburned arms and the hair on his legs. This is not what audiences were used to.

The publication of *The Germ* by the PRB members attempted to offset criticism by educating the public in the new style of art. Its subtitle, "Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature, and Art," demonstrated Rossetti's opinion that: "An artist ought to be bent upon defining and expressing his own personal thoughts, and these ought to be based upon a direct study of nature, and harmonized with her manifestation."³⁰ F. G. Stephens' "The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art," published in *The Germ* in 1850, clarifies the PRB interest in medieval topics by explaining that those earlier painters were "nearer to fact" and less "artificial."³¹ The PRB resolution to paint not according to rules but to nature also followed Ruskin's notion of fidelity—making a "self-conscious effort to render faithfully all that the eyes saw."³² In support of the beleaguered Brotherhood, Ruskin himself wrote two letters to *The Times*, which, though not entirely complimentary, nonetheless had the effect of conferring respectability to the group. In May 1851, in response to an attack by Charles Dickens, he also responds: "They may, as they gain experience, lay in our England the foundations of a school of art nobler than the world has seen for three hundred years."³³ He further labels painting after the time of Raphael as "decadent." William Rossetti noted that "a word from Ruskin will do more to attract notice to merit as yet unadmitted than anything else whatever."³⁴ Indeed, by 1854, *Art Journal*, the mouthpiece of the conservative English art community,

³⁰ Hough, 55.

³¹ Ormond, 156.

³² Lang, xiii.

³³ Des Cars, 35.

³⁴ John Nicoll, *Rossetti* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 96.

stated that the Brotherhood had helped to remove from English painting “that vice of ‘slap-dash’ which some of our painters a few years ago considered excellence.”³⁵

In those early years, Rossetti worked closely with a number of important figures. In 1848, he wrote a letter, introducing himself to Ford Madox Brown by extravagantly praising the man’s work and then asking if Brown would consider teaching him.³⁶

Brown had recently visited Rome, where he had been studying the work of a group of German artists called Nazarenes, and he had returned to England to compete for the commission to paint the murals being proposed for Westminster Hall.³⁷ According to art historian Julian Treuherz, Nazarene art is characterized by the use of “clear bright color, uniform lighting, smooth contours, strong wiry outlines and formal symmetry,” qualities that attracted Rossetti to Brown’s work.³⁸ At first put off by Rossetti’s forward and enthusiastic manner, Brown nevertheless agreed to give him lessons. The formal lessons with Brown did not last long, however, because Rossetti grew restless with dry exercises that provided little mental stimulation. Their friendship, on the other hand, endured for many years, and during his brief tenure under Brown’s tutelage, Rossetti did adopt Brown’s practice of undercoating whole pictures in white in order to “get a good sunny color.”³⁹ This technique Rossetti, in turn, passed on to the other members of his circle, resulting in the strong, clear colors identified as characteristic of their work. In 1849, Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais worked together to illustrate Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, a sign that they were becoming accepted. Hunt remained Rossetti’s good friend for many

³⁵ Doug Stewart, “Incurably Romantic,” *Smithsonian* 37.11 (Feb. 2007): 87.

³⁶ Robert M. Cooper, *Lost on Both Sides: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Critic and Poet* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1970), 13.

³⁷ Éva Péteri, *Victorian Approaches to Religion as Reflected in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Budapest: Adadémiai Kiado, 2003), 15.

³⁸ Péteri, 14.

³⁹ Nicoll, 23.

years and, Evelyn Waugh suggests, was the actual person who instructed Rossetti in painting and not Brown.⁴⁰ According to Waugh, Rossetti recalled those lessons differently after he and Hunt had ended their friendship. Sources disagree on this point, but all agree that Rossetti's life was characterized by long and enthusiastic friendships that often ended abruptly.

Several characteristics typify the works these men produced: literary or vaguely medieval topics, symbolism, definite outlines, and equal attention to detail in the background as well as the foreground.⁴¹ Over the years their styles evolved, especially in the medieval aspect, which is most evident in the early works. Hunt, however, never really changed but produced rather moralistic works throughout his career. Millais, whose training had made him superior in technique to most of the others, eventually found less and less in common with the group. His election to the Royal Academy in 1853 prompted Rossetti to tell his sister Christina that the "whole Round Table is dissolved."⁴²

Impressed by Rossetti's work, John Ruskin recruited the painter to teach at the Working Men's College in London.⁴³ The Working Men's College was established to counter the National Course of Instruction offered by government design schools, which aimed to develop more proficient workers.⁴⁴ According to Quentin Bell, the national curriculum required that students copy figures repeatedly to develop an "accuracy of eye and skill of hand," but the course of study "turned its back on nature."⁴⁵ While Ruskin

⁴⁰ Waugh, 33.

⁴¹ Lang, xii.

⁴² Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970), 107.

⁴³ Kristin Mahoney, "Work, Lack, and Longing: Rossetti's 'The Blessed Damozel' and the Working Men's College," *Victorian Studies* 52.2 (Winter 2010): 221.

⁴⁴ Mahoney, 226.

⁴⁵ Quentin Bell, *The Schools of Design* (London: Routledge, 1964), 261.

agreed that “the excellence of an artist depends wholly on the refinement of perception,” he urged that students “get rid of academic fribble” and “draw only what [they] see.”⁴⁶ Rossetti found that he liked teaching, and Ruskin remarked that Rossetti’s “passion for art made up for his capricious nature.”⁴⁷ By “capricious” he may have been referring to the fact that Rossetti reportedly was erratic in his attendance.⁴⁸ The two men were very different. Ruskin took a realist’s stance, attempting to catch the actual fact of Nature, while Rossetti was more idealistic, relying on intuition and attempting to represent the ethereal.⁴⁹ They worked well in concert for a number of years, during which, according to Ruskin, their classes were the “most popular” and the most “useless”—a good thing since the school’s aim was to allow students to escape their utilitarian lives.⁵⁰ Rossetti’s “highly physical” approach emphasized “vividness more than accuracy” and “shade and splendid color” more than line-drawing.⁵¹ In his teaching experience, Rossetti averred that his “sole and only wish [was] to teach others principles and truths which they may not know and which have made us happy.”⁵²

In Rossetti’s early paintings, the distinct characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelites are evident. *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation*, first produced as a watercolor in 1852, recalls the medievalism and startling tints of that group’s early works. The Beatrice in this painting is Elizabeth “Lizzie” Siddal, Rossetti’s model and student who shared his residence at Chatham Place and sat for many of his early works. This picture depicts a wedding procession entering from the left with at

⁴⁶ Mahoney, 227-228.

⁴⁷ Des Cars, 51.

⁴⁸ Hilton, 138.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁰ Mahoney, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

⁵² Cooper, 32.

least nine maidens and a little girl with a basket of flowers in a procession preceding the bride and groom. As the group walks down an inclined passage in order to enter the house where the feast will take place, Dante faces them from the right, while another man slightly behind him seems to restrain the poet from stepping forward toward the oncoming procession. The maidens are all dressed in rich green overgowns, slashed to show brilliant blue sleeves. Each wears a white flower in her hair. The little girl with the basket, dressed all in gold, looks intently up at Dante's face as she reaches to present him a flower. Dante, however, stares fixedly into the face of Beatrice, seemingly unaware of anything else. Beatrice, in the center of the group of maidens looks straight at Dante, but her expressionless face reveals the slight she intends. The maidens on either side of Beatrice whisper and direct curious looks his way as well.

The impression of the painting is of an arrested moment. Visible just within the door of the house are musicians already in a balcony on the left preparing for the entrance of the bride. Among the bridal party and just ahead of the newly married couple, a young man leans over the railing toward a young peasant woman who, with a basket full of harvested grapes, is accompanied by two laborers cutting the fruit from the mature vines. The groom is absorbed with his bride, whose downcast eyes suggest her modesty. The attitudes of the other revelers convey the animation of the moment: the maidens hold hands or embrace each other while the men lean toward each other in conversation. All seems to be active except the frozen faces of Dante and Beatrice. The viewer's eyes are drawn immediately to Dante, whose robe of brilliant red and customary headgear identify him. In turn, Dante's pointed gaze directs the viewer to Beatrice with her red-gold hair.

Rossetti drew this moment from his own translation of the *Vita Nuova* wherein

Dante Alighieri describes the incident:

It chanced on a day that my most gracious lady was with a gathering of ladies in a certain place; to the which I was conducted by a friend of mine; he thinking to do me a great pleasure by showing me the beauty of so many women. Then I, hardly knowing whereunto he conducted me, but trusting in him (who was yet leading his friend to the last verge of life), made question: "To what end are we come among these ladies?" and he answered: "To the end that they may be worthily served."⁵³

Dante explains his own reaction to the event in a sonnet composed shortly after:

Lo! Love, when thou are present, sits at ease,
And bears his mastership so mightily,
That all my troubled senses he thrusts out,
Sorely tormenting some, and slaying some,
Till none but he is left and has free range
To gaze on thee. This makes my face to change
Into another's; while I stand all dumb,
And hear my senses clamour in their rout.⁵⁴

The preeminence of Love as a powerful character typifies both Dante and Rossetti.

Dante's explanation for his rude staring places the blame upon Love, who has overtaken all other emotions and focused the powerless Dante solely upon Beatrice. In the painting, Rossetti captures the spiritual nature of Dante's Love by focusing upon the bride and groom, the harvesters' rich suggestion of fecundity, and the physical nature of the revelers, from whose celebratory antics Dante stands removed.

⁵³ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, trans. *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1861), 245. www.rossettiarchive.org

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.



Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation, watercolor, 1855, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Dante's Dream on the Day of the Death of Beatrice: 9th of June, 1290, watercolor, 1856, Tate, London 2002.

Dante's Dream on the Day of the Death of Beatrice: 9th of June, 1290 also draws its source from the *Vita Nuova*, and derives much from the earlier painting as well. In his account of the death of Beatrice, Dante wrote:

Then Love spoke thus, "Now all shall be made clear:
Come and behold our lady where she lies."
These idle phantasies
Then carried me to see my lady dead:
And standing at her head
Her ladies put a white veil over her;
And with her was such very humbleness
That she appeared to say, "I am at peace."⁵⁵

Dante stands beside the death bed, his hand being held by Love, who stoops to kiss the eyes of Beatrice. Dante is dressed as before, in the brilliant red robe, but this time covered with a sleeveless black coat. Reminiscent of the maidens at the wedding, Beatrice's ladies are garbed in the same green, and similar flowers adorn the veil they hold over the reposing body. In the 1856 watercolor, Love wears the same blue of the maiden's undergowns in the earlier painting. If not for the bow and arrows that the winged figure of Love holds, he might be mistaken for an angel as he leans toward

⁵⁵ Rossetti, 271.

Beatrice, whose hands rest piously between them in an attitude of prayer. As in the earlier piece, Dante is an onlooker. Still part of the living world, he stands apart on a carpet strewn with red flowers, while the dying Beatrice is surrounded by the white of her gown, the white veil lowering toward her, and the white flowers that adorn it. Love's chaste kiss grounds this scene in the spiritual realm. Beatrice, the "blessed one," is joined to Dante only through the connection of Love: Love kisses her and Love holds the hand of Dante. Thus, their joining only through Love negates any suggestion of carnality and associates the poet's love with the ideal. Rossetti has captured a fleeting moment between life in this world and the hereafter, suggested by the stairways on either side of the room, one of which rises upward, while the other descends. Beatrice's room is the middle ground where Dante lives, suspended between Heaven and Hell.

A common interest in such medievalism and in the Arthurian legends drew Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones together when they met two years later in Oxford. Before long, Burne-Jones had resolved to quit Exeter College at Oxford, and Morris to leave his architectural apprenticeship, to study painting with Rossetti.⁵⁶ In a letter to a friend, Rossetti said about Morris' lessons: "It is all being done from Nature, of course."⁵⁷ Although Rossetti himself tired easily of painting *en plein air*, he passed on Ruskin's enthusiasm to Morris, whose future designs would affirm his delight in the natural world. Later, Burne-Jones' widow Georgiana recalled, "At Oxford, Gabriel was in his glory and Edward and Morris sat at his feet and rejoiced in the light."⁵⁸ In a letter to Burne-Jones, Rossetti wrote, "If a man have any poetry in him he should paint, for it has

⁵⁶ Lang, xviii.

⁵⁷ Cooper, 51.

⁵⁸ Nicoll, 100.

all been said and sung, but they have hardly begun to paint it.”⁵⁹ Be that as it may, Rossetti and Morris also continued to distinguish themselves through their writing. Rossetti increasingly fused his poetry and his painting, often inscribing poetic lines on a picture or its frame, and Morris’ copious outpourings consisted of well-received poetry and essays urging social reform.

One of the first projects the young men undertook together was the painting of frescoes on the walls above the gallery at the Oxford Union Debating Hall.⁶⁰ Because the three had no knowledge of fresco technique, the project represents both their “reckless self-confidence” and Rossetti’s formidable skills of persuasion.⁶¹ Purportedly, the fresco had already begun to flake off the walls before the work was completed. The theme of the work, tales from the King Arthur cycle, reveals the burgeoning common interest of the group. While in Oxford, Morris and Rossetti met eighteen year old Jane Burden and her sister at the theatre and invited Jane to “sit to” a portrait.⁶² Jane Burden made a strong impression on all who met her. George Bernard Shaw later said, “When she came into a room in her strangely beautiful garments, looking at least eight feet high, the effect was as if she had walked out of an Egyptian tomb at Luxor.”⁶³ By all accounts, Burden modeled for the Guinevere in the Oxford frescoes. Jan Marsh feels that Burden might have fallen in love with Rossetti that same year while they were in Oxford, but Rossetti was already engaged to Elizabeth Siddal.⁶⁴ Speculation suggests that Rossetti returned her affection, but as a matter of honor would not break faith with “Lizzie,” with whom he

⁵⁹ Hough, 42.

⁶⁰ Nicoll, 100.

⁶¹ Des Cars, 68.

⁶² Hilton, 166.

⁶³ Lang, xviii.

⁶⁴ Marsh, 338

had been first artist, then mentor, and finally fiancé over a period of almost ten years. William Morris, however, was also smitten, and when he proposed, Jane accepted. It was to be an unconventional match; Morris came from a more privileged class, and she was a workingman's daughter. That, coupled with Morris' involvement in the art world, closed upper middle class doors and relegated them to a Bohemian life.⁶⁵

Moving to Bexleyheath, Kent in 1859 and unable to find suitable furnishings, the Morrises called upon their friends to help design the décor and furnishings. They were joined by Lizzie Siddal, who at that time modeled frequently for Hunt and Millais as well as for Rossetti.⁶⁶ She was known not only for her languid and otherworldly beauty, but also for her own talent as an artist and writer, and for her ability to hold a pose without complaint for hours. This proved unhealthy in the case of Millais' *Ophelia*. To catch details exactly from life, Millais had Lizzie float in a bathtub for long days. Unfortunately, the lamps that were heating the tub burned out and the water turned cold, causing Lizzie to contract a serious cold with aftereffects that lasted for months.⁶⁷ She had never enjoyed good health, and, having suffered from pain and malaise for many years, used laudanum regularly.⁶⁸

After a turbulent engagement, protracted on the one hand by Lizzie's ill health and travels to take cures, and on the other by Rossetti's purported infidelities and vacillations, the two married in 1860.⁶⁹ A honeymoon in Paris and a brief period of happiness were followed by the birth of a stillborn child the following year and Lizzie's subsequent death from an apparent laudanum overdose in 1862. In grief and remorse for

⁶⁵ Hilton, 169.

⁶⁶ Des Cars, 67.

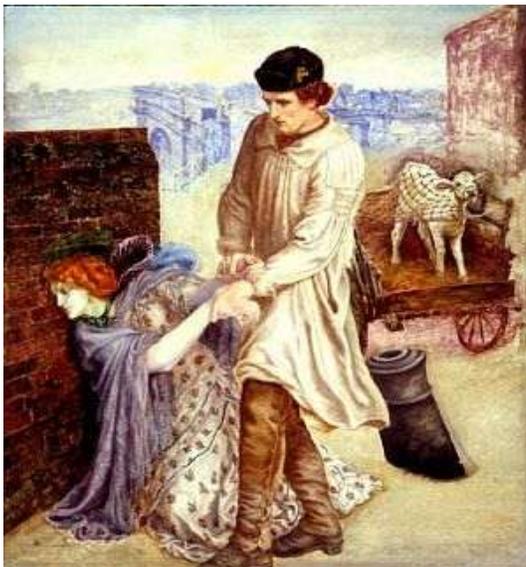
⁶⁷ Doug Stewart, "Incurably Romantic," *Smithsonian* 37.11 (Feb. 2007): 88.

⁶⁸ Stewart, 88.

⁶⁹ Hilton, 178.

what he saw as his neglect of his wife, Rossetti placed the bound manuscript book of poems that he had been working on in the coffin with her, a gesture his brother William called “honorable.”⁷⁰

After his wife’s death, Rossetti moved to Tudor House, Chelsea, and installed his “housekeeper” Fanny Cornforth there.⁷¹ Fanny Cornforth, who used several names in her lifetime, had been with Rossetti from the mid- to late 1850s, during the time that Lizzie Siddal was often away. William Rossetti described Fanny as, “low-born, ill-bred, illiterate, voluptuous, [and] gorgeous.”⁷² Her appearance as the fallen woman in Rossetti’s painting, *Found*, and as *Fazio’s Mistress*, functioned as an admission of his relationship with her.



Found, oil, 1854, Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial

Found
(For a Picture)

“There is a budding morrow in midnight:”—
 So sang our Keats, our English nightingale.
 And here, as lamps across the bridge turn pale
 In London’s smokeless resurrection-light,
 Dark breaks to dawn. But o’er the deadly blight
 Of love deflowered and sorrow of none avail
 Which makes this man gasp and this woman quail,
 Can day from darkness ever again take flight?

Ah! Gave not these two hearts their mutual pledge,
 Under one mantle sheltered ‘neath the hedge
 In gloaming courtship? And O God! to-day
 He only knows he holds her;—but what part
 Can life now take? She cries in her locked heart,—
 “Leave me—I do not know you—go away!”

The painting *Found* is one of several from the Victorian era that focus upon “fallen women.” Streetwalkers were not uncommon, but sympathy for their plight was a new fascination in that age of rising social consciousness. Rossetti started the work as

⁷⁰ Marsh, 244.

⁷¹ Des Cars, 77.

⁷² Lang, xvii.

early as 1854 and put his hand to it off and on for years. Although he reworked it many times, he never painted over Fanny Cornforth's features as he did later on several other canvasses. Fanny's amoral behavior and general disregard for the opinions of others insured her immortality here. At the time of Rossetti's death the painting was unfinished, though some of his friends may have added to it.

The sonnet was not written to accompany the painting until 1881. The opening lines contrast the idealism of Keats with the stark realism of late nineteenth century life. The "budding morrow" of line one discloses only "love deflowered" (6) and "deadly blight" (5), a reversal of Romantic images of flowers and nature. Unlike the optimism of a new day's dawning touted by the original poet, Rossetti portrays a dimmer dawn. The rising sun diminishes the kinder illumination of moonlight and lamps by revealing the stark realities of urban life. The "man gasp[s]" with realization, and the "woman quail[s]" in shame (7). The second stanza of the poem, which reflects his memories of her, reverses the role of light as it recalls the couple's stolen moments at twilight in more innocent times. A "mutual pledge" (9) had united them and "one mantle" (10) bound them in their "courtship." Abruptly, the poem returns to the present with the exclamation "O God!" and the sudden recognition that there is no future for them. The woman knows this best; she has a "locked heart" (13). Though she insists that he "go away" (14), her claiming not to know the man is more heartfelt than heartless. Her initial shame at seeing her young love again demonstrates that she is not unfeeling. When she says, "Leave me" (14), she pushes away both the man and her own forced acknowledgment of what she has become. Keats' sonnet, *To Homer*, the source of this poem's opening line, plays with

images of blindness and sight in its celebration of the epic poet. On the shore of this darkness, there is no light, only the dreary burden of promise interrupted.

The central figure of the painting is a man who has come to the city and recognizes a woman who had disappeared from his past. The man fills the center foreground, dividing the scene between the embarrassed woman who pulls away from him against a grimy brick wall and the bound young calf in a cart. The woman has become part of the city, and the calf represents the country; the man finds himself halfway between the two. The woman's garish clothing and over-bright red hair confirm her tawdry occupation. The suggestions of the painting are more ambiguous than the sonnet. Does the woman resist because she does not want to be trapped as the calf has been? She has the illusion of independence, but both of them have no future: the calf will succumb to the slaughterhouse and the woman, to violence or disease. She is already caught in the net of her own past. Characteristic of Rossetti's earlier work, this painting tells a story in miniature, uses color and line simply, and avoids any semblance of glamour.

Over the many years of their association, Fanny's persistent presence proved problematic, and she was linked with unpleasant encounters among his circle of friends, as well as dishonest dealings with Rossetti's art. According to some of the family letters, many drawings and paintings passed through Fanny's hands, yielding her a profit.⁷³ Fanny was also the original model for *Lady Lilith*, but eventually, perhaps because Fanny had fallen from favor, Rossetti over-painted her face with that of Alexa Wilding, a favorite model in later years.

⁷³ Janet Camp Troxel, ed. *Three Rossettis: Unpublished Letters to and from Dante Gabriel, Christina, and William* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 77.

Through the 1860s, Rossetti maintained his close relationship with William Morris. He joined Morris, Ford Madox Brown, Philip Webb (who had designed Morris' house), Edward Burne-Jones and several others to form Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., which specialized in interiors, decorated furniture, stained glass, tapestries, wallpaper, textiles and other related products.⁷⁴ Burne-Jones also enlisted to teach with Rossetti at the Working Men's College. Surely, conversations at Red Lion Square included the socialist views of the College as well as new ideas in art, providing an intellectually stimulating environment for these men and their friends and laying the groundwork for the changes to come in fine arts, design, and social consciousness. The Pre-Raphaelites' interest in texture—baskets, rugs, wickerwork, earthenware—is apparent in their products for homes as well as in their paintings.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the market that they served was peopled by those who had been prosperous in trade, no nonsense buyers who preferred faithfulness to the actuality of nature. These men were successful, and, even though they lived far from the big cities, wanted to bring cultural life to their communities.⁷⁶ Collins described their customers as “not easily imposed upon,” and said that they “wanted interesting subjects; variety, resemblance to nature; genuineness of the article, and fresh paint.”⁷⁷

During this period, Rossetti completed one of his best-known works, which had been begun with Lizzie as model before his wife's death. *Beata Beatrix*, a third piece tangentially related to the *Vita Nuova*, is less literal in its portrayal than the two earlier Dante watercolors. Instead, the upper body of the blessed Beatrice fills the foreground

⁷⁴ Cummings, 35.

⁷⁵ Hilton, 116.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

while the figures of Love and Dante stand at a distance behind her, making this more portrait than picture. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante recounts a “marvelous vision” which features the figure of Love presenting Dante’s own heart to Beatrice and demanding that she eat it. Love says to Dante, “Ego dominus tuus” (I am your God), and “Vide cor tuum” (See your heart). Not able to sleep, Dante determined to write a sonnet, which reads in part:

[Love] seem’d like one who is full of joy, and had
 My heart within his hand, and on his arm
 My lady, with a mantle round her, slept;
 Whom (having waken’d her) anon he made
 To eat that heart; she ate, as fearing harm.
 Then he went out; and as he went, he wept.⁷⁸

In the painting, Dante and the figure of Love appear to have been walking down a city street toward Beatrice in the foreground. A suggestion of stone buildings lining the street parts in the center to admit bright sunlight which streams toward Beatrice and glows around her. To her left stands Love, garbed in red (the color that he wears in a later version of *Dante’s Dream on the Day of the Death of Beatrice*) and holding a flaming heart in his hand. His body is positioned as if he were walking away, but his head is turned back toward Dante, who is on the opposite side of the street and, therefore, the right side of the picture.



Beata Beatrix, oil, 1864, Tate, London 2001.

⁷⁸ Rossetti, 227.

Unlike the glowing portrayal of Love, Dante clings to the shadows and clutches his robe around himself. His attention is arrested by the departing figure of Love. On a wall that separates Beatrice from the street scene sits a sundial, its shadow revealing the ninth hour, the time that Beatrice had first spoken to Dante. In addition to its reference to Dante's text, the sundial also serves the symbolic function of interposing time between Dante and Beatrice. Beatrice herself seems trancelike, her eyes closed and her hands open, palms upward, in her lap. Into those hands, a red bird drops a pale poppy blossom. The poppy, so often associated with sleep, here announces Beatrice's death. The nimbus round the bird's head has traditional associations with the Holy Spirit, but the bird's red color correlates with the *Vita Nuova's* figure of Love. Thus, in one symbol Rossetti affirms the transcendent nature of Love, which, divorced from all meaner aspects, provides the closest brush with the divine that mere humankind may have.

In the three works inspired by his namesake Dante, Rossetti moves toward some understanding of the divine, which could be glimpsed but never fully understood. In work after work, he sought to capture this Divine Elusive with words and with paint. Several other devices link these three paintings drawn from the *Vita Nuova*. Color provides one binding element: in *Beata Beatrix*, Beatrice wears the green overgown that the ladies wear in both of the other paintings. Secondly, Rossetti's wife modeled for two of the three, and the third Beatrice also has Lizzie Siddal's red-gold hair. The figure of Dante himself provides another constant. In every portrayal, Dante is a spectator, not a participant, thus qualifying the nature of his long "relationship" with Beatrice. Either aloof or indeed separated from the earthly realm altogether, Beatrice stands always just

out of reach. Just so Rossetti through his translations approaches Dante, a man whom he will never know, and through his art approaches ideal Beauty but can never fully grasp it.

In the pair of sonnets, *Soul's Beauty* and *Body's Beauty*, published as Sonnet LXVII and Sonnet LXVIII in *Ballads and Sonnets*, Rossetti further explores the aesthetic impulse of the artist. *Soul's Beauty* depicts Beauty as a woman “enthroned” (3) “under

<p>Soul's Beauty</p> <p>Under the arch of Life, where love and death, Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe, I drew it in as simply as my breath. Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath, 5 The sky and sea bend on thee, which can draw, By sea or sky or woman, to one law, The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.</p> <p>This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise Thy voice and hand shake still, long known to thee 10 By flying hair and fluttering hem, the beat Following her daily of thy heart and feet, How passionately and irretrievably, In what fond flight, how many ways and days!</p>	<p>the arch of Life” (1) in a shrine guarded by “love and death” (1) and “terror and mystery” (2). The viewer of this icon feels her gaze and takes it with him from that place. He says that he “drew it in as simply as [his] breath” (4) and later feels those eyes “bend” (6) upon him wherever he goes. The</p>
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confusion here of the senses—he feels her gaze—gives a synesthetic power to the experience, and the use of the word “breath” in line four arouses ancient associations of breath with spirit, lifting the viewer’s experience from the mere appreciation of earthly beauty to a brush with the sublime. She *inspires* but does not yield to understanding. Her powerful omnipresence “over and beneath” (5) and in “sky and sea” (6), pairing Heaven/life and earth/death, transcends time and place, transforming the pilgrim at her shrine into a “bondman of her palm and wreath” (8).

In the sestet, Rossetti more fully addresses the tenuous character of Beauty and the frustration of mankind’s longing to master it. Lady Beauty reveals herself only

Lilith is equated with the serpent whom she precedes, and “her sweet tongue could deceive” (3) as well. In the following line, the use of the word “enchanted” recalls the use of speech as well, but her hair does the “speaking.” Later, the consonant “s” in lines 10-11 evokes the serpent’s whisper to men “whom shed scent / And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare.” The “scent” refers to the rose in line nine, while “sleep” recounts the poppy—“her flowers.” The rose may symbolize love, but here its scent is part of a snare; the poppy’s association with sleep may be enlarged to suggest a drugged sleep or death when paired with the sense of entrapment in these lines. This use of entrapment in the two poems varies from the submission in *Soul’s Beauty* to the compulsion in *Body’s Beauty*. While the artist is drawn to Beauty’s “one law” (13), the worshipper of Lilith has “his straight neck bent” (13). The evocative language of divinity in *Soul’s Beauty*—“shrine,” “Enthroned,” “awe,” and “praise”—relegates the language of *Body’s Beauty* to a lesser thing, with words such as, “deceive,” “web,” “snare,” “spell,” and “strangling.”

The artist is drawn to Beauty by “sea or sky or woman,” but in Lilith’s poem, the word “beauty” never appears. Both poems use various forms of the word “draw,” but Lilith only draws “Adam” to herself, while Beauty draws Her “bondman” toward the “palm and wreath” (14) of the

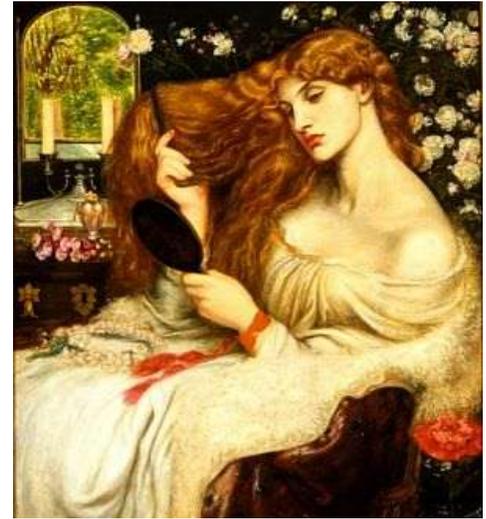


Sibylla Palmifera, oil, 1866-70, Board of Trustees of National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight)

Soul's fulfillment. *Body's Beauty* ends in stasis; the heart of the youth is "strangl[ed by a] golden hair." Conversely, the "voice and hand" of the worshipper of *Soul's Beauty* "shake still" (10).

If *Soul's Beauty* is the product of the artist's shaking voice (10), then *Sibylla Palmifera*, the painting paired with the sonnet, arises from his shaking hand as he "passionately and irretrievably" (13) seeks to capture concretely in another medium what can only be sensed. The figure of the Sibyl grasps a palm branch, the symbol of honor. Her eyes suggest that she has been taken unaware and has just glanced up to see the viewer. She is enthroned between two images emblematic of life and death: on the left, a winged child is blindfolded and crowned with a wreath of roses, while on the right a wreath of poppies adorns what seems to be skull. Beneath each, burning censers emit plumes of smoke which drift upward toward the images, evoking the presence of spirit. The light falls strongest on the face of the Sibyl, while the background fades into shadows, pulling the viewer's gaze toward her. This focus is intensified by the dark green draping around her head and shoulder, which serves to frame her face against the lighter background. Against the white stone that surrounds her, the red of her garments and of the flower wreaths also draws the viewer to the central figure. The painting is symmetrical in the sense that the Sibyl is caught between pairs of censers, of wreaths, of stone figures. However, the rich draping of her garment and the position of her hands to the far left offset that mechanical aspect and lend richness and life to the portrait.

The symmetry of the portrait lends an air of timelessness, with only the fluttering butterflies at her shoulder animating the scene. She does indeed seem to be the lady of the shrine evoked by the poem. In contrast, Lady Lilith lounges, studying herself in a mirror. Curiously, she wears white, forcing the viewer of the two portraits to reconsider the traditional roles of color imagery. The red of the Sibyl's gown turns in a new direction to suggest spiritual rather than worldly passion, while Lilith's white gown seems more aligned with



Lady Lilith, oil, 1868, Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial.

death than innocence. Just as in the sonnet, Lilith's dominant attribute is her hair, which she combs in the portrait, seemingly unaware of the viewer. The sensuality of her unbound long golden-red hair and her absorption with it, combined with the disheveled gown ground this portrait firmly in the physical world.

In creating the two portraits, Rossetti introduces several aspects that contradict what one might assume from the sonnets. In *Body's Beauty*, the poet associates Lilith with "rose and poppy," but those flowers appear in both portraits. Lilith's face, shoulders, and hair appear before a background of fully opened white roses, and a coronet of white flowers lies in her lap, to be donned when the combing of the hair is complete. However, by her side, in the right foreground, is a full-blown red poppy. The bright red of the poppy is mirrored by her braceleted wrist and her red lips. Together with her hair, these are the brightest spots of color and draw the viewer's gaze. The red, tasseled sash tied around her wrist resembles a garot more than jewelry, and, combined with the lush

poppy and her red lips, seems more malignant than decorative. In contrast, *Soul's Beauty* introduces the two flowers in the form of wreaths: roses associated with Cupid, and poppies with death. Here the flowers suggest the immortality of the Soul, which transcends earthly love and death.

Like Lilith, the Sibyl also wears a bracelet on her left wrist. Hers, however, is gold. Oddly, the only mention of gold in the sonnets is the negative associations of gold with Lilith's hair, but here the gold bracelet adorning the Sibyl connects her to the golden censers, whose rising smoke symbolizes the spirit. *Lady Lilith* also contains what may be a censer, but it is unlit. It sits to the left upon a table, which also holds a mirrored candelabrum. The censer is idle, the candles are burned out, and the mirror, which should reflect the viewer, instead shows only a tangled garden. These three things evoke only death and absence. The sonnet portrays her still sitting though the earth has grown old. Does the mirror reflect the Garden of Eden? This extends the poem's image of her hair as a snare to a larger web which includes the garden, where she sits alone, inaccessible, unchanging, deadly. A final aspect of the two portraits is Rossetti's use of the same model for them. This adds an additional layer beyond the two sonnets. Woman is portrayed here as a means of salvation and a means of destruction, but in either case, she is ultimately remote.

During that period of great productivity for Rossetti, the partners of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. met often for social evenings in each other's homes. These regular events included an interesting variety of artists and writers as guests. For her part, Jane Burden Morris was the hostess admired by all. Whistler recalled her "sitting

side-by-side in state, being worshipped in an inner room.”⁷⁹ Henry James described her in the 1860s when he first met the Morrises: “Whether she’s a grand synthesis of all Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made—or they a keen analysis of her—whether she’s an original or a copy...she’s a wonder.”⁸⁰ Lizzie Siddal had once called Rossetti “hair mad” and claimed that no matter how intense a conversation might be, he would stop abruptly if he saw a woman with wavy hair enter the room.⁸¹ No one knows whether this infatuation pre-dated his first encounter with the young Jane Burden or resulted because of her. Whatever the case, Rossetti, William Morris, and Jane Morris were close friends, often in company or in correspondence with one another. She became one of Rossetti’s favorite models and her face the one most associated with his work.

In 1867, Rossetti began to suffer from a “neurotic illness,” characterized by insomnia, loss of vision, and feelings of persecution.⁸² He reported a “mist over his vision with swirling shapes when he closed his eyes” and felt that he was going “blind or mad or both.”⁸³ Recalling that period, William Rossetti later wrote, “Of course, he was madly in love and [I] can believe in anything in the way of hypochondria on that score.”⁸⁴ Whatever its cause, the symptoms lingered for long enough to have two significant effects on Rossetti: he returned to writing poetry, which did not depend so extensively upon his sight, and he eventually began to take chloral hydrate to ease his persistent insomnia. According to his brother, Rossetti had been a man of temperate

⁷⁹ Marsh, 339.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁸² Nicoll, 148.

⁸³ Marsh, 341.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 342.

habits until the age of forty, not even drinking alcohol, and then found himself needing the chloral, the taste of which he negated with whiskey, in order to sleep.⁸⁵

In 1868 Rossetti returned to his interest in Dante when he painted Jane Morris as “La Pia,” one of the suffering souls from the *Purgatorio*. Dante and Vergil encounter her in the section of Purgatory for those who have died violently. She tells Dante her brief story:

"Ah! when thou to the world shalt be return'd, And rested after thy long road," so spake. Next the third spirit; "then remember me. I once was Pia. Sienna gave me life, Maremma took it from me. That he knows, Who me with jewell'd ring had first espous'd."

Purgatorio, Canto V



La Pia de' Tolomei, oil, 1868-80, Spencer Museum of Art: SMA Museum Purchase.

Tradition supposes that the real Pia de' Tolomei died either due to fever from the noxious damp of the swamp surrounding the fortress at Maremma, where she had been imprisoned by her husband, or at the hand of an assassin sent by her husband to kill her so that he might marry more conveniently. Whatever the case, she was an unhappy woman, held captive and alone.

In the painting, the figure of Pia is squeezed into the frame in a literal portrayal of her confinement. Beside her she has placed a rosary, a book of devotions, and several crumpled letters, meant no doubt to help pass the time and provide hope. Their very

⁸⁵ Marsh, 497.

presence, suggesting as it does the need for solace, does little to lift the spirit. The colors are muted and dim, unrelieved by the stormy sky and bleak landscape visible outside the unshuttered window. A flock of crows besets the fortress, more a premonition of death than a sign of life. The plant behind her, which might offset the deathly gloom, instead seems menacing as it fills the space and further cramps the lady's pose. Another has crept up the outside wall and is beginning to come into the tiny room through the open window on the left. The presence of a sundial compels Pia to watch the slow movement of time, and a bundle of weapons on the left window ledge supply the threat of violence. Unlike the other Dante paintings, which celebrate the Florentine's chaste love for Beatrice, this woman is not in Paradise and has no one to love her. The parallels to Jane Morris' situation are obvious. Dante speaks to Pia as she waits in Purgatory; Rossetti "converses" with Jane Morris as he paints the picture. Here Pia despondently sits, compulsively twisting her wedding ring around her finger, while Jane endures a loveless marriage. The poignancy stems from the beautiful woman portrayed as innocent victim and the onlooker's frustrating inability to save her.

Letters from the period reveal Rossetti's love for his business partner's wife. On 30 July 1869, he wrote to her while she and Morris traveled to Bad Ems for treatments to improve her health:

Dear kind Janey, All that concerns me is the all absorbing question with me, as dear Top (Morris) will not mind my telling you at this anxious time. The more he loves you, the more he knows that you are too lovely and noble not to be loved; and, dear Janey, there are too few things that seem worth expressing as life goes on, for one friend to deny another the poor expression of what is most at his heart. But he is before me in granting this, and there is no need for me to say it. I can never tell you how much I am with you at all times. Absence from your sight is what I have long been used to; and no absence can ever make me so far from you

again as your presence did for years. For this long inconceivable change, you know now what my thanks must be. Gabriel.⁸⁶

The change referred to in the letter can only be the long-awaited shift in their relationship from friendship to passion. In another of his letters to Bad Ems, he told her that he had plans for a new full-length painting of her portrayed as Pandora. “I have a great desire to paint you,” he said, and promised something “more worthy than I have yet managed.”⁸⁷

Some time after the Morrises’ return to England, he wrote:

Dearest Janey, the sight of you going down the dark steps to the cab all alone has plagued me ever since—you looked so lonely. I hope you got home safe and well. Now everything will be dark for me till I can see you again. Your most affectionate Gabriel.⁸⁸

That letter was followed with:

Funny sweet Janey, No one else seems alive to me now, and places that are empty of you are empty of all life. No lesser loss than the loss of you could have brought me so much bitterness. I would still rather have had this to endure than have missed the fullness of wonder and worship which nothing else could have made known to me. Your most affectionate Gabriel.⁸⁹

Much of Jane Morris’ correspondence from these years is missing and presumed destroyed by her or her family, but the sincerity of his extant letters to her seems to confirm their relationship.

In 1871, Rossetti and William Morris arranged a joint lease of Kelmscott Manor, a site chosen for its beautiful natural surroundings, which they thought would be conducive to their work.⁹⁰ In his diary, William Rossetti relates his brother’s enthusiasm for the manor; Rossetti wrote to him, calling it “a very jolly old place.”⁹¹ Rossetti moved

⁸⁶ John Bryson and Janet Camp Troxell, eds. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 11.

⁸⁷ Marsh, 41.

⁸⁸ Bryson and Troxell, 33.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁰ Cooper, 52.

⁹¹ Dornand, 63.

to Kelmscott for the summer and was joined there by Jane Morris and her children, while William Morris traveled to Iceland in order to research its language and literature.⁹² Acquaintance William Bell Scott wrote, “I have concluded [Gabriel and Janey] will not go further than they have gone,” and about Jane Morris added, “She is the most remarkable looking woman in the world.”⁹³ A pair of related anecdotes sheds light on the unusual relationships in Jane Morris’ life. Early in their marriage, William Morris painted a portrait of Jane. On the back of the canvas he wrote: “I cannot paint you, but I love you.”⁹⁴ Rossetti inscribed a later portrait thusly: “Famous for her poet husband and surpassingly famous for her beauty, now may she be famous for my painting.”⁹⁵ In this brief line, Rossetti supplants Morris’ offering by promising her immortality. Over the course of his career, Rossetti drew or painted at least thirty-nine completed portraits of Jane Morris.⁹⁶ This number does not include an additional collection of preliminary or incomplete sketches and a collection of photographs of her in a variety of poses to be used for later projects when she was not available.

Along with his renewed interest in writing came regret for the notebook he had hastily cast aside when Lizzie died. After some encouragement, he wrote to Charles Augustus Howell that he would “give [him] the swellest drawing conceivable” to arrange the exhumation of the coffin and the retrieval of the poetry.⁹⁷ With legal approval, the task was completed, the manuscript was disinfected by a doctor, and Rossetti returned to writing. In several ways, the association with Howell was an unsavory one. Whistler

⁹² Nicoll, 148.

⁹³ Marsh, 347.

⁹⁴ Hilton, 184.

⁹⁵ Stewart, 90.

⁹⁶ Odette Bornand, ed. *The Diary of W. M. Rossetti: 1870-1873* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 90.

⁹⁷ Marsh, 369.

mentioned that the man “told amazing lies” and that “what belonged to others became his in no time.”⁹⁸ Rossetti’s assistant, Treffry Dunn said that he had observed Howell taking a pencil and chalk sketch from a book of Rossetti’s and that “neither [he] nor Rossetti ever saw it again.”⁹⁹ In any case, among those closest to Rossetti were two, Fanny Cornforth and Howell, who were not primarily motivated by his best interests.

That beautiful Kelmscott summer gave way to a miserable fall, during which the weather was so bad that boats had to be used to cross the meadows they had walked on only a few months earlier. Rossetti still chafed at his discovery that Robert Buchanan, and not “Thomas Maitland,” was the actual author of “The Fleshly School of Poetry”—a bitterly critical article about Rossetti’s work that had been published under a false name in *Contemporary Review*. In the article, Buchanan lumped Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne together and charged: “These fleshly gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshiness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art.”¹⁰⁰ The inclusion of Swinburne associated the other two with his recent arraignment on charges of indecency and amorality.¹⁰¹ According to Buchanan, Swinburne could be partially excused for his outrageous writing because he was young and infatuated with the notion of shocking readers. Conversely, Rossetti was old enough to know better. The motivations behind the article are obscure, but twice during the piece, “Maitland” charges Rossetti with imitating Robert Buchanan’s work. These supposedly objective comments suggest that the article was motivated more by jealousy or resentment than by literary sensibilities.

⁹⁸ Gaunt, 38.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰⁰ Merritt, 25.

¹⁰¹ Marsh, 431.

In fact, much of the criticism of Rossetti in the article has nothing to do with the focus upon “flesh.” A goodly number of Buchanan’s barbs are directed toward other writers, among them: Donne, Pope, Wordsworth, Browning, Tennyson, and many other successful writers. Buchanan’s test of quality writing stems from the possibility of a poet’s work being imitated. If it is easily imitated, Buchanan asserts, it is not good poetry. He suggests that only Shakespeare resists all imitation. By comparison he accuses Rossetti of being some kind of second-rate Tennyson. He also argues that Rossetti’s work showed a regard for expression in place of thought, a preference for the body instead of the soul, and a focus on sound to the exclusion of sense.¹⁰²

To add to his misery, Rossetti read an additional article in *The Echo* which seemed to support Buchanan’s view.¹⁰³ He determined to write and print a scathing reply.¹⁰⁴ William Rossetti and other friends opposed this, but Rossetti was resolute. In his own article, “The Stealthy School of Criticism,” Rossetti refuted Buchanan’s barbs by referring to the poems in the “House of Life” sequence, *Jenny* and *Last Confession*: “All the passionate and just delights of the body are declared to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times.”¹⁰⁵ Although Buchanan had initially admitted that the poem *Jenny* had some merit, Rossetti must have felt Buchanan’s remarks overall to be an attack upon not only his work but also his character. Certainly he had also made such a distinction in his relationships with real women, drawing a definite line that separated Lizzie and Jane from Fanny and others. Perhaps with these matters on his mind, in the same month he wrote a story about a king who gives to a friend a peasant

¹⁰² Marsh, 431.

¹⁰³ Bornand, 201.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

girl whom they both love, a continuation of a recurring strand begun several years before with *The Orchard Pit*.¹⁰⁶ In that incomplete fragment, a man tries to fight his way to an enchantress even though he knows the outcome will be his death. *The Doom of the Sirens* inverts the idea with a bride and a siren fighting over a Prince.¹⁰⁷ These iterations of mismatched or frustrated love suited his mood in those dark months.

Rossetti had also become interested in spiritualism. His brother William writes about an evening of table-turning that resulted in messages from Lizzie, saying, “she is happy” and “still loves Gabriel.” Lizzie’s “spirit” also produced the initials of her younger brother, whom no one in the room but Rossetti professed to know.¹⁰⁸ In a letter dated 2 March 1872, he shares with William an unusual experience two years earlier at Tudor House. He had been awakened, he said, by a child’s crying and walking back and forth outside his door for a period of at least five minutes. When he had searched, he found nothing. His brother suggested that one from his menagerie of exotic animals must have caused the noises, but Rossetti discounted that by saying that the sounds were “not at all like [sic].”¹⁰⁹ Such experiences and his growing preoccupation with criticism of his work exacerbated his worsening health.

In late November, Rossetti reported a “chilliness of chest” and a “bobbing of heart” and admitted to spitting blood.¹¹⁰ Refusing to see a doctor and persisting in the publication of “The Stealthy School of Criticism” pamphlet, Rossetti weakened both physically and emotionally in the following months. Years earlier the first critical news articles after the exhibition of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* had shown Rossetti to be

¹⁰⁶ Ormand, 120.

¹⁰⁷ Marsh, 343.

¹⁰⁸ Bornand, 206.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹¹⁰ Ormand, 132.

inordinately sensitive to criticism, a quality that had finally intensified to the point of paranoia in 1872.¹¹¹ That June, William recorded in his diary that he was anxious about his brother's nervous and depressed condition.¹¹² Shortly after, Rossetti overdosed himself with laudanum, resulting in several days near death and a group of friends who made desperate arrangements to keep him out of an asylum.¹¹³ His behavior had become more and more erratic. When he was moved to the country to recuperate, Rossetti became convinced that a group of revelers in a local holiday celebration were talking about him, and he ran from the house shouting at them.¹¹⁴ Thinking that greatly increased doses of chloral and alcohol were at least partly responsible for much of Rossetti's poor health and manic behavior, his brother and friends moved him back to London and tried various subterfuges to reduce his intake of the drug.¹¹⁵ Rossetti also tried mesmerism, beer, galvanism, and strenuous exercise to relieve his chronic insomnia, but to no avail.¹¹⁶ A friend, Dr. George Hake moved with Rossetti back to Kelmscott and took over his medication. Over a period of months, Hake was able to wean Rossetti to weaker doses by mixing the drug with gradually increasing amounts of water; however, the more alert Rossetti began to insist upon preparing his own chloral doses and all was for naught.¹¹⁷

In 1872, motivated perhaps by long separations from Jane Morris, Rossetti wrote the sonnet *Proserpina*. The poem gives voice to the sad fate of Ceres' daughter, who, abducted by Pluto, reigns unwillingly as Queen of his dark kingdom. Hers is the

¹¹¹ Lang, xvi.

¹¹² Ormand, 205.

¹¹³ Marsh, 440.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 439.

¹¹⁵ Marsh, 488.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 496.

¹¹⁷ Ormand, 229.

dominant voice of the sonnet and

hers is the lament of a darkness

that never gives rise to dawn.

She murmurs her plight,

beginning with the word, “Afar,”

and the poem echoes “afar” and

“far” five times before its close.

She is distanced from the “light”

(1), from the “flowers” (4), from

the “skies” (6)—“far away” (7) from all she had known in her surface life. As a result,

Proserpina feels a distance from her “own self” (9) because she continues to recall the

“days that were” (8). Ovid attributes her abduction to Pluto’s being struck by Cupid’s

arrow just before he saw the maiden picking flowers in a field. When Ceres bitterly

complained to Jupiter, a compromise was struck, whereby Proserpina could return to the

surface world if she had not eaten anything during her sojourn with Pluto. Fatally, the

young goddess had eaten seven seeds from a pomegranate, and so it was decided that she

would spend six months in each place. Proserpina was powerless to affect this decision,

just as Pluto was powerless to resist her charm; therefore, the unlucky two rule on in the

great depths of a dark kingdom.

This sense of distance from the surface world pairs with a sense of emptiness and silence in the octave; no word signifying sound can be found in the opening stanza.

Instead, cold and silence predominate. The light in that dark place comes only when her

“distant palace-door” (4) opens “one instant and no more” (3). As that light travels to the

Proserpina
(For a Picture)

Afar away the light that brings cold cheer
 Unto this wall,—one instant and no more
 Admitted at my distant palace-door
 Afar the flowers of Enna from this drear
 Dire fruit, which, tasted once, must thrall me here. 5
 Afar those skies from this Tartarean grey
 That chills me: and afar, how far away,
 The nights that shall be from the days that were.

Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing
 Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign: 10
 And still some heart unto some soul doth pine,
 (Whose sounds mine inner sense is fain to bring,
 Continually together murmuring)—
 “Woe’s me for thee, unhappy Proserpine!”

depths where Proserpina abides, it loses all but its “cold cheer” (1). This oxymoron serves well beside the goddess’s confusion of nights and days. When one spends life perpetually at night, the only light is the moon’s, reflected from the sun and retaining nothing of its warmth. In addition, she sees the light indirectly, as it spills upon a wall, reducing further the sense of immediacy she might gain from a glimpse of the world above. Any positive emotion that the brief appearance of light in this dark place might evoke pales in the transience of the moment, and she is left in “Tartarean grey” (6). The power of the transient moment is heavy in her thoughts: her sudden seizure in the flowery fields, the “Dire fruit” she only “tasted once” (5), and the fleeting reflected light. These combine to underscore her inability to act against her own captivity.

Although she speaks of her separation from the life she had known, Proserpina makes no mention of her current life. Pluto does not figure in this poem. The use of the word “thrall” in line five suggests that her time is arrested by unwilling servitude, and the sense of time’s slow movement is clarified in the poem through a contrast to the “instant” of the light’s appearance. In the sestet, however, motion and sound intrude when Proserpina reveals that she can “wing / Strange ways in thought” (9-10). The use of “wing,” which suggests the freedom of flight, opposes the stasis of “thrall.” While she has no physical power, her thoughts cannot be confined by her dark environs. Though she feels “far from [her] own self,” she “listen[s] for a sign” (10). She hears the pining of “some heart” for “some soul” (11): “Woe’s me for thee, unhappy Proserpine!” (14). She does not block her “inner sense” from this “murmuring” (13); instead it echoes “continually” (13) in her thoughts. Because a “heart” is a physical part of the living world, and a “soul” is associated with spiritual life, one’s pining for the other suggests

eternity. In that sense, Proserpina represents all those who have felt separation from or loss of loved ones. Hers is the “soul” that can only “listen,” but whose is the “heart” that cries for her? While it is not unusual for the bereft to weep, the melancholy of this poem derives from the suggestion that the departed grieve as well.



Proserpine (seventh version), oil, 1874, Tate Gallery, London 2001.

In her portrait, Proserpina’s empty stare reveals her grief. While it is possible that Rossetti intended the portrait to add to the poem by showing us the moment that had condemned her to darkness—that first eating of the fruit—it is more likely that this is the Proserpina whose later lament we read in the sonnet. The light on her three-quarters figure comes from behind the viewer, and the painting itself serves as the portal to her nether world. In that respect, the observer becomes one of the living, whose gaze intrudes into her grief from beyond. Although one might expect to find her looking toward that momentary light, her averted, downcast eyes confirm

her having learned that her only joy may come from listening. She lowers her face until her eyes are shadowed and opens herself to echoes from above.

Predominant in the painting is the gown that swirls around Proserpina. One voluminous sleeve pools upon a table in the foreground. Both its deep blue tint and its rippled folds suggest turbulent water and provide the only sense of motion in the portrait. However, there is a sense of menace in the garment inherent in that movement, as well as

in the suggestion of its weight. Proserpina has been pulled down to Pluto's kingdom, and there she remains wearing a robe that signifies her despair. Though it represents her divinity, the lamp at the bottom left offers no light to brighten her dark hours.

Rossetti also conveys Proserpina's suffering in several other ways. Most powerful is the tortuous positioning of head and hands. Proserpina's body faces one direction, suggesting her determination to avoid another brief, but painful, reminder of loss, but she cannot resist turning hopefully once more toward the possibility of sound from above. Mirroring this, the unnatural positioning of her hands shows disparate intentions. Her left hand holds the pomegranate near her lips, but her right hand restrains her from tasting it again. The color of the fruit itself draws the eye, and the artist's pairing of the color of the fruit with the color of her lips narrows the distance between them. Does she consider ending her torment by consuming more of the "dire fruit"? Would resignation to the underworld be more tolerable than the continual cycle of reunion and separation that she knows so well? Though she cannot sate her hunger for the "days that were," she can diminish the pain of the "nights that shall be." The fatal sensuality of the fruit evokes the sweet poignancy of desire withheld. In so doing, the artist captures the implicit sexuality in this moment of indecision and reveals a parallel to his relationship with the painting's model, Jane Morris.

In the following year, a disagreement between Morris, Rossetti, and Brown broke up Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.¹¹⁸ Burne-Jones became the main designer for Morris & Co., the newly reorganized company. Rossetti's share of the buy-out was £1000, which he gave to Jane Morris, on deposit in a bank so that she might draw the

¹¹⁸ Des Cars, 92.

interest.¹¹⁹ According to Faulkner, Jane Morris' last visit to Rossetti occurred in 1876 because she said that "he was ruining himself with chloral and ...I could do nothing to prevent it. I left off going to him—and on account of the children."¹²⁰ Other sources as well as some of their correspondence suggest a later date, but his gradual decline was having its effect upon his circle of acquaintances.

In *Astarte Syriaca*, completed in 1877, Rossetti uses the Petrarchan sonnet form to reinforce the duality of the ancient goddess, Astarte, and the inability of man to resolve the mystery of the divine. The sonnet begins and ends with "Mystery." Line one, "Mystery! Lo! Betwixt the sun and moon," becomes the chiasmic ending dilemma, "Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery." Notably the capital "M" resolves to a lower case at the conclusion of the poem, showing that the great Mysteries of Life are not as esoteric as one might think, but instead are the details of corporal life on earth that confront everyone.

Astarte herself is linked to the ancients by references to the Syrians, to Venus of the Romans, and to Aphrodite of the Greeks. Rossetti connects her passage through time by a shift in tense, from the past tense "was" of line three to the present tense "clasps" in line four, and finally to the infinitive "to be" in line eleven. The use of the root form of "be" suggests a permanent condition, unchangeable. The use of "infinite" (4), "absolute" (7), and "all-penetrative" (12) reinforce this timelessness and also introduce an aspect of compulsion or weight. With "clasps" (4), "wean" and "-freighted" (7), "dominant" (8), "compel" (9), and "spell" (12), the reader confronts the inescapable.

¹¹⁹ Marsh, 485.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 493.

Astarte Syriaca
(For a Picture)

Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon
 Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
 Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen
 Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
 Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune: 5
 And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean
 Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
 The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.

Torch-bearing her sweet ministers compel
 All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea 10
 The witness of Beauty's face to be:
 That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell
 Amulet, talisman, and oracle—
 Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery.

Dual images abound in this
 short work: “sun and moon” (1),
 “heaven and earth” (5), “lips” and
 “eyes” (7), “sky and sea” (10), and a
 final return to “sun and moon” (14).
 These pairs work toward the poet's
 assertion that the human dilemma
 arises from the magnetic pull of two
 poles, the physical and the spiritual, as

well as the masculine and the feminine. From ancient times, the sun and sky have had associations with deity, connoting “enlightenment.” Even our language associates light with knowledge. Conversely, the moon, with its mysterious pull upon the tides and its association with the menstrual cycles of women, represents the feminine. Irrationality and passion dominate the moon's associations, as in the western use of its root, “luna” to create “lunatic” or “lunacy.” Like the sun and moon, heaven and earth are respectively linked to the spiritual-intellectual and the physical-emotional states. In lines seven and eight, Rossetti states that Astarte's “Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes...wean/The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.” Astarte embodies the spiritual and the physical. She is physical in her associations with fertility: the poet says that her girdle encloses the “boon of bliss whereof heaven and earth commune” (4-5). Her sash binds the reproductive regions of her body, but her lips and eyes pull the unwilling mortal toward the music of the spheres. As a maternal image, she “weans” the mortal away from the “pulse of hearts.” She raises humanity from the merely physical to the spiritual.

In this Rossetti creates another duality with his evocation of physical love and spiritual love arising from the same source. Astarte is a god-woman, an embodiment of the spiritual. Paradoxically, only in the continuation of life's rhythms may harmony be achieved in the universe.

With great subtlety, Rossetti insinuates an additional double touch with his end rhyme. Masculine end rhyme, appearing in lines one through twelve, dominates this poem. However, "oracle" (13) and "mystery" (14), the poem's resolution, are double-feminine. Also in line thirteen, he links "amulet," "talisman," and "oracle" with the final "mystery" by their dactylic rhythm, so opposed to the dominant iambic meter of the sonnet. In so doing, the poem arrives where it began, with the irresolute "mystery" of the god-woman Astarte.

Lastly, like many of Rossetti's works, the poem has Christian overtones which are reinforced by the painting. On both sides of Astarte in the painting stand two "ministers" (9) who hold torches. At first glance, they seem to be angels. They look rapturously toward Heaven. Between them, Astarte stands with her head wreathed in light and crowned by a star. The poem's suggestions of light—"sun and moon" (1, 14), "sheen" (3), "torch-bearing" (9), and the word "light" (10); words with mildly religious overtones, such as, "bliss" (5) and "ministers" (9); and Marian attributes, such as "Queen" (2), the bluish gown, and the association with flowers further reinforce the undying nature of



Astarte Syriaca, oil, 1877, Manchester City Art Galleries.

Astarte. She was in the past, is now, and will continue to be. Additionally, the use of “Love” twice in the poem and its reinforcement by the consonant “l”-sounds which accompany it connect the Eros of ancient times with Christ, the embodiment of spiritual love in modern times: “Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean/
The pulse of hearts to the sphere’s dominant tune” (7-8) and “...Love’s all-penetrative spell/Amulet, talisman, and oracle—” (12-13).

Rossetti’s sonnet *A Sea-Spell*, written several years before its paired painting, ostensibly retells the ancient story of a siren who draws sailors to their deaths with her irresistibly beautiful singing. Beneath

the surface of the poem lies a second story—the artist’s drive to create.

Several groups of images bolster this idea. Vivid references associate the sea with the world. In line four, a “sea-bird” abandons his mundane occupations (the sea) and flies toward “branches,” the source of the siren’s song. Tired from his

flight, the bird seeks rest. Though he finds physical sustenance in the sea, his body demands more than food; he must have respite from the merely physical. The siren and her lute are “shadowed” in an “apple-tree” (1). Temptation is inextricably linked to shade, and this attractive fruit holds danger.

Other instances of compulsion and temptation imply that the siren herself is caught by being attuned to “netherworld gulf-whispers” (6). She “sinks into her spell”

A Sea-Spell
(For a Picture)

Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree
While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell
Between its chords, and as the wild notes swell,
The sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea.
But to what sound her listening ear stoops she? 5
What netherworld gulf-whispers doth she hear,
In answering echoes from what planisphere,
Along the wind, along the estuary?

She sinks into her spell and when full soon 10
Her lips move and she soars into her song,
What creatures of the midmost main shall throng
In furrowed surf-clouds to the summoning rune:
Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,
And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?

(9) before she can “soar into her song” (10). This paradox of “sink” and “soar” illustrates the greater conundrum that Art is both hindered and released by the artist. If Art embodies Truth, then it exists above the “planisphere” (7) of ordinary life. When the siren Art listens, she hears only “echoes”—the poor attempts of artists to find that Truth. Revealed through human efforts, Art is forever limited, distorted, or muted; only its echoes are perceived.

Nevertheless, Art “weave[s] the sweet-strung spell” (2) that the sea-bird/artist cannot resist. In line three, the reference to musical “chords” also suggests its homophone “cords,” and the artist hears “wild notes.” The “spell” is reiterated in line nine, and the artist, a “[creature] of the midmost main” (11), follows the “summoning rune” (12). Since runes have both magical and mystical connotations, the artist is literally enchanted as the song draws him into the spell. This mystic communion of artist and Art extracts its cost. The “fated mariner hears [Art’s] cry” (13), but it draws him to



A Sea-Spell, oil, 1877, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University.

death. The word “cry” ambiguously suggests both seduction and pain, and Art pulls the artist toward the immersion of self into his creations. His ambition to achieve perfection leaves the artist vulnerable and breaks him “bare-breasted” upon the unyielding “rock” of Art when he falls short (14).

Rossetti’s 1877 oil, *A Sea-Spell*, depicts the siren plucking the strings of

her suspended lute as the sea-bird arrives. She leans forward, the better her notes to hear, as well as their resounding “echoes.” The predominant use of red and pale gold combines the passion and the mysticism of the poem. Over her left shoulder, an apple hangs, a reminder that the pursuit of beauty costs.

However, other considerations outweigh these symbolic objects’ significance. The siren fills the frame, looking trapped. Her garment brushes against the bottom of the canvas, appearing as if it would spill out of the frame if it were not contained. Her bent arms, knees and neck fit her into the space awkwardly. She and the sea-bird are similarly confined, compelled to continue together despite discomfort. The siren’s gossamer garment resembles a storm-tossed sea in its billows and folds, and a strong wind blows through the piece, pushing the flowers in the left foreground up against her knees and lifting her long red hair off her shoulders to surround the apple behind her. Art’s dominance of the artist receives a humorously ironic twist here: Rossetti has captured Art within the frame, but his drive to do so perpetuates her power over him.

Rossetti returned to his

Of his Last Sight of Fiammetta

Round her red garland and her golden hair
I saw a fire about Fiammetta’s head;
Thence to a little cloud I watch’d it fade,
Than silver or than gold more brightly fair;

And like a pearl that a gold ring doth bear 5
Even so an angel sat therein, who sped
Alone and glorious throughout the heaven, array’d
In sapphires and in gold that lit the air.

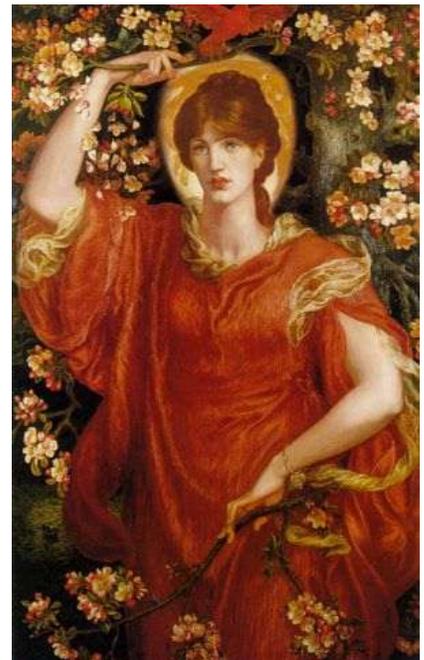
Then I rejoiced as hoping happy things,
Who rather should have then discern’d how God 10
Had haste to make my lady all his own,

Even as it came to pass. And with these stings
Of sorrow, and with life’s most weary load
I dwell, who fain would be where she is gone.

fascination with the Italian poets the following year in his tribute to Fiammetta. Like Dante, Boccaccio was enamored of a beautiful woman, whom he called “Fiammetta.” Rossetti had translated Boccaccio’s sonnet, *Of his Last Sight of Fiammetta*, and later wrote an original sonnet in English to

and jewels. If there is grief in this poem, its tears are the petals of blossoms, and the presence of “Death’s dark storm” is only a backdrop for the “rainbow of the Soul” (14). Boccaccio recounts a flame on Fiammetta’s head, a classical sign of the presence of the supernatural, but Rossetti’s Fiammetta is herself (as her name suggests) aflame; she both warms and brightens while being consumed. The draft of that fire “stirs [all] with change” and causes her “garments [to] beat the air” (9). The movement from Spring to the falling of blossoms connotes the passage of time, further expressed in line eight with the acknowledgement that “Life” itself has been “shaken and shower’d and flown.” The “Vision” (1) that Fiammetta provides is one of gentle transience from one realm to another: the bird does not leap or fall into the air, it “expands” (6), and the angel circles and “shimmers” (11) around the glowing Fiammetta. Rossetti’s sonnet opens with the image of Fiammetta lightening the “gloom-girt” (2) darkness, and it ends with the promise of a rainbow. “Behold Fiammetta,” the poet says, “And lo! thy spirit understands.”

Rossetti’s 1878 oil *Fiammetta* fills the frame with her presence. The positioning of her arms serves to encircle and focus the viewer’s attention upon Fiammetta’s face. Her garments are “aflame” with a rich coral hue and the suggestion of movement in the creases and folds of the fabric. Boccaccio’s gold appears in both her drapery and the bracelet on her left wrist, while the golden aureole contains the suggestion of angel wings within. The poem’s apple blossoms bring to mind



Fiammetta, oil, 1878, Collection of Lord Andrew Lloyd-Webber.

another tree and the Fall of Man. The painting, however, makes evident the absence of the apples themselves. This is the season before the fruit, and Fiammetta is an ideal. Above her head a brilliant red bird hovers, not unlike the bird in *Beata Beatrix*, a sign of her spirit's departure. Her eyes seem transfixed by something just behind the viewer, and her gaze keeps the secret that she sees. Her expression suggests acceptance as she seems about to step through the branches that she grasps and move toward whatever claims her attention. Those "reassuring eyes" invite us to believe the "promise" of that "rainbow."

Correspondence between Rossetti and Jane Morris in that period discusses his plans for portraits of her and others, both those that were already complete and those he still wanted to improve. Her letter to him on 25 August 1879 alludes to *Fiammetta's* model Maria Spartali, who had married American journalist and painter William Stillman, their good friend of long standing: "Who would have thought a few years back that she would be sitting to you when I am becoming a mummy? So much has Happiness done for one and Misery for the other!"¹²¹

Often in his letters to Jane, he also included manuscript poems that he intended to pair with art. One of his later letters to her states that he had feelings for her far deeper than he had ever felt for any other and that if only "circumstances had given the power to prove this...proved it would have been. And now you do not believe it."¹²² He wrote on 7 January 1880, "I have just kissed your handwriting, the most welcome thing in the world that I could have seen today."¹²³

Rossetti's absorption with the idea of women's uncanny connection to forces larger than life and his pursuit of that knowledge through his works inform both the poem

¹²¹ Bryson and Troxell, 115.

¹²² Marsh, 503.

¹²³ Bryson and Troxell, 130.

The Day-Dream and its related painting. Jane Morris modeled for the picture, although it is unclear how much, if any, of that was done in person and how much from previous sketches. A long spate of letters to her from spring into autumn of 1880 discusses the painting, and an early version of the sonnet was included in his letter to her on 3 September 1880.¹²⁴ In beginning the project, he had written, “It is a pleasure to me to think that luck generally comes through the drawings of your dear face.”¹²⁵ It is that face that draws one’s attention here. The woman is seated in a tree, thus visually joining the two parts of the sonnet. As unusual as this may sound, it has the effect of placing her above the earth and level with the sky, which appears here and there through the foliage of the tree. Her position is languid; she has a tenuous hold on the tree and her “forgotten” book slips from her grasp.

In *The Day-Dream*, Rossetti presents a woman of his own imagining. Like

<p>The Day-Dream (For a Picture)</p> <p>The thronged boughs of the shadowy sycamore Still bear young leaflets half the summer through; From when the robin ‘gainst the unhidden blue Perched dark, till now, deep in the leafy core, The embowered thistle’s urgent wood-notes soar Through summer silence. Still the leaves come new; Yet never rosy-sheathed as those which drew Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore.</p> <p>Within the branching shade of Reverie Dreams even may spring till autumn; yet none be Like woman’s budding day-dream spirit-fann’d. Lo! tow’rd deep skies, not deeper than her look, She dreams; till now on her forgotten book Drops the forgotten blossom from her hand.</p>	<p>5</p> <p>10</p>	<p>Fiammetta, she is absorbed with something beyond the range of usual thought. The poem is structured in two distinct portions: the octave shows a summery scene, characterized by foliage and birdsong, while the sestet expands the initial image into a metaphor with clever word play and the presence of dreams. The opening line depicts a</p>
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¹²⁴ Bryson and Troxell, 159.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

sycamore tree, fully leafed in summer, but still producing new growth and providing shade from the summer glare. It is filled with “young leaflets” (2) and new buds, though these manifestations of summer’s height do not produce the elation of the “rosy-sheathed” (7) offerings of that earlier season. The stillness of a warm day quiets all but the “embowered” (5) robin, who disrupts the silence with his song. His summer song is real in contrast to the mute appeal of spring’s “spiral tongues” (8).

The poem’s second stanza mirrors the first: here the “branching shade of Reverie” expands the earlier tree-vision into something altogether more sublime. The seasons also alter their significance because dreams

“spring till autumn” (10). Rossetti teases his reader with the two-fold “spring,” both a season and a sudden action. Does he mean to suggest that time passes quickly? Perhaps dreams merely continue to arise into later life, as the sycamore’s opening leaflets persist into the summer. Line eleven adds another layer of meaning with “woman’s budding day-dream spirit-fann’d.” The clever turn of “budding” from the vegetable realm to the spiritual implies otherworldly concerns. However, a different pause in the line creates “woman’s budding day,” another play on words

that directs the reader to understand that the woman is “dream spirit-fann’d” or moved by the power of dreams to grow from her previous self into a new awareness. In this sense the title of the poem offers another perspective, a *double entendre* suggesting not only its



The Day Dream, oil, 1880, V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum.

mundane usage as idle wool-gathering but also the suggestion that life, the “day,” is itself a dream. The dream presence is powerful in the sestet through the repetition of “dream” or “dreams” and the reminiscent consonance of the letter “d” throughout. Caught in her reverie, the woman abandons the external world of bird, branch, and blossom. The “deep skies” are “not deeper than her look” (12), and her dreams move her to an ethereal realm.

In the painting, leafy branches in the full flush of summer surround the seated woman. Her unlikely immersion in a different sphere separates her from the earthly plane. Rossetti’s use of a deep blue gown with green undertones further fuses the figure with the foliage, drawing the viewer to her face and hands. The brightest light falls upon her lower face and left shoulder, leaving her eyes somewhat shadowed by her hair and the branches above. Her distant gaze detaches her from her surroundings.

The woman’s grasp upon the tree is tenuous; her right hand lightly encircles a slender branch—certainly not sturdy enough to catch her if she should fall—and her left hand lies open in her lap, holding a plucked bloom. Below her, her unsupported feet hang. She is, in fact, a visual metaphor arising from Rossetti’s extended simile begun in line eleven: “Like woman’s budding day-dream spirit-fann’d.” Her loose clothing, reminiscent of earlier eras, associates her less with the realm of reality and more with an ideal. The lack of movement in both the woman and the tree makes silence visible, and the shadowy depths of the tree paradoxically confirm the presence of the bright sun above. Thus the quiet and shade amplify her solitary state. Although the sonnet never identifies the subject of her reverie, her expression is one of longing. Her reverie—or perhaps the artist’s—stems from the search for human connection. She is Beatrice, Pia

de' Tolomei, Fiammetta, and Proserpine, the beauty of soul and body; she is Love, at once sacred and profane.

From this time forward, Rossetti's health deteriorated, and his circle of friends narrowed. By most accounts, he did not see Jane Morris again. His oldest friend Ford Madox Brown also curtailed visits to Rossetti because Rossetti continued taking chloral.¹²⁶ In December 1881, Rossetti had a mild stroke, which left his left side paralyzed and his sight dim. He was given morphine, which heightened his delusions of persecution.¹²⁷ Through the winter Rossetti's condition did not improve, and on Easter Sunday morning, 1882, he told his friends, "I believe I shall die tonight."¹²⁸ His passing that evening at the age of fifty-three effectively marks the end of the Pre-Raphaelite school.¹²⁹

Rossetti frequently felt unsatisfied with his work and would re-work it in his hope to match his achievements to his aspirations.¹³⁰ In the course of his career, Rossetti produced three hundred subject pictures with studies and revisions, around the same number of portrait drawings, and another three hundred designs for works that never took shape.¹³¹ In an early review for *Fortnightly*, Swinburne called Rossetti a "light-bearer and leader of men" and said, "light and fresh life have long been the gifts of his giving."¹³² Rossetti's estate was split among his mother, his brother William, and his sister Christina, but drawings were left to Brown, Scott, Burne-Jones, Leyland, Graham, Valpy, Watts, Cain, and Swinburne, a distinguished list of friends, painters, poets, buyers,

¹²⁶ Marsh, 499.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 525.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 527.

¹²⁹ Merritt, 15.

¹³⁰ Marsh, 534.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 529

¹³² *Ibid.*, 396.

and agents upon whom his influence had been most powerful. To Jane Morris, “my friend,” he left three of the largest and best chalk drawings of her, and her favorite profile-head chalk drawing which had resided over his studio mantelpiece.¹³³

A consideration of Rossetti’s *The Song of the Bower* (page 65) and *The Blessed Damozel* (page 66) goes far towards exemplifying the themes that pervade his poetry and paintings throughout his career. Their juxtaposition reveals the dichotomy that so often characterized Rossetti’s work. Both works and their paired paintings explore the subject of love lost and the consequences of that loss but through the use of different structures and perspectives. *The Song of the Bower* is one man’s lament as he recalls a past love, but several voices narrate *The Blessed Damozel*: an observer, the beautiful Damozel who speaks from Heaven, and the Damozel’s earthbound beloved.

In its first stanza, *The Song of the Bower* suggests what is to come. The strongly rhythmic dactylic tetrameter lines ironically impose a musicality that opposes the mood of the speaker. The speaker remarks that the “Free Love” (5) of the past has yielded to the “Fettered Love” (7) of the present. In the past Love “leaped” (5), but in the present it lies “motionless” (7). The sorrowful tone continues into the second stanza, in which imagery of “a shower-beaten flower” (11) and “leaves torn apart” (12) signifies the condition of his heart, whose fire of desire has been doused by the “water” of her loss. The third stanza is a more intimate reminiscence of “My hand round thy neck and thy hand on my shoulder, / My mouth to thy mouth as the world melts away” (24). The speaker warmly recalls a time that could not last. Instead, he is left behind, unable to rejoin his lover:

¹³³ Marsh, 525.

What is it keeps me afar from thy bower,
 My spirit, my body, so fain to be there?
 Waters engulfing or fires that devour?
 Earth heaped against me or death in the air? (25-28)

He realizes that he has lost her and cannot be reunited in his lifetime; she has gone where he cannot reach her. Repeated images of light and dark in the guise of day and night join elemental references to “waters engulfing or fires that devour” (27). Overall, the physical details of life outnumber the spiritual. He longs for a return to their intimacy, but knows that it cannot happen. Tormented day and night by a lack of sleep and disturbing dreams, he cries, “Ah God, if again it might be!” (36). Despite that appeal, the speaker does not enjoy the consolation of faith. He finds that his life has become a dimly lit path which shows no promise of his being reunited with his love in the next world:

Peace, peace! such a small lamp illumes, on this highway,
 So dimly so few steps in front of my feet,
 Yet shows me that her way is parted from my way....
 Out of sight, beyond light, at what goal may we meet? (37-40)

The poem’s tone of regret fits well with William Rossetti’s supposition that this poem refers to Lizzie Siddal, whose death was the precursor to a number of health problems for his brother, most particularly insomnia. While that may be true, the painting most often partnered with the poem is *Bocca Baciata*, or “the kissed mouth” (page 70), a portrayal that little resembles Rossetti’s delicate wife. Basing the poem upon a text by Boccaccio, Rossetti painted the portrait in a very different style than he had used before. Gone are the medieval aspects of the earlier 1850s; this lush portrait draws upon a Renaissance appreciation of beauty. Parallels to *Lady Lilith* are inescapable. This woman, like Lilith of *Body’s Beauty*, also has unbound her hair and twists it between her fingers. Her immodest dress and showy adornments, coupled with her rouged lips and

the apple in the right foreground, signify her sensuality. This is no Beatrice, nor did Lizzie Siddal sit for the portrait; this is Fanny Cornforth, the original model for the temptress Lilith.

Bocca Baciata brings to life the innamorata of the speaker in *The Song of the Bower*. Hers are the “Large lovely arms” (19) and “bosom...heaving” (20), and hers the “love-breath” (21) that he has lost forever. Unlike the “embowered” Jane Morris in the leafy surroundings of *The Day-Dream*, this portrait connotes another aspect of “bower,” a private chamber. Although closer examination shows that the painting’s subject has probably paused while walking in a walled garden, her abstracted gaze, as if into a mirror, and the “wall” of marigolds behind her—resembling nothing so much as wallpaper—project a feeling of intimacy. The presence of garden imagery in the poem bolsters this idea. Here one may believe that the “world [might] melt away” (24), rain drench blossoms and damage greenery, and winds make “trees wave their heads with an omen to tell” (30). The beautiful garden will be spoiled, and the hundred visits of the past will not be repeated. The body’s beauty remains only in this sentinel moment.

In comparison, the oil panel painting of *The Blessed Damozel* (page 70) draws its strength from traditional Christian symbols. The Damozel herself is not alone in a private garden, but surrounded by hosts of others: below her are three angels, and above a host of embracing couples. She leans against a “gold bar” (2) that is warmed by her bosom (45) instead of a masonry wall, which is too dense to be warmed by human touch. Her hair, while unbound, is decorously loose, adorned only with stars. She holds a spray of three lilies, traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary and reminiscent of Rossetti’s early painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. The Damozel gazes longingly down to her

beloved, who reclines in the predella added at the bottom of the painting. Her gown and scarf are caught in a heavenly breeze. The figure of the Damozel herself is much larger than that of her beloved, signifying her relative nearness to the viewer and her distance from earth. Surrounded by roses, she is another heavenly bloom, unlike the physically alluring woman in *Bocca Baciata* who, in commanding the viewer's attention, reduces the marigolds behind her to background decoration. Marigolds may have derived their name from an early association with the Virgin, and here they offer an innocent contrast to the florid blossom before them. Because it has been used to adorn the woman's hair, a white rose emphasizes her vanity instead of signifying her purity. The use of the model Alexa Wilding connects *The Blessed Damozel* to *Sibylla Palmifera* and its paired poem, *Soul's Beauty*.

Rossetti composed *The Blessed Damozel* in three bands. Below, the angels hover between the Damozel and Earth. She stands on a heavenly terrace that offers a view of the earth far below. Higher above her—as signified by their smaller size—Heaven is filled with other pairs of the blessed: they kiss; they embrace; they stare into each other's eyes as if they have just been reunited. All of these surrounding figures mark the Damozel's loneliness. She has not forgotten her beloved, nor he her, and the singularity of their focus is suggested by each one's looking in the direction of the other, though they cannot see each other.

The painting confirms the poem's story. Rossetti first wrote *The Blessed Damozel* before age twenty, but made emendations over the years. Its atmosphere is as mystic as *The Song of the Bower*'s atmosphere is sensual. *Damozel*'s tightly woven structure contrasts the looser rhythms of *Song*. Compared to the marked musical nature

of *Song*'s dactylic rhythm, *Damoze*'s meter is predominately iambic, evoking spoken voices. The poems' differing meters add to meaning through their correspondence to the moods of the speakers. The forlorn lover in *Song* carries a refrain in his head and heart: like music too often repeated, his regret dominates his thoughts. The heavily rhymed nature of *Song* adds to its rhythm, while *Damoze*, though it has three end rhymes in each of its twenty-four stanzas, lacks rhyme in the alternating lines, thereby lessening and subduing the possible distraction of rhyme. The three voices of *Damoze* speak simply, and Rossetti used several techniques to differentiate these speakers. The opening stanzas introduce a third person narrative that is broken in the fourth by an interjection from the earthly lover. Three times the poem's narrative is interrupted in this way; each time the use of parentheses, which suggest an understated tone, clarifies the role of the second speaker. The third speaker is the Damoze herself, whose thoughts are interposed primarily in stanzas twelve through twenty-two.

Numerological and cosmological references typify the frame narrative of the "observer." In stanza one, the "three lilies" (5) and seven stars (6) carry mystical connotations, here associated with the Damoze's heavenly status. The Damoze also dwells upon numbers and their significance. In stanza twelve, she asserts the "perfect strength" (71) of two prayers. Later, the repeated use of "we two," a phrase that opens stanzas fourteen, fifteen, and eighteen, expands the power of the perfectly attuned pair of lovers. Echoing the pairs and doubles overtly stated, Rossetti fills the Damoze's speech with other more subtle syntactical pairings. When the Damoze begins to speak in stanza twelve, she states her wish "that he were *come* to me" (67) and adds "for he will *come*" (68). Two lines later, she connects the repeated

apostrophe “Lord Lord” with the “perfect strength” of two prayers (70). The use of “I *myself* will teach to him” and “I *myself*, lying so” (91-91), followed two lines later with her affirmation that she will “find *some knowledge*” and “*some* new thing to *know*” (95-96), suggests that the speaker finds solace in the repetition of such assurances.

References to the structure of Heaven and the sheer vastness of creation work together as assurances and sources of sorrow. The initial speaker defines Heaven in earthly terms: the Damozel leans out over “the rampart of God’s house” (25), which is “built over the sheer depth” of Space (26-27). In the following stanza, Heaven is situated “above the flood of ether” (31-32) so far above the human sphere that from the Damozel’s perspective, “earth / Spins like a fretful midge” (35-36). Contrasting a lowly insect to the perfect beauty of Heaven’s golden ramparts furthers the distance between man and the blessed realm. So far removed is she, that the Damozel, “Looking downward thence... scarce could see the sun” (29-30). Adding to the speaker’s despair, Time affects “all the worlds” (51), but Heaven is a “fixt place” (49). From the heavenly heights the sliver of the moon resembles a feather “Fluttering far down the gulf” (57). The universe moves in such Pythagorean perfection that the speaker equates its harmony to the singing of the stars “in their spheres” (54). The poet also idealizes and distances the Damozel from her earthly lover by the comparison of her voice to that music because “she spoke as when the stars sang” (54), and “Her voice was like the voice the stars / Had when they sang together” (59-60).

In her portion of the poem, the Damozel comforts herself with speculations about her lover’s imminent arrival and her vision of their future “life” together. The nature of her assurances provokes the reader to question the nature of this poem’s three voices.

After the arrival of the beloved, the Damozel will clothe him, comfort him, and otherwise ease his transition to a new and alien mode of existence. She will “take his hand” (75) and bathe with him in “God’s sight” (78). She will stand with him in God’s “Occult” presence, where even the “lamps tremble continually” (81) in awe. Together they will “lie in the shadow of [a] living mystic tree” (85). She will introduce him to Mary and her handmaidens, and Mary will take the two of them into the presence of Christ to ask that they might “live as once on earth / with Love—only to be, / As then awhile, for ever now” (130-131). One might suppose that the spirit of the Blessed Damozel would have lost interest in such earthly concerns. Even though the lady speaks occasionally about the various perfections of Heaven, she does so in decidedly human terms—white robes, golden thread, and its “circling charm” (44).

An interesting structural device further equates the Damozel’s perceptions with those of both the frame narrator and the Damozel’s beloved. When the beloved interjects a stanza, it repeats or reiterates something just said, as if completing a thought. At the end of stanza three, the narrator says that the length of time since the Damozel’s death “Had counted as ten years” (18). As the beloved begins his stanza, he expands that time to “ten years of years” (19). At the end of stanza ten, the narrator equates the Damozel’s voice with the harmony of the spheres “when they sang together” (60). The beloved picks up that thread in the following line by saying that he hears the blessed voice in “bird song” (61), an extrapolation of the original observation into a more easily perceptible one. Just before his third interruption, the Damozel mentions in stanzas fourteen and fifteen “We two” and “We two.” The beloved echoes, “Alas! We two, we two, thou say’st!” (97). The various speakers’ limited insight in this poem affirms that

there is but one voice: that of the beloved. This poem constitutes a vision of the afterlife by one who can only speculate in earthly terms. He equates his ascension after death to a reunion with his lover. She will take care of all his needs, and things will be as they were before. This fusion—or confusion—of the physical and spiritual stems from humanity’s inability to understand God’s love in any terms but human ones. We sense that there is more than the physical and use terms such as “soul mates” and “kindred spirits” to qualify relationships. We can only glimpse the divine through these occasional encounters.

Though not particularly religious in a conventional sense, Dante Gabriel Rossetti came from a family of devout believers. The religious topics of his early paintings affirm his familiarity with the conventions of Catholicism and Anglicanism. As a young man Rossetti immersed himself in the writings of Dante, and he perceived in Dante’s chaste love for Beatrice that human love might form a bridge to a higher realm. The death of his beautiful young wife, paralleling that of Beatrice, nurtured his artist’s inclination to capture Truth in words and paint. This early association of women, and, by extension, the love between men and women with the sublime propelled his drive to define concretely what can only be intuited through feelings. His career took him in many directions, but the oft revisited fascination with this theme links his early works with the later ones. In fact, many of his earliest works became his later ones through his compulsion to edit and revise, re-imagine and repaint.

At the beginning of Rossetti’s career, English painting had been mired in traditions of the past, but at the end of his life, the changes that he had helped to bring about had brought forth a new interest in an individual vision and in the search for

honesty and truth in art. Ruskin said that Rossetti, not Millais or Hunt, was the first to adhere successfully to the Pre-Raphaelite code, and wondered whether there had been any of the “greatest men of old times [who] possessed more invention than either Millais or Rossetti.”¹³⁴ Burne-Jones, Rossetti’s lifelong friend, credited him with “precious counsel and encouragement,” and wrote to Rossetti in 1877, “No one in this world ever owed so much to another as I do to you.”¹³⁵ According to Richard Frith, frequent writer for *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, Rossetti’s failures “result[ed] more from an excess rather than a lack of intelligent thought.”¹³⁶ He occasionally became mired in a project and was unable to let it go even if a patron were clamoring for him to fulfill the terms of a contract.

Rossetti was also sometimes accused of adapting his works to the market. In fact, one of his purchasers, Gambert, pushed him in the direction of what Rossetti called “pot boilers”—paintings that would pay the rent.¹³⁷ These often took the form of copies of works already completed and sold. Though his brother called the later paintings “female heads with floral adjuncts,” he also referred to those works’ being franker but more serious.¹³⁸ In “Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty,” an essay published just a few years after the painter’s death, Frederick William Henry Myers says that “in this newer school—with Rossetti especially—we feel at once that Nature is no more than an accessory. The most direct appeals, the most penetrating reminiscences, come to the worshipper of Beauty from a woman’s eyes.”¹³⁹ Although criticized in his own time for

¹³⁴ Nicoll, 95-96.

¹³⁵ John Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 137.

¹³⁶ Richard Frith, “Rethinking Rossetti,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 32.1 (2003): 84.

¹³⁷ Hilton, 150.

¹³⁸ Hough, 41.

¹³⁹ Des Cars, 63.

his so-called “fleshly” paintings, Rossetti persisted in his attempts to portray the inner experience, to suggest the past, and to provoke a longing for unreachable beauty.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Mahoney, 230.

The Song of the Bower

Say, is it day, is it dusk in thy bower,
 Thou whom I long for, who longest for me?
 Oh! be it light, be it night, 'tis Love's hour,
 Love's that is fettered as Love's that is free.
 Free Love has leaped to that innermost chamber, 5
 Oh! the last time, and the hundred before:
 Fettered Love, motionless, can but remember,
 Yet something that sighs from him passes the door.

Nay, but my heart when it flies to thy bower,
 What does it find there that knows it again? 10
 There it must droop like a shower-beaten flower,
 Red at the core and dark with the rain.
 Ah! yet what shelter is still shed above it,
 What waters still image its leaves torn apart?
 Thy soul is the shade that clings round it to love it, 15
 And tears are its mirror deep down in thy heart.

What were my prize, could I enter thy bower,
 This day, to-morrow, at eve or at morn?
 Large lovely arms and a neck like a tower,
 Bosom then heaving that now lies forlorn. 20
 Kindled with love-breath, (the sun's kiss is colder!)
 Thy sweetness all near me, so distant to-day:
 My hand round thy neck and thy hand on my shoulder,
 My mouth to thy mouth as the world melts away.

What is it keeps me afar from thy bower, 25
 My spirit, my body, so fain to be there?
 Waters engulfing or fires that devour?
 Earth heaped against me or death in the air?
 Nay, but in day-dreams, for terror, for pity,
 The trees wave their heads with an omen to tell; 30
 Nay, but in night-dreams, throughout the dark city,
 The hours, clashed together, lose count in the bell.

Shall I not one day remember thy bower,
 One day when all days are one day to me?
 Thinking, I stirred not, and yet had the power! 35
 Yearning, Ah God, if again it might be!
 Peace, peace! such a small lamp illumes, on this highway,
 So dimly so few steps in front of my feet,
 Yet shows me that her way is parted from my way....
 Out of sight, beyond light, at what goal may we meet? 40

The Blessed Damozel

The blessed Damozel leaned out
 From the gold bar of Heaven;
 Her eyes were deeper than the depth
 Of water stilled at even;
 She had three lilies in her hand, 5
 And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
 No wrought flowers did adorn,
 But a white rose of Mary's gift,
 For service meetly worn; 10
 Her hair that lay along her back,
 Was yellow like ripe corn.

Herseemed she scarce had been a day
 One of God's choristers;
 The wonder was not yet quite gone 15
 From that still look of hers;
 Albeit, to them she left, her day
 Had counted as ten years.

(To one, it is ten years of years.
 ...Yet now, and in this place, 20
 Surely she leaned o'er me,--her hair
 Fell all about my face....
 Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
 The whole year sets apace.)

It was the rampart of God's house 25
 That she was standing on,
 By God built over the sheer depth
 The which is Space begun;
 So high, that looking downward thence,
 She scarce could see the sun. 30

It lies in Heaven, across the flood
 Of ether, as a bridge.
 Beneath, the tides of day and night
 With flame and darkness ridge
 The void, as low as where this earth 35
 Spins like a fretful midge.

Around her, lovers, newly met
 'Mid deathless love's acclaims
 Spoke evermore among themselves
 Their heart-remembered names; 40
 And the souls mounting up to God,
 Went by her like thin flames.

And still she bowed herself and stooped
 Out of the circling charm;
 Until her bosom must have made 45
 The bar she leaned on warm,
 And the lilies lay as if asleep
 Along her bended arm.

From the fixt place of Heaven she saw
 Time like a pulse shake fierce 50
 Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
 Within the gulf to pierce
 Its path; and now she spoke as when
 The stars sang in their spheres.

The sun was gone now; the curled moon 55
 Was like a little feather
 Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
 She spoke through the still weather.
 Her voice was like the voice the stars
 Had when they sang together. 60

(Ah, sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,
 Strove not her accents there,
 Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
 Possessed the mid-day air,
 Strove not her steps to reach my side 65
 Down all the echoing stair?)

'I wish that he were come to me,
 For he will come,' she said.
 'Have I not prayed in Heaven?—on earth,
 Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd? 70
 Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
 And shall I feel afraid?

When round his head the aureole clings,
 And he is clothed in white,
 I'll take his hand and go with him 75
 To the deep wells of light;
 As unto a stream we will step down,
 And bathe there in God's sight.

'We two will stand beside that shrine,
 Occult, withheld, untrod, 80
 Whose lamps tremble continually
 With prayer sent up to God;
 And see our old prayers, granted, melt
 Each like a little cloud.

'We two will lie i' the shadow of 85
 That living mystic tree
 Within whose secret growth the Dove
 Is sometimes felt to be,
 While every leaf that His plumes touch
 Saith His Name audibly. 90

'And I myself will teach to him,
 I myself, lying so,
 The songs I sing here; which his voice
 Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
 And find some knowledge at each pause, 95
 And some new thing to know.'

(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
 Yea, one wast thou with me
 That once of old. But shall God lift
 To endless unity 100
 The soul whose likeness with thy soul
 Was but its love for thee?)

'We two,' she said, 'will seek the groves
 Where the lady Mary is,
 With her five handmaidens, whose names 105
 Are five sweet symphonies,
 Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
 Margaret and Rosalys.

'Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
 And foreheads garlanded; 110
 Into the fine cloth white like flame,
 Weaving the golden thread,
 To fashion the birth-robcs for them
 Who are just born, being dead.

'He shall fear, haply, and be dumb: 115
 Then will I lay my cheek
 To his, and tell about our love,
 Not once abashed or weak:
 And the dear Mother will approve
 My pride, and let me speak. 120

'Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
 To him round whom all souls
 Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumber'd heads
 Bowed with their aureoles:
 And angels meeting us shall sing 125
 To their citherns and citoles.

'There will I ask of Christ the Lord
 Thus much for him and me:--
 Only to live as once on earth
 With Love, --only to be, 130
 As then awhile, for ever now
 Together, I and he.'

She gazed, and listened, and then said,
 Less sad of speech than mild,--
 'All this is when he comes.' She ceased. 135
 The light thrilled towards her, fill'd
 With angels in strong level flight.
 Her eyes prayed, and she smil'd.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path
 Was vague in distant spheres: 140
 And then she cast her arms along
 The golden barriers,
 And laid her face between her hands,
 And wept. (I heard her tears.)



Bocca Baciata, oil on panel, 1859, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All Rights Reserved. Gift of James Lawrence. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission.



The Blessed Damozel, oil, 1875-78. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop. Photo Credit: David Mathews.

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